

## II. 2

### THE WINDS AT FIFTY

My stomach, which had been bounced on desert roads for several hours in an aptly-named Ford “Bronco,” tied itself in a knot of self-preservation at the mere thought of what I might have to eat this day. The one hundred degree weather in this part of Egypt's Libyan Desert didn't help much either. Yesterday I was feasting from sumptuous buffets at the Nile Hilton; today's lunch turned out to be some strange tinned fish in a tin-flavored sauce and some unleavened bread from a roadside store not much bigger than the Bronco in which I ate it.

I tried to distance myself from thoughts of food by looking at the monuments to the Allied and Axis armies that contested this scorched territory, and buried many of their dead in these drifting sands some fifty-years ago.

Fifty—*khamseen*—there it was again. I'd learned the Arabic word when I was asked my age by a government official. When I replied that I had just turned fifty a couple of weeks earlier and was trying to get used to the start of my sixth decade, he said to his colleague “*khamseen*.” If it were France they would say “he *has* fifty years,” or in the UK they might say I'd *gone* fifty. Being called *khamseen* almost sounded like an honorific.

Dr. Nagi had been briefing us on how the day might go. We're heading out this way into the desert—only thirty “klicks” or so to the West and we could have lunch (or be lunch) with Col. Quadaffi—to visit a tribe of pastoral Bedouins. Nagi, an agronomist, has been working with this tribe and their goats for over four years, and he informed us that they are a very hospitable people. We might be offered food, he added.

Food! The word slammed into my guts like an uppercut. Bedouin food!

“*Inshallah*,” I mumbled under my breath, appending a little prayer that we would miss the dinner hour, or something might come up to spare us. I'd picked up “*inshallah*” (the Arabic equivalent to “God-willing”) from its almost punctuational usage by Egyptians. Gods used to be everywhere in Egypt, and these days it is Allah who is everywhere, so it becomes somewhat natural to expect that the reigning divinity might have something to say about everything from the fate of the nation to the fate of one's gastro-intestinal system.

I'd been in *souks* in Cairo and seen some of the animals hanging in the butcher stalls: scrawny, skinned goats and sheep, plucked chickens, and all sorts of internal organs and genitals, all coated with flies and dripping blood. No plastic-wrapped prime cuts with labels declaring reduced fat content in these parts. And I'd read about diplomatic corps people having to ingest “delicacies” such as sheep eyes, or goat testicles so as not to give offense to their hosts.

I certainly didn't want to give any offense. After all we were asking these people to be in a documentary film made by some Westerners they probably regarded as prying infidels. If I insulted them by rejecting, if not regurgitating, some exquisitely prepared goat testicles I might blow the project.

In fact the subject of this segment of the documentary was Goats. Not just any goats; these were being touted as “Super Goats.” They were a hybrid of the traditional North African “Barki” goat, a scrawny and hardy little critter that might have been served at The Last Supper, and a more robust, hirsute cousin from Crete. The resultant “super” goats of the union of these breeds were designed to thrive on a new grazing plant Dr. Nagi was introducing into the desert. Supergoats were being bred to give more meat and milk. If they were a success, maybe supermarkets wouldn't be far behind in Egypt.

These animals were part of a USAID-sponsored research and experimentation project concerned with developing plant and animal hybrids that would squeeze more food and fiber out of a country that is pretty much a sandbox with a thin green stripe down the middle. Egypt needs to get more self-sufficient and expand its economy beyond its heavy reliance on tourism. Judging from the zillions of *non-goat* kids I'd seen running around Cairo and Alexandria they were going to need super everything. A condom over the whole country might help, but tradition and fundamentalist resistance have little tolerance for birth control. Nagi told us that Egyptian officialdom, which hasn't had much success with family planning, has therefore decided to hedge its bets by messing around with the reproduction systems of their quadrupeds.

We got to meet some supergoats the day before at a place called Burg al Arab, a small town West of Alexandria where Nagi has a facility that interbreeds the two species. Burg al Arab means Arab Tower, but I didn't see anything higher than a few rude buildings around a large pen that seemed to be about a foot deep in pebbly goat turds.

