

Aysha's Ring

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"I'm so *scared*! That hunk Nadim invited me to a chic restaurant." Amused at how she pronounces 'hunk', I watch Aysha blow on her silver fingernails to dry them, while she waits for customers in her childrens boutique. Besides running the most stylish shop in town, Aysha is an English teacher where I teach, in the *Buyuk Adana* (Great Adana) Language School.

"Who's Nadim?" I ask. Lounging in my chair for visitors behind her display counter, I see a fluttery quickness in her eyes, dark as the eye-liner she always wears.

"Well, I don't know how to tell you. It's all happened so fast." Aysha's eyes flit into mine. "A week ago, Nadim and his mother came to see my mom and me. 'To see me' is the only way to say it. You can't imagine how it feels. Turkish men on this kind of visit look us up and down. The girl folds her hands in her lap — afraid to breathe." She strikes a pose: demure features, surrounded by glossy hair, tumultuous over the shoulders of a sleek knit dress.

"Secretly, you looked him over. What's he like?" I pick up a clothes hanger, infant size, and hook it on a rack.

"Wow! He's tall" - Aysha herself sits taller - "He's focused and sharp. He surveys the world with his eyes. He *scares me to death!*"

"He must like you or he wouldn't invite you to dinner." I watch her return her nail polish to a drawer below the counter.

"You don't *know*. It's not just one of a hundred dates as in your country; it's our *only* date. We have to decide whether to get married or not, just by how we get along tomorrow night." Aysha is unwrapping a carton of infants' gowns, removing the tissue. "If we were seen together again without being engaged, my reputation would be *ruined*. Once a couple..."

A bell jingles and the door swooshes. A customer hugging a baby in one arm, pulls a balky two-year-old with the other. She stops in the doorway, bracing the glass door open with her back. I rush over to help. Wearing a pullover the colors of stained glass, the mother asks to see a dress, size two.

Aysha flips through the hangers on the rack until she comes to a white frilly work of art - all lace and pink ribbons at the neck. The lady buys it. Tucking the dress into a plastic bag, Aysha looks fully as thrilled as the customer seems with her purchase. Aysha talks to the mother, her little girl, and helps them to the car.

When they leave, Aysha turns to me. "You're moving into our apartment, aren't you? I *mean* it. When are you coming? Tomorrow? Today? You *must* come. I need your advice about my life."

I feel a surge of happiness. We've discussed this idea before. "Well, I'm not working tomorrow morning..."

"Good! Then it's settled! But one thing" -Aysha's finger tip pauses before her lips - "As we say in Turkish, 'Don't let the baklava out of the mouth.' It's a secret about Nadim. Don't tell anyone. Promise?"

"Promise."

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Aysha's brick and tiled building stands like a haughty neighbor next to the town's main theater. Across the street a cassette-shop speaker flutes arabesque music onto the sidewalk. Shaded by the sycamore that furs the late fall air, I open the door and carry my backpack to the stairwell. Touching a light switch, I walk upstairs to the third floor before the light automatically goes out.

Aysha opens the door with her mother, just behind her. Wearing an olive pullover and no make-up, Hatice looks like a pleasant countrywoman, her head wrapped with a white cotton scarf, hemmed with a network of tiny blue beads.

Hatice hugs my waist with her arm, leading me to Aysha's room.

"We'll share my bedroom. All right?" Aysha trails behind me.

"Of course! Thank you!" In the cologne-scented room an extra mattress is curled up in the corner by the blond clothes cabinet. On the vanity a family of fancy make-up jars awaits Aysha's own beauty.

"I have a class in an hour, so I'll leave. But make yourself at home. The bureau is empty," - Aysha opens a drawer - "I'm afraid it's not enough space." She frowns a fleeting line between her bright eyes.

"More space than I need. Have fun tonight, if I don't see you before you go." I begin to unpack.

That night at about ten the hall door clicks shut. Footsteps approach the bedroom. "Hello. Are you sleeping?" Aysha whispers when she comes in.

"How could I sleep when you've just been to the restaurant with Nadim?" Under the quilt, I'm wide awake to hear the story.

"Oh! I can't imagine what he thinks" -I can hear Aysha undressing in the dark -"I was hoping he wouldn't order meat for me; he would see my hand shake, as I cut the food. He told me, 'Relax!' You know? Every time he told me to relax, I got more tense."

"I know the feeling." I hear her bed squoosh as she sits down.

"Guess what!" the dark shape says. "He wants to visit my English class before we decide. So, he's coming either to the Monday or Tuesday evening class." Aysha lies down and snuggles into the quilt. "If he says after class that he wants to marry me, I'm going to say 'Yes!'"

