

The Lingering Death of a Lover

A novel by Murat Gülsoy

Translated from the Turkish by İdil Aydoğan

In the beginning...

If only he had a harpoon with him... when he noticed the squid that suddenly appeared in front of him as he was chasing a swarm of fish with orange stripes he had never seen in his life before, Cem regretted not having a harpoon with him. When the creature started letting out a milky white liquid as a sign that it perceived him as a threat, Cem set off headed for the shore without looking back. Was there any such thing as an albino squid?

He was near the rocks. Serap was floating on the surface of the water. Her arms stretched out. As if she was asleep. Cem held his breath, deciding to surprise the young woman by swimming underwater.

They were wrapped up in an embrace. She had her legs around Cem's waist. They were sinking slowly. The water was cold but Cem could feel his body temperature rising; his groins were on fire. His ears were blocked. The crackling sound of the sea urchins mixed with the roar of a distant engine. Serap's mouth was now a sea monster. A soft and inviting abalone whose cavities he explored with his tongue. Seaweed dancing between their legs.

When he got up on the boat he realised he had dropped his watch. Aslı was lying down on the front deck of the boat, topless. They had better find a spot where they wouldn't be seen from the shore. Frivolous girl. Cem drew the paddles, staring at the barbed wire tattoo winding around her ankle. I have to buy a new watch now, he thought. The silhouette of Serap lying on the beach reading grew smaller and became blurred. Crackles... The hot and rough surface of the paddle with crumbled paint burned his hands. He noticed that one of the rowlocks was quite loose. As he tried to secure it in place it went to pieces. The moment he laid hands on the other one it felt apart too. As he was trying to figure out how he'd hold the paddles in place, Cem heard Aslı's voice. Look, the weather's getting strange! When Cem looked up he saw that a white fog had cloaked everything. The albino squid! Could it really be that effective? If only he had his harpoon with him...

The island was now completely invisible. The horizon line had fused as the sea and sky met at the same colour, and those on the boat were trapped inside a gigantic water drop. Was it morning or evening? You couldn't tell... They just stood there waiting. If only he hadn't dropped his watch... Cem couldn't recognise the phone ringing at first. The cover of the thick book Serap was reading had faded in the sun. Aren't you going to get that? There was a mischievous look on Serap's face. I mean the phone. Her cheeks had gone red just like on nights when she'd had too much wine. Cem asked Aslı for a cigarette. No, I'm not going to answer it. Serap and Aslı caught each other's eyes. They shrugged. Suit yourself Cem. As Cem watched the orange fish swarming under the boat, the phone went on ringing insistently. Outside the blue water drop, in another world.

Berzah* ...

* Berzah: In Islam, a place where the souls of all the dead wait for judgement day.

Cem was incredibly busy. After spraying some air freshener to overcome the foul smell that had spread all over the house, he put on his rubber gloves. A jumble of disconnected thoughts ran through his head. That wasn't the way it used to be. He unfastened the sticky tabs. Here's the scene: Cem and Serap are reading the paper. In a supermarket in Argentina, women workers have been forbidden to go to the toilet. Women workers are being forced to wear nappies... After reading the article out loud, Serap looks up at Cem in horror. The morning sun rains on them in blots through the tree branches outside the window. Cem tries to see the flag on the boat cruising by as he murmurs to himself: the world is a terrible place... Breakfast at Hisar, the day is Sunday, the year, bliss. Right now: he is wiping Serap's bottom all clean with a wet wipe. The colour and form are normal. If it were too dark in colour he was to suspect haemorrhage. He retches when he sees the yellowish stool smeared all over her pubic hairs. He rolls up her dirty nappy and fastens the sticky tabs. After laying out her new nappy, Cem hesitates whether to apply her rash cream or not. He contemplates for a while, looking at the little spots on Serap's buttocks. He fastens the nappy, deciding to apply the cream at night. He takes his gloves off and stuffs them into the waste bag.

Vegetative state.

He wasn't vegetarian. He always said that one should be but he'd forget all the promises he'd made at the first opportunity he got to go to a kebab shop and give in to the parching taste of red meat. Serap... is now in a vegetative state. A persistent vegetative state. A vegetable... Cem was beginning to think that he had grown used to their new life. And sometimes he looked for similarities between his old life and current condition... In vain. Cem was someone else now. For one: he had started talking incessantly. He'd try to host everyone that came to the house in overflowing excitement. Visiting the house of a sick person on the verge of death, they all dragged their heels. Thus he did his best so that visitors did not find a dark and gloomy atmosphere. He only felt tired and weary when Gamze came around. The pain in his back got worse. And he'd pray that Gamze wouldn't leave. He really needs to have a few drinks. He doesn't drink when he's on his own. He's afraid of not being able to handle a matter of emergency, should it arise. A matter of emergency: anything could happen. Food could get stuck in her oesophagus, Serap could die, yes, this was possible... Cem has been ready for this from the very first moment. There is very little chance that Serap will ever wake up... Even if he gave Erkan permission as "prince charming"... (You may kiss the bride.) Sleeping Beauty has one in a thousand chance of waking up. Cem raises his head to take a look at the city as he's making salad in the kitchen. Could there be a thousand PVS patients in this city? It's a relief to call it PVS. He prefers to accept the acronym of the illness Persistent Vegetative State, instead of calling it a Permanent Vegetative State. Because sooner or later, the cure for every illness is found... What's important is naming it.

