

My Life's a Lie

Murat Gülsoy

My name's Fırat. Fırat Saner. I live in Flat 12, Block B, Basın Housing Estate. I work for a publisher. I'm in charge of the storeroom. I'm thirty-three. Single. My name's Fırat. But recently, other people have stopped believing this. They're laughing at me. "A lie—your life's a lie," they tell me. I try to put them straight. I talk about myself at great length. At first they listen to me, eyebrows raised, with a condescending look on their faces. But then they just say "rubbish" and walk away. I feel like running after them and pleading, but no, I can't bring myself to do it. I'm not an important person—that I accept. All the same, to be denied existence just like that touches my honor. Everything has its honor: a stone, a tree, soil. Nothing can be denied existence. Nothing can be denied existence, so long as it exists.

The first person to break the news to me was Bahri Yücel. Last year he came to pick up his book. Such an impatient man! He had actually wanted to go and fetch his book from the printer's but, because he'd argued with the printer earlier, he had to wait until his book reached the storeroom. He'd been sticking his nose into the business of the guys at the printer's, moaning "Look, you haven't cut the cover straight," "The picture's faded," "Print it again." Well, the printer got worked up. They're irritable people to start with, printers. Our job's straightforward. Packages of books arrive. We count them. Then we repack them and start the distribution process. We run a straightforward and calm storeroom. A total of one hundred and eighty square meters. Apart from me, two other people work there. They've been getting uppity, too, all because of this Mr. Bahri. Madness is contagious!

I always felt that Mr. Bahri was a bit odd. For one thing, he doesn't behave like a man in his fifties. When he appears at the top of the stairs, you think for a moment that a tall white-haired aging primary school kid has just entered. Lop-sided, as if weighed down by his school bag. That bow-tie... The obligatory cookies in his bag... (I don't know where he gets them; they're awfully tasty.) He'd heard that his book would be coming out on Friday. We in the storeroom didn't know anything about it, but he'd found out from the publisher and dropped by. Well, we served him tea, sat him down; I call the publishing house, but they pass the buck to the printer's, so I call the printer's and the man there says, "We can't get it done today. Out of the question!" Friday's the most chaotic day. It's the day when all of the payments and allocations are dealt with. While pleading with Dursun Efendi over the phone, I watch Mr. Bahri pulling over packages into the middle of the room to create a small tea-table. I feel sorry for his predicament. Noting

his frayed jacket sleeves, his stooping body and his enthusiasm, it really gets to me. This man with a bow-tie, I think, is actually an overgrown child living in a world of his own. I tell Dursun Efendi to send twenty books over here no matter what. We settle on a large bottle of rakı as compensation.

Eagerly I rushed over to Mr. Bahri to pass on the good news. When I announced that his books were on the way, he gave me the strangest look. As if he hadn't heard what I'd said. For a while, neither of us said anything; Mehmet and Burak stopped what they were doing and looked up at us. "Tea," I said. "Bring the tea." The tea arrived, and a glass was placed in front of Mr. Bahri. But like a primary school child puzzling over how to do his homework, he remained silent. The way he was staring at me was getting on my nerves. The man was a bit odd, that's true, but still he was the only writer who occasionally showed up here. Even if it were only once in a blue moon. Authors of all these other books I sometimes see in the paper or on TV, but none of them know me. Only Mr. Bahri. If it weren't for him, it would gradually cease to make any difference to me whether these packages contained books or detergent. Maybe I liked him. Even if I felt sorry for him, I certainly didn't feel I was being disrespectful towards him.

I couldn't wait to eat the cookies, but as long as Mr. Bahri kept on staring at me, all I could do was sit there, motionless. "The thing is," he eventually said, "your life's a story."

"I don't understand," I said.

"There's nothing to understand," he replied. "Your life is a piece of fiction, a story, a lie—all made up," he commented and started laughing. I was just about to pity him even more when I noticed Mehmet and Burak laughing. They were laughing at me! Annoyed, I left the room. Inhaling deeply on my cigarette, I tried to calm down. What made me most angry was Mehmet and Burak.

