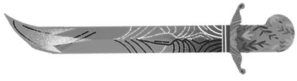


MAD, BAD & DANGEROUS TO KNOW



SAMIRA AHMED

ATOM

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For Thomas, Lena, and Noah,
the astonishing lights of my world.

And for those whose stories are buried, hidden in the dark
corners of history, I lift up my lantern for you.

When I want to understand what is happening today
or try to decide what will happen tomorrow, I look back.

—Omar Khayyam

KHAYYAM

I live in between spaces.

The borders between nations, the invisible hyphen between words, the wide chasm between "one of us" and me alone.

French American.

Indian American.

Muslim American.

Biracial. Interfaith. Child of immigrants.

A Parisienne for one month a year: the month when all the other Parisians flee the city.

A girl staring at her phone screen, looking for love but knowing it's not going to show up.

I didn't choose any of this. Which is not to say I wouldn't have, given the opportunity. But it's not like I ever had the option.

I don't even get a say in my diminutives. It's always "Frenchie" or "la petite Américaine."

The people who can't guess what I am think I'm "exotic." Some people say I'm lucky to be an ethnomorph—a person whose brown skin, brown hair, and brown eyes make it seem like I could be from half the countries in the world. But I'm

not a passport that everyone gets to stamp with a label of their choosing. Others look at me and try to shove me into their own narrative to define who and what I am. But I'm not a blank page that everyone else gets to write on.

I have my own voice.

I have my own story.

I have my own name. It's Khayyam.

KHAYYAM

I just stepped in dog shit. Bienvenue à Paris.

Welcome to my life of constant code-switching. Witness my attempts to blend an occasional impulse for Bollywood melodramatics with my flair for complaining like a local. I shouldn't be cranky, summering in Paris. I should be an expert at dodging excrement on sidewalks and accustomed to tepid service from waiters and sardonic smiles at my fluent but slightly accented French. And I should absolutely be prepared for les grèves—the strikes that bring the Métro to a standstill every single time we're here.

I should be French about it and nonchalant.

Instead, I'm American and have no chill.

Because it *is* hot. The air-conditioning is mostly aspirational. And I'm a captive here, since my parents value family vacation tradition more than my desire to stay in Chicago, stewing in self-doubt and woe-is-me pity and the truth universally acknowledged that the forces of entropy attack you on all fronts.

This is what metaphorical multiple organ failure feels like:

My head: I have likely, most probably, almost definitely

royally screwed up my chances of getting into the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—my dream college that I've been shooting for since ninth grade. It is *the* school if you want to go into art history. Which I do. Obsessively.

My heart: Belongs to Zaid. *Still*. Zaid, my not-exactly boyfriend, but only because he never actually called himself my boyfriend, who is thousands of miles away in Chicago.

My lungs: On top of the dog crap, there's a railway strike today, somehow precisely coinciding with this heat wave and my arrival in Paris. The air is humid and so thick I'm panting.

But those are merely symptoms.

The underlying cause? An essay. Yeah, really.

The School of the Art Institute is super competitive, so I wanted to find a way to stand out from the pack. I had this brilliant idea to submit an absolutely mind-blowing essay for its Young Scholar Prize. Technically, I was ineligible because you have to be a high school grad to enter. I was only a junior, and I petitioned the judges to make an exception. I didn't want a technicality standing in the way of my dreams. Besides, my college counselor told me it would show I have "moxie" and would look great on my college applications. I was certain I had solved a centuries-old art world mystery, proving that Eugène Delacroix had secretly given a painting—one of several—from his *Giaour* series to the writer Alexandre Dumas, the *all for one, one for all* dude. Not just any painting in the series—*the* exact one on display at the Art Institute. I was going to astound the old fogey museum curators with my genius. I would unveil a secret that was hiding in plain sight. I would be the youngest prizewinner ever, an art world darling. I based my entire theory on a single sentence in a twenty-year-old article about Delacroix I found online and followed down a rabbit hole. Apparently fake news is also old news.

