

THE OCEAN BETWEEN THE LEAVES

Ray Nayler

Ray has lived and worked in Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus for well over a decade. He is a Foreign Service Officer, and was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Turkmenistan. He speaks Russian, Albanian, and Azerbaijani Turkish. Ray's most recent foreign assignment was as Press Attaché in Baku, Azerbaijan, and he is currently headed to Pristina, Kosovo, where he will manage Cultural Affairs for the U.S. Embassy. This is his sixth story for *Asimov's*. You can read his work and follow him at raynayler.net.

It began just like a fairy tale; an orphaned young woman pricked her finger on the thorn of a rose, and fell asleep.

She had always loved to be outdoors, and so the job she had as gardener at one of the stately, ancient yalis along the shore of the Bosphorus was perfect for her. The mansion looked out over the waters of the strait from the Asian side, where it widens to meet the Black Sea, just north of the border of Istanbul Protectorate.

It was an investment owned by an Emirati family who was hardly ever there. She and the other staff had the place much to themselves most of the year. They planted and watered, trimmed and pruned. They polished floors, painted eaves, and washed windows. She took walks in the morning and watched the seagulls, the hydrogen-driven freighters sliding past, large as buildings, the pleasure boats with sails so white they blinded you in the sun.

She had no family except a brother she had never met. Her parents had died before she knew them. She had been raised in an orphanage, surrounded by institutionally kind people in tidy, well-ironed uniforms with tidy, well-ironed emotions. She was quiet, a reader, rarely leaving the estate, putting most of her money away in the bank, cooking for herself. Her name was Feride, which means "the only one." She thought, on some days, that it really meant "the lonely one."

She had worked at the yali for seven years when, digging in the earth one day, she scratched her hand on a thorn. The wound bled, but she washed it under a tap in her little staff cottage, and thought no more of it. The next morning she felt dizzy, unsteady. She had a temperature. Her muscles ached as if she had run a marathon.

When the head gardener arrived, Feride was wrapped in a wool blanket on the couch. He told her to take a few days off. Later that day, he saw her through the

window of her cottage, slumped on the floor. She didn't respond to his hammering on the window frame. He kicked the door in and called an ambulance.

* * *

It is three months later. In the intensive care unit Feride's hair, the color of India ink, makes her face look even paler than it is. She is paralyzed and on a ventilator, with plastic tubes running into her mouth, nose, neck, wrist, forearm, and bladder, wires running to her chest to record her heartbeat, a plastic clip running red light through the skin of her earlobe to read the oxygen levels of her blood. They have taped her eyes shut to protect her corneas—two x's of tape over her eyelids that make her look like a cartoon corpse. She is an anemone of wires and tubing, adrift in the greenish, undersea light of the night ward, surrounded by a reef of drip-stands gravitating antibiotics, plasma, transfusions, heart-strengthening drugs into a system opened rudely up to a world she always sought to close herself off from.

The *staphylococcus* bacteria had multiplied quickly in her bloodstream, its toxins turning the ordered harmony of her body into cacophony. Her blood ceased to regulate its clotting: scarlet flowers hemorrhaged on her limbs, as if in dark imitation of the rose she had grasped too clumsily. Elsewhere, her bloodstream clotted off supplies of oxygen to vital organs. Bacterial growths blighted her fingers and toes black. As the infection spread to her organs, the hemoglobin in her blood metabolized to bilirubin, yellowing and stiffening her skin with jaundice, as if she were being turned to wax from the inside. Her thin figure is waterlogged with fluid leaking from the failed seals of her arteries and veins. Her features are blurred, as if the wax she is being turned into is losing form, becoming a puddle.

And indeed, her skin feels like wax when Fahri lays his hand against the side of her cheek. She is like something discarded, emptied of all she had once been.

In the cafomat Fahri drinks his nightly coffee, watching the dawn over the port. A freighter is being unloaded. The enormous, skeletal cranes, silent behind the window's glass, rotate their hooked limbs as they shift the containers down to the spidery, tracked roustabots who delicately nudge them into place onto the waiting truck bases. It has rained. The surface of everything is clean and reflective. The loaded trucks, cyclopean and featureless as a child's building block fitted with wheels, are mirrored darkly in the surface of the pavement as they roll away with their loads. Their green lights pool and slide on the pavement beneath them, smeared emeralds. In the control tower above the port it is possible there is a human being, but likely there is nobody at all. Near the cafomat's coffee dispenser, the puck-shaped floor polisher shivers in spirals.

Melek, the night doctor on the ward, slides into the chair across from him. "How is your sister?"

"About the same."

"I looked at her charts on my rounds earlier. No worse than yesterday. We shouldn't get our hopes up, but that's good news of a sort, right?"

