

Novel Excerpt: Elliot Ackerman's 'Red Dress in Black and White'

That evening, at half past nine

To William, the question of his mother is clear. The question of his father is more complicated, because there is Peter.

The night that they meet, William is about seven years old and his mother has brought him to one of Peter's exhibits. She hasn't said much to her son, just that she has an American friend, that he takes pictures and that the two of them are going to see that friend's art, which is very special. That's what she always calls it, *his art*.

His mother doesn't drive, at least not in this city, and in the taxi on the way there she keeps looking at her wristwatch. It isn't that they are late, but that she's anxious to arrive at the right time, which is not to say right on time. The apartment she's trying to find is off İstiklal Caddesi, which is a sort of Ottoman Gran Rue running through the heart of Istanbul, the place of William's birth but a home-in-exile to his mother, who, like her friend Peter, is American. As their cab crawls along Cevdet Paşa Caddesi, the seaside road which handrails the Bosphorus Strait, she stares out the window, her eyes brushed with a bluish cosmetic, blinking slowly, while she absently answers the boy's questions about where they are going and whom they'll meet there. William holds a game called Simon on his lap. It is a palm-size disk divided into four colored panels—blue, red, green, yellow—that flashes increasingly complicated patterns, which reflect off the cab's night-darkened windows. The aim is to repeat those patterns. It was a gift from his father and his father has the high score, which he has instructed William to try to beat.



An allée of birch canopies their route and they skirt the high limestone walls of Dolmabahçe Palace. Their cab jostles in and out of first gear in the suffocating traffic until they break from the seaside road and switchback into altitudes of linden-, oak- and elm-forested hills. When the sun dips behind the hills, the lights come on in the city. Below them the waters of the Bosphorus, cold and pulling, turn from green-blue to just black. The boat lights, the bridge lights, the black-white contrast of the skyline reflecting off the water would come to remind the boy of Peter and, as his mother termed it, his art.

After paying the fare, his mother takes him by the hand, dragging him along as they shoulder through the evening foot traffic trying to find their way. Despite the darkness eternal day lingers along the İstiklal, flightless pigeons hobble along the neon-lit boulevard, chestnuts smolder from the red-painted pushcarts on the street corners, the doughy smell of baked açma and simit hangs in the air. The İstiklal is cobblestone, she has worn heels for the occasion, and when she catches one in the grouting and stumbles into the crowd, she knocks a shopping bag out of another woman's hand. Standing from her knees, William's mother repeatedly apologizes and a few men reach under her arms to help her up, but her son quickly waves them away and helps his mother up himself. After that the two of them walk more slowly and she still holds his arm, but now she isn't dragging her son, and when the boy feels her lose balance once more, he grabs her tightly at the elbow and with the help of his steady grip she manages to keep on her feet.

They turn down a quiet side street, which aside from a few shuttered kiosks has little to recommend it. The apartment building they come to isn't much wider than its door. After they press the buzzer, a window opens several floors above. A

man ducks his head into the bracing night and calls down to them in a high-pitched yet forceful voice, like air through a steel pinhole. He then blows them an invisible kiss, launching it off an open palm. William's mother raises her face to that kiss and then blows one back. The street smells bitterly of scents the boy doesn't yet recognize and it is filled with the halos of fluorescent lamps and suspect patches of wetness on the curbs and even the cinder-block walls. The buzzer goes off and William's mother shoulders open the door. Inside someone has hammered a plank across the elevator entry. It has been there long enough for the nail heads to rust. They climb up several floors where the brown paint scales from the brick. The empty apartment building meets them with an uproar of scattering rats and the stairwell smells as bitter as the street.

A shuttle of unclasping locks receives his mother's knock at the apartment door and then the same man who had appeared in the window presses his face to the jamb. His gaze is level with the fastened chain and his eyes are pretty and spacious, as if hidden, well-apportioned rooms existed within them. The honey-colored light from inside the apartment shines on his skin. His eyebrows are like two black smudges. William notices the plucked bridge between them, and also his rectangular smile with its brilliantly white teeth. The man is uncommonly handsome, and William feels drawn to him, as if he can't quite resolve himself to look away.

The chain unlatches and then half a dozen or so men and broad-shouldered women spill across the apartment's threshold, pressing against William's mother, kissing her on the cheek, welcoming her. When they kiss William on the cheek, the harsh, glancing trace of the men's stubble scrapes against his fresh skin. The women begin a refrain of *Wonderful to see you, Cat*, and while they escort her inside they keep saying *wonderful* over and over in their guttural voices as if that superlative is the last word of a spell that will transform them into the

people they wish to be.

