

Stoning the Devil | Garry Craig Powell

The letter is in Gulf Arabic. Mechanics, spelling, etc., follow English conventions in this translation.

Dear Nawal,

In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate—cousin, I've just completed the *hajj* and my sins are forgiven, haha. Don't worry: I haven't turned pious, like Maryam did when she got back from Mecca. I'm the same old Badria; I won't be wearing a veil and black gloves when we meet again. You are probably wondering why I didn't return to school after I went to Muscat with my family during the January break, and why I haven't returned your calls—I'm sorry about that—but you mustn't think I don't care for you any more. I love you like a sister, dearest, and I'm going to explain everything now. I'm writing this letter in my "holy" hotel room to tell you about the jinni that attacked me in Muscat and the accident that happened here. Then you'll forgive me, *inshallah*.

Where do I begin? My thoughts are darting about like hares in the desert. Every time Muscat crosses my mind, I cry. But at least I remember now. For over a month, while I was at home, I was numb, as if I'd been anesthetized. My memory started coming back eleven or twelve days ago as we drew near Mecca. I could hardly think for the noise—Musabbah and father shouting in the front of the Nissan Patrol, Moza and Muna chattering like parakeets in the back, and a lovesick Kuwaiti twanging his lute on the stereo—and I could barely breathe for the smoke of the men's cigarettes. Grandmother would bleat whenever I tried to open a window. The dunes had drifted by for two days, dark and dull through the tinted glass, as if we were in one of those endless, pointless films from Iran. But now we were driving through ranges of bare rock, brown as burnt bread, and the thorn trees were black scribble against a sky of somber blue. Camels stood in the scrub like cutouts. The scenery brought Oman back to me, especially the approach to Muscat. As we crested the last pass, the sun drooped over a city whose white tower blocks glistened like long teeth. The scorched mountains in the background had sharp serrated ridges. Grandmother shook and made gurgling noises like a sheep having its throat cut. "God be praised," she groaned, over and over. "I shall be a *hajja* before I die, *inshallah*." But to me the holy city looked like Muscat. As the sun set, the hole in the sky filled like a fresh wound, leaked over the mountains and minarets, and Mecca sucked up the blood like a sponge.

Suddenly I saw the blood on my nightdress and bed sheets anew.

When my mother called for me in my hotel bedroom in Muscat to fetch me for breakfast, I had no idea where the gore had come from. At first she thought my period must have started early. Then she noticed my eyes—they were like a sleepwalker's, she said—and she examined me and found bruises and scratches. *It was a jinni*, I said. That was all I could tell her.

But as we crawled through the miasma of traffic and fumes and horns and checkpoints—the religious police who thumbed our passports had bloodshot eyes and sharp yellow teeth, like demons—the memories flooded back. Father hadn't put his *gutra* back on after we'd stopped to pray at a roadside mosque, and his shiny brown bald scalp recalled the jinni's head, which was like a polished leather ball. And yet his face was wrinkled, with mean little monkey features and a white beard. He said nasty things—the jinni, I mean. *You're beautiful*, he said, but his face was clenched like a fist, and he uttered words I've heard Musabbah use to describe the camels rutting, forbidden words, and maybe he spoke in the tongue of devils also because I didn't understand everything.

I don't know how we found the hotel. Cars and buses choked the streets like Dubai during the Shopping Festival, and we had to buy Seven-Up from sweat-soaked emaciated Indians who scurried around the vehicles like rats, shouting with hoarse voices and wild eyes. When we finally arrived after the evening prayer, our guide was waiting for us in the lobby. Abu Bakr was a kinky-haired Egyptian, already dressed in the pilgrim's *ihram*. He shook hands with father and Musabbah and told us that a maid would deliver *ihram* garments to our rooms. I wanted to sleep with Moza and Muna, even though they are still annoying children, or with mother and grandmother, but father said I was fifteen, old enough to be married and old enough to have my own room, which was what he'd said in Oman, too. Now I remembered what had happened there; I was scared and I cried and pleaded but he said it was already arranged. So I went up to my bedroom with a maid and bathed with that unscented soap you have to use, then joined my sisters in my mother's and grandmother's room, and after a while a Filipina knocked and barged in, bearing our loose white robes. At that moment I recalled my door opening in the middle of the night in Muscat—father had instructed me not to lock it in case of fire, and for a moment, muddled with sleep, I'd thought the jinni was my father—and when the creature spoke and his voice sounded as if it came from a cave, I found I couldn't scream; when his claws pinched my skin, I was petrified. He must have cast a spell on me.

