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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 FIVE



The following morning I was collected by a driver and whisked off to my new hotel without even having time for breakfast. The roads were deserted and I tried to ask the driver if all this was really necessary but as he couldn't speak one word of English I finally gave up and continued the rest of the way in silence. About twenty minutes into the journey I spotted the pyramids from the left hand window of the car and it looked as though we were heading straight for them. I had always imagined the pyramids to be in the middle of the desert somewhere and it was quite a shock seeing them so close to the road amongst all the houses. I kept my eyes firmly fixed on them and when we were almost directly opposite the largest of the three edifices the driver pulled to the right into the driveway of a luxurious looking hotel. He drove down a row of towering palms, past a security guard into a large car park finally pulling up at a disappointingly ordinary hotel entrance. He made no offer of taking me inside and when a particularly handsome porter opened my door the driver gestured me to get out of the car saying "Mena House, Mena House" which were the only words he had spoken to me the whole time and then he held out his hand presumably expecting a tip. I gave him ten Egyptian pounds that I don't think he deserved but I didn't want to appear mean especially as the lawyers had paid the actual taxi fare.

I entered the hotel past tight security and once inside I saw that the Mena House with its lavish gold reception and red velvet seating was certainly much grander than the Sheapherds. I was told by the concierge that my room had been arranged but due to so many people moving out of the city there had been a high demand for rooms and I would be in a room right at the back of the hotel. He proceeded to guide me through a labyrinth of corridors, down some stairs and finally along another narrow hallway until we reached a door with a big brass number one ominously displayed on it. On entering the room I saw that it was comfortable but nowhere near as opulent as the rest of the hotel and what is more it did not have a view of either the pyramids or the gardens. In fact it looked out directly onto an empty stretch of desert. Feeling a little bit cheated

for having paid so much to stay in such a bog standard room I unpacked my cases and settled myself in hoping I would not to have to stay there for long. I was hungry but I was too late for breakfast so I ordered coffee and sandwiches in my room and decided that there was nothing else for it but to start reading my grandmother's diary. I opened it to find the writing very small and spidery and difficult to decipher which was very off-putting and I was all set to give up but knowing very well that I had to persevere I forced myself to start reading. The first thing that struck me as unusual was that she had included a prologue; 'in order to help the reader understand me better' she had written. "Who does that?" I asked myself. I had always thought diaries were meant to be for private thoughts not public consumption but it looked like my grandmother had other ideas. She had obviously planned for someone to read it from the very day she started writing it. Despite the difficulty I had with her handwriting within minutes I was engrossed in my grandmother's story.

❧ Diaries of Nancy Blackwell ❧

· *Volume one* ·

Prologue

My name is Nancy Blackwell and in this year of our Lord nineteen fifty one I have reached twenty years of age. I have not previously written a diary so I am including this introduction in order that the reader might come to know me better and understand the circumstances that have brought me to this point.

I was born in 1931 of genteel but almost destitute parents. I had no education to speak of but am blessed with exceedingly good looks. My fair hair, blue eyes and full lips are the envy of every girl in the county. My bosoms, although a little smaller than is the fashion of the day, are pert and slightly pointed and complement my petite frame perfectly. I have slender hands with long tapering fingers and beautifully manicured nails. I can play the piano tolerably well and

sing a little but can do neither of these competently enough to teach. My lack of education precludes me from taking up a post as a governess and being an only child I have no experience that would allow me to work as a nanny. The only option left open to me is to find a husband which I set out to do with some determination as soon as I reached my eighteenth birthday.

I was fortunate in that there was a lack of eligible young ladies living in my area so I occasionally received invitations to some dinner parties and dances from a higher class than my station would normally allow. I knew that I was only there to make up the numbers so to speak and that the young eligible bachelors I met there, although finding me attractive, understood that I was not suitable marriage material. If I were to enter this society I would need to find a man who was not so concerned about my background and one preferably without a mother. Any young gentleman showing interest in me would never have been able to get me approved by any of his family let alone get me past an ambitious mother. No I needed an older man; perhaps a widower.

