

The Story of a City

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Call me Leyla. My name is not Leyla, but it's safer this way. If I tell you my name, you might recognize me, and if you do, my story will become a fairytale. You won't believe me anymore, and I will have no choice but to leave this city. I will become my old self again--that which I erased and forgot in order to write a new story.

Names are strange things. We do not choose them, but we are made to bear them our entire life. When I was little, this thought always bothered me. I felt sentenced and also somewhat anticipated, as if my story had already been written. This is why I renounced my name at the first opportunity I got, if only very briefly, and even viewed it as an act of liberation from my parental yoke. And as I already said, it was safer this way.

Leyla is an accessible name if you live in the East or the West, depending on where you are from. It is also believable in my case, since my eyes are black as night, so you can't tell my lie from my eyes. The story I am going to tell is real to the extent that this city is real. If it turns out one day that it never existed or that it will no longer exist, let this be a testament to this city's one-time existence. The testimony of a testifier with a false name who might not have any influence whatsoever on the decree of fate, but will at least prove that in someone's memory, or as skeptics would say, imagination, this city nonetheless did once exist.

I came to this city, or more precisely, I returned to this city, to relive and to be reborn. To see what I remembered but had never lived. I returned to understand what it means to have two names and two identities--to live two lives. To be Anush by night and Leyla by day. What it means to live inside history, or more precisely, inside its perturbing abyss, in a city of memories where not remembering is the only way to live. I returned, because I didn't have a choice. I had stopped believing in the existence of this city. To believe, I had to see, and to live, I had to believe.

Up to my departure, I got acquainted with Nav, a young Turk who was born in that city and lived there. He was studying in the history department at a local university. He knew a few words of Armenian, which is probably why he attracted me. In those days, I was researching the history of translation. It was an interesting coincidence, almost predetermined: Nav was interested in history and the translation of history, and I was interested in translation and the history of translation. Finding a common language wasn't hard, even though I tried to learn his language to understand him better. That bold step was founded on one of my grandmother's wisdoms. She would say that if you're Armenian, learning Turkish is not difficult, because we have many names in common. All words were names to my grandmother. I abandoned the idea of learning Turkish when I understood that we understood each other well without it. English was good enough. Besides, it was a foreign language to both of us. And it was in this language that we were to write our story and memory. It was as if this language were a mediator. I'm sure you will agree that interaction in this way was less restricted. Words are lighter in a foreign language. It's as if they are weightless.

Nav invited me to come over in the spring, saying that there are many things to see in his city and that spring was the most convenient season. I already knew that--I had already been told. I accepted Nav's proposal. To me, my acquaintance with him, the strangeness of his name, and finally all the things that had happened between us and more, but mainly history and translation, were signs of

providence and not an ironic chain of coincidences. Not accepting was not an option. I also knew that I didn't have a choice. It was necessary to return and to see it as Anush. It was also necessary to come face to face with it as Leyla.

I took off in April. Nav came to pick me up at the airport. Airports are also strange places. They simultaneously emit coldness and warmth. Perhaps these are sighs and exclamations of departures and arrivals. There is a kind of promise of freedom inside the walls of airports. And it's as if the wind is there to make that promise more convincing. After indulging in that apparent enjoyment of freedom for a few seconds, I walked up to Nav with unsure steps. Usually people embrace each other at airports, because those who come to pick you up or see you off are generally people you know. There are, of course, people who are neither picked up nor seen off, just like, for instance, wanderers. I was not a wanderer, however, and I had never met Nav before. This was more like the return of a landlord who had rented out his home for years on end. It was the return to a home where I could have been born.

Nav greeted me and shook my hand. He got confused for a moment, then quickly dispelled the confusion with a joke. We laughed. Despite the cold wind, that moment was warm. I told Nav to call me Leyla here. He silently nodded. We truly did understand each other. I had no time to waste time. We had to hurry. I had to see the island before the sun set--that island whose story my grandmother had told me countless times. I got on the boat with Nav, and we made our way to the island. Nav did not know about the legend of its name. That became our main topic of conversation as well as the first breach of our agreement to talk only of translation.

When I finished the story behind the name of the island, Nav, as if suddenly remembering our agreement, asked:

“Why do you translate, An... Leyla? Is it because you can't write your own?”