"It is." Fahri looks at her—Melek, in her scrubs the color of a faded key-lime pie. Mischief always in her lively eyebrows, a chipped front tooth, one eye slightly larger, and greener, than the other. She glances at the time in her thumbnail, gives the cuticle a double-tap to start a timer. They had met the first night Fahri came in to see his sister. Melek had sat across from him the same way, nearly three months ago now, when they first met. Her interest in him had been as obvious to him then as it was now: over the first cup of coffee they shared she'd said: "I like you—but I don't have time to date anyone. Not for more than five minutes at a time."

Fahri had smiled his genuine, but tired (always tired) smile. "Five minutes is about all I can spare as well."

"Perfect. Then we'll just have to do this in five-minute increments."

And so they had, for nearly a quarter of a year now: building a relationship out of the tiniest nanoblocks, in increments of time anyone could afford.

“Okay: five-minute date starts now.” Elbows on the table, she rests her jaw on the backs of her hands, flutters her off-kilter eyes at Fahri like something out of the film archives, mocking romance and infatuation. “So let me tell you what I did today.”

As tired as Fahri is, as aching as he is, as eager as he is for a few hours of sleep, natural or induced, he does listen. Because everyone can afford five minutes: this is right. And everyone deserves five minutes, at a minimum, from a fellow human being. It should not be too much to ask. The cafomat, otherwise empty, warms with her conversation. She speaks, and he listens. She has an inner light as easy to see as a lamp behind a gauze curtain. She has a warmth he could warm his hands to. And they are, he and Melek, of the same world. Contractors, gleaners on the edge of the protectorate, making a living. Even after all these five-minute dates, he cannot tell how he feels for her, beyond this.

Now her face changes, mid-sentence. She is looking at him, startled. Then he feels it—a warm line along the side of his face, two drops of dark grape across the table, like thick red wine.

“You are bleeding.”

He puts a hand to his head, but she grabs his wrist. “Come with me.”

In the all-white examination room she tilts his chin up to her with an authoritative, gloved hand. Her other hand, thumb at the tragus of his ear, searches in his umber hair for the wound.

“Look up at me. Blink twice to permit me to read your vitals.”

He does so. Melek looks up and to the right a moment, reading. She doesn’t have implants: she prefers contacts. He remembers her saying, that first night they met: “I don’t like knives. Even in the hand of an autosurgeon. Even if I don’t see them.”

“But you are a doctor,” he’d said.

“I mean that I don’t like knives when their business ends are directed at me.”

“Vitals look okay.” Melek’s fingers find the wound. “Okay, everything is all right. Here it is. Just a nick. Two centimeters.”

She cleans the wound with a cotton swab. He concentrates on the carbonated sting of the solution. He tries to push the image of himself tackling the skip from behind out of his mind. Them toppling to the pavement. But he didn’t hit his head. So from where? He’s holding the skip down while he struggles, trying to get the inhibitor on him. The skip had reached a hand up, tried to grasp his hair. He must have cut him then. A key of some kind? A fingernail? He doesn’t even know, but the skip cut him. A small cut, it must have bled a little into his hair and then closed itself. Later, the cut must have opened up again on its own.

Melek pinches the edges of the wound together, runs the warmth of the liquid skin applicator over the wound, wipes the excess blood and disinfectant from his hair and face with a cotton ball.

“I must have hit my head on the edge of the faucet in the bathroom, washing my face in the sink.”

“Didn’t you feel it?”

“No, I must not have. Too tired.”

“You need to sleep more.”

“No,” Fahri says. “I need to work more. I’m a contractor. My sister’s care won’t pay for itself.”

Melek is stripping off the gloves. “You are a prince, Fahri. She must have been a good sister to you.”

“Perhaps she might have been,” Fahri says, standing up. “But I never got the chance to find out. We never met one another. But she is all I have in the world. What do I owe you?”

"No charge," Melek says. "You owe me a bit more caution with yourself. I don't want to have my five-minute dates with someone else."

Nothing is free. Melek will be paying for the gloves, the swab, the auto-registered use of the applicator, the disinfectant—even the cotton ball. But Fahri can't afford to turn down the gift. Shame heats his cheeks.

On the way out of the hospital, he takes one more look at Feride's waxen, sleeping face, blurred by disease. A death mask? Or only a suspension? Then he blinks three times into the paydesk's eye, and glances up and to the right to see the turquoise numbers of his bank account spiraling down to no more than a metaphorical handful of Protectorate lira. The familiar feeling of dread washes over him. Enough left for what? Three meals, an energy tab or two, the rent on his cell for one more day. They used to call it "hand to mouth." Now it's "from one blink to another."

