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On love and museums

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TEXT

- 1 Four years after the publication of my novel *The Museum of Innocence* in late August 2008, I opened the actual Museum of Innocence in the same building in Çukurcuma where Füsün and her family used to live. Those wishing to visit the museum can take their copy of the novel along and enter for free by having the ticket page 485 stamped at the door; inside, they will find Füsün's earrings, hairclips, dresses, shoes, driver's license, and many more of her belongings on display. As well as Füsün's personal possessions, the museum, which opened in 2012, also features clothes and day-to-day items worn and used by Füsün's mother Nesibe Hanım and her father Tarık Bey, by Kemal and his father, and by many other characters in the novel, the little gifts they exchanged, their cigarette stubs, their lighters, and a vast array of images, photographs, video clips, and postcards of Istanbul from the time when the novel is set.
- 2 I started thinking of the novel *The Museum of Innocence* and of the museum itself at the same time, starting in the mid-1990s. I planned to write a love story while also creating a museum where I could exhibit the objects that appeared in that story. I have talked at length about these objects and every display cabinet in the museum in the illustrated volume *The Innocence of Objects*, in which I have described how the idea for the museum evolved over time. Now I would like to say a few words about how the novel itself developed, about objects, and about the love story in this book.
- 3 I will begin with the location of the museum and of Füsün's home. Between 1996 and 2000, I would drop my daughter Rüya off to school every morning. From the entrance of her school in the depths of Tophane (some 300 metres from the home of the Keskins), I would walk through the back alleys of Beyoğlu, Çukurcuma, Firuzaga, and Cihangir towards my office, thinking all the while about what I was going to write that day (*My Name is Red*, say, or *Snow*). I loved roaming the streets in the cool air of the morning, as the shops slowly

began to open their doors, the smell of bread and traditional Turkish sesame bagels wafted out of the bakeries, and schoolchildren quickened their steps to make it to class in time. Perhaps it was because I knew I had a happy day ahead of me, a page or two of a novel to write... There was also the satisfaction of noticing that so many of the things I remembered from my childhood and youth still endured, and had neither fallen into complete decay, nor been veneered into some artificial appearance of glossiness. I would tell myself that those streets and their people would never lose the air of timelessness that distinguished them. The sights I encountered in these neighbourhoods – the piles of oven-fresh loaves and bagels displayed on bakery shelves; the rather ancient-looking painkiller advertisement I spotted in a pharmacy once, showing the human body and its internal organs; the colours of the vast jars arranged in neat rows in the window of the pickle shop – would remind me of the delights of seeing and observing; I found myself wanting to possess those scenes, to put them in a frame and study them, and to make sure that I would never lose them.

- 4 During the time it took me to write my novel and open the museum, Çukurcuma's humble flea market continued to grow. There were stalls selling all sorts of odds and ends, from old tables to ashtrays and cutlery sets, from the locally manufactured toys I remembered from my childhood to quince graters and saltshakers. Shops specialising in old magazines, books, maps, and photographs also fuelled my growing desire to frame everything I saw and preserve it forever. It was around this time that I began to think about buying items from these shops and using them and other objects I had collected from my family and from my own life to create a 'house-museum'.
- 5 There was a period when I spent a long time walking around these streets in search of an old house that I could transform into a museum. When I managed in 1999 to find such a building (where the museum is now housed), the aspiring collector inside of me gained courage. Yet I knew that I lacked the spirit of a true collector. Whenever I bought a used saltshaker, a cigarette holder, a meter stripped from an old taxi, or a bottle of eau de cologne I had seen in a shop window, I did not do so in order to create a collection out of these objects, but because I wanted to incorporate them into the

novel I was writing. It made me happy to buy all these objects I planned to use and place them upon my writing desk. Sometimes I would see something in a display that I hadn't even thought of using before, and in my eagerness, I would buy it anyway and take it home with me.

