The Folk & Lore of the Blue Road

Part I: Death and Reunion

During the month of September, in a recent year, fourteen people gathered to commemorate the lives of two women who had died not so long before. The family and friends of these two women set sail in the Mediterranean Sea, along the southern coast of Turkey, on a voyage that lasted eleven days. I was among these fourteen passengers and this is my story of our journey together. It is a story about grief and the rituals we devise to cope with sorrow. It is a story about how an assemblage of very different people knit themselves into a group of folk with a lore appreciated and known only to them. And, it is a story about stories.

In Turkey, these Mediterranean boat trips are known as the “mavi yol,” the Blue Road (or sea route). The schooner-yachts that travel along the Blue Road take Turkish and international vacationers to charming coves, towns, harbors and to barely accessible, ancient ruins. All but three members of our fourteen passengers had sailed on the mavi yol before, as had the two women whose deaths we mourned. This was to be my first trip. I had been invited by my friends, Louise and Kemal, whom I knew when I resided in Istanbul in the 1960s. Although we have kept in touch since then, we had only managed to see each other twice in the past four decades. How we came to meet, for a third time, before taking the Blue Road, is the beginning of the story. It is a beginning that is rooted in tragic endings, in the early deaths of three people.

The first death was that of my son and only child, Russell, who died accidentally in the summer of 2002, while he was living in China. In the months following his death, I felt a strong need to reconnect with some of my oldest and dearest friends. I was especially anxious to be reunited with Louise and Kemal, now living in the American south, because we had been too many years apart. I was able to arrange a visit with them nine months after Russell’s death, and we all eagerly anticipated being together again. But none of us could have guessed how our lives would be changed and mutually bound together during this reunion.

Upon my arrival at their home, the three of us spent hours talking about our lives and our children: my son and their daughters, Gulme and Nur. Gulme, who had been born six months before I left Istanbul, had grown into a fine woman. Combining Louise’s love of animals and Kemal’s science background, she had become a veterinarian. Gulme had recently gone back to Turkey to live and work. Radiant, thoughtful Nur had inherited her mother’s poetic
sensibilities and had studied literature; she was in the early stages of her second pregnancy. She, with her husband and son, lived just a few miles from Louise and Kemal who were, of course, doting grandparents. All that evening, Louise, Kemal and I basked in the warmth of our friendship that was nearly forty years old. It would, however, be our last hours of an unfettered happiness. During that night, Louise and Kemal learned that Gulme, their first born, had died while in Istanbul.

Before dawn, Kemal had departed for Turkey. Like me, he had to travel thousands of miles, to the other side of the earth, to take care of the body and affairs of a dead child. Gulme and Russell, both in their mid-thirties, were accomplished and vibrant individuals whose deaths were sudden and unexpected. How could any of us account for the uncanny and parallel tragedies that had befallen us? Louise said that I was destined to be with them at that moment and in the days that followed. But even now, we can only wonder at this coincidence of events.

Six weeks after Gulme’s death, Louise and Kemal invited several dozen close friends to gather at their home to honor their daughter’s memory. Those of us who came from distant places were there for two days during which we talked, shared meals, and consoled our friends and each other. We guests spanned four to five decades of the lives of this family, each representing different eras and places in which we knew them. Even though many of us did not know each other, we grew closer as we reminisced and recalled our days with Louise and Kemal and their children. Curiously, nearly all of the stories each of us told about Gulme included anecdotes about goats of which she was evidently quite fond. I recalled how, during my visit with her family in the 1980s, Gulme came home carrying a baby goat that she was tending. We sat around the kitchen table talking while she cuddled the animal in her arms. And, many of the recollections at Gulme’s commemoration included mention of “mavi yol” — words in Turkish for which I had no reference points. Though I couldn’t understand what was being described, it became apparent that some of Louise and Kemal’s friends had a shared body of experience that threaded through their lives over time and that the name of this experience was mavi yol. Later on, I would learn that Louise and Kemal had been organizing these mavi yol boat trips for various groups of friends for many years. And, of course, their children, Gulme and Nur, had been at the heart of these adventurous vacations.

