
Opening Extract from...

Silent House

Written by Orhan Pamuk

Translated from the Turkish by Robert Finn

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Silent House

I

Recep Goes to the Movies

Dinner is nearly ready, Madam," I said. "Please come to the table."

She said nothing, just stood there, planted on her cane. I went over, took her by the arm, and brought her to the table. She just muttered a little. I went down to the kitchen, got her tray, and put it in front of her. She looked at it but didn't touch the food. I got out her napkin, stretched it out under her huge ears, and knotted it.

"Well, what did you make tonight?" she said. "Let's see what you put together."

"Baked eggplant," I said. "You requested it yesterday, right?"

She looked at me.

I slid the plate in front of her. She pushed the food around with her fork, complaining to herself. After picking at it a little, she began to eat.

"Madam, don't forget your salad," I said before going inside and sitting down to my own eggplant.

A little later, she called out, "Salt. Recep, where's the salt?" I went back out and saw it was right in front of her.

"Here it is!"

"Well, this is a new one," she said. "Why do you go inside when I'm eating?"

I didn't answer.

"They're coming tomorrow, aren't they?"

"They're coming, Madam, they're coming," I said. "Weren't you going to put some salt on that?"

"You mind your own business!" she said. "Are they coming?"

"Tomorrow afternoon," I said. "They called, you know."

"What else have you got?"

I took the uneaten eggplant back, ladled a good portion of beans onto a fresh plate, and brought it out to her. When she'd lost interest in the beans and started stirring them around, I returned to the kitchen and sat down to resume my supper. A little later she called out again, this time for pepper, but I pretended not to hear her. When she cried *Fruit!* I went in and pushed the fruit bowl in front of her. Her thin, bony hand began to wander over the fruit like a drowsy spider. Finally it stopped.

"All rotten! Where'd you find these? Lying on the ground under the trees?"

"They're not rotten, Madam," I said. "They're just ripe. These are the best peaches. I got them from the fruit seller. You know there are no peach trees around here anymore."

Pretending she hadn't heard me she chose one of the peaches. I went inside and was just finishing my beans when she shouted, "Untie me! Recep, where are you? Let me out of this!"

I ran in and as I undid her napkin I saw that she had left half the peach.

"Let me at least give you some apricots, Madam. Otherwise you'll wake me up in the middle of the night and tell me you're hungry."

"I've never been so hungry that I've had to eat things that have fallen off the trees, thank you."

As she wiped her mouth she wrinkled her face, then pretended to pray for a while before getting up.

"Take me upstairs!"

She leaned on me and we made our way, stopping on the ninth step to catch our breath.

"Have you made up their rooms?" she said, gasping.

"I made them up."

"Okay, then let's go," she said, leaning on me all the more.

We continued to the top step. "Eighteen, nineteen, thank God," she said, and went into her room.

"Let's turn on your light," I said. "I am going to be at the movies."

"The movies!" she said. "A grown man. Well, don't stay out late."

I went down, finished my beans, and washed the dishes. I already had my tie on under my apron. So I had only to get my jacket, check for my wallet, and be gone.

The wind blew cool from the sea, and it was pleasant. The leaves of the fig tree were rustling. I shut the garden gate and walked down toward the beach. Where our garden wall ended, the pavement and the new concrete houses began. They were on their balconies, in their little narrow gardens, watching, families listening to the news on TV, the women at their charcoal grills. They didn't see me. Meat on the grills and smoke. Families, lives; I wonder what it's like. When winter comes, though, there'll be nobody around. Then I'll be frightened just to hear my own footsteps in the empty streets. I felt myself shivering and put on my jacket and turned the corner.

It was funny to think how they all sat down to eat their dinner and watch TV at the same time! As I was walking around in the back streets, a car pulled up at the end of one of those that opened onto the square, and a tired husband back from Istanbul got out. He went into the house with his bag, looking upset to be getting home so late for his dinner in front of the television. When I got down to the shore again, I heard Ismail's voice: "National lottery, six days left!"

He didn't see me; I didn't say anything either. He was bobbing up and down as he walked among the tables in the restaurant. One table called him over, and he went, bending down to present a fistful of lottery tickets to a girl in a white dress with a ribbon in her hair. The girl picked carefully as her mother and father smiled with pleasure. I

turned away, saying I was not going to look anymore. If I had called out, if Ismail had seen me, he would have quickly limped over to me. He would have said, Brother, why don't you ever stop by? Your house is so far away, Ismail, I would have said, and it's up high on the hill. Yes, you're right, he would have said. When Doğan Bey gave us that money, brother, if I had bought property here instead of on the hill, oh Recep, if I had bought on the shore instead of up there because it was near the train station, I'd be a millionaire, he would have said, always in those words. His pretty wife would say nothing, only look at you. Why should I go? True, sometimes I want to, sometimes on winter nights when I have no one to talk to, I feel the urge and I do go, but it's always the same words.

