

# Of Sea and Sand

Denyse Woods



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قِفَا نَبِّكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ      بِسَقَطِ اللَّوِيِّ بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلِ

Let us weep, recalling a love and a lodging  
by the rim of the twisted sands

—Imru' al-Qays, *al-Mu'allaqat*

In the dark of night I believe  
And sometimes in the day;  
Maybe they're not there at all  
But still I believe.

—“The Good People” by Vincent Woods

I  
Dear Prudence

IN THEORY, GABRIEL HAD COME for a month; in practice, he knew he would never go back. Glancing out, and seeing jagged black mountains appear on the right of the aircraft, he gasped. He had thought he was beyond any such reaction, believing himself to be numb and numbed, too detached for wonder of any sort. Awe, he thought, was a luxury enjoyed by the emotionally alert, by those of enhanced perception, whereas he was dulled, blunted, now and forever, amen. And yet he had gasped when he had looked through the aircraft window and seen those magnificent angry edges scraping the blue-blue sky. It looked to be an inhospitable environment down there, but it could hardly be worse than the environment from which he had come.

He had been dispatched to stay with his sister in order to recover—not from a breakdown or a bout of serious illness (although he felt as if he'd had both) but from guilt. Shame, too. Pointless, he thought. What cure for shame? A change of scenery could hardly be expected to wipe it out. No, the only thing that could repair the damage was for time to go into reverse, to undo his steps and allow him another direction. Unfortunately, air travel could not offer the same facilities as time travel but, still, he had come away; although he could not undo the remorse, he could at least escape his parents' wordless agony.

His heart burned. This was the beginning of an odyssey, one that had already failed, because it could not do otherwise, but he would nonetheless trudge along its way, going wherever

it took him, never, ever, turning back. He would not even look over his shoulder. He would not return to Ireland, or see again her lumpen skies, her slate headlands or creamy beaches. It was a heavy price, yet no price at all.

His brother-in-law met him at the airport with a cursory handshake—scarcely a welcome; more an acknowledgment of his arrival. Gabriel, it seemed, had traveled three thousand miles to receive the same chilling treatment he'd been enduring at home. The airport building was small, dusty. Men wearing long white dishdashas and skullcaps stood around chatting, but offered a nod and a greeting, “Welcome to Muscat. Ahlan,” as Rolf led the way out into the sunshine and across to the parking lot.

As they drove into town, Gabriel noticed, along the shoreline, bundles of white boxy houses, like a crowd that had rushed to the coast and been brought to a halt by the sea. Muscat looked like an outpost, a place on the edge. The edge of the sea, of the land, of Arabia. An ideal place to cower.

“This is Muttrah, actually,” Rolf said. “The town is spread out, and old Muscat is farther along, beyond those hills.” He pulled in behind some buildings. “We have to walk the last bit of the way.”

The March heat was manageable. Gabriel welcomed the sun on his shoulders—some warmth at last—as he followed Rolf along narrow, scrappy streets, where small shops were opening their shutters to the day and shopkeepers nodded as they passed. Space nudged itself between the compacted thoughts in Gabriel’s head, spreading their density, making elbow room. For weeks he had felt compressed, as if the air were tightening around him and would go on doing so until he was unable to think at all; a kind of mental suffocation.

They turned up to the right and followed a curved lane, with houses pulled tight on either side, until they came to a corner house. “This is it,” said Rolf. “We won’t be here much

longer. Our new place will be ready soon, but for now . . .” He pushed open the low wooden door and stood back.

Gabriel dipped his head and stepped straight into a white living room. Immediately he saw Annie, and felt relief. She came through a doorway at the back, wiping her hands on a tea towel. They embraced. “How are you?” she asked.

“Wrecked.”

They were close, Annie and Gabriel. No better person, he thought. No other person. If there was any hope for him at all, it lay in the understanding and soothing ministrations of his sister. At least he could bear to be with her.

“Come, come,” Rolf said, trying to get past them.

“Nice,” Gabriel said, looking around. The whitewashed room was sparsely furnished, with bench seating, draped in fabrics the colors of sunsets, along two sides, and a narrow window allowed one beam of sunlight to target the floor. A breakfast table and chairs stood near an entrance that led into a small kitchen, beside which another opening led to the rest of the house. They had impeccable taste. Annie was a stylish bird, he used to tell his friends—and Rolf was Swiss, a perfectionist in all things esthetic; and they had money, which helped. Rolf had been working for an oil company for years and had accrued his wealth on a fat expat, tax-free salary, which he generally referred to as “grocery money.” His only real interest was painting.

