4. The World of Men

I wanted to see something of the world on my first trip into it, so I left İstanbul by sea. The Ambasciatore, an Italian ship, departed from the Asian shore, from the docks on the Marmara below Haydarpaşa. My family had come to see me off. Even my grandmother came along, elegant and correct in her ancient black Chanel suit, glad of a rare outing down the Bosporus if not glad to see me go. Not that she didn't heartily approve of my leaving the country to study; she had sent her own sons abroad at the appropriate times. Her antique mother-in-law, who lived with us as well, was too frail to leave the house and did not, I think, quite understand how far away I was going. In any case, my great-grandmother had difficulty distinguishing among her many descendants. I had knelt down that morning in the dim, scented, filtered light of the gallery above the garden, where she sat as erect and fastidious as any Ottoman dowager in the harem, and, not convinced I would see the old lady again in this lifetime, I kissed her tiny hand, pressed it to my brow, asked for her blessing.

At the docks we were less formal. We had arrived three hours before the ship was to depart. İzzet and Veli, self-important, carried my bags aboard and stowed them in the cabin, then, with a tribe of young cousins, ran off to explore the boat. Holding a sheaf of abundant crimson and

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pink roses from our garden, my grandmother peered around the cabin, inspected the minuscule bathroom and tested the firmness of pillows and mattresses on the two bunks, nodded: it would do. My father asked me to check again that I had my passport and other documents. Opening the secret inner compartment of the beltpack Veli and İzzet had given me, I was able to show him I did, as well as the folder of traveller's cheques and selection of emergency cash in the currencies of each country I would pass through. The denominations of the Italian lire were nearly as outrageous as the Turkish, while the numbers on British and US banknotes seemed absurdly small. Mehmet, whose experience of international travel was limited (as had mine been) to day trips to offshore Greek islands, solemnly advised me to keep the pack strapped around my waist even when I slept. I was not to imagine everyone in the world was as honest as a Turk. Brisk, my mother asked which bunk I planned to sleep on. I said the upper, and she placed upon it the basket of summer fruits she had brought.

The cabin was too small to admit sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, crowded around the open door. They moved aside for my grandmother. When I came out, I saw over their shoulders a stranger – an unshaven young man leaning against the bulkhead, his eyes on the door through which I came. Widening my own eyes in inquiry, I touched the brass numerals fastened to the door. With a slight smile, he nodded and held up his key.

My mother saw him as well. Assuming on the evidence of his being alone that he was not a Turk, she asked in English if he was her son's cabinmate for the voyage to Venice. Nearly as fluent, he agreed he was, introducing himself as Sebastián Ávila, a Spaniard. My mother ushered him into the cabin as though it were the başoda in her own house, offered a plump fig from the basket, and invited him to join us for coffee. Polite, he said that that would be very pleasant. He wished to wash up first, he added, diffident: he was just off a bus from Ayvalık (and had noticed, I thought, my grandmother's disapproving glance, which said as clear as words that no relative of hers would ever appear in public looking so disreputable). If we would excuse him, he'd join us in the lounge in a little bit.

Nevertheless, he did not appear during the hour we spent on the observation deck, sipping Italian espresso, eating Italian gelato, looking across the water to the minarets and domes of Stambul. I unwrapped last-minute farewell gifts – cassette tapes for my Walkman, several little boxes of sweets; a novel by Yaşar Kemal from my sister Sacide, who wasn't at all sure she approved of my going away; from Melek, my other sister, a black skullcap she had crocheted herself. I put it on, embarrassing her. One of my paternal uncles gave me a pocket English-Turkish dictionary – my third.

Mehmet, who complacently denied any envy of my trip through Europe, let alone to America, handed me three slim phrasebooks: Italian, German, French. "I didn't think of Spanish," he murmured, looking away, and I looked up, thinking he saw Sebastián approaching. Holding her roses up to inhale their fragrance, my grandmother said, stiffly, what a pity the young man hadn't joined us. Understanding what she meant, my mother made excuses for Sebastián, saying he had looked exhausted, doubtless was taking a nap. "But you should go down and wake him before the boat casts off, Ziya," she told me. "The point to leaving İstanbul by sea is watching the city slip away into the Marmara."

An announcement was made in several languages, asking non-passengers to leave the ship. Waving aside the protests of my uncles, I paid for coffees and ices with nearly the last of my lira – since, as I explained, given the riotous rate of inflation, the bills would be worthless the next occasion I found to spend them. My sisters rounded up the younger children, and we all went to the gangplank. Here my grandmother finally handed me the roses, slightly wilted now and consequently more odorous. She had painstakingly removed all the thorns. She wished me adieu and bon voyage – French was the foreign language of choice for her generation – and pressed her dry lips to both my cheeks in a manner that, in its formality, was to be taken for French. Accepting the arm of her youngest son, she allowed him to steer her down the stairs.

