
ŞEMSİNUR

From the Aegean to the Bosphorus





NEKTARIA ANASTASIADOU is the 2019 winner of the Zografeios Agon, a Greek-language literary award founded in 19th-century Constantinople. Her first novel, *A Recipe for Daphne*, written in English, was published by AUC Press in 2021. It was shortlisted for the 2022 Runciman Award, longlisted for the 2022 Dublin Literary Award, and a finalist with an honorable mention for the 2022 Eric Hoffer Book Award. In 2023, Anastasiadou represented Turkey and Greece as a visiting fellow in creative writing at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program. Her second novel, *Στα Πόδια της Αιώνιας Άνοιξης/At the Foot of Eternal Spring*, written in Istanbul Greek, was published by Papadopoulos in 2023. Her short stories have appeared in anthologies including *Stories from the Center of the World* (City Lights, 2024) and *Κωνσταντινούπολη: Νόστος στον χώρο και τον χρόνο* (Ellinoekdotiki, 2024). She is a contributing editor for *The Markaz Review*.

The search for Şemsinur took me on a voyage in time from Istanbul to Chios and back again. All the while I was accompanied by the souls that had likely been walking beside me before I ever met them in fiction. I still hear their whisper: “Μμε φοάστε.”

Nektaria Anastasiadou

◀ Preceding two pages: Mastic tree, Chios, 2023. Photo: T. Tuten

Tear Trees: A Short Story

The mastic trees of Southern Chios have been weeping for centuries. Island tradition says that, in the year 251, Saint Isídoros, an Alexandrian by birth and a sailor of the Roman fleet, was tortured in Chios by his admiral because he adhered to the Christian faith. In one account, the admiral beheaded Isídoros; in another, Isídoros’s own father murdered him beneath a mastic tree. In both versions, the martyr’s tears watered the soil of the region, were absorbed by the roots of the mastic trees, and were exuded as droplets of resin. Regardless of who in fact killed Isídoros, one thing is certain: the island has had more than its share of tears.

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I arrive in Mestá, one of the Southern mastic villages, in the evening. I’ve already travelled through half the island. In each village, I examine the houses. The only thing I know about my ancestor’s family home is that it had a balcony. If we leave out the island capitol, you don’t see a lot of balconies on the remaining old houses of Chios. Even in Mestá—a labyrinthine castle-town with arching stoas—the balconies are few. It’s July, and everyone is sitting outside their homes, enjoying the coolness of evening. An old woman is removing the tough strings from summer beans. An old man, sitting in the stone-paved street, has fallen asleep with his forearm on the chair in front of him. The song of the cicadas is nearly deafening. I find my hotel and check in. The young employee photocopies my Turkish passport and speaks to me in decent English. He doesn’t give me the impression that he considers me the descendent of those who, two centuries prior, laid waste to the island. I don’t speak to him in the Greek that I learned by taking lessons, in my middle age, first at the Greek consulate of Istanbul, then at a school in the Pangráti neighborhood of Athens, and lately at my house in Léros. I’m tired and I don’t feel like giving explanations such as “I learned Greek in order to search for a house that I will never find.” Or “I am searching hopelessly for my ancestor herself; not for her grave, which lies in Istanbul, but for the twelve-year old girl who was torn away from this island two centuries ago.”

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There is a void in her place on the family tree. Or perhaps I should say a grey box with the white silhouette of a woman. There is also a void in our memory of her and of all the women who were enslaved in 1822.

To her left, in the middle of the tree, is a portrait of her husband, our great-great-great grandfather, Ahmed Fethi Pasha. He has round cheeks, sleepy eyelids, and a bushy beard. He seems refined, posh, and slightly bored. Maybe he is tired from his many duties or perhaps he is impatient for the next party. He was passionate not only about clothing and décor, but also about food, entertainment, and dinnerware.

To his left is a photograph of his second wife (in the Muslim sense, simultaneously with the first), the princess Atiye. A transparent veil covers her young face. She was only sixteen when they were married, whereas he was thirty-nine. Historians say that Atiye was intelligent, delicate-boned, with sandy-colored hair. As a young girl she would dress like a boy, put on a fez, and follow her brother Abdülmecid (later to become Sultan) around the palace. She was also an adept calligrapher. In the photo she smiles slightly, although she may not have been cheerful in general. They say that she was unhappy in her marriage and mortally jealous of the first wife of Fethi—the woman of whom neither a portrait nor a trace has remained.

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Since I arrived in Chios, the midges have been biting me mercilessly. They pass through ripped screens and fly stealthily inside sleeves and trousers. In the morning I wake with bites swollen like hard balls. They burn and itch. One of my ankles has swollen like a drum from an allergic reaction.

After buying cortisone cream from a pharmacy and applying it to the bites, I go out for breakfast and try to forget the fire in my ankle. The sun is shining between the leaves of the grapevine that shelters the stone street. Bees buzz around the tiny, tight grapes while I eat fried eggs and mastelo cheese. I drink a Greek coffee—*after* breakfast, according to Turkish custom.

