

A CRAZY OLD MAN

By Murat Gülsoy

Dr. Nevzat Akat didn't hear the knock as he was struggling with the stuck desk drawer. He was irritable. He had only been at the hospital three days but already he had a growing voice inside him: something was about to go wrong. The room was small, his computer had no Internet connection, the desk drawers wouldn't close all the way, he couldn't find a parking space in front of the hospital, and things were getting worse. He'd even cut his hand trying to close the drawer. Of course he couldn't hear the knock as he watched the blood swell under the exposed layer of skin.

"I'm sorry, Doctor..." said a voice. He realized that the door had opened and someone had entered. "Now what?" he muttered to himself. He motioned to the man to sit down as he dialed reception to ask for a nurse to dress his hand. The man, feeling he was bothering the doctor, perched hesitatingly on the edge of one of the blue armchairs. Because of the over-sized blue armchairs the room seemed much smaller than it actually was. "Hi! It's Nevzat, would you send... Yes, Dr. Akat! Yes I'm a doctor. I need a nurse in Room 3102! With a surgical dressing, please. Not for a patient, for me. Yes, right away, please." He put the receiver down irritably and then turned to the man sitting in front of him as if about to continue where he had left off.

"It's impossible to get anything simple from these people in reception!" Seeing the man's embarrassing smile, he pulled himself together. "Yes, how can I help you?"

"Um, you were recommended to me. It's about my father..." But before the man could finish speaking there was a tap on the door and a nurse entered. "Is something wrong, Doctor? Let's have a look - oh, yes, you've cut your hand. How did you do that?" The mockery in her voice was not lost on him; hinting at his clumsiness. "I was trying to shut this drawer..." he started to answer. He felt so completely annoyed that he misread the name on her tag. For the next few months he would call her Seda without realizing the slip of tongue or that her actual name was Selda. Perhaps later on, while concentrating on another slip of the tongue, he would discover the reason for this particular slip, understanding how he had coded her mockery into the misreading of her name; he would once again be amazed at this puzzling quality of the human mind. He would have again regretted not taking up the position in Maryland.

He in fact regretted it now, but there seemed to be some sort of obstacle in front of him; the same obstacle that raised itself in front of him whenever he had to make a major decision in his life. He knew the obstacle was there but neither had the energy to overcome it at this point in time nor did he even know exactly what it was. He told himself it was a lie that he couldn't overcome it, that he's always been this way, always had an excuse and this is why he'd never made a major decision in his life. He thought that the uneasy voice in him must be his suppressed ego making itself felt; that if he had had time to make the decision the uneasy voice would have stopped nagging him. But he had been unable to make the decision to go and the excuses were always there: he had parents at home and if he was separated from them for any length of time it seemed to him that he would never see them again. There were other things, too he thought. Maybe a slight lack of self-confidence.

The stab of pain from Nurse Selda wiping antiseptic on his hand interrupted his thoughts. That permanent grin on her face was annoying. She didn't seem she could care less about what she was doing. Was there something funny about it? Obviously, hurting himself as soon as he had set foot in the hospital had made him look ridiculous. All he could do was hope that she would go away as soon as possible.

As soon as she finished she smiled once more at the man and then at the doctor before she left. He was sure that as soon as she left she'd go and talk with the nurses about him: "You know Dr Nevzat, that new psycho? He's such a dope, ha, ha, ha! The cut his hand!" In order to silence his inner nagging he turned to the man. "Okay, I can deal with you now. What's the problem?" He picked up a pen with his bandaged hand and placed a notepad in front of him.

"Sorry about the hand, Doctor. I came at the wrong time. It's about my father. I'd like you to have a look at him. He's in the geriatric ward. His name's Pertev Belende. I'm his son, Nahit Belende."

"Why do you want me to examine him?" asked the doctor as he made a note of the names.

"None of the other doctors have been able to help very much so far. My father started going senile two years ago..."

"How old is he?"

"Seventy eight. Do you think that's normal?"

"Going senile? Look, Mr. Nahit, senile dementia is an illness. It could happen to anyone. The fact that it is seen more frequently in old people does not mean that all old people will suffer from senile dementia. There can be many reasons for it. There is damage to the brain; the patient loses his ability to distinguish between yesterday and today. It's circulatory and neurological complaints that lead to senile dementia. There can be many reasons for these things."

