

SARAH DOHRMANN

POINT OF DEPARTURE

I wake to the Muslim Call to Prayer. The muezzin's voice is pleading with me, only I can't make out for what.

Aziz, my new Moroccan lover, is sleeping beside me. He is dreaming in Arabic; he is dreaming in French. Together we are prostrate on his bed—naked, uncovered, surrounded by four red walls. There is a window above the bed, and a yellow curtain hanging from it. The curtain lifts and falls from the hot Middle Atlas wind that pushes itself into the tiny room; the sun is coming through the yellow curtain, making the room golden.

Today is February 4, 2008. It is the thirtieth anniversary of my mother's death, although "anniversary" seems too musical a word.

I turn onto my side, put my back to the new man. Outside the window Aziz's niece is shouting, "Uncle Aziz! Uncle Aziz!" Her singsong French reminds me of a baby bird. She is a tiny *fauvette*, a warbler flapping her brown wings. But Aziz doesn't stir, and I am careful not to speak. He wouldn't like Leila to know that he has a woman with him in his room.

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The girl quiets, flutters off in search of another playmate. I shut my eyes and try to go back to sleep, only there is a voice inside me that won't stop saying this is all wrong: this room on the outskirts of Fez, this country, this man. Outside, just beyond Aziz's yellow window, is a parking lot of vintage cars. There is a man asleep in a chair, guarding them. There is a German shepherd sleeping on the ground beside the man. Behind them is a stand of timber, inside which is an abandoned train caboose and two eagles in a cage.

Aziz stirs. He grips my hip in a half-awake dream and tugs me toward him. "Morning of goodness," he says in Arabic. "Morning of light," I say in response. He kisses my neck.

I shut my eyes to imagine a woman whom I have made into my mother. She is on the top floor of a two-story house with clean white siding out in South Dakota somewhere—or in Minnesota with all those lakes. She is smoking a cigarette on a porch. Fireflies are hovering at a distance, lighting up and off as if they're too lazy to stay lit. My mother has a glass of white Zinfandel in one hand, and there is the orange setting sun suspended in the air, droopy and full. There's an RV parked out in the drive with a fishing boat hitched to it. There is a neighbor pushing a lawn mower, the smell of fresh-cut grass.

And she is my mother. And she is safe. She is circling job listings in the newspaper: *in need of nurse's aide, secretary wanted, someone good with animals to care for my dogs.*

Useless fantasy. Thirty years ago to the day, it was a very cold night in Des Moines. After my sisters and I had found her, we ran for help through snow with no shoes on. My feet! And the dog was alive then, too. Running beside us, barking.

I open my eyes. Aziz is above me in the golden light. His hair that's normally tamed by gel is now a wild globe of curls. He presses one of my hips toward the bed to unfold my body. I reach to his chest.

"I have to go," I say.

"Wait."

"No, I have to go."

"Wait."

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Dad had dropped us off. His headlights glared on the garage door. The porch lights weren't on and the walkway hadn't been shoveled. My sister, Melinda, who was nine years old at the time, held the tip of my mitten so I wouldn't slip. Claudia, who was twelve, waved at my father when we got to the front door. *Bye-bye! See you next weekend!* Dad backed away. His headlights swept over us in the darkness, as if we were escapees.

Aziz is trying to work his magic on me. I place both hands on the rounds of his freckled shoulders; his protruding bones make perfect dips for my thumbs. He smiles at my touch. He has no idea my mother is here with us. And there's a train I need to catch to Asilah, a coastal town in northern Morocco. Evidently going to Fez wasn't enough. It's no good, I'd rather be left alone. I want to fling myself into the outer galaxy, I want more and more of the frozen sky and its flaming stars, only I can't seem to reach that far.

"I have to go."

"Non."

"The train."

"Non."

Our little dog was crazed to see us come home. Melinda helped me unlace my moon boots. A pile of the dog's shit was near the front door. *Mom, we're home! Mom?*

Aziz's eyes are closed. I clasp his ears with both hands. He opens his eyes, looks at me. I am here. He is here. There is breeze and the curtain lifting, falling, suctioning, lifting.

