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Chapter 4

The Meeting kicked off at 9:00 a.m. The program listed a series of panels, with breaks for coffee and lunch. On the last day, after they'd all given their lectures, the Basske-Wortz Prize would be awarded during a ceremony held at sunset by the lake (and if it rained, in the building they called Patrick Hus, where communal activities—such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner—would be held). The lectures would all take place in a spacious white tent pitched on a lawn at the top of a small hill. Part of the interior was occupied by a small wooden platform; the rest was filled with rows of wooden benches easily mistaken for church pews. Along one side, interpreters were seated in little booths, where they performed simultaneous translation for each of the speakers. The writers had been asked to send their talks ahead of time, in English, and each was now available in Swedish translation. Outside the tent, the horizon dissolved into the mirror-calm bay of a lake, and the hill softly descended into a meadow filled with little white and yellow flowers.

Mona entered slowly, a mug of green tea in hand. Aside from the jet lag, she'd slept too much, deep beneath thick layers of Ambien and Valium. She took a seat at the back of the tent, where it would be easier to slip out for a cigarette. Mona didn't usually indulge, but she considered herself a social smoker, particularly when socializing with other writers. They made her anxious—more so if she had to spend several days with them in an environment that allowed few avenues of escape. The only comforting thing about the Basske-Wortz Meeting was that there were so few writers "in Spanish" there. Writers take their languages so seriously, to the point of aggression. The phony solidarity of having a "Latin" culture in common with other writers was something that always repulsed her. And socially—that is, in the global society of writers, the society to which she belonged, albeit in a forcefully reluctant and itinerant way—there was nothing worse than falling in with a bunch of *déclassé* monolinguals. Mona felt much more comfortable in the company of other languages. That is, she preferred to live *en traducción*, according to her literary tastes: she was much more interested in Japanese lyrics of terror and Nigerian poetry written in Hausa than she was in reading about rich narcos, rich intellectuals, and intellectuals who got rich writing about the poor in Miraflores, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, or Santiago—it was all so boring. Anyway, sharing a language could turn into a complicated chore, requiring translations harder than Hausa to Spanish. Once, during the ceremony for a different prize (she didn't win), Mona was verbally assaulted by a writer from Murcia who misunderstood one of her jokes. The Spaniard had attempted to praise Peruvian literature by resorting to the commonplace courtesy of defenestrating the literary culture of his home country. Mona told him that she hadn't boarded two flights just to hear people say nice things about other Peruvian writers, and proceeded to launch her own defense of Peninsular literature: "Our Javier Cercas would wreck your Vargas Llosa in two seconds flat!" This gauntlet thrown, Mona figured he would pick up the joke and run with it, but her pique only sparked his Murcian rage, burning not merely at her words—he wasn't listening anyway—but at the confident and self-sufficient way that Mona had negotiated this public *côté*, transforming a leisurely exchange into something that seemed more like a real intellectual challenge—something that had become unusual at those types of events. The guy got up from the table, still wagging a finger at her, while Mona, seated between two men who had no idea what was happening, laconically replied that there must have been some kind of misunderstanding: Maybe he didn't understand her colonial Spanish?

Life in translation, on the other hand, was like swimming in an Olympic pool: people could cheerfully ignore each other, and everyone adopted an Anglo-Saxon deference and stayed in their own lane. It allowed Mona to luxuriate in her own exoticism, gliding freely through her very own ocean, feeling special and unique.

But it wasn't just a linguistic preference. In general, European writers were already used to the idea that nobody cared about what they wrote. They were crystal-clear on the insignificance of their role in contemporary society, and it translated to humility in their conduct. But things weren't the same everywhere: in some cultures the writer still retained a rock-star status, and this esteem wasn't always salubrious. Philippe, the Frenchman, exuded an aura of unhappiness and a general reticence regarding any sort of participation in human life. It radiated from him like a magnetic field, throwing off a skein of dark energy. When he passed in front of Mona, he looked back at her from the corner of his eye, Moleskine in hand, before taking a seat next to one of the side exits. Latin American writers liked to fantasize that they shared this French exceptionality. But this self-conception, Antonio had remarked during one of their first encounters, was merely based on the experience of white people raised in semiliterate countries. Mona's hand quivered, spilling tea across her notebook. Why did she tremble at the mere thought of Antonio? *Empty Trash*, she muttered.

