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## Fortress of the Soldier

October 1991

The fortress of Qal'at al-Gundi rises to the left of the paved road. So perfectly does it blend with the desert hilltop that sun-dazzled travelers might even pass it unnoticed unless they chanced to look back from the east upon its yawning, broken walls. Why did Saladin build here? And which forgotten soldier does the name commemorate other than that great warrior himself? Far from Cairo, far from Palestine, surrounded by the silence and space of the Sinai desert, this once fearsome stronghold guards its secrets well. Only a few young soldiers from a nearby camp break the silence with their shouting. Like young men everywhere, they seem to have little respect for history.

"Have you any magazines?" one soldier asks hopefully when we stop. Sadly, we do not. Day trippers from Cairo seldom carry such luxuries. But the soldier's plaintive request calls up other questions. A thwarted intellectual outcast in the desert? A sex-starved young man hoping for a girlie magazine? A misfit who shuns the ribald talk around the evening fire? Or just a bored teenager longing for his family in Cairo? No matter, the moment has passed. The soldier tells us where to begin the ascent and then disappears. We have failed him and are of no further interest.

The track bucks and fishtails under the Range Rover's steady grip. Below are crevices and boulders. Eventually, we reach a level area bordered by deep sand and get out on a plateau less than half a mile from the road. Technology has its limits. Anyway, like Allenby entering Jerusalem, we prefer to ascend onto holy ground on foot.

The air is still and heavy with heat and silence. A broken track climbs steeply from the east towards a gap in the great walls whose giant dressed stones litter the wadis. The heat is scalding pitch and flaming arrows. We climb steadily, pausing once to pant under pretext of admiring the view. The Labrador retriever in her heavy coat is overheating and must be watered. We reach a level path and, after another steep scramble, the gate is ours.

“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” We rest in shade beneath the inscribed arch. Who were these men who built here, and where are the bones of their enemies who died on the ascent? Appropriately we bow to pass through the arch and enter their sanctuary. Built in the 1170s, the *Blue Guide* says, Qal’at al-Gundi was destroyed in the thirteenth century. Yes, but why? And by whom?

The remains of a small fire, an owl feather, a few small bones are the only signs of recent visitation. Two soldiers appear, laughing after their rapid climb, then disappear again and silence returns. Subterranean chambers reach to entrap the unwary, and we explore cautiously. Reverently, we peer into half-covered storerooms, broken-vaulted chambers, and then an enormous, dark cistern. A small stone falls a long way before thudding on the bottom. Empty. Did the last defenders give in at last with glazed eyes and broken lips, their surrender slurred through swollen tongues?

The small mosque that adorns the summit is also ruined. But its broken walls retain evidence of careful workmanship. The Labrador follows the tantalizing smell of fox onto holy ground and we call her back. Who last prayed here and for what hopeless cause? The towers on the eastern wall have fallen outward. Surely the work of an earthquake?

A light breeze finds us on the western wall as we survey the miles commanded by Qal’at al-Gundi. No arrogant crusaders or night creeping bedu could have pulled off a surprise here. It had to be siege. When the last defenders stood here longing for help, did they shade their eyes towards the Nile as we do now? For how long did they hold on after accepting that help would not come, that defeat was inevitable?

The desert seldom reveals its secrets, and, meanwhile, the night would surely come. To remain here after dark would be folly. We

descend towards the desert floor, towards the road winding far below. Like jinn, the soldiers appear once again. No, we have no cigarettes. And once more we feel miserable to have let them down. Tourism, it seems, does not extend its benefits to all Egyptians.

Later, picnicking near the Cairo road at the foot of the only tree in sight, we look back and wonder. Did we really climb up there? A brown-necked raven, disgruntled by our presence under his tree, lurks in the shrubs that march across the sand. It is written, "By their works, ye shall know them." But we do not know, for the guidebooks are almost as mute about the origins of this desert fortress as the fortress itself. Even Steven Runciman's three-volume study of the Crusades fails to mention Qal'at al-Gundi.