Annie stood, watching her brother.

Gabriel smiled. There was something in her he adored. Simplicity, perhaps; the way she got things right. He liked Rolf too, a pragmatic artist twelve years her senior.

She did not return his smile. She said, “Funny, you look like the same person you were two months ago.”

It cut right through. So this was how it was going to be.

She went into the kitchen. “Tea?”

“Great, thanks. Mam gave me some for you. Tea, I mean. Bags and . . . well, leaves.”

“Rolf, would you show Gabriel his room?”

Gabriel followed his brother-in-law up a narrow white-washed stairwell to a room that stood alone on the top floor. “A little tight,” said Rolf, “but cooler in the hot weather. It gets the sea breeze.”

“It’s perfect. Thanks.”

Rolf seemed on the point of saying something. Gabriel hoped he wouldn’t. He was only just off the plane, for Christ’s sake. Couldn’t they keep the recriminations until later? With a blink, Rolf seemed to reach the same conclusion. “Bathroom one floor down, I’m afraid. Come down when you’re ready.”

Gabriel moved backward to the bed and sat on its hard surface. His hands were trembling. In his own sister’s house, he was shaking. What had he hoped for? Compassion? Yes, a little. He scratched his forehead, entertained, almost, by his own narcissism, because only undiluted ego could have allowed him to expect open arms and a shoulder to lean on. And he was fearful now, because if Annie could not forgive him, no one ever would.

He had a quick shower, changed into lighter clothes, and went downstairs. Rolf and Annie were in another room—long and quite formal, with a blood-red hue about it, set off by dark red rugs and drapes. The seating, which ran along the wall, was low and soft and covered in cushions and bolsters.

‘Nice,’ he said.

‘This is the diwan,’ said Annie. ‘We use it all the time, but in traditional houses it’s like the reception room, used for special occasions.’

‘Ah, like the Sunday room at home. Never used except when the priest calls.’

They were sitting rather stiffly in front of a tray (thermos jug, three glasses, bread and fruit—he was hungry suddenly), looking like stern parents who had discovered their teenager had been smoking pot in his room.

Gabriel tried to lighten the mood. “You two look like you’re about to give me a major telling-off.”

Annie leaned forward to pour. “What good would that do?”

“Might make you feel better.” He sat down.

“You think so?” she said, one eyebrow arched, her eyes on the stream of urine-colored liquid flowing from the jug.

They sipped their tea as Gabriel looked around at their accumulated artifacts: Eastern rugs, heavy timber chests, daggers with adorned silver hilts. How easily Annie wore this life, he thought. He envied her. He wished he’d done it. Got out. Away. Before he’d had to.

The tea was served in the small glasses and bitter without milk. He was a man who enjoyed a great wallop of milk in his tea, but he would get used to it, just as he must get used to other things. Like the light—so very bright, white almost, and cheering, as it shone through windows high in the wall. Gabriel felt the change of air, of country and continent, in his blood, which already seemed to be flowing thinner through his veins. “So this is an old-fashioned sultanate, yeah?” he asked. “And the sultan deposed his own father?”

Rolf nodded. “Twelve years ago, in 1970.”

“Sounds pretty cheeky. There’s no dissent?”

“He’s doing a lot for the country,” said Rolf. “There were nine schools in 1970, but schools and hospitals are opening every week now, and transport is improving, with new roads heading out in every direction. So of course he’s popular, but he’s low-key.”

Annie was nibbling on a corner of bread—nervously, Gabriel realized. *Christ.*

Rolf cleared his throat and grasped at conversational straws. “So, umm, you’ve escaped the deep freeze.”

Gabriel nodded. “That’s long over.”

Annie’s curiosity dived around her rectitude, like a rugby player getting over the line. “What was it like?”

“Bloody cold is what it was like. We didn’t have the snow they had in Dublin, but even in Cork people struggled to get about. Ice everywhere.” He wanted to add, Just like there is right here.

“Sandra wrote and said there was a lovely atmosphere, everyone helping out and being cheerful and stuff.”

“Yeah, I cleared quite a few driveways.”

And that was all it took for Annie to swerve right back into disapproval. “I should hope so. But doing good deeds for the neighbors won’t change anything.”

“Annie,” Rolf said quietly.

Gabriel turned to him with a sheepish glance. “Thanks, Rolf, for . . . fixing this. I hope it wasn’t too much hassle getting me that certificate thing.”

