

Dreaming of the Nile by Lara Owen

Chapter One: The Beginning

Looking back, I guess it all started with being depressed. I didn't call it that at the time, but now I see people walking round in that half-alive state and I think, that's what I used to be like. Living the unbearably ordinary life. Shower, work, television, phone calls, movies, the occasional party or family drama, interspersed by food three times a day. It's not enough. I hadn't even had any sex in ages, because finding a decent and available man seemed to have become strangely impossible.

Divine dissatisfaction, some people call it. I just knew I couldn't go on like that any longer. I realized I needed magic. Not mere excitement, no, that's easy to get. There's an ever-increasing supply of quick fixes of adrenalin-rush excitement, from the armchair anxiety of scary movies to the life-risking peril of bungee-jumping and white-water river rafting adventure vacations. Even the stock market is a thrill for some people. I didn't want mere romance, either, because I'd had all the sunset beach walks and candlelit dinners a girl can take without there being a really strong feeling. Of what, I didn't exactly know.

I just knew that there was more to life, that I was only tasting a fraction of the splendor that life could be. I felt like a pilgrim walking through a fog wanting something I couldn't even name, and the closest name I could come up with was Magic. There was also a feeling that it was about searching for God, too, but I felt so uncomfortable with the conventional idea of God that I couldn't even phrase it that way to myself. So I thought of my quest as being for Magic, for the Magic of Life.

Here is the story of how I found it.

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My name is Leila Martin. I'm thirty-three years old and I live in Los Angeles. Santa Monica to be precise: four blocks from the ocean and five from the freeway, in a rent-controlled apartment in a thirties building which was once very fine, but is now bedraggled, depressed, and in need of some loving attention. Which is roughly how I feel about myself, so I suppose that means I am in perfect alignment with my surroundings.

In which case, just to torment you (and me) further with this tenuous analogy, the basic underpinnings are sound, the foundation well-built, and the style and structure pleasing to the eye. Now I feel a little better about myself, but not much. Having good bones and flesh doesn't compensate for having a great void in the middle of your life, which is how mine feels to me right now.

I was born in Pennsylvania, grew up in England, went to school and university there, and moved back to the U.S. in my early twenties when my mother remarried. My stepfather is a cardiologist at Cedars-Sinai and I followed them over here because the weather in England was really getting to me. Plus I had just broken up with my boyfriend, didn't know what to do with myself, and wanted a change. I know it's weird to follow your mother around the world at that great age, and we don't even get on very well, but I wanted to live in California anyway.

I make a rather pathetic and disgruntled living as a journalist. I got a psychology degree at the usual age, too young to know what to do with it, and too lazy to go onto postgraduate study. I only got the degree in the first place because my tutor was a radical who didn't agree with the exam system and who fancied me, so he brought my most atrocious paper back to me after the exam was over and said you can have this overnight to complete it, I'll be round at ten tomorrow morning to pick it up. I have a dim memory

of us smooching drunkenly at a graduation party, in mutual congratulation of our prowess in working the system, and I am eternally grateful to him for helping me complete my education with apparent success.

I wanted to encounter the "real world" and I was fed up with the narrowness of academia, so I didn't go on to graduate school, and I had had enough of being graded and told what to do so I didn't train as a therapist. I'm not sorry now. It wouldn't suit me to sit with everyone else's pain all day. I believe in psychotherapy, and I've had years and years of it myself, but I couldn't do it on a daily basis. But the degree was the only qualification I had, and you've got to start somewhere, right?

Soon after I got here I met a woman at a party and she and I got to talking about the power of archetypes and I dazzled her with my knowledge of the intricacies of Jung (he was my favorite and the only exam I passed easily) and she hired me on the spot to write an essay for a forthcoming book called "Themes in Twentieth Century Psychotherapy" aimed at the very undergraduate milieu from which I had so recently emerged.

