Personal History

1924 - 2014 : The head scarf, modern Turkey, and me

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In 1924, a year after founding the Turkish Republic on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country's new leader, abolished the Ottoman Caliphate, which had been the last remaining Sunni Islamic Caliphate since 1517. Having introduced a secular constitution and a Western-style civil and criminal legal code, Atatürk shut down the dervish lodges and religious schools, abolished polygamy, and introduced civil marriage and a national beauty contest. He granted women the right to vote, to hold property, to become supreme-court justices, and to run for office. The head scarf was discouraged. A notorious 1925 "Hat Law" outlawed the fez and turban; the only acceptable male headgear was a Western-style hat with a brim. The Ottoman Arabic script was replaced by a Latin alphabet, and the language itself was "cleansed" of Arabic and Persian elements.

At the time, my grandparents were either very young or not yet born. Only my mother's father was old enough to remember throwing his fez in the air on the Sultan's birthday. My parents were born into a secular country. They met in Turkey's top medical school, moved to America in the nineteen-seventies, and became researchers and professors. Both were, and continue to be, passionate supporters of Atatürk. I grew up hearing that if it hadn't been for Atatürk my grandmother would have been "a covered person" who would have been reliant on a man for her livelihood. Instead, she went to boarding school, wrote a thesis on Balzac, and became a teacher. I felt grateful to Atatürk that my parents were so well educated, that they weren't held back by superstition or religion, that they were true scientists, who taught me how to read when I was three and never doubted that I could become a writer.

My father grew up in Adana, not far from the Syrian border. His family was Alevi—part of Turkey's Shia minority—and one of his earliest memories was waking up to hear his grandfather reciting the Koran in Arabic. My father experienced his first religious doubts at the age of twelve, when he discovered Bergson and Comte in an Adana bookstore, and read that religion was part of a primitive and pre-scientific state of civilization; he has been an atheist since his teens. My mother grew up in Ankara, Atatürk's capital. Her father, one of the civil engineers who helped to modernize Anatolia, was politically a staunch secularist and privately a devout Muslim (though not a proponent of head scarves, which nobody in the family wore). In grade school, my mother read what the Koran said about skeptics—that God would close their eyes and ears—and got so depressed that she didn't get out of bed for two days. Her parents told her that God was more merciful than she thought, and that people who did good would go to Heaven on the Day of Judgment, regardless of what they believed. I have always known my mother as an agnostic, less certain than my father that the universe hadn't been created by some great intelligence. But she would get even more annoyed than my father did when she thought that people were invoking God to do their jobs for them—for example, when she saw a bus with a sticker saying "Allah Protect Us."

Both my parents always told me that, in order to be a good person, it was neither necessary nor desirable to believe in God; it was more noble and efficient to do good for disinterested reasons,

without thoughts of Heaven. Nothing in the milieu where I grew up, in New Jersey in the eighties and early nineties, contradicted the idea I formed of religion as something unnecessary, unscientific, provincial—essentially, uncool. For a long time, I thought there was an immutable link between coolness and positivism. I thought this was the way of the world. Then came identity politics and, in Turkey, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (A.K.P.), a center-right party with Islamist roots. Its charismatic leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been the head of state since 2003, after the A.K.P. won its first landslide victory.

Suddenly, it was the secularists who seemed stodgy: racist, authoritarian, élitist, and slavishly pro-Western. The *Times* started referring to them as "the secular elite." In 2007, the *Times* reported that a protest of the A.K.P. by hundreds of thousands of Turkish secularists was motivated in part by a "fear" of the life styles of their more religious compatriots—by "snobbish" complaints that "religious Turks were uneducated and poor" and that "their pesky prayer rugs got underfoot in hospital halls." It's difficult to imagine the *Times* reporting in an equally condescending manner about the élitism of Americans who oppose the Christian right. The Western view of Erdoğan eventually soured, especially after the Gezi protests of 2013; he was criticized for alleged corruption and for increasingly authoritarian tactics toward journalists and opposition parties. But for a number of years all my American liberal friends who had any opinion at all on Turkey were pro-Erdoğan. They thought it had been unsustainable for Turkey to repress and deny its religion for so long—that the people had finally spoken out.

