

THE WATCHMAKER'S SECRET

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Michel found himself standing before the quaint watch repair shop, a thin rectangle located in the bustling Grand Bazaar. Within the box worked an old man, a maestro of chronometry who mended the fabric of time with his nimble fingers and keen ears. To one side of the repairman sat his apprentice, a girl with watchful eyes. Positioned at a short distance, a tea tray with a triangular handle gently swinging in his hand, Michel observed the repairman assemble the components of a watch: the dial, the hands, the movement. The man's demeanor conveyed a sense that time itself would come to a standstill in the absence of his fingers. His hands were engaged in a dance with the intricacies of gears and cogs, moving as if they were reading a sentence written in Braille. Yet Michel's focus was locked on the repairman's eyes, which had fat, exhausted lids, trying to decipher why they were lowered when they should be wide open to guide his senses to restore the watch.

Though he could stay to watch the repairman all day, a cuckoo clock's bird humming from the hole woke Michel up. He was a runner boy for a coffee shop in the Grand Bazaar, so he returned to work delivering çay (black tea) throughout the bazaar. He skillfully maneuvered the tepsi (the circular metal tray), which dangled in his hand, its handles converging like the apex of a pyramid firmly affixed to its base and made his way back to "Emir's Coffee Shop." As he felt Michel leave, the old repairman opened his eyes and, without turning to his granddaughter, who was of similar age as the boy, asked, "Su, who was this boy eyeing you?" The girl replied matter-of-factly, "His attention seemed to be directed your way, grandpa, not mine." The grandfather responded with a short "Hmph," which was accompanied by a wry smile and then paused.

Michel got back to the shop. For the past year, Michel had been working for Emir, in his coffee shop within the bazaar. Emir had dark features and emerald green eyes, which were accentuated by a Bali Bey-style mustache and black shalwar that hung low. He treasured his coffee shop as a Shah treasures his throne. The shop had been in his family for over a century. When viewed from the outside, it looked simple and uninviting. It had a narrow, elongated layout, with minimal lighting towards the back. It looked like a horizontal bottomless well of tea and coffee. There was no seating inside except for a plastic stool that barely stood, which Michel would sit on while awaiting the cups to carry. The shop catered solely to the twenty shops it had hereditary ties to. In the Grand Bazaar, you didn't go to a coffee shop, it came to you. Shopkeepers ordered their coffee and tea for themselves and their customers through an intercom that stretched a direct line to each store around the kahve. The bazaar, an expansive, 600-year-old mall with 3600 shops, had hundreds of kahves, each of which contained a collection of intercoms with unique chimes corresponding to its affiliated shops. One does not need to dial a number but simply pick up the receiver. It rings the kahve, the coffee maker answers, you order, and the tepsi flies to your shop, attached to the fingers of a runner boy who arrives at the speed of light.

Each of Emir's twenty phones, all installed on the dark blue wall behind the counter, had a distinct ring to it—one mimicked a hummingbird, another played a nationalist march, one meowed, one barked, the other Cuckooed, and another, attached to Emir's least favorite customer, brayed. Each day, after lunchtime, chaos erupted as all handsets competed for Emir's attention. Shopkeepers rushed to order their post-lunch Turkish coffees, all in a frenzy of fifteen minutes. During the moments of respite from the ceaseless ringing, Emir would beckon Michel over and share his fanciful theories about being related to Osman I. Michel listened listlessly. He was never asked about his own stories. Emir had offered Michel, a Syrian boy, an opportunity to work for him when a neighbor told him about "a hungry refugee family living in a tent alongside the ancient walls of the city." The poor boy had a name like a rich French tourist, thought Emir, who was unaware that Syrians could also be Christian. His Ottoman nationalism did not aid in his knowledge of Syria, one of the oldest Ottoman states.

Throughout the day, Emir would stand beside the stove, enveloped in the lingering scent of the tea, humming an Ottoman military march: "Ceddin Deden." He was well-versed in every nuance of his supposed ancestral history, eager to share it with anyone who would lend an ear. The boy was not interested; he had the watch repairman on his mind. Michel would usually wait outside of the window to receive the tepsi full of tea and coffee. Then, holding the tepsi by its top ring, he went off into the merchants' jungle. Carefully weaving his way through the masses of shoppers, he didn't spill a drop.

