

**UPSTAIRS, RENÉE  
IS SQUATTING ON  
THE NEW BIDET.**

**SHE SNEEZES  
TO FORCE OUT  
THE SEMEN,  
A TRICK HER  
GRANDMOTHER  
TAUGHT HER.**

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Kamand Kojouri

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**ADA**

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1917. A brothel in France. A prostitute names her baby Adam and dies shortly after giving birth. The baby, however, is a girl and is sent to an orphanage run by nuns as soon as she is an adolescent. There, she becomes Ada, an eager-to-please girl, who falls in love with Théo. But after a rape and subsequent pregnancy, she struggles to escape. Lost between two worlds, Ada remains hopeful that she will belong and be loved.



Kamand was born in Tehran, raised in Dubai and Toronto, and currently resides in London. She wants to rewrite women into history by giving voice to a silenced female perspective. This is her first novel.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **NOVEMBER 1917 BRIVES-CHARENSAC**

Everyone in the house knows that Lola will die soon, except for Lola. She stubbornly holds every breath until she is sure that she can take another. Lola's mother died during childbirth, and her mother before her. It was known that the women in their family were cursed with bearing daughters that killed them.

Her mother, a devout Catholic, rocked her for an hour before deciding on the name Dolores — Lola for short. It's unclear whether the meaning of her name, *sorrows*, shaped her destiny or that her destiny moulded itself to fit her name — much like the way a liquid expands to fill the shape of its container. But since the protagonist will be unborn for a few more hours, it's important to explain now that nothing in life is ever clear.

Everything is perceived through glasses tainted by the dirt of prejudice and the dust of assumption. By retelling this past, the writer modestly attempts to wipe away the grime of judgement so the reader may look, understand, and perhaps appreciate.

As Lola bites the insides of her cheeks, she notices the bucket placed beneath her and wonders, *what if my baby falls into shit?*

She pushes her weight into the chair and bites Céline's fist while Éloïse watches helplessly. Éloïse is always wary of appearing this way. She worries about it so much that it makes her helpless.

Fifi, the black sub-mistress, is bustling about looking for towels. It's important to look busy because the pistol-toting Madame Sabine — whom the girls call Maman — certainly doesn't pay her to sit on her bottom. Her paisley green dress will travel all around the house tonight but her attention, like the reader's, must only be undivided in this room where the birth will take place.

Céline traces Lola's uneven bite mark on her veined hand. She doesn't dare look over her shoulder to check on Éloïse. But poor Éloïse hasn't said a word. She's only looking out of the uncurtained window, holding a lit cigarette. Standing there in one of her reveries, she appears more fragile than the bric-a-bracs in Maman's vitrine.

"Fetch my rosary," Lola whimpers in pain.

"Éloïse, move!" says Céline.

Renée's fake moans from the opposite room are distracting for a moment. She doesn't mind the burly man mounting her, his hot vinegar breath on her neck. Maman has been very happy with her since she contracted syphilis — the ideal venereal disease. Not exactly incurable, but it does grant soldiers a thirty-day respite from the carnage of the front line. And ever since the moustachioed Philippe Pétain, the new Commander-in-Chief, ordered mass arrests and firing squad executions for mutinous soldiers, they have been lining up all the way from the East to sleep with her.

Renée squeezes the soldier's hand on her breast. Seeing her notice the black albatross on his hand, he pushes her on all fours and rams into her from behind. Every thrust is filled with an unwavering amount of fury. Only when she surrenders to the pain does it subside. Her relaxed muscles allow him to penetrate her further. Holding onto both her elbows, he empties himself in her. He lets go and she falls onto the bed.

Renée's heavy-handed sister, Ruelle, is downstairs with Julie enticing the passers-by. She waves her once-white handkerchief to flag down the gendarmes. Julie, thespian that she is, fans herself coyly. She opens her bodice just enough to let a heavy breast slip out. The men whistle and cheer as Julie runs her tongue across her upper teeth bringing attention to the pleasant gap in the middle.

"Some of us don't need to resort to nudity," says Ruelle.

"Here to bake pies, are you?" Julie squeezes her nipple at Ruelle, as if to squirt milk, and goes inside to retrieve her coat. She's better off finding men at the cabaret.

