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A STORY OF ONE'S OWN: CREATIVE NARRATIVES ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN IN TURKEY

by

MIRKENA OZER

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani

ABSTRACT

Writing fiction within a feminist framework is a helpful way in bringing up women's issues to a wider readership that is not necessarily familiar with feminist scholarship. Through creative narrative an author can dispel misunderstandings, correct misconceptions and represent underrepresented women who have been rendered invisible or pushed to the margins by hegemonic discourses. My novella tells the story of a group of Muslim women doing community work in Turkey. Navigating their way in contemporary Turkey, these women dispel the upheld literary stereotypes of Muslim women. Through their work and dedication, these women show that they are not victims of a suppressive religion, or escapees from an oppressive culture. Instead they see themselves as participants in a noble cause for the benefit of the wider society. The impetus for their service is drawn from the main sources of their religion: Quran and the example of the prophet Muhammad.

INDEX WORDS: Muslim woman, Turkey, Activism

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by

MIRKENA OZER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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MIRKENA OZER

Committee Chair: Amira Jarmakani

Committee: Joshua Russell

Nadine Sinno

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, to my husband, and to my five children who put up patiently with their busy mom. You all mean the world to me!

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1 INTRODUCTION

When I first contemplated the idea of doing a creative project as a master's thesis in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program, the impetus was my desire to converge my interest in both feminism and fiction. Only when I approached the end of the master program was I able to see the opportunities that creative writing can offer to a woman writer with a feminist consciousness. After all, many renowned feminist theorists have ventured into writing fiction as a venue in raising awareness to women's issues. In fact until a few decades ago, the gap between those who produced "theory" and those who practiced "creative writing" didn't exist (Sandra and Susan 2007).

Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Wolf, Monique Witting, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Jamaica Kincaid, and Mohja Kahf, to name a few, have engaged in both fictional or poetic writing, as well as critical and theoretical essays. Writing fiction within a feminist framework is a helpful way to bring women's issues to a wider readership that might not necessarily be familiar with or interested in feminist scholarship. Through creative narrative an author can dispel misunderstandings, correct misconceptions or/and represent groups of women who have been rendered invisible or pushed to the margins by hegemonic discourses.

Literary representations of women can be a mirror to changes in socio-economic and political landscapes of today's globalizing world. In order for that mirror to capture the shifting realities of our times without becoming obsolete, it is important that women writers from a variety of backgrounds continue to write about women's experiences, struggles, and aspirations utilizing the expressive possibilities of different literary genres such as letters, memoirs, biographies, poems, screenplays, novels etc.

For my thesis I have decided to write about the experiences of Muslim women for two main reasons. First, as a Muslim myself, I feel affinity toward them and I am interested in attempting to portray

their lived experiences in the contemporary world.¹ Second, the current literary representations do not do justice to the diversity and complexity of Muslim women. I am aware that a homogenous, timeless category named Muslim woman is fictive. This invented category can be useful as a situated signifier (Zayzafoon 2005). Yet, I shall use it in its plural form, i.e. Muslim women to point to the pluralities and particularities of their situations in the matrix of relations of power.

Because the existing multitude of the interpretations and applications of Islam vary over time and over different geographies, a monolithic version of religion, even in a theoretical framework, simply does not exist, much less could a fixed notion of a Muslim woman, as a category, hold any coherence. Other identities, such as: race, ethnicity, class, and education intersect with the religious component and problematize the homogeneity and universality of the Muslim woman.

In *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* Lamia Ben Youssef (Zayzafoon 2005) contends that the Muslim Woman as signifier has two metaphoric functions: 1. to produce the alterity and inferiority of Islam in the Western Orientalist discourse and 2. to stand as a nationalist symbol in Arab countries. My work will interrogate the first function by presenting a richly complex set of Muslim protagonists who will challenge the taken-for-granted alterity and inferiority.

Today's media and popular fiction depict Muslim women with broad strokes, usually in Orientalist tones, erasing the differences and the pluralities in doing so. The common understanding in today's Western countries is that Muslim women are victimized. They are seen either as accomplices of their oppression, or as rebelling against it (Kahf 1999). Those fortunate rebels, who are able to escape, find refuge and blissful repose in the bosom of the West. This representation of the Muslim woman as a victim in need of salvation, Kahf maintains, has been one of the justifying precursors of Western interventions in the Muslim World. See also (Abu-Lughod 2002) .

¹ This is not to say that I am the insider's voice or that I, as a writer, am immune to misrepresenting the Muslim women in my writing. That's why I say that I will only attempt to portray them in hope that my narratives will contribute in diversifying the literary representations of Muslim women by offering an alternate point of view.

Many feminist scholars, (such as (Abu-Lughod 2002), (Deeb 2006), and (Mahmood 2005)) have refuted these simplistic images in their critical essays and ethnographic research, pointing to the matrix of factors and specificities that produce the lived experiences of Muslim Women. Deeb and Mahmood argue that the Muslim women who participated in their research weren't poor victims caught between modernity and tradition, devoid of agency. On the contrary they negotiated between levels of powers, exercising agency, not just as resistance, but as on-going negotiations and reproduction of the terms of one's existence, taking responsibility for this process. Yet, these scholars' findings and refutations have yet to be reflected extensively in the genres of fiction and reach a wider audience.

Keeping in mind the immense diversity among women who identify as Muslims, I will confine myself to mainly Muslim women of Turkish descent for the sake of space and time and for fear of stretching the narrative too thin. The protagonists of my fiction work will be women who strive to live their religion to the best of their abilities, making sense at the same time of their ever-changing world. These women have come up with their own definition of progress, empowerment and equality. They are aware of the Western cultural hegemony and resist it, but do not reject the Western intellectual heritage wholesale, only when it conflicts with their faith tenets.

I will write in the genre of realistic fiction primarily because I feel this genre fits best to the purpose of my work, i.e., dispelling misconceptions and myths about the lives of Muslim women. My work will be based on and inspired by my everyday interactions with Muslim women, and my personal experiences and the observations I have made over the years with acquaintances both in Turkey and America. I will do my best to attend to the differences that class, education and ideology bring into these women's lives. My creative project will be in a novella format. I hope that my work will contribute to the growing voices that tell the stories of contemporary women and contest the taken-for-granted misconceptions about Muslim women.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 *Women Writers, Female Subjects*

When venturing into, what was then, the men's literary world, the first women writers did so with timidity and humility as if apologizing for their intrusion, depicting their work as modestly subordinate to men and relating to the challenges, confusions and obstacles they faced in order to write, as exemplified in Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Sandra and Susan 2007). The sentiments of these writers were products of their era's conceptualization of gender, which relegated woman as less than human and saw femininity as a weakness (Ibid. 8). Some of them, such as George Elliot had to change their names to assure their acceptance among male writers. Later, women writer's approach toward writing took the form of protest towards the engenderment of their work. In the twentieth century a few women writers insisted that an author's mind is genderless and thus the anthologies of women's literature were, in their view, a type of demeaning compilation. For example, the poet Laura Riding Jackson maintained that such differentiation of literary work as women's writing constitute an offense to the human identity of women and she refused to have her work included in the anthologies of women's literature (Ibid, 8).

Despite this anxiety expressed in the beginnings of women's writing endeavor, women writers have deployed four crucial strategies to define and expand the canon of women's literature (Sandra and Susan 2007):

1. Proposing not just education but reeducation of women needed as to correct a skewed social order. Women colleges and the interdisciplinary field of Women Studies may be viewed as fruits of these feminist endeavors (Ibid, 9).
2. Recovering and reevaluating individual women of letters that were considered the "mothers" of the literary canon. Wolf's *The Common Reader* (1925) presents an example of Wolf's excavation of forerunning women writers whose work had largely fallen into obscurity (Ibid, 10)

3. Reeducating readers in general but especially misogynistic male readers with the intention of speaking “truth to power” (p.10).
4. Excavating the intricate female-male relationship in literary history in order to shed light on the factors that influenced male-female dialectic. Adrienne Rich’s *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) very succinctly portrays this quest to re-vision, to look back, an act that is “more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival” (p.12).

My work can be included in the third strategy, i.e. an attempt to educate the reader.

1.1.2 Women’s Travel Writing

Western women writers have not written only about their immediate reality but also have ventured through their imagination to faraway lands and foreign cultures based on accounts of travelogues written by men and women who travelled around the world in colonial and post-colonial times. Travel writing has been considered by postcolonial literary theory as a “contact zone” (Pratt 2008) between colonizer, colonized and a domestic readership in the colonial power (Weedon 2007). Traveling women writers have contributed to colonial modes of representation and racialized difference (Weedon 2007), producing a female orientalism (Zonana 1993) which, albeit a distinct one from male orientalism, insisted on the production of the colonized as the subaltern Other. Female orientalism produced by women writers and activists was involved in two distinct yet related projects. The first had to do with the desire to change the poor state of the Eastern woman. This project was mostly engaged by missionary women who, endorsed with the perceived superiority of the Christian West, looked down on the blasphemous East. The second was constructed upon the desire of Western feminists to reform the men at home by cleansing them of “Eastern” vices. Joyce Zonana analyses the ramifications of the latter in the writings of British women in late nineteenth century. Focused on Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Zonana points out the ways in which Jane invokes prevalent albeit unexamined imageries of harem, slave, and sultans to criticize des-

potism at home (Zonana 1993). The simile of sultan and slave facilitates the feminist project of reforming men by displacing the source of patriarchal oppression onto an oriental society. By figuring objectionable aspects of life at home as “Eastern”, the project of removing oppression becomes a cleansing process of alien elements and a redemption of Christian men who have been led astray by “Mohame-tan” vices of polygamy, female trade and domestic despotism. This strategy neutralizes the threat and fear towards feminist demands and renders them palatable for an audience that wishes to affirm its oc-cidental superiority (Zonana 1993).

In *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*, Nima Naghibi (Naghibi 2007) ex-plores the first project of female orientalism mentioned above by analyzing the writings of women mis-sionaries of Presbyterian and Anglican churches and women suffragists from England who traveled to Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In these writing these women wrote about their experiences in Iran to “unveil” for the female armchair traveler back home not only the Orient but also the Oriental woman. Although the missionaries and the suffragists differed on many aspects, their travel writings have several traits in common. Through their affiliations with the empire, be it through estab-lished missionary institution or blood ties with imperial appointed authorities, they participated in the production of colonial discourse, presenting the Oriental woman as simultaneously exotic and sup-pressed being. In their writings the Eastern woman was typed as silent, passive and in total darkness to the extent that she wasn’t even aware of her wretched state. It was, thus incumbent upon their West-ern sisters to come to their aid (Naghibi 2007). For this reason, the suffragists had no scruples in speak-ing for the Eastern woman in the name of universal womanhood (Ibid. p.11). The degraded state of the Oriental sisters was often used as a yardstick to measure Western women’s social and political ad-vancement. This dual approach to Eastern women, especially to Muslim women can be easily identified in today’s literary endeavors. Orientalist imageries of the harem, veiled women and belly dancers roam contemporary fiction where the Muslim Woman is depicted as fixed in timelessness, immured by cul-

ture, tradition or religion. Such images are powerful partially because they claim historical accuracy and they also conceal the function they hold from the mainstream Western reader (Jarmakani 2008).

Because representation of Muslim women in modern literature produced particularly in the West or for Western consumption closely interests my creative project, it would be useful to turn now to the contemporary modes of productions and receptions of literary representations of the Muslim woman.

1.1.3 The Muslim Woman as a protagonist in Western Literature under the Dictates of the Politics of Reception

The Muslim woman is associated in Western Literature with the Third World woman which is depicted as victim of ignorance and restrictive cultures and religions, thus producing what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls “a composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (Mohanty 1991).

One of the key projects of postcolonial feminist literary theory is to make visible and to contest the racist and Eurocentric meanings that have become part of the common sense of Western societies (Weedon 2007). As a Muslim woman living in the West, I encounter prejudice and bias in the most unexpected places. These encounters remind me that literary, artistic, and media representations of Muslim women have practical implications for Muslim women around the globe. One such encounter inspired me to look into literary representations of Muslim women and their discursive roles with greater interest.

I went to visit the Georgia Aquarium with my family on a bright winter day. At the entrance, I approached one of the employees and asked for a map to better navigate the inside of the aquarium. She scrutinized me from head to toe and responded in a dismissive tone: “Yes, we have maps, but they are in English.” Needless to say, her response caught me off guard. That she had judged me as a foreigner just by the way I dress and had assumed that I knew no English, despite the fact that I had spoken

to her in perfect English, was perplexing and very telling at the same time. My dress and my accent formed in the employee's mind an image that was out of my control.

Due to this special interest of mine toward literary representation, Mohja Kahf's essay *Packaging "Huda": Sharawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment* (Kahf 2000) sparked my interest. In her paper, Kahf shows ample evidence to the mishandling and the appropriations of the original text (through mistranslations) to satisfy readers' expectations. Her arguments urged me to look a bit closer into the politics of reception of literary texts written outside of the West. In her essay Kahf argues that the translation of Sharawi's memoirs was handled in consideration of what she calls the "horizon of reader expectations" where the Arab woman (Muslim woman can replace Arab woman here since Arab and Muslim are considered synonymous in public recognition) can only figure as a victim, an escapee, or a pawn of men. While Kahf provides lots of evidence to describe how the translated text is molded according to these expectations, she doesn't elaborate on how this horizon of reader expectation came to be in the first place. Has this horizon been established since the beginning of interactions between East and West? What are the historical and political contingencies of this horizon? Kahf sheds light on these issues in another work of hers entitled *The Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Ter-magant to Odalisque* (Kahf 1999).

Kahf argues that literary representations of Muslim women mirror closely the socio-political changes in the world. But this is hardly a new phenomenon and it is not confined to modern times. The relationship between the West and the Islamicate² world has played an important role in the literary representation of the Muslim woman, both in the translated works and those written in English. According to Kahf, the representation of the Muslim woman in Western literature is mainly developed in close relationship to two strands: The discourse of Western relationship with Islamic world and the Western

² The term Islamicate denotes countries or areas with a large Muslim population, regardless of whether they live under the Islamic law or not.

discourse on gender. Kahf goes on to show in her analysis that the representation of the Muslim Woman in the West has gone through a metamorphosis in accordance with changes in world geopolitics, from termagant to odalisque, as the title suggests. In medieval texts, the Muslim woman occupies a smaller place because the Western concerns about Islam at that time cluster around other issues (such as how could blasphemy i.e. Islam be allowed to gain power and glory). In the rare instances that she appears in medieval texts, the Muslim woman is a queen or a noblewoman, wielding power of harm over the Christian hero.

As the Islamic world lost the upper hand, the image of Muslim Woman as oppressed by her culture and religion emerged. Harem and the veil, the symbols of Muslim women's oppression appear in the seventeenth century and the veil it could be said is still prevailing in today's literature. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Western interest in gender issues in Muslim populated lands gained a new momentum and replaced the interest, shown till then, toward the nationalist struggle in post-colonial Muslim lands. This interest remains strong even today, maybe more so than ever, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the U.S war on terrorism. All that remains from the parade of Muslim women in Western culture is "a supine odalisque, a shrinking- violet virgin and a veiled victim woman" (p.179).

As seen in this brief overview, the Western representation of the Muslim woman has been and is a changing, evolving phenomenon, one that accommodates shifting geopolitical relations. There is nothing timeless or monolithic about it. Yet, that doesn't mean that it is not a powerful discursive location that, apart from legitimizing Western military/political interventions in Islamic countries, also regulates the inner workings of politics of reception. Next, I turn to the politics of reception that supervise the reception of Third World literature in general and literature by and/or about Muslim women in particular.

1.1.4 *The Guardians of the Gates of Literature in English*

Reception theory “takes meaning not to be an attribute immanent in a text but rather a product of larger discursive contexts in which the text is read” (Amireh 2000) Instead of being viewed as literary texts and assessed by literary standards, the literature produced by non- Western writers is viewed as “windows to the inside”, granting a glimpse into the oppression of Third World women. The “authentic insider” notion, ascribed to the Muslim (or any Third World) writer becomes problematic when the author and the text are collapsed and are made to stand for an entire nation or culture (Majaj 2000).

Even a superficial look at the shelves of the bookstores will assert that writing about Islam and Muslim women has become a hot commodity. Muslim women find themselves represented in literature within the Victim-Escapee narrative promoted by neo-Orientalists whom Mohja Kahf calls *The Pity Committee* (Kahf 2011). Kahf makes a list of key elements of the Victim-Escapee stereotype and a few strategies for a careful reading. Usually the Muslim woman in contemporary fiction is portrayed as a mute marionette or an exceptional escapee with a meek mother and a forbidding father, living in a cruel country under the dictates of a rotten religion which orders her to wear the vile veil. Specifically, some Muslim women writers such as Irshad Manji, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi, endorsed with the ‘native informant’ power and with the approval from the rhetoric of Western modernity, democracy and “the American way of life”, have contributed in the solidification of the stereotype. These writers stand for “good Muslims” and are publicly speaking about the gender oppression in Islam, the freedoms in the West and the anti-Semitism of the Arabs/Muslims (Maira 2009). Seen as pro-Western allies, these writers receive extensive state and university support. Drawing on Orientalist imageries, these writers construct a different Muslim woman, not the alien, silent, Eastern, woman of colonial times but a woman who is just like us, who dreams of freedom and modernity and who would happily emulate her Western counterpart, if only she could escape the oppressive culture (Ahmad 2009).

What is then a genuine reader to do in his/her quest to know what the lives of Muslim women look like? How to sift through the layers of misleading representations? While Kahf enumerates strategies for a careful reading to dispel these misrepresentations such as finding loopholes and inconsistencies in the text, new works of fiction that present alternatives to these representations are needed. While it is hard for translated works to offer these alternatives because of the aforementioned “horizon of expectations” which guards the gates of entrance of the foreign novels into the Anglophone world and regulates the ways translations are manipulated, the novels or stories written in English can be a way out of this monopoly, provided that proliferating independent publishing houses and internet will give them a chance.

1.2 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In her introduction to *Feminist Literary Criticism*, Mary Eagleton warns that, despite the ambiguous relationship between feminism and theory, an un-theorized politics of personal experience may never get beyond subjectivism. She quotes Spivak who notes that: “Unless one is aware that one cannot avoid taking a stand, unwitting stands get taken” as quoted in (Eagleton 1991).

When it comes to gender injustices suffered by Muslim women across the globe, one may discern, across a wide spectrum, three main approaches to the purported origins of these injustices. First, there is the secular/ liberal, western approach that sees Islam as the culprit of the oppression of Muslim women. Scholars and analysts in this camp usually conflate religion and culture and tend to perceive Islam as a monolithic and totalitarian religion erasing its variations through time and space. Contenders in this group claim that Islamic feminism is nonexistent, an oxymoron at best, because Islam would not allow the production of any sort of feminism (Badran 2009). Accordingly, the only solution to end women’s oppression lies within the frame of the secular democratic state and the relegation of Islam- if not its eradication- into the private sphere, as the Kemalist status quo in Turkey has maintained for years (Naim 2010).

On the other far extreme side of the spectrum, one finds the consolidated idea that Islam elevated women to the highest possible status and the firm belief that Muslim women today are much better off than their non-Muslim counterparts. This approach also presents Islam as a unified body of beliefs and practices erasing different interpretations and applications of the religion throughout Islamic history. Advocates of this rhetoric, usually male clerics or state officials in Muslim countries, maintain that Islamic feminism is an anathema, imported from the West that is not only alien to Islam but it also constitutes an assault on the religion that must be resisted. They also argue that the one and only solution to whatever problems Muslim societies face today can be achieved by a fundamental return to religion and a stricter adherence to Islamic regulations. Wherever it is applied, such a return to the fundamentals of religion is observed to make greater demands on women as preservers of tradition, asking them to return to their homes in the service of the family as the nuclear unit of the society.

In between these two contending claims, one can discern an emerging scholarship in the last decade that seeks to understand and interrogate the complexities of the Muslim women's lived experiences attending to contributing factors such as socio-economic background, political/state policies, cultural norms, ethnic affiliations, or/and religious interpretations. Scholars in this approach recognize Islam, in its many different forms of interpretations and applications, as an important factor that affects women and the society at large. Being aware of the danger of orientalist gaze, scholars are careful not to capitalize on or universalize difference. They also acknowledge that any change in the Muslim societies should come from within and they recognize a potential in Islam for women's liberation and gender justice. Most of the scholars in this approach confess the Islamic faith, despite the fact that some of them have reservations toward being labeled "Islamic feminists".

I am aware that I have depicted the three main approaches to gender injustice against Muslim women in broad strokes. Indeed many nuances exist in each of them but I am not going to elaborate on them for reasons of brevity. Suffice it to say that there cross fertilizations among camps.

The Islamic feminist approach is going to be the framework of my creative project because I personally think that Islamic feminism is one viable path toward gender justice in the face of today's globalizing, modern world. Islam is undeniably a defining element that saturates the broader culture (Badran 2009) in the Muslim world, especially in the light of the rise of political Islam and grassroots Islamist revival movements. Thus the first approach has proven to be counter-productive. On the other hand a literal return to the first centuries of Islam, such as fundamentalists like the Taliban demand, remains more a utopia than a possibility, ruling out the feasibility of the second approach. The third type of approach, Islamic feminism/s holds a particular advantage compared to secular feminism because, speaking within an Islamic framework, Islamic feminism speaks to society at large, both men and women (Badran 2009). Also, Islamic feminists promote through an ijthadic project (an intellectual endeavor) gender equality or gender justice along a fluid private-public continuum, advocating for an egalitarian mode of both family and society (Ibid, p.4).

Muslim progressive scholars have proposed different steps of action in solving gender injustices among Muslims. Some of them, like Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have looked into possibilities of re-reading or reinterpreting the major texts in Islam, namely the Quran and the prophetic traditions. Both, (Barlas 2002) and (Wadud 1999) have shown in their respective exegesis that the Quran does not differentiate between men and women in terms of moral agency and humanity. Similarly, many Sufi masters have argued throughout Islamic history that both women and men have equal spiritual competency to attain moral perfection (Shaikh 2012). Quranic exegesis by women scholars composes the backbone of the Islamic feminist discourse.

Other scholars, such as Kecia Ali, have proposed a re-visitation of the Shariah, the Islamic Law and its underlying assumptions about human relations between men and women, especially in the private sphere. Scholars disagree on how this reformulation of the law should take place. Some of them suggest that new ijthad (analytical reasoning) should be engaged to produce new regulations that re-

spond to the needs of the modernized, urbanized realities of Muslim populations in today's globalized world and to reflect the understanding of today's Muslims about gender, equality, human rights, etc. Others insist on a more radical move claiming that even *usul ul-fikh* (the methodology of Islamic jurisprudence) should be reconsidered because it holds outdated assumptions that do not reflect the thematic ideals of the Quran but are a product of the understanding of medieval times (Ali 2006).

One of the characters in my fiction is going to be a female scholar that struggles with issues of religious interpretation and legitimacy. She is the spiritual leader of the group and she teaches the women in her circle to authenticate their opinions and beliefs through verification upon original sources of Islam. Since I imagine most of my characters to be participants in a faith-based movement in Turkey, I know they face the risk to be considered as Islamist, so a little reflection on the term is deemed necessary.

Highly polarized, poorly defined and ill construed, the term Islamist is flung around to raise suspicion and animosity in the West. While disentangling the matrix of the discourse around the term is beyond the scope and the capacity of this proposal, here I focus on describing my take on it, the way it will appear in the novel. Margot Badran, in her book (Badran 2009), argues that Islamic feminists articulate an egalitarian mode of Islam while Islamist women promote political Islam and its patriarchal interpretations of religion. I have some reservations about her definition of the Islamist women. They may be promoting political Islam, which in itself has many different manifestations, but I don't think they necessarily advocate for wholesale acceptance of patriarchal interpretations of Islam. As Nilufer Gole illustrates in her study of the headscarf movement, the Islamist participants already subverted traditional gender norms by participating in the movement (public sphere), aspiring to higher education and professional lives outside their homes (Gole 1996).

I prefer to use in my work the category of Muslim activists to denote Muslim women who don't have an explicit political agenda but who participate in the public sphere, and are dedicated to commu-

nity service individually or as members of a civic, grassroots movement within mosques and/or outside them. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2005) is an ethnographic study of such a movement of Muslim women within the mosques in Egypt. Unlike the respondents in this study, the female characters in my novella will be involved not only in reading circles (sohbets in Turkish) for their own Islamic education and fortification but also they will engage in community services directed toward the education of young females in need. During their gatherings, these women will discuss matters of importance to them such as family, reproduction, politics, and the world order. These reading circles, unlike the secular public space, provide a counter public space where being a devout Muslim is promoted and thus the construction of a religious consciousness is created along with a sense of social responsibility (Ebaugh 2010). Through a plethora of characters, I aim to attend to the nuances of class, ethnic and education status in these women's lives.

I am aware that my interest in writing short fiction about the everyday lives of Muslims lies in the desire to correct misunderstandings and misconceptions about Muslim woman. After all, literature is an important venue for appropriating, subverting or challenging dominant modes of representation and colonial ideologies (Loomba 1998 as quoted in (Weedon 2007)).

I will also engage with postcolonial theory mainly in the interaction between the secularist Turkish women and conservative Muslim women. Their opinions about each other are locked in a mode of temporality where the secularist woman represents the modern while the conservative woman is imagined to be stuck in Middle Ages. Also, the presence of an American ethnographer will enhance the "us" vs. "them" juxtaposition of ideas, granting a platform where thoughts on Western cultural hegemony can be discussed.

I imagine the women in my novella as participants of a real-life, faith-based civic movement, known in the Western academia as the Gulen Movement (Ebaugh 2010). Rooted in moderate Islam and formed around a charismatic figure, Fethullah Gulen, who is a renowned Muslim scholar, this movement

has mobilized different sections of Turkish societies bridging gaps of ideological differences. Women who are active participants in this movement embrace several ideals such as the duty of humanitarian relief, the need for a combined education fused both with teachings of science and ethics, mobilization around human values etc. Meanwhile they also have to contend with the demands of tradition that expect women to be in the service of their husbands only. In Turkey this movement is referred to as Hizmet, a Turkish word meaning service but which stands for an empty signifier appealing to people from different walks of life in Turkey. I will not mention the real name of the movement because I don't want my novella to be read in the framework of historical fiction due to my inability to present the movement in its historical chronology with factual accuracy. Attempts to remedy my insufficiency will not only exhaust my efforts in researching a few decades of the movements but also may shift the focus from the women protagonists to the leader of the movement. Instead I will represent the women in my novella as part of a wider revival of Islamic activism with very little reference to the founder.

Among the themes of marriage, education, work, family and veiling, I imagine that other elements of the public space such as the state and the university as a locus of Kemalist ideology will also be present in my fiction. Particularly I will pay close attention toward state-sponsored reforms and regulations, not only because they account for important changes in the lives of Turkish women, but also because, when it comes to Muslim women, repressive state policies are overlooked in Western feminist analyses and the focus is placed mainly on tradition and patriarchy (Ahmad 2009).

2 DOCUMENTED ESSAY

Writing in English about Muslim women living in Turkey presents its own sets of challenges. One of them is the risk of appropriating the cultural elements of the work to make it culturally intelligible for the Western readers while at the same time losing some of its authenticity. The feminist theoretical framework of my work also demands that I modify the content and the form of my work to foreground themes and characters that elucidate better women's issues. The narrative is written in episodic format and told from two points of view, first person and third person subjective.

A plethora of female characters and themes are introduced and depicted to portray the multitude of situated and diversified lived experiences of Turkish Muslim women. This textual analysis of the novella follows the themes and the main characters in it to point out how this work contributes to problematizing the trope of the pitiful Muslim woman in need of saving, prevalent in contemporary literature.

Among the themes of marriage, education, work, family and the headscarf, elements of the public space such as the university as a locus of Kemalist ideology and state patriarchy had to be present in the novella because, as Kandiyoti (Kandiyoti 1987) contends, the fate of Turkish women has been closely connected with State policies.

2.1 Islam as the Female Characters See It

In the popular stereotypical representations Islam is described as a patriarchal, primitive religion of the past with oppressive sanctions on women and which is thus detrimental to their well-being. The trope of the *rotten religion* is a persistent element among the stereotypes about Muslim women, as Kahf points out in her essay "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader: How not to Buy Stereotypes about Muslim Women".

For Zeynep and her friends, the main characters in the novella, Islam is the organizing principle of their lives. They were born in a predominantly Muslim society, and they practice Islam but not just the passed-down traditional form of it. In the reading circles (*sohbets*), the women, under the leadership of Zeynep, try to authenticate their understanding of Islam by engaging in discussion and formulation of ideas and opinions on what constitutes the “true” Islam. In these circles, they discuss within an Islamic framework issues that are relevant to their lives such as birth control (as in Hilal’s question related to “tube-tying”) and domestic violence (Nazife’s case). Through the exercise of analytical reasoning, they not only find in the sacred texts (the Quran and the hadith, the Prophetic tradition) satisfactory solutions to their dilemmas but also they provide different readings of the texts that undermine previous patriarchal readings. This engagement with exegesis and hermeneutics in a secluded space, far from the intimidating presence of men is an empowering and an act of agency for them. In that space they find their own voices to validate their way of thinking.

The religion of Islam also motivates and regulates these women’s activism (i.e. community service-*Hizmet*). Gaining the pleasure of Allah is for them the impetus behind their unpaid volunteer work. Through *hizmet*, Zeynep and her friends try to implement the ethos of the Quran, which they see understand to be justice and egalitarianism. Poverty and lack of education (both secular and religious) are among the problems tackled. *Hizmet*, as a grand narrative, connects these women with other women, thus forging alliances and support networks. It also provides a space for cooperation with men without transgressing the limits of proper exchange. In *kermes*, an event organized by women, men volunteered to do menial jobs such as carrying the supplies, while in the building of the school in Sudan, a primarily male endeavor, women contributed by providing funds.

As compared to other house wives (Nadire, for example) who engage solely in housework and familial duties, the women involved in *hizmet*, find other ways to render their talents beneficial to the wider community. Gulcan uses her communication skills to gain more subscription for *Ailem* magazine.

Hulya utilizes her knowledge of science for tutoring, and Nazife makes use of her cooking skills for the benefit of raising funds. This utilitarianism not only gives them a sense of worth and purpose through their daily lives but also attaches a value (though not monetary) to their quotidian efforts. Because they see existence as comprised by this world and the one after death, these women do not focus only on the material gains of their activism. This public piety, that is the ethical practices that constitute the ethical Subject according to Foucault, is a parameter that, though ignored by materialist feminist thought plays an important role in these women's agency (Mahmood 2005).

Islam, as these women see it, if it is understood and lived "right", is a way of life that guarantees the prosperity of humanity (men and women) in this world and promises bliss and eternal happiness in the next. Within this worldview, everything that happens, good or bad, is a test for human beings and is transient in time. The duty of every human is to pass these tests and strive to climb the ladder of spiritual perfection by developing one's given faculties. So Islam for these women is not some religion that represses them and against which they rebel against but a guidance to navigate the world away from harm and perish. Some Orientalist chroniclers have written that the wretched state of the Eastern women is pervasive to the point that these women become unaware of it and the only way to recognize it, is to come in touch with the enlightened state of their Western counterparts (Naghibi 2007). The entrance of the researcher into the scene in the opening lines of the novella represents that meeting point which does bring forth a change in the group but not the kind suggested by Orientalist writers. Zeynep and her friends do not feel that Jen is in anyway better off than them and they do not try to emulate her. They are curious about her, sometimes shy around her, but not envious of her. In fact at times they pity her (as in case of Rana) for not having what they see as a healthy family.

These women are aware that the state they live in is imperfect. Hence, their activism is directed toward improvement. However they don't see the solutions in Westernization but in the stealth of wisdom and energy found in their own religious and cultural heritage. They feel that their own resources,

Islam being the major one, are more than sufficient to solve their predicaments and not only theirs but also other people's in the world.

In short, Islam, far from being a rotten religion or a yoke that they try to break, represents for these women a source of power and salvation, both in the material and spiritual senses.

2.2 Headscarf vs. Veil

The veil has attracted fascination to the point of becoming a fetish in Western academic discourses. Meyda Yegenoglu contends that the veil of the Eastern woman in Orientalist discourse was the barrier that prevented the Western Gaze to penetrate the Eastern Other (Yegenoglu 1998). And because this Other was crucial in understanding one self, the veil stood between the West and itself. In a psychoanalytical analysis Yegenoglu attempts to deconstruct the significance of the veil and the fascination of the West with it. The veil itself etymologically suggests the idea of obscuring, hiding from sight.

In the novella I preferred to use the term headscarf instead of veil for several reasons. First, the veil in many cases implies the covering of the face as well. None of the protagonists wears a face veil. Second, the headscarf itself in Turkish women's wear is a modern urban invention that replaced *carsaf*, a two piece black clothing that concealed a part of the face as well. Usually worn with an outer coat, the headscarf allows for more social mobility and visibility. It is no surprise that in its beginning it was mostly worn in urban areas. As Nilufer Gole illustrates in her study of the headscarf movement, the Islamist participants already subverted traditional gender norms by participating in the movement (thereby entering the public sphere) and aspiring to higher education and professional lives outside their homes (Gole 1996).

The headscarf in Turkish context is a polysemic symbol. For secular elite, the headscarf is a symbol of political Islam and as such should be banned in public institutions of the Republic. For conservative Muslim women, the headscarf was a sign of modesty and piety. When it is viewed as an expression of modesty, the headscarf shields the private parts of a woman from the gaze of men. It provides for

women a mobile privacy allowing for more comfort in public space. But the headscarf is also worn by women in private too. When they are praying, even if they are praying behind locked doors, away from the male gaze, women have to cover as decorum for prayer. In that case, the headscarf represents a symbol of piety, a compliance with the requirements of prayer.

The headscarf is also associated with other benefits that might not always be intentional. For example the headscarf provides a certain degree of respectability to the wearer in areas where wearing it is deemed a virtue. The quality of the headscarf or the brand of it can denote the wealth status of the wearer as is the case of Leyla Hanim, whose scarf (as Rana notes) costs more than anything the other women were wearing.

Also the headscarf denotes the female body in case of the deceased when it is placed on the coffin so the congregation will know for whom to pray. Since Arabic is a gendered language, it is a linguistic necessity to know the gender of the person for whom you pray.

The headscarf is a complex matter, one that cannot be written off in simplistic notes. Hulya's friend, Ayse', who is forced to bare her head to continue her education, is an example of the trauma that the imposed removal of the headscarf causes on women that attach a value to it.

2.3 Domestic vs. Public

Unlike participants in Mahmood's study of women's mosques movement in Egypt, the protagonists of my work meet at each other's houses instead of mosques. Although at first glance this preference of the home as the locus of their activism may seem to stem from the comfort of seclusion it provides, the main reason rests in the repressive nature of Turkish State which does not allow for any social reform that is not officially orchestrated by state itself (Kandiyoti 1987). It is for this reason that the men in this movement, who may not favor seclusion as much as women, do also meet for sohbet at each other's homes. Kandiyoti argues that this heavy surveillance by the Turkish state on social organizing

has played a role in the absence of a women's movement in Turkey (Kandiyoti 1987). All reforms on women were implemented by the State in top-down emancipating moves. This caused the conservative Muslim population, who resisted the reforms as westernizing efforts, to shy away from the State and its apparatus for many decades in the beginning years of the Turkish Republic.

Even though the agenda of this movement, as seen by the operation of the sohbet, is apolitical and non-confrontational, given its religious format and its rhetoric of change, it can draw suspicion and unnecessary State opposition. Although the women know that what they are doing for the community is not harmful or prohibited by law, they show precaution. Little protection is extended to citizens by the precarious democracy and rule of law in a country that has suffered several coups. So the homes of the participants provide a safe heaven and allow for an underground platform, free from the state's gaze.

2.4 Empowerment and Agency

The involvement of women in movements led by men and especially movements with an Islamic agenda is met with mixed reactions by radical feminists because the women involved are seen as suspect pawns of patriarchy.

