

# THE TORN PHOTO

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As a child, I was intrigued by my grandmother's personal stuff. Being raised in an old high-ceiling Art Deco apartment in Zamalek with plenty of doors, old armoires and locked closets, I felt like Alice in my grandmother's wonderland.

There was a combination of scents in her room, a combination of old books, her cigarettes, the salt she used to put in water to heal her feet after long walks as a tourist guide. Her old vintage cushions and linens linger with me to this day - along with stories of her youth that make me feel like I belong to the wrong era. Perhaps those stories are what made me want to become a filmmaker.

One day amongst my aunt's belongings I found an old black and white photo of one of my favourite actresses, a beauty icon, dated back to the sixties. I noticed the photo was torn and repaired with old tape - after probing my Dad, I discovered that after a fight with my Aunt, my Grandma had torn the photo off the wall and ripped it as punishment. The story never left my mind for some reason.

Four years later, in 1999, during my last year at the Higher Cinema Institute, I was working on a short film for my graduation. I had written a story of bonding between a young girl and an old lady that takes place on a plane. I won't lie to you - *she* was on my mind, I felt the role was perfect for her, the 1960s icon and actress, but I had



trouble enough sorting out permission to film on a plane and at the Cairo airport. I didn't need more trouble or disappointments, yet somehow my production manager procured her telephone number - Joy! Terror!

I called her in a crowded street, so she wouldn't hear my apprehension. She answered - how different her voice was to the one on screen! To my surprise she was gracious and welcoming. I took her address.

I was too shy to go by myself, so my production manager and I reached her place in Garden City, Cairo. A lovely old building, a street surrounded by trees, I guess that's where the street name comes from (*Sharia Nabatat*, means 'Plant Street'). We asked the *bawab* for the apartment, he told us it was located on the last floor. I couldn't feel my knees as the elevator took us up. Once on her floor, we found a huge portrait of her on the wall and something written on it *Gama3eyet El Hemeer* which means 'The Donkeys Club', a group she created a long time ago for cinema artists.

I rang the door bell, she opened the door and greeted us. I remember feeling like the luckiest person in the world. Forgive me for not being able to describe her apartment in detail, this is something that happened fifteen years ago after all. But I do remember a portrait of her signed by an extremely talented film director who was a painter too, a photo of her in one of the most famous movies in Egypt's history, and the old wooden stairs leading to the roof.

I was in a daze. Here I was, before one of the most important actresses of Egyptian cinema - a cool blonde who could have easily been cast by Hitchcock. She had diminished - there was no denying it. From a screen goddess she had become a modest looking lady in her late seventies, but I was thrilled. If I managed to cast her, doubtless my little film would become one of the best ever made at the institute.

As soon as I explained my film to her, the arguments began, she criticised it in every way imaginable. I was crushed.

I left feeling that I was dealing with an extremely high-maintenance person. But no one can judge her for that, after all, she worked with the most important film directors. She was supposed to call me in the upcoming days, because the airport permits meant we were short on time.

Nerve wracking times! My father came to my room and told me that *she* was on the phone. We laughed, it was ridiculous that this screen goddess was calling a student! I picked up and she said, "Listen, I am calling you to tell you that I might disappear for a couple of days, I am leaving the city." She hung up saying she would call me upon her return.

Two more days, and to my surprise, she called back, we met again, but this time I went alone. I can't remember how many hours I spent there, talking and mostly arguing because she wanted to change the whole plot of my script! On that day I noticed for the first time that there were beer bottle caps all over the floor. She kept on drinking all through our conversation. Her ashtrays were filled to the brim with cigarette stubs - it shocked me.

She let me stare at her picture, the one with her favourite role, and she sat close to me, really close, and put her hand on my shoulder and said, you remind me of one of my favourite directors Shady Abdel Salam. I felt really flattered, I couldn't speak after what she said, but I decided to share the torn photo story with her.

She left to the kitchen and got me a wrapped chocolate egg, the Easter ones with a toy inside from Simonds (a well-known patisserie in Egypt). She held the egg and stared at me and said, "Do you know what's inside the egg?" I said no, she continued, "It might be a bird or a dinosaur...Do you want to be a bird or a dinosaur Louisa?" (Louisa was a character she played).

I admit, at the age of twenty that was way too philosophical for

me, so I insisted on her final decision. It ended up with both of us being stubborn and not finding a middle ground: she didn't mind acting in a short film, but she wanted to change the whole script. I asked her to think about it and that I would call her the next day.

The next day was my last phone call to her, she was quite irritated by me, I guess it was mutual. I apologised that I couldn't change my script and I thanked her for her time, but surprisingly *she* said "why don't you call MF?"

MF was a well-known actress, still living, but known for her shocking opinions and foul mouth.

Now, at the age of thirty-six, looking back at this week, remembering how serious I was about my project, I've come to realise that *she*, I guess, was playing... Now, I think she wanted to play those little games adults enjoy to play, especially with younger people. She knew she was teaching me something, she knew she would forget about it completely.