

SAVAGE TONGUES

A NOVEL

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TWENTY YEARS HAD PASSED since I'd been to Marbella. *Twenty years*, I repeated to myself as the plane descended through the sky toward Spain. I leaned my head against the plexiglass. The cool surface felt good against my forehead. I could see the mountains in the distance covered in a forbidding veil of mist. We'd flown through the night; now dawn was breaking. An uncertain yellow light was coming through the pillowy masses of clouds. Wrapped in fog, the ring of mountains looked muted and dull; only their peaks glowed in the hushed smoky tones of the sky. Below, I could see airplanes lined up on the black belt of the runway waiting to take off; closer to the gates, there were tourists deplaning, leaning into the wind, their hair blown back, the turbines on the regional planes still spinning. The drone of the slowing engines echoed in my ears. I had the uneasy feeling that time had come to a standstill. That all of Marbella had existed in a state of suspension since I had last been there at seventeen — raw, restless, with a savage temperament that had led me

into Omar's arms. Omar, my stepmother's nephew. Omar: my lover, my torturer, my confidant and enemy.

It had been one hell of a night. And now, here I was, returning to one of the ugliest episodes of my youth: that strange, wild summer I'd spent in this moonlit city of salt and gulls and palm trees, on this dark and playful coast, living in my father's vacant and abandoned apartment, learning to ride Omar in the blazing afternoon heat. I was supposed to spend the summer with my father, though I'd known full well that he would fail to show up, or that he would show up late, and that even if he did show up it would be with that wife of his, that fussy demimonde from Beirut, a woman of the old world who was raised on French colonial patisseries and who, at sixteen, was shuffled from her father's home to her first husband's, a cousin two decades her senior who had left her widowed in middle age. She is as naïve as she is possessive, manipulative, calculating.

I knew that my father would ignore me that summer, or that he would acknowledge my presence but deny his responsibility for me, his daughter, a human he'd created, whose health and happiness, if normal societal rules were applied, he should be tending to. But normal societal rules have never been a part of my life. They do not interest me. They provoke in me nothing but boredom.

I am a half-formed thing, neither this nor that. My mother is Iranian. My father, British. I am a split child of the gutters, raised in the shadowy streets of Tehran, where a few lonely hooded faces murmur with trembling lips, "Death to America." America,

the country I moved to as an adolescent, a country that groans at the very thought of Iranians, calling us blood thirsty tyrants, vowing to smoke us out of our holes, as if the whole Middle East were living under one big primordial rock, spinning the yarn of evil. I suppose from the white man's view we are so evil that we deserve to be eviscerated. Just look, for example, at how quickly after we set foot on American soil that my brother was subjugated by a hate crime that damaged him beyond repair, a cruel attack that I witnessed and that infused my already fragmented life with an unfocused rage and despair. I wonder now: If we had never moved to America, would my life still have collided with Omar's with such brutal force on the other side of the Atlantic in Spain? Would I still have been animated by self-loathing, self-immolation, a misdirected revenge? It never ceases to amaze and bewilder me how events that have germinated on one continent can be harvested in the shadows of another far, far away.

Yes, I have lived an itinerant life. I've lived here and there: in the sun-bleached streets of Los Angeles; the dull roads of Reno; the moody, superior streets of New York; the gritty, pulsating avenues of Chicago. My father, too, is a nomad; as children, we are, after all, an invention of our parents. My father had worked for years at sea with the British India Steam Navigation Company until he got tuberculosis. He hadn't been allowed to work on deck after that. That's the only concrete fact about his life that he ever shared with me. The rest is conjecture. But I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was devastated by the disease, that it distorted his whole sense of self, that he survived, but that he

would have preferred not to; he'd never learned to conduct himself on dry land.

