

Story 2128 (1966 Tape 1

Narrator: Mine Sümer at time of narration but subsequently reverted to maiden name (Erol) after divorce

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Mehmet, His Foolish Mother, and the
Servant Girls

Once there was and once there was not,¹ time within time,² when the sieve was in the straw,³ there was a boy named Mehmet who lived in a small village in Kastamonu

¹Formulaic opening for many Turkish folktales, this is known as a tekerleme. A full tekerleme may run to many lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of a tekerleme. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and to alert the audience to the fact that a tale is to follow. Some of the humor is lost in translation because it is difficult to reproduce in English the rhyme scheme.

²"Time within Time" refers to the chronology of events in an interior world. A person may dream or fantasize at great length during only a few seconds of ordinary time. One may even seem to spend many years in that other world within; one may take a job, marry, have children, and see them grow to maturity. In Turkish this is called Zaman Zaman İçinde. It is elsewhere sometimes referred to as "Frozen Time" or "Moments of Eternity."

³The sieve is never in the straw. While threshing grain, workers pass the detached kernels and finely ground straw through a large-mesh sieve. Longer pieces of straw which may still have grains attached to them do not pass through and will need further threshing. So, the straw is in the sieve, not the sieve in the straw.

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Province.⁴ When someone told him, "İstanbul soil and stones are made of gold," he put a hoe, a shovel, and some other tools in a bag and set out for that wonderful city.

As he approached İstanbul, he happened to find a gold coin by the side of the road. By great coincidence, he found a second gold coin just after coming within the limits. He was certain now of the account he had heard concerning the golden soil and stones of İstanbul.

As Mehmet was passing down a street in İstanbul, the owner of a restaurant stood outside his door shouting, "Ladies and gentlemen, come into this fine restaurant and enjoy an excellent lunch." He was, of course, simply trying to attract customers into his restaurant, but Mehmet thought that the owner was inviting passersby to enjoy a free meal.

Mehmet mused, "What generous people live in İstanbul! They invite strangers to have lunch with them." When a waiter came to his table, Mehmet said, "Bring me a little bit of every food that you have." Supposing that Mehmet had money

⁴Although neither the word Laz nor the word Karadenizli is mentioned, this tale is listed as a Laz anecdote. Both of the two foolish characters (Mehmet and his mother) are from Kastamonu Province, which borders on the Black Sea coast, the homeland of the Lazes.

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to pay for what he ordered, the waiter went to the kitchen and returned with a sample of each kind of food they had prepared. Mehmet was very hungry after having walked steadily for two days, and he ate eagerly from all the dishes. He then said, "Thank you" to the waiter and headed for the door.

But the waiter caught him before he could leave and said, "Wait, wait! You cannot go before you have paid for your meal! Where is the money that you owe us?"

"What money do you mean?" asked Mehmet.

"The money for the food you ate. Did you think that the food was free?"

"I was invited in here and made welcome by the man outside the door. He offered me food. I was hungry and so I ate that food."

"No, no! You cannot leave without paying for the food you ate!"

While they were arguing in this way, a man seated near them overheard their dispute. That man said to the waiter, "I shall pay his bill. Let him go." Then that man called Mehmet and explained the situation. "This is a restaurant," he said. "Whenever you eat here, you must

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pay for the food. By the way, what is your occupation?"

Mehmet replied, "I am from Kastamonu, where I heard a report that the soil and stones of İstanbul were made of gold. I came here with some tools to dig up a bagful of the ground of İstanbul and take it back to my village in Kastamonu."

The man laughed at this, realizing what a simple peasant lad Mehmet was. Feeling sorry for Mehmet, the man advised him, "There really is no gold in the soil and stones of İstanbul, but there are many jobs available here. You can get one of those jobs and earn money to take back to your village. When they say that the soil and stones of İstanbul are filled with gold, they mean that there are many opportunities to earn money here." Then, after a pause, the man continued. "I own a large mansion in this city, and right now I am in need of a butler. Would you like to work for me as my butler?"

Mehmet accepted this offer immediately. He went with that kind man to his mansion and became his butler. After a few instructions, Mehmet was able to do his job well, and all of the residents and servants in that mansion liked him. In fact they came to like Mehmet so much that one day some of the servant girls suggested to him that

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he bring his mother there for a visit. Mehmet answered, "My mother is a simple village woman. She would probably not be able to get here, but if she did, she would be bored with life in a mansion like this one."

