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VATERMAL / FATHER-MARK

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English-language sample translation by Sheridan Marshall

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If you are reading this, Dad – and I pause here, already. Should I really call you that? I know that Aylin calls you that when she talks about you; only very rarely, don't get any ideas now. But unlike me, you let Aylin swing between you, laughing, you holding one hand and Mum the other, and then up. And just as she still has this memory, Aylin also still has the word 'Dad' from this time. It is different for me. I have often tried it out: Dad? Father? Baba? Saying the word is really not so difficult, only after that it doesn't go any further. Even stranger than saying 'Dad' is hearing myself say it. It sounds like a foreign word that I have picked up or read somewhere. When I use it, it is as though I am acting. How do you say 'Dad' without there being an audible question mark? I am sticking with Metin until I have an answer. So: If you are reading this, Metin, I will probably be dead.

I have often imagined what it would be like to find out that you have died. Don't get me wrong: I have not wished you dead. I do not believe that you are a bad person. On the contrary. You have probably become the most gentle, loving father in the world after being in prison. I am sure you come home after work, late in the evening, and your second wife is already lying on her side of the bed. She wears pink satin pyjamas, like the ones you once gave Mum for her birthday even though there was absolutely no money for things like that. (This is also a story I know from Aylin). Maybe your second wife is flicking through a magazine with pictures of expensive furniture, a cucumber mask on her face, her hair wrapped in a towel. She hears your key turning in the lock. The moment she has been waiting for all evening. A glance at the clock: 'Later than usual,' she thinks, and remembers how hard you work every day. She knows nothing of your life before prison, of the life in Germany. She doesn't know that you work so much, coming straight home afterwards and not to the teahouse, because you don't want to screw up your second life like you did your first.

So, you enter your flat, a stressful day, the office phone is still ringing in your head, you close the door behind you, gently, you don't want anyone to hear you, you hang your coat carefully over the other jackets and put your shoes next to those stupid dinosaur wellies that all the rich kids have. You enter your new flat as quietly as you left ours back then, when you sneaked out of my mother's bed in the night. A note from your new wife on

the kitchen table: 'There are manti in the microwave, yoghurt in the fridge.' Be honest, Metin, she can't cook, can she? Of course not – you would not love a woman who found her fulfilment in the kitchen. She would remind you too much of your mother; you would feel too much like your father – the General, who also wanted to make you into a General, before you became a leftist. And because your wife can't cook you had a quick kebab on your way home at your old revolutionary pal Serkan Amca's place. He is back again too. After the thing with Merve Teyze, he opened a new Mevlana grill in your neighbourhood.

You walk past the manti in the microwave, see that a light is still on in the bedroom, loosen your tie, kiss your wife's green-creamed forehead, perhaps exchange a few words: 'Don't wake him.' – 'Don't worry.' Then back into the hall, the wooden floor creaks under your feet. (Black socks. After prison you got yourself a whole drawer full of them. That is how an ordered life begins). You open the door at the end of the hall a crack. A shaft of light falls on a black, tousled head at the end of the bed, the window above. You set one foot on the rug, one of the ones with roads and parks marked on it. Be careful not to slip on a car in the dark and break your neck, Metin. You sit on your youngest son's bed, one hand on the covers and the other stroking his fingers. You imagine that he will sense your presence in his sleep. Even if there is another military coup tonight, even if they come tomorrow to take you away, even if at this very moment a friend of the man you killed breaks in through your son's window to avenge his old comrade: you are with your son. And as you think that, you hear him breathing softly, see the minarets outside behind the treetops rustling in the wind, the moon, the stars, everything is there.

This image remains fixed in my mind for a moment, as though it were the last page in a children's book that we never read. But do you know what happens next? You look away from the night sky back to your son's closed eyes, his small mouth, his child's nose, and briefly, just for a millisecond, you think of us.

And suddenly there are two silhouettes in the room, two shadow children who are looking at you – silent, barefoot, Aylin next to me, her arm around me. You do not recognise our faces, but you know that it is us and that we have been watching you the whole time. You stand up, walk past us, lie down next to your second wife. 'Everything ok, darling?' – 'Yes, I'm just tired.' You switch the light off, and when your son wakes up early in the morning he will notice that I have moved all the cars on the rug around in the night.

I would not write any of this, Metin, if I thought you were one of those arsehole-fathers. To be honest, I sometimes imagine that too: how you slam the door behind you, your wife is arguing with the children, and you give them all a slap to shut them up. Just like your comrade Serkan Amca always did with Merve Teyze. Afterwards you sit on the couch, annoyed, or collapse over a table covered in bills, and while the whole family is mute with fear or everyone is shouting at each other and crying, you wonder how the hell you could have got yourself into this situation for a second time. And then you lift your head and there I am again. I am sitting next to you on the couch flicking through all the TV channels while you are going crazy.