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The following Monday evening, Aysha hurries upstairs to her classroom. Her knit dress glimmers electric blue and her eye shadow shines a faint blue reflection. The drift of a heavenly perfume catches up with her in the hall, when Aysha stops and gives my arm a squeeze. "I'm sure the class is going to do everything wrong tonight. My stomach's been tight all day." She touches the tension spot.

"Why worry? Nadim doesn't know English, you told me. He'll think they're all brilliant. And you, too!" I retrieve the class list she's dropped.

"Right. He can't even say, 'Good morning.'"

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Students and teachers gather in the school's tea room in the break between the two evening classes. To keep warm we need tea - the town's substitute for central heating. The other source of heat is the fire of men who roast chestnuts on street

comers. Like most of the Turkish teachers, I wear a coat and scarf in the classroom. I wear an angora hat and gloves as well. We stamp our feet to warm them. In the tea room we can see the vapor of our breath as we speak.

I chat with a Turkish student, wearing ear-muffs and a jacket. He blows on his hands, pink and blue from the cold.

"Why go back to Australia?" I ask him. My tea glass feels warm through my glove.

Under the eminence of his dark brows, amused eyes take me on. "Well, first, I need to send money to my mama and papa in their village. It makes me feel good in my heart." He presses his hand over his chest and smiles expansively, stretching his black mustache on each side.

"Then second," - the man clusters his fingertips together before my face - "from the money earned from one day's work in Australia, I can buy half a lamb, a pair of shoes, and material for a pair of trousers. Here in Turkey, a man can work a *lifetime*, yet not earn to buy a car." His eyes become brown tortoise shells. "Are you interesting in this?"

"Yes, yes." I look at him from above my tea glass.

"Besides," he winds up, "the Melbourne weather's warmer than in Adana."

"That's the *winning* argument!" I put my tea glass on the counter. "Your nose is red. I'll bet mine is redder." I look for Aysha. No Aysha.

The buzzer rings. Fifty students leave tea glasses on the counter, wet with their rings, and begin a new bout with English.

I see Aysha in the hall.

"He didn't come to my class." She takes a deep breath, relief mixed with disappointment. "One more night of not sleeping."

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Nor does he come the next evening.

"You know what Nadim's sister's doing? She's telling everyone that I've traveled all over Europe." In our room at home Aysha draws angry circles around mistakes on a student paper.

"That's bad?" I'm reading through a stack of English papers, too.

"I've been to London. That's all. Just fifteen days. I visited my aunt." Aysha scores the paper.

"Why so apologetic. Wasn't it great seeing London?" I look over at her, sitting on the bed.

"You don't understand. Here in Turkey it's not really a plus. A proper young lady here doesn't travel."

In a few days, Aysha's mother learns through the grapevine that Nadim doesn't have a job. So, he's apparently out of the running.

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A week passes. The rumor is wrong. Nadim is working as a butcher, though he's graduated in engineering. The news is that he's visited Aysha's uncle, who represents her interests, because Aysha's father died more than ten years ago. Nadim has invited

Aysha and her uncle to his house next Wednesday evening.

At 10 p.m. on Wednesday, Aysha's mother and I sit at home in the heated living room, watching a rerun of *The Waltons* — not my idea - on TV. Aysha comes in, entranced, after the visit.

"You look stunning!" I half whisper.

Her mother turns off the TV.

Aysha circles with arms outstretched to model her outfit: a soft wool skirt with leather belt, a creamy silk blouse and gold jewelry. Her eyes wear green shadow flecked with gold.

Aysha drops to the couch beside her mother, caresses her hand, and tells her in Turkish, "I was surprised. I didn't expect Nadim's brother and his wife would be there. He acted formal, but his wife was friendly. When she said, 'I wish I'd traveled the way you have,' I had a chance to tell her I'd only visited my aunt in London."

"What did they serve?" Soft wrinkles curve her mother's mouth. She fingers the blue beads on her white headscarf and looks thoughtful.

"They offered gin tonics, brandy or wine, and pastries." Aysha looks vulnerable.

"What did you have?" Hatice leans close to her daughter. Soft flesh hammocks under each gray eye.

"I drank a gin tonic." Aysha tries to convince her this was right and up-to-date for the occasion. "And *guess what?* Next week, Nadim's parents are coming from Istanbul. They're going to visit us, too! They'll stay with Nadim until the engagement party."

Hatice - overcome, eyes moist - hugs Aysha, pressing her face to her cheek.

