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DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

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

Marina Hitchen



CHAPTER THREE



Lily Johnson's house was very different from how I had imagined it. With a name like Green Lodge I had been expecting something much humbler and more homely but the house that stood before me was imposing and austere. The bleakness of this large Edwardian property was in stark contrast to the acre of beautiful, well-tended gardens it stood in. I walked up the tree-lined path to the heavy wooden panelled door and nervously pulled the chain on the old fashioned bell. The door opened almost instantly as though someone had been standing directly behind it waiting for me. I was silently ushered inside by a stony faced woman in her late fifties who I assumed by the way she was dressed to be the daily help. Once inside, the house was surprisingly light and airy and I was led down a gaily painted hallway into a finely appointed drawing room where I was left alone to wait for Lily. I looked round in awe at the beautiful art work that adorned almost every section of the walls. The whole place was the epitome of good taste which was not what I had been expecting having previously met the occupant. Lily Johnson did not pay anything like the attention to her own appearance that she paid to that of her property. I recalled the short dumpy woman with a kindly wrinkled face, frizzy hair and outdated spectacles that I had met at my grandmother's funeral. She might have been described as ugly had it not been for those bright blue eyes which lit up her whole face and indicated a sharp mind almost certainly lay behind that rather plain exterior.

It was almost ten minutes later when she entered the room dressed in a pair of shabby trousers and a baggy top that went only a little way to disguising her portly figure. Despite her age and her appalling dress sense there was an aura of inner beauty and quiet confidence about her that gave one the impression that one was in the presence of a great lady. After the usual greetings and the ordering of lemon and ginger tea she kindly opened up the conversation for me.

"I don't think this is just a social call is it? I presume you are here to ask me about your father" she said candidly.

"Well about all my family, not only my father" I replied not wishing her to think

that I had come here only to hear the lurid details of the affair she had had with my father. "My grandmother, my Uncle Julius, my mother, anything really; I don't know much about any of them."

"Well in that case I will need to go way back" she explained, "so I hope you have plenty of time. My relationship with your family goes back a long way; right back to my childhood in fact. Simon Paramour was a friend of the family so I knew him quite well from being just a young girl. He was already living overseas by then but he came home at least two or three times every year. A rather dull arrogant man I always thought, but handsome in a military sort of way and of course he was terribly wealthy which always makes a man appear more attractive don't you think. Your grandmother set her cap for him before she even met him. Sorry I am getting ahead of myself there I'll go back a bit. Nancy Blackwell was two or three years younger than me and she came from what I would call impoverished but genteel farming stock. I didn't know her very well but I knew who she was and more importantly I knew what she was. Nancy wanted money. She loved the high society parties and the fancy dinners. That surprises you doesn't it?" she said, pausing when she saw the look of shock on my face. "Yes it's hard to imagine but your reclusive grandmother was once quite the socialite. Unfortunately she had nothing going for her apart from her good looks. She wasn't very clever or witty or accomplished and she certainly wasn't a lady of fortune but she was beautiful and she knew it. What Nancy needed was a rich husband and Simon Paramour was on the market for a wife. I am sorry to say that I was the one who introduced them to each other. It was at a dinner party in this very house. One of my guests had called off sick at the last minute and I couldn't think of who I could invite to replace her only Nancy. Almost as soon as we were seated at the table Nancy made her move on Simon. He was almost thirty years her senior and I could see he was flattered by a young beautiful woman paying him all that attention. Nancy was relentless in her pursuit of him and went gadding off to Egypt after him where he was stationed at the time. I tried to warn Simon off but he wouldn't listen and I lost touch with both of them

at that point. But being determined Nancy finally caught her prey and I read about their wedding in the society pages about a year later. I heard nothing more of them after that until Nancy returned home alone with her young son. Simon was dead and not from natural causes. He had been killed by some Egyptian apparently but that's all I know. There were no details in any of the newspapers and Nancy wasn't talking; well not about her husband and certainly not to me. She was talking to almost everyone else though about some Egyptian lover she had taken out there and she made no secret of the fact that he was the one who had impregnated her. In fact she seemed rather proud of it. Who he was, what had happened to him she never said but I got the impression that he might have been involved in Simon's death in some way. More tea Gloria? We need to take a little break there because the next part of my story doesn't take place until more than twenty years later."

"Yes please but don't stop. It's fascinating. I can't imagine my grandmother being such a party lover but I can certainly see her as a gold-digger."

We sat quietly for a few minutes while we waited for more tea; mint tea this time.

