

NAOMI WAX

Authentic Experience

So I couldn't be a Turk arriving at the bathhouse after a gritty day in the cotton fields or a Muslim responding to the Koranic demand for good hygiene, but by visiting the hamam in Antayla's old city, maybe for a moment, I hoped, I could lose a sense of myself as defined by the pressurized, sanitized showers and other western conventions I'd been born to. American, female, and thirty-two, I thought the possibility of experiencing a part of myself that existed beyond social context—or, at least, outside of the one I was used to—was much of the appeal of travel.

The baths were described as “untouristy” in the guidebook, desirable if you preferred a more “authentic experience,” which—despite not knowing what that entailed—I did. I'd seen sketches of an ancient bathhouse in a magazine some months before. With bathers lounging on marble benches amidst pools of water, clouds of steam, ornate sinks, and attentive orderlies, they made washing seem more a grandiose affair than the utilitarian practice it was to me. Now, presented with the opportunity to experience this extravagance firsthand, I was eager to be immersed, and happy to have it occur without the distracting rabble of other travelers or an abridged-for-tourists version of a Turkish bath.

We'd arrived in Antalya on foot—Andy, Scott, and myself—after hiking along the Mediterranean coast for three days in relentless heat, and had accumulated enough dirt and sweat to make our first night in town an ideal time to pay someone to bathe us. After checking into a pension in the old city, we dragged our packs to the room and debated whether we should eat before or after the hamam.

Andy checked the hours in the guidebook and called my attention to a passage I hadn't noticed about “complaints from women readers who suffered indignities at the hands of masseurs.” It warned that “no Turkish woman would let a masseur touch her”; it was possible to be paired with a masseuse during the women-only hours, but it wasn't guaranteed.

“Maybe you shouldn’t come,” Andy said, stuffing a crumpled change of clothes into his daypack. Scott, splayed across the room’s only single bed with his eyes closed, said nothing.

“It’s not like you guys are immune to ‘indignities.’” I was annoyed at their indifference to leaving me behind, and was not about to settle for a cold, dribbly shower at the pension while they went to the hamam without me. “Anyway, those warnings are for women traveling alone.” Things were the least likely to go wrong, I figured, if the three of us went together. Not all hamams permitted men and women to bathe at the same time, but the one we’d selected did, and if it was allowed it was probably all right. Anyway, I was less concerned with danger than with not wanting to wait for the women-only hours the next day or having to go alone or not go at all. My inclination was to pursue the experience I wanted, and deal with the consequences later. So the question really was when to go, not if.

We settled on nine o’clock that night when the bathhouse would be open to everyone.

The place was in the middle of an old-city block around the corner from our pension. A yellow bulb illuminated the entryway where a group of young locals was exiting as we arrived. Once inside, quiet pervaded and the air was sharp with ammonia. We climbed a few steps to the reception area where chairs with plastic cushions were arranged around a table not much bigger than the magazines on its surface. Two almost identical burly-chested men with butcher-thick arms stood off to the side behind a plywood podium drinking tea. These attendants, referred to as *tellaks* in the guidebook, looked more like weight lifters than masseurs. Shirtless, they wore only high-waisted shorts and rubber sandals, and they took no notice of our arrival.

“Bath?” Andy asked, approaching them and pointing to himself, then Scott and me. “Hamam?”

One of the men nodded and pulled some towels and plastic sandals from a shelf behind the podium. He led us down a hallway, stopping before a row of changing cubicles, and handed us each a ratty towel and pair of shoes. Take everything off, he directed with a brush of his hands down his body and a flick of his wrists outward. Then he pointed to a staircase at the end of the hall.

“Where we go after?” Andy ventured.

The man turned and lumbered down the hallway without answering. We were in the tellaks' domain now, where our words had no meaning and our role was to give over to their charge.

Once in the cubicle, I took off my clothes and pulled the towel around me, trying not to care that the skimpy cloth, ample for guys concerned with only their lower body, barely covered what I had to conceal. But I'd been in enough hot tubs and locker rooms, feigning nonchalance with my naked body, that some of that willed-comfort had taken root. I covered what I could and emerged only slightly self-consciously into the hallway.