The casinos on the shore were empty. The televisions were on. The tea men had lined up hundreds of empty tea glasses in rows they all sparkled nice and clean under the powerful lights. They were waiting for the news to finish and the crowds to pour out into the streets. The cats were crouched under the empty chairs. I walked on.

Rowboats were pulled up close to the wall on the other side of the breakwater. There was nobody on the dirty little beach. Seaweed that had landed on the shore and dried out, bottles, pieces of plastic . . . They said they were going to knock down Ibrahim the coffee man's house, the coffeehouses, too. I suddenly got excited when I saw the light in the windows of the coffeehouse. Maybe there'd be somebody there. Somebody who didn't play cards—we'd talk. He'd ask, How are you. I'd tell him, he'd listen, and How are you; he'd tell and I'd listen. Raising our voices to be heard above the television and the general din. Friendship. Maybe we'd even go to the movies together.

But as soon as I walked into the coffeehouse I lost my good spirits, because those two punks were there again. They were glad when they saw me, and they looked at each other and laughed. But I don't see you, I'm looking at my watch. I'm looking for a friend. Nevzat was sitting over there on the left, watching the card players. I got a chair and joined him. I was happy.

"So," I said. "How are you?"

He didn't say anything.

I looked at the television a little bit; it was the end of the news. I looked at the cards being passed around and at Nevzat looking at them. I wanted them all to finish their hand, and they did, but still they didn't talk to me; they just talked and laughed among themselves. Then they resumed their game and got wrapped up in it before stopping again. Finally, as they were dealing out the cards for another hand, I figured I'd better say something.

"Nevzat, that milk you gave us this morning was very good."

He nodded without turning his head from the cards.

"Plenty of fat in it; it's good."

He nodded again. I looked at my watch. It was five to nine. I looked at the television and lost track of things; much later I realized that the young men were snickering. When I saw the newspaper in their hands, I thought in fear, Oh God, not another picture. Because they kept looking at me and then the newspaper, laughing in a nasty way. Pay no attention, Recep! But I thought about it anyway: sometimes they put a picture in the papers, they have no feelings. They write something terrible underneath, just as when they print a picture of a naked lady or a bear giving birth in the zoo. In a panic, I turned to Nevzat and said, without thinking:

"How are you?"

He turned to me for a second, muttering something, but I couldn't think of anything more to say because my mind was on the picture. So I gave up and began to watch the two young guys on the sly. When we came eye to eye, they began to smirk even more. I turned away. A king fell on the table. The players all cursed, some of them happy and some of them disappointed. Then a new game began; the cards and the good mood changed hands. Was there a face card? I had a sudden thought.

"Cemil," I called out. "A tea over here!"

So I had found something to keep me busy for a little while, but it didn't last very long. I kept thinking about what the young men were

laughing about in the newspaper. When I looked again, they had given it to Cemil and were pointing out the picture. When Cemil saw my discomfort, he let them have it: "Hoodlums!"

Well, everything was out in the open. I couldn't pretend I hadn't noticed anymore. I should have left a long time ago. The young guys were laughing openly.

"What is going on, Cemil?" I said. "What is in that paper?"

"Nothing!" he said.

I tried to hold myself back, but I didn't have the strength because I was overwhelmed with curiosity. I got up from the chair like someone in a trance, took a few slow steps over to Cemil, passing the young men who had fallen silent.

"Give me that paper!"

He made as if to withhold the paper as he spoke softly. "Who knows if it's even real? I've never heard of such a thing." Then staring fiercely at the young men, he said, "Shameless!" before finally surrendering the newspaper.

Like a hungry wolf I grabbed it from his hand and opened it, my heart was pounding as I looked at the page he had pointed to, but there was no picture.

"Down there!" said Cemil growing nervous.

My eyes moved quickly over the "History Corner."

" 'Üsküdar's historical treasures,' " I began to read aloud, " 'Yahya Kemal, the poet, and Üsküdar . . . " Then below headlines "General Mehmet" . . . "the Greek Mosque" . . . "Şemsi Pasha Mosque and Library" . . . Finally I followed Cemil's fingertip down to the bottom and I saw:

"The Dwarves' House in Üsküdar!"

I felt the blood rush to my face as I read the item in one breath.