A blue haze of cigarette smoke hugs the ceiling. Tacked to the sitting room wall, next to a white hard hat displayed like a trophy, is a poster advertising this exhibit. It is a portrait Peter shot of one of the women. She was photographed shirtless from the shoulders up, her mascara runs down her cheeks, her lip is split, a small gash zigzags across her forehead, and her wig—a tight bob symmetrical as a rocketeer’s helmet—is missing a few tufts of hair. That summer, protests had shaken the city, shutting it down for weeks. Hundreds of thousands had squared off with the authorities. William’s dominant memories of those events aren’t the television images of riot police clubbing the environmental activists who opposed a new shopping mall at Taksim Square’s Gezi Park—seventy-four acres of neglected lawns with a crosshatch of dusty concrete walkways shaded by dying trees—or even the way so many everyday people surprised themselves by joining the protesters’ ranks, but instead William remembers his father pacing their apartment on his cellphone, unable to drive into the office because of the many blocked streets as he negotiated a construction deal on a different shopping mall across town.

By the time the protests had finished, the city’s long-persecuted queer community had assumed its vanguard. This caused one columnist, a friend of Peter’s, to observe, “Among those who struggled for their rights at the police barricades at Gezi Park, the toughest ‘men’ were the transgender women.” And so, Peter had a name for his exhibit. In the poster, battered though she is, his subject’s eyes hold a certain, scalding defiance, as if she can read the words beneath her: *The Men of Gezi, An Exhibit*. As William’s mother wanders into the apartment she becomes indistinguishable from the others, blending perfectly into this crowd.

. . .

Catherine and William have arrived at Peter's exhibit right on time, which is to say that they have arrived early. The apartment belongs to Deniz, the one who had appeared in the window to let them in. His date, who takes their coats, is a university-age girl with a pageboy haircut. She is as beautiful as Deniz is handsome. Her mouth is lipsticked savagely, and with it she offers Catherine and William a thin smile before retreating to the sofa, where she stares absorbedly into her phone. Soon others arrive and Deniz comes and goes from a small galley kitchen off the sitting room, where his guests pick at the food he's elegantly laid out on the thinnest of budgets. Not much wine, but carefully selected bottles from his favorite bodegas, a few plates of fresh sliced vegetables on ice bought end-of-day for a bargain at last Sunday's market, small boxes of expensive chocolates to ornament each table. William can't keep track of who is who, as there are several Hayals, as well as many Öyküs and Nurs. Their self-assigned names affirm their identity, but in this political climate also serve the double purpose of noms de guerre. Who knows if one Öykü was born an Arslan and one Hayal was born an Egemen. Why so many of them had chosen the same names, he couldn't say. What seemed most important was that they had chosen.

His mother makes him a small plate and sits him in a chair by the window. While William picks at his dinner, the scented and beautiful crowd swarms around her, saying *Cat that* and *Cat this*. To take her son here, without his father's permission, so that she can be called Cat instead of Catherine, which is what everyone else calls her, endears her to the Men of Gezi. She has made a choice, just as they have. Having lost sight of his mother, William removes the game Simon from his pocket. He sits by the window and he plays.

Soon everyone has arrived and the apartment becomes too warm. Deniz walks to where William sits and heaves open the window. William glances up from his game. His eyes are drawn to

Deniz's muscled arms, his rounded shoulders, how strong he is. A hint of breeze passes through. Deniz cracks a door catty-corner to the window and whispers inside, "Our guests are here." Nobody replies and he says it again. Then a man's voice answers, "Yeah, okay," and Deniz shuts the door and returns to mingle in the crowd, where William has lost his mother.

Whatever this night is about exists just beyond that door, so William stands from his chair by the window. Carefully, he turns the knob. The hinges open smoothly, without a trace of noise. Inside there is light: white walls, white floor and ceiling. The room is transformed into a gleaming cube. The scent of fresh paint hangs heavily around Peter, who stands in the room's center, his back to the door, surrounded by his portraits. William steps behind him and watches.

Peter has almost hung the exhibit. A pair of photos lean one against each of his legs. They are printed in the same dimensions as the other portraits, twelve by eighteen, and the finishes are a monochromatic black-and-white matte. In front of him a single empty nail protrudes from the wall. He combs his fingers through his longish brown curls, which he often teases into a globe of frizz while concentrating. He cranes his neck forward, as if trying to stoop to a normal person's height, which bends him into the shape of a question mark. He has pulled his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and his alternating gaze dips into their lenses and then shifts above them. None of this seems to help Peter resolve the decision with which he's wrestling. William watches him for a while, until Peter feels the boy's eyes on his back despite the many sets of photographed eyes that encircle him.

Peter turns around. His scrutiny is slow and accurate. "Who are you?" he asks. As an afterthought, he adds, "And shut the door."

William does as requested but remains silent.