He'd softened the blow by finding new ways to insert himself into the vast and distant lands to which he'd grown accustomed: India, and later Iran, Lebanon, the Emirates. "Oh, the women of the Middle East!" he would say. "They're so sensual—dark and suggestive, loyal, obedient." He attached himself to what he called the "mysteries of the Orient," first through my mother, a girl from the upper echelons of Tehran society whose father had been killed during the revolution. When my father came along, she'd been confused, caught in the horrors of coups and confiscated property, of house-arrest orders and death executed in cold blood. My father would later abandon her for my stepmother, whom he'd married without finalizing his divorce to my mother; he'd converted to Islam purely to take advantage of its patriarchal leanings, which allowed him, a white British man, to be married to two Muslim women, one Shia, one Sunni, at the same time against their will. But as much as he fetishized them, he also echoed the words of violence so common in the West. He would often say, "I'm repulsed by how irrational your people are, their lack of logic, their bent toward murder, their self-destructiveness. It's why the Middle East can't survive without a benign dictator in place." His gaze was always forbidding, his tone declarative. Oh, how little regard we have for the power words have to wound!

A *benign dictator*, I'd thought to myself, examining the cruelty of my father's sentences. And that pair of words, *your people*. As

if I weren't made of him, weren't a part of him. I was, in his eyes, part of the enemy camp no matter that my veins run with equal parts oil and the brackish waters of western seas.

My body—what an unlikely experiment. I'd always felt that I was fundamentally distorted, a reckless invention. That there was something deeply flawed about my being. Iranian American: victim and victimizer, colonized and colonizer. How I was meant to make my way through the world is beyond me. My own father, if someone so utterly absent from his children's life can be called that, had read my people with the same air of superiority with which we've long been read by Britain, France, America, modern nations that have defined themselves in opposition to us, that have split the world in two—Occident, Orient—that have defined us as morally impure, uncivilized fools with an unquenchable thirst for violence, barbarians who would only benefit from the levelheaded beneficence of the West, the Occidental man's even temper, his logician's mind.

And now, here I am: I've returned to Marbella, the only place where I'd ever tried to spend significant time with my father—a failed attempt, as he hadn't shown up until it was too late, until the dreadful events of that summer had unfolded, impressed themselves upon my already misshapen life. Instead of spending time with my father, I'd spent time in the hollow corridors of a life that belonged to him, a life from which he was absent, in the rooms of his barren apartment, a symbol of what he could have been to me but never was: a father not just in name, a protector, an unconditional source of love.

I'd come back to Marbella to examine the ways in which my own punishing destiny had intersected with Omar's, a man who was more or less family. He was my stepmother's favorite nephew. He'd been forty years old that summer, twenty-three years older than I was. Tall, handsome, seductive, he looked at me with big hungry eyes and a penetrating gaze, a gaze that—once it turned cruel, well into our affair, when I'd least expected it—had drained my body of its will to live.

I suppose I have what some might refer to as an investigative nature, a relentless edge, a charge to understand how it was that the crooked path of my life—a life that I'd wrongly thought Omar could save me from, a life lived in the shadows of parental neglect and informed by historical annihilation—had led me right to Omar. It had taken me twenty years to understand that the lens through which Omar had seen me was so wretched, so disgraceful, so disenfranchising, it had robbed me of my ability to see in return: I had lost the power to look. And because I had lost my ability to look, I had lost the ability to see myself clearly. Where then would I speak from? How would I retell my story? I had lost my descriptive capacities. He had reshaped my identity in his image, with his gaze. Going forward from that summer, who I am would always be, in part, because of what he did to me. I couldn't undo that. I no longer had any interest in denying myself the past. I needed to see and then unsee myself through Omar's eyes. Then, I wondered, would I be able to look at the world as myself for the first time?

I was returning to Marbella in order to face head-on the abso-

lute pain and pleasure of our story. I needed to purge my body of his memory. To destroy all the sensual memories I had built up around him in my mind. To translate the bitterness and the heat of our relationship into a language of my own making. What, I wondered, had Omar asked me not to see, not to be? How had he both made and unmade me? I had no idea. He had worked my muscles with his tongue until his mouth had gone dry against my skin. He had left me raw and limp. That I was already wounded was clear from the lines on my face: at seventeen, my eyes shone with the heat of intense grief, my mouth curled downward, my nostrils flared easily. All Omar had to do was rework my bruises, expand their boundaries. And he did. He crafted an exquisite wound knowing full well that beneath that wound existed another, and beneath that, another still. My life had made his job easy.

