



THE UPRISING IN EGYPT
CHANGED THE WORLD.
BUT BEHIND THE
HEADLINES WERE
PERSONAL STORIES—
SOME GOOD, SOME
BAD—ABOUT THE
PEOPLE WHO GATHERED
IN TAHRIR SQUARE

**SCENES
FROM A
REVOLUTION**

BY
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THE REVOLUTION NO ONE SAW COMING. A beaten, injured anti-Mubarak demonstrator holds a bloodied Egyptian flag.

ON a brisk afternoon in early January, I met Ahmed Salah on a busy street corner in downtown Cairo along the Nile River. I was interviewing Egyptians for a newspaper story about the epidemic of sexual harassment in the capital, and a journalist friend had recommended I hire Salah to translate. “Just don’t take him to any smoky cafés,” my friend said, “because he hates cigarette smoke.” In two-pack-a-day Cairo, I thought, this was a bit like meeting an L.A. resident who deplored sunshine. When Salah showed up, however, I saw that he had a persistent wheeze, and he explained that it came from spending many nights sleeping on cold bare floors in Egyptian police detention.

For more than a decade, Salah had worked as a political activist and organizer for various opposition parties and movements that had tried—but failed—to challenge President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled ruthlessly since 1981. At every turn, Mubarak’s all-powerful security services had stymied protests and punished activists like Salah with arrests and beatings. During one of his prolonged detentions, Salah staged a hunger strike that brought him enough renown that he was called to Washington to testify before a congressional committee about human rights in Egypt. But he was a marked man

in his own country, forever living in fear of his next run-in with the police.

After my interviews Salah and I found an open-air café tucked into an alleyway, sat on plastic chairs and sipped Cokes as he talked about revolution. About 40 years old, with glasses and a mop of curly black hair, Salah looked like an accountant, not a political rabble-rouser. But for half an hour he spoke passionately about the burgeoning popular uprising in the North African country of Tunisia and about his and his fellow activists’ plans to launch solidarity marches from multiple sites across Cairo in the ensuing weeks.

“I think something big is coming,” he said as we parted. I told him I’d stay in touch, but I thought he was doomed. It was conventional wisdom that nothing could topple the 82-year-old Mubarak, one of the Arab world’s most entrenched leaders and stalwart ally to five American presidents.

By the time we spoke again, the protests Salah helped organize had blossomed into the biggest popular revolt in modern Egyptian history.

I returned to Cairo on February 1 after a few weeks in Iraq, which suddenly seemed placid by comparison. In fact, although I had been globe-trotting for

seven years as a foreign correspondent for McClatchy newspapers, reporting from more than 30 countries and war zones from Somalia to Lebanon, little could prepare me for the particular chaos and uncertainty of revolutionary Cairo.

Since taking a six-month Middle East posting in September, I’d been using Cairo as a base—a safe haven where I could walk the streets, watch NFL games on satellite and abuse 24-hour fast-food delivery in between rougher assignments to Iraq and Sudan. Cairo was a big and frenzied metropolis of some 17 million people, yes, but by Middle Eastern standards it was also remarkably cosmopolitan, efficient and foreigner-friendly. A few weeks earlier my parents had visited from California, and we’d walked up and down the banks of the shimmering Nile until late at night.

Of course, we were reveling in the security that only a police state could guarantee. In his last days in power, Mubarak turned that security establishment on the people who were telling the world about the uprising: journalists like me.

Only one taxi driver I reached had been willing to meet me at the airport. The parking lot was a study in chaos. Large buses were double- and triple-parked, filled with American citizens booked on U.S.

government-chartered evacuation flights. Outside the departures area a sea of Egyptians and less fortunate foreigners sat on their luggage or pressed their noses to the locked doors, praying for a way out.

Yet again in this job, while so many people were trying to leave a place, I was trying to get in.

Memo (pronounced *mee-mo*, short for Mohammed) is a tough, leathery-skinned Bedouin with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut that gives him the look of an old boxer. He also curses like one.

“Fucking Mubarak, he wants to destroy this country,” he said as he grabbed my bags and hauled them out to his car. It was a clean new Chinese-made SUV, and it was blocked by a row of buses honking their horns.

