December 2024

Greetings from the Ghoniems,

This was a year of love, family, friends, travel, and adventures from the Mexican Sonoran Desert to the African Sahara Desert and several non-sandy places in between.

Nasr broke the bank this year. Believe me, he was scrounging among the many pieces of his piggy bank to get to the last penny. Jasmine and Tommy got married on April 21, 2024! He gave them a fairy tale wedding. (KA-CHING), Jasmine’s taste runs high—just like Princess Jasmine—except Nasr didn’t have the blue genie giving him bags of gold. Then two months later, he took the family on a two-week family vacation to Egypt. (KA-CHING). Our family is no longer merely 5 people, it has expanded to 11. Our kids have visited Egypt before, but their memories have faded and none of the grandchildren have been there, nor have Oanh or Tommy. A private tour, complete with 16 passenger van, driver, manager, tour guide and security guard is not how we usually travel, but we wanted to show them the best of Egypt. (KA-CHING). We only saw part of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM). The huge red granite statue of Ramses II stands in the entrance. He is over 30 feet tall and weighs 83 tons, yeah-he IS a big guy. Nasr gathered all of us around him and said, “Kids, this is your great, great, great grandpa. He didn’t say that it was their great 133 times grandpa. Nasr does he himself as coming from royalty, but I think most Egyptian people have a bit of Ramses II in them. Later when the grandkids saw the mummy of Ramses II, they very politely said, “Hi Grandpa.” You can’t go to Egypt without a camel ride at the Pyramids. Well, at least, we can’t. The grandkids didn’t expect that when the camel stands, his backside comes up first and you lean forward at 45-degree angle and you feel as if you are going to take a nosedive into the hot Saharan sand, so you hang on for dear life. Siena didn’t used to like horses, so the camels petrified her. She started to cry the minute she got on his back. Tommy doesn’t like horses either, but he held it together well. Gemma and Olivia jumped on these creatures, put their hands in the air and said, “Look Mom, no hands!” As we caravaned on the camels, Nasr, the descendent of the pharaoh rode in a red canopied chariot next to us. Should I mention it was being pulled by a donkey? We picked the hottest day (102 degrees) for our visit to the Pyramids. The Ghoniem tribe, minus Gidu and Teta, climbed UP the 250-foot windowless tunnel. Yes, they came out looking like they had taken a shower. Once we returned from Egypt, Nasr kept breaking more piggy banks because in September we visited Croatia with our dear friends, Sam and Semra. In the city of Split—yes, just like it looks—there is a 28-foot bronze statue of St. Gregory of Nin. (Nasr s happy he was shorter than Ramses.) He is best known for advocating for church services to be in the language of the people. His bare feet are huge and very lifelike. He has a large big toe that has a shiny brass sheen. This is an overworked toe because the belief is that if you rub this toe, your wishes will come true. Nasr and I were rubbing it like crazy. No, we weren’t done traveling. We flew to Viena to visit a long time friend and Nasr treated us to stay in the Hotel Imperial. (KA-CHING). The original building was built by royalty, so it has huge chandeliers in every room, even the bathrooms. Nasr was pleased that he splurged on the hotel for us, but then his fun was deflated when he learned Amira had stayed there several years before. Nasr has glued his piggy banks back together. He is still doing research at UCLA, consulting, and teaching a renewable energy class. Clink, Clink, Clink, the piggy banks are being refilled. Who knows when we will have to open them again? Christmas is here, but Nasr is guarding those banks with his life.

Virginia spent most of the year planning and planning for Jasmine’s wedding. I didn’t have to slide down the Pyramid this year, because I was smart enough not to tackle it again. However, as we were leaving the GEM, there are dome-shaped caps covering something on the floor—I am thinking holes to hold the Disneyland type poles. Well, if there is something on the floor, rest assured, my feet will find it. And I did! I tripped over one and went flying. Nasr told me he was impressed by the way I fell; he said I was like a stunt woman because I twisted and rolled. Did I do that consciously, nope. I think survival mode kicked in. Surprisingly, I only had a few bumps and bruises on my knees and hands. Tommy was shocked that I was riding a camel an hour later. The truth is I am not going to let anything get in the way of my fun.

