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Apollo Karamani

THE STEWARD ASKS IF I'd like some reading material for the flight, but I've got my hands full: Laura's letter, still unopened, in one hand, and Dr. Karaman's bio in the other. The bio is easier to handle right now. I learn that he's the foremost lepidopterist in Asia, with a collection reported to be one of the largest in the world. He's discovered three new species in as many years, including this most recent one, which, defying a tradition of modesty, he's decided to name after himself. My editor suggested this might make a good opening for the article so I scribble a star beside it and read on about the new species.

I pull out my Turkish phrasebook. The man beside me looks at it and smiles.

"Merhaba," he says.

"Excuse me?"

"Your first Turkish lesson." He folds his hands on his lap and clears his throat. "It means *bello*."

"Merhaba," I return, and he nods in approval. "How do you say butterfly?" I ask.

"Kelebek."

The word sounds familiar.

"Also the name of famous Turkish movie," he says.

I remember it. It won something at Cannes in the seventies so Laura and I rented it. This was back in the early days of our marriage, when we couldn't keep our hands off each other. I'd rub her feet with peppermint lotion while she fed me butter-slathered popcorn and laughed at the scenes that weren't funny, cried at the parts that weren't sad. We'd make love on the couch while the end credits rolled. I look at the letter now partially tucked under my leg on the seat. I don't need to read it, I know what it says. I turn back to the bio.

Ataturk Airport is madness. I can't read the signs so I follow the crowd, but the crowd splinters and I can't find my luggage. Men are smoking and laughing. I'm sick with jet lag and I can't find any line-ups or information desks. A man with a moustache bumps me from behind and turns around apologizing in Turkish, a big smile, his hand at my elbow.

I see Dr. Karaman holding a sign with his name on it. He's a big, round man with short greying hair, thick eyebrows arching over gentle blue eyes. He has hairy arms and hands, rings on almost every finger. I greet him with a *merhaba*. His hand is at my elbow; he's saying welcome, welcome, and I'm smiling and thanking him. He leads me to the luggage carousel and insists on carrying my suitcase and my carry-on. He shifts this way and that, nudging straps up his shoulders, trying to balance his barrel belly.

In the parking lot, he tells me about the performance statistics of his SUV. Says it attracts the ladies. He asks me how I like my women and I laugh. I show him my ring, but he says that doesn't mean anything. "I have been married twice, divorced twice, my friend. It is a necessary institution, one we cannot live without. But where is the enjoyment?" His accent lends him an air of Byzantine royalty; there's conviction here. He opens the passenger door for me and I slip down into the sleek leather and sigh. He tells me we'll get something to eat and drink, clear up my jet lag with a visit to a hamam, and just the mention of it makes me feel better.

Two attendants scrub me down with coarse mittens and a bucket of water until my skin glows pink. They rinse me off with a hose and escort me to a marble bench where I lie flat on my back, next to the doctor, looking up at a great white dome. The masseur is missing his teeth yet he doesn't stop grinning. His hands begin ferociously at my arms and legs, then turn me over and roll their knuckles over my back like a cogwheel. The bench is cold and hard, my muscles tender. I can't help but groan. The jet lag drains out of me like water.

The doctor can't get off the topic of women. He tells me about his two ex-wives, the grief they caused him.

“A woman is a lion, my friend. They will tear your dignity apart with their teeth, but they will not eat it. They will spit it back in your face.” He makes a spitting sound and some catches me on the cheek. He glares at a tile on the floor and his blue eyes suddenly appear emptied of all emotion. The masseur slaps his back and the sound echoes off the domed ceiling. It’s enough to jar him back to life. “Butterflies are much simpler.”

“Is that why you collect them?” I ask.

He looks at me blankly at first, as if the question was obvious. “The butterfly is like a brief moment of happiness—there on a flower to observe only for a short time before it is gone.”

“And you preserve that moment?”

“Yes, my friend. It is much easier than love. Love is best left to the poets. I have a new girlfriend whose beauty cannot harm me. Her name is Ajça. You will meet her tomorrow. She cannot possibly love me, and therefore, she cannot possibly ruin me.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because she is already ruining her husband’s life.” We both laugh, him first, and then me. The masseur perpetually grinning. The sound echoes in the confines of the hamam.

