

LBRIS

We know
books

SABAHATTIN ALI

Madonna in a Fur Coat

*Translated by Maureen Freely and Alexander Dawe
With an Introduction by David Selim Sayers*



PENGUIN BOOKS

Of all the people I have chanced upon in life, there is no one who has left a greater impression. Months have passed but still Raif Efendi haunts my thoughts. As I sit here alone, I can see his honest face, gazing off into the distance, but ready, nonetheless, to greet all who cross his path with a smile. Yet he was hardly an extraordinary man. Indeed, he was rather ordinary, with no distinguishing features – no different from the hundreds of others we meet and fail to notice in the course of a normal day. Indeed, there was no part of his life – public or private – that might give rise to curiosity. He was, in the end, the sort of man who causes us to ask ourselves: ‘What do they live for? What do they find in life? What logic compels them to keep breathing? What philosophy drives them, as they wander the earth?’ But we ask in vain, if we fail to look beyond the surface – if we forget that beneath each surface lurks another realm, in which a caged mind whirls alone. It is, perhaps, easier to dismiss a man whose face gives no indication of an inner life. And what a pity that is: a dash of curiosity is all it takes to stumble upon treasures we never expected. That said, we rarely seek that which we do not expect to find. Send a hero into a dragon’s den, and his task is clear. It is a hero of another order who can summon up the courage to lower himself into a well of which we have no knowledge. Certainly this was not the case for me; if I came to know Raif Efendi, it was happenstance, pure and simple.

After losing my modest post in a bank – I am still not sure why, they said it was to reduce costs, but within the week they had hired someone else – I spent a long time seeking work in Ankara. My meagre savings kept me going through the summer, but as winter approached, I knew that my days of sleeping on friends' sofas would soon come to an end. My restaurant ration card was to expire within the week, and even this I could not afford to renew. Every failed job application drained me of all hope, even when I knew from the outset that my chances were nil; cut off from my friends, I would go from shop to shop seeking work as a salesman; rejected by them all, I would wander the streets in despair for half the night. From time to time, my friends would invite me over for supper, but even as I sat there, enjoying their food and drink, the fog refused to lift. And here was the strangest thing: the more my situation worsened, the less I could be sure of surviving from one day to the next, the greater my shame and my reluctance to ask for help. I would see a friend in the street – a friend who in the past had been more than willing to suggest where else I might look for work – and I would rush past him, head bowed. I was even different with friends whom I had openly asked for food, or happily borrowed money from. When they asked me how I was doing, I would flash an awkward smile and say, 'Not bad . . . I keep finding bits of work to do, here and there.' With that, I'd take my leave. The more I needed my friends, the more I longed to run away.

One evening, I was ambling along the quiet road between the station and the Exhibition Hall, breathing in the beauties of an Ankara autumn, in the hope that they might lift my heart. The sun reflected in the windows of the People's House had punctured this white marble building with holes the colour of blood; hovering over the pine saplings and the acacia trees was a cloud of smoke that might also have been steam or dust,

while a group of bedraggled workers returning from some construction site or another moved in hunchbacked silence over the skid-marked tarmac . . . And everything in this scene seemed content to be where it was. All was well with the world. All was in its proper place. There was, I thought, nothing more I could do. Just then a car sped past me. Glancing at the driver, I thought I recognized him. The car came to a halt a few paces ahead, and the door flew open. Leaning out of the window was my old classmate Hamdi, calling out my name.

I went over to him.

'Where are you off to?' he asked.

'Nowhere. I'm just out for a stroll.'

'Get in, then. Let's go to my house!'

Without waiting for an answer, he ushered me into the seat next to him. Along the way he told me he was on his way home from a tour of a number of factories owned by the firm he now worked for: 'I sent a telegram back to the house to let them know when to expect me. So they'll have the place ready for me. Otherwise I'd never have dared to invite you over!'

I laughed.

Time was when Hamdi and I had seen a great deal of each other, but since losing my job I'd not seen him at all. I knew him to be making a good living as an assistant director of a firm that traded in machinery but also involved itself in forestry and timber. And that was precisely why I had not sought him out after losing my job: I feared that he might think I'd come asking for a loan, not a job.

'Are you still at that bank?' he asked.

