

Story 1093 (Taken from
Uysal tape
in Ankara)

Narrator: Talibi Coşkun, 75,
folk poet; former
heavyweight wrestler

Location: Tosun köyü, Şarkışla
kazası, Sivas vilayeti

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How I Became an (Aşık) - 24

/Ahmet Uysal: Talibi Coşkun, tell us about yourself, your poems, and how you became a wandering poet.¹ 7

Yes, sir. I was born in the year 1314.² During my lifetime I have served in many wars. When I was young, even ten-year-olds and twelve-year-olds went to war. Before had reached that age, I used to tend the cows and sheep of the village. At night I slept among the rocks. One night as I was sleeping among the rocks, I met a beautiful girl in my dreams, a girl whose name was Keklik³ Emine. As soon as I saw Keklik Emine, I immediately fell in love with her. She

¹ Folk poets in Turkey often travel during part of every year. Their purported reason for doing so is their quest for the girl of their dreams, often described as the Most Beautiful Girl in the World. Besides this idealistic reason, there is a more practical one: they can earn more money on a coffeehouse circuit among audiences which have not heard their performances before. The word aşık means lover poet and wandering poet.

² This is the date on the Muslim Hegira calendar. It equals late 1896 or early 1897.

³ Keklik means partridge.

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was the reason that I became a wandering minstrel. ⁴

Those were the days of ağas. ^{26, 29, 31-32} ⁵ They then had more influence on daily life than they do today. They were, among other things, the money lenders, for there were no banks then. If you wished to borrow money, you borrowed it from an ağa and usually at a very high rate of interest.

Well, once I had seen Keklik Emine in a dream, I could not resist her love. I looked around until I found her village. There the people told me that her father was a wealthy man and that he would never give Keklik Emine to me as my wife. "You had better pray to God to help you secure Keklik Emine. Only He can help you. Without His help all your love of Keklik Emine will be in vain.

In the area where I lived there was a river named Camuş River. Its water was clear and sparkling in a way that we imagine the Water of Life must be. ⁶ Even during the summer

⁴ The narrator followed the tradition of wandering, though the main reason for such wandering was lacking in his case. He quickly found his dream-girl, and thus had no need of further search. Most minstrels never find in the real world a girl who corresponds with their dream-girl.

⁵ An ağa (English agha) is a rural landowner, usually rich, often powerful. By extension the word may be an honorific when placed after a male name--even if the honoree is a landless urbanite.

⁶ The Abu Hayat or Water of Life (like the Fountain of Youth) was supposed to give immortality to those who drank it.

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its water remained very cold. When sheep drank its water and ate the flowers that grew along its banks, their milk was very rich. Butter made from that milk was very yellow and looked like gold. It was so delicious that boys and girls there would eat it with a spoon. But in the area summers were quite short.⁷

The given name of my beloved was at first just Emine. One day someone asked me, "How does your Emine walk?"

"She walks like a partridge," I answered. From that day onward she was known as Partridge Emine

Some of the young people went to Partridge Emine and said, "This man has fallen in love with you

"Oh, is he my talip?"⁸ she asked. And from that day onward I was known as Talip. When the law requiring last names was passed,⁹ I added Coşkun to Talip.

⁷ A suggestion of the high altitude of much of Eastern Turkey, the climatic factor that shortened the summer.

⁸ Talip means suitor. Followed by a vowel, the voiceless p becomes a voiced b: Talibi.

⁹ Among the Kemalist Reforms of the 1920s and 1930s, after the founding of the Republic in 1923, was the requirement of a surname. This law was passed in 1935. At that time, families chose whatever last names they wished.

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My first poem was directed partly to Partridge Emine and partly to

You are the source of a river high in the mountains;
 You are a nursing lamb selected from the entire flock;
 Your beauty exceeds all others', mountain girl.
 Upon your brow has God declared you mine?¹⁰

Janebol Fok

I saw you first when spring gave way to summer;
 I saw coquette and flirt before me then.
 "O budding rose" my lute^{S²³?} strings then implore,
 "May God inscribe your brow to say you're mine!"

The hazel eye beneath the arched brow,
 The neck that moves with fascinating grace--
 Mate of the nightingale O mountain flower!
 May God inscribe your brow to say you're mine!

And now to mountain pastures^{724/2} let me go
 To gaze my fill upon your beauty tall
 And pray that someday you will be my own.
 May God inscribe your brow to say you're mine!

My loved one joined her friends in wedding feasts.
 Her neck gleamed brightly as she moved along.
 What is this beauty's destiny to be?
 May God inscribe your brow to say you're mine!

