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THE WHITE CASTLE

ORHAN PAMUK

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The White Castle

Orhan Pamuk

For Nilgun Darvinoglu

a loving sister

(1961-1980)

To imagine that a person who intrigues us has access to a way of life unknown and all
~~the more attractive for its mystery, to believe that we will begin to live only through the~~
love of that person – what else is this but the birth of great passion?

Marcel Proust, from the mistranslation
of Y.K. Karaosmanođlu

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I found this manuscript in 1982 in that forgotten ‘archive’ attached to the governor’s office in Gebze that I used to rummage through for a week each summer, at the bottom of a dusty chest stuffed overflowing with imperial decrees, title deeds, court registers and tax rolls. The dreamlike blue of its delicate, marbled binding, its bright calligraphy, shining among the faded government documents immediately caught my eye. I guessed from the difference in handwriting that someone other than the original calligrapher had later on, as if to arouse my interest further, penned a title on the first page of the book: ‘The Quilter’s Stepson’. There was no other heading. The margins and blank pages were filled with pictures of people with tiny heads dressed in costumes studded with buttons, all drawn in a childish hand. I read the book at once, with immense pleasure. Delighted, but too lazy to transcribe the manuscript, I stole it from the dump that even the young governor dared not call an ‘archive’, taking advantage of the trust of a custodian who was so deferential as to leave me unsupervised, and slipping it, in the twinkling of an eye, into my case.

At first I didn’t quite know what I would do with the book, other than to read it over and over again. My distrust of history then was still strong, and I wanted to concentrate on the story for its own sake rather than on the manuscript’s scientific, cultural, anthropological, or ‘historical’ value. I was drawn to the author himself. Since my friends and I had been forced to withdraw from the university, I had taken up my grandfather’s profession of encyclopaedist: it was then that it occurred to me to include an entry on the author in the history section – my responsibility – of an encyclopaedia of famous men.

To this task I devoted what spare time remained to me after the encyclopaedia and my drinking. When I consulted the basic sources for the period, I saw right away that some events described in the story bore little resemblance to fact: for example, I confirmed that at one point during the five years Koprulu served as Grand Vizier a great fire had ravaged Istanbul, but there was no evidence at all of an outbreak of disease worth recording, let alone of a widespread plague like the one in the book. Some of the names of viziers of the period had been misspelled, some were confused with one another, some had even been changed. The names of imperial astrologers did not match those in the palace records, but since I thought this discrepancy had a special place in the story I didn’t dwell upon it. On the other hand, our ‘knowledge’ of history generally verified the events in the book. Sometimes I saw this ‘realism’ even in small details: for example, the historian Naima described in similar fashion the Imperial Astrologer Huseyn Efendi’s execution and Mehmet IV’s rabbit hunt at Mirahor Palace. It occurred to me that the author, who clearly enjoyed reading and fantasizing, may have been familiar with such sources and a great many other books – such as the memoirs of European travellers or emancipated slaves – and gleaned material for his story from them. He may have merely read the travel journals of Evliya Chelebi, whom he said he knew. Thinking the reverse might just as well be true, as other examples could show, I kept trying to track down the author of my story, but the research I did in Istanbul libraries dashed most of my hopes. I wasn’t able to find a single one of those treatises and books presented to Mehmet IV between 1652 and 1680, neither in the library at Topkapi Palace nor in other public and private libraries where I thought they might have strayed. I came across only one clue: there were other works in these libraries by the ‘left-handed calligrapher’ mentioned in the story. I chased after them for a while, but only disappointing replies came back from the Italian universities I’d besieged with a torrent of letters; my wanderings among the tombstones at Gebze, Jennethisar, and Uskudar graveyards in search of the name of the author (revealed in the book itself though not on the title-page) were also unsuccessful, and by then I’d had enough: I gave up the following possible leads and wrote the encyclopaedia article solely on the basis of the story itself. As I feared, they didn’t print this article, not, however, for lack of scientific evidence, but because it

subject was not deemed to be famous enough.

My fascination with the story increased even more perhaps for this reason. I even thought of resigning in protest, but I loved my work and my friends. For a time I told my story to everyone I met as passionately as though I had written it myself rather than discovered it. To make it seem more interesting I talked about its symbolic value, its fundamental relevance to our contemporary realities, how through this tale I had come to understand our own time, etc. When I made these claims, young people usually more absorbed in issues like politics, activism, East-West relations, or democracy were at first intrigued, but like my drinking friends, they too soon forgot my story. A professor friend returning the manuscript he'd thumbed through at my insistence, said that in the old wooden houses on the back streets of Istanbul there were tens of thousands of manuscripts filled with stories of this kind. If the simple people living in those houses hadn't mistaken them, with their old Ottoman script for Arabic Korans and kept them in a place of honour high up on top of their cupboards, they were probably ripping them up page by page to light their stoves.

So I decided, encouraged by a certain girl in glasses from whose hand a cigarette was never absent, to publish the story which I returned to read over and over again. My readers will see that I nourished no pretensions to style while revising the book into contemporary Turkish: after reading a couple of sentences from the manuscript I kept on one table, I'd go to another table in the other room where I kept my papers and try to narrate in today's idiom the sense of what remained in my mind. It was not I who chose the title of the book, but the publishing house that agreed to print it. Readers seeing the dedication at the beginning may ask if it has a personal significance. I suppose that to see everything as connected with everything else is the addiction of our time. It is because I too have succumbed to this disease that I publish this tale.

FARUK DARVINOG

We were sailing from Venice to Naples when the Turkish fleet appeared. We numbered three ships at first, but the file of their galleys emerging from the fog seemed to have no end. We lost our nerve; fear and confusion instantly broke out on our ship, and our oarsmen, most of them Turks and Moors, were screaming with joy. Our vessel turned its bow landward, westward, like the other two, but unlike them we could not gather speed. Our captain, fearing punishment should he be captured, could not bring himself to give the command to whip the captives at the oars. In later years I often thought that that moment of cowardice changed my whole life.

But now it seems to me that my life would have been changed if our captain had *not* suddenly been overcome by fear. Many men believe that no life is determined in advance, that all stories are essentially a chain of coincidences. And yet, even those who believe this come to the conclusion, when they look back, that events they once took for chance were really inevitable. I have reached that moment now, as I sit at an old table writing my book, visualizing the colours of the Turkish ships appearing like phantoms in the fog; this seems the best of times to tell a tale.

Our captain took heart when he saw the other two ships slip away from the Turkish vessels and disappear into the fog, and at last he dared to beat the oarsmen, but we were too late; even whips could not make the slaves obey once they had been aroused by the passion for freedom. Cutting through the unnerving wall of fog into waves of colour, more than ten Turkish galleys were upon us at once. Not at last our captain decided to fight, trying to overcome, I believe, not the enemy, but his own fear and shame; he had the slaves flogged mercilessly and ordered the cannons made ready, but the passion for battle, late to flame, was also quick to burn out. We were caught in a violent broadside volley – our ship would surely sink if we did not give up at once – we decided to raise the flag of surrender.

