

BULL

MEN'S FICTION

500 KILOMETERS TO CAIRO

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My first night in Hurghada I wore the wrong shoes.

"What's that? What's that?" the boy nettled beside me, joined in chorus by another of the same height and look: beige robe, no shoes, a mess of black hair falling halfway to his eyes. Both of them pointing at my shoes. "What's that?" they said again. And again, "What's that?"

Jana glanced at me, her mouth a tripwire. I gripped her hand tighter and lengthened my steps. The kids stayed beside us. One of them held a wooden box for polishing shoes. The other tapped at the pockets of my slacks with every other What's that? He was feeling for something. He wanted to know where it was.

The main street of Hurghada was rigged with men fishing for tourists outside of their shops, restaurants, and coffee houses. If Jana and I got too close the men would smile wide and say what became a mantra: "Hello, my friend. What is your name? Where are you from?" Some of them got creative: "My friend, hello. Where are you from? My name is Karim. What is yours?"

"What's that? What's that?" went the kids.

"Look—" I started, but was cut off by a hard shout in Arabic and the boy on my right, the one with the box, scampered away down the street. The other boy was grabbed by a broad-framed security guard in a black cap and uniform. Hauled off to Lord knows where. I thought I saw fear in the kid's eyes, but any pity I had was overwhelmed by relief that he wouldn't bother us anymore. I squeezed Jana's hand. Only later that night, as we undressed to turn in, did I notice the orange streak of paint running across the front of one of my black dress shoes.

When we were under the covers and close I said, "Come with me to America."

"I'll come to America when the koruna is stronger than the dollar."

"That'll never happen."

"You and your money," she said, and pinched the flabby bit of my waist. "Your little money-diaper under your pants. Are you not going to sleep with it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Can I trust you?"

Jana smiled and let this go. "Why don't you stay in Brno? They like you. You are a good teacher."

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"I make no money teaching English."

"You make enough. You don't need more."

"It's not that. It's...."

"Say it. My country."

"I can't live in your country," I said, "long-term."

She turned away, and it took some coaxing, a few minutes rubbing her neck and shoulders to bring her back to my side.

"Why don't you like America?" I asked. "Your sister lives there. She's married. She has a family."

"My sister is the house, the yard, the land. When I go to see her I see these things, not her. The land is like a mouth there. Her house is a mouth."

Jana had always had her opinions about America, but I had never heard her talk this way. Before she had put arguments against typical American excess—all in precise, pointed language. Now she was speaking in metaphors I didn't care to understand. I suppose I should not have told her about my inheritance and explained to her the concept of a trust fund, which was ultimately what brought us here and provided, in great part, for her.

"Give it six months," I said. "I've been in Brno for six months. This English-teaching thing lasts a year, and then...."

"Then you leave me."

"No, then you come with me. Right?"

"Which one do you want more?" asked Jana. "Your country, or me?"

I sighed. "All I know is I can't stay in the Czech Republic. There's no..." I was about to do it again, and couldn't stop now. "There's no infrastructure."

"What does that mean, infrastructure? What does that word mean?"

"Opportunities, I guess."

Jana pushed away from me and stared up at the ceiling. It was warm for February, and the mosquitoes had yet to strike.

"Six months," I said. "That's all I'm asking. We are married, aren't we?"

"If that were the truth. Only *here* we are married. To them we *must* be married."

She had been clear about this on the plane. "Because it's dangerous to say otherwise?"

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you," I said. "I just think it may be dangerous either way."

Jana's first trip to Egypt was with her parents and sister. All four of them were taking in the pyramids when they heard shouts and screams. In the shadow of the largest pyramid an Egyptian man was being kicked and clubbed on the ground by the tourist police. Scattered in the bloody sand were an assortment of trinkets—alabaster pyramids, replicas of gods and the like. The beating continued. Tourists watched and a few took pictures. Eventually the hawk, who had reportedly tried to trick some money out of a tourist, was hauled off bleeding from the head and mouth.

