

# Where Life and Death Sleep Side by Side

*Julie Winokur*  
 Photographs by Ed Kashi

**O**n the outskirts of Cairo, a mangy dog with her nipples nearly touching the ground stalks a narrow dirt road lined with tombs. She wanders past a row of vendors who quietly set down blankets cluttered with junk for the Friday market: old telephones,

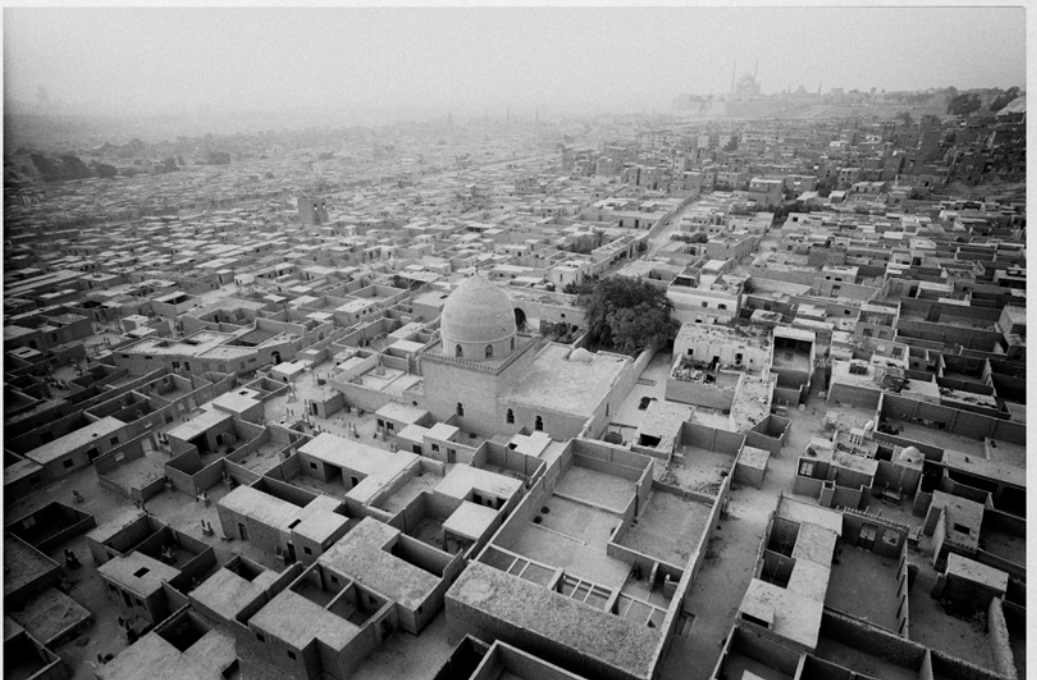
fans, toilet bowls and bathtubs, hinges, TV antennas, coffee pots, and door knobs are randomly strewn across the ground. On one blanket a row of dolls' heads is followed by a row of arms; at the next table, second-hand videos of *Escape from New York* and *Getting Out Alive* sell for under a dollar.

Medhat, a strapping young man who has appointed himself my chief escort and number one Egyptian friend, gets sidetracked by a mound of magazines. Ancient issues of *Life*, *Time*, and *Geo* spill to the ground like pick-up sticks and Medhat is busy excavating a *New York Times Magazine* so he can

practice his English. "I told you, you can get your heart desire here," he says with effort.

In this scrap heap of modern detritus it is possible to construct an entire automobile from scratch or develop a hybrid hairdryer that could double as a vacuum cleaner. It seems fitting in this

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*The cemetery sprawls for miles along the eastern edge of Cairo.*



*A lone woman walks the alleyways between the tombs.*

graveyard of recycled tombs that the weekly market is a cluttered heap of odds and ends, bits and scraps, broken shards waiting to be reborn in some new context.

"Why you want to see the graves?" asks Medhat, pronouncing graves as though it is a French word with a long flat "aaah." He would rather take me to visit his family and show off a small hand-held computer he has bought with his entire savings. The computer can store addresses and telephone numbers, and Medhat is proud to show me how many other foreigners' names populate its brain. With all these modern wonders at his fingertips, Medhat is confounded that I want to spend so much time around the crumbling tombs that he has seen every day of every month of every year of his life.

