Translated excerpt

Meral Kureyshi
Elefanten im Garten
Roman

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Elephants in the Garden
Novel

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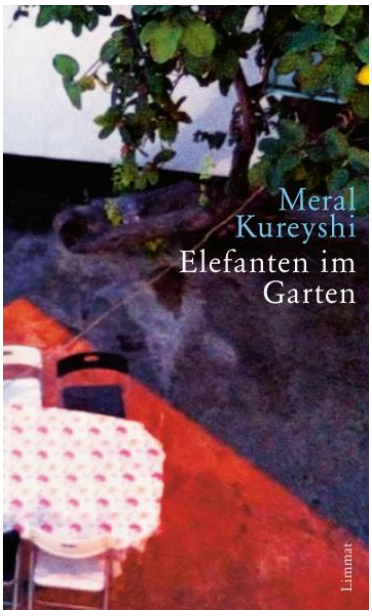

Your coffin is in the ground. You wanted to be buried in Prizren. For a month I've covered my hair with a white headscarf every Friday morning and said the "Yasin," the prayer for the dead, for you.

From the ninth-floor window I see Anne leaving the building. I know there's a Marlboro stuck between her lips. In her purse, which must be older than I am, there's at least one of those red and white packs of cigarettes. She's barely outside when she lights a cigarette with a lighter that she's been warming in her hand. She takes a drag on it, narrowing her eyes, as though it's too bright. Her chest heaves. When she exhales, she disappears for a moment in a cloud of smoke. She doesn't like smoking alone, she never did, and now she stands there looking like a heating stove that nobody needs because it's summer.

Baba tried to get her to quit. Anne blew smoke in his face and said a cigarette goes with a good wine, and when she stopped drinking, she said a cigarette goes with a good cup of coffee.

Her purse is made of black pigskin, which is cheap. It's big and has a long strap so that in winter it will fit over the padding on her shoulder. When I go to look for a pair of

tweezers in it, I find a little inside pocket. The zipper looks like a wound from which the stitches were never removed. I open the zipper tooth by tooth and find a wooden comb that belonged to you.

Anne takes her collapsible cane from her purse. I watch as the cane sweeps wide from left to right. Today two new canes came in the mail; the tip of the old one is worn out.

You would like our new apartment. The floors aren't carpeted, and from the ninth-floor balcony you can look out over the rooftops and see into other apartments. You always did like Bümpliz. You used to come here for shopping, a lot of your friends lived here, and you went to mosque in the basement of a high-rise building for the Bajram prayer with a large group of Albanian men.

We looked for an apartment for five years. After you died we found one in a high rise on the outskirts of Bern where twenty-seven foreign and three Swiss families live.

"My, but your German is good," the landlady said to me, very loudly and distinctly.

"We've lived in Switzerland since I was ten," I replied. Ever since we moved in, we've said we would put pictures on the walls. They're still bare.

Anne goes to the school for the blind by herself. She goes shopping at Alima, the Turkish store, and takes the train to Biel to visit her friend Emine. Franz comes once a month to teach her new routes, which she then proudly shows off, leading the way while the rest of us follow. "The duck family," Maria yells from the sixth floor. She knows who in the building has had a fight, who didn't clean the washing machine after using it, who didn't clean the lint out of the dryer.

My brother is twenty-two now, two years younger than I am. He wants to be a graphic artist, sleeps half the day, and his room is always dark and dirty. My sister, to whom I'm more of a mother than her own mother—my mother, our mother—is ten years younger than I am. Anne protects her as though she were a delicate piece of jewelry. She never treated us that way. When my brother was little, she always used to beat his behind with stinging nettles when he wet the bed.

I look for more things in the wound and find a folded piece of paper. It's the letter you sent us from Istanbul in the summer of 1991. That was fifteen years ago. It says you want to emigrate to Switzerland, and you ask us to come with you, to trust you. You write in capital letters.

The letter is folded into four rectangles, the paper is slightly brown on the folds, the writing is neat. "A doctor's handwriting," I can hear you say. You didn't become a doctor, you cleaned doctors' offices, and when we came to visit, you put on the white lab coat that hung behind the door, and we sat on the exam table, which you covered with white paper. We breathed deeply in and out while you gave us checkups.

When the letter came, Anne sat down on the sofa in our small apartment in the Kurila neighborhood in Prizren and cried. My brother was sleeping on his pillow under the table. I was standing beside the open door of the house. The wind blew yellow leaves into the room. It was a warm wind, it tickled under my arms. When Anne got up and went past me over the threshold, my head turned toward her and then away again. A brown eye peered from under the table. Anne's voice sounded far away,

"Baba isn't coming home."

When I licked my lips, I tasted salt.

"People are salty," Dede, my grandfather, once told me.

"Where is Baba?"

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!"