That was where we stood as the workers proudly hauled out their hybrids so Nagi could explain to us their physical differences. Typically, as with many of the government facilities we visited in Egypt, there were the usual superfluous number of workers, many of whom appeared to have little if anything to do but stand around and smile. Smiling comes easy to Egyptians who are among the most cheerful people I have met anywhere. So it seemed that nearly each goat had its own personal attendant, that would proudly pose them for our inspection as though this were some wacky satire on a snobby dog show in Scarsdale.

**Fig. II.2/1: Title: “Best in Show” at Burg al Arab**

I discovered that if I took a photo of one worker-goat combo, another combo would approach to pose. On my last shot one worker was trying to get his quite young kid to stop suckling from underneath a larger goat, but it kept dashing back to it before I could get the shot framed. It was then that I noticed that the larger goat's long coat obscured that it was in fact a ram, not a ewe. Noticing my pause the little goat's handler came toward me, broadly smiling with badly stained teeth. I'm not sure I wasn't being set up for this little display, since I noticed a couple other workers chuckling.

“Big goat is man goat, not lady goat. Maybe little goat is ho-mo-sex-u-al, yes?” he offered, stifling an urge to laugh. I thought of a couple of sheep jokes, but held off

when the guy winked at me. Who knows what else they do for laughs and thrills in a town with a phallic name and is full of mostly guys 'n goats.

When we pulled into the Bedouin 'encampment' it wasn't quite what I was expecting. There were a couple of tents, but the main settlement was pretty permanent, consisting of simple, but sturdy, adobe structures, spare and whitewashed, and some lean-to structures adjoining pens for the goats.

Nagi greeted the men, who gathered around like old friends, asking questions and joking in Arabic. He motioned us over to one of the nearby tents, which he explained belonged to a Bedouin who was pastoral herder and was bringing some of his goats in to the headman of his community, on whose property we were now standing.

When we peered into the tent I wasn't all that surprised to see the herder assisting in the birth of a supergoat. There were several others gathered around, seeming to take more than the usual interest in what must be a rather commonplace event in these parts. But what did surprise me—even after the previous day's little demo in goat alternative lifestyles—was that the herder doing the delivery was wearing a dress! It was one of those, what I call, “English lady dresses,” rather 1940s-ish, with the obligatory flower print, in this case large red and blue flowers.

Nobody seemed to be making much of his curious appearance. I tried to hold onto the hypothesis that perhaps he threw this little frock on when making deliveries to keep from getting his clothes soiled. After all, his hair was close-cropped and curly; there was no purse or matching pumps in sight, nothing to conclude that I was in the tent of “Ahmed, Queen of the Desert.”

He was massaging and gently coaxing the ewe, but it was going to be a while and the heat and biting flies were too much. As we walked toward the shade of one of the lean-tos Nagi said that I probably noticed that the herder was wearing a dress and I gave a flat, non-committal and non-judgmental 'yes'.

“He always wears lady clothes,” Nagi said. “He likes the ones with flowers, and he says they are cooler than other clothes in the desert.” I had to admit that in many respects the design of a dress was not all that different from the *galabiyya* worn by many Egyptian men, which also resembled the *soutane* worn by some Catholic priests. In fact it was getting hot enough in this desert that I would have slipped into a sequined strapless prom frock with petticoat if it would have cooled me off a few degrees.

“That's how fashion trends get started,” I replied, not having a clue what would be an appropriate response.

“But he is not a man who goes with other men,” Nagi quickly interjected. “He has a woman, two daughters, and a son,” he informed me, as though this was a Bedouin version of the Cleavers. Naturally, I immediately wondered what must happen when they all want to wear the same dress. “There's his boy, Mahmoud, over there,” Nagi said, pointing to a boy of about six kicking a dusty soccer ball against one of the buildings, “handsome boy.” The boy was wearing shorts.

“I hope he can fight some,” I mumbled almost inaudibly.

