

Pat Rahmann

THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS

When they entered Cairo's dimly lit airport shortly before midnight, Lane felt sure they'd done the right thing. Buck had wanted to fly directly to Nairobi and spend the entire four weeks on safari, but she argued that it would be a waste to by-pass so much. "Just think, the pyramids." He was unmoved. "And Madrid. We could see Flamenco and stay at the Palace. It's a cushy old hotel. Dignified, very Spanish," she groped for the persuasive word. "Voluptuous. Really, you'll love it. With me. Please." He relented and indulged her, but two days was all he'd allow for Madrid. And one for Athens—long enough for seafood and the Acropolis. More reluctantly he agreed to a day in Cairo. She had accepted his concessions quite happily. Their plans appealed to her enormously, and she had closed her eyes and imagined retreating back through time and space, through layers of history from Washington to Madrid, Athens, Cairo, and finally the East African Bush. Once she dreamed they were in a grassy place encircled by the high, embracing rim of the crater. There were gazelles there, and predators—all living in lovely, precarious balance and tension under a rhythmically alternating blue to starry sky.

But now they were in Egypt and the only deplaning passengers. That pleased her. "Half-way there," she thought and sat on a suitcase to guard their luggage while Buck took care of the paperwork. It would take time. She didn't mind. She felt wide awake, listening to strange voices, watching the dark faces and milling figures in a vast room that looked more like an abandoned hangar than a building designed for a passenger terminal.

A sweeper moved through the crowd, stirring up a heavy cloud, he brushed close past her drawn-in feet. He was muttering to himself, and she remembered then to count the luggage. It was all there. She looked for Buck and spotted him shaking hands with an airport official. His large, greying head was held up and almost tipped back in an attitude more characteristic of short men than one of his light-heavyweight build. Even without her glasses she could pick out that distinctive carriage at a distance, and when he turned and walked toward her across the wide room she suddenly felt reassured and excited. Travelling with Buck stimulated her, made her feel at once pampered and threatened. Somehow illicit.

They got through the routine confusion of customs, and then a dis-

patcher was loading them into a battered Fiat, pocketing the tip, directing the driver to the Cairo Sheraton, and waving them off into the night. The car proceeded at a steady 20 mph in utter darkness. "Christ, he's driving with no lights." Buck leaned forward to give instructions, but after one flick of head lights and an incomprehensible grunt the driver refused to comply.

"Please," Lane whispered, "don't insist. He doesn't understand. They're so poor. Maybe he wants to save his batteries. Look," she strained her eyes against the flat night, "everything is dark." She thought she could make out an occasional figure along the side of the road, a palm, a dot of light in the distance. She thought she felt the presence of an occasional building, but she wasn't certain and leaned back against Buck's familiar weight as they drove blindly toward Cairo.

In the Sheraton's deserted lobby a sleepy nightclerk informed them that the hotel was full with representatives to The Arab League's Joint Defense Council and he had no record of reservations for them. Buck produced his copy of the reservations, and the matter was settled. The clerk then took orders for breakfast, made arrangements for a car and driver, and explained that the lobby lights were low because of the black-out. "The black-out is due to the situation."

"Oh, of course," Lane said. "How stupid of us not to think of it. You mean because of Israel?"

The clerk looked blank and repeated, "It is necessary, Madame, because of the situation."

At nine their guide was in the lobby. Mr. Alysides was barrel-chested in shiny serge a size too small; his unpressed shirt was held firmly in place by a splendid blaze of paisley tie that swayed forward when he bowed to present his card.

Buck explained that they would be there for just one day and were interested in seeing only the museum and pyramids. No shopping. "No shopping?" Mr. Alysides was stricken. Might they not consider an hour for perfume; it would be a mistake to miss the Sound and Light Show at the Sphinx that evening. "Very special, very artistic."

"Maybe," Buck said, but made no promises.

