

I'm the Bad Guy in This Movie
a novel
by **Murat Gülsoy**

Translated from the Turkish by Amy Spangler

Chapter One

With the back of her hand she pushed away the angels who had descended to earth out of respect for the sanctity of her name. As she slipped the clothesline around her neck, one of the saints appeared to her. But Ayşe did not understand the words that he spoke. She slipped the clothesline, which was tied to an iron hook in the center of the ceiling, from which a lamp should have hung, around her neck and moments later, she began to swing from the end of it. The chair had toppled over onto the floor. She must have lost her mind long before. As the clothesline tightened around her neck she thought for a time, which seemed interminably long to her, that she would not die. Her neck hurt, she couldn't breathe, but still she was alive. She began to think that she would remain hanging there like that forever, in the grip of that same pain. There was just enough air left in her lungs to keep alive the belief that she could sustain her previous actions for as long as she wanted. Caught in this timeless and groundless illusion, thinking that it was impossible to hang herself, she changed her mind; she decided not to commit suicide. As she used her hands to try and free her neck from the tightening clothesline, she felt the vertebra at the back of her neck quickly begin to pull apart. Her neck, which used to grow stiff as a board after long hours working in her studio, was now being ripped to pieces. She was nearly out of breath. The nylon string, the clothesline, had turned into the hands of Azrael, strangling her windpipe. As she tried to slip her fingers beneath the string, she realized that her struggle was in vain, and that suicide by hanging was an irreversible act. This horrible moment of realization lasted only a few seconds. She hoped during that brief time that someone might just happen by the house and help her. In fact, at one point, amidst the haze she saw Hasan, who came in and beat her down from the ceiling, releasing her from the strangling grip. Then her consciousness went dead. Pain had finally ceased to course through the body which had lived and breathed as Ayşe Solmaz on this earth for 26 years. The simultaneous demise of life and pain was a source of profound reflection. For the living that is, of course. Ayşe had now become part of the world of objects. One of those unconscious beings unaware that they are part of a whole: clothes hanging off of

the ironing board; the mass of tricot tops nearly bursting out of the plastic, zip-up wardrobe; the 37-inch television, turned off, now a giant blind eye; the teapot in the kitchen, nearly out of water; the print-cloth window curtains, their color a revolting pistachio green; the pair of faded boots removed outside the door; the cheese and yoghurt, moldy even though it was in the fridge; the city bugs roaming amongst the pile of dishes in the sink; and... Ayşe. She had been aware of these objects before losing consciousness, but now, having lost the coherence that had once bound them together, they floated in a void, like soulless planets in a nameless universe. Ayşe's dead body swung from the ceiling like a pendulum on an infernal clock, showing an irrational time. This small universe comprised of objects that had lost all meaning were a lucid expression of the destructive power that that thing once called a human being had wielded against life. As the letter that would shape the future inside this massive void lay there on the table, waiting for the moment when it would be read, the blood trickling down from between Ayşe's legs continued to form a dark puddle on the floor.

Chapter Two

‘Look, do you see those big rocks over there? There, over there sweetie... Don’t you see them? Look. Follow my finger, look right to where I’m pointing.’

‘Tell me what it looks like. I don’t see anything over there.’

‘Find the biggest tree behind the pool mansion. See it? ... Now, go about a hundred meters from that tree towards the electric pole on the hill. You see the rocks over there?’

‘Yeah. So?’

‘So what do those rocks look like to you?’

‘What do they look like? I don’t know, they look like everything. For example, they look like a set of humungous salt shakers...’

‘What do you mean salt shakers?’

‘I mean plain old salt shakers.’

‘Don’t they look like a shepherd and his sheep?’

‘A shepherd? Which one’s the shepherd?’

‘There, that one, right over there.’

‘They say that once upon a time, there was a shepherd who lived in this village.’

‘What, are you going to tell me a fairy tale now?’

‘Just listen. I’m telling you the story of those rocks. The shepherd was a pretty ruthless guy. One day, right over there, at the place you’re looking at... He had his sheep out to pasture as usual when a woman passed by, walking down the road. A raggedly dressed woman, carrying one baby on her back, and one in her arms. A woman miserable from hunger and weariness... The woman asked the shepherd to give her some milk. She told him, if she could just milk one of his sheep, she’d be able to feed her babies, who’d gone hungry for days. But the shepherd didn’t want to give her any milk, and so he chased her off. As the woman walked away, she cursed the shepherd and his sheep. “May Allah turn you to stone, right now, you stone-hearted creatures!” she yelled. And just like that, before the woman was even out of site, the shepherd and the sheep suddenly turned to stone.’

