

IN A NEW COUNTRY
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The man who ran the store on the first floor of my apartment building called me Cumartesi—Turkish for Saturday—after the name of the cheapest bottle of wine he sold. I entered his shop and went straight for it, brought it upstairs and drank from the bottle. I had no glasses, no plates or silverware. I took long walks in the evenings and spent nights in my apartment eating lahmacun, the closest thing I could find to pizza. As the light bulbs went out, first in the bathroom, then in the kitchen, I failed to replace them. I wasn't sure where I could buy them.

I taught a compulsory English class for undergraduates at a university on the European side of Istanbul. From the beginning it was clear my students were bored. They scrolled through their text messages and talked openly with each other in the long rows of the enormous auditorium. I tried everything to win their admiration, or at the very least,

their attention. I played American pop music. I tried having them write poems in the style of Mevlana. I cancelled lectures to show movies and have them write reviews. Nothing worked. I was teaching students not much younger than I was, who, if they didn't resent me outright, seemed to think of me as a curiosity from an irrelevant world.

Clusters of students ceased attending. Each lecture I'd stare out anxiously at the expanding patches of empty seats in the auditorium. The university cut my course load in half. I looked everywhere for ways to make up the lost income, desperate to avoid asking my father for any more help. I could almost feel him hoping for it, all the way across Europe and the Atlantic, although on my better days I was able to convince myself this sprang from his compassion. He was president of the small, Midwestern college from which I had just graduated—a place he had determined I shouldn't stray too far from—and had a way of brushing aside, often in five words or less, my most carefully constructed plans. “Good luck,” he told me, when I shared my intention to move abroad and teach, like him, in a college lecture hall. To save money, I stopped going out with the few friends I had from the faculty and cut down to one meal a day. Eventually I found work, teaching high school students at a community center on my street.

That's where I met Ersan.

Unlike my students at the university, who seemed to vanish into the vastness of the city as soon as they stepped off campus, I saw my students from the community center everywhere. In the restaurant where I ordered my dinner of lahmacun; in the cramped, leafy park at the end of my street where I called my father every other Saturday to let him know how flawlessly my life was unfolding; in the store below my apartment where I bought my nightly bottle of Cumartesi (although when they were present I'd

pause at its entrance and fiddle with my phone, wait for them to leave before I entered, so that they wouldn't overhear the owner's greeting). They were ubiquitous. At first, every interaction filled me with dread. I was sure each of them held an ability to see through me, to the smoldering core of what I was, or at least what I felt I was—a false teacher, a wino with a lightless apartment—but slowly I grew to enjoy their presence. One of them, at the very least, would know where I could buy light bulbs, if I ever worked up the courage to ask. Seeing familiar faces helped me feel as though I were making a home for myself, becoming a fixture in the neighborhood. They were always polite, always greeted me with a shy smile and an overly enthusiastic wave, as though any subtler gesture would be lost in translation. They always broke into laughter just after I passed.

Ersan was one of my new students. I ran into him during one of my walks. He was sitting outside a coffee house with several students from the community center.

“It's Edward,” I heard one of them say.

On a whim, I approached. I couldn't decide whether to greet them in English or Turkish, and a kind of jumbled, unintelligible mix came out. Only Ersan responded. He asked me, in English, if I lived around there.

“Close,” I said.

“How close?” he asked.

“Not too close,” I said.

He smiled, as if he had caught me in a lie. He asked if I wanted a cigarette.

“You smoke?” I asked.

“Here,” he said. “Away from our parents.” Some of his friends laughed. Some of them looked at him sternly. I think they were worried I would get them in trouble. Ersan

sat erect and skinny, with a look that suggested he either did not register their glances or did not care what was behind them.

I shrugged. “Okay,” I said. I didn't normally smoke, but I didn't want to seem impolite, or prim, and I didn't want to leave just yet. He offered the pack and I took a cigarette. He struck a match and I bent toward the flame.