Egyptians never call the sprawling cemetery at the eastern edge of Cairo "City of the Dead." Only Westerners do. Cairenes prefer to call it simply the *arafa*, the cemetery, and it is as much a part of the topography here as glass and steel skyscrapers are in Hong Kong. But what better name than City of the Dead to describe the four-mile-long walled necropolis that now houses thousands of families and countless small businesses? Video stores, car repair shops, and tile factories line the main arteries of the cemetery, and cramped buses deliver hordes of commuters at the end of each work day. Furniture makers ply their craft inside tombs, and streams of uniformed children parade to and from school, stopping for a quick soccer game between the cenotaphs.

The *arafa* is a necropolis turned metropolis where the needs of the living have far outpaced the sanctity of the dead. Here, survival takes precedence over superstition, and the impact of overpopulation and overcrowding wears a human face.

"In Egypt we have a saying," explains Mohamed al Biali, a journalist with the Middle East News Agency "*El aish abqa min*

*el mayet*. The living are more immortal than the dead." Biali is a small man with a round head who has all the time in the world to share broad philosophies and no inclination to talk specifics. But in one line he captures the special brand of pragmatism that propels City of the Dead.

The cemetery is filled with refugees from Cairo's housing shortage who became home-steaders in a landscape of tombs and mausoleums. Today some 50,000 people live in tombs while between 500,000 and a million more are cramped into tenement houses where tombs once stood. These people staked their claim in the cem-

etry when no place else could absorb them, and subsequently they came to prefer the silent company of the dead to the harsh conditions of urban living. Many claim they would not leave even if they had the chance.

For the government of Egypt, City of the Dead is a national embarrassment, especially in light of its having hosted the United Nations' International Conference on Population and Development last September. In a country so deftly positioned to lead the Arab and African worlds toward peace and prosperity, City of the Dead represents an obstacle on the road to progress. It is perhaps the world's most stunning example of the fallout from overpopulation.

"The government thinks this is a very confidential issue," explains sociologist Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim with a hint of mockery, although he still refuses to hand over a copy of his recent study on the cemetery. Dr. Saad is the ordained authority on City of the Dead, and where other people resort to conjecture, he has facts. We are sitting in his airy neo-Moorish office in the hills of Mokkatam which tower over the cemetery. Dr. Saad riffles through the pages of his government-sponsored study. "At all the population conferences everybody asks about City of the Dead and the government says they don't know anything. It's a very sensitive subject."

At the Ministry of Information, Naela Chahine's face takes a noticeable downturn when I ask her to help me schedule interviews about City of the Dead. "Why must you write a story about this place?" she asks indignantly. "It's a terrible situation. Why do you insist on drawing attention there?" Mrs. Chahine's job is to obstruct journalists from concentrating on the cemetery

**Opposite: A young boy holds a broken doll in the doorway of the mausoleum where he lives.**







*Washing dishes on a makeshift rooftop above the graves with tenements in the background.*

and she seems personally insulted by my request. She argues defensively about Cairo's population crisis, and over the next three weeks she is effectively ineffective at scheduling interviews.

City of the Dead is the great unmentionable, the social problem that all Cairenes are aware of but most prefer not to talk about. "It sickens me to think that there are people pissing by my father's grave," says a woman at a swank dinner party, "but where else are all these people supposed to go?"

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**W**hen Cairo was founded in 969, it marked the dawn of a new dynasty. The Fatamids were the self-proclaimed descendants of Mohammed's daughter Fatima and they entered Egypt from North Africa with little resistance. Legend holds that at the site for their new city, court astrologers staked four posts in the ground between which they strung a series of bells. At the most auspicious time, they planned to jangle the bells to initiate the ground breaking. But a raven landed on one of the ropes and set the bells ringing and the workers digging before the horrified astrologers could intercept fate. Panic stricken, they looked to the sky and saw the red planet Mars, *El Kahir*, in its ascendancy. So at an ill-fated time, in the shadow of the god of war and discord, *El Kahira*, Cairo, was born.

Today, Cairo's buildings are crumbling from the foundations up, and one-room apartments sometimes house families of eight or more people. The city's population has doubled in just over a decade, even though the basic infrastructure has not changed for nearly one hundred years. The air is thick with fumes, factory smog, car horns, running motors, belching buses, the comings and goings of some 15 million people in an anarchy of motion.

Fine brown dirt filters through the air, encrusting your skin, your nose, the lining of your lungs, your very senses with soil and soot. In Cairo, relentless cacophony assaults the senses with no refuge from the noise, the dust, the dirt, the chaos.

