

*Aslı Erdoğan is an exceptionally perceptive and sensitive writer
who always produces perfect literary texts.—Orhan Pamuk*

The Stone
Building
and Other
Places

Aslı Erdoğan

TRANSLATED FROM THE TURKISH BY SEVINÇ TÜRKKAN

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

The Stone Building and Other Places

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City Lights Books | San Francisco

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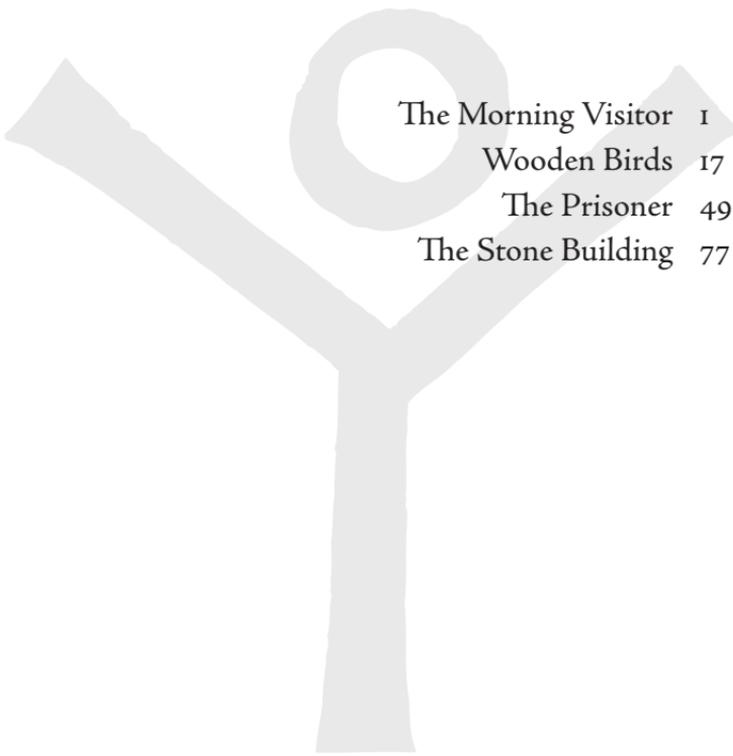
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THE
MORNING
VISITOR

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Dawn came at last. The night had passed slowly, arduously, like a heavy freight train climbing a steep grade. At sunrise, a patch of light quietly appeared on my attic window, deepening gradually. A sleepy sun, the shy, cautious sun of the North, announced the break of day as if fulfilling an obligation. All I could see was a bit of sky framed by the towering trees and the wet roof slanting up at almost a 90-degree angle. Thin, sad branches swaying in the wind, leaves anticipating their decay, shivering. . . like the hands of a beggar,

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outstretched in vain. The month was August, the season, supposedly summer. I had already surrendered to the hazy gloom of this northern country, my soul submerged in the sea, the rain, and the mossy smell of this city surrounded by water

Somewhere inside the wooden house, the phone begins to ring, and it goes on ringing for a long time. The room's darkness is deceptive — it's after eight o'clock, but still, it's much too early for this place, a boardinghouse for migrants. Nothing is heard at this hour, except snores, sighs, and the wooden house breathing in its restless sleep. In the room on my right, is the Bosnian who takes particular pleasure from showing off his shrapnel wounds to the cold beauties of the North — most of us carry our wounds more privately. On my left is a Russian who makes a living acting in porn films and likes to listen all night to protest songs from a long-gone era. Further down the hall is a red-haired woman whose origin or occupation no one knows; and at the far end is the supposedly Somalian mother, who's actually a Rumanian, one hundred percent gypsy, a freeloader and a flirt who hasn't worked a single day in her life. She likes to brag about how her accordion can melt even the

iciest heart. All of these immigrants, each one having arrived from a different land, on a different night, are lost in sleep now, with the bone-wearying fatigue of borders and frontiers. Resigned to a fate they despise, they trust nothing beyond their misfortune. In this shelter of ours, a cloud stinking of alcohol, sweat, tobacco, and filth drifts slowly, so heavy with all the world's excesses and disappointments that on some mornings the echo of light footsteps can be heard inside of it. Maybe it's a lonely ghost, grimy and be-draggled, taking leave of the house,. Or perhaps the red-haired woman has sampled a new lover.