At the museum they brushed past souvenir vendors waiting in dust-white sun and entered the airless tomb of a building. It was nearly empty of visitors, and unattended treasures were guarded only by loosely banked sandbags. Buck nodded toward them, "Because of the situation." He frowned in mock concern. Lane knew he was going to clip past the entire

collection at an indiscriminating pace, but she wasn't going to stew about it. In Madrid, over lunch, she had declared, "No one, but no one with any sensibility at all can do the Prado in forty-five minutes flat," though she knew he could recall with irritating catalogue precision nearly everything they'd seen. "That's not experiencing art. That's showing off." He had grinned, ordered two very stiff martinis and put a pacifying hand on her thigh. "Let's experience the siesta. That's an important cultural event in Spain."

Now she stood stubbornly in front of a large glass case and forced herself to concentrate on an Anubis flanked statue. Buck and Mr. Alysidi were already disappearing into the next gallery, and she ruffled through her guidebook in search of some explanation, wishing she'd read more before she came. Glancing back up, she realized that someone had joined her in viewing the display. Superimposed on the elaborate arrangement, like a tinted double exposure, was reflected an immensely tall figure in gleaming white robes. To the right of this towering presence, equidistant to her position on the left, was the slight, dark robed figure of a woman holding a child by the hand. The vision of this phantom tableau captured her unaware. The combination held through a dozen soft beats before she made the first tentative motion to move on. She might have been tiptoeing through church in the middle of high Mass, and she saw the ghostly reflection drift silently down the glass case with her, as though they were all being drawn along together, linked by a fine thread. Without speaking or acknowledging one another directly they stayed together then, pausing ritualistically in front of every display, gazing with shy solemnity at each other, at themselves, delicately possessed in transparent overlay against mummied pharaohs and ageless treasures.

As the moments passed, the foolishness of their little game, so formal and so intimate, filled Lane with affectionate calm, and when at last they came to the end of the long gallery, she turned to them directly for the first time. They were radiant. Beautiful. The man especially awed her, and as she looked up into his face, he gestured with a sculptured hand down the corridor to where Buck and Mr. Alysidi were hurrying towards them.

"Ready for the pyramids?" Buck called. At the door Lane looked back and saw her museum companions standing at the end of the hall in a square of light falling from a high window. The man was one protective pace in advance. They looked, she thought, innocently posed like models for an heroic monument or propaganda poster. Out in the blinding sun again she asked Mr. Alysidi who they were. "Tourists," he answered. "Sudanese, I think. Nubians."

The Giza pyramids were massively impressive, and Buck willingly joined her in doing the usual tourist routine. They climbed to the top of Cheops and followed a guide with a Coleman lantern up into an empty crypt, slipping on bat dung, catching their breath against its putrid sweetness, giggling and cursing like kids to view the hieroglyphics of tourist graffiti. Lane distributed lifesavers to little boys, and Buck's film was lifted from his carrying case. They hired camels to ride down to the Sphynx, and she waved and called to him, "Honey, relax. Just let your hips go with the movement."

Mr. Alysids delivered them to the Mina House for a late lunch. Very colonial, very atmospheric they agreed, dining alone under slowly turning fans in a high ceilinged old room. The tables were set with white cloths and cut marigolds, but in contrast to these fresh details their waiter's caftan was heavily soiled. "That's not just yesterday's lunch, you know." Buck eyed the greasy sleeve and cracked fingernails busy with another clattering change of cutlery.

"Oh, don't be so squeamish." The revulsion on his face annoyed her. She chewed vigorously, swallowing the last bite of stone-cold chop. She recrossed her legs and motioned for him to look at the maitre d'. Buck glanced at the old man just as he was wiping sunken, watery eyes with a napkin he kept folded over one arm.

"Syphilis," Lane whispered dramatically and rearranged her own napkin. "Nothing offends me. Nothing really shocks me except unkindness or cruelty." She declared this as though it were an audacious summation of her own philosophy, though she knew perfectly well that it was a line from some Tennessee Williams play.

"Well, you can eat anything. I'll hand you that."

"True," she agreed and took a large spoonful of gelatinous dessert. It was pleasantly acid. "Except coke and cheap candy. I loath trash. It ruins the teeth," she laughed, consciously revealing her own small perfect mouth and pointed tongue for him.