The salad is ready. And the water to boil the macaroni... He had programmed himself to finish all the work that needed to be done in the house by nine o'clock in the morning. He looked at the time: It was ten. An hour delay. As if it was absolutely necessary to prepare the water for the macaroni he would cook in the afternoon. Cem had put daily life in a routine to save himself from becoming a housewife. His programme was quite simple. Like in the military:

- 7:30 get up and SSB (Shave-Shower-Brush);
- 7:45 breakfast;
- 8:00-9:00 housework;
- 9:00-11:00 Time to feed Serap and read to her;
- 11:00-12:30 music therapy;
- 12:30 lunch;
- 13:30 midday nap;

(And this was a habit of the new era, long midday naps. Siesta. It often lasted more than just a couple of hours. Because he had to get up early in the mornings, he just felt exhausted. But Elmas Bey didn't agree. Cem kept sleeping because he was depressed. He was depressed: in fact, his depression was a lot deeper than he could imagine. He needed help. He should let Elmas Bey help him. Cem listened to what Elmas Bey said silently, and in his most serious disposition told him that he was wrong. Cem was elevated by this sort of grief. Well, was he really in depression? According to Elmas Bey, his behaviour wasn't normal. His exaggerated cheerful state, locking himself up indoors, insisting on looking after Serap himself, all that military discipline, his schedule, his routine...)

17:00 Tea time;

(For one thing, the fact that he had quit his job was unacceptable, there was still so much that he could do. Cem couldn't say much when it came to his career. He was happy that Elmas Bey still valued him. How could he have told him... That, for example, for some time now, he had no hope in himself... Since when, he didn't know, -since they stopped publishing *Hayat Geçiyor*, perhaps even long before that... perhaps it was his own end that also brought the magazine's end- he no longer felt productive. This was the least disheartening definition. Unproductiveness... And as Elmas Bey patiently listened to him, there, right in front of his very eyes, Cem could see vast fields, waiting to be ploughed, dying as they wait... Unproductiveness.)

18:00 Clean up/Nurse Serap;

(For example, he could hire someone to help take care of Serap, he could make time for himself, he could work home office or he could get a lot of work done just by leaving the house for a couple of hours... He was listening to Elmas Bey calmly. There was someone who cared for him. He had been needing this in Serap's absence. Once upon a time, Serap was his own personal heaven. He understood this better now. He wanted Elmas Bey to go on talking like he did forever. He could listen. He took pleasure in the fact that someone was worried about him, and that someone still had hope in him...)

19:00 dinner time

20:00 free time or study

23:00 bedtime

Of course this schedule was disturbed with the first ring of the doorbell announcing a visitor, and everything but Serap's nursing was subject to change. Cem was fine. He was fine. Really. Elmas Bey was worrying over nothing. He had only stopped by last week and here he was again. Elmas Bey... God grant him a long and healthy life, was one of the people Cem

loved the most on this earth. His care and concern for Cem never died down. The number of doctors Elmas Bey knew was unbelievable. Quite natural of course for a hypochondriac health freak. An illness freak more like. It was his hobby to formulate possible answers to the question of how one could be healthier using words such as, almonds, walnuts, green tea, oxygen therapy, growth hormones and the like. He found and brought them the best doctors, and never even let Cem pay. But unfortunately the condition was hopeless. Serap had opened her eyes ten days after the accident, had come out of the coma, and had drowned Cem in everlasting joy. But that was it. She wasn't conscious. She was in a persistent vegetative state. Doctors understood her condition the minute they took a look at her files and reports. And well, did Cem have hope? He didn't ask himself that. Because he was afraid of the wave of questions he would have to face afterwards. He was fine like this. He really was. After leading an aimless life for years and years, Cem had finally become an intensive care nurse.

Merve was amazed the last time she came to visit.

At first, Merve would visit once a week and would stay for about an hour. She would hold Serap's hands tightly in hers, silently sit by her side, and then, before she left, whispering she'd ask if there was anything he needed. Nowadays, she just made do with phone calls. Even though Cem had told her there was no need to whisper, Merve insisted on preserving the natural hospital environment.