While we waited on a calm sea for the Turkish ships to draw alongside, I went to my cabin, put my things in order as if expecting not arch-enemies who would change my whole life, but a few friends paying a visit, and opening my little trunk rummaged through my books, lost in thought. My eyes were filled with tears as I turned the pages of a volume I'd paid dearly for in Florence; I heard shrieking footsteps rushing back and forth, an uproar going on outside, I knew that at any moment the book would be snatched from my hand, yet I wanted to think not of that but of what was written on its pages. It was as if the thoughts, the sentences, the equations in the book contained the whole of my past life which I dreaded to lose; while I read random phrases under my breath, as though reciting prayer. I desperately wanted to engrave the entire volume on my memory so that when they did come I would not think of them and what they would make me suffer, but would remember the colours of my past as if recalling the cherished words of a book I had memorized with pleasure.

In those days I was a different person, even called a different name by mother, fiancée and friends. Once in a while I still see in my dreams that person who used to be me, or who I now believe was me, and wake up drenched in sweat. This person who brings to mind now the faded colours, the dream-like shades of those lands that never were, the animals that never existed, the incredible weapons we later invented year after year, was twenty-three years old then, had studied 'science and art' in Florence and Venice, believed he knew something of astronomy, mathematics, physics, painting. Of course he was conceited: having devoured most of what had been accomplished before his time, he turned up his nose at it all; he had no doubt he'd do better; he had no equal; he knew he was more intelligent and creative than anyone else. In short, he was an average youth. It pains me to think, when I have invented a past for myself, that this youth who talked with his beloved about his passions, his plans about the world and science, who found it natural that his fiancée adored him, was actually me. But I comfort myself with the thought that one day a few people will patiently read to the end what I write.

here and understand that I was not that youth. And perhaps those patient readers will think, as I do now, that the story of that youth who let go of his life while reading his precious books continued later from where it broke off.

When the Turkish sailors threw down their ramps and came on board I put the books in my trunk and peered outside. Pandemonium had broken out on the vessel. They were gathering everyone together on deck and stripping them naked. For a moment it passed through my mind that I could jump overboard in the confusion, but I thought they would shoot me in the water, or capture and kill me immediately, and anyway, I didn't know how close we were to land. At first no one bothered with me. The Muslim slaves, loosed from their chains, were shouting with joy, and a gang of them started about taking vengeance right away on the men who had whipped them. Soon they found me in my cabin, came inside, ransacked my possessions. They rifled through my trunks searching for gold, and after they took away some of my books and all of my clothes, someone grabbed me as I distractedly pored over the couple of books left and took me to one of the captains.

The captain, who as I learned later was a Genoese convert, treated me well; he asked what my profession was. Wanting to avoid being put to the oars, I declared right away that I had knowledge of astronomy and nocturnal navigation, but this made no impression. I then claimed I was a doctor counting on the anatomy book they'd left me. When I was showed a man who'd lost an arm, I protested that I was not a surgeon. This angered them, and they were about to put me to the oars when the captain, noticing my books, asked if I knew anything of urine and pulses. When I said I did I was saved from the oar and even managed to salvage a few of my books.

But this privilege cost me dear. The other Christians who were put to the oars despised me instantly. They would have killed me in the hold where we were locked up at night if they could have but they were afraid to, because I had so quickly established relations with the Turks. Our cowardly captain had just died at the stake, and as a warning to others they'd cut off the noses and ears of the sailors who had lashed the slaves, then set them adrift on a raft. After I'd treated a few Turks, using my common sense rather than a knowledge of anatomy, and their wounds had healed by themselves, everyone believed I was a doctor. Even some of those who, moved by envy, had told the Turks I was no doctor at all showed me their wounds at night in the hold.

We sailed into Istanbul with spectacular ceremony. It was said that the child sultan was watching the celebrations. They hoisted their banners on every mast and at the bottom hung our flags, our icons of the Virgin Mary and crucifixes upside down, letting hotheads from the city who jumped aboard to shoot at them. Cannon fire burst across the sky. The ceremony, like many I would watch from land in later years with a mixture of sorrow, disgust, and pleasure, lasted such a long time that many spectators fainted in the sun. Towards evening we dropped anchor at Kasimpasha. Before bringing us before the sultan they put us in chains, made our soldiers wear their armour back to front in ridicule, put iron hoops around the necks of our officers, and blasting away on the horns and trumpets they were taken from our ship, raucously, triumphantly, brought us to the palace. The people of the city were lined up along the avenues, watching us with amusement and curiosity. The sultan, hidden from our view, selected his share of slaves and had them separated from the others. They transported us across the Golden Horn to Galata on caiques and crammed us into Sadik Pasha's prison.

The gaol was a miserable place. Hundreds of captives rotted away in filth inside the tiny, dank cells. I found plenty of people there to practise my new profession on, and I actually cured some of them. I wrote prescriptions for guards with aching backs or legs. So here, too, they treated me differently from the rest, and gave me a better cell that caught the sunlight. Seeing how it was for the others, I tried to be thankful for my own circumstances, but one morning they woke me along with the rest of the prisoners and told me I was going out to work. When I protested that I was a doctor, with

knowledge of medicine and science, they just laughed: there were walls to be built around the pasha's garden, men were needed. We were chained together each morning before the sun rose and taken outside the city. While we trudged back to our prison in the evenings, still chained to one another after gathering stones all day, I reflected that Istanbul was indeed a beautiful city, but that here one must be a master, not a slave.

Yet still I was no ordinary slave. People had heard I was a doctor, so now I was not just looking after the slaves rotting away in the prison, but others as well. I had to give a large part of the fees earned for doctoring to the guards who smuggled me outside. With the money I was able to hide from them, I paid for lessons in Turkish. My teacher was an agreeable, elderly fellow who looked after the pasha's petty affairs. It pleased him to see I was quick to learn Turkish and he'd say I would soon become a Muslim. I had to press him to take his fee after each lesson. I also gave him money to bring me food, for I was determined to look after myself well.

One foggy evening an officer came to my cell, saying that the pasha wished to see me. Surprised and excited, I prepared myself at once. I thought that one of my resourceful relatives at home, perhaps my father, perhaps my future father-in-law, must have sent money for my ransom. As I walked through the fog down the twisting, narrow streets, I felt as if I would suddenly come upon my house or find myself face to face with my loved ones as though awakening from a dream. Perhaps they had managed to send someone to negotiate my release, perhaps this very night in this same fog I'd be packed on a ship and sent back home. When I entered the pasha's mansion I realized I could not be rescued so easily. The people here walked around on tiptoe.

First they led me into a long hall where I waited until I was shown into one of the rooms. An affable little man was stretched out under a blanket on a small divan. There was another, powerfully built man standing at his side. The one lying down was the pasha, who beckoned me to him. We spoke. He asked me a few questions. I said my real fields of study had been astronomy, mathematics, and to a lesser extent engineering, but that I also had knowledge of medicine and had treated a number of patients. He continued to question me and I was about to tell him more when, saying I must be an intelligent man to have learned Turkish so quickly, he added that he had a problem with his health which none of the other doctors had been able to cure, and, hearing of me, he'd wanted to put me to the test.

