The Blacksmith's Daughter

Selim Özdoğan

translated by Ayça Türkoğlu and Katy Derbyshire

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Inhalt

It is doubtful, of course, that things happened that way, but what we don't know, we don't know.

Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Pevear & Volokhonsky

Your life has a limit, but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger.

Zhuang Zhou, translated by Watson, Palmer & Breuilly

I

‘Don’t make my husband a murderer, I told him. Stop the car, don’t make my husband a murderer. Stop the car and let me out, and then piss off as fast as you can.’

Timur exhales and turns his head away so Fatma can’t see him tearing up. He’s still struggling for breath. He’s grateful, so grateful that fate has chosen this woman for him. She must have been written in his book of life on the very day he was born. He doesn’t know what’s happened to him, where all the time has gone.

Just yesterday he was a little boy in ragged trousers, scrumping pears from the neighbour’s garden with his friends. The neighbour had spotted the thieves, and they’d all jumped swiftly over the wall, pockets and shirts full of fruit. All but Timur, who’d been a little too slow, as usual. Though he could run just as fast as the others, he always missed his chance to make a bolt for it. Now he stood there, rooted to the spot, and the neighbour ran past Timur up to the wall and yelled after the escaping boys: ‘Come back! Come back, and give Timur a pear, at least. Great friends *you* are…’

Then he turned back to Timur and just said: ‘Run.’Timur didn’t dare go past the neighbour, so he ran all the way across the garden and jumped over the wall on the other side.

Just yesterday he'd been a little boy, not all that good at school, not all that skilled, not all that popular. Until he began to help his father the blacksmith, helped him blow the heavy bellows and fetch big buckets of water for Necmi to quench the glowing iron. Timur had built up muscles in the workshop, had proved himself hardworking and untiring. He had learned quickly, and he'd enjoyed being with his father all day long. He also enjoyed testing out his new strength. The boy who once avoided fights now let no opportunity pass to show off his superiority.

Timur had a sister, Hülya, and he could well recall the night when she was born, even though he was only five at the time. He remembered the excitement in the house, and above all his father's determined face and his vow to open the girl's feet, no matter what it cost him. *Open*, that was the word he used. Hülya's feet pointed inwards, the big toes touching, and no one who saw them thought she'd grow out of it.

'God means to test us,' Timur's mother, Zeliha, had said in a tear-choked voice, and Necmi had answered: 'If there is a way, I will find it.'

But the doctor had said he could do nothing for the child, Necmi would have to take Hülya to Ankara if he wanted to get help for her. There were specialists there. He had to take her to Ankara and that wouldn't come cheap.

Necmi had money, and although Zeliha was reluctant to make the journey, in the end they boarded the train and went to the big city.

'It's God's will that her feet are closed,' Zeliha had told her husband, but he'd simply ignored her.

In Ankara, the doctor explained the child was too small; they were to come back in two or three years and then he'd

operate, but he couldn’t promise anything. And it would cost them.

Zeliha gave Necmi a discreet nudge. They were sitting side by side in the surgery, the baby on Zeliha’s lap. Stepping on his wife’s foot, Necmi stood up and said goodbye, cap in hand.

Outside in the dusty corridor, he said: ‘Wife, I can’t haggle with a doctor, I’m not a carpet seller, I’m a blacksmith. And he’s not a carpet seller either. I don’t care how much it’ll cost, as long as the girl is cured. I made a vow.’

‘We’ll end up going hungry just because you’ve gone and got this idea in your head. If only the Lord had given you a bit of sense to go with your stubbornness,’ she added quietly.

They slept in a cheap hotel and returned home the next day with a lorry driver from their small town. Zeliha had arranged it all. It took longer than the train and was uncomfortable too, but it was cheaper.

Her husband could almost be called well-off, but only because she managed to rein in his extravagance and earn a little extra with a few deals here and there. The evening before they left for home, Necmi had taken her to a restaurant and drunk a small bottle of rakı, and they had eaten kebab. As if bread and cheese and tomatoes and onions and a glass of water weren’t good enough. No, this man could not handle money; only she knew how to save up and multiply it.