Maman, the eye of the storm, is counting — the mahogany front desk almost reaching her height. Her tobacco-coloured shawl is wrapped around her back and rests lazily on her elbows. A cigarette burns in the ashtray on her left as she mumbles to herself and slides the beads of the abacus with sharp fingers.

"I'm going to the cabaret. Ruelle's scaring the men."

Maman's nod is as slight as the flap of a butterfly wing and Julie wonders whether she should repeat herself. She goes into the salon when Paulette walks through the front door with one of her regulars. Paulette is wearing her favourite, and only, ankle length fur coat.

Maman looks up — the cat-eye glasses are on the tip of her nose and make her look cross-eyed. "Monsieur Guillaume," she says, "pleasure to have you with us." She esteems men like M. Guillaume who are from the East of the town, men she considers noble. She likes to think she belongs to their society.

He gives her fifty francs as Paulette drags him into the salon, giggling. She bumps into Julie and says, "Hi my little one," landing a wet kiss on her top lip. Julie realises that Paulette is as high as the windmills tonight.

Maman rings her small bell and the sound travels with purpose as it makes Fifi's ears perk up. Fifi knows better than to be invested in anyone else tonight but she starts making her way down the stairs. Although ten years her junior and the size of a cherub, Madame Sabine frightens her. What Maman lacks in size she makes up twofold by her deep voice. Her gravelled speech makes her appear large and sinister even when she's cooing at the neighbourhood cats.

Paulette leaves the salon to look for her pipe while Fifi unzips M. Guillaume and thoroughly checks him for diseases. Maman wants every man checked after Renée's incident. She wants complete jurisdiction over which diseases come in and which ones go out.

M. Guillaume is clean so Fifi tries to sell him cigars, candy, and the new condoms from America — everything is double shop price, of course. He politely declines and goes up to Paulette's bedroom.

"It's not here," says Paulette. "Are you certain you don't have yours?"

"Why don't you use needles, pussycat?"

She takes out a lidless shoebox from underneath her bed and pulls out two needles from her tomato pincushion. She sits at her dressing table and drinks the dregs in her cup. After she rolls the opium into a small ball, she places it on one of the needles and lights a candle. She holds the other needle to the flame of the candle until it is scorching red and then presses it into the ball. She blows on it and places it on the table, turning the cup over it. Her mouth waters as she waits for the smoke to rise inside the cup. She lifts it, inhales with thirst and repeats this four times: ball, burn, blow, and breathe. The smell of burnt caramel and potpourri spirals in the room like a satin ribbon.

She pouts, holds up the needle and looks through the eye, "You see this? That's how small the pieces of my heart are. They can easily pass through this."

He slaps her hand aside. "We won't bother with that hole tonight, pussycat." He lifts her head with his thumb and licks her neck.

"It tickles," she says, sinking her chin into her collarbone.

"Do you want to wear some colour? You look like you need a little rouge."

She pushes him onto her bed and lifts her dress, exposing her dark sex. She takes her new lipstick — packaged in a metal tube — and rouges her sex, "Better?"

"How about now?" asks Céline, as she rubs Lola's hairless arm. "Do you want me to pray with you?"

Lola's pallid expression doesn't change. The pain has sedated her.

"Hail Mary, full of grace. The — "

“No, please,” Lola whispers, her eyes shut. “The Peace Prayer.”

Céline nods. “Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.”

Fifi returns and shuts the door softly behind her.

“Where there is hatred, let me sow love.”

Lola opens her eyes. “Bring me the laudanum, Céline.”

“Where there is injury, pardon.”

“The laudanum — “

“Where there is doubt, faith.”

“You know where Maman keeps it,” says Lola. “I need it or I’ll die.”

Éloise speaks this time with her modest lisp from the corner of the room, “Where there is despair, hope.”

Céline looks over at Fifi who raises her hands in resignation.

“Watch her,” she orders Éloise and leaves. She crosses the hall to slip into Julie’s red room, picks up a perfume bottle and pours it all over herself.

The door creaks open. “What the hell are you doing?”

She turns around and sees Julie. “I need to put laudanum in it for Lola.”

“Why didn’t you fetch a saucer?” asks Julie.

“Maman’s at her desk,” says Céline, “She’d see me.”

“You’ve always been jealous of my gifts.”

“Calm your head. I needed it for Lola.”

