Rain is an agony here. In other parts of the world, a downpour will in all likelihood come as a boon for nearly everyone and I
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everything-good for the crops, good for the fauna and the flora, and with an extra splash of romanticism, good for lovers. Not so in Istanbul though. Rain, for us, isn't necessarily about getting wet. It's not about getting dirty even. If anything, it's about getting angry. It's mud and chaos and rage, as if we didn't have enough of each already. And struggle. It's always about struggle. Like kittens thrown into a bucketful of water, all ten million of us put up a futile fight against the drops. It can't be said that we are completely alone in this scuffle, for the streets too are on in it, with their antediluvian names stenciled on tin placards, and the tombstones of so many saints scattered in all directions, the piles of garbage that wait on almost every comer, the hideously huge construction pits soon to be turned into glitzy, modern buildings, and the seagulls.... It angers us all when the sky opens and spits on our heads.

But then, as the final drops reach the ground and many more perch unsteadily on the now dustless leaves, at that unprotected moment, when you are not quite sure that it has finally ceased raining, and neither is the rain itself, in that very interstice, everything becomes serene. For one long minute, the sky seems to apologize for the mess she has left us in. And we, with dribbles still in our hair, slush in our cuffs, and dreaminess in our gaze, stare back at the sky, now a lighter shade of cerulean and clearer than ever. We look up and can't help smiling back. We forgive her; we always do.

At the moment, however, it was still pouring and Zeliha had little, if any, forgiveness in her heart. She did not have an umbrella, for she had promised herself that if she was enough of an imbecile to throw a bunch of money to yet another street vendor for yet another umbrella, only to forget it here and there as soon as the sun came back, then she deserved to be soaked to the bone. Besides, it was too late now anyway. She was already sopping wet. That was the one thing about the rain that likened it to sorrow: You did your best to remain untouched, safe and dry, but if and when you failed, there came a point in which you started seeing the problem less in
rules of Petite-Ma, her grandmother, that was sheer blasphemy. You might not be fond of the rain, you certainly did not have to be, but under no circumstances should you cuss at anything that came from the skies, because something poured from above on it and behind it all there was Allah the Almighty.

Surely Zeliha knew the unwritten and unbreakable rules of Petite-Ma, but on this first Friday of July she felt spoiled enough not to care. Besides, whatever had been uttered had been uttered, just like whatever had been done in life had been done and was now gone. Zeliha had no time for regrets. She was late for her appointment with the gynecologist. Not a negligible risk, indeed, given that the moment you notice being late for an appointment with the gynecologist, you might decide not to go there at all. A yellow cab with bumper stickers all over its back fender pulled up short. The driver, a rough-looking, swarthy man who had a Zapatista mustache and a gold front tooth, and who might very well have been a molester when off-duty, had all the windows down and

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a local rock station blasting Madonna's "Like a Virgin" full bore. There was a sharp mismatch between the man's utterly traditional look and his contrastingly unconventional musical preferences. He braked brusquely, cocked his head out of the window, and after whistling at Zeliha, barked, "I'll have some of that!" His next words were muffled by Zeliha's.

"What's wrong with you, creep? Can't a woman walk in peace in this city?"

"But why walk when I could give you a ride?" the driver asked. "You wouldn't want that sexy body to get wet, would you?"

As Madonna cried in the background "My fear is fading fast, been saving it all for you," Zeliha began to swear, thus breaking another unwritten and unbreakable rule, this time not one of Petite-Ma's but one of Female Prudence. Never cuss at your harasser.

The Golden Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: When harassed on the street, never respond, since a woman who responds, let alone swears back at her harasser, shall only fire up the enthusiasm of the latter.

Zeliha was no stranger to this rule, and she knew better than to violate it, but this first Friday of July was like no other, and there was now another self unleashed in her, one far more carefree and brash, and frighteningly furious. It was this other Zeliha that inhabited most of her inner space and took charge of things now, making decisions in the name of both. That was why she continued to curse at the top of her voice. As she drowned out Madonna, the pedestrians and umbrella vendors gathered to see what kind of trouble was brewing. In the turmoil, the stalker behind her flinched, knowing better than to mess with a madwoman. But the cabdriver was neither as prudent nor as timid, for he welcomed all the fuss with a grin. Zeliha noticed how surprisingly white and flawless the man's teeth were, and could not help wondering if they were porcelain capped.

Little by little, she once again felt that wave of adren
"Baba means Father in Turkish.

*Istanbul!

bureaucratic regulations were less keen to rescue babies born out of wedlock than those born to married couples. A fatherless baby in Istanbul was just another bastard, and a

Fortunately for Zeliha, the fact that there was no husband turned out to be an advantage in formalities. Apparently she didn't need to get anyone's written approval. The

words from her vocabulary and now that she recalled that decision, why not start with the word shame. Still, she didn't have the nerve to utter aloud what by now everyone in

person in the room weighed heavier upon her, Zeliha's grimace evolved into a beatific smile. Not that she was enjoying the tortuous moment, but the indifference deep

"We'd need the consent of your husband, of course," the receptionist continued, no longer in a chirpy voice, and wasted no time in proceeding on to another question, the

"I am," she conceded, "nineteen years old." As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she blushed, as if caught naked in front of all these people.

Zeliha was smart enough to know that even if she had brought up the harassment now, other women, far from being supportive, would have the tendency to pass judgment on

The Copper Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: When harassed on the street, you'd better forget about the incident as soon as you are on your way again, since to

"Because I need to have an abortion.

The word hovered in the air, and they all waited for it to sink. The receptionist's eyes grew small, then large, while the smile on her face disappeared. Zeliha couldn't help feeling

wondered. But leaving aside the question that tugged at the edges of her mind, she responded: "An abortion.

Zeliha managed to ignore the absurdity of the question. By now she knew too well that it was precisely this unconditional and all-embracing female cheerfulness that she sorely

lacked in life. Some women were devoted smilers; they smiled with a Spartan sense of duty. How could one ever learn to do so naturally something so unnatural, Zeliha

wondered. But leaving aside the question that tagged at the edges of her mind, she responded: "An abortion." The word hovered in the air, and they all waited for it to sink. The receptionist's eyes grew small, then large, while the smile on her face disappeared. Zeliha couldn't help feeling relieved. After all, unconditional and all-embracing female cheerfulness brought out a vindictive streak in her.

I have an appointment... " Zeliha said, tucking a ringlet behind her ears while letting the rest of her hair fall around her face and over her shoulders like a thick, black burka. She lifted her chin, thus accentuating her aquiline nose, and felt the need to repeat, a notch louder than she had intended, or maybe not. "Because I need to have an abortion." Torn between impartially registering the new patient and giv

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brows knit. Zeliha guessed she was having trouble getting pregnant. Now that, Zeliha assumed, could be bothersome, depending on one's perspective. She personally did not see infertility as the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

"Helloo you!" chirped the receptionist, forcing herself into a goofy, phony smile so well practiced it looked neither goofy nor phony. "Are you our three o'clock appointment?"

The receptionist seemed to be having a hard time pronouncing the letter r, and as if to compensate she went extra long with the accentuating the sound, raising her voice, and offering an extra smile on top of that whenever her tongue bumped into that ominous letter. To save her the burden, Zeliha nodded instantly and perhaps too heartily.

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The copper rule was to open the door without any formality of knock or any other sign that you had arrived. But Zeliha was not sure of her decorum and decided to raise the hand in

scolding eye to such intrepidity, the receptionist stood still, a huge, leather-covered notebook lying open in front of her. A few more seconds passed before she finally

started scribbling. In the meantime Zeliha muttered:

"I'm sorry that I'm late." The clock on the wall indicated that she was forty-six minutes late, and as her gaze rested on it, for a second, she looked as if she were drifting away.

"It's because of the rain. That was a little unfair to the rain, since the traffic, the broken cobblestones, the municipality, the stalker, and the cabdriver, not to mention the stop for shopping, should also have been held accountable for her delay, but Zeliha decided to bring up none of those. She might have violated The Golden Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman, she might also have violated The Silver Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman, but she held her ground to abide by the Copper Rule.

The Copper Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: When harassed on the street, you'd better forget about the incident as soon as you are on your way again, since to recall the incident all day long will only further wrack your nerves!

Zeliha was smart enough to know that even if she had brought up the harassment now, other women, far from being supportive, would have the tendency to pass judgment on a harassed sister in cases like these. So she kept the answer short and the rain remained the only thing to blame.

"Your age, miss?" the receptionist wanted to know.

Now that was an annoying question, and utterly unnecessary. Zeliha squinted at the receptionist as if she were some sort of semidarkness one needed to adjust her eyes to

better see. All of a sudden, she remembered the sad truth about herself her age. Like too many women used to acting above and beyond their years, she

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was disturbed by the fact that, after all, she was far younger than she'd like to be.

"I am," she conceded, "nineteen years old." As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she blushed, as if caught naked in front of all these people.

"We'd need the consent of your husband, of course," the receptionist continued, no longer in a chirpy voice, and wasted no time in proceeding on to another question, the

answer of which she already suspected. "May I ask you, are you married, miss?"

From the corner of her eye Zeliha noticed the plump blonde on her right and the head-scarved woman on her left wiggle uncomfortably. As the inquisitive gaze of every person in the room weighed heavily upon her, Zeliha's grinace evolved into a beatific smile. Not that was enjoying the tortuous moment, but the indifference deep underneath had just whispered to her not to disturb other people's opinions since they would make no difference at the end of the day. Lately she had decided to purge certain words from her vocabulary and now that she recalled that decision, why not start with the word shame. Still, she didn't have the nerve to utter aloud what by now everyone in the room had fully understood. There was no husband to consent to this abortion. There was no father. Instead of a BA-BA* there was only a VO-ID.

Fortunately for Zeliha, the fact that there was no husband turned out to be an advantage in formalities. Apparently she didn't need to get anyone's written approval. The bureaucratic regulations were less keen to rescue babies born out of wedlock than those born to married couples. A fatherless baby in Istanbul was just another bastard, and a bastard just another sagging tooth in the city's jaw, ready to fall out at any time.

"Your birthplace?" the receptionist continued dreamily.

*Istanbul*

* Baba means Father in Turkish.
In her endeavor to sway away from the color of silence, Zeliha grew distracted by a black spot on the ceiling. The more she fixed her stare on it, the more the spot resembled as much as this absolute whiteness. There was something in the color white that resembled silence. Both were emptied of life.

"Figist ... ? Figist ... ?!" Zeliha thought to herself, as she laid still on a table in a room unnervingly white and immaculate. Neither the accoutrements nor even the knives scared her him ... ? Figist ... ?! Zeliha thought to herself, as she laid still on a table in a room unnervingly white and immaculate. Neither the accoutrements nor even the knives scared her.

Was it the same vendor or a new one? What did his customers call "Figs ... Delicious figs ... Good ripe figs!" crying.

The doctor patted her shoulder, handed her a tissue, and then handed her the whole box. He always had a spare box of tissues ready by his desk. Drug companies distributed letters. The correlation between the two was unknown to Zeliha, but she had taken the test all the same. When the results arrived, her blood sugar turned out to be normal and she turned out to be pregnant.

"Miss, you can come in now!" called the receptionist as she stood in the doorway, fighting another r, this time one that was hard to avoid in her profession. "The doctor ... he is waiting for you." Grabbing her box of tea glasses and the broken heel, Zeliha jumped to her feet. She felt all the heads in the room turn toward her, recording her every gesture. Normally, she would have walked as rapidly as she could. At the moment, however, her moves were visibly slow, almost languorous. Just when she was about to leave the room, she paused, and as if pushed by a button, she turned around, knowing exactly whom to look at. There, at the center of her gaze, was a most embittered face. The head-scarved woman grinned, her brown eyes shadowed by resentment, her lips mov...
It was wrong, she knew. Allah could not and should not be personified. Allah did not have fingers, or blood for that matter. One had to refrain from attributing human qualities to him-that's to say, Him-which was not easy since every one of his that's to say, His-ninety-nine names happened to be qualities also pertinent to human beings. He could see it all but had no eyes; He could hear it all but had no ears; He could reach out everywhere but had no hands.... Out of all this information an eight-year-old Zeliha had drawn the conclusion that Allah could resemble us, but we could not resemble Him. Or was it vice versa? Anyway, one had to learn to think about him-that's to say, Him-without thinking of Him as him.

The chances are she would not have minded this as much if one afternoon she had not spotted a bloody bandage around her elder sister Feride's index finger. It looked like the Kurdish girl made her a blood-sister too. Zeliha felt betrayed. Only then it dawned on her that her real objection to Allah was not his-that's to say, His-not having any blood but rather having too many blood-sisters, too many to care for so as to end up not caring for anyone.

The episode of friendship had not lasted long after that. The konak being so big and dilapidated and Mom being so grumpy and mulish, the cleaning lady quit after a while, rather having too many blood-sisters, too many to care for so as to end up not caring for anyone.

Kurdish girl made her a blood-sister too. Zeliha felt betrayed. Only then it dawned on her that her real objection to Allah was not his—that's to say, His—not having any blood but rather having too many blood-sisters, too many to care for so as to end up not caring for anyone.

It was too bright here, almost glossy. Slowly and cautiously, she walked along a bridge teeming with cars and pedestrians, and motionless fishermen with worms wiggling at the ends of their spinning rods. As she navigated among them, every cobblestone she stepped on turned out to be loose, and to her awe, there was only void underneath. Soon she'd realize in horror that what was below was also above, and it was ruining cobblestones from the blue skies. When a cobblestone fell from the sky, a cobblestone lessened from the pavement below. Above the sky and under the ground, there was the same thing: VO-ID.

As cobblestones rained from above, enlarging further the cavity underneath, she panicked, afraid of being swallowed by the hungry abyss. "Stop!" she cried out as the stones from the pavement below. Above the sky and under the ground, there was the same thing: VO-ID.

It was wrong, she knew. Allah could not and should not be personified. Allah did not have fingers, or blood for that matter. One had to refrain from attributing human qualities to him—that's to say, Him—which was not easy since every one of his that's to say, His—ninety-nine names happened to be qualities also pertinent to human beings. He could see it all but had no eyes; He could hear it all but had no ears; He could reach out everywhere but had no hands.... Out of all this information an eight-year-old Zeliha had drawn the conclusion that Allah could resemble us, but we could not resemble Him. Or was it vice versa? Anyway, one had to learn to think about him—that's to say, Him—without thinking of Him as him.

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"What do you mean ...?" Zeliha faltered, trying less to find out the answer than to comprehend the weight of her own question. "You mean ... you have not."

"No, we haven't." The receptionist sighed, holding her head as if at the onset of a migraine. "There was absolutely no way the doctor could do anything with you screaming at the top of your voice. You did not pass out, woman, no way; first you were blathering, and then you started yelling and cursing. I've never seen anything like it in fifteen years. It must have taken the morphine twice as long to take effect on you."

Zeliha suspected some exaggeration behind this statement but did not feel like arguing. Two hours into her visit to the gynecolo

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gist she had come to realize that herein a patient was expected to talk only when asked to.

"And when you finally blacked out it was so hard to believe that you wouldn't start shrieking again, the doctor said, let's wait till her mind is clear. If she wants to have this abortion for sure, she can still go for it afterward. We brought you here and let you sleep. And sleep indeed you did!"

"You mean there was no ..." The word she had so dairingly uttered in front of strangers just this afternoon felt unutterable now. Zeliha touched her belly while her eyes appealed for a consolation the receptionist was the last person on earth to grant. "So she is still here...."

"Well, you do not know yet if it is a she!" the receptionist said, her voice mutter-of-fact.

But Zeliha knew. She simply did.

Once on the street, despite the gathering darkness, it felt like early morning. The rain had ceased and life looked beautiful, almost manageable. Though the traffic was still a mess and the streets full of sludge, the crisp smell of the after-rain gave the whole city a sacred air. Here and there children stomped in mud puddles, taking delight in committing simple sins. If there ever was a right time to sin, it must have been at this fleeting instant. One of those rare moments when it felt like Allah not only watched over us but also cared for us; one of those moments when He felt close.

It almost felt as if Istanbul had become a blissful metropolis, romantically picturesque, just like Paris, thought Zeliha; not that she had ever been to Paris. A seagull flew close crying a coded message she was almost on the verge of deciphering. For half a minute Zeliha believed she was on the cutting edge of a new beginning. "Why did you not let me do it, Allah?" she heard herself mutter, but as soon as the words came out of her mouth, she apologized in panic to the atheist in herself.

Pardon me, pardon me, pardon me.

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Far and under the rainbow Zeliha limped back home, clutching the box of tea glasses and the broken heel, somehow feeling less dispirited than she had felt in weeks.

So on that Friday afternoon around eight p.m. Zeliha came home, to the slightly decrepit, high-ceileding Ottoman kona, that looked out of place amid five times as tall modern apartment buildings on both sides. She trudged up the curved staircase and found all the Kazanci females gathered upstairs around the wide dinner table, occupied with their meal, obviously having felt no reason to wait for her.

"Hello stranger! Come on in, join our supper," Banu exclaimed, craning her neck over an oven-fried crispy chicken wing. "The prophet Mohammed advises us to share our food with strangers."

Her lips were glossy, so were her cheeks, as if she had taken extra time to wipe the chicken grease all over her face, including on those shiny, fawn eyes of hers. Twelve years older and thirty pounds heavier than Zeliha, she looked less like her sister than like her mother. If she was to be believed, Banu had a bizarre digestive system that stored everything ingested, which could have been a more credible claim had she not also argued that even if it were pure water that she consumed, her body would still evolve it into fat, and thereby she could not possibly be held accountable for her weight or be asked to go on a diet.

"This must be my lucky day!" Zeliha said.

Today's menu looked splendidly familiar. In addition to a huge chicken, there was yogurt soup, karniyarak, pilaki, kadin budu kofte from the day before, tür, newly made (orek), ajar of ayran, and, yes, stuffed green peppers. Zeliha instantly pulled up a chair, her hunger prevailing over her lack of enthusiasm for attending a family dinner on such a hard day's eve.

"Where were you, missy?" grumbled her mother, Gulsum, who might have been Ivan the Terrible in another life. She squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, knitted her eyebrows, and then turned her contorted face toward Zeliha's, as if by doing so she could read her youngest daughter's mind.

So there they stood, Gulsum and Zeliha mother and daughter, scowling at each other, each ready to quarrel but reluctant to start the fight. It was Zeliha who first averted her eyes. Knowing too well what a big mistake it would be to display her temper in front of her mother, she forced herself to smile and attempted an answer, albeit an indirect one.

"There were good discounts at the bazaar today. I bought a set of tea glasses. They are absolutely gorgeous! They have gilded stars and little spoons that match."

"Alas, they break so easily," murmured Cevriye, the second eldest of the Kazanci sisters and a Turkish national history teacher at a private high school. She always ate healthy, balanced meals and wore her hair in a perfectly pinned chignon that twisted at the nape of her neck without letting even a tangle of hair loose.

"You've been to the bazaar? Why didn't you get any cinnamon sticks?! I told you this morning we were going to have rice pudding today and there was no cinnamon left at the top of your voice. You did not pass out, woman, no way; first you were blathering, and then you started yelling and cursing. I've never seen anything like it in fifteen years. It must have taken the morphine twice as long to take effect on you."
And then... Zeliha carried on with her story, "this mysterious voice commands: 'Oooo Zeliha! Oooo you the culprit of the righteous Kazanci family! Let this child live! You finished her soup, obediently waiting for her next dish to arrive.

Cevriye flinched, Feride nervously coughed into her table napkin, Banu swallowed hard, and Gulsum frowned. Only Petite-Ma remained far off in a better land, having now unconscious on that operating table, I hear the afternoon prayer from a nearby mosque.... The prayer is soft, like a piece of velvet. It envelops my whole body. Then, as soon anesthetized with a doctor and a nurse on each side. In a few minutes the operation will begin and the baby will be gone. Forever! But then just when I am about to go...

"What do you mean?" asked Banu.

"Well, I have good news then. I have not killed... it-herwhatever!" Zeliha turned toward her sister calmly. "Not that I did not want to. I did! I tried to have the droplet aborted"

"Scientific! You are not scientific, you are cold-blooded!" Cevriye burst into tears. "Cold-blooded! That's what you are!"

How could you slaughter your baby?" Cevriye asked in awe.

Although Feride's interest in physical geography had never petered out in the fullness of time, it inspired yet another area of interest that she profoundly enjoyed: accidents and disasters. Every day she read the third page of the tabloids. Car accidents, serial killings, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires and floods, terminal illnesses, contagious diseases, and unknown viruses... Feride would peruse them all. Her selective memory would absorb local, rational, and international calamities only to convey them to others out of the blue.

It never took her long to darken any conversation, as from birth she was inclined to see misery in each and every story, and to fabricate some when there was none. But the news she conveyed did not upset the others, as they had renounced believing in her long ago. Her family had figured out one way of dealing with insanity, and that was to confuse it with a lack of credibility.

Feride was first diagnosed with a "stress ulcer," a diagnosis no one in the family took seriously because "stress" had become some sort of catchphrase. As soon as it was introduced into Turkish culture, "stress" had been so euphorically welcomed by the Istanbulites that there had emerged countless patients of stress in the city. Feride had traveled nonstop from one stress-related illness to another, surprised to discover the vastness of the land since there seemed to be virtually nothing that could not be related to stress. After that, she had latched onto obsessive-compulsive disorder, dissociative amnesia, and psychotic depression. Managing to poison herself, she was once diagnosed with Bittersweet Nightshade, the name she most relished among her infirmities.

At each stage of her journey to insanity, Feride changed her hair color and style, so that after a while the doctors, in their endeavor to follow the changes in her psychology, started to keep a hair chart. Short, midlength, very long, and once entirely shaven; spiked, flattened, flipped, and braided; subjected to tons of hairspray, gel, wax, or styling cream; accessorized with barrettes, gems, or ribbons; cropped in punk style, pinned up in ballerina buns, highlighted and dyed in every possible hue, each one of her hairstyles had been a fleeting episode while her illness had remained firm and fixed.

After a lengthy sojourn in "major depressive disorder," Feride had moved to "borderline"-a term construed quite arbitrarily by different members of the Kazanci family. Her mother interpreted the word "border" as a problem to be associated with police, customs officers, and illegality, thereby finding a "felon foreigner" in

the persona of Feride. She thus became even more suspicious of this crazy daughter whom she had not trusted in the first place. In stark contrast, for Feride's sisters, the concept of "border" mainly invoked the idea of edge, and the idea of edge invoked the image of a deadly cliff. For quite a while they treated her with utmost care, as if she were a walking somnambulist on a wall meters high and could fall down any time. However, the word "border" invoked the trim of latticework for Petite-Ma, and she studied her granddaughter with deep interest and sympathy.

Feride had recently emigrated into another diagnosis nobody could even pronounce, let alone dare to interpret: "hebephrenic schizophrenia." Ever since then, she remained faithful to her new nomenclature, as if finally content to achieve the nominal clarification she sorely needed. Whatever the diagnosis, she lived according to the rules of her own fantasyland, outside of which she had never set foot.

But on this first Friday of July, Zeliha paid no attention to her sister's renowned distaste for doctors. As she started to eat, she realized how hungry she had been all day long. Almost mechanically, she ate a piece of forek, poured herself a glass of ayran, forked another green dolma onto her plate, and revealed the piece of information growing inside her. "I went to a gynecologist today..."

"Gynecologist?" Feride repeated instantly, but she made no specific comment. Gynecologists were the one group among all the physicians she had had the least experience with. "I went to a gynecologist today to have an abortion." Zeliha completed her sentence without looking at anyone.

Banu dropped her chicken wing and looked down at her feet as if they had something to do with this; Cevriye pursed her lips hard; Feride shrieked and then oddly unleashed a whoop of laughter; their mother tensely rubbed her forehead, feeling the first aura of a terrible headache approaching; and Petite-Ma... well, Petite-Ma just continued to eat her yogurt soup. It might be because she had gone quite deaf in the course of the recent months. It might also be

because she was suffering from the early stages of dementia. Perhaps it was simply because she thought there was nothing to fuss about. With Petite-Ma you never knew.

"How could you slaughter your baby?" Cevriye asked in awe.

"It is not a baby!" Zeliha shrugged. "At this stage, I'd rather call it a droplet. That'd be more scientific!"

"Scientific! You are not scientific, you are cold-blooded!" Cevriye burst into tears. "Cold-blooded! That's what you are!"

"Well, I have good news then. I have not killed... it-herwhatever!" Zeliha turned toward her sister calmly. "Not that I did not want to. I did! I tried to have the droplet aborted but somehow it did not happen."

"What do you mean?" asked Banu.

Zeliha put on a brave face. "Allah sent me a message," she said tonelessly, knowing it was the wrong thing to say to a family like hers but saying it anyway. "So there I am lying anesthetized with a doctor and a nurse on each side. In a few minutes the operation will begin and the baby will be gone. Forever! But then just when I am about to go unconscious on that operating table, I hear the afternoon prayer from a nearby mosque.... The prayer is soft, like a piece of velvet. It envelops my whole body. Then, as soon as the prayer is over, I hear a murmur as if somebody is whispering in my ear: 'Thou shall not kill this child!'"

Cevriye flinched, Feride nervously coughed into her table napkin, Banu swallowed hard, and Gulsum frowned. Only Petite-Ma remained far off in a better land, having now finished her soup, obediently waiting for her next dish to arrive.

And then..." Zeliha carried on with her story, "this mysterious voice commands: 'Oooo Zeliha! Oooo you the culprit of the righteous Kazanci family! Let this child live! You..."
managed to copulate with in one of her runaways. Generation after generation, as if taking turns, one of the two genetic traits had prevailed in the feline inhabitants born under
the women in the neighborhood had mocked). On the other hand, there was the "street" gene coming from an unidentified but apparently tawny street cat the white Persian had
coming from a longhaired, flat-nosed, powder white Persian cat Petite-Ma had brought with her as a young bride in the late 1920s ("the cat must be what little dowry she has,"

In the Kazanci konak generations of cats had succeeded each other, like human beings; all had been loved and without exception swept away solely by old age, unlike human
people. Though each cat had retained its distinct character, overall two competing genes ran through the feline lineage in the house. On the one hand, there was the "noble" gene

Zeliha paused and let out a breath.
"Anyhow, good news everybody! The baby is still with me! Before long, we'll put another plate at this table."
"A bastard!" Gulsum exclaimed. "You want to bring into this family a child out of wedlock. A bastard!"
The word's effect spread out, like a pebble thrown into still water.
"Shame on you! You've always brought disgrace on this family," Gulsum's face contorted in anger. "Look at your nose piercing.... All that makeup and the revoltingly short
skirts, and oh, those high heels! This is what happens when you dress up ... like a whore! You should thank Allah night and day; you should be grateful that there are no men
around in this family. They've killed you."
It wasn't quite true. Not the part about the killing perhaps, but the part about there being no men in the family. There were. Somewhere. But it was also true that there were far
fewer men than women in the Kazanci family. Like an evil spell put on the whole lineage, generations after generations of Kazanci men had died young and unexpectedly.
Petite-Ma's husband, Riza Selim Kazanci, for instance, had all of a sudden dropped dead at sixty, unable to breathe. Then in the next generation, Levent Kazanci had died of a
heart attack before he had reached his fifty-first birthday, following the patterns of his father and his father's father. It looked as if the life span of the men in the family got
shorter and shorter with each generation.
There was a great-uncle who had run away with a Russian prostitute, only to be robbed by her of all his money and frozen to death in St. Petersburg; another kinsman had gone
to his last resting place after being hit by a car while trying to cross the autobahn heavily

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intoxicated; various nephews had died as early as their twenties, one of them drowning while swimming drunk under the full moon, another one hit in the chest by a bullet fired
by a hooligan enjoying himself after his soccer team had won the cup, yet another nephew having fallen into a six-foot-deep ditch dug out by the municipality to renovate the
street gutters. Then there was a second cousin, Ziya, who had shot himself, for no apparent reason.

Generation after generation, as if complying with an unwritten rule, the men in the Kazanci family tree had died young. The greatest age any had reached in the current
generation was forty-one. Determined not to repeat the pattern, another great-uncle had taken utmost care to lead a healthy life, strictly refraining from overeating, sex with
prostitutes, contacts with hooligans, alcohol and other sorts of intoxicants, and had ended up crushed by a concrete chunk falling from a construction site he happened to pass by.

Then there was Celal, a distant cousin, who was the love of Cevriye's life and the husband she lost in a brawl. For reasons still unclear, Celal had been sentenced to two
years on charges of bribery. During this time Celal's presence in the family had been confined to the infrequent letters he had been sending from jail, so vague and distant that
when the news of his death had arrived, for everyone other than his wife, it had felt like losing a third arm, one that you never had. He departed this life in a fight, not by a blow
or a punch, but by stepping on a high-voltage electricity cable while trying to find a better spot to watch two other prisoners exchange blows. After losing the love of her life,
Cevriye sold their house and joined the Kazanci domicile as a humorless history teacher with a Spartan sense of discipline and self-control. Just as she waged battle against plagiarism at school, she took it upon herself to crusade against impulsiveness, disruption, and spontaneity at home.

Then there was Sabahattin, the tenderhearted, good-natured, but equally self-effacing husband of Banu. Though he was not a blood relative and looked exceptionally pale and
hearty, though the

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two were still married on paper, except for a brief period following their honeymoon, Banu had spent more time in her family's konak than at home with her husband. So
noticeable was their physical distance that when Banu had announced being heavy with twin boys everyone had joked about the technical impossibility of the pregnancy. Yet
the ominous fate awaiting every Kazanci man had struck the twins at an early age. Upon losing her toddler boys to childhood illnesses, Banu permanently moved into her family
house, only to sporadically visit her husband in the years that followed. Every now and then she went to see if he was doing okay, more like a concerned stranger than a loving
spouse.

Then, of course, there was Mustafa, the only son in the current generation, a precious gem bequeathed by Allah amid four daughters. The result of Levent Kazanci's fixation on
having a boy to bear his surname had been that the four Kazanci sisters had each grown up feeling like unwelcome visitors. The first three children were all girls. Banu, Cevriye,
and Feride had each felt like an introduction before the real thing, an accidental prelude in their parents' sex life, so determinedly were they oriented toward a male child. As for
the fifth child, Zeliha, she knew she had been conceived with the hope that fortune could be generous twice in a row. After finally having a boy, her parents had wanted to see if
they were lucky enough to make another one.

Mustafa was precious from the day he was born. A series of measures had been taken to protect him from the grim fate awaiting all the men in the family tree. As a baby he
was bundled in evil-eye beads and amulets; as a toddler he was kept under constant surveillance, and until age eight his hair was kept long like a girl's so as to deceive Azrıl,
the angel of death. Whenever someone needed to address the child, "girl" they would say, "girl, come here!" Though a good student, most of Mustafa's high school life was
ruined by his inability to socialize. A king in his house, the boy seemed to refuse to be one among many in the classroom. So unpopular had he be

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come over time that when Gulsum wanted to throw a party for Mustafa and his friends to celebrate their graduation, there was no one to invite.

So arrogantly antisocial outside his house, so indisputably cherished as the king at home, and with the passing of each birthday so ominously close to the doom suffered by all
the Kazanci men, after a while it seemed like a good idea to send Mustafa abroad. Within a month, Petite-Ma's jewels were sold for the money required and the eighteen-year-
old son of the Kazanci family left Istanbul for Arizona, where he became an undergraduate student in agricultural and biosystems engineering and would hopefully survive to see
his old age.

Hence, when on that first Friday of July, Gulsum chided Zeliha, asking her to be grateful for the lack of men in the family, there was some truth somewhere in that statement. In
response Zeliha said nothing. Instead she went to the kitchen to find and feed the only male in the house—a silver tabby cat with an insatiable hunger, an unusual fondness for

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stopped bothering to find alternative names, instead just following the feline genealogy. If the kitten looked like a descendant of the aristocratic line, white and furry and flat-nosed, they would name it successively, Pasha the First, Pasha the Second, Pasha the Third... If it were from the street cat's lineage, they would name it Sultan—a more superior name, signaling the belief that street cats were self-governing free spirits, in no need of flattering anyone.

To this day the nominal distinction, without exception, had been reflected in the personalities of the cats under this roof. Those of the nobility turned out to be the aloof, needy, quiet types, constantly licking themselves, wiping out all traces of human contact whenever someone patted them; those of the second group had been the more curious and vigorous types who delighted in bizarre luxuries, such as eating chocolates.

Pasha the Third characteristically embodied the features of his lineage, always walking with a pompous rhythm, as if tiptoeing through broken glass. He had two favorite occupations, which he put into practice on every occasion: gnawing electrical cords and observing birds and butterflies, too lazy to chase them. Of the latter he could get tired, but of the former, never. Almost every electrical cord in the house had been once or thrice chewed, scraped, dented, and damaged by him. Pasha the Third had managed to survive to a ripe old age despite the numerous electric shocks he had received.

"There, Pasha, good boy," Zeliha fed him chunks of feta cheese, his favorite. She then put on an apron and toiled through a hill of pots and pans and plates. When she had finished the dishes and calmed herself, she shuffled back to the dinner table, where she found the word bastard still hanging in the air, and her mother still frowning. They all sat there motionless until someone remembered the dessert. A sweet, soothing smell filled the room as Cevriye poured rice pudding from a huge cauldron into tiny bowls. While Cevriye kept doling with practiced ease, Feride followed her, sprinkling shredded coconut on top of each bowl.

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Unfortunately, that was not the case with the rest of the human body. Rose's physical form was anything but loyal. So volatile was her body she could not even classify it, the occupations, which he put into practice on every occasion: gnawing electrical cords and observing birds and butterflies, too lazy to chase them. Of the latter he could get tired, but of the former, never. Almost every electrical cord in the house had been once or thrice chewed, scraped, dented, and damaged by him. Pasha the Third had managed to survive to a ripe old age despite the numerous electric shocks he had received.

In a flash she swerved the cart, but found herself in another aisle of junk food. Where the hell were the diapers? Her eyes caught sight of a pile of toasted coconut marshmallows and the next thing she knew there were one, two ... six packages in the cart. Don't Rose, don't.... Just this afternoon you gobbled a whole quart of Cherry Garcia ice cream.... You've already gained so much weight.... If this was an inner warning, it didn't come through loud enough. Nevertheless, it activated a guilt button somewhere in Rose's subconscious and a picture of herself popped up in her mind. For a fleeting second, she stood staring at her reflection in an imaginary mirror, although she had so deftly avoided the real mirror behind the organic baby lettuces. With a sinking heart she eyed her widened hips and buttocks but still managed to smile at her high cheekbones, gold blond hair, misty blue eyes, and those perfect ears of hers! The ear was such a trustworthy part of the human body. No matter how much weight you gained, your ears remained exactly the same, always loyal.

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Buoyed at the thought of surprising her ex-husband and his large extended family with the new woman she would soon become, Rose scanned the aisle. Her hands reached out to sweets and toffees-Sweet 'N Low Sugar Free Butter Toffee, Starburst Fruit Chews, black licorice twists—and as soon as she had tossed these into the cart, she hurried as if running from someone chasing her. But surrendering to her sweet tooth must have had a triggering effect on her guilty conscience because in next to no time she was struggling with a deeper sense of remorse. How could she have left her baby girl inside the car all alone? Every day you heard on KVOA about a toddler abducted in front of your ears remained exactly the same, always loyal.

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"I am sorry...." she said. "I am so sorry."
The young man was now quizzically studying Rose's face as if to memorize every detail for future reference.

seduce; and her pugnacious-coyote expression, which she wore whenever she was criticized.

sex: her staunch-canine expression, one that she chose when she wanted to convey complete dedication; her impish-feline expression, which she used when she wanted to

She smiled to show the young man that she pardoned him and then looked at his face without so much as a blink, making him even more nervous. Besides the suave-bunny

blushed. Having been caught by surprise, he could not easily get his masculine guard back.

"They are good, aren't they?" Rose asked. "Unfortunately not everyone is sensible enough to appreciate them...."

"This is all I am left with... " Rose muttered to herself. That, indeed, was the most common side effect of postmarital chronic bittersomeness: It made you talk to yourself. No matter how much dialogue you imagined, you were never out of words. Over the past weeks Rose had repeatedly argued in her imagination with each and every member of the Tchakhmakhchian family, defending herself with determination, winning every time, fluently articulating all the things she had failed to voice during the divorce and had been lamenting ever since.

There they were! Latex-free superabsorbent diapers. As she placed them in the cart, she noticed a middle-aged man with graying hair and a goatee smiling at her. The truth is, Rose liked to have her motherhood observed, and now that she had an audience, she couldn't help but break into a grin. Happily, she reached up to get a huge box of highly scented wipes with aloe vera and vitamin E. Thank God some people appreciated her motherhood. Piloted by her yearning for further recognition, she walked up and down the aisle of baby products, each time finding something she had no intention of purchasing earlier but now saw no reason why not to: three bottles of antibiotic diaper-rash lotion, a baby bath safety ducky that warned when the water in the tub was too hot, a set of six plastic door guards to protect little fingers, a Max the Monkey car litterbag, and a water-filled freezeable chewy butterfly teether.

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Put them all in the cart. Who could possibly call her an irresponsible mom? How could they accuse her of paying no heed to her baby girl's needs? Had she not given up her college education when the baby was born? Had she not been working hard to sustain this marriage? Every now and then Rose liked to imagine her best self still going to college, still a virgin, and yes, still slim. Recently she had found a job at the university cafeteria, which might help the first dream to come true, though it wouldn't help the other two.

As she stepped into the next aisle Rose's face contorted. International Food. She stole a nervous glance at the jars of eggplant dips and cans of salted grape leaves. No more patlji! No more samus! No more weird ethnic food! Even the sight of that hideous khourummi twisted her stomach into knots. From now on she would cook whatever she wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter. For one long minute Rose stood there racking her brain to find an example of the perfect meal. Her face perked up as she thought of hamburgers. Definitely! she assured herself. What's more, fried eggs and maple-syrup-soaked pancakes and hot dogs with onions and mutton barbecue, yes especially mutton barbecue.... And instead of that squeaky yogurt drink that she was sick of seeing at every meal, they would drink apple cider! From now on she would choose their daily menu from Southern cuisine, hot spicy chili or smoked bacon ... or ... garbanzo beans. She would serve these dishes without complaining. All she needed was a man who would sit across from her at the end of the day. A man who would truly love her, and her cooking. Definitely, that was what Rose needed: a lover with no ethnic luggage, no hard-topronounce names, and no crowded family; a fresh new lover who would appreciate garbanzo beans.

There was a time when she and Barsam had loved each other. A time when Barsam did not even notice, and certainly did not mind, whatever food she placed on the table, for the guste would be elsewhere, locked into hers, immersed in love. Rose's cheeks warmed at the recollection of these prudent moments but instantly

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chilled as she remembered the very next phase. Alas, in next to no time that horrendous family of his had entered onto the stage only to dominate it forever, and ever since then her affection for each other had worn thin. If that Tchakhmakhchian gang had not poked their aquline noses into her marriage, Rose thought, her husband would still be by her side. "Why did you constantly snipe into our marriage?" she asked Shushan, whom she now imagined sitting in her armchair, counting the stitches in her knitting, making yet another baby blanket for her granddaughter. But her mother-in-law did not respond. Frustrated, Rose repeated the question. That, indeed, was the second most common side effect of postmarital chronic resentment: It made you not only talk to yourself, but also made you obstinate with others. Even if you might be dangerously close to the breaking point, you would never bend. "Why didn't you ever leave us alone?" Rose posed the same question one by one to her husband's three sisters-Auntie Surpun, Auntie Zarouhi, and Auntie Varsenig-while she glared at the jars of baba-ghanoush on the grocery shelves.

Rose left the ethnic foods section, making a sharp, swift U-turn into the next aisle. Inspired by her anger and melancholy, she moved down the aisle of Canned Food and Dry Beans from one end to the other, almost bumping into a young man standing there. He was eyeing the shelf where different brands of garbanzo beans were lined up. That guy surely wasn't there a second ago! thought Rose. He seemed to have simply materialized, as if zoomed down from the sky. He had fair skin, a slim, well-proportioned body, short dark hair, and a water-filled freezable chewy butterfly teether.

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blushed. Having been caught by surprise, he could not easily get his masculine guard back.

"I am sorry... " he said, and tilted his head to the right, a nervous tic, which Rose interpreted as a sign of shyness. She smiled to show the young man that she pardoned him and then looked at his face without so much as a blink, making him even more nervous. Besides the suave-bunny expression that she now wore, Rose had three other animal-like looks inspired by Mother Nature, which she interchangingly employed for all her dealings with the opposite sex: her staunch-canine expression, one that she chose when she wanted to convey complete dedication; her impish-feline expression, which she used when she wanted to seduce; and her pugnacious-coyote expression, which she wore whenever she was criticized.

"Oh, I know you!" All of a sudden Rose beamed an ear-to-ear grin, satisfied with her memory. "I was racking my brain wondering where I'd seen you before. Now I know! You're from the U of A, right? I bet you like chicken quesadillas!"

The young man glanced up the aisle, as if he were considering running away at any moment but couldn't figure out toward which direction.

"I work part-time at the Cactus Grill!" Rose tried her best to help him comprehend-"the big restaurant on the second floor inside the Student Union, remember? I am usually behind the counter where the hot food is served-you know, omelettes and quesadillas. It's a part-time job, of course; it doesn't pay much but what are you gonna do? This is just for the time being. What I really want is to become a primary schoolteacher."

The young man was now quizzically studying Rose's face as if to memorize every detail for future reference.
"Anyway, that is where I must have seen you before," Rose concluded. She narrowed her eyes and moistened her bottom lip, switching to her feline expression. "I dropped out when I had a baby last year, but now I'm trying to go back to college...."

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"Oh, really?" the guy said, but then instantly shut his mouth. If Rose had had any previous experience with foreigners she would have detected the foreigner's introduction reflex—the fear of engaging in a conversation and not expressing the right words at the right time or with the correct pronunciation. However, ever since she was a teenager Rose harbored a propensity to assume everything around her was either for or about or against her. Accordingly, she interpreted the silence as a sign of her own inability to make a decent introduction. To compensate for the error, she reached out her hand.

"Oh, I am sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Rose."

"Mustafa..." The young man swallowed, his Adam's apple moving up and down.

"Where are you from?" Rose asked.

"Istanbul," he answered curtly.

Rose raised her eyebrows and a trace of panic crossed her face. If Mustafa had had any previous experience with provincials, he could detect the provincial's information reflex—the fear of not having enough knowledge of geography or world history. Rose was trying to recall where on earth Istanbul was. Was it the capital of Egypt or perhaps somewhere in India...? She frowned in confusion.

However, ever since he was a teenager Mustafa harbored a fright of losing his grip on time and his appeal for women. So he interpreted the gesture as a sign of having bored Rose by failing to come up with anything interesting to say, and to compensate for the lack, he hastened to cut off the conversation.

"Nice meeting you, Rose," he said, drawing his vowels with a mellow but obvious accent. "I have to go now...."

Very quickly he put back both cans of garbanzo beans, stared at his watch, grabbed his basket, and walked off. Before he disappeared, Rose heard him mumble "bye-bye" and then, as if echoing himself, another "bye-bye." Then he was gone.

Having thus lost this mysterious companion, Rose suddenly re

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alized how much time she had squandered in the supermarket. She grabbed a few cans of garbanzo beans, including the ones Mustafa had left behind, and hurried to the checkout. She passed through the aisle of journals and books, and it was there that she caught sight of something she sorely needed: The Great World Atlas. Underneath the title it said: A World Atlas of Flags, Facts, and Maps/Helping Parents, Students, Teachers, and Travelers Worldwide. She grabbed the book, pinpointed "Istanbul" in the index, and once having found the relevant page, looked at the map to see where it was.

Outside in the parking lot she found the ultramarine 1984 Jeep Cherokee heating up under the Arizona sun while her baby girl slept inside.

"Armounous, wake up sweetheart, Manni's back!"

The baby moved but did not open her eyes, not even when Rose rained kisses all over her face. Her soft brown hair was tied with a golden ribbon almost as big as her head and she was wearing a fluffy green outfit adorned with salmon stripes and purplish buttons. She looked like a dwarf Christmas tree decorated by someone in a state of frenzy.

"Are you hungry? Manni is gonna cook you real American food tonight!" Rose exclaimed as she put the plastic bags in the backseat, reserving a package of coconut marshmallows for the road. She checked her hair in the rearview mirror, put on a cassette that was her favorite these days, and grabbed a handful of marshmallows before she started the engine.

"Did you know that the guy I just met in the supermarket is from Turkey?!" Rose said, as she winked at her daughter in the rearview mirror. Everything about her baby seemed just about right: her button nose, her round hands, her feet, everything except her name. Her husband's family had wanted to name the baby girl after her grandmother's mother. How deeply Rose lamented not having named her something less outlandish, like Annie or Katie or Cyndie, instead of accepting the name her mother-in-law had come up with. A child was supposed to have a childlike name and "Armounous"

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was anything but that. The name sounded so... so mature and cold, appropriate for a grown-up, perhaps. Did Rose have to wait until her baby girl had reached forty to use her name without it pricking her tongue? Rose rolled her eyes and ate another marshmallow. Then and there she had a revelation: She could call her daughter "Amy" from now on, and as part of the baptism ceremony, she sent the baby a kiss.

At the next intersection they waited for the light to turn green. Rose drummed on the steering wheel, accompanying Gloria Estefan.

No modern love for me, it's all a hustle

What's done is done, now it's my turn to have fun...

Mustafa placed the few items he had selected in front of the cashier: Kalamata olives, frozen spinach and feta pizza, a can of mushroom soup, a can of cream of chicken soup, and a can of chicken noodle soup. Until he came to the United States, he had never had to cook in his life. Every time he labored in the small kitchen in his twobedroom student apartment, he felt like a dethroned king living in exile. Long gone were the days when he was served and fed by a devoted grandmother, mother, and four sisters. Now, dishwashing, room-cleaning, ironing, and especially shopping were a huge burden for him. It wouldn't be as difficult if he could only rid himself of the feeling that someone else should be doing these things for him. He was no more used to doing chores than he was to being alone.