"You bastards," I thought to myself. (I like the word "bastards" so much—a keepsake from my dad). "You were hungry, I gave you work and fed you. When you pinched books, I didn't say anything, as I thought you were reading them. Then, when I found out that you were selling them, all I did was warn you; it wouldn't be right to threaten your livelihood, I told myself." Just when I was grumbling to myself that no good deed goes unpunished, the books arrived and I managed to get rid of Mr. Bahri. He signed his book "To the hero of a story, my dear friend Fırat." On his way out, he added: "Don't be sad. We're all dying to be the hero of our own story. Look at me. I've been trying like mad for years, but I'm still playing minor roles in other people's stories." After that, he said the strangest things. He was well-intentioned. I could see that. But this didn't stop me rushing to the restroom after shaking hands with him. I gave my hands a good soapy wash. I was convinced that Mr. Bahri had been infected by a Chinese virus that caused madness.

Then this madness began to spread.

At one point, they were banging on in the news about an epidemic causing insanity; it was apparently spreading from China to the rest of the world. For nights on end, I followed this news on the talk shows. According to experts, the epidemic was a consequence of the unequal division of labor in the globalizing world. Labor was so cheap in China that anything that had to be produced at minimum cost was being made there. Everything from textiles to electronics, shoes to watches was coming to us from the Far East. If we looked on the back of any object in our house, we would be sure to see *Made in China*—or perhaps *Taiwan*—or the stamp of some other country in the Far East. An epidemic that had started in that part of the world was spreading everywhere via these products. People had begun to panic. Chinese restaurants all over the world were putting up their shutters. Nobody wanted to go anywhere near them. For some reason or other, at the time I didn't consider the possibility that the epidemic could reach us here. I thought that—as usual—the experts on TV were out to frighten us. I was quite sure that they were out to put the wind up all those people who weren't being laxe on hygiene and health. But you see, the news had turned out to be true! And now I see the epidemic spreading rapidly around me.

The day after the incident with Mr. Bahri was a Saturday, so I didn't leave the house. From morning till evening I zapped between TV channels, looking for news about the epidemic. There was nothing except news of the war and show-business. Now the experts were waiting with baited breath to see how the markets would react to the war. They seemed to have forgotten all about the epidemic. How about you? Do you remember it? Well, maybe you do have a vague recollection of such news appearing at some point. Of course, it's been quite a while; it all began back in May last year. To be honest, if Mr. Bahri hadn't come out with all that nonsense, I'd have forgotten about it, too. The last I heard about the epidemic was a week ago. Now there were other things on the agenda. The more I heard about them, the less interested I felt in the epidemic, and by evening I'd lost all interest in it whatsoever. It terrifies me to think of what all else I might forget in the same way. Perhaps what you need to do is keep a diary. But those hundreds of events would hardly fit into one person's diary. With the weary and bleary mind of a man who'd spent the whole day in front of the TV, I was just about to surrender to sleep's sweet embrace when temptation struck. "Get up and go for a walk," I said to myself. I thought I might be able to relax. Because it was spring, there was a lot of work to be done in the storeroom. The best months are July and August. Then there's practically nothing to do. We open the storeroom door as well as the back windows. While outside it's hot as hell, inside we're wandering around in our jackets. Watermelon and cheese for lunch. One day last summer Mr. Bahri had dropped by. It was clear that because his books didn't sell very well, they'd printed them during the off-season. He made a big thing about not wanting to eat any watermelon. He'd only have some if the seeds were removed. I did my best to get rid of them, but he stuck to his guns. The seeds would stick in his throat, he said. We had a

good laugh at that, Mehmet, Burak and I. Now they're all laughing at *me*, the bastards! At the very thought of them, I decided not to go out. That weekend I didn't feel up to meeting anyone.

