

# THE RUG BAZAAR

*A Chapbook*

**MARYLEE MACDONALD**

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## FOREWORD

DAVID JAMES POISSANT

*The Rug Bazaar* is a duet of stories, both of which concern American women traveling in Turkey. Both are love stories, and both seem to fly in the face of everything you'd think a love story could be. These are independent stories, yet, as a pair, they harmonize. In music, we might call this "call and response," how one instrument follows another, and, in following, comments on the first. I'll leave it to the reader to pick the order in which these two pieces might best be read. But, surely, read them both! Much of the beauty of *The Rug Bazaar* is to be found in the way each story complements the other.

Jeanne Leiby, the writer, editor, and teacher in whose memory this chapbook series is named, was a mentor to me early in my career. I wish I'd known her well enough to call her a friend. She published

two of my stories during her short time at The Southern Review, and I was always grateful, not just for the publication, but for her taking the stories she took. Jeanne took risks. She was a fan of unusual stories, a friend to the weird. The stories you'll find here, "Youthful Acts of Charity" and "Bonds of Love & Blood," are two such stories. I can't say whether Jeanne would have admired them as I admire them, but, as Jake says at the end of *The Sun Also Rises*, "Isn't it pretty to think so."

David James Poissant is the author of *The Heaven of Animals: Stories*, winner of the 2015 GLCA New Writers Award and the Silver Medal for fiction from the Florida Book Awards, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and an Amazon Best Book of the Year. His stories and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Glimmer Train*, *The New York Times*, *One Story*, *Playboy*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, and in several annual anthologies including *New Stories from the South* and *Best New American Voices*. He is a professor at the University of Central Florida where he teaches in the Creative Writing MFA Program and serves as an advisory editor to *The Florida Review*.

Learn more about [David James Poissant's](#) writing.

## BONDS OF LOVE AND BLOOD

**I**t was getting on towards dusk, and I had stopped by the rug shop to tell Hamdi farewell. While the tense little Kurd with the shining eyes talked to his boss, Duran Duran, on the phone, I studied a framed photograph of a village somewhere in eastern Turkey. On a rolling, grassless steppe, a settlement of low, domed houses huddled. No water vessels or stacks of wood, no clotheslines or looms, nothing to announce that, here, people needed warmth, light, water, food, or wore clothes or made love or laughed.

Wedged in a corner of the frame was a faded color photo of two boys with hollow, black eyes. The older boy was Hamdi. Even then his smile occupied half his face. Or maybe it was not a smile so much as a grimace of anxiety, hunger, and

despair. The younger boy, his forehead shielded with bangs, had the perfectly round face of a baby, which told me that he was still under the protection of a woman's care, maybe still fed by her or favored with the extra cup of goat's milk on which the boys must have survived. The younger boy's hair was raggedly cut, and his chin shadowed by the dust ground into its pores. His belly button stuck out of a stomach that looked pregnant, and at the end of his too-long arms, his hands hung limp. Rickets, no doubt.

Why did one child fall through the cracks, and another not? It was a question that had preoccupied me for most of my adult life.

I looked around the carpet shop for the grown-up Hamdi. With a painfully forced smile, he spoke in bursts of Turkish into the phone. Hamdi's face had a gouged, lean look that made him handsome despite his sunken cheeks. Another bad boy to add to the list of men I wished I'd never gotten involved with, Hamdi had immediately drawn me into the orbit of his life. As if this day wasn't going to be hard enough, I had to deal with my period. The Turkish tampons were useless, and I needed another Motrin for cramps.

"Hamdi, I need something to drink."

"No, no, Angela. I get you tea in half a second."



Hamdi put his hand over the receiver and flapped his hand toward the rug-covered bench.

I didn't want him ordering me apple tea or calling little kids to bring a Coke, and I had gone through his album of postcards often enough to realize that I was just one of the many women he had seduced. The late afternoon sun spilling down the stairs beckoned me outside. Did I want to leave or not? I wasn't sure. At home nothing waited for me but my job as a postal inspector, and I had an absolutely dead and vacant life compared to the wild ride Istanbul had been.

Standing on the outside stairs, I pointed to the plaza where Hamdi had first seen me staring into space. Three weeks. A lifetime ago. He gave me a thumbs-up to show he would soon stop talking to his boss. I meant to leave the instant I'd thanked him for showing me around. His enormous key chain jangled as he triple-locked the door and came bounding up behind me, squinting at the sun as it fell behind the domes of the Hagia Sofia. His little hop-walk as he tried to keep pace with my long legs made me think about that picture of his brother and of Jamie, the brother I had not seen in many a year.

"Why you run away?" Hamdi said.

"I'm walking, not running," I said. "You don't have to come with me."

"I just want to be your friend, Angela."

Resolutely, I dodged a streetcar on Sultan Ahmet, hoping Hamdi would give it a rest, and sat down near the Hippodrome fountain, listening to the muezzin chant "*Al-lah Akhbar! Al-lah Akhbar!*" from the Blue Mosque's needle-thin minaret.

"Why don't you let me be your friend?" Hamdi said.

"What makes you think you're not?"

"Your eyes."

I turned away and sighed.

"See, that what you do."

I almost believed him, that he wanted to be my friend; but the moment I softened, he would see it in my eyes and try to squeeze my hand with his sweaty palm. If I ever came back to Turkey, I vowed never to set foot in the store again, even if it meant walking a mile around the walls of Hagia Sofia to reach my pension. Hamdi had an urgent sincerity that he pressed on you, whether you were up for it or not. I mean, people have their own problems, right? You don't need to be every stranger's friend.

"I really just came to say goodbye," I said.

"That's it? That's all?" When he turned his face to the sun, his pupils shrank. The glitter in his eyes and his half-shaven beard made him look jacked-up, but I

couldn't guess on what. He pressed his hands together and looked down, dejected.

"You send me a postcard, or no, just forget about Hamdi?"

"Oh, all right. I'll send you a postcard," I said. "Now I'm going."

"Too bad, Angela, you will miss the night I planned for you."

"Yes, it's too bad." I crossed my arms.

"Kathryn was going to meet us for dinner."

"Kathryn? The mythical Kathryn?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd understand."

"What is there to understand?" I said. "I think maybe I'll just stay here and watch the movie."

In the middle of the dirt square, a fountain splashed up intermittently like a geyser. The women wore long gray coats and light scarves tied under their chins. Men in Western dress—jeans and open-necked shirts—herded their wives and children toward wooden bleachers in front of a big outdoor screen. I was just the tiniest bit grateful for Hamdi's presence. My jeans had shrunk in a commercial dryer, and I had not bothered with a head covering.

Grandmothers and older sisters guarded small children who ran back and forth to the fountain, dipping their hands in the water and leaning over to see the faces of who they might become.

"Are you not hungry, Angela?"

"What did you tell Kathryn?"

"Nothing. Just to meet us at the store."

I was mildly curious about Kathryn.

"Oh, all right. Let's have dinner then."

"After, we drive up to see lights of the Bosphorus."

"What is it, some kind of lovers' lane?"

"A place to see the view. Your last night I make special send-off."

"No, Hamdi. I've got a four a.m. flight and I haven't packed."

He held his hands up and said, "We'll see, we'll see," and I thought, nobody can make me do something I don't want to do. Jamie had driven that lesson home. To get the \$10,000 for the defense lawyer he wanted me to hire, I went to an IVF clinic and donated eggs; but no amount of help on my part could change the direction of Jamie's life.

