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VERKIN

English sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

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CHAPTER 1

Tarabya

The friendly gendarme dog / German sausage products / blue above green / group portrait in bathrobes

A dog barks behind the wall shielding the early modernist house suspended above the Bosporus and the steep slope from the road. The gate opens as if of its own accord, and just as I'm thinking it must be a big dog, a black-brown Dobermann leaps in my direction and sniffs at me and the bag over my shoulder.

Báron! I hear a call. Báron!

Verkin is standing in the entrance a few metres away, wearing a simple black dress and silver sandals. She's holding a pair of dark glasses in her hand and looks as if she's about to appear on TV.

My decadent gendarme dog seems to like you, she says. Báron licks my hand. His fur is shiny with a rusty stripe of red.

He can smell my gifts for the cat-smuggler, I say, strolling with the friendly Cerberus past blossoming rose bushes and a barely audible marble fountain to the front door framed by abstract carvings.

No, no, he can smell that you're German, says Verkin. It takes me a moment to register that she was speaking German, impeccable and unaccented, but by that point she's introducing me in English to her assistant Nevin, another elegant black-clad woman with grey curly hair, who welcomes me in Turkish and invites me into the house. I answer her with the three words I can say in her language, noticing that she and I are wearing similar horn-rimmed glasses.

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She vanishes into the depths of the house as Verkin guides me and the dog through a marble-tiled atrium and along a vaulted passage into a large room with two glass exterior walls. We're now high above the Bosporus, and I see nothing but deep blue moving water and a great deal of pale blue sky between Europe and Asia. And I say nothing for a while. I say nothing because I can say nothing; I fall into the view, flying, sailing over the river's surface all the way to the Black Sea as the water glints so incredibly blue, green, grey, turquoise, silver and then back to blue.

Verkin seems to savour my speechless moment. When Báron nudges my tote bag I compose myself and ask how long her house has been floating above this view.

She tells me her father bought the land at the end of the forties, half the hill including the riverside plots, a large area that had previously belonged to the family of Egypt's King Farouk.

I stroke Báron's large head and his cropped ears; he likes it.

No one wanted to build here, she continues, but my father always had a nose for a good deal and it didn't put him off. He parcelled off the land on the slope, built the steep road and cast concrete to anchor this house in the rock, plus another a little way further up, earthquake-proof.

I see a huge ship loaded with hundreds, no thousands of brightly coloured containers, heading our way.

In the Ottoman days, the ambassadors of Europe's great powers had their summer residences in this area, Verkin says. In Büyükdere, just across the bay – she points at the opposite riverbank – you can see the Russian one. The German summer residence is a little way in the other direction; it's the largest, most beautiful and best-kept of them all. The French and British yalılar burned down and were never rebuilt. In one of Pierre Loti's books, he writes about how the embassies were rowed up to Therapiá, now Tarabya, with all their possessions and personnel at the start of summer; it was far too hot without air conditioning in Péra, today's Beyoğlu.

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And back there, I ask, pointing at the two pylons rising at a distance, one on each side of the river. Is that going to be the third bridge over the Bosporus?

The supporting cables are in place, all that's missing now is the carriageway, Verkin answers. The third bridge will connect the new airport and the neglected Black Sea coast.

It's going to be the biggest airport in the world, I've read.

At least, says Verkin. And one day it'll be called Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Havalimanı.

I haven't been here for five minutes and his name's already come up, I think, turning to face the room, where I see an antique card table decorated with intarsia, two leather sofas, carved occasional tables piled with hardbacks and coffee-table books. I see a flat-screen TV and several abstract oil paintings, blue-green and orange-blue colour fields, presumably American. I see a dented metallic object reminiscent of an antique bidet, two rugs featuring combat helicopter and tank motifs, probably from Afghanistan, and above the richly decorated marble mantlepiece I see Verkin, the dog and myself in a large mirror with a carved wooden frame similar to the ornamentation around the door through which I just entered.

Verkin tells me she has lived in this house, with interruptions, since her early childhood, but it was originally just a summer house for her parents; the city, the old town and Beyoğlu, were far away back then, she says, there was no motorway, no metro and only a narrow dusty road down by the water.

I notice another artwork, a portrait of a woman who reminds me of a silent movie actress; I presume it was painted in the twenties. Beside it hangs a framed colour photograph in which Verkin and Pope Benedict XVI are shaking hands, between them an impressive beard sported by an Orthodox clergyman in dark robes.

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Verkin spots me looking at the photograph and explains that she spent a few years as an advisor to the Armenian Apostolic Patriarch of Constantinople. He was a good friend, she says; the photo was taken shortly after Ratzinger became pope. One of his very first trips brought him on an inaugural visit to Istanbul; we had an interesting chat.

I open my tote bag and present an array of Teutonic organic sausage specialities: Palatinate-style liver sausage, homemade liver sausage, tea sausage and blood sausages from the world blood sausage champion in Berlin-Neukölln.

Verkin utters cries of joy, I'm not sure in which language.

