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Hayati's Box

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In a back corner of the parking lot, occupying at least two parking places, stands a large wooden box-like structure. Everyone who lives in Oyak Sitesi called it "Hayati's Box" because Hayati used to sit in it every day. Or at least he was supposed to sit in it—from the first call of the muezzin to the last. *Why did he sit in the box? What did he do all day?* Children would ask their fathers, while their fathers cursed the box for the parking spaces it occupied. *Watch*, the fathers would say. *Watch what?* The children asked. *Everything. Nothing.*

It was Hayati's job to watch.

The box actually wasn't a box; it was more like a small house, with one wall missing. Each of the other three walls had large windows cut into them, which made it possible for the person who sat inside to look out on all sides. Unlike the flat-topped apartment buildings, it had a low, peaked roof. The whole structure was painted a dirty pink, and it used to sit at the entrance to the front parking lot.

From this position, the person inside the box could observe the three separate worlds of the apartment complex: the four identical buildings whose entrances opened onto the front parking lot, which was edged with trees and flowers. On each floor of each building, balconies looked out over the parking lot; in the autumn, spring and summer, the person sitting in the box could watch the women hanging their laundry out to dry, watch the women gripping window frames while they stretched to wipe the picture windows clean, watch the women sitting outside for tea together, talking, playing with babies, making preparations for the evening meals. When bored with watching the women in the buildings, the person in the box could watch the traffic of the busy downtown Ankara street into which the fathers and older sons and an occasional woman disappeared every morning, dissolved into the working world of the city. During the school year, too, many of the children, neatly dressed in white and black school uniforms, also became part of that city traffic as they headed to school. However, many of the small service buses that brought them to their private schools pulled right into the parking lot, so most of the children never really had to venture past the end of the driveway. The parking lot itself was the land of cars, of adults coming and going, of the water service trucks and the gas service trucks and the workers' trucks and their occupants as they came and went to the various buildings in the complex. Most of all, the parking lot was the domain of the children; it was an extension of their playground, and a perfect place for evening soccer games. So the children

knew the parking lot intimately, and were very aware of how it changed when Hayati's box was moved to the back corner.

Don't go near it, fathers would say. Some people thought Hayati died in that box.

Thus, the box was like a disease—and a fatal one, at that. No one approached it, except for the children, who would sit at a distance from it, their faces resting on their hands as they tried to see if anything of Hayati had been left behind on the thin shelf that wrapped around the inside of the box, just below the windows.

One day, Tolga, one of the older boys, went and sat down inside it, at which point several children gathered closer to the box, to watch him die. Tolga sat cross-legged on the floor, and watched back.

"Hayati did not die in this box," he declared. "I remember. He died somewhere else, maybe in the playground, lying on one of the benches. Remember how he used to go back there all the time, and fall asleep?"

Yes, actually, the children did remember. Well, actually, they did not remember him dying, but they did remember finding him, on various occasions, prone on the bench under the tree, his hat on the ground just beneath his huge, grey head, his gruff bear-like snore tainted by a slightly sweet-bitter scent.

Hayati's Head

His head appeared in children's dreams when it was least expected, either with or without his body. Öner regularly dreamed he woke up, only to find Hayati's sleeping face on the pillow next to his, the large nose tickling him with its breathing, the smelly breath invading his own always sniffly nose. Then, he would really wake up, screaming, and often be shocked to find his father smiling down at him.

Meryem, one of the middle girls, had a consistent dream in which a giant Hayati's head would break through the floor of the family's salon: huge, rock-like, his white-grey curly hair all tousled (she had touched it once, while he was sleeping in the playground, thinking it would be soft, only to find it coarse and thick, like the Bulut family's terrier.) There, in the family's salon, Hayati's eyes would open and his huge, saliva coated lower lip would drop down, and he would roar:

I'm trapped in the floor!

And then his tongue, like a snake, would curl out and chase her around the room. If it caught her she knew it would tickle her until she wet her pants.

Meryem never told the others about her dream, not even her best friend Burcu. Burcu was eleven, two years older than Meryem, and already wore a bra, and her mother took her weekly to the kuafor, who recently had cut Burcu's long thick black hair into a short-short crop that stood straight out in the back. Hair glop held it firm and rigid. Meryem was certain that Burcu learned secrets at the kuafor's, perhaps she even knew what went on in the back room into which only women were allowed. Meryem's mother went to that room once every two weeks.

If Burcu knew these secrets, she would laugh at the dream about Hayati's head.