I never should have told Hamdi about my brother. That had sort of spilled out of me one hot afternoon when the air was motionless and the damp sheets called out for some further intimacy. I had offered up a fact about Jamie, that unless he got clemency, he'd be in the slammer till he was seventy-three.



A WHITE FIAT roared up and Hamdi pushed me into the back seat. Neither Hamdi nor the driver moved their seats, even though both were half a foot shorter than me. I suppose I represented some sort of conquest for Hamdi, like a short lumberjack and a tall tree.

After a two minute drive, the car jolted to a stop in front of a carpet store. Maybe we'd driven one block. In the rearview mirror, the driver stared at me. The musty smell of blood filled the car, and I was relieved when Hamdi opened the door and let me out. My work colleague, Fred, would have told me to go back to my pension, lie down, and take a nap. A father with three grown daughters, he can tell from my eyes when I have cramps. I'm kind of lethargic when my period actually hits me, but this time, I was relieved not to find myself pregnant.

Two men waited in the doorway of a carpet store.

"Why are we stopping here?" I said, going inside.

"Kathryn will meet us in half hour," Hamdi said.

"Look, I am almost out of money." The only ATM that would take my card was at the Four Seasons Hotel. "I am not going to buy a carpet."

"You pay too much for carpet in Duran Duran's

shop. I do you a favor now and get you low price, so it all average out.”

After I went to the bathroom and stuffed toilet paper in my undies, I sat down on a bench and waited. My ovaries hurt and I massaged them with my fingertips. The IVF thing had left me with scar tissue and a longing for the kids out there—if there were any—who looked like me.

The two carpet dealers, light-haired Turks with polyester pants and gold tie clips, spoke almost no English. Their job was to lift the carpets and float them down on the floor, giving the corner a smart snap or brushing the pile so I could see how it looked, light or dark. Hamdi dragged one of the rugs closer and folded back a corner. He re-explained the difference between aniline and vegetable dyes and how the dye went all the way to the bottom of the pile. As the rugs stacked up and I slumped back against the wall, massaging my abdomen and, as Fred says, “zoning out,” Hamdi unfolded a brochure that explained the symbolism of creatures from Noah’s Ark; he talked about young weavers who worked at the looms until they married.

What a way to spend your puberty, I thought, and swung my feet up on the bench. Looking from me to Hamdi, the two carpet guys stood with their arms folded. Hamdi asked me did I like the red or

green, and I said red. I did like red. And in a certain mood, I could sit all day listening and watching handsome Turkish men throw rugs down on the floor. It was like having an art gallery displayed at your feet, only your back doesn't kill you from standing.

Kathryn arrived, fifty pounds thinner than the picture Hamdi had belatedly shown me. Like a housewife who'd been vacuuming all day and just run down to the store for cigarettes, she had her hair up in curlers and wore loose, ill-fitting pants and a baggy vest with droopy pockets. After unpinning her curls and shaking out dandruff on her shoulders, she sat down.

"I'm starving," she said.

"When I finish," Hamdi said.

"I'm not going to buy a carpet," I said

Hamdi crawled over to the tower of rugs and knelt before me, hands clasped in supplication. "I want to change jobs. I told these guys..." Hamdi jerked a thumb toward the two other Turks "... I can bring them retail business, and tonight, I must show them how good I sell. That's why I bring you, Angela. You my best customer and friend."

Kathryn lit a cigarette. "Hamdi, she doesn't want to buy."

Hamdi threw out his hands like a comical boy.

"No tourist comes to Turkey expecting to buy a rug, but they all leave with one."

"She doesn't want one."

Kathryn, my ally, even though we'd just met and even though I'd been fucking her husband and she probably knew it, stood up. I put my feet down on the ground. The two men from the shop looked at each other and said something to Hamdi. Some plot they had been hatching had gone awry. Hamdi did some fast talking, and they shook hands.

"Last chance," Hamdi followed me out the door. "Last chance for such a good deal. No other tourist come this place. Only Turkish dealer, and I get in big trouble with Duran Duran if he find out I bring you here."

Next door to the carpet shop, the tilted crates of a fruit merchant rested on a flimsy table that I bumped, spilling pomegranates. The men from the carpet store and Hamdi scrambled after the rolling fruit; and then, in the mood of general handshaking, the two men from the store, who looked philosophical about the loss of the sale, reached for my hand and wished me well, and I pumped the hand of the dark-haired man who leaned stolidly against the picture window. The setup reminded me of walking down a lineup and shaking hands with felons, not that Fred and I ever booked anyone. As postal inspectors we mostly



opened crates with our pry bars and radioed for the police if we saw anything suspicious. The grocer whose hand I held in mine came up to my shoulder, and I looked down on the balding circle of his head and the way the shoulder pads of his jacket squared off the round contours of his chest. His greasy forehead bumped my chin.

"Pleasure meeting you," I said.

"I'm the driver," he said. "I'm the one who brought you here."

"Oh, right," I said. "Excuse me."

"I am Ahmet."

"Okay, Ahmet, let's move it along."

He rose on his tiptoes, and when someone passed him on the street, pushing his face into my breasts, he jumped back with a look of suffocated dismay. Short men don't usually like a big woman right up next to them. It aggravates what my brother used to call short man's complex. Jamie had six inches on me, and always felt, in his various encounters with police, that the shorter the officer, the more he'd be in for some billy club action. It gave me some sympathy for this poor Turk.



AT THE RESTAURANT, Ahmet sat next to Hamdi and Kathryn sat next to me, and I guess Hamdi had fixed it so Ahmet was supposed to be my date. The restaurant had taken over a quiet street, crowding the sidewalk with tables. To my surprise, Hamdi ordered the most expensive entrée, a feast of five kinds of kebabs, plus köfte and sliced lamb. Enough food for ten. Kathryn ate like she hadn't eaten for a week, and I felt hungry, too; but while Kathryn and I devoured the food, Hamdi and Ahmet turned their heads toward one another, mumbling in Turkish. Ahmet had the pitiable, droopy eyes of a starving dog.

I pointed to his plate. "You should eat."

"What? Oh." He looked down at his plate and picked up a kebab, rotating it like an ear of corn and nibbling it with dainty bites, but never putting it down to wipe his chin, which dripped on his tie. Finally, when I had sated myself, Hamdi flung his arm over Ahmet's shoulder.

"So, Angela, I am so happy for you to meet Ahmet who is like a brother to me."

"Don't say brother!" Kathryn said.

"It pains me, my darling, when you use that tone of voice."

"Brother this. Brother that." She turned to me. "And where am I supposed to get the money for rent, I ask you that?"

I frowned. "Do you work?"

"Work! It wouldn't be necessary for me to work, would it Hamdi? You would take care of me, wouldn't you, darling?"

Hamdi reached across the table and patted Kathryn's hand.

She removed it, as if she'd touched a hot burner. "Let's ask an impartial observer, shall we Hamdi?"

"Oh, Kathryn, I wish you wouldn't. I'll get the bill." He signaled the waiter, who brought the bill and left it sitting in the middle of the table. Both Hamdi and Ahmet reached for their cigarettes.

Kathryn took out her smokes and showed Hamdi the empty pack. "I'm out, darling. Shall we call each other darling tonight?"

He took a cigarette from his pack and transferred it to hers. "Don't worry, darling. Everything will be all right."

"Where are you from originally?" I said, fanning her smoke away.

"New Zealand. I met Hamdi the first day of my vacation in Istanbul. He scooped me right up, didn't he?" She looked over at Hamdi with a hate glare.

