

## The Gypsy Dance

For years now I've wondered, wherever I land, if each country has its own smell. I've tried in passing to put my finger on it, but that only seems to nudge any answer further away. If the first breath somewhere, the only honest one, tries to remember the last breath somewhere else, the present smell is lost; likewise, if that same breath is taken in, fully and unknowingly and all at once, the past one slips beyond memory.

In the lamp light outside arrivals, the thought surprised me once more as I recognized this country again. Moments stored deeply away became strange as the clean air mixed with cigarettes from the last country. The straight sidewalk, orderly lamps and designated smoking area came to my senses in an unreal way. I stared into the steady stream of cars, coming and going, and it all appeared a great mystery to me. No over filled mini-buses screaming down narrow, ancient streets; no impetuous, young drivers eager to coax me into their car and out of my money; the accustomed, frantic pulse was missing – I had fallen asleep in one world and awoken in another one.

Between cigarettes, I watched an older driver standing against a spotless, cream colored car near the entrance. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I had a great desire to take a taxi. It just looked so peculiar and precious. It had been my every intention, before that moment, to go back inside, to take a connecting train into the city, but the world was warm again and I still had more money than I was used to from my last job in the spring.

The taxi went down from the elevated terminal and onto the highway. The man was keen on talking and asked me all the usual questions; footnotes to where I was from and what I did for work. As we approached the city, the colors of very early morning were just starting to drift onto the red clay tiles of the surrounding suburbs. Overlapping church bells rang out in the red roofed stillness,

reminding me of the echoing call to prayer. Until now I had forgotten all about these bells; how long, I wonder, would it be before I would forget those sounds too?

The illuminated surfaces of baroque buildings floated out of the slowly receding dark. We were in the city now. We drove past the circular junction point for the trams, then past the beginning of the grand avenue that led to the river.

“Stop here” I said

“You said the –bridge riverside” He said “It’s just a few minutes further”

“Here’s fine”

With the car still running, he got my backpack out of the trunk and I paid him. He had been talking the whole time and seemed reluctant now to stop.

“I have to say, your German is very good – almost no accent. Do you have German parents?” He asked me

“No, my parents are American too” I’d hardly stood up since sitting down for my flight and the weather felt good for walking. “I’m curious, where did you learn your German then?” I was eager to leave and pulled the backpack onto one shoulder “I learned it from a Turkish woman actually— I’ll tell you all about it next time” His good natured, middle aged face took on a wholly legitimate expression of interest.

“That’s really quite unbelievable, how is it possible that an immigrant—”

I smiled, shook his hand and told him I was sorry, but I was already late and had to be going.

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I would have nowhere to go until noon and idly walked the length of the avenue; all its boutiques, cafes, bookstores, and cinemas closed. A well maintained strip, full of neatly kept gardens and trees, cut the avenue in two and along either side, benches, fountains, statues and advertising ran its length. Altogether, it gave the impression of a paused party, ready to start exactly where it had left off with the next day's crowds. The fountains' round sound of running water was all that saved my

presence from being an unwelcome guest.

I continued on until I reached the base of the ornate walking bridge that connected the two sides of the city. It had been a rainy afternoon the last time I had walked across it and it seemed wrong to do so now. I stood at its entrance for a long while, leaning on a gilded railing with one hand and smoking with the other one. The plume of my cigarette smoke was silhouetted against the faint red and deep purple of the rising, clean atmosphere. Had the sky grown lighter? As the very last stars withdrew, buildings cast long reflections of a delicate gold and the sky beyond turned a pale blue. I looked down into the shadows along the shoreline. The boardwalk was there, I was sure, still quiet and dark, resting alongside the river.

I made my way back to the trams, slower than before; a new found fatigue had formed with the sunrise. A little ways down the avenue, ensconced in its tall borders of buildings and trees and still quite dark, I saw the light of a single store, a bakery. Walking closer, through its large front window, I could see a girl flitting about the small building, almost skipping between the backroom and the counter.

She seemed to be alone. I decided to go in out of some vague, sentimental idea that it was better to be with someone, even a stranger, now that the night was over.

An electronic bell rang as I entered the bakery. She hadn't seen me standing outside and quickly turned toward the door. We looked at each other and smiled. Instead of a uniform she wore an old fashioned, light blue shirt dress, conservatively cut but adorned with little flourishes that gave it a light, lively interest. She had very dark, straight hair that fell away from a round face in a practiced curl around her ears, stopping at her shoulders.