We leave the navigation bridge over the Bosporus, entering a windowless corridor that turns several corners and is also marble-tiled, passing closed doors and a gallery of large-format framed black-and-white photos. In one of them, I recognise a perhaps fifteen-year-old Verkin; another shows her as a pigtailed child. Báron, the great lunk, is by my side, his paws tip-tapping against the stone, and I feel as if I were rambling right into the hill beneath the house – but then Verkin opens a door and we step into a not particularly large kitchen, where two women are occupied at the cooker. A third, older woman in a headscarf is sitting at a small table drawn up to a window onto the garden. She says hello, at which Verkin responds with something I don't understand and I greet her back, and then we pass through another door into a glass extension, a kind of summer kitchen with a fireplace and a larger round table laid with a lace tablecloth embroidered with rose patterns. Small fat-bottomed tea glasses, already filled, on a tray, beside them an icing-sugared Linzer torte with its pastry lattice. Outside on the terrace, which must have been dug halfway into the steep green slope, the other half resting on stilts above the abyss, are five, no six individuals. Three of them dressed in fluffy white bathrobes, two women sporting turbans twisted out of towels, a third woman with a large plaster on her face, a fourth in hijab. Behind them lilies in full bloom; I see plum trees, a palm, pines and fig trees, and Verkin informs me today is bathing day and the guests are visiting her hammam.

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The woman with the bandage is my painter friend Susan, she says; she's just had a facelift here in Istanbul. Susan used to be my neighbour in New York, we've known each other since 1979. The beauty next to her is Sevgi, my plastic surgeon's daughter, she manages his clinic, let me know if you want anything done, eyelids, nose, chin, Sevgi can help you with that. The woman in hijab is my oldest friend from the AKP, we met as volunteers on the party's first election campaign and now she works for the Home Secretary. Opposite her is my lawyer, and the wiry man with the joint in his hand is Tarek, an ex-husband of mine. His grandfather was a famous imam, his great-uncle a hero in the Battle of Gallipoli, and his great-great-great-great-grandfather came to Constantinople with Mehmed the Conqueror in 1453. He's descended from a new arrival, in other words; we Armenians and my family have been on the Bosporus for a thousand years longer.

She laughs at her little exaggeration, which may not be one, and tells me to help myself to a glass of tea from the tray.

Tarek is a healer and an organic farmer these days, Verkin reports, running her small farm on the Black Sea, practising acupuncture and in demand as a chiropractor.

If anything's hurting or wrong, he could help you with his needles or bleed you; he's just got a fresh delivery of hungry leeches from Sivas.

Sounds enticing, I say; perhaps another time.

Nevin has reappeared and takes the bag of meat products from Verkin, passes it on to one of the women in the main kitchen and hands me a plate with a slice of Linzer torte.

Stepping out into the great blue above the lush garden green, Verkin introduces me to the group portrait at the marble table, and I tell them I'm here to write a book about Istanbul's shopping malls.

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Do I like shopping, I'm asked.

No, I say, not really.

After two or three glasses of tea, over which I learn a great deal about cosmetic surgery, Van cats, the upcoming election, New York lofts and blood-letting with leeches, I take my leave. First, though, I ask about the Pierre Loti book in which he describes Tarabya.

It's not the one with the overblown Orientalist love story, Verkin says; it's a later book, in which an author returns to Istanbul around 1900 to write about two Ottoman sisters in a harem, it's called, it's called …

Do you mean *Les Désenchantées*? I've found the novel on my phone; its German title is *Die Entzauberten*. I can download it right now.

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CHAPTER 2

Bosporus

Turkish singing / Verkin is a *kara kartallar* / My father could have bought Huber Kösku / Swimming in the Bosporus / The wedding in Çankaya / My grandmother's men

A few days later, I'm in the passenger seat beside Verkin. She's driving herself; Nevin, otherwise her chauffeur, has stayed at Verkin's city and business house Suma Han, which we've just viewed together. Verkin steers us through Karaköy while on the telephone, the Bosporus on our right, a tram to our left. Verkin is speaking Turkish into her phone; no, she's singing, I think, and I had no idea how melodic, tuneful and beautiful Turkish can sound. Since she's not using a hands-free device, Verkin has only one hand on the steering wheel.

Look, Dolmabahçe Palace, built by an Armenian, she interrupts her singing, and tells me, now in German, that almost all the architects who built anything of import in the Ottoman Empire were Armenians.

I've heard that before, I think, probably from an Armenian.

With Kabataş behind us, Verkin interrupts her phone call again, pointing at the black-and-white-flagged stadium at the foot of the hillside, to disclose that she's a *kara kartallar*, a black eagle – a fan of Beşiktaş football club.

I realise I've walked this same route, a short stretch beneath tall old plane trees and along the back wall of the Dolmabahçe Sarayı. Where buildings don't block the view, the ships on the Bosporus are now visible from the car, the water they're navigating the colour of wet ink. I believe a ferry and a tanker are making faster progress than we are.

It's actually nonsense to take the riverside road, says Verkin, her telephone now stowed in a cubbyhole below the centre console. Nevin would never have allowed it; we're caught in traffic for purely scenic reasons. So that you can see how beautiful the Bosporus is. And its villages, which aren't villages any more.

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Her phone rings again and the singing recommences, new verses sounding out as I wonder what Verkin is talking about.

Tailbacks in Ortaköy, tailbacks under the first bridge connecting Europe and Asia, tailbacks in Arnavutköy, but then we cruise through Bebek and Verkin tells me about her charitable foundation, which a few years ago managed despite great resistance to restore Armenian antiquities, in other words ruins, in the east of Turkey, including the famous Cathedral of the Holy Cross on the island of Aghtamar in Lake Van, the home of the snow-white swimming cats.

