

THE MIRROR OF THE VOID

*The Governance of Desires and the
Instinct*

— a novel —

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THE WITNESS OF THE NIGHT

I.

Istanbul does not die at night; it changes the guard. By day it makes noise, as if to forget who it is; by night it falls silent, to remember what it forgot. And that remembering is perhaps the heaviest noise of all.

Doctor Orhan sat at his desk, in the very center of the lamp's yellow ring of light. Before him lay Deniz's file, open — six months, line by line, dose by dose. He had gone back to the beginning for the third time, and each time something strange happened: the more he read, the less he knew his patient. It was as though every sentence he had set down on paper were a lid closing softly over another sentence, one he had not been able to write; and as the lids accumulated, the face beneath grew invisible. The file swelled, Deniz dissolved. In the end he held a hundred pages between his fingers, but nowhere on those hundred pages did a human being breathe. He pressed his fingertip to the line that read "fragmentation of the self." With two words he had sealed an entire human being — and so cleanly, so tightly, that neither a cry nor a smell passed up from beneath it. A good

diagnosis is not the name of understanding; it is the name of escaping the act of looking. Orhan sensed this that night, at a very late hour, for the first time.

The diplomas on the wall caught the lamplight. Istanbul, Johns Hopkins, Europe. The man behind the glass in the photograph was young and alive, his chin lifted, in his eyes a triumph not yet wearied. Orhan looked at him; that man did not look back, could not, for he had stayed standing at the summit of the climb, whereas the Orhan in this room had descended from that peak for years, imperceptibly, step by step. The two men bore the same name, and between them lay nothing but a thin pane of glass — yet that thin glass was thicker than the breadth of an entire life. A man climbs to his summit and leaves his best part there; only the one who left it there descends.

A voice stirred in him; cool, measured, a voice that laid everything on the scale. Years ago he had given it a name: the Thinker.

Look at that man, said the voice, and beneath the voice lay a thin mockery. *Thirty years you descended into people, and deep, at that. Tell me: did you look into Deniz, or did you write your own hand over his face? For the longer you look at a patient, the more you screen your gaze behind words, doses,*

reports, and the more panes of glass you lay one upon another, the closer you think you are coming. Yet each pane pushes you back a layer further. The one who looks the most sits behind the thickest glass — and the only thing he sees is his own reflection, gone dull from staring.

Orhan set the glass down on the desk. The glass met the wood; a dry, small, definite sound — like a full stop falling at the end of a sentence.

The moment that full stop fell, there was a knock at the door.

At this hour one does not knock, one strikes. Midnight was long past, and that blow split the silence clean down the middle. This time a second voice woke in him — warm, impatient, deaf to every reason. To this voice too he had given a name: the Craver.

Don't open it, whispered the Craver, but his whisper was stronger than a command. Stay seated. Fill your glass. Walk to the window, look at the dark water, let whatever has come wait. You cannot bear a single second of emptiness; the instant you see the void, you cram into it the first thing that comes to hand — a glass, a patient, a diagnosis. Let it be ugly, let it be wrong, let it be a lie; so long as it stops up that hole. For a man, faced with a gaping

abyss, clings to an ugly wall. So cling to a lie, cling to it tightly; for to fall out of a lie is always harder than to hang on to it.

Orhan walked to the door. His legs carried a weight he refused to carry. Sometimes a man surrenders to his feet, because his mind has long since sat down in a corner and will not move.

He opened it.

The nurse stood on the threshold, the lamplight falling on one half of her face and leaving the other in shadow. Her hair was wet, though it was not raining outside — that groundless, clinging damp of the city, which soaks everyone through without falling on anyone. There was something on her face; something said before it was spoken. Some pieces of news enter the room before the mouth opens; the word only presses the seal upon them.

— Doctor. Deniz.

Two words, and the rest was needless. In Orhan's chest something drew back quietly, the way the sea draws back — that eerie, telling ebb just before the great wave comes. His mind had grasped nothing yet, but his body already had; for the news we cannot carry, the mind, out of mercy, reports to us too late, while

the body knows no such mercy and is struck just as it is.