I watched her descend, and by this point I was ready to abandon the idea of America, of travel, of education, ready to return with my family to our pleasant house above the Bosporus. It

seemed suddenly inconceivable I could wish to live anywhere else – that English, this language I had studied and spoken since childhood, could properly replace Turkish. With its short, invariable words, its simplistic grammar and impossible spelling and paucity of tenses, the harsh, authoritarian sound of it, English seemed inflexible, inadequate, ugly. And yet there remained my secret, which only Mehmet knew: that I dreamed in English. Turkish was the language I wished to hear about me, to speak, for it is in the ear the most beautiful language imaginable, but it was in English I believed I could write. There was little enough precedent, in modern Turkish, with less than a century of tradition behind it, for literature – Yaşar Kemal spoke to me hardly at all.

My relatives proffered wishes for good fortune, productive study, a speedy, triumphant return. They had no notion where I was going: I was going to America, to Massachusetts – to Harvard. My mother had come back from America a medical student; my father's engineering credentials were German. My elder brother, not yet graduated, was already an architect: had designed an elegant summer house my father intended to replace the old-fashioned, ramshackle place in Bodrum. Mehmet had not left the country; what might I achieve? My father advised me to study hard, say my daily prayers, find a mosque in Cambridge or Boston for Friday worship. My mother told me to keep my eyes and ears open – to remember that, just as Turkey was not the whole world, nor was America. Drawing me a little aside, Mehmet said he would miss me. Roughly, he tousled my hair, knocking Melek's skullcap to the deck; fiercely, he embraced me, crushing the roses between our chests, as if he would never let go. "You will write," he said in my ear, "– and I don't mean letters." Breaking away from me, he knelt to retrieve the skullcap, which I stuffed into an outer pocket of my beltpack. I offered him one of our grandmother's roses and, when he smiled, tucked it behind his ear. "Allahaısmarladık," I said, releasing his hand, but my brother replied in neutral English, "Good-bye, Ziyacık," and hugged me again, and rushed away. If you traced its derivation, the English word was no more profane than the Turkish.

Abruptly, then, I was alone, clinging to the rail so far above the upturned faces on the wharf, watching Mehmet and our parents descend the gangplank. My mother called out something of

which I caught only "young Spaniard." I waved to show I understood, but waited for them to reach the dock.

The public-address system warned that we would be casting off in fifteen minutes. Looking around, I saw no-one who did not appear to be a foreigner. Even the crewmen were most likely to be Italians. Waving again to my family on the dock, I cocked my chin, raised my eyebrows, hardly expecting them to understand, and then went below.

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At the door to the cabin, I knocked before turning the key, but not loudly enough to wake Sebastián, who sprawled asleep on the lower bunk. I pushed the door to behind me. A precise air-conditioned breeze from the vents quarrelled in the small room with the hot air that came through open portholes, bearing fetid, oily smells from harbor and city, faint, evergreen breaths down the swift Bosporus. Sebastián's large knapsack stood propped against my own suitcase, next to his sturdy hiking boots; his soiled clothing lay discarded on one of the chairs and a damp towel hung on the handle of the bathroom door.

Sebastián himself lay untidily on his back on the lower bunk, one arm thrown up to shade his eyes. He had showered but not shaved. He was naked. I had seen any number of shirtless European vacationers on the beaches at Bodrum or wearing sleeveless singlets on the streets, so the tuft of hair in his armpit was no real surprise. For that matter, not every Turk nowadays follows the prescriptions for cleanliness. But I had never before seen a Christian entirely nude and could not prevent myself from staring for a moment. His hip was canted toward me slightly, the blade-like bone of the pelvis protruding, almost white in a narrow band of pale, untanned skin. He was otherwise quite dark, as dark as I, so the livid scar left by his bathing suit somehow brought his body into focus and made more lurid the brush of black pubic hair. The only naked Europeans I had encountered had been Greek statues and vase paintings in museums – I had imagined a man's pubic hair, if left unhygienically in its natural state, a tidy little patch; the uncircumcised penis a neat, tiny organ. Like a boy's, as if the cut that made him a Muslim also

freed the appendage to grow. Sebastián's prick was neither neat nor tiny. Limp and defenseless, it lay across his thigh, the sleeve of dark skin wrinkled and drooping like a too-big condom, obscuring and softening the helmet shape of the glans.

When I cleared my throat and said his name, he shuddered briefly, abruptly sat up, planting his feet wide apart on the floor. I looked away from his startled, sleepy face. The fragrance of the roses caught in my throat. He uttered a short phrase I assumed to be Spanish and to mean Who are you?

"Your cabinmate," I said in English, a word he seemed not to understand. "The other bunk?" I said, pointing at the basket of fruit he could not see above his head.

Knuckling his eyes, Sebastián yawned, then stretched, clenching his fists on empty air as if grasping for memory. "Ziya?" he said after a moment, puzzled but agreeable, making the initial sibilant voiceless, hissing, an s.

"Ziya Sinan," I agreed, recalling that, outside Turkey, one's surname was as important as the forename. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but the boat is about to cast off and I thought you would want to watch our departure."

He was staring at the roses I held. "Çok güzel," he said – Very beautiful, the all-purpose phrase every tourist learns. He shook his head. "Yes, of course. It would please me to see." Unselfconscious in his nudity, he stood and took two steps across the cabin, crouched down by his pack. "I will dress and come up."

