

In Search of the



by Paul Morin

We received the request through e-mail while on vacation in Turkey, sent by Canadian friends living in Cyprus.

Audrey's niece's boyfriend spent a year in Gaza, where he developed a taste for the nargile ... part of the occupational hazard of being a student, I guess. Anyway, now that he's back in Canada he's got a hankering for the old waterpipe ... apparently impossible to find this kind of tobacco in Winnipeg, so I thought you might be able to track some down in Eskisehir.

I wouldn't have remembered what a nargile was, if it hadn't been for my barber back in the States. When he learned that I used to live in Turkey, this became the only thing we talked about, and one day as my hair fell down my neck he asked if I'd ever smoked a hookah. I hadn't. I'd seen them often enough, in bazaars and tourist shops around the country, but to me they looked like rickety stage props.

"There's another name for it," my barber said. "What else do they call it?" He stopped clipping and stared at the floor. I thought of bong, but I wasn't going to fall into the trap of suggesting it. There was also water pipe and, for the British, hubble-bubble.

"A nargile," he blurted out. "That's it. A nargile." My barber reads a lot, but I couldn't think of where he might've learned that word.

Village Pleasure



In search of nargile tobacco

In cities where the pastime of smoking hookahs still survives — Istanbul, Cairo, Baghdad — buying nargile tobacco probably would've been a simple errand, but we were in Eskisehir, a modern university town halfway between Istanbul and Ankara, and not a place where you can lay your hands on just any old cultural artifact.

My wife Aysel wasn't hopeful. She's a Turk who was born and raised in Eskisehir, but even she thought the best place to find nargile tobacco was the 19th century. Nevertheless, it was for Audrey's niece's boyfriend, the sweetest guy we never met, and we knew we had to try.

The first spice seller we approached looked at us with a blank expression until our request sank in, then smiled unsurely and suggested we try a café.

We got that a lot. One after another the shopkeepers and café owners and spice sellers stared, then sent us back out to the street with another cockamamie suggestion based on a different mythic hypothesis, like so much well-intentioned advice on how to capture a genie. We might as well be looking for glass slippers, I thought. I began to get cranky. We had only a couple weeks of freedom until we had to be back at our jobs, and here we were wasting an entire day trying to fulfill the whim of a stranger — not merely someone we'd never met but the boyfriend of someone we'd never met, which is like fifty times worse. (How long is their relationship going to last? Does he love her, or is he just using her for sex? I felt I had a right to know.)

Then the man selling state-sanctioned alcohol sent us to a shop filled

In Search of the Village Pleasure

with a catch-all of souvenirs and machine-made Turkish antiques — copper and ceramics, meerschaum pipes, tiny teacups, and other baubles. High on a dusty shelf stood two or three forgotten hookahs.

The proprietor was the first man who wasn't disarmed by my wife's request. He told us of a café in town where, he had heard, they smoked the nargile. It was called Koy Sofrasi, the Village Pleasure, and it was up in the city center by the river. With his directions we found ourselves along a row of cafés crowded with students, some of them talking on cell phones, others nuzzling lovers or strumming guitars, and others violently playing backgammon, but all of them smoking cigarettes. My wife checked at one of the cafés, and came away with a complicated verbal map that included several turns and no landmarks. "So this place exists?" I said. She guessed so.

We were heading down a random alley in a deserted neighborhood

behind the cafés, when the relentless cement-faced buildings were abruptly interrupted by a fake log cabin, a little house on the prairie right there in the middle of Turkey. It might just as well have been made of gingerbread. No signs identified it as the Village Pleasure, but to us, after a day of searching, this was definitely the place.

The café was a long, low room, as musty and dark as a closet. We sensed the presence of others but couldn't see them, like at some opium

den in a Sherlock Holmes story. At the far end of the café, past a collection of a dozen water pipes in a corner, fluorescent light from the kitchen stabbed the darkness.

