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Die Ungehaltenen

by Deniz Utlu

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Translated by Katy Derbyshire

Translator's Introduction

I wrote this translation for an event at Schöneberg Town Hall, the site of Kennedy's famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech. Deniz Utlu was invited to read and speak as a voice of his generation: a postmigrant youth with no sense of hold, it was suggested—*Die Ungehaltenen* is the novel's title. Ironically, the setting was not unlike the event at the end of the extract. The other guests on the podium were mostly older representatives of the political class with Turkish surnames. Because it was part of a cross-cultural festival, Deniz and I were to read in English and German. The event was opened by the mayor of Schöneberg.

Deniz made a collage out of German and English passages, kindly giving me all the rudest lines. You'll notice there's a lot of swearing later in the extract, and as I practiced my first line, which was to open the reading without further introduction, I wasn't aware who would be in the audience. That line, in German, was "Ich scheiße auf den Bürgermeister." I commonly ratchet up the swearing when translating from German to English, and clearly "I shit on the mayor" was not going to fly. So that entire passage became an homage to Tarantino, fucks flying thick and fast. Utlu's narrator is a proudly postmigrant anti-hero with plenty of fucks to give.

Reading my rendering to an audience—thankfully, the mayor said a few words of welcome and promptly bowed out due to an unexpected meeting—turned me into that narrator, albeit sitting primly on stage where I was supposed to be rather than storming in from the audience. It was invigorating to speak Elyas' thoughts out loud, from his stumbling sexual advances to his anger over official Germany's patronizing take on Turkish workers' contributions to the economy. Afterwards, I got to sit in the front row pulling faces while poor Deniz had to endure the discussion from its midst. All I remember is that it was very dry; life imitated art.

"Chapter Three"

1

I pushed the pillow off my face and sat up. It must have been around midday, maybe afternoon already. I extracted a hoodie from the pile of clothes on the floor and shuffled into the kitchen. All there was in the fridge was a wizened carrot and a pat of butter smeared on a saucer. I went back to my room and lay down on the bed.

I screwed up the pillow at the back of my neck and let my head drop backwards, and the world was upside down. I looked through the dirty windowpanes at the sky and the

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façade of the building opposite. The smears dated back to my last attempt to get some clarity in my life – I had just smudged the dirt around in a streaky semi-circle.

I lay there like that for a while. Then I put on a pair of sweatpants and left the flat. I sat down on the rocks in Görlitzer Park with a coffee. I listened to the piercing voices of children playing. Two teenagers were practicing tricks on their bikes, riding slalom and doing bunnyhops. A man with a bald head and a fat belly was walking his dog. A couple stopped to kiss in front of me.

It was only when I'd finished my coffee, once the bike riders were long gone, and the man with the bald head and fat belly had followed his dog that I noticed: the autumn sun was shimmering red through my eyelids. For the first time in ages, I was capable of enjoying it.

I got another coffee because it tasted good. I suddenly believed in the possibility of walking into a supermarket, taking a bag of cream puffs out of the freezer and waiting at home—sitting in the kitchen and banging my spoon against the table edge—for them to defrost. I wanted to go on long walks in the sunshine and order dishes in restaurants, not because I was hungry but because I liked the names so much: chicken tikka masala, aloo gobi, blunzengröstl, Styrian wurzelfleisch, plinsen and knieperkohl.

I pulled the newspaper out of the rusty letterbox in the downstairs corridor. A letter fell out. The mayor of Berlin had written to me. Up to that point in time I hadn't imagined he was aware of my existence. Why would he be interested in someone like me? The maximum I'd achieved in life to date was winning a poetry competition.

Me, Hans Schmidt! That's what I'd called myself.

'You're a poet?' Mother had asked me.

'Did you ever doubt it?'

She'd insisted on coming to the award ceremony. With a turban wrapped round my head and my beard backcombed, I'd climbed on stage and, instead of the poem, recited the Muslim confession of faith in Arabic.

For my mother, that was the third lowest point in my life.

Number one: smashing a window of the KaDeWe department store at sixteen.

Number two: dropping out of uni.

And now number three: There is no god but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God.

The mayor of Berlin seemed to take a more relaxed approach to it all. Either that or some intern had looked me up and come across my article about capitalism, the internet, and migrants which I'd published on the homepage of the Eviction Prevention Alliance and on the blog of a weekly newspaper. The blog entry had got five thousand clicks; not bad. But I still wouldn't have thought anyone up there would ever notice me in this life. I tried to ignore them as best I could, and I'd assumed it was the other way round as well.

