

8. Ramazan in the Gardens of Paradise

Every afternoon when I sat down to work, I set the alarm clock on my computer to the hour and minute the daily paper had given me for sunset. Flashing ikon and synthetic beep were not so evocative as a müezzín's chant, startling me out of my concentration, but served. I saved my document, found a towel, and went down the hall to wash. It was a temptation, splashing my face, to allow a drop or two of water between my lips. The basins in the men's bathroom were not positioned to make it convenient to rinse one's feet. Shuffling in my slippers, I returned to the room, laid out my rug, turned to Mekke, and said my prayers.

The newspaper's astronomical calculations were not in themselves sufficient – direct observation was required. After performing the last prostration, I went to the window to ensure it had gone truly dark outside. Then, pushing the keyboard to the back of the desk, out of the way, I opened the drawer and took out the plastic bottle of water, the package of preserved dates.

Institutional or community support for keepers of the fast existed, in its fashion. I might have sidled into the smug embrace of the Islamic Society and its Arab organizers; most observant Muslims of my acquaintance did, whatever their national origins. 'Ali, my roommate, of course was there. For all his piety, indeed, I suspected 'Ali would have trouble making it through the

month without his friends' example and support. He did not deny himself gracefully – he was an ugly sight after a day without sustenance. Avoiding that sight – avoiding the sight of him breaking fast in the evening – was in a small, petty, significant way one reason for not going in the late afternoon to the Society's drab basement to await the arrival of the designated lookout with confirmation of sunset. That young man's heavy Pakistani accent made the summons to prayer sound exotic.

The first sip of tepid spring water tasted of nothing, unless a faint sublimation of plastic. The first swallow always made me gag after so many hours of not consciously performing that simple, necessary action – after consciously not performing it. Traditionally, an İstanbul native could name the source of his water by its flavor, like a French toper with his wine. I can tell good water from bad. The first mouthful after sunset on a Ramazan night is the worst water imaginable – the second, from the same bottle, the same spring, is as the waters of paradise. After the second, I wanted to brush my teeth so I might properly appreciate the third, but forced myself to eat a date first, insipid in its crust of sugar. Dates are not my favorite, but tradition exists to be honored. Bismillah: in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful. I nibbled the flesh of another off its pit, drank off half the liter bottle, and went to brush my teeth.

The dates' sweet reminder inspired my hunger. Ramazan fell in the spring that year. Days were lengthening, but not so quickly the dining hall wasn't still serving after dark. Nevertheless, the kind of bland, denatured meal my father had already paid for was seldom, if I thought about it, a tolerable end to the day's deprivation. More often than not I went anyway, chose a seat well away from other late diners so I could study as I ate, scattered a great deal of black pepper over my food, collected fresh fruit and bread to take back to my room, because the dining hall did not open before dawn. I drank glass after glass of water with my meal, American coffee with dessert, of which I took two, sometimes three, servings.

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I answered the phone warily, hopeful it wasn't for me, hoping the person on the other end

spoke English. ‘Ali’s mother, who did not, chose inexplicable hours to call. “Hey-oh, Ziya,” Yussuf said, his voice tinny and hollow on a campus-phone connection, “I’m downstairs. Come and let me in.”

“Was I expecting you?” I asked, fretful.

“Not unless you’re clairvoyant.” My friend sounded both amused and irritated. “Just wanted to drop by, say hello – haven’t seen you in more’n a week.”

Bouncing on his toes outside the door when I got downstairs, he was kitted out for soccer practice, though it was apparent he was coming from, not going to. “How it is?” he cried happily and rushed me as though I’d slotted in a goal, leaping to clasp his thighs about my waist, batting my skull with his hands. I just got free of him and caught the door before it closed, locking us out. Dizzy, I clung to it for a moment, spat out the saliva that had flooded my mouth. “Good practice?” I observed.

“Five-nil – not bad.” Grinning up from where he lay on the grass, Yussuf tapped his chest. “Two goals, two assists.”

“Well done.” Holding the door open with my ankle, I offered him a hand. “Come on up and tell me about it.”

Upright, he threw his arm around my shoulders. “See, that’s the thing. I was gonna check in on you anyway, after I got cleaned up, but I’m pumped and – well, you know my roommates. They don’t get it.”

“Fine.” I pushed him away a little. His jersey was clammy. The rank smell of it, of him, was too rich, invigorating my hunger. “Grab your things and come upstairs. If you can hold out –” I glanced up at the pale sky above the Yard – “half an hour or so, we can go get something to eat. You need a shower first, though.”

He inhaled ostentatiously. “That bad?”

“Worse.”

Picking up his gym bag, he smiled. “I’ve got clothes to change into, if you’ll lend me a towel.”

He started up the stairs before me. “How’s it going, Ziya?” he asked, not looking back. “Is it hard?”

“It’s supposed to be hard.”

“I’ve missed seeing you.”

“I’m trying to keep busy.”

“You know, I understand why you can’t go full tilt on the pitch, but couldn’t you come watch? I’d bang in more than two goals if I had a cheering section.”

I waited a moment, gripped the stair rail hard. “My European history course? There’s one woman who brings her lunch every day. It makes me sick, literally, to sit near her when she’s eating. She offered me her apple today – I must have looked hungry. Watching what I can’t do makes me remember I can’t do it. Every time you took a water break I’d despise you for making me feel weak.”

“You can’t even drink water?”

“Not during daylight.”

“Jesus.” Yussuf looked away, ahead, continued up the stairs. “I guess I’m glad my ancestors twelve hundred years ago stayed Christian.”

“Hah!” said I, unrepentant. “Your Byzanto-Aramaic ancestors assimilated the Prophet’s language and basic cultural underpinnings pretty thoroughly – you think they didn’t accept his message as well? Then the Crusaders came along and scared them into backsliding.”