His brother-in-law lifted, then dropped one shoulder in a half-shrug.

“What does it mean—a ‘No Objection Certificate?’”

“It’s a type of visa. Oman is loosening up a bit, but you still have to be sponsored by an employer to get in.”

“So how did you pull it off? Do I have to work for someone?”

Rolf shook his head. “I explained your—our—circumstances to a well-connected friend of mine, Rashid al-Suwaidi. He owns an import–export company and has other interests. He organized the paperwork.”

“Did you have to . . .”

Rolf gave him the hard eye.

“You know—baksheesh, or whatever it’s called.”

“Bribe him, you mean? He’s a friend, Gabriel. He did it for us. So for God’s sake don’t make any trouble for him.”

Gabriel raised his hands in apology.

Rolf stood up. “Baksheesh! Is that the extent of your understanding of this part of the world? The Arabs understand friendship better than any nation. Don’t forget that. I must go to work, Annie.”

“Don’t be late,” she said anxiously, as if she feared being left alone with her younger brother.

After he left, silence settled on them, like sepia over a print. Although it had been ages since they had had any proper time alone together, Annie had little to say, it seemed, and Gabriel even less. “So, you like it here?”

“You know I do.” With one finger, she pushed a corner of flatbread, smeared with honey, across her plate. “Even more than I expected, in fact. I’ve made great friends.” She put down her glass. “It’s a pretty good life, all in all.”

Annie was the only remaining person whom Gabriel could look straight in the eye, but it pained him to do so now, because there was only sadness there, and he could see a weight around her, as if the dense atmosphere that had been strangling him was also hugging her, curbing her movements. And that was him. *He* was the very density that restricted her.

She cleared her throat. “So, what do you want to do while you’re here?” she asked, as if he were some kind of tourist.

“What is there to do?”

“Well, there’s loads to see—mountains, desert, sea. People go fishing and snorkeling, but Rolf paints when he’s off work, which might be a bit dull for you.”

She made it sound like a personal reproach, which was another low blow. It had been Gabriel, after all, who had picked Rolf out of the crowd in a pub and had engaged him in conversation at the bar. Introductions were made, drinks were bought, and Annie was unobtrusively proffered. “Come and join us,” Gabriel had said to the visitor. “I’m with my sister.” With a formal nod and almost a click of his heels, Rolf declared himself to be enchanted when they were introduced at the small round table in the corner, though Annie was less impressed. He’d looked like an old bloke to her, but Gabriel had persevered, inviting him back to their home for supper, after which Rolf took over, wooing Annie in a quiet, discreet sort of way. Gabriel knew, instinctively, that he was the perfect life partner for his

adored second self, and when the time had come for Rolf to leave Ireland, Annie found it inexplicably difficult to let him go. She had become accustomed to his presence, to the quiet fuss he made of her, to his curious English and his solid, attractive frame, so Gabriel told her to follow, even though that meant going to Oman, where Rolf had been working for some years. To her own surprise, she was easily persuaded. Her job in the bank was dull, the news always bad, with one or another atrocity reported daily from Northern Ireland, and the Republic was gray, grim, and sinking deeper into recession. The Arabian Gulf and the twinkling white town of Muscat, which Rolf had described, were, in contrast, attractive propositions.

They had married after a short courtship—it was the only way for her to reside in Oman, and now, two years later, she was hoping to become pregnant.

“You should get some rest,” she said suddenly. “You look exhausted. Aren’t you sleeping?”

A sliver of concern shows through at last, Gabriel thought. “Are any of us sleeping?”

“We’ve been invited out this evening. Dinner with friends,” she said. “I accepted on your behalf.”

Annie was slight, always had been. Pale of complexion, with short brown hair and livid blue eyes (unlike either of her brown-eyed brothers), she looked younger than she was—gamine; more like twenty-two than twenty-eight. Her long spindly fingers, like spiders’ legs, were never still—as now—rolling bits of torn-off bread between her fingertips. She kept her eyes on her hands when she went on, “There isn’t much in the way of nightlife. The Intercontinental, mostly. So we socialize a lot in one another’s houses. . . . Anyway, our friends are keen to meet you.”

“I’ll bet.”

She looked up. “You don’t think I’ve *told* them? Good God, why would I do that?”

“You haven’t said anything?”

“No. I didn’t feel I had much choice. Anyway, it’s bad enough that my friends at home are gossiping about us over their coffee-breaks.” She rubbed her hands together in an abstracted way. “Still, the story’s losing its legs now.”