Mustafa had a housemate, an undergrad student from Indonesia who spoke very little, worked hard, and listened to odd tapes, such as Sounds of Mountain Streams or Songs of the Whales, in order to go to sleep every night. Mustafa had hoped that if he had a housemate, he would feel less lonely in Arizona, but the result had been quite the opposite. At night, alone in his bed and thousands of miles away from

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his family, he couldn't fight back the voices inside his head. Voices that questioned and blamed him for who he was. He slept poorly. He spent many nights watching old comedies or surfing on the Internet. It helped. The thoughts stopped at those times. Yet they would return with daylight. Walking from home to the campus, between classes or during lunchtime, Mustafa would catch himself thinking about Istanbul. How he wished he could remove his memory, restart the program, until all of the files were deleted and gone.

Arizona was to have spared Mustafa the bad omen that fell upon every man in the Kazanci family. But he didn't believe in such things. Drifting away from all those superstitions—evil-eye beads, coffee-cup readings, and fortune-telling ceremonies in his family was less a conscious choice than an involuntary reflex. He thought they were all part of a dark and complicated world peculiar to women.

Women were a mystery anyway. Having grown up with so many women, it was odd that he had felt so estranged from them all of his life. Mustafa had grown up as the only boy in a family where the men died too soon and too unexpectedly. He experienced growing sexual desires while surrounded by sisters who were taboo to a fantasy life. Nevertheless, he slipped into unspeakable thoughts about women. At first Mustafa fell for girls who rejected him. Terrified that he would be rejected, ridiculed, and reviled, he turned to yearning for the female body from a distance. This year he had looked angrily at the photos of top models in glossy American magazines, as if to absorb the excruciating fact that no woman this perfect would ever desire him...
Mustafa would never forget the fierce look on Zeliha's face when she called him "a precious phallus." The embarrassment of that moment still burned through him today. He knew Zeliha could see behind his forced masculinity to the real story of his upbringing. She recognized that he had been pampered and spoon-fed by an oppressed mother, intimidated and beaten by an oppressive father. "In the end you have become both narcissistic and insecure," she said.

"Could things have been different between Zeliha and him? Why did he feel so rejected and unloved with so many sisters around and a doting mother by his side? Zeliha always mocked Mustafa and his mother always admired him. He wanted to be just an ordinary man, good and fallible at the same time. All he needed was compassion and a chance to be a better person. If only he had a woman who loved him, everything would be different. Mustafa knew he had to make it in America not because he wanted to attain a better future but because he had to dispose of his past.

"How you doin'?" The young woman at the cash register smiled at him. That was one thing Mustafa still had not gotten used to. In America everyone asked everyone how they were doing, even complete strangers. He understood that it was a way of greeting more than a real question. But then he didn't know how to greet back with the same graceless ease.

"I am fine, thank you," he said. "How are you?"

The girl smiled. "Where are you from?"

One day, Mustafa thought, I will speak in such a way that no one will ask this rude question because they will not believe, even for a minute, that they are talking to a foreigner. He picked up his plastic bag and walked outside. A Mexican American couple crossed the sidewalk, she pushing a baby in a stroller, he holding the hand of a toddler. They walked unhurriedly while Rose watched them with envy. Now that her marriage was over, every couple she saw seemed blissfully content.

"You know what? I wish your grandma-the-witch could have seen me flirting with that Turk. Can you imagine her horror? I cannot think of a worse nightmare for the proud Tchakhmakhchian family! Proud and puffed up ... proud and ..."
kran Stamboulian exclaimed as he banged the door open and dashed into the living room, searching for his nephew or nieces or anyone willing to console him. His dark eyes were slightly bulged with excitement. He had a full, drooping mustache that turned up slightly at the ends, making him look like he was smiling even when seriously enraged.

"Please calm down and have a seat, Uncle," Auntie Surpun, the youngest of the Tchakhmakhchian sisters, muttered without directly looking at him. Being the only one in the family who had unreservedly supported Barsam's marriage to Rose, she now felt culpable. Such self-reproach was not something she was used to. A professor of humanities at the University of California at Berkeley, Surpun Tchakhmakhchian was a self-confident feminist scholar who believed that every problem in this world was negotiable by calm dialogue and reason. There were times this particular conviction had made her feel alone in a family as temperamental as hers.

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THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL

Dikran Stamboulian did as he was told and scuffled toward an empty chair, chewing on the ends of his mustache. The whole family was gathered around an antique mahogany table full of food, although nobody seemed to be eating anything. Auntie Varsenig's twin babies slept peacefully on the sofa. Distant cousin Kevork Karaoglanian was here too, having flown from Minneapolis for a social event organized by the Armenian Youth Community in the Bay Area. Over the past three months Kevork had dutifully attended every event organized by the group—a benefit concert, Annual Picnic, Christmas Party, Friday Night Light Party, Annual Winter Gala, Sunday Brunch, and a rafting race to benefit ecotourism in Yerevan. Uncle Dikran suspected the reason his handsome nephew came to San Francisco so frequently was not only because he was committed to these organizational events, but also because he had a yet-to-be-revealed affection for a girl he had met in the group.

Dikran Stamboulian gazed longingly at the food set out on the table, and reached for a jar of yogurt drink, Americanized with too many ice cubes. In multihued clay bowls of different sizes were many of his favorite dishes: fassoulye pilaki, kadin budu kofte, karmyarlk, newly made churek, and to Uncle Dikran's delight, bastirma. Though he was still fuming, his heart warmed at the sight of bastirma and entirely melted when he saw his favorite dish next to it: Burm. Despite the fact that he had always been under the strict dietary surveillance of his wife, every year Uncle Dikran had added another layer of flab to his infamous belly, like a tree trunk adding a growth ring with the passing of each year. Now he was a squat and portly man who did not mind drawing attention to either fact. Two years ago he had been offered a role in a pasta commercial. He had played a jolly cook whose spirits could not be dampened, even when he was dumped by his fiancee, since he still owned his kitchen and could cook spaghetti casserole. In truth, just as in the commercial, Uncle Dikran was such an exceptionally good-humored man that whenever one of his many acquaintances wanted to illustrate the cliché of fat people being far more cheery fellows than others, they would cite his name. Except today Uncle Dikran didn't look like his usual self.

"Where is Barsam?" Uncle Dikran asked as he reached for a kofle from the pile. "Does he know what his wife is up to?"

"Ex-wife!" Auntie Zarouhi corrected. As a new-to-the-job elementary school teacher grappling with unruly kids all day long, she couldn't help correcting any mistake she heard.

"Yeah, ex! Except she doesn't acknowledge that! That woman is nuts, I tell you. She is doing this on purpose. If Rose is not doing this just to upset us, let my name not be Dikran anymore. Find me another name!"

"You don't need another name," Auntie Varsenig consoled her uncle. "No doubt she is doing this deliberately...."

"We have to rescue Armanoush," interrupted Grandmama Shushan, the matrrix of the family. She left the table and scuffled toward her armchair. Though a wonderful cook, she had never had a big appetite and lately, her daughters feared, had somehow developed a way to stay alive by eating no more than a teacupful a day. She was a short, bony woman who possessed an exceptional strength to handle situations even more dire than this, and whose delicate face radiated an aura of competence. Her refusal to admit defeat no matter what, her unfailing conviction that life was always a struggle but if you were an Armenian it was three times as grueling, and her ability to win over everyone she came across had over the years bewildered many in her family.

"Nothing is as important as the well-being of the child," Grandmama Shushan muttered as she caressed the silver pendant of Saint Anthony that she always wore. The patron saint of lost articles had helped her numerous times in the past to cope with the losses in her life.

With that Grandmama Shushan took up her knitting needles and sat down. The first skeins of a cerulean baby's blanket dangled from the needles with the initials A. K. woven on the border. There was silence for a moment as everyone in the room watched her hands move gracefully with the needles. Grandmama Shushan's knitting affected the family like group therapy. The sure and even cadence of each stitch soothed everyone watching, making them feel that as long as Grandmama Shushan kept knitting, there was nothing to fear and in the end, everything would be all right.

"You are right. Poor little Armanoush," said Uncle Dikran, who as a rule took Shushan's side in every family dispute, knowing better than to disagree with the omnipotent matrrix. Uncle Dikran dropped his voice as he asked, "What's going to become of that innocent lamb?"

Before anyone could respond, there was a jingling at the doorstep and the door was opened with a key. Barsam walked in, his face pale, his eyes staring worriedly behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"Hah! Look who's here!" said Uncle Dikran. "Mr. Barsam, your daughter is going to be raised by a Turk and here you are doing nothing about it.... Amot!"

"What can I do?" lamented Barsam Tchakhmakhchian, turning to his uncle. He moved his eyes to a huge reproduction of Martiros Saryan's Still Life with Masks on the wall, as if the answer he needed was hidden somewhere in the painting. But he must have failed to encounter any solace there because when he spoke again his voice sounded as fuming, his heart warmed at the sight of bastirma and entirely melted when he saw his favorite dish next to it: Burm.

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"What will that innocent lamb tell her friends when she grows up? My father is Barsam Tchakhmakhchian, my great-uncle is Dikran Stamboulian, his father is Varvant Istanboulian, my name is Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian, all my family tree has been somethingian, and I am the grandchild of genocide survivors who lost all their relatives at the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915, but I myself have been brainwashed to deny the genocide because..."

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I was raised by some Turk named Mustafa! What kind of a joke is that?... Ah, marmim khalasint!

Dikran Stamboulian paused and looked closely at his nephew to see the effect of his words. Barsam stood stone still.

"Go, Barsam!" Uncle Dikran exclaimed louder this time. "Fly to Tucson tonight and stop this comedy before it's too late. Talk with your wife. Haydeh!"
"Ex-wife!" Auntie Zarouhi corrected him, as she served herself a piece of Burra. "Ah, I shouldn't be eating this. It has so much sugar in it. So many calories. Why don't you try artificial sweeteners, Mom?"

"Because nothing artificial enters my kitchen," Shushan Tehkhrumkhchian replied. "Eat freely until you have diabetes in old age. Everything has a season."

"Right, I guess I am still in my sugar season." Auntie Zarouhi winked at her, but dared to eat only half a Burra. Still chewing, she turned to her brother: "What is Rose doing in Arizona, anyway?"

"She has found a job there," said Barsam tonelessly.

"Yeah, what a job," Auntie Varsenig tapped the ridge of her nose. "What the hell does she think she is doing, stuffing enchiladas as if she didn't have a penny to her name? She is doing that on purpose, you know. She wants the whole world to blame us, thinking we are not giving her any child support. A brave single mom fighting against all odds! That's the role she is trying to play!"

"Armanoush will be just fine," Barsam muttered, trying not to sound hopeless. "Rose stayed in Arizona because she wants to go back to college. Working at the Student Union is a temporary thing. What she really wants is to become a grade school teacher. She wants to spend her time with kids. There is nothing bad in that. As long as she is OK and takes good care of Armanoush, what difference does it make who she is dating?"

"You are right, but you are also wrong," Auntie Surpun spoke as she drew her legs under her in her chair and resettled, her eyes suddenly hardening with a trace of cynicism. 

"In an ideal world, THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL you could say, well, that's her life, none of our business. If you have no appreciation of history and ancestry, no memory and responsibility, and if you live solely in the present, you certainly can claim that. But the past lives within the present, and our ancestors breathe through our children and you know that.... As long as Rose has your daughter, you have every right to intervene in her life. Especially when she starts dating a Turk!"

"Never quite comfortable with philosophical speeches, and preferring straight talk over intellectual jargon, Auntie Varsenig interjected: "Barsam dear, show me a Turk who speaks Armenian, will you?"

Instead of an answer, Barsam gave his elder sister a sidelong look. Auntie Varsenig continued, "Tell me how many Turks ever learned Armenian. None! Why did our mothers learn their language and not vice versa? Isn't it clear who has dominated whom? Only a handful of Turks come from Central Asia, right? And then the next thing you know they are everywhere! What happened to the millions of Armenians who were already there? Assimilated! Massacred! Orphaned! Deported! And then forgotten! How can you give your flesh-and-blood daughter to those who are responsible for our being so few and in so much pain today? Mesrop Mashtots would turn in his grave!"

Shaking his head, Barsam remained silent. To ease the distress of his nephew, Uncle Dikran began telling a story.

"An Arab goes to a barber for a haircut. After the haircut, he tries to pay but the barber says, 'No way, I cannot accept your money. This is a community service.' The Arab is pleasantly surprised and leaves the shop. The next morning when the barber opens his shop, he finds a 'Thank you' card and a basket of dates waiting at his door."

One of the twins sleeping on the sofa fidgeted but stopped short of crying.

"Then the next day an Armenian enters for a haircut. After the haircut, he tries to pay the barber and the barber objects- 'Sorry, I cannot accept your money. This is a community service.' The Armenian is pleasantly surprised and leaves the shop. The next morning when the barber opens his shop, he finds a 'Thank you' card and a basket of dates waiting at his door."

"A package of Burras?" Kevork suggested.

"No! He found a dozen Armenians waiting for a free haircut!" Auntie Varsenig exclaimed. "Are you trying to tell us that we are penny-pinching people?" Kevork asked.

"No, you ignorant young man," Uncle Dikran said. "All I am trying to tell you is that we care for one another. If we see something good, we immediately share it with our friends and relatives. It is because of this collective spirit that the Armenian people have managed to survive."

"But they also say, 'When two Armenians come together, they create three different churches,'" said Cousin Kevork, taking a firm stand.

"Da's" mother's mornfr, noren koh chi mfrats," Dikran Stamboulian grunted, switching to Armenian as he always did when he tried to teach a young person a lesson, but failed. Able to comprehend only house-Armenian but not newspaperArmenian, Kevork chuckled, a bit too nervously perhaps, as he tried to conceal the fact that he had understood the first half of the sentence but failed to get the rest.

"Oglni kizdimnyasit." Grandma Shushan raised an eyebrow, speaking Turkish, as she always did when she wanted to directly convey a message to an elder in the room without the younger ones understanding.

Having gotten the message, Uncle Dikran heaved a sigh, like a boy scolded by his mother, and went back to his Burra for consolation. A silence ensued. Everyone and everything-the three men, the three generations of women, the myriad rugs decorating the floor, the antique silver in the cupboard, the samovar on the chiffonier, the videotape in the VCR (The Color of Pomegranates), as well as the multiple paintings and the icon of The Prayer of Saint Anna and the poster of Mount Ararat canopied under pure white snow-fell silent for a brief moment as the room acquired a rare luminosity under the drowsy light of a streetlamp just lit outside. The ghosts of the past were with them.

A car pulled over and parked in front of the house, its headlights panning the interior of the room, illuminating the letters on the wall in a gilded frame: AMEN, I SAY TO YOU, WHATSOEVER YOU BOUND ON EARTH, SHALL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN, AND WHATSOEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN.- ST. MATTHEW 18:18. Another trolley passed by chiming its bells, transporting noisy children and tourists from Russian Hill to Aquatic Park, the Maritime Museum, and Fisherman's Wharf. The rush-hour sounds of San Francisco poured into the room, pulling them out of their reverie.

"Rose is not a bad person at heart," Barsam ventured. "It was not easy for her to get used to our ways. She was a shy girl from Kentucky when we first met."
That is why you shouldn't have married her in the first place." Uncle Dikran cackled quietly. By now all the anger had drained out of him, replaced by the knowledge that he couldn’t possibly manage to remain upset with his favorite nephew any longer.

"What I am trying to say is that Rose had no multicultural background," Barsam remarked. "The only child of a kind Southern couple operating the same hardware store forever, she lives a small-town life, and before she knows it, she finds herself amid this extended and tightly knit Armenian Catholic family in the diaspora. A huge family with a very traumatic past! How can you expect her to cope with all of this so easily?"

"Well, it wasn't easy for us either," Auntie Varsenig objected, pointing the tines of her fork at her brother before spearing them into another kofte. Unlike her mother she had a good appetite, and given the amount of food she ate every day, plus the fact that she had recently given birth to twins, it was nothing short of a miracle that she could stay so thin.

"When you come to think that the only food she was able to cook was that horrid meat barbeque on buns! Each time we came to your house, she would put on that dirty apron and cook mutton."

Everyone but Barsam laughed.

"Oh, but I should be fair," Auntie Varsenig continued, pleased with her audience's response. "She would change the sauce every now and then. Sometimes we would get mutton barbeque with Spicy Tex-Mex sauce, and other times mutton barbeque with Creamy Ranch sauce... Your wife's kitchen was a land of variety!"

"Ex-wife!" Auntie Zarouhi corrected again.

"But you guys gave her a hard time too," Barsam said, without looking at anyone in particular. "Mind you, the very first word she learned in Armenian was odar."

"But she is an odar." Uncle Dikran lurched forward, slapping his nephew on the back. "If she is an odar, why not call her an odar?"

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Shaken by the slap more than the question, Barsam dared to add: "Some in this family have even called her Thom."

"What is wrong with that?" Auntie Varsenig took it personally, in between her final two bites of churek. "That woman should have her name changed from Rose to Thom. Rose is not appropriate for her. Such a sweet name for that much bitterness. If her poor papa and mami had had the finest idea as to what sort of a woman she would turn out to be, believe me, my dear brother, they would have named her Thom!"

"That's enough joking!"

It was Shushan Tchakhmakhchian. The exclamation had sounded neither like a reproach nor like a warning, but somehow had both effects on everyone in the room. By now the dusk had turned to night and the light inside shifted. Grandma Shushan stood up and turned on the crystal chandelier.

"We should save Armanoush from harm, that is the only thing that matters," Shushan Tchakhmakhchian said softly, the many lines on her face and the thin, purplish veins in her hands all the more apparent under the harsh white light. "That innocent lamb needs us, just like we need her."

Her face faded from determination to resignation as she slowly bobbed her head and added: "Only an Armenian can understand what it means to be so drastically reduced in numbers. We've shrunk like a pruned tree.... Rose can date and even marry whomever she wants, but her daughter is Armenian and she should be raised as an Armenian."

Then she leaned forward and with a smile said to her eldest daughter: "Give me that half on your plate, will you? Diabetes or no diabetes, how could one decline Burma?"

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FOUR

Roasted Hazelnuts

A

sya Kazanci didn't know what it was that made some people so fond of birthdays, but she personally detested them. She always had.

Perhaps her disapproval had something to do with the fact that ever since she was a little girl, each year on her birthday she was made to eat exactly the same cake—a triple-layer caramelized apple cake (extremely sugary) with whipped lemon cream frosting (extremely sour). How her aunts could expect to please her with this cake, she had no idea, since all they heard from her on the matter was a litany of protests. Perhaps they simply forgot. Perhaps each time they erased all recollections of last year's birthday.

That was possible. The Kazancis were a family inclined to never forget other people's stories but to blank when it came to their own.

Thus on each birthday Asya Kazanci had eaten the same cake and at the same time had discovered a new fact about herself. At the age of three, for instance, she had found that she could get almost anything she wanted, provided she went into tantrums. Three

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years later on her sixth birthday, however, she realized she'd better stop the tantrums since with each episode, although her demands were met, her childhood was prolonged.

When she reached the age of eight, she learned something that until then she had had only a sense of but did not know for sure: that she was a bastard. Looking back, she thought she shouldn't be given the credit for this particular information since if it weren't for Grandma Gulsum, it would have taken her much longer to discover it.

It so happened that the two were alone in the living room on that day. Grandma Gulsum was immersed in watering her plants, and Asya in watching her as she colored in a clown in a children's coloring book.

"Why do you talk to your plants?" Asya wanted to know.

"Plants bloom if you talk to them." Grandma Gulsum pretended not to have noticed. Emboldened by her indifference, Asya increased the dose of her chant.

It was the African violet's turn to be watered, Grandma Gulsum's favorite. She cooed to the flower, "How are you, sweetie?" Asya cooed mockingly, "How are you, sweetie?"

Grandma Gulsum frowned and pursed her lips. "How beautifully purple you are!" she said.

"How beautifully purple you are!"

It was then that Grandma Gulsum's mouth tightened and she murmured, "Bastard." She uttered the word so calmly, Asya did not immediately understand that her grandmother was addressing her, not the flower.

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Asya didn't learn the meaning of the word until one year later, sometime close to her ninth birthday, when she was called a bastard by a kid at school. Then, at age ten, she discovered that unlike all the other girls in her classroom, she had no male role model in her household. It would take her another three years to comprehend that this could have a lasting effect on her personality. On her fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth birthdays, she uncovered respectively three other truths about her life: that other families weren't like hers and some families could be normal; that in her ancestry there were too many women and too many secrets about men who disappeared too early and too peculiarly; and that no matter how hard she strived, she was never going to be a beautiful woman.

By the time Asya Kazanci reached seventeen she had further comprehended that she no more belonged to Istanbul than did the ROAD UNDER CONSTRUCTION Or BUILDING UNDER RESTORATION Signs temporarily put up by the municipality, or the fog that fell over the city on gloomy nights, only to be dispersed at the crack of
three of them started to raise objections, each in the most officious voice she could muster. It's hard to know if there was a connection between this deduction and what ensued next, but her obsession with music started more or less in those days. It wasn't an abstract, encompassing love for music in general, not even a fondness for selected musical genres, but rather a fixation on one and only one singer: Johnny Cash.

The very next year, exactly two days before her eighteenth birthday, Asya plundered the pillbox in the house and swallowed all the capsules she found there. She opened her eyes in a bed surrounded by all her aunts and Petite-Ma and Grandmother Gulsum, having been forced to drink muddy, smelly herbal teas as if it wasn't bad enough that they had made her vomit everything she had had in her stomach. She began her eighteenth year discerning a further fact to be added to her previous discoveries: that in this weird world, suicide was a privilege as rare as rubies, and with a family like hers, she sure wouldn't be one of the privileged.

ELIF SHAFAK

The bastards of Istanbul

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She knew everything about him the myriad details of his tra
"Mind you, the dervishes used to clad themselves in coarse sacks or woolen garbs, not cashmere scarves," interjected Auntie Cevriye, the most mauldin of all.

Auntie Banu swallowed uneasily, uncomfortably in her clothes, uncomfortable in her body.

"Dervishes used to sleep on hay, not on queen-size feather mattresses," Auntie Feride joined in, the most moonstruck of all.

Auntie Banu stood silent, gazing across the room to avoid eye contact with her interrogators. What could she do, her back pain went through the roof if she didn't sleep on a special bed.

"Besides, the dervishes had no nefs. Look at you!" It was Auntie Zeliha, the most offbeat of all.

Eager to defend herself, Auntie Banu launched a counterattack.

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"Neither do I. Not any longer. Those days are over." Then she added in her new mystical voice, "I will go into battle with my nefs and I shall prevail!!!"

In the Kazanci family whenever someone had the nerve to do something unusual, the others always reacted in the same way, following the old course of action, which could be summarized as: 'Go ahead. See if we care.' Accordingly, no one took Auntie Banu seriously. Upon noticing the general skepticism, she headed to her room and slammed the door, never to open it again for the next forty days except for quick visits to the kitchen and toilet. Other than that the only time she left the door ajar was to attach a cardboard sign that said: ALL SELF ABANDON YE WHO ENTER HERE!

Initially, Banu attempted to take with her Pasha the Third, who at the time was going through his last days on earth. She must have thought he could keep her company in her lonesome penitence, not that the dervishes kept pets. But no matter how antisocial he could be at times, the life of a hermit was too much for Pasha the Third, he having too many stakes in worldly vanities, starting with feta cheese and electrical cords. After no more than an hour inside Auntie Banu's cell, Pasha the Third launched a series of highpitched moans and scratched the door so forcefully he was immediately let out. After losing her only company, Auntie Banu sunk into her loneliness and stopped talking, mute and deaf to everyone. She also stopped taking showers, combing her hair, and even watching her favorite soap opera, The Malediction of the Ivy of Infatuation—a Brazilian drama in which a kindhearted supermodel suffered all sorts of betrayals by those she loved most.

But the true shock came when Auntie Banu, always a woman of immense appetite, stopped eating anything but bread and water. She had been notoriously fond of carbohydrates, especially bread, but no one ever thought that she could survive on bread. To tempt her into indulgence, her three sisters did their best, cooking many dishes, filling the house with the scents of sweet desserts, deep-fried fish, and roasted meat, often heavily buttered to enhance the smell.

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ELIF SHAFAK

Auntie Banu did not waver. If anything, she more resolutely clung to her devotion, as well as to her dry bread. For forty days and nights she remained unreachable under the same roof. Washing the dishes, doing the laundry, watching TV, gossiping with neighbors—everyday life routines became profanities she wanted to have nothing to do with. During the days that followed, every time the sisters checked to see how she was doing, they found her reciting the Holy Qur'an. So intense was her blissful abyss, she became alien to those who had known her all her life. Then on the morning of day forty-one, while everyone else was eating grilled sucuk and fried eggs at the breakfast table, Banu shuffled out of her room, bearing a radiant smile, with an Uncanny sparkle in her eyes and a cherry red scarf on her head.

"What's that sorry thing on your head?" was the first reaction of Grandmama Gulsum, who having not softened a wee bit after all these years still maintained her Ivan the Terrible resemblance.

"From this moment on I am going to cover my head as my faith requires."

"What kind of nonsense is that?" Grandmama Gulsum frowned. "Turkish women took off the veil ninety years ago. No daughter of mine is going to betray the rights the great commander-in-chief Ataturk bestowed on the women of this country."

"Yeah, women were given the right to vote in 1934," Auntie Cevriye echoed. "In case you didn't know, history moves forward, not backward. Take that thing off immediately!"

But Auntie Banu did not.

She remained head-scarved, and having passed the test of the three Ps—penitence, prostration, and piety—declared herself a soothsayer. Just like her appearance, her techniques of clairvoyance underwent profound change throughout her psychic trajectory. At first she solely used coffee cups to read the future of her customers, but in the fullness of time she gradually employed new as well as highly unconventional techniques, including tarot cards, dried beans, silver coins, rosary beads, doorbells, imitation pearls, real pearls, ocean pebbles anything, as long as it would bring news from the paranormal world. Sometimes she chatted passionately with her shoulders whereupon, she claimed, sat two invisible djinn, dangling their feet. The good one on the right shoulder and the bad one on the left shoulder. Though she knew the name of each, in order not to utter them aloud, she simply called them Mrs. Sweet and Mr. Bitter, respectively.

"If there is a bad djinn on your left shoulder, why don't you throw him down?" Asya asked her aunt once.

"Because there are times when we all need the company of the bad." was the answer.

Asya tried a frown and then rolled her eyes, gaining no effect with either gesture other than a childish face. She whistled a tune from a Johnny Cash song, which she liked to talk, mute and deaf to everyone. She also stopped taking showers, combing her hair, and even watching her favorite soap opera, The Malediction of the Ivy of Infatuation—a Brazilian drama in which a kindhearted supermodel suffered all sorts of betrayals by those she loved most.

"What are you whistling?" Auntie Banu asked suspiciously. She didn't know any English and was deeply distrustful of any language that made her miss something obvious.

"I was singing a song that says as my eldest aunt you are supposed to be a role model for me and teach me right from wrong. But here you are giving me lessons on the necessity of evil."

"Well, let me tell you something," Auntie Banu decreed, looking at her niece intently. "There are things so awful in this world that the good-hearted people, may Allah bless them all, have absolutely no idea of. And that's perfectly fine, I tell you; it is all right that they know nothing about such things because it proves what good-hearted people they are. Otherwise they wouldn't be good, would they?"

"But if you ever step into a mine of malice, it won't be one of these people you will ask help from."

"And you think I will ask help from a malicious djinn?" Asya exclaimed.

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Asya couldn't help but nod. After all, she had a feeling Johnny Cash would be of the same opinion.

"Besides, the dervishes had no nefs. Look at you!" It was Auntie Zeliha, the most offbeat of all.

Eager to defend herself, Auntie Banu launched a counterattack.
Asya swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry.

"You are a Kazanci, not a vegetarian!" Asya bellowed. "How many times do I need to tell you I do not like manta?" Her voice sounded strange to her, hoarse and alien.

Only then did Asya notice the tray Auntie Feride was carrying. There was a big ball of meat and a bigger ball of dough. They were going to have mantı for dinner tonight.

Auntie Zeliha surrendered with a puckish twinkle in her eyes, "All right, sweetie, if you say so."

Though she knew too well what a big mistake it was to display her temper in front of her mother, Asya yelled furiously: "That's not true!"

"Don't you understand why Asya doesn't want any cake this year?" Auntie Zeliha said when she had finished with the inspection of her manicure. "She's just afraid of gaining weight.

Now Asya averted her eyes so as not to have to stare any longer at her mother, the mother whom she had never called "mom" and had perhaps hoped to keep at a distance by

Istanbul being a city of broken hearts, it didn't take Auntie Zeliha long to expand the business, becoming legendary particularly among bohemian circles.

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The ex-love was interiorized-injected into the body, and yet at the same time exteriorized-left outside the skin. Once the ex-lover was located in this threshold between inside

shamanistic practice of simultaneously internalizing and externalizing one's totems. To strengthen vis-a-vis your antagonist you had to accept, welcome, and then transform it.

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from their lives forever but somehow could not stop loving. Auntie Zeliha then studied the picture and ransacked her brain until she found which particular animal that person

love they wanted to banish

Every tattoo in this special collection was designed to address one person only: the ex-love. The dumped and the despondent, the hurt and the irate brought a picture of the ex-

abiding heartache.

emotion, not an abstract thought. Learning her lesson well, Zeliha had then launched a new series, a compound collection of images, which she entitled "the management of

independent and inventive—and also, if possible, inflict a bit of pain.

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and outside, and deftly transformed into an animal, the power structure between the dumped and the dumper changed. Now the tattooed lover felt superior, as if the key to the

ex-love's soul was in his or her hands. As soon as this stage was reached and the ex-love lost his or her appeal, those suffering from abiding heartache could finally let go of

their obsession, for love loves power. That is why we can suicidally fall in love with others but can rarely reciprocate the love of those suicidally in love with us.

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ELIF SHAFAK

tie Zeliha stood, corduroy jacket over her shoulders, high heels on her feet, with a quizzical expression that made her look heartbreakingly beautiful. She must have sneaked

into the room and then stood silently listening to the conversation, unless she had developed a talent for materializing at will. Unlike most Turkish women who might have

enjoyed short skirts and high heels in their youth, Zeliha had not lengthened the former and shortened the latter as she got older. Her style of dress was as flamboyant as it had

ever been. The years had only added to her beauty while taking their toll on each of her sisters. As if she knew the effect of her presence, Auntie Zeliha remained in the

doorway, eying her manicured fingernails. She feared deeply about her hands because she used them in her work. Having no liking for bureaucratic institutions or any chain of

and command, and possessing too much exasperation and anger inside, she had realized at an early age that she would have to choose a profession where she could be both

independent and inventive—and also, if possible, inflict a bit of pain.

Ten years ago Auntie Zeliha had opened a tattoo parlor, where she had started to develop a collection of original designs. In addition to the classics of the art-clown roses,

iridescent butterflies, hearts pumped with love—and the usual compilation of hairy insects, fierce wolves, and giant spiders, she had introduced her own designs inspired by one basic principle: contradiction. There were faces half-masculine half-feminine, bodies half-animal half-human, trees half-blossomed half-dry. However, her designs were not

popular. The customers wanted to make a statement through their tattoos, not to add yet another ambiguity to their already uncertain lives. Their tattoos had to express a simple

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And we Kazancis love red meat! The redder, the greasier, the better! If you don't believe me, ask Sultan the Fifth, isn't that so, Sultan?” Auntie Zeliha tilted her head toward the overweight cat lying on his velvet cushion by the balcony door. He turned toward Auntie Zeliha with squinted, misty eyes as if he had fully understood and approved the statement.

Reshuffling the deck of tarot cards, Auntie Banu chided from her corner, “There are people in this country so desperately poor that they wouldn't even know what red meat tastes like, if it weren't for the alms benevolent Muslims give them during the Feast of Sacrifice. That is the only time they can have a decent meal. Go and ask those destitute souls what it really means to be vegetarian. You should be grateful for every morsel of meat put on your plate, because it is a symbol of opulence.”

“This is a nuthouse! We are all nuts, each and every one of us.” Asya repeated her mantra, only this time her voice was drenched in

No one noticed that she had snorted the word ballet as if it were some sputum she had to spit out but was simultaneously disgusted at not being able to control the urge to do so.

On four sides there were hundreds of frames that came in all sizes and shapes, a myriad of photographs, paintings, and sketches, so many that one could easily doubt if there really were walls behind them. The whole place gave the impression of being erected on frames instead of bricks. In all the frames without exception shone the image of a road. Wide motorways in America, endless highways in Australia, busy autobahns in Germany, glitzy boulevards in Paris, crammed side streets in Rome, narrow paths in Machu Picchu, forgotten caravan routes in North Africa, and maps

The real reason why the bistro was named after Kundera, ran the counterargument, was because this spot in space was nothing but a figment of his flawed imagination. The cafe was a fictive place with fictive people as the regulars. Sometime ago Kundera had, as part of a new book project, started to write about this place, thus breathing life and chaos into it, but before long he had gotten distracted by far more important projects-invitations, panels, and lit

ELIF SHAFAK

No matter how far away the pictures could take you, one thing was certain: None of them had anything to do with Milan Kundera. When the place was newly opened, one theory ran, the author had happened to be in Istanbul, and on his way to elsewhere he had fortuitously stopped by for a cappuccino. The cappuccino wasn't so good and he hated the vanilla biscuit they brought with it, but he had soon ordered another one and done some writing, since nobody had disturbed or even recognized him. On that day, the place was baptized under his name. Yet another theory claimed that the owner of the cafe was an avid reader of Kundera; having devoured all his books and had each one autographed, he had decided to dedicate the place to his favorite author. This could have been the more plausible contention had the owner of the cafe not been a middle-aged musician and singer who always looked tanned and athletic, and who had such deep dislike for the printed word that he did not even bother to read the lyrics of the songs his band played on Friday nights.

The next day they could travel elsewhere.

Looking at him, it was hard to imagine that he made a living from humor, and that behind that sullen face of his streamed the funniest jokes. Though he was always a notorious drinker, lately his problems with alcohol had skyrocketed. He started waking up in questionable places he'd never been before. But the final straw came when early one morning he found himself in the courtyard of a mosque lying on the flat stone where the dead were washed, apparently having passed out there while trying to mastermind his

It was a small coffee shop on a narrow, snaky street on the European side of Istanbul. It was the only bistro in the city where you wasted no energy on conversation and tipped the waiters to be treated badly. How and why it was named after the famous author, nobody knew for sure—a lack of knowledge magnified by the fact that there was nothing, literally nothing, inside the place reminiscent of either Milan Kundera or any one of his novels.

No one noticed that she had snorted the word ballet as if it were some sputum she had to spit out but was simultaneously disgusted at not being able to control the urge to do so.

The Dipsomaniac Cartoonist's friends—and even his wife—were so alarmed they urged him to get professional help and to make

The Dipsomaniac Cartoonist was planning to draw the cabinet as a pack of wolves and the prime minister as a jackal in wolf's clothing. Should this caricature too be

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and for an ephemeral lull the other customers would believe him, toying with the new theory, until they got bored and sunk back to their marshes of moroseness.

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Boredom" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist remarked when he had knocked back his cafe latte. "Boredom is the summary of our lives. Day after day we wallow in ennui. Why? Because we cannot abandon this rabbit hole for fear of a traumatic encounter with our own culture. Western politicians presume there is a cultural gap between Eastern Civilization and Western Civilization. If it were that simple! The real civilization gap is between the Turks and the Turks. We are a bunch of cultured urbanites surrounded by hillbillies and bampkins on all sides. They have conquered the whole city."

He threw the windows a sidelong look, as if afraid that a throng of folks might ram them with their clubs and cannonballs.

"The streets belong to them, the plazas belong to them, the ferries belong to them. Every open area is theirs. Perhaps in a few years this cafe will be the only place left for us. Our last liberated zone. We rush here every day to seek refuge from them. Oh yes, them! God save me from my own people!"

"You are talking poetry," said the Exceptionally Untalented Poet. Since he was an exceptionally untalented poet, he had the habit of likening everything to poetry.

"We are stuck. We are stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future. On the one hand there are the secular modernists, so proud of the regime they constructed, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the army and half of the state on their side. On the other hand there are the conventional traditionalists, so infatuated with the Ottoman past, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the general public and the remaining half of the state on their side. What is left for us?"

He put the cigarette back between his pale, chapped lips, where it remained throughout his continued grievance. "The Modernists tell us to move forward, but we have no faith in their idea of progress. The Traditionalists tell us to move backward, but we do not want to return to their ideal order either. Sandwiched between the two sides, we march two steps forward and one step backward, just like the Ottoman army band did! But we don't even play an instrument! Where can we possibly escape to? We are not even a minority. I wish we were an ethnic minority or an indigenous people under the protection of the UN Charter. Then we could have at least some basic rights. But nihilists, pessimists, and anarchists are not regarded as a minority, although we are an extinct species. Our number is lessening every day. How long can we survive?"

The question hung heavily above their heads, somewhere below the cloud of smoke. The cartoonist's wife, who was a jittery woman with full, somber eyes and too much umbrage welling inside, and who happened to be a better cartoonist than her husband but far less appreciated, gnashed her teeth, torn between picking on her partner of twelve years, as she would like to do, and supporting his frenzy no matter what, as an ideal wife would do. They sincerely disliked each other and yet all these years they both had clutched at their marriage, she with the hope of revenge, he out of hope that it would get better. Today they spoke with words and gestures stolen from each other. Even their caricatures were analogous now. They drew deformed bodies and invented twisted dialogues involving depressed people dropped into sad and sarcastic situations.

"You know what we are? The scum of the city. A sorry soggy pulp, nothing more than that! Everyone but us is obsessed with entering the EU, making profits, buying stocks, trading up their cars, and trading up their girlfriends...."

The Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies fidgeted nervously.

"This is where Kundera enters into the picture," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist continued without noticing the gaffe. "The whole idea of lightness permeates our lives in the form of a meaningless emptiness. Our existence is kitsch, a beautiful lie, which helps us to defy the reality of death and mortality. It is precisely this-

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Boredom," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist said with a puff of smoke. Coils of smoke ascended from all sides as people smoked like chimneys all around, and his wispy puff lazily joined the thick, gray cloud hovering over the table.

The only one who didn't smoke at the table was the Closeted-Gay Columnist. He detested the smell of smoke. Every day when he went home he immediately took off his clothes to get rid of the stinky odors of Cafe Kundera. Still, he did not object when others smoked. Neither did he stop going to the cafe. He came here regularly both because he enjoyed being part of this motley group, and also because he was secretly attracted to the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist.

Not that the Closeted-Gay Columnist wanted to have anything physical with the cartoonist. Even the thought of him raised was enough to send shivers down his spine. This wasn't about sex, he assured himself; but about kindred spirits. Besides, there were two big obstacles that blocked his way. First, the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist was strictly heterosexual and the chances of him changing seemed slim. Second, he had a crush on that morose girl Asya a fact that everyone but she had noticed by this time.

So the Closeted-Gay Columnist did not harbor any hopes about having an affair with the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist. He just wanted to be close to him. Every now and then he felt a sudden shudder when the cartoonist, while reaching for a glass or an ashtray, accidentally touched his hand or shoulder. Still, in the itch to assure everyone that he had absolutely no interest in him, or in any man for that matter, there were times the columnist treated the cartoonist distantly, denigrating his opinions out of the blue. It was a complicated story.

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door of Cafe Kundera opened with a blast and a young woman walked in, looking tired beyond her age and pissed off.

"Yo, Asya!" the scenarist yelled, as if she were the much awaited savior who would terminate this daft conversation. "Over here! We're here!"

Asya Kazanci offered a half smile and her forehead furrowed with an expression that said, Oh well, I can join you folks briefly, what difference does it make anyway, life sucks either way. Slowly, as if saddled with invisible sacks of inertia, she approached the table, gave everyone a toneless greeting, took a seat, and started to roll a cigarette.

Asya Kazanci was a top female scenarist, but not exactly a top scenarist. She had been a top scenarist once, but then she met her husband, who was a top scenarist, and her career was tarnished. She was the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies, because she felt it was extremely important to be female scenarist. Asya Kazanci was a top female scenarist. But then she met her husband, who was a top scenarist, and her career was tarnished. She was the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies, because she felt it was extremely important to be female scenarist.

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He heaved a sigh. "We are stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future. On the one hand there are the secular modernists, so proud of the regime they constructed, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the army and half of the state on their side. On the other hand there are the conventional traditionalists, so infatuated with the Ottoman past, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the general public and the remaining half of the state on their side. What is left for us?"

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"What are you doing here at this hour? Aren't you supposed to be at ballet now?" asked the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, forgetting his soliloquy. His eyes flickered with consideration-a sign that was noticed by all but his wife.

"But that's exactly where I am in my ballet class. And right now! - Asya stuffed the rolling paper with tobacco-"I am doing one of the most difficult jumps, meeting my calves in the air between forty-five and ninety degrees-cabriole!"

"Wow!" the cartoonist smiled.

"Then I make a turning jump," Asya continued. "Right foot front, demi plie, jump up!" She grabbed the leather tobacco pouch and held it in the air. "Turn a hundred and eighty degrees-she ordered as she rotated the pouch, sprinkling some tobacco on the table- and land on left foot!" The pouch perched next to the bowl of cashews. "Then repeat the whole thing one more time to go back to the starting position. Enboile!"

"Ballet is like writing poetry with your body," muttered the Exceptionally Untalented Poet.

A sullen torpor set in. Someplace far away churned the sounds of the city, an amalgam of sirens, horns, shouts, and laughter accompanied by the squeaks of the seagulls. A
It is true, they were not the ideal friends her aunts would have chosen for her. Some in the group were old enough to be Asya's mother or father. Being the youngest, she among them Asya Kazanci found inner peace. Cafe Kundera was her sanctuary. In the Kazanci domicile she always had to correct her ways, striving for a perfection that was.

"What was he thinking?" Someone else would add, and then everybody would have a laugh. "So if it weren't for him ballet dancers wouldn't be able to walk on their toes, huh?" Someone would chuckle each time. Cecchetti. They loved him. Ever since that day, now and again someone at the table would propose a toast to him, the dancer who introduced the pointe walk on the toes.

"Cecchetti," Asya corrected her, still lamenting the day she had been intoxicated enough to give the group a speech on ballet history, and in passing mentioned the name of a country, "This country owes its freedom to this little bottle which I can so freely hold in my hand." The cartoonist raised his voice over an ambulance siren squealing outside. "Neither social reforms, nor political regulations. Not even the War of Independence. It is this very bottle that differentiates Turkey from all other Muslim countries. This beer here-he raised the bottle as if to toast-"is the symbol of freedom and civil society."

"Oh, come on. Since when is being a rotten drunkard a symbol of freedom?" the scenarist reprimanded sharply. The others did not join in. Debating was a waste of energy. Instead, they chose a frame on the wall and focused on a road picture.

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Every day they met at the Cafe Kundera. The Exceptionally Untalented Poet, the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies and whomever his girlfriend might be at that moment, the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist's wife, the Closeted-Gay Columnist, and Asya Kazanci. There was tension buried far below the surface, waiting for talk of the day to pump it out. In the meantime, things flowed swimmingly. Some days they brought other people along, friends or colleagues or consummate strangers; some days they came alone. The group was a self-regulating organism wherein individual differences were displayed but could never take over, as if the organism had a life outside and beyond the personalities composing it.

