

For photographer **Elżbieta Smoleńska**, it was two dreams coming true at once: being able to visit a destination that always fascinated her, and meeting a photography icon she admired.

A Portrait *of* Istanbul

Right, Ara Güler: The legendary photographer kindly agreed to let me take this portrait. Cherished memory of a wonderful afternoon.

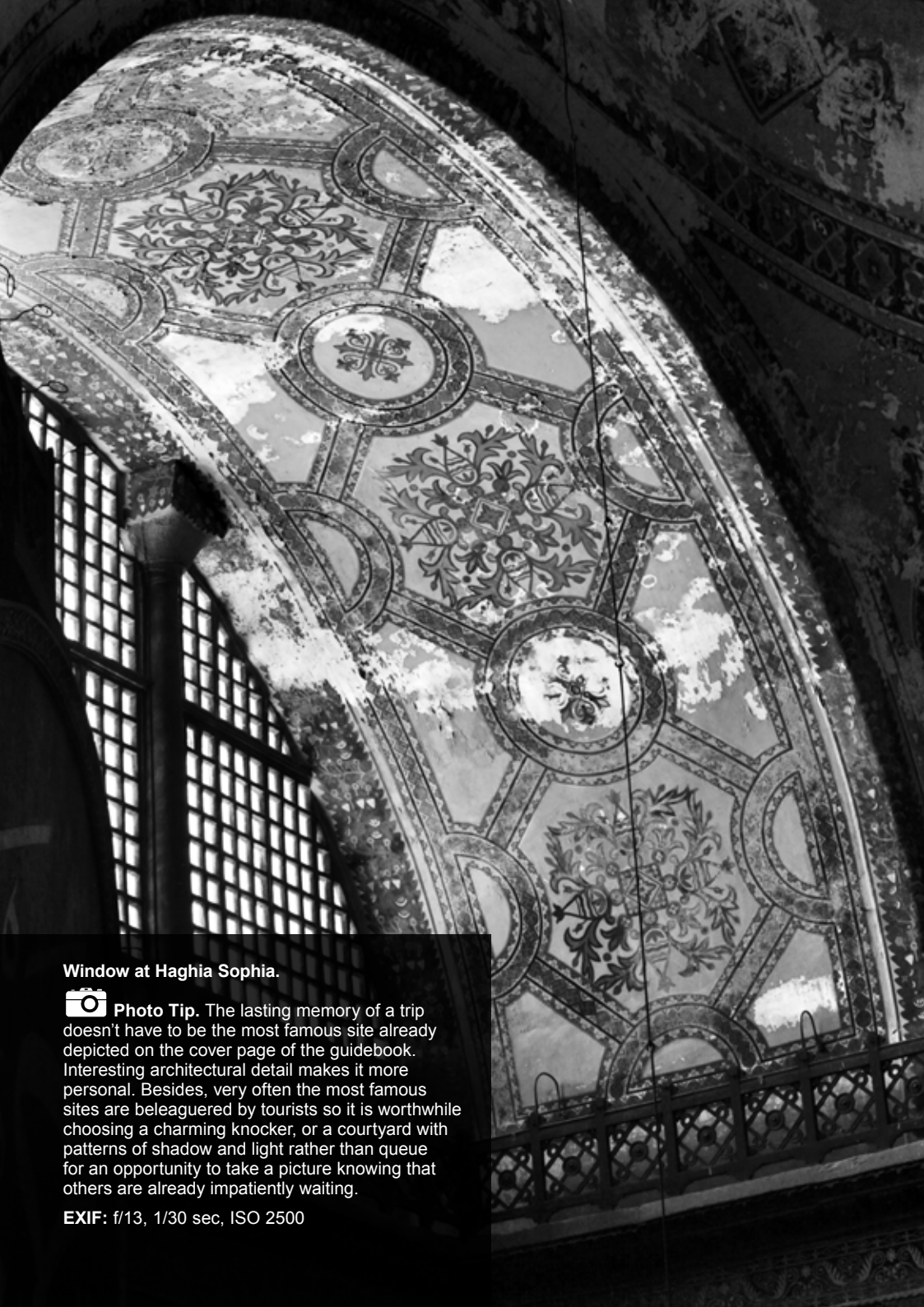
Photo Tip. The soft, natural light coming from the street was just perfect. Whenever I can, I try to use natural light or diffused ambient light. I'd rather not use flash if I can avoid it. I find that the less equipment you use, the closer you can get to the person you'd like to photograph. Talking to your subject helps to break the ice and forget about the shutter speed...

EXIF: f/5, 1/25 sec, ISO 640

I always dreamt about going to Istanbul which for me embodies the European fascination for the Orient. However, for many years, other travel destinations took precedence... Iran, Nepal, Ethiopia, Libya, Cambodia and Laos, to name but a few.

