THE SILENCE OF SCHEHERAZADE

DEFNE SUMAN

TRANSLATED BY BETSY GÖKSEL

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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.

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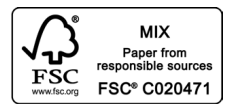

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The First September

My birth, on a sweet, orange-tinted evening, coincided with the arrival of Avinash Pillai in Smyrna.

According to the European calendar, it was the year 1905. The month was September.

When the passenger ship carrying the Indian spy approached the port, I had not yet been born, but through the opening in my mother's womb a slender beam of light had begun to seep into the dark pool where I had lived for months. She couldn't get up and walk. Not because of the weight of me, but because of the opium she was inhaling from the pipe wedged between her middle and ring fingers. She'd turned her face to the window and was watching the curtains flying drunkenly in the arms of the wind.

The previous year – or was it two years ago? – she'd danced a waltz with one of the engineers from the Aydin Railway at a midsummer party held at the Bournabat Club. The man had whirled her around on the polished-wood floors much like those curtains were flying around just then. What was the man's name? She remembered his high British cheekbones, the house he lived in at the northern end of the quay and the soulless skill of his steps, but somehow she couldn't recall

his name. Mr…? Mr Somebody. What? A strange name. Not ordinary. She raised her head and took another puff of the pipe between her two fingers. Purple rings wavered in front of her dark eyes. Mr Somebody slid away, across the polished-wood floor.

Avinash Pillai, standing on the second-class deck of the elegant *Aphrodite* as it waited out in the gulf, was unaware of my mother, or me. He was busy sniffing the air like a wild animal, his eyes closed, his nose lifted towards the dappled firmament. As the sun set, the land was expelling the breath it had been holding all day. The young Indian man, fed up with the smell of coal and cold iron which had permeated the days-long sea voyage, was inhaling the pleasant aroma of flowers and grass. Rose, lemon, magnolia, jasmine and deep down a touch of amber.

Avinash's nose was long and delicate, as noble as an Ottoman sultan's. As he identified each fragrance, he savoured its tone and essence as if it were a tasty morsel with which he was breaking his fast. Especially the roses. Even with his eyes shut, he could distinguish a white rose from a red one. Somewhere ashore, in the city whose pink lights were dancing on the sea, lived a man named Yakoumi. Neither the beautiful city nor its legendarily beautiful women interested the young man. His entire mind was set on the dim room which Yakoumi had mentioned in his letters. In the workshop behind his pharmacy the elderly chemist extracted oil from the petals of the rarest roses brought from the four corners of the empire.

'What is this captain waiting for now?'

'That freighter will move away and make room for him probably.'

On the brightly lit upper deck, the first-class passengers

– gentlemen in frock coats and bowler hats, with expensive cigars splitting their lips – grumbled as if they had not already patiently voyaged from Alexandria to Rhodes, from there to Leros, then to Chios, and finally to Smyrna.

'Not so, Sir. That freighter will not move. Don't you see, it has drawn up to that barge. It's coal. That one's got to be loaded yet.'

'I'm not talking about that one. I'm talking about the ship that's loading the bales of tobacco. It's been standing there for twenty minutes.'

'This ship won't go into the harbour, gentlemen. Its waters are shallow, and captains who don't know this are always running aground on the rocks. There's nothing for it but to wait for the rowing boats.'

The sounds coming from the quay – the ringing of tram bells, the rattling of carriage wheels, the clanging of horseshoes – reminded the gentlemen of pleasures they had forgotten during the sea voyage. Some of them even swore that they could hear the laughter of women drifting out of the nightclubs along the quay. Surrounded by whistling pilot boats, multi-coloured sailing boats, and freight and passenger ships passing each other and then vanishing on the china-blue waters, the gentlemen checked the time on their pocket watches every minute on the minute.

'To be this close to shore and not able to step out upon it is intolerable, my dear friends. Where could the rowing boats be?'

