

Ante Masry?

In a taxi cab two wide we sat three across. No seatbelts buckled us in, rather we were glued together arm to arm, squished intimately between the car doors. Outside of our windows Cairo as we knew it seemed to transform itself. Normally Cairo was an aimless city that bustled in all directions. Cabs drove fast when there was space and slowly wiggled six or seven cars into four lanes when there wasn't. Pedestrians calmly walked into traffic, fearlessly ignorant of the minibus' passing only twenty inches in front of them. Street vendors walked and ran and shuffled and hobbled along. Everything seemed to move according to its own course.

This afternoon was different though. The whole city appeared to be moving together. Cars and pedestrians accumulated to form one jumbled caravan heading northwest. If it wasn't clear before, the flags draped over every last vehicle said it all. There was only one reason for the northwestern exodus that day. The Cairo International Stadium. Football.

Honking at each other, beeping back and forth, all of the drivers voiced their allegiance with their steering wheels. In red, fans of El-Ahly, in white, Zamalek. Passengers didn't just wear their colors, they were surrounded by them. Flags of all sizes hung out windows and lay draped across car hoods. Ugly dashboards were muffled, covered in fabric and fringe. Appropriately colored tapestries and other team paraphernalia disguised even Kleenex boxes. Having the two best football teams in Africa and the Arab World, in one city, produces a pretty intense rivalry. Every single Cairene football fan makes it blatantly clear whose side he is on.

We inched onwards and our car spat, splattered, and sputtered from the wear of twenty years of use. Every time we moved even ten feet, the chatter of the stadium seemed to double beyond our passenger windows. We spent about forty-five minutes squeezed into the backseat,

grasping our prized imported American fruit snacks and bags of Egyptian muesli with sweaty fingers. Then we parked.

Starting about a mile away, we pushed through a heavily male crowd. From that far back we could see only two things – the stadium, seemingly eating its way out of a large hill, and rows of soldiers in black riot gear, meshed together into an imposing human fence. The closer we came to the soldiers the more human they seemed. Not that they were more friendly or showed any sort of emotion on their faces. That was not the case. Instead, their helmets turned in a reflexive chain reaction, amorous dominos, visibly and sometimes audibly lusting after the two women on either side of me. A few soldiers grunted, others moaned. Their noises made it very clear how sexually repressed Egyptian men are. Though there were few, no Egyptian women elicited this response. In fact nothing else elicited a response from the guards besides the very pale, very American ladies I was with. By this point the two were used to the lecherous looks and catcalls, but this was something very different. Hundreds of men. Loaded automatic weapons. All staring intently. They attempted to act coolly in the face of so many leering eyes, but it tacitly disconcerted them. As the only man among three of us, (and the one with the most elementary Arabic skills) I was dismayed by an overwhelming sense of helplessness. If anything had happened to my friends, say a groping, sexual assault (both of which are not uncommon), I would have been unquestionably useless.

We walked swiftly past the first barricade of riot police to the entrance of the stadium. As I learned later, this was only the second of a number of arbitrary obstacles. Before us, the crowd split ways. We looked down at our tickets -- the only directive apparent was the word *theleth*, or three, referring to a bleacher type level of seating. With a bit of broken Arabic, basic

charades, and exaggerated facial features we managed to get a good idea of where to go next – or at least which enormous line to queue up in.

To our left nearly five hundred men stood in line on a sidewalk, bordered by the backs of more riot police. As usual we tried to quietly blend in, casually taking our place in the back. Standing there, people watching, I felt suddenly alone. I turned around. There was no one there. I was the last person in line. My eyes snapped back and forth looking for my friends. Then I noticed them. Beyond the line of riot soldiers, a large man with a rifle was taking them by the arm, gesturing to them. One of the two spoke back to him in Arabic. I could only pick up a word or so from where I stood. *Amriki, Amriki*, this is what I heard. The friend speaking gestured over to me, sending the soldier my way. His gait was wide and would have been almost cartoonish if I hadn't been so scared. He parted the soldiers next to me and pointed. "*Ante Masry? Ante Masry?*" He repeated. I responded with two palms held outwards as they shook back and forth, "*Le'e.*" "No. No, I'm not Egyptian. I'm from America" "*Le'e. Ayna min Amrika.*" I gagged back. He took my arm and pulled me through the line towards my friends. Then he pointed once more, but this time towards the gate at far end of the line. The three of us looked at each other. There was no way we would cut in front of so many patiently waiting fans. "*Le'e shookran*, No thank you," we replied and began to walk back to our place in line. "*Le'e, Le'e, Le'e.*" the soldier's voice snapped from behind us. We stood still at once and took an anxious breath. It was clear there was no other choice. The two girls and I bowed our heads and walked briskly down the line, while the eyes of every soldier and crowd member followed.