The doctor’s butterflies have their own floor on the upper level of his house. It is a massive collection: two of each insect—male and female—are displayed side by side, one mounted face up and the other face down to reveal both sides of their wings. They are grouped by species in glass terrariums and stored in enormous oak cabinets whose multiple drawers open up like those of a jewellery box. Despite the occasional flourish of tasteful decorating, the rest of the house proliferates the butterfly theme. There are pictures, candles, vases, and wallpaper all shaped as or patterned with butterflies. So it is no surprise when I’m escorted to the guest room to find a brass bed laid over with pink and blue butterfly-patterned linen.

At dawn, I hear the muezzin’s call to prayer from a nearby mosque. It is a plaintive song that lasts for minutes and puts me in a reflective mood normally reserved for nights. As we make out for Bursa that morning, the mood does not leave me. We drive over the last bridge out of Istanbul and cross the Bosphorus into Asia. The sun floats like an orange buoy on the strait, guiding liners and

fishing cruisers to their early morning work. Soon we pass fertile crops of broad tobacco and sunflower, orchards of apricot, peach, and fig trees. The road climbs and narrows into a skirting, winding trail overlooking the Mamara Sea, and then it descends again into the wide plain at the bottom of Mt. Uludag, where I suddenly see the minarets of Bursa's mosques stab up at the pale moon of morning. On the way down we pass rows of wild flowers swathed across a pasture, gently cleaving into clusters of olive and bay trees in the distance.

"That is where we will butterfly," the doctor whispers, pointing.

Apollo Karamani is housed in the entomology department at Bursa's Uludag University. The lab is small but pristine and well organized. Dr. Karaman leads me to the back where the new species is mounted in its own display case. He lifts a black cloth from the glass and sets the case flat on the table.

It is the male of the species. The wings are translucent, but for an upper cluster of blue spots and a lower band of chevrons. The pattern may vary considerably for the female, the doctor tells me. I remove the lens cap from my camera, making sure the flash is disabled so as not to disturb the photosensitive scales. I take several shots and ask the doctor more questions: what he knows about its feeding pattern, mating, its rarity, and finally, how he found it. He is less excited than I expected. He insists we retreat to the hotel, he says it is time for a nap, that he never misses his afternoon nap.

"I apologize. There is not much more I can tell you presently. We need to find a female specimen. Let us go, I am tired."

I meet Ajça that night at the restaurant. She's a buxom, full-hipped young woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and bright teeth. She asks me several questions about America as we sit around the table sipping raki and nibbling on olives and cheese. Dr. Karaman translates for her. They are questions that dispense with small talk and get right to the point. Foreign policy, science, poverty. The doctor looks proud. He touches her hand, her leg, her cheek. He doesn't stop smiling. But she is preoccupied with her questions to

me and brushes him away as she would a fly. Her hands are slender, her nails painted crimson. She still wears her wedding ring.

After our third round of drinks, I feel warm inside. A friend of Ajça's shows up and they hug, gabbing and laughing like school-girls sharing rumours. They look over to me more than once. "Her name is Sibel," the doctor says, leaning over. "She is a lion, my friend. Just like this one." He pinches Ajça in her side and she swats at him with her crimson nails. Sibel is more fair-haired, but with a figure not unlike her friend's. She sits down next to me and crosses her legs. Under the table, I slip my wedding ring off and hide it in my inside pocket.

A band starts up in the corner of the room and a belly dancer slithers her way around the tables, clicking castanets at her hips. The waiter brings us four kebabs. It goes down well with the raki. Warm flatbread topped with shaved lamb, thick yoghurt, a garlic and eggplant puree, and a heap of fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, and bell peppers. I'm talking more now. I'm boasting about my credentials as a journalist and admitting what a cutthroat line of work it is. I've had one too many rakis to care what foolishness escapes my mouth. The girls listen without understanding a word I'm saying, Ajça still fending off the doctor's advances. Sibel scoops a forkful of kebab from my plate and feeds it to me. The belly dancer slinks by and drifts a scented red scarf around my neck. The waiter brings us another round.

It's past midnight by the time we leave, but the girls have disappeared and Dr. Karaman looks irritated.

"Where are they?" I ask.

