



THE ANCIENT EGYPT SLEEPOVER

STEPHEN DAVIES

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SLEEPOVER

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For Miriam and Jonah

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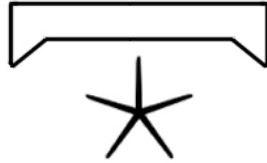
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Chapter 1 – Sunset



Mo jumped off the Tube train and sprinted up the escalator all the way to the top.

“Slow down, Muhammed!” His father lumbered behind him, huffing and puffing. “We’re only a little bit late.”

“I don’t want to be late at all,” said Mo. “You said it yourself, this sleepover is a once in a lifetime opportunity!”

They emerged into the chilly November air and headed north up Tottenham Court Road. All along the pavement, workers on their way home jostled shoulder to shoulder with diners and theatre goers. A skyscraper loomed above them, so tall that Mo had to crane his neck right back to see the top of it.

“Centre Point,” said his dad, still gasping for breath. “One of London’s very first skyscrapers.”

“What’s inside?”

“Luxury flats.” His dad grinned. “Not for the likes of us, Muhammed.”

They half walked, half ran past a theatre, a jewellery shop, a burger bar and a casino, then turned right into Great Russell Street, a quiet, leafy street lined with London plane trees and Victorian mansion blocks. Mo saw the

black railings of the British Museum up ahead and his heart leapt with excitement.

At the gates of the museum a man in a flat cap was selling caramelized almonds from a little cart. A woman dozed on a wooden bench nearby.

“She looks how I feel,” joked Mo’s dad.

It had certainly been a long day. Since arriving in London on the coach that morning, they had visited the Sherlock Holmes museum, Madame Tussauds, Buckingham Palace and Lord’s Cricket Ground. It had already been one of the best days of Mo’s life, and the Ancient Egypt Sleepover had not even started yet.

As they entered the British Museum courtyard, the sight in front of them took their breath away – a colossal stone building with huge Greek columns along the front. A magnificent black and gold banner beside the main entrance announced the attraction that the whole country was talking about: THE TUTANKHAMUN EXPERIENCE.

Just yesterday Mo and his sister had watched a Newsround story about the new Tutankhamun exhibition. The reporter said that the museum had spent twelve million pounds creating it, and that everyone who worked on it had signed an agreement promising not to say a word about it. It was the most expensive museum exhibition in the world as well as the most secret.

They joined a long queue of parents and children snaking across the courtyard. Pigeons strutted to and fro, puffing out their chests. The sleepover ticket in Mo’s hand glinted gold in the light of the setting sun.

In the queue ahead of Mo, a tall, freckly boy drew back his leg and aimed a vicious kick at a passing pigeon. It squawked in shock and stumbled away, flapping its wings indignantly.

“Oi!” shouted Mo. “Don’t be so cruel!”

The pigeon kicker craned his neck to see who had challenged him. Mo scowled back at him.

At last they arrived at the top of the steps, where a thin-faced man with ginger hair was taking the register. “I’m Mr Lamb,” he beamed, pointing to his name badge. “I’m leading the Ancient Egypt Sleepover tonight. Your name, please?”

“Muhammed Bashir. People call me Mo.”

Mr Lamb took Mo’s ticket and ticked his name off his list. “You’re in the blue team, Mo. Go inside and join the others.”

“Good night, Muhammed.” Mo’s dad gave him an awkward sideways hug. “Learn lots, behave yourself, and most of all, have fun!”

Muhammed entered the museum through a revolving door and found himself in a huge entrance hall. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach.

“Bag, please,” said a security guard.

Mo placed his rucksack on the table and the guard searched its contents: sleeping bag, toothbrush, toothpaste and reading book. A second security guard advanced towards him with what looked like a magic wand. “Hold your arms out,” he said and began to wave the wand up and down Mo’s body.

BZZZZZZ! went the wand, and Mo nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Step over here, please,” said the guard, “and empty your pockets.”

Chapter 2 – Kelvin



The only thing in Mo's pockets was a pressed penny, a souvenir from Lord's Cricket Ground. He had inserted one pound and one penny into the machine and had then stood back to watch the cogs squish the penny flat and stamp a picture of the cricket ground on the front of it.

"You went to Lord's today?" asked the guard, and Mo looked up to see that he was smiling.

"Yes," said Mo.

"Did they let you walk out onto the pitch?"

"Yes."

"You're a cricket fan?"

"Yes."

