CHAPTER 2

The Ottoman Café

Our excursions in the Plaza grew less frequent when we finally found the steps that led up to a café hidden from casual view. I had heard of this place—the city’s inhabitants called it the Elevated Café—but I had never managed to discover its exact location in spite of the fact that the steps are just a stone’s throw away from one of the Plaza’s main gates. The café stood on what once used to be a bare and sandy hill that had gradually pulled the old city into its orbit. A number of tall buildings had risen around it and partly concealed it from the street below, leaving three approaches that were known only to its regular customers. The first one abuts the old city, with its antique houses and its Great Mosque. The second rises from the modern districts that spread out to the seafront, while the third leads up from the French District and the river, to the north. This artificial hill was originally created during one of the many troubled periods that succeeded each other at the beginning of
the nineteenth century. It was intended as a strategic military stronghold from which to command the city and bombard, if need be, the fort that towers above the old city, but this military function eventually gave way to a purely recreational one.

The café was most often frequented by the city’s pleasure-seekers between late afternoon and nightfall. The spot rises about twenty meters above the Plaza. The first time we climbed up there we were duly impressed by its size and its perfectly intact late-Ottoman design. A group of flower beds were arranged in the shape of two crescents enclosing a five-pointed star, and there were huge trees of different species that had, no doubt, been planted when the café was first founded. Men placidly puffing on water pipes sat around the pond that occupied the center of the grounds. A polygonal wooden pergola and another rectangular one with glass windows stood nearby. The place had obviously been designed as a summer café, but its customers stubbornly refused to abandon it in wintertime. In cold weather, they patiently negotiated the bottlenecks of chairs and tables, the leisurely racket of their diverse amusements and the smoky traffic of their water pipes in the crowded wooden sheds.

The custom of the Elevated Café varied depending on the hour of the day. On the mornings when we skipped school to go there, there were mostly old men playing cards or backgammon. Mr. Sandrusi, with his