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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 THIRTY SIX



We now had six months to finish the hotel and then we would have to start making repayments on the loan. That meant opening in June or July which is low season for tourism in Luxor; not a happy thought. I only hoped that by the time the season started in October the tourists would have regained confidence in Egypt and it looked as though things were definitely moving in the right direction for that.

During the first month of the year a new constitution was prepared which took effect on the eighteenth of the month and elections for a new president and a new parliament were scheduled for May. Although participation in the referendum for the constitution was low it was supported by over ninety percent of the voters so no more demonstrations were expected.

With this in mind we ploughed on with our work in an optimistic frame of mind despite the completion of the hotel taking far more money than either I or Mohamed had bargained for. I underestimated the cost of all the practical things such as water heaters and electricity lines all of which cost a fortune and Mohamed completely forgot about all the small things such as place mats, coat hangers and key rings, all of which were inexpensive individually but added up to a surprisingly big amount. As Mohamed had been the one to raise the money it was all with him and I felt completely helpless to stop his extravagances. The stress we were under was substantial and the many fights we had because of it almost made me reconsider my engagement but as we neared the completion date all the tension disappeared as if by magic. Without doubt we had created something unique and beautiful and if any tourists ever did come to Luxor we were sure they would be delighted to stay in such a timeless and peaceful place. In March el-Sisi who was already in control of the country resigned from the military, announcing he would stand as a presidential candidate in the upcoming election and by the end of May it was all over with. Having won a resounding victory el-Sisi was sworn into office on the eighth of June.

On the twenty first of June we opened the hotel with no guests and no future bookings. I was frantic with worry because we would soon have to start paying

back the bank and for that I needed to sell the villa which due to some legal problem was still not in my name. I had never been more pleased to see the lawyer than when he came to inspect the work at the end of July and finally handed me the deeds. I put the villa on the market straightaway. With no foreigners wanting to buy property in Luxor I was looking towards the Egyptians who all complained that two bedrooms were insufficient for such a large property. Not only that but we had taken all the best pieces of furniture to the hotel and replaced them with odds and ends from Mohamed's apartments which were all in excellent condition but were somewhat of a mismatch for the house. Because of the exterior beauty of the building we did manage to sell it quite quickly but not for the price we were asking. Mohamed wanted to hold out for more but I was so worried about the bank that I overruled him and accepted the first offer.

With the pressure of money lifted from us Mohamed and I started to enjoy our palace hotel for the first time. He had found me some excellent staff so despite tourism being at an all time low we were never completely empty again after that first agonising month.

It was shortly after I closed the deal on the villa that the lawyer called me. He had something else for me he said. When I arrived at his office he handed me a book and a small box and said that I would know the significance of these items. I opened the box first to find it contained my grandmother's wedding ring. The intricate engraving on the glistening gold was of a quality I had not seen before and I gasped in amazement. It was too tiny for my finger so I replaced it in the box and started to make my way out of the office.

"Don't forget your book" the lawyer called after me.

"Oh thanks" I said taking it from him. It was 'The Interpretation of Dreams' as I had thought it would be and I thrust it into my bag without paying it much attention. When I reached home I took it from my bag and before putting it on the shelf I had a quick flick through it. I was just about to put it down when a letter that must have been tucked inside the dust cover fell to the floor. It was

addressed to me. I held it in my hands for a good fifteen minutes before I built up the courage to read it. It started off quite matter of factly.

'Dear Gloria,

So I am dead and you are in Egypt. You have been given this letter only because you have decided to keep my palace and live in it yourself which is something I always hoped you would do. It's a magnificent house isn't it? I hope you find the love and happiness there that I once did.'

Then the letter became much more personal and I could almost hear my grandmother speaking the words to me.

'You think you know the truth now don't you? But does anyone ever really know someone else's truth. No doubt you are thinking that I lived a fantasy:-a dream. Are you sure? If the reality of the earthly world is too hard and life in the dream world is beautiful where would you rather live? Sometimes it is better to forget who you think you are and look beyond to who you really are. Many philosophers have spoken on how the world of our night dreams is essentially no different from our waking consciousness as in essence that is also only a dream too. The notion that everything is a dream is difficult for the common man to understand and even many scholars of philosophy and psychology who presume to think that they have all the answers often reject the idea. Anyone with a hypothesis which does not fit their limited experience or their scientific models is showing signs of insanity they say. Peoples' minds are too small to understand that we are all ignorant of our true identity and that there is another world where sensations and fantasies live. In their ignorance they refer to this other world as a delusion of the ego rather than an independent entity in another consciousness.