“Beg pardon?” Nagi asked.

“He is a handsome boy, all right.” I amended. The heat was taking its toll on my better judgment. I was also getting hungry and thirsty, but I didn't dare bring the subject up.

It was a lot cooler inside the building, which turned out to be part of a compound of several little buildings around a courtyard. It was owned by the 'headman' of this collection of Bedouins that had settled into this area. There were mats on the floor, and no furniture except sort of a wooden box into which we placed our shoes. Thick walls were painted up to a wainscot-level in green, white up to the ceiling. There were no electrical outlets, no windows, and the only wall adornment was a calendar of Arabic calligraphy.

Kids, the two-legged kind, flitted up to the doorway to peer at us sitting around the perimeter of the room, then the scurried or were shoed away. Women passed by, but didn't even look in. They seemed to be carrying food.

Nagi, our driver, Jack and I, and one of the headman's sons sat along the walls and waited for the headman. He didn't keep us long, and when he arrived he turned out to be central casting's idea of what a Bedouin headman should be: straight-backed, confident in bearing, deep-set eyes, Semitic nose, and almost plum-colored leathered skin that made him look a like one of those mummies I'd seen in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo several days earlier. He probably would have fit in just fine to any of the last twenty centuries in Egypt.

He sat down against the wall like the rest of us, the light from the door accentuating the crags and angular features of his face. It was all I could do to keep from pulling out my camera. Niceties were exchanged, Nagi interpreting. A joke was tossed to the driver, cigarettes passed around. I saw more food go by the door on a tray in the hands of a pretty girl young enough to be un-veiled. The time of reckoning was approaching; would I die of starvation, or of nourishment.

**Fig. II.2/2: Title: The classic Bedouin headman**

With Nagi interpreting the headman explained to us why there was such interest in the birthing of that goat out in the tent. It seemed that the Barki ewes were having a rough time delivering live births from the conjugal unions with the larger rams from Crete. The Barki ewes weren't built to deliver kids that size. Some of the kids were stillborn, and some of the ewes didn't make it either. Furthermore, the supergoats weren't gobbling up with any relish that new plant they had introduced. It was pretty much as the Bedouins had told Nagi and the other scientists things would be. It sounded to me a lot like the Bedouins were saying: "OK, we'll play along with your modern science, but we've got two or three thousand years of goat experience behind us."

There was a change in the tone of their discourse. The headman was asking Nagi something and he looked over at us, answered the headman and then said that the headman would like to offer us something to eat. For all the consideration I had given in obsessing over this moment I started and stopped at least three different sentences. I was hoping Jack might come up with something, but he had managed only a few sentences the entire day as his bronchitis had worsened. He just gave me a "you've got the ball" sort of look.

Finally, I lamely said something like "Oh, we wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," when Nagi interjected that it was no trouble at all because they were preparing the meal that they would have after sundown because it was "Ramadan." So they

wouldn't be having anything with us, since, for the observing Muslim, nothing of food or liquid could be ingested during the hours of sunshine during the month of Ramadan. They do, however, make up for it during the nighttime hours when a good deal of feasting takes place.

It was a possible “out” of the situation. I explained that we would prefer to wait for some occasion when we could share a meal with them. Then I heard Jack say “tea?” I realized would be just the thing for his irritated throat. It was the ideal compromise: the tea would be hot enough to kill any unwelcome parasites, we could accept their hospitality, but not have appear like Western barbarians by sitting in front of them gobbling up sheep's eyes, goat testicles, and other delicacies which they had to sit and watch in envious abstinence.

*Inshallah!* Allah had let me off on this one. This seemed to conclude our business at the Bedouin encampment and, after some goatless group photos outdoors we were on our way to a town on the Mediterranean coast where Jack and I would “relax” for a day or so while Nagi conducted some other business at a government agricultural station nearby.

