

The Twelfth
Acolyte Reader

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Selem

by Bob Henderson

Almost ten years ago I made my first visit to Istanbul.

I've been back many times since then and never been disappointed.

The City (as the Greeks refer to it) has changed somewhat in recent times, particularly in regard to size: the drought of 1990 caused a massive influx from the surrounding countryside.

Even so, Istanbul remains Istanbul, a city of unique charm, ineffably Eastern and elusive.

For me, nothing could ever erase the memory of our initial meeting.

Istanbul...

The very word was alien: no name at all, for Constantinople, which, according to general report, was fairly well accounted for back in 1453.

Such conquests do not impress the Greek mind overmuch. I had been willingly absorbing Greek attitudes since 1975, at least.

Unready for Istanbul, I was, however, very much ready for travel and change.

At the end of a long, lucrative contract, dubbing a video series. Experiencing the usual let-down.

This down was shaded darker by the end of a love affair which had never really begun: pretty Marios, barely 14, after a summer of

separation and some unexpected changes in both of us, all too quickly agreed to stop. Provoking the sadness of failure.

In short, I was alone. Loveless. Bored. Adrift.

I couldn't stand it. Reacting to the casual remarks of some foreign neighbors, I decided to go to Istanbul.

Worried by strikes in Olympic Airlines, and terrified by the thought of being stranded in Turkey, I booked my seat with the Turkish competitor.

From office to check-in, the staff were unfailingly helpful, displaying a quiet courtesy which continued in flight.

The journey of less than an hour barely allowed time for formalities, let alone eating and shopping. But it was too early to be hungry, even if you weren't excited and nervous.

Beside me sat a handsome, smartly dressed young Turk, who murmured to me sociably in English. I was in such a dizzy dream, what with an early Spring, and the approaching strangeness, that I could hardly pay attention. My eyes ever drawn to the window and the brightening sun.

We approached Istanbul, however, in cloud; and descended slowly, after they throttled back the engines, into a thick, white mist.

The mist lay also upon the ground as we emerged, clanking down the stairway, but now seemed enchanting. It even smelled good, somehow fresh and invigorating, as in the Scottish Highlands.

It did not hide the rather large number of armed soldiers on the tarmac and beyond. But passport control was quick and customs waived. I changed \$100 into an astounding wad of Turkish Lira; and a taxi was waiting outside.

My driver was sociable, though restrained by lack of English. As we sped through mist now explained by the surrounding waters of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara and the Golden Horn – Istanbul

built on seven hills, like Rome – he tried in broken phrases to discourage me from visiting Saint Sophia, which I had mentioned to help him find my less than famous hotel, and to rejoice instead in the glories of the Blue Mosque. I assured him that I would.

The hotel, in Old Stamboul, Europe, was indeed small and unimposing. My arrival in a taxi, with Vuitton luggage – actually 'borrowed' from a friend who had parked it in my flat – caused some embarrassment. The young desk clerk was unnervingly obsequious. When I paid for four days in advance, I saw that I could have afforded to stay somewhere much smarter. (I'd used some student guide book.)

But the place was clean and light and my simple bare room proved to be large; clean sheets daily, showers adjacent. There was not a sound to be heard on my floor. Peace. I was content.

The room was flooded with soft sunlight, filtered by the fog. Which made outside the single window a gentle curtain.

I stripped, stretched out on the narrow bed, relaxed; and thought of my good fortune.

There I was in Istanbul, city of history and fable, with days of delicious time free to discover. I closed my eyes, dozed, dreamed.

Next door to the hotel was the famous Pudding Shop, where the food was good and cheap and conversation lively. From waiters and from young back packers I learned my advantage in staying in the Old Town, very close to St. Sophia, the Blue Mosque, Topkapi, the University and many other landmarks.

Venturing forth, I headed automatically for St. Sophia, conditioned by decades of studies; and whispers.

The ancient cathedral of Orthodoxy, whose surrounding Ottoman minarets seem only to protect it. The grand Christian statement,

pride or folly of Justinian, remains in place; drawing you in. To see what can possibly survive within.

On the piazza, I was confronted by a boy selling postcards. His approach was so tentative and hopeless that I bought several cards; apparently overpaid; and didn't look at them for days after.

Inside the gate, midst leafy, shaded surrounds, there were not many tourists about, on this misty March morning.

There was a group of uniformed schoolboys, groomed and disciplined; apparently from some private school, on an excursion. About thirty or forty boys in their early teens; a teacher walking fore and aft; as they proceeded two by two towards the bronze door.

I allowed them to pass, thinking to avoid the noise and confusion; though they were quiet enough.

