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# The Bastard of Istanbul

'Heartbreaking'

*Janine di Giovanni, Vogue*

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by  
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## ONE

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# Cinnamon

**W**hatever falls from the sky above, thou shall not curse it.  
That includes the rain.

No matter what might pour down, no matter how heavy the cloudburst or how icy the sleet, you should never ever utter profanities against whatever the heavens might have in store for us. Everybody knows this. And that includes Zeliha.

Yet, there she was on this first Friday of July, walking on a sidewalk that flowed next to hopelessly clogged traffic; rushing to an appointment she was now late for, swearing like a trooper, hissing one profanity after another at the broken pavement stones, at her high heels, at the man stalking her, at each and every driver who honked frantically when it was an urban fact that clamor had no effect on unclogging traffic, at the whole Ottoman dynasty for once upon a time conquering the city of Constantinople, and then sticking by its mistake, and yes, at the rain . . . this damn summer rain.

Rain is an agony here. In other parts of the world, a down-pour will in all likelihood come as a boon for nearly everyone and

everything—good for the crops, good for the fauna and the flora, and with an extra splash of romanticism, good for lovers. Not so in Istanbul though. Rain, for us, isn't necessarily about getting wet. It's not about getting dirty even. If anything, it's about getting angry. It's mud and chaos and rage, as if we didn't have enough of each already. And struggle. It's always about struggle. Like kittens thrown into a bucketful of water, all ten million of us put up a futile fight against the drops. It can't be said that we are completely alone in this scuffle, for the streets too are in on it, with their antediluvian names stenciled on tin placards, and the tombstones of so many saints scattered in all directions, the piles of garbage that wait on almost every corner, the hideously huge construction pits soon to be turned into glitzy, modern buildings, and the seagulls. . . . It angers us all when the sky opens and spits on our heads.

But then, as the final drops reach the ground and many more perch unsteadily on the now dustless leaves, at that unprotected moment, when you are not quite sure that it has finally ceased raining, and neither is the rain itself, in that very interstice, everything becomes serene. For one long minute, the sky seems to apologize for the mess she has left us in. And we, with dribblets still in our hair, slush in our cuffs, and dreariness in our gaze, stare back at the sky, now a lighter shade of cerulean and clearer than ever. We look up and can't help smiling back. We forgive her; we always do.

At the moment, however, it was still pouring and Zeliha had little, if any, forgiveness in her heart. She did not have an umbrella, for she had promised herself that if she was enough of an imbecile to throw a bunch of money to yet another street vendor for yet another umbrella, only to forget it here and there as soon as the sun came back, then she deserved to be soaked to the bone. Besides, it was too late now anyway. She was already sopping wet. That was the one thing about the rain that likened it to sorrow: You did your best to remain untouched, safe and dry, but if and when you failed, there came a point in which you started seeing the problem less in

terms of drops than as an incessant gush, and thereby you decide you might as well get drenched.

Rain dripped from her dark curls onto her broad shoulders. Like all the women in the Kazancı family, Zeliha had been born with frizzy raven-black hair, but unlike the others, she liked to keep it that way. From time to time her eyes of jade green, normally wide open, and filled with fiery intelligence, squinted into two lines of untainted indifference inherent only to three groups of people: the hopelessly naïve, the hopelessly withdrawn, and the hopelessly full of hope. She being none of these, it was hard to make sense of this indifference, even if it was such a flickering one. One minute it was here, canopying her soul to drugged insensibility, the next minute it was gone, leaving her alone in her body.

Thus she felt on that first Friday of July desensitized as if anesthetized, a powerfully corrosive mood for someone so zestful as she. Could this be why she had had absolutely no interest in fighting the city today, or the rain for that matter? While the yo-yo indifference went up and down with a rhythm all its own, the pendulum of her mood swayed between two opposite poles: from frozen to fuming.

As Zeliha rushed by, the street vendors selling umbrellas and raincoats and plastic scarves in glowing colors eyed her in amusement. She managed to ignore their gaze, just as she managed to ignore the gaze of all the men who stared at her body with hunger. The vendors looked disapprovingly at her shiny nose ring too, as if therein lay a clue as to her deviance from modesty, and thereby the sign of her *lustfulness*. She was especially proud of her piercing because she had done it herself. It had hurt but the piercing was here to stay and so was her style. Be it the harassment of men or the reproach of other women, the impossibility of walking on broken cobblestones or hopping into the ferryboats, and even her mother's constant nagging . . . there was no power on earth that could prevent Zeliha, who was taller than most women in this city, from donning miniskirts of glaring colors, tight-fitting blouses that dis-

played her ample breasts, satiny nylon stockings, and yes, those towering high heels.

Now, as she stepped on another loose cobblestone, and watched the puddle of sludge underneath splash dark stains on her lavender skirt, Zeliha unleashed another long chain of curses. She was the only woman in the whole family and one of the few among all Turkish women who used such foul language so unreservedly, vociferously, and knowledgeably; thus, whenever she started swearing, she kept going as if to compensate for all the rest. This time was no different. As she ran, Zeliha swore at the municipal administration, past and present, because ever since she was a little girl, never a rainy day had passed with these cobblestones primed and fixed. Before she was done swearing, however, she abruptly paused, lifted her chin as if suspecting someone had called her name, but rather than looking around for an acquaintance, she instead pouted at the smoky sky. She squinted, sighed a conflicted sigh, and then unleashed another profanity, only this time against the rain. Now, according to the unwritten and unbreakable rules of Petite-Ma, her grandmother, *that* was sheer blasphemy. You might not be fond of the rain, you certainly did not have to be, but under no circumstances should you cuss at anything that came from the skies, because nothing poured from above on its own and behind it all there was Allah the Almighty.

Surely Zeliha knew the unwritten and unbreakable rules of Petite-Ma, but on this first Friday of July she felt spoiled enough not to care. Besides, whatever had been uttered had been uttered, just like whatever had been done in life had been done and was now gone. Zeliha had no time for regrets. She was late for her appointment with the gynecologist. Not a negligible risk, indeed, given that the moment you notice being late for an appointment with the gynecologist, you might decide not to go there at all.

A yellow cab with bumper stickers all over its back fender pulled up short. The driver, a rough-looking, swarthy man who had a Zapata mustache and a gold front tooth, and who might very well have been a molester when off duty, had all the windows down and

a local rock station blasting Madonna's "Like a Virgin" full bore. There was a sharp mismatch between the man's utterly traditional look and his contrastingly unconventional musical preferences. He braked brusquely, cocked his head out of the window, and after whistling at Zeliha, barked, "I'll have some of that!" His next words were muffled by Zeliha's.

"What's wrong with you, creep? Can't a woman walk in peace in this city?"

"But why walk when I could give you a ride?" the driver asked. "You wouldn't want that sexy body to get wet, would you?"