Working a tea samovar in the kitchen was a young woman dressed in grunge: jeans and an unbuttoned flannel shirt over a white t-shirt. She

told us they don't sell the tobacco. What tobacco they have is for use in the café. Then she called past us into the darkness. "Mehmet, they're looking for tobacco. Do we have any extra?"

We turned to peer into the darkness. I don't know what my wife

I wouldn't have remembered what a nargile was if it hadn't been for my barber back in the States.

When he learned I used to live in Turkey that became the only thing we talked about, and one day as my hair fell down my neck he asked if I'd ever smoked a hookah.



expected, but I expected Mehmet to be an old man with decadent yellow eyes and skin ravaged by vice.

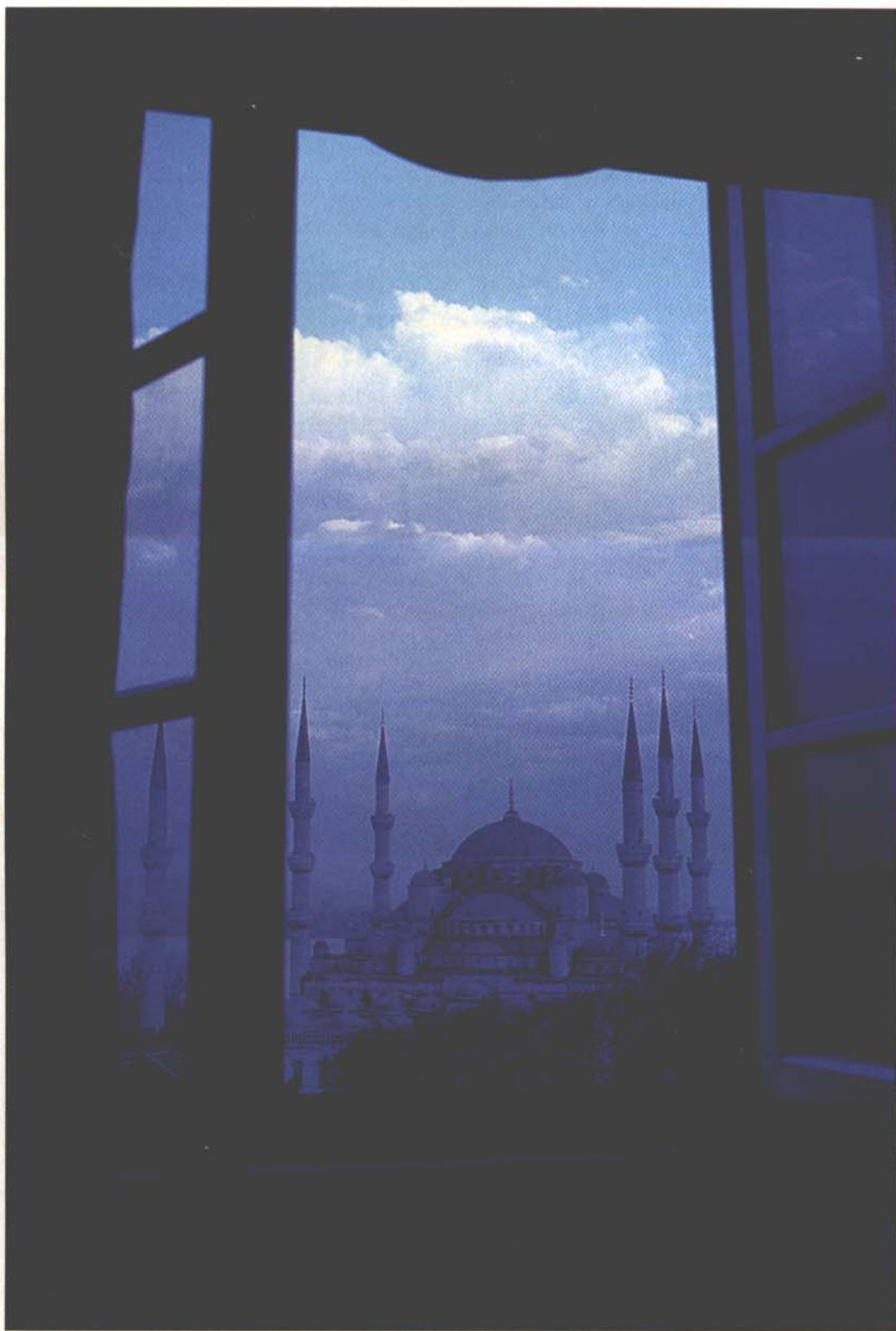
What we got instead was a sleek and hip entrepreneur, not yet 30, sitting in the dark with his sleek and hip entrepreneur brother Mustafa. They were both wearing jeans and v-neck sweaters, their hair and goatees trimmed identically close, and eating, at two o'clock in the afternoon, what appeared to be breakfast.

