

The Americans

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I wonder when the new Americans will be moving into the Simons' old apartment one floor below us. Mr. and Mrs. Simon left when I was four or five, half my life ago, after that big earthquake in Izmir that cracked our living room wall. It was a beautiful crack, winding down to their sixth-floor apartment like a river connecting us. But the earthquake must have really frightened Mrs. Simon, who had to be seated on a couch and given a glass of water—or was it alcohol?—and still looked as white as the plaster on the wall even after she drank it.

I guess that was a workday, because I don't see Baba in the replays of the earthquake in my mind. Mama was there, as always, but for once she looked calm, as if she'd been preparing for a natural disaster all along. She squatted before our cracked wall and carefully picked up the pieces of a broken lamp, which she later got fixed and returned to its original spot. Mr. Simon, whom I adored, was there, too. He'd probably rushed home from his work at the NATO base on Kordon, which is only a short walk from us. He towered over everyone

in the room, feet spread wide like the legs of the compass I use in math class, not looking particularly scared. He couldn't calm the worries of his wife, though—I wonder if he even tried. A few weeks later, they packed and left Turkey for fear of another big earthquake that never came, leaving us to live with the ghost of their apartment below ours, which has not been exactly empty all this time, but has seemed so since the couple who lived there for a few years were both doctors and never at home.

When the Simons lived here, all my sister Ece and I had to do was walk down a flight of stairs when we wanted to visit—seven plus seven, fourteen stairs. I wasn't in school then, and fought with Ece a lot. We were two little girls in matching clothes snatching at the slightest disagreement as a chance to kick, pull hair, even bite. Mama, who's always tired, though all she has to do is take care of us and our apartment, would scream from the kitchen that the Iron Lady from the television news herself couldn't keep order in our home. Mama's only hope was Baba. Baba didn't come home until evening, but she made sure he heard about our every little mischief the moment he stepped through the door so he would punish us the way she thought we deserved—yelling at the top of his lungs in his high-pitched voice, his hand coming down on our faces, hard and fast.

The only place where Ece and I played quietly—the way we were supposed to play at home—was in the Americans' apartment, but there it wasn't forced. Mrs. Simon didn't have children of her own, and she really loved us—or so I always thought. A tall woman with soft, white curls, Mrs. Simon didn't speak any Turkish, and we didn't speak any English except for a few phrases she'd taught us. At her door, she'd greet our greedy knocking with a smile and lead us straight to the kitchen cupboard filled with toys. While we played, she would prepare Kool-Aid in the flavor of our choice and serve us cream-filled American cookies from the cookie jar. I liked that those little cookies were all individually wrapped, a brand new pack for each of us, which we'd peel open like gifts.

When Mr. Simon was home, in shorts instead of the big black boots and daunting army uniform he wore to work, we'd play tag around their long

dining-room table with him chasing us, his snub-nosed face flushed, looking like a red balloon. My sister and I would huddle under the table, delighted that Mr. Simon, with his big belly pressing against his thighs, could never reach us. Part of the game was *pretending* that he might.

The Simons' apartment smelled different from ours. A smell with hints of plastic, spicy butter, and vanilla that I've encountered only once or twice in the years since they left, when my mother organized the things Mrs. Simon had bought for us at the PX. No locals without special IDs were permitted to shop at the PX, but my mother and Mrs. Simon found a way around this rule. We "shopped" by folding the corners of the PX catalogs, the last third devoted to photos of happy American children playing with wonderful dollhouses, nylon tents, and red Radio Flyers that Mama said were too big for our apartment. In the end, our wish list included things my mother decided we needed for our dowries. To this day, they are stored in tall hall closets on shelves Mama can't reach without a ladder. Lacy sheets, flowery plate sets. Items that, by the time I get married—if I marry at all—will be like Mama's antiques: too precious to touch or, God forbid, sit on unless we have guests.

Who knows what games we'll play with the new Americans? They are rumored to have three children—big news since no other family in the building has more than two. Not even the super and his wife, who are villagers and, like the chickens they keep back home, are known to multiply.

