

The day the palace moved to Dolmabahçe

The cats of Topkapi

We may be a motley gathering of cats, lacking in organisation, habit, governance, policies towards dogs, and we know—from photographs of Topkapi in leaflets lying on the ground—humans have little interest in us here at the old palace. We have seen pictures of tiles and domes, thrones and doorways, hearths, ceilings, corridors, tulips, panels, some even with animals, but no cats. However, ignorance is power, human negligence our strength: in two thousand years of inhabiting the very centre of Byzantium, we are indubitably the true custodians. Who or what could possibly rival us? We know of the cats of Dolmabahçe, of course, even if few of us have seen them. They are reportedly creatures of great beauty, having perfectly black fur and ice-green eyes. Whether warming themselves against cool marble pillars in summer, or pretending indifference to the mists of the Bosphorus in the winter chills, they supposedly have a spirit only they possess, something not of the earth, or sky or water. We by comparison are too much of this world. But no matter, as those relative newcomers are far from here, way across the Golden Horn. And their regime has spanned at most a tenth of ours.

The sultans on the road from Rome

I'm from your hotel. From reception, though I help a great deal with the laundry. You are English? You know The Archers? I thought so. You do know this is not a good area for food? Don't be fooled by the lights in there, having lights doesn't mean it's safe. You'll find only men hunched over glasses of sweet tea, playing backgammon with tiny dice. With your uncovered knees you are to them an infidel first and a customer second. Take my word, I know this city, and not only its eating places; not only the rooftops, the waterside villas,

the planes and cypresses; I've known the heartache of dust, knives in the night and the half-slaughtered sheep, the porters fallen and crushed beneath their loads. Unlike me you may never see the Mona Lisas of the suburbs, never learn to forgive the packs of dogs that have roamed here for ever, in this city built upon their desperate bones.

Topkapi to Dolmabahçe

We know where to find the cats of Dolmabahçe, were we to have a reason to. They are half a day from our palace of Topkapi, down cobblestoned hills so as to skirt the stench from the zoo—the old camels gasping from the cigarette smoke of the visitors, only getting their breath back by night—over the Galata bridge and beside the Bosphorus shore. That means a morning or afternoon waiting at roadsides to dart across—in an incisive thrust, like a swordfighter seizing an opening—or slinking slowly forth by night. Yes, there are tempting fish on the Galata bridge, hauled in by cooperative fishermen with lines. But dogs equal to us in fierceness criss-cross the route. The wheels of trams may slice us cleaner than a scimitar, and without legs or heads we will never reach Dolmabahçe. And why see for ourselves another dynasty of cats? It is not as if we would have relations with them. Why go, when we have so many kitchens, well, no, we don't have them any more, we have a café—still with many meats, mushrooms, olives and desserts of lemon and honey. There used to be a line of kitchens, when there were sultans. That magnificent row of chimneys was all kitchens.

Sultans on the road from Rome

If not the Archers, the House of Lords? I know you know. I know it all. Your situation is plain to me, Ahmet is my name. You have found yourself in the street of shoes and before you realise you could be lost among the silversmiths and hairdressers when all you want is a square meal, am I right? Well then, go

a little further along this road, not in that direction, you'll never find a restaurant, certainly not above the ground, that way is all dervish territory and brushes and pans and coat hangers, to the left there are more and more carpets—you don't look like someone searching for a rug, while to the right, waiting to waylay you with invitations to buy caged birds and aquariums, the streets yawn and plunge into the Sea of Marmara, so go this way and try the Aras restaurant, it is simply the best. Ignore that dog. You do know this is the road from Rome? The old capital is back over our shoulders, through Bulgaria and Albania; imagine marching—if you haven't already—on all those carpets laid end to end, seven days of carpets from here to the Coliseum. As history—or geography—that's a mere snippet you may say, but it's good to know all there is beneath you. As my family say, you may look in awe at the ceilings of our mosques, but heaven is still beneath your mother's feet. Do you have a family, children? Ah, you want to eat, not talk. So cross at the tram stop and take the third left, before the Pudding Shop. The Aras. The Aras has second-floor seating and overhead heating. Their sea bream is the finest.

Topkapi

As cats we don't lose time making things, going places. We simply deal with what is in front of us—an intruder, an idiot of a dog, a stupid peacock—mostly by outstaring them. Faced by the midday stench of the camels at the zoo below, their humps full with smoke, we likewise sit it out. As for seeing places, it's enough to look out from a rooftop. What advantage could there be in knowing, say, another old harem, other palace grounds? Better we stay put, the incumbents, the immovables, allowing the shape of our lives to continue as we want it to be, keeping watch, in the cool rooms and on the terraces of Topkapi.