He began to describe his problem in such a way that I was forced to conclude that it was a rare illness which had stricken only the pasha of all the men on the face of the earth, because his enemies had deceived God with their calumnies. But his complaint was simply shortness of breath. I questioned him at length, listened to his cough, then went down to the kitchen and made mint-flavoured green troches with what I found there. I prepared cough-syrup as well. Because the pasha was afraid of being poisoned, I swallowed one of the troches with a sip of the syrup while he watched. He told me I must leave the mansion secretly, taking great care not to be seen, and return to the prison. The officer later explained that the pasha did not want to arouse the envy of the other doctors. He returned the next day, listened to his cough, and gave him the same medicine. He was as delighted as a child with the colourful troches I left in his palm. As I walked back to my cell, I prayed he would get better. The following day the north wind was blowing. It was a gentle, cool breeze and I thought a man would improve in this weather even against his will, but heard nothing.

A month later when I was called for, again in the middle of the night, the pasha was up on his feet in good spirits. I was relieved to hear him draw breath easily as he scolded a few people. He was glad to see me, said his illness was cured, that I was a good doctor. What favour did I ask of him? I knew he would not immediately free me and send me home. So I complained of my cell, of the prison, and explained I was being worn out pointlessly with heavy labour when I could be more useful if I were occupied with astronomy and medicine. I don't know how much of it he listened to. The guards took

lion's share of the purse full of money he gave me.

A week later an officer came to my cell one night, and after making me swear I wouldn't try to escape, took off my chains. I was to be taken out to work again, but the slave-drivers now gave me preferential treatment. Three days later the officer brought me new clothes and I realized I was under the pasha's protection.

I was still being summoned at night to various mansions. I administered drugs to old pirates with rheumatism, and young soldiers whose stomachs ached. I bled those who itched, lost colour, or had headaches. Once, a week after I gave syrups to a servant's stuttering son, he recovered and recited a poem for me.

Winter passed in this way. When spring came I heard that the pasha, who hadn't asked for me in months, was in the Mediterranean with the fleet. During the hot days of summer people who noticed my despair and frustration told me I had no reason to complain, as I was earning good money as a doctor. A former slave who had converted to Islam many years before advised me not to run away. They always kept a slave who was useful to them, as they were keeping me, never granting him permission to return to his country. If I became a Muslim as he had done, I could make a freedman of myself, but nothing more. Since I thought he might have said this just to sound me out, I told him I had no intention of trying to escape. It wasn't the desire I lacked but the courage. Those who fled, a few of them, were caught before they got very far. After these unfortunates were beaten I was the one who spread salve on their wounds at night in their cells.

As autumn drew near, the pasha returned with the fleet; he greeted the sultan with cannon fire, tried to cheer the city as he had done the previous year, but it was obvious they'd not passed this season all well. They brought only a few slaves to the prison. We learned later that the Venetians had burned six ships. Hoping to get news of home, I watched for an opportunity to talk with the slaves, most of whom were Spanish; but they were silent, ignorant, timid things who had no desire to speak unless they begged for help or food. Only one of them interested me: he'd lost an arm, but optimistically said one of his ancestors had lived through the same misadventure and survived to write a romance of chivalry with the arm he had left. He believed he would be spared to do the same. In later years, when I wrote stories to live, I remembered this man who dreamed of living to write stories. Not long after this contagious disease broke out in the prison, an ill-omened epidemic which killed more than half of the slaves before it passed on, and from which I protected myself by smothering the guards with bribes.

Those left alive were taken out to work on new projects. I didn't go. In the evenings they talked of how they went all the way to the tip of the Golden Horn, where they were set to work at various tasks under the supervision of carpenters, costumers, painters: they were making papier mâché models of ships, castles, towers. Later we learned why: the pasha's son was to marry the daughter of the grand vizier and he was arranging a spectacular wedding.

One morning I was called to the pasha's mansion. I went, thinking his shortness of breath had returned. The pasha was engaged, they took me to a room to wait, I sat down. After a few moments another door opened and someone five or six years older than myself came in. I looked up at his face in shock – immediately I was terrified.

The resemblance between myself and the man who entered the room was incredible! It was *me* there for that first instant this was what I thought. It was as if someone wanted to play a trick on me and had brought me in again by a door directly opposite the one I had first come through, saying, look, you really should have been like this, you should have come in the door like this, should have gestured with your hands like this, the other man sitting in the room should have looked at you like this. As our eyes met, we greeted one another. But he did not seem surprised. Then I decided he didn't resemble me all that much, he had a beard; and I seemed to have forgotten what my own face looked like. As he sat down facing me, I realized that it had been a year since I last looked in a mirror.

After a few moments the door through which I had entered opened and he was called inside. While I waited, I thought this must be all a fiction of my troubled mind rather than a cleverly planned joke. For in those days I was always fantasizing that I would return home, welcomed by all, that they would immediately set me free, that actually I was still asleep in my cabin on the ship, it had all been a dream – consoling visions of that sort. I was about to conclude that this, too, was one of those day-dreams, but one come to life, or that it was a sign that everything would suddenly change and return to its former state, when the door opened and I was summoned inside.

The pasha was standing up, a little behind my look-alike. He let me kiss the hem of his skirt, and intended when he enquired after my welfare to mention my sufferings in my cell, that I wanted to return to my country, but he wasn't listening. It seemed that the pasha remembered I'd told him I had knowledge of science, astronomy, engineering – well then, did I know anything of those fireworks hurled at the sky, of gunpowder? Immediately I replied that I did, but the instant my eyes met those of the other man I suspected they were leading me into a trap.

The pasha was saying that the wedding he planned would be unparalleled, and he would have a fireworks display, but it must be quite unlike any other. My look-alike, whom the pasha called on 'Hoja', meaning 'master', had in the past, at the sultan's birth, worked on a display with fire-eaters arranged by a Maltese who had since died, so he knew a little about these things, but the pasha thought I would be able to assist him – we would complement one another. The pasha would reward us if we put on a good display. When, thinking the time had come, I dared to say that what I wanted was to return home, the pasha asked me if I'd been to a whorehouse since I arrived, and hearing my answer said if I had no desire for a woman what good would freedom be to me? He was using the coarse language of the guards and I must have looked bewildered, for he roared with laughter. Then he turned to that spectre he called 'Hoja': the responsibility was his. We left.

In the morning as I walked to my look-alike's house I imagined there was nothing I would be able to teach him. But apparently his knowledge was no greater than mine. Moreover, we were in accord that the whole problem was to come up with the right camphoric mixture. Our task would thus be to carefully prepare experimental mixtures with scale and measures, fire them off at night in the shadow of the high city walls at Surdibi, and derive conclusions from what we observed. Children watched our men in awe while they ignited the rockets we'd prepared, and we stood under the dark trees waiting anxiously for the result, just as we would do years later by daylight while testing that incredible weapon. After these experiments I would try, sometimes by moonlight, sometimes in blind darkness, to record our observations in a small notebook. Before separating for the night, we'd return to Hoja's house overlooking the Golden Horn and discuss the results at length.

