

HERE COMES THE FAMILY

LEIGH remembered to say “*Xalti werime deste te*” when Anne came through the door later that afternoon. She kissed the elderly woman’s hand and lifted it, but Anne didn’t allow it to touch Leigh’s forehead, as she did her children. Still, every wrinkle in the soft face was friendly.

She had brought a single plastic bag with her, clearly the mother of Ahmet. It contained night clothes, a copy of the *Quran* and a prayer mat. Shana had a bag for herself and Halil. They had changes of clothes.

Anne, Shana and Halil sat on the floor in the front room, and all the neighbours filed in to see the company. Anne was a benevolent queen. She sat peacefully, rarely moving or speaking. She welcomed everyone, smiling with her eyes and then simply observing.

Leigh served pot after pot of tea. Halil quickly made friends and disappeared for most of the evening. Children raced through the rooms and played with Leigh’s nail polish and hair clips.

Ahmet delighted the women with stories about himself, like the time he tracked a tourist’s stolen wallet or the time he straightened out his oldest nephew who was not attending school. They all spoke intimately, sharing stories about their families: the son who died, the husband who lived somewhere else in order to work,

the good student who got sick.

Anne asked Ahmet under her breath why the neighbours were inquiring after her heart, and she allowed him to chuckle and answer vaguely. Everyone addressed their stories to Anne who sat placidly through it all. She moved her lips in prayer, constantly running prayer beads through her fingers, nodding at the conversation, a Mona Lisa smile at the corner of her lips.

As the evening passed, Leigh remembered to serve pistachios and a bowl of apples, oranges and grapefruit. The guests used the knives provided to peel their own fruit. They handed orange sections and slices of apple to each other. Talk and food, tea and children's interruptions, it was familiar to Leigh now, and she felt at home.

The last visitor left after midnight. After a few more of Ahmet's sparkling stories, the family sorted out the beds. Anne and Shana slept on mattresses in the front room. The others slept on floor cushions placed together until equal to the size of a body, Halil in the front room, Ahmet and Leigh in the bedroom.

Ahmet disappeared after the night of welcome. Each morning, he rose before breakfast was ready, ate little, and then went to Goreme. He wasn't seen again until after midnight each night. Leigh was deeply hurt by this desertion. She was also dismayed to learn that each day in the house was the same as the first evening. It was constantly full of guests.

Anne got up in the morning, ate breakfast and then sat on the floor in the front room receiving guests. The guests were the same each day: neighbours and the neighbours' neighbours. Anne commanded respect

because of her advanced age and her religious commitment. When Anne left the group four times a day to pray in an adjoining room, some of the women would join her.

Anne unrolled her maroon velveteen prayer mat facing Mecca. Then she prayed for about ten minutes, moving her body in a series of positions that seemed a little like yoga to Leigh. It was a peaceful sight. It was also a guaranteed cigarette break for Leigh and Shana.

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It took only a couple of days for Leigh to become disconcerted by the language barrier and the constant entertaining. The guests treated her like a servant in her own home. She served tea and snacks without receiving a second glance. Sometimes more was ordered with a lift of the finger. There was barely time to wash tea-glasses between guests.

Shana did most of the cooking much to Leigh's relief. She bought foods at the *pazaar* that Leigh didn't recognize and taught her some new dishes. Anne ate only brown rice and a few vegetables. Halil ate everything, and Ahmet missed most meals.

Shana was entirely capable of running the house and managing the guests. It surprised Leigh only because of Shana's delicate appearance. She was slender with a pretty face and high distinctive Kurdish cheekbones. Leigh had to remind herself that the slight girl was a twenty-year-old woman who attended university in Ankara. Shana's English was as poor as Leigh's Turkish, but they found each other anyway.

It became apparent that Shana was not impressed with the constant flow of guests either. Leigh and Shana

rolled their eyes at each other every time a knock came at the door, and a new pot of tea had to be made. They escaped to the balcony with the English/Turkish dictionary and smoked *sigaras* in secret. Shana couldn't smoke in front of Anne or Ahmet, but she also hid from little Halil, fearing he would tell on her.

One afternoon, they smoked in the cramped pink kitchen, sitting with their backs against the closed door, waiting for the water to boil, the cheap tobacco drying the back of their throats. Using dramatics and the dictionary, Leigh learned that Shana had never been kissed. The family planned for her to marry a man from their village, and Shana had met him once. She wanted to finish school first. She was training to be a teacher but didn't know if she would ever work.