As I opened the door, he looked back over his broad shoulder, shifting his weight. Below and between pale buttocks his genitals dangled, flirting with his heels. "Thank you," he said.

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Above, I found the gangplank had been removed, the opening in the railing gated across, and my family gone from the wharf. I had expected them to remain – to wave to me as the Ambasciatore pulled away into the roadstead, waving and waving until I could see them no longer. Disappointed, I turned away and found a companionway to take me farther up, to the

observation deck.

It was not a large ship – a luxury liner berthed nearby dwarfed it – but larger than the Bosporus ferries to which I was accustomed. There were several hundred passengers, most of whom appeared to have come up to watch our departure. There were clusters and couples and knots and proper families and edgy groups that clumped up together only because they came from the same city or spoke the same language or had travelled for ten days under the auspices of the same agency. I heard Italian, French, German, even Greek. I heard different varieties of English, but I would have all the English I wanted in three weeks, more English than I could stomach, nothing but English. I heard not a word of Turkish.

Somewhere far below our feet, engines were turning over in their housings. Detouring around people, holding my grandmother's roses to my chest, I made my way to the railing, looking away north along the waterfront, past the railway terminal where Asia stopped to stare, resentful, across the water to Europe. As two tugboats maneuvered the ship out into the roadstead, I saw the tower of Kızkulesi, the little nineteenth-century lighthouse with its tall flag staff on the islet athwart Üsküdar proper, guarding the throat of the Bosporus. As I watched, three ferries negotiated a complex pas de trois below Kızkulesi; one was making the regular crossing from European to Asian shore, another coming south from Beykoz and Çengelköy, the third heading north. My family might well be on the third, going home. A gleaming, aloof Black Sea cruise ship steamed past them all.

The Ambasciatore was pulling out from the wharf obliquely, on a heading as much north as west. From my position to starboard, in the waist of the ship, I would not see Stambul until we turned south. Nor, because of the curve of the strait, would I see even as far up the Bosporus as the span of the bridge at Ortaköy – though perhaps the tips of its towers like titanic twenty-first-century minarets. Every November my brother ran across it at the start of the Asia-to-Europe marathon, though I'm not sure he ever completed the course. Our suburban house lay several kilometers further up the strait, beyond the second bridge.

I leaned on the railing, smelling the water and the air pollution and the scent of my grandmother's roses, feeling a bittersweet melancholy such that, if I were a poet like my great-grandmother's long-dead husband, I might have improvised an elegiac quatrain. İbrahim Efendi composed his verses in Osmanlıca, the court language of the Sultans, an exquisite medley of Persian, Arabic, and Turkish written in Arabic calligraphy – a dead language now, since Atatürk's reforms. In my mood, plain Turkish seemed as moribund. As the ship drew its broad arc across the mouth of the Bosporus, I let fall wilted roses one after another into the blue water below, marking a trail that could not be followed home.

"I've brought you a beer." This was said in accented English – not to me, I thought, until the sweating bottle was pressed against my upper arm and the chill penetrated the thin fabric of my shirt. "Oh!" said Sebastián as I turned to him. "Your lovely roses!"

Two remained from my grandmother's bouquet. I offered them to him in exchange for the beer; he accepted one, holding onto it without knowing what to do with it, but insisted I keep the last. He hung over the rail to see the discarded blossoms scattered across the waves, foundering in the chop where Bosporus currents met the ship's wake. I don't like beer, but it was Efes Pilsen, a Turkish brew, and I drank deep from the bottle and thanked him.

"You are sad," he said. Someone who doesn't quite trust his fluency in a foreign language often produces statements of intolerable directness and honesty, simply because he doesn't know the euphemisms. From his expression, more quizzical than concerned, I could see Sebastián's sympathy was polite rather than profound.

I shrugged, practicing western body language. "I'm leaving my home and my family," I said, burying emotion in conventional sentiment.

"You are not just going on holiday?"

"I'm going to America."

"Look!"

I turned back to the railing. The European shore had come into view. North and inland stood

the shoddy, ugly highrises of the new parts of Beyoğlu, in one of which (though, thankfully, I couldn't pick it out) we maintained our city apartment. The brutal Hilton reared above Taksim Square. Below, just above the Golden Horn, which we couldn't see, Galata Tower showed its pointed crown.

We couldn't see the Horn because Stambul stood in the way, a ramshackle mosaic of two millennia's splendors glittering in the summer sun. I had seen variations on this panorama countless times, in all seasons and weathers (under snow it was pristine, unearthly), but not with the possibility before me of never returning or, when I did return, being a different person. My heart hammered. My eyes blurred. I had never even lived in the old city.