And there is also a third scenario that I sometimes imagine: you are dead. No idea why, maybe because a right-winger climbed through the window into your now perfect world and shot you in revenge, maybe because your bitter second wife sat there smoking and watched you slowly choke on an olive, or maybe because you just left the world after spending your last days drooling and demented. (How old are you now, actually?) Anyway, you have died, and I am coming to your funeral which is taking place in a festooned ballroom. (I know that funerals in Turkey are different, but this is what it looks like in my head). So, I cross the room wearing – let's say – a white linen suit, I stand in front of the coffin holding a bunch of flowers and am relieved to see that you weren't bald, so that baldness isn't something you can have passed down to me. The other people in the room ask each other: 'Who the devil is the boy?' Only one or two of the old comrades – Serkan Amca is also there – realise: 'Shit, that's *the* kid!'

I would step up to the lectern and speak to your coffin. What about? Who knows, Metin? I wouldn't trust myself to start a Dad-where-were-you-number. But I would ask about the reasons why you couldn't stick it out in Germany. Why you voluntarily went back to Turkey, even though you knew that they would greet you at the airport with handcuffs and lock you up. I would want to know whether you really murdered someone. Whether you can remember his face, his name, his fear. How you managed to shoot a man to avenge your brother. Whether you just pulled the trigger, jumped in the car with the other terrorist-fathers and took off. I would ask whether you are haunted by the soul of the man you killed, or whether you are embracing one another now that you are dead too. I would want to know whether I was the son of a passionate revolutionary, freedom fighter, guerrillero (what was it you actually called yourselves?) or whether it was more that you fell into it

because you just idolised your big brother and at some point couldn't get out of it anymore. Whether you were a left-wing but still nationalist arsehole who had Mustafa Kemal's picture on your bedside table alongside your daughter's.

Oh, I don't know, Metin, maybe I'd just like to know how you picked up my mother in that bar and later she translated your indictment for your asylum proceedings into German. The crucial thing about the whole setting would be this: the fact that I don't get any answers is only because you are dead. And not because you are just not interested in me.

The chance of me picking up the phone and calling you, which is the easiest and at the same time the most impossible thing in the world, and of you hanging up again after some casual small talk between us, that isn't a possibility anymore. And even if you didn't hang up and we actually made an arrangement – let's say in a coffee house, on neutral ground, so to speak – it could still happen that you sit on a stool in front of me, two glasses of tea between us, that you answer all my questions, sometimes hesitating, sometimes searching for words, but only because you know that after all these years I am entitled to answers. But when I am through with my questions, it could still be that you don't ask me anything in return. Nothing at all. In the worst case, you simply wait until the tea between us has gone cold, and then you say goodbye and leave. Do you understand what I mean? Fuck your honest or lying answers. It would be much worse if you didn't want to know about me. The dead, on the other hand, are mute and cannot silence you. You couldn't ignore me. I'd have to tell you because it wouldn't make any sense to wait to be asked by you.

But now it is the other way round. It's not you that is dying, but me. I am in intensive care. Organ failure. My liver has decided to stop cooperating. That isn't a metaphor in a Bildungsroman for wogs or anything. It can be described quite soberly and scientifically: autoimmune hepatitis. My immune system is overreacting, perceiving me as a foreign body, and attacking my organs. That is why they are giving me cortisone, in the hope that my immune system calms itself down again. It sounds complicated but is essentially really simple: I lie here and wait with tubes sticking out of my neck that lead from my heart into a whirring machine, which is why I can barely turn my head without feeling a sharp pain down my spine. The only time I can carefully loosen the clamps is when I have to go to the bathroom. My right arm is covered with blue dots, as many as the scars on my mother's legs. They are the signs of the daily blood tests: each dot represents a new set of bloods and

an accompanying prognosis about how many days I have left to live. The results are printed out next to me on the window sill, the pile grows from week to week. Every evening I transcribe them meticulously into tables on my laptop: GGT, GOT, GPT. The abbreviations in the hospital are more complicated than any of the ones I learnt in the immigration office. I document my disappearance and when I look at the colourful graphs in the evenings, because I am too afraid to sleep, I think I understand what it is all about.

On the table next to my bed there is a notebook, all the pages full with: 'My name is Arda Kaya, and I am fine.' The doctors say that I should write the same sentence every day. It is supposedly possible to tell from my handwriting how concentrated the toxins in my brain are that my liver would normally have filtered out, and whether the damage is irreparable or not. I cannot perceive any change at all in the blue writing, except that sentence by sentence, day by day, I am making less effort and the hope fades from the letters.

