

THE GENDARME

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Bookpage

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Mustian is an author, attorney, and city commissioner. He lives with his wife and three children in Tallahassee, Florida.

THE
GENDARME

Mark Mustian



ONE WORLD
OXFORD

The Gendarme

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For Bern

To the Roaring Wind.

What syllable are you seeking,

Vocalissimus,

In the distances of sleep?

Speak it.

—WALLACE STEVENS, *1917*

THE
GENDARME

I awake in a whispering ambulance.

Attendants huddle, a gloved finger withdraws.

Memory makes its way back: the crush of the headache, the darkness. I am cold now. My face is numb.

“Can you hear me?”

Başım . . .

“What is your name?”

Speech half forms. In English? At length, “Em . . . Em . . . Emmett Conn.”

“Where do you live?”

I think. “Twenty-three fifteen Wisteria Court. Wadesboro, Georgia.” The words flow easier.

“When were you born?”

I pause, for I do not truly know. “The year 1898.” This is what I have said, for many years now. “I am ninety-two years old.”

A light shines in my eyes, twisting the headache’s slow thrust.

I smell alcohol. Metallic voices flutter. The siren rises—did I not hear it? Then silence, except for a buzzing sound, and darkness. Sleep falls. Is this it?

A sudden burst of coldness comes, then nothing.

I wake. A chill shakes and leaves me, a great wind rushing past. The headache remains, confined now to a solitary spot, perhaps a single nerve ending. I touch my face. A television speaks somewhere, perhaps in a different room. I see no window, no natural light. I am . . . where?

A rustling sounds next to me. Shapes form and dissolve into a woman, a voice.

“You’re awake.”

For a moment I think I am back there, injured. A prisoner. Unidentified Patient Number A-17.

“How are you feeling?”

I close my eyes. I was a soldier. My injury left me without memory, of the war or much before it.

“A neighbor saw you collapse,” the woman whispers. “You had a seizure. They’re going to run tests.”

“For what?” I try to still myself, even my pulse.

She pauses. “A stroke. Or a brain . . . something.”

I attempt a smile, for there is humor in it. A brain something. I shift in her direction, the headache stabbing its response.

“I am an old man.”

“They’re calling your daughter,” she says. My daughter who stays away.

This woman—nurse?—pulls the sheet. “Where are you from?”

I sigh. My foreignness, found at just a few syllables. Despite all the years, all my efforts at English.

“I am an American.” I say this. The woman nods.

“We’re gonna set you up for an MRI.”

She says something more, but a tiredness creeps over me. Arms become elbows become joints, PVC pipe. Plastic tubing spawns hair. I think, How have I lived, for so long now?

I sleep.

Coldness again, and wind. This time I can see—a long, wind-swept plain, and a train, an ancient steam locomotive, spewing black smoke tossed sideways by the wind. The smoke smells vile and heavy, not the sweet odor of burning wood, but harsher, more primitive. The oddness of smell permeating a dream tugs at me. The train sways. I do not recognize the surroundings.

It looks to be late afternoon, maybe spring or summer. The wind rushes across the plain, barren except for the train and a few dusty trees. The train is barely moving; in fact, I seem to be moving faster, in the same direction, bobbing my head like the mast on a ship. In the distance to my left, at the far end of the plain, red and violet mountains merge with the horizon. The sun stands on my right in what appears to be a sinking posture, placing my bearing as southerly. I hear nothing, which makes it seem surreal, even otherworldly, except for the train, and then the people.

A black line of humanity, several hundred long, trudges in the same direction the train moves. I wonder why I hadn't noticed them before—perhaps the languidness of their pace, perhaps the way they mesh with the shadow. They look to be pilgrims of some sort, dressed mostly in black, with the high collars and shawls of those who seek comfort from the past. A few ride on mules, and here and there a wagon breaks the uniformity of the line, a line that sweeps out to the horizon, longer than I had first noticed, thousands instead of hundreds, maybe more. Figures on horseback pace beside them, erect, dipping, like dogs nudging a herd. I reach down, recognizing my buckle and weave as that of a rider. My hand strikes the hardness of metal and wood, the elongated form of a rifle. For a moment it feels so familiar. Then it trails away, in a blast of cold and wind, the chill condensed to a pinpoint, like after the first headache. Then gone.

The gurney glides along the polished floor. A surgery sign, a black arrow. Post-Op, an arrow. Rumbling, rotating, a large vessel's slow movement. People passing, speaking. Oncology, arrow. Radiology, arrow. A final turn, a slowing.

A heavysset nurse runs a hand through red hair.

“Are you able to sit?”

Lights blink and shimmer. The headache has nearly vanished, a tenderness in its place like a newly formed bruise. It hurts if I move my head quickly, or if I look at the overhead light. I move slowly, cautiously. I lift a hand to my face.

The nurse prods me onto another gurney, this one attached to a large machine.

“Lie down here, with your head on this headrest.”