"Just a little," he says. He bites his bottom lip as he pushes his way in. *Rush.*

She was not in her bedroom. She was not in the bathroom attached to her bedroom. She was not in her closet. *Mom?* She was not in my bedroom or my closet, or in Melinda's bedroom or Melinda's closet, she was not in the hall bathroom, or the hall closet. *Mom!* She was not in the living room, she was not in the dining room, she was not in the kitchen. Claudia had said: *You and Melinda check the basement.*

I didn't insist that Aziz wear a condom. I didn't say a word. But he is gentle with me as he pushes, as he pushes. And it is my job to be here. I came to Morocco to *be here*. So I place both hands around his neck and release my interior grip. It is near enough to being flung.

In the basement was a freezer where steaks were stored. I was afraid of the steaks because I had been told they were animals before they were meat. Go, Claudia had said.

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Aziz lifts my body. We are in golden light and this is a morning of goodness. Isn't it?

Claudia stayed upstairs while Melinda and I went into the basement. *Mom!* Our mother was not in the laundry room, she was not in the bathroom. She was not in her office, she was not in Claudia's bedroom or Claudia's closet. She was not in the rec room at her sewing machine. *Mom!* She was not in the TV room.

The *fauvette* returns. "Uncle Aziz!" she calls, "Wake up!"

"Go away!" he yells, letting go of my body. I'm nothing but a body. "Shh," he says to it.

"Come out and play!" the *fauvette* calls.

"I will, *cherie*, in a minute!"

"Come now!"

"I'm trying!" he laughs. My grip takes hold, my mind reclaiming my body. I place one hand over Aziz's mouth, shut my eyes. I didn't insist upon a condom.

The *fauvette* is flitting but three feet from the window. I imagine her treading air. She wants to see inside. "But Aziz!" she sings.

He removes my hand, holds it. "I mean it, Leila! Go away!" Little thing has no choice but to sprout two feet and skulk away.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, pressing my hand. He brings it to his mouth, kisses the palm. He strokes my fine hair. I say nothing. "Don't be angry with me."

Melinda and I came back up the stairs. I thought I'd escaped the frozen meat. But when we got to the kitchen, Claudia wasn't there.

Aziz pushes.

"But the train."

"Shh."

Where did Claudia go? The dog was scratching at the garage door, which Melinda opened.

"Does it feel good, *cherie*?"

"*Oui*."

Darkness. There was darkness. And a blow of stiff cold, stench.

"*Non*," I say.

"Shh."

"But the train."

"Wait," the man is saying. "*Attends*."

It's so dark I can't see. I can't see! But then, like an object breaking the skin of water: Claudia kneeling at the driver's door of the station wagon. And then: Mom inside the car. She is wearing the cowl-neck sweater I love. *You guys! Shut the door!* Claudia screams. Melinda shuts it, leaving Claudia alone with Mom. Was she wearing the cowl-neck sweater I loved?

"You feel so good," the man is saying. He is pushing, pushing, trying to find his way to the center of me. Here are eagles' clipped wings. Here our guardians keep sleeping. *Rush!*

Claudia pushed her way past us out of the garage. Melinda shut the door, leaving our mother alone inside the refrigerated space. Oh no. Claudia got onto the yellow telephone that had the curly coil. She was crying and Melinda was crying. Claudia was dialing—each finger in a hole and then the rotary spin—and hanging up. Each finger in a hole and then the rotary spin—and hanging up. Dialing and slamming the phone, dialing, slamming—until she reached our father.

And then: bare feet in snow. Look, see: there is the dog running and barking. We are knocking on the neighbor's door but there is no answer, only her

blue furniture inside and her grandfather clock tick-ticking. Our small feet are slipping on ice as we cross the street to the Grahams'.

There: comic books and socks. Outside: sirens and lights.