I had narrowed my options down to two, neither of whom was very appealing to me but who both had the necessary attributes of money and status. The first one, Samuel Lovage was a man in his mid-sixties whose wife had died many years ago. He showed some interest in me and was constantly pawing my hands and arms whenever the opportunity arose. I immediately labelled him a lascivious boor and rather too salacious for good taste. He would be my last choice I decided. The other, Jack Trevallion was much younger and of a more jovial demeanour. He had never been married and I could see why. He was tremendously wealthy but what had been bestowed on him in that direction had been denied him in every other. He was quite repulsive to the eye; grossly overweight, thinning red hair and bad teeth. I could not envisage myself with him either so I relegated him to my last choice too. This meant I had two last choices and I spent many a night in my room agonising over marriage to which one of these two men would be the lesser of two evils. I didn't relish the thought of living with either of them but I needed the money. I had almost settled on Samuel

when I was invited to dinner at the home of an acquaintance of mine, Lily Johnson, and it was at that dinner that I was first introduced to Simon Paramour.

Lily Johnson was not someone I was terribly fond of. She is a very plain bookish woman about three years my senior who had managed to marry way above her station. Her husband of only a few months, Henry Johnson has charm good looks and money. God know what he saw in Lily. Anyway Lily and Henry were having a quiet intimate dinner party that night and Debbie Goldsmith, a rather fetching divorcee from the same neighbourhood as me had suddenly been taken ill and had sent her apologies. It looked like I was being drafted in as a last resort as I only received my invitation the morning of the party.

"Please do say you can come" Lily begged me when she called me at around eleven that morning. "There will only be eight of us and six of us are couples; if you don't come poor Simon will be totally alone."

She made no apology for not placing me on the original guest list and she made no secret that I was only a poor replacement for Debbie who was so sadly disposed. I toyed briefly with the idea of turning down her somewhat insulting invitation professing a prior engagement but I was intrigued as to who this Simon Paramour was. I had definitely never come into contact with him before or even heard of him but as soon I was off the telephone my mother very eagerly enlightened me.

"He's Josiah's son" she told me. "You must know who Josiah Paramour is Nancy. He has several big cotton mills in Leeds and he's the MP for Bradford North I think. He lives on his own at that desolate old mansion house, Extwistle Hall. His wife died two or three years ago and Simon, his only son is away working in the colonies. I am almost certain that Simon has never been married."

"You mean he's in the army mother I corrected her, "I don't think we still have people working in the colonies do we."

"No not the army. I don't think he's a diplomat either so what else does one do abroad apart from work?" she responded haughtily.

She didn't know any more than that but she had heard from someone that

Simon was almost certainly looking for a wife and being no longer a young man he was rapidly running out of suitable options. With this in mind and not looking to miss an opportunity I took particular care over my appearance. I wore my 'New Look' salmon pink dress with the billowy skirt and puff sleeves which if not exactly a Dior was almost indiscernible from one. My hair looked particularly fetching with the soft waves I had decided to keep from last year's fashion rather than change to the straighter look becoming popular now. I set off for my dinner engagement confident that I looked my best and that this Simon was sure to find me irresistible.

I was the last to arrive and the other guests were already finishing their first cocktail and preparing to sit down to dinner. Lily being the rude person she is made no attempt to introduce me to anyone, but her husband, seeing my consternation, took my arm and escorted me into the dining room himself. Once seated he quickly ran through who everyone was but the only name that was of interest to me and the only one I remembered was that of Simon Paramour. As soon as I laid eyes on the said Simon Paramour I knew he was the one I was going to marry. Don't ask me how I knew it; I just did. He was just short of thirty years older than me which was a good age for a wealthy husband in my opinion and he had never been married. He had been out of the country and in the army for so long, first in the Sudan and now in Egypt, that there had never been any reason to take a wife only for her to live in some inhospitable army barracks out there. Things had changed now. He wasn't in the army any longer he told me but was working for some governmental organization looking after the archaeological sites in Egypt "making sure nobody makes off with the antiquities" he joked.