Waiting patiently, I am suddenly greeted by one of these kids, in English:

“Good morning! How are you?” he pipes. Smiling brightly. With a chirpy challenge to his manner.

I return his greeting and he turns back to his companions, who move inside for instruction.

After a short delay, I go inside, too. Passing though cold, damp shadows into – miracles!

St. Sophia. I am soon lost in its wonders, moving from one to another slowly, grateful, like someone in a dream, fearing to wake. The architectural grandeur and the sensation of vast interior space combine to make me giddy.

The 'museum' is virtually empty: just me and those schoolboys; whose instructor speaks, sometimes at length, in a respectful whisper. It is easy to keep myself apart from them.

And yet, curiously, each time I pause to gaze, absorbed, upon one of the magnificent mosaics, I find, on turning away, that the boy who

greeted me outside is standing nearby. Not close beside me but near enough to observe my response to the Miracles. And to give brief signs of understanding, with flickering changes in his eyes; or brows; a subtle movement of his head.

Sometimes I smile; at others I am too dazzled by ancient beauties to bother.

The climax to this game of hide and seek comes after I have climbed to the high gallery within the apse, in order to look more closely at the mosaic of the Madonna and Child, in the half-dome: the one that strikes your eye when first you enter the nave. I achieve my goal with some uncomfortable distortions.

Just then, half hanging like some aging orangutan, mouth open in awe, I spot the Boy again.

Who has also climbed and is leaning adroitly from the opposite balcony. Gazing fixedly not at the Madonna nor the Child. But at me.

I have no chance to reflect on his taste.

Hullo! He whispers sibilantly across the void. And promptly disappears. Possibly called to order by one of his guardians.

Soon I find myself alone in St. Sophia. Lingered in the oddly buzzing silence. Reluctant to leave, I find a dark corner, its stony surfaces rubbed smooth by time; in a transept close to the Emperor's Door. Here I slide to the floor and fold my legs beneath me; leaning against the ancient marble; and come to rest.

Staring up into the dome.

I don't know exactly how long I remain there. It is something like a death.

A tiny sound in the far distance finally causes me to lower my eyes and look in front of me.

Where I discover two dark oriental eyes very close to mine.

It is that Boy. Squatting at my feet. Our knees all but touching. Somewhere deep within himself he is smiling, his eyes brimming with messages, as yet unclear.

We gaze perforce into each other's eyes, silent both.

The confrontation seems to go on for hours.

At length, he moves one hand in his lap, turning two small brown fingers towards his heart. And utters:

"Selem."

A whisper which becomes a hum, reverberating, amplified in the empty nave.

"Selem," he repeats several times, at intervals. "Selem."

The ancient church seems to be filled with benevolent snakes.

"Selem..."

Raising a numbed hand to point at my own heart, I say,

"David." It seems too loud. And the echoes are irksome.

A long silence follows. Our knees almost touching.

"David," I manage to repeat.

A spark leaps in his eyes. The smile reaches his lips.

"David," he responds, slowly and clearly.

"Selem," I answer, more confident.

"David," he says, now radiant.

And, like idiots, we go on repeating our names like this. Vowels and consonants drifting up into the dome. Multiple echoes.

Which finally cease, long after my eyes have closed. The silence must have opened them. When I look in front of me, Selem has gone.

Of course, I sigh, stirring my limbs at the arrival of a museum guard, preparing to close up. Called away back to his school group.

Back to reality, I mutter, rising and stretching. Though barely convincing myself. Back to my hotel, anyway, through the lingering fog, ready to sleep again; and dream.

Clutching the leaflet I found on the floor of St. Sophia as I was emerging. It was printed in Turkish, but there were a few words in English, naming his school, under a small photograph; and the church-museum. Some kind of student pass, I suppose.

This I slip into my pocket and promptly forget, along with the boy.

As I re-enter the warm, exciting present of the Old City.

A second visit to the Pudding Shop for an evening snack leads to a lively session with some young Turks, and many beers. Plainly dressed clerks, they want nothing from me but my company and some English conversation, as they are studying the language; and news of the outside world. The local papers are strictly censored and few in number. Football papers are the most commonly seen – subtle snub to the alternative. Those who can afford and understand it buy the "Herald Tribune" in tourist areas, but never flaunt it.

This friendly group are as much interested in Athens, Greece as they are in Sydney, Australia; or any other town I have visited. They seem to know quite a bit about Greek history, art and literature. Some of them dream of a Greek holiday.

