



İSTANBUL

Memories and the City

Orhan Pamuk

Translated from the Turkish by Maureen Freely



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Another Orhan

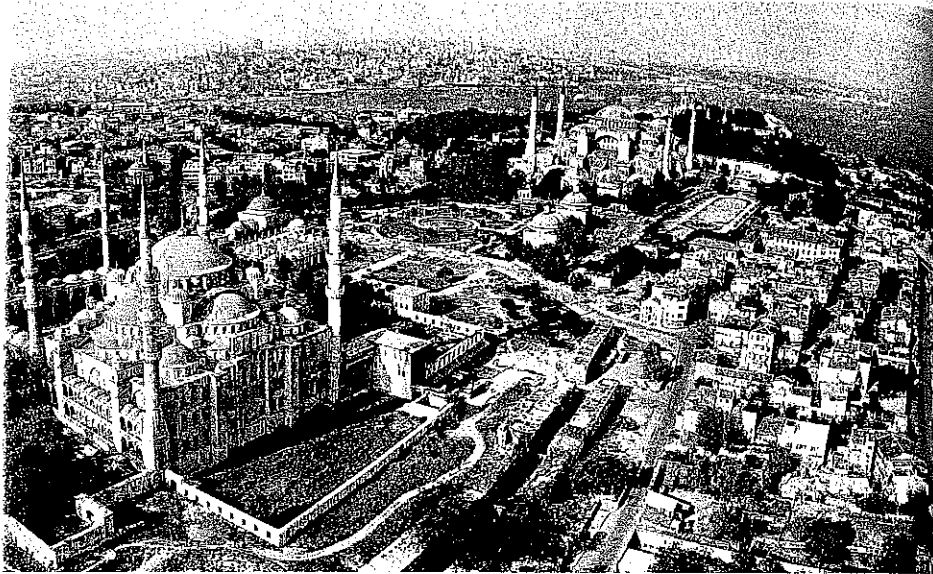
From a very young age, I suspected there was more to my world than I could see: Somewhere in the streets of Istanbul, in a house resembling ours, there lived another Orhan so much like me that he could pass for my twin, even my double. I can't remember where I got this idea or how it came to me. It must have emerged from a web of rumors, misunderstandings, illusions, and fears. But in one of my earliest memories, it is already clear how I've come to feel about my ghostly other.



When I was five I was sent to live for a short time in another house. After one of their many stormy separations, my parents arranged to meet in Paris, and it was decided that my older brother and I should remain in Istanbul, though in separate places. My brother would stay in the heart of the family with our grandmother in the Pamuk Apartments, in Nişantaşı, but I would be sent to stay with my aunt in Cihangir. Hanging on the wall in this house—where

I was treated with the utmost kindness—was a picture of a small child, and every once in a while my aunt or uncle would point up at him and say with a smile, “Look! That’s you!”

The sweet doe-eyed boy inside the small white frame did look a bit like me, it’s true. He was even wearing the cap I sometimes wore. I knew I was not that boy in the picture (a kitsch representation of a “cute child” that someone had brought back from Europe). And yet I kept asking myself, Is this the Orhan who lives in that other house?



Of course, now I too was living in another house. It was as if I’d had to move here before I could meet my twin, but as I wanted only to return to my real home, I took no pleasure in making his acquaintance. My aunt and uncle’s jovial little game of saying I was the boy in the picture became an unintended taunt, and each time I’d feel my mind unraveling: my ideas about myself and the boy who looked like me, my picture and the picture I resembled, my home and the other house—all would slide about in a confusion that made me long all the more to be at home again, surrounded by my family.