"When Uncle Aktan drove me home, he said, 'I feel responsible to make a good match for you.' He's found out that Nadim's not a gambler and that he doesn't drink too much." Aysha looks at me.

"I was about to ask, did he spill his drink?" I stretch out against the chair pillows.

"No, no. Self-assured, as always. Polished manners. Be sure of that."

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On the way home from class the next day, I am walking by the tea garden near the statue of Ataturk, when I see Aysha sitting with a friend in the family section. (The management of select tea gardens in Turkey rope off sections for families and women.) Usually Aysha tends her boutique at this hour. As I come up, the friend, about to leave, gathers her knitting and puts it into a cloth bag.

"Hi, Aysha!" I step into the roped-off section.

"I had to leave the shop to think," murmurs Aysha. "Sit down!" She lowers her darkened eyelids and strokes her wavy black hair away from her face.

"No bad news, I hope." *Now what*, I think.

"It's perplexing. This man, Kayhan. You haven't met him, but he often comes into the shop to talk with my uncle or me. This morning, he burst in - all dressed up with a fresh haircut. I sat behind the counter, alone in the shop. 'Hello, Kayhan. What's the matter? You look upset,' I said.

'Do you want to marry Nadim?' he blurted out.

'It's hard to decide, because I only know his face,' I said.

'Why marry Nadim? We've known each other for a year. You know what makes

me happy and what makes me angry. I love you and I want you to marry me.'

"I was completely taken by surprise. I couldn't take him seriously. I even laughed." Aysha's eyes reach into mine. "But Kayhan persisted, 'I've felt this way for a long time, though I was silent. When I heard your uncle was in negotiation with Nadim about marriage, I had to tell you.'

'Please give me time to think it over,' I told him. Now he's gone to Silifke to talk with his mother. She hasn't met me yet." Aysha signals the waiter for tea.

I set my book bag on the empty chair and relax.

"Really, I like Kayhan's happy nature." Aysha's face softens. "He spreads a good feeling when he comes into the room. Everybody likes him, but he's not so handsome, not so tall or self-assured as Nadim. I know Kayhan like a friend. / *don't know Nadim at all*"

"He's a mystery." I lean back, as the waiter reaches over my shoulder to set down a little glass and the scent of tea lifts into the air. I sip and feel warmer. "Aysha, don't you discuss whether you want children? About whether you'll keep your boutique after you get married, things like that? Where are you going to live?"

Aysha acts patient. "We Turks discuss these things during the engagement period."

"But if you disagree, can you break the engagement?"

Aysha frowns. "No, never. That would be a terrible disgrace for the girl. I just pray to Allah to help me decide between them."

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There follow five days of indecision. Nadim seems to have the edge in the beginning. By Saturday, it's a tie and then early in the week Kayhan holds the lead. Aysha's mother says that Kayhan, 27, is a newcomer to the bride-searching scene in contrast with Nadim, who is 31. For her part, she only wants Aysha to be happy and to let her decide.

On Monday night, a man stands on one foot and then the other, outside Aysha's classroom door. He isn't tall, so there's a good chance that he's not Nadim, but Kayhan. Straightening his tie, he says "Hi!" to an American from Incirlik Air Force Base. They slap each other on the back and speak together, using the American's undependable Turkish for half of the conversation.

Some off duty Air Force men - dressed in civilian clothes - come out to the school in the evenings to meet Turks and to help them with English conversation. In the tea room I talk with one of these volunteers, who looks unreasonably blond and weakly pigmented in this country. He tells me, "In class the students all asked me questions. I had a ball! They wanted to know all about my state of New Jersey, about my family and hobbies. One thing though, we can't date the girls. Turkish families keep them sheltered. Unless you plan to marry one, and even then, you need to be careful. By Turkish law we can be put in jail!"

After the evening classes are over, I walk home, joining Aysha's mother in watching a Turkish program on TV in the living room. During a commercial, we go to the kitchen to fix tea. I dry dishes from the rack.

The door bursts open and in a rush of cold air from the hall, the star of the evening arrives, bundled in a plaid coat, hat and gloves.

"Shut the door! It's freezing!" scolds Aysha's mother.

"Did you see him?" Aysha asks me. Nose pink and hair blown, she rubs her hands together over the heater.

"Yes! Was that Kayhan?" I wipe a plate, though it's already dry.

"He's back from Silifke!" Aysha's eyes, filled with Stardust, flit from me to her mother. "He talked with his mother and she agrees - without meeting me." Aysha speaks to her mother in Turkish. Her mother's eyes never leave Aysha as she pours a cup of tea from the porcelain teapot. "We went out to a cafe together after class. Before we came home, I told him 'yes.' He touched my shoulders. I pulled away. He said, 'Why not? We're going to be married, aren't we?'"

