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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 TWENTY



It has been over a week and I have made very little progress with the diary. If I don't get a move on I will become like Nancy; waiting a lifetime to get into the palace. It's no good telling myself it's because I am studying all the plans and sketches as I am going along because that wouldn't be true. I will need to do that at some point if I am going to restore my grandmother's palace to exactly what it once was but I haven't done it yet. No I can't use that as my excuse. If I am being strictly honest with myself the reason I'm behind is because I have been doing lots of other things that I shouldn't have been doing. I have to keep reminding myself that I am not here on vacation, I am here to work. Yesterday evening when Carmen asked me why I hadn't finished the diary yet I told her rather ashamedly that I have no idea where the time goes but in actual fact I know exactly where it goes. Most days I spend at least two hours in the kitchen with Islam working through my grandmother's recipe book. I have made some very interesting things; rosewater cheesecake, cashew nut soup and of course the spaghetti with oranges to name but a few. Then almost every evening I am next door with Carlo and Carmen sipping cocktails or slugging back Sangria on their roof. I have to watch the news every day to see what's going on so that's another hour gone and that only leaves me with the afternoons. Even so if I had spent just a couple of hours every afternoon reading I would probably have finished the diary by now but of course I haven't been doing that; I have been going out almost every day. Sometimes I only go to the local café for a beer or take a felucca trip on the river but I have never taken the diary along with me even once. I have had two full days out visiting the sites and the town which I think one ought to do when one is in Luxor so I make no apology for that. I have already seen Karnak, Madinet Habu and Hatshepsut's temple and I fully intend to visit the Valley of the Kings one afternoon soon and maybe go to the museum as well. I can't agree with my grandmother about these sites. They are not all alike and she shouldn't have compared them with each other in that very dismissive manner. Each one is unique with its own merits and points of interest and even if Karnak is the most spectacular that doesn't mean the others are not

worthy of attention.

I had a look for the duck restaurant when I was out at Habu but it has either disappeared completely or is now in some other guise. There are at least a dozen cafes in the area but the only one serving duck opened very recently so that can't be it. Their duck was excellent and had definitely not been boiled like the one my grandmother complained about.

I spent almost a full day looking round the town which I must say was very disappointing. I had envisaged something more, shall I say, classy. Luxor is full of tacky souvenir shops and English restaurants serving fish and chips and a few pubs that are there purely to serve the package tourists. The souk sells the same rubbish as the souvenir shops only at highly inflated prices and isn't even worth walking round. The local market is good as long as you only need vegetables or household goods; otherwise it's not very interesting. There seems to be an awful lot of banks here but only three supermarkets. None of these supermarkets is very big and none of them stock anything that you can't buy much cheaper in the souk. I did find a small grocery store propitiously named 'Arkwright's' which does have some useful items such as tonic water and ginger biscuits so I stocked up with a few things there. Apart from The Winter Palace the hotels are either the five star big chain ones such as the Sheraton and Hilton or quaint little backpacker places. There doesn't seem to be much in-between and as I don't care for either of these types of hotel I steered well clear of them. The worst thing about Luxor is the constant hassle you get from the taxis, caleche drivers and tourist touts. You can't walk five yards without one or another of them demanding your attention and worse still asking for your money. Carlo says they have only started being like this since the revolution and I suppose that's understandable so I am trying my best to be patient. I can see that they are desperate now that all the tourists have disappeared.

To my amazement Aboudi bookshop is still operating although not in the same location as it was originally. The old man who first opened it, the original Mr. Aboudi is dead now but his son is still alive. Unfortunately he was only a child

when my grandmother was a customer there and he has no recollection of her. The shop is absolutely wonderful. It's like one of those old places that disappeared from London years ago. There doesn't appear to be any system as to how the books are arranged and you could come across anything in there. You would think it would be impossible to ask for any particular title but the staff knows exactly what is there and can put their hands on whatever it is you are looking for in seconds. I spent a couple of hours browsing the shelves and drinking mint tea with Mr. Aboudi the younger so I felt obliged to buy something. Not wanting any more reading material I resisted the temptation of Naguib Mahfouz and purchased a small water colour instead. It was painted by a local artist and I thought I might as well make a contribution to my grandmother's collection which I sincerely hope is still there in the palace. As soon as I finish the diary I will go back to that bookshop for a copy of *The Alexandria Quartet* to see if Durrell really does write a lot about prostitutes.