There was a man named Mr. Hench. I don't know why I'm calling him Hench. It's just his name. He was a bald man, and every morning, before he walked out into the world, he looked at himself in the mirror and said, "Hench, you are one helluva guy." He believed in the power of self-thought, which made him one of those lovable people.

This is why, when he met my mother in a café one day, and noticed that she was new in town, he said to her, "You're one pretty lady!" She smiled and shook her head. "No," she said, "but thank you for saying it."

"What brings you here?" Hench asked.

She didn't want to tell him that she'd fled her husband whom she was trying to divorce, or that she'd abandoned her three girls. Even Mr. Hench would have a hard time understanding that.

"Life," she said. She meant this as opposed to death. Mr. Hench looked over her shoulder at the newspaper she had on the counter. He noticed she'd circled some want ads.

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"I'm not the kind to say bad about nobody," he said, pointing to one of the ads, "but I'd suggest seeing about that dog-walking last."

"Oh?"

"Let's just say it's in the paper a lot. Turn-over."

"Oh. Well thank you." She had a cup of coffee with her on the counter. I don't know if it had milk or sugar in it. I don't know how my mother took her coffee.

"Where you from?" Hench asked.

My mother got shifty (and don't think Mr. Hench didn't see it). She cleared her throat, looked down at the napkin in her lap, folded it. She knew people would ask her this question. She'd had plenty of time to mull it over on the bus, but she'd not yet decided on an answer. She knew it would be best to avoid saying she was from Iowa—by now my father had certainly called the police; certainly he'd called his divorce lawyer.

But Iowa was all she'd ever really known. She was born there; she'd been one of nine children raised on a farm there. Her mother was born in Iowa, and her mother's mother before her. She had been confirmed in the Catholic Church in Iowa (in an intrepid county parish, at a time when Catholics

were considered intrepid). She'd belonged to 4-H in Iowa, she'd gone to a two-year all-girls college in Iowa, she'd gotten her bachelor's degree in Iowa, she'd married an Iowa boy. She'd had her children in Iowa, got her master's degree in Iowa, become a leading feminist in Iowa in the mid-1970s. All the hate mail she'd received was addressed to her home in Iowa: *Mizzzzzz Rita Dohrmann, Des Moines, Iowa*. She'd filed for divorce in Iowa.

She'd lived for a short while in Pennsylvania with my father and my eldest sister Claudia, but that was a long time ago, before Melinda and I were born. There's a picture of Claudia as a toddler in that house, running from the toilet with her pants down. It's a series of pictures: her exiting the bathroom bare-assed, then another of her running for the front door, then another of someone at the front door, reaching his arms out for her (a man I do not recognize wearing a red hat)—all the while, her dog Pepper, who had to be given away because he liked to bite, is at her feet. In the photos, it seems my sister is afraid of something that happened in the bathroom, and the adult who's taking the pictures is getting a kick out of her cute fear.

176 They didn't live in Pennsylvania but for a year or so, which is why my mother didn't feel she knew it well enough to talk about it with authority.

"I'm from Iowa," she confessed.

"Iowa!" Hench said. "A fine state!"

"Yes," said my mother. By now she'd folded the napkin into a cushion. "It was." She might've felt sad when she said this. Maybe she missed us.

I seem to remember being in the front pew of my mother's funeral service, but I cannot say for sure. So much has been sealed up, thrown out, or shoved down—such was the unspoken edict, the code to survive by. We will be good girls. We will do what we are told, we will not sass back, we will not whine, we will not be sad, we will not be loud, we will do well in school, we will be happy, we will be pretty, we will be popular, we won't talk about Mom.

And yet. Here I am, writing it all down, reaching for a liquid hold the only way I know how. I stretch for the scene that is my mother's funeral: me sitting between my two big sisters, who, like me, are not crying. There is a swell of people behind us, the lights are seventies-style amber, there is church incense, and pitying eyes upon us. The woman who was our mother is just a few feet before us, a cadaver inside a closed casket.