The tree, long roots arching above ground by wind erosion and reaching far in search of water, provides the only shade for miles. How old is this tree and how did it get here? Likely the raven knows this, as well as who has partially burned one of the tree's still living roots. The tree sighs as a slight breeze arrives to caress it.

Lunch over, we collect a large sack of empty tins and other rubbish left by earlier visitors. Feeling righteous for having done this, we consider emptying a jerry can of water at the base of the tree. No, better not raise the tree's expectations. Beside, relief from siege is all too infrequent in the desert, and we ourselves have miles to go.

As we rejoin the main road that crosses the Mitla Pass to Suez, the raven resettles himself on the tree, the better to keep an eye on Tree and Fortress to which he has been appointed Guardian.



Qal'at al Gundi—the Fortress of the Soldier, Sinai, October 1991

## The Ladies of Abu Zabaal

12 November 1991

I remembered a line from Max Boyce's account of his trip to a brothel: "I didn't wanna go!" Perhaps. Nor did I, particularly. But philanthropy is often the way affluence excuses its voyeurism. As a new, albeit reluctant, member of the British Embassy Garden Fete Disbursement Committee, I had little choice. At 8 a.m. Cairo time—I don't know what time it was in hell—we set out by car on the road towards Ismailia. With delays to meet the nuns and to check on a gift of wood, it would be two hours before we arrived at Abu Zabaal.

That was this morning. It's now 3:30 in the afternoon, and I'm back in the city doing what I do when greatly disturbed: listening to Bach, too loud, with an ache inside that feels like hunger but is probably a combination of fear, sorrow, and regret.

The Abu Zabaal hospital is in a military zone, the better to restrict access. Medical students are not taken to Abu Zabaal, a Cairo surgeon told me, and even many Egyptian doctors do not know the secret which confines some 650 sufferers there. A few foreigners are allowed in because three or four western embassies take an interest and to deny access might cause publicity. But, really, it is best not to speak of it. The disease represents backwardness, people say, so best not mention it. The afflicted are the poor. Best not to tally them—although they number more than 24,000 and are found throughout Egypt.

I've often noticed that most of the most difficult jobs, other than war and coal mining, are assigned to women. In the entrance



courtyard, a nun had offered to shake our hands. Somehow I hadn't expected that—or the “characteristic” leonine faces, the sightless eyes, the stumps of eroded flesh. With a panoply of antibiotics, including Ramphasin, which I had taken myself for the related tuberculosis bacillus, this disease is controllable, even curable. But only if the patient takes the full treatment. Only if care and preventive measures are adequate. Only if the bacillus is caught before nerve damage has occurred. And only if others provide adequate help and support. All this I learned today.

In a low, rundown building put up in the 1930s, twisted and grotesque old men sit silently waiting. I like very old men. Often you can hold their hands and look into their eyes and see wisdom, tranquility or at least trust. But most of these untouchable creatures are ageless, blind, all hope erased from ravished faces. One man toasts bread over bricks at the foot of his bed, lifting and turning the loaf with stumps that can feel neither heat nor pain. Each patient prepares his own food, we are told, but the inadequate government rations have a way of disappearing before they reach the lepers. This is part of the reason our delegation of diplomatic wives has come here today.

“Leper!” Horrible label, written in decaying flesh. “Unclean! Unclean!” The ancient sufferers ring their bells down through history and decent, healthy folk banish them into the desert of Abu Zabaal. “Leper colony,” the place where lepers are warehoused, is the last refuge of the damned, a place of the crawling wounded and the walking dead. Is there anything worse than this? Yes.

In the contagious ward, someone has broken all the chairs and young men crowd onto sagging beds set high on bricks. A body-building poster of a man rippling his well-oiled back muscles dominates one corner, and a fellow voyeur, who claims to know, whispers to me that leprosy, by some obscene parody, augments the victim's sex drive. I also learn that five years ago all floors here were earthen.

