Honour
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ALWAYS LEARNING
PEARSON
When I was seven years old, we lived in a green house. One of our neighbours, a talented tailor, would often beat his wife. In the evenings we listened to the shouts, the cries, the swearing. In the mornings we went on with our lives as usual. The entire neighbourhood pretended not to have heard, not to have seen.

This novel is dedicated to those who hear, those who see.
As long as he can remember he has had a sense of himself as prince of the house, and of his mother as his dubious promoter and anxious protector.

J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*
Esma

London, 12 September 1992

My mother died twice. I promised myself I would not let her story be forgotten, but I could never find the time or the will or the courage to write about it. That is, until recently. I don’t think I’ll ever become a real writer and that’s quite all right now. I’ve reached an age at which I’m more at peace with my limitations and failures. But I had to tell the story, even if only to one person. I had to send it into some corner of the universe where it could float freely, away from us. I owed it to Mum, this freedom. And I had to finish it this year. Before he was released from prison.

In a few hours I’ll take the sesame halva off the hob, let it cool by the sink and kiss my husband, pretending not to notice the worried look in his eyes. Then I’ll leave the house with my twin daughters – seven years old, four minutes apart – and drive them to a birthday party. They’ll quarrel on the way, and, for once, I’ll not scold them. They’ll wonder if there will be a clown at the party, or, better still, a magician.

‘Like Harry Houdini,’ I’ll say.
‘Harry who?’
‘Who-deeny, she said, you silly!’
‘Who’s that, Mummy?’

That will hurt. A pain like a bee sting. Not much on the surface, but a growing burning within. I’ll realize, as I have done on so many occasions before, that they don’t know anything about their family history because I have told them so little. One day, when they’re ready. When I’m ready.

After I have dropped off the girls, I’ll chat for a while with the other mothers who have shown up. I’ll remind the party host that one of my daughters is allergic to nuts, but, since it is difficult to tell the twins apart, it is better to keep an eye on both of them and make
sure neither gets any food with nuts, including the birthday cake. That is a bit unfair to my other daughter, but between siblings that does happen sometimes, the unfairness, I mean.

I’ll then get back into my car, a red Austin Montego that my husband and I take turns driving. The journey from London to Shrewsbury is three and a half hours. I may have to make a pit stop just before Birmingham. I will keep the radio on — that will help to chase the ghosts away, the music.

There have been many times when I thought of killing him. I have made elaborate plans that involved guns, poison or, better yet, a flick-knife — a poetic justice, of sorts. I have also thought of forgiving him, fully and truly. In the end, I haven’t achieved either.

*

When I arrive in Shrewsbury, I’ll leave the car in front of the railway station and take the five-minute walk to the grimy prison building. I’ll pace the street or lean against the wall across from the main entrance, waiting for him to come out. I don’t know how long this will take. And I don’t know how he’ll react when he sees me. I haven’t visited him for more than a year. I used to go regularly, but as the day of his release drew closer I just stopped.

At some point the massive door will open from inside and he’ll walk out. He’ll gaze up at the overcast sky, unused to seeing this vast expanse above his head after fourteen years of incarceration. I imagine him blinking at the daylight, like a creature of the dark. In the meantime, I’ll stay put, counting up to ten or one hundred or three thousand. We won’t embrace. We won’t shake hands. A mutual nod and the thinnest of greetings in small, strangulated voices. Once we get to the station, he’ll hop into the car. I’ll be surprised to see how athletic he is. He’s still a young man, after all.

Should he want to have a cigarette, I won’t object, even though I hate the smell and don’t let my husband smoke in the car or in the house. We’ll drive across the English countryside, passing through quiet meadows and open fields. He’ll inquire about my daughters. I’ll tell him they’re fine, growing fast. He’ll smile, though he hasn’t the slightest idea about parenthood. I won’t ask him anything in return.
I will have brought a cassette along to play. The greatest hits of ABBA – all the songs that my mother used to hum while cooking or cleaning or sewing. ‘Take a Chance on Me’, ‘Mamma Mia’, ‘Dancing Queen’, ‘The Name of the Game’ . . . for she’ll be watching us, I’m sure. Mothers don’t go to heaven when they die. They get special permission from God to stay around a bit longer and watch over their children, no matter what has passed between them in their brief mortal lives.

Back in London, once we reach Barnsbury Square, I’ll search for a parking space, grumbling to myself. It will start to rain – tiny crystal drops. Finally, we’ll find a spot into which I’ll squeeze the car after a dozen manoeuvres. I can deceive myself that I’m a good driver, until it comes to parking. I wonder if he’ll scoff at me for being a typical woman driver. He would have done so once.

We’ll walk together towards the house, the street quiet and bright behind and ahead of us. For a fleeting moment we’ll compare our surroundings with our old home in Hackney, the house on Lavender Grove, marvelling at how different things seem now, and how time has moved forward, even when we couldn’t.

Once inside, we’ll take off our shoes and put on slippers – classic charcoal for him, a pair of my husband’s, and for me burgundy slip-ons with pompoms. His face will crumple when he sees them. To put his mind at ease, I’ll tell him they are a present from my daughters. He’ll relax, now realizing that they are not hers. The resemblance is merely coincidental.

From the doorway he’ll watch me make tea, which I’ll serve without milk and with lots of sugar, that is, if gaol hasn’t changed his habits. Then I’ll take out the sesame halva. We’ll sit together by the window, with porcelain cups and plates in our hands, like genteel strangers, watching it rain on the violas in my back garden. He’ll compliment me on my cooking, saying how much he has missed sesame halva, though he’ll politely decline another serving. I’ll tell him I follow Mum’s recipe to the letter, but it never turns out as good as hers. That will shut him up. We’ll lock gazes, the silence heavy in the air. Then he’ll excuse himself, saying that he feels tired and would like to rest, if that is all right. I’ll show him to his room and close the door, slowly.
I'll leave him there. In a room in my house. Neither far away nor too close. I'll keep him confined within those four walls, between the hate and the love, none of which I can help but feel, for ever trapped in a box in my heart.

He is my brother.

He, a murderer.
When Pembe was born, Naze was so sad she forgot about all she had suffered for the previous twenty-six hours, the blood oozing between her legs, and tried to get up and walk away. At least, that’s what everyone said – everyone present in the delivery room on that blustery day.

As much as she might have wanted to leave, however, Naze could not go anywhere. To the surprise of the women in the room and her husband, Berzo, waiting in the courtyard, she was forced back into bed by a new wave of contractions. Three minutes later the head of a second baby appeared. Lots of hair, reddish skin, all wet and wrinkled. Another girl, only smaller.

This time Naze did not attempt to run away. She gave a wisp of a sigh, buried her head in the pillow and turned towards the open window, as if straining to hear fate’s whisper in the wind, as mild as milk. If she listened attentively, she thought, she might hear an answer from the skies. After all, there must be a reason, a justification unknownst to her but surely obvious to Allah, as to why He had given them two more daughters when they already had six, and still not a single son.

Thus Naze pursed her lips like a folded hem, determined not to say a word until Allah had explained, fully and convincingly, the motive behind His actions. Even in sleep her mouth was clamped tight. During the next forty days and forty nights she did not speak a word. Not when she was cooking chickpeas with sheep’s-tail fat, nor when she was giving her six other daughters baths in a large round tin bucket, nor even when she was making cheese with wild garlic and herbs, nor when her husband asked her what she would like to name the babies. She remained as silent as the graveyard by the hills where
all her ancestors were buried and where she, too, would some day be laid to rest.

It was a rugged, remote Kurdish village with no roads, no electricity, no doctor, no school. Barely any news from the outside world permeated its sheath of seclusion. The aftermath of the Second World War, the atomic bomb . . . The villagers hadn’t heard of any of this. And yet they were convinced that strange things happened in the universe, that is, beyond the shores of the Euphrates. The world being what it was, there was no point in wishing to discover it. Everything there had been, and everything there ever would be, was already present here and now. Human beings were ordained to be sedentary, like trees and boulders. Unless you happened to be one of these three: a wandering mystic who had lost his past, a fool who had lost his head or a majnun who had lost his beloved.

Dervishes, eccentrics and lovers aside, for the rest of the people nothing was astonishing, and everything was as it should be. Whatever took place in one corner was heard, at once, by everyone else. Secrets were a luxury only the rich could afford, and in this village, named Mala Çar Bayan, ‘House of Four Winds’, no one was rich.

The village elders were three small-statured, forlorn-looking men who spent most of their time in the sole tea house contemplating the mysteries of Divine Wisdom and the stupidities of politicians while they sipped tea out of glasses as thin as eggshells, as fragile as life. When they heard about Naze’s oath of silence, they decided to pay her a visit.

‘We came to warn you that you’re about to commit sacrilege,’ said the first man, who was so old the slightest breeze could have knocked him down.

‘How can you expect Allah the Almighty to reveal His ways to you when He is known to have spoken only to prophets?’ remarked the second man, who had but a few teeth left in his mouth. ‘Surely there was no woman among them.’

The third man waved his hands, as stiff and gnarled as tree roots. ‘Allah wants to hear you talk. If it had been any other way, He would have made you into a fish.’

Naze listened, now and then dabbing her eyes with the ends of her
headscarf. For a moment, she imagined herself as a fish – a big, brown trout in the river, its fins glittering in the sun, its spots surrounded by pale haloes. Little did she know that her children and grandchildren would, at different times in their lives, feel attached to various kinds of fish, and an affinity with the kingdom under the water would run in the family for generations to come.

‘Speak!’ said the first old man. ‘It’s against nature for your kind to be quiet. What goes against nature goes against Allah’s will.’

But still Naze said nothing.

When the honourable guests had left, she approached the cradle where the twins were sleeping. The shimmer from the lighted hearth painted the room a golden yellow, giving the babies’ skins a soft glow, almost angelic. Her heart mellowed. She turned to her six daughters, who had lined up beside her, from the tallest to the shortest, and said, in a voice both hoarse and hollow: ‘I know what I’ll name them.’

‘Tell us, Mama!’ the girls exclaimed, delighted to hear her speak again.

Naze cleared her throat and said, with a note of defeat, ‘This one will be Bext and the other, Bese.’

‘Bext and Bese,’ the girls echoed in unison.

‘Yes, my children.’

Upon saying this, she smacked her lips, as if the names had left a distinct taste on her tongue, salty and sour. Bext and Bese in Kurdish, Kader and Yeter in Turkish, Destiny and Enough in every language possible. This would be her way of declaring to Allah that even though, like a good Muslim, she was resigned to her fate, she had had her fill of daughters and the next time she was pregnant, which she knew would be the last time because she was forty-one years old and past her prime now, He had to give her a son and nothing but a son.

That same evening, when their father came home, the girls rushed to give him the good news: ‘Papa! Papa! Mama is talking.’

Pleased as he was to hear his wife speaking again, Berzo’s face clouded over when he learned about the names she had chosen for the newborns. Shaking his head, he remained silent for few awkward minutes.

‘Destiny and Enough,’ he muttered finally, as though to himself.
'But you haven’t named the babies, really. You’ve sent a petition to the skies.'

Naze stared down at her feet, studying the toe poking out of a hole in her woollen sock.

‘Names hinting at resentful feelings might offend the Creator,’ Berzo continued. ‘Why draw His wrath upon us? Better stick to ordinary names and stay on the safe side.’

Thus saying, he announced that he had alternatives in mind: Pembe and Jamila – Pink and Beautiful. Names like sugar cubes that melted in your tea, sweet and yielding, with no sharp edges.

Though Berzo’s decision was final, Naze’s choices were not easily discarded. They would linger in everyone’s memory, tied to the family tree like two flimsy kites caught in some branches. Thus the twins came to be known by both sets of names: Pembe Kader and Jamila Yeter – Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty. Who could tell that one of these names would some day be printed in newspapers all around the world?
Since she was a little girl, Pembe had adored dogs. She loved the way they could see into people’s souls, even in deep sleep through closed eyes. Most grown-ups thought dogs did not understand much, but she believed that was not true. They understood everything. They were just forgiving.

There was one sheepdog in particular that she treasured. Droopy ears, long muzzle, a shaggy coat of black, white and tan. He was a good-natured creature that liked to chase butterflies and play catch with twigs, and ate almost everything. They called him Kitmir, but also Quto or Dodo. His name changed all the time.

One day, out of the blue, the animal started to act strangely, as if possessed by a mischievous *djinni*. When Pembe tried to pat him on his chest, he lunged at her with a growl and bit her hand. More than the shallow cut he caused, it was the change in the dog’s character that was worrying. Lately there had been an outbreak of rabies in the region and the three village elders insisted that she go to a doctor, except there was none within sixty miles.

So it was that the girl Pembe, with her father, Berzo, took first a minibus, and then a bus, to the big city, Urfa. The thought of spending the day away from her twin, Jamila, sent a chill down her spine, but she was equally delighted to have her father all to herself. Berzo was a solidly built, broad-boned man with strong features and a large moustache, the hands of a peasant, and hair greyin at the temples. His deep-set hazel eyes were kindly, and apart from the times when he displayed a temper, he had a calm disposition – even if it saddened him profoundly not to have a son to carry his name to the ends of the earth. Though a man of few words and fewer smiles, he communicated with his children better than his wife did. In return, his eight
daughters competed for his love, like chickens pecking at a handful of grain.

Travelling to the city was fun and exciting; waiting at the hospital was neither. Lined up in front of the doctor’s door were twenty-three patients. Pembe knew the exact number because, unlike the other eight-year-old girls in her village, she and Jamila went to school – a decrepit, one-storey building in another village forty minutes’ walk away – and could count. There was a stove in the middle of the classroom that spurted more smoke than heat. Younger children sat to one side of it, older children to the other. As the windows were rarely opened, the air inside was stale and as thick as sawdust.

Before starting school Pembe had taken it for granted that everyone in the world spoke Kurdish. Now she understood that wasn’t the case. Some people didn’t know Kurdish at all. Their teacher, for instance. He was a man with short-cut, thinning hair and a doleful look in his eyes, as if he missed the life he had left behind in Istanbul and resented having been sent to this forsaken place. He got upset when the students didn’t understand what he was saying or made a joke in Kurdish at his expense. He had recently introduced a set of rules: whoever uttered a word in Kurdish would have to stand on one foot by the blackboard with their back turned to their classmates. Most students stayed there for a few minutes and were then pardoned on the condition that they didn’t repeat the mistake; but from time to time someone was forgotten in the course of the day and had to spend hours in the same position. The rule had generated opposite reactions in the twins. While Jamila clammed up completely, refusing to speak any language whatsoever, Pembe tried hard to excel in Turkish, determined to learn the teacher’s language and, through that, to reach his heart.

Meanwhile, their mother, Naze, didn’t see the point in their going to such lengths to master words and numbers that would be of no use, since they would all get married before long. But her husband insisted that his daughters be educated.

‘Every day they walk all that way back and forth. Their shoes are wearing out,’ Naze grumbled. ‘And what for?’

‘So that they can read the constitution,’ said Berzo.
‘What’s a constitution?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘The law, you ignorant woman! The big book! There are things that are allowed, things that are forbidden, and if you don’t know the difference you’re in deep trouble.’

Naze clucked her tongue, still not convinced. ‘How’s that going to help my daughters get married?’

‘What do you know? If one day their husbands treat them badly, they won’t have to put up with it. They can take their children and leave.’

‘Oh, where will they go?’

Berzo hadn’t thought about that. ‘They can seek shelter in their father’s home, of course.’

‘Uh-hm, is that why they trudge so far every day and fill their minds with that stuff? So that they can return to the house where they were born?’

‘Go and bring me tea,’ Berzo snapped. ‘You talk too much.’

‘Perish the thought,’ Naze murmured as she headed to the kitchen. ‘No daughter of mine will abandon her husband. If she does, I’ll beat the hell out of her, even if I’m dead by then. I’ll come back as a ghost!’

That threat, empty and impetuous though it was, would become a prophecy. Even long after she had passed away, Naze would come back to haunt her daughters, some more than others. After all, she was a stubborn woman. She never forgot. And she never forgave – unlike dogs.

Now, as they waited at the hospital, Pembe gaped with her child’s eyes at the men and women lined up in the corridor. Some were smoking, some eating the flat breads they had brought from home, some nursing wounds or wailing in pain. Over everything hung a heavy stench – of sweat, disinfectant and cough syrup.

As she observed the state of each patient, the girl felt a growing admiration for the doctor she had yet to meet. The man who could provide a cure for so many diseases must be an extraordinary person, she decided. A seer. A magus. An ageless wizard with miraculous fingers. By the time it was their turn, she was brimming with curiosity and eagerly followed her father into the doctor’s room.
Inside, everything was white. Not like the suds that formed on the surface of the fountain when they washed their clothes. Not like the snow that piled up outside on a winter’s night or like the whey they mixed with wild garlic to make cheese. It was a white she had never seen before – unyielding and unnatural. A white so cold it made her shiver. The chairs, the walls, the floor tiles, the examination table, even the cups and scalpels were awash with this no-colour. Never had it entered Pembe’s mind that white could be so disconcerting, so distant, so dark.

What surprised her even more was that the doctor was a woman – but different from her mother, her aunts, her neighbours. Just as the room was swathed in an absence of colour, the doctor in front of her eyes had none of the female qualities with which Pembe was familiar. Underneath her long coat she sported a knee-length taupe skirt, stockings of the finest and softest wool, and leather boots. She wore glasses so square they gave her the appearance of a grumpy owl. Not that the child had ever seen a grumpy owl but surely this was what one must look like. How different she was from the women who worked in the fields from dawn to dusk, got wrinkles from squinting in the sun and bore children until they had enough sons. Here was a female who was used to having people, including men, hang on her every word. Even Berzo had taken off his cap and dropped his shoulders in her presence.

The doctor gave the father and daughter no more than a grudging glance. It was as if their mere existence tired – even saddened – her. They were clearly the last people she wanted to treat at the end of this arduous day. She did not talk to them much, letting the nurse ask the important questions. *What was the dog like? Was he foaming at the mouth? Did he act strangely when he saw water? Had he bitten anyone else in the village? Was he examined afterwards?* The nurse spoke very fast, as if there was a clock ticking somewhere and time was running short. Pembe was glad her mother had not come with them. Naze wouldn’t have been able to follow the conversation, and would have made all the wrong assumptions, prickly with apprehension.

While the doctor wrote out a prescription, the nurse gave the child an injection in the stomach that sent her into a full-throated wail. She
was still crying hard when they stepped out into the corridor, where the attention of the strangers worsened her distress. It was at that point that her father, with his head straight, shoulders erect – Berzo again – whispered in her ear that if she would be quiet and behave like the good girl that she was, he would take her to the cinema.

Pembe instantly fell silent, eyes glittering with expectation. The word ‘cinema’ sounded like a wrapped sweet: she didn’t know what was inside, but she was sure it had to be something nice.

* *

There were two theatres in the city. The larger one was used more by visiting politicians than by local performers and musicians. Before and after the elections crowds of men gathered there and fiery speeches were made, promises and propaganda circling the air like buzzing bees.

The second venue was far more modest but just as popular. It showed films of varying quality, thanks to the tastes of its owner, who preferred adventures to political tirades and paid smugglers large commissions to bring him new films, along with tobacco, tea and other contraband. Thus the people of Urfa had seen a number of John Wayne Westerns, *The Man from the Alamo* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as *The Gold Rush* and other films involving the funny little man with the dark moustache.

On this day there was a black-and-white Turkish film, which Pembe watched from the beginning to the end with her mouth slightly agape. The heroine was a poor, pretty girl in love with a boy who was very rich, very spoiled. But he changed. Such was the magic of love. While everyone – starting with the boy’s parents – disparaged the young lovers and connived to separate them, they would meet secretly under a willow tree on the banks of a river. There they would hold hands and sing songs as sad as a sigh.

Pembe loved everything about the cinema – the ornate foyer, the heavy, draped curtains, the thick, welcoming darkness. She couldn’t wait to tell Jamila about this new wonder. On the bus back home, she sang the film’s theme song over and over.
Your name is carved on my destiny,
Your love flows in my veins
If you ever smile at someone else
I'd kill myself or grief would kill me first

As Pembe swayed her hips and fluttered her hands, the other passengers clapped and cheered. When finally she fell silent, more out of weariness than out of any sense of propriety, Berzo laughed, his eyes creasing around the edges.

‘My talented girl,’ he said, with a touch of pride in his voice.

