

THE EYE OF CAIRO

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**The unforgettable Fifi Abdou
makes a lasting impression...**

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A Night in the Eye of Cairo

A Lebanese friend used to say: "I knew you were coming - you were in my eye!" He would teasingly suggest he woke up that morning with a piece of grit in his eye that made it twitch and water and this infirmity was a sure sign I would soon be coming through the door. When he was being more charitable he would say that there are things seen once which are never forgotten for they are in the eye and the eye never forgets.

So imagine, if you will, one of Cairo's more beaten-up black and white taxis careering through the city at several minutes past midnight. In the front is our personal driver, a huge grinning bear of a man who is taking his duty as chaperone very seriously. Beside him is Emma, a pretty blonde student from Dorset whom we have kidnapped for the adventure, and in the back, myself and Kate. We've been in Cairo for nearly a week, and are just about ready for a night of Egyptian glamour...

"Who's your favourite singer, Sauri?" asks Kate.

"Hakim!" he says, grinning widely.

"We like Hakim, too." and "Why do you like Hakim?"

He turns round, slapping his hand to his heart.

"Because he is a man like me!"

Sure he is, Sauri, with his world-tours, and luxury penthouse. Sauri fishes in the wire-strewn hole in the dashboard that doubles as a glove compartment and pulls out a dilapidated tape. He shoves it into the cassette-player with one meaty hand, and the unmistakable strains of Hakim's *Nazra* blare out.

We're in a playful mood, so I start to dance around in the back of the taxi – elaborate shoulder jiving, Samia Gamal flicks, and chest-shimmies. Sauri, beaming, leans across to Emma in the front seat: "You have crazy friend. Crazy."

The Meridien Cairo is one of those polished brass and burnished wood hotels, where everything is concealed beneath marble floors, and behind featureless doors. Uniformed flunkeys and lift-boys glide about in gloved servility; doors open and close on well-oiled hinges; ornate luggage racks are wheeled by, looking for all the world like hostess-

trolleys for some valise-eating giant. I start to feel a little colourless, a little lacking in makeup, despite reassuring myself that this whole charade is a veneer of super-subtlety to create the impression that, in the Meridien's perfume-wafted air, no one would be graceless enough to sweat, or fart, or wear the wrong sort of tie. Despite all the polish, however, there is the inevitable Egyptian tang of after-shave and nicotine, which lends a certain downmarket male shabbiness. Time, I think, to "do" a floor...



The Maitre-d', immaculate in an Empire wing-collar, is graciously attentive. He whistles up a waiter to show us to a small side table, which, although not one of the long tables which radiate around the small curtained stage, is, nevertheless, centrally-placed, with an excellent view. We note that we are the only Westerners, the only party comprised entirely of women, and then, with some consternation, that the remainder of the audience seem to be the guests of an extended and expensive wedding party.

As we make ourselves comfortable, another waiter approaches with the set menu. It seems bizarre to be sitting down to a big meal at this time of the morning, and it can't do any good for the digestive system, but, as they say, when in Rome...!

The stage is still shrouded in faded pink curtains – for all the sophistication of the rest of the hotel, this penthouse cabaret club feels like a 1970s bordello. I idle away my time looking out of the window – the whole wall to my right is glass, falling away into blackness and the river below. Far away, the dipped sail of a white felucca drifts with the current like a sleeping swan. Across the river, advertising hoardings blink and pulse and cars continue to stream in dirty orange ribbons across the University Bridge. Behind the glass, the Meridien Cabaret bar is like the eye of the city: old, bleary, and veined with red, catching brief respite behind pink ruched lashes.

The last of the plates are taken away, and we sit back, nursing our glasses. A drum starts behind the curtain, one of those reverberating, speaking frame drums with tambourine attachments, and the Eye of Cairo rolls back to reveal a stage filled with musicians. I do a head count, and approximate around 42 persons crammed together. There are young lads and bonny girls, and three stout housewives in tight black dresses triangulating an old-fashioned microphone. The vast majority of the musicians, however, will never see 50 again, and the stage is a sea of white shirts, grey hair, and balding pates, fronted by a Buddha-eared Methuselah embracing a sagging accordion. They might not be the most prepossessing bunch of musicians, but there is no doubt that they can play. The noise is tremendous, with the drums

setting up an expectant, throbbing pulse. A side door opens, with a rather wobbly spotlight, and Fifi Abdou makes her entrance.