They ask politely to try my cigarettes which are Greek not English but still very welcome. Between 'shouts', I dash next door to fetch the cartons I bought at the duty-free and distribute the packets to the company. They also envy my cheap plastic lighter, which I leave on the table, wishing I had a hundred. Poison and trash making bridges of communication. They are not beggars, these guys, and suffer no loss of dignity.

Staggering slightly as I collect my key from the hotel clerk, I chance to drop on the desk the leaflet I found in St. Sophia. The clerk responds with respect and enthusiasm:

"Ah! The Lawrence College! Very fine. Very exclusive. You have come to teach there, perhaps?"

I ignore the question and stumble into the lift.

Lying once more on my narrow bed, letting the night mist snake in through the open window, I try to remember the boy in the Church. But find I can't. He is past and gone. My head is filled with more recent acquaintances. I sleep long and deeply. I see no dreams.

Next morning, I briefly muse upon my experience in St. Sophia. And come to dismiss it in terms of jet-lag and culture gap, congratulating myself that I have done nothing hasty. Like touching a Turkish boy. A narrow escape, from dire punishments.

Nevertheless, fortified by breakfast, I find the sight of St. Sophia next door irresistible. I have to go back. See those mosaics again.

However, at the desk I am forestalled by the clerk, who presses gently upon me various words and pamphlets, concerning the Famous School. It seems it is something of a tourist attraction, housed in a former castle with extensive grounds and gardens.

So I delay my return to St. Sophia and find an outside cafe, close to the waters of the Marmara, where I sip delicious rose-colored tea served in small goblets like liqueur glasses. Meanwhile, I read the stuff the hotel clerk gave me. Which reminds me of advertisements in Greek newspapers, touting pseudo-English colleges. Whether out of boredom or curiosity, I leave the cafe, hail a taxi and visit the Lawrence School.

Taxis are one of the few expensive things in Istanbul and the school is quite distant – about half way up the Bosphorus, towards the Black Sea. I could easily have taken a ferry. (Live and learn.)

The grounds are open to the public so I wander about the manicured lawns admiring the gardens; then sit and dream in the shade of a venerable fig tree. The school building – more of a manor house than a castle, I thought – stands some hundreds of meters higher up the bank. Its windows must command stunning views of

the Straits. But there is still some mist about, and I can see the water only in patches. Nevertheless, it is a delightful setting, verdant and tranquil, half England, half Germany. After Old Stamboul, this island of privilege is like another planet.

I am briskly aroused from contemplation, by whistles; it is time for tourists to vacate the precincts.

Cars are beginning to draw up outside the iron gates, many of them chauffeured.

Students appear, straggling towards their family chariots. Such pretty young boys! I wonder why they are so quiet. Is it the English or the Germans?

They stream past me, polite and enigmatic – which I think is a fair description of the Turkey I have so far experienced.

"Hullo!" I hear beside me. "David," he adds softly.

And there are those eyes again.

"Hullo, Selem." I realize at once that I have actually come here to find him.

We do a repeat of that close-up in St. Sophia.

Until we laugh. And, relaxing, look at each other. We are glad to do this again.

What next? I don't know.

But Selem does.

He takes my hand, squeezes it quickly, and leads me to a limo, chauffeur waiting at attention.

Then I am in the back seat with Selem; which is almost as large as my hotel room and much more comfortable. Darkened windows and the scent of fresh flowers.

The chauffeur gets in the front and drives away; shortly to stop again in a nearby village where he parks and leaves us on foot.

At this lower altitude, close to the embankment, the sun has disappeared and the mist thickens as afternoon progresses.

Inside the car it is warm and shadowy. The air is loaded with electricity. Voices echo in my head.

The first soft touch of his knee against mine is like a hammer blow.

Selem explains that the chauffeur has gone to collect the mail and do some shopping. He will be some time returning – after he meets his cronies at the local cafe. He and Selem have an agreement about this. There is a suggestion in Selem's voice that they have an agreement about other things as well. I may be mistaken, lost and enchanted as I am. Perhaps it is a fantasy of his. The chauffeur is certainly handsome and well built.

And Selem is exquisite.

I understand, now, why I was unable to remember him clearly after our first meeting; he is unlike any boy I have met before.

I am used to Greek boys. Selem could never be mistaken for a Greek boy.

His darkness is different; his hair a new shade, texture and smell; his light brown eyes are opaque and still: they reveal no spark of cunning, only mystery and dreams. His nose is short and rounded. His lips more idly sensual than the lips I am used to kissing – those defined, Hellenic lips expressive of the mind. Selem's lips, salmon-cinnamon in color, tempting the tongue, have no connection with thought. They reflect appetite and gratification.