'No,' I said, 'I left.'

He looked surprised.

'So where are you working now?'

Half-heartedly, I said, 'I'm unemployed!'

He turned to look me over, taking note of the condition of

my clothes, and then, as if to let me know he did not regret inviting me back to his house, he smiled and gave me a friendly pat on the back. 'Don't worry, we'll talk it over tonight and figure something out!'

He seemed so confident, so pleased with himself. He could now, after all, enjoy the luxury of helping his friends. How I envied him!

His house was small but charming; his wife homely but amiable. Without embarrassment, they kissed each other. Then Hamdi left me to go and wash.

He had not introduced me formally to his wife, so I just stood there in the sitting room, uncertain what to do. Meanwhile, his wife lingered in the doorway, furtively watching me. She seemed to be considering something. Most probably, she was wondering if she should invite me to sit down. Changing her mind, she sidled away.

While I asked myself why it was that Hamdi had left me hanging like this, for I had always known him to be fastidious about such things – if anything, too fastidious – believing, as he did, that attentiveness was a necessary ingredient of success. It was, perhaps, a quirk accorded to those who had risen to positions of importance – to be deliberately inattentive in the presence of old (and less successful) friends. To take on a humble, fatherly tone with friends you have always addressed with some formality, to feel entitled to interrupt them mid-flow with some meaningless question, most often with a soft and compassionate smile . . . I'd had so much of this in recent days that it did not even occur to me to be angry with Hamdi. All I wanted was to put this irksome situation behind me. But at just this moment an old village woman padded in, wearing a headscarf, a white apron and much-darned black socks, and bearing coffee. So I sat down on one of the armchairs – midnight blue, embroidered in silver – and looked around. On the wall were

photographs of relatives and film stars; on the bookshelf that clearly belonged to the wife, there sat a number of cheap novels and fashion magazines. Stacked beneath a side table were a few albums that looked to have been well leafed through by visitors. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up one of them, but before I could open it, Hamdi appeared at the door. He was combing his wet hair with one hand while buttoning up his shirt with the other.

'So, now,' he said. 'Bring me up to date.'

'There's nothing to say, really, beyond what I've already told you.'

He seemed pleased to have run into me. Perhaps because it gave him a chance to show me how well he'd done, or because, when he looked at me, he was so glad he wasn't like me. When misfortune visits those who once walked alongside us, we do tend to feel relief, almost as if we believe we have ourselves been spared, and as we come to convince ourselves that they are suffering in our stead, we feel for these wretched creatures. We feel merciful. This was more or less the tone Hamdi took when he asked, 'Are you still writing?'

'Now and again . . . Some poetry, some stories . . .'

'But tell me, is there ever any profit in such things?'

Again, I laughed. Whereupon he said, 'You really have to stop, my friend!' and went on to lecture me about how, if I wanted to be successful, I had to start being practical, and how empty pursuits like literature could do nothing but harm once your schooldays were behind you. He spoke to me as if I were a child, never considering that I might have something to say, indeed to argue, in response, and he did not shy away from making it clear that it was success that had given him his courage. Meanwhile I just sat there, hiding behind a smile that I was sure must look very foolish, and only served to add to his confidence.

'Come and see me tomorrow morning!' he said now. 'We'll see if we can figure something out for you. You have a good brain in that head of yours. You were always pretty lazy, too, but that's not important. Experience is the best teacher! . . . Don't forget now. Get there early.'

He seemed to have forgotten that he himself had been one of the laziest boys in the school. Or else he was taking liberties, knowing that I was not about to challenge him.

As he made to rise from his chair, I jumped up and offered him my hand. 'If you'll excuse me,' I said.

'Why so early, my friend? Oh well, you know best.'

Only then did I remember that he'd invited me to supper. But it seemed to have slipped his mind entirely. I made for the door. As I took my hat, I said: 'Please pass on my respects to your wife!'

'Oh, I shall, I shall. And don't you forget to come in and see me tomorrow! In the meantime, don't be downhearted!' he said, and he patted me on the back.

Darkness had well and truly fallen by the time I left the house. The street lamps were glowing. I took a deep breath. There was dust in the air, but to me it felt wondrously clean and calming. I took my time walking home.