Most of my memories are from this other world Gloria. I wrote down those memories for you which are as real to me as any of my waking memories are. If you also doubt my sanity then you only need to read some of the teachings from the Buddhists' philosophy to know that the whole world is only a figment of the mind. I read somewhere in one of their teachings that the waking world

is like 'a magic spell, a dream, a gleam before the eyes, a reflection, lightning, an echo, a rainbow, moonlight upon water, dimness before the eyes, fog and apparitions.' So if this entire world is nothing but a dream then the dream world is surely nothing less.

I was not mad Gloria. I knew the difference between my two worlds. I chose which one of the two I wanted to live in that's all; which one to call reality. What you read in my diaries is the truth.

I pray that you can also live in a world of your choosing. Your poor father could not escape from the terrible world he created in his mind and it was never his choice to live there. He couldn't help it. It was not so with me. Call it vanity if you like but in my world I was truly loved and I regret none of it.

Your Affectionate Grandmother

Nancy.'

So my grandmother had known exactly what she was doing. She was a self-educated intelligent woman who had turned what she read in books into a philosophy all of her own. Don't we all do that to some extent with philosophies and religions? That doesn't make everyone mad. I thought I understood her better now but resolved not to bore Mohamed with it. He has a far simpler outlook on life to digest all this. I decided to tell my Uncle Julius everything when he came over for our wedding in November and see what he could make of it.

Mohamed and I were to have a very small wedding in the hotel with only family and a few friends. Being of different religions and Mohamed already being married it didn't seem prudent to make our wedding into a grand affair. None the less I spent hours planning the menu for the buffet and spent a fortune on my dress.

Two nights before the wedding Uncle Julius arrived laden down with presents. We spent a long evening together catching up on all the gossip and news and on the eve of my wedding I told him everything I had read in the diaries and what I had learned later about my father and grandparents.

"My mother sounds a bit like a character from 'As You like It' to me" he said

when I had finished. "You know; 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts. Either that or 'Alice in Wonderland'; Life is but a Dream."

"That's not from 'Alice in Wonderland' Uncle Julius" I answered sharply, disappointed by his flippant attitude. "It's a poem about the logic or illogic of the book and life itself. I don't think my grandmother's life is anything to laugh about. I thought you might have more sympathy seeing as she was your mother as well as my grandmother."

"My; we are touchy. I know my Lewis Carroll actually Gloria. He was inspired by his own stories to write that bloody poem if you must know because he couldn't remove Alice from his dreams. I wasn't trying to make fun of my mother but you have to admit she wasn't what you might call the average parent."

I left it there because I didn't want to argue with him and anyway he had changed the subject and had suddenly become very serious.

"I have something to tell you too" he said; "Lily Johnson died last week; I'm sorry. Before she died she called me over to the house to tell me that she knew what had happened to your mother and she had always meant to tell you but it was too late now so she would tell me instead."

"Oh my God; poor Lily! What did she say?" I asked, only half interested because I was more upset about Lily dying than wanting to know anything about my mother.

"Well she told me that after Janice left she went to train as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross. Soon after your father died she contacted Lily to tell her she was in Angola. As soon as she could get some money together and get to a safer place she told Lily she was going to come back for you."

"And why didn't she?" I demanded. "She couldn't have cared that much about me seeing as she never did come back or even write."

"Can you just listen Gloria? Your mother was killed by a land mine a few weeks later. Someone came round to tell Lily because Janice had said she had no next

of kin. I don't think her intention was to deny having a daughter but more to deny having parents. Remember you were only three years old so there was no point speaking to you."

"Is that it?" I asked

"No that's not it; Lily gave me a letter for you"

"Another letter? Why do people always write letters instead of talking about things?" I demanded angrily. "I have had enough of reading letters from the deceased and I am not sure I really want to read another one. You read it uncle and tell me what it says."

"I shall do nothing of the kind" he replied forcing the letter into my hand. "Lily wrote it to you so she obviously intended you to read it. Come on Gloria, there can't be much in it. I think Lily told me all she knew about your mother."

