



Rear Window – Turkish Style
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Part One

The afternoon October sun, hazy after its journey over the Istanbul rooftops, glistened on the crucifix around Shirley's neck distracting Niamh. Niamh felt bad, she'd invited Shirley over impulsively and now she found herself bored by a ream of stories about teaching English in Italy, Israel, the Philippines and now here in Turkey. Shirley, a thirty-six year old American, had arrived last month moving into an apartment in the block behind Niamh's Yukari Goztepe apartment. A neighbourhood on the Asian side of Istanbul, it was far from the historical monuments of the Golden Horn or the exclusive neighbourhoods around Taksim.

"The kid was so cute, but he just could not say 'world'. It kept coming out as 'word'."

Niamh startled from a daydream about baby names for her seven-month bump and saw Shirley staring at her. She fingered a strand of her long red hair, wrapping it around her forefinger and dragged her thoughts back to the talkative Shirley, "So, what age do you teach?"

"Mainly teenagers, but I do private business English lessons for older people." Niamh noticed a solid gold band on Shirley's left ring finger, "Are you married?" Shirley touched her ring, "No, not exactly. Em, I wear it to discourage unwanted attention."

“Why did you choose to come to Turkey?” Niamh made an effort to stay focused, thinking it was just as well she’d eased back on her workload. Dealing with people’s ideas of what their websites should be required her to be a good listener, something she clearly wasn’t succeeding at today.

“The Turks are lovely, so welcoming and friendly and I heard that, em, English teachers are always needed.”

“Did an organisation send you to all these countries? Which one is it?”

“Eh, yes. But it isn’t one you’d know.” Shirley was evasive and changed the subject. “How have you coped with the jump from New York to Istanbul?”

“It was difficult at first.” Niamh wondered what Shirley was trying to hide. “The reason we moved back to Turkey was because Ahmet’s dad died of a sudden heart attack. Ahmet took over his Dad’s business. He has two sisters but they live in Ankara.”

They were interrupted by the sound of a key in the hall door. Bedriye *Anne*, Niamh’s mother-in-law bustled in the door carrying bags of fruit and vegetables bought from the local *pazar*. Sellers of all things, fruit, vegetables, clothes, underwear and household goods would assemble and sell in an open air market usually held in council-built markets or sometimes directly on the street. Each day the *pazar* would move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

“*Anne*, what have you got?” Niamh asked her mother-in-law in Turkish, calling her An-ne, the familiar term for mother.

“Nothing, my dear, I just picked up some vegetables when I was passing the *pazar*.” Bedriye *Anne* looked up from changing her shoes and jumped when she saw the American in the living room. “I didn’t know you had a guest. You talk to your friend; I’ll just put these away.” Bedriye *Anne* went into the kitchen, returning to leave her jacket and headscarf on the coat rack by the door. “I’ll make some tea for us.” she said in Turkish before adding “Tee, tee, yes” in broken English.

“Sorry about that,” Niamh apologised to Shirley. “That’s my mother-in-law. She lives nearby and thinks of this as her second home; in a way it is, since Ahmet’s father is the one who bought it originally. So she arrives at any time and usually starts cleaning.”

“That’s one thing I don’t think I could cope with; the way Turkish families live in each other’s pockets. I value my quiet time to meditate.” Shirley’s tight bob of blond hair shuddered as she glanced at her watch. It was nearly 4.30pm. “I’ve got to go, I’m afraid. But you should come over to my place for coffee sometime. I think we could have a lot in common.”

Bedriye *Anne* came out of the kitchen as Shirley put her shoes on at the front door. “But the tea, ‘tee’, will be ready soon.”

Shirley waved to Niamh. “Thanks for the chat. We must do it again.”

After she closed the door, Niamh turned to her mother-in-law waiting for the questions to begin.

“Who was that? She’s a foreigner, is she American? What is she doing in Istanbul? How did you meet her? What does she work as? Why did she leave so suddenly?” Bedriye *Anne’s* curiosity was unstoppable.

“Calm down *Anne.*” Niamh led her to the spare bedroom at the opposite end of the corridor from the living room. It was already filling up with baby furniture, clothes and accessories. Niamh had plans to paint it, buy a *kilim* for the floor; *Anne* was going to make curtains and get bedding made.

Niamh pulled back the net curtain and looked down from three floors up. She pointed to a building diagonally behind them, though the building faced the street behind the door was in an alley at the side. “Shirley’s American, she only moved here a month ago. I met her at the corner store; she works as an English teacher with a private school.” As she spoke Shirley appeared from the street behind, walked to the door and took some keys out of her purse.

