

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention, Adult Essay Contest

Cutting Through Chaos

By Jennifer L. Blanck, Arlington, Virginia

Chaos reigned from the moment my friend and I left the plane. In many ways, an expected disorientation—signs in an unfamiliar alphabet, bellows in a foreign language, and a general haze from jet lag. Then there was the insistent driver who couldn't wait for a bathroom break or ATM stop, whisking us not to our hotel, but to his agency's office with the requirement to pay upfront in cash for all the hotels during our trip. This did not preclude us from stopping along the way at his friend's juice stand, where we were expected to purchase something and enjoy it, quickly.

I tried to let Cairo's hubbub wash over me and enter its flow. It wasn't always easy.

Soon we adapted to the Egyptian roulette game of crossing the street, the early morning calls to prayer, the relentless heat in early March, and the regular sensory overload. We were more worried about eating something with lettuce than any threat to our personal safety. Even so, the armed tourism guards along the road to the Giza pyramids were comforting and worrisome at the same time.

My love of markets led us to Khan el-Khalili, a microcosm of our Egyptian trip. Enduring since the 14th century, the famous bazaar channels you through its maze-like passageways and absorbs you into its flow. There's the constant bombardment of the senses from vendors inviting you into their colorful and overflowing stores, fruit shisha and spices seducing your nose, and bodies brushing up against each other in the narrow alleys.

After reluctantly yet successfully haggling for some scarves and an ankh pendant, I was ready for a break. My friend still wanted to find a Mother's Day gift. While waiting, I discovered a quiet nook nearby and perused the guidebook for our next stop.

A loud fart burst through my thoughts. Startled, I looked up to see the source. An elderly couple walked by arm in arm, seemingly oblivious to their contribution. Beyond them, I saw a middle-aged shopkeeper standing in the doorway of his store. Our eyes locked, and we broke into smiles. It was silly. Childish. And oddly comforting. Things weren't so unfamiliar after all.