Perhaps I should begin at the beginning. Like I said, I am not alone in my wretchedness though I have not seen my brother in years. In a decade. I have other brothers and sisters, too, half siblings, but I don't know them. I don't know how many of us there are. I only know my own brother, the one with whom I share a mother. Not long before I'd left for Marbella, just weeks after my mother, brother, and I arrived in the United States from Tehran, to Reno, my brother had been beaten to a pulp by a skin-head. His face had been shattered, his disfigured body left on the sidewalk, his hair matted with his own blood. I'd found him; I'd stepped off the school bus and onto his lifeless body, into a pool of our shared blood. For a moment, I thought I'd gone mad, that

I was in a nightmare. The pain of seeing my brother barely gulping for air, at the edge of death, deranged me. But then he moved. He must have felt me standing over him, looking down at his swollen eyes, as blue as the darkening sky above us, in disbelief. His school supplies were scattered around on the sidewalk, under the bushes, dirty with mud. He made a noise, let out a complaint, and I bent toward him; I kneeled on the ground beneath the trees and drew his head into my lap.

Thinking about it now, I felt my hands tingle. I was sweating. My palms were wet. I reached up and twisted the overhead fan on and breathed in the recycled air of the airplane. Then I looked out the window at the tarmac, at the mountains in the distance, at the green fields dotted with palm trees and *macchia mediterranea*, its wild red and purple flowers already in bloom. As we approached the glistening tarmac wet from the morning's rain, I saw my brother lying on the runway; there he was, his face still smashed, his bones shattered, his skin bruised and swollen and misshapen; he was looking up at me from the black ribbon of the runway, silently asking: *What are you doing back here?* I shut my eyes.

At seventeen, I'd come to Marbella numb with a rage I hadn't had the language to articulate. None of us—neither my mother, my brother, nor I—were able to speak to the others after his attack. We had always spoken to one another in Farsi, but now we heard the echo of his skull being shattered against concrete in every word of our mother tongue. And we couldn't speak to one another in English. No. That was the language of our first de-

feat. So we lived in an ever-widening silence. Once his face had healed enough for him to travel, my brother left for London to stay with my father, my father who seemed only to have affection for us when we were in danger; he'd sweep in and try to rescue us, make a grand gesture of love, then dispose of us once the novelty had passed. Back then my father lived near Hyde Park, spending what he could of his wife's money. My father who was always broke, who'd been raised as poor as a church mouse, kicking rocks around in the East End.

My mother had begged my brother not to go. She couldn't stand the thought of losing him. "Without you," she'd said to him, "it will be as if one-half of my life has disappeared. Each of you is like one of my lungs," she'd said. "How will I breathe with just one lung?" But he'd left anyway. And my father had promptly used his wife's money to send him away to a boarding school in the English countryside, I don't remember where. I barely saw him after that. His suffering had broken us down. The only kinship left between us was pain.

I became reckless, impulsive; I craved danger. I went to Marbella. My mother encouraged me to go. She was hopeful I would see my brother, that my father would bring him along for the summer. She wanted me to convince my brother to come back to her. He had stopped speaking to her. He had come to associate her with the beating he had taken. He'd said, "You didn't teach me how to be a man" and "What kind of man is incapable of defending himself?" He spoke as though my mother had castrated him. It was my job to remind him of our father's culpabil-

ity, his cold, disaffected parenting, our mother's eternal sacrifice. But none of that came to be. I didn't see him in Marbella. I could never have anticipated what happened there. That summer will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I'd spent the first half of the summer living alone, tanning at the beach, smoking my Gauloises, reading Lorca, masturbating, ignoring my mother's phone calls. I couldn't stand hearing the disappointment in her voice. I couldn't stand her loneliness, the sense of disorientation that had weakened her resolve to live. Her pain seemed to tip me over the edge. The few times I'd picked up, I'd lied to her. I convinced her that my father was with me. She'd had no idea I'd been alone all along, alone until Omar showed up and declared himself my patron.

