Installment 1 of Turkish Delighted

*Mooret. Mewrut.*  The In-Flight audiobook I had downloaded onto my IPOD, for the flight over, stressed that the language was phonetic, like Italian or Japanese. Most words were pronounced the way they appeared, *Muhret*, *Mehrut*. I took a few more quiet stabs at this name, while we waited for him to fish change from an antiquated register.

“No no no … pronouncing it wrong … Murat … like American cow make noise … moo …” he sheepishly scolded. I noticed a vein near his right temple throb intermittently as he mouthed his correction. Placing his other palm beneath my outstretched hand, he counted back the nine Lira in his best English. Great, I thought to myself, what a way to make a first impression. I get your drift sir.

“Moo … moo …” I felt ridiculous. An American taking pronunciation lessons from a foreigner for a word he should already know all too well. Thankfully no one was within earshot; though it appeared from my immediate surroundings, that I was the only one who understood or cared.

” Yes, yes … moo … moo … like dat … now try raht … raht …”. His demeanor had changed. I think I detected the makings of a grin. Perhaps my perfect elocution of bovinese had given him hope that all was not lost with this foreigner.

“Raht … raht …” I tried rolling the r’s like the natives.

“Yes yes … now try Mooraht … Mooraht …”. He exaggerated the vowels, puckering his lips, hoping I would do the same.

“Mooraht … Mooraht … Mooraht …”. I was dead on about the grin.

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It’s true, pictures don’t do justice. They do an injustice. The place was incredibly filthy. The cerulean blue tiles that the travel catalogue had so highly praised were covered with a thin film of deep green. The chipping grout needed a serious makeover. The water, I imagined, had probably not been changed since the last decade. What they failed to clarify in the article was that “established” really equated to “dilapidated”. If this was the “trendy” area of Edirne, I could only imagine what the shadier parts of the town were like. The cab driver was vehement that the address I had given him was this non-descript hole in the wall, littered with pink flyers and empty Dasane bottles.

Edirne was the closest town with accommodations to Cappadoccia, my ultimate destination. “Land of the whispering dunes” sounded almost too alluring. Nature took on a new meaning in my life after Stephen died from cancer. For a while, I struggled with the notion that there was nothing after death. That we returned back to the earth from whence we came. The possibility of ever being in his presence again was non-existent. Nearly a year to the day after he had passed, while sitting on the balcony, sipping a cup of Echinacea tea, a ritual we shared every Sunday, I noticed a lone bee buzzing about the tea roses we had planted three springs ago. If it weren’t for the little guy flitting between the blooms, the plant could never reproduce I thought to myself. It would never reproduce. It would never seed and make new copies of itself. The bee, unknowingly, helped to create a new life. Who planned all this? By the simple act of gathering pollen for its nourishment, a creature would help produce life for another. Wow. This could not be mere coincidence. There had to be a grand designer behind all of this. Someone or something was in the background. I then began to notice other things. How perfect water is. Or how the earth is perfectly positioned away from the sun to promote life, a few millions too far or too close and we would either burn up or freeze to death.

I kid to my friends that the bee was Stephen reincarnated. I secretly believed it though. It was soon after that that I began planning for my trip to Cappadoccia. I had caught the tail end of an episode of Samantha Brown in the Arabic World on the Travel Channel. She was doing her usual “ohs” and “ahs” about places in western Turkey, including a place named Cappadoccia. The Turks, she advised, had deemed this a magical locale; on gusty days the dunes seemed to whisper on the breeze. I did some research online and grew more and more fascinated with the place. Soon enough, I was more than determined to visit one of God’s greatest works of nature. I would have to put Paris and Rome on the back-burner for now.

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“It means to wish … to desire … in Arabic …” Murat explained as we made our way to the very back of the steam baths. Did his English suddenly improve? Perhaps that scene at the front counter was all a rouse. A way to further secure intrepid foreigners into his questionable establishment.

“I am the first and the fourth son in my family” he proudly continued.

“First and fourth son?” I repeated with as apparent a quiver in my voice as possible. I had hoped he noticed the quizzically worried look on my face. The corridor we were traversing was growing more and more dimly lit and I began to feel slightly more and more uneasy about what lay at the end.

“Yes first and fourth” he responded, “my mother had three other sons before me but they all died before they were able to breathe.”

“On her fourth try” he added, “I popped out!”

“So you see I am the fourth son if you count the dead ones and the first son if you don’t!” He chuckled contentedly to himself.

It made perfect sense. He was named Murat because his parents *wished* and *desired* that this fourth child would live. I was more than certain that he would point out this obvious conclusion. Instead, he motioned that the room at the end of the hallway adjoining this end of the corridor was a more private dressing room. He half-heartedly joked that he found American men more reserved about nudity than their Turkish counterparts. I assured him I was not.

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Edirne is a town of contrast. In spite of the seemingly disheveled façade of the steam baths, the room Murat had directed me to was an oasis. Here the tile was more vivid than any cerulean. The grout was firmly in place. The clear water flowed directly from one of the hot springs that the building was erected upon, bubbling to the surface. These particular steam baths had been around for two centuries. In fact, the very room that Murat had selected for me was built specifically for the late great King Suleiman as a rest stop on his many prophetic treks to Cappadoccia. Despite the grandeur of the room however, I had wished that Murat had mentioned beforehand that the fee for usage of this room was quadruple the going entrance rate. Needless to say, this little excursion made a dent in my travel budget.

The King’s room was quite different from all the others. Where the steam baths in the main common area and three adjacent rooms were simply shallow swimming pools, mine was two elliptical half moons facing each other, flanked in the middle by a foot and half wide walkway. These moons bowed in as they approached the walkway, at the very bottom the natural spring’s water gurgled into the pool. The almost iridescent tiles that covered the middle walkway were made of a soft marble that could only be quarried in the highest reaches of the Balkan Mountains. What a marvel of Arabic engineering.

Murat explained that in older times, it was common for patrons to lie on the periphery of the pools and have their servant soap and rinse them. In the King’s case, he could lie leisurely on the center walkway and be serviced from both sides. What opulence.

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A few other patrons came and went from the oasis. I was too absorbed in trying to determine why this place held a distinctly different feel from other bath houses I had visited. Could it be because it was in a wholly different country? Was the water here different since it sprung straight from the earth, not piped through tubes and filtration systems? Or was it the spirit of bathing, a defining feature of Turkish culture, pervading this place?

It was nearly midnight when I realized that I had not eaten anything since arriving here. A few aging bathers were left in the common area pool, chatting heatedly about some topic, when I made my way to the front entrance. Murat was no longer on duty. In his place was an older gentleman with a nose as prominent and as hairy as his belly.

The air outside was warm and windy. As I shuffled toward my hotel, one of those bright pink flyers that I had noticed earlier clung to the back of my calf. I crouched to pick it up and tried to decipher the Arabic scribbled on it. Without much success, the only thing I could gather was something called Kirkpinar on September 28th, three days from now.