Among them Asya Kazanci found inner peace. Cafe Kundera was her sanctuary. In the Kazanci domicile she always had to correct her ways, striving for a perfection that was beyond her comprehension, whereas here in Cafe Kundera no one forced you to change since human beings were thought to be essentially imperfect and uncorrectable. It is true, they were not the ideal friends her aunts would have chosen for her. Some in the group were old enough to be Asya's mother or father. Being the youngest, she enjoyed watching their childishness. It was rather comforting to see that nothing really imp.
proved in life over the years; if you were a sullen teenager, you ended up being a sullen adult. The pattern was with us to stay. True, it sounded a bit glum, but at least, Asya
consoled herself, it proved that one didn't have to become something else, something more, like her aunts kept nagging her about day and night. Since nothing was going to
change in time and this sullenness was here forever, she could continue to be her same sullen self.
"Today is my birthday," announced Asya, surprising herself since she hadn't had any intention of declaring that.
"Oh yeah?" someone asked.
"What a coincidence! It is also my youngest daughter's birthday today," exclaimed the Exceptionally Untalented Poet.
"Oh yeah?" Now it was Asya's turn.
"So you were born on the same day as my daughter! Gemini." The poet shook his fluffly head with glee, theatrically.
And that was that. Nobody tried to hug her or suffocate her with kisses, just like nobody thought about ordering a cake. Instead the poet recited an awful poem for her, the
cartoonist drank three bottles of beer in her honor, and the cartoonist's wife drew her caricature on a napkin—a surly young woman with electrified hair, huge tits, and a sharp
nose under a pair of piercingly astute eyes. The others bought her another coffee and at the end did not let her pay her share of the bill. It was as simple as that. Not that they
didn't take Asya's birthday seriously. To the contrary, they had taken it so seriously that soon they were excogitating aloud the notion of time and mortality, only to travel from
there to the questions of when they were going to die and whether there really was an afterlife. "There is an afterlife and it's going to be worse than here," was the general
opinion in the group. "So enjoy whatever time you have left."
Some mulled it over, others stopped midword and fled into this or that road picture on the wall. They took their time, as if no one was waiting for them outside, as if there was
no outside, their gri
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maces gradually evolving into beatific smiles of indifference. Having no energy, no passion, no need for further conversation, they sunk deeper into the murky waters of apathy,
wondering why on earth this place was named Cafe Kundera.
At nine o'clock that night, after finishing a square meal and with the lights turned off, amid singing and clapping, Asya Kazanci blew out the candles on the triple-layer
caramelized apple cake (extremely sugary) with whipped lemon cream frosting (extremely sour). She was able to blow out only a third of them. The rest of the candles were
doused by her aunts, grandmother, and Petite-Ma, all of them blowing from all sides.
"How was your ballet class today?" Auntie Feride asked as she turned the lights back on.
"It was good." Asya smiled. "My back hurts a little because of all the stretching the teacher compels us to do, but, still, I can't complain. I learned many new moves...."
"Oh yeah?" came a suspicious voice. It was Auntie Zeliha. "Like what?"
"Well..." Asya replied as she took her first bite of the cake. "Let's see. I learned the petit jete, which is a little jump, and the pirouette and the glissade."
"You know, this is like killing two birds with one stone," Auntie Feride remarked. "We pay for her ballet class, but she ends up learning both ballet and French. We save a
whole lot of money!"
Everyone nodded—everyone except Auntie Zeliha. With a skeptical glint in the abyss of her jade green eyes, she drew her face up close to her daughter's and said in an almost
inaudible voice, "Show us!"
"Are you crazy?" Asya finished. "I can't do those things right in the middle of our living room! I need to be in the studio and working with a teacher. We warm up and stretch
first, and concentrate. And there is always music.... Glissade means to glide, did you know?"
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you know that? How am I possibly going to glide here on the carpet?! One cannot start doing ballet just like that!"
A saturnine smile etched along Auntie Zeliha's lips as she ran her fingers through her dark hair. She said nothing further, seeming to be more interested in eating her cake than in
quarreling with her daughter. But her smile was enough to infuriate Asya. She pushed her own plate away, pulled her chair back, and stood up.
At nine fifteen that evening, in the living room of a once fashionably opulent but now long outmoded and dilapidated konak in Istanbul, Asya Kazanci was doing ballet on a
Turkish carpet, her face romantically poised, her arms stretched out, her hands softly curved so that her middle fingers touched her thumbs, while her mind swirled with rage
and resentment.
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SIX
Pistachios
A
rmanoush Tchakhmakhchian watched the cashier at A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books pile the twelve novels she had just purchased one by one into a canvas backpack
while they waited for her credit card to be processed. When finally given the receipt, she signed the paper, trying to avoid looking at the total. Once again she had spent all her
monthly savings on books! She was a true bookworm, not a promising feature at all given that it had zero value in the eyes of boys and thus served to only further upset her
mother about the prospects of her getting married to a moneyed husband. Just this morning on the phone her mother had made her promise not to whisper a word about
ballet. "You know, this is like killing two birds with one stone," Auntie Feride remarked. "We pay for her ballet class, but she ends up learning both ballet and French. We save a
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intellectuals were the first ones within the Armenian millet to be eliminated by the late Ottoman government. They had first gotten rid of "the brains" and only then proceeded to

Armanoush had a feeling that beneath Auntie Varsenig's constant objection to her reading darker source than simply from an urge to remind her of the things girls her age were busy with. It was not only because she was a woman but also because she was an

All things considered, Armanoush knew, perhaps not rationally but instinctively, that the Tchakhmakhchian family's resistance to her passion for books came from a deeper, read years ago but had been wanting to read again.

"We are proud of her, but she could just as well act her age." Auntie Varsenig shrugged as she placed the last china plate on the table and then gave her niece a hug. "Girls your

"Don't you listen to her. She's just getting old and grumpy," Auntie Surpun chirped from behind her as she followed her into the living room. "We are all so proud of you, sweetheart." "Yes, I did say 'books,'" Armanoush said, shouldering her canvas backpack as she walked into the spacious living room.

"Hello, sweetheart, welcome home!" Surprisingly, it was not her grandmother but Auntie Surpun who opened the door. "I missed you," she twittered lovingly. "What have you done all day long? How was your day?"

"It was OK," Armanoush said placidly, wondering what her youngest aunt was doing here on a Tuesday evening. "I missed you," she twittered lovingly. "What have you done all day long? How was your day?"

Armanoush winked without knowing how pretty she looked under the sun's fading light in the room. She set her backpack on her grandma's armchair and instantly emptied it, like a kid eager to see a bunch of new toys. Books rained on top of one another: The Aleph and Other Stories, A Confederacy of Dunces, A Frolic of His Own, The

THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL tunes to her ears. She caught sight of a young couple inside Max's Opera Cafe who were either disappointed with the piled-high corned beef sandwiches in front of them, or' else had just had a quarrel. Thank God I'm single, Armanoush half jokingly thought to herself before she turned toward Turk Street. Years ago when she was still in her teens, Armanoush had shown the city to an Armenian American girl from New York. Upon reaching this street the girl's face had crumpled. "Turk Street! Aren't they everywhere?"

Armanoush recalled her own surprise at the girl's reaction. She had tried to explain to her that the street was named after Frank Turk, an attorney who had served as second alcalde and was important in the city's history. "Whatever." Her friend had broken off the lecture, showing not too much interest in urban history. "All the same, aren't they everywhere?"

Yes indeed, they were everywhere, so much so that one of them was married to her mom. But this last bit of information Armanoush had kept to herself. She avoided talking about her stepfather with her Armenian friends. She did not talk about him with non-Armenians either. Not even with those who had absolutely no interest in life outside of their own and therefore couldn't care less about the history of the Armenian-Turkish conflict. All the same, wise enough to know that secrets could spread quicker than dust in the wind, Armanoush maintained her silence. When you didn't tell anyone the extraordinary, everyone assumed the normal, Armanoush discovered at an early age. Since her mother was an odar, what could have been more normal for her than to get married to another odar? This being the general assumption on the part of her friends, Armanoush's stepfather was thought to be an American, presumably from the Midwest.

On Turk Street she passed by a guy-friendly bed-and-breakfast, a Middle Eastern grocery store, and a small Thai market, and strolled next to pedestrians from all walks of life until she finally got on the trolley to Russian Hill. Leaning her forehead on the dusty window,
"Is he Armenian too?" Mrs. Grinnell whispered when Mustafa left the room.

"Oh yeah," Rose nodded heartily. "Believe me, they do. They spice it up with garlic and herbs, stuff it with rice, and wolf it down."

"Gross," Mrs. Grinnell exclaimed with a trace of disgust creeping into her voice. "Do they really eat the intestines?"

Armanoush recalled how Rose once complained to Mrs. Grinnell, the next-door neighbor. She was especially fond of drawing attention to two dishes, which she publicly disparaged on every available occasion: cooked calf's feet and stuffed intestines. Armanoush's mother in Arizona wanted to keep Armenian cuisine as far from the borders of her kitchen as possible, and profoundly enjoyed vilifying it to her neighbors and friends. She was especially fond of drawing attention to two dishes, which she publicly disparaged on every available occasion: cooked calf's feet and stuffed intestines. Armanoush's mother in Arizona wanted to keep Armenian cuisine as far from the borders of her kitchen as possible, and profoundly enjoyed vilifying it to her neighbors and friends.

"That's not going to help!" Armanoush gasped. "No toothpaste, no chewing gum, not even those awful mouthwashes! There is nothing on earth strong enough to suppress the smell of bastirma. It takes a week to finally disappear. If you eat bastirma you smell and sweat and breathe bastirma for days on end. Even your pee smells like bastirma!"

"No problem. If you brush your teeth and chew a mint gum there will be no smell whatsoever." That was Auntie Zarouhi walking in with a plate of musaqqa, beautifully garnished with parsley and slices of lemon. She left the plate on the table and opened her arms wide to embrace her niece.

Armanoush embraced her back wondering all the while what was she doing here ...? But she started to get the picture. What a well-planned "coincidence" it was that the whole Tchakhmakchian family had materialized at Grandma Shushan's house at the same time Armanoush would be going on her date. Everyone here had shown up with a different pretext but exactly the same purpose: They wanted to see, test, and judge with their own eyes this Matt Hassinger, the lucky young man who would be dating the apple of their eye this evening.

Armanoush looked at her relatives with a stare that bordered on desperate. What could she do? How could she be independent when they were so frighteningly close? How could she convince them that they didn't have to worry so much about her when they had had so much in life to worry about? How could she break free from her genetic heritage, especially when a part of her was so proud of it? How could she fight off the kindness of her loved ones? Could goodness be fought?

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"What's peeing got to do with dating?" Armanoush heard a befuddled Auntie Varsenig whisper to Auntie Surpun as soon as she had turned her back.

"Uncle, what are you doing?"

"If you say so," echoed a voice from under the sink.

Uncle Dikran the Impossible Plumber on the job, Armanoush moved toward her grandma's bedroom, opened the door slightly, and peeked inside. There she was sleeping lightly but still protesting but unwilling to squabble with them, Armanoush headed to the bathroom, only to find Uncle Dikran there, his head inside the cabinet under the sink, his bulky body on hands and knees.

"Uncle?" Armanoush almost let out a shriek.

"Hellooo!" Dikran Stamboulian hooted from the cabinet. "This house is full of Chekhovian characters," Armanoush muttered to herself.

Though books were potentially harmful, novels were all the more dangerous. The path of fiction could easily mislead you into extraditing the rest-the kikepeople. Like too many Armenian families in the diaspora, safe and sound here but never truly at ease, the Tchakhmakchians were both elated and vexed when a child of theirs read too much, thought too much, and swerved too far away from the ordinary.

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"Of course not," Rose said, her voice trailing off. "It's just that they have some things in common."

The doorbell rang shrilly, snatching Armanoush out of her trance and making everyone else jump in panic. It was not even seven o'clock yet. Punctuality, apparently, wasn't one of Matt Hassinger's merits. As if a button had been pressed, all three aunts scrambled to the door only to stop short of opening it. Uncle Dikran hit his head on the cupboard he was still working in and Grandma Shushan opened her eyes in fright. Only Armanoush remained calm and composed. In intentionally measured steps she walked to the door under the fixed gaze of her aunts and opened it.

"Daddy!!" Armanoush fluted with delight. "I thought you had a meeting this evening. How come you're home so early?"

But before she reached the end of her question, Armanoush had already sensed the answer. Barsam Tchakhmakhchian smiled his soft dimpled smile and hugged his daughter, his eyes glistening with pride and traces of anxiety. "Yeah, but it didn't work out, we had to reschedule the meeting," he said to Armanoush. As soon as she was beyond earshot, he whispered to his sisters: "Is he here yet?"

The last thirty minutes before Matt Hassinger's arrival were marked with escalating apprehension on the part of everyone but Armanoush. They made her put on several dresses and parade around in each one, until they unilaterally reached a decision: the turquoise dress. The outfit was completed with earrings that matched, a burgundy beaded purse that Auntie Varsenig claimed would add a feminine touch, and a fluffy dark blue cardigan, just in case it got cold. That was one other thing Armanoush knew she should not question. Somehow the world outside the family house had an arctic character in the eyes of the Tchakhmakhchians. "Outside" meant "chilly land," and to visit it, you had to take your cardigan, preferably handwoven. This she partly knew from her childhood, having spent her early years under the downy blankets Grandma knit for her with her initials stitched at the edges. To go to sleep without anything covering your body was simply unthinkable, and going out into the street without a cardigan would be a blunder. Just like a house needed a roof above its head, human beings too needed an additional skin between them and the rest of the world so that they could feel safe and warm. Once Armanoush agreed to put on her cardigan and the dressing part was over, they came forth with another demand, one that was fundamentally paradoxical but not to the Tchakhmakhchians.

They wanted her to sit with them at the table and eat, so that she could be ready and strong for tonight's dinner.

"But honey you are just nibbling like a bird. Don't tell me you are not even going to taste my manta?" Auntie Varsenig wailed with a scoop in her hand and such severe dismay in her dark brown eyes that it made Armanoush wonder if something far more life-and-death than a bowl of manta was concerned.

"Auntie, I can't." Armanoush exhaled. "You already filled my plate with khaday f Let me finish this, that's more than enough."

"Well you didn't want to smell of meat and garlic," Auntie Surpun chimed in with a hint of mischief in her voice. "So we served you elmek khaday f This way your breath will smell of pistachios."

"Why would anyone want to smell like pistachios?" Grandma Shushan asked amazed, having missed the first episode of the debate, not that it would have made sense to her anyway. Armanoush narrowed her eyes with desperation and turned to her dad, flashing a distress signal, waiting to be saved.

"I do not want to smell like pistachios." Armanoush widened her eyes with desperation and turned to her dad, flashing a distress signal, waiting to be saved. Before Barsam Tchakhmakhchian could utter a word, however, Armanoush's cell phone started to ring a classical melody by Tchaikovsky: "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." She picked it up and pouted at the little screen. Private number. It could be anyone. It could even be Matt Hassinger, calling to give her a weird excuse to cancel the dinner tonight. Armanoush stood there, holding the phone uneasily. On the fourth ring, she answered it, hoping it wasn't her mother.

It was.

"Honey, are they treating you all right?" was the first thing she asked.

"Yes, Mother," Armanoush muttered tonelessly. By now she was kind of used to it. Ever since she was a little girl, whenever she stayed at the Tchakhmakhchian domicile, her mother acted as if her life was in danger.

"Amy, don't tell me you're still at home?"

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Armanoush was used to this too, relatively speaking. Since the day her parents had separated, a separation of a different sort had happened between her mother and her own name. She had stopped calling her "Armanoush," as if she needed to rename her daughter to be able to continue loving her. To this day Armanoush had not told anyone in the Tchakhmakhchian family about this shift of nomenclature. Sometimes things had to be kept as secrets, of which she happened to have way too many.

"Why don't you respond?" her mother insisted. "Weren't you going out tonight?"

"Well, I have my own reasons, just like any mother would. You don't always answer the phone if you know it's me." Rose's voice dwindled desolately only to escalate again.

"Yes, Mother." Armanoush muttered tonelessly.

"No, Mother. But why do you have a private number?"

"Well, I have my own reasons, just like any mother would. You don't always answer the phone if you know it's me." Rose's voice dwindled desolately only to escalate again.

"Yes, Mother."

"Why! That will be the worst mistake ever. They'll scare the life out of him. Oh your aunts, you don't know them, you are such a good girl you can't see the bad, they'll strike terror into the poor boy with their questions and interrogations." Armanoush didn't say anything. There were bizarre swishes on the line and she suspected her mother was brushing her hair at the same time as she delivered her tongue-lashing.

"Honey, why don't you say something? Are they all there?" Rose asked. There came another muffled rustle, except it didn't sound like brushing to Armanoush anymore. Rather it sounded like a mushy object dropping into a liquid without a splash, or more precisely, a scoop of pancake mix being poured into a sizzling pan.

"Oh, why do I ask the obvious? Of course they are. All of them, I bet. They still hate me, don't they?"
from his past, but she could not possibly tell why. A few times she had tried to converse with him about 1915 and what the Turks had done to the Armenians. "I don't know much about those things," Mustafa had replied, shutting her out with a genteel but equally stiff manner. "It's all history. You should talk with historians."

"Amy, are you gonna talk to me?" Rose's voice now sounded irritated.

"Mann, I have to hang up. I'll call you later," Armanoush said. There was an abrupt click accompanied by a swish on the phone, which sounded like her mother had either scooped another dollop of pancake mix into the pan or had broken into a sob. Armanoush preferred to think it was the former. Utterly pissed off, she returned to the table, resettled in her chair, grabbed her spoon, and avoiding eye contact, started to cram down what was in front of her, except it wasn't what she wanted. It took her a few more spoonfuls to realize the mistake.

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"Why am I eating manta!?!" Armanoush exclaimed.

"I don't know, honey," Auntie Varsenig exclaimed back, staring at her with fright as if she were a kind of creature new to her. "I put it there in case you wanted to try it. And it looks like you did."

Now Armanoush felt like crying. She asked permission to leave the table and whisked off to the bathroom to brush her teeth, deeply regretting in the meantime this whole silly date. She stood in front of the mirror with a half-squeezed tube of toothpaste in her hand and the look of someone who was about to forswear society forever to become a lonely hermit on some godforsaken mountain. What could a Colgate Total Whitening Paste do to fight the infamous manta? Perhaps she could call Matt Hassinger and cancel the whole thing? All she wanted was to lie in bed saturated in despair and read the novels she had purchased. Read and read until her nose bled and her eyes drooped. That was all she wanted.

"You should have stayed in bed and read your novels," she scolded the familiar face in the mirror.

"Nonsense!" It was Auntie Zarouhi, having just materialized next to her in the mirror. "You are a beautiful young woman who deserves the best man in the world. Now let's see a little feminine glamor. Put on some lipstick, miss!"

She did. It didn't say feminine glamor on the bottom of the lipstick tube but close enough: It said CHERRY GLAMOR. Armanoush generously applied the lipstick, only to put her mouth with a napkin and wipe most of it off. And that was precisely when the doorbell rang. Seven thirty-two! Punctuality seemed to be among Matt Hassinger's merits, after all.

A minute later Armanoush was smiling at a neatly dressed, noticeably excited, and somewhat baffled Matt Hassinger standing at the door. He was three years younger than her—a trivial fact which she hadn't felt the need to tell anyone but was very much evident from his face now. Either because he had done something with his cropped hair or slipped into clothes he wouldn't normally wear, dark brown lambskin blazer and Ralph Lauren honeydew pants,

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Matt Hassinger looked like a teenager dressed as an adult. He stepped inside with a huge bouquet of crimson tulips in his left hand, smiled at Armanoush, then noticed the audiance in the background and froze. The whole Tchakhmakhchian family had lined up behind Armanoush.

"Come on in, young man," said Auntie Varsenig in her most encouraging voice, which also happened to be her most intimidating one.

Matt shacked hands with each family member, feeling their inquiring gazes rake his face. He lost his confidence and broke into a sweat. Somebody took the flowers and someone else took his blazer. Looking like a plucked peacock now that his blazer was off, he shuffled toward the living room and threw himself on the first chair he spotted. Everyone else sat close, forming a half-circle around him. They exchanged a few words about the weather, about Matt's education (he was in law school, which could be good and bad), about Matt's family (he was an only child, which could be good and bad), about Matt's parents (they too were lawyers, which could be good and bad), about Matt's level of knowledge on the Armenians (not much, which was bad, but he was eager to learn more, which was good), and then went back to the weather again before an irritating silence fell. For almost five minutes no one had a word to utter but everyone beamed as if they all had something lodged in their throats and found humor in this. From this awkward state they were about to pass into an almost dismal impasse when "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" was heard again. Armanoush checked the screen: Seventy-three sheep! Punctuation seemed to be among Matt Hassinger's merits, after all.

At seven forty-five Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian and Matt Hassinger were finally outside, steadily speeding up along Hyde Street in a Venetian red Suzuki Verona, heading toward a restaurant that Matt had heard much about and assumed would be cute and romantic: Skewed Window.

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"I hope you like Asian fusion with a touch of Caribbean influence," Matt chuckled, amused at his own words. "This place was highly recommended."

Now "highly recommended" was not a criterion for Armanoush, mainly because she was always wary of "highly recommended" best sellers. Still, she didn't object, hoping that her cynicism would stand corrected at the end of the night.

That, however, turned out to be far from the case. A popular meeting place for urban intellectuals and artists, Skewed Window was anything but a cute, romantic restaurant. It was a funky warehouse with lofty ceilings, art deco pendant lights, and walls on which glimmered examples of contemporary abstract art. Dressed headto-toe in black, the waiters scurried around like a colony of ants who had just discovered a pile of granulated sugar. The colony of waiters served artfully crafted dishes with the knowledge that soon you'd be replaced by a new customer, probably someone who would tip better. As for the menu, it was simply incomprehensible. As if the contents weren't perplexing enough, each dish was shaped, trimmed, and garnished so as to allude to a particular abstract expressionist painting.

The Dutch chef of the restaurant had three aspirations in life: to become a philosopher, to become a painter, and to become a restaurant chef. Having badly failed in both philosophy and art during his youth, he saw no reason not to bring his unappreciated talents into his cuisine. Thus, he prided himself on re-materializing the abstract, and reinserting into the human body the work of art that had come out through an artist's desire to externalize his inner emotional state. Here at the Skewed Window, dining was less culinary than philosophical, and the act of eating was deemed to be guided not by the primordial urge to fill your stomach or suppress your hunger but by a sublime dance with catharsis.

After numerous aborted attempts to choose what they were going to eat, Armanoush decided to go for the sesame-crusted ahi tuna tartare with foie gras yakiniku, and Matt decided to try a prime

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rib-eye with hot mustard cream sauce on a bed of passion fruit vinaigrette and jicama. Not knowing which wine would match with these dishes but in need of making a good impression, Matt inspected the wine list and after five minutes of bewilderment, he did what he always did when he had absolutely no idea about what to pick: Decide on a wine by looking at its price. A 1997 Cabernet Sauvignon looked perfect, expensive enough but also within his means. Thus having given their order, they tried to read how good their choices were on the face of the waiter who served them, but all they could find there was a blank page of professional politeness.

They talked a little, he about the career he wanted to build, she about the childhood she would like to destroy; he about his future plans, she about the traces of the past; he about his expectations in life, she about family recollections. The Sugar Plum Fairy started to dance just when they were about to embark on another conversational topic.
Armanoush firely checked the number. It wasn't a familiar number, but it wasn't private either. She answered.

"Amy, where are you?"

Dumbfounded, Armanoush stuttered, "Ma-ma! How did you ... how come your number is different now?"

"Oh, it's because I'm calling you on Mrs. Grinnell's cell phone," Rose conceded. "I wouldn't have to go to this much trouble if you cared to answer my calls, of course."

Armanoush blinked blankly as she watched the waiter place a peculiar-looking plate of food in front of her, composed of hues of red, beige, and white. Amid a sauce that resembled smudged brush strokes rested three spherical chunks of red, raw tuna and a bright yellow egg yolk, altogether forming a sorry face with hollow eyes. Still holding the cell phone to her ear but not listening to her mother anymore, Armanoush puckered her lips, as she tried to figure out how to eat a face.

"Amy, why aren't you responding to me? Am I not your mother?"

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mother? Don't you allow me at least half the rights you grant the Tchakhmakhchians?"

"Mom, please," Armanoush said, because this seemed like a question that could only be answered by begging her not to ask it. She hunched her shoulders as if the weight of her body had doubled. Why was it so hard to communicate with her mother?

With a quick excuse and a promise to call her back as soon as she got home, Armanoush hung up and turned off the cell phone. She sneaked a look at Matt to see if he minded the phone call, but upon noticing he was still inspecting his plate, she decided not to worry. Matt's plate was rectangular, not round, and the food on it was divided into two zones separated by a perfectly straight line of mustard cream sauce. It was less the design or the colors that had struck him than the flawlessness of the arrangement. He swallowed hard as if afraid of spoiling the seamless rectangularity.

Their dishes were replicas of two expressionist paintings. Armanoush's plate was based on a painting by Francesco Boretti titled The Blind Whore. As for Matt's plate, it was inspired by one of Mark Rothko's paintings and was aptly titled Untitled. So absorbed were the two in their plates that neither of them heard the waiter when he asked them if everything was all right.

The rest of the evening was nice but only as far as the word nice can go. The food turned out to be delicious and they quickly got used to wolfing down works of art, so much so that when their desserts arrived, Matt had no trouble in munching up the impeccably lined blueberries in April Blues Bring May Yellows by Peter Kitchell, and Armanoush did not even hesitate to jab her spoon into the shaky, velvet custard representing Jackson Pollock's Shimmering Substance. But when it came to conversing they couldn't make half the progress they achieved in eating. Not that Armanoush did not enjoy being with Matt or did not find him attractive. But something was terribly missing, not in the sense of a detail missing from the whole, but in the sense of the whole dissolving into pieces.

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without that missing part. Perhaps it was too much philosophical food. At any rate, Armanoush had understood her limits; she could not possibly fall in love with Matt Hassinger. After making this discovery, she stopped questioning herself, and her interest in him was replaced by sheer sympathy.

On the way back home they stopped the car and walked a little bit along Columbus Avenue, both pensive and silent. The breeze shifted then, and for a fleeting moment Armanoush caught the sharp, salty whiff of the sea, longing to be by the seaside now, aching to run away from this very moment. Once in front of the City Lights bookstore, however, she couldn't help perking up with interest as she spotted one of her favorite books behind the window: A Tomb for Boris Davidovich.

"Oh, have you read that book? It's awesome!" she blurted out, and upon hearing a definite "no," she started describing: the first story of the book, and then all seven of them. Since she sincerely believed the book could not be fully grasped without mapping the bumpy terrain of Eastern European literature first, during the ensuing ten minutes that was more or less what Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian did, thus breaking the promise she had made to her mother that very morning about not uttering a word about books, at least for just the first date.

Once back in Russian Hill, in front of Grandma Shushan's condo, they stood face to face, aware that the night was over and eager to make the ending better than the preceding evening in the only way they could think of. It was meant to be a real kiss, long-awaited and fantasized. Instead it turned out to be a gentle kiss, sealed with compassion on the part of Armanoush and admiration on the part of Matt, as both were miles away from feeling any passion.

"You know I meant to tell you this all night long," Matt stammered, as if saddled with the uncomfortable truth he was about to confess. "You have this incredible smell.... It's unusual and exotic.... Just like-"

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"Like what?" Armanoush's face went pale, as the sight of a plate of steaming manta popped into her mind.

Matt Hassinger put his arm around her and whispered: "Pistachios ... yes, you smell just like pistachios."

At a quarter past eleven Armanoush fished out a bunch of keys to open the many locks of Grandma Shushan's door, fearing in the meantime encountering the whole family in the living room, talking politics, drinking tea, and eating fruit, awaiting her return.

But inside it was dark and empty. Her dad and grandma had gone to sleep and everyone else had left. On the table there was a plate of two apples and two oranges, all carefully peeled and apparently left for her to eat. Armanoush grabbed one of the apples, now darkened on the outside. Her heart sank. In the eerie serenity of the night she nibbled the apple, feeling sad and tired. Soon she would have to go back to Arizona, but she wasn't sure she could put up with her mother's encapsulating universe. Though she liked it here in San Francisco and perhaps could take a semester off to stay with her father and Grandma Shushan, she also couldn't help feeling that something was absent here, that a part of her identity was missing and without it she couldn't start living her own life. The lackluster date with Matt Hassinger had only served to reinforce this feeling.

Now she felt wiser, more cognizant of her situation, but saddened at the cost of this knowledge. In fact, it was as if Armanoush had understood her limits; she could not possibly fall in love with Matt Hassinger. After making this discovery, she stopped questioning herself, and her interest in him was replaced by sheer sympathy.

Hassinger. After making this discovery, she stopped questioning herself, and her interest in him was replaced by sheer sympathy.

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all were the grandchildren of families once based in Istanbul. The Web site opened with a familiar tune: Istanbul was Constantinople/ Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople ... With that melody appeared the silhouette of the city canopied under the flickering shades of sunset, veils upon veils of amethyst and black and yellow. In the middle of the screen there was a flashing arrow to indicate where to click to enter the chat room. You had to sign in with a password to be able to proceed further. Just like many real cafes there was a flashing arrow to indicate where to click to enter the chat room. You had to sign in with a password to be able to proceed further. Just like many real cafes
4-8 points: You sound like an inside-outsider. Chances are you are.

0-3 points: Sorry dude, you must be an outsider.

Having given a "yes" to every single one of the questions, Armanoush scrolled down to learn her score:

15. If deep inside you feel like there is always more about your past than you will ever be allowed to learn, can cry so sadly

14. If the sound of duduk sends shivers down your spine and you accept "I am full" as an answer

13. If your relatives keep shoveling food into your mouth and do not matter what age you might have reached

12. If gathering to eat fruit after each dinner is a deeply rooted habit.

11. If you can't help feeling sad when you dance to "Lorke Lorke,"

10. If you have a cherished rug on the floor of your living room somewhere in your storeroom

9. If you have a jar of Nutella in your refrigerator and a tav/a board handwoven cardigans to school

8. If you have had (or are planning to have) a nose job

7. If you easily get pestered and aggravated over remarkably trivial things but manage to stay composed when there is something really grave to worry or panic about

6. If you are familiar with the taste of manta, the smell of sudzuk, and the curse of bastirma

5. If you serve your guests hummus with nacho chips and eggplant dip with rice cakes

4. If you are used to being loved and cooed at in Armenian, scolded and disciplined in English, and avoided in Turkish

3. If you have a picture of Mount Ararat hanging in your house, birthday until the age of six or seven

2. If you have been given an Armenian alphabet book on each handwoven blankets or wearing handwoven cardigans to school

1. If you grew up sleeping under handwoven blankets or wearing handwoven cardigans to school
married to an Armenian.

9-12 points: Almost certainly you are an Armenian.

13-15 points: There's no doubt, you are a proud Armenian.

Armanoush smiled at the screen. And in that moment she grasped what she already knew. It was as if a secret gate had been unlatched in the depths of her brain, and before her mind could accommodate the thoughts gushing in, a wave of introspection rolled over her. She had to go there. That was what she sorely needed: a journey.

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Because of her fragmented childhood, she had still not been able to find a sense of continuity and identity. She had to make a journey to her past to be able to start living her own life. As the weight of this new revelation dawned on her, it also motivated her to type a message, seemingly to everyone but in particular to Baron Bae-sthassarian:

The Janissary's Paradox is being torn between two clashing states of existence. On the one hand, the remnants of the past pile up a wound of tenderness and sorrow, a sense of injustice and discrimination. On the other hand glimmers the promised future—a shelter decorated with the trimmings and trappings of success, a sense of safety like you have never had before, the comfort of joining the majority and finally being deemed normal.

Hello there Madame My-Exiled-Soul! Glad you are back. So nice to hear the poetess in you.

That was Baron Bae-sthassarian. Armanoush couldn't help rereading the last part aloud: so nice to hear the poetess in you. She lost her train of thought but only momentarily.

I think I can relate to the Janissary's Paradox. As the only child of resentfully divorced parents coming from different cultural backgrounds, she paused with the discomfort of revealing her personal story, but the urge to carry on was too strong.

Being the only daughter of an Armenian father, he himself a child of survivors, and of a mother from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, I do know how it feels to be torn between opposite sides, unable to fully belong anywhere, constantly fluctuating between two states of existence.

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To this day she had never written anything so personal and so direct to anyone in the group. Her heart pumping hard, she took a breather. What was Baron Bae-sthassarian going to think about her now and would he write his true thoughts?

That must be hard. For most Armenians in the diaspora, Hai Dat is the sole psychological anchor that we have in order to sustain an identity. Your situation is different but ultimately we are all Americans and Armenians, that plurality is good as long as we do not lose our anchor.

That was Miserable-Coexistence, a housewife unhappily married to the editor-in-chief of a prominent literary journal in the Bay Area. Plurality means the state of being more than one. But that was not the case with me. I've never been able to become an Armenian in the first place, Armanoush wrote, realizing she was on the brink of making a confession. I need to find my identity. You know what I've been secretly contemplating? Going to visit my family's house in Turkey. Grandma always talks about this gorgeous house in Istanbul. I'll go and see it with my own eyes. This is a journey into my family's past, as well as into my future. The Janissary's Paradox will haunt me unless I do something to discover my past.

Wait, wait, wait, Lady Peacock/Siramark typed in panic. What the hell do you think you are doing? Are you planning to go to Turkey on your own, did you take leave of your senses?

I can find connections. It's not that difficult.

How so Madame My-Exiled-Soul? Lady Peacock/Siramark insisted. How far do you think you can go with that name on your passport?

Why don't you instead directly walk into a police headquarters in Istanbul and get yourself nicely arrested! broke in Anti-Khavurma, a grad student in Near Eastern Studies at Columbia University.

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Armanoush felt this could be the right moment to confess another fundamental truth of her life. Finding the right connections might not be that difficult for me since my mother is now married to a Turk.

There was an unsettling lull. For a full minute no one wrote anything back, so Armanoush continued.

His name is Mustafa, he is a geologist who works for a company in Arizona. He's a nice man, but he is completely disinterested in history and ever since he arrived in the USA, which is like twenty years ago, he has never been back home. He didn't even invite his family to the wedding. Something's fishy there but I don't know what. He just doesn't talk about that. But I know he has a large family in Istanbul. I asked him once what kind of people they were and he said: Oh, they are just ordinary people, like you and me. He doesn't sound like the most sensitive man on earth—that is, of course, if men can ever have feelings, barged in the Daughter of Sappho, a lesbian bartender who had recently found a job in a shabby reggae bar in Brooklyn. He sure doesn't, Miserable-Coexistence added. Does he have a heart?

Oh, he does. He loves my mom, and my mom loves him, Armanoush replied. She realized she had for the first time recognized the love between her mother and stepfather, as if seeing them through a stranger's eyes. Anyway, I can stay with his family, after all I am his stepdaughter, I guess they will have to accept me as a guest. It's a puzzle to me how I will be received by ordinary Turks. A real Turkish family, not one of those Americanized academics.

What are you going to talk about with ordinary Turks? asked Lady Peacock/Siramark. Look, even the well-educated are either nationalist or ignorant. Do you think ordinary people will be interested in accepting historical truths? Do you think they are going to say: Oh yeah, we are sorry we massacred and deported you guys and then contentedly go on their way?

He sure doesn't, Miserable-Coexistence added. Does he have a heart?

What will you talk about with ordinary Turks? Armanoush smiled at the screen. And in that moment she grasped what she already knew. It was as if a secret gate had been unlatched in the depths of her brain, and before her mind could accommodate the thoughts gushing in, a wave of introspection rolled over her. She had to go there. That was what she sorely needed: a journey.
Wow, you will be our war reporter, enthused Anti-Khavurma, but there followed an even longer pause as no one joined in the joke.

Armanoush leaned back in her chair. Deep in the stillness of the

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night she could hear her father’s unruffled breathing and her grandmother tossing in her bed. She felt her body slipping sideways, as if part of her crave sitting in this chair all night long to savor what insomnia was like, while part of her wanted to go to bed and fall into a deep slumber. She munched the last bit of her apple, feeling a rush of adrenaline about her dangerous decision.

Armanoush turned off the table lamp, leaving a grainy light radiating from the computer. Just when she was about to exit Cafe Constantinopolis, however, a line appeared on the screen.

Wherever your inner journey might take you, please take care of yourself dear Madame My-Exiled-Soul, and don't let the Turks treat you badly.

It was Baron Baghdadarrisirin.

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SEVEN
Wheat

I

had been more than two hours since she had woken up, but Asya Kazanci was still lying in bed under a goose-feather quilt, listening to the myriad sounds only Istanbul is capable of producing while her mind meticulously composed a Personal Manifesto of Nihilism.

Article One: If you cannot find a reason to love the life you are living, do not pretend to love the life you are living.

She gave this statement some thought and decided she liked it well enough to make it the opening line of her manifesto. As she proceeded into the second article, outside on the street somebody slammed on his brakes. In next to no time the driver was heard swearing and shouting at the top of his voice at some pedestrian who had materialized on the road, crossing an intersection diagonally and also on a red light. The driver yelled and yelled until his voice dwindled amid the humming of the city.

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Article Two: The overwhelming majority of people never think and those who think never become the overwhelming majority. Choose your side.

Article Three: If you cannot choose, then just exist; be a mushroom or a plant.

"I cannot believe you are still in the same position that I found you in half an hour ago! What the hell are you doing in bed, lazy girl?"

That was Auntie Banu, having ducked her head into the room without feeling the need to knock on the door first. She was wearing an eye-catching head scarf this morning of a hue so dazzlingly red that from a distance it made her head look like a huge, ripe tomato. "We have finished a whole samovar of tea while waiting for you, our Lady Queen. Come on, rise and shine! Can't you smell the grilled sucuk? Aren't you hungry?" She slammed the door shut before waiting for an answer.

Asya muttered under her breath as she pulled the quilt up to her nose and turned to the other side.

Article Four: If you have no interest in their answers, then do not ask questions.

There amid the typical bustle of a weekend breakfast, she could hear the water dropping from the tiny faucet of the samovar, the seven eggs feverishly boiling in a stockpot, the slices of sucuk sizzling inside the grill pan, and somebody continually flipping through the TV channels, skipping from cartoons to pop music videos and from there, to local and international news. Without needing to sneak a peek, Asya knew that it was Grandma Gulsum who was in charge of the samovar; just like she could tell it was Auntie Banu who grilled the sucuk, her unparalleled appetite having returned now that the forty days of Sufi penitence was over and she had suc

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cessfully declared herself a clairvoyant. Asya also knew that it was Auntie Feride who flipped through the channels, unable to decide on one, having enough room in the vast kind of schizophrenic paranoia to absorb them all, cartoons and pop music and news at the same time, just like she yearned for success in multiple tasks in life and ended up accomplishing none.

Article Five: If you have no reason or ability to accomplish anything, then just practice the art of becoming.

Article Six: If you have no reason or ability to practice the art of becoming, then just be.

"Asya!!!" The door banged open and Auntie Zeliha rammed in, her green eyes glittering like two round pieces of jade. "Do we have to keep sending envoys to your bed to make you join us?"

Article Seven: If you have no reason or ability to be, then just endure.

"Asya!!!"

"What?!?!!" Asya's head popped up from under the bedcovers in a curious, raven ball of fury. Jumping to her feet she kicked the pair of lavender slippers beside the bed, missing one of them but managing to catapult the other directly on top of the dresser where it hit the mirror and from there parachuted to the floor. She then pulled up her loose-around-the-waist pajamas in a funny sort of way, which, if truth be told, did not quite support the dramatic effect she wanted to generate.

"For heaven's sake, can't I possibly have a moment's peace on a Sunday morning?"

"Regrettably there exists no moment on earth that lasts two hours," Auntie Zeliha pointed out, after watching the distressing trajectory of the slipper. "Why are you getting on my nerves? If this

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is a teenage rebellion that you are going through, you're too late, miss, you should have been there at least five years ago. Remember, you are already nineteen."

"Yeah, the age you had me out of wedlock," Asya croaked, knowing she shouldn't be so brutal but doing it anyway.

Standing in the doorway, Auntie Zeliha stared at Asya with the disappointment of a visual artist who after drinking and working on a piece of art all night long sleeps with satisfaction, only to wake up later the next morning confronted with the bedlam he has created while intoxicated. Despite the dourness of the discovery, she didn't say anything for a full minute. Then her lips twisted into a morose smile as if she had just realized that the face she had been looking at was in fact her own image in the mirror, so alike and yet completely detached. Her daughter had turned out to be just like her in character, though vastly different in appearance.

As far as the personality went, it was the same skepticism, the same uninterest, the same bitterness she had displayed when she was Asya's age. Before she knew it, she had neatly passed on the role of the maverick of the Kazanci family to her daughter. Fortunately, Asya didn't look world-weary or angst-ridden yet, being too young for all of that.

But the temptation to raze the edifice of her own existence was there, softly glittering in her eyes, the sweet lure of self-destruction that only the sophisticated or the saturnine

...
Excited about this, trying to push Sultan the Fifth away from the dripping little faucet with her feet, Asya poured herself tea from the steaming samovar and asked dully: "Why are you all so...

"You have to get ready, you know, our guest is arriving today," Auntie Banu said as she entered the living room with the tray of borek fresh out of the oven, visibly pleased to

... of a radical change in mood. She inspected Auntie Feride for traces of insanity. Other than that she seemed to be absorbed in the TV, watching with delight a terribly

Asya's pockets to save her from the evil eye. Other than crusading against the evil eye, laughing was the thing she did best and most... that is, until the day her illness escalated.

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ever since she was a little girl, of all the women in her family, she was never the prettiest. Unlike others in her family, Petite-Ma had always been capable of loving without

... and have supper with us."

"What do you mean?" Petite-Ma blinked her eyes, now more lost than ever.

I mean, now that the prayer has ended in one way or another, you can stop thinking about it. That's what it says here, right? Come on Petite-Ma, disperse abroad in the land and seek of God's grace and remember God, that you may be successful" (62:9-10).

"What do you mean?" Petite-Ma blinked her eyes, now more lost than ever.

I mean, now that the prayer has ended in one way or another, you can stop thinking about it. That's what it says here, right? Come on Petite-Ma, disperse abroad in the land... and have supper with us.

It had worked. Petite-Ma had stopped worrying about the forgotten line and had dined with them peacefully. Nonetheless, incidences like this had lately started to occur with an alarming frequency. Often subdued and withdrawn, there were times in which she forgot the simplest things, including where she was, which day of the week it was, or who

... which was perfectly okay, except that here she was painfully going through a phase of her life in which "cuteness" was the last thing she wanted to be associated with. Twenty

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The first weaver accepted the offer with joy and grumpily. One day the sultan came to the village. He said to them: "I will fill your baskets with wheat, and if you take good care of this wheat, the grains will turn into golden "Once there was; once there wasn't.... There lived two basket weavers back in the old Ottoman days. Both were hard workers, but one had faith, the other was always the statement she was going to announce. 

"Oh, they smell superb." Auntie Banu beamed when she returned to the table wearing the simits on each arm like a circus acrobat ready to juggle with hoops. She left one in her mouth, she proceeded to the next line, without waiting for the man to answer. "All right, give us eight simits." Not that she didn't know how much a simit cost, she sure did. The question was less a query than a rite, performed dutifully. That is why as soon as the question came out of her mouth, she shut up for a second and chewed nervously. "Journeys are not safe. The roads are full of perils. Airplanes are hijacked, cars crash in accidents... even trains tumble. Eight people died in a car accident yesterday on the Aegean Coast," Auntie Feride noted. Unable to make eye contact with anyone, her eyeballs drew nervous circles around the table until they landed on a black olive resting on her plate. Every time Auntie Feride conveyed ghastly news from the third page of the Turkish tabloids there followed a prickly silence. This time it was no different. In the ensuing silence Grandma Gulsum grimaced, disturbed to hear her only son being disparaged like this; Auntie Banu tugged on the ends of her head scarf; Auntie Cevriye tried to remember what kind of an animal "coyote" was, but since twenty-four years in the profession of teaching had made her terrific with answers and equally bad with questions, she didn't dare ask anyone; Petite-Ma stopped nibbling the slice of sucul on her plate; and Auntie Feride tried to think of some other accidents she'd read about, but instead of more macabre news, she recalled the bright blue simit that Mustafa's American wife was wearing in one of the pictures—if only she could find anything close to that in Istanbul, she sure would like to wear it day and night. In the meantime, no one noticed that Auntie Zeliha's face looked woeful all of a sudden. "We need to face the truth!" Auntie Banu announced with certitude. "All these years you have all dotted on Uncle Mustafa as the one and only precious son of this family, and the instant he flew from the nest, he forgot about you. Isn't it obvious that the man doesn't give a hoot about his family? Why should he mean anything for us, then?"

"The boy is busy," Grandma Gulsum interjected. In truth, she favored her son, of which she had only one, over the daughters, of which she had too many. "It is not easy to be abroad. America is a long way away."

"Yeah, of course it's a long way, especially when you consider the fact that you need to swim the Atlantic Ocean and walk the entire European continent," Auntie Banu said, biting into a slice of white cheese to soothe her tea-burned tongue. To her surprise the cheese was really good, soft and salty, the way she liked it. Finding it a bit difficult to gripe and enjoy the food at the same time, she shut up for a second and chewed nervously. Taking advantage of the momentary lull, Auntie Banu launched into a moral story, as she always did in times of distress. She told them the story of a man who decided to travel the entire globe round and round, in an endeavor to escape his mortality. North and south, east and west, he wandered every which way he could. Once, in one of his numerous trips, he unexpectedly ran into Azrail, the angel of death, in Cairo. Azrail's piercing gaze raked the man with a mysterious expression. He neither said a word nor followed him. The man right away abandoned Cairo, traveling nonstop thereafter until he arrived in a small, sleepy town in China. Thirsty and tired he rushed into the first tavern on his way. There, next to the table to which he was ushered, sat Azrail patiently waiting for him, this time with a relieved expression on his face. "I was so surprised to run into you in Cairo," he rasped to the man, "for your destiny said it was here in China that we two would meet."

Asya knew this story by heart, just like she knew the many other stories repeatedly narrated under this roof. She didn't understand, and didn't think she ever could, was the thrill her aunts derived from narrating a story of which the punch line was already known. The air in the living room grew snug, all too sheltered, enveloped by the recurrence of the routine, as if life were one long, uninterrupted rehearsal and everyone memorized their speech. During the ensuing minutes, as the women around her jumped from tittle-tattle to tittle-tattle, each story triggering the next, Asya perked up, looking quite unlike the girl she had been earlier this morning. Sometimes she herself was baffled by her own inconsistencies. How could she so begrudge the ones she loved most? It was as if her mood were a yo-yo, bobbing up and down, now incensed, now contented. In this respect too she resembled her mother. A simit vendor's monotonous voice infiltrated from the open window, piercing the ongoing chatter. Auntie Banu rushed to the window and popped her red head outside. "Simitist! Simitist! Come this way!" she yelled. "How much are they?"

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"He also sends his wife's pictures," Auntie Feride added to be fair.

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"I couldn't care less about those pictures. Plump blond wife smiling in front of their adobe house, where by the way we have never been invited; plump blond wife smiling in the Grand Canyon; plump blond wife smiling, wearing a huge Mexican sombrero; plump blond wife smiling with a dead coyote on the porch; plump blond wife smiling, cooking pancakes in the kitchen.... Aren't you
1923. The time Petite-Ma arrived in this city cannot be confused for it coincided with the proclamation of the modern Turkish Republic.