Finally my dream came true—and in what a great fashion! I wanted to do what many travellers envisage: marvel at the beautiful columns and candelabras of Hagia Sophia,





Window at Hagia Sophia.



Photo Tip. The lasting memory of a trip doesn't have to be the most famous site already depicted on the cover page of the guidebook. Interesting architectural detail makes it more personal. Besides, very often the most famous sites are beleaguered by tourists so it is worthwhile choosing a charming knocker, or a courtyard with patterns of shadow and light rather than queue for an opportunity to take a picture knowing that others are already impatiently waiting.

EXIF: f/13, 1/30 sec, ISO 2500



admire the ceiling of the Blue Mosque and lose myself in the countless alleys of the Grand Bazaar. And I did all that, and much more, thanks to a lucky set of events....

I started however with what I saw as the obligatory visit to Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence. For me Istanbul is as much a real city as a phenomenon created by the imagination of the writers who crafted a grand picture of it with their words. By entering the Museum of Innocence (which from the outside is a rather inconspicuous house), you step into a different world filled with objects and photographs from a long gone era.

Portrait of a seller in front of Chora Church. This charming gentleman kindly let me take a photograph of him. He had such a warm, contagious smile and reminded me of my own grandfather.



Photo Tip. When taking portrait shots I try to choose the background which is complementary to the complexion or glow of the person I am depicting. Reducing the colour scheme helps the composition of the picture.

EXIF: f/6.3, 1/320 sec, ISO 2500

**Opposite page: Matchbox girl—
Street scene, Suleymaniye.**

I decided to lower my camera in the direction of this scene in order to be closer to this little figure sitting on the pavement.



Photo Tip. Don't be afraid to get your knees dirty or climb on a stone in order to achieve a better view of your subject.

EXIF: f/5.6, 1/125 sec, ISO 160



Elżbieta Smolenska with Ara Güler.

Still enchanted by Pamuk's nostalgic view of Beyoğlu, I decided to visit a couple of nearby bric-a-brac shops, as if trying to find my own little talisman from the past. As usual I was also taking pictures. Soon I realised I was not alone in my quest. This is how I met Ali Mushaima, the publisher of this very book.

Ali suggested lunch at a coffee place that he knew. When I sat down under enormous black and white panoramas of old Istanbul and intimate photographs of its people, I realised that I was in a restaurant owned by one of the world's great photographers, Ara Güler.

As soon as I heard that the legendary "Eye of Istanbul" himself sometimes came to Café Ara, I immediately hatched a plan. The very same day I went to a bookshop and bought the biggest volume containing Güler's photographs I could lay my hands on. It happened to be the beautifully produced *Ara Güler's Istanbul* (Thames & Hudson).

