



MORIAH

Leon Marks

The hazy orange globe is setting somewhere over Romania. Twilight's emerging softness and tranquility are entirely out of place on my rooftop, where a battle of wills is splitting the evening air. Bell is tugging at my elbows, pulling me toward her, begging me to do it. She's seated on the ledge, her knees and feet and pained brown eyes facing me while her backside faces the open air, only concrete four stories below. I don't want to grab her; she could misdirect my rescue into a tragic push.

We met last night in Kasimpasa, where her American looks stood out like a jewel in shit. She'd been sitting on an upside-down trash barrel, her skirt pulled up, a lit cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, her eyeshadow twinkling purple under the street lamp. If she'd been Turkish, I would have dismissed her as a novice prostitute, but she was American and had a kind face, so her presence in one of Istanbul's most dangerous neighborhoods at night was too perverse to ignore. An undercover agent? A lost tourist? A crime novelist in need of inspiration? She appeared too young to be there alone, and I felt protective instincts rising in my gut. Once she locked glances with me, these instincts became inescapable waves. Using my sloppy, self-taught English, I introduced myself. Her determined stare battled with her shyness. When she finally spoke, her words were muffled and only half-intelligible to my Turkish brain, but the sensual voice that spilled from between those plump lips stimulated me quite fiercely. I told her my name was Ibrahim, and she seemed charmed by that. When I asked what she was doing there, she said she was a student and that was all. She smiled at her coyness, then touched my forearm, then stroked it like it was the first time she'd felt a man.

"What do I call you?" I asked.

“Bell.”

“Bell?”

“It’s actually Isabella, but I shorten it for men I like.”

I asked her if Bell meant “beautiful” and she said she didn’t know.

My wife’s name—Hande—means smile. Years ago, this label was perfect for such a happy soul. She awoke every morning to a life of possibility. Joy followed her into any room she entered. Her laugh was a burst of life. Her breast, where I lay my head at night, was warm and hopeful. The smiles faded, however, when we had trouble conceiving a child; they vanished when the doctor told her she had no chance. She doesn’t cry every day anymore, but I still hear the sobs. They’re always there, her trauma engraved on my mind. The suffering of Hande was—is?—unlike the suffering of other women. Her light had been so bright that its absence was deadening. Sadness lives with us now, even if more quietly, in the apartment just off Taksim Square, where we dress each morning, dazed by emptiness, before she leaves for her job at the bank, and I leave for the processing plant. A few months ago, the doctor removed any hope for invitro fertilization, suggesting we consider surrogacy if we had the required financial sum, which we didn’t.

I want children. I am a man from a large family. My five older brothers have twenty children in total. Hande knows this very well, and knows the shame of childlessness in Islam, which is why she approached me a few weeks ago, like a sleepwalker with coffee pot in hand, and offered to share me with another wife. Nobody had to know. Perhaps only this could be less painful for her than divorce. She said we could even move to the Emirates, where it’s legal. She suggested I could marry an American woman and share my time between two continents; this is the life an old friend of my family arranged for him. Since Hande cannot give me a son, she instead gave me her blessing. I shushed her, and I haven’t thought about it since.



Glory Be.

Our Father.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Jesus

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Four times more.

Glory Be.

Our Father.

On and on and on.

My grandmother had assigned me the rosary every morning and every night, but I never really minded because it gave my body a schedule, a kneeling position twice a day, and a kind of rhythm that my mind needed, especially that first year after I'd moved in with her and my grandfather. I was only six, but it wasn't long before I learned the prayers byheart. I'd been enrolled in a Catholic elementary school after my parents died.(My father was still alive, but not to me.) I didn't remember much about my life before this. Over the next few years, my mind became increasingly heavy and tired in a blur of horrible thoughts, so the discipline from the nuns was welcome; they kept my mind from wandering too far or ruminating too long before calling on me in class or rushing me toward the chapel right before lunch. It also helped me focus on my studies. In ninth grade, I found church history interesting, especially how every element of church architecture symbolized something important. I also loved the face of the Virgin. On art. On porcelain. On the cover of the missal. Scripture, on the other hand, bored me, and I avoided reading the Bible with its stuffy King James language and lack of feeling.

