

istanbul noir

EDITED BY MUSTAFA ZİYALAN & AMY SPANGLER

FERYAL TİLMAÇ RIZA KIRAÇ HİKMET HÜKÜMENOĞLU

BEHÇET ÇELİK İSMAİL GÜZELSOY LYDIA LUNCH AND OTHERS



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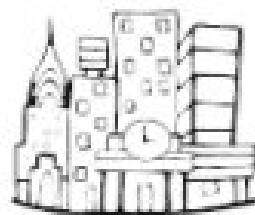


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MUSTAFA ZİYALAN & AMY SPANGLER

Translated by Amy Spangler & Mustafa Ziyalan



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This collection is comprised of works of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the authors' imaginations. Any resemblance to real events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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INTRODUCTION

TRANSGRESSION AND THE STRAIT: POLITICS, PASSION, AND PAIN

Istanbul is the place where East meets West, literally. It is, as convention would have it, a meeting point, a crossroads. At the same time, it marks the spot where geography is irreparably rent in two; it is a fissure in the continuum, a seething rupture, so to speak. The only city in the world to lie smack dab at the junction of two continents, Europe and Asia, Istanbul is split down the middle by the Bosphorus Strait, pierced by the Golden Horn, and caressed by the Black and Marmara seas. In short, with her “tough love,” Mother Nature has pummeled and groomed this place into one of the most stunning geographical locations on earth.

Indeed, Istanbul has been the site of the collision and collusion, of the fracturing and the fusion of cultures, for millennia. Capital of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) and Ottoman empires, the city formerly known as Byzantium and then Constantinople became Istanbul (incidentally, a word derived from the Greek term for “in the city”) after being conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. Many Christian Greeks remained and even flourished in Istanbul following Byzantium’s defeat at the hands of the Muslim Ottomans. Under Ottoman rule, Istanbul became known as *alem-penah*—“refuge of the universe,” a haven for myriad religious and ethnic groups. When the Jews were expelled during the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 by the Spanish king, the Ottoman Sultan welcomed them with open arms. As the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul attracted hundreds of thousands of people for centuries from within the empire’s vast territories and beyond. In the wake of the empire’s demise, the Turkish Republic (founded in 1923) has served this legacy well. Waves of immigration, especially since the 1950s, have increased the city’s population by more than tenfold: Turks, Kurds, Laz, Alevis, Circassians, Bosnians, Albanians, Macedonians, etc. You get the picture. A mosaic, a melting pot, a vat of oil and water—call it what you will, there is no denying that Istanbul has always been ethnically, socially, and religiously cosmopolitan to the core.

As submissions for *Istanbul Noir* started to come in, it became increasingly clear to us that what was taking shape was not just some collection of dark stories set in old Stamboul, but a rich portrait of the city itself—or, at the very least, a particularly revealing series of snapshots. Mind you, it is a city shaped largely by the often vicious ebb and tide of the nation’s politics. Although Ankara may be the capital of the Republic of Turkey, the truth of the matter is, with a good twelve million people and thus a fifth of its population, Istanbul is the throbbing, often bleeding, heart of the country’s politics. And it shows.

In a tumultuous and notoriously unreliable city where the only constant is instability, one often seeks solace in humor. You will get a dose of that in at least a couple of the stories in this collection. The humor is, we hope, appropriately dark. Rather (but not entirely) antithetical to this humor is a mood that also predominates in several of the pieces: *hüzün*. Like many of the terms you’ll find in the glossary at the end of this book, *hüzün* is one of those difficult-to-translate concepts integral to the culture of Turkey and the Turkish language, and as a characteristic mood of the inhabitants of this city, several of the stories in this collection are imbued with it. *Hüzün* is a kind of melancholy, a

heaviness or a sadness of heart. It is a world pervaded by gray, a state of weariness and hopelessness and lethargy. It is a word for which, arguably, there is no equivalent in English. It is an indescribable mood that you can describe for hours. And in that respect, it is a lot like Istanbul.

