



THE BOOK OF MIRRORS

an Excerpt

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Rosalind and Peter were sitting in Bilmecce, a restaurant with rooftop seating that looked out over the Galatasaray section of Istanbul. The high winds of the city blew their words away, and so they sat in silence, gazing out at an urban landscape full of glowing domes, modern skyscrapers, and hulking ruins. The sun was going down; the flames of night licked at the sky.

They ordered drinks and *mezes*. It was easy, their silence, which was something new to both of them. They had spent their first week knowing each other through conversation. That was in The City of Thieves and Lovers, their name for Barcelona. The conversation began in the Placa Reial of the old city. Rosalind looked up and found Peter watching her in the café window. They ended up touring the city together, telling each other stories, arguing furiously, tenderly making love. And the whole time, talking. But in spite of those conversations, it wasn't until their second night in Istanbul, after they had visited the Ayasofya, that they admitted to loving each other.

The church made it possible. Rosalind had climbed the ramps to the upper gallery, to allow Peter time to contemplate the great dome alone. Upstairs, she found that an art exhibit filled the south side of the gallery, photographs by a Turkish artist of the great church-turned-mosque-turned-museum. Ros-

alind read the description: “Ahmet Ertug sheds a unique light on the architectural values beneath the incredible dome that has been referred to as ‘the mirror of Heaven on Earth’ and asks us to look anew at the gems concealed within the ‘Temple of Holy Wisdom’ of empires.” Rosalind gazed at the photographs of the church, then turned her eyes upward, to the great dark dome, with its string of jewel-like windows. The mirror of heaven on earth.

Ertug’s pictures were good, but she wouldn’t have remembered them if it weren’t for what happened later, when she and Peter were seated on the terrace of the rooftop restaurant. They sat in silence, gazing out at the darkening sky, feeling both shy and amazed. After one week of being together, they had admitted it: they were in love. The intimacy of it was overwhelming: when Rosalind looked at Peter, she could now *feel* every flicker of expression that passed over his face, as though each expression was mirrored on her own face. It was as though her nerve-endings now extended—invisibly, impossibly—through the space that separated them, into Peter’s body. Impossible, crazy. More than a little bit frightening. The intensity of it scalded her, and to recover she knew she had to escape the table and his presence for a few moments. She pictured herself crouching alone in a bathroom stall, reclaiming her wayward nerves in privacy. She got up from the table.

But where was the bathroom? She walked toward the bar at the far end of the rooftop terrace. The restroom, the bartender told her, was one floor down, but as she stood next to the bar, Rosalind found she no longer needed that haven. Instead, she gazed across the crowd at a gilt-framed mirror hanging on the back wall of the terrace. It was almost obscured by the milling Turks and tourists, all drinking and laughing and talking.

The mirror hung demurely, just above people’s heads. It was protected by a roof made up of vine-covered trellises, but the stiff wind that blew across the terrace had managed to infiltrate the people and the grapevines. In that wind, the mirror danced, bucking and clanking on the wall as though it were

alive. Rosalind stood at the edge of the crowd, watching images pass across its silvery surface. She got a glimpse of herself; then the crowd; a brief interval of terrifying empty space; then the crimson sunset. And that was when Rosalind realized: Istanbul is a City of Mirrors.

When she came back to the table, Peter's face was shadowed in the light from the candle, which burned and flickered inside its glass globe. Behind him, the sky was almost black. Rosalind sat down, reached across the table, and touched him on the wrist. His eyes on her in the flickering light made her chest ache.

She leaned forward so that he could hear. She told him that they should find a house together. She'd always wanted to live in a house by the sea.

It was the first time either of them had talked about the future. Peter put his hand on hers. He said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

They traveled down the Aegean coast and rented a crumbling villa on the outskirts of a little town called Ayvalik. Rosalind loved their decaying villa, though it was sad to watch it flake away. Chunks of the roof fell in during rainstorms; bits of the walls were carried off on the hard wet winds that swept over the hilltops in December. The tiled mirror they'd bought when they said goodbye to The City of Mirrors Peter hung next to the bed, so that, every morning, they could see the Aegean's blue waters without getting up.

