

*3. Kindness*

I am going to tell you about my friend, but first I must say a little about myself. I was twenty-one. I had been in Konya for two years, fulfilling my national service as a jandarma, a policeman. Of all the cities where a conscript from İstanbul might be posted, Konya is perhaps the least sympathetic. Capital of the Selçuk sultanate and ancient home of the Mevlevi dervişler, it is a kind of holy place – the only city in Turkey where one can't buy beer. More women than not wear headscarves when they go out of the house and would not think of speaking to a man on the street, even if they know him. Atatürk had dissolved the derviş orders and closed their lodges; by law, the Mevlevi may whirl only once a year, for the tourists, but in Konya that law is largely ignored and in any case most of the tourists are Turks, Mevlevi by sympathy themselves, come on pilgrimage to the tombs of Rumi and Şams.

I had seen the sema in İstanbul, where it is presented as a cultural or folkloric rather than religious or ecstatic event. I don't like beer so its unavailability in Konya was no hardship. In any case, rakı and other spirits were easily enough found. On my leaves I could go to Bodrum or İstanbul, wherever my family was, and all the arrangements for my going to America, once my service was completed, had been made. All in all, I was not unhappy in Konya – no more

unhappy than any boy away from his family and home for the first time. When I thought of how much farther from home was America, where I would be surrounded not by the perhaps overly pious residents of Konya but by infidels and atheists, I felt less unhappy still. I said my Friday prayers at different mosques, depending on my mood, and if the sermons were more rigorous than I was accustomed to they weren't as strident as those one often heard in İstanbul, declamations by fanatics intent on seeing the secular state overthrown. In Konya the notion of a Turkish theocracy seemed somehow beside the point. The Mevlevi, like the other derviş orders, in any case, are heretics and mystics, unconcerned with the secular world.

My duties were not onerous. I had friends among my fellow jandarmalar, with whom I would go out to eat or to spend hours in a tea shop, playing backgammon. There was a soccer pitch where we often kicked a ball about. In free hours, I would wander around the city as though I were any tourist, peering at the monuments of Selçuk architecture – tekkeler and medreseler, mosques and tombs, so different from the Ottoman buildings I was used to viewing as historic: these were upright, angular, severe, decorated with tiles and reliefs in which even the calligraphy seemed figurative – sacrilegious. I kept up correspondence with my pen pal in the US, who was astonished and appalled by the fact of my conscription and that I had not protested it. He himself, he admitted, had registered with Selective Services, but only because he could not have received financial aid for college if he hadn't. The American draft was inactive, in any case.

I sought out American and British travellers on whom to practice my spoken English; read and reread the books my pen pal sent me – he had a fondness for Dickens – and those I bought at the foreign-language bookstores in İstanbul when I went home on leave. (My nickname at the barracks was Küçük İngiliz – Little Englishman.) But I also read in my own language: it was in Konya, where it seemed most appropriate, that I first read Rumi – although of course he wrote in Persian, so I was reading translations. And I wrote in both languages: letters in Turkish to my family and a few friends, in English to the young Californian who had long since got over his diffidence about correcting my errors and whom I did not clearly remember meeting face to face.

Already, too, I was writing little fictions – fanciful, made-up memoirs of my childhood and inept imitations of Sufi fables, fragments of historical fantasy and, equally misunderstood, stories of life in other countries. These I composed in English, for it seemed thus that I could remove myself, my essential Turkish self, from the process, stand away from the narrative – reinvent myself. Also, this practice impressed my friends, already daunted by my plans to study at an American university. Too, no-one in Konya I might be tempted to show any of these exercises to could have read them.

You must imagine me, then, as an odd kind of military man. Not, surely, an American grunt private, whether draftee or volunteer, for the jandarma is not the army. Nor were there not other apprentice intellectuals in the Konya barracks, though the grandest dream of the majority was to find work in Germany, Switzerland, or one of the rich Arab countries. I was small, so my uniform appeared to fit badly and my truncheon and pistol looked like oversized toys. I often carried around a notebook and pen, usually a dictionary that caused my pocket to bulge. My hair, of course, was kept clipped to stubble, and I had had to shave off the mustache cultivated in imitation of my elder brother – in paltry adolescent rebellion against my father.

One of my friends among the other conscripts was a young man who also hailed from İstanbul. In fact, İhsan had been born near Trabzon on the Black Sea coast, but his family had migrated to the city when he was a small child and he had grown up there. The situation of his family, however, İhsan's upbringing and the city he knew, were very different from mine. His father worked in a sweatshop, sewing up replicas of American and French blue jeans to be sold in the Covered Bazaar, and the family had lived for some years in one of the squatter settlements against the Byzantine land walls of Stambul. They still lived in Fatih, the city's most conservative district.

İhsan himself, as a boy, had worked in the bazaar, running errands and fetching trays of tea, exerting his urchin charm and scraps of English, French, and German to entice tourists into the shop of one of his uncles, a carpet seller. It seemed to me likely that İhsan might once or more

than once have fetched tea for one of my prosperous relatives, if not for my father – picking out rugs for one of his resort hotels or for our houses in Emirgan and Bodrum or the Nişantaşı apartment. My father might have bought from İhsan's uncle the prayer rug he gave me after I was circumcised. I never mentioned this thought to İhsan, although I'm sure some such occurred to him as well.

