

The 
Elephant
in the
 Room 

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1.

What Sila Tekin would remember about that afternoon was that she had been wearing her favorite shirt. It was nothing fancy. Just red with white stripes and blue stitching, but it fit perfectly, not too tight and not too loose. And it wasn't only comfortable; it was lucky, because she had been wearing the shirt when she found a twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk one afternoon while walking home from school. Sila had also bowled her highest score in August, and done well on a very hard math test while wearing the garment. Another time when she had on the shirt she'd spotted a two-foot-tall speckled owl sleeping high up in a tree in Hendricks Park. That was amazing.

So the T-shirt was special. There was no question about it.

At least not until Thursday, September 6, when Sila came through the front door of the apartment to find her parents in the kitchen. Her mom and dad were never there when she got home from school; they were always at work. Her mom's eyes were red and puffy from crying and her nose



looked like it was leaking water. Sila asked in Turkish, which was the language she spoke at home, “What’s going on?”

Her father put his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. She could feel tension even in his fingertips. “We’ve had some bad news.”

Sila’s ears started to buzz. One of her grandparents must have died. Her voice was shaky as she asked: “What’s happened? You have to tell me!”

Sila’s mother, Oya, looked as if she was going to speak, only nothing came out except a long, dry exhale that had choking sounds mixed in. But then her father managed, “Your mother is going on a trip. She’ll be back soon. Very soon.”

“A trip? Why?”

“Legal things. Fixing paperwork.”

Sila looked at her mother. “Where are you going?”

“To Turkey.”

Sila’s eyes moved from her mother to her father. They weren’t sick. No one had died. Health wasn’t the issue. Sila stared at her parents and could see they were trying to seem calm, but it looked as if their heads were going to explode.

“I don’t understand. So what’s the bad news?”

Her mother wiped her nose. “It’s immigration. There is a problem.”

Sila's parents went on to explain that Oya needed to return to the country she left as an adult and get a replacement for a document that had never been properly executed. Without fixing the situation, Oya was facing a court proceeding and even deportation. So she just needed to correct a clerical mistake. They had a plan.

It didn't sound to Sila like that big of a deal. Hadn't her mother admitted she missed where she was born? Couldn't going back to Turkey be a good thing? Didn't Oya speak all the time about longing to see Sila's grandparents? Wasn't she always saying she missed the bread and the cheese and the tomatoes she'd grown up with?

But this trip was forced on her. Maybe, Sila thought, anything that you are told to do isn't as good as when you make the choice yourself.

Everyone wants to be the boss of their own life.

Sila had been born in Oregon. She was an American citizen. Her parents had lived in Eugene for almost fifteen years, but they were Turkish citizens. In Istanbul her mother had studied to be a librarian, but once they came to America she had taken work in the housekeeping department of the most expensive hotel on main street. She cleaned rooms five days

a week, and if she was lucky, got overtime for a sixth day. That job had ended after fourteen years only last week. So much was in turmoil.

These were the facts: Sila's mother would be gone for eight days—two Sundays with six days sandwiched in between. Before Oya left, she cooked her husband's and daughter's favorite foods and then packed the refrigerator and the freezer tight with glass containers. While her mother buzzed around the oven and the stove, Sila tried to be helpful and cleaned the apartment. When she was finished, she cleaned it all over again. She would have started on a third round but she went with her mother to shop for the gifts to bring for family and friends.

Later that night Sila sat on her parents' bed as Oya filled a large suitcase with wrapped presents. Once they were in place she had room for only three outfits, a week's worth of underwear, and four pairs of socks. Her mother insisted this would be enough for the short time she would be traveling.

Sila didn't think so, but said nothing.

Her parents took money from their savings and then more money from a credit card to finance the trip. Sila could see that her mom was nervous when she said goodbye. Oya pressed a blue glass evil eye on a chain into her daughter's

hand and told her to keep it with her at all times for protection. Sila didn't think her mother believed in curses, but she looked pretty serious. It was, she knew, bad luck to be superstitious.

Sila slipped the gold chain around her neck. She didn't want to cry. Her mother whispered, "Eight days will go by so fast. You'll see."

But the eight days had turned into eight months. Sila had hung a calendar on a wall in her room, and she put an X in the appropriate square every night before she went to bed. She then wrote the number of days her mother been gone. She was now on 237.

Sila loved her father, but being apart from her mom was harder than anything she had ever known. She missed her so much that even her skin didn't feel right. The air was pushing down on her arms in a new way and her feet somehow moved as if they were twice their former size.

At first Sila's dad, Alp, didn't eat much. He wore the same shirt for three days in a row, and wasn't shaving every morning. He spoke to his wife all the time, often trying to hide it from Sila. But she knew. She could hear her mother crying. On Skype. On the phone. Alp would be in the bedroom with

the door shut, or even in the bathroom whispering as if Sila didn't have ears.

It took some time for them to get used to the fact that they were facing a crisis. It was sharp in the beginning and time turned it to something deep and dull and even more difficult. It turned into their new reality.

One of the hardest things was that Sila kept expecting to see her mother everywhere. When she came into the kitchen she looked for her at the stove. Her mom should have been on the couch. In the front seat of the car. Coming out of the bathroom. Her mother was there in Sila's head and her heart but not in the room.

And who knew when she would be coming back?

Waiting was what they did now.

Oya Tekin had flown to a place Sila had only heard about, but never seen. Her mother had gone back to Turkey. She had waited in lines. She had called officials. She had shown her file over and over and over again, and was told it was a process, which took time. Every day Sila and her father woke up hoping that the necessary paperwork was at the embassy in Ankara. But there was no answer to the biggest question: When would Oya get what she needed to fly back

across the ocean and then across a continent to the place she called home?

In all the months that her mother had been gone, Sila had not once put on the red-and-white shirt with the blue stitching. The shirt had turned into a symbol for all the bad luck in the universe. Sila wanted to rip it apart and throw it away, but instead she stuffed the shirt into a plastic bag, which she jammed under the kitchen sink.

As the days and then weeks and then months passed, Sila stopped spending time with her friends. She came straight home every day after school and stayed in her room with her family's computer as a companion. Sila lost track of many of the things that she used to find fun, and clung to a very specific routine. She told no one about her situation. It wasn't anyone's business.

Sila did chores with her father on weekends, taking the laundry downstairs to the room off the parking garage on Saturdays. She vacuumed the apartment on Sundays, because that's what her mother had done.

She and Alp had stretched out her mother's home-cooked food for as long as possible, but it had been gone for months now. They tried to make meals the way they used to eat as a family, with vegetables, a salad, fish or chicken,

and bread, but it was a lost cause. Mostly they ate scrambled eggs and toast for dinner.

Her father always read as he consumed his food. He worked as a car mechanic at an independent repair shop, and Sila was sure he was one of the few people in the world to find an owner's manual interesting. Sila just stared at the computer screen, keeping the sound on mute.

The best part of the day was when her mother would appear online at the arranged time. They talked. They laughed. They tried not to cry. They worked to keep it light-hearted. It was amazing how much they spoke about the weather. It was a neutral subject that was ever changing. But maybe more to the point, there was nothing they could do about it. Is that why talking about rain felt safe?

Because the time online was never enough. Once they had said goodbye the empty space would return. Sila and Alp didn't speak much to each other after the calls. Waiting made silence easier to tolerate than voices. No one but Sila's father understood, because no one else but him was feeling the same thing.

The rest of the world was getting on with their lives.