Before the telephone stops ringing, footsteps can be heard coming up the stairs. Slow and tired footsteps at the end of a long journey. They come closer and closer, and then stop in front of my door. After a few, heart-stopping seconds, I hear my name being spoken. Maybe it's my mind playing tricks on me; a hoarse voice asks for me in my mother tongue.

"Yes, it's me. Come in."

The door opens with its usual creak, a moan like the sound of a violin. A short, swarthy man comes in, along with a rush of bitter cold air that quickly permeates the entire room. His sagging shoulders and

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wide back fill up the room; the door is already closed, as if it had never been opened. My visitor stands still for a moment and then, with the sudden, mechanical moves of a marionette, he turns toward me, his spindly legs barely able to support his body. His face looks like it's been molded from plaster that hardened before the artist could finish his clumsy job. His large nose seems like it has melted and run down between his hollow cheeks, his eyes are nearly invisible in their deep sockets. His wrinkled, saggy, dark-colored suit is far too big for him and looks as if he never takes it off. He quit shaving and wearing neckties long ago. His once thick, receding black hair still bore the scent of the cool, dark night. I was sure I had seen him before.

After a moment he spoke, "I found out you live here so I thought I'd stop by."

Perhaps I should have mumbled a greeting, should have shaken his freezing-cold hand. Maybe I should have been afraid. But there was nothing to fear in this quiet port city. . . Not even death, it seemed. It, too, would arrive exactly on time, just like the trams, neither early nor late. . .

Clutching his topcoat in his pale hands, he scans my room, squinting. As his eyes adjust to the

darkness, his gaze settles at first on the bed squeezed under the slanted ceiling. The scrawny mattress thrown atop a woven iron bedframe looks battered by a struggle with dark nightmares that has only just ended. On the table covered with books, glass jars, dirty cups and overflowing ashtrays, a candle stuck in a beer bottle is still burning. My room, dark at all hours of the day, is spacious and almost empty. In the morning, when I stand under the small window and look up, I feel like I'm in a submarine, surfacing and rushing toward the sky. Random artifacts of everyday life are scattered around the room. These underappreciated, unassuming, faithful objects, witnesses of my unbroken solitude, bear the traces of depressing gloom. Everything, whatever I touch, is scarred and bruised. The clothes spilling out of the suitcase are torn and stained, the books heaped on the table are tattered. The water glasses have become cloudy, the pencils and moldy pieces of bread bear tooth marks, like the nicks and holes on the dreary walls. A small mirror hangs above a sink filled with a foul liquid. So much of the mirror's silvering has fallen off that none of these battered objects can see their own reflections, dissolving instead into the murky haze. For my part,

I see myself on the bruised surfaces of these objects. My own bruised skin. . . The thin, gauzy membrane between me and the void, both within and without, bruised and wounded. . .

“These are cold climes, aren’t they?” He smiled, his eyes fixed on the electric heater. He had a compassionate smile. “And it’s only August.”

I looked at his face without speaking. I could see nothing more than a pair of eyes, a pair of endless, pitch-black tunnels.

“Won’t be even two months before it starts snowing. First it’s a bitter wind that burns the lungs, blowing in from the sea. The layer of ice on the mud puddles gradually thickens, and one morning you wake up to find yourself in a completely white world. Everything is frozen. Buried alive and dreaming of the day when they’ll rise up from their coffin of ice.”

