At the Breakfast Table

Defne Suman was born in Istanbul and grew up on Prinkipo Island. She holds a Masters in Sociology from the Bosphorus University, later working as a teacher in Thailand and Laos where she studied Far Eastern philosophy and mystic disciplines. She continued her studies in Oregon, USA and now lives in Athens with her husband.

Betsy Göksel is an American teacher and translator who has lived in Turkey since the 1960s. Her translations include *The Hate Trap* by Haluk Şahin as well as several books on art and architecture for the Istanbul Municipality.

Also by Defne Suman

The Silence of Scheherazade

AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

Defne Suman

Translated by Betsy Göksel



An Apollo Book

Originally published in 2018 as *Kahvaltı Sofrası*
by Doğan Kitap, Istanbul, Turkey.

First published in the UK in 2022 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Defne Suman and © Kalem Agency 2018

The moral right of Defne Suman to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781800247000
ISBN (XTPB): 9781800247017
ISBN (E): 9781800247031

Typeset by Divaddict Publishing Solutions Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For my mother

The writing of this novel was inspired by Ayfer Tunc's short story 'Burden'

The truth is like a shutter made of iron and if you get caught underneath it you will be crushed. That's the most tragic aspect of historiography; in attempting to open the shutter, there are those who are crushed beneath its weight – and no one writes their story down.

Ayfer Tunc (transl. by Caroline Stockford), 'Burden'

Where my mama left me, hold me tight,
Where I've given up on love, set me right.

Metin Altiok (transl. by Betsy Göksel), 'Saril Bana'

<<insert family tree: 'The Family of Shirin Saka>>

1

Burak

Buyukada, an island off Istanbul
Summer 2017

The door opened a crack.

'Burak?'

I grunted.

'Psst, Burak! Are you asleep?'

The wood floor creaked and Celine slipped in.

I'm not asleep any more, Celine. Thanks to you.

I forced my eyes open. My head was thumping. Long, tanned legs entered my field of vision; hair brushed my face and tickled my neck. Celine plopped down beside me on the bed and grinned, realizing I was awake. I closed my eyes. High ceilings, white paint, a headache.

'I guess you're hungover, mister. You've got squinty eyes.'

'Mmm…'

'Burak, wake up. I want to tell you something.'

Just go away, Celine. I'm asleep. Find a man your own age to go to bed with. You might be young and beautiful, you might have hair the colour of straw and legs as shapely as

columns, but it's your aunt I'm interested in, not you. And where is she? Asleep, of course.

The thought of Nur took me back to last night. We'd sat out on the wooden jetty below the house, Nur, Celine and I: aunt, niece and family friend, Burak. Nur's friend Burak. Drunk. Celine and I had polished off two bottles of red wine. Nur was drinking cognac, even though it was a hot summer's night, and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. When she stubbed them out on the rotten jetty, instead of chucking the filters into the sea, she lined up the butts carefully, side by side on the boards. And then? And then you, Celine, went into the house and came back with a fresh bottle of wine in your hand. Because you were weaving all over the place, couldn't walk in a straight line, the bottle fell into the water. I retrieved it, and you and Nur clapped. 'Our hero, Burak!' So what? I saved a bottle of wine that had fallen into knee-deep water. We drank the wine, then Nur produced some weed and we rolled a joint. Then I was kissing one of you. Probably Nur. Or was it both of you? No, I didn't kiss anyone. That was a dream.

'Psst, Burak. Wake up, okay! I'm serious. My father's not here.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I'm telling you, he's not here. He's gone!'

'He'll be back soon, Celine. He'll have gone for a walk.'

Yes, it was a dream; a beautiful dream. I was kissing Nur. We were alone on the jetty – not the one in front of Shirin Saka's house but on the beach in the remote valley where Nur and I first met. Nur's naked body shone silver as the moonlight filtered through the clouds. There was something important I needed to tell her, but I stopped myself because I didn't want to come out of my dream.

Then Celine poked me and I had to open my eyes. Dream over. Forced landing into the present. When the wheels hit the ground, my headache returned. I ran through a mental checklist: me, Burak Gokce, forty-four years old, male, currently staying at Shirin Saka's house on the island of Buyukada. What day was it? Sunday. The second day of the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan. Tomorrow was Shirin Saka's hundredth birthday and I was there both as a family friend and as a journalist.

Reaching for my glasses on the bedside table, I came face to face with Celine. The world was foggy, but Celine was so close, I couldn't fail to see how her big blue eyes widened as we talked. Her childishness, the way she aped the intonation of the girls in the local TV soap, irritated me.

'No, no… He's gone. His bed hasn't been slept in – it's exactly as it was when Sadik Usta made it yesterday morning. He took the backpack he always takes on his trips, and his laptop isn't there either, or his charger. My father's disappeared, Burak.'

