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THE RED-HAIRED WOMAN

NIGHTS OF PLAGUE

MY NAME IS RED

THE MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE

Orhan Pamuk

Translated from the Turkish
by Maureen Freely

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The Happiest Moment of My Life

It was the happiest moment of my life, though I didn't know it. Had I known, had I cherished this gift, would everything have turned out differently? Yes, if I had recognized this instant of perfect happiness, I would have held it fast and never let it slip away. It took a few seconds, perhaps, for that luminous state to enfold me, suffusing me with the deepest peace, but it seemed to last hours, even years. In that moment, on the afternoon of Monday, May 26, 1975, at about a quarter to three, just as we felt ourselves to be beyond sin and guilt so too did the world seem to have been released from gravity and time. Kissing Füsün's shoulder, already moist from the heat of our love-making, I gently entered her from behind, and as I softly bit her ear, her earring must have come free and, for all we knew, hovered in midair before falling of its own accord. Our bliss was so profound that we went on kissing, heedless of the fall of the earring, whose shape I had not even noticed.

Outside the sky was shimmering as it does only in Istanbul in the spring. In the streets people still in their winter clothes were perspiring, but inside shops and buildings, and under the linden and chestnut trees, it was still cool. We felt the same coolness rising from the musty mattress on which we were making love, the way children play, happily forgetting everything else. A breeze wafted in through the balcony window, tinged with the sea and linden leaves; it lifted the tulle curtains, and they billowed down again in slow motion, chilling our naked bodies. From the bed of the back bedroom of the second-floor apartment, we could see a group of boys playing football in the garden below, swearing furiously in the May heat, and as it dawned on us that we were enacting, word for word, exactly those indecencies, we stopped making love to look into each other's eyes and smile. But so

great was our elation that the joke life had sent us from the back garden was forgotten as quickly as the earring.

When we met the next day, Füsün told me she had lost one of her earrings. Actually, not long after she had left the preceding afternoon, I'd spotted it nestled in the blue sheets, her initial dangling at its tip, and I was about to put it aside when, by a strange compulsion, I slipped it into my pocket. So now I said, "I have it here, darling," as I reached into the right-hand pocket of my jacket hanging on the back of a chair. "Oh, it's gone!" For a moment, I glimpsed a bad omen, a hint of malign fate, but then I remembered that I'd put on a different jacket that morning, because of the warm weather. "It must be in the pocket of my other jacket."

"Please bring it tomorrow. Don't forget," Füsün said, her eyes widening. "It is very dear to me."

"All right."

Füsün was eighteen, a poor distant relation, and before running into her a month ago, I had all but forgotten she existed. I was thirty and about to become engaged to Sibel, who, according to everyone, was the perfect match.

The Şanzelize Boutique

The series of events and coincidences that were to change my entire life had begun a month before on April 27, 1975, when Sibel happened to spot a handbag designed by the famous Jenny Colon in a shop window as we were walking along Valikonağı Avenue, enjoying the cool spring evening. Our formal engagement was not far off; we were tipsy and in high spirits. We'd just been to Fuaye, a posh new restaurant in Nişantaşı; over supper with my parents, we had discussed at length the preparations for the engagement party, which was scheduled for the middle of June so that Nurcihan, Sibel's friend since her days at Notre Dame de Sion Lycée and then her years in Paris, could come from France to attend. Sibel had long ago arranged for her engagement dress to be made by Silky İsmet, then the most expensive and sought-after dress-maker in Istanbul, and that evening Sibel and my mother discussed how they might sew on the pearls my mother had given her for the dress. It was my future father-in-law's express wish that his only daughter's engagement party be as extravagant as a wedding, and my mother was only too delighted to help fulfill that wish as best as she could. As for my father, he was charmed enough by the prospect of a daughter-in-law who had "studied at the Sorbonne," as was said in those days among the Istanbul bourgeoisie of any girl who had gone to Paris for any kind of study.