My wife repeated that we were looking for nargile tobacco. She told them the story, the boyfriend of the niece of the Canadian friends in Cyprus and all that. Our request amused them, and they invited us to sit and ordered us tea. My wife said later she was afraid we were headed for, as she put it, a "Turkish over-hospitality trap," which usually takes about four hours to get out of.

Nevertheless, a long day of searching had finally brought us to someone who had the actual goods, and so we sat. My wife asked again if they could get us some. Instead of answering, Mehmet offered us cigarettes, as if silently advising discretion, like we were asking Sidney Greenstreet for transit visas out of Casablanca.

Halfway through our tea and cigarettes, Mehmet called out an order to the waiter, who returned with a cellophane package of the tobacco, imported from Egypt, which he unwrapped under our noses. It was moist and leafy, like the Red Man I used to chew in the first of many failed attempts to separate myself from adolescence, but smelled sweet from a soaking in molasses and fruit juices. The waiter thought we might also like to see an unopened box of the stuff. The labeling on the box was Arabic, but the fine print, in English, declared that the tobacco contained zero tar.

Upon some invisible signal from Mehmet, the waiter appeared with a hookah about the size of a baseball bat. My wife and I looked at each other, realizing that our hosts wouldn't let us simply buy the stuff and leave. There were traditions, ancient rituals these 20-somethings took care to observe. I was seated on a divan in a dark, smoky Turkish café with a hookah standing before me, America was a long way away, but I thought of my barber. He'd asked me if smoking a hookah got you stoned, and I told him I didn't know.



The Village Pleasure

With a pair of metal pincers our waiter fished out from the fireplace a small red-hot coal — oak, used for its slow burn — and brought it over on a silver platter. He put the coal on a piece of aluminum foil and then on the top of the hookah, pushing it down onto the tobacco.

With the casual familiarity of a drug addict preparing a fix, Mehmet unwrapped the tube and wiped the mouthpiece with a napkin, all the while carrying on a conversation with my wife. We learned

In Search of the Village Pleasure

that the pair attended the same university.

He stoked the coal with rapid breaths, but when he smoked for real Mehmet exhaled through his mouth and nostrils simultaneously, like a dragon sighing, and soon his whole head was enveloped in dense plumes of smoke. The bubbles rose and in the quiet of the café the hookah gurgled like a contented baby. He passed it to Mustafa, who smoked and passed it back.

Mehmet inserted into the mouthpiece another mouthpiece, like a golf tee, only hollow. He handed me the tube and all over again I was an awkward high school freshman about to make an expert fool of myself. My first draw of smoke was pathetically feeble, and I quickly tried again to prevent laughter. The tobacco smelled sweet: not like pipe tobacco, but in the airy way that a florist's shop smells sweet.

They talked on leisurely, Mehmet and my wife, while we passed the hose around. Mehmet told us a story about Sinan, a renowned Turkish architect of the 16th century, whose oval reconstruction of Constantine's Aya Sofya in Istanbul allows one to hear, in perfect

detail, conversations occurring 50 yards away.