Words from different countries bloated my brain, severing any connection it had with my tongue. At a loss, I asked her if she spoke English and apologized, explaining that my German wasn't very good. She said she did and I ordered a coffee, then a pastry at random from the many rows underneath the glass counter.

“Cream and Sugar?”

I asked for milk instead and she paused, repeating the word milk aloud, testing it with a question mark. I complimented her on her English, but it fell flatly, without any reaction beyond a polite smile, interchangeable with the last one. She brought me my coffee and took my money, then continued in her carefree way behind the counter, lightly and efficiently finishing her routine. She looked like a completely happy woman.

All of a sudden, a warm familiarity welled up within me and I wondered for just an instant if the familiar face of a stranger can ever be unique.

“Are you Turkish?” I asked suddenly in Turkish

“Ay! Yes—” She spun rapidly around to face me. She had covered her mouth in surprise. She became shy and uncertain; an intangible seal had been broken. We only spoke in Turkish. People always insist when they can.

“And you?” She said finally

“American” I heard myself say. I recognized the traces of that familiar epiphanic emotion, the conviction that life could always start again.

“Why can you speak Turkish?”

“Oh, it's a long story” I couldn't help smiling and sipped my coffee as a distraction. It was too hot and I willed a grimace smooth, feeling increasingly foolish “My Turkish is terrible though, I'm sorry”

“No, come on, it's pretty good in my opinion” She paused “What are you doing here in Germany then I wonder?”

“I'm looking for someone – another Turkish woman actually. Maybe you know her?” She put up her hands modestly and softly shrugged her shoulders. “I'm sorry, but I just moved here. I really don't know anyone yet” The young woman broke off and shyly flattened the fabric of her dress. “But what's her name, maybe I can help?”

“What's your name?” I asked

“Elif, yours?”

“William”

Her pronunciation was better than I had expected and laughed. There was a silence. We both looked at each other without any obvious direction for the conversation to head towards next. Her large brown eyes gave off an inscrutably perceptive quality. “I can ask one of the guys in the grocery store next door a little later if you want” She said finally as the first customers, two older looking men, came in. I looked over my shoulder, it was bright out now, and imagined the morning rush would be here soon. She continued quickly “He's from here and Turkish. He knows everybody”

“There's no need really— maybe later. I'll be here for a little while longer. There's no rush.” I said and stepped out of line.

There's always a point in a conversation marking a better and worse time to leave. After another twenty minutes of sipping the same coffee, the swell of customers having prevented any further interaction with her, I accepted I had well passed that point in this one already. I asked a group of construction workers, unmistakably regulars, drinking coffee next to me, for directions to the address I had written out, then took a last look at Elif – she was waiting on a tired looking mother with her children – and walked out.

Half a block down, back in the direction of the trams, a voice called out behind me.

“Hey!” Elif waved and ran toward me. “Did you understand those guys?” She stopped in front of me, closer than I expected. “I thought your German wasn't so good?” She flashed me a smile and I couldn't help but smile in return.

“It's better than my Turkish, but you can see how bad that is” Any weariness I'd felt before left me talking to her now, but I set the backpack down anyway. “Sorry, I wanted to say goodbye before I left, but you looked busy”

“I'm sorry. It's always like that. But I just work a few hours in the morning. I'm an apprentice—” Her voiced trailed, then bounced back “Wait ten more minutes. I live in the same direction you're going, we

can walk together”

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We walked a while without talking or looking at each other. When we came to the tram junction where we would separate, we stood facing each other.

“How come you can speak Turkish, or German for that matter?”

“Can’t everyone?”

“Do you always give annoying answers?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“You really do always give annoying answers.” She said

“I’d have to cut off my tongue to say anything else”

“If you don’t want to tell me, it’s fine”

“I’ll tell you all about it next time — I’ll be working at a restaurant on the boardwalk this summer. I’m sure we’ll see each other again”

“Which one?” Her face was clear in the morning light.

#

We decided to walk to the restaurant before going home. We kept brushing up against each other, slowly veering in either direction down the grand avenue, and I reached out to hold her hand but she pulled away. There was no strength or disgust in the movement and neither of us acknowledged it. Looking up, we stopped in front of the restaurant. It was a tall, narrow building – South American cuisine. The angled, morning light highlighted some of the gaudier features meant to attract the summer tourists.

