

## II. 3

### NIGHT OF THE PYRAMIDS

Somehow the idea of having a meeting at 11PM didn't seem that absurd. After all, there wasn't much chance of getting any sleep at the hotel, or for that matter maybe anywhere in Egypt. *Ramadan* sort of reverses the circadian patterns of the day: with no eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset, the night becomes the time of feasting, socializing, weddings and, it seems, taking meetings.

At the Hilton the nights have been anything but restful. Last night there was a wedding and reception in the huge atrium and swimming pool area of the hotel. A band played amplified Arabic pop music until 4AM, by which time the furious traffic of Tahrir Square that the hotel backs up to took over the insomnia-producing din.

I had already asked for a room change away from the atrium. The hotel manager cheerfully complied; it was a room further away from the atrium, but closer to the square. The new room came with an enormous bouquet of fresh-cut flowers; a nice gesture of contrition (unless it was left-over from the wedding), but the effect was to make the room smell like a funeral parlor.

I had managed to get a nap in the afternoon, so when our driver-minder, Hisham, arrived with the government car to pick Jack and me up for the 11PM meeting I was almost relieved. It looked like they were setting up for another wedding for tonight.

Hisham had been our driver since we arrived in Egypt. His English was quite good, if perhaps colored with a few too many American idioms from pop culture. His current favorite American pop singer was a woman named Sadé, and he had already extracted a promise from me to send him her latest tapes when I arrived back home. He was pleasant-looking, with that 'nappy' Egyptian hair cut close, and a bit pudgy as young Egyptians go. I think he comes from a fairly well-off family. And, like many of his age and social class, he seems to be doing work that is well below his education and training. He is a chauffeur with a master's in public administration.

At Doqqi, the area of Cairo of government bureaus, ministries and the university, we were ushered into an anteroom to the Minister's office. Here, typical of most every meeting, we were served tea or cola, offered cigarettes and some cookies, and made to wait while being chatted up by various ministerial underlings. We sat, smoked, drank and chatted for the better part of an hour. Now approaching 12:30AM I reflected on the contrasts with the experience we'd had with officials in Israel.

The joint agricultural program between Egypt and Israel on which we were preparing a script had been somewhat of a challenge since its inception. Initially funded by a grant from an American foundation looking for some basis to strengthen the peaceful relations between the two nations since the historic visit of Anwar Sadat to Israel, the program now involved the U.S. Government and several universities. The challenge was more than just overcoming the former antipathies between the two adversaries, but also to find an endeavor that would have a long-term benefit to each of them. My working title for the documentary treatment was called “Common Ground”.

The two countries did have a Semitic heritage in common, but this has done little in the past to sew amity in racial brotherhood. They drew their religions from much of the same myths and legends, but they found more reason to fight each other than pray together over that. But they also had to squeeze from their parched and parsimonious landscape a life and livelihood. Much of that landscape was desert. They should both be interested in finding ways to make the desert bloom. That became the joint project, on which Jack and I were preparing to document.

We had met with the Israeli scientists and officials a week earlier. Their meetings had all been in austere offices, in the field, or in labs. They were conducted punctually, on a tight schedule, were devoid of interruptions, and were concluded promptly on time. All very business-like and efficient, very Israeli.

So in the time we sat drinking tea and chatting in the ante-room at Doqqi we might have been able to conduct two or three Israeli-style meetings. The Egyptian meeting had not even started and it was going on 1AM. All of the meetings in Egypt had been pretty much this way. We could only wonder what it was like when the scientists and officials from Israel took meetings in Egypt.

At one-fifteen we were ushered into the Deputy Minister’s office. My first impression was that this was what it must have been like to enter Benito Mussolini’s office in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. Il Duce had a desk at the end of an office the size of a ballroom, and visitors had to walk about forty yards across a hardwood floor to reach his desk. It must have been intimidating.

The minister’s office wasn’t quite that large, but it was huge by any standards and in its center was a meeting table large enough to accommodate about twenty-five chairs along each side. At the far end of the table sat the minister, surrounded by phones, a few piles of papers, and the ever-present feature of every Egyptian government office we had visited, a legion of supernumeraries-in-waiting.

We were shown to seats along the side to the left of the minister, a couple of officials took up places opposite us. We got to stare at each other because the minister was on one of the phones, speaking authoritatively in rapid Arabic. For all we knew he could be ordering pizza. I wouldn’t have minded a slice or two, as something to soak up the endless pots of tea, another of which had been placed before us.

