Fall 1989

Sojourn: A Time in Egypt

Deborah L. Miller
Old Dominion University

SOJOURN:
A TIME IN EGYPT

by

Deborah L. Miller
B.A. January 1972, Old Dominion University

A Creative-Project Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

HUMANITIES

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
December, 1989

Approved by:

Alf J. Mapp, Jr. (Director)

ABSTRACT

SOJOURN:
A TIME IN EGYPT

Deborah L. Miller
Old Dominion University, 1989
Director: Alf J. Mapp, Jr.

This work is a chronicle of events and ideas experienced by the author while traveling in the Arab Republic of Egypt in December, 1986 and January, 1987. The illustrations at each chapter head were drawn to help the reader understand the nature of the story of each chapter.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, the late Harris Edgar Miller, Jr., who believed that paradise was a village called Avon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank her thesis committee chairman, Alf Mapp, Jr., for his guidance and wealth of knowledge that he so willingly shared during the writing of this work. Gratitude is also extended to the other committee members, Ron Snapp and Fred Talbott and to the Director of the Humanities program, Dr. Douglas Greene for his advice and good humor as well as to Ruth Bradberry for helping all of us.

The Old Dominion University Office of Personnel, Training and Development are greatly appreciated for offering university employees free tuition, without which this Master of Arts degree would have been impossible for me to attain. I also wish to thank the staff of the Office of University Relations for helping me to pursue my goals and to attain this degree.

CREATIVE-PROJECT STATEMENT

SOJOURN:
A TIME IN EGYPT

Deborah L. Miller
Old Dominion University, 1989
Director: Alf J. Mapp, Jr.

In preparation for the Master of Arts degree in Humanities, I have combined a program of visual arts, predominantly painting and drawing, with creative writing. The resulting project is one of nonfiction, illustrated with pen and ink drawings. The subject matter for this work was derived from my experiences while traveling in north Africa during December, 1986 and January, 1987.

It is not my intent to provide the reader with a travelogue or documentary of sights and places visited. This work is meant to help the reader understand what results when one is unprepared for the intense cultural differences between the United States and the third world. This work attempts to define the term "culture shock." It is hoped that the reader will sense the trauma and realize the growth and understanding that resulted from that trauma.

Egypt is a country rooted in art. From the earliest hieroglyphic carvings and tomb paintings to its modern presidential palaces, Egypt lives its life as an artist surrounded by masterpieces, indeed as one apprenticed to a master. The ancient monuments, the ever watchful eye of the sphinx,

and the towering magnificence of the Colossi of Memnon live in harmony with Coca Cola, Hilton Hotels, and Lear jets. This juxtaposition of ancient and modern cultures is found in every segment of Egyptian life. As an artist, my senses were continually heightened, the visual images were seemingly endless. The experiences from which I wrote are as paintings in my mind's eye. It is from these paintings that I have gleaned twenty-three sketches as relevant illustrations for each chapter. The intent is to enhance the written word with a simple, visual image, one not overwhelmed with detail. They are meant to impart feeling. They are not meant merely as decoration.

During my stay in north Africa I did not keep a journal. This creative-project is a written account of my encounters with people, my experiences in third world surroundings and, most importantly, my reactions to them. It is drawn completely from a very vivid memory. For many months after returning from Egypt, I carried these stories in my mind, continually composing and placing them in perspective. They became almost a burden, a weight that I needed to alleviate. Telling bits and pieces of them to others always brought the same response--" You should write a book."

The writing itself came fairly easily since the composition had been going on from the moment that I stepped on the airplane at the start of the trip. Oddly enough, the parts that I thought would be the simplest to put into written form turned out to be the most difficult and vice versa. For example, when I began to write of my visit to the pyramids at Giza in Chapter 5, I found that I was writing about something that had been written about over and over and over again, by travel writers, artists, scholars, architects, engineers and a plethora of others. How does one describe, yet again, one of the seven wonders of the world? The resulting chapter is one, not so much of portraiture, but one of perception. The power of the structure is

overshadowed by the effects of a modern humanity. It is these effects that I chose to write about.

Similarly, in Chapter 6, one in which I recount my experience with death on the streets of Cairo, I had such an intense feeling for the situation and that situation had such an agonizing grip on me that I felt a great deal of dread in recounting it and putting it on paper. Once reconciled to the opening sentence, I could not seem to write fast enough, my mind racing against my hand to get it all down in sequence with the emotion and adrenaline of the moment. The illustration which accompanies this chapter is a simple street scene with a lone figure, back to the viewer. The viewer will not understand the significance of the drawing at first glance. It is with the reading of the chapter that the meaning is revealed.

An undergraduate degree in studio art, three graduate courses in painting and one in art criticism have helped me to add visual detail to my writing. Ideally, paintings, perhaps even on a grand scale, would have given me great satisfaction in expressing the extraordinary personal feelings I have for this creative-project. That undertaking, however, would be a creative-project of its own. I feel that the paintings and drawings that I created during my graduate studies gave me a better perspective on making the illustrations for this work. The sense of scope, of being able to narrow one's impression's of a particular subject down to the simplest of lines, was imparted to me in these classes. The task can be a difficult one when faced with a montage of images in one's mind, hundreds of flashing scenes, colors, and sensory perceptions, all begging to be put to paper.

The art criticism course offered me the opportunity to glean other's reaction's to art and to learn how the written word can affect our ability to see works of art. That is, by reading a review of an artist's work, are we able

to better understand it and the motivation of the artist, or are we biased in our opinion by having read the opinion of the reviewer? In this creative-project, I hope to have enticed the viewer to read the work by means of the illustrations while at the same time helping the reader to better understand the significance of my writing by studying the illustrations.

I had eventually planned to write this work as a series of stories with no formal purpose in mind other than as a publication, a slim volume of nonfiction. The creative nonfiction classes as well as the feature story writing class that I completed towards my degree helped me to realize my goal of a finalized manuscript. Each chapter of this work was written as a weekly paper throughout those classes. The chapters were read aloud in class by the author and were then given criticism by both the professor and the other students in the class. Suggestions, comments and opposing viewpoints were all taken into consideration when preparing this work as a creative-project. By affording me an open forum for my work, I was able to reassess my methods and motives in writing this piece as well as getting a positive reinforcement from a captive audience. Class reaction was always encouraging and the learning process greatly enhanced by their comments. In return, hearing the works of others read aloud and discussed gave me ideas for my own writing. The different types of stories created by class-members afforded me the opportunity to realize my own sense of style. The professor commented at one point late in the semester that as he read our papers to himself, he felt that he could actually hear the voice of the author giving the proper intonation and feeling to the words. That, he told us, is style. I feel that I have learned immensely from these classes and am a much better writer as a result.

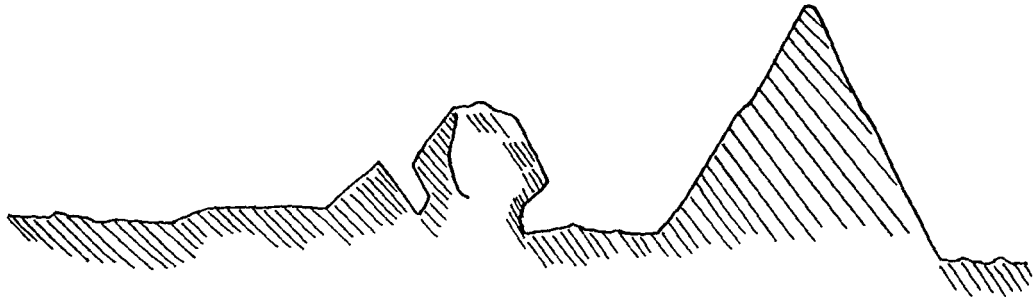
Sojourn: A Time in Egypt is meant to explore sensory details and to

evoke a sense of the sublime through its descriptions and musings. As I noted earlier, sight-seeing is not the intent. Sound, color, light, taste, smell and touch all have a place in this work. Writing it was a learning experience for me, and it is hoped that the reader will find it a similar experience. It was also therapeutic. The trauma associated with culture shock took a long time to resolve. Seeing my experiences on paper, reading them to myself and then aloud to my classmates and professor was a true release. I feel that a true test of a piece of writing is to be able to read it many times without growing tired of it, to be able to feel or understand something new with each reading. This work has afforded me that sensation. With each review I feel transported back to another culture, not only to the reality of the Arab Republic of Egypt, but to the realm of the ancients, of Isis and Osiris, Hatshepsut and Ramses. It is hoped the reader will experience this as well.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES



Chapter 1

"Go. Just go. What an experience for you! Stop thinking about hijackers and terrorists! The chances of anything like that happening in a two week period are so small--God! It'll take you ten days just to see the Cairo Museum and then you probably wouldn't see everything in it!" The words of my friend reverberated over and over in my head as we were jostled by the other passengers deplaning from EgyptAir flight 212.

"I guess American flight safety rules don't apply here," I thought as I was bumped from behind in the aisle of the plane by two Arab women who were carrying a microwave oven between them. The aisles had been stacked with boxes and bags of goods brought on board at JFK. None of the passengers were told to stow their belongings above or below them. It seemed perfectly normal for these flight attendants to have to grapple their way among the piles of baggage. One woman had brought aboard eight large dress bags containing a formal bridal gown and several bridesmaid's outfits as well as tuxedos and accessories for an entire wedding party. Periodically during the flight, she would unzip one or more of the bags and pass them about for the neighboring passengers to see, chattering excitedly in Arabic, gesturing at the fabrics all the while. It seemed very odd to me at that moment, this woman, draped from head to foot in a long, gray, robe-like dress, her hair

veiled, completely covered except for her face, which peeked out like a nun's out of the habit--odd that she would be carrying home a typical American wedding dress. "Surely the Moslems have their own traditional wedding attire," I mused, "and a religious ceremony that must last for days." That was but one instance, of which there would be many in the upcoming days, where my naivete was worn like a heart on one's sleeve.

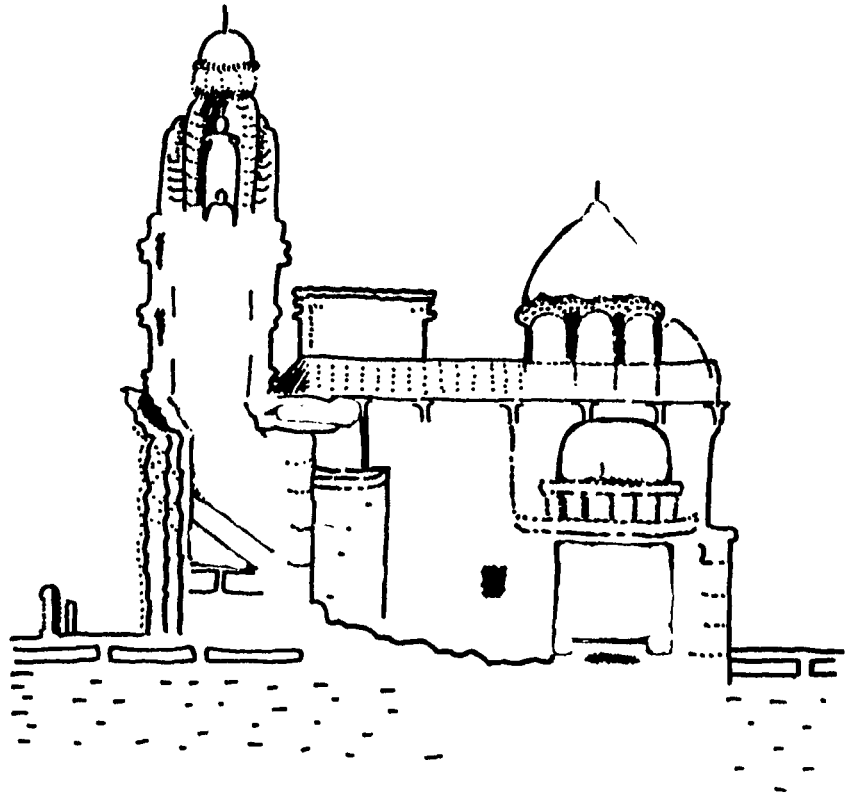
Walking into the crowded concourse, Keith and I searched for some sign of welcome from our hitherto unseen Egyptian hosts. It was steamy, and the drift of many strange aromas--spicy, dank, citrus-like and sulphuric all at once--overwhelmed my senses. The pushing still hadn't stopped. "Dr. Carson," a dark, strong-looking woman shyly called to my husband. "See, it is him! Here's his picture! See, it is him!" She held a tiny black and white photo close to her, letting her two male companions barely glance at it. "I will keep the picture always," she smiled. "Are you Fairoz ?" Keith inquired. She grinned and shook her head up and down.

"Please, your passports," the taller of the two men with her asked. I was unsure as to a response. Keith shrugged as if to say we had no choice but to hand the documents over. A well-travelled friend had warned, "Keep your passport in your breast pocket at all times and don't leave it anywhere!" Keith had pulled the small blue booklets from his pocket. The golden eagle embossed on the cover flashed briefly as the dark-eyed man snatched them away.

"I wonder where the embassy is?" I murmured to Keith. He merely raised his eyebrows. Fairoz beckoned us.

"Come, please." She and the other man pushed people out of the way, chastising them loudly in rapid Arabic as we followed behind. A door was opened and shut quickly behind us. The noise and odors of the concourse vanished instantly. There was silence except for the delicate clinking of china cups against their saucers. The room was large, the ceilings very high. There was a glow around us , from the intricate painting of the ceiling, to the mosaics on the walls, to the brass coffee service. All gold. Velvet couches in green and gold were scattered about jewel-toned Persian carpets, themselves atop grey marble floors. Magnificent. "Conspicuous consumption," I thought. The run-down concourse, jammed with Arabs, animals, boxes, baskets; and this palatial room, soundproofed and opulent. Had we been rock-stars or governmental diplomats I might better have understood our invitation to this respite, but a university professor and his wife, decked out in their best old jeans and Reeboks?

"Please, sit. You will have coffee? Tea?" Fairoz seemed more nervous than we were. We sat gingerly on the velvet sofas. I clutched my khaki travel bag close to me, fearing what, I wasn't sure. There we sat. Two Americans without benefit of identification. The man with our passports had yet to return.



Chapter 2

Fairoz introduced the man with her as her husband, Ibrahim. He was much smaller than she, with deeply set dark eyes and even though the weather was very mild, he wore a heavy looking tweed suit. He spoke very little at first, but became quite animated and excited upon spotting the fellow who had taken our passports. We were told that all was in order. Customs had been cleared without our presence or that of our baggage and just as abruptly as we had found ourselves in the splendidly arrayed, quiet lounge, we were ushered outside into the pandemonium of the baggage claim area. Confused at first as to why we were in the midst of a gravel lot with cars double and triple parked in all directions, donkey-led carts loaded with baskets, trying to plod through the shouting, pushing throng, I suddenly saw the baggage. Piled in a massive heap, the luggage had all been dumped in the center of the parking area and the passengers were engaged in a free-for-all, struggling and shouting, grabbing at suitcases and each other. This, Ibrahim stated flatly, was standard operating procedure. Ibrahim and Ali, the man who had taken our passports and whom we were now introduced to as Fairoz's cousin, elbowed their way into the melee with Keith in tow. After fifteen or twenty minutes they emerged with the suitcase that I had never expected to see again. Piling into Ali's old Bonneville sedan, we inched out of the mob and with the driving beat of French disco music blaring from the radio, we sped through the dark streets of Cairo.

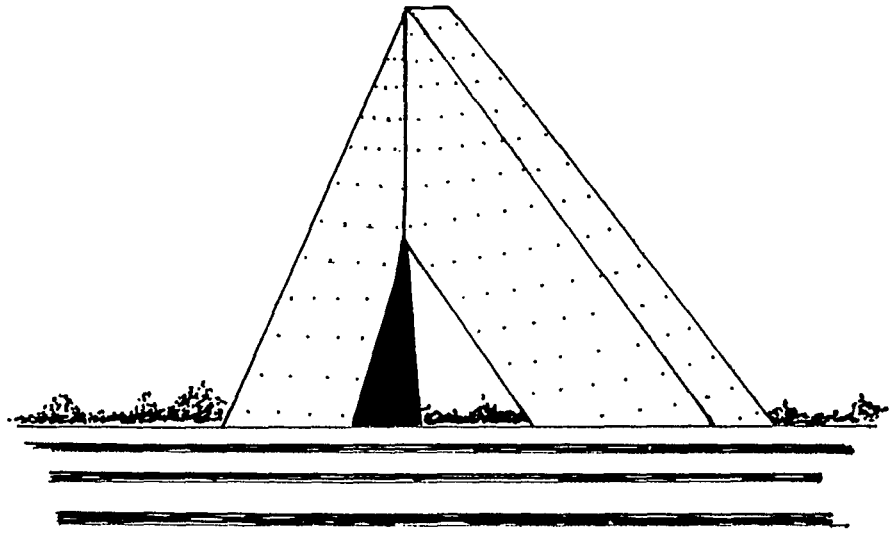
It was early January and the Baron Hotel was decked out in the gaudy trappings of a secular Christmas holiday. A larger-than-life Santa and reindeer stood on the front lawn amid strands of blinking multicolor 100-watt lightbulbs. The lobby contained a sickly cedar tree, strung with faded crepe paper garlands, its branches drooping with gobs of fiberglass "angel hair." "Merry Christmas," the desk clerk chirped to everyone, Christian and Moslem alike. The rest of the lobby was as splendid as the airport lounge had been, with marble floors and the same velvet furnishings and the ornate brass coffee service.

