

FIRST AND LAST AND ALWAYS

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I would imagine I first saw it as love on the bus from Port Said to Cairo. We had been allocated seats by virtue of our schools, and I had prayed all night that he would be placed on the same one as I. Not so, and as I stared at the passing desert, at the huge ships effortlessly gliding through the endless sand, I felt a numbing sense of loss at his absence.

There must have been six or seven buses – including one spare in case of accident or faulty mechanics – so the odds, I suppose, were against us. It mattered not that, had we been lucky enough to ride the same bus, we would doubtless have been seats apart; to be only that close was enough, enough to keep the hunger growing.

As it happened, I saw precious little of him that day. Our respective guides seemed to purposefully keep us apart, as they led us through a maze of classic Egyptian hawkers toward one of the world's greatest mysteries. The pyramids at Giza: what more romantic a place to fall in love?

And yet the majesty of these great edifices and their guardian, the scaffold-plated Sphinx, was lost on me as I followed my Twentieth Century caravan of schoolchildren through the dusty leftovers of long lost millennia. Had his countenance truly overwhelmed my sense of wonder? Or had countless school texts and breathless tales of Egypt tarnished the truth, painted the Sphinx a great deal bigger and allowed her the grace of standing unaided? I had been obsessed with this country since the age of six, when our teacher had taught us to spell its name as a precursor to a stunning initiation into antiquity. That year we drew, painted and crayoned hundreds of pictures of pharaohs, longboats and snakes. We constructed a classroom-sized pyramid with a papier-mâché sphinx, and even went so far as to learn the hieroglyphs, though to this day I am unable to recall how well. It was a love and a passion from that day forward, so much so that, to this day, discussions of reincarnation fill me with the conviction that I was once born of Egypt.

Naturally enough, eight years on when the opportunity arose to walk those fabled sands, I was excited beyond belief. Aged fourteen, I was about to visit a country that I had never been certain was real. Like some delicate Oz, Egypt held far too much magic to exist in the same world as Thatcherite London. And there I was, a young girl well-versed in the works of Louis Carroll, who had suddenly found the looking glass.

The visit formed part of a ten day voyage, a tour of the Mediterranean on a ship of five hundred schoolchildren. It was, I appreciate, nothing short of the chance of a lifetime, a dream from which I never truly awoke and something that tweaked many a jealous brow in the years that followed. At the time, this sort of journey was unheard of. Sadly, as the ship was to sink the following year, it is also unlikely to be repeated.

We had started in Athens, boarding the vessel with uneasy excitement, each of us afraid to believe that this could all be real. At the time, school trips traditionally involved a weekend at some country mansion, converted with bunks though still happily riddled with crannies and supposedly secret passages. On rare occasions, a group would go skiing in the mountains of France or Italy, but nothing so grand as this. Africa was uncharted territory.

I say Africa, but I have never been able to reconcile Egypt with that mysterious continent. Too dry, too arid, and its populace far too Arabic; the land of Moses bears little

or no resemblance to the leopard-filled jungles and lion-hunted plains of my imagination. The backdrop to *Out of Africa* and Edgar Rice Burroughs is entirely incongruous with the dusty mosques of Cairo and the hordes of middle-Eastern men selling carpets and camel whips in the Port Said bazaar. Without gazelles and Negroes, there can be no childhood Africa.

If the Acropolis is indeed a wonder of the ancient world, then together we saw three in those ten days. If not, then to finally truly find each other more than makes up for the difference. That we would witness a great deal more together was something I could only wish for.

I've often wondered when it was that he first felt love in return. Were I forced to guess, I would choose that glorious moment in Turkey, when we almost missed departure after losing our way in the winding streets of another foreign town. The memory is blurred now. Knowing as much of schools as I do, it seems ridiculous to me that, at such a young age, we should be allowed to wander without supervision through the alleys of Eastern cities. And yet, that is the way I remember it – total freedom to explore the mysteries of the Balkans and the alien lands beyond.

At last we had spent the day together. Far harder than escaping the eyes of my teachers was casting aside friends who would have liked nothing more than to while away the hours with a boy almost twelve months their senior. A year was a long time back then, playground politics being heavily dependent on age. I suppose that was why he seemed so mature, so full of knowledge of a world to me steeped in mysticism – films, the arts, everything – while I clung for buoyancy to the hidden secrets of Egypt.