"We will sleep alone tonight, my friend. It is Ajça's wish. Do not worry for we will see them tomorrow, after we butterfly. They are accompanying us back to Istanbul."

We share a room. Dr. Karaman doesn't undress. He reclines on his bed, the springs squeaking under his weight, and falls asleep instantly. Soon he's snoring. His breathing is laboured and uneven; he's gurgling and swallowing, gasping for air at times. I can tell he's dreaming.

I get under my covers and turn off the lamp. The moon lights up the middle of my bed, casting a broad band across my chest and up the wall. I look at the clock and realize it's early

evening at home. Laura should be home from work by now, if she went in to work at all this week. I picture her with him again, can't steer it clear from my mind. I asked my editor how one knows he should end it. He said you could never know, but you should decide if it would hurt more to forgive than to say goodbye. He also said that you should find every excuse to hold on. So I search for a memory there in the moonlight, a moment to capture our marriage. But nothing crystallizes. I can't recall anything good about us in the past six months. Just coming to bed after a late day at work and lying next to her, facing the wall. The smell of her there. How can I blame her? I realize that if I had her letter with me, if I hadn't left it in Istanbul, I'd read it. But thinking this makes me tired. It makes me realize that I just don't want to think of it at all.

Dr. Karaman's snoring grows louder. Just before I nod off, he moans loudly and it jerks me from half-slumber. Then he starts talking in his sleep—a panicky string of Turkish words coursing from his mouth—followed by a short, powerful blast of fright. I say his name and he wakes up with a large sucking sound. He opens his eyes and looks at me and they are as empty as before.

The pasture is bathed in a morning dew that quickly evaporates when the sun peeks over the eastern tree line. Dr. Karaman is refreshed and spry, apparently remembering nothing of his dreams. As he unloads his nets and jars from the hatch of the SUV, he whistles and stretches and drinks the fresh air in through his flaring nostrils. On the ride out, feathers of fog hung low to the ground in the ditches along the highway, but now the air is warming. I load film in my camera and make a few preliminary notes. The stretch of pasture before us is still asleep, but soon stirs as we skulk through the knee-high grass of its fringe and wade into a perfume of Turkish wildflowers, yellow daisies, and milkweed. Within a minute of reaching an opening, a cloud of butterflies tumbles up into the air and blocks the ascending sun, temporarily casting the valley under a moving shadow. The doctor does not give chase, but watches, as I do, as it floats back down on a patch not forty yards away.

By mid-day the doctor has caught eight butterflies, one of which he boasts is a migrant species from South Africa. Under the shade of a bay tree on the northern end of the field, we spot two tessellated skippers mating on a puddling pond. Dr. Karaman qui-

etly crouches down and closes in. He nets them from behind but the male escapes. He whips the net, so it loops over and traps the female between the mesh and the grass next to the pond. To prevent her from beating the scales off her wings, he stuns her by pinching her thorax. I open the killing jar and the smell of ethyl acetate pervades the air. Within two minutes of being in the jar with the lid closed tight, the female skipper stops moving. She is not dead, but she will be. We wait another fifteen minutes to ensure she won't revive during pinning, and then Dr. Karaman clears a spot in the grass and pins the female to the spreading board—one in the thorax and two behind the main arteries of the wings. He does this with the disaffected air of a true scientist, and I can't help envying him for it.

But we have yet to find a female specimen of *Apollo Karamani*, and as the afternoon wears thin, the doctor becomes impatient. He no longer creeps up on the insects, but charges them with his net held high. He does this unsuccessfully, not only because it is widely known among lepidopterists as a failed technique, but because he wobbles and stumbles when he runs, like a toddler in diapers. Finally, after the sun has completely submerged below the syrupy blur of Mt. Uludag's peak, I lay my hand on his shoulder, and he knows. He doesn't say anything. We walk back to the car, pack up the equipment, and leave.