“Does it pay well?” She asked

“I haven’t started yet, but I can’t say the guy has ever paid me”

“Well, the best things in life are free”

There was a big sign for the building next door.

*GYPSY FORTUNE TELLING AND GIFTS.*

I felt the heat of imagined eyes on my neck and turned toward her. She was looking at the gypsy store too.

“They can’t even tell fortunes” She said

“No?”

“No. If you want your fortune told, Turks do it much better.”

“I’m sure they do”

“Oh, you know Turkish fortune telling?” She turned toward me, half surprised with a satisfied expression.

“Of course” I said ironically. It was an old habit. Every country is convinced they invented drinking, fortune telling and discovered America. “That means you can tell my fortune too, right?”

“Of course—” She said, mocking my tone “better than getting your fortune told here. They’re all Bulgarian gypsies. My family is from western Turkey— they will rob you blind, but they play beautiful music.”

#

I hadn't spoken with Nico in three years. Three long, strange years. At one time we were quite close; I don't know why, but I just never responded to any of his messages after leaving the city. I was surprised then when I opened an email from him with a job offer. He had sold his club, where we had spent most of our days together, and bought a restaurant on the riverside boardwalk. I should come by if I was in Europe, work for the summer and catch up.

Despite having other admirable qualities, Nico was like a painter who only paints so that he can see his models naked. He was friendly with the fortune telling store next door and many nights, certainly every weekend, after we closed our doors, we had an after party with the Gypsy families of

the area. There were always different people, music and drinks, but the energy behind everything was the same. Nico had often said in the past that at every point in a man's life he needs at least one good drinking partner. A whole tribe of gypsies was filling that role now.

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Day after day, food was carried in and out and up the many floors of the restaurant. Our small square of boardwalk swelled with the regular rushes. The sun glinted off the broad body of water beside us and small waves lapped its bank. The indistinct murmur of many different voices filled either side of the river. The small whites of distant sailboats rested in the water like so many motionless birds in a mirrored sky while more determined riverboat cruises and dining ships steadily made their daily route past the bend and beyond the city.

We closed the outside dining area whenever it rained and sometimes my mind would will itself into wishful thinking. The boardwalk was lined with perfectly spaced magnolia trees that turned pink in the spring. Time after time, the rustling of their leaves took me in and sounded so much like rain that I had to look up to tell the difference – to see the trees, quite out of my control, swaying in the wind.

When dusk set in, the sky tinged with colors of copper and rust and a reddish glow seemed to hang across the river. The boardwalk's numbers increased one last time; growing in size until it rapidly emptied with the onset of night. As soon as the restaurant closed for the customers, it opened for the gypsies. The open sign was turned off and the rooms cleared of tables and chairs for dancing. Sometimes the gypsies would bring their own instruments, other times they just played music into our sound system with whatever they had. Whatever money was earned was spent on alcohol, all without any visible purpose. All I could do there was drink and I didn't have the slightest interest in it. After drinking I left for the bakery.



#

Our bench was on the avenue between the bakery and the river. Sometimes I would come early and keep her company while she worked, but usually I picked her up at the same time every day after her shift. We didn't talk much or look at each other while walking. Often she would walk ahead of me; some amount of separation was needed before we sat down to hold each other and talk – inevitably for hours. I liked to watch her move in front of me; caring purpose in each slow, hip swaying step.

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“Now?” I asked. She lightly touched the bottom of the upturned demitasse, testing its temperature.

“No, it's still not ready. Be patient”

I tried to pick it up anyway and she smacked my hand.

“Come on, you're not even trying”

My mood was darkening with the fading alcohol, so I drank three cups of coffee while we waited.

Finally, it was deemed cold enough and she turned the cup right side up and began her reading. Turning it slowly, scanning its inside with her inscrutable eyes, she pursed her lips and periodically raised and lowered her eyebrows in comic concentration.

“What do you see” I asked, making it a statement “You know I don't believe in any of this, right?” She theatrically continued, as if she hadn't heard anything. “Come here, do you see?” Keeping the same pose as before, she grew closer to me. Wanting me to hear her words in this way, she put her mouth to my ear. “I see that you will meet a younger, more beautiful Turkish woman where you go to next”

“Give me that— where, show me.”

“Right there.”