" 'Along with these, there was at one time a dwarves' house in Üsküdar. This house, which was built for dwarves, not for ordinary people, was perfectly complete. Except its rooms, doors, windows, and stairs were made for dwarves, and a regular person had to bend himself in half to get in. According to research done by the art his-

torian Dr. Süheyl Enver, this house was built by Handan Sultan, spouse of Sultan Mehmet III, and mother of Sultan Ahmet I. This lady loved her dwarves so much, this excessive affection occupies a special place in the history of the Harem. Handan Sultan wanted her dear friends to live together undisturbed in peace after she died, so she put the palace carpenter Ramazan Usta to work. It is said that the perfection of the ironwork and woodwork made this little house a work of art. However, we must admit that we do not know for certain whether such a strange and interesting building actually existed, as it is not mentioned by the historian Evliya Çelebi, who wandered through Üsküdar in the same years. Even if there had really been such a place, this curious house must have disappeared in the famous fire that terrorized Üsküdar in 1642.' "

"Just forget it, Recep," Cemil said as I stood there trembling. "Why do you pay attention to these punks?"

I had a terrible compulsion to read the newspaper again, but I didn't have the strength. Drenched in sweat, I felt as if I couldn't breathe. The paper slipped out of my hand and fell to the floor.

"Have a seat," said Cemil. "Take it easy. You're upset, don't overreact." Then he said again, "Punks!" talking to the young men who were watching with malicious interest as I swayed on my feet.

"Yes," I said, "I am upset." I was quiet for a minute and collected myself and then, mustering all my strength, I spoke again. "Not because I'm a dwarf, am I upset," I said. "What's really upsetting is that people can be nasty enough to make fun of a fifty-five-year-old dwarf."

There was a silence. The card players must have heard, too. Nevzat and I came eye to eye. The young men were looking down; they were at least a bit ashamed. My head was now spinning; the television was droning away.

"Punks," repeated Cemil, now with less feeling.

And then, as I was weaving my way to the door, "Hey, Recep, where are you going?"

I didn't answer. I managed in a couple of faltering steps to leave

the bright lights of the coffeehouse behind me. I was outside again, in the cool dark night.

I was in no condition to continue, but I forced myself to take a few more steps before sitting down on one of the posts near the jetty. I breathed deeply in the clean air; my heart was still beating fast. What should I do? The lights of the casinos and restaurants were gleaming in the distance. They had strung colored lights in the trees, and underneath those lights people were eating, talking with one another: my God!

The door of the coffeehouse opened, and I heard Cemil call out:

"Recep, Recep, where are you?"

I didn't make a sound. He didn't see me and went inside.

A long time afterward, I heard the rumbling of the train to Ankara. It must have been about ten past nine, and I was thinking like this: They were all just words, weren't they? A cloud of sound that disappeared the moment it came out? I felt a little better, but I didn't want to go home. There was nothing else to do: I'd still go to the movies. I'd stopped sweating; my heart had slowed down; I was better. I took a deep breath and walked on.

In the coffeehouse, I thought, they've forgotten me and those words now, and the television is still droning. If Cemil hasn't thrown them out, the young men are looking for somebody else to make fun of. So, here I am on the street again, the crowd's out, they've finished their food, and now they're taking a little stroll to digest before they sit down in front of the TV again or go to the nightclubs. They eat ice cream, talk, and greet one another. The women and their husbands who come back from Istanbul in the evenings and their children always chewing on something; they recognize one another and say hello. I passed by the restaurants again. Ismail wasn't there. Maybe he sold out the tickets he had in his hand and was climbing the hill up to his house again. If I had planned to go see him instead of a movie, we might have talked. But we always say the same things.

The avenue was pretty crowded. Cars waiting in front of the ice-cream shop and groups of three or four walking together tied

up the traffic. I looked presentable in my tie and jacket but I can't stand crowds like that; I turned off into a side street. The kids were playing hide-and-seek between the cars on the narrow streets in the blue light coming from the televisions. When I was little I used to think that I would be good at this game, but I never had the courage to join in with them like Ismail. But if I had played I would have hidden myself best of all, maybe here, in the ruins of the caravanserai that my mother said had had plague or, for example, in the village, in the haystack, and if I never came out, then who would they have made fun of, I wondered, but my mother would have looked for me, she would have said, Ismail, where's your brother? And Ismail would have pulled on his nose and said, How would I know, as I stayed hidden listening to them, whispering, I live in secret, all by myself, Mother, where no one can see me, only my mother would then start to cry so much that I'd come out, saying, Look, here I am, I'm not hiding anymore, see, I'm not hiding anymore, Mother, and my mother would have said, Why were you hiding, my son, and I would have thought, Maybe she's right, what use is hiding, what's to be gained living in secret? I would have forgotten for a moment.

I saw them as they moved quickly down the avenue. Sıtkı Bey, grown up and married, with his wife, and he even had a kid as tall as I was. He recognized me, smiled, and paused.

"Hello, Recep Efendi," he said. "How are you?"

I always waited for them to talk first.

"Hello, Sıtkı Bey," I said. "I'm fine, thank you."

I shook hands with him. Not with his wife. The children were staring in fear and curiosity.

"Sweetie, Recep Bey's been living here in Cennethisar longer than just about anybody else."