Nevertheless we became friends: he asked me one evening soon after I arrived in Konya (İhsan had already been there for a year) what foreign language was the book I was reading. When I said English, he invited me for coffee on the condition I speak English to him. Doubtless he would have made the same offer if I were reading German or French.

Let me now attempt to recapture my friend as I knew him first in Konya. I am not seeing him in uniform, for we all looked much the same in our dark green fatigues with the scarlet armbands – he is wearing a pair of the fake blue jeans his father makes and an open-necked yellow polo shirt. At the throat gleams a blue glass bead strung on a thong; playful, he insists he must wear the talisman in my company because my blue eyes are those of a witch or demon. His own eyes are deep, dark brown, but still he appears more European than I, being less swarthy, having delicate, finely cut features and lighter hair. He's taller than I, as well, more robust, and more hirsute so that he looks unshaven a few hours after shaving and the blue bead nestles in the hair that curls up from his chest. His voice, though, is light, breathy, and he moves with a kind of gentility or timidity that is as poignant in this biggish man, a poorly educated Anatolian peasant, as it is affected. Because of his military haircut one can see the fine shape of his skull and he cannot disguise the deep recessions in his hairline above the temples; he often expresses a fear of going bald. Many Turkish given names do double duty as common, everyday words – my own is one of the words for light. İhsan, as a word, means benevolence – kindness.

I cannot, will not say İhsan was my closest friend in Konya. Truly, I had no close friends there, and there were other conscripts with whom I had more in common and spent more time. The nearest I came to intimates were my elder brother back in İstanbul, where he was a student at

Boğaziçi University, and my friend in California, a university student himself. In any event, after many English lessons fueled by coffee or tea or rakı and mezeler, many games of backgammon at which İhsan usually beat me, soccer matches in which my smallness and speed complemented his greater size, strength, and endurance – eight or ten months after I arrived in Konya, İhsan completed his obligation and, a civilian, climbed aboard a bus back to the city.

I expected never to see him again, however much we pounded each other's shoulders in the Konya bus terminal and proclaimed our mutual affection. Our lives, our futures were too different. He was returning to İstanbul, but it would not be my İstanbul. When I in turn went home, it would be to a city as alien to İhsan as any metropolis in Western Europe or America, and then, soon after, I would fly to America itself. Indeed, I had leave some weeks later and spent the whole of it at our house in the Bosphorus suburb of Emirgan, which İhsan, I thought, would find as bewildering and opulent as labyrinthine Topkapı. I didn't venture even as close to the old city as our apartment, across the Golden Horn from Stambul in the northern reaches of Beyoğlu.

I was startled, therefore, to discover a letter from İhsan waiting for me at the Konya barracks. It said little. He was working for his uncle the carpet merchant again, though as a salesman rather than an errand boy. The English I had taught him came in handy, garnered him compliments and, therefore, customers. What else? I don't recall, any more than I recall what I wrote in reply. Nor do I remember which of us let the correspondence lapse after three or four more exchanges; I suspect it was myself. The last letter I am sure of having received was typewritten. İhsan had saved up to buy a second-hand machine and lessons, and hoped with this skill to qualify himself for a post in government service or industry. I found this narrow dream of his unspeakably sad, imagining my friend as a kind of Turkish Bob Cratchit or Bartleby the Scrivener, abused and ill paid, tapping doggedly away at the recalcitrant keys of his manual typewriter (back home, I shared a personal computer with my brothers) in some dark warren among overflowing file cases....

I neglected to say that, in Konya, I had introduced İhsan to the poetry of Rumi. He was

especially taken with the verses that expressed the poet's passionate love for his friend and spiritual guide Şams.

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Now you must imagine it is early summer of 1988 and I have returned to İstanbul, a civilian again and – because my family is wealthy – more or less idle, at loose ends. Because in a matter of three months I will matriculate at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA (its renown as bright in Turkey as anywhere else in the world), and because I am accordingly arrogant, I have quarrelled with my elder brother, himself on vacation from his studies at Boğaziçi University. Mehmet's English is (at the time) as good as my own, his intelligence more penetrating, his study of architecture hardly more pragmatic or less élitist than the course of study I envision for myself; Boğaziçi is no second-rate institution – I must have provoked him sorely, because he slapped me and called me ugly names and chased me out of the house.

Laughing, outrageously pleased with myself and with Mehmet, whom I adore, I run, then stride, then amble through the leafy, shady streets of Emirgan, down to the Bosphorus. Across the water, the yalılar and apartment blocks of districts as charming, historic, and expensive as Emirgan line the Asian shore. At a waterfront café, I sit under a canvas parasol, sipping a glass of tea and sucking at cold spoonsful of ice cream. It's early, ten or ten-thirty, already hot, but a breeze comes off the water, stealing coolly down the strait from the Black Sea. A white ferry from Büyükdere and Yeniköy hoots its whistle as it pulls into the Emirgan landing stage and, with sudden resolve, I throw down a few bills and rush out of the café to meet the boat.

