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# Guest Faces

By Emine Sevgi Özdamar  
*Translated by Erik Born*

As a child in Istanbul, the first European word that I heard was: “Deux-Pièces.” Every Monday, my parents went to a movie theatre called “Teyyare Sinemasi.” In German, this meant, “Flugzeugkino” (Airplane Theatre). This movie theatre only showed European films. My mother told me about the owner of the Airplane Theatre who dressed like a movie star himself and greeted visitors at the entrance to his theatre. He knew that viewers would cry during some of the European films he showed. For these sad films, he had handkerchiefs made out of particularly fine materials, and he distributed them personally in front of the theatre. My mother gave me one of these handkerchiefs, which she had used to dry her tears in the theatre. I put this cloth with my mother’s tears in my school atlas, directly between the pages with a map of Europe on them.

My mother and my father dressed very fashionably every Monday to go to the Airplane Theatre. “What will you wear?” they asked each other every time. Once my mother said: “I’ll wear my Deux-Pièces.” I asked, “Mother, what does ‘Deux-Pièces’ mean?” “‘Deux-Pièces’ means ‘Deux-Pièces’” my mother answered.

My grandmother was a superstitious woman. She was afraid that the shadows on the screen would take away my parents’ faces. The next morning I asked my parents what they had seen in the movie theatre and what the film was called. My father answered, “I’ve forgotten what the film’s called, but look, the actor Jean Gabin smokes like this,” and he imitated how Jean Gabin smoked. The cigarette hung in the corner of his mouth until ash fell from it. My father smoked like Jean Gabin for a couple of weeks until, on another Monday in the Airplane Theatre, he saw a film with Rossano Brazzi, and changed over to Brazzi that Tuesday. So the first European guests in our wooden house in Istanbul were Jean Gabin and Rossano Brazzi. As a child, I had difficulty pronouncing the names of our European guests correctly, and for Jean, I found a Turkish word, “Can,” which means “soul” in Turkish,” so “Soul Gabin,” and for Brazzi, the Turkish word “Biraz iyi,” which means “a little bit better.” Before I went to the movie theatre and saw “Soul Gabin” and “Rossano A-Little-Bit-Better” on the screen for myself, I had already met them in my father’s face and body. My mother also brought home two European guests in her face and body: Silvano Mangano and Anna Magnani. There were similar words in Turkish for their names too: “Silbana,” i.e., “Wipe-Me-Off Mangano,” and “Ana,” i.e., “Mother Magnani.” The first faces exchanged between countries were those of movie stars.

At some point, a hat by the name of “Borsalino” appeared in our house in Istanbul. My father put it on every morning in front of the mirror, and cast one last glance at his hat before he opened the door to go out. He attached so much importance to putting this hat on correctly and he kept standing in front of the mirror for so long that I thought his head would stay behind in the mirror with the Borsalino even after he had left the house. Atatürk introduced hats in Turkey as a form of “Europeanization.” In photos, Atatürk always had a hat either on his head or in his hand. He always greeted people with his hat. He traveled around Turkey to persuade people of Europeanization. To greet Atatürk, all the men in a small town on the Black Sea suddenly wore European women’s hats. A clever salesman didn’t have any more hats

for men, only old-fashioned hats for ladies, and the men there didn't recognize the difference yet.

When my parents invited "Soul Gabin" and "Rossano A-Little-Bit-Better" and "Wipe-Me-Off Mangano" and "Mother Magnani" into their own faces as guest faces and got along with them quite well, I made my first European friends. As a child, I got sick. Tuberculosis. A crazy woman lived on our little street. Sometimes she invited me up to her balcony, covered with mulberries that had fallen from trees. She asked me if, before I died, I wanted to deserve to go to Paradise. She said, "If you cut a pomegranate in two and you can eat every single pomegranate seed inside without letting any fall to the ground, then you'll go to Paradise." The crazy woman and I ate a pomegranate. She had half the pomegranate in her hand, I had the other half in mine. The crazy woman ate without letting a piece fall. I, too, had eaten almost half the pomegranate without letting a piece fall, and when it was time for the last piece, I hurried out of joy and it fell to the ground. I would not be able to go to Paradise. But I wanted to go there because I believed that my grandmother, whom I loved very much and who told me a story every night, would go to Paradise. She had lost eight children. She believed that everyone has two angels. On one shoulder is the angel that writes down your good deeds in a little book. The angel on the other shoulder writes down your sins. When you die, the angels will read your sins and your good deeds from these books. They'll weigh up your sins and your good deeds on a scale. Then you'll be brought to a bridge, a bridge thin as a hair, sharp as a knife. You'll have to walk on it barefoot, and if you're able to walk to the end of this bridge, you'll go to Paradise, if not, to Hell, and Hell lies directly under this bridge.