"Me too." The guard's dark eyes twinkled. "Do you play for a team?"

"Preston Under Elevens."

"Are you a batter or a bowler?"

"A bit of both. But what I really like is fielding."

"Really?" The guard's smile widened. "Have you got a strong throw?"

Mo shrugged, which for some reason made the guard laugh.

"Good man," said the guard, handing back the penny. "Enjoy your evening."

Mo grinned. No one had ever called him ‘Good man’ before, and he liked the way it sounded. He shrugged his rucksack back onto his shoulder and joined the crowd of children in the middle of the entrance hall.

“Do you know the time?” said a voice in his ear.

Mo turned and saw a red-haired boy with a kind, crumpled face.

“Six-thirty,” said Mo, then noticed that the red-haired boy was wearing a watch. “Why do you ask?”

“Conversation starter,” grinned the boy. “I could also have said, ‘Have you come far?’ or ‘What do you know about Tutankhamun?’ or ‘Got any snacks?’ but I thought I’d save those for later. I’m Kelvin, by the way.”

“Mo.”

“Just a Mo.” Kelvin giggled. “I bet everyone says that, don’t they?”

“You’re the first,” Mo lied.

By the time the last child had passed through security, the entrance hall was completely full.

Mr Lamb hopped up onto a step and flung his arms wide. “Greetings, one and all, and welcome to the Ancient Egypt Sleepover! We received over twenty-six thousand entries to our Ancient Egypt writing competition, and you lot are the winners. Ninety-nine clever, creative sausages!” He clasped his hands in genuine delight. “I’m happy to say, you are in for a real treat. At nine o’clock tonight you are going to attend the opening of the most mindboggling museum exhibition ever created. When you are old and dodderly, you will look back on this night and you will say to yourself, ‘*I was there. I was one of those lucky ninety-nine who travelled back in time to the greatest moment in the history of archaeology.*’”

Mr Lamb gazed around him, his eyes sparkling with excitement. A few of the children clapped timidly and someone at the back murmured “Yay!”

“And now,” continued Mr Lamb, “I would like to introduce you to three very important people. First, Miss Kenton, the cloakroom attendant!” He beamed at a grey-haired lady standing behind a counter. “If you have a coat, Miss Kenton will look after it for you. You should also give her any valuable items for safe keeping.”

“That includes all phones!” Miss Kenton added, scowling at the children over her spectacles.

A pale girl next to Mo gasped out loud. “But my friends and I are playing Code Wars tonight.”

Mr Lamb looked at the girl. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Debbie.”

“Well, Debbie, I am going to tell you a secret that will change your life.” Mr Lamb’s voice sank to a whisper. “*One night without your phone won’t kill you.*”

Debbie sighed but did not argue.

“And now,” said Mr Lamb, “our second very important person. Mr Rumpole, where are you?”

A grumpy-looking man in a white jacket gave a curt nod.

“Mr Rumpole will be providing refreshments, so if you are allergic to nuts or anything else, be sure to let him know. Mr Rumpole makes excellent Ancient Egyptian snacks and delicious hot chocolate.”

A cheer echoed around the marble hall. It was the first real enthusiasm the children had shown.

“Everyone likes hot chocolate!” chuckled Mr Lamb.

“I don’t,” muttered Debbie, but this time the speaker did not hear her.

“Our third very important person is a world expert on Ancient Egypt. She has come all the way from Oxford University and will be helping us with some super-fun Ancient Egypt activities between now and midnight.

Her name” (Mr Lamb squinted down at his clipboard) “is Professor Maria Van Tam but I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting her. Are you here, Professor?”

In the silence that followed, children stared at the various adult helpers, trying to spot someone who looked like they might be a professor.

Mr Lamb laughed nervously. “The professor will arrive soon, I’m sure. In the meantime, we will pitch camp. This room to my right is Room 4, the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery. Inside you will find nine flags: red, yellow, blue, green, pink, purple, orange, white and black. You already know which team you are in, so find your flag and unroll your sleeping bag somewhere near it. When you’ve done that, please join me in the Great Court and we will begin our first Ancient Egypt activity.”

Ninety-nine children and nine teams, thought Mo. Eleven in each team, just like cricket. The thought set him off daydreaming again. He recalled walking out onto the pitch at Lord’s that afternoon and standing at the crease in dizzy bliss, imagining he was batting for England in an Ashes test match.

“Earth calling Planet Mo,” Kelvin was waving both hands in front of his face. “I asked you a question. What team are you in?”