Many years ago, as he told it, Memo lived in Colorado Springs, where he worked as an entry-level engineer for IBM. His first marriage, to an Arab American woman, fizzled after a few years. A second marriage didn’t work out either, and the vagaries of U.S. divorce law were too much for the descendant of an ancient clan of nomads to handle.

“Your country made my life too complicated,” Memo said.

It was one of the banal indignities of Egyptian life that a man who’d worked for one of the top firms in the United States could find no better job in his home country than driving a taxi. He rose before dawn most days to take up his post outside the Marriott, a five-star hotel built into a former palace, competing with dozens of drivers to ferry well-heeled tourists to the pyramids or bazaars of old Cairo for pitifully low fares. This was how I’d learned about Memo: My parents had hired him to take them around the city for half a day, for which they’d paid about \$12 with tip.

When he first saw me, he sized me up. “Good,” he said finally. “You look Egyptian.” With my dark complexion—my parents hail from India—I stood out far less in a crowd than fair-skinned journalists and TV people carrying big cameras. But I spoke no Arabic, so still I felt vulnerable.

“If we get stopped by anyone, just let me talk. Now let’s go,” Memo said, and he pulled onto the empty highway leading into the city.

Salah was one of the first people I called back in Cairo. He politely declined my offer to meet in Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the demonstrations.

“I look like a protester,” he said.

During the first days of the protests he was at the front of a crowd of people near the square when Mubarak’s riot police opened fire with rubber bullets, one of which struck him in the head. An

I COULD STAND ON MY BALCONY AND WATCH THE BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST.

Tahrir Square in Cairo became ground zero for the uprising. In an effort to quell the revolt, the government moved tanks into the city while demonstrators prayed, beat portraits of Hosni Mubarak with shoes and set cars on fire. Fittingly, *tahrir* means “liberation” in Arabic.



officer also broke his nose, so he now wore a big bandage on the middle of his face. Any pro-government thug roaming the streets would immediately recognize him as someone from what people were starting to call the Republic of Tahrir.

Before the uprising it didn’t take much to see that Cairo was simmering with problems—the strangest of which was the epidemic of sexual harassment of women. In a 2008 survey, four out of five Egyptian women reported being groped, rubbed, squeezed, teased, catcalled, ogled or otherwise treated inappropriately by strange men in public. Perhaps the most infamous case would occur at the end of the uprising, when CBS’s Lara Logan was sexually assaulted by a mob outside Tahrir.

When I began reporting on the phenomenon, the stories women told would make anyone blush.

A young brunette was reading a book inside her parked car one evening when a man walked up to her window and started masturbating. A young American friend, on her first night in the city, had a taxi driver thrust his cell phone into her hand when she went to pay her fare; on the screen was a picture of a naked woman with her legs wrapped around a palm tree.



What's wrong with the men in Egypt? Almost everyone blamed poverty, ignorance, chauvinism and religious hypocrisy. "Add to that corruption and poor law enforcement and you can easily see the whole picture," Marwa Rakha, who writes often on relationships and sexual culture in Cairo, told me. "The government is more concerned with putting out other fires: bloggers, Facebook demonstrations, [police abuse] victims, presidency-related rumors, student riots, workers' protests, new media exposés, opposition parties...."

She went on. But I got the point. Egypt, welcoming to outsiders and seemingly safe, was rotting on the inside.

"Protest view," the receptionist at the Ramses Hilton said with a smile when he checked me in. I had been told by reporter friends which rooms to ask for. Any number ending in six to 14 would have you facing south, overlooking Tahrir Square and, just as important, a good location for a satellite modem, which was the only way to transmit stories and pictures since Mubarak had shut down the internet in a bid to thwart the protests.

There's an oddly warm familiarity to a war zone hotel—the inevitably faded but ideally situated place that journalists commandeered in times of crisis after the tourists have decamped. In the lobby I saw old friends and familiar names. CNN was there, as were a few other American networks, *The Los Angeles Times* and an alphabet soup of European and Asian channels. One broadcast reporter complained that she kept getting knocked off her satellite feed because so many people were trying to connect.

"I can't stay on long enough to get through one goddamn live shot," she said.

My 19th-floor room was uninspiring, but the view more than justified the \$350 price tag. Tahrir Square was filled with demonstrators. For the next several days I could stand on my balcony and watch the battle for the future of the Middle East.