He is short, for a ten-year-old, and almost shapeless, in his loose-fitting clothes. Thick-waisted but not fat, his body promises soft skin and silky curves. Strength and energy are there too – but none of your tight pectorals and narrow hips.

Comparisons aside, Selem is a criminally beautiful boy.

As for sex appeal, he is dynamite.

Long before he touches me, I feel the discomfort of a monstrous erection.

Selem is immediately aware of my arousal.

I wonder when the chauffeur will return...

Small, hot hands, briefly clinging like some shy night creature, inflame my forearm, my bicep, my shoulder, my neck...

It is a slow, magical seduction...

I remember his wet lips kissing my cheek; then lingering at my throat.

I remember him sucking my ears.

His fingers sliding into my groin; finding and gripping my sex.

He unzips me and my organ springs out grossly, swelling further in the humid dimness.

I am passive, almost paralyzed. All that is happening is unexpected and delicious. Especially exciting the touch of Selem's fingers on my cock, exploring with interest from crown to pubes; murmuring compliments and hissing little jokes.

I chuckle and clear my throat, anxious lest I come; and make an awkward mess.

Selem chuckles in turn, and asks to see my balls.

Relying on blackened windows and thickening mist, I loosen my belt, pull down the front of my slip and drop my hot, grateful nuts into his waiting palm. The reception is both soothing and stimulating. He's done this before, I think.

"Have you done this before, Selem?"

He is slow to answer, absorbed in experiment.

"These make the juice that you blow, don't they?"

"Well – yes," I groan, unable to give further instruction at this point.

"I don't blow anything when I come. I have balls. But they are not ready. Maybe next year; or the year after that. This year, I had my first climax. Just a few weeks ago. That was very nice."

His hand closes about my stem, squeezing. Then he uses only his thumb and forefinger to grip me in a tight, suggestive ring.

"I always come now, when I do it," he adds with satisfaction. "But not like a man."

"Have you ever seen a man come?" I venture. Fighting the fire in his fist.

"Oh yes," he admits, dismissively.

Selem produces a large white handkerchief. Unhurried, he unfolds it and spreads it over my belly, carefully covering my clothes.

He proceeds to rub and pull my penis towards Paradise.

When I am almost ready to shoot, he instinctively flips the top of the handkerchief over my bulging crown, just enough to catch a long ejaculation.

I lie back, grateful, and close my eyes.

When I open them again, Selem is busy with his own cock; short and stiff.

Stirred by his desire, I think to suck him off. (The least I can do.)

But he seems to have forgotten me.

His erection is getting bigger and he obviously loves it.

He eases his school trousers open and begins in earnest.

It is lovely to watch. His patience, persistence. His total concentration.

He spits on his hand and spreads the spittle on his crown. He licks his forefinger and talks to the little hole. He holds his balls and cries softly to Allah.

Finally, he stretches out his short legs, shuddering, and comes. No juice, as he said, but... That was an orgasm.

Selem readjusts his clothes.

He looks at me.

I see no shame, nor regret. But soon, a grin. Selem is satisfied, content; and untroubled.

When the chauffeur returns, we are ship-shape and ready.

For my first visit to the family mansion, which proves to be a sprawling villa of timber and brick a few kilometers north of the school, in a similarly elevated position.

Selem leaves me in a shaded salon with rich rugs on a polished stone floor; orange walls and green drapes.

I sink into a very soft, low, green and orange canapé; adjust my eyes to the semi-darkness; make out several beautiful ceramic murals with Arabic texts: gold and silver on gleaming white. Hearing nothing but the gentle sound of water, somewhere outside in the garden.

I wait, unaware of time. Until stirred by the presence of a man in his early forties, whom I take to be a servant, so discreet his entrance and humble his manner, as he waits to gain my attention.

Only, he is a little too well dressed to be a servant; surely that suit comes straight from Savile Row? Those shoes must be hand made, Florentine. The subtle tang of his cologne, when it reaches me, does not suggest the supermarket.

He is already speaking to me softly, before we look at each other; as if he feels unworthy to confront me.

I wake up, listen, and understand: this is in fact Selem's father, introducing himself, with a name too long and complicated for me to reproduce.

He speaks in beautiful, effortless English, with an accent which stirs distant memories.

Belatedly, I rise and straighten myself, all too aware of my crumpled jeans and stained sneakers. (Is there a hint of sperm? I trust my duty-free Givenchy to cover me.)

"David Kennedy," I pronounce, taking his outstretched hand. He favors a weak, 'English' handshake.