The first thing you notice is that she's not as tall as she appears in her publicity photographs, maybe 5'6" at most, and several inches of that her high-spiked stilettos and mane of lustrous brown-black hair. Hitching up her wide skirts like a Tudor lady-in-waiting, she runs girlishly up the little flight of steps onto the stage. Once there, she turns, draws herself up to her full height, and stands so that we can drink in her beauty. And we do. I am reminded of a leather-corseted dominatrix, a black-robed martyr at the stake, and of Venus Anadyomene rising from the waters, clad only in swirling draperies. She seems all and every woman at once, victor, virgin, and victim, Madonna and Morrigan. Her dress is black, with the sheen of satin, and cut like a Dior ball-gown. It's doubly slashed across the front, revealing youthful, shapely legs. Her belt is the colour of old gold, with only a few jewelled tassels intruding upon the darkness of her skirts. From this, black satin caresses the contours of her hips, accentuates the curves of her waist, and climbs to barely cover an opulent cleavage. A shawl neckline in old gold, and tight, black princess sleeves complete the outfit. Her skin has a creamy golden warmth, with only the merest suggestion of age encircling her neck. It is only then that I dare look at her face, and find it is every bit as extravagantly beautiful as the twenty-year old videos had suggested. It is the face of a film star, and would not look out of place next to Liz Taylor and Ava Gardner at just past their prime. She is made up with the lustrous lips and heavy eye make-up of a 1970's sword-and-sandal heroine: warm coffee colours to compliment the luxuriant youthfulness of her long hair. It is only when she turns sideways that you notice a certain taut peevishness about the corners of her mouth, a certain middle-aged fullness to the throat, and you suspect that, after all, it just might be a wig.... Even so, I am smitten with her. It is like seeing someone who has stepped straight out of the Arabian Nights, and, if such as she be flesh, and blood, and beautiful - then might not also flying horses, Captain Sinbad, savage rocs, and sirens be?

I cannot believe I am here. I look across at Kate, and she has the same rapt expression. Quite what Emma makes of this is anyone's guess.

Fifi runs artlessly from one side of the stage to another, holding coy poses for the audience before turning each time to encourage her band. Opa! At each turn the noise rises, becomes more frantic; and the mood in the room changes, as if everyone is leaning imperceptibly towards the stage, drawn into the spell she creates from sound, space, and black satin. As she moves, she seems to become less girlish; the pounding of the drums is mirrored in a heavy pulse running through her body, and her spine flexes into long curves, absorbing the swelling

rhythm. And the sound becomes so intense, so insane, that you would swear there wasn't room for a single beat more.

The stage shakes, the room spins, and like a storm riding time and the tides, Fifi Abdou takes control of her natural element. Part of me starts to count off moves: deep swerves, flat figures of eight, dishes, more swerves, and chest-drops with shimmies running up and down. There are lateral and vertical circles where the movement comes from her knees and hips, and then the same moves run across the face of her stomach, rippling and fluttering. Sometimes she's using her knees to power the movement, sometimes it comes from the angle of her heels; then the shoes come off and she shows you she can do the whole thing from start to finish on flat feet. Her upper body movements are, by turns, small and artful, and deep and emotional. There's a wonderful sequence where her shoulders rock back and forth for a count of three, and then hold the baladi pause on the fourth; the whole has a lazy, syncopated sexiness that left behind mere counting long ago. I sit open-mouthed and goggle-eyed. And then almost as soon as it started, it's over, and she stands, central stage, letting the waves of applause break over her.