Our passports were once again taken from us. We learned that this would occur whenever we checked into a new hotel throughout Egypt. Passports were held by the local police for twenty-four hours as a part of some security check. I kept thinking about the warnings given us by our friend at home, about keeping our passports with us at all times. I thought about the story he had told us of an American tourist in Cairo who had been involved in a traffic accident. Getting out of his car to assist an injured woman, he was set upon by some local passers-by, beaten and stoned. His companions managed to get him back into the car and drove to the American Embassy. The Embassy escorted them to the airport and out of the country that night. These people, Fairoz and Ibrahim and Ali, seemed so friendly and eager to please us. I found it difficult to picture such an incident happening, and them as assailants.

I was tired. While our three hosts stood at the registration desk, Keith and I sank onto a nearby sofa. A heavy-set man in an expensive-looking suit came over and inquired whether we were Americans. "From Brooklyn?" he asked,

with the air of a name-dropper. Upon hearing "Virginia," he shrugged, shook his head slowly from side-to-side, and with a distasteful look, turned and walked away.

The beauty of the lobby faded as we saw the cracked plaster and peeling paint in our room. The sparse, formica-topped furniture was scarred with age and the bath had seen better days. We were to be up early the next morning for a trip to Ains Sham University and although my body ached and longed for rest, I found myself lying awake long after Keith had settled into the deep, rhythmic breathing of a peaceful sleep. The quiet of the late night was suddenly pierced by a low moaning sound that quickly escalated into a high-pitched shriek. It wavered, vacillating back and forth from a low wail to loud shout. Half dazed, sitting upright in the bed in the darkness, I struggled to wake Keith. "Listen to that--what is it?" I whispered. "Get down on the floor, on your hands and knees," he replied in a barely audible tone. "Face Mecca. It's the Islamic call to prayer."



Chapter 3

The hotel lobby was stirring with activity. There was a newness about it --as if the place had changed with the sunrise: a bakery to my left with people lined up, peering over one another's shoulders at the cream-covered cakes, glistening fruit tarts and the layered pastries, heavy with nuts, honey and chocolate. Groups of businessmen, dressed in three-piece suits, some with traditional Arab head coverings, were gathered throughout the lobby, some sitting on the sofas, some standing. Lively Arabic conversation filled the air.

I viewed all of this while descending a curved staircase. Standing upon the last step, I hesitated before entering the lobby. Silence had overcome what had been a bustling scene. I glanced down quickly. Was I unbuttoned or unzipped somewhere? I looked to see if there was someone behind me, but found that I was alone on the stair. The businessmen stared blatantly, their eyes moving up and down my body. I had deliberately not worn jeans today and was dressed, I thought, conservatively in pleated khaki trousers and white polo shirt. I wore no makeup and my long hair hung straight, void of any ornamentation. I moved quickly towards a rack of postcards. Even the young boy who was serving coffee and tea was watching me. I hid behind the display, palms sweating, face flushed, suddenly overheated in the midst of this unwanted attention. There I stayed until I saw Keith, Ibrahim and Fairoz enter the front door of the hotel. Having felt nauseated and extremely tired earlier

that morning, I had elected to stay in bed while Keith went with our hosts to the university. At noon they had returned. I darted out from my hiding place and grabbed my husband's arm, clutching it tightly as we went outside and climbed into the waiting cab.

"Mrs. Carson is feeling better now?" Ibrahim asked Keith. Keith turned to me, eyebrows raised. I nodded. The three of us shared the cramped back seat. Fairoz sat up front directing the driver. Ibrahim leaned over Keith towards me. "Why you wear your hair like that?" His tone was like that of a father scolding his child. "Is immodest. Hair is for husband to see, not world. Not other men. Should not wear pants with body showing for all to see." Stunned and silent, I realized what the men back at the hotel must have been thinking--an American floozy come to see the antiquities. Pressing my moist forehead to the cool window, I was relieved to hear Keith gently rebuff Ibrahim's insults. Dear Keith, always the diplomat, always seeing the good side of everyone. He was telling his Arab host that American women were not regulated by any dress code and wore what they liked and were comfortable in, especially on vacation. He added matter-of-factly that he thought that I looked fine.

The taxi careened through the streets, the driver blowing the horn incessantly. So did all of the other motorists. There were no lines on the road designating lanes, no signal lights, no traffic signs. The cars were six abreast at times. Whenever there was no oncoming traffic, cars took over the whole road, using every inch of space. We reached a bottleneck at one point. Car horns blared and drivers and passengers shouted at each other as the vehicles narrowed down to single file, to encircle a round-about. A hand extended out

the window with thumb and fingers pressed together was the equivalent of a turn signal--the "let me in line, please" sign. Shooting out from the pack, our driver made a beeline for the open highway, flooring the accelerator, throwing us all back against the seats. Fairoz grinned at me. The driver turned to face us, the cab still speeding at an undetermined rate--the speedometer was broken. "Sadat assassination shrine," he said excitedly. "Holy place. You will see." He pointed out the left window at what appeared to be a large structure of seats looming ahead of us. "Tomb of Sadat. Tomb of Unknown Soldier. Guarded all day, all night," the driver continued, gesturing to each side of the highway in turn.

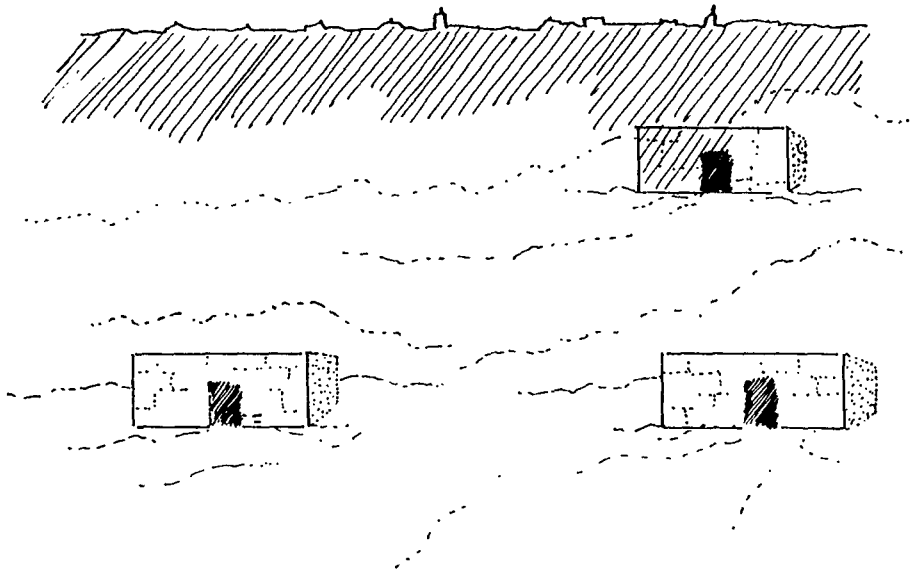
The cab screeched to a stop. We all climbed out, the driver running to the middle of the street, waving his arms at the oncoming cars so that they would stop for us to cross. I was certain he would be hit, but amazingly, the cars slowed and we ran to the other side. It was through the viewfinder of my camera that I saw the bloodstains and the bullet holes. The grandstand where Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had viewed his last military parade in 1981 had been left intact. The exact spot where his blood had spilled in a hail of gunfire from a passing tank was preserved, untouched. I thought of Dallas, of the book depository and the Kennedy assassination. We crossed back over the highway, the cab driver again leading the way. The memorial to Egypt's unknown soldier, a pyramid with a large, triangular walk-through, loomed before us. The afternoon sunlight dappled the Arabic letterforms carved into the granite making them look even more deeply etched than they were. Passing through the open center of the monument, we came upon Sadat's

tomb, which was guarded by two rifle-toting soldiers in mismatched uniforms. They chatted with each other, one opening a stick of chewing gum, tossing the wrapper aimlessly on the ground. Seeing us, they shouldered their guns and did a bit of shuffled marching, more to get out of our way than as ceremony. The gravesite was rather haphazardly built. The marble face of the large tombstone was chipped and patched in places where cracks had formed. Sadat's own words, written in Arabic on one side and English on the other , were carved into the stone--words asking for world peace.

We piled back into the cab. "He was a good man," I heard myself say, as if in a dream. "His wife teaches in Virginia now."

"Why you have your husband's name, Mrs. Carson?" Ibrahim leaned across Keith's lap once again, his face inches from mine. "You have father's name. Is all you need. Husband's name for children only, not wife." My hand had been resting on Keith's. Feeling it ball-up into a fist, he grasped my wrist. "I have both names, my father's and my husband's. It is my choice," I hissed, trying to control my anger.

"Why you not have children? Why you deny your husband's right to be father?" Ibrahim persisted. His inquisition was unending.



Chapter 4

I had decided to remain silent. Keith, on the other hand, had decided to talk. Ibrahim looked at us both in a perplexed, almost irritated way, his brows knitted, creating deep lines in his forehead. The two of them discussed the word "personal," Keith trying to explain its meaning. In Arabic there is no equivalent word to signify that which one considers too intimate to discuss with another. It was futile to me, this attempt to bridge an enormous cultural gap. I was wrapped up in my annoyance, feeling only my own resentment towards Ibrahim and his prying questions. Staring out of the taxi window, half of Cairo had passed before me. I never saw it.

Coming slowly out of the daze I'd been in, I noticed the deep yellow glow of the afternoon sun spreading across an endless view of small, flat-topped buildings. There were no windows in them, only low, door-like openings. People had to stoop to avoid bumping their heads as they came in and out. The structures were not unlike the old adobes I'd seen in Taos, but were strung out, side by side instead of built up, one atop the other. We had gone about half a mile and the hovels still stretched far into the distance. "What is that place?" I asked the driver. I rolled down my window and leaned my head out slightly. "City of dead," he replied. "Americans call cemetery," he said smugly, obviously proud of his recall. "But there are houses and so many people walking around and it's so big--where are the graves?" I asked in a rush of

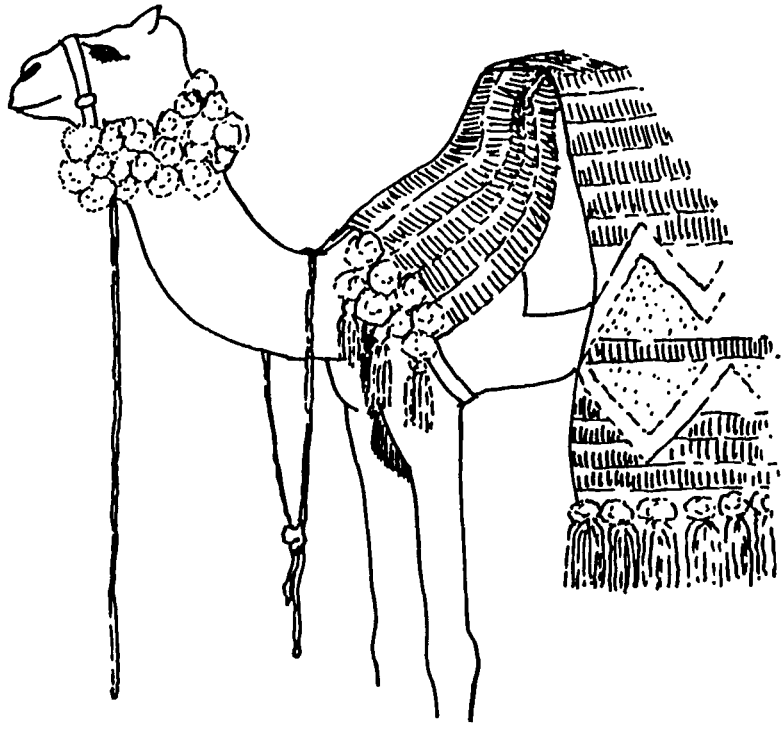
words, my quick English too much for him to grasp all at once. "Where are the dead people buried?" I said slowly. "Not buried. In boxes, in those buildings." He turned off the main building onto a road that cut through the cemetary. We passed young children leading toddlers by the hand--some even held infant siblings in their arms-- group after group of them playing in the rubble. They were all barefooted, wearing tattered, dirty galabiyahs, the long, loose, caftan-like native garb. They laughed and waved to us as we drove by. Fourteen million people live in Cairo. Three million live in the City of the Dead--the cemetery. These are the homeless. Men and women and more children than in all of the schoolyards in the city, making shelters out of the concrete places used to house the stacks of caskets. The faces of the children were so haunting--so happy, their eyes aglow. I recalled a woman who lived in a lovely home not too far from the shabby row houses where I'd grown up. I didn't know I was poor until she told me. These little sprites, effusively chasing our car with dancer-like leaps and hops, held me fast in their gaze. I finally had to roll my window up. The stench of urine and feces was overpowering.

The landscape flattened out. Buildings became scarce. The deep green of the Nile and its fertile riverbanks gave way to the voluminous stretches of sand of the Sahara. Giza. The great pyramids of the pharoahs rose before us, the sphynx keeping watch nearby. Although we were still quite some distance from them, cars were allowed to go no further. One had to hike across the sand or rent a donkey-drawn cart from one of the old Arab men, who sent young boys to grab at the tourists' hands, coercing them to spend their dollars for the "best of all possible rides." Fairoz and Ibrahim shooed them away from us, but one

asked if we would not like a camel ride instead. Before I could answer, a grizzled old Arab in a white galabiyah, his head wrapped in a flowing white turban, plopped a green headress atop my hair and firmly grasping my upper arm, led me to the beast. The camel turned toward me, its long eyelashes and wide, upturned nose, cartoon-like. I laughed at its whimsical leer. Curling its lips tightly back, the animal snarled and spit at me through gaping spaces between mammoth teeth, showering both its owner and me with saliva. The man yelled something in Arabic and the camel slowly got down on its knees, the orange and yellow pompons draped about its neck and saddle blanket swinging with the movement. I was hoisted aboard first, then Keith climbed on in front of me. The camel squealed, turning its long, sloping neck around, looked at us side-ways and spit again. He missed. On command, he rose, front legs first. I grabbed onto Keith's shirt as I felt myself sliding off the camel's back. Just as I was about to tumble off, the animal lurched, extending its hind legs. This time we both fell forward, each holding on for dear life. All the while, the camel's owner took picture after picture of the event, having grabbed our camera from Keith. We were led around for several minutes, being pitched and tossed, teetering in the awkward saddle. Ibrahim paid the old man, bargaining with him half in Arabic, half in English, over the cost of the ride, the camel owner making quite an issue of the fact that he had taken our picture and that how wonderful it would be.

Fairoz flagged down a donkey cart and we clambered aboard. The driver stepped up and sat on the edge of the cart, inches from me. He was filthy. Although his creased, dry skin was deep brown in color, his hands and what

few teeth he had were stained nearly black, most likely from the strong, unfiltered Turkish tobacco that he smoked. His bare feet were knotty and calloused, the toenails broken or twisted grotesquely. He laughed deliriously, throwing his head back, and whipped the donkey's rump; and so we began our trek to Cheops' stone memorial.



Chapter 5

The way to the pyramids was bumpy. Strewn with rubble, the path was indistinct. The large wooden wheels of the cart creaked and swayed as the donkey, responding to the continuous lashes from the driver, plodded clumsily along. From a distance, the great pyramid seemed smooth, its angles sharply outlined against the cloudless blue desert sky. As we drew closer, the contours roughened, the edges seemed jagged, the huge stone blocks formed a somewhat haphazard pattern. The last of the seven wonders of the ancient world looked tired and saggy under the burden of its own weight. Vandals and treasure seekers had taken their toll of the majestic creation. What from afar had appeared to be perfect geometric symmetry, now showed its true face--crumbling, gouged and ravaged. Huge gaps in the structure provided further evidence of the insensitivity of man to such an incredible feat of architecture. How many buildings throughout Giza and Cairo could boast of a foundation made from the stones of the ancients? Flinders Petrie, the British Egyptologist, wrote in the late 1800's of seeing hundreds of camels, laden with massive stones cut from the pyramids, winding their way into Cairo on a daily basis. Long before that, Amenemhet, a successor to Cheops, took many stones from the existing pyramid to build one of his own nearby.

I got out of the cart and stood at the base of this towering giant. For a brief moment, the sheer enormousness of the structure and the thought of its

undertaking by a society void of hydraulic forklifts and Auto-Cad design, allowed me to feel what one should when standing in the presence of eternity: absolute awe. I reached out and gingerly touched a stone. The rush of reality filled my ears as some local school children boosted one another onto the lower section. Ibrahim had already climbed up onto the first level and beckoned us to follow him. Face to face with the stone, I planted both hands firmly on its flat surface and scrambled onto it. "Hypocrite," I said to myself. "You complain about centuries of abuse by humans, then add to the problem yourself." The stones were waist high. I stood still, thrilling to the thought that I was sharing footsteps with the people of so ancient a civilization. Keith hoisted himself up beside me. Ibrahim took our picture.

