The Man Whose Tomorrow Was Cancelled

Short story · 13 min read

After mankind was driven out of paradise, right after the devil came and whispered sins into their ears, an angel came to them. It asked the bodies made of clay what they would do the next day. Those who had fallen from the very top dreamed of tomorrow in spite of everything.

When the tower of Babel pierced the floor of heaven, when tongues tangled and no one understood anyone else, the angel asked them what they would do. Each of them told it, in their own tongue, what they would do.

The angel was beautiful in those days. Because even if it came to man only after the devil, every mind was hopeful for tomorrow. Tomorrow would come, and the future was pregnant with good things for every person. Even in the worst of times.

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A man passes under the yellow light of the streetlamps. As he walks, raindrops burst on his jacket. Pat... Pat... Pat...

The yellow light of the street reflects off the torn jacket on his hunched back. The steep streets of Beyoğlu have been left as they are to the cold and the wet of a September night. The old women of the city carry the flowers in their pots out onto the fire escapes. They know they are trapped inside the concrete. Now and then footsteps pass in the street.

The man stops in front of a theatre poster. When he turns his head for a moment, part of his face appears in the light. A face pure white and hairless, the sockets of eyes as dark blue as the night. His face is sunken to the bone, and it looks less like a person's than like the skin of a

mummy waiting to dry and fall away.

The poster on the wall is made to look like the front page of an old newspaper, for a play about the Second World War. You can read Winston Churchill's broad body and the name of the play: "The Second World War."

1942

The door of a tavern in Istanbul opens. The young man breathes in the air, heavy with anise and tobacco smoke, and makes a face. His hair, carefully combed to the right, catches the tired light of the paraffin lamp thanks to the lotion he has put on it. His shaved, shining face shows the soft lines of his shapely jaw. His blue eyes wander among the men who fill the tavern, talking slowly among themselves, laughing, or just sitting. At last he heads for a table where two men are sitting. As he pulls out a stool he asks:

"Gentlemen, would you allow me?"

One of the men breaks off his conversation and turns to the young man. Drawing deeply on his cigarette, he nods. He is middle-aged, his sweeping moustache yellowed by years of tobacco.

The young man looks at the magazine lying on the table. A large photograph of the English leader Winston Churchill looks back at him from the other end of the yellow newsprint. "World War" is the headline, once again. The young man points at the magazine:

"Tell me," he says, "are you hopeful about tomorrow?"

The men give the young man a strange look, but after a while they nod and answer:

"Hopeful, of course."

The young man smiles. He folds the newspaper, tucks it under his arm and leaves the tavern the way he came.

The rain keeps falling on the streets of Beyoğlu. There are not even cats in the streets. But the man is thinking. He is thinking of the shiny watch he threw into the sea a moment ago, or years ago. It was a present from his wife. How long had it been since he caught her in bed with someone else, three days, a week? Or had all this happened a human lifetime ago? He does not remember. How long has it been since he chose to live inside this strange human body?

He puts his strange, shapeless hands, nothing but skin and bone, into his pockets. His body, freshly out of the grave or long overdue for one, is shaking. As a senseless joy rises in his chest, he looks around.

1962

In the coffeehouse under the big plane tree, watching the black and white television, he grows restless. He looks at the shiny watch on its chain in his pocket. He does not look at what time the hands show. He only wants to be sure they are moving. When at last the minute hand shows a minute's movement, he snaps the lid shut and puts the watch back in his pocket. Something is turning deep inside this body of flesh and bone, something that troubles him. Is it the fear of losing his youth?

When he feels time catching up with him, a shiver climbs his back. White shows among the hair he so carefully combs to the right. He sets his cigarette down in the ashtray and takes a big gulp of tea to wet his dry throat. His blue eyes turn to Recep Ağa at the next table, who is watching the woman reading the news on television with great attention.

"Recep Ağa," he says, trying to hide the shake in his voice, "are you hopeful about tomorrow?"

At first Recep Ağa does not understand the question. Then he thinks about it a little.

"Well," he says, and waits. To the man the wait feels very long. With every second an unbearable weight seems to settle on him. "Well, hopeful, of course."

The man takes a deep breath. With a trembling hand he picks up the cigarette from the ashtray and draws on it. "Hopeful, of course," he repeats.

Walking up the narrow, steep streets of Istanbul, more drops fall into the water pooled along the edge of the pavement. A man runs past him. He runs with his collar turned up so as not to get wet. He is trying to make it somewhere. But there is nothing left that he could make it to. Not any more.