But now a hostile youth (who wants to be on exhibit?) sweeps the concrete floor. The sweeper, outwardly unmarked, tosses some solid object into a corner with a loud clang and gets on savagely with his work. The Italian nun is angry about the broken chairs but banks her frustration. No prize for guessing “who dunnit.”

We ladies from Zamalek, Maadi, and Heliopolis gather our skirts and peer into the watery depths of a bathroom, awash with filth, broken toilet seats, and wastewater. There had been a plan last year to refurbish but someone was on the take and only two of six bathrooms were renovated. Someone has traced artistic lines in excrement on the entrance wall. When winter comes, I think, this place will be very cold.

"No games today!" an old dragon chortles as we exit back toward the courtyard. His eye sockets are screwed shut with scar tissue but a beatific smile flashes across his collapsed face. Two young men flank him on the bench, one snuggled close. The small circle of men around the blind buffoon laugh and wave at us. Perhaps they are wondering if even being a woman would be preferable to this life. And how long since any of them touched a woman, and what is going on here with the old dragon? A memory sings across the taut wires of my mind: Papillon taking the half-smoked cigar offered by a leper and so building the confidence that bought him a boat to freedom.

At the Caritas Center, rows of strangely subdued children are eating sandwiches. Prompted, they thank us for the chocolate bars. No snatching, no cries of "Ana! Ana!" Proudly, a worker announces, "Only three or four of the lepers' children contracted the disease here last year." But these are contaminated children. Who, except a leper, would want them?

A ten-year-old named Wasila gently takes my hand. We walk in silence past our gift of wood, now being carefully stowed for use as roofing material. The living conditions are no worse here than in many rural villages, I tell myself. And besides, we are told, "There is a strong social support network among the lepers." Wasila is small for her age and the scaly white patches on her face are, I hope, due only to Vitamin B deficiency. Her resistance, then, is low.

"We all have the plague within us," Camus said. I see that in the tale told by a pretty teenager, the mother of two, who was "married in" to Abu Zabaal from Upper Egypt when she was fifteen. What sort of family sends its daughter to be the third wife to a leper? She takes the medicine regularly, of course. But still, a volunteer worker mutters, "She shouldn't be sleeping with him." One of the grand ladies slips the young wife some cash, and we pass out of her life. Wasila squeezes my hand.

The chickens in the women's compound are as exotic as the patients, each chicken marked by ownership on wing or leg by colored yarn. We are greeted by a wizened woman, teeth grimacing from a gaping, noseless face, her voice throaty and obscure. Abu Zabaal has been her home since she was eighteen, nearly forty years ago. She grins hideously at her grand friend from Heliopolis, and the two women hug one another.

What do lepers die from, someone wants to know, since the bacilli attack extremities only? But the question is irrelevant: these are the Living Dead. In the dispensary, a mother displays her beautiful baby girl and other women clap their stumps in admiration. Their earrings, gypsy-bright scarves, and kohl-lined eyes emphasize their twisted facial features. Child of leper, wife of leper, leper.

Best to try to forget what I have seen. Wasila, to ensure that I do not, presses her tiny face against the car window. But though she asks politely, I do not give her my ring. Probably, I excuse myself, she will one day have no fingers on which to wear it. Besides, irrational but terrifying thought, what has she given me?

In the car on the long drive back to Cairo, I sit in silence as others cope with what we have seen by discussing servants, dressmakers, persistent fatigue from long nights at endless dinner parties. I wish they would stop talking. I need Bach and a bath. I need to be alone.

For some reason I keep seeing the way the cheerful, snaggle-toothed government dentist plopped a set of new dentures into a destroyed face. The dentures didn't make the man handsome, but at least he could chew again. And keep on waiting for Godot.

It is late afternoon in Cairo. I turn up the Bach, thinking about Wasila, suspecting that even if I tried to extricate her, they wouldn't let her go. She is a Muslim and I am a Christian, a leper. Best not to mention it.