* * *

The tekray dopples southwest, the Marble Sea on the left, glaucous and undulating in the blue-shifted early light. To the right, the hives of cell towers beyond the southern boundaries of the Protectorate tessellate past, a few windows already lit up. Fahri glimpses a line at an immigration center, hopefuls rubbing their hands against the morning cold. The Protectorate announced a new citizenship lottery, with the promise of benefits—pensions, insurance, minimums, safety nets—dangled in front of a few thousand more hopefuls. It's a cold morning with a freezing salt wind off the sea. Spring keeps advancing and retreating. Under a bridge of the abandoned motorway, he checks in with Mahir.

Mahir's office is a cage of rusted steel and dirty glass in an ancient garage that once serviced gasoline-powered cars. Now its bays are empty: all that is left are tools, spare parts, rags, hydraulic lifts smeared with the oily filth of internal combustion. There are pegs on the walls with belts and hoses dangling from them, ancient, battered license plates intended to be read with the naked eye, unidentifiable machines, battered bumpers leaned against the wall. Mahir's office, secure as the shell of a hermit crab, used to be for the cashier of this place. Inside, Mahir drifts in a cloud of vapor, his face like some terrible fish, chewing on the soggy fiber applicator of an electric cigar.

"Can you handle three? Think you have it in you?"

Three! Fahri could get a week ahead on payments. In his mind, the paid-up days spin out, seemingly endless, like a luxury without limit. "Of course I can."

The feeling fades when he sees Tarik leaning against the concrete of a bridge support outside the garage. The concrete is bleeding rust through its cracks. Tarik's coated teeth have the green patina of a copper roof—the latest vogue. Coordinates, compass points, and facial patterns cascade backward down the lenses of his fashionably out of date horn-rim Parker Philips overlay glasses in amaranthine, like something out of a Kurdish cult VR.

"Riddle me this," he lisps through his statuary bicuspid. "What has four legs in the morning, sleeps while running on two legs all day long, and ceases to exist at midnight?"

Fahri shrugs.

"The answer," Tarik says, taking his glasses off and wiping them with a microfiber cloth, "Is you, if you don't blink me 40K usage fee by 11:30."

"I get it," Fahri says. "Very funny."

"I'll meet you at the hospital. Don't make me chase you down to some late-night döner stand like yesterday: it grates." Tarik pushes the glasses up the bridge of his nose, glares at Fahri through a cataract of magenta data and a reverse image of Fahri's own head, ghost-translucent, monochrome, rotating trapped in Tarik's lenses, overlaid with skin texture analysis triangulations like a phrenology bust.

"Plus a thousand for the ding. Be more careful with our toys."

The first two skips are easy: Fahri finds the first one in the lobby of the Intercon, ensconced in a chair-pod built to look like the nest of some enormous bird, licking salt off the rim of a margarita. The skip just shrugs and puts one floppy hand out for the inhibitor.

The second one leads him up through the autocheckpoints of the Protectorate and out its north side on the Tekray, then arcing over to the Antalyan side of the strait. He catches up with her in Kiliçli on a branch-line platform, completely seized up: she's been in a fugue state for days, and is collapsed on a bench, jerking like a puppet when he locks the inhibitor on her wrist. A mercy: she's trapped in this malfunctioning body without escape. Sparrows hop around Fahri's feet, confused into thinking he is going to feed them.

Giving in to the sparrows, he buys a simit from a vendor and sits down on the bench. He tears tiny pieces off the ring of sesame-spangled bread for the fierce, fat little birds. They battle one another for position and twist their little heads, regarding him with one glistening sable eye and then the other, always eager for more.

He takes a few bites of the simit ring. Time is a luxury. He's at least paid up for the next four days, and it seems like he has forever ahead of him. He's registered the two skips, and in the upper right of his vision the turquoise balance of his account has grown. A five-minute date, he thinks. I'm having a five-minute date with myself. But Melek's face arises in his mind: he feels the gentle pressure of her thumb on the tragus of his ear as her fingers move through his hair, looking for the wound. He closes his eyes and concentrates on the feeling, brings out all the nuance he can squeeze from this moment, until he can almost feel the ridges of her thumbprint through the surgical gloves, like the most minutely grooved corduroy.

He notices, then, that one of the sparrows has an artificial foot. Its brown dinosaur leg is grafted to a construct of delicate carbon fiber struts and miniature talons of hardened glass. The foot flexes and grasps just like its other foot of flesh and blood. Who would take the time? This little piece of loving kindness, like a gap torn in the net of injustice. The tiny cyborg pokes one of its comrades in the butt, startling the other bird into dropping its bread, then seizes the prize and flies off, triumphant, with a hunk of simit half the size of its head clasped in its beak.