“I translate to lose and recreate,” I said to him. “It feels closer to me. Besides, I don't like being in the center of attention. Translators are ghosts, or the ghosts of writers. Not only that, there is always the danger of becoming forgotten. I translate those stories that are in danger of becoming forgotten. That's my way of fighting against humanity's bad memory. By translating, I secure the continuation of this book, of that story. Also, translation allows you to reveal a whole set of new things about your own language. For instance, 'story' and 'history' in English are translated into one word in Armenian.”

He was very surprised.

“You mean that for you they are the same?”

“I don't know. But it says a lot about the speakers of that language. In Armenian you can tell a story about history or tell the history of the creation of that story. Maybe our history has been told more than it has been written. There are things that you can't tell in writing. Stories are attempts to tell that history. Our stories are about our history. Maybe that's why story and history are the same to us.”

“And what are stories to you?”

So it turns out that it is indeed impossible to talk about translation without history or the other way around. Of course I knew this already, but having it proved once more is never redundant for doubters.

“To me, they are ways to prevent silence,” I replied, noticing for the first time that Nav’s eyes were blue like the lake. “My grandmother was the one who used to tell me stories. She would tell me one thing and think of something else. And then she would fall silent. I would beg her to continue or to tell it again, because that silence felt heavy. It was as if that silence were hiding another story inside of it. By telling a story it was as if she denied or at least tried to deny the untellability of the other story, while by being silent she accepted it. In my life, stories have been ways to escape silence. And what are they to you?”

For a moment, Nav was stumped, as if he did not expect a question in return. It was as if he were being asked this question for the first time. And maybe it was. But also, when we are the ones asking questions, they seem much easier than when we are asked those same questions. A question asked in another voice sounds new to our ears and somehow weightier from the answer that was given just moments ago.

“I was hardly told any stories. I rather read many stories. Not everyone can tell stories. First of all, you need a good memory for it, and then you have to have a gift for enchanting people so that they believe your story. I think of stories as challenges to time. We’re almost at the island,” Nav said, suddenly roused by the coldness of the sparge that had freed itself from the shackles of the waves.

“Let me add something else about translation. You know your name in Armenian means something? In Armenian it’s a word and it means ‘boat’” I told Nav. “It means that to me, in Armenian, it sounds like ‘Boat is on a boat.’ If I said that I went to the island with Nav, my friends would think I’m joking. But it would make for a nice title: Boat on an island. I suppose it’s time to write a new story.”

“So Armenians take boats up islands,” he joked.

I didn’t tell him that Armenians have tried to carry a boat up a mountain. He wouldn’t believe that story, no matter how much I tried to enchant him.

We set foot on the island. As we approached the church, I slowed down for a moment. The thousand-year-old church was a stone witness to history. It was history in and of itself, and if you came face to face with it, it was impossible to walk past it indifferently, it was impossible to numb the pain of loss. Even the air inside the church was history. Here, silence was a different kind of silence. You cannot prevent this silence with any story. Silence here speaks, compelling you to fall silent.

It was here that I finally heard the story my grandmother never told me; the story of her silence. Perhaps there really are stories that cannot be told, or they can only be heard by being silent and listening to the silence of the stones. While I was lost in these thoughts, Nav followed me without saying a word. I knew what question tormented him, but the time to ask it had not come yet. Nav was very well aware of this.

We left the island when the sun was already setting. Nav accompanied me to my hotel. I was to leave the next day.

“Out of the twenty-five springs of my life, this was the most beautiful one,” I told Nav.

He smiled, wished me good night, and left. He came to get me in the morning, and together we

went to the airport. The time for departure was close.

“Leyla,” he said, “when you leave, I won’t believe that any of this ever happened.”

“Tell someone this story,” I told him, “tell it and you’ll begin to believe it. Stories are also memories or repositories of memories.”

We embraced as people usually do at airports.

We embraced, because this is how you say goodbye to someone with whom, if only for a very brief moment, you managed to write a story.

My journey lasted a day. Please accept this as a historical fact. The reality, however, is that I never returned from that city. I became Leyla and lived there. I stayed so that I could tell others this story. If I had to leave again this time, telling it would once again become impossible.

Translated by Nairi Hakhverdi, 2016