"How romantic," I said. "Quite a prize I should imagine."

"Kathryn has never accepted Hamdi's family," Ahmet said.

His voice had a silky earnestness that made me think of mobsters in old movies: Edward G. Robinson, parked on a dock and waiting for a delivery of machine guns.

"The truth is..." Hamdi draped his arm over the back of Ahmet's chair. "...Ahmet is like a brother to me."

"When Kathryn came," Ahmet said, "I bought cabinets for her apartment and helped her find furniture. Now she won't speak to me."

Kathryn blew a smoke ring and looked away.

"In fact, she's jealous because of the time we spend together," Ahmet said. He looked over at Hamdi, who gave Ahmet's shoulder another squeeze and then let go. "Hamdi rescued me. I was a university student, failing all my classes and hooked on drugs. He found me sleeping under a tree in a park and took me to a center for drug-addicted kids, which he supports with the money he makes from his job. The Turkish government doesn't have drug treatment programs. They just put you in jail."

"Is that so?" I said. Now this was interesting. I mean, we don't have enough rehab centers in our country. Addicts wait and wait and sometimes hit bottom, just because that's inevitable, or sometimes they get sentenced for dealing and spend the rest of their lives in jail. The justice system gave Jamie his

chance. As had I. He'd slept on my couch, stolen my ATM card, and wrecked my Camaro. In jail he could no longer bring chaos into my life. What I feared was Jamie getting early release, and then me having to teach him about cell phones and bank accounts. He never could hold any sort of job, not even used-car salesman.

"Sounds like they could use Nar-Anon over here," I said to Ahmet.

"We have it," Ahmet said. "Hamdi and I are both involved."

"Too involved, isn't that right, Hamdi?" Kathryn said. "Always money for the family, but not for the wife? Always spending the night out at a meeting, aren't we?" She turned to me again. "You think it's one way when you come here for the first time. What a gorgeous country. What gorgeous men. But when you live here day in and day out, it's another reality. Isn't it Hamdi?"

"I guess I'll take care of the bill," I said, hoping someone would argue.

"Thank you for inviting us to dinner," Kathryn said. "It's a relief to speak English. Hamdi refuses to speak English with me. Isn't that right, darling?"

Ahmet and Hamdi exchanged a look. I don't think he beat her. She was acting too bold for that. My brother's wife never would have challenged him

with questions, but then again, I never knew until he went to jail what went on at his house.

While I took out the last of my cash, Hamdi cleared his throat and said, "I wondered if you would consider making a small donation to the drug treatment center."

"No," I said.

Kathryn groaned. "He never gives up." She bummed another cigarette.

"Really what I need money for," Hamdi said, "is my brother. He is in a Turkish Army prison, and I must raise \$500 to get him out, or he will rot in there for the next twenty years."

"Let him rot," Kathryn said.

"Let him rot," Ahmet said. "Do you not know what the Quran advises? In 2:178, the Prophet says 'Equivalence is the law—the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the female for the female. If one is pardoned by the victim's kin, compensation shall be paid. This is an alleviation from your Lord and mercy.' Think about it Kathryn. Locking him away will only turn him into an unproductive and alienated person. If Hamdi gets him out, we can rehabilitate him and save his family from the shame."

"Shame, is it? There comes a time when a person doesn't deserve a second chance, don't you think?" She looked at me. "What's the law in your country?"

"Three strikes and you're out."

"He's my brother," Hamdi said, looking down at his knuckles. He shook his head. "My little brother."

I wished I'd never told him about my brother. Now he had this wedge, and I could feel him prying at the rock in me. I went to the bathroom, and Kathryn followed me.

"Do you happen to have a tampon?" I asked.

From the other stall, Kathryn said no she didn't. "Don't give him any money," she said. "No matter what he says."

"Does Hamdi even have a brother?"

"Oh yes," she said. "A younger brother. I'm so sick of all this 'love you like a brother' stuff. They love their brothers more than their wives." She flushed the toilet. "You know he has a woman in Finland and a seven-year-old child. You'd think he'd want to send the child some money, wouldn't you?"

I agreed that I would expect that. Still, the brother must be the one in the picture. I had pictures like that, pictures inside my head. My hand on my brother's shoulder. Dressed up for Easter. Jumping off a dock at a Wisconsin lake. Years before he got into trouble, he had loved dinosaurs and skateboarding and Parcheesi.



WE PILED INTO THE CAR, me and Kathryn in back. Ahmet drove a few blocks and pulled over to the curb. Hamdi opened his door and flipped the seat forward so Kathryn could climb out.

"Goodnight, you two!" he said cheerfully. "Kathryn's tired, aren't you dear, and Ahmet's going to drive you up to see the lights of the Bosphorus."

Kathryn jerked Hamdi's arm. "Did you warn her?"

"Of course," he said and turned to us. "Enjoy the view."

I was sitting in the back. In case I had to grab the wheel or reach for the key, I moved to the seat Hamdi had vacated.

"Skip the Bosphorus," I told Ahmet. "Take me back to my pension."

Ahmet sat like a block of stone, and I turned to watch Hamdi and Kathryn enter a dingy alley door. Ahmet's fingers squeezed my knee. I put his hand back on the wheel. He wiggled his fingers and, scowling at me, started the car. It was eleven, and I was dead tired. As long as he didn't have a weapon, I could defend myself. Put him in a headlock. Put two fingers in his eyes or knee him in the nuts. I closed my eyes, lulled by the car winding through darkened streets.

Ahmet pulled into a crowded, paved parking lot.



“Hamdi told me to bring you here,” Ahmet said. “It’s your last night in Istanbul, and he wanted you to see something special.”

“Oh, all right.” I opened the door. “Let’s get it over with.”

At a city park on the crest of a hill, I saw newly planted trees and fresh sod. Below were the lights of the Bosphorus, the strait that divided Europe and Asia. The commerce of the world passed at our feet: oil and contraband and arms and grain, massive tankers that, from this distance, looked no bigger than bathtub toys. How great it would be if the drug traffic could be strangled here. If Afghanistan’s poppies never made it to New York. If dealers like my brother had nothing to deal. Cutting off the supply was the only thing that could have saved him.

Ahmet led me past an outdoor bar of happy drunks. Granite stairs continued down past terraces where entwined couples had taken over all the benches. And no wonder. The moon hung like a silver mirror above the illuminated spans of a bridge. White and red beacons cast narrow beams ahead of ships’ prows, and spumes of foam trailed from the sterns.

“It feels like you can see the whole world from here,” I said.

A couple vacated a bench and we sat down.

"The Bosphorus Strait connects the Black Sea and the Mediterranean," Ahmet said, crowding against me while delivering his geography lesson. I was not the least attracted to this pudgy Turk whose shirt didn't even button. He hadn't one third of Hamdi's energy. Hamdi had fucked me into a state of oblivion.

"What do you do?" I said.

"I'm a customs inspector," he said.

"Is that right? I'm a postal inspector. I work for the US Postal Service."

"Do you carry a gun?"

"At home, but not here."

He shook his head. "We have such an unfortunate problem with hashish and heroin in this country. Not only do we ship a lot of drugs overseas, but many of our own citizens fall victim to this perversion. I feel as though I owe my life to Hamdi. He knows he can call me any time of the day or night and I will help him out. He is like a brother to me."

"You sound like a broken record," I said, "but what's the story with Hamdi's real brother?"