Many spoke warmly of the anthropologist Jenny White, an important scholar of modern Turkey whose book "Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks" characterizes the pro-Atatürk Kemalist culture as one of "militarism, hostility, suspicion, and authoritarianism" rooted in "blood-based Turkish ethnicity." Muslim nationalism, by contrast, has sought to replace "historically embattled Republican borders" with "more flexible Ottoman imperial boundaries" and to "privilege Muslim identity and culture over race." In the A.K.P.-sympathetic world view, the Ottomans, whom Kemalists had blamed for selling Turkey to the British, enjoyed a vogue as models of enlightened Muslim multiculturalism.

I could see that every slight to Kemalism was a knife in my parents' hearts. For my part, I wasn't sure what to think. Unlike them, I was educated in America. To me, as to most Americans, it seemed a tiny bit weird that nearly every public building in Turkey had a picture of Atatürk on the wall. I also knew that, in order for the Turkish Republic to succeed, millions of people had been obliged to change their language, their clothes, and their way of life, all at once, because Atatürk said so. I knew that people who had been perceived as threats to the state—religious leaders, Marxists, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians—were deported, exiled, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. I knew that, even at the start of the twenty-first century, there still weren't enough checks on the military, and that women who wore head scarves were subject to discrimination, barred from certain jobs and universities.

Furthermore, when I thought about my own family, something about White's critique of Kemalism felt familiar: the sense of embattlement and paranoia. Kemalism, not unlike Zionism, drew much of its energy from the fact that there could easily have been no Turkish state. At the end of the First World War, the victorious Allied powers assumed control over nearly all Anatolia; they divided some of it up into British and French mandates, and parcelled much of the rest out to the Greeks, the Armenians, and the Kurds. Before Atatürk was a lawmaker, he was a military commander, the leader of the Turkish War of Independence; and, from a military perspective, all those people and nations were anti-Turkish (as were the Arabs, who supported Britain in the First World War). My parents always dreamed of a post-nationalist world; as a small child, my mother prayed to Allah every night that the United Nations would be formed and there would be no more countries or wars. At the same time, I remember being warned as a child that there were anti-Turkish people in the world, people who held old grudges and could cause problems. For a while, Erdoğan really did seem to be trying to

counter this kind of adversarial thinking—to open up business and diplomatic relations with Turkey's neighbors, to lift the taboos on mentioning the "Kurdish issue" and the Armenian genocide. Under the A.K.P., a Kurdish-language channel débuted on Turkish national television; in 2009, Erdoğan went on the air and expressed good wishes in Kurdish. This would have been unthinkable a short time earlier.

In 2010, I moved to Istanbul, where I taught at a university and reported for this magazine for three years. I found that, much like America, Turkey was polarizing into two camps that were increasingly unable to communicate with each other. There was a new dichotomy I had never heard of before: the "white Turks" (Westernized secular élites in Istanbul and Ankara) versus the "black Turks" (the pious Muslim middle and lower-middle classes of Anatolia). The black Turks were the underdogs, while the white Turks were the racists who despised them. Jenny White writes, "The term 'Black Turk' is used by Kemalists to disparage Turks of lower-class or peasant heritage, who are considered to be uncivilized, patriarchal, not modern, and mired in Islam, even if they have moved into the middle class." Erdoğan proudly declared that he was a black Turk.

The black and white breakdown was difficult for me to understand. My mother's family—fair-skinned Ankara professionals who once had a chauffeur and a gardener—clearly fit the "white" profile. My father's relatives in Adana were generally less educated and darker-complexioned. His father owned a store that sold textile dye to shepherds. There was a brief time when my father wore a mustache. Yet my father had written the essay in praise of Atatürk in his high-school yearbook, his sisters were pro-choice, none of the women in his family wore head scarves except to do housework, and I had never heard any of them express the remotest hint of nostalgia for the Ottoman past. I had heard relatives on both sides of my family worry that, if Atatürk's reforms were undone, Turkey could end up "like Iran." So who were my father's family—also white Turks?

In Istanbul, I became careful about how I talked, careful not to sound—not to be—Orientalist or Islamophobic. One evening, while I was hanging out at my apartment with a Turkish friend, our conversation was interrupted by the call to prayer, which was amplified by loudspeakers. In my apartment, as in most points in the city, you could hear the competing calls from several mosques going off at the same time, five times a day. Often, when I was walking around the city, I liked hearing the call to prayer. Some people were really good at it. (My mother had often told me that when her father was a boy he had such a beautiful voice and knew the prayer so well that he would fill in when the regular muezzin was sick.) Still, when I was at home with the windows closed, working or trying to have a conversation, the sound of amplified male voices extolling Islam always felt somehow invasive. "I know I sound like an asshole, but I really get mad sometimes," I confessed to my friend. "Oh, no, are you an Islamophobe?" he said playfully. He advised me to think of the imam as "a singer, like Michael Jackson."

