

Crossing the Danube

Rebecca Gould

Sarah met Yasin at a conference in Tel Aviv. It was one in a year-long series of events that brought together scholars in their field from around the world. Most of the attendees were natives from Uzbekistan, in southern Russia. Yasin was part of a delegation that had been invited to present on the thousands of manuscripts that had been unearthed in Uzbek and Tajik villages since the fall of the Soviet Union.

When they first met, Yasin was studying Arabic and Sarah was studying Persian. They presented their research to the same audience and exchanged pleasantries over coffee but they did not have much to say to each other. They were pursuing separate lives along paths that did not intersect. Nonetheless, Yasin made an impression. During every conference break, Sarah noticed him seated in a corner, copying the letters of the Hebrew alphabet into his notebook. Whenever they made eye contact, he smiled. She liked his smile; it was sweet, humble, and kind.

He was a creature from another world. Where he came from, English was unknown. Uzbekistan was a place her feminism could barely penetrate. Sarah went home and forgot about him. She defended her dissertation on a subject for which she had only moderate enthusiasm. The topic – the Russian invasion of Northern Ossetia and the violence that ensued from the Georgian side – had been dictated by the news headlines more than by her passions.

Meanwhile, Yasin burrowed deeper and deeper into the manuscripts that he, as the director of the Makhachkala archives, was responsible for preserving. Arabic manuscripts were the love of his life. He passed his hours unearthing, from private libraries across Uzbekistan, manuscripts that had never before been catalogued, manuscripts no one knew had existed, by authors whose names had long been lost to history and which would never have been remembered, but for his research. His passion was history, the study of how things used to be and of what otherwise would not be remembered. Her passion was politics, the study of how things might have been but never were.

Years passed. His salary at the institute was slashed when inflation hit Russia in 2008. Hard times followed, and he was forced to put his research on hold in order to seek work as a teacher of Arabic. Although the rouble rose slightly against the dollar in subsequent years, it never returned to its pre-recession levels. He initiated a massive research project, on the forgotten history of Central Asian modernism. His research spanned the early decades of the twentieth century, the period that witnessed the most dramatic changes, and a drastic shift from tsarist rule to Soviet power. He situated Central Asia within the history of Islam, at the crossroads of the Turkish intellectual life in Tatarstan and Arabic modernism from Egypt to the Levant.

While Yasin was busy formulating his research project, Sarah found a job at Iowa State University. The yearly influx of students did little to make it seem like a place she could call home. Anyone who seemed in any way out of the ordinary – who was not white, who spoke languages other than English, whose politics were progressive, who valued dissent and opposed the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – was an anomaly and suspected of lacking patriotism.

Along with her problems with US government policies and with the systematic bombing of foreign lands that her taxes helped to fund, Sarah had problems on the professional front: her classes were under-enrolled. The students could not have cared less about Middle Eastern

literatures. Sarah became a curiosity on campus, an oddball professor inexplicably invested in an obscure corner of the world that was increasingly seen as a zone for breeding terrorists.

Three years passed: she had made it halfway through her tenure clock. Finally, she had an opportunity to shift to a new geography, to obtain a brief respite from cornfields and cows. She applied for a residential fellowship in a city she had never visited, but of which she had always dreamed: Budapest, city of castles, of Mongol invasions, and of the long, winding Danube. She wanted to roam the city, to absorb its caryatids and to breathe the moist Danube misting over the Chain Bridge. She wanted to do these things in the company of another human being, preferably someone to whom she could latch her soul.

At the end of the year, she received a call. 'I am calling to congratulate you,' said the voice on the other end. 'We look forward to greeting you in Budapest.'

With her fellowship came the opportunity to invite colleagues to visit her during her year's stay, and she invited the most famous scholar in her field. He politely declined. She remembered Yasin, the Uzbek scholar with whom she had crossed paths in Tel Aviv. True, he was an Arabist and she was a Persianist, but what was the harm in asking? They shared a passion for manuscripts. She found a scrap of paper on which he had scribbled his name and number years ago. She crossed her fingers and picked up the phone. Someone answered in a distant, accented Russian. She explained who she was and why she was calling. She asked if he remembered her. He said he had never forgotten her.