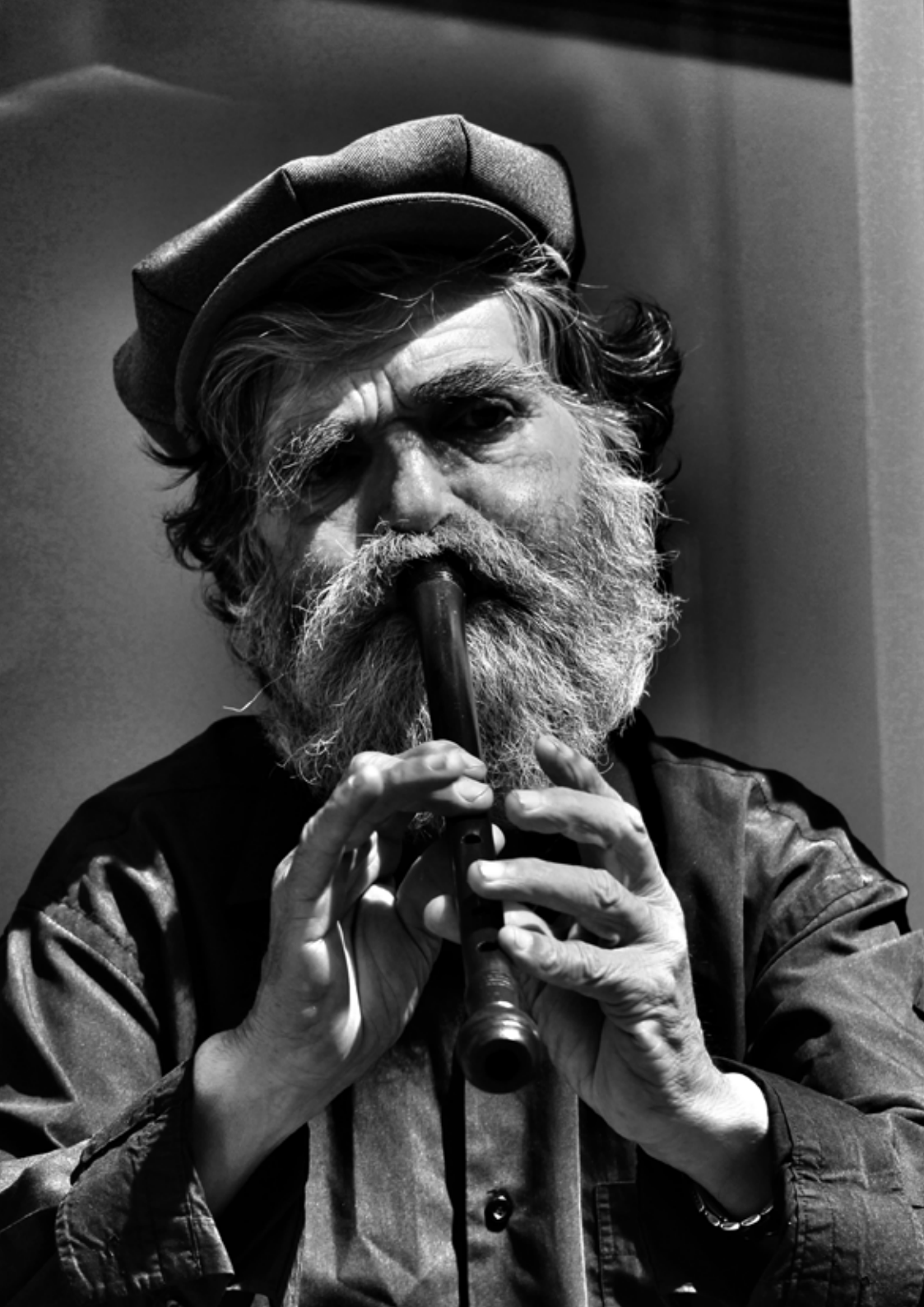
The day after, at noon, I went to the restaurant. Sure enough, before my espresso went cold, I spotted a silhouette slowly approaching. I hesitated a while, and then went over to the table. "Sir, could I ask you for an autograph?" I asked.

Güler raised his eyes: "What is your name, child?"

"Elżbieta," I answered.

"Hmmm... Polish name! My first love was called Leokadia."





After this introduction, the conversation proceeded with amazing ease. We looked through the book of Güler's photographs and talks about light and life, travelling and childhood memories. Güler was extremely kind, attentive and, above all, witty. Despite having met so many famous people (Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Winston Churchill and Indira Gandhi come to mind), he still had a great gift of being simply curious about another person. I felt as if I had known him for a long time.

Güler was interested to see Istanbul through my eyes and asked me to show him my photographs. He particularly liked a portrait of a flute player, which I had taken just a moment before we met in a nearby street.

With hindsight I appreciate how lucky I was to have this afternoon with Güler and his friends. While in Istanbul I met many great characters: carpet sellers from Uzbekistan and Turkmen traders of antique silver; bazaar shop owners who can master an invitation for a cup of tea in all possible languages of the world, and simply warm Istanbulites who create the very atmosphere of this great city. I have seen glorious architecture and ventured into lesser known backstreets.

With my camera I tried to capture the essence of the mood of the city. Something which so many photographers and writers alike have tried before me.

Opposite page: Flute player.

A flutist plays for his imaginary flock on fashionable and hip Istiklal Caddesi. Maybe it is not surprising that just nearby is Mevlevihanesi—the Hall of Whirling Dervishes.

EXIF: f/8, 1/320sec, ISO 320

In his 1896 book *Constantinople* (translated into English and republished in 2005), famed Italian author Edmondo de Amicis marvelled:

One can light one's cigars in Europe, and drop the ash in Asia. On getting up in the morning, we can enquire: 'What part of the world shall I visit today?' We have a choice of two continents and two seas. We have at our command horses standing saddled in every square, sailboats in every cove, steamboats at a hundred landing stages; the darting caique, the flying talika, and an army of guides speaking all the languages of Europe.

Do you wish to hear an Italian comedy? To see the dancing dervishes? Or the antics of Karagöz in the Turkish puppet-show? Or see gypsy acrobats? Or listen to a storyteller telling an old Arabian tale? Or would you prefer a Greek theatre? To hear an imam preach or watch the Sultan pass by? All you need to do is ask.

And you couldn't agree more! Our views on smoking cigars and our modes of transport may have changed but the wealth of things you can do in Istanbul is still just as amazing. All you need to do is ask....