Whatever the nuns didn't teach me at school, my grandmother, and occasionally my grandfather, filled in at home. My grandmother was a failed nun. She had lived at a convent when she was 18, but decided, after anguished indecision, that God hadn't called her after all. Instead, He wanted her to have a child, and in order to do that, she had to find a husband. So, she married my grandfather, who was always so kind to me. He spoke softly, especially when my grandmother was in the same room, and he loved playing chess and cribbage, so we did that a lot, especially on the weekends. We lived in a small house with a screened-in porch that offered a panoramic view of the bird feeders and bird baths lining the backyard fence, so that porch became our game room where my grandfather and I pondered our next moves to the music of finches and cardinals.

My grandparents hadn't attended my mother's wedding because the man she married—my father—was a Jew. With so many Catholic boys in town, my grandmother had disapproved fiercely. He wasn't even a wealthy Jew. She might have tolerated a Jewish doctor or even a Jewish scholar, but a Jewish good-for-nothing with a squared jaw and thick, sloppy mustache was about as disgraceful as husbands came, so she'd said. She believed my mother had married him out of lust or spite. She believed all women were lustful and spiteful, not just her daughter and granddaughter, but all the female bodies that had come and gone with their wicked minds since Eve. When my mother told them she might convert to Judaism (not because he demanded it, but because she wanted to), my grandparents didn't speak to her for months. That was before I was born. I never learned if she'd gone through with the conversion; in fact, I don't remember my mother being religious at all. But I remember my father's faith; he was wholly religious; God burned in his eyes.

In high school, I belched frequently because I couldn't help it. They started when my father went away, and they tasted how I assumed poison would taste. I constantly felt like I had corrosive acid in my stomach and on occasion it crawled up my throat so quickly that I couldn't suppress the audible pop. The nuns never slapped me for it because they weren't allowed to do that anymore, but they slapped me in a non-physical way, metaphorically, with their reddened glances and stern words.

“Get to a doctor,” Sister Cynthia shouted at me once. “A stomach doctor!” I never went, but I worked on my skills of resisting and concealing the burps. They came far less frequently at home, probably because my grandfather was there to keep me calm. Until I was nineteen. I had spent my freshman year commuting to college and telling my grandmother I was busy with school clubs and socializing, which was an excuse to explore the shadows of the city alone. But my grandfather’s sudden absence in the spring was too much to bear. The little bit of peace in the house was gone. The cribbage board was gone. I begged my college for a slot in the study abroad program for fall, and they obliged, probably out of sympathy. My mother had left me some money, fully accessible now that I was 18, so I funded the trip myself. I didn’t tell my grandmother till the day I left in mid-July. Until then, she had occupied her time berating me—grief had intensified her constant judgment—and issued warnings like enemy grenades. College boys want your virginity. Poor grades will ruin your life. The Lord knows whenever you have an uncharitable thought. I kept up with prayer and the rosary, but only because I wanted to. The day I left, she protested wildly, then cried desperately, then told me never to come back. Good. That had been the plan.

I was no longer burping. That reflex had subsided, the acid replaced by tobacco and alcohol as soon as we landed in Europe.

The exchange program had sent me to a sister college in Vienna, where I was to share an off-campus apartment with an Iranian student named Azita, who also arrived early to spend part of the summer in Austria. Azita fell into a habit of screaming in my ear about the grotesqueness of patriarchy—widespread and obvious in the Middle East, subtle but more insidious in the West, especially the United States. She told me how aggressive and domineering the men are in Iran, how violent they could be and how it was condoned by the law. She told me stories of women in Saudi Arabia who were stoned to death or hacked to pieces because they were found to have had sex, a woman in Turkey who was run over by her boyfriend for looking at another man, a woman in Egypt who was murdered by her husband’s brothers because she told the police he had raped their daughter.

