

Razor Boy

Gönül Kıvılcım

I

On Top of the Kamikaze

Everyone is reveling in the carnival. Except for me. Fathers, sons, and young lovers are chasing happiness on the Ferris wheel, riding deadly turns in dark tunnels. Once back outside, they fill their lungs with oxygen-lose themselves in scratching and scrabbling for more happiness. The clouds gathering above us are about to start a fight. I feel isolated from everyone. Standing at the ride controls of the Kamikaze, I'm lonely and unhappy. Watching the gondolas spinning in the sky, I imagine that these steel carnival rides have veins pulsing with daring and desire.

The Kamikaze gondolas swallow their next victims. Then they skyrocket. Higher and higher. The people inside close their eyes and hurl their fears into space. I watch people hurrying into the fairground through the front gate, running to the ticket windows. Then, I see myself. From morning till evening I have nothing to do but kill time beside the machine. Once the gondolas are full, I stand up. I press the button, and the roar of the machine smothers my distress. I smoke one cigarette after another as I keep asking myself why I can't be one of those people. A dog charges into the highway buzzing with cars. Bewildered, it tries to cross. The bitter sound of brakes. That bastard has survived this time. I am that dog. I quit huffing paint thinner cold turkey, but still I'm on the edge. I can't be a respectable civil servant, a cashier in a bank, or a faithful husband. Like a sponge, my flesh has soaked up too many fumes; it doesn't fit in straight-laced chairs at all. Jobs inside four fucking walls, leather seats, white linen tablecloths, scheduled meals—they don't belong on my menu. My nicotine and red blood cell rates stabilize only in the open air. After my stint in the army, I tried working as a deck boy on ships, a

bartender, a welder, and even a gigolo. I've tried every wave-top, chatty Cathy job out there. But no matter what I do, some shit comes up. I spent six extra months in the army because I skimmed the canteen money, my bartender boss almost knocked me out because I didn't jot down all the beer I sold and pocketed cash, and I burned through money from my jane until she accused me of stealing her jewelry. Once crime's in your bones, you just can't get it out. It gets right under your nails.

I press the button when the Kamikaze's gondolas complete their one-hundred-and-eighty-degree rotation and turn upside down. Ten... twenty... thirty... I count the seconds. The gondolas are topsy-turvy. The screams are getting louder.

“Bring it down! Bring it down!”

Listening to their begging, I laugh silently. This time, *they're* the ones ass over teakettle. I savor it.

I stumbled on this fairground job while I was drifting. I was twenty-three, but I was withdrawn, idle like an old woman long past her prime. My intention was to leave the city and die on the open sea on a stormy night while the waves flung the tuna in the air, as high as ten meters. Still, the pandemonium of the fairground was calling me. The old guy, the operator, had a heart problem, so they gave me his job. Start the ride, stop it, sell tickets, get customers. Well, no wonder, I have the devil's own luck. In the end: the customers flocked. The following day, a big crowd was waiting in front of the Kamikaze. My secret was the arabesque music cassettes I played on the boom box. Müslüm Baba's songs give our loneliness a good spin, flinging it in the air like pizza dough. Right at noon, I pulled the lever of the Kamikaze and then turned on the tape recorder. While young hotshots whispered into their girls' ears up in the Ferris wheel, I kept thinking about my last ten years. They'd passed in the blink of an eye. My journeys on my own

special kamikaze ride with Kaçak, my jailtime after Broken hot-wired that car and we ransacked the grocery store...

Joy is on my job at the fairground.

I try to resurrect my father through memories. I recall our last meeting in the restaurant he opened without bothering to tell us. The way I missed him like crazy everywhere I went. How I cried and cried the day I started school because it was my mother, not my father, who held my hand and brought. Everyone thought I was afraid of school. Yet, what I feared as I sobbed inconsolably was that I'd lost my father. Would I be able to recognize him if I ever ran into him on the street? Or would he recognize his own son? I curse my father. Because of him, I'm stuck on the as-Sirāt, dangling over Hell, never reaching Paradise. I'm all alone in the middle of the fairground, hanging on to the sappy songs to avoid plunging into the abyss. Lost in the clatter of the Ferris wheels, gondolas, and bumper cars, I miss Kaçak.