‘Oh come on! When did that happen? I didn’t see *that* in the papers.’

‘Well for one, it’s a folk tale, you stone-hearted writer you. A folk tale...’

‘Alright, alright, I get it. So where did you hear it?’

‘An old Indian told it to me: an old woman in the village... Aunt Fatma. You’ve seen her too, actually. Her house is right next to the village square. To the left of the market. She always sits outside, at the front door. An old, thin woman. She told me.’

‘So why did the sheep turn to stone too?’

‘To teach a lesson, why else!’

‘Of course, right... To teach a lesson...’

After reliving in his mind once again the last loving conversation that he and Defne had had, Önder moved his chair to a spot from which he could gaze upon the last lingering rays of light of the descending sun. When was it? Fifteen days ago? A month? Two months? It was the most adorable scene he could remember. And today? They’d just had a fight that morning. They’d gotten into it over the cocktail they’d been invited to at the pool mansion. Önder wanted to be alone. He had no desire to meet any new people. He couldn’t stand being around anyone. Not even Defne... It was time he admitted it: Things weren’t going well between him and his wife. It was blatantly obvious. Why? That was the thing—for that question he had no definite answer.

Those first few sips... The familiar scent of alcohol... Had he begun drinking more? No. Three doubles, that was the limit he’d set for himself. He was finishing the first one fast though, and on an empty stomach. Well, with some nuts. The others he would have after dinner... Though he had hit forty, his stomach was still as reliable as could be. He considered the success of his internal organs to be a valuable inheritance passed down to him from his family. His father, who had led a rather humble life as a university professor, never felt the need to go to the doctor, not even once, for the first seventy-two years of his life. But then, he didn’t drink every night the way Önder did. And not only that, he never smoked, nor did he stick around when others smoked. The result? He died in perfectly good health, in a god-damned car wreck. It was his grandfather whose genetic legacy he put his faith in most of all. though The man had lived healthy as a horse to the age of ninety-eight. His father used to brag that their ancestors came from the Caucasus, and that longevity just ran in the family. Deducting a few years to account for his bad habits,

Önder had come up with an arbitrary calculation of how long he would live: Eighty years! Even if the negative effects of all of his naughty deeds shaved off fifteen years of his life (which was a pretty pessimistic calculation), he would still live to be at least eighty-three. And by then, Defne would have reached her seventies. Not bad... And if you added the positive effects of living in this environment... But the idea of living at Keklik Bay for the rest of his life, and even the idea of spending that time with Defne... How should he put it... It just didn't appeal to him. It occurred to him just then, his mind apparently having slipped into cynical gear, that he hadn't figured the genetic inheritance from his mother's side into his calculations. But then there was already an antidote to offset that negative thought: *Men can't get breast cancer...*

Where was Defne anyway? She'd left with Memduh and his wife saying that they were heading down to Datça. He expected they'd be back before nightfall. That bond he had once had with Defne, he severed it at some point, but when? It had been Defne's idea to move here. Önder took a deep breath. The warm breeze that blew in from the south around nightfall swept through Keklik Bay, bearing the scents of all those wild herbs, the names of which only Defne would know. They had come here in the fall. During the windy winter months they had been mesmerized by the unfamiliar beauty of Datça's nature, and they had congratulated themselves often on having made the decision to move here. The truth was, looking back, Önder was uncertain of his own sincerity during these little shows of jubilation. As the enchanting vivacity of May gave way to the heat of June, time had slowed down and the days had begun to pass in a blur, one just like the next. This place, like so many others, had begun to impose its own habits upon the new inhabitants. The case had been different back in Istanbul. For example, back in Istanbul, they hadn't argued this much. And Önder hadn't felt so weak and useless. One might even say he had been a success. He had gotten a good handle on the TV scriptwriting job, which was really Defne's doing, had acquired a new circle of friends, and his old friends had commended him for his achievement. And it was all thanks to Defne. But then, in the beginning...

They'd rushed into the marriage, and their decision to get married had come as a big surprise to his close friends. Three years earlier. Önder had taken his place at the table to sign their marriage certificate under the anxious eyes of Cemal, Mehmet, Can, and the others. Back

then, he acted nonchalant about the whole thing. Maybe he believed that voice somewhere deep down within him that kept saying this was a temporary solution, a step that had to be taken, a test that had to be passed. He had hit rock bottom back then. He needed to grab onto something, to pull himself back up onto his feet. And then Defne walked into his life. She was a young, energetic woman with round, athletic shoulders, honey colored hair, and a wholesome smile. But now three years had gone by. In their first months together, he had felt as if his heart beat to the exact same rhythm as his, and that made him happy. But then, when their lives began to be taken over by a state of banal serenity, both Önder's heart and his mind had begun to pull away from Defne. He didn't think she was right for him, he began to see in her every human trait that he had ever looked down upon, and he became utterly annoyed by her every move. But then he would convince himself that his reactions were just a natural part of being married and give himself over to other tasks. Here though, here in this void, it was just the two of them...