So they squeezed into the driver’s cab. Zeliha had the baby on her lap and sat on the far side, breathing in the smoke from the two men’s roll-ups, swallowing the dust from the road right alongside them for almost ten hours. During the short stops, she made tea on a gas flame and

prepared cold food while Necmi and the driver played backgammon.

Almost three years later, Necmi took the train to the capital city again, but this time Hülya was old enough not to need her mother to come along. When the blacksmith returned after four days, he carried his daughter on his back; her legs were in plaster up to the knees.

Six weeks passed, during which Hülya cried nearly every day because it was so itchy under the plaster. Necmi was standing in front of the only mirror in the house, shaving. Timur stood next to him, but he hardly dared ask him his most pressing question, afraid his father would tell him off.

‘Can I come with you?’

‘All right,’ Necmi said to his surprise, not thinking it over for long, and he stroked his boy’s blond hair. ‘Run and tell your mother to pack a bit more to eat.’

Timur was waiting impatiently outside the door with the bread and cheese when he heard voices from the kitchen.

‘It’s absolutely unnecessary for him to go. He’s too little, what does he want in Ankara?’

‘An adventure,’ Necmi said. ‘It’ll be an adventure for him.’

‘It’s…’

‘Enough. He’s coming with us.’

Timur wished he could dash off and tell his friends, but he didn’t want to miss the train. The train! He’d never been on a train before.

When a young simit-seller carrying a big tray of sesame rings on his head walked past, Timur piped up.

‘Brother,’ he said, ‘I’m going to Ankara today.’

‘To Ankara?’

The boy, who might have been two or three years older than Timur, smiled and said: ‘Keep your eyes peeled, they

have simit there as big as wagon wheels. The people are rich there, they can afford it.’

Timur was excited to see the big city, the incredible sesame rings, and he was excited to see his sister cured.

He looked out of the window almost all the way, and sometimes he hummed along with the clatter of the train. He didn’t want to fall asleep, he was waiting for the moment when the city appeared before them. But the clattering made him tired, that and the endless dry brown of the plains and the hills on the horizon and his father’s snoring. Shortly before Ankara, he fell asleep.

Timur didn’t wake up until the train pulled into the station with a loud screech of brakes.

‘Don’t be scared, and watch out for the cars,’ the blacksmith told his son as they disembarked.

Timur wasn’t scared: he was fascinated by all the people, by the noise, by the big buildings and the cars, which he’d never seen before. When he noticed his sister was afraid, he walked closer alongside his father, who was carrying Hülya on his back. Timur wanted to stroke her, but he couldn’t reach any higher than the plaster.

‘Why do you keep staring at the simit-sellers?’ Necmi asked. And then he laughed and said: ‘Did someone tell you they had simit as big as wagon wheels in Ankara?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ignorant people are always inventing nonsense like that,’ his father said, and Timur was proud he was no longer one of the ignorant.

Later, at the doctor’s surgery, he did hold Hülya’s hand. His sister didn’t cry but Timur could see she was stiff with fear.

‘Close your eyes,’ Timur said, and the doctor added in a warm voice: ‘Don’t be afraid, it won’t hurt.’

Hülya seemed not to hear either of them; she could barely breathe, and when the plaster was sawn open, Timur screamed: ‘Dad, Dad, her eyes are slipping!’

But it was too late. From that day on, his sister had a permanent squint.

Sometimes, when the little girls were playing in the street outside the forge, Necmi would go out and call them over. Then he’d take them along to the grocer’s, where the girls would scoop up their skirts in front of them to receive a handful of sweets. And Timur’s father had enormous hands.

When he began working in the forge, Timur took up this habit from his father. He would often put sweets in Fatma’s skirt. He must have been 14 or 15 at the time, and she 10 years younger. He still remembered the girl’s smile. Nobody knew anything specific about Fatma’s parents; some said they’d been Greeks, some Aramaeans, and others claimed she was the daughter of Circassians. All they could agree upon was that the couple had arrived in the town after the confusion of the First World War. Fatma’s father had died before she was born. One day he had complained of back pain, and two weeks later cancer had taken hold of his entire body. Fatma’s mother began working as a nanny to a rich family to feed herself and her daughter. When Fatma was six months old, her mother was trampled to death by horses in the marketplace. Everyone told a different story, but all anyone knew for sure was that the horses had bolted, and she had fallen. The family who’d employed her mother had taken Fatma in.

