



FAREWELL ALYOSHA Oya Baydar

I remember the volatile, steamy, heavy aroma of oleasters on spring mornings. The pleasant coolness of dawn that made you shiver, no matter how warm the day would become.

I remember the sudden downpours and the maddening chirping of a thousand sparrows perched in the acacias lining the two sides of the street. And the agony of a love affair that had ended; the long, worried waits at post offices in pursuit of midnight telegrams; a reunion one day; the next, a separation. My hazel green, eggplant purple dresses; my life that of a human being during the day, a wolf at night; love poems that I wrote with coloured chalk on the walls of my desolate flat, furtive affairs to eradicate the memory of an unfulfilled obsession.

I remember the sprigs of plum blossoms falling on hors-d'oeuvre plates; the dark cherry red of the cheap wine in our glasses; the hills of Cankaya that we climbed with longing in search of a non-existent sea during the nights when the moon was out; the cheap buses we took

whenever we felt like it and waking up the following morning in Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, Bodrum. Going past the Salt Lake and arriving in Cappadocia behind trucks loaded with watermelons, in the peace of the secret shrines of the first Christians, trying to appease the sweet fatigue of our lives which were an eternal race at full speed; climbing to the castle, out of breath, up slopes covered with small stones and leaning our burning palms and foreheads against the coolness of dull marbles, of age-old goddesses, of Hittite statues.

Forums, protest marches, rallies, occupations of buildings. Conferences, meetings; heated debates; obsessive, extreme statements of opposing opinions. Keeping us watch all night at student dorms, on campuses; when all clocks, all lives were attuned to an unknown revolution; our fairy-tale days of wild hopes with the slogans, 'Ho, Ho, Ho, Chi Minh, we want more Vietnams', 'We have yet to utter our final word, the struggle is about to begin.'

At that time we were about 25 or 30 years old, and we were strong believers, enthusiastic, hopeful and willing to make sacrifices; we kept writing and debating what we wrote all night long; and we took the world, life, war, revolution, socialism, human beings and ourselves seriously in a way perhaps we would never do again. We packed ourselves like sardines into the old Volkswagen beetle, searched out hidden nooks under the spindly pine trees, our bags filled with books on socialism, on fascism; finding childish measures, romantic solutions for the storm that we were anticipating; leaving our houses one morning and never going back; being as free as the birds, volatile like the clouds. And then we were dispersed in all directions...

I was taken away in the middle of class while lecturing; 'Army

Greens' with Thompson rifles and heavy army boots dissected our houses, lives, identities; confiscated several posters, many books and magazines, my dilapidated typewriter. My little black cat sadly watched me go and I could also feel the suspicious frightened gaze of my apartment neighbours upon the tiny comical figure I made in the midst of an armed squad — the whole scene resembling a Walt Disney cartoon.

My fear was like that of a trapped mouse, in the damp torture chambers of the stone barracks where I was taken blindfolded, shanty houses painted blue which one could see from the courtyard of the women's ward, the meadows the autumn mist turned into fairy-tale gardens, willow trees, the marred happiness of the steeped tea we drank after the iron gates were closed.

Today, with a tinge of sorrow, I thought of you Alyosha. But, in fact, among us you were the one the furthest removed from sorrow. Sorrow wouldn't dare come anywhere near you when, with childish anger, you tried to erase the love poems on my walls, finding them unsuitable to the revolutionary spirit — even those by Nazim Hikmet — *I love you like I love bread dipped in salt / like drinking straight from the tap waking up in a sweat at night*; when you made heated speeches at student forums, discussion groups, workers' rallies all too confident of yourself and your ideas, never feeling the slightest doubt about your own truths; when, tired of our never-ending discussions, you put an end to them, saying 'Fewer words, more work'; or one day when, in a good mood, you cooked a huge pan of rice with anchovies and gobbled half of it up before even setting it on the table and then smiled shyly with lowered eyes.

You loved cats, anchovies, sweets and making all kinds of

animals from paper. Your purity and childish optimism entitled you to the name 'Alyosha', your daring haste, your constant toil after work, action... Perhaps also your naturalness and transparency which I belittled somewhat... I used to get the feeling that I would see through you. One wouldn't qualify you as 'full of life', that's for sure! With no ulterior motives just like the trees, the grass, deer, cats, the waters, you were an all too flat extension of life and of nature. This sorrow which makes people somewhat misty, somewhat mysterious, which files down joy, appeases excitement, brings forth feelings while stifling action, what would it have to do with you!

How joyfully, feverishly, ambitiously we used to work in the midst of books, periodicals, papers scattered all around us... From the previous day Hatice would have prepared and put in the fridge a carrot salad, beans cooked in olive oil, stuffed grape leaves. Certainly no drinking at work! My eyes would search only for your eyes while, a little intimidated and a little shy, I would place on the table the wine bottle I had hidden somewhere. It was one of those days: an autumn evening when you had earned your name, Alyosha, in a way we would never forget. Now, don't start grumbling! Even when we get to be a hundred we will remember it at every drinking table. You were afraid to refuse your share of the black-label Scotch that some of us had acquired from somewhere and had kept for a surprise, and we caught you secretly pouring it down the kitchen sink. Your being an Alyosha was confirmed once more that day.

