

The Eyes of the Sphinx

It was dusk, and the sun lay dying in the darkening sand dunes, casting its last golden beam to the top of the Great Pyramid. Before me stood a tall, burly, elderly Arab man; his angelic face distorted by the flaming anger directed toward me.

On the ground between us lay crumpled money.

Two young Australian girls stood beside me, their faces horrified. They realized that they had been wrong to put their faith in my judgment. By association, they had become collateral damage to my gaffe.

Behind me were the tent merchants that we had recently visited. I could feel their gaze on my back. They should have been happy. Each of them had sold something to the girls. Yet they, too, gawked.

Looming over everyone stood the towering Sphinx. Four thousand years of weathered time could not erode its menacing stare. Its eyes looked upon me with hatred, as if I were the officer in Napoleon's army who thought the Sphinx was hollow and filled with gold and fired the cannonball that took off its nose.

The eyes! Peering, piercing, and penetrating. That is what I remember most about that moment in 1978, standing in the shadow of the Sphinx. I was encircled by myriad eyes, all watching to see what I might do next. There was no escape. I felt like a helpless Christian facing lions in the Colosseum of Rome under the gaze of staring spectators.

I shivered in the warm desert air as I searched for salvation. Only in the placid eyes of the camels, who were happy to be rid of their heavy tourist loads, did I see a non-threatening look.

How did I get into this situation? Was this the curse of the Pharaoh Khufu for me having entered the King's Chamber inside the Pyramid? Did I create an international incident?

Just hours before, I was happily approaching the Pyramids with two beautiful Australian girls on my arms. We were all excited to be in Cairo and heading to one of the great wonders of the world. I met Judy and Jennifer at the airport immigration counter. They were recent college graduates breaking away from their six-month caravan tour across Asia and Europe. I was bumming around the world on a high school diploma. We had all arrived on the same plane from Athens.

We found a hotel hawker outside the airport who got us rooms at the Orient Palace Hotel for \$2.00 a night. My room came with a marriage proposal from a

maid, but I felt we were overcharged. It was no palace. And the maid was no queen.

We woke up early the first morning and stepped out into the bustling streets of Cairo. The city looked as if nothing new had been built there in the 30 years since the British left in 1948. Everything was covered in desert sand. Even the skies were a smoky tan.

Our first challenge was to get to the Pyramids by bus. The old buses in Cairo weren't much more than cheaply built boxes on wheels. They were jam-packed with riders. People waiting for the bus would crouch down and rush to its sides as it pulled up and fling themselves feet-first through the windows. It was a scene the proud Egyptians were ashamed of, so bystanders raised their hands in front of our cameras when we tried to take pictures.

After three unsuccessful attempts to climb aboard a bus, a young Egyptian boy told us, "You don't have to be so polite. Don't hold back because of the old ladies. They can elbow you just as hard as any man." We took his advice. I let the girls go first and watched them fight and claw their way into the bus before I gingerly stepped on behind them.

At the end of the line, we walked a short distance up a knoll and caught sight of the peak of the tallest pyramid. It grew in height with each step we took, ascending the hill. By the time we rolled over the top of the knoll, all three

pyramids had risen into view in the desert sands. I never knew 4000 years of dust and stone could shine so brightly. The Pyramids glowed like gold in the “Midas touch” of the morning sun.

After taking pictures, the girls and I approached the Pyramid of Khufu. We were surprised to be the only tourists there. Egyptian tourism had not fully recovered from the recent wars in the Middle East. Being the only tourists, however, didn't mean being alone. We were immediately set upon by hawkers offering guided tours and camel rides. Everyone walked up to us and gave a cheerful “Hello, Welcome to Cairo!” hoping to sell us something. While considering what to do, the crowd around us parted like the Red Sea, and an old Arab man appeared. In his white, ankle-length robe, he walked gracefully, Christ-like, as if the earth rolled beneath his feet. His white-bearded face, framed by an Egyptian scarf, showcased dark, russet eyes that radiated back the peacefulness that comes with the knowledge and confidence of old age. He walked up to us and said, “Welcome to Cairo. My name is Moses. You want tour of the Pyramids? I can give you one.”

I looked toward the girls. Together we rolled our eyes, wondering if the guy was for real. Not realizing Moses was a common Egyptian name, I half expected him to pull out the 10 Commandments and maybe a burning bush. But he did have a

suave, sophisticated aura about him, so I responded, "Sure! We would love a tour. How much will it cost?"

He looked the three of us over and, with benevolent eyes, said, "Don't worry. I know you are not rich Americans. You are just poor students. So, let me show you the Pyramids, and after the tour, you can pay me what you think it is worth."

I glanced towards the girls, saw approval on their faces, and turned back to Moses. "Fair enough. Let's go." We then moved through the crowd of hawkers. None of them appeared disappointed at losing the sale. I took that as meaning Moses had priority on the hill.

Moses took us directly to the entrance of the Pyramid of Khufu. His helpers gave us a lit candle, and we entered a ladder-like walkway through a tight ascending passageway that took us to the Queen's Chamber. From there, we climbed to the King's Chamber through a much taller arch-like hall.