Because I spoke Turkish imperfectly, smiled a lot, and often travelled alone, I got a lot of lectures from men, particularly taxi-drivers. Some were secularists; others, those with the most religious paraphernalia in their cars, didn't try to make conversation. That still left many outgoing, casually Muslim drivers who took the time to explain to me how great the head scarf was—how it was "actually a beautiful thing." For a woman to cover her head, they said, was in fact a feminist gesture, because it made clear she was demanding respect. There weren't the same misunderstandings as with a woman whose head was uncovered.

I usually didn't reply, especially if the driver seemed at all excitable, because when those drivers started to argue they would stop watching the road, and a lot of the cabs didn't have seat belts. But once, when a driver pressed me particularly jovially for an opinion, I said something like "I think all women should be respected. It shouldn't depend on their hair."

The driver replied that I was absolutely right, that of course women should be respected, and that the head scarf was the best way for women to remind men of this necessity for respect. Men, after all, were worse than women: they could sometimes forget themselves, and then unfortunate things could happen, "even"—he said in a hushed voice, adding that he didn't like to mention such things in front of me—"even rape."

I replied, in my simplistic Turkish, that to me this sounded like a threat: either cover your head or rape can happen. The driver protested in ornate phrases that nobody was threatening anyone, that to speak of threats in this situation was unfitting, that he could tell from my smiling face that I was a good and trusting person, but that the world was an imperfect place, that some men were less like humans than like animals, and that it was best to send clear signals about what one was or wasn't looking for. Then he left me at the fish restaurant where I was going to meet some literature professors.

If it had been just the two of us in the taxi in a political vacuum, I wouldn't have begrudged the driver his opinions. It was his car and his country, and he was driving me where I wanted to go. I knew that my limited Turkish, which felt like such a handicap, was in his eyes a marker of privilege—a sign that I could afford to travel and live abroad. Often, the second question drivers asked, after the invariable "Where are you from?," was "How much did the plane ticket cost?"

But the cab wasn't in a vacuum; it was in a country where the head of state, whose wife wore a head scarf, repeatedly urged all women to have at least three children, preferably four or five. Erdoğan opposed abortion, birth control, and Cesarean section. He said that Islam had set out a clear position for women, but that you couldn't explain it to feminists, because they "don't accept the concept of motherhood." The longer he stayed in office, the more outspoken he became. In 2014, he went so far as to describe birth control as "treason" designed "to dry up our bloodline." No matter how hard I tried to be tolerant—no matter how sympathetic I felt toward Muslim feminists who didn't want to be "liberated" from the veil, and who felt just as judged by the secularist establishment as secular women felt by the Muslim patriarchy—I could never forgive Erdoğan for saying those things about women. And, because he said them in the name of Islam, I couldn't forgive Islam, either.

In the fall of 2011, I travelled to southeastern Anatolia to report on a newly discovered Neolithic site that archeologists thought might have been the world's first temple. The site, Göbekli Tepe, was near the city of Urfa, a Muslim holy destination, believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. (The town, near the Syrian border, is now one of the points through which foreign fighters pass in order to join ISIS.) I seemed to be the only unaccompanied woman at my hotel. When I told the clerk I was staying for six days, he almost had a heart attack. "Six days?" he repeated. "All by yourself?" When I asked about the hours of the steam bath, he said it was for men only—not just at that time of day but all the time. I took the elevator up to my room, filled with the depressing knowledge that there would be no alcohol in the minibar. All the time I was in Urfa, whenever I saw any member of the hotel staff in the halls or the lobby, I always received the same greeting: "Oh, you're still here?"

I had a hard time finding a taxi to take me to the archeological site. In the end, the hotel receptionist called a driver he knew: a surly guy with no meter, who charged an exorbitant fifty-five dollars round trip, and sighed and muttered under his breath the whole way. He didn't answer his phone when I called him to pick me up, and I ended up having to hitchhike. Thinking that life might be easier if I had my own car, I made an appointment for six the next evening at a Europcar location supposedly on Urfa's 749 Street. I got so lost that, by seven, I was still wandering up and down a mysterious stretch of road that seemed to start out as 771 Street and then to become, without any visible change, 764 Street. I had walked several times past the same convenience store, catching the attention of a bread-delivery man.