“Does she teach adults?” Bedriye *Anne* asked as a man looking to be in his early sixties joined Shirley at her front door. The grey-haired man shook her hand and then placed a hand on her upper back as she opened the door.

“Yes, but...” He doesn’t look like a business man Niamh was about to say though dressed in dark clothes and a long overcoat that wasn’t true. But there was something about the man’s movements, the way he carried himself that seemed familiar to Niamh.

He held the door for Shirley to pass through, and then looked furtively back towards the street before entering the building.

Part Two

Shirley, a newly-arrived American, had dodged questions about the organisation she worked for, before leaving Niamh’s apartment in a rush. Niamh’s suspicions were further raised by a grey-haired man seen with Shirley.

By Friday, two weeks after Shirley’s visit, Niamh finished painting the spare room a delicate shade of pale yellow. It gave her ample opportunity to watch the comings and goings at the English-teacher’s apartment behind. Shirley went to the language school from 8am to 12pm daily, sometimes arriving home later with shopping bags. In the afternoon the people would come, sometimes in groups of two or three but more often alone. The grey-haired man was a constant visitor, coming at least every day but always at different times. But there were other visitors as well, teenagers, men of a variety of ages and sometimes women. Shirley’s blond head would emerge over her balcony on the first floor to look at the door immediately below, then disappear inside and moments later the door would buzz open.

What was she doing? Private English lessons would hardly explain the variety of visitors or the odd hours at which they arrived. Niamh had not been able to see a pattern in their arrival times. And most curious of all if several people had

entered the apartment they left singly, four or five minutes apart. Everyone looked suspiciously about when they entered or left the building.

Ahmet found her in the spare room when he arrived in from work. She'd started to arrange the baby things and was making a list of things to buy when he came in at 9.30pm. The company was moving to larger premises so he'd been working late. Niamh excitedly told him all about her observations during the day.

"You are worse than a Turk," he sighed. "Even my mother doesn't obsess about the neighbours the way you do."

"There's something going on over there, Ahmet. Something suspicious."

"You think she's a prostitute?" Ahmet was direct as usual.

"No, there are too many women arriving for that."

"That doesn't rule anything out." Ahmet grinned, "Maybe she's a madam."

"Running a brothel staffed by middle-aged housewives? I doubt there'd be many takers."

"You'd never know, desperate people..." Ahmet put his arms around her bump, watching the rear apartment over the gentle waves of her red hair. The grey-haired man appeared out of the doorway. "I suppose that's her pimp."

"Ahmet will you get your mind out of the gutter. Though he is the most frequent visitor..."

Niamh looked back at Ahmet; there were dark circles under his eyes. They were there constantly that since they moved to Istanbul from New York the previous summer. Since his father's death Ahmet worked at rebuilding the logistics business his father had let dwindle. With the premises move he was working flat out, hoping to be in a position to have more time at home when the baby arrived in two months time. Ahmet picked up the half-finished list. "My love, I won't be able to go shopping at the weekend. We have to pack up the office. I've spent this week going through old files. You know *Baba* kept everything that came through the door. Even take-out menus."

Niamh was disappointed, "Well I might go with *Anne* then, pick up the small stuff."

On Sunday Niamh forbade *Anne* from coming over, claiming truthfully that she was tired and needed rest after the previous day of shopping. Sitting in the rocking chair in the spare room, or the nursery as it was now, after lunch Niamh looked out the window. Shirley's door was barely shut before it opened again, there were so many people arriving.

Niamh was seized by an idea – she had to get inside to see what was going on. She grabbed a jacket, her mobile phone and the house keys, turning back for a spare headscarf *Anne* kept on the coat rack and walked as calmly as possible around the block to the front of Shirley's apartment. Two men turned down the alley between the houses to go to the front door. Taking a deep breath, hair hidden as much as possible below the scarf Niamh followed behind them. They rang the bell in silence, acknowledging Niamh with a slight nod. Niamh looked

at her feet as Shirley looked over her balcony, hoping that her hair would not give her identity away.

The door buzzed and Niamh followed the two men up the stairs and into the first floor apartment. Without stopping to take off their shoes, normal practice in Turkish households, they went inside, and turned into the living room.

There were at least thirty people in the room, all standing in rows looking at the grey-haired man standing behind a desk at one end of the room. Niamh strained to see over the shoulders of the people in front of her.

Niamh could not believe what was glittering on the table in front of the grey-haired man.