His house was small, oppressive, and unattractive. The entrance was on a crooked street muddied by a dirty stream flowing from some source I was never able to discover. Inside there was almost no furniture, but every time I entered the house I felt pressed in and overcome by a queer feeling

distress. Perhaps it came from this man who, because he didn't like being named after his grandfather, wanted me to call him 'Hoja': he was watching me, he seemed to want to learn something from me but wasn't yet sure what it was. Since I could not get used to sitting on the low divans that lined the walls, I stood up while we discussed our experiments, sometimes pacing nervously up and down the room. I believe Hoja enjoyed this. He could sit and watch me to his heart's content, if only by the dim light of a lamp.

As I felt his eyes following me it made me all the more uneasy that he didn't notice the resemblance between us. Once or twice I thought he saw it but was pretending not to. It was as if he were toying with me; he was performing a small experiment on me, obtaining information I could not comprehend. For in those first days he continually scrutinized me as if he were learning something and the more he learned the more curious he became. But he seemed hesitant to take any further steps to penetrate the meaning of this strange knowledge. It was this inconclusiveness that oppressed me that made the house so suffocating! True, I gained some confidence from his hesitation, but it did not reassure me. Once, while we were discussing our experiments, and another time when he asked me why I still had not become a Muslim, I felt he was covertly trying to draw me into an argument so I did not respond. He sensed my restraint; I realized he thought less of me for it, and this made me angry. In those days it was perhaps only in this way we understood each other: each of us looked down on the other. I held myself in check, thinking that if we succeeded in putting on the fireworks display without mishap, they would grant me permission to return home.

One night, elated by the success of a rocket that had climbed to an extraordinary height, Hoja said that someday he would be able to make one that would shoot as high as the moon; the only problem was to find the requisite proportions of gunpowder and cast a chamber that could tolerate the mixture. I remarked that the moon was very far away but he interrupted me, saying he knew that as well as I but wasn't it also the planet nearest the Earth? When I admitted he was right, he didn't relax as expected, he became even more agitated, but said nothing more.

Two days later, at midnight, he took up the question again: how could I be so sure that the moon was the closest planet? Perhaps we were letting ourselves be taken in by an optical illusion. It was then I spoke to him for the first time about my studies in astronomy and explained briefly the basic principles of Ptolemaic cosmography. I saw that he listened with interest, but was reluctant to say anything that would reveal his curiosity. A little later, when I stopped talking, he said he too had knowledge of Ptolemy but this did not change his suspicion that there might be a planet nearer than the moon. Towards morning he was talking about that planet as if he had already obtained proofs of its existence.

The next day he thrust a badly translated manuscript into my hand. In spite of my poor Turkish I was able to decipher it: I believe it was a second-hand summary of *Almagest* drawn up not from the original but from another summary; only the Arabic names of the planets interested me, and I was in no mood to get excited about them at that time. When Hoja saw I was unimpressed and soon put the book aside, he was angry. He'd paid seven gold pieces for this volume, it was only right that I should set aside my conceit, turn the pages and take a look at it. Like an obedient student, I opened the book again and while patiently turning its pages came across a primitive diagram. It showed the planets as crudely drawn spheres arranged in relation to the Earth. Although the positions of the spheres were correct the illustrator had no idea of the distances between them. Then my eye was caught by a tiny planet between the moon and the Earth; examining it a little more carefully, I could tell from the relative freshness of the ink that it had been added to the manuscript later. I went over the entire manuscript and gave it back to Hoja. He told me he was going to find that planet: he did not seem at all to be joking. I said nothing, and there was a silence that unnerved him as much as it did me. Since

we were never able to make another rocket shoot high enough to steer the conversation to astronomy again, the subject was not re-opened. Our little success remained a coincidence whose mystery we could not solve.

But we had very good results with the violence and brightness of light and flame, and we knew the secret of our success: in one of the herbalist shops Hoja searched out one by one he'd found a powder even the shop-owner did not know the name of; we decided that this yellowish dust, which produced superb brightness, was a mixture of sulphur and copper sulphate. Later we mixed the powder with every substance we could think of to give brilliance to the effect, but we were unable to obtain anything more than a coffee-coloured brown and a pale green barely distinguishable from one another. According to Hoja, even this was infinitely better than anything Istanbul had ever seen.

And so was our display on the second night of the celebration, everyone said so, even our rivals who were intrigued behind our backs. I was very nervous when we were told that the sultan had come to watch from the far shore of the Golden Horn, terrified something might go wrong and that it would be years before I could return to my country. When they ordered us to begin, I said a prayer. First, to welcome the guests and announce the beginning of the display, we fired off colourless rockets shooting straight up into the sky; immediately after that we set off the hoop display Hoja and I called 'The Mill'. In an instant the sky turned red, yellow and green, booming with terrifying explosions. It was even more beautiful than we'd hoped; as the rockets soared the hoop gathered speed, whirled and whirled and suddenly, lighting up the surrounding area bright as day, hung suspended, motionless. For a moment I thought I was in Venice again, an eight-year-old watching a fireworks display for the first time and just as unhappy because it was not I who was wearing my new red suit, but my big brother who'd torn his own clothes in a quarrel the previous day. The exploding fireworks were as red as the bright buttoned suit I couldn't wear that night and swore I never would again, the same red as the matching buttons on the suit which was too tight for my brother.

Then we set off the display we called 'The Fountain'; flames poured from the mouth of a scaffold the height of five men; those on the far shore should have had a good view of the streaming flames they must have been as excited as we were when the rockets began to shoot out of the mouth of 'The Fountain', and we did not intend to let their excitement die down: the caiques on the surface of the Golden Horn stirred. First the papier mâché towers and fortresses, shooting rockets from their turrets as they sailed by, caught fire and went up in flames – these were supposed to symbolize victories of former years. When they released the ships representing those from the year I'd been taken captive, other ships attacked our vessel with a rain of rocket fire; thus I relived the day I had become a slave. As the ships burned and sank, shouts of 'God, oh God!' arose from both shores. Then, one by one, we released our dragons; flames spurted from their huge nostrils, their gaping mouths and pointed ears. We had them fight one another; as planned, none could defeat the other at first. We reddened the sky even more with rockets fired from shore, and after the sky had darkened a bit, our men on the caiques turned the winches and the dragons began to ascend very slowly into the sky; now everyone was screaming in fear and awe; as the dragons attacked one another again with a great uproar, all the rockets on the caiques were fired at once; the wicks we had placed in the bodies of the creatures must have caught fire at just the right moment, for the whole scene, exactly as we desired, was transformed into a burning inferno. I knew we had succeeded when I heard a child screaming and weeping nearby; his father had forgotten the boy and was staring open-mouthed at the terrible sky. At last I will be allowed to return home, I thought. Just then, the creature I called 'The Devil' glided into the inferno on a little black caique invisible to the eye; we had tied so many rockets to it that we were afraid all the caiques might blow up, along with our men, but everything went as planned; as the battling dragons disappeared into the sky, spitting flames, 'The Devil' and its rockets, all catching fire at once

swooped into the heavens; balls of fire scattering from every part of its body exploded, booming in the air. I exulted at the thought that in one moment we had managed to terrify all Istanbul. I was afraid, well, just because I seemed to have at last found the courage to do the things I wanted in life. At that moment it seemed of no importance what city I was in; I wanted that devil to hang suspended there showering fire over the crowd all night long. After swaying a little from side to side, it fluttered down upon the Golden Horn without harming anyone, accompanied by ecstatic screams from both shores. It was still spewing fire from its top as it sank into the water.