“You could’ve fetched — “

“She’s dying,” says Céline, a little too loudly.

“You could’ve fetched anything else.”

“I’ll buy you one, you witch.” Céline leaves Julie and creeps down the stairs to Maman’s room. Everyone knows that Maman takes laudanum nightly for her joint pain but no one knows where she keeps the key to her chest of drawers. Céline looks in between the bedclothes, under the kerosene lamp and inside the gramophone pickup, her heart beating in her fingertips.

Meanwhile, Éloise is reciting the prayer for the fourth time. She over-enunciates the words as Céline walks in: “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

Céline swats her away and sits in the chair. “I couldn’t find the key, Lola.”

“Bucket!” yells Lola.

“What?”

Fifi holds the bucket for Lola as she empties the contents of last night's meal into it. Fifi looks at Céline and explains: "You reek."

"It's Jacinthe by Coty!" says Céline.

Fifi rubs Lola's back. "It's too much. You're making her ill."

"I'm not making her ill. Am I making you ill, Lola?"

Lola gags, as if in deference to Fifi.

"Fine," says Céline. She takes Éloïse by the arm and leaves the room.

"You shouldn't have done that," says Lola. Her cheeks are blotched red. She puts down the bucket and thinks about her baby in a bucket of vomit and shit.

"They're not important, dear," Fifi consoles her.

In the room across from them, Renée's client is lacing his shoestrings. Renée searches for herself in the glass above her dressing table and inspects her birthmark, a dark dent on her left cheek. She places her pointy thumb on the mark — *a devil's thumbprint*, her mother used to call it. She watches herself as she languidly tightens her robe and lights a cigarette. "Do I get anything?"

"For what?" he asks.

"For being a good girl."

"I should slap you for giving me a disease."

"All right then, slap me."

He leaves the other shoe untied, walks over to her and lands a thick slap on her cheek, the indent of his palm glowing on her face.

She takes a drag on her cigarette and blows it into his eyes. He shakes his head and walks away.

Laughter can be heard from the small room at the end of the hall, Paulette's room, of course. M. Guillaume is keeping himself entertained with his head between her legs. She giggles a bit louder.

He lifts his head. "Why do you laugh? Am I no good?"

"Darling, you're wonderful," says Paulette. "Not many men do this."

“I like that you’re always laughing.”

“How’s your wife?”

“Don’t speak of blasphemy now,” he pulls her to the edge of the bed and drops his trousers. “I’m going to make you see God.”

She laughs once more.

All of a sudden, Lola realises that this is the first time her baby will see her. “Fetch me my hand mirror, Fifi.”

As Lola takes it from Fifi’s hand, the baby kicks so hard that she grunts and lets the mirror fall. It cracks right in the middle but she doesn’t know this yet, the mirror is facing down. Fifi tries to pick it up.

“Don’t! I don’t want to see it.”

“Superstitions are for simple people. You aren’t simple, dear.”

“Do you think he’ll live?” asks Lola.

“Who?” Fifi puts the mirror on the table without turning it around.

“My baby!”

“*He*?” Fifi relaxes her forehead. “Yes, of course he will. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Do you think I’ll live?”

“You’ll live as sure as the sun will rise,” says Fifi.

“Why can’t you move me to the bed?”

“Because it’ll be easier for the baby to come out.”

“You know this?” Lola screams. “It’s getting worse.”

“Let me see.” Fifi holds Lola’s legs open and inserts her fingers. “It’s time, dear.”

Just then Lola feels a pop and gushes a pool of water. Fifi takes the bucket and empties it out the window. The fluid splashes the pavement, making a pleasant sound.

“Call Céline,” says Lola.

“But — “

“Call her!”

Céline enters with Éloïse trailing behind her. “I’ve been behind the door the whole time, Lola,” says Céline. The musty smell in the room is loud now. Céline lifts the collar of her dress to smell the perfume again.

Lola reaches for her hands, “Promise me you’ll name him Adam.”

“You can name him yourself,” says Céline. “Besides, my godson isn’t getting such a dreadful — “

“I need you to promise me.“

Céline presses her hand and smiles. “We’ll name him together.”

Lola screams. Céline takes deep breaths to encourage her.

“You’re going to have to start pushing, dear,” says Fifi.

