

Bastet

By

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It was the marriage counselor who had suggested they go to Egypt.

“You’ve been to Paris, London, Rome... Hawaii too, I think you said.” Barbara Craig nodded.

“Why not Egypt, the land of the pharaohs and the sphinx? Ride a camel, cruise the Nile, see Cairo. You might fall in love all over again.”

Not likely, thought Barbara; we’re bored and unhappy – at least she was -- wherever we are because we’re together. Walter seemed oblivious to her misery and hadn’t wanted to see a marriage counselor. “Why should we?” he said. “I think we have the perfect marriage.” Perfect for you, Barbara said to herself. She told the counselor they’d think about an Egyptian trip, thanked him, and left.

They drove home without speaking, heading north to Tarrytown. Barbara looked at Walter, who was driving, and wondered what she had ever seen in him. She knew it wasn’t the red moustache he was so proud of (he pulled out the occasional gray hair with tweezers). Walter loved telling people at parties, “It’s a strange thing, my hair is brown but my moustache is red, while my sister’s hair is red –“

“And her moustache is brown?” someone had said. Barbara had nearly laughed, while Walter blushed furiously and seemed to be examining the olive in his martini.

And then there was the Cornell baseball cap Walter insisted on wearing everywhere. He kept hoping someone would stop and say, “Oh, did you go to Cornell, too?” But only one time had this happened, when a younger man said that he, too, had attended the school, and then added, “I wanted to go to Yale, but I guess their standards are higher.” She could almost hear Walter grinding his teeth.

In any event, they would be married 25 years in June, and she supposed many of her friends would congratulate her, not knowing how unhappy she really was. One friend, Leslie Pomerance, certainly knew; Walter and his many flaws came up in conversation every time they met, which was weekly, at the Riverside Café.

“You could get a divorce,” Leslie urged her between sips of mocha. “There’s nothing stopping you – you’d get a nice settlement, you could move anywhere you wanted. You’re doing what, volunteering at the animal shelter and hospital? You could do that anywhere.”

Barbara didn’t answer right away, but turned her head to look at the Hudson, where a freighter was moving slowly upstream, its steel hull and blue funnels reflecting off the water in the sunlight.

Leslie was right, of course, Barbara thought, but she knew something her friend didn’t know, that Walter would agree to a divorce, though she knew he would be more mystified than hurt. There had been no children, so an amicable split seemed reasonable. But Barbara hated the prospect; it smacked of failure.

“The fact is,” said Barbara, “a divorce would affect me more than it would affect him. He’d keep on selling his bonds, and find another sucker to care for him.” She paused. “Besides, who would get Cinderella?” she added, referring to their Siamese cat. “We’re both so fond of her.”

Variations of this conversation were repeated almost every time they met, so Barbara called a halt to their lunches for a while. The next day when Walter came home she brought up the Egyptian trip.

“Why should we go there?” he said, irritably. “Just because some young pup with a degree on his wall suggests it? What does he know? He’s probably not even married.”

“Whether he is or not, it’s still an excellent suggestion,” Barbara replied. “You can take some time off from selling bonds. You said business is slow right now.”

“It would have to be, with the stock market going crazy,” Walter grumbled. “All right, I have a week coming, but we’d better go soon – summer must be murder over there.”

Barbara booked the tour, six days and five nights. They would fly from JFK to Cairo and stay at the Ramses Hilton when in the city; the tour would take care of the other details.

“You’ll be so glad we did this,” Barbara assured her husband as they boarded the plane.

“Whatever makes you happy,” Walter answered, with an air of great sacrifice. Barbara settled into her seat and pulled out the book on Egypt she’d been meaning to read. Their gods – Ra, Isis, Osiris – weren’t like the Greek gods, who seemed, well, almost human in their jealousies and suspicions. The old Egyptian gods seemed terrible, inexorable and vengeful in comparison. She shivered, put down the book and gazed out the window at a mountain of cloud.

