

## Home is where...?

'EGYPT? You jammy bastard! You're bugging off to Cairo to play Lawrence of Arabia, while I spend Year 3 peering down a microscope!' But Darren had been grinning as he spoke. He'd clapped Josh on the back. 'Make sure you keep in touch,' he'd added.

'Cairo is such an assault on the senses,' Josh had written in his blog soon after arriving. He had mentally filed its richness into cerebral recycling bins for future use. He would write poems about the colour, the noise, the buzz it gave him. Five years ago he'd written a poem for his first girlfriend. She'd giggled, but Josh knew she'd liked it. He enjoyed writing his blog. It made a welcome change from his dissertation.

Josh thought of his blog now, as he stepped out on to the platform with the jostling mass of commuters disgorged by the metro. He liked the metro, despite the shoving, elbowing crowds trying to board before the unforgiving doors slid closed, trapping them or separating them from their family or friends. It was clean enough, reliable and incredibly cheap. It cost a tiny fraction of the London Tube. He smiled momentarily at the comparison. His blog was his way of recording the impressions before they paled, and he hoped Darren and his other mates back home would read it, too. Especially Emma.

Swept along with those exiting, he emerged from the stuffy, airless heat of the underground, into the blazing sun of the dusty street, with its cacophony of car horns, exuberant greetings and the clunk of metal on metal – the gas bottle seller, pedaling his bike loaded with cylinders and advertising his availability.

Following Ashraf's directions, Josh headed down a side street, where pedestrians vied for space with cars, motor bikes, tuk-tuks and donkey carts. Men wearing galabeyas and turbans sat outside, luxuriating in their shishas while the warm apple smell mingled with coffee with cardamom, wet fish and koshari.

Josh loved koshari. It seemed to be the local home food. Easy to make, with rice, pasta, lentils, onions and tomato, it even suited his student budget.

Suddenly he heard someone shouting his name, and he looked up to see Ashraf waving from a roof terrace three buildings further down the street. Josh stood and waited for him. Looking around, he suddenly felt conspicuous with his fair skin, his probably-too-long blond hair and his jeans designed to reveal the brand of his boxers. He admired the dignified woman walking with such poise, an enormous load balanced on her head. A small, barefoot girl, unafraid, was weaving in and out of the traffic, selling sprigs of mint.

'Hello Mister! Welcome in Egypt!' A boy of around eleven greeted him with a grubby handshake and a bright grin. 'Where you want go? I help you.' But Ashraf materialised while Josh was working out how to refuse politely.

'Hello my friend!' Ashraf embraced Josh warmly with a kiss on each cheek. He looked relaxed and comfortable in a loose, full-length galabeya and flip-flops, not the western-style jeans and trainers that he wore when he worked at the language school. He linked arms with Josh. Familiar, now, with the physical contact between men, Josh allowed himself to be propelled towards the flat. Ashraf apologised, 'We live on top. Eighth floor. No lift. You OK?'

'Sure,' Josh replied, and followed his friend up the stairs.

The roof terrace comprised a clean, swept area, spacious but sparse, with half a dozen old plastic chairs stacked against the wall. Across one corner was a washing line with some towels and cloths hanging. But on the roof was a small building, not much more than a hut. 'This my home,' Ashraf said with a measure of pride. 'And this Heba, my wife.'

A young woman emerged from the little house. She was pretty, though her hijab hid her hair and neck. The beautiful blue floor-length robe, intended to conceal

her shape and preserve her modesty, failed to disguise an elegant bump. 'Hello,' she said. 'How are you? Welcome in Egypt.'

'Hello,' Josh replied 'you speak good English.'

Ashraf chuckled. 'That all. She practised special for you. She don't speak English.' He pushed the door wide open. 'Please to come in. Baytee baytak - my house, your house.' He led Josh into a tiny seating area. Josh glanced around. There were two chairs with wooden arms, a coffee table and a colourful rug. Against the wall was a dresser with an earthenware jug. Heba had already disappeared behind a door which must be the kitchen. There was only one other door. The bedroom? Was there an ensuite bathroom? The very word felt alien here.

'Please to sit down. I am so happy you come my house. Thank you very much.'

'No, no,' Josh remonstrated in faltering Arabic. 'I am very happy to have you as my language helper. Thank you for inviting me. And thank you to Heba.' He gestured towards the door, just as she reappeared with glasses of sweet mint tea. The conversation continued in a mixture of English and Arabic, while Josh tried to come to terms with his surroundings. The tiny flat was sparse but spotless. A selection of unframed family photos was blu-tacked to the wall. 'Who's this?' Josh asked, pointing to one of the photos.

'That my brother Mina and his wife. He have two boys. My nephews. You have brothers?'

'A sister,' Josh replied. At his university tutor's suggestion, he had brought some photos of his own as conversation starters, along with a couple of postcards of Edinburgh, his home town. He delved into his rucksack. 'This is my sister, Alison. And these are my parents.' He handed Ashraf a picture of his mum and dad looking happy and windblown on a walk up Ben Lomond. He slid a picture of his home back into his bag. He didn't live in a mansion, just a three-bed semi. But the

neat front lawn and pretty flower bed seemed out of place here. He did the same with the photo of Emma. *Girlfriend* was something of a non-category.

‘And these *my* parents,’ Ashraf said, lifting the only framed photo reverently from its hook. The couple looked serious, distinguished and very formal.