I remember the first time Omar and I met. One evening, he'd come to the apartment with money my father had sent me through his bank account. When I opened the door to let him in, he said, "You ordered money?" He was holding a white envelope in his hand, looking at me with a friendly intensity, his mouth ajar. He was wearing a gray T-shirt and a pair of black leather motorcycle pants with knee armor and red stitching on the sides that drew my eyes down the full length of his muscular thighs. When I met his gaze, his eyes widened and his expression, which had been light, even jocular, turned serious, as if, having caught sight of my desire, of my youth and foolishness, he'd recalibrated his thoughts. His brow was laced with sweat and he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. His sweat dripped on the envelope, softening the paper, rendering it trans-

parent, exposing the pinks and greens of the bills within. "I was out riding," he said, and stepped inside. He put the envelope on the console table where I kept my keys. "Don't spend it all in one place," he joked, sliding his fingers along the edge of the envelope, stroking it; I could have sworn that as his hand dropped to his side he let out a little moan. I remember that my heart was beating in a frightful way. I felt heat rising in my face. "Have you ever ridden a Ducati?" he said, turning to face me.

I swallowed, trying to extinguish the fire that had, quite suddenly and against my will, ignited inside me. "No," I managed to say, suppressing the tremor in my voice.

Omar walked into the kitchen. He took a cold drink, an orange soda, out of the fridge, then leaning against the door, he tilted his head back and laughed with a boyish charm that excited me. "Never?" he asked.

"Never," I said, laughing along with him. Our combined laughter swirled through the room, a whirlpool of pleasure laced with danger and darkness. It had been months since I'd heard an adult laugh. Months since anyone had broken the silence of my life with an intimation of joy.

Omar leaned away from the fridge and came toward me. "Feel here," he said, gently lifting my hand to his chest. "I think my heart is exploding," he said, rubbing my hand, squeezing it against his body. I felt the heat of his skin and the coarse hairs on his chest beneath his thin T-shirt, his heart pumping against my palm. "It's a lot of adrenaline," he said. "It feels great. I'm going to take you."

I removed my hand. He shrugged with what seemed to me feigned indifference, then finished his orange soda. Right before he left, we looked at each other with an intentionality and an intensity that had frightened and aroused me simultaneously. Our interlocked gaze pierced the silence; it was a form of communication unfamiliar to me, one that didn't rely on words but was extremely clear nevertheless. This was how I would come to feel in his presence—unnerved, even petrified at times, but still excited, exhilarated by the electric response that his body elicited in mine, something I'd never before experienced, an energy I didn't know how to control, didn't know how to create for myself.

“You,” he said to me weeks later, said to me habitually then, his head tilted back, his throat exposed, “are my lover.” He would draw me in and kiss me hungrily. I didn't always like it, perhaps wasn't even comfortable, but I let him. Maybe I even egged him on. I don't know. I'll never know. I was in acute pain, lonely in ways I was too young to grasp, and there was no one around to ask me to articulate my suffering, to help me fix it in language, so I raged on like a wounded animal who knows not what to do except soothe her pain with more pain, lust after the final blow of death that will put an end to it all. I became hooked on Omar. He was like a drug, a humiliation I craved, and I kept going back for more. I loved his voice, so deep, like a primordial cry ricocheting against the cold walls of a cave when he came.

It took me years to realize that Omar had had other youthful lovers, that I had shared his body with others, though I would

never have the occasion to know them myself. Once unleashed, this knowledge, a caged beast that had long lurked in the shadows, gnawed on my nerves; it minced my heart. I felt I had gone mad. I wanted to rip my flesh off my bones and feed the beast before it had a chance to devour me whole. I could not understand how I could have been naïve to the fact that I had been just one of a whole repertoire of girls who had satiated Omar's appetites. But conscience can be slow to awaken. Especially when one is used to all manner of abuses.

And now here I was again, approaching Marbella. I needed to lift myself out of the tyranny of silence, the silence that had informed my life before and after Omar, the very silence he had sensed in me, had taken advantage of for his own secret desires. I needed to search the shadows. I needed to shine the light of language onto the dark vaults of my life. I had become a writer. I had devoted my life to language, to mapping the banality of suffering, to exposing hidden truths in everyday realities. A salubrious exercise, I supposed, to confront one's ghosts, but I had my doubts. There are things better put away in a box. That's what my father used to say; that's how he'd dealt with me.

