

Walk past the vines, past the orchards¹

Meltem Gürle

‘The train is delayed’, said the woman.

‘Let’s go and have a beer.’

The man lifted his bag off the floor and slung it over his back. With his other hand he grabbed the handle of the trolley. His jacket hung limply from his arm. His shirtsleeves were rolled halfway to his elbow. The woman’s hands were empty. She was wearing a light summer dress and her hair in a careless bun at the nape of her neck.

‘The usual place?’ she asked.

‘The usual place’, he replied. ‘We can still hear the announcements there.’ He started walking with long, confident steps.

They crossed from one end of the station to the other. There were only two platforms. Arrivals and departures. When they first settled in this small town, they thought this was a good thing. Their guests would never get lost. Not that they had many guests. Only a few people. And nobody stayed for long.

They followed a young woman pushing a pram. On the way to the exit, they heard the announcement again. A woman’s voice apologized at length for the delay.

‘What was that again?’ asked the man once they’d sat down at the pub.

‘They found a bomb’, said the woman. ‘It must be somewhere close to the rails. A team is working on it.’

‘One from the war?’

The woman nodded, but the man did not see her. ‘They always give some reason for the delays’, he said digging in his backpack for cigarettes. ‘Everything happens for a reason here.’

‘When you know the cause of events, there is a sense of relief’, she responded. ‘The information makes it easier to wait.’

‘Thus spake Zarathustra!’, said the man and placed the cigarette between his lips.

¹ This essay was first published in *The Yale Review*, 2019. Available at <https://yalereview.yale.edu/walk-past-vines-past-orchards>. Republished with permission.

'Did you have to light one now? We just got here.'

'I haven't lit it yet', said the man and struck a match. 'And for *your* information', he added, inhaling the smoke, 'I am not relieved when I know the cause of events. Not one bit.'

He looked for the waiter. The place seemed deserted. *It's roasting hot*, he thought, *people must be hiding inside*. There was an old couple a few tables away. The man was holding half a glass of beer. The woman had folded her small wrinkled hands in her lap.

'*Zwei Kölsch, bitte*', he heard his wife asking in her deep, melodious voice.

The waiter was a young man with short blond hair, which he had combed very neatly to one side. On one of his cheeks was a birthmark in the shape of Australia. They didn't serve *Kölsch*, he informed her, offering instead, '*Weizen, Pils, oder Alt?*' '*Dann nehmen wir Alt*', replied the woman.

'You should let me order some time', the man said. 'I need to practice my German.' He puffed another big cloud of smoke into the air.

'Please don't start again', she sighed. 'Your German is fine.'

'You always forget', he continued, '*Kölsch* is the beer from the *other* side. In Düsseldorf, it's *Alt*. Don't you know the joke? In Köln people hate *altbier* so much that they remove the ALT tab in their laptops.'

'Goodness', said the woman, 'that's so lame!'

'I know', said the man.

'Why "the other side"?'

'They were part of the Roman Empire. The *Kölsch*. The Romans didn't get this far, though.'

'Shame for the Romans', laughed the woman. 'They don't know what they're missing.'

'You're also Roman', the man said, kissing her hand. 'From Eastern Rome.'

'The Roman Empire collapsed.' She took her hand back and reached for the menu.

'Do you want something to eat?'

'Do you think we should?', he said. 'What's the time?'

'The greatest distance between two places.'

'Don't make things more difficult than they actually are.' The man took a deep breath. His cigarette was burning his fingers. He threw the butt away.

'But things *are* difficult.'

'Come on, tell me the time', he said with a quirky smile. 'All right, then. *What watch?*' 'Almost five.'

'Such watch!'

She laughed, appreciating the *Casablanca* reference. The deep lines around her mouth softened.

'I don't think we have time to eat', he said. 'The train may come any moment.'

He looked at the other couple again. They weren't talking. The old woman held the handles of her purse as though preparing to leave. Her fingers were crooked with arthritis. Her companion had a growth on his bald head, maybe a benign tumor. *Nobody dies here*, the man thought. *They get old but they don't die. They just get smaller and smaller.*

'They go together', the woman was saying.

'Who, dear?'

'The old couple in *Casablanca*. They leave together.'

'So did we', said the man.

The woman did not answer.

The blond waiter brought the beers. The man paid the bill. He left a generous tip.

'*Danke, mein Freund*', he said to the waiter. '*Gerne*', said the boy. The Australia on his cheek flared up and became bright red.

