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Arif's Refusal to Bargain

SOMETIMES A NAME is a kind of map faintly tracing the route its bearer has followed and perhaps intimating a direction still to be taken. Before I met Arif in one of the oldest quarters of Istanbul, however, I did not think of such things. He was standing just beneath a yawning stone entrance inscribed with the words *Misir Charshisi*—*Market of Egypt* if translated literally from the Turkish.

The Spice Bazaar, as it is also called, is a stone *L* nestled behind the New Mosque as if looking to the larger edifice for protection. The New Mosque, already more than 300 years old, lies within sight of a dozen or so other mosques, including the Aya Sofya, which was once one of Christendom's greatest cathedrals. With its enormous tiled dome among many smaller ones reminiscent of offspring and its two minarets spearing the sky, the New Mosque seemed in hibernation but capable of rousing itself to repel invaders should the need arise. At least that was how it looked to me when I first arrived in Istanbul and my dark hair had not yet oxidized to the powdery white it is now.

Arif, not much more than three feet tall, made the grand doorway of the Spice Bazaar look that much grander. I later discovered that while his legs were correctly proportioned, they had not been properly formed and he therefore leaned heavily on a walking stick. He was disarmingly handsome in spite of the creases age had worn into his forehead and the two front teeth he was missing. Although the stubble on his face was white, the cheeks themselves were taut and his thick eyebrows had remained black. I could not see his hair for the woolen cap he wore. Dull orange, the hat was not pulled down around his head but pointed up, like a blunt minaret. What I remember most about my first sight of Arif, however, was his smile. It made me feel lighter but was somehow more subtle than the levity of humor.

He watched me as I walked past him, his two missing teeth adding an undeniable charm to his grin. Somewhat uncertainly, I smiled back. He addressed me as *Agabey*—a standard greeting among Turkish men—although exactly what he said after that, I am not sure. Fairly easily flustered youth that I was, I walked on.

For a foreigner, especially one fresh out of university, a visit to the Spice Market can be something of an experience. The vendors' niches lining the long corridor are brightly lit and often mirrored or trimmed in gold to magnify the effect. Open sacks of fresh spices, which turned the air pungent, looked almost like ground pigment waiting to be made into paint. There were also dried fruits, nuts, and *lokum* or Turkish Delight. Generally cut into cubes and chalky with powdered sugar, there are so many varieties of Turkish Delight that some vendors stuffed their stalls with nothing else. The dark-haired men themselves, wearing aprons with deep pockets, kept their sleeves rolled up and competed with one another by shouting at each passing buyer.

I walked up and down the long corridor twice, politely turning down the aproned men by patting my chest as they stepped in front of me. Finally I stopped at a stall and eyed everything carefully as if I could distinguish quality almonds from a poorer grade, as if I knew figs gathered at the right time from those prematurely gathered. In the end, I decided on a bag of dates. There was a price written on white cardboard, but I knew that bargaining was a common practice in Turkey and so I asked the vendor how much a kilo would cost.

He pointed to the cardboard sign: 50 Turkish lira. I made an offer of 40, hoping he would counter with 45, which I would have been happy to accept.

This time he pointed to the sign and said, in English, "Fifty."

I was now a little embarrassed. Having never bargained before, I thought I might have gone about it the wrong way. "*Tamam*," I said and nodded.

He snapped open a paper bag and put it on a balance scale. Filling the bag with a silver scoop, he used a cylindrical weight as a counterbalance and added a few more dates until the scale was balanced. He then snatched up the bag, rolled its top down

and handed it to me. "Buyrun."

I handed him a fifty-lira note and thanked him.

"You don't bargain well."

Arif was smiling up at me, two hands on top of his walking stick, the stick itself under his chin as if he might need to prop his head up, too. He had a kind of boyish expression to his old man's face.

"But the prices," I said, "they're already set."

"The Spice Market is not a good place to bargain, it is true, but I can see you don't bargain well."

His English was as clear as mine and I wondered if, in better days, he had been able to afford school abroad. He looked like something of a beggar, his black shoes worn, his tiny trousers shabby. Only his vest, a traditionally patterned and embroidered with gold thread, seemed in good condition.