(At one time I could recite many poems of this kind, but I cannot now remember all of them.)

¹⁰ It was believed by many Turks that their destiny was written upon their foreheads. Although not visible to the ordinary eye, it could be read by those with a high level of religious insight.

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After some time people came to me and tried to discourage my suit for the hand of Partridge Emine. They said, "Son, you do not own a hundred sheep or even fifty, and you seem to be lacking in other wealth. Don't set your hope on Partridge Emine. Her father is very rich, and he will never give his daughter to one like you.

A short while later I heard a rumor that Partridge Emine was going to be abducted by a young man.¹¹ His name was Osman and he had no more money than I did. Several agas put Osman up to kidnapping her. They said to Osman, "You go ahead and kidnap this girl and then we shall have her married to you." But, in fact, they wished to have Partridge Emine as a mistress for themselves, for she was a beauty of the world.

After Partridge Emine had been kidnapped, I went to the kaymakam¹² of the nearest town and to the chief of police and complained about this. They said, "What a pity for you that this happened. But you did not do anything to prevent it! You allowed a stranger to abduct Partridge Emine without raising a hand to stop him!"

"What could I have done?" I asked. "I have neither wealth

¹¹ Abducting girls for wives instead of winning them through traditional procedures was once a very common practice in Turkey. It still occurs occasionally in Eastern Turkey.

¹² The chief executive officer in a kaza town. He is appointed to this position by the Ministry of Interior. It is a civil-service job assigned to a person with training in administration and political science.

Abductor
29-32

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nor power. I would like to have you investigate this matter I think that I can discover the whereabouts of Partridge Emine."

The chief of police assigned several men to me, and these men began to search for the girl. They said to me, "Come on Talîbi! Give us some clues that will enable us to find the girl."

I did not know where she was, but I spoke these lines to them:

The beloved coquette has been kidnapped.

Who is there that can follow her trail?

Gather tidings from every traveler.

Who has seen her upon the plains?

By seizing the highway from end to opposite end,

Who can search its every stone?

Along the way is there anyone now

Who braids her hair down her long white neck?

I myself am a traveler along this road.

I seek the Beauty of Beauties.

I hunt every forest and plain that I pass.

Where in the mountains runs a gazelle?

Gendarmes,¹³ take arms and travel this route,

30-31

¹³ The French term gendarme is quite appropriate here. Outside of the cities and larger towns there are no ordinary police forces. Law and order are maintained by soldiers transferred temporarily from the Army to the Ministry of Interior for that purpose, and these reassigned soldiers are called gendarmes.

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Searching both sides with care as you pass
 Burn off the brush on mountains and hills
 To open a way to find Emine.

Gendarmes, make every last effort to see
 Wherever it is that my Emine walks.
 "A-a-ah," Talîbi says, "What is happening to me?
 I am fading faster than any rose.
 A-a-ah, I am dying for love of this girl.
 Who is there who will wind my shroud?"

These were but some of the lines I recited to them. The whole poem was actually much longer than that, but this is all of it that I can remember now.

The leader of the gendarmes then said to me, "Talîbi, there is a man we know who was once a bandit in this area. He is called Mehmet Ağa. We should seek his help, for he knows every hiding place in this region. Let us ask him to locate Partridge Emine.

We proceeded to Mehmet Ağa's farm and were received there as his guests. He slaughtered one of his lambs for us. After we had been well fed, the leader of the gendarmes said, "Mehmet Ağa, this aşık makes us very sad--so sad that he

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puts a hole in our livers.¹⁴ He recites very sad poems and sings very sad songs over the loss of his loved one. You should find that girl of his both for his sake and for ours."

"All right," said Mehmet Ağa. "I shall find her for you. I have heard that she is hidden somewhere in the nearby Taurus Mountains. Give me an hour, and I'll ride into those mountains and find her."

"Take one hour, two hours, four hours--however many hours you may need. Take whatever time is required to find her."

True to his word, Mehmet Ağa rode away and returned a short while later. "I have found them," he said. "They are located in such-and-such a place and they are hidden in such-and-such a house."

A number of villagers joined the gendarmes, and all together they descended upon that house. After capturing all of its occupants, they held a trial for the kidnappers. Emine was also at that trial, where she wore a veil. It was decided by the muhtar¹⁵ and the ağas that he had gathered around him that all of those involved in abducting Partridge Emine should be beaten soundly.

¹⁴ This is literally what the narrator says. This is a folk belief.

¹⁵ The muhtar is the head man of a village. He is elected by the people of the village, and in some cases is the only elected official with whom villagers have any contact.