The collector van pulls up to the station. The tech is in field gray coveralls and a company garrison cap. Bored, tired, probably on a double shift. Fahri can see him watching a 'cast in the corner of his eye: the privacy shield still allows a slight blur through it, a darker cloud behind clouds.

"She's locked up," Fahri tells the tech. "The neuromodulators in the blank's reticular activating system aren't firing properly. Wherever her original is, she can't transmute back."

The tech shines a penlight into her eyes, pointlessly.

"She wasn't on the run: she was wandering. She's in a fugue state. You're going to need a shop reset."

"Oh, do your own fucking job, contract whore," the tech says. But there's no anger in his voice—only exhaustion. "I don't need to be lectured on Keiser's Law by some ex-urban temp." Moving to feel the woman's pulse, he never bothers to look at Fahri.

The other tech arrives, practically a twin to the first in exhaustion and apathy, leading a stretcher on a tether. Fahri walks onto the Tekray train headed back to the European side of the strait. So much, he thinks, for loving kindness. This, he thinks, is why Feride avoided speaking to people as much as she could. But they'll get this person, trapped in their malfunctioning blank, back to the shop and reset its reticular activating system. And somewhere, wherever they are, this person will wake. To what? No matter: to something. To whatever and whoever there is for them to go back to.

Back on the Tekray, he gets a call from Mahir. "Fair warning," Mahir says into his

ear. "This last one for the day is a heavy blank. Custom. Big—you can't miss him. But you'd better sneak up on him and clap that inhibitor on him before he sees you. I don't want to lose my best tracer."

"Very kind of you to look out for me."

"No, just practical."

The skipped blank is big. A mountain of a man. Somebody's fetish: all roiling muscle straining against his clothing, black beard practically up to his eye sockets, hands like the paws of a bear. Fahri catches up to him on the ferry to Fener. The blank eats a quick dinner at a family café and then wanders a while, looking into the blandest of shop windows while the sun goes down and lays, for a few minutes, a net of claret, ruby, persimmon, and salmon clouds on top of the city. He doesn't seem to be in any hurry, isn't looking around to see if he's being followed. Just strolling along. The muezzins call the faithful to the Maghrib prayer. The man raises his head, listening to their songs winding into one another, a small smile almost lost in the forest of his beard. He walks past street vendors folding their wares away, past knots of locals in doorways discussing the day as they and their ancestors have for centuries.

In the rusting, cast-iron cave of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church of St. Stephen, they are alone. As the man raises his arm to light a candle to the Virgin, Fahri makes his move. But although he is fast, the man is faster. He must have known Fahri was there. He claps a giant hand on Fahri's wrist and squeezes. Fahri's tendons go limp, and the inhibitor clatters to the floor. With a swift step, the man is behind Fahri, has swept his legs out from under him and wrapped a thick arm around his neck. His other forearm pushes on the back of Fahri's head, urging him further into the chokehold. The candles before the church icons dance, shudder, and streak as the world darkens. The man slides to a sitting position, holding Fahri against his massive chest, and as Fahri slides into an indigo space full of stars and the ringing of blood in his ears, he hears the man say, "Shh. Don't struggle. It doesn't hurt. You just go to sleep." And he seems to be holding Fahri firmly, but with a tenderness. In a fairy tale there is a bear who clutches an orphaned human child to its chest and takes it to the forest. Takes it to a den to protect it against the winter.

... Fahri's unconscious body slumps to the marble floor.

* * *

On the day of her accident, Feride remembered running her bloody hand under the tap. Then she'd made herself a cup of tea, thinking nothing of it. Slept like a normal person. In the morning, the darkness began, flowing in from the edges of her vision. She remembered lying on the floor, the nap of the rug under her cheek, the room dancing in a fever around her. Then the occasional stutter of clarity in a mist: a robot holding her arm gently in its cuffed appendage and inserting an IV. Autogurneys trundling down night-lit corridors, a nurse tapping a drip-bag with the back of a finger and singing, in a clear baritone:

The foothills of these mountains . . .

I long to see the meadows.

Birds turn their backs on their nests.

Some day you will forget me, too . . .

* * *

Two days later, Feride awoke sitting upright in a chair. The room was not white, like a hospital room: it was the blue of an evening sky. A woman was sitting across from her. She was lean and angular, dressed in some sort of woolen, asymmetrical thing, like a knitted blanket equipped with sleeves. When Feride tried to move, she felt loose and dizzy, like a marble rolling around inside the shell of her own body. A cascade of needles showered through the vagueness of her limbs.