Anne put her head between her hands. Anne read the letter to us and wrote back to Baba. Today her words slip through our fingers, and her eyes see through our words.

Anne walks as though she can see. She stops suddenly, and I lean out the window,

"Is something wrong? Should I come down?"

She laughs, turns around, and disappears into the entry way. I'm worried, I hurry to the elevator.

"You forgot to put on my makeup." Anne "clapses" her cane, which is how she describes that action. She doesn't need it in the house. She goes into the bathroom, puts the toilet seat down, sits on it, and closes her eyes. I spread the powder on her face with my fingers, trying to cover the red patches on her cheeks. Her skin feels slightly rough.

"Open your eyes."

"How do I look? I haven't seen myself in ten years."

"You look like Fatma Girik."

She pulls the white scarf over her black locks.

I was ashamed of it. No one in our family wore a headscarf, so why did she have to wear a headscarf now, here, in Switzerland, I thought, and I told her so. Anne told me I should think before I speak. That's why I started writing. I could write what I thought and no one told me to think first.

I was ashamed that we couldn't buy new clothes, that we cut each other's hair, that we were the only ones who didn't have a car or a telephone. And on top of that Anne had to wear a headscarf. We had been different before, now we were "those people."

In the kitchen Anne takes a bottle of Coke out of the refrigerator. She says she could gain weight without eating, that she could double the kilos on her hips just by looking at them.

I remember the photos she carries in her purse. I don't have to hide to go through her purse, I can do it under her eyes, which can't see me while she sips her Coke and laughs. I'm ashamed of myself.

The photos show you and Anne dancing, holding each other tight. There are lots of wine bottles on the table, and the mascara under Anne's eyes is smeared. Her lips are red. Her nails are red. In one photo you're kissing. In another one she's sitting on your lap and laughing with her head thrown back, one arm around your neck. Anne's cheeks swell. Her lips part slightly, she lets out a burp.

"That's gross, don't ever do that again."

I go to my room and slam the door behind me. I can hear her laughing.

The apartment door clicks shut. I get up right away and go back to the window. Winter is in its annual war with autumn and will soon win the battle. I wait till she comes out of the entrance, lights her cigarette, and rummages in her purse for her cane. Left, right, left, right. Just before the last bend she turns and smiles broadly. She knows I'm waving to her.

Some days the first of September seems so far away that I can barely remember it—not your face, not your smell, not your hands.

Your voice, too, is gradually disappearing from my ears.

I'm afraid that someday you'll disappear completely.

From my memory, from my mouth, from my face. Aga says I look like you.

On other days it's as if you've hardly been dead a few days.

You lie lifeless on the bed.

No laughter in your face.

No movement in your hands.

No sight beneath your fallen eyelids.

Your jaw is tied up with my pink scarf.

Anne stood beside Baba.

My sister sat on the chair beside him with her head down. Her hair covered her face. Now and then a tear dripped from the tip of her nose onto the back of her hand.

My brother tried to be strong, tried not to look me in the eye, tried to say nothing, tried to breathe evenly. My brother was trying to be a man.

I saw his chin tremble; mine did, too.

Baba's hand was in mine. I don't know how long.

At some point it was dark; the room in the Inselspital, the University Hospital, was brightly lit. His hand had turned cold and pale. I bent and kissed it three times, bringing it to my mouth, to my forehead and back again.

"I forgive you for what was on earth; please forgive me, too."

Sometimes Baba bought things on credit at the bakery in Neuenegg. I was with him once. I was behind him at the cash register as he, quietly and bending forward slightly, asked the cashier—whom he barely knew, who always smiled at me, whose breath smelled like cat food, who had a Serbian husband who ran the bakery and was very nice to us—whether he could put the purchase on his tab. He said thank you, smiled, placed his hand over his heart, and inclined his head forward a bit. I had put the bread, butter, Nutella, a few vegetables, and the milk into the shopping bag. Baba reached for the pack of cigarettes immediately. As soon as we were outside he lit one. He blew smoke rings at the sky, I laughed. At precisely that moment—I was twelve—as he stood beside me with shining eyes, I swore I would one day have so much money that Baba and Anne would never again have to buy anything on credit.

I swore it to the heavens between the smoke rings as loudly as I could.

Anne and I are leaving the Globus department store where we looked at nice dishes and silverware, smelled perfumes, stroked cashmere sweaters. It's gotten cold.

Anne asks whether I have a warm sweater, I say yes, she asks what it cost. Anne asks what everything costs. She says money comes from the devil. With money you can divert people from life, lead them astray, deceive them, make them happy, kill them.

