

I AM A GOLD COIN

Behold! I am a twenty-two-carat Ottoman Sultani gold coin and I bear the glorious insignia of His Excellency Our Sultan, Refuge of the World. Here, in the middle of the night in this fine coffeehouse overcome with funereal melancholy, Stork, one of Our Sultan's great masters, has just finished drawing my picture, though he hasn't yet been able to embellish me with gold wash—I'll leave that to your imagination. My image is here before you, yet I myself can be found in the money purse of your dear brother, Stork, that illustrious miniaturist. He's rising now, removing me from his purse and showing me off to each of you. Hello, hello, greetings to all the master artists and assorted guests. Your eyes widen as you behold my glimmer, you thrill as I shimmer in the light of the oil lamp, and finally, you bristle with envy at my owner, Master Stork. You're justified in behaving so, for there's no better measure of an illustrator's talent than I.

In the past three months, Master Stork has earned exactly forty-seven gold pieces like myself. We're all in this money-purse and Master Stork, see for yourself, isn't hiding us from anyone; he knows there's none among the miniaturists of Istanbul who earns more than he does. I take pride in being recognized as a measure of talent among artists and in putting an end to unnecessary disagreements. In the past, before we got used to coffee and our minds sharpened, these dim-witted miniaturists weren't satisfied with spending their evenings arguing about who was the most talented or who had the best sense of color, who could draw the best tree or who was most expert in the depiction of clouds; no, they'd also come to blows over such issues, knocking out each other's teeth in the process. Now that my judgment decides everything, there's a sweet harmony in the workshop, and what's more, an air that would suit the old masters of Herat.

In addition to noting the harmony and ambience brought about by my judgment, let me list for you the various things I might be exchanged for: the foot of a young and beautiful slave girl, which amounts to about one-fiftieth of her person; a good-quality walnut-handled barber's mirror, edges inlaid with bone; a well-painted chest of drawers decorated with sunburst designs and silver leaf worth ninety silver pieces; 120 fresh loaves of bread; a grave site and coffins for three; a silver armband; one-tenth of a horse; the legs of an old and fat concubine; one buffalo calf; two high-quality pieces of china; the monthly wage of Persian miniaturist Mehmet the Dervish of Tabriz and the majority of those of his like who work in Our Sultan's workshop; one good

hunting falcon with cage; ten jugs of Panayot's wine; a heavenly hour with Mahmut, one of those young boys world-renowned for his beauty, and many other opportunities too numerous to specify.

Before I arrived here, I spent ten days in the dirty sock of a poor shoemaker's apprentice. Each night the unfortunate man would fall asleep in his bed, naming the endless things he could buy with me. The lines of this epic poem, sweet as a lullaby, proved to me that there was no place on Earth a coin couldn't go.

Which reminds me. If I recited all that happened to me before I came here, it'd fill volumes. There are no strangers among us, we're all friends; as long as you promise not to tell anyone, and as long as Stork Effendi won't take offense, I'll tell you a secret. Do you swear not to tell?

All right then, I confess. I'm not a genuine twenty-two-carat Ottoman Sultani gold coin minted at the Chemberlitash Mint. I'm counterfeit. They made me in Venice using adulterated gold and brought me here, passing me off as twenty-two-carat Ottoman gold. Your sympathy and understanding are much obliged.

Based on what I could gather from being in the mint in Venice, this business has been going on for years. Until recently, the debased gold pieces that the Venetian infidels brought to the East and spent were Venetian ducats which they minted in that same mint. We Ottomans, forever respectful of whatever is written, paid no heed to the amount of gold in each ducat—so long as the inscription remained the same—and these fake Venetian gold pieces flooded Istanbul. Later, noting that coins with less gold and more copper were harder, we began to distinguish the coins by biting them. For example, you're burning with love; you go running to Mahmut, that youth of unsurpassed beauty, beloved by all; first, he takes into his soft mouth the coin—not the other thing—and biting it, declares it counterfeit. As a consequence, he'll take you to Heaven for only half an hour instead of one full hour. The Venetian infidels, realizing that their counterfeit coins presented such disadvantages, decided that they might as well counterfeit Ottoman coins, reasoning that the Ottomans would be fooled again.

Now, let me draw your attention to something quite bizarre: When these Venetian infidels paint, it's as if they're not making a painting but actually creating the object they're painting. When it comes to money, however, rather than making the real thing, they make its counterfeit.

We were loaded into iron chests, hauled onto ships and pitching to and fro traveled from Venice to Istanbul. I found myself in a money changer's shop, in the garlicky mouth of its proprietor. We waited for a while, and a simple-minded peasant entered, hoping to exchange some gold. The master money changer, who was a genuine trickster, declared that he needed to bite the gold piece to see if it was counterfeit. So he took the peasant's coin and tossed it into his mouth.

When we met inside his mouth, I realized that the peasant's coin was a genuine Ottoman Sultani. He saw me within that stench of garlic and said, "You're nothing but a counterfeit." He was right, but his arrogant manner offended my pride and I lied to him: "Actually, my brother, you're the one who's counterfeit."

Meanwhile, the peasant was proudly insisting, "How could my gold coin possibly be counterfeit? I buried it in the ground twenty years ago, did a vice like counterfeiting exist back then?"

