

"This is the first I've heard of it. You can give her your present yourself, if you want."

"No, no . . . Anyway, that earring was not a present; it belongs to her."

"Which earring?" asked Aunt Nesibe. When she saw that I was having trouble making up my mind, she said, "If only everything could be sorted out with a pair of earrings. . . . When Füsün was feeling poorly, Feridun came to see us, too. When my daughter was so weak from sorrow that she could barely walk, he would take her by the arm and walk her all the way to Beyoğlu to see a film. Every evening, before he went off to the coffeehouse to see his film friends, he would come and sit with us, and eat with us, watch television with us, he paid Füsün such loving attention. . . ."

"I can do a great deal more than that, Aunt Nesibe."

"If God is willing, Kemal Bey. You are always welcome. Come any evening! Give my best to your mother, but please don't cause her any upset."

As she glanced at the door, so as to warn me that I needed to leave before Füsün caught me there, I left the house at once, feeling at peace as I walked up Çukurcuma Hill to Beyoğlu, freed from indignation, from pique of either kind.

FOR SEVEN years and ten months exactly I made regular visits to Çukurcuma for supper to see Füsün. If we bear in mind that my first visit was on Saturday, October 23, 1976—eleven days after Aunt Nesibe's open-ended welcome ("Come any evening!")—and that my last night in Çukurcuma with Füsün and Aunt Nesibe was on Sunday, August 26, 1984, we can see that there were 2,864 days intervening. According to my notes, during the 409 weeks that my story will now describe, I went there for supper 1,593 times. From this we can deduce that I went four times a week on average, but that does not mean I went there four times a week as a matter of course.

There were weeks when I saw them every day, and others when—growing indignant again and again convincing myself that I could forget Füsün—I stayed away. But never did more than ten days go by without Füsün (that is, without my seeing her), because after ten days I would be reduced to those levels of misery that I had endured during the autumn of 1975, which had precipitated the current regime, so it would be correct to say that I saw Füsün and her family (the Keskins) on a regular basis. They, for their part, expected me on a regular basis, and they could always guess when I was likely to turn up. However it happened, before long they had grown accustomed to seeing me at the supper table, as I had grown accustomed to the idea that they were expecting me.

The Keskins never needed to formally invite me to supper, because they always kept a place for me at the table. This provoked a great deal of hand-wringing on my part, when I was not altogether inclined to go and struggled over the decision. I sometimes thought that if I went one more time, I might be imposing on them; and if I didn't go, I not only would face the pain of not seeing Füsün that evening, but might "cause offense" or succumb to fears that my absence might be taken amiss.

I was most preoccupied by such anxieties during my first visits to Çukurcuma, when I was still getting used to the house, Füsün's regular presence, and the domestic routines. I hoped that Füsün would know from the way I looked into her eyes that I was trying to say, Here I am. This was my chief sentiment during my first visit. For the first few minutes after my arrival, I congratulated myself on conquering my shame and disquiet to be there. After all, if it made me this happy to be near Füsün, then why should I make such a fuss over my visits? And here was Füsün, smiling sweetly, as if there was nothing unusual about my being there, as if she was truly happy I had come.

What a pity that we only rarely found ourselves alone during those first visits. Still, I seized every opportunity to whisper things like "I've missed you terribly!" or "It seems I've missed you terribly!" and Füsün would answer, if only with her eyes, seeming to say that she had warmed to my words. There was no possibility of getting any closer than that.

For the sake of any readers who are amazed that I could visit Füsün and her family (it seems so clinical to call them the Keskins) for eight years, and who wonder how I can speak so breezily about such a long interval—thousands of days—I would like to say a few words about the illusion that is time, as

there is one sort of time we can call our own, and another—shall we call it "official" time?—that we share with all others. It is important to elaborate this distinction, first to gain the respect of those readers who might think me a strange, obsessed, and even frightening person, on account of my having spent eight lovelorn years trudging in and out of Füsün's house, but also to describe what life was like in that household.