We smoked in nervous silence. There were no extra chairs, so I stood. I found myself afraid that someone I knew might see me smoking with these seventeen-year-olds. Another teacher, or maybe someone who lived in my building. It was a foolish thought. No one knew me well enough to care about what I did or who I did it with. I sucked in the smoke, imagined it scorching my throat. The pain seemed to corroborate the rebelliousness of the act. I felt like I was back in high school, doing what I had always been afraid to, with the kind of kids my father insisted I avoid.

I smoked my cigarette down to the nub, smiled, and nodded goodbye. I mentioned something about class the following Saturday. I turned to leave.

“Are you going home?” Ersan asked.

I had no idea. “Yes,” I said.

“I'll walk with you.”

And just like that, he was by my side.

It began with the walking. A pressure I had felt before, that I hadn't expected to find in Turkey, that in some vague way involved Ersan. A pressure I associated with my father, and the understanding that everything I did was wrong, that everything I lived must be lived in secret. I had grown up in a perpetual state of fault, and now here, as far

away as I could think to go, the sensation had followed me, and for the first time I recognized its borderlessness.

Ersan wore dark jeans and a white dress shirt, still brilliant despite the heavy, humid air. He seemed to float above the city's grime. He lit a cigarette with a match and flicked it into a puddle. He had all the gestures down, the practiced glances and shrugs, knew when to light his cigarette and where to toss the match.

We reached my street, my apartment building. I searched for my keys, turned to say goodbye.

"I want to see your flat," he said. There was a constant gleam of appraisal in his eyes, as though he were always assessing people and things, determining their value. A part of me wanted to know where I stood.

When he saw me hesitating, he laughed.

"Come," he said. "It will be fun."

We walked up the three flights to my floor and I unlocked the door. He followed me inside, wandered through the few rooms while I walked into the bedroom to hang my coat and try to understand what it was I was doing.

"I love it," I heard him say.

I laughed. He seemed earnest. I came back and asked him if he wanted something to drink.

He smiled. "Okay," he said.

We sat on my living room floor and passed my bottle of Cumartesi back and forth until it was empty. I ran downstairs and got another. When I came back, he was sitting

with his legs sprawled across the living room carpet. He saw me enter and smiled, pulled them in slowly, shifting so that his back was against the couch. I sat beside him.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I drink,” he paused, as though unsure of what came next. “Ara sıra.”

“Occasionally,” I said, proud to recognize the word from my meager accumulation of Turkish.

He smiled as I opened the bottle, silently mouthing the word as I passed it to him.

“An American who speaks Turkish,” he said, and took a long drink.

I felt a tightening in my chest, struggled for something to say. It was as though my body was shutting down, preparing for some awful event, an imminent, unavoidable pain just beyond my field of vision.

“And you are from New York?” Ersan asked.

I laughed, shook my head. “I told you in class,” I said, realizing how harsh I sounded, how impatient.

He looked at me, smiled in a way that made me feel foolish.

“The Midwest,” I said. “A small town. Conservative, religious.” I paused. “Çok küçük şehir,” I added, gesturing as though I could hold my hometown and all its inhabitants in the space between my thumb and forefinger.

Recognition spread across Ersan's face. He nodded. “The east is like that,” he said, waving his hand lazily, ambiguously. “Everything is küçük.”

“Is that where you're from?” I asked.

He nodded.

I asked where. He shrugged.

“You will not know it,” he said, raising his eyebrows, challenging me. It was in that indifference for his hometown that I understood the beginnings of what would draw us together.

“What brought you to Istanbul?”

“My father,” he said. “He is a police captain.”

“Do you like it?”

Ersan smiled. “Of course. It's Istanbul.”

“Does your father?”

He shrugged.

“Here,” he said, and paused. He gestured with his hands as he struggled to explain. “Here he is small. In Istanbul.” He pointed with both index fingers at the floor. “In the east he is big.” He looked at me, laughed at the ridiculousness of his gestures. His teeth were stained from the wine. “He needs to be big.”

I nodded and smiled. “My father is like that too,” I said, startled by my candor. I was drunk. I wondered if Ersan could sense it.

“Yes,” he said, to what I wasn't sure. He placed his hand on my arm. “And what about you?”

“I want to be small,” I said. “As small as possible.”