"Come on. I'll buy you some perfume. The rake-off will make Alysids happy as hell."

Over miniature cups of gritty coffee the proprietor of the Shahinaz Palace Parfumerie ceremoniously marked Lane's bare arms with a series of heavy essences. "One should not hurry this," he instructed. "It is like tasting fine wine in your country. One must clear the palate, so to speak, before proceeding." It was true, but Lane having abandoned herself to the profusion of fragrances, simply selected the one this connoisseur seemed most reverent about. "Ah, of course, Madame. 'Secret of the Desert' for you."

His fleshy lids lowered, he nearly moaned. "The most sensuous, the most Arabian of perfumes. An unusual choice for an American, very unusual." His dreamy, old man's eyes looked with child-like candor into Buck's amused face. "You are a fortunate man to have a woman of such tastes."

In the car she waited for Alysids to settle behind the wheel and launch into his weary monologue before she turned her face up to Buck's and ran her tongue quickly into his mouth. "Tell me," she whispered. He put his lips to her ear, and she listened and laughed softly. "Oh, you are vile. You are a vile and fortunate man." He sought her tongue then and held it for a moment until she pushed him away to glance at Alysids's back. "More," she prompted. He murmured again, and she burst into such helpless, wild laughter that Alysids paused in the middle of his version of the Blue Mosque's history and forgot what he was saying.

Traffic thinned as they came out onto a palm-lined boulevard bordering the Nile. They heard a siren. The warning drew closer, and through the rear window they saw an ambulance lurching through the traffic backing up behind them. The hunched white vehicle bumped up on the sidewalk to pass, scattering pedestrians like pigeons in its path.

In minutes their own car pulled abreast of the hotel but was blocked by police from entering the circular driveway. The ambulance hid the entrance. There was commotion there. Lane recognized the desk clerk start toward them. He shouted in Arabic to Alysids, then seeing Buck, called in English, "Go around. You cannot enter here. Go around." He motioned widely, indicating the rear of the hotel. But now they were hemmed in from behind by a personnel carrier. Across the street a crowd dispersed suddenly; explosively separating, men and boys dodged between slowing traffic, shouting to others as they ran. In an instant more poured from alleys and side streets into the wide avenue as though released from a breaking dam. Police leaped from trucks.

Buck and Lane watched in uncomprehending, nonplussed distraction as the scene slowed and developed in the slanting sun like bleached clips from a half remembered documentary. Police formed lines, the crowd filled in, swelling into a sea of white rags, surging and casting up contorted faces and flailing arms. Now the mob broke, scattered, regrouped and rushed again into the police cordon, cutting the air with shrieks that covered a growing din of chanting voices and pounding feet from behind.

"What's wrong? Why are they doing that?" Lane's voice sounded distant in her own ears. Alysids, if he heard her questions at all, didn't acknowledge them; instead he turned with an air of injured dignity and announced, as though he were about to conduct them on another leg of sightseeing, that they would please follow him.

He opened his door and stepped into the street with heavy grace. Three yards away police lashing with heavy leather straps held the violence before them like some lavish diversion. Alysia opened Lane's door. Gravely she gave him her hand, pausing to register the bizarre spectacle before them once more in dazed, stop-frame perception. She felt light-headed as though sounds were coming to her through an echo chamber. Glass shattered nearby. Shots cracked. Tens of hundreds of feet drummed steadily behind the uneven hysteria, so immediate, so close. And arching over all rang the high, thin wail of Arab women.

Buck and Lane paced together behind Alysia's broad-shouldered portliness, eyes ahead, following his decorous example almost as if it might be rude to notice anything out of the ordinary. They entered the building through the fetid kitchen entranceway where all pretense of business as usual had ceased. Simmering pots were left unattended, and only two kitchen helpers remained hovering at their sinks.