Mehmet had said that if I knew what was good for me I wouldn't return to the house that day. Of course I knew he didn't mean it, but I had my keys to the Beyoğlu apartment, and I had not yet gone into the city proper except for one night's restaurant dinner with the whole family. I had not even made my usual pilgrimage to the Süleymaniye, most sublime achievement of the sublime architect after whom my family is named. (Sinan himself thought his Selimiye in Edirne more successful, but I don't agree.) I thought I could reach the Süleymaniye in time for

noon prayers. Luckily, though it was hot, I was wearing long trousers and a shirt with sleeves that could be rolled down to cover my bare arms. It was not Friday, so there would be no sermon or proper service, which was fine with me. I would lunch in Stambul, then go across the Horn to the apartment for a shower and, probably, a nap, then telephone around in search of a companion or several for dinner. Perhaps I would call home and invite Mehmet to join me for a night on the town: a peace offering.

The ferry approached its terminus by the Galata Bridge. Ugly garbage floated in the oily water around the bridge's pontoons and the floating restaurants, which were crowded, as always, as was the bridge itself above. Looking up from the ferry deck, I saw the scaled dome with its golden finial of Yeni Cami, rising beside a bank's huge, unlit neon sign. High above, the slender minarets and broad domes of the Süleymaniye on its hill crowned the jumbled, crazy roofscape of Stambul. Oddly exhilarated, I pushed through the throngs at the dock. Near the railway station I found a dolmuş that would take me up the hill.

The call to prayer had begun by the time I reached the forecourt below the mosque. The müezzin's cry spiralled up into the fierce blue-white sky from speakers in the balconies of the minarets, rising like the gyres of circling pigeons. Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar! The Arabic phrases were made unearthly by the beauty of the voice and the distant, monodic counterpoint of other müezzinler from other mosques across the city – from as far, it seemed, as Üsküdar on the Asian shore – as far as Emirgan. Within the compound, vendors of trinkets and baubles, perfumes, cigarettes, failed to make the space anything but holy. No more did the crowds of Western tourists. As I crossed the forecourt, a simit seller dodged out of my way, his pole wavering over our heads, a miniature, mobile minaret of bread dough crusted with sesame. I noticed, off in a corner, a letter writer at a tiny folding table, hunched over his typewriter, beside him a little white-haired woman swathed in many-patterned chintzes; I noticed him because his hair was as pale and bright as the old woman's, a brassy, artificial blond. The letter writer looked up. I turned away.

Many men and a few women crowded under the arcade by the entrance, waiting their turns to wash at the row of spouts. Above us, ponderous yet light as air, the grey domes and half-domes of the mosque piled up like soap bubbles under the drip of another, titanic, invisible faucet, its waters the müezzin's divine words as they dropped from the sky – La illaha illa'Llah! I moved closer to the arcade, seeking a space where I could make my own ablutions.

“Ziya!”

I heard my name called, its two syllables cutting sharply through the murmur of the throngs and the high, thin chant of the müezzin.

“Ziya Bey!”

My name is not unusual, not uncommon, but I looked around. Short, I could not see over the heads of the multitudes, could not see through their solid chests and shoulders. It seemed no-one near me was also named Ziya, for my neighbors were unconcerned, patient, waiting, and then shuffling a step or two closer to the marble trough and trickling spouts.

“Ziya! My friend!”

Suddenly, inexplicably, I recognized the voice, but when a young man pushed between two others, saying my name again, I did not recognize him.

In heavily accented English he said, “You remember your old buddy, don't you?” The false, gaudy, bleached splendor of his hair caused him to look like no-one real at all, a cunningly articulated plastic automaton. He reached out with his two hands for mine, grinning broadly.

“İhsan?” I asked, bewildered, as he clasped my hands for a moment in his, then threw his arms about me and pressed his lips against my cheek. “Is it you?”

He kissed my other cheek. “Of course!” Releasing me, he moved back a little. My eyes were caught again by his brilliant hair so that I could hardly take in the newly familiar face. With both hands he ruffled that hair, pushing it back from the brow to reveal dark roots, then, grinning still, brushed one palm over my own bristly scalp. “You're here for prayers?” he asked. “No, I won't keep you. But you saw where I've set myself up in the corner – come see me when you're done, come

talk to me.”

Without waiting for a reply, he was backing away, smiling grandly but his dark eyes serious, fixed on mine. He collided with a swarthy, unshaven, unsmiling man, who grunted and, after İhsan murmured a polite apology and sidled past him, grimaced, glared at the marble pavement at his feet as if he wished to spit. “İbne,” the man said in a harsh undertone, and did spit, washing the ugly word from his mouth and his mind before adjusting his skullcap and pulling a string of prayer beads from a pocket.

Abruptly a space opened at the fountains and I took it, removing my shoes, sitting down to wash my feet and hands and face, my eyes, mouth, ears. The cool water still clinging to my skin, I made my way through the inner courtyard and into the sanctuary. Light from high stained-glass windows fell to tangle in the net of wires close above the floor and the light of the many white bulbs strung among those wires. Then the light seemed to rise again, hazy, an incandescent fountain that overflowed the vast dome. Carpets laid like tiles over the floor were soft and scratchy under my bare feet. Rows of men facing the mihrap and Mekke were already praying. I found a place of my own.

I could not properly concentrate on my prayers. I spoke the words – Arabic phrases I understood properly only in paraphrase – I made the motions and bowed toward Mekke, touching my brow to the carpets. But I was thinking of İhsan and of the ugly word that had been thrown at him like a gob of phlegm – plastering itself to the forehead below the dark roots of his bleached hair: ibne. In English, the upright workingman might have called İhsan “faggot” or “queer” – this is how ibne is rendered, not entirely correctly, in the up-to-date Turkish-English dictionary.

