

Chapter 1

Welcome to Cairo

It's a shocking experience coming from crisp New England weather and walking down the plane ladder, setting foot on Cairo's windy, dusty desert. Men wearing long, loose galabiyas and kuffis, the white Muslim head cover, stand everywhere holding up large cardboard signs in Arabic searching for their parties. Swarthy faces peer into mine, wondering if I am their party.

Military police wearing tan uniforms, berets, and holding loaded rifles stand posted at regular intervals throughout the airport. These men are young and look trigger happy. The energy pattern set up by the soldiers tells me the airport either isn't or hasn't been a safe place. It feels like all hell can break loose any second and I'm not in the mood to deal with that now. Like a baby duckling, I cling to my group. Fran gives us some insight into what's going on.

Fran sat next to an Egyptian entertainer on the plane who seemed to care about our group's well being. "She wanted me to tell everyone that Cairo airport is a dangerous place right now. The earthquake has driven the homeless into this city looking for food and shelter. People are desperate and have turned into pickpockets and thieves. We have to be really careful watching out for our luggage" says Fran, passing on the alarming warning. To keep order, the Egyptian government has turned the airport into a military outpost. Soldiers are within shouting

distance of each other. They watch people greet each other with the intensity of Dobermans. They perch on rafters pointing rifles down on us as we enter the airport's main corridor. Reunions are subdued under the surveillance. An undercurrent of festering trouble permeates the air. With a start, I realize I've just met the men with machine guns from my dreams!

Most of us are over tired and disoriented by the time change. Some are outright cranky. Fran snaps at Tish, but Tish doesn't take her friend's irritation personally. Instead, she says optimistic things to Fran to ease the tension. Amabel scans the sea of faces looking for our hotel guide. We huddle around her like iron filings around a magnet. Soon a collegiate looking young man steps forward, introducing himself as Mohammed. His confident manner tells me everything is going to be all right.

The soldiers are trying to keep order by herding everyone into the appropriate lines. Amabel is in the midst of asking Mohammed directions when she notices soldiers have zealously corralled three of her group members into a custom's line. She rushes over to retrieve her misguided flock. The guards get pissed at Amabel's interference. They draw their rifles on her but she doesn't flinch. Her eyes are ablaze with the fiery excitement of a righteous preacher.

Mohammed rushes over to Amabel's side, inserting himself into the altercation. When the soldiers realize Mohammed is the Egyptian party responsible for Amabel, they scream at him for her actions. I hold my breath, waiting for the worst to happen but Mohammed stands his ground. My sense of his Arabic explanation is that Amabel is a foreigner, doesn't know any better and that he, Mohammed, will keep us in line. He identifies himself as hotel personnel and the soldiers take their rifles off Amabel.

The soldiers are still huffy and pumped up with adrenaline. They scan our group as a possible security threat. What they see are a bunch of females in long skirts and a couple of old women. Our cowed expressions tell them we aren't really dangerous after all. Reluctantly, they get off our case. They walk away as deflated as little boys called back home early from playing outside. Immediately afterwards they spot a new

group of disembarking tourists. They perk up at the sight, eagerly trotting over to corral them into lines because anyone standing still means trouble at this airport.

Mohammed establishes guardianship over our group while Amabel still beams victory over the soldiers. He wisks us past the other waiting passengers to a small counter next to a wall. He has us fill out simple custom's entry forms that seem incomprehensible because of fatigue. He is gentle with us. Whatever we can't do, he does for us in a fatherly way. His patience and unpatronizing attitude impress me. Recovered from her fray with the soldiers, Amabel repeats all of Mohammed's directions to us after him, as if he is speaking a foreign language. She doesn't seem to want to give up control of the group to him. Her repetition isn't that bad an idea, given our weariness.

Mohammed consolidates everyone's paperwork into one packet then sprints ahead to the next bureaucratic checkpoint. All of us lope behind in his wake. Other passengers see us forge ahead and look envious of the help we're getting. It occurs to me that some of the trip's padded cost over the actual airfare has gone to grease palms and cut red tape. I don't begrudge the money spent. I'll do anything to lessen this traveling ordeal.

So far, airport officials have treated us as special but we still have to get through customs individually. The customs officials look intimidating, not easily impressed by anybody. These no nonsense types stand in bulletproof cages, automatic weapons in full view. They determine who enters and who doesn't so no one dares give them any crapola. Mohammed allows two soldiers to herd us into two different lines, their starting point marked by masking tape on the floor. The tape reminds me of starting lines at Olympic games but the mood is far from festive here. We wait like humble penitents ready to approach confessional boxes, our fate hanging in balance. Mohammed watches from afar, as intently as a father would watch his children riding bikes for the first time.

It's my turn to approach the booth. The official looks severe and as humorless as the veiled woman who somberly works the computer terminal beside him. I try making friendly eye contact with her but she

looks afraid to smile, even sort of reprimanded. It's clear no party is going on here...the only opening in the bulletproof cage is a space to exchange papers. There, a loaded weapon rests on the counter, pointed in my direction. I plan on being polite and avoiding hesitations when he asks me questions. Now is not the time for fear, I decide, so start visualizing my passport as acceptable. Mohammed has raced further up the processing line but turns around and waits for us like a Labrador retriever on a hunting trip. I can almost feel him WILLING me to get through the line without incident. I feel him pulling me through to the other side and decide to join forces with him in intent. After a few shaky minutes in front of the scowling official, I pass. The official whisks me through customs without a second glance, stamping my passport with a vengeance.

Now that we're officially admitted into Egypt, we get to join the crazed mob at baggage claim. Tish towers over most men in the airport so becomes our lookout post for the group's luggage. She elbows apart two smoking Egyptians with athletic grace then spots my distinctive bags with the yellow pom-poms. Tish grabs bag after bag off the conveyor belt with Fran standing a few feet behind her as backup. Egyptian men poke one another and laugh watching demure looking Fran take on the assertive attitude of a man. "Good show" they seem to nod with amusement while Fran remains oblivious to their attention. Mohammed and Amabel stand off to one side like proud parents, watching us cooperate with one another. Amabel seems to have accepted Mohammed as co-leader while they take turns grilling us in parental fashion. "Do you have all your luggage? Are all your pieces off the plane?" they ask. Their attention feels nurturing to me after being alone during the long plane ride.

Mohammed plasters all our luggage with hotel stickers in case it gets lost. "I'm going to get some carts for these suitcases" he tells Amabel. Tish overhears him and decides to help. She sees carts are scarce but manages to snag two. She and Amabel begin loading the suitcases, which stuns Mohammed returning with his cart. We load up three heavy carts each needing two people to steer them. While Amy and I push one, I notice hundreds of other people involved in the same activity. I'd been

so caught up with my own luggage drama that I failed to notice the magnitude of this scramble. A wagon train of squeaking carts make a mass exodus towards the door. I see no helpful porter in this airport; it's everyone for themselves. Bags slide off the carts, blocking forward motion of the wagon train. Everyone's struggle and progress affects everyone else in domino fashion.

Finally we push out through airport doors but barely get to breathe the fresh air. Cab drivers swarm us like gnats. "Taxi, lady, taxi?" they ask, presenting dust streaked faces. A second wave of self appointed "guides" try taking over the steering of our luggage carts. The men ignore our protests, sticking to us like pesky flies before a storm. Sweet looking Fran especially draws these feral looking men to her. "No!" she says three times to one, but he treats her as if she can't really mean it. He and others get bolder, seeming intrigued by her blond hair. It's not that they don't understand her refusal...It's more that they choose not to. They understand perfectly when other people say no.

They study Fran's porcelain features with a familiarity that's distressing to her. They stare at her chin dimple as if examining a kitten at a pet store. Fortunately watchdog Mohammed circles back, driving the "flies" away from Fran. But while Mohammed rescues Fran, another "guide" zeroes in on Amabel, trying to wrestle her cart away from her without her permission. Unlike Fran, Amabel hisses a "No!" at the man like a striking snake. Her vehemence shrivels his innards. He skulks away like a coyote winged by a sheep rancher's bullet.

Rows of busses are lined up outside, all belching and smoking like rejects from several different nations. Mohammed greets a particular bus driver, then encourages us to board his friend's bus. I'm relieved to enter the bus's womb-like protection. Latino-style pom-poms strung across the dashboard only partially obscure my view of Mohammed outside. He calls to a pack of emaciated looking men. Some of these are the same ones who were following us. Their tattered appearance makes them look frightening. They seem desperately aggressive in a hard-edged way. I wondered if they're aware of how appalling they appear...or if they're even in a position to do anything about it. They seem oblivious to their appearance but...interestingly enough, I thought

I detected some of them almost enjoying scaring certain tourists! Others seemed to use their appearance to intimidate a few well dressed tourists into letting them take control of their luggage. Perhaps they know full well how they appear and are using that to their advantage?

Now as I see the men gathered together into a group, I'm overcome with empathy for them and their weather beaten appearance. What first impressed me as their aggressiveness now appears as protection of an almost shabby respectability. They stand before our bus like a bunch of forgotten items on a shopping list. They look poor, but no longer frightening. I remember reading that Cairo has a population density of 250,000 per square mile and grows by one million souls a year. My heart goes out to them for having to hustle for any work in a country rife with unemployment.

Mohammed hires a few of the eager men to load our bags onto the bus. The rest look dejected. Some stand around as if hoping something will go wrong so they can fill in. It is sad to watch the disappointment of those not chosen but I'm thinking Mohammed probably has good reason for his decisions.

