THE LAST APARTMENT IN ISTANBUL

ALSO BY DEFNE SUMAN

The Silence of Scheherazade
At the Breakfast Table
Summer Heat

THE LAST APARTMENT IN ISTANBUL

DEFNE SUMAN

Translated by Betsy Göksel



An Apollo Book

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The Ground Floor

I gave up on love the year my wife died. The same year that Ulker vanished into thin air, as a matter of fact. There were those who thought that it was because of Ulker that my wife died, and there were those who wondered whether it was because my wife had died that Ulker left. It may be that both theories are true. But many years, many long years had passed since all that. So many that time had come to a standstill for me. I had understood nothing of this new century, the first quarter of which had almost gone. Whatever life held for me had remained in the past. I'd been able to bring neither love nor spirit into the present, only grief and longing. Thus was I bemoaning my circumstances to my friend and neighbour, Berin, as we sat together in her top-floor flat with its magnificent view of Topkapi Palace, she drinking tea, me coffee.

Then I saw Leyla.

It was January 2020. I was seventy-five years old. I remember the month because the cursed virus that went on to terrorize the entire world had not yet entered our lives. We were still shaking hands with new acquaintances and hugging old ones, and we were not yet regarding with

suspicion anyone breathing the same air as us. Two months later, everyone of my age was imprisoned in their homes. 'We will not see the end of this pandemic, Pericles,' Berin said. She was the same age as me and in excellent health, which she put down to her eating just the one meal a day, at twelve noon precisely. So when she said that, I didn't take her seriously. I didn't take the virus seriously either. During my many years as a pharmacist I'd dispensed medications for three or four Asian flu epidemics, and I assumed that this one would be no different.

I had been on my way out. I was going into Beyoglu, as I did every midday. Where Berin attributed her good health to her ascetic diet, for me it was walking. Despite my age, I could walk a long way without needing to rest. I had faith in my lungs and my bones. In the spring months and on winter days, when the weather was cool but sunny, I would walk from the Tarlabasi neighbourhood to Galatasaray, from there to Tunel, and then, if I was in good spirits, on down to Karakoy. I'd have soup at the fish restaurant there and then drink tea in the courtyard of the old building next door. Over the years, I'd made friends with the old master blacksmiths and joiners, with their apprentices, and also with the young men and women who worked in the modern architectural firms on the upper floors.

The day I first set eyes on Leyla was cool, bright and sunny. As the cage lift reached the ground floor, shafts of purple, yellow and blue light streamed through the stained-glass fanlight above the heavy-duty front door and cast colourful shadows across the mosaic floor. When I was a child, this play of light had enchanted me. But now The Circle was in a miserable state. No matter how frequently we had it cleaned, how often Samiha mopped the stairs with soapy water, within

two days you couldn't even see the floor for all the dirt. Berin and I were the only ones left who knew that the floor was covered in Italian mosaics of dark red, blue and white. Edip would probably have known that too, back when his memory was sharp, but now he was no longer in his right mind. He lived in the first-floor apartment, cramming it with whatever he found in Istanbul's garbage bins.

Back when the basement was occupied by Fortune Nightclub, we thought they were bringing in all the dirt and grime, so we cursed Nejat and his men. Veli, who owned the coffeeshop on the corner, wouldn't allow his sister Samiha to clean our building in that time. Even at seven in the morning, you could smell raki fumes and cigarette smoke coming from the nightclub, and sometimes it rose all the way up to our apartments. It was no easy job to clean up the filth left by its customers, who vomited and urinated right outside the door and crashed out on the marble steps. The Fortune Nightclub did have its own entrance, separate from ours, on Temrin Hill Street. The club's owner, Nejat, only used the main entrance for special guests. The VIPs used to make a lot of noise when they left the club. A fight broke out beside the lift once, and blood was spilled. It seeped into the mosaics and we couldn't get it out. Veli was right to forbid his sister from cleaning our building back then.

But Fortune Nightclub shut down a long time ago, and the basement has been empty ever since. Nejat had the stairs down to the club laid with red carpet, and the bannisters and walls upholstered in thickly padded velvet, presumably so that the VIP guests wouldn't injure themselves on their way up or down and cause him any headaches. When Nejat disappeared, the velvet curtains, vomit-stained carpets and padded bannisters remained. The Circle still stands in a world

of dust and dirt. Outside, there is non-stop construction work. Not a day goes by without a building on a backstreet or on the other side of the road being demolished.

