

Wednesday, August 13, 6:52 PM local time, Aswan.

To the tune of *Midnight Train to Georgia*

*I'm leaving (leaving)*

*On a midnight train to Cairo (leaving on a midnight train)*

*Sure found out the hard way, buses don't always come through*

*(ah ah ah ah ah ah)*

*So I'm putting both my bags*

*On a midnight train to Cairo (going on a midnight train)*

*I'd rather be poor in New York*

*Than live a rich man in Aswan*

*(poor, York, not in Aswan)*

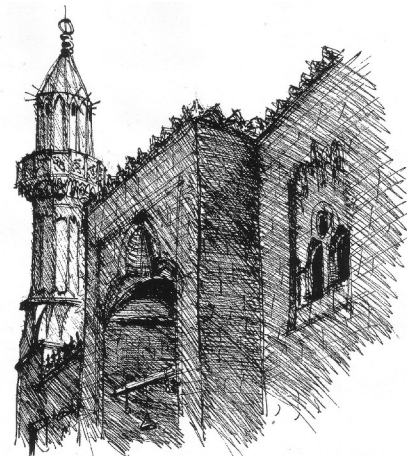
*All aboard (all aboard) All aboard (all aboard) All aboard (all aboard)*

Actually my train is supposed to leave at 8:00 PM.

That was the last entry in my journal before it happened.

I bought a second-class train ticket from Aswan to Cairo. I knew it would not be in a semi-private couchette. It would be better than the cattle cars full of people I had seen some of the destitute poor travel in. I was expecting a European style cabin couch. So when the train arrived and it was an open coach crammed full of people I changed my strategy.

Normally when I travel I disperse important papers and money on my body and bags so any single loss would not result in a disaster. But realizing I was going to be in a crowded coach for 20 hours with my bags on a rack overhead, while I slept, I decided to put my passport, my credit cards, my travelers checks and the bulk of my cash in a single leather travel fold in my front jeans pocket. It bulged and dug into my hip as I tried to sleep, but I knew someone on the train would have to cut off my leg to get it. If they grabbed a bag off the rack they would get my clothes, my camera and unfortunately my sketchbook, but I could risk that.



*A mosque in Cairo near the Midan Opera*

At that point in the trip I was reading my **Bible**. I was enjoying the context of the original Pentateuch. Later in my journal I review the books describing **Genesis** as “a non-stop laugh riot with Abraham leading the zany bunch.” And how in **Judges** and 2 books of **Samuel** you have the making of a good Sam Peckinpah movie. When one sees the word Beersheba both in the Bible and as an exit sign on a highway ramp it draws together epochs. An Egyptian on the train asked me what I was reading. I

showed him. He was not familiar with it so I explained it was the Christian Koran. He was still perplexed.

Twenty hours later, we arrived in Cairo and a frantic exodus from the train began. People surged off the train and on the train simultaneously, noisily yelling and tossing bags overhead like a beach ball at a football game.

I held tightly to my bags, and worked my way through the horde intending to find a quiet spot within the station to rearrange my things before I left the station. I ended up on the far side of the station near where tracks enter a barren concrete neighborhood. I realized I needed to turn around and walk back. On my way back, a friendly Egyptian stopped me and pointed to a wad of dog crap on my left pant leg. I was wondering how it got there and as I reached down to set my bags and get some tissues; he started swatting the poop off. I was saying “no thank you” but he insisted on helping. The offending feces gone, we both walked away in different directions. I turned to thank him. He nodded hesitantly. I turned toward the station. Two steps later my left leg felt funny. There was no leather fold, no cash, passport, no credit cards, no cash, and no travelers’ checks. I turned around again and he was gone.

I ran up and down local streets but there was no sign of him. I had about 5 Egyptian Pounds in my other pocket. USA television commercials in that era showed people in trouble going directly to American Express. I was reacting with an adrenalin rush of instinct and intellect. Theft – go to American Express. “American” is right in the name!!! And nothing I had seen made me inclined to trust Egyptian Police. I knew there was an American Express office at the Cairo Hilton across the Tahrir Square from the Cleopatra.