Though she was much older, Timur’s sister, Hülya, often played with Fatma, because Fatma never teased her. The other children mocked her squint and her feet, which still turned slightly inwards, making her waddle. But Fatma liked Hülya. Fatma liked almost everyone; she was a happy

girl who made friends easily. One moment, Timur had been a teenager, dropping sweets into this little girl's skirts, and now she would soon be a woman.

'Shall we set you up with Fatma?' his mother asked, for the second time. 'You're 25 now, it's time you got married.'

Hülya had been squinting for six years when her father grew sick. He lay in bed for a week and on the morning of the eighth day, he didn't get up again. The first year had been hard for them all, but Zeliha had rented out the forge and managed to make enough money for food and even a little extra. Timur had continued to help in the workshop, and when he turned 17, he took over the forge and earned a livelihood for the family, which his mother managed.

And now he was 25 and he liked his life. He liked working at the forge, sitting at the teahouse and smoking shisha, and every so often he would get drunk. When he did, everything seemed to fall away, he savoured it. He savoured the world, felt nothing but pleasure. It was as if the stars in the night sky rained down on his hair, like sweets dropped into the skirts of a little girl. When he drank, it all became one; beauty and ugliness, heaven and hell, silk and sackcloth, pillows and the hard clay ground. As long as he had this happiness, and his work, nothing could happen to him. And when he needed a change, he would go to the big city and enjoy the sense of adventure he felt since his first visit there. He had no need to get married, but now he was standing drunk in front of his mother on a winter's night, snowflakes melting on the shoulders of his coat, and he said: 'Yes. Go and ask if they'll give her to us.'

And Zeliha said: 'Blessed be the Lord. I'll go straight out in the morning and fix it up.'

‘Yes,’ he had said, that night, drunk. Yes, as if fate had placed the word in his mouth. It was not the first time his mother had suggested someone, but this time he’d said yes. But was Fatma even old enough? The next morning, he pulled his sister aside.

‘You know Fatma, the orphan girl?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mum wants me to marry her.’

Hülya went to hug her brother, but he held her back. ‘Do me a favour, will you? Find an excuse to sleep over at hers. You’re friends after all, aren’t you? You know each other well enough?’

Hülya looked at him, uncomprehending.

‘Have a look to see if she’s got breasts. She’s still too young to get married, don’t you think? What am I supposed to do with a wife without breasts?’

Hülya hesitated, so Timur added: ‘Please.’ It was a please which sounded more like *go*.

‘Okay,’ Hülya said. ‘I’ll try. But believe me, Fatma would make a good wife for you, breasts or no.’

Timur was not convinced, but he couldn’t keep it to himself and so he told his friends the news over lunch.

‘Mum has gone out today to fix my engagement. Fatma and I are getting married.’

‘Fatma, the orphan girl? Get away,’ the barber’s son said. ‘She looks like she’s got swamp fever.’

‘Swamp fever?’

‘Yeah, I don’t know, she’s so yellow and sickly-looking. Have you seen her recently?’

Timur shook his head. But after a moment’s pause, he told his assistant he had something to attend to and would probably be back sometime in the afternoon.

And then, despite the heavy snowfall, he loitered by the big house where Fatma lived until nightfall.

‘In spring,’ said Zeliha that evening. ‘You’ll marry in spring. I arranged it all today. She’s a hard-working girl and good-natured too, she’ll be able to help me out around the house and you’ll be less inclined to go wandering about.’

Swamp fever and no breasts. It wasn’t quite what Timur had imagined. He found it difficult to say anything, but in the end, he managed: ‘It’s all happened a bit fast. I hardly had time to think it over.’

‘You had 25 years to think it over,’ his mother said.

Timur was as strong as a lion, nobody could take him on, he was as strong as a lion and proud – what would he do with a sickly girl? Yesterday, with the stars caught in his hair, he had said yes, but today his feet were back on the ground.

