

**Ferzan Ozpetek**

**LIKE A BREATH**

**Translation by Olivia Jung**

Kaş, June 20, 2019

Dear Adele,

*I'm writing you this letter from the terrace of a café overlooking the port of Kaş. I will stay here for another week. It's been a long time since my last letter where I told you about my many adventures and how much I was enjoying the new life I had chosen away from home. Meanwhile, more things have happened, some of which left a mark. I lost some of my enthusiasm along the way, but they say it's physiological: I am now a "mature" woman. And you must be too, even though I have a hard time picturing it.*

*This year has been rather trying, also on a physical level. I barely recognize myself. Living is consuming me. I look in the mirror and I see myself disfigured. I encountered many joys, but also many sorrows, and the last one is always worse than the previous. My beloved friend Dario passed last month. He didn't live in Turkey anymore, but we were still in touch and we used to call each other almost every week. We decided to meet right here, in Kaş, during these days of early summer. But death was in a hurry and took him away without giving us the chance to say goodbye. I am crying for him like I've never cried for anyone else before, not even for love. I think about his optimism, his irresistible irony, the honesty with which he could speak directly to my heart.*

*Today is a beautiful sunny day. And yet, here I am, sitting in the shade in the company of ghosts from the past, while an angst I can't even describe robs me of the little breath I have left. If life were fairer, Dario would be sitting next to me now, sipping a Turkish coffee, a lit cigarette between his fingers. Instead, I am alone at our rendezvous. I know, coming here anyway was absurd, but I thought that deep down I owed it to him. We talked at lengths about this trip: cancelling it would've been like betraying him. Now, however, I'm not so sure it was wise to follow my heart. Dealing with his absence is an intolerable pain. Even the sea, so bright and blue, wounds me. And I repeat to myself that poem by Nazim Hikmet: "The days are gradually getting shorter, the rains are about to start. My door waited wide open for you. Why were you so late?"*

*These verses just accentuate my sadness. And here I am, frail and inconsolable.*

*The pain reopens ancient wounds. It forces me to think about everything I have lost, to think about you. So, after a long period of silence, I am showing up again.*

*Where had we left off? What did we become?*

*It's been fifty years since we took different roads. I certainly didn't believe that day would be our last one together, that we would never see each other again. Believe it or not, but leaving Italy at the time wasn't a sacrifice at all for me. It was a life choice that allowed me to be reborn. I hope it was just as essential for you to stay. Thanks to that decision, I was able once again to love, to betray, to laugh a lot, and even to suffer. And you? How did you live during these years? Not a day goes by that I don't ask myself that question.*

*And now that I'm out of reasons to stay away from where it all started, I would like to see you again. I don't have much time. My health is stable at the moment, but I know it will deteriorate soon, so I've decided to start traveling now before it's too late. I will be arriving in Rome in a few days. It will be like going back in time, which fills me both with joy and dread. I've learned at my own expense to avoid illusions, but I would be lying if I told you that my heart wasn't brimming with hope.*

*I will land in Fiumicino at the end of the month and my greatest wish would be to see you one last time. I don't know how else to get in touch with you: I'm relying entirely on this letter. I don't expect you to answer it, but I hope you will at least read it this time.*

*I will knock on your door on the 28<sup>th</sup>. We can talk then, but we don't have to. Even just a hug will suffice if time was able to heal all wounds, as I hope it did.*

*Yours, Elsa.*

The roast is almost ready. It smells delicious. Even the gratin vegetables have an inviting aroma. The large clock hanging over the fridge indicates it's eleven thirty. In an hour, the guests, or rather their life-long best friends, will arrive: Giulio and Elena, and Annamaria and Leonardo, who are expecting a baby. As Sergio turns to the fridge, he catches a glimpse of his reflection in the kitchen window and for a second he is pleased with himself. He is a handsome man, and he knows it. Dark curly hair, brown eyes, wide forehead, sensual lips, at thirty-four he has a lean and muscular body, but without the excesses of someone obsessed with going to the gym.

Behind him, Giovanna moves efficiently around the large kitchen table. They have been married for two years, but they have been together for twelve. Sergio knows her so well he could guess what she is doing with his eyes shut. But is that really how it is? Are twelve years enough to truly know each other? He turns around. Giovanna, in sweatpants, is setting the table for six with the concentration of an architect laying the foundations of a building, her blue eyes wistfully lost in thought. Her blond, slightly ruffled hair gives her a youthful appearance: she still looks like the girl he approached at the university café, even though they are more or less the same age. They are part of the generation that just turned thirty, just like their friends. Sergio smiles to himself: he can read his wife like an open book. Solid, precise, efficient, and reliable. If there is something she lacks, it's unpredictability. And he loves her for it.

