

I was
twenty-six
when I went
as a bride
to Sultanahmet.

We were married in the month of May, and what I remember most clearly is the horse chestnut trees lining the park in front of the mosque, and their flowers, which had blossomed like masses of lanterns. Later, as we raced home, it became clear that my hair had become sprinkled with horse chestnut blossoms, which fell to the floor one by one as I unfastened my hair and lay down. Years later, during the month of Ramadan, as I looked at Sultanahmet Mosque from the Ibrahim Pasha Palace on the coast across from the hippodrome, again in the month of May, I noticed the way the horse chestnut blossoms and the minarets, seemingly the same size, rose in an alternate line up to the sky. I was madly in love at the time and wrote of my discovery to the man I loved. Afterwards, we referred amongst ourselves to that period and the first awakening of our love as “the time when the horse chestnut blossomed.”

There was a Byzantine palace under the house when I arrived as a bride. I've forgotten its name. A corridor descended from the far side of the house to the sea. My mother-in-law told of how she had once entered the corridor, torch in hand, and advanced a fair way before becoming frightened and returning. The house was fashioned from the remains of an old mansion, in the garden a

rose acacia and pistachio tree had grown into giants, making it ever more difficult to see the view they obscured of the Sea of Marmara, the opposite coast and Selimiye. At another time, harmonious melodies were heard in this garden, as the compositions of the house's musician son would be sung. And what do you know, my own mother was among those joining in those harmonious nights, but I learned why much later, after having married, while collecting pistachios in that garden. I learned so much more. For instance, early one evening my mother was hurrying up Mercan lane. She was in a hurry because a friend of hers who worked as an assistant in the Astronomy Department-the first female astronomer in Turkey-had invited her to watch an eclipse of the moon from the observatory in the university garden. She ran into that musician friend of hers in the middle of the slope, but he was slowly descending, leaning upon the arm of his assistant. They greeted each other. My mother was ready to burst with excitement. She explained the reason for her haste and asked for leave. Upon hearing this, the musician exclaimed: Ah, so there is a moon.

Despite the passage of some 40 years, my mother was still deeply affected by the shame she felt at that moment, and unable to forgive herself for her tactlessness. Every since hearing the story, whenever I raise my head and gaze at the moon, I remember those people. The city of my birth is the setting for an intricate interweaving of names of people, about all of whom I know many tales. The oft-related scenes are enacted before my eyes. Wherever I go in this city, sitting or standing, I am accompanied everywhere, always, by tales of these people. New tales are spawned.

Like one night of many, in a Beyoğlu meyhane where I had gone with friends, when I encountered my former husband from Sultanahmet, he who had waded through the horse chestnut blossoms, and the woman he now loved. We saw each other at the same time. Just at that moment, Anahit, who had been playing the accordion in Beyoğlu for as long as I could remember, came and sat at the centre of the table. Everyone was silent, as they awaited Anahit's music. Anahit had known us when we were young, and smiled at us. My former husband, rising and turning towards me as he prepared to introduce the young women next

to him, bowed slightly and made a graceful gesture of presentation with his hand, and, at that moment, the music of Anahit began. It was a tango: "I once loved a young women." The eyes of my former husband and mine met. We both bit our lips to keep from laughing. The reason was that the composition being played was that of the young man in the house in Sultanahmet, the uncle of my former husband, the friend of my mother, and we had heard that piece many times.

But the practical tricks played by the old tales do not end here. They even accompany me on my distant voyages, presenting me with memories concerning my childhood, old ties or someone connected with my country, in the most improbable of places. Like the women I recognised as an acquaintance of mine when, somewhere in Sao Paulo, a Portuguese friend of mine introduced me to a Croatian who had come from Zagreb and settled in Brazil; the Croatian, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, immediately asked upon meeting me whether a Turkish women he had met while studying in..., a place whose name he could not even remember, was in good health and spirits; and I-what else would have been appropriate to the situation-knew to whom he referred.

People are what make up a person's country. And the people of Istanbul are my country.

Fatma Artunkal, born in 1943 in Istanbul. Mother of three children. She continues to live in Istanbul.