The chosen ones eagerly snap to well orchestrated action. They form a relay line that goes from the baggage carts to the bus. One Egyptian defies gravity by walking up the outside of the bus. He stations himself on the roof while the other men send heavy bags flying up towards him. I blink, thinking my eyes deceive me as I see these underfed looking men tossing heavy pieces upwards like Frisbees®. The men work quickly, efficiently and wordlessly. The only sounds heard are "thunking" luggage sounds as bag after bag goes flying past bus windows to the guy overhead. Amy and I stare open-mouthed at each other when we see her backbreakingly heavy suitcase go sailing by. In no time at all the job is finished. The men fix their obsidian bright eyes expectantly on Mohammed...it's time to get paid. They stuff Mohammed's money deep into the folds of their galabiyas and take off, again resembling a pack of ranging dogs.

All that out of the way, we settle deep into bus seats with sighs of relief. Finally we've left airport turmoil behind! Yes, the bus is noisy but roomy, and a definite improvement over cramped airplane seats. Ama-

bel takes back control by formally introducing Mohammed to us, as if we're seeing him for the first time. "Mohammed will be our host during our stay at the Mena House Oberoi Hotel" she beams. Mohammed wears an enduring John Wayne look, as if he wants to be done with the fuss. He looks like a hero figure to me because he's successfully fished us out of messy Cairo customs.

Mohammed delivers a welcoming speech standing at the head of the bus. His thick Egyptian accent sounds sexy but he looks like a kid. He's self-assured, well educated, and looks to be in his early thirties, tops. When I think back to his protective manner at the airport, I sense more than professionalism at work. His take charge attitude over women old enough to be his mother now strikes me as more cultural than amusing. Egypt is a predominantly Muslim country where women defer to men's leadership, I've read. So now I start wondering if Mohammed relates to us as an individual or more as a Muslim.

Mohammed's pride in his country shines through his introductory remarks. He introduces Egypt as if he is respectfully introducing his regal mother to us. I'm not used to hearing someone speak about their country as if it's a living, breathing female entity. This presentation changes my attitude about being here. My visa now appears as a stewardship privilege rather than an invitation to *carte blanche* tourist detachment.

I'm wondering if Mohammed is just weird or if other Egyptians share his passion for Egypt. It's hard to imagine the feral looking baggage men at the airport being able to think about anything other than survival. I myself had been in survival mode at the airport, unsettled by the clamor and them. None of my attention was focused on higher thoughts of anyone's patriotic attitudes then. Now Mohammed introduces me to a higher plane on this bus. Mohammed's speech paints Egypt's grandeur but all I'm able to see is its rawness. Am I missing something? Is he? Is the dusty poverty I'm seeing not really there or is he in denial of it? If his perception is closer to reality, then why am I feeling I want to hide in this bus in order to be protected from feeling assaulted by direct contact with Egypt's poor? Something isn't matching up in this unsettling discrepancy of perceptions.

My willingness to examine these issues opens up a door in my consciousness. Slowly I begin to see how my perceptions of Egypt have been filtered through my own experience and judgments. I see how those judgments prevent me from sharing Mohammed's reality. Mohammed has alerted me to this filter so now I decide to try and take it off. When I remove my expectations, my experience changes. My usual framework of explanation for what I am seeing is gone. I am free, open to take in what he is saying. The strength of Mohammed's ideas are infectious. Freed from my filter, I find myself automatically reframing my physical experience of Egypt...as something grand and luxuriant. He has helped me recalibrate my perception so that I become open enough to see past Egypt's worn exterior to its inner beauty. In a sense Mohammed's become a shaman, showing me how to see things as a child does...with acceptance and non judgment. The trick will be to maintain this new way of seeing.

Being in this bus feels as comforting as sucking my thumb. I've regressed into being a child after having been a responsible adult until now. It's a relief being taken care of after the airport din. I relax and allow my mind to wander. I tune out Mohammed's words, watching the airport lights reflect off his glasses. Then I start thinking more about why people perceive things differently. I wonder if Mohammed has spent his whole life in Egypt. If so, he might have a parochial view of the rest of the world. The grandeur he sees in Egypt might exist because it's free of competition. I'll have to ask him.

Mohammed gives everyone two gifts, a slender pink rose and a small packet of Egyptian coins. Surprise gifts for no apparent reason from a stranger in a foreign land touch me emotionally. The rose stands out in utter perfection, inspiring me to think higher thoughts. Its angelic fragrance chases away my weariness. It links me up to beauty, serenity and all the qualities I find desirable. Its refinement contrasts sharply with the feral looking baggage men but also connects me with their hidden nobility as fellow players on life's chessboard.

The rose, a product of Egypt, helps me understand Mohammed's admiration for his country more effectively than words. Its dewy moistness sits 180 degrees opposite the barren landing strip we set foot upon.

Merely looking at it dispels the harsh experience of the airport men with machine guns. It blows up pictures of what might have happened had Mohammed not been there to whisk us through customs. The flower is an enigma, a contrast in a land of contrasts. Its beauty will not last, but for now I immortalize it in my mind, much the same as Mohammed perceives Egypt's grandeur, despite the ravages of time.

Inside the bus, my hair hangs in limp strands. I need a shower and want to get out of the remainder of the clothes I've been wearing for two days. I feel shaky from eating the non-protein breakfast served on the plane. Low blood sugar levels make me feel over-wrought and pessimistic. Amazing how poor nutrition negatively affects my mood and sense of well being! I'm not the only hungry one. Others complain openly, seem ready for an argument. I think about how hunger probably causes a lot of arguments between people, especially road wars during the rush hour commute home.

I unwrap a carob-covered rice cake from my backpack and split it with Amy. We demolish this food item with the quiet intensity of dogs-finding-precious-discarded-meatball-in-trash-can. I share some dried fruit with her. The calories stoke up our metabolism enough to enjoy the bus ride to the hotel. Maybe the key to resolving differences between people is to stuff protein down everyone's throat, wait twenty minutes, then see if there are any differences left to talk about.

Mohammed wastes no time assuring us we're safe in Egypt. "If people yell at you, it is only because they want to be friendly to Americans" he explains. My guess is he knows our media has alerted us to recent tourist attacks. Genny updates us on the seriousness of our situation.

"Right before I left Seattle, I heard a news report warning tourists to stay out of Egypt" she tells Mohammed.

"You are safe here. Egypt is a safe country. It is only a few who give it a bad name" he says, downplaying her comment. Despite his assurance, I sense the situation has worsened but it is too late to worry because we are already here.

Mohammed "preps" us for our ride through town. "Cairo is a beautiful city. Many of our buildings have been renovated and will resemble some of your western buildings" he says. But this part looks like

rubbed ruins to me. As we buzz through what looks like an atomic bomb test site, I experience Cairo as another weather beaten Tijuana, Mexico. It has the tall date palms and whitewashed one story buildings like Phoenix, Arizona but the buildings are covered with Arabic graffiti. Many of the buildings are missing roofs, have no doors...just like the scenery in my dreams.

There's a predominance of men on Cairo streets. The few women seen are clumped in groups. All carry themselves with self-esteem and grace. Their dignified walk seems misplaced on the crumbling landscape, making me question their perception of surrounding reality. Or mine. They walk as if they are surrounded by...grandeur.

I wonder if their poised self-containment is their way of compensating for the erosion I see around them? Somehow I don't think so. I think they share Mohammed's reality of Egypt but I can't see it because I have my filter on. When I see that most Egyptians seem to be sharing a reality different from mine, I begin to doubt my perceptions of shabbiness. What also feels true is that I am unable to perceive all that Cairo is. I have a strong feeling that there's more happening here than meets the eye, even without noticing the Egyptian's positive reaction to their environment. I have the eerie sense that Cairo is a living, breathing entity and knows more than I know. I feel awed and altered being here but damned if I can put my finger on why. One thing I know for sure...Cairo is doing something to me. I don't like the feeling of not knowing what that is, but do feel this location is significant in ways I can't yet understand.

A few of the shops in downtown Cairo are large, about the size of an old Woolworth store. The vast majority, however, are as small as kitchens. The tiny shops line the street like teeth in a jaw, separate but connected. Each shop is lit by one dangling light bulb. The glare from the single bulb accentuates the already deep set eyes of the vendors, making a genetic adaptation to harsh blowing sands even more prominent. Nothing, not even mutations, can be hidden from the scrutiny of the screaming bulb.

Bright street lights are limited to the main drag. The rest of the side streets lay mysteriously shrouded in darkness. The shadowed parts of

Cairo intrigue me. They don't feel like dead space. I sense unfinished business there. I wonder if they're filled with ongoing new construction or littered with buildings being torn down. The shadows feel alive with transformation. I sense they're more important than the lit parts because they hold more power of becoming.

Through the bus window I see darkened cubicles resembling apartments. I wonder why the lights aren't on. Has there been a power outage there or are the inhabitants still at work? There is something tomblike about these places. Something doesn't feel right. They don't feel lived in, as if something is pending. I think about Mohammed's earlier description of Cairo as a beautiful city. For me, Cairo is unsettling, even startling.

Nothing has prepared me for the different plane of reality that Cairo is. Being here expands my consciousness like some mood altering drug. As I watch Egyptians swarming over their city, I flash back to people in my own home town shopping at supermarkets, driving sport vehicles, withdrawing money from ATM machines and occupying an existence far removed from Egyptian life. That life I left behind now seems insular compared to Cairo's magnitude. Yet, while I was there, my life seemed complete. Being in Cairo has enlarged my view of what I thought was my complete world. Leaving familiar surroundings has shaken me up enough to alter my perception of my world. Now I see how I had been living on only a tiny slice of the world pie. Traveling to visit another pie segment in Cairo gives me some idea of what the entire world pie must look like. The magnitude of the glimpse splashes me like cold water. The beauty of the master plan stuns me. The basic connectedness among all human lives within this plan makes me feel at peace with all that I've perceived as different from me.