After that, she works the crowd: welcoming some, and joshing with others. There's some business with a bouffant-haired lady which seems to be disparaging to this lady's beau. We try to ask the nearest waiter to translate for us, but he seems more than unwilling. The joke is probably veering towards blue... I am not entirely certain these waiters are treating us with the respect due to paying guests. I think we annoy them. Perhaps they wish we were not here tonight. Perhaps they cannot quite relax. This could be because we are three single women, or it could be, by sheer weight of numbers stacked against us, that we appear to have gate-crashed the wedding party...

Still, even if we don't understand a word of what she's saying, there is no doubting that Fifi has the whole crowd by its heartstrings. They sit, mesmerised like sparrows before a black mamba. I sit, wondering some more about the contradictions of this dance and this culture. I am watching the so-called richest woman in Cairo, in all probability then the richest woman in the greater part of Africa, and she is old, and ageless, cheap, and tawdry, and splendid. She's dancing again now, teasing and flirtatious, the perfect coquetry of her satin-clad curves setting a smile around the whole room. It's suave and understated, and yet also the most complex dance sequence I have ever seen. Fifi Abdou, you're a veritable wonder!

After this, there's Fifi's trademark stick-whirling – a show of such intimidating vehemence that one can almost feel the waiters flinch as the heavy cane whips by. There's also Fifi's trademark terrible costumes – a white mini-dress with see-through plastic crinoline, a

green 1930's pant-suit with Carmen Miranda turban, and a pink frilly floaty number in which she executes a veil dance with its various skirts. Finally she settles for a purple lycra galabeya that hangs from sheer net shoulders to just skim her ample cleavage with a heavy row of sequins. This last is twinned with some startling purple eye-shadow. The head waiter brings a card to our table. It seems a gentleman wishes to ply us with champagne. We politely decline, not knowing – or trusting – the required form of etiquette. Emma wants champagne, as does Kate, although her conscience would never allow it. Me, I don't really like champagne, so am not in the slightest disturbed. There's a bit more pestering, in which the head-waiter assures us that the gentleman in question is a highly respected business man who owns a string of hotels. I think I could quite happily throw the head waiter and his sneering disdain out of the highest window.

It now seems as if we've come to the unplanned part of the evening. First, a small monkey-faced boy comes to the front of the stage, wearing an immaculate white suit and bow-tie. Excruciatingly, he sings his way through what we have now come to recognise as "the wedding song", having heard it several nights running back at the Movenpick. Unfortunately, the small boy seems to know all the verses... The audience are, however, enchanted. One man tries to press money into the child's hand, but Fifi rushes in to prevent him.

Then bride and groom take the stage. In her platform shoes, the peroxide-dabbed bride is far taller than her slick-quiffed husband. They are both presented with microphones, and asked to sing. The girl has a nice voice, if occasionally flat from nerves. Her microphone doesn't seem to be switched on. Her spouse believes wholeheartedly in his own talent and serenades both his bride and the audience in a trussed-up voice of little compass. Then Fifi wheels on the cake-trolley, and poses for photographs with the happy couple. It's wonderful, but utterly beyond me!

Then there's a smatter of applause and a tall, tanned gentleman who looks like an extra from a 1950's beach movie takes to the stage. Fifi wheels the cake away, and begins to sweep the stage with a large broom that's appeared from nowhere, as if she's anxious to remove any crumbs before the distinguished gentleman can tread upon them. I'm not sure if she's playing a joke, or just doing what she normally does. She suddenly looks terribly mumsy!

"Who's he?" we hiss to the nearest waiter.

"Very famous!" says the man between clenched teeth.

"Yes, but who *is* he!"

The waiter shrugs. "He is famous man in Egypt."

The famous man with the high waist-band trousers picks up the

microphone and starts to sing. At the end of his first line, the audience bursts into suspiciously non-spontaneous applause. He has a “Tony Bennet hand”...

Then Fifi’s back on stage with a matching turban and sequined coat thrown over her purple galabeya. There’s a smoking lantern on stage, and she steps over it once or twice, holding out the skirts of her coat to absorb the perfume.