Stung, Yussuf shrugged and kept his head down as he climbed the last flight. “Whatever. For my part, I’ve assimilated Anglo-American culture and language, and I do quite happily without any religion at all.”

I knew better than to press him further – I liked Yussuf too well: he was my friend, my guide and companion in this strange country. I was not unaware I required him to take up some of the empty space in my American life that, at home, my elder brother had filled – Mehmet was my only model for this friendship. Similarly, there were directions in which neither could be urged.

There was no determining which of us, in absolute terms, was the elder, Yussuf or I. He was two years ahead of me toward his bachelor's in English Lit but a year younger, since the United States, a civilized polity with no local rivals, did not require a period of national service of its young men; he was, in fact, stateless. In his homeland (I thought from time to time, though we never spoke of it), he might crouch among the rubble of bulldozed tenements to hurl stones at armed Israeli youths as unprepared to be soldiers as I had once been, a national-service conscript in Konya. He was a scholar of his second language and it pained him, he said, to speak his first, which he could barely read, and yet he reacted with icy fury if it were suggested he might call himself Joe. Joe Gabriel: a baseball player's name. He ignored baseball and basketball in favor of the pick-up soccer he'd long ago watched his uncles and big brothers play in the dusty back alleys of Bethlehem – Bet-Lacham. In differing moods, he could boast of or mourn not remembering the name of the high-school acquaintance who had relieved him of his virginity – although the fuck itself, he said, he recalled with crystalline purity: her impatience, her good humor, her resilient teenage tits and eager little cunt.

Upstairs, Yussuf took off his mud-caked boots and, considerate, left them outside my door. In my room, restless, he prowled the confined space, going over the practice match almost, it seemed, minute by minute, real time. Our manager had split first and second elevens down the middle and spliced them together, evening the sides. Having no reserve keeper that afternoon, João donned gloves and stood between the posts himself. Although it was not his natural position – in his brief career in the Portuguese leagues, João had played midfield – and although he had twenty years on the opposing strikers, he allowed no goals. “But, hey-oh, Chano was way off his game,” Yussuf said, referring to our regular keeper. “A tiny baby could have stopped Arrigo's shot.”

I was charitable. “They're friends. Harry hardly ever gets near the goal. It was a gift.”

“I didn't hear you say that.” Yussuf mimed spitting. “What if it were a real game? Chano can't get into the habit of giving goals away.”

“You take it too seriously.”

“Somebody has to.” Throwing himself onto ‘Ali’s bed, Yussuf sprawled on his back, head hanging over the foot and chin cocked toward the ceiling as he glared at me, upside down. It wasn’t difficult to make out his expression, even at this odd angle: Yussuf was irritated. He would say pissed, but Yussuf grew up with American idioms. In my mouth they sound secondhand, borrowed. He slapped his belly, bared by the jersey that had flown up when he launched himself into the air, with the other hand made a rude gesture I had to take on faith, much American body language still a puzzle. “Apparently you don’t.”

“Ay-vay.” I turned away. My own temper was short enough, in this season. “Don’t mess up ‘Ali’s bed. You know how seriously I take it – on the pitch.”

“Yeah, well.”

I was facing my desk. As I watched, the computer’s screen saver cleared, revealing my document on the desktop behind it, and the speaker beeped. “It’s time for me to pray,” I said, deactivating the alarm. “You wanted to take a shower?”

“I forgot the other reason I came by, besides the pleasure of arguing with you. João –”

When I looked around, I found him already upright, standing in the center of the narrow room, pulling his shirt over his head. When João came to Harvard (poached from CalTech) and established our club, six years before, he had chosen the colors of Benfica, the Lisbon first-division side on whose bench he had sat for two seasons in the early seventies, before abandoning dreams of futebol glory and going to university. Yussuf swiped the scarlet jersey across his chest, dropped it to the floor. Dirty white shorts were damp, the synthetic fabric nearly sheer where it wasn’t stained. “João asked me to ask if you’d like to come to dinner tonight. He just got a batch of tapes from Portugal transferred to VHS and thought we might enjoy watching a match or two. Rachid’s making something special, apparently.”

“I saw him today. He didn’t say anything.”

“João?”

“No, Rachid. Midday prayers at the Islamic Center. We talked for a bit afterward. He didn’t

say anything about dinner.”

Yussuf snorted. “He said something to João about seeing you – I don’t know, they think you’re miserable and alone, ought to get out and spend time with people.” With an unselfconsciousness that was profoundly un-Arab and still shocked me, Yussuf moved from scratching at his crotch to pushing down his shorts and stepping out of them. “All right – washee-washee,” he said, digging thumbs under the wide elastic of his jockstrap. “Towel?” Hitting the floor, the hard cup made a sound like boot striking ball.

Taking a towel from the closet, I tossed it to him. “I was thinking of going out tonight, after dinner.”

Naked, Yussuf stared at me, absently rubbing the towel against his cheek. “You have such nice towels – if I gave you some money, would you pick up a couple for me next time you go home? Out?”

“Out. Dancing. It’s Friday.” I pulled down my own towel, went looking for keys.

“During Ramadan?” He pronounced the month’s name as Arabic. “Is that allowed?”

“What isn’t permitted is my missing prayers because I’m arguing with a fealthy Ayrab.”

Chastened, Yussuf kicked his soiled kit out of the way, under the corner of my bed, wrapped the towel around his hips, came after me. As I locked the door behind us, I said, “The Ayatollah Khomeini doesn’t approve of dancing under any circumstance – but I’m not from Iran. Should I call João and Rachid to confirm? I can go out after. If I still want to.”