"I know," he purrs. "An English teacher. You are welcome."

I have not said, even to Selem, that I am an English teacher.

"I myself have studied in England," he says. "I love England."

He declared this in such a distinctive drawl that I am moved to ask,

"Tell me, were you at Harrow?"

"Yes, yes, I was!" he gladly confirms. Becoming more handsome in his joy. "Were you?"

Almost certainly, he knows I wasn't, having taken my measure. But it is very polite.

"Not me. But your accent is unmistakable. I have friends."

He is delighted. But still has two feet on Turkish ground.

"Well, you know," he grins, with a disarming gesture, "Harrow was a long time ago."

"Not very long, surely?" I venture.

He bows in response to the compliment.

"Bit of a lark," he tries out, as a topper, visibly doubtful of the currency of his slang. "But, as I look at you, David – may I? (He may.) – I believe that you are the answer to one of my more earnest prayers."

"Oh? How could that be?"

Smiling enigmatically, he lights up a cheroot. I am brave enough to decline.

"It is for Selem," he explains, after a long exhalation of smoke.

He pronounces his son's name with such a depth of feeling that I am instantly reminded of our meeting in St. Sophia; the echoes.

I should be unnerved by now – but that his manner remains gently charming.

"I have so long wished to give my boy the male companion that I know he needs: a man who knows himself. Who knows England. And understands boys. I've considered one or two chaps before, but somehow – they weren't quite – and Selem was not enthusiastic. David, you could teach him so much, you see."

I demur, while privately acknowledging a partial truth.

I feel that I must stop him before he says more. And events overtake me.

"You should know," I say firmly, "that I am not English. Not even British. I am Australian. I have lived and studied in England. But all my blood is Celtic."

I don't know what presses me to declare all this in such a forceful manner. But the man is far from displeased.

"Ah, yes, the Celts!" he exclaims, unruffled; remembering some past experience, or instruction. "I know about the Celts!" He walks about for a minute or two and concludes, "My son has chosen well. I shall remember this in my prayers. I am glad that you are Australian." He doesn't explain this, but accompanies the words with a warm, emphatic smile. Then his tone becomes brisker. "David, you have taught English to foreign boys before, haven't you?" He demands this much reassurance. And continues to question me.

I realize that I am being interviewed for a post.

Selem's father manages to extract from me a verbal c.v. And after, offers me the job. Which is to be Selem's private tutor; and companion, with total freedom. As he puts it. I can live at the home,

or elsewhere, if I prefer – the latter would be superior to my current hotel, I understand.

I say little, not having come to Istanbul in search of work. My lack of response prompts him to offer me more money, to be paid in English pounds or American dollars; monthly, weekly, a year in advance? Fringe benefits, like a car or motor-bike, a lot of free time, paid travel, and so on.

Here, in short, is the prospect of a total change of life: a new country, a new culture, a new challenge. I am ready for something such. Though still feel wary. I am not really sure what is going on. Nor what it means to me.

I do not accept the offer. Nor do I reject it. I am well aware of its advantages. Expressing grateful appreciation, I ask for a little time to consider. This is granted. The man is sure I'll accept.

The chauffeur drives me back to my hotel, which already feels like home, the desk clerk smiling welcome.

Papa's final, half-whispered words were: "Selem wants you so much, David. He wants you."

And I want Selem, of course. But we are not talking about the same thing. Are we?

That afternoon, I feel restless, and do some touring: back to Asia, to Taksim Square, impressive, pleasant, its leafy shade and comfy cafes a bit like Paris on the cheap; service even more splendid and discreet. Finally I am alienated by noisy tourists, and feeble imitations.

Glad to return to Old Stamboul, where I feel more at home; and visit the zoo; while beginning to consider the Proposal.

The advantages have already been made clear. To these I add the chance to develop a close relationship with Selem: a prospect made attractive not simply by our brief sexual skirmish but rather the

rapport that already exists between us. And the joy I instantly feel, flooding my being, every time I recall his name.

There is the promise of security – which has lately become a stranger.

New friends, when most of my old ones have left Greece.

And the adventure of learning a new culture. Which already attracts me. I have yet to visit the Blue Mosque, Topkapi and other Sights. But everything and everyone I have met as yet in Turkey is warm and positive – surely this is a sign?

The caged birds chatter and shrill as I dawdle down the leaf-caked, muddy lanes. Some of the monkeys are more confronting, sensing my dilemma, perhaps. But unhelpful, when I speak to them.

"Get out of Greece!" a languid lizard seems to hiss.

The snakes are more beautiful. They do not enlighten me, exactly; but change my temperature.