By Monday morning I'd forgotten about everything—Mr. Bahri, the virus and all that nonsense. I thought life had returned to normal. But then, on my way to the store, a few people I didn't know said hello to me. And when I went into the corner grocery near the storeroom, it all started again. I was going to buy some cigarettes. As soon as I stepped into the shop and nodded hello, the grocer's face lit up.

"Brother, we're all right behind you. Good luck!"

"What do you mean by that? Why should I need good luck?"

"We've heard you landed the lead role in a story."

"What story's this supposed to be? Where are you getting all this crap?" I shouted and turned on my heels. But I knew where he'd gotten it. The virus had spread to the grocer's. I was scared stiff. Out on the street, I cleaned my pack of cigarettes with a wet wipe before opening it. I decided to buy some disinfectant as soon as possible. When I arrived at the storeroom, then, a nasty surprise was awaiting me.

On entering, I found Mehmet sprawled out on some boxes.

"Where's Burak?" I shouted, waking Mehmet in the process. He obviously wasn't at all perturbed about having been caught sleeping. He stretched and yawned, "I was having such a nice dream!"

"Listen sonny, where's Burak? And what were you doing asleep? Is something wrong? Are you ill?"

I was beginning to suspect that they'd caught the virus too. And maybe they hadn't washed Mr. Bahri's glass well enough. They didn't care much about cleanliness. And here was the result.

"Me? I'm fine. But how are you? How's the story going?"

When he saw that I didn't reply, he began in a soothing voice. "There's nothing to be sad about. This is as far as we go, and there's nothing we can do about it. Obviously, your work here's over. We'll see you again some time. Well, actually, maybe we won't. I wish you the best of luck in your story. Thanks for everything."

I wanted to tell him that he was speaking rubbish, but I'd run out of steam.

"Where's Burak?"

He looked around as if he didn't know who I was talking about.

"Burak?" he said. "You're right; there was a Burak here, too. I don't know. This must be as far as his role goes."

It occurred to me that, as the person in charge of a storeroom with a staff of two, both of whom had gone mad, what I should do next was to call the publishing house. But I was worried that the people over there might have gone mad, too. I wasn't in any state to take another blow.

I went out, and began walking down the street. Mehmet reached out his hand to shake goodbye, but I didn't touch it. "You stay here," I said. I had to

get away before I too became infected by the virus. I panted my way up the hill. As soon as I started down the road, I noticed everyone looking at me. It was as if everyone was frozen in place. The cars weren't moving even though there wasn't much traffic. Drivers, passengers, children—all of them were gawking at me. I hastened my pace and headed for the local hospital. I could see people waving at me from afar. Schoolboys were pointing their fingers at me, giggling. I started to run. I couldn't bear everyone gazing at me with love and compassion. In one breath I told the hospital receptionist everything. Presumably, what I said didn't make any sense. "The new virus, huh?" said the receptionist, and called over a few nurses. I was about to pass out. They laid me down on a bed.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the face of a doctor standing at my bedside. In a self-confident voice she said hello. I smiled, weary, yet relieved.

"How are we feeling? A bit tired, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Okay, it's all over now. Now you're going to tell me the whole story. There's no need to rush. Slowly and calmly."

I began to tell her what had happened. That the virus from China had crazed everyone around me, one by one—first Mr. Bahri, then the grocer, so on and so forth. From time to time I'd ask exactly how it was possible to contract the disease. Whether it could be passed on through a glass of tea or by shaking hands. I got no answers, for she responded to all my questions with other questions.

"What makes you say they've gone mad?"

"They start to say things that don't make any sense."

"Like what? Hostile things?"

"No, I wouldn't say hostile. But they're making fun of me. Mr. Bahri started it all. It's as if they've all agreed to say the same thing, every one of them tells me that I'm the hero of a story. They say my life's a lie. That's the kind of bizarre stuff they come out with."

As if struggling to find the best way to put the question, the doctor drawled, "W-e-e-ell now... What if I were to tell yo-u-u-u... that you really a-a-a-re the hero of a story? W-e-e-ell, what would you think then?"