As I went down in the lift, I heard Ferit, the estate agent, talking to someone from behind the half-opened door of the apartment that was for sale on the ground floor. He was once again singing its praises. Yes, he could not deny that it was in a dilapidated state, but it was a marvellous investment opportunity. He'd been repeating that same line for two months and I'd not yet seen anyone fall for it. It had once been a hairdressing salon, filled with cigarette smoke and hair clippings of various colours. Mirrors still hung on the walls. Cross-dressers used to get hair extensions there, which I learnt about from going in and out of the building. Neither the hairdresser, Barbaros, nor his customers were ever anything but polite to me. When I went past his open door, they never failed to say good morning, have a nice day.

'You know, girls, Monsieur Pericles is the building's most senior resident. Isn't that right, sir? How many years is it that you've lived here?' Barbaros would say.

When I said that I'd been born there, the women would exclaim in surprise and invite me in. I would give them a tip of my hat and continue on my way.

One day the previous November, when I exited the lift as usual at noon, I saw that Barbaros's salon was completely empty. It had been abandoned overnight. They had taken away the seats, the hair-washing armchairs and the sink. Only the mirrors remained in place. I was sorry. Barbaros's salon had been there for more than twenty years and I'd become accustomed to it. I'd even planned to accept their invitation to tea one day. But I was too late.

That same day, Ferit began bringing round potential

buyers. He replaced the fancy red lettering on the window with a huge sign announcing 'FOR SALE BY OWNER' and attached a slip of paper underneath it with a phone number underlined.

Some time later, I collared Ferit in front of his office, which was in The Circle's old coal cellar.

'Are you the owner of this apartment?'

'No, Uncle Pericles. How could I own an apartment?'

He was lying, of course. Ferit owned condominiums in a thirty-storey tower in some neighbourhood that I didn't know the name of. I had heard this from Berin's adopted daughter, Tulin. But laid-back Ferit was not overly concerned with the truth.

'I get more calls when the ad says "By the owner". They come to see it. I show them around.'

'And what if they don't give your realter commission?'

'Then we will handle it, Uncle Pericles. Just let them like it and let us agree on a price. The rest is minor detail.'

I first set eyes on Leyla in one of Hairdresser Barbaros's mirrors, the one that could be seen through the crack in the door. Ferit had been talking to her, and she was looking up at the water stain that had ruined the paintwork on the ceiling. A couple of years earlier a pipe had burst on the floor above, but Edip wouldn't let anyone inside his apartment – including repairmen – so Barbaros had to shut off the main valve in the basement. This resolved the problem, but it also turned off Edip's water supply. Edip's electricity had already been cut off by then, because he hadn't paid his bill. I don't know how he managed with his water cut off as well.

Through the crack in the door a mirror could be seen, and in the mirror was Leyla. She was wearing a long, light-blue knitted jacket and a beret of the same colour. The hair

curling out from beneath the beret was red, and even in the cold fluorescent light of Barbaros's salon, it shone. For some unexplainable reason I wanted to stand there and gaze at her. However, with that sixth sense that people have when they know they're being watched, she turned towards the door and saw me. Ferit, aware that his client's attention had been distracted, also turned round. Seeing me, he opened the door wide with a flourish.

'Oh, Monsieur Pericles, won't you come in? God willing, Leyla Hanim will be your new neighbour.'

Leyla smiled politely which, I immediately understood, meant that she had absolutely no intention of buying the ground-floor flat. She wanted to get rid of the estate agent and leave. Of course, Ferit understood that as well as I did. He was trying to use me to make the building seem more respectable. It had not escaped my attention that Ferit always brought his clients to the building at midday, just as I was leaving for my walk. He was trying to show them that, though the ground floor was shabby, the residents of the upper floors were distinguished gentlemen who still wore hats when they went out and about in Beyoglu. It was an attempt to distract his clients from the reality of residents like Edip, with his boxes and bags of rubbish; from the stains left by the nightclub; from the floor so filthy that you couldn't see its mosaics; from the strands of hair that littered the linoleum.

'Monsieur Pericles lives on the third floor. He and Berin Hanim, who is on the fifth floor, have been here the longest. How many years have you lived here for, Monsieur Pericles?'

I did not reply. In fact, by the time Berin and her late husband, Mansur Bey, had moved into The Circle, I was already married and in my forties (though for someone of my advanced years, that might as well have been yesterday). But

I didn't correct Ferit. I was preoccupied with looking at Leyla, looking awkward and lovely.

Getting no reply from me, Ferit said, 'Leyla Hanim is moving to Istanbul from Bodrum.'

Leyla opened her mouth to say something, but by then Ferit had gone into the corridor, so she simply shrugged and then smiled at me, her eyes like a cat's. I followed them both.