Late the next morning, I went to Hamdi's office – even though I'd had no intention of doing so when leaving his house the previous evening. He had not, after all, made a firm offer. Everyone else I'd asked for help had sent me off with the same trite words: 'Let's see what we can come up with, let's see what we can do.' Nevertheless, I went. It wasn't hope that drove me, so much as the desire to see myself insulted. I was more or less telling myself: 'You sat there in silence last night, and let him play the patron, didn't you? Well then, you're going to see this through to the bitter end, for this is what you deserve.'

The porter took me first to a small waiting room. When I

was ushered into Hamdi's office, I could feel that same foolish smile on my face, and I hated myself even more.

Hamdi was occupied with the stack of papers on his desk, and with the managers rushing in and out of his office. Directed to a chair with a peremptory nod, and lacking the courage to shake his hand, I went to sit down. My confidence had ebbed to the point that I felt as dazed as if he were a real boss, showing me my place, and at the same time I genuinely accepted this treatment as normal. What a great gulf had grown between my old classmate and me since he'd invited me into his car, just over twelve hours ago! How absurd they were, the games we played in the name of friendship; did empty, artificial jockeying of this sort bear any relation whatsoever to the real thing?

Neither Hamdi nor I had changed since yesterday evening. We were who we were. But having discovered a few things about each other, we had allowed these minute details to send us on diverging paths. The strangest thing was that we both accepted this change in our relations, and even found it natural. I felt anger neither at him nor at myself. All I wanted was not to be here.

'I've found you a job!' he announced. Looking straight at me, with those brave, sincere eyes of his, he added, 'I mean, I invented a job. It won't be very taxing. You'll keep track of our dealings with various banks, and especially our own bank . . . You'll be something along the lines of a liaison clerk, coordinating the firm's dealings with banks . . . And when there's nothing else to do, you can see to your own business . . . Write as many poems as you please . . . I've spoken to the director, and we can take you on . . . except that we can't offer you much at the moment: forty or fifty liras. We'll raise your salary later, of course. So let's get going! Success awaits us!'

Without bothering to stand up, he extended his hand. I did the same and thanked him. In his face I could see how

thoroughly pleased he was to have been in a position to help me. I thought then that he was not a bad fellow, actually – he had only acted in keeping with his station, and perhaps this had been genuinely necessary. But there was a moment after I left his office when I was not a little tempted to leave this place at once, instead of proceeding to the room he had indicated. But in the end I went shuffling down the corridor, head bowed, asking the first porter I saw if he could show me the way to Raif Efendi's office. He waved at a door and moved on. Again, I stopped. Why couldn't I just leave? Was I incapable of giving up a salary of forty liras? Or was I afraid of having been seen to offend Hamdi? No! I had been out of work for months now. I would leave this place with no prospects, and no idea where to go . . . and stripped of all courage. These were the thoughts that kept me in this dim corridor, waiting for a porter to show me the way.

In the end I peeked through a random door and saw Raif Efendi inside. I'd never met him before. Nevertheless, when I saw this man bowed over his desk, I knew it had to be him. Later, I wondered how I'd made my deduction. Hamdi had said, 'I've arranged for you to have a desk in our German translator Raif Efendi's room. He's a simple man, and a very quiet one, too. Entirely harmless.' At a time when everyone else had moved on to addressing each other as Mr and Mrs, he was still known as Raif Efendi. It was, perhaps, the image conjured up by this description that told me this grey-haired, stubble-faced man with tortoiseshell glasses must be him. I walked in.

He raised his head to look at me with daydreaming eyes, whereupon I said: 'You must be Raif Efendi.'

For a moment he looked me over. Then, in a soft and almost fearful voice, he said: 'Yes. And you must be the new clerk. They just came in now to set up your desk. Welcome! Do come in!'

I went to sit down at my desk. I examined the scratches and faint ink stains on its surface. What I longed to do, as is customary when sitting across from a stranger, was to size him up, and with stolen glances to form my first – and of course, mistaken – impressions. But he, I saw, had no such desire; he just bent down over his work and continued as if I weren't even there.