The next morning the pasha sent Hoja a purse of gold, just as in fairy tales. He had said he was very pleased with the display but found the victory of 'The Devil' strange. We continued the fireworks for ten more nights. By day we repaired the burnt models, planned new spectacles and had captives brought from the prison to fill rockets. One slave was blinded when ten bags of gunpowder exploded in his face.

After the wedding celebrations were over, I saw Hoja no more. I felt easier away from the probing eyes of this curious man who watched me constantly, but it wasn't as if my mind didn't wander back to the exhilarating days we'd spent together. When I returned home, I would tell everyone about the man who looked so much like me and yet had never referred to this haunting resemblance. I sat in my cell, looking after patients to pass the time; when I heard the pasha had called for me I felt a thrill, almost happiness, and ran to go. First he praised me perfunctorily, everyone had been satisfied with the fireworks, the guests were pleased, I was quite talented, etc. Suddenly he said that if I became Muslim he would make me a freedman at once. I was shocked, stupefied, I said I wanted to return to my country, in my folly I even went so far as to stutter a few sentences about my mother, my fiancé. The pasha repeated what he'd said as if he had not heard me at all. I kept silent for a while. For some reason I was thinking of lazy, good-for-nothing boys I'd known in childhood; the sort of wicked children who raise their hands against their fathers. When I said I would not abandon my faith, the pasha was furious. I returned to my cell.

Three days later, the pasha called for me again. This time he was in a good mood. I had reached my decision, being unable to decide whether changing my religion would help me to escape or not. The pasha asked for my thoughts and said he himself would arrange for me to marry a beautiful girl here. In a sudden moment of courage, I said I would not change my religion, and the pasha, surprised, called me a fool. After all, there was no one around me whom I would be ashamed to tell I had become Muslim. Then he talked for a while about the precepts of Islam. When he had finished, he sent me back to my cell.

On my third visit I was not brought into the pasha's presence. A steward asked for my decision. Perhaps I would have changed my mind, but not because a steward asked me to! I said I was still not ready to abandon my faith. The steward took me by the arm and brought me downstairs, surrendering me to someone else. This was a tall man, thin like the men I often saw in my dreams. He also took me by the arm, and as he was leading me to a corner of the garden, kindly as though helping a bedridden invalid, someone else came up to us, this one too real to appear in a dream, a huge man. The two men, one of whom carried a smallish axe, stopped at the foot of a wall and tied my hands: they said the pasha had commanded that I should be beheaded at once if I would not become a Muslim. I froze.

Not so quickly, I thought. They were looking at me with pity. I said nothing. At least don't let them ask me again, I was saying to myself, when a moment later they did ask. Suddenly my religion became something that seemed easy to die for; I felt I was important, and on the other hand I pitied myself the way these two men did who made it harder for me to abandon my religion the more they interrogated me. When I tried to think of something else the scene through the window overlooking the garden behind our house came to life before my eyes: peaches and cherries lay on a tray inlaid with mother

of-pearl upon a table, behind the table was a divan upholstered with straw matting strewn with feather cushions the same colour as the green window-frame; further back, I saw a sparrow perched on the edge of a well among the olive and cherry trees. A swing tied with long ropes to a high branch of a walnut-tree swayed slightly in a barely perceptible breeze. When they asked me once again, I said I would not change my religion. They pointed to a stump, made me kneel and lay my head upon it. I closed my eyes, but then opened them again. One of them lifted the axe. The other said perhaps I had regretted my decision: they stood me up. I should think it over a while longer.

Leaving me to reconsider, they began to dig into the earth next to the stump. It occurred to me they might bury me here right now, and along with the fear of death, I now felt the fear of being buried alive. I was telling myself I'd make up my mind by the time they finished digging the grave when they came towards me, having dug only a shallow hole. At that moment I thought how very foolish it would be to die here. I felt I could become a Muslim, but I had no time to form a resolve. If I'd been able to return to the prison, to my beloved cell I'd finally grown used to, I could have sat up all night thinking and made the decision to convert, but not like this, not right away.

They seized me suddenly, pushing me to my knees. Just before I laid my head on the stump I was bewildered to see someone moving through the trees, as if flying; it was me, but with a long beard walking silently on the air. I wanted to call out to the apparition of myself in the trees, but I could not speak with my head pressed against the stump. It will be no different from sleep, I thought, and let myself go, waiting; I felt a chill at my back and the nape of my neck, I didn't want to think, but the cold at my neck made me go on. They stood me up, grumbling that the pasha would be furious. As they untied my hands they admonished me: I was the enemy of God and Muhammad. They took me up to the mansion.

After letting me kiss the hem of his skirt, the pasha treated me gently; he said he loved me for not abandoning my faith to save my life, but a moment later he started to rant and rave, saying I was being stubborn for nothing, Islam was a superior religion, and so on. The more he chastised me the angrier he became; he had decided to punish me. He began to explain he'd made a promise to someone, I understood that this promise spared me sufferings I would otherwise have endured, and finally realized that the man to whom the promise had been made, an odd man judging from what he said, was Hoja. Then the pasha said abruptly that he had given me to Hoja as a present. I looked at him blankly; the pasha explained that I was now Hoja's slave, he'd given Hoja a document, the power to make me a freed-man or not was now his, he would do whatever he liked with me from now on. Then the pasha left the room.

I was told that Hoja was at the mansion too, waiting for me downstairs. I realized then that it was he I had seen through the trees in the garden. We walked to his house. He said he'd known all along I wouldn't abandon my faith. He'd even made ready a room in his house for me. He asked if I was hungry. The fear of death was still upon me, I was in no state to eat anything. Still I was able to gulp down a few mouthfuls of the bread and yogurt he put before me. Hoja watched happily while I chewed my food. He looked at me with the pleasure of a peasant feeding a fine horse he'd just bought from the bazaar, thinking of all the work it would do for him in future. Until the days when he forgot me, submerged in the details of his theory of cosmography and designs for the clock he planned to present to the pasha, I had many occasions to remember that look.

Later he said I would teach him everything; that's why he'd asked the pasha to give me to him, and only after I had done this would he make me a freedman. It would take me months to find out what this 'everything' was. 'Everything' meant all that I'd learned in primary and secondary school; all that astronomy, medicine, engineering, everything that was taught in my country. It was what was written in the books in my cell he had a servant go and fetch the following day, all I'd heard and seen, all

had to say about rivers, bridges, lakes, caves and clouds and seas, the causes of earthquakes and thunder... Around midnight he added that it was the stars and planets which most interested him. Moonlight was shining in through the open window, he said we must at least find definite proofs regarding the existence or non-existence of that planet between the moon and the Earth. With the ravaged eyes of a man who'd spent a day standing side by side with death, I couldn't help but notice the unnerving likeness between us again as Hoja gradually ceased to use the word 'teach': we were going to search together, discover together, progress together.