I try holding onto this expanded vision of the world but it fades in and out like some long distance radio station. I want to stay aware of these other planes of reality but they blink on and off like daydreams. I remember having similar flashes of heightened awareness back in Massachusetts....I'd stay there until some earthly concern pulled me back to a more basic level. Thoughts like "I have to take a leak" or "oh, wow, I've got three messages on my answering machine" would tug me back

through the enchanted window I had escaped. Then I'd awake with a start thinking "Hey, what WAS that stuff I was just thinking about?...It was sure interesting!"...as someone honked their horn at me to move forward in Massachusetts traffic. Here, in Cairo, those altered states begin to make sense. I see how daydreams expand my reality past my own insular world. I can look at a dangling shop light bulb from a Cairo bus and daydream new breath into my Massachusetts life alive. Or I can lie in my Massachusetts bed and dream of men with machine guns in Cairo. Suddenly I realize I have a life here and a life there and they somehow go on simultaneously. Egads! A veil has dropped between the two lives, I realize with a start. I don't exist on just one plane of reality.

Ideas seem to come to me out of thin air in Cairo. It is as if this entity called Cairo lovingly tolerates my crawling on her sacred belly and teaches me by osmosis. She paints informational pictures upon my mind like television screen images. She shows me a diagram...There I am in my small town life surrounded by illusionary borders I have created. The borders collapse out, merging into other people's illusionary borders. The screen shows earth as a physical place where physical bodies are anchored in three dimensional space. But earth is only a home base for physical consciousness. Bodies stay anchored there while minds travel to other dimensions. The diagram shows cords of energy coming out of people's heads, traveling off in different directions. Some cords connect with other locations on the globe, others connect to other people. Some bodies have many attachments to places and people while others have fewer but thicker cords. The diagram shows people accessing different realities through reading, focus and intent.

A second diagram gets weirder. This one shows various spots on the earth's surface vibrating at different speeds. Some places vibrate fast, others slower. People on those spots "tune into" different informational wavelengths just by being there. Traveling to different parts of the globe gives visitors access to information particular to that particular area. Truly, I am "soaking up the atmosphere" in Cairo! Traveling anywhere can expand consciousness this way.

Meeting Cairo gives me a whole new scoop on life. I wonder if I'll find similar "windows" of consciousness elsewhere. It seems likely

I will, as long as I retain an open mind receptive to that possibility. Meanwhile, Fran pulls me back to the business at hand.

“Why is the city so dark in parts?” she asks Mohammed.

“Not everyone has electricity...many people burn kerosene lamps that cannot be seen from the road” he says.

His answer comes as a revelation to me. The city looked dark but THERE WAS ALWAYS LIGHT THERE!...I just didn't see it. The kerosene lamplight was just too subtle for my eyes to perceive. I take this to mean I shouldn't let my eyes determine my reality. They have their limits. From now on I'll try to supplement what my eyes can see with other senses, sort of an expanded way of seeing. This way I'll get a fuller picture of what's really out there. I start practicing my new skill. Our bus passes shops with Arabic signs posted over the doors. I try tuning into what type of business goes on inside without being able to read the signs and begin to get information, like bats do at night.

Traffic noise makes conversation with Mohammed difficult. I want to ask him questions about the buildings that look like parking garages but can't be heard over the bus engines. The white washed structures have a hosed down cinder block look to them. I sense a mysterious incompleteness about them. Some buildings look tenant ready while others appear vacated and swept out. During a lull in traffic noise, I overhear Mohammed telling someone these structures are apartment buildings. Many apartment buildings stand unfinished because funding for them runs out, a chronic situation in Cairo.

Merging traffic slows us down enough to give me a good look at one small apartment. The bottom half of the cubicle is dipped in turquoise paint. Bare walls beg for pictures. A small rug covers a too large floor. An overly large, ornate crystal chandelier defiantly suspends itself like a spider trying to encapsulate the room's starkness in light. The chandelier and the rug seem to have an agreement...to band together and decorate the stark apartment.

The apartment looks cellular like the ones around it, giving the whole complex the appearance of a honeycomb. The units lack basic decorative touches, such as shutters, screens and, in some cases, even doors. Several doorless apartments open right out into the street. The

lack of privacy in these living quarters looks weird, like some allied occupation during a war. The whole set up resembles an ant farm where anyone can watch what's going on inside.

The bus moves through neighborhoods having different moods and feelings. One area feels vibrantly alive. Bedspreads and outer garments billow from numerous balconies. Road dust coats originally colorful rugs into muted, flapping patterns. Then, after a few blocks of this, the mood changes. The mood of the next neighborhood feels dark and foreboding. I notice what looks like a demolition site where silent cranes haven't quite leveled the debris in this no man's land. Skeletal remains of windows and doors stick up like broken teeth from the former structures. The area looks like a collapsed house of cards. "Mohammed, what happened over there?" Fran asks with dismay.

Seconds go by before he reluctantly answers. "This is the older section of Cairo where the recent earthquake hit." His abrupt answer signifies the end of discussion. He has shut down, does not want to talk about it. Or have us dwell upon it. In fact, he seems personally pained we've noticed the blighted area at all! His uptake on our attention is quick. "Over here you'll see brand new buildings going up" he points out enthusiastically, refocusing our curiosity elsewhere.

The traffic intersections in Cairo are wildly amorphous. Much worse than anywhere else I've seen. No painted lines. No signs. Bumper to bumper traffic feeding in from countless side roads. It's totally unclear who has the right of way or where the lanes are in this fray. A parade of bashed up heaps that were once cars still jockey for position with other automotive amputees. Mercedes without fenders, Toyotas missing bumpers and Jeeps without doors are embellished upon by Egyptian ingenuity with mismatched pieces of metal, plastic, wooden planks, even cardboard and drapes. These wobblers aim at our bus as if it's wearing a bullseye. They burp and fart emissions too black to be on any state inspection scale. Throughout this congestion, our bus driver maintains a benevolent attitude. He lets other drivers cut in or cuts them off with good natured acceptance. The snarled jam has its benefits...It gives me a chance to check out the people next to us. There are truckloads of leather skinned workers wearing head cloths and earth stained

galabiyas. There are students dressed in western clothing packed into busses like sardines. Male drivers steer taxis filled with sequestered, black-veiled female passengers. But the most startling thing is that it is night...AND PEOPLE ARE DRIVING CARS WITHOUT THEIR HEADLIGHTS ON!

Mohammed explains. “The heat of the Egyptian sun draws people out at night when it is cooler. Many walk along the streets at night. Motorists drive in darkness so their bright headlights do not disturb the people walking near the road.” This situation looks peculiar and dangerous, but seems to work for them. Drivers use horns to compensate for lack of headlights. They sometimes use a single headlight flash to warn crossing pedestrians of their approach. Motorists also use horns to signal each other when others can cut into traffic. The horns are used to communicate, not harass or reprimand. The Egyptians have perfected horn and light use into an expressive art form.

Egyptian drivers love to go fast. Unlit motor vehicles dart around slower moving donkey carts with alarming speed. It’s a miracle there aren’t more collisions at night but driver reaction time is extremely fast. Something else may be at work here preventing accidents. Egyptians seem to have sonar abilities to be able to detect when they are approaching road obstacles in the road. They seem to see without the aid of their eyes, as blind people do. Perhaps their night vision is superb...maybe because of those slimy green- but nutritionally rich- salad garnishes they served us on the airplane, I chuckle.

“Are there many accidents?” Fran asks Mohammed.

“No, they usually do not get into accidents...no one wants to get in trouble with the police” he dryly answers. The dark line of equally spaced vehicles moving along the road in front of us looks like a well coordinated caterpillar.

“Oh, look, there’s a Kentucky Fried Chicken® stand!” Ethyl exclaims. Several group members wax warm at the familiar reminder of home. To me it looks like an alien outpost with Arabic writing on it. I’m wondering if they’re using the infamous green salad garnishes on their cole slaw.

As traffic slows, opportunistic vendors begin to appear, aided by

the congestion. Billowing caftans weave in and out of moving traffic, safely retreating back to concrete traffic islands like quick witted sandpipers when traffic moves again. Some cross several lanes of traffic trying to make a sale. They risk life and limb darting in and out of cars holding up merchandise but possess grace and timing that would earn them choreographic praise.

Emission streaked faces hawk paper flowers, necklaces and the Egyptian equivalent of toilet paper – boxes of Kleenex®. The unpredictability of sale time makes exchanges intense affairs with much high pitched barking on both sides. It doesn't take much of an imagination to figure out what would happen if a motorist shortchanged a vendor. Egyptian vendors are already high strung, their metabolism volatile by the caffeine in strong Turkish coffees and teas sold on streets. It appears they have crow eyes in sensing a sales opportunity and latent badger viciousness if crossed. I could imagine a cheated vendor pursuing a motorist to the next traffic slowdown to get justice. But this doesn't happen...it's not New York.