His air of maturity held me spellbound for years. Through our teens I was perpetually afflicted with the belief that he knew infinitely more than I of the ways of the world, of the seas of love and the tantalising whirlpool of intimacy. In my eyes he was a man of a thousand lovers, inexplicably smitten with me, while I was the captured innocent, more ignorant of the flesh than I was of the heart and destined only for embarrassment. He would lead me in these things, I was sure, teach me what I needed to know and guide my shaking hand in moments of nervous excitement.

But that was all for the future; for now all I wanted was to hold him, entwine my fingers in his and perhaps, before we returned to London, place a vulnerable kiss on those spell-binding lips. Fourteen years old and unknissed – how my friends would have laughed, had kissing been common at all.

And in Dubrovnik we so nearly did it. I could almost taste the salt of the sea on his lips, but I never had the courage to lean that little bit closer and steal the moment for our own. He bought me the most beautiful earrings, slipping them to me in secret lest his curious friends catch him out. Strange that he should fear ridicule when it was clear his classmates were envious – those days and those schools were slower when it came to affairs of the heart.

I still have the earrings today, rarely worn, seldom leaving the little cardboard box in which they came. I take them out from time to time and smile at what was, think of the snow and the ski lift and wonder how the city looks now, tortured by war and no doubt crumbling into the sea. Perhaps it, too, needs scaffold to keep it standing.

In London the future seemed bright – that we would continue unchecked was so certain. Back in our respective schools, we spoke often, wrote daily and were determined

to make our love last. Not once did I think we might fail, never had I prepared myself for the letter the house-mistress brought one chill October afternoon. I tested my resolve by leaving it unopened on the bed while I busied myself with chores. But the anticipation soon burnt too much. I sliced it open, careful not to damage the envelope, and seized those joyful pages. I can picture myself now, night-dress crisply ironed, lying on my front on the bed with my ankles crossed behind me in the air.

This was to be the letter in which his love would be revealed, emerging as words from the dusty silence of Egypt – I was sure of it. I had made my own feelings clear, thrusting my young heart into his path so that he might be forced to take notice. As I held the page to my lips, I could see him sat at his desk, feigning an industrious prep hour while instead conjuring poems for me. Not once did it occur to me that this beauty might end.

And yet there, on that page, it collapsed. Afraid of the unbridled intensity, he had fled my affections and swaddled his rebuff in a wealth of conflicting excuses. Naturally, at the time, I was certain I would never recover.

When we were together again it was different. *She* had entered his life, a girl with whom I could never compete. Several years his senior, she could offer to teach, while I could but beg to learn. Foreign and brimming with mystery, she could be his Egypt while I would always be London. Of course, I saw her in passing. I watched the way they were together. I imagined his hand in mine as they waved their goodnights then departed for bed and all those things I envied. I would lay awake through the stifling darkness, daring to imagine them loving, crying as I pictured that look in his eye – the look I had thought was only for me.

The nightmare continued for years, spanning a far greater distance than that between our schools, and he and I grew apart once more. We retreated to our dens and the exciting lives within, spending fewer and fewer hours together beyond the usual festivities. Our letters grew intermittent, our words turning inward and concerning only ourselves. With time, our lives became mysteries once more as I buried my love in the sand.

At eighteen I was engaged, wrapped in another man's love so tightly I could scarce take a breath. There can be no doubt I adored him – with emotions like mine these things are easily come by. What staggers me now is how things might have turned out, how different my life would have been. After all, I don't even know the boy now. I no longer remember his birthday and often misplace even his name. And yet, back then, I was so clearly convinced. If only I kept some species of diary. Perhaps, with its help, I might understand my feelings for the stranger I might well have married.

When I announced my engagement, *his* only response was 'Why?' No heartfelt congratulations; no shock, or demand that I drop all this nonsense at once, just the sincerest and shortest of questions. It threw me completely and the engagement promptly collapsed.

As I sat in that small Camden pub, watching him fight for the bar, I imagined him stood at the altar, pledging his devotion to another while I struggled to hold back the tears, knowing it was all irrevocably changed. Would I shout my objections? Or would I simply brave the silence, cursing myself for being too late, for leaving my love to the dust? Could I taint his imminent marriage with thoughts of what might have been, ruin what could be perfection with the strangling weeds of doubt? No. As he fetched us drinks on that dull

April night, I promised myself that I wouldn't. I would act in advance of that day, or leave him to the love he had found. To do otherwise would be utterly selfish.