Cairo was hot; the April sun was unrelenting, and Walter began complaining almost immediately. The hotel didn’t suit him, he couldn’t get good cellphone reception away from it, the market was soaring and bond sales were tanking

“Are we really safe here?” he wondered aloud as he and Barbara walked the busy streets. So many poor people, Barbara thought, almost as poor as their ancestors of 4,000 years ago. The food was an adventure – it leaned heavily on chickpeas, rice and beans – and after the first night dining with their fellow tourists the Craigs ate breakfast in the hotel. Then it was off by bus to

Giza to see the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid. Their guide was a native who rambled wonderfully in his good if slightly-accented English.

“My name is Masud,” he said, turning a full set of white teeth in their direction, “which in our language means poor.”

“A none-too- subtle hint for a tip,” muttered Walter Craig.

The Craigs saw the Sphinx, a weathered marvel, and the pyramid, but declined the pleasure of riding camels. Back in Cairo they walked hurriedly through the bazaars and contemplated the purchase of souvenirs, but Walter said there was no hurry. The next morning they took the long train ride to Aswan.

They stayed overnight in that bustling city, and in the morning toured the famous mosque and the crumbling monastery of St. Simeon; the mighty Aswan Dam towered in the distance. The following day they took the train north to Luxor, where they viewed the colossus of Ramesses II, and the court of Amenhotep II. “How did they ever build all this with the primitive tools they had back then?” Walter wondered aloud. He turned to their guide. “Hey, Masud! How did the old Egyptians do all this? They used elephants, didn’t they? They must have.”

“I do not know, sir,” said Masud, smiling politely. “I was not there at the time.” The group boarded a bus and followed crude, sandy roads to the nearby Valley of the Kings, where so many pharaohs sleep eternally.

Barbara would later say that the boat ride down the Nile was her favorite part of the trip; even Walter had to admit it was something. She lay in a deck chair with her eyes closed, a striped awning of green and white shielding her from the sun; the breeze off the river helped cool her.

She had made friends with Edna Mulholland, a single woman from Toronto, and Edna lay in the chair beside her, enjoying the ride and talking enough for both of them.

“It’s so wonderful to be out of Canada and the cold,” Edna was saying. “You people in New York must be well ahead of us, in terms of leaves and flowers,” Barbara nodded, half listening. “Years ago when the weather got warm enough I would walk with Stanley along the lakefront – Stanley is my former husband. Yes, I was married, but the marriage didn’t work out.” Neither did mine, Barbara thought, but did not say. She opened her eyes and looked at the unending riverbank; she could almost imagine men and women of ancient times plowing and gathering crops. Were their marriages happy, she wondered? Was there even marriage then? She closed her eyes. And the gods they prayed to – did the gods ever answer their prayers? She liked to think so.

They left the boat and boarded the train back to Cairo for the last day of their stay. Masud left them at the railroad station, and shook their hands as they got on the shuttle bus. He smiled sympathetically at Barbara and said, politely but untruthfully, to Walter, “It has been a pleasure, sir.”

The Egyptian Museum was as sumptuous as they had been led to believe, but also intimidating – even spooky – with its coffins, mummy masks and statues of the long dead. Walter was fascinated by the gold mask of Tutankhamun. “Why, that would be worth a fortune today,” he said, “even if melted down.” Their tour guide, Ziad, had blinked and looked shocked, and Barbara turned away, embarrassed.

At Barbara’s urging the couple dined that night away from the hotel, and then walked through the bazaars in search of appropriate souvenirs. “We’ve got to have something to bring back, to show people we’ve been to Egypt,” she said.

“Why?” asked Walter, with mock innocence. “Won’t they believe us?” She ignored him.

In the second shop they entered a small bald man, as withered as a mummy, or a raisin, came forward to greet them and show them his wares. Nothing seemed quite right; she didn’t need another bracelet, or a trinket. Then she saw the row of black statuettes, of cats sitting upright, eyes closed, on the shelf behind the counter. The owner followed her gaze and said, “Ah, you like Bastet? Very powerful. Goddess of fertility and protector of the home.” He took down one of the identical images and handed it to Barbara. “Not real ebony, but still very nice.”