“Who told you that?”

“Aunt Gertie. She’s been great. Writing every week. She’s the only person who seems to realize what it’s like for me over here, out of the loop.”

“You’re far better off.”

“Oh, am I? Away from Mam, at a time like this? Have you any idea how hard it was to come back last month? Only I had no choice, had I? Because *you* needed somewhere to run away to!”

This was not it, not it at all. Gabriel had believed he was coming to Muscat to be comforted by someone who loved him unconditionally, and therefore forgave him. Instead, she was hissing and spitting and twisted with hurt. There would be no reprieve here.

“It’s so hard at times like this,” she said, her voice breaking, “being away.”

“I suppose.” It seemed fair that she too should be allowed to believe that this was worse for her than for anyone else in the family. There had been a lot of that going on.

“But as far as our friends here are concerned,” she continued, “you’re on holiday, so perk up. Make an effort, *please*.”

Dinner with friends, Gabriel thought, going upstairs to rest. The prospect made him sweat, but at least they wouldn’t have to sit across a dining table, just the three of them, trying to duck the elephant.

It was difficult for Annie. She loved Gabriel; adored him. Sometimes she wondered about that, about whom she loved most and to whom she owed the greatest loyalty. Gabriel was a part of her, an extension. He had come the same way with her; they had come the same way together until he’d delivered

her into Rolf's safe hands. Into contentment. Initially, she had worried about finding love enough for both men, but had discovered room in her heart to accommodate her brother and her husband in comfort. Neither pushed the other aside; they could remain shoulder to shoulder, it seemed, and her loyalties need never be truly strained. As for their older brother, Max, well, everyone loved Max, and so did she, but when they were growing up, he wasn't affectionate, cuddly, or approachable, and he'd always had work to do. By the time she was a teenager, she'd found him irritating, even embarrassing, and he was no fun; the grooves in his forehead were deep by the time he'd turned thirteen. Gabriel was the soft one, amenable. He and Annie looked out at the world from the same point of reference.

Annie had suspected, when she was younger, that it was on account of her partiality toward Gabriel that she believed him to be so much more talented than Max, but this was fact, not affection. Everyone knew it. Gabriel was hugely, instinctively gifted. He never had to work as hard as Max, but because his focus could meander, the gift eventually became limp. Where Max had passion, Gabriel had fun. Where Max was competitive, Gabriel was *laissez-faire*. If his big brother had outperformed him, if he had achieved greater things, it would have been because Gabriel allowed it. But for all his work, all his hours on the piano stool, Max's playing had none of the edge of Gabriel's sharp, intuitive expression. *His* interpretation, one teacher had said, was close to perfection. And yet, although applause and admiration were heaped upon him, he had had enough by the time he turned sixteen. He wanted a life, he had told his devastated parents, not the career of the concert pianist for which they, and the School of Music, had been grooming him since he was four. And so Max went after the laurels that everyone—teachers, examiners, and relatives—knew were rightfully Gabriel's. But Gabriel, Annie used to tell her frustrated parents, had another gift—for living and giving, for friendship and humor.

They valued that not at all. Perhaps they were right.

Max had only his work, and they all admired him for it. They loved his peculiarities, his stooped frame hanging over the keyboard come what may, and the way he forgot to eat, sometimes even to wash. They loved him for his poor attempts at telling jokes, though he had no timing, except when he played, of course, and even that had been acquired through hard work. Perfection was the only mistress Max had ever sought.

Recently he had almost, almost, found her.

“This is my brother, Gabriel.”

Annie waved in his direction as they stepped into a square hallway, and a tall, dark-haired Frenchwoman reached out. “Gabriel, how lovely,” she said, shaking his hand. She looked like a long black pencil. “I’m Stéphanie. Come and meet the others.”

In a broad living room, two other couples stood up as they came in. He didn’t take in their names, but tried hard, for Annie, to adopt some kind of great-to-be-here expression. Keen. He had to seem keen, to appear as though he had come of his own volition, but the assembled guests, it turned out, weren’t particularly interested in him. Small talk rushed in behind the introductions. Expat gossip. He sat mute, feeling like a prize idiot. Baksheesh. Ignorant bastard. Books about Oman had been thin on the ground in Cork, but Annie had left a couple behind, which Gabriel had read while waiting to leave, so he knew about the Portuguese, the British, and the battle of Dhofar. He knew to expect desert and mountains and longed to learn something of Bedouin ways. These had been his expectations of Oman—rudimentary, perhaps, but not unreasonable—and yet the first word he had assigned to this culture was “baksheesh,” which came from he knew not what preconceived notion. He still felt the sharp sting of his worldly brother-in-law’s rebuke.