Soon my wish came true. But the ghost of the other Orhan in another house somewhere in Istanbul never left me. Throughout

my childhood and well into adolescence, he haunted my thoughts. On winter evenings, walking through the streets of the city, I would gaze into other people’s houses through the pale orange light of home and dream of happy, peaceful families living comfortable lives. Then I would shudder to think that the other Orhan might be living in one of these houses. As I grew older, the ghost became a fantasy and the fantasy a recurrent nightmare. In some dreams I would greet this Orhan—always in another house—with shrieks of horror; in others the two of us would stare each other down in eerie merciless silence. Afterward, wafting in and out of sleep, I would cling ever more fiercely to my pillow, my house, my street, my place in the world. Whenever I was unhappy, I imagined going to the other house, the other life, the place where the other Orhan lived, and in spite of everything I’d half convince myself that I was he and took pleasure in imagining how happy he was, such pleasure that, for a time, I felt no need to go to seek out the other house in that other imagined part of the city.

Here we come to the heart of the matter: I’ve never left Istanbul, never left the houses, streets, and neighborhoods of my childhood. Although I’ve lived in different districts from time to time, fifty years on I find myself back in the Pamuk Apartments, where my first photographs were taken and where my mother first held me in her arms to show me the world. I know this persistence owes some-



thing to my imaginary friend, the other Orhan, and to the solace I took from the bond between us. But we live in an age defined by mass migration and creative immigrants, so I am sometimes hard-pressed to explain why I've stayed, not only in the same place but in the same building. My mother's sorrowful voice comes back to me: "Why don't you go outside for a while? Why don't you try a change of scene, do some traveling . . . ?"

Conrad, Nabokov, Naipaul—these are writers known for having managed to migrate between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilizations. Their imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness. My imagination, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. Istanbul's fate is my fate. I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am.

Gustave Flaubert, who visited Istanbul 102 years before my birth, was struck by the variety of life in its teeming streets; in one of his letters he predicted that in a century's time it would be the capital of the world. The reverse came true: After the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the world almost forgot that Istanbul existed. The city into which I was born was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been before in its two-thousand-year history. For me it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy or (like all *İstanbululus*) making it my own.

At least once in a lifetime, self-reflection leads us to examine the circumstances of our birth. Why were we born in this particular corner of the world, on this particular date? These families into which we were born, these countries and cities to which the lottery of life has assigned us—they expect love from us, and in the end we do love them from the bottom of our hearts; but did we perhaps deserve better? I sometimes think myself unlucky to have been born in an aging and impoverished city buried under the ashes of a ruined empire. But a voice inside me always insists this was really a piece of luck. If it is a matter of wealth, I can certainly count myself

fortunate to have been born into an affluent family at a time when the city was at its lowest ebb (though some have ably argued the contrary). Mostly, I am disinclined to complain; I've accepted the city into which I was born in the same way that I've accepted my body (much as I would have preferred to be more handsome and better built) and my gender (even though I still ask myself, naïvely, whether I might have been better off had I been born a woman). This is my fate, and there's no sense arguing with it. This book is concerned with fate.

I was born in the middle of the night on June 7, 1952, in a small private hospital in Moda. Its corridors, I'm told, were peaceful that night, and so was the world. Aside from the Strambolini volcano's having suddenly begun to spew flames and ash two days earlier, relatively little seems to have been happening on our planet. The newspapers were full of small news: a few stories about the Turkish troops fighting in Korea; a few rumors spread by Americans stoking fears that the North Koreans might be preparing to use biological weapons. In the hours before I was born, my mother had been avidly following a local story: Two days earlier, the caretakers and "heroic" residents of the Konya Student Center had seen a man in a terrifying mask trying to enter a house in Langa through the bathroom window; they'd chased him through the streets to a lumberyard, where, after cursing the police, the hardened criminal had committed suicide; a seller of dry goods identified the corpse as a gangster who the year before had entered his shop in broad daylight and robbed him at gunpoint.

When she was reading the latest on this drama, my mother was alone in her room, or so she told me with a mixture of regret and annoyance many years later. After taking her to the hospital, my father had grown restless and, when my mother's labor failed to progress, he'd gone out to meet with friends. The only person with her in the delivery room was my aunt, who'd managed to climb over the hospital's garden wall in the middle of the night. When my mother first set eyes on me, she found me thinner and more fragile than my brother had been.