Today I’m taking a break from the sad monasteries, the ossuaries with the skulls of the victims of 1822, the ruined stone houses that were abandoned then, the cliffs from which women jumped to escape rape and slavery. I get into my already hot car, take a few lemon-colored balls of mastic from the tin that I bought as soon as I arrived, and chew them into one bittersweet mass while driving away from the village. Some people say that mastic smells fresh and tastes like cedar. To me it smells like my grandfather’s hands and tastes like summer in Istanbul. I remember the secret Saturday trips we used to take to Üç Yıldız candy shop, where we would buy a small box of mastic *lokum* and eat them all before arriving home. My grandmother (the great-granddaughter of the ancestor I am searching for) surely smelled it on our breath. She would frown, but as long as we threw away the box before entering the flat, she wouldn’t reprimand us.

I drive past orchards full of mastic trees, their trunks low and bent, their foliage dark green and dense like myrtle, their branches pointing downward toward the earth. Mastic trees do not reach more than two or three meters in height, but their roots can burrow into the soil up to twenty meters. Most of their being is under ground, in the land itself.

I arrive at Mávra Vólia, a black beach formed in antiquity by the eruption of nearby Volcano Psáronas. In the morning the cliffs behind the beach shade the long stretch of round black pebbles and dark sea. Nature seems dressed for a funeral here. I take off my shoes and walk. The glistening pebbles give the soles of my feet a hard, painful massage. The cold water and sea salt both sting and soothe my bloody bites and swollen ankle.

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They renamed our great-great-great-grandmother Ayşe Şemsinur in Turkish, although Ayşe was usually omitted. “Şemsi” and “nur” are Ottoman words with Arabic roots. Together they mean “the brightness of the sun.” Perhaps they called her that because she had been baptized Lambriní (Bright) or Fotiní (Luminous). Or maybe she was blond, with hair like the light of the Aegean. But the most probable explanation is this: Şemsinur was a name ordinarily given to female slaves. It would therefore have distinguished my ancestor from freeborn Muslim women for the rest of her life.

Only a few details dripped like tears of mastic from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. She was born in 1810 in Chios. At that time, Chios was a flourishing Aegean island with a public library, hospitals, a printing press, public schools, seven monasteries, two convents, law courts, and a privileged system of near self-government under Ottoman dominion. My ancestor lived in a house with a balcony, which leads me to believe that her family was at least middle class. We know that her father was a priest, but at that time the priesthood was a side job to another profession, which was almost always agriculture. Since the source of the island’s wealth was its precious mastic resin, coveted by the Sultan’s harem as a breath freshener, it is likely that her people were mastic cultivators.

I don’t know if I should imagine her rolling out homemade pasta with her mother in a smoky kitchen, if I should envision her practicing whitework sitting on her balcony, or if I should think of her tagging along behind her father to the orchards, where he would perform his own sort of tree bark embroidery (that is what scoring is called in Chios: *kéndos*, embroidery). Perhaps she helped her father flatten and clean the ground around the mastic trees and sprinkle it with calcium carbonate, a white powder that reminds me of the sugar with which Orthodox Christians cover *kollyva* wheat offerings to the dead. Perhaps she would have gazed at the mastic drops that hung from the tree bark for weeks before dropping to the ground. The mastic stalactites might have reminded her of diamonds or crystals; the time hadn’t yet come for her to think of them as tears.

In 1821, the Greek Revolution erupted, but the island of Chios, having enjoyed the protection of the Sultan’s mother for centuries, was not interested in participating. Greeks from nearby islands, notably Samos, tried to force a Chiot uprising by stirring up trouble; they succeeded only in enraging the Sultan. The result was the 1822 massacre, during which nearly the entire population of Chios was killed or enslaved.

Şemsinur was twelve at the time. Ottoman soldiers tore her from her parents’ arms. Historians say that the soldiers raped most of the women and girls. If that was her case, I expect she never would have spoken about it because violated women considered themselves dishonored and sinful until the end of their lives. She wept *hüngur hüngur* (as we say in Turkish, with sobs that sound like those words) from the day that they seized her and throughout the voyage to Constantinople in the hold of a ship. Perhaps she was among the first girls who were sold on Saturday, the 15th of July 1822, in the Fish Bazaar. Or perhaps she was in the second batch, which they took up to the Grande Rue de Pera the next morning. The prices for the half-naked, wounded, insect-bitten, weeping slaves started at a hundred piastres and soon went down to fifty, both rock bottom. Constantinopolitan Greeks, on their way to the Church of the Virgin of Pera, passed with lowered heads. Chiot women were intentionally sold on the streets and not in the regular slave market across from the Nuruosmaniye Mosque; they were living warnings to the Greeks of the capitol.

When I walk in Pera on rainy days and hear the itinerant venders shouting “*şemsiye, şemsiye!*”—literally parasol and not umbrella for rain as we think today—I imagine how, in the same place, Şemsinur might have been sold like an object with less value than a flimsy transparent umbrella that breaks with the first strong gust of wind.

