

From "My Father's Favorite Picture"

## Concrete / Beton

Sema remembered the faded family photo portrait. The faces on the photo, how serious they looked at the lens. And how everyone was just itching to get it over with, even her father. Their expressions were different somehow, not like their everyday countenance. Her aunt on the front row was holding something outside the frame. "A glass" her father had explained. "She was still stirring her drink and your grandfather was heckling her to put it aside. The photographer insisted she keep it, as a memento."

Her father would always lean on a wall or a tree while taking photos during rainy weather to prevent them from ending up blurred. So his coats would always be streaked with dirt and the occasional dust from a tree or lime paint from a wall. And sometimes he would kneel on the ground before shooting a sought-after picture; surrendering to the power of the frame, not caring what he was wearing. That is why his pants would always have holes, usually at the same place, the left knee. Sema started to smile as she leaned on a tree. She reminisced how her mother used to scold him: "Your pants are always dirty or full of gaping holes. Don't you feel any pity for me?"

She had put on the wool gloves Mother Can's maid, the one with the porcelain smile, had given her as a present. Sema was on her way to the one bus stop that had been ignored throughout their whole family history. To uncover the fate of a woman, she was curious to find out what lingered beneath her eyelids.

This would open the window for the third woman, after Sema and her mother, to glide into the room and recount what was left to tell. Her aunt who had carried her sheared hair in her arms for months, as if it were a severed head. She, too, was in the abyss at whose borders the Kızılırmak river flowed passed by. Her name was never uttered in the family house. Aunt Melek had been lonely, lonelier than anyone else. Nothing was left of her except her name. Sema had even forgotten her daughters' names. She was reminded of their drawn out faces; the older one's drawl, the younger one's wild wide-open eyes. Both had inherited the grace of their mother. The most beautiful woman of the town, yet her aunt had been abandoned, left to be forgotten in the corner of the steppe. She wasn't even sure if she was still alive. All because of that unhappy marriage. That officer husband of hers. She knew the truth could crash down upon her anytime if she continued poking around. She had once asked her father why the family had stopped talking to her. He had replied how her husband's opinions were radically different than that of his, how he was an alcoholic, how his sister had always sent letters asking for money, how the husband had been involved in questionable activities, rather than taking care of his family. Sema was slowly unearthing all the knowledge she had swept under the rug. Yes, now she could remember the sisters' names. Aygül, the older one, and Aypare. Their names had suddenly emerged while she sat in the minibus that took her to her aunt's country house with the iron gate that had once stood on the lush countryside. But the town had encroached upon it. Only its large and tall walls protected the place from being completely engulfed by the urban onslaught. On a number of occasions she had toyed with the idea to visit her, but ended up abandoning it every single time.

She was going to say "I did it for you" to the unborn child. Again she had been transfixed by the idea of the nonexistent child. Once born, the child would radiate a grace that would give peace to everyone, the kind of peace

that old stone houses emanate. She would tell the child. "I did this all for you. So I could tell you the story of your grandfather and his brother whose slow death he had witnessed, maybe even voluntarily. There should at least be one story you could tell properly. From beginning to end, the rest would just unfold on its own.

The water inside her belly, had Sema really been impregnated, would have protected her as well. She imagined curling up and settling in a corner of her own belly. With the cells that were multiplying right next to her. With each step she could feel the little thing sucking at her inside her womb and the honk of every third car.

She thought how they would respect her if they knew what she was carrying. Every time she encountered a man, her internal defense mechanism would involuntarily spring into action. It was an instinct to protect, an examination process. She needed the layers of thick skin she had grown since she had been a little child herself, the shields that would protect her womanhood. Her shoes might not have been suitable for the terrain, but what mattered was her instinct to sniff out danger. Because she was defying her fate. As a woman she was passing a threshold she was expected to never even approach.

*Don't you dare!...*

There was no end to her self-reminders. *Don't tell your real name to anyone who asks.* She would tread carefully. She would keep the names of places she visited to herself. Can Mother's voice echoed in her mind while the minibus was driving across the dried plain.