Sometimes a whole team of people in white coats burst in in the mornings: senior doctors, ward doctors, consultants, assistant doctors, students in their practical year. The most senior doctors point at me as though they were weighing a few nuts in their hand, while the less important ones nod and take notes. They explain very little to me. Mostly they don't speak to me at all. This reminds me of the immigration office too, where the official who was responsible for us always spoke about us in the third person. He said that in Germany everybody needed this or that document, and we were then allowed to subsume ourselves under it, as the saying goes. The course of one's existence is communicated in a similarly monologic fashion here. At most, they give me the occasional test: they ask whether I can still say my name, what year it is, when my birthday is. I have acted as though I didn't know a few times, just to see their reaction. There wasn't one. One time a woman in a white coat raised her eyebrows approvingly when I told her my date of birth. I added that for a long time my birth certificate had been the only identity document that I had possessed. She wasn't interested in hearing why. But she was interested in the fact that my brain was still capable of remembering that. In spite of everything, I would have kissed all of them by the hand if they could have wangled it for me to leave the hospital any way except feet-first.

When I found out that I had to go into hospital, I immediately went home. Perhaps I am like those fish – salmon, I think – who, at a certain point, swim off against the current to

the place where they were born, and die there. The good thing is that Aylin and Mum can visit me, and because there is nothing else to do in this lousy hospital room, they have no other choice except to answer my questions and finally talk to me. They only talk to me though. Aylin and Mum haven't spoken a word to one another for over ten years. They take care to visit me at different times so that they don't have to sit in the same room and breathe the same air, because otherwise one of them would probably grab a fork from somewhere and shove it down the other one's throat. When they leave my room after the visits I sometimes ask myself whether they are thinking the same thing as me: that unless one of the therapies succeeds in convincing my immune system that I am me, soon they will only have each other as family.

In other words: our time is running out, Metin, with every line.

Have you ever imagined that I am dead? Of course, you don't know that I am lying here right now. Just in case, against all expectations, you should get the idea to pick up the phone or appear at my door next year, only to find out that you are unfortunately too late, I will write it down for you here. You should know who I have been. So that you never experience the relief that I have so often secretly dreamed of: of being silenced by a dead person. I want to permanently take away the possibility of your not knowing who I was. You should know how your family in Germany were doing, how during the last summer of my youth, all my friends disappeared and how I also tried to flee from myself. You should know how hard it was raining on the day Aylin ran away from home, how she whispered 'Sorry,' in my ear, shut the door to the flat, and never came back. You should know how your shadow has continued to haunt me here, when your old friend Serkan Amca patted me on the shoulder and said that one day I would be like you. The hero of a failed revolution.

I will write these stories down, for you and my two half-brothers. So that they know that they had another brother, and also a sister, so that they learn who their father was never a father to, so that they learn to value how much time and love they have received from you.

It is almost as difficult for me to say 'I' as it is to say 'Dad'. 'Dad' sounds wrong out loud, 'I' triggers a hesitation, a muscle spasm in the tongue. I will do it anyway. Even if this 'I' was

always someone else. I will tell my story, Metin, but I will be permanently lying. Nothing is right and yet every word is true.

On the only photo that I have of you, you are wearing thick, gold-rimmed glasses over your moustache and there is a mole under your left eye, in between your beard and the frame of your glasses. You are sat deep in a leather couch with a fag in the corner of your mouth and Aylin on your knee. She is laughing, tickling you, while you try to play cards with Serkan Amca, who is sitting opposite you. Mum is not in the photo – it was probably her who stood up, pushed her rounded belly into the corner of the small room and took the photo. Unlike Serkam Amca, who has a relaxed smile, you are ignoring the camera. Or at least appearing to do so. In spite of the thick glasses, you are holding the cards right in front of your nose. You didn't want your face to be recognisable, right? Perhaps you did not want to be photographed at leisure, not even during a card game with your old friend. But perhaps you already knew then that you would be leaving, even before the film had been developed, and you didn't know what look you ought to leave behind for me. Just as I don't want to leave a photo for you now. So, I'll describe myself: your son had thick, black curls, just like his sister. He had a high, clear forehead, powerful eyebrows, a bit like the Nike Swoosh, with his mother's eyes underneath, but even darker, almost black, deep-set. Like you, he had a black mole under his left eye. His father-mark. And he had your small mouth, your thin lips.

This morning I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, put my finger on this mark, and asked myself how my face would look without it. When I took my finger away, the mark wasn't there anymore. It was stuck to my fingertip. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes and blew it away.

2

‘Hurry up,’ my mother screams. As though we hadn’t been hurrying up the whole time. Aylin and I are making one sandwich after another, as though we are on a conveyer belt, while all morning all she does is look for her cigarettes. But Aylin and I are a well-practiced team. She fingers a slice of bread out of the plastic bag, presses it flat with both hands, spreads it with a thick layer of margarine and chucks it across the table, where it lands on the plate in front of me. I shake salt onto it neatly, divide it in the middle, clap the two halves together, and by the time I have wrapped it in foil, the next slice is already on the plate in front of me. The bread is as hard as the crusty sponge in the sink. I am certainly not going to eat any of it all day. But I’ll say it now. In the end, you get what you are given.