“That feeling,” the woman said, “will pass. It is trasmigratory paresthesia. Most refer to it as ‘falling awake.’ We believe it is caused by your consciousness’ neural patterns remapping to a body slightly different from your own. Try not to make any sudden movements. It will fade on its own.” The woman pulled her chair slightly closer to Feride. “Feride, my name is Dr. Solmaz Haznadar. I am from the Istanbul Metropolitan Protectorate Institute of Technology and Integrated Sciences. That’s quite a mouthful, so you probably know us as ‘IMPITIS’ or simply ‘the Institute.’ I’m from a department of the Institute called Theoretical Benefits.”

Feride tried to speak, to respond, but she could not find the muscles of her face and mouth. There was a strange sound, like a quacking. She realized with a feeling of shame that it was coming from her.

“Don’t speak,” said Dr. Haznadar. “You won’t be able to now. In a few minutes, perhaps, or half an hour, you will. But not during the adjustment phase.” Her face held kindness, but of a clinical, automated sort. It was a look Feride was used to. Feride could see Dr. Haznadar was reading something in the privacy-shielded periphery of her right eye. “Just sit still. Feride . . . There is no easy way to tell you this, so I will not waste your time. You—the real you, that is, a few floors beneath us, is dying. Your body is being attacked by *staphylococcus* bacteria. The bacteria—a resistant form that does not respond to antibiotics—is in your bloodstream, destroying you from the inside. The hospital is doing everything it can to stop it, but it is unlikely they will be able to. I’m sorry.

“In the meantime my department at the Institute, Theoretical Benefits, has taken your case on for one of our trial studies. We are considering a new benefit for cases like yours, among citizens of the Protectorate. We’re initiating trials here at the experimental hospital, outside the border. You are one of the . . .” she stopped herself from saying something else “. . . few non-citizen beneficiaries. We’re offering you something few people get in an interrupted life . . .”

Was Feride crying? A terrible sound was in the room with them. A squawking, an awful stutter of animal pain. And now she found, in the confused map of her new physical self, her cheeks, and the track of tears on them, a rivulet across the alien topography of this body.

Dr. Haznadar continued. “. . . A chance to say goodbye. To find closure. To make arrangements. Three days. The Institute is giving you this gift.”

“What does it cost?” He voice was slurred. But yes—there was her mouth. And the words were words, though they dragged as if through water.

“Sorry?” Dr. Haznadar seemed genuinely confused by the question, as though she had never considered such a thing before.

Of course. Of course—she’s a *citizen*, Feride thought, suddenly furious. These things never cross her mind. And now they are considering yet another benefit—for *citizens*.

“What . . . does . . . it . . . cost?”

Dr. Haznadar smiled, the way one would smile at a child who wanted to know where babies come from. “Why, nothing at all. And in the meantime—for these three days—the Institute will pay for your hospital care as well. It’s a *study*.” She placed a hand on Feride’s hand. She flicked the word condescendingly off her tongue, as if Feride were some sort of troglodyte who would find it difficult to understand. “We’re gathering *data*, and so it’s all covered. All you have to do is live. Use these days as you will. Prepare yourself. Say goodbye to your loved ones. Our hope is that this benefit will be psychologically useful—a chance for closure. If we determine it is, we may seek to have it included in the Protectorate’s benefits package.”

Through the field of needles and numbness, Feride felt the doctor’s touch and was ashamed to find herself crying again. Humiliation, fear, anger—a clamor of emotions in her head. But what she wanted most was to be away from here.

* * *

An hour later she was outside. The Institute had thought of everything—changes of clothes and toiletries in a rucksack, a cell just outside the edge of the Protectorate, travel authorizations through the Protectorate loaded, enough lira to cover a decent life. More than decent—more money than she'd ever had to whittle away in a day. What would other people do? They would go, she imagined, to their loved ones, and they would say goodbye to them. Together, they would hold some kind of ceremony. They would do something meaningful. She imagined the lighting of candles. She imagined washing her feet and hands at the sebil before prayer.

She found herself outside the gates of the yali where she had worked those three years. All was as before. Beyond the gates, lined up along the drive, the roses, the cause of it all, were a hot red. They shuddered in the breeze of a cloudless day. The windows of the yali had been thrown open to the wind. The staff was airing the house out. Likely the owners were returning, then, in a few days.

She saw Suat, the head gardener, resting for a moment, leaning on a hoe beneath a tree. He took his old brown canvas field cap from his head and wiped his wispy scalp with it. Such a familiar motion—but one she had never, she thought, really taken note of before. He paused a moment, doing nothing at all, not moving. Thinking of me? Perhaps. They had been friends. They had shared many teas together in the garden, had laughed and even danced. And yes—now she remembered. He had wanted to pick her up and carry her to the ambulance. The memory was blurred; white coats of the technicians, questions melting in the air. She had been deep in fever, lying incoherent on the floor of her little cottage. He had reached down to pick her up, and one of them had stopped him. “You are a true knight, beyefendi, but we have stretchers for that.”