While I drive the SUV, the doctor sits with Ajça in the back seat. He's pouring twelve-year-old scotch into Dixie cups, offering Sibel some in front. He skipped his nap and started in as soon as we hit town—a grieving, drowning want that he's now turned into a celebration. I'm trying to concentrate on the road, but Sibel's hand is resting on the inside of my thigh. For the first time, I can really smell her. Her perfume is cheap, chemically. The Turks are passing on both sides, honking or flashing their lights to let me know they're coming. They have no respect for lane control and sometimes pass on the shoulder, their wheels spinning dirt up from the ditch. Sibel turns the radio up and jiggles her shoulders to a bad Turkish pop song. In the rear view mirror, I see the doctor's hand on the seat, a cautious distance from Ajça's leg, the ringed fingers ready to crawl over given the right sign. It's all a little maddening for me. I reach over to turn the radio down, but Sibel blasts

it up again and gives another shake. I look in the mirror and now Dr. Karaman's all over Ajça. His hands are everywhere. I can't see her face—he's pressed up against her—but then her hand springs out and slaps him across the cheek. The doctor jumps back, his eyes afire, his face red. He starts yelling and she starts yelling back. It's all like a silent movie with a heavy musical score. Sibel leans over shouting between the seats. I can't see anything in the mirror now, but the dial of the radio is free, so I turn it off and edge the car to an off ramp. The doctor's low, barking voice stands out, but the girls are doubling up on him. I come to a full stop at the entrance to a shopping centre, the doors swing open and the girls are gone. The doctor gets in the front seat and slams the door.

"Drive," he says, without looking at me.

Once home, I go straight to my room to lie down, breathe. I can hear him pacing the floor upstairs, then he's on the phone with her, more yelling, and then he's pacing again. I think of going up to talk to him, settle him down, but no. I just don't know. Better to let him seethe a while than to coax out any unmanageable feelings too soon. This I know.

I pack my things for tomorrow's flight and then lie in bed and wait for sleep. Just before I nod off, I hear a crash on the upper floor. Then pounding and an awful shrill noise, like burning ants. I rush up the steps, taking two at a time, and find the doctor kneeling on the floor, broken glass scattered like ice crystals across the hardwood, the oak cabinets in disarray, one knocked right over on its side. It is he who is making this shrill noise, this bear of a man crying. It doesn't seem to come from his mouth, but from somewhere deep in the joints of his hands and knees. The display cases have all been shattered and specimens are everywhere. I rush towards him, but he raises his arms and I stop. He is squeezing fistfuls of butterflies, hammering them against his temples. Blood runs down his hands and along his wrists, smudged in his hair. I can see the tips of burnt amber, violet, olive wings poking through his fingers. He releases them and sweeps more up from the shards of glass around his knuckles. Again, he squeezes. Finally, his hands go limp and he stops crying; he crumples to the floor in a puddle of tears and blood and broken butterflies. Alone. Me with him.

I sit with him into the morning while they stitch his hands. For a long time, he says nothing and we listen to the hollow sounds of gurneys rolling from room to room in the hospital corridor. Then, for the first time, he asks about my wife. My wife. I cannot answer him in full sentences. They break off. I end everything with sorry. He puts his arm around me and calls me *arkadas*: friend. "Let me tell you something, my friend," he says. "The first two butterfly species I discovered are named after my wives. So what could I do with this third one?" He laughs and clutches my hand in his bandaged hand. "It's a disastrous name. Disastrous." He holds me tight and we stop moving. I stop breathing, just for a moment.

When I leave, I don't say goodbye. As the nurse is talking to him, I pick up my bags and walk towards the exit, without looking back. I am alarmed to be on a plane again, at the airport, on the way home. I've been transported there by pure instinct, blackened and insensible. The space between then and now is gone, never was. The steward looks me up and down: there is blood on my hands, my jacket, my trousers; I didn't have time to shave.

The letter is written in red ink. I flip it over, smooth it out, study her handwriting. I don't read it for a whole two minutes because I can't get over the red ink. It mourns along the page, stops at the ends of sentences with deep, blotchy smudges that bubble up, dried out, like impasto. It says what I thought it would say. It says *sorry*. *It was a mistake*. It pleads and pleads but it is angry too, and I want to hit myself over the head with how justified that anger is. At the end of the letter she mentions the foot massages and peppermint lotion. *Those moments*. And I see, yes, that they were moments. They are moments, retrievable to me.

I take my ring out of my inside pocket and slip it back on my finger. It feels cold and heavy, and I'm scared it may never feel any other way.