Yasin was delighted by the invitation to visit her in Budapest the following year. The visa process was set in motion by the Institute, which also arranged for his lecture. Meanwhile, Sarah waited, unsure of what the visit would bring.

She finished lecturing to her nearly empty classroom. The semester was over, and her life was about to take a new turn.

The flight to Budapest was long and mostly uneventful. She passed the evening in the sky reading Gershom Scholem's account of his tense friendship with Walter Benjamin. Scholem's efforts to influence Benjamin, to make him reject Marxism and embrace his Jewish origins, reminded Sarah of her own friendships. What did friendship mean? Was it just about having a good time together? Was it about coming to know another human being in the way you know yourself, or about coming to know yourself through another? And what was the difference between friendship and love?

She arrived in Budapest three days before Yasin, which gave her time to explore the town in advance of his arrival. What would it be like to meet again, after a lapse of five years? Would he have aged? Had she? In the past five years he had received fellowships in Germany, Austria, and France. He had learned English and German. She had a book nearing publication, had secured a permanent position at a large public university, albeit one overrun with cornfields and cows, and had come to think of herself as a permanently displaced person. They had both, as far as she could tell, remained single and childless, and immersed in scholarship. Having finished her first book, she was ready to open a new chapter in her life. She eagerly awaited the inspiration his visit would bring. The Institute had offered a luxurious two-story apartment with two large bedrooms for Yasin when she arranged for his visit, soon after the fellowship had been offered to her. He had promised to call her as soon as he was settled in this apartment.

On the day of his arrival, she waited anxiously for his call. Finally, the telephone rang. It was Yasin, addressing her in Russian as readily as if it were her native language, and a language that they had spoken together all their lives. She had not spoken Russian in years and the words did not flow as easily as they had in Tel Aviv. She suggested that they meet. After all, he was only

two floors beneath her. ‘*Mozhno* (May I)?’ she said simply, leaving her meaning open to interpretation. ‘*Mozhno*,’ he replied with equal brevity.

When she saw him standing at the threshold of his door, she realised that she would have recognised him anywhere. He was darker in complexion and his hair was unrulier than she remembered from five years ago. He had grown a beard. But he was the same Yasin, the same unassuming man with thick glasses and a boyish smile on his face. ‘Shall we explore the town?’ he proposed.

It was around seven in the evening. The sun was lingering on the horizon and seeping blood that cast a haze over the Danube. Their first stop was the Chain Bridge, where majestic lions sat at each end. The bridge appeared to be suspended in the water. They meandered down 6 October Street. The name captured Yasin’s attention. Sarah explained that it referred to an anti-Soviet rebellion: October 6 was the day when, on 1956, the anti-Soviet communist László Rajk was publicly buried in a memorial to the victims of the Stalin-backed purges from several years prior. October 6 was a prelude to October 23 of the same year, the date of the Hungarian Revolution.

While Sarah recited these details with enthusiasm, Yasin grew weary of the flow of information. His Soviet education had given him enough lessons in history for a lifetime. He turned to her with a smile and took her hand in his. ‘Let’s go have pizza,’ he suggested. They ascended the winding stairs of an Italian restaurant that was tucked away from the main street. He ordered a pizza with salmon and feta cheese. She ordered a pizza with arugula, mozzarella, and broccoli.

He asked her about life in Iowa. Was it like the rest of America? He had only been to the States once, to San Francisco for a conference a decade ago. She explained that the American Midwest was a country unto itself, with a culture unlike that of the coasts. He asked whether she liked living there. It was far from home, she said, and far from her family. The answer could not have been further from the truth – she never visited her family, no matter how near or far they were – but it was the closest approximation to reality she could give.

‘Family.’ Yasin repeated the last word, as if he failed to recognise its meaning.

