

## May I Have Your Passport

Walking over to the passport control and reaching the beginning of the queue that seems endless, I see huge boards that say, “Welcome to the United States of America.” I pass along these boards that have pictures of smiling people on them and march through the queue for Non-Americans, Others. I begin gathering my documents inside my backpack: my burgundy Turkish Passport, *Check*, my headphones, *I better put them inside*, my Turkish ID card, *I will not need this for a while*, my visa documents, *Thank God, I didn't forget them*, my I-20 form, *Where is it? Oh, got it*. While I am thinking about whether or not my baggage has turned up, I arrive at the officer's desk. I smile at him, my shaven face shining, and hand him all of my documents. *Oh, not my Turkish ID, I can take it*. His tired face looking serious, the officer leans in a little toward the protective glass barrier that separates him and I and asks, “Why did you come to the US?”

When James Baldwin left his home for Europe, he was sick, penniless, and on the verge of losing his sanity. Saying “I knew what it meant to be white, and I knew what it meant to be a n-----, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail. I was going to kill somebody or be killed. My best friend [Eugene Worth] had committed suicide two years earlier, jumping off the George Washington Bridge,” Baldwin left his home behind in 1948. He went to Paris, and thirteen years later, he arrived in Istanbul (Isler, 2019). Baldwin must have gone through halls embellished with enormous “Türkiye'ye Hoş Geldiniz” or “Welcome to Istanbul” boards. During the passport control, an officer probably asked Baldwin, “Why did you come to Turkey?”

Me and my best friend are sitting on the rocks. The sky is painted with red, orange, and pink. We gaze at the Bosphorus, where the purple sea billows back and forth between Europe and Asia. Our eyes

take a tour from Hagia Sophia to the Topkapi Palace, from Tower of Galata to the Dolmabahce Palace, and to the Bosphorus Bridge—until suddenly they are met by two strangers’ eyes. We realize that they have been staring at us for a long time. Enchanted by the beauty of the setting, we have forgotten that we are in a strictly conservative district. We lower our voices, my *girl* best friend pulled her skirt down a little, and the sun finally disappears, darkening our dreams, comments, and amazement. Their mouths are closed, but their judgmental eyes speak. It is uncomfortable. We stand up and leave, clenching our hands together.

Baldwin alluded to Istanbul as being a location of healing for him. He perceived the city to be a location squeezed among things both Asian and European (Isler, 2019). For him, Istanbul was a city where he could discard the various identities assigned to him by others and try to exist in between things, too, at least for a while. In Istanbul, he said he could begin again. While in the city, Baldwin explored his artistic career and wrote some of his most famous works, including *Another Country*, *The Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street*. He told his friends that Turkey, especially Istanbul, had saved his life (Fahim, 2017). Who knows? Maybe he wrote a part of one of his works on a steamboat, crossing the Bosphorus, feeding the seagulls, and feeling the amazing smell of the sea.

After checking both the national and international trending tweets on my phone and criticizing them, I get off the subway and head straight to my internship building. I greet everyone, “Günaydın (Good morning),” and sit next to my superior. We have become friends in a week, so we begin talking, *laughing*, and working, *whining*. Not surprisingly, our conversation leads to politics. She asks me what I think; I answer. She asks me what should happen for the future; I answer. Putting her hand next to her hijab, or *başörtüsü*, she asks, “So, you are against hijab? What do you think about it?”; I freeze ... Over the years, my country has been extremely polarized by the conflict between seculars and non-seculars. One side’s

radicals have accused the other side of being atheist oppressors, while the other side's radicals have accused the others of threatening the values of our republic and democracy. This conflict had led people to misjudge others based on what they wear. This time, I felt like *I* was being polarized ... I answer, "Of course not. Why would I be? Every woman has the freedom to choose wearing it or not. I respect that."

Baldwin was in an intersectional place that was all new to him: Turkish and Islamic cultures, combinations and conflicts among secularism and religion, gender norms, masculinity, femininity... (Isler, 2019) He experienced how it felt to be a true American expatriate living in Turkey because he never mastered Turkish and was not able to read the country's political atmosphere like a native. Baldwin's biographer and friend, David Leeming, said, "In America, Baldwin was 'overwhelmed.' In Istanbul, Baldwin was freed somewhat, from the constant demands to speak up about American racism, and from the heartache over the killings of black leaders in the United States" (Fahim, 2017). He must have played backgammon with old Turkish "champions" on the street, which is a great way to make friends and learn the language. Maybe he swore in Turkish after losing the last set, laughing and shaking hands afterwards.

After a rough day full of writing reports and essays, I throw myself onto my couch at home. I say to myself, *I'm dead*. I turn on the TV to watch the news and relieve myself from the daily stress and mental workload. The news terrifies my soul and shakes my core: "A woman was stabbed by her ex-husband in front of her 10-year-old daughter while screaming 'I don't want to die' ... A female university student was sexually assaulted, choked to death, and thrown out of a building by her ex-boyfriend ... A young woman's burnt body was discovered today. She was murdered, raped, and burnt by a minibus driver and two other men." I turn off the TV. These women had names: *Emine, Şule, Özgecan*, names that people would forget after a few weeks. After hearing news about femicide, I want to cry, scream, and tear down

the walls of my house, but I stand still. I cannot move. I remember Duygu Asena, a female Turkish author and activist for women's rights. Decades ago, she said, "The woman has no name." Today, the woman has no existence. I regret that I said *I'm dead* previously. As a man, I know nothing about death.

