

THE WOMAN IN PENTHOUSE A

Music by Martin Hennessy
Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

The ample balcony and living room of a penthouse apartment in the Bebek neighborhood of Istanbul. A large window upstage. MRS. BAKSHLEVI dressed alluringly, is being interviewed by an unseen journalist. She is elegantly ageless, though in reality somewhere between 40 and 50.

MRS. BAKSHLEVI

(spoken)

Welcome to 'Stamboul, Mrs. Poggioli. Such an estimable journalist. And from the foreign desk! I'm honored. I've always admired your neutrality. Someone finally offering to hear my side of the story. Of course, we could have met at one of the more secluded coffeeshouses. After all, I'm not under house arrest, and I plan to keep it that way. But it's much nicer here, no? These walls won't utter a peep.

(sung)

You asked, so I will tell you!
Somewhere between what never happened
and what really happened,
is what might have happened.

I don't mean to be coy, it's just that
I've always thought that truth
like sleep, was overrated.

(laughing)

Oh, you like that?

What are lies really but our
own version of those things
we need to control?
Those facts we assemble
when we construct the stories of our lives.

Take my first husband, Aslan.
Before he ascended to
the ministry and
sold his soul to Ankara,
he learned how the power of his words,
distorted, could ambush his rivals.

One exquisitely designed syllable
could be more powerful than a *shahab* missile.

(modestly)

Of course I grew up beneath
the shadow of those weapons.

My father was the secret architect of their
covert creation before one bolt
was pressed into national service.

To Izmir we fled Teheran on the
caravansary that followed the Pahlavis.
The royal reign collapsed and now those
bombs are the toys of the Aerospace Force
of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps!

Whoop-de-do. Whoop-de-do!

(she lights a cigarette)

*(spoken) Turkish. (sung) The Italians have
a saying "Fume come un Turco."*

(spoken) Would you like one?

(agitated)

So people don't believe me?
They think I make things up.
They think I'm a fraud, a charlatan, a bluffer.
And now they want their money back.
It really all comes down to that.

Well, first they did believe me,
when I could make them rich,
because I had been a guest at Windsor Palace
and sat at the edge of Putin's
rather ordinary desk.

(spoken) But where was I?

(sung) You asked, so I will tell you.

Oh, yes. The power of fiction.
It all comes down to that.

Well, Aslan and I didn't last very long
following the sluggish afternoon I returned
to find a boy.

No, not a boy.
A young man.
His face buried in that place on my husband
that I thought only women were permitted.
My marriage collapsed
and so did my whole life.

He made up so many stories.
How silly of me. How stupid of me
not to realize that even his *lies* were *lies*.

He bought my silence not with money,
but with secrets. And after that day
(spoken) I only flew *private*...
(sung) Nothing like private skies!

So ... a plane to New York where my
cousin Ariana had planted herself.
I traded a view of Ataturk's forest for
one of Central Park.

And before too long there I was,
a woman with a reputation who could
speak Farsi, Italian, English and
French to a certain degree.

Conversing at dinner with a
General from Bolivia or drinking
chocolate martinis with Bowie and Iman
at Giselle's *La Grenouille*.

After five years, I didn't need to drop any names.
It was *my* name that was being dropped!

My new American husband
made a fortune gouging patients with
counterfeit Viagra stuffed with drywall
or anti-virals packed with Haldol.
From him I learned it's all about the generic.
Who cares what's in it, if the packaging is right?

Secrets, we all have our secrets.
They follow us like shadows on a wall.
Secrets, he *knew* I had secrets.
But he never cared much about them at all.
I wanted something more for myself.
More! More! More than what he saw
the night we met.

But it was only the glove he sought,
and not the hand inside it.
Secrets, we all have our secrets.

(spoken) *That* part was all off the record.

He didn't ask much of me.
As long as I played his Persian cat
with my whiskers and long silky muzzle.
Though I'll admit, I had some minor work
done in Beverly Hills!
Where else could I smooth back the
wrinkles of time?
Moving pieces around like a puzzle.
How quickly I learned the "Hollywood Way"
Who cares what's in it
if the packaging is right?

So when you tell them that you
tiptoe through the tulips in the
Jacqueline Kennedy Garden,
they think you know. They think you know!
They think you can make them rich!
They believe what you tell them!

And when I mentioned an opportunity
to partner with me in a venture,
the checkbooks came out faster than
I could say, "Check please"
Or it was just cash in a plain, white envelope
stuffed under the service door of Penthouse A

Was it *my* fault that the Euro took a dive?
We all need to do what we do to survive.

You asked, so I will tell you!

These people don't believe me.
They think I make things up.
They call me a hustler who
lured them into schemes.

(wild laughter) Ha, ha, ha.
And now they want their money back.
It really all comes down to that.
But first they did believe me,
when I could make them rich.

Because I knew how to get around the sanctions. I had a highly placed source in Defense. *(spoken)* Thank you, Aslan!

Now they say, "We didn't know it was illegal. We just want our money back."
And I'm a swindler, a shark, a Persian Madoff!
(I knew Bernie quite well, by the way).

They sent the law to me and I put up a fight.
Trust me. It's a lot of work to extradite.

I don't mean to be coy, it's just that
I've always thought the law, like truth,
another moving target.

And the stories they made up!
As if I could construct this,
this story of my life.
That I come from a village east of Beirut.
The daughter of a tailor who screwed
her way out of Lebanon, and
blackmailed a wealthy Israeli.

And so what if this *is* my story?
My truth is still the same.
Beirut or Tehran, I had to survive.
Fatima Bakshlevi is the woman I became.
Fatima Bakshlevi is

(suddenly a cellphone rings, that obnoxious ring tone)

Sorry. So sorry.
But I was waiting for this call.

(she answers the phone)

Yoko? Arigatou. Arigatou.
(to Mrs. Poggioli) It's my friend, Yoko. Ono.

So happy you called your friend, Fatima. You heard?

(spoken) Interpol is up my ass. Aslan can do nothing.
I tried Gaga. Even Justin. No, no. Not Timberlake. Trudeau.

(sung) But, Yoko, one call from you.

(she listens a few seconds and smiles contentedly)

*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu. ***

** A Japanese expression used to make a request and also to thank the person, either before or after that do it for you.