He watched the sun disappear behind the mountains, his mind nearly emptied of all thought. The thought, 'Is this really me?' quickly flitted through his mind before making a swift exit. Eighty minus forty equals forty. Forty. But could you really say he was forty? What did it matter. He was smack in the middle of his life. Exactly. At that moment. Could a person really arrive at a moment in his life? Just arrive at it, at that one point, and stop, just stay there? Cognizant and willingly? He looked at the bay, which appeared more beautiful than it really was beneath the curving red beams of evening sunlight. He began scanning the bay, slowly, like a video camera, starting from the beach casino to his right. The sea was still, the breeze having subsided at sundown. While İbrahim picked up the litter swept in by the waves, his son Mercan played with a toy boat made from a can and tied to a string, guiding it over the water. Önder wondered for a moment what kind of a future awaited this kid burnt brown as could be by the sun. He made up a story, free of suspense and topped off by a happy ending, before turning his attention to the left side of the beach. The edge of the beach was marked by a marsh at the end of the dry stream bed which filled with rainwater in the winter. After that came a small, rocky bay. And then the long, narrow cape that separated Keklik Bay from Palamut Thicket. As his eyes wandered from the small, rocky shore upwards, another structure caught his attention: An elegant mansion painted dark green to match the surroundings. The blue that played peek-a-boo from behind the trees

swaying the wind belonged to the pool. It was because of that pool that the locals had named the place 'the pool mansion.' He couldn't see it in detail from the distance. It reminded Önder of the luxurious houses he'd seen in the decoration magazines that Defne used to read back in Istanbul; she never used to miss an issue. Who would live there? Actually, Önder didn't wonder about it in the least. Just like he never wondered about the people in the village behind the hill, or his neighbors... He perceived everything around him as if it were happening in a vapid state of lethargy. As if nothing ever happened around here; it never had and it never would. Because no matter where he went, life was always happening somewhere else. He'd come here to stop, to stay put. And there he was, stuck in the middle of forty. When he looked back on his life, what he saw was mostly memories that caused him nothing but distress, and when he looked ahead... Nothing. Everything had become so hazy in the meaningless fog of a hot, humid summer evening. His youth had ended long ago. Had he realized it when it happened? Yes, and no. There was no reason for him not to feel good. He drained the last drops of his drink. He was downing them fast. As he wiped his mouth with a napkin, his eyes lingered on the stuffed zucchini blossoms on his plate. A large ash had fallen into the olive oil, its stain gradually spreading. A flaw in all of this perfection. A mixed feeling, partly of compassion, for Defne welled up inside of him. They would never have children. Defne would be his wife, his child, and his best friend, all in one. Was she really? That had been the plan, but... Önder couldn't take his eyes off the stuffed zucchini blossoms. He was afraid that the compassionate feelings they had triggered would pass if he did. He needed to win back Defne's love. He should love Defne more. That was the way things should be.

Önder got up and went to the kitchen. Coffee would counteract the debilitating effects of the alcohol. He poured the water from the teapot into his glass and looked out the small window at Memduh's two-story house. The other, more distant neighbors also had big, well-kept yards like Memduh's. Robust fruit trees, honeysuckle wrapped around the veranda, ivy roses winding climbing the door... In their small garden they had just one almond tree. They hadn't even looked for a gardener. Defne loved gardening more than anything. She had managed in no time to embellish their tiny garden with flowers of all colors. Evergreen roses, irises, geraniums, large daisies, and purple flowers he hadn't yet learned the names of... And the veranda was surrounded

by hydrangeas. He hadn't really understood why Defne had planted those hydrangeas. For him, hydrangeas were boring plants one found in the gardens of middle class hotels. Botanical decor. He knew very well why he thought this way. He had seen them at a hotel near the thermal baths he'd gone to when he was 9, 10 years old. The hotel was plain as could be. But the hydrangeas were something else. With their heavy flowers, they looked as if they were standing at attention at a solemn ceremony.