Peter sat for hours by the window in the second-storey front room, sketching this sea on which he had never sailed, while Rosalind took walks through the farmland that bordered the town. Olive trees grew on the hills around the house, and in the spring a strangely pungent aroma carried into their windows on the softening winds. It was different from the dusky scent of the olives in flower; this one was slightly bitter, and it haunted them. They decided it was quince, since groves of the trees flowered in the surrounding hills, but they never knew for sure if they were right. Their villa stood on a low hill; their

neighbors to the north raised goats, who bleh'ed philosophically all day long. These neighbors also kept a dusty little pony in a pen beside the footpath that led to town. When the pony was in his pen, Rosalind fed him carrots. Once, as they headed into Ayvalik to have lunch, a milk-colored camel stood tethered to the bars of the pony's pen, eyeing the dusty brown creature inside with disdain. The pony stayed on the far side of its pen, not craning its neck toward them as it usually did.

Released memories coursed through Rosalind as she sat there in the cab, their ferocity that of a mountain stream in springtime. She bit her thumbnail, gazing blindly out the window at Lincoln Center. Twenty years later, driving up Broadway through New York City, and she could still smell the damp mineral yearning of that rocky earth on the edge of the Asian continent, could still see those stubborn stones that made the land so difficult to farm. Her own mind had turned against her. It was as though Ayvalik had been freed from the past and had somehow re-entered the present. She remembered walking with Peter along the sea-front walk, watching the ferries coming in from Greece, smiling at the tourists who disembarked with wondering expressions as they took in the Greek-style architecture, the ornate iron grilles and graceful stone facades. Sometimes Peter and Rosalind rode a water *dolmus* to one of the nearer islands that dotted the harbor and protected Ayvalik from the sea. They faced into the wind, their lips tasting of brine from the sea spray. Or they wandered through the market, buying a packet of figs to bring to their friend Beliz, a former Turkish television star, who, with her small daughter, ran a *pansiyone*. Beliz's *meze* and *gozleme* were better than anything served in restaurants, and the meal always finished with hot strong cups of tea and the figs, or, in autumn, pomegranates from Beliz's terrace. After the visit Rosalind and Peter would return to their house the color of bleached bones, where the air was always haunted by the cries of Turkish gulls.

No, not a death-world. Rosalind wrestled that image back into true—it wasn't a death-world to them then. Only in retro-

spect, when she looked back on it and thought that there must have been portents that she had refused to see.

After a year they left Ayvalik and moved to New York. Rosalind, who had been accepted to Columbia but deferred grad school to live in Italy, needed to start her Ph.D. She had already spent three years abroad.

They got an apartment in Astoria. People can be young and in love in New York just as easily as in Turkey. As long as one of them doesn't arrive in that city of tall towers and brisk, orderly crowds, only to revert instantly to the girl she had been three years before, when she was finishing up her B.A. at Swarthmore.

Rosalind knew what was happening between her and Peter, but at the time couldn't admit it to herself. They left Turkey for New York, and she was transformed into someone Peter couldn't recognize: a girl who was serious and hard-working, too intense for friendships, who gave only a portion of her attention to her lover, the former sailor who had spent two years of his life dreaming of Istanbul. Where was the woman who had taken long walks by the sea, and come back with shells or a tangle of flowers for Peter to draw? The woman who had taken up her neighbors' offer and gone for a camel-ride, finding herself high up in the air, oddly comfortable sitting on the rounded, bristly-haired hump, her nostrils pricking at its acrid odor, even as she adjusted the tense and slide of her muscles to the animal's stilted, stiff-legged gait?

In Turkey, every art book that arrived from Rosalind's London bookseller was an occasion for sensual revel. Together, she and Peter had pored over volumes on Leonardo and Caravaggio, Bosch and Schiele, Ernst and di Chirico. It was one of the ways they made love to each other—looking at, and talking about, art. And after they did make love, Peter would draw her, lazy in the bed, half entwined with a blanket, a shell sitting on her belly, or a flower lying against her cheek.