A sadomasochistic metropolis in equal measures self-important and self-loathing, Istanbul is rife with contradiction. It is a living conundrum: impossible to pin down and moody as hell. It is raw and human, vibrant and pulsating. It is a city of blood and concrete, a palimpsest of memorials and scars that will not be erased.

Istanbul's history has been marked by the clashing of wills, battling sometimes for life, sometimes for power, often, ultimately, for both. The last several violence-riddled decades in particular have left an indelible mark on the contemporary fabric of the city, not to mention on the minds, bodies, and souls of its people. The knife has cut deep, and the wounds may never completely heal.

This holds true especially for the coup of 1980, which marked a violent and painful rupture in the history of the Turkish Republic. In its efforts to squelch the political left, the state effectively crushed the spirit of an entire generation, extinguishing hope and erecting on its ashes an apolitical society, shaped to the mold of consumerism. An inexhaustible source of heartache and melancholy, bitterness and rage, the involuntary transition from a society fermenting with dissidence to one numbed to the point of docility has had a pervasive impact upon the Turkish people, palpable in many of the stories in this volume.

The political vacuum created by the subjugation of the left was soon filled by the emergence of new forms of nationalism and Islamism. While the history of the Republic is fraught with efforts to galvanize Turkish identity at the expense of others—such as the incitement of the “Riots of September 6–7” in 1955, during which Greeks and other non-Muslims and their property in Istanbul suffered widespread attacks, the banning of the Kurdish language, and myriad other discriminatory practices and policies targeting “non-Turks”—in its most recent guise, hysterical ultra-nationalism has become normalized. The Turkish state continues to wage a nearly twenty-five-year war against Kurdish rebels in the southeast, and a psychological war throughout the nation. With displaced Kurds heading west, Istanbul has become rife with ethnic tensions—the perfect breeding ground for paranoia. In a state that propagates its own exaltation by means of a ban on “insulting Turkishness” (Law 301), self-esteem is a shaky business, and targets for venting your own insecurity are easy to come by. Hence the assassination of Hrant Dink, an intrepid Armenian journalist convicted of 301, just two years ago—in broad daylight on a lazy day in the heart of Istanbul, nonetheless.

Together with ultra-nationalism, the post-1980 era has also seen the rise of Islamic movements, ranging from the most radical marginal groups, like Hezbollah, to the current ruling party, the “moderate conservative” Justice and Development Party (AKP). The party of a marginalized majority, oppressed by the militantly secular elite cultivated by founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the early years of the Republic, AKP is a nightmare-come-true for many, who believe that they will not stay “moderate” for long.

Lying at the crossroads of East and West, Istanbul belongs to neither and to both, and it is precisely this elusive in-betweenness upon which the city thrives. No matter how much blood is spilled trying to conform to Western standards, they just don't stick in this slippery city. Here, you don't break the rules, you forge a loophole through them. It is no coincidence that transvestites are generally banished to the gritty back streets of Istanbul, while one of Turkey's most popular icons is an outrageous and outspoken transsexual, cherished by families throughout the nation.

A den of sin and a bastion of virtue, Istanbul is a fog-covered playground of power and

resistance, denial and repression, and if you don't know the tricks of the game, you'll likely feel the urge to abandon your marbles and go.

Some people here say that you're a true Istanbulite when you start insisting that you're leaving, but you never do. Others insist that there's no such thing as a true Istanbulite—everyone comes from somewhere, but that somewhere is never Istanbul. These clichés are perhaps testimony to this city's simultaneous push and pull, its allure—whether aesthetic, economic, mystical, inexplicable, or otherwise—and its tendency to either eradicate or repulse its own. It is a city of love and of hate, where passions ride high and often come crashing down with a vengeance.

Welcome to *Istanbul Noir*: Leave your shoes, and expectations, at the door.