The fact that women teach one another in matters of religion is in itself a step toward empowerment and agency given the historically male-centered nature of Islamic pedagogy (as illustrated in Zeynep's formative years).

Mahmood criticizes the notion that agency is necessarily a mode of resisting or subverting existing norms because it obscures the ways women can act as agents in patriarchal structures. The approach that sees agency as subverting or resisting norms is based on the presumption that the desire for freedom is an innate disposition and not some mode of being mediated by cultural and historical conditions (Mahmood 2005). Mahmood questions the assumption that all women seek freedom from male power (Ibid p.10). The question remaining is how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics? If the ability

to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts and processes that enable specific modes of being. “My reason for urging this move,” Mahmood explains “has to do with my interest in understanding how different modalities of moral-ethical action contribute to the construction of particular kinds of subjects, subjects whose political autonomy cannot be grasped without applying critical scrutiny to the precise form their embodied actions take” (24).

Instead of limiting agency to those acts that disrupt existing power relations, Foucault’s work encourages us to think of agency: (a) “in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed” (29). When viewed in this way, living according to one’s ethical tradition allows for agency and for subject formation (32-33). Agency emerges within a system where people chart their own path, even when options are limited. Political agency and ethical agency are inseparable (35). All the women in the *hizmet* movement exercise an ethical agency when they decide to volunteer within it and follow the ethical practices that it involves (i.e. attending sohbet, reading certain sources, donating money, etc.)

2.5 To Save or to Be Saved

In her essay “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? An Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others” Abou Lughod points out how the rhetoric of “saving” the other, based on the notion of one’s superiority, it entails enacting violence and brutal intervention on other people (Abu-Lughod 2002). In this paradigm not only a neat cultural icon i.e. “the MUSLIM Woman” is plastered but she also is in dire need of being saved. In my work, the paradigm of the damsel in distress is subverted. The protagonists not only don’t regard themselves as needing to be saved by anyone (Western or Eastern) but they see in themselves a power to improve the lives of others both inside Turkey and outside of it. While they don’t conceptualize their work as saving, they realize the importance of provid-

ing to youth an opportunity for education as a way out of poverty. They see themselves as “guardians of love with no time for hostility” and as “maidens of Allah in service of His creation”.

When they face problems in their lives, the women in Hizmet utilize their own material or spiritual resources to remedy these problems and do not expect anything from the West. There is a level of distrust related to what comes from the West as shown by their measured exchanges with Jen. This distrust has to do with geopolitical and historical contingencies and is reinforced by the belief that the West behaves double-standarily toward them, as in the case of EU Human Rights Court upholding the headscarf ban.

2.6 Legitimization of Change

Many Islamic women scholars, whether they embrace feminism or not, have argued that because Islam informs and regulates Muslim women’s lived experiences, any change in cultural norms or practices can be only be made successful if it is legitimized and conceptualized by the sources and methodology of the Islamic religion. Exterior interventions or imposition of imported ideas are sure to backfire. The case of Hulya proves the point. When she is advised by Jen to work as a babysitter while studying and living alone in the U.S., her approach is viewed and rejected as alien by Huyla’s family and the very proposition is cause for familial discord. When Zeynep proposes a similar venue (i.e. studying in U.S) on the condition that she marries someone living there and who can support her, the family accepts the idea because it comes from someone that they look up to as a qualified religious leader, but also it also makes sense within the system of values the family upholds.

Another example is Nazife’s case. The topic of mistreatment toward the disobedient wife is cause for much deliberation in contemporary Islamic feminist discourse because some patriarchal readings of earlier centuries have conceptualized the wife’s disobedience as a misdemeanor worthy of punishment. At that time, this was not only a feature of Islam but of Christianity and Judaism as well.

When one of the women in the reading circle suggests that Nazife was wrong in disobeying her husband, she points to a prophetic tradition which she interprets in defense of punishment. Zeynep rejects that interpretation on the basis of religious authority and provides an alternative reading that does not give the man the right to demand obedience on his every whim. Subordination is owed to the Divine and it is not meant to be directed explicitly to men.

Another case of a major change happens when Zeynep decides not to follow the Brothers' deliberation regarding Jen's stay at the student's house. Obedience to the Brothers should not be seen only as a matter of gender relations because the Brothers' decisions are obeyed by all, men and women. Zeynep opts to differ in opinion with the Brothers because she sees herself in a better position to decide, given her proximity to both Jen and the student house.

2.7 Postcolonial and Modern Temporality

Although Turkey, like Iran and China, was never colonized, it is sometimes considered semi-postcolonial because it has had to deal with capitalist modernity that takes colonial forms in particular places and times (Aijaz 2009). The discourse of modernity is very often invoked when the question of the headscarf is raised in Turkish media. The headscarf itself is relegated to the seventh century Arabia and the women who choose to wear it are seen as living in medieval ages because the headscarf as the antithesis of modernity cannot be reconciled with the twentieth century. This conceptualization leads into a schism of population into two camps living in two different time frames: Those who live in the past and those who live in the present. This surrealistic temporality is illustrated in the mock gesture of Hulya when she stands in front of the mirror and she voices the view on the incompatibility of headscarf with modernity. She removes the headscarf in front of the mirror and says to her image: "Now you are a liberated woman!" and later she covers her head and says again to her image "Now, you are not. It's funny how I can transverse centuries with a simple move of my hand." Of course, she is mocking the idea that her decision to wear a headscarf makes her a nomad living in Mecca.

The women in *Hizmet* deny living in the past. Although like most Muslims they look at the period the prophet lived on earth as a special time and revisit it to gain guidance, their eyes are set on the future. They value modern education (hence the focus on science and math) and are engaged in promoting it (as in the project of opening schools in underdeveloped countries). As shown in the epilogue they do not hesitate to make use of the technology (websites, blogs, computers etc.) for the promotion of their cause.

After this overview of the main themes, I turn next to the analysis of the main characters. They all play a role in subverting and/or problematizing stereotypical representation of Muslim women in literature.

2.8 A Closer Look at the Main Characters of the Novella

I am aware of the fact that introducing a plethora of characters for a novella runs the risk of stretching the narrative thin but my aim was to display diversified profiles of Muslim women. The male characters that are given prominence are foregrounded to the degree they serve this purpose.

The figure of the father (Mehmet Efendi): Since one of the major elements of the pitiful Muslim woman narrative is a cruel, oppressive father, the figure of Mehmet Efendi as an antidote to it, remains central to the novella. He is not only a caring father but also a teacher who goes against the norms of his time to give Zeynep access to the wealth of knowledge available. Despite the fact that women were excluded from reading circles in his time, he finds a medium to include her without uprooting the conventional setting. Because Zeynep's fulfillment is of great importance to Mehmet Efendi, he interferes to solve Zeynep's difficult predicament with her mother in law. He also serves as a trope for the repressed religious scholars who suffered imprisonment or exile during the first decades of the Turkish republic. It is argued that Islamic scholars come out of prison radicalized from their experiences in prison with a desire to overthrow the unjust system that imprisoned them. Mehmet Efendi underwent a life-changing experience in prison where he got interested in doing something to change the order of things in his

country, not by overthrowing the system but by getting involved in community service dedicated to education, which in turn would bring about the desired change gradually. He initiated Zeynep into hizmet, who in turn helped other women to get involved. Another figure of a father is Yusuf who is absent from his daughter's life due to his busy schedule. Would Mehmet Efendi have been this absent had he been involved in hizmet during Zeynep's formative years? Who knows, maybe yes. It is not uncommon in hizmet circles for men to be outside the house more than people who are not involved in it because other than working to earn money, and they use the rest of their time for volunteer work. There even exists an expression to denote the state of dedicated engagement and it goes: To be so involved in hizmet that you forget which way home is.

Rana loves her father but she misses him and resents the fact that he doesn't help with house chores like her brother does. Hulya's father also appears, albeit shortly, when the question of her studying abroad arises. He represents the traditional, overprotective father who resorts to force when he can't convince his daughter through reasoning.

Zeynep hoca: Needless to say, Zeynep hoca is the main character around whom the novella revolves. She embodies in herself important traits such as leadership and scholarship. She also is a mother of three other women/girl characters who show to the reader the different locations that women occupy in this movement. Zeynep is the only character that is developed from childhood till her middle age when the encounter with the researcher happens. She is self-contained and aware of the crucial position she stands in. She has to be an element of balance in her otherwise very diverse reading group. When taking decisions, she must attend to the sensitivities of her friends so that she preserves the cohesion of the group. She has to work the hardest to lead by example. For her, leadership is more about serving than living with privilege. Her speeches are her capital in credibility, so she must be truthful in her words and must inspire respect in her conduct if people are to listen to what she says. For this rea-

son she is meticulous when dealing with funds and money (as was the case when she refused to eat the food that was provided with parent donations).

Yasin: Yasin is the only son of the family. He is involved in the movement but that doesn't deter him from helping with house chores, even though Rana she can take over for him. When Zeynep forbids Yasin to see Jen on his own, that goes to show the reader that cultural/religious conventions make demands on men too.

Meryem: Is one of the more complex of the characters not because she is living in the West but because she also witnesses changes with Turkish community in America. In Islamic Jurisprudence there is an interesting principle of necessity (dharurat) that allows for concessions when the need arises. According to this principle, in case of dire needs, the forbidden can turn into permissible. For example, if someone is dying of starvation, that person is allowed to eat pork which is prohibited in normal times, provided that he/she cannot find anything else to survive. The amount of pork allowed should be only as much as needed for survival and the person should not indulge in eating something prohibited. Following this principle, the community sees it necessary to bend some regulations when it comes together with the wider community because it is impossible to come together on other terms. But it retains the regulations and conventions when functioning within. Meryem questions the validity of this logic and the duality it produces realizing that it is forcing her to live a dual life too. In public she is Meryem, a Ph.D student who speaks from a pulpit whereas in her community she is a sexual being, a woman who needs to hide behind a curtain.

Zehra: is the most dedicated to hizmet. She married Ahmet with the idea of doing hizmet abroad. She works as a math teacher with the same motives, even though she resents the facts that she has to stay away from her baby daughter. At times she feels torn between her duty as a mother and her dedication to her students. Both her husband and she are the prototypical, full-time participants of this movement: the committed, self-negating, and idealist teacher in service of humanity everywhere.

Leyla Hanım: denotes the class difference in the reading circle. Her family is old money and her protected life reflects that status and the proper conduct associated with it. (She couldn't go to the local grocer as a child). Getting involved with the movement has urged Leyla to change the norms a bit but hasn't erased her class status altogether (She wasn't doing menial work in Kermes but rather was to accompany important people). She is the one who donates the most money and that secures her an important place in the group, a delicate balance that even Zeynep observes and she is not very happy with it. Leyla doesn't have a formal higher education but she has been abroad and she feels she knows a lot more than the rest of the group. She has internalized a sense of inferiority due to the Western progress narrative but tries to conceal it because it would not look good on her.

Hulya : Her name means "dream, aspiration". She is the dreamer whose dreams are cut short. She is left to decide between her religion and her education. Since the religion was the propelling force behind her education, it doesn't make sense to her to prefer the latter over the former. Also Hulya rejects the idea of becoming second class citizen in her country when her grandfather died fighting occupation. In the end she finds a medium to fulfill her desire to serve without giving concessions on religion.

Rana (The zone of contact): Because she is coming of age, Rana is still trying to understand the world around her. With Jen's presence, this knowing gets a bit complicated. While she is genuinely interested in understanding Jen, she can't help but measure her up with cultural conventions. Her genuine interest in Jen and the lack of distrust between the two of them, creates the space for friendship which later is transferred into the group as well where the others also let down some of their guards, Zeynep hoca included.

Jen, the ethnographer: Jen is not given much audience in the novella and that was intentional on my part. She is there to serve a purpose, to create a need to tell the story from the participants' perspective. Her presence in the group does changes the dynamic of the group. Women are shy to ask question in her presence. They are intimidated by her interviews and distracted by simultaneous trans-

lation. Jen is not just an American, she is also a researcher, a figure of some kind of power, the women can't quite name. In the beginning they don't know what to do with her. I didn't give prominence to her thoughts and perspective because I didn't want to give preference to the Western gaze on these women. Their work existed before she came and would continue long before she was gone. Neither her presence, nor her research was crucial to these women. The fact that her research was cut short didn't mean much to these women because they were not looking for recognition or to be understood nor were they expecting any kind of help from America. Hers was a presence that they merely tolerated. But for me, her presence, albeit not central to the storyline, was an important element that provided an angle for viewing the group. Even members of the group when they allowed themselves to be concerned about what she thought, attempted to look at themselves from Jen's corner. The little glimpse that Zeynep hoca gets from Jen's notebook also is given in hints for the same reason. The story is neither about the researcher, nor about what she thinks but about these women who strive to be active in a public space that rejects them.

2.9 Conclusion

As Reina Lewis argues, Orientalism even in colonial time wasn't unidirectional and univocal. There were writers from the East that were already countering Orientalist representations (Lewis 2004). Likewise, I believe that despite the hegemonic representation of the pitiful Muslim woman in literature, there are works of fiction that counter that simplistic negative image. These interventions might not be successful in changing perceptions as they are in small numbers but if they proliferate, their effects will be more evident. I see my work as a contribution, albeit a modest one, to this corpus that articulates the complexities of Muslim women's lives.

3 CREATIVE PROJECT - A NOVELLA

3.1 Prologue

Like all good stories, ours begins with a divine intervention or so we like to think of it. To a clear eye perfected with spiritual exactitude, the falling of a leaf is as much an execution of the divine will as the setting of the sun. Both should inspire awe as does an earthquake. Yet, most human beings are hindered by veils of flesh and desire, and thus, only the extraordinary registers in our brains.

It is possible to trace the genesis of *Hizmet*, which literally means service, back forty years ago to a preacher who, often accompanied by his tears, preached like no other in Izmir, a modern city in western Turkey. His voice was a wake-up call for many. Ever since, this call has moved the hearts of millions of people in Turkey and around the World, men and women alike. The noble call to serve our people, to rise from our slumber of historical amnesia, and take our place in history still echoes fresh and strong, resonating with our deepest dreams. Every day scores of ordinary people take heed of it and join the caravan of the blessed. This is a colorful caravan with professionals, merchants, politicians, academicians, students, housewives, youth and people of modest means in its ranks. We, Muslim women, joined our men in this noble cause. Some of us are teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals; some of us are housewives, mothers, and companions.

Given the fact that our country has survived ten coup d'état's since the founding of the Republic in 1923, it is hard to call our homeland free and democratic. It has been in everyone's interest to keep a low profile, abide by the laws no matter how unjust they are, and shy away from confrontation with the State. We don't advertise our services, *hizmet*, and we are not after fame or the spotlight.

For this reason, the coming of an American ethnographer in our midst took us by surprise. She had specifically come to research our group of eight women. While most of us looked at this as an amazing Godsend, one or two more skeptical minds were suspicious. How did she hear of us? How did

she find us? Who sponsored her? For what reason? Could she be a spy working for American government?

For most of us, the fact that a researcher had taken interest in Turkish Muslim women was flattering. So, despite the dissenting voices of skeptics, we welcomed her into our midst and laid bare our souls. We hoped that she would venture in, not like a miner who dynamites a mountain to find a piece of gold, but like a diver who descends down in the ocean to be amazed by its wonders.

After the six months the researcher stayed with us, we were left bewildered, disoriented. Did she find what she was looking for in the first place? Had we been all too naive to expect anything good from this encounter?

In Allah we trust, as we have always done. He is ever-watchful over all His servants. Yet, trust is never passive. So we speak up to tell the story, our story. Only the efforts are ours, for the success belongs solely to Our Munificent God.

3.2 The Encounter

Yesterday mom told me that an American researcher will be attending the sohbet, her weekly lectures, to conduct a research. Needless to say my jaw dropped, literally. A thousand questions streamed in my mind escalating the excitement. Mom did her best to answer them, but, truth is, she didn't know much. She cut my furious interrogation with the quintessential Turkish escapee, "*Bakalim: We will see*". This answer is purported to soothe the recipient, but depending on the urgency of the situation, it can be very frustrating. Mom, will you buy me a new pair of shoes tomorrow? *Bakalim*. Can I go to play with Sule after I am done with homework? *Bakalim*. Dad, are you coming to my end of school celebration next Friday? *Bakalim*. This vague response is utilized to avoid confrontation at least for a while. Yet, this time, Mom's genuine tone told me that she was not escaping from my interrogation. "Are you coming with me?" she asked. I nodded heartily. Of course I would, what kind of question was that?

Usually I don't go with mom to these meetings because in the morning I have to be at school. In the summer when school is out, I beg mom to leave me at home. Since I have been to so many sohbet, it seems like I know all the lectures mom can possibly give. But this time is different. I want to go. Lucky for me, my class is on a field trip to the municipality, so it won't be hard to excuse my absence because these trips are not mandatory. The sohbet will be held at Nazife teyze's house, and I am thrilled because I love her place.

I have come to notice that every house has its own scent, its special feel, almost its own soul. And all that, I believe, is shaped by the people who live in it. Take Nazife teyze's home, for example. It may be old and rickety, but it welcomes you so warmly to its bosom that you hardly want to leave. It might be that her delicious cooking takes guests to happy places, making them forget the hours that fly by. Or perhaps, it is her lovely way of addressing you: my rose, my soul, my life. Today's sohbet, the first one the American researcher will observe, will be held in her house. I am sure, she, too, will feel the warmth that envelops you the moment you step in.

The only thing that may spoil the serenity of her house is the presence of her husband. I hope he doesn't come for lunch from his barber shop. I have long suspected that not only he is he a sour -faced man, but also very mean spirited. He is so stingy that when he greets you with *selam*, with peace, he does it between his teeth, reluctantly as if he is wasting money. I have seen Nazmi Amca smile deliberately only to his customers so far. Nazife teyze has never complained of him, but her old shoes, her withered coat bespeak his lack of generosity from the mountain tops. Doesn't he know that the stingy won't enter paradise? He may not know. He doesn't attend men's sohbet.

I have heard that Nazife teyze sells her stitch work to neighbors and acquaintances and saves most of her money for her pilgrimage to Mecca, the very mention of which never fails to fill her eyes with tears. I have also heard that she spends bits of her money at gatherings for Quran recitation where

she throws big meals to feed crowds. I am sure, her husband wouldn't approve of it, had he had to pay for it.

I wonder what Nazife teyze has cooked for us today. I imagine she has outdone herself. Maybe she has enlisted her neighbors to help. After all, how many times do you get to accommodate an American? If I know anything about our people, it is that we go out of our way to please our guests. You'd think we were hosting angels from heaven, literally.

Did I tell you the sohbet was today? As a matter of fact, right at this moment, Mom is ready and is calling for me to hurry up. As I rush downstairs, I am reminded that our house, an old two story house, is special too. It belonged to my grandfather, Mehmet Efendi. I don't remember him. I was two when he passed away, but mom has told me so much about him that at times I miss him terribly. There are no pictures of him hanging around primarily because we don't hang any pictures or images of humans. Mom says that angels don't enter a house if images are displayed around. Naturally we want angels to visit us all the time. But I don't need pictures around to remember him. There are a lot of remnants from my grandfather around. His thick books with Ottoman and Arabic letters on their spine fill the shelves in the living room. His prayer beads and his prayer rug, which has thinned out where feet and forehead touch it, come up in all corners of the house. When mom prays on his rug, I have noticed, she prolongs her prostration and takes a deep breath, as if trying to withdraw any lingering scent from her father. Mom says that Mehmet Dede lived such an austere life that all that he left behind can fit in an average trunk. Except for his books, of course. Those would easily fill two big trunks. No matter how much I am told about him, an aura of mystery surrounds his memory.

Once I discovered a bunch of letters in one of my mom's drawers. They were addressed to My Zeynep and signed by "Your Father." The strangest thing about them was that they were sent from a prison. "Why was Mehmet Dede sent to prison?" I asked mom, with the letters still in my hands. Her face turned ashen, she put the letter back in place and said to me in a sober voice "It is complicated,

Rana, my daughter. You are too little.” Trust me. It wasn't me who was too little to comprehend the situation; rather her pain was too great to put in words.

“You have finally come down,” mom says exasperated. As I put on my shoes, mom picks up the keys from the coat rack in the hall. It's one of Mehmet Dede's books that she is holding in her left hand. Mom turns the key twice. Bismillah, she whispers. In Allah's name we begin everything good. We start eating with His name, open doors and step in with Bismillah, you name it. Does Nazmi Amca open his shop this way too? Ufff, why has Nazmi Amca gotten stuck in my brain today, like the refrain of a hideous song you hear in the bus. Whether you like it or not, it plays inside your head all day. To take it off your mind, you mumble another song, one that you like, with the hope that this one will stick instead. But who should I think of instead? The American? I know next to nothing about her.

The outdoors greets us with bright light, dust, and heat. Mom gestures toward me to come under the shade of a poplar tree (or is it a sycamore?), as we wait at the bus stop. I pray we won't wait long. It's barely ten o'clock but the sun is already heating up the earth like an oven. A layer of sweat forms behind my neck, under my headscarf. I started wearing a headscarf a month ago when I turned twelve. My parents wanted me to wait till I finish middle school. But I couldn't wait. All my best friends in class are wearing one. Am I less a Muslim to fall behind?

I am sure my face has turned red like a beet, because it is hot when I touch it. Mom is sweating too. She is wearing a long dress and a light outer coat over it. She has wrapped her purple scarf on top of it. She must have worn long underpants too, as it is her custom. When I first asked why the long underpants in the summer, she said that a woman mustn't expose her body, even if she accidentally falls or the wind blows up her skirt. Yes, that's my mom, resolute, earnest, and always prepared. If she hears me complain of the stifling heat, she will say: “The sun is doing its duty, Rana sultan. Like a diligent baker, it is baking the fruits and vegetables we will eat. Who loves the rose, should bear with the thorn, have said our ancestors”. I could have not said it better myself. Mom calls me Sultan when she

reproaches, as if, being a sultan, an Ottoman princess, I should know better. On the other hand, Dad calls me Sultan to assure me that there is nothing he won't do for my sake. "I sure will remember to bring your birthday cake, Rana sultan," he will say for example. Dad is rarely home. Sometimes he will be gone for days.

Still no sign of the bus. I wish Yasin abi, my older brother, had driven us to the sohbet. Usually, he takes us places, but today he had to leave early for an appointment at his office. He works so much, drawing sketches over sketches of buildings that will be erected somewhere by construction companies. "They look so ugly on paper" I often tease him. "Says who, little lady?" he teases back, tugging my pony tail. On payday he always buys me something, a fancy pen, a hair pin, a pair of earrings, nothing expensive, but it makes me happy. Since we share a room, on many nights I fall asleep staring at him, as he bends over his table drawing lines with rulers, once in a while stretching his back and neck, letting out a sigh.

Mom wants Yasin abi to get married but he insists on waiting to save some money first. As far as I know, Mom hasn't mentioned to him yet, but she is thinking to arrange for Sema teyze's daughter, Hulya, to marry him. Sema teyze works as a nurse and has been a friend of mom's, for as long as I can remember. Her husband is friends with Dad too. Sema teyze must know of this desire on mom's part, because sometimes they will whisper between themselves when Hulya abla isn't looking. Hulya abla, besides her beauty, has as many skills as she has fingers on her hands. I am sure, other mothers of sons have an eye on her too.

I like Hulya abla as well. She is nice and soft spoken. She plaits the prettiest braids too. But, I am afraid, Yasin abi is not interested in her. I know it because I once tried to interest him in her. One afternoon while lying on my bed, I was relating to Yasin abi the sohbet I had attended at Sema teyze's house that morning. Yasin abi, halfheartedly listening, was perusing a book for a quote or a particular passage, I guess. I was rambling, as usual, about the exquisite food cooked mostly by Hulya abla. That

was a wrong choice, I admit. Yasin abi is as indifferent toward food as a car toward gasoline, emotionally speaking. If you don't call him to the table, he will not remember to eat. His slim body proves the point beyond doubt. So he wasn't paying much attention. I switched next to a new pattern of stitch work. Sema teyze intended to embroider it on a set of sheets for Hulya abla's dowry. I hoped that the word dowry would ring a bell in his mind and maybe the idea of marriage would pop up in his brain amid architectural designs. Alas, Yasin abi must have found what he was looking for in the book because he stopped nodding absent mindedly to me and started underlining here and there on the page. Annoyed that he wasn't showing the least interest, I turned to Hulya abla's hair braiding mastery.

“Yasin abi, do you know? Hulya abla, has this beautiful, wavy, brown hair that comes to her waist. Today she had it braided in two braids that started from the sides and joined in the middle of her...”

Yasin abi raised his hand abruptly to motion at me to stop and looked at me with terror mixed with worry, as if he just remembered he had left his car engine running all day long in front of the house and chances were, someone might have stolen it by now. I would have rejoiced at his attention, hadn't his look scared me.

“Rana,” - he said in a stern voice. “Does this Hulya abla of yours cover her hair when in public?”

“Yes,” - I said timidly

“Why does she do that?”

“So other men don't see her hair.”

“That's right and what you just did a moment ago by describing her hair to me is equal to removing her headscarf in public. Don't you ever do that again, okay? Your Hulya abla, would be very embarrassed if she knew.”

I blushed to the tip of my ears, barely holding back my tears. Yasin abi, seldom reproached me. Of course, I knew that describing her hair's beauty wasn't a proper thing to do, but I thought that since they may marry one day, it was no big deal.

"I am sorry." I muttered.

"Alright, now" He softened "Why don't you go and play with your friend, Sule. I have to prepare for a meeting".

I left the room disheartened. Ah, Yasin abi, you will die as a bachelor, if you bury yourself in your books and sketches, I thought.

Mom tugs my arm and wakes me from my reverie. The bus is finally arriving. We get on the bus and look for available seats. There is one at the far end of the bus. The seat next to it is occupied by a young man who, upon seeing us standing, gets up and leaves his seat to us. Mom thanks him and sits by the window. She places a kerchief over her nose. The pervasive gasoline scent makes her sick, especially in the summer when the dust of the streets worsens her nausea. She looks at the watch on her wrist and takes a deep breath. Mom is punctual to a fault and today being the first day with the American, she seems extra cautious. I don't know how mom manages to be on time in a place where everybody else is late and no one even frets about it.

"Mom, does the American teyze speak Turkish?" I ask her. "Some." she answers without moving her kerchief. "I hope her some is more than my little English," I say. From her eyes, I can tell mom is smiling "Don't worry," she says, removing the kerchief. "The ethnographer will bring a translator with her." I wonder what she looks like. The ethnographer that is, not the translator. Though, I am curious about her too. What does an ethnographer do anyway? Research, mom has told me. How do you research people? Research, I thought, is done on lab rats. Apparently, I am wrong. Though the imagery of rats persists and gives me a shudder.

Come to think of it, I remember that two young girls knocked on our door, one day and told me that they were doing a research on the TV- watching habits of the neighborhood. I said we didn't have TV at home because mom said it was a total waste of time. They gave me a forced smile as if I had offended them. They bade me good day and went ahead to knock on our next door neighbor's door. Sure enough, as soon as the neighbor consented to be interviewed, they bombarded her with questions, some of which they had to repeat or explain because the neighbor apparently hadn't gotten over the first shock and seemed unsure and reluctant to be part of something that she wasn't clear what it entailed. Depending on her answers, one of them was checking off a list on her notepad. The surveys, they told her, were part of a research but to me what they were doing looked like spying on people's lives. When I related the ordeal to Yasin abi, he told me that especially advertisement companies were interested in that kind of information. If, say, a certain soap opera was watched mostly by women then the ads in the cuts would be about products women are interested in. "Like beauty products, furniture, and detergents?" I contributed. Needless to say, cleanliness, viewed akin to godliness, is taken seriously on our parts. Our dusty streets may not show it but homes are a different matter. I wonder who the American is doing the research for.

Five stations down the road, we get off the bus. We need to walk for ten minutes on winding lanes lined with apricot trees. The trees are planted by the municipality to provide relief with their shades. Today their blossoms are mixed with new green leaves. In a month or two, the branches will hang low with fruit. When they turn yellow, passersby or the neighborhood children will devour them. My mouth waters at the very thought of those plump, fragrant apricots. I crave them to despair but at least, as I try to remember their sweet taste, I realize Nazmi Amca has been out of my head for the whole time. Oh no, he is back now. As a remedy, I concentrate on the American researcher as we get closer to Nazife teyze's home. I imagine myself exchanging pleasantries in English with her.

-Hello, my name is Rana. What is your name?

Actually, I know her name is Jen but since all I know to ask in English is limited, why waste one question? And let me say it upfront, her name sounds inauspicious due to its similar pronunciation with *cin*: genie. We are so afraid from *cins* that most women will not say the word *cin* at all. When they want to refer to these scary creatures, they say the three lettered beings, instead.

“How are you?” I will ask next.

“I am fine, thank you.” I will answer when she asks me back.

“How old are you?”

I wonder if it is okay to ask that to an American. Middle aged women here don't like to be asked about their age. To be on the safe side, I cross that out.

“Where are you from?”

That's totally unnecessary, I will skip it.

“What time is it?”

Whoa, where did that come from? I let out a giggle and mom asks. “What is it Rana? Why are you laughing to yourself?” “Nothing.” I say.

We have finally come to Nazife teyze's house. By now my undershirt is soaked in sweat and sticks on my back. Mom pulls the little latch and the gate opens with a squeak. It is begging for a drop of oil to relieve its joints. We enter the courtyard. Three stray cats parade in the garden, meowing. Nazife teyze, not only keeps a sparkling clean house, but she doesn't leave an inch of her garden uncultivated. The fertile earth has reciprocated her efforts and bountiful rows of tomatoes, pepper, and herbs greet the visitor on the right. Bushes of roses intoxicate with their scent on the left. The scent of the rose, Mom once said, reminds her of the Prophet. He was the rose that bloomed in the desert and many companions reported that his skin smelled like rose. We love the smell of roses, the pink ones particularly. We make rose jam, rose water, rose- scented Turkish delight. I don't know how they do it, but recently rose scented prayer beads are sold in the market.

Nazife teyze must have splashed the cement in front of the steps with water to settle the dust which must have risen after her sweeping it. We approach the door, as if in slow motion, and mom rings the bell. As we wait for her to open the door, a small anxiety builds up in my chest. My heart starts beating faster with every second Nazife teyze delays opening her door. I try to think again of the correct questions I will use to chat with the American. They all rush to my brain and in vertigo- arousing speed they spin, mix, and mush together. The palms of my hands begin to sweat. I look at mom, my eyes asking her why Nazife teyze is taking so long to open the door. She smiles at me and promises that everything is fine. Nazife teyze might be busy taking a baking tray from the oven and placing it on the cooling rack. Then she will have to wash her hands with soap, dry them, and check the living room one last time before opening the door to the first comer.

She finally unlocks the door and gestures us in with a soft whisper “The American is already here. So is her translator too”. Mom is impressed. I should feel relieved if I only can shake off the feeling of foreboding that sinks in my stomach the moment we step in. Something horrible will happen today. I sense it. I just don't know if the American will have anything to do with it.

3.3 Heavy Hand of the State

Hulya had been up all night long. In the morning, her excitement, subdued a bit, still lingered in her heart. It was taking her a longer time to get ready for classes today. She rechecked her class schedule for today and perused her book bag to make sure she has all she needed. Her absent-mindedness was obvious in her constant pacing of the room, up and down, like a caged animal, with no single purpose. She stopped in front of the mirror and examined her long dress. The white chiffon of her sleeves felt smooth on her arms. She liked how the fake gemstones on the black stash around her waist accentuated her slender body. Kerim wouldn't be able to see her in this dress, what with the outer coat she would be wearing, but she wanted to feel beautiful in and out. After buttoning her beige outer coat, designed for summer with fabric light like a feather, she opened her drawers to pick her headscarf. In a

moment of indecision she lifted three of them to her face. The brown one was too plain and would make her look simple minded. The crème one with big roses printed on it was too bold for the occasion. She chose to wear the vintage silk mauve headscarf by Vakko with scenes from Istanbul printed on its borders. She laid the scarf on her bed and diagonally folded it in two, the inner fold a bit shorter and holding it firmly she threw it over her head and around her face to pin it under her chin. She picked the two corners and tied them behind her neck, tugging the rest under the collar of her coat. It is not that Kerim was going to see her for the first time. Although he lowered his gaze when speaking to women, he must at least have looked at her long enough to recognize her during the almost six years of medical school. Yet, today he would glance at her in a different way. The very thought of it made her shudder with emotion. A faint doubt passed her mind swiftly. Was she doing the right thing?

Without consulting anyone, Hulya had decided to propose marriage to Kerim, her classmate, the aspiring ophthalmologist of the class of 2007. It wasn't good looks that attracted Hulya, though of good looks Kerim had plenty. His black, thick hair that he combed upward made his fair skinned face look translucent. Two dimples formed when he smiled. His small black eyes, darting with energy were windows to his restless spirit. His broad forehead, where wrinkles gave out his concerns, spoke of a visionary youth. More than all this, Kerim had won Hulya's heart with his devotion to religious practice. He skipped one or two classes weekly to attend his Friday prayers in a mosque not far from campus. She loved to throw furtive glances toward him, when he came back from prayers, his face radiating the light of inner peace one feels after one's duty toward the Creator is accomplished. Hulya regretted that she had not noticed him before. But how could she? The first years of med school had been so hectic that Hulya had barely found time to look at herself in the mirror. It was only during the trip to Kenya last summer that she took notice of people she worked with. Hulya had volunteered to join a group of her professors on a ten- day trip to Africa to operate cataracts for free. What made Kerim stand out of the group was his degree of engagement in his work. The undergraduates, who like Hulya and Kerim had

volunteered to gain experience and a sneak peak in the field of ophthalmology, were supposed to help the patients get ready for the surgery. Hulya was to interrogate them about their current ailments and medical family background, while Kerim, after taking the vitals, would explain through the translator the surgery to patients and their families. Under the make- shift tents it was very hot and many students, not used to African heat would complain. Kerim was focused on the need of Kenyan people instead. He proposed that they use some of the sheets and poles to make a longer shade for the endless line of people waiting to receive an appointment. Kerim was most attentive to children whom he handled with care. In break times, when they rested a bit and ate lunch, everybody but Kerim would talk animatedly about the destitution of the locals. Kerim commented only on how the eyes of Kenyan children shone like jewels or stars in the dark sky of the night after operation and recovery. He loved the majestic green of Nairobi and the pristine beauty of Mombasa beach.

Hulya left Kenya inspired with a vision for her future as a doctor, but also with an inexplicable infatuation with Kerim. During her stay there, she had interacted with him in a professional way and had observed his behavior toward her for clues. Did he like her? Or was she another female student he happened to work with? Kerim was relaxed among his male friends, laughing at jokes, patting shoulders. He was extremely guarded when speaking with women though, be they Kenyan or partners in the medical group.

After the return from Kenya last summer, Hulya had waited a whole semester for Kerim to make his advances or for her infatuation to die down. None had happened. So today, five months short of graduation, after which all the students would proceed toward the residency of choice, Hulya decided to take the initiative to propose. Maybe Kerim had no interest in her and would reject her, but at least she would know it and move on, albeit in a state of heartbreak. Yet, if she didn't do it, she would never know his feelings for her and she would loath to spend the rest of her life looking at the past with a sigh: What if?

Hulya had never heard of a woman proposing to a man. It just wasn't done around here. But so what? What mattered to her was whether her proposal was permissible by Islam and of course it was. The example par excellence was the prophet's wife Hatice. Fifteen years his senior, she had proposed marriage to Muhammed, a youth she had employed in her trade and who had proven himself loyal and reliable. Hulya intended to employ Hatice's strategy. Instead of proposing to Kerim herself, in which case she risked misrepresenting herself as too bold and maybe with suspect morals, Hulya intended to approach Kerim's cousin Ayse whom she had befriended a month ago. She had met Ayse in one of the sohgets college students attended and had immediately warmed up to her lively nature. She was pleasantly talkative and very intuitive. When Hulya had mentioned that she studied medicine at Capa University, Ayse had mentioned her cousin Kerim right away. Upon hearing that, Hulya had tried to hide her sudden delight, but most likely her excitement hadn't escaped Ayse's eyes.