Kaçak was my blood brother, closer to me than my own real brother. One day when we were both in the thick of it, we cut our fingers open, pressing the wounds together. Our blood mixed, binding us to the days we would later spend in flea-infested one-star hotels, to the beerhouse din of endless football chatter, and to our hatred of anyone who would try to sweep us into the gutters.

We were fatherless. These men shook us out of their lives like the dust from a carpet—we couldn't even remember when—and we abandoned them just the same. They were a song we sang, like a catchy tune we couldn't help humming every now and then. *'Wait, my son. One day your father will come and you'll see him again.'*

I was thirteen when we met, and Kaçak was fourteen. In the mornings, he shined shoes, and in the evenings, he jumped drunks. If he wanted, he could rob those idiots blind. His mind was occupied with school, but according to his father, everyone had his own special calling in life. And Kaçak's was to get enough money for his father's booze. He was only ten when he first strapped the shoe shine box to his back.

We spent our childhood together, and our wild youths, too. We ended up in whorehouses and prison cells. Hand in hand.

When we first hit the streets, we hadn't yet discovered the world was round. Our dreams were drawn like the countries on a medieval map: one next to another. We would later discover the remedy for loneliness and poverty in Kaçak's laboratory, becoming the greatest men of the century. Fabulous villas—more magnificent than the ones in the movies—would sprout up around us with every step we took. We dined at tables fit for wedding banquets with babes like the ones winking on billboards. Our fantasies popped out of their boxes and danced around us. We frequented nightclubs. The weapons entrusted to us glinted in our belts. *Gadjis* swirled their skirts all around us, and even the cops bowed before us. If shit went down, I'd rush to the police station lickety-split. Let's say, if Kaçak was locked up for hijacking a car, I'd glide into the station with my glossed hair, in my black swanky suit. The pig who saw me stood at attention, saying, "Your wish is my command!" The chief shrank back, saying "These things happen. We'll fix it," and he'd let Kaçak go. I was the big man on the block. I was responsible for the kids, the night, and smoking dope.

We dreamt as the heat blasting out of the exhaust vents of burger joints kept us warm at night. We woke up into a reality where women turned out to be men, men turned out to be women, and the crooks came out on top.

They forced us out of our shells. The Earth was round, not flat, and they drilled this fact into our heads. On this round Earth, our business belonged not the honest but the crooked, not our dreams but the loan sharks. Our ambitions were fireworks exploding inside of us. We swore an oath. If the Earth rotated, we'd force it to rotate in the opposite direction.

From that time on, we'd be punks. If those crooks were making the rounds, we'd show them how it was done. We were hounds. At night, we waited on the street corners for rich bastards. If one of them didn't want to give up his wallet, we showed no mercy and took his appendix instead. If we got busted, we cut our arms and legs with razor blades before the cops could beat us to it. We slit our own faces.

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Ba bum, ba bump!

I'm in an ambulance trying to cut through the traffic jam. The cars don't seem to be moving out of the way, I keep seeing the same second-floor billboard for the East Turkish Education Foundation. Kaçak is next to me, totally miserable. He's staring at me, itching for glue he can't have with those boys in white all around. As I lie with an oxygen mask on my face, I have no idea what's happened or what the hell I'm doing in here. I also have no clue where we're going once the road clears. I imagine I'll have an operation: my heart will be taken out and transplanted into a rich woman with a pretty face. This is how my wretched life will finally end, and I'll take a clean step into my second life with my golden heart. Ba bum, ba bump. I hear my heartbeat. It's deafening. I'm breathing in and out with the entire city. The nurse's face stretches out like putty while she takes my pulse.

I want to laugh at her... stretching out like putty... I'm cracking up... can't move.

Ba bum, ba bump.

Drums are thundering in the streets of the city. Enjoy the festivities! I want to stand up, hug the nurse, Kaçak, and the driver. I must be fastened to the stretcher by my aorta, I can't move. The sidewalks are unraveling, my ear drums are expanding to ten feet and then snapping back into place.

“Hey, Razor! Why the hell did you do this to yourself?”

Kaçak throws his nasty question right out into the ambulance.

I'm going back to the yellow phone booths, red buses, and gray buildings of the city.

“Kaçak, take me under the bridge.”

“Man! You haven't got a drop of blood in your veins.”