She felt nauseous, numb, not entirely prepared to confront humanity; maybe the signal emanating from Philippe the Afflicted was afflicting her in turn (though, much as Mona tried to deny it, the affliction was Antonio's venom collecting in her brain, stinging like the tentacles of a jellyfish, hidden underwater). She remembered something she'd heard a while back from her friend Vlad, a sixty-something Russian novelist she'd met at Iowa during a prestigious writers' residency in the middle of Yankee Nowhere, at a time when Mona was still a newcomer to the circuit. According to Vlad, a self-declared expert on Nabokov's superiority over his Russian contemporaries, peace reigned in Iowa "only because we don't understand each other's languages, and our ignorance protects us." Vlad had a Tatar's slanted eyes and hailed from Georgia, the Soviet region most punished by Stalin, its famous native son. To illustrate his point, Vlad told Mona he'd participated in residencies that included composers and musicians as well as writers—and that was real hell. Peace between musicians, Vlad continued, was impossible, because they could all tell who was a real genius and who was just a mediocre poseur. Music was a transparent field in which genius and mediocrity were self-evident truths—and this only ever led to hatred, distrust, and malaise. No doubt about it: not knowing each other's languages was the key to conviviality, because if we were able to read what everyone else was writing, if we were able to understand it and feel it like music, the Russian calmly concluded, well, then we'd be murdering each other in our beds.

Mona balanced her notebook across her knees and sipped what remained of her tea. Something, someone, was observing her intently. She turned her head and smoothed her hair, casting a furtive gaze over her shoulder. She was startled to confront the black eyes of a fox, fixated on her. She'd never seen a fox in real life; it almost seemed a hallucination, pausing there at the tent's open flaps, handsome and tragic, with an otherworldly glow. Mona held out her palm so she could come over and sniff it. But the fox disappeared, her caramel tail waving like a feathered fan.

A brunette woman sat down beside Mona, flapping a white shawl over her shoulders. She wore a close-fitting red dress, somewhat low-cut, and had stabbed her way across the lawn in red stilettos. She was probably about fifty. "How lovely," Mona whispered, more curious than admiring. Her entire look was an ode to the impractical, the incarnation of a certain sort of literary idea of what it means to be a woman. Her *belle poitrine* was easily discerned like she'd just walked out of a

detective novel in which her destiny was to be murdered by a minor character (such as the unreliable witness). She met Mona's compliment with a broad smile.

"I never take off my heels. *Sono una donna italiana!*"

"*Brava!*" Mona replied. She hadn't realized there would be anyone from Italy at the Meeting. Oh, right, an author from Sicily, Fabrizio Castelli or Castelloni—something like that. The woman introduced herself as Carmina. She was born in Albania and this was her first time in Sweden. Mona imagined Carmina winning the Basske-Wortz Prize and giving interviews from aboard a yacht, smiling in Dolce & Gabbana dresses, surrounded by impoverished children.

The speakers had taken their places at the front of the tent. The first, Abdullah Farid, brought his thick mustache close to the microphone. Wearing a blue blazer and glasses with orange designer frames, Abdullah had a vague Omar Sharif vibe. His voice was dark and deep, and he pronounced his *v*'s and *w*'s like a German.

"My story begins in Iran, around the time I was getting ready to leave the country. I was twenty years old when the revolution broke out, and the Iran that I'd known was about to disappear. I loved life, I loved liberty, and life as I'd known it in Tehran had ended for good. A man offered me a pass- port and safe passage to New York for fifteen thousand dol- lars. For nine thousand, I could go to Italy. I only had ten thousand, so the guy told me he'd take me to Denmark and from there to New York. The first place we ended up was a refugee camp on the outskirts of Copenhagen. I'm not going to say much about that part, though, because the day is just getting started and I don't want to be a downer. When they finally released us and let us go into the city, I barely had enough money to survive. I couldn't afford the trip to New York. So I stayed in Copenhagen."

Abdullah glanced up to observe his audience over the rims of his orange glasses, as though checking his listeners' vitals.

"Never in my life had I heard a single word in Danish. I had to learn it all from scratch. I got a small apartment, a friend of the family from back in Iran got me a job, and that was how I spent the next two years, during which I kept writing in Farsi. But I was an idiot, wasting time. I thought, How am I going to make enough money to live in Denmark if I keep writing in Farsi? I had to learn Danish fast, so that I could write in Danish. In those days my mustache was big and bushy and black, and there were plenty of Danish ladies who wanted to help me out. Beautiful Danish ladies. And they fell in love with me, and I wrote as best I could, and they corrected my terrible beginner's Danish. That's how I published my first book of stories in Danish."

