



Excerpt from

Dilek Güngör's

Ich bin Özlem

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I am Özlem

1

The smell of braised meat hangs in the air warm and heavy. My clothes, my skin, every bit of me reeks of fat and sautéed onions. I'll take a shower before the guests arrive.

The fact that it still bothers me . . .

Sometimes I catch myself raising my sleeve to my nose, sniffing my T-shirt, my hair. I do it in the middle of the day, just because. My T-shirt doesn't smell bad, neither do my armpits, the only scents are deodorant and warm skin. But what if I stink and just don't smell it?

The first time I am surprised at myself. I was going to work, my hair still wet from the shower. Passing by the mailboxes in the entryway I stood still, pulled a handful of t-shirt under my nose and breathed in. Orange body wash, detergent; everything's okay. It's been almost thirty years but the fear I might stink remains. Luckily nobody on the school bus ever called me a dirty Turk or garlic muncher, which would have been incorrect in any case since bathing was a family ritual for us and we rarely ate garlic. We did eat plenty of onions. Green onions, raw, the bulbs too, from inside out. The tender inside layers are mild and juicy. I didn't tell anyone at school about that.

2

The doorbell rings. Johanna is coming up the stairs carrying a big paper bag. She's out of breath.

"Why didn't you take the elevator?"

I take the bag from her.

"That always takes too long."

She slips off her shoes, washes her hands in the sink and unpacks the groceries. She bought arugula, lettuce and mushrooms, salad dressing, croutons and small mozzarella balls in a plastic tub.

"I still have to make the salad; I was at the office until just now. Just three of us came in today."

She apologizes for the store-bought salad dressing and pre-packaged croutons.

“We can leave out the mozzarella if you don't like it.”

Of course Johanna is capable of making a salad. The way I fuss over the meal must be intimidating for her. I lift the lid off the pot, give it a stir and turn down the heat, then dice onions and (rinsing off the cutting board in between) snip dill and slice a lemon. Three pots on the stove at once and bread in the oven too. How should she know I'm only acting like I have everything under control, that the lentils really have to be soft before you can add the onions? I forgot the foam on the lentils!

“As soon as the lentils boil, you have to carefully skim off the foam,” my mother always said and spooned the gray foam out of the pot. How I hated standing next to her by the stove.

“Watch and learn.”

I didn't want to learn. I wasn't interested in how you make soup because I wasn't going to be a woman who greeted her husband with dinner waiting on the table. None of my friends had to stay by their mothers and learn how to cook.

“It's only because I'm a girl. It's only because we're Turkish.”

“Don't be ridiculous. What does that have to do with anything? Do you want to survive on noodles and fish sticks for the rest of your life? Everybody has to learn to cook.”

“Are you listening to the radio?” asks Johanna and goes over to it. A story is playing about balcony plants and what time of day you should water them. But the news will be on soon, and we'll learn that integration has failed, like we did on the five o'clock news and the week before and from the very beginning in fact. I push past her and turn it off.

“You don't have to turn it off. I only wanted to turn it down.”

“No, I only had it on to distract me.”

“From what?”

“From cooking.”

Why didn't I just make spaghetti? Canned tomatoes, onions and garlic, they could have cooked as long as needed until the guests arrived. There's a big piece of parmesan in the refrigerator and basil is growing by the bushel on the balcony. I like to make a lot of work for myself. I should have spared myself the effort, if only for Johanna's sake.

Now she's standing at the kitchen counter thinking she has to make the perfect salad to go with my perfect meal.

My mother cooked every evening – and plenty. There had to be at least enough food for the next day, for lunch and for dinner. When the green beans and rice in the pots had cooled, she filled two generous portions in tin lunch pails with covers that glowed blue. At six in the morning the pails and a thermos of Nescafé went in the basket that my parents took with them to work. For my mother, cooking in large amounts was a habit, she had five siblings and my father four. To this day my father brings home a trunk full of groceries from the farmers market. And when in doubt my mother always chooses the bigger pot, even for just the two of them. It doesn't mean she wants to impress anyone, though, or that she does it to be praised. She cooks because it's good to have a warm meal on the stove and you never know if someone might drop by unexpectedly.

At my friends' houses a cold supper – *Vesper* – was always served. Bread, cheese, cold cuts, cocktail pickles, apple juice or peppermint tea for the children, mineral water for mom and a beer for dad. Nobody cooked in the evening except us, and I would have preferred to eat *Vesper* as well. Then I wouldn't have had to worry if I smelled like food. But my mother insisted on a proper dinner.

“Man it stinks in here. It sucks you can't open the window on this bus.”

