

Leo

Clouds sailed overhead, shredded by the *lodos* wind, and August's stars blinked through them. Leo didn't really want Jason to follow him, but he didn't know how to ask him to stop, so he reluctantly led him toward the next town. The Bosphorous spat froth from colliding currents as they rounded the long curve approaching Arnavutköy. Narrow wooden houses creaked shoulder-to-shoulder on twisted cobblestone streets overlooking the water. Their windows were dark. Leo knew all about the sleeping people inside, and how safe they felt in their beds.

A lone chestnut gleamed in the light of a streetlamp, surrounded by the corpses of dozens of bugs. Leo reached down and picked it up. A good omen, he thought. He believed in omens, and was convinced of their power to attract luck. He had not yet discovered that omens may be attached to both varieties of luck. He scored the chestnut with his thumbnail and pocketed it. He imagined a monkey picking it up and entertaining herself with the feel of it in her inquisitive hands, trying to find meaning in his mark.

"It's a lucky chestnut," he said.

Jason shrugged.

"Where are we going?"

"The peace corps guy's having a party. He wants some hash."

"You know those guys?"

"I know everybody."

They made their way up the hill and found the house at the corner of two cobbled alleyways. It was four stories tall, sandwiched between a pair of ancient wooden buildings like an afterthought. Leo found the key hidden beneath the azalea pot and let them in. There was a basic kitchen and a traditional Turkish toilet on the ground floor, a living-room on the second, and cramped bedrooms on the third and fourth, both painted black on the inside. The peace corps volunteer had linguistic talents, Leo

conceded, but he was abjectly inept at home decor. They climbed the wooden spiral staircase that fed onto each floor. It had cunningly disguised supports that were almost invisible to the eye, and reminded Leo a little bit of the miracle stairway in the Loretto Chapel. He knew the house well; it was one of his regular stops. He didn't really think any close friends of god had built its stairs, but he enjoyed the flight of fancy. They stopped at the living-room landing and went in.

An antique hookah dominated the room, a reservoir of immense volumes of intoxicating smoke. Five flexible extensions of braided purple velvet shot through with gold thread sprung from its ample crystal base. Each tube was capped with a yellowed meerschaum end for its smokers to suck upon. Leo wondered about the people whose lips had been wrapped around them over the years, and the cleanliness of their saliva. The hookah sat empty, waiting for Leo. He wished he hadn't brought Jason.

The party-goers were sprawled upon cushions and beanbags on the floor, sipping cocktails and smoking cigarettes and chatting among themselves. He recognised the cocky British reporter with the posh accent, and her well-muscled Rhodesian stud-of-the-month, and the bearded economist from Boston who always wore a heavy peacoat to hide his withered arm, and the angry Syrian poet with the toothbrush moustache whose plump French wife had once made off with Leo's Zippo lighter and failed to return it, feigning ignorance of the theft. The other guests were strangers to him. He studied them carefully, but saw no cause for concern. He lived on the honed edge of his paranoia; he had no wish to be captive within a Turkish prison. He had smoked hashish more than once with the college student who eventually gained notoriety in the book *Midnight Express*. Leo hadn't lied to Jason. He was a fixture among the denizens of Istanbul's expatriate underbelly. He knew everyone.

One of the guests was an intense young black man wearing a military field jacket and a Black Panthers t-shirt. His short Afro was teased out

to its fullest extent, and was pierced at the back with a long-handled comb. Leo concluded he was an enlisted man stationed at Karamürsel on weekend leave. He had met many of the US airforce contingent, and had provided hashish to most of them. He considered it his patriotic duty, although he did sometimes receive hard-to-obtain American luxuries in return.

An emaciated Italian couple sat against the far wall, most likely befriended by their host in the seedy vicinities of the Pudding Shop or Yener's *lokanta* in Sultanahmet. Their long hair was matted, and they wore embroidered Afghan waistcoats glittering with chips of mirror. The peace corps guy was fond of collecting nomadic waifs and strays from the gutters of the Old City. He revelled in their stories of adventure on the road to Goa and Katmandu. The Italians looked like they had just made the overland trip back from India on infrequent handouts and the smell of an oil rag. They had demolished a platter of *mezes* between them and were picking through its remains like ravenous magpies. Crumbs and olive oil rimmed their lips. Candles provided the only light in the room, and Bob Dylan railed against injustice on a reel-to-reel tape-recorder.