I was wondering what the outcome would be when the money changer took me out of his mouth instead of the peasant's gold coin. "Take your gold coin, I don't want any vile Venetian infidel's fake money," he said, "have you no shame?" The peasant responded with some biting words of his own, then took me with him out the door. After hearing the same pronouncement from other money changers, the peasant's spirit broke and he exchanged me as a debased coin for only ninety silver pieces. This is how my seven-year saga of endless wandering from hand to hand began.

Allow me to admit proudly that I've spent most of my time in Istanbul wandering from purse to purse, and from sash to pocket, as befits an intelligent coin. My worst nightmare is to be stored in a jug and languish for years beneath a rock, buried in some garden; not that it hasn't happened to me, but for whatever reason, these periods have never lasted long. Many of the people who hold me want to be rid of me as soon as possible, especially if they discover I'm fake. Nonetheless, I have yet to come across someone who'll warn an unsuspecting buyer that I'm counterfeit. A broker, not recognizing that I'm counterfeit, who has counted out 120 silver coins in exchange for me, will berate himself in fits of anger, sorrow and impatience as soon as he learns he's been cheated, and these fits won't subside until he rids himself of me by cheating another. During this crisis, even as he attempts to repeatedly swindle others, failing each time on account of his haste and anger, he'll continue all the while to curse the "immoral" person who had originally conned him.

Over the last seven years in Istanbul, I've changed hands 560 times, and there's not a house, shop, market, bazaar, mosque, church or synagogue I haven't entered. As I've roamed about, I've learned that much more gossip has been spread, many more legends told and lies spun in my name than I'd ever suspected. I've constantly had my nose rubbed in it: Nothing's considered valuable anymore besides me, I'm merciless, I'm blind, I myself am even enamored of money, the unfortunate world revolves around, not God, but me, and there's nothing I can't buy—all this is to say nothing of my dirty, vulgar and base nature. And those who know that I'm fake are given to even harsher judgments. As my actual value drops, however, my metaphorical value increases—proof that poetry is consolation to life's miseries. But despite all such heartless comparison and thoughtless slander, I've realized that a large majority do sincerely love me. In this age of hatred, such heartfelt—even impassioned—affection ought to gladden us all.

I've seen every square inch of Istanbul, street by street and district by district; I've known all hands from Jews to Abkhazians and from Arabs to Mingerians. I once left Istanbul in the purse of a preacher from Edirne who was going to Manisa. On the way, we happened to be attacked by thieves. One of them shouted, "Your money or your life!" Panicking, the miserable preacher hid us in his asshole. This spot, which he assumed was the safest, smelled worse than the mouth of the garlic lover and was much less comfortable. But the situation quickly grew worse when instead of "Your money or your life!" the thieves began to shout "Your honor or your life!" Lining up, they took him by turns. I don't dare describe the agony we suffered in that cramped hole. It's for this reason that I dislike leaving Istanbul.

I've been well received in Istanbul. Young girls kiss me as if I were the husband of their dreams; they hide me beneath their pillows, between their huge breasts, and in their underwear; they even fondle me in their sleep to make certain I'm still there. I've been stored next to the furnace in a public bath, in a boot, at the bottom of a small bottle in a wonderful-smelling musk seller's shop and in the secret pocket sewn into a chef's lentil sack. I've wandered through Istanbul in belts made of camel leather, jacket linings made from checkered Egyptian cloth, in the thick fabric of shoe lining and in the hidden corners of multicolored shalwars. The master watchmaker Petro hid me in a secret compartment of a grandfather clock, and a Greek grocer stuck me directly into a wheel of kashari cheese. I hid together with jewelry, seals and keys wrapped in pieces of thick cloth stowed away in chimneys, in stoves, beneath windowsills, inside cushions stuffed with rough straw, in

underground chambers and in the hidden compartments of chests. I've known fathers who frequently stood up from the dinner table to check whether I was still where I was supposed to be, women who sucked on me like candy for no reason, children who sniffed at me as they stuck me up their noses and old people with one foot in the grave who couldn't relax unless they removed me from their sheepskin purses at least seven times a day. There was a meticulous Circassian woman who, after spending the whole day cleaning the house, took us coins out of her purse and scrubbed us with a coarse brush. I remember the one-eyed money changer who constantly stacked us up into towers; the porter who smelled of morning glories and who, along with his family, watched us as if looking out over a stunning landscape; and the gilder, no longer among us—no need to name names—who spent his evenings arranging us into various designs. I've traveled in mahogany skiffs; I've visited the Sultan's palace; I've hidden within Herat-made bindings, in the heels of rose-scented shoes and in the covers of packsaddles. I've known hundreds of hands: dirty, hairy, plump, oily, trembling and old. I've been redolent of opium dens, candle-makers' shops, dried mackerel and the sweat of all of Istanbul. After experiencing such excitement and commotion, a base thief who had slit his victim's throat in the blackness of night and tossed me into his purse, once back in his accursed house, spat in my face and grunted, "Damn you, it's all because of you." I was so offended, so hurt, that I wanted nothing more than to disappear.

If I didn't exist, however, no one would be able to distinguish a good artist from a bad one, and this would lead to chaos among the miniaturists; they'd all be at each other's throats. So I haven't vanished. I've entered the purse of the most talented and intelligent of miniaturists and made my way here.

If you think you're better than Stork, then by all means, get hold of me.