

**MEDUSA**  
of the  
**ROSES**

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# ROSES

A NOVEL **Navid Sinaki**



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To Luis C. for the chapters

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# 1

Tiresias was mine. I always played the part of the man from Greek mythology who turned into a woman simply by striking two snakes.

It would have made the most sense if we pretended to be Zal and Rudabeh, even though we were two boys. Zal, who I always loved more than a friend, shared his name with a fabled Persian prince. And like Rudabeh, I was told my hair could pass for snakes. But I chose Tiresias when we played in a garden where gravity was especially cruel. Since our house was built on a slant, cherries from a neighbor's tree rolled into our yard from one side and out the other before we could catch the fruit. Pomegranate trees kicked up rocks in search of water that was always out of reach. Nectarines didn't just fall, they were impaled by stones. If ever one fell on my head, I'd pretend I deserved it in preparation for juices I'd eventually catch on my neck.

Sometimes I wore a veil for the role. A simple lace tablecloth completed my metamorphosis. In the myth, Tiresias eventually struck another two snakes and returned from being a woman to being a man, so we looked for the fruit vendor

who hammered his cantaloupes at the end of the day. He would rather they rot than go for free. He also sold oranges I peeled to see what it felt like to walk around with foreskin, as I assumed they did in ancient Greece.

“It’s hard to love you,” Zal began to say when we were older. Not because I was a boy who wore veils and a fake foreskin. “Because you’re so infatuated with death.”

Perhaps he was right. I was the boy who gathered moths for spiders’ webs. I would polish the light bulbs when a memorial was strung for a kid who had drowned. I’d cry at spring because, with the dry leaves gone, for months nobody would talk about death.

Zal, let our words be a ribbon between the mouths of painted angels. If I start a conversation with you and keep it to myself, at least that won’t end.

## 2

I've long since mastered the disappearing act. Every time you leave, I take our photos off the refrigerator, even though I leave the evil-eye magnets. None of our pictures—postcard-style ones you took of places we fucked—are explicit to outsiders. The caravanserai near Nushabad. You pointed your camera outward while I was still splayed. The bird garden in Lavizan where I gave you head. Curious cranes tried not to look. And in Orost, we stood at the travertines of Badab-e Surt. You photographed the puddles on the rock layers while I dried myself with the cum rag we brought along.

I empty the frames and shove our photos in the box that once held a samovar. Whenever you leave, I cut off the top inch of each candle so no burn marks remain. Even though the tapers slowly shrink from being sawed, I appreciate the ceremony to make it all brand-new when I am rid of you.

I don't clear out your shirts from the closet. If I was more superstitious, perhaps setting fire to the sleeves might force



you to combust wherever you are, whether you're driving or back where you live. I'd rather set your dress shirt on the mattress and whisper where your ears would be. I'd proclaim that it's over. Is it over?

I take out the VHSes you bought for me in an act of pettiness. Erasing some of the videos requires me to hold down the record button on the VCR while playing a channel that's all static.

"Videos are easier to smuggle," you swore, since most airport guards didn't have a VHS player handy like they did for DVDs. My VCR is decades old. Holding down the record button is a challenge. I sometimes let go and see a scrap of the film—Jean Harlow on a telephone. Gheysar's dance. Mary Pickford as she faints. Should I have just suggested a long weekend instead of a murder? Maybe you never expected me to give in, to really want to leave.

Because you left again without a goodbye, I need help to sleep. A heavy pillow over my eyes usually does the trick. Not now. I picture the man swinging from a citron tree, for no reason other than being found with a man. We read about it in the morning paper. He was someone like us, though we didn't know him.

"They claim he was caught with an underaged boy," I said earlier today.

"A lie. Anything to kill a faggot. The same old charge for each new cast."

"I don't want our lives to end the same way." The words weren't enough to get you to act. Maybe a dramatic gesture

would rile you up. I shook the paper hoping some dust would catch on your eyes to force a tear or two.

“We’re safe.”