Aylin sits opposite me like a zombie. She carries out all her hand movements with her eyes closed, her head on her chest. She is not tired because it is so early, just because she is always tired. Her dark curls hang down into the margarine tub in front of her and she is still wearing the black Minnie Mouse shirt that she has not taken off since last week, not even to sleep. She probably thinks that she looks like the Minnie Mouse on the shirt. Which is kind of true. Aylin has the same large eyes, she has long eyelashes, round cheeks and she already had the spotty bow, before she was given the shirt as a present by Nalan Teyze. Her underarms protrude from the sleeves like two thin branches. They are still covered in dark red scratches. She had been fighting with a cat to defend Minnie Mouse, Aylin answered, when I asked her where the scratches came from the first time. When the cuts still hadn’t healed days later and I asked her again, she replied that she had fallen off her bike into a thorn bush. We don’t have a bike, neither of us, but I won’t ask a third time.

‘You’re sure you haven’t seen my cigarettes, yes?’

My mother is frantically looking through the pockets of her thousand jackets on the hook in the hall. I can hear from her voice that it won’t be long until she makes it Aylin’s responsibility. She always does that. Instead of looking herself she yells for so long that I end up pulling the cigarettes or the key or whatever out of a corner of the sofa or from behind the toilet.

‘Ah, got them,’ our mother calls and Aylin looks up, only to roll her eyes briefly.

‘Are you ready?’

‘But you’re not even dressed!’

Aylin stands up, shuffles to the fridge, puts the margarine back and shoves the silver foil bars into a plastic bag.

'I am, I am!' says our mother, attempting to put her jacket on without having to put her cup of coffee down.

'If we're the first there it'll be really quick!'

When our mother finally has her jacket on she stands in front of the door, lights a cigarette, then alternates between bringing first the hand with the coffee cup, and then the hand with the cigarette to her mouth in swift succession. Coffee and ciggy, every morning. Aylin calls it her c-and-c-breakfast. When we have to wake our mother up because otherwise she always sleeps in and ends up being late to the snack bar, we put a cup of coffee, a packet of Camels, a lighter and a glass of water on her bedside table. Then Aylin prods our mother carefully on the shoulder, while I use the TV listings to waft the coffee steam towards her. The minute our mother opens one reddened eye, Aylin and I leave the room, sometimes even the flat. No one knows what mood the sleeping whale will be in after it has been woken.

'You say that every time and it's never right!'

My sister is right. Even if I wouldn't dare to say it. It is never quick; it always takes the whole day.

'Well, come on,' says my mother, and her gaze falls on Aylin's bare arm.

'What? Do you want to leave like that? Have you looked out of the window?'

'Yeah, and?'

'Well, it's up to you. Your problem if you get ill. Have you got everything?'

Aylin holds up a brown envelope, annoyed.

'Then haydi now. Come here Arda, come on darling.'

Outside, the sun is only just coming up. Even the tramp in the bus stop by our door is still asleep. Apart from a couple of cars chasing along the empty streets, there is nobody about. Not that there would be much more going on around here at other times of day. My mother toddles ahead in her gem-studded trainers. No idea how someone with such small feet, no bigger than two potatoes, can move so fast. As I try to keep up with her, I hear Aylin behind me, dragging the plastic bags along the pavement.

'Why don't we just ask someone to give us a lift? They're all going into town anyway?'

My sister's eyes follow a black BMW as it races past us.

'You can try standing on the curb sometime. See if anyone stops,' our mother says, without looking back.

When we arrive at the immigration office, we are not the first. Of course not. A long queue of people snakes up the steps of the red brick building to the double glass doors with the eagle on. They all have plastic bags or rucksacks with them – probably all full of sandwiches with margarine and salt.

'I told you, you were too slow,' our mother complains, while throwing an angry look at my sister. She rolls up her sleeves and marches towards the queue as though she is going to work, but then the eagle parts in the middle and everyone rushes inside. A machine in the entrance area spits out a ticket with a number on, and along with the others we enter the longest green-tiled hallway in the world, at the end of which hangs a red display panel with small flashing numbers. From now on our eyes will be glued to this panel.

'Otur oraya,' says my mother, so quietly that I can barely hear her. She indicates the chair opposite her with her eyes. But it isn't really about the chair. She wants me to understand that from now on we should only speak quietly and only in Turkish. No idea why. The whispering somehow makes sense to me, because every step and every word echoes through the whole room. But for some reason it is one of the secret rules for quiet rooms was that we speak in Turkish there. We are probably just fitting in. It is probably just that you have to behave like an immigrant when you are at the immigration office. It is just the same in doctor's surgeries or at the job centre.

'Is it the window frames?'

'No.'

'Is it the wooden chairs?'

'No.'

'Is it the brown in the sunflowers?'

'No.'

'I don't want to anymore.'

'Come on!'

