

SCRIPT: "Sunbird"
Youssef Shaalan
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This audio documentary is a profile of a woman and her very unique garden where she teaches people, mostly children, about Egyptian culture, farming and nature.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Sunbird" Score by Youssef Shaalan.

I know a bird who carries Egypt's most marvelous secrets. She whispers in my ear everyday and brings me closer to the nature around me. You want to meet her? I know where.

MUSIC: STOPS.

NAT Sound: Birds chirping

I used to hold my birthday parties there when I was a kid, along with my siblings. We'd get into the car with my mom...

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Sunbird" Score by Youssef Shaalan.

...and drive for an hour or so to get there, excited to see the clown and the cake and the balloons. I should've known back then that I needed none of that to enjoy that place.

RANIA EL HAKIM (RH): She showed me a book she did when she was 15 years old about Egypt, and someone, when he saw this book and then he saw this garden he told her, "this is your book coming true." You know it was really amazing.

That was my mother telling us a bit about the garden before we've arrived.

The gates would open...

NAT SOUND: Gate opening.

...and we'd enter "Sunbird". All green on each side of the sandy road where I could see my grandmother waiting to greet us at the end.

LAILA SADEK (LS): Good morning!

There she is with a huge smile on her face standing at the center of her garden... her home.

RH: She named it "Sunbird" because it is a bird that lives in Egypt and has the three colors that represent Egypt. Blue for the Nile, yellow for the sand and green representing the plantation and the greenery.

And for sure these colors encompass the garden, while the garden encompasses, well, Egypt.

NAT SOUND: LS speaking.

Here I am about fifteen years later, and my grandmother, Laila Sadek, is giving me her traditional tour around the garden. It's not my first time, but it always feels like it is. Every time I learn something new.

NAT Sound: Bird chirping.

LS: What we have here are some of the birds that people can find in the garden. Of course, the crow. Very naughty bird which comes often steals the food of the children when the boxes are open.

This is a very important bird. He is an Australian bird, and he's called the gardener bird. This is the male bird which builds his own home in a lovely way. He makes a fence around it and he decorates the home with flowers. He picks up all the colored flowers and he sticks them into the home, and this is to attract the female. What do you think? Hard working male? Well see! Come along...

As a former tour guide, my grandmother spent most of her life learning about nature and Egypt. She wanted to create a place where all this information could be displayed for people, especially children, to come and learn.

NAT Sound: Ducks and geese.

LS: We have a pond here with ducks and geese, mostly geese. We'll show you what we feed them and how we teach the children the different size and what birds are, the beaks, how they swim, the color of their feathers.

NAT Sound: Water in the pond.

LS: Here we show the different types of eggs. We have the chicken, we have the goose turkey, we have the goose eggs. And the children of course when they look at this big egg they think it's a dinosaur. "Ahh dinosaur egg!"

I remember when I used to think the same thing. Of course, it was an ostrich egg.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Sunbird" Score by Youssef Shaalan

Through her artistic explanations and the countless illustrations that she painted herself, I felt like I was rediscovering Egypt as the tour went on.

NAT Sound: Donkey bell.

My favorite part was the donkey the waterwheel in exchange for treats.

LS: They know that they're going to have their carrots, see?

And then... the place where it came to an end.

MUSIC: STOPS.

LS: We are in a farmer's house. He's a modern farmer and what is used in here mostly was used during the Ancient Egyptians. Why? How did the farmer think? What did the man think? What did he have to start building? He was cold, he needed a wall around.

What did he have around him? A palm tree. Okay? In the early times, thousands of years ago, he put the trunk of trees close to each other and that was his wall. But later on, he thought, "and why shouldn't I use the mud that is on the floor? And make a home, build." And that is what he did. He made bricks from mud, and he found that these bricks cracked. "What am I going to do? How am I going to solve that problem?" So what did he put? Straw. To stick it together, he tried and he got a result. And this straw was from the wheat.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Every Grain of Sand" – Youssef Shaalan (instrumental cover).

The garden is located by the Mansoureya canal, not too far outside of Cairo. Many schools usually go on field trips there and it's not just the children that come out more knowledgeable but the teachers as well.

LS: The main motivation of the garden is to excite the children at whatever age they come. When they are small, it is not that difficult because everything is surprised. They're so surprised at whatever they see and whatever we show that we find that their excitement is all the time there, because we have so many things to show. We talk about Ancient Egypt, what is important, how people used to live. When they found themselves in a problem, they thought of how to solve it. But do we do this today? We just go, "Ah, I have some money, I'll go and buy and I solve my problem." Today, people have so many problems. They don't know even how to eat properly, what should be their diet. When you find people hardly know anything about your country or of the Ancient Egyptians or even up to present day, it is nice to be able to give them an idea of the daily life of people. And you notice all these people, how they react and what they do, you get excited!

This audio documentary was produced by Youssef Shaalan for the Audio Production course at the American University in Cairo taught by professor Kim Fox in spring 2017. Special thanks to my grandmother Leila Sadek and my mother Rania El Hakim.

MUSIC: FADE OUT.