Beside us, the water of the Black Sea flows towards Marmara, heading in our direction. We're moving against the stream, I say, but then I learn that the Bosporus has a visible current on the surface and also an undercurrent in the opposite direction, towards the Black Sea, and that this undercurrent was used in antiquity by boats with drift anchors to propel them against the visible current to the Black Sea, the Bosporus as conveyor belt.

Not far after Emirgan – we have already passed under the second Bosporus bridge – the road makes another turn to the left and leads into the bay at İstinye. Uphill, as I know from my explorations, lies İstinye Park, one of Europe's largest shopping malls. A car ferry docks on the right. The road rises and falls again and we cruise into Yeneköy, cordoned by high plane trees; I see a luxury car dealership, restaurants, one café after another, tables on the pavements and a boy of about thirteen, dressed in rags and pulling a handcart piled a metre high with collapsed cardboard boxes past freshly polished SUVs. Verkin points out the buildings to the right of the road and says most of the beautiful old houses on the banks, where they apparently film a lot of Turkish telenovelas these days, once belonged to Greeks or Armenians. Another broad curve, another bay, another view of the hills on the opposite bank, and I say it looks like the Rhine in my childhood, just outside Bad Godesberg; all that's missing is the Drachenfels on the Asian side. Verkin laughs and says, We're Romans both here and there.

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Another thing I know is the feeling the road might plummet straight into the water behind the next curve, I say, and I tell Verkin about the landscape in which I grew up, where the hills on the banks are not quite as high and the ships on the river significantly smaller.

We take another gentle curve – navigators have to change course thirty-eight times during the Bosporus passage – and a gigantic cream-painted wooden palace appears before us, a tank parked out front and at least four Turkish flags hoisted on flagpoles above and beside the building.

What on earth is that? I ask.

Huber Köşkü, says Verkin, the president of the Turkish Republic's residence in Istanbul. The house is named after the Huber brothers, German arms traders who sold guns and cannons to the Ottoman Empire, the good old Krupp models. They must have made a pretty penny, as you can see.

Is that why the tank is there? Because arms dealers live there?

No, these days the grounds are guarded by soldiers because *he* sometimes stays there.

He?

You know, *he*, the *reis*. The captain. Huber Kösku and the complex on the hill, which we can't see from here, is his Istanbul residence.

A German arms dealers' summer mansion as the Turkish presidential palace? There's a punchline in there somewhere. The whole thing looks edible, like an over-decorated gateau. Like a wooden mille-feuille.

My father could have bought Huber Köşkü once, Verkin says. The Egyptian Coptic nuns who owned the palace after the Germans left offered him the land and all the buildings on it – in a terrible state at the time – for a very low price. They practically begged him on bended knee to take it, they wanted to give it to him for next to nothing because they knew he had the means to restore it.

And did he take the gift?

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No, my father was far too clever to expose himself with such a conspicuous property. He knew a jewel like that would only be taken away from him one day. And that's exactly what happened; the man who took over the palace and renovated it had to give it up when the republic was looking for a prestigious house for its president in Istanbul.

It looks freshly painted, the wooden palace.

Yalılar need painting constantly, every year, like ships. They're expensive to keep; most families can only afford them for one generation.

Verkin indicates, brakes rather abruptly and steers her BMW into a car park belonging to a café directly on the Bosporus.

We find a spot in a half-open tent on the water; there are barely any guests other than us. A waiter comes to our table from the low adjacent building; we order tea and look out at the ships passing close by: another tanker, a ferry and a smaller cargo ship, which is allowed to steer its own way to the Black Sea without a pilot boat.

Can you see that box there? Verkin points at a building about two hundred metres away, apparently floating above the Bosporus. It's a chain restaurant now but in my childhood it was a swimming bath with diving towers, a bar and white-painted bathing huts between the rocks. As a child, I'd dive into the Bosporus by our house and let the current carry me there. It saved me the entrance fee.

You could have afforded it, though, couldn't you?

It was all about not paying, says Verkin. I thought it absurd to charge an entrance fee for rocks and water.

My mother swam in the Rhine as a child, not long after the war. I presume she learned to swim in the Rhine. She would walk a little way upstream, jump into the water from a breakwater and swim home with the stream. That was inconceivable in my own childhood; the river was too polluted.

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How long as your mother been dead? Verkin asks then, which surprises me; I can't remember telling her about my mother.

How do you know she's not alive?

I can tell by looking at you, says Verkin.

I might even like to believe her, but I'm not sure whether I've perhaps mentioned my mother's early death after all. You're right, I say. She's actually been dead so long I can barely remember her. I was twelve when she died. And it often feels like I haven't aged a day since then.

I don't want to worry you, my dear, but you don't look like a twelve-year-old these days. Perhaps you should think about a facelift. I'm afraid it's too late for Botox.

The waiter – as in almost all the cafés and restaurants I've visited in Istanbul, a man; female serving staff are a rare sight – brings us tea, and Verkin tells me the café's previous owner was once Erdoğan's chauffeur. Long ago, back when he was the mayor of Istanbul. A connection that no doubt helped him to obtain this profitable location.

A cruise ship, far too big and far too tall, creeps past in the company of two pilot vessels.

According to Verkin, Erdoğan's former chauffeur got involved in organised crime and bogged down with his four wives and mistresses; he died in Russia, and it wasn't a natural death.

The disproportioned cruise ship might fall over, I think, fall over and capsize. Or get stuck in the Bosporus. It inches towards the Black Sea.