So there I was, in like Flynn, a published writer and apparent psychological authority. From there I bounced into an editorial position at a new magazine, "Psychology for You", and spent several semi-grueling years dealing with the grim realities of semi-corporate America (the semis are there to offset my guilt at complaining about a job that is luxurious and wondrous by the standards of so many other occupations: my inverted sense of privilege appalls me).

Then I got sick. My doctor couldn't find anything actually wrong with me, other than mild depression, but I felt dreadful. I did some research and I found that mysterious illnesses like this have probably always been around, called different names at different times, and presenting in subtly different ways. In the nineteenth century people got something called neurasthenia which involved a lot of fainting and romantic obsession and strange sexual symptoms. This disease went completely out of fashion in the first half of the early twentieth century, and instead, people went down with a genteel form of nervous breakdown. A few years back Chronic Fatigue Syndrome was all the rage. I knew loads of people with that, or its cousin, the Epstein-Barr virus, but these illnesses aren't so popular any more. Since SSRI's came along, there's been an epidemic of people diagnosed with clinical depression. If you go to a non-traditional doctor they seem to like to call it adrenal burnout. A friend of mine calls it "taking to your bed", and that's probably about the best term yet.

Whatever you call it, I found myself barely able to function--not actually crazy enough to consider myself mentally ill, but not exactly well either. I was nervous beyond belief, weepy, terrified of everything, and so tired I could barely lift my arms to wash my hair. For two months I pushed myself until I literally could not get out of bed one morning and I called the office to say I was sick. My body and mind had erupted in disgust at the way I lived, always racing from one meeting to another, from one deadline to the next, awash with coffee, sugar, and adrenaline. And my soul was sick, which was the worst of it. I wasn't happy, and I didn't know how to be, and now everything had fallen apart.

After a month, Sue, my boss, came to visit and we agreed, me tearfully, her worriedly yet still glowing with efficiency, that I should quit my job and work part-time on a freelance basis. My contract wasn't good enough to keep me being paid for much longer and I couldn't face being on disability and having no identity in the world at all. I don't know if that was a mistake or not. Opinion is mixed about whether people with this kind of thing should capitulate or fight. I did both, sometimes one more than the other. If you give up completely then your muscles waste and your immune system isn't stimulated and you just start to wither away. If you work too much then the battered

adrenals and nervous system don't get a chance to properly recoup their strength. So it's a long-term balancing act, and I walked that tightrope for two years, and can still feel the after-effects.

So that's where I am now. Much better but still fragile. I've had some acupuncture treatments and I eat much more sensibly and I don't drink coffee and I make sure I get plenty of rest and oxygen-filled walks by the ocean. But I still feel like there is this gaping hole inside myself, and I know it is some kind of spiritual disorder that no medicines or herbs or vitamins can fill.

I'm working for the magazine more and more, but I don't like it. The other day Sue sent me an assignment for an article on the connection between good teeth and self-esteem. Good God. I was bored instantly, and I hated myself as I made phone calls, bothering perfectly nice people with my inane questions about their teeth, their patients' teeth, the psychological ramifications of having orthodontics, the horrors of losing all your teeth, etc. etc.. It was like pulling teeth, getting that article done. And once I had finished it a little voice inside said, No More. But I am afraid, very afraid. How will I make a living? Who will I be? What is happening to me? No one, no teacher, friend, or parent has prepared me for this type of crisis. I thought once I figured out what I was going to be in life it was all a steady process toward stability, moderate success, and eventual retirement. Apparently not.

Okay, enough whining about that. Now I suppose I'm going to have to talk about my relationship life, such that it is. It's embarrassing to see how I gab on and on about work and health when really the big problem, the thorny issue I really can't get to grips with, is Love and Matters of the Heart. I seem to be in this Catch 22 right now. I have a history of being involved with married or otherwise unavailable men. I'm not proud of it, believe me, but it's the truth. A few years ago I made a decision not to do this any more and what has happened? Nada. No one. Theoretically when one makes a decision of that sort an available knight on a white charger is supposed to come steaming in. This has not happened, so I have been celibate for three years. It sucks, it really does.