Hulya felt confident that Ayse would not chide her for her intentions and would be more than willing to go in between her and Kerim. If Kerim accepted her proposal-Hulya's heart beat faster at the very consideration of it- he would propose to meet with her in a cafe, or tea garden where they could talk privately while still being in public. Hulya would have to tell her parents about this rendezvous and would go there only after they had made the preliminary investigation about his family and had given their consent. Oh, those would be happy days, Hulya sighed.

She looked at the clock and realized with terror that she was running late. They had agreed on the phone that Ayse would be waiting for her in the cafe across the street from the campus' main entrance. Hulya finished adjusting her scarf, smoothed the front of her coat, threw her book bag on her shoulder and closed the door of her bedroom behind her.

"Mom, I am leaving." She shouted by the door putting on her shoes. Sema, her mother, placed the teapot on the stove and rushed to see her daughter off to school. "But you didn't have breakfast yet." she chided.

"I am not hungry. Besides, I am running late. If I get hungry, I will buy a bite from the cafeteria."

"Don't forget to take the key." Sema reminded her placing a kiss on her velvety cheek. "I will be at sohbet today."

"I have it." Hulya said after she double-checked her pockets. She hugged her mom and teased "Well, are you all excited to meet the American researcher? Treat her nice. You will become famous through her."

"You said you were running late, weren't you?" Sema reminded her. "Shoo shoo, go now. "

"All right, all right. I am off."

Sema looked at her daughter striding on the street, head up high, with resolve and determination. "Mashallah, my daughter will be a doctor one day." Her mother's chest expanded with pride for her fifth child. "Many Praises to my Allah" she muttered as she closed the door.

The traffic was a drag, very typical of Istanbul but today, among all days, Hulya found it irritating. Did all these people really need to hit the road at this hour? She resented all those people who drove around in the rush hour out of habit or for something they could have it done later in the day.

Finally she got off the crowded bus and strode down two blocks to campus, bumping into people along the way, each time excusing herself. She worried she would be all sweaty and out of breath when she finally met with Ayse, but that was better than missing her altogether. "Hurry in beneficial matters," advised the prophetic tradition, and for the moment, Hulya couldn't think of a more beneficial cause. She slowed down when she saw the big iron gates of the campus entrance.

A tremor overtook her when she saw a multitude of students standing in front of the gates with some sort of a commotion picking up. A few young men were shouting at the security guards, who seemed to have doubled in numbers overnight.

"Leave immediately. Don't make us call the police." shouted the oldest of the guards.

Panic rose in Hulya's throat when she saw that all the female students in the crowd were wearing headscarves. Not a bare head among them. Her anxiety peaked when she spotted Ayse among them. Her face had turned red and she was shouting: "Open the gate! You can't take the right of education from us. It is a big injustice."

The old guard spoke up again: "We obey only orders. According to the new regulation, sent this morning from The Institute of Higher Learning, from now on you can't enter the campus wearing a headscarf. It is a breach of the dress code. Please, don't make our job harder than it is. Don't oblige us to ask for law enforcement."

A group of male students who apparently had decided to boycott the classes in support of the women booed him and drowned his voice with their slogans. Hulya felt her knees grow weak. This can't be happening, she murmured. Almost stumbling on the curve of the pavement, she approached Ayse, tugged her arm and asked: "What is happening?"

"We will resist." replied Ayse. "We won't let them throw us from school."

She started chanting her slogan, followed by throngs of women, whose numbers kept growing with new arrivals: "Education is our right! No one can take it from us!"

The men joined them, occasionally starting their own slogans. Hulya looked around for Kerim but didn't see him. Was he sick today and hadn't come to school? Or had he decided to attend his classes, ignoring his Muslim sisters' plights, his cousin's included? A thin layer of ice formed around Hulya's heart upon the second thought.

The crowd grew restless at the sight of two police vans which parked by the road and spilled a dozen of heavily armed police. "Protect the sisters!" shouted one young man with a thick beard from the back of the crowd. Upon his urge, the men closed in around the cluster of women. Hulya got scared as she realized that she was trapped between the protecting men and the security behind closed gates.

To make things worse the police officers were approaching with clubs in their hands, while their chief was shouting last warnings through a bullhorn.

One of the men shouted “Allahu Ekber! Down with the secular regime” and the crowd cheered him. Hulya was horrified at the speed the protest transformed from a peaceful resistance to a roaring demonstration against the secular Turkish State. Her education was at stake. Her dreams, her future were crushing down like a house of cards and she felt powerless, so powerless that she would rather be swallowed up by a quake and buried to the center of the earth.

The men took the blows heroically as the police tried to penetrate their circle. Some of them started bleeding, yet they still kept their place with their brothers. The police dragged some of them to the vans and handcuffed them. When some of the bold women protested and tried to prevent the police from arresting the men, they were handcuffed too. Among the pushing and shoving, shouting and screaming, Hulya felt claustrophobic. Sweat broke out on her face and she felt nausea come up her throat. Someone's heavy boots stepped on her left foot. She banged on the gates and screamed on the top of her lungs at the security. “Open the gates! Open them for Allah's sake! Don't your mothers or sisters wear headscarf too? What did we do to be worthy of this treatment? What is our crime? Aren't we your sisters too?” She broke into sobs when she met their dumbfounded gaze. She fell on her knees and cried over her ill fate.

The police was having a hard time controlling the crowd. Some of the policemen had been wounded by the stones the protesters had thrown at them. The chief police chief shot his gun three times in the air. Women screamed and ran for cover. Hulya noticed Ayse among the women dragged to the van. She wanted to get up but her knees wouldn't hold and she was trembling with fear. Among tears that blurred her vision she noticed that press had come. The cameramen were filming the strife for prime time news. Will they show us as a bunch of angry people intent on wreaking havoc in the country, intent of overthrowing the Republic? Will they make us seem as violent people devoid of any manner of

civility who wanted to take the country back to the dark ages? “All we want is what every citizen should enjoy in a free and democratic country.” She wanted to shout in the cameras. “Equal right to education.” But she had lost faith in the press long ago. The majority of channels loved to show the Muslim population as ignorant, violent, and uncivilized. With civilization, all they understood was a Western lifestyle. Everything else, even ethnically rooted in Turkish was archaic, obsolete, and unnecessary. Talking heads would, as they had done before, explain that the headscarf was an Arab tradition and it had nothing to do with religion. They would say that by this regulation, the Institute of Higher Education was doing women a favor because it was providing for them a venue to overthrow the shackles of patriarchy. Which woman, in her right mind, would choose to be wrapped in layers of cloth, if she wasn't forced by her family? According to them a woman wearing the headscarf was either forced to do so or she was brainwashed.

Hulya felt a throbbing headache seize her forehead. The crowd was dispersed and the police had left. Only the journalists were stopping passers-by to ask their opinions about “what had just happened here”. Hulya didn't want to face them, so she gathered what little strength she had left and leaning on the metal rails of the gate she stood up. Her coat had been stepped on and looked very dirty. She didn't see the big stains of- probably- a protesters' blood on her back but she felt filthy nonetheless.

She walked all the way home, pretending all this was a bad dream. More than anything, she wanted to hug her mom, craved to hear her say that this whole ordeal was just a nightmare and it would soon come to pass. That she still could graduate, become a doctor, heal people, marry, and have a happy life.

Random passers-by looked at her tear- streaked face, at her erratic walking and wondered what had happened. Doomsday had just happened, as far as Hulya was concerned, but they continued on with their lives as if everything was fine.

The road to home seemed to stretch itself out for a spite. Just when she thought that her knees would give away, she saw her apartment building. She climbed up the two flights of stairs and fumbled with her pockets to find the keys. When she couldn't find them, she pressed on the bell. Long and hard. No one answered. Her mom must be at the sohbet. She tried to remember at whose house they would be meeting. Was it Nazife's or Hilal's? Either way. She couldn't wait for her mom collapsed outside her own door as if banished from her own house. One neighbor might notice and the whole neighborhood was likely to gather to see what the matter was. She wasn't in a mood to give explanation to anyone, so she resolved to try her luck. She would go to Nazife abla's home first. She prayed with every cell in her body. She prayed her mom was there.

3.4 Sohbet-i Canan – The gathering where the Beloved is mentioned

Nazife teyze has no children of her own but she loves them to pieces. Her face brightens up as she gives me the welcome hug. Mom and I step in the living room a bit timidly. Mom shakes hands with both the American and her translator who introduces herself. Her name is Tugce and she is a graduate student at the Department of American Literature, Bogazici University.

“Hi, my name is Rana,” I say with a trembling voice as I shake hands with the researcher. I am surprised that she is very young, barely thirty years old. Her blond hair is almost white, a color I have never seen on anyone. Well, I have seen women that dye their hair that color but it shows in their roots and it looks lame on their darker complexions. While on the American, it looks natural.

“Merhaba, benim adim Jen”, she surprises me by speaking in Turkish. Her accent is heavy. I wonder about mine, if it sounds as funny as hers. If she wants to practice her Turkish nonstop, I won't have a chance to utter even hello.

We sit and mom begins a small talk, asking questions, the answers to which, we will soon forget. “How was your trip? How do you find our city? Are you comfortable where you are staying?” Jen smiles a lot, more than anyone I know. Her straight, white teeth give a certain quality to her smile, make it a

professional smile. She could very easily play in an ad for a brand name tooth paste. Now that I come to think of it, do our women smile less, because it isn't very proper to bare your teeth in public, or are they intimidated of their imperfect teeth ?My sister Meryem, says that in America all people smile, good teeth or not. So it must be a cultural thing. And that's one of the rare occasions, Meryem abla will say "All Americans" because, as she has stated many times, she doesn't like to generalize. She says it is misleading. To where, I wonder. Among all my siblings, Meryem abla is the hardest to understand when she speaks. She is pursuing a doctorate degree in sociology in the U.S. Sometimes I think that it is her graduate school that has messed up her mind and she can't speak in simple words. On the other hand, Zehra abla, the oldest of my sister, always finds a way to explain things to me. Her Albanian students are very lucky to have her as their math teacher.

By now, Jen has apparently exhausted her arsenal of Turkish and we are sitting in silence. I can tell Mom wants to fill the silence with small talk but she seems reluctant to employ the translator. We sit and wait for the others to come. The tick tock of the antique wall clock keeps us company.

The bell rings and the scent of lavender announces Leyla teyze's arrival. She wears the most exquisite perfumes, purchased from Europe during her husband's business trips. Mom doesn't find wearing strong perfumes appropriate. She thinks scented soaps are enough for a Muslim to smell nice. Leyla is wearing a long white skirt with printed red roses at the bottom, a light pink jacket and a crème headscarf with twirls of red. The brand of the silk headscarf, Vakko declares that it is worth more than all the scarves Mom owns. I have noticed that if someone is wearing an expensive brand of headscarf, she makes sure the brand name is in the visible corner of it, the one that falls on the small of one's back, not the one hidden among the folds around the neck. Sure enough, these headscarves are not purchased only for the comfort of the high quality silk.

Leyla teyze greets us with selam and shakes hands with Jen and Tugce granting each an exaggerated hello. Did she take the translator for a foreigner too? If she did, that wouldn't be

unforgivable. In a short black pencil skirt and sleeveless silk blouse, Tugce seems more in tune with Jen, who is wearing a cotton print dress, which barely covered her knees while standing. Although mom has removed her long outer coat and Leyla teyze her light jacket, none of us is showing an inch of skin (or a piece of hair) other than our faces and hands. Judging by the way we are dressed, one might wrongly conclude that we live in two different climate zones. I wonder what Jen thinks of us, overdressed like this on an unusually warm April day. I realize that the American's face, all smiles and without blemish is impossible to read, like a book written in a foreign language. No matter how long you stare at the letters you won't understand any better. I know a little about Americans. Things I have seen in the cowboys movies or in the news when I spend time at Sule's. Also, my second older sister, Meryem, tells me of her life in America when she visits us in the summers. Meryem ablam, I learned from Mom yesterday, referred the interested researcher to our mother's sohbet.

I have often overheard conversations in the neighborhood where people are critical of America. They say that America is like a global police, interferes everywhere, as if the world is their backyard, but Meryem abla insists that not all Americans approve of everything their government does and most Americans are decent people like us struggling to make a living for their families. She told us how polite and respectful her fellow students and her professors are. I suspect that she stresses that "all is well with my life" to appease Mom's worries. If she hadn't been obliged, Mom would have never allowed my sister, her unmarried daughter to go to the other corner of the world.

The huge mulberry tree shades the living room from the bright light, but does little to lighten up the hot, humid air. Nazife teyze has opened every possible window to let in a bit of breeze, despite the inexplicable fear we all share against the ailing potential of the *ceryan*, the sneaky draft that will give you pneumonia if you are sweaty. Yet, no sacrifice is too big to accommodate the guest.

Mom shifts uncomfortably in her seat when the American checks her watch a second time. By now, she has lost hope that any amount of her preaching on the virtue of punctuality, can remedy her

friends' relaxed relationship with time. If time is money, everyone has plenty of it. Yet, this time she seems truly embarrassed.

The tick-tock of the clock on the wall accentuates the silence, pressing heavily on our patience. A car stops in front of the house and once doors are slammed closed, tack-tacks of high heels join the beats of the clock.

The bell rings with slight urgency. Sema teyze, Nilgun, Elif, and Gulcan, holding her baby, rush in breathing laboriously. Their faces have turned pink and glisten with sweat. Each says welcome to the guests and shake hands with them, a bit coyly. Gulcan places her baby on a big pillow and asks Nazife teyze for a glass of water.

In no time, Nazife offers each of the late comers a glass of cold water. All, except Leyla Hanim who hasn't suffered from heat in her air-conditioned car, drink heartily, and thank Nazife profusely "May this kindness benefit your deceased loved ones."

Without asking for an explanation of their tardiness, Mom turns toward the researcher and asks: "Jen, could you please tell us about your research and what we can do to help?"

The researcher addresses Mom's question. Her speech sounds soft and pleasing to the ear. Tugce waits for her to finish before beginning to translate.

She says "First of all thank you for accepting me to do research in your midst. I will observe your weekly meetings. I may ask questions related to the weekly lectures. If you don't mind I would like to observe whatever you do as a group. At the end of the first phase of my research, which I suspect to last six months, I would love to interview each one of you and tape those who consent. But you won't be taped if you don't want to. Also, I will pay 70 lira's to everyone who is interviewed. This is a common procedure among researchers. It is a type of appreciation for your time."

I can see that the money thing doesn't sound good to Mom by the way she purses her lips at the mention of it. In an environment where everybody volunteers and gives without expecting anything in return, her proposal stands like a crooked stick among rows of straight ones.

Jen asks if anything is unclear. No one says anything, so she assumes that everything is as clear as day light. But I think that most of the women present are just shy to ask. In fact I doubt they will ever open their mouth in Jen's presence.

"In that case, let us begin," Mom says. She raises her hands and begins her supplication." I seek refuge in Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Gracious from the cursed devil and I begin with His name," she says in Arabic.

She pauses for a moment to see if Tugce will translate. When all she gets from Tugce is a blank stare, Mom resumes her prayer. Is it possible, I wonder, that Tugce abla doesn't know this simple invocation? Where in Turkey did she even grow up? This is one of the first prayers a Muslim child learns in every household. If she is so unfamiliar with religion, how will she translate Mom's intricate speeches in which she weaves verses from the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet, and pearls of wisdom from Muslim saints all in one lecture? Sometimes I have a hard time to understand mom in Turkish, I wonder how Jen teyze will understand anything if the translation is poor or incomplete.

It might or it might not be due to her disappointment with the translator, but Mom cuts short the Arabic part of the prayer and continues the supplication in Turkish. She asks for forgiveness, insight, and guidance. Sure enough, Tugce starts muttering what sounds like English, halting here and there, apparently choosing the right words. Jen nods at her. Is she nodding because she finds Mom's prayer meaningful or is she nodding to signal that she gets the translation?

Mom seals her prayer with amin and with a wide smile radiating serenity. She asks Sema teyze to recite a short passage from the Quran. Sema teyze has a beautiful voice that has a bit of melancholic tone when she recites the Quranic verses. She picks to recite from the chapter Ar Rahman: the Most

Merciful. The repeating verse in that chapter, “Then which of the bounties of your Lord shall you deny?” gains a tone of lament in her voice causing Mom to sigh and Hilal abla to cry. I don't know if anyone else is thinking this but noticing how concentrated Jen is listening, I can't help but think that maybe one day she will become a Muslim. We have heard of tourists who convert to Islam just by hearing the Ezan, the call to prayer, for the first time, so why not?

When Sema teyze stops by saying “Surely Allah has spoken the truth,” Mom begins to read from the book on her lap, the *Words* by Said Nursi.

“Faith is both light and strength,” she reads slowly, and not just for the benefit of translation, I guess. It is Mom's custom to stress the most important part of her message. “The person who acquires true faith can overcome all challenges of the world.”

Tugce's murmuring simultaneous translation is very distracting. If I wasn't so familiar with the topic, I wouldn't understand a thing. And I suspect the women in the room wouldn't either. The text Mom is reading is among the best known in sohbet. It is written by Said Nursi, a brilliant scholar who was forced to live his life in exile. I read a short biography of his, not long ago and I was astonished by the hardships he had to put up with. It wasn't clear to me why he was being charged with rebellion against the State by different state courts, while all he was doing, till he breathed his last, was restoring the faith in Muslims by providing a rational basis for the tenets of Islam. One of his most known quotes says “If I see the faith of the young people of my nation restored to its fullest, I won't worry even if I burn in Hell. For, as my body is consumed among flames, my soul will soar in gardens of roses.” That is Mom's motto in life too. Actually both my parents believe that living your life to help others live theirs according to the divine plan is the only meaningful way to do it. Would the American be able to comprehend this perspective of theirs?

Sema teyze nods as she listens to Mom. I love this part where she says that belief in Allah and hereafter gives meaning not only to our existence, but sheds light on the whole creation. Just like

switching on the light during nights, makes the objects and people in this room visible in their full colors and shapes, so does belief in Allah and in hereafter move us from darkness to light. Everybody in the room alternately looks in the direction of the researcher. It feels as if she is the only audience to this sohbet and we are just witnesses to it. Anyway she doesn't seem to mind the attention she is getting. Had I been in her place, I would be burning hot with embarrassment. Only when I am with my family, does it feels good to be the center of attention.

Sema teyze lets out a sigh. Being the oldest, her presence gives comfort to me, always has. She has been the faithful follower of the group meetings for as long as I remember and is rightly considered, though never professed, Mom's right hand. Although Mom seldom complains, I know being a leader is a tough responsibility. With dad being engaged outside this much, Mom, must be thankful for Sema teyze's support.

In public Mom is always contained, like a current that flows deep. The only times that I witness her burst with emotions are the times she speaks of the love for Allah, of His Mercy toward us, of the tortures our dear prophet and his companions had to endure in the hands of unbelievers. And that's what she is getting into, right now. "Look at the strength faith gave to the Companions of our Beloved Prophet. Look at how they weren't afraid to lay down their life for the sake of Allah" she says in trembling timbers.

I perk my ears to the translation to hear if Tugce will say "our beloved" too, or will she just say the prophet? Was the prophet her beloved as well? Not that I know what beloved is in English but maybe I can tell from her tone. The closest word to it, that I know is "dear" and Tugce does not say it, I am sure of this much.

Mom goes on to account how they heroically protected the wounded prophet at the battle of Uhud, their heroic participation in the battle of Bedr where they were outnumbered thrice by the

unbelievers of Mecca. Because I have heard these events on more accounts than I can remember my mind wanders off.

There are so many things I am curious about. For example, I wonder if Mom can ask Tugce to translate something on our behalf or is she exclusively in the researcher's service, who has hired her. I wonder if Jen is married.

Mom finishes her lecture with another prayer. Afterward she asks Hilal abla, this time to sing for us an ilahi. Hilal abla straightens up and clears her throat. Her soft voice travels ever so smoothly through the air and into our ears. It caresses my heart pleasantly.

They ask for heaven so earnestly

Though a few mansions and some maidens be

Give them to those who ask ardently

I need only Thee, I need only Thee.

As soon as the song ends, Nazife teyze, as if on cue, gets up to serve tea. Hilal abla and I join her in the kitchen. We fill each plate with the delicious treats and bring them to the room, placing them in trestles in front of every guest. Gulcab abla's baby wakes up and starts to cry. Her mother picks her up and goes to another room to feed.

Next, as it is usually the custom, Mom moves to the upcoming events. Although this part of the gathering takes place among slurps of tea and the sounds of spoons, it is no less important. In fact if you ask me, one of the purposes of the first part is to prepare those present for the second one.

"In a month we will hold a kermes, a bake and consignment sale" Mom says. Bake and consignment sales are frequent events for Mom and her friends. They are organized twice a year or more often if needed. "Needless to say, not only should each of us pitch in, but we must invite our neighbors and relatives to help," she continues. "A part of the proceeds from the sales will go to the education expenses of six female college students. The girls will rent a house in our part of the town and

we will be checking on them during their studies". The houses in which these students stay are called *dersane*, study halls, but there is much more to the communion and the fellowship these girls share. Mom calls them houses of light, because besides providing a safe place for the girls to continue their studies, these houses are the place their faith is fortified through daily readings and group prayers. These girls will not only be the future professionals but also "the next standard bearers." as Mom puts it. They will continue the community service work for the generations to come.

Everyone jumps in with suggestions of what could be sold and how much of it she pledges to bring herself and what she could ask for from her acquaintances. Nazife abla will cook ten big trays of borek: cheese filled pastries. Leyla teyze pledges to bring twenty trays of baklava. Most likely she will have her maid bake them or purchase them from the pastry shop. I can't imagine her sweating in front of the oven, burning her fingers when taking the trays out. Jen raises her hand and asks "What will you do with the rest of the money?" Though this might be an innocent question, because it involves the money, it doesn't sound right to me. Mom answers unperturbed. "We will keep it in our budget to organize other events throughout the year. For example, we buy gifts for orphans and distribute them on religious holidays. We prepare fast-breaking dinners in tents during Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims worldwide and such."

Noticing that the researcher is satisfied, Mom turns to her circle and asks what else can be sold. Each of the women will bring new items to sell, presents that were never used, baby clothes never worn, and stitch work newly finished. Mom writes down every single detail. Lastly, she gives information about the warehouse the Brothers have rented for the event. Jen raises her hand a second time and asks herself in Turkish, "Who are the Brothers?"

"Muslim men, who like us, organize voluntarily to serve the community. My husband Yusuf, my son Yasin, and the husbands and many relatives of the sisters present today are involved as well." Mom answers matter-of-factly. "We usually operate separately but in accordance and cooperation with

one another. For this event, they will help with the logistics, such as rent the place, repair it if needed, move around tables and chairs, distribute fliers, etc.”

“What about decision-making? Who has the last word in decisions?” Jen asks, this time through Tugce. The forceful way Tugce translates it, makes it sound like this is the most important part of the whole thing. It is bewildering. As far as I know Mom, after each meeting, takes the women's proposals for main events to the Brothers, through either Dad or my brother Yasin. More often than not they approve them. Does that make them the decision-makers? Why does it matter who is the decision-maker, as long as good and beneficial decisions are made? I am perplexed. At times the brothers will consult Mom, again through Dad, for advice on their matters too.

“Abiler” Mom replies. “The Brothers” Tugce unnecessarily translates. Jen puts down her glass of tea with a clink and starts scribbling eagerly into her notebook. She seems like she is racing with time to catch a superb idea before it evaporates in thin air.

The silence that ensues brings forth the tick-tock of the clock into the scene again. Mom appears to have lost her train of thought. We gawk waiting for Jen abla to punctuate her genius idea and share it with us. Instead she shuts closed her notebook and with a content smile tells us: “Well, that's enough work for today. “ She asks permission to leave and, when that is granted, leaves with Tugce tagging along. On her way out she compliments Nazife teyze. “The food is simply delicious. Thank you.” I hear her say in Turkish. “You are welcome,” Nazife teyze says politely, though she sounds unconvinced. Jen's plate is far from being empty. Did she really like the food? Or is she on a diet to preserve her figure?

Hilal and Gulcan, who had been sitting on floor pillows, take Jen and Tugce's seats, as soon as the door closes behind them. With that change, the arrangement of the room feels a bit disorienting. Is everybody pretending to be hungry indulging in food or are they escaping from commenting on their first day with the researcher? I start to play with Gulcan abla's baby, so her mother can eat her food. I

feel that, like a snail that leaves a trail of mucous behind, Jen and her translator have left something behind, a shade of their overpowering presence.

The doorbell startles almost everyone in the room. If it wasn't ringing with alarm, we would think Jen came back to pick something she forgot. Nazife abla gets up from her chair with fright and makes toward the door, followed by Sema abla, who has placed her hand over her throat, as if she is sensing disaster. When the door opens, her daughter, Hulya abla throws herself into her arms, letting out a piercing cry: "Oh annee, annee. It's over, everything is over". Everybody rushes to the hall. I am afraid to look. They bring Hulya abla in and have her sit on the sofa. "Calm down, my dear," Sema teyze says in a soothing tone "and tell me everything, one by one". Nazife teyze bring a glass of water while Mom rubs cologne on Hulya abla's palms to refresh her. In her agitation, between sobs and hiccups, Hulya abla relates what has happened at the university today. Nazife teyze turns on the TV and with dismay we watch how violent confrontations between students and police have reupted on other campuses throughout Turkey. "The state is preparing a crackdown on the conservatives" says the anchor woman. Hulya abla breaks into sobs again. She looks like she is going to faint. I want to ask what a *crackdown* is supposed to mean. The fear in Mom's eyes makes me stay put.

"Hulya, Hulya come to your senses." Her mom is urging her, holding her shoulders. "There's got to be a solution to this. They can't kick out thousands of students like that, do you hear me?"

"Someone turn the TV off," Mom orders. "Hulya, listen sweetheart" - she says as if cooing a baby. "We shall overcome this, insaallah. With the help of Allah, we will find a way out. Have faith and be strong. Trust in Allah. Only in Him."

Mom, try as she might to appear hopeful, is very sad. This whole ordeal is shocking to me. Why, all of a sudden, did the lovely, colorful headscarves of these women become a problem? I worry about my school too. Will I be kicked out as well? Is this matter very complicated or am I too small?

As I ponder on it, I get this feeling that the exile of Said Nursi, the incarceration of my grandfather, and Hulya abla's inconsolable misery are linked together. I resolve to ask Mom in the evening. I will insist to know. It's time to grow, to understand this country of mine.

3.5 Zeynep – Ornament of Her Father

Konya, 1960-1980

Upon hearing the good news of his daughter's birth, Mehmet Efendi let out a deep breath in relief. To the bewilderment of the midwife who expected him to twitch his lips, as if some bitter bile had come up his throat, he prostrated on his prayer mat and praised Allah. The celebration of a daughter's birth was a rare sight in this part of Anatolia, but Mehmet Efendi was no ordinary man either. The midwife knew this much. Everyone in Konya knew that he was a Sufi, a seeker of God.

He decided to name his first child Zeynep, hoping that she would truly be the beauty of his remaining years. His wife, Meryem Hanim had finally fallen asleep in a heavy stupor after long hours of breech delivery. The cracking hearth fire cast a pale glow on her tired face. He pecked a kiss on her forehead and adjusted the blanket on her. "Paradise really lies under the feet of mothers. Look what they go through for their children. You have told the truth, O messenger of Allah!" Mehmet Efendi murmured. Watching his baby daughter's angelic face twitch and smile in sleep, he felt gratitude swell in his chest for this gift delivered after thirteen years of anguish. After every difficulty, comes ease, promised the Quran. His faithful God had fulfilled His promise. Bearing no children for so long, had been the hardest on his wife. Pressures from neighbors and relatives who had suggested that he marry a second wife or divorce Meryem Hanim had crushed his wife's spirit. He had dismissed such suggestions saying that Allah had blessed him with a chaste, God-fearing woman, whose worth can't be measured with her ability to give birth. A woman is no less a woman even if she can't be a mother. A woman's worth and a man's value lies only in takva, in the closeness to Allah according to Quran.

Yet, Allah in His unquestionable wisdom had finally gratified them with a child, Zeynep. Mehmet Efendi picked up his daughter from the cradle and swinging her lightly in his arms, he bent, first over her right ear, then her left ear and, after reciting the call to prayer he whispered three times: Your name is Zeynep. May Allah bless your journey, my daughter!

The baby wiggled a bit as if to break free of her wrapped bundle. Mehmet Efendi kissed her cheeks taking in her baby scent, a scent that he imagined to be from heaven. He placed her back into the cradle and wiped his eyes that had moistened at the sight of that helpless human being set out to live a life of trials and joy. "Men don't cry Mehmet Efendi," he imagined his friends tease him.

"Men do cry," he would tell them." Men should cry. Our beloved prophet, who had wept till his beard soaked up in his tears, had pleaded with God to protect him from a hardened heart that doesn't tremble and from dry eyes that don't shed a tear."

Mehmet Efendi left his wife and the baby in the care of the midwife and headed toward the neighborhood mosque for his morning prayers. In this hour of dawn, one could witness the silent retreat of darkness and the emanation of light. In the turns of days and nights there are signs for those who reflect said Allah in His word, but how many of us pay heed, sighed Mehmet Efendi.

He entered the spacious praying area where a group of men were lining up behind the imam who raised his hands to the sides of his head. His thumbs barely touching the earlobes "Allahu Ekber" he said loudly proclaiming that Allah is the Greatest. The prayer was the short amount of time where the believers toss the worries of this world behind their shoulders and meet with their Maker. The closeness to Him was maximized during the prostration where the forehead kisses the ground. There the ego of man, humbled, realizes its insignificant worth. Allah is great, humans are small.

Mehmet Efendi felt his chest expand with adoration for the Almighty. With his senses heightened by the emotions of fatherhood, he felt an immense compassion toward the believers around him, toward the birds that had begun to sing their morning praise, and toward everything alive. Amazed

by the capacity of a human heart to contain an ocean of love, he let his tears roll down his face wetting his beard and finally landing on the carpeted ground.

The imam, having finished leading the prayers, sat down silently and began invoking the beautiful names of Allah with the rest of the congregation, inserting pieces from the prophet's own supplications. "O Allah, I seek from You the goodness of this new day and whatever it holds and I seek refuge in You from the harm of this new day and of whatever it contains."

Life itself seemed like one huge prayer to Mehmet Efendi. Like a seed beseeches the Almighty to become a tree, so the passion of life in a human's heart longs for eternity. "But more than anything, I desire to behold the beauty of your face in paradise. My Lord, don't deprive me from seeing your glory" he prayed.

A little boy rushed in breathless, searching around for a particular face. When he saw Mehmet Efendi, he sprang toward him. "Mehmet amca, come quickly," - He whispered "Meryem teyze got very sick. The midwife says she must go to the hospital immediately." Mehmet Effendi jumped to his feet with vigor, put on his shoes and ran outside the mosque. His heart beating frantically like a bird bumping into his cage, he arrived at home just when the midwife and two neighbors were carrying his wife into the neighbor's car. Mehmet Efendi sat in the back and took Meryem Hanim's head on his lap. The paleness of her face, her closed eyes scared him, but it was a growing bloody stain on her dress that sent a shudder through his spine.

"All of a sudden, she started bleeding like a gushing stream. Try as I might, I couldn't stop it. Inshaallah it is not too late," explained the midwife from the front seat next to the driver.

"Insaallah: may Allah will it." said Mehmet Efendi. In his heart he searched for the most effective prayer, for the right words to plead with the Almighty. Yet, the pain in his chest had ransacked his mind. Maybe that tightness that left little room for air was the best supplication. His heart was calling in its beat-like language: "Ya Shafi, Ya Allah. O Allah, the Ultimate Healer."

When Meryem Hanim was placed in the hospital her face had turned white like lime. Mehmet Efendi was sent out of the room with the rest, as the doctor rushed in with three nurses in tow. All that followed happened in a blur for Mehmet Efendi. His wife was taken to the operating room; several nurses had gone in and out, carrying utensils, blood bags, papers and whatnots. Two hours later, the doctor had come out and told him that his wife was saved. Her uterus had been removed though. As the doctor listed the medical complications that would develop had they not done the operation, Mehmet Efendi, elated and thankful that his wife was spared, felt a great urge to go home and hold his baby daughter. She would, from that moment on, be his one and only child.

Years passed but the dedication Mehmet Efendi showed toward his daughter did not diminish. "You will spoil her," warned Meryem Hanim. But Mehmet Efendi paid no heed. Zeynep reciprocated his love. She would sit by the window overlooking the street and wait for him to come from his shop. As soon as he had closed the gate of the courtyard, she would run to hug him. "Baba, babacigim" Nothing delighted him more than to be her dear father. When she was still a little girl, he would take Zeynep with him to his carpenter shop where she played with bits of woods he had carved into shapes of birds for her. He would show her how planks of wood could become beautiful furniture with skill and hard work.

"Do you see, Zeynebim? When humans are born, they resemble these planks of wood that wait to take their shapes. Sometimes they will be cut, shaved, carved, gouged, and polished. The wood endures it without complain and so must we."

His apprentice, Hasan who overheard their conversations, while going about his duties, was amazed at how someone could talk like that to a child. Zeynep listened attentively, nodded, and ran around the shop in search of other items of interest.

Mehmet Efendi allowed Zeynep to come to the shop until she reached the tender age of ten. He had dismissed Meryem Hanim's warning about the impropriety of the presence of a girl in a place where

mostly men entered because he delighted in her presence. But when he saw a customer casting a glance at her with desire, blood boiled in his veins and he feared for his daughter. Her slender body, her long wavy hair, and her sweet face weren't to be devoured by wretched, dirty looks. The hard part was to explain it to Zeynep. He handed that to Meryem Hanim. "Tell her she won't come to the shop from now on. Don't embarrass her though" he warned. "She has nothing to be ashamed of".

To compensate, Mehmet Efendi began to spend more time with her in the evening, instructing her in Quran recitation, tradition, and Islamic Jurisprudence. When she reached puberty, Mehmet Efendi intended to initiate her into the Sufi seeker path, a lifelong discipline where the seeker moves from station to station in spiritual realm. Meryem Hanim worried that because Zeynep was a sensitive girl, she wouldn't adapt well to it.

"Don't worry my soul." Mehmet Efendi assured her. "If she puts her heart into it, she will succeed insaallah. There is no advantage in being a boy or a girl, when it comes to spiritual matters. Don't forget that Rabia al Adawiye was a Sufi master who surpassed her male counterparts in her time." He reminded her of his grandmother too, the woman who had molded him with patience for years into the man he was today. "People look at the appearance, while Allah looks at the heart, my soul."

"Alright, go ahead," Meryem Hanim consented "but let us keep it between us. People may talk."

Mehmet Efendi smiled "You are worried that no one will marry a learned woman." He let out a chuckle. "I'd rather have her remain unmarried than marry a man who doesn't know her worth. But let us not worry, not yet. Allah is the provider and He has written her fate on her forehead. Our only duty is to raise her to be a truthful believer. And that's what I intend to do as much as I can muster it."

Meryem Hanim leaned toward him and placed her head on his chest. "Sometimes, I suspect that you look at her as you'd look at a son you never had." She teased.

Mehmet Efendi caressed her silky, long hair. "No, I look at her, the way the Prophet looked at his daughter Fatma, whom he carried on his shoulders when he walked through the market, in a time

and place where baby daughters were buried alive in the sand. I look at her like the prophet looked at his young wife, Ayse, whose genial mind he nurtured to become the greatest female scholar of his community till the Day of Judgment.”

Mehmet Efendi paused for a moment. Later he let out a deep breath and asked. “Do you remember the story of the blessed Mary in the Quran? Her mother asked in prayer for a child to consecrate to the Temple of Solomon. When she saw that she gave birth to a girl, she was dismayed and didn't know how she could fulfill her oath, because, at the time, only boys were consecrated to the temple. Prophet Zacharia, through divine revelation, told her that God had accepted her oath and her daughter Meryem, blessed among the women of her time, was taken to the temple.”

