

an octopus has three hearts**by hatice açikgöz**

(translated from the German by Jon-Cho Polizzi)

we go out to an asian restaurant for my best friend's 18th birthday. that's pretty typical for us. we always eat out on special occasions. we always go to this same restaurant. always this same greasy, meaty, sage-incensy smelling restaurant.

we take our seats at the table, the same table where we always sit. it's almost like an episode from some hip television sitcom where the characters always meet at one specific spot they've made their own. and that's usually the moment when i start feeling like a fish out of water: while everyone else is chatting about the last party they went to, i never know what to talk about other than school. but no one wants to talk about that. no one wants to hear how i solved the last biology assignment or what i'm going to write my next essay on for english class.

and so, i stare at my friends' plates. most of them ordered something unspectacular. i see chicken legs, salads, and rice. but one plate catches my eye: the plate of the birthday kid. there's something elongated on it that almost looks like a snake sprawling across her salad.

the birthday kid is eating octopus today.

ok, i think my intro might have given you the wrong impression of me. biology has never been my favorite subject. really. i'm just there in some room at some school for 90 minutes scribbling in my notebook how i'd so much rather be at home in bed.

but if we'd learned in class that octopuses are the closest thing to aliens, maybe i wouldn't have been so bored.

if i'd have learned how their tentacles have 500 million neurons and are capable of independent thought, i wouldn't have just stared at the clock, sighing a little more with every passing second. if i'd known that they cast off their shells more than 140 million years ago to become quicker and more agile, my notebook would be filled with useful notes.

i walk home at the end of the night, making my keys into a wolverine-claw fist. i keep my cellphone in my other hand. when the screen lights up for a moment, i notice three missed calls. mama cell, mama cell, mama cell. i put my phone away and quicken pace.

my mother's fallen asleep on the couch in the living room again. the tv is still on. if i turn it off now, she'll wake up. so, i just turn it down and text my friends i've made it back home in one piece. they tell me they've made their ways home safely, too.

while i lie in bed and my stomach makes funny noises—it must be the aftermath of whatever weird vegetables i just ate—i think back on that fateful night in turkey. it was the second time i experienced culture shock because i found out that night my grandmother couldn't read.

you always think you know the person you call grandmother. but of course, you only know the vintage version of that person. i want to know every version of my grandmother. and so, on that aforementioned night of my culture shock, i drill her with questions.

when i ask hürü what she dreamed of when she was my age, she says *having a son*.

when i ask hürü what she wanted to be when she was a little girl, she says *a mother*.

when i ask hürü whether she loves my grandfather hasan, she doesn't answer. then she says that they respect each other, and respect is more important than love.

maybe i've gone too far now. hürü thinks the same thing. she suggests bringing me with her in the morning to a quran lesson at the local mosque. maybe she thinks i can drive these senseless questions out of my head by reading some sensible prayers. kind of like she thinks an uneaten bit of food left lying on your plate will later burn in hell.

i hesitate after her invitation. it's a little embarrassing for me to admit i can't read arabic.

and besides, i also have to confess sometimes i don't know what prayer i'm supposed to recite at the mosque when the imam just says the name. it seems like everyone else knows immediately, they all sink their heads and begin murmuring. so, i just murmur along and say a different prayer. i know my sister is just listing off the things she ate today to keep her lips moving. ever since she developed epilepsy she can't remember things, but my mother told her before we left for turkey she should pretend to know the quran inside and out to keep our relatives from branding us as godless germans.

but back to hürü: of course, she's pretty stern at first and asks me why i can't read the quran yet. i tell her i read the turkish and the german versions at home. hürü tells me god doesn't accept prayers in other languages. i feel ashamed and ask her if she can teach me.

and then she tells me: "no. i can't read at all."

at first, i assume that she means arabic and wonder then why she's scolding me.

but then it occurs to me that she never opens letters, even the ones addressed to her. she always gives them to hasan who reads them and tells her what they're about. she always sits in the backseat of the car when someone needs to help with reading road signs, and neighbors who ask her for recipes always get them later from my aunts.

i ask hürü whether i've understood correctly. whether she can neither read nor write. and she tells me like it's the most natural thing in the world that she dropped out of school after first grade to marry hasan. when i offer to teach her to read, she tells me it wouldn't matter because she's already become the vintage version of herself.

somehow, it's wild how accessible an education is in germany. if you were born in this country, it's unimaginable to think people are still illiterate.

i always have to wonder whether hürü would have rather stayed in school instead of becoming a bride at 12. whether she regrets her five children. whether hasan respects her, too. i wonder whether hürü simply believed everything they told her at those quran readings. i wonder what happens if hasan tells her something different about the contents of her letters—what happens if he lies? has she ever second-guessed her world? or did she just take everyone at face value?

ever since that night, she seems so helpless to me. almost like a little child. she needs support for everything. and even when everyone is here, there's also nobody.

did you know some people call octopuses the *masters of disguise*? they can pretty much transform into other sea creatures, plants, or even humans? they imitate the movements of other animals and pretend to be their species; they camouflage themselves by changing the texture and the color of their skin to fit in. they're intelligence gives them such an advantage that only their own offspring can kill them.

when i arrive at school the next morning and enter the classroom for advanced german, my classmates are having a heated discussion about integration and racism. i hear them say my name.