'Arda, but there are only window frames, wooden chairs and pictures of sunflowers here! And tiles, but they are green, not brown!'

'Not true.'

'It is!'

'It's that man's knee, over there.'

I point with my eyes to a man at the end of the corridor, who has one leg stretched out in front of him. When my sister sees the purulent wound gaping on his knee and is disgusted, I have to laugh.

'There's something not right with you,' she says, fetching a hand mirror and beginning to comb her eyebrows. She always does that when she has had enough of me. I think what I could do. It is so boring here that I even think about doing my homework. But the last time the teacher didn't even want to see the exercises that I had copied down. I should have brought the book that Aylin gave me for my birthday. Then I could at least have gone whaling with the little pirates now. I get out my notebook and pens, lie on the cold tiles, and as I draw one of the sunflower pictures from the walls, I ask Aylin how the artist can have succeeded in copying the flowers without them fading in the meantime.

'I don't think he copied them, he did them from his imagination,' Aylin states. She observes the painting above us with a furrowed brow and what are by now perfectly combed eyebrows.

At the end of the corridor the front tyres of a walking frame edge their way around the corner, slowly followed by a woman with the face of a witch. Two men immediately jump up to offer the old lady their seats. The woman reminds me of my grandmother. She acts as though she is overwhelmed and can't decide what to do, but really she doesn't sit down because she is enjoying the pair's attention too much. One man places one of his hands to his breast and points to the free chair with the other. The other copies him, adding a deep bow, as though his residency status depends upon her taking his seat. I learnt the term residency status from Aylin. This is the most important thing for us and the reason why we are here.

'Please, please,' says one of the men loudly, and because he has broken the whispering rule for quiet rooms, the whole corridor begins to stir. As he is insisting that the woman takes his seat, one of the thousand identical-looking office doors opens, a white-haired head appears and hisses, 'Pssst.'

A foil bar lands in front of my nose.

'Eat something!'

Aylin nods at me. Suddenly I feel a hole in my stomach and ask myself how Aylin could have known about it before me. After I have unwrapped the foil and rolled it into a ball, I bite into the bread. But I do not bite it off. It is so hard that my teeth just cannot get through it.

'Nalan Teyze!', Aylin calls. As I look up from the sandwich, that I have just been examining to see whether my wobbly canine has come out in it, Nalan Teyze is walking towards us from the end of the corridor with a broad smile on her red lips and a silver serving dish in her hands. Aylin jumps up, runs towards her, and hugs her. She loves Nalan Teyze. Even more than our mother, I think sometimes. I stand up too, and because we are speaking Turkish the whole time, I am somehow in the mode where I want to greet her with a kiss on the hand.

'What is this rubbish,' says Nalan Teyze, pulling her hand away. 'Am I your grandmother?'

For a moment I think that she is really angry, but then she smiles and says 'Voila!', before taking the lid off the dish as though we were sitting in a grand restaurant and not in the cold corridor of the immigration office. The dish is full to the brim with stuffed vine leaves, covered in lemon juice and glinting juicily.

'You didn't have to do that,' says my mother, as she lets Nalan Teyze kiss her on both cheeks. 'Seriously,' she carries on, 'They have to learn to look after themselves.'

'Let me though!'

Nalan Teyze looks along the corridor as though everyone sitting here is ill.

'Darling, can you come out quickly?'

Our mother first looks at the display panel, then she gets the slip of paper with our number our of her bag and nods, before they disappear outside together to smoke. Aylin reaches for the dish immediately and stuffs a little roll in her mouth.

'Shouldn't we wait for Mum?' I ask.

'Didn't you hear her? Everyone has to look after themselves,' Aylin says, reaching into the dish again. I know it will cause trouble, but my hunger is greater than my fear.

When our mother returns without Nalan Teyze and sees that there are only three rolls left in the dish, she becomes stony-faced. She would normally start yelling now, but

because that would violate the rules for quiet rooms, she directs all her suppressed anger into a whisper that is not a whisper.

‘Can’t you even eat properly, without getting all ten fingers greasy!’

Aylin and I both know that the really bad repercussions will only start at home. Probably on the journey back. Suddenly I have no idea why we have brought on a whole evening of trouble instead of just waiting for her for a few minutes. I wonder if Aylin is thinking the same thing right now. But sitting on the floor with my back to her, I can't read her face to see what's going on with her. Instead, I feel how she begins to rub my head. I pretend not to notice that she only wants to wipe her greasy fingers in my curls. Silently, the three of us watch the display board until our mother eventually jumps up.

‘Haydi, we're up!’

As she walks, she continues to point her finger at the red flashing 318 before disappearing behind one of the doors. Aylin tosses our bags and the empty dish under her chair, saying, ‘We'll get them later!’ and pulls me up by the arm behind our mother.