Reluctantly I opened the envelope and took out Lily's letter. I didn't want to read it but after a few minutes curiosity got the better of me.

'Dear Gloria,

I am sorry you had to learn what happened to your mother this way but I always did mean to tell you one day. The day you came to my house was a day for you to learn about your father and I thought that hearing that your mother was also dead would be too much for you. I always assumed we would meet again but sadly it is not to be. I am dying and I do not want to leave this world with any more secrets. I told your uncle most of what I know and I will tell you the rest now.

After I learned that your mother had been killed I kept the information to myself for over a week. Janice had disowned her parents for a reason I thought and I should honour her wishes. Eventually I remembered that keeping confidences doesn't always pay so I went to Janice's parents to tell them the sad news. I left it to them to tell you which they clearly never did even after many years when you met them to ask about your mother. I am sure they never told Nancy either; she would have told you. Maybe they were too embarrassed after all the fuss they had made when Janice went missing or maybe they did it deliberately



to tarnish your father's memory. Maybe they hoped that everyone would believe you father had killed her. I honestly don't know but I do know that they weren't very nice people. I am sorry to have to say that about your maternal grandparents but it's a fact.

Apart from everything that happened with your father my only other regret is not telling Nancy what a violent and dangerous man Simon was. I can fool myself into believing that I didn't tell her because she was so determined to marry him that she wouldn't have listened to me and whilst that maybe true it's not the real reason I didn't speak out. No Gloria I wanted Nancy to suffer. I wanted her to get what I thought she deserved. If I am honest I was jealous of her; her beauty and her brains. Yes Nancy was clever although I remember telling you that she wasn't. I knew what Simon had done to Hermione in the Sudan; Hermione told me. I think I was the only person she told that Simon had raped her. She was ashamed that she had lost the virginity she had been preserving for so many years for her husband. She told me in confidence and that is another secret I should not have kept. So much harm has been done by my desire not to betray the trust of other people. I will never do it again. I shall go to my grave with no secrets.

I hope you have found what you were looking for in Egypt and I sincerely hope it wasn't too painful. I also hope you find the happiness in life that I found; the happiness that so sadly eluded your grandmother and your parents. Please don't think too badly of me for not telling you all this in person.

Lily.'

I handed the letter back to my uncle and told him to read it for himself. I couldn't bring myself to tell him yet another sad story. When he had finished reading it he stood up and came over to me and put his arms round me.

"Well that's just about cleared up everything hasn't it? Now we can get on with our lives and you have a wedding to think about young lady."

"Yes you are right" I said cheering up. "You do know that Mohamed is bringing his wife and children tomorrow don't you? What do you think about polyga-

mous marriages? I never think about it much but right this minute I am wondering if I am making a big mistake"

"I have no opinion on marriage of any kind Gloria. If you don't think it's a mistake then it isn't one but if you are not sure then don't do it" he answered.

"I am sure. I just wondered what other people might think"

"Why?" he asked looking bewildered.

"No reason; forget it. I had better be getting to bed. It's a big day tomorrow. I left my uncle sitting in the bar and I went back to my room hoping to get some sleep.

The following morning a lawyer came round with Mohamed and I signed one piece of paper and it was all over; we were married. At six o'clock in the evening the guests arrived for the wedding breakfast. Apart from Mohamed's family, Uncle Julius, Carmen and Carlo there was no one else there apart from the hotel staff. I was ridiculously over dressed and the food I had prepared was completely unsuitable for Mohamed's wife and children who filled themselves up on salad and a bit of fruit before leaving an hour later. Mohamed himself left long before midnight and I went home with Carmen and Carlo to drink away my wedding night alone without my groom. Carmen seemed concerned about this strange arrangement and wouldn't shut up about it until Uncle Julius showed up about an hour later and stopped her in her tracks.

"Have you told her yet?" he demanded to know.

"Told me what?" I asked. "I thought we were done with secrets."

"Oh we are, we are" Carlo jumped in. "It's only that Carmen and I were thinking about moving back to Spain. We only decided for definite tonight when your uncle made us an offer for the house."

