

Guardian Angel

When I was young, my guardian angel seemed real. I never saw her, of course, but there were pictures of her in my Catholic pre-school catechism, drawn with blond hair and a white robe with angel's wings. I had hoped to see her, but soon outgrew that childish belief.

I didn't actually see my guardian angel until thirty years later. She came to me in the form of a ten year old girl. She didn't have blond hair - her's was black, though I couldn't be sure under the blue bandana she wore. She did have a white robe of a sort, though unlike the pictures from preschool, her's was worn and dirty. She certainly didn't have wings, yet I have no doubt that she was my guardian angel.

The year was 1981. I was the Senior System Architect for a new computer we had just developed at NCR Corporation. Only two carefully handcrafted computers existed, and I was accompanying them both to NCR's worldwide sales offices. Our first stop, in Frankfurt, Germany had gone smoothly. The second leg of the trip was to Cairo, Egypt.

In Cairo, nothing was simple, and nothing moved quickly. Administrative and customs delays gave me weeks to prepare my two computers for a one-day exposition to the NCR senior sales staff from northern Africa and the Middle East. The setup took a day. Then I waited. What would I do? I explored Cairo.

Few roads had signs and there was no map for where I wanted to go. I had already seen the tourist landmarks - the Sphinx, the Great Pyramids, the Egyptian Museum. I wanted to see Cairo away from the tourist areas. I knew to leave the tourist areas meant to walk through a perimeter guarded by armed soldiers, and that once past that safety line, I was on my own.

I dressed as if I had no wealth on me, though in an Arab world it was clear was an interloper. I would walk in one compass direction, perhaps north, for an hour. Then east for an hour, then south, and finally west, returning in four hours to within sight of the Great Pyramids, which were conveniently located right outside my hotel room. Each day I would start in another direction and follow my pattern to return home. Some days this would take me to the marketplace, where live animals were selected and carried away. Other days I might find myself in a business district. Another day, following a different pattern, I made it entirely out of Cairo into the surrounding countryside. The extreme poverty and horrific conditions I had seen on the streets of Cairo did not extend into the countryside, which was quite peaceful and, especially near the Nile River, even beautiful.

One day, though, my walking path took me to a part of Cairo that did not feel safe. I wasn't paying attention as I walked, but suddenly I felt very aware that there weren't any people around. An ominous feeling swept over me. I knew I had to get out of there, but where? Straight ahead, in particular, looked like a very bad choice. But if I changed direction, I could easily become lost. I stood there motionless.

That's when she appeared. I didn't see her walk up. Suddenly she was just there, standing beside me. Usually when street children would approach me they would persistently ask me for "baksheesh", begging for a coin or two that meant little to me, a Westerner, but would be a fortune to them. But this young girl did not say a word. We both faced the same

direction, side by side, as if she was waiting to walk with me. So I started to walk and so did she, staying close to my side.

Then, as I was about to enter a particular street, she quickly walked in front of me, blocking my path. I would turn and proceed in a new direction. She would then walk with me some more until she felt she needed to redirect me again down a different street. I realized that she was directing my path, silently but effectively.

I don't know why I trusted her - something in her large, dark, knowing eyes, perhaps. I began to wonder as we walked if she was real. I carried a subminiature camera in my blue-jeans pants pocket. I slipped it up, out of my pocket as we walked just enough to snap a picture of her walking beside me.



After about 15 blocks on a zigzag path, the cityscape seemed safer. I noticed that I was walking in the same direction I had been facing when I realized I was entering a very bad part of Cairo some thirty minutes before. As I walked, now feeling much safer, my companion abruptly stopped. I went a few steps before I realized she was not at my side. I stopped and turned. There she stood. I realized what she had done for me and, though she did not ask, I offered her some of the Egyptian currency I carried. She declined with a shake of her head, but still not a word was spoken.

She stood still, and I could see that the extra time to safely navigate through that part of Cairo had put me behind schedule. Soon sunset would be upon me, and I wanted to make it back inside that armed soldier perimeter near the hotel before nightfall.

As I walked away, I thought about the young girl. I wondered if I had finally met my guardian angel. Had my camera captured anything at all along that Cairo street where she had walked by my side? The camera did capture her, and though I will never know her name, or why she never spoke, or why she chose to walk me to safety, I will always remember her. I'm probably one of the few people who have a picture of an angel.