I wasn’t so sure. Out of panic, I would always check our curtains to make certain they’d been shut tight. The air conditioner, ready to rat us out, causes the curtains to part. I’m convinced people live downstairs, though I never see anyone else. I might catch a dustbin left outside before entering, but never do I hear voices or footsteps or conversations. The apartment is my uncle’s. He’s gone for most of the year, so you and I have a safe place to fuck and fight.

We aren’t lovers in Antarctica who have to swear off summer fruit in order to hold hands. Here, one does not date, one mates for life. If by chance a man meets another and the two share more than words, Rumi mixtapes, a book by Kerouac, what generous luck. Otherwise it is a marriage arranged in fear of death. Death shares our bed because I had the misfortune of being fortunate, of finding love so early. Now I only dread its end.

I mentioned the newspaper article. We argued. You knocked the samovar over on your way out. I picked up the gold kettle knowing I’d burn my hands.

The cat that knows when I’m alone. Black with black eyes, fur on only half its tail. It paces when you are gone to remind me I am loveless again. How the stray gets to our balcony, I never know. It circles my legs.

I hope you’ll come back to continue the conversation you wanted me to lead. About your wife. About a gun under the

bridge, her pearls in the bathtub, as little blood as possible. A clean escape, a new life in another place without fear of an executioner. It was a joke. Maybe it wasn't.

I take a third pill. I close my eyes and, finally, sleep comes.

I wake up hungover on the bedroom balcony. I never sleep outside, but I was desperate enough for any change. The phone rings inside. I hurry into the apartment before any of our invisible neighbors can complain. The room sways. There's a mess. I smell the smoke of your cigarettes. You came back while I was knocked out. Maybe you didn't realize I was pill-drunk and asleep outside. Did you sneak into the apartment alone to make sure the coast was clear?

I try to make sense of the scene you've only recently left behind. Two cups. A shoe with burgundy laces.

I answer the phone, ready to scold you. "Hello?" Even my voice is dizzy.

"Are you related to Zal?" a woman asks.

"Yes." Our lie.

"He was attacked," the nurse says.

A haunted lamp distracts me. Even with the light switched off, the bulb still buzzes with electricity. I blame the ghosts. They want me to see what you've left behind.

"You got that, sir?"

The nurse doesn't stop chewing her gum. Machines levitate past the phone. Or maybe the nurse is walking, hence the intercoms and passing screams; a murmur of Arabic,

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immigrants in the ER; the opening and closing of filing cabinets. Some of them derail from rust, the way the nurse keeps pulling out a drawer and pushing it back in.

“Don’t come with a full stomach,” she says. “We have enough to do without cleaning another mess.”

I grab a coat from the closet. It’s something for me to do, even though I won’t need a layer during this heat wave. I make sure the stove is off, though I haven’t used it in days. I need the safety of routine to buy me time, some crevice to help me process. I look around for something to toss. I feel I should. I pause to finally make sense of the scene. Two cups. A condom wrapper. You were here with someone else.

# 3

I can't remember how to speak when I call for a cab, but I somehow make it into one. The driver forces small talk. Weather. Politics. Street closures.

"Allah be with you," he says at the end. I don't remember how to respond. He tells me the fare. I don't understand numbers. I hold open my wallet. A smile obscures his face. Later I realize he's taken too much.

I can't rush to your side like the king from Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, who raced his messenger to see who could get to his ailing beloved first. How could I explain to anyone else who you are to me? It's as difficult as when we were kids, when I'd beg your aunt to let you come out to play.

"Where are you taking him?" she'd ask.

I didn't take you anywhere. You would run out the door and grab my hand, and take me up and up and up to the end of our steep street, until we had no place else but down. You carried me along because I understood you. I knew you were too afraid to own anything feminine, so you pretended

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spoons were dolls and tore off your shirt buttons just to have an excuse to sew.

The hospital's automatic doors open and close whenever a crow passes by. One in particular mistakes a prune for a cockroach. The crow nears the entrance. The door opens. Afraid, the bird flies back. The hospital gift shop is full of kids. They rearrange the cards, all Get Well. Half of them have stock photos of cats. Roses, irises, dry bouquets. The new batch comes in tomorrow. I don't buy anything. You don't deserve a reward.