“Are you looking for something?” the deliveryman asked. I showed him the address. He showed it to another guy. They debated for a long time whether there was or was not a 749 Street. A third guy came out of the store and joined in the conversation. I waited for a few minutes, but it was clear that they were never going to agree, and, anyway, the Europcar was already closed. I thanked them for their help and walked back to the city center to get something to eat.

Most of the restaurants in Urfa had a sign that said “family restaurant,” meaning there was one room that was for men only and one “family room,” where women were allowed. The one I chose had its family room on the roof. There were two or three families sitting up there, with children. The remaining tables were empty. I sat at a table for four people, in a corner. The families had a lot of requests, and I was unable to get the waiter’s attention. I had been sitting there for several minutes when I got a phone call from a friend in Istanbul. When I started talking, in English, two of the women at a nearby table turned and stared at me, openmouthed. I thought that maybe they thought I was being rude for talking on a cell phone.

“I’ll call you back,” I told my friend.

Even after I hung up, the women didn’t stop staring. I tried smiling and waving, but they neither waved back nor looked away. The waiter, who still hadn’t taken my order, was standing in a corner gazing up at a ceiling-mounted TV. I gave up and went back to my hotel room, where I ate tahini rolls while reading about the Neolithic Revolution.

The main tourist and religious sites in Urfa—an ancient castle, numerous mosques, a cave where Abraham may have been born and suckled by a deer for ten years, and a lake of sacred carp believed to mark the spot where Nimrod tried to burn Abraham alive (God turned the cinders into fish) are all in or around a shady green park, with fountains and rosebushes. I went there every day to escape the heat. Women had to wear head scarves at the holy sites, so I bought one at the market and always kept it in my bag. It was soft, gauzy, spring green, with a pattern of tiny intricate vines and leaves.

One day, when I had been visiting Abraham’s cave, I forgot to take the scarf off. Walking back through the park, I almost immediately felt that something was different. I passed two beautiful young women in scarves, walking arm-in-arm and laughing about something. When I looked at them, they looked right back into my face and met my eyes, still smiling, as if we were all in the presence of a great joke. I realized that no young women had met my eyes or smiled at me in Urfa till then. As I walked on, I felt a rising sense of freedom, as if for the first time I could look wherever I wanted and not risk receiving a hostile glance. So I kept the scarf on. And then I went back into the city.

This isn’t a scientific study; I didn’t try it multiple times, or measure anything. All I have is my subjective impression, which is this: walking through the city with a head scarf was a completely different experience. People were so much nicer. Nobody looked away when I approached. I felt less jostled; men seemed to step aside, to give me more room. When I went into a store, a man held the door for me, and I realized that it was the first time anyone had reached a door before me without going in first and letting it shut in my face. Most incredibly, when I got to a bus stop shortly after the bus had pulled away, the departing vehicle stopped in the middle of the street, the door opened, and a man reached out his hand to help me in, calling me “sister.” It felt amazing. To feel so welcomed and accepted and safe, to be able to look into someone’s face and smile, and have the smile returned—it was a wonderful gift.

How long can I keep wearing it? I found myself thinking, as the bus lurched into motion and cars honked around us. The rest of the day? Forever?

I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me sooner to try wearing a head scarf—why nobody ever told me it was something I could do. It wasn't difficult, or expensive. Why should I not cover my head here, if it made the people who lived here feel so much better? Why should I cause needless discomfort to them and to myself? Out of principle? What principle? The principle that women were equal to men? To whom was I communicating that principle? With what degree of success? What if I thought I was communicating one thing but what people understood was something else—what if what they understood was that I disapproved of them and thought their way of life was backward? Did that still count as "communicating"?

I found myself thinking about high heels. High heels were painful, and, for me at least, expensive, because they made walking more difficult and I ended up taking more taxis. Yet there were many times when I wore heels to work-related events in New York, specifically because I felt it made people treat me with more consideration. Why, then, would I refuse to wear a head scarf, which brought a similar benefit of social acceptance, without the disadvantage of impeding my ability to stand or walk?

And yet, when I thought about leaving the scarf on for the rest of my stay, something about it felt dishonest, almost shameful, as if I were duping people into being kind to me. Those girls who smiled into my eyes—they thought I was like them. The guy who helped me on the bus—he thought I was his sister.