‘So?’ he asked his sister when she came home the next morning. He had slept poorly and had no appetite.

‘So what?’

‘So, has she got…?’

‘It was too dark in the room.’

‘You could have tried feeling for them secretly.’

‘Wouldn’t have worked.’

‘So you couldn’t make anything out under her nightdress?’

‘No, but she’s still very young, they might not be big enough to be obvious yet – that’s if she has any…’

That day, Timur again left the forge in the hands of his assistant, who was surprised because Timur never usually stayed away so long.

Once again, the blacksmith went to the house where Fatma lived, and just when he could no longer feel his feet for the cold, she stepped out the door holding a clay jug. He was standing behind a spot where the wall jutted out,

and Fatma didn't notice him until she was almost standing in front of him. She knew that this was the man whom she'd been promised to the day before, and she turned around and ran back, only to stop abruptly. It had clearly occurred to her that she couldn't go back into the house without an explanation. She turned around again; she had to visit the neighbour, get some vinegar. She wavered, taking two slow steps forward, hesitantly, her eyes fixed on the ground. Then she took a step back, her cheeks glowing, the snow making an incredible crunch beneath her feet, and stopped. She heard another crunch, then another and another, and as she slowly looked up, she saw the broad back of the blacksmith, walking away.

Timur lit a cigarette and smiled. Maybe she didn't have any breasts, but she was beautiful. She was beautiful, like a piece of the moon. She was beautiful, as if the stars still hung in his hair. Timur didn't go back to the workshop straight away, he went to the shopkeeper, to see the one bed he had for sale. He followed the shopkeeper into the storeroom, squatted down and looked long and carefully at the frame.

'Would you like to buy it?' the shopkeeper asked, scenting a sale. The bed had sat in the shop for six months. Almost everybody in the small town slept on the floor on mattresses or cushions, or on a divan, and even the rich ones didn't seem to want to buy a bed – there was no reason to do so.

Timur didn't respond, so the shopkeeper went on: 'Are you getting married? Are congratulations in order?'

Timur muttered something incomprehensible without looking up from the bed frame.

'We can be a little flexible with the price, of course.'

The blacksmith made no sound and his eyes narrowed a little; he nodded briefly, then stood up and slowly walked

around the frame.

Finally, he said to the shopkeeper: ‘Yes, I’m getting married. In spring. In spring when everything is green and fragrant. No, I’m not going to buy the bed, but thank you and have a profitable day.’

Timur returned to the workshop in good spirits. There was a lot to do, he would have to stay longer if he wanted to make a start on the bed frame. The bedposts were to be exactly like the model at the shopkeeper’s; knee-high, round and gleaming. And on top of these, he would lay the slats, just as he had seen. But the headboard would not be made out of straight rods, like a prison cell; they’d be curved, like climbing roses.

He worked in the forge until almost midnight and when he finally lay down on his mattress, he closed his eyes, content. A piece of the moon.

Fatma and Timur slept in a real bed for the first time on their wedding night. Neither of them said a word once they’d entered the room. But later, when Timur was just about to fall asleep, Fatma murmured: ‘So this is how kings sleep.’

And Timur was not only proud but also surprised at how exactly her words said what he himself was feeling. He felt richer, more powerful, safer; he felt big enough to rule the world.

It was spring and they were newlyweds, Timur had enough work at the forge, they had money, Fatma brought him something to eat every lunchtime, and then they’d sit together for a while and talk and talk until it was time for Fatma to go and for Timur to get back to work. The food was usually still untouched, but Fatma knew that Timur would’ve eaten it by the evening and that he’d be hungry

again by the time he got home; he was a big man who worked hard. It was spring and they had their own room in the house Timur's father had left his mother.

And that was how the problems began. Zeliha saw her son looking after the young woman, this girl, saw him bringing home a little something for her almost every evening: a length of cloth so she could sew some clothes, a simit, a new headscarf, sometimes sweets or a piece of chocolate. Zeliha saw her son wanting to get close to his wife, saw him in love and caring for her.

