

A Woman Alone In Istanbul
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“What’s a young woman doing all by herself in a place like Istanbul?”

A common question, easily answered, “She’s on the road, she’s traveling.” Increasing numbers of American women, educated, independent and curious are becoming adventurers of the world. With more freedom and means than women have ever known, we see that the world is at our fingertips and we grasp it, *toute seule*, if necessary.

That’s what I did once I graduated from college. Eagerly, I grabbed a bag, flew to Europe and gallivanted overland through Asia by myself, taking a year to do it. My experiences seasoned my senses, heightened my awareness, burrowed my perceptions and made my programmed value structure turn cartwheels. Understatedly, there is nothing that can expand the mind in record time like traveling alone in foreign countries.

Istanbul, the city where East meets west and the twain collide, I first see from a soot smudged train window. My eyes scan the enormous suspension bridges over large bodies of blue; my mind conjures the Gold Gate image, San Francisco style. A closer and longer look however, makes mockery of the resemblance.

Sitting strategically atop a cluttered and knobby hill, encased in crumbling walls, is the hoary old sector called *Stamboul*. Outside its walls, disheveled neighborhoods slide down the side of the hill, roll onto flat land and pause for an instant at the water’s edge. More than 500 minarets on the *Stamboul* side of the Bosphorus Straight glare across at high-rise hotels on the Istanbul side, forcing past and future to fuse in the present. The Galata Bridge feebly makes the effort to connect these two very different samplings of human mentality, but the East-West separation remains distinct and wide. My mind races through facts gleaned from classroom teachers and travel brochures. My heart beat increases speed and the adrenalin pumps as I jump off the train at *Stamboul* station, anxious to assess this dichotomy.

Finding a reasonable, safe and clean *otel* room is accomplished easily (thanks to friendly fellow travelers) and I go out to maneuver the streets, discover the feel of the city and search for a meal. Earsplitting horns whip hunchbacked old Chevies through rutted streets designed for narrow carts. English letters, indecipherably arranged and accented, gleam neon advertisements through the haze of the city. Noisy vendors cluster in the gutters hawking street-dusted sweets and fly ridden fruits. Black marketers whisper “Change money? Make money, I give you good rate.” Fat and idle shoeshine men with big black handlebar moustaches cry out “Shine, lady, shine?” (as I flip-flop by in plastics). Delivery boys scurry around me, carrying layered racks of Turkish coffee cups, not spilling a drop in the portage. Big glass windows dripping with steam exhibit the sumptuous stuffed peppers of Turkish cuisine. Juices secrete in my mouth. The culture feels good; now, I want to taste it and duck inside a restaurant for a *dolma*. There I pass

hours, seated by a window, watching Turkish street activity like cartooned animation as stereo-typical beings pass by.

Each morning, I scour the clapboard stalls at the infamously bizarre bazaar. I sip black coffee with shop personnel and barter my brains out. Making friends with these tenacious merchants causes the prices to gradually decline and, by week's end, I am pleased with both the bargains and the buddies I've earned with patience. I ship a package home and pray for its deliverance as I endure the line at the post office.

Afternoons I wander through museums and palaces, learning Turkish history and shuddering as I capture their mindset. The most influential is the grand, imposing structure that, in the past, housed the sultans of the Ottoman Empire. It is known as *Topkapi* and has long been forbidden to outsiders. Now, thanks to tourism, the camera-laden hoards may enter and see for themselves just how these degenerates lived. The names of the chambers are disquieting enough: the Harem's Quarters, the Black Eunuch's Quarters, and the Circumcision room. Pottery and basket weaving are not highlighted at *Topkapi*, armor and weaponry is. On display in these rooms is the non-productive booty that these Sultan's dubiously obtained from neighboring empires. Everything inside these cold walls divulges Turkish character: aggressive, tough, proud.

Gleaming viciously in display cases are helmets inlaid in solid gold, studded with rubies and turquoise; chain mail laboriously jeweled by the sweaty lower class; the *Topkapi* dagger, of James Bond fame, the hilt set with emeralds, the largest one concealing a silver watch; the Spoonmaker's diamond, 86 carats, the world's 5th largest. Whether for sheer selfish indulgence or in the sacred name of Mohammed, the bloodthirsty Turks have lived a thunderous, plunderous existence. Their national creed of strength and ferocity holds obstinately today.

