

THE
MARRIAGE
PORTRAIT

A NOVEL

MAGGIE
O'FARRELL

Author of HAMNET

ALSO BY MAGGIE O'FARRELL

Fiction

After You'd Gone

My Lover's Lover

The Distance Between Us

The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

The Hand That First Held Mine

Instructions for a Heatwave

This Must Be the Place

Hamnet

The Marriage Portrait

Nonfiction

I Am, I Am, I Am



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MARRIAGE
PORTRAIT



Maggie O'Farrell



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Author's Note

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A Note About the Author

For Mary-Anne and Victoria

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive.

ROBERT BROWNING, "MY LAST DUCHESS"

The ladies...are forced to follow the whims, fancies and dictates of their fathers, mothers, brothers and husbands, so that they spend most of their time cooped up within the narrow confines of their rooms, where they sit in apparent idleness, wishing one thing and at the same time wishing its opposite, and reflecting on various matters...

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, *THE DECAMERON*

Historical Note

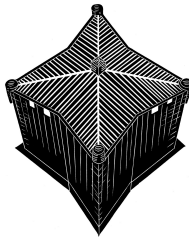
In 1560, fifteen-year-old Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici left Florence to begin her married life with Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara.

Less than a year later, she would be dead.

The official cause of her death was given as "putrid fever," but it was rumoured that she had been murdered by her husband.

A Wild and Lonely Place

FORTEZZA, NEAR BONDENO, 1561



Lucrezia is taking her seat at the long dining table, which is polished to a watery gleam and spread with dishes, inverted cups, a woven circlet of fir. Her husband is sitting down, not in his customary place at the opposite end but next to her, close enough that she could rest her head on his shoulder, should she wish; he is unfolding his napkin and straightening a knife and moving the candle towards them both when it comes to her with a peculiar clarity, as if some coloured glass has been put in front of her eyes, or perhaps removed from them, that he intends to kill her.

She is sixteen years old, not quite a year into her marriage. They have travelled for most of the day, using what little daylight the season offers, leaving Ferrara at dawn and riding out to what he had told her was a hunting lodge, far in the north-west of the province.

But this is no hunting lodge, is what Lucrezia had wanted to say when they reached their destination: a high-walled edifice of dark stone, flanked on one side by dense forest and on the other by a twisting meander of the Po river. She would have liked to turn in her saddle and ask, why have you brought me here?

She said nothing, however, allowing her mare to follow him along the path, through dripping trees, over the arch-backed bridge and into the courtyard of the strange, fortified, star-shaped building, which seemed, even then, to strike her as peculiarly empty of people.

The horses have been led away, she has removed her sodden cloak and hat, and he has watched her do this, standing with his back to the blaze in the grate, and now he is gesturing to the country servants in the hall's outer shadows to step forward and place food on their plates, to slice the bread, to pour wine into their cups, and she is suddenly recalling the words of her sister-in-law, delivered in a hoarse whisper: You will be blamed.

Lucrezia's fingers grip the rim of her plate. The certainty that he means her to die is like a presence beside her, as if a dark-feathered bird of prey has alighted on the arm of her chair.

This is the reason for their sudden journey to such a wild and lonely place. He has brought her here, to this stone fortress, to murder her.

Astonishment yanks her up out of her body and she almost laughs; she is hovering by the vaulted ceiling, looking down at herself and him, sitting at the table, putting broth and salted bread into their mouths. She sees the way he leans towards her, resting his fingers on the bare skin of her wrist as he says something; she watches herself nodding at him, swallowing the food, speaking some words about their journey here and the interesting scenery through which they passed, as if nothing at all is amiss between them, as if this is a normal dinner, after which they will retire to bed.