One evening, it was summer by this point, she drew him aside: 'Your wife, she's lazy, she comes up with excuses not to help around the house. One day she's sprained her ankle and the next she has a stomachache. And when she does do anything, she never tries hard. On our last washing day, she sat down at the trough and didn't change the water once in two hours. She washed our laundry in dirty water.'

'Why didn't you say something?'

'I did. She sighed and said she had changed the water. She heaved a great big sigh. You need to teach her some respect.'

'Mother, you were the one who said she was hard-working and reliable.'

'I must have been wrong. She's lazy and disrespectful.'

That night in bed, Timur told his wife his mother had complained about her. And Fatma said in a quiet voice: 'I'm really doing everything I can. I'm trying my best but your mother… She can be unfair, I think.'

The complaints grew more frequent: Fatma sliced the cheese wrong, she cut the dishcloths in two when she washed up knives. When she went out, she dragged her feet on purpose so she'd get new shoes before the winter, she spread the butter too thickly on the bread, and Timur began to work out what the problem was.

‘Listen,’ he said to Fatma one evening, ‘I think I know what we can do. Next time my mother complains, I’ll drag you into our room and then I’ll bash the cushions and yell a bit, and you scream with pain, then I’ll go out and you stay in here for a while longer.’

Now, every time Zeliha complained to her son about her daughter-in-law, the young couple went to their room and the sound of beatings and screams was heard. The complaints tailed off.

Timur showed off to his friends about the trick, and they laughed together, raised their glasses and drank. And by the time autumn was over, the whole town knew about it.

‘We’ll have to come up with something new,’ said Timur as they lay side by side on the mattress one evening. They had lent out the bedstead; a distant cousin of Timur’s was getting married and she wanted to spend her wedding night in a proper bed too. Even the rich envied Timur for this bed, its feet decorated with brass by his own hand.

‘We could leave,’ Fatma said, ‘you could open a workshop, do a bit of trading, I could weave carpets. You’ve got two horses, we could live somewhere else.’

Yes, he had two horses and a donkey, yes, he had a bit of money, but where were they to go? Leave the town, leave all their relatives and friends, for another small town where they wouldn’t know anybody?

‘A strange place?’ he asked.

‘We could move to a village.’

‘You have no idea what it’s like, life’s completely different there. They don’t even have toilets, they squat down in the bushes.’

‘We could build an outhouse. You could keep the forge and ride into town and back, sell fruit and vegetables at the market on the side. Timur, we could lead our own life.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

And to help him think better, he took a week off and got on a train to Ankara. He wanted to enjoy life in the big city for a few days, look at cars and rich people's houses, take in the sounds and the scents, the crowds. By day, he sat in teahouses and started conversations with city folk. Some said the war would soon be over, others predicted it would last a long time yet and that the Germans would be at the gates of Istanbul in six months' time, like the Ottomans besieged Vienna back in the day. For Timur, the war was a long way off nonetheless; he listened but changed the subject at the first opportunity and tried to find out who supported Beşiktaş like he did. He was more interested in football than politics.

What interested him most of all were the evenings in the city. Listening to the scantily dressed singers in a bar for a couple of hours, drinking a glass or two, eating a slice of melon, a few chunks of white cheese, and he'd melt into the music after only the third glass. And later he lay alone and relaxed in a cheap hotel room, his worries lifted, his business far away and his mother too. Nobody knew him there, he'd lost himself in the big city, lost himself by losing his greed, ambitions, reservations – all the chains that bound him. He had lost himself only to find himself again, smiling on a hotel bed, his breathing even and calm.

When he got back, he said: 'Winter isn't a good time to move house.'

In the spring, Timur had found a house and taken their possessions there on the backs of the horses and the donkey. He had hired a cart to transport the bed, now returned to them by the cousin, and last of all he had fetched his wife. She'd been on the donkey's back for two hours by the time they got there. The ride on one of the horses took only half that time.

It had been Fatma's idea to move to the village, but she only knew villages from stories people told, and she'd only come across villagers as traders at the market.

Lying in bed on her first day in the new house, Fatma asked: 'Are all the women here related?'

'No, why?'

'They all wear the same clothes.'