I sat down on the pile of clothes on my sofa. My hand bumped up against something cool and hard—I pulled a can of beer out of the laundry. The beer fizzed. The smell of hops came rushing towards me. I stared at the opening. I got up, shuffled into the kitchen

and threw the full beer can in the bin, not even taking a sip. I read the mayor's letter again.

First I looked out of the window for a long time, then I chucked the paperclip I'd shaped into at least eighty-six figures over the past hour into a corner behind my desk. I went to the wardrobe, kicking aside everything on the floor on my way, Johann Wolfgang's *Maxims and Reflections* and Carlos'—God bless his soul—*Capital*, Volume I. And reams of old magazines and newspapers. I opened the cupboard doors and threw items of clothing across the room until the clothes rail made an appearance. And lo and behold, as good as newly tailored: my suit jacket.

I put it on and stood in front of the mirror. My hair was ruffled. My grimy beard had grown almost up to my eyelids. The circles under my eyes were violet. On the outside edge of my right eye was a pale wrinkle in the shape of a triangle. A gap had opened up between my brows. My hair was still full and still black. But not as full as it had been, and I spotted two patches of grey. When had that happened? I sat back down on the laundry.

I'd spent a long time checking things off lists. Getting the death certificate issued: check. Arranging tickets for Father's transport to Turkey: check. Follow-up application for my half-orphan's pension: check. Final exams: check. Then I sat down on my sofa and checked myself off.

And now I was going to be officially received, if you like. I leapt up off my sofa. I stepped to the middle of the room. I wanted to kick my desk chair with all my might, but I felt exhausted and I put my hands in my pockets and just gave one hard stamp on the floorboards. The pattern of the grain in front of my big toe looked like a hypnotized eye.

'We're getting old, Cemo,' I said to Uncle Cemal, 'we're getting old.'

He looked at me through his dark pupils under drooping eyelids.

'You're getting old, Elyas my boy. You keep me out of it.'

Uncle Cemal dragged himself into the kitchen and came back with black tea, no milk—rabbit's blood, as the men of his generation called it.

'Cemo, I don't get it. What happened to the past few years, where have they gone?'

'My boy, you'll remember that time when you're older. It's too soon to think about it now.'

'It's all just gone up in smoke.'

I looked at Uncle Cemal sitting on his sofa with his glass of tea balanced on his pot-belly. He'd shaved off his remaining hair, and his walrus moustache had also given way to a three-day shadow. With that smooth, round head and his chubby cheeks, I could imagine Uncle Cemal as a baby. I grabbed at my face and felt my curly beard.

I asked him if he'd accept the mayor's invitation if he were me.

'The buffet won't be bad,' he said, 'but their tea's like dishwater, I wouldn't drink it.'

That meant I ought to go along.

I asked, 'Have you got any dynamite?'

'What century are you stuck in?'

'I told you I was old.'

He grinned. 'I've still got some Molotov cocktails down in the cellar.'

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I stood in front of the smeary mirror with a razor and sprayed foam on my face. ‘All right, Mister Mayor, you’ve gone and invited me. And I’m coming.’

Mother had laid the table in the living room. She piled up my plate with salad and a chunk of lamb. My knife screeched against the porcelain, and we both flinched.

‘You look great,’ she said.

‘I should have known you’d like my new look.’

The cutlery clattered against our plates. I poked my fork in the lamb and said, ‘The mayor’s invited me round.’

‘The what?’

‘The mayor,’ I murmured with my mouth full. ‘Anniversary celebration for the fiftieth anniversary of the German-Turkish recruitment treaty.’

Mother’s knife and fork clanged onto her plate. I jumped.

‘That’s wonderful!’ she exclaimed.

‘What?’ I said. ‘What’s wonderful?’

‘At last the time has come. At last all your efforts are being...’

‘No.’

‘...recognized and appreciated like you deserve...’

‘Come on. First of all, what efforts? And secondly, the guy’s probably invited half the country.’

‘The guy? Is that how you talk about the mayor?’

‘Oh, Mum.’

‘Has it got his signature on it?’

‘What, on what?’

‘The invitation.’

‘How should I know?’

‘Show me it.’

‘I threw it away.’

She slapped her hand on the table. ‘You didn’t bring the invitation with you?’

‘Oh man, yes, OK, I’ll get it in a minute.’

‘Now!’

I got up to fish the invitation out of my jacket pocket.

‘We’ll have to get you some new trousers. You’re an intellectual, you have to dress like one.’