What amazed Merve the last time she came to visit wasn't how the house was run like clockwork, or that Serap was sleeping in a sparkling clean bed; it was the loud music and heavy smell of food cooking that penetrated the other rooms. This was back when he was cooking selections from Italian cuisine. The smell of garlic, olive oil and fish gave the house a different atmosphere. The atmosphere of a place that was lived. A home. Any moment, Serap would wake up stretching herself and would observe all that Cem had done in admiration. Merve, standing in the middle of the living room, had stared suspiciously at Cem who looked blissful, and had asked if Serap had regained consciousness or something. Not yet, Cem had replied. He was kind of mocking Merve's reactions too. Did they think this place was a graveyard or something? Everyone was acting so strange. It was as if... as if they were meaning to say... If she's not going to regain consciousness she might as well just die! Ok, no doubt that these weren't the exact words that crossed their minds. But they secretly felt that the right place for a dead person to lie was under the ground.

After he got over the shock in those first few days, Cem had placed Serap's condition centre stage in his life. He had done research on PVS patients in a coma and had read every bit of information he could get hold of. When he first found out as the doctors were speaking

amongst themselves, a stranger to the topic, he was devastated like the rest of them. He had done his best to understand. Comatose was a state of brain function. No doubt it was the lowest level. The comatose person seemed to be in profound sleep. This was why some called it a deep sleep state. Doctor Cavit Köprülü sat in front of Cem and explained Serap's condition to him. A month after the accident...

“You do know Cem Bey that it is excellent progress that the patient has come out of the coma. However, her condition now unfortunately is what we call a vegetative state... While a significant part of the brain is not functioning properly, the brainstem and limbic system can maintain activity in a way... Because her heart stopped on the way here to the hospital, there was a lack of oxygen to the brain. It is hard to estimate the extent of the trauma. The patient is unconscious Cem Bey. And no one can say when she will regain consciousness... She can breath properly without any aid, her blood circulation is normal. This could be a step in the process of her recovery, or she could live like this until the day she dies.”

“This is a very difficult question to ask but... If she doesn't recover...”

From the tone of his voice the doctor had understood the question Cem had wanted to ask, but which he didn't know how to phrase.

“34 physiological parameters in the seven major systems have been continuously checked. Her acute physiological score is 2. In the most severe case, it is 4... No one can tell you how long she will live, or when or if, she will recover. But, if there is no progress within six months and a year... It is almost impossible to expect a recovery. Patients can live for years in this condition. The average being between two to five years... But don't wholly depend on statistics. There are also those who live twenty years.”

As if in a dream, Cem was murmuring in a voice that sounded distant even to himself:

“Like a vegetable... You mean she can't think...”

“Unfortunately there is no justification for us to give a positive answer to that question. We can't trace sufficient neural brain activity in the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for complex cognitive behaviours such as the orchestration of thought and reasoning. The state of consciousness and the state of wakefulness are two totally different things. Our patient has awoken. But she has not regained consciousness. She opens her eyes... Yes, she does demonstrate sleep-wake cycles. I mean, she sleeps at night and opens her eyes during the day, but...”

“Does she dream?”

“Dreams occur in certain stages of sleep. When rapid eye movements called REM begin, recordings of EEG waves show fast brain activity to be most like wakefulness.”

In the meantime, Cem had drawn chains of mountains with sharp peaks onto the piece of paper in front of him.

“Throughout the night, we live in this rhythm of sleep. It’s like a rough sea. At moments when we come close to wakefulness, we begin to dream. The REM period is very similar to the electrical activity recorded when we’re awake... Patients in a vegetative state do experience REM periods, although they are shorter. But this doesn’t necessarily mean that they dream.”

It had shaken him to find out that Serap was just lying there in the middle of a dreamless sea of sleep. Doctor Cavit Köprülü had gone into detail. He mentioned scales and criterions. Serap’s condition was now clear. PVS, she was in a persistent vegetative state. Even if there was a way she could recover, science had not yet discovered it. Yes, there were cases where, the patient, after years, regained consciousness all by his or herself. But the longer she stayed in PVS, the lesser was her chance of return. Statistically. Cem didn’t know what to think and couldn’t figure what to do. Perhaps if the doctor were to examine him at that moment, he would have reported Cem’s level of consciousness to be not quite bright either.

After the shock of the first few months was over, a new order had been restored. A *Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastronomy* tube (Cem took notes of all technical details with the exertion of a researcher, and went on doing research on their technologies) had been placed into Serap’s stomach, and so she could now easily feed. All her operation wounds had healed, there was just this 30cm long, white PEG tube hanging out of her stomach. And thus Cem had brought Serap home, had prepared an air-conditioned clean room for her and then the waiting had begun. (With the 14 inch television set he had placed right in front of her, he had turned the place into a right hospital room.) Of course there wasn’t really anyone else but Cem waiting. Patients who woke up after years and said ‘can I have a can of coke?’ must have been urban legends. Or they might be nothing but secret advertising anecdotes, tales told by mischievous marketing units of coke companies, hoping that the word would spread.