Sultans

Of *course* I'm from your hotel, I thought you would recognise me. You do sound determined. A woman who knows what she wants, I can tell. Oh, I can tell a great deal. And: how can I put it?—you have style, you can have as much style as you like, but you are not mosque material. I refer to your appearance, the tint in your hair, the dip of your dress about your shoulders. I recognise that old pattern, by the way. Were you to look at me, rather than straight ahead—trust me, you and others have always been safe with me—you might guess a thing or two about me. Take my jacket. This black satin wear is identical to my brother's—that's him up ahead, the big man in the fez with the fake jewels; he is a real character, an actor of sorts—you can see the same jacket from the back. You are right to say it is not the usual hotel garb, whatever the word garb means. But wrong to say my particularly black hair, and indeed, the exaggerations of my moustache, don't suggest I'm from here. I'm very much from here. Our sultans and our families knew virtually nowhere else until we were expelled, but our roots are in this soil, and now we are growing back.

You are not sultan material.

What an expression.

It was yours.

You are beginning to get my measure, I see.

Topkapi

Our only real connection to Dolmabahçe is history, the history of sultans and sultanas. We saw plenty of sultanising in the harem here—as thirty sultans came and went—until the Arbiter of the Universe, as he then was, with his cooks and eunuchs and sultanas, like some touring caravan, upped and left Topkapi for the new palace at Dolmabahçe. We were not surprised at this decamping. There had been many signs, and how many signs are needed to know what is going on? No more mules arrived with snow from the mountains.

No wood for the kitchens came; the great lumberjacks from the Belgrade forest no longer came to scatter us with shouts and drunken rages. Production in volume—of sherbets, cheeses, spinach, mushrooms, olives, those desserts of lemon and honey—ceased.

There was quite a clear-out the day the palace moved to Dolmabahçe, as eunuchs vanished with concubines and new slaves arrived. On the eve, the pampered little Venetian dogs we so detested were taken out by boat, and the boats came back without them. Then came the day. The usual serenity of daylight was broken by porters, their numbers swollen by a contingent fresh from Africa, hurrying with silver trays upon their heads. As bird cages snapped open, storks thrust their flapping wings through covies of desperate canaries. Coins got scattered everywhere. In that swirl of activity, great veils fluttering to try and hide the sultanas and their suddenly unruly children, and feathers flying, then rain starting, and the oxen restless, the elephants demolishing a summer house, we watched the carriages depart and licked our whiskers, to continue as before, the true guardians of this place.

Sultans

Let me talk plainly. Our family are complicated but we ourselves are simple: we are merchants with something to sell. In more ancient times we would not have bothered with such negotiations.

You're negotiating?

We got anyone to do almost anything—then.

By force? By coercion?

Coercion, I don't know this word.

Making people do what they don't want.

I'm coming to that.

To what?

Wait, don't take that street. You're safest with me. Don't touch those dogs either. We've met before, don't you remember? I tell you, it was me who put your suitcase in the lift, I remember your perfume from the moment I pushed the button. Oh well. But you must know my brother, he is on the desk all night. We are both from the sultan family dynasty, that huge tree with branches reaching all across the world, yes we are, we have cousins in Santiago, Putney and Henley-on-Thames. You must know Putney. The Boat Race? Where was I? Yes, not surprisingly, many of our family are in the property business—the maintenance of properties is in our blood. Our palaces are still a wonder to the touring public. As indeed you will have seen, being a tourist. But don't start me on that. There are worse tourists. Much worse than yourself.

What do you mean?

The other tourist public. You should hear my brother on the subject. Hakan! *Buraya gel!* Tell about tourists. Your party piece.

My what?

Go on. Tourists are the new dervishes.

Oh yes. Hello. Tourists are the new dervishes. Only faster. Round and round. Out come the phones, *ka-chik ka-chik*, twirl around and get that too, go panoramic, get ecstatic, pull down the sights into the cameras—the way a dervish pulls down the sky into himself—take a city home in a box—

Thank you, Hakan.

—it's the striving after ecstasy, you see, it's that *Oh my God* that's the bed Ataturk *died* in, I can't believe it, isn't that *awesome*?

Thank you, Hakan, thank you.

Do you want a picture with me in my fez? Did you tell her to go to the Aras? Their portions are the largest.

Yes. Now go. Don't give Hakan money, just don't.

Or you in my fez? You next to Ahmet?

Just *go*.

