Checkpoint

Erkin hesitated at the edge of the square—a vast, empty desert from which he might never return.

Spreading out in front of the mosque, the square had seemed immense to him since his youth, but in a much different way: expansive as the sun, the center around which his life would gravitate, the light from which he would find guidance. Echoes of sparkling laughter, shades of running children reached to him across the decades. Right there was the flagstone where he sprained his ankle. Where Aynur first spoke to him, lifted him up and helped him home. 'Moonlight': she was well-named. His wife reflected the sun's wisdom back to him and gave it beauty.

Erkin thought of her at home, unable to get out of bed. Her light was waning, darkened by her own body's betrayal. The night he had found her lying by the front door, her hip broken. Far worse that she didn't recognize him, screamed as he tried to help her. The real betrayal came not from her body, but from her mind.

Anger seized him. The reflection on the flagstones was no longer the clear light of the sun and moon, but an unnatural crimson. He raised his eyes to the LED signs around the entrance to the mosque, scrolling official announcements spelled out in cherry-red bulbs. A few tourists stood underneath the arch, showing their passports to the guards. He would never be allowed a passport. No matter—he no longer wanted to enter the mosque. No longer wanted to go to any of the places a passport might take him, even if it was permitted. The mosque was empty now anyway; he doubted even God would go there.

Erkin remembered when the mosque was so full that Friday afternoon congregation swelled into the square. He and his friends would spread their rugs on the flagstones and kneel, their prayers joining with thousands of others into a single voice. A community. He whispered a prayer now and his breathing slowed. He felt Aynur's donepezil prescription through the lining of his pant pocket, hidden in his underwear, and found his resolve.

The checkpoint stood at the far end of the square. Erkin knew every alley in the old town, and he could avoid the other checkpoints, but there was no way around this one. When his neighborhood had first been designated a tourism development zone, the city officials said it would bring opportunity for everyone. Then the businesses came from outside; then the fights and arrests; then the checkpoint. He could walk out of the zone freely but returning to his own home was increasingly difficult. A difference of a few blocks had changed his entire world.

Erkin shuffled across the square, the stones hard against his worn-out soles. These same stones upon which he had played, upon which he had knelt, now made his hips ache. He fumbled with the striped bags in his hands—his arthritic fingers couldn't find a good grip. The vegetables were awkwardly shaped, and they were already poking holes through the cheap plastic. He hated wasting money on the waxy, tasteless food from the convenience store, but the markets had all been shut down. This would at least provide him with an excuse for why he was out.

Last time Erkin hadn't gone to all this trouble. He simply showed them the pills. When the guard asked why they weren't in his name, he explained they were for his wife. The guard took the bottle and told him that if they belonged to his wife, she should come claim them herself. Erkin knew from the cruelty in the guard's eyes he didn't care about the pills, didn't care whose name was on the label. He simply saw an opportunity to exert power over someone weaker and he took advantage of it. A rustling came from the plastic bags. Erkin looked down

and saw his hands trembling. Aynur went without her medicine for a month before the doctor would give him another prescription. The wildness in her eyes as her memory struggled to recognize him. Confusion. Fear. He would not put her through that again.

He reached the stoplight and waited for it to change. The checkpoint was just across the street. When they installed it, this was the first stoplight he had ever seen. There seemed little point at the time. Donkey carts outnumbered automobiles, and the small flatbed trucks that came through were usually moving slowly as they looked for a place to park and sell the produce they brought from the countryside. Now vehicles raced by, driven by strangers who cared little whether an old man had difficulty crossing the street. The light still seemed pointless to Erkin; no one stopped for it. Nevertheless, he would wait. He did not want to risk drawing attention from the guards.

A group of young people shoved past Erkin, nearly knocking him over. They stepped in front of a vehicle without pausing. It skidded to a stop and blasted its horn. They yelled profanities at the driver and one of the girls threw her plastic cup at him; ice tinkled on the windshield. The light changed and Erkin crossed, getting in line for the checkpoint behind the group. He tried not to wrinkle his nose at the smell of alcohol emanating from them, but the clouds of sickly-sweet smelling e-cigarette vapor they blew into his face made him cough. He was glad he and Aynur could not have children, if this was what their grandchildren would have become. Erkin stared at their expensive clothing, their clean faces. He was suddenly self-conscious of his old suit, his beard, his taqiyah. They were the same as the guards; he was not. It was all the reason the guards needed to stop him. The group casually held up their IDs and the guards waved them through the metal detector without so much as a glance.