Another afternoon was spent rooting about under the stairs looking at the books Carmen had packed away under there. I found a dozen or more books on Ancient Egypt but none of them told me anything about Horus or Hatshepsut that I didn't know already. There is a lot of other information in them, mainly about pharaohs, that I am sure will come in useful if I ever get round to doing my *Masters in Egyptology* so I packed them all safely back where I found them. There were only three volumes on philosophy and one of them was Plato which of course I know very well. The other two were Spinoza and Kant and it's no wonder my grandmother gave up to them so quickly; it's very heavy stuff. There were lots of ledgers containing what must be my grandmother's and Simon's accounts but I didn't examine them too closely. Maybe I will go through them one day to see if I can discover what sort of things they bought for the palace and how much it all cost. I'm sure I went through everything but I didn't come across *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Either it's lost or my grandmother took it back to England with her. I will call Uncle Julius and ask him to keep an eye out for it and if he finds it to put it on one side for me. That's more for senti-

mental reasons than for any desire for me to own such a book. I found it on the Internet and downloaded it so I don't actually need a copy. What a book it is! My grandmother was right; Freud does talk a lot about himself in it. I always thought his obsession with sex showed that he had psychological issues of his own and after reading what he has to say about Oedipus I am now convinced of it. I mean he got the story right but his interpretation is all wrong. It is perfectly correct that an oracle informed the father that his son, who was still unborn, would be his murderer and that the same oracle later informed Oedipus that he would marry his mother but it is all to do with politics not sex. The Ancient Greeks didn't have the same view of incest that we have today and Freud doesn't appear to know that. I think it is absolute nonsense that 'we are all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers as Freud says. The idea that dreams of this nature are nothing more or less than the wish fulfilment of our childhood is quite distasteful and I don't think Sophocles had any of that in mind when he wrote Oedipus Rex.

My grandmother's dreams are very interesting but they don't need much interpretation. I am sure they are simply founded on her need to find someone to love her. She must have been very lonely in Luxor with only Simon and Amin to talk to so it's hardly any wonder she became fixated on Amin. Simon was far too cold and calculating a person to be the object of anybody's romantic or sexual fantasies. From what I have read so far I don't think I would have liked Simon very much at all. I am still not one hundred percent convinced that Amin harboured any desires for my grandmother but then again I suppose he must have done if he fathered Amer. It seems to me he was only likening my grandmother to Hatshepsut because she enjoyed building the palace alongside him and if that's the case it's only natural that as her contractor he would think of himself as a kind of Senmut. After all it is only rumour and gossip about Hatshepsut and Senmut having had an affair and maybe Amin didn't even know about it let alone believe it. Assuming that he did know about this supposed relationship

between the queen and her builder it would have been a very obscure way of sending a message to my grandmother. If he was with her every night he could easily have told her directly what he felt. My grandmother said they could talk about everything so surely if Amin was hankering after her he would have said so. Maybe he does later on so I will have to keep reading if I am ever to find out how their affair started.

What absolutely amazes me is that the three pieces of jewellery I have kept for myself all had some significance to my grandmother. The Yemeni fish and the malachite ring are both beautiful but I don't know what it was that attracted me to that bracelet. If I remember rightly I came across the horrible thing in one of my grandmother's handbags so maybe she never did take it out of there despite her pretence of not being superstitious. I'm almost certain I took all three pieces back with me to my flat in London and I must remember to get them out and have another look at them when I go back there in June. I never saw my grandmother wearing a wedding ring and I don't think I spotted one amongst all her other jewellery. I will ask Uncle Julius to keep that for me as well if he comes across it.

