

# Love

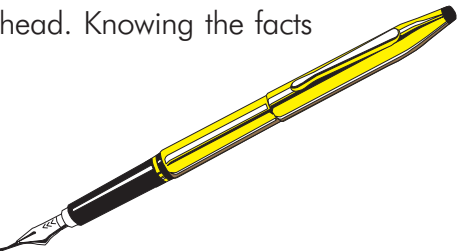
## Cool Head Warm Heart

Everywhere I went in Africa, I met with promises of undying and everlasting affection. Love blossomed at a moment's notice and marriage proposals became commonplace. I could hardly be blamed for beginning to imagine that I must be the most desirable creature that ever walked this earth. Vanity aside, I have to admit that the truth was something else.

I call it the "Mrs Robinson Syndrome." Speaking generally and of course from the female point of view, it seems to me that men just naturally assume a woman traveling alone would rather have company if she had a choice. They conclude that she must be the "adventurous" type, and it follows that a woman traveling alone must be well off, rich even, which she likely is by third world standards. Wealth – real or imagined – is a potent attraction in any society, and an "adventurous" woman has an irresistible allure, especially in countries where females normally lead a cloistered existence.

Millions of people the world over look to the tourist dollar to earn a living. Many individuals use unorthodox and creative means to enrich themselves through travelers. I am not talking here about crooks, con artists and pickpockets. No, the people I'm speaking of are just folks trying to get along in the world, live a little, and have a bit of fun along the way, just like you and me. Nothing wrong in that.

Am I implying here that all travel encounters are crass and shallow? Are travelers subject to exploitation and greed wherever they go? Should we be defensive and cynical toward all who approach us on the road? I don't think so, but I do think it important to maintain a level head. Knowing the facts





should not destroy the value of having experiences we choose to have. At the same time we should be cognizant of some basic concepts of human nature, mainly that a streak of self-interest runs through every one of us. We are all in this game of life to get what we can out of it. So the world is full of charmers; nowhere is this more true than in Egypt.

I was nervous about Egypt. It was my first time alone in an Islamic country. Ali, a Sudanese journalist and my seat mate on the flight from Nairobi to Cairo, saw me through the first couple of days. Knowing Cairo well, he directed me to a decent hotel, dealt with taxi-drivers, money changers, and went sightseeing with me until I got my bearings. In short, he was as chivalrous as any 15th century knight-errant. Then he went his way, and I was alone in this huge, dusty city on the edge of the desert.

Cairo, like an aging, voluptuous, belly dancer, may be a little careworn, but an air of mystery sensuously beckons from behind the veils. Cairo charms and enfolds in subtle, indefinable ways. Within one week I was considering staying on for awhile . . . maybe forever.

Finding my way about old Cairo (which is where tourists are most likely to be) was daunting. Most signs were written in Arabic; streets veered off at angles, ending in alleys and dead ends, and periodically pedestrians were forced to mingle among hair raising traffic to get around heaps of refuse, construction rubble, parked cars, donkeys and carts, and what-have-you.

Typically, as I edged through the streets with map in hand, someone – invariably a male, aged 8 to 80 – offered assistance. “Where are you going please? Do you need help?”

“Thank you, I was just looking for the . . . ”

“Oh that place is,” . . . so and thus from here, “you’ll get lost. I’ll take you.”

“Very kind of you.”

Then I would go along with my congenial guide and eventually reach my preferred destination in a round-about fashion via some establishment such as Mohammed’s Perfumery or Ali’s Curio Shop where, my guide insisted, I must, please, step in quickly and say hello. Please, it is Egyptian hospitality. These pleas were delivered as if life would be unbearable without my guide’s friends having made my acquaintance. Refusing seemed out of the question. Once lured inside the shop I had then to get out without loading up on perfume or curios, which was not easy. Fortunately I had become practiced in the art of gentle refusal during eight months on the road.

One day I was tripping along Ramses Street bent on finding the Egyptian Museum, home of the famous, fabulous Tutankhamen treasures. My instinct that the place must be nearby was reinforced

when I spotted an imposing building looming two blocks ahead but on the opposite side of several lanes of heavy traffic. I dithered on the street corner, working up courage to stride like a local into the non-stop flow of bumpers and fenders, which was the only way to get across. Confidence to move finally came after I caught a sidelong glimpse of a man approaching. Oh no! Here comes another pesky perfume salesman, I thought. Hoping to escape his notice I plunged into the traffic.

As I made the careening dash into the fray of vehicles, I realized I was not alone. I felt a protective grip upon my elbow. The Egyptian had kept apace and now stepped right along with me, chivalrously holding up a halting hand for all the drivers to see as he escorted me across the street. On the opposite side, I nodded a curt thanks and hurried away.

"Wait!" he called.

"Don't want any perfume thanks," I waved him off and continued towards the building I hoped was the Egyptian Museum.

"No, please wait. Where are you from?"