"You did what!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Don't look so worried Gloria" my uncle laughed; "I won't be living here permanently. I will spend the summers in London and come to Egypt only for the winters. You could do with a bit of extra help especially over Christmas. Carmen and Carlo will come back to keep you company for a couple of weeks every

summer. If you really don't want me here say so but I will buy the house anyway and rent it out. You lost your villa and we don't need to lose another house so near to the palace. It will be handy for friends to stay in if the hotel is full."

"Of course I want you here uncle" I apologised. "It was just a shock that's all. I will miss you two" I continued "so you must promise to come back and visit us every single year. Have you any idea when will you be going?"

"Not exactly but it will be before Christmas. Julius is staying with us until we leave because I know the hotel is full from next week. This was only decided today Gloria. We weren't hiding anything from you." Carmen was blushing so I didn't know if I really believed her or not but it wasn't something worth making a fuss about. Carlo got up and hurried off to the kitchen to make another jug of Sangria so I wasn't able to get any answers from him. By the time he got back Uncle Julius had turned the conversation round to the menus for Christmas and New Year which I had already planned weeks ago. "I hope my uncle won't try to take over" I thought to myself. "One controlling person in a family is enough." I was still having problems with Mohamed on that score even though his work at the hotel was over and he had a steel company to run.

"Penny for them!" Carlo said nudging my arm. "You seem miles away there. Lets' have a final toast to the new Mrs Fawy and then get to bed shall we."

This final toast was swiftly followed by three more final toasts; one to Carmen and Carlo, one to my uncle and one to life. After all these toasts I was very drunk and Carlo, being the only one sober enough, had to escort me back to my room in the hotel. I woke next morning with what must have been the worst hangover of my life.

In the end Carmen and Carlo decided to stay for both Christmas and the New Year. I was glad they did. The hotel was full and the banquet I had planned for New Year's Eve was so elaborate that the chef could never have coped on his own.

At midnight we all trooped down to the pool bar and saw the New Year in drinking Bucks Fizz and watching the fireworks over the Nile. Once the clock

chimed the final stroke of midnight Mohamed grabbed my hand and rushed me round to the front door of the hotel.

"It's your turn to go in first" I said.

"No; with luck like yours it has to be you" he answered unlocking the door and pushing me towards it.

Reluctantly I stepped inside the first. I was not convinced that I was lucky at all and I had superstitiously put on my grandmother's bracelet for some extra help. Mohamed hadn't noticed it before because of my shawl but as he took me into his arms and the shawl slipped from my shoulders he saw it.

"Is my wife becoming superstitious too now?" he asked laughingly.

"This whole first footing thing is superstition Mohamed and you love it so please do you mind not laughing at me" I responded sharply.

"Sorry" he said pulling me towards him. He took me in a firm embrace and as he crushed me against him the bracelet came off my arm and fell to the floor where it broke into two identically sized pieces."

"Look at that" Mohamed said in amazement, picking the pieces up from the floor. "It's made from cement or something very like it. It's modern. It must have been brand new when your grandmother had it given to her. Your silly grandmother built half her life round her faith in a cheap piece bit of gypsum. They were probably moulding these things by the dozen back then to sell to the tourists although I must admit I haven't seen one like it before."

Irrationally I burst into tears.

"Look Gloria it doesn't matter what it was made of or how old it was or how many they made" Mohamed continued seeing my discomfiture. "Your grandmother believed in the luck it brought her and that's what matters. All the ancient talismans were new once and the pharaohs still believed in their power. Does it really matter if what you believe in is true?"

"Yes it does really matter" I snapped back. "You only have to look at my father to see that. Sorry" I added after realising how I must have sounded, "I know I am talking nonsense. I never believed the stupid bracelet had supernatural powers

anyway but let's say that I did. It never brought my grandmother any luck so good that it's gone."

"Well your grandmother is at peace now and so is your father. Don't worry about them anymore; they are not destined for eternal misery you know. Eventually everyone wakes up to the truth. No one is left in the dream state forever." "You are right" I said kissing him gently on the cheek. "Who is dreaming this now? Nobody is. Our life is not a dream; it's real and we should embrace this reality with all our heart. We don't need bracelets; we will bring our own luck Mohamed"

As I set off back to the bar I saw Mohamed drop the two pieces of the broken bracelet into his pocket. He wasn't taking any chances by throwing it into the rubbish.