I shrugged. "It was my first time."

"Ah," he said, "you must learn."

Nodding, I opened the bag of dates and held it out to him.

He reached in and pulled one out. "Teshekkür ederim."

"Bir şey değil," I answered.

"You've learned some Turkish."

"I take lessons once a week. But what about...could you teach me to bargain?"

He smiled, exposing the space where his front teeth had been. "How can I teach you what I myself do not do?"

"You can't bargain?"

He let the pit of the date drop from his mouth to the floor. Then he turned his handsome little face up at me. "I didn't say I *can* not, I said I *do* not."

"You mean you pay the asking price?"

He lifted a hand from his walking stick and asked for another date. I held out the open bag. With fingers almost as brown as the dates, he picked out two more.

"Learn how to bargain," he said popping a date into his mouth. "Watch how Turks do it. Then practice. After a while you'll feel confident, you'll see." Once again he let the pit drop to the floor and then asked, "Where are you from?"

I told him that I had been born in Italy, had moved to England as a boy, and then had attended an American University. I was in Istanbul taking a course on Byzantine art.

“*Chok guzel*,” he said, “how wonderful.” He lifted a finger. “But if you learn how to bargain, then you will have really learned something.” He rubbed his chin, silvery with the beginnings of a beard. “The vendors know English but speak to them in Turkish,” he advised. “Make it seem you know your way around Istanbul.”

“But you just told me—”

“Once you understand how to bargain, maybe you will understand why I do not.” Then he sighed. “I know no Italian, but English and Arabic—Turkish, of course—I speak well enough.”

“Three languages?”

He shrugged. “A little Greek, too.” He held out his hand. “*Benim adim Arif*.”

“Joseph,” I said, shaking his hand. “Giuseppe really?”

“Yusuf. That is your name in Turkish. If I see you again I will call you Yusuf.” He grinned at me, making me feel suddenly buoyant and then, leaning on his walking stick, made his way through the crowded arcade.

With my bag of dates, I exited the market at the opposite end and headed deeper into the old quarter of Istanbul. To avoid getting lost, I followed the tram tracks, which were like silver inlay in the asphalt.

Near the main entrance to the Covered Bazaar stood a single column bound along its impressive height with strips of iron. Perhaps a meter and a half in diameter, it rested atop an enormous pedestal of stone blocks. Held fast by these rusting bands it looked like an Ozymandian leg in a brace.

The bazaar itself, a labyrinthine array of stalls and shops under a vaulted ceiling, was packed with everything from Turkish carpets and Byzantine relics to cheap fezzes and tourist trinkets. Boys swept by with brass trays carrying tiny glasses of tea. Vendors shouted in French, English and Spanish. I was drawn to a stall hung with Turkish vests. I picked out one that looked as traditional as Arif’s.

The bargaining began at 300 lira and my first offer was for half that.

The vendor, his thick forearms crossed over his chest, made a face and muttered a Turkish phrase that clearly meant he was unhappy, but came down to 250.

I started to wander away, not as part of the bargaining but to get a better look at something that had caught my eye in a neighboring stall. The vendor shouted, "Two hundred!"

I thought it was a fair price and I bought it.

By the time I left the bazaar, once again following the tram tracks, I encountered that ill-defined time of day in which the lingering light and deepening shadows made Istanbul a little nebulous, as if the ghosts of all the cities it had ever been were overlapping the one it had become.

A voice shouting "Yusuf! Yusuf!" caught me completely by surprise.

He was there on the sidewalk, altering gravity's pull with that smile of his, the pink of his tongue showing through the gap in his teeth.

I opened my jacket to show him my new waistcoat. "He asked for 300 lira; I paid 200."

Arif nodded. "You've made progress."

When I saw that Arif was standing beside an old spring scale, pity swept through me like a seasonal wind. A bathroom scale like that was used by someone who had no skills to market, no wares to sell, but insisted on the veneer of something to offer in exchange for the lira he received.

"How much," I asked, "to find out my weight?"

Arif recoiled like a turtle pulling its wrinkled head back into its shell. "Friends shouldn't exchange money."

I nodded. "Of course."