When I had completed my devotions, I hurried out of the mosque, reclaimed my shoes in the foyer; I crossed the courtyard, and from the entrance stairs looked out over the forecourt, looking for İhsan. He was seated at his typewriter again, bent head gleaming bright in the sunlight, typing, although I saw no client beside him. I started toward him, but halted again a few meters

away. His gaudy print shirt fell open nearly to the navel, revealing a completely hairless chest. It appeared too that his forearms were either shaved or the hair bleached to invisibility. His brow and nose were pink with sunburn. There was no blue bead at his throat.

“Selamünaleyküm,” I said, approaching.

İhsan stopped typing and looked up. “Aleykümselam,” he replied automatically, then, rising to his feet, “So formal!” Coming around the little table, he said, “Must I ask you how you are?” He used the formal second person, drawling out the syllables in parody. “You look well and fine, Ziya Efendi – you look wonderful.” Embracing me again, he kissed my cheeks again and lightly kissed my lips. “Now, sit down beside me and tell me about yourself. Have you a letter you need written?” He lifted his eyebrows, self-mocking. “Or shall we go somewhere for a glass of tea?”

Surprising myself, I said, “Let me buy you lunch, İhsan.”

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And now I will insert an aside that is equally a flashback and which does not concern İhsan at all, except by inference. This is not how one is expected to construct a story.

The summer after I turned fifteen, when we went on holiday to Bodrum, my family was short one member: Mehmet had been drafted for his national service and was in Diyarbakır, far to the east. The house was nevertheless full: my father and mother, myself, my sisters Sacide and Melek, and my little twin brothers, İzzet and Veli. Then, after we had been in residence a few weeks, my favorite uncle came for a long weekend visit.

For some reason that I don’t understand, maternal uncles are more lovable than paternal. The word for one’s father’s brother is amca, which doubles as a term of respect for any male elder. The secondary definition for dayı, mother’s brother, is protector. Much younger than his sister, my dayı İsmet seemed to me a kind of play adult, whom I thought of (and treated) as a slightly bigger, less dignified version of Mehmet.

He was married, of course, although he married late. In keeping with his other eccentricities, he had married a woman neither Muslim nor Turkish but Jewish and American. It was a scandal.

Moreover, Rebekah was a year or two older than İsmet. Still worse, she had said quite plainly, aloud so anyone could hear her, that she had no intention of having children until she was quite ready. If my elder dayı, Mustafa, hadn't been a proper son who cheerfully sired four children, not even my mother's six could have made up for the shame of İsmet and Rebekah. But now it seemed Rebekah was quite ready at last, for she was gloriously pregnant. Dignified and calm, she listened to my mother's anxious advice with an air that made one understand she would ignore whatever she chose to ignore for she was vastly pleased with herself – she could do no wrong.

As for İsmet, he was alternately thrilled and impatient, indulgent and fretful. When we went to the beach at Gümbet, Rebekah politely asked me to take her tiresome little boy in hand, to take him away. Hand in hand, my dayı and I walked along the beach. Veli and İzzet tagged after us for a bit, but I was ten years older than they and, though İsmet was more than ten years older than I, I shooed them back.

On the broad, calm reach of the turquoise gulf rode yachts and colorful small sailboats and windsurfers. Back in town, tourists would be shopping; eating lunches that might be more exotic to me than to them (the only Indian restaurant in all Turkey is in Bodrum); inspecting the collections of the museum in the castle; debating a day trip to the Greek island of Kós just outside the bay; waiting for dolmuş, taxi or kayık to the beach.

Where İsmet and I started walking, most of the people on the beach were Turks like ourselves. Not the year-'round residents of the town, of course – middle-class and wealthy families on vacation from İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir. In places the sand would be spread as thickly with beach towels as the floor of a mosque with carpets, ornamented with parasols and picnic baskets. Many of the women and not a few of the men remained fully dressed. This was not true of my family: Rebekah, being a liberated young American woman, despite her pregnancy and long residence in Turkey, wore a bikini; my mother a sleek maillot; my father and uncle European-style briefs. Conversations were loud and cheerful. Men and older boys drank beer; women brewed tea over small fires or expensive camp stoves; children ran yelling into and out of

the calm, warm water; young women huddled together in giggling cliques, nervous and proud of their exposed limbs; young men in similar cliques prowled the reaches of the beach, resentfully eyeing the girls made inviolate by the presence of their families, or prowled further, toward the areas reserved as if by common agreement to foreign vacationers.

The foreigners, the sun worshippers, were Scandinavian and Dutch mainly; that is, generally tall and fair and uninhibited – big, blond men and women wearing minimal bathing costumes, their skin burnished and gleaming with oil. Their groups tended to be smaller and were clearly not families. Nor did they consider a visit to the beach a social occasion; they had come for the brilliant sunshine and warm Aegean and alternately swam and basked. Hungry or thirsty, they called on one of the convenient wandering vendors. İsmet called on one himself, purchasing a simit that he tore in half and shared with me. Munching on the chewy bread, we walked on at the edge of the water while the simit seller headed inland, balancing the pole on which the rings of bread were stacked like the plastic rings of a child's toy.