I move to comply, a man with his fragile egg-head. I think again—I cannot help it—of before, of the hospital. Seven decades before. Almost a year to remember my name. I should have died then. Without Carol I would have.

“Let’s scoot you up a bit.”

My memory is fine from the hospital forward, but before is still darkness, only speckles of light. I remember almost nothing of the war, the Great War. I rarely dream.

“Lie as still as you can.” The voice comes through an earpiece. A plastic object is placed in my hand. “Use the panic button if you need to.”

The bench slides inside the machine. The apparatus whooshes and clicks. The machine accelerates to buzzing, then clanging, loud to the point of pain. The earplugs rattle and bounce in my ears. I wonder again at the purpose of this—to add a few breaths to my life? Carol is dead, dead now three years. I am alive. Ninety-two years have passed—for what? For *what*?

I finger the panic button. Then, gently, release it.

The horse sways under me, the wind back in my face. It is dark. The light of a campfire flickers off to my right. Sounds carry on the wind, yelps of pain, guttural grunts and moans. Words snap and volley: admonishments to be quiet, directions to get up. A faint sobbing crescendos and lessens, stops. The word *gâvur* sprouts in front of me, hurled as an accusation. *Bahşış. Sigara.* Groupings of consonants, vowels, clips and snorts strung together as symbol, as communication. Snarling, human conversation.

It dawns on me, even through the depths of the dream, that I know this language. I have always known it. It is odd, this, to dream and recognize the dreaming, to dangle beyond the vision like a watchful ghost or god. For an instant I see myself astride the horse, bundled against the wind by a mottled wool blanket, my face scruffy and bearded, my hair long and free. Young, maybe seventeen, thin and upright, dark eyes, heavy brow. Then everything swirls, like a rotating camera, until I find myself back atop

the swaying animal, pulling and prodding, peering through darkness at gray things below.

A man straddles a prone form, his bare rump visible in the dim light. He looks up at my approach, smiles in recognition, decouples, extends his arm toward the object beneath. A young girl lies below him, her face darkened with mud. I shake my head, declining, observing his gap-filled grin, his filthy beard, his still-erect *kamış*. Izzet is his name; I knew him somewhere before. Then he is on her again, grunting, the girl whimpering, the slapping sound of flesh on flesh mixed with the wind. I wonder at it a moment, at why I am here, why I seem to know this place yet not to know it, why I understand this language but cannot place it. I smell the smoke of the campfire, hear the shouts and the groans and the rustles. I feel the wind. I touch my own mouth. A certainty strikes that I have been here before, that I have ridden this horse, spoken these words, borne the same silent witness, watching and waiting. And then it is gone, leaving only the dark and the cold, and the wind. I pull the blanket tighter around me, and continue on through the night.

A man fingers my face. I do not know my surroundings, my name. Liquid drips on a hard surface, metal rattles, the smell of medicine floats—all familiar, all strange. Am I among enemies? My hands shake, my body tensed in protection, until the round, smooth face of Dr. Harry Wan registers, like a key clicking true in a lock. I recognize the hospital's bright lights, the static intercom announcements, the smells of plastic and urine. I am Emmett Conn. I am in the United States. It is April 1990.

“How are you this day?”

The dream still tugs at me, the coldness and wind. I smell the sweat of the horse.

“Can you understand me? You may nod yes or no.”

I nod affirmatively. My head is sluggish, not my own.

“Good!”

I remember that Dr. Wan is perpetually cheerful, prone to elaborate bows and exclamations of “wonderful.” He and I are Rotarians, one of the things Carol tossed me into to acclimate me to Wadesboro. That effort failed, but I remain a member. The others have become used to me, or at best feign indifference. I am an outsider—a Yankee, a foreigner. A transplant. An old man.

“You have what looks to be a brain tumor, Mr. Conn.” He smiles as he says this, as if I have won a big prize. “A glioma. It is about the size of a pea, located at the base of the left parietal lobe. We will do a biopsy, confirm the best course of action. We may want to try radiosurgery. It is something new.”

He stops to let this sink in. My daughter Violet leans forward, her frown transformed and whisked into a smile. The edge of her mouth curls like Carol’s, her mother. I haven’t seen her in . . . months? For this I blame myself—we have long had our difficulties. We are in ways so alike. I am pleased she has come now, even under these circumstances.

“Dr. Wan, at my age . . .”

“Shush.” Violet spreads her long fingers. “I spoke to him earlier. Dr. Wan says you are in fantastic shape. He says others older than you have been treated and lived active lives. He is a leader in this field.”

I shake my head no. But I think, To be wanted now. Yes.

She leans farther in, exposing dark gums. Has she dreaded this day? She must care for me, comfort me. "Papa. Please."

I nod, confused. Her tone has a hunger. Has she told her sister? The boy Wilfred, her son? For a moment it is 1932, and I am working, working. I realize, as I lie here, that the language in the dream had been Turkish.