He turned his attention to the assembled company: Stéphanie's husband, Mark, was a dapper Englishman, even sporting a silk cravat; Joan, a woman in her forties probably, wore a long skirt and cheesecloth top, and looked as if she had fallen off the hippie wagon, keeping the clothes, but rejecting the lifestyle, to live in air-conditioned comfort in the Gulf. Her husband wore pristine whites and had such highly arched eyebrows that he looked like he was about to take off. Marie, clearly a good friend of Annie, and her husband, Jasper, also English, were warm and engaging.

It wasn't until they were seated at the dining-table that they turned their attention to Gabriel, with a rush of questions. How long would he be staying? What did he hope to do during his holiday? How was he finding Muscat? He had little to say on that score—all he had seen of Muscat was a small airport with two huge sabers over the entrance, some gray-gold hills and a short stretch of seafront, where he had walked with Annie in the late afternoon.

Joan, leaning her forearms on the edge of the table, said, "Annie was telling us that you're a musician."

"A teacher, actually. I teach piano." They all looked at him, expecting more. "At the School of Music in Cork."

"So are you in between terms right now?" Stéphanie asked, perplexed.

Fair question, since it was mid-March, but how was it, he wondered, that people sniffed out the holes in any story without even knowing there were any to be filled? "No," he said. "I've taken a leave of absence."

That silenced them, but a change of topic only made things worse when Joan said, in a pert, determined tone, "Annie, I haven't seen you since before Christmas! How was your brother's wedding?"

"Not *this* brother, I hope," Jasper quipped. "Unless you've run away from your new wife already?"

Gabriel smiled.

Joan persisted: “Did you find something to wear? You were fretting, I seem to remember, about finding something elegant but warm.”

Annie chewed a mouthful of lamb at length, as if hoping for inspiration, then swallowed, reaching for her glass, and said, “We stopped off in Rome and I got a dress there.”

That at least was not a lie, Gabriel thought.

“It must have been a *wonderful* day,” Joan went on. “I always think winter weddings must be so romantic. Did it snow? Winter Wonderland and all that?”

Annie turned her glass between her fingers before saying, “Mmm. It was lovely. No snow, but a great day.”

Gabriel frowned at her. Rolf frowned at him.

“I don’t think it’s romantic at all,” said Marie. “I’ve never understood why anyone could possibly want to get married in the winter. The bride must have been perishing, poor thing.”

“Oh, she was,” Annie said, turning her eyes to Gabriel. “*Perishing.*”

Pressed for more details, Annie got off to a halting start, but then the words, the fables, began to flow out: she described the wedding, related key moments and amusing anecdotes, and even made Rolf and Gabriel smile indulgently when she looked to them for confirmation that this or that had been the funniest, most touching moment. It was altogether bizarre: a conspiracy of invention.

The wedding chat exhausted, the guests turned their attention back to Gabriel, pushing forth suggestions of how he should use his time and telling him he must see this and this, and mustn’t miss that.

Mesmerized, exhausted, he had never worked so hard to be courteous to people who meant nothing to him, but he would have feigned interest in a babbling parrot if it would help him regain his sister’s respect. Looking at her face now was like gazing up from within a deep pit to see her peering over the rim, down at him.



“Why did you say all that about the wedding?” he asked her from the back of the car after they’d left. “You don’t have to protect me, you know.”

“I’m not protecting you. I’m protecting myself. Besides, one lie is much the same as the next. I went with the happy lie.”

“But how can you sustain it? Isn’t Marie a close friend of yours?”

“Yes, and I’ll tell her . . . in my own time.” After a moment she said, “I mean, they’ll think we’re a very odd family.” Rolf put his hand on her lap. “But we’re not . . . or we weren’t, or at least I didn’t think we were.”

Gabriel knew better than to speak, since he was the one who had given the family this new perception of itself. He looked out. The night lights of Muscat told him little about the town, but when they continued on foot, after parking the car, the dark, quiet alleys that led to the house spoke louder. This was a secretive place; much was held in behind the thick walls. Probing deeper into the warren of back streets, Muttrah felt like a den. His den. He and his shame could hide out there, he thought, for quite a while, undisturbed.