But now, as the bucking Bronco hauled us toward the coastal town of Marsa Matruh, my stomach felt empty enough to accept some of those bushes the supergoats were declining to eat. Marsa Matruh wasn't a big town, but it was a popular seaside resort, so I expected that it would have a decent selection of restaurants. My mind began playing with the prospects of choosing among different cuisines: Italian? French? Maybe even Chinese; anything but an Israeli breakfast of raw vegetables, or Arab “delicacies.”

We pulled into Marsa Matruh in the late afternoon, and a more deserted desert town could not be imagined. Shops, restaurants, and houses were shuttered, there was hardly a person to be seen anywhere as we drove through streets in which the only movement was the papers, other flotsam and sand blowing through them. The “feel” of the place was almost cinematic; as if it was a set for one of those movies where there are only a couple of people left after a plague or nuclear attack.

“*Khamseen*,” Nagi said. “No one comes here during *khamseen*.” In this usage the word refers, as Nagi explained, to hot, dry winds that blow into North Africa almost without relent for fifty days. The winds are maddeningly unpleasant, filling one's eyes, nose, mouth and ears with sand and dust, turning the atmosphere into a suffocating cloud chamber. I could only assume that it was a wind like the legendary “mistral” of southern France; the kind of wind that makes some people, as it did Vincent Van Gogh, go a bit “off”. One couldn't blame the Egyptians for staying away from this Allah-forsaken place during the *khamseen*.

Apparently that is just what Nagi and our driver intended to do. Nagi told us that they were “required” to stay the night in the government facility some miles out of town, so they were dropping us at one of the “best hotels in the city, right on the seafront.” My guess was they either had a couple of dates lined up, or some great food, perhaps both. And I couldn't blame them for wanting to get away from a couple of infidel Westerners who were constantly requesting that they turn down the volume on their infuriating pop Egyptian music, or having to watch us eat while they had to keep their fast. I didn't give a damn if they were going dancing as well. All I wanted was some spaghetti Bolognese (I had made my choice), a shower, and a comfortable bed.

The hotel was on the road that paralleled the beach; but if it was the best hotel in town I wouldn't want to see the worst. The lobby was dark, cavernous and unclean, the furniture dirty and shabby. There were corners in spooky shadows, hallways leading into unlit voids, and the only person in sight was a single man behind the registration desk. What struck me most however, was the enormous green carpet that covered all the floors, a filthy, spotted, landscape that went from the lobby to the dining room, down hallways and up stairs. It was a carpet that smelled of GOATS! Could it be that that goat odor was lodged in my nostrils, or clothes from the day's adventures, or could it be that there might actually have been goats in this hotel? Was my hunger bringing on an olfactory hallucination?

"All free," the desk clerk said, answering our unspoken question as to whether there was anyone else in the hotel. We could have any rooms we desired.

We were alone, not just in the hotel, but probably in the whole town as well. Nagi and the driver were gone and unreachable, and the concierge knew as much English as we knew of Arabic. It had all the premises for some sort of surreal movie. I wondered if the sign said "Bates Hotel" in Arabic. Maybe that feeling came from the fact that my blood sugar had about dropped through the green carpet, and that this was Egypt, ancient land of pharaohs and inspiration for countless films about mummies, tombs, and mysterious deaths of archaeologists. Or was it the parching winds, the *khamseen*?

As it turned out we were restricted to the fourth floor because the electricity was turned off on all the others. And even after the concierge escorted us to our floor, after having turned on the current to run the elevator, one couldn't help notice that there was exposed wiring sticking out of walls and running along the shadowy corridors. Had goats been gnawing at the wiring? I resolved to locate my nearest fire exit.

We were shown to our rooms, both overlooking the seafront, and the clerk indicated that we should come down to the dining room for our supper as soon as we were ready. *Inshallah*, I supplicated once again, but I knew it would be too much to ask for my prayer to provide me with spaghetti Bolognese.

The dining room was enormous, seeming even larger since all the tables, except two, had been removed, showing a soccer field expanse of soiled, smelly, green carpet. Our table was set up close to one end of the room, but still with an almost uncomfortable expanse around it. The other table was nearly at the opposite end of the room, next to one of the fourteen-foot high draped windows that lined that side.