‘Yes, family,’ she repeated.

He stared deep into her eyes. ‘Who is your family?’

‘Me, my sisters, and my mother.’

‘So, no husband?’

‘No, no husband.’

From her fieldwork in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Daghestan, Sarah had come to expect the husband question. Equally familiar was the one that followed: how many children was she going to have? Whenever she travelled in the former Soviet Union, or for that matter to most places outside the United States, it was the first question on her interlocutor’s tongue. She was thirty-five, after all. As an elderly woman in the Daghestani village where she conducted fieldwork had told her frankly, a woman needs only two things in life: a husband and a son. Anything else, she added, is a luxury.

However, when Yasin asked her the husband question, with his eyebrows gently arched, his curiosity seemed to originate in another source. Normally she greeted questions about her personal life with polite silence, but with Yasin Sarah was moved to speak openly. She railed against the sexism that dominated her profession and lamented that a woman was assumed to be incomplete without a man. Yasin laughed lightly, with an expression that to her implied a deeper understanding than words could communicate.

When they finished eating, they wandered down Andrásy Avenue, Budapest’s main commercial thoroughfare. Yasin pulled out a pack of cigarettes and began to smoke. The smell

affected Sarah strangely, as though someone were rubbing the palm of her hand. They passed fountains, shop windows, and even a ferris wheel, until they found themselves surrounded by benches and trees. It was late at night and the park was deserted. A few pairs of lovers were seated side by side, lost in each others' arms beneath flickering lamps.

'Let's sit down,' Yasin suggested, taking her hand.

She expected his hand to move away from hers once they were seated, but it remained pressed on her palm: soft, respectful, but nonetheless firm, as if it were natural for a man and a woman who had spent only a few hours together to hold hands; as if her hand belonged to him and his hand belonged to her. Sarah recalled his question about her family, and she wondered again why he had asked, but that was the first and last time he inquired about her personal circumstances.

When they arrived back at the guesthouse, he invited her into his apartment, explaining that he wanted to copy onto her laptop some medieval manuscripts that he had scanned and stored on his zip drive. She knew that he had access to the best collection of Central Asian manuscripts in the world. It was an offer she could not refuse.

As soon as they entered he set the kettle on for tea, opened his laptop and began searching through his files. They passed the next three hours like that, as he copied gigabytes of digital manuscripts onto an external drive. All the while, his hand rested firmly on her lap. Sarah arrested its movement, but she was pleased. She wanted to touch him in the way he was touching her, but she also did not want to do anything that she would regret. She had not been involved with anyone for over three years. This might be her last sexual encounter for many years to come, perhaps for the remainder of her life. She wanted to delay their intimacy for as long as possible, so that, once it happened, it would be etched forever, in all its singularity, on her memory.

When Yasin's fingers began to wander, creeping over her knees and up her legs, Sarah stood up and said it was time for her to say good night. He suggested they share another cup of tea, but she said she needed to go to sleep.

Back in her room, Sarah spent the rest of the night thinking about him. She wondered what it would be like to return to her bed after having slept with him. What would it be like when he was gone? Would she continue to experience the same familiar loneliness? Would Budapest look the same?

She called him as soon as she awoke. The sun was edging its way over the Danube. He suggested that they walk across the Chain Bridge. They reached the same park where they had lingered together the day before and sat down on a bench facing the tallest fountain. They began talking about Persian, Arabic, and Turkic manuscripts, a topic that excited them both. He took her hand in his as he had done before. This time, however, his hand moved, from her lap to her cheek, to her lips. When his fingers rested on her lips, she knew that the moment she had been waiting for had arrived. She closed her eyes and their lips touched.

The kiss was polite, restrained, and gentle. As his lips graced her cheek, the movement could have been seen simply as an expression of collegial warmth. But when he whispered into her ear, 'Let's go home,' their passion entered a new phase.