1982

"Wait!" The old man's cracked voice echoes in the empty street. He is out of breath, but he keeps running. The strange neon yellow tracksuit he wears and the exercise headband on his head are not enough to make up for the hair he has lost.

"Wait, you didn't answer my question!"

The hurried sound of a pair of high heels slowly fades. When the old man finally understands he will not catch up, he sinks down onto the pavement. He cannot hold back his tears. Out of breath, he talks to the empty air.

"Are you hopeful about tomorrow, about tomorrow? What cruelty this is... This life of mine is a slow torture that never ends. For God to make me like this, to have to keep bringing tomorrow until there is no one left who wants it... When all I want is to be young, to wake up in a time when there are people who look to tomorrow with hope, like before. But how hard it is to find people who look to tomorrow with hope..."

Just then the man sees a woman on the avenue looking at him strangely. Between his strange sentences he goes toward the person he sees, on his hands and knees.

"You at least, tell me, tell me, are you hopeful about tomorrow?"

"Don't crawl on the ground like that. What are you doing?"

"Please tell me, are you hopeful about tomorrow?"

"About tomorrow... Yes, yes, I'm hopeful," the woman has to say. The man's tears slowly roll down.

The whistle of a ship from very far away breaks the night. As the sad sound carried by the wind and the rain settles over the city, the man stops for a moment. His face, like a skull, smiles faintly. He looks less like a person than a freak.

2002

In the blindest half of the night, trying to sleep in his spot by the bins at the edge of the pier, he hears the whistle of a ferry coming in and returns to the land of the living. He cannot leave them any more. The old man simply cannot die. He is sure that very few people are left who hope for tomorrow. But God has given him such a task that if even one person dreams of tomorrow, tomorrow has to come.

The old man looks at his watch. Five minutes to the next day. He will do what he has to, one more time.

He puts his hand into his chest. In great pain he takes a small shining sphere out from where his heart should be. He rubs it between his trembling palms, then blows on it through a fit of coughing. Every piece of it slowly scatters. It mixes with the wind and is gone. The clock passes twelve once again.

Walking along the wet road, the freak sees someone coming the other way. When he slowly steps in front of them, the other slows down without meaning to.

“Excuse me, don’t take this the wrong way. For tomorrow...” says the freak, but the other hurries past him.

“Sorry, I have somewhere to be,” they say quickly.

But the freak has nowhere to be. Really, why is that? Why can he never make it anywhere? Is it because, in the despair of not being able to die, he keeps trying to bring the next day? Because he makes himself and mankind suffer without end? Or because every night he has to do his business in corners of toilets that stink of pus and piss? None of these, of course. The freak smiles. The few yellow teeth he has left, full of rot, show in the light of the streetlamp.

That he could never make it anywhere, however fast he ran, was of course because no one wanted tomorrow to happen. It was not only because one person sank up to the neck every day in the shit they lived in. It was the merciless hatred of tomorrow felt by the toughs with their sweeping moustaches, by Recep Ağa, by the women of the night, by everyone, in short.

The freak took out his phone. The glow of the screen gave away the strange blue of his eyes, caught in the rain. He no longer had any hair to comb carefully and lay to one side. The digital clock showed a quarter to twelve. The freak stopped and watched the street. He marvelled at the way people threw their bodies this way and that. He was amazed at how quickly these heaps of meat, trapped in the moment, could forget.

Then he will do what no one has been able to do. That is right, what the freak does is not easy. Everyone will understand, but no one will want to accept it. But there is no other way: due to insufficient demand, tomorrow will be cancelled. And so he will free himself from his endless torture.

* * *

Now they are all coming out of the holes they hid in. Everyone understands that something is wrong. Like worms that come up onto the soil after rain, they crawl out of the houses they hid in. They turn faces wrapped in a meaningless expression toward one another. What will they do now? What would a sensible person do?

They look at their watches, but the hands have finished their endless circle. Yet modern man does not give up hope. They look at their pendulums, but the pendulums that left those elegant marks in the fine sand have stopped. Some smile, sure that the red of the rising sun brings death. Some reach for their wrists in one last effort. Every pulse has stopped. The blood no longer even knocks against the walls of the veins.

While silence wraps everything, the freak walks on in spite of the puddle under his feet. Splash... Splash... Splash...

Faces turn to him. In all this stillness, in that moment when the wind is not broken even by steady breathing, the freak steps before the collective mind of all mankind. Mankind waits for an explanation. Minds stuck in time that no longer moves are curious.