I wonder how old these American children will be and whether they are boys or girls. I hope one will be a boy my age (and not Ece's). Once he's here, I can fall madly in love with him and escape our apartment, leaving my mother with her voice always clambering up a scale out to get us, and Baba, there but not seeing us unless we do something wrong, in which case he has to stop plotting the next move for his auto-parts business and, hands flipping in the air like the fish my mother fries for dinner, bang on the table to remind us who's the boss.

Today after school, I dawdle in our building lobby, hoping to run into the new Americans. I check our mailbox, lifting the lid even though I can see

through the glass panel that it's empty. I let a few elevators go up without getting in and continue to pretend I've just arrived. But the super's son is here, staring at me with his big bug eyes, making me conscious that I'm a girl and he's not.

It's a relief when his father comes out of their stuffy apartment and slips into the shoes he left on the doormat, their backs flattened like squashed cockroaches.

"Hey, Mümtaz abi, have the Americans moved in yet?" I ask.

Mümtaz abi twirls his moustache. There are traces of sleep in his eyes, and he takes his time responding. "There was a furniture delivery this morning, but they're not moving in until next Tuesday. The apartment still has to be painted."

He slaps the back of his son's head and tells him not to slouch. I look away, feeling bad to have seen this. Waiting for the elevator, I think, *Seven minus one is six. Six more days before I meet my American boy.*

Three weeks pass, and I still haven't seen a single American, not one of the promised five. Meanwhile, Hülya from the fifth floor, a girl my age with straight hair, slender hands, and a crater-like vaccination mark on her right arm that I always long to touch, not only has met them but has been to their apartment with her mother, who's one of the few women I know with a college diploma.

Hülya mentions the visit while we're playing dolls in her room. She says the American kids have a tent. I don't want her to feel special or entitled to my American boy, so I don't ask her about the tent, nor whether the American kids are boys or girls. I'll find out for myself.

I reach for a pretty, green-checked dress for my doll, glad that Hülya hasn't picked it, listening for her mom to call us into the kitchen where she's preparing French toast, which isn't French at all but an American dish that my mother doesn't know how to make and would never try to learn.

"Where are you going?" my mother asks, holding the elevator door open on our floor.

She's taking me shopping. In the past, Ece would have joined us, but at thirteen, now a self-important middle-schooler, she gets to shop at Mudo and

Vakkorama instead of ABC with its bright bees and ladybugs stamped on yellow shopping bags.

“I’m taking the stairs,” I say. “You might want to join me for the exercise.”

I throw in the word *exercise*, a concept introduced into our lives by Jane Fonda in her mother-of-pearl leotards and colorful leggings. Every woman in the building has a videotape of her, following the example of Hülya’s mom.

My mother gives me a dangerous look and lets the elevator door shut in my face. Behind the wire-crossed glass, the elevator’s cool light disappears into the black void of the shaft.

I walk slowly down the stairs, trying to be ladylike. Will this become a habit soon, as in the Simons’ day, when I went up and down these stairs in my house slippers all the time?

My heart races as the Americans’ door comes into sight. It has been painted white and looks plain compared to the handmade woodwork of our door, which was crafted by a carpenter from Bornova who took months finishing the job. I stare at this door with love, as if seeing the American boy himself. *Please swing open*, I plead, convinced, at that moment, of my power to move the whole world. But nothing budes in the sixth-floor corridor. Disappointment mixes with relief as I reach the landing. What would I do if he suddenly stood before me? Run and hide, or stand there and give him a stupid smile?

Now I run, taking the stairs two at a time, heels hammering each step straight into my brain: tam, tam, tam, two, four, six, seven, two, four, six, seven. By the third floor, I’m turning the corners without effort, but on the second floor, the automatic light turns off, leaving me in the dark. I take tiny, hesitant steps in the direction of the switch. I’m sure of nothing, not even when or whether my foot will touch the ground. Why didn’t I take the elevator with Mama?

She has beaten me to the ground floor and is not happy about waiting. She sticks her hand down the back of my shirt to see if I’m sweaty from running down the stairs, convinced that the slightest mix of sweat and wind might cause me to die of pneumonia.

“Mother!” I protest, and duck away, angry that she still treats my body

as if it belongs to her. At least this gives me the excuse not to hold her hand in case my American boy is standing on the sixth-floor balcony, looking out and seeing us. I wait to ask my question until we turn the corner. “Mother,” I begin, now a good girl holding her mother’s hand, “have you met the new Americans yet?”