Avinash had walked to the afterdeck. When he was certain that no one was watching, he clasped his palms together over his breast. As he was now working in the service of the British Empire, it was important to give the appearance of a European. However, he was also the grandson of a hermit

who awaited God's mercy as he lived out his final years in a monastery in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was time to give thanks to the mighty Creator who had protected him throughout the difficult days and stormy nights, first from Colombo to Port Said, then on the dark train to Alexandria, and from there to Smyrna on the *Aphrodite*.

He turned his face towards the sun, which was melting into the sea like a scoop of red ice cream, and closed his eyes.

'*Om namah Shivayame*. Oh, mighty Shiva. We give thanks to you for protecting us from being shipwrecked and from disasters, horrors, illnesses and epidemics, and for bringing us to the shores of this lovely city.'

He had said his prayers ever since childhood. And not only to the god Shiva, whom his family favoured, but also to the Protector, Vishnu, and, of course, to the Creator of the Universe, Brahma. He believed that the gods were friendly beings, even Shiva the Destroyer, and that they loved him. Before them he was himself, without a mask, without deceptions. He asked their mercy for any offences he might unknowingly have given, and he felt in the depths of his heart that these divine beings forgave and protected him.

'Oh, great Shiva, divine power that destroys and re-creates! Help me, that all my works may go well on this new page of my life. Be near me, that my duties be successfully completed; bestow strength, skill and understanding. Protect my mother, father and siblings from accidents, catastrophes, sickness and plague, that I may accept what happens with patience.'

A strong wind suddenly swept across the deck. This wind, which always picked up just before twilight, was famous for the way it could cool even the hottest of days in a matter of moments. Sometimes, like a good-hearted giant unaware of his

own strength, it stirred things up too much, unintentionally capsizing the fishing boats and causing a sack of curses to be unleashed upon it. But that evening it was at its most benign. After stroking the flaking green paint of the ship's rail, it snatched up the young man's bowler hat and carried it off to the empty chaises longues at the foot of the stairs. At first Avinash didn't react. He kept in mind the manners he'd been taught by his grandfather; even when agitated – particularly when agitated – one should finish one's prayers properly. It would bring bad luck if he were to run after such worldly troubles before bidding farewell to the gods. Hastily, he touched his hands to the space between his two eyebrows, to his lips and lastly to his heart.

'Oh, mighty God, you are great, you are capable of miracles. We entrust ourselves to you. *Om namah Shivayame*.'

Then he raced over to the chaises longues to retrieve his hat. He felt guilty that he'd cut his prayers in half, particularly at the point of request.

The wind, as if to remind him that life was too short to waste on feelings as weighty as guilt, swept the hat a few steps away, tousling his raven ringlets. Avinash's curls were as thick and heavy as the plaits of the Armenian girls who were hanging their clothes out to dry; even if the ship were to capsize, his hair would not be disarrayed. The wind whistled and crept down his front, inside his silk shirt. The colour of Avinash's skin was the velvet brown of Eastern slaves, but in appearance he was superior to the Europeans who were strolling along the quay all dressed up, holding onto their hats. He was not a maharajah – he was travelling second class, yes – but he strode the earth more elegantly in his pointy-toed shoes than the gentlemen on the upper deck. He wore an emerald earring in his right ear, a matching green silk

cravat, and a handkerchief of the same shade in his pocket. Just like the Europeans.

The wind made another tour around Avinash, howled in his ears and then took its spicy breath to the other side of the harbour, to the rooftop terrace where my mother and I were living the last of our interconnected hours. Through half-closed eyes, my mother glanced suspiciously at the dancing tulle curtains. Was someone there? But the top floor of our mansion was a long way from the passenger ship *Aphrodite*, well beyond the sights of the young Indian man that evening.

God winks at us with coincidences. The Indian spy Avinash arrived in the city that same evening, and it was he who, years later, brought me the story of my birth. It was by chance that he discovered my story, thanks to an old photograph, when he was looking out over the city from the deck of another ship, just as he had on the night of my birth.

Again, it was the month of September.

But that was a very different September.

