

Here But Not Here

Frank really wanted to ride the tram. He wanted to experience Egypt like an Egyptian. He knew it headed west from San Stefano and that if he used Google maps on his iPhone, he'd generally know where to get off. The 25 piastre price was laughable to him; where he came from there was nothing which cost a nickel; taxes on a one-dollar purchase were a nickel; twenty-five piasters was four cents. He knew enough not to board the front car with all the women. He stood near the ticket taker. He drew stares on the rattily cars.

A young man in business attire asked him where he was from. "America," he answered, knowing more than one compatriot who would hesitate to tell. America, so far away now, now now dusting the streets at his home, America, so much to him boiled down to a word. "I have an uncle in Arizona," said the Egyptian in accented English, "my grandmother is there too." A tree branch scraped the side of the tram and the brakes screeched the metal beast to a stop. "What place?" Frank asked him.

"Phoenix," the man answered, tapping his heart in an endearing gesture, "Ma ah salakeum."

Frank tapped his iPhone and saw he had a ways to go. Plastic shopping bags cluttered the bushes and a scruffy cat slouched on a concrete sill. The famous Bibliotheca Alexandria, the famous library of Alexandria, was rebuilt in recent years, Frank knew, and it recalled the ancient Library of Alexandria, which once stood in this ancient city by the sea. Here, but not here, Frank thought. Here, but not here. Like the ancient Pharos of Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, now just an etching on a vase, a description in a manuscript, measurements described in some document. It was, it isn't. Not there but still impresses.

His iPhone told him he was near. He hopped off the tram in an area that looked very much like a university. He crossed the street, a black and yellow Lada rattrap taxi veering eerily close. He padded up the street and look a left, wandering past the Faculty of Arts, detoured by a massive dug up sidewalk, past chatting scarfed women, an old man on a tree root sipping tea. A massive tilted concrete edge tilted above, letters in a myriad of scripts etched in its surface. "Bibliotheca Alexandria," he knew. In the courtyard a bust of Alexander the Great topped a pedestal, students and young mothers, young boys and schoolchildren, a party atmosphere, couples snuggling on a retaining wall. The massive court faced the east bay, the dark silhouette of Qutbay off in the distance, the locale for the Pharos, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, here but not here.

A bearded young man waved the black Islamic flag on the steps facing The Corniche, the traffic-packed ten lane highway, bordering el Bahr el Montawaset, the Mediterranean, stunningly blue. The golden shore and jet blue sea contrasted with the honking traffic and buzzing highway. The library called.

He plopped his fanny pack onto a familiar conveyor belt and came through the turnstile. Beyond, he stopped, looking into the cavernous room, looming into shadows, like a huge sports arena tilted on its side, readers at study carrels, players on the field, tiny scribblers and keyboard tappers beneath a roof overarching.

Frank wandered the stacks, wondering if the books were by subject or by language, so many titles in French, shelf upon shelf in Arabic, text read from right to left, from what to him was back to front. Lots of texts in English. He pulled a tour guide to Petra in Jordan and pulled up to a table to read, noting that he'd like to go, remarking that he'd only known about it from an Indiana Jones

movie, such an odd introduction to an ancient shrine. He left the book on the table and stepped up a few levels, noting the stack of flashing hard drives behind glass, a collaborative effort with a San Francisco tech firm to chronicle every web page ever created. Frank thought of web sites he once used like Genie, an early Facebook, or his membership in America Online. Library patrons tapped on Smartphones or clicked on web pages. He made his way up the steps and, like he was prone to do, pulled a picture book, this one Pictorial History of the Holocaust. He was a little surprised to see the book there; somehow he thought texts on that Jewish nightmare wouldn't be in the library. He flipped through the pages and stopped at a page on the Warsaw ghetto, two young children starving on the street. From that picture of the children, he flashed on the wars between Egypt and Israel, the battles highlighted on the news in his youth, his sentiments clearly pro Israel. He looked up from the book and noted a young attendant in the library, pushing a book cart, clean shirted, a kind smile, and he thought about the young Egyptians so long ago, killed and wounded, the young Israeli soldiers, semi automatic weapons barking at shapes in the desert, mothers on both sides, home weeping with fear, or for too many, with the nightmare of their precious child lost: futility, the tragedies, struggles, repeated.

He reshelved the book. Two library workers from a table looked up. He exited and found his way to the Antiquities Museum below, Roman statues gleaming white in spotlights. He studied the clothing of a centurion, the pleated kilt, big belt, shield. Romans; they traveled so far, influenced so many, but like so many, here, but not here.

He descended to the mummies; several serenely laid out in glass cases. The "No Photos" sign glared from a pillar as he stared at the dental work of some ancient septuagenarian, wrapped in cloth. He watched the movie on the ancient practice and wondered if the Pharonic Egyptians weren't as devout as we make them out to be, remembering the secular Christmases at home, the Muslims drinking beer. All the mummifiers "Even I shall die," Frank thought, "Even I."

He walked up to the Coptic Christian section of the museum, feeling he knew so little, and moved into the Islamic part, knowing that Islam, so much a part of the Egyptian soul, is by an Egyptian timeline, a relative newcomer. He thought of the Pharonic and Coptic past, the amalgamation of so much, merged, and he thought again of America, itself an amalgamation, so recent, so new, prominent and audacious like a pyramid, a gleaming two centuries new.

He left the library at four, patrons spilling out into the court, lining the garden sills. The sun was low in the west, bright above the high rise apartments; the Mediterranean, the Middle Sea dashed against the shore and he headed home.