“Blue.”

“Snap!” Kelvin grinned. “We’re going to have a brilliant time tonight, just you wait.”

Chapter 3 – Sennefer



Room 4 was the largest gallery in the British Museum. It needed to be big, because it contained dozens of colossal statues, carved doors and limestone slabs etched with neat columns of Ancient Egyptian writing. In the middle of the room, two four-sided pillars towered over their surroundings.

“They’re called obelisks,” Mo whispered to Kelvin. He did not know why he was whispering. Something about the majesty of these ancient objects, perhaps.

Security guards patrolled up and down, their mouths set in thin hard lines and their eyes flickering to and fro. While ninety-nine excited children explored the gallery, the guards’ voices echoed among the artefacts. *Please don’t touch that! Please don’t lean on that!* After a while, they stopped saying please. “Stop climbing that pillar!” bellowed one guard. “Get down from there!”

“Don’t take risks on our obelisks!” sang Kelvin, and the guard scowled even more.

Mo found the blue flag in the middle of the gallery beside a shiny, black statue – a handsome Egyptian man with his robe pulled tightly over his

knees. The robe was covered with hieroglyphs: owls, bowls, snakes, semicircles, squares and tiny stick men.

Kelvin ran his finger across the strange symbols and frowned as if straining to decipher the ancient writing. “Got it,” he said at last. “I am Sennefer, servant of the great king Thutmose. If you sleep near my statue, my curse will fall on you. Your toaster will explode. You will step barefooted on loose Lego. Your next-door neighbour will play the bagpipes at midnight.

“Don’t be daft,” giggled Mo. “Where did you get the names Sennefer and Thutmose from, anyway?”

Kelvin pointed to an information panel in English. According to the panel, Sennefer was indeed a servant of King Thutmose the Third, but there was no mention of Lego, toasters or bagpipes.

They laid down their sleeping bags between the statue of Sennefer and a huge, black coffin. Carved into the coffin lid was a picture of a beautiful woman with long cow horns.

“Hello,” said a posh voice. “Is this the blue group?”

Mo turned and saw two girls about the same age as him and Kelvin. One was the pale girl who had complained about having to give up her phone. The other, the one who had spoken, had sky blue eyes, a turned-up nose and a silver tiara adorning a mass of blonde curls.

Kelvin goggled at the tiara. “I thought we were supposed to give our valuables to Miss Kenton.”

“I can’t, silly. It’s part of my outfit.”

“What if it gets stolen?”

The posh girl shrugged. “I have another one at home.”

Kelvin nodded wisely. “Same with me and my golden underpants,” he said. “There’s no way I’m giving them to Miss Kenton.”

The posh girl laughed a jolly ho-ho-ho laugh. "I'm Jennifer," she said.

"Jennifer, meet Sennefer," said Kelvin, putting his arm around the black statue. A guard glared at him and he removed it again quickly.

Mo turned to the dark-haired girl. "You're Debbie, aren't you?" he said. "Sorry about your phone."

"It's fine," she muttered. "I can play Code Wars another time."

At that moment, a tall, freckly boy barged roughly into the middle of their group. "Code Wars is for geeks," he sneered. "Isn't that right, pigeon lover?"

Mo's heart sank as he recognized the boy who had kicked the pigeon in the courtyard.

"I'm Dexter," said the boy. "Call me Dex. Except for you, pigeon lover. You can call me Your Royal Highness, King of the Blue Team." The boy picked up Mo's sleeping bag, threw it onto the coffin lid and laid down his own sleeping bag where Mo's had been.

"Don't be such a bully!" said Jennifer.

Dexter just laughed. He reached out, plucked the tiara off Jennifer's head and balanced it neatly on the head of Sennefer's statue. "Catch you later, losers," he called, and strolled off towards the Great Court.

Debbie stared after him. "We shouldn't judge," she said quietly. "I'm guessing he has problems at home."

Mo left Dexter's sleeping bag where it was and laid his own sleeping bag next to Kelvin's. The two girls found a cosy spot on the far side of the enormous stone coffin and unrolled their sleeping bags there. The other children in the blue team had also arrived and were arranging their camp a little further along the wall. They waved at Mo and one of them shouted, "*Go, Blues!*"

A sudden sneeze sounded from where Jennifer and Debbie were unpacking.

“Bless you,” said Mo and Kelvin.

At the same moment, both girls also said, “Bless you.”