Alaa Al Aswany's dental office sits on the fourth floor of an apartment block in Garden City, an elegant, tree-lined neighborhood of Cairo that evokes the West Village. A simple sign outside the building advertises his credentials, including a degree in dentistry from the University of Illinois at Chicago. When I visited on the morning of February 2, however, it wasn't for my teeth.

Aswany, a thick-chested man with a commanding baritone, also happens to be Egypt's most celebrated novelist. (A caricature on the wall of his office shows him writing under the light of a dentist's chair.) For the past week he had closed his dental practice and joined the



"Egypt is free!" yelled demonstrators as they climbed onto tanks and set off fireworks when President Hosni Mubarak (below right) finally stepped down. Tareq Hussein Ali (below left), a 30-year-old lawyer, had been one of the protesters. Beaten with rocks by pro-government forces, he kept fighting, telling his parents, "I will come home victorious, or you will receive my dead body."



protests that had transfixed the world. Many saw the roots of the uprising—the venality of the ruling class, the ceaseless corruption, the stagnant economy, a disaffected young generation facing dwindling job prospects—in Aswany's 2002 bestseller, *The Yacoubian Building*, which traced the rot in a once-proud society through the lives of residents of one Garden City apartment block.

"I think there is a link between the frustration of these characters and the frustration of millions of young Egyptians who you could see in the street, calling

for ending the whole old system and beginning a new Egypt," Aswany said.

There was pride and hope in his voice, because it seemed that Mubarak finally was losing his grip. The night before, he'd appeared on state television and offered a stunning concession: He would step down when his current term, his fifth, expired in the fall.

The protesters weren't appeased—they wanted Mubarak gone immediately—but Aswany felt the end was nigh. He found symbolism in the last patient he saw before (continued on page 102)



REVOLUTION

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the uprising began. "It was an operation to extract a very tough wisdom tooth which was terribly embedded. But it couldn't resist," Aswany said, his eyes twinkling. "Even my assistants were saying, 'Are we going to take this tooth out?' I said, 'Yes, it's going to get out.' And I took it out—it took an hour. But it will take more with Mr. Mubarak."

As I left Aswany's office and walked about a mile north toward Tahrir, my BlackBerry buzzed to life; the internet had finally been restored. Still, I felt a sense of foreboding that even Aswany's articulate optimism couldn't soothe.

As I approached the square my pulse quickened when I saw a young man in a gray baseball cap and jacket pull out a spray-paint canister, draw a big X over the anti-Mubarak graffiti that protesters had scrawled on the walls and write in a new message. He clapped a friend on the back and they strode off toward the square.

I snapped a photo with my cell phone and e-mailed it to my Egyptian colleague for translation. "He crossed out 'Leave,'" she said, "and wrote 'We love you.'" Mubarak's loyalists were girding for battle.

At the north end of Tahrir—across from the stately peach-colored palace that houses the Egyptian Museum and one of the world's most valuable collections of antiquities—I stood on a sidewalk and watched a large group of pro-Mubarak demonstrators mass in front of a handful of Egyptian soldiers. The soldiers had set up a flimsy barricade with a few planks of wood, and it quickly became clear it wouldn't hold back the mob that was gesturing angrily toward the people inside the square. They were carrying large pictures of Mubarak and waving their fists.

In the blink of an eye the barricade fell away and the mob surged into the square.

The huge crowds in Tahrir had overwhelmed the cell phone networks, and I couldn't get a call through to any of the translators I knew. A cry went up from the mob as it surged past, and I felt bodies all around, pushing roughly past me, elbows in my ribs and back. "*Allahu akbar!*" they chanted. "God is great!" Wave upon wave, numbering easily in the tens of thousands, they thundered toward the center of the square, where the Mubarak foes had camped for more than a week and were now, instantly, outnumbered.

It was startling how much the whole thing had been choreographed—the grim invention of a regime intent on keeping power and punishing its opponents. "Why are you here?" I yelled after one man.

He looked back at me and motioned nonchalantly toward the anti-Mubarak protesters. "I want to kill them," he said.

For hours each side rained stones and Molotov cocktails on the other. The

protesters had dug up a construction site inside Tahrir—the future site of a new Ritz-Carlton—and were firing chunks of concrete back at their attackers. I retreated to my hotel room, and by nightfall the view from my balcony was of a square in flames. The crack of automatic gunfire echoed across the sky, and when my editor called from Washington I felt as though I was yelling to be heard over the sounds of battle.