But as for when in advance I might act, I was lost. With its myriad of accompanying problems, our love would perish on all but the most fertile of grounds. That we were never simultaneously without partners was one thing; that we now lived in different cities made it worse. We would have to draw closer for my hopes to become a reality. How else might our affinity and affection take root and come to full bloom?

University saw him shake off one great love only to become embroiled in another, still deeper, affair. For the first time I was truly fearful that my deadline might be at hand, yet never did I see them apart. Rarely did they visit London, the city of our birth, and rarely did I read his words or hear his voice. And all the while, as my hopes waned, my adoration swelled. His successes were mounting and his wisdom shone forward into adulthood.

I, for my part, busied myself at home. I learned a trade I loved while developing the artistic talent he had never tired of grooming. By the time he returned, I was the capable manager of a suave suburban restaurant with commendations from all the best sources. I was on the verge of self-employment, hard at work on a business plan that would bring me a place of my own, a riverside eatery that would indulge my artistic leanings. Investment was a footstep away; success, it seemed, would require nothing but hard work and diligence, and the future was no longer a pipe dream. Never before had I felt such ambition; never before had I been so convinced I'd been right to forsake academia.

And then, at last, he returned. The three year romance now deceased, he was filled with a new lease of life, an exuberance to which I had never before been treated. He spoke for the first time of his lover's admitted jealousy, of her fear of my humble influence and the way she had kept him from home. He told me how much he had missed me, that he was determined to make up the years. He rebuilt my heart in a week.

We devoted countless hours to rejuvenating our past. We drank wine to the rolling of years and laughed at the dubious fashions to which we had subjected ourselves through a decade of twee self-invention. We sifted through the remnants of relationships gone sour, picked morbidly at life's fickle ironies, and let night after night trickle by as we spoke of regrets though we claimed we had none.

But not once did we mention that ship; not once did we touch and not once did I fall into those welcoming eyes. The fourteen year-old girl was gone. Ten years on, I knew the risks all too well. To open up now was to risk losing everything, from history to family to new-found closeness. I wondered often if it would still be worth it; would I cast it all aside for a moment's warm embrace, a single fevered kiss or a night of all-consuming passion? Would I take a leaf from a friend who had confronted her parents with the existence of her non-Moslem lover, trusting in the path of true love to keep her family together? Or would fear of losing it all overcome me, and return me to the desert once more?

Taking soulless refuge in my femininity, I handed the baton to him. Afraid that to confess would leave me disowned, I sought instead to turn the tables, to have him profess love for me. For a year I was to be disappointed. He dallied his way through a series of empty encounters to which I could only bear witness – though, at times, I mocked friendship by encouraging him to greater success.

It was a painful year and one I felt loathe to repeat, forced as I was to watch again and again as he pressed his silken lips to another. The fever that had burned within me for

over a decade grew more furious with every coupling. My jealousy sharpened, whetted by the sheer physicality of it all, the satyric parody of love I saw before me. How I hated to watch him scanning the women while we danced, how I wanted to grasp that head and insist those eyes were for me. 'Look no further,' I longed to scream over the thumping music. 'All you need is here.'

And one night I almost did. One cold winter's night, as my mind clouded over with shocking sincerity, I dropped the stone that soon became an avalanche. Such a small compliment it seemed at the time, an innocent call for attention that soon made a fool of my silence. But my admission to pangs of jealousy fell on ears all too wise to flippancy.

The months that followed were painful. As we grew steadily more aware of each other's feelings, the sense of despondency deepened. It seemed both of us wished I hadn't said those words, opened Pandora's awful box and placed our happiness in jeopardy. Perhaps we should have continued in silence, neither of us speaking our mind for fear of upsetting the delicate balance. Perhaps we should have left the Sphinx her scaffold, not swept it from her and cast her at the mercy of the wild desert winds. Perhaps we should never have strayed into Egypt at all. Perhaps then we would never have realised that our beloved pyramids were nothing but glorious monuments to an elusive past. We might never have gone in search of something deeper, the forbidden magic that lay beneath the desert's shifting sands. I remember thinking then that we should have been content in the classroom, learning our hieroglyphs and the names of long dead pharaohs. Perhaps, but I for one would never have been content in the drizzly confines of London, convinced as I was that the magic of Egypt was real and that the Sphinx could stand on her own.