I looked at the smeared form of coffee grounds she pointed to with her little finger “Sorry, that's not right” I said. She surrendered a small look of disappointment, then became angry with me “Well, it's better than whatever they try to tell you at that gypsy place!” I switched to English to show her I was serious. “Calm down, it just doesn't look anything like Mongolia is all”

“What?” She said still in Turkish.

“That doesn’t look anything like Mongolia, if I’m going anywhere next, it’s Mongolia”

“Why Mongolia?”

I suddenly felt very hollow.

“I’d like to live in a new place I’ve never been before and never meet anyone again.”

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Not far past the boardwalk there was a beach, man-made and clean like everything else. It was a shimmering stretch full of grinning children, the observations of the older people on the shore and the actions and flirtations of the many ages in between. We often went there with a cooler full of drinks to have makeshift parties with girls on the beach and the varied crowds that came to drink with Nico.

One hot evening, on a day when the restaurant was closed, as we approached the worn circle of chairs that had accumulated over the summer, a girl was waiting for us. She jumped up and brightly waved in our direction. I recognized that it was the tall, German girl whom Nico had been trying to set up with me for the past few weeks. From this distance she made an eager and cheerful appearance.

As always, our little party drank freely and deeply into the night. Groups broke off to play games in the sand or swim. Men my age splashed and chased and held women in the shallows. I thought it a pity that even if they remembered these moments forever, holding these girls in their arms, playfully threatening to throw them in the water, their screams full of delight, they would never know that this was only possible with some girls.

The same faces played guitars, repeating songs they had known for a long time. Others, stepping in and out of the circle, took turns playing music from their phones. I wanted to leave and go to the bakery, but it wouldn't be late enough for a couple hours yet and kept drinking. They were a rotten crowd, all of them, but they were right. I couldn't help but see they were right, every last one. They were like animals engaged in some terrible act, bloodied faces gnawing at the bones of something dead, but behaving according to their nature and exactly right.

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There is an endless amount of pretty girls in the world maybe, but whenever I see one, some small part of me becomes convinced they're the last one. I mostly sat with the tall, German girl. After almost every other word, she scrunched up her nose, furrowed her eyebrows and laughed with hyena proportions. She had the long, thin bones of a dancer. She would be attending school in the US that fall and wanted to know Americans' opinions about her university. We only spoke in English. People always insist when they can.

When I said I was leaving, she persistently said she was tired and wished to leave with me and we walked back to the boardwalk together. "Enough from me, whatever are you doing in Germany and where did you learn such a German?" We kept brushing up against each other and she reached out and took my hand.

"My parents are German" I said "I just come here sometimes in the summer to visit relatives."

"That's very sweet of you to visit" She squeezed my hand lightly "Ah, the night is beautiful. I feel myself so good— you must come with me next weekend!" She said and patted my hand "we're all going to Paris"

"I can't speak French and I think I'm too old to learn any other languages."

"Nonsense!" She exclaimed and unpleasantly rested more of her weight on my hand.

I replied that there is a Turkish proverb that says a language cannot be learned without touching tongues.

"Exactly!" She agreed and laughed shrilly "I can teach you. We must learn in the school French here. I went to a boarding school one year in Toulouse, so my French is quite good; not as good as my English, but it is not very difficult." She paused as if to consider something serious, then blithely continued at full volume. "You are fortunate to be born with your languages, I had to work for mine. My parents paid for travels in Australia and the United States, naturally, but still it needed a certain time"

We followed the wide walking path back to the boardwalk, the girl talking the whole way. Not far from the restaurant, children had decorated a section of smooth concrete with large, clumsy chalk drawings. What was drawn sometimes changed, but there were always drawings there. Amongst the ceaseless drunken walks back from the beach that summer, they had become one of the few reminders that time truly was passing. I stepped onto the grass to avoid stepping on them, but she didn't notice and smeared one of them with the twist of a sandal. I pulled her towards me and she exaggerated the motion, wrapping herself around my body. She held herself close and I recognized a perfume I'd smelled countless times before; the same smell mixed with the same summer air. Was it the woman or the perfume? I looked at the drawing over her shoulder, it was ruined.

Stirred by the warmth of her body and the smell of that perfume, I was ready to accept that this was all a dream, past, present and future, and to discard any responsibility I might have for the dream world. I kissed her; and reminding myself that Nico was the only other person with a key, we found an empty room together in the closed restaurant.

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Tell me, why can you speak Turkish?"

Sitting together on our bench, I looked down the abandoned avenue and I knew that the summer was over.

