

ISTANBUL HONEYMOON

TO save money, Ahmet and Leigh took the overnight bus to Istanbul. The monstrous bus felt almost like an airbus to Leigh: modern, well-lit and high-ceilinged, but packed. Most passengers smoked heavily, and the air seemed to disappear immediately. The ride would be twelve hours long and frightening for anyone who looked out the large front windshield. Leigh knew better; she passed the first hour eating pistachios and poking at Ahmet's newspaper.

"What's that about?"

"A woman fell down a hole in the street. The workers forgot to cover it."

"A hole like a sewer?"

"She died. And she was carrying a baby; that is why she could not see the hole. The baby died also."

"Oh my God."

He turned the page.

She pointed. "What's that?"

"A bomb in Antalya."

"Who is responsible?"

"P.K.K."

She picked a tiny article in the bottom corner. "What's that?"

"A villager died. Stupid man," laughed Ahmet, reading.

“Why? What?”

“He had a bad tooth. He shot it out with his gun.”

“He shot himself dead?” Leigh was incredulous.

“Oh my God!” He mimicked her well, even putting his cupped hand over his mouth.

At the halfway point, the bus stopped at a cafeteria and outdoor teahouse owned by the bus company. They stretched their legs in the cool night and then ordered tea at an outside table. It was cold, but they both wanted fresh air on their faces and in their lungs. They watched the monstrous buses pull up and spit out sleepy people. Boys rushed to the buses with squeegees, their fat black hoses splashing water across the parking lot. They scrubbed the buses industriously, their long-handled brushes reaching the high windows. There were no cars.

It was three a.m. Some people wandered disoriented. Others rushed from the toilets as if the smell was chasing them. The fruit stand was brilliant with oranges and apples and bananas. It drew Leigh, and she bought an orange for a bus activity and then looked at the sticky Turkish Delight on display. Rows and rows of the pinwheel candy were laid out on trays. Each log was a different colour, covered in different coatings. It was a party: yellow with green pistachios, pink with coconut, mint green with hazelnuts.

“Do you want some?” asked Ahmet, coming beside her.

“No, it’s too sweet. But it’s gorgeous.”

They climbed back on the bus and curled up in their seats near the front. Tinny music whined, keeping the driver awake as the seats around them became

a dark snoring symphony. Leigh and Ahmet huddled together, their feet in each other’s seat. They whispered and smothered giggles all night. They never ran out of things to say anyway, but they were also charged by acting on this impulse. Male Aries had found female Aries, and they were best friends in line at the go-kart track; they were the first homo sapiens setting out from Africa.

Dawn arrived with Istanbul. They watched the giant city emerge gold with the light and then become grey. Abruptly, the bus stopped in Sultanahmet at six o’clock, and they were expelled from its warmth.

They arrived dishevelled at Ipek Pension, their home in Istanbul where Ahmet arranged for a room. After a quickie and a hot shower, they popped into the pension’s little breakfast room for tea, boiled eggs, crusty bread and sour cherry jam.

Back out on the street, Ahmet hailed a taxi.

“Where are we going?” asked Leigh.

“To the best place in Istanbul!”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

“Ahmet, I hope you’re not going to do any business on this trip.”

“No. No. I told you, we must be very still.” They were careful with their choice of words, conscious that the taxi driver might understand English.

“No business?” She had learned to double check.

“Just one thing. It will be very quick.”

It was half an hour before the taxi slowed.

“There! Look.” Ahmet pointed out the window and hurriedly paid the driver.

Leigh looked at a giant's castle standing by the sea. It was made of stones as big as the taxi and the rough black and brown walls reached high into the blue sky. The outer wall featured an enormous iron double door.

"Wow," she said. "What is it?"

He beamed. "It is jail."

"Still?"

"No, no, not now. From Byzantine times. It's *Yedikule*. It means Fortress of the Seven Towers. *Gel!*" He bounced off toward the great doors.

The iron doors were three times the height of a man. The surfaces were spiked in a geometrical pattern with squares of metal as big as Leigh's palm. A portcullis made of large metal rods, sharpened at the top and bottom, was poised above the doors, ready to fall. The entrance walkway was made of large boulders, uneven in the ground after fifteen hundred years.

They entered a large grass courtyard dotted with wildflowers. Spring was warmer in Istanbul. Leigh opened her coat and let the sunshine in. Ahmet led the way to a tall stone tower. It was one of four towers at each corner of the outside wall. No one else was in sight.

It was dark and damp inside the tower. Leigh stood in the centre of the earth floor and held her arms out. She could reach halfway to the stone walls which were slippery with condensation. She walked over and put ten fingertips on the black slimy walls.

"Look up," said Ahmet.

It seemed a mile to the top. White birds flew around in the upper third of the tower. There was no roof; it opened to the sky.

"I feel like I'm in the bottom of a well," she said.

"This is where the prisoners were put to fight until one of them was dead. Or both."

"What? Really?"

"People watched from the windows." Ahmet pointed up.

Leigh could see small irregular holes in the stone walls at all levels of the tower.

"Sometimes they made the prisoners blind first and gave them swords to fight with." Ahmet leaned on the wall. "I wish I lived in that time."

