

# My Hazelnut Heart

She only speaks a few words of her in-laws' language, but she knows how to find the right thing to say.

by Justine Ickes, first published in The Magazine on Medium, Issue # 40, April 10, 2014

photos by Justine Ickes



*the author's son, Ayden*

Each August, a filbert frenzy seizes Beşikdüzü, my Turkish husband's hometown in the foothills of the Kaçkar Mountains. Men, women, and children scour the sprawling groves, shaking the 10-foot trees, and rooting in the moist sod for fallen nuts.

An agricultural staple, the hazelnut has been grown here since 300 b.c. Packed with fiber and vitamin E, the super food purportedly lessens the risk of colon cancer and heart disease and

ameliorates high blood pressure. Turkey produces roughly 75 percent of the world's supply, enough to quell the most insatiable Nutella cravings.

The harvest alone didn't draw me to this hillside hamlet. With my in-laws nearing 80, little time remains for bicultural bonding between my American-born sons and their grandparents Muzaffer and Sevim. So in June we left my husband behind in Connecticut and headed to the Black Sea.

Without a common language, we relied on gestures and one-word exchanges.

"*Guzel?*" I asked one day, holding up a shriveled specimen. Good? Growing in clusters of five to twelve, each nut shelters in a leathery green husk, or "hazel" from the Anglo-Saxon for "headdress." As the fruit ripens, the leaves and stem dry out until the mature nuts drop to the ground.

"Tsk," Muzaffer clicked his tongue, and tossed the moldy mass over his shoulder. He brushed a mosquito from his brow and settled back on his heels. In his baggy pinstriped cotton pajamas and ribbed sleeveless undershirt he looked like a Silk Road Bilbo Baggins.

Sevim padded over, hooked a small funnel-shaped basket around my waist, and shooed me off toward the roof to lay our haul out to dry. Halfway up the slope I tripped and toppled face-first, the hazelnuts bouncing to the ground like badminton birdies.

"Stupid nuts," I hissed under my breath in embarrassment.

## **Amerikali**

My ankle and my ego were still smarting later when we decamped to the earthen patio. Muzaffer spread a prayer rug beneath a

green-and-white striped canopy strung between two mimosa trees. Even in the shade, the still air sizzled. I thumbed through a newspaper, my sweat sticking to the pages, and tried to decipher the Turkish.

Nearby, Sevim raked a heap of nuts onto a tarp and scanned the sky for clouds. Then, wiping her brow, she plopped onto a tree stump and began to peel. Deftly, she pried open the bonnets with her thumb and flicked the nuts into a red plastic basin. Soon husks littered the table and ground.

I set down my dictionary and picked up a cluster. Wedging my fingers between the frills, I tugged at the leaves. But the nut wouldn't budge. Frustrated, I decided to go for a walk and gathered my boys and we clomped off down the hill past thousands of nuts basking in the sun.



*the author and her son, Noah*

The footpath dead-ended into a gully where boulders and tree roots clogged a mud-choked rivulet. The town was paving over hazelnut groves to make way for a modern road. A dump truck clattered by with a tangle of limp branches.

“Why are they cutting everything down?” my son Ayden worried. “Don’t they know we’re farmers?”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself a farmer,” I said.

“Why not?” Ayden asked, squatting down to examine an anthill.

“Why don’t you guys play torpedo?” I said to sidestep the awkwardness. As my sons lobbed rock-bombs into the stream I closed my eyes and imagined their father, uncles and all the generations of village boys that came before.

We lingered for an hour, Ayden and Noah cheering over every hit. Then, as lightning flickered across the valley, we headed home.

Suddenly, Ayden stopped short. I looked up and saw Muzaffer, flashlight in hand. From his glare I knew we were late.

“*Ayip!*” he scolded — *Shame on you.*

The insult stung and, wounded, I retreated to my room while the kids peeled off to play hide-and-seek. “I’m 50 years old!” I fumed silently. “I’m not going to do everything his way!” Through the window, I heard Sevim trying to calm Muzaffer. “*Amerikali,*” she’s American, she murmured.

An hour later I was getting ready for bed when Muzaffer tiptoed in. “*Gelin,*” daughter-in-law, he said, “I am not smart. I am not modern. But here,” he continued, jabbing his chest with a finger, “here I have a good heart.”

A burst of static crackled, and before I could answer, the call to prayer floated over the public radio. Muzaffer leaned over, kissed me on the forehead, and slipped off to his evening ablutions.

Stunned, I fell back into bed puzzling over his words. Outside, the hazelnuts, one by one, gave way to gravity.



*Muzaffer and the author*

## **Guzel**

The next day at sunrise my in-laws' voices floated through the open window as they ambled to a neighbor's house. Through the cucumber vines snaking up Muzaffer's homemade trellis I watched my boys spin in a hammock like onions in a mesh bag.

At last, a morning alone.

In the kitchen Muzaffer's white cap, a souvenir from his pilgrimage to Mecca, sat primly next to the family's Koran. I traced the hat's fine gold embroidery and spied a slip of paper

beneath the Koran. Tugging the sheet free I was startled to see a photo of my younger self cradling newborn Ayden. Someone, most likely Muzaffer, had placed the picture here for safekeeping.

I was tucking the photo back when my boys skidded through the door. “Mom, it’s pouring!” they cried. “The hazelnuts!” I shouted and sprinted to the roof.

Frantically, I grasped at a tarp with rain-slicked hands but it skidded away like a gulet on the Bosphorus. With my bare feet I snared the plastic just before it sailed over the roof’s edge. Then I spread it over the nuts, pinning the corners down with cinder blocks.

*There,* I sighed, *you’re safe now.*

Two hours later we were in the kitchen, listening to the thrum of rain. Sevim slid a pan from the potbelly stove and handed it to me. I tilted the tray and toasted nuts clattered into a white porcelain bowl.

From his spot on the sofa, Muzaffer suddenly remembered the stash on the roof. “*Kim?*” he asked, pointing toward the ceiling and wondering who kept the nuts dry.

“*Ben,*” me, I answered. “*Guzel,*” he said. *Good.*

I smiled and together we plunged our fingers into the warm nuts, cradling them like prayer beads.

*Cultural anthropologist and instructional designer Justine Ickes has written for Gastronomica, Language magazine, and Parent & Child, among others. Justine also develops and facilitates training programs, coaches executives and leaders, and creates custom content for the United Nations, the Peace Corps, Berlitz, and other clients.*

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