

# The Bookstore at the End of the World

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*Please note, this work contains content related to sensitive themes such as homophobia and misogyny as well as derogatory language.*

**M**y name is Lucius. In Latin, my name means light. Normally, Lucius is a boy's name. My father slammed his fist on our barren table when I told him I was changing my name to a boy's name. It was an outrage. It was a scandal, especially in a clan like ours, where gender roles constitute a perfectly organized system of literary and by extension earthly protection. I am a member of the Okuyucular tribe. Okuyucular means readers in Turkish. For years of the climate crisis, our tribe has kept the sacred art of reading alive. We now are the last of the populations that hold onto paper and bindings, preserving the materiality of words, while coal burns for words to be on screens. Normally the men preserve the books, read the words, uphold the knowledge, and run the stores that both protect and pass along the bindings most have forgotten in this age of apocalypse. The women in our tribe clean the bindings. We are treated as if mothering is our only job, extending even into volumes. I have spent many years in our small shack, watching my mother wipe spines, cleaning and caring for them. I almost forgot it was a book, for it was as if she was caring for me and my brother.

I decided to change my name when I realized my old name, Alara, would forever make me feminine, and by extension a lover and a mother. I didn't have time nor a desire to be either. We all knew it was a matter of time before everything ended. Sex would make men feel more powerful

and babies would bring more suffering. Earthly disintegration was inevitable, so why not disintegrate gender roles? My mother always said I looked more like the men in my family than any of the women. It was as if God decided that I could decide who I was meant to be. I'm still not sure. All I know is motherhood and dresses, marriage, and sex, were all subjects I detested. I hated most subjects in real life. They were ascribed to me, and I didn't get to ascribe them to myself. I was meant to be genderless. I was meant to choose my own life and role. I was meant to disappoint my family, in order to protect the planet.

Our town is a dilapidated center of knowledge, world-renowned, mysterious, and mystical to the Westerners, and a wasteland to its inhabitants. Just because we were the last of the bookkeepers did not mean we were free from suffering. Our town is called Dünyanın Sonu-The End of The World. It's called this because of its appearance, not of what it holds. There is nothing but a gray desert around us. The soil is so dry and crunchy and the food is so scarce, that sometimes young kids pick it up and eat it, laughing at how it is like those Pringles in the big scary country of America. Ever since I could remember, desolation toughened us up, like an actor troupe, where the dilapidation of our climate became a theater, where we pretended to use anything to give us memories of an easy world. There are only five bigger buildings in our town.

One is for our elder, Ahmet. Two are for communal food sharing, although the buildings are much too big for the amount of food we have stored there. Two other buildings are for caring for the sick and wounded. We have too many right now. It is my father's job to bring a few books to the sick at the hospital, once in a while. I went with him one time and my eyes opened up like a book to the suffering. I can still smell the blood and feel the slickness of puss on the walls. Medicine is a rarity, so oftentimes we use dirt, leaves, herbs, and tinctures made by the village medicine women, to heal. Houses are scattered around the bigger buildings, in a circle of suffering, half-worn, half-standing. At the furthest edge of town is our bookstore. It is a small building, but quite long, which means it is almost visibly unnoticeable, but it has so much room to store what we want to save. The floors are wooden and creak like my grandfather's bones. The shelves are long and tall, made out of the melted plastic of recycling bins found before our town and country gave up on being environmentally conscious. The halls of books are long. The walls are an eerie mix of gray and white with little intricately painted butterflies painted on them. I only know that word from stories. I've never seen such things in real life. Sometimes, as I walk past, or if I sit for a while, I swear they move, a slight flutter. How they have enough life and sustenance to move joyfully is beyond me. It has been my dream to run the bookstore At The End of The World for as long as I did not want to be a man or a woman.

My father once called me an *ibne*, or *f\*\*\*\*\**. His spit stuck to my face. The world was already so inhospitable, it did not seem it could get any more so. Anyone who was a woman was a wife, and anyone who wasn't was a *f\*\*\*\*\**, at least to him. I think about this often, now that I live in the bookshop, running it, having run away from the norm of the town. I wasn't a *f\*\*\*\*\** as my father proudly called me with disdain, I just didn't see any point in wearing

clothes to get a man to notice me. I didn't see a point in marrying someone, only to be a servant of both food and sex, to bring more children into this world of suffering. I didn't cut my hair short because I wanted to be a boy, I just didn't want anyone to know my gender; I didn't want to know my gender. I just wanted to be. Baba, I once said, I am not a man because I do not want to control, and I am not a woman because I do not want to suffer. I am neither, so I can be happy before I die and before we all die, I said. He didn't understand, but that was my Baba-wrinkled dark-tanned skin that smelled of leather and sweat and a brain of absent-minded bigotry. I feel more at home with the books I take care of, and with the books I sell. I feel more hope protecting what is endangered, than being loved by humans. I tell this to myself, every day, as I sit on the small stool, picking at the strand of my cutoff jean shorts, my bones showing more each day.