The ambulance driver is unable to avoid a hole. The nurse is taking my pulse, Kaçak is dreaming of all the stuff he's going to steal from apartments glowing with the blue light of television screens, the driver is cursing the pothole, and all of them ask the same question:

“Why the hell did you cut yourself with a blunt razor?”

I wake up in a hospital room. With my brain high on painkillers, this place seems somehow familiar. Suddenly it dawns on me that this room is just like those corner tea-houses with low ceilings. But patients have replaced the customers, and nurses and doctors have replaced the baristas. Listen, when you step into a tea house, you have to feel the vibe—you sip your tea or play a game of cards or backgammon. When you find yourself in a hospital, they stitch you up, and you get put in a numbered room down some corridor and wait for their doctors to come lecture you. “It will take a year until you'll start feeling your legs again... You're under sedatives, please don't try committing suicide when you regain full consciousness... The surgery wounds will hurt once the morphine wears off... Is it really worth killing yourself or your kids

just because your man beat you?... When you can't bear the pain anymore, push the button, and the nurse will bring some pain killers..."

Three patients are brought in one after the other. They're across from me, moaning. An old man with cigarette boxes instead of lungs, a peroxide blond roughed up by her drunk husband, and a young boy whose mother included him in her suicide plan. One day, as the sun was about to knock on the doors of every house on Earth, his mother, vexed with the new day to come, took her two little sons under her arm and jumped off their fifth-floor balcony. Çetin, the young boy, landed on his brother and survived, but the other boy landed in the morgue. Now Çetin's aunt is keeping watch beside him, his loving hospital attendant... She's telling the little boy about the delicious ice cream he will have as soon as he wakes up. Then she turns around and asks me why a five-year-old boy has been left in a crowded hospital room. I tell her she should read the writing on the wall: Our hospital is in the Guinness Book of World Records for having the sleaziest conditions.

Suddenly, Kaçak appears next to me.

"Razor, I thought we were blood brothers. Didn't you make me a promise? Didn't you say no more? No more cutting yourself?"

I want to say, "Kaçak, I'm fucking tired of starting everything all over again every single day." But I can't talk; I'm listening to Çetin talking in his sleep, asking for his mother.

We're like a jigsaw puzzle: jumble it up and find the right pieces. Unfortunately, our pieces don't fit together, and whatever we've learned through groping in the dark proves to be futile. We memorize life and its rules over and over again, but learning's not enough. Our jigsaw puzzle is rigged. The cops say, *We won't beat you, we're better than that*. And then they beat us

even more brutally. The city condemns and destroys the shacks where we take shelter. The people who feed us today become angry beasts tomorrow. I want to start my days in the same bed, breathe in the morning on the same balcony, and dock at the same shores. However, we are still a long way from putting ourselves in the orbit of that special sun that will set our vagrant lives in order. I will to tell Kaçak all of this.

“Take it easy Kaçak.” That’s all I can say. “A warm bed, caring nurses... what more could I want...”

The nurse thrusts the last dope of the day into my hip. I feast on sleep.

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As I wait for the gondolas in the Kamikaze to fill, I take out a wallet photo of me and Kaçak. The edges are worn. This one was taken five years ago. To the right of the frame, there you see Razor Sinan, the angel I am, with my brown felt hat and dirty brown cowboy vest. Next to me is a bigger guy with a round face shaved like an officer: Kaçak.

We were brats! One time on a bet, we swallowed nineteen pills one after another and got really fucked up. When we woke up, we found ourselves—our stinking feet and heavy heads—in lock up. Our heads were so clouded I didn’t even remember ripping off that car stereo. Nineteen pills had really smashed my brain.

I left jail and rushed to a hardware store. The store closed at seven. Just as the guy was taking down the shutters, I caught him.

“I want some thinner, bro!”

He came at me with an ax in his hand.

“Your decision. If you don’t give it to us now, then we’ll just come back and take it ourselves.” He, of course, had to open the store again. With two bottles of thinner, I showed them all.

Not to mention how we snatched those fancy poodles out of the backyards of socialites to fence them afterwards. We were so small, dammit, we could fit in through any hole. We grabbed the dogs and took the bitches to the vet. When the guy there told us the grooming would cost a hundred bucks, we both went pale, but in the end we managed to sell them to a rich bitch who was as fancy as the dogs, and what’s more, we got four hundred bucks in return.