The tellak was waiting for us at the top of the narrow staircase. As we descended behind him, the air grew heavy with humidity. We passed through a well-lit room with basins spaced at intervals along the walls and rows of flat marble benches through the center. The thick granite slabs reminded me of the tables in the fudge shops on Mackinac Island where, as a child, I'd watched men in white uniforms spreading, kneading, and folding trays of gooey fudge into neat rectangular blocks. This room seemed as immaculate—well above the standards I'd come to expect in Turkey: The restaurants we ate in were open to flea-infested dogs and mangy cats; the beaches were strewn with ice cream wrappers, soda cans, and cigarette butts; public restrooms bore the odors of septic tanks gone awry. Backpacking in Mediterranean summer heat, you never felt entirely clean anyway. Hotel showers dribbled when they worked at all, and minutes after washing, you were sweating again. It came to matter less as you got used to it, but still the scrubbed marble and glistening faucets reawakened me to the appeal of a total cleansing and gave me confidence that we were in capable hands.

The tellak deposited us in a steamy back room, laying us down rather roughly on adjacent benches. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Scott fussing with his towel.

"They should give you two," he complained, tucking the top in more securely and tugging at the side to cover his thigh. He was uneasy in a way I wouldn't have predicted. We'd skinny-dipped off the coast of Fethiye and had been sharing rooms, and even beds, for the past few weeks, and, athletic guys, he and Andy seemed confident and unselfconscious about their physicality. I found his discomfort reassuring, however, as it relieved me of having to be the anxious one.

We sweated for a while until the tellak returned. What followed, as he tended to us one at a time, was a sensorial blur of hot, warm, and cold water poured over head and body from a plastic bowl, a rush of scrubbing and massaging. After the initial soaking, I was led alone into the fudge room, to one of the pearly basins. The brusque tellak poured bowls of water over my head, then scrubbed it with shampoo. He followed with a shock of icy water, which seemed at first like a nasty trick but a moment later felt rather exhilarating. Then he stretched me out on a stone slab and tossed my wet towel over me before retrieving and running through the ritual with each of the guys.

As I lay listening to the torrents and splashes of their baths, the wringing and scrubbing, their moans and the tellak's grunts, I felt eager for what was to come, yet also apprehensive, wondering whether I was foolish not to be more distrusting.

The *kese* massage was a confidence builder. I'd read about the powers of the camel-haired glove in the guidebook: "It'll remove dirt you never knew you had." Though at moments the gruff abrasiveness hurt as much as it satisfied, it also assured that not only would this cleansing be thorough but that we were getting the full hamam treatment.

Then came the best part, the soapy segment, in which the tellak wrung an endless stream of warm white suds from a sponge, moving me about as he flooded every surface, fold, and crevice of my body. It was what I imagined going through a car wash would feel like—warm friendly water, suds, and sponges from every direction. He took his time working the lather. He laid me down, sat me up, laid me down again. He lifted my arms and washed under them, lifted legs, spread toes, scrubbed my back and neck, even got behind my ears. It was a sensation I hadn't had since childhood, giving my body over for the sole purpose of being taken care of.

By this time the towel was a soaked and sorry pile at my side, but the sponge buffered the tellak's hands from my skin and Andy and Scott lay on benches nearby, so I felt at ease relinquishing myself to his professional hands. I was even ready to believe that my breasts had been very dirty, as he spent an inordinately long time cleaning them.

Actually, I didn't quite give over fully. Rather the entire experience occurred at the edge of surrender where the tellak's deft

touch seduced me toward trust and relaxation, but the slightest questionable movement would then startle me to vigilance. I took faith in his agility with the towel, for instance, yet was aware that his skillful moving, folding, and manipulating was more an indication of years of experience than concern with standards of modesty. Though periodically he made a point of re-covering whatever area he'd bared to work on, the thin white towel was hardly protective or concealing. It was difficult, at moments, to shake feeling like a piece of meat being treated and manipulated, despite the competing instinct to interpret this attention as care.

After the bath the tellak supplied us with dry towels and led us up to the seating area in the front lobby. We sat rehydrating with complimentary Fantas, Andy and Scott sprawled in chairs adjacent to mine, quelled into a trancelike silence. My thoughts drifted to the pension room and the good night's sleep that seemed imminent and certain.

Then one of the tellaks asked in a garble of words and gestures if we wanted massages. We deliberated until we realized it would cost the equivalent of three American dollars. Scott went first, disappearing into a private room down the hall with one of the men.

I laid my head back against the wall and closed my eyes, knowing Andy wouldn't want to talk. I'd hardly known either Andy or Scott when we'd arranged to meet up in Turkey. The friends I'd started out with in Istanbul had had only two weeks free, and Andy, a colleague of my stepmother's and an acquaintance of mine, had invited me to join him and Scott, his college buddy, when my friends left. Things had begun enthusiastically. The whole group of us met up at a resort outside Fethiye and spent a few days together, drinking and swimming at night, beaching and boating between islands during the day. Andy and I had struck up a flirtation but soon decided, it seemed, in mutual silence, that our attraction was more fleeting than substantial and that acting on it would compromise the casualness so conducive to traveling as a threesome. Actually, I had also become frustrated with his, and Scott's, aversion to any conversation that wasn't about sports, some movie, a crisis in the news, or some other topic that demanded no introspection. And I suspected they found me, and my tendency to say what was on my mind, and to not necessarily phrase it delicately, exactly in that category of

unwieldy things they didn't want to deal with. So, by the time my friends left and we'd started up the Lycian Coast, romantic prospects had been put aside and an edgy reserve had taken over.