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After a swim in the cold water of Mávra Vólia and a second anointment with cortisone, which hasn’t helped as much as I’d like, I stop at a taverna for lunch. I order octopus in vinegar, grilled sardines, and beans in tomato sauce. The waitress writes down my order and says, “You speak Greek very well. Where are you from?”

I reply, “From across the sea.”

In the best case she considers me a neighbor; in the worst a descendent of those who emptied the island in 1822. Under no circumstances does she guess that I’m not a descendent of those who massacred but of those who were massacred. Greeks learn in school that thousands of women and children were enslaved during the revolution. They don’t seem to wonder, however, about the lives that those women and children lived. I learn as much as I can from books in Greek, English, and Turkish. I read about a Chiot woman who, after being abused for years in Crete, escaped from her pasha and remarried in Syros. I also read about a woman from the Ágrafa of Thessaly, renamed Emine, who murdered her husband, Ferik Ibrahim Pasha, in 1860; it was the most provocative murder committed in Constantinople during the Tanzimat period. Perhaps the worst testimony I read was that of a Chiot woman who, because she insisted on making the sign of the cross, had burning oil thrown onto her breasts twice by her owner; later she was able to escape. But what became of those who neither escaped nor became famous? A few might have lived well in new families. Others probably suffered abuse their entire lives. Most changed religion, although there were exceptions. The only thing that I can say with some certainty is that they became mothers.

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At the head of our family tree are the parents of Ahmed Fethi Pasha: Hafız Ahmed Ağa and Saliha Hanım. I’ve always felt close to them, far closer than I do to their son Ahmed Fethi. Hafız Ahmed was born into a wealthy family in the village of Sgouroú, Rhodes, in 1740. He completed his education at the Sultan’s palace and later served in high positions of state. In 1793 he established in Rhodes a charitable foundation that continues to operate until today. On the hadj of 1801, the Sultan charged Hafız Ahmed with the escort of the imperial gifts to the emir of the Hejaz; while passing through Arabia, Hafız Ahmed was murdered under suspicious circumstances.

Together with him on that hadj was his pregnant wife Saliha, who, most likely horrified by the murder of her husband, returned to the family mansion in Constantinople's Eyüp, a melancholy village in the armpit of the Golden Horn. It was not by chance, in my opinion, that so many Ottoman aristocrats were buried in the cemetery of Eyüp; the air of that village blows constantly from the other world, and the living suffer autumn depressions while watching the leaves fall from the trees on the marshy islets in the Golden Horn. I'm sure that Saliha suffered such a depression in 1801 because, immediately after the birth of her son, the family remarried her to the bey of the sanjak of Artvin. Saliha, however, didn't go to Artvin. She remained in funerary Eyüp with Ahmed, her newborn son.

We know that Ahmed Fethi spoke Greek as if it were his mother tongue, despite the fact that he spent his early childhood in an almost completely Muslim village, at a time when there were few Greek slaves—and those only from the Ionian Islands—because Ottoman Greeks were protected from slavery until 1821. Nor were there many Greek governesses, as could be found in wealthy Muslim families from the end of the nineteenth century, when slavery had been restricted and officially banned. Therefore, I suspect that Saliha was also Rhodian and Greek-speaking like her first husband, Hafız Ahmed; to use the Greek expression, “a shoe from his homeland.” She might even have been born into a Christian Greek family.

The second fact that we know about Saliha is that, from Hafız Ahmed's death until the coming of age of her son, she must have been the trustee of the family foundation in Rhodes. The foundation's regulation stipulates that upon the death of Hafız Ahmed, his mother (if she was still alive, which she was not) would become the trustee. Second in line was his wife Saliha, and third his eldest child (not his eldest *son*, but his eldest *child*). In other words, Hafız Ahmed trusted the women of his family. With the result that, throughout its history, our foundation has been managed more by women, myself included, than by men. Saliha may have directed the foundation from Eyüp. She might also have made one or more trips to Rhodes, because the foundation's properties—including shops, houses, and fountains—would have needed her attention. This leads me to believe that Saliha was a strong and capable woman.

The last fact that we know about her, apart from the year of her death (1855), is that she was the owner of the Chiot girl renamed Şemsinur. We don't know how the purchase occurred. However, I would like to believe that Saliha, when she learned that Chiot women and girls were being sold in the streets of Pera, decided to save one or more. I imagine her from Şemsinur's perspective: in the midst of the absolute degradation of the sale, a closed carriage stops before the crowd. A Muslim lady, with her face elegantly covered, opens the window and points at a few girls. A servant pays, and the lady takes the miserable slaves inside her carriage, ignoring their filth. After she has closed the door, she removes her veil and comforts the girls in Rhodian Greek: “*Eteliósan pio ta vásana, kóres. Mme fodáste.*” Your suffering is over, daughters. Don't be afraid.