"Ask them what's happened," Lane let out her breath. She wanted to know. Now. Offended, Alysia lowered his voice for the questioning, then clearing his voice announced as though he were giving the time, "Someone has been shot. This way please." He resumed his mission and escorted them through a tiled hall where they skirted broken glass and splashed whiskey left where it has been dropped.

In the lobby a woman was sobbing. Though hidden by an encirclement of a dozen or more men, she threw her anguish out over them beseeching the room at large in demented rage. The men closed tighter around her, fumbling to cover her hysteria like so many fingers pressed against a severed artery. Her voice was not stanchied. The group lurched, recovered its collective footing, and with sudden purpose started moving towards the elevators.

Gazing past this small drama, Alysia might have been humming. An annoyed twitch flicked along Buck's jaw, but Lane emerged from her initial numbed reaction with nervous agitation. "What is she saying? Tell me," she demanded.

"She says they killed her husband," Alysia delivered the information reluctantly, "and no one tried to stop them. She says no one tried to help her husband."

Bewildered, Lane looked around the lobby. It was filled, though not crowded, with members of the various delegations to the Joint Defense League, some in Arab dress, others in the dark suits that are standard uniforms for diplomats the world over. There were some police and military officials, hotel personnel, reporters, and at least one photographer. Elevator doors slid shut, cutting off the widow's voice. A flash bulb popped, and

Lane saw near the entrance green jacketed bell boys standing in a circle, their arms linked together, facing out around the body of a man lying just inside the shattered glass door. He was straight on his back—buttoned, combed, neatly composed against an oval red stain. She glanced there, then kept her eyes up and away from the floor.

Buck and Alysia were already making plans as they retreated toward the relative quiet at the opposite end of the room. "You could dine at El Awal, very first class, or Shephards, and still have time for the Sound and Light Show," Alysia was suggesting for the second time.

Since the widow's removal only one other woman besides Lane remained in the lobby. Though clearly mid-eastern, she was dressed in slacks and sweater, her high, pointed breasts assertive through thin knit. She stood apart from the milling male spectators watching the haphazard, somewhat excited beginnings of official procedures and apologies regarding the dead man. Her passionate face was alert with hatred.

Lane made her way toward this certainty like a swimmer floundering for shore. "What happened," she breathed. The woman turned to Lane and pronounced in flat, clear English: "Wasfi Tal is dead." Then very distinctly to the uncomprehending blond face confronting her, "Assassins have killed our Premier. The Premier of Jordan is dead. Shot down by curs." Lane's hand went out, but something in the woman's ferocity stayed her touch. "I'm so sorry. How terrible, how terrible for you." Her voice betrayed wavering control. "Are you travelling alone?" But the woman turned away at this, deliberate as granite. Lane's hesitant insistence rose. "We'll help you." Once more the woman turned to her. "No!" the word rang. "You will not help me." Her scorn fell like an unanticipated slap across Lane's open face. Stunned, Lane turned away, nearly colliding with a couple of middle-aged Egyptian men. She wanted to apologize to someone, but their long-lashed eyes skimmed past her.

Outside the lobby windows troops were cordoning off the building in shoulder-to-shoulder closed ranks. Every trace of the rioting mob had disappeared: taxis, vehicles, pedestrians, all the usual life of the street had been removed, entrances to the area blocked off. Only the click of automatic weapons being inspected and the rustling of palm fronds marked the late afternoon quiet.

She found Buck and Alysia who had learned that for the time being no guests would be allowed to leave the hotel. Alysia said good-bye then, kissing Lane's hand to make a set speech to "lovely lady".

The atmosphere in the lobby had become that of a badly organized reception. A dull expectancy hung in the air as though bored guests were waiting for a signal to move on to the bar or buffet or some sort of enter-

tainment. A tall Egyptian colonel in British style uniform with swagger stick moved from one group to another. When the Jordanian delegation entered from the elevator, he strode toward them, elaborately shaking out a handkerchief and dabbing at dry eyes. "Now we'll have the official expression of grief," Buck observed, prompting a languid young man standing nearby to address them in English. "Wasfi Tal is no loss to the Arab countries. He was a compromiser with the enemies of Arab people." And to Lane's shocked face, "Save your sympathy. He killed 7,000 by his weakness." He drew deeply on a cigarette and enveloped her in an insinuating, aromatic cloud.