Abdullah paused to take a sip of water.

"So that's how I became a success. I published six novels in Denmark, five books of stories, and most recently a translation of the Koran—which now, to my delight, is finally being translated into Swedish." He added this last part with a light inclination of his skull. "This was my gift to Europe: to bring this magnificent work of language and compassion to occupy the place it deserves—that of a classic work of distinguished prose. And people came to me and said, Abdullah, your books are published all over the place. You win prizes, you have money. You have a wonderful home, a beautiful wife, a TV. People read and discuss your work. Critics appreciate your books, and so do regular people. What more could you want? And I tell them, I want more! Denmark is a small country where they think that success is enough. But it's never enough!"

Laughter, stifled up to this point, rippled under the tent. Abdullah's egomaniacal candor was irresistible. There was something so direct and real about his happiness that put everyone at ease. Except for Carmina, she of the red stilettos: as Abdullah spoke, Carmina pulled the white shawl over the top of her head and coiled the loose end around her neck. It seemed to have spiraled into a hijab. She sat there listening gloomily, dead serious.

"What I'm about to tell you now is something I tell all the young Arab men I meet, the young guys arriving here to Europe. I see them in the street and they look timid to me, awkward. They feel like they don't belong—you can see it in their faces, in their attitudes. They're not happy. They try to be like Europeans and it doesn't work, because they can never achieve that. They think they have to hide a part of themselves, to trade the Arab in them for the future European who's hiding inside, waiting to emerge. Substitute one for the other. And I tell them: No! You don't have to hide, and you don't have to assimilate. It's just the opposite. Precisely the opposite. It's your Arab customs, your Arab manners, that the Europeans have to learn and assimilate for themselves. Because . . . Europe is pregnant! Pregnant with our children! There are millions of us already living here, and millions more on the way. They can try to contain it for a while, but nobody, *nobody* will ever be able to stop it! And we're here to stay!"

Mona applauded, doubled over with laughter. Abdullah Farid was pulling a Kanye West, the Kanye of "BLKKK SKNNN HEAD," a fantastic King Kong avatar in total command of his charm and power. She couldn't help feeling delighted whenever someone exotic (as exotic as her) gave voice to the threat they represented, casting off the minority roleplay and the fake amiability to the dominant culture. Abdullah had come to pronounce an inevitable prophecy: Did you think the "Muslim problem" was just terrorism and women who refuse to wear bikinis and swim in pants? Think again.

The writers from Algeria and Armenia applauded rabidly, infected by Abdullah's enthusiasm, while the Nordics smiled and made animated comments about his delivery. It was obvious that Abdullah had abandoned any illusion of winning the Basske-Wortz, and could therefore entertain himself by giving whatever kind of speech he wanted. Part of the euphoria unleashed in the audience had to do with the certainty of his loss, as if his valiant abdication had electrified them. His was an elegant solution: instead of waiting for the bomb to drop at the prize ceremony, Abdullah had decided to pea-cock around the Meeting and launch his own missiles. Mona amused herself by imaging Europe knocked up with millions of zygotes, the map of the continent appearing to her like a woman splayed out across the water, wearing Italy's boot on one foot, with an arm extended (waving for help? squirming with pleasure?) in the shape of Denmark. How could anyone convince the women of Europe that there'd be nothing in it for them as long as hot Middle Eastern guys kept turning up? A massive hit of DNA, bayonets of semen penetrating European uteruses in a sweeping paramilitary strategy, uncontrollable because it was based on seduction and love— and love and seduction can't be corralled in refugee camps.

Mona noticed a very handsome man watching her as he applauded, entertained by the whole situation. He was too handsome to be a novelist; he had to be a journalist, or a nonfiction author. He was wearing a jacket with a high collar, made of lambskin or imitation-lambskin, similar to the one from *Blade Runner 2049*. He looked Nordic, but with dark hair. Perhaps he was an "Alpine," as Goebbels liked to call the darker Aryans. Mona massaged her neck and returned his smile. Maybe he was just another gringo.