“Little Meryem surpassed all the boys in her learning to the chagrin of the Torah teachers. Moreover she was provided with fruits of paradise and the spiritual disposition to become the mother of Isa. Now, who can say that if a boy was born instead of her he would have accomplished more?”

Meryem Hanim nodded. She had been raised in a loving family but she had understood her worth only in the arms of her wise husband. A knock on the door, interrupted their reverie and both stood to answer it. Zeynep, who had come from her neighbor's home, where she had gone to help their daughter with school work, was puzzled to see both parents receive her with great anticipation. She smiled back at them and felt a thrill from the warmth with which they returned her selam, the greeting of peace.

If her father wasn't the reason the sky wasn't falling, he sure held up the roof of their house for Zeynep or so she believed as a young child. On many nights, when she woke to drink some water or was frightened by a lightning, she would peek into her parents' room and always find her father standing up in prayer, reciting in soft voice verses from the Quran, sometimes muffled between his sobbing. At times her mother would be praying with him, her presence adding a loving hue to the moonlit room.

Waking up every morning to his voice reciting the Quran, had for Zeynep the reassuring effect that all is well in the cosmic order. At least once a year, Mehmet Efendi, secluded himself from the rest of the world in the little room at the end of the hall, he called halvetgah: the alcove of intimacy. Also, the last ten days of Ramadan, the fasting month of the Lunar year, were spent there amid prayers and fasting. Zeynep placed everyday a tray with food at the threshold, as soon as the evening call to prayer announced the end of fasting for the day. Her father left the room only at night to use the restroom and brought the tray with food, almost intact, back to the kitchen. "A full stomach dulls the spiritual faculties of the heart," he warned. "Mortification doesn't happen when you indulge your body." She missed her father terribly on halvet days but was rewarded for her patience when he returned, to her, to his family, to the world with replenished energy and spiritual radiance.

Once a week, on Thursday nights, Mehmet Efendi held a session of sohbet in his home. Men he knew from his neighborhood, from the congregation, from his customers, and whoever heard of this gathering by word of mouth came and sat in their living room to listen to his lectures. On those nights, Mehmet Efendi instructed them on the matters of religion, taught them about the spiritual potential in human beings, and introduced to them the Blessed Century: the period of time the Prophet lived in Medina, the place where the first community of believers was established to be continued till the Day of Judgment. After the sohbet, Mehmet Efendi would answer miscellaneous questions from his guests. On Thursdays, Zeynep brewed three pots of tea for them and left trays filled with tea cups and treats, she and her mother had spent the whole day preparing, on the threshold, behind the closed door. She would knock twice to signal to her father that the tea was waiting outside the door to be served. She shied from the presence of men now. Long gone were the days where she sat on her father's lap and observed the circle of men listening attentively, as if they had birds on their heads and were afraid to move. In their serious expression, Zeynep saw their reverence they felt toward her father. When she

commented on that, her father corrected her assessment; the men were awe struck by the wisdom of the Quran and the beauty of the Beloved Prophet, and not by his humble rendering.

Zeynep resented having grown up and missing the sohbet, especially now that she could benefit from it more. She had daily lessons, one on one, with her father. Yet, there was something appealing in the exchange of the men. Other scholars of her father's caliber or students of Sufi masters were known to join in too. She was tempted to eavesdrop but she was embarrassed to do so. At any given moment, someone might open the door to leave or use the restroom.

She expressed her desire to join the sohbet to her father with trepidation, should she be scorned. Her father smiled and said "My Zeynep, I will find a way to squeeze you in too."

One day, Zeynep came home to find two masons who were demolishing the left wall of the sitting room, only to erect it again, this time leaving a square opening in the middle of it. They installed panes in the opening and soon enough a new window that opened to Zeynep's room was built. Zeynep hung a thick velvet curtain to the window that would shield both sides from view. Zeynep hugged her father for this genius idea. Mehmet Efendi patted her on the back. "Now, now let us not exaggerate. Our honorable Prophet says that knowledge is the lost property of every Muslim. He or she must claim it, even if it is found in China. This effort of mine compares nothing to going to China."

Zeynep let out a chuckle as she prayed silently in her heart: "O Allah grant my father a long life. Take from my days if need be."

With the new window, she started to anticipate Thursday evenings with incomparable delight. With pen and notebook in hand, she took notes of everything, wrote down the comments made by the attendees and even wrote down her own questions to ask later. Although the attendance varied weekly, she had started to recognize some regulars by their voices and matched them with their names when her father addressed them. After the meeting, before bidding goodbye, someone would ask her father to pray for an ailing mother, for a child, for a spouse, or for a job. Zeynep felt uneasy spying on

them. Would these men feel comfortable if they knew that Mehmet Efendi's daughter was listening behind the curtain?

Among the men who asked questions frequently, was someone, named Yusuf. From the way her father addressed him, "Yusuf, my son", Zeynep deduced that he was young and her father was fond of him. Judging by the types of questions he asked, she surmised that he was a serious seeker of knowledge. Being a seeker of answers herself, Zeynep felt curious about him. When one of the first questions that popped up in her mind was whether he was married or not, Zeynep chastised herself for not keeping herself chaste in thoughts. It disturbed her to admit that hearing his settled, calm voice in the meeting was a moment she started to look forward to with excitement. She felt ashamed for her inability to restrain herself. Yusuf could be married for all she knew. She paid attention to his request for prayers trying to find a clue about his private life. Was he looking for a spouse, or begging God for matrimonial harmony? Yet, all Yusuf asked had to do with some degree of spirituality. He wanted to draw near to Allah.

One Thursday somebody new to the gatherings, Zeynep judged by the novelty of his voice, asked Mehmet Efendi about the Seriat, the sacred law. "Isn't it a disgrace," he asked "that Muslims in Turkey lived under secular laws borrowed from Europe, while the laws of Allah were totally ignored. A tense silence ensued and Zeynep almost could feel the discomfort in her father's response. "Seriat, in the Quranic Arabic, means the path to water. For the Arabs in the desert who were the first audience of the revelation, the path to water meant the path to life. Likewise for us, Seriat is not just a codified body of laws produced by years of Islamic Jurisprudence but rather the body of principles and the ethos of the Qur'an. As long as you can live by the tenets of the Qur'an, justice, cooperation, egalitarianism, little difference makes which civil or penal code is enforced by the state."

Usually, her father didn't choose to speak about politics in his lectures. He avoided such topics when they came up by redirecting the question into the sphere of the private life of each Muslim. Yet,

this night, the questioner stubbornly insisted: “How can we say that in our country we are free to live according to our religion when the state has closed the Sufi lodges, Qur’anic schools, and religious endowments? Imams have to teach the Quran to children secretly and are persecuted if caught doing so. Even us in here, we come pretending to outsiders that all we do is drink tea and pass time. What do you say to that?”

Suddenly Zeynep remembered it was past the time for tea. She rushed to the kitchen and arranged the trays and the pots of tea that had been brewed by her mom. Meryem Hanim had gone to a neighbor's house to assist a new mother giving birth. Zeynep listened behind the door to see if her father would respond to the last question. She didn't want to knock in the middle of his answer. He cleared his throat and said “Ya Allah! After every difficulty, there comes a time of ease. This, too, shall come to pass, my friend”.

She knocked twice and hurried back to her room. As she was taking her seat by the window she heard her father say: “Yusuf, my son, won't you serve the tea tonight.”

Without thinking, she jumped out of her seat and with trepidation she opened her bedroom's door just a bit and turned off the light. The door of the sitting room creaked open. A tall, lean figure came out into the hall and bent down to pick up the tray which he took inside. He came out again shortly. Zeynep couldn't see his features well, being able to see him only in profile but there was something she registered in her memory: the sight of his hands clutching the teapots. She closed the door with her heart beating loudly in her ears. There was no ring in those elegant fingers.

Two nights later, Zeynep and her father were sitting on pillows by the hearth, reviewing some legal rulings related to divorce matters. Meryem Hanim had excused herself and had retreated to her bedroom. Zeynep loved to read books with the glowing fire illuminating the pages. They were discussing

what constituted ground for divorce in Islamic jurisprudence. Infidelity appeared on the top of the list. Reading it, made Zeynep asks a question that had been on her mind for some time.

“Baba,” she called with agitation.

“Why is it that a man's honor belongs to him alone but the honor of a woman is the honor of the whole family? We have heard of fathers or brothers killing their daughters or sisters on the pretense that they have defiled the honor of the family while the men with whom they must have committed the abominable sin are not punished by his family. Is there a religious grounding in the seriat for this?” She asks trying to muffle her agitation.

“No, my daughter. Those honor killings are plainly dishonorable murders with no foundation in the seriat.” Mehmet Efendi answered taking a deep breath. “Adultery and fornication are punishable by seriat and only the state can execute it. The evidence should be free of doubt with the uncontested testimony of four eyewitnesses. If it is proven that a man and a woman are guilty of fornication or of adultery, then both are punished equally without discrimination”. Zeynep pondered on the answer sensing that her father hadn't finished yet.

“As for the honor issue, I suppose that, at first out of desire to protect the women, people invested in them the family honor to make sure that men of the family were motivated to protect their women from harm just like they protected themselves. Yet, this whole idea has turned against women to the point that harm is done to them in the name of family honor.” Mehmet Efendi took a sip from his tea and waited for his daughter to respond to that. He could see from her questioning pose, head thrown back slightly on the left, that she wasn't convinced.

“But baba,” she began but stopped in midair with anguish. Someone was pounding on the door as if intent on bringing it down.

“May it be for good. Who can it be at this hourhour?” Mehmet Efendi wondered jumping on his feet. Zeynep took her headscarf from the back of a chair where she had left it and covered her hair. A

fear gripped her heart. Someone was shouting and threatening to break the door if someone didn't open it soon. Meryem Hanim, equally scared, came out of the room, fully dressed too. Zeynep took courage from her mom and went to see who it was. Two soldiers with arms hanged from their shoulders were ordering her father to come with them to their station. "Why?" Her father demanded to know.

"You will learn soon," said the youngest of them, pulling Mehmet Efendi by his arms impatiently. "Wait till I get my coat" Mehmet Effendi said calmly. "We have no time for ceremonies," intruded the older soldier. "Come with me immediately," he pulled the other arm forcefully. "Wait," her father insisted. "I want to talk to my family."

The younger soldier gave a push with his rifle to his back. "Baba!" Zeynep cried rushing to him.

Mehmet Efendi had fallen on the cobbler stones of the courtyard." Why do you treat him like that? He has done no harm to anyone." Zeynep defiantly asked as she tried to get her father on his feet again.

The soldier grabbed Zeynep and shoved her to the side. Her back hit the wall, and she let out a cry. Meryem Hanim pleaded with the soldiers. "You must be mistaken my son. My husband is a respectable man who has never broken the law. Please let him go."

"Your husband," he sneered, "has plotted an insurrection against the state. He is an enemy of the Republic. We have orders to take him, now get out of our way."

Zeynep hugged her mom who could barely stand on her feet. Mehmet Efendi being pulled on both arms by the two soldiers walked toward the green jeep parked by the road. Before being pushed inside he shouted: "My Zeyneb, fear nothing, Allah is with us. Take care of your mom. I leave you in the hands of Allah. Do not worry for..." They didn't let him finish but shoved him in instead and drove away.

Standing there, frozen in tears and pain, Zeynep and her mom didn't know what to do. They both thought this was all a bad dream. As if waiting to wake up, as if waiting for the jeep to come back upon the realization that the arrest was a mistake, they stood in one another's arms. Zeynep didn't

know if this was as hard a blow for her mom as it was for her. Was Meryem Hanım as clueless as her or if she saw it coming. Yet, she was sure of one thing. The world, as she knew it, had crumbled to pieces in front of her eyes.

3.6 The Persuasion Room

Three weeks had passed from the first confrontation with the police on university campuses. Since then the sit-ins and the demonstrations had continued, but the fervor was dwindling away. By then, it was obvious that the state wouldn't budge an inch. The new dress code regulations prohibited beards and headscarves. There was no doubt, conservative Muslims were the target. Hot arguments among the pundits about the limits of public space were aired in the media. The scandal escalated when an emergency patient, because of her headscarf, wasn't admitted into a state hospital. She had to be transferred into a private clinic, where she almost died. The whole country was in an uproar. The military had forced the coalition government with the religious party in the lead to resign. The economy suffered due to the ensuing market disruption. The battle between the secularists and the conservatives took on a new surge. Zeynep Hoca warned her friends to be cautious. On the phone they spoke in code, where "sohbet" was just "a visit for tea," and "performing the prayers" turned into "fulfilling our duty".

Hulya barely survived amid this hullabaloo. Oblivious to the upheavals, she had lost track of the days she had stood in front of the university gate with the hope, fainter with each passing moment, that maybe the professors would show mercy and turn a blind eye to her attire. The number of students, waiting with her, decreased daily. Where did these girls go? Did they shut themselves up in their houses weeping over their ill fate? Perhaps, they removed their headscarves, put on a wig and pretended nothing had happened. Hulya had seen Ayşe go to school bare-headed. She had recognized her with difficulty, not just because she didn't expect to see Ayşe without a headscarf in public, but also because Ayşe walked with her head lowered in shame. Ayşe's surrender had angered Hulya.

She was angry at the university staff, at her mom and her sohbet friends serving community in a country where freedom did not exist. Hulya shunned everyone. If suicide wasn't prohibited in Islam, if she didn't fear everlasting hell, she would have ended her life. At night she slept poorly, awakened by nightmares. During the days she wept, looking at her books, her pens, her photos with classmates. Had it really been three weeks? Had she really been that happy to smile with such energy in those photos? Hulya couldn't recall.

She had received a notice through the mail the day before. It said that in two days her university registration would be erased permanently. She had forty-eight hours to decide, to choose between a headscarf and an education. In the letter it was stated that she was welcome to talk with a member of an ad hoc committee that had been formed for the dress code issue. In fact, they had appointed someone to meet with her on campus the next day at noon. Hulya had heard of these appointments in a small, stifling room that came to be called "ikna odasi", the persuasion room. The name was a bit misleading. It conveyed the illusion that either side, if any, could be convinced. The truth was, only the student was expected to be persuaded. Of what? Of the absurdity of the headscarf. Of the good intention of the state that initiated this "liberating" move for women.

Hulya looked at herself in the mirror. Her wavy, brown hair fell gracefully on her slender shoulders. "Now," she said to her image, "you are an enlightened woman." She picked a random scarf from the first drawer of the dresser and threw it over her head. "Now, you are not," she said full of irony. "Funny, how I can transpose centuries with just a move of my hand and a piece of cloth. I am time traveling without moving an inch," she said smirking with sarcasm. "Shall I go tomorrow to be convinced?"

Hulya sat on her bed and smoothed the cover mindlessly. The little pot of violets with half-withered flowers was begging for water. It would probably die, but still Hulya poured some water from

the pitcher on her study desk. "I will go tomorrow to the room of persuasion." she decided, "Come what may."

The little room smelled musky and it was mostly bare, but for a small wooden table with two chairs. Hulya waited for the professor. "What if I had brought the American researcher with me?" she mused. Would the convincing professor feel validated with a Westerner by her side? Hulya had still to meet the researcher, but she already knew her opinions related to the headscarf ban.

"It is inhumane and unfair." The American had judged when probed by Hilal in one of the sohbet. Hilal was a certified nurse but stayed at home to tend to her five children. Because her husband was a lawyer, Hilal was sensitive on the issue of human rights. Once, she had asked in a sohbet if it was fair to prohibit the Kurds from speaking Kurdish among themselves. That had called for a long pause, Hulya was told. Issues of the Kurdish problem, like other political issues, were not discussed in a sohbet.

Would the American maintain the same attitude in front of the professor? Would she say, if she were here, that in America, a secular country no less, everyone could choose how to dress? Or would she deflect? Hulya imagined Meryem, Zeynep hoca's daughter, walking the halls of her university in Atlanta, her head high despite of her headscarf - or maybe because of it.

A slight knock on the door startled Hulya and brought her back to the musty little room. A round- faced, middle- aged woman came solemnly. Her gray hair was peeking at the roots of red color. She was wearing a crimson suit. The jacket must have fit a bit tightly, because she had left it open. A pendant with an intricate design and a gem stone in its center hung between the folds of the white silk blouse. Her outfit was brightened by a colorful foulard under the collar. Hulya stood up when the professor extended her hand and greeted her with deference.

“Hulya, please sit,” urged the professor. She laid a folder on the table, which she opened and perused with feigned interest.

“As I see, you are a bright student. More importantly, you are about to graduate next semester. It will be a shame to cut short your education, when you are so close to finishing. What do you think?”

“I have no intention of cutting it short,” Hulya said a bit timidly. “But I don't want to give concessions from my religion either. It is not right.”

The professor pursed her lips and took a deep breath. Hulya saw that she was disappointed. How many more times has she had to *convince* other students? Hulya wondered. Did she think, like many secular- minded modern women, that because she covered her head, Hulya was pitiful and brainwashed? Did she see Hulya as a shameful failure of Ataturk's modernizing reforms?

“There is no obligation for the headscarf in religion.” The professor said, a bit forcefully. “I am a Muslim, too. The headscarf is a redundant custom of Arabs. We are Turks. Why should we dress like Arabs?”

Hulya wanted to say: You seem dressed like a European. How is a Turk supposed to dress? Instead she said: “The headscarf is worn by Muslim women worldwide, in all continents and not just Arabs. The majority of scholars agree that it is obligatory for Muslim women to cover her private parts. I have read the primary sources including the Quran and I have arrived to the conclusion that this attire is what my religion demands from me.”

“The majority of scholars, ha? And they happen to be all men perhaps?”

“What if they are all men? Are all men against women?”

“No, but all men want to control women and what a greater device can there be than a headscarf?”

“What about Ataturk and his friends? Since they were men too, can we say, by your logic, that his reforms were intended to control women?”

At the Ataturk reference, the professor got agitated and snapped back. "You should show more respect to Ataturk." she chided. "If we both stand here on this campus today, we owe it to his visionary reforms regarding women. If it wasn't for him, you would now be embroidering your dowry in your father's harem."

"I will return to embroidering if this regulation, which they say it was developed based on the principles of Ataturk, remains in force." Hulya said, a bit impatiently.

The professor was clearly losing her patience too. "Look, dear. Use your mind and choose wisely. We will overlook your absences, if you return to school tomorrow dressed properly."

Hulya stood silent for a moment. The professor took it to mean that she was pondering her decision. Instead, Hulya was recalling a conversation she had had with Zeynep hoca ten days ago.

Zeynep hoca had come to see her and with permission had entered her room, sat on her bed and holding Hulya's hand, she had confessed. "Hulya dear, I have been thinking for days about a way out of this predicament. I have consulted all the Islamic jurisprudence books at hand; I have talked with my husband who, as you know, specialized in Islamic Jurisprudence. After much deliberation, I have reached a conclusion."

Hulya could see her genuine worry from the wrinkles on her forehead and she was not only touched, but also hopeful, sincerely anticipating a solution.

"I want you to go to school without a heavy conscience, without thinking you are committing a sin." Zeynep hoca said. Taking in a deep breath, she continued "The Islamic jurists have ruled that the head covering is obligatory upon every *free* Muslim woman. The key word, here, is *free*. It was rightly assumed that, since a slave woman had no control over what she wore, it would be unfair on the part of God to oblige her with certain attire, so they were held exempt from covering their hair. For this reason, the head covering became indicative of the status of women, *free* versus *slave*. So..."

Here Zeynep hoca swallowed hard. "Since in this country we are not allowed to wear what we want and where we want it, we are not *free*. So if you remove it because you are forced to, it won't be your sin." Zeynep hoca waited for Hulya's response.

Hulya's head was spinning. Instead of appeasing her worries, this proposition angered her. Removing her headscarf meant accepting her slave status, bowing to the secular establishment. I would rather remain uneducated, she thought. It was easy for Zeynep hoca to speak. Both her daughters, Meryem and Zehra, were living abroad and wearing whatever they wanted, *free*, without constraints.

"Hocam, thank you for coming but I won't give in," she thanked, though not without bitterness. "Even if I bare my head till I finish school, I won't be able to work as a doctor in the hospital with a headscarf. I will have to make concessions all my life," she said, as sadness sank in again. "You know the saying 'If your beliefs don't shape your life, then your life will shape your beliefs.' Although my heart is bleeding and only Allah can witness my pain, I choose my beliefs. This is my test in life. I shall not fail it."

Back at the persuasion room, the professor cleared her throat and, thinking that Hulya was ready to answer, she asked: "What is your decision?"

Startled, Hulya raised her head, locked eyes with her professor and answered in a calm voice: "I choose to be free. My great grandfather died in the battle of Gallipoli against the Western powers in 1915. He shed his blood, so that I could be free. I will honor his sacrifice," she said, rising from her seat with dignity.

The professor looked puzzled, but she could see from Hulya's stoutness that she wasn't persuaded. "I hope you will not come to regret this," the professor said in a threatening tone.

Hulya ignored her and left the room without replying. She sped down the hall to get out before her tears rushed down her face. "I shall not cry," she muttered with anger. "I shall not please them."

The din of the traffic muffled her sobs. The blurry silhouettes of people walking past her did not spoil the stillness of her mind. She walked until she had no energy left and collapsed on a bank in a

nearby park. The breeze blew softly. She looked up toward the blue sky. The seagulls were soaring, noisily plunging into the sea catching fish or pieces of bread thrown to them by children on the shore.

Hulya looked around and saw a small mosque a few hundred meters away. She walked toward it and entered the ablution place for women. An older woman was washing her feet, whispering prayers in the meantime. *Guide my feet to the right path. I testify that there is no god but Allah and Muhammet is His messenger.* She wiped her hands and face with the paper towel and smiled at Hulya. The old woman sidestepped, so Hulya could pass to the next sink. "Come my dear," she said. "Freshen up with the water of ablution and don't despair in the mercy of Allah." Had she understood from Hulya's tear-stricken face, from her swollen red eyelids that her heart ached beyond measure?

Hulya took off her outer coat and headscarf and hung them on a plastic hook on the wall. She placed her purse on the floor and after rolling up her sleeves, she took off her shoes and socks. She put on a pair of slippers that stood by the wall. They were way too big for her. Were they men's slippers? She turned on the tap and the rush of cold water felt good on her hands. Hulya tried to remember the supplications for ablution. Her grandmother had taught her when she first started to read the Quran. She had recited them for many years, but had ignored them later. Ablution had become for a long time just a routine that she performed mindlessly, not a part of worship. She paused for a moment to remember. What did one say when washing one's mouth? For years, Hulya had focused on becoming a doctor, a passion that had encompassed her whole being. Now that her dream was shrinking, the emptiness in her soul was exposed. Washing her hands, her face, and her feet, Hulya felt her body grow lighter, as if with the running water all her worldly concerns were dripping down and streaming underground toward the seas.

She stepped into the cool prayer section for women. The old lady whom she met a moment ago, had opened her hands with palms facing the ceiling, she was pouring her soul toward the heavens. Hulya took a deep breath, raised her hands to her chest with palms facing outward and proclaimed in a

soft whisper, *Allahu Ekber*. She bowed and prostrated, as her soul soared free in the spiritual realm. Hulya was small. Allah was great. This life was but a dream, we woke from it with death. Believers were always winners. When something good happened, they gave thanks and thus gained rewards from their God. When a calamity befell them, they showed patience and won favors from their God. The real triumph rested with the hereafter. With every cell in her body she believed. Hulya felt her chest expand with relief. A tight knot was being untied with her prayer.

Life was transient. This too, shall come to pass, Hulya thought. Of this, she was convinced.

3.7 Kermes - The Grand Sale

On the day of the kermes, I heard Mom get up long before the sun. In fact, the darkness of the night was so thick that, had I not checked the clock on the night stand, I would think she hadn't gone to bed yet.

I heard her open the faucet in the restroom and I assumed she was taking ablution. Mom aims to spend her waking hours in a state of physical purity. She says she wants to give her last breath in a state of ablution. For her, ablution is not just about physical cleanliness, but also a reminder of spiritual purity. Sometimes she goes through her day with an intense focus, as though it was her last, as if the angel of death is breathing behind her neck. Ecel, the moment of death, is hidden and unknown to all of us. It is better to be prepared all the time. Mom exited the restroom and I heard her switch off the light.

She must have gone to pray because the door of her bedroom creaked. At 4:00 a.m., there is only one place Mom would rather be: on her prayer mat, supplicating, meditating. She will ask Allah to help us during kermes. She will pray for a bright sun and a blue sky. That people will come, that they will be generous, that they will buy a lot, even if they do not need as much. The only time Mom will tolerate waste is when money is spent in kermes, in the fund raising sale. Usually the items are priced a bit higher than in stores. After all, one doesn't go to a kermes to strike a bargain. One buys to help.

The day before, Mom and her friends spent the whole afternoon cleaning and decorating the place. I blew up countless balloons of different colors and hung them from the ceiling. Mom and others arranged the tables and placed white covers and vases for fresh flowers on them. My brother, my father, and Sema teyze's sons carried in chairs, repaired the lights, and made sure that the speakers were working properly.

Around six o'clock, as the sun was kissing the hem of the sky, Mom woke my brother and me for morning prayers. Dad was already praying when we joined him. After prayers, we went straight to the kitchen where the teapot was whistling its happy song. As I munched my toasted bread, Mom, Dad, and Yasin abi went over what was left to do. No matter how much we work, there is always more to do. And Mom thinks that is a good thing. Heaven is not cheap, Rana Sultan, she has told me many times. I know. But that doesn't mean I don't wish it were otherwise. Who wouldn't want her parents to be less occupied outside the house, so that they could eat a Sunday breakfast, together as a family, without the phone ring interrupting my joke? Mom says we will do *all that* and much more in the heaven. "This world is a place of service," she says. "The next is the abode of reward."

Around seven o'clock we left the house. Sema teyze and her husband were already there and had opened the doors and windows to air the place. The sun was promising a warm day. Mom sprayed some room freshener around. The clothes and nonperishable items had been brought, priced, and placed on racks and tables yesterday. Soft drinks had been placed in coolers. Only food was to come today. Mom had enlisted one volunteer for each table to sell the items and each one would be replaced by another every four hours. Kermes was expected to last till late evening.

By eight o'clock, most of the food had arrived. All sorts of scents from spiced ground beef to cinnamon and apple infused the place. The rhythmic folk music blared from the speaker. My friend, Sule, was responsible for changing the tapes, first side A, then side B. Leyla teyze brought many trays of baklava, ten more than she had pledged. A group of young men from her husband's factory carried them

in. Leyla teyze had not been assigned a table to participate in the sale. She was to greet and accompany the guests around, especially the wives of important people, like the Mayor and his team from the municipality if they showed up.

Since the coming of the researcher, Leyla teyze has grown a bit colder toward Mom. She gives her reluctant hugs and challenges some of her opinions during sohbet. She has always been outspoken, a trait that Mom doesn't frown upon, but there is a trace of bitter discontent in her remarks which makes any situation at hand seem hopeless. For example, Leyla teyze is very critical of some customs, like, for example, the tying of the red bridal sash around the bride's waist to show that she is a virgin. She has traveled with her husband throughout Europe and has spent summers in England where both her children study and every time she is back, she boasts of the material progress, the cleanliness of the streets, the civility of people she has seen abroad. Mom usually tolerates her unfavored comparisons, but once, when she described most of the people in Istanbul as ignorant for throwing trash on the streets, Mom had had enough.

"Leyla hanim," she said. "It is not proper to call the believers ignorant. As far as the beauty of the West is concerned, remember that it was built on the blood and stolen wealth of the colonized peoples. Under what you see as splendid grandeur, lies a shallow civilization deprived of true morals. Moreover, political prowess and industrial progress may be important but family is the building block of the society. And family is falling apart over there." I could see that Mom's response had nothing to do with excusing the trash on the street, of which she herself complains. Instead, it seemed to address deeper grievances on her part. Something disturbing had accumulated in Mom and now was seeping out.

I remember that Leyla teyze fell silent. It was a bitter silence.

“Yes, we have our shortcomings.” Mom continued. “A ton of them. But there is no need to feel inferior. We shall overcome all our problems, insallah. That's what our work is all about,” she finished in a softer tone.

Another example of disagreement between them happened more recently. Last week, when the researcher and her translator were busy taping Nazife teyze's interview, Hilal abla asked Mom whether it was permissible in Islam to get her tubes tied. She had had her fifth child a few months ago and was afraid, she might get pregnant again. She complained that, although she had tried every single birth control available after her third child, she still had gotten pregnant, by accident, twice. Although her lawyer husband could provide comfortably for his family, her big brood was putting a strain on her.

Mom started to tell her that tying the tubes, which I understood to mean that she wouldn't have any more children, was forbidden in Islam unless the health of the mother was at risk. While all other birth controls were permissible, what Hilal abla wanted to do was allowed only in extreme cases, as a last resort.

Leyla teyze somehow must have gotten impatient with Mom's argument that she blurted out, “With health risks, you don't mean only physical, right? Because mental health is important too. And it is obvious that her children are wearing out her wits.” I could tell that even Hilal abla was distressed by her interference. Was she inferring that Hilal abla was depressed? Going crazy with her crowd?

Mom ignored Leyla teyze's interjection and asked Hilal abla if she had anyone to help with child care. Hilal abla responded that since they had moved out of her in-laws big house five years ago, their relations had deteriorated and she couldn't ask for her mother-in-law's assistance. I wondered what Leyla teyze had to say on this. Once she had declared that the extended family was a powerhouse for trouble. But she did not comment.

Mom assigned Nazife teyze to help her every other day. Mom and Sema teyze would pitch in once in a while. "As for your decision about tying the tubes," Mom said softly, "I say, trust in Allah. Yet still, in the end, it is your and your husband's decision."

When the clock struck twelve, the sale was in full swing. I noticed that the researcher had come and was taking pictures. Her translator was pointing toward the banner and explaining something. My brother, Yasin, with his impeccable handwriting had written: *Welcome to our Annual Kermes, Organized for the Benefit of Education of Youth in Need*. People around her were eyeing the American with curiosity. Some were a bit disturbed by her taking pictures and they hurried out. I was assigned to the cookie table and my customers were mostly children who dragged their parents, enticed by the scent of cinnamon and vanilla.

"Merhaba, Rana. How is it going?" the researcher asked me in Turkish.

"Fine," I said, blushing. I found it flattering that among all tables, she chose to stop at mine.

"Can I take your picture?" she asked with her perfect smile.

I nodded and straightened up. Her camera clicked and I was overtaken with fear that she took my picture right when I blinked. I wanted to ask her if she was taking pictures for her research or for her personal collection, but I was afraid it would sound vain to ask, especially after I posed for her. I wondered what people in America would think when they looked at me, standing erect, behind a table full of cookies, if she included it in her research. A young Muslim girl volunteering for a good cause? A dutiful daughter helping her Mom? Or a silly salesgirl half asleep, in case I blinked?

Leyla teyze stopped the American and was trying to draw her attention to the baklava table. Out of the blue, she called out to my Yasin abi who hurried toward her, thinking that his help might be needed. Leyla teyze has always been fond of Yasin abi. At first I thought that maybe she intended to set him up to marry her daughter. But as I grew a little older, I understood that Humeyra, her beautiful and rich daughter had a long line of suitors and Yasin abi was nowhere near the front of it, not that I thought

that he was interested anyway. Leyla teyze asked the researcher. “Jen, have you met Yasin, the handsome son of Zeynep hoca?”

Yasin abi blushed to the tip of his ears. “Leyla teyze, Jen and I have met a couple of times,” he said before the American could answer.

“Merhaba Yasin,” greeted Jen with the ease that you say hi to an acquaintance. Yasin Abi greeted her with a bow of his head and after excusing himself, he dashed out.

All of a sudden, I grew curious. When did they meet a couple of times? As far as I knew, they had met only once, around two weeks ago. Mom, Sema teyze, Nurcan abla, and I had gone to recruit people to subscribe to *My Family* magazine. *Ailem Dergisi*, had short beneficial information on all sorts of topics, from religion to health and cooking. Written in a simple language that required little schooling, the magazine was a hit among housewives, I was told. I loved the *Dear Can abi* section where Dr. Can, a psychologist, answers questions from his readers.

The whole ordeal of knocking on the doors of random people in the neighborhood had always been utterly embarrassing, to say the least. Sometimes people were plain rude and shooed you away with annoyance. Once, a man, with a protruding pot belly opened the door dressed in underwear. Mom looked away, as she inquired about the whereabouts of the women of his family.

For this reason, I usually opt out of the subscription expedition, if I can. This time, I consented to go since the American was coming to observe. Mom believes that our people read too little and watch TV too much. Gulcan abla, who works as a dental hygienist, had volunteered to come along since she had her day off. She took on the talking part of our visits. It was funny to see the difference in people's reactions with Jen in our midst. Many were perplexed by her presence. Others showed interest and felt honored. A middle- aged woman lamented that unfortunately she couldn't subscribe to the magazine because no one in her family knew English. When Gulcan abla clarified that the magazine was in Turkish,

she was stupefied. The furrows on her forehead indicated that she was trying hard to understand what business could an American have with a Turkish magazine.

Most people invited us in. We politely declined. Mom wanted to knock on as many doors as possible. Some insisted that we come in and drink a cup of tea. Other brave souls tried to speak English with Jen, ignoring the rest of us altogether. In the end we ended with more subscriptions than usual, which was good.

Another similar expedition happens annually before Kurban bayrami, the Sacrificial Holiday. We ask people to donate animals to be slaughtered for the benefit of students' light houses or dorms. Yasin abi also drives along a truck she borrows from Hamdi amca to collect the animal skins which are sold to skin curators to be used later in different products. The money raised is used for scholarships for students. I don't think we raise a lot of money this way. But Mom says it is the effort that counts.

Around noon, Sule came to replace me, but I insisted that I wasn't tired. She bought a cookie and went to see if she could help somebody else. I was about to think that business was slowing down for my table when an old lady approached, taking slow steps.

"My daughter, how much is it for five cookies?" She handed me the money with her trembling hand, after I told her the price. "I want to buy them for my granddaughter."

I counted the money and realized that she had given me less. Did she hear me correctly, or did she count them wrong? Should I tell her to give me more? What if she doesn't have any left? The pension salaries were deemed as "never sufficient for anything." Would it be honest to pretend that the sum was right?

In the end, I decided to give her the cookies and compensate for the difference from my own pocket. She thanked me, without a single clue of my donation. I was about to feel proud for helping a destitute *nine* who wanted to make an innocent grandchild happy, when a young woman, well-to-do in appearance, with a little girl in tow, hurried toward her.

“Mom, where have you been? I have been looking everywhere for you, for half an hour in this crowd. My feet are killing me. Come on. Let's go home,” she said pulling her arm.

“I just wanted to buy Sebnem some cookies,” she said, extending the cookies to a little girl with two pony tails. The little girl looked inside the paper bag for a second and then pushed it away, dissatisfied.

“I don't want cookies, Grandma, I want cotton candy” she said, turning her back.

The old woman looked at me with eyes full of apology. She started walking slowly behind them, still carrying the cookie bag.

“Ungrateful, spoiled brat,” I muttered. “You deserve a smack on your face.”

Yasin abi stopped by and brought me meatballs with rice on a paper plate. “You must be hungry, princess. Here, sit down on this chair and eat while I sell your cookies,” he said with a wink.

I watched him interact with customers. He was respectful toward elders and bashful with young women, avoiding eye contact, but all the same handsome. Where did he meet with the researcher, I wondered, trying to ransack my memory. After the magazine subscription foray, we dispersed and since it was past sunset, Mom thought it would not be safe for Jen to take the bus. There were all sorts of people in Istanbul, and foreigners drew attention everywhere, like magnets drew nails. We walked home and Mom invited Jen in. She rejected her invitation politely, saying that she was tired and wanted to rest. Mom asked Yasin abi to give her a ride, with me in the car as a chaperone. I thought that Jen would sit in the back with me, like a Turkish woman would have done. Only Mom, Grandma or my aunt sat in the front row with Yasin abi. But Jen sat down in the front seat with such normalcy, I was stunned.