His body moved to mirror the motion of the tepsi that swayed left and right, creating a peculiar dance. He tried hard to be quick, so that at the end of every delivery, he would have a moment or two to stop and observe the repairman, enchanted by his craft and the way he fixed time. That afternoon Michel was again standing across from the tiny window of the repairman's shop, bewildering at the habitual choreography between the repairman and his granddaughter. He watched the old man sniff a watch as if it were a flower. His index finger trailed its curves and crevices as if taking its pulse. All the while the girl's eyes followed her grandfather's every move. Never looking down, the watch repairman extended his palm forward, and the girl, perfectly in time, would hand over the cool metal tools. The old man stared into the beyond as if observing the passers-by, while the girl beside him acted as his eyes, perfectly in sync with his actions as she handed him each tool of his trade.

One day, following one of his customary study sessions with the watchmaker, Michel returned to the kahve, only to find an absence of cups waiting for him and an eerie silence that contrasted with the intercom chatter of birds, cats, dogs, donkeys, and Cuckoo. Emir was preoccupied with his phone, while nearby, the backgammon twins—who sold false leather bags next to Emir's coffeeshop—were engaged in a duel of dice on their backgammon board. As the observant boy drew closer to the twins, one of them playfully poked fun at him, jesting, "Here comes the kid with the tourist's name. How are you, Michael Jackson!" Unable to wait for another second, Michel impulsively voiced his burning inquiry, "Can a blind man repair watches?" The twins erupted in laughter—they loved laughing no matter what. The one seated on the left, with his legs spread wide and a black rosary dangling from his hand, inclined his head slightly toward Michel and, with a jab at his twin, said: "If this fool can play backgammon, surely anyone can achieve the impossible!" For Michel, that meant a Yes! The watchman could indeed be blind.

That following morning, at precisely 8:30 am, Michel opened the shop, and Emir came soon after. It was around 9:00 am when the incessant calls began to fill the place. Michel, feeling restless, attempted to pass the time. His ears tethered to the phone counter, awaiting the distinctive "cuckoo" chime that meant there was an order from the watch repair shop. He had to see the man again, this time being sure that he was blind. To Michel, who was delivering close to a thousand cups of tea a day, the mayhem of the bazaar was standard. Yet today, he paid little heed to his other customers who were a part of his everyday scene. He just wanted to be around this blind watch repairman.

Amidst the cacophony of the brays, barks, meows, and nationalist marches coming from at the intercom, there arrived the unmistakable "cuckoo, cuckoo." Michel couldn't contain his joy, much to Emir's bewilderment. With efficiency, he took the order for one extradark tea (the blind man surely needed to wake up) and a sprite (it had to be for the girl), then dashed through the labyrinthine bazaar. Having traversed the path to the watch repairman store so many times, Michel could have made the journey with his eyes closed. And he arrived in no time at all. Trying to catch his breath, Michel placed the tea and soda on the wooden counter near the shop's window and silently retreated. As he hid around the corner, he thought: "How could I be so foolish? I can't go back now and ask my question; they'll think I'm ill-mannered." As he was turning back to leave, a voice reached out to him, calling him back. It was the watch repairman himself. There, he found the old man in the same mysterious state, gazing into the distance with his head held high, with a watch pressed to his

left ear. The apprentice girl, with a smile on her face and a blush on her cheeks, talked first: "What is your name?" "Michel," said Michel. To this, the granddaughter expressed her surprise, exclaiming, "What? Why Michel? Aren't you Syrian?" Michel calmly affirmed, "Yes, a Christian Syrian." There was an awkward interval of silence until Michel followed through with his question to the watch repairman himself, "Sir, are you blind?".

The watch repairman took a breath and leaned back. He then closed his eyes again, enveloping the watch in his hand, he nodded and said, "Yes! But don't tell anyone!" Su, irked by this perplexing statement, shot a puzzled look at her grandfather. Why was he making up such a story? In the meantime, she noticed Michel's eyes expand in awe while a grateful smile illuminated his face. The boy then quickly recovered and resorted to a solemn nod as if acknowledging that he was now the bearer of this sacred piece of information. The Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, which bore gems and treasures from three continents for hundreds of years had gifted him a special secret, his own little treasure to keep and remember. Su thought that the Syrian boy stood a bit taller as he made his way back to the coffee shop. This time he walked without a rush, but still with his familiar swagger, rising and descending as he stepped on his shorter left leg.