

I

Even here, Maria thought, a pebble's throw from the grimy once-ornate facade of the Egyptian Museum, the fetid stew of Cairo in July hung in the air, noxious and unhealthy. From the car she could see shimmering thermal patterns, like ghostly dervishes, whirling through the late-afternoon *falluca* traffic on the river.

Joey's rubber ball made pocking sounds against the rear deck of the Mercedes. It printed smudges in the dusty surface but left no damage, and she let him amuse himself. Her gaze drifted toward the hodgepodge of vehicles thrashing forward in the streets: ramshackle buses choked with people, trucks belching dark exhausts, cars of every vintage, donkeys pulling flatbed carts, a slow-moving river of molasses. She contemplated the impending Friday run to Alexandria. It would be a gut-wrenching punishment.

One more time she looked at her watch. Robert had told her that the schedule called for the delegation to be finished with the museum tour by four, which meant five or thereabouts, acknowledging the Egyptian penchant for defying punctuality. It was now fifteen minutes past five.

"Can't duck this one," Robert had apologized at breakfast, offering his mock-exasperated smile, mischievous under his shock of sandy hair, which made him appear so deceptively yielding and innocent. How misleading, she thought, warmed, once again, by the image. After all, hadn't he defied the vaunted all-powerful Padre? She allowed herself a private grin as a momentary picture of her father, like a bit of flotsam on the slate gray of the Nile, passed briefly on the flow of memory. Padre! Her voice could never say it, although it resonated often in her mind. He is daddy, she protested, yet again, whispering the word.

“What?” Joey asked, coming to the open window.

“Nothing, sweets.”

“We’ll be late, Mommy.”

“Late for what?” she asked patiently.

“For a swim.” Joey pouted. “You promised.”

“Then I’ll keep it. Even if it’s dark.”

“But I’m afraid of the dark, Mommy.”

She was disturbed that her irritation had made her say that. Impatience and the heat, she rationalized.

“We’ll make it, sweets. You’ll see,” she said gently, putting out her hand, ruffling his hair. He smiled and went back to the rear of the car, resuming his game.

The Assistant Secretary was a classmate from Princeton, Robert had explained with his usual bias, one of the foot soldiers who ventured into the muck of irreversible entropy, which was, specifically, modern Egypt and the Arab world in general. Robert, ever the antiquarian, often vented his contempt for the modern world using the Arab example. The visit of the Assistant Secretary had set him off that morning.

“Their entire culture is dominated by a mentality that will not rest until it gets the upper hand, which is impossible, like immortality. Yet they continue to haggle away like traders in the marketplace. They have a sweetness in them that is very attractive, but they cannot compromise.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t deal with them?” Maria asked gently. She had heard the monologue before.

“Not shouldn’t. Can’t.”

“That goes nowhere.”

“Why must there always be a somewhere?” Robert asked.

“For an archaeologist, you are remarkably cynical,” she said, an old refrain.

“For the daughter of the Mafia don, you are remarkably hopeful.”

“I just don’t believe in the sins of the fathers falling on the heads of the children. Look at me. Living proof.” She had bent over and

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kissed his cool forehead. Painful issues, once grating and divisive, had finally reduced themselves to domestic banter, for which she was grateful.

“Someday,” he replied, “somebody like me will be poking around in our rubble.”

“And what will they find?”

“Artifacts and a lesson too late to learn.”

It was obligatory for Americans, especially in the case of first-timers like Robert’s Princeton friend, whose name was Bigelow, to view the geegaws of antiquity in the musty museum. American voluntary contributions attempted to hold back further decay, but they were sufficient only to provide for figurative sandbags to top the barricades.

Maria’s husband was an exchange professor of Egyptian antiquities from Amherst doing research under a government grant. He was, therefore, frequently asked to shepherd official visitors through the museum. Normally, especially in the stifling summers, he had begged off on Fridays. Unfortunately, his Princeton connection made his attendance obligatory.

“But where is Daddy?” Joey whined, exhibiting his five-year-old petulance. He suddenly lost the rhythm of the ball, which bounced out of range and rolled along the macadam of the parking lot. The ball came to rest under a car.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Maria said, sliding out of the driver’s side and following her son to the car. Six men sat in the car’s interior, which surprised her mildly since the windows were pulled up and the temperature was nearly one hundred. She tapped on the window.

