



~

DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

~

**The story of two women,
two revolutions and one house.**

Marina Hitchen



CHAPTER TWO



The next couple of days passed quickly as we were caught up in the whirlwind of activity that customarily follows a death in the family. Uncle Julius and I did everything together which made the sorry tasks far less burdensome. We had to do the usual things such as registering the death, putting announcements in the papers and booking the church and so on but as Nancy was to be buried next to her son the plot had already been arranged years before. I don't remember my grandmother ever once entering a church in her lifetime so we decided that a religious service would be inappropriate although we did agree to the Lord's Prayer and the traditional 'ashes to ashes' bit more to please the vicar than anything else. My uncle and I had some disagreement over the music but in the end I gave way to his more theatrical taste. The coffin was to enter the church to the sound of the 'Triumphal March' from Aida and then he was determined to play the Simple Minds song 'don't you forget about me' as the cortege left for the graveyard. Uncle Julius wanted white lotus flowers which he said symbolized devotion but we couldn't find any in time so we finally settled on narcissus because I had heard they were used a lot in Ancient Egypt in the mummification process. Uncle Julius thought that bizarre and informed me that it was the bulbs they used and not the flowers but in the end he didn't put up much objection and we ordered a huge wreath of them with a few lilies thrown in for the sake of her English side. My uncle point blank refused to read a eulogy even though he was her nearest living relative so that was unfortunately left to me. I'm afraid what I wrote wasn't personal to my grandmother at all. I hadn't really known her well enough to put any genuine feeling into it so it ended up rather bland and something that could have been said about almost anyone. I was sure my grandmother would have hated everything about her own funeral but we were happy with it.

My uncle was most insistent that he prepared the funeral breakfast himself but he was unsure how many to cater for.

"There might not be anyone there at all or I could be mistaken and hundreds of

people we don't know about suddenly show up" he said worriedly.

I was sure that there could not possibly be more than about ten people attending and finally convinced him not to make too much food. He was very secretive about it and refused to tell me what he was making but he said he was sure that I would like it.

On the night before the funeral Uncle Julius and I sat round the fire in the reception room and he regaled me with stories of his life in London. After the houseboy had left him he told me that he had never found anyone else that could replace him. He had spent a great deal of his time trawling the saunas and gay bars of Soho in search of a soul mate but he never formed a lasting relationship with anyone again. "All this was before AIDS of course" he said trying to reassure me but to be honest I found it all distasteful and rather sad. In spite of his trying to make it sound like fun and decadent rather than just plain sordid I wasn't fooled. Poor Uncle Julius had had a lonely life with no real purpose or direction and no one to share it with and I suddenly felt terribly sorry for him. The next morning, the Thursday of the funeral, the skies opened. It was the worst weather imaginable but it was somehow fitting for the funeral of such a cold-hearted woman who had never appeared to care for anyone in almost twenty years. The service was held at ten in the morning with the burial forty minutes later and as I had predicted the church was almost empty. There was myself and Uncle Julius and the two men who had come up to London to inform me of my grandmother's death. They were from the law firm Uncle Julius told me. The three servants were there and an elderly lady who my uncle introduced me to as Lily Johnson. There was no representative from my mother's side of the family which I thought was very impolite and in my opinion was a sign of bad breeding. Finally my grandmother's doctor arrived half way through the proceedings. With the vicar that made ten in all so I had been exactly right on the numbers. After the service we hurried over to the grave where we launched rather than buried the coffin because the grave was already half full of water from the torrential downpour. Apart from our lavish display of narcissus there was a wreath

from Lily Johnson and a small spray of carnations with a card saying 'RIP from all your staff in Egypt.'

"What does that mean?" I asked my uncle knowing that I wouldn't get an answer. It was clear before my asking it that he would be no wiser than me.

"Some of her old staff must still be alive" he suggested. "Forget about it for now; I am sure the lawyers will enlighten us later."

All ten of us trooped back to the house to find that Uncle Julius had made a stalwart attempt to make the place appear welcoming. There was a huge fire in the grate and a table positively heaving with food, most of which I could not recognise.

"I got a woman from the village to set it all up while we were at the church" my uncle announced proudly. "The food was more or less ready beforehand; Egyptian fare mainly. Vine leaves, hummus, tahini, kibbeh and lots of other small dishes that I forget the name of. That's stuffed pigeon over there," he said pointing at something that didn't resemble a bird at all, "and Arabian salads which are not much different to any other salads to be honest. Falafel is over there and I have made Om Ali for dessert. I managed to find some bottles of Omar Khayyam in the cellar. Horrible wine but it's what they drink over there. The brandy is from France though. Even I cannot stomach that Egyptian stuff and anyway I've heard it can make you go blind."

