

# Beauty and Truth

by Aziz Nesin\*

From what he heard at home, Murat found out that his grandfather wrote poetry. But he did not know what poetry was.

A spring morning after breakfast, they were sitting out on the balcony with his grandfather. His grandfather was reading the newspaper.

- Grandpa, do you write poetry? asked Murat.

His grandpa looked up from the newspaper

- Yes, every now and then I write poetry... he said.

Murat was curious. What sort of a thing was poetry? His mom and his dad did not write poetry. But his grandfather did. That meant that not all people wrote poetry. Why didn't everyone write poetry? Maybe they did not know how to write it. Was he going to write poetry once he started school and learned to read and write? Murat's head was filled with many questions like these.

He could not overcome his curiosity.

- Grandpa, what is poetry? he asked.

His grandfather again lifted his head from the paper, looked at his grandson from over his glasses and smiled.

- It's difficult to explain.. he said.

-You tell me, I'll understand.. Murat said with confidence.

His grandpa said:

- Of course you'll understand, but it is difficult for me to explain..

As always, Murat started asking question after question:

- Why is it difficult?

- Because everyone defines poetry differently, that's why...

- In that case, tell me what it is as you understand it.. he said.

There was no escaping Murat's questions. His grandfather sat him on his lap and said to him:

- For me, poetry is saying something that is true in the form of beautiful sentiments.

Murat did not understand anything from this explanation. His pride was hurt because he did not understand, and he kept quiet, not asking any more questions of his grandpa.

A few days later, around nightfall, Murat was again sitting out on the balcony with his grandfather.

- It's getting dark, it's almost nighttime. Let's go inside.. said his grandfather.

For some time now, Murat was wondering what day and night were, why it was light during the day and dark at night. He used this opportunity to ask:

- Grandpa, why is it dark at night? Where does darkness come from? And how come it is light during the day?

His grandfather said:

- I'll tell you.

After thinking a little bit, he said:

- If there is anything you do not know or understand in what I am saying, be sure to ask...

- All right... Murat said.

His grandfather started:

- In the sky, there is a very handsome young man and a very beautiful young girl. She is so beautiful that she is surely the prettiest girl in the world.. That handsome young man's eyes are coal-black, and his hair jet-black. Moreover, his face is covered by a mask made of black silk. His clothes are made of black velvet. On his feet he has spotless shoes of black leather, and on his hands he is wearing black gloves. On this young man's back is a wide coattailed cloak, the cloak is also made of dark black velvet.

Murat asked curiously:

- Why is this handsome young man dressed all in black grandpa?

His grandfather replied:

- Because he is in love with that beautiful girl. He is constantly after her, following her around. He wants to catch up with her without being seen. Secretly he is chasing her; dressed in pitch-black, his clothes, cape, and mask all made of velvet, silk and satin...His gloves are of the softest leather. The coattails of his cape are so incredibly wide that they cover half the earth. It is because of this then, because that handsome young man runs after that beautiful girl, and because the coattails of his dark cape sweep over all he comes across, darkness goes with him. In this way, on the other side of the globe it also starts to be nighttime.

The handsome young man is dressed coal-black, but on his costume, on his cape, there are buttons of gold. On his lapel and his wristband are gilded silver threads. He is wearing gold and silver decorations on his chest. His cape's coattails are decorated with glittering sequins. On his waist he is wearing a gold and silver studded belt. The belt's buckle is a huge diamond. His boots' silver spurs are adorned with pearls.

The stars we see at night, the constellations, the milky way, all of these are the ornaments, decorations; the gold, diamonds, and brilliants he is wearing... As this young man runs after the beautiful girl, he carries with him the darkness. In this way, night follows us around the globe in step with him.

Murat asked with excitement:

- What about the daytime then grandpa?

His grandfather told the story of the day as follows:

- This girl that the young man in black is trying to catch.. What is she like? She is so beautiful, so extraordinarily pretty that there is no girl fairer than her in the whole wide world. All who regard her beauty are dazzled by it. Her hair is golden and soft as silk. She is wearing a pure white silk dress. Her long cape is made of white satin. On her neck is an embroidered white lace scarf. A white gossamer belt is curled around her waist. Her shoes are of white velvet... She has soft white leather gloves, and a white silk handkerchief. She is adorned with a bonnet of unblemished white flowers; she sometimes puts this bonnet on, sometime she takes it off. When she takes her bonnet off, the tiara that frames her golden hair is visible. And what a tiara it is! The precious stones in the tiara are so bright and brilliant that no one can look at them. This all-white clad beautiful girl's cape and its coattails are so amazingly wide that they cover the other half of the globe. Just as the half of the earth covered by the black cape of the young man is in the dark and it is nighttime there, the other half of the globe, covered by the coattails of the all-white clad beautiful girl's cape stays in the light, and it is daytime there.

The young man gives chase, and the girl runs away. The night chases and the day runs away. In this way they keep circling around the world one after another. As they go around, one side of the earth becomes night, and the other side day.