We walked around the base of the pyramid. It is said that, when the great stones were originally amassed, only a thin sheet of papyrus could pass between any two slabs. The gaps have widened. Places where mortar is missing are now tested by a different method--that of cramming trash into every accessible crevice. Plastic 6-pack holders, cigarette and candy wrappers, empty liter mineral water bottles, and of course, that great American invention, the flip-top can. The sight was made even more disconcerting by the addition of sections of chain link fence that had been placed over the larger holes to keep people out. They succeeded only in keeping the trash in.

We rode the cart to the far end of the plateau, to the last of the pyramids, and accepted an old Arab dragoman's invitation to view the interior tomb. Dragoman, literally translated from ancient Arabic, means interpreter; but today it implies more of the role of opportunistic tour guide, one who holds his hand

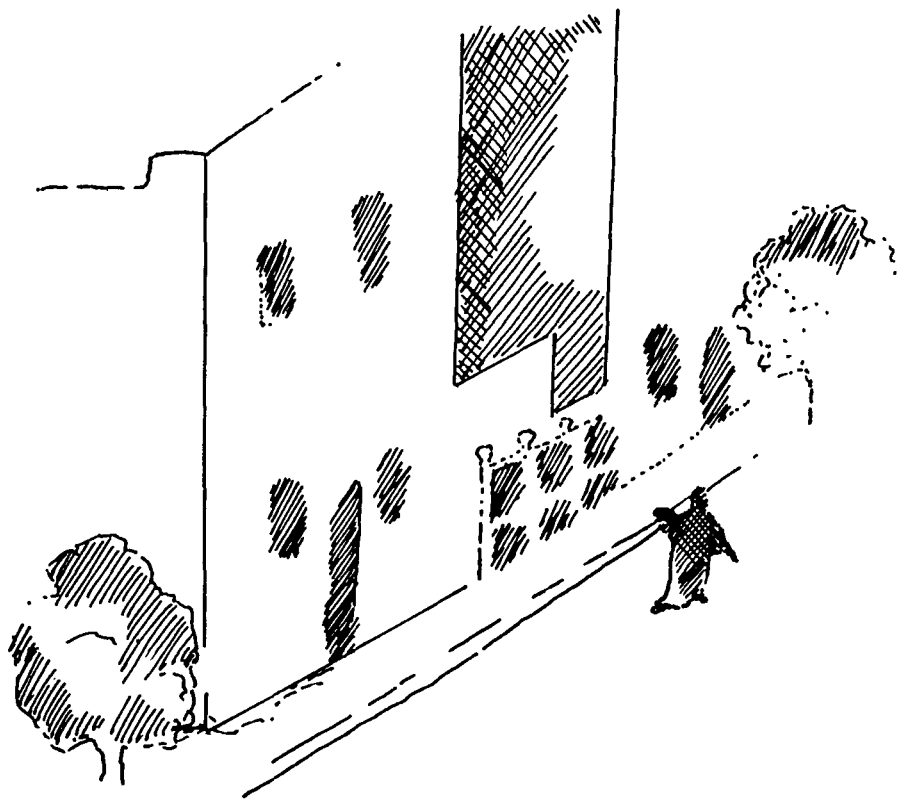
out for " baksheesh" after service is rendered. He led us through a short opening in the wall and we began an immediate descent on a flight of short, steep steps. The corridor was so narrow that even two very thin people could not pass each other. The ceiling was so low that we had to stoop over the whole way down. Although a few fluorescent lights had been mounted along the walls, the guide used a flashlight, shining its beam on the steps that seemed to go on endlessly. The air was cool, but thin and difficult to breathe. Reaching the bottom, the old man stood aside and gestured to us to go into the chamber. I found it difficult to see, even with the flashlight. The paintings on the walls were like the outside, chipped and crumbling from vandalism and souvenir seekers. It was hard to concentrate on the subject at hand. The thought had just occurred to me that I was not only standing in someone's tomb, but that I was beneath more than two million blocks of stone, each weighing an average of two and a half tons. By the time I reached the top of the stairs, I was out of breath and dizzy with the claustrophobic after effect of being in an immense, disintegrating stone vault. I was glad, if only temporarily, for the hub-bub of other tourists and the noisy hawking of the dragomans.

The cart started down the inclined gravel path away from the plateau. A little way across the desert I saw the smooth, green, sloping fairways of the Giza Golf and Country Club. We passed a row of weathered old camel owners, squatting next to their charges in the dusty haze of the late afternoon sun.

"You know what dragoman doing when he sit like that?" the gap-toothed driver grinned, thumping my knee as he spoke.

A barbed wire fence appeared out of nowhere, running along the edge of

a deep ravine-like cut in the rocks. A huge round stone rose up out of the gully. It was a few moments before I fully realized what I was seeing--the rump of the Sphynx. As we passed slowly alongside the famous statue, Ibrahim told us proudly that the fence was to protect the monument from tourists who insisted on climbing upon it.



Chapter 6

Upon returning to the hotel late in the afternoon, Keith made a phone call to Bill Dees, a former Ph.D. student of his who was stationed with the U.S. Navy in Cairo. Bill invited us over that evening and offered to take us out to a "safe" restaurant for dinner. I was hungry--more emotionally than physically. I felt a desperate need to tell a fellow American about the experiences I'd had in the last twenty-four hours. I was the "ugly American", that species of tourist who cannot or will not adjust to culture shock, the one to whom assimilation of sudden changes in everyday routine is impossible. I didn't understand my own reaction to this place, these people. I'd been in third world countries before. I'd seen this type of raw existence, the abject poverty and struggle to survive. Why was this experience like a jagged stone, scraping my very soul? The thought of two more weeks here was unbearable.

Bill picked us up at the hotel. He and his wife, Wendy, lived just a few blocks away in a beautiful old stone apartment building with a large flower garden surrounding the front entrance. A park across the street offered a green respite from the traffic and rubble that seemed to be everywhere. Bill and Keith laughed and talked as we started up the front walk. It was then that I saw the man in the street. He wasn't very old, maybe twenty-five. He was unkempt, a ragged brown galabiyah covered his thin body. His face and arms were smudged with what looked like soot. He was barefooted, and was running hard down the middle of the street, laboring for every

breath. In his arms he carried the body of a child. A dead child. He was five, maybe six years old. The little boy's legs and one arm dangled lifelessly, bouncing around with the jolt of the man's steps on the pavement. I was paralyzed--frozen, unable to move, unable to speak. As the man came parallel to where I stood on the sidewalk, he veered over towards a light pole and collapsed against it, sinking to the ground. Tears streamed down his face, his features twisted in an agonized grimace.

I turned and ran up the walk, screaming for Bill as I went. He and Keith were already in the lobby. "There's a man out in the street--he's carrying a child--it's dead--he's exhausted." Bill ran outside with me. The man was gone. We looked over at the park and up and down the street. He had vanished. Bill put his arm around my shoulders. I was devastated. I felt as though I was going to be sick. "Don't let it bother you too much, Debbie. Life and death have a whole new meaning in this place. I hate to say it, but it probably won't be the only time you'll see something like that while you're here. People die on the street everyday. Don't be surprised if you see a body lying by the side of the road. The locals usually cover it with newspapers until the family or friends--if there are any--or the city workers remove it."

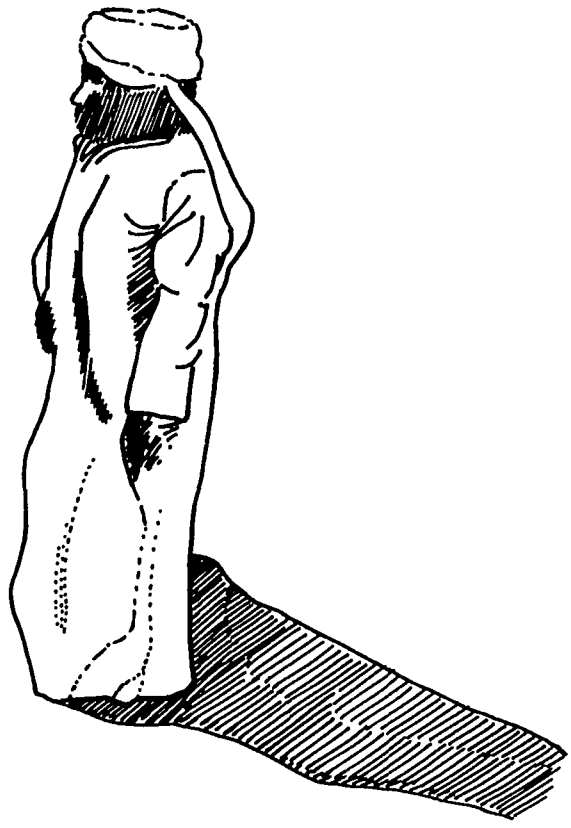
Wendy took me into the kitchen and fixed me a cup of tea. Scotch would have been more appropriate, but I had to take what I could get. She told me about her elementary school class and what it was like teaching the more privileged children of Egyptian society. "There is no middle class," she said, "only rich and poor." She told me how she had taken to wearing only long skirts and long-sleeved blouses when she went out, just to help alleviate the problem of the local men bothering her. Even so the issue wasn't entirely eliminated. She spoke of the markets, about how difficult it

was to find places where the meat was clean and not rotting; about how good the local produce was--that is--the stuff that could be cooked. They never ate anything raw, unless it could be peeled first. I'd learned that trick the hard way on a trip to France. After twenty-four hours in the hotel bathroom, not knowing whether to pray to live or pray to die, I swore that I'd never eat another salad outside the U.S.A. "After all," my doctor told me later, "even if the produce is washed first, its washed in the water that you can't drink."

Wendy and Bill's apartment was filled with art and mementos from their stay in north Africa. There were beautiful wood carvings of animals, a warrior's shield bought on a trip to Nairobi, and several different pairs of antlers and horns gotten elsewhere on the continent. Bill told us about an expedition he'd made into the Sudan. While taking water samples, he had contracted some elaborately named infection. The side effects from the medication he'd had to take were worse than the disease itself, so he had discontinued the cure. Rolling up one leg of his pants, he pointed to large, round black spots on his calf, remnants of his illness. "We're still taking malaria pills," he said, "from our trip to Kenya a few weeks ago. It's funny, the people all swear that the Nile River is their greatest asset, that it's the cleanest, most beautiful river in the world. Don't go near it--it's filled with raw sewage, and all sorts of other contaminants--worse than the Chesapeake Bay ever could be."

The conversation turned toward a more pleasant topic--home. The things they missed the most were Celestial Seasonings herbal teas, Durkee's French Fried Onions, and Russell Stover's Chocolate-covered Nuts. With all the talk of food, Bill jumped up and announced that he was starving and couldn't wait another minute to eat. As we started for the door,

my apprehension of the goings-on outside the haven of that apartment grew wildly. All I could think of was that man and that child. Where were they? Where would he be having dinner that night?



Chapter 7

The gurgle grew louder and then became a rasping, hoarse sounding rattle. I turned both faucets on full-force. Nothing. Not a drop. Just that awful racket breaking the stillness of early morning. I tried the tub. No dice. Keith was on the phone by then, calling the front desk. Even though I'd felt dirty and in need of a shower after our day of camel riding and pyramid climbing, sleep was more important to me than cleanliness. I justified going to bed unshowered with the thought, "when in Rome ...." Now I was sorry. It was New Year's Eve morning and we had a lot of territory to cover that day. "No water today, maybe tomorrow." The desk clerk gave no explanation, nor did he wait for further inquiry. He simply hung up. Opening up a liter bottle of mineral water, I made do with it and a wash cloth.

I was excited about our excursion today--a trip to the Egyptian Museum of Cairo. Even though so many of Egypt's ancient treasures are in museums throughout the world, seeing the bulk of it in its mother country would be a great thrill. And then there was Tut. I'd missed the traveling exhibit in the States, accidentally on purpose. The long lines and the crowds were so prohibitive that seeing any of the collection up close seemed out of the question.

Once again we rode in a cab provided by Ibrahim and Fairoz. The traffic was stop and go once we got into the city. As we sat in a jam of cars I watched a woman lead a small boy to the curb. She unzipped his pants and with a golden arc befitting someone three times his size, he urinated

into the street, inches from the car, grinning at me all the while.

Ibrahim was explaining his job at the Arab National Bank to us and, as luck would have it, his office was right next door to the museum. He insisted that we go in and meet his colleagues and his supervisor. With much pomp and ceremony, we were ushered into the large bank building. Ibrahim called and waved to everyone in turn, gesturing towards us as if we were prized possessions on display. His supervisor, one of the vice-presidents of that institution, graciously asked us to be seated in his office. It was rather cramped, mostly because seven or eight chairs had been moved in to accommodate everyone who wanted to come in and visit with us. It was a dingy place. The sunlight streaming in from a small window near the ceiling reflected the fine Sahara dust that permeated everything everywhere. As introductions were made, the supervisor rang a small bell that was on a thin rope against the side of his disk. A young man dressed in white from head to foot appeared in the doorway. Orders were given for hot tea. The supervisor leaned back in his chair, hands folded against his chest. "You have children?" he asked Keith. "Here we go again," I thought in disbelief. "What is it with these people? What is this obsession with our sex life?"

"I am lucky, I have five children, three sons," he beamed, showing perfect white teeth, made even whiter by his cafe au lait colored skin, framed with a dark, meticulously manicured beard. The tea arrived. Strangely enough it was served in glasses, the sort one normally associates with milk served to a child. I declined the offer of the strong looking black beverage and watched as all of the men handled the steaming glasses, thumb on the rim, fingers on the bottom edge. As they talked, they rotated the glasses in their hands, presumably to keep from burning their fingers.

There was only one other woman in the room besides me and I moved discretely nearer to where she was seated. I needed to find a restroom and decided to ask this woman the whereabouts of one. Not knowing whether or not she spoke English, I decided to use the universal word "toilet" so that there would be no mistaking where I needed to go and what I needed to do. She never said a word, but stood and crooked her index finger at me, beckoning me to follow her. We walked in silence down a long, winding corridor, made several turns and cut through two offices until she suddenly stopped in front of a room and stepped back for me to enter. There was no door, only rusted hinges where one had once been. The large room was empty except for a white porcelain toilet in the middle of the floor. She graciously gestured towards it. People passed by the door, most of them men. I hesitated, then pulled up my skirt and sat.

"What the hell," I thought, "I'll never see them again and they'll never see me again." I was glad that Wendy had given me a cannister of "Wet Ones" towelettes the night before. They were still in my bag.

"There is no toilet paper in Egypt, except in the hotels," she had said. She was right. There was no sink for hand washing either.

"You're lucky," Bill would tell me later. "Usually there isn't a toilet, just two concrete footprints and a hole in the ground."

We left the bank and walked next door to the museum. The vaulted ceiling, with its rows of small square glass skylights above rows of arches, cast eerie shadows upon the groupings of stone sarcophagi and statuary. Room after room was filled with chronologically ordered burial art. Oddly, most were covered with dust, and labels were either damaged or missing entirely, making identification a rather haphazard process. Tourists and locals moved freely though security guards were present in each room,

none of them reproached those who touched or even leaned on the ancient collection. Several guards smoked cigarettes and tossed the butts on the floor. It was a far cry from the thermostatically controlled museum environment I was used to where signs on every wall proclaimed "DO NOT TOUCH." I wondered what shape the treasures of King Tut were in if this sort of neglect was commonplace. But first we had to see the mummy rooms.

Chapter 8

The eyelashes were perfect, thick and curled. With lids half closed and mouth slightly open revealing decayed teeth, the mummy seemed to be smiling at some private joke. The skin was like finely tanned leather, stretched tautly over high cheekbones. The nasal septum of his nose showed through where the flesh had long since rotted away. It was strange, staring at this man in the glass case. In his society his people had performed elaborate burial rites, preparing his body and his tomb for passage into the hereafter. Yet, after more than three thousand years, he lay in this museum, his dreams of a peaceful afterlife forever shattered, his protective shroud long since torn away, causing his body to decompose. Twentieth-century man has walked on the moon, transplanted human hearts with plastic ones and discovered and split the atom, but has yet to duplicate the process of mummification. I am glad, or at least relieved. Perhaps in the year 4,000, no one will see fit to put my remains on display for the pleasure of a paying public.

The mummies were everywhere--some still wrapped, some partially or completely exposed. Others were in wooden crates, stacked inside dusty cabinets with dirty glass doors. There were men, women and children. Some lay near vessels that contained the preserved remains of their internal organs. Many were smiling. Perhaps they were content in the knowledge that the god, Horus, had weighed their hearts according to ritual, and found them lighter when balanced against the feather, thus ensuring a

serene life to come.

Fairoz's pace had slowed considerably by the time we'd seen all of the mummy exhibits. I'd noticed that she chose to sit on a bench outside each room that we visited rather than see it with us. At first I shrugged it off as boredom on her part--taking tourists to see the same things over and over again can be tiring--but then I noticed her feet. They were badly swollen. The stiff looking, high heeled dress shoes that she wore appeared to be several sizes too small for her feet. As I came up behind her, I saw that she was stuffing tissues around the sides of her shoes in a vain attempt to ease her discomfort. I told her it wasn't necessary for her to walk with us, that she could sit and wait, but she sheepishly smiled and shook her head. Keith told her that she needed some Reeboks, but, from her puzzled look, I really don't think that she understood what he meant. She hobbled with us through the crowd to the rooms that housed the treasures of Tutankhamen.