"Have you seen the arch of distances?" He gestured toward a fragment of stone fenced off behind the sidewalk.

A sign hung on the fence read: *The Milion. A stone pillar is all that's left of a Byzantine triumphal arch, from which road distances to all corners of the empire were measured. 4th Century A.D.* The marble, which had weathered like a slab of soap, was no longer white and

its streaks of black had become gray smudges.

“Not until now,” I answered. I was curious as to why the Byzantines had chosen this spot for their arch.

Arif shrugged. “They could have chosen the pillar that stands outside the Covered Bazaar.” He waved his hand to indicate an indefinite distance. “They could have chosen another city. Just so long as they always used the same spot.”

“When I come to the Sultanahmet quarter again, will I see you here?”

He shrugged. “*Inshallah*. But I do not live in Istanbul, I live in Mardin. In the southeast, close to the border of Syria. You must come some time.”

“If I come to Mardin, how will I find you?”

He smiled. “Mardin is a small town. You will find me.”

I laughed and said good-bye in Turkish.

“*Güle, güle* Yusuf?”

I went to Sultanahmet many times after that without seeing Arif.

I did, however, learn to bargain. The method I finally settled on was fairly simple. I usually began by offering half of the asking price and usually settled for about three quarters. After the vendor made his “final offer,” beyond which he claimed he simply could not go, I would pretend to lose interest and walk slowly away. Often, a new low price would be called out and the bargain would be struck. If he did not undercut his last offer, I would return a few minutes later and pay it. It was, I felt, a fool-proof method.

When the spring session ended in May, I decided to take up Arif on his suggestion and visit Mardin. I purchased my bus ticket in June—a time when my Turkish friends assured me it would be unbearably hot in Mardin—and set off, hoping I would be able to find Arif.

There was a decidedly Arabic influence visible in the sunburnt stone houses crowded together on a hillside so steep, that stairways often took the place of streets.

Of the two hotels in Mardin, I chose the cheaper. A shabby affair with worn carpeting and cracking plaster walls, it was not

as uncomfortable as it might have been. The real drawback, I discovered, was its proximity to the marketplace. Early the first morning, I was woken by the incessant braying of donkeys. The steepness of Mardin's hill, which made roads scarce, also made donkeys a common form of transport.

The main avenue, on which the hotel was located, was noisy with cars and lined with telephone poles, but its buildings still managed to give off the odor of age. First mentioned by the Assyrians, Mardin was known to be at least 4,000 years old and was probably older. Seasoned by three cultures—Kurdish, Arabic and Turkish—it had a distinctness I hadn't found anywhere else in Turkey.

Although I looked around expectantly as I walked through town, I did not see Arif. I returned to my hotel room that evening a little disappointed.

The following morning was as filled with braying donkeys as the previous. This time, on my way to the marketplace, I spotted Arif. He was standing on a step-stool, making a phone call, still wearing, in spite of the heat, his orange wool cap. Just as I recognized him, he hung up the phone and, as he turned, spotted me.

"Yusuf!"

"*Merhaba*, Arif. It only took a day to find you!"

"Well, as you see, Mardin is not so big. And there is only one marketplace. You're going there now?"

"Yes."

"Good, we can go together. Have you practiced bargaining?"

While he returned the step-stool to a shop owner, I explained my method to him. He seemed to approve.

The marketplace in Mardin was a patchwork of shops, tarp-covered stalls and the open backs of a few trucks. Vendors with neither stall nor truck laid out their goods over carpets.

Once we reached the market, Arif pretended we weren't acquainted because, he said, only traveling vendors didn't know him and I wouldn't be able to bargain fairly.

We worked our separate ways around the stalls, which sold mostly produce and meats, until I saw Arif stopped at the end of a narrow alley. In his browned hands, he was studying a black

vase carved with figures of some sort. Arif did not ask the seller his price, he simply said, "I will give you 250 lira."

The man complained of the low price and then began extolling the workmanship of the vase. He wanted 320 for it.

Arif lifted his chin and raised his dark eyebrows, a gesture that meant *no*. "I will give you 250."

This time the vendor returned the gesture and said, "Three-hundred."

"My friend, I have made my offer."

"I cannot go lower than 275."