We drove into town, wandered through the stores. First Loeb's, then Voegele, later C&A, and finally EPA. Each of us was allowed to get something. I always reached for the price tag first. But I didn't want to run around in the same clothes all the time, the same shoes, so I chose violet leg warmers and a big T-shirt with a flower pattern. I wanted to keep them on right then and never take them off again. My brother bought candy and a wig, which he put on right away. Anne bought a blonde doll for my sister, and Baba bought a ring for Anne—which made her finger green after a few days and lost its gold color. She never took it off. The plastic jewel fell out several times, and he always glued it back in. Every month we drove into the city as soon as Baba's pay was in the bank. We all knew we couldn't spend much, but this was the best day. We

ate at McDonald's, sometimes in a pizzeria. Baba loved pizza. I watched how he cut it into real little pieces and folded the little pieces with his fork before he put them in his mouth. I tried to copy him, but I was too greedy and ate the pieces whole with my hands.

When we had money, Baba and Anne laughed a lot. When we had no money, they smoked a lot and we sat around the house. They fought, we cried in our room. My brother and I said if the light goes on right now, we'll be real rich. Or: if it starts raining right now. Or: if Baba wins the lottery.

Anne clings to my arm. When I'm with her, she doesn't need the cane. My arm gets warm where her hand is. On her ring finger she's wearing the ring with the green jewel that you gave her. It's stopped losing its color, she says, when I twist it around her finger several times. Anne always has warm hands. She says people with warm hands get lots of love. You loved her a lot. When I say that I always have cold hands, she takes my hand in hers, warms it, and says,

"That's not true, don't say dumb things."

She asks me whether her hands are wrinkled. No, I say, you don't have any wrinkles, not even in your face. She smiles and knows that I'm lying.

I didn't know it would be my last five minutes with Baba. He was sitting on the couch listening to music. We were talking about the apartment he wanted to go see with Anne. Next morning he complained about pains in his shoulder, so Anne wanted to postpone the appointment. Baba wanted to see the apartment no matter what. They got into the red Mercedes and drove toward Bümpliz. After five minutes Baba's heart stopped beating. Then Anne screamed.

On bath day we were all taken to the changing room in the gym of the Brunnmatt schoolhouse in Effingerstraße. The women shared a shower room with the girls, the men shared one with the boys.

While the women and girls undressed, I fled into the hallway. Anne followed and sat beside me on the cold floor. We sat there till the others had finished showering and had left the changing room.

Then we got up and went into the empty room. Anne turned her back to me and looked for something in her purse until I had undressed and wrapped a towel around my naked body. I showered quickly. When I was done, Anne, wrapped in a towel, went past me into the shower room. I got dressed, combed my hair, and packed my things in my bag. Anne came out of the shower after a little while, and I went into the bathroom. When I came out, Anne was already dressed. Freshly showered, we descended into the bunker. That was our first home in Switzerland. The green neon sign of the University Hospital dazzled my eyes as we crossed the schoolyard.

I take the bus from Bümpliz into the city almost every day, past that air-raid shelter where we lived for two weeks. I

think of you. Everything is still the same. I press my forehead against the bus window and try vainly to recognize something as we go by. I get out of the bus and go down to the entrance to the bunker. The first time in fifteen years.

The iron gate is shut. I hold onto it with both hands, smell the damp walls, press my face between two ice-cold iron bars. It's dark.

Lights were on only in the apartments across the way. I watched strange people watching television. Some were standing at open windows and smoking, others were drinking tea and talking on the phone. I watched for hours, gave them names. The smoking man was Moonface; I had never seen such a round face. The woman in front of the TV was Elizabeth because she looked so much like the queen in the magazines that I read at the newsstand. Her husband was Transfer. I heard this word so often that it had to be the name of a king. One evening Moonface called something out to me in his foreign language; it frightened me, and I ran back to the room. All twenty-four foreigners were already asleep.

I was afraid of Moonface. He would turn us in to the security guards, they could put our family in jail, and we'd have to spend years there. I wouldn't be able to go to school any more. They'd give my brother to a family with no children because he was so cute.

Anne had told me that a lot of married couples can't have children. She herself once toyed with the idea of giving her unborn child—which she was going to call Orhan because she liked that actor and singer so much—to Aga, my father's brother, and his wife. They couldn't have children, and my parents already had me and my brother.

The thought of giving away her child got harder for her every day. When she was seven months pregnant, she started bleeding heavily. The child's tiny legs hung from her lower body when she was sitting on the toilet. She cried loudly, held onto the child's legs with her hands, and had to be taken to the hospital. Anne lost a lot of blood and almost lost her life. The child was stillborn and was buried in a small coffin. Anne said to me later,

"I could never have given my child away, never."

While I'm pressing my head against the cold bars, a man in military uniform comes toward me from the bunker.

Could I have a look inside, I ask, I'd like to see what it's like to live underground.

"There's nothing to see. It's just an air-raid shelter."