She thanked Yasin abi in Turkish for taking the trouble to drop her off.

“You are welcome,” said Yasin Abi, with his eyes on the road.

Jen's apartment wasn't far, a twenty-minute ride, estimated by my brother based on her address. But with Istanbul's traffic, we ended up on the road for about an hour, during which time Jen

shared her impressions about Turkey, Istanbul, and its residents. Yasin abi listened politely, nodding here and there. Then Jen asked what he was doing for a living. When said that he worked as an architect, she livened up with interest. Her father, back in America, was an architect too. She said that since childhood her father had introduced her, through books and pictures, to the best architectural masterpieces around the world, Istanbul's monuments included.

“Interesting,” commented my brother.

I thought the coincidence was interesting, too. Her speech, with its many grammatical errors and strange accent, rendered the most mundane pronouncement like, “I love white cheese,” an interesting statement.

She said she wanted to go sightseeing with a guide who knew the historical background of ancient monuments among the modern buildings of Istanbul. Next, for reasons unbeknownst to me, she asked my brother whether he spoke English. Both my sisters and Yasin abi was taken rigorous courses in English during college. When Yasin abi nodded, Jen switched into her mother tongue with unsuppressed delight. From then on I could catch only words like: house, father, mother, Africa, tomorrow, happy, love, visit, thank you.

In the din of Kermes, those words regrouped in my head for all possible combinations. Did they agree to go sightseeing together? Did Yasin abi guide her around, alone, unaccompanied by anyone else? The idea made me gasp. Did Mom know? Glancing toward him, I tried to detect if his eyes searched for Jen in the crowd. No signs of special interest were evident.

“Rana,” my brother said, after I had thrown the paper plate to the trash. “If you have not yet performed the noon prayers, there is a room in the back reserved for ladies. I will wait till you come back.”

“Tamam,” I agreed.

In the makeshift prayer room, a few volunteers were bowing and prostrating on prayer mats. When I finally finished and sat down to recite the names of Allah, counting them with my fingers, I realized how tired I was. At least five more hours to go, I guessed. Probably, we would stay for the cleanup, too.

On my way back to the cookie table, I asked Sema teyze if I could sell items at some other table. She assigned me the baklava table in front of which a line of customers were waiting. She called Sule to take my place, so Yasin abi could go. The line of eager customers waiting for baklava was getting longer. Apparently another helping hand was needed to speed up the sales.

As soon as I appeared by her side, the assigned volunteer handed me the money box with impatience. "Here," She said " you take the money from the buyers and give them the change while I box their order."

Math is not one of my strengths and being pressed for time didn't help. One man said I had given too much change and returned the surplus, which I took back with gratitude. Another woman demanded that I add two more liras to her change.

My head was spinning with numbers when it was announced from the speaker that since we were getting closer to the end of kermes, the food items were on discount for fifty percent and other merchandise twenty-five percent off. I pitied those sales volunteers of other merchandise who would have to calculate the twenty-five percent discount. Kermes or not, people love bargaining and as if waiting for this announcement, many more crowded around the baklava trays.

Hours had passed when the muezzin called us to evening prayers. By then, we had emptied the place, swept, and mopped it until the floor shone. Mom noticed a brown notebook with a brown leather cover, sitting on top of a stack of chairs. She looked between the pages to determine who it belonged to. I came closer, filled with curiosity. The handwriting was neat and round, but the text was in English.

“It must be Jen's,” I said. “She must have dropped it.”

Mom nodded but kept looking attentively, as if she had just discovered something peculiar. I inched a bit closer. Among strings of unfamiliar English words, I noticed names of people I knew: Sema, Zeynep, Nazife, Gulcan. I kept looking to spot my name, but Mom closed it shut with haste. Not quick enough. In the split-second before the notebook snapped, I saw the root of Mom's curiosity. My brother's name, Yasin, was written in capitals. A little heart was drawn in pink ink next to it.

3.8 The Awakening

Mehmet Efendi came home from prison a different man. His whitened hair and the scars on his body bore witness to the harsh treatment he suffered during the three months he was imprisoned. Those three months had been like three years for his family. Meryem Hanim had taken to bed in his absence, with frequent bouts of severe migraines she suffered stoically in the darkness of her room, shaded with curtains at all times. Zeynep worrying over mother and aching for her father had come to shoulder alone the burden that her life had become.

Till that fateful day of her father's arrest, she had lived a shielded life, protected from the ugliness of vice and crime. Her needs, both spiritual and material had been provided. During those long months she had felt like an orphan.

Yusuf, from the very beginning, had pledged to help and had remained true to his word. He brought food and groceries for them, leaving bags of produce on the threshold after knocking twice, very lightly not to disturb Meryem Hanim. Although Zeynep and Yusuf communicated rarely and mostly behind the door, Zeynep had grown familiar to his knocks, his timid voice, his lively gait. He had visited Mehmet Efendi on visit days, had found a lawyer for him, and had testified for him in the court. Walking in front with his head bowed for modesty, he had accompanied them to prison to meet Mehmet Efendi

twice. "Maasallah, what a well-mannered young man." Meryem hanım praised him in front of Mehmet Efendi.

Meeting with her father behind a steel mesh, not being able to embrace him or, feel the brush of his beard on her cheek, had caused much heart ache for Zeynep. Saying good bye to her father on these visits, seeing him walk slowly on the empty corridors toward his cell, was, truly, a test of faith. "Why, why, should he be here?" she questioned "When real criminals roam the earth?" Her heart protested with each beat. Her father, sensing her despair, had reminded her: Remember the story of prophet Yusuf, son of prophet Yakup, as told in the Holy Quran. He was thrown first to a deep well by his envious brothers and later to prison by the Egyptian Potiphar, for no crime of his own. Only when he ascended to the throne of Egyptian governor and reunited with his family, it was understood that all the trials he went through were part of a divine plan."

Mehmet Efendi called his prison, Medrese-i Yusufiye, Yusuf's school. Not only did he continue his sohbet there, answering questions from inmates, some of whom were murderers and thieves, but also he met with the person who would change the course of his life. He was younger by a decade than Mehmet Efendi but that didn't impede him to see that this fervent soul was destined, chosen even, for a great cause.

It was amazing to Mehmet Efendi, that this imam, whom his imprisoned followers called The Noble- Teacher wasn't really saying anything new. The verses he recited, were from the same Quran Mehmet Efendi treasured in his heart; the prophet he described, was the same beloved Mehmet efendi adored; the companions were the same fearless men in the face of danger and soft and lenient toward one another. Like an archeologist, the Noble -Teacher excavated buried diamonds from the dark layers of the past and held them to the sun of the present. Those diamonds emanated a blinding light which brightened a future of unmatched brilliance. Among his tears and sobs, the Noble-Teacher weaved his loyalty for Islam, his love for the prophet and his companions with the pain of seeing his Muslim fellows

so remiss with the wealth of their past, unaware of the worth of their ancestral heritage embedded in the heart of Anatolia.

When he related a prophetic tradition, that is, one of prophet Muhamet's sayings or deeds, he didn't do it in a traditional way, that is, first relating the chain of transmitters who had orally transmitted the saying for years until it was recorded in the books of Tradition; second, point to the specific volume where that particular hadis was found; third, how scholars of the past had interpreted that tradition and so on.

Instead of following that calm and dry scholarly path, the Noble-Teacher took his listeners to jump into a ferocious river, doubled in size with melting snow, gushing with unsurpassed rigor from the rocks and sweeping away all that stood in its path, flowing with restless passion toward its union with the sea. Blending different narrations, he set up the scene and with the trembling timbers of his voice he transported his listeners to the dry land of Mecca or to the green oasis of Medina. Those present could have sworn they felt the dry wind graze their faces as they witnessed the bravery of Muslim warriors in the battle of Uhud. They could hear the sounds of the swords, the cries of victory of the Meccan polytheists and the exhaustion of the wounded Prophet.

At other times, the inmates listening in a circle around the Noble-Teacher in the courtyard, under the perplexed gaze of the guards, would time travel from the cool shade of palms trees where the prophet instructed his companions in a calm voice that a Muslim is someone from whose harm everyone is safe to the glorious commander Salahaddin who refused to rest while Jerusalem was under the crusaders' invasion. Next, in their imagination, they would visit Osman, the founder of Ottoman state who didn't stretch his legs on his bed all night out for respect for the Quran hanging on the wall.

In the transfixed gazes of his listeners the Noble-Teacher saw the shame for their current conditions, their longing for the glory of the Ottoman past from which they had been severed, and their yearning for a new spring. He sensed the silent germination of hope, the restoration of their hurt pride

all waiting to be unleashed. He saw it in their heavy sighs, in their trickling tears, in their ecstatic shudders, that the awaking of their noble souls was long overdue, that the sons of this blessed land, the grandchildren of rulers of the world must not remain in shackles. This awaking would not take place over night. This centennial slumber could not be shaken off in days. Lasting change was gradual, unlike a jolt shock, unlike a disruptive revolution. Just like a baby waits in a mother's womb for the day to see the light, like the seed dreams of the sun in the dark embrace of the earth, they would strive with patience, within the boundaries of law and order. We are wardens of love, he said. We have no time for hatred, nor hostility.

Mehmet Efendi came out of prison a changed man. Like the stream of water that finds a way to join the river, he had found his calling. In the words of Rumi, till now, he had called to people: *Come, come whoever you are/ Ours is not a caravan of despair*, but from now on he would not wait for people to come. He would go to them wherever they were, to their shops, to the mosque, to the bazaar. He would go to meet people that would otherwise have never crossed his path.

A week after his acquittal, Mehmet Efendi sent word for Yusuf to visit him. Zeynep placed the tray with two cups of tea in front of the door and knocked. Without waiting for an answer, she left and went to sit in her room where she could hear their conversation. Although an affinity had formed between Zeynep and Yusuf, he still was a *namahrem*, an unrelated man with whom she couldn't mix without a valid reason.

Sitting on pillows on the floor, between sips of tea, Mehmet Efendi told Yusuf what was brewing in his soul. "Yusuf, my son, amid four walls and behind bars, I was able to assess the poor state of the faith of our people. The judge, the guardians, the soldiers who treated us like criminals because we defended the faith of our people, are like us, sons of this land, grandchildren of Ottomans who were the flag bearers of Islam. Yet, they spoke of religion as one speaks of opium, like the communists in Russia. How did they become so estranged from the legacy of our forerunners, I wondered." Yusuf listened

quietly, nodding once in a while. "I figured that people like me, who are learned in religion, haven't done their part, have remained silent, taking care only of their business and families. I was awakened by an imam who helped me realize that fire doesn't burn only the place where it starts." Mehmet Efendi paused to take a sip from his tea, leaving Yusuf time to ponder on his words. "I have decided to search, like a madman if need be, for those thirsty souls who seek their way as if blindfolded. Will you come to my aid?" Yusuf agreed wholeheartedly. "Let my soul be sacrificed on your path," he said bowing his head in humility. Mehmet Efendi placed his hand on Yusuf's shoulder. "May Allah be pleased with you my son," he prayed.

From the next day on, after closing his shop in the afternoon, Mehmet Efendi would meet with Yusuf to visit coffee houses in the city and in the nearby towns, searching for people, young or old, of every profession, who were interested in what they had to say. Those that showed interest were invited to Mehmet Efendi's home for the weekly sohbet. The circle of comers grew larger quickly. Among the faithful followers, Mehmet Efendi formed a group that started meeting separately, on a different day. Mehmet Efendi called the group, the gathering for counsel. Each member of the group started, under Mehmet Efendi's directives, his own sohbet at his home. Thus mini circles of sohbet were established around Konya. Mehmet Efendi took Yusuf to Istanbul to meet the Noble Teacher. Other learned people from around Turkey had come to tell about the latest development in their respective communities and take advice on what to do next with their growing numbers. The Noble-Teacher urged them to support the education of the youth, by sponsoring the hard working students of families of modest means and by opening student houses where college students could stay together in fellowship. The students in those houses would hold their own sohbet to fortify their faith and would pray together in brotherly spirit. In their spare time, mostly during weekend, the students started tutoring high school students for free to prepare for university entrance exams.

The last idea that the Noble- Teacher shared with them had to do with women. “We cannot go forward if we don't educate our women. Similar circles of sohbet should start among women. Student houses should be established for female students, too. Especially for them this is more important, since most parents who live according to the tenets of Islam are afraid to send their daughters to live in official dorms, fearing moral laxity.” Most men present nodded in agreement. Some seemed unconvinced though.

“If we can provide for them a clean, decent, and chaste environment, more girls will be sent to college,” the Noble- Teacher concluded. Mehmet Efendi thought of Zeynep. She had missed the college entrance exam dates after he got arrested. She had made no mention of university after his return either. He saw her busy at all times, tending to her mother, to the house and preparing treats for his guests. He wondered whether she wanted to continue her higher education. Mehmet Efendi felt ashamed that he, caught up with the fervor of setting up groups of sohbet, had neglected his own daughter lately. He had had less time to instruct her, one- on- one, as he used to before.

“Efendim,” he spoke to Noble Teacher “I am confident that my daughter, Zeynep, is qualified to give sohbet to women. With the leave of Allah she can start one in our house first and as they increase in numbers they can split in groups.” The Noble-Teacher nodded in agreement. Mehmet Efendi turned to Yusuf who was sitting next to him, to see if he had anything to add. When their eyes met, Yusuf blushed to the tip of his ears and lowered his gaze. It took a moment for Mehmet Efendi to understand what stood behind his shyness. What he saw pleased him and his face radiated with a smile.

The night he returned from Istanbul, Mehmet Efendi talked with Meryem Hanım about the matter. She approved the idea of starting a sohbet at their house and was delighted to learn of Yusuf's interest in Zeynep, an interest which, in her opinion, was reciprocated.

The next morning, as Zeynep was setting up the table, she noticed that both her parents were eyeing her with amusement. Meryem Hanim's health had improved considerably since Mehmet Efendi came home. Zeynep looked at her attire to ascertain that she hadn't worn anything inside out. When they sat to eat, her father spoke softly, "Zeynep, the light of my eyes, what do you think of going to college?"

Zeynep found herself unprepared for this question. She had thought about the subject. She paused for a moment and replied. "I'd love to study theology. I want to study by correspondence so I can still help Mom daily." She waited for her father's opinion. When he spoke he took her by surprise because instead of commenting on her proposition, he threw in another question: "What do you think of Yusuf?"

"Yusuf?" - Zeynep stammered, trying hard to conceal her embarrassment. What did Yusuf have to do with her schooling? "Yusuf was a great help to us during your absence," she muttered, her cheeks growing hot. "May Allah be pleased with him," she added not knowing what else to say. "Amin," said both her parents with a smile. Zeynep wished to say: "What's up with both of you today?" Instead she said: "Baba, would like me to refill you cup?" Changing the subject seemed the safest route.

"No, thanks Zeynevim. I have had enough tea for today." Mehmet effendi said placing the cup on its saucer. "Yusuf wants to marry you, my dear" He said. Zeynep was shocked by his bluntness. "What do you say to that?"

Zeynep's hand shook violently and she spilled some tea when putting her cup down. She was in love with Yusuf, from the first night she had seen him bending over the tea tray. That love had increased with his attention to her and her family, but she had not dared express it. She couldn't dare even now as she sat uncomfortably in front of her parents. "Whatever you say on this matter, I accept." She said timidly. Will they concede? She wondered. Her father loved Yusuf but what if they rejected his request

just because she had given a reluctant response? Zeynep's heart beat so ferociously that she feared her parents might notice.

Mehmet Efendi remained silent for what seemed an eternity to Zeynep. When did his little Zeynep grow into this mature, beautiful woman? How was it possible, to let her fly like a bird to another nest?

“Come on, Mehmet efendi,” Meryem hanım had chastised his emotional state the night before. “It is the natural course for your daughter. You don't intend to keep her unmarried to make pickles of her, do you?” she teased.

“We approve of it. May Allah bless this union” Mehmet effendi finally spoke. Zeynep exhaled with relief and hugged both her parents with joy.

Yusuf, was feeling uneasy when he was told that Mehmet effendi was waiting for him in his shop. Since their return from Istanbul he had felt embarrassed to stop by his workshop. With selam, he entered the dusty dim of the shop and went to sit on a chair, next to the bench Mehmet Efendi was sipping tea.

After a small talk, where he inquired about the sohbet groups, Mehmet Efendi opened the topic of marriage. “Yusuf, my son it is time for you to marry and start your own family. Solitude is reserved only for Allah. What do you say?”

Yusuf gulped with difficulty. “You know better, effendim” he said respectfully.

“Is there a girl you are thinking of?”

Yes, there was but Yusuf couldn't bring himself to say “your daughter.” It would be disrespectful, or even treacherous, as if Yusuf had betrayed his trust by entertaining unchaste thoughts.

Instead he said: “Whomever you see appropriate for me, I will marry.” Mehmet Efendi was pleased with his submission. “Alright then, come tonight to us for tea. Bring your parents and two rings”.

If he had not contained himself, Yusuf would have thrown himself to Mehmet Efendi's arms for joy. He kissed Mehmet Efendi's hand instead. "May Allah be pleased with you, efendim" He thanked bowing and walking backwards. "May He be pleased with all of us" replied Mehmet Efendi.

Ignoring the surprised looks of people, Yusuf ran through the streets of Konya toward his house. He tried to remember the features of Zeynep's face, but all was in a blur. Only her voice was clear in his ears. He would have a proper, even if a furtive look at her tonight. She would serve coffee as was the custom. Her father would slide the rings on his and her fingers and after invoking Allah's blessing, he would cut the ribbons that tied the rings together. Yusuf couldn't wait for the sun to set. He wished he could gather the stars to make a necklace for Zeynep, his moon-faced bride.

3.9 Home Away From Home

May 1997, Albania

Zehra threw a furtive glance at the clock. One more hour till the water comes, she thought. The dishes were sponged with warm water and detergent and now stood on the kitchen counter, waiting to be rinsed. Water came rushing through the taps in three courses, at 6:00 am, 12:00 pm, and 6:00pm. It had taken Zehra some time to get used to this routine. Because it flowed for only an hour and a half, Zehra had to sponge everything ahead, so that, besides rinsing the dishes, she could have time to fill bottles and containers with much needed water.

She made a mental list of the things that remained to be done before her students came for tutoring and tea. "First, I should prepare the pogaca dough and let it rise. In the meantime I can cook the milk desert. After doing the dishes and filling water, I can wash the fruits and put the teapot on the stove to brew tea. It's good that Ahmet took Feyza with him, otherwise I would never be able to finish anything with her clinging to me, as I move around in this small kitchen."

Zehra took out from the bottom drawer a big plastic bowl. She added flour, oil, milk, salt, and yeast. Using both her hands, she mixed them a little and finally added warm water until the dough was “as soft as the earlobe.” She kneaded it for five minutes and after covering with a kitchen towel, let it rise on the counter. “Insaallah, the pogaca will turn out good this time,” she prayed. Her Albanian students loved these Friday nights. They came to her house primarily to study math for Math Olympiad, but the most exciting time was the tea session afterward. At first, they had complained that the Turkish tea tasted bitter and they were able to drink a cup only with a lot of sugar. Yet, now, a year later, all of them refilled their cups and one or two of them omitted sugar altogether. Their changing relationship with tea was emblematic of their approach to their math teacher. Teaching math in a high school for girls came with its set of challenges, some of which had tested Zehra's patience, but she loved the girls and persevered with forbearance. She taught math in English. The girls giggled at her accent in her first day in class, without concealing their mock. Albanians were gifted when it came to languages. It could be due to the extensive phonetics in their mother tongue. They had thirty six sounds for thirty six letters. She marveled at her students' fluency and good pronunciation both in Turkish and in English. She had tried to learn some Albanian words to win her students' hearts but her pronunciation must have been so horrible that each time she attempted to say “*What are you girls up to?*”, her students cracked up and bent with laughter. After giving up trying to impress them with lingual feats she failed to produce, Zehra focused on her teaching. Math was an important subject for their future education, comprising a major part of university entrance exams both in Turkey and Albania. First, her students complained of too much homework. But she could sense that they started to admire her ease in solving difficult problems in class, especially her ability to do multi-digit calculations in her mind. They started considering her a math wizard. Apparently, math equaled smart in Albania too.

Last September, out of her eighty students Zehra chose ten of the best for the Math Olympiad, assigning group study time on the weekends at the school. Eight of the girls were not from the capital,

where the school was founded, so they stayed in the school's dorm which occupied the last floor, the fifth, in the building. Because her students, like her, lived away from their families and very often became homesick, Zehra decided to have a sleepover every last Friday of the month. After study and tea they would watch a movie, followed by a lot of lively chatting, way into the night. The following morning, Zehra would wake up very early to catch the water still running. She would wake up the girls after setting the table for breakfast. Looking at them, yawning, and stretching in their pajamas, Zehra would feel her chest expand with compassion. She and her husband had come all the way from Turkey to teach them, to mentor them so that they could lead fruitful lives. Their first day in the country remained a distinguished moment for her. Newly wed, Ahmet and Zehra instead of going for a honeymoon as was expected had packed three big suitcases and boarded a small plane to Albania. Although the flight lasted about one hour and a half, for Zehra this was the first trip abroad and Albania, with mountain peaks covered with snow was very far from home. Sitting next to her husband, whom she barely knew, Zehra felt displaced for the first time in her life. Ahmet had come to Turkey in the beginning of summer for the purpose of finding a suitable woman to marry. He intended to return shortly to his teaching position. A common acquaintance had proposed that he marry Zeynep hoca's daughter. After preliminary inquiry about the potential groom's family and profile, Zehra had agreed to meet him in a cafe. Usually a chaperone sits with the couple but Yasin, her brother, had preferred to sit two tables away after shaking hands with Ahmet. Zehra remembers being very nervous that day. This was her first arranged rendezvous. She had barely glanced at him twice before lowering her head and looking at her hands during the whole meeting. They had talked about their schooling backgrounds and family origins. He had mentioned his work as a chemistry teacher in Albania, in a high school for girls. Zehra liked that he sounded passionate about his students. He described the Albanians as warm blooded people, "just like us". Ahmet went on talking on the Ottoman cultural and architectural imprints in Albania, how the five centuries of Ottoman rule had resulted in a common cultural heritage, especially

among the Muslim population. Listening to him talk, Zehra had felt a warm sensation encompass her body.

“Is this attraction,” she wondered “or love?” She had left the meeting feeling a sweet tremor in her hands. Her mom had inquired about her first impression but seeing her daughter tremble with emotions, she had taken her aside and said “My daughter, if you don't like him, say so. You are under no obligation.” Zehra shook her head. “No it's not that. It's just that he wants to marry by the end of summer and I don't know how much of him. How I can get to know him well enough before I tie my life with him. I asked to meet again tomorrow in the same place and he agreed. It seems that his first impression isn't bad either.”

Zeynep gave her daughter a tight hug. “Why shouldn't it be good? Where can he find a girl like you?”

Zehra met with Ahmet three more times, where they discussed habits, ideals, children, food, and health issues. During these meetings, Zehra overcame her shyness and looked into his green eyes that twinkled with a different light, when he told something funny. After the third meeting, Zehra invited him home to meet her family. It was not hard to see that he was a pleaser. Even Rana, then nine years old, warmed up to him. A month after their first encounter, a small engagement ceremony was held at Zehra's house where the two families met and decided on wedding and dowries. It pleased Zehra that their preparations didn't resemble conventional ones, where the families share financial burden in the furniture of the couple's house. Instead of worrying who will buy the kitchen appliances, who the living room furniture, how many installments to pay for the bedroom set and such, the young couple had to pack just three suitcases, one for her, one for him, and one for the books that nurtured their faith.

Her parents, her sister Meryem and Rana, and her brother Yasin, had all come to see her off to the airport. Rana had cried uncontrollably, because Zehra had been her second mom, when Zeynep ran from a sohbet to the other. She had wiped her tears with a promise to call home every week and visit

every summer. Zeynep had hugged her daughter with all her strength to restrain tears. “May Allah bless your *hicret*, your sacred migration for His sake,” she said to both. They had parted and had waived to each other until the throngs of people blocked the view.

Now, three years later, many things had changed. She had gotten to know her husband better and their marriage had been strengthened with the birth of their daughter. She had gained experience in teaching and loved her students unconditionally. Her students loved her back and praised her cooking.

Zehra put a deep aluminum pot on the stove and turned it on to medium high. She cut the butter packet in half, placing one half of it in the pot to melt. Next, she added one cup of flour and started stirring it until the two mixed well. When she added one liter of milk, the pot sizzled and she kept stirring until a homogenous mixture formed, smooth like yogurt. She continued stirring with one hand to prevent it from getting stuck at the bottom and with the other hand added a cup of sugar and vanilla.

The sweet scent of vanilla spread around enhancing her nostalgia. That's how her house smelled on Sundays throughout her childhood. Despite her busy schedule, her mom made sure they had breakfast as a family on Sundays. When the mixture started burbling, Zehra lowered the heat and withdrew the spoon, placing it in the sink. After three minutes of simmering, she put the pot on the counter and poured the content into a glass rectangular tray to let it sit in the fridge till serving time.

With a smile on her face, Zehra imagined her students asking: “What is this?” “It’s a dessert,” she would explain. “What is it called?” one of them would probably insist. “*Fake Chicken Breast*” was the answer. Would they laugh at it? Or would they say, “Yucky, that's weird? Who makes a dessert with chicken breast?” Probably, the second one.

Zehra would take the time to explain to them that there was no chicken breast in this dessert, hence the word *fake* in its name but there was real chicken breast, the white lean tenderloins, in the

original recipe. Or so it was believed. Zehra had never tasted the original dessert. No one she knew had either. She wondered why this persistence in naming the dessert after an ingredient that was no longer in it.

She checked the pogaca dough poking her index finger into the smooth risen dough. Pleased with its deep print which proved that it had risen two fold its first size, "Perfect." she thought.

She bent to open the drawer below the oven and she heard her back complain. "After eight hours of teaching and an hour of department training you need to lay down for a bit" the pain and the stiffness seemed to suggest. Zehra retrieved the big baking pan and she straightened up. She turned her upper body right and then left to flex her waist a bit. No sleep and rest till everyone falls asleep tonight, she knew.

Zehra took a handful of dough, rounded it between her hands and presses it on her left palm. Next she placed one teaspoon of feta cheese in the middle of it and closed the dough in the shape of a half moon. She repeated it until all the dough was used and twenty five half-moons were brushed with egg yolk on the top and sprinkled with sesame seeds. Zehra let the dough rise again as the oven preheated.

"Ten minutes, till the water makes its appearance in the scene," she mused. She turned on the tap a tiny bit and listened for the little whistle, more a wheezing sound to be precise, which announced the arrival of water. Some days Zehra worried over the purity of the water they drank. In Albania, a country plunged in economic crisis and with no political stability it was hard to be sure of the quality of anything. Most of the food products were imported from neighboring countries, with labels and signs in different languages. Rumors said that many of them were consumed after their expiration date.

The tap shook with the first gush of water as if coming to life with it. Later the flow of water got steady. Zehra quickly placed the baking pan into the oven and rushed to the sink. The race begins, she smiled to herself. Let's see who wins. She imagined the taps of every apartment in the five- floor -

building cranking with the vigor of water as the Albanians wives and daughters, pretty-homely, educated-illiterate, healthy-sick, happy-sad, all washed, rinsed and filled bottles. This communion was comforting to her, reminiscent of their common womanhood. When the scent of baked pogaca, not very different from that of bread, filled the kitchen, Zehra was done with the dishes. She filled buckets, cauldrons, and bottles with water in the bathroom too. One bucket of it was needed to mop the floor, one to wash the baby. One cauldron will be used for ablution before prayers. That reminded her that only one of her students, Elona, prayed the five daily prayers. She did it in Zehra's bedroom so that her friend would not find it imposing. Three of her students were orthodox Christian, five were nominally Muslim, and two claimed to be atheists. Zehra had a hard time to understanding the latter. How could someone not believe in the Creator?

The high school she worked for organized home visits as a sign of good will on the part of Turkish teachers who desired to know their Albanian students better. Zehra had been in the houses of all the students, except Elona. Come to think of it, she remembered that once in a while she even teased Elona for not inviting her favorite teacher over at her house. Elona, blushed, apparently embarrassed, and avoided commenting on the topic by saying "Someday I will".

From the very first visit, it was made clear as daylight to Zehra that Albanians were as hospitable as her people in Turkey, if not more. Not only they were delighted by these visits but the hosts did everything in their hands to turn these gatherings into memorable moments. Very often members of the extended families were invited as well, tables were filled to the brim and photos and videos were made of the occasion. Usually the student served as the translator, tending to many simultaneous lines of communications, getting mixed up when doing so by speaking Turkish to relatives and Albanian to teachers. After a short moment of confusion, the sense of realization would call for a pause, in which time everyone present contributed to the roar of laughter.

The only disturbing aspect of these visits for Zehra and her husband were the bottles of raki, a heavy alcoholic beverage that was consumed. Although the parents, had been warned beforehand that the teachers never drank alcohol, the hosts would still make toasts with them and enjoy themselves. After a few topped glasses, the faces reddened, the tongues thickened, and the men at the table got giddy, while the women gestured to them by biting their lower lips that they had had enough of the drink. When things reached that point, Zehra and her husband would take leave, thanking their host again.

On their way home, breathing fresh air without any reeking of raki, they would talk and try to understand where this infatuation with raki started and reached the point that both Christians and Muslims were equally fond of it. They were told by Albanian teachers that raki was encouraged in communist years. Maybe as a way of numbing people and keeping them happy, Zehra surmised.

The tap started coughing again as if to say good-bye. Zehra took the pogaca out of the oven, placed a towel on top to soften the crust and sat on the chair by the kitchen window which she opened to let in the cool air of the evening. A team of little children were playing and chasing after a ball in the courtyard, shouting and yelling with what little air their over-worked lungs could afford. It is funny, Zehra thought. Although I can't recognize a word of what they are saying, I feel that I know what their hullabaloo is all about. Oh, the joyful, care-free childhood, why do you have to pass this fast, she moaned. She thought of Feyza, her little daughter who had gone with her father to the neighborhood park. She found herself in a conflicting predicament. She missed her daughter who had been with her baby sitter all day but on the other hand she was happy she would spend the evening with her dad in the men's sohbet as Zehra and her students worked on solving intricate math questions.

Zehra got up from her chair. The soles of her feet, the muscles of her neck and arms joined her back in petitioning for a little more rest. Not yet, my dear body. Hang in there, a bit more. She went into

the living room and perused the math worksheets she had placed there a few hours ago on the coffee table.

Her students were smart and hardworking. If she could keep them motivated, focused on their goals, they might avoid the traps of youth, the call to bohemian life, to self-destruction." You are the future of your country. You should serve your motherland and bring it back to its feet after the collapse. Become the change you want to see around you." She would urge them during break and tea time.

Zehra straightened the cover on the couch and fluffed the pillows. She looked around with satisfaction. Her house was clean, the food smelled splendid, and her heart was full with compassion for her students. She heard heavy steps stomping on the stairs. "They will ring the bell any second now," she intuited. And ring they did.

The living room, for the past two hours, had come to life with conversation, laughter, noise. The clinking of the teaspoons, the sugar melting in the swirls of hot teas, and the ohhs and ahhs for bites of desserts would have composed a symphony of bliss for Zehra. If only deep sorrow hadn't planted itself on Elona's face, tonight. Zehra had inquired about the reason for it when Elona retreated into Zehra's bedroom for evening prayer. *Sonra hocam*: Later my teacher- she had half-heartedly promised. And now worry and concern were eating Zehra up. She had to wait for the rest of girls to go to sleep, so she could listen to Elona bare her soul and tell her what had stolen her usual jolliness.

Before the movie started, Ahmet rang the bell and without coming in, he handed a sleeping Feyza to her mom. Zehra kissed her daughter's forehead before placing her in her crib. "Forgive your mommy for tonight, sweetie." She whispered, as she covered her little angel with a blanket. Then without delay, she gave to Ahmet, who was still waiting by the door, his pijamas in a plastic bag. Ahmet had never found it right to sleep in his house when the girls were having their sleepovers. He stayed at

the house of three of his colleagues who were bachelors. Zehra gave him the remaining pogacas to have for breakfast with his friends.

When she came to the living room, the girls had already put on the pijamas, and were watching the opening scene of the movie, huddled together in the sofa. They had turned off the light and had immersed themselves in what Zehra knew to be the intriguing crime scene. The movie playing in a VHS player was an old Turkish movie titled Reis Bey, Honorable Judge. Zehra had watched it many times and found its message eye opening. It was about a criminal court judge who sentenced a youth to death for killing his mother. The youth protested in the beginning of the movie "I am innocent, Reis Bey. I am innocent". The judge paid him no heed and the execution took place. Not much later into the film, new evidence came up that proved beyond doubt the executed youth's innocence. The real murderer got caught and he confessed his crime in the court. Reis Bey was tortured so much in his conscience for the unjust punishment of the youth he had decreed that he could not find a moment of peace. His sense of guilt grew and grew so much that it expanded to the degree that he started to feel guilty for every injustice anywhere in the world. He felt an indirect responsibility for not taking action to help people before they commit crimes, to extend a hand to those who felt desolate, to shelter the forsaken and so on. Reis Bey stood for an exaggerated incarnation of Zehra's perspective in life. Nurtured from her childhood by her mother, Zeynep, Zehra had always felt a responsibility for the calamities of other people, for their ignorance, for the poverty, for the injustice. While working alone, the road seemed impassible and the goal laughable. But finding like-minded people (her husband, her family, her colleagues) and working together without expecting any material gain, without wanting a sign of gratitude in return, showed her that all that she cherished was not a utopia.

Zehra got up to check on her daughter. She caressed her head and looked at her as a botanist looks with astonishment at a flower that is growing on a foreign land. Her daughter, who spent more time with her Albanian baby sitter, had estranged a bit from her mother. Sometimes she would place

her arms around her mother and ask in Albanian, “Me kendo.” Only after asking the baby sitter with a student translating, did Zehra understand that what her daughter wanted to hear before falling asleep was an Albanian lullaby.

Her daughter was asked in the words of the lullaby, in a foreign tongue to grow like a cypress, to be brave and have no fear because mom was always near, to live a long life as the light of her mother's eyes. “Fli, shpirti i mamit.” she murmured in soothing voice the only line, she had learned. *Sleep, o your mother's soul.*

Zehra could hear the girls getting up and commenting on the film that apparently had ended. They were talking in Albanian and were unusually quiet about it. Albanians are loud people, even if they were never made to accept it.

“Beautiful.” they said in Turkish. It was evident by the gleam of their eyes that they had been touched by Reis Bey. What other age is there more susceptible to ideals than youth, Zehra wondered. Would she be here, with these lovely girls who spoke in their dreams in a different tongue, had not her mother imbued in her the power of selfless love?

“Okay, girls, enough for today. You need your beauty sleep.” She converted the sofas to full size beds, placed clean sheets that still smelled of fragrant soaps. “Everybody take a pillow, share your beds and turn off the lights. Elona, you can come and sleep with me.” she added.

Elona followed her, a bit reluctantly. They sat on the bed, silently. To avoid turning on the light for fear of waking up her baby, Zehra opened the blinds, letting the moonlight fill the room with soothing radiance. “What is it that troubles you tonight, Elona?” Sema asked softly.

Elona lowers her head and whispers. “You know we are poor, hocam. Very poor.” She replied obviously embarrassed. That much Zehra, knew. Elona was one of the few students that had won a full scholarship with her high score in the entrance examination.

“And as if that isn't enough, mom's kidneys are failing. She must be operated on as soon as possible. I can give her my kidney because it is compatible but the operation is expensive and given the poor conditions in our hospitals, this surgery must be performed abroad.” She broke into a muffled sob. Zehra stroked her back.

“I will have to drop out of school.” She said after a deep breath.