Céline rubs Lola’s hand. “Deep breath in. Deep breath out.”

“Now push,” says Fifi, standing in front of her, holding her knees apart. Lola presses her palms on the edge of the seat to raise her bottom off the chair. Her golden-brown hair is darkened with sweat.

Maman can hear Lola’s cries downstairs. She can also hear something heavy being dragged in the room above her. A little bit of dust powders on her desk. It’s a shame to lose Lola tonight — her best girl. Maman charges extra on holidays and Lola alone makes the month’s rent on these nights. Yes, a really big shame. She sweeps the dust with her fingers and rubs it into oblivion.

“I’m going to the cabaret,” says Julie, dressed in her coat now. She has drawn her eyebrows higher than usual.

Maman scribbles figures in her ledger. “I heard you the first time.”

“Have a blessed All Saints’ Day, Maman.”

Maman looks up at her, “And you, Julie,” and continues with her scribbling.

Julie ignores Ruelle as she walks into the cold of the night.

Upstairs, Renée is squatting on the new bidet. Having smeared rancid olive oil in her sex before her customer, she takes the feather now to tickle her nose. She sneezes to force out the semen, a trick her grandmother taught her to prevent Lola’s fate.

The door opens and Ruelle walks in. “Where are your brains, darling?” says Renée. “Can’t you see it’s occupied?”

Ruelle lifts her heavy dress to sit on the commode chair. “That Julie really vexes me — “

“Oh, that stench!” Renée pinches her nose with two fingers, her other fingers flaring out like a fan.

“What do you want? I’m not in here to make perfume,” says Ruelle with a mischievous brow.

Renée continues to clean herself as Paulette and M. Guillaume have languorous sex — the kind that only opium induces. Not lethargic lazy sex, but sensual spiritual sex that takes its time touching every inch of flesh, pleasuring every orifice. M. Guillaume loves being here with her, and only her, lost to the world, his marriage and work. They have moved the armoire to cover the window tonight — Maman doesn’t invest in curtains because the tableaux of her girls bring customers — and are now lying on top of the bristly carpet where M. Guillaume likes to explore her body best.

He trails his velvet tongue in circles around her vulva, enticing her so much that she keeps lifting her hips to him. She can’t take it any longer so she pushes his head into her. He places a pillow beneath her, exposing her buttock. The flicks of his quick tongue drive her wild as he moves down towards her anus. Paulette thanks God for opium poppies.

In what feels like a few minutes, Julie is back on Rue des Martyrs with a customer, beaming with pride. Ruelle watches her with the cool malice only women can show one another.

Maman looks up at the timid man — definitely from this side of the river. Unimpressed, she rings her bell and says *thirty francs*.

“I thought — I thought it’s fifteen,” he says.

She studies him with sharp eyes. “Not on holidays, it isn’t.”

Upstairs, what resembles blood-streaked egg whites travel down Lola’s thighs.

“You need to keep pushing,” says Céline.

Fifi hears Maman’s bell this time. “I’ll be right back, dear. Éloise, hold her legs.”

“No, you can’t leave us,” protests Céline.

Fifi checks the man with haste, not bothering with the cigars and condoms. She climbs the stairs with her heavy steps and enters the room: “What’s wrong?”

“Her head hurts and she was sick again,” says Céline.

“What? Lola dear, I need you to push if you want to keep this baby.”

“But — “ Lola struggles to keep her eyes open.

“It’ll soon be over. I promise you.”

With these words Lola starts to push again.

Julie believes that her luck has finally turned. “You didn’t even tell me your name,” she says, as she closes the red door behind her. She hangs her coat on one of the six pins of the clothes tree, laughing at her own seductive charm.

“Oh, I’m Raphael.”

“Raphael?”

“Yes, like the painter.”

She unties her bodice and drops her dress, “Do you paint, too?”

He studies her body, his eyes lingering on her large breasts for a moment and then on the thick glossy hair of her sex. He swallows his spit, “Well, yes.”

“Will you paint me one day?” She moves close to him now, feeling his excitement on her thigh.

“Yes,” he clears his throat and repeats a more audible yes.

Julie turns away, thinking this one will be easy. She takes out the silver cigarette case from her hanging coat and traces the *CJ* initials monogrammed on it — a gift once meant for another woman. She lights a cigarette. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want to blindfold and tie you,” his voice is more restrained now.

