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Chapter Eleven

We Lost Our Memories at the Movies

*Films do not just ruin children's eyes;
they ruin their minds.*

—Ulunay

When Galip woke up, he was somehow aware that more snow had fallen. Perhaps he'd seen it in the dream he still half remembered upon waking but forgot the moment he reached the window, the din of traffic fading as the city settled under the silence of snow. It had been dark for some time. After washing himself with water that the *chauffé-bain* had not quite managed to heat, he quickly got dressed. He sat down at the table with pencil and paper and worked for a while on his clues. Then he shaved and put on the herringbone jacket that Rüya said looked so good on him; Celâl had one exactly like it. Throwing on his thick, coarse overcoat, he stepped outside.

By now it had stopped snowing. The cars and the pavements were covered with a new blanket several inches thick. The streets were crowded with Saturday evening shoppers returning home, laden with packages and walking gingerly through the new-fallen snow, like visitors to a planet not quite accustomed to its spongy surface.

When he reached Nişantaşı Square, he was glad to see that traffic was still moving on the main thoroughfare. He went across to the newspaper stand, which had moved into the entrance of a grocery store for the evening; among the magazines featuring naked women and scandals, he found a copy of yesterday's *Milliyet*. He then went into the restaurant across the street, taking a table in the corner so no one in the street could see him, ordering a bowl of tomato soup and a plate of grilled meatballs. While waiting for his food, he spread his

newspaper over the table and slowly, carefully, went over Celâl's Sunday column.

It was a piece he'd first published years ago, and because Galip had also read it that morning, there were sentences he now knew by heart. While he drank his coffee, he marked up the text. When he left the restaurant, he hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take him to Bakırköy, to Sinanpaşa.

During the long journey, Galip began thinking it was not Istanbul he saw flowing past his window but another city altogether. Three buses had plowed into one another at the turning from Gümüşsuyu to Dolmabahçe, and now a crowd had gathered around them. The bus and taxi stops were deserted. The snow made the city seem more desolate than ever; the lamps were dimmer and he saw none of the normal nighttime activities that made the city what it was; with its closed doors and empty pavements, it looked like the empty set for a medieval city. The snow covering the warehouses, the hastily built shanties, and the domes of the mosques was not white but blue. Loitering in the streets around Aksaray he saw prostitutes with purple lips and blue faces; he saw youths sledding on ladders in front of the old city walls; as buses left the depot, their passengers stared fearfully at the blue lights of the police cars stationed outside. His elderly cabdriver told him a long and outlandish story dating back to that long-ago freak winter when the Golden Horn had frozen over. The interior light in the '59 Plymouth was just bright enough for Galip to see Celâl's Sunday column; as he pored over it, he covered it with more digits, letters, and signs, but still no answer emerged. At Sinanpaşa, the driver told him he could go no farther, so Galip got out of the taxi and went the rest of the way on foot.

The Güntepe development was closer to the main road than he remembered. The houses he passed along the way (mostly two-story concrete buildings built on the foundations of shanties) had their curtains drawn, and the shops along the street were dark; after walking up a small slope, he found himself in the little square he'd noted that morning in the City Directory. In the middle was a bust (not a statue) of Atatürk. Confident that he could remember the map well enough to find his way, he headed down the street next to the mosque, which was larger than he expected and whose walls were covered with political slogans.

It pained Galip to think of Rüya living in a place like this—in a house whose stovepipe poked right through the middle of a window, whose balcony sloped gently to the street—but ten years earlier, when he had come here to see her—again, in the middle of the night—he had seen the unthinkable and had turned on his heel at once: peering through the open window on that hot August evening, he'd found Rüya in a sleeveless cotton dress, sitting at a table piled high with papers, twirling a curl in her hair as she worked, while her husband, who had his back to Galip, stirred his tea, and above them a moth made ever more erratic circles around a naked lightbulb. Sitting between husband and wife was a plate of figs, and next to it was a canister of mosquito spray. Galip could still hear the tinkling of the spoon inside the tea glass and the chirping of the cicadas outside, but now, when he arrived at a corner and saw a sign attached to a snow-covered electricity pole that said REFET BEY STREET, nothing looked familiar.