It will not be until years later that I will, in the night by myself, stalk the Internet for any image I can find that will show me, exactly, what happens to the human body when it has been terminated by carbon monoxide. This is how I reach for the lodged memory, that night my sisters and I found our mother in the garage.

But here let me say: it was Claudia who found her. Claudia was first. Melinda and I were merely standing at the kitchen door, looking on. In this way, our mother's death was Claudia's discovery alone, the implication being (just like the impossible parameters of a dream) that the loss of our mother was Claudia's loss and thus (as the dream further distorts), our mother was Claudia's mother. It was Claudia who suffered. Oh dear, does this help to explain why I am writing?

Discovery means you were first. But it also means you know what you've found is gold. You can have found twenty kilos of the stuff, but if you don't know that it's gold, then gold has not been discovered. I never once thought my mother had died in any other way. I always knew she killed herself. I saw her with my own eyes.

But the details elude. Was there blood? Was she wearing the cowl-neck sweater I loved? I was but five years old, and it was too dark to see. Still, having a solid hold of the image of her dead face inside my mind could be a remedy of some sort, something to do with that unreachable center I seek, the source of rupture.

I could ask Melinda. Now to ask her what our mother's favorite ice cream flavor might have been would be one thing (and even this I wouldn't do), but to ask her about the state of our mother's corpse upon discovery could be a devastation, something I fear she would see as an attack. I could ask Claudia, but doing so would make her the authority over her mother again, thus taking mine away, forcing me to comply with a dream logic that's gone on far too long.

And so I reach for what I must already know, what the very eyes inside my head once saw. Was my mother sitting upright in the driver's seat as I think I remember? Was her head leaning on the steering wheel? Or was it back, her mouth agape? What did her face look like?

It is night. I am alone in my apartment in Brooklyn, New York, surfing the net in the pathetic hope that it will bring me closer to a night more than thirty years gone. Such explorations require one to be alone. Such occasions will not suffer even, say, the footsteps of your neighbor crossing overhead.

Every tenant in your building must be in the ocean of REM, swimming inside the muck of their psyche, so deep beneath consciousness that tomorrow the only remaining evidence will be footsteps in psychic sand, mere impressions to be washed over by a tide of coffee. There must be no cabs passing by. No skateboarders. No drunken revelers. Even the pigeons must be asleep, their beaks tucked into wings. For this is a private hunt. And the stopped world is the mirrored state you yearn for, the necessary condition to swim through your shit. There can be no witnesses. *Click click click*. Only you and the ghost of your mother and your search for what's been wiped out. *Google image search*: "cadaver carbon monoxide poisoning." *Click*.

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Here, a drawing. *Click*. The caption says it is a woman from the nineteenth century. She'd knocked her head in the kitchen, fallen to the floor, and unfortunately for her, landed with her face next to an open oven. There appear to be welts on her upper breasts. There is blood on one side of her face. At first, when I click to zoom in on the sketch, I think the blood isn't just blood, but instead that half of her face has exploded, as if her blood had boiled beneath the skin, and when her skin could no longer bubble, it split along surprising fault lines. It's not until I look closer that I see these lines are dried blood that had dripped from the woman's eyes, her nose, her mouth and ears. I'd been told once this could happen, that blood could crawl out of a person's orifices in order to seek oxygen. Amazing the lengths to which the body will go to fight against the mind.

Google web search: "physical results carbon monoxide poisoning." *Click*. "Skin turns cherry red, especially for fair-skinned people. Areas where corpse's body rested or leaned on surface remain white. Possible edema (swelling)."

Suddenly the mental image I get of my mother's face is like a clown's. Add to it that when she died, she had braces on her teeth. My mother becomes a red-faced tinsel-toothed corpse with blood squirting out her eyeballs. See? How easy it is for me to make her into something other than my mother?

What did I see? What is my rightful memory? I'm afraid I can't conjure a clear image of my mother's departure, not one that is mine alone, not enough to turn her back into my mother.