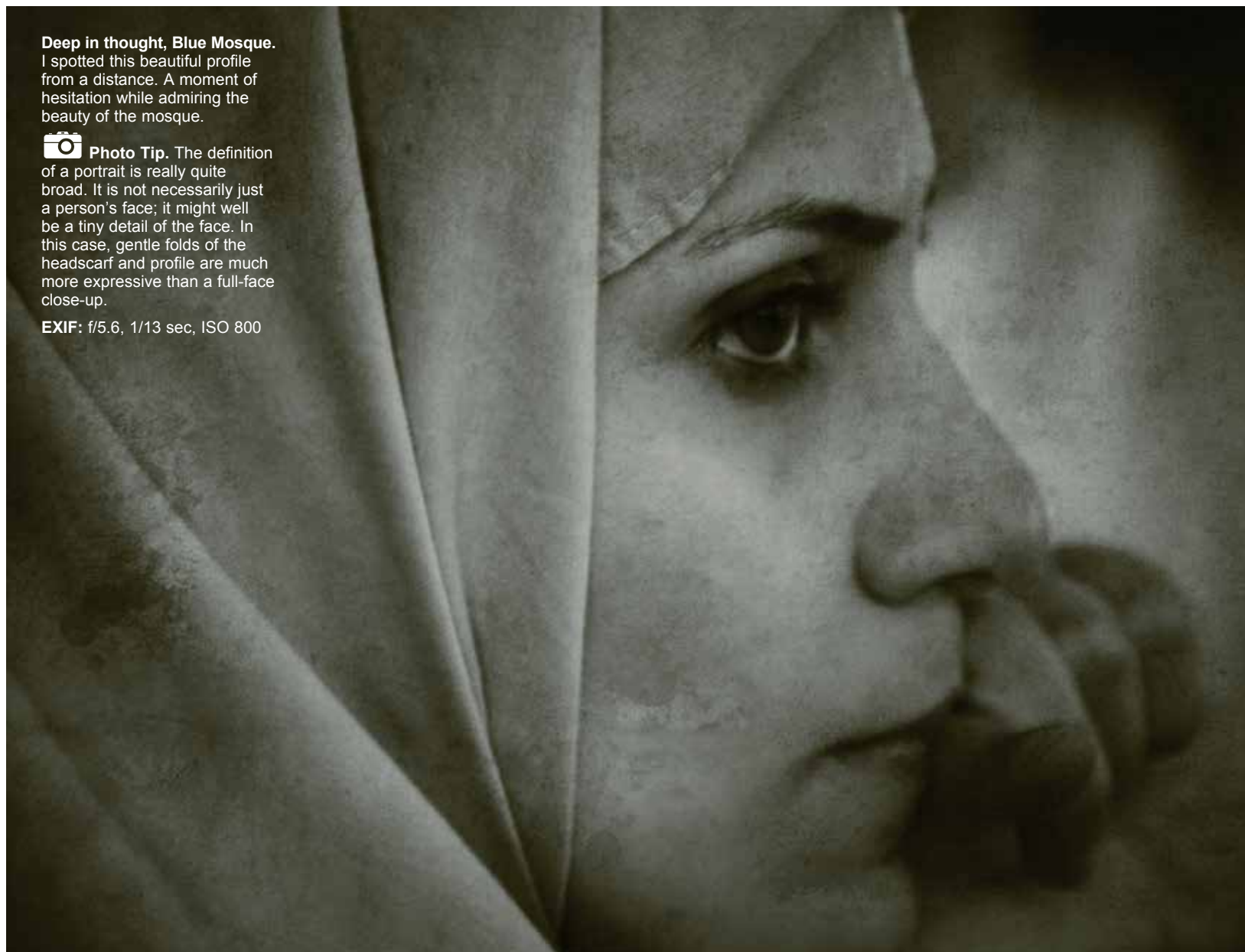
Deep in thought, Blue Mosque.

I spotted this beautiful profile from a distance. A moment of hesitation while admiring the beauty of the mosque.



Photo Tip. The definition of a portrait is really quite broad. It is not necessarily just a person's face; it might well be a tiny detail of the face. In this case, gentle folds of the headscarf and profile are much more expressive than a full-face close-up.

EXIF: f/5.6, 1/13 sec, ISO 800



Just calling... Street scene. A glimpse of café life in one of the streets near Topkapı Palace.



Photo Tip. Although tempting, it is best not to check your shots as you go. You can do that in the evening when more relaxed. Sometimes the best images are not quite what you were hoping to depict. Not what you planned. Let yourself be surprised.

EXIF: f/5.6, 1/320 sec, ISO 2500, focal length 260 mm





**Opposite page:
Looking into the
past—Mehtarân.**

After stepping outside Hagia Sophia I heard distant music. I followed the sound and came across a performance of Mehtarân (Ottoman army band which played martial tunes during military campaigns). The wonderful crimson of the uniform made me think of Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*.

