

Sample Translation

*The Scent of Rusty Iron*

(De geur van roestig ijzer)

by Harm de Jonge

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Translated by Laura Watkinson

## 1. I'm dreaming that you're here this evening, Dad!

*'Tell me everything, Yuri,' you say quietly. 'Just pretend I'm not your dad. I'm a stranger, I don't know about anything.'*

It's still warm and there's not the slightest breath of wind. I've opened the window wide. On the other side of the canal a farmer is burning some old hay. The smoke's rising straight up into the air, but I can still smell the sharp scent of burning in my room. The gate's closed at Osman Ockers' Scrap Yard and Recycling Companies Ltd. It's never that quiet there usually. Osman's car crusher isn't thudding; the grinding wheel isn't screaming. They're not even testing any engines. Osman's gone on holiday, to Turkey, would you believe, and Nesrin's gone with her dad. He's been promising to take her for years and now it's finally happening.

Mum's gone to the music school. I'm alone in the house. It's one of those evenings when I can't help thinking about you, Dad. Sweden's such a long way away and you never write to us. Mum thinks that you're not going to come back. And she doesn't care if she never sees you again, she says. And definitely not that woman who's with you now. But I'm sure that you are going to come back, Dad. You want to know how things are going with me, don't you? You don't know Bruno Levie yet either. He's an old man. Nesrin and I met him last week. He's our friend now. Levie says that people are like homing pigeons: they always come back to the nest, no matter where you release them. Levie also taught us how you have to dream when you really want something that's not possible. If you do it properly, there's no difference between dream and reality, he reckons.

I'm sniffing at the bottle of Desertfresh, that nice cologne you always used to put on when you'd had a shave. Mum doesn't know that I've still got the bottle. I'm dreaming that you're here this evening, Dad. I can clearly see you standing before me and all at once everything is very real. You're standing by the window and looking out at the scrap yard.

‘Blimey,’ you say, ‘what a mess that man makes over there!’

You ask me whether any oil ever leaks out of the cars. If circles of oil ever end up on the surface of the canal. Then you go and sit on the windowsill. You look at me and you smile.

‘Tell me,’ you say, ‘what do you remember about the way things used to be?’

I think of that evening when it was my birthday. You were supposed to come, but you’d forgotten. We sat there waiting the whole evening. I cried when I had to go to bed. And in the middle of the night you turned up, Dad. You’d brought a toy tractor for me.

‘Fancy you still remembering that, Yuri,’ you say. ‘But what’s happened in the past few weeks? Tell me a bit about what’s been going on.’

You put a blade of grass in your mouth and look at me. Your eyes are very pale blue. Do all people in Sweden have blue eyes? I have to tell you about the Turkish girl Nesrin. At first, she was just a girl who lived nearby, but now everything’s so very different. You don’t know that her dad’s making a statue for Mum yet either. And of course I’ll have to tell you about Bruno Levie and that night in his old Volvo. There’s so much that you don’t know. I’ll have to tell you everything very precisely, because you don’t know the people here. You’ve been away for such a long time, Dad. Aren’t you surprised that I’ve got so big?

‘Is it true that you’ve got a thing about smells?’ you ask. ‘That girl, for instance, does she really smell of rusty iron?’

You lean your head against the frame and close your eyes.

‘Tell me everything, Yuri,’ you say quietly. ‘Just pretend I’m not your dad. I’m from Sweden, I’m a stranger, I don’t know about anything.’

## 2. Roserust: the scent of rusty iron

*'I can smell you through your skin, Nesrin. There really is iron in your blood.'*

Where should you begin when you want to tell someone everything? Shall I say something about Nesrin first? She's not just the craziest girl from Turkey, she's the most beautiful one too. I think about her all day now that she's not here. And it's true: she smells of iron, of rusty iron that's been left out in the rain. Yesterday I managed to make that scent. When I breathe it in, I can see Nesrin in my mind, so real that it seems as though she's with me.

I've also come up with a name for the scent of Nesrin. I give all new smells a name. Nesrin means 'wild rose' and so I've called her scent 'Roserust'. It was very difficult to make Roserust. Most people have one smell: they smell of toffees, of tar or of mussels. With Nesrin, the rusty iron was certainly the most important, but there were also other smells involved. I'll tell you all the details later. But first I just want to tell you about that afternoon when she asked whether I wanted a driving lesson. I hardly knew her back then. We live near each other, so we sometimes used to bike to school together. And I'd sometimes see her tearing about in her dad's scrap yard as well. But that was as far as it went. Until the moment she said:

'I bet you can't drive. Shall I give you a lesson?'