She began testing me. Asking questions to determine whether or not *I* was mad. Questions like "What's your name?" or "What day is it today?"

"What else could I think, doctor, except that the virus has got hold of you, too."

"Just one more question then. Why does the idea of being the hero of a story disturb you so?"

This I hadn't expected.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Tell me about yourself. Tell me who you are."

"My name's Firat. Firat Saner. I live in the Basın Housing Estate. It's Thursday today. I work for a publisher. It's May. I'm in charge of the storeroom.

I'm single. Thirty-three. My name's Firat. Recently people have started telling me I'm not real. To my face. "Your life's a lie," they say.

"And what about your youth, your childhood, your family? Where were you born, for instance?"

I was confused. The storeroom appeared before my eyes, as if she'd asked me where I worked. But she'd asked me where I was born. Then I became angry. What did this whole thing have to do with my childhood, my family, or anything else for that matter? At the same time it occurred to me that I might have lost my memory. I closed my eyes. I believed I was all alone in a world gone mad. How long could I bear it? I began to pray. "Dear God, if this is only a story, please let the doctor and the hospital vanish before I open my eyes." Though my eyes were tightly shut, I could still smell the doctor's perfume, wafted around the room by the draft from the window, slightly ajar. She took my hand. I opened my eyes.

"I'm a doctor. My duty is to cure the ill. But you're not ill. You're the hero of a story. There's a life for you to lead. Do you understand?"

Her voice was soothing. All I wanted was to hear her voice. I felt as if the great wound opened inside me was being healed by some medication oozing from her voice.

"So what about the virus? Are you saying there's no such illness? Hasn't everyone gone mad?"

She smiled.

"There's an old fairy tale, a story that takes place in a small kingdom where the people had always lived very happily. There comes a time when some poison finds its way into a river of the kingdom. One by one, those who drink the water begin to hallucinate. The king forbids his subjects to drink the water and orders his vizier to guard the palace. For a while the situation remains under control, but when the people can no longer bear the thirst, they run to the river and drink, and the madness spreads until one day all the people, save for those in the palace, are stark raving mad. Then the water reserves in the palace begin to run out, and all but the closest friends and family of the king go crazy. With every passing minute, more and more people join the ranks of the insane. The vizier appears every hour on the hour to warn the king that the water reserves are running out and that the people can't take it any longer. Then the vizier disappears for several hours. While the king is eagerly awaiting news from the vizier, the door opens and the vizier enters, followed by a huge crowd. They immediately pounce upon the king. There is grief on the faces of the vizier, the queen and their close friends in the court. The king still hasn't understood what's happening."

"Why are you telling me this story?"

"Well, you're in the middle of a story like this. This world is here just for you alone."

As she spoke, her voice rose. "Everything, all of us, this whole hospital," she said, and pulling the curtains aside, "these streets, this city, all these people are here for you!" I must have made her angry. Perhaps she was trying to tell me that I was being selfish. I didn't understand. I was confused.

“You’re not going to keep me here, are you?”

“Keep you here? Quite the contrary.”

Getting to my feet, I asked her, as if requesting permission, “What should I do?”

“Go and live your life.”

I was pleased that I wasn’t ill, but I was also sad because there was no cure for my plight. I had no choice but to head straight for the storeroom. Mehmet and Burak were working. I was glad to see them. Everything seemed normal. But they weren’t happy to see me. They glared at me with fire in their eyes. Mehmet, the more enterprising one, boldly demanded, “What are you doing back here? What is there here for you to do? Why have you come?”

I was taken aback.

“What the hell are you trying to say?”

“Your work here is supposed to be over.”

I went on staring into his eyes. Shaking his head from side to side, he opened one of the boxes he had finished packing and pulled out a book.

“This isn’t a real storeroom. Look at this.”

He began to rip empty pages out of the book he was holding, one by one. At first I wanted to leap upon him to stop him. But then I realized how pointless that would be.