“Why?” Zehra asked alarmed. Only one year left of high school and this hard working student of hers was headed for the best colleges.

“I am the oldest child in the family. My two sisters are very young. The only person that works is my dad who does menial jobs as he finds them. Most of the money from his meager wages goes to his drinking and his debts.” Elona sniffed to open her airways. Zehra handed her a kerchief she took out of the side stand's drawer. “One of my cousins, who works in Greece, has found me a job as a maid in a wealthy Greek household. The employer has agreed to pay my first year's salary ahead. My cousin will come from Greece to smuggle me over the border in a week. He has already forged a passport with a visa for me through his friends.” She blew into the kerchief quietly. Zehra listened to her but on the other side her brain was raging on other possible solutions.

“I hate to leave school but I have to do it for my mom. The doctors have given her only three months to live. I would feel less regret if only...” she paused.

“If only what?”

“... I trusted my cousin. He has been known to smuggle drugs and other people over the border. There are rumors that he is even involved in human trafficking. I am afraid he will sell me to a brothel instead.”

Zehra shuddered and her blood froze upon hearing the word brothel.

“Wait a second, this is not right. There should be another solution.” Zehra insisted. Can we raise the necessary amount for the surgery if we collect money among the teachers, she wondered. The

salaries weren't very high, barely enough for the expenses, but still she was confident that somehow the money would be found.

“Forget about this plan. You will continue your education. Tomorrow I will ask some people I know who can help.”

“Why should they help, someone they don't know? - Elona asked. “Even my own cousin, who can easily lend us the money with the profit of his trade, didn't extend a hand.”

“Don't worry about that now. Lie down and sleep. I am confident that with the leave of Allah I will find the money. Then, we can arrange for you and your mom to go to Turkey for the operation. Visas are easily obtained through the embassy, so there is no need for smuggling.”

Elona's eyes shone with hope.” Sleep now,” Zehra urged, as she went to the restroom to take ablution. She prayed the prayer of need and supplicated to Allah for a solution to this problem. She was barely done when a brilliant idea came to her. “I will ask mom to ask Leyla teyze. They are well to do and can surely help.” Zehra went to sleep with a feeling of elation that mixed in her dreams with whirls of vanilla.

3.10 Ten Bracelets of Gold

June 1997, Istanbul

After the morning prayers I fell into a troubled sleep. In my dream, I asked Jen, in perfect English, why she had drawn a heart by my brother's name in her notebook. She denied it and showed me that she had drawn a heart next to her boyfriend's name, Ben. I laughed hard because in Turkish, ben means I, so it sounded like she was in love with herself. Jen started laughing too when she saw my point. And we would be laughing our heads off hadn't the phone rang.

Now, as I gather my bearings on my bed, I hear Mom pick up the phone and timidly say: Alo? From her joyful tone, I understand that is one of my sisters, Meryem or Zehra. When she asks "How is my granddaughter" I finally see that is Zehra abla calling from Albania. Why did she call so early, at seven in the morning, which is even earlier for her since Albania is an hour behind? I get up and hurry to the hall and sit next to Mom so I can speak with Feyza, my niece if she is awake. She doesn't say much, but she can say teyze and that is more than enough joy for me. Mom places a finger on her lips for to me to be quiet. I can sense that the matter at hand is something serious. "Don't worry I will talk to her" Mom promises before hanging up. "I wanted to talk to her," I protest. "Another time," mom says as she sits by the phone a little longer pondering. "Is something wrong?" I ask with trepidation. I hope everything is okay with my sister. Since she her first miscarriage in Albania, I am afraid something bad will happen again. Although Albania is only one hour and a half by flight from Istanbul, I imagine it to be a faraway place filled with dangers.

"One of Zehra's students' needs our help." Mom cuts short as she gets up from the chair. "Breakfast is ready on the table. Wake up your abi and pour him tea. I need to see Leyla hanım." Mom puts on her coat, pins her scarf, and before hurrying out she places Jen's notebook in her bag. I assume that on her way to Leyla hanım she will return it to the researcher. She places a kiss on my cheek. "I will be back in an hour or two" she says as she closes the door behind her.

I try to wake Yasin abi up but he pretends he is dead until bend close to shout into his ear, and he pulls on lightly on my long braid. I let out a squeal and he promises to release me if I tell him what's for breakfast, I tell him that Mom has cooked *menemen*.

Yasin Abi gets up and heads for the restroom. He comes out shaven and clean. Both he and Dad always come to the table presentable. Dad left for Izmir last night. I have stopped asking what baba does out of town. Some meeting of some sort, I guess. Yasin abi crisscrosses his legs close by the *sofra*, the

floor round table, which is too low for him. I fill his cup with tea and watch him as he forks the menemen. Mom has cooked the sliced green peppers and tomatoes soft before breaking two eggs over them. I munch on my bread as I debate with myself whether I should broach the subject of his name on the researcher's notebook. I decide to leave it to Mom because the case is too risky and I don't want to cause any misunderstanding.

“Did your ships get sunk in the Black Sea?” My abi asks in proverbial words.

“No. I was just thinking.”

“What is my princess thinking? Care to share with your brother?”

“Nothing special. What are you doing today after work?”

“Nothing special.” He says with a wink. “I have a meeting with a friend and later I will come home around seven.”

I want to ask who that friend is. I wonder if it is Jen. But I am shy to open the topic. Not, before mom does. She would be mad at me. “Why do you ask?” Yasin abi mumbles as he chews an olive. “I'd like to go someplace for an ice cream this evening.” I say and that is not a total lie. “Then, ice cream it is.” He says jovially, placing down his empty tea cup a bit noisily. I rise to refill it but he stops me “No more tea. I am running late for work.” He says checking his watch on his wrist. He gets up with a jump and bends down again to lift his plate and tea glass to put them in the sink. “Leave it, I will clean up.” I rush to take the plate from him. But he does it all the same. Unlike my father, Yasin abi helps with house chores. Especially after my sister Zehra married and Meryem abla went to America, he volunteers to do things around the house to help Mom. He will vacuum, put up the freshly ironed curtain with their elaborate nooks. He will beat the dust off the carpets and rugs and let them hung on the balcony for some sun. He doesn't seem to mind that other men around him are not doing any such thing. Granted,

my Dad is very busy and he is hardly at home, still I can't help but wish that at least he didn't expect so much from Mom. Dad cannot tolerate mess, so Mom gets always frantic about straightening up the house before he arrives. Maybe Dad isn't even aware of the strain this puts on Mom. Last Saturday we were coming back from sohbet and Mom was so sick from the heat and the gasoline scent of the bus that she could barely stand. Yet, the moment she entered the house, she took ablution to refresh herself and begin inspecting the house, changed her outfit, combed her hair, mopped the kitchen, wiped the counters, and placed the pot of lentil soup to heat for dinner. She told me to prepare the salad urging me to hurry because Dad would be home soon. When baba rang the bell, before opening the door Mom sprayed some room freshener on her way there. Needless to say she was exhausted by the end of the day and prayed her night prayer in a sitting position, even the parts where she should be standing.

I hear Yasin abi whistle in front of the mirror in the hall. I can't tell which tune it is but it is a happy one. I rinse my soapy hands and go to see him off. I check for any unusual behavior. Is he combing his hair in a different fashion? Does he smile to his image in the mirror? Has he dressed extra-fashionably? No sign of anything different. He has on black dress pants and a light blue checked t-shirt. Both bring the blackness of his eyes to the forefront. My brother is handsome I think. All he lacks is ten more pounds.

He picks up the keys of his car and waves at me. I return to do the dishes and wonder why Mom was in such a hurry to see Leyla teyze. I wish I had gone with her for two reasons. Number one, Leyla teyze's house is so nice. They even have a gardener who tends to the roses and the trees. The two floor-villa with balconies on each side bespeaks the wealth of Hamdi amca. I love the artwork hanging on the walls. It is mostly intricate calligraphy and marbled flowers. As much as Leyla teyze likes Europe she prefers traditional art. The wood floor shines and the plush carpets feel good under your feet. And

number two, Mom will not tell me a lot about her visit there. She dislikes being pestered with questions out of unnecessary curiosity.

I finish the dishes, wipe the sofra and place it behind the refrigerator. I think I am done with work when I notice that Mom has left a note for me taped on one of the cupboards. It says: "Dear Rana, if you could do the following chores while I am gone, it would give us a head start in our spring cleaning." She has listed a few chores that will take me more than an hour to finish. "Bring down the curtains and soak them in water with detergents." Oh no, not the curtains. My arms get numb every time I try to bring them down. "Hang the carpets and the rugs on the balcony." My poor back, some of them are pretty heavy. "Sweep the corners and the ceiling with a broom for possible spider nests." It is more likely to find life on Mars than spider webs in our meticulous house. "Start washing the windows and the panes." Ugh and I thought I would go to sit with Sule, my friend who lives next door. This shouldn't surprise me. Mom has mentioned earlier that once my school closes for the summer, we would do spring cleaning, which in our house is more like summer cleaning. The whole neighborhood has done this sort of cleaning months ago. Spring cleaning is a collective ordeal. As soon as the weather warms up, the women of the neighborhood will start scrubbing and brushing as if on cue and for days you will hear bang- bang on carpets, see freshly laundered curtains hanging on clothes lines and girls washing windows and wiping them dry with newspaper. Carpets are laid out in front yards and washed with soap and water from a hose. Later they are hanged on the garden walls where they sit to dry. We are probably the only house that doesn't join the marathon. People may think we are plain lazy but the truth is during spring Mom gets extra busy with events she wants to do before school ends. For example, she will visit the student houses to see who will graduate and leave the house, talk with the house owner for lease renewal and make preparations for the summer camps. Every summer, for two months our house will hum with the voices of about forty kids who practice reciting the Quran. I couldn't imagine our house could hold so many people. Mom says it is the blessing of the Quran and the

presence of the angels that give us the feeling of serenity. Mom teaches the new students how to recite the Quran properly and she will help older students memorize chapters from it. This summer have I set my goal to learn by heart the chapter of Yasin. The dear prophet said that this chapter is the heart of the Quran. My brother was named after it. Mom usually enlists other women from her reading circles to help tutor the kids not just in Quran but also in math and science. She serves rice and chicken with lemonade before she sends the kids home. Well- to- do parents contribute in the expenses for food. Mom never eats from the rice and chicken cooked with donated money. She thinks she has no right to it because it was donated for the children, despite the fact that she isn't paid a *kurus*: a cent, for all her teaching. "My reward is with my Lord," she will say "and that suffices." It is because of this trait of my mother that people trust her and no one asks what she does with the donations or the proceeds from the kermes. Nonetheless mom always keeps record of the spending and shares it with Sema teyze just to have an eye witness in case disputes arise.

Two seagulls let out a shriek outside the window. Seagulls are the loudest and lousiest birds I have ever seen. They seem to be arguing a lot with one another. For what? A piece of food maybe. This time they sound like they are yelling to me: "Go back to work!!" I'd better do that. Mom may come in any moment. Bismillah. Curtains, here I come.

Leyla sits on her conjugal bed and dials her husband's number. His secretary answers and tells her that Hamdi bey is in a meeting but she will let him know that his wife called. "Tell him it is urgent." Leyla adds. She hangs up and thinks over what she is going to tell her husband; how to ask for the money enough for the surgery of the Albanian woman. Hamdi bey is known for his generosity but that is no guarantee that he will be able to give this time. Many people ask for donations from him and he also

plans to expand his business by opening another furniture factory. Still she will try. The matter is important. Otherwise Zeynep hoca wouldn't have taken the trouble to visit her in this heat just to talk face to face. The Albanian mother has a daughter who promises a bright future but if money isn't found that future will fade into nonexistence. Leyla shivers when she thinks for a moment that she could be the mother with the failing kidney and her pretty daughter smuggled to Greece. Born into a well-to-do family with a long tradition of artisanship, Leyla has never wanted for anything in life. The only thing money couldn't get her was higher education. Her father feared his daughters' morals would deteriorate if they were sent to college where young people lived immoral lives. He was so protective of them that he never even sent them to buy bread from the neighborhood grocery. Izmir is full of people with dubious characters who didn't observe Islam. When his daughters or his wife needed a personal item from the market, say new shoes or a dress, something that he couldn't purchase for them without a trial, he would phone one of his merchant friends to keep his shop open for half an hour beyond the regular hours and let his family shop with no other customers around. Because he didn't give them an education, Leyla's father, Hilmi effendi made sure all three of them married into rich families, sent them with a good dowry and promised to provide for every whim that their husband didn't want to buy. He had been good to his word.

For a moment Leyla thought to ask her dad for the money but she was afraid of being rejected. Her father had promised to fulfill her needs, not the needs of some Albanian strangers. The phone rang and Leyla picked it up, startled.

"Yes, honey?" Her husband spoke a bit louder because there were men in his office that were talking in the background.

"Hamdi bey, I need some money for a good cause. An Albanian student of Zehra's, you remember Zehra, Zeynep hoca's daughter right? Yes, she told us that a student of hers risks being

smuggled to Greece to work as house help so that she can send money home for her ailing mother. This poor kid will drop out of school if we don't help her.

"How much does she need?" He asked a bit impatiently because his secretary was pointing to a folder in front of his desk. "Sign here, Hamdi bey."

"Ten thousand liras." Leyla answered feeling annoyed that her husband was being distracted. She regretted her decision to talk the matter over the phone. Had the matter been less urgent she would have waited to open it after dinner when Hamdi bey relaxed on his armchair perusing the paper.

Hamdi bey was silent for a moment and let out a sigh. "Listen, I'd love to help. You know me." He said a bit impatiently. "Yet, right now I am bit tight financially because I just signed a partnership with a firm for a new factory in Izmir. I had to use all the cash in my deposit. What is left is barely enough for our expenses. I am sorry."

"Can't you at least give half the amount?" Leyla asked with a faint hope. "No, my soul. Not this time. Let Zeynep hoca ask someone else. I am sure her husband knows other people they can ask. I need to go now. Let's talk more when I get home, okay? Good bye."

He hung up without waiting for her reply. Leyla felt enraged that he could dismiss such a matter with great ease. Yes, he had a lot to deal with in his business. But here two women's lives were concerned. At least he could have volunteered to ask someone from his friends in the business association.

"What shall I do now?"- She wondered as she surveyed her face in the mirror above the dresser. Disappointment lingered on her features making her look older than she was. She wished she had some money of her own, a salary, a fund or whatever some amount of money that she could spend as she pleased without asking permission, without begging for it. Then she remembered. She had a box full of

gold bracelets. Most of them had been given to her, as was the custom on her wedding day as gift from her father's guests and relatives. Both her arms had been full to the elbow with shining bracelets. Later Hamdi bey had bought her bracelets for different occasions, two after the birth of each child, on her birthdays, on their anniversaries. Last time she counted them there were twenty five bracelets of gold in the velvety box in her wardrobe. Her husband insisted that she should keep them in a safe in the bank but she liked to hold and inspect them once in a while. They were hers and she could spend them as she wanted, no questions asked. Yet, Leyla rarely exchanged a bracelet for money because they were her safety net. If something happened to her husband or God forbid if he divorced her that was her insurance in life. She had donated three bracelets once when Zeynep hoca had asked for donation for a new school opening in Hakkari, the farthest southeastern city in the country. Underdeveloped and with no infrastructure, the city was a camping ground for Kurdish separatists. Young people unemployed and uneducated joined the ranks of PKK and participated in its terroristic assaults. This school was a new hope for them, a chance to drop the arms and stones and pick up pencils instead. One of Leyla's cousins had been killed in a car explosion in Hakkari where he was stationed as a police officer. Because of this tragedy the call for donations struck a tender string in Leyla's heart that she didn't ask for money from her husband but went straight to the jewelry shop and changed two bracelets.

She could do the same now. Ten bracelets would suffice. She opened the box and the sparkly bracelets shone in her eyes. She counted ten, laid them on her bed and placed the box back in her wardrobe. The yellow of the gold caught the light of the sun and blazed on the white bedspread. They were so beautiful that her heart hurt with pangs of desire. Why is gold so dear to a human heart, she wondered. It is just a metal extracted like a mineral from the bosom of the earth. It doesn't grant health, it doesn't prolong life but why does it make one happy? Why do we cling to it? "If you don't give from what you hold most dear, you won't enter paradise" warned Quran. Now it was Leyla's turn to show that the material bliss of this world hadn't tied up her heart, that she could give her most cherished

possessions for Allah's sake. But what if something happens tomorrow and you need them yourself? Who is going to help you? Besides, who is to tell that the surgery will be successful and will really save the woman? What if it fails and she dies without waking up from the operation table? Even if the mother is saved, what if the father still decides to send his daughter to Greece to bring more income? Wouldn't her sacrifice be made in vain? Such thoughts swirled in Leyla's mind. These are Seytan's whispers, she thought. The devil loves to rob the believer of the chance to do what is right. "I seek refuge in Allah from the cursed devil," she whispered with her right hand over her heart. What would Hamdi bey say when he learned that she had changed her bracelets for money? Would he be proud of her? Or would he think of her as a stubborn woman who doesn't take heed of her husband's advice? What does it matter? This is my money and I can do with it as I please. She rose from her bed, changed her clothes, tied her headscarf and headed toward the door. "I will be back in an hour, Kadriye" she told her maid. "If Hamdi bey calls, tell him I went out for a short walk."

She tugged her purse under her arm and walked toward the jewelry shop around the corner. Its owner was a friend of her husband and a reliable jeweler. He was surprised to see her lay ten bracelets on the glass counter. She could sense that the jeweler was curious but also very shy to pry. As he counted the money, Leyla cast a glance at the rows of gold bracelets on the display window. Her bracelets will join them soon and will lure engaged couples into the shop. Who knows if they will make anyone happy? Who knows whose hand they will adorn? Leyla placed the money in her purse and walked hurriedly out of the shop toward the bank. She looked sideways and clutched her purse safely. She had heard that pocket pickers waited outside jewelry shops to stalk the clients and snatch their merchandise.

She entered the bank, took a number and waited to be called. She took out the account number Zeynep hoca had provided. It was Ahmet's account. She heard her number being announced. Timidly

she approached the window and slid the stack of money under the opening. “I want this amount to be deposited and transferred to this account.” She told the clerk. “Can I see your bank card, please?” the clerk asked politely. “Yes, of course” Leyla answered handing the card. After a couple of more questions, the transaction was completed. Leyla bid a good day to the clerk and left the bank. The sun shone bright and strong. The sun is so generous, Leyla thought, shining on both good and bad, poor and rich. She felt her spirit expand with gratitude. She will never know the name of the Albanian girl she was helping. The girl would never have a chance to shake the hand of her benefactor to say thank you. But hidden charity is better than the one exposed. What did the prophet say? Let not your left hand know what your right hand gives. Leyla walked home with a proverb in her heart. “Do good and throw it to the sea. If the fish will not know it, its Maker will.”

Mom comes home two hours later than she promised. She seems overly tired and in a bad mood. Did Leyla teyze say something to upset her? Mom goes to her room and changes her clothes. She comes out in an old dress she usually wears for cleaning around the house. “Did you meet with Leyla teyze?” I ask her, not without hesitation. “Yes, I did Elhamdulillah.” She says taking in a deep breath. Since she is giving thanks for seeing Leyla teyze, then something else is bothering her. The phone rings and Mom picks it. “Oh, Merhaba Leyla Hanim” she greets with genuine surprise. “You sent the money, already? May Allah be pleased with you and your husband! May He accept your good deeds! You cannot imagine how happy Zehra will be when I call her today. Please pass to Hamdi Bey our gratitude. May Allah bless his trade in honor of this gesture of his!”

Mom hangs up and looks into the little phone book she has compiled with the numbers of friends and acquaintances. As she waits for Zehra abla to pick up, she turns toward me and sensing my

curiosity she says. One of Zehra's students had a sick mother in need of operation. Hamdi bey has donated the money, Allah be praised.

I am happy to hear that and I am impressed. What a generous man Hamdi amca is. I let Mom talk to Zehra abla. And I go to Mom's room to pick up the broom. It is standing against the wall, where I left it after I swept the corners of the ceiling. Mom's bag lays open on her bed. To my surprise Jen's notebook sticks out together with a bunch of Xeroxed papers. I take a look at the paper and I gasp. Mom has photocopied Jen's notebook, at least part of it and has had it translated in a notary. This is so unlike Mom. She never investigates or pries into other people's belongings. Did she think that it was okay to learn what Jen writes about us since she finds in herself the right to ask everything she wants to know? Is Mom upset because of what she has written about her and her friends? Now, I am dying to know. I start reading from the first page but I understand very little. Either the translation is not very good or Jen, like Meryem abla, writes in difficult expressions. What catches my eye is that she refers to Mom and her friends as Islamists women. Islamist this and Islamist that. I see now why Mom is upset. She abhors the term Islamist. Because Islamist, Islamci is formed by the suffix -ci which gives the meaning of someone that produces something and sells it as in mobilya-ci, the furniture manufacturer like Hamdi amca. "We do not produce Islam," Mom has repeatedly explained, "and we definitely don't sell it, be it for political gains or material profits." People on TV call practicing Muslim like us Islamci and say that they a threat to the secular state.

I hear Mom say goodbye and I turn with haste on the last page to see why the heart was drawn next to Yasin Abi's name. The translator hasn't drawn a heart next to it but I find it since it is the last line. When I read it, I can only imagine Mom's worry. It says: "I think Yasin, Zeynep's son, has a crush on me."

When Dad and Yasin Abi, come home we are almost done with the spring/summer cleaning. Mom's sour mood hasn't changed a bit. I can tell because she didn't hum an ilahi as is her custom while working in the house. During dinner she remains silent and answers questions absent mindedly. Will she confront my brother? Is it true that he is fond of Jen? Would Mom mind if he is? What if Jen has misunderstood his gentleness?

After dinner Dad retreats into his room to pray and sleep. He will wake earlier tomorrow to go to Ankara. "Come on princess, it's time for some ice cream." Yasin abi says. I am flattered that he did not forget but I have no desire to go, not now that I sense mom is worried about him and wants to talk with him. "I am exhausted, abi. We cleaned the whole house, top to down. I won't enjoy it in this state. How about tomorrow, can we go then?" "As you wish, my soul," he answers a bit surprised.

I take a pitcher, fill it with water and go to the balcony to water the flowers. It's such a pleasant night and a light breeze blows from the sea, bringing its salty scent to the shore. Mom has gone to check if Dad needs anything prepared for his trip. Yasin abi is gathering the dishes.

"Yasin, I need to talk to you," Mom says with a serious tone. She doesn't know I am in the balcony and I can hear them. I hold my breath.

"Sure, Mom." Yasin abi says placing the plates on the counter. I imagine he turns toward her with full attention.

"Yasin, have you met with Jen, outside of the time I sent you to accompany her with Rana?"

Yasin abi doesn't answer right away. I wish I could see his facial expression. Is he surprised? Ashamed, or perplexed?

“Yes, three times. I took her to visit the Suleymaniye mosque and the underground Roman cistern. She said her father who is an architect had her interested in ancient architecture. So I thought it would interest her....”

“Did you accompany her alone?” Mom asked a bit resentfully. I can tell she doesn’t want to hear about Jen’s interests.

“No, I was with Murat.” He replies. Murat abi is Yasin abi’s best friend.

“I am disappointed with you, Yasin. You should know better. You know it is not proper to go places alone with a woman that is not your wife, your mother or your sister.”

“I wasn’t alone.” Interjects Yasin abi “Murat...”

“Murat is bachelor, just like you. What difference does his presence make? It still isn’t proper. Do you speak in English with her?”

“Yes.”

“Does Murat understand English?”

“No.”

“Then what good does his presence do?”

“Mom, it’s not that we have personal things to talk about. Besides, what is really bothering you?”

“Yasin, promise me that you will let me know ahead if you plan to meet with her or take her places. From now on, on such an occasion I will accompany you. Agreed?”

“Okay, but I still don’t understand why are you blowing it out of proportion?”

“Yasin, trust me it is safer this way.” Mom says in a tone that says: End of discussion. The call to prayer echoes from the minarets and they both fall silent. As I listen to it, I wonder why Mom didn’t ask Yasin abi if he has a crush on Jen. Is she afraid that she will put the idea in his head in case he has no such feelings in his heart? Yasin abi leaves the house to pray the last prayer of the day in the mosque. I see him walk under the street lights. His shadow with a bowed head tells me he is very sad.

3.11 The Last Will

July, 1985 Istanbul

On his death bed Mehmet Efendi thought for days about his daughter. Zeynep seemed so unhappy living in the same quarters with her in-laws. Though she never complained, her eyes reflected melancholy every time she spoke with him. Surrounded by her three little children, Zeynep exhausted herself with housework besides going to four different reading circles for sohbet. Yusuf had a wide kin and relatives streamed to his house for visits. This added to the load of Zeynep’s work as the only bride in the family.

Mehmet Efendi suspected her mother in law did not treat Zeynep right either. His daughter was melting away by day. Her frail figure, her trembling voice, the tears she held back with great endurance worried him. He had advised her to be patient through her tests but now as he felt his departure from this world was near, he decided to talk with his son in law. Yusuf was kind to Zeynep, but caught between two fires, he didn’t seem to be able to manage the situation. He picked up the phone and dialed their number. Alo? he heard his daughter’s voice, the beloved voice that never failed to make him happy.

“My daughter, how are you?”

“I am fine baba” she replied with worry. “Are you okay? Do you need anything? Are you in pain?”

“I am well, praise Allah. Is Yusuf home?”

“No, he is at school. He will come late tonight.”

“Tell him to come over and see me, first thing in the morning tomorrow.”

“Is everything all right, baba? Should I come too?”

“No, my dear. I want to talk with Yusuf, man to man.”

“As you wish, baba. I will let him know.”

“Good night, my dear. May Allah grant you rest!”

“Same to you, baba!”

Mehmet Efendi placed the phone on the receiver. The full moon was rising and the evening star, her faithful companion, was shining bright. The last rays of the setting sun which had set the horizon aflame a few moments ago were receding quietly. These last days of mine resemble the sunset, Mehmet Efendi thought. Ever since his wife, Meryam, passed away the sun hadn't shone brightly for him, nor had the spring attracted his spirit. He had started longing for the eternal abode, for the beloved people who had preceded him in their migration to the next world. There were only two reasons that he still paid attention to the transient world: Hizmet, his noble cause to serve the Quran and the tenets of faith, and Zeynep, the beauty of his life.

He had done what he could to establish reading circles, train teachers to teach the youth the beauty of their religion. He had encouraged people of means to give of their time, of their money, and of their skills for the greater good of the society. Allah had blessed him with friends, generous, faithful and devoted. Mehmet Efendi had wanted women to join the ranks of this blessed community. He had utilized the help of Zeynep to mobilize the women of faith, those mothers who knew how to sacrifice, who felt compassion for the needy and who understood the need for hizmet no less than men. He had married Zeynep to Yusuf so they can be helpers of one another in this worthy cause. Yusuf had proven himself to be a loyal follower, ready to sprint wherever there was a need for hizmet. He had travelled throughout Anatolia doing what Mehmet Efendi would if old age hadn't taken his walking feet. Now he

could barely stand and walked only with a cane. Like a mare that has run to the point of exhaustion, his old body which had served him for seventy two years was now failing, more each day.

He stretched his hand toward the pitcher by his night stand for a glass of water. His mouth felt dry and he also needed to take the many pills prescribed by his doctor. Sometimes he wanted to give up on pills but was afraid that wouldn't please Allah as he was trying to bring forth his death sooner. I must go in my time, he thought, in my appointed time. Moving slowly, he got up and placing a hand on the wall he steadied himself on his feet. The house creaked under his weight. This house is old too, he thought. He had sold his shop and home in Konya to move closer to Yusuf and Zeynep. Mehmet Efendi loved his grandchildren. He was fonder, though he never showed it, of Meryem, his wife's namesake. Zehra was loving and caring while Meryem had an inquisitive mind. "Children are like books with blank pages," Mehmet Efendi always said to parents. "Be aware what you and others write on them."

After taking ablution, Mehmet Efendi sat on his prayer mat to perform the evening prayers. These days not only he could not attend the mosque for prayers, but he had to perform them in a sitting position at home. His memory was losing its grip on his mind and he couldn't remember much of what he had memorized from the Quran. Thus he recited shorter chapters in his prayers and supplications. That was the only grievance he kept against old age. "My Lord, grant us good things in this life and the next. And protect us from the hellfire." He murmured in soft whispers. He wondered in what state he would breathe his last. What did Azrail, the feared angel of death look like? How does it feel when the body and soul separated? He prayed that he would surrender his soul while supplicating to Allah in prostration. He got up leaning on his bed and his knees unbuckled with pain. His feet were tingling like an army of ants had invaded them. He threw himself on his bed and let out a sigh. "Lord, have mercy on your servant."

He must have fallen asleep because he was woken, startled even, by a knock on his bedroom door. "Mehmet Baba, are you awake?" It was Yusuf's voice. Mehmet Efendi felt disoriented. Is it

morning already? Did he miss the dawn prayers? A pang of fear engulfed his chest. He looked at the window and the sight of the moon quieted his fast-pacing heart. Thank Allah, it was still night.

“Come in, my son” - he managed to say loudly.

Yusuf entered the room with his head bowed with reverence. “Forgive me for coming at this late hour. But I was so worried I couldn’t wait until the morning.”

Mehmet Efendi smiled. Yusuf had been a loyal student and a worthy son in law. “Take that chair and sit closer to me. There was no need for you to travel in the night, my son. I told Zeynep there was no need to worry.”

“Thank Allah”

“There was something important I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Yes, baba?”

“You have been my faithful companion in this blessed cause, in our hizmet. May Allah be pleased with you! My numbered days are counting down and I have a last wish, will you do it ?”

“Anything. Tell me.”

“I see that you treat my daughter right and you are a good husband to her. But I see that she is not happy living with your family. She has never complained but a father knows. I remember the times when you were newlyweds and still living in Konya. Zeynep was so happy there, so strong and so motivated. Here she seems like a bird squeezed in a tight box where she cannot stretch her wings. Isn’t it time to give her some space to breathe, a chance to freely do what she is in love with, to support her hizmet? Zeynep cannot be happy if she is impeded in her work, in her service to faith. Am I wrong?”

Yusuf swallowed hard and blushed at the mention of his family. His mother disliked Zeynep from the very beginning. She found her homely, slow at house work and not social enough to sit and chat with her or her friends when they gossiped over coffee. Also, she had told Yusuf many times that she wasn’t pleased with Zeynep’s going outside to her sohbet four times a week. “A woman’s place is in her

house, serving her children and her husband.” She said aloud behind Zeynep’s back. What business did she have going out to other people’s homes, dragging three children behind her, rain or shine? Is she going to save the world? His mother was never satisfied with Zeynep’s cleaning, cooking or child rearing ways either. “Her father has filled her head with ideas when all she needed was solid instruction on housekeeping.” Yusuf disagreed that Zeynep was incompetent in the kitchen. She just wasn’t the type that tried new recipes every so often or the typical housewife who lives in the kitchen and her only claim to fame is her pristine house and a table filled to the brim with food. Zeynep found this kind of living a waste for all involved: a waste of time and energy on her part and a waste of health on overeating family members or guests. Because Zeynep disliked most of the TV programs, she tried to keep her children away from it, keeping them busy in the kitchen with her or in their bedroom. Zeynep was kind and respectful toward her mother in law and bore with patience the lashes of her sharp tongue. Yusuf who had been caught between two fires had remained a bit aloof and now he felt guilty and ashamed for it.

“It is not my intention to go into details of what is exactly wrong in her situation.” Continued Mehmet Efendi. “They are your family and surely your mother is worthy of your respect. What I ask of you is that you move out to another place. You will continue to visit and help your family as it is your duty before Allah but you will have your own home. Your younger brother is engaged to be married and his wife as the new bride can help your aging parents. What do you say?”

Yusuf had thought of moving out too. His only concern had been his meager salary of a teacher which wouldn’t suffice for rent and other expenses. It hurt his pride to admit it or to confess it to Mehmet Efendi so he remained silent. Mehmet effendi as if reading his thoughts said: “I want you to move to this house with me. I will leave this house to Zeynep, my only heir. In this way I will have the opportunity to spend my last days with you, my daughter and my grandchildren. What do you think? What would your family say to that?”

Yusuf paused to think for a few moments. His mother would surely disapprove. As much as she disliked Zeynep, Nuriye hanim loved her grandchildren and would want them near. Besides, his salary, meager as it was, contributed to the family's expenses. Maybe he could use his brother's soon-to-be marriage as an excuse to move out. After all, the house wasn't big enough to hold all three families under one roof. The bride-to-be had been handpicked by his mother so she would hopefully get along with her new daughter in law.

Yusuf nodded in agreement. He rose to go but Mehmet Efendi held his hand. "Yusuf my son, do hurry. I have only one week left." Sensing Yusuf's shock he continued: "In my dream I saw seven coffins in one room. It was shown to me that the seventh coffin was mine. Please don't tell my daughter about it." He took a deep raspy breath.

"I will not close my eyes in peace if I don't see Zeynep happy again."

"Don't worry baba," Yusuf said bending over to kiss his teacher's and father-in-law's hand. The bony fingers felt cold to his lips. "Your wish will be fulfilled. With your permission..."

"Go my son, it got very late. May Allah grant you rest for the night!"

"Same to you baba!"

Yusuf closed the bedroom door and headed outside. The warm breeze was no relief, nor caress to him. Only seven more days, he thought, pained. Tears rolled down his face. His heart made room for a torrent of grief.

It took only half a day for Zeynep to pack all her belongings and move to her father's house. She had been shocked by her husband's decision to move and was worried that her mother-in-law would blame her since they were moving to her father's house. After hours of protest on her part and her son's attempt to reason with her, the matriarch had given in. She had remained bitter toward them and had refused to see them off but had stayed in her room during the loading of their furniture. It had

saddened Zeynep to see her mother in law grieve, so she had tried to console her. Zeynep had placed her arm around her shoulders and said in soothing tones. “Annee, please don’t be sad. We aren’t going far. We will visit every day if you want.” Her mother-in-law had removed Zeynep’s arm and had let it drop. “This was all your plan, right? To take my son away from me. You and your father plotted all this.”

It broke Zeynep’s heart to hear speak of her father with such contempt. She wished she could open up her heart and show to her mother-in-law that she did not foster any ill feeling toward her. Neither did her father. How could he? Mehmet Efendi’s look on people and living beings in general had been only love. To love the created for the sake of the Creator. His motto in life had been: we are gatekeepers of love, and as such we have no time for hostility.

Zeynep knew that no amount of talking could prove to her mother-in-law that she was wrong. In a way Zeynep felt pity for her. She had learned from her sister in law that her mother in law had lived a hard life, neglected by her husband and abused by her own mother in law. Zeynep prayed that Allah would heal the grievances of the past and will give her a chance to repair her relationship with Yusuf’s mother.

She helped Yusuf carry down their stuff and sat in the car with the children who had no idea what’s happening. “Where are we going?” Maryam asked.

“To grandpa Mehmet’s house.”

“Why?” She insisted to know.

“We shall live there from now on.”

“Why?”

“You uncle Tarik is getting married and they need a little more space.”

“They are kicking us out?”

“No, Meryem. Where do you get these ideas?”

“Then why is grandma mad?”

“Grandma is always mad.” interjected Zehra.

“You are both wrong.” chastised Zeynep. “Grandma is not always mad. Right, now she is just sad.”

“Why?”

Zehra let out a sigh. Meryem was never satisfied with answers.

“She is sad because she thinks she will miss you. But I told her we will visit her very often.”

Zehra, older by one year, bowed her head. Such a sensitive child, Zeynep marveled. She can feel other people’s pain as her own, as some type of conductor sent currents of emotion right to the center of her heart. Meryem’s heart was busy understanding what Zehra’s heart already knew.

Zeynep still didn’t know whose idea this move was. Yusuf hadn’t talked a lot after his meeting with her father. She hadn’t insisted when she realized that he didn’t want to talk about it. The relationship between her father and Yusuf had a dimension of its own and she had preferred not to interfere.