At that point, another thought came to me, a kind of fantasy, so foreign that I could barely articulate it even to myself: What if I really did it? What if I wore a scarf not as a disguise but somehow for real? I was thirty-four, and I'd been having a lot of doubts about the direction my life was taking. I had had an abortion the previous year, with some reluctance, and everything—every minor defeat, every sign of unfriendliness—still hurt a little extra. I had never felt so alone, and in a way that seemed suddenly to have been of my design, as if I had chosen this life without realizing it, years earlier, when I set out to become a writer. And now a glimmer appeared before me of a totally different way of being than any I had imagined, a life with clear rules and duties that you followed, in exchange for which you were respected and honored and safe. You had children—not maybe but definitely. You didn't have to worry that your social value was irrevocably tied to your sexual value. You had less freedom, true. But what was so great about freedom? What was so great about being a journalist and going around being a pain in everyone's ass, having people either be suspicious and mean to you or try to use you for their P.R. strategy? Travelling alone, especially as a woman, especially in a patriarchal culture, can be really stressful. It can make you question the most basic priorities around which your life is arranged. Like: Why do I have a job that makes me travel alone? For literature? What's literature?

These thoughts recently came back to me when I read "Submission," the latest novel by Michel Houellebecq, a satire set in a 2022 France ruled by democratically elected Islamic moderates. The Islam in "Submission" is largely a fantasy designed, by Houellebecq, to appeal to someone just like Houellebecq, with lavishly funded universities, fantastic meze, freely flowing French and Lebanese wines, and multiple teen wives for every intellectual who converts to Islam. But the political rhetoric of the movement's leader, Mohammed Ben Abbes, is well reasoned and coherent, bearing a certain resemblance to Erdoğan's actual platform, and presented with a frankness and lucidity that made me understand the logic of the A.K.P. in a way I never had before.

Internationally, Ben Abbes seeks to transform Europe into a Mediterranean and North African union of Muslim states: a program similar to the "neo-Islamism" of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the A.K.P. prime minister. Domestically, Ben Abbes supports entrepreneurialism, family businesses, and the free market; socially, he seeks to bolster Muslim education and to encourage women to be stay-at-home mothers, while continuing to tout the supreme value of democratic rule. I had never understood how

all these goals were related, or even compatible. How could someone who opposed feminism—who was O.K. with half the population being less educated than the other half—be in favor of democracy? How could a democratic constitution not be secular? How could it be compatible with any of the Abrahamic faiths, with anything that came out of that cave in Urfa? I had always assumed that Erdoğan was being insincere about something: either he was just pretending to care about democracy or he was just pretending to care about Muslim family values—or, as my relatives said, he was pretending both about democracy and Islam, and the only thing he really cared about was building more shopping malls with Gulf money.

Reading "Submission," I saw that there is, in fact, a logical consistency in the Islamist moderate free-trade platform. Democracy, like capitalism, is a numbers game, and "family values" is a machine that boosts the population. As one Houellebecq character puts it:

"Couples who follow one of the three religions of the Book and maintain patriarchal values have more children than atheists or agnostics. You see less education among women, less hedonism and individualism. And to a large degree, this belief in transcendence can be passed on genetically. Conversions, or cases where people grow up to reject family values, are statistically insignificant. In the vast majority of cases, people stick with whatever metaphysical system they grow up in. That's why atheist humanism—the basis of any "pluralist society"—is doomed."

The atheist humanists in Houellebecq's 2022 are doomed, not just to extinction but also to uncoolness. The 1968 movement in Europe, much like the Kemalist revolution in Turkey, was once youthful and countercultural, and then it won, and itself became an old and crumbling establishment. Ben Abbes, Houellebecq writes, gets no trouble from "the last of the soixante-huitards, those progressive mummified corpses—extinct in the wider world—who managed to hang on in the citadels of the media." The outnumbered, irrelevant zombies, still naïvely believing themselves to be the defenders of the downtrodden, are so "paralyzed" by the Muslims' "multicultural background" that they don't even put up a fight.