In the photo, we’re sitting around a pot of beans. Three hands inside the pot.

“Anatolia by inches,” says one of them. That’s what we used to say when we had to use bread as a filler because we didn’t have enough food. Do you remember?

Today if I said “Anatolia by inches, so hit the bread,” the kids would probably have fucked up faces. Yep, that’s how the street is, never the same on any given day. You pester a tourist and pocket the dollars. You live like a king for three days in a row. But you also know how to survive without food for days. You’re broke, and it’s cold as the grave. In the winter, the cold messes you up, and in the summer, it’s the heat. I remember once the fig tree froze over. Waking up head still clouded, I confused the ice with the fruit. The icicles had grown so long that they almost touched my nose. I said, “The tree has borne fruit on this winter day!”

When I first met Gül, Kaçak was with me. We had gone almost mad imagining a pair of female hands, a soft shoulder we could lean our heads on and black eyes we could fall in love with. Since we ran away from home, the street dogs had been our only companions. We were desperate! We kept staring into people’s eyes, dying for a morsel of tenderness. The year when our manhood first awakened, Kaçak fell in love with Aynur, and me with Gül. True, we were hot

shots, but all the same, we had tender hearts. We both believed that we could hold onto this love forever.

II

Razor Sinan Is an Angel

On a sunny Sunday morning, Razor sat in the park near the fairground and idled away his time watching the passers-by. Every now and then, one or two immigrants from Anatolia, faces parched and wrinkled like dried dates, or university students who looked as though they were carrying the burden of a Sunday morning in their pockets, or children who shoved their heads into the vivid mosaic of the city: they all passed him by. The photographer taking pictures of the distant cape wanted to take a shot from the bench where Razor sat because he couldn't stand the putrid smell of shit in the air. Razor hated cameras and tape recorders, so he scooted over, just in case. Then, he went and sat on another empty bench and covered himself with a cloudy cloak of paint thinner. In this city, where the mafia had replaced the law, he burst through buildings and roofs and landed on the street. The photographer took pictures of two kids selling sesame rolls, the street vendor with his bushy mustache, and a hairdresser's assistant with dyed-red hair, grinning flirtatiously. Once the photographer thought Razor was fast asleep, he approached, looking down at him. Razor would have made a perfect picture with his blue jean shirt, cowboy vest and felt hat. However, he suddenly opened his eyes and saluted the camera.

“Good morning, messieurs, fags, you guys who fuck over anyone in your way.”

“Not on a good day, I guess.”

“Send your good deeds to heaven. I’ve already picked hell. What the hell are you doing without even saying hi?”

“They sent me to take a photo of hell.”

Razor Sinan turned to look at the photographer. He hadn’t intended to show any interest at all, but for some reason, he liked the man’s wit. The expert photographer immediately recognized the softened expression on the face of this rebellious soul who was at most seventeen or eighteen. And he pushed the shutter release. Razor’s dark, almost coal-black face, his eyes shining with a white glitter, and the thinner bottle in his pocket were captured by the camera.

Razor continued: “Bro, you know what, they separated hell into two. Economy and first class. I guess you’re in first class. I haven’t seen you where I hang around.

“I know where you hang around. But I haven’t been by lately.”

“Come back, bro! So that you can see the flames of hell up close, so close you can warm your hands over them. There’s just one hell, and that’s our life. Don’t you dare put that photo in the newspaper.” After finishing his spiel, Razor shut his eyes, no longer bear the heavy feeling caused by huffing the thinner.

The photographer, who looked older than his age because of the white streaks in his long curly hair, sat on the bench next to the one where Razor slept. For a while, he just thought about this young addict who talked a big game for his age. His dirty elegance and his vest and ha—who knows where he found them. His long nails, his swaggering walk, and the lines on his face which gave him a helpless appearance when he surrendered his feeble body, underdeveloped from huffing, over to sleep. A muezzin far away announced it was midday already. The photographer stood up and made to leave.

As he left the park, he had in the pocket of his vest the roll of film with the image of the addict who couldn't, as if by the skillful cut of a sword, cleanly divide his days into three meals and routine nights. If he had lingered a little longer, he would have been able to learn about the long years Razor spent in the invisible corners of the city, his numerous adventures—which in statistics would be depicted as petty thefts—the poetry notebook he always kept beside his bed, and the love that smashed his young and weary heart into pieces.