No place, that is, except City of the Dead, where the bedlam outside is held at bay by a thick stone wall. This wall, which defines the parameter of City of the Dead, acts like a dam, holding back the torrid currents of noise and traffic. Behind the wall, a vast oasis of calm seeps through the dirt alleys and smooth limestone surfaces of the tombs. From above, the cemetery looks like a labyrinth

of infinite right angles and dead ends with the tombs standing shoulder-to-shoulder like neatly packed cartons. An occasional dome or minaret breaks the uniformity of the angles, and cenotaphs seem to sprout in open spaces like cloned sculptures in small public parks.

Unlike Western cemeteries, which serve as breeding grounds for anxiety and fear, City of the Dead has from its beginning integrated the world of the living into the sanctum of the dead. Egyptian superstition holds that a person's spirit lingers on after he dies, so the living feel obligated to keep the dead company. Since the cemetery was founded in the thirteenth century, wealthy families built huge mausoleums with an adjacent house specially designed for the caretaker and his family. Poor families gravitated to the tombs because they hoped proximity to the bodies of famous imams would guarantee safe passage to paradise, and over time a whole class of caretakers, or *ghafirs*, migrated from the countryside to the cemetery. But in the past two decades, fate took a strange diversion. Although the extreme wealth of the past built the cemetery, extreme poverty brings people there today.

Ironically, for poor people, City of the Dead is one of the more desirable places to live, with its uncrowded alleys and indolent atmosphere. Living conditions in Cairo are desperately overcrowded, with 129,000 people per square kilometer in some neighborhoods, a population density six times that of Manhattan. The dwellings in the cemetery are spacious by Cairo standards, with a courtyard, a few rooms, and in many cases running water and electricity. It is not as thickly populated as many of the slums nor as physically oppressive.

Throughout the cemetery the cenotaphs sit above ground, but the bodies are buried below in special chambers that separate



men from women. Each tomb has a hidden set of stairs which is covered by stone slabs and a layer of dirt. One day, an hour before a burial, a gravedigger led me down into one of these crypts, which had none of the eerie macabre feeling my Western instincts foreboded. After removing my shoes, I descended the stone stairs onto the soft dirt floor of the chamber. The air was thick with the rich smell of earth and moisture, not the stench of death and decay. To either side, a room contained several lumpy muslin sacks, within which lay the remains of the men, women, and children buried there. By now these cloths were little more than bags of bones, resting heavily on the ground, slowly disintegrating to dust.

The Koran instructs Muslims to bury their dead within twenty-four hours, and everything surrounding death rituals in Egypt reflects the humility and austerity of Islam. The body is carefully washed and wrapped in a simple muslin shroud, a series of Koranic verses are recited, and it is placed directly in the ground without a coffin. What a reversal from the unnatural primping and preening of Western cadavers, and how far removed from the velvet-lined, brass-handled vaults that sit impenetrably beneath Western cemeteries!

On a blistering afternoon, a quarter of a mile from the cemetery, a group of men marched down the highway with a wooden coffin hoisted on their shoulders. They moved with violent haste, rocking the box from side-to-side while honking cars sped past. Beneath an overpass, a group of women cloaked in black waited for the procession while an elderly woman wailed, her shrill cries echoing in the concrete tunnel. As the coffin passed, one of the men grabbed her by the shoulder shouting, "Stop that. You'll curse his soul. You should be happy he's joining Allah." She muffled her cries and followed the march to the grave. There, the women waited outside as the men lifted the body from the box and placed it in the ground in one sweeping move.

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cross town, in a dilapidated turn-of-the-century mansion, Mahmoud Sabit drew on a cigarette, his lanky frame slunk back in a chair. The mansion, like his family's prominence, was gradually eroding, turning into a shadowy reminder of Egypt's proud past. Sabit, whose family owns four mausoleums in City of the Dead, is a descendent of the Mamelukes, the mercenary soldiers who took control of Cairo in 1250 and whose bodies are interred in some of the cemetery's most elaborate tombs and mausoleums.

Known as superb horsemen, the Mamelukes were purchased as young boys from nomadic Turkish tribes. They were taught to defend the Egyptian caliphs whose power was constantly under attack. Unlike slaves, they came willfully to their adopted homes where they hoped to reap the benefits of Cairo's immense wealth. When they had mastered the use of bow, sword, and lance on horseback they were freed, although most stayed in the employ of their patrons out of devotion and obligation. Without loyalty to the state, a constitution, or the army as a whole, these professional soldiers became free agents once their patrons died, and ultimately they became the de facto rulers of Egypt, usurping power for themselves.