Asya grabbed her hippie bag and hurried toward the door. Just when she was about to step outside, however, she heard a most unexpected sound. Somebody was playing the

Auntie Zeliha did not push it any further. "All right, go and see your Chinese movie," she nodded. "But don't be late, miss. I want you back home before five o'clock. We

"There's this Chinese Film Festival," Asya answered, her voice slightly strained from the effort to look serious and sincere. "The professor of one of my courses asked us to go

"Where are you going, miss? The breakfast is not over yet," Auntie Zeliha said, opening her mouth for the first time since they sat down at the table. Working amid the hustle

"Of all the shocks and traumas Asya suffered in her childhood, none remained in her memory more bitterly than the wheat incident. It was then that she reheard the word that

Asya crinkled her nose, as if she had just detected an awful stink in the house that was apparent only to her, and screwed up her lips, as if to say, "You wish!"

"You girls will exchange letters to and fro between San Francisco and Istanbul," Auntie Cevriye murmured half to herself. Corresponding with a stranger without an educational

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the two of them together and order: "Play now! Be friends!" Being of the same age group automatically meant getting along well; somehow peers were regarded as the broken

"This is going to be so exciting. And when she goes back to her country, you girls can become pen pals," Auntie Cevriye trilled. She was a strong believer in pen-pal

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could have more or less remained in that position had her eldest aunt not proven relentless.

"What's more, she will improve your English and perhaps you will teach her Turkish. Won't this be a wonderful friendship?"

Friendship.... Speaking of which, Asya rose to her feet and grabbed her half-eaten simit, getting ready to leave to see some real friends.

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"Of course I do," Asya said. "How can I not know the end of a story I must have listened to at least a hundred times? But what you don't know is the damage these stories do to

"You will keep escorting her in the years to come, always at those moments when she least expected it: "Bastard!" Until that wheat incident in her first year at primary school, Auntie

friendships. As a comrade of the Turkish Republican regime it was her belief that every Turkish citizen, no matter how ordinary she might be in society, had a duty to proudly represent the motherland vis-a-vis the whole world. What better opportunity than in an international pen-pal friendship was there to represent one's country?

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1923. The time Petite-Ma arrived in this city cannot be confused for it coincided with the proclamation of the modern Turkish Republic.
Late into the party, Riza Selim Kazanci would call his wife and ask her to play the piano for the honored guests. Petite-Ma never refused. In addition to Western composers, in the room, no matter which camp she was in.

"comrades" than women, and the professionals didn't like them, whom they regarded more as "concubines" than women. In the end nobody found anyone "woman" enough.

whites, pasty pinks, and pastel blues—the hues of ladylikeness, innocence, and vulnerability. They didn't like the professionals very much, whom they regarded more as

grays—the colors of chastity, modesty, and partisanship. They had short haircuts, no makeup, no accessories. They moved in defeminized, desexualized bodies. And whenever

new professionals—lawyers, teachers, judges, managers, clerks, academics.... Unlike their mothers they were not confined to the house and had the chance to climb the social,

Meanwhile, the ladies clustered at the other end of the house, holding crystal glasses of mint liquor, eyeing one another's clothes. In the ladies section there were two types of

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dron makers. This is how Riza Selim entered into the flag-making business.

Though line-looking and definitely well off, given his age and the trauma of his first marriage (who knows why his wife abandoned him; perhaps the man was a pervert, the women gossiped), Riza Selim Kazanci was one of the last men on earth Petite-Ma's mother would have liked to see her treasured daughter marry. There sure were better candidates than him. But despite her mother's persistent objections, Petite-Ma refused to listen to anyone but her heart. Perhaps it was because there was something in Riza Selim Kazanci's dark eyes that made Petite-Ma grasp, not intellectually but intuitively, that he was gifted with something rare to many in this world: the ability to love another human being more than you love yourself. Though too young and too inexperienced at the age of sixteen, Petite-Ma was sensible enough to comprehend what an exceptional bliss it could be to be loved and adored by a man with such a gift. Riza Selim Kazanci's eyes were soft and sparkly, just like his voice; there was something in him that made one feel secure in his company, cherished and protected even amid surrounding turbulence. This man was no deserter.

At a time when marriage without kids was, if not a sign of an incurable malady, then surely a sacrilege, Petite-Ma and Riza Selim Kazanci didn't have a child. Not because he was too old but because at the beginning she was too young and disinterested in raising kids, and then when she changed her mind, he was simply too old. Levent Kazanci remained the only child to continue the lineage, a title he wasn't thrilled to hold.

Though saddened and offended by her stepson's acrimony, Petite-Ma was an exuberant, extroverted girl with a wide imagination and an even wider list of requests. There remained the only child to continue the lineage, a title he wasn't thrilled to hold.

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dron makers. This is how Riza Selim entered into the flag-making business.

Though line-looking and definitely well off, given his age and the trauma of his first marriage (who knows why his wife abandoned him; perhaps the man was a pervert, the women gossiped), Riza Selim Kazanci was one of the last men on earth Petite-Ma's mother would have liked to see her treasured daughter marry. There sure were better candidates than him. But despite her mother's persistent objections, Petite-Ma refused to listen to anyone but her heart. Perhaps it was because there was something in Riza Selim Kazanci's dark eyes that made Petite-Ma grasp, not intellectually but intuitively, that he was gifted with something rare to many in this world: the ability to love another human being more than you love yourself. Though too young and too inexperienced at the age of sixteen, Petite-Ma was sensible enough to comprehend what an exceptional bliss it could be to be loved and adored by a man with such a gift. Riza Selim Kazanci's eyes were soft and sparkly, just like his voice; there was something in him that made one feel secure in his company, cherished and protected even amid surrounding turbulence. This man was no deserter.

At a time when marriage without kids was, if not a sign of an incurable malady, then surely a sacrilege, Petite-Ma and Riza Selim Kazanci didn't have a child. Not because he was too old but because at the beginning she was too young and disinterested in raising kids, and then when she changed her mind, he was simply too old. Levent Kazanci remained the only child to continue the lineage, a title he wasn't thrilled to hold.

Though saddened and offended by her stepson's acrimony, Petite-Ma was an exuberant, extroverted girl with a wide imagination and an even wider list of requests. There were things in this world far more interesting than nursing babies, such as learning the piano. Before long, a Bentley piano made by Stroud Piano Co., Ltd., in England was gleaming in the best spot in the living room. It was with this piano that Petite-Ma started taking her first lessons from her first piano teacher—a white Russian musician who had escaped the Bolshevik Revolution and settled permanently in Istanbul. Petite-Ma was his best student. She not only had the talent but also the perseverance to make the piano a lifelong companion rather than a fleeting pastime.

Rachmaninoff, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky were her favorites. Whenever she was alone at home, playing just for herself with Pasha the First on her lap, these were the composers whose works she would perform. When she played for guests, however, she'd choose songs from an entirely different repertoire. A Western repertoire: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, and above all, Wagner, on those special occasions when they had government officials and
breasts, cupping them each in his hands. The kiss was brash, unhurried, but also woven with a shade of force, if not ferocity. With shimmering eyes he asked, "When are we

The Dipsomaniac Cartoonist broke into a soft smile. He kissed the little mole on her left cheek, caressed her neck gently, until his hands started moving down to her abundant

But high above the clouds, Asya didn't hear him. She lit another joint and put it between her chapped lips. She drew a deep puff of indifference, ignoring afterward the feeling

If that doesn't work, we'll try the other way, see if we can veer to the East." He chuckled. "It's no good to be in between. International politics does not appreciate ambiguity.

"Yeah, we should all line up along the Bosphorus Bridge and puff as hard as we can to shove this city in the direction of the West.

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Kazanci flickered from a distance like a dim, ancient lighthouse misguiding her through the stormy waters of Alzheimer's.

On a divan in a renovated apartment facing the Galata Tower, a neighborhood where the streets never slept and the cobblestones knew many secrets, under the rays of the

Asya took another drag, and held the smoke in.

"Here, let me feed you," said the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, taking the joint from her hands. He leaned toward her, his hairy chest pressing against her; she opened her mouth like

Asya scrunched up her face like she had just been pinched by an invisible needle. "It's such a pity...."

The bastards of Istanbul

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The guests cheered and applauded. Particularly in the year 1933, when the anthem of the Tenth Anniversary was composed, "March of the Republic," she had to play it over and over again. The anthem was everywhere, echoing in their ears when they slept. It was a time when even babies in their cradles were put to sleep with this hearty rhythm.

Consequently, at a time when Turkish women were going through a radical transformation in the public sphere thanks to a series of social reforms, Petite-Ma was savoring her

...that she played national anthems exuding patriotic fervor. The guests cheered and applauded. Particularly in the year 1933, when the anthem of the Tenth Anniversary was

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Anyway, out of the blue this Amy writes a letter saying she is a college student at the University of Arizona, and she is deeply interested in getting to know other cultures and

Asya paused to pay her respects to the song—that had just started to play. It was "It Ain't Me, Babe." She whistled the melody and then mouthed the words before she went twenty years was in fact not a virgin when they got married, no sir, no virgin, but a divorcee!"

"You have an American pen pal?"

"I'd better go." She handed him the Zippo and looked for her clothes. "My dear family has assigned me an important duty. I have to go to the airport with Mom and welcome

"It might not be good for the people around you, but it's good for you," Asya insisted.

"That's not good, sweetie."

"It annoys me to see all those home-sweet-homes. Sad facsimiles of happy families. You know at times I envy my Petite-Ma, she is almost a hundred years old now, how I wish I had her disease. Sweet Alzheimer's. Memory withers away."

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"Well, usually the two are related."

"Everybody needs a past," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist took a pull from his glass, his expression hovering somewhere between rue and ire.

"Don't count me in because I sure don't!" Asya now grabbed the Zippo on the coffee table and thumbed it to life, only to instantly snap the lighter closed with a sharp click. She liked the sound and repeated the routine several times, without knowing that she drove the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist slightly mad. Click! Click! Click!

"I'd better go." She handed him the Zippo and looked for her clothes. "My dear family has assigned me an important duty. I have to go to the airport with Mom and welcome my American pen pal."

"You have an American pen pal?"

"Sort of. This girl who materialized out of nowhere. So one day I wake up and there is this letter in the mailbox, guess from where? San Francisco! Some girl named Amy. She says she is my uncle Mustafa's stepdaughter. We didn't even know the man had a stepdaughter! So now it dawns on us that this marriage is his wife's second marriage, you know? He never told us that! My grandma almost had a heart attack finding out that her precious son's wife of

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There was an eerie silence in the room, muffled by the screams of the children playing soccer on the street outside. From the pitch of the screams it sounded like one of the boys had just been shown a red card and all the players on his team were now busy arguing with the referee, whoever that was.

"You have such a dark side, Asya," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist's voice came from a distance. "Because it doesn't show on your sweet face, it is hard to tell at first glance. But it is there. You have a bottomless potential for demolition."

"Well, I do not demolish anyone, do I?" Asya felt the need to defend herself. "All I want is to be free and to be myself and all that shit.... If only I could be left on my own. .." If only you could be left on your own so that you could destroy yourself faster and earlier.... Is that what you want? You are attracted to self-destruction like a moth is attracted to light."

Asya snorted a tense chuckle.

"When you drink you drink to extremes, when you criticize you bullydoze, when you get down you sink and hit the bottom. I honestly don't know how to approach you. You are so full of rage, baby..."

"Perhaps it's because I was born a bastard," remarked Asya, taking another puff. "I don't even know who my father is. I never ask, they never tell. Sometimes when my mother looks at me I think she sees him in my face but never says a word. We all pretend there is no such thing as father. Instead there is only Father, with a capital F. When you have Allah up there in the sky to look after you, who needs a father? Aren't we all His children? Not that my mother buys that crap. I tell you she is more cynical than any woman I've ever known. And that is precisely where the problem is. My mom and I, we are so alike and yet so distant." She blew a plume of smoke in the direction of the mahogany desk where the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist kept some of his best works, those he was afraid his wife might destroy after one of their frequent fights. He also kept there the first rough sketches of the

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Amphibian Politician and Rhinoceros Politicus, two new series in which he depicted the members of the Turkish parliament as different animal species. He planned to release this series soon, especially now that the court had agreed to postpone indefinitely his three-year prison sentence for drawing the prime minister as a wolf in sheep's clothing. The main prerequisite of the deferment was that he did not repeat the wrong, which he was determined to do. What was the use of fighting for freedom of expression, he thought, if one didn't fight for freedom of humor first?

At the corner of the desk, beneath the ochre light of a goose-neck art deco table lamp, sat a huge hand-carved wood sculpture of Don Quixote bent over a book, lost in his ruminations. Asya liked this sculpture very much. "My family is a bunch of clean freaks. Brushing away the dirt and dust of the memories! They always talk about the past, but it is a cleansed version of the past. That's the Kazanci's technique of coping with problems; if something's naggling you, well, close your eyes, count to ten, wish it never happened, and the next thing you know, it has never happened, hurray! Every day we swallow yet another capsule of mendacity...."

What was it that Don Quixote read, Asya wondered in her pixilated mind. What was written on that open page there? Had the sculptor cared to scribble down a few words? Curiously she bolted from the sofa and got closer to the sculpture. Alas, there were no words on the wooden page. She took a long drag before she went back to her seat and started complaining again. "It annoys me to see all those home-sweet-homes. Sad facsimiles of happy families. You know at times I envy my Petite-Ma, she is almost a hundred years old now, how I wished I had her disease. Sweet Alzheimer's. Memory withers away."

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But Asya ignored that. "You know, today Petite-Ma opened you piano after so many years; I heard her play these dissonant sounds. It's depressing. This woman used to play Rachmaninoff, and now she can't even play a silly children's song. "She paused for a second, considering what she had just said. Sometimes she talked first, thought later. "But my point is, she doesn't know that, we do!" Asya exclaimed with a forged zest. "Alzheimer's is not as terrible as it sounds. The past is nothing but a shackel we need to get rid of. Such an excruciating burden. If only I could have no past you know, if only I could be a nobody, start from point zero and just remain there forever. As light as a feather. No family, no memories and all that shit...."

"Employees need a past," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist took a pull from his glass, his expression hovering somewhere between rue and ire.

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"Sort of. This girl who materialized out of nowhere. So one day I wake up and there is this letter in the mailbox, guess from where? San Francisco! Some girl named Amy. She says she is my uncle Mustafa's stepdaughter. We didn't even know the man had a stepdaughter! So now it dawns on us that this marriage is his wife's second marriage, you know? He never told us that! My grandma almost had a heart attack finding out that her precious son's wife of

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twenty years was in fact not a virgin when they got married, no sir, no virgin, but a divorcee!"

Asya paused to pay her respects to the song—that had just started to play. It was "It Ain't Me, Babe." She whistled the melody and then mouthed the words before she went back to her speech again.

"Anyway, out of the blue this Amy writes a letter saying she is a college student at the University of Arizona, and she is deeply interested in getting to know other cultures and
"Wow!" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist exclaimed as he threw three ice cubes into his replenished rake glass. "But does she say why she is coming here of all places? Just as a tourist?"

"I dunno," Asya mumbled from the floor on her knees, searching for one of her socks under the divan. "But given that she is a college student, I bet she is doing some research on 'Islam and the oppression of women' or 'patriarchal precedents in the Middle East.' Otherwise why would she want to stay at our nuthouse-you know, full of women-when there are so many hotels in this city, cheap and funky? I am sure she wants to interview each of us about the situation of women in Muslim countries and all that."

"Shit!" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist completed the sentence for her.

"Right!" Asya exclaimed triumphantly, having found the lost sock. In a flash, she donned her skirt and shirt and ran a brush through her hair.

"Well, bring her to Cafe Kundera sometime."

"I'll ask her, but I'm sure she'll want to go to a museum instead." Asya grunted as she put on her leather boots. She glanced around to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

"Well, I will certainly have to spend some time with her, since my family keeps producing me about guiding her all over the place so that she can marvel at Istanbul. They want her to sing the praises of this city when she goes back to America."

Despite the open windows the room still smelled heavily of marijuana, rake, and sex. Johnny Cash roared in the background.

Asya grabbed her bag and motored toward the door. Just when she was about to leave, however, the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist blocked her way. Looking her directly in the eye, he grabbed her shoulders and gently pulled her toward himself. His dark brown eyes had the plum rings and puffy bags common to the alcoholic or the grief-stricken or both.

"Dear Asya," he whispered, his face brightening up with a compassion she'd never seen there before. "Despite all that poison that you harbor inside, and perhaps precisely because of it, you are in some odd way so special and such a kindred soul. And I love you. I fell in love with you the day you first appeared in Cafe Kundera, with that troubled look on your face. I don't know if this means anything to you but I am going to confess it all the same. Before you leave this apartment you need to understand that this is no cathouse, and I do not bring chicks here. I come here to drink and draw and get depressed, get depressed and draw and drink, and sometimes to draw and get depressed and drink. That's it...

Utterly astounded, Asya clutched the door's handle and stood still for a moment at the threshold. Not knowing where to place her hands, she thrust them into the pockets of her skirt and fingered something there that felt like crumbs. She took her hands out, only to see the tips of her fingers covered with the brownish seeds consecrated by Petite-Ma to protect her against the evil-eye.

"Look at this! Wheat ... wheat..." Asya slurred the word every which way. "Petite-Ma is trying to protect me from evil." She opened her hand and gave him a grain of wheat.

No sooner had she done this, however, than she blushed as if having revealed an amorous secret.

"Well, at least some people in this house are given the chance to stay in bed as long as they want," Asya grumbled. On the way back from the airport, to her dismay, she had found out that her aunts had placed a second bed right across from hers and turned her only private space under this roof into "the girls' room." They had done so either because they were always looking for new ways of tormenting her or because this room had a better view and they wanted to make a good impression on their guest, or else, they had seen the accommodation as yet another opportunity to bring the girls closer within their PIFCUP-Promoting International Friendship and Cultural Understanding Project. Having absolutely no desire whatsoever to share her private space with a complete stranger, yet unable to protest in front of the guest, Asya had grudgingly consented. But now her tolerance was wearing thin. As if it weren't enough that they put the American girl in her bedroom, the Kazanci women seemed determined not to start supper before the guest of honor joined them. Thus, although the dinner had been put on the table more than an hour ago and everyone had long taken her place around the table, including Sultan the Fifth, nobody had fully dined yet, including Sultan the Fifth. Every twenty minutes or so, somebody got up to warm the lentil soup and reheat the meat dish, carrying the pots back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, while Sultan the Fifth followed the smell each time with beseeching meows. They were in such a state, pasted to their chairs, watching TV on the lowest volume, and talking in whispers.

Nonetheless, since they kept picking at this dish or that, everyone but Sultan the Fifth had already eaten more than they normally would have at one sitting.

"Perhaps she is already awake and is just lying in bed because she is too shy or something. Why don't I go in and take a look?" Asya asked.

"Stay put, miss. Let the girl sleep." Auntie Zeliha puckered an eyebrow.

Keeping an eye on the screen, another eye on the remote control, Auntie Feride agreed: "She needs to sleep. It is because of the jet lag. She traversed not only oceanic currents but also different time zones."

"Well, at least some people in this house are given the chance to stay in bed as long as they want," Asya grumbled.

It was precisely then that a sparkling soundtrack started to play in the background and the program everybody had been waiting for flashed on the screen: the Turkish version of The Apprentice. In rapt silence they watched the Turkish Donald Trump materialize from behind the bright satin curtains of a spacious office with a wonderful panorama of the Bosphorus Bridge. After a quick, condescending glance at the two teams awaiting his orders, the businessman informed them of their task. Each team was instructed to design a bottle of sparkling water, find a way to manufacture ninety-nine of them, and then sell them all as swiftly and as expensively as possible in one of the most luxurious quarters of the city.

"I don't call that a challenge," Asya said with a whoop. "If they want a real challenge they should send all these contestants to the most religious and conservative neighborhoods in Istanbul and have them sell bottled red wine there."

"Oh, be quiet," Auntie Banu snapped, sighing. She was discontent with the way her niece constantly made fun of religion and religiosity; in that regard she could plainly see who Asya resembled exactly: her mother. If blasphemy, more or less like breast cancer or diabetes, was genetically passed on from mother to daughter, what was the use of trying to correct it? Thus, she sighed again.
Now lapsing into a taut yet equally self-confident mood, Armanoush straightened her back and looked from one end of the table to the other to see how everyone was.

"Turkish restaurant many in America?" Auntie Cevriye asked. "Actually, I happen to know this food because it is also part of the Armenian cuisine," Armanoush replied slowly. Being presented to the family as Mustafa's stepdaughter Amy, an American girl from San Francisco, she had initially planned to remain detached. She should, for instance, ask the contestants to sell packaged pork in a Muslim neighborhood. There you go. Now that's a challenge. Let's see those marketing strategies flower.

Before anyone could comment on that, the door of the bedroom opened with a creak and out stepped Armanoush Tchakhmokhchian, a bit diffident, a bit dizzy. She was wearing faded denim jeans and a navy sweatshirt long and loose enough to hide the features of her body. While packing for her flight to Turkey she had thought hard about what kind of clothing to take with her and had ended up choosing her most modest clothes so as not to look strange in a conservative place. It had therefore come as a shock to be welcomed at the Istanbul airport by Auntie Zeliha wearing an outrageously short skirt and even more outrageously high heels. What was even more startling, however, was to meet Auntie Banu afterward in a head scarf and a long dress, and to learn how pious she was, praying five times a day. That the two women, despite the stark contrast in their appearance and obviously in their personalities, were sisters living under the same roof was a puzzle Armanoush figured she would have to work on for a while.

"Welcome, welcome!" Auntie Banu exclaimed cheerily, but instantly ran out of English words. As they watched her approach, the four aunts at the table fidgeted awkwardly with the discomfort of unfamiliarity, but still wore ear-to-toe smiles on their faces. Curious as to what the stranger smelled like, Sultan the Fifth immediately sprang to his feet and paced a narrowing circle around Armanoush, sniffing her slippers, until he had decided there was nothing of interest there.

"I am very sorry, I don't know how I slept that long," Armanoush stammered in slow-motion English.

"Of course, your body needed that sleep. It's a long flight," Auntie Zeliha said. Though she had a mellow yet blunt accent and tended to stress the wrong syllables, she also sounded pretty comfortable expressing herself in English. "Aren't you hungry? I hope you will enjoy Turkish food."

"Well, I guess I speak the Turkish cuisine." Armanoush guessed.

Auntie Banu bolted to the kitchen to bring the lentil soup. Almost robotically Sultan the Fifth leaped over his cushion to follow her, meowing and pleading along the way. As she sat in the chair reserved for her, Armanoush inspected the living room for the first time. Quickly, warily, she looked around, pausing at certain spots: the carved rosewood, glass-door cupboard with gilded coffee cups, tea-glass sets, and several antiques inside; the old piano against the wall; the exquisite rug on the floor; the multiple pieces of latticework glowing on top of the coffee tables, velvet armchairs, and even the TV set; the canary in an ornamented cage swaying by the balcony door; the pictures on the walls—a bucolic oil painting of a countryside too picturesque to be real, a calendar with the photograph of a different cultural and natural site in Turkey for each month; an evil-eye amulet; and a portrait of Atatürk in a tuxedo, waving his fedora toward a crowd not included in the frame. The entire room was pulsating with mementos and vivid hues blues, maroons, sea greens, turquoises—and blaz...
The town for a walk and then the soldiers would come back alone. One day the soldiers took my grandpa for a walk too."

"Dadim sana altın liralar içmece olmamı.... I told you she must have come here for golden coins!"

"What does she say?" Auntie Feride nudged Asya's elbow, understanding the first half of the sentence but missing the rest.

"Ask her what their family name is." Grandma Gulsum elbowed Asya, sounding like she possessed the key to a secret archive in the basement wherein the records of all the Istanbulite families, past and present, were neatly kept.

"Tchakmakchian," Armanoush replied when the question was translated to her. "You can call me Amy if you want but my full name is Armanoush Tchakmakchian."

"Why should she have to wait, anyway? She sipped her tea. In a listless, almost sapped voice she said, "They were forced to leave." But as soon as she said this, her weariness disappeared. She lifted her chin as she added, "My grandmother's father, Hovhannes Stamboulian, was a poet and a writer. He was an eminent man, who was profoundly respected in the community.""
Withdrawn, Asya lapsed into a disdainful smile. This was the moment somebody had to be fired. As if a button had been pushed, all three contestants started insulting one another to avoid being the one eliminated.


members of the losing group. The uniforms they'd designed for the soccer team had turned out to be so awful that even the most easygoing athletes had refused to wear them.


the same. The same misery everywhere. God either did not exist, or was simply too aloof to see the wretchedness into which he had thrust us all. Life was mean and cruel, and Asya had always tried to be ready to hear an account from an actual person. Never before had Asya met someone so young with a memory so old.


With a sinking heart Asya had watched Armanoush politely accept the offer and grab her fork to go back to her kaburga. She lowered her head, losing her appetite. Not that she hadn't eaten anything. "It's very good, thank you." Armanoush grabbed her fork. She noticed they had cooked the rice exactly the way her grandmother did, with butter and sauteed pine nuts.


"But you haven't eaten anything. Come on, my child, you came a long way, eat now," Auntie Banu said, shifting the topic to food, one of the two cures she knew for sorrow.


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distinguishing the Ottoman Empire from the modern Turkish Republic, that she had actually heard the whole story as grim news from a distant country. The new state in Turkey had been established in 1923 and that was as far as the genesis of this regime could extend. Whatever might or might not have happened preceding this commencement date was the issue of another era and another people.


Auntie Banu tilted her head to one side and started twining the beads of her amber rosary through her bony, never-manicured fingers, all the while murmuring, "All that is on this earth will perish: But will abide (for ever) the Face of thy Lord, full of Majesty, Bounty and Honor." But "I don't understand," Auntie Feride was the first to raise doubts. "What happened to them? They died because they walked?"


This time Asya translated everything without skipping a word.


"Who did this atrocity?!" Auntie Cevriye exclaimed as if addressing a classroom of ill-disciplined students.


Auntie Banu joined in her sister's reaction, although hers was inclined more toward disbelief than anger. Her eyes wide open, she tugged the ends of her head scarf as she always did in times of stress, and then heaved a prayer, as she always did when tugging the ends of her head scarf didn't get her anywhere.


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"My aunt is asking who did this?!" Asya said.

"The Turks did it," Armanoush replied, without paying attention to the implications.

"What a shame, what a sin, are they not human?!" Auntie Feride volleyed.

"Of course not, some people are monsters!" Auntie Cevriye declared without comprehending that the repercussions could be far more complex than she would care to acknowledge. Twenty years in her career as a Turkish national history teacher, she was so accustomed to drawing an impermeable boundary between the past and the present, distinguishing the Ottoman Empire from the modern Turkish Republic, that she had actually heard the whole story as grim news from a distant country. The new state in Turkey had been established in 1923 and that was as far as the genesis of this regime could extend. Whatever might or might not have happened preceding this commencement date was the issue of another era and another people.


Armanoush looked at them one by one, puzzled. She was relieved to see that the family had not taken the story as badly as she feared, but then she couldn't be sure that they had really taken it. True, they neither refused to believe her nor attacked with a counterargument. If anything, they listened attentively and they all seemed sorry. But was that the limit of their commiseration? And what exactly had she expected? Armanoush felt slightly disconcerted as she wondered whether it would have been different if she were talking to a group of intellectuals.


Slowly it dawned on Armanoush that perhaps she was waiting for an admission of guilt, if not an apology. And yet that apology had not come, not because they had not felt for her, for it looked as if they had, but because they had seen no connection between themselves and the perpetrators of the crimes. She, as an Armenian, embodied the spirits of her people generations and generations earlier, whereas the average Turk had no such notion of continuity with his or her ancestors. The Armenians and the Turks lived in different time frames. For the Armenians, time was a cycle in which the past incarnated in the present and the present birthed the future. For the Turks, time was a multiphyphenated line, where the past ended at some definite point and the present started anew from scratch, and there was nothing but rupture in between.

"But you haven't eaten anything. Come on, my child, you came a long way, eat now," Auntie Banu said, shifting the topic to food, one of the two cures she knew for sorrow. "It's very good, thank you," Armanoush grabbed her fork. She noticed they had cooked the rice exactly the way her grandmother did, with butter and sauteed pine nuts.

"Good, good! Eat, eat!" Auntie Banu nodded as vigorously as she could manage.

With a sinking heart Asya had watched Armanoush politely accept the offer and grab her fork to go back to her kaburga. She lowered her head, losing her appetite. Not that she was hearing the story of the deportation of the Armenians for the first time. She had heard things before, some pro and most con. But it was quite a different experience to hear an account from an actual person. Never before had Asya met someone so young with a memory so old.

It wouldn't take the nihilist in her too long, however, to chuck out the distress. She shrugged. Whatever! The world sucked anyway. Past and future, here and there ... it was all the same. The same misery everywhere. God either did not exist, or was simply too aloof to see the wretchedness into which he had thrust us all. Life was mean and cruel, and a lot of other things she had long been tired of hearing. Her hazy gaze slid toward the corner where the Turkish Donald Trump was now grilling the three most culpable members of the losing group. The uniforms they'd designed for the soccer team had turned out to be so awful that even the most easygoing athletes had refused to wear them. Now somebody had to be fired. As if a button had been pushed, all three contestants started insulting one another to avoid being the one eliminated.
we come and go in clusters, Jews go, Russians come, my brother's neighborhood is full of Moldovans.... Tomorrow they will go, others will arrive. That's how it is...."

shatter to pieces in the cook's hands. But in a few seconds the man had managed to take the whole bone out. Pleased with himself, he continued. "We are all passengers here, with that he held the fish by its head and started moving the backbone right and left. For a second Armanoush imagined the mackerel to be made of porcelain, fearing it would

"Because Istanbul is not a city," the cook remarked, his face lighting up with the importance of the statement he was about to make. "It looks like a city but it is not. It is a city-

"Ask him why things have changed," Armanoush turned to Asya.

What if they were bad people?

"I dunno, Mom, the dark oak sounds good too."

"I think so too. But how about the dark oak? It's a bit more expensive but it has class written all over it. Which one do you think would be better?"

"I duno, Mom, the dark oak sounds good too."

"Yeah, but you see, you're not helping me much." Rose sighed. When she hung up Armanoush looked around her and felt a deep estrangement. The Turkish rugs, the old-fashioned bedside lamps, the unfamiliar furniture, books and newspapers that spoke another language... Suddenly she felt a panic that she hadn't felt since she was a small child. When Armanoush was six years old, she and her mother had once run out of gas in the middle of nowhere in Arizona. They'd

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... shit.

Still keeping an eye on the screen, but now having fully regained her appetite, Asya jerked her chair forward and started filling her plate. She took a large piece of kaburga and began to eat. When she lifted her head, she met her mother's piercing gaze, and quickly looked away. After dinner Armanoush retreated to the girls' room to make two phone calls. First she called San Francisco. She stood face-to-face with a Johnny Cash poster on the wall directly above the desk.

"Grandma, it's me!" she exclaimed excitedly, but instantly stopped. "What is that noise in the background?"

"Oh, it is nothing, honey," came the answer. "They are repairing the pipes in the bathroom. It turns out your Uncle Dikran messed them up the other day. We had to call a plumber. Tell me how you have been doing?"

Anticipating this question, Armanoush talked about her daily routine in Arizona. Though she felt awful about the deception, she tried to assuage her discomfort by thinking it was for the best. How could she tell her, "I am not in Arizona. I am in the city where you were born?"

After she hung up, she waited a few minutes. Pensively, she took a deep breath, mustered her courage, and made her second call. She decided to stay calm and not to sound frustrated- promises she found hard to keep upon hearing her mother's edgy voice.

"Arny, honey, why didn't you call before? How are you? How is the weather in San Francisco? Are they treating you well?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm OK. The weather is? Armanoush regretted

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not having checked the weather in San Francisco on the Internet "fine, a bit windy, as always:-"

"Yeah," Rose interjected, "I have called you over and over but your cell phone was dead. Oh, I've been so worried!"

"Mom, please listen," Armanoush said, surprised at the note of determination in her own voice. "I feel uncomfortable when you keep calling me at my grandma's house. Let's make a deal, OK? Let me call you and do not call me. Please."

"Are they making you say this?" Rose asked suspiciously.

"No Ma, of course not. For God's sake. I'm the one who's asking you this." Though reluctant, Rose accepted the terms. She complained about not having any time for herself, her days being divided between home and work. But then she cheered up as she told how there was a sale at Home Depot and she and Mustafa had agreed to get new kitchen cabinets.

"Tell me your opinion," Rose enthused. "What do you think about cherry wood? Do you think it would look good in our kitchen?"

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had to wait almost an hour before another vehicle passed by them. Rose stuck her thumb out and a truck stopped to pick them up. Inside there were two rough-looking, brawny men, scary, sullen fellows. They didn't say a word and drove them to the next gas station. Once they were dropped off and the truck disappeared, Rose hugged Armanoush with a quivering lip, weeping in panic. "Oh God, what if they had been bad people? They could have kidnapped, raped, and killed us, and nobody would have found our bodies. How could I have taken this risk?"

Though not quite that dramatic, Armanoush had a similar feeling right now. Here she was in Istanbul staying at the house of strangers without anyone in her family knowing about it. How could she have acted so impulsively?

What if they were bad people?

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NINE

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Orange Peels

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southeast, and the cook, though he had lived longer in Istanbul, did not have any memory of the street's history.

"Of the long-standing Istanbulite families, only a few have remained on their soil of birth," the cook explained with an air of authority, as he started gutting and cleaning a huge mackerel.

"This city was so cosmopolitan once," the cook continued, breaking the mackerel's backbone first above its tail, then below its head. "We had Jewish neighbors, lots of them. We also had Greek neighbors, and Armenian neighbors... As a boy I used to buy fish from Greek fishermen. My mother's tailor was Armenian. My father's boss was Jewish. You know, we were all intermingled."

"Ask him why things have changed," Armanoush turned to Asya.

"Because Istanbul is not a city," the cook remarked, his face lighting up with the importance of the statement he was about to make. "It looks like a city but it is not. It is a city-

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Asya disappointed, Armanoush distressed, they walked out of the restaurant into an exquisite Bosphorus landscape sparkling under the late winter sun. They put their hands over their eyes to block the sun. Both took a deep breath and knew instantly that spring was in the air. Having no better plans, they strolled through the neighborhood, buying something from almost every street vendor they came upon: boiled sweet corn, stuffed mussels, semolina halvah, and finally, a large package of sunflower seeds. With each new treat, they launched on a new topic, talking about many things, except the three customary untouchables between young women who were still strangers to one another: sex, men, and fathers.

"I like your family," Armanoush said. "They are so full of life."

"Yeah, sure, tell me about it," Asya countered, and jingled her many bracelets. She was wearing a long, sage green hippie skirt with a maroon flower print, a patchwork bag, and lots of jewelryglass bead necklaces, bracelets, and silver rings on almost every finger. Next to her Armanoush felt a bit underdressed in her jeans and tweed jacket.

"There's a downside," Asya said. "It is so demanding to be born into a house full of women, where everyone loves you so overwhelmingly that they end up suffocating with their love; a house where you, as the only child, have to be more mature than all the adults around. I'm grateful that I was sent to a first-rate school and probably given the best education possible in this country. But the problem is that they want me to become everything they themselves couldn't accomplish in life. You know what I mean?"

Armanoush feared she did.

"As a result, I had to work my butt off to fulfill all their dreams at the same time. I started learning English at six, which was okay if only they could have stopped there, you know? The next year I had a private teacher to teach me French. When I was nine, I was made to study the violin the whole year, although it was obvious that I had absolutely no interest and no talent in it. After that a skating rink was opened near our house and my aunts decided I should become a skater. They dreamed of me in sparkly dresses pirouetting gracefully to the tune of our national anthem. I'd be the Turkish Katrina Witt! Soon there I was spiraling on ice, falling on my rear again and again while trying to pirouette! The sound of skates scraping on ice still sends shivers down my spine."

Out of courtesy Armanoush managed not to laugh, though she found the image of Asya pirouetting in an international competition hard to resist.

"Then came a time when they expected me to develop into a long-distance runner. If I trained hard enough, I could be this wondrous athlete and represent Turkey in the Olympic Games! Can you imagine me competing in the women's marathon with such big breasts, for Allah's sake!"

Armanoush didn't hold back her laughter this time.

"All those women athletes, I don't know how they do it, but they all have chests as flat as marble, you know. They must be taking male hormones to deflate their tits. But women like me are not created to become athletes; it is against the most basic laws of physics. The body moves forward gaining speed in accordance with the law of acceleration. The amount of change in your speed is proportional to the amount of force impressed upon the body, and in that direction. Then what happens? The boobs accelerate too, even though they move with a completely dissonant rhythm of their own, up and down, eventually slowing your wind. The law of inertia plus the law of universal gravitation! You cannot possibly win. Oh, it was so embarrassing!" Asya exclaimed excitedly. "Thank God that stage was quickly over. After that, I took painting classes and alas, they even made me take ballet until Ma recently found out I had been skipping the classes and gave up on me."

Armanoush nodded with the familiarity of someone identifying fragments of her personal story in the story of another. She could relate to such overwhelming love from her own aunts but didn't feel comfortable talking about it. Instead, she asked:

"There's something I couldn't understand. The lady you came to the airport with, the lady with the nose ring." Armanoush giggled but instantly composed herself. "Zeliha... She is your mom, right? But you don't call her mom... am I right?"

"You're right. It's a bit confusing. I myself get confused sometimes," Asya said as she lit her first cigarette of the day. By now she was visibly a bit more weary, not knowing how to interpret this remark.

"You see, I can understand Auntie Bana's need to seek refuge in Allah," Asya added, stroking the beads of her necklace. "Anyway, the point is, when I was born I found myself surrounded by four auntie-moms or mommy-aunties. Either I had to call them all 'mom' or else I had to call my mother 'Auntie Zeliha.' That proved easier in a way. But wasn't she offended?"

Armanoush sighed wearily, not knowing how to interpret this remark.

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"Offended? No! You see, she was only nineteen when she became pregnant with me. Odd as it might sound, my not calling her 'mom' must have come as a relief to her. They were all my 'aunties,' and somehow that title rendered my mother's sin less visible in the eyes of society. There was no sinful mother to point a finger at. As a matter of fact, I suspect I might have been encouraged to call her 'auntie,' at least for a while, and after that, it was hard to break the habit."

"I liked her," Armanoush said, but then she paused, confused. "What sin are you talking about?"

"Oh, giving birth to an illegitimate child. My mom is--" Asya wrinkled her nose hunting for the right word--"she is ... the black sheep of the family, you know. The warrior rebel who gave birth to a child out of wedlock."

A Russian tanker passed by, sending small waves to the shore. It was a big vessel, carrying petroleum.

"I'd noticed there was no father around, but I thought he might be dead or something," Armanoush stammered. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry that my father is not dead." Asya chuckled. She gave a flickering glance at Armanoush, who had flushed crimson.
"But you are right, you know," Asya said, with a glint of rage in her eyes. "I feel the same way. I mean, if my father were deceased, this vagueness would be over once and for all. That's what infuriates me most. I can't help thinking he could be anyone. When you have absolutely no idea what kind of a man your father is, your imagination fills in the void. Perhaps I watch him on TV or hear his voice on the radio every day, without knowing it's him. Or I might have come face-to-face with him sometime, someplace. I imagine I might have taken the same bus with him; perhaps he is the proles."

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sor of their class, the photographer whose exhibition I go to see, or this street vendor here. You never know."

The subject of their attention was a pencil-mustached, wiry man between forty and fifty. In the window case in front of him were dozens of jumbo jars with pickles of all sizes, which he, with the help of an automatic juice machine, turned into fresh pickle juice. Noticing the two young women eyeing him, the man broke into a grin. Armanoush instantly turned their face away while Asya frowned at him.

"You mean your mom hasn't told you who your father is?" asked Armanoush, delicately.

"My mom is a unique species! She won't tell me anything unless she wants to. She is the most stubborn, the most iron-willed woman you could ever chance upon. I don't think the others know my father's identity either. I doubt if my mom has told anyone. Anyway, even if they knew something about it, the family wouldn't share it with me. Nobody tells me anything. I am an outcast in that house, eternally exiled from dreadful family secrets. In the name of protecting me, they have separated me from them." Asya bit into a sunflower seed and spat out the shell. "And after a while it became a reciprocal game—they separate themselves from me, I separate myself from them."

In that same moment they both slowed down. There, half a mile away from them on the sea, was a man standing up in a small motorboat with several other passengers, holding a newly lit cigarette in one hand and in the other a fantastic tree of balloons in glowing yellows, oranges, and purples. Perhaps he was a fatigued balloon vendor, the father of many children, taking a shortcut from one coast to another on his way back from work, without knowing how breathtaking a pose he struck, as he dragged along a rain of colors and a plume of smoke over the blue waves.

Caught utterly unprepared by the exquisiteness of the scene, Armanoush and Asya stood silently watching the motorboat until all the balloons had disappeared into the horizon.

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"Let's sit somewhere, shall we?" Asya asked, as if tired out by what she had just seen.

There was a shabby, open-air café nearby.

"So tell me, what kind of music do you like?" Asya asked, as soon as they had found an empty seat and ordered their drinks: Asya, tea with lemon, Armanoush, Diet Coke with ice. The question was a manifest attempt to become better acquainted, since music happened to be Asya's main connection with the entire world.

"Classical music, ethnic music, Armenian music, and jazz," Armanoush replied. "How about you?"

"A bit different." Asya blushed though she didn't know why. "For a while I listened to harsh stuff—you know, alternative music, punk, post-punk, industrial metal, death metal, darkwave, psychedelic, also a bit of third-wave ska and a bit of gothic, that sort of stuff."

Accustomed to regarding that sort of stuff as a lost genre shared by decadent teenagers or directionless adults with more fury than character, Armanoush asked, "Really?"

"Yeah, but then some time ago I got hooked on Johnny Cash. And that was it. Ever since then I stopped listening to anything else. I like Cash. He depresses me so deeply, I am not depressed anymore."

"But don't you listen to anything local? Like Turkish music ... Turkish pop ..."

"Turkish pop!!! No way!" Asya flapped her hands in panic as if trying to wave away a pushy street vendor.

Sensing her limits, Armanoush did not press the question any further. Self-hatred, she deduced, could be something the Turks went through.

But Asya tossed back her tea, and added, "Auntie Feride likes that kind of stuff. Though, to be perfectly honest, I sometimes can't tell if it's the music or the singers' hairstyles that she is most interested in."

Halfway through her second Diet Coke, Armanoush asked

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Asya what kind of books she read, since fiction was her main connection with the entire world. "Books. Oh yeah, they saved my life, you know. I like fiction...."

A boisterous group of boys and girls materialized in the café, and they were ushered to the table across from Asya and Armanoush. As soon as they sat down, they started to scoff at everyone and everything. They laughed at the plastic burgundy chairs, the glass cases displaying a modest selection of refreshments, the errors in the English translations of the items listed on the menu, and the I LOVE ISTANBUL T-shirts the waiters wore. Asya and Armanoush yanked their chairs forward.

"I read philosophy, political philosophy especially, you know, Benjamin, Adorno, Gramsci, a bit of Zizek ... especially Deleuze. That kind of stuff. I like them I like abstractions, I guess, philosophy-I love philosophy. Especially existential philosophy." Asya lit another cigarette and asked through the smoke, "How about you?"

Armanoush named an elongated list of fiction writers, mostly Russian and Eastern European.

"You see?" Asya turned both palms up, as if to indicate the situation made by the two of them. "When it comes to your favorite occupation in life, you too are less regional in your choices... Your reading list doesn't sound very Armenian to me."

Armanoush's eyebrow slightly rose. "Literature needs freedom to thrive," she said as she wagged her head. "We didn't have much of that to expand and enlarge Armenian literature, did we?"

Sensing her limits, Asya did not press the question any further. Self-pity, she deduced, could be something the Armenians went through.

The teenagers behind started to play a game of charades. Each chosen player was assigned a movie title by the rival team, which he then had to convey to his fellow team members. A freckled, ginger-haired girl started to mimic the assigned movie title, and each time she came up with a gesture, the others broke into raucous laughter. It was odd to see how a game based on the principle of silence could cause so much clamor.

Perhaps because of the noise in the background, whatever spirit had guided Armanoush not to trespass her limits had now departed. "The music you listen to is so Western. Why don't you listen to your Middle Eastern roots?"

"What do you mean?" Asya sounded perplexed. "We are Western."

"No, you are not Western. Turks are Middle Eastern but somehow in constant denial. And if you had let us stay in our homes, we too could still be Middle Easterners instead of turning into a diaspora people," Armanoush retorted, and instantly felt discomfited for she hadn't meant to sound so harsh.

Asya gnawed the insides of her mouth, but when she had finished, all she said was, "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean, Sultan Hamid's Pan-Turkish and Pan-Islamic yoke. I mean, the 1909 Adana massacres or the 1915 deportations. Do those ring a bell? Did you not hear anything about the Armenian genocide?"

"I'm only nineteen." Asya shrugged.
I'm okay, wrote Madame My-Exiled-Soul. But I've not been able to find grandma's house. In its place there is an ugly modern building. It's gone. No traces left behind...

Questions began to come in from everyone. 

On the way back to the konak, Armanoush grabbed Asya's hand and squeezed it as she said, "You remind me of a friend of mine."

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in personifying the word until she had found an English-Turkish dictionary and looked it up. Savoring the brief reappearance of the sun from behind thick clouds, she remained quiet for what felt like a long time. Then she murmured, "You're fascinated with history."

"And you aren't?" drawled Armanoush, her voice conveying both disbelief and scorn. "What's the use of it?" was Asya's curt answer. "Why should I know anything about the past? Memories are too much of a burden."

Armanoush turned her head, and her gaze involuntarily settled on the teenagers. Narrowing her eyes, she concentrated on the boy's gestures. Asya too turned around, observed the game, and before she knew it blurted out the answer: "Orange!"

The teenagers burst into laughter, all looking at the young women at the next table. Asya flushed crimson, Armanoush smiled. They paid the bill quickly and were out on the street again.

"What movie has 'orange' in its name?" Armanoush asked once they had reached the path along the seaside.

"A Clockwork Orange ... I guess."