He walked to the center of the room, toward the rectangular splash of daylight that resembled a startled eye gazing at the ceiling. In his movement, I recognized the restraint of someone who has always lived in cramped spaces; even in this empty room it seemed like he was afraid of bumping into something. Or maybe he didn’t want to leave any trace of himself

behind. A wan bouquet of light played over his face. And suddenly, I remembered him. His pale skin the yellow of earth, the purple bags under those eyes whose whites were webbed by red capillaries. . . He, too, was among those whom sleep didn't visit.

"But the darkness is more unbearable than the cold. That sun. . ."

He paused and looked at the bright shape on the floor. As if, should he reach down and open that trapdoor, sunlight would burst forth, filling the room. I turned to the window. Green, quivering branches, silvery drops on the leaves; the soft, dreamy dance of shadows on the window. . . The infinite blue that contains and restricts my vision. . . In those rare moments when the northern sun shines, the entire world is transformed, glowing, smiling. But then the clouds return, and the room seems even darker than before.

"You'll see that sun for an hour, maybe two, each day. Around noon, it will appear like a sickly white stain on the horizon and then, before it can climb, it'll tire out. In fact, the real sun will never rise. Its derelict ghost, an imposter, will spread blank canvases instead of days. The earth's light and dark halves will split off, sliced in two."

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He stared at the walls, and I did too, scanning those dingy walls that I knew by heart. There, among the electrical cords dangling like strands of hair, among pipes and water stains resembling scabbed-over wounds, a shadow that had lost its human shape looked back at me. His shadow — bigger, and more terrifying than he was, another shadow among shadows. . .

“And that’s when your life will consist of one single night. Only ghosts can endure such a night. Albino people, albino trees, a city where ghosts wander. . . That’s when the long night of the mind will begin.”

This voice. . . This eerie, familiar, mournful voice had spoken to me before, many times. . . Door after door began to open in my soul; I rushed to close them, shivering from the frigid draft pushing its way in. . .

“At any rate, we don’t have much time. You have to decide.”

I reached for my pack of cigarettes and the candle.

“Decide and be done with it. That’s how life is, plain and simple. Breathe in, breathe out. . . Plain and simple.”

He cast a sharp, intense, disapproving look

toward the mirror, but all he saw was a blurry, mottled reflection.

"I'll tell you a story that happened thousands of years ago," he began, his eyelids closing slowly like the lid of a coffin.

"I won't listen. You always take me back there. (I was speaking for the first time. Was I really speaking?) You come to remind me that I have never left that place. That dark cell, it follows me wherever I go. In fact, it lives inside of me. It grows like the roots of a tree at night. It spreads and spreads, tearing through my skin to get out, and then it takes shape, finding its outline in the emptiness."

I pointed to my room.

"You can see for yourself, it's as if I keep building the same three-dimensional scene and then locking myself up inside of it. My life is the infinite palimpsest of the same picture. Trees, horizon, sky. . . Wherever I look, inside or outside, I see only a wall. Whatever direction I take, the past or the future, a stone wall confronts me. Maybe it's because I can't face the emptiness that I hide among walls. The void, its endless echo. . ."

"Once upon a time there was a man," he went on

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impatiently. "He was a good man, in fact. You know, everybody is a good person. But this man would change at night. Become bad. Do you understand? Words often fail us. This man would turn into his shadow cast on the wall. Maybe it was his wife who caused him to change, since the worse he became, the more she would indulge him.

"In that faraway land, there was a building that cloaked itself in darkness as soon as the sun fell below the horizon. One of the stone buildings that are found everywhere. . . Do you recall? When darkness fell, so did a deep, immeasurable silence. Those who aren't familiar with nightmares worse than death call it the silence of death. But that's because they can't hear the voices inside the silence, the sound of emptiness breathing.

"And when that dreadful darkness descended, the moonlight caressed the iron bars with its white fingers in satin gloves. The moon has a big heart of white gold, flawless. But that kind of heart can't cope with the darkness. Besides, didn't people invent the iron bars to keep their inner darkness from escaping?