İsmet eyed the statuesque blonde women sprawled on their towels with a certain speculation (Rebekah was dark and petite), but did not embarrass me with comments on their charms. The roaming bands of younger men were less circumspect and sophisticated, ogling the women shamelessly, nudging each other and making lewd remarks and daring each other to approach single women and groups of women unaccompanied by men. A number of women sunbathed topless, and they attracted the most attention, as cuts of meat in a butcher's stall attract flies. Boys younger than I sidled past them again and again, abashed and fascinated; older boys muttered that these European cows were desperate to be fucked while it was clear the young Turks were desperate to fuck – not a specific buxom Swedish beauty but any woman, all women – but were too frightened to approach. I will if you'll come with me, they said to their friends: there was safety in numbers, and in any case it wouldn't be fair if only one of the friends got his rocks off. European sluts liked so much to be fucked by a manly Turk that they liked even better several in a row. There's no point to making excuses for my countrymen's attitude toward women, toward

sex.

Quite suddenly, İsmet and I reached a part of the beach where all the sunbathers were male, the majority Turks. No – not all male, for there under a vast parasol sat a large woman wearing a gold-lamé bathing suit, her wrists and ankles heavy with bangles, her fingers heavy with rings. Her face was strikingly made up and her gloriously fake red hair piled up high like a birthday cake. Like the Valide Sultan in her son's harem holding court amongst the eunuchs, she was surrounded by men who themselves wore a great deal of jewelry and spoke in high, gossipy voices, who were either middle aged and soft or young and slim. The woman – but was she a woman? Her hands were big, her arms muscular. She noticed us, İsmet and me down by the water, and waved one hand to quiet her companions. “What a handsome, handsome man,” she exclaimed in a loud, braying voice that carried across the sand like the voice of a singer in an auditorium, “and what a precious, lovely boy!”

İsmet's grip on my hand tightened for an instant before he released it, grasped my shoulder and swung me around. “We've come far enough, nephew,” he said, his tone harsh, peremptory – outraged or scared – and gave me an ungentle push back the way we'd come. Behind us, the extraordinary woman gave out a cry both disappointed and mocking.

After we had walked in silence three or five minutes, İsmet said, “Stay away from those köçekler and ibneler, Ziya.” He sounded uncharacteristically severe. I did not know those words, köçek, ibne (how ridiculously naïve I was as a boy!), but didn't dare ask him to explain.

By the time we regained the haven of the family, my dayı seemed his usual self again. He drank a beer and talked to my father about business. My little brothers dragged him into the shallow waves, where he gamely allowed them to abuse him. Coming out of the water, preoccupied, he glanced at his wife, resplendent, fecund, and then at me. He smiled, sweetly.

The room in the Bodrum house that I usually shared with Mehmet was next to İsmet and Rebekah's. Through the joint wall I heard them quarrel; I could make out that they went back and forth between Turkish and English but not their words. İsmet was drunk. I had seen him

getting drunk and happy before and during dinner, then he and my father went out, then two or three hours later my father came home without his brother-in-law, my father himself a little tipsy. “Well, the man’s on holiday after all,” he muttered, defensive. “He’s young. Younger than I, certainly. When you get to my age you need your rest.”

I was asleep when my dayı came in but I woke, though he was not loud, and heard him quarrel with his wife, and heard him leave the room and close the door behind him. The house was silent. İsmet must have leaned against the wall outside their door for a time or sat on the floor, taking meditative pulls from time to time at his bottle of brandy. I fell asleep again.

When my dayı, naked, climbed into bed beside me and raped me – well, would I call it rape? It hurt, of course it hurt, but not because he wished to hurt me. He wanted to fuck; his wife in her seventh month was neither attractive nor willing; prowling around downtown after midnight he had not happened to encounter a prostitute or, if he had, she hadn’t satisfied him. He was a lusty young man, İsmet my uncle, a Turk with strong masculine appetites: he fucked me three times, fast and hard. Between times he kissed and caressed me – though his hands never ventured near my groin and if he had discovered I was aroused (indeed, came twice myself, discreetly) he would have been appalled; he fed me sweets and held the bottle so I could sip his brandy and called me a sweet thing, a pretty thing, and then he fucked me again.

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My uncle cannot countenance my refusal to marry and breed, but he would not be especially perturbed to know I enjoy fucking other males. That I prefer full-grown men, muscular and hairy, to lissome boys would be puzzling but within the realm of possibility. Men like to fuck, he would say – need to fuck, are made to fuck. Unlike a western man, he’s not disgusted by the simple idea of sex between males. What a man fucks is not so crucial as that he fucks, and I use the word what rather than whom deliberately. What my uncle would not comprehend is that I also enjoy being fucked – and enjoy oral sex, given and received, mutual masturbation, endless necking and foreplay – that orgasm (my own) is nice but not the only goal and pleasant to postpone, that my

partner's orgasm can please me no end. But here I am sounding like an American homosexual – a gay man.

The notion of sexual reciprocity would not occur to the general run of Turkish men – the idea, you see, is ludicrous. As a rule, Turkish men are lousy lays.

Another mysterious word the naïve fifteen year old didn't know is kulampara. The Turkish-English dictionary translates it pederast; the dictionary is imprecise. The pederast lusts habitually and especially if not solely for boys, whereas any man at all can or might or will be kulampara, on occasion, if women are not available but a boy or ibne is: what the man fucks is immaterial, that he fuck imperative. The pederast, moreover, is a pervert.