When they came into the house Annie went to the kitchen; Rolf followed her, while Gabriel, near-blind with exhaustion, said goodnight and went up the stairs, but stopped when he heard Annie say to Rolf, “I wanted to tell them. I wanted to say, ‘*This* is why he is here. *This* is what he has done.’”

“But you didn’t,” Rolf said, in his most pragmatic tone, “and you mustn’t. He didn’t come here to be judged, and you, my darling, you of all people, must not judge him.”

“Why not? Why should I not? Everyone else does!”

Gabriel could not move without revealing that he was still on the stairs.

“This is how we change,” Annie went on. “I turned my head and he became someone else. Do you think I should try to save what’s left of him? Of *my* Gabriel?”

“I think it’s best you let that Gabriel go.”

“I wish I could. And I wish I could leave. Get away. If I don’t, I’m afraid I might hurl a glass across the room and cut his face. I want to cut his beautiful archangel face!”

Gabriel went on up. Short of breath, he passed his bedroom and climbed to the top of the house, where a wooden door led onto a small rooftop balcony. He stepped out and stood, fingers in hip pockets. In spite of stars aplenty, galaxies crowding, and a glow coming off the streetlights on the seafront, it was still, somehow, a dark night. Between the stars, the sky was black as oil and deep. Perhaps all Arabian nights were this black.

He tried to root himself in place, not time, to blot out why he came to be there. It took quite an effort to strip away the circumstances, but a slow intake of warm night air and the sight of a minaret along the bay brought him properly to Oman. He thought about the invaders and the traders sailing into this cozy cove over the centuries. Arriving in their long wake, he felt the history in the soles of his feet and saw it in the towers that overlooked the town from the surrounding hills. The three Muscat forts, Rolf had said, were built in the sixteenth century when the Portuguese, alarmed by the size of Oman’s navy, occupied this coast to protect their route to the Indian Ocean. Now it was one of the busiest waterways in the world, and the lights Gabriel could see on the blinking horizon were oil tankers, no doubt, plying back and forth.

The dinner party had been the first social event he had attended in months, the first time he had been part of light conversation, had eaten a meal in lively company. It was a relief that nobody had known anything about anything. He had been prepared to face further reprobation, and even though a bunch of strangers could inflict no greater humiliation than he had endured in his own tight neighborhood at home, he was grateful for his sister’s discretion. In Muscat he could breathe, was breathing already, in spite of Annie’s

froideur. How deeply aggrieved she must be, he thought, to go to such lengths to disguise the events that had brought him here. She had almost convinced Gabriel that Max's wedding *had* been a grand shindig, so much so that, listening to her describe it in fantastical detail, he had vicariously enjoyed what had not happened, and never would.

"Max, Max, Max," he said out loud, and the warm Muscat wind curved around him, like a longed-for embrace.

A shuffle of bare feet in the stairwell made him turn: Annie, coming to join him. Good. Perhaps they could talk here, with only the sky to eavesdrop. But no one emerged. He had heard her, he was sure of it. Stepping toward the door, he put his head inside. No Annie.

It was Geraldine who kept Annie awake, not Max. Geraldine, the perishing non-bride.

She had been, in Annie's view, an entirely predictable event. Ten years earlier, she could have described to a T the woman who would one day drag Max away from his piano for just long enough to get him to the altar. Geraldine had made herself indispensable from the start, as if she had seen too many films in which able, slightly frumpy but frightfully sensible women take on those men who are not quite tuned in to the diurnal workings of a life and manage to make them function by reminding them to eat, show up for appointments, and change out of their pyjamas before leaving the house. Geraldine almost certainly seduced Max first—it would not have occurred to him to do so, and if she did not exactly propose to him, he most likely proposed under nifty direction. Everyone rejoiced: the family now had less cause to worry about Max because, with Geraldine's help, the world made more sense to him, and he to it.

She had been endearingly excited about getting married and went for the full hoopla. This otherwise sensible woman in sensible clothes became altogether giddy when talking wedding dresses, bridesmaids, and banquets. Her dull purposefulness

was lost in the romanticism of the event, and she even counted the days, she coyly admitted, from ten months out. When Annie had gone home for the summer, to avoid the murderous Omani heat, she shared in Geraldine's excitement—somebody had to, since her brother frequently forgot that they were getting married at all and seemed bewildered whenever his fiancée mentioned entrées or invitations. So Annie became fellow plotter and even helped Geraldine select her dress. It was at least elegant, which could not be said of any other item of her clothing.

What of Geraldine now? she wondered, sitting up in her bed.