Halil smashed into the kitchen door from the hallway and yelled. The door bounced Leigh and Shana's backs and bobbed their heads, but it didn't open. Shana yelled something at Halil, and he went away, leaving them their tiny pink oasis.

That night, Uncle John dropped by. He was driving a truck for a living now. He knew Anne was visiting the new Nevsehir apartment, and he drove far off course for a *Bayram* break. Fat and bald, jolly as ever, he jumped in the door carrying a box of chocolate bars.

"These are the ones that fell off the truck!"

He passed them around. The chocolate bars were ripped open, and they quickly disappeared.

"*Bah!* What is that sound?" asked Uncle John, holding his hand to his ear. "I think more chocolate bars are falling off the truck!"

He ran out for another box.

Leigh was touched that he'd come. Although he'd given her food poisoning, Uncle John had been one of the easiest to love from the first day in the rain at Ahmet's pension. He was a joyful and filthy man who seemed to spend his life joking, laughing and singing.

Leigh brought out photos from her parents' visit. In the first, Valerie and Anne sat side by side on a white silk sofa. Anne's smile was soft and dreamy; Valerie's was bright and brittle. The neighbours couldn't accept that the mothers were only three years apart. Valerie looked so much younger with her short hair dyed a chestnut brown. Her wrinkles were small lines; Anne's were deep folds.

Leigh handed them her favourite picture: Mom and Dad at Zelve, holding hands. The neighbours exclaimed over the public display of affection and then animatedly discussed Valerie's clothing—pants and a short jacket—for a very long time. Leigh felt they had judged her mother, or at least, had great fun poking at her appearance, and she regretted trying to share.

In the midst of the crowds, Leigh sometimes did very solitary things—wrote in a corner of the room or daydreamed with a blank look on her face—but mostly she was busy cleaning or serving, at first chatty and smiling, but progressively mute and sullen. She looked forward to seeing Ahmet at night, but everyone wanted to tell Ahmet something by the time he got home. The family greeted him like a returning war hero, getting out of bed to laugh and eat with him. Halil jumped to his lap; Shana fed him and polished his shoes and left them waiting at the door. His mother listened attentively to his stories from the day, her *Quran* tucked by her pil-

low like a teddy bear. Leigh understood very little of the conversation. She would watch the family tighten around him and then, too tired to compete, she'd retreat to a corner.

She was further confused by her reaction to Shana polishing Ahmet's shoes. Part of her was jealous; she wanted to clean his shoes! Then she remembered that not in a million years did she want to clean her husband's shoes. She had been horrified when Shana had cleaned Ahmet's shoes in Ankara, but now she came to understand that for Shana, it was act of love. She'd been raised to feel good about cleaning her brothers' shoes, and so, Shana enjoyed what Leigh once saw as an act of servitude. In the end, Leigh let her do it.

One morning, Ahmet called Leigh into the front room and in front of everyone told her to put out her hand. She did, and with great ceremony, he gave her a few *lira*. Everyone watched him explain in English that it was a *Bayram* tradition. The money was for the house. Leigh shrugged, put it in her pocket, and rudely turned to walk out of the room. She knew it was meant as a token, but she felt wildly angry. After everything that was expected of her for *Bayram*, this was her gift? Enough money to buy more oranges for the bleeping bleeping guests? This was fun? A holiday?

Leigh hid on the balcony with a smoke and a *Canadian Living*. She read Valentine's Day recipes, compared window dressings and planned a garden.

A couple of hours after Ahmet left for Goreme, everyone in the building gathered in the courtyard to kill two sheep. Children ran in excited circles around the group. Someone's husband held the first sheep lying on

the ground while another waited for the right moment, holding a knife above his head. A man stood over the scene of the sacrifice and prayed, silently moving his lips. The frightened sheep bleated. Leigh turned away.

There was a cheer from the small crowd as the man quickly sliced the animal's jugular vein. Blood spurted high. The adults laughed, and the children shrieked. Leigh went into the house unnoticed. Later, the two dead sheep went to the butcher's to be skinned and divided into manageable portions.

Many other sheep were sacrificed on the same day. Then the meat deliveries began. Leigh became extremely apprehensive about opening the door. When there was a knock, she opened the door slowly and peered carefully through the crack. Sometimes it was children in their best clothes with their hands out.

"*Bayramiasmak!*" (Happy Holiday!) They shouted in unison.

Leigh gave them Turkish Delight.

But sometimes it was meat at the door. The first time a neighbour proudly shoved a plate of dripping red mutton in her face, she smiled politely and carried it to the kitchen. The smile faded quickly with subsequent meat deliveries. Soon plates and bowls of raw meat covered the kitchen windowsills. The kitchen became a morgue. The front room was full of generous neighbours: coming, going, staying.

