

# The Brightest Sky

By Aditi Sriram



Emine had grown up in New York City and thought she could handle anything. No street was too crowded, no skyline too bright, and no parade too loud. She owned the city, and she was in command. The city was a part of her.

Or so she thought. When Emine traveled to Cairo for a two-week vacation, she wasn't prepared for what happened the moment she stepped off the plane. The heat hit her like a slap on the face. The dust found her eyes and nose immediately, and clogged them. Taxi drivers at the airport clamored for her attention, shouting and barking at her and each other in Arabic, trying to convince her to come with them. "Best price," they insisted in thick accents, looking at her eagerly. "For you—best price."

But Emine was determined to adapt to the city's frenetic energy. On her first evening in Cairo, she took a stroll from her hotel to the banks of the Nile, and watched the boats bobbing lazily on the water. Away from the traffic, people strolled and laughed quietly; the palm trees whispered in the wind, and Emine felt calmer. She watched the sun set, a deep red orb that sank into the clouds and then disappeared behind distant minarets, casting the evening in meditative hues of pink and purple. Emine relished the sight; it was nearly impossible to witness such a sight in New York City.

After a week of sightseeing in and around Cairo, Emine felt like she had a handle on the city. She knew all the second-hand bookshops and the metro. She had sugary crepes for breakfast. She listened to the calls to prayer from the many mosques. She could count up to ten in Arabic, which made bargaining and ordering food a little easier. And she could recognize

the stray cats that lazed outside her hotel. It was time for something new, Emine thought. A tour operator down the street had approached her a few times, advertising all kinds of trips on the Nile, to the Pyramids, and into the Black and White Deserts. The last adventure had caught her eye ever since she saw the pictures in the brochure, and Emine decided she would do it before her trip was up.

The following week, Emine joined two South Korean tourists and a friendly Bedouin guide, and together they drove 250 kilometers into the deserts. The Black Desert contained black volcanic rocks, whereas the White Desert contained white chalk rocks. The setting sun set the sky on fire, which she was used to, but what came next startled her completely: stars! Stars everywhere, and not at all like the few stars she could see in the New York City sky! These stars twinkled and nearly danced above her. Every few minutes, a shooting star whizzed by.

Her guide explained they were deep enough in the desert that no manmade light could interfere with the natural light in the sky. Compared to New York City's skyline, there was absolutely no electricity around her for miles. As a result, it looked like millions of people were taking pictures from the sky—each star a camera flash. Some stars blinked more brightly than others, and the guide told her they were planets. He took out a high-powered telescope, through which Emine could see Saturn and its rings. She was amazed at how rapidly it moved out of focus, because it was orbiting the sun so quickly. Emine fell asleep counting not sheep, not stars, but *shooting* stars. She had easily seen ten that night—more than she had ever seen before in her life.

In the morning, Emine was up early to watch the sun rise. The red ball was bigger than she had ever imagined, and Emine understood that, compared to the stars she had seen the night before, it was so much closer to planet Earth. Even as the sun rose higher in the sky, she could make out other stars twinkling faintly in the fresh morning sky and knew she would remember that sunrise forever.