In my ramblings I notice that the majority of public places are frequented only by men. Inside the dimly lit coffee houses they discuss and argue in loud threatening tones, ceasing only to puff on a hookah or slurp some mud black coffee. They spend intense hours playing Backgammon, heaving the dice and advancing points with battle ground ferocity. I slink into my invisible mode as I pass by the windows of these dingy, smoke filled hangouts, but always feel their penetrating glares on my western features. Whether vicious or curious, I figure that all of them want to lay a hand on me.

Turkish women are no longer bound by law to wear the Moslem veil, but when Ataturk died in 1940, progressive thought died with him. Women continue to succumb to restrictions imposed by their men by wearing uncomely triangle scarves over their heads. All women eat, pray, socialize and do most things in their segregated realm. Rarely are they seen in public enjoying themselves. In the Turkish *haman* (bath) I have a chance to view them in the naturalness offered by all female company. They're pleasant, giggly. They wash while clothed and glare at my nakedness, inducing me to learn how to bathe in third world fashion. Outside, their behavior transforms. Their faces look worn, almost grievous, as they trudge homeward carrying heavy household bundles. Often while walking, they will stop and start at me. Sensing this, I look back at them. Our locked

eyes communicate wordless bewilderment; then the perplexity passes and we continue walking our different directions. Our steps lag as we ponder secret questions.

In celebration of leaving Istanbul, I save the best for the last and visit the Blue Mosque of Sultan Ahmet. That day my fellow American Mohammed Ali is to speak there. The speculation is that today he will announce his retirement from boxing and begin his new career “using his tongue as his fists in the service of Islam”.

I feel the noonday sun warmer than usual as I arrive in time for the second of five daily prayers. I squint at the massive bulbs of the Blue Mosque’s stone exterior and wonder how it got its name. I count six minarets that jut upwards from the round roof. I note the intricate carving on each one, gold caps glinting in my eyes. Outside the portal I deposit my flip-flops and donate a few liras, still questioning the reason for the name of this gray monstrosity.

Once inside my question is immediately answered. I stand there, in the blue, in total awe. Centuries of painstaking artistry and manual labor have resulted in walls, hundreds of feet high and vaulted ceilings Byzantine in style, that are completely covered with miniscule mosaic tiles in various shades of blue. Black Arabic quotations from the Koran contrast within the blue mosaics. Above, sunlight filters in through stained glass windows. The hues slant softly to the mystic scene below. In the direction of Mecca, Turkish Moslems prostrate themselves on richly woven carpets and look like dwarves compared to the height of the structure. They chant in low sonorous tones, “la ilaha illa Allah, Mohammed rasul allahi”, Koranic verse meaning “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet”. Their voices mute every other sound. The reverberations mesmerize my Western brain waves. Instantly, my belief that, in essence, all religions are the same is reinforced. I linger in their tranquil blue dimension, not wanting the spiritual sharing to end. I realize that for the first time since I jumped off the train in old *Stamboul* that I am feeling something in common with the Turks.

Outside, the long sidewalk leading from the mosque is already crowding with spectators, evidence that the Ali event is about to take place. A few families are seated on benches directly in front of the speaker’s platform. I sit down amongst them, congratulating myself on the safe, yet “ring side” seat I’ve found.

By standing on the bench I can survey the grounds surrounding the mosque. Plain white squares checkerboard the green lawn as Islam lays down prayer mats. The men’s black prayer caps outnumber and contrast with the women’s floral print head scarves. Behind the assemblage the gray looking Blue Mosque and its six slim minarets loom upward omnisciently, looking smoothly and calmly at the busyness below.

The atmosphere is festive, the effects of it contagious. Some of the women seem surprisingly frivolous as they gaily sprinkle lemon water on everyone gathered about. With ease, they mingle in the growing crowd of bronze bodies. One woman flings the refreshment with one arm as she encircles her dark-eyed infant with the other. A girl, about the angelic age of twelve, offers me a flower and gestures that I put it in my hair as

she has done. The soprano laughter of little ones jingles in the air. The rhythms exude from homemade drums and synchronize the action with the baritone chant for MO-HAM-MED, A- LI, MO-HAM-MED-A-LI.

A few feet away a sculptor with graying hair and spectacles, dressed in a long shirt and baggy muslin *vrakes* is intently shaping several pounds of clay. His sensitive and well practiced fingers gradually form the unmistakable beauty of the Mohammed Ali. After a few final affectionate touches, the sculptor steps back and smiles with satisfaction as he views his creation. He turns to face the crowd puffing with pride as the onlookers applaud his masterpiece. This moment seems to be the zenith of his career.