‘Yesterday I was a dropout.’

‘You can always go back to your degree. You haven’t got much left to do—just clench your teeth for two more years and you’ll be a lawyer.’

‘And then? What then, tell me?’

‘Then you can start earning money, you can set up your own...’

‘Spare me, please.’

She stared at her plate, the slice of lamb still untouched.

‘Is this what your father worked for?’

‘Oh no, not that again...’

‘By the end he couldn’t even hold a... he couldn’t even hold a glass of water with his trembling fingers.’

Back home. Four full rubbish bags. Old newspapers. Magazines. Pens that didn't write any more, plus some that still did. Notes, scribbles—including the interior designs for Veit's bar—unopened bars of chocolate, chewing gum, sweets, old toothbrushes, mugs with islands of mould on the bottom, business cards, phone numbers on scraps of paper, theatre programmes, event flyers... socks, shirts, sweaters I hadn't worn for ten years. All thrown away.

I felt like I could plough through my life with a spade, with a crane. Through my present and my past. A huge compost heap, everything gnawed by worms. The only thing I couldn't shovel away was the future.

My notes for the virtual migration museum landed in the rubbish bag too. Then I took them out again.

I carried the sacks down to the backyard and stuffed them in the rubbish container. The sun was shining on the house-fronts out back. I still couldn't believe it. For years I'd been cursing the summer. And now—the sun was warming my face. And I liked it. My fear vanished like clouds in a sky clearing up: without prior announcement or sensation, just like that.

I went back inside and tidied up my books. I wanted to vacuum, but I didn't have a vacuum cleaner, so I swept the floor for the time being. I threw away all the unpaid bills and all the unopened letters from the bank and the insurance people. The only one I read was the one about my half-orphan's pension. They weren't going to pay it anymore because I'd passed my twenty-seventh birthday. I was glad to be rid of the boys from the pension department, and I screwed the letter up into a ball. It hit the waste paper basket on the other side of the room.

Once I'd finished and even wiped down my desk, I sat down on my armchair. I took a deep breath in and had the feeling the air contained more oxygen, or my body was absorbing it better.

It was no big deal really: take the train to the factory building where the event was to take place, try and think of something nice during the speeches, shake the mayor's hand, and back home again. If it's that easy to make Mother happy, I thought, to hell with anyone who doesn't do it. I found my mother's number in the list of contacts on my phone.

'No tie!' I said once I'd put on my new suit in front of Mother's mirrored wardrobe.

'Are you crazy?' she said.

'Do you want to argue about it? No shirt either.'

'No shirt?'

I took off my shirt and put the jacket on over my bare torso. We looked in the mirror. I'd put on a bit of weight around the middle but I still didn't look bad. I buttoned up the jacket so my belly wasn't visible any more, only my chest hair. I grinned at my mother. She sat down on the bed.

'You drive me mad.'

In the end I sat on the sofa freshly shaven, in my suit and coat, my legs stretched out across the table. Any minute now a couple of hundred Turkish workers and a few B-list

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celebrities would be celebrating each other on a factory floor. We're oh so multicultural. And behind the façade, every one of them was cursing those fifty years and every year that came after them. My father was buried in Turkey. The words of welcome came too late.

'Are you on your way?' Mother asked on the phone.

'Yes, I'm leaving in a minute.'

'You're going to be late.'

'I'm leaving now.'

I went down the stairs, the soft fabric of the suit trousers drawing tight across my knees every time I bent my legs. I stepped out onto the pavement. There were clouds across the sky, but they opened up in two places. Two broad rays of light linked the city and the sky. A sparrow fluttered in front of my face and chirped. I said, 'Watch what you say.' The bird jerked its head to and fro and flew away.

The city passed me by in the window of the train. It was twilight. The cars had already switched their headlamps on. At Innsbrucker Platz, where you could look down at the street from the overhead tracks, rush-hour traffic piled up. The cars' red rear lights glowed into the twilight's blue. I leaned my head against the window. There was my reflection.

Opposite me sat a delicately built middle-aged man with a silk scarf and a guy about my age.

'When did you first meet Yasmina anyway?' one of them asked.

'Four years ago. She was still young back then.'

'She's got her own TV show now.'

'Yeah, so I heard.'

So it only takes four years, I thought, to stop being young. Four years. Sometimes you fall asleep and don't wake up for four years. Sometimes time stands still, for four long years. Then you wake up and you're much older, time goes on, you say 'yesterday,' and people correct you: 'four years ago.'