Given that they had passed most of his visit discussing Islamic ethics, she was surprised by his distinctive way of making love, which had more in common with Soviet sexual mores than conventional Islamic values. He undressed her and immediately began performing oral sex on her, with his penis positioned straight above her mouth. Then he slipped on a condom gracefully, with such a lightness of touch that indicated much practice. She wondered how many times he had performed this very act with other women. Had they been colleagues? Friends? Prostitutes?

Had he brought condoms with him from Uzbekistan expecting to have sex? Or did he carry them with him everywhere he went?

When they were done, they rested, exhausted, in each other's arms. He lit a cigarette. Behind him, on the other side of the bed, a pile of condoms towered like a crumbling pyramid. She reflected on the sterilisation operation she had recently undergone, a procedure with a symbolically significant name: Essure. The word's phonemic proximity to 'erasure' reflected its function. Essure erased her capacity for bearing children, and she was delighted that it did. Sarah's tubes were tied, metaphorically and literally. One abortion in her life, which even now, ten years later, she recalled with pain, had persuaded her that sterilisation had been the best choice of her life, regardless of the money it cost her, which she did not have, and regardless of her longstanding abstinence. She could rest confident in the knowledge that it was impossible for her to ever bring a child into the world. The only reason to use a condom now was to guard against disease. But Yasin was Muslim, Sarah reasoned. Surely sex was a rare occurrence in his life? She decided to try to find out more.

'I can't get pregnant,' she began. 'I had an operation.'

'An operation? For what?'

'Not to have kids.'

For a moment there was silence, then, slowly, he repeated her words: 'Not to have kids.'

She elaborated: 'I believe in adoption. What about you? Do you want to have children?'

'Children?' he repeated. 'I already have them.'

Sarah froze. At first his answer made no sense. How could he have kids without having a wife? Perhaps his wife had died? Perhaps he was divorced? Then finally she understood. He was married.

'And your wife?' she asked. 'How old is she?'

'Thirty-three,' he said mildly.

'Does she work?'

'No.'

The question she wanted to ask most, whether he loved his wife, frightened her. She could hardly summon the words to her lips. Either way, the outcome would bring sorrow. If he didn't love his wife, that was a cause for lament. If he loved his wife, what was he doing in bed with her in Budapest? Finally, she asked.

A long pause followed. Then finally Yasin answered. 'Yes.'

That was it. There was nothing more to say or do, other than to absorb the shock of his deceptive silence. They had connected profoundly. They had probed the depths of each others' intellects, without knowing even the most basic details of each others' personal lives. It was her first extra-marital affair, the first time she had made love to a married man.

'Are you Muslim?' she asked, as they put on their clothes.

'Yes.'

'Then how do you explain this?' She pointed to his uncovered and still slightly erect penis, which he quickly covered with the palm of his hand. 'Was that an Islamic act?'

'Even believers do wrong.'

'So you think what we just did is wrong? I think rather that it was right, and that your marriage is wrong.' He had no response. 'I'm opposed to marriage,' she went on. 'It's the world's biggest source of gender inequality'. She paused. 'I'm also against hypocrisy,' she added.

Yasin stared at her silently, as if unable to fathom her meaning. If he had been offended by her accusation, his face did not show it. Perhaps, she reflected, this was the critique of marriage

he had ever heard. Finally, she asked. 'How would you like it if your wife did with another man what you just did with me?'

'I would be furious,' he said, without missing a beat, as if the very possibility of his potential wife's infidelity was an offence to his manhood.

'You see?' Sarah smiled. 'That's what I mean. That's what I call hypocrisy. It is also patriarchy. And that's the basis of your marriage.'

He reached for a cigarette and moved to the window ledge. Without giving signs of anger, he was doing his best to withdraw from her intimacy. After several minutes, Sarah moved towards him. She wanted to sit next to him. The scent of his cigarettes turned her on. She wanted to make love. She had forgotten her rage at the betrayal of a moment earlier. The hypocrisy that had recently repelled her now seemed like less of a turn-off or a mark of moral failure than one of the contradictions intrinsic in all human relations. It was the hypocrisy of the institution of marriage, not his moral depravity, that moved her to rage.