Ferit was showing Leyla the middle room, behind the kitchen. Its floors were sticky and the wallpaper was peeling off. Ayten, who worked for Barbaros, used to use that room for hair-removal treatments. Once, when I was walking up the hill, a breeze blew the net curtain aside and I accidentally caught sight of a woman lying on a massage table. It was Zishan, one of the singers from the nightclub. Her legs were covered from top to bottom in green wax. It reminded me of how, at the beginning of summer, before they decamped to the islands, Aunt Ismene and Mama used to cook up their own hair-removal mixture in our kitchen. The whole apartment would smell of burnt sugar, like caramel. They would dip a wooden stick into the mixture and give that to me so that I wouldn't bother them, and then they'd shut themselves up in the little room. Stick in hand, I would press my eye to the keyhole and try to fathom the mysteries of that forbidden, sugar-scented world.

If Ayten hadn't come to the window that day, I would never have realized that I was absentmindedly watching them from the pavement. Reaching for the wooden shutters, Ayten shouted at me, 'Pericles, you are just too much!' I didn't even have time to apologize before she clattered the shutters closed in my face.

'You see this room, Leyla Hanim? It's the most beautiful room in the apartment. You will never tire of its view in the

evening light. This room is a library in Monsieur Pericles's apartment.'

Hearing this, Leyla raised her head and looked over at me. I smiled, one booklover greeting another. She reciprocated, a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

'The previous tenant didn't take such good care of it, but that's easily rectified. A lick of paint should do it, and once the linoleum's been taken up, the wooden floor will creak just as it did on its first day. I presume you'll be renting it out for holiday lets, yes? Tourists love this district. It's close to Taksim and Sultanahmet, and they like the atmosphere of its traditional streets. The building's at least a century old. It was designed by an Italian architect – his name is carved into the front. Did you see the bas-reliefs on the side and the wrought-iron flowers on the door? European tourists love those sorts of details. Am I wrong, Monsieur Pericles? You used to rent to tourists at one point.'

'I'm looking for a flat for myself,' said Leyla. 'To live in.'

Her voice was a little rough, nasal, a contrast to her slight figure. She walked back out into the corridor and, without even sticking her head into the kitchen, where it looked like an atomic bomb had exploded, she returned to the living room.

'There are two more rooms in the back,' Ferit called out behind her. 'One is a bedroom. The other's a bit dark, but…'

Leyla was not interested in the back rooms, the pantry, the bathroom which had supposedly been renovated. She had stopped in front of the living-room window, beret in hand, and was watching a bulldozer repeatedly striking the building opposite, which was stubbornly resisting its blows.

I left them there and went out. Paying no heed to the din of the construction work, which I had long since gotten used to,

I turned right and took a couple of steps towards the church that marked the end of Kaymakcalan Street and its junction with a bigger road. Kaymakcalan Street was a sorry sight, its two- and three-storey stone buildings having either fallen into extreme disrepair or already been demolished. I turned and looked back at The Circle. Despite its faded shutters and discoloured marble steps, it stood solid and intact on the corner of Kaymakcalan Street and Temrin Hill Street. Its sides as well as its frontage were decorated with elegant circular bas-reliefs of snakes swallowing their own tails. I felt a familiar stab of pain as I remembered their plan to apply for a demolition order. Gentrification had been advancing on us from all sides. Like a fire that had raged out of control, it was devouring every one of the old buildings that stood in its way. The new city born from the ashes would in no way compare to the old city – not even close.

To distract myself from these painful thoughts, I glanced up at Barbaros's former salon. Leyla was still at the window. She was standing right behind the 'FOR SALE BY OWNER' sign. I imagined her watching the destruction of the building opposite with sadness. When she waved to me and smiled, I was momentarily confused. I raised my hand, but my fingers were indecisive. Eventually, I touched the brim of my hat in greeting. Her smile was infectious. As I passed the church, out of habit I almost imperceptibly made the sign of the cross and pressed my hand to my heart.

Walking through the fish market on my way to Beyoglu, everything looked so colourful – the red trays that shone under the lightbulbs, the silver-backed anchovies that the fishmongers were dousing with water, the heads of lettuce, the rocket leaves, lemons and turnips. The young lad who was unloading stuffed mussels smiled at me. A tortoiseshell

cat slipped out from under the fish trays and rubbed herself against my trouser leg. I petted her head, her white neck. She was pregnant. When I got to Galatasaray High School, I stopped as if compelled to do so. The clouds were thinning into cotton wisps, scattering across the light-blue sky. The smell of coal came to my nose from far away. I realized that it was imperative that Leyla move into The Circle. She was the injection of life the building and its residents needed. I heard this like a command in my brain. A clear signal. With abrupt decisiveness, I turned back, pushing my way through the Beyoglu crowds, retracing my steps at speed as I raced down the streets that I'd strolled along just minutes earlier. It had been a very long time since I'd wanted anything so much.