The minister was a large, heavy-set man, handsome, with thinning dark hair, piercing eyes and a growing paunch. He looked more Greek or Italian to me than Egyptian. He flipped through papers during his conversation on the phone and no one else spoke. Jack and I decided to remain silent as well, and I embellished some of my notes to pass the time. I also noticed that my bladder was sending signals to my brain about all the tea I had sent to it.

Just as I had decided that it might make things a bit more comfortable if I visited the men’s room the minister put down the receiver and greeted us warmly. I didn’t need to hear him ask if we would like anything else to drink. After a few other preliminaries and some kibitzing

with some of the officials on the other side of the table there commenced what had to be one of the most frustrating meetings I had ever participated in my life.

My presentation was interrupted in nearly every paragraph by an incoming phone call, or some aide or another coming into the room with a question for the minister or with paper's requiring his signature. Usually he just waved to me to put myself on "pause" while an aide handed him the phone receiver, or showed him where his signature was required. Then he would say: "So, and after you visit the facility at Burg Al Arab you will. . . ." repeating where I had left-off as a cue for me to continue.

What should have been a thirty-minute meeting dragged out, to the extreme distress to my brain and bladder, for over two hours. It was now nearing 2AM, by Egyptian *Ramadan* schedule that's just about lunchtime, which brought a merciful adjournment to the meeting in spite of loose ends and unresolved issues that didn't seem to matter at all to the minister.

"You ready to 'rock and roll'?" Hisham asked back in the ante-room.

"Huh?" I said. I understood the idiom, but wasn't sure he did.

"Rock and roll, have some fun, you know. Where would you like to go? People are eating now. Many restaurants are open. It's Ramadan."

"Hey, if I want to party it up all I have to do is go back to the Hilton. There's probably a couple of weddings right outside my room right now," I replied. I would have liked to go back to the hotel and get some sleep, but I knew that was impossible.

"I am available to take you wherever you prefer." Hisham insisted.

Jack didn't seem to have a preference, other than getting some sleep to rest his 'curse-of-the-Pharaohs' bronchitis.

"Tell you what I'd like to do," I said, half expecting that Hisham's offer wasn't really a plenary one, "I'd like to go out to Giza and climb a pyramid, preferably Kufu's. The only time I've seen them at night was at that sound and light show they have, but that's at a distance and very touristic. I'd like to climb up to the top and look at the city and the Nile in the moonlight."

Hisham looked a little surprised, but Jack didn't.

"Pyramids?"

"Pyramids. At Giza. Those big neat piles of stones." I said, making a triangular shape with my hands. Hisham missed the irony of my little joke; I think Hisham was thinking about food and music, not pyramids.

"OK, pyramids. We will go to Giza."

**Fig. II.3/1: Title: "It is Prohibited to Climb the Pyramid"**

Giza is a good fifteen miles from the center of Cairo, a long ride on a road that, although built less than twenty years ago, is rutted, potholed, and crowded with half-built, and already obsolete, buildings comprising overcrowded slums along nearly its entire course. Even at this hour it was lined with people squatting at the curbside doing little businesses, or eating, or just watching everything else going on. Cairo, typical of most every third-world capital city, cannot keep pace with the influx of its citizens from the countryside and its own out-of-control birthrate, confirming that, deprived of other distractions, the principal amusement of the poor must be sexual intercourse.

We bounced along the road, windows open, Hisham's Sadé tape blending with the sounds of the crowded thoroughfare, music, laughter, shouts, and the sibilant tones of Arabic. It

hardly seemed like a religious occasion, but then a month of *Ramadan* is a long time to sustain an attitude of solemnity.

But solemnity does characterize the atmosphere of the pyramids at Giza. After handing over a wad of Egyptian pounds to Hisham as *baksheesh* for the military guard at the gate we are allowed to drive up onto the plateau of the pyramids.

In the distance I could see the silhouette of the Sphinx, its profile ruined even in shadow. It was supposed to guard against intruders and grave robbers, but all I wish to steal from this ancient, fabled place is an unusual experience. It seems that the conditions could not be more propitious for letting the imagination have a go at spanning the millennia, back to when the pyramids were sheathed with glistening smooth stone and the Nile flowed free and clear. This night was bright, an almost full moon in a clear sky. The temperature was still in the humid eighties, cooled slightly by an occasional breeze. And it was quiet, appropriately, deathly quiet. The wheels of the government car crunched the gravel of the roadbed as we drove up to and alongside Kufu. I had that thrilling frisson of doing something illegal, or, like when as a kid we used to run through an old cemetery at night, skirting the edge of the spiritual world.

