

31 May 2008

THE IRISH TIMES

UP FRONT.

I was on the point of leaving Cairo for good when I fell in love with an Egyptian girl, writes Hugh Miles.

IT'S JUST after 5am on the morning of one of the major feast days in Cairo and the streets are filling up with crowds of eager worshippers. Although it is not yet dawn, in the half-light thousands of men and boys are already arriving in droves, wrapped up warmly against the chill as they walk briskly with prayer rugs and Korans under their arms down the main street towards the central mosque. Crowds of heavily veiled women follow.

Quietly, the worshippers arrange themselves less than a shoulder's width apart in long lines rippling in concentric circles around the gate of the green-domed mosque. A sense of anticipation fills the early morning air.

Then, as soon as the light is bright enough that the imam can differentiate a white thread from a black one, huge speakers crackle into life and a voice rings out, echoing through the trees and around the parked cars. Like a school of brightly coloured fish, as far as the eye can see, the people respond as one and prostrate themselves before God.

I went to Egypt to work as a freelance journalist and finish a book. Foreigners in Cairo live a privileged existence, enjoying the fine weather and the Nile-side clubs and bars, but there was no escaping the signs of Islam's ascendancy. Everywhere I turned I saw men with beards and calloused prayer marks on their foreheads; nearly all women wear veils. Egypt seemed a deeply alien society, unlike anything I had experienced in the West, and even the call to prayer sometimes sounded threatening. The thought of one billion Muslims around the world seemed daunting.

I was on the point of leaving Cairo for good when I fell in love with an Egyptian girl. To spend time together without raising neighbourly suspicions, I got to know her and her friends around the card table and they showed me another side to life in Cairo - one I had not known while I was living on my own.

Arab women have to take care to protect their honour at all times - an idea that went out of fashion in Ireland a while ago - but, since I was a foreigner, the girls guessed correctly I was unlikely to gossip with their family and friends, and so they spoke freely about their personal

lives and gave me an amazing opportunity to view a half of Arab society outsiders rarely get to see. I realised it was my turn to be viewed as alien. I soon discovered that there is another side to Egyptian life, more like something out of Sex and the City than what you find in the Koran. Over cards, I learnt all about sex in Egypt, contraception, fertility and virginity. I learnt where I could find a reliable doctor for a back-street abortion or a cheap hymenorrhaphy, and what to feed your husband to make him horny.

Arab tradition dictates that when a young Muslim man gets married, he must buy his fiancée a furnished apartment before showering her with lavish gifts such as gold and precious stones. The country's depressed economic situation means marriage is way out of reach of most people - and since marriage is the only socially accepted outlet for sex, this naturally leads to intense frustration. Seven million women over the age of 20 in Egypt have never been married and there are another 11 million unmarried men.

One solution is to have an "Urfi" marriage, a kind of common law marriage sanctioned by Islam. Done in private, the couple just need a contract, an imam to perform the ceremony and two witnesses. Cheaper than regular marriages, Urfi marriages are frowned upon by Egyptian society because they are generally secretive and carried out either by young people who want to have sex, men who want to marry a second wife without their first wife knowing, or couples who have already been prevented from having a regular marriage by one or both sets of parents. Another solution to the marriage deadlock is simply to "marry the TV" as they say in Arabic. In the Islamic world, masturbation is generally viewed as the lesser of the unspeakable evils tempting frustrated unmarried men.

What I learned around the card table was that you never really know a country until you spend time with the people who live there. Although the Arab world can seem impenetrable, Muslims have dreams and love lives like anyone else - I know for sure because now I am a Muslim and that Egyptian girl is my wife. In an information age where ideas change in the blink of an eye, Egyptian society is undergoing a deep social transformation - just as Ireland did not so long ago.

Hugh Miles' memoir, *Playing Cards in Cairo*, is published by Abacus