"Oh yeah!" Armanoush conceded with a nod. "Listen, about thee fascination with history," she said, marshaling her thoughts. "You have to understand, despite all the grief that it embodies, history is what keeps us alive and united."

"Well, I say that's a privilege."

"What do you mean?"

"This sense of continuity is a privilege. It makes you part of a group where there is a great feeling of solidarity," Asya replied. "Don't get me wrong. I can see how tragic the past was for your family, and I respect your wish to keep the memories alive come what may so that the sorrow of your ancestors is not forgotten. But that is precisely where our paths diverge. Yours is a crusade for remembrance, whereas if it were me, I'd rather be just like Petite-Ma, with no capacity for reminiscence whatsoever."

"Why does the past frighten you so?"

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Asya demurred. "It doesn't!" As the capricious to and fro of the Istanbul wind fluttered her long skirt and cigarette smoke every which way, she paused briefly. "I just don't want to have anything to do with it, that's all."

"That doesn't make sense," Armanoush insisted. "Perhaps it doesn't. But in all honesty, someone like me can never be past-oriented... You know why?" Asya asked after a long pause. "Not because I find my past poignant or that I don't care. It's because I don't know anything about it. I think it's better to have the knowledge of past events than not to know anything at all."

An expression of puzzlement passed over Armanoush's face. "But you also said you didn't want to know your past. Now you sound different."

"I do?" Asya asked. "Well, let's put it this way, I have conflicting voices inside me with respect to this issue." She gave her companion a glance full of mischief but then her voice became more serious. "All I know about my past is that something wasn't right, and I can't attain that information. For me history starts today, you see? There is no continuity in time. You can't feel attached to ancestors if you can't even trace your own father. Maybe I will never be able to learn my father's name. If I keep thinking about it, I'll go nuts. So I say to myself, why do you want to unearth the secrets? Don't you see that the past is a vicious circle? It is a loop. It sucks us in and makes us run like a hamster on a wheel. Then we start to repeat ourselves, again and again."

As they walked up and down on the undulating streets, every neighborhood looked so different that Armanoush began to think Istanbul was an urban maze, cities within a city. She wondered if James Baldwin had felt the same way when he was here.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, exhausted and hungry, they entered a restaurant, which Asya said was a must, since it was here that one could find the best chicken döner in town. They each got a doper and a large glass of frothy yogurt drink.

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"I have to confess," Armanoush muttered after a lull. "Istanbul is a bit different from what I expected. It's more modern and less conservative than I feared."

"Well, you should tell that to my Auntie Cevriye sometime. She'd be thrilled. She'll give me a medal for having represented my country so well!"

They laughed together for the first time since they'd met. "There's a place I want to take you to sometime," Asya said. "It is this little café where we regularly meet. Cafe Kundera." "Really? He's one of my favorite authors!" Armanoush exclaimed in delight. "Why is it called that?"

"Well, that's an endless debate. Actually, every day we develop a new theory."

On the way back to the konak, Armanoush grabbed Asya's hand and squeezed it as she said, "You remind me of a friend of mine."

For a while she looked at Asya like she knew something but couldn't tell. But then she remarked, "I have never seen anyone so perceptive and so ... so empathetic be so stringent and so ... so confrontational at the same time. Except one person! You remind me of my most unusual friend: Baron Baghdassarian. You two are so alike in many ways, you could well be soul mates."

"Oh yeah?" Asya asked, the name intriguing her. "What is it? Tell me why you're laughing."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help laughing at the twist of fate," Armanoush said. "It's just that among all my acquaintances Baron Baghdassarian happens to be the most-most anti-Turk! That night when all the Kazanci women had gone to sleep, Armanoush slipped out of her bed in pajamas, turned on the frail desk lamp, and doing her very best not to make any noise, turned on her laptop. Never before had she realized how distressingly noisy it could be to get online. She dialed the telephone number, found the number, and typed in her password to log on to Café Constantinopolis. Where have U been? We were so sick worried! How R U?"

Questions began to come in from everyone. I'm okay, wrote Madame My-Exiled-Soul. But I've not been able to find grandma's house. In its place there is an ugly modern building. It's gone. No traces left behind ...
There are no traces, no records, no reminiscences of the Armenian family who lived in that building at the beginning of the century. I am so sorry dear, Lady Peacock/Siramark wrote. When R U coming back? I'll stay till the end of the week, Madame My-Exiled-Soul replied. It is quite an adventure here. The city is beautiful. It resembles San Francisco in some ways, the hilly streets, the constant fog and sea breeze, and the bohemian faces in places least expected. It is an urban maze here. More than one single city, it is like cities within a city. By the way, the cuisine is fantastic. Every Armenian would be in heaven here.

Armanoush halted, realizing what she had just written. I mean, in terms of food, she added quickly. Yo Madame My-Exiled-Soul, you were our war reporter and now you sound like a Turk! You have not been Turkified, have you? It was AntiKhavurma.

Armanoush took a deep breath. The opposite. I have never felt more Armenian in my life. You see, for me to fully experience my Armenianness, I had to come to Turkey and meet the Turks.

The family I am living with is quite interesting, a bit crazy but perhaps all families are. But there is something surreal here. Irrationality is part of the everyday rationale. I feel like I am in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel. One of the sisters is a tattoo artist; another sister is a clairvoyant; one other is a national history teacher; and the fourth is an eccentric wallflower, or a full-time cuckoo, as Asya would say.


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She is the daughter of the household. A young woman with four mothers and no father. Quite a character—full of rage, satire, and wit. She'd make a good Dostoyevsky character.

Armanoush wondered where on earth Baron Baghdassarian was. Madame My-Exiled-Soul, have you talked about the genocide with anyone? Miserable-Coexistence wanted to know.

Yes, several times, but it is so difficult. The women in the house listened to my family's history with sincere interest and sorrow but that is as far as they could get. The past is another country for the Turks.

If even the women stop there, I cannot possibly be hopeful about their men... the Daughter of Sappho cut in.

Actually, I haven't yet found the chance to talk to any Turkish men, Madame My-Exiled-Soul wrote back, only just now realizing this. But one of these days Asya will take me to this cafe where they meet regularly. There I will get to know at least some men, I guess.

Be careful if you drink with them. Alcohol brings out the worst in people, you know. That was Alex the Stoic.

I don't think Asya drinks. They're Muslims! But she sure smokes like a chimney.

Lady Peacock/Siramark wrote, In Armenia people smoke a lot too. I revisited Yerevan recently. Cigarettes are killing the nation.

Armanoush fidgeted in her chair. Where was he? Why wasn't he writing? Was he angry or cross at her? Had he been thinking about her at all? ... She would have gone on torturing herself with questions, if it hadn't been for the next line that appeared on the shimmering screen.

Tell us, Madame My-Exiled-Soul, since you have been to Turkey, have you pondered the Janissary's Paradox?

It was him! Him! Him! Armanoush reread the two lines, after which she typed: Yes, I have. But then she didn't know what else to write. As if he had sensed her hesitation, Baron Baghdassarian continued.

It's very nice of you to get along with that family so well. And I believe

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you when you say they are good-hearted people, interesting in their own way. But don't you see? You are their friend only insofar as you deny your own identity. That's how it has been with the Turks all through history.

Armanoush pursed her lips, saddened. At the other end of the room, Asya tossed and turned in her bed, in the throes of what looked like a nightmare, and murmured something incomprehensible. Whatever she was saying, she repeated it many times.

All we Armenians ask for is the recognition of our loss and pain, which is the most fundamental requirement for genuine human relationships to flourish. This is what we say to the Turks: Look, we are mourning, we have been mourning for almost a century now, because we lost our loved ones, we were driven out of our homes, banished from our land; we were treated like animals and butchered like sheep. We have been denied even a decent death. Even the pain inflicted on our grandparents is not as agonizing as the systemic denial that followed.

If you say this, what will be the Turks' response? Nothing! There is only one single way of becoming friends with the Turks: to be just as uninformed and forgetful. Since they won't join us in our recognition of the past, we are expected to join them in their ignorance of the past.

All of a sudden there was a light knock on the door, and then there were too many knocks. Armanoush slumped in her chair, her heart leaped into her throat. She impulsively turned off the computer screen. "Yes," she whispered.

The door opened gently and Auntie Banu's head popped in. She had a rosy, loosely tied scarf on her head now and a long, pasty nightgown. Awake at this hour for prayer, she had noticed the light coming from the girls' room.

With the discomfort of all the words she lacked in English etched on her face, Auntie Banu made a series of gestures, as if she too were playing charades. She shook her head, furrowed her brows, and then smilingly wagged a finger—all of which Armanoush interpreted as: "You study a lot. Don't tire yourself too much."

After that Auntie Banu shoved forward the plate in her hand.

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and mimicked an eating effect, both too obvious to need any interpretation. She smiled, patted Armanoush's shoulder, put the plate next to the laptop, and then left, closing the door softly behind her. On the plate were two oranges, peeled and sliced.

Turning on the screen again, Armanoush bit into a slice of orange, as she contemplated what to write back to Baron Baghdassarian.

Almonds

B

By the fifth day of her stay, Armanoush had discovered the morning routine of the Kazanci konak. Every weekday the breakfast was laid out as early as six and stayed on the table until nine thirty. During that time, the samovar continuously boiled and a new pot of tea was made every hour. Instead of everyone sitting at the table at once, different members of the family came at different intervals, depending on their work or mood or schedule. Thus, unlike dinner, which was an entirely synchronized event, breakfast on weekdays resembled a morning train that stopped at sundry stations, each time with new passengers getting on and others getting off.

Almost always it was Auntie Banu who set the table, the first to wake up, ready for the dawn prayer. She slipped out of her bed, muttering, "Indeed, it is," while the muezzin from the nearest mosque blared for the second time: "Prayer is better than sleep." Auntie Banu then went to the bathroom to prepare herself for prayer, washing her face, washing her arms to the elbows and feet...
"What is wrong with you guys, why don't you let me move?" Auntie Banu asked in a tone tinged with frustration.

Mr. Bitter jumped aside and let her stand up.

"Get down from my shoulder," Auntie Banu decreed and uttered a prayer that the Qur'an advised to voice every time one had to face a dodgy djinni. All of a sudden compliant.

"Are you going to release me?" Mr. Bitter asked, having read her mind. "Or are you going to use my powers for some specific information?"

The two djinn sitting one on each shoulder glanced at each other. "Don't ask me, ask him. He is the one who is causing mischief," said Mrs. Sweet from her right shoulder.

Auntie Banu trusted Mrs. Sweet enormously, for she was not one of those renegades but a kindhearted, devout djinni who had converted to Islam from atheism—a malady which ran rampant among many a djinni. Mrs. Sweet visited mosques and shrines frequently, and was highly knowledgeable in the Holy Qur'an. Over the years she and Auntie Banu had grown very close. That, how ever, was not the case at all with Mr. Bitter, who was created from an entirely different mold and had come from places where the wind never stopped howling. Mr. Bitter was very old, even in terms of djinn years. Consequently, he was far more powerful than he often made it sound, for as everybody knows too well, the older they are the more potent the djinn become.

The only reason Mr. Bitter was staying at the Kazanci domicile was because Auntie Banu had bound him years ago, on the last morning of her forty days of penitence. Ever since then she had had him under her control, having never taken off the talisman that held him captive. To tie up a djinni was no easy thing. It first and foremost required knowing his name, guessing it right—a lethal game indeed, given that if the djinni figured out your name before you discovered his, he would become the master and you the slave. Even when you guessed the name and had the djinni under your control, you couldn’t take your authority for granted, since that would be a most foolish delusion. Throughout human history, only the great Solomon had been able to surely defeat the djinni, armies of them, but even he had needed an extra hand from a magic iron ring. Since no one else could match the great Solomon, only a narcissistic fool could take pride in capturing a djinni, and Auntie Banu was anything but. Though Mr. Bitter had been serving her for more than six years now, she regarded their rapport as a temporary contract that had to be renewed every so often. Never had she treated him callously or condescendingly, for she knew that djinni, unlike human beings, had everlasting memories of wrong done to them. They would never forget any injustice. Like a dedicated clerk jotting down every incident to the most infinitesimal aspect, the memories of the djinn recorded everything, only to be evoked someday. Accordingly, Auntie Banu had always respected her captive’s rights and never exploited her power.

Still, she could have used her authority in an entirely different way, asking for material gains, such as money, jewels, or fame. She hadn’t. All these, she knew, were nothing but illusions, and the djinn happened to be particularly good in creating illusions. Besides, every sudden wealth one acquired was necessarily a wealth stolen from someone else, since there is no such thing in nature as a pure vacuum and the fates of human beings are interrelated like stitches in a tattletale. Hence, all these years Auntie Banu had prudently refrained from asking for any material gains. Instead there was only one thing she had demanded from Mr. Bitter: knowledge.

Knowledge about forgotten events, unidentified individuals, property disputes, family conflicts, unburied secrets, unsolved mysteries—the basics she needed to be able to help her many clients. If a certain family had a valuable document long lost, they would come to Auntie Banu to learn its whereabouts. Or a woman who suspected being put under a vicious spell would come to her to inquire about the perpetrator of the wrongdoing. Once they had brought in a pregnant woman who had suddenly fallen ill and was getting frighteningly worse by the day. After consulting with her djinni, Auntie Banu told the pregnant woman to go to the fruitless lemon tree in her own garden, where she would find, in a black velvet purse, a bar of olive soap with her own fingernails jabbed into it—a spell cast by a jealous neighbor. Auntie Banu did not tell her the name of that neighbor, though, so that there would be no further grudge. In a few days news arrived that the pregnant woman had quickly recovered and was doing well. Subsequently, it was along these lines that Auntie Banu used Mr. Bitter’s service to this day. Except on one occasion. Once only had she asked him a personal favor, just for herself, a most confidential question: Who was Asya’s father?

Mr. Bitter gave her an answer, the answer, but she had indignantly, indefatigably refused to believe him, although she knew perfectly well that an enslaved djinni could never lie to his master. She refused to believe until her heart one day simply stopped defyng what her mind had long recognized. After that Auntie Banu had never been the same. Time and again she still wondered if it would have been better for her not to know, since knowledge in
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to miss it, how could
forgive her, she had thought about The Malediction of the Ivy of Infatuation, wondering what was happening in the show while she repented. But now that there was no reason
about it, missing her favorite program for the first time in years. The only other time she had missed it was years ago during her period of penitence. Even then, may Allah
room, she found the two girls still at the breakfast table, scoffing at every single scene in The Malediction of f the Ivy of Infatuation—the longest-running soap opera in Turkish
walnut cookies, washed the plastic fruits on the counter, and painstakingly sponged an ossified mustard stain at the corner of the stove. When she finally came back to the living
Instead of answering, Auntie Banu headed to the kitchen.. In the following two hours, she reorganized the cereal jars lined on the shelves, mopped the floors, baked raisin-
"What's the problem, have your djinn dumped you?" Asya asked.

They found the table set just for the two of them, everyone else having already finished their breakfast. Grandma and Petite-Ma had gone to visit a relative, Auntie Cevriye to
Before Armanoush could ruminate on that, someone knocked on the door calling both girls to catch the last train to breakfast.

"Isn't that a bit irrational too? How can you listen to music and concentrate on existential philosophy at the same time?"

"Oh, sure! What are you reading?"

"Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy," the same loud, steady voice replied.

"Isn't that a bit irrational too? How can you listen to music and concentrate on existential philosophy at the same time?"

"They square perfectly," Asya remarked. "Johnny Cash and existential philosophy, they both probe the human soul to see what's inside, and unhappy with their findings, they both leave it open!"

Before Armanoush could ruminate on that, someone knocked on the door calling both girls to catch the last train to breakfast. They found the table set just for the two of them, everyone else having already finished their breakfast. Grandma and Petite-Ma had gone to visit a relative, Auntie Cevriye to

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thing else. The gulyabani had witnessed firsthand each and every one of these calamities. They were particularly notorious for stalking those lost in the desert with no food and
water. Whenever, wherever someone died leaving no gravestone behind, they appeared beside the corpse. Should they feel the need, they could disguise themselves as plants,
rocks, or animals, particularly vultures. They would spy on calamities, observing the scene from the side or above, though it is also known that occasionally they would haunt
caravans, steal whatever food the destitute might need to survive, scare the pilgrims on their holy journey, attack processions, or whisper a terrifying tone of death into the ears
of those sentenced to the galleys or those forced to walk a death march. They were the spectators of those moments in time in which humans had no testimony, no written
record left behind.

The gulyabani were the ugly witnesses of the ugliness human beings were capable of inflicting on one another. Consequently, Auntie Banu reasoned, if Armanoush's family had
really been forced on a death march in 1915, as she claimed, Mr. Bitter would surely know about it. "Aren't you going to ask me anything?" Mr. Bitter mouthed as he sat on the edge of the bed, fully enjoying Auntie Banu's quandary. "I was a vulture," he continued bitterly, the only tone in which he knew to talk. "I saw it all. I watched them as they walked and walked and walked, women and children. I flew over them, drawing circles in the blue sky, waiting for them to fall on their knees."

"Shut up!" Auntie Banu bawled. "Shut up! Don't want to know. Don't forget who the master is."

"Yes, master." Mr. Bitter shrank back. "Your wish is my command and thus it shall be as long as you wear that talisman. But should you want to learn what happened to that
girl's family in 1915, just let me know. My memory can be yours, master."

Auntie Banu sat straight up in her bed, biting her lips hard to look adamant, having no intentions of showing weakness to Mr.

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Bitter. As she tried to be resilient, the air started to reek of dust and mold, as if the room had fallen into a state of putrefaction. Either the present moment was quickly decaying
into a residue of time or the decay of the past was seeping into the present. The inner gates of time awaited being unbolted. To preserve them locked and everything in its place, Auntie Banu took out the Holy Qur'an, which she kept inside a pearly cover in a drawer in her bedside table. She opened a page randomly and read: "I am closer to you than your jugular vein" (50:16).

"Allah." She sighed. "You are closer to me than my jugular vein. Help me out of this dilemma. Either grant me the bliss of the ignorant or give me the strength to bear the
knowledge. Whichever you choose shall make me grateful, but please don't make me powerless and knowledgeable at the same time."

On that prayer Auntie Banu slipped out of bed, put on, her nightgown, and with soft, swift steps tiptoed to the bathroom to get ready for her morning prayer. She checked the
clock on the buffet inside, seven forty-five. Had she been in bed so long, arguing with Mr. Bitter, arguing with her conscience? Hurriedly she washed her face, hands, and feet, walked back to her room wearing her gauzy prayer head scarf, spread her little rug, and stood to pray. If Auntie Banu had been late to set the breakfast table this morning, Armanoush would be one of the last to realize it. Having remained online till late, she had overslept, and would have liked to have slept in more. She tossed, turned, pulled the blanket up and down over her chest, doing her best to sink back into sleep. She opened one droopy eye
and saw Asya at her desk reading a book and listening to music with her headphones on. "What are you listening to?" Armanoush asked loudly. "Huh?" Asya shouted, "Johnny Cash!"

"Oh, sure! What are you reading?"

"Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy," the same loud, steady voice replied.

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to help her find out the truth? Or do you reserve your powers for your clients alone?" Mr. Bitter challenged, his charcoal, bulging eyes feverishly triumphant. Then he added, suddenly placid, "I can tell you, I am old enough to know. I was there."

"Stop it!" Auntie Banu exclaimed, almost shivering. She felt her stomach lurch and the burn of sour bile in her throat as she snapped, "I don't want to learn. I am not curious. I
regret the day I asked you about Asya's father. Oh God, I wish I hadn't! What is knowledge good for if you cannot change anything? It is venom that handicaps you forever.
You can't vomit it up and you can't die. I don't want that to happen again... Besides, what do you know?"

Why she had blurted out that last question, she couldn't fathom. For she knew too well that if she wanted to learn about Armanoush's past, Mr. Bitter would be the right one to
ask, since he was a gulyabani, the most treacherous among all the djinn, yet also the most knowledgeable when it came to traumatic ends. Ill-omened soldiers, ambushed and mauled and...
"I admire philosophy," Asya conceded. "But that doesn't necessarily mean I agree with the philosophers."

Armanoush looked at her friend, amazed. "I thought you liked philosophy. . . ." she stammered without quite knowing why she'd said it.

from a distance, mating without even touching—Amor platonicus! The ladder of love one is expected to climb higher and higher, elating the Self and the Other. Plato clearly

Now they were entering that murky zone guarded by the three untouchables. A good sign indeed, indicating that they were drawing closer to each other.

"I am dying to learn more about him, and yet deep down, I don't want to meet him ever. When you date someone the magic perishes. I couldn't bear for that to happen with . . ."

Armanoush did as told. A seagull materialized from the empty sky and bolted the treat down.

“You don't have to wait for them to appear.” Asya smiled. “Just toss a piece up in the air and a seagull will catch it instantly.”

"Tell me more about this Baron," Asya said out of the blue. "What does he look like? How old is he?"

Auntie Banu blinked, completely deadpan.

"Thanks, auntie, I got the message." Asya chuckled. "But you don't have to place your relatives in every cup you read, that's called nepotism."

Auntie Banu solemnly paused, turned the cup an inch, and then paused again. Her face looked troubled now. "I see a girl your age. She has curly hair, black, pure black . . . an ample bosom...."

"Yes and no," Armanoush confessed after purchasing a simit from the small but crowded buffet inside. She ripped a piece off and

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"I am dying to learn more about him, and yet deep down, I don't want to meet him ever. When you date someone the magic perishes. I couldn't bear for that to happen with him. He's too important to me. Dating and sex are just another story, so knotty...."

"Then . . ." Auntie Banu said, skipping the bad news settled at the bottom of the cup flowers soon to be scattered on a grave, far far away. She rotated the coffee cup between her plump fingers. Her next words came out louder than she intended, startling them all. "Oh, there is a young man who cares deeply for you. But why is he behind a veil? . . . Something like a veil."

Armanoush's heart skipped a beat.

"Can that be a computer screen?" Asya asked mischievously as Sultan the Fifth hopped onto her lap.

"I don't see computers in my coffee grounds," Auntie Banu objected. She didn't like to incorporate technology in her psychic universe.

Auntie Banu solemnly paused, turned the cup an inch, and then paused again. Her face looked troubled now. "I see a girl your age. She has curly hair, black, pure black . . . an ample bosom...."

Armanoush blushed. Within the vivid light of the winter sun glowing from among thick clouds, her face was that of an enamored young woman. "I don't know. I've never met . . ."

"Then read some roasted hazelnuts for her," Asya insisted, skipping the translation. "I don't do that anymore," said Auntie Banu, contrarily. "It didn't prove such a good method after all."

"You see, my aunt is a positivistic psychic. She scientifically measures the margin of error in each divination," Asya said to Armanoush in English but then switched back to a

"We'll then, read our coffee cups."

"Now that's another thing," Auntie Banu agreed, incapable of saying no to coffee cups. "Those I can read anytime."

Coffees were made, Armanoush's with no sugar and Asya's with plenty, although the latter did not want to have her cup read. It was caffeine that she was after, not her fate. When Armanoush finished her coffee, the saucer was placed on top of the coffee cup, held tight, and moved around in three horizontal circles; the coffee cup was then turned upside down over the saucer, letting the coffee grinds slowly descend to form patterns. When the bottom of the cup had cooled off, it was flipped over and Auntie Banu started to read the patterns left in the coffee cup, moving her gaze clockwise.

"I can see a very worried woman here."

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"It must be my mother." Armanoush sighed.

"She is deeply worried. She thinks about you all the time, loves you very much, but her soul is stressed. Then- there is a city with red bridges. There is water, sea, wind, and . . . mist. There I see a family, many heads—look at this, lots of people, lots of love and caring, lots of food too...."

Armanoush nodded, a little embarrassed at being found out like this.

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"Tell me more about this Baron," Asya said out of the blue. "What does he look like? How old is he?"

Auntie Banu blinked, completely deadpan.

"There is a rope here, a thick, strong rope with a noose at one end, like a lasso. You two girls are going to be attached to each other with a strong bond.... I see a spiritual bond...."

"Thanks, auntie, I got the message." Asya chuckled. "But you don't have to place your relatives in every cup you read, that's called nepotism."

Auntie Banu solemnly paused, turned the cup an inch, and then paused again. Her face looked troubled now. "I see a girl your age. She has curly hair, black, pure black . . . an ample bosom...."

"Auntie Banu said nothing further. She stopped reading, put the coffee cup on the saucer, and filled it with cold water so that the patterns jumbled and vanished before anyone else, good or bad, had a chance to peek inside. That was the

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one good thing about coffee-cup reading: Unlike the fate written by Allah, that written by coffee could always be washed away.

On the way to Cafe Kundera, they took the ferry so that Armanoush could see the city in all its vastness and splendor. Like the ferry itself, its passengers too had an air of

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Armanoush blushed. Within the vivid light of the winter sun glowing from among thick clouds, her face was that of an enamored young woman. "I don't know. I've never met him in person. We're cyber friends, you see. I admire his intellect and passion, I guess."

"Don't you want to meet him someday?"

"Yes and no," Armanoush confessed after purchasing a simit from the small but crowded buffet inside. She ripped a piece off and

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met the merman and her teenage son sat on the bench across from them, side by side but worlds apart. From her face Armanoush could tell the woman was no big fan of public transportation, despising the masses, and if possible would have thrown all of the poorly dressed passengers into the sea. Hidden behind thick-rimmed glasses, the son looked half embarrassed by his mother's standoffish ways. They are like Flannery O'Connor characters, Armanoush thought to herself

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"Don't you want to meet him someday?!"

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with the morsel in her hand leaned against the rail surrounding the deck, waiting for a seagull to approach.

"You don't have to wait for them to appear." Asya smiled. "Just toss a piece up in the air and a seagull will catch it instantly."

Armanoush did as told. A seagull materialized from the empty sky and bolted the treat down.

"I am dying to learn more about him, and yet deep down, I don't want to meet him ever. When you date someone the magic perishes. I couldn't bear for that to happen with him. He's too important to me. Dating and sex are just another story, so knotty...."

Now they were entering that murky zone guarded by the three untouchables. A good sign indeed, indicating that they were drawing closer to each other.

"Magic!" Asya said. "Who needs magic? The tales of Layla and Majnun, Yusuf and Zulaykha, the Moth and the Candle, or the Nightingale and the Rose.... Ways of loving from a distance, mating without even touching—Amor platonicus! The ladder of love one is expected to climb higher and higher, elating the Self and the Other. Plato clearly regards any actual physical contact as corrupt and ignoble because he thinks the true goal of Eros is beauty. Is there no beauty in sex? Not according to Plato. He is after more sublime pursuits. But if you ask me, I think Plato's problem, like those of many others, was that he never got splendidly laid."

Armanoush looked at her friend, amused. "I thought you liked philosophy...." she stammered without quite knowing why she'd said it.

"I admire philosophy," Asya conceded. "But that doesn't necessarily mean I agree with the philosophers."
A swarthy, slim street vendor sneaked in, almost hiding himself from the waiters, who might have chased him away. The man carried a huge tray of unpeeled yellow almonds with what might fall in between. Having made this observation, she didn't quite know how to interpret it. Perhaps the flight of the imagination here was oriented toward either long rotten inside.

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nineteen, she had known many men's hands and did not feel a speck of guilt for it? Besides, how could she ever reveal the truth without giving the wrong impression to an outsider about "the chastity of Turkish girls"?

This kind of "national responsibility" was utterly foreign to Asya Kazanci. Never before had she felt part of a collectivity and she had no intention of being so now or in the future. Yet here she was accomplishing a pretty good impersonation of someone else, someone who had gotten patriotic overnight. How could she now step outside her national identity and be her pure, sinning self? Could she tell Armanoush that deep in her heart she believed only when you had sex with a man, could you really be sure that he was the right person for you; that only in bed did people's most imperceptible, innate complexes surface; and that no matter what people assumed all the time, sex was in fact far more sensual than physical. How could she reveal she had had numerous relations in the past, way too many, as if to take revenge on men, but the revenge of what, she still couldn't tell. She had had many boyfriends, sometimes simultaneously, polyamorous affairs that had always ended in heartbreak, accumulating a heap of secrets she had neatly kept away from the frontiers of the Kazanci domicile. Could she divulge these? Would Armanoush understand without being judgmental; could she really, truly see into Asya's soul from the echelons of that sterile tower of hers?

Could Asya confess to her that once she had tried to commit suicide, a nasty experience from which she had derived two basic lessons: that swallowing your lunatic aunt's pills was, not the right way to go about doing this and that if you wanted to kill yourself you'd better have a rationale ready in hand in case you survived, since "WHY?" would be the one question you would hear from all sides. Could she further confess that to this day she hadn't been able to fathom the answer to that question, other than recalling being too young too foolish too furious too intense for the universe in which she lived? Would any of this make sense to Armanoush?

Could she then disclose that recently she had made some progress toward stability and tranquility, since she now had a monogamous relationship, except that it was with a married man twice her age whom she met every now and then to share sex, a joint, and refuge from loneliness? How could she tell Armanoush that, if true be told, she was a bit of a disaster?

Thus, instead of replying, Asya pulled a Walkman out of her knapsack and asked permission to listen to a song, just one song. A dose of Cash was what she needed right now. She offered one of the headphones to Armanoush. Armanoush accepted the headphone warily and asked: "Which Johnny Cash song are we going to listen to?"

"Dirty Old Egg-Suckin' Dog!"

"Is that the name of the song? I don't know that one." "Yup," Asya said gravely. "Here it comes. Listen ..."

And the song started, first a listless prelude, then country melo dies fusing with seagull shrieks and Turkish vocalizations in the background.

As she listened, Armanoush was too stunned by the dissonance between the lyrics and the surrounding setting to enjoy the song. It dawned on her that this song was just like Asya-full of contradictions and temper, utterly disharmonious with her surroundings; sensitive, reactive, and ready to explode at any time. As she leaned back, the murmur in the background dwindled into a tedious humming, pieces of sinit disappeared in the air, a touch of enchantment wafted with the breeze, the ferry glided smoothly, and the ghosts of all the fish that had once lived in these waters swam with them in a sea of dense, viscous azure.

When the song was over they had already reached the shore. Some of the passengers jumped off before the ferry reached the dock. Armanoush watched this acrobatic scene out of a Kundera novel. They, however, didn't and couldn't know this, being too enveloped, too much a part of it, like fish that couldn't possibly comprehend the immensity of the ocean in which they swam from the blurry lens of the waters surrounding them.

"Is this your first time here?" someone asked. And then the others started to inquire: "Do you like the city? Do you like the food? How long will you stay? Are you planning to ..."

"Hello, Amy!” they greeted in unison. "Welcome to Istanbul!"

"Hello, everyone!” Asya chirped. "This is Amy, a friend from America."

"Hello, Amy!” they greeted in unison. "Welcome to Istanbul!

"Is this your first time here?" someone asked. And then the others started to inquire: "Do you like the city? Do you like the food? How long will you stay? Are you planning to come back? ..."

Though they welcomed her warmly, they were also quick to go back to their standard posture of unremitting languor, since nothing could upset the sluggish rhythm that prevailed in Cafe Kundera. Those in need of speed and variation could simply go out, for there was plenty of that on the streets. Here it was about mandatory indolence and performance with amazement, admiring the many talents the Istanbulites had acquired to cope with the pace of the city.

Fifteen minutes later the shaky, wooden door of Cafe Kundera opened with a strident tinkle and in walked Asya Kazanci, wearing a mauve hippie dress, with her guest, in a pair of jeans and a plain sweater. Asya found the usual group sitting in its usual place with its usual attitude.

"Hello, everyone!" Asya chirped. "This is Amy, a friend from America."

"Hello, Amy!" they greeted in unison. "Welcome to Istanbul!

"Is this your first time here?" someone asked. And then the others started to inquire: "Do you like the city? Do you like the food? How long will you stay? Are you planning to come back? ..."

"Dirty Old Egg-Suckin' Dog!"

"Is that the name of the song? I don't know that one. "Yup," Asya said gravely. "Here it comes. Listen . . ."

And the song started, first a listless prelude, then country melo dies fusing with seagull shrieks and Turkish vocalizations in the background.

As she listened, Armanoush was too stunned by the dissonance between the lyrics and the surrounding setting to enjoy the song. It dawned on her that this song was just like Asya-full of contradictions and temper, utterly disharmonious with her surroundings; sensitive, reactive, and ready to explode at any time. As she leaned back, the murmur in the background dwindled into a tedious humming, pieces of sinit disappeared in the air, a touch of enchantment wafted with the breeze, the ferry glided smoothly, and the ghosts of all the fish that had once lived in these waters swam with them in a sea of dense, viscous azure.

When the song was over they had already reached the shore. Some of the passengers jumped off before the ferry reached the dock. Armanoush watched this acrobatic scene out of a Kundera novel. They, however, didn't and couldn't know this, being too enveloped, too much a part of it, like fish that couldn't possibly comprehend the immensity of the ocean in which they swam from the blurry lens of the waters surrounding them.

Liking the cafe to a Kundera scene only doubled Armanoush's interest. She noticed many other things, including the fact that everyone at the table spoke English, although with an accent and

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Though they welcomed her warmly, they were also quick to go back to their standard posture of unremitting languor, since nothing could upset the sluggish rhythm that prevailed in Cafe Kundera. Those in need of speed and variation could simply go out, for there was plenty of that on the streets. Here it was about mandatory indolence and eternal recurrence. This place was about fixations, repetitions, and obsessions; it was for those who didn't want to have anything to do with the bigger picture, if there indeed was such a thing.

During the brief pauses between questions, Armanoush scrutinized the place and the people, intuiting where the name of the cafe came from. The constant tension between vulgar reality and treacherous fantasy, the notion of the outside person versus us people inside, the dreamlike quality of the place, and finally, the sullen expression on the men's faces, as if they were desperately ruminating on what to choose-either to carry the weight of disheveled love affairs or become half real with lightness-everything evoked a scene out of a Kundera novel. They, however, didn't and couldn't know this, being too enveloped, too much a part of it, like fish that couldn't possibly comprehend the immensity of the ocean in which they swam from the blurry lens of the waters surrounding them.

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grammatical flaws. Overall they seemed to have no trouble switching from Turkish to English. At first Armanoush attributed such ease to their self-confidence, but by the end of the day she suspected that the facilitating factor might be less their confidence in their English than their lack of confidence in any language whatsoever. They acted and talked as if no matter what they said or how they said it, one could not really fully express the innermost self and, in the end, language was only a reeking carcass of hollow words long rotten inside.

Armanoush also noticed that the overwhelming majority of the framed road pictures on the walls depicted either Western countries or exotic places; few had anything to do with what might fall in between. Having made this observation, she didn't quite know how to interpret it. Perhaps the flight of the imagination here was oriented toward either moving to the West or fleeing into an exotic land far away. A swarthy, slim street vendor sneaked in, almost hiding himself from the waiters, who might have chased him away. The man carried a huge tray of unpeeled yellow almonds on cubes of ice.
wash his hands with hot water and soap, and on top of that use sanitizing liquids and wear latex gloves.... Theoretically, of course. I mean, come on, who would bother with all
“Blood poisoning and hepatitis are only two of the many fatal diseases you can contract at a tattoo parlor. The artist needs to break open a new sterile package each time and
at the overtly sexual gesture, but something in Asya's eyes stopped her halfway through.
repeatedly pushing it back and forth as if illustrating the act, until she finally lighted it. The new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies tried to smile
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hundred percent sure about the risk of contamination, which, of course, is a serious issue given that the most common technique of tattooing is inserting ink into the skin via
needles...."

Asya waited a few seconds for the word dangerous to sink in. "The instruments used in the process should be thoroughly disinfected, but the truth is you can never be a

His mood went unnoticed by all but one. Armanoush detected the warmth in his eyes when he looked at Asya and sensed he might be in love with her.

"Her mother operates a tattoo parlor," interjected the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist without tearing his eyes from Asya. He sank into his chair, resisting the urge to kiss her angry lips,

There were a few tables scattered outside on the sidewalk. A grim couple settled themselves at one of them, and then another couple, with stressed-out, serious urban faces.

"Wow, more than five thousand years old!" the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies enthused.

"Often they tattooed animals, the ones that were their totems ... probably donkeys, deer, owls, mountain rams—and snakes, of course, I'm sure snakes were always on

Armanoush watched
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their gestures with curiosity, likening them to characters from a Fitzgerald novel.
"We somehow tend to associate tattoos with originality, inventiveness, and even modernism. In point of fact, having tattoos around your belly button is one of the oldest
customs in world history. Let me remind you that by the end of the nineteenth century a mumified body was discovered by a group of Western archaeologists. It belonged to an
Egyptian princess. Her name was Amunet. And guess what? She had a tattoo. Guess where?" Now Asya turned toward the scenarist and looked him directly in the eye.
"On her belly button!"
The scenarist blinked, puzzled by so much information. His new girlfriend seemed just as impressed when she asked: "How do you know all this?"
"Her mother operates a tattoo parlor," interjected the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist without tearing his eyes from Asya. He sank into his chair, resisting the urge to kiss her angry lips,
resisting the urge to ask for another beer without ado, resisting the urge to stop impersonating the man he was not.
His mood went unnoticed by all but one. Armanoush detected the warmth in his eyes when he looked at Asya and sensed he might be in love with her.
Asya meanwhile seemed to be in an entirely different state of mind, getting ready to launch another attack on the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies. Leaning forward with a hard look on her face, she said: "Tattoos can be very dangerous though.

Asya leaned backward and picked up her glass between thumb and forefinger, observing the red liquid. Even when she started to talk she didn't remove her gaze from the

It was a wild orchid, as red as hell, snaking around her belly button.

"In point of fact, when we come to recall how long-standing the practice of tattooing is . . . ". Asya said, but didn't finish her sentence. Instead she started a new one. "At the
beginning of the 1990s, explorers found a well-preserved body in the Italian Alps. It was more than five thousand years old. It had fifty-seven tattoos on its body. The world's
oldest tattoos!"
"Really?" Armanoush asked. "I wonder what kinds of tattoos were done back then?"
"Often they tattooed animals, the ones that were their totems ... probably donkeys, deer, owls, mountain rams—and snakes, of course, I'm sure snakes were always on
demand."

"Wow, more than five thousand years old!" the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies enthused.

"But I guess he didn't have a tattoo on his belly button!" he cooed back to her. And they laughed together, followed by a kiss and a cuddle.
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A few minutes later, the waiter returned with a large glass of frothy beer for the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist and a carafe of dry red wine for everyone else. As he poured the dark
crimson liquid into elegant wine glasses, Armanoush took the opportunity to observe the people around the table. She figured that the edgy woman sitting next to and yet miles
away from the bulky man with the bulbous nose must be his wife. One by one she examined the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist's wife and the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, as well as the
Closed-Gay Columnist, the Exceptionally Untalented Poet, the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies, and ... she couldn't help staring a bit longer at the young,
sexy brunette across from her, who didn't look like part of the group but seemed, if anything, awkwardly attached to it. Definitely a cell phone person, the brunette kept toying
with her pink, glittery phone, flipping it open for no apparent reason, pressing on this button or that, sending an SMS or receiving one, absorbed by the small device. From time
to time, she inched toward the bearded man next to her and nuzzled his ear. Evidently, she was the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies.
"I had a tattoo done yesterday."
The words were so out of context that Armanoush could not instantly grasp if they were addressed to anyone, let alone to her. Yet, either out of sheer boredom or in an
attempt to befriended the only other recent addition to the group, the new girlfriend of the
and contrast? What research, which literature? . . . I bet you've read nothing! But you are so convinced. Aren't we just swallowing what's given to us? Capsules of "Yeah, what do you know?" Asya echoed. "What do we know about 1915? How many books have you read on this topic? How many controversial standpoints did you

"Well, how do you know? Maybe you too have been brainwashed," Armanoush said slowly.

Asya took an almond from the pile and peeled off the skin. Everyone at the table, even Armanoush, couldn't help but stare at the almond with horror. Pleased with her audience's reaction, Asya tossed the peeled almond into her mouth and chewed heartily. The eyes of the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies grew wide as she watched Asya chew the almond.

"I personally would never recommend the third. Not that the others are any better. You need to find a good—a very good—dermatologist or cosmetic surgeon. It costs a lot, but what can you do? Each visit is a ton of money and you need to pay for several visits. Even when the tattoo is removed, there will be a visible scar left behind, not to mention skin discoloration. If you want to get rid of that, you'll need another cosmetic surgery. Even then there is no hundred-percent guarantee."

Armanoush pinched herself not to laugh. "Well, why don't we drink?" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist's wife broke in with a tired smile. "And what better reason do we have to drink than Mr. Tiptoe? What was his name? ... Cecche?"

"Cecchetti," Asya corrected her, still lamenting the day she had been intoxicated enough to give the group a speech on ballet history.

"Yes, yes, Cecchetti." The Exceptionally Untalented Poet chuckled and explained to Armanoush, "If it weren't for him, ballet dancers wouldn't have to tire themselves out walking on their toes, you know?"

"What was he thinking?" someone added, and then everybody laughed.

"So tell us, Amy, where do you come from?" the Exceptionally Untalented Poet now asked Armanoush over the customary muttering in the café.

"Actually, Amy is short for Armanoush," Asya interjected, still in a provocative mood. "She is Armenian American!"

Now the word Armenian wouldn't surprise anyone at Café Kundera, but Armenian American was a different story. Armenian Armenian was no problem similar culture, similar problems—but Armenian American meant someone who despised the Turks. All heads turned toward Armanoush now. Their stares revealed interest tainted with alarm, as if she were a flamboyant gift box with unknown content. Inside the box there could be a present as exquisite as the outside, or there could be a bomb. Armanoush squared her shoulders as if steeling herself against a blow, but, being regulars at Café Kundera for so many years, the group had too deeply absorbed the sluggish characteristic of the place to get excited for long.

Asya, however, did not let the excitement wane. "Did you know that Armanoush's family was Istanbulite?" she said in between chomping on two almonds.

"They were made to suffer all sorts of pain in 1915. Many died during the deportations—died of hunger, fatigue, brutality...."

"No, I didn't," the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies said. Her face now turned grave, etching new lines around her lips and eyes.

"Had you consulted a physician before getting it done?" Asya asked with a concerned expression that she hoped would prove persuasive.

"He did all that. The needles were new and his hands were clean," the new girlfriend remarked in Turkish with a tinge of panic.

"Right, the ink!" Asya decreed with certitude. "There are many infections that can surface after a tattoo operation just because of the ink. One of the most common ones is Staphylococcus aureus, which sadly—"she frowned—"is known to cause serious cardiac damage."

Though she tried not to lose her cool, upon hearing this piece of information the color drained from the face of the new girlfriend of the Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies. Her cell phone beeped just then but she didn't even look at it. 
Apart from the scattered twinkles, it is still densely dark in Istanbul. Perfect harmony, constantly flickering, as if coding a cryptic message to God. Of sparkles, each dot a light lit by someone awake at this hour. From where the Celestial Gaze is situated, from that high above, all these sporadically lit bulbs must seem in time to get a sense of who did what behind closed doors and who, if any, uttered profanities. To the one in the skies, this city must look like a scintillating pattern of speckled, late to build them anew.

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Dried Apricots

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ELEVEN

Dried Apricots

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t is almost dawn, a short step away from that uncanny threshold between nighttime and daylight. It is the only time in which it is still possible to find solace in dreams and yet too late to build them anew.

If there is an eye in the seventh sky, a Celestial Gaze watching each and every one from way up high. He would have had to keep Istanbul under surveillance for quite some time to get a sense of who did what behind closed doors and who, if any, uttered profanities. To the one in the skies, this city must look like a scintillating pattern of speckled, late to build them anew.

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The Bastard of Istanbul

Whether along the grimy, narrow streets snaking the oldest quarters, in the modern apartment buildings cramming the newly built districts, or throughout the fancy suburbs, people are fast asleep. All but some.

Some Istanbulites have, as usual, awakened earlier than others. The imams all around the city, for instance; the young and the old, the mellow-voiced and the not-so-mellow-voiced, the imams of the copious mosques are the first ones to wake up, ready to call the believers to morning prayer. Then there are the simit vendors. They too are awake, headed to their respective bakeries to pick up the crispy sesame bagels they will be selling all day long. Accordingly, the bakers are awake too. Most of them get only a few hours of sleep before they start work, while others never sleep at night. Every day without exception, the bakers heat their ovens in the middle of the night, so that before dawn, the bakeries in the city are thick with the delicious smell of bread.

The cleaning ladies are also awake. These women, of all ages, get up early to take at least two or three different buses to arrive at the houses of the well-off, where they will scrub, clean, and polish all day long. It is a different world here. The wealthy women always wear makeup and never show their age. Unlike the husbands of the cleaning ladies, the husbands in suburbia are always busy, surprisingly polite, and somewhat effeminate. Time is not a scarce commodity in suburbia. People use it as lavishly and freely as hot water.

It is dawn now. The city is a gummy, almost gelatinous entity at this moment, an amorphous shape half-liquid, half-solid.

To the Celestial Gaze up in the sky, the Kazanci domicile must seem like a glittering sphere of sullied sparklers amid the shadows of the night. Most of its rooms are dark and quiet now, but a few are lit.

One of the Kazanci residents awake at this hour is Armanoush. She woke up early and instantly went online, eager to tell the members of the Cafe Constantinopolis about the shocking incident of

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day before. She told them about the bohemian circles in Istanbul and then about the quarrel, summarizing every character and detail she took in at Cafe Kundera. Now sheds giving them a full description of the Dipomanic Cartoonist, adding how he had found a new function for the table.

That cartoonist sounds fun, writes Anti-Khavurma. So you are saying he might go to prison for drawing the prime minister as a wolf? Humor is serious biz in Turkey!

Yeah, the guy seems cool, Lady Peacock/Siramark agrees. Tell us more about him.

But apparently someone has an entirely dissimilar interpretation of the incident.

