

Translated excerpt

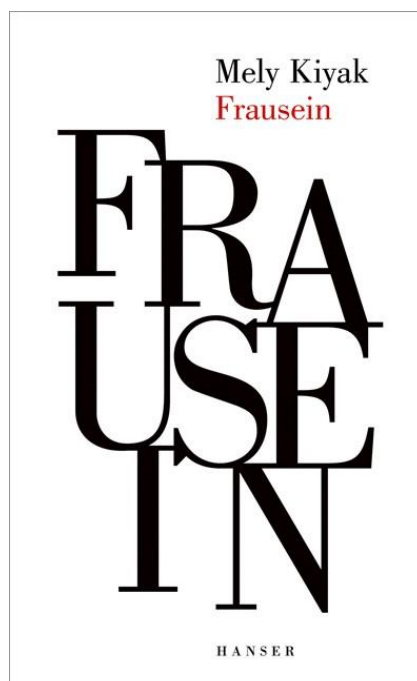
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Frausein

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Mely Kiyak
On Being a Woman

Translated by Lucy Jones



One morning, I woke up and saw the world disappear. As always, I was lying in bed with a coffee and a book after the dawn chorus. I was reading about freedom and sacrifice. And as I did, my eyes gradually gave out. It took until the late afternoon — I watched the world literally fade before my eyes — for my vision to slowly dim to twilight and then to darkness.

When they picked me up, I was sitting in my armchair. In the hours before that, I had showered and got ready. I wanted to be found straight away, so I had left the front door ajar. Had packed my bag and combed my hair, and then before getting dressed, had tried it.

But this time it wasn't supposed to be a test of courage — after all, it always made me feel uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed. This time I was saying goodbye to myself.

I wanted to look at myself.

With my damaged vision, I looked at my naked body. The test was to stand the sight of my naked self. Even though I could barely see anything by now, I was ashamed. Ashamed of my breasts. Of the triangle between my legs. Of this formidable nakedness, curves, shades and all. Or of what I assumed was where and what.

Although the woman in the mirror was gradually slipping away and could have been anyone, the sight of her was unbearable.

My last glimpse as she disappeared into the fog before my eyes was imperfect in every sense.

By midday, I had realised that whatever was happening to one of my eyes was also happening to the other. I sensed there wasn't much time left. Still, I waited several hours before calling for help because the whole time I thought, *It's all probably in my imagination. All the impressions will come back soon.* I'd never heard of whatever was happening to me. I distrusted my perception.

It took several goes to get help. I had to feel the keys on the telephone. After that, I sat down and just listened. I was living by the sea at the time. Outside, the gulls were mewing in the sea wind. Inside, I was losing my eyesight. In one hand I held my ID and my health insurance card. With the other, I clasped the armrest of the chair.

I was taken to the mainland.

In A & E, I had difficulty coordinating the stretcher and how my body felt lying on it. I felt and yet I didn't feel.

I knew I had to save myself. I talked to myself. During the hours, months and years that followed, I held onto these words: I accept everything. *I accept everything.*

I am a woman. I like being one. It is unequivocal. No regret. Nothing lacking. But no surplus either. That's the story I want to tell.

I'll start in a random place because there are no beginnings. There's only the view back.

My mother was a cleaner at the district court. At around six p.m. She would walk the few metres from our flat to the grand building opposite and start sweeping and mopping. Sometimes she would take me with her. She opened the detention cell with a very old iron key. A big key like the ones you see in films of Czech fairy tales. Very unreal-looking and heavy.

During the day, the inmates were brought from prison to that cell to wait for their courtroom hearings. In the evening when my mother arrived, the cell was long since empty. The district court judge liked my mother. If he did overtime and she set off a few minutes early, they would run into each other. I sometimes helped with the cleaning and saw him, too. He was a polite, well-dressed old gent who wore a waistcoat and carried a pocket watch. He was about to retire. He would leave his breakfast roll, thickly spread with butter and liver sausage, in his office. His wife had prepared it for him, wrapped it in tinfoil, and given it to him to take to work. For years, he pretended to her that he'd eaten it, but would leave it in the office cupboard. 'For your children,' he'd say, and point out to my mother where it was hidden. She would take the roll home and force us children to eat it. That liver sausage roll was a test. We would cut it up into several pieces and argue over who had to eat how much.

