

My Cave of Shrines

A Memoir of Espionage, Archeology, Scandals, and Life from the Seine to
the Sahara

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Chapter I

The changeling

The following happened before my mind's eye opened around the age of three and a half, but it feels like a creation myth since my father was retracing scars when he told me how our boxer, Meg, and I had almost suffered the same fate around the time that mobs burned 600 buildings associated with the English in Cairo.

As a baby, he said, I was accident-prone, breaking bones three times; first by falling out of a highchair; next when dropped by a nanny; finally, as I was pursued by my mother around a table while clutching a stolen centerpiece of bananas - by freakishly slipping on a rug, instead of a peel.

The first time it happened, in the middle of the Egyptian revolution against King Farouk and his English backers, foreign doctors were so scarce because of grenade attacks on Europeans, and local ones were so busy or unwilling to treat foreigners, that my parents fell back in desperation upon a race-course vet from Giza to set the bones and make the cast. Working with a carpenter in what had been the best hospital, the vet suspended my tiny legs from improvised scaffolding like the adult patient in a book. And, from the look of things, he'd done a fine job. I wriggled happily, batting at beads and my Nubian nanny's fan.

My mother's friends had said she would be daft to call off a long-awaited family reunion in Europe – where a liner bearing her father and his bride was about to land at Le Havre, and my parents were supposed to be waiting on the dock - since I was obviously out of danger, and, God knows, my parents had earned a break after I'd given them such a scare. Now that I was in safe hands and even had a wet nurse, they said it

was time for my mom to join her dad and her new step-mother, since he'd been on a rollercoaster after my 46-year-old grandmother had suddenly died in her sleep. This was my mother's chance to welcome the woman, even if she thought the lady was neurotic and had caught her father on the rebound after she'd found him grieving in what he thought was an empty church.

Plus there was the touchy subject of my maternal grandfather's disapproval of my mother's marriage. This was the perfect occasion, her girlfriends decreed, to fulfill her filial duty, prove she'd found Mister Right, and get a well-deserved vacation into the bargain.

Each time my father told the story, he seemed just as perplexed by why he'd collaborated in such specious reasoning. Sure, he was on the defensive because of his patrician father-in-law's disapproval. Sure, I had seemed to be thriving when they visited me in the hospital. And, sure, they had it covered.

But after barely making it through the war, whose landings had usually been planned with such redundancy that the Allies practically expected to waltz ashore, well-laid plans often had a hollow ring. On beach after beach, from North Africa to Europe, my father had seen even greater certainties hit the sand and go grey appallingly fast. On paper, he told me, hubris almost always made sense – just like religions and conspiracy theories. He should know, he said, as an apostate and spy. Perhaps, he thought, he'd abandoned me in a hospital during the aftershocks of a revolution simply because he'd wanted to make a good impression and please everyone.

But, whatever it was, my parents had flown to Europe despite their misgivings and pretended they could keep up with the patriarch's lavish choices of restaurants and hotels on a junior civil servant's salary after my grandfather made it abundantly clear that he expected any man who'd married his daughter to be able to pay for her. The trip was untenable financially and intolerable to him as a parent. To avoid bankruptcy, my father had invented a diplomatic cable, and fled back to Cairo, leaving my mother to resume her daughterly role and hold the flag.

But when he got to the hospital, I'd vanished - crib, attendants and all! It had taken a moment, he told me, to realize that the piercing wails from a staircase might be me. Inflamed with foreboding, my father had sprung after the screams and traced them to a reeking alcove under the steps. I was so smeared in feces, tangled in filthy bedding and cords, and making such an unearthly noise - like rope screeching from pulleys - that he felt gut-punched with guilt.

He told me he'd tried to unravel my snarled rigging while sobbing baby talk - and then burst out of the alcove to accost whoever was running by, and crashed into an Egyptian nurse who'd come to lambaste him. He said he'd found himself stumbling through English, French and Arabic in apoplectic fury, but she shouted right back in good English that he was one to talk!

Patients gathered and jostled him, shouting that his son had been wailing for a week, making life miserable for them all. One man even yelled that my father was lucky nobody had fulfilled God's will by smothering the dying child, which would have been merciful!

In the midst of mayhem, my dad had flicked his lighter, making the mob momentarily assume he was assaulting them, and burned through the cords, liberating me, whereupon he bundled me up like an unstrung puppet, and carried me keening through crowded corridors to the director's office, from which my father damn well called the embassy, a government minister, and then, playing for keeps, hauled in the man's personal physician. When the doctor finally snipped off the plaster, he found that my ankles had been rubbed raw against unpadded ridges as my legs instinctively kicked to build muscle tone and had putrefied.

Fetching Meg from her boarding kennel hadn't seemed like much of a priority, at least till my mom got back from Europe, where she'd left the newlyweds to continue their Grand Tour. When they did go to retrieve Meg, the vision of what they found crystallized my father's guilt.

“We saw a mob throwing stones over the fence, and laughing about it! Meg was trapped. We found out that she’d been lunging at them for days, but, by the time we got there, she couldn’t get up, and was covered with sores. I had to carry her out in my arms.” His voice broke. “She had so much heart, but we couldn’t let her near Egyptians afterwards. She’d go for their throats before they’d opened their mouths. When the foreign minister came unannounced one day, she lunged for him so fast despite his suit and British accent that we had to move heaven and earth to prevent a major diplomatic incident.”

If the pure-bred dog so representative of hated colonizers had been any other pet, they would have “put her down”, but Meg’s suffering and devotion to me demanded more of them. There’s a snapshot of me with my second leg in a cast beside my guardian animal after I’d cut her short fur, nipping her skin, with blunt school scissors, when I was three. She looks as patient as an indulgent mother even though she’s guarding a cherubic changeling.

And yet, my first memories are only of ships miraculously plowing dunes at Suez, an algal pool in Giza where orange blurs appeared and dissolved among blossoms floating under flame trees, and scavenging for blue motes in tawny sand. Any pain vanished into the realm of myth.