Let me begin with the big clock on the wall: It was German-made, cased in wood and glass, with a pendulum and a chime. It hung on the wall right next to the door, and it was there not to measure time, but to be a constant reminder to the whole family of time's continuity, and to bear witness to the "official" world outside. Because television had taken over the job of keeping time in recent years, and did so more entertainingly than did the radio, this clock (like hundreds of thousands of other wall clocks in Istanbul) was losing its importance.

Wall clocks first came into fashion in Istanbul at the end of the nineteenth century, when Westernized pashas and wealthy non-Muslims began to furnish their homes with large wall clocks much more ornate than these, with weights and pendulums and winders. In the early years of the twentieth century, and after the founding of the Republic, when the country was aspiring westward, such clocks rapidly gained favor with the city's middle classes. There was a clock like this in my own home when I was a child, and all the other houses that were then part of my life had identical or even larger ones, with even more exquisite woodwork, and by and large you would find them in the entryway or the hall, though people hardly looked at them, since by the 1950s "everyone," even children, had wristwatches, and each house had a radio that was always playing. Until television sets came to dominate the sound



track of domesticity, changing the way people ate, drank, and sat—until the mid-1970s, when our story begins—these wall clocks continued to tick away, as they had done for so long, even though the householders scarcely paid them any attention. In our house you could not hear the ticking or the chimes on the hour and half hour if you were in the sitting room or any of the bedrooms, so the clock never disturbed us. And so for years no one even thought about stopping the clock, and one would indeed continue to stand on chairs to wind it! Some nights, when out of love for Füsün I had drunk a great deal, and misery awoke me, and I arose from my bed to go to have a cigarette in the sitting room, I would hear the clock in the corridor chiming the hour, and it would warm my heart.

In Füsün's house there were times when the clock was ticking and times when it had stopped: It was during the first month that I noticed this difference, and I grew accustomed to it at once. Late in the evening we'd be sitting together watching a Turkish film or a seductive chanteuse crooning an old song, or something about ancient Rome with gladiators and lions, which we'd tuned in to halfway through, and which had such bad subtitles, or such bad dubbing, that we'd immediately begin to joke about it until we could barely follow the action, and were each left to drift off into his own dreams—just then a moment would arrive when by some enchantment a silence would envelop the television set, and the clock hanging right next to the door, whose existence we'd forgotten, would begin to chime. One of us—usually Aunt Nesibe, and sometimes Füsün, too—would turn to the clock with a meaningful look, and Tarık Bey would say, "Who wound it up again, I wonder?"

Sometimes the clock was wound, and sometimes it was forgotten. Even when it had been wound and was ticking away,

the chime would remain silent for months at a time; sometimes it would chime only once, on the half hour; sometimes it would surrender to the ambient silence and let weeks pass before it made another sound. That was when I'd realize, as a chill passed through me, how frightening everything must be when no one was home. Whether or not it was ticking, whether or not the chime sounded, no one looked at the clock to know the time, but they did spend a lot of time talking about whether it had been wound or not, and about how a frozen pendulum might be set in motion again just by touching it once. "Let it be, let it tick, it's not hurting anyone," Tarık Bey would sometimes say to his wife. "It reminds us that this house is a house." I think I would agree, as would Füsün, Feridun, and even the odd visitor. So the wall clock was not there to remind us of the time, or to warn us that things were changing; it was there to persuade us that nothing whatsoever had changed.

During those first months I dared not even dream that nothing would or could change—that I would spend eight years eating supper in Çukurcuma, watching television, and chatting amiably without purpose. During my first visits every word Füsün uttered, every feeling that registered on her face, the way she paced up and down the room—all of it seemed new and different to me, and whether the clock was ticking or not, I paid it no mind. What mattered was to be at the same table with her, to watch her, to feel happy and remain perfectly still as my ghost left my body to kiss her.