"But what is my destiny?" the boy asked. "The shepherd's girl in the nearby village" the old man responded. The sultan's boy, saddened at the news, ran home and told the story to his father: "Father, my destiny lies with the shepherd's girl, in that god-forsaken village." The father responds "Don't you worry, I'll get rid of her." So he changes into everyday clothes and goes on his way, taking a saddlebag full of gold with him. He arrives at the village, but is denied entry into the shepherd's home. "We haven't got anything," the shepherd says but the Sultan pleads his way in and stays for the night, using the saddlebag as a pillow. He waits until night

falls and the shepherd and his wife go to sleep. He then plunges a knife into the daughter's chest and runs away, leaving the saddlebag behind. Waking up in the morning, the parents find their daughter with the knife in her chest. The mother retrieves the knife without a second thought. Turns out the girl had already carried a wound in her chest, which the knife healed. "Mother, father. Give me food." Coming upon the gold they decide to spend it in the city, so as not to be called thieves in the village. They build themselves a house near the city's fountain. And then, one day by chance the girl and the Sultan's son meet while she is carrying water and he is watering his horse. The boy is love struck the moment he lays his eyes on her. He runs home and tells his mother "Mother, mother. There is a beautiful girl in the house next to the fountain. We are the royal family, go ask for her hand." They celebrate for 40 days and 40 nights. At the wedding night she gives him the knife the Sultan had planted in her chest. The boy runs to his father and asks him about the knife: "Isn't that the knife you used to kill the shepherd's girl? "Almighty God, your fate has not been changed. Go take the girl and go to sleep. She is your destiny."

Sema was struggling with fate. The fate of her family. Her own. The fate of a land. She could have given precedence to her father's political photos. Because he had suffered as a political man. But there was a large lake teeming with flies in front of her. She had to brave the flies and dive to the bottom if she ever wanted to reach the darkest place. The location of her uncle's grave was known, but what about the grave that held all her family's secrets?

It was as if she was keeping a terrible secret stashed away somewhere inside of her, one that would be unnoticed or even ignored by her soul. Is that what she would tell her child? She couldn't let go of the idea of the child. She scowled as she thought about it. The thoughts assaulted her while she was walking around the farm house with the large balcony. Then reality took a swing at her. She walked to the iron-gate, passing by the neglected fruit trees that lined the garden of the ivy covered concrete house. The fruit trees had been the darlings of her aunt; now look at them.

The thin-lipped woman who opened the door stuck a grimace, as if her question was an insult.

“Didn’t Ms. Melek and her family live here?”

“Who are you?”

“A relative.”

“Ahh, ahh. Melek died four years ago. Her two daughters were the only ones to attend her funeral.

It took her some time to collect herself. She leaned against the wall, dumbstruck by this unexpected news.

“We knew” her mother told her later on the phone.

“How?”

“Aygül called me six months after the funeral: ‘My mother passed away. You weren’t invited to the funeral because of the bad blood between you two.’ Your aunt was a very intelligent woman; such a waste.”

It was the women who got crushed first when something fell down. Women who didn’t have a chance to live their own lives, women whose names are forgotten. Her aunt had been such a woman. She had been the prettiest girl of the town and the man who had her future in his hands had given her to the officer. That’s it. Being a First Lieutenant, officer Mustafa had asked for her hand through mutual acquaintances. Her aunt had not hesitated, falling in love with him because he had been an “officer.” The teacher Ahmet had deplored her sister’s decision, but could not have done anything initially to prevent the marriage from happening. But what about later? Why did he let her suffer for so long later?

The voice of her mother she had called to seek comfort had taken an unexpectedly steely tone.

“Don’t you dare slander our family’s name by bringing up that man.”

“Mother, we are talking about my aunt here.”

The line was full of static. Her mother was enjoying a cup of tea with a fellow retired teacher at Moda, making the most of a sunny December. She

told Sema how mad she would get just by thinking of him. She then asked her through the coughing when she would return.

“When everything is revealed.” She said and hung up.

It was about time to tell the story of the women who suffered while dreaming of a different life. No one had asked these women, who found themselves at the far end of treacherous plots, in a land of massacres aspired to be built on the steppes, what this life they dreamed of really looked like. Her aunt had been one of them. She had suffered silently in a world where politics, philosophy, and even the sky had been dominated by men. Was this the guilt her father had been unable to bear? Was that the reason he had been unhappy during his last years, because of her abandoned sister’s suffering that had emerged after penetrating through time and soil to emerge like an underwater spring?

How could she tell all this to the baby she wanted to bring into this world? There were thousands of other things she had to tell it. For instance, the baby had to know that the heaven’s gates were protected by men. According to Prophet Muhammad’s sayings, he had visited the seven levels of heaven and encountered various angels during his ascension. One of them had been Angel Ismail (Ishmael) who was protecting gates of heaven and had commandeered seventy thousand angels who in turn commandeered a hundred thousand angels each.

