

Dissimilar Similarities

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September is not just a month of melancholy; it is also the beginning of joy and excitement because school opens again, which means great happiness for students. Azad, who had made his university selections that month, was working at a construction site in Elazığ over the summer to save some money for school and to ease his dad's huge economic burden. He woke up at first light and hurried to the construction-site tent where he would have his breakfast. As he did so, he wondered what he was doing at that strange site in the middle of nowhere, where the heat penetrated his skull to short-circuit his brain cells. In a world as vast as the wallets of subcontractor bosses, where the living conditions were severe and human life was cheap, what was he doing here? He was supposed to be having the time of his life as a boy of eighteen, like his classmates, enjoying the summer holiday. Countless times he felt his sweating body dry as he toiled into the evening shift, and countless times he cursed his fate. No matter how much he resisted the urge to put the blame on Allah, he couldn't help falling into a spiritual abyss.

He stood in the breakfast line and waited. One by one, people took their food and sat around the misshapen five- or six-legged tables made from surplus wood from the building's foundation. They weren't even aware of the way the lumps of bread got stuck in their throats; they enjoyed eating as much as anyone could enjoy eating in fear. The reason for their fear was the terrible foreman who would soon arrive and yell "off to work" in a voice that had no rival, even in the most ferocious

animal. This foreman had no qualms about walking all over the workers just to earn the subcontractor's favor.

Azad took his food and sat quietly next to a man sitting at the misshapen table. The man, who was well past the age of fifty and had angelic white hair, could barely chew the stale bread because his teeth were as uneven as a mountain range. The man wanted to finish his food and leave as soon as possible, since the sounds he made while eating were disturbing even to himself. A mouth with no teeth guaranteed a stomach with no food.

Azad couldn't help daydreaming while he ate. University selections would soon be announced, and he would be rid of this damned place. Yet, if he didn't want to be penniless and sad during his school years, he had to work harder. While everyone else took their showers at five in the afternoon, he stayed to put in more than two hours of overtime. He forced himself to hang in there a little while longer, and sometimes he spent those endless two hours with tears in his eyes. When his shift was over, he would quietly walk to the barracks, which is what the construction-site dormitories were called. They were no different than prisons, except here people were enslaved despite their freedom. This was his twenty-eighth day, and he was absolutely sick of it.

After dinner, his body completely drained, he collapsed on the bed. Too tired to think about the next day, he drifted into a deep and exhausted sleep. The twenty-ninth day wasn't really much different, except he wandered through the hills during lunch break try-

ing to get a signal on his phone, which had no reception on low ground, so that he could hear the voice of his long-missed mother. He finally got a signal, as well as a lump in his throat the moment he heard his mother's heavenly voice. "I'm fine," was all he could say.

Azad, who was from Diyarbakır, didn't speak Turkish well, and so he usually remained quiet on occasions when Turkish was spoken, well aware that Kurdish was understood to stand for separatism in Turkey. He was exposed to the same kind of cultural brainwashing during the nine months he spent at schools under the reign of Turkish culture as he experienced over the three months he spent at home under the reign of Kurdish culture. This was the reason he chose silence in both cases.

After his shift, he climbed to the eighth floor of the unfinished building, both to get some rest and to be closer to the sky. He took out the tobacco he had wrapped up in a page torn from a book. The tobacco was damp from his toiling body's sweat. He rolled himself a whopping, finger-thick cigarette and lit it, cupping his hands for protection against the wind. The light was as short-lived as his hopes. He took a deep drag, inflicting such a murderous assault on his lungs that he might have been preparing his body for suicide. Before he could exhale, his phone rang. It was his oldest brother. He was able to speak only after overcoming the shock – a state between happiness and astonishment – of hearing his brother tell him that the student lists had been announced, and he'd been accepted at university in Malatya. This was no ordinary news. His name, Azad, meant freedom in Kurdish, and now, for the first time in his life, this meant something to him. He was delighted because he'd finally be rid of this damned place, but also at the thought of hearing his father say "my son

will be a success" because he'd passed the university exam. Happiness was not a difficult thing for Azad to describe; he had gone beyond the limits of pain in his life and now, deep inside, he felt he deserved to be happy. He ran to the barracks to give his friends the good news, knowing how dulled their minds were by their awful lives at the construction site. A festive mood overtook the barracks, his news renewing the hopes of those who had given up on life. Azad, at only eighteen, was now liberated from a life at the site that would have swiftly consumed him.

He went to pack up. First thing next day, he would go to his hometown and then on to university. His mind was bombarded with daydreams. He stayed in Diyarbakır for two days, then bid farewell to his family. The road from Diyarbakır to Malatya began to seem holy to him. The longer the journey, the longer the circumambulation. Malatya was as holy to him as Kabba was to Muslims now; as sacred as a church, a mosque or a synagogue, because it was a place of salvation. University was a place of resurrection and renewal for Azad.

On the first day of school, he marvelled at the immense classrooms that easily held fifty-five students. In the schools he had gone to before, classrooms that had been built for twenty people were crammed with fifty students. The size of the classrooms alone was enough for him to conclude that university was good. Here different people from all corners of Turkey were gathered in one place. As if the imposition of two cultures weren't enough, students now came from foreign countries as well, which was a great source of distress for Azad. In the first weeks of school, he fell behind a bit, but as he built new relationships and friendships, he slowly grew accustomed to his surroundings and never missed life at the construction site.