My grandmother thought she had a lot sins because, when her children died, she smoked a lot of cigarettes out of grief. But she also believed that her eight children, who were very little when they died and didn't have any sins yet anyways, would fly to this bridge before grandmother would fall down to Hell because of her sins smoking cigarettes, and they would take her with them to Paradise. "How can I get into Paradise with you?" I asked her. She said I should not forget the dead and should pray for their souls. Sometimes she went walking with me in cemeteries. She stood still in front of every gravestone and prayed for dead people she never knew. My grandmother couldn't read. I read the names of the dead to her and learned the names by heart, and at night I prayed, counted up these names, and sent my prayers to their souls. Soon I had long lists of the dead. At first, I only had dead Turkish people, then came European ones. I read Romani loudly to my grandmother and to her friends who couldn't read. My first dead European guest was Madame Bovary, whom the old women cried for and whose name I added to my list of the dead at night. Then came another dead European: Robinson Crusoe. While I was reading Robinson Crusoe loudly, my grandmother always asked: "How did his parents take it? What did his wife do? What did his children eat when their father wasn't there?" Grandmother always thought of Robinson Crusoe's family. Because she was concerned, I read her lies as an answer—what his children ate, rice with lamb and corn and chestnuts—and at night I prayed for Robinson Crusoe. My third dead European guest was Isadora Duncan. One day, a neighbor who was an actress in the theatre asked my mother if she could borrow a scarf for her neck because she wanted to drive along the sea in her open-top car. My mother gave her a long scarf. The actress declined the scarf and said that a very famous dancer in France suffocated from one like that. She was named Isadora Duncan. She was riding in her open-top car and had a long scarf around her neck. On the drive, the scarf flapped in the air, wrapped itself around the rear tire, and suffocated the dancer Isadora Duncan. My fourth dead European guest

was Molière. I had been cured of tuberculosis and was acting in a play by Molière at the state theatre. From adult actors, I heard that Molière had died on stage, and so he too received prayers at night. I prayed every day (until one day I fell in love) for dead Turkish people and Madame Bovary, Robinson Crusoe, Isadora Duncan and Molière. When I fell in love, I started neglecting the dead a little.

It is not only the faces of movie stars that people first exchange between countries, but also the dead.

In my childhood, my parents moved from the Asian to the European side of Istanbul and back again on several occasions because they were in love with Istanbul and wanted to live in every part of the city. Whenever we were living on the Asian side, my father would look in the direction of the European side and say, “Europe is there.” Then he would be silent. I would look at his face to see Europe there. Sometimes he would count the lights from houses on the European side, shining on the hills in the direction of Asia. Cars drove on the European side, and looked like stars moving in a row, continuously twinkling in the direction of Asia. Some evenings, my mother would say to my father: “If they can count the stars in heaven, then they can count the lights in European Istanbul too.” Whenever my father told my mother that he would have to take care of something on the European side of Istanbul the next morning, my mother would carefully pick out his shirt and his pants with him that night, and these would already be hanging together on a clothes-hanger on the balcony. At night, the white color of the shirt would shine in my eyes, and it would seem to me as though shirt and pants were looking forward to their trip to Europe so much that they couldn’t sleep the night before.