Yusuf started the car and looked up from the window shield. He searched for his mom or her silhouette at least, standing by the window of her bedroom, waving at him, wishing him all the best of this world, as a mother would usually do. But his mom wasn’t there. The tightly shut windows, the closed curtain, and her absence made Yusuf feel like an orphan. Bismillah, he said as he pressed on the gas pedal. Bismillah for a new beginning.

The days that followed passed in a swirling mist for Zeynep. While cleaning, unpacking and tending to her father, she tried to keep her three children quiet so as not to disturb her father despite her father’s protest that their ruckus, up and down the stairs, and their laughter was music to his ears. At night when everyone was soundly asleep, Zeynep would go to her father’s room, pull a chair by his

bedside and talk with him. They reminisced about their days in Konya, when mother was still alive and well. Those blessed years of childhood were unearthed over cups of tea, transporting them to the past, the din of the traffic beyond the windows the only reminder of the metropolitan Istanbul.

On some nights, Mehmet Efendi asked Zeynep to read to him. She read passages of Sufi poetry full of laments for the separation from the Almighty.

Listen to this reed forlorn,
Breathing, even since it was torn
From its rushy bed, a strain
Of impassioned love and pain.

"The secret of my song, though near,
None can see, none can hear.
Oh, for a friend to know the sign
And mingle all his soul with mine.

It's the flame of Love that fired me,
It's the wine of Love inspired me.
Would you learn how lovers bleed,
Then listen, listen to the reed!"³

Mehmet Efendi wanted to prepare his daughter for what was to come soon: his departure from this world. He wanted to tell her that he had always been pleased with her, that he thanked God for granting her to him, to cherish her, to nourish her, to love her. He wanted her to continue to lead a purposeful life, to find serenity in her calling, to never lose her passion for teaching other women the beauty of

³ A poem by Rumi, Translated by R.A. Nicholson

their faith. He also wished that Zeynep wouldn't be lost in grief upon his passing. He wished that with the strength of her faith she would stand tall like a cypress with its roots deep into solid earth; that with the hope of reuniting again in the bliss of paradise, she could bear the pain of losing the last parent. It is for this reason that Mehmet Efendi chose for her to read from Rumi. The beloved sufi poet regarded his death *Sebi Aruz* : a wedding night. He warned his family not to mourn his death but to rejoice that finally his soul had reunited with the Beloved.

Mehmet Efendi was ready for that reunion. As much as he trembled at the prospect of giving account of his life, he longed to meet His Lord. On the seventh night, his last night in his aged body, he asked Zeynep not to turn off the light. She placed a kiss on his hands. Its sensation stayed in his mind through the night. Toward morning he tried to get up to pray but his feet didn't hold. The total of body fell on the floor with a thump. He experienced a shortness of breath as if something of great magnitude was being extracted out of his body. He felt his feet grow numb first, then cold. He struggled to pronounce the testimony of faith: I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is his messenger. His eyes were transfixed on the wall across the room. A fluidity of colors, as if playing tricks on his eyes, were moving, merging, separating, fluttering, and forming amazing shapes, unfathomable to the human mind. He wanted to say "Welcome Azrail, o loyal servant of Allah." But his lips couldn't move. Before breathing his last, he had one last wish. He wanted to tell Zeynep that Azrail, the angel of death, the most feared of all creatures, was handsomer than he imagined.

When she woke up before dawn for morning prayers, Zeynep found her father's body stiff and cold. She let out a cry that woke Yusuf up who rushed to her side. He found her crying on her father's body. He felt his knees grow weak with sorrow and reverence. Mehmet Efendi had passed away on the day he was told in his dream. Yusuf's respect for him grew many folds. "May Allah grant him peace! May Allah rest his soul!" He murmured. He tried to hold Zeynep up but she clung to his body with all her

might. "Baba, babacigim gitme. Don't leave me." She cried washing his body with her tears. She was shaking convulsively. "Zeynep, don't" he started to say. "It is not befitting of you to mourn like this." "You will upset your father's soul," he wanted to say but he kept his peace. What did he know about losing a father? Zeynep grew quieter but her body still shook with sobs. Yusuf let herself cry out. Let her empty her heart, he thought, of the sorrow she feels right now. He stood there, bent over his wife, unaware that Zeynep was crying the tears she had kept away from him, the sadness she had hidden from her father and the misery she had concealed from her children for fifteen years. She had kept every disappointment and every worry buried inside her for the sake of the people she loved the most. Her father's departure had opened the flood gates and her burden was being lifted. When her eyes dried and couldn't shed one more tear, she stood up kissed her father's hands and whispered in his ear the Quranic verses:

"O you satisfied soul. Return to your Lord pleased with yourself and pleasing to Him. Enter among My servants. And enter my paradise".⁴

3.12 A Suitor from America

July 23rd 1997, Istanbul

Sema teyze called Mom and asked for her to come over to her house. Mom must have sense something was amiss because she asked "Is everything okay?" I don't know what Sema teyze told her, but it must be something urgent because Mom dressed in hurry. "Can I come too?" I asked. She hesitated for a moment, and then agreed. I made sure I was ready before Mom was because I didn't want to annoy her by making her wait. Mom wrote a short note for Dad or Yasin abi whoever came

⁴ Qur'an Al Fajr 89: 27-30

home first. "We are at Sema's. Will be back before evening, inshaallah." If Allah wills: inshaallah.

Everything happens only if He wills it.

I don't remember how many buses we changed, but I remember Sema teyze's face ashen with worry and fear.

"*Hayrola* :May it be for good!" Mom said as she sat down on the sofa.

"You may take off your coats," Sema teyze said to make us comfortable "There is no one else in the house. Hulya is at her aunt's where she will stay for the weekend."

Mom took off her coat and Sema teyze hung it in the coat rack in the hall. The house was quite but I could sense that not long ago a storm had blown within these walls. Was it the red rim around Sema teyze's eyes that betrayed the serenity or her heavy, frequent sighs that she pulled in as she walked around?

"Tell me, what's the matter?" Mom urged gently. "I have never seen you in this state."

Sema teyze glanced furtively toward me. "Rana, why don't you go in the kitchen to brew some tea?" Mom asked in an attempt to send me away.

"There is baklava in the fridge too. Place some on serving plates and bring it with the tea, will you. The tea cups are on cupboard, to the left of the stove." Sema teyze directed. It still amazes me that in her state of distress she still thought of proprieties. She needn't tell me where the tea cups were either, I could have found them blindfolded. Sema teyze is to me like a real aunt, the sister Mom never had. I don't remember how many times I have visited her, stayed at her house, eaten at their table.

I obeyed and set out to prepare the tea but curiosity got the better of me and I eavesdropped behind the kitchen door after I had put the kettle to warm the water.

"It's Hulya." Sema teyze said struggling to keep back her tears. "She argued with her father and he struck her on her face twice." She let out a sob. "Recep has never laid a hand on his daughter, nor on me either."

“But why?” Mom asked. Nothing infuriates Mom more than violent husbands but this time she was only shocked because Recep amca was the gentlest soul in the block.

“You know how Hulya hasn’t been quite herself these past three months. She fluctuated between rage and despair. She closed herself up in her room, skipped meals and was very irritable. She began to improve a week ago though, after she registered in a course for memorization of the Quran. She loved the instructor there, a fine Muslim, as Hulya puts it. I haven’t met her yet but it seems to me that her prompting assuaged Hulya’s rage and despair. And of course the healing power of the Quran helped her find peace.”

“Her instructor also advised Hulya to write down what happened to her and hundreds of thousands of students, how their dreams were cut short in front of the eyes of the world, how the European Human Rights court upheld the headscarf ban as the right of the Turkish government to protect secularism, how many women went into depression, others returned to school having removed the headscarf with bowed heads and mute. Hulya loved this idea. She said she was going to publish it one day. She began writing every day; she even skipped meals to work on it. This state of exhilaration lasted until yesterday afternoon when the researcher came to pay her a visit.”

“The American?” Mom asked surprise obvious in her voice.

“Yes, I was surprised too. She brought the translator along.”

Usually Jen didn’t bring the translator along if she was just visiting to socialize. This must have been important. I perked my ears to hear better because an annoying kid started crying in the nextdoor neighbor’s kitchen. With windows opened on both sides, he was practically crying in my face. Oh, please give that kid whatever he wants, I pleaded silently.

“She sat with Hulya for two hours. She said she had just come to check on her. But she left a totally different Hulya when she left the house.” Sema teyze continued.

“How?” asked Mom. This time she wasn’t surprised, only annoyed.

“I didn’t hear all that they talked about, only bits because other than going to the kitchen to prepare tea and something to serve with it, I had also to also answer the phone and talk with my sister-in-law for half an hour because her kid was sick.”

Sema teyze, being a nurse, gets these types of calls for medical advice often I heard.

“All I heard was that Jen urged Hulya not to give up her education. She told her that she could study in America where nobody interfered with the way one dresses. When Hulya asked how she was going to do it. She advised Hulya to register for an English language course from a respectable institution to procure a student visa first. Hulya would be studying English for two years and later medical school. “

“Jen also said that she would ask someone she knew in her country if Hulya could take some exams, she said the name for it but I forgot , without an official diploma from here. If they allowed her then it would be a true time-saver because instead of having to study medicine from the very beginning, she could start her residency provided she passed those exams.”

“What did Hulya say to this?”

“Ah, hocam, you should have seen how her face lit up, how eagerly she was listening. It broke my heart. She asked how she could support herself. Everyone knows, schools are expensive in America. And our modest means will never suffice to support her even during the two years of language school.”

“Jen said that Hulya could work part time while studying English then later she could find a job in a clinic while doing residency, maybe. ‘What kind of part-time jobs?’ I interjected because I couldn’t help but fear for my daughter.”

“‘I don’t know,’ she said with an ease and that angered me, hocam. It wasn’t her life, of course so everything was easy to her. When she said that Hulya could work as a baby sitter with an American family, blood boiled in my head. What was next? Working as a waitress?”

“I barely controlled myself but still thanked her for coming all the way to our house with a concern for Hulya.” Sema teyze finished with a sigh.

I thought about my sister, Meryem. Yes, we sent her to America, unmarried and all but not before she had gotten an assistantship, had found a house with other Turkish women of hizmet background and was connected with the Turkish community there. Even with that, Mom still calls her every week and she resents having had to let her go. My sister got elected for the green card lottery and one of the Brothers talked Mom and Dad into letting her go.

“Then, what happened?” Mom asked.

“They both tried to remove her doubts and fear by relating to her how they had lived independently from their families while in college both working and studying. I told them that we didn’t send our daughters into the world to fend for themselves. I tried not to offend anyone nor pass judgment on their parents but it occurred to me only after I spoke that both Jen and her translator took it personally. I also told them that there was no way that she could go, her father and I would never give permission.”

“They both looked at me as if I had said something abominable, as if I was a terrible mother standing in the way of my daughters’ future. But what could I do, tell me?”

“Did she leave after that?” Mom asked, obviously thinking only of Jen as the responsible person. The translator was only a back-up.

“They did but not only before they planted a seed of hope in my child. It broke my heart to see Hulya retreating into her room to think it over, to dream it over. If I knew anything about my child, I was sure that she would insist like she did when she went to Kenya. But this time was different. She wasn’t part of a team, and this wasn’t something short term either.”

“I don’t know how I went about my day.” Sema teyze continued. “I was trembling with worry, did some work to move my mind into other things but in vain. The closer to the dreaded hour of my husband’s return we got, the greater the knot in my stomach grew.”

“Because we ate dinner in silence, my husband sensed something was amiss so he insisted that we talk about it. First, he listened to Hulya attentively with interest and a bit amused as you listen to a child that says she has an idea about how to fly to the moon. Recep tried to reason with her counting all the difficulties and risks she had to face. Hulya told him she was ready for everything. ‘Well, you might be but we are not’ Recep said. I could see he was starting to lose his patience. The bad thing was, Hulya was running low too. When she said that we needed to stop treating her as a child and let her decide about her life, Recep started to shout that we had every right to decide about her and that she couldn’t as much leave the house without our approval. Oh, I don’t want to remember their exchange but all you need to know is that it was distressing to hear them argue loudly. When Recep told Hulya to give up her hopes for education and wait in her home to be married, he also mentioned that some suitor from a respectable family was asking for her hand. Hulya got furious and said something that she will regret all her life.”

“What ?” Mom asked with worry.

“She said: Well, I hope they have offered a good amount of baslik parasi.”

Even my jaw dropped. Baslik parasi, money per head of the bride, is the amount of money the groom’s family pays to the bride’s father in some rural areas of the country. It has also been seen as the bride’s price. There was no way Recep amca would marry Hulya abla for baslik parasi. I could see why Recep Amca was mad at her and slapped her.

“What shall we do now?” Sema teyze asked Mom.

Mom remained silent for a moment. No doubt she was thinking. If Recep amca had set his mind on marrying his daughter, Mom could propose that Hulya marry my brother Yasin. In this way Mom could stop worrying if my brother was nurturing any liking for the American. Some dish clatter rose from the neighbor’s kitchen and someone yelled while the nagging kid picked up heart- piercing a wail I went to close the window when the teapot starting hissing. The water was boiling and drops of hot

water threatened to turn off the gas oven top. I lowered the heat and started filling up glasses as quickly as possible.

When I served the tea Mom paused for a moment to pick up her tea glass and said: "Don't worry Sema. I will talk to Meryem and insaallah she will find someone suitable."

I was perplexed. How did my sister in America come into this? What did they say in the two minutes I didn't listen? I was so annoyed I wished I could have slapped that obnoxious kid.

Sema abla nodded, took a deep breath and said "Insaallah."

"But first let me know what Hulya thinks of it. We can't do anything without her approval first."

Mom continued drinking her tea in silence but she didn't touch the baklava. She then looked at the clock on the wall and with surprise noted: It's getting late. We'd better go.

"Stay for dinner." Sema teyze proposed.

"Another time. Yusuf must be coming home any minute."

"Thank you Zeynep. May Allah be pleased with you."

"With all of us, inshaallah" replied Mom.

They hugged like two sisters with great affection. On her way out Mom touched Sema teyze's shoulders lightly. "Don't worry my friend, this too shall come to pass. Just be patient and pray." Sema teyze nodded and stood at the threshold till we went down the four flights of stairs of her apartment building.

The lights of the city were turning on like twinkling stars. We hopped into a bus thankful that we didn't have to wait. "Rana, when we get home remind me to take the chicken out of the freezer. It will have to thaw before I cook it early in the morning. Remember, tomorrow begins the summer camp." How could I forget? We had been working like horses for the past week to prepare. Mom and her friends had gone to the homes of the students to talk with parents and register them. Jen had accompanied without the translator. She usually brought Tugce with her only on weekly sohbet.

Collections of donations were made and now all that was needed was for the children to march and fill the house with their copies of the Quran under their arms.

I tried to determine whether Mom was mad at Jen for interfering. Even if she meant well, she should have consulted Hulya abla's parents before talking to Hulya. Maybe she didn't understand how families worked in Turkey. Parents' approval was needed for many things. They did so much for us, we owed it to them. Even men had to please their parents, especially their mothers. For example, I couldn't imagine Yasin abi marrying someone Mom would disapprove of. Not in a million years.

When we approached our door, the phone was ringing. Since no one picked it up, I concluded that Dad or my brother hadn't come yet. Or they were praying. Mom searched frantically for the key in her big purse. She didn't want to miss whoever was calling. She dashed in without taking her shoes off and picked up the receiver almost out of breath:

"Alo?"

.....

"Yes, it's me, Zeynep Yegenoglu."

.....

"Yes, I know her. What happened?"

.....

"What? When?"

.....

"Where is she now?"

.....

"I am coming. Tell her, I am coming." Mom dropped the receiver and stood for a moment to catch her breath and maybe process what she just heard. From the furrows on her forehead face, I could

see something horrible had happened to someone Mom cared about. Was it Dad? Did he have an accident? I looked at her with fear.

“Rana, you go sit with Sule till I come back. I have to go.” She said with urgency.

“Why? Where are you going?” I asked as my eyes welled up. Bad news makes me heave for breath.

“Please tell me.”

Mom saw my state and she decided to tell me whatever it was.

“I am going to the police station. I don’t want you to worry so I will tell you why I am going there. But I don’t mention it to anyone, tamam mi?”

I nodded, feeling weak like my knees were unbuckled. “Someone has attacked Jen. She is at the station now. I must go to pick her up.” I gasped with the horrendous surprise of the news. “Is she all right?” I asked, genuinely worried. “I don’t know. Inshaallah she is fine.”

“You go to Sule. I will call her home if I need to talk to you.” Mom instructed before heading out. I had been left at home before in the evenings. Why was she worried tonight that she wanted me to go to my neighbor’s? I looked out of the window and saw Mom hold her hand up to stop a passing taxi. When the taxi sped out of sight, I locked the door and went down and out of the gate to Sule’s house. All sorts of scenarios played in my head. Who attacked Jen, what for? Did they want to kidnap her so they can ask for ransom from her family? Or were they simple pick-pocketers like the ones that snatched Gulcan’s abla’s purse last week? As I was waiting for Sule to answer the door, I wondered if Hulya abla would still insist on going to America alone after this frightful assault.

It was very late, around eleven I suppose, when Mom came to pick me up. She thanked Sule’s Mom for letting me sit so long with them but didn’t give any explanation related to their late return even though it was clear as daylight that the woman was dying to know.

Sule's mother, Nadire teyze, is one of those women that are in love with their kitchen where they spend their days and in the evening their favorite past time is watching soap operas while cracking sunflower seeds between their front teeth. She follows a couple of them at a time and I am amazed how she keeps track with so many characters when the plotlines are similar. The hero and the heroine have fallen in love but there is a mountain of obstacles and dangers to overcome before they can be united. I know this because Sule recounts with details the highlights of the past episode of a telenovela if I happen to be watching one with her, like I did tonight.

When nothing interesting is showing or if her husband has the TV all by himself, Nadire teyze will sit by her window and crochet, taking in the scent of basil and other herbs she grows in little pots on the window sill. Being the house pet that she is, Nadire teyze finds it hard to understand what Mom does outside the home. She will especially disapprove when we go out in inclement weather to attend to a sohbet or return late at night. I have seen her shake her head in disapproval upon seeing us, mother and daughter walking on the iced streets of Istanbul in winter. She has more than once commented within my earshot that a house is a woman's castle. And the primary duty of a wife is to serve her husband and family. If every woman in Istanbul did this, if everyone minded their own business, everything should be taken care of. What I find perplexing though is the fact that women who chastise Mom for caring for others to the neglect of domestic duties, are the ones who love to learn of other people's lives just for the pleasure of gossip. They have this custom where they take turns to visit each other's homes just to fill up with tea, goodies, and of course with gossip. Had I told Nadire teyze that Mom went to the police station to pick up the American she would grill me with questions. This kind of interest, to know the details of people's lives, private lives no less, Mom refuses to understand. You can imagine why Mom and Nadire teyze don't see much of each-other, just the daily minimum exchange of neighborliness.

When we entered the house, Mom placed one index finger on her lips for me to be quiet. “Jen is sleeping in your room tonight. You can sleep in mine. Dad is out of town tonight.” She said in whispers. “What about Yasin abi?” I asked whispering softly my voice almost cracked. “I phoned him. He will stay at Murat’s tonight.” She answered.

After inquiring if I had eaten dinner and prayed the night prayer, mom sent me to bed. I laid on Dad’s side of the bed and closed my eyes. Mom came into the room later, prayed her prayers by the window so she could see the prayer mat by the moonlight. She went out again and brought the phone which thanks to its long cord was quite portable. “Rana, are you asleep, my love? – she whispered bending over me.” What time is it now in America?” she asked. I suspected that she was testing if I was truly asleep otherwise I can’t believe that Mom cannot subtract seven hours from twelve o’clock midnight. I wasn’t sleeping yet but I was so tired that I couldn’t open my heavy eyelids so I kept my peace. I heard Mom dial a long number, Meryem abla’s number and waited listening to the deep ringing tone. Sometimes the lines are so busy or so weak due to the weather that Meryem abla’s voice sounded from so far away, she might as well be talking from the moon. But this time, even I could hear the sound ringing tone with its suspenseful short intervals.

“Alo? Meryem, my daughter is it you?”

.....

“Yes, sweetie it’s me. How are you? How is summer school going? Is it very hot over there?”

.....

Be careful, don’t stay amid the draft if you are sweating.

.....

No, nothing to worry about. I called late because I was busy today. And also I thought you might be at school in the morning.”

.....

“Listen, sweetheart. We miss you a lot and very sad you won’t visit this summer.”

.....

“Dad is not here tonight. Yasin is at his friend’s too. Only Rana is here but she fell asleep.”

.....

“Meryem dear, Sema teyze wants you to do her a favor. You must have heard about the headscarf ban, how many female students got kicked out of school. Hulya is one of them. She dropped out when she had barely a few months remaining before graduation. Yes, it is sad, very sad.”

.....

“Listen honey. She wants to study in America. Her parents will allow her to come, only if she marries.” Mom didn’t mention to Meryem abla that the whole study-in-America idea was Jen’s in the first place. “We were wondering, if you could help us find a suitable man who can support her both financially and otherwise.”

.....

Mom’s let out a small laugh after listening to whatever Meryem abla had to say. “Yes, my daughter, I know you are singl yourself but maybe someone from the community can help you. Your sohbet teacher for example can ask her husband to investigate, can’t she?”

.....

“It would be great! Thanks my love. This is such a good deed. Hulya is not in a good shape these days. Do call her when you get a chance.”

.....

“I will wait for your call then. The sooner, the better. May Allah keep you my daughter. Yes, I will kiss her.”

....

“Good night, my soul”

Mom hung up. She placed a kiss on my cheek, for Meryem abla I guessed. She wore her nightgown and laid beside me. Listening to her breath, I tried to collect my thoughts. So, the savior for Hulya abla was a suitor from America. My admiration for Mom grew tenfold. She was asking her daughter to find a suitor for her best friend's daughter, the very young woman she had always wished would become her son's bride.

3.13 Tiny Seeds

August, 1997 Atlanta, USA

Meryem woke up alone in a silent house for the last time that summer. Her housemates, Zeliha and Tugba would be coming from Turkey and she was to pick them up from the airport in the evening. She truly missed them, the laughter, the discussions, the group readings, and the prayers performed together. She imagined they had filled their luggage with Turkish food products that were hard to find in the U.S. Every single year it was the same routine. They would open their overstuffed luggage at the customs and pray that the officers would let them pass in jars of homemade jam, dried apricots, pastirma, tulum cheese and whatnot. Sometimes they couldn't even describe in English what the items were and wrapped in newspapers they surely seemed suspicious.

Meryem turned on the stove top and placed the pot to brew tea. She wanted to savor these last days of the summer break before returning to full speed school schedule. She looked inside the refrigerator and made a mental list of the items she needed to buy before heading for airport: bread, tomatoes, lettuce, and potatoes. She planned to cook lentil soup and chicken with potatoes and sliced tomatoes for dinner. Surely it wouldn't be as delicious as the food her friends had tasted in Turkey but they would appreciate a warm dinner after a long flight.

Meryem set the table for a quick breakfast. Scrambled eggs, olives, feta cheese and bread. Sipping her tea she wondered what happened with Hulya's marriage plans. Last she heard, the suitor had agreed to fly to Turkey last week to meet face to face with Hulya after talking on the phone with her

a couple of times. He hadn't come back as far as she knew but her mother hadn't mentioned any wedding preparations either when they talked on the phone two days ago. Meryem had been teased for searching for a suitor for somebody else when she should have found one for herself. "If I am still single, it isn't because of a lack of suitors." She replied half-jokingly, which was true. Every time she visited her family, the topic of her marriage would come up and a line of match makers would appear to promote their prospective suitors. After all, Meryem was pretty, educated, and moreover was living in America. Meryem had told her family that she didn't intend to marry before finishing her PhD. Three more years, but Meryem was in no hurry. She was enjoying her program immensely. Her fellow graduate students were respectful toward her and the environment fostered learning.

After the first few months of terrible homesickness, Meryem had adjusted to many aspects of life in America. She had gotten used to the humid weather, to the southern accent, to the people smiling at you for no apparent reason. She had learned to smile back, she had become confident with her English proficiency which, though not perfect, was satisfactory and she had even begun making friends in the university.

People were curious about her hair. Some wondered if she had any. Others asked whether she ever removed her scarf at home, if she slept with it or showered with it. Her interactions with fellow students had been a bit awkward in the beginning. It was hard for people to understand her limits. She didn't hug with people of the opposite sex but could shake hands. She could join their group for coffee but couldn't accept an invitation for tea from one male student from the department. Just the two of them, it wasn't proper.

Sometime it was even hard for Meryem to draw the line. She had invited her female classmates to her apartment for fast-breaking dinners during Ramadan. They had all ahhed and ohhed at the sight of her brown mane of hair. She had felt uneasy when one of them had asked if they could take a picture of her without the headscarf on. She had refused because she was never sure to whom the picture

would be shown. Her class mates hadn't been shy to describe her hair to other students, male included and that had disturbed Meryem. She knew they didn't mean any harm and probably weren't even aware that it wasn't the right thing to do. Why is it that I have to explain every single detail to them, Meryem wondered. Is our way of living so alien to them? Is my idea of modesty so off the radar that they can't even begin to make sense of it??

Yet, it wasn't only her friends who had difficulty to understand her. Meryem also had a hard time understanding the students on campuses too, their ideas of fun, of freedom, and independence. She had been surprised by the lack of interaction between neighbors, the distrust among them. The neighbor is in need of even the ash of his neighbor, said a Turkish proverb. But here, neighbors just greeted each other. She had attempted to break the ice and had wanted to take some baklava for the neighbors in her apartment building. Three didn't even open the door, just asked "Who is it?" from inside and replied "no, thank you" after she explained who she was and why she was knocking in the door. The next door senior lady had thanked them but had refused to take baklava because she was diabetic. The single man living upstairs had rejected their offer upon hearing that baklava had walnuts to which he was allergic. Meryem and her friends had returned home dismayed, feeling lonely and rejected. Minutes later, their doorbell rang and the senior lady, Miss Betty, came in saying that she was curious to try Turkish coffee if they could make one without sugar. Her gesture of good will had warmed their hearts and they had sat for two hours talking about their families and their traditions.

The Turkish community in Atlanta had opened a cultural center where members of the community could come together and celebrate Ramadan and national and religious holidays but also have intercultural and interfaith events with local people.. Meryem was assigned to be a speaker at times. This was a very new experience for Meryem because the gatherings were mixed, where men and women sat in one room and listened to her. She was used to mixed environments in classrooms but within community this was something new.

There were segregated activities in the center as well, like for example, the reading circles of women, celebrations of births and Mother's Day gatherings. When the event was attended only by Turkish community members, men and women would sit in two distinct, separate rows or if it could be arranged, women would sit in another room and watch or listen to the speaker through a large TV on the wall. When American guests were present the crowd was accommodated in the same big room with no particular separate seating.

Some women speculated that this free mixing was necessary in America where people were suspicious of any ordering that was "separate but equal." Others, with more isolationist leanings warned that this kind of leniency would be cause for moral corruption within the community. For the latter, the best time of the year in order to regroup and strengthen the ranks of the community was Ramadan, the month of fasting. While during this blessed time, fast-breaking dinners were given to the public and were mixed gender-wise, the nightly, long congregational prayers were the perfect opportunity to learn one's place. Before the prayer, women were relegated to the back and a huge black curtain was hung in between to screen the women from view. The men could hear and see the imam leading the prayer while women could only hear him and follow accordingly. Sometimes a child would step or stumble on the microphone cord and the whole congregation of women would remain frozen in one posture because they couldn't hear nor see the imam. That was the moment that Meryem hated the most. It seemed to her that the prayers of women didn't carry the same value for the curtain-hangers, otherwise how could anyone excuse this anomaly? "Why do we mix, so that our American friends won't feel uncomfortable or look at us as weird people but we can't remove the curtain so the maidens of Allah can perform their worship properly?" Meryem had tried to voice her complaint but she had been silenced by other women who wanted the privacy of the curtain. The situation in mosques wasn't any better. Divided by a heavy curtain, women prayed in small, packed, and what's worse, in poorly ventilated areas.

There was segregation in the mosques of Istanbul too but at least the divide wasn't a stifling heavy curtain but a wooden screen, elaborately carved where you can see the congregation albeit fragmented. Besides, their speaker system wasn't as prone to interruption.

Thinking of the mosques in Istanbul, Meryem remembered how on a cold winter day, she had hurried to pray the afternoon prayer in Mihrimah Sultan Mosque. Built with the concessions of Mihrimah Sultan, daughter of Sultan Suleyman, the Magnificent, this feast of architecture stood tall after all these years next to the seaside of Uskudar.

Meryem had been delayed in the traffic and was practically running to the ablution place for women because there remained only fifteen minutes till the call for the next prayer would echo from the minarets. Daily prayers were time sensitive and should be prayed in their time slots. Meryem was dismayed when she saw the ablution place for women under lock. She asked an older man who seemed to be a frequent visitor in that mosque and was told that the place for women's ablution was closed for restoration. "Where can I take ablution then?" Meryem asked desperately. The man shrugged. What is this cruelty" Meryem wondered. How can someone close the ablution place for women without providing an alternative, a make-shift construction in a corner of the yard? Why didn't the need of thousands of women who prayed here, count to make someone to think of a way of providing this service?

Meryem was so furious she wanted to scream or break something. What was she to do? She looked at her watch. She couldn't pray without ablution. She couldn't take ablution in the men's area because not only she would she expose herself but someone might chastise her or even get angry with her. The old man must have sensed her despair because he tried to come to her aid. "If you go down the stairs and walk a bit to the left, you will see public restrooms. There you can take ablution." Without wasting more time, Meryem rushed down the stairs almost stepping on the begging woman with a baby on her arms who was pleading God to grant health and happiness to those who threw coins in her

platter. Meryem ran in the direction in which the old man had pointed but couldn't see any sign for restroom, nor the restrooms. She stopped at a newspaper stand and asked the seller. He said that she needed to walk a bit more, beyond the bus stops. After much running and bumping into people, Meryem found the hard-to find-restroom. The reason for the difficulty, Meryem realized, had to do with the restroom being built underground. She took her ablution in light speed, paid the money for the restroom while exiting and without waiting for change dashed up the stairs with the restroom keeper shouting behind, "hey you forgot the change." No, she did not forget. She was racing with time. When she reached the steps of the mosque, sweaty and blushed from running, the call to prayer for the evening boomed from the speaker. She let herself fall on the steps in despair. She had missed the prayer, of no fault of her own but she had missed it nonetheless. Sitting there, next to the beggar woman, Meryem cried over the ill fate of all Muslim women who had missed the prayers for the same reasons, who have been left out the congregation in a mosque that was funded by a woman, carried the name of a woman. She imagined the grief Mihrimah Sultan would have felt had she witnessed this injustice.

She sobbed her heart out and, when she finally could stand, she wiped her tears and prayed with vehemence, more like a curse than prayer "O Allah, record the sin of my missed prayer to whoever is responsible for my missing it. You be my witness that I don't forgive the responsible people for this neglect. O Allah, help the followers of Muhammed to be considerate of their women, like the prophet was attentive to the needs of women in their time."

Although Meryem could have prayed the evening prayer in Mihrimah mosque, she decided not to. She felt unwanted there. Hurt as she was, she took a taxi and prayed at home in the warm embrace of her family. Praying there with her father as the imam and no curtain in between, she felt valued, validated.

The phone's ring startled Meryem from her reverie. She thought it might be her Mom so she hurried in the living room. She lifted the receiver and listened for her mom's "Alo". Instead it was a "Hello".

"Oh hi, reverend Valeria" she answered surprised. Valeria was the pastor at the Emory Presbyterian Church. They had met a year ago while attending a panel on the role of religion in resolving conflicts, organized by the department of sociology at GSU. Now she was inviting her for a picnic at her church Sunday afternoon. Meryem promised to go together with her roommates.

Ever since their first meeting, Valeria had taken a special interest in Meryem because she was the first Muslim woman Valeria had met in person. They had exchanged numbers and a week later Valeria had come to have breakfast with Meryem and her friends at their modest apartment. The pastor had been touched by the hospitality the girls had shown and had been very impressed by their passion for their studies and religion. In turn, Valeria had invited Meryem and her roommates to visit their church one Wednesday afternoon and speak with members of the congregation. Valeria had also discovered that Meryem was well read in Rumi poetry due to her grandfather's admiration for the mystic poet. She had asked Meryem to give a short introduction to Rumi's life and what it was like to grow up with his poetry. Meryem was a bit nervous to prepare a speech for a large audience but Pastor Valeria reassured her that the majority of the congregants were either professors at Emory or retired faculty so they were familiar with mysticism in Islam.

Prior to her presentation, Meryem compiled a selection of Rumi's poems, translated into English from books she borrowed from the university library. She marveled at how different those familiar verses sounded in a foreign tongue, yet they resonated in the heart, traversing centuries, crossing over distances both material and spiritual and touching the essence of the human soul. She decided to open her talk with the lines she knew by heart.

Come, come, whoever you are.

Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

It doesn't matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vow

A thousand times

Come, yet again, come, come.⁵

Meryem had gone to the church alone because both her roommates had exams the next day to prepare for. She had been welcomed at the door by pastor Valeria and her associates. She was ushered to the sanctuary. "We usually don't meet here on Wednesdays but when we realized that the audience was going to be greater than ordinary, we thought why not?"

Pastor Valeria took her around to show the architecture of the sanctuary, what meant what and was used for what purpose. Meanwhile she introduced Meryem to attendants. Everyone seemed thrilled to have her there. Sharply at five o'clock, the pastor went up the three wooden stairs to the pulpit and announced the guest speaker. Americans are very punctual, Meryem noted, Mom would have liked that.

Among applause Meryem stepped up to the pulpit, placed the papers of her presentation in front of her and adjusted the microphone. She stood there, silent for a split of a second, taking in the audience. These men and women, well dressed, groomed and with an interested look would listen to her. Here she was in a place of worship that wasn't her own, in front of a congregation that didn't pray facing toward Mekke. Would they be able to tell that Meryem had never spoken from a pulpit to a congregation of worshippers before? Would they sense that in her congregation, if she ever spoke it was in muted tone from the back of a curtain and even that was considered preposterous? Could they

⁵ Masnavi Book I, 599-607 trans. By Anne Marie Shimme

deduct from her timid way she stood behind the pulpit, from her trembling hand adjusting the microphone that she came from a place where a woman's place is concealed, where a woman's voice is silenced in public? If they did see through her, would they ascribe this treatment to Islam and her prophet, or would they be able to remove the many layers of misogyny, added to religion like a crust, stifling it from inside?

People were moved by the poetry, they applauded the ancient wisdom that rang true even centuries later; many congratulated Meryem for the great job presenting it. Meryem was grateful for the chance to share with them that part of her heritage she was proud of, that part of her cultural make-up she was happy to own.

After dinner, Meryem listened to her roommates tell their stories of visiting home, seeing old friends, eating one more time the delicious foods of their childhood. She realized she missed home terribly and regretted registering for summer school. She thought of her mother, what would she be doing at that moment in the darkest hour of the night, the one closest to the breaking of dawn.

Zeliha reminded everyone that it was prayer time. The absence of ezan, that lovely call to prayer was one big void for them. They had purchased a prayer clock which would recite a recorded ezan at the correct time but how could one compare the ezan from a clock with the melodious one from the minarets that filled the sky? After ablution, they laid down their prayer mats and entered the prayer. A soft warm breeze gushed in from the open window bringing to Meryem the salty scent of Bosphorous. She felt painfully homesick. This must be the longing that our souls feel for paradise, she thought. Like a reed that is cut from its roots, my soul longs for the eternal abode. Stepping onto the prayer mat, opening her hands in prayer, Meryem felt she had come to a space, where above place and time, she

made contact with the world unseen and her soul was open to inspirations. When her forehead touched the ground she felt closer to Allah, to His creation and to the vast congregation of believers, past and present, since the time of Adam. Her prayer mat was the refuge, there her soul could breathe and she could feel the longing for the hereafter, the perfect world where pain and injustice didn't exist. This world was transient. What you planted in this world, you harvested in the hereafter. Meryem knew what she did was never enough, her deeds resembled tiny seeds but she was hopeful. For Allah was merciful. He could bring forth a giant tree from a tiny pine seed.