Sometimes things happen that blow you out of your body. People think you're there, but you're not. They say, 'You're so strong, how do you cope?' But you're not there. And you don't know you're not there until you are there again—four years later. The people who admired you for your strength have matured; they're right in the middle of life. You're where you were when you fell out of your body, when time stood still, when you fell asleep. The others are right in the middle of life. You're crawling back. Into your body. It's a different body now.

2

A whole crowd of people were already filling the event hall, standing around in groups of two or three and chatting. I didn't know anyone. The woman at the reception desk pressed a badge into my buttonhole. I passed it on to the leaf of a rubber-plant in the entrance hall.

My eyes wandered the room to see if I knew anyone, but I wouldn't have known what to talk about anyway. I joined the men around the edges of the hall who didn't know what to do with themselves either—we stared straight ahead like sheep in a field. It went on

like that for some time. Now and then I looked over at the others, but they remained oblivious.

The places began to fill up. I picked up a programme from an empty seat; they were the kind of folding plastic chairs I knew from the kitchens of student flats—and from my kitchen too. The man in front of me was acting busy, which made me conclude he must be part of the mayor's entourage. Next to him stood a thickset gentleman in a 1980s suit with shoulder pads and a long jacket.

'Nice here, isn't it, Mr Bulukuluogulu?' said the bureaucrat.

The thickset man bowed down with all of his torso.

'No one can say our immigrants don't have it good,' said the bureaucrat, patting dust off the thickset man's sleeve. It seemed not to be clean enough for him yet; the bureaucrat spat on his fingers and started rubbing at the other man's jacket while he kept bending forwards and backwards with his hands folded.

I slapped the rolled-up programme three times against my palm and then counted to ten. It didn't help much. The bureaucrat moved a hasty two steps away from me—I must have been baring my teeth again.

I chucked the programme back on the empty seat, took another look at the sheep around the edges of the room and left the event hall. I'd been there, I'd met my target: that was enough.

The foyer was full of people standing around and talking. I went to the cloakroom to demand my coat back when a handbag landed on the counter. On top of the bag was a hand, the wrist tattooed in Arabic script.

'Hello,' said the woman.

Dark hair fell to her shoulders in waves. Her right canine was studded with a glittery green stone the size of a pinhead.

'Hi,' I said.

She looked me up and down.

I said, 'We're having a little party here, but we didn't want to start without you.'

'Are you going to show me around?'

'That's the only thing I came for.'

She held out her hand. 'Canan,' she said.

'Pleased to meet you,' I said.

We sat down in the back row. She crossed her legs, sending the hem of her skirt slipping up slightly. Her skin shimmered through the dark nylon of her tights. On stage, the first words of welcome had already been spoken. Someone or other was thanking all kinds of people, saying something about people he called 'guest workers,' and wishing us 'a good evening' in wooden Turkish. The Turkish guests cheered.

I said, 'Oh man.' Canan looked at me out of the corner of her eye and leaned over to me, her neckline opening a little; between her breasts I saw a mole the size of the tip of a pencil.

She came close to my face, her breath warming and dampening my ear. She said, 'I know a remedy for blabla,' and stood up. I followed her.

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We were in a toilet cubicle. Her lips shone. I gripped her waist and reached for the back of her knee and pulled up her leg. When I touched the nylon I felt like all the blood in my body was sloshing up to my head—when she grabbed me by the nose. ‘Slow down, kiddo.’

I took my hands back.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘You’ve been popping too much porn.’

‘I thought...’

‘Yeah, I can tell.’

‘But...’

‘I just wanted to have a bit of a smoke with you. The Beatles did it in Buckingham Palace before they got knighted, did you know that?’

‘Can you let go of my nose please?’

She crumbled grass onto a paper and rolled a joint.

‘We’re not getting knighted, but it’s the thought that counts.’

She put the small white cone in her mouth, lit the fat end and took a long draw. The tip glowed. The orange crackled into the paper. She didn’t stop drawing on it. She smoked half the joint in one go.

‘Woah,’ I said.

She handed me the joint.

I said, ‘I’m fine, you can have it.’

She took another hard toke and threw the butt down the toilet. I looked at her with my mouth gaping. She pulled me towards her. I undid my trousers and then she grabbed me by the nose again.

‘You don’t get it, kiddo!’

‘What do you want then?’

She grinned, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and pressed her business card into my hand.

‘What have they got to drink here?’ I asked the guy from the buffet; he was wearing a waiter’s suit and a bow tie.