"What do you mean?" But before their informant could reply, Buck steered her toward an elevator. Before the open door, she held back. "No, let's not go up yet. I'm not ready. Please. I'm so upset. Let's have another drink or do something."

He hesitated, studying her. "OK."

The bar was crowded so Buck instructed a waiter to bring drinks to the deserted dining room where they sat facing each other over a window table. They looked out over troops still standing shoulder to shoulder at parade rest and watched Cairo spread out in beige monochromes beyond the yellow Nile, fading away under a dying sun.

Minutes passed before the waiter arrived with slightly watered whiskey sours. He placed the drinks in front of them with painstaking care as though handling grenades. Lane sipped at hers.

"Buck—" constrained, she was uncertain of what she was about to say; she simply needed to speak and be spoken to. "Will they let us leave to catch our plane?"

"Sure. If there's any trouble I'll call the Swiss consulate."

"Why did they kill that man?"

"I don't know."

"And all those people rioting. Why were they doing that? Did they know who had been killed? How could they know?" Her voice threatened low-keyed hysteria.

"You know as much about it as I do." He finished his drink and put the glass down hard on the bare table. She knew he wasn't anxious to pursue the subject. Buck was never interested in purely speculative conversation.

But Lane was unable to stop. "No one inside seemed to care. No one cared except the wife. And that woman. Who do you think she was? A sister? No. A mistress, perhaps a mistress. Did you notice?"

"What?"

"Did you notice how no one minded. No one seemed shocked or upset at all. That was what was so terrible. They didn't care. It was so strange

and lonely. So lonely." Without warning, tears welled. She wept softly at first, not wanting to make a fuss, but when he moved his chair clumsily around the table close to her, she gave herself to tears. Embarrassed, uncertain, somehow pleased by her emotion, he handed her his handkerchief, signaled the waiter for another round of drinks, murmured foolish, inappropriate things over her bent head, finally resorting to impractical promises, anything to comfort her. He'd get them out. They'd dine at Shepherds. She'd like that. He'd hire camels for a moonlight ride in the desert. Maybe they could make the Sound and Light Show after all. No? Well, they'd have a Sound and Light Show of their own in the room. How about that?

She looked up at this, sniffing. "You're awful. You don't understand," and they kissed and bumped cheeks like children making up.

They lingered over coffee and cigarettes until Cairo had long vanished in the dark, and by the time they returned to the lobby it was nearly empty of guests. Only a chalked outline indicated where the slain premier had fallen.

The young man who had approached them before was still there, still smoking, and ready to volunteer information. "They are re-enacting the crime. They captured three of the assassins. There were five. Palestinians with Syrian passports. That is one of them you see there," he nodded toward the shifting group. "That is the one who drank the blood of the victim."

"The one who drank the blood of the victim?" Lane repeated, disbelieving and enthralled.

"Yes, you know . . . to show victory over his enemy." He was pleasantly matter of fact. "To show revenge."

"Oh, I didn't know." She scanned the faces. "Which one is he?" But her informant was following Buck to the desk and didn't answer. She sat on a sofa near the proceedings to watch. The person apparently in charge looked to her as though he couldn't be more than 22 or 23 years old. He paced off steps from entrance to desk with jaunty authority, then paused for two men with a tape to measure the distance. With a start Lane realized that the men flanking him were guards and that he was the assassin. He looked nothing like she expected. He wasn't manacled. He was neither dishevelled nor distraught . . . well-dressed really, in tailored slacks and sports shirt. If anything he seemed not only in command of himself but rather in charge of the whole affair. And enjoying it, relishing the moment.