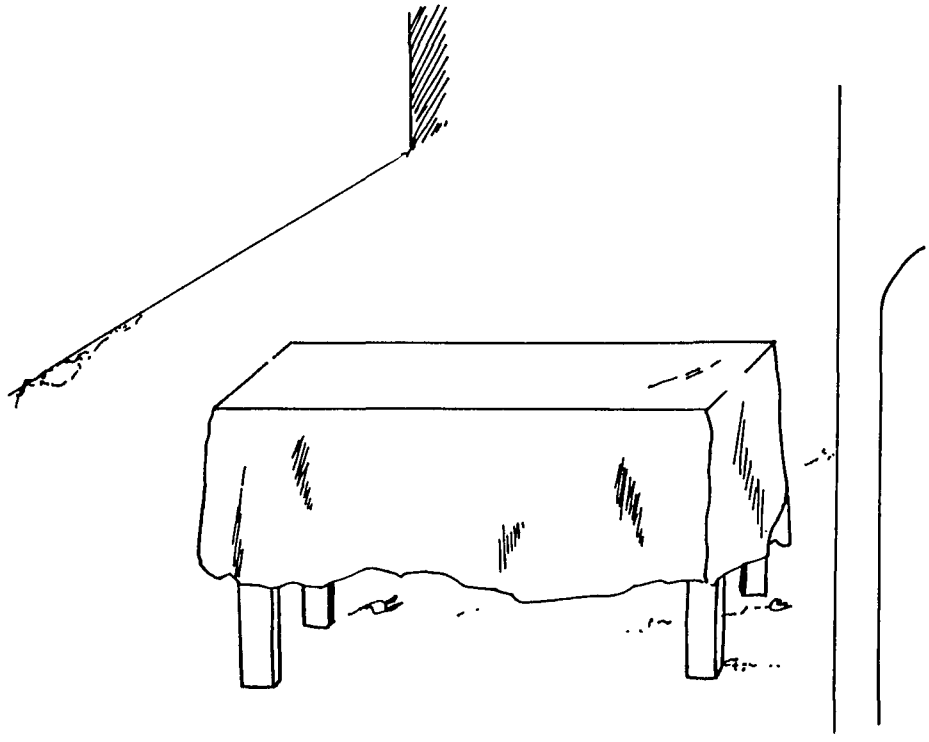
My fears of an ill-kept exhibit were dispelled the moment that we entered the door. The reflection of gold was everywhere. The color pervaded the showcases and the air. Even the people were awash in it. Although we had moved freely throughout the rest of the museum, this area was crowded and people moved slowly along from case to case. A guard clapped his hands together abruptly, startling everyone with the sharp, quick noise. It was the signal to move along. He acted as if he were a traffic cop at a busy intersection, waving his arms at people in all directions and then suddenly clapping his hands at them. I guess that was better than using a whistle.

The cache was fabulous. I could imagine the incredible sight that the British archaeologist Howard Carter beheld when he unearthed the tomb of

this boy king. Tutankhamen's golden throne, inlaid with more gold and silver, contained reliefs of the king and queen that were painted in colors so vivid that they could have been created that day. The shrine that held the canopic jars used to store the king's entrails was just as elaborate and ornate with four golden goddesses, arms outstretched, guarding each of sides. And then there were the coffins. Three coffins were used to house the body of Tutankhamen. Originally they were found stacked, one inside the other, but now each is displayed alone to show the magnificent craftmanship. Two are in this museum. The first, containing the mummy, is still interred in the tomb in the Valley of the Kings at Luxor. The second coffin is made of gilded wood with glass paste inlays. The king's delicate features are perfect in every detail. His arms are crossed on his chest. In each hand he holds a different scepter. A serpent crowns his head.

As spectacular as all of this was, it paled in comparison to the third coffin. It is the most celebrated object of what is probably the most famous archaeological discovery ever made. It is solid gold. Four hundred and fifty pounds of it, inlaid with cornelians, lapis lazuli and turquoise. The golden face with its brilliantly striped coronal has graced everything from t-shirts to *Time Magazine*. It is readily identifiable by almost everyone, yet is unbelievably stunning when seen firsthand. Even after the guard clapped his hands for us to move along, I lingered at the case, and, after circling the room, I went back for still another look. The Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt held me captive in its golden embrace. Fairoz was still limping along with us, and, as we left the museum, she asked us if we would like to go out that evening for an Egyptian New Year's Eve celebration. If we wished, she added, they would take us to one of the American or European-owned hotels for dinner and a show. Keith quickly accepted the offer of a night out

with the local people, Egyptian style. After all, we could go to an American place anytime we wanted. It sounded exciting to me, but as I would soon find out, the feeling was a fleeting one.



Chapter 9

I really hadn't expected such crowds. I guess my naivete surfaced once again. Egyptians celebrating New Year's Eve. What was I thinking of? Counting down the hours until the stroke of midnight is a universal tradition, except perhaps in China, or among those of certain religious sects who observe a different calendar.

Fairoz's cousin Ali chauffeured us in his big old Bonneville through the party-light clad city. "Khan al Kalili," Ibrahim told us, "we will go there." I supposed that it was a restaurant with a floor show, perhaps a bellydancer. There were so many people out that night that cars were being parked on the sidewalks as well as left in the middle of the street for want of a better place. Ali dodged both people and cars until we were quite a way out from the hubbub. Pulling off the road onto a rather steep embankment, he announced that we would walk the rest of the way to the restaurant. I had no idea where we were or where we were going.

We started down what seemed like a hill. It was very dark. There were no streetlights, no lights from houses, just pitch blackness. I caught hold of Keith's hand and tried to keep pace with the group. The pavement was uneven. Concrete slabs jutted up out of the road. I stumbled several times on the rocks and rubble. My high heeled shoes were no match for these roadside booby-traps. Other people came onto the road from side streets. All of them walked very fast--almost as if they would break into a run at any moment. My heel caught in a crack in the pavement and I almost

pulled Keith down in an attempt to keep myself from falling. Reaching for my shoe, I felt something slimy on the sole and sides of it. As I bent down to put the shoe back on, I realized where the muck had come from. The open sewer was spilling over onto the road, trickling down the hill along the cleavage of the buckled asphalt. I grabbed up the flowing skirt of the silk dress that I wore, pulling it up to one side to keep it from touching the ground. "Where are we going?" I angrily whispered to Keith. "Where are they taking us?"

"I don't know--I'm sure it's not much farther." His response sounded as unsure as I felt. We were in the midst of a throng of people now, all charging like sheep towards some unknown pen. Suddenly there was a flight of stairs, a crossover, a dirty, trash-filled walkway to the other side of the highway. Coming down the stairs we emerged into a crowd so large that we were forced to walk single file. Still holding tight to Keith's hand, my other filled with the skirt of my dress, I saw that we had entered a park like area. There were colored lights strung all around, and exotic music filled the night air with its curious oriental rhythms. Tall date palms were outlined in the light from the buildings along the perimeter. The noise level swelled, the crowd pressed around us. A man's face came uncomfortably close to mine. I could smell his tobacco and his sweat. Another face bore down upon mine. It was like the fun house in the amusement park--the hall of mirrors. Tiny piercing eyes, bulbous noses, and mammoth lips came at me from every direction--all distorted, all grotesque. I felt a hand on my upper arm, fingers groped at my hair. The red glow of a cigarette advanced on me, the smouldering stub held tight in the blackened teeth of a weather-beaten face. I pulled back, missing the singe but not the smoker's guttural remark.

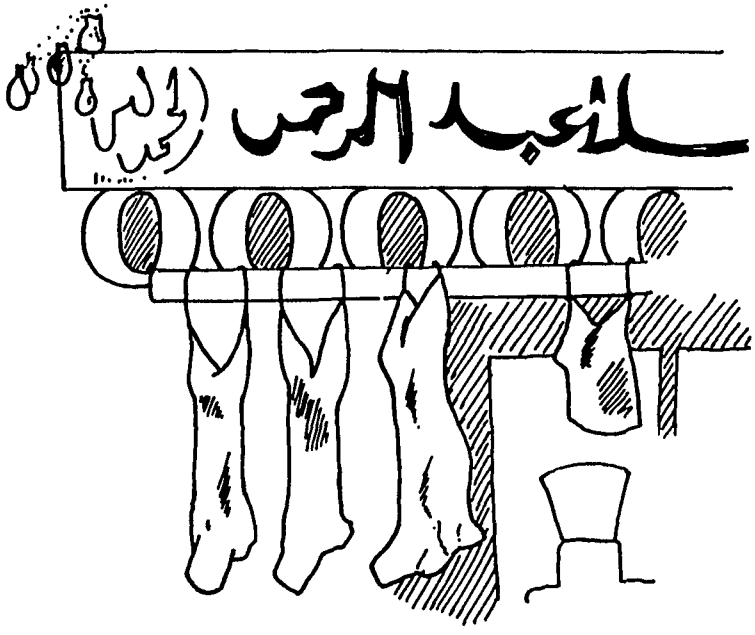
We pressed out of the mob and through a doorway into a dimly lit corridor. The floor was part dirt, part broken slate. Still following Ali, we approached a man standing by an elevator. He pulled back the flexible cross-hatched door and stood aside. The cubicle was about three feet square. There was enough room for the operator and one rider. Ibrahim motioned for me to go first. I recoiled. My lower lip was sore from biting it. Fairoz went up first, then Ibrahim, then me. The operator backed in and closed the grate. His buttocks brushed my thighs. I flattened my body against the wall, inhaling deeply as we jerked upwards to the fifth floor. I was flushed with relief as Keith stepped out of the elevator after waiting for what seemed like an eternity for the antiquated contraption to release him.

We rounded a corner and found ourselves on a wide balcony, open to the square below. There were a few tables and some old wooden, slat-backed chairs scattered across the place. Ibrahim called to a man who was standing in a doorway, watching the crowd down below. He came quickly and pushed two tables together up against the front wall. Gathering five chairs around, he gestured for us to sit. The table tops were uneven and smeared with a greasy film. Ali sternly addressed the man in Arabic, and motioned towards the table. Disappearing through a doorway, the fellow quickly returned with what appeared to be a tablecloth. As he shook and smoothed it out across the two mismatched tables, I realized that it was a bedsheet, dingy, gray-white replete with stains. I leaned dizzily against Keith's shoulder. "We can't eat here," I stammered, trying to whisper. Keith's eyes told me that we really had no choice.

He was right. What would we do? Suffer the mob and walk back to the car? I felt a cramping sensation in my right hand and realized that I was

still tightly clutching my dress. Releasing the crumpled silk, I pressed my hand to my upper lip. I silently swore to myself, "Don't cry, you idiot--not here, not now."

"Something is wrong with Mrs. Carson?" Ibrahim, as always, addressed Keith, not me. Six pairs of eyes were on me, brows knitted, curiously anxious. Keith explained something about the crowd, the long walk. I was only trying to hold back the tears. He could have been my father, defending me to the high school guidance counselor when she said that I just wasn't trying hard enough. I looked over the balcony at the teeming throng below us. I wanted my jeans. I wanted my slippers. I wanted to be home. I wanted anything except the shallow plate full of that thick, cream colored, grainy substance that the group slid across the table towards me.


لعبد الرحمن

Chapter 10

"Anyone have any resolutions?" Bill asked, pouring champagne as our small gathering counted down the seconds until the stroke of midnight.

"To lose ten pounds."

"To survive *her* diet."

We had arranged to spend the final hour of 1986 with Bill and Wendy and some of their American friends. There had been toasts and good wishes exchanged and now the talk had turned to those requisite promises made in that exhilarating moment before the New Year's Eve bubbles burst into the reality of a headache a few hours later.

"To get home." The words just popped out of my mouth. Everyone laughed. Well, almost everyone. Keith looked askance and grimaced. Aside from the celebration he would tell me that I was making too much out of such minor incidents, that I should accept the events of the last few days as a part of a unique experience. I remember thinking, "How can you be so unaffected?"

Earlier that evening, I had been too paranoid about the lack of cleanliness to eat much of anything at the restaurant. The salad had arrived on a chipped, dark blue plate. Deep green scallions lay against large rounds of carrot. Slices of red tomato nestled amid the long, slender, gently curved romaine leaves. The dish of cream colored sauce had turned out to be baba ganouj, a thick paste of chick peas, garlic and olive oil, used as a dip for the vegetables. Everyone ate off the same plate. A large platter of

shish-kabobs sitting atop a mound of what looked like oriental fried rice was set before us. Ali and Ibrahim pushed the meat off the wooden skewers onto individual plates and passed them around. The meat was charred looking and cut in very small cubes. I didn't taste it. I nibbled at the rice and ate a few carrots, more to please those around me than to satisfy my own hunger. Now, at Wendy and Bill's apartment, I wolfed down cookies and popcorn, even though the popcorn was slightly scorched and tasted of the burnt pan. I tried to hide my homesickness. I tried to subdue all negative feelings.

On the way into Cairo the following morning, I made mention of all of the buildings that were under construction. "Not finished," the cab driver said, turning around towards the back seat to face me as he drove. "Owners never finish buildings. Must pay tax if finished. Leave unfinished. Use bottom rooms for rent to people. No taxes that way." I was amazed. In a country where the economy seems so fragile, where so many struggle for so little reward, this acceptable rip-off dumbfounded me.

In a traffic tie-up, we stopped across from a butcher shop. Blood-stained carcasses of cattle, goats and sheep hung outside the window. "You know how to tell best piece of meat?" the driver asked. "One with most flies." In a serious tone, he answered his own question before anyone else could reply. Across the way, two women vendors dressed in the traditional long black garb sat on the sidewalk, a massive heap of slightly puffed, round bread between them. A block away, a small boy lashed the reins against the sides of his donkey as the animal plodded along, pulling his master who sat in a rickety wooden cart laden with tangerines. Their spicy sweet perfume fleetingly tempted me as we passed in the narrow street.

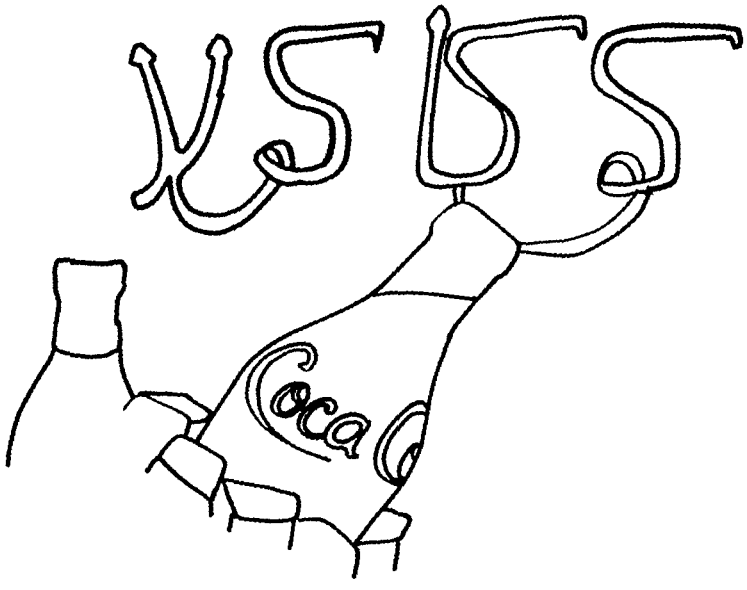
For a brief moment, I painted the picture in my mind. The flashing orange of the fruit, the stark red carcasses, the warm amber of the bread in the streaming sunlight. It was pleasant, that quick flood of color and scent--and necessary for that inner peace needed so often when uncertainty and tentativeness prevail. Moments later, stopped once again in traffic, horns tooting incessantly, I saw a carcass of the human variety. A man, covered with newspapers except for his feet, lay on the median strip, his toes spread in the stiff posture of rigor mortis.

Ibrahim was asking Keith about Christianity. He had been giving us quite a dissertation on some of the absolutes of the Moslem religion: no alcohol, no tobacco, chickens killed only by the hands of those who would eat them. Keith questioned the crime rate, or lack of it, in Cairo and its relation to religion. "Crime is very little," Ibrahim replied. "In Moslem religion, is no forgiveness. Criminals go to hell. No second chance to go to Allah. Moslems know this is fact. So, no crime. You believe in forgiveness from Allah, Dr. Carson?"

"I'm not a religious man," Keith stated flatly.

"You must have belief in Allah!" Ibrahim exclaimed, his voice rising sharply. "He is reason for all existence. Nothing happens without his blessing. Allah is all things, always." He was fervent, his tone adamant.

The cab swung into the steep, curving drive of the Citadel. Its domed cupola and graceful parapets rose up before us as if in salutation.


USSS
Coca

Chapter 11

The view was spectacular. The city sprawled before us, cowering in the dusty haze below the fortress. Far in the distance, the pyramids were outlined against the sky, a jagged edge on the horizon. It is fitting that the Citadel keeps watch over Giza from the slope of the Maukattam Hills. It was constructed of stone pilfered from the pyramids in the twelfth century.