- 6 The world was teeming with objects I could put in my novel and museum. But my excitement was not that of a collector seeking to complete a series; rather, it was the head-spinning enthusiasm of a writer-artist dreaming of turning those objects into components of a novel and a museum. Like so many other things in my life, I became attached to these objects because I knew I could potentially make them part of a book. Sometimes I would succeed, placing the object in question before me and writing about it in my story, describing what I could see just as a 'realist' novelist would. But most times I would limit myself to mentioning these objects in passing, seeking to protect my novel from the deceptive allure of reality and from the dangers of excessive descriptiveness. Every now and then I would insert more familiar items into the story: that is how I ended up giving my father's old ties to Kemal's father, and my mother's knitting needles to Füsün's mother, for the pleasure of having my protagonists use objects from my own life and family. Just as in my novel, where the wealthier branch of the family sends hand-me-downs to poorer distant relations, I was finding things that I knew from my own life and that had left some kind of mark on me, and handing them over to my characters. Or I would recall an object that had left an impression on me as a child, such as the yellow water jug which had been a fixture of my aunt's dinner table for many years, and transport it onto my characters' table without adding it to the museum collection. In 2008, after I had finished the novel and published it, I was tidying up my office when I found a box; inside were a number of items which I had bought from junk shops but then completely forgotten about. As I studied a doorbell taken from some wealthy family's historic mansion, or a rusty lantern from one of those old horse-drawn carriages that still operated on the Princes' Islands, I was tempted to write a completely different novel that would mention these objects too.
- 7 But even before the publication of *The Museum of Innocence*, I had already discovered that I could dream up a story, indeed a whole novel, just by observing a series of objects – and that this might

become something of a habit. The literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, one of the principal figures of Russian Formalism, argued that what we call plot is a line which joins the points and themes a novel has set out to describe and investigate. Once we have gathered before us an instinctively selected series of items, and begun to imagine a story that might connect them all, as well as ways to introduce them into our characters' lives, we have essentially already begun to write a novel. Murder mysteries too – which, together with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, have also had a lasting influence on the shaping of the modern novel – are based on their hero, the Detective, coming up with a story to connect a series of separate clues.

- 8 But if the objects we have collected are to be capable of transporting us into a plot, and from there into the lavish, coherent, and humane universe of a novel, we need to be able to form an emotional attachment to them. The only way to imagine a novel into existence is by using a sequence of objects that have elicited an emotive, poetic response in us. The phenomenon most conducive to granting objects the power to affect our emotions and awaken our memories is, of course, that of romantic love. I wasn't writing my novel just so that I could go on to create a museum, but also as my own attempt to examine the emotion we call love.
- 9 My primary objective with this novel was not, therefore, to make a museum, but to undertake a level-headed exploration of the convoluted psychological, cultural, and anthropological experience that is love. I did not wish to place love on a pedestal and describe it, as so many popular songs do, as 'the most wonderful feeling in the world'. Instead, I wanted to show how it is something that – much like a car accident – can simply happen to people during the course of their lives, and often causes us far more pain than we would want. *The Museum of Innocence* is, above all else, a meditation on love.
- 10 Everyone's experience of love varies in accordance with their class, gender, cultural background, nationality, and even their religious beliefs. The love in *The Museum of Innocence* is the love of an upper middle-class gentleman living in Istanbul during the second half of the twentieth century. Even as I was writing the novel, I suspected that its readers' ideas about love would be far more complex and

profound than Kemal's. After the novel was published, some readers complained of Kemal's selfishness and argued that there was nothing 'romantic' or 'sensitive' about him. Other readers were able to forgive Kemal because of all the suffering he endured as the story progressed, and even concluded that he was 'romantic' after all. As far as I'm concerned, both responses seem entirely appropriate.

