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Prologue

I am a descendant of two Balkan families who, because of circumstances beyond their control, were forced to leave their native cities where their ancestors had lived for hundreds of years, thus becoming refugees. Both families adopted the same new city, Istanbul, and tried to adapt to their new surroundings and circumstances as best they could. It was a very painful experience. The memories of their lives in their native cities lingered in their minds and never faded from their hearts. I was born in Istanbul and I, too, left my city—but not because of circumstances beyond my control. Quite the contrary. I left voluntarily and opted to live in the United States.

I think an immigrant always has a dual personality. At least I do. I have been very meticulous in keeping my identity as a Turk. With Turkey's culture, history, music, and literature woven into my very marrow, I belong to the country where I was raised and the city I will always love. But since the United States is my adopted country, I am also an American. For better or for worse, I have tied my fate with its fate. Its problems are my problems; its joy, my joy.

My dual personality manifests itself in various ways. Here in the United States, with my inalienable right, I can freely criticize the attitude my adopted country takes toward various issues whenever I deem it appropriate. I criticize the foreign policy, I criticize the educational policy, and I criticize junk food. But whenever I visit my native country, Turkey, I become very defensive if someone criticizes the United States, especially when criticism borders on disparaging comments. My counter-arguments follow one another and many times I become belligerent. Similarly, I become angry when harsh words, whether justified or not, are spoken against Turkey in the United States. And yet in Turkey I am perhaps the severest critic. Could it be love for both? I know not.

To forget one's native land is an absolute impossibility. Memories linger; from time to time, nostalgic remembrances become companions of everyday thoughts. Although one acquires the habits and mores of one's adopted country, the old self is always there. Antagonisms and cultural clashes continue, I must admit, but they sculpt a new identity that borrows from the two cultures. I have become an American. Rationally, I love America; emotionally, I am bound to remain a Turk. I am not unhappy with my dual personality.

From time to time, I yearn to return to my city of origin. I miss Istanbul, the city I left behind. Whenever I visit, I retrace my steps of yesteryears. I visit the area and the street where once stood the tiny house in which I lived and the small square with the old oak tree in its center and benches around its trunk. I visit the cobblestone street where the grade school that I attended stood. The building is no longer there, but I can still hear the voices of the teachers and the joyful noises the children made when playing. I visit my university and can look at it only from a distance; the new security rules forbid me from entering, as they allow only staff and students. I love to smell the cool musty air of the covered bazaar. Walking through the passage that snakes from the university plaza to the entrance of the covered bazaar where the used book shops are located is an absolute necessity for me. Sometimes, just for pleasure, I even buy a book or two that I already have, recalling the bittersweet memory that I could not even afford to buy one when I was a young university student.

I cannot possibly miss a boat trip on the Bosphorus. The cool breeze from the north, the blue waters that separate Asia from Europe, the tooting of the ferry that announces its arrival or departure from the stations that dot both sides of the straits—these sights and sounds evoke thousands of memories. But all of that is nothing more than a futile endeavor to relive the past. And invariably, when the time comes to return to my adopted country, I am the happiest person at the airport.

This book is not a typical autobiography. It does not tell my story in a linear fashion. Those who wish to secure a place in history write that kind of autobiography. I have no such pretension. I have written it because essentially I love to write. Another author, whose name escapes me, wrote that “Those who write their memoirs should have three characteristics: they should have something to tell, should know how to tell, and should love to tell.” I know I have one of these characteristics. I love to tell. Of the second characteristic, I am not sure. Whether I have the first is for the reader to decide.

I have always loved to write, and not just books on economics. Writing even very mundane technical reports in my own field has always been pleasurable for me. At an early age I developed a special love for words, words in all the languages I know: English, French, Spanish, and most certainly Turkish. A short poem I wrote in 1979 in Spanish poses the imaginary question as to why I write. Here is the answer:

Neither for the reader do I write
nor for myself,
nor to be in the pages of an anthology with a line or two
nor even for God.
For words I write,
just to hear their pure sounds,
just to see their hidden colors.
I write just to kiss them
to caress them
to make love to them.
For words I write,
only for words.

For me, words are not strings of letters; they have internal beauty, they have souls.

I also want to write about my grandparents, whose stories have been told to me time and again, stories that will live with me forever. This book is their story as well as mine, for it also relates my experiences as I grew up, episodes that are like snapshots buried in my memory and have left deep and unforgettable impressions on me. I also recount fragments of my professional life in my adopted country.

My life combines two worlds that are thousands of miles apart from each other, physically as well as culturally. I like to think that I have combined them harmoniously, at least in my mind and in my spirit.