It had to be done out of respect for the district judge's generosity and kindness, my mother said. It was unusual for a man of authority like him to be interested in the likes of us. True, we were poor, but we had enough to eat. That was the contradiction we

had to swallow, along with the bread roll. As soon as we had made this sacrifice for the Lower Saxony district judge, we were given our proper supper.

As far as experiences go, I'm not sure how useful this was. It was an exercise in humility, that much is clear. Not a big deal. The reason never changed: the other person was not allowed to lose face on any account. Not over a ridiculous thing like a bread roll. This memory is not meant to serve as a lecture on dependency, hierarchies, the gaze of the Other, class differences, and so on. Various levels from subordination to submission were part of a normal upbringing. Even in hindsight, I don't want to see this as scandalous in any way. There is a different detail that interests me, which is this: A woman — a mother — passed up the opportunity to set right an impression of herself, her family and their circumstances. In the eyes of the judge, she preferred to look needy than fix his skewed impression of us. Maybe she thought he would only like her as a poor *and* hungry woman.

This is how I was conditioned into acquiescence. With these kinds of exercises. Say nothing, don't protest. Don't make any trouble. Take note of interpretations or explanations of our lives without comment. Eat up. Be noticed not through feelings, but achievements. For a while, it worked very well.

I didn't rebel until later. How can I describe my rebellion? It was a physical thing. More animal than human. I tensed my thighs and calves, rolled onto the tips of my toes, screwed up my forehead and eyes and started shouting. My rebellion was a difficult, forceful act. *If somebody tries to take you somewhere against your will, shout 'No!' very loudly and run as fast as you can.* This was the advice I was given from an early age to protect me from crime. It was meant as self-defence against robbers, murderers or strangers, of course. But I used it in my everyday surroundings. By

running away and shouting, I showed I was a person for a few seconds. Afterwards, I'd collapse and fall silent. And feel regret. And be crushed. And incapable of adding any more.

I was not familiar with the scope for action before things escalated. I had no other notions about resistance. If I didn't want to do something, I put up with it until it was no longer possible. Then I rebelled, shouted and ran away instead of explaining myself. I was wild with despair inside. My body reacted rather than spoke.

To the outside world, my shouting 'No!' with every inch of strength seemed like an impulsive thing. But deep down, each of my 'No!'s had travelled a long way. None of my 'No!'s was successful or brought any relief. Each 'No!' caused distress in the person it was aimed at. After 'No!', that was it. I left the scene and walked away. I was incapable of defending myself in a healthy, adult or reasonable way. Every time I protested, I used up my energy completely.

And then finally, decades later, when those turbulent times were long over, I lost my balance. I'd suspected my eyes would cause me some real trouble one day, and that's exactly what happened. Just when my life was very peaceful.

One morning, the impressions disappeared. The world took its leave. I became nothing, suspended in limbo.

In the years of my recovery, I understood that everything we deal with is an impression. Including our experiences. What we see, go through, think or remember — none of that is *the* impression. It is the result of forming *an* impression. An impression of ourselves and things. Even the impression we think we have of a table or chair relies on the impression we have formed about the table or chair. This insight

gave me an idea of how it is even possible for sighted people who become blind to carry on living. They still have an impression of things. Ideas turn into reality. And the other way round. Even our own reflection in the mirror is superimposed by our self-image. We look at ourselves and overlay what we see with an idea. That's how seeing works, more or less, as it was explained to me over and over again. Our brains, our imaginations or imaginative faculty knows what it should see and our eyes see it that way too.

I am sitting on the floor.

I'm a little girl. My father comes home from his factory shift. He sits down next to me.

I ask him, 'Who am I?'

He asks back, 'Who are you?'

I ask insistently, 'Who am I?'

He asks, 'Who are you?'

'Papa,' I ask, 'don't you know?'

He answers, 'Do you?'

I say, 'I don't know.'

He says, 'I don't know either.'

Two Sufis sit on the floor having a conversation. The big Sufi is probably making fun of the little Sufi. The little Sufi is sure that the big Sufi isn't the brightest spark.

I write. That's the only thing I do.

I didn't want to be a woman who has children *and* writes. Or a woman who is married *and* writes. No one who does some other activity *and* writes, I didn't want a little bit of

everything, but everything from this one thing. If somebody asked me what I did, I wanted to say *I write*.

It was not a deliberate decision. It just happened. When I realised everything seemed to point to this, I decided to do only this or not do it at all.