Mustafa Ziyalan & Amy Spangler

Istanbul, Turkey

August 2008

PART I

LUST & VENGEANCE

THE TONGUE OF THE FLAMES

BY İSMAIL GÜZELSOY

Büyükada

How big a mistake can one possibly make? How much ruin can we possibly bring upon ourselves, our loved ones, or even strangers? Such questions would have sounded ridiculous to me when I was in my twenties. Back then, at most, you'd take a gun and empty two clips into people you didn't know from a hole in the wall. Okay, let's make that three clips. How many people can you kill at once? Or, for example, how deadly a bomb can you build on your own? That should be the true yardstick of how unhinged one is: How much havoc can you, as an individual, wreak upon the world? That was how I thought, and that was the reason, I imagine, why I was a guy who simply didn't give a damn. I was so damn sure that the highest price I'd pay for any mistake couldn't be more than my own life.

Now, as I do some soul-searching before boarding the ferry to the Princes' Islands from Sirkeci, I see how much I've changed over the last twelve years. Without understanding, or even realizing it, I have become another person all together.

I was calm and certain, as if going through the motions I went through countless times every day. As if every day I'd put in a token and pass through the turnstiles, checking over and over again whether the safety was off on the .45 caliber Beretta in my coat pocket, caressing the bag containing the painful last moments of the twelve loved ones I had lost.

I had tweaked my plans to avenge those twelve as soon as I was released from prison in my mind so many times, that by now I wasn't sure if I was living in reality, or only dreaming in the ward about the moment I'd confront the maniac responsible for their slaughter. But then, what did it matter! The truth is, there was only one clue to help me discern fantasy from reality: The setting for that scene of revenge in my dreams was a dark alley full of crime and vice, where thugs settled scores. I would imagine how he, with his graying hair, dreamy eyes, and the self-confidence of a comic book hero, would collapse at long last, his back against a wall, full of fear, finally aware that there was no escape from my wrath. The location would be a street of transvestites and pimps who knew well and good when to look the other way; when cornered in that street, Nigel's faint smirk and wistful expression would transform into a look of utter horror. Clearly understanding the end I had planned for him, he'd be able to remain standing only as long as he was leaning firmly against a wall of obscene graffiti. Finally, he would concede defeat, falling to his knees in a dirty puddle of rain.

I had been fantasizing about dozens of variations of this scenario every night, like a child who never gets tired of listening to the same fairy tale over and over. I had no choice. Then I'd plan how and where to look for him. This part worried me most of all. It was possible that Nigel, knowing my release date, had already made his escape. Yet the note he'd attached to the Polaroid that he sent with the last book (which I now kept next to the Beretta) made me think that he was as prepared and eager for the second round as I was: *Büyükada. I'm waiting for you.*

So there I was, gliding through the Sea of Marmara on a ship rocked by a rough and humid breeze. I could see the Princes' Islands lined up in a row on the horizon, rising like the décor of a

dream emerging from the fog. I thought that as I drew closer, certainly the spell would come to an end and I would be confronted with the cold reality of the island's earth. Spread over the hilly terrain of Büyükada, a dark forest shivered in the blast of harsh wind, allowing a glimpse of magnificent mansions before quickly concealing them once again. This shiny paradise that I used to visit as a child during summer vacations now stood before me in a diabolic visage, surrounded by fog and dark clouds heavy with rain. The closer I got, the better I understood why Nigel had chosen this place for our final showdown. He didn't want anyone else involved in this final reckoning. Nobody else would see us there in that little world of forests and isolated houses. We were now in the heart of nothingness. This is where we were to settle accounts. Ours was to be the confrontation of two ferocious, raging animals. Far from everyone and everything ... But why was he dragging me all the way out here, when in his own twisted mind he'd already gotten his revenge for Xenia's death?