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I set out for Pyrgí. I've kept it for last because I know, from photos, that it is full of balconies. I park outside the village and enter on foot at the time of the afternoon siesta. Pyrgí is just as labyrinthine as Mestá but with an entirely different appearance. Last night I read that Pyrgí's stone houses, built stuck together, shoulder to shoulder, are *ksistá* – “scratched” with geometric shapes, diamonds, circles, storks, leaves and flowers, all of which have horizontal and vertical symmetry. First the craftsmen smooth the surface of the building with plaster. Then they render it with dust from the black stones of Mávra Vólia. When the layer of black beach dust has dried, they cover it with white wash and engrave it with the help of rulers and compasses. Finally, they scratch the dried whitewash with a spoon, creating anaglyph geometric designs on top of the black layer. In other words, the scratching—which is in fact damage—transforms the façades of the houses into mathematical works of art.

I wonder if damage worked the same way for Şemsinur. Family lore says that she was exceptionally kind and selfless, to a degree that no longer exists today. Perhaps she, like biblical Joseph, was able to transform the cruelty that she suffered into its very opposite. Under Şemsinur's circumstances, simply continuing to live was a work of art; a tree trunk scored and embroidered to produce diamonds.

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When Ahmed turned eight (long before Şemsinur's arrival) Saliha sent him to the imperial school of Enderun. After his graduation, he served the palace as a soldier. In 1828, during one of the many Russo-Ottoman wars, he was sent to the front; a year later he was wounded in the left foot and returned to his mother's house in Eyüp to recover. There, they say, he met and fell in love with the nineteen-year-old Chiot slave Şemsinur, who may have nursed him back to health.

But who was Şemsinur in 1829, after seven years of servitude in melancholy Eyüp? She had converted to Islam, at least officially. Even if she spoke Greek with Saliha, she must also have learned Turkish. How had she passed those years? Did she roast coffee for Saliha's guests, embroider whitework curtains, stoke up the coals of waterpipes, sew holes in stockings, destring beans, scrub the mansion's wide plank floors, or wash windows overlooking the Golden Horn? Did she talk about home and weep with the other Chiot slave girls (if indeed there were others in the mansion), or did she sit at Saliha's feet in the evenings, beside a brazier, and listen to stories of Rhodes?

Family tradition says that Şemsinur also fell in love with Ahmed. He bought a mansion in Tophane, at the foot of the hill where his mother Saliha had probably bought his beloved seven years prior. They married and had two sons—the replacements of all that Şemsinur had lost.

In following years, Ahmed was given the rank of general and the title Fethi (Victorious) Pasha. In 1833 he left his family in Constantinople to serve as a diplomat in Vienna, Paris, and London. He danced with European princesses, enjoyed musical soirées under the direction of Strauss (the composer dedicated a waltz to him, the Ball-Racketen Op.96), and gave luxurious dinners at which emeralds filled the empty eye sockets of fish. At some point he purchased a second mansion on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, near the Jewish-Greek village of Kuzguncuk. People referred to it as the “pembe yalı,” the pink seaside mansion. From its windows one could and still can see the old city, Pera, and Ortaköy. With the exception of the winter months, which the family spent in Tophane, Şemsinur lived the rest of her life at the pembe yalı. Of all the Chiot women who were enslaved in 1822, she was likely the most fortunate. Nevertheless, they say that she continued to weep in secret until her death.

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Pyrgí seems deserted, as it was just after the massacres. I smell the jasmine that climbs on electric and telephone lines. A contemporary invader would only need to do one thing to paralyze the village: cut those lines. A few old folks, holding rough wooden canes, return home from visits and coffee houses. A young woman with a cigarette dangling from her mouth hangs wreaths of fresh tomatoes on her balcony to sun-dry. On the ground floor beneath, an elderly woman in a traditional white *sariki*—a turban-like headscarf—stands in the doorway, squinting her eyes at the sun. She wears holey homemade socks without shoes and a pleated dress with embroidered sleeves. She doesn't have teeth. She probably doesn't have hair either. She leans on her wooden cane and murmurs, “I wonder what language she speaks?” Or at least that's what I think she said, because the television, which is blasting inside the house, nearly covers her voice. I look around. I don't see anyone. It's just me and the cicadas. I smile at the old woman. She nods in return. I continue my walk.

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Throughout his career, Ahmed Fethi served in various high positions: ambassador, minister of commerce and agriculture, armory marshal, founder of the first Ottoman museum in the church of Saint Iréne. In 1839, while he was serving as ambassador in Paris, he was informed that he was to be engaged to Atiye, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the Sultan. It wasn't an honor to be refused. But even if it was, I don't think any man would pass up the opportunity to legally enjoy the charms of a pretty young woman. Regardless, the wish of Mahmud II created a dilemma: in the case of marriage with a princess, the law imposed divorce from previous wives—that is, Şemsinur.