These days, even Mameluke blood does not open doors in City of the Dead, and Sabit has been reduced to battling officialdom to regain title to his family tombs. After Egyptian



A turabi, or caretaker, can hold the keys to as many as 400 graves.

independence in 1952, his family trust, along with thousands of others, fell into the sticky grip of government hands. From the decrepit look of the tombs, nothing has been done to maintain them since then, and one of Sabit's tombs has a family living inside without his approval. He has spent the past year filing forms, hunting down official seals, and greasing the palms of every player along the way.

Perhaps the greasiest palm to date belongs to the *turabi*, or caretaker, who oversees one of the tombs. *Turabis* are like mafia dons who sometimes oversee several hundred graves, determining who lives where, who gets indoor plumbing, whether a tomb gets a second floor, where to position new graves, and who wins the contract to build them. In essence, nothing happens without the *turabi's* approval, even the repossession of a family plot.

Masters at the concept of fee-for-service, many *turabis* have done well for themselves, like Fathi el Demerdech, a neatly manicured man who drives an emerald green Mercedes from his home in suburban Maadi to his office in City of the Dead. He sat beneath a trellised courtyard in front of his two-story office

**Next Page: Grooming in the street. Much of daily life takes place in public due to overcrowded homes.**



*Menufi, the pigeon man, breeds pigeons, which are a staple of the local diet.*

with a mobile phone by his side and a gold watch poking out from beneath his tan leisure suit.

"Years ago, many *turabis* couldn't read or write, but now most are educated," he said, adding that he had sent all three of his sons to college. "My family has been in the business for more than three hundred years, but now our country looks down on *turabis* because they have a bad reputation."

Many caretakers earned that reputation through greed and disrespect for the dead, and horror stories abound about *turabis* who have sold burial sites to more than one family or who rented out tombs as apartments without the owner's consent. The worst stories entail cadavers being sold to young medical students who pay hundreds of dollars for a good specimen. Of course, every *turabi* feigns horror at inferences of wrongdoing — even one I knew who had been taken to court by the owner of a tomb who wanted to evict the family living there without his consent.

Like the Mamelukes before them, the *turabis* were brought to Cairo from rural areas to maintain order over the aristocracy's land holdings. And like the Mamelukes, over time they have come to consider that property their own and have become the *de facto* heirs of City of the Dead. Regardless of propriety, they decide which tombs will be occupied and how much rent to charge, if any. And because Cairo's housing shortage is so dire,

they have been able to write the rules in an unprecedented battle for human survival.

The recent sociological study conducted by Dr. Saad shows that the average rent in City of the Dead, ten dollars a month, is comparable to the city-wide average and higher than most rents in the rest of Old Cairo. Arcane rent-control laws allow some people to pay a couple of dollars a month for spacious apartments while other families cram into one-room hovels. In a perverse twist of

economics, more than one million new apartments sit empty in Cairo because speculators cannot get their asking prices.

Over the past few years the government has been trying to rectify the problem, encouraging Cairenes, including the cemetery's residents, to move to subsidized housing in new satellite cities outside Cairo. But these cities are inconvenient and have not had the appeal the authorities envisioned. The government is also trying to stimulate building and raise the prices on rent-stabilized apartments. "But a proposed law that would raise rents to market value could cause a revolution," explained Nabil Omar, an editor for *Al Ahrām* newspaper. So while speculators' apartments sit empty, the living conditions of the poor continue to deteriorate and the current regime has all it can do to maintain the status quo.

For Mahmoud Sabit, who had already spent a year trying to reclaim his family tombs, there were still unforeseen bureaucratic mine fields and government-issue hoops to pass through. In his office cum archive, he thumbed through one-hundred-year-old deeds and crumbling ancestral wills, the dust accumulating under his fingernails as he searched for missing signatures. He devoted hours every day trying to keep up with the government's insatiable appetite for writ-

*continued on page 61*



*Impromptu soccer games spring up in many alleyways due to lack of space for a proper field.*



## Where Life and Death Sleep Side by Side *continued from page 10*



\$550. That is not to say that many people in the cemetery do not live in abject poverty. They do. But a growing percentage receive a university education, and health standards have dramatically improved. Modern amenities such as telephones, washing machines, and television sets are increasingly common, and a handful of schools are outfitted with computers. Even so, the village mentality still prevails.