The death of Xenia was the result of a complicated and unfortunate game he could never buy into, he could never understand. When he was burning my loved ones alive he was righting a wrong in his mind, yet what he did indicated how hard it was for him to accept the state of things. Yes, his girlfriend Xenia was in love with me. That, essentially, was the fact he could not stomach. That was the reason why he was rubbing out my loved ones; the massacre he had carried out was not a response to my burning Xenia to death in a hotel room. I'm not fooling myself; I say it in all sincerity: The only reason Nigel killed twelve people I loved was his girlfriend's passionate love for me. If you asked him, he'd play weird games with his broken Turkish, so you'd see that his profession as an acrobat and juggler had shaped his speech too. He was an acrobat of the mind, a juggler of thought. He knew very well that he could fool others as long as he could fool himself. The way he put it thirteen years ago in Çiçek Pasajı: "If you want others to believe your lie, you first have to believe it yourself. That way you'll at least have a chance of convincing everybody else of equal intelligence." During that first lengthy conversation we had, spiced with laughter, Xenia did not look impressed by all his cunning, quasi-philosophical talk; she kept looking at me with a bored expression. You didn't have to be a genius to realize that she wasn't enjoying her lover's conversation, that she did not share the same world with him. Xenia, in stark contrast to the magnificent harmony they created on stage, was remote, disinterested, and cold to Nigel in everyday life.

When Nigel went to the bathroom, I leaned closer to the young woman and said, in way of striking up a conversation: "You don't seem to be enjoying yourself."

I expected her to say something like, *I'm a little tired*, but she kept her eyes on me for some time before finally responding: "I'm so bored of him. But that's understandable, isn't it? That I should grow tired of listening to the same joke a thousand times? Women like novelty more than men do, that's why it's the men who have always been heroes, and women the prizes."

I stared at her, my mouth agape. Back then neither Nigel nor Xenia spoke Turkish; our common language was English. I was wondering whether or not I had understood the woman correctly.

"I'm Count Dracula's homegirl, you better watch out," she said, and laughed. She placed her mouth on the red wine glass lasciviously; she puckered her lips, which were the same color as the wine, and sucked the half-full glass dry in one long sip. She closed her eyes, savoring the intense pleasure coming over her; she stayed like that for a moment, then peered at me intensely. She wasn't smiling anymore; she now looked at me with an alluring, even aggressive invitation. For an instant, her big black pupils wandered sideways; I glanced at the reflection in the windowpane. Nigel was walking back toward our table. Xenia, in a low voice, said: "You can speak Arabic, Persian, English, and Turkish. We can't possibly find anyone else like you. He is ready to pay twice as much as he

offered you. Between you and me.” She smiled again. She had managed to create a secret between us. ~~And a shared secret is an invitation to further shared secrets, and sins. I was mature enough to understand that; seasoned enough to bear the consequences, however, I was not.~~

If I had to describe what we experienced after that night in a single word, I’d say “fun.” It was a journey laced with anxiety, victory, and pleasure. Sometimes Xenia did such reckless things that I, fearful of the end of that magical dream, was compelled to rein her in. Her way of groping me, ignoring her boyfriend who stood with his back to us, planting a kiss on my lips before taking the stage, winking at me mischievously while sitting at a crowded table, well within her boyfriend’s field of vision, caressing my legs under the table sometimes ... perhaps these and other dangerous games were expressions of the character traits her early Hollywood femme-fatale looks implied; but I was never as aggressive and courageous in keeping up with her as the men in those films. And that spelled doom for our relationship.

The show was to be staged in a crowded hall in Cairo. That was where I woke up from a sweet fantasy which had lasted for over a year. Nigel was moving about on the stage and in the hall in a fake costume; he was levitating and performing some improvised exotic dance. Xenia would take the stage the moment the clarinet solo started. She’d be standing in front of the mirror which would convey the images, because the first few minutes of the show consisted of reflections. The audience would see her as an image appearing and disappearing at different spots of the stage. She’d wear a modernized version of a harem outfit, a bustier gilded with gold leaves, showcasing her fair skin with stunning generosity, and a flowing skirt, covered with glittering scales. Every time she made her entrance in that costume, an odd silence would fall over the audience, followed by deafening applause. We were used to it. Xenia was an angel, an image, an apparition which would disappear at once and materialize again somewhere else in the hall, only to disappear again. But that night when her turn came, Xenia did not go out in front of the conveyor mirror.