Even without our being aware of it, the clock always ticked in the same way, and when we sat at the table, eating our supper, it brought us the peace of knowing we hadn't changed, that all would stay the same with us. That the clock served to make us forget the time, even as it continually brought us back to



the present, reminding us of our relations with others—this paradox was the cause of the cold war that flared up from time to time between Aunt Nesibe and Tarık Bey. “Who wound that clock again, to wake us in the middle of the night?” said Aunt Nesibe, if during a silence she noticed that the clock was working again. “If it wasn’t ticking, it would feel as if there was something missing in this house,” said Tarık Bey one windy evening in December 1979. He added, “It used to chime in the other house, too.” “So then, are you trying to tell me you still haven’t become accustomed to Çukurcuma, Tarık Bey?” said Aunt Nesibe, with a much gentler smile than her words implied (she sometimes addressed her husband with the honorific “Bey”).

Such measured quips, aspersions, and perfectly timed digs—the couple had honed their craft over many years, and whenever we heard the clock’s tick at an unexpected moment or the gong began to chime, the discord would become more intense. “You wound this clock so that I wouldn’t get any sleep either, Tarık Bey,” Aunt Nesibe would say. “Füsun, dear, could you make it stop?” If you used your finger to still the pendulum in the middle, then no matter how much someone had wound it, the clock would stop, but Füsun would only smile and look at her father; sometimes Tarık Bey would give her a look that meant, All right then, go ahead and stop it! and sometimes he would stubbornly refuse. “I didn’t touch it. The clock started on its own, so let it stop itself!” he’d say. Sometimes, when they saw that such mysterious pronouncements made an impression on the neighbors or the children who came to visit on rare occasions, Tarık Bey and Aunt Nesibe would begin an argument of double entendres. “The djinns have got our clock working again,” Aunt Nesibe would say. “Don’t touch it, you

could get hurt,” Tarık Bey would say in a menacing voice as he frowned. “I don’t care if there’s a djinn ticking inside it,” Aunt Nesibe would reply. “I just don’t want it waking me up at night like a drunken church bell ringer who can’t tell morning from night.” “Don’t fret so, and, anyway, if you forget the time you’ll feel better,” Tarık Bey would say. Here he was using “time” to mean “the modern world” or “the age in which we live.” This “time” was an ever-changing thing, and with the help of the clock’s perpetual ticking, we tried to keep it at bay.

The device by which the Keskin family actually kept time was the television, which, like our radio during the fifties and sixties, was always on. In the days of radio, no matter what the broadcast—a piece of music, a discussion, a mathematics lesson, whatever—you would hear a soft blip on the hour and the half hour, for the benefit of those who cared to know. In the evenings, when we watched television, there was no need for such a signal, as most people had no need to know the time unless they were trying to find out what was on television.

Every evening at seven o’clock, when the enormous clock appeared on the screen a minute before TRT, the country’s only television station, began its news program, Füsun would look at her wristwatch (displayed here) as Tarık Bey looked at one of the many pocket watches I saw him use over that eight-year period—either to confirm they had the correct time or to adjust their watches to it. They would do this. It was deeply satisfying to watch Füsun sitting at the supper table, gazing at the enormous clock on the screen and squinting, pressing her tongue against the inside of her cheek as she calibrated her watch with the seriousness of a child copying her father. From my very first visits, Füsun was aware how much I enjoyed this spectacle. When she adjusted her watch, she knew I was



observing her lovingly, and when she got the time right, she would look at me and smile. "Do you have the time right now?" I would ask her just then. "Yes, I've got it!" she would say to me, with a smile that was even warmer.

As I would slowly come to understand over the eight years, it was not merely to see Füsün that I went to the Keskin house but to live for a time in the world whose air she breathed. This realm's defining property was its timelessness. And so it was that Tarık Bey advised his wife to "forget time." When people come to visit my museum and view all the Keskins' old possessions—especially all these broken, rusting clocks and watches that haven't worked for years—I want them to notice how strange they are, how they seem to exist out of time, how they have created among themselves a time that is theirs alone. This is the timeless world whose air I inhaled during my years with Füsün and her family.

Beyond this timeless space was the "official" time outside, with which we kept in touch through television, radio, and the call to prayer; when we talked about finding out what time it was, we were organizing our relations with the outside world, or so I felt.

