

## **The Long Journey Home**

**Written by Sophie Smiley**

Mehmet jumped off the tram. He liked to hitch a ride on the old tram on his way home from school. He stopped and looked in a shop window. There was a wonderful display of football boots. Mehmet loved the orange pair, the ones with black stripes. But more than anything, he longed for his team's football strip. He could never have them – they were too expensive, and he knew that his parents didn't have enough money.

He turned away, and walked sadly towards the square. A ragged beggar sat on a bench. Mehmet felt sorry for him, and wished he could give him some money. He reached into his bag for the apple he had kept for the journey home. He would give that to the old man. He looked across the tracks. The beggar reached down and touched a black bag, then glanced from side to side in a way that reminded Mehmet of a cat, hunting. Mehmet watched from the shadows. He felt as if the beggar was waiting for something. Or for someone.

A tram rattled past.

When it had gone, Mehmet saw that the seat was empty.

But to his surprise, the bag was still there. He must return it. He looked around. His eyes searched the street. But the man had vanished.

He walked forward to pick up the bag. He must find the poor man and give it back.

But as Mehmet approached, a figure stepped forward. Swiftly, the stranger reached down, snatched up the bag, and disappeared into an alley. Without a thought for his safety, Mehmet chased after him. He had to return the bag to the beggar.

The figure slid round a corner. He was dressed in black, his eyes hidden by dark glasses. Silently, Mehmet followed. The man slipped like a snake through the alleyways. Mehmet ran to keep up.

Suddenly, the man turned. He removed his dark glasses and scanned the street, his eyes like searchlights. Mehmet froze. Ducking down behind a rail of clothes, he could hear his heart pounding. He squinted through the silk dresses, and watched the man come towards him. He was going to be discovered. How could he hide? Quickly, he grabbed a flowery scarf from the shop display, and wrapped it round his head like he'd seen his sister do. No one would suspect a girl of being a spy!

The man stopped. He stared straight at him. The eyes were cold and black and dangerous. Mehmet's heart seemed to stop beating. He pretended to look at the silk dresses.

Finally, the man looked away from him and scanned the street. Then turning abruptly, he went into the bazaar. Mehmet smiled at the trick he had played.

Carefully, he walked on through the rows of spice stalls. When the man entered a shop, Mehmet followed him, quickly hiding himself behind a display of teas.

A curtain at the back of the shop parted, and a foreigner appeared.

“Good, you've got the bag,” he said, and handed over a packet.

Mehmet gasped as the man in black slid the object into his jacket. The shape was unmistakable. It could only be one thing: a gun.

Mehmet felt himself shaking. This was no longer about returning a poor man's belongings – this was something much bigger, and much worse.

He shuddered, and wished he was at home.

“They are expecting you,” the foreigner continued. “Go to Haydarpasa. They will meet you by the flower stall.”

Mehmet felt a movement next to him. Something soft touched his legs, and he nearly cried out. Then he realised - it was just a cat!

But the two men heard the movement. The stranger's face darkened. He scanned the shop and demanded, “Are you sure you weren't followed?”

The cat emerged from the display, and walked towards the men. They laughed, and one of them reached out and stroked it.

Mehmet relaxed. He was safe again. But for how long?

A moment later disaster struck: Mehmet's nose itched. He knew what was going to happen, and he couldn't stop it: he sneezed loudly. Boxes of teas tumbled to the ground. Two men with thunderous faces stared down at him. There was no escape!

“What the...?” one of the men shouted.

“I just wanted to buy some tea for my mother,” Mehmet whispered.

“Oh yeah?” the foreigner snarled, “Where's your money then?”

Mehmet's pockets were empty. He looked towards the door, but the man with the gun had already banged it shut.

“Tie him up,” he ordered, “I don't want this little spy spoiling our plans!”

A scarf gagged Mehmet's mouth. A cord cut into his wrists as his hands were tied behind his back.

“You think you're clever,” the foreigner hissed, “But you won't feel so clever when they clear your body up with the trash!”

He lifted Mehmet into the air, carried him through the shop, and dumped him head first into a deep rubbish bin. The lid clanged shut.

Mehmet struggled to breathe. Everywhere was dark. His arms touched something slimy; the smell was terrible.