In truth, she thinks, still up by the cold, sweating stone of the hall's ceiling, the ride here from court was dull, through fields stark and frozen, the sky so heavy it seemed to droop, exhausted, on the tops of bare trees. Her husband had set the pace at a trot, mile after mile of jolting up and down in the saddle, her back aching, her legs rubbed raw by wet stockings. Even inside squirrel-lined gloves, her fingers, clutching the reins, had been rigid with cold, and the horse's mane was soon cast in ice. Her husband had ridden ahead, with two guards behind. As the city had given way to countryside, Lucrezia had wanted to spur her horse, to press her heels into its flank and feel its hoofs fly over the stones and soil, to move through the flat landscape of the valley at speed, but she knew she must not, that her

place was behind or next to him, if invited, never in front, so on and on they trotted.

At the table, facing the man she now suspects will kill her, she wishes she had done it, that she had urged her mare into a gallop. She wishes she had streaked by him, cackling with transgressive glee, her hair and cloak lashing out behind her, hoofs flinging mud. She wishes she had turned the reins towards the distant hills, where she could have lost herself among the rocky folds and peaks, so that he could never find her.

He is setting an elbow on either side of his plate, telling her about coming to this lodge—as he persists in calling it—when he was a child, how his father used to bring him hunting here. She is listening to a story about how he was made to release arrow after arrow towards a target on a tree until his fingers bled. She is nodding and making sympathetic murmurs at appropriate moments, but what she really wants to do is look him in the eye and say: I know what you are up to.

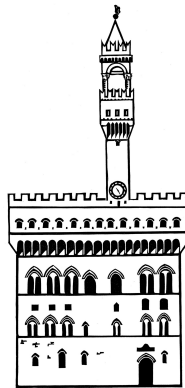
Would he be surprised, wrongfooted? Does he think of her as his innocent, unworldly wife, barely out of the nursery? She sees it all. She sees he has laid his scheme so carefully, so assiduously, separating her from others, ensuring that her retinue was left behind in Ferrara, that she is alone, that there are no people from the *castello* here, just him and her, two guards stationed outside, and a handful of country servants to wait on them.

How will he do it? Part of her would like to ask him this. The knife in a dark corridor? His hands about her throat? A tumble from a horse made to look like an accident? She has no doubt that all of these would fall within his repertoire. It had better be done well, would be her advice to him, because her father is not someone who will take a lenient view of his daughter's murder.

She sets down her cup; she lifts her chin; she turns her eyes on to her husband, Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, and wonders what will happen next.

The Unfortunate Circumstances of Lucrezia's Conception

PALAZZO, FLORENCE, 1544



In the years to come, Eleonora would come to bitterly regret the manner in which her fifth child was conceived.

Picture Eleonora in the autumn of 1544: she is in the map room of the Florentine *palazzo*, a chart held close to her face (she is somewhat short-sighted but would never admit this to anyone). Her women stand at a distance, as near to the window as they can get; although it is September, the city is still suffocatingly hot. The well of the courtyard below seems to bake the air, wafting out more and more heat from its stone rectangle. The sky is low and motionless; no breeze stirs the silk window coverings and the flags on the *palazzo's* ramparts hang limp and flaccid. The ladies-in-waiting fan themselves and blot their foreheads with handkerchiefs, sighing noiselessly; each of them is wondering how much longer they will be required to stand here, in this panelled room, how much more time

Eleonora will desire to peruse this map, and what she can possibly find so interesting about it.

Eleonora's eyes rake over the silverpoint rendering of Tuscany: the peaks of hills, the eel-like slither of rivers, the ragged coastline climbing north. Her gaze passes over the cluster of roads that knot themselves together for the cities of Siena, Livorno and Pisa. Eleonora is a woman all too aware of her rarity and worth: she possesses not only a body able to produce a string of heirs, but also a beautiful face, with a forehead like carved ivory, eyes wide-set and deep brown, a mouth that looks well in both a smile and a pout. On top of all this, she has a quick and mercurial mind. She can look at the scratch marks on this map and can, unlike most women, translate them into fields full of grain, terraces of vines, crops, farms, convents, levy-paying tenants.

She puts down one map and, just as her women are rustling their skirts in readiness to leave for a better-ventilated room, she picks up another. She is studying the area just inland from the coast; there seem to be no marks made upon that section of the chart, other than some indistinct and irregular patches of water.