Salah ed-Din, better known as Saladin, built the Citadel as a fortified city, enclosed within one wall. In the dirty, crumbling surroundings of Cairo, it rises above the rubble--solid, manicured, immaculate. Perfect green lawns, bordered by row after row of Royal palms grace the turreted structure.

Ibrahim was still troubled by Keith's lack of religious conviction. As we walked along the wall, he pointed out Bir Youssef, Joseph's Well. The structure was built by Saladin to ensure an adequate water supply in case of siege. Its waterwheels are driven by oxen. "You know of Youssef?" Ibrahim inquired of Keith. "Famous king of Egypt. As boy, told his people of great famine to come. Saved food so people would not die."

"His brothers sold him into slavery because they were jealous of him. He was his father's favorite son." Ibrahim looked at me in disbelief.

"*You* know of Youssef?" he asked incredulously. "You know of his coat?"

"The coat of many colors." We said it in unison. Each was amazed that the other knew the story, I from my childhood Bible storybook, and

Ibrahim from the ancient history of his people. He smiled at me for the first time. "Mrs. Carson should teach to Dr. Carson."

We crossed a large courtyard and were dwarfed by the towering tectonics of the Muhammed Ali Mosque. Its alabaster walls, faceted with engraved quotations from the Koran, shimmered in the sunlight. Upon entering, Ibrahim very quietly asked us to remove our shoes. We lined them up, with those of the other visitors, against a richly inlaid mosaic wall. An old Arab man touched my sleeve and pointed towards three men sitting cross-legged on the floor. Piled all around them were coarse looking cotton slippers with drawstring ties. As non-Moslems, removing our shoes was not enough. We were required to don a pair of these clown-like booties even though we were already wearing socks, so that our feet would not touch the floor. I reached for a pair, but the man swatted my hand away. He gestured at my foot, motioning me to step into the slipper and allow him to tie it. I submitted. Then, he held out his hand for payment. Ten piasters.

The interior of the mosque stretched so far that those standing on the far side of the room appeared tiny. At first, I was surprised at the lack of furnishings, but then recalled the use of prayer rugs from photos I'd seen. There was no need for pews or cushioned chairs. Here, the faithful pray on their hands and knees, bowing their heads up and down, touching their foreheads to the rugs beneath them, all the while facing in the direction of El Kabba--Mecca. High above us, hundreds of glittering crystal balls formed magnificent chandeliers, illuminating the archways and the great central dome. No one spoke. The silence emphasized the classic beauty of this Islamic holy place. Allah should be pleased.

Entering the mausoleum, we saw the great tomb of Muhammed Ali. I

had read of this man. It is said that in the early 1800's, he invited all of the Mameluk sultans to a feast at the Citadel, and, once he had them assembled, methodically beheaded them. One sultan managed to escape. Legend has it that he brazenly fought his way to his horse, mounted it and jumped it over the wall of the fortress in a death-defying leap into the city far below. Breaking the sultan's fall, the horse died. The sultan survived and, like an Arabian Paul Revere, ran through the streets to warn the local people of Muhammed Ali's treachery.

Leaving the fortress, we made our way through the city to the Cairo tower. We passed a large red and white billboard painted with huge, swirling Arabic letterforms. Although I could not read the writing, the image of the Coca-Cola bottle was unmistakable.

Standing at the top of the tower, I felt a rare twinge of the universality of this place. How many cities had I been in, leaning against the grate of an observation deck, waiting my turn at the viewfinder. Except for the minarets of the mosques below us, we could have been atop the Eiffel Tower or the Seattle Space Needle, even the Empire State Building. The feeling is the same, the view not dissimilar.

Ibrahim asked if we would like an American-style lunch. I jumped at the chance. As we pulled up in front of the beautifully landscaped Hilton Hotel, I said a silent prayer for good old home cooking. The hotel was opulent with rows of expensive European boutiques. In one window, a woman sat on the marble floor, hand-weaving a Persian rug, its myriad colors undulating in the dance of the pattern. All about us, shoppers chattered in a multitude of languages.

We were soon seated in a lovely, garden-like dining area, where I consumed every gourmet's delight--a hamburger--all-the-way.

Chapter 12

The afternoon sun burnished Kahn al Kalili. The maze that is the bazaar took on a warmth, an earthy quality that had been shrouded by the blackness of the night when we had stumbled through the crowds there on New Year's Eve. The insidious, dark passages were now illuminated, awash in a tapestry of color. A multitude of aromas encircled us from the food vendors who hawked their wares as they cooked on make-shift stoves, the flames shooting up around the steaming pots. The spicy perfume swayed with the dance of the galabiyah-clad people, calling forth the exotica that is the orient.

Ibrahim stopped at a rickety wooden cart which was laden with piles of pastel colored, fat sticks resembling chalk. "Candy. You will try?" Ibrahim asked me. Before I could answer, he thrust a small brown paper bag, stuffed with the curious stuff, into my hands. I expected it to be hard and to taste like what, I wasn't sure. To my surprise, it crumbled and melted in my mouth in an instant, with a lingering fruity sweetness, not unlike those tiny, puffed-pillow mints one finds on aunties' coffee tables throughout America.

There were vendors of all sizes and shapes, all polite, all asking us to step in and have a look at their wares. Hammered brass plates, engraved with flowing Arabic proverbs gleamed around us. Fahmy Mousin introduced himself with a bow and a sweep of his hand. His stall was glittering with brass works, all, he told us, handmade. As we browsed in the tiny shop, he pulled out piece after piece, often climbing up precariously

among the stacks of objects to reach something special, then begging our close scrutiny of his handiwork. There were huge urns several feet tall and tiny cups for demitasse. "I make you something. Anything. Send to hotel for you. You tell me what." He handed out business cards to us as we left without buying anything.

Painted papyrus was everywhere. Piles of the paper, made by the methods of the ancient Egyptian scribes, lay on tables and counters. The excess overflowed onto the floor. They bore likenesses of the gods and goddesses of that long-ago civilization, as well as kings and queens and that universal hero, Snoopy. Most were poorly rendered, with an excess of gold paint. In one shop, which also offered exquisite oriental rugs for sale, we saw papyrus of exceptional quality. The artist painted only scenes from the tombs in Luxor and her lines and colors were fine and delicate. Many pieces were filled with miniature hieroglyphics, each telling the story of the life and death of a royal Egyptian. We chose two, a matched pair. On the first, Anhai, a member of the College of Amun-Re at Thebes, stands with her hands raised in adoration of the sun god, Re. Before her is a table of offerings. In her left hand she holds a sistrum and a spray of flowers. The deep brown of her skin shows through her gossamer white gown. The god Horus, depicted as a hawk, sits across from her, the rich teal and cobalt blue of his feathers dramatised by the dark red solar disk above his head, symbolic of the rising sun. Beneath his talons is a purple mountain, representing the west and the setting sun. On either side of the sun is a winged eye of Horus and a feather. Four apes, symbolizing the Spirits of the Dawn, along with Isis and Nephtys and a depiction of the soul of Anhai in bird-like form are all beneath the hawk, worshipping the sun.

The second painting portrays the weighing of the heart of the dead

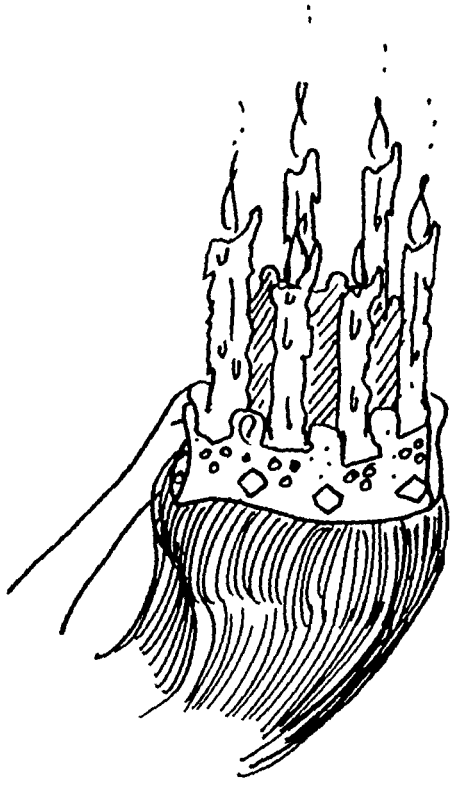
Anhai. On the left is the goddess Maat, holding a staff. A wide, gold necklace encircles her throat. Her gown is deep blue. In the center of the painting, Horus leads Anhai to the scales, where her heart will be weighed against an ostrich feather. According to the ancient Egyptian religion, if one's heart was burdened with the weight of many sins, it would sink when weighed against the feather. Thus, the people were encouraged to do good deeds and think pure thoughts so that their souls might pass on to a happy hereafter. On the lower left of the picture, the god Toth records the result of the trial. On the far right, the verdict is shown. The goddesses Maat and Amentit raise their hands jubilantly, welcoming the triumphant Anhai.

Leaving the papyrus vendor, purchases in hand, we headed down the hard, packed-dirt corridor, passing small, open rooms filled with men. They sat in wooden slat-backed chairs in groups of two or three, each man sucking on a long leader of a tall, silver waterpipe. The gurgling and hissing of the pipes could be heard above the voices and the music in the passageway. I wondered if the harsh Turkish tobacco tasted any smoother when filtered through the water in those pipes. I thought about my college roommate from long years ago who had bought one of the four-foot tall contraptions home with her from a trip to the Middle East. I remember her unpacking it piece by piece, each wrapped in a blouse or a nightgown or a sock in her suitcase. She had laughed as she told me of the customs agent in New York who believed her when she swore that the pipe was for decorative use only.

The jewelry vendors beckoned us. Heavy silver necklaces, earrings and bracelets were draped everywhere. Watchbands, key chains, pins, and charms dangled from pegs on the walls. The shops sold their silver pieces

by weight, placing them on a delicate set of scales. The price fluctuated daily, coinciding with the current market value. There was every manner of necklace, from a simple chain to the spangled, bellydancer variety, to delicately swirled Arabic names and sayings. It was one of these that I held in my hand, studying the curlicued, intricate shapes. Ibrahim stood beside me, nodding approvingly. "There is one God, Allah," he said softly, tracing each word in turn on the necklace in my hand.

"I don't need a box," I told the man who weighed the necklace for me. "I'd like to wear it."



Chapter 13

The woman with the candelabrum atop her head swayed to the beat of the music. With one hand she balanced her precarious, ornate brass crown, its thick white candles aflame, wax dripping everywhere. With the other hand she slapped a tambourine against her quivering hip. The knot of people around her shouted and sang, some with arms upraised, others tossing confetti into the air. The song that the sang was some sort of round--the second group starting a verse slightly after the first group. It was curious and circus-like in the front lobby of the Cairo Sheraton Inn that night.

"A wedding celebration," El-Banhawy shouted to us as he led the way through the crowd. As we squeezed in between people and around marble columns, I caught a glimpse of a beautiful, black-haired, doe-eyed woman, lavishly gowned in flowing white silk. A huge puff of bridal tulle was gathered around the back and sides of her head. Her bridegroom was tall and slender, his swarthy complexion a deep contrast to his white cut-away tuxedo. He held her hand aloft, but gently, delicately. His smile was soft, with a beam of pride one usually sees on the face of a new father.

Dr. El-Banhawy, a professor of neuroanatomy at Ain Shams University where Keith had guest lectured earlier in the week, had invited us to dinner this evening. The three of us were suddenly caught up in the spontaneity of this unexpected wedding feast. I was taken with the way these Moslem women adorned themselves for the occasion. All were swathed in the long

gallibayahs that covered them completely, from head to foot, but a touch of Paris chic graced them. Their flowing garments were not of the coarse, dark fabric seen on women during the day. These were of silk, some of satin, sleekly draped and tucked. Expensive European shoes peeked out from beneath the luxuriant folds. The faces that showed from beneath their manteaus were made-up, as if for some avant garde fashion plate. One's lavender shadow extended to the brows, deep ruby-red glossed her lips, while her dark, khol-rimmed eyes were fringed by lashes too long to be real. A hand cupped to her pouted mouth revealed talon-like nails painted a deep violet. But the crowning glory really were the hats. If they had been men, the angle would have been called rakish. One hates to use the word coquettish, but that is what I saw. Dainty, fitted little hats, some with tiny veils, some with sequins, all with ornate hat pins were tilted atop the covered hair of these women. A study in contrasts--the Moslem obedience, the virtuousness of being covered versus the secular call of fashion's coronet--painted, beaded, vulgar.

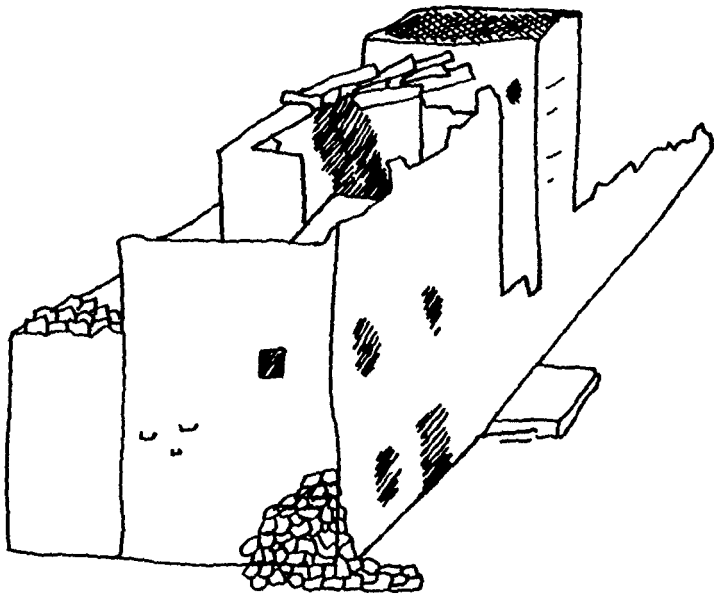
The Sheraton beguiled its customers with a sultan's tent for a dining room. Brightly painted paisley fabric hung everywhere--on the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Tables were scattered around the edges of a dancefloor. An orchestra, a la Lawrence Welk, was situated along the front wall. The sumptuous buffet, laden with dishes of all manner of ethnic foods, wound around the left side of the tent-like room. At the end of the buffet table were two Arab women sitting cross-legged on the floor. In a corner next to them was a large, domed clay oven. Smoke billowed out from an open fire and, curling and climbing upwards, escaped through an opening in the tent into the cool, night, desert air. It is a wonder, the ideas, the traditions we each

call native--are they truly? Are they each not related somehow? Are these ovens not the same adobes of the southwestern reaches of North America? Thor Heyerdahl may have proved more than just the navigational ability of early African civilizations when he sailed the papyrus vessel, Ra, across the Atlantic.

"Why they cover their hair--is for tradition only. There is no other significance anymore. Women are more westernized daily." El-Banhawy's frank response to my question surprised me. "Many don't do it at all. My wife still does. I don't know why. Not for me, certainly. I don't ascribe to the veiling of women. We have many conflicting beliefs here in Egypt. Women have the same legal rights as men in most aspects of life--education for instance. A woman or a man is educated for free in the public schools from primary through the Ph. D. if one so wishes. We have trouble with the old ways though. Some women insist on wearing the veil; the more conservative even wear gloves. You can imagine the problems they encounter in science laboratories when doing dissections or any work requiring deftness of hand. There was great public outcry recently when a woman was forced by her professor to remove her gloves and veil during a lab practical at the medical school. She simply could not see or feel what she was doing, but insisted upon continuing. You can imagine the contaminants in clothing like that. A sterile environment is impossible, but, still, they insist upon covering themselves." El Banhawy ate voraciously as he spoke, punctuating his words with a scallion held aloft or with a quick gesture with his knife and fork.

The local beer was malty and good. *Stella*. One of the liter bottles would have been plenty, but we were unaware of their size when we ordered. Our host must have thought we were lushes when the waiter

brought each of us a bottle. But, then again, he probably didn't care. The belly dancer, gyrating to the exotic music, tossing her long, black hair, had made her entrance.



Chapter 14

I boarded the overnight train to Aswan with relief. We were to have a week's free time traveling in Upper Egypt, a chance to see all of the sights we'd only read about in history books: the monuments, the temples, the tombs. The sleeping compartment was cramped. We bumped around, trying to get the luggage stowed and ourselves situated. It was chilly. There had been an Australian woman at the depot who had remarked in her thick brogue how crazy she was to have left home. "It's summer there--and I have a swimming pool, so what am I doing in this dirty, gawd-awful place?"

When Keith returned from the bathroom at the rear of the car, I asked him what shape the facilities were in. After my other "toilet experiences" in Cairo, I was ready for just about anything. "Not bad, actually. It's like an airplane. All stainless steel. There is a surprise though--you have to experience it for yourself. Take the Wet Ones. There isn't any T.P."

It was as he had described. The metal fixtures were cold to the touch, and there was no hot water. "Oh, well," I thought, "at least there *is* water." The surprise Keith had mentioned caused me to erupt in uncontrollable laughter. The bottom of the toilet was hinged, and, upon flushing, the bottom dropped away, releasing the toilet's contents onto the railroad tracks which whizzed by below me. I could just imagine what the tracks would look like in the morning. After all, there had been a hundred or more people boarding the train that night. The way from Cairo to Aswan would be well

fertilized.

