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A Space Bounded by Shadows

Novel

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Roman)

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pp. 102 – 114

PHONE BOX

Benno said, ‘Hallo, oui.’ ‘It’s me, Herr Besson.’ ‘Welcome to Paris! I’m happy you’re here. Come see me at 3pm.’ I made a note of his address. Then I called Mari, my Armenian friend from drama school. She had left Istanbul with another friend, Diana, after the military coup. A man answered, ‘Alo, oui.’ ‘Mari?’ The man started talking in Turkish, ‘Mari doesn’t live in Paris anymore.’ ‘Oh, oh,’ ‘She met someone two months ago and went to Canada with him. I live here now’ ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘she was my best friend in Istanbul. Oh, dear, have I come too late, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh?’ Then I went silent. The man on the phone went silent too. And eventually I said, ‘Ah, ah, ah.’

The man was waiting outside the telephone box. He wobbled his head through the glass, smiled and held up his phone tokens. ‘I need to go.’ The man on the phone said, ‘My name is Sinan. I live on Boulevard Raspail, come by sometime then you can see where Mari lived.’

I came out of the phone box but loitered outside.

So, you moved to Canada then, Mari. No, that’s wrong. Someone, a person, moved her to Canada. She was in Paris, in a city, in France, in a country, but she ran after a person; so just like me then, when I first went to Berlin, to Germany, to Besson, to the great man of the theatre. Besson left Berlin and said come with me, work with me in Paris and I left Berlin. So, Mari and I no longer had a country, but a person. The people we pursued were our countries.

And what would happen if Besson died today? Then the country would be gone, the city would be gone, Gare du Nord would no longer be your train station. Once you leave your own country, you never arrive in another. A few special people then become your country. Then the likes of us shouldn't answer the question that you hear so often, 'Where do you live; do you live in Germany; do you live in France?' with 'Yes, I live in France, yes, I live in Germany.' The correct answer would be: 'I live in Besson, I reside in Besson.' But you could never give this answer because no one would ever ask the right question: 'Do you live in Besson, do you reside in Besson?'

And what happens if there is no longer Besson? Where do I live then, where is my country?

The man in the silk shirt with a missing button came out of the phone box, spoke in French, said a couple of times, 'Occupé, occupé.' Perhaps he meant the number was busy and I could use the phone now. Then he smiled again.

I dwell in a smile.

Good, my country is his smile.

Merci, Monsieur.

He left; went in the direction Gaspard and Maurice had taken. In the phone box I practised my first French word *occupé* — *oküpe*; wrote it down, together with Mari's address in my notebook. Then I went out but lingered in front of the phone box. A woman came up and stood before me with a questioning look. 'Nümero oküpe,' I said. She went into the box, phoned someone, came out and said in passing, 'Madame!' I went in again and without dropping a token in the slot, picked up the receiver, leant against the glass and started talking to myself.

'Madamm doesn't know where she'll sleep tonight. Madamm has no money, Madamm has no country, but only people. Madamm doesn't need a residence permit for that, but when a policeman asks for her passport and looks at it, he will say, 'But Madamm, where is your residence permit? You are living in Europe illegally; you are here without papers; you must go back to your country. You have been living illegally in Europe for three years. You are only allowed to stay for three months on a tourist visa. Where have you lived for the last three years Madamm?' 'Berlin.' 'What did you do there?' 'Worked in the theatre.' 'And where is your residence permit?' 'I worked in East Berlin, the International Theatre Institute gave me papers for the time I was there, an art visa, an arts employee permit.' 'And where is this permit now?' 'They took it away from me at the border when I left.' 'Can you prove it?' 'I don't know.' 'Where are you staying in Paris?' 'I don't know? In the phone box?' 'Come with me!' 'No, I

have to stay here in the phone box.’ ‘Why, Madamm?’ ‘Well, because foreigners like to make phone calls, and when they talk to their countries they shout in the receiver. Istanbul is far far away.’ ‘You are from Istanbul, Madamm?’ ‘Yes, from Istanbul.’ ‘Madamm, when you had your revolution with Atatürk against your Sultan, did you behead the Sultan?’ ‘No, we didn’t behead him.’ ‘You didn’t even throw him in prison, Madamm?’ ‘No, not even in prison. They boarded a ship and left Istanbul.’ ‘This is good, Madamm. You did good there. We, the French, beheaded our kings and queens. We are traumatised, Madamm. Goodbye, Madamm.’