As Madonna cried in the background "*My fear is fading fast, been saving it all for you,*" Zeliha began to swear, thus breaking another unwritten and unbreakable rule, this time not one of Petite-Ma's but one of Female Prudence. *Never cuss at your harasser.*

**The Golden Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman:  
When harassed on the street, never respond, since a woman  
who responds, let alone swears back at her harasser, shall  
only fire up the enthusiasm of the latter!**

Zeliha was no stranger to this rule, and she knew better than to violate it, but this first Friday of July was like no other, and there was now another self unleashed in her, one far more carefree and brash, and frighteningly furious. It was this other Zeliha that inhabited most of her inner space and took charge of things now, making decisions in the name of both. That must be why she continued to curse at the top of her voice. As she drowned out Madonna, the pedestrians and umbrella vendors gathered to see what kind of trouble was brewing. In the turmoil, the stalker behind her flinched, knowing better than to mess with a madwoman. But the cabdriver was neither as prudent nor as timid, for he welcomed all the fuss with a grin. Zeliha noticed how surprisingly white and flawless the man's teeth were, and could not help wondering if they were porcelain capped. Little by little, she once again felt that wave of adren-

aline escalate in her belly, churning her stomach, accelerating her pulse, making her sense that she, rather than any other woman in her whole family, might someday kill a man.

Fortunately for Zeliha, it was then that the driver of a Toyota behind the cab lost patience and honked. As if awakened from a bad dream, Zeliha came to her senses and shivered at her grim situation. Her proclivity to violence scared her, as it always had. In an instant she was quiet and veered aside, trying to inch her way through the crowd. Yet in her haste, Zeliha's right heel became stuck under a loose cobblestone. Infuriated, she pulled her foot out of the puddle under the stone. While her foot and shoe came loose, the heel of her shoe broke, thus reminding her of a particular rule she should have never put out of her mind in the first place.

**The Silver Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman:  
When harassed on the street, do not lose nerve, since a woman who loses her nerve in the face of harassment, and thus reacts excessively, will only make matters worse for herself!**

The cabdriver laughed, the horn of the Toyota behind blared yet again, the rain hastened on, and several pedestrians tsk-tsked in unison, though it was hard to tell what exactly they were reprimanding. Amid all the tumult, Zeliha caught sight of an iridescent bumper sticker glittering on the back of the cab: DON'T CALL ME WRETCHED! it declared. THE WRETCHED TOO HAVE A HEART. As she stood there blankly staring at these words, suddenly she felt tired beyond herself—so tired and taken aback that one would suppose it wasn't the everyday problems of an Istanbulite that she was dealing with. Rather it was some sort of cryptic code that a faraway mind had specifically designed for her to decipher and that she in her mortality had never managed to crack. Soon, the cab and the Toyota left and the pedestrians went their separate ways, leaving Zeliha

there, holding the broken heel of her shoe as tenderly and despondently as if she were carrying a dead bird.

Now, among the things included in Zeliha's chaotic universe, there might be dead birds, but certainly not tenderness and despondency. She would have none of those. She straightened up and did her awkward best to walk with one heel. Soon she was hurrying amid a crowd with umbrellas, exposing her stunning legs, limping her way like a note out of tune. She was a thread of lavender, a most unbecoming hue fallen into a tapestry of browns, grays, and more browns and grays. Though hers was a discordant color, the crowd was cavernous enough to swallow her disharmony and bring her back into its cadence. The crowd was not a conglomeration of hundreds of breathing, sweating, and aching bodies, but one single breathing, sweating, and aching body under the rain. Rain or sun made little difference. Walking in Istanbul meant walking in tandem with the crowd.

As Zeliha passed by dozens of rough-looking fishermen silently standing side by side along the old Galata Bridge, each holding an umbrella in one hand and a spinning rod in the other, she envied them for their capacity for stillness, this ability to wait for hours for fish that did not exist, or if they did, turned out to be so tiny that in the end they could only be used as bait for another fish that would never get caught. How amazing was this ability to achieve plenty by achieving little, to go home empty-handed yet still satisfied at the end of the day! In this world, serenity generated luck and luck generated felicity, or so suspected Zeliha. Suspect was all she could do on this particular matter, for she had never before tasted that kind of serenity, and she didn't think she ever could. At least not today. Definitely not today.

Despite her hurry, as she wound her way through the Grand Bazaar, Zeliha slowed down. She had no time for shopping but would go inside for just a quick glance, she assured herself, as she surveyed the storefronts. She lit a cigarette and as the smoke curled

from her mouth, she felt better, almost relaxed. A woman who smoked on the streets was not highly regarded in Istanbul, but who cared? Zeliha shrugged. Hadn't she already waged a war against the entire society? With that she moved toward the older section of the bazaar.

There were vendors here who knew her on a first-name basis, especially the jewelers. Zeliha had a soft spot for glittery accessories of all sorts. Crystal hairpins, rhinestone brooches, lustrous earrings, pearly boutonnieres, zebra-stripe scarves, satin satchels, chiffon shawls, silk pom-poms, and shoes, always with high heels. Never a day had she passed by this bazaar without ducking into at least several stores, bargaining with the vendors, and ending up paying far less than the amount proposed for things she had not planned to purchase in the first place. But today she drifted by a few stalls and peeped into some windows. That was it.

Zeliha lingered in front of a stand full of jars and pots and flasks full of herbs and spices of every color and kind. She remembered one of her three sisters asking her this morning to get some cinnamon, though she couldn't remember which one had asked. She was the youngest of four girls who could not agree on anything but retained an identical conviction of always being right, and feeling each had nothing to learn from the others but lots to teach. It felt as bad as missing the lottery by a single number: Whichever way you might try to consider the situation, you could not rid yourself of feeling subjected to an injustice that was beyond correction. All the same, Zeliha purchased some cinnamon, not the crushed powder, but sticks. The vendor offered her tea and a cigarette and a chat, and she rejected none. While she sat there talking, her eyes nonchalantly scanned the shelves, until they locked onto a glass tea set. That too was among the list of the things she could not resist buying: tea glasses with gilded stars and thin, delicate spoons and brittle saucers with gilded belts around their bellies. There already must be at least thirty different glass tea sets at home, all bought by her. But there was no harm in buying another set, for they broke so

easily. "So damn fragile . . ." muttered Zeliha under her breath. She was the only one among all the Kazancı females capable of getting infuriated at tea glasses when they broke. Meanwhile, seventy-seven-year-old Petite-Ma, for her part, had developed a completely different approach.

"There goes another evil eye!" Petite-Ma exclaimed each time a tea glass fractured and fell apart. "Did you hear that ominous sound? Crack! Oh it echoed in my heart! That was somebody's evil eye, so jealous and malicious. May Allah protect us all!"

Whenever a glass broke or a mirror cracked, Petite-Ma heaved a sigh of relief. After all, given the fact that you could not completely wipe out wicked people from the surface of this madly spinning world, it was far better to have their evil eye ram into a frontier of glass than penetrate deep inside God's innocent souls and ruin their lives.

