

SUMBUL

Under her black velvet Jewish cap, a tender smile brightened her wrinkled face clear into her eyes. Parching melon seeds over a small tin brazier in front of her door, she resembled a Dutch painting. In the morning, as seamstresses, peddlers leading their donkeys, men off to work greeted her, the smile would broaden:

-Shükür, shükürⁱ she would reply.

When schools were out, boys and girls would scatter like swallows into various streets. Some would rush to her to buy forty-pence-worth of pestiliⁱ, parched melon seeds or lolly pops. Those who had no money would get their share by handing her a used notebook. And all the while, they would chirp her name cheerfully, "Sümbül, Sümbül!!" "You'll pay when you have money," she would say, delighting the poor ones who stared wishfully at their provided friends.

Having served the last of her customers who came at certain moments of the day, hands on the hips, she would gaze at the streets into which the little ones disappeared, shake her head and murmur with a sigh, shükür, shükür! Then she would take the tray of parched seeds and the small brazier into her dark, mouldy basement room. She would sit on the wooden bedstead and count the money she had made that day. She would set some aside for her daily expenses. 15 kurus would go into the tin can where she saved her monthly rent of 3 liras. A few kurus would be put aside for her grand daughter's Saturday allowance. She would wrap the rest in clean packages. She saved a large portion of these to be sent to her son in Paris.

When she finished this work, content, she would lie down on her bed and look at the two pictures hanging on the wall next to her bed. One of these was her husband, Avram's youth photograph, with whom she shared the happiest and bitterest moments in life in this room, whose chin she had tied at his death. Underneath the picture hung the Old Testament wrapped with the sacred leather strap. The book no longer served for prayers. As she glanced at the picture, she would smile and mutter:

- Shükür, shükür, Avramiko, not much is left.

The other picture was of her son who married a woman and settled in France. Taken in his military outfit, the young man looked uncomfortable with the uniform.

-The war is on, shükür, shükür. Did they take you in too, Shimoniko? You don't write me anymore. And the post office doesn't accept money anymore." Fear and hopelessness would shadow her tender expression as she talked to her son. No longer able to stay in bed, she would then get up and start preparing dinner just to do something.

Her husband's old cobbler box was now her table. She had sold neither his anvil nor his hammer. Why hadn't her son liked these tools which had never left them in misery. He had gone to France to become rich, yet now France was in ruins. Besides, both the anvil and the hammer had rusted.

- Shükür, shükür, war is terrible!

They had enlisted her daughter's husband too. Now she was selling parched seeds at the other end of the street. Jealous of her mother's sales, she had started an argument; they had since stopped talking to each other. She never came to her place. When Sümbül went to visit her, she would chase her away. Even so, Sümbül hoped everyday that her daughter would send a word to make up. But everyday her daughter disappointed her.

Sümbül would sit on the sill of her basement room until her daughter's voice scolding her child at the other end of the street would cease to be heard. While the passers-by greeted her with a "bonsoir", she would hide her tears wiping them away with the palm of her hand.

When night spread its wings over the neighborhood, she would bolt the door and get into her bed. The old days would then come back to her at every corner of her room. Those days were so good! Children were small, no war, no death and life was so sweet. That nail.. her husband had hammered it on the wall to hang the lantern the night Shimon was born. The drawing on that wall was from her daughter's school days. That greasy spot..it was when her husband, completely drunk, had thrown the plate on the wall.

Contrary to her people who resembled migrant birds, Sümbül was glued to this basement room like a mussel on its rock and had become a part of it. She kept saying that she would die there. Her foremost desire was to pass away while looking at the eyes of her husband and her son surrounded by the souvenirs complied through the years. Yet such was not to be her fate. On the third year of the war, they tore her away from there.

It happened two weeks after two men visited the house. One, fat with thick eye-brows, a strong voice, his hands clasped on the back. The other, a skinny man who talked about the solidity of the house, the quality of the neighborhood, that 'you can't even even buy a poultry-house with this amount', while rubbing his hands together and laughing every now and then with no reason, a true flatterer.

At first Sümbül hadn't grasped what was being said. She had gotten used to the perpetual change and noisy quarrels of the tenants upstairs. Yet, none of the tenants had talked the way these two did. To buy, to sell were being discussed now. What was worse, Yousef, the owner she had known for years, behaved the same way as the skinny man did. He also tried to please the thick eye-browed man. And every now and then, he talked about the war, the property, the taxes as if to raise the man's pity.

That night these conversations disturbed her with no end. For the first time, she felt herself lonely and a stranger in this room. She suffered as if all of her souvenirs, the pictures, the drawing on the wall were being drawn away from her. She curled up with fear in her bed.

- Shükür, shükür, Avramiko, why did you leave me alone in this evil world?
she whispered.

Ten days hadn't passed when the tenants upstairs moved out. The house was painted, scrubbed and cleaned. Several days later the fat man showed up again. Trucks and furniture came, women and children appeared.

Sümbül had withdrawn from the door sill. She wanted to hide for a reason she didn't understand.

One of the women discovered her basement cell.

-What in the world is this? Look, I'll have none of this beneath my house! It'll disturb my life... My god! something smells so bad.. What is she parching like that?

Holding her nose, she bent down to take a look:

-This will be a good place to store our coal for winter. You must have this Jew out of here no later than tomorrow!

The fat man grumbled softly, showing a habitual weakness in front of such determination.

Sümbül implored each of the fat man, the irritable women, the children:

-I was born here, grew up here... shükür, shükür got married here, raised my children, married them and flew them away. Please have mercy on me. Don't take me out of here...I'll pay as much rent as you want. My husband died here, let me also die here. I'm well over seventy, shükür, shükür you won't wait for long. Let me stay here, can a fish live if taken out of water?

Tears were running down the wrinkles on her face which lost nothing of its illumination in this deep sadness. They did not listen to her, told her to find a place and move within a few days. She could live with her daughter, they said, no sense in disturbing others. If she insisted on staying, they would have her belongings thrown out with the help of the police.

When moving into another basement room, she cried as she had never before, not even the day her husband died. All those who had gone had left something behind. Yet now she was abandoning all her memories, her childhood, her bride days, bitter and sweet days she had lived through.

She caressed for the last time the walls, the wood floor, everywhere of this room she knew until the tiny holes on the wood knots. Her neighbors tore her out of there with the difficulty of uprooting an old tree.

Sümbül threw herself on the mattress in her new cell and stayed there. She wept endlessly. As night wore on, people who soothed and comforted her left her in this damp, dark cell dimly lit by an oil lamp.

Sümbül woke up some time in the night. Her head was burning with fever. A wet, dark piece of ground was next to her nose. Centipedes and cockroaches were crawling on her. Suddenly, the grief on her face disappeared, replaced by a smile sweeter than ever. Her wrinkles thinned out.

- Shükür, shükür, Avramiko, so we are together again! she said. In the dim light of the oil lamp, Avram was smiling at her with excitement as he did on their wedding night, moving his head as if calling her.

In the morning, they put her in a long black funeral car. It went past by the house which had been her home until yesterday, by the children who were knocking on her closed door, chirping her name: "Sümbül, Sümbül"

ⁱ Thanks to God

ⁱⁱ Dried apricot pulp in layer