"Did you ever see *Midnight Express*?"

"Sure," I said. "Horrible movie."

"Hamdi tells me you have a brother."

Damn, Hamdi. "I'm feeling cold. Let's go."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to have a closer view of the water?"

"Take me home or I will go back to the bar and call a taxi."

He made a grab and circled me with his arms, pressing his face between my breasts. Air whistled through his nostrils. He appeared to be smelling me. I drummed my fingers on his back.

"I know you can't breathe down there. Let me go."

"My wife doesn't understand me at all."

I laughed and grabbed his tie, pulling it until his cheeks bulged and turned red. "You seem like a reasonable person," I said. "Why do you persist?"

He held up his hands in surrender and I released him. We started uphill, Ahmet trying to catch his breath.

"Hamdi told me, 'Angela is a warm woman. A caring woman. She understands when a man is unhappy with his wife.'"

"That asshole." I regretted every minute I'd spent with Hamdi and every confidence I'd shared, and I wondered how he'd gotten me to reveal myself, when normally I don't. I don't even know what it's like to be married because I've never been. We walked past the bar, Ahmet thankfully keeping his hands to himself.

"Do you work at night?" I said.

"Yes. How do you know that?"

"You're so chipper and alert."

"What does 'chipper' mean?"

"It means happy. Like a bird. Chirp. Chirp."

He laughed falsely. "Chirper." He gargled on the sound.

"No, 'chipper.'"

"Shipper," he said.

"Right," I said. "Perfect pronunciation."

In the car I dropped my seat back. Maybe I would just sleep here. Ahmet bent sideways and rested his head on my breasts, and in spite of myself, I stroked his greasy hair. His shoulders shook, and I felt tears wet my blouse.

"Oh, what's the matter? Is it your unsympathetic wife?"

"Not the wife," he said. "I lied. I'm not married."

Sure, he wasn't.

"I'm thinking about Hamdi's brother."

"Does he have a name?"

"Kemal." He raised his tear-streaked face. "Kemal is his name. He lived with me for two years at the center. My bunkmate."

"You made it, and he didn't."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. "He fell apart when I left. You know their parents died. Since Hamdi was fourteen, he has taken care of his brother. Begged. Picked cotton. Just

the two of them. Kemal never went to school. He has no skills. Hamdi and Kemal walked to Ankara from near the border with Iraq."

"That's a long walk."

"You have sheeps at home?"

"You mean like 'baa baa black sheep?'"

"What is called the man who looks after the sheeps?"

"Shepherd," I said.

I was prepared for him to grope me again, but he started the car. Very slowly he snaked down the switchbacks.

"Does your Bible not contain a story of the Good Shepherd?" Ahmet said.

In Sunday school that had always been my favorite Bible story, but I had lost my faith.

We drove along the shoreline and passed several hotels where Ahmet offered to spend the night, or the three hours of it that were left, and I accused him of driving me all around hell's half-acre instead of taking me the direct way. Then I noticed the battlements of Topkapi Palace, and knew that he had, in fact, been taking me back to my pension.

"Would you mind stopping at the Four Seasons?" I said. "They have an ATM, and I need some cash to get me to the airport."

The car slowed to a crawl.

I grabbed the handle, ready to jump.

"Forget sleeping with me," Ahmet said.

"Fine. I will."

"The money is the most important thing," Ahmet said. "Hamdi only needs \$500. You can loan it to him, and he will pay you back just as soon as he pays the bribe and gets Kemal released. You know what Turkish prisons are like. You can't let him rot in jail. Hamdi told me you're his only hope of coming up with the money. He wanted to sell you a rug to make the commission. That's why he pressed so hard for you to buy. That is the honorable way. The business way. Now, he feels so much shame to ask you that he begged me to explain. I must have that \$500 tonight. If Hamdi doesn't pay it tomorrow, they will transfer Kemal to another prison, and there will be no way to get him out. 'If one forfeits what is due to him as a charity, it will atone for his sins.'"

What did any of this mean? Why did I have to help?

"This is not my problem," I said.

"Angela, Hamdi wishes to offer prayers for your brother at the same time he prays for the release of Kemal."

"Oh, for god's sake," I said. "I have half a mind to do it just to shut you up."

"You will?" he said. "You will bring me the money?"

"I'll think about it," I said.

"What is your brother's name?" he said.

"Jamie."

"I have my Quran in the glove box." He let the engine idle. "I will wait here till you come back."

The street was dark except for the bright, narrow sidewalk and the spotlights embedded around the perimeter of a high, stucco wall. The Four Seasons was a former city jail turned into a luxury hotel. A giant glass door had replaced the wooden gates.

Exhaustion had me almost in a trance, and I paused in the entry to look at the sepia photos of prisoners in striped uniforms and fez-like cotton caps. Leg-irons attached one man to the next.

I walked to the desk. The clerk, a young, blue-eyed Brit, asked if he could help me. I hadn't written Jamie in too many years to count, and I didn't want it to be one minute longer.

"I need to write a letter," I said.

"Certainly," he said, handing me stationery and a pen.

I looked out the glass to where Ahmet waited. "That man is following me. I haven't the least idea who he is. I wonder if your security guard could make him go away."

## YOUTHFUL ACTS OF CHARITY

**T**he ashtray of the little Fiat overflowed with snuffed-out butts that spilled onto the floor, while the driver, Harun, swayed in time to a Turkish singer clanging finger cymbals. Bonnie Cross, fifty-five, gripped the handle on the passenger door to keep from lunging sideways. Her breasts jiggled, and she looked down anxiously at the buttonholes. She hadn't brought a safety pin, even though this blouse was an oldie, back when size eighteens still fit. Sun poured through the windshield, and suction taped her thighs to the leather seat.

"I'm sooo hot," she said.

Harun, half her age, threw open the vents. Her skirt ballooned, and his eyes rolled like marbles, dropping in her lap.

"Why is it, men think they're God's gift to



women?" she said, punching down her skirt. "Or in your case, Allah's gift?"

"But is true, don't you think? Womans need man, and man, womans."

"Right, they do." Looking out at the Mediterranean, she saw a cruise ship, similar to her own. She had come here on a singles trip, but was glad to have hired this waiter, squinting against the glare, to show her "the real Turkey." He'd borrowed his brother's midget car and kept bumping her arm, but she didn't mind. Harun's long fingers on the gearshift reminded her of that old game, scissors, paper, rock. An adorable curl bounced on his forehead. Somewhere in his genetic line stood a Mongol warrior; she could practically hear hooves beating across the steppes. In less than a week, she'd be sucked back into the Chicago rat race—the padded office cubicle, pizza dinners, and PowerPoint presentations. Consulting for hospitals, she made a living, not a life, but life was what she'd come here for, and as hard as she worked, she felt entitled to splurge.

They arrived in a village a few miles from the coast where Harun had arranged for her to meet the locals. His great-uncle, a stooped farmer in a black beret, led them upstairs, and the great-aunt, in harem pants and headscarf, motioned Bonnie to a seat on the carpet. Out came a platter of appetizers. As

Bonnie filled her plate and bit into a stuffed grape leaf, oil dribbled down her chin. Making a grab for Harun's pants, the great-uncle turned the boy's pocket inside out. "*Cebimde para yokken, siz hic bir sey istemiyeceksiniz,*" the old man said.

When Bonnie asked what that meant, Harun blushed. "He say next time, come with money in mine pocket. Is family joke. Mine father not rich man like great-uncle."