I feel compelled to add *or so I've been told*. In Turkish we have a special tense that allows us to distinguish hearsay from what we've seen with our own eyes; when we are relating dreams, fairy tales, or past events we could not have witnessed, we use this tense. It is a useful distinction to make as we "remember" our earliest life experiences, our cradles, our baby carriages, our first steps, all as reported by our parents, stories to which we listen with the same rapt attention we might pay some brilliant tale of some other person. It's a sensation as sweet as seeing ourselves in our dreams, but we pay a heavy price for it. Once imprinted in our minds, other people's reports of what we've done end up mattering more than what we ourselves remember. And just as we learn about our lives from others, so too do we let others shape our understanding of the city in which we live.

At times when I accept as my own the stories I've heard about my city and myself, I'm tempted to say, "Once upon a time I used to paint. I hear I was born in Istanbul, and I understand that I was a somewhat curious child. Then, when I was twenty-two, I seem to have begun writing novels without knowing why." I'd have liked to write my entire story this way—as if my life were something that happened to someone else, as if it were a dream in which I felt my voice fading and my will succumbing to enchantment. Beautiful though it is, I find the language of epic unconvincing, for I cannot accept that the myths we tell about our first lives prepare us for the brighter, more authentic second lives that are meant to begin when we awake. Because—for people like me, at least—that second life is none other than the book in your hand. So pay close attention, dear reader. Let me be straight with you, and in return let me ask for your compassion.

CHAPTER TWO

The Photographs in the Dark Museum House

My mother, my father, my older brother, my grandmother, my uncles, and my aunts—we all lived on different floors of the same five-story apartment house. Until the year before I was born, the different branches of the family had (as with so many large Ottoman families) lived together in a stone mansion; in 1951 they rented it out to a private elementary school and built on the empty lot next door the modern structure I would know as home; on the facade, in keeping with the custom of the time, they proudly put up a plaque that said PAMUK APT. We lived on the fourth floor, but I had the run of the entire building from the time I was old enough to climb off my mother's lap and can recall that on each floor there was at least one piano. When my last bachelor uncle put his newspaper down long enough to get married, and his new wife moved into the first-floor apartment, from which she was to spend the next half century gazing out the window, she brought her piano with her. No one ever played, on this one or any of the others; this may be why they made me feel so sad.

But it wasn't just the unplayed pianos; in each apartment there was also a locked glass cabinet displaying Chinese porcelains, teacups, silver sets, sugar bowls, snuffboxes, crystal glasses, rosewater ewers, plates, and censers that no one ever touched, although among them I sometimes found hiding places for miniature cars. There were the unused desks inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the tur-



ban shelves on which there were no turbans, and the Japanese and Art Nouveau screens behind which nothing was hidden. There, in the library, gathering dust behind the glass, were my doctor uncle's medical books; in the twenty years since he'd emigrated to America, no human hand had touched them. To my childish mind, these rooms were furnished not for the living but for the dead. (Every once in a while a coffee table or a carved chest would disappear from one sitting room only to appear in another sitting room on another floor.)

If she thought we weren't sitting properly on her silver-threaded chairs, our grandmother would bring us to attention. "Sit up straight!" Sitting rooms were not meant to be places where you could lounge comfortably; they were little museums designed to demonstrate to a hypothetical visitor that the householders were westernized. A person who was not fasting during Ramadan would perhaps suffer fewer pangs of conscience among these glass cupboards and dead pianos than he might if he were still sitting cross-legged in a room full of cushions and divans. Although everyone knew it as freedom from the laws of Islam, no one was quite sure what else westernization was good for. So it was not just in the affluent homes of Istanbul that you saw sitting-room museums; over the next fifty years you could find these haphazard and gloomy (but

sometimes also poetic) displays of western influence in sitting rooms all over Turkey; only with the arrival of television in the 1970s did they go out of fashion. Once people had discovered how pleasurable it was to sit together to watch the evening news, their sitting rooms changed from little museums to little cinemas—although you still hear of old families who put their televisions in their central hallways, locking up their museum sitting rooms and opening them only for holidays or special guests.