In July of 1839, Mahmud II died, and Ahmed Fethi returned to Constantinople for the coronation of Abdülmeceid I. They say that Ahmed Fethi, not wanting to divorce his beloved Şemsinur, fell at the feet of the new Sultan and begged for an exception to the monogamy required for marriage to an imperial princess. The exception was granted, and Ahmed Fethi's marriage to Atiye was celebrated royally in the summer of 1840. The festivities lasted nearly two months with animal sacrifices, tightrope walkers, acrobats, magicians, banquets, sherbets, and gifts. Their epicenter was Eyüp, but the entire city participated. Oil lamps were lit outside all the palaces and mansions along the Bosphorus shores. Fireworks were launched from rafts in front of Çırağan Palace, exactly opposite Şemsinur's pink yalı in Kuzguncuk.

I wonder if Şemsinur's servants lit oil lamps like everyone else, lest they insult the Sultan with their darkness. Probably. I can't imagine how Şemsinur must have felt while illuminating her garden for the wedding of her husband to another woman. Perhaps she hid in her bedroom despite the unbearable summer heat. Perhaps she covered her ears with pillows for two hours to dull the popping of the fireworks. Or perhaps she was pleased to have a break from Ahmed Fethi and watched the fireworks while sipping a rose sherbet. Whatever she did, I don't think she could avoid the roar of the twenty cannonballs launched according to tradition in order to mark the occasion. Surely the cannon's boom would have reminded her of her island's catastrophe.

After the ceremonies and celebrations ended, the newlywedded bride learned that the groom had another wife. I don't know who to pity more, Şemsinur or Atiye. Both were pawns in the games of men. The princess, however, put her foot down: she insisted that Ahmed Fethi not see Şemsinur; she also required that he always spend the night in her palace. Whenever Fethi was late coming home, Atiye would send men to the pink yalı in Kuzguncuk to bring him back (and with good reason, because he continued to visit Şemsinur and his sons secretly).

I envision Şemsinur sitting in a window of the harem that no longer exists (some say that it burnt, others that it was torn down). From that window she sees the row boat coming down the Bosphorus from Atiye's palace in Kuruçeşme. As soon as the boat nears her little quay, she is seized by a posttraumatic crisis, which takes her back to the day that she was captured from the balcony of her family home. She sends someone to tell the boatmen that the pasha is not there—regardless of whether it is true or not—and afterward she hides in a wardrobe, the kitchen, or the coal cellar.

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I'm standing in an almost empty piazza in Pyrgí. Two old men are playing cards beneath a grapevine pergola. On their table is a plate of Chiot cucumbers, light in color and with thick skins. The smoke from the old men's cigarettes dances before the sun beams penetrating the grapevine. One says to the other, "I want to play and laugh at the same time. If I don't laugh at my cards, I can't play."

I would like to hide from the sun, to have a coffee beside them, to laugh with them, but I can't manage to get the woman with the white turban out of my mind. In front of a church, an itinerant green grocer is hawking vegetables—all products of Chiot rainwater cultivation—from the back of his truck. Farmers don't water such crops even once after planting. The sprouts, like mastic trees, have to put down deep roots in order to survive, but they are stronger than watered cultivation and more resistant to diseases and mold. I buy a bag of tomatoes, zucchinis, and a melon. Then I lose my way in the maze. I hear plates being gathered, men murmuring, women commanding, and everywhere the cicadas. For a break I enter a cool church. Its perch-seats are high, perhaps so that you can hide behind them. Bothered by the painful swelling in my ankle, I sit to rest. My ancestors may have been baptized here or in any old church of Chios. I am impressed by the dark, almond eyes of the saints. They examine me from every direction, asking silently, "Whose child are you?"

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Atiye Sultan died in August of 1850 from tuberculosis. She was twenty-six. By that time, Fethi was an imperial brother-in-law, a close friend of the Sultan, and one of the most powerful men in Constantinople. Despite the fact that he could marry any woman he chose, he immediately left his two princess-daughters in their palace and returned to Kuzguncuk, which makes me think that his love for Şemsinur might not be a myth.

What did he bring with him from one life to the other, from Europe to Asia? As a known worshipper of luxury, I don't believe that he crossed the Bosphorus without luggage. On his hand would surely have been the diamond ring that the Sultan gave him as a wedding present. He might also have taken Atiye's wedding gift, a golden two-in-one harmonica-beardcomb, inlaid with rose diamonds and enameled with the imperial seal.

After ten years of separation and independence, did Şemsinur kiss his lavender-scented hand to welcome him? Did the imperial diamond remind her of the large mastic drop that Chiots call *dachtilópetra*, ring-stone? Did she disdain Fethi's ostentation in silence or did she ask him about each object? And how would Fethi have replied? With typical men's excuses such as "but it was a gift from the Sultan, not from *her*, I swear, and anyway, what man doesn't have absolute need of a harmonica-beardcomb?"

Family tradition says that Fethi and Şemsinur rekindled their relationship. I have my doubts. I wonder if you can love a man who spent the past decade with another woman, acquiring two daughters with her; a man who may have been absent at the death of your eldest son. I will never know what Şemsinur felt, if she loved Fethi, if she continued her marital relation with him in a compromised manner, or if she simply wanted more children—more people of her own. In any case, she gave birth to three daughters, one of which was my great-great grandmother.