In New York Peter worked as a busboy, laying place-settings, clearing tables, scraping half-eaten burritos into the garbage. When his shift was over he was too tired to come to

museums or openings, especially if Rosalind was meeting other grad students for drinks afterward.

Rosalind suggested that he try college. Peter had left school at sixteen; Rosalind explained that, compared to high school, college was a revelation. He would love it. But Peter said no, that wasn't the life he wanted. Rosalind understood, or said she did. They both knew he was smart. He had experience that was broader and richer than that of most college grads. Would it really matter to anyone that he didn't have a degree? They agreed that it wouldn't. And Rosalind's fellow students also agreed: Peter was cool; they respected him; they even envied him. Yet underneath their assurances lurked a casual, smiling disdain.

Peter on his side didn't try to put people at ease. He could no more play up to them than they could really understand what he'd been doing over the past nine years. When they met another couple for dinner, Rosalind joked about Peter's new job (he had started washing dishes in a bar in Noho), how he possessed a pedigree that none of the grad students had. But an uneasy silence lowered its squat form onto the table of smart young people. Peter remained silent, never trying to explain what he liked about washing dishes, and Rosalind knew better than to try to explain for him. And the truth was, his experiences didn't translate.

And yet, he knew more about art, she felt, than any of the people she went to school with. But as far as she knew, he never went to see it. Not once, that whole year. In *New York*.

All of which is to say it was no real surprise when, after a wearying summer, during which Rosalind spent all her time immersed in her books in preparation for her first round of exams, Peter announced that he was leaving.

She should have known. And yet she was stunned. "No," she said. "You can't. You can't be leaving. I can't live here without you." Weeks of that. Her flat denial, his desperation.

He was more desperate than he had ever been. She knew that. Even when he was sixteen and thinking about riding his bike up to the northern part of Grosse Pointe and throwing

himself into Lake St. Clair. Because what did he do all day, when Rosalind was gone? In his latest incarnation, he was a busboy at the newly-opened TGI Friday's, working with Ramone and Antonio, who didn't trust him and didn't understand why he didn't opt for one of the better-paying jobs—bartender, waiter, manager. He continued to look at the art books Rosalind brought home (she noticed that the stacks had been rearranged when she returned home from class). But Peter never looked at them with her anymore. It was no longer the two of them, exploring different artists and periods together. And so she wrote papers, took exams, read until late at night. It was hard for her not to talk about it when she was excited. And when she didn't talk about it, she felt like they had nothing.

It wasn't clean. He told her he was going, and she fought him. There was a month of "discussion." What Rosalind didn't realize then? Even as they were discussing whether he would leave, Peter was taking the subway to the Union Hall in Brooklyn every day, scoping out the jobs available, laying down his certificate for the ones he was willing to take. He was patient; he hadn't been aboard a ship in two years. But in the end, he got an AB Seaman entry-level job. One year commitment. The *Kuo Fu* was departing from San Francisco to Japan and ports south. He was leaving in three days.

She watched him pack. It wasn't real to her. Then, on Monday morning, he left for the airport, and she sat alone on their bed. She still couldn't feel it, but at least by then she understood that he was gone and she was in denial. She also understood that what she'd done, the night before, was an act of revenge. She knew what the results would be, even before she went out and bought an EPT, six weeks later.

It happened like this: They lay there on the bed. It was Sunday, the eve of his departure. They had talked and talked, Friday and Saturday and Sunday, until finally both of them were emptied out. Peter was leaving. They lay there, body to body, gazing dumbly into each other's faces.

Even then, Rosalind was conscious of wanting to have

words, wanting to say something that could make it all change. Peter lay there, looking at her, his eyes on her seeming to burn. She felt her flesh singeing, being eaten away, and she couldn't bear it. She turned her head and stared up at the ceiling. But even then she couldn't imagine him not being there. Yes, she felt the distance that had grown up between them since they'd been in New York. Yes, she sensed that part of him was gone already. But she also sensed that he was relieved. Tomorrow he would be gone. That fact protected him from her. It made him remote, even while he lay beside her and felt sad.