She held it in her hand, smiled and said, “I think I’ll take it.” Walter looked doubtful, so she added, “It’ll look so exotic on the mantel over the fireplace.” Her husband shrugged, and handed the owner his purchase, a small pyramid made of brass, which he intended to use as a paperweight in his office.

The flight was long, and the jet lag proved lasting. When they had retrieved their car from the long-term parking lot Barbara said, “Now, before we do anything else we’ve got to stop at Mike and Rita’s and get Cinderella. She’ll be so lonesome for us, the poor baby.” Their friends, the Sandersons, had taken good care of the poor baby, who seemed as bored and indifferent to her owners as she was to everything else.

“Just like a cat,” said Walter. “Their thoughts, if any, are always elsewhere.”

That had been three weeks ago. The satisfaction, almost euphoria, Barbara had felt after their trip had dissipated, and Walter’s flaws seemed to have become more pronounced. She felt herself growing short-tempered with people she worked with at the hospital and animal shelter, and had not returned the marriage counselor’s calls.

She was dusting the mantel one day when she thought of what the souvenir seller had said: “Very powerful goddess.” Well, why not pray to Bastet? She held the deity’s image in her hands and murmured, “O divine Bastet, show your mercy to one such as I and direct me in the best way to proceed.” She then put it down, feeling a little foolish, for she considered herself a good Episcopalian, and a firm believer in the Man from Galilee.

May proved to be a hard month for Barbara Craig; Leslie Pomerance had announced that her husband was being transferred to San Antonio, and they were putting their house up for sale and moving at the end of June. In addition to that, her efforts to find paid employment at the places where she had been volunteering had come to naught, and Walter’s carping had increased. It was intolerable, which is why Barbara Craig one day found herself on her knees on the living room rug, praying to a forgotten god.

“Dearest Bastet, if you exist – if you have in your feline heart the smallest drop of mercy – help me now. Take my life or Walter’s, I don’t care which” – she was horrified by her own words, but continued – “I can’t go on like this. This isn’t living, this is suffocating.” She turned and saw that Cinderella had climbed up on the couch behind her and was staring fixedly at the statue. At that moment she heard Walter’s habitual shouted, silly greeting of “Anyone home?” She got to her feet, hoping her prayer – a bad prayer, perhaps --might be answered.

The next day was Saturday. Walter was up early, headed to the golf course to tee it up with three potential clients. Barbara sleepily felt the bed move, heard the bathroom door close, and the shower being turned on. She closed her eyes again, and woke up 15 minutes later by the clock; the shower was still running. She got up and tapped on the bathroom door. “Walter? Are you all right?” No answer. She opened the door and found an empty room, with the shower going full

blast. He must have forgotten to turn it off. She turned it off, and walked to the kitchen to see if he was getting something to eat. No Walter there, or anywhere else in the house, and their Lincoln was still in the driveway.

She went back to the bathroom. There were his pajamas on the floor, but was what that moving in them? Horrified and disgusted, she saw the snout of a mouse emerge from the pajama top. She panicked, ran back in the bedroom and jumped up on the bed. "Walter," she cried, "come here and deal with this creature!" She waited in vain for a reply.

The mouse came slowly across the floor, stopped, and stood on its hind legs, front paws extended like beggar's hands; it stared at Barbara as if it knew her. Barbara was repelled but intrigued; she blinked not once, but twice -- was that a strip of red hair underneath the black nose? A movement in the doorway caused her to look up; Cinderella was sitting upright, staring at her and the mouse. The mouse must have sensed the presence of an enemy, for it swiftly darted forward, and ran beneath the bed on which Barbara was kneeling.

It was then Barbara knew her prayer had been answered. "Come here, Cinderella," she cooed. "Mommy has something nice for you." She lifted the blanket that was dangling on the floor. "Here. Under here."