As for Fethi, I've always had difficulty understanding him. He impressed me as an enterprising statesman but less as a husband until I read something that obliged me to reconsider: an article about enslaved Chiot women who had been taken to Egypt. These women were called upon by a European committee to decide whether they would like to be repatriated. Most did not want to return to their island. The married women knew that their Greek husbands (if they had survived) might not take them back, and the unmarried knew that, "dishonored" as they were, they would not find husbands. Even the fathers of these women and girls (if they had survived) might disown them. Such was the immoral morality of the times. I don't like to think that Şemsinur was raped before she was sold to Saliha, but it is probable. If Fethi married Şemsinur despite the fact that she had been violated, and if he refused to divorce her and went running to her immediately after the death of Atiye, then we know that the immoral morality of the times had no value in his eyes. And that elevates him in my eyes.

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From the dark church I emerge into the sun. I look at the balconies. Four tomato wreaths, two at each corner, hang from the frame of a balcony door. I hear a television. The familiar old woman reappears in her doorway beneath that balcony, still wearing her traditional clothing, as if she recently arrived from another century. She has left her cane inside. She says in English, “Hello, can you help me to make telephone?”

I didn’t expect a woman in a turban to speak English.

I ask in Greek, “Whom would you like to call, auntie?”

“Are you Greek? Come *oná!*”

I don’t know what the Pyrgousian word “oná” means, but she takes me by the hand and leads me inside her house: one room with a table, two chairs and a bed, upon which she has abandoned a half-finished piece of lace with the needles still attached. In one corner is the television, blasting away; its static-snow picture is half-covered by a piece of whitework embroidery. The old woman sits on the bed and searches for something in the bedstand drawer. I think I see a small pistol among the various papers and junk. It might be an old toy that once belonged to her nephew, or it might not have been a pistol at all. I say, “I brought you a few vegetables.”

She doesn’t hear me. She holds my fingers fast in her right hand; with her left she searches the drawer. “I can’t find it, I can’t...”

“The melon should go in the refrigerator.”

“Put it in, daughter.”

The kitchen is a counter on the wall. I’m uneasy, but I let go of the old woman’s hand and open the door of the refrigerator. It has only a small container with cheese, three sad onions, a little fennel that looks like it was cut from someone’s garden, and a bottle with a label that says “Mastic Liqueur.” On the counter is a package of rusks and an almost empty jar of homemade pasta. I leave the tomatoes on the table and put the melon and zucchini in the refrigerator.

“Help me,” says the old woman with her head permanently drooping. On the wall above her bed is a certificate in International Correspondence. So that’s how she learned English.

“How can I help, auntie?”

“I want to call my nephew, but I can’t find his number.”

“Maybe a neighbor has it?”

She sighs in despair. I feel my eyelids drooping from exhaustion. My eyelids are generally large, like those of Fethi, but after so many days on the road and so much searching, they are heavier than usual.

“Maybe I could do something else for you, auntie?”

“Fix the television if you insist.”

I can’t do that either. I’m useless with technology and the television is from the last century, probably the 1970s. Nevertheless, in order not to disappoint the old woman, I examine the antique.

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In 1846, while he was married to Atiye, Fethi founded the imperial glass factory in Beykoz. He may have secretly brought gifts from that factory to Şemsinur—colorful mixes of Ottoman and European artisanship. Quite a few such objet d’art were found in Kuzguncuk after his death. Due to his obesity (the English called him Ahmed Fatty), the pasha suffered from dyspnea. In February 1858, he fell ill from a related cardiovascular or respiratory disease, died, and was buried in the courtyard of the *turbe*—mausoleum—of Sultan Mahmud II. Princess Atiye had already been buried inside the turbe with her father. In death, Atiye took her husband back.

The grand pasha left so many debts to pâtissiers, butchers, watch-makers, furriers, coal merchants, lavender sellers (he was obsessed with the scent), kadayıf makers (his favorite dessert), bakers, his Armenian watchmaker, and his Greek tailor, that a large portion of the estate had to be sold. A relative said the housekeeper of the pink yalı told Şemsinur that it was a shame for so many household items to be sold to cover the debts of the extravagant dearly departed. Şemsinur either stopped the sale or hid a few objects from the repossessioners. We don’t know which, but a few glass pieces, such as a white carafe decorated with roses, were saved. As a child I loved touching them secretly, when the adults weren’t watching; I felt as if I were reaching through time to touch Şemsinur.

*

“Do you cook, auntie?” I ask when I’ve despaired of fixing the television.

“I have trouble on my feet,” says the old woman without raising her head. You would think her chin was glued to her throat.

“Does someone look after you?”