So, like two dutiful students who work faithfully at their lessons even when the grown-ups are not at home listening through a cracked door, like two obedient brothers, we sat down to work. In the beginning I felt more like the solicitous elder who agrees to review his old lessons so as to help his lazy little brother catch up; and Hoja behaved like a clever boy who tries to prove that the things his big brother knows are really not all that much. According to him, the gap between his knowledge and mine was no greater than the number of volumes he'd had brought from my cell and lined up on a shelf and the books whose contents I remembered. With his phenomenal diligence and quickness of mind, in six months he'd acquired a basic grasp of Italian which he'd improve upon later, read all my books, and by the time he'd made me repeat to him everything I remembered, there was no longer any way in which I was superior to him. However, he acted as if he had access to a knowledge that transcended what was in books – he himself agreed most of them were worthless – a knowledge more natural and more profound than things that could be learned. At the end of six months we were no longer companions who studied together, progressed together. It was he who came up with ideas, and I would only remind him of certain details to help him along or review what he already knew.

He more often found these 'ideas', most of which I have forgotten, at night, long after we'd finished the improvised meal we ate in the evening and all the lamps in the neighbourhood had gone out, leaving everything around us wrapped in silence. In the mornings he'd go to teach at the primary school in the mosque a couple of neighbourhoods away, and two days a week he'd go to a faraway district I'd never set foot in and stop by the clock-room of a mosque, where the times of prayer were calculated. The rest of our time we spent either preparing for the night's 'ideas' or chasing after them in pursuit. At that time I still had hope, I believed I would soon return home, and since I felt that to debate the particulars of his 'ideas', to which I listened with little interest, would, if anything, delay my return, I never openly disagreed with Hoja.

So we passed the first year, burying ourselves in astronomy, struggling to find proofs of the existence or non-existence of the imaginary planet. But while he worked to design telescopes for the lenses he imported from Flanders at great expense, invented instruments and drew up tables, Hoja forgot the question of the planet; he had become involved in a more profound problem. He would dispute Ptolemy's system, he said, but we didn't engage in disputation; he talked while I listened: he said it was folly to believe that the planets hung from transparent spheres; there was something else that held them there, an invisible force, a force of attraction perhaps; then he proposed that the Earth might, like the sun, be revolving around something else, perhaps all the stars turned around some other heavenly centre of whose existence we had no knowledge. Later, claiming his ideas would be far more comprehensive than Ptolemy's, he included a number of new planets in his observations for a much wider cosmography, producing theories for a new system; perhaps the moon revolved around the Earth, and the Earth around the sun; perhaps the centre was Venus; but he quickly grew tired of these theories. He had just come to the point of saying that the problem now was not to suggest the new ideas but to make the stars and their movements known to men here – and he would begin this task with Sadik Pasha – when he learned that the pasha had been banished to Erzurum. It seems he had been involved in an abortive conspiracy.

During the years we waited for the pasha to return from exile, we researched a treatise Hoja would write about the causes of the Bosphorus currents. We spent months observing the tides, roaming the cliffs overlooking the straits in a wind that chilled us to the bone, and descending into the valleys with the pots we carried to measure the temperature and flow of the rivers that emptied into the straits.

While in Gebze, a town not far from Istanbul where we'd gone at the pasha's request for three months to look after some business of his, the discrepancies between times of prayer at the mosque gave Hoja a new idea: he would make a clock that would show the times of prayer with flawless accuracy. It was then that I taught him what a table was. When I brought home the piece of furniture I'd had made by a carpenter according to my specifications, Hoja was not pleased. He likened it to a four-legged funeral bier, said it was inauspicious, but later he grew accustomed both to the chairs and the table; he declared he thought and wrote better this way. We had to go back to Istanbul to have gears for the prayer clocks cast in an elliptical shape corresponding to the arc of the setting sun. On the return journey our table, its legs pointing to the stars, followed us on the back of a mule.

In those first months, while we sat facing one another at the table, Hoja tried to work out how to calculate the times of prayer and fasting in northern countries where there was a great variation in the duration of day and night and a man went for years without seeing the face of the sun. Another problem was whether or not there was a place on earth where people could face Mecca whichever way they turned. The more he realized that I was indifferent to these problems, the more contemptuous he became, but I thought at the time that he discerned my 'superiority and difference', and perhaps I was irritated because he believed that I, too, was aware of it: he talked about intelligence as much as he did about science; when the pasha returned he would gain favour by his plans, his theories of cosmography which he would develop further and then demonstrate by means of a model, and by the new clock; he would infect all of us with the curiosity and enthusiasm that burned in him, he would sow the seeds of a new revival: we were, both of us, waiting.

In those days he was thinking about how to develop a larger geared mechanism for a clock which would require setting and adjusting only once a month rather than once a week. After developing such a geared apparatus, he had it in mind to devise a clock that would need adjustment only once a year. Finally he announced that the key to the problem was to provide enough power to drive the cogwheel of this great timepiece, which had to increase in number and weight according to the amount of time between settings. That was the day he learned from his friends at the mosque clock-room that the pasha had returned from Erzurum to take up a higher office.

Hoja went to congratulate him the following morning. The pasha singled him out among the throng of visitors, showed interest in his discoveries, and even asked after me. That night we dismantled and rebuilt the clock over and over again, adding a few things here and there to the model of the universe, painting in the planets with our brushes. Hoja read to me parts of a speech he painstakingly composed and then memorized, which was intended to move his listeners by sheer force of elegant language and poetic ornament. Towards morning, in order to calm his nerves, he recited to me once more this piece of rhetoric about the logic of the turning of the planets but this time he recited it backwards, like an incantation. Loading our instruments on a wagon he'd borrowed, he left for the pasha's mansion. I was stunned to see how the clock and the model, which had filled the house for months, now appeared so tiny on the back of the one-horse cart. He returned very late that evening.

After he'd unloaded the instruments in the garden of the mansion and the pasha had examined the odd objects with the severity of a disagreeable old man in no mood for jokes, Hoja immediately recited to him the speech he'd memorized. The pasha, alluding to me, had said, as the sultan would say many years later: 'Was it he who taught you these things?' This was his only response at first. Hoja's reply surprised the pasha even more: 'Who?' he'd asked, but then understood that the pasha was referring to me. Hoja told him that I was a well-read fool. As he narrated this he gave no thought to me, his mind was still on what had happened in the pasha's mansion. He'd insisted that everything was his own discovery, but the pasha had not believed him, he seemed to be looking for someone else to blame and his heart would not allow that his beloved Hoja was the guilty party.

This was how they'd come to talk about me instead of the stars. I could see that it had not pleased Hoja to discuss this subject. There had been a silence while the pasha's attention was drawn to the other guests around him. At dinner, when Hoja made another attempt to bring up astronomy and his discoveries, the pasha said that he'd been trying to recall my face, but instead Hoja's had come to his mind. There had been others at table, a prattling began on the subject of how human beings were created in pairs, hyperbolic examples on this theme were recalled, twins whose mothers could not tear them apart, look-alikes who were frightened at the sight of one another but were unable, as bewitched, ever again to part, bandits who took the names of the innocent and lived their lives. When dinner was over and the guests were leaving, the pasha had asked Hoja to stay.