Önder kept that memory or impression stored safely in a special corner of his mind. His memory was a like huge building. A hotel made of rooms large and small, with passages leading from one to the next. Or a government office... A storage room where everything was labeled and filed away with equal indifference. In the basement were his memories of early childhood, the time when he slowly became cognizant of the world around him. Just above those were the memories of the thermal baths, which he kept stored together with the other few memories he had of days spent with his parents outside the house. His impressions of the latter weren't even enough to fill a small room: the appearance of the hotel facade, the huge hydrangeas, the forest nearby, a small stream, the dragonflies buzzing about all over the place, his small hands inside the hands of his father, the delicious grilled cheese sandwiches they'd eaten while taking a walk together... That grilled cheese was the most precious of his fragmented memories. The thin red lines burnt into the dark yellow bread and the fat slab of cheese in between the slices, just about flow over the edge, remained with him still, the moment as crystal clear as the day it had actually happened. It was wonderful. It was the pinnacle of grilled cheese sandwiches. The other grilled cheese sandwiches that he had encountered in his daily life were nothing but second rate copies of that ultimate grilled cheese sandwich. Rather than fading with time, these fragmented memories did just the opposite, becoming more and more powerful. What made them stand out above all of the other things he had experienced in his life? How had they survived? How had they managed not to fall prey to the passage of time, to remain standing after all these years? The shepherd and the sheep were still standing too, but that's because they were cursed. There was nothing cursed about their trips to the thermal baths though... Or maybe he just didn't remember. According to Önder, there had to be a reason why. That's the way his mind worked: Everything was the outcome of cause and effect. Because Önder could not figure out exactly *why* he

remembered the trips to the thermal baths, they remained an enigma to him, like so many other memories.

Önder slowly returned to the table, his coffee in hand. He carefully laid his notebooks out before him. He used one of them as a scratchpad. In the other he was going to begin writing the final draft of his novel. So far he had only made a clean copy of the introductory paragraph. Yet the scratchpad was packed full of notes and unfinished chapters. In some places it resembled a diary. Actually, it wouldn't take him long to finish writing up the final draft, if he could only bring himself to make a few final decisions. As he ran his fingers over the notebook, he became wary of the idea of 'writing a novel in a notebook.' He had always written the television screenplays on his computer. But after he'd heard that a particular author whom he greatly admired always wrote his novels in a notebooks, he'd made a firm decision to do so himself as well. It was weird, this question that he'd gotten caught up in. A detail that had never occurred to him when he was writing for television: As whom was he writing this novel? Why was he writing it? What would those who read it think? The thought of a book with his name on the cover almost set his nerves on edge. He had developed this kind of obsession that it was an arrogant form of existence. It was nonsense... Literature, which had been a goal he had striven towards since his early youth, now stood before him like a task, like something of utmost gravity. Writing for television was easy. Nobody thought about who wrote the screenplays. It was as if the actors themselves were responsible for their actions on screen. He should write down his thoughts on this matter in his scratchpad. He liked the method he had found for separating his notes: He wrote a heading about the note between diamond brackets.

< A Writer Without a Life of His Own >

The narrator who tells the story of İzzet and Cevdet: Me. That is, Önder Ustaoglu. Me as I was four years ago. Age: 36. As I existed before Defne. But the name on the cover of the book will belong to someone else. In the novel though, the narrator will be known only by his first name, Önder; that way, nobody will be able to make the connection. Problem solved. A writer can only become enwrapped in his story to the degree that he his able to break free of the confines of his own life. The writer needs to

become one with the world that he writes. Because he is the source of the life in the novel. The life that he breathes into his characters can only come from his very own chest cavity. That's why, with each novel, a writer dies a little more. Does he continue to live in his writing? Maybe. But it is not for himself, this life after death. It is for others. It is as if he lives for others. One dies for oneself only once. An old Indian once said, 'I'll die when the last person to have known me dies.'

He smiled. It was a kind of joke of his; whenever he forgot whom such wise words that he'd heard somewhere actually belonged to, he simply attributed them to an old Indian. He had come up with this joke as a way to make fun of the widespread belief that all old Indians were wise; after he had used it the first time, he decided that he liked the idea, and so he began using it whenever and wherever necessary. And it had become a phrase all his own. A phrase that those close to him had become familiar with and even used sometimes themselves as well... Sometimes he got a real kick out of it when he saw others take this joke seriously. The twisted pleasure one derives from fooling others.

When he raised his head, he came eye-to-eye with Pirate. As he stood up, he began speaking in a sweet voice:

'Now where did you come from, huh? ... Come here, come on...'

The black and white cat came to visit them on certain nights, as if according to some unknown schedule. They had decided to call him Pirate because of the black circle of fur around one of his eyes. He must have been one of millions of cats who bore that name. Önder and Defne were careful to keep some milk and hot dogs around at all times, so as not to send Pirate off empty-handed whenever he happened by. When Önder returned with a piece of hot dog, he saw that the cat had jumped up onto the table. He was gently wagging his tail back and forth over the notebook in which Önder was writing the final draft of his novel. Önder interpreted this to be a good omen.

