

Djinns

by Fatma Aydemir

English translation by Jon Cho-Polizzi

Hüseyin... Do you know who you are, Hüseyin, when you see the shining contours of your face in the reflection on the balcony door? When you open the door, stride across the balcony, and a warm breeze caresses your face and the setting sun glimmers between the rooftops of the apartments in Zeytinburnu like a giant tangerine? You rub your eyes. Maybe you're thinking—maybe every obstacle and every conflict in this life was only there so that, one day, you could stand up here and know: I've earned this for myself. *With the sweat of my brow.*

You hear the first evening call to prayer from the balcony of this apartment—this spacious, three-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor. The apartment you worked and saved for—almost thirty years—while raising your four children and providing your wife an, albeit humble, but never meager life. You lived your days to the rhythm of three shifts, Hüseyin. You took on every Sunday, every holiday, overtime. Took advantage of every available bonus in the metalworks to get your family by. To buy new football cleats for the little one, to pay off the older one's debts, and still set a little something aside. And now you've finally done it. You're 59, and a home owner. In a few years, when Ümit finishes school and you can finally leave Germany—this cold, cold-hearted country—there'll be an apartment waiting for you in Istanbul with your name at the door: Hüseyin! You've finally found a place you can call home.

Enjoy it, Hüseyin. Listen as the blaring music from the shops in the streets below grows quiet. Now there is only the ezan. The ezan and the honking and the cries of the millions who still must navigate the streets and go about the business of their days. Hear the calling of the gulls. Inhale the humid air—tinged with exhaust and the smell of burning rubbish. Let your gaze fall for a few moments on the bustle between the houses below before you go yourself to pray.

Look, across the way, a new location of İbrahim Tatlıses' lahmacun restaurants has opened. You used to love his music so, Hüseyin. You bought one of his albums. Each evening, in the home, you'd pop open a bottle of kristallweizen; the hum of the record player followed the hiss of the bottlecap. The bağlama for the opening notes of *Tükendi Nakdi Ömrüm*. Do you remember, Hüseyin, the countless cigarettes you smoked to this song? How your body dissolved into one single white puff of smoke inside the narrow kitchen at the home. The kitchen at the end of that

long, dark hallway. You could feel Ibo because in his songs he sang of all people: of those to whom no one else lent an ear. The poor, the darkling, those hardworking people from the countryside. Those people like you, Hüseyin. And you felt Ibo because, like you, he too had discarded the language of his parents. Discarded like an unused sack of stones.

But now you can no longer stand him. You despise Ibo. How he hops around on his show every Friday evening. Speaking nonsense. And gaping at his belly dancers. This honorless man who had a simple merchant shot at the Urfa bazaar because he did not want to serve him. Or at least, so the papers said.

No, Hüseyin, this is by no means the kind of man whose cassette tapes you'd want to buy or listen to. And besides, Ibo has long since transitioned from folk music to arabesk. And you've long since given up both alcohol and tobacco. And without alcohol, it's almost impossible to tolerate arabesk. And even if you could, what could the songs of such a man provide? A man who beats his women and wears this crime in public like a badge of pride? Nothing. But still, Perihan and Hakan and Ümit will no doubt be impressed by the restaurant. It belongs to the most famous person in this country, after all. And you won't be able to say a thing, Hüseyin, when your children rush over there each day to stuff themselves.

Quite the contrary, you will pay for the food. You'll watch them peacefully. And silently, you'll be glad that you can finally provide them the opportunity from now on to spend each summer here in Istanbul. Istanbul, this splendid city, over which so many centuries of wars were waged and so much blood was shed. And all for naught. For no one has understood that this city will never permit itself to be conquered by anyone. In the end, the city always conquers you. In the end, you will be nothing more than another layer of dust on the earth, beneath the feet of new conquerors, always with the same desires. And Istanbul will absorb and devour them all, reducing all to dust. Nourishing itself on them, forever growing in its incandescent splendor.

And you, Hüseyin, you already knew that someday you would return to Istanbul. Already the first time you arrived in this city. Back then you'd come by train from your village. You disembarked for a week, you stayed here with relatives before you boarded the bus and then the train to Southern Germany where you'd be assigned a job. They put you in a line with other workers there, they inspected your naked bodies, and they examined the contents of your underpants. That was in the spring of 1971.