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While Yussuf showered, humming simply to hear his voice echo on the tiles, I made my own ablutions. Back in the room, saying my prayers, I was distracted, felt no sense of the immanence of God, only my awakened hunger and the imminence of Yussuf’s return. I recited by rote without contemplating the meanings of memorized phrases, bobbed up and down like a lizard on a hot rock, finished as if setting aside a chore. It was clearly dusk outside my window. The bottled water tasted worse than usual, the dates more cloying. It seemed to me deeply unfortunate there

had not been a cask of dried apricots in Muhammet's larder when he instituted the fast.

Date syrup gummy on my tongue and teeth, I looked up the number and dialled the phone. It was Rachid who answered. He sounded pleased to hear I was coming – someone to share Ramazan stories with (although he knew very well, once a tape was slipped into the VCR, I would have ears for nothing but João's running commentary, eyes only for the match on screen), someone to appreciate his cooking. Moroccan cuisine was not much like Turkish, but I liked it well enough and Rachid was a fine cook.

I had not had any particular ideas about Moroccans before meeting Rachid. They were not quite Arabs, not quite legitimate, whatever the historic links to lost Andalus – no doubt by virtue of their being the only Arab nation never subject to the Sublime Porte – peripheral. Having seen the movie, I knew Casablanca, Rachid's native town, to be a Westerner's exotic dream of the East, like Durrell's Alexandria or Christie's İstanbul, not a Muslim city. Rachid himself was appropriately cosmopolitan: Sorbonne educated, fluent in English, Spanish, Portuguese, besides Maghrebi Arabic and French, a respected scholar whose special foci were Proust, Genet, and contemporary francophone writers of the North African diaspora. That he lived in the United States, taught at Harvard, cohabited with a Portuguese engineering professor who managed an intramural soccer club on the side seemed all of a piece, and I had no better notion, knowing him, of his native country.

Nor, before knowing him – him and João – had I properly understood the American term gay. It was a euphemism one used when referring to homosexuality, homosexual acts, homosexual men (sometimes women) – this I knew, of course. I knew to use it in reference to myself. What I had not understood, what still did not always make sense, was its being also a badge of legitimacy. It was a descriptive term, I had thought, of limited applicability. When my thoughts turn to sex, I think of other men, therefore I am gay. Not I am gay, therefore I am fundamentally, crucially different from you. Not Because I am gay, my loyalties and sympathies lie first with other gay people – before my family, my nation, my religion.

In the fall, I had met a man from India. Sanjay was a student at the Business School across the river, near the soccer pitch where Those Foreign Bastards practiced. Indeed, he played on the B School's club side and we met, by way of collision (he fouled me), during a match. I have noticed that there is little middle ground among Indians: men and women both, either they are exquisitely beautiful or viscerally plain. Sanjay was of the former type. He had just been substituted in, the match was in its final twenty minutes, I was soon substituted out, and it was just as well as he was marking me and I should have found it painful to tackle him with any conviction. From the bench I couldn't make out his face.

Some nights later, I was waiting for my order in a Harvard Square Indian restaurant. I had been intrigued by the menu's description of tandoor cookery, since a similar clay-lined subterranean oven, in Turkey, was called a *tandır*, pronounced nearly the same, and I was trying to work out in my head which cuisine might have borrowed from the other.

"Good evening, Mr Sinan."

I looked up into the face of an angel of paradise. Not the classical paradise, perhaps, for the literature privileges fair, blushing skin while this vision was swarthy, with a beard shadow blue as slate – or as the skin of Krishna. Teeth were startlingly white against ruddy lips as he smiled. "I recognized you when I came in, from our game the other day. Would you like company for supper?"

I recognized him as the man who had knocked me head over heels on the pitch (his number was 15), but failed to recognize him in glasses. An angel's vision, I supposed, focussed on the infinite, would need correction in the minute terrestrial sphere. "I'm sorry," I said, "I don't know your name."

"Oh, and I am crestfallen! You didn't read it off my shirt, as I did yours? Sanjay Ghosh. I don't know your given name."

After I had told him and invited him to join me, we spoke of soccer, agreeing the B-School side and Those Foreign Bastards to be well matched. My team perhaps had a slight edge of

discipline owing to our having a dedicated coach – Sanjay’s team was a democracy with a rotating captaincy. The draw was deserved on both sides. He wished he had played more than half a half. He was unable to enlighten me on the question of the tandoor’s origin. A Mughal importation, he assumed. I noted that the meal he ordered was vegetarian.

We were getting along pleasantly as we ate. He did not, as I half expected, recoil in righteous horror from my lamb and chicken; he drank Indian beer, I rosewater lassi, apparently the same as Turkish ayran except for its being sugared. Taped Indian pop music and the subdued clamor of other diners provided a soothing white-noise background. I couldn’t figure out why it felt odd we got along so well, until it occurred to me, very strangely, that Sanjay was flirting.

I kept my eye on him, distinctly felt my own reactions become self-conscious, thought through, an act. Whether I spoke or listened or lifted a fork to my mouth, he watched so painstakingly the food on his own fork more than once fell unnoticed to the plate before reaching his lovely lips. Then again, from time to time he blinked slowly, masking his eyes for longer than was polite – plum-colored lids and lashes so long they brushed the lenses of his spectacles, so thick and glossily black they looked fake – or more real than real – and he parted his lips in a sweet, deliberate smile. Or he cocked his chin, knowing (I became convinced) the angle of the jaw lengthened his neck, deepened the tender hollow at the base of his throat where a little pulse fluttered. Lifting his eyes as if in sincere wonder, he peered for a moment at the carved-wood Mughal ceiling with its intricate stalactites and bosses and dangling lamps, then crinkled his eyelids humorously and reached across the table to pat the back of my hand. His own hand, the left, was big, the fingers long and slender. Fine black hair between the knuckles of the ring finger brushed the wide gold band, making it shine more brightly by contrast.