The morning found us somewhere in Upper Egypt. It puzzled me at first, this reversal of upper and lower. The southern part of the country is called Upper, the northern part, Lower. It comes from the directional flow of the Nile River, which runs, oddly enough, south to north. Now I could see the river, running beside us as the train sped along. Every now and then we passed a small group of young boys riding water buffaloes through the deep green rushes near the river bank. The boys waved to the people on the train. Laughingly, they coaxed their charges to go faster in a vain attempt to keep up with us. The irrigation system used by the local farmers forces water from the Nile into their small, carefully tended plots. The crops were indistinguishable from the window of the train, but the effect was one of a deep green carpet, set against a backdrop of an even greener river.

Two men approached us at the Aswan station. One identified himself as a tour-service manager who had been contacted by Fairoz and Ibrahim. The other introduced himself as our personal tour guide for the next three days. We were wary of these strangers, but they knew our names and those of our hosts in Cairo. They spoke English very well. Keith and I looked at each other, neither of us quite sure of what to do or say. A car awaited, its doors standing open. Without waiting for a response, the men whisked our luggage into the trunk and ushered us into the back seat. Seconds later, we were careening through the streets of Aswan, car horn blaring, dodging pedestrians, donkeys and horse-drawn carriages. We had no map of this area, so neither Keith nor I know where we were. We both looked anxiously at street markers, at shops, at hotels, trying perhaps to remember visually where we had been in case we had made a mistake by believing these two men and found ourselves in trouble. They were

speaking Arabic now and smoking. The smoke filled the small car. I tried to roll my window down, but the handle was broken. Keith's had no handle at all.

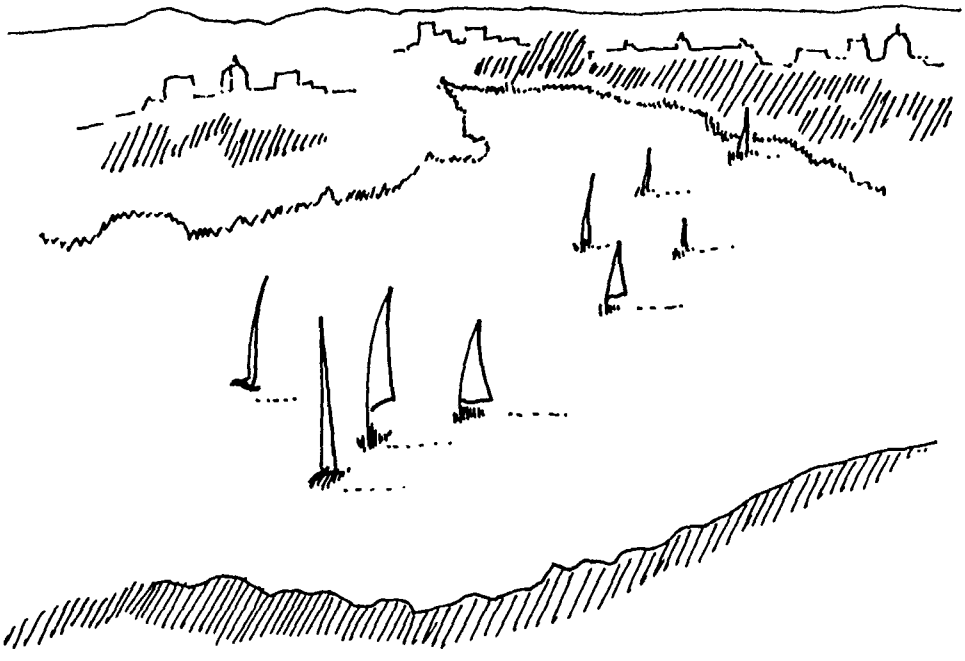
The Nile suddenly came into view, running parallel along the right-hand side of the road. Primitive-looking sailboats were scattered across its glassy surface, their white sails sagging slightly in the still air. The car jolted to a stop. "Isis Hotel," the guide said, jumping out to open the door for me. The driver pulled the luggage from the trunk and sat it on the sidewalk. "We will return for you at two o'clock for trip to Botanical Gardens and Aga Kahn Memorial."

As the car screeched away from the curb, a wave of relief swept over me, but it was to be a brief respite from anxiety. From out of nowhere, two old Arab women, wearing black gallibayahs and veils, grabbed at our bags. They were barefooted. Their feet showed the effects of weather and neglect: dry, cracked skin, peeling in places, and twisted, dirty nails that had not been cared for in years. They gestured towards the hotel doors, frantically trying to lift the heavy bags. If we had been in New York or Key West, I would have termed them panhandlers, street people, vagrants. But we were in the Third World. These were pitiful old women, small, frail, and desperately trying to earn some meager tip by carrying the cumbersome luggage for us. Keith seized the handle of the large suitcase and quickly walked towards the hotel doors. I followed closely behind, wanting not to look at the women, but not being able to take my eyes from them. They looked dejected. As we got to the lobby, I glanced back down the sidewalk. They were sitting on the curb, looking up the street at the oncoming taxicabs.

Our room wasn't ready. We checked our luggage at the desk and walked out back. The hotel was built on a terrace overlooking the Nile. The rooms were actually small bungalows, connected by a zig-zag series of walkways and bordered by angular formal gardens. There was a swimming pool, not the cleanest I'd ever seen, and white chaise lounges and deck chairs with adjoining tables. An outdoor bar, outlined in multicolored lights was off to one side of the pool. Small electric lanterns were strung from the sign posts and trees.

It was much warmer here in the south than it had been in Cairo. I was suddenly hot in my long pants and cotton sweater and shirt. I took off my shoes and socks and rolled up my pants legs a few turns. I peeled off my sweater and pinned up my hair in a vain attempt to get more comfortable. We ordered two Sprites from the tuxedo-clad waiter. Across the way, two German women sunbathed in the nude. Three men in bikini bathing suits taunted each other in Italian at the edge of the deep end of the pool. Pushing and shoving like little boys in a school yard game, they finally fell into the water, splashing those nearby. It was an odd contrast of behaviors. The Arab women, squatting on the curb, with only their faces and feet exposed, begging for their very existence, while only yards away, Westerners, wealthy by any Egyptian standard, lolled about, their naked bodies oiled and glistening in the warm, midday sun.

The waiter brought the drinks and informed us that our room was ready. We'd been outdoors over an hour and my face felt the slight, heated sting of a mild sunburn. The sun was high overhead now, blindingly bright, and as we walked across the deck towards the lobby, I hit my head on one of the hanging lanterns. "Just what I need," I thought, holding my hand to the cut on my forehead, "a black eye."



Chapter 15

"You want faluka?" the little boy hollered, chasing after us. The guide had arrived as promised and the three of us walked down the steep stairway that led to the Nile.

"Come with me! Good ride! Not too much!" another boy chanted. I felt uneasy. The guide paid them no mind.

"I have a boat waiting for us," he said. He was about thirty five with a slender build. He wore American style clothes--his shirt bore a Levi's tag on the pocket seam. His skin was cafe-au-lait, his hair, jet black. A small, closely trimmed mustache, like that of an old matinee idol--the Clark Gable variety--adorned his upper lip. But his eyes were most intriguing. They were pale green, fringed by thick, dark lashes. I wondered about his ancestry.

We stepped down into an old wooden sailboat. Layer upon layer of paint had been applied over the years, giving the surface a lumpy texture. Worn floral cushions lined the bench seats. The owner, a scrawny, dark, little fellow draped in white helped me into the boat. The lines were freed from the dock and a long pole was plunged into the water to push the boat out into the river. Then the main sail was raised. It looked like an old, white bedsheet. I asked the guide what these boats were called. "Faluka," he responded, inhaling deeply from his cigarette. The smoke curled around his lips and up towards his eyes, causing him to squint at me. "Used for fishing, transportation--now used for tourist rides as well."

We had drifted into the middle of the Nile. A peninsula jutted out ahead of us. The water was so very green, the very stereotype one associates with the river's name. "You know what is longest river in the world?" the guide asked me.

"Uh-oh," I thought, remembering that same uncomfortable feeling from Miss Keer's fifth grade history class. "Must be the Amazon," I answered, not really knowing if I was supposed to have said, "The Nile."

He smiled smugly. "Americans," he said, shaking his head. "The Mississippi River is the longest river in the world." I made a funny face to ease my embarrassment. He laughed.

"Where are you from?" I asked him, half expecting him to say, "America."

"Aswan," was his short reply. Then, "I've lived here all my life." But he knew what I wanted to know without my asking him. "My father was a Dutchman," he said, ducking his cigarette in the water. "And so, my eyes are green. Look," he said, pointing towards the bow of the boat. We had come around the peninsula. Dozens of falukas were ahead, their sails white slants against the deep azure of the afternoon sky.

The guide had been manning the tiller all this time and now, he offered it to Keith. We sailed along in silence for several minutes, never quite catching up with the fleet of boats ahead of us. We slipped into a tiny spot along the riverbank, got out of the boat, and climbed a rickety, rambling set of steps up the steep slope of a rocky hill. Bougainvillaea spilled over a ledge and cascaded its deep pinkness through the cracked concrete. The lush botanical gardens of Kitchener's Island awaited. We walked the manicured paths without benefit of our guide, who had agreed to meet us in a half hour at the cafe in the center of the garden. The plants were

surprisingly different from the typical selection one usually sees in such formal settings. Lord Kitchener, the island's namesake, a Consul-General of Sudan, created the gardens with plants propagated from specimens brought here from throughout the Middle East. Poinsettia trees dotted the tropical, verdant pathways with their brilliant red foliage. Date palms punctuated the breaks between dense hedges, and the luxuriant bougainvillaea graced every overhang.

At the far end of the garden was a peculiar sign: "The Regional Aswan Duck Research Station." With no one to explain it, we only surmised its meaning. I made a mental note to ask the guide about it later, but forgot to.

The cafe turned out to be a half dozen broken down chairs and tables strewn in front of a thatched roof shack. A rough, hand lettered sign proclaimed the availability of tea, Coca-Cola and 7-Up. Keith and I split a 7-Up that came in a bottle scratched and chipped from its many recycles. Reggae music pulsated from the shack, unwanted noise in such a seemingly unspoiled place. The souvenir hawkers were going from table to table, offering alabaster carvings, scarabs, and wooden beads. The first black-skinned people I'd seen in Egypt appeared in the doorway of the shack. "Nubians," the guide said offhandedly. "They come from Sudan, just a little south of Aswan. It was called Nubia by the ancients."

We climbed back down the stairs to the boat and, since the wind had died, tacked back and forth up the river towards the Aga Kahn Mausoleum. Startled by some unknown foe, a flock of ibis burst from the trees along the river's edge, a white blur against the emerald water.

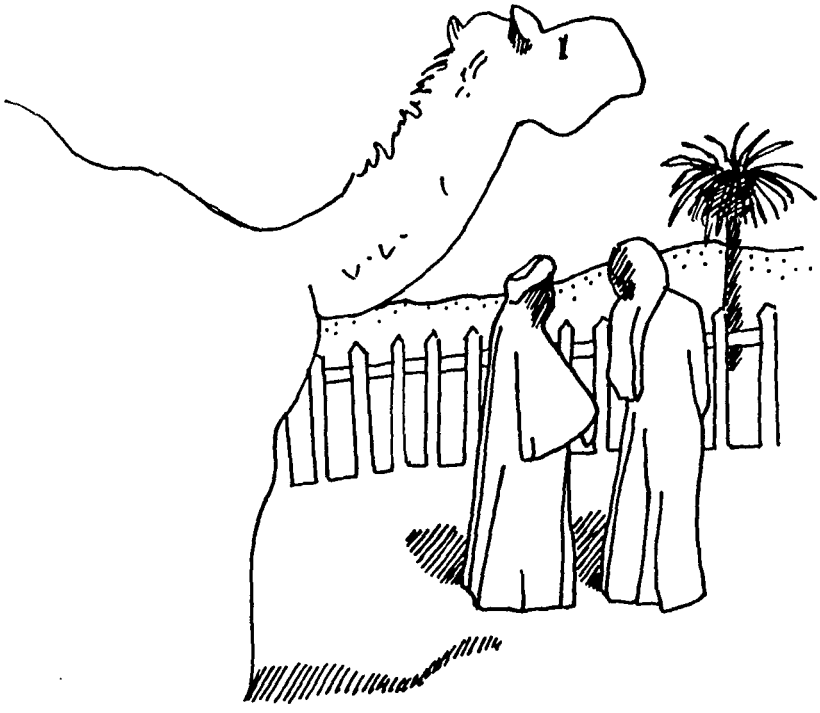
"You know of Aga Kahn?" the guide asked in his slightly sneering way. Eager to prove myself after the "longest river in the world" incident, I tossed out the only information I knew.

"He had a son--Ali Kahn--who married Rita Hayworth, the American movie star, and then he died in a car wreck somewhere in Europe." I felt as if I'd just recited the headline of the *National Enquirer*. The guide smiled that smile again. I decided to shut up.

"Aga Kahn was spiritual leader of Moslems. His wife is called Begum. She comes in winter to stay in their villa near his tomb. Rest of time, she lives in Paris."

The mausoleum and small mosque sat atop a hill, the burial place requested by the Aga Kahn. Its pink granite exterior took on a warm, rose color in the late afternoon sun. Four small domed minarets graced each of the corners of the tall, fortress-like structure. A large dome rose high above the roof at the far end of the building. As we entered, a small, dark man robed and turbaned in white, gestured towards our shoes. We walked through the archway in our socks and were directed to the left side where a huge tablet, etched in English, told of the life and death of the man buried within. There were like tablets in French and Arabic on other walls. Silence reigned, except for the soft padding of our stockinged feet against the slick marble floor.

Making our way down the steep slope back towards the boat, I could see its owner sitting in the middle of the deck, a large, silver water pipe glinting in the fading sun, between his legs. I wondered what he was smoking. As we boarded, he offered me the lead he'd been sucking on. I shook my head and looked at the quickly darkening sky. "Aswan--Sudan," I thought. "Isn't this where that ferry burned and sank last year and half the people were eaten by crocodiles?"



Chapter 16

A fish and a bird. A crooked staff. A wavy line. I pressed my fingers into the recessed shapes. Each contour was perfect. No chips or cracks, no signs of wear. No sign that this wall of hieroglyphics dated not from the previous year, or month, or week, but from the Ptolemaic Dynasty, 304 years before Christ. Such is the magnificence of Kom Ombo Temple.

Horus the Elder, Isis, his wife, and Horus, son of Isis loom, larger than life, over the entrance to the left tower. On the right side, Sobek, Hathor, his wife, and Khonsu, their son preside. There is an overall whiteness, a sun-baked, dry, bleached quality to this place. The sixteen columns, eight on either side, each intricately carved with more deities and hieroglyphics, guided the way through the court towards the inner sanctuaries. Hopi, led by the Pharaoh, Tiberius, bears libation water, bread, cakes, and lotus flowers on the right wall. The hawk-headed Horus and the ibis-headed Thoth point the direction to the rear of the court where the deities annoint Ptolemy XII. Stepping into the sanctuary rooms, we are surprised at their darkness, and use a flashlight to illuminate the towering figures on the walls. These are in a poor state of preservation and I wondered why. These holy places are enclosed, seemingly protected, unlike the outermost reliefs that must still bear the intense beatings of the sun and the flooding from the Nile. Why then should these inner rooms show such wear?

Circling around the courtyard, I see a small chamber in one corner. It is the Hat-Hor Chapel. A twentieth-century steel barred door, like that of a

prison cell, keeps me out. I am irritated, but only for a few seconds. Pressing myself against the bars, hand over my eyes to shade the streaming sunlight, I realize that I am face to face with the upright mummies of several dozen crocodiles. Their grotesque, decaying mouths are agape, their heads upturned in the grip of death. It takes my breath away. I back off too quickly, stumbling on a crumbled step. Later, our guide explained this place to me. The ancient priests of Kom Ombo vainly attempted to appease the gods whom they believed responsible for the yearly flood tides of the Nile. The floods brought the crocodiles into the temple where many became trapped and died. The priests mummified them and built this chapel, dedicating it to the crocodile god Sobek.

I listened as intently as I could to this history lesson as the battered old sedan rattled down the pot-hole-filled blacktop road. The dashboard of the car was torn open, and the yellowed, old foam padding poked through the ripped vinyl. Tangerine peels and seeds, deposited by the driver and our green-eyed, Arab guide, littered the space near the windshield. We pulled onto a grassy area outside a roped-off, flat clearing. The Kom Ombo Village Camel Market was a teeming center of activity, with animals and men everywhere.

Even though I'd reluctantly ridden on a camel at the pyramids in Giza, I wasn't prepared for them en masse. The stench overcame all of my other senses. I held Keith's arm as we walked into the penned-in holding area and, at times, buried my nose in his sleeve to try to keep from gagging. I thought about the trip I'd made to a dairy farm when I was seven years old, and how overpowering that smell was. I remembered pressing a small, black change purse, containing my lunch money, to my nose, desperately trying to block out the terrible odor. It was dusty in the marketplace and my

eyes teared and my nose smarted from the stuff floating in the air. The camels towered over us. Leaning their heads down, they followed us, their long necks swaying with the movement. We passed some smaller camels lying in that cat-like pose, with their legs tucked completely under them. They jerked upright as we passed, too closely for them, and for me. I jumped just as they did. I don't know who was more frightened, the animals or me.

Many of the large beasts were curiously bound, with one front leg doubled-up and tied, so as to hamper their movement. The guide explained that it was for our own safety and not really a matter of cruelty--the big camels tended to play "king of the mountain," so to speak, and would charge one another if allowed to roam freely. All of the camels bore Arabic numerals on their scruffy coats, most of the marks being at the base of their necks. These were the prices of the animals. I watched as a weather-beaten old Arab man held the neck of a bound camel as he scrawled the price with a fat, red Magic Marker; yet another bit of Americana seeping into a place seemingly undisturbed by time and technology.

Groups of buyers and sellers, all men, all robed and turbaned in black and white, were clustered among the animals throughout the market. They chattered in their native tongue, watching us warily as we walked by, grinning at me with their gapped, rotted-toothed smiles. I was the sole woman in their midst. I saw the glint of silver scabbards, hiding razor-like curved knives, which were partially concealed in the necklines of their gallibayahs. As we passed a hissing, spitting group of scraggly camels, a man lurched out from behind them. He was speaking rapidly in Arabic, nodding his head and gesturing at me. I held Keith's arm tighter with my left hand as the man came right up to me and grabbed my right arm. The

guide, the driver and my husband were engrossed in conversation and paid him no mind. He leaned his face uncomfortably close to mine, babbling incoherently. I backed away as much as I could without falling over, and tried to jerk my arm out of his grasp. He threw back his head, laughing loudly and, drawing back his free hand, grabbed my behind as hard as he could. I let out a yelp and the heretofore unconcerned trio I was with suddenly came to life. The guide shouted something in Arabic as he swatted at the man, who still held me in his rough embrace. As the old man released his hold on me, I saw his hand slide into the neckline folds of his gallibayah. He laughed scornfully and, as suddenly as he had appeared, he vanished.

Chapter 17

Son et luminere. Sound and light. So much irony in so few words. For two thousand years, the sound and light within the Philae Temple have been those of the natural, earthly sort--the low grunt of the ibis, the sweet breath of the Nile breeze, and the deathly rush of its surge tides, the unconscionable burning of the desert sun and the pale, tender light of the midnight moon. And now, son et luminere, twentieth-century man's base attempt at one-upmanship with time eternal. Laser lights, flashing red, blue, green, and actors' voices with contrived British accents accost today's traveller, blaring their meager imitations of the gods and goddesses of Philae Temple from a tape recorder. Ancient Egypt goes audio-visual. King Tut must be turning in his golden grave.

For the sum of 600 piasters, we were ferried across the Nile for the laser light show at Agilkai, the tiny island that has become home to this ancient shrine. The site is a reconstruction created by dismantling the entire temple, courtyards, and their contents, and moving them piece by precious piece, from the flood ravaged Philae Island to this higher and drier enclave.

The great river seems to control all aspects of life and death. Trade-offs are frequent and often painful in this country, and the results are permanent and devastating. The land of Nubia is no more. The "marriage ceremony," performed in deference to Hopi, the Nile god, in thanks for the rich flood waters that irrigated the parched fields and thereby bound the

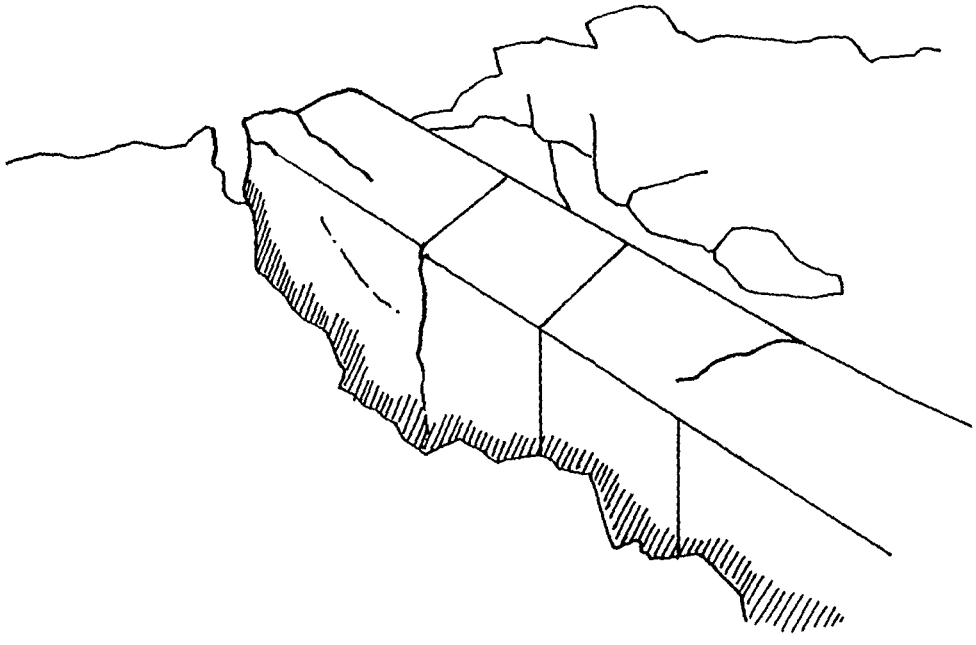
river to the land in symbolic matrimony, has long been forgotten. The original Aswan Dam brought flood waters to Philae Temple for nine months of the year. It is said that only the cornices atop the two pylons were visible during these deluges. The advent of the High Dam in the 1960's meant greater hydroelectric capacity for the Egyptians and greater irrigation control for its farmers, but ensured the destruction of Nubia and its antiquities and forced the relocation of some 100,000 people. Somehow, conscience reigned, and Philae Temple was saved.

We sat in the dark on the open deck of the ferry. It was cold, the wind off the river making it a damp, uncomfortable ride. A woman across from us looked warm enough in a long, wrap of a coat, her head and neck swathed in the black and white checkered pattern of a traditional fringed Palestinian shawl. There were, perhaps, a dozen people aboard, all in pairs, all huddled against their partners. From the looks on their faces, all probably wished as I did, that the boat would move a little faster and that the engines wouldn't drone on so loud or smell so bad.

Floodlights drenched the temple with their greenish fluorescence. We were allowed a few minutes to wander about and were encouraged along by the silent gestures of the now commonplace, dragoman guides in their flowing white raiments. The water marks have left their toll on Philae. They are clearly visible, like so many bathtub rings, the indelible marks of man in his quest to control nature.

The lamps were extinguished and, for a few seconds in the dark, the pearly granite was faintly visible under the clear night sky. The structure appeared new, revitalized, void of its scars and traumas. And then, son et luminere. But I have already spoken of that. Perhaps it would be a greater experience to merely sit in the dark and watch the shooting stars and the

shadows of the papyrus dancing in the night air. Perhaps we would think, then, of those who came before in reverence to Isis and Osiris, believing in the legend of divine love between this goddess-wife and god-husband. Perhaps, then, we would realize that not every beach needs a boardwalk or water flume ride, that not every rugged terrain need be paved for a barrage of recreational vehicles, and that the ancient beauty of these monuments does not require son et luminere.



Chapter 18

Paris. That's where I'd seen it. In Paris--right in the middle of the Place de la Concorde. The Egyptian Obelisk. The slender, granite monument points skyward, an extraordinary but simple bit of the oriental among the massive French baroque. And here, in Aswan, lying before me as if resting, waiting to be lifted to its place amid some equally enduring monuments, was its twin. Moments after I had recognized it, the guide asked if I might have been to France and seen such a monolith there. They were to have been a pair, these two huge stones, but one lies in Egypt, eternally unfinished. It is in the northern-most granite quarry, still affixed to the bedrock below. The only marks on it are those left by the ancient craftsmen who began their work and then abandoned the project when flaws were found in the stone. Once more, as I had felt so many times during these days in the land of the pharaohs, I had an overpowering sense of guilt, of man's insensitivity to the destructive forces that obliterate so many earthly wonders. Like the other tourists, I stood at the broad base of the obelisk and walked its length, and stood upon the pointed tip. How many thousand footsteps were beneath my own? How many more would follow?

We rode to the dam in silence. The construction site is still as it was during the building phase of the high dam. To be honest, I was disappointed. Isn't it funny how we are transfixed by the feats of ancient man, but are bored with modern inventions? Rubble was strewn

everywhere. Again, as at Giza, the Coca Cola bottles and cigarette wrappers seemed the most evident feature.

Six months earlier, I had stood atop Arizona's Glen Canyon Dam at Lake Powell and experienced a devastating fear of height and water combined. I could feel the imposing structure tremble beneath me as each vehicle passed by on the dam's skyscraping road. Here, at the famous Aswan Dam, there was no such sensation. I smiled to myself, thinking of some beaver family, scrambling along, building a home along the Nile. I guess I was smug in my belief in American know-how. Our guide broke the silence, his sneer still apparent. "Why you let Russians build Aswan Dam? Why Americans not help us? Why Russia, not U.S.A.?" He followed me, staying at my elbow, chattering away about the politics of dam building. I had no answer for him. I merely shook my head. As if sensing my lack of awe at this Soviet-sponsored hydroelectric feat, he tossed out a rather disconcerting remark. "Crocodiles on other side of dam. Eat dogs sometimes. Sometimes people, too. Don't fall in."

We had no plans that afternoon and decided just to walk around. The carriages lined up outside the Isis Hotel stretched as far as I could see. All black surreys, all with the proverbial fringe on top, all with flowers tucked behind the ears of the weary-eyed horses. Turning down a side street, we found ourselves on the edge of a bazaar. Open stalls lined the narrow way, but they weren't the usual tourist traps manned by grinning hucksters promising bargains. These places were even more roughly hewn than any others I'd seen. They were filled with all manner of household stuffs--dark, coarse cloth remnants, unevenly folded and stacked haphazardly about, tin pots and pans and utensils, dusty jars with questionable contents. Children ran in and out of the stalls, shouting, chasing each other in some Middle

Eastern game of tag. The street had given way to a dirt road. People stared at us, hushing their conversations as we passed. There were no hammered brass urns here, no finely turned silver bracelets, no pima cotton, no paintings on papyrus. We had entered the real world of Aswan, the local market, where two white Americans were as curious to these people as aliens from another planet. Their gazes showed that we were suspect.

Standing beneath a tattered, multicolored canopy, I caught the eye of our guide. He made no sign, but quickly smoked the last of his cigarette and tossed the butt in the trickle of muddy water that ran down the side of the road. He elbowed the driver who stood next to him and they disappeared into the stall, as if to show their neighbors that they'd never seen us before either.

It was the last time we were to see them. Although the driver had promised to be at the hotel at the ungodly hour of five a.m. the following morning to take us to the train depot, we found ourselves alone on the street in that cold, dark stillness of pre-dawn. The train was to depart Aswan at 5:30. We waited for twenty minutes in the dampness, and, in desperation, not even knowing where the station was located, Keith ran out into the street to flag down an oncoming car. The man leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door. I had visions of newspaper headlines at home: *"Local couple found dead in Nile River--crocodiles suspected."* To our chagrin, the station was but a block away, just around the corner. We had but seconds to spare. The stunned man found himself with a five dollar U.S. bill stuffed in his palm as he watched the two of us sprint for the train.


الأقصر
LUXOR

Chapter 19

Thebes. The mere sound of the word brings visions of the sun god, Amon-Ra, of elegant, artisan creations, of an ancient renaissance in all things worldly and spiritual. Hatshepsut, Amenhotep, Tutankhamen--so lyrical, so powerful. They are still here, these god-men and women. In the haze that rises from the Valley of the Kings, their spirits shape the clouds, their voices are the rhythm of the wind.

Thebes has become Luxor, but an unparalleled grandeur reigns in this city despite the name change. This is a city of monuments, each one seemingly more magnificent than the others. It was an odd juxtaposition, riding in a small, cramped taxi, racing down a black-topped thoroughfare past the towering, granite statuary, the temples, the obelisks. We should have come by camel, by caravan. We should be swathed in white robes, our faces covered to shield us from the fine, gritty shower of the desert's warm breath. There should be cinnamon, oranges, incense and gold. Instead, there are alabaster ashtrays, plastic scarab bracelets, an Italian restaurant and Luxor Beach Club t-shirts. A guard at the train station was a study in contrasts, turbaned and wrapped from head to foot with layer upon layer of dark cotton cloth, his AK47 assault rifle draped nonchalantly across his lap.

I stood at the base of the statue of Ramses II and looked up. His arms are crossed upon his chest, his chin, its long, pointed beard crumbling away, is still regal, jutting, proud. I crossed my arms upon my chest and,

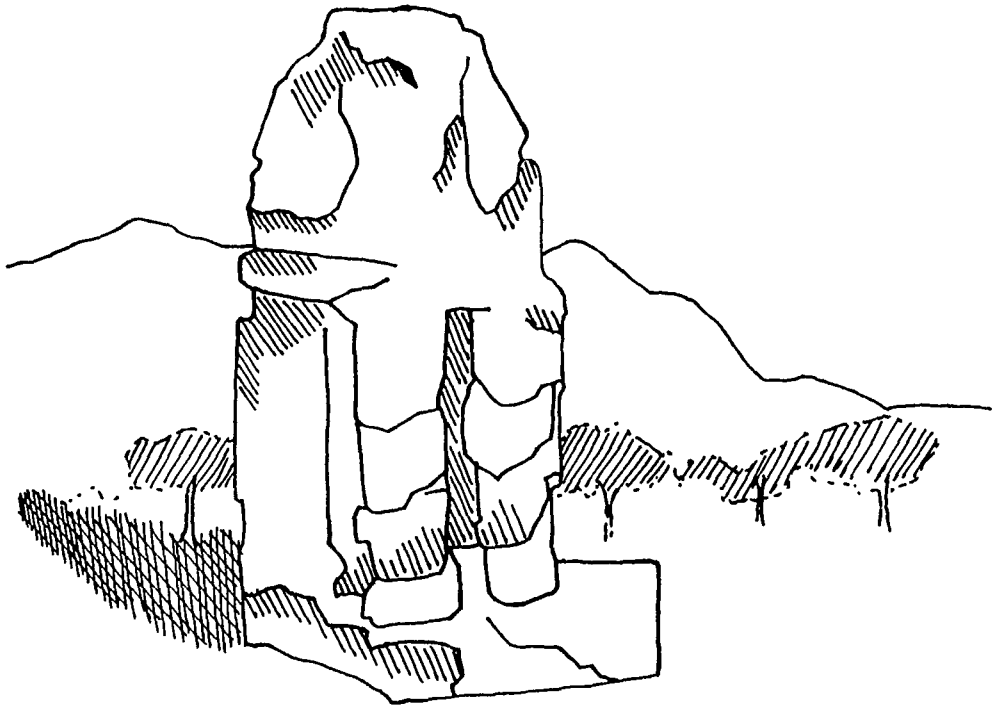
just for a brief, fleeting moment, stood one with this forty-foot giant, his modern counterpart in jeans and tennis shoes. The Great Temple of

Amon at Karnak surrounds him--and me. It seems endless. Row after row of immense columns and towering ruins of once consecrated sanctums beckon. The pharaohs, in succession, built their own entrances, colonnades, and temples. A double row of ram-headed sphinxes, each holding a statue of Ramses II between its forepaws, graces the entry way to the Great Court. Ramses III recorded the victories of his warriors on the pylons. Nearly every inch of granite is covered in low relief. There are names carved at the very top of some of these columns. Vandals, graffiti, I feared, at first glance. The names are in French, not hieroglyphics. The guide explained how at one time the temples were buried in sand from severe desert storms. Napoleon's soldiers stood on the ground and were able to carve their names on the tops of the pylons since the sand covered all but the cornices at the time of the French invasion. That sand would have to have been some forty feet deep to bring those cornices within arms reach.

In the Court of Ramses II, the bearded statues stare downward. Standing alternately with columns, they are enormous, cold, fearsome. Outside, the sun-baked Avenue of Sphinxes awaits us. For two miles, the stone creatures line the way to Luxor Temple. The tall, pointed obelisk is visible from afar.

Once again, I am filled with the wonder of the centuries. I can do nothing but smile, and open every pore to absorb the feel, the calm of this place. In a moment, the peace has vanished. The view from the hotel balcony offers Egypt's sobering reality. Old women are hunched over small campfires, their meager possessions piled amid the rubble in this their

home, the flat, decaying roof of the building next door.



Chapter 20

The "'Skins beat the Bears!" No one moved, then everyone moved--all at once, rushing towards the tall, angular-faced woman with the Dorothy Hamill haircut who had made the unlikely announcement. Only moments before, we had been an assortment of Americans, impatiently but quietly awaiting the arrival of our tour guide who would take us from the Isis Hotel to the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The guide arrived and rather futilely tried to gather everyone together so that the excursion could get underway. He might as well have spoken Chinese. King Tut, be damned! The 'Skins were going to the Superbowl.