In the office, we sit down as always, as if the official’s desk were a family dining table where everyone has a fixed seat: our mother in the middle, Aylin to her right and me to her left, right at the corner of the desk where the nodding dog is. I prod the dachshund’s nose carefully with my fingers, while the official speaks unbelievably quickly. The same mutt, or at least one of the same breed, is also on the family photo at the corner of the desk where Aylin is sitting. The heads of the official, his wife, and his son – who must be about my age – look like pumpkins on the photo, as though someone has drawn a broad grin on them with a marker pen.

The appointment goes like all appointments in quiet rooms. The official on the other side of the desk does not look any of us in the eye and says ‘federal republic’ a thousand times. I now know that my mother is not nodding because she understands what the character in front of her is robotically saying, but because she wants to convey: ‘*You are the boss with the watch on your wrist and we are some of those good people who don’t challenge that.*’ It is the same nod that our mother always does when anybody in a white coat or a uniform or with a badge on their chest is sitting in front of her, or when the men with the suitcases arrive at the door to put stickers on pieces of furniture. As soon as the men have gone she just shakes her head, questions everything that they have said and then insults them. But my mother is still nodding. I try to nudge the brown dachshund on the

table so that it keeps time with her. When the official is finished with his abbreviations and paragraphs, she starts talking even faster than he does.

‘She’s battling him,’ Aylin had explained to me once, ‘she’s showing the lump that she understands German.’ My mother puts her hand protectively on mine and Aylin’s shoulders. Aylin does not make any move to shake her hand off. I am incapable of anything except being amazed at how good the pair of them are at acting as though everything was fine, especially when neighbours or teachers or cops are around. All of a sudden they are a team. ‘And the children,’ our mother says, ‘they are here now, Mr Kozminski, they were born here and need citizenship, any kind! And they never got the Turkish one because their father was persecuted.’

Our mother takes all sorts of papers out of the envelope that Aylin has unobtrusively placed on the desk in front of her: birth certificates, photos, there are even references in there. She lays it all on the table and pushes the pile across to Kozminski, past the nodding dog and the family photo. He holds each individual sheet of paper up as though he were checking it against the light to see whether it was real.

‘Aha, very unusual,’ he says and his pumpkin head keeps emerging from behind the documents so he can look at us, as though he also needs to check whether we are real. ‘Really very unusual,’ he says again, this time looking at the mouse face across Aylin’s chest. He picks up a pink piece of paper and lays it on top of the pile, pushing the pile carefully back across the desk as though it was money that he is lending to our mother and wants to have back soon.

‘So, that’s it for today, Mrs Kaya,’ the official says and points to the door. And that really was it. As we are leaving the building, our mother remembers that she is still angry because of the vine leaves. But she still agrees, when Aylin suggests getting the bus home. They never check tickets in the evenings, Aylin claims.

‘If they do, you’re paying it out of your pocket money, so you know!’

I still remember how we sat separately in the bus that day: my mother at the front, my sister in the back row and me somewhere in the middle. If a ticket inspector came, I was to take my time looking for my ticket, so that they would have enough time to get off. One of the two of them would then run back and fetch me from the bus stop. The window pane

vibrated against my head for the whole journey. It was just getting dark, German rain rattled against the window.

Where you are, Metin, in Turkey, the rain is somehow comforting. When we were in the village with Emre Amca and Sümran Teyze and there was a storm, Aylin and I sometimes sat by the window and watched it. It is different here. A storm is not a break here, everything just carries on, but wet. Just like everything always carries on.

That is what became clear to me on this bus ride: that soon another day would come when the three of us would leave the house early, sit in the brick building and get the bus back. And after that again and again. And today I do not know anymore whether I would rather have spent that day at school. I knew then though that the next day I would have to wait again, this time outside the teacher's office, to explain again why I had been copying flowers in a corridor instead of sitting in my art lesson. As I sat on the bus and the raindrops hit the window so regularly, that it sounded like one continuous noisy sound, I understood: I will always have to sit somewhere and explain myself, while missing something else. And my sister probably thought the same, sitting in the back row with her feet on the seat in front of her, her headphones on, the newspaper lying in her lap. She thought of her friends, who had gone to the pool that day, where Aylin could have finally found out what mysterious power had been swelling under her T-shirt for weeks and how she could use it to strain the necks of everyone in the pool as she walked along the edge. My mother, on the other hand, was definitely thinking about the wages that she would miss out on today, because instead of standing in the snack van she had had to sit around in a corridor with her passportless children.

Metin, I don't think anything in the world is inscribed so clearly in the faces of my family – and probably all those who stood outside the brick building with us on those mornings – as this stolen time, the many days and hours that were taken from us, that we had to spend in all those bureaucratic offices, which still haven't even ended.