People around her had quickly accepted Serap’s absence. For example, everything at the company had run smoothly. Serap’s share had been preserved and the money was being paid to Cem’s bank account promptly. In fact, her partners had all handed their shares over to Cem, explaining that Serap’s condition could cause bureaucratic difficulties for them all. Now and then that guy called Erkan came over and had Cem sign some papers. He never failed to

bring flowers every time he dropped by, and always visited Serap in her room, in her everlasting sleep. Cem had complex feelings for the man. Especially in the last few days he had become totally obsessed with this. In his mind, again and again, scene by scene he kept going through that night Serap had made that confession, trying to remember all the details.

“What if, one day, either of us was interested in someone else?”

That night there was a discussion programme on TV. Cem was watching the show, a wine glass in one hand. He was invited too but he never liked being in front of the camera. He was seated on one end of the purple-brown three person couch. The TV volume was low. The news Cem had reported had exploded in the press. But Cem knew this wasn't really a big deal. The media was like life itself, it just flew by. You could never be on the same screen twice. This was why everything -no matter how crucial it was- vanished and was just forgotten.

Innocence announced too late! That was the headline. N.A. spoke pure and clear as he stared at the recorder, bewildered, eyes fixed, as if he were examining some sort of creature... After eighteen years, one day, he was discovered to be innocent. He was a prisoner who had been sentenced to death but his punishment hadn't been executed. He had been sentenced for murdering his wife. Eighteen years later a psycho had turned up and confessed. He lived next door. It was as simple as that. During the trial, N.A. wasn't able to prove that he was innocent so he was sentenced to death. He was the one who found the dead body. His fingerprints were everywhere. Even on the knife that had slit his wife's throat. He couldn't defend himself at court. He didn't know what to say. That place is my home... That was all he could say. To justify his fingerprints. But this wasn't what made his story interesting. N.A. had said into Cem's recorder that over the years, after he was sentenced, gradually he had begun to understand his guilt. He was sure that he was a murderer. He didn't remember why but he was the one who murdered his wife. And after eighteen years the appearance of another murderer had turned his life upside down. Yes, because in the meantime he had built himself a new life. A new life as a convict serving the sentence for the murder he committed... But now they were telling him he was innocent. This was impossible.

Cem truly felt sorry for the man. His story, which, if it had fallen into the hands of some other journalist, would have had the headline 'the tragic joy of justice which came after years', had gained a wholly new dimension thanks to Cem. More importantly, N.A. wasn't happy or anything. Oktay was shocked when he saw the interview as the two of them were placing it on the newspaper layout. He murmured that he'd interviewed the man too, but that

N.A. hadn't mentioned any of this to him. Whereas the question Cem asked him was: Would you have wanted your sentence to be carried out? Following this question, N.A. had begun to tell Cem all that he had been through, starting from his first day in prison. He had seen himself as a victim. He had rebelled against the creator; his wife had been murdered, and he had wrongfully been sentenced to death for it. Twice a death. He couldn't handle it at first. Then he got himself together. He had faced it, confessed and judged. He had accepted his guilt. His faith in the creator had saved him. Yes, he had murdered his wife, maybe he had gone insane, or maybe it was something else... But it must have been him who murdered her. Or at least he was guilty of something equally foul. Otherwise, why would the creator let him be punished if he were innocent? I died, and then I was reborn, he kept on repeating.

Cem had unearthed a stimulating subject by getting the man to talk for hours. A case that could be discussed from various different perspectives. On the one hand there was the vile death penalty and how time could never be brought back, on the other, a story of a man's transformation into someone else in prison. And that was the topic of the discussion programme on that night. The man had been invited too and N.A. was now no longer N.A. he was now Neşet Akıncı, a folk hero. He looked really out of place amongst those people. In his suit that had become weary from waiting in his wardrobe for years and that carried the lines of trend of twenty years ago, he looked like a complete stranger, a time traveller. The words he spoke, his gestures and expressions all affirmed that he wasn't from this world. From the moment they met, Cem was certain he resembled someone he knew, but who, he couldn't figure out. He spoke spiritually. He answered questions he was asked with anecdotes, tales and stories. "That man is nuts," Serap had murmured, without looking away from the TV screen.

"You really think so?"

"I don't know... He could be the real killer you know."

Cem was sort of offended. How could Serap go judging the man so easily? He might have snapped if he didn't know that everyone that appeared on the TV screen was taken for some sort of guinea pig by the viewer who naturally found the right in himself to speculate while he sat comfortably in his armchair. She hadn't shown much attention when the story first came out anyway. She had made no comment at all. N.A. had managed to attract Serap's attention by appearing on TV.

"But the murderer has been caught and he confessed. The guy next door..."

"Alright but isn't he crazy too? You said he's a psycho... A psycho-killer."