This continued until noon. By now I was staring at him openly, and without fear. He kept his hair cut short, and it was thinning at the top. The skin between his neck and his small ears was wrinkled. His long, thin fingers wandered from document to document as he conducted his translations without any sign of impatience. From time to time he'd raise his eyes, as if in search of the right word and, when our eyes met, he'd offer me something akin to a smile. Though he looked like an old man when viewed from the side, or from above, he looked enchantingly, and childishly, innocent when he smiled. His clipped blond moustache only added to the effect.

On my way out to eat, I saw him open a desk drawer to pull out a food container and a piece of bread wrapped in paper. 'Bon appétit,' I said, and left the room.

After sitting across from each other in the same room for many long days, we still hadn't spoken much. By now I'd come to know some of the clerks from other departments well enough to go out with them to a coffee house in the evenings to play backgammon. From them I discovered that Raif Efendi was one of the longest-serving clerks in the firm. Before the firm was established, he'd worked as a translator at the bank it now used. No one remembered when he'd started there. It was said that he had a large family to care for and that his salary only just covered his costs. When I asked why the firm had not raised his salary, seeing as he was so senior, and in a firm that was throwing away money, left and right, the young clerks

laughed. 'He's a slouch, that's why! We're not even sure how good he really is at languages!' Later on, though, I discovered that his German was excellent, and his translations both accurate and elegant. He could easily translate a letter about sawmill machinery or spare parts, or detailing the qualities of a shipment of ash and pine timber bound from Susak Port in Yugoslavia. When he translated contracts or specifications from Turkish into German, the director sent them off without hesitation. In his free moments he would open his desk drawer to read the book he kept there, never rushing and never removing it from the drawer. So one day I asked, 'What's that, Raif Bey?' He reddened as if I had caught him doing something wrong, and stammered, 'Nothing . . . It's a German novel, that's all!' At once, he closed the drawer. Despite all this, no one in the firm was willing to credit him with mastery of a foreign language. And perhaps not without reason, for there was nothing about the man to suggest he might know one. No foreign word ever crossed his lips. He never spoke about knowing other languages, never carried with him foreign magazines or newspapers. In sum, he bore no resemblance to the sort of man who makes it his life's main business to let the whole world know that he understands French. This was underlined by the fact that he had never asked for his worth to be confirmed with a rise in salary. Nor did he make any effort to seek out other, better-paid work.

He came to work punctually, ate lunch in his room, and in the evening he would pick up a few things at the store and head for home. I invited him to the coffee house a few times, but I couldn't get him to come. 'They're waiting for me at home!' he'd say. So he's a happy family man, I thought, rushing home to his wife and children. Later I discovered that it wasn't like that at all, as I shall chronicle in due course. His long years of hard work did not stop him from being despised at the office.

If our friend Hamdi found the tiniest typographical error in one of Raif Efendi's translations, he'd at once call the poor man in, and sometimes he'd come over to our room to upbraid him. With other clerks he was always more circumspect; knowing that each and every one of them owed their jobs to family connections, he had no wish to cause trouble for himself. If he allowed himself to go red in the face and rail against Raif Efendi in a voice loud enough for the entire building to hear, simply because a translation was a few hours late, it was because he knew the man would never find the courage to stand up to him – that much was easy to see. Can there be any sweeter intoxication than exerting power and authority over one of your own kind? It is, nevertheless, a rare pleasure, to be calculated with care, and enjoyed only with a particular sort of person.

Now and again, Raif Efendi would fall ill and absent himself from the office. Most often it was a common cold that kept him at home. But a long-ago bout of pleurisy had made him exceedingly cautious. A light case of sniffles and he would shut himself away, and when he came out again, he'd be wearing many layers of vests. He'd insist on keeping all the windows in our office shut, and when evening fell, he'd wrap himself in scarves up to his ears, not leaving the office until he'd pulled the collar of his thick, worn coat as high as it would go. But even when he was ill, he did not neglect his work. A messenger would deliver to his home any documents in need of translation and collect them a few hours later. Even so, whenever Hamdi or the director gave him a talking to, they seemed to be saying, 'And don't forget how much mercy we show you, you sniveling child! No matter how often you call in sick, we still keep you on!' They never lost an opportunity to throw it in his face: if the poor man came back after an absence of several days, they would, instead of wishing him well, make barbed remarks: