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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 EIGHT



It's the first day of April and I finished reading the diary last night just about on my deadline. As soon as I turned the final page I started calling into question all my earlier impressions of my grandmother and quite frankly I am not sure what to think of her now. Never mind everyone telling me that my father had mental problems it seems like my grandmother had bigger ones of her own. She was not writing down everything in that diary of hers that's for sure because from taking only her word as to what was happening Simon had no justification whatsoever for having her committed to a mental institution and I doubt him having contacts good enough to put her there without a reason. No there had to be something else that made Simon believe my grandmother needed hospitalising. The way she pulled that gun on him is further evidence that Nancy had problems. The most frightening thing to me was her complete lack of remorse. All this got me wondering if insanity runs in families and in that case am I likely to fall victim to it. I decided to do a bit of research on that myself and almost everything I came up with on the Internet told me that mental illness was not likely to be genetic thank goodness. Not trusting what I read on the World Wide Web I called my doctor back in England who put me on to who he said was one of the top consultants in the world on schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. "No, no, no, Gloria" he told me most reassuringly. "Most mental disorders, and I include schizophrenia amongst them, are not directly passed from one generation to another genetically. There is no one specific cause for this illness and it is usually a result of environmental factors combined with biological vulnerabilities. There may be some genetic abnormalities contributing to the onset of schizophrenia but it takes much more than that. Lately the research has shown that some abnormalities in transmission of neuro-chemicals in the brain may be a factor but there are many other reasons why someone might develop bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Did your grandmother or father have a father of advanced age for example because that increases the risk? So does having a mother suffering from malnutrition or maybe if the mother contracted some infection during pregnancy. All these are minor contributing factors and you

would be better to look more at their life circumstances especially while they were still growing up."

"Such as?" I asked.

"Such as the early loss of a parent, poverty, being the victim of abuse, emotional or physical, neglect or in fact any form of insecurity. Recent migration especially to somewhere the person might find themselves being discriminated against or being somewhere where their ethnic group is a minority have all been seen to contribute as well."

"Isn't that almost everyone" I replied "and not everyone goes mad."

"Of course not, it takes a certain precise combination of factors together with some possible slight genetic links and I would prefer it Gloria if you would refrain from using the term 'mad'. These people suffering from these illnesses are sick not mad and even if they cannot be completely cured they can be helped to lead normal lives. By the way drug use definitely increases the risk. Hashish, marijuana and other hallucinogens are the worst culprits but even prolonged use of amphetamines can exacerbate the problem. Does this information help you at all?"

"Well it does but I have read some statistics that estimate that a child with one diagnosed parent has about a ten percent genetic risk of developing the disease themselves as compared to a one percent risk in the general population and that this risk increases significantly if a grandparent also has schizophrenia. Is that right?"

"Ah you have been reading Victoria Secunda have you? Well her statistics always looked a bit dubious to me and although she has often been used as an expert witness in the courts she is more of a writer than a psychiatrist. All her stuff on relationships is good but that book 'When Madness comes Home' is based on some very flimsy evidence and there has been a lot of research done since she wrote it. I really do not hold with these armchair psychiatrists Gloria and if you do then I don't know why you are talking to me."

Having been firmly put in my place I put the telephone down feeling much

more confident that I have not inherited some sort of 'mad' gene. My grandmother had been poor as a child and appeared to be insecure and in addition to that she had migrated to a country where she was in a minority. My father on the other hand had never been poor but he had never known who his father was and as someone with Arab blood he was a definite minority in Yorkshire. On top of that he was an habitual drug user and possibly even an addict. Being as he was in close contact with Nancy and all her fanciful beliefs this could have had an adverse effect on him too. I had lost both parents at a very young age but otherwise had experienced nothing else from this doctor's list of potential risk factors and I was so far removed from my grandmother when I was growing up I had never even noticed she had any silly superstitions until I read her diaries. I decided that as there is no one overriding cause for mental illness I am no more likely to suffer from it than anyone else and put it right out of my mind.

Feeling much happier I turned on the television only to see that there were four or five thousand people back in Tahrir Square. They were demanding that the current military rulers get a move on with dismantling the lingering traces of the old regime and they were asking for Mubarak to be put on trial. The news-reader said that the Egyptians were calling this 'Save the Revolution Day.' Why the Egyptians like to give all their days of protest a name I don't know. Maybe they are hoping they will eventually get them all into the calendar as holidays. If that ever happens there will be no days left for working since there have been so many of these 'days' of theirs.

I went to bed early and dreamt about Delphi. It is very unusual for me to have vivid dreams but I put it down to a combination of that blasted diary and nervousness about my exams that are coming up very soon.

The next day I called the lawyer and told him I had finished volume two and was now ready for volume three and also that I would now like to visit my other house.

"Certainly you may visit the palace" he said in that ingratiating tone of voice he always uses when he is about to tell me I can't have something, "but the third

and final volume of the diary cannot be released to you yet. In order for me to give it to you either you have to complete all the renovation work or I have to be confident that you have every intention of doing so."

"And just how am I supposed to convince you of that?" I demanded to know.

"Well if you have a full set of quotations and enough money in the bank that would be a start. I would then like to see that you have placed a sizeable deposit with a reputable contractor and have made a decent start on the work. Do you have a builder in mind yet Miss Paramour? We would be happy to recommend someone to you if you would like."

"Yes I am sure you would" I replied hoping I sounded sufficiently distrusting of his offer. "I do have one recommended to me already but if that doesn't work out I will get back to you. Now if you will just inform the guards that I am to be permitted entry to my own palace I will be very grateful."

I put the phone down on him before he had the chance to go into another one of his dialogues about how it wasn't technically my house yet. I wanted to go off immediately to visit my other house but I suddenly felt extremely nervous about going to the palace alone and called across to next door to see if Carlo or Carmen would come with me. I was lucky; Carmen was at the hairdressers. Carlo said he would be delighted to come with me so after a quick coffee we set off together towards the big door which I presumed opened up into the reception area. The guard was expecting us and opened the door without a word.

We entered into the palace with this guard sticking much closer to us than I would have liked and to my great surprise we found ourselves in a room which was in near immaculate condition. Even the light fitting hanging down from the magnificent twenty or so metre high dome appeared to have all its light bulbs in full working order. The antique sofas, the carpets, the gilt mirrors, the occasional tables, the bookcases and the clocks all looked as though they were still in everyday use. There was not a speck of dust anywhere. Almost in unison Carlo and I both gasped in surprise.

"This is a real turn up for the books" he said. "There is not much that needs

doing in here. Plump up the cushions and you can move right in."

The guard then led us off to the right into what must have been the morning room which was quite a different story. The condition of the furniture in there was in a state of complete disrepair; broken tables, dusty lamps and rusting coffee pots were strewn everywhere. I opened the cupboard at the back of the room only to find dozens of tea sets all of which looked chipped or stained or both.

Leaving there we went across the small courtyard past a fountain sporting a pool of stagnant water into what would have been the dining room and adjoining breakfast room. The same sorry sight met us there as we had seen in the morning room. Upstairs from that the master bedroom was in a worse state with every window broken or cracked. This was going to cost a bit to put right. As if following my train of thought Carlo whispered "If you are to put all that stained glass back it's going to cost you a pretty penny."

I nodded in agreement unable to say much. I was completely lost for words. I opened a small closet to see an array of dresses dating back half a century or more. They were covered in sheets and if the insects hadn't got to them they would raise a substantial amount in Cabbages and Kings in London or on the stalls at Brick Lane or on Camden market. Reluctantly I closed the wardrobe door and went to catch up with Carlo who was already making his way down the stairs. We went back through the courtyard and up some stairs to the two children's bedrooms. One of them was in better condition than the other but both of them needed a lot of work doing on them. The harem windows looking down into reception were both in perfect condition though. What must have been the nursery and the nanny's quarters were in a reasonable state but as the furniture in those two rooms had never been the best quality it would all need replacing.

The guard led us back through the reception and out of a different door leading to what must have been Simon's domain and Lily's private sitting room. The books were still on the shelves in the library and I scanned the shelves hoping

to find *The Interpretation of Dreams*. I couldn't spot it and then I remembered that my grandmother had taken it to Greece with her and as she never returned to Egypt of course it wouldn't be there. After that we went down to the ballroom and through into the kitchens and staff quarters. This was the most dilapidated area of the house so far and we didn't linger there long. Finally we went down to the guest rooms and the gardens. The guest rooms were salvageable although the windows were nearly all broken and some of the light fittings were hanging dangerously loose. The gardens were completely overgrown but the stone paths were still there underneath and apart from the odd broken stone they seemed to be intact. Two more fountains and a disused swimming pool greeted us down there and the stench of stagnant water was unbearable. I couldn't, for the life in me imagine why the staff would have left water in that cracked oblong hole in the ground that must once have been a beautiful place to swim. The gazebo, the summerhouse and the bird houses were all falling into the ground and I presumed they would have to be demolished and rebuilt. The land itself isn't so firm down there and I think it is because the Nile River is not that far underneath the ground at that point. The grand entrance was still in a good enough condition to be saved but the balustrade wall had completely rotted. The steps down to the river were in perfect condition and surprisingly clean but when I spotted a brand new motor boat moored up alongside them I saw why. The servants still came and went this way so had taken good care of them.

"It's not as bad as it might have been" Carlo said trying to reassure me but not sounding terribly convinced himself. "Most of the furniture can be saved and the light fittings. The gardens and the windows are the biggest job. Of course the plumbing will need completely redoing and almost certainly the whole place will need rewiring but you must have been expecting that. Can you just bulldoze that summerhouse into the ground and forget about it or what?"

"No everything has to go back as it was" I said somewhat dispiritedly "and what I really came to see isn't here. My grandmother had a good collection of paintings supposedly. She mentioned only two or three of them in the diary but I am

sure she bought more. I wonder what happened to them."

"Let's ask shall we" Carlo said trying to sound hopeful and turning to the old guard he shouted "Sura, sura, wein sura."

It didn't sound like Arabic to me but the guard obviously understood him. He led us across to the bird houses where he showed us an old storeroom underneath them that was still fully serviceable. Taking out a huge bunch of keys and without even examining them he chose one and put it into the lock of the old storeroom door. The door swung open to reveal a room full of old Arabic artwork. No one was more surprised than Carlo who hadn't really believed for one moment that we were going to find any paintings there. The entire scene took my breath away. There must have been close on two hundred paintings all perfectly preserved and covered with dustsheets. I glanced at them briefly but couldn't see the one of the whirling dervish or the one of the carpet seller and I decided I would come back one day later in the week and go through them all one by one.

"Come on" I said to Carlo motioning him to go, "I have seen quite enough for one day and until we get an expert in here there's no point us guessing what needs doing and what doesn't. I need a drink; care to join me?"

When we got back Carmen was there and she quickly whipped up a jug of Sangria for us.

"You are not drinking spirits at this early hour" she said putting the jug onto a tray with three glasses. "We'll take this up to the roof shall we and you can tell me everything. I am very cross that you two went there without me and I want a full report and I insist that you take me on a guided tour tomorrow Gloria."

We sat for several hours sipping Sangria and describing to Carmen in graphic detail everything we had found in the palace. By the time I was ready to leave I felt almost excited and the formidable task facing me paled into insignificance compared to the thought of the beautiful place I would have at the end of it. Even Carlo pointing out that the one hundred thousand pounds I had in the bank wouldn't be nearly enough money to complete the restoration work

didn't dampen my spirits. He was estimating around a million but I can't see it costing that much myself. Whatever it costs I will definitely have to sell my portraits whether they reach their reserve or not. Or I could just go home and forget about it. It is one thing doing this restoration but once I have finished it I will need to find a buyer and I can't imagine the world is full of millionaires all wanting to buy a palace on the Nile in a one horse town like Luxor. This thought almost sent me back into a depression but as soon as I remembered all the antiques, the paintings and the old books I soon snapped out of it.

The whole of the next week I went to the old palace every day where I did nothing other than go through the books in the old library and scrutinise each of the paintings. The library wasn't big and most of the books were technical stuff on archaeology. There are some old gardening books which might come in useful and about ten novels; a first edition of *Catcher in the Rye*, a few Hemingway's, *The Caine Mutiny* and *The End of the Affair*. I took *The End of the Affair* back to the house with me because although I have read it before I really enjoyed it. Like my grandmother I have never been a fan of *The Catcher in The Rye* so I left that one there with the others.

I soon found the oil painting of the carpet seller and I saw at once why my grandmother had liked it so much. I don't share her love for the one of the Sufi dancer though. It had been painted far too quickly in my opinion and fails to convey the whirling appearance of the dancer properly. Many of the paintings were carelessly done like that unfortunately although there is one of Jerusalem I rather like. I think my grandmother just bought whatever took her fancy and hadn't cared too much about the quality. The eclectic nature of the work displays a wide ranging taste or maybe she just bought anything without giving it much thought. As a collection it is interesting but of little value. It struck me that almost every colour one could think of was used as background for these pieces so perhaps she had chosen them for that reason rather than for the picture itself. Maybe she just wanted anything as long as it fitted in with her existing decor. In one corner of the room I stumbled across a collection of wooden

masks and some paintings of African women in various states of undress. These must have been what Simon bought in Kenya and Sudan. Some of them are almost pornographic and I wondered if my grandmother really had displayed them all in her African summerhouse or she had left some for Simon to ogle in his office. They are not very tasteful although the quality of the work is not bad. This was all very enjoyable but wasn't getting me any nearer to actually doing anything to put the place back together. I tried not to think about it too much and concentrated instead on what was still happening up in Cairo.

On the Friday of that same week thousands of demonstrators filled Tahrir Square again, criticising the Supreme Council for not following through on their demands. Most of the remaining regime's figures have started to resign but the protestors now want the removal of the public prosecutor who they say is too slow in investigating the corrupt former officials. Of course this big demonstration had to be given a name so they called it 'Cleansing Friday'; how ridiculous.

Carlo found me another builder but he came and took one look at the work and ran away. In desperation I called my lawyer and asked him to send me his builder. He showed up the next day with a full team and a theodolite of all things. I am sure he is very professional but I disliked him on sight. He said I needed the services of a construction engineer, electrician, plumber, glazier, carpenter, painter and an array of other specialists such as furniture restorers and artisans. I told him I was very well aware of what I needed but I wanted someone who would be in charge and deal with all that. I wasn't going to be going out looking for all these individual workers myself. Having assured me he was able to do that for me he promptly demanded I give him five thousand Egyptian pounds just for the quotation. When I told him I wasn't prepared to do that but if he got the job he could add it to his final cost he went into a huff and left muttering that as this was going to cost upwards of three million dollars he was surprised at me being so mean as to be arguing over a measly thousand. Having no other choice Carmen suggested I at least speak to this Mohamed Fawy Carlo

had recommended in the first place. I saw the logic in what she was saying but I couldn't bring myself to call him. If I still don't have anyone by the time I get back from England I will speak to him then I told her.

I took some bits and pieces of furniture back to the villa with me and Islam and I did some work on them ourselves. We made a fine job of repainting the Lloyd loom chairs but they are of English origin after all and I knew what I was doing with them. The rest of the furniture will need a professional and I am in no mood for looking for one now as I have suddenly started worrying about my exams.

I bought my ticket for the twenty eighth of May and on the night of the twenty sixth I flew up to Cairo and booked myself into the Shepheard's for a couple of nights peace and quiet. I couldn't have picked a worse time. On the twenty seventh there were literally tens of thousands of protestors out on the streets all over the country with most of them appearing to be in Cairo directly outside my hotel. They were asking for the same old things plus no military trials for civilians and the hotel manager confirmed my fears that this was the biggest demonstration since the ousting of Mubarak. It was so big that some Egyptians are calling it 'The Second Revolution' but I think they finally settled on 'The Second Friday of Anger'; these Egyptians and their name days!

The worst was over before midnight and the next day I made it to the airport without any trouble. I didn't even get stopped at any of the road blocks. I need to get home and get through my exams so that I can come back with a clear head and hopefully plenty of money to start on the work.