EXIF: f/5.6, exp 1/100 sec, ISO 250, focal length 300mm

**Right: Shoeshiner's
tea break; near
Galata Tower.**

The absence of the shoeshiner and this steaming cup of tea was quite telling...



Photo Tip.

I wouldn't despair over the lack of something which you were expecting to photograph. Sometimes it is more dramatic if the subject is missing.

EXIF: f/6.3, 1/250 sec, ISO 100, focal length 250mm



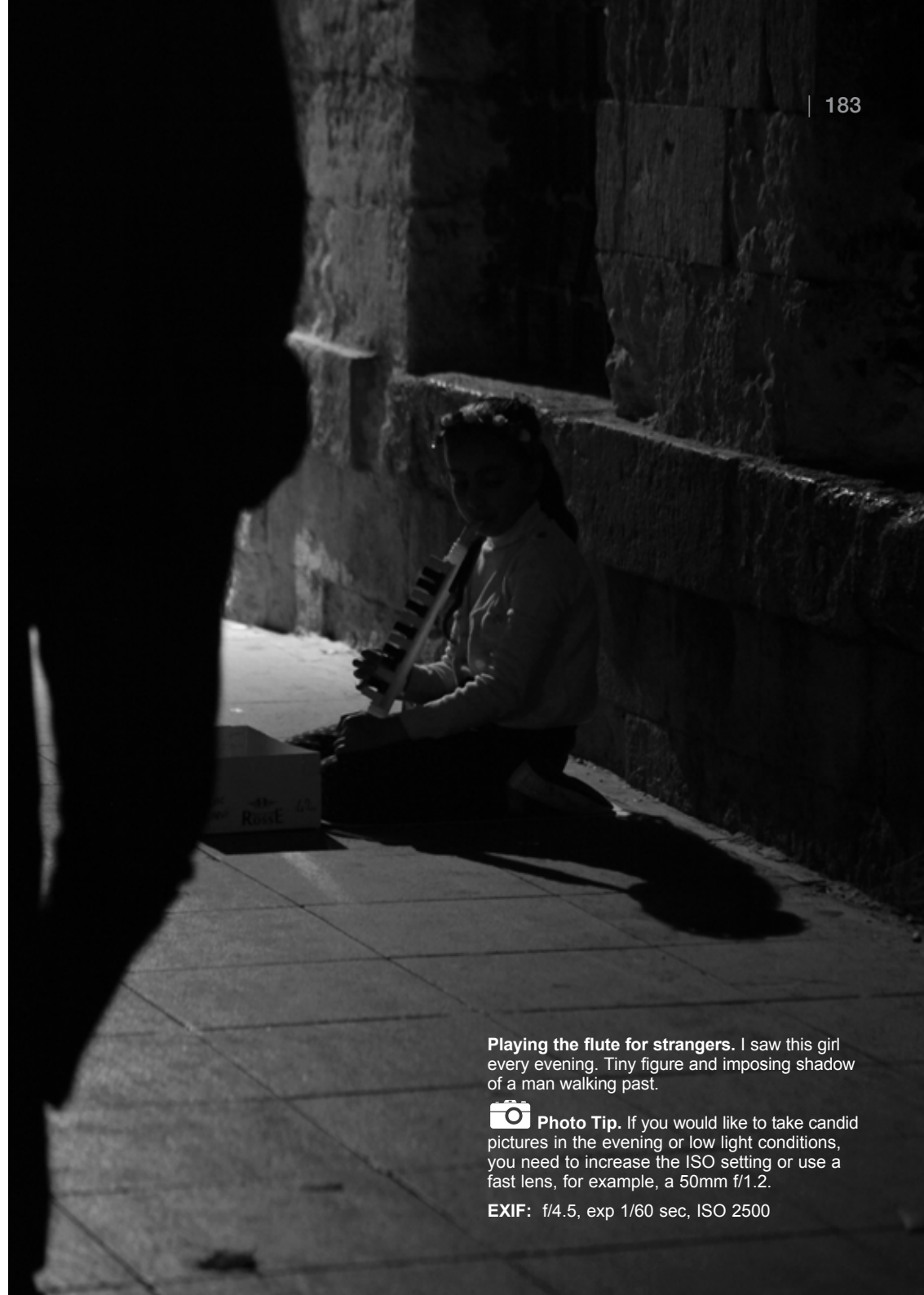


Ticket to Harem? This was one of those surprise moments. I was just about to take a picture of myself reflected in a window of the ticket booth at the Bosphorus—I couldn't resist it after seeing the Harem sign. I would have executed my plan if it wasn't for this charming ticket seller suddenly peeking out the tiny window. In a split second I changed the direction of my camera...