## To Saqqara with Sadika

5 December 1991

For twenty years, I have wanted to ride from Giza to Saqqara, over the desert in shining moonlight, every rock sheltering a fox, every dark wadi holding a chained demon. But that was a fantasy born in Beirut, city of dreams later turned into nightmares. In 1970, an American friend told me of her midnight ride to Saqqara in the 1960s, and since then I'd cherished the idea. Now, rather like the man who spent his life pursuing a rare warbler, my desire has been attained, although something important was missing—night travel on horseback in that area is no longer allowed. Nor would it be safe.

Three weeks ago, *Al Ahrām Weekly* carried an article about the horse ride from Giza to Saqqara in daylight, making it sound an event of wonder—as indeed it ought to be. The stopping at the pyramid complexes of Abu Gharab and Abu Sir, the brilliant sunlight washing down the sides of dune and ruin—these catch the heart as they have for ages. But something the writer failed to mention was out there as well. Egypt's population has grown enormously in twenty years, and the backwash of civilization encroaches on the desert, its splendor, its wild life, its monuments, and its dead.

We gathered at 8:30 in the morning, fifteen riders on sturdy but underfed Arabian horses, who seemed to sense the pyramids from afar and pranced to be on their way. The day began windless, and we rode quickly, cantering for long stretches along a route that alternated canal and desert. Military zones and forlorn archaeological sites enclosed in barbed wire hung with windblown plastic bags make it no longer possible to cover the twenty kilometers from Giza

to Saqqara in desert alone. The Cairo ring road, under construction at the edge of the town, is scheduled to cut through the plateau in a year or two, and after that, direct access to Saqqara from Giza on horseback may no longer be possible.

The elder of our two grooms rode a mare I know well, a slender red flame, which he stoked relentlessly, balancing his weight against her mouth in the way of careless riders, his feet sticking out before her withers. Her name, he told me, was Jamila. But I know her as Sadika, and though I had not ridden her for three months, she recognized my voice, signaling with her ears as I cantered, singing to her as so often before.

Someday, I know, perhaps even soon, Sadika will end on the rubbish heap near the stables with the other used up stable horses. The baladi dogs will devour her, bones and all. But today there were fewer carcasses in the smoldering dump, and the abandoned dogs expressed their resentment by pursuing our cavalcade a short distance through the sand. There is not much hope in these wadis for people or for animals. And that, of course, was why I had stopped coming here, I reminded myself—except for today.

A relatively clear day cheered us through the plantations where sorrowful donkeys turned the creaking norias, and filthy children shouted greetings and demands for baksheesh. From her perch in a palm tree, a lesser kestrel watched us pass and, once, a flash of electric blue announced a kingfisher over the canal.

Abdul Nabi, who owns possibly the largest Arabian stud in Egypt, had set the fee at 35 LE [*livres égyptiennes*, French for Egyptian pounds] each plus five for the two grooms. It isn't as though he needs the money. En route we stopped to admire his farm, which stiffened our resistance to an expected price hike at day's end. Lines of box stalls filled the vast barn, each containing a beauty with artistic neck tattoos attesting pure Arabian ancestry. Most of them seemed to be pregnant. Riding through Abdul Nabi's orchards, we helped ourselves to his tangerines and further fortified our resolve.

One of our company, an Englishman in a red shirt and out of place cowboy boots, told me that he was riding his "usual" horse. Someone else told me that the macho Englishman works for the Arab Organization for Industrialization, an improbable euphemism for arms manufacturing. He ought, I grumped to myself, to

have replaced the Crocodile Dundee knife, carefully strapped to his waist, with a miniature missile. All such devices are, after all, just phallic symbols.

Red Shirt did not return the greetings offered by the old men and laughing young soldiers whom we passed. Foreign oddities who allow women in tight trousers to ride stallions, we passed quickly through their lives and they returned to their shishas and small plates of beans and bread spread before them on the sun baked Nile mud.

