

Story 721 (1975 Tape 5)

Narrator: Fadime Kayacan, 62

Location: Yakacık village,
Söğüt kaza, Bilecik
Province

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to father

Kerem and Şahsenem

upon a time there were a widowed mother, her son, and her daughter. The son, named Kerem, was engaged to a girl named Şahsenem, but his family did not have enough money to pay for all of the expenses of a wedding. Şahsenem said to Kerem, "I shall pay the expenses of our wedding ceremony."

young man answered, "No, for if you do that you will resent it in the future. I shall work and earn the necessary money, and then I shall marry you." He therefore left his village and went to Aleppo to find work.¹ There he began to work in a ²⁸⁻³⁰ Coffeehouse. Seven years passed during which he continued to work at that job.

Back in his village no one had heard anything from him. As a result, Şahsenem, against her wishes, was

¹Aleppo is the second-ranking city of present-day Syria, but it was for centuries part of the Ottoman Empire. The narrator may mean that Kerem actually went to this city for work, or she may be using the name Aleppo in a figurative way to represent some distant place. Certainly Aleppo is a great distance from the narrator's village.

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engaged to someone else. One day a traveling peddler² came to the village where Şahsenem lived. She said to him, "Peddler, take this bowl with you and show it everywhere you go. If you should meet someone who claims that this bowl is his, then place it in his hands."

Traveling across almost the entire countryside of Turkey, the peddler one day reached Aleppo. He went to the coffeehouse where the young man was working and showed it to a number of the people who were sitting there

As the peddler was doing this, Kerem saw the bowl and asked, "Who gave this bowl to you?"

The peddler answered, "A certain girl gave me this bowl and told me to give it to anyone who claimed that the bowl was his.

When Kerem heard this, he asked these questions:

When you were in our village last,
Did vines autumnal colors wear?
Or had their leaves already dropped?
Was Şahsenem a girl or bride?

The peddler answered,

When I was in your village last,

²⁹⁻³⁰ ² The Turkish term for such traveling peddlers is bezirgan. There are numerous stories about the bezirgan. In Turkish lore he was a type somewhat similar to the Yankee peddler in nineteenth-century America. He carried his wares on a horse.

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The vineyards had not lost their leaves
 The sofra still held geese, not cranes,³
 And Şahsenem was still a girl.

Upon hearing this, Kerem went at once to the coffee-house owner and said, "If you will, sir, please pay me whatever you feel I have earned, for tomorrow morning I must leave to return once more to my village." The young man set out from Aleppo for Kars,⁴ and when he reached the Plains of Kars, he sang:

I prayed at Aleppo in morning light;
 At midday my prayer went up from Kars,
 From yonder vineyards this afternoon,
 But tonight I'll pray in my memleket.⁵

He went little, he went far, and one day he arrived at a fountain just outside his own village. At the time he arrived there, his sister was hauling some gravel with his horse. As he entered his village, the horse saw him and began neighing

³A sofra is a very shortlegged table whose surface is only about ten inches from the floor. People eat from it sitting crosslegged, in tailor fashion, on the floor. Geese migrate in fall and spring. In the Aegean area, cranes fly south in early winter. See Hesiod, Works and Days, 448-492.

⁴Kars is the capital of Turkey's easternmost province bordering on Iran and the Soviet Union.

⁵One's memleket is his home region.

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The girl, his sister, spoke to the horse, "Why do you neigh? Your master left here seven years ago. Don't think that the man approaching is your master. See what an old man that is!"

Kerem said, "Sister, can you accept me as a guest for tonight?"

The girl said, "I once had a brother, but he left us to earn money seven years ago. My mother was blinded by tears of grief, crying bitterly at my brother's departure. We have lived here alone for a long, long time. Let me first water the horse, and then we'll go home.

They went home together. In the room where they sat there was a ³¹⁻³²saz hanging on the wall. When Kerem took down the saz and started playing it, his mother said, "Lad, do not touch the saz. It was my son's instrument, and if someone else plays it, it will make me feel that my son is dead. Please do not do that."

Kerem then sprayed some medicine into his mother's eyes, and soon they were opened. When she was able to see

⁶The saz, formerly called bağlama or kopuz, is a stringed instrument used by folk poets and minstrels throughout Turkic lands to accompany their songs. It has three double strings. The melody is all played upon one string, and the other two may be used to finger chords, though usually they are open drone strings struck lightly by the hand or plectrum as it passes the melodic string.

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again, she discovered that the young man before her was her own son.

At the same time, Şahsenem's wedding party was in progress. Taking his saz along with him, Kerem went to the site of Şahsenem's home that evening. Şahsenem's female friends were all with her, and as these girls were hennaing⁷ her hands, each recited a mani⁸ to her. Outside the house Kerem played the saz and sang a song:

Is there not a poplar grove before your house?

Is not the white bride hugged by Mustafa?⁹

When the girls heard the well-known voice of Kerem, Şahsenem's best friend said, "My girl, scrub clean your hands and face, for your betrothed has come at last. Your

⁷A reddish-brown dye made from the leaves of the henna shrub is used to color female hands for festive occasions, especially weddings. Hennaing of the bride's hands is a traditional ceremony, carried on at different levels of formality at different places.

⁸A mani may be a ballad or it may be the 4-line ballad stanza.

⁹The name used by the narrator was Mustafacık, an affectionate diminutive of Mustafa. But there is no one in this tale named Mustafa. Besides being a name, Mustafa is also used as an epithet. It derives from the Arabic mustafa, which means blessed or most blessed. In Muslim prayers the Prophet is sometimes referred to as Mohammed Mustafa, Mustafa here clearly being the epithet, blessed. It is similarly used in Legend III, the story of Bamsi Beyrek with the Gray Horse, in The Book of Dede Korkut, ed. Sümer, Uysal & Walker (Austin, 1972).

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Kerem has returned." Şahsenem at once removed her make-up and as much of the henna dye as she could

The man who had been about to marry Şahsenem acknowledged Kerem's prior claim, and in place of Şahsenem, he accepted the hand of Kerem's sister. After that the two couples were married in a double wedding ceremony that lasted for forty days and forty nights. They all lived happily forever after that.