We swept slowly by. The captain gave his passengers plenty of time to gawp. Traffic seethed on the shoreline avenue below the toothy, carious remnants of the Byzantine sea walls. The myriad little domes and spiky chimneys of Topkapı floated among stands of cypress, plane, and poplar in the park on Sarayı Burnu. Massive, ruddy, so heavily buttressed it appeared squat, Aya Sofya lifted its miraculous dome, which, from a distance, appeared hardly so miraculous and offered small clue to the sacred volume within, sacred whether cathedral, mosque, or museum. High above on its hill, sublime Süleymaniye got right what the Byzantine architects and, especially, the Ottoman restorers of Aya Sofya fumbled, and below, nearer, Sultanahmet proclaimed its grey, grandiloquent flattery-by-imitation of the finer predecessors, six minarets bristling with envy. Like veins in decomposed grey marble, Ottoman terra-cotta tile roofs clambered in ragged files over the seven hills of the New Rome, following obscure, twisty streets. The Greeks, even now, call İstanbul – Constantinople – the City, and mourn its loss.

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As we sailed grandly on, I told Sebastián how, from Italy, I would go by train through Switzerland and France to Britain, thence by jet across the Atlantic to America. I would be a student, obliged to exile for at least four years. I told him I feared my great-grandmother would die before I returned, my younger siblings grow up without my knowing them – that as different

as home would become in my absence, I would myself be transformed even more.

In turn, Sebastián explained how pleased he had been when the booking agent discovered for him a berth in the cabin of a gentleman willing to share. The savings would allow him an extra three or four days in Italy, days to be treasured, before he returned to Spain. By now, the city lay well behind us, a smudge against the gilded frame of Marmara's mirror. Asia was beyond seeing, even had we settled on the port deck, and Europe stood at some distance, its profile like the continent of a mariner's dream, unreachable, inauspicious. We were afloat between one place and another, equally fabulous, a Turk and a Spaniard aboard an Italian vessel, speaking English. The specific thrill of İstanbul past, we were adrift. The unreal, unlifelike rhythms of a sea voyage had already taken hold of the passengers, who lazed and loafed and idled on sun-washed mid-afternoon decks, in air-conditioned, twilit salons and lounges.

Sebastián and I had continued drinking Turkish beer. Unused to alcohol not accompanied by food, I became hazy, my melancholy devolving to good nature; my mind grew foggy, my English precise, academic, fussy. Long silences pervaded more than punctuated our conversation. On one trip to the bar, Sebastián had been gone longer than necessary. Returned, he removed his shirt and dropped his shorts, lay back in his deck chair attired in only a vivid, abbreviated, lemon-yellow swimsuit that modelled the white scar across his hips I had seen when he was naked. His genitals made a three-knuckled fist in the yellow fabric. Shortly, he sat up again to anoint himself with a perfumed lotion that gave his skin something of the synthetic iridescence of the nylon swimsuit.

At his urging, I took off my own shirt. The bulky leather beltpack my little brothers had given me I removed and set on the cushion of the deck chair by my hip. He offered me the fragrant lotion. "I noticed that Turks, men," he said (his English had become clumsy, slow), "shave here –" he indicated his armpit – "how do you say? And here –" He brushed two fingers of his right hand across the fist in his crotch. "In Morocco too I saw this. It is a religious custom? Muslim? Like –" He made a grimace, screwing up his face, and his hand returned to his crotch, covering,

protecting, hiding.

"Like circumcision, yes." My voice sounded pedantic. "And the ritual ablutions before prayer." (I had missed the noon prayers, the mid-afternoon, would miss the sunset and evening. I was drinking alcohol. In my suitcase, rolled up tight but taking up considerable room, was the silk prayer rug I had received at my sünnet, my circumcision; in the smaller flight bag, a copy of the Koran.) "The Prophet prescribed the forms of cleanliness."

Sebastián changed the subject but left his hand in place. The pink rose I had given him reposed across his belly and chest, thornless stem following the declivity between abdominal muscles, blossom resting on his sternum. Its wilting, velvety petals were the same color as the nipples on either side, standing out against swarthy skin and black chest hair, thickest just where the flower lay. He was a young man, though older than I, in his late twenties. He worked with computers in a Madrid bank. Every other summer he took a long vacation out of the country. The travelling was as much to the point as the destination – going to Morocco, he had left Madrid by train. Although he'd flown to İstanbul, he had all along intended returning by sea and rail. This would be his third visit to Italy; abbreviated though it was, he looked forward to renewing his acquaintance with Venice and Rome. He had found the Moroccans sympathetic but not so hospitable and obliging as the Turks, while Egyptians were aloof, prideful. ("Turks are not Arabs," I murmured.) The sole attraction of Egypt was its ancient monuments; both Cairo and Alexandria were hellish places. His reminiscences rambled around Europe and the Mediterranean as the afternoon declined, but he scarcely touched on home, spoke not at all of his family. I would have had nothing else to discuss but he carried the conversation, growing unsteadily drunker, every now and then lifting the rose to his nostrils for a sniff.

We fell into a quiet, good-humored stupor, finishing our beer but not rising to fetch more. Sebastián yawned, and yawned again, and fell asleep. The lowering sun painted the sea bronze and gold and copper, and painted Sebastián's limbs and slack features with similar colors. The rose seemed to burn on his molten chest. Feeling drunkenly tender of him, because he had befriended

me, I roused him. I tucked my own remaining rose, crimson, into his hand with the other, gathered up our belongings, and supported him belowdecks to our cabin. There he collapsed with a groan onto the lower bunk, turning his face to the bulkhead, mumbling in Spanish.