“Istanbul is a good place for that,” he said. “You can be anything.” He paused. “Of course my father does not say this,” he said. “To him this is not true. To him, you need to be what you should be.”

I smiled. We had covered auxiliary verbs that morning. “You got it,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“The Auxiliary verb,” I said. “For obligation.” I was thinking about my father, how everything Ersan hadn't said I'd understood. The pressure inside me had tightened, had shrunk to a dense drop. I felt as though its mass would pull me through my floor and the apartments below, through the earth, all the way to its core.

I reached for Ersan in the half-darkness.

“I have sisters,” he said, smiling.

I moved closer.

“Perhaps you would like to meet them?”

“Perhaps,” I said, pressing against him, harder now, certain he could feel the tremor in my touch, the hidden pressure of my heart.

His body felt so cold, so unlike mine. “They are all married though,” he said. He laughed. “A shame. They would be wild for you. An American. Blonde hair. Blue eyes.” He hummed a tune I didn't recognize. It took me a moment to realize he was nervous, too.

“You're cold,” I said, taking his hands.

“I am,” he said.

When he asked me if I thought he was beautiful, I said yes. He told me to touch my favorite part of him. I grabbed his hair, pulled it first as though testing it, pulled harder. I think I made a joke about its color. “Wine-dark hair,” I think I said, and laughed, pleased with myself. He laughed too, pulled me against him.

That night I offered to walk him home, but he insisted I didn't. It would be better at this hour if he were alone, he said. His father might suspect something. I watched from

my window as he walked down the street, pausing to light a cigarette at the end of the block before he disappearing around a corner.

Over the next few months my classes at the university blurred. The only thing I know for certain is that I continued teaching at the community center and sleeping with Ersan. I would find him during my walks. Always the same route. I would head down Bahçe Caddesi in the direction of Ortaköy, cut left toward the coffee house on the narrow street behind the winding boulevard that led to Taksim Square. Most days he was there, usually with friends, students from the community center. He would rise and we would start our trip home, and I would pick up a bottle of Cumartesi at the shop below my apartment, letting him in before I did so.

We would lay stretched out on my living room rug. I had a bed, but I hadn't bought sheets for it. I slept on top of the mattress in my sleeping bag. He didn't know this. We never entered my bedroom. I think he thought it was an amusing American affectation to use different parts of the house for sex. That it added a thrilling nonchalance. In a way this bounded what we were doing, kept it from spilling beyond the borders we'd established.

Then one night, the last snowfall of winter, he told me he loved me.

We were lying on my floor, a half-finished bottle of wine between us. I didn't know how to respond, so I laughed. A part of me hated myself. I had my reasons for living like a penitent. Kitchenless, sheetless, stumbling around in the dark. It had taken a

decade for me to find the courage to let a man seduce me, and even then it had been a boy. Now that it had happened I didn't know what to do, who I could tell.

He sat up on his elbows and looked at me. The streetlamp's glow came through the loose slats of the drawn blinds, painting his face in horizontal stripes. When it was clear he wasn't going to explain himself away as drunk or young or tired, I spoke.

"You're seventeen," I said.

He asked me what I meant.

I looked over his body. "It means you can't love anything besides yourself."

My father had told me this over dinner the night before I'd started college, in the dining room of the president's mansion, and I'd wondered as I sat across from him just how true it was. He had taken to giving such pronouncements in the wake of my mother's death, as though to make up for her absence, or prepare me for the world that had snatched her so suddenly. The only thing I knew to do with his bleak advice was to bury it, then pass it on in equally harsh terms when the opportunity arose. As I spoke the words to Ersan, I wondered if I meant them. It was hard to distinguish, when I was seventeen, whether I was full of energy and fear or simply selfish, and only five years later, it was nearly impossible to tell if I had changed at all. But it hurt to say them to him, to believe they might be true. That he might not love me, might not even know he was mistaken.

Ersan rolled away and stood, his body strips of shadow and light. He left the room. I heard the bathroom door open and close. A panic surged in me, and I found myself cycling through ways I could end what was happening. When he came back, I decided I would tell him enough was enough. That this had gone too far. He was my

student, and young, and if this had happened in America and people found out, I would be in serious trouble. Turkey most likely had a similar law, one that I didn't want to end up on the wrong side of.