Bonnie glanced at the small portions the others had taken; she was ready for seconds. "Is your father poor?" she said.

He shrugged. "Born poor. Die poor."

Mea culpa, Harun, she thought, ashamed to have embarrassed him. Eyes cast down, he did penance for her gluttony, nodding like a servant while the great-aunt fiddled with her scarf and told long, musical stories. Occasionally, Harun muttered a low "*Evet.*" If the great-uncle laughed, beating his beret against his knee, Harun laughed, too. "*Hayir! Hayir!*" he said, his voice rising. The old people were reminiscing about the time of Ataturk, Harun told her. Back then, the great-uncle and Harun's father had kidnapped a beautiful young woman, tied her to a donkey, and carried her down to the grandfather's compound, fighting off her father and brothers with guns.

"How barbaric," Bonnie said.

"Make mine mother many tears," Harun said.

"Your mother?"

"I tell you later."

Harun raised his eyebrows and motioned toward the door. Next stop on the itinerary, a swim in the sea. He took her hand. Without the smirk that would have betrayed the secret thoughts of any guy back home—she was fat, fat, fat—he helped her to her feet, pressing the back of her hand with his thumb. Forceful, these Turks, even young ones.

Dodging wet laundry in the courtyard, she said, "Didn't your mother hate your father?"

"Not for long." He closed the gate.

As the car spun out, Bonnie saw a gray donkey with flattened ears tethered to an olive tree. "But she was kidnapped."

He was silent for moment. "Turkish men know how make woman happy."

"And what do Turkish women say?"

"She have fourteen children." He smiled. "I baby."



A RUTTED, gravel road twisted steeply down to the cove at Claros, and Harun edged the car into the first

turn, his eyes following the zigzags. The car slid on two wheels, and the steering column chattered as they spun downhill, careening madly over the washboards. Toad's Wild Ride, she thought, exhilarated. The car rolled to a stop by a bathhouse, where she saw a gangly pole with a rusty showerhead and a windbreak of weather-beaten cypress.

*"Allah akhbar!"* Harun's head dropped against the steering wheel.

"That was superb," she said.

He unstuck his hands. "I hope I not have trouble to get it up."

She took a deep breath. Her heart began to race, and she was about to say, half-seriously, don't worry, I can help.

"That little joke," he said. "Easier for car go up than come down."

Vaguely annoyed, Bonnie stayed by the car, watching him amble down to the water, turning over rocks with his toe. With the hatchback open, she peeled off her clothes and, grabbing a handful of belly, longed for a steak knife to trim three decades from the lean girl underneath. She glanced back at the chaparral-covered cliffs; they reminded her of Big Sur and Esalen where, in her youth, she'd soaked in the hot baths and studied massage. Fritz Perls, the white-haired guru of the inner life, must be long

dead. What had become of the burnt-out therapists with droopy muscles and baggy skin, begging for a piece of her young ass? Ah, what youthful acts of charity loving them had been. Now here she was, equally ridiculous, breasts bulging out—white, fleshy melons—thinking, at least my face looks young. Giving the elastic around her legs a final snap, Bonnie sighed, thankful for the tummy panel and the slimming effect of black. A beach-towel sarong hid her dimpled cellulite.

When she emerged from the bushes, Harun sat fully dressed on a picnic table. With his cigarette, he made a circular motion. She scrunched up her face and walked across the rocky beach toward the surf.

“What you do?” he said. “I ask turn around. You turn around, please.”

Bonnie stuck out her tongue and pulled the towel over her shoulders.

“You not swim with towel. Drop towel, I say.” He motioned again, eyes smoldering.

She dropped the towel.

“Beautiful.” In the air, he traced a shape like a kidney bean. “I admire women of your body type.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, really. Well fed womans have lots of, lots of good spirit.”

She rolled her eyes and took mincing steps to the

water. Shards of ice pierced her ankles. Gasping, she staggered out.

Harun pulled off his shirt and rolled up the legs of his pants. He had a slight frame and sinewy, lean limbs. Harun, a howling name, like the wind that blew straight into her ears. He unzipped.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Shining." He pointed up. "I take sun."

"Didn't you bring a suit?"

He shrugged. "I forgot."

"You can swim in your pants." Long pants, she meant.

"I don't want swim," he said. "Just take sun."

His trousers dropped. He looked down at the puddle of clothes and stepped onto the stones, walking toward where she stood at the water's edge. For a second, she thought he had on little girl's underpants. Sage green and iridescent, his briefs had thin elastic around the top. No fly. He hiked up the sides to cover his bony hips. Standing next to her and with his fingers laced above his head, he stretched; his underarms were clean-shaven.

Wind tangled her hair and she lowered her eyes.

It was the wind, she supposed, that gave him a hard-on, thicker than a garden hose, but smaller than a cucumber. He caught her staring and blushed. A

moment later, he spread his towel on the rocks and lay down, shielding his eyes with a white tube sock.

Think about something else, she told herself. Spreading her towel next to his, she mentally unfolded the travel brochures for Pergamom and Troy. At twelve, she'd wanted to be an archaeologist; in college, she'd studied marine biology. Now, thieves pillaged grave sites and dolphins choked on condoms. Even the beautiful ocean was doomed. Before today, had she been feeling alive or dead?

At the smell of lighter fluid, she looked up. The sky had turned postcard blue, and the ocher cliff made a backdrop for his face. God, to have such creamy skin. With his hand, he shielded the twisted tip of a joint and took a drag.

"My life after Army suck," he said. "Sorry. Is only way I can make myself stand life now."

"May I?"

He plugged the joint between her lips. The dry, sweet smoke seared her lungs. She coughed. Hadn't smoked in thirty years.

On the next exchange, her fingers slid against his hand. "Harun, Harun. Your name is a song."

Smoke rings spun toward her lips, and she inhaled his spent breath. A cottony taste thickened her tongue. The joint finished, she lay down again, cheek on her hands. Desire migrated to the hair folli-

cles of her arm. She moved a fraction of an inch, then moved again.

"You bring water?" he said.

"No."

"Why not? American tourist always have water."

"I have a name, you know, and it's not 'American tourist.'"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry."

For ten minutes they lay like parallel logs, and she thought she would die.

He lit another joint. She pinned the roach with a hair clip.

"*Su,*" he said. "Water in Turkish. I teach you Turkish word. You teach English."

"Your English is pretty good."

"Not good enough. If English good, I be night manager at Excelsior. You remember he? Short fat guy? He hate me. One night I want fuck Japanese lady, and I say him, 'Give me room key,' and he shout and say, 'No key!' and I say, 'Okay, I fuck she in hall.' On top floor is fold-up bed. I fuck she all night long. Next day manager make mouth like sour taste. What you think? His English good?"

She didn't remember the night manager's English, but she remembered the manager all right. He had picked up Bonnie's plate, trying to make her sit at the cruise ship's banquet table where widows



had already taken out their grandchildren's pictures. Harun had swiped the plate out of the manager's hands and told Bonnie it was okay to sit at a table for two. A moment later, he presented her with a paper rose made from napkins and the offer of a private tour on his day off.

"Mrs. Bonnie," he said, "what means your name?"

"Beautiful."

"Beautiful," he said. "Is good."

"And it's not 'Mrs.' We say 'Miss' for unmarried women."

"Not marry?" He propped himself on his elbows. "But you beautiful womans. What's matter? You frigid?"

She laughed. "Not hardly. The right man never came along."

"Must be something wrong with American mans."