But Abdullah's admonishing speech wasn't over:

“I’ve told you the story of how I became a Danish writer, but I omitted an important detail. The most important of all. I didn’t tell you that I had an advantage. I already knew what it was like to create a language from scratch. To invent my very own language. My father, in Persia, was deaf-mute from birth. Ever since I was little, the only way he could communicate with me was through the signs we invented. We had our own language, my father and I. A language is always an invention of the world from scratch, even if it’s just between a father and son. Learning a language means inventing every single thing it might contain, even though it usually seems like language is something that already exists, something that was already here before us, if only because other mouths have already pronounced the words. I started to write stories from a young age because I felt I had to give voice to my father, who died without having ever been able to hear his own voice. I had to give voice to the people of my city. I had to give voice to the people of Iran. That’s why I write, even today: to give voice to those who have only known silence.”

Mona had stopped laughing, like everyone else in the tent. Her mind had been transported to a noisy, yellowed street from a Naipaul novel, where Abdullah’s deaf-mute father wandered with his big, honey-colored eyes full of things he could never express. The patience of the child, their silent love ... Abdullah had transmitted all this without explicitly mentioning it. He’d lifted and wrenched their hearts using only the power of his voice. Mona’s thoughts turned to those guttural, prehistoric nights of the human species, when every-thing was made of stars and cawing birds: everyone went out to hunt, strong women and men dragging themselves across the earth, invisible to the beasts. Those who couldn’t hunt remained behind, the ones who couldn’t leap in front of a mammoth or throw a spear, the old and the young and the crippled: this was how language had emerged, because it was cold and dark and they could barely see. So they had to communicate aloud, rather than gesturing—but in whispers, lest they be devoured.

How many things remained buried in silence? The extant universe had conjured itself *ab ovo*, from scratch, and with the force necessary to penetrate the crushing avalanche of erasure, so that the history of *what really happened* wouldn’t remain trapped and invisible beneath. Silenced. She trembled despite herself.

Mona removed a mentholated Kleenex from her bag: a little tear had formed under her eye. Sometimes she was overcome by emotion, sudden seizures amid the internal storms that she repressed as best she could. A tiny tear could suddenly become a cascade, like one of those shamanic transformations in which a man swims across a river and emerges as a puma on the other side—only that Mona carried the river and the pumas and everything else she didn’t want to encounter inside, about to burst. She was brimming with tension, to the point of overflow. Huffing the menthol from a Kleenex in her clenched fist helped Mona retake control of her facial muscles and regain her international poise.

“I’m crying, too,” a masculine voice whispered from behind. Mona turned around. The man’s green eyes were re-splendent, dewy beneath the soft vapor rising in the sunlight filtering through the white tent.

It was Chrystos, a young author from Macedonia who’d exchanged timid glances with her at the PEN party. He had radiant white skin and delicate pink lips. Mona had looked him up in the Meeting program after the party and was delighted to learn that he identified as a faggot. She discreetly handed him her pack of Kleenex. Sharing a gentle cry with a fairy: Wasn’t it unthinkable, and therefore adorable? She was delighted she’d come to the Meeting now. Maybe it wouldn’t be necessary to drink her way through it—at least not all of it. It might be possible to go a few days

without being completely intoxicated. Maybe, after this interval of intrigue and anguish, she'd emerge triumphant, crowned and draped in the delicious ermine cape of the Basske-Wortz Prize and attended by its retinue of euros. Maybe she'd only be truly lost if she were somewhere else instead. Mona recalled a writer she'd met during a residency in Provence. A woman from Hawaii, the author of a book that had been adapted to film, had told her she never read anything in translation. "America is so big, there's already so much to read!" the Hawaiian writer explained. She said there was a Nebraskan literature and a Northern Californian literature and Southern Gothic literature, and then of course there was the emerging Hawaiian literature, to which her work was foundational. Writers were figuring out the local stories that their target markets wanted to consume. And as offerings diversified, they cultivated new readers, such that eventually every local writer would supply his readers with stories, and these local writers would be able to live off what they wrote, just like a berry farmer who sells organic red currants at the farmers market on Saturdays. They were riding in a French sculptor's Peugeot 308, crossing vineyards en route to the Marquis de Sade's estate. It was a curvy road, and the Hawaiian asked the sculptor to slow down because she was feeling carsick. After a silence, Mona told her, "Well, I could have stayed home, too, and never learned English or French. But it's more fun to be out in the world, to get to know it—don't you think?" In the rearview mirror, the French sculptor discreetly shot her a cheerful look as she pressed down on the accelerator.

Abdullah's speech had reached its cosmo-mystico-megalomaniacal moment. He spread his arms wide:

"To all who remain in Iran. To all the people of my village. To all the women oppressed by the regime. And to everyone whose voice has been silenced, I say to you: I will be your voice. I'm here, in this world, to be your voice. Thank you for listening."