Twenty minutes later when Zeliha rushed into a chic office in one of the most well-off quarters of the city, she had a broken heel in one hand and a new set of tea glasses in the other. Once inside the door, she was dismayed to remember that she had left the wrapped cinnamon sticks at the Grand Bazaar.

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In the waiting room there were three women, each with terrible hair, and a man with almost none. Given the way they sat, Zeliha instantly noted and cynically deduced, the youngest was the least worried of all, languidly leafing through the pictures of a women's magazine, too lazy to read the articles, probably here to renew her prescription for birth control pills; the plump blonde next to the window, who seemed to be in her early thirties and whose black roots begged to be dyed, was swaying on her feet nervously, her mind apparently elsewhere, probably here for a routine checkup and annual Pap smear. The third one, who was wearing a head scarf and had come along with her husband, seemed to be the least composed of them all, the corners of her mouth turned down, her eye-

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brows knit. Zeliha guessed she was having trouble getting pregnant. Now *that*, Zeliha assumed, could be bothersome, depending on one's perspective. She personally did not see infertility as the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

"Hellooo you!" chirped the receptionist, forcing herself into a goofy, phony smile so well practiced it looked neither goofy nor phony. "Are you our three o'clock appointment?"

The receptionist seemed to be having a hard time pronouncing the letter *r*, and as if to compensate she went to extraordinary lengths by accentuating the sound, raising her voice, and offering an extra smile on top of that whenever her tongue bumped into that ominous letter. To save her the burden, Zeliha nodded instantly and perhaps too heartily.

"And what exactly are you here for, Miss Three-o'clock-Appointment?"

Zeliha managed to ignore the absurdity of the question. By now she knew too well that it was precisely this unconditional and all-embracing female cheerfulness that she sorely lacked in life. Some women were devoted *smilers*; they smiled with a Spartan sense of duty. How could one ever learn to do so naturally something so unnatural, Zeliha wondered. But leaving aside the question that tugged at the edges of her mind, she responded: "An abortion."

The word hovered in the air, and they all waited for it to sink. The receptionist's eyes grew small, then large, while the smile on her face disappeared. Zeliha couldn't help feeling relieved. After all, unconditional and all-embracing female cheerfulness brought out a vindictive streak in her.

"I have an appointment. . . ." Zeliha said, tucking a ringlet behind her ears while letting the rest of her hair fall around her face and over her shoulders like a thick, black burka. She lifted her chin, thus accentuating her aquiline nose, and felt the need to repeat, a notch louder than she had intended, or maybe not. "Because I need to have an abortion."

Torn between impartially registering the new patient and giv-

ing a scolding eye to such intrepidity, the receptionist stood still, a huge, leather-covered notebook lying open in front of her. A few more seconds passed before she finally started scribbling. In the meantime Zeliha muttered:

“I’m sorry that I’m late.” The clock on the wall indicated that she was forty-six minutes late, and as her gaze rested on it, for a second, she looked as if she were drifting away. “It’s because of the rain. . . .”

That was a little unfair to the rain, since the traffic, the broken cobblestones, the municipality, the stalker, and the cabdriver, not to mention the stop for shopping, should also have been held accountable for her delay, but Zeliha decided to bring up none of those. She might have violated The Golden Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman, she might also have violated The Silver Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman, but she held her ground to abide by the Copper Rule.

**The Copper Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman:  
When harassed on the street, you’d better forget about the  
incident as soon as you are on your way again, since to  
recall the incident all day long will only further wrack your  
nerves!**

Zeliha was smart enough to know that even if she had brought up the harassment now, other women, far from being supportive, would have the tendency to pass judgment on a harassed *sister* in cases like these. So she kept the answer short and the rain remained the only thing to blame.

“Your age, miss?” the receptionist wanted to know.

Now *that* was an annoying question, and utterly unnecessary. Zeliha squinted at the receptionist as if she were some sort of a semidarkness one needed to adjust her eyes to better see. All of a sudden, she remembered the sad truth about herself: her age. Like too many women used to acting above and beyond their years, she

was disturbed by the fact that, after all, she was far younger than she'd like to be.

"I am," she conceded, "nineteen years old." As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she blushed, as if caught naked in front of all these people.

"We'd need the consent of your husband, of course," the receptionist continued, no longer in a chirpy voice, and wasted no time in proceeding on to another question, the answer of which she already suspected. "May I ask you, are you married, miss?"

From the corner of her eye Zeliha noticed the plump blonde on her right and the head-scarved woman on her left wriggle uncomfortably. As the inquisitive gaze of every person in the room weighed heavier upon her, Zeliha's grimace evolved into a beatific smile. Not that she was enjoying the tortuous moment, but the indifference deep underneath had just whispered to her not to mind other people's opinions since they would make no difference at the end of the day. Lately she had decided to purge certain words from her vocabulary and now that she recalled that decision, why not start with the word *shame*. Still, she didn't have the nerve to utter aloud what by now everyone in the room had fully understood. There was no husband to consent to this abortion. There was no father. Instead of a *BA-BA*\* there was only a *VO-ID*.

Fortunately for Zeliha, the fact that there was no husband turned out to be an advantage in formalities. Apparently she didn't need to get anyone's written approval. The bureaucratic regulations were less keen to rescue babies born out of wedlock than those born to married couples. A fatherless baby in Istanbul was just another bastard, and a bastard just another sagging tooth in the city's jaw, ready to fall out at any time.

"Your birthplace?" the receptionist continued drearily.

"Istanbul!"

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\* *Baba* means *Father* in Turkish.

“Istanbul?”

Zeliha shrugged as if to say, where else could it be? Where else on earth but here? She belonged to this city! Wasn't that visible on her face? After all, Zeliha considered herself a true Istanbulite, and as if to reprimand the receptionist for failing to see such an apparent fact, she turned back on her broken heel and invited herself to the chair next to the head-scarved woman. It was only then that she took notice of the latter's husband, who was sitting still, almost paralyzed with embarrassment. Rather than passing judgment on Zeliha, the man seemed to be wallowing in the discomfort of being the only male here, in such a blatantly feminine zone. For a second Zeliha felt sorry for him. It occurred to her to ask the man to step onto the balcony and have a smoke with her, for she was sure he smoked. But that could be misinterpreted. An unmarried woman could not ask such questions of married men, and a married man would display hostility toward another woman when next to his wife. Why was it difficult to become friends with men? Why did it always have to be like that? Why couldn't you just step out onto the balcony and have a smoke and exchange a few words, and then go your separate ways? Zeliha sat there silently for one long moment, not because she was dog-tired, which she was, or because she was fed up with all the attention, which she was as well, but because she wanted to be next to the open window; she was hungry for the sounds of the street. A street vendor's husky voice infiltrated the room: “Tangerines . . . Fragrant, fresh tangerines . . .”

“Good, keep shouting,” Zeliha muttered to herself. She didn't like silence. As a matter of fact, she abhorred silence. It was okay that people stared at her on the street, in the bazaar, at the doctor's waiting room, here and there, day and night; it was all right that they watched and gawked, and eyeballed at length again as if seeing her for the first time. One way or another she could always fight back their gaze. What she could not possibly fight back was their silence.