- But grandpa, nighttime is not always pitch dark.. Murat said.

- You're right, said the grandfather, some nights are blue or indigo. Just as you take your clothes off to clean them when they get dirty and wear other clothes, that young man in the sky wears his blue and his indigo outfits when his black cape and black clothes get dirty. When he puts those clothes on, the sky turns blue or indigo. And sometimes the sky and everything around us it gets pink or scarlet. Why is that? It's because when the young man gets too close to the girl and is just about to catch up with her, the beautiful girl gets excited and bashful, and her cheeks turn pink and red. The color of her cheeks are reflected in the clouds and reflected all around you. And if the young man touches the girl's hand, she turns bright red, and the sky also turns bright red.

Sometimes also during daytime it gets reddish. That is the time when the beautiful girl is troubled. If a shadow crosses her face the clouds get dark, and everything seems to close in on us.

Do you understand now what day and night are?

- I understand.. Murat said.

- What I told you is the tale of day and night.. his grandfather said.

Murat loved the tale of day and night. After that day, at each opportunity he made his grandfather retell this story. He listened to it so many times that he had it memorized. Sometimes he himself would recite the tale of day and night to his grandfather.

One day at school, the teacher explained what caused day and night, why daytime is light and nighttime dark. The earth continually revolved around the sun.

As the earth turned, the side that was towards the sun received light, and it was day there. The parts of the earth not seeing the sun were left in the dark and it was night in those places. In this way, every place on earth was in turn in the dark and then in the light. The reason for the succession of day and night was the revolution of the earth about itself. The earth also took different positions relative to the sun and thus received more or less light accordingly. Because of this, in the poles days and nights each lasted six months. Around the equatorial regions, day and night were always equal. On the equator nights did not become longer.

The teacher not only told them this in words, but also made a sketch of the earth and the sun on the board with chalk.

Murat listened to his teacher in amazement. The teacher's explanation of day and night was nothing like his grandfather's tale. The tale of day and night his grandfather told him was much more beautiful than the teacher's explanation of day and night.

The teacher saw the disbelief in the eyes of her good student Murat.

- Do you all understand? she asked the class.

- We do... they answered.

Murat was silent.

- Don't you understand, Murat? the teacher asked.

Murat hesitated. He said,

- I understand, but my grandpa had explained day and night to me differently.

- How did your grandpa explain it to you? Why don't you come up here and tell us your grandpa's version... she said.

Murat got up and went to the board. He told to his friends the tale of day and night that he heard from his grandfather, the tale that he himself often recited. His narration was so perfect that his classmates were spellbound. You could hear a pin drop.

- Which one of these explanations do you believe? asked the teacher to Murat.

Murat was faced with a difficult question to answer. His teacher had always told them "Believe in what is true, what seems true to you!" For this reason Murat said:

- Whichever one is true..

- Which one do you think is true? asked the teacher again.

After a little thought, Murat said:

- Your version seems more true to me, but still...

and he stopped. When the teacher said:

- Well?

Murat continued:

- My grandpa's explanation is more beautiful. I wish my grandpa's tale were true...

Then his teacher told him there was not much of a difference between the tale of day and night that his grandfather told him and her own version. The difference between

the two was in the form of the telling. Murat's grandfather had embellished and beautified this phenomenon with metaphors and had turned it into a fairy tale. He had made the night into a handsome young man dressed in black, and the day into a beautiful girl dressed in pure white.

On the other hand, the teacher had told them directly what happened in nature.

When he came home from school, Murat immediately went into his grandfather's room. He told his grandfather how his teacher explained that day in class the way day and night actually happened. He told his grandfather also how his teacher had told him that his grandfather's tale of day and night and her own version in class did not differ in essence.

- Yes... his grandfather said, it seems your teacher explained it in one way, I explained it another. But we both described the same thing.

After a pause, his grandfather continued:

- Do you remember, one day you asked me "What is poetry?" You were very young then. I had told you "Poetry is saying something that is true in the form of beautiful sentiments."

Yes, it had been three years, but Murat still remembered his grandfather's words. He understood now the words he could not understand then. Poetry was saying something that is true in the form of beautiful sentiments. His grandfather had recounted a fact that his teacher had taught him as a fairy tale with beautiful sentiments. His grandfather was a poet.

From that day on, Murat also tried to write poetry.

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\*Aziz Nesin (1915—1995) was a popular Turkish humorist and author of more than 100 books. His works have been translated into over thirty languages. In 1972, he founded the Nesin Foundation with the purpose of taking, each year, four poor children into the Foundation's home and providing every necessity until they complete their education. Aziz Nesin has donated to the Nesin Foundation his copyrights in their entirety for all his works. This story is from a book of stories for children published in 1985 (original title "Güzel ile Doğru"). Translated from Turkish by Ömer Eğecioğlu for his daughter Alisa's 4th grade GATE class on poetry at Isla Vista Elementary School. October 2007, Santa Barbara, CA.