During the course of this memorial gathering, two guests, in particular, engaged me in lengthy conversations: Sandra, a Peruvian woman, working as an interpreter in Rome; and Keyif, a Turkish woman, teaching Sociology in North Carolina. Of comparable ages and interests, we had much to say to each other and felt, in any case, that we were connected through our associations with Louise and Kemal. We all vowed to come together again in the near future, perhaps in Rome, or perhaps in Marmaris, Turkey, where Keyif and her husband had built a vacation home. Before a year had passed, I was able to fulfill my vow with Sandra when, together with Louise and Kemal, I visited her in Rome during the Thanksgiving holiday. As we wandered together through Rome and its environs, Louise and Kemal talked about planning another mavi yol trip for
the following summer. It would be a time when they could come together with old friends and revisit the places along the coast of Turkey that Gulme had loved. And, maybe they would place some of her ashes in her favorite coves there. Sandra, who had been on previous voyages, joined Louise and Kemal in urging me to accompany them for what, they promised, would be an unforgettable experience. Yes, we would be waited on hand and foot, all our needs met by the boat’s crew and our only task would be to rest and relax. Paradise, envisioned.

As the four of us talked and dreamed of the clear, blue waters of the Marmara and Mediterranean Seas, of the mountains and sun, we did not suppose that the next mavi yol trip might include mourners carrying the ashes of more than one person dear to the hearts of its passengers. But it would be so, because in just three months, in that following February, Keyif died. Alas, I would never be able to accept her kind invitation to spend time together and become better acquainted. So much death; it was becoming overwhelming. In the spring, we learned that Keyif’s husband and friends had decided to join in the planned mavi yol, once again. This time, they would bring some of Keyif’s ashes to leave in the special places along the Blue Road that she had loved. For months, as people’s plans fluctuated, Kemal was not sure exactly who might be going on this mavi yol trip. I was disappointed when Sandra decided that she would not be going. On the other hand, I was heartened to learn that Nur, with her bright spirit, would be a passenger.

Whether or not to go on this trip was a decision that I did not make easily. For one thing, I had decided years ago to never return to Turkey, although I have been invited to do so many times since leaving. My years there were golden ones and I did not want to displace or disrupt my memories of them with modern realities. Additionally, I was concerned about the prospect of being surrounded by grief in the concentrated space and time of a boat trip. After my child’s death, my emotional resources seemed depleted. I had since found it difficult to interact with strangers in a group or to be in a setting from which I could not readily exit. Some part of me (psyche? spirit?) still bruised easily. I had to wonder if I could be fit company. On the other hand, it is true that being near/on/in bodies of water is restorative for me. It is an activity that I often shared with my son throughout his life. Curiously enough, some months after Russell’s death, one of his Chinese colleagues sent me a large painting of a ship sailing into a rising sun. He told me that he imagined that Russell was on that ship, along with this colleague’s deceased sister, and that they were laughing and happy together. Perhaps, then, this was just where I should be: on a boat sailing into the perpetually rising and setting sun of my painting.

It wasn’t until Louise and Kemal told me that they would be in Turkey for two weeks before the start of the voyage in order to sort through Gulme’s things there, that I really began to think seriously about joining them. This would be Louise’s first visit to Istanbul since her daughter’s death and I understood the challenge that she and Kemal would face. I asked if my presence would be of any help to them and Louise said she would be grateful if I were there. So my decision was made. And, it couldn’t have been easier because Kemal kindly
organized everything for the passengers: collected down payments from us, purchased plane tickets for our travel in Turkey, hired the boat and crew, selected the menus, arranged the itinerary. All through the spring, Louise described to me the possible delights of our voyage: having all our meals cooked and served to us, being waited on by our crew, swimming to a beach barber shop, having a special breakfast brought to us by a small boat, being visited by the ‘scarf girls’ and more. So much to look forward to.

**Part II: Return and re-enchantment**

This is not the story of my first sojourn to Turkey or of how I came to be so fond of Istanbul. Suffice it to say that it is the city where I “left my heart.” My present story, however, does have to consider the route back to Turkey. In the three years that I lived in that country, I entered and left in various ways: by car and train, on foot, and —best of all— by ship. Sailing towards the Istanbul skyline of hills and minarets is a magical moment that I would wish for everyone once in their lives. I grew up on the Atlantic Ocean and vessels on water have always been my favorite mode of transportation. In the five-year period that I lived abroad in my youth, I traversed the Atlantic three times by ship. There is no denying that my preferred altitude is at or below sea level. So, while I relished the prospect of a boat voyage in the warm seas of the Mediterranean, I shrank from the prospect of having to return to Turkey by air, especially by myself. It was not only the unnatural act of flying that made me apprehensive but also knowing that I was very unschooled in the culture of airports.