I didn't turn around. I acted like I didn't hear it. I already knew who was back in the last row laughing and fanning the air with his hand. Jack and this small group from the neighbor school. He already had fuzz on his upper lip and the habit of beating people with his gym bag. Occasionally there were more of them, always in a group. It had a changing cast but Jack and his buddy always played a part. In class Jack sat behind me. He usually left me in peace, he was even nice sometimes and let me borrow a sheet of paper or a refill for my pen. I still kept my distance from him, especially after the bell. Jack's name wasn't really Jack. It was Jochen, but in English class we all had English names. Stefan was Steve and Eva, Eve. Nothing fit Özlem so I took Nancy, which the teacher suggested.

While turning over the eggplant, hot oil splashed onto my forearm. I let cold water run over it, but the little red drops burn, and a blister formed on my wrist. It's a mystery to me why I always have to be a more generous, more caring host than my friends when they come for dinner. Why do I have to outdo myself each time? I'm not really a generous host. A generous host doesn't spare effort or cost, but I buy what's on sale. I buy good meat but not the best. I don't go from market to market prodding the tomatoes. I buy the ones that look reddest. Nonetheless they see me as the most passionate cook out of all of us. It's not difficult; none of my friends bothers to be a good cook. They take every opportunity to say how much they don't like doing it. They hire cleaning ladies, nannies and have groceries delivered to their houses in the evening. I, on the other hand, roll out a pound of pizza dough after work, call Philipp and tell him to pick up pepperoni on the way home and invite the neighbors over. It's part of my culture, I say. For us entertaining people, guests, food and sharing are important. As little girls we learn to cook by watching our mothers and sisters. When I say these kinds of things, everyone at the table looks at me and laughs hesitantly. Nobody knows if I'm being serious. Why shouldn't I mean it seriously? My kitchen, I add, saying it like that, *my* kitchen, is for cooking. There's always a pot on the stove and me happily wearing my apron. Oh, this little thing, it's no trouble. I'm about to take the flatbread out of the oven and be glad to see that it's crispy and brown. My back hurts and I would like nothing more than to lay down on the kitchen floor, but *my* guests see only joie de vivre and a hearty appetite.

3

I meet Philipp in the hall, my husband is coming from work. Usually I don't bother to meet him like today, I just call out "hello" from wherever I happen to be and he comes to me. He'll give me a kiss, only once in a while on the mouth. Normally I just offer him my cheek. He must think I don't get excited, even though I start watching the clock at six.

Philipp brought vanilla ice cream and blueberries. I try to take the bag out of his hand, but he won't let go. At first, I don't realize he's grabbing it, and tug at it once more.

“Leave it, I’ve got it,” he says. I know straight away what he’s playing at. He has a way of making fun of me that I can laugh at too.

“Very funny. Now give it to me you idiot.”

In the kitchen he draws up to Johanna and lifts her up. She is small and dainty, even I could pick her up.

“Should I set the table?” he asks. The way he stands before the plates makes me feel sorry for all the times I reprimanded him for using the wrong ones. He chooses the large flat plates. We need the deeper ones for soup. It doesn’t matter, I can put them on later. He shouldn’t feel like a schoolboy at the chalkboard.

Johanna asks where the napkins are, and I give her a package of red paper napkins out of the drawer.

At home we tear paper towels into squares when we have company. I first realized there is something else you can wipe your mouth with when I ate at my friend Stefanie’s house. Her family had a dining room and in it a large wooden table with a drawer that held dishes and cloth napkins. Everyone in the family had their own napkin. Their names had been written on wooden rings with a wood burning kit. The napkins were rolled up and pulled through the rings. Her father sat at the head of the table, her two younger siblings on a bench, Stefanie and I were across from them and her mother was beside the kitchen door. Before eating we prayed, “Come Lord Jesus be our guest, let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.” I said the prayer with them even though Stefanie’s mother said I didn’t have to. There were also table manners. You could only get up when you had finished everything on your plate and anyone who put their elbows on the table was given a stern warning, as was the case if you ate sausage without bread or drank too much juice. After fourth grade, Stefanie went to a school for the gifted and I went to a normal school. Even though we were still in the same city, we lost contact. I never saw her again. Her mother still lives in the ivy-covered house with a red balcony. Stefanie lives in Freiburg, apparently. My mother ran into her mother in a sauna, she even told her to say hi to me. I could come by anytime and ring the doorbell. But I don’t dare do so.

Johanna reminds me of Stefanie a bit. Her blonde hair, skin, freckles and light fingernails. They both have something innocent, naïve, carefree about them. Skin cream, lip balm and white socks on Sunday. Am I crazy? Is it my obsession with being not just clean, but pristine, right down to the pores? I like Johanna, I like her a lot, but if I were to tell her all this she would think I'm crazy. Philipp brought Johanna and her son along to swimming lessons one day. Luis and Jakob, both are six now and the best friends in the world since they took the beginning swimming test together.

"I'm glad you like her," said Philipp after Johanna and Luis left.

Everything is easier for him. He can have a conversation with anyone, he's friendly, he's attentive, he's funny, he listens, he isn't too loud, he is thoughtful and holds his mouth when in doubt. Couples supposedly complement each other; we look for the piece that completes us. That can't be said for us, we're compatible in one or two areas, we can talk to each other (I more than he), we can apologize to each other (I more to him than he to I) and we can laugh together even if he doesn't think most of my jokes are funny. This little bit seems to be enough to hold the rest together.

