

Red Sea Holiday
By Marco Etheridge

Patricia Banks' murder was not a pleasant sort of killing, nor was it completely unexpected. Her husband had threatened her murder many times, most often at breakfast. After forty-three years of passable married life, Mrs. Banks accepted Mr. Banks' threats as part of the give and take of any solid marriage.

Douglas Banks would glare across his plate of bacon and eggs and declare his strong desire to strangle Patricia, usually waving a triangle of buttered toast to emphasize his murderous intent. Mrs. Banks acknowledged her husband's dire utterances with a wry smile and a 'yes, dear' or 'please pass the jam, dear.'

Two decades of hearing of her impending death rendered Patricia immune to the possibility that Douglas could or would ever follow through. Frankly, she did not believe her mild-mannered husband had it in him. In this, Patricia Banks proved to be very much mistaken.

Mrs. Banks might have avoided her murder at the hands of Mr. Banks. Not in the moment of her death, which was abrupt and decisive, but in the months that led to her tragic demise. Her insistence that they travel to Egypt proved fatal.

Patricia was fond of women's magazines and subscribed to several. She came across an article that extolled the virtues of travel as a means to broaden horizons and breathe new life into a stale marriage. Patricia brandished this particular article at breakfast, the quoting of which pleased Douglas Banks not at all. He declared quite firmly that his horizons were broad enough at present. She insisted, with greater firmness, that travel they would, travel they shall, and Egypt their destination.

Egypt itself is probably not to blame for Patricia's murder. Travel was not an unknown experience for the Bankses. Douglas and Patricia made a yearly trek to the seaside, always to the same resort. When available, Douglas preferred the same room. Despite the inevitable minor skirmishes, Patricia Banks returned home from these holidays very much alive. Having survived decades of seaside sojourns, she had no reason to suspect that a simple change of venue would prove fatal.

The couple set out on their adventure. Patricia bubbled with excitement while Douglas simmered in a pool of resentment. They survived the flight to Hurghada on the Red Sea coast. They survived the taxi transfer to their Egyptian resort, although by a narrower margin.

Douglas Banks was appalled by the barren desert running right down to the shores of the Red Sea. He remained vocal on this point for the duration of the cab ride. Back home, one knew where the shrubbery ended and the beach began. Here in Egypt, the blasted desert collided with the bloody sea. How was a man to tell desert from beach?

Patricia claimed it was so simple a child could grasp the notion. The sandy area between the resort buildings and the sea was the beach. The larger bit outside the resort that ran to the far horizon was desert. She urged him to look towards the sea and all would be well.

Their first Egyptian dinner was not a happy affair. Patricia found it exotic. She felt their horizons broadening there and then. Douglas, on the other hand, wished the horizon would shrink sufficiently that he would find himself back in his own land, seaside at the Shady Manor, dining on familiar food and looking forward to the creaking door of good old room number eleven.

Douglas Banks might have avoided his role as an uxoricide had circumstances altered ever so slightly. If, for example, the heat had been less beastly, or the wind less blustery, his wife might be living still.

Proper sausage could have saved Patricia's life, not mystery meat pressed round a skewer and grilled black. And all the baksheesh in his pockets could not secure a pork chop. A hungry man is a desperate man. Desperation calls for action. The seed of Patricia's grisly murder had lain dormant for decades, but it germinated on the Red Sea's fatal shore.

While the heat and wind and dearth of edible food most certainly contributed to the impending tragedy, it was what happened after their meals that pushed Douglas to administer the coup de grâce.

Douglas Bank was a man who abhorred lavatory noises. Back home—Blessed Sanctuary!—there was a solid wall betwixt bathroom and bedroom. Likewise room eleven at the Shady Manor. One's ears were spared the grunting and splashing that could drive a normally sedate man to rash aches. Not so at this twice-damned resort on the Egyptian coast.

The resort consisted of a semi-circle of white-washed stone cottages, each with a domed roof. Patricia gushed, calling the huts quaint and rustic. Douglas thought them tomb-like, bleached skeletal teeth protruding from the barren desert.

Inside their appointed cottage, a stone wall demarked bathroom from bedroom, but not completely. A gap yawned between the top of the wall and the domed roof, a segment of open air through which sound passed as easily as an Arabian wind.

Patricia Banks had always been a demonstrative defector. It was in her nature. Douglas knew this about her, but long years of stout walls shielded him from suffering confirmation of his wife's boisterousness. Now, here on this forsaken desert shore, the full brunt of her loo labors was brought home to him with striking audible clarity. It was more than a common man could bear.

In hindsight—if the dead are afforded hindsight—Patricia may have survived a holiday of seven days' duration. Alas that she booked the Egyptian seaside for ten. She did not live to see the ninth.

The fateful morning dawned bright and desolate, just as the days preceding. Their breakfast was as awful as the previous seven had been. Returning to the ridiculous stone cottage, Mrs. Banks ensconced herself in the lavatory. Mr. Banks threw himself into the single uncomfortable chair in the cramped bedroom. Then began the ordeal, a chorus of huffs, heavy exhalations, and satisfied groans.

The cacophony echoed off the tiles and flooded through the hateful gap between wall and dome. Douglas Banks plugged his ears, but his efforts were futile. The volume was simply too great to be silenced.

He thought of fleeing, but the barrenness that awaited him outside was fully as horrible as the noises within. He was trapped. His desperation was that of a wild animal with its hind leg pinioned between steel jaws. And just as a panicked creature will gnaw off a captured limb to

free itself, Douglas Banks resorted to drastic measures to escape the writhing torment that engulfed him.

The last thread of his civilizing restraint snapped. A single heartbeat later, Douglas rose from his chair and stalked to the bathroom door. He did not hesitate. The knob turned under his hand and the door flew open, much to Patricia's wide-mouthed astonishment. Before she could screech in protest, her husband yanked the lingerie cord from its reel above the toilet.

Douglas Banks looped the thin cord around his wife's neck with enough speed and determination to make a Sicilian assassin proud. Any last words Patricia Banks had were choked off as the garrote cut into her fleshy throat. Douglas stood still as a statue while Patricia kicked her life away, her knickers around her knees.

When his wife's body was quite still, Douglas opened his hands and the deadly cord fell away. He examined his palms, noted the deep creases left by the garroting. Then he turned away and stepped from the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He left the cottage and walked away without a backward glance.

It was the chambermaid who discovered Patricia's corpse. The resort manager became aware of the gruesome discovery when the chambermaid ran screaming from the cottage. The poor woman was still screaming when she fell headlong into the swimming pool. The curious manager retraced the maid's steps until he, too, found himself staring at a goggle-eyed corpse sprawled astride a toilet. The manager was not pleased, but he did avoid the swimming pool as he ran for the telephone.

The Egyptian police found Mr. Banks at a local café in a nearby town. He was wearing a white gallibaya, the ubiquitous Egyptian man-dress, and smoking a bubbling hookah. Four new friends shared his table. The five men sipped thick Turkish coffee in companionable silence. His Egyptian companions were surprised when the police led Douglas away. Douglas Banks was not.

The Bankses were shipped home separately, she in a coffin and he in handcuffs. Patricia Banks was interred following a swift and private funeral. Douglas Banks was incarcerated after an equally swift trial in which he offered no defense.

While his wife suffered the silence of the grave, Douglas Banks spent his remaining years listening to the echoes of many men defecating behind steel bars. When the explosive noise grew too deafening, Douglas retreated into his head, his fevered imagination bearing him away to a quiet, dirty café on the Red Sea coast.