An ibne is a man who does not fuck – that is, not a man; who is fucked – that is, essentially the same as a woman: that is, an object by which, on which a man's lust is satisfied. A köçek is an ibne who wears women's clothing, often transsexual as well as transvestite – a prostitute, generally. Pricier, you may be interested to know, than a female whore.

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I said, "What have you done to your hair, İhsan?"

The rank of restaurant to which I would have liked to take İhsan wouldn't have served him, we both knew without speaking of it, so we walked down the hill to the Horn, he carrying his small folding table and smaller folding stool and I the tiny typewriter and satchel of paper. The restaurants under the bridge were full and raucous. Myself, I could have been satisfied with a glass of tea and a fillet of fried palamut in a roll from one of the fishing boats that crowded up against the pontoons, but I wanted to treat him to a proper lunch: we waited on the bridge for a table.

İhsan laughed, frankly, knowingly. "You heard what the man at the Süleymaniye called me." He pressed against me where we stood at the railing, gazing out over the glittering, blinding Bosphorus toward Asia, his arm over my shoulder, mine around his waist. "I couldn't get a job with the government, Ziya, nor in business – I knew nobody, my skills are not exceptional. I can't earn a living with this –" He kicked the little typewriter. "Few people anymore can't write their

own letters or wouldn't prefer to use the telephone. My uncle won't have me working for him." Pressing closer, he leaned in by my ear. "Your old friend is a whore, Ziya Efendi." Smiling, he drew a little away. "You are shocked? But there was always something a little effeminate about İhsan, no?"

I opened my mouth to speak – to deny what he was saying? – and he pressed his finger to my lips.

"That good Muslim called me *ibne*." İhsan's voice remained within its normal range, sardonic, serene. He did not raise his voice, nor lower it. "So. I am *ibne*. Sometimes I am *köçek*, though that is a great deal of effort and not much to my taste." He licked his lips, a practiced flirt. "I should like you to fuck me, Ziya Efendi –" he was using the formal second person again, parodic – "I have wanted it since Konya, you know, and because you are my friend I would not charge you a single lira." (A single lira is worth effectively nothing at all.) "After lunch."

My buying his lunch might be taken for payment, but I didn't say it. I said nothing. We leaned against each other above the filthy waters of the Golden Horn (which in Turkish we call simply and prosaically *Haliç* – the Inlet), Stambul to one side, Beyoğlu on the other, ahead the reach of the Bosphorus (*Boğaziçi* – the Strait) and the sprawl of Üsküdar. I was twenty-one. I had been fucked by my uncle when I was fifteen, by a large, sweet, precocious boy from school the following year, but I had never fucked another boy and with women I was a virgin. This last is not so unusual in Turkey where, though the state is secular, the population is Muslim. Still, I could have bought a whore if I'd wanted to. The red-light district was not so very far from our apartment in Nişantaşı, nor was money an issue. I had fucked my own hand. With İhsan's warmth pressed against my flank, I imagined fucking him. The two figures got mixed up in my mind: he was bigger than I, a year older: I would be the boy, the *ibne*.

"I am *ibne*," he said. (He was reading my mind.) "Sometimes I am *köçek*. Far too infrequently," he said (I looked – he was smiling again), "I am also *kulampara*."

There is also, in Turkish, another term: eşcinsel. This is a synthetic word, a new word, which I had seen in print but never heard used in conversation, its elements eş – a similar thing, and cinsel – sexual. Homosexual, one would say, an accurate translation; and like that English word it was coined to describe a conundrum that did not exist before it was named. I have no real hope that Turkish will acquire a proper equivalent for gay in my lifetime.

We could not go to his room near Taksim because the man who owned the house would require me to pay: Yavuz was İhsan's pimp. It was Yavuz (whose name means tough) who persuaded İhsan to bleach his hair, shave his chest and legs. Turkish johns appreciated the slight illusion that İhsan was a boy (or, when he went in drag, a woman). Europeans and Americans, looking for at least the illusion of trade, found it disorienting.

I took him to my family's city apartment. I locked the door of the bedroom where İzzet's and Veli's schoolbooks were lined up on shelves, their toys tumbled into a chest, their drawings tacked up on the walls beside older drawings of mine and newer architectural renderings, precise and romantic, of Mehmet's. Along the way, İhsan had sauntered brazenly into a pharmacy to buy lubricant and condoms, leaving me nervous and embarrassed on the street.

Benevolent, kindly, amused, and in a way, it seemed, grateful, İhsan taught me. I had not known that fucking need not be fast and sudden – he paced me, slowed me down – nor that the act could be performed face to face. I had hardly known about kissing; I had not known (the simplest thing) that my nipples were sensitive to touch. Fellatio had been beyond the bounds of the imaginable. Simply lying beside him, holding his handsome prick in one hand, was a revelation. We were lying together like this, peaceful, hours later, when İhsan began to recite in a low, sweet voice:

Happy the moment when we are seated in the palace, thou and I,

With two forms and with two figures but with one soul, thou and I.

He went on, quoting Rumi from memory, but I lost the sense of it and drowsed, until he shocked me awake by whispering, in Arabic, a great blasphemy and great mystery, the words of

Rumi's beloved Şams to the assassins: "La illaha illa ana" – There is no God but me. "If I knew Arabic, I would say but us. I must go, Ziya Bey," he said. "I have to work this evening."

