

up smoking a pipe. Not that kind of pipe! Not all teenagers are like your teenager.

Okay, we have time for one more question. We don't? Okay then, never mind.

JULIE KLAUSNER  
NEW YORK CITY

DEAR MCSWEENEY'S,

I've never tried to explain why I keep coming back here. It could be that in some ways I don't grasp it myself. I just get on the plane again and off the plane again and then I'm here.

I didn't plan this trip. It was an impulse. I had work to do but that wasn't it. It hit me that it was Ramadan and I've never been here during Ramadan. Something unexpected always happens. I might come a hair closer—the answer to one more of my questions about Cairo might reveal itself when I least expect it to. But also, after all the messiness of the past year, it was something of a gift to myself. Every Ramadan I spent in Morocco felt somehow cleansing. I actually like fasting, the strictness of nothing passing between your lips, not food, not water, not a cigarette, not even gum or a toothbrush or a kiss. The intensity of it.

The night I arrived, I got to the hotel just before 1 a.m. I keep

a cell phone for Egypt, with an Egyptian SIM card and my Cairo phone number in it, and it runs out of batteries between trips—it uses a Euro plug (two prongs), and the network doesn't work in Chicago, so I can't check it when I'm away from here. But when I turn it on, it's like magic—it reconnects me to this world in a way that Facebook never can. By 2 a.m. I was out with a friend.

We ended up at his place, talking and drinking the last of the Scotch that his British girlfriend had brought him, and then it was almost 4 a.m. and I was teasing him about something when the call to prayer started. I had no idea dawn would come so early. It was still pitch dark outside—it turns out that they moved up daylight savings time by about six weeks to make Ramadan work a bit better for everyone. And his girlfriend says "You better hurry" so he runs to the refrigerator to gulp down a half liter of water before he can't drink for the rest of the day. When he rejoins us he says, "The call to prayer is like a pyramid, and I caught it before the peak, so it's okay." Sunset these days is at 6:30 p.m., and it's 97 degrees outside when the sun's out, so drinking that water will come in handy. But even

so he sleeps most of the day. No job. Well, he's a writer.

The days have a special rhythm here in Ramadan. People stay up so late, maybe because of the abundant Iftar meals at sunset that stretch out like a month of Thanksgivings. Sometimes there's a lighter meal before dawn (*sobour*), and then you snooze away the daylight till it starts up again. You're wondering how people with regular jobs can do this. But I have another friend here who works in an office, and he met us downtown for sohour tonight on this boat on the Nile. There was *ta'amiyya* (falafel) and tamarind juice and live music, and the call to prayer started just as we climbed into taxis.

I've fasted before, but this time I have too much work to do to struggle through the day without some nourishment, so I modified the law. I'm doing a coffee fast: no food, no water, just coffee when the sun is up. To be honest, it's not so hard. I can't eat for the first few hours after I wake anyway, and then you're almost there, so why not push all the way through? And it's putting me into this state where just as I get to that time of the day when my writing comes best, I'm half hallucinating from the caffeine and the dehydra-

tion and it's something between automatic writing and writing drunk. I love it. And when I go out rushing to meet whomever for Iftar I'm eager and wired and that first taste of food is so perfect. You really should fast, if ever you get a chance.

It's 5 a.m. now, and the sun is coming up. I'm not sure if it's just easier to stay on Chicago time, since going to bed at dawn here is like going to bed when you'd go to bed there. Night here starts when an imam somewhere in the Saudi desert can't distinguish between a black thread and a white thread. Morning begins when the first thread of sunlight scratches the eastern sky. Those are the hinges upon which Ramadan turns.

But I have to tell you about something I saw yesterday that I hadn't noticed before. I was passing under this bridge that crosses over the Nile and then lets out in Zamalek, where I'm staying. There were rows of empty tables beneath it; I had made my way between them earlier in the day without thinking about it. But when I came back, at about 6, they were filled with people sitting quietly—waiting. Someone told me they're called *ma'idat er-rahman*—tables of mercy. They're for poor people who can't afford to cook a big Iftar, or for people who can't

get back to their homes in time to break the fast, and they're paid for by rich people or mosques or neighborhood associations. Zamalek is a wealthy neighborhood by Cairo standards, and I don't know if that's why, but the food they brought out looked good—meat and soup and baby zucchinis stuffed with more meat and green peppers. And so I waited there just watching without seeming to watch while the people waited for the call to prayer to permit them to start. One man, dark like a Nubian from the south, had his head down on the table, maybe tired, maybe dehydrated. There was a hush of anticipation, a sense of community, of shared purpose. I'm not a religious person, but at moments like that I miss a connection to something bigger, to something infinite.

Cairo has 16 million people living in it. At times, when you walk up the busiest thoroughfares, you can feel like a speck, just a granule of dirt in this city where pollution smothers the sky and smears the walls right down to the pavement. It could be I want to be forgotten, to disappear into the 16 million Cairenes making their way through a city that will forget them, never knew them, breathes them with filthy lungs coated with

centuries of grime and anonymity. But then at those tables of mercy there was a moment—it took me aback—of peace and silence and anticipation. It happens each day, after depriving yourself—and I was depriving myself, too, in my way, I was coffee fasting—that brief and gorgeous moment of cool water coming down your throat and into your belly. You have passed another day of glory on this earth and in this city that has been here since the time of Khufu.

BRIAN T. EDWARDS  
CAIRO, EGYPT

DEAR EDITORS,

Did you guys see how bestselling seventeen-year-old German novelist Helene Hegemann has been accused of plagiarism after it was revealed that her debut novel, *Axolotl Roadkill*, contains passages lifted from a blog about sex and drugs in Berlin's techno scene? Although she's agreed to include acknowledgment of her source material in the next edition of the book, she denies she did anything wrong: "I can't understand what all the fuss is about."

I couldn't agree more. As you've heard me say a million times, *Axolotl* and like-minded writers' books are awash in conscious, self-conscious,