Pembe buried her face in her father’s broad chest, inhaling the lavender oil that perfumed his moustache. She didn’t know it, but this would be one of the happiest moments of her life.

*

When they returned home, they found Jamila in a dreadful state – eyes swollen, face puffed up. All day she had waited by the window, fidgeting with her hair, chewing her bottom lip. Then, suddenly and without reason, she had unleashed a terrible cry. No matter how hard her mother and sisters tried to calm her down, she hadn’t stopped wailing.

‘When Jamila started to weep, what time was it?’ Pembe queried.

Naze gave this some thought. ‘Sometime in the afternoon, I suppose. Why are you asking?’

Pembe offered no answer. She had learned what she wanted to know. She and her twin, though miles apart, had cried out simultaneously at the moment of the injection. People said twins were two bodies with one soul. But they were more than that. They were one body, one soul. Destiny and Enough. When one closed her eyes, the other one went blind. If one hurt, the other bled. And when one of them had nightmares, it was the other’s heart that pounded inside her chest.

That same evening, Pembe showed Jamila the dance steps she had seen in the film. Taking turns to mimic the heroine, they twirled, kissed and hugged like a couple in love, giggling.

‘What’s all this noise?’
It was Naze, her voice stiff with disdain. She had been winnowing rice on a flat tray.

Pembe’s eyes widened with resentment. ‘We were just dancing.’

‘And why would you do that?’ Naze retorted. ‘Unless you two have decided to turn yourselves into harlots.’

Pembe didn’t know what a harlot was but dared not ask. She felt a surge of resentment course through her – why couldn’t her mother enjoy the songs as the passengers on the bus had done? Why were perfect strangers more tolerant than one’s closest kin? She was still contemplating this question when she heard Jamila take a step forward, as if to own up to the guilt, and murmur, ‘We’re sorry, Mama. We won’t do it again.’

Pembe glared at her twin, feeling betrayed.

‘It’s for your own good that I say what I say. If you laugh too much today, you’ll be crying tomorrow. Better to feel bad now than soon after.’

‘I don’t understand why we can’t laugh today and tomorrow and the next day,’ Pembe remarked.

It was Jamila’s turn to scowl now. Her sister’s brazenness had not only taken her by surprise but also put her in an awkward position. She held her breath, fearing what would follow next: the rolling pin. Whenever one of the girls crossed a line, Naze smacked both of them with the thin wooden rod in her kitchen. Never on their faces – a girl’s beauty was her dowry – but on their backs and bottoms. The girls found it strange that the instrument they so bitterly abhorred also made the fluffy pastries that they cherished.

Yet that evening Naze did not punish anyone. She scrunched up her nose, shook her head and looked away – as if she longed to be somewhere else. When she spoke again, her voice was calm. ‘Modesty is a woman’s only shield,’ she said. ‘Bear this in mind: if you lose that, you will be worth no more than a chipped kuruş. * This world is cruel. It won’t take pity on you.’

In her mind’s eye Pembe flipped a coin in the air and watched it land on her palm. There were always two sides, and two sides only.

* Small unit of Turkish currency.
Win or lose. Dignity or disgrace, and little consolation for those who got the wrong one.

It was all because women were made of the lightest cambric, Naze continued, whereas men were cut of thick, dark fabric. That is how God had tailored the two: one superior to the other. As to why He had done that, it wasn’t up to human beings to question. What mattered was that the colour black didn’t show stains, unlike the colour white, which revealed even the tiniest speck of dirt. By the same token, women who were sullied would be instantly noticed and separated from the rest, like husks removed from grains. Hence when a virgin gave herself to a man – even if he were the man whom she loved – she had everything to lose, while he had absolutely nothing to lose.

So it was that in the land where Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty were born, ‘honour’ was more than a word. It was also a name. You could call your child ‘Honour’, as long as it was a boy. Men had honour. Old men, middle-aged men, even schoolboys so young that they still smelled of their mothers’ milk. Women did not have honour. Instead, they had shame. And, as everyone knew, Shame would be a rather poor name to bear.

As she listened, Pembe recalled the stark whiteness of the doctor’s office. The discomfort that she had felt then returned – only now the feeling was magnified. She wondered about the other colours – periwinkle-blue, pistachio-green and hazelnut-brown – and the other fabrics – velvet, gabardine and brocade. There was such variety in this world, surely more than could be found on a tray of winnowed rice.

It would be one of the many ironies of Pembe’s life that the things she hated to hear from Naze she would repeat to her daughter, Esma, word for word, years later, in England.
Askander . . . Askander . . .

A Village near the River Euphrates, 1962–7

Pembe was a woman of untenable thoughts and unfounded fears. This part of her personality wasn’t something that had evolved over the years. Instead, she had turned superstitious abruptly, almost overnight: the night Iskender was born.

Pembe was seventeen years old when she became a mother – young, beautiful and apprehensive. There she was in a room bathed in a dusky light, staring at the cradle, as if she was still not convinced that this baby with his pink, fragile fingers, translucent skin and a blotchy purple mark on his button nose had defied all the odds and survived; that he would, from now on, be her child, hers alone. Here was a son – the son that her mother had craved, and prayed to have throughout her entire life.

Naze had had one more full-term pregnancy after Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty. It had to be a boy this time – there was no other possibility. Allah owed her this; He was in her debt, she said, even though she knew she was speaking utter blasphemy. It was a secret agreement between her and the Creator. After so many girls, He was going to make it up to her. Such was her conviction that she spent months knitting little blankets, socks and vests in a blue deeper than stormy nights, all of them designed for her perfect little boy. She wouldn’t listen to anyone – not even to the midwife who examined her after her waters broke and told her, in a voice as quiet as the breeze, that the baby wasn’t positioned right, and that they had better go to the city. There still was time. If they set off now they could be at the hospital before the contractions started.

‘Nonsense,’ Naze retorted, holding the midwife’s eyes in her fiery stare.

Everything was fine. Everything was in His hands. She was
forty-nine years old and this would be her miracle child. She was going to give birth here in her own house, in her own bed, as she had done with each and every baby before, only this time it would be a boy.

It was a breech birth. The baby was too big and it was pointing the wrong way. The hours passed. Nobody counted how many, for it would bring bad luck. Besides, only Allah was the owner of time, the Divine Clockmaker. What was unbearably long for mere mortals was only the blink of an eye for Him. Thus the clock on the wall was covered with black velvet, just like all the mirrors in the house, each of which was a gate to the unknown.

‘She cannot push any more,’ said one of the women present.

‘Then we’ll have to do it for her,’ said the midwife resolutely, but her eyes gave away the fear she was hiding.

The midwife put her hand straight through Naze until she felt the sleek, slippery baby squirm under her fingers. There was a faint heart-beat, like a sputtering candle that had reached its end. Gently but firmly, she tried to turn the baby inside the womb. Once. Twice. She was more relentless the third time, acting with a sense of urgency. The baby moved clockwise, but it was not enough. Its head pressed against the umbilical cord, dangerously stifling the amount of oxygen that went through it.

Naze had lost so much blood she was fading in and out, her cheeks the colour of winter. A choice had to be made. The midwife knew it would be either the mother or the baby. There was no way she could save them both. Her conscience was as silent as a moonless night, and just as dark. All at once, she made up her mind. She would pick the woman.

At that moment Naze, lying there with her eyes clamped shut, dancing with death, bleeding umbrage, lifted her head and yelled: ‘No, you whore!’

It was a cry so shrill and forceful, it didn’t sound as if it had come out of a human being. The woman in bed had turned into a wild animal, famished and feral, ready to attack anyone who stood in her way. She was running in a thick forest where the sun cast shimmering gold and ochre reflections on the leaves — free in a way she had never
been before. Those within hearing distance suspected she had lost her mind. Only the mad could scream like that.

‘Cut me, you bitch! Take him out,’ Naze ordered and then laughed, as if she had already crossed a threshold beyond which everything was a joke. ‘It’s a boy, don’t you see? My son is coming! You spiteful, jealous whore. Take a pair of scissors! Now! Cut my belly open and take my son out!’

Swarms of tiny flies whirred in the room, like vultures circling a prey. There was too much blood everywhere. Too much rage and resentment smeared on the carpets, the sheets, the walls. The air inside the room had become heavy, listless. The flies . . . if only the flies could be made to disappear.

Naze did not survive. Nor did the baby for long – the baby whose gender she had been wrong about the whole time. Her ninth infant, the child who killed her and then quietly passed away in her cot, was another girl.

So on that day in November 1962, as she lay awake in her maternity bed late into the wee hours, it was the thought that God could be so arbitrary that distressed Pembe. Here she was, only seventeen and already breastfeeding a son. She couldn’t help suspecting that from somewhere in the heavens, under a watery light, her mother was watching her with envy. *Eight births, five miscarriages, one dead baby, and not one was a son . . . And here You are already giving a healthy boy to my hare-brained daughter. Why, Allah? Why?*

Naze’s voice echoed in Pembe’s ears until it became a ball of fury that rolled down to her chest and nestled in her stomach. Hard as she tried to fend off her anxieties, she ended up only building new ones. They drew circles in her mind, spinning like a pegtop, and suddenly there was nowhere to hide from the evil eye that was her late mother’s gaze. Once she started paying attention to it, she noticed that gaze everywhere. It was in the grain and cashew nuts that she pounded in a stone mortar, turned into a paste and then consumed to enrich her milk. It was in the rivulets of rain that streamed down the windowpanes, in the almond oil that she applied to her hair at every bath, and in the thick, bubbly yoghurt soup that simmered on the stove.
‘Allah the Merciful, please make my mother shut her eyes in her grave and make my son grow up strong and healthy,’ Pembe prayed, rocking herself back and forth, as if it were she who needed to be put to sleep, not the baby.

* 

The night Iskender was born, Pembe had a nightmare – as she had had many other times during her pregnancy. But this one felt so real that a part of her would never recover from it, never return from the liquid land of dreams.

She saw herself lying supine on an ornamental carpet, her eyes wide open, her belly swollen. Above her a few clouds slithered across the sky. It was hot, too hot. Then she realized the carpet was stretched over water, a rowdy river swirling under her weight. How is it that I’m not sinking, she thought to herself. Instead of an answer, the sky opened up and a pair of hands descended. Were they the hands of God? Or the hands of her late mother? She couldn’t tell. They cut open her belly. There was no pain, only the horror of being aware of what was happening. Then the hands pulled out the baby. It was a plump little boy with eyes the colour of dark pebbles. Before Pembe could touch him, let alone cuddle him, the hands dropped the baby into the water. He floated away on a piece of driftwood, like the prophet Moses in his basket.

Pembe shared the nightmare with only one person, her eyes bright and burning as she spoke, as if she had a fever. Jamila listened, and, either because she truly believed in it or because she wanted to free her twin of the terror of Naze’s ghost, she came up with an explanation.

‘You must have been jinxed. Probably by a djinni.’

‘A djinni,’ Pembe echoed.

‘Yes, sweetheart. The djinn love to take a nap on chairs and sofas, don’t you know? Adult djinn can make a dash for it when they see a human coming, but infants are not so fast. And pregnant women are heavy, clumsy. You must have sat on a baby djinni and crushed it.’

‘Oh, my God.’

Jamila twitched her nose as if she had caught a foul smell. ‘My
guess is the mother must have come for revenge and put a spell on you.’

‘But what am I going to do?’

‘Don’t worry, there’s always a way to appease a *djinni*, no matter how enraged,’ said Jamila authoritatively.

And so, while Pembe was nursing her newborn, Jamila made her toss dry bread to a pack of stray dogs and rush away without looking back; throw a pinch of salt over her left shoulder and a pinch of sugar over her right; walk through newly ploughed fields and under spiderwebs; pour sacred rosewater into every cranny in the house, and wear an amulet round her neck for forty days. She thus hoped to cure Pembe of her fear of their late mother. Instead she opened the door to superstitions – a door Pembe had always known existed but through which she had never before ventured to go.

Meanwhile Iskender was growing. His skin the colour of warm sand, his hair dark and wavy and gleaming like stardust, his eyes brimming with mischief and his birthmark long gone, he smiled copiously, winning hearts. The more handsome her son grew, the more Pembe became terrified of things over which she had no control – earthquakes, landslides, floods, wildfires, contagious diseases, the wrath of Naze’s ghost, the vengeance of a mother *djinni*. The world had always been an unsafe place, but suddenly the danger was too real, too close.

Such was Pembe’s unease that she refused to give her son a name. It was a way of protecting him from Azrael, the Angel of Death. If the baby had no particular affiliation, she thought, Azrael would not be able to find him, even if he wished to. Thus the boy spent his first year on earth without a name, like an envelope with no address. As well as his second, third and fourth years. When they had to call him, they would say, ‘Son!’ or ‘Hey, lad!’

Why didn’t her husband, Adem, object to this nonsense? Why didn’t he take control of the situation and name his heir like every other man did? There was something holding him back, something stronger than his quick temper and male pride, a secret between the two of them that empowered Pembe and weakened Adem, pushing him away from home towards an underground world in Istanbul, where he could gamble and be the king, even if only for one night.
Not until the boy had turned five did Adem take the reins in his hands and announce that this could not go on for ever. His son would soon start school, and if he did not have a name by then the other children would make sure he had the most ridiculous one imaginable. Grudgingly, Pembe complied but only on one condition. She would take the child to her native village and get her twin’s and family’s blessings. Once there, she would also consult with the three village elders, who, by now, were as old as Mount Ararat, but still dispensing sage advice.

* * *

‘It was wise of you to come to us,’ said the first village elder, who was so frail now that when a door slammed near by its vibration shook him to the core.

‘It is also good that you did not insist on naming the baby yourself, like some mothers do nowadays,’ remarked the second elder, who had only one tooth left in his mouth – a little pearl shining out like the first tooth of a toddler.

The third elder then spoke, but his voice was so low, his words so slurred, that no one understood what he said.

After a bit more discussion the elders reached a decision: a stranger would name the boy – someone who knew nothing about the family and, by extension, Naze’s spectre.

With a borrowed confidence Pembe agreed to the plan. A few miles away there was a stream that ran low in winter and frantically high in spring. The peasants crossed the water in a makeshift boat attached to a wire that had been stretched between the two banks. The journey was unsafe, and every year a few passengers would fall into the river. It was decided that Pembe would wait where the boat landed and ask the first man who got across to name her son. The village elders, meanwhile, would hide behind the bushes and intervene should the need arise.

Thus Pembe and her son waited. She was attired in a crimson dress that reached below her ankles and a black lace shawl. He was wearing his only suit and looked like a miniature of a man. Time crept by and the child got bored. Pembe told stories to entertain him. One of those stories would stand out in his memory for ever.
‘When Nasreddin Hodja was a boy he was the apple of his mother’s eye.’
‘Did she have apples in her eyes?’ he asked.
‘That’s an expression, my sultan. It means she loved him very much. *The two of them lived in a nice cottage on the outskirts of the town.*’
‘Where was the father?’
‘He had gone off to war. Now listen. *One day his mother had to go to the bazaar. She said to him, “You should stay at home and watch the door. If you see a burglar trying to break in, start shouting at the top of your voice. That’ll frighten him away. I’ll be back before noon.” So Nasreddin did as he was told, not taking his eyes from the door for even a moment.*’
‘Didn’t he have to pee?’
‘He had a potty with him.’
‘Wasn’t he hungry?’
‘His mother had left him food.’
‘Pastries?’
‘And sesame *halva,*’ Pembe said, knowing her son well. ‘*After an hour, there was a knock at the door. It was Nasreddin’s uncle, checking on how they were doing. He asked the boy where his mother was and said, “Well, go tell your mother to come home early and prepare lunch for us. My family will stop by for a visit.”’
‘But he is watching the door!’
‘Exactly. *Nasreddin was puzzled. His mother had advised him to do one thing and his uncle another. He didn’t want to disobey either of them. So he pulled up the door, saddled it on his back and went to get his mother.*’
The boy chuckled but he quickly grew serious. ‘I wouldn’t do that. I would always choose my mother over my uncle.’
No sooner had he said this than they heard a noise. Somebody had crossed the stream and was walking towards them. To Pembe’s – and the village elders’ – surprise it turned out to be an old woman. She had a spectacularly aquiline nose, hollows under her wrinkled cheekbones and a set of crooked teeth. Her small, beady eyes constantly moved, refusing to settle anywhere.
Pembe told her that her son urgently needed a name and asked if she would kindly help, avoiding details like Naze’s ghost or the village elders waiting behind the bush. The old woman didn’t seem the least bit surprised. Leaning against her staff, she weighed something
up in her head, calm and compliant, as if a request of this kind was the most ordinary thing in the world.

‘Mum, who is this?’ the child asked.
‘Hush, my lion. This nice lady here is going to give you a name.’
‘But she’s ugly.’

Pretending not to hear that, the woman took a step closer and scrutinized the boy. ‘So you haven’t found your name yet, I gather.’
The child raised his thin eyebrows, refusing to comment.

‘All right, well, I’m thirsty,’ she said, pointing to where the watercourse had formed an inlet. ‘Will you go and get me a cup of water?’
‘I don’t have a cup.’
‘Use your palms, then,’ the old woman insisted.

With a deepening frown the boy glanced at the woman, then at his mother, and then at the stranger again. ‘No,’ he said, a new edge to his voice. ‘Why don’t you go and get your own water? I’m not your servant.’

The woman tilted her head to one side, as if the words were a blow she had to dodge. ‘He doesn’t like to serve, does he? He only wants to be served.’

By now Pembe was convinced that they had picked the wrong person. To appease the situation she said in her most conciliatory tones, ‘I’ll go and get you water.’

But the woman didn’t drink the water Pembe brought to her, cupped in the palms of her hands. Instead she read it.

‘My daughter, this child will remain a boy for a long time and he will grow up only when he has reached mid-life. He will mature very late.’

Pembe gasped. She had the distinct impression that the woman was about to give away a secret, something she wasn’t supposed to reveal.

‘Some children are like the Euphrates, so fast, so rowdy. Their parents cannot catch up with them. I’m afraid your son will break your heart to pieces.’

The words fell between them like a stone hurled from out of nowhere.

‘But that’s not what I asked you,’ Pembe said, a bit tensely. ‘Have you thought of a name for him?’
‘Yes, I have. There are two names that might suit him well, depending on what you expect. One is Saalim. Once upon a time there was such a sultan. He was a poet and a fine musician to boot. May your son, too, learn to appreciate beauty should he be given this name.’

‘And the other?’ Pembe held her breath with anticipation. Even the boy seemed interested in the conversation now.

‘The second is the name of the great commander who always marched in front of his soldiers, fought like a tiger, won every battle, destroyed all his enemies, conquered land after land, united the East and the West, the sunrise and the sunset, and was still hungry for more. May your son, too, be invincible and strong-willed, and preside over other men should he be named after him.’

‘This one is better,’ said Pembe, her face brightening up.

‘Well, then, you are done with me.’

With that, the old woman grabbed her staff, and started to walk away down the road with a surprisingly agile gait. It took Pembe a few seconds to collect her thoughts before she ran after her.

‘But what is it?’

‘What is what?’ The woman turned and studied her – as if she had forgotten who she was.

‘The name! You didn’t tell me what it was.’

‘Oh! It is Askander.’


When they returned to Istanbul the boy was registered at the office of the local registrar. Though several years late, with a lot of pleading and a substantial bribe, his existence was legally accounted for. The name written on his card when he started school was Iskender Toprak.

‘A name worthy of a world leader,’ Pembe said. By then she had learned who Alexander the Great was.

So it was that her first child, the apple of her eye, would become Askander in Kurdish and Iskender in Turkish. When the family immigrated to London, to the children and teachers in his school, he was Alex – and this was the name he would be known by in Shrewsbury Prison, by convicts and guards alike.
A Prince in the Tree

Istanbul, 1969

The spring when he was not yet seven, Iskender ran away from a man whom he had never seen before but had heard much about. Although the man was different from what he had imagined, this made him no less frightening. He had thick-rimmed glasses that slid down his nose, an unlit cigarette between his lips and a large leather bag that was rumoured to contain sharp instruments and a piece of skin from each of his victims.

At the sight of him, Iskender felt a bolt of fear shoot along his spine. He spilled the cranberry sherbet in his hand, red drops trickling on to his white shirt, like blood on snow. He tried to wipe off the stain, first with his bare hands, then with the hem of his cape. It was no use. His beautiful costume was ruined.