Amira and Matthew had to hightail it out of Egypt because two days after they returned home, the girls were at a two-week camp. Their favorite activities we water skiing, wakeboarding and riding the banana boat—but the purpose of that boat is only to make sure you don’t stay on it. Amira and Matt celebrated their 20th Anniversary this September. Amira, as Jasmine’s maid of honor, planned a bachelorette in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico in the Sonoran Desert. I guess if there is a desert, there must be camels, so Amira, Jasmine and friends rode very large camels, enjoyed the sunsets, the water and a few drinks. They said it was only a few. 😄 Matt and Amira took the whole family to Portugal during spring break. They loved all the sightseeing, but the most impressive—especially for Jada and Siena—was Nazare Beach. This is a surfer’s paradise with 100-foot waves. Siena is dreaming of surfing there, but mom and dad put the kibosh on that. Jada is our chef and their favorite dessert in Portugal was Pasteis de Nata, an egg custard tart. Jada needs to know that the next time we visit, she is making this dessert for me. At their annual Fall Chili Cookoff, Jada and Siena got first prize again. No matter how much Teta begs, I can’t get them to tell me the recipe. Jada is in 7th grade, and the poor child needs to be at school by 7:20 a.m. I think I read that it is illegal for teenagers to go to school that early. Jada is a soccer star and is getting more and more confident. Siena at 15, is a freshman in high school and is working very hard. She loves math and science. Gidu is giddy with glee, so he thinks she may be a budding engineer. Someone tell Gidu to stand down, let her decide. Siena plays field hockey and runs track. Even though her meets are indoors, the outside weather is 20 degrees, and she is running in shorts and a tank top. She, like her mom and dad, are driven to run. Some of us can only run to the bathroom.

Oanh, Olivia and Gemma—Olivia is turning 12 in February and Gemma will be 9 before you get this letter. They travelled the longest with us in Egypt—we were together for almost three weeks. Once their cousins went home, we moved to a different hotel. The girls loved the local grocery store and went there as soon as they were finished with breakfast and right before bed. They discovered the Egyptian candy and the pomegranate Schweppes drinks. Oanh managed to carry about two dozen cans home in her suitcase. The reason being is that you can’t find that flavor in the states. When we were packing to leave, and at first, her suitcase weighed 100 pounds. But she found a way to distribute all the stuff in it. I didn’t lift her backpack, but I am sure it was very heavy--at least 45 pounds--but no liquids. When Oahn travels her backpack is like a magician’s hat. She pulled out I don’t know how many bowls of udon soup for the girls on the plane. She also can pull out all sorts of over-the-counter medicine for the whole group—some of us got King Tut’s Revenge. None of us are traveling without Oanh or without consulting her about what medicines to bring. For a while I thought she was the real Mary Poppins and was going to start bringing chairs out of it. Olivia received a certificate for solving 4000 math problems on IXL (a computer learning program that Nasr found for them. It is not only for math, but for science and reading. After returning from Egypt we stayed with Amira and Olivia and Gemma got a chance to see the monuments and the museums in Washington D.C. Surprisingly, I found we can go ice skating in Carlsbad. The girls want to go every weekend that they are here—thank goodness Tommy and Jazzy took them the first time. They bounce when they fall, Gidu and I break. Olivia has a specific amount of time that she can watch her shows on her tablet. I don’t know if Olivia is a speed reader, but she is a speed listener! She watches all her shows at two times the regular speed—this way she can watch more shows. Gemma sees Tommy as a Jungle Gym. She loves to climb on him and have him hold her upside down. Thank you, Tommy, for all your patience. Gemma, in third grade, reads at a 6th grade level, and Olivia reads at an 11th grade level as a 6th grader. She has read the whole Hunger Games series.

JASMINE AND TOMMY’s wedding was on APRIL 21, 2024. She was beautiful and he was handsome. It really was exactly how Jasmine pictured it. Everything turned out exactly as we planned it—maybe even better. (Thank you, Dad). All our friends and family were there to celebrate with us. The couple paraded into the ballroom behind the Egyptian wedding procession called the Zeffa, complete with belly dancers, drummers, and sword dancers. I looked around and the entire room was smiling and clapping as they watched the procession. It was a year of planning and 8 hours of partying. Jasmine now is teaching in Carlsbad, yes close enough so we can have lunch together. Tommy is still surveying. He may grumble about the early hours, but I can tell he loves his job. This lovely couple stayed with us in Cairo and Alexandria, but they split from us and went to Greece for their honeymoon. In Athens, they were surprised that the Greek artifacts were better preserved in Egypt than in Greece. However, they loved the islands of Mykonos and Santorini. They rode a catamaran on the blue Aegean Sea, had sunset massages on their balconies, and rode ATV’s around the islands. They dined at a restaurant where they could throw and break their plates. Their honeymoon was romantic, fruitful and fun.

2024 had new beginnings, lots of new sights, fun and adventures near and far.

We pray that 2025 will find each and every one of you healthy, happy and prosperous.

May we all find peace.