"Maybe you did," said Leigh, finding it easy to picture Ahmet with long hair tied by a bandana, knee-high leather boots, slicing the air with a sword.

They climbed the uneven stone steps that wound around and up the tower. Ahmet lit wooden matches to prevent them from stumbling in the dark. Breathing hard, they reached some small rooms and had to bend to get in. These led to a passage that led to the top of the high outer wall. The flat stone top was wide enough for them to walk side by side.

They walked the great wall with light steps. The breeze was fresh on their skin, and it smelled lightly of new flowers and spring mud. They touched frequently, a nudge here, a helping hand up and around a tower.

At the fourth and final tower Ahmet stopped, unwilling to climb down from the wall. The wall here was along the edge of an enormous cliff. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they watched the ships on the Sea of Marmora. The bridges looked like they were made from an old erector kit; the ships were tiny toy boats.

Ahmet pointed out the leather tanning industries, still located outside the ancient city walls of Istanbul.

Leigh imagined them in medieval times. She placidly took in the scene, but Ahmet celebrated it.

He climbed to the outside of the tower and scaled the rounded wall to reach the uppermost outside ledge.

“Ahmet, that ledge is not for people.”

He laughed. *“Tavuk!”*

“Come down,” she called. *“Gel!”*

Ahmet began to dance. He stepped back and forth with his arms out at his sides, fingers snapping. He gleefully danced around the edge of the tower and soon disappeared from Leigh’s sight.

She sighed a happy sigh. Ahmet’s optimism was unstoppable. She loved these impulsive moments. She’d remember this one: the ancient walls towering against the blue, blue sky, yellow cliffs below, and far below, the grey sea. She was higher than the birds that soared between her and the sea.

Soon Ahmet emerged on the other side of the tower, singing something to the sky. He shook his shoulders and danced, coming toward her with a wide smile on his face.

“Where’s your coat?” she yelled.

“Why I need coat?”

“You’ll want it at night,” she said, wondering if it was hooked on a rock at this uppermost point or tossed into the sea below. More important to get him down, she figured.

“Gel!” she called to him.

He danced two steps forward and one back, shaking his shoulders and beaming at her.

“I cannot be more happy than this!” he shouted.

Later that afternoon, they found their way through a maze of narrow streets to a seedy district of Istanbul. Ahmet wove through the people, pushcarts and honking cars stuck in the streets, walking quickly and holding Leigh’s hand tightly. Constantly distracted by the activity and cacophony all around her, she scrambled to keep up.

“Slow down,” she complained.

“Listen me,” he said slowing slightly. “You are going to wait at the hotel with Mustafa while I go somewhere with Ibrahim.”

“You said I could go with you.”

“Yes, you’re with me, isn’t it? But it is not safe where I’m going next. I will not take even one chance with you.” He jumped onto the curb to avoid a cart of cucumbers.

“How long will I have to wait at the hotel?”

“Short time.”

“Where are you going?” She ran a couple of steps keeping up.

“Underground.”

He stopped short and checked his bearings. “I think this is wrong street.”

They wandered slowly for a few blocks until Ahmet suddenly turned down a side street that looked just like all the rest.

“Here we are.” He sped up, pulling her along again.

Ibrahim and Mustafa had moved their profitable and growing business to a larger hotel since Leigh had last visited as a tourist with Nicole. Ahmet and Leigh entered the building and blinked their eyes. The lobby was dark after the sun in the street. Leigh made out

a large dim room. The blankets on the couches were rumped; the tables were covered with overflowing ashtrays, crochet and newspapers. A large fish tank gurgled against one wall, the fat goldfish barely visible in the murky water. Ahmet strode to the reception counter where an uncovered woman greeted him.

Leigh was introduced to the madame of the hotel and the few prostitutes who were up. Madame had black hair piled high over a heavy square face. She was Bulgarian, about fifty years old. Her body was also heavy and square, ready to burst out of her stark white and black nylon dress.

Madame had reached for glamour and really lost her balance. Her hair looked glued into place, and although her face was thick with make-up, a fat grubby neck revealed the paleness of her skin.

Not only Madame, but the whole place, looked better at night. The light peeking through the almost-closed curtains revealed all the drudgery of the place. The old furniture and carpets were well worn. Even the prostitutes looked worn. Their clothes were tight and mismatched; their nails were chipped and dirty. They sat on the wine and gold couches with magazines or crochet, with spaces between them, as if they didn't know each other. Hard straight mouths held *sigaras* but didn't speak. They didn't show any interest in Leigh.

Like most of the residents, Ibrahim was still in bed, but joined them shortly, bouncing down the stairs still tucking in his shirt. He was a tall slim Tunisian with creamy coffee-coloured skin. He was only 24, but his life had been long. Ahmet had said he lived on profits from drug dealing, and once swam from Turkey to Greece

because he didn't have a passport.

The men slid out the door, and Leigh joined the room of bored waiting people. Left sitting on one of the dusty couches, she turned her gaze to the television. It was a typical Turkish movie with a swashbuckling hero and helpless women. She sighed and determined not to worry. Ahmet was like that hero; he always turned just in time to avoid the knife.