Photo Tip. Sometimes the best thought out plan has to be changed. Yet again intuition and quick reaction is much more important than having a well-equipped camera bag. A simple camera is just as good, as long as it is there when you need it.

EXIF: f/5, exp 1/80 sec, ISO 160



Playing the flute for strangers. I saw this girl every evening. Tiny figure and imposing shadow of a man walking past.



Photo Tip. If you would like to take candid pictures in the evening or low light conditions, you need to increase the ISO setting or use a fast lens, for example, a 50mm f/1.2.

EXIF: f/4.5, exp 1/60 sec, ISO 2500

Prayer. I thought this was a rather intimate moment of prayer or immersion in the verse of a book. This was happening in the seclusion behind the grill of the women's section of the Blue Mosque.

 **Photo Tip.** Sometimes physical barriers—grills, door frames, gates, etc—may well add to the composition. So rather than avoiding them in a picture, try to weave this element into the composition.

EXIF: f/4, exp 1/125, ISO 500

Yo! Ahmed. Walking past a courtyard near Taksim Square, I saw this rather striking graffiti and when I looked down there was a silhouette of a man talking on the phone. The title for the photograph was written on the wall...



Photo Tip. Just have your camera at the ready and follow your instinct.

EXIF: f/8, exp 1/60 sec, ISO 400



Arresting eyes. Portrait of a salesman who tried to convince me to visit a carpet shop. I declined the offer but not without asking him for permission to take a photo.



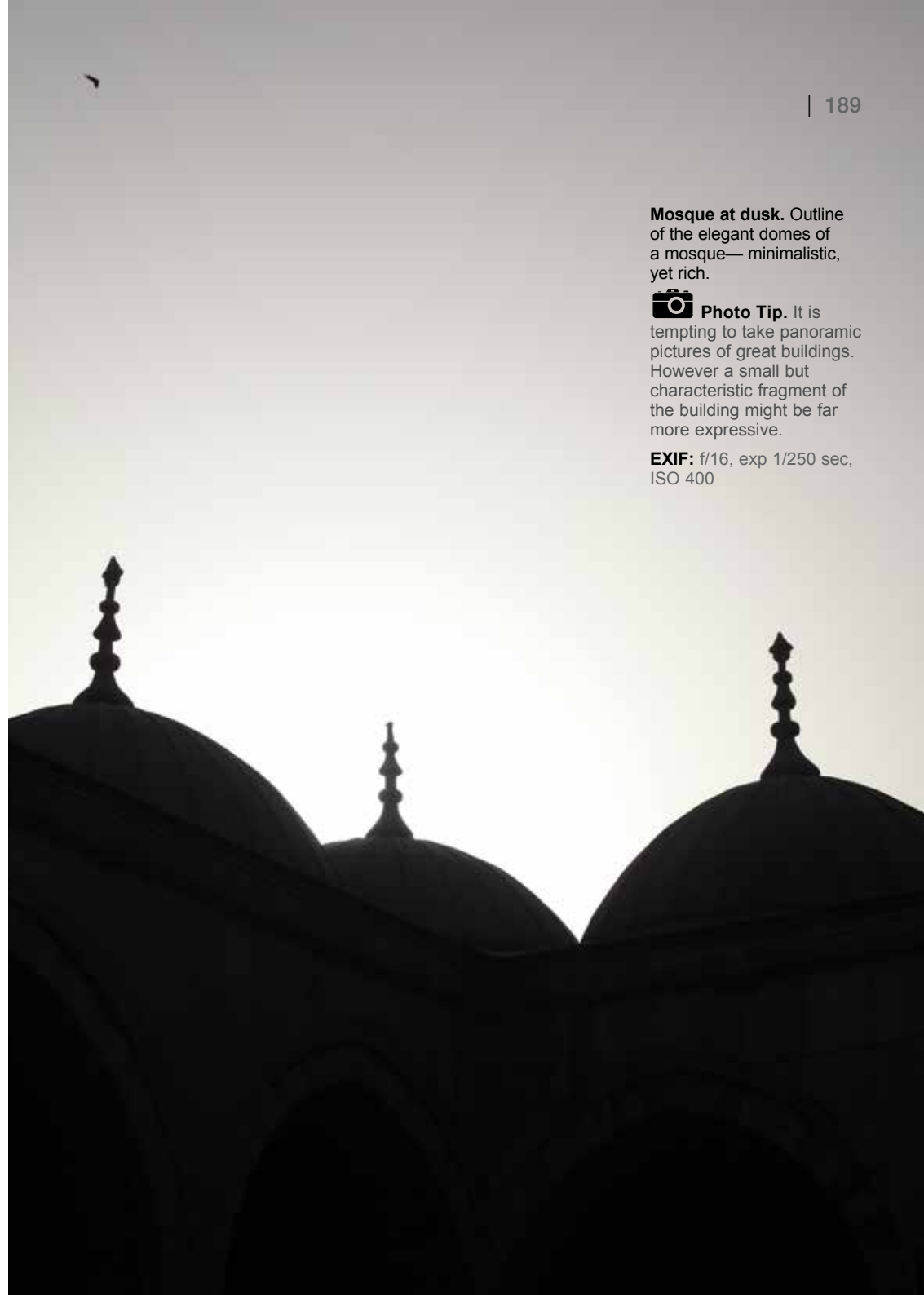
Photo Tip. I always ask whether I may take a portrait picture although often people behave in a more natural way when they are not conscious of you doing it. If you feel that that might be the case, try to ease the awkwardness with a conversation.