Only: the feel of that evening, the mania, the mounting panic. *Mom? Mom!* I remember my fear of the basement with its frozen meat, the dog on her hind legs, the *zip zip zip* sound as she scratched the screen door that linked the kitchen to the garage. I remember peering through the door's metal curli-

cue design—*You guys! Shut the door!*—and the yellow phone, Claudia slamming it, slamming it. I remember running through snow, the comic books at the neighbor's house, some drawings their son had made? I remember a female EMT who'd come to check on us girls. She asked me if I was all right and I showed her a scab on my knee. I remember knowing I was milking the moment, its trove of potential attention. I knew it was a no-no, something a spoiled girl would do. But still I took my greedy piece of it. She put a Band-Aid on the scab. After, she said, "Your mommy is dead."

I remember that. And: standing on the neighbor's couch, looking out their front window to see my father across the street at our house with the cops and the ambulance in our driveway, and the red lights sweeping over him, and oh my father sobbing, his shoulders convulsing, his face in his hands, the cop's arm reaching to steady him.

I saw that. I saw it, I did. My father was right there, right in front of our house—his horror and devastation right there for me to see. It was the first time I had seen my father cry. Worse, it was the first time I'd seen him lose grip of his hard, clenched German propriety. It was terrifying. It was my discovery.

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You see, there are agreements that are made. If you are invited into someone's home for dinner, you are to come with figs, cookies, olives—or even better, some kind of meat that most families cannot afford. If someone stops by your home to visit you, you are to follow suit by stopping by their home in the coming weeks. In the case of me and Aziz, our relationship began with its own kind of agreement.

I met him at a mutual friend's home. At the time I was having problems getting my eyeglasses repaired. The frames I'd brought to Morocco had broken, and after ordering a new pair online from the States, I needed someone to put in new lenses. I brought them to an optician in Fez, only he'd done a poor job of the work—one lens wasn't in all the way, and the other kept popping out. When I brought the glasses back to be repaired, the optician insisted they were perfect. He'd pop the lens back in, jam the other into a more suitable position, and then hardly a day would go by before they both popped out again. This happened three times until I'd tired of feeling like one of those cartoon characters whose eyeballs keep going *dwoing*, which only served to remind me how I felt studying Arabic.

SARAH DOHRMANN

Perhaps it was my sensitivity as a foreigner (and a woman) that I thought the shop owner was giving me a raw deal. I knew the lenses themselves had been poorly fitted, but each time I insisted on this, the optician would wholeheartedly deny it. There were two young women who worked in the shop, whose hot pink veils matched their hot pink tops, and who I'd catch primping in the shop's mirrored walls each time I entered. They'd gone from being friendly young ladies who spoke to me in French, complimenting me on my outfits, to mean shop girls who ignored me when I entered, whispering to each other in Arabic.

I knew I needed a Moroccan man to help, and wealthy Aziz with his air of privilege was the perfect candidate.

180 This is how our agreement began: I called him for his assistance with the eyeglass debacle. One stern conversation with the optician did the trick—suddenly the man was more than willing to completely redo the job, even offering to return some of my money if I wished. While we were in the shop, Aziz struck up a conversation with the prettier of the two girls, who shied from his attentions, giggling to her friend. He was the kind of man who some—not all, but some—made way for: he struck an extraordinary balance between forceful and coy. He was very difficult to say no to, more a petulant child than a man.

When we left the shop, night had come on. We were in the Atlas neighborhood of Fez, in the Ville Nouvelle, the “new city” the French had built during the protectorate. The sidewalks were a cracked, uneven patchwork. The stray cats were in hunt-mode after waking from their afternoon nap, jostling for scraps at the nearby *b'sarra* restaurants. Shop signs were in full fluorescent burn: the neon eyeglass frames above the optician's cast a green glow, the nearby pharmacy's cross flashed an urgent, screeching red. It would almost be redundant to mention the men sitting at the surrounding cafés, staring out into the night's action, which at this moment included Aziz and me. Aziz took a long look at me, the up-and-down kind. It was unnerving, as I suspect was the point.

