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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 THIRTEEN



The next morning I was not so fortunate and the man from room twenty-two spotted me as soon as I walked into breakfast. Giving a curt nod in his direction I proceeded to take a table at the opposite side of the room from him. Undeterred Mr. room twenty-two immediately left his own table and bringing his coffee with him joined me at mine.

"They are calling for a million people to come out today" he said without bothering to wish me good morning. "They are going to set off from Tahrir Square and march on the Presidential Palace. If this isn't a revolution I'd like you to tell me what is" he added with a self-congratulatory tone in his voice.

"Yes well a million people are a lot of people and just calling for them doesn't mean they will necessarily get them. I don't know why you are getting yourself so worked up about it. The palace is in Heliopolis isn't it? They will be well out of our way. Now I really need to eat something so if you'll excuse me---"

"Oh they will have no trouble getting the million; I heard from the waiter this morning that they'll get well over that number" he said standing up with me and almost blocking my way. "And if they are heading up towards Heliopolis all the security forces will be going up there with them to secure the palace. We could be left here without any protection at all."

"Oh for goodness sake; of course we won't be left here without guards." I replied getting annoyed now. "Why do you always have to make things sound much worse than they really are? And why on earth are you listening to a stupid waiter? No doubt this is all very inconvenient for us but the idea that we are in any danger is ludicrous."

With that I pushed past him and marched off to the buffet table. By the time I got back he had left. Hopefully I had offended him enough so that he would keep out of my way in future. Another day trapped in this hotel was bad enough without having to put up with histrionics from my fellow countryman.

It was almost two in the afternoon before I turned on the news to see how the 'March of Millions' was progressing. Every channel reported something different. According to the official Egyptian media the number of protesters was

reported to be only in the thousands whilst the BBC said that there were more than one hundred thousand and maybe as many as two hundred and fifty thousand people there. Nile TV reported that half a million protestors were in Tahrir Square alone and Al Jazeera, the sensationalist channel, began their broadcast by saying there were a million setting off on the march from Tahrir but later in the afternoon changed that to two million! The Muslim Brotherhood had been asked to withdraw from the march so that things wouldn't get too heated and in return they were being promised future legitimacy for their party. That could have made a difference to the amount of people out there. Anyway whatever the real number of protestors was the march seemed to go off peacefully enough. It was almost midnight when the news came through that Mubarak had declared that he would not be running in the next election. I only caught the last part of his speech where he said "This nation is where I lived and I have fought for it and defended its soil, sovereignty and interests. On its soil I will die. History will judge me like it did others." He condemned the political forces that had turned what would otherwise have been peaceful protests into violent and sometimes fatal clashes and he finished by saying that he would stay in office only until his term ended in September when he hoped to ensure a peaceful transition to a new government.

At that moment I felt terribly sorry for him. I wished that all the protestors would go home and let him finish his last term in office in peace but the crowds in Tahrir were relentless in their demands for him to step down immediately. I was tuned into CNN at that point and the cornerstone of the discussion that followed President Mubarak's speech was about him having previously said many times that he intended to stay in power until his dying day. This current volte face they said had only been brought about by Obama who had called him that very afternoon urging him to resign as soon as possible and prepare for a move towards democracy. Clearly poor Mubarak was to receive no accolade for what I thought to be a very noble decision. I turned off the television in disgust and tried to get some sleep.

Next morning when I asked the hotel manager if I could use the telephone again he looked quite surprised.

"Your phone should be working now" he said; "and some if not all the Internet services have been restored as well. Have you not tried it?"

I hadn't. When I did I found the manager was right. He must have thought me a complete idiot! "Thanks" I mumbled and went off to find a quiet corner in the lobby where I could try calling the lawyers again. This time I got an answer. I informed the young lady that spoke to me that I had finished the first diary and would appreciate it if someone could bring round the second volume for me as soon as possible.

"No English" she replied. "Wait."

It was several minutes before they were able to put me through to anyone who could speak good enough English and when they did and I repeated my request I did not get the answer I had been hoping for.

"No I am sorry I'm afraid we won't be able to do that" the man said. "Your grandmother was most specific. You must be in Luxor before you receive the next volume."

"Well I am not in Luxor am I?" I argued, "And I probably won't be going there for some time. Surely under these exceptional circumstances you can override my grandmother's instructions. I am stuck here in this blasted hotel, bored out of my mind with nothing to do when I could be getting on with something."

"Absolutely not" he repeated, seemingly unmoved by my plight. "It's completely out of the question. If I can help you in some other way please do not hesitate to contact me but with regards to any early release of the diaries I can do nothing. So, if there is nothing else I will wish you goodbye."

He cut me off at that point so it was fortunate I didn't want anything else. He hadn't stayed on the line long enough to find out.

"Back to the classics" I thought resigning myself to another day of Homer. I was doing more work here in Cairo than I would have done if I had still been at the university!

