

FROM

Orhan's Inheritance

BY ALINE OHANESIAN



They found him inside one of seventeen cauldrons in the courtyard, steeping in an indigo dye two shades darker than the summer sky. His arms and chin were propped over the copper edge, but the rest of Kemal Türkoğlu, age ninety-three, had turned a pretty pale blue. Orhan was told the old men of the village stood in front of the soaking corpse, fingering their worry beads, while their sons waited, holding dice from abandoned backgammon games. Modesty forbade any female spectators, but within hours the news spread from one kitchen and vendor's stall to the next. Orhan's grandfather, his *dede*, had immersed his body, naked except for his britches, into a vat of fabric dye outside their family home.

Orhan sinks into the backseat of the private car, a luxury he talked himself into when the dread of a seven-hour bus ride back to the village started to overwhelm his grief. He wanted to mourn in private, away from the chickens, the elderly, the traveling merchants, or worse yet, the odd acquaintance that could normally be found on a bus ride to Anatolia, the interior of Turkey. He told himself he could afford a little luxury now, but the car showed up an hour late, sporting a broken air conditioner and a driver reeking of cheap cologne and sweat. Orhan lights a cigarette and shuts his eyes against the sting of the man's body odor.

"Going to visit your family?" the driver asks.

"Yes," answers Orhan.

"That's nice. So many young people leave their villages and never come back," he says.

The truth is it's been three years since his last visit. Had Dede had the good sense to move out of that godforsaken place, there would be no reason

to go back. The car veers off the highway, making its way along a recently paved road toward the city of Sivas, on whose outskirts Karod village is located. The driver slows down and opens a window, letting the *terroir*-laden scent of soil waft into the car's cavity. Unlike Istanbul, whose majesty is reflected in the Bosphorus, Central Anatolia is the quintessential other Turkey, in which allusions of majesty or progress are much harder to come by. Here shepherds follow the bleating of long-haired goats, and squat village women carry bundles of kindling on their backs. Time and progress are two long-lost relatives who send an occasional letter. The ancient roads of Sivas Province, once a part of the famed Silk Road, have seen the stomping of Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman feet. Dry-rotted timber, blocks of concrete, and sheets of corrugated tin stand feebly upon ancient Byzantine stone structures whose architectural complexity suggests a more glorious past. Layer upon layer of earth and civilization washed downstream by the muddy waters of the Kizil Irmak, the Red River, produces a kind of sedimentary aesthetic. Orhan thinks of the unbearable heat of Anatolian summers acting as an adhesive for all these different layers.

"You have siblings?" the driver asks.

"No," answers Orhan.

"Just your parents then?" he asks, glancing at Orhan through the rear-view mirror.

"Father, grandfather, and an aunt," he says, looking out at the barren landscape. How is it that even without a single structure weighing down on it, the land is heavy, the atmosphere so pressed it makes it hard to breathe? It was these very fields, burdened with a history he could not name, that first inspired him to pick up Dede's Leica. Somewhere around age fifteen, Orhan discovered that if he blurred the image in the lens enough, Karod would no longer threaten to crush him. Through the lens, the slopes and valleys of his childhood started to resemble abstract paintings, broad strokes of yellow and green, hidden patches of lavender, set against an ever-changing sky of blue and orange. It was only later that he realized he was imposing meaning upon the world by the way he chose to capture it. Those first photographs were like butterflies suspended in glass panes.

"I grew up near Sivas," the driver continues. "What's your family name? Maybe I know it."

There is no escaping this constant need for placing one another in Turkey. It's one of the few things Orhan loved about living in Germany: the anonymity. "Türkoğlu," he says finally.

The driver's expression, framed in the rearview mirror, changes. "I'm sorry for your loss," he says. "Kemal Bey was an extraordinary man. Is it true he fought at Ctesiphon?"

Orhan nods, taking another drag from his cigarette.

"They don't make them like that anymore. That generation was full of real men. They fought against all of Europe and Russia, established a republic, and founded entire industries. It's something, huh?"

"Yes," agrees Orhan. "It's something."

"The paper says he immersed himself in dye for medicinal purposes," the driver says.

It's not the first time Orhan has heard this preposterous theory. It's a story crafted, no doubt, by his cunning little aunt. Though Dede had been a well-respected World War I hero-turned-businessman, he was also an eccentric man, living in a place where eccentricities needed to be explained away or covered up.

In villages like Karod, every person, object, and stone has to have some sort of covering, a layer of protection made from cloth, brick, or dust. Men and women cover their heads with skullcaps and head scarves. These standards of modesty also apply to their animals, their speech, their ideas. Why should Dede's death be an exception?

The car veers left onto a loosely graveled road that leads into the village. Orhan searches for the wooden post that used to announce the village's name in unassuming hand-painted white letters, but it's nowhere to be found. A young boy in a bright orange shirt and green shorts walks behind a herd of cows. He sweeps a long stick at their backs, ushering them into one of many narrow corridors sandwiched between mud-caked houses.

"Is this it?" asks the driver.

"Yes," says Orhan. "Just follow this road until you see the house with the large columns."

The sound of crunching gravel comes to a halt as the car stops. Orhan extinguishes his cigarette and steps out. He can hear the singular sound of hired wailers, their practiced percussion luring him out of the car: two,

maybe three female voices filled with a kind of sorrow and vulnerability that comes only with practice. The two-story family home is a dilapidated old ruin by any standards, but here in the forgotten back pocket of Central Anatolia, it is considered a sturdy and grand affair. A thin film of mustard-colored stucco advances and retreats over hand-cut stones of putty and gray, reminding Orhan of a half-peeled piece of dried-out fruit. The Victorian-looking house, complete with parlor and basement, is the birthplace of Tarik Inc., which began as a small collection of workshops and which, over the past six decades, grew into an automated firm, exporting textiles as far away as Italy and Germany. Here, inside these ruinous walls, according to family legend, Orhan's great-grandfather had woven a *kilim* for the sultan himself. That was before the empire became a republic, before democracy and Westernization revolutionized what it meant to be a Turk. In the courtyard to the left of the house, the massive copper cauldrons stand guarding the witting structure. Through the decades they've gone from holding fabric dye to sheltering children playing hide-and-seek to storing the discarded ashes of hookah pipes and cigarettes. These vessels have contained the many bits and pieces of Dede's life. Perhaps it is only fitting that they also housed his last breath.

Orhan weaves a familiar path around the cauldrons. All empty, except one holding a murky sledge-like dye that looks more black than blue, the color of a good-bye.

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