"Yes but..."

“How are we meant to know the second killer is telling the truth?”

Cem had been gripped by this question Serap had asked. She was right... He didn't know the full details to the police investigation. And plus Neşet Akıncı was really a bit... Weird. But there was something about him that touched Cem. He did look weird on screen right now, but then again, who could really be themselves on TV... Serap quickly made another suggestion:

“Maybe he was nuts from the very beginning. And that's why he killed his wife.”

This was possible, but Cem protested:

“Isn't it a bit too much to have two lunatics involved in one case? I mean two psychos who live next door to each other, come on?”

Serap hadn't answered him. She was thinking as she watched Neşet Akıncı tell a story of how ‘a good act which seems incredibly small in this world is rewarded tenfold in the other world’. When he had finished the story, Serap went on:

“Maybe the woman and the man you're all calling a psycho were having an affair.”

Cem just couldn't understand why Serap undervalued the case. He could be mad at this. And perhaps he was already. He had let Serap be in charge of his life for so long that he couldn't even imagine disagreeing with her. Whereas now, as he prepared Serap's feeding bag, everything seemed so different. Serap didn't exist. Serap was on the verge of death. He was a little surprised to be repeating this to himself over and over. Perhaps it was his habit of being prepared for the worse which was back haunting him. He shouldn't think like that. He should think positive.

Back then, on that night when Neşet Akıncı was on TV, he wasn't able to understand how their conversation with Serap had shifted to Erkan. But right now he could reevaluate the situation from a slightly different point of view. Perhaps Serap was jealous of his success. Wasn't that possible? No it wasn't. Because Serap had stood by him throughout most of his miserable life, that slipped by engulfed in crisis. She had high regards for the profession of journalism. Ok then why had she wanted to hurt Cem? Perhaps she was trying to say ‘while there are millions of vital and urgent matters in the country and worldwide that need attention, you go wasting your time on crappy third page news. What you've done Cem, exaggerating this N.A. thing, doesn't really amount to much; in fact, you've gone and misunderstood a simple case’. Perhaps Cem really was on the wrong track... Perhaps... Could he really have totally misunderstood and misinterpreted this Neşet Akıncı case? Here's the scene: Oktay staring at the Neşet Akıncı interview on the computer screen says “I interviewed the guy too,

it wasn't anything like this." No, he hadn't got it wrong. But Serap insistently kept coming up with new theories:

"Maybe the guy next door and his wife were having an affair. And when Neşet Akıncı found out he went crazy. One day, he slit his wife's throat. And the man next door gradually went insane because of the love he had for the woman and because he felt guilty about her death and so he turned into a killer. Caught after a series of murders, maybe he told the police emphasising in his own way that everything had started with the death of that woman. What, isn't that possible?"

Cem was looking at Neşet Akıncı on the screen. The man hadn't once claimed he was innocent ever since he had been released.

"No Serap dear, you're wrong. There's no such thing. The woman didn't have a lover or anything... They were truly in love with each other..."

Serap was smiling mysteriously.

"Just because they loved each other it doesn't mean they wouldn't cheat on each other..."

Cem didn't like this idea being expressed by Serap.

"You're right... But I don't think Neşet Akıncı's wife was that sort of woman."

"How can you be so sure Cem? Human beings are capable of doing everything."

Making use of Cem's silence, Serap asked another question:

"If you liked someone else one day?.. What would you do?"

"What's this about?"

"Nothing, it just came to me. Everything's possible in life."

Cem hadn't yet considered answering the question. He laughed it off:

"I'll think about it when the time comes."

But Serap wouldn't give up.

"I'm serious. What would you do?"

The smile on Cem's face had faded. Despite his strong reluctance an image of Aslı had fluttered in his mind. She was just a girl around him that he could have liked back then, there was no other reason for her to come to his mind. At that moment, he had managed to convince himself by thinking this, and the fact that even her 'coming to mind as a possibility' meant something, he just couldn't confess. He wouldn't. When he saw that Serap wasn't going to back off, he had given her the most honest answer in his head;

"I'd tell you straight away. That is if I really liked her or... if I were in love, then we'd have to get divorced..."

He was carefully looking Serap in the face. She kept silent in a manner that seemed she was hiding something. Something wasn't quite right. In their silence the low volume of the television became audible, and the voices of the exhausted guests on the discussion programme kept distracting Cem. He actually wanted to watch this programme. Yes, the main reason for this was because it involved him. But Serap wouldn't let him. And plus now they had reached a nerve-racking point in their conversation. As Cem was thinking this he was absolutely gobsmacked at the straightforwardness of how the following words stumbled out his mouth:

“Is there someone else Serap?”

Who on earth had first rephrased this question for ‘are you cheating on me’?

“No, of course not...”

