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Friday is a Lucky Day

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Editor Nil Muldur, from Istanbul, Turkey, writes about a lonely man who discovers . . .

FRIDAY IS A LUCKY DAY

By Nil Muldur

He had no idea what time it was. Night had drained out of his room a long time ago leaving behind only a single pale shadow that traveled from the center of the ceiling to the baseboard of the wall. When he looked at the shadow closely the old man realized that the shadow belonged to the electric cord which dangled from the ceiling, ending in a single, flyspecked bulb. Outside the rain beat rhythmically upon the tin roof and seeped in at the eaves, making damp, grey patterns on the wall. Water poured from the tin gutters, splashed on to the cobblestones of the narrow street and raised muddy rivers at the edges of the sidewalks.

He could see the street from his bed. He could also see the unmade bed across from his own. Five days, for five days he had stayed in his bed, sleeping, staring and then sleeping again. He had heard voices, voices that asked about him, now that his wife was dead. He heard the paper boys and their quarrels and he had heard the cat scratching at his door. Now he heard the landlady slip-slopping down the stairs. She stopped at his door and he lifted his head to listen. He wanted her to worry and to call the neighbors. She only rattled the double doors which were bolted from the inside and said, "When are you going to come out? Are you going to get out or are we going to call the police to get you out?" After a pause, when he didn't answer, she slip-slopped away.

He let his head fall on the pillow which had turned yellow with age. The wind whistled through the window panes, tearing at the newspapers stuffed in the cracks. Within the room the wind shook the electric cord and the pale shadow moved with it.

He smelled fish being fried—it was either around noon or early in the evening. He knew the cat would come again scratching at the door, purring and meowing. He also knew that with the coming of the night his wife would return.

He had heard her the first night after the funeral. He was ready to light a cigarette and he had dropped it when he heard her voice: "Why do you smoke so much? You know you shouldn't smoke, the way you keep coughing the whole night." He had stared at the empty bed and heard her talk. He turned back to his pillow but heard her move around the room, pushing chairs aside, pulling out the drawers of the small dresser. His forehead was damp and there was a funny noise in his ears, but his wife kept talking, "I really don't know why I stuck it out as long as I did with you. My father told me you wouldn't amount to anything. Do you remember the first time I met you? I bet you don't remember the first time I met you. I had long hair then." Then he heard her comb her hair, and the comb made the funny crackling noise which had always intrigued him. He had clenched his teeth and covered his head with the pillow.

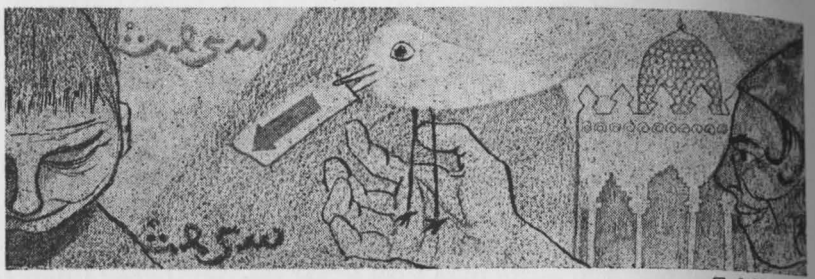
"You had a mustache and all the girls of the village smiled at you, except me. You really tried hard to get me, didn't you? I didn't even look at you and that made you mad." She gave a small laugh and kept combing her hair. He could almost hear her breathing.

She had been a good-looking girl and she was the only one who behaved as if she didn't even recognize him. "I should have listened to my father; he told me you wouldn't amount to anything. 'Good looking but good for nothing'—those're his exact words. All these years and what are you, nothing but a common watchman at the tobacco factory. I should have married that officer in the cavalry, the one who kept writing me letter after letter even when I was engaged to you. You don't even know the new Turkish script . . ."

The room was cold and the blankets weighed heavily upon his chest. The cat made noises outside his door. It was her cat and he was determined not to let it in. He was also determined not to get out of his room. For twenty-seven years he had listened to his wife and now he lay in bed listening to her, five days after the funeral.

He had gone to the mosque with her almost every night; he never went inside to pray but sat outside and watched the people feeding the pigeons. He watched them swarm around the fortune-teller woman and he felt their hope as they listened to her fortunes.

One day he had gone near the fortune-teller, close enough to hear her voice. She was a tall woman with flashing eyes, and she was loud. She joked around with the men and yet no one seemed to dare make fun of her. She really wasn't the fortune-teller, he saw. She had a trained pigeon which sat on a wooden tray full of pink slips, and when the customer paid the money the pigeon would pick a pink slip and give it to him. The pink slip told the customer what day was his lucky day, about his love, and things of that sort. He probably should have bought a pink slip a long time ago to learn about his own life. He had never gathered the courage, not after the things his wife had said about the fortune-teller:



Ted Shaw

"She wouldn't think anything of sleeping with anyone. She just looks it. The way she carries on with the men, why I can't see how they keep her in the mosque yard, right in front of God's own house—that—that sinner!" She looked sideways at him and bit her lips.

Sometime, when he still thought he saw his wife lying across from him, he heard the relatives in the room. They were in the room, they had come back to take away the body. They had been here before, why should they be back again? "Go away, go away and leave me alone!" he shouted and stared around the empty room.

I should open the window and let in some air, he thought, I can't sleep without any air. He opened the window a little, and spray hit his face, cooling his cheeks. The street was empty except for a car that slowed down a little in the rounding of the corner and he saw a child wiping the steam from the window with his fist. After the car had gone down the street he saw something move in front of the door across from his window. He saw someone hurrying from one door to the other, hurrying to avoid the rain.