Stain or no stain, he was still a prince in his long silvery cape and his cap studded with sparkling beads, carrying a sceptre so polished it was almost translucent. Throughout the afternoon he had sat in a high chair like a nobleman inspecting his lands – though being a bit short for his age all chairs were high for him. To his left were four boys, older and taller but similarly attired. As if sizing them up for a fight, Iskender had studied them from head to toe and decided their costumes were not as impressive as his.

While the other princes gobbled sweets and cracked jokes, Iskender waited, jiggling his legs. How could they be so silly when they knew what was about to happen? His eyes strayed anxiously. There were many people in the room, but he was certain that none would come to his rescue, not even his mother, Pembe, especially not her. She had wept all morning, telling him how proud she was that her little boy was becoming a man. For that is what you became when you were circumcised: a man.
Iskender couldn’t understand for the life of him how he would become a man with one cut of a knife. It was a riddle hard to solve. With less you became more. Nor could he fathom why he was told not to cry, though it was clear he would be hurt – while his mother could weep to her heart’s content, though absolutely nothing was happening to her.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched the man with the leather bag, noticing a scar that ran from his left cheek to his jaw. Perhaps one of the boys on whom he had operated had given him the wound. For a minute he indulged the idea, imagining how, just when the man was about to circumcise him, he would free himself of the hands holding him down, snatch the blade and slash his tormentor’s right cheek. Then he would help the other boys to their feet, and together they would dash for the door, victorious. But the fantasy faded away and the room came alive again – a blind *hafiz* reciting the Qur’an, a woman serving tea and almond paste, the guests chatting in hushed tones, and his most feared moment moving dangerously closer.

Slowly, Iskender slid down in his chair. His feet touched the floor, the carpet opening up beneath his weight. He took a step and held his breath, waiting for someone, anyone, to ask him where he was going, but no one did. He tiptoed past the double bed that had been placed in a corner – wrought-iron headboard, embroidered pillows, amulets against the evil eye and a satiny, cobalt-blue bedspread. Blue was Iskender’s favourite colour. It was the colour for boys, which meant the sky was a boy. So were the rivers and lakes. And the oceans, though he had yet to see one.

Feeling lighter and bolder with each step, he sneaked through the back door. Once outside he began to run, picking up speed as he made his way across the garden, around the well, down the gravel road, past the neighbours’ houses, up the hill. His costume was soiled but he didn’t mind. Not any more.

Iskender thought of his mother’s hands – combing her wavy, chestnut hair, making yoghurt in clay cups, caressing his cheeks, moulding figurines out of pastry dough. Until he reached the oak, he contemplated these images and nothing else.

It was an old tree that had roots running in four directions above
the ground and branches extending towards the billowing clouds. His breath coming in gasps, he began to climb, fast and focused. Twice his hands slipped and he almost tumbled down, but each time he regained his balance. He had never been this high before and felt disappointed that there was no one to see his achievement. From up here the sky seemed so close he could almost touch it. Beneath a blanket of clouds, he sat with sweet satisfaction and pride, until he realized he did not know how to get down.

An hour later, a blackbird perched a few feet away. It was an exquisite creature with yellow rings around its eyes and touches of crimson, bright as rubies, on its wings. It chirped once, timid and frail but full of life. Had the bird come any closer, Iskender could have caught it between his palms and listened to its tiny heart beat against his skin. He could have sheltered the bird, loved and protected it, but in one swift movement he could also have broken its neck.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than he felt a pang of remorse. There were huge cauldrons in hell, bubbling away for those who nursed such sinful thoughts. His eyes watered. He had been confident that his mother would notice he had gone missing and send out a search party, yet no one was coming. He was going to die here, perish of cold or hunger. What would people say when they learned that he had died not because of illness or accident, like everyone else seemed to do, but because of cowardice?

Perhaps they had looked for him in all the wrong places and assumed he was gone. Perhaps they thought he had been attacked by wolves, not that there were any in the area. He imagined a terrible death savaged by the claws and teeth of ferocious animals. Would his mother be devastated or would she secretly rejoice at having one less mouth to feed?

Thinking about his mother’s cooking made him realize how hungry he was. More urgently, he had to pee. Unable to contain himself any longer, he pulled down his trousers and held his willy, the cause of all his distress. He had barely started to relieve himself when he heard someone shout.

‘Hey, he’s up there! I’ve found him!’

In a few seconds a man appeared, then another, then ten more.
They stood by the tree, watching. Under their gaze, Iskender kept peeing as if his bladder had expanded to twice its usual size. Finally he pulled up his zipper and was considering asking for help to get down when he noticed that among the crowd was the man with the leather bag.

That was when the strangest thing happened: Iskender froze. His limbs went slack, his tongue went numb, and in place of his stomach was a rock. He could hear people beseeching him to get down, but he could not respond. He sat motionless, as if he had become a part of the tree. An acorn boy.

At first the onlookers below suspected he was playing dead, eager to get more attention. Only when they understood he wasn’t pretending, that the child was somehow paralysed, did they start contemplating how to bring him down. A man began to climb but couldn’t get as far as the lateral branch where Iskender was perched. Another tried his skill, with equal lack of success. Meanwhile, others were busy holding blankets for the boy to fall into or making lassoes, though no one knew exactly what to do with them. Nothing worked. Ladders were too short, ropes too thin, and the boy uncooperative.

Just then a voice cut through the air. ‘What’s he doing there?’ Pembe shouted, as she scurried up the hill.

‘He can’t get down,’ someone explained.

‘Oh, can’t he! He’s a big boy.’ Pembe was frowning at her son’s stick-thin legs dangling over the branch. ‘Get down here this minute!’

Like ice melting under the sun, Iskender felt his entire body thaw. ‘Come down, you rascal! You’ve shamed your father. All the boys have been circumcised. You’re the only one who acted like a baby.’

Try how he might, Iskender still couldn’t shift his body. Instead he looked down and grinned. Perhaps if he made light of the situation, lighter it would become. It was a mistake. All the pressure that had been mounting inside his mother gushed into a stream of fury when she saw him grin.

‘You spoiled brat! Come down this minute or I’ll break your bones! Don’t you want to be a man?’

Iskender gave this some thought. ‘No,’ he said finally.
‘If you remain a boy you’ll never have your own car.’
He shrugged. He would walk everywhere. Or take the bus.
‘Nor your own house.’
Iskender attempted another shrug. He would live in a tent like he
had seen gypsies do.
‘Nor a pretty wife.’
A puzzled expression came over Iskender’s face. He wanted to
have a wife, someone who resembled his mother but never scolded
him. He chewed his lip, brooding. After what seemed an endless
wait, he dredged up the will and the strength to look down into her
eyes – dark and green like two strands of ivy gently but firmly pull-
ing him towards her.
‘All right,’ Pembe said, sighing. ‘You win, I lose. You won’t be
circumcised. I’ll not let anyone lay a hand on you.’
‘Promise?’
‘Promise, my sultan.’
Her voice was warm, reassuring. As she spoke, Iskender found his
panic oozing away. He moved his fingers, then his toes, and managed
to descend a few branches, to where a man was waiting on the highest
rung of a ladder that had been propped up against the tree. When he
was safely on the ground again, he ran to his mother, sobbing out
loud.
‘My son,’ Pembe said, as if it needed to be verified. She hugged
him so tightly he could feel her heart beating through her chest.
‘Malamin,* my sultan.’
Iskender was happy to feel the earth beneath his feet, happier still
to have been missed this much by his mother – and yet there was
something suffocating about her embrace, sickly sweet. Her lips
against the side of his neck, her breath, her clutch enclosed him like a
coffin.
As if she had read his mind, Pembe grabbed the boy by the shoul-
ders, pushing him back so that she could stare him in the eye, and
slapped him hard. She said, ‘Do not ever shame me again!’

* ‘My house, my abode’ (Kurdish).
Half turning to the man with the leather bag, she added, ‘Take him!’

Iskender’s face went pale. He was more surprised than distraught. His mother had deceived him in front of everyone. And slapped him. He had never been hit by her before. The possibility had never even occurred to him. He tried hard to speak, but words had become like marbles, clogging his throat.

In the evening everyone commended Iskender for being brave during the circumcision. They said he hadn’t shed a single tear. But he knew his performance had nothing to do with courage. Because he was still thinking about what his mother had done and why she had done it, he hadn’t fretted over the operation. Never had it occurred to him that you could deceive the person you held dear. Until that day, he hadn’t known that you could love someone with all your heart and yet be ready to hurt them. It was his first lesson in the complexity of love.
The Wish Fountain

*A Place near the River Euphrates, 1977*

Pembe was gone now, her mirror image, her reflection in still waters. She slept under a different sky and every so often sent Jamila letters and postcards with pictures of red, two-tiered buses and immense clock towers. When she came home for a visit, her clothes smelled differently, and felt soft to the touch. That was the part that struck Jamila the most: watching her sister open her suitcase, bringing in aromas, tastes and fabrics from foreign lands. Pembe had left with the unspoken assumption that everything would be as it was upon her return. But nothing had remained the same. Nor had she come back for good.

For years Pembe had been sending Jamila letters, telling her about her life in England. The children, too, jotted down a few lines every now and then, Yunus more than anyone else. Jamila kept these missives in a tin tea box under her bed, like hoarded treasure. She wrote back regularly, although she had less to tell, or so she believed. Recently she had asked Yunus if he had seen the Queen and, if so, what she looked like. He had responded,

> The Queen lives in a palase. So big she gets lost in it. But they find her and put her on her throne again. She wears a diferent dress every day, and a funnee hat. It has to be the same colour as the dress. Her hands are soft because she puts on glouves and lots of creamz, and she doesn't wash the dishes. I saw her picturse at school. She seems nice.

Jamila could not understand how the family had been on that island for so long but still not set eyes on the Queen, save in magazines and newspapers. Sometimes she doubted whether Pembe had ventured from the neighbourhood where she lived at all. If she always
ended up confined between walls, what was the use of her travelling to a faraway country? Why couldn't human beings live and die where they were born? Jamila found big cities suffocating, and was daunted by the thought of unknown places – the buildings, the avenues, the crowds pressing on her chest, leaving her gasping for air.

In her letters, usually towards the last paragraph, Pembe would write, ‘Are you angry at me, sister? Could you forgive me in your heart?’ But she already knew what the answer would be. Jamila was not angry with her twin or with anyone else. And yet Jamila was also aware that the question had to be asked over and over, like a wound that needed to be dressed regularly.

They called her Kiz Ebe – the Virgin Midwife. They said she was the best midwife this impoverished Kurdish region had seen in a hundred years. Pregnant women felt relieved when she was in charge, as if her presence would ensure an easy labour, keeping Azrael at bay. Their husbands would bob their heads knowingly, and say, ‘The Virgin Midwife is in command. Everything will go well. Thanks first to Allah, then to her.’

Such words amounted to nothing; they only deepened Jamila’s fear of not living up to people’s expectations. She knew she was good – as skilled as one could get before starting to decline from old age, poor eyesight or sheer bad luck. Like every midwife, she was aware of the danger of her name being uttered in the same breath as the name of God. When she heard the peasants speak such blasphemy, she would murmur to herself, *Tövbe, tövbe.* They didn’t have to hear her; it was enough that God did. She had to make it clear to Him that she was not coveting His power, not competing with Him, the one and only life-giver.

Jamila knew what thin ice she was walking upon. You thought you were experienced and knowledgeable until you came across a delivery that filled you with dread, making you almost like a novice again. Every now and then something would go wrong, terribly wrong, despite her best efforts. At other times she couldn’t make it to a labour in time and when she arrived would find that the mother had just

*I take it back, I take it back.*

33
given birth on her own, sometimes even having cut the umbilical cord with a blunt blade and tied it with her hair. Jamila took these incidents as signs from God in which he was reminding her of her limitations.

They came from distant villages and forsaken parishes to fetch her. There were other midwives closer to their homes, but they sought her out. She was quite popular in this part of the world. There were dozens of girls who had been named after her — *Enough Beauty*.

‘May she carry your name and be half as chaste as you,’ prayed the fathers of the girls she brought into this world.

Jamila nodded, saying nothing, conscious of the insinuation. They would like their daughters to be modest and virtuous, and yet they wanted them to get married and have children in due course. Their daughters’ names and dispositions might be similar to the midwife’s, but their fates had better be different.

Approaching the window, a knitted shawl on her shoulders, a lamp in her hand, Jamila squinted into the dark. Under the deep mantle of the night, the valley was sleeping, bare and barren, bleary with tangled bushes and arid soil. She had always imagined a softness beneath this harsh landscape, which she likened to a rough man who hid a tender heart. Still, she didn’t have to live on her own in so remote a place. She, too, could have gone. Somewhere. Anywhere. Not that she had the means or any relatives who were willing to help her start anew elsewhere. Already thirty-two, she was past her prime and beyond proper marriage age. It was too late for her to start a family. *A dry womb is like a melon gone bad: fine on the outside, desiccated inside, and good for nothing,* the peasants said about women like her.

Even so, she could marry a disabled or elderly man, just as she could agree to become someone’s second wife — or third or fourth, though that was rare. Only the wife who had been married first was legal, of course, and could go to a hospital or courtroom or a tax register office and claim to be a married woman with legitimate children. But in this part of the country no one went to such places anyway, so long as you weren’t in serious trouble or dying of an infection or out of your good mind, in which case what difference would it make whether you were the first wife or the fourth?
Her house – if house was the right word for this shack – was nestled in a hollow near a ravine in the outer reaches of Mala Çar Bayan. Down below one could see a cluster of rocks that resembled petrified giants from afar and glowed like rubies when the sun cast its rays on them. There were many legends about these rocks, and behind every legend a story of forbidden love. For centuries Christians and Muslims and Zoroastrians and Yazidis had lived here side by side, loved and died side by side. Their grandchildren, however, had long ago left for other lands. All but a handful of peasants remained in the area – and Jamila.

Deserted places that once teemed with life had a kind of sadness, a ghost grief, which floated in the breeze, seeping into every crevice. Perhaps that was why, after a while, the people of derelict landscapes resembled the places themselves: silent, subdued and sullen. But that was what lay on the surface, and with people, as with the earth, the surface was rarely the same as the core.

Underneath the layers of clothes that she wore to keep herself warm, there was another Jamila – young, pretty, jovial, with a laugh like the tinkling of glass upon glass. She rarely went out these days, hiding behind the practical woman who chopped wood, scythed the fields, drew water and made potions. At times she feared for her sanity. Perhaps this much loneliness had finally got to her, nibbling away at her mind little by little.

When the wind blew in from the faraway mountains, it carried with it the aromas of wild flowers, fresh herbs and blossoming shrubs. But at times it also brought a cloying smell of roasted meat that hovered over everything, clinging to her skin. There were smugglers and brigands in the area – wandering about the caves and precipices, never staying in any one place for more than a day. On moonless nights she could see their campfires twinkling in the dark like forlorn stars. The smells in the air altered depending on what they were eating and how close they came.

There were wolves too. Jamila could hear them during the day, late in the evening, deep in the night. They would snarl and growl, and sometimes yip in high-pitched barks or howl in tandem. Every so often they would appear on her doorstep, so close and furtive, sniffing her solitude. Then they would leave, their jaws set in a scowl,
looking disappointed, as if they didn’t find her inviting enough to feast upon. Jamila wasn’t scared of them. The wolves were not her enemies, and, as for the bandits, they were interested in bigger rewards than her. Besides, Jamila took heart in her belief that danger always came from where it was least expected.

The smouldering heap in the fireplace stuttered to life when a twig caught fire. Jamila’s face glimmered, even though the rest of the house was sunk in shadow. She suspected the peasants didn’t love her, but they did respect her. Travelling on horse, donkey and mule, she was allowed to set foot in places no other woman could enter. She was often accompanied by people she knew, but also by complete strangers.

A man she had never seen before might knock on her door late at night, and plead, ‘Come quickly, I beg you! My wife is giving birth in the village of so and so. We need to hurry. She’s not doing well.’

He could be lying. There was always the possibility, however slight, of evil disguising itself. As she followed the man into the still of the night, Jamila was aware that he could kidnap, rape and kill her. She had to trust. Not him but Him. Yet it was also true that there were unwritten rules nobody in his right mind dared to violate. A midwife, someone who brought babies into this world, was semi-sacred. She dangled between the invisible world and the visible one, on a thread as delicate as a strand of spider’s silk.

Feeding the flames in the fireplace with more wood, Jamila put the copper cezve on the fire. Water, sugar and coffee – all these items were in short supply. But families brought her presents all the time – henna, tea, biscuits, saffron, pistachios, peanuts, and tobacco smuggled from the other side of the frontier. Jamila knew that if she had received money, she would have been paid once and that would have been it. But if you were paid in trinkets, such giving went on for a lifetime.

She mixed the coffee carefully, gently. Coffee was like love, they said, the more patient you were with it, the better it would taste. But Jamila didn’t know much about that. She had been in love once, and it had tasted sour and dark. Having scalded her tongue, she never spoke of it any more.

As she kept her eyes on the rising foam, she pricked her ears to sounds near and beyond. The valley was alive with spirits. There
were creatures here no bigger than grains of rice, imperceptible to the
naked eye but potent and perilous nevertheless. Birds tapped on the
windows, insects bounced off the water in the buckets as if skittering
across the surface of a lake. Everything had a language, she believed.
The thunderstorm, the morning dew, the ants crawling in her sugar
bowl . . . Sometimes she thought she understood what they said.

She loved nothing more than she loved being a midwife. It was her
mission, her one fortune. So it was that in the fog, or scorching sun, or
thirty inches of snow, any time during day or night, she was on call,
waiting for the knock on her door. This nobody knew, but in her heart
of hearts she was married already. Jamila was married to her destiny.

* 

Outside the night wind rattled against the windowpanes. Jamila took
the coffee off the flames and poured some into a small earthenware
cup with a chipped handle. She drank it in slow sips. The fire was a
bit like her life, smouldering within, not letting anyone come too
close, precious moments burning into embers, like dying dreams.

Far away a bird cried out – an owl, which the locals called the
mother of ruins. It hooted again, this time more boldly. Jamila sat
there with her eyes clamped shut, her thoughts wavering. Despite the
hardships, she remembered her childhood as a happy one. At times
one of the twins would pretend to be the Mummy and the other the
infant. Though older by three minutes, Pembe would always be the
baby while Jamila would be the mother, trying to constrain, control
and comfort her. She would rock her little one, singing lullabies, telling
stories. Looking back on those games, Jamila was surprised to see
how serious they had been.

She recalled how once her father, Berzo, took them to a town
where they discovered a Wish Fountain. Women who longed to have
babies, mothers-in-law who wanted to put a spell on their daughters-
in-law, and virgins who yearned for well-to-do husbands came here,
tossing coins into the water. When everyone had left, Pembe rolled
up her hems, climbed into the fountain and collected the coins. Then
they both ran, as fast as they could, shrieking with excitement, to the
closest shop, where they bought boiled sweets and sticks of rock.
Much as Jamila enjoyed the adventure, she felt guilty afterwards. They were thieves. Worse. Stealing people’s wishes was far more despicable than stealing their wallets.

‘Don’t be sentimental,’ Pembe said, when Jamila revealed her worries. ‘They had already let go of those coins and we pocketed them, that’s all.’

‘Yes, but there were prayers attached to them. If somebody had stolen your secret wish, you would be upset, no? I mean, I would.’

Pembe grinned. ‘So what is your secret wish?’

Jamila faltered, feeling cornered. True, she wanted to get married some day – a wedding dress and a buttercream cake like those they made in the city would be wonderful – but it wasn’t that important. She would love to have children, but was that because she really yearned for them, or because everyone told her she should? It would be nice to own a farmhouse and cultivate the land, but it was a fancy rather than a passion. As she thought harder, Jamila was glad that she was only a thief and not a visitor at the Wish Fountain. If she had been given a coin to make a wish, she might not have come up with one.

At her hesitation Pembe scoffed, her eyes aglow. ‘I’m going to be a sailor and travel the world. Every week I’ll wake up in a new harbour.’

Jamila had never felt more alone. She understood that as identical as they were in all respects, there was one vital difference: ambition. Pembe wanted to see the world beyond the River Euphrates. She had the nerve to pursue her heart, and not pay attention to what others thought about her. For a sinking moment it dawned on Jamila that she and her twin were bound to spend their lives apart.

Their father said identical twins were as blessed as they were damned. They were blessed because they would always have someone to count on. Yet they were also damned, because should one of them suffer despondency, they would be destined to suffer together and, therefore, twice as much. If that were the case, Jamila wondered, what was likely to cause them more pain – her sister’s passions or her own apparent lack of them?
Memories

London, December 1977

As he took a handful of oatmeal biscuits off the conveyor belt and placed them inside the next tin box, Adem Toprak had a revelation: he could not remember his mother’s face any more. He stopped for a moment, gooseflesh sweeping up and down his body – a pause that caused him to miss the next cluster of biscuits. Bilal, standing several feet down the assembly line, noticed the mistake and quietly covered it up. Had Adem realized what had happened, he would have given his friend a grateful nod, but in that moment he was still trying to recall what his mother used to look like.

There was a woman in the back of his mind, distant and hazy, as if she were standing in a fine mist. She was tall and slim, her face like marble, her pale eyes calm, concerned. A wedge of sunlight from a latticed window fell on the back of her head, leaving half her face in shadow. Her hair was coppery-brown, the colour of autumn leaves. But as the light dimmed, it changed to a shade so dark it appeared ink-black. Her lips were full and round. Perhaps not; Adem could not be sure. Perhaps she had thin lips that turned down at the corners. The woman seemed to change every second. Hers was a face sculpted out of melting wax.

Or perhaps he was confusing the memory of the woman who had borne him with the image of his wife. The long, wavy, chestnut hair that he now saw belonged to Pembe, not to his mother, Aisha. Had his wife become such an inseparable part of his existence that she eclipsed all his memories – even those from a time before they had met? He shifted his weight from one foot to another and closed his eyes.

Another recollection came. He and his mother were in an emerald-green field that overlooked a dam. He must have been eight. His
mother had let down her hair, which Istanbul’s notorious poyraz* kept blowing about her face. Ahead of them, the sky was a generous blue, flakes of gold, pewter and silver skittering across the faraway hills. Of the dam’s numerous gates only a few were open, and the lake level was low. The boy felt dizzy as he watched the waters churning beneath them. Any other day his mother would have warned him not to get so close to the edge, but oddly not that day.

‘Sheitan waits on the ledges to pull down whoever gets too close.’ That’s why they fell all the time – toddlers who leaned over balcony railings, housewives who stepped on windowsills to clean the windows, or chimney sweepers who clomped about near the eaves. Sheitan would clutch their ankles with his claws and yank them down into the emptiness below. Only cats survived because they had nine lives and could afford to die eight times.

Hand in hand, they had walked down the hill, until they reached the huge walls that sloped all the way down one side of the dam. Aisha sighed at the top of the gully, her lips moving. She seemed to have forgotten that the Evil One loomed close. Or perhaps not, because, once he concentrated on what she was saying, the boy realized she was praying – to ward off misfortune, no doubt. He was relieved, but only momentarily. What if the Devil were hiding somewhere behind the bushes, ready to push them into the void? With a sudden impulse, he pulled his hand from his mother’s and glanced around until he was certain there was no one else there. When he turned his head again, she wasn’t by his side.

Bit by bit, second by second, he watched her fall.

* Adem opened his eyes to find Bilal staring at him with something akin to alarm on his face.

‘What’s going on, man?’ Bilal asked over the clatter of the machines. ‘You’ve missed more than a dozen batches.’

‘Nothing.’ Adem put his right hand to his heart and patted. ‘I’m fine.’

* The wind that blows from the north-east, often bringing rain.
Bilal’s smile was slow but genuine. Nodding, he went back to his work, as did Adem. During the rest of the afternoon he managed to tackle every single biscuit. But those who knew him well could sense something was niggling him. Outside his control, beyond his power, an aching unease was crawling in the depths of his soul, sinister as a storm cloud.

He knew what it was: the fear of a cornered animal. He felt hounded, ground down, as if injected with a poison that didn’t kill but slowed the prey. Wherever he turned he could see his predators’ shadows. There was nowhere to escape – unless he left England for good. But he could not abscond, with his children and wife relying on him. And if he wanted to take his family with him, he would have to find money. A lot. He was stuck. The Chinese were aware of this too. That’s why they didn’t even bother to check on him every day. They knew they could find him whenever they wanted to – whenever he skipped a payment. But there was another reason why Adem couldn’t go anywhere: Roxana.

Six weeks ago, Adem had woken one morning to a sensation of exhilaration and elevation so intense it was like soaring in a dream. The portents were there. The signs had never betrayed him before. His palms were itchy, his heart was beating faster than usual, his left eye twitching ever so slightly. Nothing bothersome. Just a faint tic that came and went, like a coded message from the skies. An ordinary day in other respects, but the feeling stayed with him. All afternoon everyone was polite to him and he was polite to everyone. It was a fine, sunny day, and the sky’s reflection in the Thames was vivid and full of promise.

After sunset he went to the gambling den. One day soon, not long from now, he would stop doing this. He would break the habit, chop it off his body, as if he were pruning a sick branch from a healthy tree. Just as it was impossible for the tree to regrow the branch, he would never have the urge again. But not now. He wasn’t ready to give it up quite yet. For today it’s all right, he assured himself. Today the signs are favourable.
It was the basement of a double-fronted terraced house in Bethnal Green, resplendent with age. Inside it was a different world, though. There were five rooms: in each of them men played snooker or gathered around roulette, blackjack or poker tables. The air was thick with smoke. Those with more money or less fear were in the room at the back. From behind the tightly shut door one could hear the murmurs, the occasional gasps and grunts, and the rattle of the roulette wheel.

It was a place for men. The few women who minced around were already spoken for and therefore unapproachable. There were unwritten rules here that everyone obeyed. Indians, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Bangladeshis, Caribbeans, Iranians, Turks, Greeks, Italians... Everybody spoke English but swore, conspired and prayed in his mother tongue. The Lair, they called it. Run by a taciturn Chinese family who had lived in Vietnam for generations and been forced to leave after the war. Adem always felt uneasy next to them. The Chinese were not protective of each other like the Italians, nor were they temperamental like the Irish. There was always an unknown quality to their demeanour. A bit like the weather, they were prone to changing on a whim.

That evening Adem played blackjack and a few dice games, and then moved to the roulette wheel. He placed his first bet on black. It was an auspicious start. Next he did a combination bet. He won again, but the amount was not much. He switched to red and won thrice in a row, each time leaving his winnings from the previous bet on the current one. It was one of those magical moments when he could feel the roulette wheel. Just like him, the wheel lacked a solid memory. You could place the same bet over and over, and your chances of winning would still be the same. Roulette didn’t observe any recognized patterns. So he played without memory, concentrating on every new bet as if it were his first and his last.

The men in the room gave him a thumbs-up, patted him on the shoulder and muttered words of encouragement. It was a remarkable feeling to be respected by strangers. To be admired and envied. He played another round, still triumphant. Now the crowd around the table had thickened. Fifteen minutes later he was still watching
the ball spin around the wheel, still winning. The dealer asked for a break.

In need of fresh air Adem stepped out into the street. There was a tall, hulking Moroccan he knew from the factory, sitting by himself on the pavement.

‘You’re a lucky man,’ remarked the Moroccan.
‘Kismet. Not every day is like this.’
‘Maybe Allah is testing you.’ The man paused, giving him a cursory glance. ‘You know what they say. He who wants to ride a fast horse could break his back, but the horse has to gallop.’
‘What the hell does that mean?’
‘I don’t know but I like the sound of it.’
They laughed, their voices carrying in the night air.
‘Here’s a good one,’ said Adem. ‘One can flee to the end of the world but one cannot run away from his behind.’
‘Uh-hum.’ The Moroccan was about to raise his glass when he noticed his companion’s empty hands.
‘I don’t drink,’ Adem said by way of explanation.
This elicited a chuckle from the other man. ‘My, oh my. Look at you! You’re hooked on gambling but when it comes to booze you turn into a pious Muslim.’

Adem’s face closed down like a trap. He was not an addict. He could stop playing whenever he wanted. As for his reasons for not drinking, it was something he rarely talked about, especially with strangers. But tonight he made an exception. He said flatly, ‘My father was a heavy drinker.’

No sooner had he returned to the basement than the lights went off. Another power-cut. The third this week. These days London was grey in the mornings with rainclouds, black in the evenings with shutdowns. That candle shop in Hackney must be raking it in, Adem thought. There was good money in wholesaling candles, a business that had become as vital as selling bread and milk.

Adem strained his eyes through the half-lit corridor, until he reached the room at the back. There were three Chinese at the table, sulking by a paraffin lamp – men of few words and impenetrable expressions. Adem knew it was time for him to leave. He had to be
satisfied with what he had earned. He grabbed his jacket, tipped the dealer, and was about to walk out the door but then stopped.

Later on, whenever he recalled this moment, which he would do fairly often, he would think of the emergency handles on trains. He had never tried pulling one, but he knew if someone did, the train would come to a sudden halt. That night he had stopped as if there were such a handle attached to his back and someone had tugged and tugged on it.

A young woman had entered the room, like an apparition from the shadows. In the faint lamplight her sandy hair had an uncanny glow, curling below her ears, small and delicate. Leather miniskirt, white silk halter top, stiletto daggers on her feet. Every inch of her heart-shaped face sent out the message she was not pleased to be there, she’d rather be somewhere far away. He watched her sit next to one of the Chinese – a bald, portly man who acted as if he were the boss, and perhaps he was – and whisper in his ear. The man smiled a half-smile and caressed her thigh. Something tore inside Adem.

‘So, you are still here. You want to play another round, my friend?’

This man had asked the question without raising his head or looking at anyone in particular. And yet Adem knew, as did all the people in the room, that the question was directed at him. He could feel the gaze of each person, but it was her eyes that pierced him – a pair of blue sapphires. He had never seen eyes that big, bright and blue. If his wife had met this woman, she would have feared the evil eye. For Pembe believed that if someone with such eyes stared at you, even for a moment, you had to run back home and burn salt on the stove.

Adem’s face was aflame. He saw in that precise moment that he was about to commit the worst mistake in gambling, if not in life: to let yourself be provoked. But understanding this was one thing, accepting it quite another. With a tilt of his head, he answered, ‘Yes, I’ll play.’

He pulled it off again, though it was different this time. The energy around him had changed. He and the roulette wheel were two separate entities now, no longer in sync. Yet he didn’t budge. He remained planted in his seat, watching the goddess watch the ball spin.

The lights came on. He took this as a good sign and continued to
bet. He gained again and then again. The stakes were high. It was
dangerous. It was insane. The Chinese tried to look unperturbed but
their nervousness was beginning to show. Among the crowd Adem
captured the eyes of the Moroccan, his brow furrowed in anguish.
Shaking his head, the man mouthed, ‘Enough, brother!’

But Adem couldn’t quit. She was staring at him from the other end
of the table, her lips like cherries, full and inviting, and he felt the
possibility, a chance in a thousand but a chance nevertheless, of win-
ning her heart if he kept on winning at roulette. Seconds later he
heard someone call her and that’s how he found out her name: Rox-
ana.

Straight-up bet. He placed all his chips on the number fourteen.
The ball spun counter to the wheel, like the two tides in his life, fam-
ily and freedom, pulling him in opposite directions. A chorus of sighs
rose from the onlookers – ripples of water reaching the shores. Now
the ball made a jolt before finally landing in a slot. The wheel moved
through another full turn. Her face lit up with amazement and appre-
ciation, and something that he likened to admiration. He didn’t need
to look to know that he had won.

That was when one of the Chinese muttered under his breath, but
in a loud-enough voice, ‘Don’t you have a family waitin’, my friend?
They must be worried for you. It’s getting late.’

The hidden warning and the word family drew a thick curtain
between him and the roulette, him and the room, him and her. Adem
plunked the chips in a box, cashed them in and strode out. An
acquaintance gave him a lift half of the way and he walked the remain-
ing half.

There were piles of rubbish on the streets of East London; rotting
waste was strewn everywhere, randomly scattered. The world had
gone berserk. Everyone was on strike: firemen, miners, bakers, hos-
pital workers, bin men. No one wanted to play the game any more.
No one but the gamblers.

It was four in the morning when he reached the house on Lavender
Grove. He smoked on the sofa, the cigarette turning to ash
between his fingers, the pile of money warm and loyal next to him.
Sixteen thousand, four hundred pounds. Since everyone was sound
asleep, he couldn’t tell his family about his victory. It would have to wait. He lay wide-eyed in the dusky living room, seized by a sense of loneliness so profound as to be insurmountable. He could hear the rasp of his wife’s breathing. And his two sons, daughter, even the goldfish . . . All wrapped in a mysterious serenity.

This he had noticed while doing his military service back in Turkey. When more than three people slept in a narrow place, sooner or later their breaths would become synchronized. Perhaps it was God’s way of telling us that if we could just let go of ourselves, we would all eventually be in step and there would be no more disputes. The thought was new to him and he enjoyed it for a while. But even if there was a harmony somewhere, he could not be part of it. It occurred to him, the way it had on other occasions, that he was a man just like any other, no better and no worse, but that he was failing the people he cared about. He wondered, for the umpteenth time, whether his own flesh and blood would be better off without him.

Unable to sleep, he left the flat at dawn. He carried the money with him, though he was aware that it was a foolish thing to do. Hackney was full of muggers and thieves who would not mind breaking his ribs for such a large sum. His walk changed to a lope, and he flinched and went cold each time a stranger approached him on the street.

At the United Biscuits Factory he was treated like a king. They had all heard. During the lunch-break his brother Tariq popped in to congratulate him – and to ask for a favour.

‘You know how my wife is,’ Tariq said, his voice dwindling to a confidential whisper. ‘She’s been nagging me for ever about the kitchen.’

Tariq had a theory about British kitchens: that they were deliberately made tiny and gloomy so that everyone would have to make do with takeaways. The architects were accomplices in the conspiracy, and so were the politicians, the councils and the unions, all duly bribed by the restaurant owners, and on and on went his diatribe.

Adem nodded amiably, even though he sensed his elder brother would borrow from him as much as he could, and, after spending a
limited amount on his kitchen, would keep the rest in his savings account. Tariq was always hoarding and scrimping. It was hard to believe this was the same man who in his youth had generously supported his two brothers. When their father passed away, Tariq had worked hard, taking care of Adem and Khalil. Over the past years, however, he had become increasingly frugal, snipping toothpaste tubes to squeeze the last drop, clipping coupons from circulars, switching off the water heater, reusing the tea leaves, getting everything second-hand and forbidding his family to buy anything without asking him first, though when they did he always answered, ‘There’s no need.’

Drawing in his breath, Adem said, ‘Do you ever think of our mother?’

On an ordinary day Adem could never have brought himself to speak like this. But now that his brother had asked him for a favour, he felt he had the upper hand. He deserved to hear a few memories in return for a handout. Yet the question was so unexpected that for a moment Tariq seemed at a loss as to how to answer it. A deep wrinkle formed between his brows, extending towards his forehead, where there were several white patches, a skin disease from childhood. When he spoke his voice sounded hard, gruff. ‘Why would I do that? She was a good-for-nothing.’

*Don’t you want to know if she’s alive, whether she had other children, how she’s doing, whether she ever missed us?* Adem wanted to ask and almost did. Instead, into the ensuing hollow of silence, he said thickly, ‘I’ll stop by your house tonight and bring you the money. Tell my sister-in-law she’ll have her dream kitchen.’

After sunset, it occurred to him that if he gambled and won again, he would have twice the money he had now. Then he could lend money to Tariq, and to others, and wouldn’t even have to ask for a penny back. Motivated by a noble cause, he went to the basement in Bethnal Green and saw the woman with blue eyes. Again he watched her watch the ball spin around the wheel. Again he played big. And he lost. Everything.

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47
I had never stammered before in my life until that Tuesday. The 14th of November 1978. The day I decided to get myself a knife.

We were in the school canteen. Me and my mates. Blue plastic trays, shepherd’s pie, jam roly-poly, metal jugs of water, the usual patter. One minute I was making jokes, the next I was tripping over words like a prat. It happened just that suddenly – so fast that everyone thought I was having them on.

We were talking about the next day’s game. Chelsea were playing Moscow Dynamo. Arshad – a short, stocky Paki who dreamed of playing defence for Nottingham Forest – said he would bet his new Doc Martens that our boys in blue were going to win – a walk in the park, he said – but we all knew it was just bollocks.

Upset at not being taken seriously, Arshad turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and grinned, like he always did when he wanted something.

‘Hey, you gonna give me that puddin’?’

I shook my head. ‘Nn . . . not on yo . . . uuur . . . nn . . . neee . . . nelly! Fo . . . forr . . . gett . . . it.’

He stopped and stared. Others did too, as though they were seeing me for the first time. Then someone mentioned this twat in another class who stuttered so badly nobody talked to him. Assuming I had been mocking him, they broke into laughter. I laughed too. But deep inside I felt a surge of panic. I pushed my tray towards Arshad and gestured with my head that he could have what was left. I’d lost my appetite.

When the break was over, I returned to the classroom in low spirits. How could I have developed a speech impediment, just like that? Nobody in my family stammered. Weren’t these things supposed to be genetic? Maybe not. It could be a blip; a one-off. A temporary psych-out, like a bad trip. Maybe it would go away as suddenly as it had appeared. I had to find out. But the only thing that came out of my mouth was a strangled sound.

The girls giggled. Airheads! They must have thought I had a crush on them. I turned away, my face burning. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my girlfriend watching my every move. When the history class started, Katie threw me a note.
Maggie, Christine, Hilary. If boy, Tom.

I crumpled the paper and slipped it into my pocket. Immediately, she hurled another ball. What's up with you?

I shrugged, meaning it was nothing important. But even if Katie got the message she didn't look convinced. So I wrote her back: Tell you later!

Throughout the entire class, I was worried sick the teacher would ask me something. I would become the butt of jokes for ever. Fortunately, there were no questions. As soon as the torture was over, I grabbed my rucksack and headed to the door. I decided to blow off the rest of my classes and go home early for once.

*

It was three thirty when I reached our house and rang the bell. As I waited for the door to open, my eyes slid to the name beside the doorbell:

ADEM TOPRAK

My sister, Esma, had written this in her flowery handwriting. Against her better judgement. ‘We live here as well,’ she grumbled. ‘Why write only Dad’s name?’

Esma was a frail girl but she always expressed herself with giant ideas: equal opportunity, social justice, women’s rights . . . My friends thought she was either barmy or a Communist. If it were up to her she would have written instead:

THE TOPRAK FAMILY

Or else,

ADEM, PEMBE, ISKENDER, ESMA, YUNUS & THE GOLDFISH

Either way I didn’t give a toss. I, myself, would have left the nameplate anonymous. That would have been more decent, more straightforward. It would be my way of saying nobody lived here. Not really. We didn’t live in this flat, only sojourned. Home to us was no different than a one-star hotel where Mum washed the bed sheets instead of maids and where
every morning the breakfast would be the same: white cheese, black olives, tea in small glasses – never with milk.

Arshad might some day play in League Division One, for all I knew. He could fill his pockets with pictures of the Queen and his car with gorgeous birds, but people like us would always be outsiders. We Topraks were only passers-by in this city – a half-Turkish, half-Kurdish family in the wrong end of London.

I rang the bell again. Not a peep. Where on earth was Mum? She couldn’t be at the Crystal Scissors. She had quit her job days ago. I was the head of the family since Dad had gone off and I didn’t want her to work any more. She cried a lot but didn’t resist. She knew I had my reasons. People were gossiping. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. So I told her to stay home. I had to put out the flames.

Nobody at school was aware of what was going on. And I wanted it to stay that way. School was school, home was home. Katie didn’t know a thing either. Your girlfriend was your girl, your family was your family. Certain things had to be kept separate. Like water and oil.

It occurred to me that Mum might have gone to get the shopping or something. I had to have a word with her about that too. I took out my key, put it in the keyhole and turned it back and forth, but it didn’t budge. The door was bolted. Suddenly I heard footsteps down the corridor.

‘Who is it?’ came my mother’s voice.

‘It’s mm . . . me, MM . . . Mum.’

‘Iskender, is it you?’

There was a trace of panic in her voice, as if something bad were about to happen. I heard a whisper, low and rapid, and I knew it wasn’t my mother. My heart started to pound and I felt the air go out of me. I could neither move forward nor go backward, so I kept struggling with the key. This went on for another minute, maybe more, then the door opened.

My mother stood blocking the entrance. Her lips were curved up in a smile, but her eyes were oddly sharp. I noticed a strand of hair had come out of her ponytail and one of the buttons in her white blouse was in the wrong hole.

‘Iskender, my son,’ she said. ‘You are home.’