As she said this, a light in a colour that Cem had never known before illuminated Serap's face. Cem understood that the expression on Serap's face was not out of place. At that moment, one of the programme regulars, a man of law, was explaining in a pedagogical tone of voice how fortunate a development it was that the death penalty had been abolished: there was always the possibility that the given decisions might be wrong. He quickly switched the TV off and turned around to sit looking Serap straight in the face. In a cold and serious tone he began questioning her:

“I'm listening.”

“Oh come on Cem, stop it... what's all this switching the TV off and everything? What's going on? Stop being so silly... I was just...”

“You were just what?”

Cem insistently clung on to the matter. A voice inside kept telling him to his embarrassment that ‘this was sheer stupidity, and that this overreaction was just not him’, but every answer Serap gave showed him the opposite, signalled that he was on the right track. Serap looked down:

“Back in the past, I would have given the same answer you just gave to that question.”

“What question?”

“The, if you liked someone else, what would you do, question... Before, I would have given a simple answer like you did. But as you grow older you begin to see the world more differently. Now I believe that some things in life need to be killed before you experience them.”

As she said this last sentence she had lifted her eyes to look at Cem. She had tears in her eyes. She was crying. Cem hadn't known what to do, what to feel. Serap, his Serap, was

crying... for someone else, for someone he had never known, for someone whose existence he had never sensed. For a moment, Cem had felt anger roaring up inside him. And then he asked the shortest question that partners who discover they are being cheated on always ask:

“Who is it?”

Now, as Cem went over that night in his head, the pain he suffered had two different dimensions to it. The first was, as Serap lay there in her deathbed, *fighting for her life in agony* (Cem was thinking with words that would hurt him the most) he sat there recalling their worst memories together. The reason for this was obvious. He was trying to protect himself. It was a way of filling up the void she would leave after her death. The second was more tragic: Serap had liked Erkan but... She didn't let Erkan or Cem know about it. She had suppressed her feelings. She had pretended it didn't exist. And this was what upset Cem; if Cem wasn't in her life Serap was quite naturally going to be with Erkan, and this was going to make her happy. But Cem had made Serap unhappy with his existence. Now Serap, who had a very poor chance of coming back to life, was leaving with this failure of fulfilment. Although Serap had insistently explained to Cem that this had no importance, and that in certain stages of life people ought to uphold different values, that love was what was important... According to Serap's definition, being in love could only be the primary drive in a person's life in their twenties, or maybe perhaps if it lasted that long, in their early thirties. After the age of thirty-five, affectionate love gained greater significance. She kept talking about love. Going on and on about love... This could only mean one thing; Serap was no longer in love with Cem. What was even worse, she was in love with someone else. Cem had asked Serap how they had tumbled into such a cliché love story so quickly, he was being honest. Believing that Cem meant this question to be humiliating, Serap took a harsher manoeuvre:

“Well darling, could you honestly say that you had no feelings whatsoever for that assistant of yours?”

Cem's eyes widened. How could she be so unfair?

“Please stop it... You know that's not true.”

Serap had lit a cigarette, and in a tone that declared no matter what he said, she would never be convinced, she had the final say.

“Oh come on Cem. The girl is crazy about you. You can tell from metres away. No one can be so indifferent to being desired like that...”

That was all that was left for Cem from that night. Now, the tables were turned, and Erkan had become someone who frequently visited their home.

Erkan: A confused man, a few years younger than Cem. The younger of Serap's two business partners. A man who, with his sexy fringe and tough countenance, had managed to impress Serap. Perhaps Serap had fallen for his hands. As he handed over documents, the prim black hairs between every knuckle on his fingers... Do women first look at people's hands? Serap's not like other women. But still, just as she was leaving, Serap had confessed that she had been impressed by this Erkan guy. (*Just as she was leaving*. Are you losing your temper Cem?) This conversation that could very well be buried and forgotten was resurrected at Erkan's every visit, and devastated Cem. Because he didn't want to be mad at Serap who just helplessly lay there, peeing into the warm nappy he had just changed, Serap who would starve if it wasn't for the PEG tubes Cem had prepared. When Erkan sank into the armchair right next to the bed and silently stared at Serap, Cem, not knowing what to do with himself, rushed into the kitchen to try making coffee, and there he imagined that Erkan guy reaching out and gently kissing his wife, Serap turning her eyes to look at him with a smile on her face, and then gazing at Erkan peacefully until Cem came back into the room. Coffee? He would pull Erkan out of the dark sea of sorrow with this question he asked in a tone which really said 'time's up'. He didn't always rush to disturb this mournful scene, sometimes he'd stand by the threshold and watch the two. At the face of this tableau, with Serap emptily staring at the ceiling and this man sitting right by her side, Cem suffered immensely. And then again, the existence of another person who loved, and cared for and remained true to Serap at least as much as he did, aroused positive feelings in him. All the friends and relatives who kept knocking at their door in the beginning, had now long forgotten Serap. To be more precise, they were waiting in their homes, all ready to attend her funeral. They now feigned ignorance that she was still here and alive. She was here and still could be loved... And these positive feelings suddenly changed shape as the wave of jealousy Cem felt towards Erkan who sat there like a desperate lover, bedevilled him. At moments like this he imagined Serap defecating loudly. The little empty space between her anus and her nappy walloping with the thrust of her runny excrement... The room filling with a suffocating smell... He wondered how this Erkan guy would deal with a situation like that. Thank god this fit of jealousy didn't last too long and so he managed to draw Erkan away from Serap by offering him a cup of coffee. As the sorrowful man left the room scuffing his feet with blue galoshes on, Cem always turned to have a good look at Serap. Can you hear us Serap?