One day, while building the Sultan Selim mosque in Edirne, Sinan brought his nargile to work. His fellow workers saw him sitting on the floor sucking meditatively on his nargile, the bubbles thrumming in the glass. They knew sacrilege when they saw it, and so they ran to Sultan Selim (Selim the Grim, as he's gone down in history) to report Sinan's behavior.

The sultan arrived at the mosque and told Sinan, "You, Sinan, of all people, should know not to smoke your nargile in a mosque."

Sinan directed the sultan to look in the bowl of the nargile, and when he did the sultan found no tobacco.

"I'm testing the acoustics of the mosque, my sultan," Sinan said. "I'm simply listening."

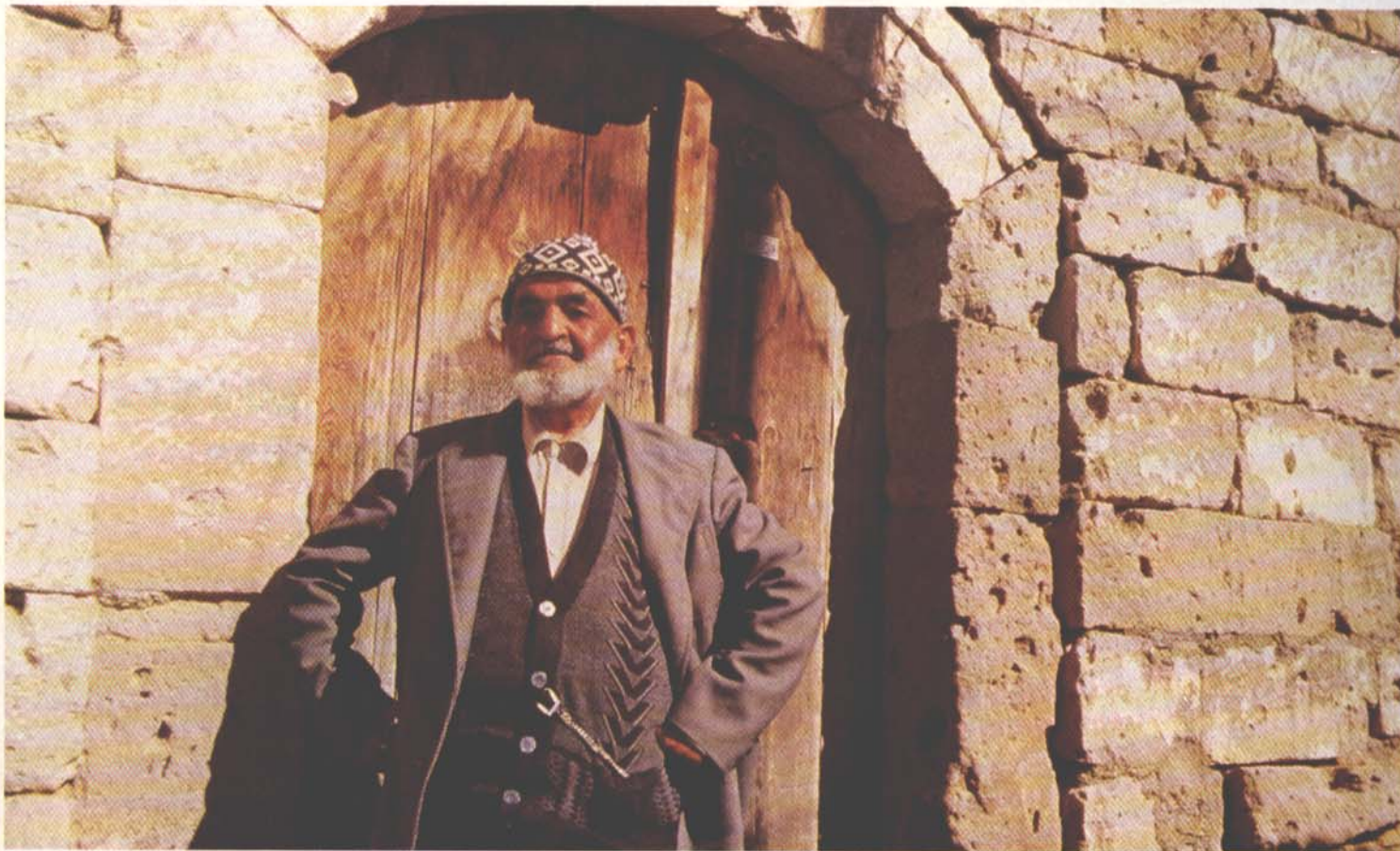
Mehmet smiled. You could tell he loved that