"The married men are okay. But in the single category you have the alcoholics, the Vietnam vets, the bitter divorced males, the sports junkies, the men who crash at nine o'clock, men with custody of small children and dogs, HIV-positives, ex-coke-addicts, AA groupies, tortured artists and failed musicians, men who'll date for five years but won't get married, men who'll marry but screw your best friend, loners,

workaholics, or impotent depressives. Oh, I forgot the men who only like thin women and only care about money."

Harun shook with laughter. "Mrs. Bonnie, too much words. Make money is business of man everywhere. Farm. Sell rug. Pick *oleeves*. But most important business is make jiggy jiggy. Hard work."

He flipped over onto his back, then to his front; over and back. Which side was up? Lying on her stomach, eyes closed, she wanted him desperately and hoped he was using these turns to close the gap. Her arm hairs felt skin. She raised her head. Only a wrinkle in her towel. Harun sat two feet away, examining his foot. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Smiling, he wiggled his toes. "You make *massaggi*?"

"You want a massage?"

"I want."

"Lie down on your stomach," she said.

He did.

She straddled his legs and tried not to crush him. The thin elastic of his underwear slid easily past the sharp bones of his hips, and as her fingers climbed the knobby bones of his spine, she adjusted her breathing to his. Then she moved off him, sitting to one side, and worked down his calf muscles to his

feet. Finally, she put his big toe in her mouth and sucked it.

He turned over quickly and she gasped. "I don't do fronts."

"You know very well how to touch the body." He closed his eyes and she lay next to him, tucking herself in the crook of his arm. Maybe he would climb on top. Oh, what the hell. Give before you get. In the horseshoe of his ribs grew a thatch of hair and her fingers dove into it. The muscles of his stomach tightened. He arched his back and moaned. Seizing her hair, he heaved her face onto his stomach.

"You make saxophone?"

"What?" She raised her cheek from his belly button.

"You make saxophone?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want, I want. . ."

"What?"

"Never mind."



SHE HATED THAT GAGGING FEELING.

He let go of her hair. "Thank you very much."

She waited to see if he would pull down her

straps or slip his fingers inside her suit. He didn't move. She raised her cheek from his stomach and spat, then waded to the surf and washed her mouth out with the gritty backwash of the sea. At a makeshift shower, she swished handfuls of rusty water and dressed.

By the time she returned to the beach, Harun stood on the shore fully clothed and skipping stones. He demanded that she swim, and she thought about lobbing rocks at him, but didn't, and stormed off down the beach. When she returned, he avoided her eyes. She walked back to the car and slammed the door, signaling her desire to leave.

He got in and started the car.

The stench of cold tobacco made her nauseated and only grew more intense as he maneuvered up the switchbacks. Dust forced her to close the window.

The car reached the highway and she couldn't stop herself. "I make saxophone, and now you won't even look at me. What the fuck, Harun!"

Harun turned to look at her and his eyes had a pained expression; he swerved from the highway onto a side road, and an ancient tractor roared out of a farmer's lane.

"Watch out!" she screamed.

He said nothing.

During the twenty-minute drive, she endured the tightness in her chest and only exhaled when she saw her cruise ship rocking like a swan in Kuşadasi's oily harbor. Then, the crenellated towers of an ancient caravansary blocked the view as Harun wove through back streets until he found a parking place. The smell of fishy water made brushing her teeth a priority; but, before she could release herself from his tether, Harun took her elbow, steering past boys carrying trays with tiny glasses. She found herself inside a rug merchant's, plunked down on a bench, drinking apple tea. She swished the candy-apple liquid like mouthwash.

So this was his game, a carpet commission. A pile of rugs grew to be five feet high, and on top of it, he scurried like a beetle.

"Gorgeous!" she clapped, roaring with delight.

The Garden of Eden carpets he was showing her were similar, but of lesser quality, than the three rolled up in her stateroom. After several apple teas, she had to find a WC. "Honestly, Harun, no more. They are gorgeous though."

Harun climbed off the pile, jingling the change in his pocket. "English always say, 'gorgeous, gorgeous' but never buy. Americans say 'no thanks' and always buy."

She laughed, thinking of the job of men—"farm,

sell rug, pick *oleeves*, and make jiggy jiggy.” He was too much, this boy. She told the owner, a portly man standing by the door, that she had exceeded her credit card limit; she’d never had any intention of buying.

Screaming Turkish insults at Harun, the shopkeeper cast them out, and she found herself on a pedestrian mall. Beyond the trinket-vendors’ wooden carts, she saw her ship. They had one more night ashore. She could walk down to the pier, get herself oriented, and take a taxi back to the Excelsior. The day had been educational, but she’d had enough of the local color.

“Thanks for showing me around,” she said, unsnapping her purse.

Harun frowned. He wanted her to see his shop. Shop? She had supposed he was just some flunky waiter. Before she could escape, he grabbed her elbow and herded her through alleys. At an empty storefront squeezed between a bar and a vegetable vendor’s, parts of the gold letters of “Harun’s Carpets” had been razor-bladed off. Empty cardboard boxes were stacked against a padlocked door. What had happened to his business?

“Before Army. I borrow lots of money. But then I must go military. Two year in Army with Kurdish soldier. They not even speak my language, and I

listen to them all night—talk, talk. When I come back, partner close store, take rugs to flat. Hard to sell. Now, men come mine house every day. Say I no pay, bad thing happen.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“No one else to tell.” He clenched his fist and beat his chest. “I bring shame on family. Have pain in here so big, it knock hole.”

He started off, hands thrust in his pockets. She caught up and grabbed his elbow.

“Don’t think I don’t appreciate you taking me around,” she said. “The visit to your great-uncle’s place was very educational. About the beach, I really don’t know what to say.”

He stopped walking and turned, his eyebrows pinched. “But day not over,” he said. “I take you to pizza place.”

Pizza. Her mouth watered. “Okay, I’ll go if you promise not to be in a bad mood.”

“I feel how I feel,” he said. “Is not same in America?”

“No, it’s not,” she said.

Seated on the restaurant’s terrace, he said he thought it made no sense to disguise your feelings. She said it did. At least until you knew a person. The dining room overlooked a sandy cove. On the beach below them, a photographer posed three fashion

models. Harun blew smoke rings. What she wanted to tell him, but did not, was that this was the most romantic place she'd been in years.

The pizza came and Harun spoke to the waiter. The lights dimmed. He clearly did not want to let her go, but why? The stomach knot that usually came from wondering if a man thought she was too fat or needy wasn't there at all. Couples on the ship ate like this, in silence, content with each other's company. The sun floated on the indigo water, burning a molten hole in the horizon.

Finished, Harun ordered another drink and began to flick his lighter. She thought about asking him not to smoke, but decided against it. This was what married people did: put the other person's needs above their own. He banged the lighter on the table, flicking it again, then lobbed it over the balcony. "Shit lighter."

He dipped his cigarette toward the candle; his features wavered behind the veil of heat. "Shit life," he said.

She touched his wrist, and he let her fingers rest on his pulse. His eyes slid across the murky beach, stopping on the bay's far side. The Excelsior. Sunken ingots of gold, the reflections from the hotel's windows shimmered beneath the black water.

"How much does the hotel pay you?" she said.



"Hundred lira a month," he said.

"That's not much."

He frowned again. "Why you buy three carpets in Istanbul and not even one from me?"

"I didn't know I'd know you," she said.