EXIF: f/6.3, exp 1/320 sec, ISO 100



Blind love. Dusk was just descending on an empty street which not long before was packed with tourists lining up to visit the Haghia Sophia. Suddenly I spotted this grandmother carrying a sweet burden: her granddaughter.

EXIF: f/5.6, 1/250 sec, ISO 160



Mosque at dusk. Outline of the elegant domes of a mosque— minimalist, yet rich.

Photo Tip. It is tempting to take panoramic pictures of great buildings. However a small but characteristic fragment of the building might be far more expressive.

EXIF: f/16, exp 1/250 sec, ISO 400

Waiting for a message from the Pasha. Taken near the Hagia Sophia, this picture offers a striking, slightly humorous, contrast between past and present: elaborate brocade costume and sleek new mobile phones. A figure engrossed in his own world, oblivious to the hustle and bustle of the street.

EXIF: f/5.6, exp 1/160, ISO 250



Number 10, but not quite Downing Street. Old signage of a beautiful wooden abandoned house in the backstreets near Topkapi Palace. Any association with Downing Street is purely numerical.

EXIF: f/3.5, exp 1/125 sec, ISO 1000



Story teller. Among the vintage memorabilia and coin collectors sat this gentleman who seemed to attract the attention of tourists and old Istanbulites in equal measure. I didn't understand a word of his story, but he was captivating. He nodded politely when I gestured permission to take a photograph. He was clearly used to this kind of request.

EXIF: f/5, exp 1/200sec, ISO 200

Cherub, Blue Mosque.

In this beautiful, intimate scene, a mother tries to capture her baby's angelic face with her iPhone. Her dainty raised hand against the soft light seeping through the window reminds me of the delicate brushstrokes of Renaissance painters.

EXIF: EXIF f/4, exp 1/5 sec, ISO 400



**Blue Mosque, Worshippers.**

A little microcosm of the courtyard of the Blue Mosque. Pious Muslims and tourists who come to visit this magnificent building are all united by the ritual of "sun worshipping".

EXIF: f/11, exp 1/640, ISO 100



Haghia Sophia. Ex Oriente Lux... This row of marvellous chandeliers were meant to dazzle the believers in the time of the Byzantine Empire and it is still stunning. The imposing, yet simple, design and contrast between black and white makes a very minimalistic picture.