"Canada," I called backwards.

"Canada! Oh Canada! I go to Canada in ten days. Oh wait, just one moment. Tell me about Canada," he shouted.

Something in his voice . . . I could not resist. I stopped, and he came to my side. A big man, well over six feet, he towered over me. I looked up into the handsome face of this tall, dark stranger, and said "Is that so, you are really going to Canada?" I was skeptical but at the same time, hearing the word "Canada" struck a chord of nostalgia, and I certainly didn't want to leave the man with the impression that Canadians are unfriendly.

"Yes it's true. I go just now to Hilton Hotel for long distance call. I have business in Canada. I have family. My cousin is married to Canadian. Yes!"

He moved closer.

"Won't you come and have tea in my shop and talk to me about Canada? Then, changing the subject abruptly, he said, "Your eyes," He looked at me appealingly. "Your eyes . . . remind me . . ."

(My eyes? This was intriguing, but probably just some foolish nonsense, I thought.) "Uh, no. I really must go. I cannot buy anything from your shop. I must travel light and have no room for souvenirs.

I'm sorry. I'm sure you have a beautiful shop, but I have no money. Honestly. I'm going to the museum. I don't have time, really I don't."

"But the museum is closed until two," he argued. "It is true. Come with me to Hilton then, not my shop." He smiled, a disarming smile with just a hint of roguishness in the curve of his lips. Then looking deep into my eyes with his own liquid brown ones he said, "You have the eyes of Nadia. The first one. This is dangerous for me."

A pained expression crossed his face. "Please. Egyptian hospitality. No selling. Just come and talk. Come. Please, we have tea and talk about Canada."

Did you imagine, dear reader, that I would fall for this line? I, the worldly, experienced, savvy traveler? You are right, I did. I simply had to hear more about Nadia's eyes.

I followed Mohamed expecting to go, as he had proposed, to the Hilton Hotel wherever that was. He finessed the way back across Ramses Street. I followed and soon we stepped over the threshold of, not the Hilton Hotel, no, no, here we were at Mohamed's curio shop. "I must stop here a moment. Would you like tea or coffee while you wait?" he said, and I noticed a mischievous flickering about the corner of his mouth.

"Coffee," I replied with an exasperated snicker and sat in the chair that was offered. Instead of coffee, a cup of sweet mint tea quickly appeared, which I accepted with a wry sigh. What was the use of getting annoyed. After all, I reasoned, I had an hour to kill before the museum opened at 2pm. The shop was cool and well stocked with lovely papyrus hangings, silver jewelry, mother-of-pearl inlaid boxes, and alabaster carvings.

We never did go to the Hilton Hotel. However, Mohamed talked and talked, and I listened, fascinated, to his rich baritone voice and endearing accent. He talked about his large family. "My family, we are Bedouins," he explained. "My grandfather, he come from the desert. He start the business at the museum. He was guide at the museum, the best. Now it is big business. All the family work in the business. We have our own garden for perfume."

Mohamed talked about his dreams. "This is family shop. I run the shop with some cousins. But I am building my own shop. There is so much to do. I am so busy with the builders. So many details, my head is big, like the pyramids, but I must do it for myself you understand."

"I wish to have nice business. Not too much. Just comfortable. I wish to marry, but no one come since my Nadia. Oh, I have many friends, but no one like Nadia. Nadia, my love."

With wistful, faraway eyes, Mohamed told me about Nadia. As a youngster, Mohamed said, he had been betrothed, in the Muslim custom, to someone else, but the pair felt no desire for one another, and their families, being progressive, had let the arrangement lapse. In the meantime, Mohamed had met and fallen in love with Nadia. They were to marry, he said, but before that happy day arrived tragedy struck. Nadia was killed in a traffic accident one month before the wedding.

Seven years had passed, said Mohamed, yet he could not get over Nadia. The thought of her was always with him.

"You have Nadia's eyes," he said once again.

A quiver passed down my spine. It was a charming story, but now it was time for a reality check. Getting my wits together, I glanced at my watch and told him I'd enjoyed the chat but as it was two o'clock I had better get on my way.

Mohamed walked me to the museum, and during that time I promised to meet him again at 6pm. As we parted he said, "Allah has brought you to me. You cannot leave me now."

I saw Mohamed that evening, and the next several evenings. He seemed to take it for granted that I would stay around Cairo indefinitely, and I hardly knew anymore what I would do. I had mixed feelings.

I noticed with minor reservations that our conversations took an inevitable commercial turn. Mohamed said he had made a wonderful deal. He had purchased, exceedingly cheap, some exceptional papyrus hangings. Now if someone were smart, said Mohamed, here was a possible fortune in the making. In North America papyrus hangings sell like "hot cakes," he said. A smart person could make easy money by buying and reselling them in Canada or America. I tended to agree but stuck to my reserve for the time being.

Other than this lurking, unspoken feeling that my friend may have some ulterior commercial motive, my mind more or less gave way to the tantalizing possibilities of romance in bloom.