Surprisingly (I believed I had matched him beer for beer), I was less drunk than he. I took clean underwear from my flight bag, went into the tiny bathroom, showered. When I emerged, my eyes went immediately to Sebastián, asleep again. He lay on his back, snoring gently. Before succumbing, he had attempted to take off the yellow bikini, but left it tangled around one ankle. If his uncircumcised penis had appeared grotesque to me before, now it was more so: it was erect. The fingers of his right hand gathered his balls into their comforting grasp; the prick reared unsupported over his belly, dipping and swaying with his breaths, filled out, foreskin clinging to turgid flesh and a rose-petal-pink bit of the head protruding. The two roses lay on the floor below his bunk.

I plucked them up and stuck them into the basket of fruit. Then I turned my back to Sebastián (I felt hardly drunk at all), dressed, and went out.

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The dining room was practically deserted. I was late for the evening meal but the waiter assured me everything on the menu was available. I had brought the Italian phrasebook, and he pretended surprise and pleasure that I would try to address him in his language. It was more efficient, however, to use English. "I know a little Turkish, too," he said – hearing my own tongue, I had to avert my eyes.

There were several Turkish dishes on the menu. The waiter asserted that they were nearly as good as one would find in İstanbul. I ordered Italian nevertheless, determined to master my sentiment, and a half bottle of Veneto white wine. I took out my notebook and worked a bit on a little story I had been writing, an historical fantasy about the nephew of David Komnenos, last emperor of Trebizond. In legend, the boy became the favorite page (and, in my story, catamite) of Mehmet Fatih, conqueror of Byzantium. Beyoğlu, they say, was named for this boy: the word

means son of the bey – his father was, depending on the source, either John IV, emperor before David, or Alexander, a rebel and scapegrace but nonetheless royal. The story was an exercise in self-alienation, a kind of preparation or discipline for living in a different country. I wrote in a language not my mother tongue; about my city when it was still Byzantine if under Ottoman occupation; from the viewpoint of a Greek forcibly converted to Islam. It pleased me, that night, what I had already set down, and I added a few paragraphs to it.

When I finished my meal and the waiter came to remove the dishes, he asked whether I preferred my coffee şekerli – very sweet, or orta – medium. He brought me a perfect little cup of Türk kahvesi instead of espresso, and a serving of tiramisù that was as sweet as any Turkish dessert. And then, after I had savored these and written another sentence or two, he came back again. He wondered if he might practice his Turkish on me; so few of the ship's passengers were ever Turkish, and he would not be returning to İstanbul for several weeks. Of course, I said, I would be pleased – delighted.

"My name is Gabriele," he said, his accent not bad, and smiled shyly.

I told him my name.

"Ziya Bey," he began, then frowned, trying to work out what he wanted to say, before ruefully continuing in English, "I am off duty in fifteen minutes, at eleven."

I didn't understand how it had got so late. I told him how to say it, and asked if he wanted to start then. If it was convenient for me – if I wasn't tired. His game attempt at the conditional touched me deeply, in my still fragile mood, his using the formal second person, and I said yes. His shy smile became brilliant.

I finished my wine. Gabriele returned shortly, having removed his bow tie and waistcoat and opened the collar of his starched white shirt. He was carrying a little tray: two glasses, a bottle of rakı, water to mix with it, a bowl of salted pistachios. Going out onto the moonlit observation deck, we claimed two deck chairs away from other late-night conversations. Gabriele admitted he felt wary of being seen fraternizing with a passenger. We were sailing close to land: a lighthouse

passed its white hand over the water ahead and the lamps of a town glimmered not far off, on shore. "Gelibolu," Gabriele said – we had entered the narrow Hellespont. "By morning the Aegean."

We ate nuts and drank rakı. Gabriele smoked cigarettes, and I had one or two myself. I had helped friends with their English, but helping someone with Turkish was a novelty. In fact, in effect, I helped him with his English as well, since it was the language we had in common. He told me a rude joke a friend in İstanbul had taught him. I was drunk enough to find it hilarious, could not stop laughing until I began to hiccup. Helping me to sit up, Gabriele pounded me between the shoulders. "You are drunk, Ziya Bey," he said sternly.

"I'm lonely," I said, mournful with the suddenness of a drunkard. Kimsesizim – without friends, alone in the world. I meant homesick, as well, already.

Holding me around the shoulders, Gabriele said, "No. I'm here."

"I miss –" I meant that I missed my family, my friends, and in my staggering mind they were all embodied in the person of my elder brother, whom I had wanted to accompany me as far as London. "I miss Mehmet!" I was weeping, helpless. Mehmet had said he couldn't spare three weeks from refining the design for the summer house before our father began construction in the fall; from preparing for the new school year. Besides, he said, Baba and Ana weren't made of money, Harvard was bloody expensive, my excursion through Europe was expensive, it would be irresponsible for him to add to the expense. He was the responsible one, the eldest son. "I miss Mehmet!" I wailed.

"My friend in İstanbul, his name too is Mehmet."