I could just make out in the gloom the entrance, several courses of stone up one side, forced into the great pyramid's side like a jagged gash. I remembered a couple of years earlier entering there and climbing up hands on knees, head to butt, with other tourists, through the fetid air of the shaft that leads upward to the king's chamber. That shaft led into the 'Grand Gallery' a tall and narrow ascent that communicated with the little room that was the burial chamber. There are still lampblack stains on the walls and ceilings from the days when the pyramid was built. Here we ascended on a wooded ramp that aided access. I remember how I shuddered at the thought of those high, stone walls closing in and crushing or trapping us.

I recalled the clamminess of the interior of the pyramid, as though the moistures, gasses and other exhalations of countless visitors remained hermetically sealed by the mass of surrounding stone. In the burial chamber itself the king's red granite sarcophagus was coated with the greasiness of innumerable sweaty hands. Even its long vacant interior was coated with the oils of visitors who had lain in it for the obligatory ghoulish souvenir "pharaoh photo." On that particular day a small group of fellow Californians were there, lotus-sitting around the perimeter of the chamber, engaged in some 'new age' attempt at cosmic connection, desecrating the place with psycho-babble and flaky 'pyramidology'. There have been enough books of bullshit written about the pyramids to pile into pyramids twice the size of the originals.

But if one can somehow block out all of the touristic static and let the mind and imagination focus on *where one really is* there is a little aperture to an almost transcendent state. When I made my way down to a much smaller, secondary chamber, called the 'queen's chamber' even though no one really knows for certain, I was for a few minutes completely alone to wonder at the mysteries of this ancient place. It wasn't the groupish 'new age' connection that interested me—I wasn't looking for some miraculous harmonic convergence that would ensure me financial success, or make my cellulite disappear—I wanted to get as close as I could to what had intrigued me since I first read a book: time travel. I wished to be a time traveling fly on the chamber wall, a witness to some ancient funerary rite, to the priestly figures in the flickering torchlight, the smoke and incense, the aromas of the chemistry of mummification, and the incomprehensible babble of requiem incantations in a language whose true sounds remain a mystery. I wanted to see the sarcophagus set in its place for the eternal journey, surrounded by the riches of the pharaoh. I wanted to hear the chamber being sealed. Was it true that priests and

slaves, maybe even concubines, might have been sealed in as well? There seemed a ghostly presence in the bare, reticent, chamber.

Maybe I just wanted the sensation that, as great and powerful as the Pharaoh and his queen were, they were long dead and that made me feel very much *alive*.

Now, on this balmy Ramadan night I wanted to walk the entire perimeter of the great pyramid of Kufu. As I did I thought I did hear the eerie moans and mournful murmurs of those long-ago voices of sealed-in priests and concubines. I soon realized, as my eyes accustomed themselves to the low light and the shadows that I was not alone. In the shadows and crevices of the huge blocks of the pyramid were, I discovered, people, or more accurately, couples. Even more accurately, if my senses were detecting the meaning of those moans and murmurs, copulating couples!

What a marvelous notion! What a concept! Making love on a pyramid! Doing perhaps the most life-affirming act on a monument to death!

How many people had done it at the very summit of Kufu, its top flattened off from the long missing golden point, and its stones covered with inscribed graffiti from over the ages? People always seemed to want to “do it” on tops of mountains, towers, high buildings, even in airplanes, as though it made them feel like gods. What a reward after a long, and perilous climb to the top of a pyramid, now, sadly, prohibited by the authorities.

When I later mentioned to Hisham that I could swear people were getting laid all over the Great Pyramid he seemed unimpressed. It may have more to do with the fact that the pyramid provides some privacy in a country that is so crowded he offered. Moreover, the Egyptians are hardly daunted by the presence of death. A couple of days earlier I had wandered through the huge City of the Dead in which thousands of squatters have made homes in the mausoleums of the dead. In a place where the past is so woven into the present there is little wonder that the dead must make way for the living.

Nor was there little wonder that rather lascivious thoughts took their place alongside my marveling at this special night. Sitting on the huge blocks a just a few courses up laid down five and a half millennia ago, and looking out toward the Nile and the lights of Cairo, I could not help contemplating what it would be like to climb all the way to the top with an adventurous lover and give a whole new connotation to ‘harmonic convergence’.

Hisham’s thoughts however were running to refreshment, and after a good soaking up of the atmosphere of the world’s most famous necropolis, he said the word I didn’t want to hear for a month or two: *shay*. The mere thought of more tea constricted my bladder. Furthermore, it was around 3AM.

“I think you will enjoy this café very much, Dr. James,” Hisham said confidently. He already knew of my penchant for cafés that had some historical connection or another. A couple of days earlier I had asked him if there were any interesting cafés nearby the Hilton and he had recommended Groppi’s at the Midan Talaat Harb. Groppi’s is known for its excellent confections, but also has a reputation as having been the scene of intrigue during WWII when spies for the Germans and the English and Americans kept tabs on each other over cups of tea and thick coffee. It still has its metal topped tables and the somewhat derelict appearance of a place that could ‘tell stories’.

