

Story #628 (1977, Tape #21)

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Shocked into Reading and Writing

About eighteen years ago, together with three friends we went to Ankara for some sightseeing. We walked on a large avenue, walked around a bit. I told my friends that I had to relieve myself, and they showed me where the public bathroom ^{-- public} was. I got to the restrooms and saw two signs. Since I couldn't read, I had no idea which one was for women and which was for men. I walked in one of the doors and was immediately assailed by a fat woman who screamed, "You mannerless brute! Police! police!"

I ran out as fast as I could to the clearing where my friends waited for me. I told them I had to get away fast because unknowingly I had walked into the women's restroom, and a fat woman was screaming for the police. But I didn't know which door was which. I haven't much reading or writing.

We went on to Ulus and found ourselves in a bazaar. I've forgotten the name. We saw a woman in a taxi¹. She was parked, smoking a cigarette. My friends dared me to go ask her if she would take us somewhere.

¹Villagers often call any sedan a taxi. Until recently most of them had seen very few automobiles in their native areas.

"What's so difficult about that?"

Since I didn't know how to read, I couldn't know whether this was a private vehicle or privately owned public transportation. She could be waiting for a husband or a son, I had no way of knowing. So I went over and very politely asked, "Lady, would you take me and my friends to the Youth Park?"

She sternly looked at me and asked, "Where are you from?"

"Elâzığ" I replied.

She then turned on me furiously and said, "You are a mannerless ill-bred man. Can't you read what is right in front of you!"

I was terribly offended to be called ill-bred,² and ashamed not to be able to read. I went at once and got myself an alphabet chart and an elementary school reader, and gradually I started to learn a bit of reading and writing. I now can sign my name. And that is what happened to me.

²Such a criticism is far more serious in Turkey than in, say, the United States. It is a criticism not only of the individual but also of his family.