"Do you need money?" I asked, naïve.

He kissed me. "Not from you. But I would like a shower, if I may."

I did not join him in the shower, because it was clear where that could lead, but I sat in the bathroom, still naked and sweaty, and watched him. "Did you write to me from Konya and get no reply?" he asked. "My father and elder brother beat me and threw me out of the house. They wouldn't have forwarded any mail I received afterwards, if they knew where I was."

"No," I admitted, ashamed, thinking that I could not imagine such a thing happening to me, my family's doing such a thing.

"Will you write to me from America?"

"Where will you be this evening?" I asked.

"Around and about Taksim and Galatasaray till late, in and out. Why? Will you come looking for me? Those aren't places you should go."

He sounded like my uncle. I shrugged, clasped my hands between my knees. "I'll be here," I muttered. "I won't go back to Emirgan tonight. I'll go out for dinner, then come back here."

"Ziya." He shut off the water and turned toward me, dripping. Wet, his hair almost looked its natural color. In an odd, coy gesture he hid his genitals behind his hands. "Are you asking me to return and spend the night with you?"

"My father might decide to stay in the city tonight," I said, thinking fast, "or my brother might come in from Emirgan. I'll give you the telephone number. You can call to see if I'm alone. When you're done."

"You're a sweet boy, Ziya," he said. He did not say he'd call but he accepted the number and the address (I scribbled down those for the Emirgan house as well), and before he went out into the late afternoon he said, "Thank you for helping me to be for a few hours man as well as boy." Himself, he meant: a homosexual man – eşcinsel erkek. How can you say what your language has

no words for?

§

I took a shower. Staring into the mirror as I shaved, I tried to see if I looked different now. Because I didn't, I shaved off two weeks' worth of new mustache, and then regretted doing so. I dressed in clean clothes from the bureau and closet of a bedroom where I had not slept overnight for at least a year, clothes I knew to be Mehmet's because they were too large. I called the house. Mehmet said, "I wondered where you'd got to, little brother." He spoke in English. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I went to the Süleymaniye, and then met a friend for lunch."

"And now?"

"I'm going to stay in the city tonight. Will you tell Ana?"

"The correct term, in American English, is Mom."

"I know that."

"Baba's coming home tonight, I think. You'll be all alone."

"I'm not afraid."

"I'm not still angry with you, Ziya," my brother said. "I don't remember why I was angry. Shall I come down and spend the evening with you?"

I thought several things at once: I thought how dear to me was my brother, how deeply I would miss him when I went to America. I had two months only to save him up in my memory, to savor him. Mehmet was four years older than I, which is to say he had always been young enough to be my playmate, enough older to be my protector. And then I thought of İzzet and Veli, my little brothers, whose circumcisions had been performed and celebrated two years before, while I was stationed in Konya, marking their accession to the rank of proper Muslims if not to adult estate – they were eleven now. I had taken leave to attend the celebration but I had never been their protector, their companion: twins, they had each other, a shared boyhood that was entirely mysterious to me, as indissolubly joint as the double circumcision ceremony. And yet

they were my brothers: I loved them, I would not see them grow up, become men. I would be in America. “If you like,” I said to Mehmet, falsely casual.

“I’ll try to get there by seven. Meet me at the ferry landing?”

It was a wild, crazy evening. The light lasted till late, then the night was lit up with flashing, flickering neon. Playing at being foreigners in our own country, we spoke English together and had drinks in the rooftop bar of the Hilton, looking south-southwest over Galata and the Stambul peninsula to the flat blue gleam of Marmara till it turned to a lake of molten bronze and then caught fire. Like silhouettes snipped from stiff black paper, the pointed minarets on the skyline appeared fragile, impermanent, decorative, and new – then, in the next (or at the same) instant, ancient and eternal. Even when the neon signs came on, staining rooftops with their acidic colors, I could not imagine any other city skyline could so definitively represent the city: could be İstanbul. Galata Bridge threw a fuse of incandescence over the Horn, igniting İstiklal Caddesi; in a flash, the avenue raced up the hill to the bomb of Taksim Square where, high above the street, we, in polo shirts and pressed blue jeans and leather slip-ons, sat by a plate-glass window drinking stiff vodka-tonics, eating stuffed grape leaves and salted nuts.

We made paltry imitations of Westerners, Mehmet and I, too nicely dressed for our ages, too polite, I with my buzz-cut that was clearly military, not affectation, and Mehmet with his affected proletarian mustache. Though we ignored the call to sunset prayer, when we went to dinner in the Hilton’s Chinese restaurant we kept our left hands scrupulously in our laps and were inept with the chopsticks in our right. Mehmet was telling me (I don’t know why) about a project he’d designed while I was in Konya; because I didn’t know the English architectural terms he had to explain them in Turkish.

We went to Çiçek Paşası, but despite all the real foreigners the beer halls were too authentically Turkish for our mood and, as I’ve said, I don’t like beer, so we moved on to a saz-ve-jaz club on İstiklal and drank whiskey. Mehmet told me about a young woman he was interested in, a fellow student at Boğaziçi, but admitted ruefully that, as the eldest son, he would

accede to our parents' choice of a mother for his sons – a decision he expected to learn of soon. When a voluptuous person with a low, smokey voice – real woman or post-op köçek I couldn't be sure – tried to persuade us to buy her a drink, Mehmet fended her off laughingly and she, laughing less pleasantly, sauntered away to join one of her associates at the table of a group of German businessmen. The only women besides professionals in the club were a very few tourists. Both wailing Turkish saz and syncopated American jazz annoyed us both, and Mehmet said, in English, "Let's go dancing."