Timur laughed: 'That's the way it is here. We're in a village now.'

He laughed but he was worried. He wasn't sure Fatma would get used to it here while he rode into town almost every day to work at the forge. But when he arrived at the village just before sunset a week later, he saw Fatma sitting in the village square, the young women and girls gathered around her, listening.

When Fatma caught sight of him she leapt up, but he gestured to her to stay seated, then he dismounted, led his horse by the reins into the stable and smoked a cigarette on the steps outside the house as he watched the sun go down.

'Fairytales,' was the first thing Fatma said when she came over. 'I was telling them fairytales. They don't know any. Isn't that strange? I always thought fairytales came to the town from the villages… You're back early, I thought you'd be back at the same time as the other days. Dinner's ready.'

Inside, the blacksmith looked at the carpet on the loom, saw that she'd been working, and smiled quietly to himself.

Timur bought green beans from the villagers, bulgur, and in summer and autumn tomatoes, broad beans, melons, grapes, apples and apricots. He loaded up his donkey to sell the produce at the market, and he made a good cut. He bought two cows, a few chickens, and at Fatma's

insistence, a small vineyard as well; his workshop was doing well, he was earning more than before.

Towards the end of autumn, he sold the carpets Fatma had woven, and now that the successful summer had put so much money in his pocket, he went to the big city again. Not to Ankara, though – this time he went all the way to Istanbul, because that was where Beşiktaş had their stadium, and the women there were even more beautiful and sang even more sweetly, and the wine flowed down his throat like liquid sunlight.

A week later he was back, having left half of the money in Istanbul.

Fatma got on well with the villagers. They all thought highly of her and valued her, and not because she was the wife of the blacksmith, the wife of the man whose strength was extolled by all, and who was also a good head taller than most of them; the wife of a man with piercing blue eyes, who sat proud and straight-backed on his horse. No, the women of the village liked Fatma because she was still so young, because she could tell stories, because she was always friendly to everyone and didn’t think herself better than them simply because she came from the town, or because she had money. They liked her because she was sweet-tempered and always tried to play the peacemaker when arguments arose; they liked that she was soft, but firm.

When Fatma got pregnant in the winter, without having had her period even once, the women of the village shared in her happiness.

The blacksmith had expanded his business, he had made sure word got around the surrounding villages that here was a man who paid farmers a fair price for their wares. One day in spring, when Fatma’s belly had grown big and round, Timur took her along with him to a village almost a

day’s ride away, to give her a change of scene. He still brought her gifts, still fussed over her. Not as much as he had in the early days, but that was the way of everyday life; it did not mean that his feelings had lost any of their intensity. In the village, they had slept at a fat man’s house, on a mattress, just as they had recently been doing at home. One of Timur’s friends had got married and was borrowing the bedstead. The next morning, Timur spent a good while haggling with a farmer who was determined to squeeze a few more kuruş out of him. It was already lunchtime once the business was finally concluded, and their host did not want to send them on their way unfed. So it wasn’t until after midday that the two of them saddled up.

They were still some distance from the village as the sun started to set, but it was dangerous to ride on in the dark; it was so hard to see and they had to be on their guard for highway robbers.

‘We’ll have to sleep here and ride on in the morning,’ Timur said.

‘Where are you expecting us to sleep? There’s nowhere safe, I won’t sleep a wink!’

‘I know a place. It’s not far.’

At dusk, they reached a graveyard.

‘No one else is brave enough to come here after dark,’ Timur said. ‘Don’t be scared, trust me, this is the safest place to spend the night.’

That night, Fatma’s sleep was light but peaceful, and from then on, the blacksmith took her with him more often when he had business in villages far away, and she grew accustomed to nights like these. She liked to lie close to her husband in the quiet and the dark, and the ground beneath them seemed to her as soft as down when she lay

her head on his shoulder and he stroked her hair and said: ‘My girl, my piece of the moon.’