We ate a dessert that was too sweet even for my taste, drenched in rose-scented syrup; drank weak coffee. While we waited for the change from our separate bills, Sanjay opened his wallet again, handed me his card, imprinted with the shield of Harvard Business School. He was to graduate in May. “What’s your phone number?” he asked, and wrote it on the back of another

card. Reading along upside down, I corrected his spelling – he had heard my name as the late president of Pakistan’s. He asked for my e-mail address as well.

Outside in the chilly Cambridge night, Sanjay clapped me matily on the shoulder but left his hand where it fell. Naturally, he was immensely taller than I. “Thank you for a very pleasant evening, Ziya,” he said. “I’ll hope to see you again soon, but now the fun is over and I must get back to my cases.”

It almost seemed to me he had been about to say the fun was just beginning. I looked up, startled. His eyes, peering down, narrowed. “Where do you live?” I asked.

“Across the river. Business School dormitory. And you?”

“In the Yard. I’ll walk with you that far. I should study as well.”

Far above me, he smiled, thoughtful, and gave me a little push along the way. Along the way, I found myself saying, as if cued, I had not really seen the B School campus, splendid in its wealthy isolation, beyond what one saw across the road from the football stadium. Would I like a tour, he asked. Tonight? Right now? – Why not?

On the bridge over the Charles, we paused side by side to gaze downriver toward the Prudential and Hancock towers and the glittering downtown skyscrapers beyond. Sanjay shuddered, pulling himself into his heavy sweater and wool coat. “It’s cold.” His breath steamed.

“It’s going to get colder.”

“I know,” he muttered mournfully. “I don’t understand how people live in this climate.” He put his big hand on my ass. “Do you get lonely here, Ziya? Homesick?”

“Of course.”

It was understood there would be no tour. He led me directly to his room and began to kiss me before the door had latched, before he lit a lamp. The only light came through his window, from the street lamps on Storrow Drive and, on the far side of the water like a miniature sketch of the Bosphorus, from the College Houses on the Cambridge shore. I kissed him back quite happily, straining on tiptoe to reach his mouth, tasting sweet rosewater syrup on his tongue,

knocking his glasses askew with my nose, pushing my fingers into his thick, crisp hair to pull him closer. He scraped his stubbled chin on my teeth, murmured, "I get so cold at night."

"I can't stay all night."

"College curfew?" He wrapped his arms around me, hugged me tight to his chest.

"Suspicious roommate. Classes in the morning."

"Classes. Of course. For me as well." Releasing me, he went to turn on a lamp by the bed, to draw the blinds. "But we can steal a few hours from academe." He threw off his coat, pulled his sweater over his head, turned to me smiling. "I liked the look of you on the pitch, Ziya, watching from the bench. Not just your play. For four days I'd been nerving myself to look up Sinan in the university directory. And then, there I was, lonely and homesick for my mother's cooking, and there you were. That made up for the food not being very good."

"Wasn't it good?" I had taken off my own jacket, hung it over the back of a chair. "I enjoyed mine."

"I could say I tasted nothing, drowning in your azure eyes."

"Don't say that."

"What restaurant compares with your mother's cooking?"

"My mother doesn't cook. She pays a professional to do it."

He shook his head, not smiling. "That sounds very sad to me. But we live different lives in different countries – perhaps it is not sad for you."

I looked down. This was before I learned of my mother's illness. "Sometimes my grandmother cooks."

"Ziya," he said.

I looked up.

"I should like to see you in my bed with no clothes on."

Staring at him, I clenched one fist, then the other. "And you?"

Turning a little away, he plucked up a small object from his desk. "I shall step into the loo

for a moment to put in my contact lenses so I can see you without worrying about crushing my spectacles.” He displayed the lens case on the palm of his hand. His ring caught a gleam of light.

“Shall I be naked when I emerge? Would you like that?”

“Yes. Yes, please. I would. Sanjay –”

“Yes?”

“First kiss me again. With your glasses and clothes on.”

His eyelids behind the lenses crinkled and his mouth opened as if to ask why, but he brought his open mouth across the room to me and allowed me to kiss it, to stuff my tongue into it, to bite his lips and chin and the tip of his nose. Feeling the blunt protrusion of his erection against my belly, I placed my hands on his ass and pressed, to feel it more distinctly. His belt buckle scraped my sternum – he had to straighten his back, rise to his full height. “I’m glad you wear glasses,” I said to the buttons of his shirt. “Because you are ... because you have possibly the loveliest face I’ve ever encountered and only that little imperfection permits me to imagine fucking you.”

“Is that what you’re going to do? Sodomize me?” Above my head, his voice was thin.

“Yes. Very much so.”

“I feared you would wish it the other way ’round.”

“Because I’m smaller and younger? Not that I won’t entertain the suggestion.”

“Because I’m bigger and older. Because ... because my family have land and money and I’m the eldest son and we’re kshatriya.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“High caste. Very high caste. Rulers, warriors.”

“Many, many years ago,” I said, “one of my maternal ancestors was a daughter of the Sultan Halife, Light of the World, Vice-Gerent of God on Earth. Which is also to say she was also the daughter of a slave. Do you want me to fuck you, Sanjay?”

He released me, took a step back. In his trousers, bound up below his belt, his cock looked

excitingly large and uncomfortable. His mouth open, lips gleaming with spittle, mine and his, he squinted at me through his glasses. I touched the corner of my own mouth, where the skin felt chafed by his stubble. "At length," he said, hoarse.

"Eventually?" I asked. "Or for a long time? Do you wish to be fucked, Sanjay?"

Turning away, he opened a door and closed it quickly behind him. Water began to run into a drain.

Pinned to the wall above his bureau was a voluptuous, saccharine chromolithograph of blue-skinned Krishna; on the bureau itself, Shiva danced in bronze miniature within a filigree mandala, between a chased brass pot holding the burnt tag ends of several sticks of incense and a few wilted yellow hot-house pansies in another brass vessel. Over his narrow bed, Sanjay had rigged a kind of canopy of gossamer silk, meters of it, garnet red with gold brocade borders. The coverlet on the bed was silk as well, heavier, the grass green of the shroud on a saint's tomb, disarranged over white sheets and what seemed to me too many heavy blankets. On the nightstand by the bed there were, besides the utilitarian lamp, a shallow brass bowl for change or jewelry, empty now, and a photograph framed in silver.