When Hoja had begun to talk again, the pasha seemed hardly entertained at first, even displeased, having his good mood upset again with a lot of mixed-up information that did not appear to be comprehensible, but later, after listening for a third time to the speech Hoja recited by heart, and watching the Earth and stars of our orrery turn, rolling around before his eyes, he seemed to have taken in a thing or two, at least he began to listen attentively to what Hoja was saying, showing just the slightest bit of curiosity. At that point Hoja had repeated vehemently that the stars were not as everyone believed, that this was how they turned. 'Very well,' the pasha said at last, 'I understand, that too is possible, why not, after all.' In response Hoja had said nothing.

I imagined there must have been a long silence. Hoja spoke, looking out the window into the

darkness over the Golden Horn. 'Why did he stop there, why didn't he go further?' If this were a question, I didn't know the answer any better than he did: I suspected that Hoja had an opinion about what more the pasha might have said, but he said nothing. It was as if he were upset that other people did not share his dreams. The pasha had later become interested in the clock, he'd asked him to open it up and explain the purpose of the cogs, the mechanism, and its counterweight. Then fearfully, as if approaching a dark and disgusting snake-hole, he'd put a finger into the ticking instrument and then withdrawn it. Hoja had been talking about clock-towers, praising the power of prayer performed by every-one at exactly the same perfect moment, when suddenly the pasha erupted. 'Be rid of him!' he said. 'If you like, poison him, if you like, free him. You'll be more at ease.' I must have glanced at Hoja with fear and hope for a moment. He said he would not free me until 'they' realized.

I didn't ask what it was that 'they' must realize. And perhaps I had a premonition which made me afraid I might find that Hoja didn't know what it was either. Later they'd talked of other things, but the pasha was frowning and looking contemptuously at the instruments before him. Hoja remained at the mansion into the late hours of the night, waiting in the hope that the pasha's interest would revive, though he knew he was no longer welcome. At last he had loaded his instruments onto the cart. I pictured someone in a house along the dark, silent road back, lying in bed unable to sleep: wondering at the sound of the huge clock ticking amidst the clatter of the wheels.

Hoja stayed up until the break of day. I wanted to replace the dying candle, but he stopped me. Because I knew he wanted me to say something, I said, 'The pasha will understand.' I said this while it was still dark, perhaps he knew as well as I did that I didn't believe it, but a moment later he spoke up saying the whole problem was to unravel the mystery of that moment when the pasha had stopped talking.

In order to solve this mystery, he went to see the pasha at the first opportunity. He had greeted Hoja cheerfully this time. He said he'd understood what had happened, or what was intended, and after soothing Hoja's feelings advised him to work on a weapon. 'A weapon to make the world a prison for our enemies!' That is what he had said, but he hadn't said what kind of thing this weapon should be. Hoja turned his passion for science in this direction, then the pasha would support him. Of course he said nothing about the endowment we hoped for. He simply gave Hoja a purse full of silver coins. When I opened it at home and counted the money: there were seventeen coins – a strange number! It was after giving him this purse that he'd said he would persuade the young sultan to grant Hoja an audience. He explained that the child was interested in 'such things'. Neither I nor Hoja, who was more easily enthused, took his promise very seriously, but a week later there was news. The pasha was going to present us, yes, me as well, to the sultan, after the evening breaking of the fast.

In preparation Hoja revised and memorized again the speech he'd recited for the pasha, changing this time so that a nine-year-old child could understand it. But for some reason his mind was on the pasha, not the sultan, he was still wondering why the pasha had fallen silent. He would discover the secret of this one day. What kind of thing could this weapon be that the pasha wanted made? There was little left for me to say, Hoja was working on his own now. While he stayed locked up in his room till midnight, I sat vacantly at my window, not even thinking of when I would return home but daydreaming like a foolish child: it was not Hoja but I who was working at the table, free to go wherever, whenever I wished!

Then one evening we loaded our instruments on to a wagon and went off to the palace. I'd come to love walking the streets of Istanbul, I felt like an invisible man moving like a ghost among the giant plane-trees, the chestnut and erguvan trees in the gardens. We set up the instruments with the help of attendants, on the site they pointed out to us in the second courtyard.

The sovereign was a sweet, red-cheeked child of a height proportionate to his few years. He handled

the instruments as if they were his toys. Am I thinking now of that time when I wanted to be his pen pal and friend, or of another time much later, fifteen years later, when we met again? I cannot tell; but I felt immediately that I must do him no wrong. Hoja suffered a bout of nerves while the sultan's entourage waited, crowding round in curiosity. At last he was able to begin; he'd added new things to his tale; he talked about the stars as if they were intelligent, living beings, likening them to attractive, mysterious creatures who knew arithmetic and geometry, and who revolved in accord with the laws of science and knowledge. He grew more passionate as he saw that the child was affected and raised his head from time to time to look at the sky in wonder. See, the planets hung on the turning transparent spheres; they were represented in the model there, there was Venus and it revolved this way and the huge ball hanging there was the moon and it, you understand, followed a different course. While Hoja made the stars turn, the bell attached to the model tinkled with a sweet sound and the little sultan, scared, took a step back, then, gathering his courage, made an effort to understand and approached the ringing machine as if it were an enchanted treasure-chest.

Now, as I recollect my memories and try to invent a past for myself, I find this a portrait of happiness fit for the fables I heard as a child, exactly as the painters of the pictures in those fairy-tale books would have it. The gingerbread-red roofs of Istanbul need only be encased in those glass spheres that swirl with snow when you shake them. The child had begun to ask Hoja questions, and I tried to find answers for them.

How did the stars stay in the air? They hung from the transparent spheres! What were the spheres made of? Of an invisible material, so they were invisible too! Didn't they bump into one another? No, each had its own zone, layered as in the model! There were so many stars, why weren't there as many spheres? Because they were very far away! How far? Very, very! Did the other stars have bells that rang when they turned? No, we attached the bells to mark each complete revolution of the stars! Did the thunder have any relation to this? None! What did it relate to? Rain! Was it going to rain tomorrow? Observation of the sky showed it would not! What did the sky reveal about the sultan's ailing lion? The lion was going to get better, but one must be patient, and so on.

While he gave his opinion about the ailing lion, Hoja continued to look at the sky, as he did when he talked about the stars. After returning home he mentioned this detail, saying that it didn't matter. The important thing was not that the child distinguish between science and sophistry, but that he should 'realize' a few things. He was using the same word again, as if I understood what it was he should realize, while I was thinking it would make no difference whether I became a Muslim or not. There were exactly five pieces of gold in the purse they gave us as we left the palace. Hoja said the sultan had grasped that there was a logic behind what happened in the stars. O my sultan! later, much later, did I know him! It amazed me that the same moon appeared through the window of our house, and I wanted to be a child! Hoja, unable to stop himself, returned to the same subject: the question of the ailing lion was not important, the child loved animals, that was all.

The next day he shut himself up in his room and began to work: a few days later he loaded the clockwork and the stars on to the wagon again and, under the gaze of those curious eyes behind the latticed windows, went this time to the primary school. When he returned in the evening he was depressed, but not so much as to keep silent: 'I thought the children would understand as the sultan did, but I was wrong,' he said. They had only been frightened. When Hoja had asked questions after his lecture, one of the children replied that Hell was on the other side of the sky and began to cry.

