

The Hotel Bar

My First Night in Cairo: The Bar at el Nil Hilton

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I love hotel bars. They are little islands of respite for weary travelers, lonely travelers, excited travelers, and traveling travelers.

I've traveled quite a bit over the course of my life, starting when I was very young, and was carted with my brother, Ken, between our grandparents' home in Missoula, Montana to our dad's house in Seattle for holiday visits. Then I traveled between college and home, on work assignments, a zillion weekend getaways, a few exotic vacations, too many mad dashes for the dead and dying, and a year of running away from home.

I'm no stranger to bars, either. My mother took Ken and I on our first excursion into this shadow world when we were in pre-school. Wait, no, that was a "shopping trip," which just happened to end up in a bar. Ken and I dangled our feet from the tall stools, sipping sweet drinks while my mother slammed a few bourbons with her Kool Filter Kings. (My grandmother would have killed her if she'd known.)

So when I arrived in Cairo, Egypt – late at night, weary, unnerved and without a hotel reservation - I surrendered to fate and headed for the hotel bar.

This is where Patrick and James come into the story.

Patrick was a communications manager with Hyatt Hotels. Hailing from Holland, he was tall, slender, and utterly professional in that totally hip, young, successful way. I recognized part of myself in him, when I was 27 and on the rise in a mega-corporation: smart, capable, and with my whole, great, grownup life ahead of me.

Patrick instantly got on his cell phone and started calling around downtown Cairo for a room somewhere for me. The man next to me, meanwhile, James from South Africa, listened to me ramble on about the minutia of my novel and my research trip to Egypt. His genuine interest

seemed like a good omen to me—that this adventure was real and right and good—and for the first time in a long time, I started feeling better.

I bought Patrick and James both a beer and we started swapping travel stories. The conversation went on for over an hour, then another hour. Hotel bars are dark and transient ports of call, witnesses to endless comings and goings and happenings in between. I think of them as human waypoints and I love them.

I didn't even notice, until James pointed it out later, that I was the only woman in the bar. Neither did it occur to me that not that long ago, women weren't even allowed in bars in Egypt. I had also forgotten the hunger and the weariness that brought me there. The Princes of Egypt and I were enjoying that happy, intense and temporary friendship that only passing travelers know. And for two blessed hours, I felt as though I wasn't alone in a great, big, weird, heartless country.

Excerpted from [*Lost & Found in Egypt: A Most Unlikely Journey Through the Shifting Sands of Love and Loss*](#).