On a field of sunlit green, two young men in soccer kit stood side by side, grinning and squinting into the camera. The one with a mustache, the shorter, burlier one, the one who was not Sanjay, wore a goalkeeper's garish long-sleeved shirt but not the gloves. Each held a small child in the arm that wasn't around the other's shoulder – the one a bewildered, cross-looking little girl in fluffy pink, the other a serene and happy boy, beautiful as a Hindu idol, who reclined against his beautiful father's shoulder and chest as if he belonged there.

"That is Ram, my best friend," said Sanjay. "I miss him as much as my mother or my son. Our children will be married, we hope, when they're old enough. You're still dressed, Ziya."

"I will not be as handsome as Ram, lying naked in your bed," I said, setting the frame down.

"Not precisely, of course," Sanjay conceded. "No-one looks as well in my bed as Ram – he's my best friend since we were boys. But Ram is not here."

I turned around. Naked, Sanjay stood framed in the bathroom door. He was long and lanky and very beautiful. Encouraging, he lifted heavy balls in his palm. Not hard but bloated, his prick lay easy on his forearm, much darker than the rest of his skin except for the pale, tender head enfolded by wrinkles of dark skin. "Ram is not here," he said again, "but you are, and intoxicatingly lovely in your own way, and I have been lonely. You too, I think."

Sanjay watched me undress, clumsily. I wanted to tell him about Joshua, the golden Florida boy who was half in love with me, half with my being foreign and exotic and a Muslim – his parents might accept his sleeping with men, Joshua said, but would find it very difficult to forgive a trans-Jordan affair, as it were. I wanted to tell Sanjay about two other American college boys who might have seduced me if there had been anywhere for us to go, and about Gabriele in Venice. I wanted to tell him how I sometimes believed I might fall in love with Joshua if it weren't for my being foreign and exotic and Muslim, he an American Jew. Sanjay waited in the doorway until I was naked, until I had pushed aside the blankets and taken my place, ready, in his bed.

His flesh was hot but his skin cool. Putting his hands over my ears to hold me still, he pressed himself full length against me. He kissed me avidly, lapping at my lips with his tongue. When I brushed my fingertips over the fine silky hair on his shoulders and back, he shivered. I felt the rasp and rustle of the coarser hair on his chest against my nipples. My hand reached his buttocks, just lightly caressed one cheek, and he moaned into my throat.

I pushed him off me. I wanted to look at him. Scabs on his knees and bruises on thighs, ribs, shoulders marred the seamless perfection of skin as dense and fine grained as polished tropical veneer. I kissed each one as I discovered it, wondering if it were mine. I knew precisely which yellow-green blot on my own calf was his. He lay back lazily, uncomplaining, his smile almost a frown between the eyebrows as I continued to explore. He smelled richly of sweat and a complex, acrid odor I decided was sandalwood, as if he had bathed in the smoke of incense. Joshua and others had taught me not to be dismayed by unshaven armpits and pubes, but Sanjay appeared to

be hairy everywhere, fine, dark hair like the hair on my own forearms, which thickened, coarsened on forearms and legs, across his chest and in a ribbon down his belly.

I was taking in details only: he was too large to take in, though slender and well knit – too largely handsome. I touched his prick. I had been with uncircumcised men before. Gabriele had liked to tug and toy with his foreskin in a way I found childish and endearing. The wrinkles on the bridge of Sanjay's nose deepened when I ran my knuckles up the underside of his penis, from base to tip, then cleared as his eyebrows rose and lips parted when I closed my fist around it. Once, Gabriele had had me stroke him to orgasm while he pinched the hooded skin closed; when his shudders ceased and his breathing slowed, he knelt up high and, letting go, sharply swung his hips. Semen spattered a white arc across the bed.

For some time longer, Sanjay permitted me to make love to him in this deliberate, disconnected, annoying fashion, longer than I would have put up with. It was provoking, his lying there like a paşa of the senses, smiling now and then but mostly calm, if not grave. If I brushed his lips with my fingertips, he kissed them, or if I brought my face near enough he lifted his head a little off the pillow to meet me. His eyes followed me wherever I turned, shifting under heavy lids. The little slave boy might exhaust himself before the jaded paşa felt lively enough to take his pleasure. Except it was the slave boy's pleasure, my pleasure, that I was going to take.

Their wives were out shopping in an air-conditioned department store – I imagined their wives, too, were friends (if not identically lovely cousins or sisters); their little children were being spoiled by one or another grandmother. Comfortably lazy in the perfumed heat of the afternoon, after one of Sanjay's mother's fondly remembered meals, they retreated to his private study, talking of soccer or international markets or films. Sanjay set down his tray, poured fresh lemonade for them both. He turned to lock the door. They had been best friends for so long they needn't fall slobbering on each other the instant they were alone – they spoke every day, on the phone if business kept them apart, they had private time together often. I could imagine how they managed (it scarcely needed to be managed), how I might manage a similar life in the

interstices and quiet, unspoken corners of my family's house, if I had a similarly dear friend.

Ram had been smaller even as a child, though he had grown into his height in a way Sanjay had not, was stronger now than his friend, outweighed him by three or five kilos. Still, he would need to be shamed or cajoled – he had fathered a daughter, as well, not a son. Sanjay would have to push him down, do to Ram as I did for him, excite Ram, frustrate him past caution or propriety.