Dolmabahçe

It must have been obvious at Dolmabahçe too a change was coming—from the signs: the arrival of the cooks the month before, and before that a lull, in which clocks ticked, and chimed, and no mouse showed. The palace buildings had been completed. Their whiteness would have surely pleased the sentries on the new grounds, who now stood inscrutably, their tails curled across their paws; the white flattering their satined blackness, casting a coolness surpassed only by their ice-green eyes. Clocks ticked, and chimed, and the waters of the Bosphorus lapped and lapped, as the great docking of boats with cargoes weighed down by marble gave way to empty water. The majestic railings had been painted white, the mirrors were in place, the tilers had left, the colossal chandeliers had swung to rest.

Sultans

I can tell: authenticity is what you seek. I know, even if my knowledge is a shadow of what every Byzantine knew. One thing I do know: for aubergine dishes you can't do better than the Aras, it will not disappoint you, you'll see. You could begin with the aubergine, spread lightly with mincemeat. After that I recommend the bream. And not only is the sea bream at the Aras a splendour, you must try the rice pudding. What is it, Hakan, I thought you'd gone.

I heard you mention the pudding, Ahmet. I wanted to say: The cooks are particularly gifted and skilful. They are most careful not to smother a pudding in cinnamon. So it is that we say *Afiyet şeker olsun*: may your taste turn to sugar.

Thank you, Hakan. Now go and don't come back.

Topkapi

We confess, we at Topkapi do envy the grace and sleekness of our black cousins at Dolmabahçe. Their quiet power—even a sultan may have turned back on finding one barring a doorway. Our guess is the cats of Dolmabahçe found affirmation in the arrival of the black eunuchs of the harem, with whom they reportedly made a silent pact. Between them, we heard, they did not once trust a sultan; and only rarely a sultana or another slave.

The day the palace moved to Dolmabahçe

We can walk a little way together down the road from Rome—or not, as you like. I needn't disturb you longer. As my brother would say, this moment will pass like all moments pass, to join the centuries below our feet—the stone idols, knives, forks, axes, helmets, brooches, heads and hands, muskets full with earth, water courses, the old paths of empire. No matter. With the passing of centuries we have lost the secrets of Constantinople, indeed I was born to parents who had lost them, although I did hear it was supposed to involve our souls. You know what else I remember? We met, in our time of sultans. You and I, on this very road. If you spare me another minute I will gladly recount a detail or two.

Another time maybe.

I do believe your sighs are expressions of exasperation. Do I take it you have no trust? You have little to lose, namely, a fine dinner at the Aras. All right, I hold up my hands, I'm not from your hotel. I don't know your hotel. All you had to do was ask which hotel I was from and you would have seen through me. And I'm not one of the family, one in the dynasty. I'm just Ahmet. But we were here before, you and I, briefly. I delivered you.

Delivered?

Safely. Past the dogs. Past the elephants rampaging up the road towards us, the leopards, the Greeks, the embittered Cossacks. I kept you close. I delivered you.

Did you.

You were a European. A rarity. Not a Georgian or a Syrian but a European. I was escorting you to Topkapi. Only what neither of us knew was: it was the day the palace moved—the moment the leopards got on the loose there was chaos everywhere, not only up and down the road from Rome. In the dust and smoke it was on my lips to tell you what you could expect, but I was listening out for leopards. I was about to tell you what lay in store: labyrinthine corridors, marble baths, dusty divans, extraordinary games.

What games?

Infantile, fantasies. And unless blessed by good fortune, a short life.

As what?

In the harem. Ending violently, oh what do I know—who knows, for a while you might have reached a position. Mistress of the sherbet, perhaps. Head of table service. Keeper of the store rooms. It would depend upon your skills. You are English, are you a gardener? Encouraging roses could have been a route to some sort of survival. Devising entertainments, creating rhapsodic desserts, or just finding ways to keep the worms of moths away from almonds. Who knows what of that shadow world? But no matter what you became, one transgression, the smallest suspicion, and you could expect to be tied in a sack, tossed into the nearest water.

Like cats?

Like cats.

I wouldn't have gone with you ever, I would have run off.

From the master of the two continents? You were only seventeen.

Fled.

Where? How?

Were we joined by a chain?

You see, you do remember. I even advised you: take the opium they offer, I said, it will help you forget your distant home, over the seas and the mountains.

I don't remember.

Anyway, that was then. We live in different times. On this occasion I shall leave you. I shall walk back with my brother in the direction of Rome. It's early. We may turn and walk this way again. I had no intention of accompanying you further than the Aras with its delights, the bream, the pudding. Goodbye.

Goodbye.

Theirs are no ordinary kitchens. The outside seating is well covered. I highly recommend you try the kitchens of the Aras.