On our first day in the bunker we were taken into a large room with long tables and lots of chairs where men with wet spots under their armpits were sitting. We went on, down a long hallway into a room where there were eight loft beds. Baba told us that there was one bed available for all of us. There were seven more beds for seven more families in the same room. The grey concrete walls reminded me of our basement in Prizren.

It smelled damp and a little like vinegar. Babaanne, my grandmother, stored her pepperoni, her tomatoes, and her over-salted cheese with dill on a rotting wooden shelf.

When I had to go to the bathroom, there were already several people ahead of me. There was one toilet for women and one for men. A woman from Kosovo, who was also waiting, asked me in Albanian where my mother was. I understood her but couldn't answer. How is it possible that people from Kosovo don't speak Albanian, she asked me.

We belonged to the Turkish minority in Yugoslavia; I had to explain that to everyone. My parents could speak Turkish, Albanian, and Serbo-Croatian.

I liked listening to the strange languages in the bunker and was glad that I didn't understand them. A different melody came from each mouth.

That was the only music that there was there.

There were no pictures on the walls of the bunker, no carpet on the floor, no windows with flowers in them, no Dede, and no Babaanne, either.

I was little, but big enough that I was no longer allowed to be little.

Baba wanted a red Mercedes. Traveling by train was too expensive, he said.

For five years we drove around Switzerland in a grey non-Mercedes until a policeman took away his Yugoslavian driver's license because it wasn't valid in Switzerland. Baba protested loudly that driving was the same everywhere. Baba took the first-aid course with eighteen-year-olds, the written exam, and defensive driving lessons. Then he had to take parallel parking lessons with a driving instructor although he'd been driving for twenty years. Meanwhile, the grey non-Mercedes rusted out because it had been outside too long. Baba took it to the crusher at the scrap yard, had it flattened, and, with no money, bought a red Mercedes for ten thousand francs, which he intended to pay off in monthly installments over five years.

When we went on long trips, we were not all allowed to go in the car together. Anne went by train with my brother or me or my sister.

Baba believed that if we had an accident, we shouldn't all get killed. We never took the same flight to Prizren; we trickled in one by one over several days.

No one questioned it—everyone had a story about a whole family getting killed because they had traveled together. No descendants, no survivors.

Once I asked Sarah after school how her family traveled.

Always together in the car to Italy. Always to the same house. Always in the second week of summer vacation. Sarah said that the whole family went hiking together once. One trail was so narrow that they could have gone over the edge any time. Their father tied a rope around their waists, and they proceeded slowly in single file. He said that if anyone fell, everyone else would go.

I liked that idea better—I just had to convince Baba.

When I proposed to him after school that it should be all of us or no one, he said everyone has a time to die. We can't influence it, only by suicide, and Islam forbids suicide. So we have no power over it and no idea when our time will come. I should stop thinking such thoughts because nothing good would come of it.

So, if everyone has a time to die, why didn't he travel with all of us, I wanted to know.

He said my brother and I were unbearable for long periods of time. Sometimes they felt like throwing us out the window and then backing up over us till we were quiet. And because they didn't want to have to kill us, because that's forbidden by Islam, too, we were going to travel separately.

That was not the first or last time Baba told us the story of how he got from Venice to Switzerland.

"I tried to act as normal as possible. I practiced a regular smile in the train window, I ate an apple so slowly that the place where I took a bite turned brown. I opened my bag and put a book in it, took it out again after a few seconds and put it on the seat beside me. I adjusted my coat, tugged at my trousers, took a drink of water. I had refilled the bottle with fresh water at least a hundred times.

"Then it was time. I held an Italian newspaper in front of my face and tried to act nonchalant. An Albanian man in the compartment behind me had to show his papers. The customs officials questioned him, and he couldn't answer. I couldn't understand anything, either. He wasn't Italian; the officials could tell from his papers and his nose. I sipped water, put the newspaper away, picked it up again, put the book in the bag and then beside me again on the seat. It was an Italian book. I set it down open without having read any of it. The dog barked and pulled the official with him; the conductor came along behind. I had my ticket ready on the little table, and I held the newspaper open.

" 'Buongiorno, come stai? Che bella giornata.'

"I spoke that sentence as though I'd done nothing else my whole life. I showed my ticket casually, with a flick of my wrist, more elegantly and more like an Italian than I had ever seen it done in Fellini films, with the Italian expression and gesture I'd practiced. The conductor punched the ticket, said 'Thank you,' and wished me a pleasant journey.

" 'Arrivederci, grazie,' I said after them and hoped they hadn't heard me say 'grazie.' Why should I say 'thank you' to them?

"When I looked at the newspaper in front of my face, I realized to my horror that the letters were upside down. I was so happy to get to Switzerland. I knew everything would be better in Switzerland. When I got off the train in Zurich, I kissed the ground."