I notice that the opposite Asian bank is almost untouched by construction, the wooded hills shimmering in various shades of green. Verkin reveals that this stretch is owned by the navy; the Turkish armed forces, she says, are the secret land barons and stage military coups every few years, and now I can make out a few anchored warships in the blue-tinged haze, just visible despite their sea-green camouflage paint.

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On our bank, a little way from the chain restaurant on the rocks that I now know once harboured a swimming bath, two boys dive from the promenade into the water, two more leaping after them with cries of elation; splashing, laughing, they paddle like joyous young dogs.

My grandmother liked diving into the Bosporus too, Verkin says. A hundred years ago it caused a minor sensation every time; crowds would gather and refuse to believe a woman could swim.

The boys drift a few metres on the current, climb a ladder back up to the promenade and leap in again with running jumps.

Your grandmother must have been a remarkable woman, I say.

Both my grandmothers were remarkable women, Verkin responds, I often think of them.

Were they both Armenian?

Through and through, *de souche et jusqu'au bout des ongles,* and with family trees going back over a thousand years, Verkin says. My father's mother was called Verkin, I'm named after her, and was the second of three daughters of an Armenian seraf, a banker and gold merchant who did business from a large house in Péra, where the family also lived. He died unexpectedly and very surprisingly in 1897, under such strange circumstances that there were suspicions he'd been poisoned by one of his debtors, one of his *Turkish* debtors who owed him large sums, in some cases immense sums – but it was never established how he died. My great-grandmother was suddenly left penniless with three unmarried underage daughters in their gigantic house on the Grande rue de Péra – İstiklal Cadessi these days. My great-grandfather's fancy business friends and delinquent debtors wouldn't pay; they thought they didn't have to pay money back to a woman. An Armenian from Smyrna – that's İzmir now – claimed he wanted to marry her oldest daughter but turned out to be a swindler who ran off with the last of their money.

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My great-grandmother began selling her jewellery and things weren't looking good for the clever, pretty, blonde fourteen or perhaps sixteen-year-old Verkin with her blue-green eyes; her prospects of a decent marriage had almost vanished. But then, a miracle, an offer of marriage arrived from Angora – today's Ankara – from the house of Kasapian, the famous Armenian gold, jewellery and wool trading dynasty that had produced fur and felt hats for the Ottoman army since the early sixteenth century. One of their sons was to marry Verkin, pictures were exchanged, everything was agreed and bound by contract, my great-grandmother sold yet more jewellery so that the bride, who never revealed her true age, could take along a modest dowry on her trip from Constantinople to Angora, an incredible distance at the time. She arrived at Çankaya Palace, the Kasapian family home for three hundred years, she saw her handsome fiancé – and learned on the day of the wedding, immediately before the church ceremony, that she was not to marry the handsome Ohannes but instead his older, syphilitic brother Rokos, the family factotum. She was alone in a city she didn't know with a family she didn't know, and she couldn't run away or return to Istanbul; she'd been bought and paid for. So – what else could she do, she was nothing but a child – she married Rokos the factotum, for whom the whole affair, thought out by his parents, was apparently similarly unpleasant; in fact it turned out that the man she was now married to wasn't an idiot or an asshole like so many Armenian men, and the two of them came to an arrangement and began a kind of Josephite marriage in the same villa in which Atatürk was to live twenty-five years later – until my grandmother one day disappeared. Did she go to Lake Van and from there to Isfahan, disguised as a man, as she claimed now and then? I don't know. All we know for sure is that she turned up in Istanbul one day in 1902, heavily pregnant, and my father was born a few weeks later.

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My grandmother never revealed who had sired my father, and I've never been able to find out, despite all the research I've done. Perhaps my father was a child of her brother-in-law, the Kasapian she thought she was marrying? It's said they were in love. Or to be more realistic and less romantic, she was merely raped, by him or another Armenian; there's no way to find out for sure because that handsome Ohannes and most of the family were killed in 1915, like so many Anatolian Armenians. The only survivors were Rokos, who had pursued my grandmother to Istanbul, and two sisters who had also moved to the city. In Istanbul, my grandmother had four more children, each from a different man; when it came to having children she was a modern, independent woman. I myself only managed one child each from two men, and they were the best of friends. I've found the men who sired all four of my father's siblings; there was an Armenian fur trader, an Armenian priest who taught at the school my father attended as a boy, an Armenian dentist and a silk trader, also Armenian. Only my father's identity remained my grandmother's secret, whether bitter or sweet, which she never gave away, even on her deathbed. And even after that no clues emerged, no secret diary, no letters, nothing that might have indicated who my paternal grandfather was.

Had she not returned to Istanbul, she would hardly have survived 1915, would she?

Probably not, no. Only in Istanbul did relatively little happen in 1915, out of deference to the foreign emissaries in the city. Everywhere else, in all the Anatolian provinces and the far east where the Van cats live, Armenians were slaughtered in broad daylight or driven into the desert to die of thirst.

Had that not happened and had your grandmother not returned from Ankara to Istanbul, she'd have lived her life in the house that became Atatürk's home and workplace in the twenties. That's bizarre!

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In the house that was also Tayyip's official residence until the new presidential palace in Ankara was finished.

And you're telling me this only a stone's throw away from the Istanbul residence your father could have bought.

Welcome to Turkish surrealism, *mon cher*.

A girl of about seven in a faded T-shirt dotted with holes approaches our table; Verkin instantly realises she's a Syrian refugee and passes her a couple of notes, quickly and discreetly – she's well practised.

The waiters in this café are compassionate, she says, they let Syrian children beg here. They're not as nice elsewhere.