"And there were birds on the roof of that dark building. Birds carrying dry twigs to the roof for

hundreds of years without rest. Thinking that, one day, they would have finally piled up enough twigs that the stone building would collapse under the weight, crumble to dust. But when night came, a cruel wind would blow, scattering the twigs. Still, the birds would get back to work each morning. . . Are you crying. Why?

“And when that long night arrived, the man would get ready. He would eat his meal always at the same time, wear the suit his wife had ironed, leaving home always at the same time. No one knew where he went. . . He would walk slowly at first, then build up speed — his footsteps feverish, precise, unwavering. On seeing him, the birds would signal one another, sounding warning calls from one end of the city to the other. The pale, tenderhearted moonlight would hide behind the clouds, hoping that maybe the man would lose his way in the pitch-black darkness. But no man would forget the path he follows at night, would he? Listen, it’s not over yet.

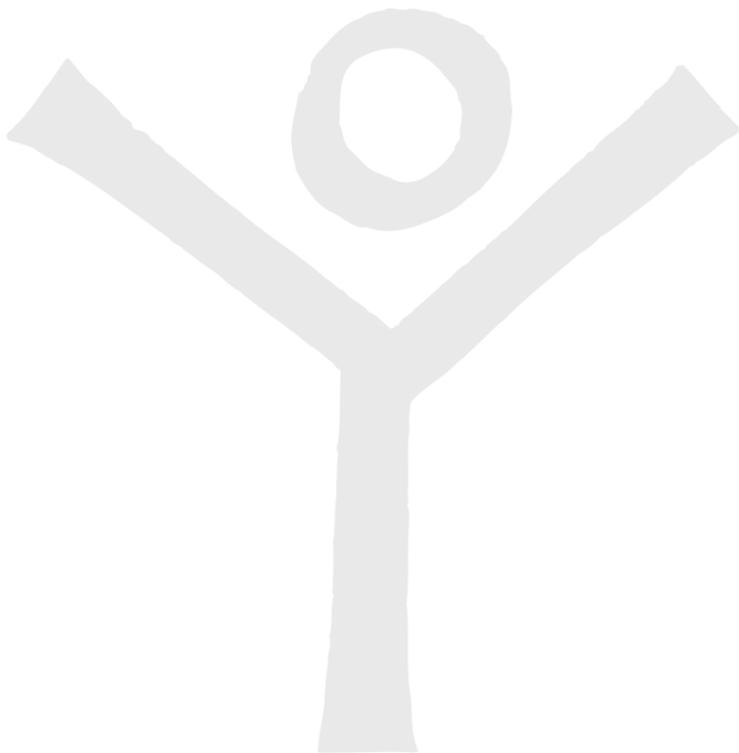
“And when that shadow man reached the stone building, the screams would be heard. Bone-chilling screams that wouldn’t cease till daybreak. . . It was the birds screaming, the moon screaming. . . As a

whirlpool of black flames filled the sky, the night itself would turn into a scream, endless, unrelenting. It would quiver like a gossamer-thin membrane over the expanding abyss, raw and bloodied, torn, ripped, slashed, covered in horrible wounds, which the thirsty lips of emptiness would suck. In the end, it would smash into pieces, strewn across the four corners of the earth. Nightmares and curses raining down on people like stones from the dark sky, wandering like shadows among the sleepers, covering their bodies with black snow, filling the deepest trenches, oozing into the most secret arteries, pouncing like a blind tiger, seizing sleep. . . And then would begin the single, long, endless night of the mind."

When I looked up, he had already gone. His letter lay on the table. I opened my drawer and placed it among the others. No matter where I went, they found me. The dead wrote to me, to recount things I could no longer remember, calling me to a place I would return to sooner or later. They cautioned me against life, for the sake of which I had been running away from my story. They knew that the future, my elusive refuge, was nothing but the past, recounted time and time again. The only visitor who came to

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my cell — the dark, eternal cell inside me — was the exiled ghost of the past that awaited me. . . I have not opened even one of the envelopes, but I knew. Inside were dry twigs, pale gold moonlight, and one last, still unclaimed scream. . .