He pursed his lips and stuck a napkin in the candle. It flamed up and he dropped the charred paper in his Orangina. "This winter I be cold. No money for winter clothes. No money give mine mother for food."

"How much do you owe?"

"Five hundred sixty-two," he said.

"Lira?"

"No US dollar," he said. "Turkish Mafia only take US currency. Dollar like sultan."

From her purse, she took \$300 in bills and put them on the table. Harun sat up straight, scowling.

"What this for?"

"Your debt," Bonnie said.

He held the bills to the candlelight and turned the bills front and back. When he tried to give the money back, she tucked the bills in his breast pocket.

"We should go," she said. "It's getting late."

In the parking lot, Harun put the key in the ignition and flung his arm over the seat behind her neck. Through the windshield, half a block away, she could see a drunk ricocheting off the walls of buildings.

"Like mine father," he said. "Many time, find him in street and carry home." He dropped his head onto her shoulder, and she could not help but gather him in her arms, smoothing his cheek with her knuckles. She dared not touch him with her fingertips. That part of the day was over.

"You want?" he said.

"You don't have to."

"I not do because I have to. I do because I want."



AT A NEON-LIT HOTEL near the railroad station, a clerk led them upstairs to a room. Bonnie sat on a corner of the bed, pulling apart tufts on the spread while Harun threw back the curtain. Beyond the broken glass was a storage closet where steel chairs were stacked. Looking at their haphazard tilt, Bonnie felt her chest tighten; warm prickles crept up her chin.

"My hotel better," he said. Of course, she thought, but she couldn't very well take him to her room at the Excelsior. Though this place was a dump, she was grateful he'd brought her here.

Harun took off his shoes and put them carefully on a tilted dresser by the door. Stepping over her feet, he hung his shirt and undid his belt and the top

button of his pants. He turned on the TV to a soccer game. "Italy kill us," he said.

"Italy?" she said.

"World Cup," he said. "Bye, bye, Turkey." He waved at the screen.

Bonnie showered. When she opened the bathroom door, she saw Harun sprawled on the bed, in pants and an undershirt, hands behind his head, his ankle rotating each time a player kicked the ball. The loose forelock of his hair hung down, and he brushed it back. Swaddled and damp, she climbed across his legs and slid between the sheets. He reached for her breast. She squealed and pulled the covers over her head. He folded the covers back. With a hand behind her neck, he kissed her so hard his gold necklace pressed into her clavicle. His eyes circled her face. "Now, we get to know each other. Have all night."

Suddenly, he rolled off the bed. Back in fifteen minutes, he said. The room door slammed. She lay very still, feeling the warp and weft of the linen. She'd just about made up her mind to brave the streets alone when he returned with a toothbrush, razor, and condoms. Thank God! She listened to him sing in the shower—What a choir boy!—then a towel swished over the rack, and he stood at the foot of the bed, arms and legs oiled.

She held out her arms. "Come here."

The mattress sagged.

Fingers working down his thighs, she told herself, go slow, go slow.

He wanted to look at her, and she tried to keep the covers up, apologizing for her size.

"Not important to me. Tonight, we have little oasis, like middle of desert." He threw the covers off the bed and held her knees apart as if climbing in a canoe. Balanced between her thighs, scooping her hair away from her face, he traced the outline of her lips.

"Darling, darling," he said. "My beautiful darling."

He tore open the wrapper of a condom with his teeth and slid it on expertly with his left hand. He lifted her leg onto his shoulder, and they began: part dream, part exercise.

In the middle of the night, he put his hand over her mouth. Outside the door, a man and woman argued. High heels clicked down the hall.

"*Oroshpu*," Harun whispered. "Not good hotel." He waited until it was quiet and rolled a joint. Soon he was starving and called down to the lobby. Someone brought up a tray piled with lamb kebabs and heaps of rice.

"For strength," Harun said. "Important for

Turkish man.” He held a skewer to her lips and fed her the last grains of rice with his fingers.

Reveling in the steamy odor of garlic and spice, naked as an odalisque, she felt voluptuous and unashamed of her appetite. When they were done, he gathered up the plates and put the tray outside.

By five a.m. she’d had enough. Harun flopped over onto his side of the bed and pulled up a sheet. Was it good? he wondered. Yes, it was good, she said. He rolled himself into a cocoon, and she accidentally brushed his back. “Ohh,” he moaned. “Turkish man say, smile on woman face, time to sleep. No more touch.”

As Harun slept, Bonnie lay awake and imagined his face, beaming down at her. She envisioned them walking along the quay, holding hands. She felt young and beautiful and thin. Her fingers crawled up his neck and clutched the curls at the nape of his neck. He started to push her away, but changed his mind and laced his fingers through hers.

“They have good running shoes in America?” he asked.

“They do,” she said.

“What best kind of jeans?”

“Shush, now,” she said.

He kissed her fingers. “You know what I always dream of, darling?”

"No. What?"

"Cowboy boots." He pulled her hand across his body. "Size 33 European. American 10, I think." All but the top of his head was wrapped in sheets.

Knowing she should keep quiet, but not able to stop herself, she jostled his shoulder. "Did you do this for money?"

"Why you say that?"

"Listen. Did you think, 'Poor Turkish boy fuck rich American lady. She give him presents!' Is that what was in your mind?"

His back went stiff, and he threw off her hand. Covering his head with the pillow, he said, "You see that on my face?"

"Your face?"

"Face not lie."

"Why no, I . . ."

She tugged on his pillow, but he rolled himself in a ball. Then he threw back the cover and stood naked beside the bed, pulling on his clothes.

"What are you doing?"

"Poor Turkish boy go to work."

"Oh, please. I'm sorry."

He sat down to put on his shoes. One lace snapped. He held it up. "Cheap shit shoe. Poor Turkish boy no money for good pair."

Through the half-open bathroom door, she saw

him dip his comb in water. Shaking, she picked up the sheet, wrapping it like a toga. He switched off the light. "Poor Turkish boy take back borrow car."

She fell on her knees and grabbed his pants. "I said a stupid thing. It wasn't about you. It was about me."

He pulled her by the elbows, placing her like a naughty child on a corner of the bed. "Don't be a crier." Then he noticed the money in his pocket and threw it at her feet. Bills flew under the dresser.

She fished one out. She hadn't meant to insult him; it was about her and her insecurities; the men at home were creeps and she was overweight. Why had he slept with her? That was all she wanted to know.

He tried to open the door. She caught his belt and they wrestled until she pushed her whole weight against him and forced him against the dresser.

"*Oroshpu!*" he screamed, and she let go.

In the bathroom, he looked over his shoulder at the mirror. "You make scratch in mine back. You fight like animal."

She sat down and bowed her head, clutching the edge of the mattress.

"Please talk to me," she begged.

He whimpered like a child until a sob tore from his throat. "I make for you my strong sex."

"But why?" she said.

"Is not enough? You want more?"

"No. I'm exhausted."

"Then what you want?"

She waited. "Do you. . . love me. . . or at least care for me a little bit?"

He blew his nose, crying. "You not want me answer that."

She insisted.

"Okay," he finally said, "but after that, no more talk." Harun folded his handkerchief. "When we lay on beach, I think, 'Lonely woman. No sex in long time.' I want make you happy."

"And you did." She reached for him.

He jumped back. His eyes traveled across her breasts and face.

She turned away.

Finally, he said, "How. . . old you are?"

She looked down at the knotted laces of his shoes. "Fifty-five."

"Old as mine mother."

"Your mother?"