Tsouk she replies; no. I surpass my feeling of awkwardness and locate a cutting board and a knife in the dish rack. I wash and cut the fennel. I dice an onion and fry it in olive oil, the only oil on the counter. I don’t want to be even more indiscreet by opening cupboards. I already feel like an invader, and I’m worried that someone might ask what I’m doing in a stranger’s house. I mix the onion and fennel with the cheese from the refrigerator and some crushed rusks. I form the mixture into patties and fry them. I will leave the old woman without a functioning television screen. Without her nephew. But my heart will not allow me to leave her without food.

*

Just a few months after Fethi’s death, in May 1858, Şemsinur’s beloved second son, Mahmud Celaleddin Pasha, married Princess Cemile, the daughter of Sultan Abdülmecid and the niece of Princess Atiye. Even though Atiye was long dead, I wonder how Şemsinur felt about her son’s engagement to a close relative of the woman who had possessed her husband for ten years. But perhaps the relation had no importance at all for Şemsinur; perhaps she was simply happy that her son had made a good match. Indeed, Princess Cemile was, according to one of her nieces, gracious, intelligent, and worthy of both respect and affection. An ideal daughter-in-law, who might, however, have looked down upon a former slave girl.

The couple had three sons and three daughters. They lived happily for thirteen years, presumably with visits to grandmother Şemsinur and their aunts in Kuzguncuk—until June of 1881, when the family received a serious blow. Mahmud Celaleddin Pasha was accused of conspiracy against the Sultan, arrested, and imprisoned in Arabia. Şemsinur was so distraught at the loss of her beloved son that she suffered a stroke and died in the pink yalı in July 1881, with the Bosphorus flowing outside her window. She was buried in the family tomb in Karacaahmet, Üsküdar. Just as Constantinopolitan Jews wanted to be buried in Kuzguncuk in order to be on the same continent with Jerusalem, so did many Ottomans wish to be given to the earth of Karacaahmet, one step closer to Mecca and Medina. I wonder what place Şemsinur wanted to be close to. Mecca and Medina? Kuzguncuk? Or to her destroyed Aegean island?

*

As soon as the first batch is ready, I say, “Come to the table, auntie.”

The old woman says, “My back hurts.”

I take the plate to her bed. “Look what I made for you.”

“Fennel fritters! That’s the way my grandmother made them, no tomato.”

She takes one and bites it. “Health to your hands, daughter. Are your people from Chios?”
“In a way.”
She points at the swollen bite on my left forearm. “The midges have devoured you.”
“I used cortisone cream. It helped a little.”
“Go to the bathroom. In there you’ll find a jar with *remédio*.”
I don’t know the Chiot word *remédio*, but it sounds like the English “remedy,” so I guess that it must be some sort of homemade medicine. On the shelf of the microscopic bathroom—or rather lavatory with a showerhead in the corner—I find a large jar. Inside it are some herbs embalmed in golden orange oil. I doubt that it will help. Also, I find it a bit disgusting, because the bathroom hasn’t been cleaned in at least six months, but I take the jar to the old woman. She opens it, sticks her fingers inside, and spreads the oil on my ankle and arms. Her fingers are rough. I get goosebumps.
“May it pass,” she says.
“Thank you, auntie. And to you bon appétit.”
“Andromache.”
“Pleased to meet you, Aunt Andromache. I’m Lela.”
My Greek nickname.

*

My grandmother (the great-granddaughter of Şemsinur) was born in Ottoman Constantinople but came of age in the Turkish Republic. She was a hobby pianist, a graduate of the German Lycée, and a speaker of Turkish, German, French, and English. She was famous for her eclectic cooking, especially perch filet, roast chicken, pilaf with clotted cream, salads with orange sauce (common now but unusual in the 1960s), and fennel fritters. She also rode horses and knew how to use a rifle, both of which she learned in order to be an emancipated woman. I never remember her using the words “fear” or “I am afraid,” as if she had expelled them from her vocabulary.
My great-grandmother (the granddaughter of Şemsinur) spent the first third of her life as an Ottoman and the second two-thirds as a Turk. The wife of an army officer, she never learned to cook—her generation considered it beneath them—but she ensured that her staff prepared meals according to family recipes. Consequently, my grandmother learned cooking from the family chef rather than from her own mother, but I wonder if some of her more unusual dishes, such as creamed pilaf and fennel fritters, were legacies of earlier generations. My great-grandmother lived with us for long periods. As a young child I would climb into her bed for a snuggle as soon as I woke up in the morning. She smelled of lavender (like her grandfather Fethi), and her hands were extremely soft, like cotton. She wore skirt suits and always carried a lace handkerchief and a bottle of perfume in her little black bag. Once she gave me a red wooden truck as a gift; I remember filling its wagon with various objects and pretending to drive it around the world. Perhaps these were her lessons to me: that one must both drive and dream.

My great-great grandmother (the daughter of Şemsinur) was born in the mid-nineteenth century and died in 1909. She spoke Turkish, Greek, French, and English. She lived her entire life in Constantinople, far from danger, but she also rode horses and knew how to use a rifle. I wonder why she learned, and I conclude the following: surely she had a hereditary fear of massacre, kidnapping, and slavery—even if her mother never spoke of these things. She learned about horses and firearms in order to be able to escape; in order never to become naked merchandise in the slave market of a foreign city.