How many refugees from Syria are there in Turkey? I ask.

Four or five million. No one knows the exact number. A million and a half or more in Istanbul alone. And if you Germans don't go on paying nicely, we'll let them stroll through into Europe; the Syrian refugees are our second army.

I watch the girl visiting other tables, receiving alms at several of them, and then I see her vanish into the constant stream of telephone-toting Turkish power walkers in sunglasses, leggings and day-glo sneakers. A number of these women are wearing headscarves, I notice, and boxing at thin air with hyperactive motions at every step, left-right, left-right.

My grandmother wouldn't put up with any nonsense, she wouldn't let anyone drive her out, she lived her whole life in Istanbul from then on. She slept with whomever she liked, she dived into the Bosporus and steered her own carriage, a coach pulled by a white horse – what are they called in German? I ought to know, the last school I went to was a German riding academy.

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Schimmel or *Apfelschimmel*, I say.

Schimmel like the pianos?

Yes, like the grand pianos from Braunschweig, I say.

Perhaps my grandmother daring to drive her own coach around Péra and Galata was to do with her having no money for a coachman, Verkin says.

In Pierre Loti's book, the Ottoman women trapped in the harem disparage the Armenian women from Péra, who can move around the city more freely and do things they themselves can only ever dream of. They call them Pérotes; your grandmother must have been a Pérote in their eyes, mustn't she?

Oh, you've already read *Les Désenchantées*, says Verkin, and she looks at her telephone while I attempt to attract the waiter's attention and order another round of tea; *çay* is one of my new words.

Verkin is occupied with her phone, answering messages, calling someone back – and all of a sudden it feels as if I'd fallen into the Bosporus, the currents carrying me along, at the top in one direction, below in the other, and I don't see where I might climb out onto the bank, don't see a ladder I could climb; I drift onwards, carried forth, but then I wake up, take my phone in my hand and try to photograph the Bosporus euphoria, for the third, fourth or fifth time today. I send the photo home to Berlin, and write that I'll probably have to stay longer in Istanbul, there are so many malls to visit, and then there's Verkin, who tells incredible stories. I'm still holding my telephone when I receive a notification that Verkin has posted two stories; I click and see a pan shot across Huber Köskü and the view of the Bosporus from Hayrola Café, the place where we're sitting. Well, well, I think, even she, who's known this view since her childhood, can't resist the beauty of these banks and has to capture it again and again. Verkin is still on her phone so I call up Wikipedia entries about the Çankaya villa in Ankara; the German is more detailed than the English but both of them contain Verkin's surname. Once she's finished her call, I read aloud to her: *Up until the Armenian genocide of 1915, the Çankaya Mansion was surrounded by vineyards belonging to the Armenian jeweller and wool trader Ohannes*

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Kasapian. The Ottoman state confiscated the house after the surviving Kasapians had fled to Ankara and presented it to the Bulgurluzâde family.

Interesting and not entirely wrong, says Verkin. Who wrote that?

I could find out, I answer, and I ask whether I'm even allowed to quote the part about the genocide in Turkey. Whether I'm risking a prison sentence.

You can quote whatever you like to me, she says. And as long as we remain friends and you don't do anything stupid, you won't be arrested; I have a direct line to the Home Secretary.

Oh, I feel much safer now, I say. What I don't mention to Verkin is that I couldn't call up the Wikipedia page at all without using VPN trickery; Wikipedia is blocked in Turkey, because it contains many other things the government doesn't like. It also says, I continue: *Mustafa Kemal bought the building in 1921 from Bulgurluzâde Tevfik Efendi for 4500 Turkish lira*. Sounds like the man had to sell.

Ironically enough, says Verkin, Atatürk – whom my father admired and adored his whole life long – had a good relationship with the surviving Kasapians. It's almost curious: in the twenties he also lived in a Kasapian house in Istanbul on İstiklal Caddesi, which belonged to one of my aunts. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was her tenant.

That's crazy, I say.

And I welcome you once again to Turkish surrealism.

Have you ever been inside Çankaya? Have you visited the villa?

No, but I will one day, and you can come with me if you like. I will enter Çankaya if I have to become president of the Turkish Republic to do so!

The four boys have been joined by a fifth and all five leap simultaneously into the Bosporus; water splashes all the way up to the promenade, two power walkers catching a few inadvertent drops.

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One of my grandmother's last lovers was an ice-cream salesman on that İstiklal, says Verkin, the street that remained the Grande rue de Péra for her as long as she lived. Whenever I passed by his stall, with her or alone, I got an ice cream.

When did she die? I ask.

1962. She's buried in the Armenian cemetery in Şişli; we can visit her some time.

Is your father there too?

Yes, almost all of the family.

CHAPTER 3

Şişli

Marble / My father brings the light / The gravestone cleaners / The Armenian smuggler couple / My father hires a double / Lucy is no longer moving / An apparition

Nevin, Verkin and I are standing in a sea of hundreds; no, thousands of white graves in the Armenian cemetery at Şişli, and Verkin is talking about a photo of her father, probably taken in 1916.

He's behind the wheel of an open-top car, a fair-haired boy who looks neither very Armenian nor particularly Turkish. He's sitting there as if he wants to try out how it feels to hold the steering wheel. And to be photographed, of course. Brimming with determination for survival, he stares at the camera and seems to be saying: you can't put a good man down.

I know that look, I say. You've got it too.