'There you go. You just sit right there. And this is our house specialty. As usual, you'll just have to settle for what you get—beggars can't be choosers!.'

Pleased with himself, Önder leaned back and watched Pirate gracefully feast upon the hot

dog. The cat possessed a kind of beauty all its own. Actually, that's all it was: beautiful. It wasn't smart, Önder could tell that much. It was incapable of learning its name. It would never be able to learn to do anything useful or to communicate. But: It could teach. After all, it had already trained them, hadn't it? It had taught them to always make sure they had something in the refrigerator for him. What's more, he hadn't done so using his intellect. Some cats simply endear themselves to humans, transforming into furry balls of endless gratification in their hands. Pirate was not one of those cats. Defne had tried several times to pet him, but each he had just dropped his hot dog, or whatever he was munching on at the time, and run. He was a guest who was fond of his independence. Sometimes he would come onto the veranda, sit on the table or on a chair, and watch them. Carefully. He had an air of self-confidence about him. Just watching him gave one the feeling that the entire world, the entire universe was moving in a meaningful harmony... All sorts of things about cats were running through his mind, but he wouldn't include those in his novel, of course; he wasn't fond of writers who wrote down each and everything that came to their minds. It was a commonly known fact, however, that writers often had feline friends. And he was making swift progress on the road to becoming a cat-loving writer.

As he read his most recent note once again, he felt as if he'd drawn closer to arriving at a solution. Giving up his own life meant giving up his name. He should publish the novel under a different name. That was the solution: That way, he wouldn't worry one way or the other about what people, those who knew him and those who didn't, thought. What would Defne have to say about this, if he deigned to ask? She wouldn't agree. She would think it was nonsense. She might even accuse him of being a coward. And she wouldn't be completely wrong if she did. Wasn't it that same cowardliness which had shaped his entire life—his life thus far? Escaping from the city, that was one thing... But what about his marriage to Defne? Wasn't there a truth underlying his decision to live with her, a truth which he had done his best to avoid admitting out loud: Defne's condition... The topic surfaced in his mind to show its ugly face from time to time. It was maddening, the way one could have such negative feelings about the person he lived with. That's right, he never wanted to have children. Becoming a father meant one thing only to Önder: the end of his youth, which was as good as the end of his life.

The first time he had heard it, he had thought Defne was joking. He had asked Defne once,

when they had first started sleeping together, whether she was on birth control. Just out of curiosity. Defne had laughed and told him she was infertile, due to some birth defect. Önder hadn't believed her. Her ample breasts seemed to be ready and waiting for the time when they would suckle tiny babies. Yet Defne had been telling the truth. Much later, once they had decided to get married, they had had a serious talk about the matter. They were smoking water pipe in Moda. Or rather, Önder was smoking, and Defne was enjoying the sound of the bubbling water coming from the pipe. Then, all of sudden, she grew dead serious; clearing her throat, she spoke these words, which Önder would never forget: 'You could regret it one day. Please, when that day comes, don't try to hide it from me. Tell me. Becoming a father is your most natural right. And I am not going to keep you from it.' Defne had spoken these words so clearly, so precisely... It was clear that she had spent years imagining the day when she would speak them. It had just broken Önder's heart to hear her say it. It had saddened him the way this woman, who appeared perfectly young and healthy, had made such a confession, clearly feeling ashamed and embarrassed, even though she knew that it was nothing to be ashamed about. He had felt sorry for her. He had taken her into his arms and assured her that that day would never come. Never. But now here he was, three years later, and the thought had become a dragon roaming the dark waters of his soul. No, it wasn't the desire to become a father which made his mind swim in doubt; it was the question of whether or not he would have married a woman who *could* give birth. That was the question. He had gotten married because it wasn't really like getting married. There really wasn't any difference between getting married and 'living together' if they weren't going to become a family. Fine, but then why... had everything become so murky now?

Something bad was going to happen. He was certain of it. The wind chimes hanging out on the veranda rang, blown by a breeze of unknown source. For a brief moment, it seemed to Önder as if he were being watched. He turned to look up at the hill, to make certain that the cursed shepherd and sheep were still in place. It had grown almost pitch dark over there. Night was spreading from the East like a disease. Pirate, as if sensing Önder's thoughts, suddenly flinched, jumped off the table and dashed away. Önder felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched the cat. The way the cat ran, it looked as if it were being chased by a ghost...