— Fell from the roof, said the nurse, her voice catching somewhere in her throat. Perhaps jumped. We don't know yet. But he is gone, Doctor. Deniz is gone.

A silence settled over them, and this time, at the very heart of that silence, stood a third thing.

This third one neither commanded nor tempted; in truth it never spoke. It only stood in a corner, and that corner was heavier than the others. Orhan had never managed to give it a name, for a name is a rope by which you hold something fast, and this voice let itself be caught by no rope; for it was mute. Even now it did not open its mouth; not a single syllable escaped it. Yet Orhan looked a sentence in the eye — one that had long stood written in him and that he could read only this night:

You knew.

Orhan laid his hand against the wall; not to stay on his feet, but so as not to fall.

With the other two voices a man could come to terms somehow. The Thinker you could contradict, with the Craver you could sit down and bargain; for every voice that speaks can be seized at some point in its words and silenced.

But this third one, the mute voice, could be caught nowhere, because it offered not a single proof. To one who shouts you can say to his face that he lies; but what lie clings to the silence of the one who keeps silent? The heaviest accusation is the one never uttered — for in order to answer, you first need a sentence, and what if that sentence was never formed?

Deniz's last words, those words that until then had lain buried at the bottom of the file, now came alive just as they were. On his way out he had taken hold of the door handle, turned back, and spoken with something that resembled a smile but was not one:

— Doctor, there are three voices in me. One thinks without cease. One wants without cease. And there is one that keeps silent. It is that one I fear most; for the silent one knows everything, yet says nothing.

Orhan had listened to those sentences that day, nodded, and let two words fall into the file: "fragmentation of the self." Then he had closed the lid, switched off the light, gone home, and fallen asleep. To give a thing a name is often not to understand it but to set a gravestone upon it; for over that to which you have given a name you need never bend again, the stone stands there, it frees you from the burden of opening it once more and looking. That night

Orhan fell into a deep sleep. Deniz did not sleep that night.

Now those same two words were slowly lifting the lid of the grave they had covered, and the darkness rising from the crack belonged not to Deniz alone; right beside him, out of the same earth, Orhan's own darkness was rising too. He who bends over another's pit forgets that he stands at the edge of his own; he always holds his lantern out ahead, onto the patient's face, and not once lowers the light to his own feet. Yet were he to turn that lantern downward for a single moment, he would see that for thirty years he has been standing in the very middle of his own darkness, without stirring.

Three voices, it passed through his mind. So Deniz named them. Perhaps in every person the same three are seated; the only difference is who hears them and who stays deaf to them. I stayed deaf for thirty years — and as long as a man does not hear the voices within him, he imagines himself a flawless whole. Yet that sense of wholeness is often not completeness, only the inability to hear the parts. The deaf man takes silence for peace.

The nurse's voice went on coming from somewhere — the station, the family, the notification form — but from far off, muffled, as if she were speaking from the bottom of the

water. Orhan drew his coat over his shoulders. He did not know where he would go. What had kept him on his feet for thirty years had always been his "knowing" side; but precisely because it was his knowing side, it had always kept him safe, always in the same place, always motionless. Safety was the silent reward of the one who stops walking. This night, perhaps for the first time in his life, he left that knowing side behind on the desk and surrendered to his unknowing side — for the only way to arrive anywhere was to give up the side that thought it knew the way.

Before he left, he looked one last time at his diplomas. Gleaming glass, sharp names, flawless dates. For years he had looked out through this glass, for years he had descended into others, yet onto that fine crack within himself he had not once turned his lantern. For to turn the light upon himself he had first to lift his gaze from everything it was fixed on, and when that light finally fell on his own face, the first thing to be lit would be how long he had stood there, motionless, in the dark.

A good refuge protects a man from the cold outside; but the truly good one makes him forget that he is even in a refuge — it lays its walls so softly that the one within takes them not for walls but for the edge of the world. Orhan lived for thirty years, under the