The faces that sidle up to my bus window are hauntingly powerful. There is nothing pathetic or beggarly about them. Earnest eyes shoot life energy out at me like forceful geysers. Hooded vendor eyes accost me time and again through the glass. Sitting here makes me their captive. These passive encounters feel more wearing than if I could dodge them on the street. Tap, tap, tap, a vendor is suddenly inches from my face. His human breath fans out a halo on the window pane. Throat clearing Arabic words hammer into me, feeling like little assaults on my face. Bang, bang, bang...there is no ignoring him. I try looking straight ahead but he does not go away. I try getting him to take the hint by talking to Amy but he noisily assaults my window, only louder, stirring up other group members. The only way I can unglue this man from my window is to face him directly. I look in his eyes and strongly say "No!" with a hand gesture to back it up. This takes energy I don't really have, but it's a good investment because he believes my refusal. Although I've beaten him off, he's won the power play by forcing me to have contact with him. He's successfully demanded that I acknowledge him and has made me relate to him. I get the hint that I won't be allowed to be

a shrinking violet in this country! Oh, no, not by a long shot. Egypt involves, Egypt engages. The encounter with him has affected my core. It's infused me with energy. I couldn't have been any more engaged with another human being, even in sex. And this was a quickie.

The same vendor repeats his entreaty from window to window, down the entire length of the bus as long as traffic permits. Other vendors take his place. Silly me, I thought my ride through Cairo would be a cushy tourist affair, not running the gamut fighting off vendors from my bus window! Meanwhile, lucky Amy is protected from all this, sitting one seat over.

"Want to sit near the window for awhile, Amy?" I pleasantly ask.

"Oh, no, that's all right. I can see fine" she says looking quite pleased with her choice of seat. I continue playing defensive tackle, running interference for her.

Amy and I sit next to each other on the bus but experience different realities. The mere 24 inches between our seats gives her enough cushion to observe my interaction with the vendors from a safe distance away. I get pulled right through the glass out into the street with them, polarized by their eye contact...while Amy gets to watch the movie. I get sucked into the vortex of vendor lives, their experience, their dust...while Amy securely sits on the center spine of our tour bus. I am "working" while Amy rests. My ride is just another version of running the airport gamut with the baggage men. These Egyptians won't allow me to play the superficial social game of "if I look away, you'll go away." Their authenticity forces my participation in their life. With wry amusement, I realize I have chosen this for myself by purposely rushing ahead of Amy when we boarded the bus to stake out a prized window seat!

More vendors in ballooning earth colored galabiyas perch like seagulls on dock pilings along the roadside. They're dwarfed against billboards plastered with looming pictures of former Egyptian president Abdul Nasser. Other billboards next to them advertise movies with violent or seductive themes. Western looking actors are villainized while western looking women are depicted as luridly promiscuous. These sexually provocative movie screen idols contrast sharply with the amor-

phously draped and chaperoned women in black gliding beneath them. Although some Egyptian women wear western clothing, none show the plump cleavage enticingly protruding over everyone's heads. Many women on the street have covered every wisp of hair with the white veil of the Sunni Muslims, Egypt's largest sect. Religion veils Egyptian sensuality while westernized fantasy women suggestively spread moist, wet tendrils of desire into the psyches of the very men who keep their own women under wraps. All Egyptian women behave very conservatively on the street. They look straight ahead, not drawing attention to themselves as if they wish to be invisible. Their nunlike manner runs counter to the passionate spectacles overhead. I see no interaction between men and women on Cairo streets. No hugging, no hand holding, no ass patting. Not even any talking or laughing. For the most part men do pass the women by as if they were invisible. Why, this is just like parochial school, I think to myself. The only sexuality taking place is on the billboards.

A rule of thumb is- the stricter the Muslim sect a woman belongs to, the more clothing she wears. Those belonging to the most conservative religious sect appear like black Halloween ghosts wearing chadors. These heat retaining garments are worn year round in temperatures soaring upwards of a hundred degrees. They cover everything except the woman's face and hands...which they often hide in the folds of their robes. Some walk in groups balancing large pots or baskets on their heads. They cut stark silhouettes on the street, reminding me of death.

They seem to walk a bit fearfully. Of what, I wonder? In Egypt, women cannot own property. Perhaps lack of economic security makes them feel they have to tow the line. I sense they feel conspicuous. Who wouldn't be, standing out like that? They are walking billboards of a moral belief system where women are thought to have no control over their passions so must be covered to prevent inciting the men! This seems like victimization at first but...The very fact that they are covered, that they would need to be covered draws attention to their tremendous sexual power. Every time a woman in black glides by a Muslim male, I can almost hear his inner torment. "Here comes a woman I must not look at. I mustn't think of her moist body hidden beneath the cloth

folds...I must not...I shall not..." all whisperings of resistance that only increase the sexual tension between the two. The women in black pass store displays of headless, armless female torsos wearing revealing fire engine red intimate apparel. Peek-a-boo lace and garters next to shapeless modesty would make an interesting photograph. Ethyl raises up her camera to see what she can get through bus window but Amabel shoots her down. "Don't take any pictures of these conservative Muslims. They don't like it and you'll have the police breathing down our necks in a minute." She says we must respect this social taboo if we want to stay clear of angry mobs chasing us. I find it strange that women can't take pictures of other women but there are other taboos. "Also, people...lissen up...don't take any pictures of airports, any government buildings or installation sites. We don't want to be suspected of espionage or terrorist activity" Amabel almost gaily announces while Mohammed winces. Since I can't read the identifying Arabic inscriptions on any of the buildings, I decide to be safe and not take any pictures of buildings at all.

After about an hour of riding, our bus slows down and turns into a long driveway. "And now...here is your hotel...how do you like it?" asks Mohammed with a flourish. His pride is warranted. The Mena House Oberoi Hotel and Casino is breathtaking. Roving searchlights give the Moorish resort a Disney World® effect. Pointed arches, lacy lantern patterns and crystal chandeliers lend it trademark opulence. This hotel is part of a chain, the large Oberoi Hotel chain of India. This particular maharajah's palace contrasts dramatically with the gritty intensity that is Cairo. In place of feral looking baggage men, we have German speaking tourists in Bermuda shorts looking as if they're trying to find the next Jane Goodall primate expedition. We have bands of wide-eyed Orientals wearing necklaces of cameras assisted by portly Egyptian hotel personnel dressed in gold and red velvet fezzes. We have arrived at yet another reality.

Mohammed shares hotel history with us, saying the Mena House was originally built as a royal hunting lodge for monarch Khedive Ismail. He had it enlarged and converted into a guest house for the Suez Canal opening festivities in 1869. Ten years later it was again enlarged

and transformed into a hotel. It's famous for its 14th century woodwork, especially its mushrabiya, or harem screens, which look intricate and lacy. The hotel has an excellent location. It conveniently sits at the base of the short, steep rise to the plateau where the Pyramids and Sphinx sit. We get a postcard view of the pyramids right from the front terrace. They look big and fake, almost like billboards because I have trouble accepting they're so near the hotel. My mind goes "Huh?...the pyramids?...right here?...how can that be?" It's exciting to see the pyramids "in the flesh," so to speak.

Mohammed takes us into the past by telling us how caravans of camels would arrive right here, right where we're standing. He paints a picture of British colonists and upper class Egyptians sipping mint tea on the open terrace that was later renovated into today's glassed in coffee house. The coffee house still gives the same 19th century view of the pyramids. No romanticism is lost on tourists who aren't familiar with the hotel's history, I muse.

All I want to do is get out of my fetid clothes but Mohammed, the hotel employee, is pretty excited telling us more about the hotel. "The main restaurant, bar, coffee shop and halls all have their original decorations. See this wood here? It had to be replaced and painted gold" he says fondling some molding. "The most lavish suites and guest rooms in all of Egypt and perhaps the Middle East are here in this original part of this hotel..." he says proudly. "...These quarters are furnished with authentic antiquities that were found in a hotel storeroom and completely restored to mint condition." The hotel has several expansive meeting rooms, including the famous one in which presidents Carter and Sadat met to discuss peace. At one point, Amy, Sandy and I form a triangle standing in the middle of the lobby floor, heads thrown back. I get a stiff neck from staring at the ceiling's fairy tale mirrored mosaics.

It's good news hearing Amy and I will be staying in one of the south side hotel rooms. These rooms give an excellent view of the Pyramids and are better than staying in the 200 newer rooms on the back side of the garden building overlooking the desert and the road to Alexandria. The hotel compensates for how that part of the hotel is less lavish than its historically refurbished counterpart by knocking down prices

approximately 25%. The hotel's expansive grounds and facilities make any room feel part of a sequestered resort on the edge of town, rather than the downtown Cairo city hotel that it is.

We go outside to put room number stickers on our luggage and are surprised by a humid breeze. Date palm branches do the hula, dancing up a storm. Rustling, whishing sounds of the trees play second fiddle to increasingly louder bagpipes and drums. What sound like droning bagpipes are actually ancient Egyptian instruments used in the Turkish military band. The strange sounds grab my attention, and excite my blood. I stand agape, heart beating faster. I feel like the swaying cobra mesmerized by the playing musician.

"Egyptians love to celebrate...please come over here" Mohammed beckons. We follow him about fifty yards to an outside massive stone staircase lit with floodlights. Two guards decoratively flank the stairs, holding staves. They're dressed in striped Sphinx headdresses and loin-cloths, looking half man, half animal. Their effect is regal and impressive, not hokey. A line of tourists dressed to the nines in glittery evening clothes makes their way up the staircase to a lavish ballroom at the top. The women haven't followed advice to dress conservatively as we have. No, they wear strapless black taffeta mini dresses that reveal prime Grade A leg as they climb the stairs. They pose such a contrast to the local Egyptian women swathed in black on the streets that I wonder what the staircase guards think. "This is a welcoming reception for a foreign investment company" Mohammed explains. I readily see that where big bucks are involved, "them that has the gold makes the rules." Apparently the visiting foreigners have little knowledge or regard for local custom.