Leigh tried to refuse meat. She tried to say that she had no fridge. She tried to say that they already had a great deal of meat, but Shana stopped her.

"No good, Sister. Yes sheep, thank you," said Shana in English.

“Much sheep,” said Leigh in Turkish. “No...” She consulted the dictionary. “No need!”

Shana took the dictionary from Leigh’s hands and looked up a word. “Courtesy,” she said. “Yes sheep thank you.”

“I don’t know cook,” said Leigh, in Turkish. “No fridge. What happening we?”

“No problem,” said Shana, in English. “We cook.”

They were interrupted by another knock at the door. Leigh wished she could have one hour alone. One hour to ignore the door. She stood well back from the threshold and reached to open the door with one hand, almost losing her balance. The gold-toothed landlord presented her with leg of mutton. It was two feet long. Each end of it hung dripping off a platter.

Horrified and wordless, Leigh brought the platter directly into the kitchen, but Shana’s back was to her. She watched Shana light the stove for tea and blindly toss the wooden match to the floor *kilim*. Smelling the fresh leg in front of her face, standing with blood dripping down her forearms and off her elbows, in a tiny pink room filled with meat, Leigh burst into tears and became a vegetarian.

“What happen?” asked Shana, turning to her, open-mouthed.

“Where can I put this?” asked Leigh.

Shana moved some meat around by adding the contents of one bowl to another and tossing the bloody bowls into the sink. Leigh put the platter down on the windowsill and walked out of the kitchen. She didn’t go back for two days. The kitchen became Shana’s domain.

The night of the sacrifice was a party, and for some

reason, it was at Leigh’s place. Guests piled in until close to twenty women formed a circle around the edge of the front room. Leigh wondered where their husbands were on this holiday night. Then she wondered where her husband was.

Children played in the other two rooms. Leigh went to check on them often, knowing from experience that their mothers would not. They played with her glasses and put on her lipstick and nail polish. She had told these same children not to touch things on the windowsills before. There was nowhere to put her things out of reach, no shelves or closets in the square cement rooms. The children smiled and nodded at her, but when she returned to the room later, she found one putting her amethyst bracelet into his pocket and another tying up her hair.

Leigh was firm, but she had no effect on them. She was a pushover compared to their parents. Respectfully, they addressed her as “*Abla*”, but they pretended to not understand her. The boldest, Tarif, mimicked her. Leigh strode back to the front room, her bracelet safely rolling up and down her forearm, and looked for his mother, but she just shrugged at Leigh’s gestures and poor Turkish and motioned for tea. Furious at herself for doing it, Leigh served her tea.

Only twenty minutes later, screams of delight pulled her into the unguarded kitchen where the children were wolfing down all the *Bayram* candy. The remaining oranges had also gone to fund the children’s party. These were the same children who followed her when she cut through the park with her bags, asking for treats. These were the same children who still

sometimes searched for her lost bunny, who regularly dropped by for a game of Fish.

“Out!” she yelled, scooting every last one out of the kitchen.

She dumped a paper cone of sunflower seeds into a bowl and carried it into the front room. She told Shana what the children were up to, and Shana shrugged. She was busy cleaning spilled tea on the carpet in the front room.

As the hours passed, Leigh grew more impatient. The women sat in their circle, talking and sometimes smoking. Some of them had not moved an inch in five hours. They occasionally bellowed to their children but did not go to see them.

At one point, the room became quiet, and the fourteen-year-old from next door sang a sweet song to her mother. Her voice was strong and carried through the house. The women listened quietly and nodded at the lyrics. “*Anne* gives life. *Anne* gives all.” Her mannish mother beamed proudly and wiped tears from her eyes as the girl finished on a long high note.

The women sang, one person at a time. The performances brought nods, smiles and tears from the audience. Most of the songs were religious. They were all very emotional.

The unsmiling landlady sang a religious song that drew choruses of “*Allah*” from the group. Soon they were swaying and chanting “*Allah, Allah*” almost as if in a trance. Leigh felt like an outsider watching a cultural show. She decided she would enjoy it more if leaving was an option. Even when the guests left, they wouldn’t all be leaving. Not for days. It was close to midnight;

she yawned again and again. The women sang on; their young children wrestled and screamed in the next room.

Suddenly, Leigh was snapped out of her dismal reverie by Abla. She was chanting “*Allah*” louder than the rest, and she began to hyperventilate. Panting loudly, she chanted faster, louder, “AL-LAH! AL-LAH!”