Last night I went to a girlfriend's birthday party. There were two men I didn't know, in town on business for the weekend. They were from Argentina originally and now live on the East Coast. That's got unavailable written all over it so of course I talked to them all evening. Out of the two of them one drew me more than the other. Guess what, he was the one in a relationship already. The other one was single and even asked me out. I wasn't that attracted to him so it wasn't hard to turn him down. So sorry but I have a prior engagement and oh dear you're leaving town, oh well it has been lovely talking to you.

My therapist says I have an unresolved psychosexual tie to my father created out of his projection onto me of his dissatisfied anima. My mother was not complex or sexual enough to carry all of his anima projection and he didn't develop his own creativity or have the courage to fall in love with another woman, he just died of a heart attack when I was fifteen and left me with this raging need for a father figure who I can never actually have. So that's the analysis of the situation, but somehow it doesn't seem to change anything.

It was supposed to get healed when I had that male therapist for two years onto whom I had a major transference. He was perfect: good-looking, very smart, sensitive, and very married with two kids. And my therapist. Ten million kinds of unavailability right there. Only trouble was, although he resisted my advances, he developed a huge crush on me, (called a counter-transference in the trade), and the therapy came to a fairly disastrous end because he was always in such a state when I came to his office. Or if not when I arrived, he certainly was by the time I left.

So now I have a rule, no unavailable men. But every time I go out that's who I meet and lust after. The world is swimming in available men, of that I have no doubt. But I screen them out somehow. I justify it by saying, if a man is really right for me then he will fight through my protective coating and get hold of me. That's what Richard did, and he was available, in that he wasn't involved with anyone else. He was twenty years older than me, so he fit my father complex but didn't fit my need for a true companion in life. He wouldn't have kids, and so as I got closer to thirty and my ovaries started sending out intense baby messages, I broke up with him.

I had this fantasy that after a month or two he was going to be in such an agony of loss that he would say, "I can't live without you. Let's make a baby anyway, even though I think I'm too old." Lots of men have kids in their fifties. What's the big deal? But instead a friend fixed him up with someone else immediately and they have been together ever since. She's his age. Already had her kids who are grown. She is stick thin and fair-haired, everything I am not, and they seem perfectly happy in a dried-out perfect sort of way.

I think that perfect life stuff makes me nervous. I am so used to trouble and not getting what I want. What would I do if everything worked out all of a sudden? If I met some lovely guy with whom I was really compatible, who was a great kisser and open-minded and past puberty emotionally and spiritually and who wanted to impregnate me and make me tea in the morning?

I almost expire from happiness just at the thought.

Death and happiness. They must be related. Do you think you get really happy when you die? Wouldn't it be far out if the thing we are so afraid of and spend so much energy preventing was actually the most ecstatic thing a human can experience? Just a thought.

Anyway, that's sort of brought you up to date. There are some other things but I don't feel like talking about them now. Maybe later. An abortion. A boyfriend I lived with for a couple of years and nearly married who turned out to be alcoholic. That was fun.

I keep trying. I keep working at healing myself. I'm not sure what it really means to have that intention but I can't think of what else to do. I won't take Prozac or any of those drugs. I'm suspicious of them because no one knows what the long-term effects are, and anyway, they don't seem to offer any kind of solution, which feels unsatisfactory to me. I'd rather be grumpy and real. But I have to do something, because otherwise this lurking malaise will present itself in some other, possibly worse way, and quite frankly, I'm bored with feeling unhappy. Enough is enough.

So I've decided to seek spiritual medicine, to try some ancient technology for the soul. Tomorrow I'm going to a sweat lodge to see if Native American wisdom can save me. I haven't been to one before. It's up in the Malibu mountains. My friend Amy is taking me. She lives in Topanga and knows a lot of people out that way. Ex-hippies and all that. So we'll see. Might as well give it a shot. I'll try almost anything once.