'You should not really say that', said the woman, after the waiter left. 'They'll take it the wrong way.'

'What did I say?'

'Nothing, dear. It's not a big deal. How long will you be in Berlin?'

'I thought I could stay at Cemil's for a couple of days. Then I'm off to Istanbul.'

'Off to Istanbul', the woman echoed. Then took a sip from her beer.

'I forgot to tell you', the man went on, 'I had a dream the other night. I was kicked out of the university.'

'You don't say!'

'It was much worse than in real life', he said, ignoring her comment. 'I was back to school. I was looking for my office and I couldn't find it. I walked around the whole campus, checking every corner. There was not a single trace of me. It was like I had disappeared from the face of the earth. Can you imagine?'

'And it was like he had disappeared from the face of the earth', said the woman. Then she dipped a finger in the beer to fish out a leaf that had fallen into the glass.

'You dream a lot, too', he said.

'Do I?'

'Yes, you do. You talk in your sleep.'

'Really? What do I say?'

'You sang an Ahmet Özhan song the other night.'

At this, the woman spurt beer through her nose. The thought of her singing that cheesy song! They laughed together. The couple at the next table looked at them disapprovingly.

'It's nerves', said the woman, wiping tears from her cheeks. She dabbed the beer stains on her dress. Her chest was still moving up and down with silent laughter.

'When you left, my soul shed a burning bright flame', the man sang in a baritone voice. He closed his eyes and raised the cigarette pack to his mouth like a microphone.

'No, wait!', said the woman still laughing. 'We have to part your hair in the middle, like this.' She reached out and stuck his hair to his forehead.

'Go ahead', he teased her, 'wipe your beer hands on my face!'

'Tell me the truth! Was I really singing that song?'

'Does it matter what song it was? You were singing in your sleep.'

The woman's reply disappeared in the rattling noise of a goods train passing by. A whistle blew somewhere far off. The old man sitting at the next table looked at his watch and signaled to the waiter for the bill.

'You know what I'm thinking?', asked the man after the train had passed.

'What?'

'We could buy a small piece of land. Somewhere on the Aegean. A few olive trees. Or a small vineyard. You love vines. I'm just saying. Whichever you like.'

The woman looked at her hands in distress.

'We don't have to stay in academia, you know. We could have another life, another future.'

The woman was silent.

'Like in the poem. *Walk past the vines, past the orchards...*'

'Cemal Süreya's poem?'

'Yes. You like that poem, don't you?'

'Walk past the orchards, past the parks, the bridges', she corrected him.

'Right', said the man, 'your memory is better.'

'There are no vines', said the woman. She turned her head away from him. Her lips were trembling.

'Yes, dear', said the man. 'I got it wrong.'

The old couple paid and left. They leaned on each other slightly as they walked to the station. *They are leaving together*, the man thought.

'The train is coming', said the woman. 'I just heard the announcement.'

'It is coming, yes', said the man.

'We have to go', said the woman.

'Chop, chop!', said the man.

They did not move. The man played with the handle of the trolley. He pulled and pushed it again.

'Are you really leaving?' The woman's voice was coarse, and she was staring at a beer stain on the table.

'Let's not go back to square one', said the man. 'We've been through this.'

'How can you go!'

'On an airplane.' When she looked at him with unbelieving eyes, he imitated the fake joy of the jingle, 'Turkish Airlines, globally yours?'

The woman did not smile. She tried to scrape the stain on the table, in vain. She pulled a coaster over it and placed the empty beer glass on the coaster.

'What if they don't let you leave the country again?'

'Then you can fly home to me', the man replied.

'I can, yes', said the woman.

'When?'

'Later.'

'How much later?'

'I don't know', said the woman, 'I'm teaching now. When classes are over', she pushed the chair and stood up, 'Later'.

The platform was becoming busy. They stood at the very end without touching each other. Under the sun, the rails bent like golden snakes and disappeared in the distance.

'Look, there's a bright light over there', the man said, pointing to the rails. Then he put his arms around the woman and pulled her towards himself.

The woman tried to clear her throat. She hid her face in his chest.

'You totally misunderstood that poem', she said finally, 'It is not like you said. Not like that at all.'

Walk past the orchards, past the parks, the bridges;
It's a shame I never learned that love needs tending.

Make love, traveller, say your big words and leave;
Cliffs will unite the high hills without bending.
— from 'Make love, traveller', by Cemal Süreya

Translation: Meltem Gürle