Come on, guys, there is nothing cool or that interesting either in him or in any other character at that dingy cafe. Don’t you see, they are all faces and names from the bohemian, avant-gardist, arty-farty side of Istanbul. Typical third world country elite who hate themselves more than anything else in the world.

Armanoush winced at this sharp message from Baron Baghdassarian and looked around.

Asya is asleep on the other side of the room with Sultan the Fifth curled up on her chest, a pair of headphones on her head, and an open book in her hand: Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, by Emmanuel Levinas. There is also a CD case next to Asya’s bed Johnny Cash dressed from head to toe in black, erect against a gray, gloomy sky with a dog on one side of him and a cat on the other, staring dourly at something far beyond the frame. Asya has slept with the Walkman set on constant replay. She is her mother’s daughter in this respect as well, perfectly capable of battling all sorts of voices but unable to cope with silence.

Armanoush cannot make out the lyrics from where she is, but she can hear the rhythm spinning round. She enjoys hearing Cash’s baritone voice pour into the room from the headphones, just as she enjoys listening to the various sounds circulating inside and outside: the morning prayers echoing from the distant mosques; the clatter of the milkman as he leaves milk bottles in front of the grocery store across the street; the surprisingly cadenced breathing of Sultan the Fifth and Asya, a whistlelike fusion of snores and purrs, though it is not always easy to tell who does which; and the sound of Armanoush’s fingertips as they move on the keyboard searching for the best response to give to Baron Baghdassarian. It is almost morning, and although Armanoush hasn’t had enough sleep, she feels elated, with the sense of triumph that comes after defeating sleep.

Downstairs is Grandma Gulsum’s room. She could indeed have been Ivan the Terrible in another life but the harshness of her persona is not without reason. Like many who end up bitter in life, Grandma too has her story. Growing up in a little town on the Aegean Coast where life was idyllic yet deprived; getting married into the Kazancis, a family much wealthier, much more urban than hers, but certainly more ill-fated; the unceasing of being a young, rural bride to the only son of a debonair, disaster-prone lineage; the burden of being assigned to give birth to sons, the more the merrier, for you never knew how long they would survive, yet giving birth to one girl after another; enduring the anguish of seeing her husband drift further away from her with each birth.

Levent Kazanci was a troubled man who didn’t hesitate to use his belt to discipline his wife and children; a boy, if only Allah had bestowed a boy, everything would have been all right. Three girls in a row, and then the dream, the fourth baby, finally a boy. Hoping their fate had changed, they tried again, a fifth baby, but it was a girl again. Still, Mustafa was enough, he was all they needed to continue the family line. There was Mustafa, pampered, mollycoddled, spoiled, always favored over the girls, his every whim catered to ... then the melody ceased and darkness and despair set into the dream Mustafa left for the United States never to return.

Grandma Gulsum was a woman who had never been reciprocally loved; one of those women who aged not gradually but in a hurry, leaping from virginity to wrinkles, never given the chance to dwell in the middle. She had fully dedicated herself to her only son

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and valued him often at the expense of her daughters, trying to find solace in him for everything that life had taken from her. Yet, once in Arizona, the boy’s existence had been reduced to postcards and letters. He had never returned to Istanbul to visit his family. Grandma Gulsum buried a deep pain of being rejected. In time, she became more and more hard-hearted. Today she bore the look of someone who had willingly accomplished austerity and meant to keep it that way.

At the right corner of the first floor, Petite-Ma is deeply asleep, cheeks flushed, mouth agape, snoring peacefully. Next to her bed there is a cherry cabinet and on it rests the

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He is a good man who deserves a better wife. Never has he treated her badly or said a mean word, but after losing her two sons, Auntie Banu couldn't stand living with him about her this morning. Her face is pale and her large, fawn eyes flicker with worry. Across from her is a mirror. She looks at herself and sees a woman aged before her time. One. Sincere and pure in her blasphemy. If Allah really exists somewhere, He should appreciate this heartfelt denunciation of hers, germane to only a select few, rather than of His? Why does He let things happen the way they do? No, Auntie Zeliha is resolute, there is no way she'll give in to religion. She lived as an agnostic, and she will die as concerned, just like it's difficult to be called "auntie" by your own child. It kills her. Nonetheless, she still believes this might be better for them both. It has somehow freed the brochure by the Ministry of Health: Children of parents addicted to smoking are three times as likely to become smokers themselves. Auntie Zeliha is worried about Asya's the bedstand and lights a cigarette. Aging has not changed her smoking habits at all. She knows her daughter is a smoker too. It all sounds like a tawdry passage from a deconstructed at the same time. The doctors have told Auntie Feride to take it easy, to use her pills regularly. But they know little about this dialectic. Make and destroy make geometrical shapes. The wind blows hard, the oceanic currents slide along, and the world becomes an orb of endless possibilities. Everything constructed can be made and destroy make and destroy. Auntie Feride's mind is an excellent collage artist. Next to Auntie Feride's room there is the bathroom and next to that, Auntie Zeliha's. She is awake. She is sitting straight up in her bed, eyeing her room as if it belonged to someone else, as if she were memorizing the details to feel closer to the stranger who belongs there. She looks at her clothes, the dozens of skirts, all of them short, all of them flambouyant, her own way of protesting the moral codes she was born into. On the walls there are pictures and posters of tattoos. Auntie Zeliha is a woman in her late thirties but her room in many ways resembles that of a teenager. Perhaps she will never grow up and lose the anger within, the anger she has unintentionally passed on to her daughter. To her way of thinking, anyone who can't rise up and rebel, anyone devoid of the ability to dissent, cannot really be said to be alive. In resistance lies the key to life. The rest of the people fall into two camps: the vegetables, who are fine with everything, and the tea glasses, who, though not fine with numerous things, lack the strength to confront. It is the latter that are the worse of the two. Auntie Zeliha crafted a rule about them, back when she used to make rules. The Iron Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: If you are as fragile as a tea glass, either find a way to never encounter burning water and hope to marry an ideal man or get yourself laid and broken as soon as possible. Alternatively, stop being a tea-glass woman! She had opted for the third choice. Auntie Zeliha abhorred fragility. To this day, she was the only one among all the Kazanci females capable of getting infuriated at tea glasses when they cracked under pressure. Auntie Zeliha reaches out for the pack of Marlboro Lights on the bedstand and lights a cigarette. Aging has not changed her smoking habits at all. She knows her daughter is a smoker too. It all sounds like a tawdry passage from a brochure by the Ministry of Health: Children of parents addicted to smoking are three times as likely to become smokers themselves. Auntie Zeliha is worried about Asya's wellbeing and yet she is wise enough to sense that if she intervenes too much, showing signs of mistrust, it will only generate a backlash. It's difficult to pretend not to look concerned, just like it's difficult to be called "auntie" by your own child. It kills her. Nonetheless, she still believes this might be better for them both. It has somehow freed the child and the mother; the two had to be detached nominally so that they could be attached physically and spiritually. Allah is her only witness; the only problem is, she doesn't believe He exists. She inhales a thoughtful drag, holds it for a moment, and exhales an angry puff. Provided that Allah exists and knows so much, why didn't He do anything with that knowledge of His? Why does He let things happen the way they do? No, Auntie Zeliha is resolute, there is no way she'll give in to religion. She lived as an agnostic, and she will die as one. Sincere and pure in her blasphemy. If Allah really exists somewhere, He should appreciate this heartfelt denunciation of hers, germane to only a select few, rather than being sweet-talked by the self-absorbed pleas of the religious fanatics, who are everywhere. In the room at the other end of the second floor is Auntie Banu. She too is awake at this hour. The third person awake in the Kazanci domicile. There is something unusual about her this morning. Her face is pale and her large, fawn eyes flicker with worry. Across from her is a mirror. She looks at herself and sees a woman aged before her time. For the first time in years she misses her husband-the husband she walked out on, but never fully abandoned. He is a good man who deserves a better wife. Never has he treated her badly or said a mean word, but after losing her two sons, Auntie Banu couldn't stand living with him anymore. Every now
Hovhannes Stamboulian respected his wife's opinion like no one else's. She had sophisticated taste in literature and fine art. Thanks to her hospitality, this chalky konak along the Blissful Country was dedicated to her.

When he finished he would go downstairs, bundle up the whole text with a ribbon, hide the golden brooch inside the knot, and hand the package to his wife. The Little Lost Pigeon and everything and everyone in his life. But fortunately he was about to finish. This was the last chapter he was writing this evening, the most demanding of all. When he was and write for however long it took him. Each night when he emerged from the room his children would already be in their beds, asleep. The urge to write had cast a spell over his time over the past eighteen months that he himself hadn't been able to spend much time with his own children. Every afternoon he would come into this room, sit at his desk, and write as quickly as it could? Or was it because the literati in Istanbul had been cut off from the oral traditions faithfully ferried by Armenian grandmothers to their grandchildren?

Writing a children's book in Armenian was something never done before, almost inconceivable. Why was there not a single piece of literature in this field? Was it because the nationalist divisions, at a time when the Armenian community was pregnant with innovative ideologies and ardent debates, he in the privacy of his house was writing a children's book while the rest of the world was engaged in revolutionary movements and grandiose undertakings? Was it because the book would be published in Istanbul and then distributed in the major cities, like Adana, Harput, Van, Trabzon, and Sivas, where Armenians lived in large numbers. Even so, he had bought the desk. Along with it, he had also purchased a brooch from the same store—a graceful brooch in the shape of a pomegranate, delicately smothered with gold threads all over, slightly cracked in the middle, with seeds of red rubies glowing from within. It was a deftly crafted piece by an Armenian artisan in Sivas, he had been told. Hovhannes Stamboulian bought the piece as a present for his wife. He was planning to give it to her tonight, after dinner, or perhaps better, as soon as he finished. He nods and mutters softly, as if talking to himself: "Don't worry, I know how to take care of myself. And thanks for the apricots..."

Now, Auntie Banu and Mr. Bitter will together travel back in time. From 2005 to 1915. It looks like a long trip, but it is only a matter of steps in terms of gulyabani years. From a drawer she produces a jade rosary and strokes the beads. "All right then, I'm ready, let's start. May Allah help me!"

"This desk will outlive you and even your children!" The dealer had guffawed, as if his merchandise outliving his customers was a standing joke with him. "Isn't it sublime that a piece of wood lives longer than us?"

Though he knew the remark was meant to demonstrate the quality of the merchandise, Hovhannes Stamboulian had felt a pang of sadness.
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had for years been a center for intellectuals and artists, visited by countless men of letters, some eminent writers, some aspiring to be. They would come to eat, drink, read, contemplate, and fervently discuss one another's works, and even more fervently, their own.

After flying too long the Little Lost Pigeon felt tired and thirsty and perched on a snowbound branch, which belonged to a pomegranate tree ready to blossom. He filled his little beak with some snow and having thus quenched his thirst, started to shed tears for his parents.

"Don't cry, little pigeon," said the pomegranate tree. "Let me tell you a story. The story of a little lost pigeon."

Hovhannes Stamboulian paused without quite understanding what exactly disturbed his concentration. He let out a sigh of exasperation, much to his own surprise. For the last hour or so his mind had been a free-for-all of gloomy thoughts. He had a hard time understanding why he was so worried. All he could remember was being present during a letter writing in his own, contemplating nameless worries. Whatever the reason behind such uneasiness he had to get rid of the torpor. This was the last chapter, the last story. It had to be good.

He pursed his lips and went back to writing.

"But that's me you are talking about. I am that pigeon!" chirped the Little Lost Pigeon in surprise.

"Oh really?" asked the pomegranate tree, but didn't sound the least surprised. "Then listen to your story... Don't you want to learn about your future?"

"Only if it's a happy one," said the Little Lost Pigeon. "I don't want to learn about it if it's sad."

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Suddenly the still air was pierced by the smashing of glass. Hovhannes Stamboulian flinched in his chair, stopped writing, and instinctively turned toward the window, all ears, frozen. For a long while he heard nothing but the howling of the wind. Oddly enough he found the silence more ominous than that eerie sound. The night was thick with a ghostly stillness while the wind outside roared as if it ferried the wrath of God, fuming for a reason unknown to mortals. In contrast to the wind whipping the walls outside, here in the house it was exceptionally silent. Hovhannes Stamboulian felt so deeply unnerved by this unusual quiet that he was almost relieved when he heard some sounds coming from downstairs. Someone scurried from one end of the house to the other, and then all the way back; panicky, abrasive footsteps in a rush as if running away from someone or something.

That must be Yervant, he thought, as a new concern crept into his eyes, a look of pensiveness and apprehension. His eldest son, Yervant, had always been naughty and boisterous, but recently the boy's waywardness had soared beyond limits. In truth, Hovhannes Stamboulian felt a pang of guilt for not spending as much time with him as he should have. Obviously the boy longed for his father. Compared to him his other two children, two boys and a girl, were so docile it was as if their eldest brother's frenzied energy had a soporific effect on them.

The two younger boys were three years apart but equally compliant. And then came the youngest sibling, the only girl in the family, little Shushan.

"Don't worry, little bird," the pomegranate tree smiled and shook the snow on her branches. "The story that I'm going to tell you is a happy one."

downstairs in the corridor footsteps multiplied alarmingly. Now it sounded as if there were dozens of Yervants disobediently running from one end to the other, stomping and crushing the floor

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underneath. But amid the scuttle, all of a sudden, he thought he heard a voice, so unexpected and curt it was hard to be sure-stern and husky, cracking for a split second. That was it. After that it was silence again, as if it all had been a figment of his imagination.

Ordinarily, he would have run out of his room to check if everything was all right. But tonight was no ordinary night. He didn't want to be disturbed, not now, not when he was about to finish the work of eighteen months. Hovhannes wriggled in angst like a diver who, after having submerged too deep, could not bring his body to swim its way back to the surface. The whirl of writing was cavernous and encapsulating but also distinctively enticing. Words jumped to and fro on the parched paper, begging him to bring this last story to a close and to shepherd them to their long-awaited destiny.

"All right, then," the Little Lost Pigeon chirped. "Tell me the story of the Little Lost Pigeon. But I warn you, if I hear anything sad, I will take wing and fly away."

Hovhannes Stamboulian knew what the pomegranate tree was going to say in return and how the last story started, but before he could put it down on paper, something somewhere fell on the floor and smashed into pieces. Amid the burst he picked up a snuffle; though it was muffled and short he instantly recognized his wife's sob. He jumped to his feet, now entirely flushed out of the abyss of his writing, and popped up to the surface like a dead fish.

As he darted toward the staircase, Hovhannes Stamboulian recalled his quarrel that very morning with Kirkor Hagopian, an eminent lawyer and member of the Ottoman Parliament.

"The times are bad, very bad. Get ready for the worst," was the first thing Kirkor muttered when they ran into each other at the barber's shop. "First they conscripted Armenian men. Aren't we all equal, aren't we all Ottomans? they declared. 'Muslims and non

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Muslims, we will fight the enemy together!' But then they disarmed all the Armenian soldiers as if they were the enemy. Next they gathered Armenian men in labor battalions.

And now, my friend, there are rumors... Some say the worst is coming."

Though sincerely concerned, Hovhannes Stamboulian had not been particularly shaken by the news. He himself was too old to be recruited and his boys too young. The only one in the family within the range of conscription age was his wife's younger brother, Levon. But he had avoided military service during the Balkan Wars thanks to receiving the badge of "the unguarded" during the selection process. Men who were the sole providers of their families were spared military duty. That old Ottoman rule, however, might be changing. Nowadays one could never be completely sure. At the beginning of the First World War, they had announced they would solely recruit those in their early twenties, but once the war had gathered speed, those in their thirties and even forties had also been conscripted.

Combat was not for Hovhannes Stamboulian. Neither was hard manual work. He loved poetry. He loved words, feeling each individual letter of the Armenian alphabet upon his tongue and lips. After ample reflection he had deduced that what the Armenian minority needed most was not arms, as some revolutionaries posed, but books, more and more books. Though new schools were founded after the Tanzimat, they were in dire need of more openminded and cultivated teachers and better books. Some additional progress had been made after the revolution in 1908. The Armenian population had supported the Young Turks in the hope that their treatment of non-Muslims would be fair and decent. The Young Turks had stated it in their proclamation:

Each citizen will enjoy complete liberty and equality, regardless of nationality or religion, and be submitted to the same obligations. All Ottomans, being equal before the law as Muslims, we will fight the enemy together!' But then they disarmed all the Armenian soldiers as if they were the enemy. Next they gathered Armenian men in labor battalions. And now, my friend, there are rumors... Some say the worst is coming."

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every citizen will enjoy complete liberty and equality, regardless of nationality or religion, and be submitted to the same obligations. All Ottomans, being equal before the law as
"You don't understand a thing, do you?" Kirkor Hagopian snapped furiously. "You live in your fairy tales!"

Hovhannes Stamboulian had never seen him so unraveled and confrontational. Still, he didn't go along with him. "I don't think zeallosness is going to help us," he said, barely getting his voice above a whisper. It was his belief that nationalist zeal would solely serve to replace one misery for another, inevitably working against the deprived and the dispossessed. In the end minorities tore themselves apart from the larger entity at a great cost, only to create their own oppressors. Nationalism was no more than a replenishment of oppressors. Instead of being oppressed by someone of a different ethnicity, you ended up being oppressed by someone of your own.

"Zealousness!" Kirkor Hagopian's face scrunched into a mask of gloom. "There is news pouring in from numerous towns in Anatolia. Have you not heard about the incidents in Adana? They enter into Armenian houses with the pretext of searching for guns, and then plunder. Don't you understand? All the Armenians are going to be exiled. All of us! And here you are betraying your own people."

Hovhannes Stamboulian remained quiet for a while, chewing the ends of his mustache. Then he muttered slowly but surely, "We need to work together, Jews and Christians and Muslims. Centuries and centuries under the same imperial roof. We have been living together all this time, albeit on unequal ground. Now we can make it fair and just for all, transform this empire together."

It was then that Kirkor Hagopian uttered those gloomy words, his face already closing up: "My friend, wake up, there is no to..."
of the third day, when the fever had finally diminished, a poem had come to Hovhannes Stamboulian, and he had welcomed it as a compensation for his suffering. Though not a religious man at all, he was a firm believer in divine compensations, which he thought operated less in large-scale manifestations than through small signs and gifts such as this.

"Read it!" The sergeant nudged the papers.

Hovhannes Stamboulian put on his glasses and with a trembling voice read the first lines aloud:

'The child weeps in his sleep without knowing why. A hushed yet unending sob of longing Impossible to console
That's how I long for thee, . . .

"This is poetry," the sergeant barged in, stressing the last word with an intonation that sounded like disappointment.

"Yes." Hovhannes Stamboulian nodded, though not sure if this was good or bad.

But the sparkle he saw in the sergeant's eyes did not seem that hostile. Perhaps he had liked it. Perhaps he would leave now, taking his soldiers with him.

"Hov-han-nes Stam-bou-li-an," the sergeant muttered, slur

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ring the words, "You are an erudite man, a man of knowledge. You are well known and well respected. Why would a sophisticated man like you conspire with a bunch of ignoble insurgents?"

Hovhannes Stamboulian raised his dark eyes from the paper and blinked absentmindedly. He didn't know what to say in his defense since he had no idea what he was being accused of.

"The Armenian insurgents.... They read your poems and then rebel against the Ottoman Sultanate," the sergeant said, creasing his forehead in thought. "You goad them into mutiny."

All of a sudden Hovhannes Stamboulian grasped what he was being accused of and the gravity of the charge. "Officer," he said, fixedly staring at the sergeant who fixedly stared back at him, afraid that if he broke eye contact the only bridge of interchange between them would forever disintegrate. "You are an educated man yourself and you'll understand the difficulty of my situation. My poems are the echo of my imagination. I write and publish them, but I cannot possibly control who reads them and with what particular intention."

Looking pensive, the sergeant cracked his knuckles one by one. He then cleared his throat as if to accentuate the importance of what he was about to say. "I perfectly understand that dilemma. However, you can control your own words. You are the one who writes them. You are the poet. . . ."

In a desperate effort to diminish what was quickly becoming real panic, Hovhannes Stamboulian scanned the room until he came eye to eye with his eldest son, standing by the door, peeking inside. When had he sneaked out of the kitchen? How long had he been watching them? The boy's cheeks were rosy with the intensity of his fury against the soldiers. But something in his expression contained far more than that. Yervant's young face looked oddly unfurled and somehow wise. Hovhannes Stamboulian smiled at his son, trying to convince him that things were OK, and then gestured for him to go back to his mother. But Yervant didn't move.

"I am afraid you need to come with us," the sergeant said.

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"I can't," Hovhannes Stamboulian said inadvertently, but he realized how miserable was the excuse he was about to give. Tonight I need to finish my book.... It is the last chapter.... Instead he asked permission to speak to his wife.

Before they took him away, the very last thing ingrained in his memory was his wife's expression, her pupils dilated and her lips pallid. But Armanoush was neither crying nor did she look shocked. If anything she looked extremely tired, as if standing there in the doorway had drained her of all her strength. How he wished he could hold her hands now, embrace her tightly, and whisper to her to be strong, always strong, for the sake of their children and the one on the way. Armanoush was four months pregnant.

Only when nudged through the outside door onto the dark street with soldiers on both sides did Hovhannes Stamboulian remember having forgotten to give his wife her present. He thrust his hands into his pockets and was relieved not to feel the golden pomegranate on the tips of his fingers. He had left it at home, in a drawer in the desk. He softly smiled at the thought of how Armanoush would be pleased when she found it there.

As soon as the soldiers left, there were quick footsteps echoing on the doorstep. It was the Turkish neighbor next door. A sweet-tempered plump woman, always jolly, except that right now she was anything but. Seeing the terrified expression on her neighbor's face helped Armanoush to emerge from her trance and allow herself to be frightened. She pulled Yervant toward her and with quivering lips whispered, "Go my son, go to your uncle Levon's house.... Tell him to come here right away. Tell him what happened."

Uncle Levon's house was nearby, around the corner of the market square. He lived on his own in a modest, two-story house, the first floor of which was his workshop. Having been refused the hand of a beautiful Armenian woman he had loved in his youth and perhaps still did, he had chosen not to marry anyone and thereafter

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had spent his years working hard in his workshop, which was famous for the quality of its products. Uncle Levon was a cauldron maker and he crafted the best cauldrons in the entire empire.

Once outside on the street Yervant walked a few steps toward Uncle Levon's house, but then he stopped abruptly and started to run. But even when he had covered the street from one end to the other, there was no sign of his father. Nothing. No one. It was as if the entire empire.

"Master Levon is gone," Riza Selim said with a strangled voice that he could hardly push out of his throat. "The soldiers came and took him away this afternoon."

As soon as he uttered these ominous words, Riza Selim let go of the tears he had been holding back. The boy was an orphan and Uncle Levon had been like a father to him for the last six years. "I don't know what to do," he said. "I am waiting."

On the way back to his house Yervant ran the snaky, steep streets east and west, searching for something, anything, that could be an auspicious sign. He passed by empty coffeehouses, grubby plazas, ramshackle houses from which wafted the smells of turlu and the cries of babies. The only sign of life was a tan kitten painfully meowing next to a filthy gutter, licking its tiny belly where the flesh was cut open and the blood had caked around a deep, swollen wound.

Years later when he thought about his father, Yervant would remember that kitten all alone on the dark, empty street. Even in Sivas, in the small Catholic Armenian village of Pirkinik where

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they went next to seek shelter with Grandpa and Grandma, only to be expelled one night by soldiers breaking into the house; even when he found himself walking amid thousands of drained, famished, beaten Armenians guarded by soldiers on horseback; even when he trudged through a long, thick carpet of mud, vomit, blood, and excrement.
March is most unbalanced in Istanbul, both psychologically and physically. March might decide she belongs to the spring season, warm and fragrant, only to change her mind through the range of the months of the year, every month knows the particular season it belongs to and behaves accordingly, every month but one: March.

Already it is morning in Istanbul. Istanbul is a hodgepodge of ten million lives. It is an open book of ten million scrambled stories. Istanbul is waking up from its perturbed sleep, ready for the chaos of the rush.

It is past dawn now. A short step away from that uncanny threshold between nighttime and daylight. The only time of the day when it is early enough to harbor hopes of...
There were showcases all over the store in which hundreds of tattoo designs and piercing jewelry were displayed. The tattoo designs were clustered under several titles:

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'Welcome!' Auntie Zeliha exclaimed in her slightly husky drawl as she heartily hugged them both. Whatever her perfume was, it was strong—a combination of spice and wood.

"Well, yeah, Auntie Zeliha and Aram have been seeing each other for Allah knows how long. He is like my step-dad, I guess, or for the sake of consistency, I should call him step-uncle.... Whatever." "Why don't they get married?"

"Married?" Asya spat out the word as if it were food between her teeth. They were now passing the can collectors, and upon closer inspection of her role models, Asya realized that they were not boys but girls. This she liked even more. To blur the gender boundaries was one more reason to become a garbage collector. She put a cigarette between her lips, but instead of lighting it, she sucked the end for a moment as if it were one of those cigaretteshaped chocolate sticks wrapped in edible paper. She then revealed another thought: "Actually, I am sure Aram wouldn't mind getting married, but Auntie Zeliha would never have any of that."

"But why not?" Armanoush wanted to know.

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tic; only when she reached the end of the couplet did Asya notice that Armanoush was still waiting for a more detailed response to the question she had asked her a few minutes ago.

"Well, I am so glad you will finally meet Aram," Asya beamed as she shifted her canvas bag from one shoulder to the other. "He is such a nice person."

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made a move under the halogen lights, her hair shimmered. Armanoush looked at her agape, for the first time sympathizing with the fright and admiration that she imagined Asya must have felt toward her mother since she was a child.

"Oh, he is ... " Asya paused, searching for the right word in English. Boyfriend sounded too light for the situation; husband-to-be didn't look plausible. Fiance seemed to suit better, but the truth is they had never been formally engaged. "He is Auntie Zeliha's significant other." Across the road, under an elegantly carved Ottoman archway, they caught a glimpse of two Gypsy boys, one of them plucking cans from garbage bins and then piling them on a dillapidated cart. The other boy sat on the edge of the cart sorting the cans, doing his best imitation of working hard while basking in the sun. That could be such an idyllic life, Asya thought to herself. She would give anything to switch places with that boy on the cart. First, she would go and buy the most lackadaisical horse she could find. Then every day she would ride her horse cart up and down along the steep streets of Istanbul, collecting things. She would wholeheartedly gather the most unattractive artifacts of human life, embracing the debris rotting underneath its polished surface. Asya had a feeling that a garbage collector in Istanbul probably led a far less stressful life than she and her friends at Cafe Kundera did.

If she became a garbage collector, she would wander the city whistling Johnny Cash songs, while a balmy breeze caressed her hair and the sun warmed her bones. Should anyone dare to disturb such blissful harmony, she would scare the hell out of him with the threat of her mammoth Gypsy clan in which probably everyone was convicted of a felony of some sort. Despite the problem of poverty, Asya concluded, as long as it was not wintertime, it must be fun to be a garbage collector. She made a mental note to herself to remember this in case she couldn't come up with a better profession after graduating from college. On that note she started to whis

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tle; only when she reached the end of the couplet did Asya notice that Armanoush was still waiting for a more detailed response to the question she had asked her a few minutes ago.

Aram had a charm, a colossal romantic, a political science professor who often confessed to being more inclined to live the life of a fisherman in a seedy village on the Mediterranean. He was a fragile heart, a gullible soul, and a walking slice of chaos; a sanguine utopian and an irresponsible promoter; an outrageously messy and quick-witted and honorable man. He was one of a kind and consequently Asya had never associated him with any collective identity. Tempted as she was to say something in this vein, she simply replied: "Actually, he is Armenian."

"I thought so," Armanoush smiled faintly.

Five minutes later they were at the tattoo parlor.

"Welcome!" Auntie Zeliha exclaimed in her slightly husky drawl as she heartily hugged them both. Whatever her perfume was, it was strong—a combination of spice and wood and jasmine. Her dark hair fell on her shoulders in dazzling curls, some of which she had highlighted with a substance so glittery that whenever she
"What did she say?" Armanoush asked Asya. "She said something about fireworks in the dark, laughingly said something in Turkish."

On the way, as they passed through a poorly lit street, they came across an apartment building from whose windows transvestite prostitutes eyed the passersby. The two on the way, as they passed through a poorly lit street, they came across an apartment building from whose windows transvestite prostitutes eyed the passersby. The two

At six thirty p.m. Auntie Zeliha handed the store over to her assistant and the four of them headed to a tavern nearby.

"I learned Armenian from my grandmother too." Aram smiled. "To tell the truth, both Mom and Grandma thought I should be raised bilingual, except they disagreed about what country anyway. But Grandma proved resolute. She wanted Turkish at school, Armenian at home."

"I can't." Armanoush shook her head. "As a child I learned some from my grandma but because my parents were separated, I didn't stay in one place for too long and there were always disruptions. Then every summer when I was between ten and thirteen, I went to an Armenian youth camp. That was fun and my Armenian improved there, but afterward, it deteriorated again."

"Thank you," Aram said. "I went to college in London, both undergrad and grad. But we can speak Armenian if you'd like."

"But what I am trying to say is, I pierced my nose because it was forbidden. You know what I mean? It was out of the question for a Turkish girl from a traditional family to have a piercing, so I went ahead and did it on my own. But times have changed now. That's what we're here for. In this store we give advice to our customers, and sometimes we even refuse some people, but we never judge them. We never ask why. That is one thing I learned early in life. If you judge people, they'll go and do it anyway."

"Really?" Armanoush said again, only this time she sounded perplexed at the turn the conversation was taking. "Yup!" Auntie Zeliha patted her nose with pride. "I screwed a ring there and just walked out of the bathroom like that. Back then I used to enjoy driving my mom crazy."

Hearing these last words from where she stood, Asya gave her mother an amused glance. "Your English is so good!" Armanoush couldn't help but remark. "How did you pick up a British accent, my dear?"

"Thank you," Aram said. "I went to college in London, both undergrad and grad. But we can speak Armenian if you'd like."

"I can't." Armanoush shook her head. "As a child I learned some from my grandma but because my parents were separated, I didn't stay in one place for too long and there were always disruptions. Then every summer when I was between ten and thirteen, I went to an Armenian youth camp. That was fun and my Armenian improved there, but afterward, it deteriorated again."

"I learned Armenian from my grandmother too." Aram smiled. "To tell the truth, both Mom and Grandma thought I should be raised bilingual, except they disagreed about what the second language had to be. Mom thought it would be better for me to speak Turkish at school and English at home, since when I grew up, I was destined to leave this country anyway. But Grandma proved resolute. She wanted Turkish at school, Armenian at home.

Armanoush was intrigued by Aram's aura, but she was even more fascinated by his humbleness. They talked about Armenian grandmothers for a while-those in the diaspora, those in Turkey, and those in Armenia.

At six thirty p.m. Auntie Zeliha handed the store over to her assistant and the four of them headed to a tavern nearby.

"Before you leave Istanbul, Aram and Auntie Zeliha want to take us to a tavern so that you can see a typical evening of drinking," Asya had explained to Armanoush.

On the way, as they passed through a poorly lit street, they came across an apartment building from whose windows transvestite prostitutes eyed the passersby. The two on the first floor were so close that Armanoush was able to glimpse the details of their heavily made-up faces. One of them, a hefty woman with thick lips and hair as glowing red as fireworks in the dark, laughingly said something in Turkish.

"What did she say?" Armanoush asked Asya.
When the musicians materialized by their side, Armanoush felt a pang of shyness. But to her relief they didn't force her to sing. It turned out that Asya wasn't much of a singer.

There was a general excitement among the customers who, having eaten and drunk their fill, were more than ready to sing.

It was then that four Gypsy musicians, all dressed in silky white shirts and black trousers, entered the tavern with their instruments—an ud, a clarinet, a kanun, and a darbuka.

Auntie Zeliha must have sensed her name being mentioned for she gave them a wink, lifted her glass of rake, and toasted: "Arefe!" They all followed suit and clinked their glasses as they echoed: "Arefe!" This word, as it would soon turn out, was some sort of a refrain that was repeated every ten or fifteen minutes. Another hour and seven courses later, Armanoush's eyes were glowing with alcohol. With amusement she watched an albino waiter bring in the hot dishes—broiled striped bass on a bed of green peppers, basil-marinated catfish with creamy spinach, charbroiled salmon with field greens, and stir-fried shrimp—in spicy garlic sauce.

To Armanoush's surprise, Asya rebelliously, almost sadistically, took pleasure in infuriating her mother at every opportunity, but when it came to smoking cigarettes in front of her, she was a docile daughter.

During the following hour they chatted idly while waiters brought one dish after another. First they served the metes—the cold dishes—followed by lukewarm dishes, the hot dishes, and desserts and coffee. This must be the style here, Armanoush figured out, instead of choosing from a menu, the whole menu comes to you.

When both the noise and the smoke inside intensified, Armanoush inched closer toward Aram, having finally summoned the courage to ask him the question that had been tugging at the edges of her mind for some time: "Aram, I understand you like Istanbul, but didn't you ever consider coming to America? I mean, you could come to California, for instance. There's a large Armenian community there, you know...."

Aram stared at her for a full minute, as if taking in every detail, until he slumped back in his chair and gave a puzzling laugh. Armanoush was rather perturbed by this laughter, which she felt somehow shut her out. Not convinced that she had been understood,

Aram did not laugh this time. Instead he gave her a warm smile, warm but somewhat tired.

"Well, let's see, there is yalanci sarma, tourshi, pathan, topik, enginar. . . ." Armanoush started naming the dishes the waiters were leaving on the table.

The tavern was a stylish but convivial place near the Flower Passage. As soon as they sat, two waiters appeared with a cart of metes.

Customers kept arriving in couples or groups, and in no more than twenty minutes the tavern was full. Amid all these equally unfamiliar faces and sounds and smells, Armanoush lost her sense of place. She felt like she could be in Europe or in the Middle East or in Russia. Auntie Zeliha and Aram drank rake, Asya and Armanoush had white wine.

Watching the scene with marveling eyes, Armanoush wondered what Jean Genet would make of it. That Cherry-Vanilla Diet Coke, bead bracelets, the tart odor of semen, and childish joy could all coexist on a seamy street in Istanbul? The tavern was a stylish but convivial place near the Flower Passage. As soon as they sat, two waiters appeared with a cart of metes.

"Arefe, why don't you surprise us again with your culinary vocabulary?" Auntie Zeliha requested.

"Well, let's see, there is yalanci sarma, tourshi, pathan, topik, enginar. . . ." Armanoush started naming the dishes the waiters were leaving on the table.

Auntie Zeliha lit the last cigarette in her pack and unintentionally blew smoke in the direction of Asya. "The tattoo is an ominous sign. It does not mean you should leave.

"It's just that the fig tree . . ." Auntie Zeliha inquired. "The fig tree is an ominous sign. It does not mean you should leave."

"It's just that the fig tree . . ." Auntie Zeliha lit the last cigarette in her pack and unintentionally blew smoke in the direction of Asya. "The tattoo is an ominous sign. It does not mean you should leave."

"The tattoo that I would like to have is a gorgeous fig tree. But, unlike other trees, this one is upside down. My fig tree has all its roots up in the air. Instead of the

They fell into an awkward silence, taking a rare distant glimpse into each other's positions, realizing there could be more than geographical distance between them—

"I am, indeed," Auntie Zeliha replied. "It is not the tattooing part that I am opposing but the design he asks for."

"Really?" Armanoush said in surprise as she turned to Auntie Zeliha. "I thought you were fond of tattoos."

"Yeah," Asya added. "She won't permit him to have a tattoo."

"Well, tell me about it." Asya sighed. Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. "Hush! Auntie Zeliha doesn't know that I smoke."

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Correctly, she leaned forward and tried to offer a better explanation: "If they are oppressing you here, you can always come to America. There are many Armenian communities there who would be more than happy to help you and your family."

Aram did not laugh this time. Instead he gave her a warm smile, warm but somewhat tired.

"Would you want to do that, dear Armanoush? This city is my city. I was born and raised in Istanbul. My family's history in this city goes back at least five hundred years. Armenian Istanbulites belong to Istanbul, just like the Turkish, Kurdish, Greek, and Jewish Istanbulites do. We have first managed and then badly failed to live together. We cannot fail again."

Just then the waiter materialized again, this time serving fried calamari and fried mussels and fried pastries.

"I know every single street in this town," Aram continued, taking another sip of rake. "And I love strolling these streets in the mornings, in the evenings, and then at night when I am merry and tipsy. I love to have breakfasts with my friends along the Bosphorus on Sundays, I love to walk alone amid the crowds. I am in love with the chaotic beauty of this city, the ferries, the music, the takes, the sadness, the colors, and the black humor...."

They fell into an awkward silence, taking a rare distant glimpse into each other's positions, realizing there could be more than geographical distance between them—

"Look, the Armenians in the diaspora have no Turkish friends. Their only acquaintance with the Turks is through the stories they heard from their grandparents or else from one another. And those stories are so terribly heartbreaking. But believe me, just like in every nation, in Turkey too there are good-hearted people and bad people. It is as simple as that. I have Turkish friends who are closer to me than my flesh-and-blood brother. And then there is, of

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for instance, an oak tree, still with its roots up in the air, I'd tattoo him right away!"

It was then that four Gypsy musicians, all dressed in silky white shirts and black trousers, entered the tavern with their instruments—an ud, a clarinet, a kanun, and a darbuka. There was a general excitement among the customers who, having eaten and drunk their fill, were more than ready to sing.

When the musicians materialized by their side, Armanoush felt a pang of shyness. But to her relief they didn't force her to sing. It turned out that Asya wasn't much of a singer.
All right. Let's start with the basics. The facts. If we can make it through the facts we can then talk about other things, decreed Lady Peacock/Siramark. Let's start with this.

Turks. Mesrop would turn in his grave if, Aramazt forbid, I would forget my past just like that.

Look, don't get us wrong, we don't have anything against you, OK? joined in Miserable-Coexistence. I am sure the city is nice and scenic, but the truth is we don't trust the

Now it was Asya's turn to pause.

Oh, thanks. But frankly, I am in no mood for a touristy tour to a country that has caused so much suffering for all my family. It was Anti-Khavurma again.

Asya realized her mistake only when Armanoush slapped her hand with Madame My-Exiled-Soul.

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I hope the next time you too will come to Istanbul with Arman...

Hello! Greetings from Istanbul, Asya wrote. There was no response.


can ask her yourself. Here she is. Dear Cafe Constantinopolis meet A Girl

It's a reinterpretation of the title of this Johnny Cash song. Anyway, you

She has a nickname, of course: A Girl Named Turk. What was that? Alex the Stoic couldn't help asking.

Our reporter from Istanbul is back. Where were you? Did the Turks
to the Cafe Constantinopolis, determined to take Asya with her this time.

Armanoush held her breath, failing to understand all the words but feeling mourning deep in her heart. When she raised her head, she was intrigued by Auntie Zelha's expression. It was a look that embodied the fear of happiness that only those who had unexpectedly, unguardedly fallen in love could wear.

When the song was over and the musicians had moved to the next table, Armanoush thought Auntie Zelha would give Aram a kiss. But instead she tenderly squeezed Asya's hand, as if acknowledging that her love for a man had allowed her to better comprehend her love for her daughter. "Sweetheart," she murmured, a hint of anguish creeping into her tone. But if Auntie Zelha was planning to say something to her daughter, she was quick to beat the urge. Instead, she took out a new pack of cigarettes and offered her one. 

Seeing her mother have sentiments so near the surface was far more surprising for Asya than being offered a cigarette by her. She lit hers and then her mom's. As the smoke slowly coiled between them, daughter and mother smiled at each other awkwardly. They looked startlingly similar from this angle and light, two faces molded by a past that one knew nothing about and the other chose not to remember. It was precisely then that Armanoush felt the pulse of the city for the first time since she had arrived in Istanbul. It had just hit her why and how people could fall in love with Istanbul, in spite of all the sorrow it might cause them. It would not be easy to fall out of love with a city this heartbreakingly beautiful.

With this recognition she raised her glass in a toast: "--erefe!"

FOURTEEN

Water

I shall go inside and tell them to quiet down? Auntie Feride asked. She was standing in front of the girls' room, her gaze fixated on the knob.

"Oh, leave them alone!" Auntie Zelha exclaimed from the couch where she had collapsed. "They're a bit tipsy and when you're a bit tipsy you listen to music loud." To make a point she

then exclaimed: "LOUD!"

"Tipsy!" bellowed Grandmu Gulsam. "Mind you, why are they tipsy? Is it not enough that you always bring disgrace to this family? Look at that skirt you are wearing. The dish towels in the kitchen are longer than your skirts! You are a single mother, a divorcée. Hear me well! I have never seen a divorcée with a ring in her nose. You should be ashamed of yourself, Zeliha!"

Auntie Zelha raised her head from the cushion she had been hugging. "Ma, for me to be a divorcée, I would have had to have gotten married first. Don't distort the facts. I cannot be called a di.

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vorcee or a grass widow or any of those sticky terms you have in reserve in your glossary for unfortunate women. This daughter of yours is a sinner who wears miniskirts and she loves her nostril ring and she loves the child she gave birth to out of wedlock. Like it or not!

"Is it not enough that you spoiled your daughter and forced her to drink? Why did you also have to make the poor guest drink? She's Mustafa's responsibility; she is your brother's guest in this house. How dare you spoil the girl!"

"My brother's responsibility! Yeah, right!" Auntie Zelha laughed morosely, and she closed her eyes. Inside the girls' room, meanwhile, Johnny Cash was playing full blast. The two girls were sitting side by side at the desk staring at the computer screen, with Sultan the Fifth curled between them, his eyes half-closed. The girls were so absorbed in the Internet that neither of them heard the argument outside their door. Armanoush had just logged on to the Cafe Constantinopolis, determined to take Asya with her this time.

Hello everyone! Haven't you missed Madame My-Exiled-Soul? she typed. Our reporter from Istanbul is back. Where were you? Did the Turks

gobble you up? wrote Anti-Khavurma. 

S

Water

FOURTEEN

ELIF SHAFAK

Asya realized her mistake only when Armanoush slapped her hand ... with Madame My-Exiled-Soul.

Oh, thanks. But frankly, I am in no mood for a touristy tour to a country that has caused so much suffering for all my family. It was Anti-Khavurma again.

Now it was Asya's turn to pause.

Look, don't get us wrong, we don't have anything against you, OK? joined in Miserable-Coexistence. I am sure the city is nice and scenic, but the truth is we don't trust the Turks. Mesrop would turn in his grave if, Aramazt forbid, I would forget my past just like that.

"Who is Mesrop?" Asya asked Armanoush in a voice barely above a whisper, as if they could hear her.

All right. Let's start with the basics. The facts. If we can make it thru the facts we can then talk about other things, decreed Lady Peacock/Siramark. Let's start with the
The older women had gone to sleep, and so had Auntie Cevriye, as a disciplined teacher. Auntie Zeliha had passed out on the couch. It was Baron Baghdassarian.

"Why don't you go to sleep, sister, and let me guard their door to make sure they are all right." Auntie Banu squeezed her sister's hand. The older women had gone to sleep, and so had Auntie Cevriye, as a disciplined teacher. Auntie Zeliha had passed out on the couch.

"You are responsible for recognizing your father's crime, Anti-Khavurma replied."

"Am I responsible for my father's crime? A Girl Named Turk asked."

"In the meantime, Asya, still fixated on the screen, typed, 'I do recognize your loss and grief. I do not deny the atrocities committed. It's just my past that I am recoiling from. I don't know who my father is or what his story was like. If I had a chance to know more about my past, even if it were sad, would I choose to know it or not? The dilemma of human memory. I can do that ... and I do apologize for all the sufferings my ancestors have caused your ancestors."

"Well, it doesn't mean much if you apologize to us, he cut in. Apologize aloud in front of the Turkish state.

"You say that's gonna do other than get her into trouble?"

"Oh come on! all of a sudden Armanoush had pulled the keyboard toward her and wrote, unable to resist the temptation to interject. It's Madame My-Exiled-Soul, here. What is that?"

"She stopped short of mentioning her Personal Manifesto of Nihilism."

"Johnny Cash wouldn't mind that! interjected Madame My-Exiled-Soul. Tell me, what can I as an ordinary Turk in this day and age do to ease your pain?"

"Now this was a question hitherto no Turk had asked the Armenians in the Café Constantinopolis. In the past, they had had Turkish visitors twice, both heatedly nationalist young men who had popped up out of nowhere, apparently with the intention to prove that the Turks had done nothing wrong to the Armenians, and if anything, it was the Armenians who had rebelled against the Ottoman regime and killed the Turks. One of them had gone so far as to argue that if the Ottoman regime had really been as genocidal as claimed, today there would be no Armenians left to talk about this. The fact that there were so many Armenians lashing against the Turks was a clear indication that the Ottomans had not persecuted them."

"THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL"

Genocide is a heavily loaded term, wrote back A Girl Named Turk. It implies a systematic, well-organized, and philosophized extermination. Honestly, I am not sure the Ottoman state at the time was of such a nature. But I do recognize the injustice that was done to the Armenians. I am not a historian. My knowledge is limited and tainted, but so is yours.

You see, here's the difference. The oppressor has no use for the past. The oppressed has nothing but the past, commented Daughter of Sappho. Without knowing your father's story, how can you expect to create your own story? Lady Peacock/Siramarl joined in.

Asya seemed confused by the bluntness of the statement, briefly irritated but also intrigued. Within the glow radiating from the computer, her face was pale and still. She had exploit Sinan's intelligence and then deny he was Armenian. She stopped short of mentioning her Personal Manifesto of Nihilism."

"You want me to apologize for something I personally had nothing to do with?"

"Then you yourself can apologize, barged in Anti-Khavurma."

"Am I responsible for my father's crime? A Girl Named Turk asked."

"You are responsible for recognizing your father's crime, Anti-Khavurma replied."