In the candlelit darkness of the King's Chamber, near the empty sarcophagus of Khufu, the three of us stood alone and listened to Moses' stories of the 4500 years of the Pyramids. We learned how it took 100,000 slaves 30 years to build them, how the granite stones were once covered in white limestone, and how Napoleon had spent hours alone in the King's Chamber before coming out very disturbed. We also learned who built them and how there was a hierarchy of slaves and an elite burial ground for the master slaves. At times, Moses may have

mixed fact with fiction, but we ate it all up. We could imagine ourselves partying with Cleopatra and Marc Anthony outside the Pyramids, along the Nile, on a warm summer evening.

When we came out into the bright sun, Moses instructed the two guards in the area to look the other way. When they did, we clambered up the outside of the Pyramids and took pictures. It was against the law to climb them, but I noticed Moses paying off the guards from my spot on the outside wall. As we climbed off the Pyramids, I expected Moses to ask for a fee, but instead, he invited us to visit some of his friends in the nearby tent market.

As we entered the first tent, we were greeted with that ubiquitous “Welcome to Cairo” and were offered tea. As we sat drinking our tea, the merchant walked into the back of the tent and returned with three bottles. Two were tiny, and one was the size of a pop can. “Smell this,” the vendor said, opening one of the smaller bottles and handing it to Judy. “This perfume is CHANEL #5. Now smell this one,” he added, opening the second bottle and passing it to her.

Judy sniffed each bottle and passed them to Jennifer. With a look that expressed her desire to buy, she excitedly said, “They do smell the same.” The merchant noticed the eagerness and proudly held up the bigger bottle. “You can buy this for just twenty Egyptian pounds (\$28.00).”

As the girls looked at each other, Moses stepped in and said, “No, no, Mohammad! These are my friends. They are not rich American tourists; they are just poor students. They can’t afford 20 pounds.”

Looking a little dejected, Mohammad responded, “Okay, Moses. I will sell the perfume for just 10 pounds for your friends.” Upon hearing that, both girls looked at each other, beamed, then simultaneously reached into their purses and paid the merchant. We then left and followed Moses into a second tent.

Inside were brass items stacked to the canvas ceiling. They had everything from brass buttons and ashtrays to a massive brass spittoon the size of a fire hydrant. I smiled, imagining myself hauling that spittoon across the desert on top of my backpack and dying of thirst at a dried-up oasis with the spittoon next to me.

As for the girls? They were in heaven as they walked among the merchandise. Moses and the merchant gave them full attention while ignoring me. The girls showed interest in a couple of brass jewelry boxes, and the vendor quoted a price for them. Moses immediately acted again and said, “No, no, Omar! These are my friends. They are not rich American tourists; they are just poor students. That is too much money.” Omar humbly relented and gave ‘Moses’ friends a better deal.

For the next 30 minutes, Moses led us through several other tents selling pottery, clothing, incense, and small souvenirs. In all locations, Moses served as the girls' protector and negotiated better prices for them. As we came out of the final tent

at dusk, Moses suddenly stopped, turned towards us, and with his back to the Sphinx, surprisingly said, “The tour is over. You can pay me now.” Immediately, people began to gather around us to see the outcome.

I huddled with the two girls to discuss what to pay. Jennifer suggested we pay five Egyptian pounds (\$7) each. I countered, saying we should pay 1 Egyptian pound (\$1.40). Trying not to appear cheap, I explained that the average Egyptian worker earned \$40 a month and that no one should get a half-month's salary for a two-hour tour. To do so could wreck the local economy. The girls bought into that line of thinking and acquiesced to my years of experience on the road. The truth was that we were from two different socio-economic classes, and I didn't have the money they did. I was doing Europe on \$3 a day, and they had purses full of American Express traveler's checks. I took their money, turned towards Moses, and handed him the three bills.

As I gave the bills to Moses, the girls' guardian angel in the tents, he turned into a raging devil. He crumpled the money, spat on it, tossed it to the ground, and roared at me, “What's this?”

I stood there, frozen in fear by what I had just done. I realized Moses was a man of God-like stature to those standing nearby, and I had just insulted him, and perhaps indirectly, all of Egypt. I struggled for words and stalled for time as I slowly bent over to pick up the money. I leaned in a way that emulated a

Japanese bow of respect and an Arabic bow of prayer. After carefully straightening each bill, I presented them to Moses again.

Nervously looking into his eyes, I softly said, "Moses. Thank you for a wonderful tour of the Pyramids. We learned a lot and will remember it for the rest of our lives. But as you know, we are not 'rich American tourists,' just poor students. This is all we have to offer."

Moses didn't say anything, but the rage disappeared, and the flames in his eyes vanished. His face was emotionless. He accepted the money, calmly turned, and strolled away with his head held high. He had a good day at the Pyramids. He had the 3 pounds he received from our tour in his right pocket. And in his left pocket, he had perhaps 20 pounds he had collected on commission from the merchants. I often think that, besides the money he earned, he should have also earned an Academy Award.

After Moses left, the scene became like a mirage in the desert, where everything disappeared quickly into the sand. The girls left me as quickly as they could, without saying goodbye; the merchants returned to their tents to close their shops; and the camel jockeys led their camels back into the corrals. One camel jockey stood around for a while, then walked up to me and said, "I want you to know that Moses is the richest man on the hill. He has 100 camels." He then walked away, leaving me alone with the Sphinx.

It was my time to go. I turned back to take a last look at the Sphinx. Maybe it was the dusk turning to night, but in the darkness, I believe I saw the Sphinx wink.