She got up, as had become her habit, and went to the kitchen, where she sat, desolate, pretending to wait for the kettle to boil. For all his oddities, Max was never a caricature; he wasn't a nerd, quite, though his eyes were round and protruding, and his smile vaguely goofy. He was thin and gangly, and always wore drab V-neck sweaters (dirty gray and dull olive), with check shirts, inoffensive corduroys, and heavily rimmed glasses. He enjoyed watching soccer (he supported Liverpool, because his younger brother did), had few friends, and he liked for everything to be nice and for the people around him to be happy, so that he didn't have to expend energy on their concerns. Most of the time, he simply wanted to think about musical scores.

He was an unassuming person and Annie liked him, but she loved Gabriel more. She still hoped that nobody would ever find this out. When she was little, having a favorite brother felt like a sin; as an adult, it felt unfair. But Gabriel was so much more accessible than Max and he knew her so well.

Until recently she had always believed that she knew him too. Now she had learned that there was something in Gabriel that none of them had known or seen, not even himself. She wanted to pretend that it had nothing to do with him, that he too was a victim, an innocent. It didn't work. What he had done

was part of him, was in him. It had come out. He could not disown it any more than Annie could, because there it was—out, for all to see, and *horrible*. She could not swallow when she thought of it, and often woke at night sweating, waving her hands over her head until Rolf took them and calmed her.

She felt ashamed: guilty by association. The truth was, she hadn't wanted to be the one to put Gabriel back on his feet, but there was no one else to do it, and she owed it to their parents. Her job, and Rolf's, was to gather him in, as only family could, and reconstitute him. Not punish him, but fix him, then put him back into the world with the fervent hope that he would never do anything like it again. The black patch that had shaded all their lives would surely pass over, having dumped its storm upon them.

But this visit—Gabriel coming for an indeterminate stay—was difficult before he had even arrived. Her anger with him bordered on disgust, tinged with hatred. That was it. That was why it had been so hard to smile when he had come in, looking forlorn, from the airport. She had wanted to shake him, but she had hugged him instead, saying, “How are you?” when she meant, *How could you?* Oh, she'd already said it, many times, in Ireland. It had become the broken record, an unspoken mantra, a plea. Even when she held him against her, feeling the steady embrace of the brother who had protected her, comforted her, seen her through bullying schoolgirls and broken hearts, all she could hear in her head was, *How could you, how could you?*

In her dreams, she hit Gabriel. In her dreams, night after night, she hit him, over and over, and woke exhausted from all the slapping. It never served to reduce him, or what he had done.

“We must take you to Nakhal,” Rolf said to Gabriel over breakfast the next morning. “It's a beautiful spot, with hot springs and a fort. I like to paint there.”

Whenever he wasn't ordering spare parts for heavy plant machinery down at the refinery, Rolf was painting. Self-taught, and good, he was neither immensely successful nor struggling, but he was generally preoccupied with his canvases and colors, and Annie knew how to live with that. She had come well prepared for life with an obsessive.

"Great, yeah," said Gabriel. Tone of voice was everything, he was learning. In Cork, he hadn't spoken much of late. No one had wanted to hear what he had to say, and they had had nothing to say to him, so he had been getting the silent treatment, far and wide. But not *this* far, he hoped. Here, he would surely find his voice again.

"So what will you do today?" Rolf asked him.

"I have to go to the house." Annie wiped some crumbs off the table and into her palm. "Check on the painters."

"I'll go with you, so," Gabriel said, looking around the neat front room. "I don't know how you can leave this place, though."

"It's too small," said Rolf. "The villa is very nice. You'll like it."

Gabriel didn't like it. It was in a new suburb made up of low houses with high walls, big gates, and yards too young to have sprouted so much as a weed. The house was spacious, open-plan, and had a huge window overlooking an uncultivated space, the kitchen was wall-to-wall with dapper American units, and the three square bedrooms each had their own bathrooms.

"But this is the best bit," Annie said, flicking a switch in the hall. "Air-conditioning! It'll make such a difference. It's pleasant now, but the summers are . . . well, they don't call this 'hellish Muscat' for nothing."

"How do you cope?"

"By leaving. I'll get away again this year, for the hottest months. Go to Switzerland and then home. Poor Rolf has to stick it out, though. It's like a furnace." She led him down a

corridor to one of the bedrooms, where easels were stacked against the walls, and canvases, used and unused, stood in clumps. “And, look, Rolf can have his own studio now. Honestly, I cannot wait to get out of Muttrah.”