For Wataneya, who has lived in City of the Dead for seventy years and whose eleven children

*Left: Roses nursery school has as many as 80 children in three cramped rooms.*

*Below: A grave digger takes a tea break against a cenotaph.*

ten permissions and rubber stamps, the consumption of which bloats Egyptian bureaucracy into paralysis.

Sabit slouched back in his chair, his features accentuated by a sweep of prematurely silver hair, and explained that one of his family tombs was filled with heirlooms to which he could not gain access. Another had been converted into a motorcycle storehouse; evicting the squatters that lived there would be the final act in an unnecessarily drawn-out epic.

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**O**utside the tall wooden doors of a tomb, a small pick-up truck is piled high with boldly patterned comfy chairs. Through the doors, in a large courtyard, a hive of twenty workmen busily cut, stuff, assemble, and sew chairs and sofas, preparing them for a pricey department store across town.

The owner of the factory, Mosin Abd el Hakkim, surveys the craftsmen as he wanders through the various rooms of the tomb. In the cavernous main hall, heaps of chair skeletons rest haphazardly on top of the cenotaphs, a layer of dust coating their surface. Mosin moves his loafered foot over a raised tile in the floor and assures me, unconvincingly, that the dead bodies have been removed from the grave below our feet. The owner of the tomb, he explains, now lives in Paris and rents the space out for \$150 a month. Since the factory nets more than \$300,000 a year, a small fortune by Egyptian standards, Mosin plans to open a second factory nearby. Born and raised in a tomb himself, Mosin has done so well financially that he has bought an apartment in the tony district of Maadi, south of central Cairo.

Mosin is a member of the small, but growing, *nouveaux riches* in the cemetery. According to Dr. Saad's study, some thirty percent of the people in City of the Dead earn close to \$1,800 per year, while the national per capita income is only



and 123 grandchildren were all born there, the old ways are sacrosanct. She sits hunched in her chair, her large breasts drooping to her knees, her coy smile revealing what remains of her bottom teeth. Like many of the cemetery's residents, Wataneya believes in *zaars*, healing ceremonies that are supposed to exorcise the evil spirits from a sick woman's body. Although most Cairenes consider the custom an old-fashioned form of village voodoo, *zaars* are a common ritual in City of the Dead.

In a make-shift tent outside the family home, a group of musicians begins strumming and drumming, singing an indecipherable mix of ancient songs, Koranic verses, and nonsensical chants until Wataneya's sick daughter feels compelled to dance. In the climax of a successful *zaar*, women have been known to tear the clothes from their bodies, desperately trying to release the spirits. The rhythms and dances of a *zaar* are distinctly black African, not Middle Eastern, and it is not surprising that most Islamic institutions condemn the ritual.

Wataneya wears a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. When she removes them, she reveals thick cataracts clouding her eyes. She points to her eyes and says that *zaars* helped her to see when her



75-year-old Wataneya has lived in the cemetery her whole life.

vision started to go. "Even if I have to sell my clothes to pay for a *zaar* it's worth it," she says.

Not everyone in the cemetery believes in *zaars*, like Menufi Said Menufi, a pigeon breeder who lives down the alley from Wataneya. In a bright blue room with a queen-sized bed and a persistent television set, Menufi pulls a plastic bag off the shelf and begins rummaging. The bag is filled with ticker tapes of paper, which he unravels one-by-one and passes on for inspection. The strips of paper show the results of an echocardiogram Menufi has had at the hospital and he passes them on with gleeful pride as though they were prized trophies.

He then hands me the doctor's report, which explains in English that Menufi has "coronary heart disease" and hypertension. He has been prescribed three different drugs for daily consumption. As we sit and sip peppermint tea, Menufi carefully removes his precious pills from a small plastic bag and swallows them like communion wafers. He meticulously refolds the echocardiogram banners and replaces the entire medical treasure trove back on the shelf.

Modern medicine and improved health care are increasing the life expectancy of the residents of the cemetery. Home births are now at-



Anything goes at the cemetery's Friday junk market.

