

FICTION

MARGUERITE

Outside my window, the rifles have returned.

Another boy has been shot. Another shot boy had a mama. I watch as, one year after the first, a second set of National Guard fills the vacant lot behind my building, leaning against the defunct parking meters as if they are old friends with the corner. They all have mamas too.

The difference this time is that bars shield the window of my little studio apartment; deadbolts rivet the door; the photo lives under my pillow. I remove the year-old clipping now, and study the howling woman centered in the frame.

Rendered in newspaper grayscale, she is so washed-out she is literally white. Her nose is just two nostrils. She is keening an unending 'O,' her lover—his photo-body pure black—spouting dark blood from bearded lips. He is sprawled like a Pietà across her naked lap. The barrel of an automatic rifle is visible in her hairline, as if aimed at her too, a trick of perspective. Her lips peel back; her breasts and his penis pixelate; her eyes are horror; she is saying something.

You have killed my heart, she is saying. Do you understand? You have killed my heart, and I will never stop screaming.

I rest the picture on my lap. I find the little Nokia camera I store on my vacant television stand, and set the lens between my window bars. A helicopter searchlight glazes me on its way into the mauve 8:00 PM sky. Through my viewfinder, I scan the scene for a freckled Guard I know I will not find. *Discharged*, I remind myself. I pause instead on a female Guard applying lipstick in the reflection of a male Guard's shield. Maybe they are flirting. Maybe they slept together last night, for the first time tasted each other's tongues, and the remembered sweetness is all they attend to now as she blots her mouth into his sleeve.

I keep my camera roving, toward the front of the crowd. This year, there is one other difference: the protestors obey a single voice, rising from a bullhorn. This time, the protests have a leader.

"Repeat after me!" she calls from the stump she uses as a platform, her voice willowy and thick. Her name is Marguerite. She is the twin sister of the boy who has been shot this round. Though her body quakes, I center her face in the crosshairs. Between her second and third teeth she has a big off-center gap, black as the photos of the dead boys, hers and mine.

Her mouth appears pasted on crooked.

“Hands up,” she says. I see a sea of upturned palms, all pale, no matter the shade of the arm beneath them. I set the camera on my bedspread. I raise my hands, just like the girl in the photo on my pillow, her palms jutting out from under the armpits of her bleeding boy. Marguerite calls, “Answer me,” voice so close to song I hear the low notes of hymn inside it.

I drop my arms. I use them to lift the photo, soft as flesh after all these months of being held. I study the body thrust toward the camera. “Answer me,” I say.

Marguerite: “Hands up.”

“Don’t shoot!”

Multitudes.

The boy and girl from the photograph met at a protest, exactly one year ago. The afternoon was blazingly hot; I’d forgotten to bring sunscreen. Seeing me burning, a black stranger offered to walk me through the two streets between us and CVS. “A woman needs protection from a man,” he told me, as we passed a boarded-up rowhouse.

“Against what?”

He looked at me like he was so tired of having to repeat what he’s already said. “Men.”

A blast of air-conditioning and an electronic two-note tone welcomed us to CVS. A freckled Guardsman stood at attention, rifle holstered, in the sunscreen aisle. I picked up two bottles of SPF 30. “Least I can do,” I told my escort.

He laughed at the same time as a second man, of uncertain race, who was wearing a bulky suit too hot for the weather and clutching a basketful of makeup and body creams.

“He doesn’t need sunscreen,” said the second man. His accent was foreign.

“You’ll watch her from here?” said the first, and, with a nod exchanged above the crown of my head, I was transferred. The black man left. The Guardsman shifted his weight from foot to foot. The new man said, “Ready to go?”

I informed him that I’d found the transaction offensive. Furthermore, I didn’t know who the hell he was.

He laughed. “My passport’s been inspected seven times this week, I was strip searched coming into this country and I’ll be strip searched going out, my visa is good through tonight. You want more assurance?”

Arab, I decided. The song of the syllables. “Love it or leave it, I guess,” I told him.

“According to my red-eye flight, I’m leaving.” He took a step toward

me under the fluorescent lights. I saw him doubled in the convex mirror above his head and tripled in the surveillance-camera lens beside the mirror as he snatched a bottle from my hands, unscrewed the cap, and swept a single line of sunscreen down my nose.

I withdrew my pen and notebook from my purse. Bent nearly double, pages balanced on my thigh, I transcribed the colors: gray-brown hand, red nose, white lotion. When I looked up, he was staring at me, eyebrows creased. His upper lip protruded farther than his lower.

“I’m magic,” I explained, closing the notebook around my finger. “It’s my superpower.”