Part Three

After two weeks of watching mysterious people entering English-teacher Shirley's apartment from the soon-to-be nursery of her apartment, Niamh summoned up her courage and snuck into Shirley's apartment.

The group of thirty people was mixed in age and gender, middle-aged men, housewives, university students and a few high-school kids. They stood in silence. Niamh could feel the static electricity of tension from every person in the crowd. Looking around the room, it contained no personal effects. Fold-out chairs were stacked in one corner, though the room was too crowded to allow their use at the moment. A narrow table just inside the door was filled with leaflets; Niamh couldn't see what was written on them.

Everyone was facing the grey-haired man who stood behind a white-clothed table at the other end of the room. On the table a gold chalice glittered, mirroring the cross stitched on his white robe-like garment. At his neck Niamh could clearly see the white and black of his clerical collar. It explained why his demeanour was familiar; she had known many of his colleagues.

As Niamh watched, he lifted the lid of the chalice and took out a pale wafer. He lifted it above his head saying some Turkish words. The crowd looked down; some made the sign of the cross, touching their right forefinger to their foreheads, chest, left and then right shoulders. Niamh was witnessing something she had seen many times during her childhood in Dublin. It was a Catholic mass.

Niamh followed the congregation through the ceremony hanging back when the time came for communion. She did not want to eat the wafer, not having been to mass since her grandmother's funeral four years before. She managed not to join the line moving towards the priest but in doing so she was observed. Shirley was moving back down the room having received communion and walked

directly to Niamh, standing behind her elbow for the remainder of the ceremony.

When the ceremony ended the tension in the room released as people began to chat with their fellow worshippers. Some left quickly; a queue formed at the door as people waited the required five minutes between leavers. Most people stayed and chatted, Niamh could hear the clatter of tea glasses from the kitchen. Shirley took three chairs from the stack and told Niamh to sit. Then she excused herself and went to talk to the priest.

Niamh sat and wondered what to do. Should she make a dash for the door? The queue was too long to push past and she wasn't exactly speedy with her seven-month bump. Besides Shirley knew where she lived and Ahmet wasn't home to back her up. So she sat and thought of after-mass gatherings in the community hall in Dublin she'd attended as a child. Her father would talk about Gaelic football while her mother found out all the ills and miseries of the older neighbours.

Shirley came back with the grey-haired priest and sat down.

"Shirley tells me you are a fellow believer. Do you want to join our flock here?"

The priest's accent was Spanish, though his very clear English.

"Well," Niamh paused, "I thought there was something suspicious going on so I decided to come investigate." All those years of confession as a child made her answer the priest honestly.

"There's nothing untoward here. We are allowed to worship freely in this country. The law protects us." The priest's eyes were wary.

"I know, so why all the sneaking around? Every person coming through the door looks suspicious, as though they'll be caught for something."

"Catholics, Christians I should say, are a minority here. Many of our congregation do not wish it to be common knowledge that they are Catholic. They fear it will affect their careers, some even hide it from family members."

"Is that why they don't go to mass in any of the Catholic churches? There are plenty to choose from in Istanbul." Niamh couldn't help feel there was more going on here.

"Perhaps, I can't speak for them all. We merely give them the option of attending mass here."

Shirley spoke now, "Or of joining in our Rosary meetings and discussion groups."

Niamh suddenly understood the crucifix around Shirley's neck and the ring on her left ring finger.

"You're a nun. Not an English teacher. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Oh, I am an English teacher and a nun. My Sisterhood sent me around the world to help our minority communities in any way I can. So I rent this apartment and give the community free use of it." Shirley paused, "I was about to tell you when your mother-in-law came in. Though I wasn't sure that you were sympathetic to our cause."

Niamh played with a strand of hair that came loose from under her headscarf.

“My thoughts on the Catholic Church are not entirely positive. Too many scandals, too many cover ups, I was in Dublin in the nineties, you know.”

“We can help you work things out. We are not all the same, you know,” the priest’s voice was soft and persuasive.

“I’m sure. But I think I can work things out myself, thank you.” Niamh had seen enough, she rose, “I’m not going to join you but I wish you luck.”

“Bless you my child,” the priest replied.

Shirley led Niamh to the front door, giving Niamh a chance to pocket a leaflet as she passed the table by the living room door.

“Our door is always open to you,” Shirley said.

“And so is mine to you,” Niamh made an effort to smile at Shirley. Behind her the door shut a little too quickly as she walked down the stairs

Walking back to her own apartment Niamh looked at the leaflet she’d picked up. Written on the front in Turkish was ‘It’s Not Too Late – JESUS CHRIST CAN SAVE YOU’.