Without thinking of what she was doing, she called out to him. He raised his head and looked at her. He laid the hoe against the trunk of the tree and came to the gate. He greeted Feride in his usual manner with friends or strangers.

“It is a beautiful day, is it not?”

The phrase never varied: in sun, wind, rain, or hail that tore the leaves from his beloved trees, it was a beautiful day. Suat's wife had passed away two years ago. When Feride had seen him the next morning he had uttered this same phrase to her, his eyes red, his face swollen and wet with tears.

“It *is* a beautiful day, beyefendi. I . . .” she stammered a moment, and then instinct or impulse carried her forward: “. . . I am looking for Feride. My sister.”

Suat unlocked the gate. “Come in, friend. I was just about to sit down to a cup of tea. What do your people call you?”

“Fahri,” she answered. She had read the name, perhaps, in a book. She did not know. It drifted up to her as if from memory.

Suat put a hand on her shoulder. “Your sister would be pleased to have such a handsome brother. She is not here, but I will tell you where to find her. Drink some tea with me before you go.”

At the table in the sun in the garden, they drank Suat's strong black tea—the same as Feride had known for three years now. And it tasted, she was happy to find out, exactly the same. Other things had felt different to her—this body's eyes were not the same: they were better than hers had been. She had been surprised to see the world's colors were a bit brighter than she remembered, the world itself just a bit sharper. Perhaps she had needed glasses, as Feride, and had not even known. She had thought her own vision was perfect. It turned out perfect, too, was relative. And because the shape of her hands was now different, things felt different in them. The pear-shaped glass of tea was smaller, it fit in her longer-fingered hand strangely. The chair she sat in was smaller—by fractions, yes, but the shape she cut in the world had changed, and so the world fit differently. And she was strong. And fast. She had

run along the Bosphorus for several minutes before strange looks had stopped her. This body had seemed . . . inexhaustible.

But the black tea cut through the difference and brought her back to her old self. And as Suat delicately worked his way to telling her what had happened to her “sister,” Feride began to weave a story of her own: a brother and a sister, separated when their parents died, delivered to separate orphanages, estranged for years. The brother’s long search for his lost sister, his tracking her to here . . .

“Fahri, dear friend,” said Suat. “I hope you are rich as a prince. Because your sister is very ill—perhaps even dying, and the hospital has already taken most of the money from her accounts. Soon, they will let her fade away.”

“If only I were,” Fahri replied. “But some are born to the palace, and some are born to the field.” The familiar saying, uttered a thousand times, now stung his mouth. “And like you, and like her, I was born to the field.”

Suat regarded the young man—neat, his hands clean as if he had been born to the palace, his face unlined yet by life. But already so bitter. That phrase, with so many variations. Injustice, Suat’s father had told him, has a shape.

He remembered when his father had said it. They had been fishing from the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn, idly watching their lines. His father was usually a happy man, but their boat had been struck a few months before by a citizen in a pleasure yacht, and Suat’s father had spent weeks now winding his way through arbitration: first in the Territorial courts and then in the outer courts of Istanbul Protectorate. His father had, perhaps, not known who he really was, what his real position in life was, until he had tried to sue a citizen. Then he had entered a world of stamps, of benches in corridors, of shaken heads, averted eyes. A world of a thousand condescensions and humiliations.

Finally, Suat’s father had stopped fighting. They had dry-docked the boat, bought new wood to replace the staved-in clinkers, and paid the boat builder three months’ profit for the repairs. As they waited for the boat to be finished—their livelihood, their lifeline—they fished from the bridge.

His father would eventually return to his old self, but at that moment he was bitter. He was a man who had come up against the limit of his world. He had found out not just who he was, but who he was not.

There on the bridge he told his son: “Suat, injustice has a shape. It is like something you see moving between the leaves in the forest. When you see it, you must recognize it for what it is, and what it can do to you. You must take action to survive. The actions are different, according to what form injustice has taken: you might have to stay quiet, to let it pass by. Or you might have to shout and bang pots and make yourself larger to scare it away. But remember this: it is too large and powerful to fight alone. That is certain. Never fight, unless you see it when you have many well-armed friends with you. Then perhaps you may kill it.”

Now Suat said these exact same words to this young man. He had not uttered them since that day, but they had always been with him: a secret wisdom, a talisman. Because this young man’s sister was going to die. Suat had seen it in her face when she lay on the floor: death had her. There were miracles that could save her, but all of the miracles were reserved for citizens of the Protectorate or for people like the Emirati lords of this yali, who drifted here once a year on their nomadic wanderings: their silent, private gliders descended from the sun to the landing-strips along the Black Sea, filled with priceless Turkmen carpets of silk, silver, and gold, necklaces worth more than a hundred of their servants’ lives, and the hunting hawks behind whose blank, telescopic eye-sights their ancestors chose to live out their uploaded afterlives.