I think, I must’ve held the receiver too tightly; my wrist hurt, and my travel bag was tired — it hung askew from my shoulder. I opened the Paris phone book, looked for Charis and Efterpi’s address, found it: Rue de la Glacière, 13^e Arrondissement, Paris.

EFTERPI DE LA GLACIÈRE

I went into a tall new house on Rue de la Glacière. The Spanish concierge led me along a dark corridor to the garden. The garden was big and, on the left, next to each other, were four identical studio apartments. The thick glass-walls facing the garden were also doors and slid sideways. Through the glass you could see inside the rooms. The concierge stood before the third studio and said, ‘Voilà Madame.’

As I stood in front of Efterpi’s glass door, in the hope of peeking inside, at first I saw only my wavering reflection and I couldn’t see through it. I approached the shadow until my nose touched the glass and I could no longer detect the shadow, only then did I see the large high-ceilinged room. A big table and chairs stood at the front; there was a baguette on the table, breadcrumbs, a book — Georges Sadoul’s *Dictionnaire des films*, and a packet of cigarettes; behind the table at a right angle was a sofa, on the floor a pair of high-heeled green brogues; in the middle of the room were two coffee tables stacked with papers, books, and a typewriter. Behind them I could see a large bed covered with rugs and cushions, and beside it a fireplace. There was a flight of stairs was to the left and the right wall was entirely taken up by shelves, endless rows of books and records peeping from their places into the shadowy room toward an animated silence. Just as you could see on the baguette and crumbs the hands of the people who had eaten them, so you could see on the books the hands that had opened them, read them, closed them, then put them back and taken them up again, looked inside, used them, closed them again; they stood in their places, some further in, others further out, some a little crookedly, as if their voices murmured, leaving an ever-present echo in this room. The light from the garden crept across the stone floor of this large room. The pictures on the walls, the books, the chair legs, the tables danced in the growing light; beside the baguette and breadcrumbs, on the long table behind the glass door, the birch tree’s shadow fell. Its silhouette quivered on the table; the leaves rustled by the gentle wind outside. I gripped the birch tree, shook it — its silhouette quivered even faster.

Suddenly, a cat with bandy legs came down the steps, crossed the shadow on the floor, walked forwards a little, jumped onto a chair facing the garden, sat on the plump cushion from which a few cat hairs were dislodged into the air and looked in my direction. That was Badi. Efterpi had sent her photo to me in Istanbul.

Efterpi and I knew each other from Istanbul. That was in the late 60s, before the second military coup. My other friend, who studied film with Pasolini and Fellini in Italy, started a cinema movement back then in Istanbul. We used to publish a magazine like *Cahiers du cinéma* where we analysed films by Godard, Buñuel, Pasolini, Glauber Rocha, Brecht, Ousmane Sembène, Dziga Vertov, Jean-Marie Straub, Eisenstein. My friend wanted to shoot a film about an insurgent during the time of the Ottoman Empire called Blindensohn; the little money he had was only enough for the film materials, so he needed people who were happy to work for free on the film. He soon gathered a crew. It was composed of four Turkish Greeks, a Turkish Jew and six Turks — among them big theatre names. Efterpi and Dido were Istanbul Greeks. Efterpi was married to Dido's brother Charis, who was a professor of documentary cinematography at the university in Paris. Dido was the script girl. We needed someone who could create a blind-man mask for the film production, because the insurgent Blindensohn — the protagonist — had a father who was blinded with hot poker on the orders of the wicked feudal landowner. Efterpi had studied for months as a make-up artist in Paris before coming to Istanbul and she did a great job of creating the mask for the actor who played the blind man.