A strange companion to the evening's well heeled opulence...is the smell of horseshit in the air. This pungent animal smell shocks my civilized western nose but isn't really offensive. Like the droning Egyptian music, the smell engages all of me. Weirdly enough, it strikes me as "hot" and "fresh," as immediately arresting as bakery smells on a winter day. I smile thinking how there's no getting away from shit, no matter how civilized, fancy or pretentious life becomes.

The animal smells mingle with other earthy deposits. "Watch your

step!” warns Mohammed as we dodge several saucer-sized piles of camel dung on the multimillion dollar grounds. It’s dark and I almost place a sandaled foot into a fresh pile of doo. I come so close to falling into it, I get to see and smell the sweet protruding hay before recovering my balance. The wind carries food smells and the sounds of clomping hooves and disgruntled camels in the distance.

It’s prime arrival time at the hotel, judging from the buzzing activity. More Germans arrive in safari gear and pith helmets, consulting hand schedules and complicated wristwatches. Italians fan the air with hand gestures, wearing body hugging, avant garde fashions. Everything is cool marble, brass and gold in the lobby. Regal looking Egyptians man hotel desks, graciously fielding visitor’s questions.

“People...lissen up...let’s all come over here to get your room assignments” Amabel says, reining us in. We stand in formation like horses in a stable, stamping our feet and restlessly swishing our hair as if activated by the lobby activity. I glance at my face in the mirrored ceiling and see someone who’s tired with drooping hair.

Ethyl complains. “It’s humid in here. Why is it so humid in here? I thought the desert was supposed to be dry?” she asks Amabel.

“It didn’t used to be humid in Egypt...but it’s been this way ever since they built the Aswan Dam” answers Amabel.

Mohammed squares away paperwork for our group stay speaking Arabic to the front desk personnel. Meanwhile, I need to relieve myself.

“I need to use the restroom. Where is it?” I ask Amabel.

“Oh, you do? NOW????” she asks with dismay. Her reaction makes me feel as if I’m personally inconveniencing her by having to go.

My walk to the ladies’ room is the first time I’ve separated myself from the group. To my surprise, I feel a sense of withdrawal heading away. “I’m on my own in a foreign hotel” I think, a bit shocked. A few Egyptians watch me curiously. One of them correctly intuits where I’m headed and points me in the right direction, causing an animated conversation among them. Several sets of foreign eyes follow me down the hall. I round a bend to see one uniformed employee posted in front of a telephone. His hands are crossed in front of him as if he is guarding access to the instrument. I look at him- he grinningly looks at me.

“Ladies room?” I ask, breaking the silence.

His face is blank because he doesn’t understand the question. “Toy-lit?” he tentatively asks.

“Yes, toy-lit” I agree.

His face lights up with recognition. “Ah, TOY-LIT!” he announces loudly, ushering me towards a gilt door.

The door markings are in Arabic, looking like mere scribbles to me. He gestures towards the ladies’ room which has another staff person in front of it. This man stands in the same hands-crossed-in-front-of-crotch museum position and nods to my escort. I begin to feel like an over supervised nursing home resident who’s not allowed to do the slightest thing for herself without getting “helped.” I wonder if this man plans on going into the stall with me and handing me the toilet paper.

I thank him for his trouble but he lingers. Does he expect a tip for this, I wonder? I thank him again but don’t give him one. Instead, I sail through the door, looking forward to privacy. That hope is short-lived...there’s ANOTHER staff person waiting for me inside the ladies’ room!

The woman waiting inside is a dark, attractive Egyptian. She eyes me curiously from her chair then jumps up from her dish of coins, revealing an advanced pregnancy. My wish is to be left alone but now I’ve got a lady in waiting who acts as if I could get lost in the small room. She ponders the three available stalls. Respectfully she ushers me into one, making me wonder if they’re numbered and supposed to be used sequentially. Inside the stall, I suddenly feel awkward. I try to strike a happy medium between not caring and feeling perfectly comfortable having this stranger listen to my bodily functions but I can’t do it here. I feel embarrassed relieving myself after being treated so royally, so stick my fingers in my ears, pretending she can’t hear me. It’s an illogical solution but one that works for me. Then I start thinking about my self-consciousness and begin questioning my need for privacy in the first place. I think of Marjorie, a friend of mine who came back from visiting west Africa. “Seeing how the natives just squat and relieve themselves there taught me how obsessed westerners are with personal privacy here” she said.

Tipping, or baksheesh, as it is referred to in Egypt, is more than a reward for service. Sometimes it seems almost a bribe to get things done the way you want them which strikes some tourists as annoyingly mandatory. Amabel said the custom was started by British colonialists who “trained” Egyptian servants to expect tips, but still continues. Just about any service from opening a door to carrying bags merits baksheesh. Clearly this restroom attendant expects baksheesh for her services as she looks over at her plate of coins begging to be supplemented. Fortunately Amabel forewarned me about this situation so I have come prepared. Before I left home, I gathered together her suggested gifts of ballpoint pens, gum, and candy but then added my own gift wrapped earrings to the pile. I rummage through my backpack for one of these prettily wrapped jewelry boxes to give the attendant.

The Egyptian woman hands me a paper towel after I wash my hands... then stands waiting next to me waiting for a tip. After I throw away the towel, I hand her my gift wrapped box. She’s astonished and delighted with the present. It’s heartwarming seeing her genuine gratitude. Two gold-capped teeth sparkle with a Christmas like smile. Her joy feels contagious, making our interchange something special. I’ve only been away from my tour group for a few minutes, but already have changed worlds by making my first genuine contact with the Egyptian people...in the restroom.

The group’s luggage starts pouring into the hotel lobby but my bags aren’t among them. With a sinking feeling, I suddenly remember I forgot to put my name on my bags at Cairo airport! I thought I remembered seeing the bags get loaded on our shuttle bus, but what if I’m mistaken? I can’t find them anywhere here so I start to panic. I scurry over to our group leader.

“Amabel, I need your help. I can’t find my bags anywhere and think I may have forgotten to put my name on my suitcases at the airport. What can I do?” She gives me a very disappointed look.

“You’re going to have to go outside and find your luggage yourself or else the porters won’t know which room to send the bags” she wearily directs.

I’m surprised she doesn’t offer more help. I feel as if she has just

told me to jump off the high diving board for the first time. I look through the hotel's glass doors to the baggage arrival area outside where several crews of dark skinned men wearing galabiyas and turbans are screaming Arabic at each other unloading bags from airport vans. No women are present. The scene looks intimidating. I'm still recuperating from the cultural shock of my restroom journey, so don't feel ready to venture into alien territory this soon. I infer from her comment that my bags probably arrived safely thanks to Mohammed's hotel stickers, but just aren't among my group's luggage. I'll have to fish around for them. I stand there, woodenly looking past the dark terrace, trying to screw up my courage to go out there. Suddenly I hear the voice of an angel next to me.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Amy asks.

"Yes, I'd like that very much" I say, jumping at her rescue.

"How come you volunteered to come with me?" I ask Amy as we push through the glass doors.

"I saw the look on your face and knew you didn't want to come out here alone" she says.

"I really appreciate this, Amy" I tell her.

Once outside, Amy begins attracting a considerable amount of attention. The Arab men love her blond, almost white hair, which is at least five shades lighter than mine. Of the two of us, she gets the brunt of their attention.

The task at hand is finding my luggage in the dark. Fortunately motor vehicle headlights reveal screaming yellow pom poms in the distance. I see my bags piled on a curb, two traffic islands out. We dodge cars and vans to reach them. Whew, what a relief knowing I'll have clean underwear on the trip now! I label my bags with name and room number 430 as Egyptian men watch and appraise us like auctioneers. "Veddy nice!"... "you pritty gayle" they say in broken English as we take the bags back into the hotel. Amy looks pleased at their attention and modestly smiles.

"This might be a good time to visit the currency exchange office because we'll be needing Egyptian currency for dinner" Amabel suggests.

It's crowded and stuffy inside the narrow room. The mood is in-

tensely serious because of the thousands of dollars exchanging hands. An armed guard herds us into a line that curls around the furniture and double backs onto itself. Two overworked Egyptian clerks sitting at the head of the line barely have time enough to look up from stacks of paper receipts. Arabic music whines from a portable radio in the background as tourists pass from one clerk to the other. I begin to tenderly appreciate my conveniently reversed fanny pack that lets me easily pull out my passport for what seems like the hundredth time. Thoughts of stapling this crucial document to my forehead pass through my mind.

I finally make it to the head of the line. The first Egyptian clerk is reserved but friendly. I hand him over \$200 in traveler's checks which initiates much stamping and flourishing of papers, just like at the motor vehicle registry back home. The second clerk makes entries in a Victorian looking ledger. The clerks seem to have stepped right out of a museum drawing of Egyptian scribes. I get the feeling nothing much has changed in this country over thousands of years. I imagine them wearing white robes, sitting in some temple with the same close cropped heads bent over similar ledgers...