He walked up and down the street twice; at one end was a group of children throwing snowballs, at the other a huge illuminated movie billboard showing a nondescript woman whose eyes had been blacked out, blinded. All the houses were two stories and none had numbers on their doors. The first time he came to the house he was looking for, he casually passed it by without recognizing it, but the second time around he reluctantly remembered the window, the dull and plasterless walls, the door handle he'd not wanted to touch ten years earlier. They'd added a second story. The garden now had a wall. Where there had been grass there was now concrete. The ground floor was dark. There was a separate entrance for the second story, and through the curtains he could see the bluish light of a television set; poking out of the wall was a stovepipe that looked like a cannon, puffing the sulfur-yellow smoke of lignite coal, bearing the good news that any unexpected guest that God might send would be greeted with a hot meal, a hot stove, and a roomful of good-hearted people staring stupidly at a television.

As Galip made his cautious way up the snow-covered stairs, the dog in the garden next door let out a few hopeless barks. I'm not going to say too much to Rüya, he told himself, or perhaps this was addressed to the ex-husband who still stalked his imagination. First he would ask her to explain what she hadn't explained in her goodbye letter—why

she had left—then he would ask her to return to the house immediately to collect all her things—her books, her cigarettes; her single socks, empty pill bottles, hairpins, glasses' cases, half-eaten bars of chocolate, and hair clips; the wooden ducks she had played with as a child. *Everything that reminds me of you makes me unbearably sad.* Of course, he wouldn't be able to say any of this in front of that hulking brute, so it would be better to suggest that he and Rüya go somewhere where they could discuss all this sensibly. Once they had arrived in this place and come to the subject they were to discuss "sensibly," it would be perfectly easy to suggest a number of other things to Rüya, but where could he take her in a neighborhood like this, except to an all-male coffeehouse? By now he had rung the bell.

First he heard a child's voice (*Mother, someone's at the door!*) and then a woman's voice, just as worried, that bore no resemblance to his wife's, and Galip knew at that moment what an idiot he'd been to think he could come here and find the woman who'd been his friend for three decades and the love of his life for twenty-five years. For a moment he considered slipping away, but then the door opened. Galip immediately recognized the ex-husband, but he did not recognize Galip. He was middle-aged and of middling build; he was just as Galip had imagined him, and as he would never imagine him again.

As Galip stood there, waiting for the ex-husband's eyes to adjust to the darkness of the dangerous outside world and remember who he was, he saw the new wife peering out at him, and then a child, and then a second child. "Who is it, Father?" When Father finally had the answer, he froze for a moment, and Galip, thinking it was his only chance to escape from this place and avoid going into this house, blurted out his story in one breath.

He apologized for disturbing him in the middle of the night, but he was in a tight spot; he'd come back another time for a relaxed and friendly visit (with Rüya, even), but tonight there was an emergency—he'd come looking for information about a certain person, or perhaps about a name. He'd taken on a client—a university student—who'd been unjustly accused of murder. No, this was not to say there'd been no death, but the real murderer was still at large, and was wandering the city under an alias, like a ghost who once upon a time. . . .

After he'd told his story, they whisked him inside, invited him to

take off his shoes, gave him a pair of slippers that were too small for him, and pressed a cup of coffee into his hands, saying that the tea was still brewing. After Galip had rounded off his story by repeating this person's name—he'd invented a new one, just to be on the safe side—Rüya's ex-husband began to speak. The longer he spoke, the more numbing his voice; anesthetized by his stories, Galip began to wonder if he'd ever find the strength to leave. He would later recall that he consoled himself at one point by reminding himself that, at the very least, he was hearing things that had to do with Rüya, things that might later serve as clues—but this was like a dying patient trying to delude himself with cheerful thoughts as he was wheeled into the operating room. It was like watching a dam burst—the flood of stories seemed to have no end—but three hours later, when he staggered out the door he had feared would never open, he knew the following:

We thought we knew a lot, but really we knew nothing.

