

Story 1540 1992 Tape 1

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Location: Derinkuyu, a kaza
town of Nevşehir
Province

Date:

Female Morality: A Laz¹ Version

This is a story about a friend of mine who was a public school teacher. He had been assigned to teach in a small village elementary school in the eastern Black Sea region of Turkey.

One day while he was teaching a class in the Turkish² language, he wrote this sentence on the blackboard: "The young girl opened the window without her mother's permission, looked outside, and smiled." He then gave the following instruction to his students: "Now rewrite this sentence using different words than I did but keeping the same meaning."

¹The Laz people are a large ethnic minority living primarily in extreme NE Turkey along the Black Sea Coast. While there are Lazes throughout Turkey, the vast majority live in Rize, Trabzon, and Artvin provinces. Although their native language is a variety of Megrillian Caucasian, most adult Lazes speak Turkish readily, though they may have numerous dialectal pronunciations. Like the inhabitants of three or four villages elsewhere in Turkey, Lazes are often stereotyped as being stupid. Of course, they are no more stupid than anyone else; they are simply the butt of folk humor.

²Turkish language is, of course, taught throughout Turkey, just as English is taught throughout the U.S. It is a more difficult course for children of northeastern Turkey, for many of them grow up in cultures where their family language and their village language is either Laz or Georgian.

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Every student in the class began to work thoughtfully on this assignment except Temel.³ Temel just sat at his desk and seemed to be doing nothing. When the teacher observed Temel's idleness, he asked, "Temel, why aren't you writing anything?"

Temel answered with great self-assurance, "I have already written what you asked us to write." Temel then showed his paper to the teacher. There was just one word on the paper: whore.⁴

³Temel, Dursun, Cemal (for standard Turkish Kemal), and Hızır are very common male names among Lazes. The first three are so strongly associated with Lazes that whenever they appear in folktales, they automatically signal Laz, even if the word Laz has not been used.

⁴Residents of northeast Turkey (Lazes and others) are more religiously conservative than are people in most other parts of Turkey. Although the veil per se was outlawed as part of the Kemalist Reforms, Turkish women in fundamentalist families cover their heads, necks, and shoulders with large head scarfs, and they often wear long black coats with ample collars--coats that look like raincoats and are called çarşafs. The girl in this tale has committed two offenses: opening a window to the outside world without her mother's permission, and smiling through the window into that outside world where there may be males who can observe her smile.