The fact that he felt relieved ripped her insides out.

That he could *want* to be apart. Not just want to be elsewhere—traveling, say; feeling that rapture when you're in love with the world. But that he could want to be *away*. From her. She wanted to claw her way into the mattress and lie there in the desolate shreds of their bed. She turned her face to the pillow, feeling the useless smooth cotton on her face.

It was then that Peter said to her, "It's not because I don't love you."

Rosalind turned her face to him, because she couldn't believe what she'd heard. She stared at him, defiantly relieved at the dryness of her eyes. Outraged and mute, she stared at him. In the suddenness of her hot fury she didn't even recognize him.

Peter had no idea. He put his hand on her cheek and he said the words again. "It's not because I don't love you." He gazed at her, and she could see that he felt as though he had already set sail. He could savor the immensity of the thing that lay between them. He could tongue the power of it, the bitter-sweet sorrow of thwarted love, like some fucking connoisseur. He touched her face, his eyes full, and didn't speak.

Rosalind lay there, still as stone. He didn't *know*. He didn't know it was outrage she was feeling, not "the bittersweet sorrow of thwarted love." She couldn't believe what he'd said. *It's not because I don't love you*. False, patronizing—a weakly-cruel attempt to make himself feel better by saying the empty words. Rosalind stared at him. He chose not to know what those words

would do to her. Were doing to her. While, of course, part of him *did* know, had to know. Which meant that, on some level, he wanted her to feel humiliated.

Rosalind let him draw her close. She let him put his mouth to hers, she made her lips go through the motions of the kiss. When Peter drew back he touched her cheek again. "I'd like to make love to you one more time. Before I go." That was what he said. His voice was husky. She knew he meant it, meant it to be a loving act. She also knew he was so far away from her now that he could make this gesture, oblivious to what it meant to her. He wanted to leave her, *and* still be in love with her. He wanted both things to be true. He wanted not to be making a choice, even while he was making a choice. It didn't matter to Rosalind that he did love her, in some way, still. What mattered was that he was denying the fact that he also *didn't* love her anymore. He didn't love her enough. Not so that he would stay and make a life with her. He chose to leave; but he wanted still to enjoy the idea of a romantic attachment.

Rosalind got up from the bed and went to the bathroom to put in her diaphragm, as she always did before their love-making. She took the diaphragm out of its pink box. She squeezed the tube of spermicidal lubricant and spread the jelly around the rim. Then she looked down at the beige circle. She flexed its sides twice, so that it grimaced up at her. At which point she glanced up at herself in the mirror. Rosalind looked at herself, and her dark-eyed self stared back. Then she put the diaphragm back in its box. She snapped the lid shut and came back to bed.

What was it like when we touched? This is what she asked herself, sometimes, in the months that followed. *When we knew the truth, that we were meant to spend our lives together, and yet would be apart?* She put her hands on her belly, which swelled much more slowly than she'd expected. She tried to keep clear in her mind what it was like, when she made love to him furiously that last time, and remained furious, even after the fury turned into sorrow and something true. That truth made her cry, despite

the fact that she was also, still, furious. After he left and months passed, she began to be afraid she would forget what really happened. And so she went over that night, again and again, how they'd held each other, how she'd hit him on the back with her fists when she came, how part of her stood back and noted, with a kind of dull surprise, how easily the forms of melodrama fit over her, like the long elegant gloves of another era. But it was real, even as it began to seem, in retrospect, slightly ridiculous, even embarrassing. (It was tempting to consign all of it to the trash: The glories of agon. The indulgences of adolescent cliché.) She had to tell herself, remind herself, that even though the expression of those feelings seemed ridiculous to her now, in 2005, as her cab pulled up before Ralph's building, it didn't mean those feelings hadn't been true. Sophie's conception had marked all of them with its furious unforgiving love.