A woman behind a table signaled to him and he stepped forward. Her hair was neatly coiffed, and her makeup perfectly accentuated her smooth skin. She couldn't have been more than twenty. From her look of disdain, it was obvious she considered having to speak to him beneath her.

"ID."

Erkin had his card prepared, and handed it to her, trying not to look too eager.

"You need to trim your beard." She took out a sheet with photos of approved appearances and pointed to one of them. "No longer than this. You don't want to look like an extremist, do you? Take care of it as soon as you get home."

Erkin nodded.

"Your purpose in going out?"

"Groceries." Erkin raised his bags.

"On the table."

As she looked through his bags with latex-gloved hands, a man stepped up behind him. Erkin turned and started: it was the guard from last time. The one who took Aynur's pills. Erkin tried desperately to control his abrupt panic. An onion rolled off the table—without thinking Erkin stooped to pick it up.

"Stand still!" The guard struck Erkin, knocking his taqiyah off his head. The guard snatched it off the ground and handed it to him—maybe he hadn't intended to use so much force. But if the guard felt guilty, he quickly masked it.

Erkin caved his chest and cast his eyes to the ground, trying to make himself as small as possible.

“Your phone.” The first guard held out her hand, an embarrassed look on her face. Erkin hadn’t anticipated this—they’d never inspected phones before. When she saw his antiquated flip phone, she turned to the other guard and rolled her eyes, whatever sympathy she might have felt for him evaporating. “I don’t know how to check this for prohibited apps. Does it even have apps?”

“Let me see.” The man took it from her. “No GPS tracking. Old man, how can we know if you’re telling the truth if we can’t see where you’ve been? Are you hiding something from us?”

Erkin remained quiet as a corpse.

“We’ll have to confiscate this phone. Get a new one—make sure it only has approved functions.”

“Yes sir.” Erkin’s face grew hot where the guard hit him. He wouldn’t be able to hide the bruise from Aynur.

“Empty your pockets.”

Erkin took out his keys and a few bills and extended them to the guard.

“Don’t hand me money—are you trying to bribe me? In the basket.”

Erkin pulled the lining out of his pockets to show they were empty.

“Arms out, legs spread.” The male guard turned to the woman. “Frisk him.”

She looked at Erkin in disgust as she patted his arms; down his torso; then up each leg. She stopped at mid-thigh, avoiding his groin. “There’s nothing.”

“Through the metal detector. Collect your belongings and be on your way. Next time be better prepared.” The male guard gripped his shoulder painfully and shoved him away.

Erkin suppressed the emotions writhing inside him when he stepped inside his house and locked the barred aluminum door. Shame. Indignation. Rage. He could not release them yet, he had to hold them in his gut a little longer. He went into the kitchen, pulled the pills from his underwear and poured a glass of water.

“Erkin?” Aynur heard him from the next room.

“Yes, my love.” He let out a breath: she remembered him. He walked to her, a pill in one hand and water in the other.

“You got my pills! But what happened to your face?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just a little bump. I’m not young anymore, I bruise easily.” He placed the pill in her mouth and helped her take a sip from the glass, then wiped the drip from her chin.

“To me you will always be young.” She lifted her hand to his face. “My poor Erkin. ‘Free.’ You are my freedom, but I am not yours. I’m such a burden to you.”

“How could moonlight ever be a burden? Rest now, I will make your meal.”

Erkin watched as she closed her eyes, a smile curving her lips. He went to the bathroom and closed the door. The tension he fought so hard to contain finally broke free. He fell into the wall behind him as tremors overtook his body; his knees gave out and he sank to the floor. He swallowed the sobs so Aynur wouldn’t hear them, choking his throat. Eventually the stress

exhausted itself and Erkin was able to sit quietly on the cool tile floor. He did not feel relief; he was not sure he could remember what relief felt like. But for now, at least, he had accomplished what he needed to do. He stood up and washed the tears from his face. He had indulged his emotions enough. Aynur needed his care.