Maybe it was travel burnout or the scorching heat, allowing us only enough energy for logistical discussions: which kebab shack looked most appetizing, which ruins to head to next, how much of the Valium we'd scored at a local pharmacy we should take in order to sleep on an overnight bus ride and not be too tired the next day. But I worried that their silence meant they resented me for encroaching on their time together or that they just plain didn't like me. Although their interaction with each other was as limited as it was with me, my suspicion that with me it was more deliberate and personal made our traveling together feel tenuous. A couple of times, however, when we disagreed about where to travel next, I'd suggested we spilt up, and each time they'd rejected the idea quickly and entirely. So I tried to conclude that they were probably just the sort of guys who don't have much to say—or don't want to say much—and I gave over to traveling in silence.

The quiet itself wasn't bad. Andy and Scott were enthusiastic enough when we met other travelers or took up with a group of children on the street, and otherwise it was relaxing, not to have to talk and not to have to muster the energy it would take to travel alone.

Scott returned from his massage looking relaxed and satisfied. Then it was my turn.

I followed the masseur down the hall and into a room, unsure if he was the tellak who had bathed us or the other one from the lobby. Although it felt strange that such an intimate interaction could be so anonymous, I found it a relief to have an exchange remain purely in the realm of service.

With a gruffness similar to that with which the bath had begun, the man laid me on my back on a table covered by a thin, sheeted mattress. He shoved my towel aside, dipped his hand into a tin of ointment, and began to work the muscles and tendons of my leg. I could feel the calluses on his hands through the lardlike cream, a pungent rose extract that was an insult to the actual flower and too thick to be blended readily into skin. His touch was more aggressive than gentle, but I didn't know how to ask him to let up and it seemed easier to bear the discomfort. I'd put myself in his hands, and it seemed rude to now question his authority.

So when those rough greasy hands then settled on the inner tendons of my right upper thigh, an area that was sensitive to begin with because of some nerve that doesn't like to be touched, I was still hesitant to protest. I'd survived the earlier bath unmolested and told myself the massage would be fine as well. These men were professionals; they handled scores of bodies each week. And soon the tellak moved on, working his fingers down my leg to my lower thigh, then my calf, kneading the heavy ointment into my skin, pulling, rotating, massaging.

"No, not there," I insisted the second time he wandered up my thigh. "It's not nice!" Knowing he might not understand the words, I pushed his hand away as well.

He grunted angrily, his black eyes flashing, and returned his efforts to my lower leg. Maybe he hadn't come that close. Maybe it hadn't been intentional. Maybe he was working out a knotted muscle. But then he quickly made his way back up my leg, and this time there was no room for question. The tellak wriggled his slimy fingers between my thighs and tried to push them inside me.

"Not there!" I jumped up from the table.

The tellak grabbed my arm, but I slipped through his lard-slick hands and, clutching my towel, ran out the door.

Once in the hallway I was faced with the burden of having acted. By getting up and leaving, I realized I'd made an accusation. But if I reported him, he'd certainly deny it and the other tellak would back him up. It would also mean pulling Andy and Scott into the situation and taking time from our travel plans. I headed to the changing room. I wanted to be clothed. I needed time to figure out what to do. I shut the partition of the changing cubicle and toweled what I could of the grease from my leg. If I turned him in I'd have to repeat the story again and again to authorities who'd probably be male and would question what a woman was doing at the baths with two guys anyway, and what she was doing naked in a room with a strange man more than twice her size. If it came down to it, I realized, I didn't even know which of the men it was. Was this the tellak who'd been, for the most part, respectful in the baths, and now behind closed doors his aggression was revealed? Or was this his angry counterpart who perhaps resented working late hours or had a punishing impulse toward women who dared to venture into his territory alone? I didn't want to deal with accusing him and pos-

sibly being accused of something myself—lying, asking for it, being crazy. But I also didn't want to think that men got away with these things because women couldn't be bothered to call them on it.