My friend and I lived in a forest. When Efterpi came to Istanbul we all went walking in the woods. Efterpi was so beautiful that even the sheep dogs, who barked viciously every time a stranger walked past our woodland house, forgot to bark. As our party strolled, Efterpi got lost somewhere in the woods. We shouted and searched for her. My friend laughed and said, 'Parisian women like to get lost so someone can come to their rescue. I liked that the Parisiennes fancied themselves being searched for. My friend had drawn, just like Eisenstein, all the scenes in the film. Scene by scene. On the first day everyone was happy, including the sun above us. We were shooting a scene with stables in it. The insurgent Blindensohn had a fabled horse. My job was camera assistant, and I had the best female role – Blindensohn's sweetheart. In the middle of the film my heroine was to be hung by her hair on a tree and killed. I had waist-length hair.

We first shot the scene with the arms dealers, arms dealers from Europe, who delivered weapons to the wicked feudal landowner so that he could kill Blindensohn. Then we filmed in the stables. A Gipsy had lent us his white horse, a gifted horse-actor which performed the role of Blindensohn's horse. My friend showed the drawing of this scene to the lighting technician. The light in the scene was supposed to illuminate only a strip on the back of the horse with everything else in darkness, but that was not possible. The lighting technician called on the best-known technician in Istanbul — an elderly gentleman with dark glasses. The horse

patiently waited in the stables. But the light that was supposed to illuminate only a long strip on his back was not to his liking either. A couple of hours went by. The light outside was slowly fading and the Gipsy said that he needed to get the horse back home. He and the horse left. The Jewish colleague, Jacob, gave the famous lighting technician a lift to town; my friend, Efterpi, Dido and Yorgo took the film material we had already shot and went to Yorgo's house in a taxi, forgetting all film cassettes in the taxi's boot. I went with the cameraman to his studio in Istanbul's red-light district to put away the Arriflex 35mm film camera. A few prostitutes greeted us and asked the cameraman what we had been filming today and the name of the film. He replied laughing, 'AT IŞIĞI — Horse light'

The film never materialised. The money ran out and soon after came the 1971 military coup; my friend's Greek partner Yorgo fled to Athens because he was a Marxist and was afraid of the Turkish military. Efterpi returned to Paris. On a quiet alleyway in Istanbul, she encountered a cat with bandy legs; took her to Paris and called her Badi — Bandy Legs.

I knocked on the glass, shouted, 'Efterpi, Efterpi!'; looked toward the stairs as if, just like the cat Badi, she too would suddenly be standing there. Nothing stirred.

In the glass, somewhere behind me, in front of a high garden wall, I saw the reflection of a bench. I walked between the flowers and the trees and sat down on the bench. From there I could see through the glass-walls of all four studios. I saw a cat in the studio next to Efterpi's. It stood on a high landing like a statue and like Badi was looking into the garden. The garden was quiet; only the noises of a typewriter could be heard in the distance. They came from an apartment window of the high-rise building that overlooked the garden.

I lay down on the bench; eyes closed; thought about the train corridor between Berlin and Paris; the café on Garde du Nord; Gaspard and Maurice; the phone box; the man with a missing shirt button; the garden bench. Eyes shut, I thought about the man's missing shirt button in the telephone box; the black receiver — somewhat soulless after so much use; the missing pages in the telephone directory I had used; blind Gaspard's yellow suede jacket with its high woollen collar.

Whilst I was lying on the bench, eyes shut, a bird flew back and forth above me, made a cheeping noise; settled on a tree or a bush and did another Cheep.

Cheep.

Cheep.

Cheep.

Cheep.

Between the Cheeps, I heard the mechanical noise of a heavy door opening: Efterpi was just pushing her glass-wall from right to left. The heavy wall squeaked as it slid on its rails. Efterpi walked inside the house, pushed the glass-wall, this time from the inside, from right to left and dropped her bag on the table. At that moment, she saw me sitting on the bench behind the trees, threw her arms in the air, jumped up and down behind the glass and yelled, but I couldn't hear her voice. Then she pushed again her glass-wall from left to right, the glass squeaked and before it was fully open, her cat Badi jumped from the chair and came to the door. As Efterpi and I embraced, Badi positioned herself between our feet. I put my travel bag on the floor. Immediately Badi lay on top of it. Efterpi said, 'Badi is claiming you.'

Without sitting down, I told Efterpi about Besson and that I would be working with him on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* for the Festival d'Avignon, and that I had to learn French. 'I'll help you,' said Efterpi.