When we made a visit there a few days earlier Jack and I ordered mint tea and some pastry. As the waitress served it to us I happened to notice a large cockroach crawl leisurely across her shoe. When it touched her skin she looked down, calmly stamped her foot with just enough force to dislodge the insect, and with a second quick and skillful tap, dispatched it with a

‘crack’, but not a splatter. A third expert foot movement flicked the corpse out of sight under the table pedestal. A ballet aficionado would have seen the moves as a well-executed *ronde de jambe*. Without changing expression she placed the bill on the table and walked off. In old cafés that serve pastry and espionage it’s a good idea that even the roaches stay “undercover.”

So when Hisham led us through an underpass in Khan al Khalili Bazaar that was crammed with squatters, screaming children, beggars, and piles of refuse, and then through the narrow streets to El Fishawy Café I was already beginning to feel like Indiana Jones or a character out of some spy novel. It was nearing 4AM now but I was exhilarated by the prospect that I might get to meet Egypt’s Nobel Laureate author, Naguib Mafouz. Hisham had remarked that the writer was a regular patron. Moreover, the story on the café was that not only has it been owned by the same family for three hundred years, but also that it has never been closed during that time.

Three centuries is a rather brief period of years for a country like Egypt. The area of Khan al Khalili, while it might appear ancient to Western eyes, is actually part of “Islamic Cairo”. The nearby Al-Azhar Mosque is, for example, a relatively ‘young’ structure from 970AD (it also boasts the world’s first ‘university’). The bazaar began as a *caravanserai* as “recently” as the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Today it is an immense *souq* of shops, small industries, mosques, mausoleums and *madrassas*, and restaurants and cafés.

El Fishawy looked like it had been there at the beginning. Rickety, low wooden chairs and small, square tables were arranged on a wooden floor that looked like it hadn’t been swept in three centuries. The dimly lit café seemed like a set from a movie. All of the patrons at this hour were in *gallibiyas*, some were wearing traditional Arab turbans, many were smoking from *shishas*, the water pipes with little smoldering mounds of aromatic tobacco on top. The exotic and mysterious atmosphere was thickened and enhanced by old framed and blemished mirrors that hung out from the walls at angles that created a kaleidoscope of reflections and made the place seem even more crowded. We watched and were watched in their reflections.

Waiters passed among the tables with trays of dented metal teapots and chipped and cracked crockery. I had to drink left-handed from my cup to avoid the serrated chip on one side of its lip. A din of Arabic, clicking cups and saucers and gurgling *shishas* composed the ambiguous sound track. Jack and I were the only Westerners I could see, and were it not for Hisham’s Western dress it seemed as though we had fallen through some time window to several centuries earlier. Everything seemed to be 300 years old!

But where was Mafouz? Hisham made inquiries on my behalf and we were disappointed to learn that this was not one of his regular nights. Perhaps it was just as well; I had read only one of his books and was saved from making a fool of myself. It was a couple of years later when I read in the paper that he had been attacked by a Muslim extremist and nearly killed by knife wounds. Fame and regular habits can be dangerous. I wonder if he will ever feel safe again to wander through the bazaar to his favorite café. Egypt has never been an easy place for pharaohs and politicians—a few days earlier I went from Tutankamen’s sarcophagus in the National Museum to where Anwar Sadat had been gunned down—and now its extremists were attacking its artists and intellectuals. Not long after I left the country tourists would become the target.

Fig. II.3/2: Title: The Tomb of Anwar Sadat

The morning light was just coming up when we were leaving el Fishawy; the fasting of *Ramadan* would begin again. Back at the Hilton I slept soundly and dreamed of the pyramid of Kufu. In the morning we would pass by them again, on our way to Alexandria. My notes for the script were fragmentary and tentative, with marginalia about death and love on the cool stones of pyramids. It makes one feel so “temporary.”

Driving northwest I reflected that it’s a rather upside-down place, Egypt. What they call “Upper Egypt” is really the Southern part, closer to the *source* of the life-giving Nile. “Lower Egypt,” in the Northern part, where the fertile delta and most of the population and economy of the country, hardly seems “lower”. During *Ramadan*, the customary activities of day and night are reversed. The country’s prime livelihood is in marketing a long-dead civilization of the past, while the present Egypt is in cultural turmoil over whether it should pursue modernization and risk all the social upheaval that might bring, or follow the reactionary course of some of its Middle Eastern neighbors.

History will sort it out, but the pyramids have seen it all before.