"I have a house in Luxor although I don't get to spend as much time in it as I would like" he continued almost wistfully. "It is very beautiful down there but unfortunately my work often takes me to Cairo and even if I am not in Cairo almost half my time is spent travelling around the country checking on one new archaeological site or another."

I didn't know the first thing about Egypt and although I knew Cairo was the capital I had never heard of Luxor or any of the other places he went on to mention. Finally he told me that he would be returning to Egypt in a few days time so sadly we would probably not meet again.

This could not happen. I had to salvage the situation. "Oh what a coincidence" I replied recklessly. "I will be in Egypt myself towards the end of the year; maybe for as long as a couple of months. I am terribly keen to see all the monuments and temples out there. If you can spare the time perhaps we could meet up and you could show me round a bit."

"Really" Lily interjected disbelievingly. "Who are you going with? Surely you are not travelling un-chaperoned and don't you already have a guide arranged?" "Of course I'm not going to be totally alone out there" I said making it up as I went along. "My parents know an elderly lady who is going and she has offered to accompany me. It's just that she won't be able to get around too much; oh and she's only going for a week or so and I want to stay much longer. She knows Egypt very well so I don't think she will have called upon the services of a tour guide."

I had no idea at that point how I was going to accomplish this trip of mine but I was determined to do so. Simon was the best person I had met in the marriage stakes so far and I wasn't about to let him go that easily. To my great relief Lily had changed the subject completely now to some new novel called "The Catcher in the Rye" which I had never heard of but which everyone else seemed very excited about. Simon was expounding on it so I resolved I had better read it before I saw him again.

At the end of the evening Simon surreptitiously handed me a telephone number and a list of places he frequented in Cairo. "Just in case you don't find me at home" he explained.

Lily was quite curt when she wished me goodbye. I could tell she was furious and it was obvious that she could see right through all my lies. She obviously considers herself very shrewd but I was about to prove her wrong. I would prove

them all wrong. I would show her and her snooty friends that I really was going to Cairo and to that other place where Simon said he lived. Lily Johnson would be laughing at the other side of her face soon.

That night I went through all of my first impressions of Simon Paramour. He was definitely handsome and looked younger than his years. I wasn't keen on that pencil moustache he sported. It was very dated and put him unmistakably into a completely different generation to me. That would have to go. He didn't have much to say for himself but whatever he did say he said with authority. Maybe a bit haughty or even arrogant but I put that down to shyness. He seemed to like me otherwise he wouldn't have been so keen to meet up with me in Egypt. A man of his standing needed a wife and children and Simon, being an ex-army man appeared to have no idea how to go about finding one. "A man's man; not a womanizer at all" I thought gleefully. "I won't be fighting off much competition there."

My only problem now was getting myself to Cairo and for that I needed money. I had no doubt that once I reached Simon in Egypt the next step would be easy. I would need enough money for about two months I thought and I would have to stay in a decent hotel. I mustn't give Simon the slightest idea that I was looking to marry him for money. I told my mother that Simon had asked me to go and visit him in Egypt and shamelessly gave her the idea that an engagement was already in the offing. Because of that she got together what money she had and gave it to me with an assurance from me that I would give it back to her once I was married. It wasn't enough. I sold my piano and a few bits of jewellery to the first bidder for slightly less than their true value and hence I was ready to travel by the end of October. So here I am; my first night in Cairo in the Shepherd's hotel; one of the most famous hotels in the world. Disappointingly the hotel once renowned for its opulence has seen better days. The Persian carpets are threadbare and the stained glass windows are so filthy one can hardly see through them. There are some ghastly granite pillars that I think are supposed to make you feel like you are in an Egyptian temple and if they had a repaint

maybe you would but the drawings are so faded it's not immediately obvious what they are meant to be. Still I suppose it has atmosphere.