The hospital workers mumble among themselves. Children from the cancer wing string together paper flowers to pass the time. A young girl in a gray scarf walks with a basket of tissue pansies. A little boy with mismatched socks does his best to straighten a paper daisy without tearing off a petal. Some kids curl their garland around a bulletin board, but don't fasten it with pins. When they leave, the sway of a passing wheelchair knocks it down. I pull an old tack from the bulletin board to fasten the garland.

I keep stalling. Paper garlands have found their way onto the doorframe of the men's bathroom. When we were teens, I wished there was a spy hole in the urinal whenever I would hear you unbuckling your belt. I would get too hard to piss. Couldn't I just give your armpit a lick? I wanted to ask. I munched my shirt collar to keep calm.

I wash my hands four times. I can't think of anything else to do. At the wrist some of my skin loosens.

I finally go to the front desk and ask for you by name.

"He's this way," a nurse says.

She doesn't ask how I know you. She doesn't care, just wants to hurry me in to hurry you out to hurry the next person in so she can continue an accelerated speed. A woman paces in the waiting room, sweat pooling on her upper lip. Though her eyebrows are black, her faint mustache is blonde. The nurse gestures to her.

"This lady called the ambulance."

I nod a greeting, not a thank-you.

She wipes the sweat off her forehead. As soon as she sees me, she leaps up to go. "I just wanted to make sure someone came for him."

"Wait. Please. What happened?"

She drops her arms. I can sense her defeat. She hoped to leave without giving any sordid details.

"These men. They were attacking them."

"Them?"

"Yes." She looks around. She's scared somehow with one conversation she'll forever be tied to me. "He was with some young man. And these hooligans started to attack."

"You stopped them?"

With a look, she begs me to leave her out of it.

"I just wanted to make sure someone came for him. That's all."

I could thank her for making sure you made it here alive. Just as easily, I could curse her for building the image in my mind. Some young man. Not me.

She leaves the empty waiting room. It must have been busier earlier. Folding chairs are scattered in almost comical randomness. One even faces the wall. Part of me expects to see him. The young man probably watches from outside the building hoping the coast will clear for his own visit.

I unwrap a box of rose hard candies from the gift shop while I wait for him. I place one on my tongue. The taste reminds me of visiting my grandmother's village. Sweeping muck away from the rose coffers. I take two more candies. They don't disintegrate. I can't produce enough spit. Instead three harden into one. But why not add another? You fucked someone else. He was probably better and looser and kinder than me. But the fact that you might want to run away with him, that you might die with someone else but me—that, not the final rose candy I shove into my already full mouth, that thought makes me heave. At that betrayal, at that sting, I produce more than enough spit. I vomit nothingness and everything. All the sweets you ever made for me, rice cookies and baklava pearled with pistachios, and walnut honey cakes, and blueberries, blueness, fountains of milk and cum, all yours.

It should have been us facing each other with blood from our mouths reaching for a kiss, until our bodies, kicked to pulp, inched closer and closer.

You're in the ward with all the people who are trying their damndest to keep from oozing outside of themselves. They



hold their holes shut, or seal their lips, or wrap themselves tight so nothing falls out, an intestine, a fetus, a third eye.

In your room, no flowers. Nobody has come to see you yet. The young man, the one who was holding your hand, would he have brought you lilacs? Would he have bought a wreath and buried it in your neck? He'd hurry in. He'd lick your chin.

"Is it over?" the young man would ask, referring to your love for me.

You'd nod. You two would be set. But, without me, it wouldn't be the same. You need adultery to feel like an adult.

You don't open your eyes. You're plugged in to so many tubes and twisty straws widen your nose. Your face is stapled, covered in plates. You keep me up with your beeps and gurgles. They rush you in. They rush you out. I get up to go home.

"That's all right," a doctor says. "You can stay."

I'm relieved he doesn't oust me from your room. He turns a corner before I finish reading judgment on his face.