Her face was a crushed tomato. She closed her eyes and hollered louder. The women stopped their own chanting to stare at Abla. Children came to the doorway and stood open-mouthed.

“My baby!” screamed Abla. “My baby is dead!”

She thrust her body into the centre of the room. She thrashed wildly on her back in a circle of stunned women. Grief screamed out of her every pore.

“AL-LAH! AL-LAH!” she cried, her voice hoarse now.

Leigh looked at Shana for help, but she was staring at the floor. Anne was calmly moving her lips in prayer and moving her fingers along her prayer beads. Everyone took their cue from Anne and waited for the show to end.

Abla’s writhing slowed, and her calls to God became a simple flow of tears. Sobbing, she pulled herself back into place in the circle beside Anne who put a compassionate arm around her.

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Leigh went to check on the children and found they had dug through her red backpack and opened the first aid kit. They had tried to put up her mosquito net like a tent. One boy had found her baseball and glove. He ran past Leigh, chased by a few others, and threw the baseball off the balcony.

Leigh caught up and took her glove off the hand of Tarif, the largest urchin who grinned at her wickedly. He wore a yellow and black checked sweater vest over a green and red plaid flannel shirt, baggy rust pants that were flying low and plastic flip flops over socks, two toes poking through. Leigh slipped her fingers into his breast pocket and pulled out her black hair ribbon. Next, she rescued her mosquito net, noting a rip along one side. She took everything she owned out of the bedroom and zipped it into her backpack. Then she carried it to the living room and dropped it, not as hard as she would've liked, on the floor by the door. Then she opened the front door and walked out of the apartment. No one noticed.

Leigh stormed down the stairs and into the dark courtyard. She searched for her baseball and eventually found it against the far wall among three or four oranges. Furious, she picked it up and stormed across the courtyard with a plan to throw children off the balcony. She stopped on the front steps though because she suddenly felt that she was a secret in the dark. She was M.I.A. but probably no one missed her. It was a moment made for self-pity. She plunked herself down on the top step, suddenly unbearably weary, and even, for a moment, homeless. She rolled the hard ball, really a softball, between her flat palms. When she'd packed it, she'd imagined playing catch in green places. With people who knew what baseball was. She remembered that she couldn't conceive of leaving home without her ball and mitt; they were such a part of her. She'd almost brought the bat! Ten months later, this was only the second time the ball had been unpacked.

She stood then and centred herself in the courtyard. She threw the ball straight up in the dark and caught it with a satisfying thunk. She threw it higher and higher until she missed and had to run out on the road to find it.

The house was still full of guests when Ahmet finally came home. Leigh tried to get him in the kitchen for a hug, but he was more interested in impressing the guests. She sat listlessly in the circle, too tired to try to follow the conversation.

"Smile," ordered Ahmet from across the room, thinking no one else could understand English.

"Ahmet, are they ever going to go home? They've been here seven hours. This is what I've been doing for *se-ven* hours!"

"These are your guests. You must smile and be polite."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired of that. The children wrecked my things, Abba went nuts and we're out of tea."

Ahmet was firm. "You are the woman of the house. Don't look bored. Smile."

"I *am* bored. I am bored out of my mind!"

"Enough! We will talk later."

Leigh got up and left the room, hoping he would follow her, even to fight, but he didn't. It was an hour before the crowd cleared out and another hour before everyone was settled into bed.

Leigh hadn't been out of the house in four days except to see the sheep killed and rescue her baseball. When they were in bed, she lay rigidly on her back and talked to the ceiling.

"Ahmet, I am drowning here. I need to get out. Why

can't I go to Goreme with you? I need some physical exercise or I'm going to freak out or something."

"Do you like my family?" His tone was closed.

"Yes, of course. But you must know it's difficult for me when I can't really communicate with them, and we have guests all the time."

"You are the woman of the house. You must do better for the guests. Why didn't you bring fruit?"

"Fruit! If you were home, you would know that I brought out every last bit of food we have." Her body was a plank of wood. "What I didn't bring out, the children stole!"

"Will you make me angry? My family are your guests. You must stay in the home."

"They are your guests. You haven't even come home for dinner. You never get home until late! You haven't even seen them!"

"I know they are here; that is enough."

"That's enough? For whom? Don't you think Halil wants to play soccer with you? Don't you think your mother expects to spend time with you? It's rude. You're the one being rude!"

Ahmet turned over and pressed his face into hers in the dark. "You do not know what is rude and what is polite." He flopped over and turned his back to her.