Rosewater filled the body of the hookah, which, when lit, would elicit rich bubbles and cool the draughts of smoke with the scent of flowers. A model-airplane propeller was suspended four inches above its empty bowl, dangling from a string of clear Christmas lights tacked in a deranged spiral into the ceiling. Apart from the scattered cushions and beanbags, and a tiny freshwater aquarium gurgling in one corner, the water pipe was the room's only furniture.

"Leo, Leo, come in," the peace corps guy said eagerly. "We've been waiting for you. And who is your friend?"

"This is Jason. He's cool."

"Good enough for me. And did you bring the goodies?"

Leo handed over the four cellophane-wrapped cubes of hashish he'd hidden beneath his shirt. They looked like large black dice.

"You promised dollars," he said.

"And dollars it shall be, my young friend. Let me first attend to my guests."

The peace corps guy sat in front of the hookah and crumbled the hashish into a mound of tobacco, filling the bowl with a fist-sized mixture of the two. He lit a match, flipped a switch, the propeller spun, and the bowl of hashish glowed red. The Christmas lights winked into life and lassoed the gloom like luminous insects flying in endless loops. Tom Lehrer replaced Bob Dylan and sang *Poisoning Pigeons In The Park* through the tape-recorder's tinny speakers. The partygoers crowded around and took turns at the pipe, eagerly sucking in lungfuls of smoke and holding them in for as long as they could, cheeks and eyes bulging with the effort. Jason joined them in the ceremony, a kindred spirit.

Leo did not. He was waiting for his dollars. He intended to leave as soon as he was paid.

The Italians grew emboldened as they smoked and regaled the others with stories of their travels. They threw out the names of exotic destinations like confetti, and proudly showed everyone the multi-coloured visas in their passports. Leo noted that they become even more animated and enthusiastic when they spoke of their adventures in Afghanistan, and he listened closely. Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, the Khyber Pass, Mazar-i-Sharif, the list of tantalising place names went on and on. By three A.M. he had made up his mind.

Dawn was a scant two hours away when he and Jason left the party house. They followed the Bosphorous road all the way to the far side of Beşiktaş. Jason followed him like a shadow, but Leo was accustomed to it by now. Istanbul awakened around them as they walked. They passed a bakery and were treated to the aroma of freshly-baked loaves. A cafe opened its doors as they walked by and they stepped inside, taking a table by the window. The cafe owner brought them slender glasses of hot tea and a pot of sugar cubes on a silver tray and took their money and

left them alone. Someone on the cafe radio fingered the strings of a saz and crooned a mournful Anatolian dirge. They sat looking out at the street as the dark lifted and the silence of night was fractured into a million pieces of sound. A light drizzle drifted in from the south and filtered the pale rising sun.

An old man wearing a 1930's-style cap and an ill-fitting brown suit came into the cafe. He nodded to them as he moved a table near the back. He didn't smile. Early morning was a serious time of day for him. He sized them up for a moment, then dismissed them and lit a cigarette, his gnarled hands folded together on the table. When his tea came he poured part of it into the saucer to cool, then held a lump of sugar between his teeth and sipped the tea through the sugar in the manner of the old-timers.

Leo would have enjoyed talking with him about the old days but he was reluctant to intrude. Besides, there was the possibility that the old man would ramble on and on about nothing and that time would be wasted. Whatever the thing was inside him that drove him continued to egg him on.

"Come on, let's go." He stood and drained the dregs of his tea.

Jason looked up at him from deeply stoned eyes.

"Where to?"

"Let's go to the Pudding Shop. Or Yener's." The Italians' stories played through his head like a movie.

"What for?"

"I feel like traveling."

"Where to, really?"