"She very beautiful when mine father carry her down from village. Now, she old Ottoman woman in head scarf. Go to bed at eight o'clock. She make best food for we. Always clean clothes. Every day white shirt. Good black sock. No hole. And shoes for school. I never barefoot. I never hungry."



He stared down, eyes glistening. From the next room, water rushed up the pipes and hammered the walls. Harun turned and opened the door to the hall.

"How will I get back to the hotel?" she said.

"You rich American lady. Take taxi."

The latch clicked, and he was gone.

In the room, a steam bath from the night, a pocket of cold spread inward from the door. Bonnie felt the chill on her feet and looked down. The snapped shoelace. He would be crossing the lobby, the loose shoe rubbing his heel; he would pause and turn. He had to come back. She'd buy him anything he wanted. Anything.

Footsteps scraped on the stairs. Harun. She stooped to gather the money, then straightened up. No, let him pick it up.

The footsteps stopped and there were three hard knocks on the door. A gruff voice shouted. "*Bir fincan çay getirir misiniz?*" The knob turned and the door shook as if it might give way. Bonnie braced the door with her shoulder. She clutched the knob in both hands.

Then it was quiet. In the hall a man sighed and began whistling. Dishes clattered on a tray. Whoever had delivered the food in the middle of the night had come to take it away.



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As always, thank you to my husband, Bruce Rittmann, my most trusted reader and best friend.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marylee MacDonald is the author of the novel *Montpelier Tomorrow*, *Bonds of Love and Blood*, *Body Language*, and *The Big Book of Small Presses and Independent Publishers*. Her fiction has won many prizes, including the Barry Hannah Prize and the Ron Rash Award. When she's not writing, she's taking long walks, working in her garden, or swinging in her hammock.

If you'd like to find out more about her writing, please visit her website:

[www.MaryleeMacDonald.com](http://www.MaryleeMacDonald.com)

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MacDonald reads the room in each story and sees not just the postures and worn shoes of their inhabitants, but also their inner states.—KIRKUS REVIEWS

# BODY LANGUAGE



*Short Stories*



MARYLEE MACDONALD

Twelve unforgettable portraits of heartbreak and desire

## FROM BODY LANGUAGE

**B**ecause this is something Mother needs to hear, I tell her it's good to be home. The bay window, large enough to accommodate two wingback chairs, looks out on Lake Michigan. The boat dock has rotted, but Mother thinks it's not worth repairing because no one sails anymore. Even so, that stretch of slate-gray water reminds me of the beauty and vastness of this earth. The lake is as large as some seas. A walk along the beach, or even better, a moment watching the sun hover at the horizon, is the closest to heaven I expect to ever get.

We're each seated in a wingback, and on the octagonal table between us sit two shirt boxes. They are tied with ribbons, one red and one yellow, the color of the roses I wear on Mother's Day, one for



this, my living mother, and one in remembrance of the mother I did not find until she was dead.

"Before we start in about Danny," Mother says, "is there anything you want from the house?"

She thrusts a clipboard toward me and folds her age-freckled hands.

A pen dangles from the clipboard.

An inventory sheet lists the sterling silver, china and crystal, my canopy bed and hope chest, and my father's 1766 Charleville Musket, once owned by Lafayette. There's also my dad's mechanical piggy bank, a first edition of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, two Elsa Schiaparelli necklaces, a Handel floor lamp, Danny's Jetson's lunch box, our old family VHS tapes, my old Greenleaf Arthur dollhouse and all its furnishings, plus pages and pages more.

"This must have taken you forever to compile," I say.

She shrugs. "I hired an estate agent."

I strike a line across the page. "Sell it." I hand back the clipboard.

She takes it, not even blinking at my gesture. "Don't you want *anything*?"

"You've seen Mexico. Nothing's formal. I practically live on the patio."

"Is everything set?"

"It is."

"Will I like it?"

"The *casita*? Yes, and my house is just steps away."

"I don't want to be a burden."

"Of course not. You won't be."

On the limestone mantel sits a gold, ormolu clock flanked by crystal sconces with small, yellowed shades. A collector, she made sure she had one of everything in this house. One boy. One girl. She rescued me from the scrapheap of orphanhood more than fifty years ago. The weight of what I owe her is almost too great to bear.

"You say you found Danny," I said.

"I found out *about* him. Not him, *per se*."

"Did you hire a detective?"

"No."

"You could have," I say. "Money being no object."

Her bottom lip pushes up and trembles. She's so tiny and fragile. Her feet barely touch the floor.

"Is there some big secret you couldn't tell me over the phone?"

Again, that trembling lip.

Scenarios of Danny's self-destruction turn in my mind. Was it murder or suicide, drugs or alcohol?

"Well?"

Mother takes a folded paper from her pocket. "This came from Social Security." She holds it out.

I read the letter. Danny has been hit by a car. Then I read the date. He has been dead two years. *Two years?*

"Why didn't Social Security notify you sooner?"

"I want you to go out to San Diego and find out," she says.

"No way," I said. "Danny used up every bit of my goodwill, and I didn't have much to start with."

Her chin puckers and she turns toward the sideboard. We all have ways of numbing ourselves. Armagnac is Mother's anesthetic *au choix*.

"Shall I pour you a drink?" I say.

She turns back. "I always wait until four o'clock."

It's three-thirty. Four is her line in the sand.

"Wouldn't you rather I spend the time with you? We could drive down to the Art Institute, or maybe there's an exhibit at the Field. I wager you haven't been there in years."

"Not since Danny was a boy." Her knotty fingers come toward me, and though I owe her, I cannot bear her touch. I spring up and move to the window. On my refrigerator in Mexico I have a magnet that reads, *I have one nerve left, and you're standing on it.*

Out in the lake, sails luff in the wind, and close to shore a man on a sailboard struggles to stay upright.

"Is your time so precious?" she says.

"Not really."

"Sunny, I need your help."

How little she has ever asked of me.

"All right, Mother. Of course, I'll go."

"Thank heaven." She sighs and folds her hands in her lap.

"But I'm not optimistic about turning up anything new."

"You found your birth mother."

I smiled. "True. Quite the needle in a haystack."

"But you did it."

"Apart from whatever I have going on genetically, I have one personality trait I definitely get from you."

"What's that?"

"Once we make up our minds to do something, we see it through to the end."

"Just so." She lifts the boxes from the table and places them on her knees. "Now, about the boxes. One is Danny's and one's yours."

"What's in them?"

"Your childhood," she says.

I shake the boxes. Something rattles.

"Don't open them now," she says. "Call a cab and go straight to the airport. You'll have time to go through them in San Diego."

"But I haven't even unpacked!"

"No need to," she says. "You're getting on a plane."

Diminutive though she is, there's no sense arguing with Mother. Flying back across the continent seems a fool's errand; however, I understand that this search is as important to her as finding my birth mother was to me. When I searched for her, I spent years reading through the "chattel sales" in the official notices of Chicago papers. My mother didn't know my birth mother's name, only that she had grown up in Kansas City and hid out in a home for unwed mothers on the North Shore. The Cradle, it was called. Both Danny and I came from there, but he never bothered to search.

Mother must want to close out Danny's trust fund before she joins me in Puerto Vallarta. I know she's going to love it there. The balmy winters. The expat community, many of whom are energetic seniors and as passionate about bridge as she is. The one thing holding her here was the hope that Danny would finally come home.

TO SEE what happens when Sunny flies out to California to search for her brother, read *Body Language*, a collection of stories about people trying, and often failing, to connect.