“Yes, I saw the mother the other day. She has a cute baby—they both have big, green eyes. I think she said that she also has two sons.”

Green eyes! Two sons! I think my heart will burst. I struggle to hold back a smile. “Did you make plans to visit each other?”

“No, not yet. Let them settle in first.”

Who is Mama fooling? There must be a ton of things she’s dying to order from the PX: nesting Pyrex bowls, canned pineapples, embossed toilet paper for nights when we have guests, and more dowry pieces for Ece and me that she can stuff in our closets.

“Hülya’s mom has already been to their home,” I say. “Maybe you didn’t get invited because your English is so bad.”

“Listen, you.” Mama yanks my hand up to pinch it with her long, painted nails.

At nine-and-a-half, my head comes up to my mother’s breast, yet her habit of pinching me, at home and in public, endures. She bites our arms, too, like a yapping, powerless dog, but that doesn’t hurt half as much as Baba’s punishments.

I pull away.

My mother takes my hand back and holds it firmly. “You know that grumpy woman can’t get along with anyone,” she says. “Her friendship with the Americans won’t last.”

It’s true that Hülya’s mom picks fights with everyone in the building. What’s more, she won’t even let her good-natured husband greet the people who are on her bad side. But it’s also no lie that she speaks fluent English, sliding her tongue over those elongated foreign words with the ease of the windsurfers of Çeshme riding the waves. Meanwhile, my parents stumble through the same language like city people in a jungle who aspire to swing from tree to tree suspended from

a vine like Jane and Tarzan.

Two weeks later, my prayers are answered. When I come home from school, I find two blondish boys waiting for the elevator in our building's marble lobby. One is about my height; the other is lanky, at least a head taller. Neither turns around to say hello, which is a good thing, since I'm in my ugly black school uniform. Its white collar is loosened and dangling around my neck like the world map at school that's hung off center, heavy on the Asia side. The American boys are in everyday clothes, except for the school bags they carry. Can it be that they don't have to wear uniforms at the American school?

I want to sneak upstairs so I can meet the boys when I'm looking right. But the taller one turns and sees me. He looks okay, except he can barely close his mouth because he's wearing the kind of braces that look like a birdcage.

I stay a few steps behind and focus on the elevator light's descent as it makes its way to the ground floor. The boys go in first, ignoring the ladies-enter-first-and-gentlemen-hold-the-door rule. I always tell my friends at school: I'm a girl, not a cripple; I can open and close my own doors. Treated as an equal now, though, I feel invisible and all alone.

I walk quickly past them and press my body firmly against the cool skin of the elevator. The boys don't nod hello or ask me which floor I'm headed to. That's all right. Their floor is before mine, and I can press my own button once they get off.

I know how to say, "Hello, how are you?" but I'm afraid that if I say it, the boys will respond to me in English. Besides, I have another reason to be tongue-tied. As I passed the boys, I saw the eyes of the younger one. They are a blue so clear they remind me of the Aegean where the sandy bottom can be seen from high up on a boat, inviting me to take a big, scary plunge. I hold my breath and don't let go of it until the boys leave the elevator. Neither says good-bye.

He would have acted differently without his brother around. That's what I tell myself all week as I scribble his name in the margins of my notebook.

John, John, John . . . I learned his name from the label on their mailbox, which includes the entire family's names, even the baby's, in the order of age according to Mümtaz abi: Paul, Kathy, Mark, John, and Maggie Rae.

Aylin Rae, my name with his, also sounds nice, which is a great sign.

During class, I adorn John's name with drawings of flowers and vines that never turn out as pretty as I want. Meanwhile, our teacher, ruler in hand, calls people randomly to the blackboard. If we misbehave, he will line up the whole class and hit each of us on the palm with his ruler. The sting lasts as long as the thin, red line imprinted by its edge. I try to look busy and raise a hand high so that the teacher will *think* I know the answer even when I don't.

Weeks go by, and I see John only once more, as he walks up Plevne Bulvarı, probably headed either to the American school or the PX, which is in Basmane. I've walked by it once, glimpsing the high ceilings inside that well-lit hangar through its big, open doors.