At Abu Gharab, we found the large stone vessels described by *Al Ahram Weekly* as blood basins. If the tomb wall paintings at Saqqara are accurate, the ancients slaughtered their bulls by tying them up and simply hacking off limb after limb. Not, I suppose, for purposeful cruelty but perhaps simply because that was the way it had always been done. So much of life seems to go on like that. Then, as today along the canal paths, peasant women carry loads of berseem home to feed the water buffalo. The women's kohl-rimmed eyes stared from wrinkled faces, which creased further in acknowledgment when I said to them, "As salaam aleikum."

At Saqqara, we ate an early lunch near the step pyramid. Once, a few years ago, I was able to enter Zoser's tomb in the train of the wife of a visiting British politician. The British archaeologist who accompanied us said that during his ten years in Egypt, this was the first time he had been allowed to enter the fragile step pyramid. The interior was a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with large slanting beams, some collapsing, holding up the pyramid from within. The air inside the pyramid was dead. We spoke softly and moved quickly, to see and return to safety.

But today, there was no question of entry or even of getting close to the step pyramid. Too many tourists, too many horses, too many hands outstretched for permits and yet more baksheesh. I threw bread at an inquisitive hoopoe lark as the arms dealer, sitting near me in the sand, uncorked a bottle of well-shaken white wine. It's 10:30 a.m. Time for a drink in the desert. A tiny sand-colored spider climbed my right boot, going about its business in near total camouflage among the human beings, whose large eyes were not large enough to see the surrounding dunes and ridges as living communities.

Our leader changed the route on the return, skirting a modern cemetery. The desert has always received the dead, preserving their bones in clean sand and thereby promoting the notion that because it is a place of death it is also a place of no life. Sadika's eyes narrowed, and her ears twitched as she trotted past the small black mare on which I rode. Perhaps, I thought, Sadika, too, knows that there is an end to living desert. But what if she does? Few people care what she feels or what she knows.

Large trucks carrying sand out of the desert and replacing it with Cairo's rubbish joined us on a stretch of road beside a major canal. Cheerful and thoughtless, the drivers usually waited until parallel with the line of horses before blasting their horns in greeting. Or perhaps, it was, after all, simply a warning that there is not room here for all of us.

"Unworthy custodians," I muttered self-righteously, although I was among the offenders. Or perhaps I was speaking for Sadika. But the little mare was already far up the line and no doubt preoccupied with the need to get back to where there was berseem, and water, and where the heavy-handed man in flip-flops would get off her back and stop trying to mutilate her mouth. But before eating, she would hope to have a quick roll in the sand.

Horses and barely surviving people are often dismissed as unable to think about tomorrow. But I begin to wonder whether they may be thinking of it more than we do.

Postscript re why I was no longer often riding with the stable where Sadika lived: overuse of animals, particularly by cruel riders; and groups of abandoned dogs in the desert where the horses were taken, making riding there a sad and sometimes dangerous ordeal.

## Death and Love in the Eastern Desert

December 1991

Mons Porphyrites, the Jebel Dukhan, can be reached from Cairo in a seven-hour drive. But you can't get back that night and will have the choice of camping by the Roman fort in Wadi el-Ma'mal or near the ruined monastery of Wadi Umm Sidra, the mother of cherries. Rocks interspersed with clean sand cover the wadi floors and the purple, green, and brown jebel walls surround the wadis like cupped hands. The way in from the main Hurghada highway by four-wheel drive takes three hours along a route almost too filled with boulders to be declared a track. But intruders are drawn on through the wadis by views of distant peaks, which resemble a Chinese landscape.

The monastery site seems the end of the earth and for many it was. Most of those hundreds or perhaps thousands of unwilling travelers to the rock mines of Mons Porphyrites never returned. Their discarded bones lie in back wadis away from the rock quarries or, perhaps, like the former owner of the remnant of winding cloth I found at the nearby quarry of Mons Claudianus, were for love or pity's sake tucked into a crevice by a fellow slave.