When Ersan returned and I said all of this, he laughed.

“You are already on the wrong side of Turkey,” he said, reaching down. He squeezed me, pulled his hand away roughly and placed it flat on my stomach, ran his sharp nails against my skin.

At some point, a point we reached every evening we spent together in that tiny apartment, the silence became unbearable, and Ersan rose, picked through our pile of mingled clothes for his undershirt and briefs, dressed and left. That night I followed him. I knew to wait until he had descended the three flights of stairs and was crossing the lobby. The footfalls would echo a certain way, and I could make my move. I clung to the walls of the stairwell to avoid triggering as many of the automatic overhead lights as possible. When I hit the street, I saw his figure at the end of the block. He was smoking, walking slowly. He seemed to be gesturing to himself. Once or twice he looked back. Each time I thought he recognized me. But he didn't, or at least gave no sign to suggest he had. At first I wasn't sure what I was doing, how long I would trail him. I wanted to catch him in a lie, have our relationship exposed as a falsehood, an illusion that couldn't possibly exist in the world I lived in, among the people I knew.

I knew Beyoğlu well enough at that point to know its main routes. Ersan cut through it senselessly. He would turn up streets that curved back toward my apartment, down slanted alleys and crumbling staircases toward the bottom of the neighborhood, as though heading for the Bosphorus, before suddenly stopping and heading back uphill.

Every so often he would stop, pull out his cigarettes, light one, and flick the match into the street. Sometimes he would toss the cigarette in the gutter after a few drags, sometimes he would smoke it down to the filter. I followed him past midye dolma vendors, their folding tables piled high with stuffed mussels and lemon wedges, past gaggles of drunk students stumbling home, followed him until the streets emptied, until it was almost dawn and the morning's first call to prayer was imminent. I trailed him down an alley that opened into a boulevard and left him there, wandering, smoking, looking up at the darkened apartments that lined the long and twisting block.

I kept up my lessons at the university, as hopelessly as ever. The community center switched me to adult classes to fill in for a pregnant colleague, and I went from teaching Ersan and his classmates to accountants and cab drivers. Instead of diagramming sentences we would go out for tea and talk aimlessly in broken Turkish and sometimes English about relations between Turkey and Israel, or things about the United States I missed. They never believed my answers. I walked slowly through the halls of the community center, delaying, hoping to catch Ersan on his way to whatever class he might be attending, but I never saw him. No matter where I went on my walks I couldn't find him. When I went out with my adult students, I'd sit straight in my chair, crane my neck to watch the distant space past the many heads surrounding me in the cafe, hoping to catch a glimpse of any students walking past. Every cluster seemed to contain him, every figure pausing to light a cigarette in just his way.

My adult students believed I was a spy. They were never shy about bringing this up. Who did I report to, they'd ask. What was I looking for? Sometimes they seemed serious, sometimes they teased me. I had a difficult time addressing the charge, explaining that, contrary to their allegations, I'd never been less fraudulent in my life. That, despite how dejected I felt, how miserable I was over the sudden and prolonged absence of a former student, I had never been more myself. "My life is not that interesting," I'd always answer, attempting to smile. And it wasn't. Not when Ersan wasn't around.

I found myself explaining these interactions to my father over the phone during our conversations every other Saturday. It was spring, each day warmer than the last, and it was nice enough to sit in the park again and call him. I struggled to explain the absurdities that seemed so familiar, so lived-in. My father would laugh politely, and if pressed admit he didn't fully understand, before asking me when I was going to return. The college was planning the fall curriculum and there was a history class he wanted me to help teach. I was largely silent. I didn't know how to explain, to him, the circumstances that had moved me toward developing my own wants and understandings, things that had long eluded me. Listening to him I found it hard not to think of my time in Istanbul as a life outside of reality. If he sensed that something had ripped a fissure in me, he hid it well. He seemed to know, however, that something was wrong and wasn't hesitant to offer his misgivings. Through the tinny echo of my cell phone he was breathless and quick.