Azad sat in the back, and never spoke until the end of each class. He grew bored with university, while everyone else was having fun. Unable to find his Kurdish identity within a Turkish system, he began to watch life pass him by. Meanwhile, there was another boy named Azat who seemed to be as isolated and detached from the world as Azad was. This boy dressed and behaved unusually; he was different from other students, and also a bit peculiar in Azad's opinion. He had come to Turkey from Turkmenistan. Azad was intrigued by their similar demeanor in class and the similarity of their names – only the last letters were different – and these similarities drew Azad to Azat.

Both names had Arabic origins as well as the same meaning: freedom. Azad began pondering these similarities, as well as their shared silence in the classroom, then felt himself begin to empathize with Azat. Considering the pain Azad had experienced in his life – first being treated like a step-child, then like an immigrant oppressed by the Turkish regime, despite being a citizen of this country – how in the world would Azat, who was a citizen of another country, keep hope alive in Turkey?

As the days went by, Azad and Azat started to spend time together. Azad's broken Turkish was a little better than Azat's, and when someone told a joke, Azad had to explain it to Azat. Because of the different nuances of humor between their countries, Azat asked for Azad's help in understanding the jokes.

Friday was a fine day for students, as the weekend lay ahead: a time for festivities or to get some rest. Azad tried to familiarize Azat with Turkish culture, while Azat introduced Azad to the culture of Turkmenistan. Sometimes they discovered very peculiar aspects of the cultures, and the differences be-

tween notions of family and lifestyles had begun to entertain them. One time, when Azad liked a girl but found it difficult to talk to her, Azat was quite surprised because no one experienced this difficulty in Turkmenistan, where everyone could easily talk to whomever they pleased. Azad wished he was in Turkmenistan. Such things weren't so easy in Turkey, which was a little on the conservative side. The separation of Turkmenistan from the Soviet Federation in 1991 separated only their borders; its culture remained very similar to Russian culture and was much more open than Turkey. Of course, it was a little more difficult for Azad. If life in Turkey was conservative, Diyarbakır was even moreso. Azad, who was already living in two different cultures within Turkey, began to be influenced by a new culture, one that combined the cultures of Turkmenistan and Russia.

Azad and Azat decided to move in together, figuring that since they were already spending so much time together at school, they might as well share an apartment. The suggestion was made by Azat, but Azad also thought it was a good idea, so they went ahead with the plan.

Azad tried to help Azat with his Turkish, so that they could both become more fluent. The Turkish they now spoke had nothing to do with what they had spoken on the first day of school; they were more competent and spoke with more confidence. Azad also started to teach Azat a bit of Kurdish, while Azat started to teach Azad a little Turkmen.

"Life is so full of surprises," said Azad. "It brings together two similar names, two similar lives and fates. The two combined create a whole new life. Certain situations are out of our control, such as where we are born, our gender, race or family. Since we have no power to decide these things, we shouldn't be discriminated against because of them; if

someone is going to question my language, he should question Allah first as he is the one who's responsible, if anyone is. There is another aspect to our differences, which is a gift. All the many differences and similarities between us are nothing but wealth." He looked at Azat. "I'm glad we met, brother. I'm glad I got to know you. Otherwise, I wouldn't be so rich now." He took a long drag from the finger-thick cigarette he'd rolled, just as he'd done that day on the construction site.

School ended in June. Azat would go to Turkmenistan and Azad to Diyarbakır. One of them was going to a different country, Turkmenistan, while the other was going to a different country-within-a-country. They would each rejoin their own cultures, neither sure of whether this would be a good thing or a bad one. When they were together, they always talked about how much they missed their homes. Would they finally satisfy their longing, or would they embark on new adventures? Azat, who had bought his plane ticket to Turkmenistan in advance, was happy to be rejoining his family, but he was also sad to be separated from Azad, whom he now felt was a brother. Azad shared these feelings too: they lived their lives on a fine line between sadness and joy, which might have had something to do with their names.

They walked to the airport together when it was time for Azat to go. With only minutes to spare until his departure, he had to go through passport control. Separation is probably the most difficult thing in life. Who

is the saddest: the one who leaves, or the one left behind? Who suffers more for the rest of his life? The two friends had embraced different lifestyles and different cultures with no problem, as brothers. Would there be war in the world if everyone lived like Azat and Azad?

They hugged each other and Azat walked towards the plane. Azad watched for a while, then went back home. Sitting down on the worn couch that could barely hold one person's weight, he took the tobacco tin from his pocket, rolled a fat cigarette, took a deep drag and started to think about all the things he had experienced, and the things still to come.

The smoke burned his throat, and his eyes started to water. He thought first about humanity's perfection, which went beyond language, religion and race. He had witnessed how a beautiful friendship could be born from so many differences. Although it was possible he wouldn't experience such a thing ever again, the smile on his face showed how content he was to have experienced it. As he reached the end of his cigarette, he stood up and prepared to go to the bus station with the suitcase he'd already packed. The difference was there again; one of them left Malatya by bus and the other by plane. Yet there were similarities again as well. They were both leaving the place where they'd started a new life, and were heading to places where they both hoped to find the loves of their lives.