

If you're in the habit of drinking

three or four beers in the evening or if you like to stop for a double shot in other places where they drink standing up you must have bumped into him. He has a black moustache, clear eyes and a rather long chin. He speaks quickly but doesn't enunciate all his letters. If he's had more than three beers I can introduce him to you, but only if you listen carefully. He's the finest, most agreeable man in the world. I'd go so far as to call him a very sweet man.

There's a cubbyhole-sized coffeehouse at the far end of Anadolu Alley. Three or four regulars come to drink the aromatic coffee which the keeper himself grinds by hand. On the walls pictures of country scenes in different seasons. You'll see a typewriter on one of the tables in the corner. A man is sitting there who earns enough to pay for his evening beers and the needs of his family. The Persian shopkeeper observed: "He eats sausage, filberts, walnuts, cucumbers."

Some people are born blind. Others are deaf and mute from birth. I suppose there are even some people born without feet or ears. But is it possible for a man to be born without teeth? Is it possible not to be? "We're all born without teeth," you say, "they only come in later." "Well, can you imagine a man who goes through life without teeth?" "Is it possible?" you ask. Let me introduce Mr Ferit Yazgan.

He says to himself: "I was born toothless." Well, not exactly. He ought to say, "I'm as toothless as the day I was born." We say about our teeth – but even then with only half the truth – that they only appear later on. It's the same with our permanent teeth.

SAIT FAİK

*The man who doesn't
know what toothache is*

We have hair on our heads from the day we're born, even if it's sparse. But our mouths are like a bird's mouth, or the mouth of a fish unless it's a shark. When my friend Mr Ferit Yazgan opens his lips and shows his mouth, it's absolutely amazing. Where you expect a full set of healthy teeth faintly yellowed, gleaming like pearls, there between his rather long chin and his black moustache, which doesn't have a white hair in it, you see instead a bright red hollow and, in place of teeth, a fine red line, looking like nylon.

To be blind from birth is a catastrophe, a miscarriage of the laws of nature. But to become blind only later is more tragic still. Perhaps a person born blind shapes the world to suit himself, or comes to have his own view of the world – even one which we cannot understand. Perhaps that strange quality which we call beauty, something most of the time unjust and difficult to defend, is really in our voice, or our smell or in the warmth or trembling from birth. He must possess a beauty and masculinity which seeing women do not perceive.

The fate of the deaf and mute from birth may not be as bad as that of the blind man, but theirs is a disability nonetheless. I don't feel the same way about Ferit Bey. I can't even consider it a defect or a flaw of nature. Just imagine, not even once to know the dentist's office with its grinding machines, for the morphine which turns our cheeks into felt, nor – I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy – a toothache. Just think about waking up from a deep sleep in the middle of the night with a raging toothache! All those things are for someone else. No nightmares of pliers or terrors of dentists chairs.

Ferit Bey says, "That's how I was born, that's the way I'll die. I can't eat lots of sloe plums the way kids do. I grate cucumbers and crush filberts. That's life. So I don't know all the delights of the world as well as you do, but I've tried them all. I've tasted hard things, but I don't like them. No walnuts or filberts for me."

"What do you like, Ferit Bey?"

"Take a guess! Soft things, of course."

Ferit Bey's vocabulary has no word for tooth. He doesn't sharpen his teeth on anything; there's nothing as precious as an eyetooth with him. He's a gentle, reliable fellow who doesn't like too much attention. If he likes a man he tells him his troubles. He

has a pleasant way of talking. Since we get along well we talk quite a lot. "I'm going on forty nine. Up 'til now I'd never had a stomachache. But this year I've started having some trouble. It's probably indigestion."

"What foods do you like? Soft mushy things, custards?"

"No, I don't like those at all. I like juices and watery things." He smiled, "I've got a weakness for beer and wine, even rakı, but not all at the same time!"

"Watch out, he's pulling your leg," the Persian shopkeeper interjected. "Just look at the walnuts he cracks in his mouth. I've seen it with my own eyes."

Ferit Bey winked. "Don't listen to a word he says. He comes from just outside Tehran."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I eat walnuts, sure, but first I crush them in my hands."

"First you put them in your mouth."

"Have it your own way then."

We laughed together. Then Ferit Bey took the pen and paper out of my hands and started to write.

"I was born in Istanbul in the quarter of Nakilbent in the district of Sultanahmet, on Güzelçeşme Street. After finishing elementary school and Sultan Ahmet High School, it was time to do my military service. But they kept putting it off. Now I'm married and father of two, a girl and a boy. My children's teeth are sound, God be praised! There's no one else in my family without teeth. After long examination at both Kadirga Dental School and the Gülhane Hospital it turned out that my teeth never came in because the tissue around them was too strong. The dentist Hüdaverdi – he was a student then – did what he could to make me a set of teeth, but it didn't work. He took an X-ray and made a plaster cast of my mouth and sent them to Paris. They sent back a set of false teeth, but they didn't fit. Finally they said they couldn't make me false teeth because my jaw bones hadn't fully developed.

"Ferit Bey, have you ever had any real worries?"

"Nothing serious."

"Would you rather have had a toothache?"

"What's a toothache like? Anything like a stomachache?"

"Much worse."

SAİT FAİK

*The man who doesn't
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"How?"

"It's hard to describe a toothache."

"And a stomachache?"

"Do you know of anyone else who was toothless from birth? That's the wrong way to put it, but you know what I mean."

"I'm the only one in Turkey. I don't know about other countries. But I doubt it. I'm probably the only man in the world who never got his teeth."

"Maybe this is a stage of evolution, Ferit Bey. Perhaps tomorrow all of a sudden we'll lose these bones, which rot so fast, which are a survival of those savage ancestors of ours. Maybe the time will come when children will be born without teeth."

Ferit Bey smiled, "I don't need any consolation. Even if your teeth, which are like a goldmine, are an excuse for eating someone else's bread and butter, I'm happy the way I am."

That's the way he is. A modest man, Ferit Bey makes a living with the sweat of his brow. He eats less than the rest of us, but more soft things. He hates anything hard or sharp. For a while he made a living as a recorder in the lower courts in Beyoğlu and Sultanahmet. It's just eight years since he started working as a typist. He fills out contracts and writes letters and petitions.

"There's just one thing," he went on. "My eyes have started to go bad recently because I haven't been getting the proper diet. I'm worried about that. The doctors are talking about a vitamin deficiency. If it weren't for these stomachaches I wouldn't have any complaints about not having teeth."

Tenants and landlords were coming to the coffeehouse to have their leases renewed. While he was putting the papers into his typewriter, Ferit Bey turned to me with his cheerful face, "Let's get together again and have a beer. But don't make me talk so much about teeth! That's something I really don't know anything about."

Nice fellow, that Ferit Bey, especially after two or three beers. And when he laughs, if you have a good imagination, you'll see thirty two perfect teeth gleaming in his mouth.

Sait Faik Abasıyanık (1906-1954), who is considered one of the founders of the modern short story in Turkey, focuses on interesting details in his poetry, a technique that he established in his short stories.