

Being an Immigrant

By Şölen Şanlı Vasquez

I've always felt that speaking and writing in a foreign language was like trying to find your way in a pitch-dark room. In one's native tongue, one is in a safe harbor, you know where land is and where the waters are choppy. You know the aura of the words you use. How do they taste? How do they feel? In a foreign language, however competent, you are in choppy waters, trying to keep your head above water.

It took me about fifteen years to finally define myself as an "immigrant." Maybe it was the fact that I came to this country as a graduate student, fully intending to go back to my beloved Istanbul, I don't know. But for 15 years, I didn't feel like an immigrant, so I didn't identify as such. So, what was it, after 15 years, that made me feel like an immigrant all of a sudden? I suspect it was the birth of my children, the twins.

Raising children in a foreign country also feels like trying to find my way in a pitch-dark room. No traditions passed down from generation to generation. No access to tight, long cultivated kin and friend networks of support. You are alone. Completely. Alone. As if parenting weren't isolating enough. A fellow immigrant friend once wrote on social media that she'd never felt more like an immigrant than the moment she realized she didn't know how to load a pez dispenser for her kids. No access to minute everyday rituals and habits that you've embodied as a child. Going to the *bakkal or kirtasiye*. Buying *on yumurta, yoğurt ve ekmek* for mom from the corner store. Playing with your friends on an empty street. Walking to school. Sure, times have changed but certain things are still there, shape-shifted but there, so you draw on them. Not me, not an immigrant. You may know American popular culture like the back of hand (what child who grew up in a developing country in a Western-oriented family doesn't?). You may *think* you do. But you don't have access to those visceral, affective, gut experiences that define who you are, that make your *habitus*, cultural capital in embodied form as Pierre Bourdieu puts it. Those childhood experiences form you, make you, mold you from childhood on, as a young person, a young adult.

The smells, ah, the smells. I once spent a few hours at the Frankfurt airport in Germany and was struck with the realization: "this is what Germany smells like." It was a distinct scent that hit my olfactory senses and brought me back to the month I spent in Germany with my aunt, uncle and cousin, in their home in Mannheim when I was 12 years old. It's the church bells that play music, sometimes even familiar contemporary tunes. It's the department stores (we didn't have any back then in Turkey). It's those wide muddy rivers of industrial German towns. That's Germany to me. And in that

moment, jet-lagged, after a nine-hour flight, it hit me like a wave: this is what Germany smells like. What did my childhood smell like?

It's the people. It's the apartment I grew up in. Spending an hour at the neighbor *teyze's* sitting room after school, eating a snack, waiting for my mom to come home from an outing. It's watching my brother there, as the *abla*, making sure he didn't do any mischief. It's the sound the elevator made when my mom got home. Seeing the neighbor *teyze* at our kitchen table in the mornings, drinking tea and happily chatting away with my mom. It's the smell of winter afternoons where the kitchen was warmed by the steam from the teapot, windows all steamed up, sweet (*kurabiye, kek, kuru pasta*) and savory (*börek, poğaç, simit*) treats on the table. It's my grandfather exiting the elevator with a bag of popcorn in his hand (a novelty back then). It's taking the *dolmuş* to Kadıköy with my mom and little brother on a rainy afternoon, going to ballet class, and getting *kestane* from the street vendor on the way home, eating it all in the *dolmuş*. It's family TV time in the evenings, during which my dad promptly and punctually fell asleep, remote in hand. It's taking the *vapur* to the "other" (European) side. Meeting my best friend Başak in Kadıköy and seeing two movies back-to-back on a Saturday. The smell of Kadıköy, so empty and pristine in the morning.

What kind of childhood memories will my children collect? What will they remember? What will be the scents that stir feelings in them, bringing them to their knees, making their arms tingle (my bodily reaction to homesickness has always been a tingling arm). I have no way of knowing. I'm raising them in such a remote location with its unique climate, vegetation, and culture. All the things that make me feel like a foreigner here, that will be their reality, their taken-for-granted, their fish-in-water stuff. I worry they'll never know what it's like to sit around a *rakı* table and just to let go, sing, reminisce, cry, argue, eat, drink, fall in love, get drunk and sober up all within the time frame (6 hours or so?) of sitting at the same table, suffering in our melodramatic Middle Eastern way. I worry they'll never feel enveloped by love and security by extended family like I did when I was a child. Distances will always be long, journeys difficult, relatives a bit foreign. If they can speak Turkish at all, they'll feel like they're trying to make their way in a dark room, like me, when I try to speak English. I hope they'll learn to tolerate their strange mother who doesn't know the ways and always feels a bit like an alien, (like really, alien from space) when dealing with Americans or those who have been Americanized. I hope their childhood will be as magical as mine, as filled with those who love them unconditionally. And maybe they'll one day make the impossible choice I've made and move to another country, to feel as isolated, lonely and foreign as I often do, questioning, every day, why they have left that magical place in the first place (mine was falling in love, *aşk*, and isn't life in the Occident supposed to be better than the one in the Orient?). And the cycle will undoubtedly continue. And the place they've left for a

better life will haunt them, like my beloved Istanbul haunts me every day. And when that happens, I hope I can be there to tell them, I know how you feel, like few people can say to me. Because life is, I suppose, the search for something better and as my wise mother says, if they have wings, I will have to let them fly.