"Maybe next time I'll tell you all about it. But not now, now I just don't feel like it."

She stirred her coffee in the to-go cup we'd taken from the bakery in slow, distracted circles.

"I want to ask you something" She said

"I want to ask you something too"

"Ok, you go first"

"Did you come to the restaurant today?"

"Who said that?"

"A guy I work with. He said a Turkish girl came to the front desk and asked for me"

“Yes— I was at the boardwalk with friends and we all decided to get our fortunes told.” She said

“Since I was there, I thought I'd stop by to see you”

“I thought you said those fortunes were a scam— I almost got into a fight last time when I said as much to one of them”

“Oh, I don't know... fortunes are just for fun. There's no such thing as a fortune.”

“What about the fortune you told me?” She grew tense and silent. I tried to make eye contact with her, but she wouldn't look up. Finally she spoke. “I can't tell fortunes...” She reached out her hand and took mine. Holding her hand, I was struck by how small it was, cold and smooth and actionless. She pulled her hand away for a moment, then took mine again. It was damp and I saw the small golden flakes of lamplight from the tips of her fingers where she had dried her eyes. She was crying, I could feel it tremble through her hand. It's an unspoken torture only being able to use some words and not others. She continued quietly crying and I sat in silence hating the lost words – it didn't matter either way, the tears came so naturally, there was no stopping them.

We sat for a long while until she came back from wherever she had been.

“What did you want to ask me?” I asked her.

Her voice crept toward me in god given softness.

“Would you stay here with me... or could we leave together? I don't want to go home this morning”

#

The religious man, at least initially, crawls away from his burning church absolutely certain that the next one he builds will stand forever.

The restaurant's open sign was turned off and the rooms cleared of tables and chairs. It was already so late; I left for the bakery without even saying goodbye. I started running. I didn't know why but the blood in my veins seemed to understand, pumping harder as I ran faster, seeing *her* face, *our* last kiss, a perfect pair of disembodied lips in the dark. Running past our bench, the imagined words I would tell her mixed with those of the conversations we had had. I felt so good and light; fast enough

to chase the sun – that abstract object now on the other side of the world – extending the night and this moment forever. I laughed between breaths, looking up at the stars, and felt the changing sky thunder down inside me. All I needed to do was explain all of this to her, tell her in all the languages we knew that there was only this moment, this single wondrous instant, ever repeating like the sunrises we had shared. If I did this, I was certain, we could forget time together and she would share in my joy.

I stopped, suddenly out of breath in the avenue in front of the bakery. Looking through the front window, I could see now. She was so much like *her*, I really had to look to tell the difference; to see her quite out of my control, happily move around the familiar counter. No, the past is something you can see, watch through a bakery window even, but never walk with, touch or kiss. I took one more step toward the building. The slowness of that step, one foot on the sidewalk and one on the avenue, made me fear for a moment that I might not turn around after all.

I don't know how long I stood there like that, but by the time I got back to the boardwalk the gypsy dance was already in full swing. I pushed my way through the crowd to the bar where Nico found me, slapping me on the shoulder. We drank a few rounds of whiskey together, pretending we were younger and it was old times. After a while a group of gypsy men came to the bar and ordered everyone vodka. It was beginners luck maybe; a pretty dark haired girl took my hand and dragged me into the dance. Her hand was warm and she directed mine. We burst into the center of the dancing and she turned herself with my hand, spinning effortlessly. She shimmied against me, then rhythmically shivered great, long staccato thrusts through her hips as her hands made smooth waves through the air and her fingers clicked to the music. I did my best to match her, coming close, face to face. The rhythm rippled through our touching bodies, traveling lower and lower, then reflected on the floor and rippled back up to our lips. A circle of dancing women screamed in laughter and pointed at an old man dancing next to us “His wife Marga is afraid because she thinks he'll go off with someone else!” Plates and glasses were thrown to the ground in time with the music and a chorus of cheers and clapping accompanied each smash. All conventions were forgotten and the room grew warmer and the drinks

flowed faster. Uncensored and formless, dancers dragged their partners by their teeth into the whirling, living mass. Men with raised drinks yelled out “I don't know, what can I do? I'll die anyway! All the Gypsies are dancing tonight! Mother we are dancing, we are drinking!”

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I left a few days later for Spain to find an apartment before the grape harvest. The sun seems to set with more patience these days; still though, I sometimes wonder which song played last that night at the gypsy dance. I can't remember and probably never will.