“Look,” he said, one Saturday afternoon. “I’ve spoken to the university’s rector.” He knew the rector, had arranged the position, in fact. It was one of the few foreign universities with which his college had an established exchange program.

I swallowed. “And?”

“He informed me that half of your classes have been cancelled.” He paused, letting the weight of the implication settle squarely on my shoulders. “How are you managing?”

“I’m finding a way,” I said, kicking at some pigeons squabbling near my feet. “There’s a community center I do some teaching in.”

“That wasn’t part of your plan.”

“Not initially.”

I think he must have thought I sounded hurt. “Learning to adjust is a valuable skill,” he said. I could tell he wanted to say something more. I waited for him to break the silence. Finally he did. “Although of course the need to adjust betrays a lack of preparation.”

“I know,” I said, hoping to sound assured.

He sighed. “Edward?”

“Yes?”

“When are you going to get started on your life?”

Something in me understood that this moment was my chance to broach what had happened there, in Istanbul. I was moving on, or at the very least, never returning. I’m staying, I wanted to say. But I deferred. I hadn’t seen Ersan in weeks. It almost felt as though he’d never existed.

“I don't know,” I said. “Soon.”

“I hope so,” my father said. “Delta is having a spring sale. I've got some miles you could use.”

Then one night, a month before final exams, Ersan showed up at my apartment. He was carrying a bottle of Cumartesi and a wrapped bundle of lahmacun. His cheeks and neck were tinged with a growth of beard I had never seen before that lent his boyish face a touch of maturity. He was sweating, as though he'd hurried over. He crossed the threshold into the living room like something treacherous lay hidden in the shag of the rug. I watched him move to the window, look out, set the food down on the couch and turn toward me. He presented the bottle awkwardly. A peace offering, but for what?

I didn't know what to say. “It's you,” or “where have you been,” or “I thought I'd never see you again” each seemed histrionic.

“Here I am,” Ersan said. His voice seemed unusually thick.

I nodded. Ersan uncorked the wine and passed it to me.

I took a drink from the bottle, returned it. “There is a problem,” Ersan said. There was concern in his eyes, something I had never seen before, that I wanted to believe was caused, in one way or another, by me, or a lack of me.

I stood, unsure of what to do with my arms, which seemed suddenly vestigial. I crossed them. What could it possibly be? I wanted to ask. I haven't seen you in months. A part of me felt as though I should be angry with him for forcing me to put off so many things: plans to stay, plans to return, plans to go someplace else. A part of me sensed he

was upset, felt as though it was my duty to provide some sort of solace, something I had only ever attempted with one or two strange, fragile girls in college.

“What is it?”

“My father suspects something.”

I was struck with the same frustration I felt when warding off the allegations of my adult students. What was there to be wary of? What had Ersan been doing that would raise any kind of suspicion?

I asked Ersan what he meant.

“Us,” he said. “You and me.” He had the bottle in his hand and he pointed it at himself and at me as he spoke. He was drunk. I told him so and he laughed, a spiteful laugh he seemed too young to own. I wanted to tell him that laugh didn't belong to him. That the beard and the sweat didn't either. He seemed grounded, suddenly, in the morass of the city. He spoke, and I stood helplessly, clenching and unclenching my empty, worried hands, desperate for something to hold.

His father's subordinates patrolled our neighborhood regularly and had seen Ersan and me on our walks. They'd watched him come up to my apartment several times, leave hours later, in the early morning. They'd reported back to his father, who'd put a tail on him. He was sure of it. He'd been avoiding me to keep from revealing our relationship, which he hastened to point out wasn't criminal in Turkey. Still, his father wouldn't tolerate it. He thought he could delay, wait until his father had forgotten. He explained how for weeks he had walked right by my apartment, right below my window, when he wasn't sure he had shaken whoever was trailing him. That tonight was the first night he was sure he had succeeded, and to celebrate he had brought dinner.

“Things are different here,” he said. “It's not like it is back home for you.”

I laughed loudly, once, pleased with how vindictive it sounded. I'd been waiting all this time to sound like this, to shield my cowardice and confusion with someone else's assumption, any assumption, about what I'd hidden for so long.