The thing with confidence, though, is that when you're proven wrong—and holy hell, was I proven wrong—you wither away into the smallest version of yourself. And head judge—now my lifelong nemesis—Celenia Mondego made sure of that. In her words, I had written, "*an earnest if ill-conceived attempt at unraveling a mystery of provenance that fell far short of its ambitions due to slipshod research—a catastrophic inability to grasp obvious facts. The work of a dilettante, not a future art historian.*"

The words still stab.

Maybe I could deal with it better if I didn't feel so alone, but *my* person, *my* I'll-always-be-there-for-you pseudo boyfriend, graduated from Lab High in June and is apparently so busy getting ready to leave for college that he can't even pick up the phone—his second favorite appendage. Meanwhile, I'm pleading with myself not to text him *again*. Clinging like a lifeline to the one text he did send while I was mid-flight: I'll see you when I see you. p.s. I got Ice Capades. Quoting *our* thing, *our* ridiculous thing, an inside joke from our cheesy retro first date movie. I melted. Ugh.

I keep letting myself forget that it's at least partly his fault I screwed up my prize essay. Somewhat. Probably. Indirectly. It seemed like every time I was in the library researching or trying to write, he'd sneak up behind me in the stacks and kiss me on the neck. His kisses are highly distracting.

Basically, I'm seventeen and already washed up. What do I do now?

Mom would tell me to go easier on myself and to trust my own voice to find a way out.

Papa would remind me that I'm young and in Paris, a city with pastries on every corner, and that life is still beautiful: C'est la belle vie, chérie.

Zaid, if he were acknowledging my existence and wasn't part of my problem, would probably tell me to forget about everything and suggest creative ways in which he might be able to help me with that.

And Julie, my best friend, who is currently inaccessible because she's on a Dark-Ages, technology-free family holiday at a cabin in Door County, would tell me to figure out where I want to go and do whatever it takes to get there. Easy for her to say—she's both an unstoppable force and an immovable object.

Here's the thing: I actually know where I want to go. But too many things I can't control keep getting in my way.

Sometimes literally.

With les grèves there's no Métro, and every electric scooter and bike share is taken. Normally I wouldn't mind a long, leisurely walk along the quais of the Seine River on the way to the Petit Palais—that's kind of the point of being in Paris. But I'm reminded that this is why there are no songs about August in Paris, when it's all tourists and la vie en sweat instead of the Hollywood version of Paris where it's perpetual spring, when young love and chestnut trees are always in bloom.

If I believed in fate, I'd say the universe was conspiring against me.

THE COURTYARD CAFÉ of the Petit Palais has always been my reliable refuge. I plan on photographing every inch of its meandering path, fragrant plants, blue-and-gold tiled fountains, and, of course, the perfectly pillowy macarons I'll be inhaling at a small wrought-iron table amongst the blossoms. Luckily, the place is made for Instagram, which is good because I need new content to replace all the dusty old books

and archival material I posted in my "ill-conceived" attempt to impress the ultimate *we are not amused*, judgiest of judges Celenia Mondego.

Maybe meticulously cataloguing my trip will help me forget my "catastrophic inability" to do anything right.

And maybe, perhaps, Zaid will see my posts and remember I exist.

First, though, I need to scrape the remaining dog crap from my red All-Stars.

I skulk into the shadows of the sculptures of naked women flanking the alabaster staircase that leads to the doors of the Petit Palais. As soon as I bend down to inspect my left sole, I hear someone behind me attempting to stifle a laugh.

Do not look, Khayyam. Keep your head down.

"Welcome to Paris!" a honeyed French accent declares in English.

I roll my eyes. I almost decide to bite back in French, but this arrogant jerk already chose my preferred language for sparring. "How do you know I'm not from Paris?" I ask with my back still turned to him.

"I'm s-sorry," the Frenchman stammers.

I stand and whirl around, ready to go for the jugular, but see that this particular jugular leads to an extremely cute face.

He's my age. Or a little older? Brown wavy hair with hints of red. Lightly tanned skin. And when he pushes his tortoiseshell sunglasses to the top of his head, he reveals eyes that could be the inspiration for the Crayola crayon I preferred above all others for my childhood masterpieces: Raw Sienna.

"Well, then you know the adage: it's the left foot; it's happiness!" he says.

I burst out laughing. And when I try to curb it, I end up snorting. It's another childhood flashback; every time I hear

the word *happiness* spoken with an even remotely French accent, it kills me.

