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Writing 33

September 18, 2005

A Daydream

I'm surrounded by men. The first question that we were instructed to answer as we sat around *that* circle was, "Where are you from?" I froze, my heart raced, nerves popped, and my hair stood erect. What should I say? Where I was born? Where I lived? Where I lived the longest? Where I graduated from? Where my parents are from? These are all valid questions from my perspective. Even though I'm Algerian- American who has lived across the world, I am truly happy to say that I lived in Egypt. In the circle, I began to think about Egypt: the desert, the skies, the sea, the people, I smiled at such beauty. My senses dulled as I was swept back into my home.

The city of Cairo, "al-Masr". The corroded smiles on Egyptian faces are gleaming in the sun atop "Al-Kobri". Below us snakes the Nile, cutting around land to leave an island surrounded by the murky water. On one side of the island sits shaded by the date palm trees a Greek-Orthodox church. On top of it surrounded by dark red dates sits an exaggerated cross. On top of the lopsided cross hangs a basket like pelicans nest. Below, the building is in ruins: the fountain outside is barely dripping, a pair of tilted door hinges hangs the door sideways, the cement walls are crumbling, and what was white paint is now tanned. Across the fields and little thatch houses sits another place of worship, a mosque. Leading to the mosque runs a narrow dirt road bordered by ripened fig trees. The soft fruit plummets towards the hungry hands of children. The call to prayer

echoes over the island, “Allah al-akhbar, Allah al-akhbar”. “Annie, from Philly.” The kids race back to the mosque, happy with the fruit in their hands and their bellies full, oblivious to the staccato cacophony above them, high above them. The swerving cars, the screeching breaks, each car swearing at the other, these are the sounds of Cairo.

Atop my terrace on a warm evening lies Cairo. The city lights flicker on, the orange soft sun sets, and the iridescent Nile slithers through Cairo, busy with feluccas. Looming in the distance stands three tall angles. Monuments of time, at the edge of Cairo and the beginning of the desert lie the Pyramids. These iconic behemoths of Giza, just outside of Cairo are one of the many anachronisms in Egypt. At the bottom of the Pyramids sits the Sphinx and a trove of undiscovered treasures. These ancient artifacts of infinite value lie untouched as they were thousands of years ago, the desert protecting them against floods, villains, and heat. The Pyramids stand as a doorway to an endless blue sky and a vast desert spotted with anemic trees. Roots clawing the ground for brine mimics the Egyptian way of life, struggle. Eagles perch atop air columns and a caravan of camels conquer a mountain. Beyond the mountain ranges and through the desert lies the Mediterranean. Untouched neon corals litter the bottom of the sea. Radian beaches outline the marine blue, and wooly clouds blanket the skies. Schools of fish skim the top of the water, while fishermen brush them into their skiffs. The carefree fishermen bundle their menial catch and ride the sweet Mediterranean breeze back to shore. Their nostrils flare as the brine cuts through their noses. Docking their boats in their plastic bottle port the winds pass them. The cool salty winds pass the fisherman, pass the village and into the desert, cutting into the Sinai Mountain Ranges and into a nomad encampment. “Jason, from Hawaii.”

A grooved face and cracked eyes stare intently toward the child's face. The cigarette smoke traces the contour of his rough face. The child stirs when the dry lips kiss the cheek of the child. The man grasps the child in his large leathered hands and rocks it back to bed. His ghallabeya sways as he examines the baby's face: a constellation of freckles dots her nose and cheeks, her darkened lips matches her mesmerizing eyes, like shimmering water in two dark wells. Her pudgy chin blends with the rest of her jaw. On her tanned head her fuzzy hair sways in the cool breeze. Her abdomen sighs with each breath under her thick red and black wool blanket. Her round legs dangle from her fragile body, as the old man lays her down in woolen sheets. A cool wind brushes his face and his coffee is ready. A grainy black sludge oozes from the brass container and drips down his throat. The heavy resonating wind picks up and the tents rattle. His browned teeth uttered "Allah s'ta fellah". "Allan, from Connecticut." He slips outside under the shade of one of the red date palms to think. Would there be food? What of the weather? Where would he graze? Where would he move to? As he sat there trying to answer all these questions a hawk circled above. The incoming wind rippled over the serene oasis in front of him, shifted the sand, and finally circled him, embracing him. The monotonous hum hypnotized him. He gazed at the mountain ranges ahead and could not imagine being anywhere else but there, the desert. In the shaking tent nestled in the sand of the ceaseless weeping desert wind, his daughter's heart rested.

The question "Where are *you* from?" projected me back into reality, I was spinning in RIT. Where *am* I from? My father is Algerian, my mother is from New York and my brother was born in Greece. I lived in Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt the longest. My mother's family is from New York but I was born in New Jersey, my father's

family is from Algeria and France but I have lived in neither country. My head spun, the whole circle now stared at me, engulfing me with their worried gaze. I looked for an escape, should I pass? Should I tell the truth? Would they accept me? Would they question me? There were so many options and so little time to decide. I looked at my R.A., he stared right back at me. Why couldn't he see the distressed look in my eyes? My pores overflowed, my eyes darted, and I became twitchy. What a first impression. What if they ridiculed me? What if they thought if I was spoiled? There are too many consequences to worry about. With no way out, I will permanently be labeling myself. Scratching my head, I looked my R.A. straight in the eyes for help but before I could say anything he said, "Can't remember now? Come on where are you from?" chuckling. Can't he see that in his attempt to unite everyone he was only separating me! I am always plagued this problem. I dread these personal situations. In the end I am stratifying myself from the rest of the students. Adults think it is wonderful, an "enriching experience". While people my age see it as a difference, something strange, a "foreigner". But every time my reply is the same, I live in Egypt. And then the mumbling ensues. Now I could see my R.A. becoming agitated. "Where are you from and what is your name?" I replied timidly, "Uh my name is Adam Merah, and I'm from Elmira, New York"- silence.