When I left for Turkey, I didn't tell her where I was going. It was the week before the semester started, and I suspected I might never come back. I spent two days in Istanbul, mostly drinking and smoking in Beyoglu at night, watching what I had expected to be a clash of eastern and western men on Istiklal Avenue, but what turned out to be mostly young drunk Turks. I wasn't certain what I was looking for, but I knew I wasn't finding it here where the professionals and families congregated. So, I started exploring the edges of the city, the river docks, the side streets, the back alleys, the dilapidated mosques that tourists avoided. That's where I found him.

Glory Be.

Our Father.



The next afternoon I picked up Bell and we drove ninety minutes to my family's apartment in the central square of Banmit, a small town on the Black Sea surrounded by hills. A mere two rooms, it's been in my family for generations, used not as a vacation getaway, despite its seaside location, but as a business hotel for my brothers and me when we needed to negotiate with the meat suppliers. I turned to gauge her expression in the passenger's seat when we came upon the ocean of red; it was like paint coating the sidewalks, the parking lots, the foundations of buildings, including mine. She wasn't fazed; in fact, she looked excited. Overhead, the birds of prey shrieked warnings as we walked from the car. As usual on feast days, the raw, heavy scent of carved flesh was battling with the chemical solvents.

"Today is Eid al-Adha," I said once we entered the foyer. I explained that the red was the blood of lambs. The whole neighborhood—the whole town, in fact—was a meat town, a lamb town, home to Turkey's butchers, and the makeshift slaughterhouses along the sidewalks were a common sight on days like this.

After a glass of *laki*, and very little conversation, I couldn't stand it anymore. I laid her on the floor and pulled off her American blue jeans and underpants. I didn't want to come across as a beast. I'm not a beast. But this girl, this Isabella, bloomed with youth and fertility; she had the sad face of a doll but the eager body of a whore. Even Hande knew I required this. If Hande were here, she'd turn away, but she'd understand. Bell had offered me her body by coming here, had offered me young motherhood, so I turned her onto all fours and got behind her, lifted her so her rib cage hooked against the radiator, and we could both see out the window and drink in the crimson graffiti from the slaughter of the sheep. She groaned painfully, but leaned farther forward and tossed her hair. I thrust behind her, felt her breasts, and peeled her blouse up and over her head. When I saw the scars on her shoulder, I paused, but only for a few seconds, just long enough for her to writhe under me eagerly. The scars were large, but not repulsive. My protective instincts shot through me all over again.

When we were finished, we both saw the blood. She didn't appear embarrassed exactly, but she stared and pondered it. The drops were darker than all the red outside, more like dark brown. Maybe she was disappointed it wasn't brighter. Or maybe she was disappointed in me.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She nodded.

I pulled her toward me and enfolded her body into mine. I kissed the back of her neck gently to reassure her that I'm not a beast.

"Where did this come from?" I asked, touching her leathered shoulder.

She reached behind and pulled me closer while arching her back and tipping her head and hair back so her lips rested close to my ear.

"Today's a day of sacrifice, isn't it?"



Even though the blasts were loud and shook the walls, it was his footsteps that froze me with fear. My room was pitch black and I could see no light under the door, so he was doing it in the dark. They slept across the hall—in separate beds—so only two walls separated me from the shots. I didn't have to wonder what it was. Some people, their minds still sleepy, might have suspected a car backfiring, or even an irresponsible hunter way too close to the house. I was only six years old, but I didn't have to wonder at all; I knew instantly he was killing her.

That's not to say I expected it. Who would ever expect their father to use a hunting rifle on their mother in the middle of the night? Who would ever expect to hear six shots, the gun cocked reliably after each, like an extremely slow musical beat, at four o'clock in the morning? Nobody would expect that, but I suppose I had. He'd wanted me dead from the moment she'd told him I was growing inside her. My grandmother told me all this later. She said that was when their fighting had started, after my conception. He was many years older than she was, already in his fifties at that point, and, besides, my mother had been told she couldn't conceive, that she was barren because of a uterine abnormality. My father knew this early on; he'd signed up for a childless marriage. So, I was quite a shock.

