

Dilek Güngör

Father and I

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When was it the two of us stopped talking? When I was twelve or thirteen? Or not until later, when we started arguing about going out and staying out late?

Had I come into the kitchen one morning and wondered why you didn't say anything? Had I told you something as I cut a slice of bread, and you just said 'Yes' or 'Hmm' or nothing? If that had been the case, I'd know. I'd remember the precise day, the moment, what we had for breakfast that morning. What you did, what shirt you were wearing. Where you looked and where I looked, whether I repeated my words or just thought I'd done something wrong.

I hadn't done anything wrong, and nor had you. Yet still it was over. No more piggybacks, no playfights, no tickles, no cuddles, no more water splashing.

No more hardboiled eggs in bed. 'You laid an egg in the night!' How we laughed and squealed and repeated the joke every weekend. For every guest who stayed overnight, we'd smuggle an egg under the covers in the early hours, and find it when we woke them up. 'Look, an egg!' At breakfast, you'd place it on the palm of your hand, hit it with the knife, quick, split in two, and then put in on our guest's plate. 'Here you are, your egg, freshly laid!'

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'You don't need to come.'

I'd expected nothing else. You'd never have asked me to keep you company. And you'd never have said, 'You stay at home, I'll have a couple of quiet days without your mother.' If you'd only once told me what you wanted. If you'd only once wanted something. That would really have surprised me. As it was, you left the decision up to me. And I made it.

'Do you think he can't cope on his own for a week?' Mum had said on the phone. 'Don't worry about it, Ipek, I've cancelled everything. I told the customers I won't be here, they don't need to come, the shop's closed. I'll put a note on the door as well. You really don't need to worry about your father. He doesn't know how good he's got it. The

freezer's stocked up and he can go out to eat if he doesn't feel like cooking. He can do as he likes, Ipek, I don't have the energy, really, I can't take care of him my whole life. Enough is enough, at some point. Let him have a rest, let him go swimming. Or to his sports. His bag's in the hall, I bought him a new top last week, a nice blue one. The old one was all ragged but he'd still be wearing it if I hadn't thrown it away. He'll cope with spending a week of his life on his own, Ipek, you don't need to worry.'

I'm not worried. You can cope fine with being alone for a week. You've got the shop and people to go on walks with. The market and the supermarket. The TV and the laptop, where you follow Turkish news sites. Sometimes you read a book. And fall asleep with it on your lap.

My train's already slowing, passing the Penny mart, the car showroom, McDonald's; the platform's up ahead. I'd standing in the corridor by the window, looking out for you even though I know you never come to the platform. You wait on the forecourt where the buses stop, or in the car park a little way off from the station building. You get out of the car but you don't come towards me. You stand kind of half-and-half, as if not sure where you're supposed to go.

Perhaps you would come to the platform if I said how nice it is to be picked up directly from the train. I don't say so, and you don't know it because you never go away and you never arrive anywhere. You're always there.

I'm always glad, when Mum comes to pick me up – or when I visit a friend in another town – when we wave at each other, walk up to each other, hug and squeeze each other and laugh.

The two of us, we don't squeeze each other, we don't hug. You shake my hand, and the last few times we kissed the air without our cheeks touching. What's all that kissing about?

There are things we quickly grow out of. As a child, I allowed your sloppy wet kisses, your bites of my hand, my cheek, my chin, but only at home, never in front of others. Later, I didn't even want to be seen with you outside school, and I got out of the car around the corner.

Was it me who started it?

This time you're not outside the station. You're not waiting in the car park. I walk around the station building and sit down on one of the square concrete planters. I fix my eyes on the end of the road, the bend in it, and with every dark car that turns onto it, I try to see if it's you. You don't arrive until the forecourt is empty. Not in a rush, not

hurried, you drive slowly out of the bend into the station layby, as if looking for the way. I stand up and walk towards you; all you'd have to do is drive up and let me jump in.

You see me, drive past me quite a way across the empty forecourt, and come to a halt at the bus stop. You don't get out, you wait until I reach the car and then the boot pops open; you've got a lever for that by your seat.

The boot contains the shopping basket, two empty water crates and a roll of thin pink foam. That's why. You've been to buy foam and spray glue, measured something somewhere or delivered something, and it took longer than planned. As usual, you've combined picking me up from the station with some other errand.