“We don’t usually let anyone cover our eyes so I’ll give you this instead. Here,” she hands him the cigarette and brings out a flogging stick and some pieces of cloth.

She jumps on the bed, stretches her limbs like a starfish and closes her eyes. He takes the first piece and gently ties her right hand to the post of the bed. She opens her eyes and stares at the ceiling. She imagines

that he will become a brilliant painter one day and buy her hundreds of perfumes. She lifts her head to watch him as he ties her left foot, his lips stiff with the bent cigarette. The lines on his face deepen when he tightens the cloth. He puts out the cigarette and looks at her with pride. “Will you shut your eyes for me?”

She inhales the stale tobacco on his breath and drops her head.

Paulette has now twisted M. Guillaume around so that his sex is in her face and her sex in his. They are sucking and licking each other until she tells him to go into her favourite position. He lifts himself and moves lower to enter her, their feet by each other’s faces.

M. Guillaume feels the warmth and comfort of her, like slipping into a pair of old slippers. He moves his sex in circles inside her, marking his dwelling.

Lola screams. She grunts and pushes.

“I can see his head. I can see!” says Céline.

“Keep going, dear. Not much longer.”

Lola pushes once more, the veins on her forehead protruding. The baby doesn’t move.

“You need to give me your biggest push, dear,” says Fifi.

She screams and pushes and the baby slides out with ease. Fifi catches the purple creature covered in the white coating and puts it on Lola’s chest — the navel string tangled like rope. Céline hands the clothespin to Fifi who clamps the string and cuts it with a knife, starting the baby’s cries.

“Strong baby he is,” says Fifi.

Lola’s body goes limp and the baby almost falls — Céline’s hand prevents it.

“Fifi, quick! Something’s wrong.”

Across the hall to the right, Raphael has taken out his penknife and is kissing Julie's thighs. He holds the knife against the lips of her sex. The cold of the metal rouses her, "What's that?"

"Every artist has his tools," he says, pushing her down with his other hand. She screams. He stares at her sex ravenously as she squirms, trying to free herself. She screams again. He places all his weight into pinning her to the bed and flicks the blade open.

"Put that down, you worthless shit, before I shoot your dick off." Maman's ominous voice fills the room.

Julie lifts her head. Raphael drops the knife. He looks at Maman and then at Julie.

"Leave!" Maman jerks her head forward, firmly aiming the pistol at him. She gestures with the gun and moves away from the threshold to let him pass. He rushes down the stairs and Maman follows him until he runs out into the street. She yells into the distance: "Don't set foot in here again. I never forget a face!" Ruelle comes forward and Maman pushes her inside, slamming the door shut. Maman climbs the stairs back to Julie's room. "Have I taught you girls nothing?"

"Maman, I swear I —"

She slaps Julie and places the empty Jacinthe flacon on the table, "And don't ever go into my room again." She leaves Julie tied up to teach her.

In the adjacent room, Céline watches, with the towelled baby in her arms, as Lola's face becomes jaundiced.

"I can't see," cries Lola.

"You've lost a lot of blood, dear. Just try to rest," says Fifi. "Éloïse, let's move her to the bed."

"How's my baby?" asks Lola as she steps closer to the bed.

Céline holds him up for the first time and notices something missing. "He's wonderful!"

"You were right, Fifi. It'll be dawn soon," says Lola. She falls onto the bed.

The sound of Paulette's orgasm snakes its way under the door and brings a sense of catharsis in the room. But it is only for a moment because the baby starts crying again. Fifi turns Lola around.

Céline gives the wailing baby to Éloïse. “Lola. Lola. Get up, Lola. You did it.”

Fifi crosses herself, “It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.”

“Stop. She’s alive, you hear me? Lola, come. Listen to the cries, your baby needs you!”

“It’s no use,” says Éloïse, her lisp discernible.

“Shut up. Lola, come now. You can have my lace chemise.”

“She was dead long before,” says Fifi. “I don’t even know how she gave life to him, stubborn mule.”

“*Her*,” says Céline.

“What?”

Céline buries her tears in Lola’s armpit. Fifi grabs the baby from Éloïse and holds it up like a painting, shaking her head. “She didn’t have a chance.”