According to my grandfather, my mother had laughed when she first told them she was pregnant; she herself had considered it impossible. My father, however, didn't laugh at all. He demanded an abortion, a proposal which apparently my mother had considered, but ultimately rejected, maybe because it was a mortal sin, or maybe because by then she had started to love me. He continued to demand my termination. When she refused, he took matters into his own hands, according to my grandmother. He pushed my mother down the stairs in an attempt to kill me, resulting in a fractured knee and sprained ankle but no dead baby. My mother denied that he pushed her, said the blame should be placed on her own clumsiness, but that was every battered woman's excuse, according to my grandmother.

The gunshots had shaken the house, but what I most remembered were his

footsteps. They had a cadence between the shots. Shoot. Cock. Steps. Shoot. Cock. Steps. I would later learn that he had walked from one side of the bed to the other between shots. A shot from the left side of the bed, then a shot from the right side, then another from the left, and soon. My mother's skull was left with six holes, three on each side.

Even more peculiar was the darkness; he hadn't turned on a single light. He had never hunted or even owned a gun—he'd purchased the rifle expressly for this performance—so it was surprising that he'd hit his target, her head, every time despite a lack of light. Six bullets and six holes in the skull. Had it been plain luck? Had nervousness somehow honed his marksmanship? Had God temporarily endowed him with the precision he needed to get the job done?

Shoot.

Cock.

Steps.

And on and on.



My first slaughter was that dog sniffing around our house for a year. I'd been feeding her hides every day, so she came to view me as her master, and I came to view her as my pet. One Saturday, Baba had decided the dog was suffering from cancer, which was the lie he used to teach me that animals and love are incompatible. I still hear the dog's whines as Baba held him down. He showed me where to insert the knife to get a clean cut of the jugular. As the blood trickled, he taught me to pull the head back to spread the vertebrae, then insert the blade to cut the spinal cord. Within seconds, the dog went limp and dropped to the ground. My little brother, Rayan, had been watching the whole time. He was indignant.

I cried all afternoon, not because I'd killed the dog, but because of the voice that had whispered to me while I was doing it. The message was eternal, but the voice was meant for me just at that moment. It said with absolute certainty, "Jahannam is real." Hell. That was the place where all Muslims ended up, according to Rayan once he was comfortable in his apostasy. Three years ago, he formally rejected Mohammad and fled to Italy, where he fancied himself some kind of Christian prophet, all new revelations falling from the sky, from God, entering and expanding his mind to the point of mental exhaustion. The last time I spoke with him by telephone, only a few month safter he'd left, he refused to share his divine revelations with me and swore me to secrecy with regard to his whereabouts.

For a virgin, Bell didn't seem scared or embarrassed or even particularly excited about having had sex. Usually, when a man and woman are together like this, sex is the destination, but it felt like Bell saw the sex as merely a prelude to something more consequential. The sex wasn't the final act? She looked at me expectantly from the sofa, the perfect curves of her breasts at odds with the twisting vines of her scars. We maintained eye contact for a while, as if we were both seeking assurance that this was real, that we were real. Like during prayer, when the mosque is silent and another man makes eye contact with me, and maybe we both feel a sense of dread in our concentration. We both know there's a chance all of this is meaningless, that we're behaving like fools, that Allah isn't listening, or never was.

A moment later, I joined Bell on the sofa and lit two cigarettes. Her body was still misted with sweat, her face sullen and newly childish once the cigarette was in place between her lips. I was surprised—maybe disappointed—by the absence of tattoos carved into her flesh. All American women had tattoos, I'd been told. Can scar tissue withstand a tattoo artist's needles?

"Are you okay?" I asked. "I mean, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," she said, then covered her mouth to muffle a belch, which reminded me of my brother, who equated belches with the release of evil. Was she evil? Had I introduced evil to her body? Was my adultery more or less forgivable than my

brother's apostasy? Did he deserve total ostracism while I sat here in the sweaty spoils of illicit love?

"Why me?" I asked. Not to the heavens, but to her.

She turned coyly, studied my face, caressed my ear—untrimmed this morning—and said, "You called to me."