He looked confused, and hurt, and I immediately regretted my reaction.

“I'm sorry,” I said. I didn't know what to do. I moved toward the window, drew the blinds back with a finger. Ersan forced a smile.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“He put in for transfer,” Ersan said. “We're going back east.”

I felt some sharp humiliation shift in me. I looked down at my chest, as though I could locate its source, see it through my shirt, through my skin. I wondered if Ersan sensed it. When I looked up and into his face, I saw he had. “Why don't you just leave him?” I asked, knowing the impossibility of the proposition. “Let him go. Stay with me.”

Ersan shook his head slowly, sadly, as though amused that someone so much older than him—an American—could be so naive. “I can't,” he said. “He's my father.” He laughed and shrugged, took his cigarettes from his pocket and put one to his lips. I hated him until I saw his thin hands trembling as he held up a match.

You can learn to father yourself, I wanted to say, unsure if it were true. Certain, in fact, that it wasn't. My own father loomed then, in my mind. We unwrapped the lahmacun and ate, in silence, on the floor. When we were finished, I spoke.

“I will never see my father again.”

“Oh?” he asked, lighting another cigarette. “Will you stay in Istanbul?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe south or west. Maybe Europe. The Aegean.” I spoke directions, continents, coasts as they came to me. My mind was working furiously, drafting plans, casting them aside, drafting more.

“Maybe I’ll open a hostel,” I said. I took his cigarette from his lips, took a long draw.

“You don’t smoke,” he said.

“Come with me,” I said, exhaling. “You can bring Turks in. I’ll attract westerners.”

He laughed. “It sounds like a brothel.”

“Sure,” I said, coughing. I tried to smile. I felt young, younger than I’d felt the day we’d met, months before, outside the coffee house. Younger than the day my first light bulb went out and I’d stared at it, aware for the first time that I had never replaced one in my entire life, that I didn’t have a clue where to find one in that large and gaping city, that I didn’t know anything. I passed him his cigarette. “What happens when you leave?” I asked. He was suddenly a stranger, a lingering party guest, someone to swap half-hearted plans with as you collected coats.

“I’ll go east,” he said. “You can come find me.” His words floated in the negative space between joke and plea.

He dropped the nub of his cigarette in the now empty bottle of wine, and we kissed. He left almost immediately afterward, forgetting his cigarettes on the floor. From my window, I watched him pat each of his pockets for the pack, watched him hesitate for a moment, as though considering whether to return, before continuing up the sidewalk. I

watched him shrink and then disappear around the corner as I smoked them down, one by one, until none were left.

I spent the final month of the semester in my apartment, hoping Ersan would return, wanting to be there when he did. My father's voicemails accumulated. It wasn't until the evening after I taught my last classes that I left for anything but work. I hit the street and curved south, downhill, my path starting the way it always had, before it inexplicably changed, and I realized I was following the same twists and circles I'd crossed the night I'd followed Ersan. I walked down alleys, up staircases that carved harsh gashes in the city's steep hills. I caught glimpses of the Bosphorus, its oily water soaked with twilight, cargo ships framed between crooked apartment blocks. I passed couples on benches, cats and humans digging through dumpsters, simit sellers headed home. It took me a while to understand what I was searching for, to realize the hopelessness of the task. Still, I pressed on. Up Bahçe Caddesi. Past the community center, the coffee house. Until, long after the last call to prayer, I came upon the spot I had left Ersan, months earlier, without a clue where I'd come from, or where I'd end up.

Above me the vacant night stretched across Istanbul like blackout curtains, like something pulled over the city to shield it from some menacing force just beyond the emptiness. The block's buildings were all dark, except for a window two stories above where I stood. I knew that beyond a sliver of a chance, there was no way it was Ersan's apartment. I also knew that everything he'd told me could have been a lie, a story you tell a terrified foreigner in a new country, ready to believe anything. I stood beneath that lit window a long time, on the steep sidewalk at the entrance of the building. I stayed there

until the morning's first call to prayer swept the empty streets, until the sky began to lighten. No shadow crossed its light. No one was waiting for me.