It was different because, on the night I was born, the city's domes, minarets and tiny houses with ceramic-tiled roofs shone like gold. Seventeen years later, the city would be vomiting flames like an angry monster. And the wind, that playful wind that had made the young spy angry by tossing his hat back then, would carry terrible smells to the deck of the ship: the stink of kerosene and melting tyres, of charred, century-old sycamores, of the milky juice of figs scattered on the streets, collapsed churches, pianos, gilded books. Worst of all would be the acrid reek of scorched flesh blowing across the deck of the *Iron Duke* as it transported Avinash, with my mother in his arms, far from the flames and the unendurable sufferings of the city. Everyone would be covering their

mouths with handkerchiefs; some would be leaning over the railings to be sick. The stink of frazzled flesh, of cats caught in narrow passageways, of seagulls with their wings on fire, of desperate camels and horses, of people rushing out of their basements and attics where they'd been hiding like cockroaches. Fingernails, bones, flesh – burning.

The same wind that had once tried to teach Avinash that life was too short to waste on feelings as heavy as shame would now allow fate to have all the wretched souls gathered on the quay witness that not only water but also air could drown a person.

But before then, much will take place.

For now, let's stay on that sweet, orange-tinted evening when I was born. Let me put pressure on my mother's narrow cervix and leave Avinash to call out the names of villages and districts he had hitherto only studied on paper, like a schoolboy asked to recite. Up ahead was Kokaryali, then Goztepe, Karantina, Salhane, Karatash, Bahri Baba. You couldn't see it from where the *Aphrodite* was anchored, but beyond the customs house there was a modern building in the shape of a horseshoe. People called it the Yellow Barracks, the Sari Kisla, and Avinash knew that six thousand Ottoman Nizam-i Djedid soldiers were stationed inside it.

This was important.

It was part of his mission to make contact with these soldiers. The Secret Service was keeping a close eye on the soldiers in all Ottoman cities, from Salonica to Smyrna. He was to live in the Turkish district and mingle with them in the coffeehouses and markets. He was to attend the meetings of the Europeans and gather intelligence on the tricks of the French and the Italians. A knot formed in his stomach.

What if he failed to carry out his duties properly?

What if he heard but could not understand the foreign languages he had learned at school?

'You are talented, determined, young; in two months you'll begin to speak better than the natives.'

That was his Oxford professor.

'We chose you for a reason, son. Trust us. You are perfect for this special mission.'

For now, this mission was a knot in his stomach.

Beneath his silk shirt, two rivulets of sweat trickled from his dark armpits. Glancing around the empty deck, he stuck his nose into his collar and smelled himself. Throughout the voyage he'd been very careful not to eat spicy food, but he could still detect a slight whiff of garlic on his skin.

This upset him.

The first thing he needed to do was find a place to stay and cleanse himself. Leaning out over the railings, he observed the deck below. Trunks were being loaded onto the rowing boats that had surrounded the *Aphrodite* like pirate ships. As soon as he got ashore, he had to find a bathhouse.

'One of our men will meet you at the pier to ensure that you have no difficulties passing through customs. But that's all. After that you're on your own. It's better that way. Head straight for Basmane train station when you leave the pier. When you get to the Street of the Goldsmiths, ask for the Yemiscizade Bazaar. Then wait for us to contact you.'

Meanwhile, as his stomach was aching at the thought of beginning a new life in an unknown city, my mother, a native, born and bred in Smyrna, was moaning desperately as she twisted in the increasingly violent pangs of my birth. The opium had lost its effect by now. The baby in her belly had turned into an animal with sharp claws, tearing her flesh from inside. She slowly, slowly stood up; like a

drunken barrel, she rolled to the door of the glassed-in room where she had been imprisoned for exactly three months, one week and five days, and leaned against it. From the turret, the vibrations of her screams reached the sitting room downstairs, where the Armenian midwife sat with a bag of gold in her hands and a huge weight of responsibility upon her, larger even than herself.

Across from Midwife Meline sat my grandmother in a velvet armchair. Coffee cup in hand, she gestured towards the ceiling with her finely pointed chin.

The time had come.

Thus, full of secrets, my life, which was to span more than a century, began.