The hot, fetid *khamseen* winds fluttered the sheer drapes that hung from floor to ceiling, rendering them an ochre hue by the fading light. They partly obscured my view of the solitary man who was seated at the other table. He faced us, but the distance between our tables made it difficult to determine whether he took any interest in our presence. The light, the fluttering drapes and his solitary stillness gave the view a Hopperesque solitude. I 'biographed' him as English, a Graham Greene sort, maybe somebody who seen hard years on the bottle, or had been implicated in a spy scandal, or a bugging incident in some public school. The *khamseen* and my deprivation of spaghetti Bolognese were affecting my imagination. But why the hell would anybody be staying in this goat-forsaken firetrap in a deserted town in the middle of fifty days of hot wind? He, of course, might have been wondering about Jack and me, who have probably ended up by now as the basis for a defrocked priest and a transsexual in his next spy novel.

Each table had four waiters in attendance, a superfluity of service people being the norm in Egypt. They seemed to be happy for something to do, or had pegged us as potentially big-tippers, because the food was plentiful to excess, diverse, and most important, if not delicious, quite tasty! There wasn't an eyeball or sheep testicle to be seen, but I still could not identify the meats in the main course, stewed as they were in a rich sauce or with herbs. The texture of the meat was not a familiar one, somewhat more stringy than beef or veal. The thought that immediately suggested itself was, of course, goat. I didn't ask because I didn't want to know. There were potatoes done several different ways, rice dishes, and at least three different kinds of squash. We drank Stella beer, for which we formed a taste back in Cairo, out of the liter bottles, and finished it all off with mint tea and those flaky cakes dripping in nuts and honey.

The waiters stood a respectful distance away, forming a perimeter of obsequious attentiveness, ready to grant any wish. Grubby and tired, we felt for the moment like royalty on holiday. I'd even forgotten about the spaghetti Bolognese. As my digestive system requisitioned most of my blood supply for its needs my brain switched to one main thought—sleep.

Unfortunately the *khamseen* wasn't finished with its torments just yet. When I got to my room I managed in my haste to break off the key in the door lock. Since the elevators and the hall and stairwell lights had all been turned off this necessitated a rather perilous journey down the halls where exposed wires coiled like high-voltage vipers. I could feel them brushing against my ankles. I had to rub my hand along the wall to find the stairwell and then make my way down four flights by foot Braille. It was pitch dark and I knew that, if a fall didn't kill me, the contact of any exposed part of my body with the ominous stains in the goat carpet would.

After I pantomimed my predicament to the desk clerk he did a nice charade of a phone call to a locksmith. I kept Jack up for an hour waiting in his room for the locksmith. When he finally arrived it was with a large basket of assorted keys, hundreds of them. None would do any good because the remains of my key were jammed in the lock. So much for my Marcel Marceau routine. Fortunately, the locksmith was one of those people who aren't daunted by little technicalities. His solution was simple: just go out on Jack's balcony and make the roughly five-foot leap to my balcony with the *khamseen* wind threatening to turn his rolled up *galabiyya* first into a kite, and then into a shroud.

Before one could say *Inshallah* three times the locksmith was opening my door from the inside, a big smile on his face. Allah really liked this guy, almost as much as I did at that moment. I stuffed a bunch of Egyptian pounds in his key basket and he helped me move my belongings to another room, which happened to be all the way at the other end of the corridor.

Carefully this time, I locked the door, and headed for the shower. I had noticed that the room was not only damp and moldy, but it had that gagging atmospheric combination of Eau de Chevre and sweet-smelling cleaning fluid. So I opened the sliding door to the balcony to let the *khamseen* wind do a little airing out of the place while I showered. What it also did was blow in a few thousand gnats and other winged pests attracted by the room light. Moths slammed themselves against the lampshades, gnats assembled in circular swarms in the center of the room, and mosquitoes took up positions on the walls and high ceiling, preparing for their sanguinary sorties once I settled down.