We never walk a path empty-handed, I learned that from watching you, without realizing. I've always got something in my hand when I go from one room to another, yesterday's paper, a cardigan that was on the sofa. An empty teacup. The rubbish, when I leave the house. Kai's never understood it.

'Hello,' I say, and I lean over the gearstick and kiss you on the cheek, because that's how you say hello to people you haven't seen for a long time, and you're glad to see them. We are glad to see each other, so casually, so cautiously that nobody can tell. Not even us.

You turn on the engine, put on the indicator, and I pull out the seatbelt, look for the buckle with my hand, open the window a crack. We inch up to the lights, I fasten my seatbelt, the lights turn green and we drive off, first, second, third gear. Now there's nothing left to fiddle with and adjust; the road remains straight as a rod. I could give a deep sigh and beam at you, turn to you on my passenger's seat; you could smile back, ask me how the journey was. But you switch on the radio, don't ask about the trip or the weather in Berlin. Why would you, what difference does it make whether the weather in Berlin is the same as here or different?

I haven't got anything to tell you either. Nothing happened on the train journey; I read or looked out of the window, bored, regretted the trip and went back to reading. I had to change trains once, passing the time at a newspaper kiosk and buying myself a cheese baguette.

You're lucky; you have to keep your eyes on the road and accelerate, pay attention to the car behind us and other important things.

I have to watch out I don't suffocate on our silence.

'Has Mum called yet?' I can't believe I didn't ask about her straight away.

'Yes, she's fine. She's relieved now.'

I can't help smiling. Maybe the three days won't be that bad after all.

'If only Allah would relieve me of you two.' Mum often says that kind of thing. All her curses: 'May Allah punish you. May Allah take your soul. May you go blind.'

It's a shame they sound made-up in translation. When I was little, Mum would throw slippers at us, widen her eyes, raise her hand in threat. It could go quickly with her, and it passed quickly too. Mum calls it fire, you call it madness, and I knew from an early age that none of it meant very much.

'How does she like it?' I ask, knowing full well how she likes it. We spoke on the phone.

'She's getting massaged. Going hiking.'

'Hiking?' She didn't tell me about that.

'With those sticks.'

'There they go with their sticks,' you always say. You can see them from your kitchen window. A group of women in waterproof jackets march past the house to the fields, into the woods every morning. You don't say it disparagingly, you don't ridicule them. There's just such amazement in your voice, such incomprehension of that activity that it makes me grin every time. I imagine my mother in a raincoat, with sticks and stretch pants.

'It's probably even fun, for her,' I say.

Mum gets fun out of all sorts of things. Qi gong, yoga, back exercises. Swimming. She only learned to swim once I'd started school. Now she's got a season ticket for the thermal baths.

Meray chose the sports hotel. A deep-blue swimming pool in a glass hall, radiating light into the night sky, a steaming whirlpool in the snow, thick white towels, hot stones, massage and champagne flutes. We'd long been planning to give the four friends a trip away together, and now that Auntie Gülseren, Meray's mother, had finished her second round of chemotherapy, we'd booked them in for a wellness week in the Black Forest.

Meray, Darija, Sonja and I have known each other since school; our mothers sewed in the same garment factory. I was the only one with no *J* and no *Y* in my first name, and I always felt a bit like a boy with my *K* at the end. And because I wore dungarees, always went to school in trousers and not in white tights and sandals like Sonja. Her real name is Süheyla, but only we know that. Since Süheyla has been called

Sonja, no one else has asked her about her funny name or said she doesn't look Turkish with her fair hair and green eyes.

When we were little, Auntie Gülseren would wind her up and say her mother had taken the wrong baby home from the hospital. 'Somewhere in town there's a Sabine wondering how her ugly child got such curly black hair.'

'Leave the poor girl alone,' Auntie Dragica would say.

But Auntie Gülseren wouldn't leave Sonja alone. 'And her husband's wondering too. I bet he gets a divorce.'

Meray, Darija and Sonja are my oldest friends, all still living in our little town. The three of them see each other almost every day, they go to yoga together, Sonja's and Darija's kids go to the same kindergarten. We see each other when I visit you and Mum, if I stay longer than three or four days. Then I meet up with them in one of the cafés on the church square, or they come over with their mothers. Back in Berlin, I forget them again.