"Tobais is bringing wine," says Johanna and looks at the clock. It's almost eight. Besides Tobais, her boyfriend, Eva and Ralf are coming. Ralf is an old classmate of Philipp's and Eva is his beautiful new girlfriend. She's not all that new anymore, they've been together for three years, but considering that Johanna and Tobais have been together since college and Philipp and I have been married for nine years, Ralf and Eva can still pass for young lovers.

Our children are sleeping at grandma and grandpa's tonight, with Philipp's parents that is. The kids call my mother *nene* and my father *dede* just like I called my grandparents *nene* and *dede*, and still do. It bothers me that my cousins in Turkey, who also said *nene* and *dede* as kids, correct my children and me when we say *nene*.

"*Anneanne*, tell the children that they should say *anneanne*, not *nene*."

"Why not?"

"Because *anneanne* sounds better and because your mother is much too young to be called *nene*. You say *nene* to elderly women."

“But we said *nene* to our *nene*.”

“Well I say *anneanne*.”

I must have slept through the switch from *nene* to *anneanne* - mother's mother. My mistake embarrasses me as it always does to have my Turkish corrected. I speak cautiously, often overcome by doubt in the middle of a sentence when I suddenly can't remember if the word I've always used is right. Is it really *ışıĝı kapa*, isn't it *ışıĝı kapat*? Turn off the light with a 't' at the end? My parents and I always said *kapat*, right? My parent's Turkish can't be trusted. They were both the first people in their families to go to school, but only until they had more or less learned to read and write; my father went for five years, my mother for only four. Why should a girl go to school any longer than that? There was work to be done in the fields, more than enough, four younger siblings at home and the sheep had to be herded down to the river. It's very possible that my parents make mistakes in their native language and they speak a dialect on top of that. Even people in the next town don't understand some of the expressions they use. Sometimes I read a Turkish word or hear people use it and am surprised that they use it, a word I'd only heard from my parents until then and assumed was from the village. I tell my children that from now on we'll say *anneanne*, but they can't adapt to this new word and still call their grandmother *nene*. It might also be because *nene* always comes spilling out of my mouth.

“Let the children say what they want,” says Johanna. I always called my grandma 'momi'.

Since then I've let the children be.

I slice off a piece of bread and put olive oil and salt on the table. In the bathroom I take off my t-shirt and pants. Philipp sticks his head in.

“Should I change as well?”

“You don't need to.”

I brush my hair and shake it about, but that doesn't send the smell of bread and meat drippings flying away. Outside Johanna is laughing, somebody slams a cupboard door, glasses rattle, Philipp says something.

I'd like nothing more than to fill up the bathtub and dive under, letting my head sink to the bottom. I like it when my hair floats around my head and my ears fill with water. As a child I would stay in the tub until my fingers were wrinkled. Then my mother would come in, roll up her sleeves and slip a *kese* on her hand, a washcloth made from artificial silk. She wrapped the band on the edge of the washcloth tightly around her wrist so that it didn't slide back down. Then she would scrub my arms, back, neck, legs and stomach. Even the skin between my toes. She scrubbed slowly but firmly. My skin turned red and rolls of dead skin and dirt emerged from under the cloth as thin dark sausages, like when you erase something you wrote. The more she rubbed the longer the sausages became.

"Look at how filthy you were," she said proudly, wiping her brow. Then she would lather me from head to toe. I would sometimes taste soap in my mouth after taking a bath.

"Now you're clean as a whistle."

When Stefanie spent the night, we were bathed and scrubbed. It was the first time any of my friends from school spent the night and we slept with my mother in my parents' bed since my bed was too small for the both of us. Stefanie's parents were going through a divorce. Her mother was leaving her father because he didn't buy her flowers anymore. That's what Stefanie told me. We were both in first grade and didn't quite understand why grown-ups split up when they stopped getting flowers. But that's the way things were, and I was worried about the nightly bath and getting ready for bed. I tried to get out of taking a bath, but it was Friday and on Friday we took baths. First me, then my father and my mother last. I was afraid that my mother would scrub me with the *kese* in front of Stefanie and then she would see how filthy I was.

Stefanie and I poured bubble bath in the tub and let it run until the foam came up past our knees. We made hairdos and beards with the bubbles and I hoped my mother had forgot about us. But she hadn't. Neither did she ask Stefanie if she wanted to be scrubbed off. My mom rolled up her sleeves like always, grabbed Stefanie by the arm and began scrubbing her neck with the *kese*.

“Oh, just look how filthy you are,” said my mother. Stefanie liked the little sausages and later she told everyone at school about them.

I wash my face and run a cotton wash cloth under my armpits. I pull my hair into a bun on my neck. No one will smell my head, no one will think I'm filthy.