‘Beautiful,’ Josh admired. ‘Do they live in Cairo?’

‘My mother, yes. She live with my brother, Mina. My father – he dead.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

Ashraf nodded his head briefly in acknowledgement. ‘Mina and me, we have tour guide company. You want visit Sharm El Sheikh? Aswan? Luxor? You come to us. We do for you.’

‘Thank you. I *am* planning to travel before I leave. How’s the company doing?’

‘Er – please?’

‘I mean, is the company doing well? Is it successful? Do you like the work?’

‘Yes, I like. But no, not successful. No tourists come Egypt now. Since the revolution.’

‘Hmm.’ Josh hadn’t thought about that. He’d been a long way from Egypt in January 2011. The Egyptian Uprising had been just another piece of bad news on TV. Tear gas and barricades. Another dictator bit the dust. As wars go, there hadn’t been many casualties.

But Ashraf was continuing eagerly, ‘That why I want to learn English good. I need good job. Maybe I go Australia.’

‘Australia? Why?’

He pointed to another photo. ‘This my sister and her husband and her baby. They live in Australia now. This my niece. She have four years now.’

‘So you haven’t seen her...?’

‘No, not never seen her. My sister go Australia five years ago.’

Australia! Josh thought of surfing and kangaroos. Then he thought of Alison. Sisters could be a pain sometimes, but he couldn’t begin to imagine not seeing her. She’d made enough fuss when he’d announced he’d be going to Egypt for six months.

The kitchen door opened, and Heba said something to Ashraf. ‘She say we eat now.’

‘Ah,’ Josh said, and managed not to add ‘At last’. He still hadn’t got used to eating lunch at 4.30pm. Heba brought in dish after dish of food, until every surface was groaning. He wondered how many more people were coming to lunch.

‘Please, help yourself,’ Ashraf said, waving a hand at the food.

‘But where is Heba going to sit?’

‘She eat later,’ Ashraf smiled, nodding towards the kitchen door.

Josh hesitated, embarrassed, but Ashraf insisted. There was so much food. Although he’d entered the realm of stir fries and curries at university, Josh came from a shepherd’s-pie-and-apple-crumble sort of home. He didn’t know where to start. Ashraf must have sensed it. ‘In Egypt, we always prepare much food. Maybe other family members will come.’

‘Will they?’ Josh asked, not quite understanding.

‘Insh – Allah. If God wills,’ Ashraf said, piling his plate high.

Josh ate as much as he could, in appreciation of his hostess’ hard work, and remembered finally to leave a morsel on his plate to indicate that he had finished. The conversation returned to family. ‘What about Heba? Does she have brothers and sisters?’ Josh asked.

Ashraf took another photo from the wall, unsticking it carefully and wiping the dust off with his hand. ‘This Heba’s brother. He dead in Egyptian revolution.’ Josh gasped and stared at the picture of a smart, handsome, confident-looking young man. ‘He wearing this suit when he dead,’ Ashraf continued. ‘The protesters, they always said, *If I wearing old clothes, no one tell my mother if I die. But if I wearing suit, they think I am important person.* It was true. They told his mother when he dead. You see,’ Ashraf continued, still holding the photo and looking earnestly at Josh, ‘I want to learn English good so we can go Australia, but Heba’s mother, she not want. She said she lost one child. She not want to lose another. I understand, but there no future here for me and Heba and our child. No work. No money. No good education. And this house – eight floors and no lift. Hard for Heba now. More hard when baby come. No space for small child.’ His customary smile had vanished. Now his face was full of pain. Josh’s thoughts were in turmoil.

But Ashraf hadn’t finished. ‘No justice here. If robbers come, who can help us? No police. Now, neighbours not trust neighbours. In the past in Cairo, everyone help everyone. Now, what will happen? No future here for us.’

‘But... but, when I arrived, everyone was so friendly and helpful to me. You especially. In the street...’

‘In the street,’ Ashraf interrupted, ‘men on motorbikes steal women bags. Heba afraid go out now. In the street, people only want money. Not proud of Egypt

now. No justice for football fans who dead at Port Said. Government want big rent, impossible for poor people. No money for doctors. If my child sick, how I pay? How can we live here?’

Ashraf’s fixed stare bored into Josh. A stinging arrow of guilt pierced every memory. He felt embarrassed. His British passport, his bank accounts in England and Egypt, his university course and his plans to travel again next summer – the security of his home - he had always taken it for granted. The accident of his birth had predetermined his lifestyle. His thoughts veered wildly to the NHS, his dad’s insurance, the police and the British justice system. Bright, crisp, frosty winter mornings, and his mother making him wear a scarf. Long weekend trips home from university, his bedroom ready and waiting for him, with his Red Hot Chilli Peppers posters still on the wall since his teenage years. And Emma...

‘Come on to the roof. The sun is finishing,’ Ashraf invited him. Josh took his camera from his rucksack and they went outside. The street noise was muted at this height, and the motion less insistent. Sunset was only minutes away. There was no dusk. Heba came out, and the three of them stood in silence, watching the fiery red ball slide beyond the horizon, and the muddle of ill-sorted buildings become silhouettes in the pink glow. Day ended, night began, while living, dying, fighting, loving, hoping and despairing continued in the city’s organised chaos.

2030 words