Your blue shirt sits on the chair next to your hospital bed, cut in two, now purple from all the blood. I bought it for you. You probably didn't choke him. He probably didn't need to be goaded into getting fucked. I used to always hesitate. And even though I tried to prepare by using thin glasses of blackberry syrup or gardenia shampoo bottles or even the back of a spatula, I still flinch when you get ready to fuck me. My fear is that I'm dirty. My ass, sure, even after cleaning it as best as I can. But also, my preference. With him, you probably don't

hear the slight mumble of apology. I prefer when you force me before I have a chance to protest.

A nurse breaks my trance. She enters with a clear, unlabeled bag and shoves your shirt inside. There's no sentimentality to the act.

"It's all yours." She plops it on my lap. "You should get outta here. Go for a walk. Grab a soda. Do something to make yourself feel whole. Even just for a minute."

Look here at the beggar I am, asking the colors of your old clothes to come back. Through the bag I can tell the collar is stiff, like when we danced our only dance in a public place. A waltz, years ago. I'm not sure how I knew the steps. A wedding. Yours. The cake was rotten, but I didn't want to complain. Instead we hid in the hallway that separated the men and the women, the hallway from which we heard the women cheer the bride, and the men call out for you. Somewhere between their two CD players—traditional folk music in one room, Donna Summer in the other—I put my head on your shoulder. In the space between the two rooms, you led the dance.

They wheel you in. A moment of unplanned eye contact. I turn away. It's much easier to look at the walls than see something in your eyes I don't want to see. A look of panic that it's me here, not him. I scan the room again. Near your hospital bed they have your teeth arranged in a vial, some powdered to halves. I've never seen them out of place. To keep from fainting—your wide-open mouth drooling blood

improvisations down your neck—I hold your teeth up to the window. Lit from behind, the molars glow. Outside the window a bee is stuck. I tap the glass to get it to move. It doesn't. I tap slightly harder. The bee falls down dead.

The doctors leave the room. To be alone with you now is the most heinous thing of all. Before I can curse or cry, I find I'm already standing over your bed. My mouth is already on yours. I kiss you once, perhaps twice. You with no teeth, except for one. Your stubborn wisdom tooth.

Your teeth are more sensitive than the rest of you. I'm sure it's because of me. I craved pomegranates when we were kids, so you would bite into their tough skins and tear out openings just for me. More than once I confused the pomegranate juice down your chin for blood from your teeth.

"I'm fine." You always lie during dessert. You eat ice cream often, no matter the pain.

Does he know about that ache, that I was the cause of it? Did he choke on any of your teeth? You share an intimacy with him I'll never know.

Perhaps because of him, you never planned on leaving with me. My suggestion was extreme, our circumstances too much to overcome. To be with you here, in our home city, seemed unlikely.

"We can pretend you're blind," you said once. "That way you can take my hand for hours."

We tested this hypothesis. I closed my eyes to see where you'd take me. I kept my eyes closed to memorize how you walked, the quick step forward, the sudden stops to let anyone

pass before us. My sunglasses were too tight. We bought them from a man on the sidewalk who also sold burnt corn. Anything quick to try your experiment. We could finally be lovers in public. I only had to sacrifice my sight.

With my eyes closed I noticed how much you apologized to strangers. Was it a show for me? You graciously stopped to let anyone pass, but you wouldn't let go of my hand. And the thought, the eclipse: What could I sacrifice to keep you with me?

You fall asleep in your hospital bed before we have a chance to speak. They've stitched your cheek. After the first kick to your head, one of your teeth got stuck in your mouth. By the next kick, it cut directly through your face. They've widened your smile, my love. When you come to, they pump you with painkillers. But there's a minute when you can feel. In that minute, you get out as many tears as you can before you drift off again.

"Can you give me any information about him?" I ask a nurse. "About the other guy?"

She shakes her head. A doctor joins her, this one with a safety pin holding her scarf over her scrubs. They whisper to each other.

"The other young man?" the doctor says.

"Do you know his name? I have to see him."

"Sorry. We can't help."