When I think about his other children, my half siblings, my brother, I realize there's nothing unique about me. We're all in our own boxes, his children. We don't know one another, but we know of one another. We exist in silos just like Omar's lovers did. It's a carefully balanced economy, my father's. I suppose it's a lot for a man like him, a lot to give each of us our own box. We each get our own space; our own casket to grovel in, to pound

against, to weep in. And now I'm standing at the cusp of reentering mine, the apartment he'd recently given me, that he'd purchased years ago with what little money he had as a way to pay back his wife for the financial sacrifices she'd made for him, to appease her; she had wanted to be closer to her twin sister, who lived in Marbella, and also, of course, to Omar, whom she'd helped care for during the bloodbath of the Lebanese civil war. He had been a teenager during the war, the same age I was when we met. They had lived together through raids and checkpoints, navigated alleyways severed by the rubble of fallen buildings, knowing every day could be their last. Their bond was unbreakable. They had survived death together, no small thing, and had come out the other end similarly selfish and cruel, with a scorching need to control others.

Ever since they met, my father has followed my stepmother's lead, her whims, her demands. He's never stood up for himself, for his children. He's the kind of man who exercises control by disappearing. When the pressure gets to be too much, he simply vanishes. No one knows where he goes. He'll call his wife to let her know that he's still alive, but that's it. And then, *when the moment has passed*, as he says, he comes home and settles back into his life as if he never left it. He has a gift, my father, for denying the discontinuities of his life. Take, for example, this apartment in Marbella; he bought it but never lived there. It remains an unoccupied container, a home empty of the warmth of bodies, an unfulfilled promise.

I could picture the building. Neutral. Forbidding. Austere. A

beige block of medium height with rectangular windows and rows of terraces filled with plants and broken sun chairs. Over the course of the summer, the apartment had turned into a weapon, a trap, a dark and isolated enclosure that had witnessed and applauded my torture. I remembered the stale smell of its walls, their stained surfaces. I remembered the sleepless nights I'd spent walking its corridors. I felt exhausted at the thought of returning to that apartment, an exhaustion exacerbated by all the traveling I'd done in the past few months. I'd woken up at two that morning in a grim hotel room in Bristol to catch my flight to Marbella, having just finished the final leg of my book tour. I was spent. I was stiff from sitting on trains, buses, and airplanes after so many years hunched over my desk absorbed in the diabolical mania of writing. Before Bristol, I'd been in Oxford and London. I'd barely seen either place. I was moving through the world like a ghost, the ghost of literature, the ghost of my former book. I felt disembodied, as though I were floating across the rugged terrain of my life, which I had tried to come to terms with by writing. By the time I'd stood on the curb at three in the morning, the Bristol wind shearing my face, I felt like a fugitive, an old feeling that had, over the course of my itinerant life, built a home for itself in the center of my being.

I'd watched the cab approach, watched it follow along the curve of the road, its headlights rolling over the city's gray stone buildings. I got in and almost immediately caught my reflection in the window. I looked worn and a little lost. I didn't like to see myself that way. I had seen my face glide across the mirror as I

was leaving my hotel room: my dark hair, my thin lips, my eyes large and brown, two wounded blue semicircles beneath them. Every time I saw my face that way, drawn and tired, I thought about how shallow my energy reserves were. I knew that Omar had robbed me of my youth. I imagined that energy, once destined to circulate in my veins, was poisoning him now; it didn't belong to him. It soothed me to think that way, to think of him diminishing as he aged, just as he had annihilated me in my youth. In reality, I didn't know if he was dead or alive.

I'd looked out the cab window, through my reflection, at the cold starless sky and watched my image dissolve into the impenetrable night. Soon we'd arrived at the airport parking lot, the whole structure flooded with bright lights. I got out and followed the crowd, a train of limbs advancing through the doors. We all lined up at security, removed our belts and shoes, carefully set our electronics in the bins, watched them move through the X-ray machine. People were either half-asleep or half-drunk. I'd been standing behind a crowd of young women; they were all wearing the same black cotton sleeveless shirts, the words BRIDE TRIBE printed in gold across their breasts. The bride herself was young, no more than twenty. She was wearing a makeshift wedding dress with a long veil that trailed down past her ankles and a bright pink crown with fake diamonds that spelled out LOVE. They were drunk, the whole lot, and they'd kept on drinking as the plane glided into the night sky. At one point, I heard the bride yell out: "Costa del Sol, here we come!"