It was Thursday evening about 5 PM and I knew I needed to get there quickly. I got a cab and negotiated my price to within my means. The American Express office was about to close but they were very helpful. Only they could do nothing until I got a police report from the Tourist Police. They offered to get me a taxi but I told them I had no more money and asked for directions. They took me to the concierge of the Hotel who paid for the taxi to take me.

I sat there on the steps of the tourist police station in Cairo, with no money, no travelers’ checks, no passport, no credit cards and no concept of what to do next. Where would I sleep; how would I eat and how would I get back home.

I had time to think and wonder because the sergeant would not be there until 10 PM. I felt stupid, a veteran New Yorker taken by a scam pick pocket. In my journal I wrote as I waited that I knew I should be patient, but I wanted to solve the problem right away... and then get home. I realized that if my one bag were not lost by the airline, I would have been back in Cairo a day earlier and may have missed the pickpocket completely. I worked out scenarios where I might get back to see Israel, at least most of what I wanted to see. I imagined the comfort of

being in the arms of my ex-girlfriend. I thought through all sorts of things but primarily if this sergeant doesn't show up tonight, where would I sleep and how would get food?

I did have the voucher for one night at the Cleopatra. I would check in and not check out. They served breakfast there. So that was some food. When the sergeant came I reported what happened. He shook his head. They translated a report in to Arabic and had me sign. Hmm. Am I admitting to something that will get me into a prison in Turkey? Hopefully not.

From there I went and checked in the hotel. They wanted to see a credit card but I insisted that the voucher for one more night was sufficient. I began to refine my aggressive begging technique. I got in.

The next morning, Friday August 15<sup>th</sup>, I savored my breakfast and went to another American Express Office even closer that at the Hilton. I showed them the police report and fortunately I had the stubs for the traveler's checks (about \$300) and cancelled my card. They were helpful until the point that I had to show them some ID. I had no ID. No ID, no card or refunded checks. I would have to go to the American Consulate, to get ID. But because of some sort of Moslem Festival, it was closed until Tuesday! There was no way I would get back to Israel see anything. I talked American Express out of \$50 worth of traveler checks, just so I could survive until Tuesday. Even if I was not who I said I was, the real Michael Molinelli would still not be hurt too much. I showed them the police report again.

I went to the Consulate to speak with the emergency officer. He was not there and could not respond. Everyone was off for the weekend and there had been a fatal car accident involving an American Tourist. A lower attaché asked me a few questions to prove I was an American. I told him my passport says I was born in Hackensack, but since both my parents were from NY and they moved back to NY when I was two months old, I consider myself a New Yorker born in exhale. That bit of wit was enough proof and he produced a letter saying he believed I was an American. "Come back on Tuesday."

I went about finding another place to cash the traveler checks. Banks were out of the question without ID. I feigned interest in a bus tour to Sakara to get me into a store of souvenirs and knick-knacks. I briefly explained to the store keep that I had only a travelers check, but no ID. I showed him the police report and naively asked, "Would you like to exchange American dollars?"

We bartered over a small cup of tea. He would not give me \$50 worth Egyptian pounds; I would have to buy something. I offered to buy a bottle of essence of flower. Two bottles, he said. Okay two bottles but for a smaller price. Deal. He showed me some bad travelers checks he had pinned to the wall. He was nervous that I was ripping him off.

With 70 Egyptian pounds, I planned the rest of my weekend. Set aside money for passport photos, some food. Maybe I could take a bus to Sakara to kill some time? Yes, that would cost me only 30 pounds for all day. Eating was easy since I got accustomed to street food. For 40 piaster I could get a hot sausage sandwich with green peppers and pickles and a hot paste that seared my mouth. It hit my colon like depth charges, so stay close to the hotel. There was also a lamb, tomato and onion sandwich with other unidentified things on it. I could splurge and spend a whole Egyptian pound (60 cents) for a meal if I felt like it.