I used to wonder what became of that man. Was he thrown in prison, or worse? What became of that boy who'd helped to paint my shoe?

We'd heard we could hire a taxi to drive us the five hundred kilometers to Cairo for no more than two hundred dollars total. It was either that or the tourist bus.

"Not possible," the first travel agent told us. "You must have the police with

you at all times. Even in Cairo. Because of the bombing in Khan Khalili..."

I didn't buy it. Solo travel couldn't have been restricted that much. The trains still operated and besides, Cairo was a sprawling city with plenty of foreigners and ex-pats. Could the government watch every one of these people? Follow each one to the market, to the restroom? Was a tourist cop stationed on every street in every suburb of the capital?

"We should do the taxi," I told Jana once we were outside. "We can't let fear control our trip."

"Has fear controlled our trip?"

"I'm just saying. I think the terrorists aren't the only ones terrorizing here."

"So dramatic," Jana chided.

"No, seriously. They're trying to scare us into an organized tour, into forking over more money. I guarantee any other agent here will say the same thing. We can get a better deal on our own."

"You're worried now about your money?"

"I'm worried about being *constrained*. I want an adventure."

Jana bowed her head to the ground and smiled.

"What," I said.

"*To nic.*"

"No, what?"

"You look like a little boy."

"Do I?"

"I like it when you're a little boy."

His name was Nizam and he must have been in his sixties, maybe early seventies. His rusty, beat-up Corolla bore nothing indicating it as a taxi. In an alley off the main drag in Hurghada, underneath oil-wet awnings and beside a still-life of fruit stands, Jana made arrangements with the man in Arabic.

"Two hundred?" I asked when she came back.

"Two hundred," she said. "And he will take us anywhere we like in Cairo."

It didn't feel like our lives were in danger, even though our seatbelts didn't work and the back door on my side popped open at random times before I rigged it closed with Jana's bandana. The car rattled and bounced along, kicking up dust into the mid-day.

At some point we fell asleep, and when we woke it was night and Nizam still had not spoken a word. Looming in the distance was downtown Cairo lit up like a circus staked and settled. On either side of the dim freeway people tended to cars broken down and immovable on the shoulder. Regular police were out in force negotiating the traffic jam just ahead; at a crawl on our right a boy on a donkey pulled a cart full of reeds and palm fronds. Pasted onto billboards were smiling people drinking soda and looming like ancient deities.

Nizam dropped us off outside the Nile Hilton, where I had made our reservation. Aware of Jana's eyes, I gave our driver an Egyptian fifty-pound note. The old man smiled and pointed at his chest. "Nizam," he said. "My name."

"Thank you, Mr. Nizam," Jana said.

We walked along the Nile. Arabic music blared from loudspeakers on almost every cruise ship and felucca on the river. Egyptian couples leaned against the riverside railing, chatting or gazing at the river and the Cairo Tower and Opera House beyond. Others strolled arm-in-arm—even men with other men. Boys as young as twelve walked past us with arms linked. Jana leaned in beside me.

"Don't worry," she said.

“What? Why am I worried?”

“Jo. Why are you?”

“I guess I wasn’t expecting—”

“It’s the custom,” she said. “In Arabic countries, men show their affection with other men. It’s normal.”

“I guess.”

“They kiss both cheeks.”

“The men do?”

“And hug with force.”

“The hugging, okay, but kissing...”

“Get used to it,” she said.

When the music and rush of men asking our names got to be too much we dodged across the street and headed for Midan Tahrir, the main square. We didn’t yet have a suitable map of downtown so instead of finding nightlife in the main commercial district, we ended up lost in a neighborhood just east of the American University. In Bab al-Luq we found not one welcoming coffee house, no bars, and every side street with young Egyptians on it turned out to be a dead end. At last I stopped Jana and brought my mouth to her ear.

“Do you feel like we’re being followed?”

“No. You are—what is that word?”

“Paranoid. But I’m not. I really think there’s someone...”

The street was narrow and black except for a thin wedge of light from an open doorway. Not even the moon touched this place.