Her uncle Ismail hadn’t been happy, neither had her aunt.

He had lived too short and unfruitful of a life to be truly called happy, this uncle who had been named after an angel. Her aunt’s life had been too tragic to even bear her name.

She read the surname she had written with a trembling hand on a piece of paper: Mustafa...She did not know what to do. If she searched for her uncle's name, the screen might come up with nothing. She could also face information too severe to stomach. She was aware of the risk.

Of course, there was no information regarding her aunt. The first thing she would do upon finding an internet connection would be to search out her

uncle's family tree. She had gotten his family name from her mother after she calmed down. She was pondering about the nearest place to access the Internet. Her rumbling stomach was reminding of her other needs, but she had to suppress it until she had what she came for. Sadly, it looked like all the signs pointed at the city for any kind of Internet access. She was going to withhold her family name once she got there, of course. The same jolts on the same ever slightly sloped roads. She waited until the road ended. But what she encountered was beyond her wildest dreams.

She was facing dozens of pages with information regarding her uncle. Sema was the only woman in the lobby of the hotel. She wanted to finish her business and get out of there as soon as possible. She asked the woman behind the reception in her loveliest voice if she could print out some pages. She thought for a few seconds how the woman would answer. She had asked for the room rates, took the hotel's card to leave the impression she was a potential customer so as not to arouse any suspicion. Whatever...the woman didn't refuse, probably because it had been such a random request. Sema took the print outs and stashed them in the bag and went for the teacher's guest house, to read all about the dark life of her uncle. Money was short so she would not have stayed in that sorry excuse of a hotel anyway. She also knew that she would want to visit her aunt's neighborhood first thing in the morning as well.

She read the print outs throughout the night, under the light of a single bulb. "Our trainer had been a retired officer. Our goal was to be Turks with impeccable character, to follow the right path, this was our goal...our role models were the dervish veterans. We wanted to become raiders trained as dervishes..." said the old Bozkurt [ultra-nationalist].

"The deceased Mustafa Ö..... had done time in the same prison as Deniz Baykal after the September 12 coup. He had told him that politicians didn't know the people. Baykal then told him that he agreed and put the words "People first" on his political parties motto. He chose Sheikh Edebali's words.

Sema couldn't believe what she was reading. His name came up again

during a senate inquiry in 1977. He had been given a minor service posting in the coalition government, because the party whose militants he had been training had also been part of the coalition. A “small” posting that would allow him to look into progressive teacher’s associations, high-school boarding houses, to ostracize and replace them with teachers that were close to their own ideology.

She was actually reading her aunt’s disregarded sorrow. The aunt who had given birth to two children during this time, who had whispered to her father about the true nature of this officer: “They planned all these massacres in our home. I cannot tell anyone, that’s how much afraid I am.” Sema could feel all the strings inside her body being wound up by an invisible hand.

The child could not know about this. This was far worse than anything Sema had expected. She covered these still undeveloped ears fearing that her mother’s additional info would reach them. She was progressing step by step. She had felt guilty for being cross to her mother and had called her to win over heart again. As a reward she had been presented with secrets buried for years. She had received information that might be worth something if they were true. Her aunt had accused her uncle of stirring trouble in the country. Why would she lie? Was the information she had found on the Internet any different? No. Sending teachers to far away posts, to plant seeds of discord in schools...the documents told her how her uncle, not only had fanned the fire in a single province but also the whole country. She felt angry at herself for not discussing these things before with her late aunt. The documents proved how his career as the right hand of the political party’s chief deputy, who had also been a former officer, had skyrocketed.

“You will know all this” she told the child she wanted to bear. “You will see how close people actually are to shit, how they think they are safely tucked away, but are not.”

Stay away from that name!

She went back to her aunt’s home with an aching heart, not knowing what she would unearth this time, even facing the possibility of losing everything.



She knew that stones couldn't talk, yet, that still warm source...Sema had to have a first account about her aunt's life. She looked at the red soil. She had come early in the morning. A small creek lined with aspens was flowing close to the house. She had forgotten how cold she was. She exhaled into her numb fingers. Had his father returned here to be close to his sister's grave? Roots, it was not always possible to tell where they reached. Sema had just tripped on her own...