It was as I walked Sibel home that evening, my arm wrapped lovingly around her sturdy shoulders, noting to myself with pride how happy and lucky I was, that Sibel said, "Oh what a beautiful bag!" Though my mind was clouded by the wine, I took note of the handbag and the name of the shop, and at noon the next day I went back. In fact I had never been one of those suave, chivalrous playboys always looking for the least excuse to buy women presents or send them flowers, though

perhaps I longed to be one. In those days, bored Westernized housewives of the affluent neighborhoods like Şişli, Nişantaşı, and Bebek did not open “art galleries” but boutiques, and stocked them with trinkets and whole ensembles smuggled in luggage from Paris and Milan, or copies of “the latest” dresses featured in imported magazines like *Elle* and *Vogue*, selling these goods at ridiculously inflated prices to other rich housewives who were as bored as they were. As she would remind me when I tracked her down many years later, Şenay Hanım, then proprietress of the Şanzelize (its name a transliteration of the legendary Parisian avenue), was, like Füsün, a very distant relation on my mother’s side. The fact that she gave me the shop sign that had once hung on the door as well as any other object connected to Füsün without once questioning the reasons for my excessive interest in the since-shuttered establishment led me to understand that some of the odder details of our story were known to her, and indeed had had a much wider circulation than I had assumed.

When I walked into the Şanzelize at around half past twelve the next day, the small bronze double-knobbed camel bell jingled two notes that can still make my heart pound. It was a warm spring day, and inside the shop it was cool and dark. At first I thought there was no one there, my eyes still adjusting to the gloom after the noonday sunlight. Then I felt my heart in my throat, with the force of an immense wave about to crash against the shore.

“I’d like to buy the handbag on the mannequin in the window,” I managed to say, staggered at the sight of her.

“Do you mean the cream-colored Jenny Colon?”

When we came eye to eye, I immediately remembered her.

“The handbag on the mannequin in the window,” I repeated dreamily.

“Oh, right,” she said and walked over to the window. In a flash she had slipped off her yellow high-heeled pump, extending her bare foot, whose nails she’d carefully painted red, onto the floor of the display

area, stretching her arm toward the mannequin. My eyes traveled from her empty shoe over her long bare legs. It wasn’t even May yet, and they were already tanned.

Their length made her lacy yellow skirt seem even shorter. Hooking the bag, she returned to the counter and with her long, dexterous fingers she removed the balls of crumpled cream-colored tissue paper, showing me the inside of the zippered pocket, the two smaller pockets (both empty) as well as the secret compartment, from which she produced a card inscribed JENNY COLON, her whole demeanor suggesting mystery and seriousness, as if she were showing me something very personal.

“Hello, Füsün. You’re all grown up! Perhaps you don’t recognize me.”

“Not at all, Cousin Kemal, I recognized you right away, but when I saw you did not recognize me, I thought it would be better not to disturb you.”

There was a silence. I looked again into one of the pockets she had just pointed to inside the bag. Her beauty, or her skirt, which was in fact too short, or something else altogether, had unsettled me, and I couldn’t act naturally.

“Well . . . what are you up to these days?”

“I’m studying for my university entrance exams. And I come here every day, too. Here in the shop, I’m meeting lots of new people.”

“That’s wonderful. So tell me, how much is this handbag?”

Furrowing her brow, she peered at the handwritten price tag on the bottom: “One thousand five hundred lira.” (At the time this would have been six months’ pay for a junior civil servant.) “But I am sure Şenay Hanım would want to offer you a special price. She’s gone home for lunch and must be napping now, so I can’t phone her. But if you could come by this evening . . .”

“It’s not important,” I said, and taking out my wallet—a clumsy gesture that, later, at our secret meeting place, Füsün would often

mimic—I counted out the damp bills. Füsün wrapped the bag in paper, carefully but with evident inexperience, and then put it into a plastic bag. Throughout this silence she knew that I was admiring her honey-hued arms, and her quick, elegant gestures. When she politely handed me the shopping bag, I thanked her. “Please give my respects to Aunt Nesibe and your father,” I said (having failed to remember Tarık Bey’s name in time). For a moment I paused: My ghost had left my body and now, in some corner of heaven, was embracing Füsün and kissing her. I made quickly for the door. What an absurd daydream, especially since Füsün wasn’t as beautiful as all that. The bell on the door jingled, and I heard a canary warbling. I went out into the street, glad to feel the heat. I was pleased with my purchase; I loved Sibel very much. I decided to forget this shop, and Füsün.

CHAPTER 3

Distant Relations

Nevertheless, at supper that evening I mentioned to my mother that I had run into our distant relation Füsün while buying a handbag for Sibel.