Carmina let out a long sigh and raised her imperious hand, demanding a chance to speak. Various inquisitive heads turned. Mona hunched over her notebook, wishing she could turn into a fox and dash off into the woods. Carmina leaned over whispering something, but Mona couldn't understand a word of what she said. A round of applause ensued. The floor was open for a Q&A. Carmina stood up and raised her hand again. They brought her the microphone; she was impossible to ignore.

"I'm sorry, Abdullah, but you're not my voice. Don't you think it's presumptuous for you, a man, to give voice to the oppressed women in Iran, all because you had the good fortune to emigrate when you were young, and because you write and publish in the West? You, you of all men: *You're* the voice of the silenced? All those children, all those men and women who will never have a voice for as long as the regime endures—and you think you're going to give it back to them? You, you and your Dane-hypnotizing mustache? Abdullah Farid, tell me: Just who do you think you are?"

Before Abdullah had the chance to respond, an Israeli writer got ahold of the other mic and connected the discussion to the Holocaust. She spoke about the importance of giving voice to those who had lost their own: It's our mission as writers, she said, to bring to life what others are determined to stifle. Chrystos fluttered his eyelashes, a fringed corridor framing his iridescent pupils. His tears had only made him more beautiful, giving his eyes a dramatic shine.

"I think I need a drink," he whispered.

The Israeli writer, Hava Pinkus, passed the microphone to a man so white he looked almost albino. He introduced himself as Akto Perksson, one of the Nordic writers. The Meeting had its

international contingent and its Scandinavian counterpart, a separate track that included half a dozen authors from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, who were invited to make contributions to the international conversation on the legacy of Viking culture. Akto explained that he was a translator from Greek and Latin, as well as Swedish and Finnish, but that recently he'd decided to write fiction in Swedish, which was why he felt it appropriate that he offer his comments in that language.

He let loose a string of vowels that sounded like little wet explosions. The visiting authors put on their headsets for the simultaneous translation. The English interpreter used expressions like, *Well, you know*, in that sort of Great Plains accent that lends everything an affable and optimistic air. *Well, you know, I got run over by a truck. Well, you know, I've got two months to live.* Here was an artificial American sun rising over the phantasmagoric languages of Europe, that pregnant slut: *Well, you know, the past thirty years have been peaceful in Europe, and obviously we have to remain on the path to peace.*

Chrystos let his jaw drop like a cartoon character, and Mona knew right away that she'd found her gay sidekick for the festival. "I guess the only wars that matter are those that involve France, England, and the U.S.," Chrystos murmured. He handed back the pack of Kleenex.

There were Bosnia and Serbia, of course. And then there were Macedonia, Montenegro, the general *Yugoangst*. As though she were reading a friend's Facebook status out loud, Mona, whose mind had taken a backseat in her brain, surprised herself by saying, "War is everywhere." The words slipped out and took Chrystos a bit by surprise. The currents of an imperceptible pod of electric eels seemed to raise some hair in the little sea of heads before her. Was that what they were doing there, releasing imperceptible animals into the wild? But ideas ran the same risks within the mind as they did outside of it, after they were released. Or worse. In her head, for example, there was an entire school of piranhas just waiting to shred her ideas. Under the tent, everything the guests were writing in the air with their bodies could be captured on video: there was no such thing as the wild outdoors. Mona brought a hand to her neck, still wrapped in silk.

That was when she noticed that Philippe Laval, that sensation of French literature, was starting at her from the middle set of benches. They both hunched back down over their respective Moleskines. She'd read his first book, a comedy about an unusually intelligent boy who is traumatized by his experience at the *École Normale Supérieure* and leaves Paris for a life of noble seclusion in the countryside. Now, who would be the first victim of her charms? Mona looked around. The Alpine nonfiction writer was nowhere to be found.

The Q&A session ended with a big round of applause. The lady in stilettos was no longer at Mona's side. Abdullah had never answered her question. A true veteran of literary conferences, he'd allowed his listeners' own urge to speak to dominate the rest of the session. Chrystos adjusted the silk foulard around his neck and slid his finger along Mona's elbow.

"Who's publishing you in France?" he asked.

"Gallimard."

"Mmm, well done! I'm with Flammarion."

"Fantastic."

“Yeah, it’s not Gallimard, but it’s a good one.”