He shrugged as if such a confession were utterly ordinary. As the clerk rang up his haul—bag after bag of foundation, mascara, lip liner, night creams, Tums, emulsions—I explained: since I was small, I’d been writing. I was a protégée. I was magic. I intuited early that the subject of a story is never its most interesting narrator. The third-person omniscient, I understood. The wall is the one to tell the story. It witnesses the most: the floor, the ceiling; long before, long after.

He paid in hundred-dollar bills. “You’re showboating,” he warned, and I forgot to hold the door, so ill prepared was I for how well he would read me. I hadn’t realized until then that I’d wanted to impress him. “Your eyes are green,” he said, when the setting sunlight hit them.

I studied him in profile as we set off down the street. “Yours are brown.”

He nodded, but seemed disappointed. Somewhere behind us, an electronic two-note tone bleated. “You forgot to pay,” he said, tapping the used sunscreen in my fist.

“I don’t feel bad,” I said, and dropped the bottle into one of his bags. “You’ve paid enough.”

He did not know how to hold my hand. He crushed my four fingers together, ignored the thumb, drew our forearms vertical and elbows bent, like Old English dancers. We were both supposed to act as though we didn’t notice the contact, and he babbled about the ache of this gormless crowd for a leader, until I couldn’t muffle myself anymore. “But you’ve had sex, haven’t you?”

He stopped dead under a mothy streetlight. He shot me a look of patient near-impatience. “In the bedrooms of Kabul,” he said, “you do as you please.” I felt his fingers stiffen around mine. “On the streets, you don’t hold hands.”

I wiggled out of his grasp. Atop his upright jacketed arm, his fingers spread wide, palm out. I pulled his hand to his side, hung it as naturally as I could, interlaced our fingers. I felt the tension ossify his grip.

“Relax,” I told him, the whole way back to my apartment. A freckled

Guardsmen eyed us on the street, but then posed for a journalist's picture with a Japanese tour group. Police officers shouted, "Five minutes till curfew." My studio was ten minutes away. A helicopter caught us in its beam. A gray-green tank rolled through a stop sign. "Relax."

Beyond the bars of my window, the Guards are no longer flirting. They have lowered their riot masks, so I can't tell which is the woman and which is the man and which has the kiss of red lipstick on his wrist. Marguerite is still shouting:

"Hands up."

Her voice, it's transfixing. It is a whisper with the urgency of a scream.

But the situation balances on the nib of a pen. One Guard lifts his mask to accept a cigarette and a light from a protestor wearing Marguerite's twin brother on his chest. One Guard stacks his finger on his trigger. I hear a peal of laughter. The clock is ticking ever nearer 10:00 PM, and soon it will be curfew. The normal laws of daily life will fall. Soon her bullhorn and her presence on the stump will be illegal.

I train my camera lens on Marguerite as 10:00 PM ticks nearer. Bulkily, I rise onto my knees to get a clearer view. I locate my shoes at the foot of my bed. I find her in the crosshairs, then shift my focus behind her, to the sea of upturned arms.

With one hand, I feel the feather-softness of my photograph. I am the subject of the photo, but it's the wall that tells the story. White wall. Black blood.

Writing was never my magic superpower. I may as well have thrown away the pen. I may as well have spent my time on tossing fairy pennies into wishing wells.

At first, I didn't understand what it was under his jacket. I was standing beside my curtains, breeze wafting through the screen, staring at the thick tan padding at his chest.

"What are you, a football player?"

"My magic superpower," he said. The Velcro screamed as he unlatched it. "Try and shoot me."

The bulletproof vest was a just-in-case measure, apparently. He'd flown here to protest—he'd finished college in the US many years ago, and still followed its politics—on a hard-won single-entry tourist visa. He knew the police would tote guns, guessed the protestors would, understood, of course, that Afghans were somewhat less than universally beloved.

"Looking out for number one," I said, as he folded the vest at the foot of my bed.

He shook his head. "My mother would die if I died."

"But she let you come."

On my television, Baltimore burned. "I'm safer here." As I dug my notebook and pen from my purse, he nudged his bulging CVS bags with his toe. "Plus, she wanted Almay."

Ask what Afghan evening news airs every night, I wrote. After a couple of seconds I heard what he'd said, and laughed. "Put that thing away," he said. "Be here with me."

Though I objected to the epithet, I tucked the notebook into its home under my pillow and slid the pen behind my ear. I heard a click behind me, and turned to find he'd taken a small Nokia camera from some pocket and was documenting the cherry blossom tree outside my window.