I wondered what surprised her more – that I was home almost three hours early or that I was her son.
‘Are you all right?’ my mother asked. ‘You don’t seem well, my sultan.’

Don’t call me that, I wanted to say. Don’t call me anything. Instead I took off my shoes and pushed past, almost knocking her over. I went straight to my room, slammed the door and put a chair in front of it so that no one could get in. I climbed up on the bed, pulled the sheets over my head and concentrated on breathing – the way they had taught us in boxing class. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale . . .

Outside, there were secretive noises: the floorboards creaking, the wind blowing and a drizzle falling on the city. Amid the mixture of sounds, I could hear our front door opening and someone stepping outside, quiet as a mouse.

She used to love me more than anything – her first child, first son, roniya chavemin.* Everything was different now. Ruined. A tear rolled down my cheek. I slapped myself to stop it. But it didn’t help. I slapped again, harder.

I listened to her feet coming down the corridor, soft and steady as heartbeats. She stopped by my door but didn’t dare to knock. I could sense her movements, touch her guilt, smell her shame. We waited like that for God knows how long, listening to each other breathe, wondering what the other might be thinking. Then she was gone – as if she had nothing to say, no explanation owed, as if my opinion didn’t count anyway, or my anger, or my pain. She walked away from me.

That’s when I knew what Uncle Tariq had told me about my mother was true. That’s when it occurred to me to buy the knife. Wooden handle, folding blade with a curved point. Illegal, of course. Nobody wanted to get into trouble with the Old Bill by selling a flick-knife, especially to a bloke like me. But I knew where to get one. I knew just the man.

I wasn’t gonna hurt anyone. I only wanted to scare her – or him.

Iskender Toprak

* ‘The light of my eye’.
Picnics in the Sun

Istanbul, 1954

Adem had spent his entire childhood torn between two fathers: his sober baba and his drunken baba. The two men lived in the same body, but they were as different from each other as night from day. So sharp was the contrast between them that Adem suspected the drink his father downed every evening to be some kind of magic potion. It didn’t morph frogs into princes or dragons into witches, but it changed the man he loved into a stranger.

Baba (the Sober One) was a stoop-shouldered, talkative person who liked to spend time with his three sons (Tariq, Khalil and Adem), and had the habit of taking one of them with him wherever he went, a random lottery of love and care. The lucky boy would accompany his father to see his friends, on strolls along the Istiklal Avenue and, occasionally, to his workplace – a garage near Taksim Square where he was the head mechanic. Big cars with complicated names pulled in there either for repair or parts. Chevrolet Bel Air, Buick Roadmaster, Cadillac Fleetwood or the new Mercedes-Benz. Not every man in town could afford these models – their owners were mostly politicians, businessmen, casino patrons or football players. On the walls of the garage there were framed pictures in which the mechanics beamed next to their influential customers.

Sometimes Adem would escort Baba to the local tea house, where they would while away the day sipping sahlep, linden or tea, and watching men of all ages play backgammon and draughts. Politics was a hot subject. That, football and the stories in the tabloids. With a general election coming up, the tea house was abuzz with fervent debates. The prime minister – the first democratically elected

* A winter drink made with milk, sugar and cinnamon.
leader in the country’s history – claimed that his Democratic Party
would win a landslide victory. Nobody could possibly guess that he
would indeed get re-elected for another term, at the end of which
he would be hanged by a military junta.

On such languid afternoons, Adem would imitate Baba (the Sober
One), smacking his tongue on a sugar cube, holding the tea glass with
his little finger raised in the air. There would be so much smoke
around that when they returned home his hair would stink like an
ashtray. Frowning ever so slightly, his mother, Aisha, would rush
him to the bathroom. He wished she wouldn’t do that. It made him
feel grown-up to have the smell of tobacco in his hair. When he con-
fessed this to his father one day, Baba laughed, and said, ‘There are
two things in this world that make a man out of a boy. The first is the
love of a woman. The second is the hatred of another man.’

Baba (the Sober One) explained that those who knew only the for-
mer softened into wimps and those who knew only the latter
hardened like rocks, but those who experienced both had what it
took to become a Sword of Steel. As skilled artisans knew, the best
way to solidify a metal was to heat it in fire and cool it in water. ‘So
it is with a man. You need to heat him in love, cool him in hatred,’
concluded Baba, pausing for his lesson to sink in.

It worried Adem that he never had emotions this profound, but he
kept such anxieties to himself. That same year he had his first asthma
attack – a malady that would disappear in his teenage years, but never
really abandon his body, chasing him throughout his life.

From time to time, Baba (the Sober One) would bring home left-
overs from a slaughterhouse near by – chunks of meat, bones and
entrails. On such occasions, he would borrow his manager’s pick-up
van, taking the family on a barbecue picnic. Adem and his two
brothers would sit on the bed in the back, boasting about how many
sausages or calves’ feet they could eat in one sitting. Baba in the front,
with his wife sitting next to him, would make jokes, and, if in an
especially mellow mood, would roll down the window and sing. The
songs would invariably be tearjerkers, but he rendered them so mer-
rily no one could tell. Their van loaded with pots, pans and linen,
their hearts light and gay, they would head to the hills over the
It troubled them that there was a cemetery in the vicinity. Yet there wasn’t much they could do. So it was that since time immemorial the dead in Istanbul had resided in the greenest areas with the best views of the city.

Once there, the boys would look for a suitable spot in the shade. Before sitting, however, their mother would pray for the souls of the deceased, asking their permission to spend time on the land. Fortunately, the dead always answered in the affirmative. After a few seconds of waiting, Aisha would nod, and spread out the mats for everyone to sit on. Then she would light the portable stove, and set up everything needed to prepare the food. Meanwhile, the boys would romp happily about, destroying ant colonies, chasing crickets and playing zombies. As the smell of sizzling beef filled the air, Baba would clap his hands, indicating that the moment had come to open his first bottle of *raki*.

Sometimes he would start slowly and gradually pick up the pace. At other times, he would set off fast, downing three glasses in the time it would normally take him to finish one. But, one way or the other, by the end of the lunch he was always a few sheets to the wind.

No sooner had Baba emptied the first bottle than he would start to show telltale signs. He would scowl more often, cursing himself, and every few minutes would scold the boys over something so trivial nobody could remember what it was afterwards. Anything might annoy him: the food was too salty, the bread stale, the ice not cold enough. In order to soothe his nerves, he would open up a second bottle.

Towards the end of one picnic, as the sun was beginning to set and the seagulls were shrieking, time seemed to come to a halt, a sharp smell of anise hanging in the air. Baba added some water to his drink, watching the translucent liquid turn to a milky grey, as blurred as his thoughts. After a while, he rose awkwardly to his feet, his eyes solemn, his chin raised, and made a toast to the cemetery.

“You fellows are so damn lucky,” he said. “No rent to pay, no petrol to buy, no mouths to feed. No wife nagging you. No boss reading you the riot act. You don’t know how blessed you are.”

The graves listened, a low wind swirling the dead leaves to and fro. “From dust we came,” Baba declared, “and to dust we must return.”

54
On the way home, he insisted that the boys sit in the front with them. No matter how careful they were, stifling every gasp, watching their every word, something always happened, something dire enough to send their father into a lather. The potholes in the road, a missing traffic sign, a stray dog running in front of the van, the news on the radio. This new man, Khrushchev, didn’t seem to know what he was doing; his brain addled by vodka, a vulgar drink that could not hold a candle to raki; Nasser expected too much of the Arabs, who spoke the same language but never listened to one another; and why didn’t the Shah of Iran divorce this second wife of his, who obviously couldn’t give him an heir?

‘What a mess! What a shitty world!’

Baba (the Drunk One) cursed the municipality, the mayor, the politicians. For a few happy minutes his irritation was aimed at the world outside, sparing his family. Usually, someone in the van would do or say something to annoy him. One of the children would wriggle, hiccup, burp, fart or guffaw.

On this day Aisha begged him to drive more slowly.

‘What in hell is wrong with you?’ he inquired in a tone so composed it hardly matched the severity of the question. ‘Can’t I have a moment’s peace? Hmm? Do you want me to explode? Is that what you want?’

Nobody answered. The boys stared at their scruffy knees, or at a fly that had flown in through the open window and now couldn’t get out.

Baba raised his voice. ‘I work my fingers to the bone. Every fucking day. Like a mule! Just so that you lot can eat. Am I the jackass of this family?’

Someone said Estagfurullah* – a lame attempt at appeasement, considering what came next.

‘You’re vampires, all of you, sucking my blood.’ He took his hands off the steering wheel to show his wrists, thin and sallow. ‘Do I have more blood to feed you? Have you left me any?’

*Originally meaning ‘Your health, your goodness’, the word is now used to say, ‘Of course not.’
‘Please hold on to the wheel,’ his wife whispered.
‘Shut your damn mouth! I’m not going to learn how to drive from you.’

Adem could not help but feel sorry for Baba, who clearly was the victim, the sufferer. Guilt would gnaw at his every fibre. They had done it again. They had upset him, although he had warned them over and over. How Adem wanted to make it up to him, to kiss his hand and promise never to suck his blood again.

‘Do I tell you how to cook lentils? Of course I don’t. Because that’s not my job. And driving isn’t your job, woman! What do you know about cars?’

Another time he slammed on the brakes so hard that the van spun round as if on ice. They careered across the road straight into a flower-bed, escaping a ditch by only yards. Adem opened his eyes to a stillness he had never known before – the perfect silence that descends after an accident. He noticed, for the first time, the susurrus of the wind, the quills of light in the air. His brother Tariq was holding his elbow, his face twisted with pain, his lips curled around a moan that never came. Slowly, Baba opened his door and walked out, his upper lip bleeding. He circled the van and opened his wife’s door.

‘Get out!’
‘Oh, please,’ Aisha said, her face ashen.
‘I said get out!’

Grabbing her by the arm, Baba dragged her towards the bonnet of the van, which had popped up when they came to a stop. He said, ‘Since you know so much about cars, fix this.’

Not a single muscle moved on her face. Baba shoved her head down into the engine and stopped only when her forehead hit it with a thud.

‘What? Can you not fix it?’

She mumbled, words so strangled neither Adem nor his brothers could make out their meaning. But they all heard Baba announce, ‘Then zip your mouth and don’t tell me how to drive.’

Together they pushed the van out of the flowerbed, the two boys and Baba. Tariq watched without a word, clutching his fractured arm. Their mother, too, waited on the verge, weeping. It was always the
same. Every picnic would start with great hopes and end with someone crying or broken.

At night Adem would remind himself that it was his other baba who fumed and raged, just as it was his other baba who punched the steering wheel/the walls/the tables/the doors/the china cupboard, and, when that didn’t help, beat them with his belt, and once kicked his wife in the groin, sending her flying down the stairs. It helped to remember that it wasn’t the same man. Not that this lessened the pain or the fear, but it made it easier the next morning to go back to loving Baba (the Sober One).
There was an artists’ lounge backstage. Not that anybody called it that – only Roxana. She alone liked to think of the cold, cramped dressing room that smelled of cigarettes, talcum powder, perfume and sweat as an area for artists to rest before they went on stage. That didn’t mean she thought of herself as an _artiste_, for she did not. When need be, she would use other words to describe her profession – _performer, danseuse, entertainer, exotic dancer_.

It was almost midnight now. In less than fifteen minutes it would be her turn to take the stage. As she scrutinized her costume, she sprinkled silver glitter on her chest. For the first act she was dressed as a samba dancer. A tiara with flamboyant purple feathers, a bikini top ornamented with rhinestones and sequins, silvery, metallic trousers and, underneath those, the skimpiest G-string – to be revealed at the end of the show. With practised ease, she opened the make-up set and arranged the cosmetic pads and brushes of varying sizes. It was an old, worn-out kit that had been used many times by many women. The sponge applicators had turned an unhealthy mushroom tone, the mascara brushes were caked with a thick, crusty substance, and some of the colours on the palette were gone, their pans staring at her like empty eye sockets. There was no more turquoise, for instance, nor platinum nor champagne – Roxana’s favourite shades – so she went for amethyst. Again.

When she was finished with her face, she put on a frosted peach lipstick. Lastly, she pushed up her breasts and arranged them so that they looked bigger, plumper, inside the frilly bra. They never called them ‘breasts’ in England. What funny names they had instead – _boobs, tits, wobblers, milky moos._

She had once danced in private for an elderly gentleman – a con-

A Scrap of Truth

_London, December 1977_
servative MP who moonlighted as a fur merchant, so it was rumoured – and heard him say, ‘Shake your jiggly wiggles for me, love.’ It had taken her a few seconds to figure out exactly which parts of her body he was talking about.

Her English had improved remarkably over the years, although her accent was still strong, unyielding. At times, she stressed her r’s deliberately, stretched out her u’s, replaced w’s with v’s. Since she couldn’t get rid of her accent, she made it even thicker, bolder, the way everyone in England expected a Russian to speak – for that’s what Roxana told each new person she met, that she was from Russia.

In truth, she was from Bulgaria. But in England, even in London, where one heard so many languages and dialects on the street, people didn’t know much about her motherland. The Balkans were a jigsaw puzzle with myriad pieces, each of which was equally unfamiliar, eccentric. If Roxana said she was from Bulgaria, they would nod tactfully and ask no more. But whenever she remarked she was born and bred in Russia, they would respond with a barrage of questions. It was intriguing, and somehow romantic, to be from the land of snow, vodka, caviar – and, oddly, KGB spies.

‘Girls who aim highest end up falling down the furthest,’ people always warned. But, even if that were true, even if she would stumble eventually, and even if her dream was destined to be shorter than a butterfly’s breath, it would count for something to have made the attempt, wouldn’t it? Roxana was her own creation. She had found herself a name (Roksana, Roxane or Roxie, as men interchangeably said), a nationality, a past, a future and a story to tell. The truth, her truth, was not hidden under layers upon layers, like a Victorian lady’s petticoat. It consisted of the total of all the fabrications that made her what she was – a girl from a sleepy town in Bulgaria pretending to be Russian and dancing to Brazilian sambas in a striptease club in the heart of London.

* 

Behind the stage, past the magenta curtains that had not been washed in ages, if ever, Roxana now stood ready, in full make-up. She peeked out and saw that the club was full. Another busy night. There were
the regulars, a few new customers: the bachelors, the soon-to-be married, the recently divorced and the long-time husbands. Black, brown, and white. Young and old, but mostly middle aged.

Then she spotted him at the bar, drinking his soda slowly. The dark-haired Turkish man with the expression of infinite despair, who wore his apprehension like a moth-eaten jacket. She had first seen him in the gamblers’ den, where she had been invited by one of the Chinese owners. That’s where she had learned his name, Adem. She had watched him win a large sum at roulette and knew that any other man would have immediately gone out and blown every penny of that money. But he had come back the next day, played even bigger and lost all of it. One part of her despised him for his stupidity. Yet another part of her applauded his recklessness.

Since then he had turned up at every one of her shows, and each time invited her for a drink afterwards. He had been solicitous, asking her about her past, expecting to hear the gloomiest confessions. The only scrap of truth she let slip was about her father’s drinking habit.

‘Really,’ Adem said. ‘So your old man was just like mine, uh? Baba died of a swollen liver.’

That was when she winced, as if she had tripped over an unseen obstacle. She didn’t want to learn this man’s sad story. She didn’t want to learn anyone’s sad story. All she wanted was to make up her own stories, taking comfort in the knowledge that they were not, and never would be, real.

She would give him the cold shoulder, tell him to stay away from her. This might hurt his feelings, but it would be better for him – and his family. Perhaps then he would be faithful to his wife, although she doubted it. Men like him, once they started frequenting this place and fantasizing about the romantic escapades that life had denied them, did not go back to their homes until they experienced something memorably disastrous.
Yunus was the only one of the Toprak children who had been born in England. His English was fluent, his Turkish halting, his Kurdish nil. He had auburn hair that curled at the ends, a few freckles across his cheeks and ears that stuck out, giving him a boyish charm. His head was slightly out of proportion to his body and a bit big for his age, from too much thinking, according to his mother. His eyes changed from moss-green to myrtle depending on the colour of the outfit he was wearing or his mood. He was named after the prophet Jonah, the fleeing prophet: the man who, upon learning that he was bound to inform the people about truths they weren’t ready to hear, headed for the hills, hoping to dodge the mission God had for him; the man who ended up being swallowed by a whale and having to endure three dark days and three dark nights, alone and full of remorse.

Seven-year-old Yunus loved to listen to this story, his face alight with curiosity as he pictured the fish’s stomach — dark, deep and damp. There was another reason why this ordeal interested him: just like the prophet himself, Yunus had a tendency to cut and run. When he didn’t like it at school, he ran away, and when he didn’t like it at home, he fled his family. At the slightest onset of boredom, he was on his feet, ready to take flight again. Despite Pembe’s unrelenting efforts, he spent so much time outside, mastering the side streets and back alleys of Hackney, that he could give directions to cab drivers.

Pembe said she never understood how her children could be so different from one another, and Yunus was different. He was the introverted one. The philosopher. The dreamer. The hermit who lived in an imaginary cave of his own, finding riches in ordinary things, company in solitude, beauty everywhere. While Iskender and Esma begrudged other people their good fortune and quarrelled, each
in their own way, with their circumstances, Yunus loathed no one and belonged to himself alone. Though everyone in the family felt they were an outsider, albeit for different reasons, Yunus seemed the most comfortable in his skin. When he retreated into his inner self such was his completeness that he didn’t need any distraction. He could have lived in the belly of a fish and have been all right.

Pembe believed he had turned out this way because he hadn’t had enough of either her womb or of her milk. Yunus was the only one of her children who had been born prematurely and who, upon refusing her breasts, had had to be fed formula. ‘See the outcome? It’s made him distant, unreachable,’ she complained.

While Iskender craved to control the world, and Esma to change it once and for all, Yunus wanted to comprehend it. That was all.

* 

Early in the autumn of 1977, Yunus was the first to notice that something was not right with his mother. She looked withdrawn, lost in thought. A few times she had forgotten to give him pocket money. And she also fed him less, not shoving as much food into his mouth, which is how Yunus knew something was definitely wrong. Pembe would never forget to feed him; even if it were the morning of the Apocalypse, she would make sure he went to heaven with his belly full.

Not that Yunus minded on his own account; it was always other people he was concerned about. Anyway he had found a way to make pocket money. And it was more than Pembe ever gave him.

There was a house on Moulins Road, several streets north-west of his school. A large detached Victorian building, solitary, abandoned and haunted by ghosts, according to the locals. It had a steep roof, a wrap-around porch and pointed arch windows. Yunus had discovered it on one of his many explorations in the neighbourhood. A group of young people were squatting there. Punks, anarchists, nihilists, pacifists, social dropouts and deviants of various views and many of no single affiliation . . . They were a colourful bunch, mostly in shades of red and black. Nobody in the Toprak family knew how Yunus had first made their acquaintance but the squatters liked him, the wise
little boy that he was. They sent him on errands when they were knackered or simply unwilling to move. Bread, cheese, milk, ham, chocolate bars, tins of tobacco, Rizlas... Yunus had learned where to get the best deals for each item.

At times they also asked him to retrieve packages from a dour-faced Asian man who lived in a badly lit building, ten minutes’ ride away by bike – a task that Yunus secretly dreaded, even though the man tipped him and didn’t ask any questions. There was a disturbing stench in his place – of decay and sickness. The squatters’ house, too, stank – sometimes even worse. And yet beneath the heavy odour that enwrapped everyone and everything, there were other aromas: of flowers, spices and leaves – lives in transition.

Inside the house there was a wooden staircase winding up three floors, so steep and rotten that it wobbled every time anyone went up or came down it. The internal walls of the ground and first floors had been knocked through, creating open spaces that were used as large bedrooms – even the bathtubs had been turned into beds. The second floor was called the agora. The squatters regularly met there, like the ancient Greeks in a city-state, to discuss, vote on and seal the decisions of the commune.

Most of the furniture in the house was reserved for the agora: lamps scavenged from second-hand shops, armchairs and dining chairs – no two of which matched – sofas with cigarette burns all over them. There was an ornate crimson oriental carpet. No one knew where it had come from. A little threadbare here and there but still in good shape, it was probably the most precious item in the entire squat. Piled all around were towers of books, magazines and fanzines, and a medley of coffee mugs, wine glasses, biscuits long gone stale, harmonicas and a broken cassette player that no one tried to repair... Everything belonged to all and not much belonged to anyone.

The number of residents changed from week to week. This Yunus discovered on his second visit, when he met new faces and learned that some of those he had met earlier had moved out.