“My son’s ball,” she said in pidgin Arabic, offering an accompaniment of miming gestures. She assumed, from the men’s rough appearance, that they did not speak English. The men scowled back at her, her intrusion an obvious annoyance. Hoping that her phony smile was ingratiating, she stumbled through another awkward explanation, using her hands to illustrate the location of the ball.

The men looked at her with frigid indifference, which was baffling. Even her persistent tapping against the drawn window could not stir them. Her attention was suddenly diverted by Joey's attempt to crawl beneath the car to get at the ball. She pulled at his legs, dragging him to safety.

"Are you crazy?" she said, waving a finger in front of his nose. "They could suddenly start to move." Wouldn't put it past these hard cases, she thought.

Tamping down the momentary panic, she tapped the window again with her knuckles.

"Just move the damned car," she said, this time in English, feeling the anger rise as she mumbled to herself. "You indifferent bastards." She had absolutely no doubt that they understood her request.

The driver lifted heavy-hooded eyes and dismissed her with a wave of his hand. He was a young man with a black scraggly beard and an expression of unsmiling menace. Still, she would not be intimidated. Not the daughter of the Padre. Again she tapped on the window with her knuckles, angling them to use her wedding ring to increase the noise level.

One of the men in the back seat waved his finger at her and snarled. Another tried to wave her away. She tapped again. Arab machismo, she decided with contempt. To these stubborn asses, a woman was nothing. It stirred her rage, reinforced her female consciousness, and stiffened her resolve. She continued to tap insistently against the window.

They apparently got the message. She saw the man sitting to the right of the driver move his lips, muttering some words to the others which she could not hear. Without rolling down the window, the driver gunned the motor and moved forward by half a car's length, just enough for Joey to scoop up the ball. She waved her hand, resisting the temptation to raise her middle finger, and mimed a sarcastic thank-you to the men. She wished she could emulate her father's expression at such moments, that look which telescoped the message

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of harnessed hate which could strike consummate fear in those who received it.

But the men barely glanced her way. After the ball had been removed, the car was driven back into its original position.

“Hope you bastards fry,” she mumbled as she grabbed Joey’s hand and led him back to their car. Her anger triggered her curiosity. Why would six grown men sit in a locked car in the parking lot of the Egyptian Museum on a steaming Friday afternoon? It jogged a shard of memory. Men in cars. The image subliminally absorbed in childhood suggested that six grown men sitting in a locked automobile, watchful and waiting, ignoring heat and discomfort, were about to perform something momentous and probably violent.

In memory, she heard her father’s voice admonishing her gently but firmly, “Go to your school.” Or was it “Help Mama” or “Go play with your dollies”? A signal for her disappearance, an absolute order for her obedience. It meant “none of your business.”

She recalled cars filled with adult men with gruff voices and odd names. Even now, the smell of them was vivid, odors of masculinity, winey, garlicky, thick with the pall of cigar smoke and masking peppermints. Always with the memory came the feel of her father’s gentle hands stroking her thighs as she sat on his lap scrunched against his chest. Occasionally his lips would brush against her cheek and his breath would sing past her ear. Daddy’s little girl.

The guilt of survival bubbled up inside of her. Total containment inevitably failed. Without warning, it attacked her like a sudden volcanic eruption blowing the head off her control. The men in the car had set it off, starting the endless, chain of recall, the curse of memory. She railed against her brothers for stupidly making her the last sibling. Yet it was pointless to admonish two dead brothers. She was the dregs at the bottom of the pot, the only survivor of the three Padronelli children. Which put the onus on Joey, the grandson, the worshiped one, whose wiry little body throbbed with the beat of Padronelli blood.

The mystique of the blood. One would think it had been pumped directly from the veins of St. Peter himself instead of that product of a Naples slum that had been the American Padronelli, the dynastic beginning. Often she had suspected that the name itself, Padronelli, with its obvious diminutive, was his synthetic concoction, a private joke. Later, visiting Naples, she had found two columns of Padronellis in the telephone directory, which considerably dampened her suspicions.

It didn't matter, however. By then the myth was irrevocably cut into the stone of history. He was her father's father, the patrone of patrones. He had died, as befits the invulnerable, in bed, twenty years before her birth. By then the blood-encrusted mace had been passed to her own father, who embellished the throne from his Greenwich Village castle and consolidated the Kingdom, the mythical land of Mafiosa bounded by the East River, the Atlantic, the Hudson, and mysterious other liquid points in the universe.