When I was young, I heard stories of when books were everywhere. It seemed like an alternate reality. I heard tales of sexually frustrated wives in America, retreating to the sensual seclusion of a romance novel. I listened, while my mother told me of mass market bookstore chains, something way of the past. What were these places, Borders, Barnes and Noble? It had never occurred to me that the rest of the world knew what books were until I heard such stories. Now, we were the last to hold onto paper copies. The rest of the world chose convenience. They burned coal, and butchered animals and plants, to mass produce these things called smart readers. With the purchase of one smart reader, you could access millions of books. There was no longer any need for libraries or bookstores. I once saw an advertisement in an American magazine I came across from a friend of a friend. The woman was glittering, gleaming, holding her smart reader, a perfect smile on her face. Replacing everything with convenience had destroyed the world.

I felt lucky to feel joy. I love running the

bookstore. Inside was a world that turned the customer from shopper to inspired. I felt more faith in my customers to do something than any politician. My favorite customer was a seven year old girl named Banou. She was small, quiet, always tugging on the corner of her colorful patchwork dress, her hair short and cropped like mine. She always went for the science section. I'd watch her read, tracing her fingers over the pages, solemnly digesting. She'd always approach my stool, look up at me and call me *Onlar kitaplardan*-they of books. It was gender neutral but also acknowledged my role, as if finally I was the ruler of my own kingdom, when out there my baba had tried to rule mine, and the mean men of corporations were ruling the lives of the whole world. I call her *nazki rhu*-kind soul. There aren't many of these. Today, Banou comes in, walking with purpose to her corner with the science books and the yellow, orange and black painted butterflies. She says they have the colors of the fall American dress up day. Halloween, I tell her... *Ha-llo-ween*, I pronounce. She sits down to read. Outside I watch as mothers collect scraps of fruit and leaves from off the ground. They fight over nature's leftovers like I've heard those *Real Housewives* fight over money and men. If only we were that lucky to fight over something that didn't matter. I look over and notice that Banou isn't in her corner anymore. She is standing next to me, quietly. "Onlar Kitaplardan?" Banou says quietly. "Yes Nazki Rhu?" I respond. "This is Earth," she says, pointing to a picture in a scientific encyclopedia. "Yes, that is Earth," I respond. "But it is so pretty," she says, looking confused. "And?" I inquire. "How can they paint Earth so beautiful, when it's so ugly"

Banou states matter of factly. "Nazki Rhu, Earth wasn't always so ugly. It used to be beautiful, filled with plants and oceans full of the saltiest and purest water, days warm and cold, dirt that was wet and people rejoiced at the outside world," I respond. Banou looks at me, more thoughtfully than I expected anyone her age to. "There's one thing that's always been ugly" she says. "What is that, Nazki Rhu?" I ask. "People. Like us. We've always been ugly because we've always been mean," she responds. Children should not have to deal with such issues. They should not have to reconcile with unhappiness as their everyday. I love Banou so. I wish I could peel those little butterflies off the walls and watch as they come alive and fly around her. I want to prove to her that the world isn't ugly. I want to show her that it was once beautiful, so she can believe. Children are our only hope, if any is left. Banou looks at me, her delicate tan lips puckering in concentration. "I want to show the world that not all of us are ugly," she says. "That is so important, Nazki Rhu, so important. I want you to know that what you want to do, that will help to make real change" I say, taking her small hands in mine, the encyclopedia dropping to the floor with a thud. "I don't want to get married and have babies. I want to make butterfly babies and have the world be colorful. I'm going to read some more" she says, breaking into a full smile. "Go Nazki Rhu, just read," I say, tenderly smiling back. My name is *Lucius* and it means light in Latin. I'm not here to be the light. I believe that I am here to restore it. I feel the shelves around me breathe. *Kelimeler aktive olacak, kelimeler aktive olacak, kelimeler aktive olacak* (words will activate, words will activate, words will activate).