His wife nodded with a smile. I was happy, proud of being one of the old-timers here.

"How's Grandma?"

"Oh," I said, "Madam always complains, but she's fine."

"How many years has it been?" he said. "Where is Faruk?"

"They're coming tomorrow," I said.

He started explaining to his wife that Faruk Bey was his childhood friend. Then without shaking hands, just nodding, we said good-bye and parted. Now he was talking to his wife about his childhood and about me, how I took them to the well when they were little and showed them how to fish for mullet, and then the kid would finally ask his question: "Daddy, why is that man so small?" I used to say: Because my mother gave birth before she got married. But Sıtkı Bey got married, Faruk Bey got married, and they had no kids at all. But because my mother had done just the opposite, Madam sent her, along with us, to the village. Before she sent us, there were words and she threatened us all with her cane, and my mother pleaded, Don't do that, Madam, what fault of the children's is it? Sometimes, I think I heard those words, on that terrible day . . .

In the well-lit street of the movie theater, I heard the music they play before the film starts. I looked at still shots from the film that was showing: *Let's Meet in Paradise*. It's an old film: in one scene, Hülya Koçyiğit and Ediz Hun are in each other's arms, then Ediz is in prison, then Hülya is singing a song, but you'd never be able to tell what order these things happened in until you'd seen the film. This probably occurred to them when they put the pictures up; it gets people interested. I went to the ticket window, One please. The woman pulled off a ticket and rose a little from her seat so as to hold it out to me

"Is the film any good?" I asked.

She hadn't seen it. Sometimes, out of the blue, I just want to talk to someone like this. I took my seat and waited.

When first they meet, the girl is a singer and doesn't like him, but the next day, when the guy saves her from those villains, she likes him and then realizes she loves him, but her father is against their getting married. Then the guy goes to prison. I didn't go out with the crowd at the intermission. When it started again, the girl marries the son of the nightclub owner, but they don't have any kids and they don't do anything about it either. Eventually, the husband runs off

after a bad woman and Ediz escapes from prison. In a house near the Istanbul Bridge, he meets Hülya Koçyiğit, who sings a song. The song left me in a strange mood. At the end, she wants to free herself from the lousy husband, and since he's met his own punishment anyway, we figure out that they are going to get married. Her father is looking at them warmly from behind as they are walking arm in arm on the road, walking, getting smaller and smaller and THE END.

After the lights came up, and everybody was filing out, buzzing about the film, I wanted to talk about it with someone, too. It was ten after eleven. Madam would be waiting, but I didn't want to return home.

I walked toward the beach over to the hill. Maybe Kemal Bey, the pharmacist, would be on duty and not feeling sleepy. I'll barge in, we'll talk, I'll tell him things, he'll listen to me, lost in thought, staring into the lights of the food stand across the way at the kids shouting at one another and racing their cars. When I saw that the pharmacy lights were on, I was happy. He hadn't gone to bed. I opened the door and the bell rang. Oh God, it wasn't Kemal Bey but his wife.

"Hello," I said and paused. "I need an aspirin."

"A box or one tablet," said the wife.

"Two tablets. I have a headache. I'm a little bored . . . Kemal Bey . . . ," I said, but she wasn't listening. She had her scissors out and was cutting the individual aspirin packets.

"Did Kemal Bey already go out for the morning fish?" I said.

"Kemal's asleep upstairs."

I looked at the ceiling for a minute and considered that, just two inches above it, my friend lay sleeping. If he happened to stir, I would tell him about my evening. He might have something to say about those kids at the coffeehouse, but then again he might not, he might simply stare out in that bewildered way, so thoughtful, as I talked, as we talked. I took the change his wife set out with her little white hands. Then I looked around and saw lying there right on the couch one of those photo novels for all to see. Nice lady! I said good night and left without troubling her further; the bell jingled again. The

streets were emptier, and the children playing hide-and-seek had gone home.

As I latched the garden gate behind me, I saw Madam's light through the shutters: she could never sleep before I went to bed. I went in through the kitchen door and locked it behind me, too, and as I slowly climbed up the stairs I wondered, Were there steps in the dwarves' house in Üsküdar? Which paper was it, I would go and get from the store tomorrow, Do you have yesterday's *Tercüman,* our Faruk Bey is looking for it, I'd say. He's a historian, he is interested in the 'History Corner . . .'

"I'm here, Madam," I said, finding her lying in bed.

"Well done," she said. "You finally managed to find your way home."

"The film was over late, what was I supposed to do?"

"Did you make sure of the doors?"

"I closed them," I said. "Do you want anything before I'm sound asleep in bed?"

"They are coming tomorrow, aren't they?"

"Yes," I said. "I've made up their beds and prepared their rooms."

"Okay," she said. "Close my door tight."

Downstairs, I went right to bed and to sleep.