He left England at the first sign of spring, pre-empting secondment with a brief tour of Asia. He wrote to me almost constantly and I found my eyes opening with his. The lure of distant cultures coiled about my heart with the tantalising warmth of that last fateful trip abroad. Once more the mysteries beckoned. I found myself aching to join him, to walk by his side through some distant paradise, sharing the adventures about which he wrote in such ludicrous and beautiful detail. From the saddhus of deepest India to the red-robed boy-monks on the streets of Rangoon; from the mountain temples of Kashmir to the swamp-mosques of Kalimantan, I was with him at every breath. And when the call finally came to join him, my bag had been packed for months.

It was to be only an extended holiday, a respite from the rigours of home, a last big outing before the future began, a future of careers and industry, commitment and devotion to duty. It was a reunion, a chance to see a world I had far too long neglected, to be reunited with a distant being I had never ceased to love.

That we both had great hopes was clear. That we appreciated the risk and belittled the importance of what we were doing was almost laughably so. The repeated warnings to ourselves and each other not to overestimate the outcome – not to assume that, after all this time apart, our natural affinity would pave the way to perfection – all were for nothing. How could either of us have hoped to dissuade ourselves that fate was on our side? What could either of us have seen but the helpful hand of destiny, guiding us through ten years of bazaars and blinding sand storms toward a common goal?

When I arrived at dawn in a numbingly crowded airport, I was that schoolgirl once more. Eleven years of progress had left me in an instant, left me to the whorls of romantic chaos that swept me through the masses with barely a thought for my luggage.

And, of course, he was there to meet me – far thinner than before and different in many ways, but brandishing the same infectious smile as the day we had waved goodbye. There was no room in that smile for taking things slowly, for a sensible approach to our reunion. There was no room in that smile for anything short of abandonment.

And so it was to be. Away from the prying eyes of our own invasive culture, here we were able to explore our love with a fresh and blameless perspective. Here we were free to indulge ourselves without fear of recrimination in a place where past and future were ours to create.

Naturally it was awkward at first, our senses battling with the confusion of lust and long-standing kinship. It was days before things became comfortable, before we could make love in the light and go naked for unfettered eyes. That first uneasy night, when our hands broke a hundred taboos and our minds fought with schooling and reason... A flood of childhood memories, visions of exploring our awakening bodies in the forbidden playground of our parents' spacious bed. Happy times, before the great wrench of puberty that stole our infant closeness and made near strangers of us through school and into our teens.

From that moment on, I was desperate to have it be more. As the weeks drew on, I wished they were years, so determined was I to forge this into the greatest of bonds, the strongest and most enviable of alliances. I longed to furnish our new acquaintances with elaborate stories, to convince them our union had spanned that tumultuous decade, that there had been no other man in my life, nor woman in his – that, as I'd felt true at the time, we had surrendered our virginities to each other, shared our first kiss and never spared a thought for another. And yet, in my heart, I knew I was wrong – that I would, in a sense, be belittling the truth.

In time the years did pass by, our love only deepening, our tolerance for each other's faults growing stronger with each confrontation. We were accepted, as I had wanted, as one of life's great couples, destined since birth and marked for unshakeable happiness. This was the love I had dreamed of, the timeless mystery and eternal resilience of which the Sphinx was born – with which she taunts the sweating scaffolders as she basks unaided in the sun. We had no need of fiction to qualify our union, no need of tales to convince the world of our devotion. We were the perfect couple, the envy of all and immune to the strongest temptation.

We made our new life there, burying the past and discarding worthless memories. We forged lives of boundless vision and dreams that always came true. Ours was the beginning and end, the culmination of over a decade of procrastination.

And it was into this new world that we brought our ambitions, his the need to sculpt, mine the burning desire to pass my days as both artist and restaurateur. Success was far from inevitable – it took more than hard work and diligence – but the future was no longer a pipe dream. Never before had I felt such contentment; never before had I been so convinced that I'd been right to forsake the approval of others.

It is four months now since we left that world, placing our lives there on hold while we travel together once more. Four months since we set out to find a new Egypt, to stir up the sands once more. A day out of Delhi and I am watching the shadow of the Sphinx as it glides across the off-white towers of the beautiful Taj Mahal.

Squinting through the blazing sun of a blistering Indian summer, I place my hand in his and recall the teenage loneliness of that bus ride from Port Said to Giza. I turn to him and smile, squeezing his fingers tightly between my own. 'Together again,' I want to say. 'Allied as never before. And together we walk through the desert: brother and sister as one.'