‘The buffet doesn’t open until after the event.’

‘Come on, man, if I have to sit through another speech without a drink I’ll put a bullet through my head on stage.’

‘Then you’ll miss the folklore troupe,’ said the waiter.

‘That’s not funny,’ I said.

At that, he uncorked a wine.

‘Gin and tonic,’ I said, ‘and make it a double.’

‘We’ve only got wine or beer.’

Out on the terrace, I pulled the business card Canan had given me out of my jacket pocket: ‘Canan Sel, PR consultant’.

‘Right, kiddo,’ she’d said. ‘I’m not here for fun. I have to get some networking done. Call me. But take your time! With the call, I mean.’

I put the card back in my pocket, drank the wine in one gulp and took one last deep breath of fresh air before I went back into the event hall.

The folklore show had started.

It was fifty years ago now that a plane had flown the first group of Anatolian women to Germany so they could work here. It was fifty years ago that the first peasants had picked bunches of daisies and stuck them in their brides' plaits before they climbed in the crowded compartments of the Orient Express and sat with their knees drawn up on the upholstered seats like on their lords and masters' latifundia. It was fifty years ago that German doctors wearing laboratory gloves had tugged at those peasants' dicks, felt up their balls, and shoved fingers up their arses. It was fifty years ago that they'd been numbered with black pens like cattle, seventy-eight, seventy-nine. Fifty years of lugging bricks, breathing in poisonous fumes, sorting parts on assembly lines, sweating in the heat of the engine room. It was fifty years ago that the first peasants turned into factory workers, lay on their bunks, and made the lattice supporting the mattress above them into the diamond patterns on their beloved's skirt. Fifty years and the peasants became workers, writers, actors, managers, and doctors, drinkers and drug users. Fifty years, and the republic had existed for seventy, and its history would have been different. Fifty years, and my father got morphine for the pain. Fifty years, and there was a folklore troupe on stage to celebrate. Next up, the human zoo: any minute now the presenter would come on stage and announce that everyone's to adjourn to the foyer because the cages have to be fitted in the hall. Then the mayor and his team get to feed potatoes through the bars to the Turks in their traditional folklore costumes.

I was about to get up, but the guy next to me pressed me down against my seat. 'Please,' he said, 'please stay.' He pointed at the girls dancing on stage. 'That's my daughter. Stay. Do that for me.'

I rolled up the programme I'd found on my chair into a tube, took a firm bite into it and stayed. It's not enough to break open the cages; people have to stop being monkeys, too.

After the folklore troupe, the presenter introduced the four protagonists of a documentary commissioned by the city council and invited them onstage. He called them 'the ones who've made it.' The presenter announced a lawyer, a postman, the founder of a women's refuge, and a doctor. The guy next to me told me I could leave now if I wanted. I took the programme out of my mouth, thanked him, and got up before the guests reached the stage.

The gap between the rows of chairs was so narrow that people had to stand up, one after another, to let me through. One after the other tutted and shook their head and gave me a sideways glance and then peered around me at the stage.

I heard the presenter saying to one of his guests, 'You're living proof of how enriching immigration can be.'

I'd just made it out of the rows of chairs and I looked around for people who might join me in solidarity if I did lose control before I got out of the place. I strode towards the exit, almost at the door, when the woman on stage answered, 'Do I look like I'm here to enrich you?'

'I beg your pardon?' the presenter stuttered.

I stopped in my tracks. Someone wasn't playing along with the country's live soap opera put on for the third-class citizens. I turned around and saw the young woman on

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stage. She was wearing a grey suit and had her arms crossed. She looked familiar and I tried to remember where I'd seen her before.

'Listen,' she said, 'I'm a doctor, I want to do my job, I want to live my life, I'm not a clown and I can't pull a rabbit out of a hat.'

The woman who'd pinned the badge with the German and Turkish flags in my buttonhole earlier was shaking me by the arm.

'Could you please sit down,' she whispered.

'You don't look,' said the presenter, 'like you're Turkish...'

I ran past the door warden, leapt onto the stage in a single bound, grabbed the microphone and yelled into it: 'Here's my speech on the celebrations for the fifty-year recruitment treaty between Germany and Turkey.'

The presenter eyed me in fear; I felt the doctor's gaze from behind.

'Fuck the mayor. Fuck the recruitment treaty. Fuck labour migration. And every other form of migration.'

I looked out at the audience; there were faces watching me in amazement, but I had their attention.