"Everything was alright until about two years ago. First of all he became very forgetful, and then he started talking less and less. Then he went to pieces so badly we had to put him in this hospital. What could have caused it?"

"There could be a number of reasons. He must have been examined. They would have checked his blood pressure, tested for diabetes, cholesterol and so on."

"Yes, but they couldn't find anything wrong. He's got a slight touch of diabetes, but..."

"Could be Alzheimer. There are other reasons for people losing their minds, though. I'd need to have a look at him."

"Is there any cure?"

"I'm sorry, but I wouldn't hold out much hope if I were you. It's no easy matter to bring back a mind that's been lost - almost impossible - especially if he's been like this for more than two years... From next week onwards I'll be examining patients. I've written down your father's name. I'll see how he's doing."

At that point Dr Nevzat was expecting the man to thank him and take his leave. However, Nahit Belende was fidgeting like someone who is concealing something and wants to make it obvious. The doctor glanced at him as if to say, "Is there anything else?" He was in the habit of doing this and that look made everybody uneasy. It was a cold, penetrating look which stressed that fact that their communication was strictly on a doctor-patient basis, it created a great distance between himself and the person sitting in front of him. The woman he was to meet a few years later and once again as a result of great fits of indecision, finally be "forced to marry", was, in the midst of a violent quarrel which broke out in the sixth month of their marriage, to mention that famous look of his, and only then would be become aware of its existence.

"There is something else, in fact. I don't know if it's important..."

"What is it?"

"The real reason for bringing my father here was not senility. If he'd just become senile we would still have been able to cope between us."

"Were you living together?"

"Yes. This is what happened when I got home one day two years ago. We knew my father was getting pretty senile and tried to do what the doctors had told us. You know, we kept our eyes peeled so he didn't wander outside and get lost. We put lists of "things to do" written on pieces of cardboard in conspicuous places in his room - so he would take his own medicines and do a few everyday jobs for himself - and most important of all, we talked to him. When I got home that day I decided to go straight to his room and have our daily attempt at a chat. When I went in he was sitting in the living room watching television. 'Hello, Father,' I said. He didn't hear, or didn't realize I was speaking to him. I went up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. He turned around and looked into my face. Then he started laughing, as if I had said something really funny - you know, chuckling first of all, and then roaring with laughter. He went on laughing, with tears pouring down his face. At first I tried to laugh with him. You know, when you see someone else laughing, you automatically start laughing as well - that's how it happens. He went on laughing, taking no notice when I asked him what had happened and why he was laughing. And whenever I opened my mouth to say something he laughed even more. My wife heard us and came into the room. By that time my father was out of breath - he went on laughing, clutching his sides, with tears pouring down his face. You couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying. When I went into the other room to telephone the doctor - because I thought it wasn't normal - I realized that he had stopped laughing. Nermin took my father, who was exhausted from all the laughing, into his room and put him to bed and I changed my mind about phoning the doctor. They'd told us that senile dementia in old people can lead to very strange behaviors. But we hadn't expected anything like that. Well, we thought it was just a passing phase, but ..."

The man's story had aroused Nevzat Akat's interest. He immediately forgot all about his injured hand, Nurse Selda's impertinence and his dissatisfaction with the hospital - and began rapidly to take notes. "But then you realized it wasn't just a passing phase?" Were constantly recurring manic attacks encountered in senile dementia patients? Of course they were. But would there be such violent crises? Odd. Very odd...

"Yes, we realized it wasn't a passing phase when the same thing happened the next day as well. There was no change over the next few days, either. We were together all day on the Sunday because I wasn't at work. It was then that I realized something else."

Dr Nevzat stopped taking notes and gazed at the man's face. What else had they realized?

"My father only has these laughing fits when he sees me. He doesn't laugh at Nermin or the television; he only laughs when he sees me."

The man breathed deeply and then fell silent, as if he had just confided his greatest secret. Dr Nevzat was amazed. He sat there wondering whether he had ever encountered a similar case in his professional career. It was very strange, like one of the cases described by Oliver Sacks. It was at least as interesting as the case of the man who mistook his wife for a hat. What sort of mental disorder could have caused it? In which nerve ganglions did these "short circuits" take place when he saw his son?