Throughout the flight, I'd turned to look at her through the

gaps between the seats. Her veil was soiled. She'd removed it and bundled it up in her lap. Her head was tilted back, her mouth wide open, a single strand of her silky blond hair caught on her teeth. She looked like she had fangs. She looked as though her teeth had been allowed to grow—teeth, which allow us to feed and defend ourselves—at the expense of women like myself. I thought of my brother's teeth that had been knocked out of his mouth. Of the Farsi that had been trapped inside me, of the years I'd been unable to chew or speak. This bride didn't live in a state of skeptical inquiry, on guard, her ability to trust shattered by history, her sense of self ground to dust by the violence it had dispatched. She'd been left alone to thrive, to eat and drink and make love in peace.

I turned back to the window and leaned my head against the plexiglass. I could see the ribbon of asphalt below ready to greet us. I felt again like a fugitive. But as we hit the ground, as we taxied down the runway, that feeling gave way to terror, then to pangs of bitter solitude. I remembered when I'd told my father about my relationship with Omar years after it had happened, the threat and overt violence of it, he'd just looked at me, eyes narrowed, and said, "How will I tell my wife? He's her favorite nephew."

Until then, I'd kept the details of that summer to myself. It had seemed easier to pretend like nothing had happened. But over time, I'd grown quieter and more withdrawn, intensely secretive, private and mistrusting over the most basic things. It was as if the fact of my relationship with Omar was rotting inside of me.

When I finally told my mother, almost a decade after that summer, she'd said, in a fit of exasperated panic, as if she had been seething over my silence all those years: "You think I don't know what happened to you? I'm your mother!" Then she reached out and held my hand, and said, "I am a woman, too." I understood by inference that my silence had kept her at bay, that I'd denied myself the companionship of a mother, who was also a survivor, at the time when I'd needed her most.

And now my father had decided, in a solipsistic move, to gift me the very place where I'd incurred that pain, to put its cruel walls in my name—an apology, he'd claimed, for his absence from my life, which I'd interpreted as an implicit acknowledgment of the many ways he'd exposed me to Omar's sadism through neglect. I'd shared this conjecture with my best friend, Ellie, who was meeting me in Marbella, adding that, in my view, parenting requires the constant exercise of foresight, something my father had opted out of entirely.

I took comfort in the fact that Ellie was right behind me. Ellie who also had led an itinerant life, who had been homeless at times; her ties to the world in which she'd been raised were frayed. She had been raised in America in an Orthodox Jewish family but had been taken abruptly to Israel by her mother after her parents' divorce. Her people's survival had come to depend on their ability to lay claim to the lands of Palestine, to resurrect amid its soil and rocks and olive trees a language that had been muted by the violence of European pogroms, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust. The dust of Palestine was used to absolve

Europe of its guilt, to move bodies it had maimed and injured farther out of its line of sight.

On long nights when neither one of us could sleep in Amherst, where our friendship first began, where we both had attended graduate school, Ellie would talk to me freely about how being transplanted to Israel as a young girl had injured her burgeoning sense of integrity. As a queer woman, she'd been treated as an obstruction, a person who'd refused to be incorporated into the community. This sense of rejection had shaped her political views. She saw how absurd it was that she could move to Israel as if it were her natural home port while Palestinians were denied freedom of movement on their own land. She'd wanted to be as far away from Israel as possible. In return, I would tell her that seeing my brother battered on the concrete pavement just after our own arrival in America had depleted any sense of self-respect I'd had at that point and replaced it with a stinging shame that had left me defenseless.

We had, as all women in intense friendships do, fallen in love with each other. We were, we came to realize, most alike in our desire to question any master narrative's claim to truth, to make visible the lies these narratives concealed through language. And we were both willing to sacrifice our lives for it, to keel over in pain however sentimental or ridiculous this shared impulse seemed to others. We would remind each other that breaking silence was never ineffectual even if at times it felt as though we were trying to shatter a block of ice with the tips of our fingers.