There was a possibility that Serap could hear the outer world. According to some experts this was impossible, but others said no one could know. In other words, no one could say if she could hear or not or whether she could understand us. Yes, Serap had been through

numerous examinations, had been identified with various classifications: she didn't show any conscious responses, according to the Glasgow Coma Scale her score was E4M1V1, meaning her eyes opened spontaneously, but she showed no motor or verbal responses. True, but her EEG wasn't flat. Her brain was alive. In our modern age, death meant a flatline, and the waves recorded in the brain were the sole authority in this. The brain did function in a way, and more sceptical doctors argued that it wasn't scientific to deny the possibility that a patient in this condition may experience his or her own state of consciousness. Plus relatives of patients like this who woke up from a coma years later said that they remembered the music they made them listen to while in a vegetative state, and that talking to them and reading to them played a significant role in the process of recovery. Therefore it was quite reasonable for Cem to read his paper and novels out loud. Even for him to talk to her... He couldn't understand why people around him treated him as if he was behaving awkward. None of them knew jackshit, and they just wouldn't stop making suggestions. Even Aslı... Even Aslı managed to annoy him sometimes. Although her phone calls had become less frequent, she was never going to abandon Cem. (Are you sure Cem? Aslı has only visited this house once after the accident!) Cem had not given up on Serap, and Aslı had not given up on Cem. (Really?) This situation which would have been defined as a mini love triangle before the accident (Serap insisted on this), was now a three ring chain, one end joined with life, the other with death. Serap was the link to death, Aslı the link to life... Cem, who stood outstretched between the two, thought he was doing a good job enduring it all. No one else would have been able to cope with this. It was a hard job to be able to handle this change. As tough as being a war correspondent... It had almost been three years since him and Aslı first met. She had started work as a trainee in her last year at college. Elmas Bey gave her a position helping Cem. Although she became a member of the regular staff in a few months time, Aslı was always to remain Cem's trainee whenever he was around.

"I got my hands on some wicked information. Wicked, I'm telling you... Cem, we have an astonishing job, it's filled with mysteries."

Cem would listen to Aslı, smiling. Aslı would always be the one to do all the talking. Back then. Cem would deliver himself to the ardent twittering of youth, fully enjoying the maturity of an old adventurer... Back then. Now (during their long conversations on the phone): Cem kept talking non-stop; he exhausted the girl in a frenzy to recount things that would arouse Aslı's curiosity, perhaps giving the impression of a man who was losing his wits. Was he really? He didn't think so.

“Look Aslı, this job isn’t just about playing Sherlock Holmes. Yes, you have to trace clues like a detective. You have to blend in with the crowd wherever you go, like a spy, chasing a scent, a hint. But don’t forget that your real job is with the person who is the source of the story. Everything you do is to make his or her adventure known... This is your goal. Do you remember the story of the lesbian transsexual?”

Cem would go on without letting Aslı interrupt him. Whereas Aslı would have wanted to talk about other things, if she was given the chance. Cem knew this. That’s why he tells the story of the transsexual’s regret, one of the most interesting reports he’s ever done, all over again, although he has told it a million times. Other newspapers had seriously published this news as a comedy. A situation comedy. Whereas Cem had seen the tragedy behind the event and then had made it visible. This was the story of a transsexual who fell in love with a woman after transforming into a woman. The hopelessness the man had fallen into was terrifying. Cem had taken his photos in a house on the backstreets of Tarlabaşı. It was a humid, miserable, single room place in which the smell of sweet scented perfume spread. The old movie posters on the walls gave one the impression that the owner of the room had his or her hopes tied to the sinema. The man-woman had no way out. He seemed determined to commit suicide. He greatly regretted having had a sex change. There was no turning back. Cem had his eyes fixed on the man’s silicone breasts. They stuck out as if they were wanting to escape his body at any moment. They no longer belonged to him. His tits were independently sexy. It was easy to get rid of the silicones. But where would he get his penis back? It must have long been exterminated along with other surgery wastes.