My reverie is broken when the second clerk hands me a pile of money. The Egyptian bills are colorful, have different pictures on them and look lovely. I know they're supposed to mean something to me, but they look silly, like monopoly money. I've just exchanged \$200 in traveler's checks for what looks like part of a board game but know the bills must stand for something! Suddenly I'm struck with how absurd money systems really are. They all involve little pieces of paper that might as well have cartoons drawn on them for how worthless they are themselves. Some of my new bills show finely drawn pictures of mosques superimposed against a lacy background with stylized Arabic writing on them. Gee, they're prettier than the travelers checks I've handed over, so I'm visually pleased. And I suppose these bills stand for-what?-a certain amount of gold or silver? Still, money systems seem like board games, where one pile of paper is exchanged for another. My new pile of money is bigger and thicker than the few skinny pieces of paper I forked over. Gosh, what a bargain, huh?

So here is this wad of stuff in my hand. Mission accomplished, I

guess. I expectantly wait for the next group activity, getting used to having events orchestrated for me by a group leader.

“Ohhhh! They gave you a lot of SMALL bills!” Amabel croons with delight seeing my money. She takes all my smaller bills. “I’m going to give you back these other ones...It’s really hard to get small bills in Egypt” she says, giving me back larger denominations.

Mohammed, our smiling hotel host, appears around the corner while I’m waiting for Amy to come out of the currency exchange office. “Is everything all right?” he asks Amabel in a self-confident tone. To his surprise, it isn’t.

“I’m not happy with the time you’ve scheduled our welcoming dinner tonight” she starts. Then, before he can catch his breath, she adds “...and I don’t like the way our arrival here was handled. It could been done more smoothly. As a matter of fact, things just aren’t moving as fast or as efficiently as they should,” she huffs.

Mohammed is deflated by the surprise attack. Desiring to please her, he suggests an alternative dinner time.

“No, that JUST WON’T DO! You’re going to have to change it to a later time!” she storms.

Mohammed recoils from her blustery face. Clearly he thought she’d be pleased with his new proposal. I’m embarrassed to be witnessing this scene. Her tone is snippy and condescending to him. He’s in a bind because he’s already made arrangements with the restaurant staff for our dinner. It’s one of several catered events this evening. Changing it would affect all the other dinner times and further stress the staff. He’s not happy at the prospect of having to renegotiate with them. Barely suppressing his anger, he grits his teeth, turns quickly on his heel, and stomps away. Amabel looks victorious. I’m shocked at seeing this aspect of her and regret that Mohammed might be getting a bad taste in his mouth about our group so soon after our arrival.

A few minutes later, Mohammed returns looking battle fatigued from hashing out a new dinner time with the restaurant staff. His expression indicates he detests having to deal with Amabel again. He offers her the later dinner time.

“Good, that’s much better” she says in a tone used for training pup-

pies. He doesn't smile.

"Yes, sure..." he says flatly, joyless from getting her approval. His desire to please her is gone.

Amy and a few other stragglers return from the currency exchange office. Amabel refocuses her attention back on us, offering to do us a favor. "Now...listen up people...each of you can pay me \$40 to have Mohammed take care of all the hotel tipping we would ordinarily encounter during the several days we're staying here. I suggest you do this so you don't have to worry about tipping the staff each day. It'll make your life a lot easier" she adds with a knowing look. Mohammed, of course, isn't there to verify the plan. It strikes me as strange that the two of them can agree on anything after what I've seen. Maybe they arranged this while they were still getting along. Everyone, including myself, gives Amabel \$40...until she has \$400 in her hands.

"How nice of you to take care of this for us" says Juliete. I, too, feel relieved knowing I won't be hassled by lingering porters and other awkward tipping situations.

Some of us start walking away but Amabel stops us. "People...we're not done yet. I have your room keys here..." she says jangling a bag she pulls out from inside a folder. "...Now, I want you to understand there's only one key between two roommates, so you're going to have to decide between you which one of you will be in charge of it. **GUARD THIS KEY WITH YOUR LIFE** because there'll be a big fine to pay if you lose it. I suggest you leave the key at the front desk, rather than carry it around with you" she warns. Amy and I look at each other blankly.

"Do you want to keep the key?" asks Amy in a tone that tells me she's interested in keeping it.

"Nah, that's O.K., you can keep it" I say. Amy looks as if I've just awarded her the medal of honor- when actually I'm happy to be rid of the responsibility! We compliment each other well. She tucks the room key inside her wallet as carefully as replacing a bird egg back into its nest. I have no doubt she'll take good care of the key.

The key turns the lock. Amy and I walk into a room fragrant with flowers. A fan-shaped floral arrangement made with tropical bird of paradise and white hyacinths sits near the window. White candles in

graceful stem holders uplift the spirit making me feel I'm in a holy place. The time pattern in the room feels slower, as if we've entered a sanctuary from some bygone era where sacred rituals took place. The room relaxes me. It reminds me of a more sensual lifestyle.

There's a basketful of fruit sitting next to the flower arrangement but we have trouble identifying the strange looking native produce. We spend a few minutes sniffing and poking, squeezing and trying to guess the fruit. A few hard green balls smell like oranges. I identify some brown oblong objects as dates after biting into one. This Easter basket of surprises adds new citrusy aromas to the flower smells after each is liberated from plastic wrap.

We explore the room. The bathroom resembles a trellis garden with dark stained lattice work. Some sort of night light in the bedroom emits a punky smell. We unlock balcony doors that open to an amphitheater-like panorama where we can see how our hotel building curves convexly around our porch. Twinkling lights dot the horizon. Feathery palm trees sway against the sky. But predominating over all is...a presence. It greets me as strongly as unexpected company meeting me on the other side of the balcony door. That presence I feel is coming from the pyramids.

The pyramids don't demand visual attention. They stand obscured by a night mist resembling a black cloud bank. They're partly visible in a cardboard cut out sort of way only after staring in their general direction awhile. No, they don't demand my visual attention...it's more that they PULL my attention towards them magnetically and THEN my eyes see them. Noticing them feels like walking into a dark room then later sensing three people quietly sitting in a corner.

The ground fog hides the bottom of the closest pyramid. Its horizontal bank makes the pyramid top look like a roving, geometric helicopter suspended in air. Despite its two dimensional appearance, it emanates a tangible life force that feels much more intelligent and enduring than my flesh and blood mortality. Its energy is intimidating, like meeting God.

The group of three pyramids feels far from inanimate. It feels as if the triad has some sort of group "personality." I pick up a sense of

humor emanating from them as they watch the tiny human beings running around at their base. I experience benevolence coming from them that feels similar to amused grandparents lovingly watching their grandchildren play. Then, eerily, I become aware of their recognition of MY presence! I'm astonished to be sensing that they're aware of me- then feel frightened when I begin to perceive their amusement at my astonishment of their awareness of me! This is too much...I'm not prepared for this experience.

The pyramids give me the feeling that more is going on with them than meets the eye, much the same as with Cairo. Standing before them fills me with a mixture of awe, curiosity and a large dose of respect, as if they are alive and worthy of my good manners. I'm not yet able to grasp what these massive stone monuments are all about but am probably as mesmerized as the early cave men were seeing their first fire. Knowing the pyramids are as significant as fire-but not knowing how-puts me in the same place as the cave men, in a dark hole where my perceptions fall short and humble me.

Meeting up with the pyramids brings me face to face with a force the likes of which I've never met before, or if I have, had forgotten until now. I'm greeting something both alien yet familiar so I stand on humid balcony puzzled for some time with the wind ruffling my hair. I forget Amy is there. If she said anything to me, I don't remember it. I might have temporarily experienced a time warp.

A knock on the door interrupts my reverie. I'm as startled as I've been while driving my car and suddenly asking myself "oh yeah, where am I supposed to be driving to now?" This interruption is about our luggage arriving. Two chisel featured Egyptians in uniform enter our room. They act deferentially at first...until they find out we're Americans. "Ah, Ahm-MARE-ree-cuns, yes!," says one with relaxed affection. Now, I don't know what we've done to deserve their good will, but it's pleasant. They treat us as like their long lost relatives, genuinely caring about making us comfortable. One man replaces the punky smelling night light/mosquito deterrent; the other turns down our beds. After doing everything they possibly can for us, it's time for them to exit. Still, they linger around, as if expectantly waiting for a movie to start. It soon

becomes obvious that they expect a tip, but wait- wasn't Amabel supposed to have taken care of the tipping situation with the \$40 each of us gave her? These guys act as if she hasn't paid them. I wonder what gives.

Maybe she hasn't had a chance to pay them. These men look too sincere to be pulling our leg. I honestly feel they haven't received any tip money yet. So that means: they're here, they've delivered our bags and I don't feel I can send them away empty handed. I dig out an American dollar for each of them. They turn the money over in their hands, inspecting the bills but seem to like the foreign money. "Anything you need, you let us know" says one as they disappear out the door.

There isn't much time to unpack or rest before having to meet Amabel and the gang for dinner. While Amy disappears into the bathroom, I go back out on the balcony again. Only a few minutes have elapsed since my first visit, so what I see strikes me as...peculiar. Below me is an elaborate banquet that hotel staff are clearing away. Why haven't I noticed this floodlit extravaganza before? How could I possibly miss something so obvious taking place right under my own hotel room? Uniformed waiters are busy clearing away half eaten plates of food from guests who-what?-ate noiselessly by candlelight then disappeared into the wind? The scene doesn't make sense. How could Amy and I both have missed seeing and commenting on this flurry of activity below us while standing outside for an extended period of time? Noticing it now feels like accidentally discovering a new TV station.

The wind playfully flaps the banquet's white formal tablecloths but isn't strong enough to extinguish the candelabras still burning for the recently departed guests. I glance up to where the pyramids were...but now THEY are gone, too, covered by a black mist. O.K., first the pyramids were visible when the banquet guests were "invisible." Then the pyramids disappeared while the banquet became visible. I don't know what's going on here, but it feels as if I'm dealing with disappearing and reappearing realities each time I walk through our balcony doors. I hear Amy coming out of the bathroom.