Although the 1960s was a politically and economically unstable period for Turkey, Baldwin felt a positive energy in the city as an American expatriate. He was delighted by the Turkish experience that broadened his perspective in racial justice and freedom while he was outside of America. According to Baldwin, it was easier to be gay in Istanbul than in America, easier to be black. In Istanbul, men could publicly hold hands and kiss one another, not necessarily meaning that they were gay, but they might be (Hansen, 2017). Thus, Istanbul gave Baldwin the intellectual space to evaluate how he had been thinking about race and sex, emerging different perspectives, imaginations, and more fluid identities for himself and others (Isler, 2019). While drinking his cup of Turkish coffee, he must have seen a woman wearing heels, a woman wearing headscarf, a man holding another man's hand, and a man with an authentic Turkish moustache, all walking in harmony on the street.

I love music, especially upbeat, ethnic, folk-pop sounds. I have this rhythm inside my veins, which can be felt by Anatolians, Balkanians, and Middle Easterners. This rhythm unconsciously controls my body every time I hear a 9/8 rhythmic beat, moving my shoulders, arms, and hips. What else can be expected from a young Turkish music lover than to watch the Eurovision Song Contest every year? I was three when Turkey won for the first time with the song *Every Way That I Can* by Sertab Erener. I was thirteen when Turkish officials decided to withdraw from the contest, criticizing the extremely political format of the contest's voting system. Some officials even critiqued that the contest endorsed homosexuality; therefore, it was against our religious and cultural family values. The contest has not been aired on Turkish

channels ever since. I watch it online and continue supporting songs I like every year. However, I do not have the excitement and joy I had when I was a child. I hopelessly wish to see my country back in the competition every year. When I hear an upbeat, ethnic, folk-pop entry in the contest, I remember my country, Turkey, my home, with sadness.

*Dad, can I tweet this?* No, do not include that. *Mom, can I retweet this?* No, you should not. *Dad, can I post this on Twitter about the worsening economy?* Please do not. *Mom, can I say this online to protest the government's social policies against democratic values?* God, no ... It is not that my family disregards my values or censures my opinions. It's because we fear. People get arrested because they criticize. People are sent to jail because they are doing their jobs as journalists. People are labeled as terrorists, betrayers, and servants for foreign powers because they speak. The result? Fear. I want to say something, but then I chop down a few words. I want to comment on a public issue as a young citizen, but then I delete my drafted tweet. You would only understand what fear's auto-censure feels like if you were somewhat afraid while writing these words, just like I am. I am silenced by fear. *Should I write this paragraph right now?*

I go out with my friends on a Saturday night. I cross the bridge from the Anatolian side to the European side, taking the First Bridge alone. Traffic, as usual. We have dinner at our usual restaurant. I raise my head, which exposes my face under my black fedora. I point my finger toward the waiter, which exposes my wrist full of bracelets. I order my usual: *mücver* with *yoğurt* and *şakşuka*. My friend picks the wine. As my taste buds get confused between Turkish cuisine and French wine, I laugh. We then go to our typical bar at Galata. We play games, discuss relationship issues, and argue politics. We start speaking in English, in Spanish if we are too drunk. After the clocks hit three a.m., we are hungry. We find a soup place. My friends have *işkembe* soup while I quickly finish my *mercimek* soup. I get in a taxi alone. The taxi driver goes straight to the bridge. There are many cars, as usual. Taxi driver starts speaking, and I

shut my mouth and ears. I do not want to listen to his judgements about how the ideal, proper, decent, conservative, religious, faithful, tamed, and national youth should behave. *At least, I try.* Only my eyes watch the night. On our way back to the Anatolian side of the bridge, I open up the window. My fedora flies back behind me. Taxi driver swears at me. My hair, freed from this European cloth, is welcomed by the Anatolian wind. I get out of the taxi and walk to the door of my house as though I'm either waltzing or dancing *halay*. I cannot decide. I unlock the door and get inside. Among the stormy meeting of West and East, my brain shuts down. My brain locks itself when the sun dawns from the East heading toward the West.

One night in October, 1961, Baldwin surprisingly showed up at the door of his friend Engin Cezzar's modest Taksim Square apartment (Isler, 2019). Cezzar, a Turkish actor who had worked with Baldwin in New York, said, "Welcome home, Jimmy." He told guests that Baldwin was an important novelist from America. Baldwin came inside, took a bath, and eventually fell asleep in the lap of an actress (Pierpont, 2009). Peaceful, calm, unruffled... He must have fallen asleep with serenity. He was welcomed by the traditional Turkish hospitality after all. Warm Anatolian wind must have hugged him.

*...because I'm angry, sad, frustrated, exhausted, silenced, and confused. I need a break from this confusion to taste what freedom feels like and come back to my country afterwards for change.* "I'm here for the college experience," I reply to the officer.

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