Solid like that apartment of theirs in a charming building from the early 1900s in the Testaccio neighborhood. They bought it barely two years ago, but they always felt like they had been there forever because it suited both their tastes perfectly. It consisted of two large well-lit spaces: the night-area with the bedroom, a walk-in closet, and the bathroom; and the day-area with the living room, an adjacent study, and, above all, a big cozy kitchen where they could invite their friends for lunch on Sundays. They started that tradition a few years back and, as time went by, it became an indispensable ritual.

Sergio enjoys cooking for his friends. He is always busy during the week, running between the courthouse and the law firm where he practices corporate law, dealing with wealthy clients and their million-dollar lawsuits. Sure, the pay is good, but the work is stressful. So cooking is his way of relaxing. As a gourmand, he always enjoys experimenting new recipes in the vast, fully equipped kitchen, with all of its jars, spices, and fresh aromatic herbs. The kitchen is also where they have their guests for lunch, seated around the large wooden table darkened from use. Because that is the room they love the most. Where every piece of furniture and decoration was chosen with special care.

Giovanna doesn't like tablecloths; she prefers setting things directly on the table. After distributing the plates and silverware, she brings the glasses over and arranges them. She takes a step back and observes the final effect with a critical eye, like an artist evaluating her painting after it's done. Sergio watches her out of the corner of his eye. She is a perfectionist in everything she does. Then, Giovanna retrieves the squash blossoms from the refrigerator, she combines them with a bouquet of chili peppers, and adds a couple miniature eggplants. She grabs a white ceramic bowl from a cupboard and places the composition upon it, satisfied: it will be a perfect centerpiece.

"Oh dear, it's almost noon and I haven't even shower yet!" she exclaims looking at the clock that hangs on the kitchen wall.

"Don't worry, I'll finish here. I'm done cooking anyway," says Sergio reassuringly as he turns off the oven.

"The bread is in the white bag in the pantry..."

"Go, go! Or they'll find you in your sweatpants when they get here."

Terrified by the prospect – heaven forbid her guests find her disheveled – Giovanna heads swiftly to the bathroom. Meanwhile, Sergio opens the pantry and immediately finds what he is looking for: a large loaf of

rustic bread. He plans on only slicing half of it, the rest will stay on the cutting board to be carved as needed.

The barely audible sound of running water informs him that his wife is under the shower. It's in that precise instant that the doorbell rings in the kitchen, which is right by the front door. 'It must be Leonardo and Annamaria, they have a habit of showing up too early,' Sergio thinks to himself. They probably found the door to the building open.

"You're always early, damnit..." but he interrupts himself, embarrassed.

He opened the door impetuously, without looking through the peephole, certain he would find his friends on the other side. Instead, there is a woman standing on the landing; she is slightly weighed down by age, probably in her seventies. Through her shoulder-length hair dyed blond, he can see her precious antique earrings. She is wearing a beautifully crafted petroleum-blue linen dress, which wraps her soft figure without highlighting it too much. Around her neck is an amber necklace, and in her hands she clutches an elegantly embroidered bag. Her face is crisscrossed by a dense network of wrinkles, but Sergio barely even notices them because he is captivated by her eyes: green and magnetic, underlined by a slightly unsteady line of kajal.

Sergio looks at her, astonished and fascinated. Who could that woman be? He is sure he has never seen her before. She also looks surprised to see him. Actually, more than surprised, she looks shaken, as if she were expecting to find someone else. Then she glances at the nametag by the door to check, but there is nothing written on it. Sergio and Giovanna never found the time to write their names on it (or maybe they didn't want to); and now that act of carelessness seems suddenly reprehensible to him.

Before he has a chance to ask her what she wants, the stranger recovers from the shock and gives him a disarming smile while looking him straight in the eyes with an innocent air: "Sorry to bother you. Oh dear, showing up at someone's door like this, on a Sunday morning, it's just not proper... not one bit!"

Sergio is so surprised that he can't come up with anything sensible to say, but he doesn't have to because she promptly introduces herself.

"My name is Elsa Corti. I lived in this apartment many years ago."