‘It is like a floating house,’ a man explained, and gave a stoned grin. ‘This is our ship and we’re sailing to the Big Unknown. Along the way some passengers disembark, others hop on board.’
The man’s hair was dyed canary yellow and spiked into shapes that resembled flames. It looked as if his head were on fire.

‘Yeah, an ark,’ said a young Irish woman with almond eyes, coal-black hair and a radiant smile. She turned to face the boy and introduced herself. ‘Hi, I’m —’

But Yunus never heard her name. Not then, not later. He was busy staring at her lip ring, her pierced eyebrows, and the tattoos that covered her arms, shoulders and upper chest. Noticing his astonishment, she asked him to come closer and showed him every visible tattoo on her body, like an art collector showing off his collection to a party guest.

She had an archer on her left arm because it was her sign – Sagittarius. And because she didn’t want the archer to feel alone and miserable, she had put an angel with a golden harp next to him. Starting from the nape of her neck, expanding towards both shoulders, was a large lotus flower, white and teal, the roots going all the way down her back. On her right arm was a pink rose in bloom, and underneath it a word: Tobiko.

‘What’s that?’

‘Oh, it’s a long story,’ she said with a shrug.

‘My sister says there’s no such thing as a long story. There are only short stories and the ones we don’t want to tell.’

‘Uh-hum, that’s cool. And what does your sister do?’

‘She’s gonna be a writer. She wants to write novels where nobody falls in love because love is for fools.’

The girl laughed. Then she told him the story of her tattoo. Once she’d had ‘Toby’ inscribed above her wrist, the name of her boyfriend. He was in the music biz, always tanked. But she loved him all the same. One day she told him she was pregnant, even though she wasn’t: she just wanted to see what his reaction would be. Men went one way or the other when they heard such news. You never could tell. They changed – the kindest of them reacted heartlessly, while the most stand-offish turned docile, considerate, totally Zen.

‘How did your boyfriend do?’ Yunus asked.

‘Oh, he went mental. He really lost it, the rat-arsed fecker!’

Toby’s response was to question whether it was his baby. And,
even if it was, he said, she still had to sort out this mess. And that was when she ditched him, strong as the urge had been not to. Erasing a tattoo was no small feat, and there would always be a scar. She wasn’t against scars – they were part of life – but she didn’t want his scar on her. So she went to a tattoo artist and had him turn Toby into Tobiko.

‘Wow. And what does it mean?’

‘Oh, it’s a Japanese dish,’ she explained. ‘Flying-fish eggs.’

‘Flying-fish eggs,’ Yunus whispered, as if he didn’t want to break the spell. In front of his eyes dozens of flying fish jumped out of the water and glided gracefully towards the setting sun. Yunus, the boy named after the prophet who had survived the belly of a whale, was in love.

From then on he appeared at the squatters’ house at the slightest opportunity. They let him stay, even when there were no errands. He sat next to Tobiko, hanging on her every word, though he could rarely follow the conversation. Unemployment, false consciousness, workers’ rights, cultural hegemony . . . If you remained outside the capitalist system, it was impossible to make any meaningful change inside it, he learned. But if you became part of that order, it would destroy your soul. So how do you transform something from within but remain detached from it at the same time, mate? Yunus pondered hard as he drank smoky tea and the occasional sip of wine, but no matter how high he floated he could not come up with an answer.

At night Yunus would dream of the squatters’ house drifting in a sea so perfect it blended with the sky, where seagulls soared and swooped. He would see the squatters paddling in the water, loud and naked, like cheerful mermaids. Tobiko would be there, standing on a cliff, her long black hair fluttering in the wind as she waved at him, pure joy. Yunus would wave back, feel the sun on his face, dive deep into the blue and swim until his muscles ached.

In the morning he would wake in a wet bed.

* 

There wasn’t much cooking done at the squat, save for their speciality dish: chilli con carne. Mince, tinned tomatoes and bags of kidney beans. In lieu of dinner there were biscuits, chocolate bars, apples,
bananas and supermarket pastries near their expiry date. If in the mood Tobiko would bake fairy cakes with whatever was available in the kitchen and add generous amounts of hashish to the mixture.

Hackney Council had long been trying to evict the squatters so that the house could be renovated and sold for a healthy profit. There was an ongoing war between the two groups. Most recently the LEB, having discovered that the squatters had figured out how to connect their electricity, had sent someone round to cut it off. Now there were candles and oil lamps on every floor, eerie shadows crawling across the walls. The toilet was repeatedly blocked, the stench often vile. Yunus could not understand why Tobiko continued to live there. If only he were older and had his own job and flat, he would ask her to live with him. But then she would probably bring the Captain with her and the Captain would have to invite the entire gang, because leaders needed people to lead, and thus everyone would end up in his place, which in a few weeks would be exactly like the squatters’ house.

The man everybody called ‘the Captain’ was a rail-thin bloke with hair falling into his flint-grey eyes, teeth slightly stained from tobacco and a ring on every finger, including his thumbs. He had a penchant for saying aloud whatever came into his head. He loved to talk, his gravelly voice growing more passionate with each new point, his audience spellbound. The Captain was the first person to call Yunus a ‘Muzzie’. The boy had never heard the word before and didn’t like it at all.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Tobiko, when Yunus shared his concern with her. ‘Despite appearances, he’s not a racist. Because how can he be a racist when he’s anti-fascist, right?’

Yunus blinked.

‘What I mean is, he likes to pigeonhole people, just to know where everybody stands. His mind works like that.’

‘My sister, Esma, loves words too,’ Yunus cut in, knowing it was a silly comment but saying it anyhow.

Tobiko smiled. ‘The Captain doesn’t love words. He makes love to them.’

Envy and despair must have shown on the boy’s face, for suddenly
Tobiko pulled him towards her and kissed him on the forehead. ‘Darlin’, how I wish you were ten years older!’

‘I will be,’ Yunus said matter-of-factly, even though he had blushed up to his ears. ‘In ten years.’

‘Mind, in ten years’ time I’ll be a dried prune, old and wrinkled.’ She ruffled his hair – a favourite gesture of hers that he hated, though he could never admit that to himself.

‘I’ll age fast,’ Yunus ventured.

‘Oh, I know you will. You’re already the oldest little boy I’ve ever known.’

With that she kissed him again, this time on his lips, light and wet. He felt as if he were kissing rain.

‘Don’t you ever change,’ Tobiko whispered. ‘Don’t let the greedy capitalist system get to you.’

‘O-kay.’

‘Give me your word. No . . . wait. Promise on something that matters to you.’

‘How about the Qur’an?’ asked Yunus timidly.

‘Oh, yeah. That’s brilliant.’

And there and then, his lips quivering, his heart hammering, seven-year-old Yunus made an oath to Allah that he would never ever let the capitalist system get anywhere near him, though he didn’t have the foggiest idea what that could mean.

***

Shrewsbury Prison, 1990

Finally it has arrived. A poster of Harry Houdini. The man who could not be chained or shackled. Or imprisoned, for that matter. My idol. It’s one of his earlier shots. Black and white, and many shades of grey. Houdini is young in the picture, a wiry magician with a wide forehead and stunning eyes. The sleeves of his tuxedo are rolled up, displaying half-a-dozen handcuffs around his wrists. Not a trace of fear on his face. Just a vague, pensive air to him. You would think he was surfacing from a dream.

I put it up on the wall. Trippy sees it and breaks into a grin. My cellmate’s name is Patrick, but no one remembers that. Whenever he sees
something that grabs his attention – which happens fairly often, even in a place as dull as this – he says, ‘Man, that’s trippy!’ Hence the name.

Trippy is younger than me, a touch shorter. Sallow skin, hair receding at the top, dark brown eyes, heavily lashed. No matter what a con’s age, his mother thinks he is a good boy corrupted by bad friends. Usually, that’s bollocks. In Trippy’s case it’s true. Nice lad from Stafford, messed with some nasty pieces of work. The funny thing is those prats were able to beat the rap, but Trippy is banged up for ten years. That’s how it is. Nothing happens to jackals. Only the ones who play at being a jackal get caught. I’m not saying we’re any better. Passing yourself off as a jackal is worse than being one, sometimes.

This I have never told him, but Trippy’s eyes remind me of Yunus’s. He’s the one I miss most. I’ve never been a true brother to him. I wasn’t there when he needed me, too busy fighting the wrong battles.

Yunus is a big man now. A talented musician. So they say. He has been to see me only twice in twelve years. Esma still visits from time to time, though not lately. She comes to tell me how much she misses, pities and hates me, in that order. Not Yunus. He has cut and run, like he always did. Even Esma’s sharpest words don’t hurt as much as my little brother’s absence. I would like him to forgive me. If he could find it in his heart, that is. Not because I expect him to love me. That’s a pipe dream. I want him to forgive me for his own good. Anger is toxic – gives you cancer. People like me are used to it, but Yunus deserves better.

‘Who is that man?’ asks Trippy, pointing at the wall.

‘He was a great magician. The best.’

‘Really?’

‘Yup, some of his tricks are still a mystery.’

‘Could he make people disappear?’

‘He could make bloody elephants disappear.’

‘Wow, that’s trippy!’

We spend the afternoon talking about Houdini, our heads filled with stories, and, in Trippy’s case, with dope. I like to have my spliff every now and then. But that’s about it. No pills, no smack. Never tried it, never will. I’m not going down that road. When I remind Trippy he has to quit, he puts his thumb in his mouth and makes a sucking noise: ‘I’m not a baby.’

‘Shut your gob!’
He grins like a naughty boy, the dope-head. But he doesn’t push it. He knows he’s the only one who can talk to me like that and he knows my limits.

Shortly after the evening roll call Martin appears with a short, stocky guard we’ve never seen before. The man has a dimple in his chin and hair so black I wonder if he dyes it.

‘Officer Andrew McLaughlin has started today. We’re visiting a few cells.’

Martin is going to retire soon and he wants to make sure we’ll respect this young man who’s here to replace him. There is an awkward silence, like we are all embarrassed and don’t know what to say. Suddenly Martin’s eyes land on the poster behind me.

‘Whose idea was that?’ he murmurs and without waiting for an answer he turns to me. ‘Yours, wasn’t it?’

Martin is a lousy actor. He has already seen this poster. If he hadn’t approved, I’d never have got it. But now he acts as if he’s seeing it for the first time. Just to show the new boy he might be retirement age but he still doesn’t miss a trick. He says that all these years he’s watched men put up all sorts of pictures on their walls – of their wives and family, religious icons, film stars, football players, cricket players, Playboy bunnies – but Houdini, that takes the biscuit.

‘Maybe you’re losing your mind,’ Martin says with a chuckle.

‘Maybe,’ I say.

Officer McLaughlin approaches and sniffs the air around me, like a hunting dog on a trail. ‘Or maybe he’s planning to escape. Houdini was an escapologist.’

Where did that come from? The vein on my forehead throbs mildly.

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Yeah,’ Martin asks, his eyes suddenly harder. ‘Why would he do that?’

Then he turns to the new screw and explains. ‘Alex has been here since ’78. He has only two more years to go.’

‘One year and ten months,’ I correct him.

‘Yeah,’ Martin says and nods as if that sums up everything.

In Martin’s face, as usual, there are two feelings competing – revulsion and respect. The former was there from day one and has never disappeared – contempt for a man who committed the worst crime
imaginable and screwed up the one life God gave him. The respect came much later, and most unexpectedly. We have a history together, Martin and I.

But Officer McLaughlin’s face tells a different story. ‘I think I know your case,’ he says flatly. ‘I remember reading about it and saying to myself how could anyone do that to his own mother.’

I realize we are the same age. Not only that. We are the same material. We might have frequented the same streets as teenagers, kissed the same girls. The strangest feeling seizes me – as if I’m looking in a skewed mirror. McLaughlin is the man I could have become had I followed a different path. And I’m the convict he might have turned into had he not managed to duck at the last minute.

‘Fourteen years, eh? What a shame,’ he says.

Martin coughs nervously. You don’t remind a man of his crime in passing, like chatting about the weather. You do that only when push comes to shove. Usually no one reminds anyone of what went before. A man in gaol is a man incarcerated in the past anyway.

‘Alex has turned a corner in the last few years,’ Martin butts in, like a tourist guide. ‘He’s gone through some dark times and is now coming back.’

Dear old Martin. Such optimism. I’ve been through hell, true. But he knows and Trippy knows and I know and my mother’s ghost knows that I’m still there.

I had an awful reputation. I suppose I still do. I easily went for a rib. It was hard to predict what would piss me off. Even I couldn’t tell most of the time. When I was off key I got violent. My left punch was as strong as a brick, so they say. Sometimes I just burst out. The only other cons who would get like this were the junkies. When they craved goods and there was no supply, they lost their rag. But I’m no addict. And that makes me scarier, perhaps. This is my sober state of mind. I harmed myself. My head. Because I didn’t like what was in there. I burned cigarettes inside my palms. They swelled, like puffy eyes. I slashed my legs. Lots of meat on a leg, the thighs, the knees, the ankles. Plenty of possibility. In Shrewsbury a razor is as precious as a ruby, but not as impossible to find.

‘You two will get to know each other,’ says Martin.

‘Well, I’m sure we will,’ says Officer McLaughlin.
Trippy is watching the tension build, uneasy. He knows what’s happening. He’s seen it before. Sometimes a screw takes against one of us and that’s the end of the story. You get off to a bad start and it never gets any better.

The tourist guide makes another attempt at reconciliation. ‘Alex is a boxer. He’s our athlete. He earned a medal when he was at school.’

It is a funny thing to say in my defence and needless to say no one laughs. I want to thank Martin for backing me, but if I move my eyes away from the young officer, even for a second, I will leave myself open.

He has to see I’m no wimp. The last time I was one, it was over twenty years ago. I was a boy in a tree running away from circumcision. It didn’t help. Since then I’ve never been weak. I’ve been wrong. Fucking wrong. But never weak. So I don’t flinch, I don’t blink, I keep staring into the eyes of this McLaughlin, who is staring into my eyes probably for the same bloody reasons.

Then they leave.

* *

I wake up in the middle of the night with a start. At first I think my mother has visited me. But, hard as I try, I can’t feel her presence. No rustle like a leaf falling, no soft glow like moonlight trapped. There is only Trippy, snoring, farting, grinding his teeth, fighting his demons.

I sit bolt upright on the bed and look around to find out what on earth could have woken me up. And then I see it. There on the floor is a paper. Somebody must have pushed it through the bars in the door. In the dimmest light penetrating from the corridor, I pick it up. It’s a newspaper clipping. The Daily Express.

**BOY KILLED HIS MOTHER FOR ‘HONOUR’, 2 DECEMBER 1978**

A 16-year-old boy of Turkish/Kurdish origin stabbed his mother to death in Hackney in an act of honour killing. Iskender Toprak stabbed Pembe Toprak in front of the family home on Lavender Grove.

It is claimed that the 33-year-old mother of three had an extramarital
affair. Neighbours said, though they remained married, Adem and Pembe Toprak no longer lived together. ‘But when the father is absent like that the mother’s honour is guarded by the eldest son, which in this case was Iskender,’ said an eyewitness. The police are now investigating whether the teenager, who is still at large, acted alone or was used as a pawn by other family members to carry out a collective murder plan.

A spokeswoman for Scotland Yard told The Times that this case was neither the first nor would it be the last in the UK and Europe. She announced that at the moment they were investigating 150 deaths that could be linked to honour killings. ‘Sadly the number could be higher since not all cases end up in the hands of the police,’ she said. ‘Family and neighbours know more than they tell. Those closest to the victims are the ones who suppress valuable information.’

‘It is a growing cancer in modern society,’ the spokeswoman added, ‘given that in numerous communities the honour of the family is deemed to be more important than the happiness of its individuals.’

*My hands shake so hard that the newspaper clipping flaps as though in a mighty wind. I’m dying for a cigarette. Or a drink. Something strong and simple. My father never knew this, but me and the boys used to have a cider or beer every now and then. Never whisky, though. That was another league. I had my first taste of it under this roof. You can find anything in gaol, if you know your way around. I fold the paper in half, creasing the corners down into the middle. A square, two triangles, a rectangle . . . I make the corners meet, pull the triangles apart and there it is: a paper boat. I put it on the floor. There is no water to make it float. No gust to push the sails. You would think it was made of cement. It doesn’t go anywhere. Like the pain in my chest.*

Iskender Toprak
Esma

London, December 1977

We lived in Hackney, on a street called Lavender Grove. It was a constant disappointment to my mother that there were no lavender bushes around, only the name. She never stopped hoping to find some one day, in someone else’s garden, or around a corner, a forgotten grove, a sea of purple.

I loved the neighbourhood. Afro hair salons, the Jamaican café, the Jewish baker’s, the Algerian boy behind his fruit stall who pronounced my name in a funny way and always had a little present for me, the penniless musicians who lived around the corner and rehearsed every day with their windows open and introduced me, without knowing it, to Chopin; the artist who drew portraits in Ridley Road Market for ten bob, and once made mine for only a smile. All creeds and colours.

Before this house, there was a flat in Istanbul – the place where Iskender and I had spent the early years of our childhood but that now belonged to another time, another country. This was where our family had lived prior to our move to England in May 1970, shortly before Yunus was born. Like many expatriates, Mum, too, had a selective memory. Of the past she had left behind, she would reminisce mostly, if not solely, about the good things: the warm sunshine, the pyramids of spices in the market, the smell of seaweed in the wind. The native land remained immaculate, a Shangri-La, a potential shelter to return to, if not actually in life, at least in dreams.

My recollections, however, were of a mixed nature. Perhaps, of the past they share together, children never remember the same bits as their parents. Once in a while my mind ran back to the basement in that old house: the furniture upholstered in azure; the round, white, crocheted lace doilies on the coffee tables and kitchen shelves;
the colony of mould on the walls; the high windows that opened on to the street . . . The flat etched in my memory was a dimly lit place where a crackly radio was on all day long and a faint odour of decay lingered in the air. It was always dusk in there, morning or afternoon made little difference.

I was little when the place was home to me. I would sit cross-legged on the carpet in the living room and look up with my mouth half open at the windows near the ceiling. Through them I could see a frantic traffic of legs flowing left and right. People going to work, returning from shopping or out for a promenade.

Watching the feet of the passers-by and trying to guess what their lives were like was a favourite game of ours – a game with three players: me, Iskender and Mum. So, for instance, we would see a pair of shiny stilettos walking at a brisk, hurried pace, ankle straps neatly tied, heels clattering against the pavement. ‘I think she’s going to meet her fiancé,’ Mum would say and then come up with an intriguing story of love and heartache. Iskender, too, was good at this game. He would spot a pair of worn-out, dirty moccasins and fabricate a story about how they belonged to a man who had been without a job for quite some time and was now so desperate he was going to rob the bank around the corner, where he would get shot by the security guard.

Though the basement did not get enough sunshine, it did receive plenty of rain. Drizzles were no threat, but whenever it rained more than two inches in the city the drains in the house overflowed, engulfing the back room in a messy, murky lake. Wooden ashtrays, spatulas, picture frames and bamboo baskets were good swimmers. Baking trays, chopping boards, teapots, and the pestle and mortar were hopeless. While the glass vase on the table would plummet fast, the plastic flowers in it would float. Then there was the backscratcher . . . I wished it, too, would sink, but it never did.

My parents had talked about moving out of the apartment, but, even if they had had the means and found a sunnier basement in this impoverished neighbourhood, there was no guarantee that it would endure Istanbul’s infamous downpours any better. Perhaps over the years they had also developed an attachment to their flat. Dark and damp it may have been, but it was, nevertheless, home.
Istanbul . . . Deep in the slow, whirling memories the city’s name stood out from the hundreds I had stored away throughout my life. I placed the word on my tongue, sucking on it slowly, eagerly, as if it were a boiled sweet. If London were a confection, it would be a butterscotch toffee – rich, intense and traditional. Istanbul, however, would be a chewy black-cherry liquorice – a mixture of conflicting tastes, capable of turning the sour into sweet and the sweet into sour.

* 

My mother first started to work shortly after my father had gambled away two months’ worth of wages. Suddenly, money was needed like never before. While Iskender was at school, Mum started to go to the houses of the rich, where she would take care of their toddlers, cook their food, clean their rooms, scour their saucepans, iron their clothes and occasionally offer a shoulder to cry on. I would be left in the care of a neighbour, an old woman with a sharp tongue and poor hearing, but otherwise nice.