*

A man about my age, somewhere in his sixties, appears at the window. He watches us through the empty spaces in the whitework curtain. Smacking the paving stones with his cane, he comes to the door. Everybody seems to have a cane in the mastic villages, either because they are old or because of an unconscious need for defense. He asks the standard Greek question: “Whose are you?”

I introduce myself and extend my hand, but he leaves it hanging in the air and asks, “What are you doing here?”
His words pierce me. I blush. I want to reply, *I’m looking for Şemsinur, however she was called*. Instead, I explain the situation, that Madame Andromache is alone, that she needs help, that she’s hungry, that she is trying to contact her nephew.
“And how did you get in here?”
“Madame Andromache invited me.”
The neighbor looks at me with suspicion. His skin, full of sunspots, sags. He must have spent most of his life in the fields with the mastic trees. “Are you Turkish?”
I nod yes.
Andromache is still sitting on the bed. She has put a napkin in the collar of her dress like a bib. She takes a bite of a fritter, then examines it up close. She says, “The girl is one of ours. It’s obvious from the fritters.”
“No, she isn’t,” the neighbor declares.
Andromache offers the plate. “Taste one and you’ll understand.”
The neighbor raises his chin in refusal. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, dragging them into the house?”
This pushes my patience. I say, “Who are you calling *them*, sir? You have no idea who I am.”
I pick up my handbag to leave, but Andromache says, “Stay, daughter.”
“You shouldn’t bother foreigners, Madame Andromache,” says the neighbor.
“I told you, she’s one of *ours*.”
“The woman is Turkish. *Tur-kish*.”
“Ours!” shouts Andromache, unwittingly spitting fennel. “Cooking is the last thing to die. Whether you like it or not, you pass it down like genes. Those fennel fritters are ours. Taste and you’ll see.”
The neighbor raises his chin again. “You’re talking like a child.”
“No, I’m not talking like a child. You’re talking like a man.”
“Nonsense.”
“Then I’ll say something that your man brain can understand. Do you see her midge bites?”
The neighbor glances at me and puts both hands on his cane. “What does that have to do with anything?”
“In the massacres, when the Turks were hunting people in the mountains, they would find them in the places where flies and midges were swarming. The midges want *us*, not foreign blood.”
The neighbor rolls his eyes and turns his hand back and forth near his ear to show that Andromache has lost her mind. “Tell that to the Germans in our rented rooms. Every day they buy a new tube of cortisone.”
Andromache sighs, takes my hand again, and kisses it. “I want my nephew.”
“Day and night *my nephew* and *my nephew*. The Athenian nephew doesn’t care at all about you.”
The neighbor looks at the tomatoes on the table and says to me, “We take care of Andromache. You look tired. You must want to go back to your hotel.”
“It’s *my* house,” says Andromache. “She stays as long as I like. Why don’t you go instead?”
I feel uncomfortable, but I don’t move. Slowly, with his gaze constantly on me, the neighbor leaves.
“Men,” says Andromache. “They know little, they say a lot. Tell me now, daughter, whose are you?”
I sit on the bed beside her. I tell her briefly that I am the descendent of a Chiot woman who was enslaved during the revolution, that I know nearly nothing about her, neither her baptismal name nor the name of her village, but I’m searching for her.
“Root around all you like,” says Andromache. “But you carry that girl inside you. It shows in your cooking.”

“Do you know what my grandmother never used in her food? Mastic. She didn’t even buy mastic lokum. Whenever my grandfather wanted mastic lokum, my grandmother said no. I asked her why. She said that mastic brings tears.”

“The Chiot woman forbade it,” Andromache says with certainty, as if she has witnessed my entire family history, all two-hundred years of it. She sighs, pats my hand, and adds, “Remembering the island was painful for her.”

My eyes fill with tears. I want to be alone. I kiss Andromache’s hand and tell her that I hope she finds her nephew. I say goodbye, but as I proceed toward the door, my eye catches a framed photograph on the wall. It shows a dark-skinned girl in traditional clothing, perhaps sixteen years old, dancing between two men. She holds one by the arm, the other with a handkerchief shared between them. The men crouch, performing figures. The girl stands royally upright. She commands. It’s the Pyrgousian dance, in which a woman dances like a queen bee while various men come and go around her.

“Is that you in the photo, Madame Andromache?” I ask.

She winks. I emerge into the light of midday. Inside, Andromache waves goodbye. I wave one last time and turn my back. On the way to Mestá I pass fields with mastic trees. From far away they look like bushes with whitewashed trunks. They are so low and humble that they seem to crawl upon the earth like slaves. A villager in overalls rides a motorcycle past me. He is driving with one hand and holding a metal ladder with the other. It’s a tall ladder. Tall enough to reach a balcony.

Fethi Paşa Yalısı (Pembe Yalı), Kuzguncuk, where Şemsinur died on July 4th 1881. >
Unknown photographer, 1925, family archive.