'At your place? In the scrap yard?'

'You can get up to eighty kilometres an hour there, you know.'

'Yeah, as long as your dad doesn't see you!'

'So, d'you want to learn or not?'

'Let me see how you do it first. I'll come as a passenger though.'

You can take your pick of the cars in the scrap yard. There are enough cars there that still work. Nesrin showed up in an old Ford. She was wearing a scooter helmet. I wasn't and her dad won't actually let you in the cars without a helmet.

Osman is fine with Nesrin zooming around in cars, but there are rules. You have to wear a helmet, stay in the yard and not go any faster than a bike. But I noticed pretty soon that Nesrin didn't stick to the rules at all. She even took off her helmet and chucked it on the back seat.

Maybe she wanted to show me just what girls can do. She didn't end up giving me much of a lesson at any rate. She raced the engine and whirled round so wildly that I really had to hold on tight. Of course she'd chosen a car with a broken exhaust pipe. And there was a loose bumper scraping over the ground as well. There was so much noise that we couldn't do much talking. But I certainly smelled that iron scent straightaway, particularly when I was covered by her hair as we took a bend. She's got beautiful hair, a black curtain halfway down her back. You couldn't imagine a better airbag!

'What are you playing at?' she screamed. 'Sit still, eh?'

'How can I sit still when you're driving like that!' I shouted back.

'Not scared, are you?'

The real talking didn't come until later when she asked if I wanted to see her secret dreaming-mobile. It turned out to be an old Rover. You know, one of those English rust-buckets, but on the inside it's got a teak steering wheel and leather upholstery. It's on the bottom row next to the canal, where Osman's piled the cars up on top of each other. They're packed closely together and they've been there for so long that there are nettles growing through the wrecks.

I couldn't believe my eyes! Nesrin had dismantled the front seats. There were bits of material hanging here and there. A poster of Turkish mountains on a side window, some candles and other girly things. And from one of the heater switches hung a photo and a small brown bear. We sat next to each other on the back seat.

'Blimey, Nesrin,' I said, 'you could live in here.'

'I sometimes sleep here,' she said. 'It's my secret hiding place. For when I want to get away from Osman for a bit.'

She also had a box full of cans of coke, biscuits and crisps. By the look of things, she could stick it out there for a while. No one would find her, that was for sure. At worst she'd have to keep as quiet as a mouse every now and then if Osman was nearby. And, of course, Osman mustn't take the idea into his head that he should start throwing the cars by the canal into the crusher.

'Now it's not a secret any more,' I said. 'Is that a problem?'

'If you don't tell anyone, it can be our secret,' she said.

Her long black eyelashes fell for a second and then flashed back up again. Why had she told me about it? We didn't know each other so well that we could just come out with our secrets like that! We talked that afternoon about things that we'd never have talked about normally. About the past and the future, about what isn't, but what might be. I told Nesrin that I loved smells, that I kept discovering new ones. I kept them in my head, but in reality as well, in little jars. And the best thing was to make a scent yourself, one that no one had ever smelled before. I don't normally talk about it. Most people just think it's weird.

Nesrin told me about Turkey, about the colour of the hills, about the flowering apricot trees and the scent of the orange blossom. And she showed me her nazar stone: a blue glass eye. It was hanging on a chain around her neck. Turkish people believe that they're lucky stones. If you have one with you, then nothing bad can happen to you.

I pointed at the photo on the heater switch. 'That photo,' I said, 'it must be...'

'My mother,' she said. 'She died in Turkey. Then I came here with my dad. But I'm not going to stay here, you know! I want to live in Turkey when I'm older.'

'In the village where you were born?'

'We're going there on holiday this year.'

Osman had often promised her that they'd go, but every time it had been put off. This summer, though, it really was going to happen. Nesrin would get to see all the places again that she remembered from before. And of course she'd choose where she wanted to live when she was older.