"Afghanistan sounds like my kind of place."

"I can't go to Afghanistan. I don't have my passport."

"I know. Come on, let's go."

Outside in the iron-grey dawn they flagged down a *dolmuş*, which swung smartly to the curb. It was a '48 Oldsmobile sedan with suicide-

doors and a pair of jump seats folded against the front bench. The two jump seats were the only spaces still vacant. Four passengers were jammed into the back seat, and two wooden crates were wedged in beside the driver, a *Laz* with yellow hair and wild blue eyes. He cocked a questioning eyebrow.

"*Köprü,*" Leo said. *The bridge.*

The driver nodded and said, "*Dört buçuk.*" *Four and a half.*

Leo dug into his pocket and handed over nine lira in change. He and Jason climbed over eight legs and feet and sat backwards in the jump seats. The other passengers stared at them. Leo ignored them; he was impervious to Turkish stares. The *dolmuş* accelerated with a lurch and nosed into the flow of traffic. The sudden motion slid Jason from his seat and he banged his forehead sharply against the knee of the fat man opposite him. The other riders laughed, and Jason's face reddened in confusion as he awkwardly regained his seat. The fat man didn't laugh; he glared at the two of them and rubbed his knee with both hands as if to wash away an insult. Leo could smell the *rakı* on his breath. A mixture of sweat and hostility gave the man's face a wet, red gloss, and his drunken eyes fastened themselves on Jason like boils.

"*Aptal pezevenk!*" he spat. *Stupid pimp!* His voice filled the back of the sedan like vomit.

The driver's eyes appeared in the rearview mirror, twin blue bullets.

"He's sorry," Leo said in Turkish. "It was an accident." He guessed the man had been out drinking all night. His suit was rumpled, and his eyes laced were with bloodshot veins.

The fat man's face tightened. "*Pis gâvur hippiler,*" he sneered. *Dirty infidel hippies.* "*Ağzına siçarım.*" *I'll shit in your mouth.*

Leo looked out the window as the car swerved past a stalled city bus surrounded by a dozen gesticulating passengers. He imagined a quick and violent end to the drunken man's sneer, with blood and pain and himself triumphant. He wondered what an Afghan warlord would do.

Finally he aimed his boldly inflamed hashish eyes at the man and said, "*Annenin amuna şemşek sokup içinde açarım.*" *I'll shove an umbrella up your mother's cunt and open it inside.*

The inside of the *dolmuş* reeked of sour sweat and *rakı*. No one said a word. The *Laz* sped nimbly through the traffic toward Galata Bridge and watched the little drama unfold in his rearview mirror.

"What's going on?" Jason shifted uncomfortably.

"He says you're a dirty infidel hippy and he's going to shit in your mouth."

Leo locked eyes with the fat man. On his left side was a university student in a jacket and tie with a stack of textbooks on his lap. The student sat very still. Pressing against him on the right side was a labourer with ropy arms and wrists that stuck out from the frayed cuff of a wool sweater, his unshaven face square and blank. Next to the labourer was a quick-featured boy of perhaps twelve whose dark brown eyes gleamed with excitement. The fat man's hands were shaking.

"*Nerelisen, kardeş?*" the driver asked over his shoulder. *Where are you from, younger brother?* He chuckled and negotiated a murderous intersection without slowing, tapping a bright tattoo on the horn.

"I was raised here, in Hisar, older brother."

The fat man leaned forward, committed, his hands clenched into unfamiliar fists. He stood to a crouch in the confined space. The student's books spilled to the floor.

"Oh shit," Jason said.

Time slowed to a crawl. Leo's blood pumped deliberately and he could hear it in his ears. The smell of stale liquor was suffocating. A droplet of sweat clung to the drunk man's upper lip and magnified an unshaven hair.

The *dolmuş* veered hard to the right on screaming tires and skidded to a halt. Jason clung grimly to his seat. A fusillade of honking horns burst the air, punctuated by shouted curses. The *Laz* leaned out of his window

and shook his fist in fury. A black Mercedes was stationary in the middle of the street, blocking all traffic. A porter wrestled with a copy machine that was crammed sideways into its backseat. A finely dressed businessman stood by, ignoring the snarled traffic behind him.