“Minds imprisoned in bodies! How sure you all were that a new day would dawn. You had no doubt that the coming day would sweep away your troubles and cares. But weren’t you fooling yourselves? You were all nothing but a snake eating its own tail. Here, I am taking you out of that circle. I am lifting the weight of the tomorrow you could not imagine from your shoulders. I am setting your minds free in the unconditional state of endless stillness. If you do not want there to be a tomorrow again, then there will not be a tomorrow again. Not until a thousand people dream it, like the dream of a thousand cats.”

In that moment a hum rises from millions of minds. The ecstatic vapour of a frenzy of joy spreads through every particle of the universe trapped in the moment. Motionless bodies rejoice that once again they are free from jobs they will never have to go to. Lovers who do not love each other are madly happy that they will never see each other again. All mankind celebrates the end of lives given over to meaningless pursuits in the meaningless circle of living.

But at that moment one of the bodies collapses to the ground. Its mind stays where it is inside the wave of joy, and then another, and then another. Hopeless minds without a tomorrow slowly fade away, left standing like crooked, twisted, toppled gravestones. They did not even know who the dead were whose heads they once stood over.

The freak drew himself up with pride before his work. This was how the magnificent harmony should be: more perfect and flawless than its Creator’s creation. What stood before him was the chaotic but ordered music of everything, made of feelings and thoughts. But the more he listened, the more he heard grating notes inside his song. Whose was this thought that did not fit the whole?

The freak wandered among the bodies frozen in time. Though it annoyed him to be pulled away from his magnificent creation, this different thought that suddenly stood before him had excited him.

He walked back the way he had come. He went down streets paved with cobblestones and heard that it came from inside a long, narrow shop lined with wooden walls. When he went in, he saw a man trapped among clocks large and small. He had frozen while reaching for watch parts falling to the floor. But his thoughts were crying out without a pause:

“So it was because the world turned that we stopped thinking about tomorrow!”

The freak took one of the gears the man was reaching for.

“That is right,” he said. “What a shame you only realised it after a whole lifetime.”

“Tomorrow did not just come,” said the old man.

“Yes,” answered the freak once again. Meanwhile he slowly fitted another part onto the gear.

“What brought tomorrow was our belief that tomorrow would come.” The excitement in the old man’s voice had slowly died down. He seemed to be talking to himself.

The freak smiled. Fitting together each of the watch parts hanging in the air, he only nodded. For a moment the old man’s unseeing eyes seemed to turn to him.

“But... But we all believed in tomorrow,” he said. “We all had things to do tomorrow, things to put right. Every one of us wished for tomorrow to come.”

“No. You wanted another day. You wanted yesterday, or the day before that. You longed for the morning to come, or for the darkest moment of the night. You dreamed of the next meal, the next episode... But none of you dreamed of tomorrow.” He gave the gears of the now finished watch a little flick. In the stillness the gears turned lazily. “And that is why there will be no tomorrow again. Now we all live in the moment. Look, listen! How happy they are.”

The freak gently fitted the hour and minute hands. Last of all he picked up the glass from the floor and, with great respect, set it in its place, then laid the watch in the old man’s palm, now reaching into the void. But the old man’s mind had already gone quiet. The freak could not be sure how much of what the old man said he had heard.

He stepped out onto the cobblestones once more. The cries of joy and the thick frenzy in the air went on. But the sound of the minds did not seem as strong as before. It was like a candle slowly burning down, going out.

* * *

Silence. In the middle of the stillness there is a thick silence, without wind and without thought. Even the sunlight is trapped inside the atmosphere. The freak waits where he is, before the collective mind.

“What happens now?” he thinks.

“What happens at the very end of time?”

Tick... A sound echoes in the void.

“When everything is over...

“...when the leaves no longer fall...

“...and every mind has gone quiet, what happens then?”

Tock,

“When those who dream of tomorrow come to an end...”

Tick,

“...what happens to tomorrow?”

Tock...

* * *

The old man catches the watch just before it falls. For a moment he stands there in surprise, looking for the cogs and gears he expected to scatter around him. Then he looks into his palm. Perhaps one of the most magnificent pocket watches he has ever seen. But there is something strange about it. Its hands turn backwards.

The old man smiles and puts it down to his age.

“I must have put the parts in the wrong places. Well, this is no job to fix at this hour,” he says, taking his coat. He gets ready to step onto the cobblestones, wet from the rain that has just stopped. He speaks out loud, as if to convince himself:

“Best I do this tomorrow.”

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Translated from my Turkish original for this site.