Germany was not what you had hoped it would be, Hüseyin. You'd hoped for a new life. But what you received, instead, was loneliness. Loneliness can never be a new life. For loneliness

is a cycle, the constant repetition of the same memories inside your head. The perpetual search for new wounds within your long-departed ego. The longing for those people you left behind. But what could you do, Hüseyin? You couldn't just return back to your village. And so, you stayed. And you did the things you had to do so that your coming here would at least make sense.

How time flies, Hüseyin. In the last twenty-eight years of your life, you've earned more money than you would ever have dreamed of in Turkey. You earned it because you were never too good for any work. The kind of work no German would do. You could not have known, Hüseyin, that your body would soon—far before retirement age—grow as weary as the German economy after Reunification. Like your many colleagues, in that moment when the two exhaustions came together and the doors of the metalworks closed, you, too, had wanted to go into early retirement. But you received no certification. No certification, although after all those long years bent before the furnace, your back had twisted inside like an inverted C. And your knee began to ache dreadfully, after even the shortest walks.

And even this had some validity, Hüseyin. For how else would you all have gotten by, back then? With three children at home, on only 900 marks' pension? From your savings? Would you have wanted to give up this apartment, Hüseyin, just so that you could have started to relax a few years earlier? A few years early, but in Germany forever more? Of course not, Hüseyin. And so, you went on to a different factory, Hüseyin. A different factory for less pay and lesser benefits. But it had still sufficed to build up the necessary savings. To put away a bit more toward your pension. And besides, it was hard to call folding cardboard work—especially after all those years of melting scraps of metal at 1500°C. And so, you drudged through five more years, Hüseyin, until last year, you personally asked your cardboard boss—as politely as you could—to be discharged. And he acquiesced. And you finally found time to look at apartments in Istanbul. Time to rededicate yourself to your beliefs which had, for long years, wilted like an unwatered flower. Time to listen to yourself and time to make peace with your demons. And next week, when you turn sixty, your pension will finally start to come in, Hüseyin. They call it early retirement, but nothing about it feels early.

How the time flies. Who knows, maybe you'll never go back to Germany, again. Maybe you'll just stay here. Maybe Emine and the children will also stay, after they arrive and see how perfectly you've arranged the apartment for them. Maybe Ümit will just finish school here. Maybe Perihan and Hakan, too, will fall in love here and finally want to get married. You tremble at the thought, Hüseyin. But why? Was it not you, back then, who wrung your hands and wanted to

deliver your eldest daughter, Sevda, to a man? Who gave her an ultimatum when she was seventeen and a half years old? You'll marry this one or that one, you can decide, but you will take one of them and start a family. And then, at least, we won't have to worry what Germany will make of our Sevda. Our Sevda, who always wants too much from life, who's never satisfied with what she has, with what she can achieve. Was it not your idea, Hüseyin, to deliver Sevda into safety in this fashion? Was it not your idea to kill her dreams?

But, poor Hüseyin, Sevda did as she pleased. And even with two children on her lap, she kept doing it, all the same. Can you not see? And now, instead, you worry about Perihan and Hakan. But you should have realized long ago, Hüseyin, that your fears for your children seldom guide you to the right decisions. Yes, you smile, Hüseyin. And well you should. For today is a good day: Perhaps the best day of your life.

All the furniture has arrived. The men arranged them according to your plan: the mirror and the heavy double bed for Emine and you in the back bedroom, the patterned futons for the children in the two smaller rooms. In the living room stands an ornate dresser of dark, polished hardwood, just how Emine would want it. She will like the dresser, of this you are sure.

Emine, whom you have loved since first you saw her in the neighboring village. You had just come back from the service, a little crazed from the experience, a little broken. And this young woman passed you in the alleyway with lowered head—white as a cotton blossom. The very next day, you'd called to ask for her hand. Called at her aunt's, for by then, Emine's parents were long dead. Her aunt had tried to suppress her joy, for she had not wished to reveal her toothless smile—and yet she had seemed gladdened by the notion of having one mouth less to feed. That was thirty-three years ago. And you have always loved Emine, more than you love yourself. Even during those eight long years when you were so far away from her, in Germany. You always thought of her, you fell asleep each night on dreams that carried you to her. To the smell of the rosewater she rubbed each morning behind her ears. To the coolness of her skin—cool, even beneath two thick layers of blankets. None of the German women you met in the bars along the river during those lonely years could still the yearning you felt for Emine. Quite the contrary, Hüseyin: The closer you drew to these women, the greater your longing grew.