The marble block glitters at me; I wonder whether the first and family names of all the Kasapians, Kasapoğlus and Kapmanns buried here might have been cut into a large block of ice crystal.

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My father was a businessman and a survivor, Verkin says. He wouldn't let anyone drive him out of the city where he was born; he stayed. He lived through the sad year of 1915, left the Armenian seminary because it was closed down and got a job as an apprentice at Istanbul's first electricity plant, a coal-fired power station in the middle of the city that delivered power for the Tünel and Topkapı Palace from 1914 on. The photo must have been taken on the Elektrik Santralı premises.

Verkin, resplendent in a black T-shirt, knee-length black trousers, silver sneakers and a black cap bearing the New York Yankees logo, is facing the gleaming-white gravestone, its marble possessed of a special soft lustre that seems to shine from the inside.

At Elektrik Santralı, my father learned that electricity can flow anywhere, all it needs is wires. At sixteen he set up a company and helped to electrify first Istanbul and soon after that all of Turkey – he was the New Economy of his time. Atatürk energised the country, my father laid the cables and installed the plugs, switches and fuses needed to turn on light bulbs even in remotest Anatolia, light bulbs only my father could deliver. By the age of eighteen he owned two of the approximately 300 cars licensed in Istanbul, and he bought his mother a new house.

Verkin has taken off her sunglasses, a pair with a white frame today. Nevin, she too in black with sunglasses, has walked around the gravestone and is inspecting its back.

Why is there nobody here? Why are we alone in this gigantic cemetery? I ask.

There are lots of people here, look around you, says Verkin. They're resting in the earth, beneath their big white stones.

Living people, I mean. Living people and relatives.

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There are hardly any Armenians left in Istanbul. And most of those buried here have no relatives left, at least in Istanbul. The cemetery belongs to a foundation, which takes care of it. In essence, this cemetery is a museum. We were here for two thousand years and now it's over, almost all of us driven out, emigrated or killed. Or they don't know any more that they're Armenians. You won't find as many Armenians as in this cemetery anywhere in Istanbul.

Suddenly – it's not clear to me from where they appear – two men in dusty work clothes approach us. One is sporting a rolled-up garden hose over his shoulder and holding a bucket, brush, broom and dustpan, the other has a hammer and chisel tucked into his belt. Their movements are so conspicuously slow and mechanical that for a moment, I think the two figures must be undead, risen from one of the many graves.

After a greeting from Verkin and a few spirited words from Nevin, the two cemetery foundation employees break out in surprising, almost hectic activity. Nevin points out a spot behind the stone where something seems not to be right and the gardener unrolls the hose, connects it to a tap and starts watering plants I had previously not noticed; it seems the men are aiming to please through demonstrative performance of their labour – they presumably know the ruler of this grave site will later show her generosity by slipping them a few bank notes.

Verkin and the stonemason, who is now scrubbing the gravestone with a brush, switch from Turkish to Istanbul High Armenian, presumably to prove to each other and themselves that they can still speak it. Meanwhile, I attempt to sketch the gravestone, slightly surprising myself. I sketch out a square, drawing in the surname in Armenian letters and beginning to copy down the first and second names and the dates of birth and death, which are carved into the stone in Latin lettering, names that I read like a cast list, like a register of protagonists in a family novel, of which Verkin has already told me fragments. I've almost finished my scribe-work when it occurs to me I could have simply photographed the stone, but since I have my fountain pen in my hand I scribble a few extra words on the paper, terms with which I might describe this cemetery if necessary. I note down impressions the way I do it in the malls I'm visiting all over Istanbul. I've

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been several times to the Grand Bazaar, I've been to the Zorlu Center, İstinye Park and Kanyon Mall; I'm interested in the architectural details and which shops and branches of which chains are here, I'm interested in supposed banalities: how the handrails feel, how the waste bins look, how often which malls are swept and mopped and how the moss is scraped out of the gaps between the paving slabs in the entrance areas, I'm interested in the benches, if there are any, I want to know how it smells in the food courts and how the new overview and orientation screens by the escalators work, reminiscent of gigantic iPhones and operated in the exact same way.

I was once, it occurs to me, in a mall designed by Daniel Libeskind, which was almost as marble-white as this cemetery; I jot *marble-white* and *Van cat-white* on the ivory-coloured, non-white page of my notebook; white is the true colour of grief, I think, and then: what kind of sentence is that, why am I writing it down and where did I get it from? I feel helpless with the pen in my hand, not knowing how I'd describe the dazzling light, the brightness, the Arctic white and the reflections on the marble – but, I realise to my relief, I don't have to; I'm writing a book about shopping malls, not about Armenian cemeteries.

The stonemason wipes a cloth across the indented letters and I can't help thinking that my father and I were at my mother's grave only two weeks ago, removing moss from her stone and scraping her name free. I didn't have a brush with me; I used the key for the car I'd hired to chauffeur my father around, my father who couldn't say, didn't know whose grave we were visiting, let alone which of his wives was buried there. The moss over my mother's name, however, I scraped not from white marble but from a boulder, a rock abraded by water and ice into a roundish shape, transported by a glacier from northern to central Europe before being rolled to and fro, shifted and smoothed in the Rhine for several tens or hundreds of thousands of years. I believe that stone was my mother's request; she had enough time before her death to think about how her grave was to look.

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The two employees have received a generous tip and are sloping off, the marble cube shining and glinting more brightly than before.

Your father lived to a fine old age, I say to Verkin. Almost a century.