I find a place to coil up in the sun, and think again.

Negatives come rushing in: I am not a Muslim! I know nothing of this religion, nor culture.

I have long enjoyed offering services, responding to various demands, cashing in on my small dowry of talents; surviving. Servant to one master I have never been.

Overreacting, I begin to fear for my freedom. Though I am not opposed to the employment offered.

The baboons become noisy. I have to move away; and leave the zoo.

That night, I dream about Greece. By morning, I have all but forgotten Selem and his father's offer.

While soaping off delusions in the shower, I am summoned to the desk, to take an 'important call'. Scarcely covered by a hotel towel, I trot downstairs to pick up the phone.

And hear again the voice of Selem's father.

Our conversation is brief, and I am passed on to his secretary, who is even more polite, if not servile. He informs me that my ferry trip up the Bosphorus has been arranged. A car will call for me in one hour.

The chauffeured limo arrives dead on time. Waiting in the back seat I find Selem. Wearing a mischievous grin. He is more enticing than ever.

Ignoring the driver, we fall into a hungry embrace. Kiss each other a thousand times.

Relief! Truth.

But is it?

Withdrawing into my corner, while still holding fast to his hand, I begin to frame a conversation.

Sensible David on duty.

No chance to begin. Selem pours forth a tearful account of being beaten by his father; for failing to secure me as his tutor.

I cannot believe this, of course. But witness his passion, and understand his wish.

Perhaps I should think again.

I have opportunity enough, that day, to reflect. Decide. And change my mind a thousand times.

The chauffeur drives us down to the terminal, gives me the tickets and promises to be there on our return.

Selem and I clamber aboard the boat rocking and slewing impatiently at its mooring; almost empty, in preseason March. For two hours or so we sprawl in luxurious privacy in a corner of windows, while Selem describes his life in Istanbul. We drink several rose-colored teas, nibble at honey wafers, and gaze through the foggy glass, lulled by the steady motion of the ferry.

We are in love; and beginning to know it.

Occasionally, Selem points out some castle, or other landmark. With schoolboy boredom. More often than not, the attraction in question is barely visible beyond the mist. Pressed, he describes it, flying into elaborate fantasies.

After a few stops, we reach the end of the line, close to the Black Sea. Shooed off the vessel, which will rest there until mid-afternoon.

We find ourselves in a village whose name I forget, a place unlike any other I have ever visited: quiet, damp, leafy, green, tranquil; undisturbed by the outside world – let alone a few visitors.

We wander through narrow, muddy streets; piss together in a public urinal. Where a local briefly appears demanding coin. Which he then refuses. He is the first of many who make us feel like a blessed couple. Nobody can resist us.

We choose postcards and souvenirs, which we are not allowed to pay for. We sit for hours in a restaurant, staring at grilled fish and succulent salads; having ordered nothing. We are received as lovers. Everyone smiles and rejoices in our beauty. They offer special treats, explaining to Selem in Turkish.

Like me, he is strangely without appetite. A boy. Made unnatural by love. We agree to make a good show of it.

His eyes are ever on me, inform me. Of love. And jokes he is saving up.

I am not allowed to pay for the meal.

We walk and breathe in charmed, midday silence, holding hands. Follow stony paths up into the long green grass of the foothills. Where we hear nothing, except when surprising a chicken or cow. They seem to add their blessing. Soon we fall down into the grass together, sheltered and warm. A goat guards us; and comments from time to time.

As we wrestle and play. Slapping, grabbing and squeezing each other as we roll about, laughing.

Coming to rest, breathless, on a thatch of dried leaves and grass, we are aware of our erections, the arousal stirred by our hours together.

Selem reaches languidly across my thigh, as if he'd done it a thousand times before. My cock springs up as if recognising his hand. He bares me, makes me comfortable and strokes me to a fiery passion in seconds. I unbutton him and reveal his own stiffie. Before I manage to hold it, he rolls aside in play and bares his buttocks, giggling.

A dazzling sight!

I slap his ass lightly and let my hand linger. Stroking and squeezing. Two lovely buns. Trailing a tentative finger between.

Still giggling, he is on his back again.

"Do you like my bottom, David?" he gurgles. Hardly needing an answer.

We masturbate each other at leisure; trying out various techniques. I come first. Selem shouts and laughs. I think to suck him off, but he wants my fist. A fingertip on his anus.

Dear Selem, the Prophet knows how many times we came, in the long grass, that delirious day.

After, we sleep, cuddling into each other; at peace.

Awakened by the blasts of the ferry's horn, we rip ourselves apart, run down to the wharf and re-board at the last minute.