"Hey, Amy, did you see this banquet when we were out here before?" I ask her.

“What banquet?” she asks.

We leave to meet the others for dinner. The two Egyptians who visited our room are loitering in the hall watching Amy lock our door. For a minute I fear they’re planning to rob our room while we’re gone but change my mind when they adoringly stare, smile and nod to us pretending to arrange already prearranged towels on a cart. They watch us walk by intently, evaluating us in Arabic as if we don’t get the gist of their conversation. They’re not trying to be rude; it’s just that they’re VERY interested in us.

The front desk becomes a teaching post as Amy and I wait for the others to go to dinner. I watch other tourists interact with staff members. The tourists seem to be operating out of certain assumptions they’ve brought with them from home. They treat the Egyptians as if they’re supposed to think just like the people back home, only dressed up in different costumes, and show irritation when they don’t behave the same way.

Dinner tonight is at the Al Rubayyat, one of several attractive restaurants within the hotel complex. The restaurant looks like a sultan’s dining room with pointed Moorish arches and candlelight. We’re first served a spicy cold sea bass cocktail that’s excellent. Next, comes an array of meatless dishes requested by the many vegetarians in our group. The local vegetables look unfamiliar but I’m happy not to find any suspicious looking airplane salad garnishes among them. All entrees are absolutely yummy, made with spices I can’t identify. Some at our table order wine. Only two types are listed, a red and a white. I decide to try a glass of the Omar Khayam red. Fran has ordered the house white and winces after tasting it.

“I guess I’m not used to the Egyptian’s idea of wine...how’s yours?” she asks me.

“Well...it tastes like a young, very rough burgundy but since I haven’t had wine in awhile, tastes pretty good after two swallows.” We chuckle, sharing a new camaraderie over wine appreciation.

“The Egyptian’s forte is beer” interjects Amabel. “Try the Stella beer...it’s excellent. Even if you’re not a beer drinker, you’ll like Stella beer...want a taste?” she says swinging her glass in our direction.

Six musicians walk on-stage. I perk up at the idea of live music. Five of them look young, have very dark close cropped hair and are dressed in calypso-type shirts. The sixth is a much older man- perhaps their father, wearing a loose fitting blue galabiya and turban wrapped around his head. I can't take my eyes off the older man. He looks deposited here from another century with his small horn in hand. Tuning the instrument up, it makes a duck call sound that reminds me of some New Year's Eve noisemakers. The high pitched bleating of this instrument sounds like a kazoo. All this is funny except that an unexpected thrill goes through my body each time I hear it. This horn sounds like the same sound I've heard in cartoons of a man sitting cross-legged hypnotizing a swaying cobra with his music. In this case my heart beats faster hearing the sound.

"What IS that?" I ask Nida.

"It's a mizmar, an instrument that forms the core of Egyptian folk music, unchanged after 3,000 years" she says.

The sound is arresting in its immediacy. It seems familiar to me, although I've never seen it before. It seems to be awakening something in me by tickling my body from the inside out. There's no ignoring its dominant sound as it shrilly trills over the other instruments. Suddenly the old man looks at me as if someone has just pointed me out to him. We lock eyes. I get the eerie feeling we're communicating telepathically. The cells in my body feel...hot...as if the electrons, protons and neutrons are all spinning at an accelerated rate. I feel I KNOW him, but think "this is impossible." He continues to stare.

The other musicians tune up their instruments before the floor show. They play intricate warm up exercises but do it joylessly, as if depressed. I wonder how many hundreds of times they've had to play this hotel gig and if they're getting paid well. They don't look especially well dressed. They wear adolescent looking white socks underneath almost Hispanic looking baggy pants. Their black shoes are unpolished and worn. The sullen looks on their faces complete a picture of economic dichotomy between themselves and the tourists. I look at the audience and see well-dressed foreigners wearing silks and jewels. Glittering French, Italians, Germans and Americans sit sipping alcoholic beverages that are against

the Muslim religion. I don't see any Egyptians in the audience. The only Egyptians I see are waiting on tables filled with wealthy tourists. It strikes me as sad that the people I've come to visit probably can't afford the price of this dinner and evening's entertainment.

The musicians begin playing electrifying Arabic scales and minor chords. Egyptian dancers with beautifully sculptured features enter the stage to perform. Their costumes are made of modern materials such as rayon and polyester but their traditional wedding dance steps date back thousands of years. I'm thrilled to be able to recognize some of their movements from Bernice, a belly dancer who taught and greatly admired ancient pharaonic dancing.

The first solo performer is a cherub-faced brunette. She smiles while shimmying and gracefully balances a heavy looking, ornate candelabra on her head. The candelabra weighs about ten pounds and is made of either copper or iron. So few performers have mastered the tremendous skills required by this type of ancient dance that it is in danger of extinction. The flames of the eight lit candles also move as she gyrates her hips. Stage light reflects off the thousands of glass bugle beads that are hand threaded onto her costume. She snakes across the wooden floor wearing high heeled shoes, making a pass in front of the dead-panned musicians. Although the candelabra dance is an ancient tradition, dating back to the original lighted candle dance, here the performer unsuccessfully tries making eye contact with an audience stuffing its face with hotel delicacies. I wonder if they are aware or appreciative of the history they are witnessing.

A second, darker skinned dancer appears wearing the head kerchief and colorful clothing of the Gawazie, people of the south who are often described as Egypt's "gypsies." She directs her charmingly flirtatious dance to several handsomely regal men surrounding her. The lively interactions of the dancers contrast strangely with the bored looking musicians. The musicians seem unaware that they, too, are part of the stage set, and seen by the audience. Next, two Arabic looking women appear on-stage wearing flowered gowns. The folksy gowns contrast with their modern high heels. The women dance an ancient and interesting water jug dance balancing huge gourds on their heads. Their agility is

somewhat upstaged by the dead panned musicians, who seem to be in a separate reality from the dancers while still able to provide the needed music. Then I realize that whatever emotions are missing from the musicians' faces are coming through their instruments.

The next dancer is a mannequin looking siren. She wears a tight fitting pink satin dress totally covered with foot-long strands of glass bugle beads. The beads fan out as she begins to spin, giving her the appearance of a whirling dervish. Although high heels certainly weren't worn during Pharaonic times, they serve to protect her feet from bloody cuts should she step on a sharp bugle bead shaken off during a performance. High heels also help prevent her from getting wrenched knees, a common occurrence when dancers dance flatfooted. High heels offer needed arch support since most belly dancing is done on the toes. The elevated shoe heels act as supports for calves that would otherwise tire from holding up this elevated leg position. For this reason most cabaret dancers in clubs wear high heels but the shoes pose their own danger if a heel gets caught on a floorboard or in the hem of a dress.

I undergo a sense of *deja vu* seeing an ancient stick dance performed by male dancers. *El Tahatibe*, or stick fencing as it is called, is one of the oldest surviving martial arts. Illustrations of *El Tahatibe* appear on Egypt's ancient monuments, evidence of a form of art that has remained intact for over thirty centuries. The men perform stylized combat between two opponents armed with thick bamboo poles. The percussionist acts as the referee in the dance, walking around and beating a drum which seems to talk, even reprimand, the two opponents. What's peculiar for me is that the dance seems to light up a distant memory within me. I know which dance steps are coming next, even though I've never seen or even read about them before. "Rediscovering" the dance here gives me a feeling of great joy. Elated, I turn to Sandy, a fellow dancer sitting next to me. "I remember this dance...I mean, I really REMEMBER it!" I excitedly say. She smiles at me tolerantly, probably thinking the wine has gotten to me. She doesn't understand the origin or depth of my feelings or how I feel like an amnesia victim waking up to the knowledge that I've been an ancient Egyptian dancer before. Seeing this dance has transported me back in time. My inner knowledge of this

is pure and riveting. I was there. I danced those steps with these men. I remember. Just when I'm remembering...the old musician, still playing his hypnotic instrument looks directly at me...and smiles. I smile; he smiles. Somehow he knows what is happening. He knows it is my awakening. Question is, how instrumental has he been in my awakening?

After dinner Amabel does us another favor. She takes us to a gift shop within the hotel that sells jewelry because she knows many of us want to buy cartouches, souvenir necklaces that can be ordered with our names done in Egyptian hieroglyphics. "We're going here because the quality of items in the Mena House jewelry shops can be trusted...you don't want to buy gold and jewelry out on the street...you don't know what you'd be getting" she explains. "Just look around now...don't buy. You'll have plenty of time for that later" she says, encouraging us to browse. The purpose of this visit is to make our faces known to the shop owner so that he can give us "special deals" when we return.

Glass cases display tray after tray of gold and silver cartouche backings, the building blocks of future necklaces. Individual hieroglyphic letters sit neatly sorted out, waiting to be arranged into names then soldered onto oval backings. Workmanship appears to be high in the finished products that lie displayed on dark blue velvet cloth. Price tags are purposely missing from the items, encouraging buyer and seller interaction.

The shop owner is a hulking man who could easily pass for Omar Sharif's distinguished father. He carefully selects gold and silver items, weighing them on scales in view of the customer. He sells the jewelry by weight, according to current market value. Wealthy women crowd the store. They fondle bracelets and chains, expecting immediate personal attention. Despite how busy the shop is, the owner is gracious and polite to all.