To his everlasting credit, Robert had stood before the Padre and fought for her as if she were the lady locked in the castle turret. A lousy no-money professor with the temerity to court and win the heart of awesome daddy's little girl. "We want no part of your scummy life," he had shouted, flinging down the gauntlet in the face of the Padre's loyal pistols.

Secretly, of course, she knew that the old bastard was delighted to have her safely ensconced in the embrace of this handsome young WASP from Boston. "Some of the boys checked the family out," the Padre had told her.

There were always some of the boys to check things out. And worse. Their house was always filled with them. No one, not herself or her mother or her brothers Gino and Mario, ever ventured into the mean streets without some of the boys within sight or earshot.

Of course they were not boys, but men like those in the locked car—malevolent, humorless, dark-eyed, and menacing, their Draconian energy held in check by the mythical power of the charis-

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matic Padre and the mumbo-jumbo code of honor that underpinned the myth. What acts these men performed, even then, seemed outside the pale of what ordinary mortals did to survive. Doing business, the Padre called it. She was never certain what that meant, only that it was violent and rapacious.

Whatever all that Gothic energy was supposed to produce, it couldn't have been money alone. The Padronellis had lived modestly in a two-story brick house in that corner of Greenwich Village known as Little Italy.

Yet the enterprise had claimed her two older brothers and, one might speculate, her mother as well. A grieving heart also kills, she had discovered. Suddenly she shook her head, hoping the movement would dislodge the memories.

She resented the six men for having induced them, looking their way suddenly, catching the metallic glint of sunbeam on metal, another familiar image engraved in memory. Not that. Was her imagination running away with her? Go play with your dolly, she ordered herself, reaching out to once again ruffle Joey's thick sandy hair.

But the image had induced a sense of discomfort. The men in the car and all her resultant memories had taken the patience out of the exercise. She now resented her husband's reluctance to meet their time frame. Friend or no friend, his obligation was still to his family first, one of the few inherited values she had preserved.

She looked toward the museum entrance. The official caravan of three shiny Mercedes limousines with little Egyptian flags perched on their fenders waited as chauffeurs watched the entrance for emerging signs of their VIP guest. Maria assumed that the usual security types would be inside protecting their charge as he poked around the mummies and sculptures of animal-faced deities of the old Egyptian dynasties.

There was no escaping the signs of tightening security and paranoia that had gripped the government. It was no secret that the

fanatic Islamic Brotherhood made life difficult for the moderate posture of the Egyptian President.

Signs of the Islamic fundamentalist tide were everywhere in the city. One could see frightening anti-Western graffiti slogans on walls and in handbills scattered on the city streets like confetti. From the American press, she read occasional stories of murders, kidnappings, and student riots, echoes of which filtered through the walls of their comfortable apartment in Cairo and their rented villa in Alexandria.

No cause for anxiety, Robert had soothed. This was Egypt not Lebanon. Americans were not being plucked off the streets or murdered in airplanes.

For her part, she managed to blithely eschew most information that contained reports of violence and bloodshed. One does not grow up as the daughter of a Mafia boss without acquiring certain protective characteristics. Think it's easy, she had asked herself ad infinitum, to be perpetually balanced on the razor's edge between pride and loathing, between profound love and dark uneasy guilt?

Robert also had the wisdom to accept the fact of the fierce mutual love between father and daughter. Maria and her father spoke frequently on the phone, an achievement in itself, considering the reliability of the Egyptian telephone system. If Joey was out on some school project she would have to catalog his routine and the events of his young life. The Padre doted on every word. A baby tooth gone. An "A" on a test. A clever retort. Apparently the stuff of grandfatherly ecstasy.

"Mommy. When is Daddy coming?" Joey whined. His tone mirrored her own thoughts.

"Soon."

But soon didn't seem early enough and her voice lacked conviction. Joey shrugged, shook his head, and pouted. Again she looked toward the museum's entrance. Not far from the limousines, a young boy in striped pajamas squatted next to a ramshackle ice-cream cart. The boy sat staring into space, his eyes transfixed in an attitude that

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the Egyptians called *kayf*, staring into nothingness. She felt Joey's tug on her arm.

"Absolutely not," she said without looking at the boy. No explanation was required. Eating ice cream purchased from a street vendor was like playing Russian roulette with one's stomach.

"I have to go peepee," Joey said.

She looked down at his sweaty little face and smiled. He could, of course, have tinkled against the car's tire, a favorite habit in this part of the world. Not the grandson of the great Padre, she told herself with a pursed smile, as she grasped Joey's hand and started moving toward the museum's entrance.

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