She felt that she had been lucky with this man. It didn’t matter to her that he frittered away half the money he earned from the carpets she made, even though they had cost her a whole summer of sitting at the loom. There were things that bothered her, of course. On one occasion, he had lent his horse to the boy he employed to help him in the forge. God knows why he’d done it; the boy was a good worker, but he was a rash young man with a habit of flying into rages. In a fit of recklessness, the boy had ridden the horse at a gallop down the main street. People leapt out of the way in shock, cursing him, and eventually the police caught up with him and took the horse away. The police knew how much the horse was worth to Timur, and he’d been forced to pay a tidy sum to get it back; he had practically bought it a second time over.

On another occasion, Timur had helped out a friend who wanted to buy a field but didn’t have enough money. Why was this man buying a field when he didn’t have any money? Timur ended up paying for most of it, the field, but it belonged to his friend.

Fatma wasn’t worried; he earned well and they always had money, but she understood that he didn’t know how to manage it, and she suspected that not all of their days would be like these. But as long as he was by her side, she felt able to face each day with a smile.

On their first night in the graveyard, they lay side by side, eyes open, in silence. Timur thought to himself: *Just two more minutes, just two more minutes to watch the stars and feel my wife in my arms, and then I’ll turn over and go to sleep*.

‘Gül,’ Fatma said softly into the silence.

‘Hm?’

‘It’s going to be a girl, I can feel it. I want to call her Gül, *rose*. I want to have a little girl called Rose.’

The blacksmith placed his hand on her belly.

‘Gül,’ he said. ‘And if it’s a boy, we’ll call him Emin.’

‘It’s not going to be a boy.’

Gül was born on a warm September day. When the blacksmith came home at dusk, there was this little creature lying next to his wife in the bed.

‘Are her hands and feet normal?’ he asked first, and Fatma nodded.

He touched Gül carefully, like the weight of his big hands alone might bruise her. With tears in his eyes, Timur kissed his wife and touched his lips to his daughter’s head. Then he went out and sat on the steps outside the house. Something tingled beneath his skin, not like bubbles, more like a warm evening breeze. He felt light, as if the breeze were gently lifting his body, as if he had given over some of his weight to the earth below. He sat on the steps and forgot to smoke.

That autumn, it seemed to him that everything was working out. He bought rich harvests from the farmers and sold them at the market in town; his vineyard bore plenty of grapes; he hired a second assistant to work in the forge; and when it was spring again he bought a summer house with a big apple orchard and a stable on the edge of the town, so that he’d have a shorter journey to work, in summer at least.

Many of the townspeople had summer houses where they would escape the heat, plant a few beds with tomatoes, with cucumbers, peppers, courgettes and corn to eat. They also hoped for a little extra income when their apple trees bore fruit in the autumn. In the summer months, they’d rent out their houses in the town, mostly to

rich people from Adana who wanted to escape the heat of the city.

When the heat grew stifling inside the summer house, you could always lie down outside in the shade of a walnut tree. You could listen to the leaves rustling, though it was barely half an hour on foot from the houses in town, lined up side by side with their little backyards with scarcely a tree.

They moved house in early May. Timur had found someone to take the bed and their household goods to the summer house on the back of a small lorry. Once they'd loaded it up, there wasn't even space left in the cab. The driver suggested he take the things to the summer house, find a couple of lads to help him unload, and then come back for Timur and Fatma. Gül was at her grandmother's house already.

'Alright, Timur said, tucking some money in the driver's shirt pocket to pay the lads for unloading. We'll start walking, get a bit of a head start at least.

As man and wife were peacefully making their way along the dusty road, a car approached them from behind and the driver slowed right down. He had soot-black hair, shiny with brilliantine, and bushy eyebrows. Once he'd wound down the window, he asked: 'Where are you heading?'

'Into town,' Timur answered.

'I can give you a lift, get in,' the man said. Fatma had never been in a car in her life. No one in their town owned a car in those days.

She'd been in lorries, in the driver's cab or on the back, but never in a car. She sat down on the back seat and felt briefly trapped as Timur pulled the passenger door shut.

The driver's hands didn't look like he used them to work, but he had a stocky figure that didn't quite match his thin, trimmed moustache.

As they drove up a slight hill the car slowed down, and suddenly it jolted forward and then stopped.