Her fingers grazed his unshaven cheeks. He turned to the side. She wanted to scream at him for lying to her, for concealing key facts about his personal life. At the same time, and just as powerfully, she wanted to make love. When would she have the opportunity to do this again with a man who shared her deepest love in the world: Islamic manuscripts?

He backed away. She realised with a shock that he wanted to erase the memories they had just created together in bed. 'Can we go for a walk?' He gestured towards the window. The moon had vanished from view and only one artificial light, hoisted over the Chain Bridge, shimmered across the Danube.

'Not tonight,' she said. 'I have to go to bed.'

He nodded, his eyes averted from her gaze. 'Sleep well,' he said gently.

The next day he had a lecture to prepare and she had some chores to take care of, an article to finish, and a book to write. Around five in the afternoon, he called her. They agreed to meet at the entrance to the Chain Bridge. As soon as they caught sight of each other, the tension that had simmered all day dissipated. They walked back and forth along the many bridges that bisected the Danube as the river wound through the city. They did not hold hands. A space as wide as the breadth of a hand intervened between them, like the force field of an electronic fence.

She asked him again how it was possible for a married man who regarded himself as Muslim to sleep with other women. '*Nafs*,' he said simply. 'Not all Muslims act as they should.'

She knew the word but she asked him to explain. How did the concept of *nafs* explain their relationship?

'*Nafs* is the lower faculty, the passions.'

'So when you made love to me, it was with your *nafs*?'

He nodded vaguely. The question made him uncomfortable. His shyness, which she remembered from Tel Aviv, returned. Then he added softly, 'I'm not sure I understand your question.'

'Unlike you, I make love with my soul, not with my *nafs*,' she retorted. 'I respect Islam, but in this regard, I'm opposed to religion. Sex is not evil.'

He remained silent, whether from incomprehension or for some other reason.

'Are you hungry?' he asked, after they had crossed the Chain Bridge for the fifth time. The Danube was sparkling with the rays of the setting sun. A lone lifeboat bobbed up and down on the gentle waves. Minutes passed and his question went unanswered. At last he said, 'Shall we have pizza again?'

Yasin went on to produce the first study of Central Asian modernism in any language. Years later, Sarah helped to translate it into English. Sarah also had her share of successes, including a study of medieval inscriptions in the mosques of Afghanistan. She found a position at another university, in Tucson, Arizona, which was marginally preferable to Iowa. She and Yasin communicated every year by email, exchanging seasonal greetings and congratulating each other on their successes. Once he sent her a postcard from Yemen, and she responded with a package of books in Chaghatay. They never met again.

One day, after she had been involved for two weeks in a relationship that seemed unusually promising, she called him in Russia, just to share with him the news that she was in love.

'I'm so happy!' he exclaimed. 'You made my day, this is the best news of the year.' His enthusiasm for her happiness touched her deeply, and she wanted to reach out and kiss him. As it turned out, the relationship was over by the end of the month, but she would always be able to cherish Yasin's joy at the news that she had finally found love. Somehow, his joy was more important—and more permanent—than the love itself.

Every time she touched a manuscript, she thought of the grace with which he once stroked her hair as they sat near the ferris wheel in Budapest, not knowing how their bodies would soon join and then summarily break away. She remembered his brown eyes, as wide as a child's. How could a man like that cheat on his wife? He was the kind of man she could have loved for her entire life. Instead, she had to make do with men she could not love, with one-night stands and other fleeting pleasures. Although she regretted the sudden end to their relationship, she did not regret the week that they had shared together in Budapest, even though they had never touched each other again.

Rebecca Gould is the author of Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus (2016) and the translator of After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems, Hasan Sijzi of Delhi (2016), and The Prose of the Mountains: Tales of the Caucasus (2015). Her literary work has appeared in The Kenyon Review and Guernica. She can be found @rrgould.