Yes, it seems like he didn't want to go. He loved his Istanbul too much, he didn't want to leave it. And as you can see, he never did leave it, he's still here – and that might be his greatest achievement. He had many imitators and enviers, was repeatedly attacked and locked up, had to defend himself, stand his ground, strike back, fight.

The older I get, the more I admire the skill with which he manoeuvred himself, us and our company through that crazy century. And all that in this crazy country, where he always had to keep his eye on the back door and the escape route and always had to cover his back; conditions change quickly in Türkiye, you can barely look around before the next putsch comes along, and then the politicians you were just friendly with are now in prison, and the ones who were just in prison are now in charge. My father knew why he deposited money in Switzerland and England and invested in property in Paris. The Turkish state was always coming up with new special taxes, *Varlık Vergisi* was one of them, look it up, it was levied during the Second World War. Armenians, Greeks and Jews had to pay it, and whenever the republic needed money they raised a new special tax to be paid by Armenians, Greeks and Jews, absurdly high special taxes; the rate for Armenians, for example, was 233 per cent of their existing assets, and for Greeks it was 156 per cent. They were demands hardly anyone could meet, obviously, demands nobody was supposed to meet, because the whole purpose of that state-run looting and expropriation measure – the then prime minister Saracoğlu said it quite openly – was to destroy the livelihoods of all non-Turks. Armenians, Greeks and Jews – he called us *foreigners* – were to be removed, and their businesses were to pass into Turkish hands. In Istanbul, thousands of properties changed ownership, including almost every building on İstiklal Caddesi; my aunt who had rented an apartment to Atatürk twenty years previously lost her houses. And although my father was one of the few who could pay, although he met all their exorbitant demands, although he paid his ransom, he was

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banished to the Aşkale quarries in 1942, to a penal and labour camp in the Erzurum province, a kind of Turkish concentration camp for Armenians.

My father – I wasn't yet born – spent almost a year there and he was one of the lucky ones; he didn't have to spend many days in the quarry, he managed to bribe the guards and the camp management by promising to electrify their villages, provide power for their huts. The joke is that at the end of his banishment, he took back to Istanbul a talented young man from near Aşkale who had worked for him, a gifted seventeen-year-old who was soon running my father's construction projects, went out on his own a few years later and became one of Turkey's most successful developers. His company grew into one of the largest conglomerates in the country; you've probably seen that young man's name on construction signs still put up all over Turkey, his name's İbrahim Polat, look him up. My father was put in prison several more times for alleged tax arrears or other fabricated accusations, sometimes long stretches, sometimes short; he spent almost nine months in Sultanahmet Cezaevi, the oldest prison in Eminönü, which was converted into a luxury hotel two decades after my father was locked up there. The house of correction became the Four Seasons, and every time we drove past the ugly neo-classicist building my father would joke that he'd once stayed in a suite there with full bed and board at the expense of the Turkish state. During the forties, to evade spontaneous arrests by subaltern hotheads hoping to raise their profiles through overzealous actions against Armenians, my father employed an actor kitted out with all the insignia of a factory director, to play the boss while my father himself sat among his employees dressed inconspicuously or mingled with the workers operating the Bakelite presses in the formaldehyde-fogged cellars of Suma Han. If anyone turned up unannounced and asked for Monsieur Antoine, my father always had plenty of time to assess the situation; the actor's job was to put them off, to give evasive answers, delaying things and saying: we don't know, what can I do for you, I'm happy to help.

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Your father employed a decoy, like Queen Padmé Amidala before the Clone Wars broke out?

I don't know what you're referring to, but yes, my father had a decoy. Once, travelling without him, my father and mother were arrested off the ferry as they were returning from Italy, where my father went every summer in the late forties and early fifties, one year with my mother, the next with his other woman. He always took the car and hid one or two kilos of gold in it on the way there. My parents' arrest was a big story, major headlines in all the newspapers: Armenian smuggler couple arrested, blah, blah, blah. My father was accused of absurd crimes; he'd allegedly exported money and failed to declare a ham and a string of Italian sausages on his return. They wanted to get at his money abroad, but my father refused to make it easy for those state robbers, of course; the customs agents couldn't prove a thing and never found out where his money was hidden. My mother was released after two days, my father after four, and the alleged Armenian smuggler couple went back to their more or less respectable lives. I was four or five at the time and obviously a little excited; the whole city – although it was much smaller then than it is now – was talking about my parents. I liked that, I thought it was great. My father wasn't worried, he always reckoned with that type of thing; he was prepared, had always treated someone to a generous meal, gifts or other kinds of obligations – bought them, in other words. His life insurance was that plenty of Istanbulites owed him a favour, which was partly why he liked entertaining, but not the only reason. A man that eats with you won't cheat you, he'd say; my father was a generous man, he ran an open house for lunch and loved having people around him. Years, even decades later, I've profited from people my father fed; the Armenian Patriarch of New York was one of his regulars, for instance; my father had given him a grant to enable him to study.