But the fact was, Burcu had her own dream about that head, one she never intended to share with a soul. In it, Tolga and his friend Ahmet had invited her behind the indoor parking garage, where they promised to tell her the secret code of their society. She was certain they had done this once, in real life; but they refused to confirm this for her. In her dream, as her feet followed the path to the boy's hiding place (and in her dream she was only feet), it was as if she was tracing a familiar route, familiar right up to those other feet, huge feet, in huge boots with old laces knotted together in several places, out of which sprouted greyish-green pants too large for the legs they housed, and then the jacket of the same color, and then that head — awake, alive, the hat pushed down over the hair in such a way that Hayati's ears stuck straight out, a bit like one of the Seven Dwarfs. When seeing her, it took a few moments for the clouds to move aside in his grey eyes, before his lips opened, like a puppet at a shopping center show, and he said:

"This is not a place for little girls . . . Go home, now, or I will tell your father—"

But she was already running, or trying to run, in her feet that were now as big and heavy as the wheels on her father's car. She ran, because she had seen what Hayati was doing there on the cement wall of the garage, and what he fumbled so quickly to hide with his huge, knuckle-filled hands.

Hayati's Hands

All the children knew Hayati's hands, because he loved to touch their hair, or lift them up, or tickle them. That was worst of all, when he tickled, and tickled, until—until—they laughed so hard they could not control their arms, their legs, their tears, their nothing—

Their parents would shout at them if they came home with a wetness between their legs, and so they would often scatter, running, screaming, in different directions, when they saw Hayati rising from the bench, or

strolling through the parking lot, his head slightly forward, his hands folded behind his back. In the mesh of his fingers, his prayer beads wound round, moving in a steady progression between thumb and forefinger. Was he really praying? What prayers did he say? Most of the children had fathers who did not go to the mosque, and who laughed at those Turkish men who carried beads and called each other “a-a-bey” or “haji.”

Hayati’s hands would also shape the air into footballs while he talked to Mehmet Bey, the old man who sat on his second floor balcony all day, every day. Mehmet Bey always wore a white shirt, jacket, and a tie, though he never went anywhere. He lived with his daughter and her husband and son, and sometimes, when she was finished cleaning up after breakfast and planning for the evening meal, she would join him out on the balcony, with the morning paper and a glass of tea.

Mehmet Bey, like Hayati—or perhaps even more than Hayati—watched all the events in the parking lot. He spoke to everyone who would speak to him, and he spoke to Hayati a lot. Many of Hayati’s waking hours were spent standing under Mehmet’s balcony, his hands sculpting the air while the two men talked.

What did they talk about? Anyone who dared join them would be subject to hearing both of them declare “Oh! What I’ve seen!” And then the men would take turns remembering, lobbing the years and the memories cordially back and forth. Sometimes Hayati would let Mehmet talk about old Galatasary and Besiktas games; sometimes Mehmet would give his partner that pleasure. Likewise, they took turns voicing their opinions on the Kurds, the American soldiers in Iraq, Cyprus, the new Turkish government. They both had their own tales of Atatürk, and what Ankara was like forty or fifty years ago, and their days in the army.

Hayati’s Eyes

Hayati claimed that he had seen it all: the tears at the news of Atatürk’s death and the black shrouded parade when the body came to town, when Hayati was just a boy, then another, when he was nearly a man, when the body was moved from the Ethnography Museum to the Mausoleum. In the years between and since, he saw the streets carved through and around the hills of the city, the rural homes that clung to the earth swept down and tall apartment complexes—just like these—built in their place.

It was hard to imagine Hayati seeing so much, because his eyes seemed to have a thin skin over them, like the eyes of a scaly creature you might find in a river or a swamp. He could barely see the pictures of his family that he kept pinned up beneath the windows in his box. Sometimes, when

he was actually in his box, you could see him with one of those pictures pressed so close to his face as he inspected it, as if looking for some sort of secret code hidden, perhaps in the print on his wife's dress.

Yes, there was the picture of his wife, a small, round woman dressed in a long flowered dress and covered with a traditional scarf that seemed to hide everything except her smile. Some remembered her coming to the box, carrying plastic bags filled with her luscious stuffed grape leaves and tied with a knot. The apartment residents called her "Anne-Anne." Only Hayati called her by her true name: "Hava" *My Hava!* He would declare whenever she left. *She is my life!*

When she died, three and a half years ago, he did not come to his box for a week. When he finally returned, he spent longer days there, only taking time off if he knew his daughter was coming in from her home in Duzce.

Yes, he had several photos of his daughter in the box, at many different ages. Sometimes he would select one of the little girls in the playground, and lead her to the box, where he would show his daughter's picture, saying "see, you look like my Deniz." Many of the parents would joke about how all the children looked like Deniz to Hayati, but the children knew: it was usually one of the three daughters of Süleyman, one of the building managers, who Hayati consistently led to his box to see Deniz's pictures. Süleyman's daughters all looked like his petite wife, Aylin, who also bore a striking resemblance to the pictures of Hayati's wife when she was young, and also, yes, to the pictures of Deniz.