I didn't tell anyone that the horror of that night in Muscat had

revisited me, not even mother. She'd been so sad since then and I didn't want to make her any sadder. Besides, I hardly had time for confidences: we were all swept up in the pilgrimage.

You've performed *umrah*, which is the same as the *hajj* except for the last stages, so I won't describe everything. In the morning everyone was in *ihram*—I'd never seen grandmother without her black *abayah* on, and I was used to seeing her in her *burqa*, which made her look like a crow, so she looked funny in white, with her face showing like a wrinkled baby's, and I hadn't realized Musabbah and father were so flabby until I saw their bare left breasts flopping like unbaked dough as we walked, all the way to the Great Mosque, more than four kilometers! Musabbah actually stopped swearing and looked devout, haha. At noon we prayed there: that is, I went through the motions, mumbling those meaningless words—did I say that?—God is great, there is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet, and so on and so forth. In his sermon the sheikh said that all Muslims must support the blessed intifada in Palestine, and hoped that soon the AlAqsa mosque in Jerusalem would be delivered from the hands of the Zionist gang. Then we circled the Ka'aba seven times, with pilgrims pressing in on us like herds of goats, stifling us—father and mother and Musabbah and grandmother made a ring around us girls so the men couldn't touch us—and it frightened me, that big box draped in black. Father scampered in front of me, like a little old monkey, and it occurred to me that I knew next to nothing about him. He doesn't know exactly how old he is, but he must be over sixty, and he was born in a Bedu tent; Musabbah says he shot three of the Bani Yas when he was young with a British rifle that hangs in the men's majlis. Of course I'm not allowed in that part of the house. Once I asked father to bring the gun to the women's quarters to show me but he said weapons were for men. He doesn't dote on me like some fathers do. In fact he's almost a stranger, because he usually stays with his first wife, and when he visits our house he spends most of his time in the men's quarters with Musabbah and my older brothers. He sleeps with mother once a week, though, and the next morning she looks like a beaten donkey. She shrinks away from everyone and her eyes are sad. I'm pleased that men aren't allowed to sleep with their wives while they're on the *hajj*. After the accident, *inshallah*, he won't wish to spend the night with us any more.

Can you imagine me, mischievous Badria, hot and tired and thirsty, stumbling around the black cube, the navel of the world, haha? Wondering who my father is, then wondering who God is. If he's merciful and compassionate, I was thinking, why is everyone so terrified of him?

What is he like, really? A wise old man like President Zayed, with a dyed black beard and designer sunglasses, a hooked nose and a grin, or maybe a little monkey with eyes like a sand-adder's?

It was too crowded for us women to run the last three circuits, as you're meant to. Father and Musabbah managed to jog round, though. Mother and grandmother tried to herd us toward the black stone that fell from heaven—so they say—but men started bumping into them and we couldn't get there. Musabbah said he and father had to knock a few Pakistanis and Indonesians out of the way to reach it and kiss it. Mother told Musabbah that he was supposed to behave like a servant of God, but my brother gave her a pious look and swore he had no evil thoughts in his mind, he was just full of fervor and didn't know his own strength. What an idiot.

Next we drank water from the well of Zamzam, which the baby Ismail is supposed to have dug up with his feet when the prophet Ibrahim abandoned his wife, Hagar. What kind of man would leave his wife and baby to die of thirst and hunger? Our second favorite prophet, that's who. Ibrahim had two wives. I don't like men who marry more than once unless it's to give protection to a widow or divorcée. But have you noticed that the second wife is always much younger, like my mother? Do you think this is God's will or men's? According to the Holy Qur'an, God decreed that men could have four wives, except of course for our favorite prophet, who could have as many as he wanted. Don't you think that's strange? Do you ever have sinful thoughts, dear one? I do, all the time. Even here, on the pilgrimage.

That night Musabbah shaved his head in a Pakistani barbershop—father didn't need to—and we women went to the hotel salon to have an inch cut off our hair. Before we went to bed, father told me not to lock my door again, but mother came to my room to say goodnight, and she bolted it on her way out. *Keep this locked every night*, she said. *And put the chain on*. And she was right: someone or something rattled the handle when I was asleep. I feared that the jinni had followed me from Oman to Saudia, but it didn't happen again, thanks to God.