Houellebecq's narrator, François, is a middle-aged professor of French literature—a specialist in the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans's "Against Nature" (1884), widely considered a masterpiece of the decadent movement, tells the story of a dissolute aristocrat who devotes his life to aesthetic pursuits, such as eating all-black meals and hanging around with a giant jewel-encrusted tortoise. These activities fail to bring him happiness, even as they seem to exhaust the possibilities of the decadent novel. Huysmans converted to Catholicism after writing "Against Nature." The parallels between François and Huysmans's hero are clear. François, too, has devoted his life to aesthetic pursuits: reading, watching television, chain-smoking, drinking supermarket wine, and dating undergraduates. He, too, finds these indulgences empty and exhaustible: literature stops seeming interesting, and sex gets more difficult every year. In much the same way that Huysmans converted to Catholicism, François converts to Islam.

When the Muslim government subsidizes a Pléiade edition of Huysmans and commissions François to write an introduction, he does some rereading and realizes, for the first time, that "Huysmans's true subject had been bourgeois happiness, a happiness painfully out of reach for a bachelor." That was all Huysmans ever wanted: not the all-black meals, not the jewel-encrusted turtle, but simply "to have his artist friends over for a pot-au-feu with horseradish sauce, accompanied by an 'honest' wine and followed by plum brandy and tobacco, with everyone sitting by the stove while the winter winds battered the towers of Saint-Sulpice." Such happiness is "painfully out of reach for a bachelor," even a rich one with servants; it really depends on a wife who can cook and entertain, who can turn a house into a home.

This is the cost of bourgeois happiness, in Houellebecq's Islamic utopia: the independence of

women. It's fascinating to see how Houellebecq rises to the challenge of making female domestic enslavement seem palatable in the novel, not just to the Islamo-curious François but also, to some extent, to the women of France. For example, early in the novel, François looks up two of his exes, successful single women in their forties; these scenes suggest, not implausibly, that the penalties of aging, and the psychic toll of dating and singleness, are even harder for women than for men, and that they aren't really balanced out by the joys of a career in, say, wine distribution or pharmaceuticals. François subsequently visits a female ex-colleague who has retired to domestic life pending the Islamization of the university. "To see her bustling around the kitchen in an apron bearing the humorous phrase 'Don't Holler at the Cook—That's the Boss's Job!,'. . . it was hard to believe that just days ago she'd been leading a doctoral seminar on the altogether unusual circumstances surrounding Balzac's corrections to the proofs of Béatrix," he observes. "She'd made us tartlets stuffed with ducks' necks and shallots, and they were delicious." In a later passage, set on a train, François contrasts the visible stress of a Muslim businessman, who is having a clearly harrowing phone conversation, with the high spirits of his two teen wives, who are solving puzzles from the newspaper. Under the "Islamic regime," François realizes, women—or "at least the ones pretty enough to attract a rich husband"—live in an eternal childhood, first as children, then as mothers, with just a few years of "sexy underwear" in between: "Obviously they had no autonomy, but as they say in English, fuck autonomy."

Houellebecq's vision of an Islamic state, for all its cartoonishness, has a certain imaginative generosity. He portrays Islam not as a depersonalized creeping menace, or as an ideological last resort to which those disenfranchised by the West may be "vulnerable," but as a system of beliefs that is enormously appealing to many people, many of whom have other options. It's the same realization I reached in Urfa. Nobody has everything; everyone is trading certain things for others.

I didn't wear the scarf again, after that afternoon. I couldn't explain it rationally, but it didn't feel right. I stuck to my original strategy of smiling and ignoring social cues—the American way. "In the vast majority of cases," as a French intellectual once said, "people stick with whatever metaphysical system they grow up in."

In the course of multiple trips to the site, the surly taxi-driver gradually opened up, especially after I complimented him on the skill with which he avoided hitting pedestrians at the last possible second. "That was nothing," the driver said, and told me about the time he had managed not to run over an old man who was walking right down the middle of the road as if it were the sidewalk, and who, in response to the driver's honking, simply stood where he was and shouted, "Pretend I'm a tree."

"How can you reason with someone like that?" the driver demanded, adding that when he drove in Urfa he conducted himself according to logic and not according to the traffic laws, because the rate of survival for someone who followed traffic laws had dropped to zero per cent.

We pulled up at the hotel. "So you're still with us," the receptionist said, not unhumorously, when I walked in.

"Of course," I replied. "What person who has come to Urfa would ever want to leave?"

Elif Batuman

P.S.

* THE NEWYORKER. FEBRUARY 8 & 15, 2016 ISSUE:
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/cover-story-personal-history-elif-batuman

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