Perhaps it was necessary to touch base with hometown news. Perhaps it was that underlying feeling of despair that we all appeared to have--despair at the sight of so many homeless children, old women and a lack of insight into some cure for the situation--even a Band-aid to help heal our own consciences. In Egypt, *Time Magazine* is a hot commodity. The only problem with getting your hands on one is that it will most likely be three or four months out of date when you do get it. *USA Today* is aptly called *USA Last Month* by Americans living in Cairo. Even so, the hoop-la over the NFL playoffs seemed strange to me, and I consider myself a devoted football fan. As homesick as I had been these last weeks, I was overcome by the excitement of seeing the tombs, of crossing the Nile to the land of the dead, to feel the ritual, the sanctuary of the burial grounds of the pharaohs.

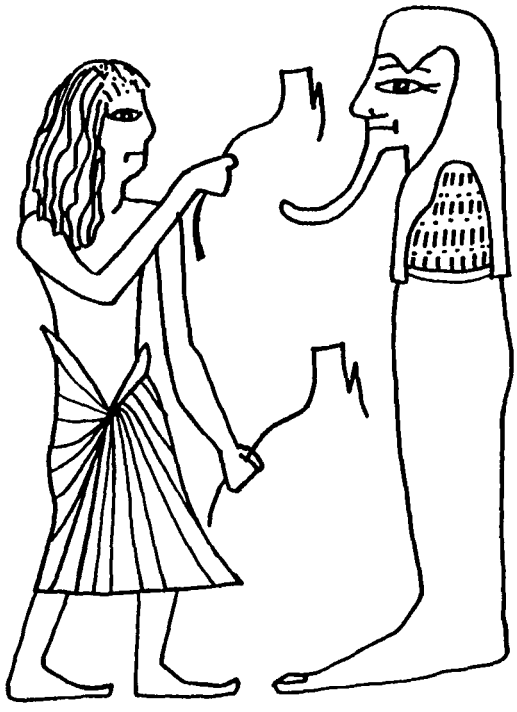
The west was hazy with that fine desert dust as we set out by ferry boat. The bare, buff colored hills gave no indication of the treasures held within. The ancient Egyptians gave much consideration to their afterlife, and so to their burials. It is logical that they would choose the west bank of the Nile for interment. Logical in that the river Nile separates the east bank of the living and the new dawn of life's creation from the setting sun and symbolic end of life of the west. Logical in that the east is verdant, fertile, and the west, barren desert.

The minibus was crowded with our band of tourists, camera bags and knapsacks. We rode through the dust clouds, the group still chattering about the Redskins' prospects against the Broncos. Every now and then, the dust would clear and the clean poof of air would reveal a knot of children at the side of the road, little waifs with black hair and tawny, dirty faces, their bare feet sticking out from under the tatters they called clothes. They grinned and waved at us as we passed.

The bus lurched to a stop. Through the windshield I could see some sort of statuary to the right. "Colossi of Memnon," the guide hollered at us as if he were a New Jersey bus driver announcing our arrival at the Hackensack terminal. Clamoring out of the vehicle, I was stunned by the sight before me. There on the flat of the desert, as if in some imposed exile, were the biggest statues I'd ever seen. The top of my head was barely even with the top of the base of each of these incredible quartzite hulks. Sadly enough, they are, like so many of these ancient treasures, in poor condition. Our group gave example to the reason why the word tourist leaves a bad aftertaste in so many mouths. Many boosted themselves or each other onto the rocks, trying to climb the decaying remains of these

giants. The more conservation-minded members shooed them off, but seemed to do so only to allow for better photos, free of people.

The van climbed farther into the hills and unloaded us at a seemingly brand new temple. It was Deir Al-Bahri, the mortuary of Queen Hatshepsut, who reigned during the fifteenth century B.C. For many years now, a Polish acheological team has excavated and reconstructed the temple. Thus, the "newness" of its appearance. Its extensive colonnades form elegant stripes against the sheer cliffs in the distance. Hatshepsut has seemingly outdone her predecessors in architectural beauty and magnificence, all in the name of women's lib. The laws of succession forbade a woman to be enthroned as pharoah. Hatshepsut, the only true heir of her father, lived her life in utter determination to break down the gender barrier. Forcefully, she proved her adeptness in the party politic. To drive her point home, she wore a man's girdle and false beard throughout her reign. Who knows? Perhaps in the hieroglyphics yet to be deciphered, there is an account of the first known bra burning.



Chapter 21

She was right out of *Frederick's of Hollywood.* Her clear, plastic, stiletto-heeled shoes were complete with lavender froufrou pompons. The chipped, lilac lacquer on her nails accented the late morning desert sky as she punctuated each sentence with sweeping gestures of her hands. Every few seconds she pulled at the neckline of her dress as it slipped off first one shoulder and then the other, exposing lacy, black bra straps. Soprano Italian banter harmonized with the tinkling percussion of an armful of golden bangle bracelets. Had I passed her on the Via Appia or the Champs d'Elysee or on Fifth Avenue, I doubt that I'd have paid her any mind; but we were in the Egyptian desert, Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, and I was her captive audience as we waited in line to enter King Tut's celebrated tomb.

The entrance was surprisingly well kept, neatly excavated out of the towering sandstone cliffs. A large throng of visitors was amassed at the broad opening, but gradually narrowed to single file at the door. Posted on the wall nearest the entry way was a sign that reminded tourists that no flash pictures could be taken within the tomb. What it didn't warn us of was the sneering, automatic rifle-toting guard who sat on a low ledge, surrounded by all manner of baggage and expensive camera equipment. To ensure that flash photos would not be taken, this fellow was confiscating all cameras. I had assumed that the long wait was because people were, understandably enough, getting their fill of this wonder of the ancient

Egyptian world. How often does one get to stand in the midst of the most famous archeological find in history? Surely, I too would take my time once in the tomb. But that was not the case. The holdup, literally speaking, was this intimidating man with the gun, arguing with one person after another, and always getting his way in the end--the camera bag stayed behind. Keith was anxious about leaving his stuff with the guard. There was no order, no check system, no guarantee that someone exiting the tomb would not swap his or her fifty dollar Polaroid Swinger for someone else's five hundred dollar Nikon, or worse, thousand dollar video recorder. "Why am I surprised?" I remember thinking. "Why should there be a check system? Has there been any semblance of order or reason anywhere here? Why am I always so surprised?"

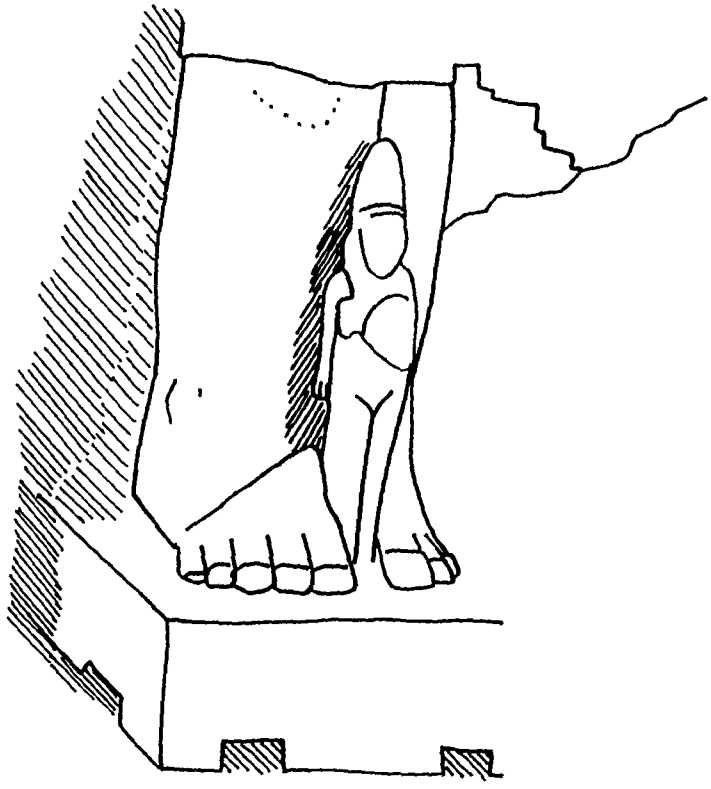
Actually I was more concerned about the knapsack Keith had brought along on the trip. I'd asked him to reconsider, but he insisted I had been watching too many James Bond movies. Why should these Moslem Arabs care that his khaki travel bag was a replica of those carried by Israeli paratroopers, complete with red, winged parachute emblazoned on the front flap? The guard's brow furrowed as he saw the emblem. "Where you get this?" he growled as he thumped the bag. His voice was solemn, unyielding.

"It was a birthday gift from my brother," Keith over-explained.

"America would have been the simplest thing to say," I thought at that moment, but I soon changed my mind. The guard had opened the bag. Stamped in large, block letters on the inside flap was the identifier--MADE IN ISRAEL. The guard gritted his teeth. Those behind us peered over our shoulders to see what the problem was.

"Passports," the guard said. "Americans," he said even more curtly as he saw the flash of the golden eagle on the covers of the little, blue booklets. Keith winced as the guard banged the bag against the ledge and then haphazardly threw it on the ever-deepening pile.

In an instant it was all forgotten. The incredible splendor of the burial chamber of Tutankhamen lay before me. The intensely colored wall decorations are so clear and perfect that they appear newly painted. The nearly life-sized figures from the Book of the Dead are overpowering. The crowd moved slowly, in silence. Even children were strangely quiet. A long, brass railing kept us at bay. Inching along the bar, I peered into the semi-darkness at the golden goddess, Nephthys, who spreads her protective wings over Tutankhamen's sarcophagus. The boy king's mummy lies within. I am completely taken with this place. I am in love with its grandeur and its devotion to the afterlife. I am suddenly cold. The recognition of my own double standard has jolted my conscience once more. I feel that I have overstayed my welcome, indeed if I were ever welcome here at all. This once hidden, sacred room, peaceful resting place to the young pharaoh-child, Tutankhamen is the main amusement in a cemetery theme park. Yet again, I am awed and ashamed all in the same moment. I recall something I learned long ago. Forgive us our trespasses.



Chapter 22

The tiny hand, fingers clenched, reached towards the slightly open mouth. The eyes were closed, the lashes softly curled and upturned. It was the most incredible sight that I had seen in these tombs. Indeed, among all of the gold, the artifacts, paintings, hieroglyphics and statuary, this perfectly preserved six-month-old fetus in its hermetically sealed glass case touched more than my conscience, stirred more than my soul. A child, unborn, yet unveiled, stripped of any semblance of dignity, laid bare for us to gawk and point at. I am one of the gawkers, one of the pointers, but I am one who wishes for a small, crocheted blanket to cover this child and heal the wound of indiscretion.

I eavesdrop on a multilingual senior citizens' tour to hear the English description of this tomb. It is that of Amon-Hir-Khopshef, nine-year-old son of Ramses III, whose likenesses are vividly painted in low relief on the walls. Robbers have long since removed the tangible objects. When the excavation team discovered this particular tomb and opened the young prince's sarcophagus, no mummy was found. In its place lay the fetus, perhaps miscarried by the mother as a result of her grieving for the loss of her elder son. "One can only speculate," the guide says. I find it ironic in this land of male supremacy that the deceased male children, yet to ascend to the throne, all have tombs in the Valley of the Queens and not the Valley of the Kings. Each is given his own magnificent burial chambers, separate from, but still near to his mother.

We climb back into the present and into the waiting minibus. Some of the original group have switched to another vehicle whose driver is going back to the hotel and we have a few new faces in our van who will continue the afternoon journey with us through the Land of the Dead. The guide shouts back over his shoulder at us. It seems that a friend of his runs the local alabaster factory and he wants to take us there instead of, as he puts it, "to more, same, boring tombs."

"So what you want?" he yells, looking at us in the rear view mirror, "my friend's lovely alabaster works or more tombs?" He grins that familiar tobacco-stained, gap-toothed smile, but it quickly becomes a frown when he hears our reply. The group yells back in unison, "More tombs!" We start down the hill. Once more the huge, swirling desert dust clouds envelope the van. One of the new people suddenly jumps up and frantically calls to the driver that he has left his camera in the other car. The car in question is far ahead of us and heading for the ferry.

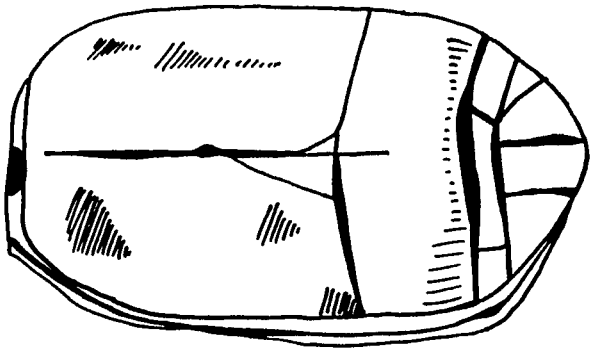
"No worry," our driver shouts back, "we catch him."

The bus lurches into overdrive and we speed down the hill, veering from side-to-side, seemingly out of control, bouncing over the ruts and holes and rubble in the rock strewn, unpaved road. Baggage flies, people hold on to their seats, each other, anything that seems stable.

"We catch," he yells again.

Camera gear slides across the seats and hits the floor. I bang my head on the window as the bus careens around a curve. The driver's hand has never left the horn. It blows incessantly. His foot has never left the gas peddle. We are flying through the desert. Indiana Jones would be proud. As if it had four feet and had thrust them all forward, dragging and digging

the dirt up in a vain effort to stop, the minibus slides sideways to a screeching halt. The missing camera is retrieved, passed up through the van window to its shaken, but grateful owner. Looking up, he sees that all of us are bug-eyed, staring at him, amazed that we have had our lives risked for the sake of his camera. He smiles sheepishly. In his crisp, clipped British accent he simply says, "Sorry."



Chapter 23

He looked intently into my eyes as he pressed something round and hard into my palm. He squeezed my hand and shook it at the same time.

"You are cousin of Egypt forever," he said. "Keep this. It will bring you back to us. You will come here again."

He turned and was gone. I don't know who he was--just a man of Luxor. I still have the scarab that he gave me, I wear it sometimes and when I do, I feel the desire to be there, to look across the Nile and see the desert dust rising up from the tombs, to see those waif-like children, those weary old women and the silent men of the temples in their white robes and turbans.

We flew from Luxor to Cairo and spent one last day in the shadow of the pyramids, walking through the bazaar, haggling with shop keepers, buying trinkets for the folks back home.

Ibrahim and Fairoz took us to the airport. It was noon when we passed through the gate. The attendant had spread his prayer mat on the broken pavement next to the tiny booth and was on his knees, arms outstretched in front of him in reverence to Allah. We went by his checkpoint without slowing down, much less stopping. Ibrahim deposited our luggage by a large glass door and shook Keith's hand.

"We cannot go in with you. Security forbids it. Only passengers allowed inside."

In a moment we were swept into the crowded terminal. I held onto the

back of Keith's shirt as we made our way to the check-in counter. A tall, slender man in a white, silk suit strode by us. He was angular, with a dark, thick beard and a white oval hat atop his cropped hair. Behind him, four women, all draped in white silk, their faces veiled, their heads bowed, followed in his footsteps. Behind them, two skycaps struggled with a massive amount of luggage on a small, uncooperative cart.

We walked out onto the tarmac and across to the waiting EgyptAir jet. I was anxious about the long flight home. Adding to my apprehension, a guard in camouflage uniform stopped us at the base of the stairs.

"Passport," he flatly stated.

He was armed to the teeth. A machine gun hung over one shoulder and a pistol rested in a holster, its grip sticking out from his left armpit. Three hand grenades hung from his belt, dangling onto his right hip. As we started up the stairs, a child screamed behind us. I turned to see the guard grab a gun from the little boy's hand. It was a toy, his mother screamed at the guard.

"Give it back to him, it's a toy! It's a toy!" she shouted over and over.

She tried grappling with the guard to no avail, he held the gun aloft, far over her head. He was unrelenting. The flight attendant, who had been checking seat assignments, rushed down the steps and tried to calm the situation. We got our seats and through the window I could see that they were still at it, only now the captain and several of the crew were involved. The guard finally handed the toy revolver to the captain who, in turn, handed it to a flight attendant. She hurried up the stairs and disappeared into the kitchen area. The mother and child came aboard, the boy crying, the mother ranting and raving to anyone who would listen. The crew was to

keep the toy until the plane reached New York. Then he could have it back, she explained to us all.

We started down the runway. Through the window I saw the great eagle of the seal of the United States on the side of a large silver jet parked to our left.

"The airplane to our left is that of the United States of America's Ambassador to Egypt," the captain broadcast over the PA system as if reading my mind. I smiled the smile of patriotism, the smile of one eagerly going home.

The plane made its low, lazy pass over the tall minarets of Cairo's mosques. We circled the city; it was that adobe color--buff and dusty. The Nile cut abruptly through the haze, glittering, a green snake in a beige garden. We climbed higher and the city outlines faded to some abstract pattern. On the horizon, the pyramids stood erect, pointing the way skyward. They were visible long after the clouds and the plane's altitude obscured all else.