I straddled Sanjay's chest. I pushed three fingers into his mouth and pulled his head up, forward. Holding my cock down with the other hand, I forced it between his lips, in with his tongue and my fingers. He wanted to introduce himself with little kisses and licks and caresses, but I brushed his hands away and pressed on. In a way it was as exciting to have my hands in his mouth as my prick. Perhaps he thought so as well. He made sounds that would have been laughter if his mouth hadn't been stuffed. Tears leaked from the corners of eyes squinted with delight. His big hands scuttled up my flanks, tickling. One found the small of my back, as if he might impel me to push more in. The other played briefly with my nipples, but that wasn't what I wanted.

In my mind, it was Sanjay who fed his big prick to nuzzling, guzzling Ram. He had evidently decided not to force the issue – or not to force it yet. He straddled Ram, but Ram's shoulders forced his knees apart and Ram's own legs were up, his back acrobatically curved. Reaching behind his own back, Sanjay found it not too awkward to push his thumb into his friend's asshole. I extricated one hand from his mouth and grabbed his wrist, guided it where I wanted it. He hesitated, made a noise that meant no, his ass, my fingers. "Do it," I said, pulled my cock out of the mouth my hand held open, slapped his cheek with it. He did it. Going in dry, the slender forefinger burned like something much larger, and I reached back and grasped something much larger.

Now the paşa was excited, heated. First one finger, then two drilling in, he mouthed the little slave boy's tender, shaven balls, chafed the insides of my thighs with the stubble on his chin.

Sanjay had turned about now: mercilessly, he bent over Ram's groin. It seemed to me plausible Ram should possess an exceptionally large cock of which Sanjay would be pressed to fit more than half in his mouth, big testicles that Sanjay would knead between his fingers. It would be Ram's thick, blunt fingers in Sanjay's ass, now.

"Please," Sanjay said when I left his mouth unfilled for a moment. "Please." He was sitting athwart Ram's belly now, in my imagination, working away at his own cock with the clear intention of bringing himself off so Ram would have no alternative but to fuck him. "Condom," I said harshly. There are always alternatives. With great affection, Ram moved Sanjay's hands away, put the condom on him, then pushed him gently off and rolled himself over, presenting upraised a handsome ass that Sanjay, after all, wasted little time on plugging.

Sanjay's ass, too, was handsome, lean and muscular, a soccer player's ass. I hoisted his ankles to my shoulders, leaned forward between his big soccer-player thighs, and teased his prick while he guided mine. He grunted at the first pressure. When, sure of myself, I pushed hard, he groaned. I fucked him as well as I knew how, although he did not want me to be patient. Unlike some in my experience, his cock stayed hard, at least until I forced him to come – he made a great deal of noise, coming with great force and volume, spattering white droplets that collected on his chest hair like dew. I gathered them on my fingertips, made him lick them off as I continued to fuck him, until his prick grew hard again. I had resolved against asking him to fuck me in turn. The second time he came, I allowed the upheaval in his gut to bring me off as well.

We met up again every so often through the fall. Sanjay never said it – and perhaps I was wrong all along, perhaps he was simply what Joshua called himself: a real bottom – but I came to believe it was something in the nature of a personal vow: the only man he would fuck was Ram, his best friend since they were boys. Conceivably, I was even more wrong and he fucked no man at all, only his wife. Between Sanjay and Joshua, I was getting more sex than seemed absolutely necessary, but I became preoccupied with wanting their cocks up my ass. With Sanjay, though, I came to like too much the picture I had of him with Ram to press the issue past the first,

gentle deflection; with Joshua, I was tiresome. In his friendly way, he tried to oblige. It was more friendly – inept, amusing – than passionate, and he said, “Look, that’s what you want, go out and find somebody good to give it to you. Then come back and give me what I want.”

Then I met Imtiyaz, a grad student nearly as handsome as Sanjay, whose wife had flown home to London to bear their first child. He had himself convinced screwing boys did not make him unfaithful to her. When we met, Imtiyaz would kiss me fondly, lips chastely dry. After he had fucked me expertly on the chaise longue in his living room, or on the floor, or bent over a table – never in his wife’s bed – he would kindly urge me to get myself off, spurting hotly over his hairy chest or belly or back, but he always looked away when the time came and never helped.

Then I went home for the winter break. After learning of my mother’s illness, after seeing it; after the nearly disastrous misunderstanding with my elder brother; after the drunken evening with my old schoolmate Cem, who fucked me in his wife’s bed, not very nicely, for old time’s sake – on my return to Cambridge I set sex aside for a while. I wasn’t interested. The noises ‘Ali made at night, masturbating angrily in his bed across the room, simply irritated me. Imtiyaz’s wife was back with their perfect little daughter, so he had no time for me in any case. Sanjay and Joshua I put off with weak excuses, saying I was busy, until they stopped calling.

I had my classes and my studies, practices, endless drills, the occasional intramural match with Those Foreign Bastards; I was enrolled in a workshop for which I wrote little stories and attempted to make helpful comments about the other writers’ work. I went to movies and concerts and lectures with Yussuf, or simply for pizza and endless talk. I spent time with Rachid. Besides being the only Muslim of my acquaintance who appeared to understand our faith in the same terms as I, he seemed to have read and thought about every work of fiction published in English or French in two hundred years. Because I was often with Rachid, I saw João, off the pitch – saw them together.

§

João greeted us at the door of their apartment, a “Hey-oh!” in precisely my friend’s intonation

for Yussuf, for me a slap on the shoulder and a comment about how he couldn't wait for the new moon. "I want you back in training, Ziya," he said. "And I can't say I won't be happy when the man stops waking me for breakfast an hour before dawn."

"And at two AM for a little snack." Rachid came from the kitchen with glasses of cool water for Yussuf and me, bringing with him as well the smells of stewing chicken and onions, lemons, cinnamon. "Merhaba, Yussuf, Ziya. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

Yussuf accepted his glass with a nice little bow. "No notice would be too short to get me here to eat your cooking."