Asya seemed confused by the bluntness of the statement, briefly irritated but also intrigued. Within the glow radiating from the computer, her face was pale and still. She had always tried to distance her past as far as possible from the future she hoped to attain. In the hope that, whatever the memories of times past entailed, no matter how dark or depressing, the past would not consume her. The truth is, as much as she hated to admit it, she knew the past did live within the present. All my life I wanted to be pastless. Being a bastard is less about having no father than having no past ... and now here you are asking me to own the past and apologize for a mythical father!

There came no answer, but Asya didn't seem to be waiting for one. She kept typing as if her fingers acted on their own, as if she were navigating with eyes closed.

"Well, perhaps it is exactly my being without a past that will eventually help me to sympathize with your attachment to history. I can recognize the significance of continuity in human memory. I can do that ... and I do apologize for all the sufferings my ancestors have caused your ancestors."

"Anti-Khavurma wasn't content. It really doesn't mean much if you apologize to us, he cut in. Apologize aloud in front of the Turkish state."

"Oh come on! all of a sudden Armanoush had pulled the keyboard toward her and wrote, unable to resist the temptation to interject. It's Madame My-Exiled-Soul, here. What is that gonna do other than get her into trouble?"

"She has to go thru that trouble if she is sincere! Anti-Khavurma blew up."

"But before anyone could respond to that came a most unexpected comment."

"Well, the truth is, dear Madame My-Exiled-Soul and dear A Girl Named Turk ... some among the Armenians in the diaspora would never want the Turks to recognize the genocide. If they do so, they'll pull the rug out from under our feet and take the strongest bond that unites us. Just like the Turks have been in the habit of denying their wrongdoing, the Armenians have been in the habit of savoring the cocoon of victimhood. Apparently, there are some old habits that need to be changed on both sides. It was Baron Baghdassarian.

"They still aren't sleeping," Auntie Feride paced left and right outside the girls' room. "Is there something wrong?"

"The older women had gone to sleep, and so had Auntie Cevriye, as a disciplined teacher. Auntie Zeliha had passed out on the couch. "Why don't you go to sleep, sister, and let me guard their door to make sure they are all right." Auntie Banu squeezed her sister's hand.
Armanoush felt a wave of worry well up in her stomach.

"Amy, I will ask you just one question and you will tell me the truth; you promise you'll tell me the truth."

picked up the phone instantly.

Fifteen minutes had never passed so slowly. Armanoush paced the room under the worried gaze of Asya. Finally, it was time to give her mom another call. This time Rose

"Rose, honey? Hi, honey!" Armanoush said, her voice cracking. "It's me, honey. I'm calling from Arizona now."

"Oh my God!! But she is not here! Where is my baby?! Where is she?" Rose started to sob, falling into one of those anxiety attacks she thought she had long ago left in the

"Yesterday, she calls every day—from San Francisco!"

When did you last speak with her?"

"Well now, that's funny. She called me three times today!" Rose replied, her voiceignant.

Rose took the glass with trembling hands. "Is that possible? My little girl has lied to me! How stupid of me to trust her. All this time I think she's in San Francisco with her grandmother and then it turns out she's lied to everyone ... and now her grandmother ... oh, God, how am I gonna tell her?"

The day before when they were both in the kitchen, she making pancakes, he reading the Arizona Daily Star, the phone rang. Rose picked up the phone with the spatula in her hand. The call was from San Francisco. Her ex-husband, Barsam Tchakhmakhchian, was on the line.

"Rose, darling, will you please calm down," Mustafa said as he rose from his chair. He didn't like the stools and instead kept two solid-wood honey pine dining chairs in the kitchen, one for him and the other for him too. He approached his wife and held her hand, in the hope of laying her worries to rest. "You will be calm, very calm, you understand? And you will calmly ask her where she is right now. This is the first thing you need to ask her, OK?"

Rose liked this slogan. Besides, the azure tint of the printed images perfectly matched the color of the tiles in her kitchen, the part of the house she was particularly proud of.

Despite her initial forbearance, once she had purchased the house, Rose had lost no time in remodeling the kitchen, adding pull-out shelves, placing a thirty-six-bottle lacquered-top wine rack in the corner—though neither she nor Mustafa were drinkers—and decorating the entire room with oak swivel stools. Now as she felt a surge of panic, it was onto one of those stools that she dropped her body.

"Oh my God, we've got fifteen minutes. What are we gonna tell her? We've only got fifteen minutes to decide," she cried to Mustafa.

"Rose, darling, will you please calm down," Mustafa said as he rose from his chair. He didn't like the stools and instead kept two solid-wood honey pine dining chairs in the kitchen, one for him and the other for him too. He approached his wife and held her hand, in the hope of laying her worries to rest. "You will be calm, very calm, you understand? And you will calmly ask her where she is right now. This is the first thing you need to ask her, OK?"

"But Armanoush shook her head, a fretful shadow crossing her face. "Oh God, there's something wrong. Something's very wrong.""

From under the blanket. "Maybe she was driving or something and couldn't talk on the phone."

But Armanoush shook her head, a fretful shadow crossing her face. "Oh God, there's something wrong. Something's very wrong."

"How am I doing? How am I doing?!" Rose repeated, now sounding bewildered and her voice muffled. "I need to hang up now, but you promise, you promise me, you will call me back in ten... no, no, ten isn't enough, in fifteen minutes exactly. I need to hang up and collect my thoughts now and then I will wait for your call. Promise me, promise me," Rose echoed hystERICALLY.

"Okay, Mom, I promise," Armanoush stammered. "Mom, are you all right? What's happening?" But Rose had already gone.

Stunned, pale, and desolately holding the phone, Armanoush looked at Asya. "My mother asked me to call back later instead of asking me why I hadn't called before. It's so unlike her. This is so not her."

"Please relax," Asya shrugged, popping her head up

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"What if she doesn't tell me?" Rose said.

"She will. You ask her nicely, she'll tell you nicely," Mustafa spoke slowly. "But no scolding. You need to keep your cool. Here, have some water."

"Rose, please, I need to give Armanoush some bad news. Will you please call her to the phone? She is not answering her cell phone. I had to call her here."

"OH MY GOD!! But she is not here! Where is my baby?! Where is she?!!" Rose started to sob, falling into one of those anxiety attacks she thought she had long ago left in the past.

"Rose, will you please calm down? I don't know what's going on, but I am sure there is an explanation. I trust Armanoush with all my heart. She won't do anything wrong. When did you last speak with her?"

"Yesterday, she calls every day—from San Francisco!"

Barsam paused. He didn't tell her that Armanoush had been calling him too, although from Arizona. "That's good, it means she is fine. We need to trust her. She is an intelligent, dependable girl, you know that. Next time she calls just tell her to give me a call. Tell her it is urgent. You got that, Rose? Will you do that?"

"Oh my God!!" Rose started to cry louder. But then all of a sudden it occurred to her to ask; "Barsam, you said there was bad news. What is it?"

"Oh... A heavy pause. "It's my mom..." He could not finish his sentence.

"Just tell Armanoush that Grandma Shushan has died in her sleep. She did not wake up this morning."

Fifteen minutes had never passed so slowly. Armanoush paced the room under the worried gaze of Asya. Finally, it was time to give her mom another call. This time Rose

"Amy, I will ask you just one question and you will tell me the truth; you promise you'll tell me the truth."

Armanoush felt a wave of worry well up in her stomach.
Amnumoush swallowed hard. "Mom, I'm in Istanbul." "What?"
"Mom, I'll tell you everything but please calm down."

Rose’s eyes sparked with pure indignation. How she hated to hear everyone telling her to calm down.

"Mother, I am terribly sorry for worrying you so much. I should never have done this. I am so sorry, but there is nothing to worry about, believe me."

Rose put her hand over the phone. "My baby is in Istanbul!" she said to her husband with a hint of a reprimand as if this were his fault. Then she yelled into the receiver: "What the hell are you doing there?"

"Actually, I am staying at your mother-in-law's house. It is a wonderful family."

Flabbergasted, Rose turned again to Mustafa and this time scolded harder: "She is staying with your family."

Then, before an ashen and alarmed Mustafa Kazanci could put in a word, she said, "We are coming here. Don't disappear anywhere. We are coming. And don’t you ever turn off your cell phone again!" With that she hung up.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mustafa squeezed his wife's arm, harder than he intended. "I am not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are going," Rose said. "We are going. My only daughter is in Istanbul!!!" she screamed, as if it meant Armanoush had been taken hostage.

"I cannot leave my job now."

"You can take a few days off. And if you don't, I will go alone," Rose, or someone who looked like Rose, snapped. "We will go there, make sure she is safe, pick her up, and bring her back home."

Late that night when they were about to go to sleep the Kazancis' phone rang.

"Inshallah it is nothing bad," Petite-Ma whispered from her bed, a rosary in her hand, a shadow of anxiety on her face. She reached out for the glass of water with her false teeth inside and, still praying, took a sip. Only water could quell fear.

Still awake, it was Auntie Feride who picked up the phone. More than anyone else in the family, she was the most talkative and communicative when it came to phone conversations.

"moo?,

"Hi, Feride, is it you?" the receiver asked in a male voice. And without waiting for an answer, he added, "It is me... from America... Mustafa..."

Thrilled to hear her brother's voice, Auntie Feride grinned. "Why don't you call us more often? How are you? When are you coming to see us?"

"Listen, dear, please. Is Amy-Armanoush there?"

"Yes yes, of course, you sent her to stay here with us. We love her very much." Auntie Feride beamed. "Why didn't you come with her, you and your wife?"

Mustafa stayed put, his forehead buckled with discomfort. Behind him in the window lay the Arizona soil, always dependable, always secretive. In time he had learned to appreciate the desert, its infinity soothing his fear of looking back, its tranquillity easing his fear of death. At times like this he remembered, as if his body reminisced on its own, the fate awaiting all the men in his family. At times like this he felt close to committing suicide. Finding death before death found him. He had lived two very different lives. Mustafa and Mustapha. And sometimes the only way to bridge the gap between the two names seemed to silence them simultaneously—to bring both of his lives to an abrupt end. He shunned the thought. A sound similar to sighing. Perhaps it was him. Perhaps it was just the desert.

"I think we are. We will come for a few days to pick Amy up and to see you.... We are coming."

These words seemed to come effortlessly, as if time was not a sequence of ruptures but an uninterrupted continuity, easily bendable even when fractured. Mustafa would visit as if it had not been almost twenty years since he had been home.
THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL

Asya stayed indoors with her playing tavla and listening to Johnny Cash.
"Six six! You lucky thing!"
But Armanoush showed no trace of pleasure about the dice she had rolled. Instead, she broodingly pouted at her checkers as if hoping to move them by the force of her gaze.
'I have this awful feeling something has happened and my mother isn't telling me.'
"Please don't worry," Asya said, chewing the end of her pencil, craving nicotine. "You've talked with your mom and she sounded all right. Thanks to you they will now visit Istanbul. They'll come and meet you here and soon you will be back in your house...." Though Asya had meant to sooth, the words had oddly come out as an objection. The truth is, it saddened her that Armanoush would be leaving so soon.

"I don't know. It's just this feeling I can't get rid of," Armanoush sighed. "My mom doesn't travel anywhere, not even to Kentucky. That she is flying to Istanbul is mind-boggling. But then again, it is so typical of her. She cannot stand not being in control of my life. She would fly around the globe to keep me under her eye." While she waited for Armanoush to decide where to move which checker, Asya drew her legs under her, working on yet another article of her Personal Manifesto of Nihilism. Distressed though she might be, Armanoush's playing skills were surely unaffected by her mood. With the "six six," she rammed it into Asya's home board, and trounced her opponent by crushing all three of her checkers at once. Triumph! Asya sunk her teeth deeper into the pencil.

"I'm sure your mom is fine. Think about it, if she weren't fine how could she make this trip all the way from Arizona to Istanbul?"

"Please don't worry," Asya said, chewing the end of her pencil, craving nicotine. "You've talked with your mom and she sounded all right. Thanks to you they will now visit Istanbul. They'll come and meet you here and soon you will be back in your house...."

"I have this awful feeling something bad has happened and my mother isn't telling me." "Please don't worry," Asya said, chewing the end of her pencil, craving nicotine. "You've talked with your mom and she sounded all right. Thanks to you they will now visit Istanbul. They'll come and meet you here and soon you will be back in your house...."

"Two days ago," Armanoush said. "I called him from Arizona and he was OK, everything sounded normal."
"But now you're speculating." Asya tried to soothe her without success. "When did you last speak with your father?"

"Two days ago," Armanoush said. "I called him from Arizona and he was OK, everything sounded normal."

"Wait, wait, wait! What do you mean you called him from Arizona?"

"I don't know. It's just this feeling I can't get rid of," Armanoush sighed. "My mom doesn't travel anywhere, not even to Kentucky. That she is flying to Istanbul is mind-boggling. But then again, it is so typical of her. She cannot stand not being in control of my life. She would fly around the globe to keep me under her eye."

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earlier in the evening. She felt nothing, except hunger. All she had to snack on in her room was a package of golden raisins she had bought from a rickety street vendor yelling in front of the house.

She hurriedly, but then with increasing sluggishness, imbibed one third of the bottle. Now, after four cigarettes and six shots, she didn't feel anxious anymore; actually, she didn't feel anything anymore. Only a mother who had already lost a child would react with such profound fear in the face of the danger of losing another one. Shushan might have had another son at some point who had become separated from her. Now as he mourned his mother's death, he couldn't find the heart to tell his daughter.

"Dad, talk to me," Armanoush said urgently. Just like his mother, his father came from a family deported from Turkey in 1915. Sarkis Tchakhmakhchian and Shushan Stamboulian shared something in common, something their children could only sense but never fully grasp. So many silences were scattered among their words. When coming to America they had left another life in another country, and they knew that no matter how often and how truthfully you evoked the past, some things could never be told.

Barsam remembered his father dancing around his mother to a Hale, drawing circles within circles with his arms raised like a soaring bird; the music starting out slow, becoming faster and faster, this Middle Eastern swirl that the children could only watch with admiration. Barsam was fascinated by religion at a young age, the best student in Sunday school. Consequently, the man with the black hood visited their neighborhood every year. He was a priest from the old country looking for young, bright boys to take back to Armenia to train them to be priests. "Barsam Tchakhmakhchian paused, stricken with sorrow from the weight of a childhood memory that had appeared out of nowhere. When he was a boy, every year a man with a dark pointed hood and black cape would visit their neighborhood, going door to door with the deacon of the local church. He was a priest from the old country looking for young, bright boys to take back to Armenia to train them to be priests."

"Dad, are you all right? What is going on?"

"I'm all right sweetheart, I missed you," was all he could say. Barsam Tchakhmakhchian would never forget the flash of fear in his mother's eyes. As much as she respected the holy priest, as much as she'd be delighted to see her son as a grown-up man in pastoral garb, as much as she wanted her only son to serve the Lord, Shushan could not help but recoil with fright, as if faced with a kidnapper who wanted to take her son away from her. She had flinched with such force and fear that the cup in her hand had shaken, spilling some tea on her dress. The priest had softly, amibly nodded, detecting the shadow of a dark secret hidden in her past. He had put her hand and blessed her. Then he had left the house, never to come back with the same request again.

That day Barsam Tchakhmakhchian had sensed something he hadn't felt before and wasn't going to feel ever again. A spiky, creepy premonition. Only a mother who had already lost a child would react with such profound fear in the face of the danger of losing another one. Shushan might have had another son at some point who had become separated from her.
"Really, is the Turkish cuisine spicy?"

"Leave the sauce," said Mustafa upon seeing that Rose was considering buying a spicy Mexican sauce in a cactus-shaped bottle. "Believe me, Rose, you are not going to need that in Istanbul.

"Is it chilly in Istanbul? Should I have brought warmer clothes?" Rose asked, despite the fact that there were three main reasons not to: because she had asked this question before, because she had already packed her luggage, and because just now they were on their way to the Tucson Airport and it was too late to wonder anyway.

"Don't worry," Auntie Zeliha whispered. "I love you ... I love you so ... Let's sleep now."

"How are we going to explain my sudden absence to my dear family, then?" Auntie Zeliha grumbled.

"Aram remained silent, conceding this.

"Nothing, you don't have to say anything ... You know that."

"Don't worry," Auntie Zeliha whispered. "I love you ... I love you so ... Let's sleep now."

As soon as she hung up, Auntie Zeliha began to slip into a deep slumber. How she turned off the cell phone, put the vodka bottle aside, stubbed the cigarette into the ashtray, turned off the light, and slid under the covers would have no recollection of the next morning, when she woke up with an excruciating headache and one of her blankets missing.

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"Don't think about that now," Aram tried to soothe her. "Give yourself a break. You're being too hard on yourself: Come here first thing tomorrow morning."

"Oh my love ... how I wish I could...." Auntie Zeliha turned away her anguished face, as if he could monitor her via the receiver. "They expect me to go to the airport to welcome them. I am the only one who can drive in this family, remember?"

"Nothing, you don't have to say anything ... You know that."

Aram remained silent, conceding this.

"Don't worry," Auntie Zeliha whispered. "I love you ... I love you so ... Let's sleep now."

"Nothing, you don't have to say anything... You know that."
had only tentative answers. After so many years of complete detachment, his familiarity with Turkish culture, like a parchment drawing stripped by the sun and the wind, had
been bit by bit rubbed out. Istanbul had imperceptibly become a ghost city for him, one that had no reality except to appear every now and then in dreams. Much as he used to
fancy the city's many quarters and characters and culture, ever since he had settled in the United States he had gradually become numb toward Istanbul and almost everything
associated with it.
Yet it was one thing to move away from the city where he was born, and another to be so far removed from his own flesh and blood. Mustafa Kazanci did not so much mind
taking refuge in America forever as if he had no native soil to return to, or even living life always forward with no memories to recall, but to turn into a foreigner with no
ancestors, a man with no boyhood, troubled him. Throughout the years, there were times when he had been tempted, in his own way, to go back to see his family and face the
person he once had been, but Mustafa had discovered that this was not easy and did not become any easier with age. Finding himself more and more distanced from his past,
he had eventually cut all ties to it. It was better this way. Both for him and the ones he had once badly hurt. America was his home now. Yet, if truth be told, more than Arizona
or any other place, it was the future that he had chosen to settle in and call his home—a home with its backdoor closed to the past.
Mustafa was visibly contemplative and withdrawn on the plane. As they took off, he sat very still, and barely changed his position even after they had reached cruising altitude.
He felt fatigued, exhausted by this mandatory journey that was only just starting.
Rose, on the contrary, was full of nervous excitement. She sipped cup after cup of bad airplane coffee, munched the meager pretzels they served, skimmed through the
complimentary magazine, watched Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason, though she had seen the movie before, engaged in a long prattle with the old lady sitting
next to her (she was going to San Francisco to visit her elder daughter and see her newborn grandchild), and when the latter fell asleep, dedicated herself to attempting to
answer the history trivia questions on the video screen in front of her.
Who suffered the most casualties in World War II?
- Japan
- Great Britain
- c. France
- d. Soviet Union

What was the name of the leading character in George Orwell's 1984?
- a. Winston Smith
- b. Akaky Akakievich
- c. Sir Francis Drake
- d. Gregor Samsa

For the first question Rose confidently answered B, but having no idea whatsoever about the second, she simply guessed A. She would soon be surprised to learn she had the
first response wrong and the second one right. If Amy were here next to her, she would have answered both correctly, and certainly not by accident. Her heart ached when she
thought about her daughter. For all their conflicts and quarrels, for all her personal failures as a mother, Rose was still confident that she had a good relationship with Amy. As
confident as believing Great Britain suffered the most casualties in the Second World War.

Then they landed in San Francisco.
Once inside the airport, Rose was swept away by another shopping urge: goodies for the road. So miserable had she been with the
crums served on the first flight that she now took matters into her own hands. Though Mustafa tried hard to explain to her that Turkish Airlines, unlike the domestic flights in
America, would serve a whole bunch of delicacies, she wanted to be on the safe side before embarking on the twelve-hour flight.
Rose purchased a package of Planters peanuts, cheese crackers, chocolate-chip cookies, two packages of BBQ potato chips, a bunch of honey-and-almond granola bars,
and sticks of bubble gum. Long gone was the idea of carb watching just for the sheer possibility of being watchful of something, anything. That was back in the days when she
was young and determined enough to prove to the Tezlokhmutkhian family that this woman they had stumped as odd, and never seen as one of them, was in fact a very nice
and even enviable person. Now, twenty years later, she only smiled at the resentful young woman she once had been.
Although her bitterness toward her first husband and his family had never really subsided, in time Rose had learned to make peace with her flaws and incapacities, including her
widen hips and belly. She had been on diets for such a long time, on and off, she didn't even remember when exactly she had stopped dieting once and for all. Whatever the
timing, Rose had managed to discard, though not the pounds, at least the need to shed the pounds. The urge had simply ceased. Mustafa liked her the way she was. He never
criticized her looks.
The announcement for boarding came when they were standing in line at Wendy's, waiting for two Big Bacon Classic combos and a sour cream-and-chive baked potato to be
ready, just in case the food they served on Turkish Airlines turned out to be inedible. They grabbed their orders just in time and headed to the gate, where they would have to go
through an extra security check reserved for those on intercontinental flights, particularly those heading to the Middle East. Rose watched with worried eyes as a polite but
sullen officer searched through the presents she had bought in
At first, his mother and elder sisters kept writing to him, asking him how he was doing, when he was coming to visit them. They make pancakes was one of the most soothing sights life had ever bestowed upon him.

Garrison, the puddle of chocolate fudge sauce hardening on the counter. He particularly liked to observe her hands as they sliced, stirred, minced, and chopped. Watching her and it made her feel at home. As for Mustafa, he simply liked to watch her amid the multiple ordinary details, the paper towels that matched the tiles, the mugs sufficient for a.

Other than Rose, of course. But then again, Rose was not a woman. Rose was Rose.

Eyeballs darted to the other side so as to avoid looking where he shouldn’t. Now that he had reached middle age, he sometimes wondered if he had ever liked women at all.
There goes another evil eye. Did you hear that ominous sound? Crack! Oh it echoed in my heart! That was somebody's evil eye, so jealous and malicious. May Allah protect us all!
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to leak out and a dark brown puddle formed on the lacework tablecloth.

"Is there an evil eye on you?" Auntie Feride said, peering at Asya suspiciously.

"Evil eye on me?" Asya laughed bitterly. "I'll bet there is! Isn't everyone in this city jealous of my beauty?"

"There was an article in today's newspaper about an eighteen-year-old who dropped on his knees and died while crossing the street. I think it might have been the evil eye," Auntie Feride said with an air of genuine fear.

"Thanks for the morale boost," Asya said. But her grin quickly turned into a frown when she noticed what her crazy aunt was now gazing at: the snowman and snowwoman shakers. Just yesterday Asya had hidden them in a cupboard with the hope that nobody would find them for at least a month. And there they were on the table again. The ceramic pair was not only shoddy and kitschingly regrettably durable—but also so alike that it was hard to tell which one was the pepper, which the salt.

"I wish Petite-Ma was feeling better, she could have poured some lead for me," Auntie Banu remarked with as vexed a look as Asya had ever seen on her face. Though indisputably the most experienced in the house with respect to the crepuscular and the paranormal, Auntie Banu was not authorized to pour lead since that required being initiated by a practitioner, a right she had been denied in the past.

Oddly enough, almost ten years ago, when she was still in the earlier stages of Alzheimer's and had decided that the time was ripe to choose the next woman in the family to hand over the secret of lead pouring, Petite-Ma picked out as her successor not Auntie Banu, as everyone had rightly expected, but the all-time champion agnostic Auntie Zeliha—a decision which back then had caused considerable turmoil in the family.

"Are you kidding?" Auntie Zeliha remarked upon hearing the

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old woman's decision. "I can't pour lead, I am not even a believer. I'm an agnostic!"

"I don't know what that word means, but I can tell it is no good." Petite-Ma snorted. "You've got the talent. Learn the secret."

"Why me?" Auntie Zeliha asked while forcing herself to consider the possibility. "Why don't you choose my eldest sister? Banu will be more than happy to learn the secret. I am the last person you should teach magic to."

"This has nothing to do with magic. The Qur'an forbids us to practice magic!" Petite-Ma retorted, looking slightly affronted. "You are the right person. You have the determination and spirit and fury."

"Fury? But what do you need fury for? I could have been the perfect candidate if this were about hurling obscenities at obnoxious people, but I doubt I would be of any use when it comes to helping others." Auntie Zeliha broke into a grin.

"Do not underestimate the good in you," Petite-Ma replied. It was then that Auntie Zeliha unleashed a remark to end the subject once and for all. "I am not the right person for this task. I might be a confused agnostic, but at least I've got the balls to stay one!"

"Wash your mouth out with soap!" Grandma Gulsum flashed a scowl, overhearing the discussion.

But Auntie Zeliha entirely avoided the subject after that. Half of her family was staunchly secularist Kemalist, the other half, practicing Muslim. While the two sides constantly conflicted but also managed to coexist under the same roof, paranormality, crosscutting ideological divisions, was deemed to be as normal in their lives as consuming bread and water on a daily basis. This being the general framework, Auntie Zeliha, for her part, had chosen to spurn both sides equally.

Consequently, after all these years, Petite-Ma remained the one

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and only lead pourer in the Kazanci domicile. Lately she felt obliged to stop the practice, however, when one day she found herself with a blazing hot pan of melted lead that she didn't know what to do with. "Why are you handing me a boiling pan?" she asked in visible panic. They had gently taken the pan from her and, ever since then, never entrusted her with the task. But now that the topic had come up once again, all heads turned toward the old woman to see if she was following the conversation. The being of all the attention at the breakfast table, Petite-Ma raised her head and looked curiously back at her family, while continuing to chew loudly on a piece of sucr. She gulped down her bite, belched, and just when she seemed to be slipping off into her own world once again, shocked everyone with the clarity of her memory.

"Asya, my dear, I will pour lead for you and crack whatever evil eye might have clustered around you."

"Thank you, Petite-Ma." Asya smiled.

When Asya was a young girl, Petite-Ma had on a regular basis poured melted lead to ward off the evil eye around her. The truth is, given the weedy toddler that she once was, Asya seemed in need of a little boost at the onset of her mortal life. For some reason she used to frequently trip over and fall down, face-first, cutting her bottom lip each time. Suspecting the evil eye, instead of the toddler's yet unbalanced steps, they would hand her to Petite-Ma.

At first the ceremony had been a fun game for Asya, amusing and exciting, and also somewhat gratifying since she was flattered to be at the center of so much attention. She remembered taking great pleasure in every paranormal feat as a child, back when she was still young enough to have faith, not necessarily in magic, but in her family's ability to command destiny. She used to enjoy every detail of the ritual: sitting cross-legged on the prettiest rug in the house while a blanket would be stretched above her head, feeling protected and well hidden inside this peculiar tent, listening to the prayers uttered from all sides, and finally, that sizzling sound, like a

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shriek, the sound of Petite-Ma pouring melted lead into a pan full of water, as she kept repeating: "Elemtereft~ kem gozlere ~i~. Goz edenin gozune kizgin fi~. "

The lead would quickly solidify into ever-changing shapes. If there happened to be some evil eye in the vicinity, there would always materialize a hole in the lead in the shape of

a eye. To this day Asya didn't remember an occasion where there wasn't one.

When all had been said and done, even though Asya had grown up watching Auntie Banu read coffee cups and Petite-Ma ward off the evil eye, she had eventually inherited her mother's skeptical agnosticism. She had decided that it all boiled down to a matter of rendition. If you were looking for purple unicorns, it wouldn't take you long to start seeing them everywhere. In a similar vein, if there ever was a rapport between divinatory material—be it coffee cups or poured lead—and the process of interpretation, it ran no farther than that between the desert and a desert moon. Though the latter needed the former as background scenery, it undoubtedly had an autonomous existence of its own.

A desert moon existed outside the desert. Likewise, what the human eye saw in a piece of gray lead could not be reduced to the shape that materialized there. If you looked long and devotedly enough, you could even come across a purple unicorn there.

But despite her lingering disbelief, now that Petite-Ma remembered the routine, Asya did not intend to object. Her affection for Petite-Ma was too profound to turn the offer
Then commanded the earth: 'O earth, hold your water, do not absorb it. The water rose so quickly no one outside the arc could survive.'

Mohammed. Thus equipped, they embarked and started to wait.

'Eventually, in Noah's ark there were good people of all faiths,' Auntie Banu continued. 'David was there; so were Moses, Solomon, Jesus, and peace be upon him, to bring them to the right path. One day God sent him the Angel Gabriel. 'Build a ship,' the angel whispered, 'and take a pair of each species...'

Asya cast an amused look at her aunt, knowing how to get to her: 'But more than anyone else it was the betrayal of his wife that devastated Noah, right Auntie? Didn't Noah's wife join the ranks of the pagans?'

Indeed she did, that she-snake in the grass!' Auntie Banu replied, torn between narrating a religious story fittingly, and peppering it with a few remarks of her own.

The kitchen smelled like a popular diner might on a busy weekend afternoon. The scent of cinnamon pungently outweighed all others. Asya took a scoop and started to dole out ashure from a huge pot into small glass bowls, one and a half scoops in each. She wondered why Auntie Zeliha didn't want to take her along to the airport. There certainly was room in the car. It crossed her mind that perhaps Auntie Zeliha was trying to keep her away from the visitors. Asya had noticed that her mother was not thrilled with the news of Mustafa's return after twenty years.

'Can I help you?'

When she turned around she spotted Armanoush standing, watching her.

'Sure, why not? Thanks.' Asya gave her a bowl of slivered almonds. 'Would you sprinkle a few of these into each bowl?'

For the following ten minutes they worked side by side as they exchanged brief, poignant words about Grandma Shushan.

'Okay, Mom, we'll all go there together,' Auntie Zeliha said, and translated her words to the rest.

'But first-' Auntie Banu perked up in midsentence. 'Come and help me in the kitchen to dole out the ashure.'

'Okay, Mom, we'll all go there together,' Auntie Zeliha said, and translated her words to the rest.
"For days on end they sailed and sailed, it was all water everywhere. Soon food became scarce. There wasn't food enough to make a meal. So Noah ordered: 'Bring whatever you have.' And they did, animals and humans, insects and birds, people of different faiths, they brought whatever little they had left. They cooked all the ingredients together and thus concocted a huge pot of ashure.' Auntie Banu proudly smiled at the pot on the stove as if it were the same as the one in the legend. "That is the story of this dessert."

According to Auntie Banu every significant event in world history had taken place on the day of ashure. It was on this day that Allah had accepted Adam's repentance. So was Yunus released by the dolphin that had swallowed him, Rumi encountered by Shams, Jesus taken to the heavens, and Moses given the Ten Commandments.

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"Ask Armanoush to tell us the most important date for the Armenians," Auntie Banu remarked, thinking there was a good chance it could be this very same day.

As soon as the question was translated, Armanoush replied, "The genocide."

"I don't think that suits your pattern," Asya smiled at her aunt, skipping the translation.

"We've talked about this," Auntie Zelia responded indifferently. It didn't quite sound like her. A husky, scary tinge infiltrated her tone, as if someone else were speaking but using her mouth. "You stay at home, miss," decreed the stranger.

What upset Asya most was the fact that she couldn't read Auntie Zelia's expression. She must have done something wrong to upset her mother, but she had no idea what it could be, unless, of course, it was her very existence.

"What have I done to her this time?" Asya lifted her hands in despair when Auntie Zelia and Armanoush had gone.

"Nothing, my dear, she loves you so," Auntie Banu muttered. "You stay with me and the djinn. We'll all finish decorating the ashure and then go shopping."

But Asya didn't feel like going shopping. With a sigh she grabbed a handful of pomegranate seeds to sprinkle on the stillundecked bowls to the side. She scattered the seeds evenly, as if leaving behind a trail of marks to guide some star-crossed fable child homeward. It occurred to her that pomegranate seeds could have been tiny, precious rubies in another life.

"Auntie." She turned to her eldest aunt. "What happened to that golden brooch that you had? The pomegranate brooch, remember? Where is it?"

Auntie Banu paled as Mr. Bitter on her left shoulder whispered

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into her ear: "When do we remember the things we remember? Why do we ask the things we ask?"

Noah's flood, terrifying though it was, started gently, inaudibly, with a few drops of rain. Sporadic drops, heralding the catastrophe to come, a message noticed by no one. There were dark, gloomy clouds clustered in the sky, so gray and heavy, as if loaded with molten lead full of evil eyes. Each hole in each cloud was an unblinking celestial eye that shed a tear for each sin committed on earth.

But the day Auntie Zelia was raped was not a rainy day. As a matter of fact, there was not even a single cloud in the bright blue sky. She remembered the sky on that ill-omened day for years and years to come, not because she had turned her eyes up toward the heavens to pray or beg Allah for help, but because during the struggle there came a time when her head was hanging over the bed, and while unable to budge under his weight, unable to fight him back anymore, her gaze had inadvertently locked on to the sky, only to catch sight of a commercial balloon slowly floating by. The balloon was orange and black, and on it was stenciled in huge letters:

KODAK.

Zelia shivered at the thought of a colossal camera taking pictures of everything happening down here on earth at that moment in time. A Polaroid camera taking a snapshot of a rape inside a room in a konak in Istanbul.

She had been alone in her room since late morning, enjoying the solitude, which was a rare occasion in their household. When her father had been alive, he wouldn't permit anyone to close the doors of their rooms. Privacy meant suspicious activity; everything had to be visible, in the open. The only place where you could lock the door was the bathroom, and even there someone would knock on the door if you lingered inside for too long. It was only after her father's death that Zelia was able to close her door and retreat into

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herself. Neither her sisters nor her mother recognized her need to shut off from the world. From time to time Zelia fantasized how fabulous it would be to move out and have a place of her own.

Early this morning the Kazanci women had left home to visit the grave of Levent Kazanci, but Zelia had excused herself. She didn't want to go to the cemetery with the whole family. She'd rather go there alone, sit on the dusty ground, and ask her father several questions he had left unanswered in his lifetime. Why did he always have to be so harsh and unloving toward his own flesh and blood? Zelia wanted to know. She also wanted to ask him if he had any idea how much his ghost still haunted them—to this day they could not read his expression. He had never asked them directly if they had behaved well during the day. Instead he lined them up like a small regiment, and stared at each of their faces for varying amounts of time: Banu (more worried for her siblings than for herself, always the protective elder sister), Cevriye (biting her lips so as not to cry), Feride (eyes rolling nervously), Mustafa, the only son (hoping to make his way out of this miserable group, still assuming he was his father's favorite), and the youngest, Zelia (a subtle sourness welling up in

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her heart). They waited until Father finished his soup, and then gradually asked one or two or three ... or sometimes, if they were lucky, all of them at the same time to join them.

Zelia did not mind her father's repeated scoldings or even his regular spankings as much as she did these predinner inspections. It pained her to wait there by the table to be looked over, as if whatever wrong she might have committed during the day was written on her forehead with ink so invisible only Father could read it. "Why can't you ever get anything right?" Levent Kazanci asked each day he read a misdemeanor on one of the children's foreheads and decided to punish them all for it.

It was almost impossible to correlate this Levent Kazanci with the man he developed into once he stepped outside the house. Anyone who ran into him outside the konak would have taken him for an icon of reliability, considerateness, togetherness, and righteousness, the kind of man each one of his daughters' closest friends dreamed of marrying one day. Inside the house, however, his kindness was reserved for strangers alone. Just like he took his shoes off as soon as he entered the house and put on his
The last time Mustafa had seen his father stare at him like that he was eight and being circumcised. He remembered that miserable boy, lying in a huge, showy satin bed with

he would take the old people's hands to kiss. As blessed as the right hand was, the left hand was reserved for the abominable. He could masturbate with his left hand only.

was reserved for clean things, clean and consecrated. It was with his right hand that he'd touch the Qur'an, hold a rosary, and open closed doors. It was with his right hand that

chair, by her desk.... Like a capricious patriarch, IT demanded absolute obedience. No matter how much he obeyed, Mustafa would never use his right hand. The right hand

IT came upon him everywhere, any time of the day. In the bathroom, in the basement, in the toilet, under the bedsheet, in the living room, and once in a while, when he sneaked

the urge had come back even stronger, in the form of IT. His hazel eyes glittering with the fervor of youth, his dark hair overly brilliantined and combed back, he could be called handsome if it weren't for the tic he had developed

His hazel eyes glittering with the fervor of youth, his dark hair overly brilliantined and combed back, he could be called handsome if it weren't for the tic he had developed

Allah knows when. He had the habit of tilting his head to the right when speaking, a brusque, mechanical movement that intensified when he was especially nervous or around

sometimes others mistook this tic for shyness, but Zeliha thought it was nothing but a sign of sheer insecurity.

His hazel eyes glittering with the fervor of youth, his dark hair overly brilliantined and combed back, he could be called handsome if it weren't for the tic he had developed

"Are you talking to yourself, silly?" Mustafa exclaimed, poking his head inside. "Turn that awful music down!"

"None of my business?" his brow deepened further. "You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood,

must wear these short skirts?"

The question was so unexpected Zeliha looked at him stunned, only now detecting the hazy veil in his stare. This year more than ever, she thought, he has been working himself

"What did you do with my razor blade?"

"Yes," Zeliha confessed. "I was going to put it back."

"What did you do with your razor blade?"

But instead of quarreling with her or slamming the door shut behind him, as he had done numerous times before, he paused, as if distracted by a thought. "Why do you wear

"That's none of your business," she said, although with some

"None of my business!" his brow deepened further. "You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood,

"What did you do with your razor blade?"

Propping herself up on one elbow, she shrugged. "I can listen to whatever I want, the way I want."

It was then that there was a knock on the door.

"Are you talking to yourself, silly?" Mustafa exclaimed, poking his head inside. "Turn that awful music down!"

His hazel eyes glittering with the fervor of youth, his dark hair overly brilliantined and combed back, he could be called handsome if it weren't for the tic he had developed

Languidly, Zeliha walked across the room and put a cassette into the tape player. It was an alla turca album by one of her favorite singers, a transsexual with a divine voice.

The singer had started her career as a man, playing the hero in melodramatic movies; eventually he had undergone surgery to become a woman. She always wore flamboyant
costumes topped with glittery accessories and lots of jewels, and so would Zeliha, if she had that much money. Zeliha adored her and had all of her albums. It was then the

"None of my business to make sure that you behave."

"None of my business?" his brow deepened further. "You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood,

But he never returned to the former nor leaped into the latter. All he knew about the threshold was that it unnerved him and all he

Zeliha's eyes brightened a little. "Why don't you go and busy yourself with something else? Go and masturbate!" she snapped.

The generals with their husky voices and frog green uniforms. Can you imagine? What could be worse than a military takeover? A military takeover that goes unnoticed!"

what he named ‘it’, managed not to masturbate. But last year, after failing his college entrance exam, years of self-castigation and self-loathing had provoked a backlash in him and the

whom did not know how much he obeyed, Mustafa would never use his right hand. The right hand

It was with his right hand that he'd touch the Qur'an, hold a rosary, and open closed doors. It was with his right hand that

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Zeliha's eyes brightened a little. "Why don't you go and busy yourself with something else? Go and masturbate!" she snapped.

"What did you do with my razor blade?"

If she went to her father's grave, Zeliha knew she would want to talk to him, and if she talked to him, she might cry, cracking like a tea glass under an evil eye. But even the

Sometimes Zeliha couldn't help but think it had been fortunate that her father died so early, like all other males in their ancestry. A man as dominant as Levent Kazanci would

needed to shed tears, she would do it alone. Hence,

Sometimes Zeliha couldn't help but think it had been fortunate that her father died so early, like all other males in their ancestry. A man as dominant as Levent Kazanci would

"None of my business?" his brow deepened further. "You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood,

It had become clear recently that he had trouble relating to women. Even though he had grown up among women of all age groups and was used to being the center of their

It had become clear recently that he had trouble relating to women. Even though he had grown up among women of all age groups and was used to being the center of their

Languidly, Zeliha walked across the room and put a cassette into the tape player. It was an alla turca album by one of her favorite singers, a transsexual with a divine voice.

She was cognizant of her beauty and did not try to conceal it. Mother said beautiful women had to be twice as modest and careful with men. Zeliha thought that was sheer claptrap from a woman who had never been beautiful herself.

The generals with their husky voices and frog green uniforms. Can you imagine? What could be worse than a military takeover? A military takeover that goes unnoticed!"

"What did you do with my razor blade?"

"It's because they feel threatened by her presence." She winked at Pasha the Third, who was curled on the bed like a heavy cushion of pure white fur, watching her with two

steamed milk. Zeliha hated the hamam, that all-women space, just as she hated the ritual of waxing. She preferred to shave with a razor; it was quick, simple, and private.

"None of my business to make sure that you behave."

"None of my business?" his brow deepened further. "You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood,

If she went to her father's grave, Zeliha knew she would want to talk to him, and if she talked to him, she might cry, cracking like a tea glass under an evil eye. But even the

Zeliha dangled her legs over the bed and checked herself in the mirror across the way. She put some more lotion in her palm and as she slowly smeared the lotion on her skin,

Somehow the generals with their husky voices and frog green uniforms. Can you imagine? What could be worse than a military takeover? A military takeover that goes unnoticed!"

"What did you do with my razor blade?"

"None of my business, the way I want."

"What did you do with my razor blade?"

Sometimes Zeliha couldn't help but think it had been fortunate that her father died so early, like all other males in their ancestry. A man as dominant as Levent Kazanci would

Sometimes Zeliha couldn't help but think it had been fortunate that her father died so early, like all other males in their ancestry. A man as dominant as Levent Kazanci would
places a hand to his back to steady himself. For a moment he was...
Asya rose to her feet and attempted to smooth down her clothes. Everything had happened so swiftly, perhaps she could convince herself that it hadn’t happened at all. But the face she saw in the mirror revealed a different story. There in the frame of her reflection, her left eye looked swollen with a purplish half circle under it. The very first thing Zeliha felt upon seeing her eye was a pang of guilt at her habitual skepticism. All these years she had snickered at cheesy action movies whenever someone got a purple eye, never believing that the human eye could swell that color with one blow. Her face yes, but her body hadn’t been damaged, she concluded. She touched herself to see if she still had feeling. How come she could feel the touch of her fingers but nothing else? If she were hurt or sad, wouldn’t her body know? Wouldn’t she know?

There was a knock on her door and without waiting for a response, Banu popped her head in. She was about to say something but her mouth opened and closed without words as she stood frozen, staring at her youngest sister.

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"What happened to your face?" Banu asked anxiously.

Zeliha knew if there ever was a time to reveal this, it was now. She could either tell it now or hide it forever. "It's not as bad as it looks," she said slowly, the moment already gone and the choice made. "I went out for a walk and then I saw this man beating the hell out of his wife in the middle of the street. I tried to save a battered woman from her husband, but I guess I ended up getting beaten myself."

They believed her. It was something she would do, something that could only happen to her, if it were to ever happen to anyone. The day Zeliha was raped she was nineteen years old. An age deemed to be a grown-up according to the Turkish laws. At this age she could get married or get a driver's license or cast a vote, once the military permitted free elections to be held again. Likewise, should she need one, she could also get an abortion on her own.

Too many times Zeliha had the same dream. She saw herself walking on the street under a rain of stones. As cobblestones fell one by one from above, digging a hole underneath, digging it deeper, she started to panic, afraid to follow suit, afraid to be swallowed without a trace by the hungry abyss. "Stop!" she cried out as stones kept rolling under her feet. "Stop!" she commanded the vehicles that sped toward her and then ran her over. "Stop!" she begged the pedestrians who shouldered her aside. "Please stop!"

That next month she missed her period. A few weeks later she paid a visit to a newly opened lab near her house. FREE PREGNANCY TEST WITH EACH BLOOD SUGAR TEST! it said on a sign at the entrance. When the results arrived, Zeliha’s blood sugar turned out to be normal and she was pregnant.

Once there was; once there wasn’t.

"What happened to your face?" Banu asked anxiously. Asya turned to Sultan the Fifth. "Auntie Zeliha didn't want me to go to the airport with them. She is being mean to me again."

"You see?" she turned to Sultan the Fifth. "Auntie Zeliha didn't want me to go to the airport with them. She is being mean to me again."

"Actually, I was," Asya instantly exited her trancelike rage. "I was just telling my cat friend here how strange it is that the last time Uncle Mustafa was here he wasn't even born and Pasha the third ruled the house. It's been twenty years. Isn't it strange? The man never visits us, and now here I am scooping out his ashure because we still welcome him."

"What does the cat say?" Auntie Feride asked.

Asya smiled sardonically. "He says I'm right, this must be a nuthouse. I should lose all hope and work on my manifesto instead."

"Of course we will welcome your uncle. Family is family, whether you like it or not. We are not like the Germans; they kick their children out of the house at the age of fourteen. We have strong family values. We don't meet just once a year to eat turkey...."

"What are you talking about?" Asya asked, puzzled, but before she reached the end of her question, she sort of guessed the answer. "Are you referring to the Americans’ Thanksgiving Day?"

"Whatever." Auntie Feride dismissed the information. "My point is that Westerners don't have strong families. We are not like that. If somebody is your father, he is your father forever; if someone is a brother, he will be your brother till the end. Besides, everything in this world is strange enough already," Auntie Feride continued. "That is why I like to read the third pages of the tabloids. I cut and collect them so that we don't forget how crazy and dangerous the world is."

Never having heard her aunt attempt to rationalize her behav-r for before, Asya couldn't help but look at her with renewed inter est. They sat there in the kitchen amid appetizing smells, while the March sun shone through the window.