The Roman appetite for purple porphyry and diorite sparkling with mica died with the empire, but Roman Egypt survives in the jebels and wadis of the Eastern Desert. The site of the slaves' years of anguished labor amidst intolerable heat and thirst remains almost untouched. It is as though just yesterday an order came to lay down tools and abandon the half-chiseled blocks, the low stone huts, and the long earthen loading ramps.



Did an exhausted messenger vomit out the word that Rome had fallen? Was work stopped by a Bedouin raid, a slaves' revolt, the stealthy attack of plague? On this the desert has nothing to say, its silence broken only by the distant sound of falling rock at night and the strident daytime cry of brown-necked ravens. The typical square Roman forts, the ruined temples to Serapis and Isis and their broken columns are all there, but the people have been released.

In a hermit's hole not far from here as the raven flies, one of these black creatures fed St. Anthony half a loaf of bread each day until St. Paul came seeking him and then—sign of divine approval—doubled the ration. So say the monks. But not far to the south of where the Christian monastic tradition began and only a few years earlier, at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus, the enslaved Christians seemed abandoned by their Lord. And so perished.

On Jebel Dukhan, purple chips, pebbles, and lumps of porphyry litter the wadis, carried by infrequent torrents for several kilometers out onto the plain that stretches to the Red Sea. The first modern explorers "discovered" the site by following these porphyry chips. Jebel Dukhan itself is scarred by ancient chisel marks and bore holes. Italian visitors of the 1930s, perhaps dreaming of renewed empire, carved their names into the living rock. But few transient visitors have ever come here. The ascent from the valley floor to the mine face rises two thousand feet in less than a mile, and the heat is near overwhelming.

Further south, high in the ridges of Mons Claudianus, two enormous slabs of diorite, signed XIII and XIV with a careful chisel, were one day propped up on small rocks. The intention was to allow access to the ropes and tree trunks that would ease their passage onto the ramp. Some seventeen hundred years have passed, and still they do not follow XII down to the plain for the hundred-mile journey by oxcart to the Nile and then by boat on the Mediterranean and across to Rome. A sand partridge cries harshly to its mate and scuttles off among the rocks.

There are also gold and emerald mines in the Eastern Desert. But modern Egyptians are mainly content thus far to exploit the coast, leaving the interior to its holy, majestic silence. Someday, tourists will come in droves to this place of spiritual power and will carve modern names. Already it has begun. Some fool named "Sa-

bry, Misr Travel" signed in on "21-11-91" with bold letters on the ancient plaster of the pillars at the dry well in Wadi Ma'mal. Thus do we modern people diminish our future by mutilating our past.

At Mons Claudianus, more accessible along a semi-paved road, we are surprised by an odd high-wheeled truck, with seats that, having announced its approach with loud noise over great distance, finally arrived and disgorged twelve fat Germans and a slim guide named Adel. Claiming to be "half Bedouin," Adel laments the number of visitors who have begun to arrive unsupervised, partying by moonlight and littering the desert with plastic rubbish and tins. Guardian of the holy places of history, he looked sharply at our group of five with no guide.

We five left the Germans staggering up into the rocks and returned to our musings and wanderings. I rejoiced by day in the seeming emptiness of the desert and its glorious silence and by night in full moon on purple jebel and the peace of sleeping under the Big Dipper, awakening often to watch it march across the sky. Early on the third morning, a black and white wagtail and a mourning wheatear visited our camp. Footprints and scat of small mammals also appeared, but we never saw any of these silent watchers.

I rejoiced, as well, in the growing attraction between our shy young English friend and the lovely woman he had brought in his Land Rover. On the first night, beside the fire, their hands strayed together. And when we three others retired to our camp beds, they continued to gaze into the flames. Each day thereafter, their desire mounted, fed by wild beauty, youth, and the brilliant stars.

On the third night, they padded silently away into the moon-washed desert carrying a blanket. And in the morning their faces shone. Driving behind them on the desert highway back to the Nile, we saw them close, and our hearts, too, sang.



Driving in the Eastern Desert, December 1991