The last bus stop in Bahcelievler...In my hand a package of roasted chickpeas, pistachios, dried mulberries, nuts and raisins bought from the nut shop at the corner. In my bag; a small bottle of cognac, notes, papers, books, periodicals... We used to prepare for

work like fully equipped soldiers. Again we are going to work into the small hours of the morning. The magazine must be finished. All the responsibility of the world, of history, of Turkey, of all human beings weighs upon our shoulders. Our Ankara days exuding faith, hope, socialism, revolution! Our Ankara days when we typed all through the night; when we believed that the future and the world lay in the palms of our hands; when on night buses we travelled from Ankara to workers' neighbourhoods in Istanbul, to student rallies, to printing presses, to strikes; when at cool dawns we dispersed to our homes, to work, going through streets pervaded by the aroma of oleasters!

Perhaps today, dozens of years and thousands of miles away from the sleepless nights whose dawns smelled of oleasters, what the sorrow that weighs on me in the early morning hours really reminds me of is not you, Alyosha, but those days. Those days when our lives were both very real and at the same time fairy-tales; when one didn't know where the boundaries of dreams, joys, hopes ended and where the real world began; when we challenged the yet to be lived pains, separations, deaths, tortures, jails and all that rendered the future painful and dismal...

What made me sad early in the morning was perhaps the small photograph of you that I saw on one of the inner pages of a newspaper from Turkey. Your face, which I thought would never age, childish, bright, which held no secrets, which had no mystery... Sorrow was perhaps in the somewhat weary, very, very tired expression in that photograph, in the greying hair, in the hardened lines, in the tired gaze; or perhaps it was in the premeditated, solemn answers you gave to the questions directed by the journalist.

Sorrow was what was hidden in our joke 'the unavoidable rise of

Alyosha’; in the lines of your last letter which said, ‘I feel tired. I no longer pour my whiskey in the sink, I may even be considered a heavy drinker in my own right.’

But actually it was not the weary and aged expression on your childish face, nor the fact that you had started to drink, nor the longing felt for a beautiful past one could never redeem, that raised my sorrow. No, the sorrow I felt was set off by the exasperating measuredness of the answers you gave the journalist, in their conformity to common sense, in their reasonableness, in the way they were deliberately contrived. It was in the quiet acquiescence, in the apathy when you said, ‘I cannot be optimistic anymore,’ in your now being the way you are, in none of us being the way we were...

In our Istanbul days, on the Uskudar boats where we had a respite after descending the slope from Cagaloglu to Sirkeci all worn out from work, where we talked quietly as we watched the sun set — we talked so much, we had so much to say! — I always used to think that you never saw the traces, the setting sun left on the turbulent waters at Sarayburnu. I used to also think that you did not enjoy the appetizers, which, with a voracious appetite, you half-finished even before the table was properly set; that you wouldn’t be able to savour the taste of complex feelings, just as you couldn’t savour that of liquor. In a way we loved you because you managed to succeed in becoming something none of us quite did — in becoming Alyosha. Now, after you’ve learned about the beauty of the last crimson lines on the horizon having seen the sun set in all four corners of the world, that choice appetizers should be savoured slowly, that cognac should be sipped from oval-shaped drinking glasses after first being warmed by holding the glass in your palms; after you’ve learned about complex

feelings, insidious pains, victories, especially about compromises, the name Alyosha no longer suits you or becomes you in the least.

In a corner on one of the inner pages of the newspaper, there is the photograph of that dear fairy-tale church of yours located on a corner of Red Square. At night, the scarlet star of the Kremlin used to shine in the milky dark-blue sky. Right across from the multi-colored, flower-like domes and towers of the fairy-tale church, the front of Lenin's mausoleum would be packed with people, who came to watch the ceremonial changing of the guards. In the background, the Kremlin with its red flag and red star would be hiding behind the castle walls like the sacred symbol of the greatest fairy-tale, the most beautiful hope which we thought had been realized in our century. Under the photograph of the fairy-tale church, the caption 'Red Square Is Changing'... A quote from you in bold black type, next to your photograph: 'We've got to see that time is changing and we have to go along with the changes.'

I wish you wouldn't speak so truthfully, so realistically, so intelligently, Alyosha! Please pour the choicest, the most expensive liquor into the sink again. Don't sit like that with a satisfied fullness, instead attack the food like a glutton. If you wish, obliterate all love poems not only from the walls, but also from books. Please be as indifferent, enthusiastic, uncalculating, hasty, angry, uncompromising as you used to be. Curse your political opponents. Tell lies! Say: 'Nothing has changed, we're standing straight and tall!' Get rid of that old-age mask, the expressionless gaze on your face; on the pages of the newspapers smile your childish smile. Don't let the fairy-tale come to an end Alyosha, I am scared! Don't allow the fairy-tale castles to be demolished. Don't let the sapphire fairy-tale stars, which show the

way to children who get lost trying to escape from witches and monsters fall to the ground and shatter.

Everything is crumbling around us... Walls, castles, chateaux, stars, statues, dreams, beliefs, values, everything tied to the past... Everything is falling apart, shattering!

Hello, new world!

Farewell, Alyosha!

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