"As you wish," Arif said, and leaning on his stick, walked off.

The vendor was too proud or too angry to undercut his last price.

A few minutes later, I caught up with Arif and offered him 25 lira to buy the vase.

He tipped his head back, lifted his eyebrows and clicked his tongue. "I make one offer Yusuf. If the seller accepts my price, then it is God's will that I have this thing. If he does not..." Yusuf shrugged. "It is also God's will."

I thought, *I have my own will* and dismissed Arif's refusal to bargain.

The next day I went back to the marketplace but I did not see Arif. I did, however, spot the antique dealer who had not agreed to Arif's offer. The black vase, which I had not been able to get out of my mind since Arif had let it go, was still there. It was even more beautiful up close. I reached down and lifted it up. Although its elegant shape suggested a potter's wheel, it was so heavy that it might have been carved from stone. I was amazed at how finely the artist had etched palm fronds, bunches of grapes and a woman playing a lyre for a man seated in the palm grove beside her. Its only flaw was a fragment missing from the lip. I thought it was something of a victory when I managed to talk the vendor down to 270 lira.

That night, I walked past the silent marketplace, which had become a haven for scavenging cats, and down a set of steps. Yellow light, visible through small square windows, warmed the stone houses from within. The sky was so frothy with stars it

seemed the earth had drifted closer the Milky Way's center. Mardin, by night, seemed a biblical place, as if wrinkles and imperfections in the dry earth were proverbs waiting to be deciphered. The houses had been built so closely together that I walked easily from roof to roof and, from the eye of a cat perhaps, seemed to be stepping from one constellation to the next.

Early the next day, I was in the marketplace to buy bread, cheese, and fruit. I found Arif talking with a vendor whom I did not recognize. As he unpacked his donkey, I saw, to my surprise, half a dozen vases nearly identical to the one I had bought. Arif was holding one—without a chipped lip—and smiling.

"Yusuf," he said, and indicated the man next to him with his head, "he is the artist." It was the first time Arif's smile failed to scatter my body's density.

"*Ne kadar?* I asked.

He answered me in English, apparently so the vendor would not be able to listen in. "His asking price was 200 lira, but I gave him 250. You can probably bargain him down to 175 if you're interested. He is an honest man and a good artist. I don't mind paying him more than he asks."

I told Arif that I was only there to shop for my breakfast but that I would like to meet him later on.

"Come to the Teahouse. It's just south of the market. I will be there all day."

I walked away confused. I wondered how a man as poor as Arif could afford to pay more than the asking price. I was also amazed at his luck. Even if it hadn't been luck, I didn't quite understand the importance Arif placed on first learning to bargain and then in learning not to bargain.

I did not arrive at the Teahouse until late afternoon. It was a lovely old place with sets of tall doors folded away like shutters, allowing scant breezes through the archways. The walls were smoothed over with white plaster and the chairs and tables were hand-worn wood.

Arif, seated at a table, seemed a great favorite among the locals. Turks, it should be mentioned, drink tea constantly—at breakfast, on ferryboats crossing the Strait of the Bosphorus, while negotiating

business deals, while entertaining guests. It generally comes not in cups but in small clear glasses shaped like tulips.

I asked Arif if I could buy him a glass.

His laugh was rough but musical. “My friend, it’s not polite to buy tea for the owner of the Teahouse.”

Amazement must have stood out on my face like flung mud.

Arif laughed again. “You thought I made my living weighing people like bags of dates?” He shook his head. “It’s a good way to observe people, an old pastime of mine.”

He motioned to a boy who stood behind a counter tending a huge ornate tea boiler that was so tarnished, the surface of the metal so worn, that I was certain it was a relic from the Ottoman Empire. Carrying a small metal tray, the boy brought over two glasses of tea.

While we sat drinking our *chay* and speaking in English—my Turkish was like traveling a badly constructed road pitted with holes—the locals made no attempt to hide their curiosity. Arif waved them over and introduced me to maybe half a dozen men who roared with approval every time I spoke in Turkish.

The talk lasted well into the evening and somehow, without any discussion I had been aware of, two boys in white restaurant attire showed up with salads and an armload of *lahmajun*, a kind of thin Turkish pizza made with ground lamb. Although the boy who had brought the *lahmajun* was given a tip and someone must have paid the bill, I was kept at a distance from the transaction.