I am not sure what language or languages we were speaking, Turkish, English, Italian. "It's the most common man's name in Turkey," I muttered, not wanting to speak about his Mehmet but mine.

"You remind me of him, a little," Gabriele said. "But your eyes are blue, like an Englishman's."

I found myself capable of wondering when and why he had noticed the color of my eyes.

"And he is bigger than you, too. Come now, Ziya, stand up. I'll help you down to your cabin."

The way he led me – supported me – was unfamiliar. Corridors and companionways seemed less presentable. I supposed he was avoiding our being seen together. I don't remember telling him my cabin number, but here we were after some indefinite length of wandering, staggering; I was hanging on his shoulder and he was asking me for the key. "No," I said, sly with drunkenness, with despondence, with hilarity, all mixed up but clear in my head. "There's a man in there. I don't want to go in. I don't like him." Did I say, "He's a Christian"? I fear I did, but perhaps Gabriele didn't understand, or forgave me. "I want to stay with you. You're my friend – you're Mehmet's friend." And then I kissed him, full on the mouth.

"You are drunk," he said, but he was amused. "Are you sure?"

I kissed him again, to show I was sure. He did not pull away – his arms went tighter around my back. The taste of rakı and cigarette smoke on his tongue was sweeter than the flavor in my own mouth.

He led me again by covert ways. Having got my way, I felt a little less drunk, less fractious. I must have wanted it all along, since first he said, "I know a little Turkish, too," and smiled, lighting up his dark Italian eyes. We came to a door. He opened it. I went in, almost tripping on the raised doorsill and then tottering to the single bunk. It was closer to the engines than my cabin, louder, and the motion of the ship was more to be felt. There was only one porthole, high in the bulkhead and small and screwed shut.

"Gabriele," I said.

He turned from placing bottle and glasses on a small table, smiled warmly.

"I'm sorry. I think I'm going to be sick."

"I am not surprised," was all he said, kindly, before he helped me up again and half-carried me to a tiny WC, lowered me to the floor. As I vomited into the toilet, he crouched by me, stroked the back of my neck and my shoulders, murmured sweet endearments, in Italian, and told me what they meant.

When my stomach was emptied, he brought me back to the bed. He gave me a glass of water – the glass tasting faintly of rakı – and wiped my face with a damp cloth. "Do you feel better?" He held the glass up for me to drink again. "Will you be all right for a few minutes if I go out? I'll be right back."

I wouldn't have known how to stop him. While Gabriele was gone, I gulped down two more glasses of water, finishing the bottle. I looked around his cabin, smaller and meaner than mine. I couldn't make much sense of anything, but I made sure of the books lying atop his bureau. The title of one was Italian but a co-author's name Turkish and the word turco not difficult to interpret; the other was a bilingual dictionary. I made sure, too, of the photograph taped to the bulkhead above the bunk. The grinning man posed in front of the ablutions fountain in the forecourt of Sultanahmet. He looked not at all like me. Gabriele had not returned – it had been five or ten minutes – so I took off my clothes, folded them, set them beside the books, and lay down on his bunk.

When he returned, he said, "I am back, Ziya Bey." He smiled to see me naked. Setting his tray down on the table, he turned around and brought me another little cup of perfect Turkish coffee, topped with thick brown foam and properly sweet. There was another liter bottle of water on the tray as well. Gabriele sat on the bunk next to me, touching me, and we sipped our coffees side by side. Pointing with my chin to the photo, I asked, "Mehmet?"

"My friend."

Rising, Gabriele took my empty cup and placed it with his on the tray. He turned to me, across the room, and unbuttoned his shirt, removed it. He kicked off his shoes and bent over to pull off his socks. He did all this matter-of-factly – not coy, not prurient; as if he were undressing for bed – but his eyes never left mine. "A blue-eyed Turk," he said wonderingly, and took off his trousers and undershorts.

His penis was uncircumcised. It did not look grotesque – interesting, somehow, perhaps because his pubic hair was shaved. He glanced down, gave a little laugh, and showed me that he

had shaved under his arms as well. "But I am not quite a Muslim," he said, grinning, "yet."

He came to me then, and I touched his interesting prick, and soon it had grown hard. The foreskin slipped easily up and down over the head. But my own penis did not rise up and I was dismayed and bewildered. "It's all right," he murmured, laying me down on the narrow bunk and lying beside me. "It's all right." Pushing his arm under my neck, he held me close, kissed my forehead, my eyelids, my lips. "You're tired, Ziyacık, and a little drunk still, that's all." I felt his erection poking at my thigh. I couldn't think what to do about it but I liked feeling it there. "Rest now," he said.

§

I dreamed I was an attendant in an İstanbul hamam, a bath boy. A customer came to me, asking for the full course, the scrubbing and dousing and shampooing and massaging. I suspected he was not a Turk, but he was entirely fluent and idiomatic. He had already stripped and wound the peştamal about his hips. He was handsome, swarthy, dark haired and dark eyed. I led him into the hot chamber, the hararet, where steamy twilight was pierced by thin, brittle shafts of light from the star-shaped holes in the dome.