“But it’s lovely there. Authentic.”

“Maybe, but that house never felt right to me.”

When they got back home, Annie went to the kitchen to make lunch, while Gabriel stood in the front room facing the wide, narrow window, hands in his pockets. Annie was right. There was something odd about this place. He had come indoors, yet felt as though he was still outside. Warmth permeated his bones, like the heat of direct sunlight, even though he was in the cool indoor umbra. Someone passed through the room behind him. He glanced over his shoulder. Whoever it was had gone to the kitchen, but all he could hear was Annie banging about.

Gabriel shivered.

There was something odd about this house.

They were invited out again that night, to a party in the home of soon-to-be-neighbors. Gabriel played it Annie’s way—he chatted and flattered, laughed at jokes he didn’t altogether understand, and frowned in concentration when the conversation turned to the atrocities just north of them, across the Strait of Hormuz.

“Saddam Hussein is as much of a tyrant as the Ayatollah,” said Thomas, a Dutchman, standing with a small group by the outdoor buffet. “They should both be wiped out.”

“I thought he was the good guy,” said Gabriel. It hadn’t impinged much on his existence, the Iran–Iraq war, but now he was a lot closer to it—uncomfortably so—and he realized the only thing he knew about it was that the Ayatollah was a raving madman.

“Hussein—a good guy?” Thomas exclaimed.

Embarrassment drenched Gabriel; he had said “bak-sheesh” again.

“He took power in a coup, wiped out his own cohorts, and now the West is throwing him garlands!”

“No, no,” said Jasper, all earnest, “America is *neutral!* Just like the Soviets.”

Everyone laughed.

“Hussein’s tanks are Soviet,” Thomas explained to Gabriel, “but his intelligence is American.”

“The West has no choice,” Mark said flatly. “If Saddam doesn’t win this war, the Ayatollah’s fundamentalism will flow out of Iran, and God knows where that will lead.”

Gabriel glanced around the walled-in, paved yard, with a solitary tree in the corner, and noticed how the men were all standing together, while the women were chatting indoors, draped across the living room. Voluntary segregation.

“This is propaganda,” said Thomas. “America should not be assisting this dictator. If he’s still in power when this war is done, his own people will pay.”

“They are already paying,” said Jasper, “with their young men.”

“And he’s building a nuclear reactor,” said Thomas. “*And* using chemical weapons, according to the Iranians.”

Gabriel was aghast. “Chemical weapons?”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “We seem to be going backward, not forward.”

“World War One rolled up with a nuclear threat,” Jasper said grimly. “Something for everyone.”

That night, as the night before, Gabriel remained trapped in restless sleep, his dreams intrusive, his consciousness too close to the surface. This was the very state he feared—the wretched half-sleep that suspended and exposed him. That was when blackness came. . . . *Live burial, coffin closed, closed on the living, sinking into quicksand, drowning in sand, in water, mud, like Flanders,*

*Flanders-like mud*. . . Every type of burial. Always burial, always alive. It rushed at him from the depths whenever he was off his guard and had lost grasp of his own thoughts. Couldn't control it. Couldn't contain his thinking.

He opened his eyes. Turned. Threw off the sheet. Silence hummed in the background, in this quiet, quiet town. He wanted to switch it off. Silent Night Effect: Off.

Several times he shook himself, like a dog, head to tail, to throw off the sleeplessness. It will wear itself out, he thought. All I can do is wait. Time, Time, the Medicine Man. . . He trusted in it, waited for it to do its thing. He would let time bleed him, imagine the blood flowing into the tin dish, like in the Elizabethan era, believing it would make him better, while in truth every hour was making him worse. Still, he would go on hoping for a lighter day. An easier day. He was, had always been, an optimist.

He closed his eyes and thought of Sandra, of making love to her . . . and of never making love to her again.

When the first shades of daylight pushed slowly across his walls, opening out the night, it brought some relief. Gabriel slept for an hour and woke again in a sunlit, breathless house. He got up and went downstairs, glancing into the diwan, where beams of sunlight slid in from high windows, slanted across the air, and landed, like children's slides, on the red rugs.

The kettle was burbling in the kitchen, so he walked in, saying, "Sleep any better?" And as quickly realized that he was talking to a stranger.

"I didn't know there was someone else staying here," he said to Annie, when she came down some hours later, poorly slept and cranky.

"Huh?"

"Your friend. She was in the kitchen earlier." She had been leaning against the sink, wearing a long blue kaftan.

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