When she saw he wanted her opinion on the subject, Mona smiled—Yeah, it’s not bad—with calculated deference. It was actually kind of funny, she added, because her editor, Marianne Dubaut, had been Gabriel García Márquez’s French translator for thirty years. Anyway, everything at Gallimard was done with the utmost attention and care. “Funny” and “not bad” were remnants of the English that she’d learned in American universities: a trail of trivial adjectives used to punctuate false modesty.

“Wow,” Chrystos replied, “I’m so jealous. To be surrounded by that kind of energy. The energy of the Boom, the Boom generation—that’s what they call it, right? Are those writers still so important to young people in South America? I think it’s vital to surround oneself with grand personalities. Everything now is so . . . boring. Don’t you think? It’s like nobody cares about being a *personality* anymore. As if being a writer were no different from being a professor or a lawyer. It makes going to a writers’ conference feel like attending a dental convention. That’s what was so great about Abdullah: he didn’t remind me of a dentist. Sorry if your parents are dentists! But I guess at the same time, personality can sometimes be something totally opaque, illegible. Have you met Ragnar yet, the Icelandic poet? You know his work? I sat next to him in the van and told him I admired his work—I said I admired it almost *too much*, because I’d read everything of his that ever came out in German (I used to have this boy- friend from Cologne, so I picked up some German—and there’s worse things you can catch from a German boyfriend, right?). Anyway after a while Ragnar turned to me and said, I’m sorry, but this wasn’t a good place—the van, I guess—it good place to be a writer’s writer. He didn’t talk to me the entire rest of the way. And he was awake the whole time—he didn’t even try to hide it! He was just looking out the window. Isn’t that funny? You think he has Asperger’s? You think he’ll win the Basske-Wortz? Part of me thinks that they brought us all here to be his courtiers, just to fill the place up. Because it’s obvious that if they invited him *and he came* it’s because they’re giving it to him. Another part of me thinks, Great, I’d love to be part of his court. What do you think?”

What did Mona think? That her Alpine man, probable author of journalistic nonfiction, was very far away, talking to other people, that he’d taken off his *Blade Runner* jacket, and that navy blue looked very good on him. But she said nothing. Chrystos and Mona left the tent with their empty mugs. Motionless over the lapis lazuli lake, a tenuous yellow star bade farewell as it faded into the day’s slow heat. Chrystos had published a European bestseller on the family of Sigmund Freud, and clearly belonged to another league entirely—the league that actually sells books. Mona, on the other hand, was much more niche. The next talk was about to begin. “I’m going back to my cabin to write for a while,” Mona said, blowing him a kiss.

“Seriously? You can write in the middle of one of these things? Well, I’m jealous. Have fun. ~~Wait, I just remembered something. Please don’t think I’m obsessed! I am, but just a little, and it’s a normal kind of obsessed. It’s about Ragnar. In the van, I watched him the whole way here—out of my peripheral vision, obviously, so I wouldn’t piss him off. And noticed something really weird. So, yeah, the Armenian poet yawned a few times during a conversation he was having with the Russian in front of me? And yawning’s contagious. So I yawned, and Hava did, too. She was sitting next to me on the other side of the aisle. But Ragnar never yawned. Not once. You see where I’m going with this? He has no empathy reflex. The man is beyond all human ties. He exists in another sphere.~~”

Mona started down the winding path that led back to the writers' quarters. They were all housed in rustic summer cabins. She remembered the room they'd assigned her was in a little duplex, two units connected by a small porch. But all of the cabins were dangerously similar, and she didn't recall which number was hers.

Mona inhaled deeply: the aroma of something like eucalyptus, the herbal freshness of the Swedish countryside. She fired up her vape and inhaled again, longer and slower this time. Through one cabin window, she saw the huge hairy back of someone facing a television. Another man was seated in front of him, semi-nude. Maybe Russians, Mona thought, looking away so that she wouldn't seem nosy. Some of the guests probably had to share rooms, an affliction so intolerable she could hardly imagine it. She tried to deduce the location of her cabin by facing the slope that led down to the lake and retracing her steps.