3.14 The American in Our Midst

August 1997, Istanbul

The summer Quranic camp was coming to a close. Zeynep had ordered a big cake to reward the children. She had also printed certificates of success for each student who had reached his or her goal. Many parents had expressed their gratitude toward Zeynep and to the volunteer teachers that had come every weekday and worked with them in the summer heat. Zeynep was grateful for every blessing from Allah. She was thankful for her daughter Rana, who had woken up early every single day and had endured with patience the noise, the hard work, and exhaustion that followed. She also had reached her camp goal: memorization of surah Yasin. Rana would love the present Zeynep had bought her.

This had been an unusual camp though. Jen had attended every day, without the translator. Now that she lived in the neighborhood she came walking to Zeynep's house before the students arrived. In the first days, she mostly observed and took pictures. It was a bit distracting to students having her there, clicking the camera and taking notes. But later they got used to her and delighted in her attention. Zeynep had challenged them to be their best, befitting to a Muslim. Even Rana noticed that they were behaving better this year, more mature, more attentive.

Zeynep had warmed up to Jen during her stay in her house. Although she had stayed only for a week, that had sufficed to see her as she was, a young woman, far from her family, in a foreign land. Rana had become very fond of her too. Thanks to Jen she had discovered a new hobby: jewelry making. Jen's Turkish had improved extensively. Rana made necklaces, earrings, and rings in her spare time and collected them in a box to be sold in the next kermes.

Jen now was boarding in Sule's house. They had a spare room and Jen loved Nadire's cooking. The downside of this arrangement was Yasin's moving out. When Jen was staying with them, Zeynep asked Yasin to stay with Murat for a couple of days. He agreed because by convention, it was improper he slept in a room next to the room in which Jen was staying.

When Jen decided to move to Sule's though, Zeynep wasn't at ease having Yasin back, not after what she had read in Jen's notebook. Though Yasin never confessed to having any particular fondness for Jen, Zeynep didn't want to take any risks. As she was thinking for a way out, the solution came from where she did not expect it. Yusuf asked Zeynep if the women in her group would agree to donate some of the kermes money for a new school opening in Sudan. The money Zeynep and her friends agreed to give went to providing doors and window frames for the school. Yusuf mentioned that construction supervisor and engineers were needed. She proposed that Yasin go too, since he was good at supervising construction. He would have to stay for three months which was ample time for Zeynep because by then Jen would have completed her six-month stay and would have returned to America. Yusuf was surprised by her proposal, out of the blue. They resorted to ask Yasin and as a dutiful son he agreed. The day Jen moved out, Yasin came home, packed his suitcases and left for Sudan. "O Allah in your hands, I place my son. Protect him from evil and harm." Zeynep prayed as she hugged him one last time.

With her mind at ease, Zeynep returned to her work with energy. Jen's presence didn't make her uncomfortable. On the contrary, she started to enjoy seeing her interact with people from her circle, good people would make a good impression on her.

Jen saw Hulya too, almost every day because Hulya started to tutor middle schoolers in math and science after they had finished Quran lessons. Students loved her, and she enjoyed teaching them.

After she had rejected marrying Kadir, the suitor who came to see her all the way from America, Hulya had resumed her own Quran memorization and seemed to have accepted her fate. The assault on Jen might have convinced her that risks of studying abroad alone were greater than the benefits. Tutoring was consoling to Hulya because she was hopeful that one day these young girls would be free to study while wearing headscarves. Zeynep showed extra compassion toward Hulya. She had seen her grow with her girls and witnessing her trauma had been hard for everybody. But now the worst was over and they were looking forward to brighter days.

Zeynep had been asked by her sohbet friends to relate what happened to Jen. "She was attacked while returning home after running on the beach, around ten o'clock in the evening." All sorts of opinions flew in the air as to who was the culprit. Sema said she shouldn't be running after dusk. Hilal commented on her wearing shorts for running. "So the attackers are not to blame?" Zeynep asked, annoyed. "No, we didn't mean that. Of course the perpetrators are the only one to blame. We are just talking of the precautions she could have taken." Hilal answered, embarrassed.

"Whatever, the sad truth is that a shameful thing has happened to our guest. Neither our government who issued her a visa, nor us who welcomed her into our homes were able to protect her. Shame on us. Thank Allah someone called the police and she was saved and was not severely harmed." Zeynep said with fury.

"Did the police catch the attackers?"

"No, that's why I decided that she move closer to us so we can keep an eye on her."

Yusuf had first objected to the idea that Jen stayed with them. "If she stays with us, whatever happens to her will implicate us as well. The police still don't know who the attackers are or why they attacked her." He said with worry.

"If we don't do something about it, then we shall be implicated" Zeynep insisted. "How are we going to answer Allah if some harm happens to her while she is our guest?"

"Okay," Yusuf said unconvinced. "Let me ask the Brothers." The Brothers had supported the idea that she moved somewhere safer. They had suggested that she stayed in the student house closest to Zeynep. "No," Zeynep had disagreed. "She mustn't stay there. She will put the female students staying there at risk too." Zeynep carried another worry but did not relate to Yusuf. She didn't want Jen so close to the girls. Who knows what ideas she could put in the minds of gullible young students? Look what happened to Hulya. Zeynep wanted no more trouble.

"This is the brothers' decision. That she stays with them." Yusuf insisted.

"Well, with all due respect I disagree. Jen will stay with us till we find her a place in the neighborhood." Zeynep spoke with determination. Yusuf looked a bit disconcerted. How shall he say to them that his wife disobeyed? What if some misfortune happened to his wife on account of her disobedience? The Brothers decisions were respected by both men and women, that's how the community could hold together. But Yusuf knew better than to argue with her. He prayed that she didn't come to regret her decision.

Now Zeynep was happy she wasn't proven wrong. She hadn't acted out of arrogance. She had based her decision on knowledge that only she was privy to. If she had shared that knowledge with the brothers, they would have agreed with her too but in that case she would have revealed Sema's and her family's private conflict and that wouldn't have been right.

There was only one month left before Jen left. After her departure, Zeynep could again work worry-free, with one less strain on her brain, one less item to worry about. Although, as Yasin said, “The problems never cease in our parts”, still she would feel relieved albeit for a short time.

Jen wondered what else Jen had written in her notebook during her stay with them and the summer camp. Did she get to know them better? Was she still of the opinion that they carried a double consciousness? Had she written anything else about Yasin? Although Zeynep had more than one chance to peek at Jen’s notebook she had not done it. She wasn’t at ease in her conscience for doing it the first time either.

It had surprised Zeynep that Jen had refused vehemently to notify the US embassy of the attack on her. “It will mess up with my stay and my research.” She had reasoned with Zeynep. “Is there anyone you would like to call, even in America?” “No, I don’t want to talk about this with anyone.” Jen had insisted and that was it. When Zeynep had seen her crouched over herself on the bench at the police station, she had felt a great a pain in her chest. She had hugged Jen for a long time as Jen had cried and sobbed on her shoulder. “Shshsh... It’s alright now. It’s over.” Zeynep had caressed and soothed. “Thanks for coming,” Jen had muffled when she stopped crying. “May Allah be pleased with you!” Even if Jen said it out of custom, it pleased Jen to be thanked that way. Looking at her tear -stricken face, Zeynep thought of Meryem, living so far away across the ocean. Was her daughter safe? Did wearing modest clothes and avoiding going around in the dark suffice to protect her from danger in America? She wondered. Above all, did Meryem have a shoulder to lean on if she felt like crying?

Meryem had told Zeynep of the many friends and sisters in the community who checked on her and her roommates periodically, invited them for fast-breaking dinners and took her car for repairs when needed.

What about Jen? Why didn’t somebody call her? What about the American diaspora in Istanbul? Didn’t she hang out with them? During Jen’s stay in her house, Zeynep got all the answers, sometimes

from Jen herself, sometimes from Rana who related to her mom everything she found interesting about the researcher. For example, Rana told her that Jen broke up with her last boyfriend because he didn't want her to leave for Turkey. Her last boyfriend? Zeynep cringed. How many more before him? What does Rana think of this? She worried.

Jen told Zeynep she didn't like mingling with other Americans because she considered it a waste of time, since all they thought about was partying and drinking and she had to focus on her research. As for her parents, her father was sick at home with Parkinson while her Mom, divorced and remarried, served as a missionary in Africa. Jen had not shared her number with her mother, so she couldn't call her daughter." Why did you not give her your number?" Zeynep asked.

"Because she did not ask for it. She expects me to call her and I do call once in a while and that seems to suffice." Jen replied matter-of-factly.

What a strange logic, Zeynep thought. What if Jen's mother wants to communicate with her daughter in times of emergency? But she didn't press any further. It was obvious that Jen's family was a strange arrangement. All Zeynep needed to know was that Jen was her guest now and made sure Jen felt welcomed in her house.

When Zeynep woke up early to cook for the camp children, she would go around the kitchen doing making minimal noise so that not to disturb her guest. She even tried to cook something new and delicious for her sake. Jen seemed to appreciate the hospitality of her host. On the day she moved out, although she would be leaving living next door, the house felt empty for Zeynep. When Jen hugged her with many thanks for her help, she also added. "Zeynep hoca, I think your daughters are lucky to have a mother like you." Then she looked at Rana as if to check that she heard it too. "I am the one blessed to have them." Zeynep responded glancing toward her youngest daughter with compassion. Tears appeared on the edges of Jen's eyes. She wiped them quickly and hurried down the stairs followed by Rana who was carrying one of her bags. Jen's words reminded Zeynep of one piece of advice Mehmet

Efendi gave to her on his last days. "These children of yours, my daughter, are a trust from Allah. Do not betray your trust. As you go about doing your hizmet, do not neglect them. Remember, while someone else may be found to fill your absence in sohbet, your children have only one mother, your absence in their life, is always going to create a void"

Zeynep had paid heed to that advice and she was grateful she had no regrets. With the leave of Allah, her children would continue working for the noble cause and pass the flag to their children and so on.

Zeynep took the cake to the living room and all the children clapped with joy. They took their slices and drinks and chatted among themselves with delight. Since the house was too small to accommodate all, Zeynep had borrowed tables and chairs from the neighbors and had set a little banquet under the fig tree for the mothers of her students and the teachers. She let Hulya supervise the children and went down to the garden to see her guests. Every one thanked her once again. "If it wasn't for you and your friends, our children would have spent their summer idly in front of TV. May Allah be pleased with you," said one mother. Zeynep recognized her to be living in one of the back streets. "With your help, my daughter studied the Quran, and got tutored in math and science for free. She will be able to pass the entrance exam to fen lisesi, the best high school in town. We could have never afforded to hire a tutor for Semra" She said with a sigh. Semra, a very bright girl, had been one of the most diligent of Hulya's students. Zeynep was happy to hear their efforts had borne fruit.

This is not enough she said to herself, who knows how many of our girls are left uneducated for lack of means? More of us should come out and extend a hand. Zeynep hoca had prepared a short talk in her mind for this occasion. How many times would she have a chance to speak to a great numbers of women, housewives with a great deal of time at their hands and a heart full of compassion?

"Knowledge," she began "is the lost possession of every Muslim, says our dear prophet. He or she must claim it even if it is found in China. For many years our people have been timid to send their

girls to higher education. Some ,because of the twisted beliefs that schooling wasn't necessary for girls, others because they had legitimately feared the decline in their morals. Elhamdulillah, today we have more means to provide our daughters a healthy environment where they can study and stay away from the bohemian life of the campuses. Student houses and private dorms are sponsored by generous people of Anatolia without expecting any gain but the good pleasure of Allah. And don't think that only rich people contribute. Everyone can as much as possible. "

She paused for a moment to let everyone ponder. They needed donations for the two student houses opening this fall, especially now that a part of their funds went to Sudan. "Allah will not let you down." Yusuf had reassured. "He will provide." Zeynep had believed that then. She believed it now as she looked at the many faces of these women who had stopped eating and were listening to her, without fidgeting as if they had birds over their heads.

"You too can help. In one month, two student houses will open their doors to our daughters from every part of Turkey. Those of you who have the means, can donate money; some of you can ask other well off—to do relatives to give and those of you that can't do neither but want to add some of their salt to this soup, can donate home appliances for these houses. If you have curtains, bed sheets, pots, and pans that are sitting idly because you have no need for them, then please consider to donating them. Who knows maybe in the day of Judgment, where people will sink in their sweat because of the burden of reckoning of their lives, what you give today will be your salvation; will help you find favor with Allah.

Zeynep noticed that Jen had come down too and was listening from a far corner, sitting under a tree. "Zeynep hoca", a woman rose with excitement. She opened her purse and handed a stack of money. "Here, take these. I had saved them bit by bit to buy myself a new fancy dress and a pair of shoes to wear at my sister's wedding. I decided my current dresses are good enough. May it be of good to you." She said sitting down. Zeynep hoca place a kerchief ofnthe table and placed the money on it.

Another woman, rose, came close to the table and placed a fat envelope over the money. "I withdrew this amount to renew my bedroom furniture. Now I decided to postpone it for a few more years."

One by one, other women rose and left their money, rings, and golden bracelets on the kerchief. Others promised to donate house items while others pledged to solicit money from their husbands, fathers or other relatives. Zeynep took notes of everything promised together with the names of the pledgers.

A light rain picked up and the guest rose to leave. Zeynep helped by Hulya and Rana cleaned up and returned the items borrowed from neighbors. Zeynep wondered where Jen was. Had she gone back to Nadire's? What did she think about the women's response to their call for help? She hadn't asked any questions. Was it something she was familiar with?

The call to prayer filled the sky one more time from the minarets as the rain started pelting the roof. Hulya wanted to leave but Zeynep refused to let her go. "Not, in this rain. Come, let us pray first and later let's have a cup of tea. It will take away our exhaustion." Tea had superpowers for its lovers. It took away exhaustion, thirst, even worry. It soothed one's spirit. "Later, me, and my husband can drop you off before evening. We can call your Mom to let her know you will be here for a little longer." Hulya agreed and went to the restroom to take ablution. Rana went to her room to change to more comfortable clothes because she had worn a layered purple chiffon dress for the celebration program.

They were sipping tea in peace when Rana came into the living room holding a parcel wrapped in glittery gift wrap. She handed the parcel to Zeynep who smiled and asked, a bit amused: "What is this?"

"A present. For you," Rana said as she hugged her mom. She thanked Rana with sincere appreciation. It was touching that during these last days of the camp, when Zeynep was all preoccupied with the students, her daughter had thought of buying something for her. "Well, aren't you going to open it?" Rana asked a bit impatiently. "Hulya abla helped me pick it."

Zeynep wanted to say to Rana that it was her thought that counted, that she already had won her Mom's heart, but she didn't resist and began tearing gently the wrapping paper. Inside there was a square wooden box with elaborately carvings on the top. Zeynep was about to open the lid when the door bell sounded with alarm. "You sit, Mom. I will go answer it," Rana said as she jumped up on her feet. In a split of a moment Zeynep was transported back twenty eight years back to that fateful night of her father's arrest. Since that night, Zeynep's heart reacted to phone rings at night or bangs on the door with palpitation and dread.

What could be wrong this time, she wondered as she heard Rana yell: Mom, come. It's Nazife teyze. Hadn't Zeynep noticed alarm in her daughter's voice she would have had chastised Rana for keeping Nazife at the door instead of inviting her in. Hulya must have sense something was wrong too because she followed Zeynep downstairs.

"Aman Allahim," they both exclaimed with horror as soon as they saw Nazife. She stood there in her house clothes and slippers. Her right cheek was bruised and a trickle of blood ran from her mouth down the chin. What was more terrifying, Nazife was cradling her right forearm with her left hand. From the way it hung limp with a swollen bump on the wrist as if one of the bones was protruding through the skin, Hulya understood that serious injuries were concerned. They both urged Nazife to sit on a chair in the foyer as Hulya examined her arm and her face. Zeynep sent Rana to bring some ice in a plastic bag from the refrigerator. "What happened to you, Nazife?" Zeynep asked not hiding her anxiety. Last they had heard, Nazife had gone to see her sister who was living her last days having lost the battle against cancer. Nazife had called Zeynep to let her know that she would be gone for a week and would not attend the next sohbet. Did she have a car accident on her way back from her sister's village? If so where was her husband? Why wasn't she taken to a hospital by somebody on the accident site? Zeynep was exploding with questions and worry when Nazife stopped crying and began to speak. "My husband, Nazmi. He beat me up."

“What?” Both women exclaimed. You needn’t be a seer to notice that Nazmi wasn’t the kindest husband in the world. But beating your wife to a pulp, in broad daylight? Nazife placed her good hand on her temple as if to stop a headache coming from there.

“Zeynep hoca,” Hulya turned toward Zeynep with urgency. “Let’s talk about this later. We must take her to the hospital as soon as possible. She doesn’t look good at all. Looking at the way that she has difficulty to speak, I am afraid she might have brain hemorrhage from blows on her head. Quick, we must hurry.” Hulya urged as she rose to put on her coat and her headscarf.

They left Rana at home with the instruction to call her father, who was at Leyla Hanim’s home for a men’s sohbet, and notify Sema, Hulya’s mother to come to the hospital too. Hulya hurried to stop a taxi as soon as possible. They tried to keep Nazife awake on the way to the hospital. Hulya was filled with worry but Zeynep was filled with rage. Who did he think he was? What could be her crime to deserve this punishment?

As soon as Hulya was taken into the emergency room to be checked by a team of doctors, Sema arrived out of breath. “How is she?” She asked her daughter. “We don’t know yet. They told us to wait.” Sema plunged on one of the chairs. “Who did this to her?” she asked. “Her husband.” Answered Zeynep. “May his hands be broken!” Sema cursed between her teeth. “Amin!” Zeynep muttered. This was the first time that she approved of a curse but it seemed to her that Nazmi had well deserved it. After hours of waiting, a nurse appeared to let them know that the doctors had placed her broken arm in a cast and were checking her for brain damage. She was put to sleep and they could only see her the next morning.

Sema and Hulya headed home while Zeynep decided to go to the police station. Like a volcano that has stayed dormant for too long, she felt her anger accumulating at her throat. As soon as she entered the station, she approached the first officer at sight. “I am here to report a serious case of domestic violence.” She said to him. She was directed to room in the corner. A woman officer sat behind

a desk with a typing machine in front of her. Zeynep spilled her frustration into words as the officer typed and typed with precision.

“Are you the complainant of this man?” The officer asked as part of the procedure.

“Yes, I am. I want him to answer before the law for this heinous crime.” Zeynep answered without feeling the least of doubts. She was asked to sign her statement before leaving. The officer told her that already a dispatch was sent to arrest Nazmi bey.

When Zeynep stepped out of the police station, the sun had bid his farewell to the world and night had claimed her victory. The muezzin was calling the faithful to worship: Come to prayer, come to salvation. Allah is greatest. Zeynep hurried toward her house. She was still devastated for Nazife but at least her anger had subsided a bit. She will recover, Zeynep thought. Allah will heal her. Allah is the greatest.

3.15 Under the Scope

September 1997, Istanbul

Jen is leaving today. She says she will come back next spring, though she doesn't sound very sure. “It depends” she says “if I still have the funds to do my research.” I got used to her sitting in Mom's sohbet. She got used to us too. Dressed more like us, with long skirts and long sleeved shirts, Jen laughs at our jokes, empties her tea cup and her plate and doesn't ask as many questions.

When she stayed in my room for a week, we loved to sit in the balcony during evenings, under the stars as she recounted her childhood. Her best days were spent in her grandfather's ranch in Texas, before her parents divorced. She showed me her parents' pictures, separate ones where her father posed from his desk at home, while her Mom blinked to the camera under the bright African sun. A tall man was standing next to her, his arm on her shoulder as if she was his trophy. In the background a few black kids were looking at the photographer with wonder. A humongous dog sat at the feet of the couple. Jen said the dog was her family's dog. Her mother had taken it to Africa to remind her of home.

Jen had visited her mother twice but hadn't liked her step-father, whom she had found strict as a general. It is still very unclear to me why Jen's parents divorced. She said her mother got into some kind of religious group and she got born again. When I asked Jen how someone can be born again, she said "It's complicated." Anyway, it seems her father had a hard time to understand his born-again wife and she started to spend less time in the house and more with her group at church. Jen, ten years old at the time, had tried in vain to keep them together but the distance grew each day.

Her father was a Jew but he didn't believe in God. That was something else I found perplexing. How can someone be a Jew and not believe in God? Isn't it like saying someone is Muslim but doesn't believe in Allah? Jen explained to me that being Jewish can mean both a religion and an ethnicity at the same time. Her Mom eventually had found it impossible to live under the roof with someone who had no belief, so she filed for divorce. During the divorce process, she started having some awkward dreams where she gave birth to black children. She believed she was called to serve and to spread the gospel in Africa. One missionary from her group had confessed that he was having the same calling, so they both decided to board a plane and fly to Africa where they opened an orphanage. There they feed these destitute children and show them how to be born again. I wonder what Nadire teyze would think of Jen's mother, a woman who left her daughter in America to mother the children of Africa.

Jen, as she tells me, decided to stay with her father after she realized that her mother had the better deal out of the divorce. She was happy with her new religion and had a man, albeit a stern one by her side. Her father's health had deteriorated with time and his drinking didn't help either. When Jen left for college, he had retired from his job as an architect and returned to his family's ranch to recuperate from his depression.

I can say Jen misses her father a lot but I am not sure she likes her mother that much. One other thing I don't get is why Jen is doing research in Turkey, lives in a different state, far away from her father when he is so lonely and misses her so much. Can't she do research somewhere closer to him? When I

shared with her my confusion, she said : “My father told me to be happy and go on with my life. He would hate it if his conditions kept me back from doing what I love to do.”

I still wonder if there is a middle way to satisfy both your desires and your parents.

Jen showed me a picture of her boyfriend too. Contrary to what I saw in my dream, His name is not Ben but Mark. In all the pictures taken with her, Mark seems to make an extra effort to look like a buffoon. He either sticks out his tongue or crosses his eyes or bends with laughter. He also seems to be fond of tattoos and piercings because there seems hardly any exposed part of his body that hasn't either one or the other. I asked Jen if she regretted breaking up with him but she said no. If someone doesn't respect her work, it he is not good enough to be with her. I asked her what he did for a living and she said that he was a design artist but not earning much.

One other thing I was very curious of had to do with her research. I asked her how she came up with the idea of finding us. She said that she had read an analysis of Turkish Muslims becoming more visible in public and she wondered what was behind it. She spoke of wanting to know as if she had the right to know everything. “Why know?” I asked. “Because knowledge is power.” She answered. What do you do with that power, I wondered but not out loud. She explained that after she prepared a proposal for her research, a Research Institute provided the money for her expenses. She will share the research with the people at that institute and they would use it later for their analysis of the region. I wonder if in Turkey there are such institutions which spend money to know what American women are up to. I asked Mom and she shook her head. “No, she said. Our institutions are too busy in labeling people, who is a secular and who is not, to have time and energy for that kind of work.”

I asked Jen if her research would help us too, the people in the research. She said she didn't know. She intends to send us a copy of her work once it's done. We may translate and read it.

Last Saturday, in the last sohbet she attended, Jen decided to interview Mom as she had finished interviewing the rest of the group. “Dessert for last,” she even teased. Mom didn't seem

flattered but agreed as one agrees to have their photos taken for passport applications. Let's get done with it.

Their interview lasted an hour long. When they finally came out, Mom, unlike her friends before her, didn't act confused or embarrassed. She rather seemed vindicated as if in her interview she had taken something off of her chest. I love it that Mom is not easily intimidated. It gives me a kind of reassurance that whatever happens, Mom will find a way out in the sea of her calm. I don't know what her secret is but in times of distress Mom behaves as if she can see the pattern of a greater design in what seems like a labyrinth of chaos.

One day as we were pruning the roses in the garden, Jen asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I told her I wanted to become a TV programmer, to make programs that won't be a waste of time. She laughed at that and asked me how I would know they won't be a waste of time to some people. "I will figure it out somehow." I said blushing to the tips of my ears. What kind of plan was that when I hadn't sorted out the most basic matter?

I have made a necklace for Jen out of small seashells. She doesn't wear much jewelry which is kind of odd. Women as I know them like showing off their golden bracelets. Except for Mom, of course. She doesn't have any left. She has sold them, I am told, when hizmet needed money.

Last night Sema teyze gave a big dinner in honor of Jen. Every one presented a gift to her and she was in tears and thanking profusely by the end of the night. "I will come back," she said teasingly "So there is no need for a good-bye party." "Your departure is just an excuse." Sema teyze teased back. "We wanted ourselves a good party." We all laughed at that.

Now Jen has everything labeled and packed in her room. She says that she came with two suitcases and is returning with four, the extra two suitcases are filled with gifts people have given her. I am happy for that. I hope the kindness shown to her will make her forget the assault those despicable men made her suffer.

My brother Yasin hasn't returned from Sudan and won't be able to say good bye to Jen. He doesn't even ask about her when she speaks with Mom on the phone. Mom doesn't mention her either. It is this total absence in their exchange that makes me very uncomfortable to talk to Jen about my brother. I have told her about my father, my two sisters, my friend Sule, even my aunt who lives in the other side of Istanbul.

Yasin abi has sent pictures from Sudan. He also is surrounded by black people in construction clothes but he doesn't have the air of a savior. In fact if it wasn't for the color of his skin, it would be hard to distinguish him from the others. He writes that Sudanese people are very humble and hospitable. They seem to love Turkish people due to their Ottoman legacy. Yasin abi is hopeful that this school will open the doors to economic and political prowess for the youth of Sudan. "The students are so smart and hardworking, it is amazing." He wrote. "With the right education, they will succeed bringing their country out of poverty and political discord." He says that the construction of the school was finished a month ago and now they are working on a dorm for boys and girls. He related that at first parents didn't want to send their daughters to school because they worked and helped inside the house. But when some of the Turkish female teachers visited them in their homes and talked to them of the importance of education for girls- one of the greatest scholars of Islam is a woman, Ayse, the wife of the prophet -by giving examples from their lives- some mothers were convinced. When the first group of girls started attending schools, more followed and like the light of dawn that sweeps the flat land of the savannah, the desire to learn spread among the young of Sudan.

Mom read parts of Yasin abi's letter in the sohbet and most of the women listening to her cried and sighed, feeling thankful that they had contributed to the building of the school, no matter how modestly. When I listen to these kinds of stories, I almost give up on becoming a TV programmer and I want to become a teacher too. It seems like teaching is the noblest of profession, a profession of prophets Mom calls it because they are the true teachers of humanity. Of course teaching doesn't only

mean to give lessons on a certain subject but rather to be an example of integrity, to help your student succeed both morally and academically, to mentor them into becoming responsible, altruistic people.

Mom says that all mothers are teachers too. The first teachers of human race and that is a mighty important duty. She confesses that although she was taught by her father in matters of religion, it was her mother who showed her how to be humble, caring and attentive to what happened in life. For example, grandma taught her by example that contentment of the heart is the biggest richness; that frugality is the key to bounty; and that Allah's mercy surpasses His wrath.

I don't know much of other faiths but I believe ours is a beautiful religion. It promises a way of life without excess. Just like during a trip a traveler doesn't indulge himself in food and entertainment before reaching his/her destination, so we live our lives in moderation. This world is a place of service, the next the abode of rewards. Blessings are enjoyed only in taste bites, so that we can be eager for the eternal counterparts in paradise.

Mom reminds me that it is time to go if we want to see Jen off in at the airport. I adjust my headscarf one last time in front of the dresser and step down stairs. The air is getting cooler as autumn makes her appearance. In a few days I will start school and summer will fade like a dream in the past.

Jen is greeting with neighbors right and left who wish her a safe return home. Nadire teyze has packed some borek for Jen to eat at the airport as she didn't have time to eat breakfast. We all hop on a taxi, Jen in the front with the driver, me and Mom in the back. "You really didn't have to come all the way to airport." Jen says as if she is giving us a second chance to give up and return as we are still in the neighborhood. "I know, Jen. But we want to." Mom replies kindly. "Thank you." Jen says, truly touched "for everything." What she doesn't know is that the whole gang will be at the airport to say goodbye to her. I wonder what she will say when she sees them: Sema teyze, Leyla teyze, Gulcan, Hilal and Hulya abla. Only Nazife teyze is missing. She returned to the hospital because her arm hadn't set well. So they needed to recast it again. She has decided to divorce her husband. It wasn't an easy decision for her. In

fact in the sohbet after she was beaten, mom asked her friends what they thought Nazife abla should do. "I wish I could hang the man.!" Leyla teyze said with vehemence. "May he rot in hell." She added for reinforcement. Nazmi amca, we learned, had punished Nazife teyze because she had been stubborn and had gone to see her sister against his wish. There was no agreement among the women present on whether her disobedience had been a wise thing to do. After all she knew she would be returning to the same husband after a week. "It would be best if she had listened to him." Sema teyze argued. "Yes, it was cruel of him to keep her from seeing her ailing sister for the last time but what can you do? Some men are heartless."

"No no, I disagree" Leyla teyze shook her head. "It is this mentality that teaches women to obey their husband's every whim that encourages men to behave as they please."

"But isn't there a tradition that tell us of a woman who was forbidden by her husband to see her father for the last time. And because she obeyed and showed patience, the prophet said that her father's suffering was lessened in the grave life?" Hilal abla asked turning toward Mom.

"That goes to show that patience is rewarded" Mom interjected " but that hadith doesn't praise the husband for forbidding his wife to visit her father. Visiting one's father before he breathes life is a beautiful deed to do and I don't see any valid reason to forbid it."

"Why did Nazmi forbid her in the first place?" Gulcan abla asked, genuinely curious.

"Nazife says that he had some grudges against her sister's husband and they weren't speaking for a long time." Mom offered.

"What a stupid reason." Leyla teyze spewed with hate.

"Anyway we are not here to judge him but to help Nazife make a decision." Mom redirected.

"Yusuf talked with Nazmi Bey while he was in custody. He is still very angry at her. He says that he will let her return only if, she apologizes and promises to never disobey him again."

"Preposterous." Leyla teyze muttered with distaste.

Nazmi amca had been convicted with three months in prison and a big fine. He will be furious like a wounded bear when he returns home.

“She should divorce him right away.” Leyla teyze insisted.

“It is not that easy. Nazife has neither a job nor qualifications for one. She doesn’t even have a family to turn to.” Mom said looking directly at Leyla teyze’s face as if saying: It is easy for you to talk. You have a rich family to provide for you, were something to happen.

“If she decides to get a divorce that should be her decision.” Mom added a bit forcefully. “We should help her to find a place to stay and a job.”

“She can work for me,” Leyla teyze said enthusiastically. “One of my house helps is getting married and moving away.”

Everyone was silent for a moment. Wouldn’t it be humiliating for Nazife teyze to work as a servant in Leyla teyze’s house while they met at the same sohbet as friends?

“Bakalim, we will see.” Mom said a bit dismissively. “Let Nazife get better first.” Then she ended the discussion with well-known verses of Ibrahim Hakki: Let’s see what the Beloved does. What he does, he does it with grace.”

Nazife teyze decided to divorce her husband while he was still in jail. She now stays in a student house temporarily, though to say the truth both she and the students are very happy about the arrangement. During the days, she works in a daycare where she can love and caress a lot of babies. “It’s heaven for me.” She once answered when Mom asked her if she was happy with her job. Once her arm heals completely she will return in our midst full force, she promised.

We remain silent as the taxi swerves through the narrow streets of Istanbul.

Jen will cross the big Atlantic Ocean and by the time she arrives in her land we will be preparing for evening prayers. We will always be on a different time zone from her and will gaze at a different sky.

At the airport entrance our group waves at us with anticipation. They have even secured two carts for her luggage. We accompany her as she checks in. Jen is truly touched that everybody has come to see her off. When she exchanges hugs with each of us, I can see that she can't talk for fear of crying. "Thank you." she mumbles as she turns toward the passport check point. We wait and wave until she is lost from sight. A young woman, alone in the crowd. We turn relieved to catch the metro. Everyone gets off in at different stations. Mom and I are the last to remain. I lay my head on her shoulder because I am a bit sleepy. I try to think what Jen is doing in her plane right now. I have never boarded a plane myself. Will someone be greeting her arrival? Will she be happy to set foot on her country again where people don't hug three times and don't speak a language that twists her tongue? I imagine she arrives safely. She takes a taxi and travels miles and miles across the country to stop in front of a ranch with grazing cows behind the fence. She drops the luggage at the gate and starts running. I imagine her running like a little girl across the grass to give a hug to her beloved father.

"Come, Rana. It's time to get off. Here comes our station." Mom nudges me. We walk on the platform a bit hurriedly. I can see mom is relieved, happy even. "Hurry a bit, won't you?" She turns toward me with an amused smile. "We must get prepared for the special visit in the evening." I wonder who we will visit and why Mom is was so thrilled about it. Mom stops at a chocolate shop and order a big box of heart-shaped chocolates. She has it decorated for a special occasion , "the asking for the hand of a bride". My heart starts beating faster with excitement. " For Yasin abi?" I ask. Mom nods with pleasure.

"Who?" I ask perplexed.

"Someone you know and love very much." She says.

"Hulya abla?" I ask. Mom nods again, patting my shoulder. I am confused. While I was busy keeping Jen company, Mom and Sema teyze must have been busy arranging this engagement.

"When your brother comes back from Sudan in two months, we will have the engagement ceremony." Mom informs me. "Tonight we will only ask for her hand."

“Shall I come too?” I ask feeling the delight. “Yes, Rana sultan, how can we go without you?”

Next Mom buys a bouquet of wild flowers and lets me carry them home. Their scents make me so happy I feel like crying. The breeze from the sea promises a cool evening. Yasin abi will marry Hulya abla. The families are happy. I am happy. The seagulls are peaceful for once. Above us the bluest sky expands to infinity.

3.16 Instead of an Epilogue

September 2007, Istanbul

Jen never returned as she had promised. In a letter sent to Zeynep hoca the following spring, she wrote that her funds had been cut but offered no further explanation. Did the sponsoring institution lose interest in her research or were they unsatisfied with her findings? What was she looking for in the first place, anyway? She wrote that she missed Istanbul and all of us. She also said that she had moved closer to her dad and was about to get married with someone named Stan. “I like better this one!” Rana exclaimed to everyone’s surprise when she saw the engagement picture she had enclosed in the envelope. Jen smiled at the camera next to a handsome young man in a suit.

“Well, our adventure with the researcher seems to be over.” Zeynep hoca declared. “We wish her all the best, but we need to move on with our work.” She went over planned activities for Ramadan. Now ten years later so many things have changed in the country. The AKP party reelection let in some air for us to breathe. We all voted in a referendum to amend the constitution of 1980 written by generals in uniform. Turkey has become more democratic and is taking steps toward EU membership. Our girls can go to college dressed as they please; Even the first lady now wears a headscarf.

Our numbers have grown, thanks to Allah. We now communicate through cell phones and emails. We founded our Own Endowment for Women and have two offices and a website. Our activities

are now greater in scope and larger in their extent. Zeynep hoca continues giving sohbet but has left the organizing part to the younger generations, to Hulya specifically, her daughter in law.

Hulya married Yasin after his return from Sudan and now they are happily expecting their third child. Hulya published her memoir which was better received than anyone expected. She now has a blog where she shares her experiences related to motherhood. Rana, encouraged and tutored by her sister in law, is studying medicine and is in her last year. Her sister Meryem works as an associate professor in a newly established university where she trains the new generations of sociologists.

With time, we could have forgotten all about Jen and her visit with us, had we not been approached by two timid girls, Meryem's students, who had decided to study the role of women in Hizmet. This time it was different. There were no strange encounters, no translation needed, no awkward silences. Needless to say, without reservations we welcomed them into our midst.

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