Ali is scheduled to appear at 1:00 PM. Uniformed men on the speaker's platform are bumping into each other, strenuously wrestling with sound equipment that they don't understand, as the sun moves over to 1:30. Hot and restless, I search the crowd for another white face, but not even the media men on the platform share my lineage. The only westerner around, I am, without a doubt, alone in Istanbul.

Several obnoxious, insistent teenage boys, bored with waiting, attempt to climb up to the platform. An agitated man in uniform approaches them. With a wicked sneer on his face and barbed stick in his hand, he begins beating the boys to the ground, drawing blood with each abusive lash. The intensity of the sun ignites the young blood, making it burn and bubble a vehement red.

Instantly, the milling mass of Moslems becomes a mean, unruly mob. Merrymaking transforms to madness. I hear the old sculptor cry for help but the crowd, pressing relentlessly towards the bloody scene on stage, ignores his plea. He is trying to protect his work of art by throwing his arms around it, but the surge of people overpowers him. Each lunge makes the sculpted face of Ali grow into that of an ogre. First, the eyes smudge, the jaw bones angle, and then the head is bashed in. Finally, the distorted lump of clay rolls off the pedestal and vanishes in the crowd. The artist, clearly pained, watches these mindless beings crush his creation to death. Soon he forgets this loss in his personal struggle to keep standing.

By this time it's 2:00 and here I am, alone and imprisoned by 250,000 raging Turks. The suffocating sound of the repetitive chant for MO-HAM-MED A-LI thunders and charges the air. The ground shakes from it. The sun makes sweat pour and bodies slide. A giant heave of humans forces me to fall off the bench. Squeezing into the throng, I am floating helplessly. My feet are not even on the ground! Fear grabs me by the neck. My mind constricts and my vision blurs. Vertigo. All I see is a jumble, glaring white teeth, swarthy bronze faces, black greasy hair, frightened eyes. Foul breathed shrieks, stinging sweat, and twisting torsos assault my senses. I pray for balance as Islam topples under the weight of its own mass.

Millenniums pass. Suddenly I feel a sharp jab in my side. A knife? No, a hand. I grasp it and feel reinforced with the contact. Simultaneously, someone grabs my other arm and

a human chain is created. Realizing that it is the only means of survival, we hold it, bending, bracing and balancing among the unwieldy bulk of bulldozing bodies.

I feel the tension ease as the resounding chant for Ali transmutes to applause. I look up to see a big black limousine purring through the mob with Ali standing tall in the back of it. He is unsuccessful at remaining characteristically cool, giving away his aplomb with his darting eyeballs. He reveals not only his apprehension of the reputed Turkish mentality, but also his awareness of crowd dynamics. He makes it to the platform intact and, after feverishly thanking his body guards, he steps up to the mike.

As quickly as it came, the wave of violence subsides. I leap at the opportunity to escape. I begin my extrication with firm pushes saying “excuse me” in English, not making much headway, but managing. As the interpreter embellishes Ali’s words, I am living in a nightmare. Hands! Hundreds of anonymous, brown, calloused hands are clawing at me from every direction. The men are delighted by the camouflage offered by the crowd and rape on the spot seems all too likely. I lose all feeling and attempt to fend off this vileness with my fingernails and fists. But the men of Turnkey only laugh at my defenselessness and rake at me again. Like the basest of all animals, I veer straight ahead, ignoring the assaults, flailing my arms, cursing, fighting and crying. Finally I reach the perimeter of this hell. Humility forces my shoulders to round and my head to bend. I find a patch of grass and sink to my knees, in relief, in exhaustion and in gratitude. Trembling and tortured, one thought pervades my tears: never has a woman alone been so glad to be left alone in a place like Istanbul.

The next day a bus loaded with Moslems heads towards Iran. As planned, I am on it, watching the window like a movie screen. A pomegranate in hand, expectations in mind, I savor every second. Timeless caravans. Nomads. Desert. Single humped camels. My eagerness undaunted, I can’t wait to see what the women will be wearing in Tehran. This global gadabout is proving more of a challenge each day. I am intensely alive.

The bus driver’s assistant comes down the aisle and offers me some lemon water. I take some, smile and say “*tesekur*”. He smiles back and utters “*hos geldinez*”. He points to the road stretching behind us and inquires, “Istanbul?” I nod. He sifts through the faces of the other passengers, looking for a white one with which to match me. His eyebrows leap up and crease his forehead. He scratches his black hair. I don’t need to know his Euro-Altic dialect to interpret the words he utters “What’s a woman doing all by herself in a place like Istanbul?”