"I did?"

"You and those killer green eyes. You called me with those killer eyes."

Her attention on my eyes and ears was short-lived, however, as the clucks of chickens sailed through the open window on the opposite wall, the one open to the rear and overlooking the coops. She pointed upward.

"Is there a roof?"

"Of course."

"Can we go?" She stood up, her ass covered in red streaks. Had I smacked that hard? I didn't like the roof idea, but it had a waist-high ledge around the perimeter and the neighborhood had been abandoned today; the butchers were feasting in the hills with their families. I walked to the bedroom, dressed and tugged the sheet off the bed. When I returned, she was already in the hall. She was nude. I met her there, where we had to climb one flight of stairs to a steel door. I draped the sheet around her shoulders, despite her half-hearted efforts to resist, and pulled up a corner to cover her hair. When I shoved against the steel, its screeching yawn gave way to the orange halcyon sky.

On the roof, which was flat and dirty, her sheet nearly blew off as she raced to the edge. She placed her hands on the ledge and took in the view of the Black Sea, which had been invisible at street level. Its blackish water curdled nearly a mile away, not much farther than the Pink Mosque, the seaside mosque attended by my father, and his father, and stretching four generations back, the mosque where occasional doubts, like ghosts, escaped my heart and tapped on a nearby shoulder, the mosque that too often smelled like dirty feet because the ablution

fountain's water pressure fluctuated with the seasons.

"See that minaret?" I pointed to the pink tower, and she followed with her eyes. "My family has worshiped there for many generations."

We were four stories high, surrounded on three sides by ugly rooftops, dirty and dilapidated.

Rayan is dead now. I'm almost sure of it. He never phoned me again. Once, I brought up his name during a holiday with my uncles and brothers. We'd gone fishing on the sea, no children allowed, and several of us had congregated at the stern. I shared a memory of Rayan, and, even with the waves, I could feel the sudden hardening of bodies. My eldest uncle shook his head and said, simply, "No." I pushed a little bit, and asked where Rayan might be; two more uncles glared at me. I wouldn't have brought up my brother if my father had been present, but even my uncles' reactions were a shock.

"That boy is gone," the eldest had said. "Forget his name."

Could there have been guilt in his voice, or in the disappointed stares of the others? Uncles are the enforcers of the moral code of Islam. They take apostasy seriously.



He wasn't done. I knew it wasn't going to end with my mother, even before he'd stepped from their blood-soaked bedroom into the hallway. He was coming for me. He couldn't get me six years earlier, so he was getting me now. I was the burden he had to discard, the surprise he had to forget. This bed was just another womb. Yet, the perfect aim of his crime across the hall hadn't followed him. Neither of us knew at the time, but it turned out he'd missed both my head and my heart.

When the deeds were done, he didn't take his own life. This puzzled me because

so many shooters, I later learned, shoot themselves as a kind of coda, especially when the victims are spouses and immediate family. Why had he spared himself? I formulated theories in the months and years afterward, but that was just to keep my mind alive. I knew the answer. God had commanded him to kill us. There's no need for shame when your actions glorify God.

For at least the first year after moving in with my grandmother, she'd cursed him daily for not blowing his own brains out too, for being alive upstate. She didn't want him in a cell of steel and concrete. She wanted his body buried in the ground and his soul tortured in Hell, and she never once tried to soften that wish for my benefit. My grandfather rarely talked about his grief, but he frequently excused himself from our cribbage games to leave the room and cry. The three of us prayed the rosary together. We said grace before every meal, holding hands and bowing our heads. We sang hymns. "On Eagles' Wings" was always my favorite. We stared up to heaven as if we'd written the lyrics especially for my mother. The priest dropped by for pie and coffee some afternoons. He had a mustache and always winked at me from across the table as if that's what grieving little girls expected from visiting priests. I didn't like him. Not because he was a priest; I love priests. But because of that mustache. My father had the same one.