**Opposite:** Men carry a body to a grave where it will be buried in only a simple shroud without a coffin.



tended by trained nurses rather than midwives, and a family planning clinic is beginning to make an impact on birth rates. Nationally, infant mortality has dropped fifty percent over the past decade, according to the National Population Council, and childhood diarrhea is being combated aggressively. "When a woman has eight children and four of them die, she keeps having children. When you save a child's life, a woman believes in family planning," explains Bahira Moktar, a journalist for *Al Ahram* who specializes in population issues.

Egypt's population crisis is so severe that Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak created a Ministry of Population in October, 1993, the first new ministry in modern Egyptian history. This initiative was as much a public ploy to win more international aid as it was a political tactic to push through family planning programs. Dr. Maher Mahran, who has an impressive track record as the head of the National Population Council, was appointed minister and immediately sent to New York to make a presentation at the United Nations. "Population won't be a matter of private opinion anymore; it will be on the national agenda," explains Bahira Moktar.

But old customs die hard, and on the main square inside City of the Dead, next to the Imam el Shafei mosque, a small one-room shop with dusty orange curtains and an old metal barber's chair is familiar to every resident. A huge poster of former president Sadat hangs above the entrance to the shop and inside, the owner, Anwar Mohamed, sits on a red vinyl couch waiting for

customers, his hand anchored confidently on his hip while he draws on a cigarette. Next to him, on a small metal table, is a pair of surgical scissors, thickly crusted forceps, and a large tin filled with cotton.

Anwar's shop is a *metaharati*, or "cleaner" shop, where young boys and girls are circumcised. "It only takes a minute or two," Anwar says as though as he were talking about trimming toe nails. "I'm a professional so there's only a little blood." Anwar has a large stubble-covered face and gray chest hair pokes out above the top of his T-shirt. "I don't use stitches like they do in the hospital, so it's much faster and much better." His large sausage-like fingers flick the cigarette ashes out the door and he settles back onto the couch.

Using only a topical anesthesia and watered-down antiseptic, Anwar performs his surgery the way his father and grandfather did before him. He lifts up the scissors and encrusted forceps to demonstrate the procedure for me and he explains that he always works with a strong helper who can hold the child down. Anwar claims he has ten to twenty customers a day at the beginning of the school year, and he even makes house calls if the price is right.

Anwar circumcises baby boys within the first week and girls around the age of six. Female circumcision is so important that he is willing to perform the operation up until a girl's wedding day. "It's good for them," he says. "Otherwise they will desire sex all the time."



*In the absence of alcohol, wedding couples toast with a different brew, Sport Cola.*

Female circumcision has no religious basis but holds a tremendous cultural grip throughout the Arab world. According to the United Nations, more than one million women, mostly Muslim, have undergone circumcision in more than twenty-five countries across the central belt of Africa as well as Yemen, Oman, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In City of the Dead the practice is universal.

Anwar points to the framed photocopy of his official government permission on the wall and says not one of his customers had ever had medical complications. "That's because I am a professional," he reiterates, and then he stamps out his cigarette butt on the floor next to a grimy plastic garbage pail used for medical waste.



*A glass factory is one of many small industries that thrive in the cemetery.*

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Only once in Islamic Egypt has a woman taken control of the country and dictated the national agenda. It was 1250, at the eve of the Mameluke empire, and Sultan Al-Salih Ayyub received word that the French king, Louis IX, had sent his army of Crusaders to capture Egypt. Ayyub, who was suffering from advanced tuberculosis, amassed his army of Mameluke soldiers midway between Cairo and Alexandria and instructed them to lay in wait for the invaders. But before the Crusaders arrived, Ayyub died in the arms of his favorite wife, Shajarit al-Durr, "Spray of Pearls."

A courageous woman of tremendous cunning, Spray of Pearls conspired with the Mameluke general to keep her husband's death a secret until the battle was over and her son could return from abroad to claim the throne. When the Crusaders eventually attempted a surprise attack, they were met by the Mameluke forces, 10,000 strong, who stormed the cavalry and cut them to pieces.

Spray of Pearls' son finally returned from abroad, but he proved to be an ingrate, given to youthful arrogance and excessive drink. He was assassinated soon after his arrival and his mother assumed the throne. When the caliph of Syria heard the news, he sent a scathing letter to Cairo saying, "Unhappy is the nation governed by a woman. If you have no men I will send you one." Eager to retain control, Spray of Pearls married her military commander, thus opening the door for Mameluke rule.