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The door opened suddenly, and a bright red head peeked in. Dijana's breathless, impatient voice rang out:

"Hurry up, Felicita! Do we have to wait for you all day? Get your fat ass out of that bed. I swear, you're like the walking dead!"

The door closed as quickly as it had opened, shutting out the hospital corridor's smell of disinfectant, Dijana's shrill voice, and her offhand, stinging sarcasm.

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Filiz, or “Felicita” as she was called with distinct irony by the lung patients — was an extremely gloomy, withdrawn, and wounded person. With her status as a political refugee, her PhD in history, and the numerous thick volumes she kept in her room, in the eyes of the other patients she was a snooty intellectual. “Ah, our Felicita,” Dijana would say. “I’d rather read a book about cancer than have a conversation with her. Getting a few words out of her is like pulling teeth.” Our dark and frail Felicita! Felicita, who had been imprisoned in her own country for two years, who had never bothered to look up from her books and learn to speak German without an accent, even after ten years!

Filiz eased out of bed slowly. Her long illness — double pneumonia and chronic asthma — had taught her to use her strength sparingly. She deferred to the moods of her ever-aching, demanding body.

For the first time in six months, she would be leaving the hospital grounds. The name “Filiz Kumcuoğlu” had appeared on the list for a two-hour Saturday pass, reserved for only those patients who’d reached a certain stage of recovery. Dijana, an expert at eluding the night-shift nurse and snooping in

patient files — the ultimate adventure of hospital life — had known of these developments since Monday. She had prepared “a huge surprise” for Filiz. THE AMAZON EXPRESS! Filiz had earned the right to share in the secret of the third-floor patients and board the Amazon Express.

Filiz really had no particular expectations. At the most, she thought they'd go to T. village — the only place inhabited by humans within a twenty-mile radius — and get a couple of drinks. Perhaps they would meet the young men of the village, or the patients of the male sanatorium who were as worn out as they were. What else was there to do in the middle of the Black Forest?

As she was heading out the door, Filiz suddenly remembered a story she'd heard at least twenty years earlier and had buried somewhere deep in her memory. At the turn of the century, the female tuberculosis patients of Heybeli Island Sanatorium, would sneak into the woods at night and make love to male tuberculosis patients. Sallow, terminally ill women in white nightgowns, walking with torches in hand. . . The story probably wasn't true, but she'd thought it was tragically poetic. Her own life was bereft of poetry, and her

personal tragedies, by now too many to count, were like leeches sucking the very soul from her body.

Exit through the double-paned door! Turn your back on the foreboding "T. Hospital, Pulmonary Patients Entrance" sign and walk quickly, looking straight ahead, until you reach the edge of the building's giant shadow. Stand there at the border of the sun's domain, take a deep breath, and then slowly, carefully, take the step that brings you out of the shadow. Suddenly, even the weak northern sun will be enough to warm your back, and you'll believe it's actually possible to erase your entire past and start anew! Let the sun play over your hair, let the forest cloak itself in vivid colors, let the shapes and outlines disappear, let truth become pure light.

Filiz thought of Nadyezdha, the sad Nadyezdha in Chekhov's *The Duel*, who dreams of soaring to the sky by spreading her arms out in flight. Filiz often felt that she could have been a Chekhov character. Perhaps she could transform into a bird right then and there, but at most it would be a wooden bird. A bird whose wings weren't made to fly but only to make mechanical noises, something lifeless and ridiculous. She was overcome with nervous excitement. Filiz wanted to cry and laugh, live and die at the same time.

“Come on Felicita! You’ve frozen up like a mummy! We’re going to be late.”

Joining in with Dijana’s cry was Gerda’s contralto, hoarse from tuberculosis and smoking: “You’ll miss the Amazon Express!”