Ellie's acknowledgment of the suffering of Palestinians had

led to accusations that she was an apologist for terrorists. She'd felt guilty all through her adolescence. Over time, though, she'd come to understand that it's an impossible but necessary line to walk, to recognize that one is implicated in injustice even if one is not a direct perpetrator. When she spoke that way, I often detected a stale taste in my mouth, which I understood to be the death of my mother tongue. I still spoke Farsi, but my words had gone rigid, stiff from disuse through the years following my brother's attack.

Ellie and I were both born into such deranged whirlpools of geopolitical conflict, with so many contradictory voices swirling through our minds, that locating our own could be a laborious, exhausting task. We'd learned to mitigate this exhaustion by accompanying each other on what we referred to as *recovery journeys*; we'd physically return to the sites of our traumas to map our stories in words, to reverse the language-destroying effects of unbearable pain. I had been with her to Israel and occupied Palestine. I'd held Ellie's hand when she was confronted by an onslaught of memories from her teenage years, when she'd struggled with the knowledge that the cost of her survival, the rehabilitation of her language and lifeworld, was the death and debilitation of others. She'd tried to mitigate Israel's structures of exclusion. She'd learned to speak Arabic. She'd translated the work of Palestinian writers into Hebrew and English without denying the asymmetrical networks of power she was operating in. She recognized her immense privilege and saw all around her

people who ignored theirs, who led their lives with a sense of carefree entitlement.

Her open, inquisitive nature, combined with her anger at the political and religious constraints she was forced to operate in, had pushed her toward other forms of violence; she'd let herself be dominated by a string of angry men. The relationship between our political pain and our attraction to destructive men was not always clear; perhaps being with men who make us scream and gasp and moan takes us beyond the confines of language, back into our original pain; it allows us to explore and later confront the patriarchal and patriotic leanings of the colonial social project. "Arezu, I am not the main victim here," Ellie would say when she was grappling with the systemic denial of Palestinian personhood. "But I am still a victim of violence. I did not give my consent; I have been made a perpetrator of violence against my will."

I would say to her then that I had, at times, suspected myself of perpetuating violence against my own body. My relationship with Omar had bloomed in a place where Muslim life existed as a concealed reality, visible only in traces, in the landscape, the architecture, the food, the tonal inflections of the Spanish south. Muslim and Jewish life, I told her, had been purposefully suppressed by the Spanish national project. The very ground beneath my feet had been primed for centuries to annihilate my body. "That energy is real," I said to her. "Our bodies detect its negative charge. If we're not careful, it can overpower us, turn

us against ourselves in a fit of rage.” I told her that for that reason and many others, not least among them my brother’s near death at the hands of a skinhead, I’d willingly participated in my own destruction.

As my plane sat on the tarmac waiting for a gate to be assigned to us, as I breathed in the cabin’s stale air, I thought about the last conversation Ellie and I had had before I’d left home for England; we’d sat on opposite ends of the phone in silence, comforted only by the knowledge that we were on the line together, that we did not always need to speak to impart understanding to each other. And now she was accompanying me to Spain. She was catching a flight to Marbella that same morning from Oxford. We had spent a few days together there before I’d gone on to Bristol to finish my book tour. My Ellie. I pictured her understanding gaze. I thought of her easy laughter, how nimbly she guides conversation away from fear. My brilliant friend Ellie, the only woman in the world on the same wavelength as I was. She would have seen the bride’s fangs, too. She would have seen them, and we would have died together right there, laughing, laughing out all of our pain.

I turned back to look at the bride-to-be one last time. Her crown was still on her head, shining under the overhead light. For a moment, I wondered if her partner knew the texture of her pain. If he knew her perversions. If he knew what turned her on, what made her wince, what shut her down. I thought of my husband, Xavi. He wouldn’t have been the best companion on this trip, my first return to Marbella. We didn’t always share the same

moral convictions. I was interested in how desire is shaped by the destructive logic of empire, how at times sex facilitates the transmission of historical violence from one body to another. Xavi, however, possessed a purity I'd never be able to access. He experienced sex as a bridge, as union, as an explosive, an exhilarating coming together; I didn't deny that was so, but that didn't constitute the entire inventory of my experiences.