When I finally reached Ahmed Salah on his cell phone he was breathless with anger. "It's an extremely low and disgusting reaction from this dictator, who is willing to put his whole country on fire," he said. "But most of the protesters have this idea: There is no way they turn back after this."

Soldiers were firing rounds into the air to control the crowds. On the street below the hotel, a gaggle of pro-Mubarak thugs were waving laser pointers at the windows, trying to scare the guests. Later I would learn that pro-Mubarak snipers were firing at demonstrators from rooftops.

I decided that standing on my balcony was a bad idea. I turned the lights off, and for the rest of the night I typed wearing a small camping headlamp that I'd last used when I was reporting in a remote village in southern Sudan four months earlier. I tried to be invisible.

Curiosity finally got the better of me around midnight. If the protesters repelled the government onslaught, I thought, it would be a pivotal moment in their fight to topple Mubarak. I decided to walk down to the overpass above the square.

CNN was playing jumpy footage of the Anderson Cooper beating over and over, telling viewers that journalists had become targets. While I figured I wouldn't attract attention like a star anchor and his crew, I didn't take chances. I stripped myself of pens, notebooks, camera, voice recorder, press card. I was the only one walking out of the hotel that night, buttoning my jacket against the crisp winter air. Tahrir was just a few hundred yards away, and the chants of anti-Mubarak protesters—"He must go! We will never go!"—rose from the square like war cries.

I walked below the overpass through an empty intersection strewn with pro-Mubarak signs and chunks of concrete, the government thugs seemingly having left their weapons behind. An army tank was stationed at the bottom of the bridge, but no one looked at me as I stepped gingerly past it and walked up to the top of the bridge, where a crowd of young men had gathered. I walked slowly and with my head down, but suddenly there was a commotion. A few young men started running toward me, then dozens. Some were carrying rocks the size of skulls; one was brandishing a knife the length of my forearm.

These were Mubarak's boys. I didn't know if they had noticed me or if they were retreating from an attack. Without hesitating, I turned and broke into a run, my heart pounding, my

legs pumping, and I didn't stop until I saw the patchy green lawn of the Hilton.

The next morning in the hotel lobby, a line of reporters stood around looking frustrated.

"They're kicking people out," one said.

The receptionist asked for my room number before telling me the hotel was full and I'd have to leave the following morning. He did the same thing for the Japanese photographer who asked next. None of us believed that this 36-story behemoth of a hotel could possibly be booked solid with Cairo in the grip of a revolution and tourists fleeing the country.

Outside, I saw a small group of young men clustered outside the gate. One was pointing animatedly up at windows on my side of the hotel. I couldn't make out what they were saying in Arabic but I understood one word clearly: "Cameras." They had found the journalists.

That afternoon, fear spread through the press corps like a runaway virus.

Several foreign journalists were beaten up by pro-Mubarak thugs at various points around Cairo. A Lebanese American friend, *Washington Post* Cairo bureau chief Leila Fadel, had been arrested along with her driver and no one had heard from her for several hours. An Egyptian American freelancer, Ashraf Khalil, was beaten by a mob as he tried to conduct an interview a mile from Tahrir. I heard that Swedish television had lost contact with one of their correspondents (we later learned that he was stabbed multiple times) and that a BBC cameraman had his equipment confiscated as he tried to enter my hotel.

Then one of the Arabic news channels flashed a bulletin at the bottom of the screen. Gangs had entered the lobby of the Hilton.

I scanned my room. My laptop was open next to a stack of notebooks and a camera. A cable led to the balcony, where my satellite modem was still connected. An envelope with all my cash—about \$5,000—was sitting on the desk. And there was my American passport splayed open on my bed. I stashed everything in the room safe or under the mattress and dead-bolted the door.

Had I told anyone that I was in the hotel? Then a flash of panic: The day before, I'd done a radio interview with *The Diane Rehm Show* on NPR and announced to her nationwide audience that I was standing on a balcony of the Hilton.

There was a heavy knock at the door of the room next to mine. I looked through the peephole and saw a beefy guy in a blue blazer who looked like hotel security. I knew the woman next door was a producer with an American news network because I'd heard her on the phone with her assignment desk in New York.

