



moon and water

ayla kutlu

translated by Roberta Micallef



ABOUT THE AUTHOR//

Ayla Kutlu (b.1938) is one of the literary virtuosos of her generation, and one of the foremost of a group of powerful Turkish women writers who came to prominence in the 1990s. Her novels, short stories, and children's books. Her works have been translated into German, English, Hungarian, Arabic, Macedonian, Greek and Italian, and three have been adapted into films. The suffering of women is an especial focus in Kutlu's work, and indeed it is her talent for depicting emotionally complex characters, especially women, which has helped her to earn a place in the top echelon of Turkish writers.

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Hello!... Yerasim is speaking with the doctors on your behalf.

He wanted me to wait. Do you remember me? I am from Iskenderun. For a while we were in the same class. You left without finishing school or even the school year. I can't imagine you would forget that I was a close friend of your brother-in-law, Yerasim. Your husband, Hristo, was older than us. Eighteen-, nineteen-year-old young men, who worked and supported a household, were considered adult men. They would ignore boys like us.

Our holidays would all mix together and join one another's. This togetherness lasted until we left that place. Now people everywhere are split apart, the sharing of holidays and joyous days forgotten. They threw out this word: "assimilation." Assimilation meant imposing an action by force. Later, it turned into a word that swept aside with the back of its hand and with the push of a pen the desire for integration that you, by virtue of being human, wanted. Assimilation disgusts me. It pushed me away from the joy of life and friendships that I miss...

If they had told me that one-day with you in a room and the two of us alone, I would not have believed them. However, under these circumstances, no one would want it.

Would you like some water? Shall I open the window? I know that you cannot speak. I don't understand the language of your eyes. Many years stand between us. As time passed the number of things we don't share increased. Don't your arms and legs move at all?

You've gained a lot of weight. Yerasim said it was because of your illness. He said, "You will find that she has changed a lot" but still ...

Seeing you took me back many years. You were our neighborhood's girl. My older brother was in love with you. You lived in a big run-down house with your father. Yerasim and Hristo weren't around yet.

Your house was surrounded by a wall, now mostly in ruins, made of round stones and filled in with river mud. It was on a narrow dead-end street. At the bottom of the house at the end of the garden, there were hibiscus trees. I was little and the trees were big. I grew but the trees did not shrink. Believe me, I have not since seen such impressive hibiscus trees. And, yet, the only place on earth that I have not seen is Indochina. Your flowers were something else.

The only window looking onto the street was the window of your room. Planted from the door of the garden all the way up to the house were, onions, eggplants, tomatoes, mint, watercress, radishes. Among the vegetables, clusters of gillyflowers and cyclamen would bloom. You were the one who had spread their seeds by the handful. Among the purple eggplants and the red tomatoes, pink cyclamen and sweet scented yellow stock would gush out, and the flowers would outshine the vegetables.

For years, I saw the difference between the dreams of my youth and the gains of my middle age as the same as the battle between those flowers and vegetables. And I always missed those flowers.

The hibiscus trees would be painted red every morning with thousands of flowers. The buds, made up of five petals each the size of a tongue, would open up quickly and in the evenings close up equally fast, and the next day another red coat would engulf the tree. The flowers that faded in three days would put a reddish death stamp on the soil under the tree.

This would leave me breathless.

In the evenings after dinner, my older brother would give the signal, and we would get up, stick our hands in our pockets and leave the house, acting as if we were grown men. We would want our family to think that we were going to the seashore. We would go to the avenue.

Because of that, the way would take longer. So what ...

Afraid of getting caught, we would turn around bend low and pass by our door. It's not like there was any other adventure in our lives.

First, we would see the lamp. It was in your room. Your father would drink his wine in the back room in the trembling light of the small kerosene lamp, which did not chase away the darkness but only barely reached across to him. You would be on your knees in front of the icon in the corner. Your head would be slightly raised. What kind of sin could you have committed that you were asking for forgiveness?

The lamp would make you translucent. You had uncovered and brushed your hair, but we wouldn't be able to see it below your waist. It flowed further down and wrapped around your heels and spread in two directions. It trailed on the floor. We knew ...