“Oh, yes, Nesibe’s daughter is working in that shop of Şenay’s up there, and what a shame it is!” said my mother. “They don’t even visit us for the holidays anymore. That beauty contest put them in such an awkward position. I walk past that shop every day, but I can’t even bring myself to go inside and say hello to the poor girl—nor in fact does it even cross my mind. But when she was little, you know, I was very fond of her. When Nesibe came to sew, she’d come too sometimes. I’d get your toys out of the cupboard and while her mother sewed she’d play with them quietly. Nesibe’s mother, Aunt Mihriver, may she rest in peace—she was a wonderful person.”

“Exactly how are we related?”

Because my father was watching television and paying us no mind, my mother launched into an elaborate story about her father, who was born the same year as Atatürk and later attended Şemsi Efendi School, also just like the founder of the Republic, as you can see in this school photograph I found many years later. It seems that long before he (Ethem Kemal, my grandfather) married my grandmother, he had made a very hasty first marriage at the age of twenty-three. Füsün’s great-grandmother, who was of Bosnian extraction, had died during the Balkan Wars, during the evacuation of Edirne. Though the unfortunate woman had not given Ethem Kemal children, she already had a daughter named Mihriver by a poor sheikh, whom she’d married when she was “still a child.” So Aunt Mihriver (Füsün’s grandmother, who had been brought up by a very odd assortment of people) and her daughter Aunt Nesibe (Füsün’s mother) were not strictly speaking

relatives; they were more like in-laws, and though my mother had been emphasizing this for years, she had still directed us to call the women from this distant branch of the family “aunts.” During their most recent holiday visits, my mother had given these impoverished relations (who lived in the backstreets of Teşvikiye) an unusually chilly reception that led to hurt feelings because two years earlier, Aunt Nesibe, without saying a word, had allowed her sixteen-year-old daughter, then a student at Nişantaşı Lycée for Girls, to enter a beauty contest; and on subsequently learning that Aunt Nesibe had in fact encouraged her daughter, even taking pride in this stunt that should have caused her to feel only shame, my mother had hardened her heart toward Aunt Nesibe, whom she had once so loved and protected.

For her part, Aunt Nesibe had always esteemed my mother, who was twenty years older, and who had been supportive of her when she was a young woman going from house to house in Istanbul’s most affluent neighborhoods, in search of work as a seamstress.

“They were desperately poor,” my mother said. And lest she exaggerate, she added, “Though they were hardly the only ones, my son—all of Turkey was poor in those days.” At the time, my mother had recommended Aunt Nesibe to all her friends as “a very good person, and a very good seamstress,” and once a year (sometimes twice) she herself would call her to our house to sew a dress for some party or wedding.

Because it was almost always during school hours, I wouldn’t see her during these sewing visits. But in 1957, at the end of August, urgently needing a dress for a wedding, my mother had called Nesibe to our summer home in Suadiye. Retiring to the back room on the second floor, overlooking the sea, they set themselves up next to the window from which, peering through the fronds of the palm trees, they might see the rowboats and motorboats, and the boys jumping from the pier. Nesibe having unpacked her sewing box, with the view of Istanbul adorning its lid, they sat surrounded by her scissors, pins,

measuring tape, thimbles, and swatches of material and lace, complaining of the heat, the mosquitoes, and the strain of sewing under such pressure, joking like sisters, and staying up half the night to slave away on my mother’s Singer sewing machine. I remember Bekri the cook bringing one glass of lemonade after another into that room (the hot air thick with the dust of velvet), because Nesibe, pregnant at twenty, was prone to cravings; when we all sat down to lunch, my mother would tell the cook, half joking, that “whatever a pregnant woman desires, you must let her have, or else the child will turn out ugly!” and with that in mind, I remember looking at Nesibe’s small bump with a certain interest. This must have been my first awareness of Füsün’s existence, though no one knew yet whether she would be a girl or a boy.

“Nesibe didn’t even inform her husband; she just lied about her daughter’s age and entered her in that beauty contest,” said my mother, fuming at the thought. “Thank God, she didn’t win, so they were spared the public disgrace. If the school had gotten wind of it, they would have expelled the girl. . . . She must have finished lycée by now. I don’t expect that she’ll be doing any further studies, but I’m not up-to-date, since they don’t come to visit on holidays anymore. . . . Can there be anyone in this country who doesn’t know what kind of girl, what kind of woman, enters a beauty contest? How did she behave with you?”