Senior year of high school is when I found myself drawn to the river, the piers where the most evil seemed to dwell in our sad little city. I'd researched which neighborhoods had the highest rates of assault and murder. I'd dropped by the most populous bars at the most populous intersections, where most patrons arrived alone, even if they'd expected not to leave that way. I dressed skimpily, smiled at men, and learned where drugs were transacted and visited those buildings, pretending to have money. I tried to start fights, said I'd call the cops if they didn't give me the stuff for free. I asked which corners were best for hookers and pretended to sell my flesh. When a man advanced me cash through his passenger side window, I walked away and laughed. Instead of chasing me, he sped off. I asked a girl how many prostitutes are killed in this area every year. She widened her eyes, shook her head, and waved me away. Another girl called me a psycho and suggested I try online.

My bed had become a puddle of sweat. The back of my head was against the ugly oak headboard. He was standing at the foot of the bed with the muzzle six feet away from my eyes. That mustache was visible in the glow of the night light, which was plugged in just above the baseboard to my side. His brown eyes weren't quite visible to me, but the twinkles were. The twinkles were his tears, and the night light had caught them too. The twinkles were shaking because his whole body was shaking. Yet he wasn't pulling the trigger. I could smell cigarette smoke—the scent had always lingered on him for hours—but I still couldn't make out his expression. He was waiting for something, almost like he was expecting someone to interrupt.

After the first bullet punctured my shoulder, my body shook frenetically, and the headboard banged against the wall. My body commenced a seizure, like when you bang your finger really hard in a door and keep shaking your hand in the air to avoid the worst of the pain. I believe I screamed, but to this day I still don't know for sure. When the seizure stopped, the burning began. Not like fire burning, but like acid inside, those future belches biting at my organs and poking at my back and shoulder and arm. It's possible my teeth were chattering. I had no control anymore; the burning was too much for my little body to experience consciously. I had to fall into sleep because sleep was my only chance to cope. I have to sleep. But if I fall asleep, I'll fall off, I'll fall backward and land on the pavement and it will be all my fault, not his.



“Bell!”

Once I've shaken her awake, two sad eyes droop down to face me as her sheet-scarfed head tilts from one side to the other and back again, as if blowing in the wind.

“What are you doing?” I shout parentally.

She blinks both eyes and stares into mine. One of her breasts peeks out from behind the lolling sheet. She takes my hands and places them on her chest.

“Please,” she whispers. It’s a plea for me to do something that only I can do right now, right at this moment on this empty roof in this empty neighborhood, the Black Sea humming in the distance. Only one of us knows what she wants. That’s what I tell myself as I squint and shake my head purposefully in an effort to appear puzzled. But I do know what she wants.

“Please what?”

She nods. She knows I know.

“Ibrahim. I’d rather not beg.”

“No!” I remove my hands, but she grasps one of my forearms with almost super-human strength. She leans into me from her seat on the ledge.

“Please do it,” she says. “I’m not supposed to be here. This was never supposed to happen.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was supposed to die. That’s his plan. It’s always been, and it must be finished. I’ve been here too long.”

She steers my hands back to her chest, but I yank them away.

“I’m not doing that,” I shout, genuinely angry. “You can’t do this tome. You want to make me a murderer?”

“It’s the only way,” she says quietly. “It will look like I jumped. That’s all you have to say.”

She looks at the building to our right, and then at the house to our left, and then the building across the street. My eyes follow hers in all directions. If there’s a human face in any of these windows, then we’re both already in danger. A naked girl in a sheet outside for all to see. But there are no human faces, and we both know that. There’s not a single heartbeat in this bleeding neighborhood besides

our own.

“I can’t do it myself,” she says. “It’s a sin. I’d be condemned for eternity.”

This time, my puzzled expression is genuine. I shake my head slowly while sound exits my mouth, a steady mumbling sound that is telling both of us no. She’s using me. She wanted to fuck at least once before she died. Now, she wants that same fuck to push her.

“A sin for you too, I know,” she says, faintly smiling in a surreal attempt at empathy. “But a lifetime to repent.”

“This is wrong, Bell,” I tell her and place my hand safely on her shoulder.

“How can it be wrong when it’s what He wants?”