Xavi had paid the price for the bruises Omar had left me with. In the year leading up to my return to Marbella, I'd spent months sleepless, waking up in the middle of the night, sobbing, only to chase my grief with days spent remembering my affection for Omar. During those times, I would forget that what I'd experienced as union and tenderness had been, for Omar, a protracted disarmament; he'd lowered my defenses through seduction so he could have his way with me, consume my body, my youth, my fervor for his own satisfaction.

My contradictory, swinging emotions confused Xavi. They stoked his rage at the injustices Omar's lust had unleashed on my life. His love for me, his desire to protect me, made it difficult for him to sit by my side as I revisited the more pleasant memories of my time with Omar. There was no reasoning with him then. He turned into a wall of anger. He couldn't entertain any ambiguity in my account of Omar, would only accept a narrative in which he was entirely evil. I resisted the line of thought that Xavi was sure would salvage me from my pain: demonizing Omar in order to purify myself. I had no interest in obliterating the contradictions of the past. To the contrary, I wanted to

savor them. Xavi was, I felt, asking me to ignore the nuances of my relationship with Omar, the historical and political terrain that had informed it. He didn't see that in doing so I would be sacrificing my own sense of self and my ability to articulate that self in language. He didn't understand, at least initially, how his attitude, pure to the extreme, dispossessed me of my own narrative, my sexuality, my appetite for inquiry, my openness to examining the darkest aspects of human nature, the things most people prefer to look away from. I was left to raise the frightening questions alone. In the process of vilifying Omar, Xavi had unwittingly placed an invisible restriction on my speech; what I needed was an eruption of language. He couldn't tolerate the idea that I was complicit in my own destruction, that I had weaponized what little agency I had and wielded it against myself.

I wanted to explore my grief, to lick my wounds, but to do so without erasing the burgeoning desire I'd felt at the time or sacrificing Omar to the Western gaze, a gaze eager to perceive him as yet another violent Arab man, a man incapable of reason and restraint, of employing the Victorian ideal handed down to him by his imperial keepers. Xavi's anger pushed me toward a reading of Omar's character that seemed only to affirm Western superiority and its repressive code of behavior, a code that served to disguise the rampant sexual violence in the West, the psychotic irrationality of colonialism, the savage brutality of progress.

It's odd that love so often acts as a barrier rather than a bridge. But so it goes. And yet, over the years, Xavi had come to know

my pain. He'd learned it. It was never obvious to him, never legible. He'd studied it as if it were a map. He'd tried to figure out all the main roads, the detours, where they digressed and where they converged, where my pain met my pleasure. He'd tried to hold the most challenging facts of my life, had tried to tease out my conviction that violence and ecstasy often exist on the same terrible continuum. That pain, no matter how unfairly it's doled out, can be our biggest asset. That conflict can be the source of justice. But as much as we'd come to understand each other, there was always a gap between when I felt something and when he came to grips with it. Our experiences of life were, to put it mildly, extremely different; he'd been dealt his own dose of suffering, but his life had been built of continuities while mine has been a conglomeration of discontinuities, fault lines, chasms. I suppose that he, too, has had to be patient when I've been slow to understand his perspective. In those moments, those times when we work to see eye to eye, I try to remind myself that love is sustained attention and I think: I am so lucky; I am so incredibly lucky.

The thought was like a flash flood, quick and unexpected. It jolted me back to life. I felt a rush of pleasure filling my lungs with air. I realized that I was once again staring at the bride. She was gazing sadly at her soiled veil. I reached for my phone and secretly snapped a photo of her with that word—*love*—stamped to her forehead. I dropped it in a message to Ellie as soon as we deplaned. It would be the first thing she'd see upon landing. I

wanted her to chuckle to herself as I had chuckled getting off the plane. I needed her to experience, as precisely as possible, what I was experiencing moment by moment — an impossible thing to do, but I knew that Ellie would get closer than anyone else would be able to; we were born of the same wounded clay, in the same ancient gutters of this fragile world.