

My Name is Red

ORHAN PAMUK

You slew a man and then fell out with one another concerning him.

—KORAN, "THE COW."

The blind and the seeing are not equal.

—KORAN, "THE CREATOR."

To God belongs the East and the West.

I AM A CORPSE

I am nothing but a corpse now, a body at the bottom of a well. Though I drew my last breath long ago and my heart has stopped beating, no one, apart from that vile murderer, knows what's happened to me. As for that wretch, he felt for my pulse and listened for my breath to be sure I was dead, then kicked me in the midriff, carried me to the edge of the well, raised me up and dropped me below. As I fell, my head, which he'd smashed with a stone, broke apart; my face, my forehead and cheeks, were crushed; my bones shattered, and my mouth filled with blood.

For nearly four days I have been missing: My wife and children must be searching for me; my daughter, spent from crying, must be staring fretfully at the courtyard gate. Yes, I know they're all at the window, hoping for my return.

But, are they truly waiting? I can't even be sure of that. Maybe they've gotten used to my absence—how dismal! For here, on the other side, one gets the feeling that one's former life persists. Before my birth there was infinite time, and after my death, inexhaustible time. I never thought of it before: I'd been living luminously between two eternities of darkness.

I was happy; I know now that I'd been happy. I made the best illuminations in Our Sultan's workshop; no one could rival my mastery. Through the work I did privately, I earned nine hundred silver coins a month, which, naturally, only makes all of this even harder to bear.

I was responsible for painting and embellishing books. I illuminated the edges of pages, coloring their borders with the most lifelike designs of leaves, branches, roses, flowers and birds. I painted scalloped Chinese-style clouds, clusters of overlapping vines and forests of color that hid gazelles, galleys, sultans, trees, palaces, horses and hunters. In my youth, I would decorate a plate, or the back of a mirror, or a chest, or at times, the ceiling of a mansion or of a Bosphorus manor, or even, a wooden spoon. In later years, however, I only worked on manuscript pages because Our Sultan paid well for them. I can't say it seems insignificant now. You know the value of money even when you're dead.

After hearing the miracle of my voice, you might think, "Who cares what you earned when you were alive? Tell us what you see. Is there life after death? Where's your soul? What about Heaven and Hell? What's death like? Are you in pain?" You're right, the living are extremely curious about the Afterlife.

Maybe you've heard the story of the man who was so driven by this curiosity that he roamed among soldiers in battlefields. He sought a man who'd died and returned to life amid the wounded struggling for their lives in pools of blood, a soldier who could tell him about the secrets of the Otherworld. But one of Tamerlane's warriors, taking the seeker for the enemy, cleaved him in half with a smooth stroke of his scimitar, causing him to conclude that in the Hereafter man gets split in two.

Nonsense! Quite the opposite, I'd even say that souls divided in life merge in the Hereafter. Contrary to the claims of sinful infidels who've fallen under the sway of the Devil, there is indeed another world, thank God, and the proof is that I'm speaking to you from here. I've died, but as you can plainly tell, I haven't ceased to be. Granted, I must confess, I haven't encountered the rivers flowing beside the silver and gold kiosks of Heaven, the broad-leaved trees bearing plump fruit and the beautiful virgins mentioned in the Glorious Koran—though I do very well recall how often and enthusiastically I made pictures of those wide-eyed houris described in the chapter "That Which Is Coming." Nor is there a trace of those rivers of milk, wine, fresh water and honey described with such flourish, not in the Koran, but by visionary dreamers like Ibn Arabi. But I have no intention of tempting the faith of those who live rightfully through their hopes and visions of the Otherworld, so let me declare that all I've seen relates specifically to my own very personal circumstances. Any believer with even a little knowledge of life after death would know that a malcontent in my state would be hard-pressed to see the rivers of Heaven.