If there is one thing Eleonora cannot abide it is a lack of purpose. Under her jurisdiction, every room, every corridor, every antechamber of this *palazzo* has been renovated and put to use. Every bare plaster wall has been adorned and beautified. She will not allow her children, her servants or her women an empty minute in their days. From the moment they wake to the moment they rest their heads on their pillows, they are kept occupied by a schedule she has designed. Unless she is asleep, she will be engaged in a task: writing letters, taking lessons in languages, making plans or lists or overseeing the children's care and education.

Eleonora's head begins to teem with ideas for this marshland. They must drain it. No, they must irrigate it. They could grow crops here. They could build a city. They could instal a system of lakes for the breeding of fish. Or an aqueduct or a—

Her thoughts are interrupted by a door opening and the sound of boots on the floor: a confident, assertive stride. She does not turn but smiles to herself as she holds up the map to the light, watching how the glow of the sun illuminates the mountains and towns and fields.

A hand lands on her waist, another on her shoulder. She feels the stippled sting of a beard on her neck, the moist press of lips.

“What are you up to, my busy little bee?” her husband murmurs into her ear.

“I am wondering about this land,” she says, still holding up the map, “near the sea, here, do you see?”

“Mmm,” he says, sliding an arm around her, burying his face in her pinned-up hair, pressing her body between his and the hard edge of the table.

“If we were to drain it, it might be possible to put it to work in some way, either by farming it or building on it and—” She breaks off because he is grappling with her skirts, hoisting them up so that his hand may roam unimpeded along her knee, up her thigh, and up, further, much further up. “Cosimo,” she chides, in a whisper, but she needn’t have worried because her women are shuffling out of the room, their dresses skimming the floor, and Cosimo’s aides are leaving, all of them clustering at the exit, eager to be away.

The door closes behind them.

“The air is bad there,” she continues, displaying the map between her pale, tapered fingers, as if nothing is happening, as if there isn’t a man behind her, trying to navigate his way through layers of undergarments, “malodorous and unhealthy, and if we were to—”

Cosimo turns her around and removes the map from her hands. “Yes, my darling,” he says, guiding her backwards to the table, “whatever you say, whatever you want.”

“But, Cosimo, only look—”

“Later.” He thrusts the map on to the table, then lifts her on to it, pushing at the mass of her skirts. “Later.”

Eleonora lets out a resigned sigh, narrowing her sloping cat eyes. She can see that there is no diverting him from this. But she seizes his hand, nonetheless. “Do you promise?” she says. “Promise me. You’ll give me leave to make use of that land?”

His hand fights hers. It is a pretence, a game, they both know. One of Cosimo’s arms is twice the width of hers. He could strip this dress off her

in seconds, with or without her agreement, were he an altogether different man.

“I promise,” he says, then kisses her, and she releases his hand.

She has never, she reflects as he sets to, refused him in this. She never will. There are many areas in their marriage in which she is able to hold sway, more than other wives in similar positions. As she sees it, unimpeded access to her body is a small price to pay for the numerous liberties and powers she is permitted.

She has had four children already; she intends to have more, as many as her husband will plant within her. A large ruling family is what is needed to give the province stability and longevity. Before she and Cosimo married, this dynasty was in danger of petering out, of dissolving into history. And now? Cosimo’s sovereignty and the region’s power are assured. Thanks to her, there are two male heirs up in the nursery already, who will be trained to step into Cosimo’s shoes, and two girls who can be married into other ruling families.

She keeps herself focused on this thought because she wants to conceive again, and because she doesn’t want to dwell on the unbaptised soul she lost last year. She never speaks of this, never tells anyone, not even her confessor, that its little pearl-grey face and curled fingers still haunt her dreams, that she longs for it and wants it, even now, that its absence has pierced a hole right through her. The cure for this secret melancholy is, she tells herself, simply to have another baby as soon as she can. She needs to get pregnant again and then all will be well. Her body is strong and fruitful. The people of Tuscany, she knows, refer to her as “La Fecundissima” and it is entirely apt: she has found birthing children not the agony and hellfire she was led to believe. She brought her own nurse, Sofia, with her when she left her father’s house and this woman takes care of her offspring. She, Eleonora, is young, she is beautiful, her husband loves her and is faithful to her and would do anything to please her. She will fill that nursery up in the eaves; she will stuff it full of heirs; she will produce child after child after child. Why not? No more babies will slip away from her before time: she will not allow it.