~~A small group of people was coming toward her. Five or six men, no more, in dark clothes, though the one leading the way was wearing a red sweater and holding some kind of staff. They might have been hikers, but the uniformity of the group caught Mona's attention. They looked like a soccer team or some kind of religious cult. Mona raised a hand to wave, but they veered into the woods without seeming to notice her.~~

Back in her cabin, Mona made sure the blinds were pulled. Then she settled down on the immaculate bed and opened her laptop. Two messages from Raoul, her favorite student, asking if she was okay. Missed calls from Antonio on practically all her messaging apps, and a photo of Franco's *cazzo*. She ignored them. Mona closed her eyes; her head was splitting. She got up to wash her face and spread a transparent green unguent over her skin. The snail mucus masque promised to reverse any dryness caused by airplane travel and hangovers. She kissed her vape a few times, then returned to the bed doubled over, coughing. With her laptop on her chest, she put on Mina's "Vorrei che fosse amore" and navigated to a porn site.

The videos started loading. Without really thinking about what she was doing, Mona opened another tab and started googling some of the other participants at the Meeting. She couldn't find anything about probable Alpine author of nonfiction. And beneath all the action, little green notifications kept lighting up—unanswered calls on Skype. Antonio again. Her novel-in-progress was also there, waiting for her, minimized at the bottom edge of the screen, far from the maddening clicks.

In her open tab, a buff dude with an American haircut was massaging a redhead's pussy while a shorter guy ate her ass. She was a consummate professional, arching her back and neck for the camera, letting herself really get into it. Her hair hung down to her shoulders, swaying back and forth as she tossed her head and gazed off-screen, as though she weren't entirely present—as though her body parts weren't completely hers. It seemed to Mona like the redhead was performing her movements for someone beyond the frame, not for her viewers or her partners. Mona liked to imagine the mental life of such moments, the connection between pleasure and "being somewhere else": skewered, and at the same time unreachable, inaccessible, sole guardian of a complex delight that wasn't trivially symmetrical to the body's adventures. A man, on the other hand, was always obliged to "be there," condemned to physical urgency and to being one with his cyclopean, one-eyed phallus. But pussies, no: they could drift, lunge, fill and empty themselves like voracious gluttons. And that was why—Mona sighed, settling into some dopamine-fueled theoretical masturbation—pussies were philosophical organs par excellence. A pussy put the body right where the philosophizing mind could scrutinize it, perforate it, grind on it, penetrate it, flip it around—all

while the intellect associated with that pussy performed its own secret, personal, and intimate revolution. She thought it was funny how even the #MeToo movement seemed to echo this private sentiment, at least lexically, spelling it out with- out spelling it out, since “#MeToo” could be pronounced *pound me too*, which in “Colonial Spanish” would translate to something like *dame masa a mí también*, destroy me, fuck me, too. But nobody seemed to notice, to be conscious of the linguistic underpinnings, and #MeToo had already passed into the annals of history as a synonym for emancipation and freedom.

At times the redhead almost seemed to be whispering something, speaking to someone only she could see, like a classic case of hallucination. Her name was Naomi. Who was she talking to off-camera? Naomi. I MOAN, thought Mona, who always turned words over in her mind to see if they could mean something else. I think, therefore I moan. Would Naomi end up with bruises? How long do bruises last? The thought of a man dressed in black, watching Naomi off-screen while the two other men gave it to her from behind, made Mona shudder.

Mona closed her eyes and lowered her panties. She sucked on her index and middle fingers before slowly introducing them to her interior world. She exhaled slowly, her body expectant before the nebulous arrival of pleasure—or the thought of it, which would come first.

Skype; incoming call. Was it possible that they’d read her manuscript? That fast? Upon the insistence of the editor, she had sent a draft of her impending second book. Mona cleared her throat and double-checked the Band-Aid over the computer camera. All good.

“*Ça va, Mona, tout va bien? Where are you, in New York?*”

It was Myriam Legouleme, Mona’s French translator. Ah, Sweden, the Basske-Wortz. She didn’t know Mona had been nominated. *Bien!* chirped Myriam. Mona heard the dry rasp of a pencil against paper. *Oui oui*, Myriam and Marianne Dubaut herself had read it. With great interest. They had comments. Would she like to hear them now? Mona didn’t have time to respond.

“Mona, the first thing I want to tell you is there’s no need to be concerned. This happens to everyone.”

“Why would I be concerned?”

“Really, it happens to everyone. It’s every writer’s second novel. You read it and think, Wow, where did that come from?”

Mona hesitated. Maybe she’d been in too much of a hurry to show them the manuscript. Maybe it hadn’t yet become a novel. It was still a pupa, and the butterfly trapped inside the pupa was drying out, rotting without ever having been born, a fetus that wasn’t alive, but wasn’t exactly dead yet, either. The idea of something dying inside her made Mona feel a cold, throbbing pain, as though her body were a voodoo doll held in someone’s frozen hand.