Deniz, however, had been injured in the 1999 earthquake. Her husband died, trapped just a meter or two away from her in the crumbled building. People told her she was lucky to be alive, as she lay in a hospital bed, after three operations on her back. Deniz never accepted her restored painful life as luck; instead, she spoke of it as her fate. *Allah'nin yaziji*, she would say, pointing at her forehead. *See; it is written on my forehead.* She walked with a cane, her once graceful legs twisted and bowed like an old lady's, even though she was only thirty-seven. Travel was hard for her now, so her visits to her father were very rare, and it was equally difficult for him to go to see her.

So Hayati spent nearly all of his life in his box, or in the parking lot, or in the playground, sleeping, walking, talking, or listening. When he wasn't talking, he loved to listen. His eyes would grow damp at tales of weddings and babies and funerals. He knew everything that happened, to every generation of every family that lived in the complex, and demanded that each resident, except for a few, tell him whenever their family changed.

Hayati's Ears

Hayati hated modern Turkish music, and Western music made him howl. If a car pulled into the parking lot throbbing with rhythm and spilling electronic notes out its windows, he would clap his huge hands over his ears and shake his head, while he roared like a lion.

His ears were huge. Those children who got close enough while he was sleeping would imagine insects running around in their deep winding cavities. Brave little boys would tug at the hair sprouting out of their centers, then run as the weary hand swung up to brush away the offending vermin.

Some people thought Hayati was probably deaf in one ear, which was why he cocked his head to the left side while he listened to people, and squinted his eyes.

This was how he was standing next to the police car on the day the American woman's apartment was robbed. He was standing there when the woman rushed home, coming first to him, perhaps thinking that since he wore something like a uniform, he might know what happened. He never responded to her when she spoke. *She whispers*, he said. *And she can't really speak Turkish*. He only waved her up to her seventh-floor apartment.

Yes, Hayati got the whole story: how the thieves perhaps disguised themselves as repairmen and snuck into the building while the door was open; how they took money, a computer, her passport and credit cards, and yet the apartment looked as if nothing had been touched. It was Süleyman who discovered her door broken open. Afraid to enter, he hurried downstairs and called the police, then called her. Once both she and the police were there, the woman called the United States Embassy and demanded that the police explain everything, especially the missing passport detail, to them. She made Süleyman talk on the phone, too. Everyone in the entire complex was afraid she would bring in American lawyers, and maybe even the military, especially since there was a large number of them, waiting idly for orders, down at the airbase in Incirlik.

Instead, she filed a report with the police, like any Turk would do, and waited. When asked how she was, she shrugged and said "that's life, right? At least my cat and I are all right." After a few months, she simply disappeared.

Be careful, Hayati told the children afterwards, as he swung on one of the swings in the playground. *Lock your doors well; I think that American woman did not know how to lock her door. Our Turkish keys are different from American keys. And don't let just anyone into your building.*

Then he yawned, rose, and wandered back to the bench under the trees, where he lay down, pulled his hat over his eyes, and fell asleep.

Sometime over the summer, while most of the children were at the seaside with their families, Hayati's box was moved to the back of the parking lot. A plastic white box, with shelves and cup-holders molded right into the walls, appeared where the old box once stood, along with a new gate over the parking lot entrance that rose and fell like a policeman's arm whenever a car wanted to pass. All of the car owners received a little black thing like a television-command that made the gate rise and fall. Fathers would grumble and curse when they lost this thing, which happened often.

A young man now sat in the box. He wore a white shirt and a tie. He watched the children play soccer with eyes not much different from their own, and sometimes, when no one was looking, he would play a little, too. But if the phone in the plastic box started ringing, or if one of the building managers appeared in the parking lot, he would rush back to the white plastic box and stay in there, perspiring under his tightly-fixed tie.

For several weeks, the children thought Hayati had gone on vacation, but by early October, it was clear that Hayati was gone. He was not in the playground, not under Mehmet's window, not wandering through the parking lot, his face to the ground, his lips moving in a silent conversation or prayer. The children asked the young man in the plastic box about Hayati, and he said he did not know him.

It was difficult to imagine Hayati simply leaving. So he must have died, the children decided. On the playground, perhaps, or sitting under a tree. But no matter what anyone said, many still believed he died in his box, his head probably leaning against the wall, his mouth slightly open, and maybe his eyes, too. They wondered—though no one ever said this out loud—how long he might have stayed like that before anyone looked, and realized, that he was no longer alive.