They were a group of six women gathered at the door. “Three foreigners, three Germans, three tubercular, three asthmatic,” Filiz quickly classified them. “All of the Germans are tubercular, while we Third World-ers are asthmatic. Though one would have expected the reverse.” Martha and Gerda, the two tall blonde Germans, had managed to remain sturdy and strong, despite their tuberculosis. (In fact, Gerda wasn’t particularly tall or blonde, but in Filiz’s eyes, indifferent to personal details, the two were identical, and she had pegged them as the working-class women in their small circle.) Filiz was somewhat cowed by their physical strength, their boorish manners, but at the same time she secretly envied their stubborn determination to fend for themselves. The third German was Beatrice, a twenty-year-old with hollow cheeks, thin as a totem pole, an introverted heroin addict. With her short, chestnut-colored hair, her sad eyes that always seemed to be searching for

something, and her adolescent's stick-like body, the girl saddened Filiz. Dijana was the trickster, the red fox popping out from behind every rock. She didn't give a damn or get rattled by anything. Except for being called Yugoslav instead of Croat. And then there was Graciela, the Argentinian. . .

The only patient in the sanatorium who was as isolated as Filiz — perhaps even more so — was Graciela. Unanimously described as “distinguished, elegant, cultured,” privileged from birth and quite well off, her presence among the pulmonary patients was an example of life's cruel sense of humor. She was only a little over five feet tall (even shorter than Filiz), dainty and petite. Her straight hair and bangs, her “Marlene Dietrich eyebrows” — which she plucked religiously, even in the hospital — and her almond-shaped eyes, with a gaze as warm as it was icy, had earned her the moniker of “Evita.” She was the favorite of the doctors and nurses, who treated her as if she were a fragile antique vase. She somehow made everyone feel that she should be treated delicately. But Filiz had recognized the hardness in that perfectly composed face of a porcelain figurine. Graciela had a smile that frightened people. She reminded Filiz

of her primary school teacher, dainty and chic in her scarves, and an expert tormentor in the classroom.

When she first saw Graciela, Filiz had thought she was a visitor who'd mistakenly walked into the patients' cafeteria. Graciela was seated by the window, at a table with one chair. She was wearing a tight, black velvet skirt and a striking blouse unbuttoned to reveal her cleavage. Between her lovely breasts hung a gleaming, heart-shaped pendant. Sheer stockings and a pair of high-heeled, buckled "tango shoes" completed her look. Among the patients with unwashed hair, walking around in sweats and sandals, Graciela stood out like a rare tropical flower. And then one day Dijana, the hospital gossip, had burst into Filiz's room and disclosed a secret:

"You know that Argentinian? Evita is just like you."

"What do you mean 'just like me'?"

"I mean a political refugee. Prison, torture, all the rest. That's how her lungs gave out, in fact. Her ex-husband was a diplomat, both of them came from wealthy families with deep roots and influential friends. But, it turns out, the man stepped on somebody's toes and a warrant was issued for his arrest.

He fled in a matter of hours. Leaving his wife behind. For two months they tried to get Graciela to talk, but she wouldn't reveal his whereabouts. And maybe she didn't know. Can you believe it? That little kitten of a woman?! Don't be fooled by appearances."

This was a devastating blow for Filiz. It felt like a mockery of her deepest agonies, denigrating her personal history, her very being. She had crafted an image of herself as a mythic hero, and only by worshipping this hero could she go on with her life. Her dreadful past, the memory of it, was the necessary proof of her existence and it claimed a sacred corner of her soul. But now that conceited woman had defiled her icons. What right could she have to the same tragedies as the strong, brave, principled Filiz (that's how she described herself), who had paid such a high price for her beliefs? And for what had Evita suffered? The love of a potbellied, contemptible man with two mistresses!