He went off to the telephone to try to round up a few friends. My eyes narrowed to pierce the thick haze of cigarette smoke, I watched the musicians on the little stage and watched the women and perhaps-women make their marks and guzzle their watery drinks. This was the very district İhsan had advised me to avoid, but I was not alone. My brother would protect me. I tried to imagine how İhsan would appear in drag, if that were how he had dressed to make his rounds tonight – could not. And then, recalling Mehmet's diffident remarks about women, it occurred to me to wonder whether my considerate elder brother might not, some night before I left for America (tonight, say), lead me down the hill to the street of licensed brothels and attempt to further my education as a man. This was suddenly, sickeningly, a horrifying thought. I could refuse Mehmet nothing, could not imagine deliberately disappointing him.

But he grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the club, and we met a crowd of his university friends at a discothèque. You would have thought it a gay club: there were very few young women, who often danced with each other, and boys happily danced with boys. There were, however, no köçekler, no drag queens, and you couldn't have told an ibne from any other man. I danced with my brother, with his friends, singly or in a group. The music was terrible, '70s disco, '80s new wave, sugary, synthetic Turkish imitations of western pop no worse than the real thing. I had a wonderful time.

Late, very late, our initial drunkenness sweated out on the dance floor and then regenerated more thoroughly, we stumbled out onto the street. Good-bye, good-bye: Mehmet's friends went

their ways. “Home now, Mehmetcik?” I asked.

“Already?” Mehmet’s arm lay heavy across my shoulders. Dizzy, I grabbed his hand to keep it there. He inclined his head, bumping his skull fondly against mine. “Okay, Ziyacık,” he agreed, pulling me, pushing me, urging me along the street. “We’ll walk, partway at least. Clear our heads.”

I kept my hand on his waist. Our hips bumped and bumped. He was sweaty, damp and rank – we both were. From time to time he squeezed my neck or brushed his palm over my scalp. From time to time, I raised my free hand to clasp his on my shoulder.

We passed a dark, stinking alley. From its depths came a harsh shout: “Filthy köçek! Walking virus!” The gross, sodden, solid sound of a fist striking home in a soft belly and a liquid grunt of pain. “You want to be a woman, I’ll rip your parts off!”

“Come along, Ziyacık.”

It seemed that I felt the man’s knee drive into my balls while his open hand struck my cheek, and I staggered, but it wasn’t I who shrieked.

“It’s not our affair, Ziya.” My brother saved me from falling. “Come along.”

“Give it away, would you?” A loud slap and then another, cutting off one moan and the next. “You have no cock, woman, understand?”

“Yavuz!”

Did I hear the name or was it a scream that became a shocked grunt, did I recognize the voice?

“Yavuz, please, no!”

“Your ass is for anyone who cares to pay for it, swine, but your cock is mine.”

Mehmet was pushing me through the open door of a taxi. I was not moaning, was not screaming, not weeping. Mehmet was leaning forward, giving the driver the address in Nişantaşı, then settling back into the seat beside me, silent, squeezing my hand.

The northern suburb or village of Emirgan, on the European shore of the Bosphorus, is named for a Persian Safavid princeling who enjoyed a scandalous liaison (I would like to say love affair) with the Ottoman Sultan Murat IV. More than three and a half centuries later, I sat in the fake-Ottoman pavilion in our garden, drinking thick, sweet coffee, nibbling white cheese and cured olives, fresh bread, rose-petal jam, smelling the roses blooming around the köşk (from which the English kiosk) and the honeysuckle climbing the lattice walls, reading Hawthorne – The Marble Faun, I think; unless I was reading Fitzgerald. It was late morning. I was no longer hung over, but I was on vacation. Capricious, indolent, I had declined Mehmet's invitation to join him in an outing to the Princes' Islands in the Marmara.

My gentle, quiet little sister Melek (whose name means angel) came out to inquire if I wanted more breakfast. I teased her, saying she was too submissive and accommodating to her menfolk, too much the proper Turkish girl. Bless her, she said that as soon as I started expecting her to cater to me she would certainly stop. Then she kissed my right hand and pressed its back to her brow, smiling slyly. Did her esteemed elder brother not wish for anything at all? I asked for another coffee.

İzzet and Veli raced past the köşk toward their hideout deeper in the garden. A moment later, Veli returned to ask if, please, I would play soccer with them and their friends later. I said I'd think about it. Was I to be on their team? Of course, he said, little flatterer – they wanted to win!

When Melek returned with my coffee, she brought me a letter as well. The mail had just been delivered.

The letter was not from America – not from my California pen pal or from Harvard; it was postmarked Taksim. The Emirgan address was typed. There was no return address. Within the envelope was a single sheet of paper bearing several typed lines:

My friend,

You are too western, you have read too many western books, are full of romantic western notions. You will fall in love with me [this sentence in English]. Go to America.

It was unsigned.

Go to America, I said to myself: and never come back.