I took a deep breath. The light sliding into the room through the open window had already faded from pink to yellow. Summer mornings are so unforgiving, so impatient, with the sun in a rush to rise in the sky, as if it weren't going to be up there for eighteen hours. I thought about Fikret, Celine's father. It was he who'd invited me to the family celebration for his grandmother's hundredth birthday. I'd be the only journalist, he'd said when he called me, his voice serious, as it always was. I smiled wryly to myself – as if the media cared about Shirin Saka. True, she'd been quite a well-known artist in her day, but who even remembered her name now? I didn't say anything, though. She was his grandmother, after all.

I was a bit upset that it wasn't Nur but her brother who'd invited me, but, still, I wasn't going to say no. I'd be staying in Shirin Saka's house on Buyukada for the entire holiday. I'd speak with Shirin Hanim, spend some time in the library where she'd created her masterpieces, look over old photographs and read through old letters, postcards and even diaries, if there were any. Most importantly, the whole time I was there, I'd be under the same roof as Nur, and what was more, for some family reason which didn't concern me, Nur's husband Ufuk would not be around. I did not turn down Fikret's invitation.

There was a time I'd have been on fire at the prospect of doing an interview with Shirin Saka. I'd asked Nur countless times to set one up for me, but she was always very protective, as if her grandmother were some kind of rare Indian fabric. Eventually I gave up. Now the opportunity was being handed to me on a plate, even if Fikret had warned me that his grandmother's mind tended to flit from here to there. That didn't faze me; I'd been conducting interviews with elderly people for years and was well used to piecing together their stories, like so many reflections in a shattered mirror. Making sense of the comings and goings of Shirin Hanim's mind would be a simple enough puzzle.

Celine was still there, right under my nose, waiting for an answer. I breathed in the sweet cinnamon smell of her. My mouth was like mud; I could barely move my dry lips.

'Maybe he's doing yoga. He told me he never starts his day without yoga.'

'Oh, come off it, Burak! Do you need a laptop to do yoga? And anyway, he always does yoga in his room before dawn – it's not as good once the sun's risen, apparently. Come on, get

up. Let's look for my dad. Let's go down to the pier. I'm really worried – maybe he left on one of the ferries.'

I straightened the sheet wrapped around my legs and propped myself up on my elbows.

Celine laughed when she saw my T-shirt. 'Look at that – Metallica!'

Last night, in the dark, when I'd come in drunk, I'd felt around in the wardrobe for something to put on and found that T-shirt. My own shirt had got wet when I'd jumped in the water to rescue the wine, so I'd taken it off and hung it up somewhere on the jetty. This one presumably belonged to Celine's brother, Oguz.

'Where's Nur? Is she awake? Maybe she knows where your dad went.'

'Oh, yeah… If we waited for her! My aunt never wakes up before noon. She was probably writing all night. She's started on a new novel, a historical novel, commissioned by a rich businessman – didn't you know? While we sleep, she writes. A literal ghostwriter!'

Celine laughed at her own joke. I didn't say anything. It hurt me to think of Nur being a ghostwriter. Everything about Nur hurt me.

'Okay, I'll get up. Give me a few minutes to get myself together and wash my face. Wait for me outside.'

Grumbling, Celine stood up and walked to the door. How come she was being so familiar with me? Burak, my boy, this is what happens when you drink wine together in the darkness of the night. Most probably in my drunkenness I'd revealed things about myself, things that had made her think she was getting close to me.

I wrapped the sheet around me and sat on the edge of the bed. My head was still pounding. I filled a glass of water from

the carafe on the bedside table, drank some and held the glass against my temple. The coolness felt good. I wasn't ready to get up quite yet. My gaze passed to the painting above the bedside table. It was one of Shirin Saka's. A ship was moving between shadows of light and dark blue, its outsized funnels billowing smoke that partly obscured the crowd of slender black silhouettes on the deck; faceless figures with handkerchiefs in their hands. In the background were green mountains out of which stone buildings had been hewn, or maybe they were tombs. Fog was rolling down from the peaks, into the foothills, smothering the prow of the ship. For some reason the painting made me think of Suheyla, Nur's mother, who'd died much too young. Shirin Saka's only child.

I never met Suheyla Bulut. She died on the day Nur and I came back from our holiday, the holiday where we met. We'd travelled back to Istanbul from Fethiye on the overnight bus. It's ridiculous, but for years I secretly held the poor woman responsible for destroying our love. As if Nur and I would have had a smooth relationship if her mother's heart hadn't stopped that day. Now, as I looked at Shirin Saka's painting, at the misty, elongated, tenderly rendered silhouettes, I realized that I had carried this angry resentment inside me for years. If her mother had lived, Nur would have fallen in love with me. I'd believed that in all sincerity. How absurd!

Another glass of water. My throat was like a desert, incapable of absorbing moisture. The water slid straight down into my stomach without touching my parched throat. Carafe in hand, I stood up, walked over to the window, pulled the curtain aside and stared out at the garden. The gardener, an extinguished cigarette stuck between his lips, was watering the desiccated earth with a hose. All the trees and flowers and pot plants had dried up. Shirin and Sadik must have

got too old to look after the garden. It had once been lovely, full of roses of every hue, honeysuckle climbing the walls, bewitching expanses of purple and red bougainvillea.