“Tangerinist . . . Tangerinist . . . How much costs a kilo?” a woman yelled from an open window on the upper floor of a build-

ing across the street. It had always amused Zeliha to see how easily, almost effortlessly, the denizens of this city were capable of inventing unlikely names for ordinary professions. You could add an *-ist* to almost every single thing sold in the market, and the next thing you knew, you had yet another name to be included in the elongated list of urban professions. Thus, depending on what was put on sale, one could easily be called a “tangerinist,” “waterist,” or “bagelist,” or . . . “abortionist.”

By now Zeliha had no doubt. Not that she needed one to know what she already was sure about, but she had also had a test done at the newly opened clinic in their vicinity. On the day of the “grand opening” the people at the clinic had given a showy reception for a bunch of selected guests, and had lined up all the bouquets and garlands right outside at the entrance so that the passersby on the street could be informed about the occasion as well. When Zeliha had visited the clinic the very next day, most of these flowers had already faded, but the flyers were as colorful as before. FREE PREGNANCY TEST WITH EACH BLOOD SUGAR TEST! it said in phosphorescent capital letters. The correlation between the two was unknown to Zeliha, but she had taken the test all the same. When the results arrived, her blood sugar turned out to be normal and she turned out to be pregnant.

“Miss, you can come in now!” called the receptionist as she stood in the doorway, fighting another *r*, this time one that was hard to avoid in her profession. “The doctor . . . he is waiting for you.”

Grabbing her box of tea glasses and the broken heel, Zeliha jumped to her feet. She felt all the heads in the room turn toward her, recording her every gesture. Normally, she would have walked as rapidly as she could. At the moment, however, her moves were visibly slow, almost languorous. Just when she was about to leave the room, she paused, and as if pushed by a button, she turned around, knowing exactly whom to look at. There, at the center of her gaze, was a most embittered face. The head-scarved woman grimaced, her brown eyes shadowed by resentment, her lips mov-

ing and cursing the doctor and this nineteen-year-old about to abort the child Allah should have bestowed not on a slapdash girl but on her.

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The doctor was a burly man who communicated strength through his erect posture. Unlike his receptionist, there was no judgment in his stare, no unwise questions on his tongue. He seemed to welcome Zeliha in every way. He made her sign some papers, and then more papers in case anything went wrong either during or after the procedure. Next to him, Zeliha felt her nerve slacken and her skin thin out, which was too bad because whenever her nerves slackened and her skin thinned out, she became as fragile as a tea glass, and whenever she became as fragile as a tea glass, she couldn't help but come close to tears. And *that* was one thing she truly hated. Harboring profound contempt for weepy women ever since she was a little girl, Zeliha had promised herself never to turn into one of those walking miseries who scattered tears and nitpicky complaints everywhere they went and of which there were far too many around her. She had forbidden herself to cry. To this day, she had on the whole managed pretty well to stick to her promise. When and if tears welled up in her eyes, she simply held her breath and remembered her promise. So on this first Friday of July she once again did what she had always done to stifle the tears: She took a deep breath and thrust her chin upward as an indication of strength. This time, however, something went awfully wrong and the breath she had held came out as a sob.

The doctor did not look surprised. He was used to it. The women always cried.

“There, there,” he said, trying to console Zeliha while putting on a pair of medical gloves. “It’s going to be all right, don’t you worry. It’s only a slumber. You’ll sleep, you’ll dream, before you finish your dream, we’ll wake you up and you’ll go home. After that, you’ll remember nothing.”

When Zeliha cried like this all of her expressions became discernible and her cheeks sunk in, thus accentuating the most telling feature of hers: her nose! That remarkably aquiline nose of hers, which she, like her siblings, had inherited from their father; hers, unlike her siblings, was sharpened further on the ridge and elongated a bit more on the edges.

The doctor patted her shoulder, handed her a tissue, and then handed her the whole box. He always had a spare box of tissues ready by his desk. Drug companies distributed these tissue boxes free of charge. Along with pens and notebooks and other things that carried their company names, they made tissues for women patients who could not stop crying.

“Figs . . . Delicious figs . . . Good ripe figs!”

*Was it the same vendor or a new one? What did his customers call him . . . ? Figist . . . ?!* Zeliha thought to herself, as she laid still on a table in a room unnervingly white and immaculate. Neither the accoutrements nor even the knives scared her as much as this absolute whiteness. There was something in the color white that resembled silence. Both were emptied of life.

In her endeavor to sway away from the color of silence, Zeliha grew distracted by a black spot on the ceiling. The more she fixed her stare on it, the more the spot resembled a black spider. First it was still, but then it started to crawl. The spider grew bigger and bigger as the injection started to spread in Zeliha’s veins. In a few seconds she was so heavy she could not move a finger. As she tried to resist being carried away by the anesthetized slumber, she started to sob again.

“Are you sure this is what you want? Perhaps you would like to mull it over,” said the doctor in a velvety voice as if Zeliha was a pile of dust and he was afraid of brushing her away with the wind of his words if he spoke louder. “If you’d like to reconsider this decision, it is not too late.”

But it was. Zeliha knew it had to be done now, on this first

Friday of July. Today or never. “There is nothing to consider. I cannot have her,” she heard herself blurt out.

The doctor nodded. As if waiting for this gesture, all of a sudden the Friday prayer poured into the room from the nearby mosque. In seconds another mosque joined in and then another and another. Zeliha’s face contorted in discomfort. She hated it when a prayer originally designed to be called out in the pureness of the human voice was dehumanized into an electro-voice roaring over the city from microphones and cabinet speakers. Soon the clamor was so deafening she suspected there was something wrong with the loudspeaker system of each and every mosque in the vicinity. Either that or her ears had become extremely sensitive.

“It will be over in a minute. . . . Don’t worry.”

It was the doctor speaking. Zeliha looked at him quizzically. Was her contempt for the electro-prayer so obvious on her face? Not that she minded. Among all the Kazancı women she was the only one who was openly irreligious. As a child it used to please her to imagine Allah as her best friend, which was not a bad thing of course, except that her other best friend was a garrulous, freckled girl who had made smoking a habit at the age of eight. The girl happened to be the daughter of their cleaning lady, a chubby Kurdish woman with a mustache she did not always bother to shave. Back in those days, the cleaning lady used to come to their house twice a week, bringing her daughter along on each visit. Zeliha and the girl became good friends after a while, even cutting their index fingers to mix their blood and become lifelong blood-sisters. For a week the two girls went around with bloody bandages wrapped around their fingers as a sign of their sisterhood. Back in those days, whenever Zeliha prayed it would be this bloody bandage she’d be thinking about—if only Allah too could become a blood-sister . . . *her* blood-sister. . . .

*Pardon me*, she would instantly apologize and then repeat again and again because whenever you apologized to Allah you had to do it thrice: *Pardon me, pardon me, pardon me*.