"Wait, are you Cat's boy?" Peter combs his fingers back through his hair and he puckers his nose toward his eyes as if the remark had left a spoiled, indigestible taste on his lips. "She brought you," he says, like an accusation, or statement, or even a compliment. William can't figure out which, so, finally, he says, "Yes."

"Come here," says Peter. "I need your help with something." He has transformed the cramped bedroom into a pristine gallery, and William steps carefully through the space Peter has created. "I can't decide on the last photo." Then Peter crouches and tilts out the two frames balanced against his legs. William crouches alongside him. One of the two photographs is similar to all of the others: a man with long, stringy hair wearing makeup looks back, a bruise darkens his cheek, a cut dimples his chin, he wears a hard hat like the one hanging on the other room's wall by the poster. Though he stares directly at the camera, his eyes are not set on parallel axes—one wanders menacingly out of the frame.

The subject of the other photograph is beautiful.

Peter has shot this young woman in the same dimensions and lighting as the rest of his portraits. A sheet of dark hair falls straight to her shoulders. There is a bruise around her eye. Up from her chin and along her jaw she also has a cut. She wears a bright dress, whose shade in black and white is exactly the same shade as the cut. A tote bag hangs from her shoulder. Her eyes fix on William clearly, in a way that feels familiar to him, the reflection in her pupil serving as a kind of a mirror.

"This one's a bit different," Peter says. "She was born a woman."

Being a boy, William doesn't understand the exhibit, the nature of Peter's subjects or why he would mix in a single photograph of this one particular woman. But William knows the

effect the second photograph has on him. He tells Peter that he likes it best. "You sure?" asks Peter.

He says that he is.

Peter hoists the last photograph onto the wall. As he takes a step back, he crosses his arms and examines it a final time. Then he crouches next to William. Peter has pushed his glasses all the way up his nose and his hands are planted firmly on his knees. "We'd better go find your mother," he says.

. . .

Twenty photographs hang inside of the gallery. About the same number of people mingle in the kitchen and sitting room. William recognizes many of the faces he has seen in the portraits. Peter's eyes shift among them, as if counting the tops of their heads. When it appears that he has found all of the portrait's subjects, he takes off his glasses and tucks them into the breast pocket of his corduroy sports coat.

A knife clinks against a wineglass. The noise comes from a woman who stands alone in a corner of the apartment. The party faces her. Around her neck on a lanyard dangles a blue badge with an embossed seal—a bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch between two furious talons. This places her in the U.S. diplomatic corps. In her photo on the badge she wears the same navy blue suit jacket with a boxy cut and powder blue shirt as on this night, giving the impression that she has only the one outfit, or maybe multiple sets of the same outfit. Her face is lean. Like that of Deniz's date, her black hair is cut into an easy-to-maintain, yet severe, pageboy. Her complexion is such that she could readily be mistaken for a native of this city. A slim and no-nonsense digital triathlete's watch cuffs her wrist. The crowd turns its attention to her. She glances down at her chest, as if she can feel the many sets of eyes settling on her badge.

Awkwardly, she lifts the badge from around her neck, having

forgotten to remove it when she left her desk at the consulate. She then raises her glass. "Thank you all for being here," she says. Her eyes land with sincerity on Deniz, who's telling his date to put away her phone. When he looks up he seems startled, as if confused at receiving thanks for being present in his own home. "And thank you to my old friend Deniz, for lending us his apartment. He was one of the first people I met when I came here nine years ago—"

"The first and last reception you ever threw at the Çırağan Palace," interrupts Deniz with a good-natured smile.

Kristin gives him a look and he shrugs, settling back into his seat. Her gaze then turns to Peter and she speaks to him directly. "I want to congratulate you on this remarkable exhibit and say how proud the Cultural Affairs Section is to have helped, in our small way, to host tonight's event."

Everyone toasts.

"That's very kind of you, Kristin," says Peter, but his words stall in the forest of raised glasses, and before he can say anything more, Kristin continues her remarks, speaking over him, saying that she hopes Peter's photos will bring awareness not only to the events in Gezi Park but also to "this community's long struggle for equal rights and dignity." The room listens, politely, but by the time she finishes most of the crowd, including William and his mother, has migrated into the gallery.

Each person falls silent as they find their image on the blistering white walls. On one side are the portraits of the battered "men" of Gezi and on the other side are the women with their meticulously layered makeup and hair arranged as best as they can manage or covered with a wig for an evening out. Viewed from the doorway, a duplicate of Peter's exhibit begins to form among the guests. Then the finished product appears: a set piece, the exhibit itself as subject, portraits

in and out of the frame. William can't put words to it, but he feels the effect Peter has created.

"What did you help him with?" his mother asks.