I feel the beginning stages of an obsession, wanting to see if his hair is thick where mine will thin. You and I have

been alive for longer, together enough to witness every detail of each other's bodies. If a corner starts to sag, or a gray pube furrows through, we'd notice. Did you betray me out of boredom? It used to be easy to keep your attention—back when we were still acting out our firsts.

Our first kiss. You admitted to stealing a metronome.

"Why?" I asked.

"To put under my bed." To fake my heartbeat while you slept.

You were embarrassed by the sentiment. It's how I knew you were earnest. To recover, you became cruel. You called me a wicked boy.

You said, "A bitch like you could even bruise milk."

Later, I sat in front of my grandmother's vanity to align my lips with a mauve stain on the mirror. There, I wished to be your bitch bride. I wanted to see myself how you saw me. At times sweetly. At times with aggression. You were right. I had a strange power. Apricots would bruise before I touched them.

I need to do something, to make myself whole, just like the nurse suggested. She's onto me. Pretty soon, she might realize why I care about you so much.

I want to ruin the lives of all other lovers. I want to take the smoke out of the mouths of strangers to taste the burn meant for air. The only way we'll be even is if I fuck someone else. There's a balance to the thought, a balance between us I'd like to find.

# 4

“If you were a woman, we could get married,” you once said. “It’d be different if you were my wife.”

The voice comes to me, a ribbon, always with a hark I never speak aloud. I can’t keep the thought out of my mind, though. It begins a stampede. Perhaps if I were a woman, I would know how to keep a man. The thought is arbitrary enough to stay.

I barely have enough gas to drive to the sculpture garden, the third stall in the southernmost bathroom. It’s the hour of parables. There’s no use being coy while waiting for routine sidelong glances. As I walk under the one bulb, the bathroom light hisses from cream to yellow. I turn my head away from the drain where the shit stink creeps up eager for a companion. I douse rose water behind my ear. I can betray you too. I clean myself with the bathroom hose. There’s a little shame afterward when a few drops slosh about in my jeans. An optimistic act, not unlike asking for grace.

I wait to see if anyone else will join. To get hard I try recalling porn clips, wide-open jockstraps, oiled holes and POVs where the men blink too much waiting for the money

shot. It's a lie to say I've thought only about you. But nothing on my phone starts more than a slight erection. At least hard, if anyone comes in and sees me jacking off, he can either join the happening side by side or drop down to his knees.

I haven't jacked off in so long, I can feel the cum curdling in me. I'm sure I'll spew fully formed statues: Ceres and Minerva, Vidar and Odin. I'll convulse out clumps of eyes and mouths from mythological busts. Zorvan and Atar, Fuxi and Nuwa.

The thought of you and him. That does it for me.

A man enters after I finish myself off. He grunts when he sees me, surprised anyone else is in there too. It's late. Must be a janitor. I try to start again, but quickly lose interest in myself.

Was your young man trying to be funny? Leaving with just one shoe because he had no need for another? Back in the apartment, I near it without touching. True, you might have found a guy who is new to love, but I can find one whose jaw drops when I show him what I can do with my throat. Even if he's younger than us, that novelty will wear off. Everything joins antiquity.

I imagine my rival returning to apologize. I'd invite him up. He'd put on his shoe. I'd pour us tea from my broken samovar. When I kicked its side in, did it happen just as they were kicking your face? I play both scenes together. My foot in the samovar. A boot in your cheek. I wince.

I remember our fight that day.

"I'm ready to leave," I said before you disappeared. Before I cut the tapers. Before I knew about him. When I thought your wife was my only real rival.

You paused before reacting, hesitant to believe me.

"Where?"

"Isfahan."

"Not farther?"

"I can't. Not while my mother's alive."

There's something finite about going too far. My grandmother wouldn't have wanted me to go at all. That much I knew. After having lost one of her children too young, and her son to another continent, she'd have wanted me to look after my mom.

You shook your head.

"You don't believe me?" I asked.

There was almost a laugh. "You're the one who always made me wait."

"Not anymore. Not with the panic of death."

"And for money?"

"You have to trust me."

"Of course I do."