Finally, in December, almost four months after they moved in, the Americans throw a party to meet the women and children in the building. Turkish mothers have to approve of one another before the fathers will mingle, and the Americans must have been told that.

The morning of the party our apartment is in an uproar. Doors bang, and Ece runs from room to room, crying as she stages one last battle for Baba's permission to go to a birthday party that afternoon where, in addition to her girlfriends, there will be boys.

"She's too young for it," Baba says, never addressing Ece directly but talking to her through our mother. "God knows what she'll be doing at eighteen if she gets started with boys at this age."

Mama weaves back and forth between Ece and Baba, carrying messages from one to the other.

I sneak into Ece's room and find her howling into her pillow. "Why don't you come to the Americans' party?" I ask. It seems only right that we should return to that apartment together. *Just like we used to*, I think, but I don't dare

say that out loud.

Ece lifts her teary face from the pillow. “Why should I bother? If they really wanted to be friends, they’d have invited us sooner.”

Her comment sounds like something Mama or Baba might say.

Lunch is quiet and cheerless, with Baba sulking the most, as if it is he, not Ece, who has just been denied the chance to be with friends. I’m too excited to eat anything, but everyone is so wrapped up in his or her own gloom that no one notices.

After lunch, Ece brightens when Mama tells her to get dressed to go to her friend Selmin’s place. The two exchange a knowing glance, but I’m confused. Didn’t Selmin’s name come up repeatedly as one of Ece’s friends with permission to go to the birthday party? Ece had offered each name during the fight with Baba as proof that she ought to be allowed to go.

Ece is happy and parks herself in front of the bathroom mirror. She blow-dries her new bangs, giving off a burnt-chicken-feathers smell.

“Move. I need to look in the mirror too,” I say.

She won’t budge. “I’m older,” she says.

I don’t push it. I want to borrow Ece’s red vest to go with my cropped, checked pants. Or should I wear my new Laura Ingalls brown-print dress with the lace collar? It looked so good on me when I tried it on in the store, but now I’m not so sure.

I change so many times that I sweat. Mama screams at me to hurry up. When I spill water on Ece’s vest while wetting my hair, Ece orders me to take it off, and that settles what I’ll wear. I end up in my brown-print dress. Mama wears the tan suede skirt that she always pairs with her olive silk shirt. She also wears perfume that makes me feel as if we’re traveling much farther than one floor.

Baba walks to the elevator with us. He’s going for a walk and might see a movie. That leaves only Ece behind. She hollers her promise to lock up when she leaves from behind the bathroom door where she must be slathering on incredible amounts of makeup.

It’s hard to believe that the Americans’ door will finally swing open for me,

and all I have to do is ring the bell.

A short woman with straight black hair, prominent cheekbones, and the green eyes Mama spoke of greets us. In her arms is a baby with a face that looks just like the mother's, but she's bald. "Hello, Kathy, to see you is nice," my mother says. She has to lean down to kiss John's mother, not because my mother is taller, but because she is in incapacitating high heels. Kathy is dressed plainly in flats, a red shirt, and khaki pants.

I look Kathy straight in the eyes to let her know I'm not cut from the same cloth as my mother. When I grow up, I'll be sure to go to college and have a job.

Peering at us from the kitchen in her muslin scarf is the super's petite wife. I nod hello and let my eyes hover above her in search of the Simons' toy cupboard. It was over the sink, but was it one or two cabinets to the left? It's hard to tell with all the kid stuff on the shelves, and the cabinets now a bright red. My mother should take a look at this kitchen to see that not every surface in a home has to be beige.

I follow Kathy and my mother into the living room—another room I've been exiled from for too long. For a moment, I think I'll find Mr. Simon hiding behind the door, ready to tickle me. Or maybe Mrs. Simon will be there to explain why they've snubbed Ece and me, never sending us a postcard.

The room is teeming with women talking over each other, like the cicadas of Çeşme tweeting from the high hearts of the pines. The walls are peach-colored now, and there's wall-to-wall carpet instead of the Simons' open parquet floors, which were perfect to slide on in socks.

I spot a group of kids sitting in a closed circle in a far corner. John's is the third face I see. Once I find him, I absorb him in little sips: his golden hair, his longish nose, the blue-jean shirt that brings out the bottomless blue of his eyes. John's older brother, Mark, is the only other kid I recognize in the group. They must all be Americans, keeping to themselves.