The music of the night, audible only to us, would surround us. We couldn't hear our own breath, but we were certain that we heard yours. We used to think that you prayed for your father to give up drinking. Your hair which flowed like a dark river and your eyes whose light continuously remained hidden because your head was bent down, left my older brother sleepless for many nights. They were rainy days. The town would experience winters no differently than the wet, foggy autumns. The street in front of your house had a depression where the rain would accumulate, and slim lines at the bottom of the walls would remain dry. The moon, crescent or full, would be reflected in the water. We wouldn't want to create ripples, so we would step into the water softly and quietly. We would get wet up to our ankles, but we wouldn't disturb the reflection of the moon in the water. The surface of the water would become wrinkled with the undulation caused by our feet. The moon was gold, the water silver. We would mix them and all we would see was the extraordinary beauty of this mixture. All sounds would vanish at that moment. We would take our eyes off you, and we would wait for the golden moon undulating in the wavy water to take its place in darkness in the sky. Another step would take us out of the silver water. We would return and

plunge into the water again, and only a few steps later would we notice that our feet were cold.

In the middle of winter, the rains seemed endless. They would not remain content with just filling holes. All the streets would be covered in water as deep as a finger's width, or the span of a hand. The streets were like canals. Mostly it was pieces of wood that would float by. Sugar cane husks and carob also ... The pieces of wood would become darker and their sides foamy. They would snag on bumps on the narrow sidewalks and remain there. Time would pass. When the streets dried up, maggots would spill out of the now rotten pieces of wood and push themselves into the sand and disappear.

Oh, why are you opening your eyes? Do you want something? Or are you bored? Don't you feel any part of your body? What if I were to scratch you somewhere? Or tickled you? Water, bad soap, cracks from the cold were always visible in your hands. I didn't want to see them. So this means that your life didn't change.

When the weather became cooler, your father knew that the season to make sweet roasted chickpeas had come. We would be on our way to school after having eaten at home. When the lid of the metal cauldron, in front of which he had worked and sweated all morning, would open, the somewhat wet, somewhat warm semi-transparent, white sugarcoated chickpeas would spill out with the abundance of a divine gift.

They wouldn't burn our hands. Shortly after we put the chickpeas in our pockets, warmth would spread over our legs. The warm taste flavored with a dash of cloves would quickly evaporate in our mouths. The boredom of school would be scattered, mixing into the thin rain

Four seasons didn't exist there. The greenery was so dense and so widespread that one thought time did not pass. It turned from day to night, from summer to winter. Children would get taller, classes would change, voices would become deeper, unknown emotions and desires would start galloping like wild foals across the meadows inside us.

When your father—who had grown tired from preparing chickpeas—stopped at the grocer next door to drink three, five glasses of wine, you would arrive later at school than all of us, usually after the teacher had entered the classroom. Your tresses that would curl above your nose, and your temple would perspire. Your eyes were large, long-lashed, and shy looking. You would braid your hair really tight, but still curly wisps of hair would escape over your ears, at the nape of your neck.... You would cut them off without any attempt at style. It was clear that you hated them.

Your father did not want your breasts to grow, your body to become shapely, or your lips to thicken. Your development meant that he would lose you.

Yerasim told me on the phone: “I am coming with my sister-in-law. Find me in the Balikli Greek Hospital. You must come...” When he said “my sister-in-law,” it never occurred to me that it could be you. Paralysis spread over your body here, is that so? What happened? I know that you can’t speak. You never really spoke much anyway. If it was really necessary to speak, you preferred to say the least with the fewest amount of words.

Yerasim doesn’t want you to be alone for one second. Apparently, your husband is coming tonight. You probably know that.

I was there when your father came out from somewhere in the back of the store. Our money in our hands, we expected you to give us candy generously without paying attention to the scale or amounts. The destructive steam of anger had mixed into his drink. He beat you savagely without any mercy. He didn’t say anything to any of us. Still we ran away in fear like a bunch of chicks. You didn’t come to school that afternoon.

You never came again. You sold the chickpea candy with your head cast down, giving us the exact amount of chickpeas for our money. You didn’t say a word to anyone.

Spring came and it turned to summer. When the mimosa tree in our garden bloomed, my brother dreamed of making a garland for your hair with its pink corkscrews, draping toward the ground.

