

# The Bastard of Istanbul

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E L I F     S H A F A K



PENGUIN BOOKS

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# **PENGUIN BOOKS**

## **THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL**

Elif Shafak is the author of five previous novels and a collection of essays. In Turkey she has won the Mevlana Prize for Literature as well as the Turkish Novel Award. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and she has been featured on National Public Radio. She lives in Istanbul.

Praise for *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak “Shafak’s charming, smart, and profoundly involving spinning top of a novel dramatizes the inescapability of guilt and punishment, and the inextricable entwinement of Armenians and Turks, East and West, past and present, the personal and the political. By aligning the ‘compulsory amnesia’ surrounding the crimes in one family with Turkey’s refusal to confront past crimes against humanity, Shafak makes the case for truth, reconciliation and remembrance.”

—Donna Seaman, *Newsday* “In a better world, Turkish writer Elif Shafak would get more attention for her zesty, imaginative writing and less for the controversy her politics stir up. . . . A lively look at contemporary Istanbul and family through the eyes of two young women, one Turkish and one Armenian American.”

—Deirdre Donahue, *USA Today* “Beautifully imagined . . . it’s as much family history as national history that drives this vital and entertaining novel. And it’s the powerful and idiosyncratic characters who drive the family history. And, as you hear in your mind’s ear, it’s Shafak’s vibrant language that drives the characters.” —Alan Cheuse, *Chicago Tribune* “The purposeful ignorance of Shafak’s Turks, born out of a willing turning away from past familial horrors, becomes a symbol for the collective Turkish turning away from the horrors of the Armenian genocide. Shafak is incapable of

bringing harmony to such unsettled matters, even in the pages of a fiction narrative. All she can do, and does, is shine a light on the past, and keep it shining so that everyone—Turkish, Armenian, and otherwise—must look.”

—Saul Austerlitz, *San Francisco Chronicle* (front page)  
“There’s more going on than interfamilial melodrama, and Shafak’s ambitions do not stop with an airing of Turkey’s century-old dirty laundry. . . . In the end, Shafak resists a tidy wrap-up. She leaves most of her characters in the lurch, abandoning them midcrisis, their dilemmas only deepened with a dose of ambiguity. But how else could she leave them? The point here—and of the ugly fuss that has greeted the book’s publication—is that the past is never finished, never neat, and never ours.”

—Ben Ehrenreich, *Los Angeles Times* “Shafak’s writing is seductive; each chapter of her novel is named for a food, and the warmth of the Turkish kitchen lies at the center of its wide-ranging plot. *The Bastard of Istanbul* portrays family as more than merely a function of genetics and fate, folding together history and fiction, the personal and the political into a thing of beauty.” —Jennifer Gerson, *Elle* “A deftly spun tale of two families—one Armenian American and the other Turkish—who are burdened by dark secrets and historical tragedies rooted in a common Istanbul past.” —Amberin Zaman, *The Economist* “Rich and satisfying . . . a vital reminder of history’s hold on us, of how the past can still control the present . . . Shafak’s prose is rich with telling detail and witty description.” —Maira McDonald, *The Seattle Times* “A brave, ambitious book . . . Shafak has used the familiar form of the diaspora family saga as an asbestos glove with which to grasp the afterlife of the Armenian catastrophe. Her novel features the requisite cast of colorful female characters, elaborately described meals, fragments of folktales. . . . Shafak is careful to sketch in the different shades of Turkish defensiveness, as well as to consider what

responsibility we bear for our fathers' crimes, especially when the wound has outlived the perpetrators." —Maria Margaronis, *The Nation* "Bold and raggedly beautiful ... although this book is crowded with characters, its most vivid one is not one of the Kazanci matriarchs but Istanbul itself. It is a city plagued by ghosts, talking and thronged to the extreme but notable for what it is silent about." —John Freeman, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) "Through her characters Shafak examines how the stories we love and the stories we tell become who we are. Her writing is beautiful and meaningful and will astound you as you find the many ways to claim the story as, also, your own. . . . This is an important book about forgetting, about retelling stories, about denial, about not knowing your past, about knowing your past, and about choosing (again and again) to start over." —Sherrie Flick, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* "A fast paced story of love, loss, and coincidence. Shafak writes powerfully of war (cultural and familial), of peace and the meaning of moral fortitude. She possesses a steady hand when it comes to creating strong female characters, and her vivid descriptions of the charms of Istanbul serve to lure the traveler... Shafak's characters linger in the mind days after finishing the book."

—Patricia Corrigan, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* "Mixing humor and tragedy as effortlessly as her two unforgettable families blend and jumble up the many layers of their identity, Elif Shafak offers up an extravagant tale of Istanbul and Arizona, food and remorse, mysticism and tattoos, human comedy and yes, massacres. Quite an exceptional literary feast." —Ariel Dorfman



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the  
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*TO EYUP and PEHRAZAT ZELDA*

*Once there was; once there wasn't.  
God's creatures were as plentiful as grains  
And talking too much was a sin. . . .*

*—The preamble to a Turkish tale ... and to an Armenian  
one*

# ONE

## 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 downpour 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

displayed 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 adrenaline 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 unbefitting 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.

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 eyebrows 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 giving 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*<sup>1</sup> 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!"

"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 building 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 moving 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.

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.