In short, I, who am known as Master Elegant Effendi, am dead, but I have not been buried, and therefore my soul has not completely left my body. This extraordinary situation, although naturally my case isn't the first, has inflicted horrible suffering upon the immortal part of me. Though I cannot feel my crushed skull or my decomposing body covered in wounds, full of broken bones and partially submerged in ice-cold water, I do feel the deep torment of my soul struggling desperately to escape its mortal coil. It's as if the whole world, along with my body, were contracting into a bolus of anguish.

I can only compare this contraction to the surprising sense of release I felt during the unequaled moment of my death. Yes, I instantly understood that the wretch wanted to kill me when he unexpectedly struck me with a stone and cracked my skull, but I didn't believe he'd follow through. I suddenly realized I was a hopeful man, something I hadn't been aware of while living my life in the shadows between workshop and household. I clung passionately

to life with my nails, my fingers and my teeth, which I sank into his skin. I won't bore you with the painful details of the subsequent blows I received.

When in the course of this agony I knew I would die, an incredible feeling of relief filled me. I felt this relief during the moment of departure; my arrival to this side was soothing, like the dream of seeing oneself asleep. The snow- and mud-covered shoes of my murderer were the last things I noticed. I closed my eyes as if I were going to sleep, and I gently passed over.

My present complaint isn't that my teeth have fallen like nuts into my bloody mouth, or even that my face has been maimed beyond recognition, or that I've been abandoned in the depths of a well—it's that everyone assumes I'm still alive. My troubled soul is anguished that my family and intimates, who, yes, think of me often, imagine me engaged in trivial dealings somewhere in Istanbul, or even chasing after another woman. Enough! Find my body without delay, pray for me and have me buried. Above all, find my murderer! For even if you bury me in the most magnificent of tombs, so long as that wretch remains free, I'll writhe restlessly in my grave, waiting and infecting you all with faithlessness. Find that son-of-a-whore murderer and I'll tell you in detail just what I see in the Afterlife—but know this, after he's caught, he must be tortured by slowly splintering eight or ten of his bones, preferably his ribs, with a vise before piercing his scalp with skewers made especially for the task by torturers and plucking out his disgusting, oily hair, strand by strand, so he shrieks each time.

Who is this murderer who vexes me so? Why has he killed me in such a surprising way? Be curious and mindful of these matters. You say the world is full of base and worthless criminals? Perhaps this one did it, perhaps that one? In that case let me caution you: My death conceals an appalling conspiracy against our religion, our traditions and the way we see the world. Open your eyes, discover why the enemies of the life in which you believe, of the life you're living, and of Islam, have destroyed me. Learn why one day they might do the same to you. One by one, everything predicted by the great preacher Nusret Hoja of Erzurum, to whom I've tearfully listened, is coming to pass. Let me say also that if the situation into which we've fallen were described in a book, even the most expert of miniaturists could never hope to illustrate it. As with the Koran—God forbid I'm misunderstood—the staggering power of such a book arises from the impossibility of its being depicted. I doubt you've fully comprehended this fact.

Listen to me. When I was an apprentice, I too feared and thus ignored underlying truths and voices from beyond. I'd joke about such matters. But

I've ended up in the depths of this deplorable well! It could happen to you, be wary. Now, I've nothing left to do but hope for my thorough decay, so they can find me by tracing my stench. I've nothing to do but hope—and imagine the torture that some benevolent man will inflict upon that beastly murderer once he's been caught.

I AM CALLED BLACK

After an absence of twelve years I entered Istanbul like a sleepwalker. “The earth called to him,” they say of men who are about to die, and in my case, it was death that drew me back to the city where I’d been born and raised. When I first returned, I thought there was only death; later, I would also encounter love. Love, however, was a distant and forgotten thing, like my memories of having lived in the city. It was in Istanbul, twelve years ago, that I fell helplessly in love with my young cousin.