“He?”

She’s finished talking. She raises her bare feet to the ledge and heaves herself to a standing position. Her five-feet-tall body now fully vulnerable to the tug of a sudden gale that could drop her to the pavement below, she looks down at my side of the ledge, down at me, her sheet blowing in the evening breeze, her eyes pleading. Her face appears less pale in the evening, oddly, the enfolding darkness imbues her skin with more color. I know nothing about this girl, but she is suffering. She’s scarred more brutally inside than her shoulder could ever reveal to me. She is someone’s child, someone who may love her, may hate her, but she’s a child. We all are.

As she prays aloud—“Blessed are the fruit of thy womb”—she turns so I can hug her around her knees, but far too abruptly, she almost buckles and falls. I embrace her like she’s the last tree on earth and I need to keep her fully rooted here. Much to my surprise, my eyes are producing tears, which blur her image when I look up. She touches the top of my head and strokes it, then smiles sadly, her face enveloped by the sheet like a head scarf that glows white in the dark.

“It’s time,” she whispers down to me. The tidiest shove will send her to death, but will save her from damnation. She’s right, I have a lifetime to find salvation. She

asks this of me as a gift. In death she might find my beautiful brother, who can assure her that I was not a beast, or my beloved Hande, whose body still walks the earth, but whose soul has gone on ahead. Where is all the life?

Bell extends her arms out to her sides and tilts back her head to find the black heavens above—"Now and at the hour of our death"—She shifts her weight backward, outward, so that if I let go, she'll plummet. The sheet slides off her cruciform body and floats away like a ghost into the night. She now stands naked and waiting, trusting me to do as she asks. The shove will have to be hard, deliberate enough to qualify as certain murder.

The song of *adhan* soars into the night. The muezzin's voice begins its tenor chant, which sounds abnormally loud up here on the roof. This is the mosque's final call to prayer. The last of the light is gone. It heightens my senses as it always does. Bell's legs have tightened slightly, the melismatic call from the minaret an unwelcome interruption to the task at hand. To reassure her, I loosen my grasp around her knees, and I give her a soft kiss on her lower belly, which has faced my eyes this whole time. When my lips pull back, I glance upward to make sure she's ready, the call vibrating loudly in the air, swirling all around our rooftop tragedy, and that's when the dome of bright white stars becomes visible through my tears and her prayers and her suffering. The town, the sea, the entire planet are enclosed in endless twinkling against the black infinity. The blessings of eternity.

Now look towards the heavens, and count the stars. If you're able to count them, so shall your descendants be.

I lift with all my might and steal her body from the ledge. I carry her toward the center of the roof, as far away from death as possible. She's shouting and hitting me, trying to wriggle from my grasp. Her strength makes me stumble, and we both topple to the cement floor. That's where I take her in my arms, not to love her, but to prevent her escape. Her naked body, however, lies still and docile after a moment, only shaking slightly, matching the rhythm of her crying. Another defeat. Another delay of her fate.

“No,” is all I can say into the sweet sadness of her face. I reach toward her belly, still shaking with sobs, and rest my hand there softly but with purpose. Protectively. I wait for the shaking, the sobbing to wane, which it does after a few moments.

“Why?” she asks, her hands covering her face.

My hand caresses her belly. Where is all the life?

“There could be a child,” I whisper. She breathes in and out a few times, then turns to me quizzically. I nod violently enough so she can see it in the dark.

“I can’t kill my child,” I say. Five words of explanation.

It’s plausible. I stayed inside her downstairs, so we might have conceived. I hadn’t considered the possibility until now, and neither had she, but there may be a child in the stars. If not yet, then soon. When we go downstairs again. And then again.

I kiss her, but she neither resists nor participates. Her mind has gone backward. She has memories of babies in the womb.

The stars above, if they had eyes, might laugh at our bodies on this roof, at the magic we reach for to keep ourselves sane. Or, they might cry over us, two sheep unaware of our significance and the worthiness of our sacrifice. Even stars will one day lose their light and die. Will they remember us from their heavenly tombs?



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