It was wrong, she knew. Allah could not and should not be personified. Allah did not have fingers, or blood for that matter. One had to refrain from attributing human qualities to him—that's to say, Him—which was not easy since every one of his—that's to say, His—ninety-nine names happened to be qualities also pertinent to human beings. He could see it all but had no eyes; He could hear it all but had no ears; He could reach out everywhere but had no hands. . . . Out of all this information an eight-year-old Zeliha had drawn the conclusion that Allah could resemble us, but we could not resemble Him. Or was it vice versa? Anyway, one had to learn to think about him—that's to say, Him—without thinking of Him as him.

The chances are she would not have minded this as much if one afternoon she had not spotted a bloody bandage around her elder sister Feride's index finger. It looked like the Kurdish girl made her a blood-sister too. Zeliha felt betrayed. Only then it dawned on her that her real objection to Allah was not his—that's to say, His—not having any blood but rather having too many blood-sisters, too many to care for so as to end up not caring for anyone.

The episode of friendship had not lasted long after that. The *konak* being so big and dilapidated and Mom being so grumpy and mulish, the cleaning lady quit after a while, taking her daughter away. Having been left without a best friend, whose friendship, indeed, had been rather dubious, Zeliha felt a subtle resentment, but she hadn't quite known toward whom—to the cleaning lady for quitting, to her mom for making her quit, to her best friend for playing two sides, to her elder sister for stealing her blood-sister, or to Allah. The others being utterly out of her reach, she chose Allah to be resentful toward. Having felt like an infidel at such an early age, she saw no reason why she shouldn't do so as an adult.

Another call to prayer from another mosque joined in. The prayers multiplied in echoes, as if drawing circles within circles. Oddly enough, at this moment in the doctor's office, she worried about being late for dinner. She wondered what would be served at

the table this evening, and which one of her three sisters had done the cooking. Each of her sisters was good with a particular recipe, so depending on the cook of the day she could pray for a different dish. She craved stuffed green peppers—a particularly tricky dish since every one of her sisters made it so differently. *Stuffed . . . green . . . peppers . . .* Her breathing slowed while the spider started to descend. Still trying to stare at the ceiling, Zeliha felt as if she and the people in the room were not occupying the same space. She stepped into the kingdom of Morpheus.

It was too bright here, almost glossy. Slowly and cautiously, she walked along a bridge teeming with cars and pedestrians, and motionless fishermen with worms wiggling at the ends of their spinning rods. As she navigated among them, every cobblestone she stepped on turned out to be loose, and to her awe, there was only void underneath. Soon she'd realize in horror that what was below was also above, and it was raining cobblestones from the blue skies. When a cobblestone fell from the sky, a cobblestone lessened from the pavement below. Above the sky and under the ground, there was the same thing: VO-ID.

As cobblestones rained from above, enlarging further the cavity underneath, she panicked, afraid of being swallowed by the hungry abyss. "Stop!" she cried out as the stones kept rolling under her feet. "Stop!" she commanded the vehicles speeding toward her and then running her over. "Stop!" she begged the pedestrians shouldering her aside.

"Please stop!"

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When Zeliha woke up she was alone, nauseous, and in an unfamiliar room. How on earth she could have walked here was a puzzle she had no desire to solve. She felt nothing, neither pain nor sorrow. So, she concluded, in the end the indifference must have won the race. It wasn't only her baby but her senses too that had been aborted on that pure white table in the next room. Perhaps there

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was a silver lining somewhere. Perhaps now she could go fishing, and finally manage to stand still for hours on end without feeling frustrated or left behind, as if life were a swift hare she could only watch from a distance but never possibly catch.

“There you are, finally back!” The receptionist was standing by the door, arms akimbo. “Goodness gracious! What a fright! How you scared us! Do you have any idea how you shrieked? It was so awful!”

Zeliha laid still, without blinking.

“The pedestrians on the street must have thought we were slaughtering you or something. . . . I only wonder why the police did not show up at our door!”

*Because it is the Istanbul police you are talking about, not some brawny cop in an American movie*, Zeliha thought to herself as she finally allowed herself a blink. Still not quite understanding why she had annoyed the receptionist but seeing no point in annoying her any further, she offered the first excuse that came to her mind: “Maybe I screamed because it hurt. . . .”

But that excuse, no matter how compelling, was instantly crushed: “It could not possibly, miss, for the doctor . . . has not performed the operation. We have not even laid a hand on you!”

“What do you mean . . . ?” Zeliha faltered, trying less to find out the answer than to comprehend the weight of her own question. “You mean . . . you have not . . .”

“No, we haven’t.” The receptionist sighed, holding her head as if at the onset of a migraine. “There was absolutely no way the doctor could do anything with you screaming at the top of your voice. You did not pass out, woman, no way; first you were blathering, and then you started yelling and cursing. I’ve never seen anything like it in fifteen years. It must have taken the morphine twice as long to take effect on you.”

Zeliha suspected some exaggeration behind this statement but did not feel like arguing. Two hours into her visit to the gynecolo-

gist she had come to realize that herein a patient was expected to talk only when asked to.

“And when you finally blacked out it was so hard to believe that you wouldn’t start shrieking again, the doctor said, let’s wait till her mind is clear. If she wants to have this abortion for sure, she can still go for it afterward. We brought you here and let you sleep. And sleep indeed you did!”

“You mean there was no . . .” The word she had so daringly uttered in front of strangers just this afternoon felt unutterable now. Zeliha touched her belly while her eyes appealed for a consolation the receptionist was the last person on earth to grant. “So she is still here. . . .”

“Well, you do not know yet if it is a she!” the receptionist said, her voice matter-of-fact.

But Zeliha knew. She simply did.

Once on the street, despite the gathering darkness, it felt like early morning. The rain had ceased and life looked beautiful, almost manageable. Though the traffic was still a mess and the streets full of sludge, the crisp smell of the after-rain gave the whole city a sacred air. Here and there children stomped in mud puddles, taking delight in committing simple sins. If there ever was a right time to sin, it must have been at this fleeting instant. One of those rare moments when it felt like Allah not only watched over us but also cared for us; one of those moments when He felt close.

It almost felt as if Istanbul had become a blissful metropolis, romantically picturesque, just like Paris, thought Zeliha; not that she had ever been to Paris. A seagull flew close crying a coded message she was almost on the verge of deciphering. For half a minute Zeliha believed she was on the cutting edge of a new beginning. “Why did you not let me do it, Allah?” she heard herself mutter, but as soon as the words came out of her mouth, she apologized in panic to the atheist in herself.

*Pardon me, pardon me, pardon me.*

Far and under the rainbow Zeliha limped back home, clutching the box of tea glasses and the broken heel, somehow feeling less dispirited than she had felt in weeks.

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So on that first Friday of July around eight p.m. Zeliha came home, to the slightly decrepit, high-ceilinged Ottoman *konak* that looked out of place amid five times as tall modern apartment buildings on both sides. She trudged up the curved staircase and found all the Kazancı females gathered upstairs around the wide dinner table, occupied with their meal, obviously having felt no reason to wait for her.