“Let’s go back and hail a cab,” I said.

“You give up? Now? We’ll find it. I’ll ask someone new.”

“I have this feeling. It’s not good.”

“Maybe it’s the Revenge of Tutankhamen.”

I started to laugh and that’s when I was hit in the stomach. A fist, and as I doubled over another fist hit me in the ear and sent me into the street. Jana screamed and I tried to lift my head but couldn’t see anything. Hands at my pockets and I felt my wallet taken. Then a shout, some words in Arabic, and Jana screamed again. I got up only to find the street empty save for Jana sitting on the asphalt, her head bowed and her knees drawn up to her chest. I knelt next to her.

“Did you see them? How many were there?”

“Two. I don’t know. I think there were two.”

“Did they touch you? They touched you, didn’t they? I swear I—”

“They did nothing to me. I hit them. I put my finger in one’s eye.” She held up her index finger and the tip of it glistened with some kind of thick fluid.

“Jesus, Jana. Good job. Way to go.”

“You shouldn’t smile.”

“I’m just happy you fought back. They took my wallet but it only had a few dollars and pounds. That’s all they got.”

“That’s all they will ever get.”

“What does that mean?”

A shadow hid half of Jana’s face, and though I tried to help her up from the curb she would not budge. “I need to wipe this,” she said.

I wiped her hand with the bandana I still had from the cab and her finger came away clean. Still she would not look at me, and now her entire face was covered in darkness, like so many of the women in burkas we’d passed along the Nile.

“It’s okay,” I said, “I knew the money belt was a good idea. Come on. Let’s go find a cab and get back to the Hilton.”

Our next driver never said his name. His cab was marked and official but as soon as I told him we were going to the Nile Hilton he just laughed and started on a ninety-minute odyssey through the Egyptian capital. Half an hour in I recognized the area enough to tell he had no plans to take us straight to our hotel. I tried reasoning with him in English and finally turned to threats but even then our driver appeared not to listen. “Can you talk to him?” I asked Jana, but she shook her head. Finally I just sat back and held her limp hand and waited for whatever was coming to us—the unnamed couple who would go missing, unable to be accounted for because we’d never been part of the accountable to begin with.

Nearing a full hour in the cab, our driver pulled over to some men on a donkey cart and had an animated discussion that involved a lot of throwing up of hands. I asked Jana what they were talking about. How much ransom to ask for? The best method for our torture?

“Football,” she said. “They’re talking about football.”

And so it came to this: Jana and I standing near our tour bus parked outside a perfumery. We were waiting to cross the street, our goal to spend a few minutes in the local bazaar, away from our guided tour and the unstated obligation to buy things in stores like the perfume parlor, or the alabaster shop we’d descended on the previous day, or the carpeteria we were scheduled to visit in two hours.

“Psst!” I heard. “Psst!” Just behind us, among the parked cars at the curb, a man in a black uniform sat between the open doors of a tourist police truck. The officer, with thick black mustache and glowering eyes, looked at me sternly and with menace.

“Jana, I don’t think we’re supposed to cross the street.”

She asked why not—after all, three young Egyptian women were waiting close by as well. But we were tourists, I told her, and as such the police in charge of protecting us didn’t want us wandering around. They wanted us in the perfume shop.

But Jana wasn’t budging and, frankly, I didn’t want to budge either—tourist cop or no. We had the right to break out of the schedule if we wanted.

“Psst!” the officer hissed again, even louder this time. He held up his hand, his index finger shooting straight up. The finger did not move at all.

“Psst!”

“I better go talk to him,” I said.

“Wait. Look at his wrist!”

The officer in the back of the truck had his other arm handcuffed to the iron bar on the side of his seat. He wasn’t tourist police at all. What I had taken as an officer’s black uniform was just a simple dark sweater and pants, a citizen’s clothing. No badge, no officer’s cap. Not even a baton at his side.