“you know who’s a good example of integration? hatice.”

i look around the room. everyone’s staring at me, waiting for some kind of statement. but i can only smile. and feel proud. proud that the real germans see me, a fake german, as their equal. proud that i behave the way the germans expect me to. that the muscles in my mouth have almost forgotten the turkish language to make room for the more difficult, more complex german words. proud to have internalized german values; proud that hard work, ambition, and orderliness are such priorities in my life, too. proud that they don’t even think of me as turkish anymore.

on the way home from school i start to cry. i sit on the park bench in front of my door and google the word “integration.” *the social inclusion of heretofore excluded individuals* is the first definition i read. i cry even more.

describing me as an example of successful integration wasn’t really the compliment i took it for at first. quite the contrary: it shuts me, my family, and my identity out. because if i were to act like my mother in the classroom and out myself as a proud turkish woman, i would no longer be the clever, hardworking, well-integrate hatice. i’d be an antisocial, loud, and lazy immigrant.

already from outside the door to our apartment, i can hear my mother is having a good day. whenever she does, she listens to turkish poetry slams at full volume. then our home is like a poetry slam rock concert. that might sound cool, but it isn’t. all the poems these people read are so depressing that it’s obvious why i’ve developed an aversion to poetry.

my mother has spread her things across the apartment in preparation for making börek with spinach and sheep’s cheese. there’s an old blanket spread out on the floor of the living room where she’s squatting down making the meal. the kitchen is full of flour. the finished börek are laid out on the kitchen table as soon as they come out of the oven. i thank her for her labor, and she tells me i can take some börek with me to school. i nod and smile.

the next morning, i’ll roll a börek up in aluminum foil and stick it in my backpack, but i won’t eat it during break. instead, i’ll wait ‘til after school, like always, sit on the park bench, and inhale my food.

a börek would out me. and the last thing i want is to have to stand up for who i am. for why my hair and my skin and my body look different from the real germans. after all, i’m not an octopus. my outward appearance will never assimilate no matter how german i act.

my mother has always been eccentric. at the age of forty, she still goes to parties for young adults. she meets up with guys she finds on the internet. she’s always the center of attention no matter where she is. once, when my best friend brought her more introverted mother over for a visit, mine put on arabesque music and challenged the two of them to a belly dance battle. and this story shows why this friend was my best friend at the time: she and her mother danced along while i sank into the floor with shame.

when i was a little kid, i always viewed my mother as a strong feminist. someone who never let anyone tell her what to do.

when my father became abusive, she broke free of him despite being completely dependent on his finances at the time. when her parents married her off against her will, she even managed

to forgive them. and when she got off the airplane and saw germany for the first time, she also managed to make this place her home.

but the older i get, the more i recognized the truth. my mother is a strong woman, indeed. but she's always had one great weakness: men.

the way she talks to her boyfriends on the phone already reveals something of her insecurities. these guys have to call her every second. constantly give her presents. and so-help-them-god never ever sit next to another woman on the bus.

when i leave my room because i have to tell her again that her poetry slam rock is disturbing my concentration and i have homework to do, she's screaming—as she so often is—at someone on the phone. i turn down her laptop and peer into the living room. my mother is crying. she stares at me for a moment, then gets up and slams the living room door.

and there it is again: this barrier between us. but maybe it's better this way. maybe a barrier is really the only way to set aside our differences.

it's always been there: this wall separating her views from mine. and during that fateful visit to turkey, new walls rose up between us, too. it was another shock. not a culture shock, more like a shock of growing up. i call it an aha-my-parents-aren't-so-perfect shock.

it's the morning after i found out that my grandmother is illiterate. i wake up with a raging anger in my gut. i wash my face at the sink in front of the pit toilet, feeling too upset to be disgusted by the smell of poop. i take my seat at the breakfast table and look around at these unfamiliar familial faces who are not my mama, papa, sister, and brother. have any of these people ever offered to teach my grandmother to read? or are they all content in their belief that it's not worth helping this vintage person advance her education? okay, in this case, “advance” really isn't the right word: hürü's lacking elementary, base-level education.

while i sit there and observe how one of my aunts is counting every single piece of food i eat, i also observe my mother bragging about my education. how important my good grades seem to be. she doesn't realize good grades are not an indication of intelligence. because they are a point of comparison. and my grade point average is the highest at this table. the best. in my mother's eyes that means i'm the most clever.