While we were talking away, there on the back seat of that old Rover, the scent of rusty iron kept floating into my nostrils. Roserust, but I hadn't come up with that name yet. It was a scent that tickled in my nose and prickled high up in my throat. I breathed the smell in deep: don't breathe out for a moment, then the scent will stay in your nose. You can smell it best if you close your eyes. But then Nesrin noticed that I was sitting there looking a bit weird, sniffing away with my eyes closed.

'You smell of rusty iron,' I said.

She looked right at me, her dark eyes gleaming.

'Rusty iron? What does that smell like then?'

'You can't explain. You have to have smelled it.'

'You can compare it with something though, can't you?'

'There are other smells mixed in with it.'

'And you think it's a nice smell, do you?'

'No one else smells like that.'

She laughed and bounced up and down on the back seat. Her long hair swished around. The Rover groaned on its old suspension.

'I know where that smell comes from,' she said. 'It's the olives from the Zvicyn Valley.'

The olives that Osman mixes in with the salad every day! He has them brought specially from the area in Turkey where he was born. Which is a bit odd, of course, because you can buy olives everywhere here and they're just as good! But they have to be from Zvicyn! Everyone in Turkey knows that there's iron in Zvicyn olives. Naturally, because the soil in the valley contains iron. It apparently gets into the olives through the sap in the tree. Nesrin's idea was a nice story, but there was no way it was true. Osman always ate the olives as well and he smelled of coffee and not of iron at all. But that delicious smell had to come from Nesrin herself. I mean, it wasn't a scent out of a spray can or a stick of deodorant.

'I can smell you through your skin, Nesrin. There really is iron in your blood.'

‘You can smell what no one else can. You’re not right in the head, you!’

‘Maybe it’s because you help your dad out in the scrap yard.’

‘I swallow a few nuts and bolts every day, you know.’

The way her laugh tinkled!

‘No, I mean with the disc cutter.’

You should see them working with the disc cutter, Nesrin and her dad, both of them wearing safety goggles! They cut pieces of car in two and the sparks fly out all around. There are scraps of iron in the fiery stars and they jump into your body from all sides. But Nesrin’s dad gets iron in him in the same way, of course. And so it’s still a puzzle why it’s only Nesrin who smells the way she does.

We sat the whole afternoon in the dreaming-mobile. Until the siren on Osman’s shed began to blare. Nesrin’s dad often does that when he can’t find her. The noise is so loud that our double glazing doesn’t stop it. Mum always gets angry when she hears it, especially when she’s playing the piano. We got back into Nesrin’s knockabout and drove off. Osman had made köftes. They’re like meatballs, really tasty. Whatever Osman cooks, it’s always good, by the way. He used to be a chef in Turkey. Now and then he brings over a bowl of cacik for Mum: yoghurt with garlic, cucumber and herbs. Sometimes he sticks around for the whole evening.

Because Mum had already gone to the music school, I stopped at Osman’s for dinner that evening. I ate a lot of köftes, lots of Zviccyn olives and I looked at Nesrin a lot. And when I was at home later, I knew that I would have to copy that iron smell. For a moment it seemed the most important thing ever. Especially if Nesrin was going to Turkey with her dad in the summer holidays. Was I already in love with her then? Or did that happen later, when she told me about the poppies?

### 3. Poppies in the Zviccyn Valley

*I'd kissed Sallie Withart in the bike shed once. But just imagine what it must be like to do that with Nesrin!*

Now that you know Nesrin is Turkish, you're going to think that she's one of those wrapped-up girls in a headscarf. From a culture where women don't have a say. But you'd be mistaken. Nesrin doesn't even wear a headscarf and she has quite a lot to say. And at home they just speak normal Dutch – well, I say normal Dutch... You can hear from the way that Osman speaks that he wasn't born here. He makes all sorts of grammatical mistakes, getting genders wrong, that sort of thing. Nesrin doesn't make any mistakes when she speaks though. Of course that's also because she's been here since she was six. Osman's been here even longer, so long that he's forgotten to be Muslim. Or was he never a Muslim? I don't know exactly how it works in Turkey. Turkish Muslims aren't so strict, I don't think. Nesrin says there are even Turks who don't pray five times a day, don't fast during Ramadan, don't have any problem drinking alcohol, but they're still Muslims.