You said it without thinking, but there was a change in your breathing. Your palms were sweaty, though you never admit your uneasiness. I saw how discreetly you tried to wipe them on your back pockets. Never discreet enough.

"You're serious?" you asked.

"Serious as a citron tree."



The room was blue. I didn't have the nerve to change the video, to play Barbara Stanwyck's ploy over again. I'd gotten out of it what I needed. The wrong time flickered on the screen. Maybe the machine thought we were elsewhere. Bangalore. Bangkok. Budapest. Blue roses on the tables and cum stains on the sheets I always try to soften with no luck.

You wavered. Yes, there were the perfunctory answers of "I shouldn't" or "It's not possible" or "You must be joking," but you eventually settled on the question I was hoping for.

"How?" We were both excited by the thought. "It's a pretty big leap. Death."

"Is it?" For a moment we both considered how close it was to being over at any moment. With a poisoned kiss, a string of pearls pulled tight, or a stumble off a balcony. Your wife would be gone and we would be free.

"Who will miss her?" I asked.

Your demeanor changed quickly, as if a hypnotist snapped his fingers cities away. You faced the window. "You've backed out before. You're a coward when it comes to me."

A harsh accusation. "Being with you is the least cowardly thing I've ever done. I'm ready now. I won't back out."

You still weren't convinced. "Will all the violence be worth it?"

"Define violence. There will be cruelty regardless, whether or not we control it."

Your next sigh was especially deep, went on for what felt like minutes. "Sometimes I just want to start over."

"Exactly. Me too."

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“With someone else. There’s too much history with you.”

I sit with my tea. I’ll let the boy in when he comes. He’ll put on his shoe. We’ll sit over cups of tea in place of an hourglass. Once the tea joins the coldness of the room, once the steam stops its ascension, the young man will leave. And I’ll be here waiting for the hospital to release you. When we die, I want to be together. I want to be at your side either as the cause or as the witness.

# 5

I make a stop on my way to work. The laces are an easy enough place to begin. If I knew anything else, if I knew any other detail about what he looked like and what he ate, his diet and his fetishes, then maybe I would start there. I'm uneasy with the thought that some young man knows about me and I know nothing about him.

"We don't carry those laces," a store owner says. The fifth shop I've tried. "He probably dyed them himself with sumac. You need some? We have so much in the back. My daughter says it's good for Alzheimer's. I told her I have sorry luck. I've never forgotten a thing."

The shopkeeper is right. The dye on the laces is uneven. I go back to the apartment and try three different mixtures to get the exact color. The sun dries them quickly. I hang them out the window where they drip red tears down the building.

I drag myself to work. I easily convinced my uncle to give me a job at his hotel. He felt guilty for leaving my mom, his sister, behind in Iran.

"I guess it's the least I can do," he said, same as when he gave me the keys to the apartment he hasn't used since he moved to the U.S.

"How generous of him," you said of the arrangement. When he sent me money to repaint the walls, I used it to buy us a samovar for the guests we never have.

"Impeccable," my uncle declared on his next visit of what he thought was a fresh coat of white. I had pocketed the extra money and bought new light bulbs for his lamps. The added brightness did the trick.

At least in the hotel I can fake normalcy until you're well. Down the corridors I push carts with luggage, or racks to replace towels. I turn down beds, empty the trash, but I always leave a little trace that someone was there. The tiniest bit of foil in the trash can. A pube in the shower. Or I tear the corner of a tea bag, which will make patrons decide to boil coffee instead.

When cleaning the rooms, I simply open the drawers and see what the rich visitors, often the wealthiest ones to traipse through Tehran, have snuck by customs. It's easier to steal drugs from them, since no one will report pillaged pharmaceuticals for fear of being arrested. And undershirts are such trivial things. Men usually think they've misplaced them.

A guest on the sixth floor forgot to shut her door completely. When I realize the room is empty, I size up what's in each drawer. A gaudy ring sits on a crumpled blouse.

The door opens. The occupant enters her room crying and stops when she catches me. She drops a Pomeranian with a bow that matches her Chanel scarf. I remove her ring.