"So it's seeing you that starts him laughing?"

"Yes. He starts laughing when he sees me. He could laugh until he died if I didn't keep out of sight. I tried it several times on Sunday. Just catching a glimpse of me was enough to set him off - and as soon as I disappeared from his field of vision he calmed down and became his old self. We brought him here the next day."

"How did you bring him here? How did you get here without him seeing your face?"

The man was pleased to have aroused the doctor's interest. He continued with a smile. "Nermin and my father traveled in a friend's car and I drove my own car. Anyway, we managed to get him admitted. You know Dr Hakan - Hakan Aslanturk? Well, he was very helpful - I don't know what I'd have done without him. He examined my father, wrote a prescription for various medicines and arranged for him to be admitted to this hospital. It was obvious that he would never get better and that we could not go on living together any more. It happened again when Dr Hakan was there, too."

Dr Nevzat was feeling quite excited. He could not wait to start work on the case. There were a number of things he'd have to look into.

"Your father's condition is very interesting, Mr. Nahit. I'd like to work on it, but I'll need your help."

The man's face lit up. "Of course. I'm prepared to do whatever's necessary. I visit him once a week, on Sunday mornings. Of course, I can only stand at a distance and look - because he starts laughing as soon as he sees me," he said and chuckled. Dr Nevzat examined the man's face with a reflex peculiar to doctors. The penetrating stare of the expert. The man lowered his eyes guiltily, just as if the doctor could see the reason for this ridiculous situation in his face... As if there really were something comical in the man's face that only his father could see. Without waiting for the man to put his thoughts into words, Dr Nevzat broke the silence with a sudden question.

"Does he react in the same way to photographs of you? Have you ever had an experience of that kind?"

"No... I can't say... It hadn't occurred to us."

Dr Nevzat had already made his decision. He was going to take an interest in the case.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters, Mr. Nahit?"

"No, I don't."

"How long have you been living together? What's your job? What was your father's job? Has he had any other illnesses? I need information of that kind. I'll need to talk to your wife as well. Then we'll have to do some tests. The main problem we have to solve is whether it's you he's laughing at, or your face. And bring some photographs of yourself when you come next week - the more the better. I want to show them to your father and gauge his reaction. Then..."

"What are you hoping for?"

"I don't know - we'll see. It's possible he won't react at all. In any case, a photograph's different. If he does react, we'll see whether or not he reacts to all of them - whether he's laughing at what you've become after a certain age..."

Dr Nevzat suddenly broke off. There was something he had not become aware of until that moment. The telephone had not rung once and nobody had tapped on the door since the man had entered the room - and the hospital was generally very busy at that time of day. Nobody had bothered them since Nurse Selda had left the room with a malicious grin on her face. And why the malice? There's something weird about this, Nevzat! Concentrate. The voice inside him was warning him, but what about? He knew there were certain bothersome situations, like when you couldn't remember a word that was on the tip of your tongue... You know something is wrong, you realize that things are going badly, you're aware of a generally unfavorable trend in events, but you can't do anything about it because you can't put your finger on what it is. That sort of situation. The uneasiness he was to experience in later years when Selin, their first child, then in her teens, came home late. A first whiff of something as yet unknown, of an inexorably approaching unpleasant

event... He had in fact thought about it. He was no stranger to such feelings. The power of intuition was something he had always been aware of since the very first years of his medical practice. He accounted for it by reasoning that the mind receives a number of warning signals, records and processes them. Then it formulates some of them on a conscious level and presents them to us; others it cannot express in their entirety because the information it has is incomplete. In actual fact part of the mind, without our realizing it, is constantly processing information. It continuously analyses the other person's body language, tone of voice and facial expression. Perhaps it reaches conclusions that cannot be expressed in words and therefore cannot be brought to a conscious level...

Why had Nurse Selda behaved like that? That was a problem requiring an immediate answer. The answer was simple, for such a patient would be known by everybody in the hospital. Everybody would know a patient who was convulsed with laughter when he saw his own son. Everybody except me. I was about to be acquainted with this comical case - that's why the nurse was grinning. "That's what you think," said the nagging voice inside him. "That's what you think." What is it, then? Think about it a little longer. Be careful. Concentrate. Think of the most unlikely possibility. Why hasn't the telephone rung since he entered the room? Dr Nevzat was in any case feeling thoroughly confused and his next question was blurted out. "Is your wife waiting outside?"