One pleasantly mild evening Mohamed and I watched the light show over the Pyramids from the balcony of his family home in Giza. The trio of ancient temples stood stolidly anchored in desert foundations and traditions while modern technology radiated dancing beams about their facades. I was reminded of careless children cavorting under the patient but wary eyes of their elders. I too felt giddy and girlish. Culturally, religiously, socially and geographically, I was in a setting far removed from my natural place by the cool green mountains and ocean shores of British Columbia. Here I

was in Egypt, and I felt like I was falling in love. The feeling was strange, thrilling and quite disconcerting.

While we stood arm and arm watching the light show, Mohamed pointed to a heap of bricks in a small lot next door. Those, he said, were the beginnings of a shop of his own. "By October it will be finished. We will have it going and for Christmas we will have holiday at Sinai. I will show you everything. You will like it. You will be big help to me."

By now the idea of tending shop alongside Mohamed held its attractions, and the notion of spending the rest of my life in Cairo no longer seemed impossible. I pictured myself busy about my little shop, selling papyrus hangings to the tourists at Giza.

"I am happy here," said Mohamed, "but I am truly a Bedouin. I love the desert best. I love best to take my horse to the desert and stay in tent. When my head gets big like pyramid, I go to the desert with my horse."

"Oh yes Mohamed! Let's do it! Let's ride off to the desert."

The next day Mohamed's head was "big like pyramid." So many problems, builders and bricks and banks. Maybe Mohamed went to the desert, but I wasn't invited, which meant I had time for a little solitary thinking. I believed he was sincere, and I didn't believe him. I trusted him and didn't trust him. I wanted him and didn't want him. At times I felt an angel was directing my affairs; at times I thought it was the devil. It was good I had some time to myself, and besides I had errands of my own to attend to, the first being to arrange the mailing of letters home.

By this time I was slipping in and out of the traffic streams with almost as much aplomb as Cairenes, and I easily located a post office, a huge, crumbling building that resembled an ancient Foreign Legion garrison fallen into disrepair.

The signs in the post office were in Arabic, and the clerk spoke no English, so I simply thrust my letters forward and hoped for the best. This action produced a commotion in the lineup, which I did not understand, but I supposed something more was expected on my part. What, I could not guess, so I just stood there looking helpless. A clean-cut young man dressed in western fashion stepped forward and instructed me, in English, on the sum to be paid. Then he took the letters, stamped them and showed me where to drop them.

He said his name was Mohamed. That I should meet a second acquaintance named Mohamed struck me as only mildly curious because it is a very common name in Egypt. He said he was due at a

karate lesson at 4:30pm, but he was at my service until then. Had I seen such and such museum, he asked? Would I like some tea?

It was mid-afternoon, a tea garden was handy; I agreed tea would be nice.

As we walked along together, I noticed that Mohamed Two (as I think of him) held in his hand a greeting card picturing a garland of roses. The card was for his girlfriend, he said, explaining that there had been some misunderstanding between them, and he hoped the card would make amends. I assured him she would be touched. What is her name, I asked?

“Nadia,” he said.

Nadia! I did not know if Nadia is as common a name in Egypt as is Mohamed, but hearing him say the name made my heart lurch as if I’d just received shocking news. Mohamed Two went on to say that now he had met me, he wasn’t so sure about his feelings for Nadia. Suddenly he didn’t care either for his karate lesson. He thought he would like to stay with me. He was sure he loved me, and he thought it would be great to come live in Canada.

“Allah is good,” he said. “Allah has brought you to me.”

Perhaps I overreacted. Maybe it was mere coincidence to meet two romantically linked Mohammed’s and Nadia’s within my brief ten-day stay in Cairo. I didn’t know for sure about that, but I was sure in my heart that true love is not so easily acquired as recent heady events would have me believe.

Allah may well have had a hand in these proceedings. In my mind alarm bells began ringing and a very large inward voice said: Get thee gone!

In short, I said my good-byes and within a few days, I resumed my vagabond life and flew away to Athens. But Mohamed of Giza lingered on in my mind. I had his address. He had mine. When I reached Vancouver six weeks later, I could not help hoping for news of Mohamed. There was none.

I chided myself as a silly thing. Cynically, I told myself that some guys will do anything to sell a papyrus hanging. Later, I learned to laugh at myself and my Egyptian folly, and I decided I had no regrets for following my instincts, neither for allowing myself the experience in the first place nor for getting out when the vibes felt wrong. Instinct, I reaffirmed to myself, is a solo traveler’s best companion.

Three months went by, and by that time Mohamed was relegated to a tender place in my memory. Then one day I received a card from Egypt, just a few words, but the sentiments stretched over thousands of miles to thrum once more upon my heartstrings.

He said he was waiting for me. He will wait forever, he said.

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

*Social Issues, Words for Women*

*Safety Tips*