The doctor moves closer, speaking in low tones, explaining. There are protocols, possibilities. Malignancy, metastasis, radiation, surgery. My eyes water and I fight welling tears; I cry so easily now, whereas earlier in my life I did not cry at all. The treatment he mentions seems so modern, so unappealing. I see myself: "World's Oldest Patient Receives New Procedure." Dr. Wan's face on a journal. I wonder about payments, insurance. Will someone care for Sultan, my cat? But it is all in the distance. In some strange way I am still in the dream, wounded or dying or already dead.

"Okay," I say.

There are smiles, exhaled breaths.

"You had a head injury once, is that right, Mr. Conn?"

"Yes, in the war." Violet must have told him. Nineteen fifteen. World War I, not II. It led to my marriage, to my coming to America. To the things I remember. To my life.

"Do you have records?"

I look at Violet. "Yes."

He looks at me quizzically. "You fought for the U.S.?"

I shake my head. "No." The headache gains force, like a storm's gathered winds.

Dr. Wan looks on, beaming.

"Wonderful!" he announces, and exits the room.

. . .

Dawn approaches in a softening gray. Men mutter, distant, a breeze stifling words and brief bursts of rough laughter. A fire glints and sparks but I am separate, removed. Leaves rustle in trees that shield the starlight spread beyond.

I sit with my back against a trunk's smoothness, watching and listening. Leaves turn and still. Birds twitter, one swooping down to peck in the near darkness. I watch the way its head moves, its tail flicks. It lifts its beak up to gulp food in and swallow. Does it feel pleasure? Know pain? It stares at me one-eyed. Then it flits away.

I turn my head to the campfire, to the dark shapes before it. Beyond lie the others, those permitted no fires, those that sleep on the ground in the cold and dream of home or of death. Some will not wake to this dawn, others may rise but will fall, unable to continue. Some will give up, the older ones or the children, or those who have lost almost everything else. Others will trudge on, stumble to the next campsite, collapse, rise again. At first some cried and complained and begged for water, but most of those are now gone. Only the sturdy remain, and those still with valuables useful for bribes. Maybe seven hundred, from what had once been two thousand. Shuffling, marching, day after day.

I think on how I have come to be here, a tiredness muddling my memory so that bits emerge, almost unwillingly. My name, Ahmet. My father's name, Mehmed. The certainty that the next town is not far. The necessity of reporting to officials in Katma. The days it will take for the return journey home. The fact that my father is dead, that his death sent me here. That I must complete this assignment

to gain entry into the army. It all swirls together, then washes away, caught in a blurred exhaustion of dim dream and remembrance. My head nods. I must wake. There are obligations, responsibilities.

I stand, fumbling in my trousers. My urine crackles on dry leaves. Another sound intrudes, or perhaps a smell. I whirl to find a figure standing apart in the gloom. I release myself with one hand, grab my rifle with the other. I adjust my clothing. The figure backs away.

“Who is it?” I ask, pointing the rifle.

The figure continues its retreat.

“Halt!”

The figure stops. I draw closer, the rifle erect in front of me, leaves crunching beneath my feet. I near the edge of the trees.

It is a woman. One of them—the baggy, dark clothes, the braided hair, the large eyes. Out trying to escape, or perhaps murder a guard. I have heard of such things. My charges have been mostly docile, cowed into submission by deprivation and the judicious culling of their men. But I must take care.

I stick the rifle barrel under her chin, lifting her face. I edge her backward, into a plume of glimmering light.

Her face hangs words half formed in my throat. She has mismatched eyes, one dark, the other light, as if neither perfect gene could be denied by her mother. I attribute it at first to the starlight. I even turn her a full rotation to get a better, closer look. The thought strikes that she has been blinded in the light eye, but I know this is not true, as both eyes are alive, reflecting the heavens stretched and glowing above us. I stand silent, struck by this oddity, wondering how I have not seen it before, how she has survived this long march without others taking advantage. She

is beautiful beyond the exoticism. She is maybe in her early teens, the small rise of breasts evident beneath the oversized garments.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice almost shaky. I could have this girl, now, here on the ground, if I wished.

The eyes stare back, unblinking, as if detached from the body. They resemble, in a way, the blank eyes of a corpse, vacant, almost unseeing. I wonder again if she has suffered some injury.

I finger the rifle. My mouth lathers and dries.

“I was collecting eucalyptus leaves,” the girl says quietly. She raises an arm to indicate a bag held in one hand. She does not seem afraid like the others, nor hateful, nor particularly submissive. When I touch my hand to her face, she neither flinches nor cries. Her skin is soft, cooled by the breath of the wind.

I release my hand. We stand for some time, until I step aside to let her pass. I feel confused afterward, as to my actions, as to why I made no move to take her. I convince myself I am merely saving her for later, like a man who saves his sweets for after his meal.

I turn before she vanishes under the trees. “What is your name?” I ask.

She does not respond, or if she does, her name is lost in the leaves.