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The next day, Aysha misses all her classes at school. When I come home, she looks up at me from her bed. The damp handkerchief in her hand blots her red nose and bloodshot eyes. "My uncle says 'No!'" She sobs and tears start again. "I won't ever see Kayhan again!"

"What's happened? Why did he say no?" I sit down on the bed opposite her.

"Nadim's parents are already on the way from Istanbul. And Nadim! Not *one word* about why he didn't show up for my English class!"

Aysha blots her tears and props herself up on one elbow. "Remember how I said my uncle and Kayhan are friends and drink beer together on Sundays? Now my uncle says, although Kayhan's a veterinarian with a good practice, he drinks too much and wastes money."

Aysha cries and I try to comfort her. Aysha's mother, nearly in tears herself, brings a tray of tea into the bedroom. Rough knocking shakes the door. Putting down the tray with a clatter, Hatice hurries to answer it.

"It's your grandfather! Get up!"

"Wait till I get the tears out of my eyes." Aysha blows her nose and her voice sounds husky. "I look a mess!"

"No. Come the way you are." Hatice looks happier and, somehow, hopeful.

I leave to join Hatice and her father, Metin Bey, in the warm living room, while Aysha gets ready to come in.

I have met Metin Bey before - a tall, balding man with a combed white mustache and a genial manner. He writes religious poetry in the Arabic script, which he learned prior to the language reform of 1928. "*Well! Well!* And how are you?" Metin Bey stands up as I enter the room.

"Very well treated here in your daughter's home! I'm grateful. Have you just been to your family village?" I sit down in the chair with pillows.

"Yes! The countryside's bare now, but in the spring the green land expands the spirit. Do you know what Ataturk said when he visited the district of Adana?" Metin Bey sits near the heater and rubs his strong stiff hands together.

"No, what did he say?" I lean on the armrest and watch his face.

Metin Bey looks so reverent, he could be speaking about the Prophet. "Ataturk said, 'The soil is so fertile that I'm afraid to put my cane on the ground for fear it will sprout roots and grow into a tree.'"

"What a wise leader and a great reformer!" After all, he gave women the right to vote, encouraged their education, and much more.

The old man takes his briar pipe from his pocket and pours tobacco from a

plastic envelope into the bowl. "Fifty years ago, on the day of my wedding, I got on my horse and rode miles to another village. There, my bride got on the horse behind me and we rode back to my father's house. Back in those days, my family paid for the bride. Now in the cities, as you see, things are different."

Hatice elbows the door and carries in a tray of pudding and tea.

"Ohhh!" Metin Bey gasps with delight. "Thank-you, my daughter. My favorite snack - Noah's Ark!" He turns to me - his dark eyes looking bright from a quarry of wrinkles - and in a story-teller's voice begins, "When Noah and his wife prepared to board the ark, they took a little sample of all the vegetables, fruit and nuts. You can find them in this pudding - we call it Noah's Ark. Try some!"

Hatice offers me a dish and I take a spoonful. I thank her in the Turkish fashion: "Thanks to your hands, it's delicious!"

"Excellent!" Metin Bey's eyes show approval. "You're so much like a Turk, it's a pity you're not a Turk!"

Spiritless, Aysha comes in, her eyes shiny with crying. I excuse myself in order to go to class.

"*Gule gule* (Go laughing)," they tell me, the usual way of saying good-bye.

On Saturday evening, Aysha breaks some news, when Hatice, Aysha and I meet at her uncle's home. Uncle Aktan's wife cradles the new baby Baris (Peace) in her lap and reads *Dr. Spock's Infant and Child Care* in Turkish. When her uncle's out of the room, Aysha shows me the honey-gold ring on her finger. The beginnings of a smile lift around her lips, and her black eyes dream. "My grandfather Metin helped me! He likes Kayhan. Grandfather could see who would make me happy. He was the one who persuaded my uncle. I'm so happy!"

Aysha lifts her hand, looking at her ring again. "Today, Saturday, all the jewelry stores are closed, but I knew one, the Pandora, would be open. So Kayhan and I went out together and we bought each other engagement rings!"

"It's lovely, Aysha." I hug her and springy black hair brushes my face.

Aysha squeezes my hand. "It's a Turkish custom that Kayhan and I can't see each other now for two weeks. *How can I wait?* Then we'll have an engagement party at our apartment. You come, too!" - she squeezes my hand again - "We'll invite about fifty people. Afterward, Kayhan and I, at last, can walk together in public!"