At one of the niches, I mixed water in the basin, hot and cold, and ladled it over him, rushing and splashing and finally gurgling down the drain. When he was drenched, I put my hand in the bath glove, lathered it up, and began to work him over where he crouched, starting with his shoulders and back. Every now and then I poured another dish of water over his head. The only sounds were the running and splattering of water, the slapping of my plastic sandals on the marble floor and the gentle slap of my bare palm on his wet flesh, our breathing – mine disciplined but loud; his stertorous, voiced and groaning when I hit a soft spot, rising nearly to a bellow when I poured over him water that was too hot. The smells were water and soap, sweat and skin. I was as wet as he.

Finishing with the glove, I rinsed him again, then took up soap and a softer cloth to buff his slippery limbs. Kneeling, I pushed the clinging peştamal up to wash his thighs. I drenched him

a third time with bowlsful of hot, clean water, and offered him the soapy cloth, so he could wash his own face and his private parts.

He declined to take it, saying, "You do it," and turning his face up to me, trusting, eyes closed. Wet hair stuck untidily to his scalp and brow; wet eyelashes lay like a stain of charcoal on flushed cheeks. Reluctant and gentle, I swabbed his face and scrubbed behind his ears, rinsed him again and again offered him the cloth.

Pushing my hand away, he rose to his feet, turned his back, and pulled the striped peştamal from around his waist. "You do it," he said, giving me no choice. And so I washed his buttocks, turned him with my hands on his hips, and, eyes modestly downcast, groped for his sex with my wet, soapy, slippery left hand.

Gabriele pushed my hand away. Sounding amused, he said, "Are you sure you're a Turk, Ziya?" His cabin was dark, only a little moonlight leaking through the porthole. Through the thin mattress I felt the thrum of the engines, the rocking of the waves. I felt his humid heat, his warm skin against mine. "With Mehmet," he said, "he is the man, I a woman. He never touches me." I found his face with my hand, traced his brow, the sockets of his eyes, pressed the tips of two fingers to his lips. "With Italians it's different." His breath and his voice buzzed, ticklish.

"With me it's different." Shifting my hand to his shoulder, then to his waist, I pulled him tighter, closer to me. Breathing bellies vibrated one against the other and two penises brushed, collided in their reaching, could not be told apart. "We are both men," I said, "you and I."

§

I could not become accustomed to a day not measured out by the bell-like, passionate calls of the müezzin. The shipboard day, for a passenger, in any case, scorned routine, regularity. My watch had an alarm that could be set to mark the hours of prayer but I did not employ it.

Lounging naked and uncovered on his bunk, Sebastián had leered at me, complicit and sarcastic, when I (wearing pyjamas) climbed down from mine. I had been certain he was asleep when I returned before dawn from Gabriele's cabin. At some time in my early-morning doze, I

had heard from below me heavy breathing, a few low moans, then a grunt of release. The acrid smell of semen was still in the air, but it might have been off my own skin. While he was in the shower, singing manfully under the spray, I cleaned up the chewed stems of three of my mother's figs, the pits of an apricot and a peach. My grandmother's roses had shed their petals over the fruit; I threw away the thornless stems. A little wooden box of lokum, Turkish delight, had been opened and its contents rifled.

Sebastián and I went to breakfast together and rediscovered something of our earlier camaraderie, though with an ironic or secretive edge to it. The coffee was espresso, the sweet melons Anatolian. Gabriele was not on duty.

The Ambasciatore ploughed the Aegean, nothing but brilliant blue sea to be seen wherever one turned. The next evening we would pass between Ándros and Évia, looming on either side, then between Kéa and Cape Sunion as we made the approach to Píreas, but for now there was nothing to tell you the waters were Greek. After breakfast, Sebastián went out on deck to take the sun. I retreated with my Walkman, notebook, and pocket dictionary to a cool salon where there were individual writing desks. Zipping open my beltpack for a pen, I found the skullcap my little sister had made for me. Instead of working on my story, then, I took a postcard (the white Ambasciatore at sea) from the stationery rack on the desk and wrote to my family, though I had nothing to tell them and would not remember to mail it till Venice.

At lunch, Gabriele was serving but I had not seen him before I chose a table, not one of his. Sebastián came late to the dining room, glowing, sunstruck. Pushing his sunglasses to the top of his head, he peered around, found me, and waved. I closed my notebook, set it aside. "There isn't another Spaniard aboard," he complained. "I asked the purser. Not even anyone from South America. My English isn't good enough to talk to Englishmen or Americans."

I reassured him his English was quite fluent enough; he merely pointed out it was not my native language either. Stung, I said, "I've been studying it since I was five. I attended an English-language secondary school. I'm going to an American university."

Waving his hands humorously at me, he turned to the waiter at his elbow and ordered. I stared at the remnants on my plate of a dish I could not remember eating and that tasted sour in my mouth. In his eyes for an instant I had clearly seen an accusation Sebastián withheld – not out of tact but pride: Your family's wealthy enough to buy your way into Harvard, is it not?