Because the traffic between floors was incessant, as it had been in the Ottoman mansion, doors in our modern apartment building were usually left open. Once my brother had started school, my mother would let me go upstairs alone, or else we would walk up together to visit my paternal grandmother in her bed. The tulle curtains in her sitting room were always closed, but it made little difference; the building next door was so close as to make the room very dark anyway, especially in the morning, so I'd sit on the large heavy carpets and invent a game to play on my own. Arranging the miniature cars that someone had brought me from Europe into an obsessively neat line, I would admit them one by one into my garage. Then, pretending the carpets were seas and the chairs and tables islands, I would catapult myself from one to the other without ever touching water (much as Calvino's Baron spent his life jumping from tree to tree without ever touching ground). When I was tired of this airborne adventure or of riding the arms of the sofas like horses (a game that may have been inspired by memories of the horse-drawn carriages of *Heybeliada*), I had another game that I would continue to play as an adult whenever I got bored: I'd imagine that the place in which I was sitting (this bedroom, this sitting room, this classroom, this barracks, this hospital room, this government office) was really somewhere else; when I had exhausted the energy to daydream, I would take refuge in the photographs that sat on every table, desk, and wall.

Never having seen them put to any other use, I assumed pianos were stands for exhibiting photographs. There was not a single surface in my grandmother's sitting room that wasn't covered with frames of all sizes. The most imposing were two enormous por-

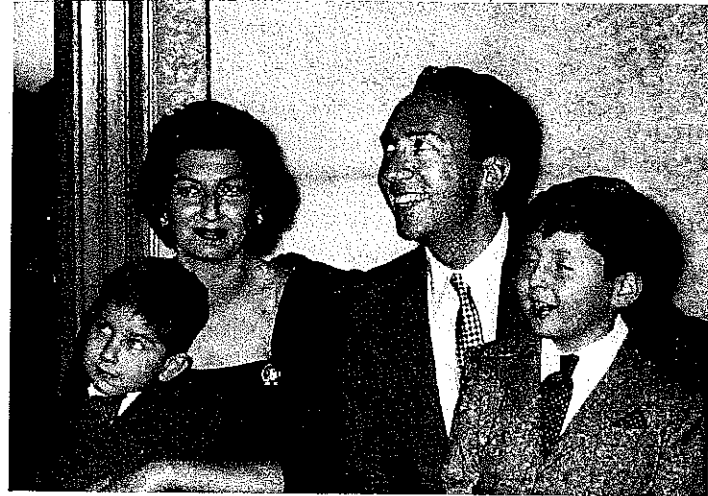
traits that hung over the never-used fireplace: One was a retouched photograph of my grandmother, the other of my grandfather, who died in 1934. From the way the pictures were positioned on the wall and the way my grandparents had been posed (turned slightly toward each other in the manner still favored by European kings and queens on stamps), anyone walking into this museum room to meet their haughty gaze would know at once that the story began with them.

They were both from a town near Manisa called Gördes; their family was known as Pamuk (cotton) because of their pale skin and white hair. My paternal grandmother was Circassian (Circassian girls, famous for being tall and beautiful, were very popular in Ottoman harems). My grandmother's father had immigrated to Anatolia during the Russian-Ottoman War (1877-78), settling first in Izmir (from time to time there was talk of an empty house there) and later in Istanbul, where my grandfather had studied civil engineering. Having made a great deal of money during the early 1930s, when the new Turkish Republic was investing heavily in railroad building, he built a large factory that made everything from rope to a sort of twine to dry tobacco; the factory was located on the banks of the Göksü, a stream that fed into the Bosphorus. When he died in 1934 at the age of fifty-two, he left a fortune so large that my father and my uncle never managed to find their way to the end of it, in spite of a long succession of failed business ventures.