I am alone. There is nothing here except silence. For weeks on end. Months on end. I aim for maximum inner presence through outer absence. The telephone has been turned off. I send greetings on weddings and birthdays. Faced with the choice of seeing someone and being on my own, I choose myself. I can't separate myself from my writing, reading and walks. If I accept an invitation from someone, I get cold feet. As soon as I wake up, I feel nervous.

Hermetically sealing myself off from everything is not a break from everyday life, it *is* everyday life. My God, you live in paradise, people sometimes say to me. But when being a recluse from the world is a requirement for contemplating the world, it's not paradise. It requires perseverance. It's as if I am balancing on a breath of air and might fall at any moment.

Being alone, I am confronted by myself. I often feel I am more carefree in my memory than I really am. On good days, I find myself pleasant and likeable. On bad days, I see myself as a deep, dark abyss. Strange impressions surface in my isolation. Every sound takes on meaning. Some days, even the paper rustles too loudly and a strange mood lingers over everything.

But still, I chose it all myself. It's the only way I can be.

My writing started of its own accord, without any outside influences. Not in my parents' library. Not from a wish to end up one day between two book covers on my

parents' shelves. There was no such bookshelf. My parents read, but the books didn't finish up in a visible place, they weren't put on display. They disappeared again. Mostly they were 'forbidden books' about the Turkish-Kurdish civil war. They dealt with the issue of who was responsible for the wretched state of politics. My family didn't go to concerts either. Except for benefit concerts for political prisoners. No trips to the theatre (except for plays that re-enacted the agonising death of poison-gas victims in Halabja. The event depicted terrible suffering, but watching the performances was too.) To sum it up, there were no links to the world where culture was miraculously ritualised and staged for its own sake.

I liked theatre shows on television. Heidi Kabel would appear on a stage in Hamburg and her plays would often be broadcast by the Norddeutscher Rundfunk. The same happened with Willy Millowitsch in Cologne, broadcast by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

I liked those shows. Doors opening, doors closing, costumes, mistaken identities, dialect. The funny, harmless world of the Ohnsorg Theater.

Elsewhere, from the stage of some multipurpose centre in Germany, voices condemned capitalism, holdings and the arms industry. In television theatre, people laughed; in the city community centre, we collected money for the victims of torture or relatives of the Disappeared. The mood on the bus home was oppressive. That was the *other* world, the *real* world, as it was called. Our world.

I didn't know that culture was something I could approach or take part in. I couldn't put it into the conditional. 'I might end up at the Ohnsorg Theater.' Everything seemed so fixed and impenetrable as if we were walled in. Where I came from, it was

automatically assumed that life's promises were meant for others. The default state was to make sacrifices.

Whatever was said about us was said by outsiders. It wasn't one of us who described the lives of our fathers and not even a father but the reporter, Günter Wallraff. He dressed himself up as 'Turkish Ali' and, in the name of research, lived and worked a run-of-the-mill Ali kind of life in Germany. He described conditions for Turkish immigrant workers. Even though Walraff himself came from humble beginnings, he was so appalled by the humiliation he suffered that he didn't name his book *The Low* or *The Low-Down* or even *The Lowest* but *The Lowest of the Low*. We were positioned at the bottom of the pile. Someone had disguised himself as 'us', had imitated our lives and spoken for us. It seemed as if no one among us could speak for themselves. Or should. Or had permission. In the decades before this and the decades that followed, there was no other story that broadened this perspective. Walraff was a hero for immigrant workers and the trade unions alike.

Free Turkish translations of his book lay in a box under the punch clock in my father's factory. It appealed to two sides: those who didn't know what working conditions for immigrant workers were like and those who were the book's subject matter. People read it, were astonished, had to digest it. I am one of Ali's daughters. An insignificant child from insignificant parents.

Our parents supported us as best they could. Especially our father. He told all of us: 'You can be whatever you want.' My brother was interested in music. Whenever he came across an instrument, he picked it up, tried it out and started playing.

He wanted a piano. A piano was bought. But at some point, the piano-tuner was too expensive and so were the piano lessons. So my brother practised on an out-of-tune

piano and still managed to win every competition. He was in the newspapers. His teachers were also impressed by his musical talent and so my father tried to persuade his son to become a pianist. 'Believe me, son,' our father would say, 'most children are told they should do something else so they can feed their families. But I'm begging you to give music a chance.' Perhaps to emancipate himself from his begging, pleading father, his son studied law. The reason he gave was unforgettable. 'Someone has to change this shitty life.' And yet we were the only the second generation.