There was no one left to say goodbye to. Nobody but the city itself: the seagulls, the ferries, the minarets. Death’s horizon rushed closer with every moment. On the Galata

Bridge, on the final day, Fahri watched the people fishing and thought of Suat's father. What shape would injustice take, between the leaves? The shape of a bear? Of a witch in a fairy tale? A tiger? The bridge was refracted in the water, distorted, drifting in the flare and shimmer of a bright day. So was this Fahri, this temporary face Feride had been loaned. Somewhere, she did have a brother. But not one who was there when she needed him. Not one who would come looking for her when she was hurt, search for her when she was dying. She had had to make that brother for herself.

"It doesn't have to be this way."

Fahri turned, startled. A young man was leaning on the bridge's rail, grinning greenly at him, regarding him through horn-rimmed lenses framing a shimmer of data.

"What?"

"It doesn't have to be this way," the young man said. "It doesn't have to end tomorrow, with a wave of the doctor's wand. You don't have to die. I can show you how to live."

* * *

A few hours later, in Mahir's garage under the bridge, his museum to the filthy old days of internal combustion, to private cars that fogged their inefficient poison into the atmosphere, Mahir also spoke of shapes and of justice. Seated at a scarred metal table once used to vivisect the organs of automobiles, delicately sipping at his coffee and tweaking one gelatinous square after another of rahat lokum from a chipped china plate into his mouth, he explained:

"It's simple, really. The High Parliament put a law into place that seemed reasonable enough to them, and protects the valuable merchandise of the body shops. You have to clap an inhibitor cuff around the wrist of a runaway blank in order to claim it again. The law's based on the antique system of process servers, things like that. And you can't have a drone do it: they were working it that way for a while, but then a drone clapped an inhibitor on a blank on a dock, and the thing went in the water. Awake, with its drifter inside. Reticular activation system didn't fire, no transmigration—and a drifter who was simply late on their payments drowned. A citizen on a holiday. Big scandal. So now they write a new law, says you have to do it in person. You need a conscious being to put the inhibitor on. And you're liable for any damage. Inconvenient, yes? But each new law is a new opportunity, a new industry. You put a limit on power, someone will shape a service to fit inside that limit. That's where we come in. Reclamation."

"But you know where they are," Fahri said. "They're all tagged, traceable."

Tarik, who has been fiddling with some unidentifiable piece of primitive tooling in the corner, interjected. "Finding them's the easy part. The problem is, some of them *really* don't want to go back where they came from. When they skip, they want to stay skipped. But I guess you can relate, right?"

"They are going to save her," Fahri said. "I just need to buy her some time, that's all."

"Motivation." Tarik tossed the tool he was fiddling with back in the bin, "is the key to everything. Let's sign contracts."

"And the Institute?"

Tarik looked at Fahri. On the screens of his Parker Philips Overlay Glasses a car chase was going on. Fahri saw it backward, stereoscoped: some ancient piece of film. In a hilly city drenched in sun, an over-powered car careened through an intersection, a blond man at the wheel. In the background, Fahri could glimpse an ocean half-concealed by a smear of smog.

"I'll deal with the Institute," Tahir said. "That's what you'll be paying me for. That, and your nice new body not full of poisonous bacteria. And your other body, drifting on the edge of death. And the price for all three together is going to be very, very high."

* * *

Three months later, Tahir and Dr. Solmaz Haznadar stand on the balcony of the Church of St. Stephen, watching the bear of a man lay Fahri's unconscious body gently down on the white floor. The man takes out a penlight. Opening Fahri's eyes one by one, he looks into them, then pauses for a moment, reading vital signs.

He turns to the two on the balcony. "Vital signs are good, but there's nobody home. The reticular activating system fired properly. This drifter has transmigrated back to the mind they came from."

"Many thanks, Doctor Akdağ. You can move the blank back to Institute storage. We'll see you at the office."

Outside, winter is making a temporary comeback. Wind and a battering rain sheet in across the Golden Horn, tearing spring blossoms from the trees. Fishermen in raincoats and sou'westers continue numbly tossing lines into the oscillating, cloud-gray surface of the water. Tahir and Solmaz, hoods up on their rain jackets, squinting against the wind-whipped water lashing against their faces, are making their way to the Tekray station.