As Cosimo labours away in the heat of the Sala delle Carte Geografiche, his aides and her women waiting listlessly in the room

outside, exchanging yawns and resigned glances, Eleonora's mind shrinks away from the little lost one and towards the marshlands again, skimming over their reeds, their yellow flags, their tussocks of scrubby grass. It weaves in and out of its mists and vapours. It pictures engineers with machinery and pipes arriving, draining away all that is dank, wet and unwanted. It creates lush crops, fat livestock and villages peopled by willing, grateful subjects.

She rests her arms upon her husband's shoulders and fixes her eyes on the maps on the walls opposite as he approaches his moment of pleasure: Ancient Greece, Byzantium, the extent of the Roman Empire, constellations of the heavens, uncharted seas, islands real and imagined, mountains that disappear up into thunderstorms.

Impossible to foresee that this would prove a mistake, that she ought to have shut her eyes and brought her mind back to the room, her marital duty, her strong and handsome husband, who still desired her after all this time. How could she have known that the child born of this coupling would be unlike any of the others, all of whom were sweet in nature and agreeable in temperament? So easily forgotten, in the moment, the principle of maternal impression. Later, she will chastise herself for her distraction, her inattention. It has been drummed into her by physicians and priests alike that the character of a child is determined by the mother's thoughts at the moment of conception.

Too late, however. Eleonora's mind, here in the map room, is unsettled, untamed, wandering at will. She is looking at maps, at landscapes, at wildernesses.

Cosimo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, finishes the act with his habitual growling gasp, clutching his wife to him in a tender grip, and she, moved but somewhat relieved (the day is hot, after all), allows him to help her down off the table. She calls for her women to accompany her back to her rooms. She would like, she tells them, a mint *tisana*, a siesta, and perhaps a clean shift.

Nine months later, when she is presented with a baby who roars and writhes and throws off its swaddling bands, a baby who will not rest or sleep or be comforted unless it is in constant motion, a baby who might accept the breast of the wet-nurse—carefully chosen by Sofia—for a few

minutes but will never settle to a feed, a baby whose eyes are open, always, as if seeking distant horizons, Eleonora is filled with something close to guilt. Is it her fault, this wildness in the baby's character? Is it all down to her? She doesn't tell anyone, least of all Cosimo. The existence of this baby terrifies her, eroding as it does her conviction that she is an excellent mother, that she produces offspring healthy in mind and body. For one of her children to be so difficult, so intractable, chips away at the very quintessence of her role here in Florence.

During a visit to the nursery, where she tries for an entire morning to embrace the squalling Lucrezia, she notices how the noise affects the four older siblings, who insist on covering their ears and running off into a different room. Eleonora is seized with the fear that the behaviour of this baby will influence the others. Will they, suddenly, become unbiddable and inconsolable? She decides, on the spur of the moment, to remove Lucrezia from the nursery altogether and place her in a different part of the *palazzo*. Just for a time, she tells herself, until the child settles down. She makes enquiries, then engages the services of a different wet-nurse, one of the cooks from the kitchens. She is a broad-hipped, cheerful woman who is more than happy to take Lucrezia into her care—her own daughter, almost two years old and toddling about the flagstones, is ready to be weaned. Eleonora sends one of her ladies down every day to the kitchens to enquire how the baby fares; she does her duty by the child, of this she is certain. The only unfortunate element is that the situation goes against the opinions of Sofia, Eleonora's old nurse, who vociferously disapproves of what she refers to as Lucrezia's "banishment" and, anyway, sees nothing wrong with the wet-nurse she herself selected. But Eleonora is strangely insistent: this child will be placed far away from the rest of the family, down in the basement kitchen, along with the servants, the maids, the noise of cooking pots and the heat of the big fires. Lucrezia's early life is spent in a laundry tub, watched over by the wet-nurse's little daughter, who pats the child's tiny tight fist, and calls for her mother whenever the baby's face creases into a wail.