It's easy to tell people to follow their dreams. But abstract dreams are hard to have. When our father said 'Go on, you can do it!' he was trying to be encouraging, but it sounded like a threat. A huge effort. 'You can change the world.' Father didn't talk much, but that was his favourite topic. 'I won't stand in your way.' He got to his feet, not just educating us, but holding important speeches. Behind me were hundreds and thousands of children who cheered him on. 'The others aren't better or cleverer than you.' His gentle, soft voice almost cracked. 'They look like you, they talk like you, they're like you. You laugh? You're a part of it all. You have to believe me. You *have to believe me.*' He would emphasise every syllable by pressing his index finger hard into the armrest of the sofa. 'You're strong and can achieve anything!'

Father was kind and touching, but his never-ending 'You have to change the world!' got on our nerves. There was nothing we found more entertaining than deflating his revolutionary air balloon. A throwaway comment or question was usually enough. That brought on a sudden change in the temperature. 'Disco?' Father looked perplexed. 'Disco? Put that out of your mind right away. If you want to dance, ask your brother to make some music and then, for all I care, you can dance.' Father would sink back into his armchair, disappointed that his lecture had not set us on fire.

Stories upon stories. The one about the exaltation of the spirit and the pen could have filled entire yearbooks.

The moral of the tale was the following: Somebody who makes his living with the pen is not pushed around. Is not overlooked. Is respected.

The pen! The pen that crowns man and his existence! In Islam, the Almighty has 99 names. He cannot simply have one profane name. He is too almighty and magnificent for that. In our family, the pen had an even higher position, with 99 times 99 names. On my birthday, my mother gave me a delicate porcelain swan. In its back was a tiny hole. I was confused. She beamed – I could keep my pen in the opening. A penholder! My pen would rise elegantly out of the swan. She tipped out the contents of my pencil case and tried every pen. Not one fitted. They were all too thick. Her hands were not used to holding pens. So in the shop, she wouldn't have realised that a normal pen was thicker than the tiny hole in the swan's back. Her attempt to glorify the already sacred pen had failed. Mother doggedly searched for a pen to fit. Then after some days of looking, I delivered her. Unscrewing a ballpoint, I took out the refill and tried it – it fitted. Now the swan looked as if I had performed voodoo on it and had rammed an arrowhead into its back.

Father also came home with hauls of pens. Depending on what was on offer at Aldi, the calligraphy set or the 24-part box with pencils from H2 to B2 would be brought home. He bought whatever was on sale at low-cost supermarkets that left a mark on paper. Watercolours, oil colours, felt tip pens. Once he brought home an insulin pen

Father had deciphered the word 'pen' on it, bought it and left it on my desk as a surprise.

I sat at my desk for hours. My mother had bought it for me. It had four drawers on the right-hand side and a large compartment on the left. When I got home from school, as soon as I finished my chores, I sat down at my desk.

Sometimes I sat there for five, six or seven hours, browsing through my books, looking at single sentences or words. Sometimes I copied out a sentence or a word 10 times, 50 times. I tried it out in joined-up handwriting, in capitals. Sometimes I sharpened all my pencils and drew lines.

I received another birthday present: the Mackensen dictionary. I would read it without being bored for a single moment. I didn't even notice the time passing. I had nothing to do, but it felt like a task.

My father would come into my room. 'What is it?' I'd ask him, 'is there something you want me to do?' 'No,' he replied. 'I just wanted to look at you for a moment.'

My mother would also come into my room. I'd ask her, too: 'Should I get up? Is there something to do?' 'No, no,' she'd say. 'I'm just looking at you. Once she said, 'I'm always afraid that I'll come in here and you won't be alive anymore.'

My father took me to one side and asked why I often sat at my desk for such a long time. He asked me if I liked it. If something was troubling me. If I'd even noticed he was there. Most of the time I hadn't. Not one of us realised how limited my field of vision was. The others would have had to shout for me to notice they were in the room.

I couldn't hear well in one ear.

They thought something was wrong with me, but it was just my eyes, one of my ears and my wish to sit alone at a desk. I might have been caught up in my thoughts and slightly hampered, but I wasn't *handicapped*.

After brushing my teeth when I was supposed to go to bed, I would get up again and sit down in the dark at my desk. Wasn't happy or unhappy. I just sat. My brother and I both sleepwalked. One day my brother unlocked the door and walked outside and around town with his bed cover.