The trip back to Istanbul is a dream I might have invented.

A cold, dark afternoon; the mist so thick and heavy on the Bosphorus as to penetrate the boat itself. Slinking into open windows. But we are warm enough. Finding the coziest corner, we

hug and doze. Glasses of hot, sweet tea appear at our side at least twice.

The chauffeur is waiting, as promised. And whisks Selem away, after delivering me to my hotel.

Selem's last words to me, especially bright and urgent,

"David, I must show you Topkapi. We must go there together. You will see the jewels of Islam!"

Next morning I wake up slowly, aware of aching limbs; as if I have run miles uphill. Can't be a hangover. I guess I had too much sex yesterday; for a man my age.

At first I think the walls have been re-painted; but it is only a change in the light. I go to the window to find Old Stamboul looking uncannily different: the mist has lifted! A strong wind from the south has blown it away.

I am energized by the change and set out early, aiming to revisit St. Sophia and after discover the Blue Mosque.

The piazza which stretches between them like a cultural chasm has changed overnight. Along with blinding sunshine, there is a crowd of foreign tourists; and many more souvenir pedlars. I no longer feel at home and slip gratefully into St. Sophia – which remains unchanged. I re-examine the fabulous mosaics; and sit a while, overcome once more by grandeur and history.

I don't know how long I am in there but when I emerge, ready to cross over and visit the Blue Mosque, I am aware of a distinct change in the atmosphere. Before I can identify it, I am urgently accosted by a youth employed by my hotel. Back at the desk, the distressed clerk gives me a belated message: I should be at the gates of Topkapi at noon. It is now almost one o'clock.

That they have made the rendezvous there, rather than at the hotel, is a fine piece of discretion, I think.

Racing back across the piazza, I am halted, at first politely, then, when I resist, brutally, by a cordon of police who have closed off the concourse which leads up to the gates of Topkapi.

More police cars arrive; and a security van with wire-mesh windows parks across the piazza, behind the police; ready to collect the arrested.

Is it a demonstration? A strike? There are now few foreigners in sight. The swelling crowd is made up of locals. Feeling is running high: I sense anger, and a kind of wild excitement.

I withdraw from the piazza, cross the road and wait under the trees beyond. Rattled by the number of police; and the threatening chaos. During my retreat, I meet a couple of Germans, who give me the news: there has been a rape, they say: a young Turkish boy.

I react with irrational guilt and ask:

"By a foreigner?"

"Probably," they nod; sliding into the Sheraton mini-bus; unconcerned.

I return to the hotel, alarmed. On the way, a card-seller tells me more.

"Raped! The son of a good family; rich people. There will be big trouble."

I hear more reports as the day wears on.

The Pudding Shop is alive with rumors. The facetious remarks of young back-packers please me no more than the waiter; who whispers that the rapist is a recent arrival; a known pederast. He is joking but I am not amused. Since my first sight of the police, I can think only of Selem. Whom I was supposed to meet at Topkapi at noon. Having already seen his bum. Albeit briefly.

Guilt, confusion... Soon I am in panic and flee to my room. As I take my key, I think that the desk clerk eyes me strangely.

Attempting nonchalance, I inquire about the incident.

He smiles and assures me that it was nothing. Some squabble amongst the soldiers.

"Soldiers?"

"Those young brats around Topkapi."

"What did the soldiers do?" I wonder.

"Roughed up some rascal who cheeked them."

"A rich boy?" I blurt out.

"No, no," he laughs. "Your key, Sir. I wish you a good sleep."

The latter is out of the question. I lie on my bed sweating. Jump up at the slightest sound. Pace the floor.

The more I think about it, the more I am convinced: it was Selem who was raped. Murdered, probably.

The desk clerk has not convinced me: he is too impressed by my phone calls; and the limo. He thinks me protected. Fears my Connections.

I know I must act. I rush out, sneaking past the desk almost on hands and knees. The Pudding Shop, now packed and raging, at least has a telephone. I push my way through the raucous drinkers, startled by a waiter's joke: "They say it was an Australian."

Amidst the bedlam, I dial Turkish Airlines and demand a seat on the first flight to Athens, claiming a family emergency. I am offered a place for 12.30 next morning: there is nothing sooner.

How to pass the night?

My hotel barely seems safe, any more. I drink several black coffees to stay awake, and retire to my room. Where I sit on the hard chair and determinedly read a paperback until the date changes. Around eight am, I take a long, cold shower and pack.

I don't mind how early I arrive at the airport: there are plenty of things to do there; I long for the controls, the formalities, the duty-

free shopping and the rest; after my nocturnal vigil.