The cute boy gives me a quizzical look.

"A-penis," I explain. "With a French accent, 'happiness' sounds like 'a penis.' I'm sorry; I know what you're saying: 'C'est du pied gauche, c'est du bonheur!'" I shrug, feeling my natural defensiveness creep up. "I guess you can chalk it up to my American immaturity?"

He grins like a true Frenchman, showing no teeth. "I think no such thing about Americans or about you," he says. Those raw sienna eyes dance. "I have heard you Americans are sometimes presumptuous, though."

"Ha, ha. Touché," I say, smiling back like an American, displaying all my gleaming, orthodontically perfected teeth.

His smile widens in return, challenging my assumptions about his aloof Frenchiness. Damn. His teeth are perfect, too.

"Tu parles français?" he asks.

"Je suis française," I answer immediately.

"Et américaine?"

I sigh. Apparently being brown means you have to be something other than European. I get the *but where are you really from from* version of this back home in America, too. "What, my accent sucks too much?" I grumble.

"No, no, not at all. I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . I only meant because of the merde on your shoe. Living in Paris . . . Parisians have a kind of dog crap radar."

I bite my lip and look down at my All-Stars. They're mostly poop free now. My emotional pendulum has swung from rage to mortification. I think I prefer the rage. It's much less embarrassing.

"I step in actual crap, then I step in figurative crap as well," I mutter, mostly to myself.

He laughs again. "Not at all. In fact, it's my fault. It was hardly chivalrous of me to question your citizenship based on your inability to avoid crap."

I laugh again, too. I can't help it. Laughing with a hot, anonymous French boy is a more satisfying diversion than either Instagram or macarons. Plus, he actually used the word *chivalrous* without irony. Zaid knows what it means, but it's not exactly in his vocabulary.

The boy clears his throat. "Perhaps I can ask for a modification?"

I knit my eyebrows together. He's pronouncing "modification" the French way, which throws me. "*Modification?*" I repeat. "Oh, um, you mean, a do-over?"

"Oui. Oui. Yes. A do-over." He offers a soft grin, then places a hand on his chest and straightens his shoulders. I realize he's tall, taller than me, and I'm five-foot-seven or, as we say in France, 1m70. I'm not just bilingual; I speak metric, too. "Please, let me begin again. I'm Alexandre Dumas."

I burst out laughing. The universe *is* trolling me. "Alexandre Dumas? Let me guess; your best friends are three brothers named Athos, Porthos, and Aramis?"

His smile falters a little.

I can feel my face getting hot. Sometimes I speak before I think. Now I actually *hear* my dumb dad joke made at his expense. Somehow I managed to be both childish and pretentious, because duh, doesn't everyone know the names of the Three Musketeers?

"Dumas is my sixth-great-grandfather," he says.

My mouth drops open. Is he kidding me? I *know* there's no such thing as fate. Fate is coincidence. Coincidence is math. But damn, the odds of this . . . I should've bought a lottery ticket.

"Alexandre Dumas is your grand-père? No freaking way." I clear my throat and collect myself, reaching out my hand. "My name is Khayyam Maquet. It's nice to meet you."

"Enchanté," he says.

He's reluctant to extend a hand back. Our eyes meet. Shaking hands is *not* the customary French greeting between friends. But we're only strangers who engaged in witty banter, and I'm not about to kiss this dude on the cheeks. Still, I don't think he'll leave me hanging.

"This might sound weird," I say when he finally does shake, "but follow me. There's something I want to show you."

Leila

Haseki.

The favored.

That is what they are compelled to call me. All of them. Eyes cast downward in reverence. Do not aspire to this, *I want to warn the young ones. The ones whose rosy lips and cheeks have yet to be introduced to Pasha. But I do not say this. I say little, choosing my words wisely.*

This is how you survive.

Study.

Rise through the ranks.

Become irreplaceable.

Become the chosen one.

Find your power. Use it, but softly.

Haseki.

Pasha conferred this once-ancient title upon me, to fashion me after Süleyman's most beloved and trusted haseki. It is an honor, *he told me.* A gift.

In that moment, my name was erased, buried under dirt.

But my spirit was not.