It was my mother’s way of suggesting that Füsün had begun to sleep with men. I’d heard the same from my Nişantaşı playboy friends when Füsün appeared in a photograph with the other finalists in the newspaper *Milliyet*, but as I found the whole thing embarrassing I tried to show no interest. After we had both fallen silent, my mother wagged her finger at me ominously and said, “Be careful! You’re about to become engaged to a very special, very charming, very lovely girl! Why don’t you show me this handbag you’ve bought her. Mümtaz!”—this was my father’s name—“Look—Kemal’s bought Sibel a handbag!”

“Really?” said my father, his face expressing such contentment as to suggest he had seen and approved the bag as a sign of how happy his son and his sweetheart were, but not once did he take his eyes off the screen.

CHAPTER 4

Love at the Office

My father was looking at a rather flashy commercial that my friend Zaim had made for Meltem, “Turkey’s first domestic fruit soda,” now sold all over the country. I watched it carefully and liked it. Zaim’s father, like mine, had amassed a fortune in the past ten years, and now Zaim was using that money to pursue ventures of his own. I gave him occasional advice, so I was keen to see him succeed.

Once I’d graduated from business school in America and completed my military service, my father had demanded I follow in my brother’s footsteps and become a manager in his business, which was growing by leaps and bounds, and so when I was still very young he’d appointed me the general manager of Satsat, his Harbiye-based distribution and export firm. Satsat had an exaggerated operating budget and made hefty profits, thanks not to me but to various accounting tricks by which the profits from his other factories and businesses were funneled into Satsat (which might be translated into English as “Sellsell”). I spent my days mastering the finer points of the business from worn-out accountants twenty or thirty years my senior and large-breasted lady clerks as old as my mother; and mindful that I would not have been in charge but for being the owner’s son, I tried to show some humility.

At quitting time, while buses and streetcars as old as Satsat’s now departed clerks rumbled down the avenue, shaking the building to its foundations, Sibel, my intended, would come to visit, and we would make love in the general manager’s office. For all her modern outlook and the feminist notions she had brought back from Europe, Sibel’s ideas about secretaries were no different from my mother’s: “Let’s not make love here. It makes me feel like a secretary!” she’d say sometimes. But as we proceeded to the leather divan in that office, the real reason

for her reserve—that Turkish girls, in those days, were afraid of sex before marriage—would become obvious.

Little by little sophisticated girls from wealthy Westernized families who had spent time in Europe were beginning to break this taboo and sleep with their boyfriends before marriage. Sibel, who occasionally boasted of being one of those “brave” girls, had first slept with me eleven months earlier. But she judged this arrangement to have gone on long enough, and thought it was about time we married.

As I sit down so many years later and devote myself heart and soul to the telling of my story, though, I do not want to exaggerate my fiancée’s daring or to make light of the sexual oppression of women, because it was only when Sibel saw that my “intentions were serious,” when she believed in me as “someone who could be trusted”—in other words, when she was absolutely sure that there would in the end be a wedding—that she gave herself to me. Believing myself a decent and responsible person, I had every intention of marrying her; but even if this hadn’t been my wish, there was no question of my having a choice now that she had “given me her virginity.” Before long, this heavy responsibility cast a shadow over the common ground between us of which we were so proud—the illusion of being “free and modern” (though of course we would never use such words for ourselves) on account of having made love before marriage, and in a way this, too, brought us closer.

A similar shadow fell over us each time Sibel anxiously hinted that we should marry at once, but there were times, too, when Sibel and I would be very happy making love in the office, and as I wrapped my arms around her in the dark, the noise of traffic and rumbling buses rising up from Halaskârgazi Avenue, I would tell myself how lucky I was, how content I would be for the rest of my life. Once, after our exertions, as I was stubbing out my cigarette in this ashtray bearing the Satsat logo, Sibel, sitting half naked on my secretary Zeynep Hanım’s

chair, started rattling the typewriter, and giggling at her best impression of the dumb blonde who featured so prominently in the jokes and humor magazines of the time.