Why did Cem keep telling Aslı all this? He was trying to suffocate her every time they talked. Because Cem was tense. He was afraid that Aslı would desert him too. No there was no such thing (Yes there was! Aslı hadn’t even called in the last two weeks; she had been calling less frequently lately anyway...) He didn’t need anyone. (Yes he did!) He had nothing else to do but to just wait here. (This was sadly too true!) He was a castrated priest watching over Serap. (Castrated?) Ok, there were times when he felt confused. But... It was impossible. Some things were just not possible. He had questioned himself a million times... (He could have handed Serap over to her family, or put her in that clinic Elmas Bey had mentioned.) And this was a disturbing thought. So disturbing he could never pronounce. The demons inside him were so keen on finding solutions... They didn’t have any children. Therefore, they weren’t really a family. Family meant a group of people who affiliated by blood relations. Therefore Gülderen Hanım, Merve and even Salim Bey were Serap’s real family. And then her real father Şefik Bey and her stepbrothers. He had only visited the hospital once

after the accident. He could barely climb up the stairs. Cem had feared that the poor man would drop dead there and then. And then he began to watch the absurdity in the hospital room. Gülderen Hanım in one corner, Şefik Bey in the other. It was obvious that neither of them were prepared for an encounter like this, several years later. Salim Bey had disappeared. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to breathe the same air as his wife's ex-husband. Şefik Bey stood there speechless, going tit, tit, tit in a reproachful tone, astonished at how a debt he had paid for years ago had popped up in his face again. His two sons were standing right next to him. Two morons incapable of understanding what was going on. On their blank and confused faces you could read the surprise of discovering the existence of their sister. Maybe the father hadn't told them this fact until that very morning. Since... Serap was the fruit of a marriage that was made in the distant past, a daughter who was forgotten the day she was born. Whereas it was Şefik Bey's mother who named Serap. All this was long ago. Before the eighties... Back when there was a call of duty. It had all happened and in the past when roll calls were taken in the frosty early morning, tea was made with snow water boiling on coal burning stoves, cigarettes were hand rolled with yellow tobacco, and when lodging buildings smelt of cement. Serap had told him. Serap would tell him everything. Tell Cem. Only Cem... But nowadays Cem wasn't so sure. Maybe she would have told Erkan too. If she had had the chance, or if fate had had a different flow...

He wondered if all worldly experiences were inevitable. Cem couldn't have asked himself this question because he wasn't a man who believed in fate in the ordinary sense. Although he didn't feel that far removed from the idea to have his religion crossed out from his id card; 'negligent' would have been a better definition. There was no reason for him to believe in fate. But still his disbelief wasn't enough to stop him from travelling back in his memory, back to before the accident, and wondering whether there was a way he could have prevented it from happening. Yes, just as Gamze had said, if they hadn't gone to the cinema that night or if Cem had been with her, Serap would be at work (with Erkan) instead of laying in that bed. Perhaps he should have changed his life way before. For example, back when they decided to live together. But that wouldn't have been so simple. Because it was the time of year when redbuds bloomed. Wisterias wrapping themselves up redbud trees had nourished İstanbul in a parade of colours. They were wandering around in the backstreets of Yeniköy. It was Sunday morning. There was no one around. They had stayed up all night at Gamze's house. Music, wine, and tête à tête till dawn. Serap was shining that night. They had greeted the first rays of the new day under a blanket, smoking. The guests had already left. Gamze had dozed off in her bed. There must have been someone with her. A young man who, in the

future, was to become part of their lives for a short period of time, and who would later disappear, leaving behind a wretched loneliness. Cem didn't remember his name. What he should remember from that night were other things anyway. They had gone down to the shore and waited for the coffee shop to open to have breakfast. They got their tea and sat down at a table by the sea, in the cool morning breeze.

“Life is beautiful...”

This was what Serap had said. Cem could hear the sound of small waves tinkling as they filled the empty space under the wooden pier. The smell of sea everywhere... Fish, seaweed, salt, and iodine. It must have been because Cem felt comfortable in his natural habitat, that he spoke the following words without hesitating, clear and simple:

“I think I'm in love with you.”

Serap had wrapped her arms around Cem's neck and given him a long kiss after he spoke these words. Cem had later thought that this must have been an answer. Because at that moment, he had lost his angels of thought. It wasn't really him to kiss like that out in public, in broad daylight. He was old-school. The only thing he could think at that moment was what he would say when the coffee shop man came to warn them. What was worse, he already believed the man was right. What could he have said? Sir it's only early in the morning, and since there are no customers yet, we're just going to make out a little, if that's ok... Was that what he would say? These worries dissolved in Serap's warm mouth, and like melting chocolate just added more flavour to the kissing. It was an unforgettable beginning. But later on, this is what Serap had said about that morning: if it wasn't me but some other girl from that night, you would have fallen in love with her. Why would she say that? When had she first said it? Had she said that from the very beginning?