'They're decent daughters,' you sometimes say when I talk to Mum on the phone. When Mum and I talk on the phone you're always nearby, commenting on our conversation from the background.

'What's he saying?'

'Oh, nothing, your father's just talking. I met Darija in town. Their house is all finished now but the garden's much too big. I told her so from the very beginning. So much work. Oh well, each to his own. They've bought a barbecue the size of our kitchen. It's up to them, I suppose.'

'They're good for making kebabs.'

'Can you be quiet for once when I'm on the phone? I can't hear a word,' Mum scolds you. 'Darija says the kids want a dog! They'll have to run around after it with one of those plastic bags and collect up its poo. May Allah give people some brains. She says hello, she asked when you're next coming.'

'I'll have to see, I've got so much to do right now.'

Mum and her friends aren't as close as their daughters are. I still call them Auntie Dragica, Auntie Vildan and Auntie Gülseren. You have your own names for them: Auntie Gülseren is the General, you call Auntie Vildan Ezo Gelin, because her eyes are as beautiful as the actress Fatma Girik, who played the tragic *Ezo Gelin* in the 1970s. We watched the film over and over on video and cried every time. Auntie Dragica, you call Dansöz, the dancer. Up until a while ago she'd perform with her belly-dance troupe at

town festivals or during Intercultural Week. On Fridays, Mum, the General, Ezo Gelin and Dansöz pack their swimsuits and head for the thermal baths, and once a month they take turns to host breakfast.

‘Hey, my heart, why are you hammering away at this hour of the morning? I can hear you all the way out in the street,’ Auntie Gülseren says at the front door. Or: ‘Here he is in his grey coat. Why are you still working? Haven’t you earned enough money yet? Buy yourself a house in Antalya and lie back in the sun like a normal pensioner.’

Auntie Vildan and Auntie Dragica smile, take Auntie Gülseren by the elbow and steer her inside. You take silent pleasure in the General, pour yourself a cup of coffee and go back to work. ‘Don’t eat up all the croissants this time, Gülseren. We don’t want you choking again so I have to come running with the supercharger.’

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At home, you take the foam down to the shop.

I carry my backpack up to the attic room. My childhood books are in here, and a cupboard full of bed linen, duvets and things that were going cheap at Tchibo or Aldi: skiing gloves, vegetable peelers, tea candles, folding laundry baskets, spare shoelaces, printer paper. Just in case you lose your gloves or the peeler stops peeling. I find a pepper grinder and put it with my things. Kai took ours with him.

Your house is built on a slope. The shop’s on the ground floor, not a shop any more, just your workshop. There are potted plants in the window to hide the view, but when the light’s on people can see you cutting leather into shape or Mum at her sewing machine. The house used to belong to Alois Herkommer, the village shoemaker, whose daughter sold it along with the shop when her father went into a home. The two of you live above the shop, on two floors.

If you walk along the hedge to the right of the shop and up four steps, you get to the front door. Behind it is the living room, your bedroom, the kitchen and the bathroom. Above them, underneath the sloping roof, two little rooms, a box room and the room where I sleep when I’m here. I’ve never lived here; you bought the house after I’d left home. Mrs Seifert knew Waltraud Herkommer, the shoemaker’s daughter, and knew she wanted to get rid of the house. You’d probably never have bought it without Mrs Seifert. Just like you might never have bought the flat on Akazienweg without her.

I was four when we moved into the three-floor building on Akazienweg, where you were to buy the flat not much later. There was an orange stripe painted down the

middle of the façade with the staircase behind it. That was how I could tell it apart from the other buildings on the street, which looked exactly the same apart from the yellow and red and purple stripes. Mrs Seifert and her son Michael lived in the orange house too, in the flat next door. She picked me up from kindergarten in the afternoon and signed me up at music school the year I turned eight. Michael helped me with my maths homework or tested my vocab. Sometimes I helped him with his paper round.

‘You’re buying a flat?’ said Uncle Orhan and other people from the factory.

‘You don’t want to stay here forever, do you?’

‘You’d get a whole apartment house in Turkey for that money.’

‘If you buy here, you’ll be buried here.’

Uncle Orhan and Auntie Gülseren wanted to go back, in three years or four or five, at the latest once Meray and her brothers and sisters had finished school. Not like Mum and you, they hadn’t come to stay. None of them moved back; Uncle Orhan was buried in the village cemetery two years ago.