During the last three decades of the 20th century, I seldom traveled by airplane and never outside of the U.S. I have rarely had to navigate airports alone and have, in fact, once managed to get lost in the underworld of O’Hare Airport even when in the company of a native Chicagoan and experienced traveler. So, yes, it was the Istanbul airport that troubled me; having to get out of the airport and into the city and, later, back to it. The best flight itinerary I could put together had a serious flaw. The first leg of my return trip was on a plane that would depart at 5 A.M. meaning that I would have to arrive at the airport at 3 o’clock in the morning. The specter of traveling alone in a taxi in the middle of the night in Turkey filled me with some dread. I am mortified to admit this and I apologize to Turks the world over, but I entertained the possibility of being kidnapped. In the weeks preceding my departure, I began to make jokes about this, which, while therapeutic for me, began to instill these fears in more than one of my friends. Worst of all, I had to confront the brutal fact that I was no longer the intrepid vagabond of yore who had hitchhiked through Europe.

I was scheduled to arrive in Istanbul two days after Louise and Kemal. During our planning conversations, Louise had suggested that I could find my own way, from the Istanbul airport, into the city and to a (one of several possibilities) particular ferry dock, where I would buy a ticket, board and disembark at one of the islands where she and Kemal would be staying. This would occur with no means of communicating with them (since I had no plans to purchase an international cell phone) and with whatever meager and
unpredictable recall of Turkish I might manage. Had I attempted any or all of this, I might still be sitting on the curb (with my excessive luggage) outside the Istanbul airport waiting for the bus that I expected would transport me to the ferry boats. After all, hadn’t Louise instructed me to head, once outside the airport, for the “Deniz Otobusu” (“autobus of the sea”) that would take me to the islands? And, wasn’t it reasonable to assume that the “bus” in the second word meant just that: a shuttle bus to one of the quays in Istanbul? But, no, the “Deniz Otobusu” refers, as I eventually learned, to the new, high-speed transport boats. They are an alternative to the older, slower ferries that still ply the waters of the Bosphorus and Marmara Sea, carrying people between the European and Asian sides of the city and to the islands beyond.

Fortunately, before my arrival, a Plan B was developed. We were not going directly to the vacation house on the island. Instead we would all stay in Istanbul for a few days with Lâle, one of Louise’s former students from the Girl’s College in Istanbul where we had both taught. Since Louise and Kemal would be in the city when I arrived, they or someone would be able to meet me at the airport. However, when I landed, I saw no familiar faces there, so I had to play the search-for-my-name-on-a-sign game and found that Lâle had dispatched a driver to retrieve me. It amazes me that this slim piece of evidence allows us to get into a car with a strange person in a strange city and expect to be safely delivered somewhere. As if in anticipation of this thought, the pleasant-faced fellow handed me a note from Louise that informed me that he would be bringing me to Lâle’s place and so we made our way to his car. Thus, on a bright-hot sunny day, I was introduced to my first taste of modern Istanbul: a six-lane highway that rings the city.

It took about forty minutes to get to Lâle’s residence, which was just enough time to discover that while I could form sentences in Turkish, I had only a dim idea of what was being said in reply. Undaunted, I kept talking and the driver was too polite to tell me if he did not understand what I thought I was saying. Construction projects were everywhere along our route and I did understand my driver to say that new mosques, as well as housing units, were being built every day. Once off the highway, we drove on roads that twisted and wound around hills of newly built apartment buildings until we reached the one in which Lâle lived. As I gazed around at these hills, I realized that this was the section of Istanbul called, “Etiler,” which used to be open fields on the outskirts of the city where Louise and I once rode horses. A bit disorienting, this exchange of horses for houses. As I was trying to visually reclaim the landscape, I heard Louise call out a greeting to me from Lâle’s balcony three floors above. The driver helped me squeeze my bags into the small elevator and sent me up. Knowing that I had failed in my oft-repeated vow to Louise to “pack light” in view of size restrictions on boats, I could only hope that she wouldn’t be too disappointed. In her happiness to see me, she pretended not to notice my pile of bags.

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