“Hello stranger! Come on in, join our supper,” Banu exclaimed, craning her neck over an oven-fried crispy chicken wing. “The prophet Mohammed advises us to share our food with strangers.”

Her lips were glossy, so were her cheeks, as if she had taken extra time to wipe the chicken grease all over her face, including on those shiny, fawn eyes of hers. Twelve years older and thirty pounds heavier than Zeliha, she looked less like her sister than like her mother. If she was to be believed, Banu had a bizarre digestive system that stored everything ingested, which could have been a more credible claim had she not also argued that even if it were pure water that she consumed, her body would still evolve it into fat, and thereby she could not possibly be held accountable for her weight or be asked to go on a diet.

“Guess what’s on today’s menu?” Banu continued merrily, as she wagged a finger at Zeliha before she clutched another chicken wing. “Stuffed green peppers!”

“This must be my lucky day!” Zeliha said.

Today’s menu looked splendidly familiar. In addition to a huge chicken, there was yogurt soup, *karmıyank*, *pilaki*, *kadın budu köfte* from the day before, *turşu*, newly made *çörek*, a jar of *ayran*, and, yes, stuffed green peppers. Zeliha instantly pulled up a chair, her hunger

prevailing over her lack of enthusiasm for attending a family dinner on such a hard day's eve.

"Where were you, missy?" grumbled her mother, Gülsüm, who might have been Ivan the Terrible in another life. She squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, knitted her eyebrows, and then turned her contorted face toward Zeliha's, as if by doing so she could read her youngest daughter's mind.

So there they stood, Gülsüm and Zeliha, mother and daughter, scowling at each other, each ready to quarrel but reluctant to start the fight. It was Zeliha who first averted her eyes. Knowing too well what a big mistake it would be to display her temper in front of her mother, she forced herself to smile and attempted an answer, albeit an indirect one.

"There were good discounts at the bazaar today. I bought a set of tea glasses. They are absolutely gorgeous! They have gilded stars and little spoons that match."

"Alas, they break so easily," murmured Cevriye, the second eldest of the Kazancı sisters and a Turkish national history teacher at a private high school. She always ate healthy, balanced meals and wore her hair in a perfectly pinned chignon that twisted at the nape of her neck without letting even a tangle of hair loose.

"You've been to the bazaar? Why didn't you get any cinnamon sticks?! I told you this morning we were going to have rice pudding today and there was no cinnamon left at home to sprinkle on it." Banu frowned in between two bites of bread, but this problem occupied her for no more than a split second. Her theory of bread, which she was fond of pronouncing regularly and putting into practice all the time, was that if not given a proper amount at each and every sitting, the stomach would not "know" it was full and would thereby ask for more food. For the stomach to fully *comprehend* its fullness, one had to eat decent portions of bread with everything. Thus, Banu would have bread with potatoes, bread with rice, bread with pasta, bread with *börek*, and at those times when she wanted to

give her stomach a far clearer message, she would have bread with bread. Dinner without bread was a sheer sin, which Allah might forgive, but Banu definitely would not.

Zeliha pursed her lips and stood silent, only now remembering the fate of the cinnamon sticks. Avoiding the question, she put a stuffed pepper on her plate. Each time she could easily tell if it was Banu or Cevriye or Feride who had prepared the peppers. If it was Banu, they turned out to be full of stuff they'd have otherwise sorely lacked, including peanuts and cashews and almonds. If it was Feride, they would be full of rice, each green pepper so ballooned it was impossible to eat without breaking. When her tendency to overstuff the peppers was added to her love for seasonings of all sorts, Feride's *dolmas* burst with herbs and spices. Depending on the combination, this turned out either exceptionally well or simply awful. When it was Cevriye who had cooked the dish, however, it was always sweeter, because she added powdered sugar to every edible thing no matter what, as if to compensate for the sourness in her universe. And today it happened to be she who had made the *dolmas*.

"I was at the doctor's. . . ." Zeliha murmured, carefully stripping the *dolma* of its pale green cloak.

"Doctors!" Feride grimaced and lifted her fork in the air as if it were a baton she would use to indicate a faraway mountain range on a map and her audience was not her own family but students in a geography class. Feride had a problem with making eye contact. She was more comfortable talking to objects. Accordingly, she addressed her words to Zeliha's plate: "Haven't you seen the newspaper this morning? They operate on a nine-year-old child for appendicitis and then forget a pair of scissors inside. Do you have any idea how many doctors in this country should be put into jail for medical malpractice?"

Among all the Kazancı women, Feride was the one best acquainted with medical procedures. In the last six years, she had been diagnosed with eight different illnesses, each of which sounded

more alien than the one before. Whether it was the doctors who could not make up their minds or Feride herself industriously working on new infirmities, one could never tell. After a while it didn't really matter one way or another. Sanity was a promised land, the Shangri-la she had been deported from as a teenager, and to which she intended to return to one day. On the way there she rested at sundry stopovers that came with erratic names and dreary treatments.

Even as a little girl, there was something bizarre about Feride. A most difficult student at school, she had shown no interest in anything other than physical geography classes, and in the geography classes had shown no interest in anything other than a few subjects, starting with the layers of the atmosphere. Her favorite topics were how the ozone was broken down in the stratosphere, and the connection between surface ocean currents and atmospheric patterns. She had learned all the information she could gather on high-latitude stratospheric circulation, the characteristics of the mesosphere, valley winds and sea breezes, solar cycles and tropical latitudes, and the shape and size of the earth. Everything she had memorized at school she would then volley in the house, peppering every conversation with atmospheric information. Each time she displayed her knowledge on physical geography, she would speak with unprecedented zeal, floating high above the clouds, jumping from one atmospheric layer to the next. Then, a year after her graduation, Feride had started to display signs of eccentricity and detachment.

Although Feride's interest in physical geography had never petered out in the fullness of time, it inspired yet another area of interest that she profoundly enjoyed: accidents and disasters. Every day she read the third page of the tabloids. Car accidents, serial killings, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires and floods, terminal illnesses, contagious diseases, and unknown viruses. . . . Feride would peruse them all. Her selective memory would absorb local, national, and international calamities only to convey them to others out of the blue.

It never took her long to darken any conversation, as from birth she was inclined to see misery in each and every story, and to fabricate some when there was none.

But the news she conveyed did not upset the others, as they had renounced believing in her long ago. Her family had figured out one way of dealing with insanity, and that was to confuse it with a lack of credibility.

Feride was first diagnosed with a “stress ulcer,” a diagnosis no one in the family took seriously because “stress” had become some sort of catchphrase. As soon as it was introduced into Turkish culture, “stress” had been so euphorically welcomed by the Istanbulites that there had emerged countless patients of stress in the city. Feride had traveled nonstop from one stress-related illness to another, surprised to discover the vastness of the land since there seemed to be virtually nothing that could not be related to stress. After that, she had loitered around obsessive-compulsive disorder, disassociative amnesia, and psychotic depression. Managing to poison herself, she was once diagnosed with Bittersweet Nightshade, the name she most relished among her infirmities.