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When I lived in Manhattan, he invited me over and helped me to get a major commission for my two unemployed sculptors Hippo and Orhan. And as a child, I'd often sit in the Trio Palace on the lap of the later pope Papa Roncalli, the Apostolic legate in Constantinople at the time, a funny man whom I liked a great deal. He and my father were friends, he'd often eat at our home, and of course we were very happy when Giuseppe Roncalli became Pope John XXIII, known as *il papa buono*. Up until his untimely death, my father visited him in Rome almost every year. My father was a mysterious man who loved playing hide and seek. He'd pop up and then vanish again, which drove my mother crazy her whole life long. He had several apartments in the city and two summer houses, perhaps even another house on the Bosporus; we never knew where he was. He had many affairs, whom he didn't particularly respect – an Armenian man through and through, *fuck them and forget them, fuck them and let them go*, those were his mottoes, but he wasn't a great seducer, not a conqueror; the women were simply there, and my mother – though she saw it differently herself – was just one of his girlfriends, one among many. When she realised she was pregnant with me, she had to write to him in Paris, where he'd been staying since the end of the war; it was a good opportunity to do business, he bought several houses. By the time he was back in Istanbul it was too late for an abortion, and the next time he returned from Paris I'd been born and apparently won him over, because he never left me again. My mother obviously told a different version of this story; for her, it was a star-crossed connection between two ancient Armenian families, though they never married. My father never married any of his women, not even my mother, with whom he had two children.

Right, you've got a brother, I keep forgetting that, I say.

He's not important. It was very simple between him and me: I was the boy, he was my mother's little girl. And it stayed that way. If you ever write a book about my life you can leave him out; he doesn't play any part.

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Verkin's just cut a character from her unwritten family novel, I think, just as she says, stop, I was wrong, my father did marry, very late, in his old age; my mother had been dead for some years by then. He married Fifi, the Greek woman he was with for at least as long as my mother, if not longer. She's buried here too.

Did she soften him up, talk him round?

No, he married her so she couldn't be expelled; she didn't have a Turkish passport. He married her so she could stay in Istanbul, the city where she was born and bred. My father had Turkish nationality, fortunately, and had Turkified his name in 1923 from Kasapian to Kasapoğlu. In his youth, it would have been socially inacceptable and barely conceivable for an Armenian like my father to marry a Greek, an Armenian didn't marry a Greek – but that was over by then, like so many other things; there were hardly any Greeks and Armenians left in Istanbul, Fifi was one of the very few, one last straggler. Her and my father's last home was the house in Büyükdere that my father had built for her, a handsome four-storey building with a view of the Bosporus, directly on the water; perhaps I'll move there one day, then I won't have to go down the steep slope when I want to swim. My mother was still alive when my father had the house built and she could see across the bay through binoculars, when she was in Tarabya, whether the windows were illuminated or not, and speculate on whether my father was with his other woman. And then, two years after my father and Fifi had married in secret, four months before her death, having lived her entire life in Istanbul as a poverty-stricken upper-class Greek with no income, Fifi received an enormous inheritance out of the blue: houses and commercial properties in Athens and land on Kefalonia – a fortune that went to my father after her death; they'd married, after all. That's not the only reason why she's buried in our family grave, side by side with my father and mother, though the latter would not be best pleased, as you can imagine; they didn't have a ménage à trois – the two women never officially met.

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My father was glad to know the two of them would be beside him, however. And when it came to marrying, my father had apparently got a taste for it; he wasn't a widower for long, he wanted to marry again – his housekeeper Lucy. Or rather, Lucy, another Greek in her early sixties, absolutely wanted to be his wife; she scared off all the other domestic staff and tried to persuade my father to marry her. She refused to cook for him and barely let him drink, all to wear him down – it took a while until I noticed it, saw through her plan and began to think about how to get rid of her. Should I have her kidnapped or pushed in the Bosporus before she could get my father's assets signed over to her? But then, one Sunday, I call my father around noon and ask how are you, have you eaten, and so on. I'm fine, he says, I've been awake for hours, I've been reading and I've eaten something out of the fridge; but Lucy's not well, she hasn't got up yet. What's the matter with her? I asked. Well, she's still in bed and she isn't moving. Nevin and I drove straight round there and found her dead. So that was the end of that.

Your father survived three women. Respect. My father's only buried two so far, my mother and my stepmother, but they're not in the same grave.

Are you older now than your mother ever was? Verkin asks, and I have to count up to establish that I have another two; no, three years to go. And I admit that I've tried over and over to write a book about my mother's funeral; it was to be set in the cemetery and during the wake afterwards, which was held in a hotel on the Rhine, in a function room looking out on the water, an occasion that confused me as a child because I couldn't understand its increasing exuberance, why people can be so upbeat after funerals.

And have you finished the book? Asks Verkin.

No, I say. Not so far. And the shopping malls are taking time as well.

My father once sent me a sign, Verkin says, right where we're standing now.

What do you mean, a sign?

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I was here at the grave and I asked him for help, give me a sign, I said, send me a sign not to give up, to carry on with this pointless life that was such a challenge at the time, as it often is, so hard that I wished I could die. And then, it was incredible, a bright ray appeared, a pillar of light suddenly rested on the gravestone, shining out of the earth and the marble. You can say, well alright, the sun was shining, a reflection, but that's not how it was; it was a cloudy day and I really did see a bright body, felt his presence; my father was there, I smelled him. Nevin was with me, standing next to me, she saw him as well and she had the presence of mind to take a photo.

Have you still got it? I'd like to see it, I say, secretly wishing I could experience such an apparition myself, why not here, now, while Nevin, Verkin and I are photographing ourselves at the grave.

On the short walk to the car, Verkin tells me that when her father died, he had only three pairs of shoes, four suits and one black and one white tuxedo in his wardrobe. His house in Büyükdere was almost empty, she says. So empty that we wondered whether he'd had another secret apartment that we didn't know about.