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From Majority to Minority

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FROM MAJORITY TO MINORITY

By Mackenzie Evan Smith

I can feel sweat saturating my clothes and dripping down my legs as I push past crowds of people and enter onto a busy roadway. It's 1 p.m. in Cairo, Egypt and I have just left my Arabic class at the Fajr Language School. I step into oncoming traffic and hail a taxi. I catch a driver's eye and after haggling for a fair price, I am off: racing through the streets of Cairo, life is teeming around me as the taxi speeds past donkeys, buses, and throngs of people.

As I exit the taxi, people stare, jaws agape, as I make my way home. I live in a part of Cairo that tourists do not frequent and I have come to learn that a fair-haired young woman walking alone is a rare sight that demands attention. I have traveled to more than 25 countries and I have never



felt more out of place than here in Cairo. Being a minority is something I don't often experience in the United States and I value the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective. Everyone is a minority somewhere, and for me, that place is certainly Cairo, Egypt.

Cairo is an irresistible conglomeration of Middle Eastern and Western cultures coinciding in a sprawling city of 30 million people. I came here to study Arabic and I have grown fond of the strange dichotomy between new and old, Middle East and West, and conservative and just plain crazy. Contradictions are everywhere: on television, rappers star in music videos with scantily clad women while on the street women wear the hijab. At the beach, some vacationers swim fully clothed, while others parade around in string bikinis. I feel at times confused as to how a young American woman fits into this cultural melee.

As I walk towards home, children are screaming and playing in the street, and women are selling Pita bread and sugarcane juice. The air is thick with heat, sweat and life. A man in a passing car sees me and yells, "Marry me," before peeling off in a cloud of dust. I ignore his behavior and smile to myself. At times the constant heckling gets on my nerves, but I never feel threatened since men's comments here are usually jovial.

I finally enter my building and climb five flights of stairs to my apartment. As my front door swings open, I hear a muezzin calling the Islamic faithful to afternoon salat. The sound radiates from the Mosque across the street as I stand in my doorway, transfixed, listening to the muezzin's peaceful call. Once again I am reminded that I am in a different world, far from home, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