Images flashed in my mind—what might have happened if I’d actually approached this criminal thinking he’s a cop. I get a little too close and lean my head in; he grabs me by the throat, either breaks my neck right then and there or holds me hostage while demanding his release. A standoff ensues. Both he and I end up perishing in a hail of gunfire. The headline back in America: He Should’ve Stayed On the Bus.

We had to see them. How could we not?

“What do you think?”

"They're kinda small," I said.

Jana looked from the pyramids to me, her hand shading her eyes.

"Maybe you have to be young," she said.

Walking around the largest of the three, the Pyramid of Khufu, we heard shouts off to our left. Two tourist police officers stood just beyond the string-barrier that kept us away from the site, AK-47s slung over their shoulders. They were obviously bored and gesturing emphatically for us to come stand next to them. They pointed at the camera slung around Jana's neck, then gestured that she was to take a picture of me with them—presumably for a fee. I wondered, would they shoot us if we don't?

"No thanks," I said and started to leave.

The officers continued to pester. The muzzles of their machine guns had shifted, rising closer to our level.

Jana said something in Arabic while I walked away, my body tense and rigid in anticipation of the bullets.

She caught up to me. "They weren't going to shoot you."

"People with guns use them sooner or later."

You will find them on the streets of Hurghada, at the roadside checkpoints on the way to Cairo, perched in medieval-style brick and mortar watchtowers overlooking the ruins, behind the bullet-proof glass and metal detectors at the entrance of every hotel. On tourist buses you will see at least one in plainclothes seated at the front, behind the driver, nine-millimeter tucked casually inside his sport coat. In every tourist-trap outdoor market, outside the door to every perfumery, carpenteria and alabaster mall, in the most expected places and at the most expected times you will encounter them. They are there to protect you, the money, the lifeblood of the country. And just how much do they resent you for that? Just a little, or just enough for them to act on it?

"Pyramid. Three for fifty. Three for fifty where you from?"

"Scarf for head. For when you go to desert."

"Cat statue! Cat statue!"

"Postcards of tombs. How much you want to pay?"

"Camel, camel. You want to buy camel?"

If it had been a real camel, and not the small, stuffed plush toy camel that this twenty-something hawker in ripped jeans and T-shirt was shoving into my face, maybe I would have played along. A real camel would have at least been authentic, something real, something *Egyptian*. But this toy camel was like everything else that had been pushed on me so far, and somewhat like this trip itself: overpriced, tacky, an undisguised rip-off, and I guess I had had enough of it.

"Why are you doing this?" I said to him.

Jana snapped my name and tugged my arm at the elbow. She said something in Arabic to the man, who laughed and said some words back. Then he grinned and again offered up the camel doll.

"You think I want your crap? I'll tell you something: I can go to New York, I can go to any fucking Wal-Mart, and get *the same thing*."

The hawker and Jana just looked at each other. The hawker's smile widened. I said to him, "You're a smart guy, right? Why don't you *do* something? Why don't you teach Arabic to tourists? Why don't you offer something *worthwhile*?"

Jana yanked me away and led me down the alley where our bus was parked in front of a papyrus shop. Robed women and poorly-dressed children crouched at

Even in the desert you can't escape the pull of the industry. On my final day of the trip I bought a head scarf and sunglasses from a vendor and rode—along with an army of tourists of varying ages and nationalities—ATV quad motorbikes through the desert. We were guided west of Hurghada toward the mountains and into a Bedouin village. Once there we drank tea from tiny cups and toured the facilities. An old Bedouin woman made herself some bread, stoking the fire with a stick clodded with camel dung. I took her picture. I took a picture of a goat, a well, a little Bedouin boy, the mountains at sunset, the bedouins dancing and drumming and clapping to their song. When it was all over our guides had recorded the entire excursion for sale on DVD. I bought one. Then I was shepherded with every other tourist back to our ATVs lined up like so many fighter jets across the sand. The final leg of that journey we raced with ourselves across the evening desert, the landscape darkening except for what passed under our headlights. We were leaving, but I did not want to leave.



(CLICK HORNS TO COMMENT)

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