Finally, after the tables had been cleared of the remnants of dinner and the empty tea glasses had been collected, after the men had tired of the novelty of a foreigner or had been called away to their homes, Arif and I were again alone at our table.

Sliding off his chair, hand gripping the table edge to steady himself, Arif produced a pocket watch secured with a chain. When he opened it, instead of a watch there was a photo trimmed to fit the silver case. The photo was a portrait, clearly old and somewhat faded, of a woman with a round face and delicate features.

“Nur was my wife for 20 years.”

I hadn't thought of Arif as ever having been married. I now wondered if he had any children.

He snapped the case closed and returned it to his pocket. "Come, help an old man into the night air."

Using his walking stick, Arif led the way through the narrow winding alleyways and up the stone steps.

"The first time I saw her," he said, "she was in the market shopping with her mother. Her family had come here from Diyarbakir. Although she was a small woman, she was still taller than I!"

We were on the main street now and we walked until we came to an iron gate. The gate was unlocked and Arif led me inside. He planted his stick on a worn step, then followed it one foot at a time. I realized, as we climbed, he was taking me to the *Zinjir Medresesi*, an Islamic seminary that had been abandoned some years earlier.

"My father was a businessman. He not only owned the Teahouse but also bought and sold many kinds of teas.

"After I saw Nur at the market, a strange feeling blossomed inside of me and I tried to hide from her. I asked my father if I could oversee the end of the business conducted in Istanbul. I was soon spending most of the year there."

At the top of the stairway, Arif sighed heavily. "One day, while speaking with a friend in the Covered Bazaar, I saw her. I was sure at first I was mistaken, but as she came nearer, we exchanged greetings. She and her mother had come to visit her mother's sister and she was so pleased, she said, to run into someone from Mardin. I knew then that she had noticed me just as I had noticed her. I had tried give up what was never mine and so when it was returned to me..." He shrugged.

We had gone into the empty *medrese* and Arif warned me to be careful in the dark.

"I returned to Mardin to be with Nur but my father did not approve. It was not that her family was Kurdish, although he sometimes pretended this was an issue, it was her size. He feared that she would have difficulty giving birth to a child." Arif laughed and it echoed briefly off the stone. "Look at me," he

said, although that was impossible in the dark stairwell. “How many women would want me for a husband? But my father thought otherwise. He insisted that because I came of a wealthy family, there would be others.”

We came at last to the roof of the old seminary. The dark plains of Turkey and Syria spread below us were almost as broad as the sky arching over them. Arif sat down, cross-legged, grasping one of his ankles to help him position the leg. He took off his woolen cap and placed it on his thigh. The cap looked like a sea animal that had collapsed after being lifted out of the water. Arif’s forehead, I now saw, was high, his hair short and silvery.

“My father had been right. More than one doctor had told Nur that a child would be dangerous for her. I was willing to have no children. Nur, however, was not. She said she would marry me only if I would give her a child. I could not agree.

“‘Then let us promise each other this,’ she said, ‘when we lie with one another it will always be for love, not because we are bored or because the day is too hot to go outside or because, like planting crops, we want to harvest in nine months. Only when we both feel enough love towards one another there is nothing left for us to do, only then. If God gives us a child out of such love, then it is His will.’

“And never in our twenty years together, did we embrace each other as husband and wife except, as we had agreed, when it impossible to do otherwise. Even then, we did not always consummate our desires. I recall one night before the New Year, she said, ‘Let us begin the New Year by wanting each other.’

“In our first years together, I was often away, using business as an excuse. If we were not together, she could not conceive. As long as I knew she would be home when I returned, I was satisfied.” He shook his head, at the crown of which was a bald spot that was somehow becoming. “Even in her absence you see, she was more to me than another woman, sitting right beside me, could have been.

“Nur understood, after a while, what I was doing, and forbade my unnecessary trips. At last, I threw up my hands and abandoned my schemes.