Mehmet tried to call out, but no sound came. He imagined being swallowed up by a rubbish truck, his body crushed by metal teeth. His family would never find him. Tears filled his eyes.

Then he heard his father's voice, “Never give up. Always go for goal!”

Mehmet pushed and tugged at the ropes. His hands bled as they scraped against the ties. At last they slipped free. Tearing the gag from his mouth, he hauled himself out of the bin, and tumbled onto the floor.

He breathed deeply and silently sneaked out of the rubbish area. He wondered what he should do next. He should get help. Looking around, he searched for a policeman. There were none. Perhaps he should go home. His mother would be sick with worry. Yes, he would be safe at home.

But instead of taking the road home, Mehmet set off towards the ferry. If he ran all the way, he could still catch the man with the gun.

Suddenly, Mehmet became a striker, tearing towards his goal. His heart raced as he neared the terminus. A ferry was at the quayside. High up on the top deck stood a man. He was carrying the bag in his arms.

Mehmet ran towards the boat. Then he remembered he had no money for a ticket. He could see the thief, but he couldn't reach him!

The boat's engines roared. The thief looked down, and spotted Mehmet stuck behind the barriers. The boat began to pull out. The man smiled and waved down at the shore.

Mehmet was furious. A burst of energy erupted with his anger. He ducked under the barrier, and sprinted forward. A gap of water lay between him and the ferry, between him and danger. Mehmet glanced at the dark, swirling Bosphorus, took a deep breath and leapt. He landed, sprawling and panting, on the deck. People stared.

Mehmet rolled over and looked up. The man had seen him, and moved towards out of sight.

Mehmet pointed and shouted, "Stop him – he's got a gun!"

No one moved. Instead, they looked at the boy, lying on the ground, covered in bits of old cabbage, with some feathers sticking out of his head. They wrinkled their noses at the smell of rotten vegetables, and moved away in disgust. No one believed his crazy story. The boy himself looked dangerous.

Mehmet was alone. For the second time, he felt tears sting his eyes. But again he heard his father's voice, "Pick yourself up, and do what's right."

Mehmet staggered to his feet and made for the stairs. He climbed to the top deck. It was empty. There was no sign of the man. The cold wind had driven the other passengers indoors. Mehmet shivered and stared at the empty deck. He could sense the man. He must be somewhere near.

Then, from the shadows, he saw a dark shape. It was just the edge of something sticking out, but Mehmet recognised it at once: it was the beggar's bag.

The man with the gun was only metres away. Mehmet had no way of defending himself. He was all alone, and he had nowhere to hide. There was only one weapon

he could use; it was something he'd learned on the football pitch – surprise your opponent!

Mehmet breathed in deeply, then at the top of the voice he screamed his football team's name and charged forward. He saw the startled face of the man. Watched in slow motion as he reached for his gun. And in that moment, Mehmet turned himself from a striker to a goal

keeper. He threw himself, and flew forward. With one swift movement, he sliced the man's legs from under him, and brought him thudding to the ground. The gun spun from his hand across the deck. Mehmet jumped on the man's back, and pushed his face into the floor.

Suddenly, people came running. There were screams. Someone picked up the gun and pointed it at the pair on the ground. Ferry staff shouted, and phone calls were made.

Mehmet was shaking, but he was still alert. "They're meeting him – at the flower stall. You must get them!"

The man was taken away. Someone wrapped Mehmet in a blanket, saying, "You're a brave lad," and gave him a hug.

Then he remembered his family, waiting at home.

"Please ring my mother," he whispered. And it was only then that Mehmet felt the tears finally fall. He slumped into the kind arms and wept.

But by the time the boat landed, Mehmet was almost himself again.

He watched the police lead the man from the boat, and saw a swarm of police cars on the shore. An officer approached him. He was carrying the bag. "Well done, son – we've been after this drugs gang for months. Thanks to you, we've got them all!"

Mehmet pointed and asked, "Will you give the bag back to the beggar – they stole it from him".

The policeman laughed, and opened the bag. Mehmet gasped at what he saw. It was bursting with money.

"That was no beggar," the policeman said, "He was one of the gang." Then he added, "And there'll be a nice reward for you for catching them."

"Enough for a new football kit?" Mehmet asked.

"Enough for a whole football stadium," the policeman smiled.

And Mehmet grinned from ear to ear!