"Excuse me for disturbing you madam" the hotel receptionist shouted across to me as soon as she saw I had come off the telephone, "but I thought you should know that the curfew has been moved forward to 5.00pm."

"Thanks" I said not having the slightest idea why she thought I ought to know that. She should have realised that changing the time of the curfew was neither here nor there to me. Surely it was quite obvious that it was far too dangerous for any foreigner to go out on the streets at any time, curfew or no curfew. Anyway I still needed to finish "The Iliad" so I went back to my room and forced myself not to turn on the television until I had made significant inroads into it. It was almost time for dinner when I allowed myself to take a quick peek at the news. A lot had been happening. Whilst I had been immersed in the Trojan War another war was going on down in Tahrir Square. Despite protestors having been advised to go home because it was thought that gangs armed with fire-bombs were making their way to the square they had ignored the warning and stayed put. They thought it was another ruse by the government who had suddenly sent a good number of pro-Mubarak supporters onto the streets in a show of defiance. These pro-Mubarak campaigners had been filmed dropping stones and firebombs from buildings onto the demonstrators below. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, provocateurs armed with swords, rocks and knives appeared on horses and camels and started attacking the anti-government protesters.

It had been quite an afternoon in Cairo and CNN was as usual broadcasting its own analysis of the situation. They said that Mubarak had often used a strategy of 'hired muscle' in the past and suggested that this was what was happening now. They even went so far as to say that Mubarak would have no qualms about setting the whole country alight if it would help safeguard his position. There was now a serious possibility of civil war according to Washington. Apparently Mubarak was refusing to take any more calls from Obama and I thought that was probably the reason why the announcers on CNN were so indignant and why they were making such outlandish claims. I had no time for sensationalistic journalism like this so I decided to try the radio for a change.

ElBaradei was making another speech asking for military intervention and saying that Mubarak should be given a safe exit for Friday's Departure Day. I don't know if I had missed something here because I had never heard Mubarak say anything about any Friday departure. I realised as I listened to more of his speech that this proposed departure was ElBaradei's own idea. Like CNN he was also laying the blame for the day's fiasco squarely on Mubarak's shoulders. "Today's violence" he said, "is another indication of a criminal regime that has lost all common sense. When the regime tries to counter a peaceful demonstration by using thugs there are few words that do justice to this villainy and I think it can only hasten that regime's departure." He then repeated his usual statement that neither he nor any representative from the Muslim Brotherhood would talk to any government representative until Mubarak resigned.

The Grand Mufti came on next and he was much more reasonable. He thanked Mubarak for his offer of dialogue and pointed out that the current violence was totally forbidden in Islam. "This is an invitation for chaos" he said, "and we must support stability. What we have now could lead to a civil war." He ended his interview by calling on all parents to ask their children to stay at home.

"Very sensible" I thought.

The situation in Cairo was becoming dangerous and I only hoped that I wouldn't run into the man from room twenty-two any time soon. He would almost certainly be gloating now that he had proved me wrong and this was indeed a real revolution. I decided to play it safe and call room service.

The violence continued through the night with anti-government and pro-Mubarak supporters hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails at each other. There was not much I could do but watching television was making me nervous. I hardly slept and woke well before the restaurant was due to open for breakfast so I called room service again. The waiter who brought up my tray had far too much to say for himself.

"Some former ministers have been prevented from leaving the country" he told me gleefully, "and they have all had their bank accounts frozen. There's going to

be an investigation and they will have to hand all that stolen money back to us. It runs into millions of dollars and by rights it belongs to the people."

I think he honestly believed that if all these alleged millions were confiscated the money would be shared out amongst the Egyptian people and that very soon he would be the recipient of a large windfall. These Egyptians are very naïve. Before he left I showed him a text message I had received on my phone and asked him if he was able to translate it.

"It's from Vodaphone" he said obligingly. "It says that anyone protesting against Mubarak is a traitor to his country. Vodaphone must have been forced to send that. They would never have sent it otherwise."

After breakfast I slept for a while, finished 'The Iliad' and moved on to 'The Odyssey.' At least my studies were progressing well even if nothing else was. The only television I saw was an interview with Mubarak.

"I was very unhappy about yesterday" he said. "I do not want to see Egyptians fighting each other. I don't care what people say about me. Right now I care about my country, I care about Egypt. I would never run away. I will die on this soil.' He was quite clear that he was no longer seeking power but explained that he was not able to resign at the moment. He didn't want to see the country descend into a chaos which would benefit no one only the Muslim Brotherhood. He stressed over and over again that neither he nor any member of his family would be standing in the next election. Someone else from the Mubarak side was also in the interview and he quite rightly pointed out that the Egyptians had no culture of democracy and it was an Islamic undercurrent that was pushing the young people to protest. "A million tourists have left Egypt in the last nine days" he added trying a different tactic; "imagine the loss in revenue." All in all I thought Mubarak and whoever the other man was were correct. Democracy couldn't just be imported from the West and dropped into a culture like this and I agreed that the youth were most likely being hoodwinked by Islamic fundamentalists. Definitely this revolution would have dire financial repercussions for years to come.