Centuries later, the patriarchal system is still firmly entrenched in City of the Dead, and a young girl goes from the strict supervision of her father to the domination of her husband, rarely

having an opportunity to make decisions for herself. In less educated families, a woman's worth is determined by the number of children she bears, and a barren woman is considered the lowest form of human tragedy. Once a woman becomes a wife, she is expected to stay home all day, and the majority of women who do work, work at home, in one of the countless cottage industries inside the tombs. The social order is changing, but at a glacial pace, not even feigning to keep up with the relatively progressive developments in the rest of Cairo.

Several mornings a week, Resha Gamel el Din's father drives her to Cairo University, where she studies geography. After taking the bus home at the end of the day, Resha, her two sisters and mother stay within the walled complex of their home, not daring to leave the house even to visit a friend down the street. Resha's father, who works two jobs with a pharmaceutical company, comes home late most days and eats his supper in the courtyard while the women wait for him to finish before taking their own meal.

"My father is a very oriental man," says Resha, her broad smile revealing a bold set of white teeth. "I'm afraid when he comes home he will be angry to find strangers here talking with his daughters." In the meantime, Resha and her sisters scurry about to find chairs, serve tea, and practice their English with unveiled excitement.

The women of the Gamel family are virtual captives in the house, and other than school, they spend their days tending the chickens, preparing meals, and watching television shows like *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Resha's situation is typical of the conflict between the old and the new worlds that converge in City of the Dead. She is earning a degree in order to become a teacher, but she would rather get married, have two children, and not work at all. "When I marry I won't have any say. My father will decide," she says without the slightest hint of resent-



ment. Then she asks if I have seen *The Bodyguard* with Whitney Houston.

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**W**hen the young Mamelukes completed their training, they were granted their freedom along with a plot of land. Over time, they began to amass wealth that was commensurate with their military might, and in turn, they bought slaves of their own, helping to perpetuate the Mameluke system. Alliances formed between members of the same household and antagonisms festered between rival houses, causing rampant factionalism that would eventually corrupt their ability to rule.

For 267 years, the Mamelukes led one of the most tumultuous reigns in Egyptian history, with a relentless series of successions, abdications, intrigues, plots, and poisonings. They governed over an unwieldy spate of invasions and revolts, and their constituents suffered plagues that were said to wipe out as many as 20,000 people in one day. Calling themselves sultans, after the Arab word for power, the various Mameluke leaders alternated between greed and jurisprudence, cruelty and benevolence, instilling fear and respect in their followers and their enemies alike.

In keeping with the tenets of Islam, their adopted religion, the Mamelukes built and endowed mosques and schools, and they encouraged the spread of higher education and religious training. Their extreme wealth gave rise to great Saracen art and architecture, as well as an excess of frivolous riches. Bowls and dishes of silver and gold, intricately woven carpets, sensual stained-glass windows, and elaborate tapestries adorned their palatial buildings. At home, their exquisite robes, perfumed beards, and the seductive smell of frankincense bespoke the sensual pleasures of a confident ruling class.

When Mameluke leaders died, their bodies were interred in magnificent mausoleums worthy of pharaohs. Throughout their cemetery, elegant domes undulate across the skyline and minarets rise from the desert sand in piercing slender streaks. The Mamelukes guided Egypt through the Middle Ages, a time when Europe was sinking beneath religious oppression while Egypt nurtured an insatiable appetite for learning. Their final resting ground, the *arafa*, was a testament to the fortitude and wealth that had paved the way for modern Cairo.

From their privileged position, in an era of boundless optimism, the

Mamelukes never could have predicted the destitution and poverty that would plague Cairo today. They could not have known that more than one million new Egyptians would be born each year and that eventually people would spill over into the cemetery for lack of anywhere else to go. They could not have guessed that one day, the living would outnumber the dead in their opulent cemetery.