“In all those years she only conceived twice. The first time—may God forgive me—I was relieved when she lost the child. The second time, however, when she was already old to be a mother, she gave birth. The child, a daughter, lived for only a few hours. Nur died two days later. Although they told me she was bleeding from within and they could not stop it, I think that when our daughter died, Nur died too.”

Arif fell quiet and, for a moment, we were as distant from each other as the old seminary was from the edge of the earth bending away in the darkness.

“Every night I sleep with her memory. It is like a blanket I pull over myself. Even here in Mardin where nights are warm, I would shiver without that. If I do not repeat her name to myself as I lie in bed, sleep does not come. Some mornings I wake to a scent that came only from her, as if something of her wished to remain behind with me. How else would the sounds I make as I move about in our home be company enough?”

“My father had remained opposed to our marriage. For him it had become a son’s challenge to his authority and he threatened to expel me from the family business and leave everything to my younger brother. After Nur and I married, he carried out his threat.

“I will not bore you with family history. Suffice it to say that my brother, given to drink and extravagant living, inherited my father’s wealth.

“Although my prosperity had dwindled, I lost no respect in Nur’s eyes. I found work with other merchants and watched from a distance as my brother brought to ruin everything my father had built.

“Barely a month after Nur was buried on the hillside”—he waved an arm vaguely east—“my brother was too ill to run what was left of my father’s business, which was mainly the Teahouse.” Arif patted his side with a hand. “He had poisoned his liver with drink, but it took him more than a year to die. His sons were too young to run the business and so he came to me.

“The Teahouse, Yusuf, was my salvation. With one hand God took Nur, with the other He gave me the Teahouse. Of course,

Nur was worth to me more than all the *chay evi* in Turkey, but if one is to be a cripple, it is good to have a sturdy stick to lean on. I spent every waking hour in the Teahouse and, as I had not been able to do while my brother was well, I got to know my young nephews. They became like sons to me. I am proud to say that I made it possible for them to attend a fine university. I am proud to say they are good boys. Like you, Yusuf.”

Arif reached out and slapped my thigh. I was surprised that such a small man had a hand that thumped so solidly against my leg.

“I am also proud to say that my nephews honor me as if I were their own father.” He nodded to himself slowly. “Those boys and the Teahouse, the men of Mardin who come to the Teahouse—the men you met this afternoon—they were my salvation.

“Of course, you understand, I would have given everything to keep Nur here, everything. But God, of course, does not bargain. If He did He would have taken everything else and left her.” Arif shrugged. “Maybe it is because He is at home in Creation—it is His after all. And He is aware of every dusty corner of it. There is not so much as a cobweb in a forgotten house that escapes His notice. He understands it and I believe He wants us to understand it as well. We are too easily fooled by the tricks of bargaining, rejoicing over saving a little money or making a little money. We have forgotten that God put each of us here to keep up a corner of His creation, maybe to add something to it, something that agrees with His will. Please don’t misunderstand me, Yusuf. It is not to confuse myself with God that I do not bargain. Nothing so foolish, nothing so...how would you say it? That would be a kind of blasphemy, I think. I have my reasons; God has His and I can only wonder about them. But it is good to know it is not I alone who refuses.”

He smiled his gap-toothed smile, his face almost young again, smoothed over by the dark and embalmed in my memory by dry desert moonlight.

Arif now lies beside Nur in that same little rectangle of earth—hardly big enough to be the corner of a garden, I am sure—he so carefully tended before age prevented him doing so. Although I return sporadically to Turkey, like a migratory

bird with a confused sense of season, I have never seen it. I once visited the hillside cemetery where he and Nur are buried and searched among the slender stones fully aware that, as many of the names were still inscribed in the Arabic alphabet, I might look right at theirs without knowing it. While I could have asked anyone at the Teahouse precisely where they were buried, I spent a good part of a morning in the cemetery on my own. When I did not find them, I felt sure it was better I did not.

When I am in Istanbul, I often pass by the Milion, that ruined arch that once radiated a thousand spokes over an empire that no longer exists. On one trip I noticed that someone had spray-painted something in garish blue down the length of it. Now and then I see a pigeon atop it. Although it marks the place where Arif had called to me in the settling dusk, it was not from this weathered bit of marble that Arif measured his distances.

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