“Myriam, I’m really interested in your comments. I think it’s really important that we have this conversation and that’s why I wanted to show you some pages, a preliminary version, so that—”

But Myriam was no Yankee: putting on a show of good-will and enthusiasm did nothing for her. Myriam was “no bullshit,” with a French accent. Her lips must have been close to the mouthpiece because Mona could hear her breathing, the air flowing hot from the rancid cavern of her stomach.

“It’s just that it’s so . . . difficult! The characters are difficult. I kept asking myself, where is all the freshness and vitality of the first book? It’s not *here*—that much I can tell you. The dialogue is practically incomprehensible. It made me ask myself, Am I really expected to make an effort to *understand*? Seriously? Why do I have to make such an effort? If I don’t make the effort, am I just stupid, according to this book? Mind you, it’s the novel that’s posing these questions, not me.”

“Well, I don’t think the novel thinks you’re stupid. I don’t think any book would ever think that about you, Myriam.”

“All jokes aside, Mona. Listen to me. Do you hear what I’m trying to tell you?”

“I don’t know what to say, Myriam. I’m sorry you had to read something half-done. I didn’t mean to bore you. I guess I was trying to be serious. I don’t know.”

“I don’t think you have to give up on seriousness in your work—that’s not it. Literature, whenever it’s *vraie littérature*, is always serious. It’s always serious. What you have to rethink is the opposition between life and non-life.” *Life or non-life*, Myriam emphasized. “Because your characters are *dead*. They’re *all dead*. And a novel is all about making them . . . *live*. So the question becomes, ‘Why should I care about these people? They’re so . . .’ ”

“Difficult?”

“Yes, difficult! But more than anything else, they’re dead.” “Do you think they know they’re dead?” Mona asked, somewhat surprised by her own question.

“What do you mean, like it’s a zombie novel? Well, maybe they think they’re alive, and maybe you think they are, too . . . but the writing just isn’t there yet. That’s the underlying issue: the writing is dead. But, like I said, don’t get upset about it. It happens to the best. The second novel is always the hardest. And we have faith in you, both Marianne and I. You have to take your time, remember that nobody’s trying to rush you. Your readers, they’re expecting something from you. But not *this*. You can’t give them this novel.”

Myriam kept on in this vein, aspirating the final consonant whenever she said “this,” as if it rhymed with *mépris*. Was she ever going to stop? Maybe Mona could just say she was about to go through a tunnel and lose the signal? Maybe she could just say, *Listen, Myriam, the internet connection is really bad here, can I call you later?* And then hide forever in the Swedish forest, lead a humble life, become like Bergman’s Monika, triumphantly lost, vanishing without a trace.

She was imagining herself spreading honey across rustic rye bread, wearing a torn dress and tall rain boots, only to be interrupted by the melody of another incoming Skype call.

She’d dropped the connection and Myriam was calling back. Mona noticed her finger was still moist from her *sancta sanctorum*. She raised it to her nose so she could sniff it. Head lolling, eyes unfocused, like she was watching another scene, off-camera.

Myriam's voice occupied the whole room, but Mona couldn't follow her train of thought. Anyway, even if Myriam hadn't said so explicitly, Gallimard wasn't going to make an offer on her book. They wouldn't publish it . . . not unless she took home the Basske-Wortz. You never can tell what a prize committee might do . . . Mona knew that what she did (what- ever it was) was considered *too intellectual* (or difficult) for her to achieve rapid commercial recognition. But the Basske-Wortz Prize, people said, operated outside the market—that is, outside the trivial criteria imposed by the market. Or at least Basske-Wortz himself was cited as saying, "The market doesn't exist because the market is imaginary, and the imagination is infinite, at least as long as the human race survives." The snail mucus had dried, leaving Mona's face cracked with gray fractals, like a girl from one of the bukkake porn channels. Flakes of peeling dried liquid hung from her face like little flaps.

Bisou bisou au revoir, and tell me when you're next in Paris, although we wouldn't want to interfere with your writing plans at all. Skype inquired whether Mona would like to rate the call (Excellent? Good? Normal?) and if she wanted to report any kind of problem with the connection. The Swedish summer light covered everything in a soft layer of dust, white material that made it seem like it had just rained chalk. It was so cruel that darkness wouldn't start to fall until close to midnight. The day would remain in this pale limbo for interminable hours. It was a writers' purgatory, the white page as breathing air.

Translated from the Spanish by Adam Morris