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Else

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else

Translated from the Turkish by Aron Aji

Already, the past is like a drowsy elephant. Elephants are nice but they make heavy metaphors. How far can you get with one chained to your ankle? Luckily, there aren't any on the island. Süheylâ says they won't let elephants ride the ferries. All the better. There isn't a soul around. Winter, firewood, two pension checks, a house left from a father... What else. Süheylâ says, "The snow has already blanketed our footsteps. And two is a good number."

Compare her to a summer's day? No chance! She is lovelier, far gentler and more sweet. The earth has grown cold, the daylight pale, the shutters are drawn. Though not before Süheylâ managed to gather all the summer's remains she could find and tuck them away in a hollow carved into winter. Like any mourner, she hoards well.

She juggles oranges, tossing them up into the air, even laughing. It's good for the brain, she says. As she laughs, cardamom milk drips from her teeth, wild summer blossoms, tender leaves, plump berries come pouring out of her mouth—they seem impervious to death. She is the priestess of oranges, a cheerful mourner, old jongleur, tart eggplant, beloved. "But soon I'll be dying," she says. "My knees are creaking. And will you just look at the kitchen." The kitchen is a mess, the pipes are wheezing, the faucet drips, and the ceramic tiles are cracked. "But who can live life only when it's beautiful..."

Death can't taunt Süheylâ's eternal summer any more. As a matter of fact, she adds, "Death can't taunt certain acorns either." She read in some book that squirrels forget about at least one stashed acorn out of four or five. "It's true." What's more, she came up with this one: being forgotten trumps forgetting. "You can't find that in a book. It's how some oaks survive. In forgotten pairs. That's good. An alliance of two, just think about it!"

So what are two rickety women supposed to do all alone? Plenty. We even picked up smoking. Oh, the way Süheylâ takes a drag, then blows out rings, one after another... Oh my, oh my. When she was young, she wore her hair short and a jacket and she had a downy lip. Now she's the perfect Island Auntie—hair in a bun, pearl earrings, camelhair coat, and all that. On the phone, she calls the greengrocer's porter "my son."

“And throw in three celery roots, don’t be late my dear son, make it on the double.” Later she juggles the celery roots. If only people knew what wild horses frothed on her tongue, all the elephants she wore down and left along the roadside. Ancient mother of tears, tough mouse, old hag, blasted elegance, you name it—there’s a peace of mind that comes when you walk about in masks. “You see, womanhood isn’t a trinket you buy at the flea market,” she says, adding that, in any case, she’ll be dying soon.

It’s possible. A life shorn from humanity, a room with a burning fire. Two tough nuts that flunked history, geography, and biology snuggled in a cavern under a blanket, cocking a snoot at the world. A house is a good place, the self dissolves inside. House, four walls, a burning fire, solitude, it’s all good. And in the flames’ glow, each person resembles another and you see all of humanity in a single face. Take Süheylâ, for example. Gazing at the fire, her glasses and her pearls suddenly drop to the floor, her brow narrows, her chin bulges, her neck shrinks, her hair pops out of her bun, gruesome bones stretch her face, and her eyes get smaller and smaller until they slip away into their sockets. And then, through those hollows, a cavewoman stares out at you. North winds blast and roar, trees fall in the distance, and beasts growl. This fire’s a sacred rite, it devours time, awakens the elephants, lets the beast run loose on the plains. Kissing Süheylâ is reaching back and kissing that cavewoman. Primeval. Two vertebrae, two spinal bulbs, two skulls clacking, then catching fire. Kissing Süheylâ is being reborn over and over until you are a soft, temperate fire, until you are reborn a woman and remain. A house is good, a fire, a cave, a cupboard, a pair... Compare her to a summer’s day? “Ah, if only it could be, *ma chère! Oh je vais mourir! Je vais mourir!*” Süheylâ whinnies and splits her sides laughing.

Then the creature showed up and snuck into the cupboard.

We were peeling tomatoes in the kitchen. “Not like that,” Süheylâ said. “The knife shouldn’t cut the flesh, this isn’t an apple.” The skinned rosy tomato sat in her palm, whole and lovely. “Just look at it,” Süheylâ said, holding the tomato at eye level and admiring the pretty, lace-like veins around the plump fruit. “Let’s name her Cemile.” And with her forefinger, she caressed Cemile, who grew juicier in her palm.

Later, opening the fridge one ordinary evening on the island, Süheylâ laa la la, her head tilted to one side, “*oh pieu*, look at the w-w-wall, the wll is shrnkng and swellwelling like a lung-g-g,” and with that a cat and her foul whiskers jumped into the fridge, eee, Süheylâ Süheylâ! “Don’t cry,” Süheylâ was saying, “there’s no catty in there, don’t cry, drink some water, wake up don’t cry wake uup! wake uup!”

He wasn't a cat but a stubborn stain, like fear, like death. He snuck out the door, swooshed down through the chimney. Just when we thought poof he'd turned to dust, he jumped back in through the window. He'd disappear but hours I mean hours later he'd come out of the fridge. If not him, then his fur or a whisker or a claw. "What catcat," Süheylâ kept asking and coughing, "Whewhere, don't sc-c-scare me." "Darling," she kept saying, "my love, my acorn, I am dying, could you please throw some more wood in the stove." And the cat would come curl up beside the stove, shrrp shrrp licking itself.