He spent the next week bolstering his confidence in the sovereign's intelligence; he went over with me one by one every moment that we had spent in the second courtyard, getting my support for his interpretations: the child was clever, yes; he already knew how to think, yes; he was already possessed of enough character to withstand the pressure put upon him by those around him at court, yes! The

long before the sultan began to dream for us, as he would in later years, we began to dream for him. Hoja was working on the clock, too, at this time; I believed he was also thinking a bit about the weapon, because he said so to the pasha when he was called to see him. But I could tell that he'd given up on the pasha. 'He's become like the others,' he said. 'He no longer wants to know that he doesn't know.' A week later the sovereign summoned Hoja again, and he went.

The sultan had received Hoja in good spirits. 'My lion is better,' he'd said, 'it is as you predicted.' Later they'd gone out into the courtyard with his retinue. The sovereign, showing him the fish in the pool, had asked what he thought of them. 'They were red,' Hoja said when he told me about it. 'I couldn't think of anything else to say.' Then he'd noticed a pattern to the movements of the fish, and it was as if they were actually discussing the pattern among themselves, trying to perfect it. Hoja had said he found the fish to be intelligent. When a dwarf, standing next to one of the harem eunuchs who continually reminded the sovereign of his mother's admonitions, laughed at this, the sultan rebuked him. As punishment he didn't allow the red-headed dwarf to sit next to him when he ascended to his carriage.

They'd gone by carriage to the hippodrome, to the lion-house. The lions, leopards, and panthers that the sultan showed Hoja one by one were chained to the columns of an ancient church. They stopped in front of the lion Hoja had predicted would get well, the child spoke to it, introducing the lion to Hoja. Then they'd gone to another lion lying in a corner, this animal, not filthy-smelling like the others, was pregnant. The sovereign, his eyes shining, asked, 'How many cubs will this lion give birth to, how many will be male, how many female?'

Taken by surprise, Hoja did something he later described to me as a 'blunder'. He told the sultan that he had knowledge of astronomy but was not an astrologer. 'But you know more than Imperial Astrologer Huseyn Efendi!' the child had said. Hoja didn't answer, fearing someone nearby might hear and pass on to Huseyn Efendi. The impatient sovereign had insisted: or did Hoja know nothing, did he observe the stars in vain after all?

In response Hoja was forced to explain at once things that he'd intended to say only much later: he replied he had learned many things from the stars and arrived at very useful conclusions based on what he'd learned. Interpreting favourably the silence of the sovereign, who was listening with widening eyes, he said it was necessary to build an observatory to watch the stars; like the observatory his grandfather Ahmet the First's grandfather, Murat the Third, had built for the late Takiyuddin Efendi ninety years ago, and which later fell into ruin from neglect. Or rather, something more advanced than that: a House of Science where scholars could observe not only the stars, but the whole world, its rivers and oceans, clouds and mountains, flowers and trees and, of course, its animals, and then come together to discuss their observations at leisure and make progress in the advancement of the intellect.

The sultan had listened to Hoja talk of this project which I, too, was hearing about for the first time, as if listening to an agreeable fable. As they returned to the palace in their carriages he'd asked once again, 'How will the lion give birth, what do you say?' Hoja had thought it over and this time he answered, 'An equal number of male and female cubs will be born.' At home he told me there was no danger in having said this. 'I will have that fool of a child in the palm of my hand,' he said. 'I am more adept than the Imperial Astrologer Huseyn Efendi!' It shocked me to hear him use this word in speaking of the sovereign; for some reason I even took offence. In those days I was keeping myself occupied with housework out of boredom.

Later he began to use that word as if it were a magical key that would unlock every door: because they were 'fools' they didn't look at the stars moving over their heads and reflect on them, because they were 'fools' they asked first what was the good of the thing they were about to learn, because

they were 'fools' they were interested not in details but in summaries, because they were 'fools' they were all alike, and so on. Although I too had liked to criticize people this way, not many years before when I still lived in my own country, I'd say nothing to Hoja. At the time, in any case, he was preoccupied with his fools, not with me. Apparently my folly was of another kind. In my indiscretion those days I had told him of a dream I'd had: he had gone to my country in my place, was marrying my fiancée, at the wedding no one realized that he was not me, and during the festivities which I watched from a corner dressed as a Turk, I met up with my mother and fiancée who both turned their backs on me without recognizing who I was, despite the tears which finally wakened me from the dream.

Around that time he went twice to the pasha's mansion. I believe the pasha was not pleased to find Hoja developing a relationship with the sovereign away from his watchful eye; he'd interrogated him and he'd asked after me, he'd been investigating me, but only much later, after the pasha had been banished from Istanbul, did Hoja tell me this; he feared I might have passed my days in terror of being poisoned if I had known. Still, I could tell that the pasha was more intrigued by me than he was by Hoja; it flattered my pride that the resemblance between Hoja and myself disturbed the pasha more than it did me. In those days it was as if this resemblance were a secret Hoja would never wish to know and whose existence lent me a strange courage: sometimes I thought that by grace of this resemblance alone I would be safe as long as Hoja lived. Perhaps that is why I contradicted Hoja when he'd say the pasha, too, was one of those fools; he became irritated at that. He spurred me to a brazenness I was not accustomed to, I wanted to feel both his need for me and his shame before me; I relentlessly questioned him about the pasha, about what he said regarding the two of us, strangling Hoja in a rage the cause of which I believe was not clear even to him. Then he'd stubbornly repeat that they would get rid of the pasha too, soon the janissaries would be up to something, he sensed the presence of conspiracies within the palace. For this reason, if he were going to work on a weapon as the pasha suggested, he should build it not for some vizier who would come and go, but for the sultan.

For a while I thought he was occupied exclusively with this obscure notion of a weapon; planning but not getting anywhere, I said to myself. For had he made progress, I was sure he'd have shared it with me, even if trying to belittle me while doing so, he would have told me about his designs in order to learn my opinion. One evening we were returning home after going to that house in Aksaray where we listened to music and lay with prostitutes, as we did every two or three weeks. Hoja said he was planning to work till morning, then asked me about women – we had never talked about women – and said suddenly, 'I'm thinking...' but the moment we entered the house he shut himself up in his room without revealing what was on his mind. I was left alone with the books I now had no desire even to browse through, and thought of him: of whatever plan or idea he had that I was convinced he could not develop, of him shut up in the room sitting at the table to which he was still not completely accustomed, staring at the empty pages before him, sitting fruitlessly at the table for hours in shame and rage...

He emerged from his room well after midnight and like an embarrassed student needing help with some minor question that defeated him, sheepishly called me inside to the table. 'Help me,' he said abruptly. 'Let's think about them together, I can't make any progress on my own.' I was silent for a moment, thinking this had something to do with women. When he saw me look blank he said seriously, 'I'm thinking about the fools. Why are they so stupid?' Then, as if he knew what my answer would be, he added, 'Very well, they aren't stupid, but there is something missing inside their heads. I didn't ask who 'they' were. 'Don't they have any corner inside their heads for storing knowledge?' he said, and looked around as if searching for the right word. 'They should have a compartment inside their heads, some compartment like the drawers of this cabinet, a spot where they can put various

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