Of the twenty portraits, the only one that nobody stands in front of is the girl in the dress chosen by William. He points toward it and his mother says nothing but leaves him and wanders to its spot on the wall. Now every portrait is mirrored by its subject, or, in the case of his mother, a nearly identical subject. William turns back toward the door, where Peter leans with his camera hung around his neck. He snatches it up and takes a picture of his exhibit. Then he departs into the sitting room.

Deniz and his guests circulate among the portraits, theorizing about themselves in Peter's work, honing in on different details within the photos. William can hear them teasing one another, saying that they look like hell, or some variation on the same. The quiet that had descended so quickly lifts. The party that began in the sitting room and kitchen now resumes in the gallery. William's mother has drifted away from the photograph of the girl in the dress, even avoiding it, instead finding protection with Deniz and the others, who keep her at the center of their conversation with their *Cat that* and *Cat this*. William has no one to stand beside, so he follows Peter.

Kristin has forgone the gallery and stands by the window. With her thumbs she punches out a text message. Peter sidles over to her and she glances up from her phone. "I have to go," she says.

"You liked the exhibit that much?" Peter says self-deprecatingly. "What's the matter? Problem at home?"

"No, nothing like that. I've got to get back to work." "It's almost midnight."

"Not in Washington it isn't, but the exhibit's beautiful.

Congratulations.” Kristin tucks her phone back into her overstuffed handbag, from which she removes a small bottle of Purell. She squeezes a dab into her palms, which she vigorously kneads together. Heading to the door, she nearly bumps into William, who is slowly angling across the room toward Peter. “It’s almost midnight,” Kristin says to the boy in a tender almost motherly tone, as if the fact that he is up at this hour is more remarkable than the fact that he is at Deniz’s apartment in the first place.

“That’s Catherine’s boy,” says Peter.

Kristin glances behind her, offering Peter a slight rebuke. Of course she knows that this is Catherine’s boy. “Don’t let your mother stay out too late,” she says to him, then touches his cheek.

“He won’t,” says Peter, answering before William can. Kristin leaves and Peter and William install themselves at the window, staring toward the streetlamps with their halos.

“Take a look here,” says Peter, lifting the camera from his chest. William tentatively leans closer.

“The portrait you picked was perfect.” Peter guides the boy next to him by the shoulder. With his head angled toward Peter’s chest, William stares into the viewfinder. The picture Peter took inside of the gallery is a symmetrical panorama, five portraits hung on each of four separate walls, with every person a reflection of their own battered image.

“Your mom filled the last spot.”

William vacantly nods.

“One of the first rules of being a photographer,” says Peter, “is that you have to take hundreds of bad photos to get a single good one.” He points back into the viewfinder. “This is the one shot that I wanted, understand?” He is inviting

William to be in on something with him, even though William doesn't completely understand what it is.

The boy offers a timid smile.

"Photography is about contrasts, black and white, light and dark, different colors. For instance, if you put blue next to black, the blue looks darker. If you put that same blue next to white, it looks lighter." Peter flips through a few more images on the viewfinder, pointing out pictures that demonstrate this effect. Each time that William nods, it seems to please Peter, so William continues to nod. "But the blue never makes the white look lighter and it never makes the black look darker. Certain absolutes exist. They can't be altered."

Catherine wanders over. She takes Peter's hand in hers, quickly laces together their fingers, and then lets go. "The exhibit is fantastic," she says.

William reaches for his mother's hand and grips it tightly.

Peter shrugs.

"You don't think so?" she asks.

He dips his gaze into the viewfinder, scrolling back through the images.

"I'm sorry more people didn't show up," she continues. "I'd hoped a couple of critics might come to write reviews. I know Kristin tried to get the word out through the consulate, but you know most of the papers are afraid to print anything on this subject."

"Meaning photography?" says Peter.

"Meaning them. Don't be cute."

He tilts the viewfinder toward Catherine. She tugs the camera

closer so that its strap cinches against his neck as she takes a deeper look. On reflex, her two fingers come to her mouth. "This whole thing was a setup for that photo?"

He takes his camera back and nods.

She glances into the exhibit, to where Deniz's guests revel at being the center of attention, for once. "Don't show them," she says.

"Catherine, I need to talk to you about something." Peter rests a hand on William's shoulder. "Give us a minute, buddy."

Catherine and Peter cross the room. They speak quietly by the front door while the party continues in the gallery. William reaches into his pocket and removes the Simon game. He plays for a few minutes, trying to match the elaborate patterns set before him, but he comes nowhere close to his father's high score. While he presses at the flashing panels, he begins to think about what Peter had told him, about contrast, about how one color might change another. He glances up from his game. As he watches Peter standing next to his mother, the two of them speaking close together, she is like the blue. William can see the effect Peter has on her. While Peter looks the same, unchanged by her, like the black or the white.

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