"Do you have a camera on your balcony?" the man asked. She immediately closed the door on him.

Seconds later, the phone in my room rang and my heart stopped. I picked up the receiver slowly. It was room service; I'd forgotten that I'd ordered dinner just a few minutes earlier.

The voice on the other end was jittery. "Sorry, sir, but the kitchen is closed. There is trouble in the hotel."

Phoning down to the lobby was risky, I decided; I didn't know who was manning the phones and what they'd think when they heard an American voice. "Sit tight," my editor in Washington told me. "We'll call Hilton corporate." But I worried that they weren't in charge of their hotel anymore.

After what felt like an eternity, two pieces of paper were slipped under the door. One listed new emergency evacuation procedures; the other was a letter from the hotel manager with new regulations for journalists. No more filming from inside the hotel, mentioning the hotel's name in news reports or interviewing any of the guests or staff.

I let another hour pass before calling room service again. This time I was greeted by a solicitous voice. "What would you like for dinner, Mr. Bengali?" he asked.

"Is everything okay? I was told there was some sort of trouble."

"Yes, of course, everything is fine," the voice said. "If you order dinner, I can recommend the pasta."

The fear I felt in my hotel room that evening was nothing compared with the story Tareq Hussein Ali had told me a few hours earlier in Tahrir Square.

I had gone down to interview people about the previous day's clashes when I saw Ali sitting alone on a concrete planter. The 30-year-old lawyer had a black eye, a leg swollen to the size of a tree trunk and a gray sweatshirt stained with so much blood that it looked as though he was wearing a bib. The blood had spurted from his scalp where a pro-Mubarak fighter

struck him with a rock, and it ran down his face and neck, saturating his clothes.

Still he kept fighting. When he left his home to join the first day of the protests, he explained, he had told his parents, "I will come home victorious, or you will receive my dead body." Bandages now crisscrossed his head and blood had crusted around his bleary eyes. As we spoke, strangers would interrupt to embrace him or kiss one of his bandages—like citizens paying their respects to a soldier home from battle.

He would not go home that day, or any other day, until Mubarak resigned, he said.

"After last night, the government has lived the last days of its possibilities," Ali said. His English was broken yet searing. "What they have done means the end for them. Egypt will never be as it used to be."

Order had been restored at the Hilton, it seemed, but I felt far from safe. I'd learn later that the hotel staff had assured pro-Mubarak gangs that they'd restrict the work of journalists, and merely walking through the lobby now made me nervous. I had a new plan: I'd go low profile, working on my own and avoiding foreigners near the square. I even eschewed the translators I'd been working with, figuring I could find people who spoke English here and there inside Tahrir. I packed my bag and left the Hilton, and it was a relief to enter a new hotel lobby, one where I didn't see any foreigners hunched over their laptops or yelling into cell phones.

So my heart sank when the woman at the reception desk asked me as I checked in: "Are you a journalist?"

"No," I said and headed up to my room.

At least Egyptians were keeping their sense of humor. I opened my e-mail to find an illustration of Mubarak and President Obama huddling in the Oval Office. Obama is telling Mubarak, "It's time to say farewell

to the Egyptian people." Mubarak replies, "Why—where are they going?"

I had barely seen my friend Leila since she was arrested, so one night she and I met for dinner in her leafy Zamalek neighborhood. It was just over the bridge from Tahrir, but the revolution seemed not to have reached this island of embassies, posh boutiques and European-style cafés. More than anything else we both wanted a drink, but after swapping stories and advice for several hours we had far overstayed the curfew that had been imposed over the city. After finding a taxi, dropping her off and navigating the maze of civilian checkpoints and military barricades around Tahrir, it was well after 11 P.M. when we reached the back entrance to my hotel.

Two men emerged from the shadows and rapped on the window, demanding to see the cabbie's license. There was something strange about this checkpoint. These men weren't the fresh-faced teens who'd taken over Cairo's street corners since the uprising began, inspecting IDs to deter thugs and looters. They started to question me in perfect English, and I realized with a sinking feeling that they probably were from the dreaded Egyptian state security.