In the evenings Mum would tell us, as if they were bedtime stories, about life in the villas where every child had his or her own room, and modern husbands invited their wives to have a drink with them. She had once seen a couple put jazzy music on a machine and dance – which had struck her as something of a shame, for they stepped on the carpet with their dusty shoes, confirming her belief that there was something queer about the wealthy. Otherwise why would anyone throw green olives into their drinks, ruin lush carpets and nibble yellow cheese cubes jabbed with toothpicks?

After working for several families, Mum found a full-time job. They were famous people, her employers. The woman was an actress and had just given birth to a girl. As for her husband, we never came to learn what exactly he did, but he was always busy and travelled frequently, that much we knew. My mother’s job was to take care of the house and the baby, as well as the actress, who didn’t seem to be coping well with the changes in her life. Colicky and moody, the baby constantly cried. But the new mother wept just as easily and sometimes even more. She was beautiful – almond eyes, jet-black hair, a shapely nose, slender hands with the thinnest veins. If her fans
had seen her like this, they might have been disappointed, but Mum felt a rush of fondness for her in her shabby, despondent state.

By then the old lady who looked after me had fallen sick and Mum started taking me with her. While I played on my own, she would toil, and secretly sprinkle cardamom seeds around the actress’s bed to protect her from the *djinn*. Then we would take a bus and a *dolmush,* and go home, just as the sky hung low and dim above the city. A full month went by. Mum expected to get her wages any day, but there was no mention of it and she was too shy to ask.

One afternoon, while Mum was cooking and I was playing under the kitchen table, the woman’s husband appeared. There was a faint, sour odour emanating from him – aftershave and whisky. His eyes were bloodshot but oddly amused. Unaware of my presence, he staggered towards Mum and grabbed her sides.

‘Hush,’ the man said, putting his finger to his lips. ‘They’re all sleeping.’

They’re all sleeping. They won’t see us. They’re all sleeping. So we can sleep too. I’ll buy you nice things. Shoes, bags, clothes, a pair of golden earrings . . . You’re a good woman, a saint. Please have pity on me. My wife will never know. Neither will your husband. They’re all sleeping. I’m not a bad man. But I am a man, like any other, and I have needs. My wife isn’t a woman any more. She’s changed since the baby, always weeping, whining. The entire city is sleeping.

My mother pushed the man against the wall; in his drunken state he offered little resistance. His hands dangled at his sides, his body slackened as if it were empty, like a soft toy. Yanking me with one hand, grabbing her handbag with the other, Mum stomped down the corridor, but then realized we didn’t have enough money to go home.

‘Sir . . .’ she said. ‘You haven’t given me my wages.’

He was standing by the door, slightly teetering. ‘You want money?’ he asked, sounding surprised.

‘It’s my monthly –’

He cut in. ‘You treat me like this and on top of that you want my money? What a bitch you are!’

* A minibus.
We marched out of the house. We took the bus, got off at our usual stop and decided to walk the rest of the way home. But Mum wasn’t paying attention to where we were going. Step by step, we drifted away from main avenues into serpentine streets that seemed to lead nowhere. It was getting dark. We found ourselves by the seaside in an area where we had never before set foot. There were huge, black rocks along the shore, the waves crashing against them. We sat there, catching our breath, observing the splendour of the city and its indifference to us.

Noticing tiny seashells on the beach, I stood up to collect them. I was still lingering by the sea when I saw two men approach my mother. They were eating sunflower seeds, spitting the shells out, leaving a trail behind them like in the Hansel and Gretel story.

‘Good evening, sister, you seem so sad,’ said the first one. ‘What’s a woman like you doing here at this hour?’

‘Yeah, you look like you need help,’ said the other.

Mum didn’t answer. She fumbled in her handbag for a handkerchief, still sniffing. A few hairpins, house keys, bills to pay, a handful of hazelnuts she had taken with her but forgotten to give me, a photo of her children, and a mirror in which she saw her melancholy, but no handkerchief.

‘Do you have anywhere to go tonight? Why don’t you join us?’

‘We’ll take care of you,’ the other said sassily.

‘I don’t need your help,’ Mum retorted, her voice tinted with irritation. Then she turned towards the shore, and yelled, ‘Esma, come here, quickly!’

The men were surprised to see me, but they didn’t back off. Instead they followed us silently. It was a game. Mum would resist. They would insist. Mum would resist. They would insist. Mum would surrender.

‘Get away! Don’t you see I’m a married woman?’

One of the men glanced nervously at her, but the other scoffed and rolled his eyes as if to say, So what?

Dark and misty, there were fewer and fewer pedestrians around, and the traffic was sparse. We hurried, careful to avoid the corners, where the moonlight etched grey outlines on the trees. We saw one
or two women, strolling next to their husbands or brothers, enjoying the protection, the privilege. Ten minutes had gone by, or maybe more, when we came across an old man with a boy. ‘Selamun aleykum. Are you all right?’

Not waiting for Mum to respond, I blurted out, ‘We’re lost.’ Tipping his head in a gentle nod, the old man smiled at me. ‘And where is your home, my dear?’

Mum whispered a district, but out of courtesy she added that he shouldn’t worry about us.

‘Well, you’re in luck. My grandson and I are going that way too.’ ‘No, we aren’t,’ objected the boy, who was slightly older than me. The old man squeezed his grandson’s shoulder. ‘Sometimes the shortest way is to follow a friend’s route.’ Then he turned to the two men behind us and scowled so hard that they averted their eyes, suddenly embarrassed.

Thus we started our walk home – Mum, me, the old man and the boy. I inhaled the salty scent the wind brought from the sea, eternally grateful to the strangers who had so unexpectedly turned into companions of the road. When we reached our street, Mum asked the man the name of his grandson.

‘Yunus,’ he said with pride. ‘He’ll be circumcised next month, inshallah.’

‘If God gives me another son,’ Mum said, ‘I shall remember you and name him Yunus, so that he can be as kind to strangers as you have been to me.’

*

Back in the basement flat, sitting under the windows now filled with a slate-coloured emptiness, my father was waiting, chain-smoking. The moment he heard our keys in the lock, he leaped to his feet. ‘Where have you been?’

‘We had to walk,’ Mum said, and frowned at me. ‘Esma, take your coat off and go back to your room.’

She pushed me towards the corridor, and closed the door so harshly it bounced open again and stood slightly ajar. ‘I didn’t have the money for the dolmush.’
‘What do you mean you didn’t have the money? How much did they give you?’
‘Nothing. I’m not going to work for them again.’
‘What the hell are you talking about?’ my father asked, raising his voice a notch, but no more. ‘I have debts, you know that.’
‘They didn’t pay me . . .’

For almost a full minute I didn’t hear a sound. Then, as if surfacing from dark waters to grab a breath, my father inhaled loudly. ‘You come home at this hour and you think I’m going to believe your lies. Where’s the money, you whore?’

There was a backscratcher on the sofa. A mustard-yellow, cold tool made of a ram’s horn. In the twinkling of an eye, he grabbed it and flung it at Mum, who was so distracted by his words that she failed to dodge it in time. The implement hit her on the side of her face with a thud, cutting her neck.

No, my father Adem Toprak did not beat his wife or his children. And yet on that night, and on other nights in the ensuing years, he would easily lose his temper and turn the air blue with words that were full of pus and bile; he would smash objects against the walls, all the while hating the entire world for pushing him to the edge, where he feared the shadow of his abusive father was waiting to tell him he might not, in the end, be that different from him.
Born and bred in Istanbul, Adem only left the city for the first time when he was eighteen years old. Taking with him a suitcase full of clean underwear, lavender cologne and a box of baklava, he got on a bus and arrived twenty-four hours later, drained and disorientated, at a south-western town he knew not much about. From there he travelled in the back of a lorry to a village that bordered the northern tip of Syria. This was where his brother Khalil had been doing his military service for the past five months.

His face tanned from the winter sun, Khalil had lost some weight, but the greatest change was in his demeanour. His eyes had acquired a thoughtful gleam and he seemed unusually reticent, as if wearing a uniform had altered his character. Even as he gladly accepted the underwear and cologne, he seemed more pensive than merry. Adem examined him with curiosity, for he, too, would become a soldier in about a year. Military service being compulsory, he had decided to do it as soon as he left secondary school. University wasn’t for him, and he couldn’t afford it anyway. Upon coming back from the army, he would find a job, get married and have six children – three boys, three girls. This, in a nutshell, was the future he had envisaged for himself.

When visiting hours were over, Adem left his brother in his garrison and rode a donkey back to the nearby village. Frozen earth, the colour of porridge, stretched out as far as the eye could see. Nature was resilient here, unyielding. Only as he was observing the landscape did it occur to him that he had forgotten to give Khalil the box of baklava.

Kismet, he thought to himself. Maybe it was for someone else.

Upon arriving in the village Adem found the muhtar – the headman.
It was a lucky coincidence that his father had done business with him in the past. Though the two men hadn’t seen each other in many years, they had kept in touch through common friends. And so, prior to his trip, Adem had sent a postcard to his father’s acquaintance to notify him of his arrival. Worryingly, he had not had a reply.

‘Postcard? What card?’ yelled the headman when Adem knocked on his door. ‘I didn’t receive anything.’

He was a swarthy man, so tall that he had to stoop before walking in and out of doorways. A thick moustache curled upwards atop his lip, and his sideboards were slicked down with a substance that looked like oil.

‘I . . . I’m sorry . . . then I’d better go,’ said Adem.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘I . . . look, I –’

‘No visitor has ever been unwelcome under this roof,’ roared the headman.

Slowly, it dawned on Adem that the Kurdish man was not angry with him. Nor was he shouting. His voice was naturally loud and husky, and his Turkish so unpractised that it made him sound enraged even when he wasn’t.

‘Well, thank you. It’s only for a night, really.’

‘A night? You cannot leave so soon! There is a wedding in two days. You must join us. Otherwise the groom’s family will be offended.’

How can they can be offended when they don’t even know me, Adem wanted to ask. But the customs were different in this part of the country, and far more pronounced. Besides, he didn’t have any reason to hurry back to Istanbul. It wasn’t as if anyone there was desperate for him to return.

Weddings, joyful as they were, had long been a source of sadness for Adem, for they always reminded him of his mother, Aisha. Her name was not mentioned in their house any more; her photos had been destroyed as if she had never been. The lace she had tatted, the handkerchiefs she had embroidered, the necklaces that had once adorned her long neck, and the blouses, stockings and hairpins she had worn – all had been burned on a bonfire lit by Baba (the Drunk One).
So it was that Adem accepted the headman’s offer and remained in the village, gorging himself on fresh butter, cream and honey. The next afternoon, the headman dozed off after lunch, his wife and daughters immersed themselves in polishing the copper utensils in the house, and his sons became caught up in a backgammon tournament. Adem had seen his brother in the morning. The second visit had been shorter, though no less sentimental. Again he had forgotten the baklava. Now, having no interest in backgammon and for want of anything better to do, he decided to go out for a walk.

He strolled through the village, observing the rickety houses, the cracks in the walls, the children with dirt under their fingernails, the ruts left by carts and caravans that had crossed this land, never to return. It was bare and bleak but oddly beguiling. He came across a pack of stray dogs basking in the dirt, and one of them, a large canine with a tawny coat and bloodshot eyes, showed its teeth. The other dogs followed suit, snarling and growling, their ears pinned back. Adem turned around and began to run, even though he knew it would prompt the pack to chase him. Panting, he scrambled down mud tracks without a sense of direction, until he arrived at a sod house with chickens and hens in the front garden. There was someone sitting on the garden wall – half-girl, half-woman – who, upon closer inspection, was sniggering at his panic. Adem dashed towards her, and entered the garden without permission, taking refuge in her self-confidence.

Only seconds later the dogs reached the garden and hemmed him in on every side. One came dangerously close, crouching. Just as it was about to attack, the girl clapped her hands and shouted, in a voice mixed with authority and amusement, words that Adem could not comprehend. The effect was magical. One by one the animals sat down, their heads low, their tails between their legs.

Adem stared at his saviour, annoyed at having been rescued by a girl, but deeply relieved. She had a dimple in her left cheek, and large, liquid eyes, evenly spaced, the colour of a bottomless lake. In her hand was some kind of pastry, which she eagerly went back to devouring. He had never seen a girl with such an appetite.

‘You scared of dogs?’ she asked.
He didn’t respond.
‘If they know that, they’ll frighten you. Smart animals! My sister loves them.’ She leaned forward as if revealing a secret. ‘I don’t.’
She spoke Turkish with a heavy accent. An ignorant Kurdish girl, he thought. Probably lice-infested. He shot a glance at her neatly plaited hair, chestnut-brown with glints of gold and amber. So strong was the urge to touch her plaits that he raised his hand, but then stopped it in mid-air.
‘How is it that you know Turkish, when most people in the village don’t?’ he said.
‘I went to school. All my sisters did. Father insisted.’
Adem’s eyes scrutinized the house, inspecting the dresses, skirts and socks pegged to a line, drying. ‘How many sisters do you have?’
‘I’m the eighth girl in the family.’
‘Wow. And no boys?’
Shaking her head, she changed the subject. ‘Hey, would you like some? I made it.’
He took the piece of pastry she offered and sank his teeth into the rich, fluffy dough. He wasn’t expecting it to be so good. The dogs looked up expectantly, wagging their tails. Under their reproachful eyes, the two ate in silence, not knowing how to keep the conversation going.
‘I live in Istanbul,’ Adem said, when he found his voice again.
‘Really? Everybody says it’s beautiful.’
‘True,’ Adem answered with a trace of pride. He decided he was beginning to like her. There was a lightness to her manner that he found fascinating, and the ease with which she spoke soothed him.
‘May I ask you something?’ she said suddenly, and went on without waiting for an answer. ‘Is it true that the cobblestones of Istanbul are made of gold?’
What kind of a girl was this, Adem wondered — brave enough to confront a pack of wild dogs but so naive as to believe in such nonsense. Yet he was smitten by her charm, and heard himself say, ‘Yes, they are. If you were to marry someone like me, you could come to Istanbul to see for yourself.’
She blushed. ‘Why would I marry you?’
‘Because I can take you far away.’
‘I don’t want to go afar. There is more than enough here.’

He was still considering how to respond when they heard a woman’s voice coming from the house. She jumped to her feet and stood facing him, holding his eyes with the intensity of her stare. Then she turned to the dogs and, shaking a finger, shouted, ‘Leave him alone.’

As soon as she disappeared, Adem began to inch his way out of the garden. The leader of the pack watched him intently, and, just as he passed by, it growled, giving him such a jolt that he dropped what remained of the pastry. Dismayed, he looked at the mushy mess on the ground, the sugar mingling with the soil.

There were no golden pavements in Istanbul. Or anywhere else in the world. No dreams to pursue. Such things existed solely in legends and fairy tales. The real world with its real people resembled a mixture of sugar and soil, and was, more or less, of the same taste. Didn’t she know that?

*

The next day Adem attended the wedding, which was like nothing he had ever seen before. A courtyard filled to the brim with men of all ages sitting in a half-circle, a musician bashing away at his drum while another played the clarinet, children running around unattended, and women watching from the flat rooftops, their faces half covered, their hands hennaed. Adem noticed that the unmarried men were careful not to look upwards, and he did the same, keeping his eyes level.

Across from the entrance were the groom’s father and the bride’s father, sitting side by side but without exchanging a word. Depending on their rank or degree of proximity, relatives were positioned on either side. The bride and the groom were in the centre, where everybody could scrutinize them to their heart’s content. The groom had been newly shaved, and he smiled often. It was impossible to know how the bride felt, for her face was hidden under a glittery, crimson veil. From time to time a woman tiptoed close, bringing her something to drink. Together they lifted her veil ever so slightly so
that she could sip without spilling anything on to her clothes, and without being seen.

Adem was planning to sit in a quiet corner when the headman spotted him and bellowed, patting the seat beside him. ‘City-boy, come next to me.’

So he did. He sat there good-humouredly, enjoying the celebration, until the man next to him pulled out his gun and began to fire it in the air. Immediately, others followed. The sound was deafening. One of the bullets hit the roof of a house near by and left a hole there, dust showering from the boards. Fearful of being shot, Adem glanced around in panic, and in the swirl of chaos he caught his breath at the sight of her, standing on a flat roof, looking at him, calm and composed, as if she were aware of being the only serene thing in a world out of control.

As soon as the shooting subsided Adem excused himself to look for a toilet, though what he really wanted was to find a way to talk to her. No sooner had he walked out of the main gate than he spotted her, sitting by a well, immersed in preparing a huge pot of yoghurt drink. When had she come down from the roof?

‘It’s good to see you again,’ he said.

She gave him a cold glare. ‘What are you talking about?’

It occurred to Adem that she was pretending not to have seen him before, for reasons of modesty and reserve that were, no doubt, required of a young woman in a place such as this. He decided to play along. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have intruded. You don’t know me, of course. My name is Adem. May I learn yours?’

‘And why should I tell you my name?’ she snapped, her lips twisted in a scowl, a dimple in her right cheek.

Her eyes were different today, the same and yet altered, glowing with a condescending sparkle, or so it seemed to him. For a sinking moment he suspected she was making fun of him. He excused himself and ambled away.

When he returned, having taken a leak behind a bush and calmed somewhat, she was no longer by the well. The bride was leaving for her new house, mounted on an ivory horse that was pulled by a boy, so that she, too, would bear sons. The animal’s mane was decorated
with scarlet ribbons and evil-eye beads, its tail braided. While a group of children and a number of women followed the horse, ululating and clapping, the male guests prepared to sit down for the wedding dinner. Large, round, copper trays were carried inside by youngsters. As he strode back, Adem could smell the flat bread and meat. Upon entering the courtyard, he saw her again. She seemed in a hurry, carrying a crying toddler.

‘Why are you angry at me?’ he asked, blocking her way.

‘What? Why should I be angry at you?’ she said with a peal of laughter. Even the child in her arms seemed engrossed, suddenly quiet.

‘Then why didn’t you tell me your name?’

Tucking a lock of hair into her loosely tied scarf, she smiled.

‘Because you didn’t ask. But, since you are now, it’s Jamila.’

He nodded, grateful.

‘What about your name?’

‘But I told you a minute ago,’ he said in a throaty whisper.

A bemused look crossed her face. ‘Maybe you talked to Pembe, my twin sister. When did you see her?’

As if prompted by the question, the shooting started again. The child broke into a wail, and Jamila had to rush her out of the courtyard. Adem stood there, feeling slightly dizzy but also relieved. A twin! Yes, that explained it all. The harsh demeanour, the frosty stare. That was not Jamila. Not his Jamila.

In the evening Adem stood by the window and watched the moonlight crest on the roofs, shedding silver streaks across the village. The house lights resembled glints of cigarette tips in the dark. He had missed Istanbul and was glad that he would be leaving soon. Yet what was he going to do without Jamila?

He went to see the headman, whom he found in his nightgown, smoking his pipe. There was an oil lamp beside him, which reflected shadows across the walls, creating hollows under his eyes. ‘I want to give you this baklava and thank you for your hospitality and—’

‘Ah, I cannot eat that. I wish I could,’ the headman said wearily.

‘Diabetes.’

Adem stared at the box in his hand. Maybe it was meant for some-
one else. He took a deep breath. He had planned to approach the matter indirectly, but now he could see there was no way to do that.
‘Today at the wedding, I saw a girl.’
‘A girl?’
Slowly, Adem watched the man’s face as he raised his eyebrows, taking in the implication. Oh, God! The boy thinks he has fallen in love.
‘Tell me about this girl,’ the headman urged. ‘What’s her name?’
‘Jamila,’ Adem replied, feeling his face grow hot.
‘Jamila . . . I don’t know any Jamila.’
‘Long brown hair. Big green eyes.’
Taking slow puffs from his water pipe, the headman shook his head. ‘Nope. There’s no such girl here.’
‘She speaks Turkish.’
‘Oh . . . I think I know who you mean. Berzo’s girls. They all went to school. Are you referring to Enough Beauty?’
‘Enough Beauty?’
‘Yes, she and her twin, they were named twice. Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty,’ said the headman, but offered no other explanation. ‘Look, you’re too young to know this, but a man’s love is the reflection of his character.’
Adem listened, not knowing what to make of this.
‘If the man is quarrelsome, his love is full of fights. If he is placid and kind, his love is a balm. Should he pity himself all the time, his love will crumble to dust. If he is a jolly chap, his love will abound with joy. Before losing your heart to a woman, you need to ask yourself what kind of love can you give her?’
‘Well, I’m a good man,’ Adem said.
‘The only good man I know of was the prophet, may peace be upon him,’ said the headman. ‘Anyway, Berzo has too many girls. Custom requires that they marry the eldest one first. And Jamila is the youngest. However, I can see that it might be a perfect match. The family has gone through hardships. The mother, Naze, died in childbirth, poor woman. She so wanted to have a son. Berzo got married again. But the new wife has given him no children yet. And then the eldest girl, Hediye . . .’
‘What happened?’
'That man is doomed, son. He might want to marry off the girls quickly. Jamila might not have to wait.'