Hülya and her mom are doing the same. Their one close friend in the building—a squat woman with Cleopatra hair who never disagrees with Hülya's mom—stands faithfully by them like a collie.

The other ladies of the building are occupying the area with the bamboo couch in their Saturday glory, wearing lots of jewelry and makeup. They're all housewives who are identified as "the doctor's wife," "the pilot's widow," or "the industrialist's wife," whose new copper-colored Mercedes must be parked somewhere on the street, though its striking presence is felt everywhere she goes.

Mama walks toward this group. A few women cheerfully call out her name. One scoots over on the couch to make room for her. So I don't just stand there like a pole, I perch on the arm beside my mother's seat, in what may seem like a rare show of affection.

The arm is stiff and uncomfortable, but I put up with it for the glances I can steal in John's direction. Girls are sitting close to him, girls with blond curls and plaid shirts. I detest them. Once, as I check for lint on the arm of my dress, I see John glance up at me. Blood rushes to my face, like mercury in a thermometer.

Mama is busy telling a neighbor about our broken washing machine, boring the poor woman to death. Why can't she ever talk about things that matter in life, like politics, how she met Baba (something beyond "Friends introduced us."), or how much we miss the Simons independent of all the American things they could be buying us?

I get up and walk over to Hülya and her mom. The simple act of crossing the room makes me feel as if I'm switching sides.

Hülya, a good head taller than I, looks beautiful in a red skirt and green sweater. The colors of her outfit cleverly match the New Year tree standing in the corner of the room where the Simons used to have their Emmanuelle chair with its signature round back, which I was shy about sitting on after seeing the movie poster for *Emmanuelle* showing an actress with a very revealing neckline—if she was wearing anything at all.

Suddenly, I worry that I may be pulling John's attention to Hülya.

"Want to eat something?" I ask, knowing she's a terrible eater.

"No, thanks," she murmurs as her eyes dart around the room like a frightened kitten's.

I approach the buffet table in anticipation of reporting to Ece all the

yummy things to eat: things bought from the PX that will surely make her regret that she didn't come. But there are only a few plates on this table, half-filled with food items that look like they're from the corner market where we have an open tab. My eyes quickly pick out the two American offerings on the table: a bowl of Hershey's Kisses with red wrappers instead of silver and a leaf-patterned ceramic plate full of sandwiches made with bright white, cloud-like bread, which I know comes in a package with happy dots. I reach for one, then the other, letting my teeth sink into the comforting softness of the sandwich that has none of the earthy substance of regular bread. If John has been waiting to catch me alone, here is his chance.

Kathy walks toward me with a smile that makes me feel all good and warm inside. She goes past me to a credenza, where she opens a drawer with one hand, the other still balancing the wobbly baby, Maggie, on her hip bone. The American smell wafts through the room: the smell of new, unopened stuff, probably stemming from the package of red paper napkins Kathy now holds in her hand.

Our moment finally arrives when John's older brother, Mark, brings in a blackboard and a box of chalk that he sets down close to their friends. I imagine John and me sitting side by side, exchanging little notes. I gobble two Hershey's Kisses and watch a giggly girl draw a smiling tomato. I know how to draw that. Next, a freckly boy with auburn hair is up at the board drawing a pink race car, doing an okay job of it, especially the fenders and the exhaust. No one gets up after him. The American kids are all laughing as if someone has just told a joke, one I'm too far away to have heard even if I could understand. Could it be that the drawing game is over before I even have a chance to play?

That's it, I think. I'm not going to stand here and wait. I put down my paper plate and march forward. Mama's voice is audible somewhere to my left, pitched high like an opera singer's.

I have no idea what I'll draw until I pick up a piece of blue chalk and find myself making a table for tic tac toe. An American girl to my right utters some English words I don't understand. *Girl*, she says, and something that sounds like

sillidress. I make a circle in one corner, repeating in my mind the few English phrases I know: “Hello, how are you?” and “Thank you,” to which Mrs. Simon would reply, “*Bi şey değil*,” you’re welcome. Those Turkish words sounded broken in her non-Turkish mouth, but they extended to us like a wobbly bridge, inviting us to cross over anytime.