"Well" Lily resumed after pouring the tea into two tiny glasses, "Nancy had her little Egyptian baby and from all accounts she spoiled him rotten. She wasn't a friend of mine you understand so I never came into contact with her much. When I first met your father it was years later when he was twenty-two and I was fifty-six and I had no idea who he was. It was 1984 and I was travelling on the train to London. Amer was in the first-class compartment and he asked me to join him there because the third class was overcrowded and the best seats had already been taken. I hesitated at first and told him, not very convincingly I might add, that I couldn't possibly do that because I didn't have enough money to pay the difference. He laughed and said he would pay it if we got caught. I remember the ticket collector walking down the corridor and nodding at Amer as though he knew him. He never asked either of us to show him our tickets and neither of us offered to pay for the upgrade. We chatted about what we were

going to do in London and had a few glasses of wine together as people do when they are travelling but when we reached Kings Cross we exchanged telephone numbers. I have no idea why I did that. I was happily married and it wasn't something I would normally do. Anyway I did it. I was going to the ballet and Amer said that he had a big meeting with some government people and then he had to go to the Freemasons Hall on Great Queens Street so we wouldn't have time to see each other down there in London. We agreed to meet up when we got back to Yorkshire but I don't believe I had any real intentions of doing so. I had discovered who his mother was by then you see. By the way I found out later that Amer was never in the Freemasons at all, only the Rotary, but he really believed himself to be important to the Grand Master of that London Lodge. That was probably the first indication that I had that Amer was quite a disturbed young man. Sorry I am losing track here; that all happened weeks later. As soon as I left him and got into London I vowed to forget all about Amer and I probably would have done had my husband not gone to Saudi Arabia a few days after I got back. He was to be away on business for six months and I was left alone in this godforsaken place. I started thinking who I could call. All my friends were married and had their own lives and then I suddenly remembered Amer."

I noticed that Lily's eyes were glistening with tears and although I desperately wanted her to go on I could see she needed a break.

"You don't have to tell me if it's too painful Lily" I said half-heartedly.

"No. I want to tell you and it's not painful at all. These are beautiful memories and I haven't spoken about Amer to anyone in years and I never told anyone the whole story even then. Just give me a minute."

We sat in silence for almost fifteen minutes before Lily was ready to continue.

"I called Amer that night and he came rushing round in his fancy sports car. We went to the Box Tree restaurant in Ilkley. Do you know it; it's still there? It was terribly romantic and I'm afraid I got rather drunk. On the way home in the car Amer started smoking a joint. I had never seen anyone do that before and I found it all rather daring. When he said he wanted me to go home with

him I said yes without a second thought. I had never been unfaithful to my husband before but this didn't seem wrong somehow. I went with him to his rooms in the mews of Extwistle Hall. I can still remember every detail; the place was horrible actually. When I woke next morning I just wanted to go home and forget it had ever happened. It was flattering that a young handsome man had wanted to seduce me but I wasn't about to let it happen again. Well that's what I thought. Two days later he called me and invited me to Blackpool of all places. I have always had a secret liking for Blackpool and the thought of a weekend there with a young lover was very appealing. I decided that I would have this little fling and end it immediately afterwards. It wasn't a great weekend to be honest because I suddenly started having twinges of guilt and although I knew that I was falling for Amer I didn't really want to sleep with him. I did sleep with him though and that was the start of the greatest love affair of my life. After that weekend in Blackpool we saw each other almost every day. We went out together and cooked together but most of all we talked. Amer was a great talker, he was clever and more than that he was entertaining. He could tell the most marvellous stories. We talked about almost everything but most of all we talked about his dreams and one dream in particular. He told me that he had this recurring dream that was set in Egypt and he was sure it was some sort of message. In this dream he discovered two caves. He opened the first one and it was full of gold so he closed it immediately. He didn't need money he explained. The second one was filled with swords that he said represented power. He went inside and came out followed by a flock of sheep which he said represented the people. Once outside he was attacked by a swarm of bees which he believed was a foreign army. One stung him on his neck which he was convinced represented his death. He had to go to Egypt one day to open this cave he said. He believed in this dream implicitly and I asked him why it was that he was so sure that this dream had some significance. He told me that all his dreams came true sooner or later but when I asked for an example he couldn't give me one. It was then that I realised that Amer was not rational. I had never questioned the validity of

his stories before I had just listened to them even though I knew that most of them must have been complete fantasy.

There was no doubt that by this time we were both in love with each other. You may ask what a young man like him would see in an old woman like me. After all there was over thirty years difference in our ages but as I explained this was a meeting of minds more than bodies. I was everything to him; mother, sister and lover all in one person and as for me I had never met anyone like him before and he became somewhat of an addiction. We went to the finest hotels and the seediest bars. Amer could relate to anyone from the highest nobility to the poorest of the poor. We camped on the moors and drove at breakneck speed all over Yorkshire and he made me feel young again. Yes we did have great fun together. It was the height of summer when we started our affair Gloria and whenever I think of your father I always see him standing in the sunshine holding a glass of wine or a black Sobrane cigarette or picking strawberries from one of my bushes over there" she said pointing out towards the garden.