“Are you wearing contacts?” he asked me. I explained I was; I had to wear them in order to give my glasses to the optician. “Your vision's really that bad?”

“Oh yes—I'm practically blind.”

“But you can see now? With your contacts?”

“Yes, perfectly.”

“Oh?”

Had he never heard of contacts? “Anyway, thank you for your help,” I said. He nodded, lifting his shoulders to ears. “It’s getting cold.”

“Yes, it is.”

A beggar approached us. Aziz reached into his pocket and gave him a five-dirham piece before the beggar said a word.

“Come to dinner with me,” he said. “*Je t’invite*. This is how you will return the favor.”

Wait, *he* was taking *me* to dinner as a way for *me* to return *his* favor? By New York standards that did not add up. Still, a part of me had been angling for the invitation. I rarely wore lipstick when I was in Morocco, but that afternoon, before I’d met up with Aziz to get his help, I’d carefully applied a faint hint of red.

When we got into his car, an ancient Renault that I loved, he turned over the engine and looked straight ahead before moving. He said, “I have half a mind to go back into that optician’s and ruin those glasses for good.”

“Why!?” I laughed.

“Because,” he said, “you’re much prettier without them.”

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That first night of her escape, my mother did not dream of me. She did not dream of my sisters. She didn’t even dream of my father. Instead, she dreamt of her brother Roland who had been in and out of mental institutions most of his adult life. Poor Uncle Roland. Poor, poor Uncle Roland with his severe epilepsy. My mother was his main health advocate, his closest confidante. Oh, what would become of Roland now that my mother had disappeared?

Later, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you later what became of Roland. But first, my mother’s awful dream, the one she dreamt while lying on a single bed in a podunk motel, a saucer plate of stubbed-out menthols on the nightstand beside her.

In the dream, her father was about to slaughter Roland instead of a pig. Roland was sitting in a straight-back chair in a barn stall, his back to my mother and her father; he was reading an *Archie* comic book, laughing at Jughead. Her father was holding a mallet in one hand, rolling up his shirt-sleeves with the other, just as he does in waking life before he bashes the mallet into the pig’s skull. Just like a pig, Roland is totally unaware of his imminent slaughter. My mother sees this in the dream. She begins to scream, “No! It’s Roland, Daddy! Daddy, it’s Roland!” But her father can’t hear her

screaming, because my mother's not really there. She's already left, see. She's already taken a bus to nowhere.

Roland snorts a giggle, slaps his knee, runs his left forefinger over Blondie's curves, swipes back a loose lock of hair that's fallen into his eyes. There is the sound of her father's heavy breathing, and then the sound of a horse stomping one hoof onto the hard barn floor, and then the breathing again, and it occurs to my mother that the breath is not her father's breath, but instead her own, as if she were the one holding the mallet. Only she's not holding the mallet, her father is. "Daddy!" my mother is yelling. "Daddy, don't do it!" My mother knows very well what is to come. Globes of Roland's brains will go flying, and then her father will hose them down until they're collected into a single mound, and then he'll scoop them up with a shovel, hook the animal in the center of the stall, get to work on separating its meat.

The mallet is thrust into the air. The pig that is Roland is clueless. The breath that is her father's breath is my mother's breath. My mother screams and screams but no one can hear her because she's the asshole who up and disappeared. What gives her the right to have any say over what happens to Roland?

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Swallows fly above the city of Fez, and you think it doesn't matter whether this is her story or your sisters' story or Roland's story or yours. Or whether your father once said, "God put animals on this earth for humans to eat." Or whether you could slice open the stomach of your father's hunt and inside the inside of the bird was a perfect, whole kernel of corn. Or whether words can be arranged so as to describe a howling hole just as that howling hole is felt, so that one can say *My oh my, that is a howling hole if ever I heard a howling hole*. Or whether you're let in after banging down the door only to discover there's not even a room on the other side.