At each stage of her journey to insanity, Feride changed her hair color and style, so that after a while the doctors, in their endeavor to follow the changes in her psychology, started to keep a hair chart. Short, midlength, very long, and once entirely shaven; spiked, flattened, flipped, and braided; subjected to tons of hair-spray, gel, wax, or styling cream; accessorized with barrettes, gems, or ribbons; cropped in punk style, pinned up in ballerina buns, highlighted and dyed in every possible hue, each one of her hairstyles had been a fleeting episode while her illness had remained firm and fixed.

After a lengthy sojourn in “major depressive disorder,” Feride had moved to “borderline”—a term construed quite arbitrarily by different members of the Kazancı family. Her mother interpreted the word “border” as a problem to be associated with police, customs officers, and illegality, thereby finding a “felon foreigner” in

the persona of Feride. She thus became even more suspicious of this crazy daughter whom she had not trusted in the first place. In stark contrast, for Feride's sisters, the concept of "border" mainly invoked the idea of edge, and the idea of edge invoked the image of a deadly cliff. For quite a while they treated her with utmost care, as if she were a walking somnambulist on a wall meters high and could fall down any time. However, the word "border" invoked the trim of latticework for Petite-Ma, and she studied her granddaughter with deep interest and sympathy.

Feride had recently emigrated into another diagnosis nobody could even pronounce, let alone dare to interpret: "hebephrenic schizophrenia." Ever since then, she remained faithful to her new nomenclature, as if finally content to achieve the nominal clarification she sorely needed. Whatever the diagnosis, she lived according to the rules of her own fantasyland, outside of which she had never set foot.

But on this first Friday of July, Zeliha paid no attention to her sister's renowned distaste for doctors. As she started to eat, she realized how hungry she had been all day long. Almost mechanically, she ate a piece of *çörek*, poured herself a glass of *ayran*, forked another green *dolma* onto her plate, and revealed the piece of information growing inside her: "I went to a gynecologist today. . . ."

"Gynecologist!" Feride repeated instantly, but she made no specific comment. Gynecologists were the one group among all the physicians she had had the least experience with.

"I went to a gynecologist today to have an abortion." Zeliha completed her sentence without looking at anyone.

Banu dropped her chicken wing and looked down at her feet as if they had something to do with this; Cevriye pursed her lips hard; Feride shrieked and then oddly unleashed a whoop of laughter; their mother tensely rubbed her forehead, feeling the first aura of a terrible headache approaching; and Petite-Ma . . . well, Petite-Ma just continued to eat her yogurt soup. It might be because she had gone quite deaf in the course of the recent months. It might also be

because she was suffering from the early stages of dementia. Perhaps it was simply because she thought there was nothing to fuss about. With Petite-Ma you never knew.

“How could you slaughter your baby?” Cevriye asked in awe.

“It is not a *baby!*” Zeliha shrugged. “At this stage, I’d rather call it a *droplet*. That’d be more scientific!”

“Scientific! You are not scientific, you are cold-blooded!” Cevriye burst into tears. “Cold-blooded! That’s what you are!”

“Well, I have good news then. I have not killed . . . it—*her*—whatever!” Zeliha turned toward her sister calmly. “Not that I did not want to. I did! I tried to have the *droplet* aborted but somehow it did not happen.”

“What do you mean?” asked Banu.

Zeliha put on a brave face. “Allah sent me a message,” she said tonelessly, knowing it was the wrong thing to say to a family like hers but saying it anyway. “So there I am lying anesthetized with a doctor and a nurse on each side. In a few minutes the operation will begin and the baby will be gone. Forever! But then just when I am about to go unconscious on that operating table, I hear the afternoon prayer from a nearby mosque. . . . The prayer is soft, like a piece of velvet. It envelops my whole body. Then, as soon as the prayer is over, I hear a murmur as if somebody is whispering in my ear: ‘Thou shall not kill this child!’”

Cevriye flinched, Feride nervously coughed into her table napkin, Banu swallowed hard, and Gülsüm frowned. Only Petite-Ma remained far off in a better land, having now finished her soup, obediently waiting for her next dish to arrive.

“And then . . .” Zeliha carried on with her story, “this mysterious voice commands: ‘Oooo Zeliha! Oooo you the culprit of the righteous Kazancı family! Let this child live! You don’t know it yet, but this child will be a leader. This baby will be a monarch!’”

“He cannot!” the teacher Cevriye broke in, missing no opportunity to show her expertise. “There aren’t monarchs anymore, we are a modern nation.”

“Oooo you sinner, this child will rule over others!” Zeliha continued, pretending not to have heard the lesson. “Not only this country, not only the entire Middle East and the Balkans, but the whole world will know her name. This child of yours will lead the masses, and bring peace and justice to humankind!”

Zeliha paused and let out a breath.

“Anyhow, good news everybody! The baby is still with me! Before long, we’ll put another plate at this table.”

“A bastard!” Gülsüm exclaimed. “You want to bring into this family a child out of wedlock. A bastard!”

The word’s effect spread out, like a pebble thrown into still water.

“Shame on you! You’ve always brought disgrace on this family.” Gülsüm’s face contorted in anger. “Look at your nose piercing. . . . All that makeup and the revoltingly short skirts, and oh, those high heels! This is what happens when you dress up . . . like a whore! You should thank Allah night and day; you should be grateful that there are no men around in this family. They’d have killed you.”

It wasn’t quite true. Not the part about the killing perhaps, but the part about there being no men in the family. There were. Somewhere. But it was also true that there were far fewer men than women in the Kazancı family. Like an evil spell put on the whole lineage, generations after generations of Kazancı men had died young and unexpectedly. Petite-Ma’s husband, Rıza Selim Kazancı, for instance, had all of a sudden dropped dead at sixty, unable to breathe. Then in the next generation, Levent Kazancı had died of a heart attack before he had reached his fifty-first birthday, following the patterns of his father and his father’s father. It looked as if the life span of the men in the family got shorter and shorter with each generation.

There was a great-uncle who had run away with a Russian prostitute, only to be robbed by her of all his money and frozen to death in St. Petersburg; another kinsman had gone to his last resting place after being hit by a car while trying to cross the autobahn heavily

intoxicated; various nephews had died as early as their twenties, one of them drowning while swimming drunk under the full moon, another one hit in the chest by a bullet fired by a hooligan enjoying himself after his soccer team had won the cup, yet another nephew having fallen into a six-foot-deep ditch dug out by the municipality to renovate the street gutters. Then there was a second cousin, Ziya, who had shot himself, for no apparent reason.