'I say, fuck capital. Fuck communism. Fuck the Nazis, and fuck the anti-Nazis. Fuck the dirty Turks. Fuck suits and punks. Fuck German unity. Fuck the welfare state. Fuck the German pension schemes and compulsory health insurance. Fuck the Federal Agency for Civic Education. And fuck civic education. And uncivic education. Fuck Romanticism and the Enlightenment. Fuck industrialization. Fuck the kebab industry. Fuck the motor scooter for the one millionth-and-one guest worker. Fuck all the nods of condolence after my father's death. I say, fuck all the years I spent staring at the ceiling. I demand those years back, here and now. Mine and my father's years. My four, his forty. This is an official application; I studied law.'

'Hello?' said the warden. 'Did you hear me?' And she dragged me out of my reverie, 'You have to sit back down.'

I stayed leaning against the door, ready to leap.

'Whatever you think that is,' said the woman on stage.

I had the feeling I knew her, and I wanted her to look at me so she knew I was here.

'How do people react when they find out?'

'I don't really care, to be honest,' she said. 'When people hear my R most of them think it's Bavarian.'

A few people laughed out loud.

'You mean your accent?'

'Did I say anything about an accent? That's my German. My R is part of it.'

The presenter thanked the mayor of Berlin, the organizers, the guests, the audience and many, many more and then finally declared the buffet open. Everyone stood up and wobbled towards the foyer like penguins.

The waiter had already poured me a glass of red wine.

‘That’s how I like it,’ I said.

‘Looks like you survived after all,’ he said.

‘I can still drag my body around the room, yeah. But look: my eyes are dead.’

He laughed. ‘You’re right.’

I wanted to leave but the knowledge that the young doctor must still be around held me back. I looked for her. She had to pose for photos with the other talking heads. I smiled at her, but I don’t think she noticed me.

The room was gradually emptying out. I stood by myself at a tall table. There was a programme on it: the doctor’s name was Aylin Yefa and she was an anaesthetist. I was right. She was the doctor I’d seen in the hospital canteen and then later at the Chicken House. How long ago was that? More than four years?

I drank my last wine of the evening at that table. The others were talking around me, but that was OK.

Almost involuntarily, I thought of my father.

I looked up at the ceiling of the foyer. Strip lighting.

I took another sip of wine.

I was sad, but it didn’t hurt any more. Calm sorrow. Gentle pain.

I pushed the wine glass aside.

Outside the cloakroom, the mayor was standing around with a clutch of officials. I’d promised my mother a photo. I pressed my phone on one of the bystanders; the mayor had no time to dodge and he grinned into the shutter.

I put my phone in my pocket.

‘For my father,’ I said.

Then I asked for my coat.

The doctor was by the exit, her bag between her feet, putting on her coat.

I said, ‘Excuse me?’

She said, ‘Yes?’

Her dark brown hair reached down to her shoulders.

‘Thanks for the rolled R.’

She smiled. As if with the last of her strength. I liked her smile.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘what’s that all about: you look Turkish, you don’t look Turkish. Stupid question.’

She was wearing a necklace with a small blue wire figure on it.

She saw it had caught my attention, and she touched it.

‘From my father,’ she said in a warm voice.

‘Did he used to enamel wire?’

She looked amazed.

‘My father spent forty years on an assembly line,’ I explained.

‘Is he here?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said, more quietly and withdrawn than I intended, and she didn’t ask any more, but she looked at me for a while, then blinked and shifted her gaze to my coat.

‘I always thought my father went to the factory to make little men out of wires for me,’ she said.

‘Your father’s not here either?’ I asked.

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She turned her head aside. I caught a glimpse of the furrow between her eyebrows deepening.

‘I’m tired,’ she said.

She held onto the blue figure. She must have rubbed her eyes because her mascara was slightly smudged.

I said, ‘No one could tell when you were on stage.’

She looked out through the glass doors. A car pulled up and someone got out and waved at her.

‘Have you got to go now?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

She went out. Our hands touched for a brief goodbye.

I waited. There was nothing more for me here, but I wanted to let her go before I left myself.

On the back seat of the taxi—the streetlamps cast their yellow light on the asphalt—I promised myself I’d stop drinking wine and finish the concept for the virtual museum.

In my jacket pocket, my fingers brushed against the PR consultant’s business card. I wasn’t going to call her.

I liked stroking the smooth leather of the taxi’s back seat. I thought of my father. Of Aylin. Anaesthesia. Leonard Cohen was playing on the radio. The taxi driver had a blue eye talisman hanging from the rear-view mirror. I asked him to turn up the music.