Gray as a grizzly's fart. Matted jowls, a coarse prickly mop between his ears. Sly, deceitful. He grew unruly as the winter, onerous. Hungry, he groaned, his belly glued to the kitchen tiles. He ate from our plate, snorted into our food, took to our bed. Every night, he crawled up and sat on Süheylâ's chest. When you'd least expect it, he sank his teeth or his claws into our ankles. The more you kicked and tried to shake him off, the deeper he sunk his claws. Through those gooey yellow eyes of his, a fawner kept peering at you. "Maybe hehe isn't a cat," Süheylâ would say, tears in her eyes, her hair falling out. "Don't cry," she'd say every time, "I am ti-red, forgive your w-weary acorn."

So it has snowed over our footsteps, that's all. Is that all? "The world's already a hole," so she says, "no point in digging out a cave to live in." Time passes, leaves behind a dirty mess... "I can't breathe." Süheylâ wheezes and coughs into her linden tea. Black pine needles blow in through the window opened a crack. "Close the window," she says, "open the window," she says, reaching out and grasping at the air. The cat purrs, his ear on Süheylâ's heart, *tarhana* soup simmering on the stove, brothy vapor clinging to the walls. Even if the house went up in flames, our drying pajamas would still be damp. Süheylâ's back is covered with festering sores. The wind soughs. Teacups chip and crack. The woodstove gulps down half a ton of wood. Blight creeps insidiously through a body already broken down, greedy cells whip around—they have mouths, they frown. Soup oozes from the corner of Süheylâ's mouth. The cat stretches, hops from Süheylâ's cheek to the windowsill, and begins to rub his whiskers against the glass. He glances every so often at Süheylâ, preening and clawing at the damp newspaper packed between the window frame and sill, ripping it to shreds. "Höm," Süheylâ clears her throat. "The dawgs are lown-ly too passing like days passing oneone after another"—dogs digging for bones in the woods and barking at the ferries and racing in their dreams and down the streets at dawn.

Encircled, the Go piece falls captive, falls off the game board. Whenever Süheylâ tries to escape and flings a cord up over a branch and pulls, an elephant comes lowing into her ear, a pair of scissors snipsnips beside her head. The nicks and cuts always mark her spaces on the game board. She draws a pair of captives, "This one you, and this one me, and later we kiss, agreed?" She pours imaginary tea, serves pretend cakes, "You arrived as a guest but stayed, agreed?" Only in the spaces that belong to her she opens her mouth filled with cloves, cardamom, and nutmeg, "hamm," she says, "delishh," she says and falls tumbling off the game board.

Now try and pull if you can the cat's claws that rip and shred the night to pieces or his long sandpaper tongue off Süheylâ's earlobe. "Dawgs too theythey bark so lown-ly." Now Süheylâ starts coughing with her calves, her belly growls, her ear leaks. Every creature wandering the earth, dragging its umbilical cord, stops by to see the world once through Süheylâ's eyes. "Ya crying? Why ya crying?" When you grab the cat by his neck and pull him away, he sinks his claws deep into Süheylâ's bosom. Yank his tail and he rips and pulls another thread off Süheylâ's bosom, she comes unraveled unraveled Sühey lâa Sühey lâa. "The scissrs. Wh drw thm thr? Böh! My daddaddy usd to beat me sooo baad."

Süheylâ never had a father. She had a gale. A storm that blew everything up into the air like tufts of cotton while she brewed tea and watched. She was robbed of something that was never hers oh yes she always yearned for something she never knew. Hevsel Gardens, for instance, on the banks of the River Tigris, the poplar leaves would rustle while Süheylâ drew cottonsoft arcs with her forefinger and ask one by one: "See that ferryman, you see him? He's been coming and going for a thousand years, carting watermelons over the river? That rabbit's been eluding the police for a thousand years, no? So who am I? I don't even have a father to kill." And the glow in her eyes fades like a puma stealing back to her den. "But naw, ya dunnaw how my diddy used to beat me so baad and aym scared."

And blöh! she throws off the blanket. Her hair in threads, her sweater torn, "aym sc-c-cared," looking for her slippers, "sc-c-cared and aym leeving," the cat paces up and down the hallway. Swimming in her nightgown, Süheylâ is a shriveled plum in a cave. Her legs shake as she walks, dragging her leaden slippers, "aym goin out to halvay m bord bord, trapt inside dis olifont all the taym." The cat gets in front of Süheylâ, leading the way. Grasping into the air, Süheylâ waddles with her crooked back, "leeving," as the auntie of the cave, the mournful acorn, "inside dis olifant all the taym," the door to the garden opens, ohh! a crystal

blue morning pours into the house, the cat in front, Süheylâ behind, the shadows of the cat and the woman's body trembling one last time on the wall of the cave. Passing through the door she leaves open for me, she fades into the garden and the wind, Süheylâa eylaa la la la.