The desk clerk seems pleased to greet me. He hands me the telephone. Beginning to panic anew, I take it.

It is the secretary to Selem's father.

"My dear sir, I am so very sorry that Selem missed your rendezvous, yesterday. He was extremely disappointed, of course. And his father is most upset. We thought you had been informed, you see. Whereas..."

His words leave me lost and dizzy.

"Never mind," I stammer, struggling to take in his message. "Is Selem all right?"

There is a definite pause. The line crackles.

"Oh yes, sir. Thank you very much. Selem is well."

I am suspicious. When I fail to reply, the voice goes on.

"He is at school now. At his studies, you know." Brightly, thinking to appeal to a teacher.

Then, I dare, "He came to no harm?"

"Harm?" Perhaps he is searching in his mind for the meaning of the word. "Oh, of course, you are thinking of the... no, no. The boy never left the car."

Again I delay my response. The secretary babbles on anxiously.

"You were concerned, naturally. We are aware of this. So unfortunate. It was the chauffeur's mistake. He did well to leave, but he ought to have contacted you. We assumed that he had. Only today did we learn that he had not. I do apologize!"

I am more confused than ever. Though soothed by the secretary's voice. Perhaps I am being duped. But I must hear more.

"What happened, exactly?"

He coughs, and begins an explanation which sounds oddly rehearsed. But then he is speaking in a foreign language, and may

well have rehearsed for my benefit; or his own, under pressure from his employer.

"It was a very small thing. Not, er, political." A village youth taunted some soldiers, who reacted and roughed him up. The situation was complicated by the intervention of some mullah, who considered himself above the army. His protests provoked the riot.

Nothing came of it. There were no arrests.

Prepared to hang up, I hear the voice proceeding:

"Let us make a new appointment, sir, shall we? Perhaps not Topkapi, tomorrow. The palace of Constantine? Or would you prefer a ferry trip, to one of the Prince's Islands?"

"Unfortunately, I am leaving today, for Athens."

As I say it, I wonder why.

"Today? You are leaving today?"

"That's right. On the twelve-thirty flight."

"Please hold the line, sir."

There is a long, crackling interval, during which I madly wonder if the police are being alerted. I look at my watch: there's still a long time before nine-thirty.

"David!" It is Selem's father. He sounds uncertain. "Are you leaving? I had thought..."

I am humbled by his Harrow vowels; and apparent dismay.

"I'm afraid so, yes. It was not my plan but the airline screwed up my reservation."

"Oh dear! This happens far too often. A hopeless mob, our airline."

"Well, no, really, they have been marvelous."

"You are good to say this. But I know. The same old story: muddle and inefficiency! I apologise."

"I have no complaint."

"You wouldn't. I dare to say, I know you a little. I had hoped to know you better."

"And I."

"Do leave me your address, dear fellow. Selem is going to be very disappointed."

Returning to Greece, I felt a great sense of relief, the moment I stepped out of the aircraft. I am always glad when I return from abroad, but this time I was elated. Home: familiar and safe. I chattered away to the taxi driver like a man on top of the world.

I slept for three hours in the afternoon; saw a movie; ate some fast food, and then slept for another eleven hours.

No one asked me: how was Istanbul? If they had, I don't know what I should have answered. Through time or distance, I had temporarily lost the experience. I remembered little.

A week after my return, I received a postcard with two views of St. Sophia. On the back was a carefully written message:

David. The old Cathedral. Don't you want to see it again? When I go there, I will say your name – and listen. O.K.? Maybe there are other things you want to see again. I will show you All of them. Whenever you want. Kisses, Selem.

Two days later I received a letter from his father:

Dear David,

I hope this finds you well, and that your return flight was tolerable.

You cannot know how great a pleasure it was for me to meet you. My only regret is that your stay was so short. We must correct this.

After all, Athens is so close. Next time, you will stay with us. No strings, you'll be a free man!

Come as soon as you can. Selem misses you.

If you wish, we can discuss the proposal I put to you.

I am sorry that your first acquaintance with our city should have been tainted by that nonsense at Topkapi. Be assured it was a storm in a teacup!

I look forward to resuming our friendship. As does my son, Selem.

I wish you good health.

Yours in anticipation...

Very nicely done, I thought. Hearing the whole letter in a fine Harrow accent.

Mentally, I found myself back at the zoo, in Old Stamboul, considering pros and cons...

Physically, I'd been tormented by a recurring hard-on, the result of Selem's postcard. And now vivid memories of his charms; our sex...

I took up the letter once again, to re-read and consider.