But he was pleasant and inconsequential thereafter, ordering me a beer I didn't want, praising the beauty of the Greek sea and the splendor of Greek sunshine. "Not even the Balearics can compare," he declared. "My next holiday, I will come to Greece and be a beach bum." He asked what I would do after lunch. I said I'd probably write, or read.

"Oh, no!" Sebastián exclaimed. "I cannot allow this. You are on holiday, Señor Sinan." He frowned reprovingly. I was surprised he remembered my surname. "You have a bathing suit, I am sure. You will put it on and join me on deck to bask in this glorious Greek sun. Remember, I have no-one else to talk to, I depend on you to entertain me." He grinned to take the edge off this remark. "A pity there's no pool on this ship. Do you swim? I'll bet your bathing suit is sky blue, to match your eyes."

I couldn't recall offhand which swimsuit I had packed – I owned a blue one – but I was trying to enjoy his facetiousness. "How much do you bet?"

"Oh – five thousand Italian lire?"

It was an inconsequential sum. "Done."

I reached across the table to shake his hand: we were agreed. The waiter brought Sebastián's meal, and a different waiter brought coffee I hadn't ordered. This was Gabriele, and the coffee was Turkish. Smiling his diffident, incongruously boyish smile, he asked if the hour between three and four would be convenient for his Turkish lesson. Sebastián stared at his plate.

§

My bathing suit was blue. "You see – to match your eyes," said Sebastián when I dug it out of the small flight bag. I laughed and took a five-thousand-lira note from my beltpack, held it out to him. "No," he said, refusing it. "I think you'll buy me a coffee on Piazza San Marco when we

reach Venice, instead."

Shrugging, I returned the bill to its place. "Fine." I looked around the cabin. Whatever my cautious brother's misgivings, I was tired of wearing the beltpack – it was clumsy, got in the way. Finally, I stuffed it into the flight bag.

Lounging in the chair by the table, legs outstretched, Sebastián gazed benignly at me, waiting, eating an apricot. Thinking that if he felt no shame in showing himself to me naked I ought not either (Christians were notoriously less modest than Muslims, something I would have to get used to), I began to undress. I was nude, not displaying myself but not hiding, lifting a foot to draw on the swimsuit, when he said as if idly, "I wondered whether you had found a woman or a boy last night, but that Italiano is big, a man. Are you his boy, then? Without hair, you look like a boy."

Shocked, I let the swimsuit fall around my ankle, then crouched to retrieve it, then stared up at him.

"But how does he pay you, I wonder?" He smiled. "Five thousand lire here, five thousand lire there? Surely you don't need his money."

"Get out."

"Ah, but I have paid for my berth in this cabin, have I not?" He smiled again, plucked another apricot from the basket. "With money I worked for, Señor Sinan."

I bit my tongue. There was no way I could face him with any dignity. Turning my back, I reached for the clothes I had just removed.

"Generally I have no use for boys," Sebastián went on, his voice just as calm. "I like women. But I have been feeling – how do the Americans say it? Horny? Of course, I cannot afford to pay you."

His hand touched my buttocks. I whirled around, but he had caught both my wrists before I could strike him.

"I think we can come to an arrangement, yes? You will consider that I could inform your

friend's superiors he is fucking a passenger. And I – I will forgive you the coffee in Venice."

§

I did not want to return to the cabin. When I left Gabriele shortly before dawn – I had not told him; he didn't want other crew members to see me – I sat out on a deck chair, watching the black Aegean turn indigo, the sky turn blue, then white. I waited until I saw Sebastián go in for breakfast, then went down to shower and change my clothes. I moved a chair in front of the door while I was there, and when I left took my flight bag, my books, my beltpack. I took the unopened boxes of sweets, too, but left the few remaining pieces of fruit for Sebastián. For the rest of the voyage, I haunted decks and salons, skulking, going back to the cabin only when I was sure Sebastián was not there. If he saw me, he smirked but did not approach.

I did not tell Gabriele. I'm sure he recognized something was wrong, but he didn't ask about it and treated me no more kindly than he would have anyway: I never paid for a single one of the procession of cups of sweet Türk kahvesi. He prepared them himself, he told me shyly. Later, he would guide me around Venice. For an hour each afternoon I coached him through a lesson in his Turkish textbook. I sat at one of his tables at lunch and dinner. I slept – and didn't sleep – with him through most of every night, before I went up on deck for my lonely dawn vigil.

The third morning, I looked out on the busy lights of Píreas from the Ambasciatore's anchorage offshore. Later, the ship docked, and laid over for most of the day, allowing passengers a brief chance at Athens. I did not go ashore, but Sebastián did. I saw him on the wharf; I saw he was wearing a black skullcap. He looked up, saw me watching, waved jauntily. I had not missed my sister's gift before. The purser changed a traveller's cheque into lire for me before we arrived in Venice, to replace those Sebastián had taken – somewhat more than five thousand. At least he had left the other currencies and my irreplaceable documents. Melek's skullcap was in the way of a trophy, I suppose.

It occurred to me much later (I was back in Turkey for the summer, picking out what to pack for a month in Bodrum) that Sebastián had cheated when he made his bet on the color of my

swimsuit. He had already rifled my flight bag once and seen it was sky blue, to match my eyes.