And then it became possible to bring her and the children to you. The long wait came to an end. You moved together into the dark ground-level apartment of a yellow high-rise building, across from the factory. A building where only Turkish and Italian workers and one ancient German widow woman lived. And you made the best of everything, you sent your children to better schools

than you ever could have dreamed of in Turkey. You did everything. You gave your all—except, perhaps, for Sevda. But the firstborn child is always an experiment. What could you do? People make mistakes. And you could do better with those who followed after, isn't that right, Hüseyin? Except for the firstborn. Only the firstborn.

And now, Hüseyin, you're waiting for Emine, again. For this time, it is she who is in Germany, and you, here in Turkey. Next week she will follow with Hakan, Perihan, and little Ümit, who finally has summer break. You flew earlier to prepare the apartment. Halime Bacı, your friendly neighbor from the apartment below already arranged a cleaning woman for Sunday to look after the details. Your glance falls on the kitchen, Hüseyin, through the balcony's French doors. The pile of apricots—still wrapped in newspaper—that Halime Bacı brought this afternoon. You were lucky, Hüseyin, to find such a helpful and respectable neighbor. Such things are no longer the rule these days, not even here.

The call to prayer has already ended. But it doesn't matter if you pray five minutes late, today, Hüseyin. And so, you push open the doors to the kitchen, unwrap the newspapers, and let warm water run over the fruit. You leave the balcony doors open, so that the synthetic smell of the new furniture can drift away. The apricots are already slightly fermented, just the way you like them. Sugary sweet and almost mush.

You eat just one, and then another. And you're just about to walk to the bathroom, Hüseyin, to prepare yourself for prayer. You've just decided not to wash your sticky fingers in the kitchen, but head straight to the bathroom—where you will wash your hands and your face and your arms and your head and your ears and your neck and your feet anyway. You've just taken one step from the kitchen toward the hallway, and you feel a sharp twinge of pain in your left arm.

You wonder whether you overstrained yourself earlier helping the men carry those two sofas and three futons down the hallway, even though they had said graciously that they'd be fine. They hadn't been that heavy anyway. But the pain does not subside. A stabbing pain. Again and again. Like an axe, cleaving you apart.

Hüseyin, cold sweat beads on your neck. Your body does not know this kind of pain. And suddenly, a tightness spreads across your chest, as if your whole torso were contracting until it was no larger than a button. You remain on your feet, Hüseyin. You stand, crossing your arms across your chest, as if hugging yourself. And then you have to sit down anyway. You take two steps toward the living room where the brand-new dining table and the matching upholstered chairs are

waiting, but after these two steps you're overcome with such a wave of nausea that you turn instead toward the bathroom. But it's too late for that, Hüseyin. Your body bends in half and you vomit then and there, before the entryway, in the middle of the hall.

You cough, falling to your knees and crying as loudly as you still can for your neighbor, Halime Bacı. You hammer with both hands on the floor, but you don't know whether she will hear you knocking. The world is spinning. You see bits of apricot on the oak-finish laminate of the floor. Your body struggles to right itself from this crouch, but you just can't manage it, Hüseyin. Everything is too heavy. Too much. Too tight. Your chest is rocked by sudden cramps, and while you're screaming for Halime, you jerk upwards, lose your balance, and your body tumbles to the floor amidst your own vomit.

You keep your head high, with all your strength. You scream, struggling for air. You scream again. And suddenly you hear Halime Bacı's voice outside in the main hallway. The slip-slap of her rubber slippers ascending the stone stairs. The cramp in your upper body releases for two seconds. Somehow you manage to heave your arm against the doorknob, to open the front door. And then another cramp, more forceful still. A pain so deep, so bitter, the like of which you've never known before. Cries flood from your body. They sound so odd, you cannot be sure whether they're yours at all. They must come from somewhere else, outside. It's not possible for you to make such a noise.