But Nesrin is actually more Turkish than you probably think now. When she tells you about Turkey, she just can't stop. And you mustn't say the wrong thing about the place where she was born and, please, you'd better not start on her name. She's called Nesrin Özkizçim and Osman has the same surname as well. But people here can't pronounce it so well and so he changed it to Ockers. A lot easier for his business. And just to make it properly Dutch he spells it with a ck. And that's something that really winds Nesrin up, you see. As I noticed on the day after the so-called driving lesson in the scrap yard.

Osman had been called away to fetch a car with his breakdown lorry. I couldn't see Nesrin – maybe she was sitting in the dreaming-mobile. Calm evenings with no wind are really good for capturing smells. They don't blow into

one another and get mixed up, so they stay pure. I'd already found a lump of iron filings that had rusted together. The question was what I'd have to add to get the Nesrin scent, Roserust. Not scents of flowers or soap, that much was clear. No, something more modern, a machine sort of smell. I had a vague idea that I'd be able to find something under the bonnet of a car. You can find a lot of unusual smells there. For instance, have you ever smelled plastic from a burnt-out dynamo? Old ball-bearing grease, soot from a broken catalytic converter?

On the main route down to the canal I found a Peugeot that was quite new, but as bent as a banana. I think that it had got wrapped around a tree in a crash. The bonnet was gone. A broken door was dangling on the ground. I didn't feel like looking inside the car. Sometimes you can still find traces of the accident and it's often not a pretty sight. Osman claims that he once found a foot in a car. A lovely, slender foot with red-painted nails and a gold ring around the little toe.

But anyway, I bent down over the Peugeot's engine and unscrewed the top of the brake-fluid container. I wanted to try it out with some iron filings. I thought the smells would work well together. I'd been looking and sniffing for a while when I heard the loud horn of Osman's breakdown lorry. Somewhere else in the yard a car engine was screaming: it had to be Nesrin. I quickly poured a little brake fluid into a bottle and stuffed it into my pocket. Osman's breakdown lorry jolted slowly up the yard. Suspended from the jib was a red car, its front wheels off the ground. It was a Volvo 440 Sunbeam, a Swedish car, about fifteen years old.

Osman drove slowly up the yard. Behind me Nesrin came racing up in her knockabout. She stopped in the parking space by the fence, with her wheels locked. Stones spat up, smacking into a wrecked car. The engine made a lot of noise: judders and rattles, a squealing fan belt. Nesrin really had chosen an old beast this time. She raised her visor. The sight of her laughing face encased in that black helmet! When she laughs, her eyes close a little. She was acting as though she hadn't seen her dad.

‘Hi, Yuri, let’s cut the roof off,’ she called. ‘Then we’ll have an open-top sports car.’

Osman blew the horn and stuck his arm out of the window. He gestured to Nesrin that she should get out of the way. And if Osman had just called her Nesrin, then nothing would have happened. But he shouted:

‘Dear Miss Ockers, racemonster away, OK?’

And that really isn’t the thing to say. Maybe it’s sometimes just a game and they’re not really always arguing. But it seemed damn real this time. Nesrin’s head jolted forwards. She said nothing, climbed out the car and threw her helmet onto the back seat. Osman called again and sounded the horn of the breakdown lorry. That wild head of his with all the hair looked just like a birds’ nest. He drove on a little way. Pieces of glass were rolling out of the Volvo. And then came the argument, screaming above the noise of the diesel engine.

‘My name is not Ockers.’

‘Oh, come on, Nesrin.’

‘We’re Turkish, man. You don’t just change your name then, do you?’

‘But you do if it’s good for business, don’t you?’

‘That’s betraying the country of your birth.’

‘Come on, sweet little girl.’

Osman smiled broadly. He dangled one arm out of the window and tapped the outside of the door. And then Nesrin started again:

‘You’re just trying to be posh. Like with that name: Osman Ockers’ Scrap Yard and Recycling Companies Ltd.’

‘No good?’

‘It’s just a scrap yard.’

‘A nice name doesn’t cost any extra.’

‘And there’s just the one company, not companies!’

And it carried on like that for a while until Osman began to get annoyed. He shouted something about girls in Turkey. That they would never say anything like that, that they had respect for their fathers in Turkey. Nesrin ran off and just left

her car there. Osman shook his head and pushed the car to one side with the bumper of the breakdown lorry. He jolted onwards a little and deposited the Volvo by the fence.