Suddenly the music stopped. Nigel came over to where we were. He glared at his girlfriend, who had grabbed me by the collar and was manhandling me. “What’s going on here?” he asked. Just as the woman was parting her lips to say something, a deafening, defiant roar rose from the audience.

I quickly took advantage of that window of opportunity. “She’s having cramps and asked me for a painkiller.”

I didn’t know how much of the lie Nigel believed, but he silently turned around, stepped onto the platform where his conveyor mirror was, and said, “We’ll start over. Please find a more appropriate time and place to take your painkiller.” His voice, strangely enough, didn’t sound angry. Nevertheless I decided to be more careful from then on and to warn Xenia that she should do the same.

As it turned out, however, I didn’t have to. She managed to stay away from me for eight days following our show in Cairo. She preferred to sit next to her boyfriend, somewhere far away from me to avoid looking at me, to avoid my eyes, all the while aware that they were on her. It seemed the love affair between the two of them had been revived. Xenia laughed with exaggeration, hugged and kissed him time and again even when Nigel was carrying on with his tasteless jokes like he had when I first met them.

As you see, everything I’ve told you so far fits the mold of Hollywood melodramas. I can tell you now that the rest won’t be any different. At least, up until a particular point. That point is also the turning point of my short and pathetic adventure, which started with my trying to talk to Xenia backstage before a show in Jordan.

“We have nothing to talk about, I won’t have anything to do with a coward like you,” she said,

before pushing me aside with her elbow and strutting over to the conveyor mirror platform. I followed her.

“We work together, so we should interact in a civilized manner, even if it will end soon!” I was shouting.

“Okay, so what do you want?” She had raised her voice too.

“Come to my room tonight. We should talk.”

“No, I can’t be alone with you.”

I reached out and grabbed her arm; in the same instant the spotlight came on. Following some confusion, people in the audience started laughing. My arm and part of my face had become visible next to her.

“Let go! What are you doing? You’ll ruin the show,” she said.

“Tonight ...”

“Okay,” she said. “Promise?”

“Yes! Now go,” she said and started her dance. Everything was ruined.

Nigel’s headaches had started again. I didn’t mind much when I heard him whispering to Xenia backstage, “It’s time we found someone to replace this guy.”

Whenever Nigel had a headache, he withdrew to his room and occupied himself with bookbinding. He kept saying that he came from five generations of Hungarian bookbinders, bragging about it at every opportunity. Though I couldn’t really appreciate his craft, I did derive a strange kind of pleasure from the books he bound, as if I was touching some sort of sacred relic. While working as an illusionist, he bound books of various sizes in his spare time, to keep in practice so that down the road he could teach his yet-to-be-born son the fine art, and thus keep the family trade from dying out. Most importantly, I recall him explaining that this occupation was the perfect remedy for a headache. I recall him saying to Xenia once: “Why on earth do you take those stupid painkillers? We should just bind books together.”

That night Xenia came to my room for a few short minutes. “I can’t leave Nigel alone. Let’s talk in Istanbul tomorrow,” she said, and then she quickly made her way, barefoot, across the hardwood floor of the hotel, back to her room down the hall.

We were in Istanbul the next day. There was a knock on the door, so faint that at first I wasn’t even sure that’s what it was. It was careful, reminiscent of the light footsteps on the hardwood floors in the hallway. I emptied my glass of *raki* at once; there was another knock. It was Xenia.