This was the first time any of us had seen one man discriminate against his own countryman in favor of a foreigner. It was a disturbing and alien sight. Never before had I been

so humbled. Never before had I been so ashamed, nor had I ever been so distraught about simply being American.

After years of US event protocol I wrongly assumed that this first line would be the last. It was in fact one of three arduously lengthy lines. Each required a new set of assumptions, more broken Arabic, and more hand wagging. For a foreigner, these were three appropriately monumental trials – seemingly characteristic in a land of tombs guarded by mythically complicated pit falls and passages.

The passage through gate one marked the beginning of two new lines, forms that more closely resembled twin monsters than orderly queues. These, we later learned, were due to the fact that both teams shared a single stadium. Fans of Zamalek and El-Ahly sat in neighboring sections, safely protected from one another. Divided into lines, one red, one white, each row of men grumbled and gesticulated at the other. We paused to assess our options and immediately made each line aware of our indecision. As we consulted each other the crowd assessed our clothes, loudly voicing their opinions at us. The faces of fans in red sneered at our three white t-shirts and made the decision fairly straightforward. Instincts of self-preservation kicked in automatically and we escaped into the comfort of the white line. In its uniformity it was the first place where any of us had felt some sense of belonging that day.

Unlike our experience in the initial line, no guards who patrolled the second felt the need to awkwardly single us out. Instead, we waited patiently in line, mostly in silence, just watching. Beyond the two lines, rows of military transport trucks were parked in formation. Just beneath these vehicles we witnessed the most perverse example of what came to be known as “habibi love.”

Habibi is an Arabic word that literally means “my love” (habibity is used for females). This love isn’t necessarily a romantic or platonic love, instead it ambiguously refers to both types. Stereotypically, sexuality in Egypt is conservative and strictly heterosexual. Homosexuality is met with absolute revulsion and is a crime punishable by execution -- because of this a bizarre contradiction emerges. Based on the assumption that nobody would consciously reveal his homosexuality in public for fear of death, masculine affection is openly displayed. Grown men walk through the streets arm in arm. Others sit at cafes smoking sheesha and lovingly holding hands. It was one of the few cultural characteristics that continued to baffle me even towards the last days of my time in Egypt.

By their vehicles, a number of the soldiers ambled in circles, looking for ways to keep cool in the hot July sun. Some leaned against trucks. Some stood and waited it out. Others hid from the glare, finding comfort lying beneath the military transports. These soldiers didn’t appear as separate bodies, instead as one large camouflaged mass. Despite having so many AK-47s and semiautomatic weapons packed in between, the troops spooned with the affection of sleeping infants. Their smiley faces beamed towards us as they quietly cuddled in the shadows. The three of us laughed inaudibly at the strange digression from our own army’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, careful to be discrete in our hilarity.

After a great deal of waiting our line of white moved slowly towards the next checkpoint. Guards inspected our tickets at the second gate and looked us up and down. They nodded and we proceeded through this gate to the third line, which for lack of any other difficulty was mostly an exercise in patience. Time to think in line three brought me more anxiety. If it was this difficult to enter the stadium, getting out might be just as hard.

Four at a time the men in front of us moved through the final set of gates. There, guards grabbed tickets and without thought casually threw them into the air. Behind them it rained a confetti of red and purple tickets. The hologrammed papers reflected the sun as they fell, covering those waiting in an attire of silver and gold. When it was our turn we walked forwards and cautiously handed our tickets to the soldiers. After an acknowledgement we hesitatingly stepped forward, almost surprised to have finally entered the stadium grounds.

Ahead of us, a lone vendor frantically waved a handful of hats, flags, and banners, as he fought with the screams of the crowd in the stands beyond. High above him the backs of fans leaned over the concrete edge of the stadium. They fearlessly wavered in and out while shaking their own sports memorabilia and fists into the air.

To the left of the vendor an immense and dark tunnel marked the last passage between our seats and the three of us. In this tunnel the cries of the stadium and the mass of entering fans squeezed together into a racket and chaos almost unbearable; it was exciting, it was terrifying. We were thrown forward out of the tunnel and into the crowd. The intensity of their cheers, though clearly for their team of choice, felt somehow directed at us.

With the continued rush of the tunnel we made it past the concession stands selling ketchup and kabob flavored potato chips. We ran to the stairs, then down them. We ran past the rows of wailing men. We ran past the fans shrieking through horns. Only steps ahead our empty seats waited patiently. The three of us screamed, joining the din of the crowd, as we forcefully threw ourselves into the chairs. Instantly and with an almost paparazzi like fervor, dozens of men around us took out their cameras and cell phones. Unashamedly, they marked the end of our journey into the stadium with picture after picture of my two “beautiful American” friends.

It felt imposing and triumphant and unreal. I was scared and thrilled and unsettled -- and the game had not yet begun.