The next day Musabbah drove mother and me to a hospital in Jeddah. Musabbah played Fayruz on the stereo, very loud, and mother and I held hands and cried together. I told her that the jinni's attack had come back to me, piecemeal, the way nightmares sometimes do, and with her I relived that morning in Muscat. I could hardly move, and my mother beat her breasts and pulled her hair out. She asked me who did it and I told her it was a jinni. *What did he look like?* she shrieked. When I told her, she groaned like a camel giving birth and asked if it

might have been my father. Nawal, I don't love him but he is my father and he couldn't act like a beast or a devil to his own daughter. Could he? *It was a jinni*, I said. *It had to be a jinni*. She asked if he had cloven hoofs like a demon. *No, I said, he had bare human feet*. But jinn can assume any shape they choose, can't they? *I hate him*, my mother said, and scuttled from the room like a scorpion. She came back with my grandmother, who crumpled up in her *abayah* as if it were an empty black bag and whimpered. She's always crying, though. Mother covered me up in my *abayah* and Musabbah appeared, looking as gormless as a goat. Doors banged. I heard my mother's shouts and screams, and my father's voice, also harsh and angry. They yelled at each other in the corridor where anyone could hear them. *Come in and look at her*, my mother told him, but he said it wasn't right for him to enter his daughter's bedroom. It wasn't right for Musabbah to be there, either. He gaped at me like an Afghan workman and scratched his crotch; I felt like spitting in his face. *How is she going to get married now?* mother asked father with scorn, but to my surprise he answered mildly. *We can take her to Egypt*, he said. *Or Saudia. The hajj starts soon. We can make the pilgrimage and no one will talk. Yes, Saudia is better*. My mother replied as if he were a dog. *You propose to take my daughter to some dirty foreign doctor and have her sewn up?* There was a long silence, like when a teacher asks a hard question at school. Finally my father said, *Inshallah, her husband will believe she's a virgin. May God protect her*.

May God protect you!, my mother said, as if it were a curse. I thought he would hit her, but I heard him shuffling away in his sandals.

So I knew I was going to the hospital to be repaired but I had no idea how funny it would be. Musabbah told the receptionist, a Syrian or Jordanian girl wearing a white *shayla* over her hair, that we wanted a lady doctor—and she answered that they were busy and only had male doctors. Musabbah tried to bribe her, then threatened her, but she left and came back with a big Sudanese man in a white coat and turban. He told my brother to calm down or he would have to leave. In the end a Filipina nurse took me and my mother into a little room. A tall, skinny man said he was Doctor something, in Arabic, but from his accent I'm sure he was English or American. He had glasses, hair the color of the dunes at Hatta, and skin as white as paper. He must have been forty but his face was hairless like a boy's. Maybe it was because he didn't seem like a man that I felt little shame when he asked me to undress. My mother nearly died, though.

After the doctor had examined me, he asked who had hurt me and I told him, a jinni. He laughed without mirth and said he hadn't heard that one before. My mother shook her head. He asked her who did it and she shrugged her shoulders. He muttered to himself but I'm good at English, and after all the American films I've seen, I understood. He said *fuckin' animals* and *goddamn country*, very bad words.

Then he asked my mother when I was getting married and she said, when God wills. He told her it was usual to have this operation a few days before the wedding and my mother nodded. He asked why we wanted it done now, and my mother told him, because it is my husband's wish. *Are you sure you want it done now?* he asked her. *As you like*, she said. He repeated the question and she gave the same answer. This happened again and again until I thought he would go crazy. In the end he said, *it's up to you*. My mother was wearing a veil so he couldn't see her face. He stared at the black cloth and she didn't reply. *So are we doing it?* he said. *God willing*, she answered. He shook his head and stormed out. I thought he was furious with us and wouldn't do anything for me but the nurse picked up a jug and took me to a toilet. I had to make water in the jug and give it to her. Back in the doctor's office a few minutes later she said I was lucky because I wasn't pregnant. Then she gave me an injection and I fell asleep. When I woke up, mother said I was a maid again. Hahahaha. I just had to lie in the bed for an hour. I didn't even have to have the stitches out because they dissolve on their own. The nurse and doctor said I must be careful. I mustn't play basketball at school or ride the horses on our farm. I'm not supposed to tell anyone, either, but I know I can trust you, dear cousin.

The next days went by in a blur of shopping in the *souks* and eating. On the eighth day we had baths and put on *ihram* again. We were supposed to walk to Mina, ten kilometers away! But Abu Bakr told us that the religious police had closed the underground walkways because two hundred pilgrims had been trampled to death or suffocated down there. "Thanks be to God, we weren't there," my grandmother said. But I wished I had been.