Every morning he would fasten new ones. At first his passion and dream seemed comical to me. But I got used to it quickly. When there were no customers in the dark store, you sat on the wicker chair resting your hands on your knees. I saw curly pink mimosas in your hair that cascaded downward in waves.

My brother was right. Love is always right. When you catch beauty, there is nothing as joyous as living with it.

When we left the house and headed to the avenue, my brother would stop under the lamp at the corner and he would lift his head and look at the lamp. According to him, the lifeless yellow light was the color of your face. He was right. Later when we arrived under the lamp, we would raise our heads together. My brother gave me permission to fall in love with you.

He went to a military prep school. In a short while, he forgot his childhood love. I didn't forget.

You were not coming to school. My brother was far away. Your father took a young boy as an apprentice. After the boy learned the job, you stayed in the house. All the spells were broken. The hibiscuses were painting the front of your house a deep red. You were no longer the light of the dark store or the curves of the dark road. Not being able to talk about you with anyone was choking me. The moon was falling on the water. I was going into the water on my own, like a cad. I was making the moon quiver, upsetting it. I was passing through the water and standing in front of your door without waiting for the moon to settle into its place again. I could not see you. Yerasim and his family rented the front part of your house. I don't know, but maybe that's why I wanted to be friends with Yerasim. Whatever the reason, the result was good.

We even compared the length of our things, Yerasim and I. His thing still had its peel on it. I laughed. It was childish. His boyish feelings were crushed. Because of that,

we didn't compare again. My paternal grandmother would say that there were non-Muslims who were circumcised from birth and therefore born Muslims. I always wanted to tell him that. Then I forgot.

If you could laugh, you would laugh.

Yerasim's mother, wasn't her name Maro? Your mother-in-law. She would make warm, olive-oil-based meals, with chick peas, lots of mint, stuffed bell peppers and tomatoes, rice with mussels, delicious salads from greens I had never heard of and that I would never taste again. We wouldn't just eat them—we would inhale them.

In the evenings, my hands in my pockets, all alone, I would enter the water where the moon swam. Knowing that I would not be able to see you would not stop me.

You are she, Hristo's sweet, young wife. Time began to move when I left town. I grew up. In my mind, you always remained in that town and at that age—seventeen, I think.

Were you happy? Do you have children? If you can't move at all, open and close your eyes. Ooh, four children? I thought you would be of those delicate ones who only give birth to one child. How the daughter of a poor chickpea seller could be a delicate woman was not something I ever thought about.

The night that I saw you at your church is an important night. I had stayed awake all night. I had not spoken for an entire day. After the Christmas mass was over, we were going to go and spy on the bedroom of a newly wed waiter. I waited for a long time outside the church. Those who entered were not coming out. Fearing that I would lose my religion, I entered. I looked for you among those sitting on the polished pews. Not Yerasim, you. You were standing. You were leaning against the wall. You had thrown a deep black lace covering over your head. Your face was sallow. You know, how when the summer sun hits the dried grass and turns it into mother-of-pearl, that color. Yerasim was about to explode from boredom.

I understood that liking had turned to love when I saw that mother-of-pearl face framed in black lace. Yerasim and I went out. The air cooled off Yerasim's perspiration.

I was hoping that the air would lighten my reality. But it was making my heart hurt. I no longer wanted to watch the angry waiter, who every night ripped off his wife's clothes, beat her, and then made love to her. I needed to think about you. Because I felt very guilty, I couldn't look Yerasim in the face.

Yerasim's conversation with the doctor is taking a long time.

It's as if the hospital is totally empty. Maybe Yerasim left to buy your medicine. Why are you looking at me like that, your eyes like saucers? Your eyes are green. Weren't they black?

Could you be someone else? You didn't smile, you didn't seem to recognize any of my story. You kept looking at me like a little girl listening to a sweet love story. I may have failed to remember the color of your eyes.

With your permission, I am going to touch you. Until now I never touched you. My hands are shaking. I am excited. Your eyes must be shut. Yes, like that... Your hands must join one another across your breast. They are going to make you pretty...

What does one say under these circumstances? Fare well.

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ON THE COVER// This tin-glazed floor tile, from the prayer-cell of abbess Maria Benedetti in the convent of San Paolo in Parma, was ordered and laid in the 1470s or '80s.



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