Mo and Kelvin looked at each other, surprised. Mo jumped up onto the pedestal of the coffin and peered over the top. “Which of you two sneezed?” he asked.

“Neither of us,” said Debbie.

“We thought it was you,” said Jennifer.

Mo looked down at the coffin. The stone felt cold beneath his hands. The picture of the woman with the cow horns gazed up at him.

“But if it wasn’t any of us...”

He could not bring himself to finish his sentence.

The sneeze must have come from inside the coffin.

Chapter 4 – The Coffin



Kelvin knocked on the side of the coffin. “Hello? Anybody home?” He was trying to be funny but his voice was shaking a little.

“Maybe we imagined the sneeze,” said Jennifer. “Or maybe it was one of the guards.”

Mo jumped down from the pedestal and looked at the information panel. “Black stone sarcophagus,” he read. “Made in 530 BC for a woman called...” Mo paused and sounded out the name slowly “...Ankh-nes-nefer-ibra.”

“Wow,” said Kelvin. “Try saying that with a mouth full of marshmallows.”

“She was the daughter of a king,” Mo continued. “The picture on the lid is the goddess Hathor, and that circle between her horns is the sun. The picture and the writing are all about rebirth.”

“Coming back to life,” whispered Kelvin, goggling at the black coffin. “That sneeze we heard...do you think the king’s daughter has...you know?”

“Impossible.” Jennifer shook her head firmly. “Rebirth for Ancient Egyptians was about going to Aaru, the Field of Reeds, and living happily for all eternity, eating and drinking and gazing at waterfalls. It wasn’t about coming back to this world to scare kids.”

Mo was impressed. “How do you know so much about it all?”

“I’ve been to Egypt twice,” said Jennifer. “And I pay attention in class.”

“All the same,” said Debbie, “we might as well make certain.” She waited until none of the security guards were looking, then moved to the far end of the coffin, put both hands on the lid, and started pushing.

“Woah!” Kelvin looked startled. “What are you doing?”

“I’m curious. Aren’t you?” Debbie spoke through gritted teeth. “Don’t just stand there, come and help me.”

Mo, Jennifer and Kelvin joined Debbie at the foot of the coffin and pushed hard. The stone lid was immensely heavy and at first it looked as though nothing would budge it. However, as they strained with all their might, the lid did indeed begin to move. Just an inch at first, then two.

“Keep going,” Debbie panted.

Footsteps echoed on the hard, tiled floor. A woman was rushing towards them, eyes wide, hands flapping in panic. “Stop!” she shrieked. “What do you think you’re doing?”

The children sprang back from the coffin and stared at the woman, who now stood wheezing and panting in front of them. She was smartly dressed but her sprint across Gallery 4 had caused her blouse to come untucked, her silk scarf to come untied and a few strands of frizzy brown hair to come loose from her hair clip. She might have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five – she was wearing so much eye makeup and lipstick, it was impossible to tell.

“Have some respect!” the woman scolded them, still gasping for breath. “That coffin is five thousand years old, and you lot are playing with it like it’s a toy. What do you think this sleepover is for? Destroying the exhibits one by one?”

“Sorry,” mumbled Jennifer. “We heard someone sneeze, and we thought —”

“Let me guess.” The woman scratched her head. “You thought it was a mummy coming to life. I devote my life to teaching children the wonders of Ancient Egypt, but all they are interested in is killer mummies and curses and nonsense like that. Put all of that stuff out of your head and you might actually learn something tonight.”

Mo noticed that Jennifer’s lower lip was quivering, and he was afraid she was about to burst into tears. The woman must have seen it, too, because her voice suddenly became softer and kinder. “Forgive me, children. I feel protective towards these wonderful objects, and sometimes I overreact. I will ask the guards to take a look inside this coffin and make sure it’s completely empty. We want you to sleep well, tonight, don’t we?”

“Yes,” the children mumbled.

“Lovely to meet you all,” said the woman, tucking her blouse back into her skirt. “My name is Maria.”

“Professor Maria Van Tam!” cried Jennifer. “Mr Lamb was looking for you earlier. He’s in the Great Court.”

The professor smiled warmly and linked arms with Jennifer. “In that case, my dear, let’s not keep him waiting any longer. You introduce me to Mr Lamb, and we’ll get this party started!”

The professor and Jennifer walked ahead. Mo, Kelvin and Debbie followed behind. Kelvin was chattering about something or other, but Mo hardly heard him. He was thinking about something the professor had said, something that made him feel extremely uneasy.

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