I had been in this one room for well over twenty-four hours and I needed to get out. I decided to risk going down to the bar for dinner. I had never seen my room twenty-two friend in there: perhaps he didn't drink. When I got downstairs I found the bar practically empty. There was no sign of my 'friend' so I was able to enjoy my hamburger in peace. Tomorrow being Friday might bring more trouble so I needed to keep my strength up.

During the night the security forces, which were much better prepared these days, got more tanks out onto the streets. If the protestors plan was to hold another march to the Presidential Palace to make yet another demand for Mubarak to leave immediately then Mubarak's men were ready for them. It was a good job that they were because next morning there were more people than ever in Tahrir Square. The protestors had assembled there to hold Friday prayers and a large number of Christians had joined them to show that this was a people's movement not just an Islamic one. The day passed off relatively peacefully but there was still no end in sight and I was no nearer to getting out of Cairo Saturday was more of the same. I was shocked to see on the news that some foreigners had joined the protests now including one man from Britain. The idiots were handing out flowers and holding up banners written in English. A very foolhardy gesture in my opinion! The head of the army asked protestors to go home which they refused to do saying that it was Mubarak who had to go not them; they were going nowhere. "It's the revolution itself that's not going anywhere" I thought. "Nobody is willing to give an inch and no progress is being made by either side. Mubarak certainly isn't moving but nor are the Egyptian people."

Four days later things were exactly the same apart from some of the banks had opened. "That is the first step towards a return to normality" I thought. It had been more than two weeks since the first demonstration and nothing much had been achieved and it didn't look like it was going to be either but the Egyptian people thought otherwise and stood their ground. On the very next day, the tenth of February, they got the news they had been waiting for. Mubarak was

going to make a speech and they were sure that in this speech he would tender his resignation. Now I am not a gambling person but if anyone had asked me to place a bet I would have laid it down squarely on the side of Mubarak not standing down. Conflicting reports of what he would say came out at least once every hour. First the protestors were told that all their demands for democracy would be met and shortly afterwards they were told that there would be no democracy and the army would take over. Next came the Minister of Information who denied all claims that Mubarak was about to resign. Minutes before he was about to speak Al Arabiya television confidently declared that President Mubarak would not be resigning but he would transfer all his powers to the vice-president. That sounded possible.

I watched Mubarak's speech with bated breath. He started off by saying he would penalise all those responsible for the violence and that he had a clear vision on how to end the crisis. Then came the important part; the part everyone had been waiting for.

"I am satisfied with what I have offered" he stated. "Whilst I will remain president to the end of my term in September I will transfer power to the vice-president. I have seen that it is possible to delegate the powers and authorities of the president to the vice president as dictated in the constitution and this article does not require my resignation. I will lift emergency laws when security in the country permits it. I intend to remain in the country and continue to shoulder my responsibility to protect the constitution and safeguard the interests of the people until power is handed over in September to those elected by the people in free and fair elections."

I wasn't overly surprised. I had been expecting Mubarak to say something along those lines but as I continued to watch the television I saw that the protestors in Tahrir Square had not been expecting this at all. Some were crying and many of them were waving their shoes in the air. All of them were chanting "Leave! Leave! Leave!" ElBaradei made a short statement calling on the military to intervene. "Otherwise Egypt will explode" he said.

CNN reporters had their usual theories. "Mubarak's advisors and his family and in particular his son Gamal have told him he can ride this out" they said. "They are to blame; they are the ones who have convinced him to cling on to power." I didn't agree. Mubarak had enough about him to make his own decisions. He knew what he was doing. Their silly little revolution was about to come to an end I thought and apart from a few minor constitutional changes things would carry on very much as before. It came as quite a shock to me when massive protests continued through the night and into the next day. The people still weren't giving up! The army issued a statement supporting Mubarak's decision but the protestors once again paid no heed and made yet another march on the palace. Why they did that I don't know. Mubarak wasn't there. For security reasons he and his entire family had removed themselves to Sharm El Sheikh.

At a little after six in the evening the vice president made the surprise announcement that Mubarak had finally agreed to resign and the army would now be running the country. The announcement was immediately followed by nationwide celebrations in which the car honking was absolutely deafening and went on until late in the night making sleep almost impossible. ElBaradei made another appearance on television claiming this to be the greatest day of his life and of course Obama had to get his two-penneth in.

"The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same" he said speaking on CNN shortly after the news came out. So the revolution was finally over although not entirely to my liking. At least I could get back to my life now. It was far too late to call the lawyer but I resolved to do so first thing in the morning. I couldn't wait to get out of Cairo and I promised myself that I would not spend even one more night here.