We knew, for example, that most of the Jews in America and Western Europe were descended from the Jewish kingdom of the Khazars, which had ruled the area between the Volga and the Caucasus a thousand years ago. We also knew that the Khazars were really Turks who had converted to Judaism. But what we did not know was that Turks were as Jewish as Jews were Turkish. And wasn't it amazing, just amazing, to watch these two peoples travel through the twentieth century swaying to the rhythm of the same secret music, never meeting, always at a tangent, but forever linked, forever condemned, like a pair of hopeless twins.

Then a map floated into the room like a magic carpet; Galip woke in a flash and sprang to his feet; he walked across the overheated room, trying to pump some life back into his tired legs, and there, on the table, was the map of a storybook planet. It was covered with arrows, and—wasn't it amazing?—they'd been drawn with a green ballpoint pen.

Their first step would be to establish a new state along the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. But instead of bringing in new settlers to populate this new state, as their predecessors had done a thousand years ago, they would turn the old inhabitants into "new people" tailored to serve their purposes. No need to read Ibn Khaldun; those charged with this task would quickly guess that the only way forward

was to rip away our memories, our past, our history, leaving us with nothing to share but our misfortunes. It was known that Turkish children attending the shadowy missionary schools in the back streets of Beyoğlu and the hills overlooking the Bosphorus had once been made to drink a certain lilac-colored liquid (remember that color, said Mother, who was drinking in her husband's every word). But later on, the Western bloc's "humanitarian wing" had declared this reckless initiative too dangerous on chemical grounds and switched to a gentler approach that promised longer-lasting results: the new plan was to erode our collective memory with movie music.

Church organs, pounding out chords of a fearful symmetry, women as beautiful as icons, the hymnlike repetition of images, and those arresting scenes sparkling with drinks, weapons, airplanes, designer clothes—put these all together and it was clear that the movie method proved far more radical and effective than anything missionaries had attempted in Africa and Latin America. (These long sentences of his were well-rehearsed, Galip decided. Who else had had to hear them, his neighbors? His colleagues at work? His mother-in-law? The people sitting next to him in a *dolmuş*?) It was in the Şehzadebaşı and Beyoğlu movie theaters that they set their plan into action; before long, hundreds of people had gone utterly blind. Viewers who sensed the terrible plot that was being perpetrated on them and rebelled with angry cries were quickly silenced by policemen and mad doctors. When the children of today showed a similar reaction—when they were blinded by the proliferation of new images—they were fobbed off with free prescription glasses. But there were always a few who refused to go away quietly. A while ago, he'd been walking through another neighborhood not far from here around midnight when he'd seen a sixteen-year-old boy pumping futile bullets into a movie billboard—and immediately he'd understood why. Another time, he'd seen a man at the entrance to a theater with two cans of gasoline swinging from his hands; as the bouncers roughed him up, he kept demanding that they give him his eyes back—yes, the eyes that could see the *old* images. Then there was that peasant boy from Malatya who'd fallen into the habit of going to the movies once a week, and who realized, on the way home, that he'd lost his memory, along with everything he'd ever learned—he'd written to the papers; had Galip

read his letters? He could go on for days telling Galip sad tales about people so entranced by the streets and clothes and women they'd seen on the silver screen that they'd been unable to go on living as before, and now they were poorer and more wretched than ever. As for those who identified with the stars they saw on the screen—our new masters refused to see them as “sick” or “in the wrong,” enlisting them instead as partners in the project. We'd all been blinded, every last one of us, every last one. . . .

Assuming his role as head of household, Rüya's ex-husband asked, Why had not a single official in the state bureaucracy noticed that the rise of moviegoing was in inverse proportion to Istanbul's decline? Was it a coincidence that theaters were always located on the same streets as brothels? he asked. Why did movie theaters have to be dark; why were they *all* dark?

