

Baba

He doesn't have to count before he clacks the black chips from one triangle to another on the *tavla* – or backgammon – board. I try not to count myself, but often get it wrong. We have an unspoken deal that he can move my pieces backward or forward to correct my mistakes at any time. Today, though, it doesn't seem to matter much, as my father-in-law is absentmindedly beating me soundly.

“Du shesh.” Double sixes. He, like many Turkish *tavla* players, uses the Persian numbers, perhaps in deference to the origin of the game.

We first met two years ago, when I came to my wife's parents' house loaded down with a silver tray, chocolates, and flowers all trembling in my hands. Once we'd gone through the introductions, he asked if I played *tavla* and I said, in my spotty Turkish, that I preferred the more logical game of chess. As soon as I'd said it, I could've punched myself, but he smiled.

“Chess is nice,” he said, “but *tavla* is more like life.”

Now I look at the white and black chips, the ‘gates,’ as the triangles are known in Turkish, and the dice. It is most certainly closer to real life – a balance beam between skill and chance where only one won't cut it because you need both, or at the very least an opponent with less of both than you. I blow on the dice and throw them.

“Du jar,” I say, trying to practice the Persian numbers.

“‘Du jar’ is double fours,” he says, “that's ‘jar du,’ four and two.”

He isn't looking at me while he's speaking but into the far distance, where you would normally be able to see the Bosphorous, Topkapı Palace, and the Golden Horn – all of which the humidity has blurred and erased on this August afternoon. Still he looks from his third-floor balcony across to where the winding coast of the European side should be, as if he could see all the way to the airport through the haze.

He shakes the dice and lets them loose onto the board.

“Penju say – five and three.” he says, and flips his pieces into place before staring again into the humidity. “Penju say severler güzelli genç ise,” he says. Lovers of five and three love youth as well as beauty. He takes two chips off the third and fifth gate on his side, giving me a small chance to get my captured piece back on the board.

At three a.m. this morning, he took his oldest daughter – my sister in law – to the airport with her husband and child. Today, the three of them are immigrating to Vancouver, Canada, where my mother lives. It's the sort of coincidence that you should never put in a piece of writing because it's simply too unbelievable, for when they applied for an immigration visa to Canada three years ago, none of us had ever met – in fact, I hadn't yet moved to Turkey and they still didn't speak English. Now my wife and I live ten minutes by foot from my in-laws. And in a few more hours, halfway around the world, my sister-in-law will live the same short walk from my mother.

“Du shesh.” Double sixes. I could've used them at any other time during the whole game but now with a captured chip and two of his pieces blocking my gate, these sixes are useless. He's about to get *mars*, worth two game points, where the winner gets all his chips off the board before the other player can remove a single one.

“Hapi âk,” he says, looking at the dice he's just tossed. Double ones, or ‘snake eyes’ as my mother calls them. He takes four of his pieces off the last gate.

His words hang in the air and sound exactly like the English words ‘happy’ and ‘ache.’

“Tea's ready,” my mother-in-law calls from the balcony door. I roll and manage to get my piece back on the board, but it's too little too late – with the very next throw of the dice, he wins the game.

“That's *mars*,” I say as we pack up the set.

He looks across the table at this foreigner who fate has sent him even as she took his daughter, and he tells me, “Winning and losing are old friends who come and go hand-in-hand.”