I called my Mom at an international public phone - you give them the number and wait for them to call you into a booth. (Remember this was in an age before cell phones and international ATMs.) I told Mom what had happened and asked her to cancel my Visa credit card. I told her I was okay and I would know more on Tuesday.

I did not eat dinner at the Hotel because I did not want to aggravate the suspicious desk clerk. On Saturday morning, one day beyond my voucher, he asked me to pay for the night. I showed him the police report and explained that I would get my credit card on Tuesday after the Consulate opened. I showed him the letter that said they thought I was an American. Those two documents and some more aggressive begging got me a room until Tuesday morning. I hoped nothing else would go wrong.

The trip was obviously getting to me as my journal entries show:

Saturday, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 3:34 PM, Cairo

I am sitting here, in the shade, outside the Citadel and I have come to another of my pedantic rash generalizations.

What this country needs is alcohol and severe amounts of it. It might take the edge off their lifestyle and let them mellow out a bit. True, I personally embrace a lifestyle which is free from drunkenness and generally free from alcohol, the exception is wine with dinner, but I have never said its is for everyone and this society is proof of that.

Get 10 or 20 Egyptians in the shade and they they'll start yelling about something. It may be harmless but it sounds sinister in Arabic. The only time I've seen more than 20 Egyptians in the shade and not arguing was in the Mosque and then they were probably asking for power to smite the infidels.

If the Egyptians would just booze it up a bit, if Akmed and Zem would tie one on now and then, maybe they wouldn't be so militant. Not that it works for Ireland, but here it would be a start.

Sunday, August 17<sup>th</sup>, 5:41 PM, Room at the Cleopatra Hotel in Cairo

Four days in Cairo. Four days. Everyday I'm here Akmed is out there. Everyday I get softer, Akmed gets sharper. Sure, I've been back to the United States, but I'm back here waiting to be assigned, Four days in Cairo.

Apocalypse Nile.

Monday, August 18<sup>th</sup>, Noon, Old Cairo

The guidebook said that the Coptic Museum has the finest collection of Coptic Art in the world. This I do not doubt. What the guidebook fails to mention is that Coptic Art is deservedly undistinguished. In all manner of their art they are exceeded by other civilizations.

- In architecture - the Byzantines
- In bas-reliefs - the (*ancient*) Egyptians
- In sculpture - the Romans
- In pottery – the Greeks
- In woodwork – their Islamic neighbors
- In household utensils – F. W. Woolworths

It is good that someone bothered to collect all this stuff. It is a waste of time to see it. Of one has precious few days in Cairo don't bother. If you have time to kill, then make the trip.

My, I'm critical today.

On Tuesday stuff started happening. Good stuff. I was on line at the American Consular office at 8:30. I filled out the form and waited. Their computers were down and they could not verify who I was. Some time passed and they made up my passport anyway. But they wanted \$40 and I didn't have enough money. They offered to hold a watch or something while I took my passport to go get the money. I handed over my sketchbook. I told them this was the reason I came to Egypt and I was happy that only my money was taken, not this. They held it while I went to American Express and got my traveler's checks refunded. My card had my name misspelled so I had to come back later. I went back to the Consulate and paid my \$40. (They liked the sketches.) I also went to the Cairo Hilton and tried to pay the concierge for the taxi ride a few days before. They refused to take the money.

Next I had to get an exit visa to get out of the country. The Mogamma office building was also close to the main square at Tahrir. It is an official Egyptian Government building so I did not expect the relative efficiency of the American institutions like the American Consulate. Even the American Express office had

my revised card in just under an hour. I showed the card to the clerk at the Hotel who sighed relief. My journal describes the next step in the process.

Tuesday August 19<sup>th</sup>, 12:15 PM, Cairo

To get my exit visa, an information clerk had me pay 5 pounds Egyptian for a form I did not need. I gave the guy at the window the police report and he wanted me to get a photocopy and told me to come back in one hour.