Pulling the sheet over my head didn't help much; in five minutes I was bathing in my own sweat and gasping for air. It was now probably 2AM and I was desperate to get some sleep. Without a mosquito net it would be impossible, and asking for another change of room would make me look like an even bigger fool than one who breaks keys off in locks.

It was the *khamseen* that suggested a possible solution. It blew the long sheer drapes horizontal as if to say, "here's your mosquito net, stupid!" I all but tore the drape down, with gnats swarming in my armpits and some other little buggers going for my eyes. In five frantic minutes a "net" was jury-rigged over the bed by securing it to the headboard and to a chair I placed on the bed at its foot, then tucking the edges in under the mattress. I carefully sealed myself into this contraption, dripping with perspiration and the guts of smashed bugs. The *khamseen* howled through the sliding door and tugged at the netting, but it held, and in a few minutes, reasonably cool and bug free, I was asleep.

It probably was only a couple of hours later when I heard the first "Eh-eh-eh-eh". A few seconds later there was another. Then, a return "eh-eh-eh-Eh," with a slightly different inflection on the last "Eh". It sounded like an interrogative "eh-eh-eh-eh". It got louder as I became more awake, and the *khamseen* carried it up from somewhere down below in almost metered stanzas. "Eh-eh-eh-eh."/ "eh-eh-eh-Eh?" "Eh-eh-eh-eh."/ "eh-eh-eh-Eh?" "Eh-eh-eh-eh."/ "eh-eh-eh-Eh?"

GOATS! I'd recognize that bleating anywhere. I was almost an expert on goats now. I'd have bet my car that they were purebred Barkis, not "Supers". But whatever they were I wanted them *dead*, as soon as possible. I wanted to see them like their relatives, skinned and eviscerated, hanging from hooks in the *souk*, covered with flies. I wanted their genitals to be sold as delicacies. I wanted silence, and sleep.

**Fig. II.2/3: Title: Rooftop goats with Mediterranean view**

But the plaintive bleating continued. I got up and went out on the balcony and looked over. The bugs either left in the dark or I couldn't see them. There was very little light and the wind made my eyes water. But I followed the direction of the "Eh-eh-eh-eh" sound. Two goats were on the roof of a building two stories below and to the right. They were tethered to opposite walls and seemed to be trying to get to one another, bleating and tugging at their ropes. I went back in the room for something to throw at them. Maybe if they were startled they would stop for a while and I could get back to sleep. I found a heavy glass ashtray and went back out on the balcony and cocked my arm. *Inshallah!* I muttered, taking aim on the one I took to be the ram.

Something brought me up short. I was naked, standing on a hotel balcony in a hot, lashing wind, about to hurl a two-pound ashtray at two sexually frustrated goats. I lowered my arm. The goats seemed to sense something and stopped bleating.

The light was just beginning to come up as a fingernail of sun rose from the Mediterranean. I held on to the ashtray and watched the sun fully clear the horizon. Here I was, fifty—make that *khamseen*-years-old—at the rising of the sun in ageless Egypt. I could appreciate how Akhenaten, the heretic pharaoh of the 18th dynasty could base his monotheism on the sun, the Aten.

I had to forgive the goats. If it weren't for goats I wouldn't be in Egypt in the first place. I wouldn't be able to laugh one day about my terror of ingesting their testicles, of watching them paraded before me like fussed over purebreds at a dog show, or encountering a Bedouin guy who midwives ewes while wearing flower print dresses. I wouldn't be able to chuckle to myself at a locksmith who leaps from balconies because I clumsily broke off my key, or have a reverie about the mysterious diner who sat in the corner of that huge, empty dining room. It was goats that gave me such memories that I would always associate with turning and experiencing *khamseen*.

Naked and looking out to sea, I stood on the balcony as the Aten ascended for yet another journey from East to West, his hot breath buffeting my tired, fifty-year-old body, humbled, but with a growing resolve to make something of this life passage. It's an ill *khamseen* that doesn't blow some good.