Razor recognized in his doze that the photographer had left the park; he roused and screamed at the top of his lungs: "I know I'm a man, but I can't take it. I've been roaming around like crazy. If Gül doesn't return, if I never again hold her sweet face in the palms of my hands, I won't ever recover."

The love between Razor and Gül was other worldly. Their passion had sprouted in a brutal, harsh climate wild as love itself.

"One day, when I looked in the mirror, my eyes were glittering. I looked good even though my eyelids were heavy with thinner, my hair was scruffy, and I had that scar on my cheek, a souvenir from the street. There was this one night... One night, I met Gül. I got to know her bowed lips, her eyebrows, and her neck, all like they'd been sculpted by a jeweler. Gül brought the East to me. She had arrived in this city when she was ten months old, but it seemed like she had grown up in a distant village because of the letters her grandmother and her cousin sent her. When Gül left me, I told her she was an Eastern goddess and that I worshipped her, even though she didn't care about me."

Gül was lost when Razor first met her. One evening, she had grabbed her distant childhood and the blue school uniform she had never been able to wear, and left for the streets. The naked queen of the city had been only nine years old when they placed her newborn sister, Filiz, in her lap. With the full harshness of language, they told her, “Now you can be a mother, too. Like all other mothers, you have a baby.”

Gül, her mother, their neighbors, the cops who took her father away, the women who worked in the textile factory with her mother—they were all naked. Gül’s childhood; the books that taught her life’s alphabet; the worn out, unvarnished shoes she wore on the way to school; and the evil eye bead her mother fastened under her school uniform for good luck—they were all ripped from Gül that very evening when the cops tore her father away from home. When her mother answered the door, a cop pushed her aside and loads of them stormed in. Looking at the swarthy cops with their thick-eyebrows who took her father by his arms, Gül thought they resembled her father. Then she shouted, “My dad can’t live without Filiz. Don’t take him away!”

Her eyes narrowed as she shouted. She saw a shadow disappear. That shadow was her father. Her mother consoled Filiz.

“One day, he’ll come back. Don’t worry. Your dad would never leave you.”

After the police took away Father, the only breadwinner in the family, Gül’s mother, started working at the textile factory, which sucked in women like the vacuum cleaners in the television ads.

Gül, the queen of expectations, waited all alone at home for evening to come. She had planned to be a kid, not a mother, and she searched for a world where the walls resembled swing sets. When her mother took the first grunting morning bus to get to her sewing machine in the workshop, Gül was left alone; she picked up Filiz, held her in her arms, began watching

Istanbul from their slum window, and felt scared. *What if the cops come again, what if they take my mother, too, what if I fall asleep and don't hear my mom come home?* She dreamed of alarm clocks. Clocks in all colors and sizes. Clocks that would start ringing as soon as her mother turned the corner... It was not the clocks but the cold of the night that told her the time. She sat on the balcony and kept vigil, her eyes fixed on the stars in the night sky until her mother came home from the factory with her elder brothers. The frost bit into her skin. Clocks of frost woke Gül up free of charge.

Months and years passed, and Filiz grew up in Gül's lap. One day, Gül couldn't take it anymore and asked, "But who will hug and cuddle *me*?"

Her mother told her that the souls of her dad in jail, of her grandfather back in the village, and of her brother had been entrusted to Gül. Once, a friend of Gül who went to the Quran school had told her that a person could hold onto the wings of sinless souls and fly all the way to any city or land far away. What sin could Gül have that she couldn't even leave home at all? In the spring of her sixteenth year, she turned the television off, drew all the curtains, took her sister into her lap, and shut her eyes. She set off on journeys together with other souls who were bored to exhaustion. She was on a blue and yellow fisherman's boat. The boat floated through the city, visiting every shore and every home one by one, introducing its passengers to people who had real stories. The warm, gentle breeze slipped through Gül's T-shirt and caressed her dark-skinned, frail body. Soon they would visit the summer palace, abandoned now for many years. Red carpets were laid in front of the gates to welcome Gül, the queen of expectations.

Gül brought her soul with her on her journeys, and it couldn't even rebel. The days were carried into her dreams, and her dreams into the streets. Until her dream journey turned to reality, and Gül met Sinan. That day, Gül lost her way. Or her destiny had united with Razor Boy's.