Ten years ago, he and Rüya Hanım had moved here, into this very house, hoping to serve a cause they believed in with all their hearts; this had meant taking on pseudonyms and false identities. (Galip kept glancing at his nails.) They'd devoted their lives to the propagation of ideas; this had meant taking manifestos from a distant country they'd never visited and translating them into the mother tongue while still remaining faithful to the foreign original; it had meant taking political forecasts from people they had never seen and recasting them in this “new language” for other people they would never see; it had meant a life of typing and duplicating. Though of course all they'd wanted all along was to be someone other than the people they were. When they heard of a new acquaintance who took his alias seriously, how happy they were! The fatigue of those long hours at the battery factory would suddenly lift, and he'd forget about all those unwritten articles, all those manifestos waiting to be stuffed into envelopes; he'd sit there staring, staring, at the new identity card in his hand. “I've changed!” he'd cry with joyous, youthful innocence. “I'm a completely new person!” He couldn't say it often enough, and those around him never tired of hearing it. Equipped with his new identity, he could now read meanings into the world around him that he had never before suspected: The world was a brand new encyclopedia, waiting to be read from start to finish; as they read this new tome, it would change before their eyes, and so too would its readers; so when they'd read it right to

the end, they could return to the first page of their encyclopedia world and read the whole thing all over again, finally to disappear between the pages, lost even to themselves in the drunken profusion of assumed names. (While the head of household was himself vanishing into the pages of his encyclopedia metaphor—not, Galip suspected, for the first time—he noticed a stack of newspaper supplements on one of the shelves in the buffet: *Tree of Knowledge*, in weekly installments.) With the passage of time, however, his host had come to realize that this was in fact a ruse “they” had devised to distract them. For after becoming a new person, and then another and another and another, there was less and less hope of returning to the happiness they had known as the people they’d been at the beginning. A moment had arrived when, hemmed in by the signs they’d never managed to decipher—the letters, manifestos, pictures, faces, and guns—this man and his wife had been forced to admit that they had lost their way. This house stood all alone then, on a hill in the middle of a wasteland. One evening, Rüya had packed a few belongings into her little bag and returned to her old family, to her old house, where she felt safe.

Whenever the force of his own words overtook him, the host would jump from his chair to pace the room, grimacing like Bugs Bunny, or so Galip thought as his foggy mind struggled to keep pace. His host was now explaining why it was essential to go right back to the beginning if we were ever to beat “them” at their own game. As Galip Bey could see, his house defined him as petit bourgeois, a member of the middle class; everything about this place said he was a “traditional citizen.” All the props were there: the old easy chairs with their floral cotton slipcovers, the synthetic curtains, the enameled plates with butterflies around the rims, the ugly buffet with the candy dish they only used on holidays when guests came to call and the never-touched assortment of liqueurs, the carpets that had faded to a shabby brown. His wife was not a glamorous well-educated woman like Rüya, and she knew it too; like his own dear mother, she was plain, simple, and modest (here the wife gave him a smile Galip could not decipher); she was, in fact, his uncle’s daughter. Their children resembled her too. This was the life his father would have made for himself, if he’d lived, if he hadn’t changed. To have deliberately chosen this life as he himself had done, to live it in full consciousness, was to say no to a conspiracy

that dated back two thousand years; it meant being true to the person you really were and refusing to become someone else.

All the things Galip Bey had assumed were here by chance were in truth here to serve this single purpose. The clock on the wall? They'd chosen it because a house like this had to have a clock like that ticking on its walls. Because there was always a television on in such houses all night long, they too kept their television on all night long, glowing in its corner like a streetlamp; they'd put a hand-crocheted doily on top of it because houses like this always had them. It was all by design: the clutter on the table, the old newspapers that they tossed aside after clipping out the coupons, the jam smear on the side of the box of chocolates someone had brought as a gift and someone else had turned into a sewing box; even the things he hadn't expressly designed, like the handle that one of the children had broken off a coffee cup—the one that looked like an ear—and the clothes that were drying near the fearsome stove. Sometimes, when he was talking with his wife or his children, his host would sit back to watch the scene, watch it like a film, and when he saw that everything they did and said was in perfect keeping with the sort of family who lived in this kind of house, how he rejoiced! If happiness was to live the way you wished, and to do so in full consciousness, then, yes, he was happy. But, above all, his happiness derived from the knowledge that he had, by living this happy life, “foiled a conspiracy dating back two millennia.”