Moving on to the library, we find large portraits of the new generation arranged in careful symmetry along the walls; from their pastel coloring we can take them to be the work of the same photographer. On the far wall is my fat but robust Uncle Özhan, who went to America to study medicine without first doing his military service and so was never able to return to Turkey, thus paving the way for my grandmother to spend the rest of her life assuming mournful airs. There is his bespectacled younger brother Aydın, who lived on the ground floor. Like my father, he studied civil engineering and spent most of his life involved in big engineering projects that never quite got off the ground. On the fourth wall is my father's sister, who spent time in Paris studying piano. Her husband

was an assistant in the law faculty and they lived in the penthouse apartment, to which I would move many years later and where I am now writing this book.

Leaving the library to return to the main room of the museum, stopping briefly by the crystal lamps that only add to the gloom, we find a crowd of untouched black-and-white photographs that tell us life is gaining momentum. Here we see all the children posing at their betrothals, their weddings, and the other great moments of their lives. Next to the first color photographs that my uncle sent from America are snapshots of the extended family enjoying holiday meals in various city parks, in Taksim Square, and on the shores of the Bosphorus; next to a picture of me and my brother with our parents at a wedding is one of my grandfather, posing with his new



car in the garden of the old house, and another of my uncle, posing with his new car outside the entrance to the Pamuk Apartments. Except for extraordinary events like the day my grandmother removed the picture of my American uncle's first wife and replaced it with a picture of his second, the old protocols prevailed: Once assigned its place in the museum, a photograph was never moved; although I had looked at each one hundreds of times, I could never go into that cluttered room without examining all of them again.

My prolonged study of these photographs led me to appreciate the importance of preserving certain moments for posterity, and in time I also came to see what a powerful influence these framed scenes exerted over us as we went about our daily lives. To watch my uncle pose my brother a math problem, and at the same time to see him in a picture taken thirty-two years earlier; to watch my father scanning the newspaper and trying, with a half smile, to catch the tail of a joke rippling across the crowded room, and at that very same moment to see a picture of him at five years old—my age—with hair as long as a girl's, it seemed plain to me that my grandmother had framed and frozen these memories so we could weave them into the present. When, in the tones ordinarily reserved for discussing the founding of a nation, my grandmother spoke of my grandfather, who had died so young, and pointed at the frames on the tables and the walls, it seemed that she—like me—was pulled in two directions, wanting to get on with life but also longing to capture the moment of perfection, savoring the ordinary but still honoring the ideal. But even as I pondered these dilemmas—if you pluck a special moment from life and frame it, are you defying death, decay, and the passage of time or are you submitting to it?—I grew very bored with them.

In time I would come to dread those long festive lunches, those endless evening celebrations, those New Year's feasts when the whole family would linger after the meal to play lotto; every year, I would swear it was the last time I'd go, but somehow I never managed to break the habit. When I was little, though, I loved these meals. As I watched the jokes travel around the crowded table, my uncles laughing (under the influence of vodka or rakı) and my grandmother smiling (under the influence of the tiny glass of beer she allowed herself), I could not help but notice how much more fun life was outside the picture frame. I felt the security of belonging to a large and happy family and could bask in the illusion that we were put on earth to take pleasure in it. Not that I was unaware that these relatives of mine who could laugh, dine, and joke together on holidays were also merciless and unforgiving in quarrels over money

and property. By ourselves, in the privacy of our own apartment, my mother was always complaining to my brother and me about the cruelties of "your aunt," "your uncle," "your grandmother." In the event of a disagreement over who owned what, or how to divide the shares of the rope factory, or who would live on which floor of the apartment house, the only certainty was that there would never be a resolution. These rifts may have faded for holiday meals, but from an early age I knew that behind the gaiety there was a mounting pile of unsettled scores and a sea of recriminations.