But still more of the female workers said, "Please, Mehmet! We should like to meet your mother. We would entertain her and prevent her from being bored."

After awhile Mehmet could no longer resist this plea of the servant girls. He sent a letter to his mother inviting her to the mansion, and with the letter he included money to pay her ship fare to Istanbul.

The mother bought a ticket for a steamship going to Istanbul. Before she left her village, however, she packed a basketful of plums to take to the mansion as a gift. But she was a greedy woman who enjoyed eating. During the voyage she began to eat some of the plums. Unfortunately, she could not find any place to dispose of the plum pits, and so she just stored them in her cheeks. When Mehmet and the household help met her, they noticed at once that her face seemed to be badly swollen. They asked her if she had a toothache, but Mehmet's mother did not answer a single word. Later they discovered that her mouth was tightly

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packed with plum pits. Mehmet was, of course, embarrassed by his mother's behavior, and he sent her back to her village as quickly as he could do so.

After some time had passed, the household help again asked Mehmet to invite his mother there for another visit. Mehmet wrote a second letter to his mother. Along with the invitation Mehmet also sent her money for her passage to Istanbul. As they had done before, the female servants welcomed her and made her feel comfortable in the mansion. Although she was given an excellent dinner, her great hunger was not entirely satisfied. As she was passing along a hallway, she noticed a cupboard filled with jars of jam and jelly. She decided to return to that cupboard after everyone else was asleep and get one of those jars for herself.

In the middle of the night Mehmet's mother left her bed and took a jar of jelly from the cupboard. Opening the jar, she greedily plunged her hand into it to get some of the jelly. Unfortunately, her hand became stuck in the jar. She tried and tried to pull her hand out of that jar, but she was unable to do so. She then began to seek some hard object against which she could break the

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jar. There was then very little light in the mansion, and she stumbled from room to room trying to find something against which she could strike the jar. Finally she saw something gleaming in the dark, and so she struck the jar against that bright spot. To her amazement, that blow caused someone to start screaming. Frightened by this, Mehmet's mother ran back to her room. The jar had been broken, but the top ring of the jar was still on her wrist. She did not yet know what had caused the screaming. Later she learned that she had struck the jar against the gleaming teeth of an Arab girl who was sleeping with her mouth open. Unable to see clearly, she had thought that the white teeth were a marble object of some sort. The Arab girl did not know what had happened to her, and she continued to scream until the whole household was awakened. No one else could determine what had happened to her either but an investigation of the matter began.

When the servant girls went to breakfast the next morning, they noticed that Mehmet's mother was not at the table. Going to her room, the young servant girls woke up the woman. When they pulled back the blanket on her bed they saw that her hand was still full of jelly and that

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the neck of the jelly jar was still around her wrist. The girls went to Mehmet and gave him an account of the incident of the jelly jar. Mehmet was very embarrassed by his mother for a second time, and he at once made arrangements to ship her back to Kastamonu.

It was some time after that before the servant girls again urged Mehmet to invite his mother to the mansion. And it took more urging this time to persuade Mehmet to write to her. Furthermore, he warned his mother this time not to misbehave in any way that would embarrass him. The servant girls were not worried about any such thing, for all during the dinner they talked and laughed with the older woman

During her third stay at the mansion Mehmet's mother observed the attractiveness of some of the servant girls' dresses. She envied these dresses and decided to steal some of them and then run away. After everyone else in the mansion had gone to sleep, she went to one of the clothes closets and selected several of the dresses that seemed prettiest to her. She placed them in a bag and started downstairs to escape, but she tripped on her way down, fell into the barn below, and landed on the back of one

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of the horses.⁵ Immediately all of the horses stabled there began to neigh loudly.

Hearing this noise, Mehmet ran down to the barn, suspecting that thieves were trying to steal the horses. But when he got there, Mehmet found no thieves but just his mother sitting astride a horse. He shouted, "What is this, Mother? What are you doing here in the barn sitting upon a horse?" Once again he was humiliated by his mother's behavior. He sent her at once back to Kastamonu, telling her he would never again invite her back to the mansion

But no one else in the mansion became angry at the woman. Quite to the contrary, they thought her a delightful person. They felt that she was both amusing and very sociable. They wished to see her more often and not less often

After Mehmet had worked at the mansion for several years, he married one of the servant girls. The married couple lived very happily together, even though Mehmet's mother continued to visit them occasionally.

⁵On some farms in Europe and the Middle East, the livestock are housed on the ground floor of the family residence.