

The Blacksmith's Daughter

Selim Özdoğan

translated by Ayça Türkoğlu and Katy Derbyshire



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It is doubtful, of course, that things happened that way, but what we don't know, we don't know.

Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Pevear & Volokhonsky

Your life has a limit, but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger.

Zhuang Zhou, translated by Watson, Palmer & Breuilly

‘Don’t make my husband a murderer, I told him. Stop the car, don’t make my husband a murderer. Stop the car and let me out, and then piss off as fast as you can.’

Timur exhales and turns his head away so Fatma can’t see him tearing up. He’s still struggling for breath. He’s grateful, so grateful that fate has chosen this woman for him. She must have been written in his book of life on the very day he was born. He doesn’t know what’s happened to him, where all the time has gone.

Just yesterday he was a little boy in ragged trousers, scrumping pears from the neighbour’s garden with his friends. The neighbour had spotted the thieves, and they’d all jumped swiftly over the wall, pockets and shirts full of fruit. All but Timur, who’d been a little too slow, as usual. Though he could run just as fast as the others, he always missed his chance to make a bolt for it. Now he stood there, rooted to the spot, and the neighbour ran past Timur up to the wall and yelled after the escaping boys: ‘Come back! Come back, and give Timur a pear, at least. Great friends *you* are...’

Then he turned back to Timur and just said: ‘Run.’ Timur didn’t dare go past the neighbour, so he ran all the way across the garden and jumped over the wall on the other side.

Just yesterday he’d been a little boy, not all that good at school, not all that skilled, not all that popular. Until he began to help his father the blacksmith, helped him blow the heavy bellows and fetch big buckets of water for Necmi to quench the glowing iron. Timur had built up muscles in the workshop, had proved himself hardworking and untiring. He had learned quickly, and he’d enjoyed being with his father all day long. He also enjoyed testing out his new strength. The boy who once avoided fights now let no opportunity pass to show off his superiority.

Timur had a sister, Hülya, and he could well recall the night when she was born, even though he was only five at the time. He remembered the excitement in the house, and above all his father's determined face and his vow to open the girl's feet, no matter what it cost him. *Open*, that was the word he used. Hülya's feet pointed inwards, the big toes touching, and no one who saw them thought she'd grow out of it.

'God means to test us,' Timur's mother, Zeliha, had said in a tear-choked voice, and Necmi had answered: 'If there is a way, I will find it.'

But the doctor had said he could do nothing for the child, Necmi would have to take Hülya to Ankara if he wanted to get help for her. There were specialists there. He had to take her to Ankara and that wouldn't come cheap.

Necmi had money, and although Zeliha was reluctant to make the journey, in the end they boarded the train and went to the big city.

'It's God's will that her feet are closed,' Zeliha had told her husband, but he'd simply ignored her.

In Ankara, the doctor explained the child was too small; they were to come back in two or three years and then he'd operate, but he couldn't promise anything. And it would cost them.

Zeliha gave Necmi a discreet nudge. They were sitting side by side in the surgery, the baby on Zeliha's lap. Stepping on his wife's foot, Necmi stood up and said goodbye, cap in hand.

Outside in the dusty corridor, he said: 'Wife, I can't haggle with a doctor, I'm not a carpet seller, I'm a blacksmith. And he's not a carpet seller either. I don't care how much it'll cost, as long as the girl is cured. I made a vow.'

'We'll end up going hungry just because you've gone and got this idea in your head. If only the Lord had given you a bit of sense to go with your stubbornness,' she added quietly.

They slept in a cheap hotel and returned home the next day with a lorry driver from their small town. Zeliha had arranged it

all. It took longer than the train and was uncomfortable too, but it was cheaper.

Her husband could almost be called well-off, but only because she managed to rein in his extravagance and earn a little extra with a few deals here and there. The evening before they left for home, Necmi had taken her to a restaurant and drunk a small bottle of rakı, and they had eaten kebab. As if bread and cheese and tomatoes and onions and a glass of water weren't good enough. No, this man could not handle money; only she knew how to save up and multiply it.