She was talking with a raised eyebrow; I was trying to listen to her. I perceived what she said as disconnected words, not as a meaningful whole. I recalled images from the night she had come to my room for the first time. Scenes from our games, games she had played with increasing audacity. Now she had knocked on my door cautiously, she was telling me what a knucklehead I was, she was going on and on about me not having the balls to face the fact that some things were finished. Perhaps she only said it once, but I kept spinning her words in my head and developed the impression that she was repeating the same thing over and over again. I was contemplating the shadows on her face. It was like watching a riveting thriller: The intimacy I once saw in those shapely eyes was fading away shade by shade, being replaced by an aggressive, shrill, even enraged, façade. The skin of Xenia’s face was cracking, peeling away like topsoil in drought and yielding to the features of an ugly, cruel mythological beast.

I wanted to say, *Oh, my Xenia, even if we have to finish everything, let’s do it gently; we may hurt each other, but let’s not ruin all those beautiful moments.* Or something like that. Instead, a snarl

escaped my lips: “You must die!”

~~My voice scared even me. You would perhaps deem me completely crazy if I told you what happened next, using the same words, in the same order that I did during my interrogation. In fact, the district attorney argued that I was acting the part. I can say this much: What I said and did from that moment on had nothing to do with the person I have been historically. Yes, I believe that the human being lives his or her own life as a historical subject. Every moment builds on the one before. Life progresses like the words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters in a meaningful text. Every time I recall what I did to Xenia, I believe in retrospect that I experienced a strange fracture in the flow of my life the way we pause at an expression at odds with the flow of a text.~~

I wasn't the one who opened the petroleum lamp on the bed stand and hurled the liquid on her. I wasn't the one who screamed, “You've been a witch, and now you should be punished like one, you cunt!” I wasn't the one who took his lighter out of his pocket, all the while savoring the lines of horror breaking out on her face. I wasn't the one who swung the burning lighter, catching the flame on her dress. I wasn't the demon who dashed out and held the door shut as she, engulfed in flames, ran around in a frenzy. Or perhaps it was me, releasing the flames of the hell now in charge of my rage. I made a mistake; just once in my life, I made a mistake.

I was so sure the smell of burnt flesh, hair, and nylon was coming from my own private hell that I casually took out a cigarette once she had ceased trying to force the door. I remember. I was surprised not to find the lighter in its usual place, in my right pocket, and considered for the first time the possibility that these things were true, that they had happened outside my own private dark world, somewhere within this nightmare called life. I remember. I was walking backwards down the hallway trying to understand the uneasy mutterings of the crowd gathering close by, trying to piece together a meaningful whole from whatever they were saying. That, I remember. The rest, I don't. I don't remember that I ran under pouring rain for hours, wandering with a soggy, disintegrating cigarette between my lips before finally returning to the hotel. I don't remember being arrested and put in a hospital. The next thing I remember is how someone with a long face and matty hair questioned me, keeping his deep and glinting eyes on me the whole time: “Why did you burn her?”

* * *

Nigel visited me two months after I went to prison. He looked as calm as ever, but a little worn out. He stared at me, motionless, for some time. When he parted his lips, as if struggling to talk, lines formed on his forehead and around his eyes.

“Why did you kill her?” he asked.

I had lost everything. I didn't owe him anything. I annihilated something which belonged as much to me as it did to him. I smiled.

“You watched the trial; everything was discussed there, everything I did was reported in the papers, with details even I wasn't aware of. What more do you want to know?”

“You owe me. A lot.” He said this in Turkish. Although not on the same par with Xenia, Nigel too was very adept at learning languages.

“What do you think I'm doing here? I'm paying my debts,” I said, smiling.

“I'm talking about what you owe *me*, not the ones running this world,” he shot back, once again in excellent Turkish.

“It's all the same to me. I've lost everything. There's nothing more I can give you.”

“You haven't lost everything; there is always something more to lose. Just wait. You'll see,” he said. He walked away before I had the chance to truly consider his words.

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