

NEDİM GÜRSEL

Extract from

The First Woman

Translated by

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After what happened to him last week

he is afraid to go out. He believes that the city on the other side of the green cat-iron fence of the front garden is indeed a marsh, and that whoever steps into its mire will slowly but surely be swallowed up forever. Despite the fact that the school is in the thick of this filthy expanse, it seems to be a safe place. It stands like a fortress built on the summit of the highest of the seven hills of the city, a desolate island surrounded by the passageways, alleys and old houses of Beyoğlu. On the weekends, when the majority of the students have gone home to their families, the calm of the deserted gardens, playing fields, hallways and classrooms fills him with a sense of serenity.

So here he is, alone in an isolated courtyard at school, far from the Saturday crowd that fills the avenues, cinemas and coffeehouses of the city. His universe has been reduced to a few square yards. And he cannot even go to the park behind the school, because the teacher Kazim, known as the "Dragon", is on guard duty this week. In the Dragon's eyes, all students are trouble-makers. He refuses to show any understanding or compassion, for if he did, they would surely take advantage of it immediately and walk all over him. If it were left up to him, he would deny them everything, even the permission to take a piss. School is a place where discipline needs to reign; after all, this isn't the corner coffeehouse! Barracks, school, what's the difference? He lives by the motto "He who doesn't smack the

child hits his own thigh” and “To punish a child is a heavensent right.” The days he is on duty, only he, and if pestered enough, several other handpicked students from the upper classes, are allowed entry to the park behind to school. This park, with its lily pond adorned with a mermaid spewing water from her mouth, its majestic plane trees, its red and white roses and deep purple violets, is the Dragon’s private pleasure grounds. Whenever he is on duty he goes there, even in the worst of weather, to relieve his boredom and bachelor’s loneliness. Peering out from behind wire-rimmed glasses, he surveys Istanbul which spreads out below him. Istanbul is a creamy-skinned adolescent, sweating in the bathhouse heat, his lustrous, pristine body aglow from perspiration. From head to toe, he is rosy and crystalline. His waist is as lissome as a cypress tree, his lips are ruby red and his teeth are like pearls. His eyes are eternally languid from drowsiness. Istanbul, the ravisher of hearts, with soft flesh of exquisite aroma and delicate tint. And what about his arched eyebrows, the darkness of his curls? Not to mention his sleek chest and the insolent line of his neck! The buttons of his shirt come undone to reveal his abdomen; oh, how can one resist him! Gazing out over the city at his feet, the Dragon dreams of the seraglio ephebes depicted in the Ottoman miniature paintings of the Tulip Era, the verses of its famous poet Nedim teeming in his thoughts:

*Oh you, city of Istanbul, peerless and priceless!
I would offer all of Persia for just one of your stones!*

*Unique jewel set in the bezel of two seas,
You warm the Earth like the Heavenly Orb.*

*You are the flower beds of Eden, with roses of renown,
A font of felicity of which your finery is a divine gift.*

*Has he vanquished the Seventh Heaven, is he the victor?
Oh God! What an admirable site, what a bewitching clime!*

The Dragon has read all the panegyrics of the era concerning Istanbul. He knows that a city is only as seductive as the beauty

of its young men. Despite his Istanbul upbringing, he cannot dissuade himself of the existence of mystical love and, because of this, he blushes when talking with his students outside the classroom. Yet in the classroom, that sacrificial altar that he dominates with his allocutions and authority, he roars forth like a lion. While explaining the poetry of Nedim, he whispers to himself the verses of the Ottoman poet Taşlıcalı Yahya. Yes, Yahya's "Ode to Istanbul" is truly his favourite poem. The ephebes celebrated in its verses fill his dreams at night:

*They disrobe and by twos plunge into the water
Lips like flower buds and silver bodies burst into bloom*

*Offered for view, naked amongst the waves
Like freshly-blossomed roses they float upon the water*

*And the Ocean, this pirate by whom
Every Adonis is divested and charmed to enticement*

When he looks at the city from the rear park, the first thing the Dragon sees is Haghia Sophia. Emerging from the mist with her four minarets flanking the colossal dome, she is certainly "a temple in the face of beauty; walls and ceilings spread with mosaics of gold; seemingly built of lime and sand, all courses and buttresses." At the same time, Haghia Sophia is the sacred temple of Byzantium. When you lift your eyes from the prayer rugs and Koran stands and gaze upwards, higher, ever higher, all the way up to the arched windows, you can see archangels behind large, green medallions inscribed with sacred verses. Giant, winged Byzantine seraphs are deployed in splendor, perched to take wing heavenward from the four pendentives supporting the main dome. Yes, yes, "Her nave is the dwelling place and refuge of Christ; for one of her vaults, we would offer one hundred Persian Kings in sacrifice." Such is Haghia Sophia!