The procession of sick women walked along the narrow asphalt road that twisted and turned like a gray snake on its way to the T. Valley. At the very start of the journey the group had split in two, like a cell dividing. The leaders, Dijana and the two burly

Germans, started up a trivial conversation. A rambling Saturday afternoon conversation on topics of absolutely no interest to Filiz. It began with the usual nitpicking complaints about the doctors — the female doctors were treated with jealousy while the handsome male doctors were flattered. Then they took up the subject of the cafeteria: the food and coffee were roundly condemned, as were the shows on TV. Next, they compared the charms of Banderas and Pitt, with the Germans rooting for Banderas while Dijana — a fan of the Anglo-Saxon race — championed Pitt. Finally, they dredged up a few random memories from the time before they were hospitalized. . . In the factory where Martha had worked four years ago, a female worker was found completely naked with her throat slashed. Gerda also had a few murder stories in the deep-freeze of her memory, one of which she took out to reheat and serve. Dijana, whose family lived in Bosnia, didn't say a word about violence; she hid behind a silence that loomed like an avalanche.

Beatrice, never quite sure of where she belonged, walked by herself, alone in her inner world. She was trying to drink in, sip by sip without wasting a single drop, the extraordinary September afternoon, the

emerald-green valley spreading before her, and the two hours of freedom. She looked happy, and this happiness on her ruined young face was even more moving than a sorrowful expression.

Filiz ended up walking alongside Graciela, and she searched for something trivial to talk about.

“To be honest, it’s surprising to see you on the Amazon Express.”

“Why?” asked Graciela sharply. A cold flame shone in her eyes — a hint of the molten ore, the anger hidden for years at the core of her being. “They didn’t tell you where we’re going, did they?”

“No, they’re keeping it a big secret.”

“It is indeed a very big secret, the Amazon Express.” (A mocking, scheming tone of voice, with a smile like a scar.) “Even you will be surprised.”

“I’m guessing we’re going to the village?”

Graciela brought her finger with its long, cherry-red nail, to her lips. “Shhhh,” she said. Like the picture of the nurse on the “Silence Please!” sign back at the sanatorium.

Filiz had neither the stamina nor the desire to continue the conversation. She concentrated on enjoying the walk. She was going to be released in eight

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months; she was walking in fairytale woods, she was taking in the air, pure and delicious as water. Air that filled her tired lungs, cleansing them of the grime of the past. A tender, generous sun, an infinity of green stretching to the horizon, and the simple, unadulterated, glorious happiness of being able to walk to her heart's content. Unconstrained. With no closed doors in sight. . . Ward doors with iron bars; sound-proof hospital doors with room numbers and lubricated hinges. . . A healthy person would never know the sublime pleasure of being able to use one's legs to carry oneself forward freely. Filiz took note of the forest's incomparable scent. It wasn't as sweet and tame as the smell of the freshly mown hospital lawn; it was raw, primordial, dizzying. Perhaps it was the eerie silence that made her head spin. The T. Valley spread out before her like a densely woven green carpet; it was as though the hills, cascading one after another, were signaling to her. In the valley, where the autumn light had painted everything in sharp relief, sun and shadow were waging an endless turf war. The cross on the village church, gleaming like gold, was discernible from afar. "Everything is so light and carefree, it's enough to make a person feel sentimental," she thought.

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Beatrice approached the two black-haired women, her palms full of wild berries. She must have resolved her identity crisis and decided that she belonged among the “foreigners.” The tragic bond attracting these two former prisoners was drawing Beatrice in as well, consuming her. Heroin had taught her loneliness, despair, devastation, and although she was the youngest among them, she was the one most intimate with death. She carried death in her childlike body. Others tried to believe in life, to commit to it, to belong, and they were still trying, but Beatrice had already renounced life by the time she was sixteen. Heroin, prostitution, hepatitis, tuberculosis. . . She’d suffered one fatal blow after another, but each time, at the count of nine before the referee could call the fight, she got back on her feet to withstand yet another beating.

“Would you like some wild berries?” (No, neither of them wanted any.)

“On TV last night, there was a program about Argentina. Did you see it?” (No, neither had.)

“They showed Buenos Aires. An extraordinary city. So moody! A bit like Berlin, the architecture, the cafés. . . They showed a neighborhood full of colorful houses, like the rainbow: Labakar. . .”