"To be honest I can see exactly what my father saw in you" I interjected. "You are clever, terribly honest and I think loyal but it's more than that. There is something very alluring about you but safe at the same time. Is that a very rude thing to say?"

"No don't worry; it isn't. Men have always flocked round me despite my rather plain appearance and my complete indifference to the way I look. I always knew I had 'something' other women didn't have. My husband was a very handsome and successful man and there were many people, your grandmother being one of them, who wondered how I had managed to ensnare such a man but I knew exactly how. We loved each other, my husband and I and before I met Amer I had never once even dreamt of betraying him. He was everything to me, my rock, my foundation, my true soul mate but Amer was something different. He was like the perfume in the air and I needed him every bit as much as I needed my husband. That year I was in love with two men and I didn't think of myself as doing anything wrong.

It was about two months into our affair that my husband came home. I did not hide Amer from him but simply introduced him as a friend. They liked each other immediately as I knew they would and my poor husband never once suspected there was anything other than friendship between us. He trusted me you see. I no longer felt guilty because as I said, I had convinced myself I was doing nothing wrong. Amer and I weren't sleeping together by then so was it really all that wrong anyway?"

"That's beautiful "I whispered." I hope I can find a love like that one day."

"Well I had two for that short time but I knew it wasn't going to last. Maybe that was what made our affair all the more poignant. It was winter now and I knew Amer was about to leave me; he was looking for a wife. He told me that he needed to be married urgently because MI6 needed to send him to Palestine where more than likely he would be killed. He needed children before that happened. It was prophesised he said and there would be no avoiding it. The first girl he met, Melanie, was a social climber, who was involved on the fringes of the socialist workers party. At first Amer was besotted by her but then he said he had discovered that she had been sent to him by the government to try to control him. He dropped her almost immediately after that. The next one was a teacher; I rather liked her. She had been engaged before to a man she said resembled Amer. This made Amer feel uncertain about her. He was worried that she wanted him just because he looked like her dead fiancé and not for himself at all. It was about this time that his stories started getting wilder. He once thought he might be a reincarnation of Tutankhamun but although he went off that idea quite quickly he started reading hieroglyphics and got interested in numerology. The number twenty-two was everywhere around him he said. His birthday was the twenty-second of July and he was obsessed by that number. He imagined that men in black were following him in big Mercedes cars and each car had a number plate with twenty-two in it. I knew he needed help and that he was getting more paranoid by the day but he also desperately needed someone to believe in him and not label him as crazy so I'm afraid I went along with all his

stories. Then he met Janice. She was almost ten years older than him and he met her on the London train of all places. This was an omen he said because he had met me on that same train six months earlier. Janice worked in the bank and had two broken engagements behind her. He met her every afternoon after she finished work and then he came to me every evening. Janice knew about me but she never seemed bothered by our friendship. Silly deluded Janice; she thought Amer was a gift from heaven and she was very keen to marry him. She had no intention of losing a third man. I could see he didn't love her and they were completely unsuited to each other but he was determined to get married. The problem was that he started telling her all his stories. She came to me once to ask me what I thought was wrong with him and I told her I was pretty sure he was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. She begged me to help him and although I promised her I would I never did. Anyway Janice's priority, like Amer's was to be married so she set aside her concerns about his sanity and they got engaged. Amer bought a small calf that day that he said he would rear and kill on the eve of his wedding to provide the food for his guests. He said that's what the Egyptians did. Poor Amer; he started believing the calf had special powers and could perform black magic. This was the same time that he told me the God Horus was sending him messages through a receiver in his brain. He explained that Horus had been in contact with him once before when he was much younger and that he was scared of him then and he was even more scared of him now. He needed to get Horus out of his body somehow he said. One night he came to my house very drunk. I don't know where he had been to get into that state but he was violently sick and shaking badly. I shamelessly told him that this was Horus leaving him and thankfully he believed it and was much calmer after that. What I did was wrong, I know that now, but he was never going to see a doctor so I convinced myself that I was helping him in my own way. Two days before the wedding Amer came to me to say he couldn't kill his cow and that instead he had exchanged it with a local farmer for vegetables and cheese. I wasn't surprised; Amer could never kill anything. That was the

last time I saw him for almost five years. I couldn't bear to go to the wedding and my husband was back home by then so I tried to forget all about Amer. It was hard. Our affair had lasted only eight months but it was probably the most important relationship of my life. I thought about him almost every day. I still do. I think I need to take another break now if you don't mind Gloria. The next part is the hardest part for me to talk about."