I am thinking of all the hours that my mother must have spent getting a job or a flat, or of the annoying flute music in the holding queue for the hundredth doctor that also didn't have any appointments, after my mother had spent ten minutes typing her name into the telephone. I am thinking too of all the hours that we steal from ourselves, thinking about our appearance and our smile and our handshakes: the trustworthy tenant, the

diligent worker, the accent-free 'I'. I am thinking of all the waiting. I waited for school books from the benefits office in the first weeks of the school year. I waited at national borders, where men in uniforms stared at my tattered papers for minutes at a time, where I then sometimes sat for hours in a white room, as the stains under my arms grew ever larger, where no border policeman looked through the thousands of documents I put in front of him, and where in the end only the accent-free 'I' ensured that I could go after all. I was always waiting for friends, for their release from rehab, for their return after deportation, on the steps in front of the police station, where one of us was being interrogated. I waited at home, sitting on a kitchen chair and staring at the door of the flat, because I thought Aylin would come back again one evening. I have spent so much time in my life waiting for something and now that I am here in the hospital and the weeks feel like a single day that is never going to end, without anything happening, I think of your time in prison and that you also waited for almost a decade and that that is something that could perhaps connect us, if I were to get a second chance too.

There is a knock. I know that it is Aylin. The nurses never knock and I said to my mother that she shouldn't come today. My sister walks in quietly, sits down on a chair next to my bed and looks at me wordlessly. She puts her hand on the covers, so that hers and my fingertips are touching, very carefully, so that the canula in the vein in the back of my hand does not slip. And because it is a long time since we touched one another. It feels as though a strange animal is showing me affection. My sister does not utter any greeting, and she does not ask me how I am. In her eyes I only see questions. All of the years we have spent apart are there. At some point her gaze falls on the blood results from today, the printout is lying on a little side table.

'Any news?'

I shake my head and a brief sadness shows on Aylin's face before she regains her composure.

'It probably takes a few days before the cortisone works,' I say.

'You look better than yesterday, anyway.'

It is nice that she lies.

'Aylin?'

'Yes?'

‘Can you actually remember the time before he left?’ I ask

‘You mean Dad?’

3

‘Where is the key, darling?’

Her father is kneeling in front of her with both his hands on her shoulders, waiting for her to meet his eyes. But Aylin carries on looking at the dark blue carpet in between his black socks.

‘I don’t know, Baba, really.’

She knew she was very good at lying. At school she was even regarded as the best liar. Once when one of the blonde girls had claimed that she and Tansu had pulled her hair – which was true, because they hated the way she always came in in the mornings with her pink toy horse and her perfect clothes – Aylin had actually managed to divert the suspicion away from them both. She had told Mrs Becker that it wasn’t she and Tansu who had pulled out clumps of the girl’s hair, but that it was one of the boys, and that he had done it because he was actually secretly in love with the girl. (People who were in love sometimes did things like that. Her mother had explained that to her after her father had dragged her across the living room floor by her hair for the first time). That was the trick with lying: you had to lay another story over the made-up one, one that you knew was true, and then nobody – sometimes not even you yourself – could distinguish between what was true and what was lies.

The only person whom Aylin could never deceive was her mother. Not even now. When her father had jiggled the handle and found that the door was locked, he had looked angrily at her mother, who immediately said: ‘Don’t look like that, it was your daughter!’ Since then, Aylin’s head had felt like a hot air balloon that was getting bigger and bigger, exposing her further and making her head feel even hotter. As Mrs Becker would put it, the cat was biting its own tail.

But it didn’t really matter. So what if her parents knew that she had locked the door and hidden the key. She didn’t care that later she would be made to dust the radiators or clean the toilet as a punishment. She would have to do the radiators sooner or later anyway, since her small hands were supposedly more adept at it, and the toilet wasn’t a big thing. There was a much worse fate awaiting her if she were to produce the key now: her father had threatened to take the money and run. That was exactly what she had seen coming and had to stop from happening.

‘Aylin, I have to go to work!’ said her father.

‘But that’s not what you said before.’

He exhaled heavily.

‘Sometimes adults say things that they don’t mean!’

As though he needed to explain that to her. She was not a baby anymore and knew that adults lied too. That was the thing. He was not telling her the truth even now. She had not forgotten that after the last argument he had slammed the door behind him and not come back. Her mother had been really angry that day. She had tidied the kitchen and argued with herself all day. Or rather with Aylin’s father, but because he was not there, she had screamed and cursed into the fridge as she frantically wiped the glass shelves. Then she complained to the living room cabinets, and finally the shower cubicle, and only when she was finished and standing by herself in the spotless flat did she suddenly fall silent. This loud silence could still be heard in the flat in the days that followed, when her father was away.