"You see that?" he said. "That's a picture. Stand somebody in front of that tree in full bloom, lean him into the frame, catch the vacant lot behind him, you've got a leader in the making."

"Her," I corrected, for the fight of it. He adjusted the aperture. I saw the mechanisms of the camera extend outward, heard the metal hum of gears shifting. "Showboating," I said.

He grinned. "Did I impress you?"

I felt the way we were juggling power, me then him, each offering the other an opportunity to show our best face. I smiled. With most men, I'd have kept my yes to myself, hoarded the control, but with my affirmation I lobbed the power back at him.

He used it to sit on my bed and invite me, with his silence, to sit too. We pushed our shoes off with our toes. He snapped a photo of our feet dangling above the carpet: one dark, one light.

"You were strip searched at the airport," I said, hoping he'd hear the question.

"I expected it," he said. "Afghan passport, worst in the world. Handwritten. Any nutjob with a gun can write one himself."

"Let me see."

He set the camera on the windowsill and asked for my hands; I offered them. Hands up, palms bared, elbows bent.

"Turn out your pockets."

"You haven't looked at me?" I was wearing a cotton V-neck dress that had left me largely sunburned. I had no pockets.

"Oh," he said, gaping pointedly at my chest, the downward-facing arrowhead of my neck and clavicle. He must have noted the Star of David hanging there, but—though I inspected the minute expressions around his eyes—I found no hint of disappointment or distaste. "I'm looking."

I could have thanked him: he'd lobbed me the power again. That trade enabled me to ask, as though I didn't care, "What are you looking for?"

His gaze rose to my eyes. His were black, stone-serious. "A pen," he said,

removing mine from behind my ear. “You cannot have a pen.”

Strip searches and bomb threats and Jewish girls didn’t scare him. But of pens, he was terrified. I could scrawl a mark in his passport as official as any border authority’s. I could bar him from America forever. *And what would be so bad about that?* I didn’t say. The query would have been a ploy to make him kiss me, and I was afraid he would instead cite gunshots or curfews and answer, *Nothing*.

He rolled to one hip, and I plucked the rectangular silhouette from his back pocket. A helicopter droned behind my curtains as an 11:00 PM darkness settled on the city; spotlights roamed the unseen flesh of Baltimore, every rise and hollow. I opened the little booklet, expecting a younger version of his face. I planned to poke fun at whatever I might find—acne, bangs, boyish weight—and then emblazon the image in my heart so I could rock it to sleep. Instead, I found a woman’s black-and-white photograph.

“This is not your passport,” I said, trying to quell my sudden fear. For the first time, it occurred to me in a serious way that I did not know who the hell he was. I had bought the story so credulously, that an Afghan national would show up in Baltimore to protest a death that had nothing to do with him. But why wear a bulletproof vest? That camera, withdrawn from some pocket as if from nowhere—what else might he be hiding in his pockets?

He flipped a single glossy page: there he was, lovely, ten years younger in grainy black-and-white, a smooth silence to his face. “My mother,” he said, presenting the woman again, and this time I recognized the protruding upper lip framed in a hijab.

“Your father?” I asked, and I was shocked by the depth of my own sadness when he said, “Dead.”

I chided myself for my suspicions. I was glad he couldn’t see my mind. I was glad he’d made me shed the notebook and pen, before I could record my thoughts. To redeem myself, I tossed the power to him and decided to let him keep it.

“Tell me about this,” I said, of each stamp in the passport—Pakistan, Egypt, Bhutan, places I planned never to go—until I reached the final page. There I found his image as I knew him, superimposed on the US Capitol dome, which sat at that moment just forty miles down a highway filled with gray-green tanks. I studied the visa, his face, my flag; the stamp atop the stars, *duration of stay*.

I poked him in the ribs. “You were supposed to leave tonight.”

He caught my poking fingers and held on. He didn’t have to tell me: *I met you*.

It is 10:30, and the crowd in the lot has vanished. The police deploy

rubber bullets; the remaining stragglers disperse, except for Marguerite. I set down my camera and my photo. I cup both hands to my face and peer between the bars of my window. By the indeterminate formation of the Guard, I know that they do not know what to do with her. They are half-circling the tree stump on which she stands, half-milling in the vacant lot that stretches at her back.

Marguerite raises her hands like a partnerless dancer. In the dark, I see only the lightness of her palms, the white flash of her lopsided teeth, the crescent moons of the whites of her eyes.

“Hands up,” she says into the bullhorn.