"Would you like me to leave you alone for a while?" I asked. "I can take a walk round your gardens if you like. They are absolutely beautiful."

"Maybe for half an hour if you are sure you don't mind" Lily replied, "and when you get back I'll prepare something a bit stronger than tea for us to drink."

I left her alone with her thoughts and I went out into the garden. The weather had cleared up and although it was chilly the sun had come out. I sat myself down on the bench near the rock pool and reflected upon what I had just heard. I wondered what on earth had happened to my father to make him become like that or perhaps some people are just born that way. I wasn't shocked at his having fallen in love with Lily. She had something ethereal about her and she was totally different to anyone I had ever met. Their love must have been something very special I decided and being lost in these thoughts it was almost an hour before I went back inside. I found Lily busy mixing two large mint juleps. "I will need this" she said nervously. "I have never spoken of this before to anyone so here goes. As the years passed I assumed that Janice and Amer must have settled down happily and I was pleased to hear that they now had a daughter. I never contacted them but I still had several friends who knew them so all their news came to me. On your second birthday, the 25th of October 1991 if I remember correctly, Janice disappeared. The police were involved but to all intents and purposes it looked as though Janice had simply had enough of Amer and decided to leave him. Most of her clothes had gone so that was the logical explanation and the one the police accepted. Her parents on the other hand were having none of it. They said that she would never have left without her daughter and without telling them where she was. Amer must have killed

her they said. They tried to convince the police that he was insane and that he had murdered Janice because she was trying to get him committed. The police reopened the investigation at their request but still couldn't find any sign of foul play so all their protestations came to nothing. I have some idea what happened to her but I can't tell you. Not now; maybe one day I will but not now. One thing I knew for certain from the day Janice went missing was that Amer would never have harmed her. I expected him to come to me at that time but he never did and within a couple of months the search for Janice was called off.

It was almost a year later when one morning I found Amer asleep on my front doorstep. He had come in the night he said but couldn't wake me. He became very animated as he told me that he had discovered what had happened to Janice. He was now sure she had been murdered by MI6 and they were threatening to kill everyone he was close to unless he went to fight for some terrorist organisation in Palestine. That's why he hadn't been to see me earlier he told me. He had to throw the government off my scent. Once MI6 and the CIA found out that Janice was trying to have him committed they had no choice but to kill her. He was totally convinced of it. He couldn't see me again he said until all these problems were solved. He had to make a decision as to what he should do for the best. Horus was back inside his body he said and he was losing control. If there was no other way out he would kill himself before letting anything happen to anyone else. Joining a terrorist organization was also out of the question. He was going to try to make a deal with America to exchange the gold in the cave in Egypt for his freedom. Having said what he had come to say he ran very quickly away from me down the driveway leaving me completely stunned and speechless. I knew then that Janice had been correct in seeking help for Amer and I should have been strong enough to do it years before. After he left I decided I had to speak to my husband about finding him a doctor. I kept putting it off because it seemed like a betrayal of all we had shared together. A week later on the 22nd of October 1992 Amer shot himself. I cannot tell you what agonies I have suffered since that day. I could have done something. I should have done

something. I didn't go to the funeral and I didn't even send any flowers but I have been to his grave many times since then. Your father, Gloria, was one of the sweetest people I have ever met. He helped so many people in his lifetime, giving them money when they needed it, sitting at the bedsides of the dying, listening to everyone's problems but sadly he was not able to help himself. My husband is dead too now. He died just two years ago and I miss him dreadfully but I don't feel the pain I felt for Amer. My husband was an old man and had had a good life but Amer was only thirty years old and he never even knew who is father was and I know that was something that plagued him tremendously. Nancy never allowed him to go to Egypt so I am sure there was something out there she didn't want him to know about."

In an attempt to comfort her I told Lily about the will and about my inheritance and the diaries. She said that she hoped that I would go to Luxor and find out the truth for Amer about his ancestry and what happened in Egypt so that he could rest in peace.

I left Lily that evening wondering if I would ever see her again. She had raised more questions than she had answered and I hoped very much that I would discover something in those diaries. As soon as I got back to Extwistle Hall I packed my case and immediately left for London. I never wanted to come back to my home again but something made me turn the car round at the end of the drive. I parked up for a few minutes trying to recall if I had ever been happy there. The rhododendrons were growing wild all down the drive and I thought of 'Rebecca' and the opening lines of the book; 'Last night I dreamt I went to Mandalay again.' Funny how I could always find a phrase from some book or other to fit every occasion. That phrase Lily had used about my father being 'the perfume in the air' I was sure was from a book too but I couldn't for the life of me think which one. I drove through the night without stopping and it was only when I was drawing up outside my apartment that I suddenly remembered it was from 'A Dangerous Method'; a story about Jung and Freud. I am sure Lily must have known that.