‘Damn,’ said the driver, then turned to Timur: ‘Brother, I can tell you’re a strong man. Would you mind getting out and pushing the car up the last bit? It’s bound to start again as soon as we’re going downhill.’

The blacksmith nodded and smiled, his blue eyes full of zest and pride, and he got out and braced himself against the car. It was easier than he’d thought; he hadn’t even broken a sweat by the time they were at the top. The car rolled downhill, the engine started, and the man put his foot down.

He wants to get the engine warmed up, Timur thought first, until he realised the man was simply driving away. His face flushed with heat and he broke into a run, chasing the car. He’d kill that man, he’d kill him. Even if he didn’t get his hands on him now, he’d strike him dead if he laid a finger on Fatma.

Timur doesn’t notice the car stopping and Fatma getting out; he simply runs without registering anything, and now he sees her standing by the side of the road. But he doesn’t slow down, he keeps running until he reaches her. The car is out of sight by now.

‘What happened?’ Timur asks.

‘Don’t make my husband a murderer, I told him, don’t make my husband a murderer. Stop the car and let me out, and then piss off as fast as you can. He’ll find you and kill you, I said, he’s a man of honour. I put my arm around his throat from the back seat and I said: Don’t make my husband a murderer.’

Timur is grateful. He’s grateful and he thinks life will get bigger and bigger and more and more wonderful as long as he has Fatma by his side. Just yesterday he was a little boy,

and today he’s married to her and thinks they will conquer all dangers together.

Timur bought another cow, he dug the vegetable patches, hammered in the forge, and in the evenings he swept up his daughter in his arms and cuddled her. Fatma made friends with the neighbours, she milked the cows at dawn and then again at dusk when they came back from grazing. When she was alone with Gül, she talked to her daughter, told her what she was doing and who she was thinking of, told her she hadn’t had a mother of her own but her adoptive mother had taken good care of her, perhaps because she was the girl she’d always wished for and never had. Fatma hadn’t got on well with her three brothers; they’d teased and tormented her, once forcing her to eat a rotten apple, another time hiding her clothes when she was bathing in the river, but all that was long ago. Now she had Timur and she had Gül, and if God willed it, she’d have more children.

Summer passed, and when autumn was almost over they moved back to the village because it had grown too cold in the little summer house without a stove, because there wasn’t much left to do once the apples had been harvested, because the neighbours were moving back to town too, back to their homes, now vacated by the people from Adana who would spend a mild winter in the city, probably without a single glimpse of snow. Timur, Fatma and Gül moved back to the village; in the summer houses, there was no one left to talk to, no one left to lend some flour or a barrowful of manure. They moved back to the village without their bed – they had lent it, once again, to someone who had just married – they moved without their bed, but with cows and chickens in tow.

‘In a few years’ time, everyone in town will know how kings sleep,’ Timur said, acting as if he’d find it annoying.

In reality, he was proud of the bed, and when it was lent out he'd look forward to being able to wake up in it in the mornings again, without the hard-trodden clay being the first thing he saw and smelt.

Gül had very quickly started talking. But it took her longer than other children to learn to walk. She was almost two and her mother had started to worry, while the blacksmith simply laughed. Gül crawled, but not like the other children; she crawled backwards and was always looking over her shoulder to see what was behind her.

'My crazy rose,' Timur said.

Gül was walking by the time Fatma was pregnant again. One night, Fatma lay once again in Timur's arms at a graveyard and got that same feeling, quite clearly. It was the new moon, and Fatma felt that the spirits of the dead were looking on her kindly, looking on her kindly from surprisingly nearby.

'Timur,' she said, 'would you rather have a son or another daughter?'

'All that matters to me is that its hands and feet are in the right place,' replied the blacksmith, 'that it's healthy and grows up with a mother and a father. That's the most important thing.'

'You're going to have another daughter. Do you know what you'd like to call her?'

'Melike.'

Melike cried through the night, she bawled until her face was purple; sometimes she would nurse greedily, sometimes she wouldn't want anything at all, and sometimes it seemed she would only sleep if all was well. If Fatma was overtired and exhausted and weak, she could be certain Melike would cry all night long. But Fatma never complained.