At some point she had wanted to comfort her mother. She had never made coffee before, although she had watched a couple of times. ‘How difficult can it be?’ she thought. So, she climbed up on the counter, shook the brown powder into the funnel, pressed the button, and waited. For some reason liquid suddenly started to come out of all the holes in the machine. When her mother came into the kitchen and saw Aylin standing on the kitchen counter in her socks in a brown puddle, trying desperately to stop any more water coming out with her hands, she expected that her mother would either go mad or start laughing. But she did neither of those things. She just exhaled deeply, as though she was tired of everything, took the cloth, and silently began to wipe up the spilt coffee. Aylin took her mother’s hand, pressed it against her cheek, and promised her that she would never go away and leave her on her own, in response to which her mother just sobbed and took her hand away. Not even Nalan Teyze could cheer her mother up at that time. ’Honestly, you should be happy,’ she had said, as they sat together on the sofa, but her mother had just sobbed even more loudly.

Her sadness only transformed back into anger once Aylin’s father came back. Aylin heard the key turning in the lock as she was sitting watching TV with her mother one evening. She leapt up and wanted to run to the door, but her mother sent her to her room with a serious nod of her head, where Aylin sat with her ear pressed to the door. Her parents were speaking suspiciously quietly, either because they had had enough of shouting

or because they guessed that Aylin was listening to them. She couldn't hear anything except murmuring, and at some point decided to lie and wait in her bed. She closed her eyes, with the covers pulled up under her chin. Only after the door to her room had been slowly pushed open and she felt her father's rough hand on her cheek did she fall asleep.

Her parents were always especially kind to each other after they had made up. Her mother began every sentence with 'aşkım' or 'canım' and spoke in a purring tone, while her father brought home numerous bunches of flowers and praised her cooking, even when it tasted really bad. But Aylin was not interested in waiting for days until things got bad again. So she was not going to give up the key under any circumstances.

'Darling, Daddy will get into trouble with his boss if he doesn't go now.'

Her father was still trying to stay calm. She could tell from his voice. She knew that if he lost it, he would really lose it, but it took a while with him. Her mother would have hit the roof ages ago. When Aylin forgot to flush the toilet, her mother would grab her by the neck, push her head up close to the toilet seat and say, 'If you behave like a dog, you'll have to be treated like one!' Her father was never like that. He always called her, 'Aslanım benim,' (my lion), before pulling Aylin up onto his knee and tickling her with his stubble. Her father was a different person with her. The man who sometimes grabbed her mother by the throat and pushed her against the wall was not her father.

'I want to go with you, Baba!' Aylin said.

Her mother laughed. But Aylin was serious. Tansu was always at the tailor shop, helping Ridvan Amca to sort the buttons or tidy the zips. Whereas Aylin was only ever at home, or lately in school. Once she had even got up when it was still dark outside, had got herself dressed and waited for her father outside the bathroom. He had almost tripped over her. 'I want to see your work,' she had said to him, trying to sound as much like her mother as possible. But he just waved her away. 'Aylin, there are just conveyor belts with dead animals. It's not for you.' But she would not give up, until at some point he said, 'Another time, I promise.' And Aylin thought that today it was time for him to honour that promise. If he was going away for days, he could at least take her with him.

'I want to see the dead animals now!'

'But then Daddy can't go gambling afterwards, isn't that right?'

Her mother sounded like the snake out of her cartoon series. She stood behind her father and lit a cigarette. She blew the white smoke upwards with a grin.

'You shut up, Ümran!'

'Sure, you guys can sort it out.'

Her mother turned around and disappeared into the kitchen.

'I promise I will take you with me one time, but not today. Now open the door.'

His voice sounded more serious. She knew that if she carried on he would stand up and say *that's enough now*. He would lift his hand and then his mother would get in between the two of them and everything would be even worse.

'But you're coming back, right?'

'Of course, Aylin!'

'Not last time!'

'That was different, darling.'

'How?'

He stroked her check. Only now did she realise that her face was wet. He wiped her tears away with his sleeve and pressed her to him. Then Aylin went into the living room and climbed onto the sofa. She looked in the cracks for the key to the flat. She felt him watching her. Next time she would have to use a different hiding place.

'Good girl.'

Her father took the key from her hand, gave her a scratchy kiss and shut the door, without saying goodbye to her mother. She stood in the kitchen, one hand on her rounded belly, the cigarette still smoking in her other hand.

'He won't be coming back anytime soon…'

There is another knock on the door of my hospital room. Shocked, Aylin pulls her hand away and gives me a reproachful look. I try to show her with my eyes that I am innocent. But my sister has already jumped up and gone to stand by the window with her back to the room, as though she were looking down on the forest behind the clinic. My mother enters the room with a rustling sound, a couple of bags over her shoulder. When she sees Aylin she stops in her tracks and opens her mouth. But she says nothing. For a moment she seems utterly helpless.

'Hallo, Ardacım.'

'Hallo, Mama,' I say.

'I just wanted to bring you some clean underwear and a couple of T shirts.'

While my mother puts the washing away in the cupboard, Aylin turns around, kisses me on my forehead – which is covered in spots due to the cortisone – and runs out of the room. After she has gone, my mother sits down on the stool that Aylin was just sitting on and looks down at the floor for a moment, lost in thought, before turning to me.