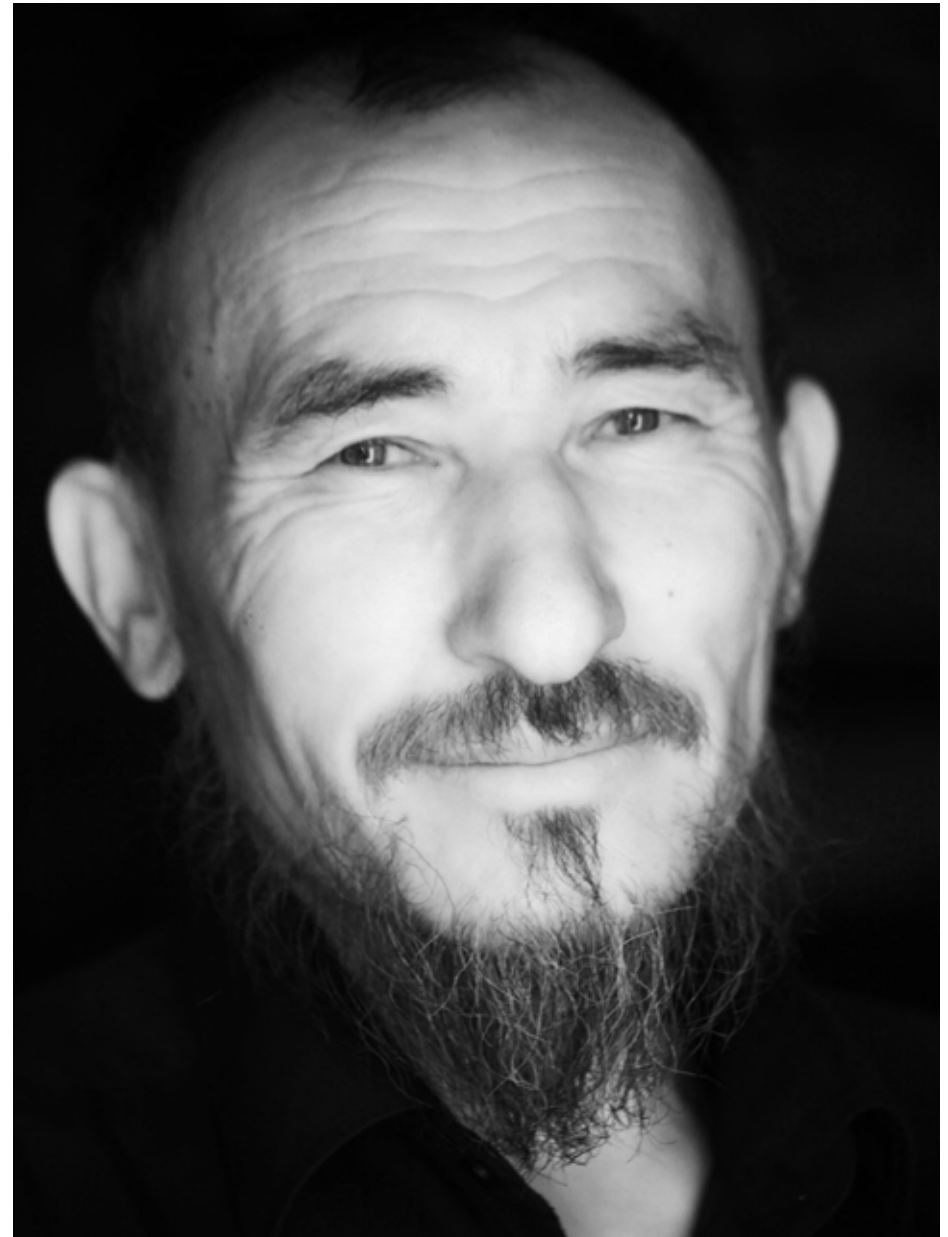
EXIF: f/10, 1/30sec, ISO 2000

Opposite page: Carpet seller, Grand Bazaar. It was a chance meeting. The customary invitation for a cup of tea and stories about Turkmen carpets followed with ease. Tea was the icebreaker. Wonderful and quiet moment in the otherwise bustling bazaar. Soft light coming from the cracks in the roof just gently lingers on this gentleman's face.



Photo Tip. In this case I had to ask my subject to step outside of the shop. If you need it and it is not too much trouble, you should ask your subject to move towards a flattering spot of light. However, it is a matter of careful judgment; you wouldn't like the person to feel that they are part of a photosession. With a courteous smile I try to make the matter as natural and low key as possible.

EXIF: f/4.5, 1/40 sec, ISO 400, 35 focal length





Istanbul Extreme! In a backstreet of İstiklal Cadesi, filled with nice little boutiques, shopkeepers were relaxing in the late afternoon in front of their shops. This scene struck me as a great juxtaposition: a dynamic and trendy poster, and the almost sculpture-like pose of a gentleman enjoying his siesta.

EXIF: f/7.1, 1/60 sec, ISO 250

Biography



Elżbieta Smoleńska, photographed by her daughter Mirela, age 9

Elżbieta Smoleńska grew up in Białystok, a culturally diverse region in eastern Poland. Proximity to the country's borders sparked her interest in travel from a very early age.

She studied Polish literature and theatre in Warsaw before moving to London where she joined the BBC World Service. During her time with the BBC, she interviewed many well-known names in literature including Mario Vargas Llosa and Günther Grass, as well as politicians such as then Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller.

After leaving the BBC and life in front of a microphone, Elżbieta decided to grab a camera. She now devotes her time to travel and street photography. She has staged numerous exhibitions of her photographic impressions from Ethiopia, Nepal, Laos, Libya and Turkey (Istanbul) in Poland and in London.

Elżbieta is currently settled in London. She says she has two things in common with Queen Elizabeth: a name and the fact that both of them are depicted on stamps! The latter honour came thanks to her being on board the Airbus 380's maiden flight from Singapore to London, after which all passengers were given a gift—limited edition stamps with photographs taken at the event.

www.smolenska.com