i'm angry. angry at hürü for rejecting my offer. angry about my mother's pride. angry at these strangers who are always venerating hürü without ever trying to help her out. so, i go back to the living room and sit down next to my brother on the couch. we're not twins. we're not even full, but half-siblings. but when we exchange a glance, we're both thinking the same thing: *i want to go home*. because turkey is not our home. of course, we can't admit this. not here. and not in germany.

after the others finish eating and we help clear the table, we hear loud honking outside. i look around. everyone else has gathered at the fence in front of the door. there's another strange man standing there that i'm related to. dişci dayı.

he's no different from the other men hanging around: old, fat, and a mansplainer of the first degree. the only difference between him and the others is that you *have* to listen to him. he's our dentist uncle. and because the title doctor belongs to his name, every word he speaks is wisdom.

in turkey, there's a particular ritual for greeting people one should show respect to. you usually do it with older people. you take the hand of the person you want to respect, kiss it, and press it gently to your forehead. while dişci dayı makes his rounds and gathers everyone's respect, i watch everyone else bow to him as if he were a queen. my mother bows, too, and kisses his hand. three times, even. a sign of the highest respect. but when he finally arrives at me, expecting a grand

gesture from the young german girl, i just give him my hand. without the kisses. i offer him a totally normal handshake. and he does not accept.

i guess you can imagine how much trouble i was in. particularly from my grandmother and my mother. the dirty looks. the curses. when they haul me to the kitchen and demand to know what's wrong with me, why i can't show this man some respect, i tell them he didn't show any to me and that i'm disappointed by their performances.

now, you don't know this man, of course. but my mother and my grandmother sure do. dişci dayı is the reason my mother couldn't finish school. he convinced hasan and hürü back then that educated girls were all whores and that they needed to take her out of school immediately. hürü said nothing, like always, when hasan forbid his daughters from pursuing an education. shortly thereafter, this dentist uncle sent his own daughter to the best school in istanbul. she became a teacher while my aunts still have to scrape together their last pennies to buy a new headscarf.

it's disappointing to see my mother act this way. to see her kissing his hand despite always saying he's the only reason why she couldn't finish school.

and so, i ask her in the kitchen while this dentist uncle is laughing loudly and spitefully outside: "where's your self-respect?" and another wall rises between us.

i'm sitting with my homework, listening to my mother cry. an unpleasant feeling spreads inside of me. so, i go to check on her.

opening the living room door isn't easy. i don't know what's waiting for me on the other side.

the telephone is lying beside her. when i talk, she does not respond. slowly, i approach her, and i notice that she hasn't hung up. my grandfather is still on the line. i take the phone and ask what's happening. hasan tells me hürü is dead.

octopuses are pretty weird. they're so intelligent and agile that it's almost impossible for other predators to catch them. but as soon as they mate and lay their eggs, they just turn into vegetables. they waste away until they die.

sometimes i wonder if human mothers aren't so different. once you become a mother, people stop seeing the person behind the title. once their children move out, mothers have the possibility of finding themselves again. but then their children have children and mothers simply become grandmothers. and once a woman is a grandmother, people pretty much expect that her life is over. it doesn't matter whether their grandmother only has the education of a seven-year-old or not.

my mother packs the necessities into a suitcase, tells my father to pay for her flight, and heads to the airport by taxi at 3 am.

2 weeks later, she comes back. but she's still wearing the headscarf she wears so our turkish relatives don't gossip about her freedoms.

this time, she doesn't take the headscarf off again. it's become a part of her. my grandmother's dying wish was for my mother to become a decent woman. wear a headscarf. pray. give up her identify.

since then, our apartment has been silent. the loud, extroverted woman with interests and goals for her life died, too. there's only the shell of what she was before. our poetry slam rock concerts are over. everything is quiet. gloomy. my mother most of all.

with her dying wish, my grandmother revealed that she'd never accepted her daughter. demanded that this woman—with her big, loud personality—make herself small. the way a woman should.

maybe i'm being unfair to hürü. and i don't know what my mother thought of her last wish. but for me, it's a slap in the face.

just like when hasan took my mother and her three sisters out of school and hürü just stood back and watched. just like when my mother had to marry a stranger and hürü just stood back and watched. just like when my mother finally had to leave her home forever and hürü just stood back and watched. because that's what a woman should do. they should just stand back and watch.

octopuses have three hearts. the main heart delivers blood to their internal organs. the other two support the main heart and feed it oxygen. i wish i could have been a support heart for my grandmother. that i could have expanded her world view beyond her tiny village in turkey.

i wish i could be a support heart for my mother and help her overcome her insecurities.

i wish i didn't simply wish to hide myself like an octopus with camouflage. i wish i could accept myself the way i am. and maybe even be brave enough to love myself, too.

i wish the three of us could have formed a symbiosis. we three, together, like an alien life form. i wish we wouldn't have needed our protective shells. that we could have moved more freely. maybe then, we would have been strong enough that not even the birth of a hasan or a dentist could have killed us.