You see the long frame of Halime Bacı's frightened face above you. You can't understand what she's saying, but she quivers. She looks terrified. Pale. Her face is a mirror in which you see the reflection of your own fate, Hüseyin.

The fuzzy thoughts inside your head suddenly grow clearer: This is the end. The finish. Over. This is how you will die. Covered in your own vomit. A sticky mess of fruit in the apartment you dreamed of all your long life. You'll die like this, without a glimpse of the sparkle in Emine's eyes when she sees it for the first time, without feeling the youthful excitement of your youngest daughter and two sons. You'll never know what they think of the furniture you chose, the bustle of the neighborhood. Of Istanbul: a city they know only from postcards and a few short stopovers during childhood—and of course, from TV.

Just like you, Hüseyin. Why did you want to move to Istanbul, anyway? What do you truly know of the place? Was this really the place you dreamed of, or merely a memory? A memory of leaving home, a layover on the way to the factory—a place between forgetting and the toil which followed after. The first place where you could breathe.

You want to breathe, Hüseyin. You don't want to die. Not now, even though you are devout. Even though you've always said that you'll be ready when Azrael comes for you. Maybe, you think now, maybe you've secretly hoped your faith would grant you a long and healthy life. How naïve you've been, Hüseyin. You are not ready. It just can't end this way. Not like this. You would pray to Allah if your tongue were not as heavy as lead, your mouth so cleft with the pain roiling inside you—like an uncontrollable wildfire set to scorch the earth and burn away all hostile life. You would beseech Azrael that he—or she—or it—grant you just one week more. Please, just one more week. Just this short period of grace. To open the apartment doors to your dear family, the doorway here before you, and lead them into the bright rooms. This is Hakan and Ümit's bedroom; this room is for Perihan. This is the living room, and here, our balcony. Over there is another, attached to our bedroom, Emine. Just one week more to walk along the water with them. To pour your children a çay; to hold your daughter's hand and tell her how very much you love her. To tell your sons you're proud of them. To call Sevda and beg her to forgive you. To hear the voices of the grandchildren you've missed for all these years. Maybe a bit more than a week. You stopped smoking long ago, Hüseyin. That was meant to prolong your life. How can you die of a heart attack now, of all times, and miss everything that was meant to happen in this apartment? Your apartment, Hüseyin.

Hüseyin, you strain your eyes. You keep them open. You look around. Halime Bacı was gone, but now she's back again. You understand that Halime has called an ambulance, is begging you to hold on. She wipes your brow with a damp towel. Ice cold it runs across your forehead and nose; over the twitching corners of your mouth. For a moment, it feels as though a hole has opened in your heart. A hole through which all the pain is vanishing, is sinking. Disappears.

Hüseyin, you know that this will only last a moment—this respite from the pain. You know it will return, come soon. The pain will return. You can't say how you have this knowledge, how you know with such certainty, but the next cramp will surely come. And it will be monstrous. It will carry you far from here. You know this. And so, you use this yawning emptiness in your chest, use the final strength you find within you, to move your lips. Panic-stricken and pale, Halime stares questioningly. She lowers her ear to your mouth to better understand what you have to say, Hüseyin. You whisper it. One word. And Halime asks, "What was that? Come again?" But you cannot. You see a shadow fall across the wall. You feel those cold beads of sweat gathering at your neck. But you need not be afraid, Hüseyin. That shadow is only me. I promise you, I will tarry here. In this house. In this apartment. I will watch over your family when they arrive. I give you my word,

Hüseyin. I promise. But it is now time for you to go, Hüseyin. Even I can't do anything to change that.

Don't be afraid, Hüseyin. Come. Just take one breath. Just take one little breath. Only as much air as you need to compose yourself. To murmur your words. You've held on to them for a lifetime. For this moment, Hüseyin. But now you don't want to say them. Because you don't want to give up yet. But this is no longer in your hands, Hüseyin. There's nothing in your hands, Hüseyin. And you want to do it, before it is too late. You take a breath. One breath to let go. To decide yourself this is the moment to let go. And so, you take a breath and you whisper: "Eşhedü en la ilahe illallah..."