Two Guards give her instructions I can’t hear. A helicopter spotlights her like a prima ballerina. The group is growing ever less cautious, forming an ever more unbroken arc around her. The silence surrounding the scene is eerie. A terrifying thought occurs to me: maybe I am the only eye watching. My block has shut down, largely, since this time last year. The few residents who used to be my neighbors have moved away. The city tried to raze my building and the lawn behind it, but I wouldn’t go.

“Don’t shoot,” Marguerite answers herself into the bullhorn.

Say something else, I want to tell her. Say, I’ve paid enough. Say nothing. Words don’t work.

The arc around her closes in. Blindly, reaching behind me, I tug one shoe onto my foot. Then the other.

Marguerite does not budge. In the calm, I know what’s coming. Horror spikes in me. I want to look away, but cannot shake the fear that I might be the only witness. No photojournalist this time, arriving with metal mechanics to shoot.

Inches on all sides from Marguerite, the Guards stop moving. They must know they cannot make a martyr of the second twin, and also that they can. They have their guns. She is breaking curfew, the week’s new decree. They touch the grip of their rifles. The laws have fallen, but their laws don’t have to fall. One of them carries a kiss on the sleeve of his uniform. One of them planted it there.

The street is silent as a cemetery. In a moment, somebody will move. I might be the only person watching. I have a bulletproof vest, a camera, a pen, my body. Which will save Marguerite?

A group of five Guards, riot shields up, lunges toward her.

He and I lay naked in my bed, curtains drawn, moving so slowly we were barely moving.

“How can I improve?”

“You’re good!” I told him. Laughing.

“I can’t even hold hands.”

His upper lip protruded a millimeter farther than his lower. I thought maybe I loved him. I prepared to turn my life into a calculation: the time in Kabul. It was 8:15 then in Kabul. Wake up.

“You could try using tongue,” I said, loathe to say it because of his goodness.

He kissed me, hesitant between my lips. “It’s really intimate,” he said, pulling back, “tongue kissing. More intimate than . . .” and he looked down, to the tops of our legs, where all I could see was the brown length of skin across his hipbone, fitted flush with mine.

“More intimate than how some people have sex,” I said. I’d had men hold a pushup above me, scarcely touch but for the necessary in and out. “But the way you have sex . . .”

He hushed me. *The way you have sex*—he mouthed the words silently, and I knew his erection was strengthening somewhere I could barely feel inside me.

“Why did you really come here?” I said. Maybe I whispered.

Some human scuffle sounded in the lot outside. “I wanted to know the feeling of a protest that might actually lead to change.”

Sometimes Baltimore felt intractable to me, but not just then. The din outside grew louder, and closer to my building. I wrenched the windowpane down over the screen, and triggered an accidental camera flash.

“Oh,” I told him. “Your eyes are green, too.”

Our legs pushed his passport off the edge of the bed. The bulletproof vest followed his mother’s pasted picture to the floor. Some minutes later, we were a circle curling outward, his spine arcing north, mine south. He drew the sheet over our bodies, toes to crown of head. We braided our four arms. I found his heartbeat; he found mine; 8:30 in Kabul, we slept.

I am outside soaked in helicopter spotlight. In the sultry heat I am running, running. I carry nothing. The circle of Guards grows nearer with each footfall. Marguerite is upright in their center, somehow standing, tall as a tree. Her arms are raised above her head. My eyes do not stray from the heels of her hands. It is 8:30 in Kabul, I think. Wake up.

My dreamsleeper ended only minutes later. The flimsy brass of my door chain snapped in two. A freckled Guard burst in, a photographer close behind. The camera shot; the gun drew; a voice roared, then stopped. They didn’t see us. We were under the sheet, lying lip to lip, naked spines curved in opposite directions, arms crossed over each other’s hearts. We were mismatched twins together in a womb. We were safe one second more.

They didn’t see us. But we woke, and saw each other wake. Wordlessly,

we watched our green eyes grow dark with the knowledge of what was happening. His visa had expired. He’d stowed a tube of stolen sunscreen in his bag. He’d answered leave it, when the choice was love it. The helicopter had spotlighted us five minutes after curfew. His passport was handwritten. His vest was on the floor. I didn’t have a camera, or a pen.

The voice roared. The laws fell. Cause followed effect. I knew he would spread his body over mine before I felt the tiny undulations of his muscles travel through the bedsprings, after the sheet had been ripped off, before the first shot fired, after he was bleeding in my arms, before I was howling toward a camera’s lens. I knew infinities. I knew more than I had ever known. I knew my magic superpower. I knew I needed to be the one to lie on top of him. I needed to spread my body over his, because I am my magic superpower. Full chest, slim waist, green eyes, white skin. Don’t shoot.

If they see me first, I remember thinking then, I think again now as I run, they won’t.