It was the fortune-teller woman. He was surprised, he almost smiled. "Hello, hello you there—" She didn't hear him.

He pushed the window open; all of a sudden it was very important that she hear him. He felt dizzy and he could hardly see now that he was sitting in his bed and he stuck out his hand and yelled, "Aren't you getting wet out there? You, you over there!" He saw the woman look at the house, he waved with both hands.

She had heard him. She walked across, trying to keep her shawl, the pigeon and the tray of slips from flying away. She came to the window and said, "What do you want?"

"Here," he said, short of breath, "do you want to come inside, you are getting wet out there."

She looked at him strangely.

"Come on," he said.

"I might as well," she answered, "the bird is getting awfully wet."

When she knocked on the door he was there, leaning on the wall with one hand. He was so dizzy he didn't think he could stand. "Watch out for the cat," he said.

The woman came inside and he closed the door, bolting it from the inside. "What did you do that for?" the woman asked as she crossed the room and sat down on his wife's bed.

"Please don't sit over there," he whispered hoarsely. "Please don't sit over there." His eyes ached but he said it again.

"You are a funny man," she said. Her face was wet and she looked tired. Her dress had come unbuttoned at the throat; her hair was disheveled, and the pigeon looked wet and little larger than a sparrow. "You see," he tried to explain, "my wife died and you are sitting—" He couldn't finish.

"Oh, I am sorry," the fortune-teller said, "I am awfully sorry."

She stood up and sat on the chair. Her head sank to her chest. She sighed. "The pink slips are wet, I have to go all the way across the city to get new ones. This poor thing is wet too—do you know what they call her kind? See her feathers, see the feathers of my bird? They call her Sultan's Favorite. The Sultans used to keep birds and this was the favorite kind because of the feathers on their heads." She spoke as if to apologize for the wet, shivering bird. She looked tired and small, almost as tired as the pigeon she tried to hold on her lap. She had looked so tall and strong in the mosque yard with the men around her.

"Are you cold?" he asked. "If you are cold we could light the stove or something."

He tried to stand up; his head swam and the whole room seemed to be shivering.

She was near him and she pushed him back, and he sat like a puppet whose strings are cut. "You must be sick," she said. "Do you have anything in the house? Something to cook, how about some soup or something?"

"Yes, yes some soup would be fine—you see my wife died, and I didn't—"

"Don't worry, you can't die with the dead. We get all kinds at our trade. People come to talk to us after they lose a husband or something, and this one here," she nodded at the pigeon, "this one here always knows which pink slip to pick. You'll get over it soon, it is harder in the beginning. I remember a young bride whose husband had died, she came and cried and cried."

He could only hear her voice faintly; he couldn't hear his wife, he couldn't even hear the other people. He wondered what the landlady would think. He could hear drawers being opened and chairs being pushed around again.

"There is nothing here," she said.

"I have money," he said, "I have money in the small leather billfold in the second drawer. Listen, please take the money and you can go and get something to eat. You could get some fish maybe — yes, some fish. We could get some fish and you could fry it, and—" He was talking breathlessly. It was important that she stay in the room and talk to him. As long as she stayed in the room and talked he knew he would be all right. He didn't want her to go away and the voices to begin again. He didn't want the rain to let up lest she go away. And the landlady, the landlady wanted the room; she wanted to rent it to another married man.

"Look," he said, "I am a watchman in the tobacco factory."

"I know," she said, "I saw you coming to the mosque each night. Your wife prayed and you sat on the steps and watched me." Her lips turned into a smile. She continued, "You never bought a fortune; I thought maybe your wife didn't want you to spend money on fortunes. We get all sorts in our trade. Husbands come and want to know if their wives are faithful and the wives come to learn if their husbands are faithful to them. I remember one year when a woman—"

Again she smiled and he thought: would she stay if he asked her to? She didn't seem very strong but she kept talking to him. He

wondered if her hair made a funny sound when she combed it. He wouldn't even smoke. He wouldn't even start looking outside when she kept talking, the way he did with his wife who died.

He started again, "I am a watchman in the tobacco factory; I don't make much, but we could stay in this room and you could work if you wanted to."

The woman drew in her breath. She looked frightened, the door was locked and the rain made noises outside. She covered her head with her shawl; her arms were bare and they looked white in the shadows of the room. Her eyes were sparkling. He didn't know if she was crying or angry. "Don't be angry—I really didn't mean any harm. Please don't cry."

"No," she said, "I am not angry. I am not—not at all. Nobody, nobody ever—" she stopped. "Maybe I shouldn't even tell you this, but nobody ever asked me, not like this."

"That's all right," he said. "Don't worry about that. We can go to the court house, we can go there as soon as the rain lets up. I mean after I get well, and you can get a new dress maybe, and we could get—" He didn't say the next word.

She was crying; the pigeon had its head under its wing. "What is your name?" she asked. "What day is it today?"

"Ali," he answered, "my name is Ali Makar and it must be Friday today. Yes, I think it is Friday today."

"Let's see," she said, shaking her shawl back on her shoulders. "Do you know how to read the new Turkish script?"

"No—do you mind?"

"No, not at all," she replied, "I can." Carefully she separated a pink slip of paper from the damp pile on the tray and read, "You have a good heart. Friday is your lucky day. You should start a business on Friday."