- 11 Which brings us to the question I have most frequently been asked since the publication of the novel: 'Mr Pamuk, are you Kemal?' It is easy enough to say 'no, I am not Kemal; he is a character I invented.' But it is a lot harder to persuade the reader who has explored and believed every facet of Kemal's most private emotions that I might not have personally experienced those same emotions too. Indeed, the novelist's art resides in the ability to write about one's own feelings as if they belonged to someone else, and of the feelings of others as if they were one's own. Like all novelists, no matter how many times I tell people that Kemal is an imaginary character, I also want my readers to believe that the love affair I wrote about is one that I also experienced myself.
- 12 As for those readers who ask 'Mr Pamuk, have you ever fallen in love and started collecting objects that belonged to your beloved, like your protagonist does?', the best response I have is to show them just how much this novel owes to real life. My aunt's family used to have a 1956 model Chevrolet; their driver was called Çetin. When my father worked as a general manager at Aygaz, his office was right in front of the statue of Atatürk at the entrance of the military base in Harbiye – precisely where the Satsat offices are located. Every New Year's Eve, my paternal grandmother would gather all her children and their wives and husbands for dinner at the Pamuk Apartments, and set up a game of tombola for her grandchildren, for which she would choose and prepare the winners' prizes months in advance. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, many homes and shops in Istanbul used to have a canary in a cage or a small aquarium, but with the arrival and growing popularity of televisions, these had all but disappeared – showing us, in the process, that our relationship to these animals had gone no deeper than the simple desire to have something to look at. In 1983, newly married and in need of some additional income, I began to turn my first novel *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* into a screenplay, encouraged by a film director who was a fan of the novel,

but the film was never made, and I never completed the screenplay. Around this time, a friend of mine who was also a director would take me to the bars and clubs in Beyoğlu that filmmakers usually frequented, and when he saw how little it took to get me inebriated – just a few snatches of scandalous gossip overheard among the loud chatter of the starlets around us, and a couple of glasses of beer – he would start laughing at me, teasing me benevolently. From 1974, when I stopped painting and studying architecture, to 1995, I smoked an average of thirty cigarettes a day, and in 1995, I gave up smoking for the first time. To me, the expression ‘to smoke like a Turk’ – used in some western countries – is not really about consuming too much tobacco or becoming enveloped in a cloud of smoke; rather, it signifies a familiarity with certain social gestures and their individual interpretations (as well as the ability to know and recognise those interpretations) – from opening a packet of cigarettes to offering one to a stranger, still in its packet, in the spirit of friendship and peace; from rolling an unlit cigarette between your fingers until it is at precisely the right firmness to be smoked to the hundreds of different ways you can hold it in your fingertips or blow out the smoke. Towards the end of the 1960s, we used to go to an open-air cinema similar to the one I described in my novel *Silent House* in a small village and holiday resort on the coast of the Marmara Sea, where we would watch Turkish films in the company of the pungent smell of manure and the mooing of cows from a nearby barn. I also clearly remember watching films in the early 1970s with my university friends and thousands of others sunflower seed-chewing spectators in the famous park in Beşiktaş known as the Hunchback’s Place. When my mother decided, at the start of the 1960s, to get herself a driver’s license, she started taking my brother and I along to her classes so that we would not get too bored at home through the hot summer days. We would sit at the back and giggle – or feel apprehensive – every time the car juddered to a stall. Only when I decided ten years later, at the age of eighteen, to learn how to drive myself, and ended up failing the practical test over and over again, did I finally understand my mother’s struggle. Some of the wealthy people I have written about in the novel are inspired by my father and my uncle’s friends, some by my cousins and their friends, and others by my own high school friends. As for seeking to summarise how my

own experiences informed the descriptions of the ‘luxury’ restaurants, the *meyhanes* on the shores of the Bosphorus, the Istanbul streets, and the many different shops that appear in the novel, it would be something of an endless task, akin to trying to explain the extent to which all of my books feed upon the city of Istanbul.

- 13 I have always wished I could respond in the affirmative when asked ‘Orhan, are you Kemal?’ – a question which I have encountered with renewed regularity after the opening of the museum in 2012. Perhaps that is why I have come up with the following response: ‘Yes, I too spent my childhood and youth among the 1950s to 1990s Nişantaşı bourgeoisie who are the subjects of this novel. Kemal’s family and friends closely resemble my own circle, and the places he lives in and visits are similar to those I frequented. Eventually both Kemal and I were pushed out of the social class we belonged to and the milieux we moved in. In a sense, we both fell outside of our class – Kemal due to his love for Füsün; and I due to my love of literature, as well as for political reasons. Neither of us has any regrets.’

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