Galip, seeing his chance, chose to take this as the closing statement; saying it had begun to snow again, he lurched toward the door, feeling faint despite the ten teas and coffees he had downed during his stay. But before he could take his coat off the hook, his host blocked the way to say one more thing.

He pitied Galip Bey because he was going back to Istanbul, the very place where this disintegration had begun. Istanbul was the touchstone; forget about living there. Just to set foot in this city was to bow to “their” will, to admit defeat. What had begun in a handful of darkened movie houses had now spread far beyond; the frightful city was now awash with images of decay: hopeless crowds, old cars, bridges sinking slowly into the sea, piles of tin cans, roads riddled with potholes, billboards with giant letters that no one stopped to read, ripped wall panels signifying nothing, graffiti that made no sense because half

the paint had washed away, advertisements for bottled drinks and cigarettes, minarets from which no one ever made the call to prayer, piles of rubble, dust, mud, et cetera, et cetera. Nothing would come of this decay. If they were ever to see a resurgence—and Galip's host was certain there were others like him, resisting the decay all day, every day, in every way possible—it could only begin here, in one of these districts the high and mighty dismissed as “concrete shantytowns,” for it was only here that our true essence was still preserved. He was proud to be this community's founder and main spokesman; he would be happy to welcome Galip into the fold this very minute. He could spend the night here if he wished; if nothing else, to talk it over. . . .

Galip had his coat on by now; he'd said his goodbyes to the silent wife and the comotose children and was on his way out the door. The host took a long look at the snow and said, “How white!” in a way that even Galip found pleasing. He went on to tell Galip about a sheikh he'd once known, who dressed all in white; after meeting him, he'd had a dream all in white too. In his pure white dream, he'd found himself sitting in a pure white Cadillac next to Muhammed. In the front, next to a driver whose face he couldn't see, were Muhammed's two little grandsons, Hasan and Hüseyin. As the white Cadillac rolled past the posters, billboards, movies, and brothels of Beyoğlu, they kept turning around to grimace at their grandfather.

As Galip headed for the snow-covered stairs, the host continued. Galip was not to think he read too much into dreams. He'd just learned how to pick out a few sacred signs. He wanted to share them with Galip; he might find them useful. Rüya too. Others already did.

It had been gratifying to hear the prime minister repeating word for word the “global analyses” he himself had written under a pseudonym three years earlier, when his political activities were at their height. It was beyond doubt: “these men” drew upon a vast network of intelligence agencies that even scoured the country's smallest periodicals, and when they happened on something of worth, they sent it straight upstairs. Not long ago, he'd caught sight of an article by Celâl Salik, who seemed to have acquired the same material by the same means, but this was a hopeless case: Celâl had gone in search of the wrong answer, in vain pursuit of a lost cause, and somewhere along the way he'd sold his soul.

But what was interesting about both cases is that, however they'd acquired them, these two men—the prime minister and the famous columnist—had felt compelled to mimic the thoughts of a true believer everyone else ignored and dismissed. For a time he'd considered going to the press and exposing these two men for their brazen plagiarism, showing word for word how they'd lifted expressions and even whole sentences from an article first published in a left-wing splinter-group publication that no one ever read, but the conditions weren't right for such a bold frontal attack. He knew as well as he knew his own name that patience was his byword: one day he would open his door, and they too would be standing on his doorstep. If Galip Bey had come all the way out to the back of beyond on a snowy evening in pursuit of an alias that was entirely improbable—this was a sign. He wanted Galip Bey to know how well he had read this and all the other signs, and as Galip finally began to walk down the steps, he whispered his last questions.

Would Galip Bey find it in him to read our history with new eyes? Since there was a danger of his taking the wrong turn, might his host accompany him back to the main road? When did Galip think he might come for another visit? Very well, then, could he send his very best regards to Rüya?