He makes mental notes of our faces as he offers each of us a free souvenir papyrus bookmark. He spreads out a fan of bookmarks in front of my face, smiling. I'm immediately attracted to one of a woman with the head of a lioness. Although he hasn't commented on the choices others have made, he seems taken aback by mine.

“That is Sekhmet. She holds the key to eternal life. She is a very powerful goddess” he says reverently. I’d like to spend more time hearing about Sekhmet but Amabel shepherds us out.

“You’ll have plenty of time to shop later” she says, responding to the group’s reluctance to leave.

The reason for Amabel’s antsiness becomes apparent.

“Does anyone want to take a quick walk to see the pyramids?” she enticingly asks.

“Yes!” the others unanimously say. Although I want to see the pyramids eventually, I’m in no rush to walk there right now, at the end of a very long first day in Cairo. After all, we have two weeks to connect with them and I’m feeling tired. But I’m also curious about why she’s so anxious to connect with them, so go along more out of curiosity about her than from my own desire.

We leave the safe hotel haven and walk down the stone terrace. Get ready to change worlds...now we set foot on the real Egypt, I think, looking at the uneven cobblestones. Our path is littered with large piles of camel dung from tourist rides earlier that day. The walk is short; before I know it, we’re standing on the rise that leads to the base of the pyramids. Out of nowhere, a fierce looking guard steps out of the shadows, barring our way with a machine gun. Surprisingly, Amabel doesn’t flinch at the menacing figure and maintains assertive body language.

“Pee-rah-meed ees not working. Too meh-knee people get keeled climbing” he says curtly. Instead of deferring to his authority, Amabel challenges it.

“I’ve been here before at night...Why can’t we go now?...” She proceeds to tell him more than he wants to know about her previous freedoms on other trips. In a land where men usually have the last say, he’s taken aback that she isn’t intimidated. It takes a second or two for him to recover from the shock of her not backing down. He decides he’s not going to let her sway him. I try to decide if Amabel is brave or stupid as their conversation escalates. Two more armed guards are attracted by their heated exchange. Now all three guards are shouting in Arabic at each other, all pumped up about the “security threat” to the pyramids. A brush fire of excitement spreads to other guards as adrenaline laced

updates are exchanged in the distance. I decide that not being able to see the pyramids will be the least of our worries. Amabel is getting us all into trouble with the police. Finally she begins backing down when it becomes clear she can't win. She physically retreats while still arguing with the men. But just as we turn around to head back to the hotel we hear a voice.

"Psst! Hey, lady! You want to see pee-rah-meed? I show you pee-rah-meed." Astonished, we all look at each other then turn to face the opportunist in our midst. There's really no time to figure out why this one lingering guard has decided to break away from the others and help us. We've got to decide whether we want to follow him back into forbidden territory or not. "Queek!..." he urges, swaying our decision, "...you must run after me and stay close to sides of building so no one sees you."

We run across a limestone ridge that smells like damp concrete. I marvel at how only a few minutes ago I was eating a fine gourmet dinner in the best Cairo hotel. Now I'm furtively slinking along the sides of crumbling buildings like a criminal, taking part in something that's dangerous- something that I could get shot at for! It's a whole different ball game out here with this defecting guard. Amabel couldn't have arranged a better cloak and dagger scene if she tried.

In the midst of our run, I look at Amabel, trying to figure her out. She seems quite sure of herself and O.K. with all this. It's not clear to me whether she's standing up for her rights against a silly bureaucracy or putting us all in jeopardy with her obsession about visiting the pyramids. I wonder why I'm here. Originally I thought I came along to see why she was so hot to see the pyramids, but now I'm thinking about my own issues. Her desire to see the pyramids has already put me in a dangerous position. Now I'm wondering if I should continue to trust her leadership in this situation or defect and get the hell back to my safe hotel room.

She seems to be putting a lot on the line, but for what? The pyramids aren't worth getting shot over...this I know. An overriding aspect of this situation is: it doesn't really feel I'm in any danger...unless I think I am (?). This feeling isn't the same as denying reality or even delusional thinking. It's my sense that the reality here is actually safer than its

surface appearance. It's more of a Pac-Man® reality and one that feels vaguely familiar. I search my mind why it feels familiar. Let's see...the men with machine guns...hiding from the guards. Bingo, I've got it! I've done all this before in my dreams! Yes, my dreams, my dreams! No wonder this set up feels familiar. I've landed in the dreamscape of my pre-Cairo dreams where what I think shapes the outcome of events.

It seems I've positioned myself into this situation where issues of trust are involved. Trusting my own judgment to stay with Amabel's group...deciding whether to trust Amabel's leadership here or not. Since I don't have a lot of information on Amabel, I return to my gut feelings. Those tell me that I need to trust that I'll be O.K. I don't limit my decision on whether to stay with her and the group on gut feelings alone, however. I also include memories of how Amabel has always put her own welfare first. Based on that, I'd wager she's looking out for herself right now. What this means is that if Amabel's safe, then her group is also safe because she seems too smart and self-preserving to put herself in a risky situation.

We run along that side of the pyramid hidden from the hotel with the guard in the lead. He motions for us to crouch down and duck under a rope that partitions off the pyramids to the public. Dung smells hang heavily in the moist air from camel caravans that have paused to pose for pictures in the scenic area. Once underneath the rope, he points to a spot on the ground and says "I cannot let you go any further than that." We don't need to. The pyramid is so huge, it seems to engulf us.

Second thoughts haunt me about where we are. In a forbidden zone. I get concerned about my safety, not without reason. Look what we've done...we've followed this stranger with a machine gun into a deserted area at night. No one from the hotel knows we're here and other tourists can't see or hear us. Why, anything could happen. I try to stop my mind from imagining the worst by remembering how Mohammed and the travel books said Egypt is safe and virtually crime free. On the other hand, I can't forget the recent attacks made on tourists.

We line up facing the pyramid. It looks fat and imposing. My nostrils inhale the chalky semi-sweet smell of limestone clouds that my sandals have kicked up. The smell is so strong I feel I'm drinking pul-

verized stone while standing in front of stone. We all stand respectfully quiet before the pyramid. Some of the younger members stretch their palms towards it, as if trying to make contact with its essence. I think of how I was employed by a blind man some twenty years ago. He could identify the various denominations of money through touch. His other senses were so acutely developed that he was able to accurately tell me my weight and height just from my walking across his floor. He could sense objects in his path and would walk around them without the aid of a cane. It was his belief that anyone could sense the radiating force field around an object with a little practice.

The guard stood silently next to us. Now he seemed protective of our group, rather than protecting the pyramids from us, as he did earlier.

The ground hugging mist shifted, revealing our illicit presence to another guard in the distance. When this second guard sees us standing in the forbidden zone, he becomes upset, almost rabid. He shouts and runs towards our group. None of us budes.

“What are you doing there? You can’t go there! You need appointment!” he angrily sputters. His voice sounds tinny, like an annoying alarm clock buzzing me awake from a thick dream. Now he’s so close to me that I can almost feel his breath on my neck. He menacingly rattles his weapon inches away from my head.

No one breaks their preoccupation with the pyramid, despite the sputtering guard. Seeing we’re not reacting to him, he starts venting on our guide for breaking the pyramid cop rules. At first our sympathizer defends his behavior, but maybe realizing how he can get in trouble, snaps back into doing his job.

“Time is up. You must leave. You aren’t supposed to be here!” he reprimands us harshly as if the transgression was all our idea.

Amabel adds more depth to this scenario. She thanks our betrayer for his trouble and shoves some Egyptian money in his hand. It appears he has regrets about abandoning us, wearing a “Now look what you made me go and do” expression on his face after taking the money. He looks as if he doesn’t feel he deserves the money, as if he’s compromised himself and stares at it. Perhaps he regrets having to be on the take.

The two guards walk away but two other characters materialize out

of the night mist when we're halfway to the hotel. These two look like bit actors right out of a "Lawrence of Arabia" movie set, wearing flowing Arabic robes and head cloths. They sneak up on us with cat's feet, waiting for the kill.

"You want to see pee-rah-mids? I can show you pee-rah-mids. I show you Sphinx, too. Come with me. Vee can arrange, yes..." pitches the more entrepreneurial of the two in a loud, hopeful voice.

"No, thank you" Amabel says with amusement. He takes her refusal as encouragement and moves in closer, this time only inches away from her ear.

The man stands like an apparition silhouetted against a dark road that appears to go nowhere. He wants us to walk with him into a virtual black hole blowing gusting sand into my contact lenses. My eyes hurt; I've already worn the contacts too long. There's no safe place to take them out without losing them and all I have with me are dark prescription sunglasses as replacements. Visually I'm not prepared for this journey and want to get back to the hotel. As it is, we can't see a quarter of a mile down the road, let alone two miles in the direction he wants to take us. To my relief, Amabel comes to her senses.

"We're not dressed properly and have been through too much for one day" she tells the men.

It feels reassuring getting back to the hotel. The Egyptian chambermaid has already turned down our beds and laid out slippers and robes for us in our absence. Amy lights the candles, recreating the feeling of sanctuary in our room. We open the balcony doors and take a breath of fresh air. Needle-like mosque minarets pierce the sky.

I try to pack things up for the early morning flight out to Luxor, but my suitcase contents have expanded since I've opened the bags up. I can't stuff everything back into its originally folded neatness. The paperbacks take up space and weigh a lot...I look forward to dumping them once I read them. The parcels of baksheesh also take up a lot of room, I see, as I spread them all over the bed. It doesn't matter, I decide. I'm exhausted and need sleep, so throw everything impatiently back into the suitcases. I fall into bed and begin dreaming about what brought me to Cairo...