I had a powerful urge to go and wake up Nur and reminisce with her about that morning we returned to Istanbul and went together to her university campus. I'd go through the bathroom separating our two rooms, tap on her door and lie down beside her. We'd replay the memories of our youth, as if we were watching an old film. But there was no way I could do that, not with Celine keeping guard at my door. And Nur would be furious at my interrupting her precious sleep. In any case, why would she want to remember the day she found out her mother had died?

I'd have to reminisce by myself.

I reminisced.

Nur, a prepaid phonecard clamped between her teeth, was waving at me, laughing, about to call her mother. We were on the Bosphorus University campus, with its beautiful red-roofed buildings and green surroundings, and I was sitting on the steps, watching students returning to their halls of residence, suitcases in hand. Pretty, suntanned girls were lounging like cats on the grass in the spring sunshine. It was if the campus was a theatre set and my life was the most wonderful play being acted out within it. Nur's dress was lifting in the breeze and the boys were turning to look at her shapely brown legs. Her dress was too short for May and its bright colours – orange, red, yellow – too summery. I hadn't registered that it was so short until we got to the city, but now I felt uncomfortable. We'd made straight for campus as soon as we got off the overnight bus because Nur had a seminar that morning. Epistemology. I held my palms to my nose and inhaled the scent of her hair: honeysuckle, salt, sand.

'Don't go to the seminar,' I'd said on the bus back to Istanbul. 'You can get the notes off someone else later.'

The bus attendant was handing round cups of Nescafé. Sunday night was turning into Monday morning and real life loomed as our holiday receded. I held onto Nur so as not break the connection between the idyll of the last week and reality ahead. I ran my fingers through her hedgehog hair. The bus was racing towards the city at full speed along the newly opened TEM highway and Nur was gazing out the window with sleepy eyes. To our right, the surface of the bay was like oil, totally smooth, purple, pink, lavender. This was not the crystal-clear turquoise sea that we'd been diving into with happy shrieks for the past week. It made me sad. I wanted to go back.

'I have to go. It's one of my options for my philosophy degree and I don't know anyone else in the seminar group. I wouldn't copy somebody else's notes anyway. I need to go.'

We went, but Nur didn't make it to the seminar.

The road up to the South Campus was extraordinarily beautiful, lined with pine trees and green bushes as it followed the elegant twists and turns of the Bosphorus; the Judas trees were in bloom, the hillsides were purple, and the sea was blue. Several couples passed us, walking arm in arm or holding hands, but I wasn't able to reach for Nur's hand. She was walking absent-mindedly beside me, lugging a backpack bigger than she was, to which were tied a sleeping bag, a tent and various metal camping utensils. There were streaks of white salt in her short hair from our final swim the evening before, and her tanned face looked gaunt. The overnight bus must have worn her out, I thought. Our canyon, our remote beach accessible only by boat, our nights of drinking wine

beside the fire, roasting sausages, counting stars and then making love in our tiny tent seemed so distant now.

When we got to the green playing field, Nur turned to me. Her voice was soft, her face sweet like a child's. 'I can't miss this seminar, Burak, but after it I have a three-hour gap. I was going to go home and dump my backpack, but forget about that. Let's just sit on the grass. We can buy potato pies and tea from the canteen – I've even missed their horrible tea. What do you think? Or we could head down to Hisar if you like, buy some sausages from the kiosk and go to the Ali Baba Café.'

She gripped my hand, tightly, and my fears evaporated. I felt like laughing. If it hadn't been for her enormous backpack, I'd have pulled her to me, but as it was, I just nodded like an idiot. She put her pack down, unzipped the front compartment and took out a phonecard.

'I'll run and call my mum, tell her we're back so she won't worry. Stay here on the steps with our bags. It won't take two minutes.'

Let's pause it right there, Nur. Let's yell 'Cut!' and make the film stop at that frame. You get to the phone booth, turn and wave. Let there be a girlish smile on your face. Let your short, thin, multicoloured summer skirt dance in the breeze. Let the boys passing to the right and left of you stare at your legs. Turn and look at me with the phonecard clamped between your teeth; smile, wave.

Let the hands of time not touch the happiest moment of my life.

It wasn't Nur's mother but her brother Fikret who answered the phone.

Suheyla Bulut had had a heart attack that morning. Nur didn't wait for her brother to finish talking; she dropped

the receiver and came out of the booth, leaving the phone swinging on its cord. A boy handed her the phonecard she'd left in there. She raised her head and stared at me sitting on the steps. The girlish smile had gone. In its place was a look of utter desolation. I was stunned. Mine was the shock of a spectator who'd come to watch the most wonderful play of his life. Much later I realized that it wasn't time that had destroyed the happiest moment of my life but that look of utter desolation.

Nur never smiled in that beautiful way again. Not at me, not at anyone.

'Burak, what are you doing? Aren't you coming? Have you gone back to asleep?'

Celine opened the door and stuck her head in. Seeing me standing at the window in my underwear and T-shirt, she quickly backed out again. I walked over and put the carafe down on the bedside table. A lump had settled in my heart. Pulling on some trousers under my black Metallica T-shirt, I went into the bathroom between my room and Nur's.