"You're an incorrigible flirt, Yussuf. Thank you. It's nearly ready."

Yussuf went with Rachid to help pull things together in the kitchen – he had an unexpected domestic side. João put his arm around my shoulder, a pleasant little hug. "I've a special treat for you," he said, drawing me into the living room, leading me toward the large TV that dominated one end.

"Dinner isn't special enough?"

"That was Rachid's idea when I told him what I had. The man can't help himself." Five or six videocassettes were stacked beside the television. João took up the top one. "My family tape every broadcast league match for me, of course, but this one – well, they know how I feel about Porto. They despise Porto, if only for my sake. I don't know what they were thinking. Why I'd care about Porto trying to qualify for the European Cup."

"Porto versus Galatasaray!" I exclaimed, my voice skipping.

"In İstanbul," he agreed.

"At Ali Sami Yen." Delighted, I embraced him as if he were a teammate. Of course, the game is too beautiful not to watch any teams playing anywhere, but there's something deeper, stronger if it's your own side, in your own stadium. "My brothers went to that match. They would have gone anyway, but I've told them about you – I don't think İzzet and Veli quite comprehend that there's a full league in Portugal. We're very provincial about football in Turkey. Think of Porto as

Fenerbahçe, I told them, the side you used to play for as Gala.”

João gently pushed me away. Dark eyebrows low and tight, he looked all around the living room, as if confused. “I never actually played for Benfica,” he muttered. “If the manager had ever taken me off the bench, I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’d be managing them.”

“I’d be fat and bitter and disgraced, running some dingy queer dive in the Bairro Alto, with old team photos on the wall in my sordid flat upstairs and my jersey under glass, always fearful someone would recognize me. I only stuck it out as long as I did because I was in love with the second-string keeper. Rui got to play now and then.” He was staring at his jersey under glass, a brilliant red specimen butterfly pinned to the wall above the television. “He would have come through okay if we’d been found out. Rui wasn’t queer – just horny all the time, too lazy and cheap and self-centered to hold onto a girlfriend. I just made sure to be convenient when he needed a hole to plug his stick into, and to out-macho him the rest of the time.” Shaking his head, João sank into the couch. “He’s fat now, but very jolly and successful, running a classy dive in the Bairro. Pictures of the wife and kids up with the team photos behind the bar – I took Rachid by when we went to Lisbon last summer. Rui couldn’t get over how I was still in fair shape, but it was like he was patronizing me. He might be fat and out of breath, but he’s a real man.” João shook his head again. “I know you’re not as strict about alcohol as Rachid,” he said, looking up. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

I saw that it would be unkind to refuse. “Sure, Coach – I’m not in training, I can probably handle one.”

He smiled gamely and stood up. “One’s all you’ll get.”

While he was gone, I tried to interest myself in the wall of books – all Rachid’s. Every title I focussed on was French. I didn’t understand why João had told me the story. I didn’t want the wine. On an empty stomach I’d get drunk fast; it was difficult enough not to get dehydrated during Ramazan. If I went out dancing, after all, I’d drink bottle after bottle of mineral water as

long as I remained in the club.

“Well,” João said, touching my shoulder, “since it’s Porto, we won’t be rooting for opposing sides. That’s good. I suppose your brothers told you the outcome.”

“I won’t tell you.”

“I already know. I read the press.” He handed me one glass, took a sip from the other.

“Doesn’t matter. I can watch a good game forty times over.”

“Wait till you see Tanju,” I said eagerly. “He’s a marvel.”

“Ziya.” Turning away, João went back to the couch. “Whatever happened to the boy you were seeing in the fall?”

Surprised, I raised my glass. The straw-colored wine was pungent. “Which one? The American, the Indian, or the Brit? I’m not seeing any of them now.”

He looked at his hands. “Anyone?”

A puddle of wine lay on my tongue, dry and sharp, a myriad microscopic burrs caught on the tastebuds, each emitting its little burst of fragrance that seeped up into my sinuses, making them burn. I swallowed. “Not really. Truth is, before Yussuf showed up with your invitation, I was planning to go over to that dance club near the Fens. That’s what I seem to want now, every now and then. I don’t want to see anyone twice.”

Without looking up, João patted the seat beside him. “I’m going to ask a stupid, impolite question, Ziya. Sit down for a minute.”

Offended, I glared at him, though he still didn’t raise his head. “I know all about that.”

“What?” Puzzled, he peered at me. “Oh. Not that. I hadn’t even thought of it. I know how not stupid you are. Please, Ziya, just sit down here.”

When I complied, he laid his hand on my knee for a moment, then took it away, lifted his glass from the coffee table, gazed into the crystal bowl. “I won’t say Rachid put me up to this. We’re both concerned. Can I say that? We care about you, Ziya.” Trying out a thin smile, he glanced at me, then away, pressing his lips together. “I don’t know what it’s like in Turkey, of

course, but I knew Portugal twenty years ago. Rachid remembers Morocco.”

Rachid had been at Harvard some years already when João came from California – I knew that. I didn’t know how they’d met. Their interests were so divergent, almost any encounter seemed implausible, fantastical. Their being together was so unlikely, until you saw them together, the match might have been arranged, like my parents’ marriage.

“In the fall,” João went on, leaving gaps between phrases, invitations to interrupt I didn’t take, “well, there are excesses you expect from college students, from foreigners coming into what seems a libertine culture. I certainly went out of my way to have a good time the first year or two. American boys asked for what they wanted. It wasn’t so sordid and hidden, so full of pretense. What Rachid says is, you knew where you stood. If a man said he liked girls, he wasn’t saying But I’ll settle for you since you’re on offer. Since you’re really a kind of girl, like a whore I don’t have to pay for. Like I was for Rui. An American boy might despise you or pity you, but he wouldn’t fuck you too. What I mean is – the fellow from the B School? Indian, you said? He was the one I knew about. He’s married, right?”