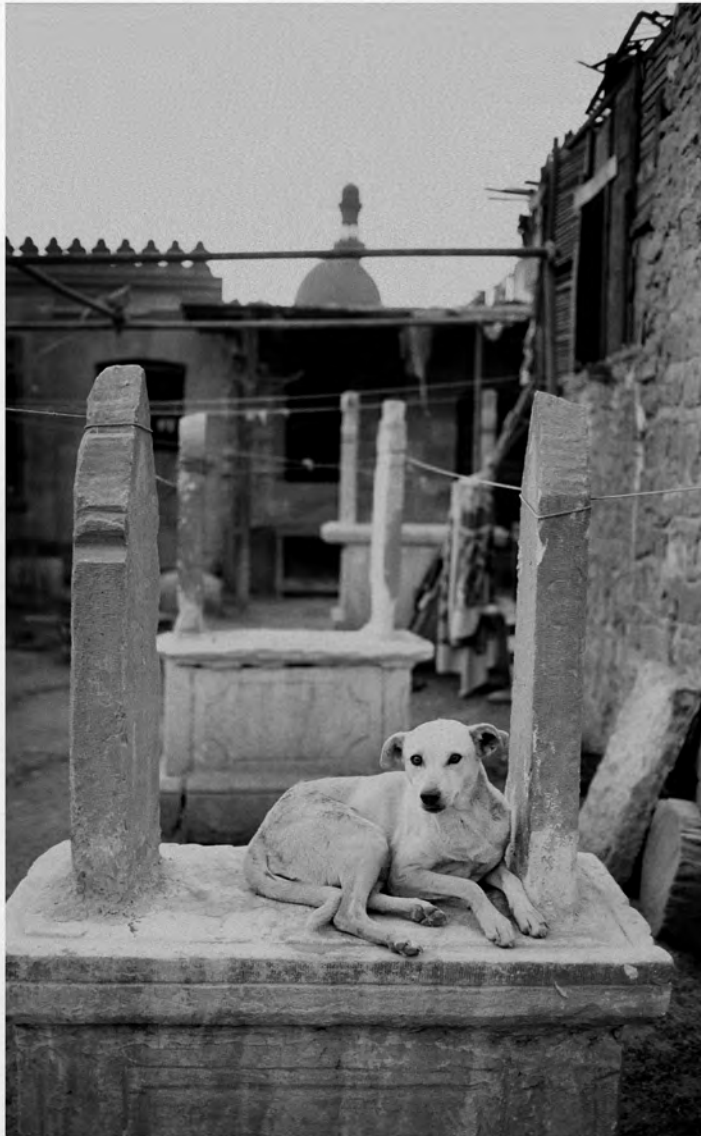
Today, tombs that were designed to house a single family teem with bare-bottomed children, chickens, and goats. Soccer balls fly where the relatives of the deceased used to pay their respects every week, and tattered laundry floats between the cenotaphs, obscuring the names and prayers engraved on weather-beaten surfaces. Where horse-drawn carriages used to deliver weekly visitors, sooty buses honk their way down paved roads, and on a once contemplative lane among the tombs, a Friday junk market overflows with the refuse of modern society looking to be reborn.

Every Friday morning in City of the Dead the *muezzin* broadcasts the call to prayer. Gradually men file into the Imam el Shafei mosque, leaving their shoes outside by the door. Imam el Shafei, the founder of one of the four orthodox schools of Islamic jurisprudence, is perhaps the most revered saint buried in the cemetery. Men gravitate to the mosque in a slow steady stream, spreading mats and newspapers on the pavement out front once the inside fills to capacity. Neat rows of seated bodies obediently face east while the market flows around them.

The men stand for final prayers, moving their lips in supplication, their eyes lowered. They kneel in unison and touch their heads to the hard ground, leaving a permanent indentation in the foreheads of the devout. Friday prayer is perhaps the only time in City of the Dead that order and uniformity prevail. But as



*The weekly market does not stop for Friday prayers at the Imam el Shafei mosque.*



***Local superstition has it that dogs scare away the ghosts.***

soon as the prayers end, the men move in random directions and the market swallows the pious back into its folds.

The market swarms well into the afternoon, churning with the vitality and noise of a bustling bazaar. A woman passes by with two turkeys under her arms, a child screams for its mother while a donkey cart forces its way through the layers of people. Young girls examine colorful head scarves while men suck on long sheesha pipes in the tea shops, arguing over their favorite soccer teams. Life goes on in City of the Dead as though immortality were merely a matter of superimposing new faces on the same old situations.

"Nothing has changed here in a hundred years, except maybe the bread used to be better," says Abd el Aziz Saleh, the grand *turabi* who oversees all the *turabis* in the cemetery. "My sons are always trying to get me to live with them in Maadi, but I refuse. I love living here. I was born here." He will die there, too, in a familiar place where life and death coexist side by side, and the rate of change crawls to an ancient pace.

"*El aish abqa min el mayet*," I was told. In Egypt, "the living are more immortal than the dead." ■