When Lucrezia begins to walk, there is a near-miss with an upset pan of boiling water so she is sent back upstairs. Removed from the familiar steam and racket of the kitchens, and confronted by four children she has

no memory of, she screams for two days. She screams for her basement wet-nurse, for the wooden spoons she was given to suck when her teeth hurt, for the herb bouquets silhouetted against square windows, for a hand coming down with a slice of warm bread or a rind of cheese to chew. She wants none of this room up in the eaves with bed after bed, with identical-faced children who stare at her with impassive black eyes, who whisper to each other, then suddenly get to their feet and walk away. She has a troubling recollection of an immense black pot toppling near her, and then a flood of sizzling liquid. She refuses the arms and laps of these nursery women; she won't let them dress or feed her. She wants the cook from downstairs, her milk-mother; she wants to twist a strand of her smooth hair between her finger and thumb while she dozes, curled safe in her capacious lap. She wants the kind face of her milk-sister, who sings to her and lets her draw in the fire's ashes with a stick. Sofia shakes her head, and mutters that she told Eleonora no good would come of sending the child downstairs. The only way she can get Lucrezia to eat is to leave food on the floor beside her. Like a wild animal, Sofia remarks.

When all this is reported to Eleonora, by Sofia, who makes a point of going to the chambers of her erstwhile charge and standing beside the bed, fists pressed into hips, Eleonora sighs and pushes a freshly cracked almond into her mouth. She is days away from giving birth again, her belly a mountain beneath the bedsheets; she is hoping for a boy. She took no chances this time, and arranged for her chamber to be filled with paintings of healthy young men engaged in virile, masculine pursuits—spear-throwing or jousting. She would not submit to conjugal acts anywhere in the *palazzo* but here, much to Cosimo's disappointment—he has always had a fondness for an urgent coupling in a corridor or mezzanine. But she will not make the same mistake as last time.

At four years old, Lucrezia will not play with a doll, as her sisters did, or sit at the table to eat, or join in the games of her siblings, preferring instead to spend her time on her own, running like a savage from one side of the walkway to the other or to kneel at the window, where she spends hours looking out at the city and the distant hills beyond. When she is six, she wriggles and fidgets instead of sitting nicely for a painter, so much so that Eleonora loses her temper and says there will be no portrait of her

after all—she can return to the nursery. At eight or nine, she goes through a time of refusing to wear any shoes, even when Sofia smacks her for this disobedience. And at the age of fifteen, when she is about to be married, she creates an enormous fuss about the bridal dress that she, Eleonora, had commissioned herself, in a glorious combination of blue silk and gold brocade. Lucrezia bursts into her chambers, unannounced, shouting at the top of her voice about how she will not wear it, she will not, it is too big for her. Eleonora, who is in her *scrittoio*, writing to one of her favourite abbesses, tries to keep her temper and says to Lucrezia, in a firm voice, that the dress is being altered for her, as she well knows. But Lucrezia, of course, goes too far. Why, she demands, with a furious face, should she wear a dress that was made for her sister Maria, when Maria died, isn't it bad enough that she has to marry Maria's fiancé, must she really wear her dress as well? Eleonora's mind, as she sets down her stylus, raises herself from her desk and walks through the archway towards her daughter, fixes once more on Lucrezia's conception, the way her eyes had passed over the maps of ancient lands, had been focused on strange and wild seas, filled with dragons and monsters, beset by winds that might blow a ship far off course. What a mistake for her to make! How she has been haunted by it, punished for it!

At the other end of the room, Eleonora sees her daughter's angular, tear-streaked face open like a flower with hope and expectation. Here is my mother, Eleonora knows she is thinking. Perhaps she will save me, from the dress, from the marriage. Perhaps all will be well.