Each branch of our large family had its own maid, and each maid considered it her duty to take sides in the wars. Esma Hanım, who worked for my mother, would pay a visit to İkbâl, who worked for my aunt. Later, at breakfast, my mother would say, "Did you hear what Aydın's saying?"

My father would be curious to know, but when the story was over he'd say only, "For God's sake, just stop worrying about it," and return to his newspaper.

If I was too young to understand the underlying cause of these disputes—that my family, still living as it had done in the days of the Ottoman mansion, was slowly falling apart—I could not fail to notice my father's bankruptcies and his ever-more-frequent absences. I could hear in more detail how bad things were whenever my mother took my brother and me to visit our other grandmother in her ghost-ridden house in Şişli. While my brother and I played, my mother would complain and my grandmother would counsel patience. Worried, perhaps, that my mother would want to return to this dusty three-story house, my grandmother, who now lived all alone, would again draw our attention to its many defects.

Apart from the occasional show of temper, my father found little to complain about; he took a childish delight in his good looks, his brains, and the good fortune he never tried to hide. Inside, he was always whistling, inspecting his reflection in the mirror, rubbing a wedge of lemon like brilliantine on his hair. He loved jokes, word games, surprises, reciting poetry, showing off his cleverness, taking planes to faraway places. He was never a father to scold, forbid, or



punish. When he took us out, we would wander all over the city, making friends wherever we went; it was during these excursions that I came to think of the world as a place made for taking pleasure.

If evil ever encroached, if boredom loomed, my father's response was to turn his back on it and remain silent. My mother, who set the rules, was the one to raise her eyebrows and instruct us in life's darker side. If she was less fun to be with, I was still very dependent on her love and attention, for she gave us far more time than did our father, who seized every opportunity to escape from the apartment. My harshest lesson in life was to learn I was in competition with my brother for my mother's affections.

It was, perhaps, because my father exerted so little authority that relations with my brother took on the significance they did: He was the rival for my mother's love. As we of course knew nothing of psychology, the war was initially dressed up as a game, and in the game we would both pretend to be other people. It was not Orhan and Şevket locked in deadly combat but my own favorite hero or soccer player versus my brother's. Convinced that we had become our heroes, we gave the game all we had; and when it ended in blood and tears, the anger and jealousy would make us forget we were brothers.

Whenever my mood dipped, whenever I became unhappy or bored, I'd leave our apartment without a word to anyone and go either to play with my aunt's son downstairs or, more often, upstairs to my grandmother's. Although all the apartments looked very



much alike, with chairs and dining sets, sugar bowls and ashtrays all bought from the same stores, every apartment seemed like a different country, a separate universe. And in the cluttered gloom of my grandmother's sitting room, particularly in the shadow of its coffee tables and glass cabinets, its vases and framed photographs, I could dream I was somewhere else.

In the evenings when we gathered in this room as a family, I often played a game wherein my grandmother's apartment became the bridge of a large ship. This fantasy owed much to the traffic passing through the Bosphorus, those mournful horns making their way into my dreams as I lay in bed. As I steered my imaginary craft through the storm, my crew and passengers ever more troubled by the rising waves, I took a captain's pride in knowing that our ship, our family—our fate—was in my hands.

Although my brother's adventure comics may have inspired this dream, so too did my thoughts about God. God had chosen not to bind us to the city's fate, I thought, simply because we were rich. But as my father and my uncle stumbled from one bankruptcy to the next, as our fortune dwindled and our family disintegrated and the quarrels over money grew more intense, every visit to my grandmother's apartment became a sorrow and took me a step closer to a realization: It was a long time coming, arriving by a circuitous route, but the cloud of gloom and loss spread over Istanbul by the fall of the Ottoman Empire had finally claimed my family too.