The man could not have been expecting a question of that kind, for there was a momentary hesitation. "My wife? Um, no. She's at home at the moment."

"Did you come here alone?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Where have you left your coat?" This was one of the things that Dr Nevzat had found strange. There was no cloakroom outside. The man could not have come in shirt and trousers on such a cold day.

"My coat? I don't have a coat..." At that moment Dr Nevzat obeyed his instincts and picked up the telephone. When reception replied, he said "Send Nurse Selda here right away, it's Nev..." The girl, with a swift "very good, sir," cut him off. Putting the receiver down, he fixed his eyes on the man and scrutinized him. Silence, he knew, was a very good weapon. He had tried it many times and had been successful in the main. Most people could not bear the tension created by silence. A conversation interrupted by silence was like being left in the dark. Dr Nevzat knew the man was lying - or at least that he was not telling the truth. Meanwhile, Nahit Belende had averted his eyes and was gazing at the floor. He was embarrassed. It was difficult to withstand Dr Nevzat's penetrating stare. The doctor stared unblinkingly, directly and expressionlessly into the man's face. It seemed to Nahit Belende that the doctor was looking not at him, but at the conditions that had created the situation. The doctor was so tense he felt that if he so much as moved, he would pounce on his prey.

"Who sent you to my room?"

The sentence exploded like a bomb in the middle of the room after the oppressive silence. The man did not speak. A strange smile settled on his face. This "escape route" was typical of patients... Dr Nevzat was now sure.

The arrival of Nurse Selda signaled that the game was almost over. When the nurse opened the door, Dr Nevzat was sitting motionless at his desk and the man was silent. It was obvious that, whatever charade was being played, the nurses were involved in it. Dr Nevzat was so angry that he knew the trembling of his lower jaw would give him away if he began to speak. For this reason he remained silent, trying to regain his composure by counting to himself. Nurse Selda gently took hold of the man's arm, raised him to his feet and led him towards the door. As they both turned to

look at him, Dr Nevzat spoke in a tone which announced his victory. "Come and see me when you're finished, Nurse Selda. Then, when I've heard what you have to say, I'd like to speak to the Chief Doctor."

Nurse Selda murmured something that could have been an apology or a "yes".

After the door had closed, Dr Nevzat smiled and looked at the notes he had made on the pad. He underlined them all, and then wrote the word "mythomania" in ornate handwriting. Had he spent the last three days reorganizing his office, had he taken a look at patient records he would not have found himself in this situation. As well as being slightly annoyed with himself, he was also pleased to have dealt with the situation so admirably. It was obvious that Nahit Belende (or whatever his name was) was an interesting mythomaniac, that the nurses knew about him and turned a blind eye when he descended on new doctors posing as a patient's relative. That day's victim had been himself. While the mythomaniac had been in his office they all acted as if they did not know he was there. Today, however, things had gone slightly wrong, for he had summoned the nurse to his room and she had seen the man. What she should have done was to warn the doctor immediately and remove the patient from the room. Nurse Selda, however, had failed to do so. She had, at that moment, been unwilling to miss such a god-sent opportunity. Had she been a person of sound character, she would have spoken out immediately. He had written down the nurse's name in his notebook. When she arrived in a moment she would be forced to confess to everything. He had allowed her time. He wanted her to consult the friends with whom she had planned this little charade - and to make up a story to try and save the situation. If he did not do so, he would have an unnecessary relationship problem with the staff right from his very first week at the hospital. Dr Nevzat was a calculating man.

He was pleased with himself. The nagging voice inside him had fallen silent for the time being. He was thinking about the mythomaniac at that moment, trying to analyze the underlying reason for making up such a story. Telling a lie designed to undermine authority to a person who represented authority... His first efforts would be concentrated on this case. He had to work on this man. It was interesting. But the tale he had told was even more interesting. He thought about his own father. What if he went senile in the same way, roaring with laughter when he saw Dr Nevzat...? It was the stuff of nightmares.

He quickly picked up the telephone receiver, dialed a number and waited, doodling small snakes as he did so.

"Hello? This is Nevzat, father. No, there's nothing wrong. I just thought I'd give you a call... How are you?"

Translated by Georgina Ozel