

## The Old City

The Old City beckoned with ancient fingers, offering fragrant sweetmeats and good fortune to some, heartbreak and despair to others. I wanted to know which of the two would be my fate, but for that I needed a gypsy to read my palm. I headed east as the sun rose, armed only with the lucky chestnut in my pocket.

A forest of minarets reached delicately into the sky. Muezzins equipped with electric bullhorns climbed their tight spiral staircases and enjoined the faithful to come to prayer. One or two eschewed the bullhorns and sang their call from lofty perches through cupped hands with a sweet tenor in the old way. A ferryboat's banshee wail competed with the morning call to prayer, her monstrous iron screws churning the Golden Horn into whirlpools.

The gypsies were asleep in the Sultanahmet district, camped on bare dirt in the middle of a treeless traffic island. Their weathered black tent was slung low on wooden poles, pitched amid refuse and fresh dung from their animals. I picked my way through spirals of dog-shit toward it. A hobbled camel shifted her weight and groaned as I approached. She curled her lip at the circling traffic.

A bear was tethered to a spike in the ground with a length of chain through a brass ring in his nose. His eyes followed me, and his nose twisted with my scent. His spirit was mostly broken. A half-gnawed loaf of stale bread rested between his paws, soggy from his drool.

A flap in the tent opened and a suspicious eye appeared, and then the flap slapped shut. A woman's murmur melted into the morning, and a child's chuckle. The flap re-opened wider, revealing a man's head. A jagged scar connected his eyebrow to his chin. The scar on his face gleamed like a fresh brand on a calf's hip.

I was willing to bet the bear had one day provided the man with that scar, one day before its spirit was mostly broken.

"What do you want from us?"

"I want someone to tell my fortune." I held out a fifty lira bill.

The bear stirred uneasily at its tether.

The man's head turned from the flap and disappeared into the tent again. A quick conversation ensued inside.

A woman stepped out of the tent. She was a good head taller than the man, and she moved with decision. She took the money from me and strode to their cold campfire and kicked at it with her foot.

"You are young to be asking for a fortune-telling," she remarked.

"If I was already old I wouldn't need to ask," I said. "What would be the point?"

The woman laughed.

The tent flap opened and a little girl emerged. Her hair was long and tangled, and she held a tambourine in one small hand. She banged it sharply against her knee.

The bear reared up and stood, swaying from his great height. The chain from his nose was now taut to the stake in the ground like a gleaming rivulet of metal snot cascading six feet to the earth. His nose oozed blood where it was pierced by the ring. His jaws opened and he roared, a terrible bray that shook the morning. Droplets of saliva flew from his mouth and sparkled like hail in the air. The camel rocked to her feet with ungainly haste and rolled her eyes back into her hammerhead. She trembled in her hobbles and stretched her dun neck away from the bear in a long arc of fear.

The little girl began to dance and tap her tambourine. Light cavorted among the chips of glass and mirror that decorated it. Her skirts swayed in time to her nimble fingers. Her eyes were partway closed, and her cheeks burned red with

her effort. Even the camel that was undone with terror cocked an ear aside to listen and ceased her foolish lunging.

"Atla, abicim, atla," the child sang. Dance, older brother, dance.

The bear drooled slobber down his huge chest and swayed back and forth. She waltzed closer to him and then skipped away, all the while maintaining her rhythmic percussions and tinsled counterpoints. I could barely hold myself back from joining in and dancing wildly on disjointed limbs like a marionette's shadow in front of a waxed yellow lamp.

The bear was snared in the rhythms of her cymbals and the girl danced on, encouraging him with sharp short yells and whistles and claps of the instrument. She spun like a plastic top flung from a street urchin's string. The bear staggered and wheeled in diminishing circles, his wide flat feet slapping time in the dirt. Finally he sank to his haunches and was subdued, his carnivore breath pulsing in and out like a bellows.

The gypsy woman took my hand in hers and looked intently at my palm. Then she felt among the lines and her warm fingers probed unknowable things.

She traced the web of lines in my palm and when she was done my head swam. Images of distant deserts and mountain crags and rushing streams exploded in my mind. There were no answers to my questions.

Istanbul's noxious traffic wheeled heedlessly around us, and the lucky chestnut in my pocket pressed against my groin like a cyst.

I dug into my wallet and gave her all of my money. The little girl sang a familiar song for me in her strange accent as I left: "Que sera, sera, vatvewer vill be, vill be, deh future not our ta see, que sera, sera..."

The camel sneered and curled her lip as I stumbled past her toward the circling traffic. She knew I was headed even deeper into the Old City.