I was still offended. “Yes,” I said, because it was true. “No” – I knew, for whatever reason, he did care, was concerned. “It’s not Sanjay you’re talking about. It’s Imtiyaz, the Brit. British-born Pakistani. His wife was away. He needed an outlet. It would be immoral to be with another woman when his wife was carrying his baby.” João was talking about my uncle İsmet who raped me, very gently and considerately, one summer night when I was fifteen, when he was drunk and horny, his wife pregnant, uninterested. “We used each other. Like you and Rui. Sanjay was different.”

“How?”

I remembered my mother telling me, when I was home for the winter, how my father felt he had one goal met, with Mehmet about to be married. Now it was my turn. He was afraid, my father was, I wouldn’t return from America without a Turkish bride to lure me home. My mother had returned to Turkey from America to marry the husband her parents had chosen.

“He’s married because his mother wanted grandchildren. He wanted me because he missed his best friend since they were schoolboys.”

“How different is it, Ziya?” João set down his glass. He placed his hand on my knee again, gazed into my eyes. “It’s not acknowledged, I imagine, your friend and his friend. If I’d stayed in Portugal, I would have married. I wouldn’t have had any option. We visited Rachid’s family – he’s forty-three, it was the third time he’d brought me, he has adolescent nephews who snigger about Tante Pédé and his footballer husband. His mother had a list of women for him to consider.”

His grip tightened on my knee. The creases around his eyes made them look dry and urgent. His breath smelled of wine. I thought he might weep if I told him I already knew everything he said, even if I had only worked it out as he spoke. I didn’t wish to become American, but I wanted – I imagined I wanted, I ought to want – what becoming American allowed João and Rachid to have. Lifting his hand from my leg, I squeezed it. As if he were my uncle İsmet, I raised it to my lips, kissed the palm, pressed the back to my brow. “Thanks, Coach,” I said in American. “I’ll think about what you said.”

Sentimental and rough, he took the back of my neck in his hand and rocked my head back and forth, before pulling me against his chest. “João,” I said into his collar, “are you this thoughtful with all your gay players?”

“Which gay players?” His voice was rough. “Gay boys don’t play violent games. All my players are macho Latin pigs like Rui. Especially the ones who like to suck dick. Like I tried to be. Like I still have to pretend if I’m going to get any respect from them – you think I’m going to invite Chano or Paolo or Rudolfo home to meet Rachid? I mean, they’d have to be incredibly dense not to know about him, about me, but as long as I swagger and bellow and don’t bring gay onto the pitch they’ll do me the honor of ignoring it.”

“I think you’re making wild generalizations,” I said, patting his shoulder. “What about Yussuf?”

“What –” He thrust me away as if in abrupt panic or anger, making me flinch. “What about

Yussuf? He's not gay."

I watched him lift his glass, waited for him to swallow. "I'm aware of that. He's not Latin or a pig, either, and only macho when it amuses him. He's in the kitchen with your boyfriend, helping with dinner. What was that about?"

João swallowed another mouthful of wine, before muttering, "Sorry. You reminded me."

Seeing his stricken expression and working it all out in a flash, I laughed. "What an idiot. That stupid, impolite question you were going to ask? His question, yes? Ziya, do you have a crush on your pal Yussuf? 'Cause that's not his scene, you know, but he doesn't want you hurting. Maşallah, the arrogance." I laughed again. "Americans! What an ugly thing they must believe friendship to be if they can confuse it like that. João." Lifting his hand in mine, I held it against his flushed cheek. "I love Yussuf the way I love my brothers. And after the fast, when I'm match fit and back on the pitch, I'm going to knock him down just as hard as I would any of them."

§

The tape started midway through a commercial, in Portuguese, involving scantily clad women and men romping on a beach and that seemed to be trying to sell us soap. João didn't translate. The screen cleared. Fancy animation transformed what appeared to be the cable channel's logo into a soccer ball, flighted it across a painfully green pitch to the accompaniment of a grandiose, swelling theme and the roars of a crowd in full throat. A photo montage of handsome stadia passed quickly. "Estádio da Luz," said João – Benfica's ground – but it was gone already. A voice over the music: "Goal Europe," João said, "special presentation." Dissolve to a picture-postcard vista of Old Stambul from the Marmara – two months before, snow clinging to the Süleymaniye dome momentarily overlaid by GALATASARAY SK – FC PORTO in meter-high letters. ESTÁDIO ALI SAMI YEN, ISTANBUL.

The players and reserves of both sides, the referees, the coaching staffs trotted through the tunnel onto the edge of the ground. In the stands, fans gave up on the pop music on the PA and began to sing in enormous unison, Cim, Bom, Bom! Huge yellow and red banners waved. Flares

sparked and smoked. “Buraya!” the stands yelled as the players in their quartered yellow and red or blue and white stripes hit the pitch for their warm up. “Come here. Right here. You.” By name they called them, every member of the Galatasaray eleven, keeper, defenders, midfielders, forwards. “Come here!”

Fascinated by the barbaric ritual spectacle, the Portuguese camera operators panned the crowds for each call, then focussed in tightly on each man as he answered the summons. “Tanju! Buraya!” they implored, and Europe’s Golden Boot sprinted to the touch line, grinning, punched the air, blew a kiss.

“This is wild,” Yussuf said. “You think we could get our fans to start something, João?”

“What fans?”

“Incredibly intimidating for the visiting team, I’d think,” murmured Rachid.

One of the attacking midfielders shared my name as well as my position. “Buraya!” Yussuf stuck his elbow in my ribs. Past too fast in the camera’s pan for me to be sure I’d seen them in the crowd, my three brothers called my name. “Ziya! Come here!” I blinked. It was a two-month-old soccer match, on tape. The referee blew his whistle. One Porto player tapped the ball to another’s feet, and it began.