So they squeezed into the driver's cab. Zeliha had the baby on her lap and sat on the far side, breathing in the smoke from the two men's roll-ups, swallowing the dust from the road right alongside them for almost ten hours. During the short stops, she made tea on a gas flame and prepared cold food while Necmi and the driver played backgammon.

Almost three years later, Necmi took the train to the capital city again, but this time Hülya was old enough not to need her mother to come along. When the blacksmith returned after four days, he carried his daughter on his back; her legs were in plaster up to the knees.

Six weeks passed, during which Hülya cried nearly every day because it was so itchy under the plaster. Necmi was standing in front of the only mirror in the house, shaving. Timur stood next to him, but he hardly dared ask him his most pressing question, afraid his father would tell him off.

'Can I come with you?'

'All right,' Necmi said to his surprise, not thinking it over for long, and he stroked his boy's blond hair. 'Run and tell your mother to pack a bit more to eat.'

Timur was waiting impatiently outside the door with the bread and cheese when he heard voices from the kitchen.

'It's absolutely unnecessary for him to go. He's too little, what does he want in Ankara?'

‘An adventure,’ Necmi said. ‘It’ll be an adventure for him.’
‘It’s...’

‘Enough. He’s coming with us.’

Timur wished he could dash off and tell his friends, but he didn’t want to miss the train. The train! He’d never been on a train before.

When a young simit-seller carrying a big tray of sesame rings on his head walked past, Timur piped up.

‘Brother,’ he said, ‘I’m going to Ankara today.’

‘To Ankara?’

The boy, who might have been two or three years older than Timur, smiled and said: ‘Keep your eyes peeled, they have simit there as big as wagon wheels. The people are rich there, they can afford it.’

Timur was excited to see the big city, the incredible sesame rings, and he was excited to see his sister cured.

He looked out of the window almost all the way, and sometimes he hummed along with the clatter of the train. He didn’t want to fall asleep, he was waiting for the moment when the city appeared before them. But the clattering made him tired, that and the endless dry brown of the plains and the hills on the horizon and his father’s snoring. Shortly before Ankara, he fell asleep.

Timur didn’t wake up until the train pulled into the station with a loud screech of brakes.

‘Don’t be scared, and watch out for the cars,’ the blacksmith told his son as they disembarked.

Timur wasn’t scared: he was fascinated by all the people, by the noise, by the big buildings and the cars, which he’d never seen before. When he noticed his sister was afraid, he walked closer alongside his father, who was carrying Hülya on his back. Timur wanted to stroke her, but he couldn’t reach any higher than the plaster.

‘Why do you keep staring at the simit-sellers?’ Necmi asked. And then he laughed and said: ‘Did someone tell you they had simit as big as wagon wheels in Ankara?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ignorant people are always inventing nonsense like that,’ his father said, and Timur was proud he was no longer one of the ignorant.

Later, at the doctor’s surgery, he did hold Hülya’s hand. His sister didn’t cry but Timur could see she was stiff with fear.

‘Close your eyes,’ Timur said, and the doctor added in a warm voice: ‘Don’t be afraid, it won’t hurt.’

Hülya seemed not to hear either of them; she could barely breathe, and when the plaster was sawn open, Timur screamed: ‘Dad, Dad, her eyes are slipping!’

But it was too late. From that day on, his sister had a permanent squint.

Sometimes, when the little girls were playing in the street outside the forge, Necmi would go out and call them over. Then he’d take them along to the grocer’s, where the girls would scoop up their skirts in front of them to receive a handful of sweets. And Timur’s father had enormous hands.

When he began working in the forge, Timur took up this habit from his father. He would often put sweets in Fatma’s skirt. He must have been 14 or 15 at the time, and she 10 years younger. He still remembered the girl’s smile. Nobody knew anything specific about Fatma’s parents; some said they’d been Greeks, some Aramaeans, and others claimed she was the daughter of Circassians. All they could agree upon was that the couple had arrived in the town after the confusion of the First World War. Fatma’s father had died before she was born. One day he had complained of back pain, and two weeks later cancer had taken hold of his entire body. Fatma’s mother began working as a nanny to a rich family to feed herself and her daughter. When Fatma was six months old, her mother was trampled to death by horses in the marketplace. Everyone told a different story, but all anyone knew for sure was that the horses had bolt-