story. He told it quietly, without any need to impress. Occasionally he would look us in the eye, and fall silent mid-sentence, confident we would correctly fill in what he didn't say. He trusted us. He knew us. We were smoking the hookah together.

I watched the bubbles rise in the water as I smoked, mesmerized by their sound and motion. It made perfect sense that Mehmet and

Upon some invisible signal from Mehmet, the waiter appeared with a hookah about the size of a baseball bat. My wife and I looked at each other, realizing that our hosts wouldn't let us simply buy the stuff and leave.





Mustafa would spend their afternoon in a dark café pondering things. Despite their young age, they were the heirs to this long and rich water pipe tradition, and they took their heritage seriously. It was simple and important that they enjoy themselves. It was what I would do in their position.

Slowly, the U.S. and everything it meant — our e-mail in-box, our mortgage, our time-crunched pastimes and microwaved cravings, our Quik Shop survival tactics, all the consumerist and careerist noise of our American lives — melted away like snow in spring. I sat on a lumpy divan in the darkness watching the smoke and the ripening bubbles, listening to the somnolent murmur of Turkish ponderings and the gurgle of the hookah, and my thoughts wandered back to me. We spend our lives and our health and all our money trying to keep up with the Joneses, but we *are* the Joneses, and we can blame no one but ourselves for having to keep up with them. We aren't at peace simply because we don't will it. We have other priorities. It all made perfect sense. For a moment, pleasantly indifferent to my only chance here on earth, I let go of plans, careers, tasks, even dreams, and simply smoked and watched the hookah.

We bought a kilo of nargile tobacco, four boxes of a quarter-kilo each, which cost us roughly 30 dollars. Each quarter kilo rendered about 50 bowls, and each bowl could be lingered over for an

hour or so. Two hundred hours of smoking. Was that enough for Audrey's niece's boyfriend? No, only an infinite amount was enough.

Goods in hand, we rose to depart. Mehmet and Mustafa invited us to stop by their import shop, and we said we would do that. Outside, the sky was cloudy, but still too bright. My mind was clear, my thoughts lucid, but I couldn't really say what time it was nor how long we'd been in the Village Pleasure. It just didn't matter. My head felt about half an inch above where it should've been.

Our vacation resumed — Cyprus, Istanbul, rush, rush, rush — and we never found time to return to the Village Pleasure or to visit Mehmet and Mustafa in their shop.

After vacation I went back to my nine-to-five, sitting under fluorescent lights all day long in my ergonomically correct chair, staring at the glare of my monitor. I picked up the habit of going out to the corporate-sanctioned smoking shelter to suck on dry tobacco wrapped in dry paper. I couldn't get it out of my mind that, halfway across the globe, Mehmet and Mustafa were sitting on divans in the dark, finishing up their afternoon breakfast, filling their nargile with tobacco and their consciousness with the soft smoke and subdued gurgle of the water, pleasantly aware that they are alive, on earth, this moment, with friends.

That's the effect my barber wondered about, the effect smoking a nargile has on a person. I'm afraid even to mention it to him. **S**