Generation after generation, as if complying with an unwritten rule, the men in the Kazancı family tree had died young. The greatest age any had reached in the current generation was forty-one. Determined not to repeat the pattern, another great-uncle had taken utmost care to lead a healthy life, strictly refraining from overeating, sex with prostitutes, contacts with hooligans, alcohol and other sorts of intoxicants, and had ended up crushed by a concrete chunk falling from a construction site he happened to pass by. Then there was Celal, a distant cousin, who was the love of Cevriye's life and the husband she lost in a brawl. For reasons still unclear, Celal had been sentenced to two years on charges of bribery. During this time Celal's presence in the family had been confined to the infrequent letters he had been sending from jail, so vague and distant that when the news of his death had arrived, for everyone other than his wife, it had felt like losing a third arm, one that you never had. He departed this life in a fight, not by a blow or a punch, but by stepping on a high-voltage electricity cable while trying to find a better spot to watch two other prisoners exchange blows. After losing the love of her life, Cevriye sold their house and joined the Kazancı domicile as a humorless history teacher with a Spartan sense of discipline and self-control. Just as she waged battle against plagiarism at school, she took it upon herself to crusade against impulsiveness, disruption, and spontaneity at home.

Then there was Sabahattin, the tenderhearted, good-natured, but equally self-effacing husband of Banu. Though he was not a blood relative and looked exceptionally hale and hearty, though the

two were still married on paper, except for a brief period following their honeymoon, Banu had spent more time in her family's *konak* than at home with her husband. So noticeable was their physical distance that when Banu had announced being heavy with twin boys everyone had joked about the technical impossibility of the pregnancy. Yet the ominous fate awaiting every Kazancı man had struck the twins at an early age. Upon losing her toddler boys to childhood illnesses, Banu permanently moved into her family house, only to sporadically visit her husband in the years that followed. Every now and then she went to see if he was doing okay, more like a concerned stranger than a loving spouse.

Then, of course, there was Mustafa, the only son in the current generation, a precious gem bequeathed by Allah amid four daughters. The result of Levent Kazancı's fixation on having a boy to bear his surname had been that the four Kazancı sisters had each grown up feeling like unwelcome visitors. The first three children were all girls. Banu, Cevriye, and Feride had each felt like an introduction before the real thing, an accidental prelude in their parents' sex life, so determinedly were they oriented toward a male child. As for the fifth child, Zeliha, she knew she had been conceived with the hope that fortune could be generous twice in a row. After finally having a boy, her parents had wanted to see if they were lucky enough to make another one.

Mustafa was precious from the day he was born. A series of measures had been taken to protect him from the grim fate awaiting all the men in the family tree. As a baby he was bundled in evil-eye beads and amulets; as a toddler he was kept under constant surveillance, and until age eight his hair was kept long like a girl's so as to deceive Azrail, the angel of death. Whenever someone needed to address the child, "girl" they would say, "girl, come here!" Though a good student, most of Mustafa's high school life was ruined by his inability to socialize. A king in his house, the boy seemed to refuse to be one among many in the classroom. So unpopular had he be-

come over time that when Gülsüm wanted to throw a party for Mustafa and his friends to celebrate their graduation, there was no one to invite.

So arrogantly antisocial outside his house, so indisputably cherished as the king at home, and with the passing of each birthday so ominously close to the doom suffered by all the Kazancı men, after a while it seemed like a good idea to send Mustafa abroad. Within a month, Petite-Ma's jewels were sold for the money required and the eighteen-year-old son of the Kazancı family left Istanbul for Arizona, where he became an undergraduate student in agricultural and biosystems engineering and would hopefully survive to see his old age.

Hence, when on that first Friday of July, Gülsüm chided Zeliha, asking her to be grateful for the lack of men in the family, there was *some* truth somewhere in that statement. In response Zeliha said nothing. Instead she went to the kitchen to find and feed the only male in the house—a silver tabby cat with an insatiable hunger, an unusual fondness for water, and plentiful social-stress symptoms, which could at best be interpreted as independent, and at worst, as neurotic. His name was Pasha the Third.

In the Kazancı *konak* generations of cats had succeeded each other, like human beings; all had been loved and without exception swept away solely by old age, unlike human beings. Though each cat had retained its distinct character, overall two competing genes ran through the feline lineage in the house. On the one hand, there was the “noble” gene coming from a longhaired, flat-nosed, powder white Persian cat Petite-Ma had brought with her as a young bride in the late 1920s (“the cat must be what little dowry she has,” the women in the neighborhood had mocked). On the other hand, there was the “street” gene coming from an unidentified but apparently tawny street cat the white Persian had managed to copulate with in one of her runaways. Generation after generation, as if taking turns, one of the two genetic traits had prevailed in the feline inhabitants born under this roof. After a while the Kazancı had

stopped bothering to find alternative names, instead just following the feline genealogy. If the kitten looked like a descendant of the aristocratic line, white and furry and flat-nosed, they would name it successively, Pasha the First, Pasha the Second, Pasha the Third. . . . If it were from the street cat's lineage, they would name it Sultan—a more superior name, signaling the belief that street cats were self-governing free spirits, in no need of flattering anyone.

To this day the nominal distinction, without exception, had been reflected in the personalities of the cats under this roof. Those of the nobility turned out to be the aloof, needy, quiet types, constantly licking themselves, wiping out all traces of human contact whenever someone patted them; those of the second group had been the more curious and vigorous types who delighted in bizarre luxuries, such as eating chocolates.

Pasha the Third characteristically embodied the features of his lineage, always walking with a pompous rhythm, as if tiptoeing through broken glass. He had two favorite occupations, which he put into practice on every occasion: gnawing electrical cords and observing birds and butterflies, too lazy to chase them. Of the latter he could get tired, but of the former, never. Almost every electrical cord in the house had been once or thrice chewed, scraped, dented, and damaged by him. Pasha the Third had managed to survive to a ripe old age despite the numerous electric shocks he had received.

“There, Pasha, good boy.” Zeliha fed him chunks of feta cheese, his favorite. She then put on an apron and toiled through a hill of pots and pans and plates. When she had finished the dishes and calmed herself, she shuffled back to the dinner table, where she found the word *bastard* still hanging in the air, and her mother still frowning.

They all sat there motionless until someone remembered the dessert. A sweet, soothing smell filled the room as Cevriye poured rice pudding from a huge cauldron into tiny bowls. While Cevriye kept doling with practiced ease, Feride followed her, sprinkling shredded coconut on top of each bowl.

“It would have been much better with cinnamon,” whined Banu. “You shouldn’t have forgotten to buy cinnamon. . . .”

Leaning back in her chair, Zeliha lifted her nose and inhaled as if taking a drag on an invisible cigarette. As she breathed out her fatigue bit by bit, she felt the yo-yo indifference slacken off again. Her spirits sank under the weight of all that had and had not happened on this prolonged and hellish day. She scanned the dinner table, feeling more and more guilt-ridden at the sight of each bowl of rice pudding now canopied by coconut flakes. Then, without turning her gaze, she murmured in a voice so gracefully soft, it didn’t sound like her at all.

“I am sorry. . . .” she said. “I am so sorry.”