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Berlin Story
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I always try to remember what is the first time I first thought about Berlin but I just don't. When I was only 14 or 15, so I think in 1995 our school organized a field trip for the second language class students. Those who were learning Spanish, like me, had a wonderful time cruising around *Andalusia*; but those few who had been unlucky enough to study German came back from Berlin with only *disappointment* and hunger as souvenirs. Grey, they said, grey and ugly and sad were the words to describe the city. They had been hosted by families, mostly families from East Berlin in need for some extra cash, and were given food so bland and tasteless that it seemed the beginning of a *Roald Dahl* Novel were a poor kid feeds on potatoes. We, Turkish kids, are the apples of our parent's eyes; we only eat the finest dishes.

My peers accounts had engraved Berlin and Germany in general as somewhere not to set foot. In my early youth, I had been lucky enough to travel to most European countries but all I knew from Germany was the Munich transit lounge, and I did not mind.

And yet, flash forward to 10 years later. I am finishing my studies in New York and my visa is about to run out. What I liked about being there was its outmost regenerating power, as you become the person you are when you set foot in the city. New York had made me who I was, liberating me from the dusty heaviness of an accumulated past in the old continent. Walking large sidewalks of a dirty but expensive neighborhood (NYC's favorite paradox: *dirty but expensive*) I found myself at loss. Could I find the same freedom back in Europe? Would I be able to escape the debilitating vortex of a bourgeois-bohemian life in Paris, or the career obsessed chaos of Istanbul?

One night at a gallery opening I heard a conversation. It was about Berlin. And just like a girl flashes on a man walking past the door, well I set my heart that I had to go see myself, discover how on earth Berlin had become, well... "Cool".

It was a string of coincidences that finally years later allowed me to make my move to the desired city. Long story short, time had come to make the official arrangements. Two things stood at the top of the list.

- 1- Convince mother
- 2- Convince father

The second was rather easy. My father having never really done anything half rational in his life, I might have as well told him "*Hokkaido*". He remembered coming to Berlin in his youth. Let's say he remembered the bus ride through East Germany into West Berlin. Hearing that sent chills through my spine: in the rest of the western world, as a young person, you have the ultimate comfort to feel extremely remote from most events of the WWII, or Cold War era. There are just so text-book and *passé*. In Berlin you cannot escape the unease provoked by that simple thought: "*In my lifetime, this city knew one of the worst atrocities of humanity: a dividing wall*"

My mother's reaction was pretty much the same reaction as to everything I decide to take upon myself. She just throws herself into a frenzy of information collecting. So I wasn't much surprised when about a week later she had collected full binders of print outs of the Internet and had spoken to about three quarters of her agenda. I saw that she did not really know how to digest the results.

- a- Berlin is doing great for the Arts and media (positive)
- b- Berlin is still facing huge economic challenges (negative)
- c- Berlin is the third Turkish city after Istanbul and Ankara (Positive to find food but negative because all are immigrants)
- d- Cool and intellectual friends know about Berlin (positive)
- e- Rich and influent friends don't know anything about it (negative)

About half of the people she had talked to asked her if her daughter was getting married. Apparently that is the main reason a Turkish girl in her 20's would go to Berlin. Having responded no, she faced the next step: "then why?" I was neither going to study university, nor to a specific job. What I was going to do was: "*to try to experience a new city and try to put my artistic career under way*". Now, that was a simple answer that in the mind of a Turkish person of middle class origin would provoke no surprise if the city in question were London or Paris. But Berlin had just been engraved in our minds as a huge factory for Turkish people. It was a stereotype hard to brake.

However, Internet being the Guru of our times, she convinced herself through thorough research that it was, overall, a cool city to be and it could be a good opportunity for me. And so I left, for Berlin.

The first place I arrived was Kreuzberg, so it isn't surprising that one of my first thought was "*this is how a Chinese person must feel in Chinatown*". Coming from a country whose international presence is always a minor one, it is quite shocking. Fine, you do see *Doner kebab* stores in each European city, you might even find a Turkish street like in North London, but it is never comparable to what one can experience in Kreuzberg. What I had in front of me was the first "little Istanbul" complete with Turkish banks, Satellite resellers, and bookstores. I discovered wide-eyed that if I chose to I could continue having even my toothpaste with Turkish writings.

When I enter a Turkish community abroad, I have to do the "*Turkishness assessment test*" first. Not only I have a foreign last name that comes from my father and a foreign first name that comes from a book; but my mother did not even have the intelligence to give me a Turkish middle name I could use. That may sound like an irrelevant issue but in Turkey it is not. She had to fight a lot to be able to get me my nationality, and that only happened when I was 8 years old. Still today, when I have to deal with a bureaucratic issue and I show my I.D. card I always get the "eyebrow". Nothing else, just the "eyebrow".

The “*Turkishness assessment test*” is simple. I try to decide as fast as I can if I can say my real name without having to tell my life story. If the shopkeeper fails to pass the test I just use my mother’s name: Sema.

In most places the shopkeepers fail to pass the test, and each time I do tell my real name I get the “How come?” look and so I have to explain: “Because my father is French...” which provokes a doubt about my origins, so I have to sweat double to convince them about the validity of my *turkishness* “but I lived in Istanbul all my Life!”

If I get to go to the same shop often I also have to be prepared for the “*uber-nationalistic protective brother syndrome*” In which the shopkeeper will gently warn me against western boyfriends and the importance of staying with your culture peers. I have long ago given up telling my real thoughts, and I just nod along.

To my surprise, I can say that in Berlin I encountered an extremely opened minded reaction. Maybe because in Kreuzberg we do live in a tiny *multu-culti* paradise, maybe because they have been here so long, I do not know, but nothing seems too strange to people really. Except a few cases, neither my name, nor my complicated life story, nor the fact that I live with my Italian boyfriend and drink with him vodka’s at the *getranke* shop at 3 in the morning provoked an upheaval, as behavior unfit to a Turkish lady.

Today it has been more then I year I am here, and I know that only two things make my mother doubt that Berlin is indeed a good place.

The first one is that my hot water boiler in my apartment is electric, just like the one we have in turkey, and we believe that the first thing a developed country should give you is unlimited hot water. When I was looking for my flat I really thought that the Turkish community could help me find something cheap and cool. But soon enough I understood that old floorboards, big windows without isolations, strange bathroom dispositions, gas ovens in kitchen, and all the pipe sounds that come with old Berlin buildings had only charm for me; and that they only seeks what I despised, those new, ugly, square constructions.

The second is that each time she tells me go grocery shopping with the credit card (under her account) I have to explain that it is not that easy to use the credit card in Kreuzberg, actually it is quite uncommon. Now for someone coming from Turkey, a country in which the credit cards are given out like bread loafs in the subway, where each person posses an average of 4 card each with different advantages and payment options; a country where pretty much everyone has some kind of credit card debt because you can even pay chewing gum with it; Well, let’s say that having no credit card is like being quite underdeveloped!

End.