“What’s going on!” whispers Emma.

“It’s folkloric,” I answer, not wishing to go further with Mister Waiter listening, but thinking of one of my favourite Orientalist paintings, *Fumée d’ambergris*, a master-study in white and creams.

“Huh,” says Kate. “She looks like a brothel-madam.”

There’s a table set up next to Fifi, with a large water-pipe beside it. She takes up the long tail and begins to smoke. A young man comes out from the band playing fat metal castanets. She detaches the water-pipe and dances with it, whirling it round her head like a dance cane, and balancing it upon her hip, and turban. The audience goes wild as she returns to the table, reattaches the pipe, and blows a perfect smoke ring. Then she comes down into the audience, moving between the tables, and blowing smoke into the faces of the respectable gentlemen and their wives. Up goes Fifi’s eyebrow, and a plume of smoke comes from her right nostril. A tug on her right ear, and the rest comes out of the left. Did she really just do that? It’s deliciously funny, but I’m not sure I like her expression.

Eventually it’s our turn. Just as she gets to our table, she’s called away to the next aisle where the bride is now perched on the knee of an elderly gentleman, her skirts bunched around her thighs. She looks very tired. Fifi poses for photographs, all brightness and colour next to the wan girl in the meringue.

“She’s not coming to us!” wails Kate.

Photographs complete, Fifi makes her way at last to our table. Kate and Emma don’t know where to look as she repeats the trick with the smoke. I meet her eye. One eyebrow flicks up. I match the gesture, and grin: there’s a little ironic smile about the painted lips. She turns, gives a signal to the stage, and makes her way back through the tables to riotous applause and pounding music. There’s a little shilly-shallying on stage, a few hip-drops and shimmies, then she turns and looks backwards over one rounded shoulder. At this distance, you can’t see the paper-thin lines beneath her eyes, and she is, once more, an ageless beauty. She turns, sketches a move that’s half curtsey, half-bow, and the curtain comes down at last on the Eye of Cairo.

“Wow!” says Emma. “She was really something else!”

“No! I can’t believe I just did that!” wails Kate, “I just sat here like an idiot with my camera!”

Me, I laugh at myself for daring to raise my eyes to Fifi Abdou.

At last, we file out into the lobby and wait for the lift. The small child appears at a doorway, clutching a chocolate bar. I feel like singing and dancing myself, so I catch his eye and acknowledge him with a nod of the head. He places his small hand over his heart and bows back. We trade waves and wide smiles, although his has a shortage of teeth. One of the women in black appears behind him and pulls him back into the room.

We get into the golden lift and drop down several floors to the foyer. There are flunkeys everywhere, bowing and scraping. We attempt to be gracious, but it’s cropping four in the morning, and we’re past tired. Outside, a string of shiny vehicles ooze up to the doors to collect a parcel of beautiful people. Sauri obviously spots us looking lost, and insinuates his ramshackle taxi into the line. It’s a relief to climb in, kick off our shoes, and relax.

At this time of night, Cairo is almost deserted. There’s weird empty calmness about the place. Near the big roundabout we passed on our way in, a troupe of ragged boys of all ages play football. There’s a peach and orange mist hanging in the streets. A few black-clad women loom out of the darkness, shuffling on callused feet. A man with a donkey-cart piled high with what looks like sugar-beet keeps pace with the taxi, then falls back, waving his stick and shouting something unintelligible.

It is a time and a place that few will see. The twilight, homecoming world of Fifi Abdou, the richest woman in Cairo.



If it is possible to identify moments when everything changed, then this is one of them. From this moment belly-dance was not just a bit of fun, a bit of a giggle: it suddenly came with all sorts of questions: how, why, when, and what does it feel like to be a woman who dances.

For a generation - more - Fifi Abdou has been in the eye of Cairo. True, for some, she is the grit that makes the eyes blink and water and like no other she can make the eye grow round with disbelief and wonder, but it is true, never the less, what they say: A thing once seen is never forgotten.

It is in my eye - and will be forever.