An on-duty policeman recognised him. Early the next morning, he brought my brother home again. My parents hadn't even noticed he'd gone. They came up with a simple solution to stop his sleepwalking trips. They locked the door at night and hid the key in a place that only they knew. My brother carried on sleepwalking in the flat. As if circumnavigating the Kaaba, he'd go around the sofa a few times and then back to bed.

My brother's excursions amused my father very much, whereas my sleepwalking problem concerned him very much. Even though my radius was considerably smaller than my brother's. I would get up at night, roll under my desk and carry on sleeping.

Reading and studying? No problem, consider it done. But the rest? Weak woman vs. strong woman. This daughter had no idea how to deal with these categories. Moving up sounded like emigrating – unpleasant. Like what her parents had gone through as if she'd have to go to a place where a foreign language was spoken. But did she

want that? Everyone knew people whose entire characters changed once they arrived in a foreign place. Mostly they were more likeable in the old version without all the new, affected mannerisms. So, she'd rather stay where she was, the way she was. That's why: no moving up in the world, thank you. When she heard people saying they could be better off, she always asked herself secretly: But why? What exactly would be better? She didn't understand all along what her parents had been trying to teach her – that she was not condemned to being in the audience, that she could actively take part and participate in shaping her own life. She didn't realise all of this, of course, until the battles had been won.

Writing from the perspective of *the lowest of the low* is not a socio-economic condition measured through bank balances and property ownership. It's an immaterial place. A new beginning, not the continuation of something. Writing from this perspective can be compared to construction work. It's more 'rubble literature' than great work of art. The writer opens up a world and lets a readership glimpse inside who think they know everything and have read it a hundred times better and more understandably in the political section of the newspaper. Your function is to explain. But actually, you want to tell a story.

It's a route comparable to a room in the Alps. You look out of the window and there's a panorama of mountains, stunningly beautiful. You only have to reach out your arm and your fingertips touch the mountain. That's how near it seems. You quickly put something on and set off walking. You walk and walk, and as you walk, you notice the real gap between you and your destination. The weather takes a turn for the worst and you don't have the right clothes on. It becomes clear that you won't make it. Not today anyway. Disheartened, you turn back. In the days that follow, the same

thing happens again and again. You are duped by the view. How can something that looks so near be so far away?

I didn't know any children whose mothers didn't work. Mothers with up to four children went to work, full-time at the factory in shifts. The oldest schoolchildren looked after the youngest. And when I say eldest, what I mean are nine-year-olds who took their brothers and sisters to kindergarten in the morning and picked them up later. That was home as I knew it – a zest for life, a sense of new beginnings and hardship which could be seen in the expressions of young but tired faces, swollen legs, deep sleep and tense moods. Tough men. Tough women. Then there were public holidays and tables were laid, songs were sung, wildly funny stories told, rowdy laughter, sometimes tears. Life was lived as well and as much as possible. Both were equally present – the fun and the difficult aspects.

Non-stop working. It's barely possible to express how important working was. Working was the rationale for staying in Germany. Constant forks in the path with two possibilities: to work and stay. Or to go back. I can still hear it. 'We're staying for the girls.' That's how it was put. 'It doesn't matter about the boys. They'll always make it wherever they go.' Everything was done for the girls so that they could have a better life. And that's why we carried the burden of having to become a different kind of woman: an amazing woman, a proud woman, a successful woman. If a mother said to her daughters: 'Study!', then no further explanation was required. In 'Study' there was no concealed meaning like 'Fulfil your potential,' but rather something like 'Get away from here, for your own sake.' I understood the opportunity that lay in this

command. If it came your way, you took it with both hands. Opportunity passed like a gentle breeze. You had to grab it.

The life of a cleaning woman was the reference point for everything.

Most of the women I knew were factory workers. Those who weren't were the ones I observed very closely. They wore high heels to work and back. In the evening, their hair still smelled of hairspray.

The daughter of friends of my parents became a doctor's receptionist. She was very elegant. She showed me her chest of drawers where she kept her fine lingerie. She had a fiancé. He was an officer in Turkey. She was going to go and live with him. 'Are you looking forward to it?' I asked her. 'You bet,' she answered, stroking her lingerie. 'He's going to see me in this underwear.' I didn't clarify that I was talking about emigrating.

When I was 14, and even as late as 15 or 16, I did thought experiments. I browsed through the advertising leaflets of furniture stores. In those photographs, there would be a woman lying on the sofa or standing in a fitted kitchen. I placed a finger on her head and imagine mine in its place.