



*The  
Red-Haired  
Woman*

A NOVEL

ORHAN PAMUK

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE



ALSO BY ORHAN PAMUK

*A Strangeness in My Mind*

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THE  
RED-HAIRED  
WOMAN

ORHAN PAMUK

*Translated from the Turkish by Ekin Oklap*



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## Part III

## The Red-Haired Woman

*A Note About the Author*



*to Ashi*

Oedipus, the murderer of his father, the husband of his mother, Oedipus, the interpreter of the riddle of the Sphinx! What does the mysterious triad of these deeds of destiny tell us? There is a primitive popular belief, especially in Persia, that a wise Magian can be born only of incest.

—NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*

OEDIPUS: Where would a trace of this old crime be found?

—SOPHOCLES, *Oedipus the King*

As a fatherless son, so a sonless father will be embraced by none.

—FERDOWSI, *Shahnameh*

• PART I •

I HAD WANTED TO BE A WRITER. But after the events I am about to describe, I studied engineering geology and became a building contractor. Even so, readers shouldn't conclude from my telling the story now that it is over, that I've put it all behind me. The more I remember, the deeper I fall into it. Perhaps you, too, will follow, lured by the enigma of fathers and sons.

In 1984, we lived in a small apartment deep in Beşiktaş, near the nineteenth-century Ottoman Ihlamur Palace. My father had a little pharmacy called Hayat, meaning "Life." Once a week, it stayed open all night, and my father took the late shift. On those evenings, I'd bring him his dinner. I liked to spend time there, breathing in the medicinal smells while my father, a tall, slim, handsome figure, had his meal by the cash register. Almost thirty years have passed, but even at forty-five I still love the smell of those old pharmacies lined with wooden drawers and cupboards.

The Life Pharmacy wasn't particularly busy. My father would while away the nights with one of those small portable television sets so popular back then. Sometimes his leftist friends would stop by, and I would arrive to find them talking in low tones. They always changed the subject at the sight of me, remarking how I was just as handsome and charming as he was, asking what year was I in, whether I liked school, what I wanted to be when I grew up.

My father was obviously uncomfortable when I ran into his political friends, so I never stayed too long when they dropped by. At the first chance, I'd take his empty dinner box and walk back home under the plane trees and the pale streetlights. I learned never to tell my mother about seeing Father's leftist friends at the shop. That would only get her angry at

the lot of them and worried that my father might be getting into trouble and about to disappear once again.

But my parents' quarrels were not all about politics. They used to go through long periods when they barely said a word to each other. Perhaps they didn't love each other. I suspected that my father was attracted to other women, and that many other women were attracted to him. Sometimes my mother hinted openly at the existence of a mistress, so that even I understood. My parents' squabbles were so upsetting that I willed myself not to remember or think about them.

It was an ordinary autumn evening the last time I brought my father his dinner at the pharmacy. I had just started high school. I found him watching the news on TV. While he ate at the counter, I served a customer who needed aspirin, and another who bought vitamin-C tablets and antibiotics. I put the money in the old-fashioned till, whose drawer shut with a pleasant tinkling sound. After he'd eaten, on the way out, I took one last glance back at my father; he smiled and waved at me, standing in the doorway.

He never came home the next morning. My mother told me when I got back from school that afternoon, her eyes still puffy from crying. Had my father been picked up at the pharmacy and taken to the Political Affairs Bureau? They'd have tortured him there with bastinado and electric shocks. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Years ago, soldiers had first come for him the night after the military coup. My mother was devastated. She told me that my father was a hero, that I should be proud of him; and until his release, she took over the night shifts, together with his assistant Macit. Sometimes I'd wear Macit's white coat myself—though at the time I was of course planning to be a scientist when I grew up, as my father had wanted, not some pharmacist's assistant.

When my father again disappeared seven or eight years after that, it was different. Upon his return, after almost two years, my mother seemed not to care that he had been taken away, interrogated, and tortured. She was furious at him. "What did he expect?" she said.

So, too, after my father's final disappearance, my mother seemed resigned, made no mention of Macit, or of what was to become of the pharmacy. That's what made me think that my father didn't always



disappear for the same reason. But what is this thing we call thinking, anyway?

By then I'd already learned that thoughts sometimes come to us in words, and sometimes in images. There were some thoughts—such as a memory of running under the pouring rain, and how it felt—that I couldn't even begin to put into words...Yet their image was clear in my mind. And there were other things that I could describe in words but were otherwise impossible to visualize: black light, my mother's death, infinity.

Perhaps I was still a child, and so able to dispel unwanted thoughts. But sometimes it was the other way around, and I would find myself with an image or a word that I could not get out of my head.

My father didn't contact us for a long time. There were moments when I couldn't remember what he looked like. It felt as if the lights had gone out and everything around me had vanished. One night, I walked alone toward the Ihlamur Palace. The Life Pharmacy was bolted shut with a heavy black padlock, as if closed forever. A mist drifted out from the gardens of the palace.

Sometime later, my mother told me that neither my father's money nor the pharmacy was enough for us to live on. I myself had no expenses other than movie tickets, kebab sandwiches, and comic books. I used to walk to Kabataş High School and back. I had friends who trafficked in used comic books for sale or loan. But I didn't want to spend my weekends as they did, waiting patiently for customers in the backstreets and by the back doors of cinemas in Beşiktaş.

I spent the summer of 1985 helping out at a bookstore called Deniz on the main shopping street of Beşiktaş. My job consisted mainly of chasing off would-be thieves, most of whom were students. Every now and then, Mr. Deniz would drive with me to Çağaloğlu to replenish his stock. The boss grew fond of me: he noticed how I remembered all the authors' and publishers' names, and he let me borrow his books to read at home. I read a lot that summer: children's books, Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Edgar Allan Poe's stories, poetry books, historical novels about the adventures of Ottoman warriors, and a book about dreams. One passage in this latter book would change my life forever.

When Mr. Deniz's writer friends came by the shop, the boss started introducing me as an aspiring writer. By then I had started harboring this dream and foolishly confessed it to him in an unguarded moment. Under his influence, I soon began to take it seriously.