Füsün did not adjust her watch because life as she lived it called for a clock that was accurate to the second, so that she could be punctual for work or some meetings; like her father, the retired civil servant, she did so as a way of acceding to a directive signaled to her straight from Ankara and the state, or so it seemed to me. We looked at the clock that appeared on the screen before the news much as we looked at the flag that appeared on the screen, while the national anthem was playing at the end of the broadcasting day: As we sat in our patch of the world, preparing to eat supper or bring the evening to a

close by turning off the television, we felt the presence of millions of other families, all doing likewise, and the throng that was the nation, and the power of what we called the state, and our own insignificance. It was when we were watching flags, Atatürk programs, and the official clock (once in a while, the radio would refer to the "national time") that we were most keenly aware that our messy and disordered domestic lives existed outside the official realm.

In *Physics* Aristotle makes a distinction between Time and the single moments he describes as the "present." Single moments are—like Aristotle's atoms—indivisible, unbreakable things. But Time is the line that links these indivisible moments. Though Tarık Bey asked us to forget Time—that line connecting one present moment to the next—no one except for idiots and amnesiacs can succeed in forgetting it altogether. A person can only try to be happy and forget Time, and this we all do. If there are readers who sneer at the things my love for Füsün taught me, at these observations that arise from my experiences during the eight years at the house in Çukurcuma, I would like to ask them please to be careful not to confuse forgetting about Time with forgetting about clocks or calendars. Clocks and calendars do not exist to remind us of the Time we've forgotten but to regulate our relations with others and indeed all of society, and this is how we use them. When looking at the black-and-white clock that appeared on the screen every evening, just before the news, it was not Time we remembered but other families, other people, and the clocks that regulated our business with them. It was for this reason that Füsün studied the clock on the television screen to check if she'd adjusted her watch "perfectly," and perhaps it was because I was looking at her with love that she smiled so happily—and not because she'd remembered Time.



My life has taught me that remembering Time—that line connecting all the moments that Aristotle called the present—is for most of us a rather painful business. When we try to conjure up the line connecting these moments, or, as in our museum, the line connecting all the objects that carry those moments inside them, we are forced to remember that the line comes to an end, and to contemplate death. As we get older and come to the painful realization that this line per se has no real meaning—a sense that comes to us cumulatively in intimations we struggle to ignore—we are brought to sorrow. But sometimes these moments we call the “present” can bring us enough happiness to last a century, as they did if Füsün smiled, in the days when I was going to Çukurcuma for supper. I knew from the beginning that I was going to the Keskin house hoping to harvest enough happiness to last me the rest of my life, and it was to preserve these happy moments for the future that I picked up so many objects large and small that Füsün had touched, and took them away with me.

Late one evening, during the second of the eight years, when the television stopped broadcasting for the night, I listened to Tarık Bey’s memories of his time as a young teacher in Kars Lycée. If he had fond memories of these unhappy years, when he was alone and scraping by on a low salary, suffering many misfortunes, it was not because bad memories grow rosier with the passage of time, as most people believe, but because he enjoyed talking about the good moments (the particles of Now) from that troubled phase of his life (beads inevitably strung on that evil line, Time). It was after he had noted this paradox one evening that he remembered for some reason the “East-West” watch he’d

bought while in Kars, which he brought out to show me had two faces, one in Arabic numerals, and the other in Roman.

Let me elaborate this theme with another timepiece: when I see this slender Buren wristwatch that Füsün began to wear in April 1982, what appears before my eyes is the moment when I gave it to Füsün on her twenty-fifth birthday, and the moment when, after she had taken it out of its now lost box, with her parents elsewhere (and Feridun not at home), she kissed me on the cheek, behind the open kitchen door, and the moment when we were all sitting together and she joyously showed the watch to her parents, and the moment when her parents, having long accepted me as an eccentric member of the family, each thanked me in turn. For me, happiness is in reliving those unforgettable moments. If we can learn to stop thinking of our lives as a line corresponding to Aristotle’s Time, treasuring our time instead for its deepest moments, each in turn, then waiting eight years at your beloved’s dinner table no longer seems such a strange and laughable obsession but rather (as I would discover much later) assumes the reality of 1,593 happy nights at Füsün’s dinner table. Today I remember each and every evening I went to supper in Çukurcuma—even the most difficult, most hopeless, most humiliating evenings—as happiness.