Looking over the city from the rear park, next to Haghia Sophia the Dragon recognises the Topkapı Palace with its slender chimney towers, pavilions, and imperial gardens. He swoons with delight as he evokes the Harem and Vizier's Chambers. The verses accumulated in the teacher's head swirl back and forth like

the blue waters around Seraglio Point. He gazes upon Istanbul for one last time before returning to his students, his soul purified and rinsed of its unmentionable desires. The day after tomorrow, he will begin his course with the couplets of Yahya Kemal:

*Yesterday, beloved Istanbul, I contemplated you from above;
Not one spot remains that I did not visit, haunt or adore.*

*Until my death, enchant my heart at your will!
To love but one of your neighbourhoods would a whole life fill.*

And so, the days he is on duty, only the Dragon is allowed to breathe in the pure air of the park. It is not the stench of carrion wafting up from the Golden Horn that fills his lungs, but rather the invigorating breezes of Istanbul. From now on, the Dragon turns into Nedim, the crazed epicuran who travelled in grand pomp in a caique manned by three pairs of oarsmen up to the Sweet Waters of Europe, humming a ballad, declaiming an elegy, sniffing rose after rose on end.

He calmly smiles to himself, imagining the Dragon striding through the park clad in a flowing, sable-lined caftan. For some reason, the Dragon is still wearing his wire-rimmed glasses. He picks a rosebud with a trembling hand and brings it to his nose. Instead, it is the odour of onions, wafting up from the pushcart of a *köfte* vendor at Tophane, that stings his nostrils. The Dragon moves away, holding his nose. When he stated during the first class that "The more poems you learn by heart, the loftier your mind will be," someone in one of the back rows piped up, "Fresh *köfte* for sale! Get'em while they're hot!" The Dragon flew into a livid rage. "Scoundrel! Ignorant lout! Do you think it is *köfte* we are selling here? I am going to make you regret the day you were born!" he hurled at the top of his lungs, instilling terror in the hearts of the entire class. During recess, students who had flunked last year's class and were repeating it explained to the new students that the Dragon cannot tolerate wisecracking, and that he will prove how he got his nickname at the most unexpected moment. And from that day on, no one dared to joke in class. He smiles to himself. On Monday there will be an oral quiz on classical Ottoman poetry. He recalls the verses that he has

tried to learn by heart all week long, repeating them to himself during the evening study hour, at night in the dormitory hallways before going to bed, early in the morning before the reveille bell sounded, and in the front garden:

*Flower beds of the Graces are your gardens,
Each corner overflowing with lively spirit.*

*To wish the whole earth instead of just you, what iniquity!
To compare your rose gardens with Paradise, what futility!*

*For everyone finds his contentment in desire,
The Brothers of Hope seek refuge in your convents.*

If he could grasp the meaning of these verses, he would understand that Nedim's passion for Istanbul drove him mad. By understanding the poet's sensuality and the way of life in the Tulip Era, he might to discover this "Heaven most high", this dream city so different from the city of Istanbul in which he roams all alone over the weekends, with its streets reeking of urine and the rotting carrion of the Golden Horn. But like all students his age, he has yet to attain the level of maturity necessary to comprehend the meaning of these Ottoman words. For the time being, all that is necessary is to stumble through Nedim's lines in order to get a passing grade. He is not asked to provide the meaning of the poem, to define its place in the history of Ottoman poetry, or to fathom why a single stone of Istanbul is worth the entire kingdom of Persia a thousandfold. In a few years, he will memorize the poem "Mist" by Tefvik Fikret in the same way, without comprehending anything of its Ottoman vocabulary, repeating it over and over from morning till night to correctly enunciate the strange-sounding words, twisting his tongue to accommodate their peculiar phrasing. However, if he could have deciphered the true meaning of "Mist", these verses which he will flawlessly recite in front of the Dragon, he would certainly have felt closer to this poem. He would see the resemblance between the Istanbul he knows and this "ancient sorceress", this "widow still virgin after one thousand nuptials," these "murderous towers, palaces, castles, jails and decrepit

medreses”, these “age-old streets where dust does battle.” He would even offer to do a paper on the topic, knowing quiet well in advance that the Dragon would refuse it. “The more poems you learn by heart, the loftier will be your mind,” he would answer in opposition, impeding him from thinking on his own and from understanding the world through his own trial and error.

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