I put the diary aside and contemplated on how calculating and vain a woman my grandmother had been. I had never been over-fond of her but now I positively disliked her, not least because of the antipathy she had shown to Lily. I wasn't as shocked as I might otherwise have been because Lily had already given me plenty of hints as to the dubious character of Nancy Blackwell but I had to admit despite everything I was beginning to have a sneaking admiration for her audacity. What gall she had and what an inordinate belief she had in herself that allowed her to take such a chance. I was finding it hard to believe that this was the same woman I had lived with for the best part of twenty years. Having come to the conclusion that nothing was ever as it appeared on the surface I decided that that was enough from my grandmother for one day and I would check in to the news to see how the revolution was getting along.

The BBC reported that riots were still going on with protesters' numbers continuing to rise and violence by both protesters and police on the increase. I couldn't see it myself as nothing was happening at all near me and tourists were still coming into the hotel as usual for afternoon tea after their camel rides round the pyramids. None of them seemed in the least perturbed. I decided that most of the riots must have been in Suez because the television showed the demonstrators setting fire to several government buildings over there including the police station.

I ate another Indian meal that night but this one was definitely classier and a great deal more expensive than the last one. I was told that there were normally musicians there playing sitar but they had called off tonight in fear for their safety. I was quite relieved to hear this because the monotonous drone of Indian music always gives me a headache. After dinner I drank a beer in the bar

and then called it a night without even bothering to check the progress of their so-called revolution. After a quick shower in barely tepid water I got into bed where I immediately fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

The following morning I went down to breakfast to be told that protests would not be as large today because everyone was planning for Friday which was traditionally the best day for riots according to my hotel waiter.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is pledging its support" he said proudly, "so we will be out in huge numbers tomorrow. There is no going back for us now; we are no longer afraid. You will be with us for a few days yet" he added without pausing for breath. "Oh and I almost forgot; a better room has become vacant if you want to move. Sadly there is still no view of the pyramids but it is overlooking the garden and the pool which is better than just staring out on to all that sand." I went to look at the other room but it was much smaller than the one I was in and as it was so near to the pool I decided it would probably be noisy. I wanted to do some of my university work as well as reading the diary so I needed quiet and anyway there was something quite romantic about looking out across the desert. I sent my thanks to the hotel manager and told him that I was very comfortable where I was and that he should not bother himself again with trying to find me a better room.

I spent the whole of the morning and most of the afternoon wading through *Hippolytus*, the classic drama by Euripides. I had read it before of course but I needed to refresh my memory. After reading the introduction to my grandmother's diary I suddenly saw Euripides' play in a whole new light. I could see quite clearly how people and their actions do not always fit into the black and white of right and wrong. Sometimes they fit into a more morally grey area, with everyone or no-one taking the blame. The story of my grandmother and the story of *Hippolytus* had very little in common of course apart from the basic idea that love and human decency can so easily be corrupted by greed, envy and petty human desires. With that in mind I decided I would look on my grandmother a little more generously and stop being so judgmental on something and

someone I knew very little about.

It was mid-afternoon by the time I had made a thorough revision of the Euripides play and time for my daily check-in to the revolution. Despite numbers being down from the previous two days hundreds had been arrested, mainly in Cairo itself. "That President Mubarak is taking no chances" I thought to myself. "He just needs to lock up a few more of the leaders and that should be the end of their grand uprising." Showing that they really meant business at approximately 5:20 pm the government shut down several major Internet Service Providers. I checked my phone only to discover that I had no telephone line either. My whole network was blocked. I wasn't overly concerned because, after all, I had no one I wanted to call and I was absolutely positive that everything would be back to normal by Saturday.

Not being able to face another Indian I ordered a club sandwich in my room and settled down to an evening with Nancy Blackwell.