I invented a story about working for a bank and being stuck in my hotel because international flights had been canceled. I thought it was convincing, but the smaller man asked for specifics. I fumbled for a few seconds before the bigger, pug-nosed man stuck his giant palm through my open window and onto my chest, feeling for my heartbeat.

"Are you nervous?" he sneered. "I think you're lying. Get out of the car."

Deciding I had to come clean, I produced the temporary press card the Egyptian authorities had given me when I'd arrived several months earlier—which had since expired. It was an unconvincing credential, just a handwritten card with my photo stapled to it, and when the big man laughed I wasn't sure if it was at the shoddy ID or at me.

He led me toward the main road, where a couple of Egyptian army soldiers were absentmindedly directing traffic even though there was none. The taxi driver, silent to that point, suddenly decided to speak up. I could make out flashes of what he was saying: *Lebanese, Zamalek, Marshly Street...*

He was giving these guys Leila's home address.

A day earlier, a British reporter I'd run into downtown had told me that thugs had invaded the home of one foreign correspondent. It was a rumor, but now, standing on a street corner surrounded by armed men who wouldn't identify themselves, it was all I could think about.

"Why do you need her address, and what does it matter where she's from?" I said to the big man, feeling my face grow red.

"Oh, you know some of these Lebanese," he said. "They are very close with the Israelis."

It didn't take much experience to know how ridiculous this sounded; it was the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, after all, that had fought so bitterly with Israel in 2006, a war that Leila and I had covered together for McClatchy. But logic and reason had evaporated from



"Okay, sir...I'm satisfied. You can get back in your car."

Cairo's security establishment, replaced by a virulent suspicion of anything foreign.

On this night, though I felt my heart might leap out of my jacket, I was spared any further trouble when a high-ranking army soldier appeared seemingly from out of nowhere and took my ID. He was brusque and businesslike, and after a few more questions and several minutes of silence, he told me I could leave. The pug-nosed man looked almost disappointed when I turned and walked the few yards to the door of my hotel.

More than anything, I felt sick about Leila. I called her to explain what had happened. She told me the next day that she asked a female friend to spend that night in her apartment because she didn't want to be alone.

A phalanx of tanks and soldiers guarded the entrance to the Radio and Television Building on the Nile, just north of Tahrir. In his second-story office, Attiya Shakran was shaking his head. The director of the Egyptian government's foreign press center, Shakran said that at least 22 journalists had been detained since the uprising began and that what I had experienced was a "misunderstanding."

I first met Shakran in January 2009, when he helped me obtain a permit to travel to the Egyptian border with Gaza during the bombardment by Israeli forces. We bonded over our California ties—he'd lived there for eight years and still had relatives in the Bay Area—and he offered a cursory apology.

Even this dedicated civil servant had reached the limits of his patience with the excesses of Mubarak's regime. "We have to get rid of all this corruption," Shakran told me. "This is why there is a revolution."

On the 17th night Leila and I met up with Muhammad Mansour, a 32-year-

old reporter for a Japanese newspaper in Cairo who had quit his job to join the uprising, for what nearly everyone thought would be Mubarak's final speech as president. Word spread—including from the Obama administration—that the increasingly isolated leader had decided to resign. The crowds on that cold night were among the biggest ever to pack Tahrir, but when Mubarak delivered a defiant, rambling speech, refusing yet again to step down, the smiling faces around us hardened into stony silence. Some men fought back tears.

That night I happened to bump into Ahmed Salah, who wasn't in a mood to celebrate. Even if Mubarak left, he said, there was much work left to transform Egypt into a real representative democracy. His mind was occupied with thoughts of constitutional reform, military rule, political transition.

The following afternoon I was in my hotel room, waiting to do a radio interview, when Mubarak's vice president, Omar Suleiman, appeared on TV. Ashen-faced and terse, he said the words that so many Egyptians had longed to hear: Mubarak was stepping down. Immediately, car horns began blaring in celebration, and by the time I reached Tahrir a few minutes later the square was in full-blown party mode.

For several hours I moved among the throngs, letting the songs and laughter wash over me, letting strangers embrace and kiss me, gazing up at the fireworks and waving flags, abandoning for once the pretense of objectivity and allowing myself even to smile. I was in awe that this whole thing had come to pass, that I had witnessed it and that my friends and I had survived it.

Late that night, when I finally reached Salah again by phone, he was in tears.