He dictated then paused, had his words read back, corrected errors, expanded on his commentary and answered questions, recapitulating his violent drama with an air of expansive, theatrical magnanimity. He was

apparently re-enacting the roles of all five assassins. He finished a sequence, and with a wide stride crossed the floor to within a few feet of where Lane sat primly expectant. He stopped, bringing the entire entourage to a ragged halt in his wake, and noticed her presence for the first time. Chest out, standing tall, darkly handsome, he leaned towards her and looking directly into her eyes flashed a deep, wide open, brilliant smile. Involuntarily, she smiled back.

And then Buck was at her side. She looked up at him with her pretty fox face. "I'm ready now," she said.

They entered the elevator with five members from the Kuwaiti delegation. The barbaric perfume from Lane's arms filled the closed space, and they rode up surrounded by the white, elegant flow of robes. Lane considered the dark profiles inches away, and felt momentarily held captive with strangers as poised and watchful as caged eagles.

Their room was cold with air-conditioning. Buck drew back draperies and opened balcony doors, and they stepped into the sensuous night. Lane leaned over the railing to look down at the swimming pool lying directly beneath them like a deepening stain. Its taut surface reflected the curve of a waning moon. "Buck, look. You can see the moon in the pool. Look, it seems farther away than the one in the sky."

But he turned her to him. "I want to look at you now." He unbuttoned her blouse with the slow care ritualistic people give to opening gifts.

"Buck..."

"Don't talk." He undressed her then in the dim night, suspended half way up the Sheraton's standard modernity over blacked-out Cairo. He led her to the bath where he filled the tub with warm water, and she sat immersed to her waist while his large hands methodically soaped her. When he pushed her back in the suds, she turned her face away, but in a moment obediently spread her legs to the ordering hands. She stood quietly to be dried, only lifting her arms and turning to accommodate the unhurried toweling.

She lay flat on the bed, as slim as death in pale lamplight, and closed her eyes and waited. She felt a lipstick daub her lengthening nipples, the stopper from a perfume bottle streaking her breasts, belly, lips, and then the thick hands and tongue working at her. When she heard dog-like panting she swarmed to life with an elan that excited him terribly, that made him then mad to her demands and filled her at last with craven pleasure. And power. Marvellous power.

The 4 a.m. call woke them from a heavy sleep. "I'm starved," she announced. "Couldn't we get a sandwich?"

"Oh God, will you just hold on until I find out if we can get out of here?" As if in reply to his uncertainty the telephone rang again, and a voice identified itself as that of the night manager. "No, taxis are still not allowed in the area, but I personally am arranging for a military sedan to drive you to the airport." The cheerful voice then added by way of fuller explanation that he, the speaker, was a Cornell man. Just graduated last year. "Fine, fine," Buck laughed. "That's great. We'll be down in twenty minutes and I'll check with you."

And then it was all over quite smoothly, without mishap. A military sedan did get them to the airport on time, customs were routine, and by the time the plane levelled off at cruising altitude Buck was sound asleep. They had seen Egypt. Lane made a mental note to look up the assassination in the *New York Times* when they got back.

She tipped back her chair and adjusted the little pillow behind her neck. Buck was snoring softly. The strong lines around his mouth slackened, making his face soft and trusting. She pulled up the lap robe, closed her eyes, and saw the assassin. He stood before her . . . tall, foppish, the expensive shirt opened low beneath the young throat, and she lay back, detached and watchful. When he smiled she held still. Then the dark conspirator face came closer and blurred behind the lurid polish of that deep open, toothy mouth, until like the Cheshire Cat all was gone but the feverish intimacy of that insane, triumphant smile.

Lane unfastened her seat belt, sat forward and leaned her forehead against the window. Her own hot, puzzled face reflected back, and she remembered the Nubian family in the museum and the gentle game played between strangers. Holding off a surge of loneliness, she consciously refocused her eyes past her own image in the window and looked out over the Sudan, its menacing beauty only now perceptible in the first streaks of dawn.

Martin Wampler

RINGS ON HER TOES

They'll be coming out any minute. The place is about to close. It's about 1 a.m. and I've been in there watching them dance. They don't dance too good together, and I know how Samantha likes to dance. To dance with what she's always feeling. I'm sitting up here on the hood of Samantha's