The fat man was thrown into Leo's lap, the soft weight of him rubbery and without definition. His face was in Leo's chest and his meaty haunches struggled for purchase. He stiffened for an instant, hands groping wildly for his breast, and then croaked deeply like a frog and died. His mouth fell open, exposing his moist pink gums. He was suddenly heavier than he had been, and his head lolled uncontrolled against Leo's throat. A greying cowlick brushed Leo's chin, and the dead man's arms embraced his knees with hideous familiarity.

The labourer leaned forward and clutched the fat man by the ears and pulled him away from Leo. The body collapsed onto the floorboards with the hiss of escaping gas. The young boy stared at the dead man for a moment, then flung open the car door and leaped from the moving *dolmuş*, running full stride as soon as his feet touched the street. The student gathered his books from beneath the corpse with an embarrassed grin and sat back in his seat waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

The labourer asked Leo matter of factly, "Did you kill him?"

Leo shook his head. "*Hayır. Kalbi patladı.*" No. His heart exploded.

"*Yazık.*" It's a shame. "*Kolay gelsin.*" May it pass easily.

The Mercedes drove nonchalantly down the street and the *Laz* pulled the sedan gently to the curb so as not to damage the open rear door. He got out and shook his head with disgust.

"Now I have a dead type in my car."

Jason eased out of the Oldsmobile, followed by the labourer and the student. Leo joined them on the curb, all bound together by the fat man's death. The sickly liquorice smell of *rakı* still clung to their clothes.

Leo took Jason by the arm and turned him towards the Golden Horn. The street was smooth and pitched slightly downhill. Within mo-

ments they were out of sight of the *dolmuş* and its yellow haired driver. Traffic roared by as usual, indifferent.

"Not even seven yet," Leo said. His fingers curled gently around the chestnut in his pocket.

When they reached Galata bridge Leo paused to gaze across at the Old City skyline. The grey domes of mosques shifted uncertainly in the mist like the backs of elephants, and flocks of pigeons with iridescent necks of lavender and green streaked them with their waste.

Jason's eyes looked out at the city from hidden caverns, veiled and red. His mouth tightened around his teeth. He nodded, and then spat over the railing without looking below.

"Alright," he said, fists deep in his pockets. "Where to now?"

Leo led the way, his inner demons at bay for the moment. The halves of the bridge swayed and trembled with the press of early morning traffic. A *simitçi* sporting twirled cavalry moustaches trundled a cart of hot-baked sesame rings along the curb beside them, glass panels afog.

The road seethed in both directions with throngs of Turks. There were Anatolian peasants with gold-toothed grins, and city sophisticates wearing highly polished shoes. Cars, trucks, and handcarts inched along, becalmed by the foot traffic. The ripe odour of damp woollen clothing steamed the air. A water-seller hawked brass cupfuls of cool water to the thirsty, ladling it out of buckets suspended from his wooden yoke.

A *hamal* worked his way across the swell of the bridge, eyes fixed on the ground. A refrigerator the size of a coffin was strapped to his leather back-saddle. Sweat beaded his broad forehead and dripped down his unshaven cheeks. The crowds parted and closed behind him as he pressed forward with weight and momentum, his trotting feet awash in torn rubber boots. A matron in European dress kept pace with him, her mascaraed eyes riveted upon the porter's burden. She maintained a course less than a foot away from his soiled canvas trousers, alert to any slip or stumble that might result in a nick or dent in her new appliance.

She carried a vast black umbrella angled forward, reserving most of its generosity for her new refrigerator.

Leo had seen old *hamals* eternally bent in half from years of such labor, forever unable to straighten their spines. They would stand smoking cheap *Bafra* cigarettes together in the shade of Byzantine porticos with torsos tilted groundward like so many ungulates at graze. He wondered how they slept. The wild unfairness of life tore at him once again. He wondered what was coming next.