We went on a smelly bus to the plain of Arafat. When we got there we saw tents as far as the eye could see. Two million people, Abu Bakr said. We had to stand for hours under that sand-filled, dirty yellow sky for *wuquf*, contemplating God, praying for mercy, and wanting to use the toilet. Sometimes God seemed like a little old monkey to me, and at others he was like the poster of Sheikh Zayed on a white horse, wearing sunglasses and grinning, and once he was a column of stone with a few lines chiseled in it—eyes, nose, and mouth. I truly prayed

this time but Zayed and the monkey only smirked back, and the stone was silent.

Then we took a bus and performed the sunset and evening prayers at Muzdalifah, where we slept in a tent without any A/C. Even the Arabs stank like Asians and Africans and there was nowhere to take a shower. Everyone says you feel pure on the *hajj*, but how can you when you're dirty and sweaty most of the time, and suffer hour after hour holding your water? I'd rather go on a shopping trip to Paris or London, wouldn't you?

I can't explain what happened at Mina the next day. All the pilgrims were carrying pebbles, smiling and laughing and rushing about, skittish, like horses when they are about to rear up or bolt, their voices too loud. They dedicated themselves to God and swore they would drive the devils out of themselves; I did, too. My heart was pounding like the drums at Eid al Fitr and I clutched my two big pebbles, one in each hand, as if they were grenades. I was thinking about the jinni; I wanted to hurt him. But when we came to the *jamra*—it's a column of stone like the god I had imagined on the plain of Arafat—and everyone started pelting it, shouting, *take that, Satan!*—I raised my right arm and took aim and at that very moment my father stepped in front of me and I screamed and threw the rock with all my might and a red flower bloomed on the back of his bald head. He didn't move right away. Then he turned in slow motion and stared. Although it was quite hot I shuddered as if I'd felt a sudden chill. I put the other pebble into my right hand. I wasn't thinking. Honestly I aimed at the *jamra* but I felt a force bending my arm and somehow I flung the stone into my father's face. It struck him between the eyes and he fell like a horse with a broken leg. I started shaking. *Don't cry, Badria*, mother said, *it was an accident*. Everyone said the same thing. Of course I didn't mean to hurt my own father.

They didn't take him to a hospital. I don't know whether the hospitals were full with all the people who had been crushed in the tunnels, or father refused to go. He was befuddled and had a headache and kept falling asleep. The next day was Eid al Adha so Musabbah bought a sheep and kept it in the car until after sunset prayer, when he took us down to the street and flipped the animal onto its back on the sidewalk and tied its legs together. It was shitting uncontrollably like they always do. He gave the knife to father but he dropped it and started stroking the ewe's face. *You're a lovely camel*, he said, *and I'm going to ride you all the way back to Dubai*. Musabbah reminded father

that he was the head of the family and had to make the sacrifice, but father said, *She's too young, she will be one of my seventy-two virgins in heaven*. In the end mother had to hold him while Musabbah cut the sheep's throat. The blood spurted onto his *dishdasha* and pooled on the pavement. I think he enjoyed it. As usual Moza and Muna sobbed like babies. I've always felt sick every time I've seen the sacrifice, but this year, Nawal, as I saw the ewe's rolling eyes and heard her screaming like a human, it was worse. I knew how she felt.

Tomorrow we go home to Dubai. This afternoon they took father to the hospital because his headache was worse and he couldn't stay awake at all. The doctor said he had a serious concussion and must stay in hospital but mother said God would protect him, for we had to return to the Emirates. Musabbah was the head of the family now but he didn't argue; father has always treated his half-brothers better. Mother said that father's other wife could look after him if he started acting like a mad dog, because *she* wasn't going to.

Nawal, dearest, you are not only my cousin but also my sister, and I hope we will always love each other. I don't care what people say. I'm not going to be a good girl anymore, because if you are good they slit your throat, drain your blood and suck your flesh. To hell with men, devils and jinn. Let God judge me. Aisha was nine when our favorite prophet married her. The *mutaween* say he didn't know her as a woman until she had her first period. But how do they know? Do you believe it? Why must women submit to the will of men? Because the Holy Qur'an tells us to. And who wrote the Holy Qur'an? Men, that's who. Arab men. They assure us that the Archangel Jibreel dictated it to our favorite prophet because he said so. There's no other evidence. Everything depends on the word of one man. I don't understand why God allows men and jinn to be so wicked unless he's a nasty little monkey or a grinning God with sunglasses. But I must go. See you in Starbuck's on Thursday at seven? Mother says I can borrow her car and driver.

In the name of God ~~the Merciful, the Compassionate,~~ the Merciless, the Pitiless—In the name of God the Blind Butcher—

Your tender lamb

Badria

haha