“Whenever *you* come here, you’ll find us packing these books. There’s no point in it. Don’t you get it? This is only a space designed to look like a storeroom. But it’s not actually a storeroom. There’s nothing inside the books. And have a look at the covers—there’s nothing on them except small gray squares. Like a pattern on the binding. Look here, just look; there isn’t even a publisher’s name! Do you know the name of the publisher? Do you? You see, you have nothing to reply because I’m telling the truth. Don’t come back again. Go and live your life. You’ll be better off, and so will we.”

I wanted to calm the waters.

“Come on, just forget it,” I said. “Don’t get all worked up about this kind of thing. Have we got any tea?”

It was Burak’s turn to cut in:

“Mr. Firat, sir, your story doesn’t belong here any more. I admit, it may well have started off here, but it’s fulfilled its purpose here now.”

The storeroom that Burak was indicating with such a shrug of helplessness really did look run-down and deserted. Everything was covered in dust. Conversations like this are upsetting indeed. Aware that they had no good answer, either, I asked, “So, Burak, if my story isn’t here, where is it then?”

He shrugged his shoulders again and replied, “I don’t know. That’s something you should know.”

“Well, what would you do if you were in my shoes?”

Now Burak was taken aback. He looked at Mehmet helplessly and stammered, “I-I-I d-d-don’t know. I’d probably go in search of adventure. Maybe find a beautiful woman. Enjoy myself. Travel round the world.”

I was becoming annoyed.

“Is that what you think happens in stories? It’s obvious that you didn’t read those books you stole. I should have fired you the moment I found out that you were selling them on the sly.”

At which Mehmet blurted out, “I swear we never stole anything! Whoever said so was lying.”

I decided on a pretence of anger to end the conversation.

“Well, that *is* my story, if it’s okay by you. I’m the protagonist in the story, aren’t I? My story is here, in this storeroom, among these books. I don’t want to hear about this again, OK? Or I’ll show you the door! People are queuing up to pack those books you turn your noses up at. There are millions of unemployed people out there.”

After that day, they haven’t moaned once. They go on packaging—like automatons. They carry on packing those items which I too had begun to suspect might not be books. For a while, people like my landlord, my boss and the grocer tried to talk me round. Because I realized that their thoughts about my life were just part of their general madness, I began to ignore them. Then they too gave up trying to persuade me. They lost all hope in me. And I went back to my ordinary routine of storeroom-to-home, home-to-storeroom.

I don’t understand people. I don’t understand why they’re so persistent. A few days ago, a young woman threw herself at my feet and began pleading with me. She said she was fed up with waiting for me, and that this endless wait was finishing her off, tearing her apart. It was the first time I’d ever seen the woman. I tried to explain to the poor soul. She didn’t even listen to me. She was simply obsessed...

Sometimes I run into people like you who hear me through patiently till the end. The thing is, they don’t believe in me. Some of them even laugh at me. Do you think what I’ve said is funny? I don’t think so. You don’t believe me either, do you? You’re sure that I’m only a character in a story. How can you be so sure? Do you remember everything accurately and in all detail? Are you sure that everything around you is real? If you’re looking for an example, you have one right in front of you. Me. I’m telling you all this. You think I’m not a real person. But as for you... you’re living in a world of reality, aren’t you? Well, then, how is it that you can come across an artificial, fictional person like me in your world of realities? God only knows how many imaginary things you’ve incorporated into your world of realities! But no, you know best! Well you’re wrong, and you can’t fool me. My name’s Firat. Firat Saner. I live in the Basın Housing Estate. I work for a publisher. I’m in charge of the storeroom. I’m single. Thirty-three. A while ago people started telling me that I’m not real. To my face! “Your life’s a lie,” they say. I don’t believe them.

Translated by Emine Deliorman and Jonathan Ross

“Hayatım Yalan,” *Bu An’ı Daha Önce Yaşamıştım* (2004). Istanbul: Can Yayınları, pp. 173-184.