"Now comes the fun part," Tahir says. "Collating all this data. Preliminarily, though, it's interesting. Just about no limit to what the subject will pay to keep going. I had him up to forty thousand lira near the end. He—or she, or whatever. Even I'm getting confused at this point. I keep thinking of Fahri as a separate person. Anyway, he sure seemed determined to continue. Given more budget on the project from Motivations, I think I could have cranked his fees even higher. He was barely sleeping, taking on two or three assignments in a day, oblivious to risk. Absolutely minimal lifestyle: he was eating the cheapest possible food, bought nothing for his cell, and was working double shifts skip tracing. I think if we had kept pushing the numbers up, though, he'd eventually have gotten hurt—but there has to be a balance there somewhere: that tipping point between a sustainable, high level of motivation and self-destructive levels of output." The raindrops on his Parker Philips lenses smear and distort the rotating heads of Feride and Fahri in translucent mulberry topographs, a stream of data the color of dark wine—receipts, transit maps, time stamps. "Prelims tell me if we were charging thirty thousand, we could probably exploit indefinitely. That's a rough guess. But the fucking Motivations Department geeks and the Ethics sub-department of Exurban Studies are in a spat and pfffft! Project funding cut! Back to the drawing board. What about your study?"

Solmaz sidestepped an overly eager trash robot chasing a shred of paper. "Inconclusive. I'll need to read all the scans again—but overall? My guess is it may not be a great benefit on the larger scale. That's just my instinct. Disorientation in the early hours of the first day, followed by a morbid melancholy, indications of destabilization—even what I would call an almost entirely new personality emerging. And very quickly. I think there's a chance the benefit could cause violent reactions, cascading events it would be difficult to control. But the subject is sub-optimal: background is institutional, and she's barely socialized. I wouldn't have chosen her."

"I suppose not, but then wouldn't many of the beneficiaries of this benefit also not be optimal?"

"Well, that's the rub. We'll continue the study, but this first case makes me doubt this benefit is a benefit at all. It could be a liability for the Protectorate."

"Ah, well. *Geçmiş olsun*. Let it be in the past."

* * *

A few days later, Feride wakes up in a gauzy haze—a haze accentuated by the evening sunlight pouring through the curtains of the hospital suite. It is a strong light, red-gold, made stronger by its reflection off the mirrored buildings and the pavement soaked by a day of rain. She is brittle, foggy, her senses diffracting off sore spots, aches coming alive. The sagging jellyfish of intravenous drips surround her,

the evening light refracted through their liquids, striping and pooling across the white bedsheets. The darkness grows in the room as the day dies, and the diodes light the ward in its strange, undersea green.

For a moment, she is Fahri. But when she looks at her bruised hands, they are not her own. Where are the thick, knuckly fingers she had? The black dusting of mid-digital hair? Already a life—her own, not quite her own—is fading: looking out at the port from the cafomat, Melek's fingers in her hair, searching for a wound, a sparrow with an artificial foot, candles in the rusting iron church. She cries for a time, quietly. She is the only attendee at Fahri's funeral: a brother of her own creation, a second self, a figment.

An hour after she wakes up, a young nurse comes in and has her blink permission to access her vitals.

"I'm not going to say you are out of danger yet," he says, "But we've turned a corner. We're glad to see you back in the world." As he takes down one of her IV drips, he half-sings:

Birds turn their backs on their nests.

Some day you will forget me, too . . .

* * *

"You were here when they admitted me," Feride said. "You sang that song. That old folk song. A friend of mine would sing it, sometimes. Suat. In the garden where I worked."

"It's been stuck in my head for months, but all I can remember is four lines of it."

Surprised at the strength of her own voice, despite her tube-scratched throat, her dry mouth, Feride sings the next verse of the song:

Roads are far away

My mad heart cries out

Life goes on, just goes . . .

One day you will forget me, too.

* * *

From the doorway, standing there in her scrubs the color of a faded key-lime pie, Melek finishes the song:

This longing has turned to mourning

My summers and springs turned to winter

My life has passed in vain

One day you will forget me, too.

* * *

"Ah," the young nurse says, walking out. "Here's your benefactor."

"Benefactor?"

Melek settles herself into the bedside chair. Feride realizes this is the first time she has ever seen Melek with her own eyes. But Melek is the same: mischief in her lively eyebrows, a chipped front tooth, one eye slightly larger, and greener, than the other. She says: "I thought I glimpsed something—a return. It's hard to explain. I could see something had changed. There was someone there . . . someone trying to surface. I thought a few days might be enough to see you through."

"But the expense. It must have been . . . I remember struggling to pay . . . it's thousands of lira a day . . . you can't possibly afford . . ."

"Hush." Melek presses a finger to Feride's lips. "It's my choice to make, Fahri. And where else would I find such a hero? And who would I go on my five-minute dates with? Are you trying to make me drink my coffee alone?"