Suddenly I realize that I’ve drawn the circle clockwise and feel a pang of regret. In school, it’s pounded into our heads that a circle must be drawn counterclockwise—*not* clockwise. Will one wrong start ruin my chances? I turn and hold out the chalk in John’s direction, gazing at the void directly to his right.

Mark elbows his younger brother and mumbles something to him in English. I hear that word *girl* again. John looks down at the wool carpet that only traps mites and dust. That, at least, is my mother’s objection to wall-to-wall carpets.

Will John ever look up? Each second stretches, crushing my heart. After what seems like too long for any hope to survive, John stands up and takes the chalk from my hand, his fingers brushing mine.

Making a fat, perfect zero, John draws another circle in the cell next to mine. I love seeing the two circles: his and mine, side by side. But can it be that he doesn’t know how to play tic-tac-toe? I erase the game and try something else.

“ $10 \div 2 =$,” I write, proud of myself for having found a way to use math in real life, to speak to this boy without language forming a barrier between us. I remember to draw the zero the right way this time.

John stands an arm’s length away, his shoulders’ height perfectly matching mine. He gazes intently at the problem, his bright-blue eyes squinting, as if they might be able to spurt out the answer if they stare at the problem long enough. I stand next to him, trying to convey by telepathy the right answer: *Five! Five! Five! Come on, write it down, so that we can move on to doing other stuff, the two of us alone.*

John looks at the board a bit longer, then steps back with a shrug. We’re still standing so close that I could reach out and touch his arm. Or perhaps this would be a good moment to fish out my few English phrases from the tangled web of my insides. That’s what I’m thinking when John walks back to

the American kids and holds out the chalk to a girl whose good looks strike me only on second glance—her beauty a stab straight in my heart.

I feel stupid standing there. But I can't just turn around and walk away. Not while my problem remains to be solved. I continue to stand next to this girl with eyes that look like they're naturally eye-lined. Is she as good at math as I am?

I watch as she trades my blue chalk for a green and turns my one into a tall tree with spiky leaves reaching up to the sky. Her upper body leans close to the board as she brushes over a section with an eraser to show where the light falls on the tree. Next she transforms my zero into an orange setting sun, changing the rest of the problem to make it look like a body of water. How could she have created such beauty with just a few chalk strokes?

I look down, and my gaze lands on the skirt of my dress, which the blue chalk has snowed on. Why am I even wearing this silly farm-girl dress in a city apartment where there's no place to run when it's time to cry? I want to go home and tear off this dress, never to lay eyes on it again.

My mother is busy talking and hunts for the apartment keys in her chic leather bag without a question when I ask for them, though I'm not usually allowed to be home alone. "Lock the door behind you," she says, just as she did to Ece a few hours ago.

The super's wife, Gülriz abla, watches me leave without my mother.

The elevator light signals available, but I head to the stairwell and take the steps two at a time, stomping as I go, no longer caring to be ladylike. I already dread my sister's "I told you so" and try to think of something to tell her about, like the red Hershey's Kisses. What else was there?

I let myself into the empty apartment, walking through the beam of light that pours through the living-room window, which is full of dancing dust, surprising me with the amount of activity in our home even when no one's home. I head to the kitchen in search of something to quiet the gnawing I feel inside. My mother's warning voice rings in my ears as I browse the contents of the fridge. "Take off your new dress, before you stain it!" As if I care about this dress.

I find stuffed cabbage leaves, untouched from lunch. Cold peas and rice.

Apples and oranges. Homemade rice puddings in neat little bowls. The front door swings open, making me gasp. Did *I* leave the door unlocked? And is this what happens to girls when they're alone?

Thank God, it's only Ece. She runs in, her face awash in makeup, wearing her Mudo corduroy jacket that I secretly tried on just the other day. She's crying and holding a reddened cheek. Right behind her is Baba, frowning. "You should have known better than to lie!" he shouts. Neither of them greets me or asks me about the party. Ece rushes to her room, and Baba stomps into the living room, closing the half-glass door with a quivering bang.

I close the fridge door with a bang too. There is nothing in the fridge that appeals to me, and nothing in the cookie jar we inherited from the Simons, which sits atop a high shelf I once had to climb to reach.