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They sat together until Auntie Feride left after hearing her favorite VJ announce the video clips of a new band, and Asya craved a cigarette. She craved not as much a cigarette as smoking that cigarette with the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, though it surprised her that she had missed him so much. She had at least two hours until the guests came back from the airport. Besides, even if she were late, what difference would it make to anyone? she thought.
Shermin Kazanci, in the meantime, remained as silent as a displaced stone. Hoping it would be a favor to his wife for having converted to Islam. Honoring the master from whom he had learned the art of cauldron making was not the only incentive behind this nominal choice. By naming their son Levon, he was also protecting the baby's right ear and announcing to him the name he'd carry hereafter: "You will be named Levon."

"May Allah bless my son with longer life than any man in this family has ever had," Riza Selim Kazanci said when the midwife handed him the baby. He then put his lips to the baby's right ear and pronounced, "You will be named Levon." Indeed it was a boy, a boy born into harrowing times.

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her pregnancy had Shermin Kazanci craved anything sour or salty, the way she would have if she was expecting a girl.

Patisseries, apfelstrudel from the bakery opened by White Russians who escaped from Russia, homemade baklava, bonbons, and sweets of all sorts... Not even once during the last nine months did she think of a single thing she had craved. The Circassian midwife revealed the sex of the baby months before his birth, by observing the shape of her belly and the types of food she craved. Creme brulee from posh patisseries, apfelstrudel from the bakery opened by White Russians who escaped from Russia, homemade baklava, bonbons, and sweets of all sorts... Not even once during the last nine months did she think of a single thing she had craved.

"Nothing," Auntie Banu whispered as she opened a dresser drawer and took out a box. Inside the velvet cover rested the pomegranate brooch. As the oldest of the Kazanci children, this brooch was given to her, a present from her father, who had inherited it from his mother—not his stepmother, Petite-Ma, but from the mother he never talked about, the mother who had abandoned him when he was a child, the mother he had never forgiven. The brooch was both sublime and heartbreaking. Auntie Banu feared. This nobody knew, but she had once kept the golden pomegranate with ruby seeds in salted water to wash away its sad saga. Under the watchful gaze of the djinn, Auntie Banu caressed the brooch, feeling the glamor of the rubies glowing inside. Until she met Armanoush it had never occurred to her to investigate the story of the pomegranate brooch. Now that she knew the story, however, she couldn't figure out what to do next. Tempted as she was to give the brooch to Armanoush, for she believed it belonged to her more than to anyone else, she hesitated because she wasn't quite sure how to explain why she was giving it to her. Could she tell Armanoush that this brooch had once belonged to her grandma Shushan without telling her the rest of the story? How much of her knowledge could she share with those whose stories she learned through magic?

Forty minutes later on the other side of the city, Asya entered through the squeaky, wooden door of Cafe Kundera. "Yo, Asya!" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist called out cheerfully. "Over here! I'm here!"

He hugged her and then, as she drew back from his arms, he exclaimed, "I've got news for you, one piece is good, one is bad, and one is yet to be classified. Which one would you like to hear first?"

"Give me the bad one," Asya said.

"I am going to prison. My drawings of the prime minister as a penguin weren't well received, I guess. I am sentenced to eight months in prison." Asya stared at him with astonishment that soon widened into alarm. "Shush, dear," the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist mumbled in a meek voice, putting his finger on her lips. "Don't you want to hear the good news?" Then he beamèd with pride. "I decided I need to be true to my heart and get a divorce."

As the shadow of bewilderment that marred her face faded out, it finally occurred to Asya to ask, "And the yet-to-be classified news?"

"Today is my fourth day without a drink. Not even a drop! You know why?"

"I guess because you went to Alcoholics Anonymous again," Asya replied.

"No!" the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist drawled, looking hurt. "Because today was the fourth day since I last saw you and I wanted to be sober the next time we met. You are my one and only incentive in this life to become a better person."

Now he blushed. "Love!" he declared. "I am in love with you, Asya."

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Asya's hazel eyes slid toward a frame on the wall, the photo of a rutted road from Camel Trophy 1997 in Mongolia. It would be nice to run into that picture now, she thought, to be traversing the Gobi Desert in a 4x4 Jeep, heavy, dirty boots on her feet, sunglasses on her face, sweating out her troubles as she went, until she'd become as light as a nobody, as light as a dry leaf in a gust, and thus waft into a Buddhist monastery in Mongolia. "Don't you worry, little bird," the pomegranate tree smiled and shook the snow on her branches. "The story that I'm going to tell you is a happy one."

Hovhannes Stamboulian pursed his lips, as his mind worked feverishly, and the swirl and writing swallowed him up. With each new line added to this last story of his children's book, generations of lessons swirled back to him, some disheartening, others raising his spirits, but all similarly reverberating from another time, a time without beginning or end.

Children's stories were the oldest stories in the world, where the ghosts of generations long gone spoke through the words. The urge to finish this book was so instinctive and undeniable riveting as to be irrepressible. The world had been a gloomy place since he had started writing it and now he had to finish without ado, as if its becoming a less heartrending place depended on this.

"All right, then," the Little Lost Pigeon chirped. "Tell me the story of the Little Lost Pigeon. But I warn you, if I hear anything sad, I will take wing and fly away."

After Hovhannes Stamboulian had been taken away by the soldiers, his family did not have the heart to enter his writing room for days. They had been in and out of every room but that one, and

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kept the door closed as if he were still inside working day and night. But the despondency permeating the house had become too intense and too palpable to pretend that life could return to normal. Soon Armanoush decided they would all be better off in Sivas, where they would stay with her parents for a while. It was only after this decision that they entered Hovhannes Stamboulian's room and found his manuscript, The Little Lost Pigeon and the Blissful Country, waiting to be completed. There among the pages they also found the pomegranate brooch.

Shushan Stamboulian saw the pomegranate brooch for the first time there on the walnut desk that belonged to her father. All of the other details of that ominous day faded away, but not that brooch. Perhaps it was the twinkle emanating from the rubies that had mesmerized her, or else seeing the world around her fall apart in a day made this the only thing she could remember. Whatever the reason, Shushan never forgot that pomegranate brooch. Not when she dropped half dead on the road to Aleppo and was left behind; not when the Turkish mother and daughter found her and took her into their house to heal her; not when she was taken by bandits to the orphanage; not when she was given her letters of recommendation.

The Circassian midwife revealed the sex of the baby months before his birth, by observing the shape of her belly and the types of food she craved. Creme brulee from posh patisseries, apfelstrudel from the bakery opened by White Russians who escaped from Russia, homemade baklava, bonbons, and sweets of all sorts... Not even once during her pregnancy had Shermin Kazanci craved anything sour or salty, the way she would have if she was expecting a girl.

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Indeed it was a boy, a boy born into harrowing times. "May Allah bless my son with longer life than any man in this family has ever had," Riza Selim Kazanci said when the midwife handed him the baby. He then put his lips to the baby's right ear and announced to him the name he'd carry hereafter: "You will be named Levon."

Honorizing the master from whom he had learned the art of cauldron making was not the only incentive behind this nominal choice. By naming their son Levon, he was also hoping it would be a favor to his wife for having converted to Islam. Thus he chose the name Levon and like a good Muslim repeated it thrice: "Levon! Levon! Levon!"

Shermin Kazanci, in the meantime, remained as silent as a displaced stone.
Shortly thereafter, the two of them walked out of the arrivals area, pushing a cart loaded with a matching luggage set. They found a semicircle of strangers waiting outside.

something smaller for the crammed streets of Istanbul. They agreed on a Toyota Corolla.

thought it would be better if they had their own car, rather than using the family car. From a brochure Rose first chose a Grand Cherokee Laredo 4x4, but Mustafa advised

DKNY footwear. She wondered to herself how on earth these stewardesses with their high heels could stay on their feet through a whole day of flying.

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comfortable orange leather

When the plane landed in Istanbul, Rose was exhausted. She moved her swollen feet carefully, fearing they wouldn't fit into her shoes anymore, though she was wearing

things: to give the brooch to their son as something to remember her by, and to forgive her.

had a small bag. She left all her possessions behind. As for the pomegranate brooch, she put it in an envelope with a letter explaining her situation and asked her husband two

Only then did she acknowledge what she needed to do.

stared at the Pigeon's Blood.

deep inside. That ruby was the last surviving reminiscence from The Little Lost Pigeon and the Blissful Country.

But on the third day, as if her mind had been reflecting and her heart aching without her knowing it, she ran to the drawer and held the brooch tightly in her palms, feeling its

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Kazancis are. A name like Levon will not serve you well. If we write down this name, this boy of yours might have problems in the future. Everyone will assume that he is

Christian, although he is a hundred percent Muslim.... Or am I mistaken? Is he not Muslim?"

"He sure is," Riza Selim immediately corrected. "Elhumdullah. " For a fleeting moment it occurred to him to confide in the clerk that the boy's mother was an Armenian orphan

converted to Islam and this would be a gesture to her, but something inside told him to keep this information to himself.

"Well, then, with all due respect to the good man you want to name this child after, let's make a slight change. Make it something akin to Levon, if you so wish, but choose a

Muslim name this time. How about Levent?" The clerk then added kindly, too kindly for the harshness of the statement he was about to make: "Otherwise, I am afraid I will have

to refuse to register him"

And so it was Levent Kazanci; the boy born upon the ashes of a past still smoldering: the boy no one knew his father had once wanted to name Levon; the boy who would

one day be abandoned by his mother and grow up sullen and bitter; the boy who would be a terrible father to his own children.... Were it not for the pomegranate brooch, could Shermin Kazanci have ever found the urge to leave her husband and son? It is hard to say. With them she had started a family and a new life with only one direction for it to go in. For her to have a future, she had to become a woman with no past. Her childhood identity was nothing more than morsels of memory, like crumbs of bread she had scattered behind for some bird to nibble on, since she herself would never be able to return the same way back home. Though even the dearest memories of her childhood eventually vanished, the brooch remained vividly ingrained in her mind. And years later when a man from America appeared at her door, it would be this very brooch that helped her to fathom that the stranger was none other than her own brother.

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Yervant Stamboulian appeared at her door with dark, bright eyes set off by black, bushy eyebrows, a sharp nose, and a thick mustache that grew to his chin, making him look

like he was smiling even when doleful. With a trembling voice and in words that were lacking to him, he announced who he was and then told her, half in Turkish, half in

Armenian, that he had come all the way from America to find her. As much as he wanted to hug his sister there and then, he knew she was a married Muslim woman now. He

stayed on the doorstep. Around them the Istanbul breeze drew circles and for a second it was as if they were pulled out of time.

At the end of their brief exchange, Yervant Stamboulian gave Shermin Kazanci two things: the golden pomegranate brooch and time to think.

Perplexed and dazed, she closed the door and waited for the revelation to sink in. Beside her on the floor Levent crawled and babbling with unbounded enthusiasm.

She went quickly to her room and hid the brooch inside one of the drawers in her wardrobe. When she came back she found the toddler laughing, having just managed to pull himself up into a standing position. The baby stood like that for a full second, took a step, then another one, and brusquely fell back on his bottom, the delightful fear of his first steps sparking in his eyes. Suddenly the boy broke into a toothless smile and exclaimed: "Ma-mu!"

The entire house took on a rare, almost ghostly luminosity, as Shermin Kazanci broke out of her daze and repeated to herself: "Ma-ma!" This was the second word that had

come out of Levent's mouth, after experimenting with "Da-da" for a while and finally saying "Ba-ba" the day before. Now she realized her son had uttered the word father in

himself up into a standing position. The baby stood like that for a full second, took a step, then another one, and brusquely fell back on his bottom, the delightful fear of his first

steps sparking in his eyes. Suddenly the boy broke into a toothless smile and exclaimed: "Ma-ma!"

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surfedaced. This new name, religion, nationality, family, and self she had acquired had not succeeded in overtaking her true self. The pomegranate brooch whispered her name

and it was in Armenian. Shermin Kazanci cuddled her son and for three full days managed not to think about the brooch.

But on the third day, as if her mind had been reflecting and her heart aching without her knowing it, she ran to the drawer and held the brooch tightly in her palms, feeling its

warmth.

Rubies are distinguished gemstones known by their fiery red color. Yet it is not uncommon for them to alter their color, growing darker and darker inside, especially when their

owners are in jeopardy. There exists a particular kind of ruby which the connoisseurs call the "Pigeon's Blood"-a precious blood-red ruby with a hint of blue, as if dimmed

deep inside. That ruby was the last surviving reminiscence from The Little Lost Pigeon and the Blissful Country.

On the eve of the third day, Shermin Kazanci found a brief moment of solitude after dinner to sneak into her room. Appealing for consolation that no one could grant her, she

stared at the Pigeon's Blood.

Only then did she acknowledge what she needed to do.

A week later on a Sunday morning she went to the harbor where her brother awaited her with a pounding heart and two tickets to America. In lieu of a suitcase, Shermin only

had a small bag. She left all her possessions behind. As for the pomegranate brooch, she put it in an envelope with a letter explaining her situation and asked her husband two

things: to give the brooch to their son as something to remember her by, and to forgive her.

When the plane landed in Istanbul, Rose was exhausted. She moved her swollen feet carefully, fearing they wouldn't fit into her shoes anymore, though she was wearing

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It took Mustafa and Rose half an hour to get their passports stamped, get through customs, pick up their luggage, exchange money, and find a car rental service. Mustafa

thought it would be better if they had their own car, rather than using their family car. From a brochure Rose first chose a Grand Cherokee Laredo 4x4, but Mustafa advised

something smaller for the crammed streets of Istanbul. They agreed on a Toyota Corolla.

Shortly thereafter, the two of them walked out of the arrivals area, pushing a cart loaded with a matching luggage set. They found a semicircle of strangers waiting outside.
Among the group they first spotted Armanoush, smiling and waving; next to her was Grandma Gulsum, her right hand pressed on her heart, about to faint from excitement. A step behind them stood Auntie Zeliha, tall and aloof, wearing a pair of dark purple-tensed sunglasses.

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SEVENTEEN
White Rice

Rose and Mustafa spent their first two days in Istanbul eating. At the table they answered a plethora of questions different members of the Kazanci family asked them from all directions: How was life in America? Was there really a desert in Arizona? Was it true that Americans survived on mammoth portions of fast food, only to go on a diet in TV contests? Was the American version of The Apprentice better than the Turkish version? And so on.

Then there followed a series of more personal questions: Why didn't they have children together? Why hadn't they come to Istanbul before? Why didn't they stay longer? Why?

The questions had opposing effects on the couple. Rose for her part did not seem to mind the interrogation. If anything she enjoyed being in the spotlight. Mustafa, however, steadily drifted into silence, getting smaller and smaller in his body. He spoke little, spending most of his time reading Turkish newspapers, conservative and progressive alike, as if trying to catch up with the country he had left. From time to time he asked questions about this or that

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politician, questions answered by whoever might know the answer. Though always an avid newspaper reader, he had never been so interested in politics.

"So this conservative party in power seems to be losing blood. What is their chance of winning in the coming elections?"

"Rascals! They are a bunch of liars," growled Grandma Gulsum, in lieu of an answer. There was a tray in her lap with a pile of uncooked rice, which she sorted through before cooking in case there were any stones or husks. "All they know is to make promises to the people and forget what they said as soon as they get elected."

From his armchair by the window, Mustafa glanced up at his mother over the newspaper in his hand. "What about the party in opposition? The social democrats?"

"Same difference!" came the answer. "They are all a bunch of liars. All politicians are corrupt."

"If we had more women in the parliament everything would be different," Auntie Feride joined in, wearing the I LOVE ARIZONA T-shirt Rose had brought her as a present.

"Mama is right. If you ask me, the only trustworthy institution in this country has always been the army," Auntie Cevriye said. "Thank God we have the Turkish army. If it weren't for them"

"Yes, but they should let us women serve in the army," interrupted Auntie Feride. "I myself would go immediately."

Asya stopped translating the conversation for Rose and Armanoush, who were sitting alongside her, and chuckled as she said in English, "One of my aunts is a feminist, the other is a staunch militarist! And they get along so well. What a nuthouse!"

Grandma Gulsum turned to her son, suddenly concerned. "How about you, dear? When are you going to complete your military duty?"

Having a hard time following despite the instantaneous translation, Rose turned to her husband and blinked.

"Don't worry about me," Mustafa said. "Provided I pay a certain fee, and show them I live and work in America, I do not"

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have to complete full-term military service. I'll be done with only basic training. Just a month, that's all...."

"But isn't there a deadline for that?" someone asked.

"Yes there is," Mustafa replied. "You need to go through this training by age forty-one."

"Well, then you need to do it this year," Grandma Gulsum said. "You are forty now...."

Sitting at the end of the table painting her nails a shiny cherry, Auntie Zeliha raised her head and darted Mustafa a glance. "What a fateful age," she hissed all of a sudden. "The age your father died, just like his father and his grandfather.... You must be pretty nervous now that you are forty, my brother.... So close to death...."

The silence that followed was so deadly it made Asya inadvertently recoil.

"How can you talk to him like that?" Grandma Gulsum rose to her feet, the tray of rice still in her hands.

"I can say whatever I want to whomever I want." Auntie Zeliha shrugged.

"You shame me! Get out, miss," Grandma Gulsum rasped, her voice low and steely. "Get out of my house right now."

Still having two fingernails unpainted, Auntie Zeliha left the brush in the bottle, pulled back her chair, and walked out of the room.

On the third day of their visit, Mustafa stayed in his room all day long, excusing himself as sick. He had been running a fever, which must have diminished not only his energy

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the streets of Istanbul, particularly the streets around shopping centers.

They went to bed earlier than usual that night.

"Rose, honey," Mustafa whispered to his wife as he caressed her light blond hair. The straightness, the blondness, the smoothness of his wife's hair had always soothed him, caressing him tenderly against his dark-haired family and dark-haired past. She lay against him, her body warm and soft. "Rose, sweetheart. We need to go back. Let's fly

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a mysterious light and the dark bags under her eyes made her look ghostly. "You haven't come downstairs all day long. I just wanted to check on you," she whispered, while
"You cannot take him home!" exclaimed the scrawny deadwasher as he blocked the exit of the mosque-yard and frowned at each and every one involved. "The man is going to dry naked on the flat stone in the mosque-yard before being wrapped in a three-piece cotton shroud, placed in a coffin, and, despite the adamant counsel of the elderly to bury him, he was cleansed with a bar of daphne soap, as fragrant and pure and green as the pastures in paradise are said to be. It was scrubbed, swabbed, rinsed, and then left to harden according to each step of the ritual in order to avoid any contact with the soil.

Potassium Cyanide

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Seconds after he finished the ashure, he was seized with an abdominal cramp so sharp he couldn't breathe. Two minutes later his breathing stopped completely.

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Seconds after he finished the ashure, he was seized with an abdominal cramp so sharp he couldn't breathe. Two minutes later his breathing stopped completely.
Tuesday, in the month of March, no doubt the most unbalanced and unbalancing month in Istanbul, seemed to have changed its mind yet again, deciding its fate in fact belonged to the winter season.

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"But dead-washer brother"-Auntie Feride sniffed, instantly integrating the nervous man into her engulfing and egaliatarian cosmos of hebephrenic schizophrenia "we will take him back to his house so that everyone can see him one last time. You see, my brother had been abroad for so many years, we had almost forgotten his face. After twenty years, he finally returns to Istanbul and on his third day here, he breathes his last breath. His death was so unexpected, neighbors and distant relatives will not believe he has passed away if they don't have a chance to see him dead."

"Woman, are you out of your mind? There is no such thing in our religion!" the dead-washer snapped, hoping this would stop whatever she might be planning to say next. "We Muslims do not exhibit our deceased in a showcase." His face visibly hardened as he added, "If your neighbors want to see him, they'll have to visit his gravestone in the cemetery."

While Auntie Feride paused to ponder this suggestion, Auntie Cevriye, standing next to her, stared at the man with a raised eyebrow, the way she looked at her students in an oral quiz when she wanted them to realize, by themselves, how illogical was the answer they had just given.

"But dead-washer brother," Auntie Cevriye continued, now catching up. "How can they see him when he is in a grave six feet down?"

The dead-washer's thick eyebrows shot up in frustration, but he preferred not to answer, finally sensing the futility of discussing anything with these women. Auntie Feride had dyed her hair black that morning. This was her mourning hair. She shook her head with determination and then added: "Don't you worry. You can rest assured that we are not going to display him like the Christians do in the movies."

Pouting at Auntie Feride's relentlessly moving eyebrows and flapping hands, the dead-washer stood dead still for an awful minute, now looking less annoyed than distressed, as if he had suddenly realized she was the craziest person he had ever come across.

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retty eyes looked around for help. Having found none, they then slid toward the corpse patiently waiting for them to reach a decision about its fate, and finally back to both aunts again, but if there was a message secreted somewhere in this back-and-forth chilly glance, none of them could decode the meaning.

Instead, Auntie Cevriye tipped him, generously.

So the dead-washer took his tip and the Kazancis their dead.

In a flash, they formed a convoy of four vehicles. Leading the procession was a hearse, sage green as a Muslim hearse is dictated to be, the color black being reserved for the funerals of the minorities, Armenians and Jews and Greeks alike. The coffin lay at the back of the three-sided truck, and since somebody had to go with the dead, Asya volunteered. Armanoush, her face full of confusion, was tightly gripping Asya's hand so that it looked like the two had volunteered together. "I am not having any women sitting in front of a hearse," remarked the driver who sternly looked very much like the dead-washer. Maybe they were brothers; one of them washed while the other carried the dead, and perhaps there was a third brother working in the cemetery, in charge of burying them.

"Well, you have to because there aren't any more men left in our family," Auntie Zeliha chided from behind, in a voice so icy the man grew quiet. Perhaps it had occurred to him that if there truly were no men to escort the dead in the hearse, it was better that these two girls accompanied him rather than this intimidating woman with her miniskirt and nose ring.

So the man stopped complaining and soon the hearse lumbered off.

Right behind them was Rose's Toyota Corolla. Her panic was almost palpable from the way the car lurched and halted, moving inch by inch, as if she were either convulsed by rhythmic hiccups or intimidated by the wild traffic.

Given her steadily increasing trepidation, it was now hardly possible to imagine Rose at the wheel of a five-door, ultramarine Grand Cherokee Limited 4x4, equipped with an 8.0 cylinder engine. The woman who roared down the wide boulevards of Arizona had turned into a different driver on the snaky, crowded streets of Istanbul. Truth be told, Rose was completely astounded at the moment, her bafflement and disorientation almost outweighing her grief. In no more than seventy-two hours after their arrival, she felt like she had accidentally fallen through a wormhole in the cosmos and stumbled into another dimension, a strange land where nothing seemed normal, and even death was smothered by surrealness.

Grandma Gulsum sat next to her, unable to communicate with this American daughter-in-law she hadn't seen all her life, but also feeling concern and pity for her now that she had lost her husband, though not as much concern and pity as she felt for herself; now that she had lost her son.

In the back seat was Petite-Ma. Today she wore a teal outdoor head scarf trimmed with inky black on the edges. On her first day in Istanbul, Rose had spent a great deal of time trying to unravel the essential criteria that would illuminate once and for all why some women in Turkey wore the head scarf and others did not. Before long, however, she had given up, failing to solve the puzzle even at the local level, or even within the household. Why on earth ageless Petite-Ma wore the head scarf while her daughter-in-law Gulsum did not, and why one of the aunts wore the head scarf while her three sisters did not, was simply beyond her.

Right behind the Toyota was Auntie Zeliha's metallic silver Alfa Romeo, with her three sisters crammed inside and Sultan the Fifth curled in a basket on Auntie Cevriye's lap, startlingly tranquil today, as if human death had having effect on his feline ferocity.

Alongside the Alfa Romeo whooshed a yellow Volkswagen Beetle driven by Aram. Having a hard time understanding why the Kazanci women were taking their dead home but wise enough to know that nothing so tires a person as to attempt an objection to

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the aunts, especially when they came in a cluster like that, he had chosen not to ask. Hence he simply tagged along, trying to make sure his sweetheart was doing okay amid all this commotion.

At the jam-packed traffic lights at Shishli, only blocks away from the Muslim cemetery the dead-washer had tried to direct them to, by chance they all lined up side by side, like the leading regiment of an indomitable army with all the zeal to fight but no common cause. Auntie Feride popped her head out of the window and waved left and right, apparently thrilled by the happenstance of them all being lined up like this, acting in unison for the first time, even if it were for the sake of some mechanical red light. Rose ignored the gesture, Grandma Gulsum the gesturer.

At the next red light, sitting between Armanoush and the driver of the hearse, Asya scrutinized the surrounding cars again, but luckily they had lost sight of one another. She felt a sudden, shameless relief to spot no Kazanci relatives of hers within eye range, except the one lying in the coffin in the back, of course, but then again that might not be included in her eye range as long as she did not turn around. As they drifted along in the jellylike traffic, so thick and congoloid, silt here and there by unpredicted openings, in front of them materialized a bright red Coca-Cola van.

When the light turned green and they were moving again, in the lane to their right a fleet of cars with soccer fans appeared. They had caps and scarves and flags and banners and bandannas, and some had the colors of their team in their hair; red and yellow. Frustrated with the slow-moving traffic, most of the fans had momentarily sunk into lethargy, idly chattering among themselves, and once in a while waving a bandanna or two from the open windows.
As the traffic began lurching forward again, however, they resumed their chants and shouts with renewed vigor. Before long, a yellow cab with dozens of bumper stickers on it recklessly boxed itself into the tiny bit of space between the hearse and the CocaCola van ahead. The driver next to Asya cursed angrily as he slowed down. While he growled some more and Armanoush watched the cab in front with increasing wonder, Asya struggled to decode the writing on the bumper stickers. There, among many others, she spotted an indescent sticker that claimed: DON'T CALL ME WRETCHED. THE WRETCHED TOO HAVE A HEART.

The driver of the cab in front was a rough-looking, swarthy man who had a gray Zapata mustache and who looked to be at least sixty, too old to get involved in such a soccer hullabaloo. There was a sharp mismatch between the man's utterly traditional look and the frenzy with which he drove. Even more interesting than him, however, were the customers—or else, friends— in his cab. The man next to the cabdriver had his face painted half yellow, half red. This Asya could clearly see from the hearse behind because this man had popped his head out the open window, waving a yellow and red banner with one hand, while loosely holding on to the front seat with the other. The upper part of his body jerking outside, and the lower part hidden inside the car, he looked like someone cut in two by a magician. Even from a distance Asya could see that the man's nose was so alcohol crimson that it upset the symmetry of half yellow and half red on his face, tipping the balance on behalf of the red. Just as she was pondering which particular drink—beer or raki or both—could endow a human being's nose with this particular shade, the window behind his was rolled down and another fan raised a drum in the air with one hand and held on to the interior of the car with the other. In perfect unison, the two hooligans sprouted half their bodies out of the windows, like the pruned branches of a yellow cab tree. Then the man in the front seat pulled out a stick and started beating the drum the other held in the air. The impossibility of the task must have energized them, for they soon supplemented the banging and thumping with an anthem. Several pedestrians on the sidewalk stood stunned, but a good number applauded and joined the duo, mouthing the lyrics in an ever-increasing fervor:

Let earth, sky, water listen to our voice
Let the whole world shake with our heavy steps
What are they saying?" Armanoush elbowed Asya, but Asya was slow to translate mainly because her attention had been fixed on a pedestrian. It was a lanky lad in rags, inhaling glue from a plastic bag while stomping his naked, blackened feet in time to the rhythm of the anthem. Every few seconds the boy stopped inhaling and mouthed the words of the anthem, but behind the rest of them, like an eerie echo: "... with our heavy steps...."

In the meantime the other partygoers also started to wave flags and bandannas out of their car windows, as they jovially joined in the song. Now and then the drummer stopped and used his stick to draw imaginary snakes in the air at the pedestrians and the street vendors on the sidewalk, as if directing them all, orchestrating the whole city's hubbub. When the first half of the song was over, a brief confusion ensued since few in this motley chorus seemed to know the lyrics of the second half. Not letting this bothersome detail shatter their solidarity, they started singing right from the beginning once again, this time more festively than before. Let earth, sky, water listen to our voice Let the whole world shake with our heavy steps Thus they all flowed along the avenue in a flood of red and yellow, amid chaos and clamor. Inside the hearse Armanoush and Asya and the driver silently watched, their eyes fixed on the yellow cab ahead. They tailed it so dangerously close to the vehicle that Asya could see empty cans of beer rolling around in the back window.

"Look at them! Is this how grown-up men should behave?" the driver of the hearse exploded. "Now and again it happens. A fanatic dies, and his family or his madcap friends want to wrap his coffin with the flag of this or that soccer team. Then they shamelessly expect me to transport these sacrilegious coffins to the cemetery! If you ask me, all this is sheer blasphemy! There should be a law prohibiting such nonsense. Only the green prayer mantle should be allowed, I say. Nothing else. What do these people think they are doing? Aren't they Muslim or what? You are dead for Allah's sake, what do you need a soccer flag for? Has Allah built a stadium up there in the sky? Are there tournaments in heaven?"

Not knowing how to answer this last question, Asya fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat, but then the driver's attention was drawn toward the yellow cab again. A mechanical melody rang out from the cell phone of the fanatic leaning out the front window. Still holding on to the cab with one hand, still conducting the city with his other hand, the portly hooligan made an attempt to answer his phone, forgetting he had no other hand for the task. He lost his balance, and along with it he lost two other things: first the drumstick, then the cell phone. Both fell onto the road, right in front of the hearse.

The yellow cab abruptly stopped and the hearse came to a halt just when the rift between the two cars had shrunk to a hair. Asya and Armanoush lurched forward with the sudden stop, and then both simultaneously checked the coffin in the back. It was safe and sound.

In a flash the owner of the dropped items jumped down, still smiling and singing, his half-yellow, half-red face glowing with fervor. He stared back as if apologizing to the traffic. "Was that better than this?" the driver said. "It pays so little, you have no coverage, no health insurance, no right to go on strike, no nothing. I used to drive large lorries in the past, long-distance transportation, you know. Coal, petroleum, butane gas, industrial water... you name it. I transported them all."

"Was that better than this?"

"Are you kidding? Of course it was better! You load the cargo in Istanbul and head to another city. No boss to butter up, no supervisor to bootlick! You are your own master. If you feel like it, you can linger on the road provided the boss does not ask you to deliver the cargo too fast. In that case, you gotta drive with no sleep. Other than that, it was a clean job. Clean and dignified. You didn't have to bow to anyone."

The traffic began to accelerate and the driver shifted gears. Before long the soccer fleet veered right toward the stadium. "Then why did you quit that job?" Asya wanted to know.

"I fell asleep at the wheel. One moment I am speeding down the road. The next moment there is a terrible blast, like it is judgment Day and Allah is summoning us all. When I
open my eyes, I find myself inside the kitchen of this shanty house by the road."

"What is he saying?" Armanoush whispered.

"Believe me, you wouldn't want to know," Asya whispered back.

"Well, ask him how many dead he carries in his hearse per day?"

When the question was translated, the driver shook his head:

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"It depends on the season. Spring is the worst time of all; not many people die in spring. But then comes the summer, the busiest season. If it is above eighty degrees, it gets pretty hectic for us, especially the old... They die like flies... In the summer Istanbulites die in droves!"

He paused broodingly, leaving Asya with the semantic burden of the very last sentence he had constructed. Then he glanced at a pedestrian in a tuxedo shouting orders into his cell phone and exclaimed:

"All these rich people! Huh! They stockpile money all through their life, what for? How foolish! Do shrouds have pockets? It's a cotton shroud that we are all going to wear in the end. That's it. No chic clothes. No jewelry. Can you wear a tuxedo to the grave or a ball gown? Who holds the skies for these people?"

Asya had no answer to offer, so she didn't attempt one.

"If nobody's holding it how could we possibly live under this sky? I see no celestial columns, do you? How can one play soccer in these stadiums if Allah says 'I am not holding the sky up anymore'?"

With that question still hovering in the air, they turned the corner and finally reached the Kazanci domicile.

Auntie Zeliha was waiting for them in front of the house. She exchanged a few words with the driver and tipped him.

The Volkswagen, the silver metallic Alfa Romeo, and the Toyota Corolla were lined up in front of the house. It looked like everyone had arrived before them. The house was full of guests, all waiting for the coffin to be unloaded.

Upon entering the house Asya and Armanoush encountered a jam-packed, all-female space. Though the majority of the guests were clustered in the living room on the first floor, some were momentarily dispersed to the other rooms, either to change a baby's diapers or to scold a child, to gossip a bit or to pray, now that it was time for the afternoon prayer.

With no bedroom to retreat into, the girls headed to the kitchen, only to find all the aunts there whispering about the tragedy that had befallen them, as prepared trays of ashure to be served.

"Poor Manni is devastated. Who would have thought all the ashure she had cooked for Mustafa would be served to his mourners?" Auntie Cevriye said, standing near the stove.

"Yeah, the American bride is devastated too," Auntie Feride remarked, without lifting her gaze from a mysterious stain on the floor. "Poor thing. She comes to Istanbul for the first time in her life and loses her husband. How creepy."

Sitting at the table, listening to her sisters while smoking a cigarette, Auntie Zeliha said softly, "Well, I suppose she will go back to America now and remarry there. You know, Allah's share is three. If she married for a second time, she has to marry for a third time. But I wonder, after one Armenian and one Turkish husband, what will her third choice be?"

"The woman is mourning, how can you say such things?" asked Auntie Cevriye.

"Mourning is like virginity." Auntie Zeliha heaved a sigh. "You should give it to the one who deserves it most."

Aghast at what they had just heard, the two aunts flinched in stupefied amazement. It was in that instant Asya and Armanoush entered the room, followed by Sultan the Fifth, meowing in hunger.

"Come on, sisters, let's give the cat something to eat before he devours all the ashure," Auntie Zeliha said.

Just then Auntie Banu, who had for the last twenty minutes or so been working at the counter, brewing tea, slicing lemons, and listening to the ongoing debate without ever interjecting, turned toward her youngest sister and decreed: "We've got more urgent things to do."

Auntie Banu opened a drawer, pulled out a huge, shiny knife, grabbed an onion lying on the counter, and cut it in half. She then cupped one half of the onion and pushed it toward Auntie Zeliha's nose.

"What are you doing?" Auntie Zeliha jumped in her chair.

"I am helping you to cry, my dear." Auntie Banu shook her head. "You wouldn't want the guests inside to see you like this, would you? As much of a free spirit as you might be, even you need to shed a tear or two in the house of the dead."

With the onion under her nose, Auntie Zeliha closed her eyes, looking like an avant-garde statue that had no chance of being exhibited in a mainstream museum: The Woman Who Couldn't Cry and the Onion.

Auntie Zeliha opened her jade green eyes and sniffed a tear. The onion had worked.

"Good!" Auntie Banu nodded. "Come on, everyone, we need to go into the living room. The guests must be wondering where their hosts are, leaving their dead alone!"

So said the sister who once used to play "mom" to Auntie Zeliha, singing her half-made-up lullabies, feeding her cookies on cardboard boxes turned into imaginary tables, narrating stories that always ended with the pretty girl getting married to the prince, cuddling and tickling her, the sister who made her laugh like no one else.

"All right!" Auntie Zeliha agreed. "Let's go, then."

So they ambled into the living room, the four aunts in the front, Armanoush and Asya following behind. In harmonized steps, they entered the room full of guests, the room where the body was.

Sitting in the corner on a floor cushion, her light blond hair covered with a scarf, her eyes puffy from crying, her plump body squeezed in among strangers, was Rose. She instantly gestured to Armanoush, calling her to her side.

"Amy, where were you?" Rose asked, but before waiting for the answer, she hurled other questions at her: "I have no idea what's going on here. Could you find out what they're going to do with his body? When are they planning to bury him?"

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Having barely any answers herself, Armanoush inched closer toward her mother and held her hand. "Mom, I'm sure they know what they're doing."

"But I'm his wi-fe," Rose faltered over the last word, as if she were starting to doubt that.

They had laid him on the divan. His hands were placed with the two thumbs tied together on his chest, where a heavy blade of steel lay so that the corpse would not swell up.
Once there was; once there wasn't. God's creatures were as plentiful as grains and talking too much was a sin, for you could tell what you shouldn't remember and you could
father so that I rocked his cradle upon hearing his cry ... when the world was upside down and time was a cycle that turned around and around so that the future was older
A long, long time ago, in a land not so far away, when the sieve was inside the straw, the donkey was the town crier, and the camel was the barber ... when I was older than my
Once there was; once there wasn't.
In the beginning there was the word, says Islam, preceding any and every existence. Be that as it may, with her father it was just the opposite. In the beginning was the absence
women in an endless chain. All were interconnected in a sequence of reaction and rhythm, each and every story woven into those of others, whether their owners recognized it
Asya took a step toward her dead father. One step and then another, closer. The smoke intensified in tandem. Somewhere in the room Rose wailed in pain. So did all the
Her aunt ... her mother ... her aunt ... her mother....
gaped at her mother, it dawned on her why she hadn't objected to her daughter calling her "auntie."
She lifted her gaze and combed the room until she saw Auntie Zeliha, now sitting at the back with an unresponsiveness that even freshly cut onions could not touch. Asya
Her uncle ... her father ... her uncle ... her father....
Asya slowly rose to her feet and looked at the body. She looked hard and intently so as not to forget that this body washed with green daphne soap and wrapped in a three-
"You don't have to," Auntie Zeliha muttered. "But I finally realized, I owed you an explanation. And if I don't make it now, there will be no other time. He's dead."
"I don't believe you," Asya said without looking directly at her mother.
Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian watched the swirl of women shift and part. In complete harmony and unfaltering shifts, guests exchanged seats with newcomers. Like birds of a feather they perched on the armchairs, the couch, and the floor cushions, so close that their shoulders touched. They wordlessly greeted and stridently cried; all these women who could be so quiet on their own yet so loud when they grieved collectively. By now Armanoush had detected some of the rules of the rite of mourning: There was no more cooking in the house, for instance. Instead, every guest came with a tray of food; the kitchen was jammed with casseroles and saucepans. There was no salt, no meat, no liquor in sight, and no appetizing smells of baked goods. Just like smells, sounds too were controlled. Music was not allowed; no TV, no radio. Thinking of Johnny Cash, Armanoush looked around for Asya. She spotted her sitting on the couch with a bunch of neighbors, her head held high, distractedly tugging at a curl while looking at the dead body. Just when she was going to make a move toward
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every woman jumped to her feet and bowed her head obediently. Their faces alert with grief and reverence but also nosiness, they watched the crippled imam leave the room.
As she walked him outside, Auntie Banu kissed his hands and thanked him many times, after which she tipped him.
At first, the imam, a piercing shriek ripped the air apart. It was emitted by a chubby woman nobody had ever seen before. Her cry escalated in piercing decibels, and in
next to no time her face was crimson, her voice grating, and her whole body shaking. So miserable was her state and so palpable her pain that the others watched her in awe.
Thus finding herself surrounded by a swarm of mourning strangers (even her mother looked like a stranger at this point), Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian watched the swirl of
women shift and part. In complete harmony and unfaltering shifts, guests exchanged seats with newcomers. Like birds of a feather they perched on the armchairs, the couch, and the floor cushions, so close that their shoulders touched. They wordlessly greeted and stridently cried; all these women who could be so quiet on their own yet so loud when they grieved collectively. By now Armanoush had detected some of the rules of the rite of mourning: There was no more cooking in the house, for instance. Instead, every guest came with a tray of food; the kitchen was jammed with casseroles and saucepans. There was no salt, no meat, no liquor in sight, and no appetizing smells of baked goods. Just like smells, sounds too were controlled. Music was not allowed; no TV, no radio. Thinking of Johnny Cash, Armanoush looked around for Asya. She spotted her sitting on the couch with a bunch of neighbors, her head held high, distractedly tugging at a curl while looking at the dead body. Just when she was going to make a move toward
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her, Armanoush saw Auntie Zeliha sit next to her daughter, and with an unreadable expression say something into her ear.
So there was the dead body, lying on the divan.
And among a group of ceaselessly wailing and weeping women, Asya was sitting quietly, the color draining from her face.
"I don't believe you," Asya said without looking directly at her mother.
"You don't have to," Auntie Zeliha muttered. "But I finally realized, I owed you an explanation. And if I don't make it now, there will be no other time. He's dead."
A long, long time ago, in a land not so far away, when the sieve was inside the straw, the donkey was the town crier, and the camel was the barber ... when I was older than my father so that I rocked his cradle upon hearing his cry ... when the world was upside down and time was a cycle that turned around and around so that the future was older than the past and the past was as pristine as newly sowed fields ...
Once there was; once there wasn't. God's creatures were as plentiful as grains and talking too much was a sin, for you could tell what you shouldn't remember and you could
The many ingredients.

"What have you done, master?" Mr. Bitter crooked as he broke into a slyly grin, as was expected of him. "You intervened in the way of the world!"

Auntie Banu tightened her lips. "I did," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "True, I gave him the ashure, but he is the one who chose to eat it. We both decided it was better this way, far more dignified than to survive with the burden of the past. It was better than not to do anything with this knowledge. Allah will never forgive me. I am ostracized forever from the world of the virtuous. I will never go to heaven. I will be thrown directly into the flames of hell. But Allah knows there is little regret in my heart."

"Perhaps purgatory will be your abode forever." Mrs. Sweet tried to offer some solace, feeling helpless as she witnessed the master cry. "How about the Armenian girl? Are you going to tell her about her grandmother's secret?"

"I can't. It is too much. Besides, she wouldn't believe me."

"Life is coincidence, master." It was Mr. Bitter again.

"I cannot tell her the story. But I will give her this." Auntie Banu opened a drawer and took out a golden pomegranate brooch with seeds of rubies buried inside.

Grandma Shushan, once the owner of this brooch, was one of those expatriate souls destined to adopt one name after another, only to abandon each at every new stage of her life. Born as Shushan Stamboulian, she then became Shermi 626. Next she was Shermin Kazanci, and after that, Shushan Tchakhmakchian. With every name acquired something was also lost in her forever.

Riza Selim Kazanci was a shrewd businessman, a dedicated citizen, and also a good husband in his own way. He had been astute enough to switch from cauldron making to flag making at the beginning of the Republican era, right at a time when the nation needed more and more flags to adorn the entire motherland. That is how he became one of the wealthiest businessmen in Istanbul. His visit to the orphanage took place sometime around then, as he intended to see the headmaster for potential business arrangements.

There in the dimly lit corridor, he saw a converted Armenian girl, only fourteen. It wouldn't take him long to find out she was the niece of the man he most adored in this world: master Levon—the man who had taught him the art of cauldron making and who had taken care of the needy boy that he once was. Now it was his turn to help master Levon's family, he thought. And yet, when after numerous visits he would finally propose to her, 'it wasn't kindness that guided him but love. He was convinced that she could and eventually would forget. He was convinced that if he treated her nicely and dotingly, and gave her a child and a magnificent home, she would bit by bit forget her past and her wound would ultimately heal. It was just a matter of time. Women cannot keep carrying the burden of their childhood once they themselves give birth to a child, he reasoned. Thus, when the news arrived that his wife had abandoned him to go with her brother to America, he at first refused to believe it, and then ostracized her. Shushan disappeared from the annals of the Kazanci family, including from the memories of her own son.

Being named Levon or Levent made little difference to Shushan's son. Either way, he grew up to be a dour man. As gentle and polite as he was outside his house, he was cruel to his own children, four girls and a boy.

Family stories intertwine in such ways that what happened generations ago can have an impact on seemingly irrelevant developments of the present day. The past is anything but bygone. If Levent Kazanci hadn't grown up to be such a bitter and abusive man, would his only son, Mustafa, have ended up being a different person? If generations ago in 1915 Shushan hadn't been left an orphan, would Asya today still be a bastard?

Life is coincidence, though sometimes it takes a djinni to fathom that.

Late in the afternoon, Auntie Zeliha stepped outside into the garden. Not wanting to enter the house, Aram had been waiting there for hours, having long since finished smoking all his cigars.

"I brought you tea," she said. The spring breeze caressed their faces, carrying from far and wide the sundry smells of the sea, growing grass, and the yet-to-blossom almond flowers of Istanbul.

"Thank you, my love," Aram replied. "What a lovely tea glass."

"Do you like it?" Auntie Zeliha rotated the tea glass in her hand as her face brightened with recognition. "This is so bizarre. You know what I've realized just now? I bought this set twenty years ago. So strange!"

"What is so strange?" Aram asked, feeling at that moment a drop of rain.

"Nothing," Auntie Zeliha said, her voice lowering. "It's just that I never believed they could survive this long. I always feared they would break so easily, but I guess they live to tell the tale, after all. Even tea glasses do!"

In a few minutes, Sultan the Fifth slowly padded out of the house, his stomach full, his eyes drowsy. He drew a circle around them before curling up next to Auntie Zeliha. For a while he seemed immersed in meticulously licking a claw, but then he stopped, looking around in alarm to ascertain what might possibly have disturbed the serenity. In lieu of an answer, a lukewarm drop fell on his nose. Then followed another drop, this time on his head. The cat rose slowly with deep discontent, and stretched his limbs before heading back into the house. Another drop. He quickened his pace.

Maybe he didn't know the rules. He just didn't know that whatever falls from the sky shall not be cursed. And that includes the rain.

This novel was written while commuting between Arizona, New York, and Istanbul. My gratitude goes to numerous Armenian and Turkish families who have welcomed me, hosted me in their houses, cooked for me, and shared their personal stories with me, despite the difficulty of remembering a painful past. I am particularly indebted to Armenian and Turkish grandmothers, who have an almost natural ability to transcend the very boundaries that nationalists on each side take for granted.

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Between the Turkish edition and the English edition of this novel in 2006, I was put on trial for "denigrating Turkishness" under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. The charges that were brought against me were due to the words that some of the Arme
man characters spoke in the novel; I could have been given up to a three-year prison sentence, but the charges were eventually dropped. During this time, I have been fortunate enough to receive enormous support from so many people, friends, and strangers alike, of such different nationalities and religions. I owe them more than I can say. And finally, as ever, I thank Eyup, for his patience and love ... for just being himself... .

THE END