

The Simit Seller

Julia Copus

Turkan sat perched on his stool in the quayside square, and from his spot near the Cicek Tea Garden he savoured his favourite part of the day: the city at dawn, when the rumbling of vehicles was no more than a half-remembered dream in the ancient foundations of the cobblestone streets – and the cries of street vendors, the coming and going of ships in the busy port, had not yet shaken the air.

At this time of the morning it was almost possible to believe that nothing had changed since the days of Turkan's boyhood, when the best simits in Istanbul were those made at the bakery at Galata, where his father worked.

He could see him now, his thick-set arms mixing up a pale dough from flour, milk, sugar, salt and yeast, and shaping it into neat bread rings, which Turkan helped dip into a mixture of cold water and grape molasses and then into sesame seeds.

Half an hour or so later they emerged from the oven the colour of a 22 carat gold coin. 'You see this hole in the middle?' he remembered his father saying. 'This is the most important part. This hole is for the secrets people will tell you. A simit man is more than a street vendor. He is a guardian of secrets, Turkan, a peddler of dreams.'

Sure enough, not many weeks after his first shave, when Turkan was deemed old enough to stay out and work the late shift, he began to understand what his father had meant by those words.

He learned that nightfall was, generally speaking, the time when people were most disposed to tell their secrets.

Walking the streets with his last batch of the day threaded on a long stick hung with a lantern, he listened as the squeals and shouts of late-night revellers on their way home from the bars and theatres melted into the night. And within minutes, people from every class, all walks of life – lovers, businessmen, bandits – began to emerge from the side-streets, from alleyways, from shadowy recesses, one by one, bringing with them all manner of delicate matters, matters that needed handling with the utmost discretion.

Over the years, Turkan had grown fat on secrets, and the generous tips that accompanied them. But the demand for such services had fallen off in recent years as more modern modes of living spread in from the West and took hold.

Turkan shifted his stool and blinked. In the middle of his reverie the newcomer had appeared out of nowhere (as all things must appear at dawn), swimming into the foreground, surfacing.

Turkan wasn't used to visitors at this hour. 'I wanted to come before the crowds, she said. 'I'm starting a stall on Sunday. Just opposite you, in fact. The other side of that fountain there.' She was in her late thirties. Her auburn hair was swept back into a ponytail, and her eyes were the watery grey of the Uzbek Turks – once a rare sight in the city, but becoming more common now.

'What are you selling?' he asked.

'Jewellery. My own. I mean, I make it myself.' She was wearing an elegant choker of polished silver discs. The pale skin on her wrists and fingers was bare.

'It's a good spot,' he said. 'A busy one.'

That first Sunday he brought her glasses of hot sweet tea from the tea-garden, and found himself now and then watching her over the cataract of the tiny fountain that occupied the centre of the square.

At some point in the first week they exchanged names. She was Tulay. As far as he could ascertain she lived alone.

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At first, Turkan did most of the talking.

He entertained her with stories about the old days when he had carried his wares piled in a tower on a wooden tray balanced on a small round pad on his head, and roamed the streets shouting, 'Simitciiiii!'

He embellished the last syllable with a flourish; and insane kind of yodel, startling enough to attract the attention of the least attentive passer-by.

'Yes, yes!' she laughed. 'I remember them doing that.'

Over the months that followed, Turkan made a habit of arriving early, and they'd talk while he leant her a hand setting out the stall, arranging sinuous lengths of silver – bracelets and necklaces, some set with delicate shades of mother of pear – against the navy, velvet drop that didn't quite cover the legs of a scruffy trestle table.

At around 7 o'clock, beneath her unchanging skyline of domes and minarets, the city's streets began to fill with eager customers hungry for breakfast – people off to work or school, and passengers for the ferry boats who picked up a fresh warm simit to enjoy on board with a glass of hot tea.

And for an hour or so Turkan's hands were a blur, diving into his money pouch, wrapping simits, exchanging notes and coins. Around mid-morning, when he finally got to sit down – a brief interval which he jokingly referred to as his siesta, Tulay's stall came into its own.

By that time the students had begun to show up for lunch at the baked potato stall, and tourists mooched along the waterfront, with time to browse.

During quieter spells the fountain bubbled between them, with the sound of a huge contented cat lapping at a saucer of milk. Some time later, when the square had emptied after a long day, they caressed for the first time to the happy music of that creature.

One evening, Turkan asked her out of curiosity, 'What's the story then, Tulay? Don't tell me you haven't had any offers.'

'I was married,' she answered, looking down at her hands. 'I was wealthy then. A kept woman, you might say. But he cheated on me. I went back to live with my mother for a while. One evening we agreed to meet – here in Kadikoy, as it happens. He swore the affair was over, that it meant nothing to him. I waited for over an hour. I never saw him again.'

Once the thought had occurred to him, Turkan could not shake it off.

Tulay's story had touched him deeply, and their times alone together – at the close of the days beside the endless ferment of the fountain – begun to unsettle him.

He had watched a young Uzbek woman once, waiting like that on the corner of Karantina Street. She was dressed in full purday, covered except for the eyes and the hands.

Eventually she gave up waiting and crossed the street to question him. Had he seen a man of such and such a description pass by this way?

Turkan recognised the description well. The man in question had been a customer of his.

More than once had had taken money to deliver messages to a pretty American girl half the man's age.

But now he cursed himself for entertaining such a fanciful idea. Ridiculous! What were the chances that.....? It was the remotest of possibilities. In any case there was no way of telling – covered as she was, from head to toe.....except for the eyes and the hands: the grey eyes and the pale hands.