"Why ever did you go to so much trouble?" I asked.

"Well the mean old woman never entertained anyone in her lifetime so I thought I would let her make up for it in death" he joked.

I wanted to speak to Lily Johnson about my parents but this was obviously not the right time so I just thanked her for coming and made arrangements to call on her on Saturday. She didn't linger and nor did the lawyers. They informed us that they would be returning at six that evening to formally read and discuss the terms of the will. The doctor was the only one who made the most of my uncle's banquet.

"Your grandmother never so much as offered me a cup of tea throughout all the

years I was paying her home visits "he complained, "so I think I deserve to get my money's worth now."

In fact he drank so much of the wine that he had to leave his car and I had to ask one of the servants to drive him home. It was one of the best funerals he had ever attended he told me as he walked unsteadily out of the front door unceremoniously tripping over the cat that had positioned itself on the doorstep.

After everyone had left my uncle and I thought it prudent that we take a short nap before the lawyers came back as we would definitely need our wits about us for the reading of the will. Uncle Julius managed to climb up to his room but I wasn't steady enough to face the stairs so I lay down on the carpet in front of the fire and tried to sleep off the effects of the Omar Khayyam. I was oblivious to the activities of the servants around me and was surprised to see when I eventually woke just before six that the remains of the banquet had been cleared away and there was no alcohol in sight. In fact by the time the lawyers returned there were only bottles of iced water and glasses set out on the dining table looking as though we were about to hold some kind of board meeting. At precisely six o'clock we took our seats at the table and the elder of the two lawyers opened his briefcase and took out what I presumed was the will.

"I will not formally read through all this" he said, brandishing the papers with an air of authority "but rather I will simply give you the salient points."

"No you will not. I insist you read the damn thing word for word" Uncle Julius interjected.

"Very well if you insist" the lawyer replied somewhat disgruntled "but it is rather long. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Of course I'm sure. Get on with it" Uncle Julius replied sharply. I could see he was getting impatient and so could the lawyer who made no further attempt to delay the proceedings.

"I, Nancy Paramour being of sound mind on the day of our Lord 1st May 2010 bequeath the following. To my son Julius I leave the house known as Extwistle Hall and all its contents, excepting the portraits, to do with whatso-

ever he wishes. In addition I also leave my son two hundred thousand pounds in trust which will be paid to him in his monthly cheques as normal. Upon his death the balance of this money will revert to my granddaughter Gloria. To my granddaughter Gloria in addition to the portraits I bequeath both my properties in Luxor, Egypt on condition that she goes there in person within the next six months and once there restores the said properties to their former state of beauty and grandeur. In order for her to better understand what is expected of her I leave her my personal diaries. These diaries will be given to her at the Shephard's Hotel in Cairo as soon as she informs my lawyers that she is there. That's about it" the lawyer said pausing, "apart from almost fifty small monetary bequests to charities and the servants here and the ones over in Egypt. I don't think you need me to read out all that word for word" he announced smugly, folding up the will and returning it to his briefcase. "I am obliged to inform you Gloria that there are two properties in Luxor; a small villa and a huge mansion house on the Nile. The villa is in good repair and rented out to a Spanish couple but the larger property has been empty for over forty years and requires a great deal of restoration work. There are only two old guards and one cleaning lady still working there. The gardens are in a terrible state I believe but I do know that the house itself is structurally sound. Your grandmother has set aside the rest of her liquid cash for this, which amounts to just over one hundred thousand pounds but at today's prices there will almost certainly be a shortfall in funds. I fear you will have to sell at least one of the paintings if you are to fulfil her wishes and complete the restoration."

"And when I have completed the work what then? Can I sell the properties?"

"Yes you can dispose of them as you wish but the work must be completed before the deeds are passed to you."

"And if I don't want to do it?"

"Then you may keep only the portraits; the Egyptian properties and the money will revert to the Luxor Governate. We need to know your intentions within the next few weeks so that we can make alternative arrangements should you

not wish to go to Luxor and carry out your grandmother's final wishes." Both lawyers looked rather disdainful of any suggestion that I might not wish to carry out my grandmother's last request so I quickly put their minds at ease.