On the wall behind Efterpi hung a cloth like those the old street photographers of Istanbul would hang as a background to photograph people in front of them. 'Istanbul Hatırası — Memories of Istanbul' was embroidered on the cloth.

'Did you get this in Istanbul?'

'Yes, I bought it from a street photographer. Zavallı adam — poor man, he wanted to sell me his tripod camera too. He said, "Polaroid arrived and killed my three-legged friend, hanım." He was wearing a yellow cotton jacket that was too small for him. I photographed him in front of his cloth, look.'

She showed me a black and white photo; the photographer's yellow cotton jacket was black on it. Efterpi said, 'I'll run and get a fresh baguette.' She pushed the glass-wall again; the glass slid on its steel rails. Badi went out first, then Efterpi. From the garden, Efterpi pushed the glass-wall again; the glass rolled and squeaked on the steel rails.

I stood still in the middle of the room with the black and white photograph of the Istanbul street photographer; instead of looking at his face, I stared at his jacket. It had three pockets. If you were to empty them, out would fall loneliness. Or perhaps a piece of faded paper on which would be written:

The road was lonely, animals and we too

We looked around — in disbelief

All around us, night¹.

The street photographer stood by a wall, holding the legs of his tripod in his left hand. The embroidered Memories of Istanbul cloth was still hanging behind him, next to it, someone had written three lines in chalk:

Hey, old Sunbird

Give me my memories

So I can recognize myself, maybe.²

I knew this wall in front of which Efterpi had photographed the street photographer. It was the wall of the British Consulate in Istanbul. Twenty-five years later al Qaeda suicide bombers would plough into it with a van, killing themselves; the British consul who spoke Turkish, loved Istanbul, and wanted to spend all his life there; the tea server and other people who worked in the consulate. The father of one of the victims would try to find a piece of his child among the glass fragments — searching, searching but only finding pieces of glass.

Badi scratched at the glass door from outside, wanting to get in. I pushed the glass door to the right, the rails squeaked, Badi came in, sat on my bag again. I pushed the glass door back to the left, it screeched. On one of the walls hung two enlarged photos. A woman and a man. These were Efterpi's parents. Efterpi had shown me the tiny pictures in Istanbul. Her mother and father were murdered in Thessaloniki during the Nazi occupation of Greece in the 40s. Efterpi's mother was a Sephardic Jew, her father Greek. Efterpi was two-years old when her father and her mother were killed only a day apart. Efterpi was then sent to Istanbul, to her fraternal aunt who was married to an Istanbul Greek. Efterpi grew up in Istanbul. Her aunt's husband kept books by Marx in his library. When one night in 1955 nationalist Turks smashed the shops, churches and graveyards of the Istanbul Greeks and Jews, Efterpi's aunt and uncle emigrated with her to Greece. Efterpi returned to Istanbul at 18; married an Istanbul Greek — Charis; then moved to Paris with him.

When we were in Istanbul, Efterpi told me that the only thing she had from her parents were the two small photos. Every year she took the two photos out of an envelope that her father had received in the 40s. Although she knew they were dead, she hoped or rather wanted

¹ Turgut Uyar, 'Güz Avlanıp Gidiyor' (translated from Turkish to German by Emine Sevgi Özdamar, translated from the German by Yana Ellis).

² Turgut Uyar, 'Ey yaşlı güneş kuşu' (translated from Turkish to German by Emine Sevgi Özdamar, translated from the German by Yana Ellis).

to discover her father and mother gradually ageing on these photos, and to think they are still alive, still alive.

We said back then, in Istanbul, that she should enlarge these two small photos and hang them on the wall where they could yellow, and she could at least see the photos age. In one of the photos was Efterpi's father — hands on hips; wearing a white shirt tucked into his trousers, standing on stony ground. His diagonally striped tie waving to the left in the wind. In the right corner of his mouth, a black cigar. His lower lip protruded a little to hold it in place. The photograph of Efterpi's mother was a passport photo. She was looking ahead, mouth closed, eyes fixed on the photographer, who had probably just lifted the black cloth to duck under and take the shot. He would come out straight away and adjust the lens cap, exposing the gelatine plate with a rhythmic, elegant movement.

Efterpi told me, back then in Istanbul, that she didn't want children, because if something were to happen to her, she didn't want her child to grow up motherless and suffer as she had.