Adem broke into a grin. There was a hope, after all, however slight.

‘But don’t forget they are poor,’ the headman whispered. ‘Your father and brothers might not approve of a Kurdish bride, a villager. On the other hand . . . your family doesn’t have the best of reputations since your mother ran away with another man. Perhaps it’s better for you to choose someone here, out of the way.’

All at once Adem’s face darkened. He’d had no idea that the man knew about his family’s shame. Words, like wandering tribes, were of no fixed address. They travelled far and wide, scattering over the earth.
In the stillness of the night, Jamila was dozing by the fireplace, her head tilted to one side. Her left hand was dangling over the edge of the chair and her right hand was firmly clutching a letter. She had fallen asleep while reading it for the fifth time.

Her sleep was uncomfortable, full of demons. Colour had rushed into her cheekbones, and a light sheen of sweat gleamed on her face. In her dream she was in a town that looked both oddly familiar and unlike anywhere else in the world. A river ran through its centre, wide and unruly, with vessels of all sizes lapping at their moorings, bobbing up and down. Jamila found herself alone on the waterfront, peeking inside one of the fishing boats. There was a gathering of people inside the cabin, their expressions sullen, their bodies pliant and viscous, as if made of wax. They were talking fervently about... her.

A half-moan, half-sigh, escaped Jamila’s lips. One of the group—a man who strangely resembled Adem—noticed her and alerted the others. Furious and spiteful for no reason at all, they scampered off the boat and on to the dock, hunting for her. She sprinted away as fast as she could, passing through serpentine alleyways and cobbled squares, but soon she got tired, her feet heavier than cement blocks. She would wake up in a little while: when her pursuers finally cornered her in a blind alley, she would catapult herself, with all her might, out of the dream, panting. But at the moment she was still there, in the town of her nightmare.

The air in the hut felt musty, stale. The last log in the fireplace cracked and burst into flame, sending out a shower of golden sparks like dust from a magic wand. Outside in the valley a bird cried out. There were footsteps, but they were distant, indistinct. Jamila didn’t
hear them. Not yet. She was still running for dear life, having just turned the bend into the dead-end street.

Right now, Jamila’s face looked older than that of a 32-year-old woman. There were wrinkles around her neck, twisty lines that resembled an arcane alphabet chiselled in wood. The truth was she had stopped feeling young years ago.

With a sudden jerk Jamila’s body was pulled back and she woke up, the carved panel of the chair imprinted on her cheek. There was such a nasty pain in her left shoulder that she dared not move at first. Gently, she massaged her stiff limbs with one hand while still holding the letter with the other. For a moment she stared at the paper through empty eyes, as though she had forgotten what it was. But, unlike the boats in her dream, the letter was real. It was as real as the mountains that surrounded her and just as portentous. Jamila began to read it again.

Sister of mine,

Since I came to this island, where I have yet to see the sea, I have wished many times that you were by my side. But never as much as I do now. If you were here, I would put my head in your lap, and tell you that I am falling. Will you hold me?

Adem is no husband to me. He doesn’t come home any more. He has found himself another woman. The children don’t know it. I keep everything inside. Always. My heart is full of words unsaid, tears unshed. I don’t blame him. I blame myself. It was the biggest mistake of our lives that I was his bride, instead of you. It’s true, he never loved me the way he loved you. He is a man who has many regrets and no courage. I feel sorry for him.

How I wish we were children again, you and I. Stealing coins from wish fountains. If only we knew then what we know now.

Did I tell you what Adem once said to me? ‘I wish I had a magic eraser,’ he said. ‘There are so many things I would like to change.’ And, though he didn’t confess this, I know he also meant us. I should have never married him. It wasn’t in my hands, but I didn’t try to prevent it. Not really. I so wanted to get out of the village. He was my ticket to other lands. Jamila, you must be upset at me, are you? I would be, if I were in your shoes.
Do you ever think of our sister Hediye? The other day I made halva for her soul. I distributed it to my neighbours. They were a bit surprised, not being familiar with our customs. It was a shame that we didn’t mourn her the way we should have. Do you feel the same way?

Your loving half, Pembe

Jamila stood up, rubbing the calluses on the palms of her hands. She approached the window and peered into the night. She thought she had heard a sound, but upon listening more carefully, she doubted it. Sighing, she went back, put the kettle on the stove and began to make tea.

* 

‘There are so many stars in the sky tonight,’ Adem had said. It was a bone-chilling evening in the year 1961.

Leaning closer, his eyes raking her face, Adem told her that some loves were like the brightest stars. They winked at human beings, filling hearts with hope and joy, even when the times were bad. Some other loves resembled the Milky Way, with the ghosts of their ancestors trailing behind in a pale stripe of afterglow.

‘What about our love?’ Jamila asked. ‘Is that a star too?’

Adem flinched at the ease with which she embraced the word. He had been contemplating how to tell her that he loved her, but here she was saying it herself. She was brisker than him, and bolder. For him everything was happening too fast, leaving him dazzled and intimidated in equal measure. Yet there was no time to wait for time to catch up with them. No time to walk holding hands, no time to taste furtive kisses, no time to get to know each other.

His face wore a gallant smile as he said, ‘Our love is a star with a huge double tail. Do you know what that is?’

Jamila had shaken her head.

‘It’s called a comet.’

‘A comet . . . ’ Still repeating the word, Jamila leaped to her feet, grabbed the sickle off the wall and hacked off a lock of her long hair.

‘For me?’ Adem asked, surprised.

‘It will remind you of me. Always keep it with you.’
In her face were affection and concern, and something that he hadn’t seen in anyone else: trust.

‘I don’t need to keep it with me; you’ll be next to me all the time,’ he said. But he put her gift in his pocket, as if he didn’t believe his own words.

Years later, she would learn more about comets, about the ways they could crash into one another. Although Adem had probably been unaware of this at the time, she came to realize that, just like two comets, they had headed with amazing speed towards collision, trailing behind them the burden of promises unkept, dreams unfulfilled.

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Jamila took the kettle off the fire and poured tea into a small glass. Before her first sip, she popped a sugar cube into her mouth and sucked on it broodingly. Then, with unnecessary force, she grabbed a pen, as many unused to writing tend to do. Unlike her twin, who wrote half in Turkish and half in Kurdish, she stuck to Kurdish only.

My dear Pembe, my flesh and blood, my other half, my endless longing,

I am never angry at you. Our lives are created by Allah, and Him alone.

These days I wake up with a heavy feeling. Something under way. I cannot sleep in my bed any more. I fall asleep on chairs. Nothing helps. I have nightmares. It will pass, of course. Nothing to worry you about.

Jamila put down the pen; her hand had gone slack, and her forehead was creased. She could hear people approaching from the north-west – three or four visitors, she guessed. She could detect the snap of twigs under their heavy boots, and the clatter of the pebbles that they sent down into the valley below.

They could be soldiers. They could be brigands. They could be anyone. Jamila glanced at the door. It was bolted, and the windows were closed with worm-eaten wooden panels. She put on her headscarf, took her rifle off the wall. There was nothing else she could do.

She wanted to finish the letter. She had to tell Pembe more about this gnawing feeling inside and warn her not to do anything careless.
or improper about her marriage. But had Pembe ever been cautious in her life? Her twin, that skinny girl who always asked impossible questions, and even wanted to know why tree roots were in the ground and not up in the air where they could drink rainwater instead – she had grown up but not changed.

Weighing it up in her heart, it also worried her that her sister had a face like an open book. Whatever Pembe felt, from the smallest delight to a hint of sorrow, she projected. If she could not hide the most uncomplicated emotions, how could she possibly conceal her indifference towards her marriage from everyone?

Outside, the footsteps drew closer until they stopped at her doorstep. There was the slightest tap, bashful but persistent. Jamila took a deep breath, muttered a quick prayer and opened the door.

There were three men with a couple of dogs at their heels. They were outlaws, she could see that. Splinters of ice clung to their moustaches like icicles dangling from eaves. One of them came forward. A heavily built man with deep-set eyes and a gold-capped tooth. She had seen him before: he was their leader.

‘My wife,’ the bandit said curtly. ‘You must come with us.’

‘When did the pain start?’

‘Two hours, maybe more.’

Nodding, Jamila took her coat and her rifle, and followed them.

Later in the night she was in a derelict house with bullet holes in the door and a corrugated-iron roof overhead, her face covered in blood and sweat, her hands holding the strangest baby she had ever come across.

It was a girl or, more precisely, a girl and a half. She had a baby boy’s body attached to her chest and abdomen. They had started their journey in their mother’s womb as twins, but one of them had developed while the other had stopped halfway, as if he had feared the world to come and changed his mind. The undeveloped baby had remained joined to her twin.

‘You must go to the city,’ Jamila said. ‘They’ll have to perform surgery. The second body needs to be removed. Then your child will be all right.’
The smuggler stood transfixed, his eyes narrowed in a way that was neither disbelief nor acceptance. ‘Is it an omen?’

Jamila was half expecting this question and she answered gently, ‘It is not an omen. Such births are rare, but it happens. Some twins cannot separate.’

‘There was a goat with five legs. Just like that,’ he said, as though he hadn’t heard a word of what she had said.

‘This child of yours is special. She needs your love,’ Jamila said, realizing how few words she could find to comfort this man of the mountains. ‘If anyone tells you otherwise, that person is not your friend. Do you understand?’

The man looked away.

Yet when Jamila was back in her cottage, exhausted but still unable to sleep, she wondered if it had indeed been a sign. Not for the bandit and his family, but for her. She sat down and finished the letter to her sister.

I’ve just come back from a difficult birth. Conjoined twins. One dead, one alive. If you were here, you would ask: ‘Why does He let this happen? It’s unfair.’ But this is not how I look at it. I surrender fully, unconditionally, I do my best to help my people.

My dear, we cannot erase the past. That’s not in our hands. I am not, and I never was, upset at you or at Adem. Can you stop a gusty wind from blowing? Can you make the snow turn any colour other than white? We easily accept that we have no power over nature. But why don’t we admit that we cannot change our fates? It’s not that different. If Allah guided us on to separate paths, there must have been a reason for that. You have your life there; I have my life here. We have to accept. But I am worried about your marriage. Can’t you try harder to make it work? For the sake of your children, you must.

You mention Hediye. How strange, I have been thinking about her too, lately more than ever.

Your loving sister, always,
Jamila
In the afternoon, the call of the *muezzin* wafted through the small Kurdish village. Adem listened, a dreadful sensation growing in the pit of his stomach. Time trudged on agonizingly slowly, and yet also too hurriedly. He had postponed going back to Istanbul for a few days, but he couldn’t delay his return any longer. He went to the mosque with the headman, and prayed for the first time since his mother had left home.

‘Allah, my God, I know I don’t pray often enough,’ he whispered as he sat on the prayer rug. ‘I didn’t fast during the last Ramadan. Or the one before. But help me, please. Let Jamila’s eyes see no other than me. Ever!’

‘Are you all right, lad?’ asked the headman when they walked out into the bright day. Despite the sun, the air felt chilly.

‘I need to marry her.’

‘Aren’t you too young for that?’

‘I’m old enough to get betrothed.’

‘Yes, but you don’t even have a job. You haven’t done your military service. Why are you rushing?’

The day before Adem had gone to visit his brother Khalil in the barracks, and, with his help, had sent a telegram to Tariq in Istanbul.

BROTHER I MET A GIRL STOP SHE’S THE ONE STOP I KNOW I’M YOUNG STOP BUT THIS IS GOD’S CALL STOP WILL MARRY HER STOP NEED YOUR BLESSING STOP AND MONEY STOP

Adem didn’t tell the headman any of this. Instead, he said, ‘Because
I’ve found the girl I’ve been waiting for, and I’ll die if I can’t have her.’

‘You need to talk to her father, then.’

‘What if he says he doesn’t want to see me?’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll talk to Berzo for you. He won’t eat you.’

‘Why are you helping me?’ Adem asked after a brief pause.

This elicited a chuckle from the headman. ‘Because somebody should. You don’t seem like you could do much without assistance.’

Getting a meeting with Jamila’s father was easier than Adem had imagined; bringing the subject up, however, seemed impossible. Never a talkative person, Berzo had turned more taciturn after the death of his wife and his daughter Hediye. So when Adem visited Jamila’s house with the headman by his side and the box of baklava under his arm, he found a sullen man, his eyebrows clamped down, his stare glassy.

‘I came here to talk about your daughter,’ Adem said, after they were served tea and dried figs. Then, remembering that the man had a great many, he added, ‘Your daughter Jamila, I mean. Enough Beauty.’

‘No call her that!’ the man said in broken Turkish.

‘Sorry . . .’ Adem faltered.

Jamila’s father let out a stream of words in Kurdish, which the headman translated curtly as ‘He says only the girl’s late mother can call her Enough.’

Adem felt a self-pity that bordered on despair. Thankfully, the headman intervened. ‘This young man is an outsider, true. But he’s an honest person and he comes from an honourable family. I know his father. Adem’s intentions are pure. He would like to marry your daughter.’

Once again Jamila’s father spoke in Kurdish; once again his words were partially translated: ‘What kind of a marriage proposal is this? Where are your parents?’

‘My mother is dead,’ Adem lied. ‘And Baba is ill.’ At least that part was true. ‘I’ve two brothers. The elder one, Tariq, is like a father to me. I’ve already sent him a telegram.’

Lapsing into an unwieldy silence, they sipped their teas, finished
their figs. Finally, Jamila’s father said, ‘You cannot marry her. She’s already spoken for.’

‘What?’ Adem blurted out. Why hadn’t she told him? He turned to the headman, who averted his gaze.

Switching to broken Turkish again, Berzo went on, ‘She’s engaged to a relative. They marry next year.’

‘But –’

‘You want to marry a daughter of mine, take Pembe. They are same. You like one, you like the other.’

Adem shook his head, his eyes defiant. ‘No, I want Jamila. She’s the one in my heart. You give Pembe to your relative.’ He was crossing a line but he couldn’t help it.

Berzo slurped the last of his tea, smacking his lips with a little grunt. ‘It cannot be. My last word.’

When the two of them were outside in the garden, Adem threw up his hands, bellowing at the headman. ‘What’s going on here? You owe me an explanation. What are you hiding from me?’

The headman took out his pouch and began to roll a cigarette. ‘A year ago Jamila’s elder sister Kamile was going to get married. Just before the wedding the two families got into a fight. I don’t even remember what it was about, but it turned nasty. Berzo called off the wedding. The groom’s family was so upset they kidnapped Jamila in retaliation.’

‘What?’ Adem rasped.

‘They kept her somewhere for a few days. Then Berzo sent for them and gave his consent to Kamile’s marriage. In return they brought Jamila back.’

‘Did they . . . touch her . . .?’

‘Hmm, nobody knows for sure. They say they didn’t lay a hand on her, but they’re shifty and the girl never explained. Her father beat her several times but still not a word. A midwife examined her. She says Jamila has no hymen but some girls are born like this.’

Adem was shivering.

‘The good news is that the family of Kamile’s husband accepts the girl as a bride for an old relative. A widower. Her honour is saved.’
Gripped by a new realization, Adem glared. ‘You knew about this all along.’
‘A headman knows everything that takes place in his village.’
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
‘There still was a chance you could get her. And, if not, you had to find it out for yourself.’

Adem wasn’t listening properly, blinded by fury. ‘I thought you were my friend. A wise man!’

‘Nobody is wise,’ the headman said. ‘We are all half-fool, half-wise. There is no wisdom without foolishness. And no pride without shame.’

But Adem was already storming away, almost running, as if he were being chased. Only this time there was no pack of stray dogs behind him. He found Jamila in the house of a neighbour, weaving a carpet with women of varying ages. When they saw him looking through the window, the women giggled and covered their faces. Instantly, Jamila leaped to her feet and dashed outside.

‘What are you doing here? You’re shaming me!’ she said.

‘Shame! Yes, exactly,’ Adem snapped. ‘The word I was looking for.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Well, you tell me. Apparently, there’s some explaining that you need to do.’

All at once Jamila’s stare hardened. ‘All right, then, let’s talk.’

They walked to the back of the house where recently someone had been making flat bread on the tandoor, and though the fire had gone out there were a few embers among the ash, still glowing. Around it there were patches of grass, strips of green, like a harbinger of spring.

‘Your father says you may not be a virgin.’ He hadn’t meant to say it so bluntly, but that was how it came out.

‘He told you that?’ Jamila said, avoiding his eyes.

Adem had expected her to react more dramatically, protesting in the face of such insolence, crying her heart out. But she was oddly composed as she raised her head and looked at him.
‘What about you?’ she asked.
‘What about me?’
‘What did you say?’
He wasn’t expecting this question. ‘I want to know the truth!’ he said.
‘The truth is what you make of it.’
Rage rose like bile in his throat. ‘Shut up. Stop fooling around with me.’
‘But I wasn’t,’ Jamila said, a tired look on her pretty features. ‘Will you love me the way I am?’
He said nothing. He wanted to say ‘yes’, but it just didn’t reach his lips. As he glanced towards the mountains, he heard her mutter, before she marched away, ‘Well, I suppose I won’t be seeing the golden stones of Istanbul after all.’
That day in the Kurdish village Adem spent the rest of the afternoon on the move, quarrelling with himself. His feet crunching audibly upon a pile of dirt, he paced circles around a mound overlooking Jamila’s house. He could see the garden where he had first run into her. It had been five days since he had come to this godforsaken village. In five days his life had changed so much he didn’t think it would ever be the same again.
One part of him wanted, in fact was desperate, to go to Jamila’s father and tell him that he didn’t care. He loved her, and, as far as he could see, she loved him. That was all that mattered. Everything else was trivial. He would marry her and take her far away from here as promised.
Another part of him, however, was doubtful, disturbed. Jamila had not defended herself or sworn her chastity, and her silence was so unsettling. What if she was not a virgin? How could he live with this doubt for the rest of his life? What would his brother Tariq say when he learned that he had found himself a tainted wife – an exact replica of their mother?
Tariq! What was he going to tell him? By now he must have read the telegram. Even the thought of having to confront his eldest brother was enough to tie knots in Adem’s stomach. He couldn’t go
back to Istanbul and say it was all a horrible misunderstanding. Hours later, when he entered the headman’s house, he found him smoking a pipe, waiting.

‘There you are, city boy! No village girl for you, uh?’

‘That’s not true. I haven’t changed my mind,’ Adem said resolutely. ‘I do want to marry.’

‘Really?’ The headman’s eyes glinted with appreciation. ‘You surprise me, lad. I thought you wouldn’t want Jamila.’

‘And I don’t,’ Adem said, after a pause. ‘I’ll take the other one.’

‘What?’

‘The other twin. I’ll have her.’

Deep down in his heart, beneath the boldness he had presented as his personality, Adem knew he should feel awful about the turn of events. Strangely, he didn’t. In fact, he didn’t feel anything at all. Would a splinter of wood suffer pain while being carried along by a roiling river? Would a feather experience anxiety as it was wafted on the winds? That’s how it was with him on that day, and for many more to come.

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Shrewsbury Prison, 1991

*Trippy has had a bad day. There are bad days here and not-so-bad days – and then there are ‘zoned-out days’, when you feel like a wrecked car. Despite the name, the last are not the worst. A zoned-out day is a bit like one of those nights when you feel so zonked that you can’t possibly sleep. At times like that you’re in a vegetative state, and do nothing, think nothing. Numb as a turnip. On such days you’re too depressed to know you’re down in the dumps. Somebody takes care of you or nobody does. Either way you don’t mind. And the not-so-bad days, as to be expected, are rather passable. It’s the bad days that are the worst – the ones that get to you and damage your soul.

A calendar is a daft invention. If time flies, as they say, it does not do so with equal speed at every moment. If only there could be a way to assess each day of the week separately. Let’s say, a not-so-bad day is marked in white and equals one point. Then a zoned-out day would be*