The Egyptians are fond of telling you to come back in one hour when they are no longer working their shift. That way, they don't have to do the involved task. It happened to me at train station, with different telephone operators when I was trying to call the USA, and now at the Central Government Building.

Tuesday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2:23 PM, Cairo

LOGJAM. Just as I anticipated, getting an exit visa is not so simple. I went through about eight different rooms and lines with little pieces of paper. Whenever you enter a room there are about a half a dozen or so men sitting around a desk, not doing anything. Only one man is working and he is being harassed and is harassing eight people at once. And then some Egyptian steps in front of you, as if he has a reason to get through, and you find out it was just to butt in front of you. Then four more Egyptians come and yell something to the one guy working, who's flipping through a large book of lists while the rest of the men do nothing. Not even talk to each other. They just stare and sit there with reams of paper and binders in front of them.

In the last room I finally get handed back a sheet of paper in Arabic and they tell me nothing. So I ask what next and I am told come back in three days as if I should have known. So I say my flight leaves Thursday and he said okay come back Thursday and I say it leaves Thursday 8:00 AM and he says go see "The Colonel."

(My journal does not note that I had stepped up my aggressive begging technique to outright lying. I had no plane ticket, but I was trying to create a sense of urgency.)

The subtleness of this conversation is the result of the kind interpretations of one of the Egyptians who was also going through this and told me, "We have to put up with this nonsense all the time."

So I go to the next office (and they are all decorated a la "The Honeymooners") and I explain the situation to someone called "The

Colonel” who is dressed like a bartender in Queens and he says comeback tomorrow at 10:00. He didn’t write anything down. Whatever has to happen I hope it happens.

I called home to tell Mom, I was making progress and expected to leave on Thursday. I was trying to give her good news. She told me not to worry that she had cancelled my American Express card. “What!!!!” I yelled at her. “I just spent 5 days trying to get it back!!!” She realized that she misspoke and had canceled the Visa card. But I guess I let my exasperation out on her.

I went immediately to buy the airline ticket with that American Express card. The comfort and ease of transaction in the TWA was great relief. Computers are wonderful things. I noticed the American run companies featured many women working, all of whom had great wonderful eyes and in their western dress were very attractive, even without ankles. But as I was trying to get out of the country, I would not get distracted.

Wednesday, August 20<sup>th</sup>, 9:25 AM Cairo

Back here at the Mogamma office building amongst a frenzy of officials and paper and applicants. Each step costs me more money, 2 pounds here, 30 pounds there. I’ve gotten my application stamped by three more people which brings our total to about eight. The last thing that happened is that I went into an office, the commander signed the paper and clapped his hands twice and a white outfitted soldier, with old black boots, showed up and took the receipt. That was twenty minutes ago. We’ll see what happens now.

Wednesday, August 20<sup>th</sup>, Noon, Cairo

Well I finished all that business today at 10:00 and while I should be grateful it is over I can’t imagine what was done today could not have been done yesterday.

But I am all set to leave. I briefly took in the Museum of Islamic Art and it was interesting. It is strange that the polyhedral patterns of their stone and woodwork never made it their carpets which stayed very Persian. I am back at Felfela (*a restaurant*) for some fried beanballs for lunch. It is heavily decorated in a clean village style with bamboo and weavings and live cats. It’s wonderful but bring your own napkin. They don’t seem to give them to anyone.

Now I can relax and enjoy Cairo one more afternoon. Places are so much nicer when you can leave them.

Thursday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 7:30 AM Cairo Airport.

*To the tune of Marrakesh Express by Crosby Stills and Nash*

*Don't you know we're riding on American Express  
Don't you know we're riding on American Express  
They're taking us to 'merica  
All aboard the plane  
All aboard the plane.*

This return trip is brought to you by the two most gorgeous and valuable things you can have on a trip abroad: An American Passport and An American Express Card.

Thursday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 8:03 PM White Plains.

Home.



*The Nile in Cairo*