Four years after I first left Istanbul, while traveling through the endless steppes, snow-covered mountains and melancholy cities of Persia, carrying letters and collecting taxes, I admitted to myself that I was slowly forgetting the face of the childhood love I’d left behind. With growing panic, I tried desperately to remember her, only to realize that despite love, a face long not seen finally fades. During the sixth year I spent in the East, traveling or working as a secretary in the service of pashas, I knew that the face I imagined was no longer that of my beloved. Later, in the eighth year, I forgot what I’d mistakenly called to mind in the sixth, and again visualized a completely different countenance. In this way, by the twelfth year, when I returned to my city at the age of thirty-six, I was painfully aware that my beloved’s face had long since escaped me.

Many of my friends and relatives had died during my twelve-year exile. I visited the cemetery overlooking the Golden Horn and prayed for my mother and for the uncles who’d passed away in my absence. The earthy smell of mud mingled with my memories. Someone had broken an earthenware pitcher beside my mother’s grave. For whatever reason, gazing at the broken pieces, I began to cry. Was I crying for the dead or because I was, strangely, still only at the beginning of my life after all these years? Or was it because I’d come to the end of my life’s journey? A faint snow fell. Entranced by the flakes blowing here and there, I became so lost in the vagaries of my life that I didn’t notice the black dog staring at me from a dark corner of the cemetery.

My tears subsided. I wiped my nose. I saw the black dog wagging its tail in friendship as I left the cemetery. Sometime later, I settled into our neighborhood, renting one of the houses where a relative on my father’s side once lived. It seems I reminded the landlady of her son who’d been killed by Safavid Persian soldiers at the front and so she agreed to clean the house and cook for me.

I set out on long and satisfying walks through the streets as if I'd settled not in Istanbul, but temporarily in one of the Arab cities at the other end of the world. The streets had become narrower, or so it seemed to me. In certain areas, on roads squeezed between houses leaning toward one another, I was forced to rub up against walls and doors to avoid being hit by laden packhorses. There were more wealthy people, or so it seemed to me. I saw an ornate carriage, a citadel drawn by proud horses, the likes of which couldn't be found in Arabia or Persia. Near the "Burnt Column," I saw some bothersome beggars dressed in rags huddling together as the smell of offal coming from the chicken-sellers market wafted over them. One of them who was blind smiled as he watched the falling snow.

Had I been told Istanbul used to be a poorer, smaller and happier city, I might not have believed it, but that's what my heart told me. Though my beloved's house was where it'd always been among linden and chestnut trees, others were now living there, as I learned from inquiring at the door. I discovered that my beloved's mother, my maternal aunt, had died, and that her husband, my Enishte, and his daughter had moved away. This is how I came to learn that father and daughter were the victims of certain misfortunes, from strangers answering the door, who in such situations are perfectly forthcoming, without the least awareness of how mercilessly they've broken your heart and destroyed your dreams. I won't describe all of this to you now, but allow me to say that as I recalled warm, verdant and sunny summer days in that old garden, I also noticed icicles the size of my little finger hanging from the branches of the linden tree in a place whose misery, snow and neglect now evoked nothing but death.

I'd already learned about some of what had befallen my relatives through a letter my Enishte sent to me in Tabriz. In that letter, he invited me back to Istanbul, explaining that he was preparing a secret book for Our Sultan and that he wanted my help. He'd heard that for a period while in Tabriz, I made books for Ottoman pashas, provincial governors and Istanbulites. What I did then was to use the money advanced by clients who'd placed manuscript orders in Istanbul to locate miniaturists and calligraphers who were frustrated by the wars and the presence of Ottoman soldiers, but hadn't yet left for Kazvin or another Persian city, and it was these masters—complaining of poverty and neglect—whom I commissioned to inscribe, illustrate and bind the pages of the manuscripts I would then send back to Istanbul. If it weren't for the love of illustrating and fine books that my Enishte instilled in me during my youth, I could have never involved myself in such pursuits.