Our neighbor Madame Athena, an Istanbul Greek, would pull her cheeks—which had become old by then, in my childhood—back behind her ears and stick them there with a piece of tape. I was supposed to help her do it. With the piece of tape behind her ears, Madame Athena would go with me to the port. I was eight years old. She looked young with her cheeks pulled back, which is why I walked fast. She wanted to walk as fast as I did and, in doing so, fell into the street sometimes. From time to time, she would tell me that she was neither Asian nor European, she was Byzantine, and she walked with me to the church Hagia Sophia. I loved the Hagia Sophia. Its floor was uneven, and on the walls you could see frescos of Christ without a cross, and this Christ was a very handsome man. I tried to imitate the way he held his fingers. His thumb was touching his little finger and his ring finger, with the other two fingers extended. Madame Athena told me that there used to be two crazy people in Istanbul. One of them would stand on the European shore and say, “from here, Istanbul is mine,” and the other would stand on the Asian side of the shore and cry out to the European side, “from here, Istanbul is mine.” Once Madame Athena and I took a ship on our return trip from Europe to the Asian part. Madame Athena showed me a little tower on the sea. “The Byzantine Emperor whose daughter was prophesied to be bitten and killed by a snake, had this Leander’s Tower (Maiden’s Tower) built out at sea in front of the Asian shore, and he hid his daughter there. When the girl was longing for figs one day and someone sailed a basket of figs over to her from the European side of the city, she was bitten by the snake that had been hiding in the basket and died.”

I grew up in Istanbul between the Asian and the European part of the city, and over our two heavens I saw rainbows, the moon, snow, the sun, the stars, thunder and lightning. One night when thunder and lightning appeared over Europe’s and Asia’s heaven, I was sitting on a ship that was bringing me from the European to the Asian side. Tea vendors were carrying tea around, change jingling in their pockets. When

we went over to the European side of the ship, the thunder and lightning stopped and the moon appeared over the port. Anywhere you went on the ship, you caught hold of the moon. On this night, everyone had a little moon in their hands. When the ship departed, a couple was sitting next to me. The young man said, “So you gave someone else the key to your apartment too. I’m leaving. Goodbye.” He jumped from deck into the sea and dove into the moonlight. The ship was exactly in the middle between Europe and Asia. All the people hurried to the railing. The ship tilted with the mass of people, even the tea glasses slid toward the railing with their saucers. The tea vendors screamed, “Tea money, tea money.” The ship’s crew threw two life preservers down to the young man, but he did not want a life preserver. The ship turned and went after the young man, in the direction of Europe, and eventually a rescue boat picked him up out of the sea. The moon, which was now exactly between Europe and Asia in the heavens, tracked everything that happened, and when young man was pulled on board with wet clothes and wet hair, someone asked him: “Where did you want to run off to, brother?” He answered, “To Europe.” To Europe, to Europe. The ship turned toward Asia, the tea vendors found their customers and collected their change, the moon shone on the empty tea glasses, but suddenly the ship turned back to the European side, because it had forgotten the life preservers, which were making their way in the direction of Europe. To Europe, to Europe.

It was often discussed in Istanbul, on both sides. Are we Europeans? Where does Europe begin? How much are we European? To become real Europeans, we’d still have to eat up two hundred bakeries. We won’t make it, belonging to Europe. Where are we, where is Europe?

European cars never got in crashes. European dogs all studied at European dog schools. European women were real blondes.

In my youth, I was in Istanbul during the movement of ’68, and I traveled on ships between the Asian and the European side of Istanbul with books in hand, including Kafka, Büchner, Hölderlin, Böll, Joyce, Conrad, Borchert, and, outside, seen from the ship’s window, the shore on the European side rose up high from the southwest wind like in my childhood and came crashing down, the shore with its houses, Byzantine walls, Orthodox and Armenian churches, the Genoese Tower and the Ottoman palaces and mosques. It was raining and beating against the ship’s window, and I was reading Büchner’s *Woyzeck* and in a flash of lightning I saw a Turkish man before me who could have been Woyzeck. As a child, my first European guests were dead people: Madame Bovary, Robinson Crusoe, Isadora Duncan, Molière. As a young woman in the movement of ’68 in Istanbul, I held the European dead in my hands and in my heart again, as books, on ships between Asia and Europe, and the moon over Istanbul shone on these books at night and lit them up. When I emigrated to Berlin later on to work at a theatre, it never seemed to me as though I had emigrated to Europe. We performed Büchner’s *Woyzeck* at the Schauspielhaus Bochum. I saw Woyzeck in the theatre, no longer in German streets. But Woyzeck existed in Turkish streets. There you could see men who would move you like Büchner’s figure Woyzeck. I was in Europe with my dead friends. They had not left me alone here. Prinz von Homburg, Woyzeck, Hamlet, Heinrich Böll’s *Und sagte kein einziges Wort*, Wolfgang Borchert’s *Draußen vor der Tür*, Brecht, Kafka, they are in Europe’s heaven next to the moon, and they move people even if they are far away. It is the dead who have made this European heaven.