"No of course I will go. The problem is this six month caveat because it means I will have to delay my final year at University. I will do it of course; I have no choice. I have to go down to London first to make arrangements for a sabbatical but I should be ready to travel to Egypt, let's say, early in the New Year. Thank-you for your time gentlemen and if there is nothing more then you are welcome to leave."

As soon as they were out the door Uncle Julius and I both burst out laughing. "Well the old lady did just fine by us both" he said putting his arms around me. "She hated me but she couldn't break with good old British protocol in the end. Who'd have thought she kept hold of those properties in Egypt. I wonder why she did that and why she had two houses out there. I certainly only remember one. All will be revealed in the fullness of time as they say. Selling this house is going to be a nightmare. Still it will give me a bit of extra cash on top of her measly cheques. I could live well off them at one time but not anymore; no idea about inflation my mother."

"There are some bits and pieces you can sell too" I reassured him. "Not the crystal of course, you will want to keep that, but the china should bring a pretty penny. It's Royal Dalton and dates back well over a hundred years. There are some other pictures that might be worth something besides the portraits and some of the furniture could be worth a bit if you can salvage it. The carpets have had it I think although they must have been fabulous in their day. There's been no mention of my grandmother's jewellery so I presume that will be included in with the house contents too. I don't know if that's worth anything or not but I remember her wearing some gold pieces and maybe some diamonds. How exciting. These diaries sound like they will be interesting. Who'd have thought that my grandmother kept a diary? I never saw her writing in one. Maybe she stopped writing them when she left Egypt. Finally I might find something out

about my grandfather. That's what I am really looking forward to. Do you think she might have known anything more about my mother's disappearance? There must be something in her diary about that surely. I don't know why she couldn't just hand over the diaries now. All this going to that hotel in Cairo, whatever its name is, is rather melodramatic don't you think."

"No I don't agree with you there" my uncle said thoughtfully. "She obviously really wanted you to go to Egypt and she has used everything she had to lure you there. You might not have gone without something to tempt you. All this news deserves a celebration but unfortunately I think we have had enough celebrating for one day don't you. We need to get an early night and start getting our plans together for the future. I want to get out of this place as soon as possible. I need some bright lights and some of that London civilisation for a few weeks before I can face coming back here to start sorting all this stuff out and putting the house on the market. I'm not going to restore Extwistle Hall to its former glory by the way. I will sell it 'as is' and leave all that to the buyer; if I find one. It won't bring a lot in this condition I know but I want it off my hands as quickly as possible. Look Gloria, I want to leave tomorrow; how about you? Do you want to travel back with me? Drive in convoy I mean."

"No I can't. I have to see Lily Johnson on Saturday and anyway I don't have the energy to drive all that way at the moment. I will leave Sunday or even Monday morning. I have to see my tutor on Tuesday so I have to be back at the university by then. I don't know what he is going to say but I do know he's not going to be very pleased. I really don't want to take this sabbatical. I would have rather finished my degree this year and then gone to Egypt. This six month clause has put a stop to that. I know I shouldn't complain because at least I have the money now to complete my studies and my masters too if I want. Come on then we had better get to bed if you are leaving in the morning. I have a headache anyway. It's that Egyptian wine. My God it's rough."

With that we said goodnight and when I woke in the morning my Uncle Julius had already left. He had disappeared from my life as quickly as he had come into

it but I had no intention of losing him a second time round.

I spent the whole of Friday mooching about the house looking what there was that my uncle would be able to sell. I found quite a bit of jewellery that looked like it might be worth something. Two or three of the pieces I would like to have for me and I put them to one side ready to tell my uncle that I would buy them off him. They didn't look very valuable but then I am no expert. A silver fish pendant with a black stone which I think from my quick search on the Internet came from Yemen, a bracelet shaped like a cobra that appears to be made out of stone and a malachite ring. I wasn't interested in the gold or the diamonds and I couldn't find my father's wedding ring. Perhaps he had been buried in it. The last thing I did was call Sotheby's to get a valuation on the portraits. All in all there were six that I thought might be worth something. None of them appealed to me or had any sentimental value so I decided they could all go to auction.

The house seemed empty without Uncle Julius and all the frivolity had definitely left the place. I saw it again for what it was; a damp, decaying, depressing mausoleum and I too now wanted to leave as soon as I could. I would see Lily Johnson tomorrow and depart immediately after that even if it meant driving through the night. There were no happy childhood memories for me here.