Although my grandmother was not terribly clever and most certainly lacked experience in the ways of the world she had a definite sense of humour. I don't know if it's intentional or not but some of her writing is quite funny. She seems to be able to laugh at herself and criticise herself both at the same time which is not an easy thing to do even in a private journal. There are some very touching moments in that diary too. I hate the way Simon speaks to her let alone how he treats her. All that about his dalliance with prostitutes was so insensitive. There was no need for him to go into such detail and he must have done it with the sole purpose of hurting her. Everything my grandmother writes about sex is very disturbing and I wonder how much she left out about hers and Simon's physical relationship. She clearly dreaded him coming to her room. At least I know that my grandmother did manage to get pregnant in the end but it must have been a very worrying time for her. She must have known that Simon would have no

qualms in getting rid of her if she couldn't produce an heir and Uncle Julius certainly took his time in coming.

My grandmother gave me a fascinating insight into the last revolution which I have decided was not really a revolution at all. It was nothing more than a coup orchestrated by Nasser and his gang. I was surprised at first that she wrote so prolifically about the political situation in Egypt but then I realised she couldn't have had much else to think about stuck down here in Luxor without any other foreigners for company. Thank God for Carmen and Carlo or I would be in the same situation. I don't know how she managed it for so long without going mad. Having said that I do think that her being alone so much had an effect on her and started to make her slightly unstable.

She managed to keep up with all the news though and having a firsthand account really made me reconsider what I had believed before. I used to think Nasser was the great saviour of the Egyptian people but having read what my grandmother had to say I am not so sure that he was. He clearly had the ability to get near to his people and although much of his success was due to his unquestionable skill as an orator much more of it was due to the hogwash coming out of the state media. It's practically impossible to disentangle any genuine feeling the people might have had for him from the state sponsored propaganda he was pumping out every day. He was definitely running an oppressive if not tyrannical regime back then and he seemed to be primarily concerned with his own rise to power. He was totally unconcerned who he destroyed on his way up and an awful lot of people had to suffer in order for Nasser to get where he wanted. Mubarak is different; I think he genuinely cares as much for his country as he does for himself and in my opinion has been very much maligned over the past few weeks. Everything seems to be quiet up in Cairo now although there are bound to be more demonstrations before it all gets sorted out and they get a proper government elected. Anyway the Egyptians have had their revolution and they will have to live with it just as they had to live with the last one. There was no going back then and there will be no going back now. Sooner or later they will

realise what they have done. More likely it will be sooner for the people down in Luxor who are already starting to regret it. Mubarak might have been corrupt, and let's face it what politician isn't, but at least the coffers were full and the people had work when he was in power. I think countries like Egypt need dictators like him until the people are educated enough to run a proper democracy and if that's what they really want they should start spending more money on schools. Until such a time comes they would be better off sticking with a monarch. The Moroccans and Jordanians seem very happy with theirs. Life wasn't so bad under the British and King Farouk and there are plenty of Egyptians willing to admit it.

Putting all that aside I am determined to knuckle down and get through volume two of the diaries over the next two weeks. I need to get it finished by then at the latest. If I don't get through it I won't get to see my palace before I go back to do my exams. I need to know what repairs I have to do and cost it out and ideally I would like to start on the work before I leave. I will have to find a builder very soon and I need one I can trust; that's if such a person exists. How I'm going to know if I am being cheated or not I haven't the foggiest idea. Carlo might know someone. I will ask him tonight if I remember. Failing that I will have to speak to the lawyer but the less I have to do with him the better. For one thing he is rude and very patronising and for another I am sure he is the kind of person who would be looking to take commission on everything.

Uncle Julius called me yesterday to tell me that not even one of the portraits reached its reserve and he asked me what he should do about it. Should he let them go for less or not he asked me. These types of paintings are not in fashion apparently and very few people even made a bid for them at the auction. I hate the idea of selling something for under its valuation figure and as I don't know yet if I will need the money or not I told him to hang on to them and I will let him know later.

I have made a plan. Starting from tomorrow I will leave Islam to get on with the cooking without me and I will confine my reading only to the diary. No more

trips out either.