

The guidebook I had on my first trip provided lengthy warnings of what to expect upon arriving in Tangier. Still, nothing could have prepared me for the welcoming I was about to receive as I stepped off the boat. Perhaps I should have paid closer attention to the literal plank we had to walk to disembark. But by then it was too late.

I looked up from where my feet had landed and discovered a throng of locals waiting outside the dock. It was a nightmarish scene, and my entire body tensed in dreaded anticipation of the gauntlet I was about to run. I looked around for another way out, only to confirm my fears. Unless I wanted to swim through the shark-infested waters back to Spain, I had to resign myself to my fate, each step heavier than the last for reasons that had nothing to do with the weight of my backpack.

As though my time had come to repay a long-forgotten karmic debt, I threw myself into the lynch mob, walking as quickly as possible without making eye contact with any of my would-be assailants. It didn't matter. Like a celebrity smothered by paparazzi, I was assaulted on all sides by an overwhelming barrage of unsolicited questions and insistent offers. All I could do was try to keep walking, which was no easy task.

"Welcome friend!" said a man whose particularly aggressive tactics had somehow distinguished him from the rest of the crowd. Tall, dark, and greasy, with beady eyes, a long, hooked nose, and a face that hadn't been shaved for days, he had obviously laid claim to me. All the other men fell back like children conceding victory to a departing train.

*"¿Español?"*

Hoping to walk the extremely fine line between neither encouraging nor offending him, without saying a word I smiled half-heartedly and kept going.

"Where are you from?" the man attempted again, innocently, as though he harbored a secret hope we might someday be friends.

When I still showed no sign of engaging, he ventured, "*Vous êtes Français?*" There were, after all, only so many

possibilities. He was going to go through each and every one until he stumbled upon the nationality that made my eyes light up.

In spite of myself, a “no” slipped out. That was all. Nothing more. I couldn't help it. It was too hard to ignore someone—his motives notwithstanding—staring me right in the face. Besides, it was hardly an invitation to conversation. I hoped he would get the hint and give it a rest.

But an invitation is exactly what my self-appointed host heard in my monosyllabic utterance. Whether I realized it or not, he had just got his foot in the door, and he wasn't about to waste any time before forcing himself inside.

“English! Are you English! American?” he asked, with relief bordering on elation now that things were starting to go his way.

I kept walking, once again falling mute, hating myself for having given in.

“Is this your first time in Morocco?”

I didn't know what to do. He was looming over me, encroaching so completely on my personal space that even my shadow was crowded out. His face was so close I could smell whatever was festering in his gut, and his eyes were opened so wide all I could see were my own reflected back. There was no way to ignore him. It was only a matter of time before the pressure became too much, my manners again subjugating my sense of self-preservation.

“Yes,” I replied as dispassionately as possible, still naively clinging to the hope he would pick up on my disinterest and leave me alone.

Having already made two big mistakes, I had now made an even bigger one. I never should have admitted it was my first time in Morocco.