Yet maybe it wasn't such big deal. Some guy had touched me. So what. I searched my psyche for signs of trauma. I seemed to be all right. I was used to a certain amount of harassment while traveling: the Muslim across the aisle on a train to Upper Egypt who made lascivious sounds with his lips and tongue while my then-boyfriend slept, and hid studiously behind his Koran each time he awoke; the masturbator in the bushes of a Jerusalem park ten feet from where a friend and I had sunbathed, who, once we noticed him, finished, and invited us to smoke some hash; all the men who whistled, winked, grabbed, clicked their tongues, made kissing sounds, invited you to coffee, a meal, their home, your home in America. Certainly the tellak's behavior was some notches over on the offense continuum, but how significant were those notches?

I didn't know. I was more distressed by my uncertainty than the incident itself. This utterly personal thing had happened, but my feelings about it were eclipsed by notions of what I was *supposed* to feel and do, by a collective of voices vying to define it for me: You were violated. People are scarred by such things, made afraid of intimacy, angry at all men. If you think you're okay, you're in denial. If you don't report it, future attacks will be your fault. There was also the litany of criticisms: You went in there with him alone—and naked—what did you expect? You Americans think you can casually experience another culture and then you get all self-righteous when you don't like the consequences. Have you even thought about the consequences for him and his family if you turn him in?

Every option had repercussions that would be my responsibility, responsibility I didn't want. I didn't know what to do. I decided I'd decide later. For now I just wanted to get out of that cubicle and away from the bathhouse.

I found Andy and Scott lounging in the lobby, drinking sodas and flipping through Turkish magazines. Oblivious to what I'd just gone through, they continued to enjoy the sweet relaxation that had been mine so briefly. They'd had a hamam experience to match that of their fantasies, while mine was now corrupted by the vulgar reality.

Faced with them, I became acutely aware that my earlier enthusiasm and my dismissal of their—or the guidebook's—concerns

made this partially my fault. I was annoyed that that was the truth of this situation, that it wasn't necessarily safe, that I put myself in dangerous situations, that I'd risked this happening and now it was for me to deal with.

"I'm going," was all I could think of to say. "I'll meet you at the room later."

They asked if everything was okay.

I said I just wanted to go.

"Should we pay him?" Andy asked.

"I don't know. Well...no."

"What should we say?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Say whatever you want."

I headed to the door, only vaguely aware, and not really caring, that by leaving them to deal with the tellaks, I was making it their problem, too.

It was dark on the street. The air was still thickly humid, but it was cooler than it had been in the day. I headed back to the pension, wanting to be alone behind the locked door of our room. But once there I found myself with the same mess of thoughts and feelings, and that awful rose scent. It was my fault, I'd handled it badly, overreacted, misinterpreted. For a brief moment I'd been cleaner than I'd probably ever been, and now here I was, soiled with a grime I couldn't get rid of.

I took off my shorts to make another attempt. There it was in incriminating pink globs, matted to the hair and skin of my inner thigh. The transgression, which had become more uncertain in my mind, was again undeniable. I wiped at my leg, contaminating my only towel in the process and then realized it would be a while before we did laundry and that I'd be confronted with this dirty feeling every time I felt clean from showering and wanted to dry off. I tossed the towel on the bed and looked for something with a sharp edge to scrape off the resistant remains. Grabbing my passport, I ran it hard over the top of my leg, realizing—again, too late—that I'd now be sentenced to carry this nauseating smell with me until the passport expired in three years. Border guards would sniff suspiciously at the perfumed booklet, think it some pathetic attempt at flirtation. Well, I thought, I've had my Turkish bath experience—and perhaps it was as authentic as any. Isn't that the nature

of experience? You seek it, and it finds you, and it sticks to you in ways you hadn't intended.

I put on a pair of shorts, took some postcards out of my backpack, and sat on the bed to write. But I couldn't. Andy and Scott would be back soon. I didn't know what to tell them about what happened or how to justify having left them to deal with the tellaks. I worried they'd be angry with me, not only for leaving, but also, if I told them, for making them face the uncomfortable truth of what some men do to women once they have them alone and defenseless. Given the code of silence we'd been traveling under, it was the sort of situation I sensed they'd rather not know about. And it was one that brought my doubts about their feelings toward me to the surface—as well as my resentment that they weren't more communicative. Yet maybe I wasn't so different from them. I hadn't wanted to report the tellak, and I didn't want to talk about what happened. I also didn't want to worry about what Andy and Scott were thinking. I didn't want to have to explain or justify. I just wanted to get out of the close space of our room.

I stuffed the postcards and a bottle of water into a daypack and headed out, not knowing where I was going. I walked in the opposite direction from the hamam. At the end of the block I came to an empty plaza that edged a cliff overlooking the sea. I climbed over a sagging wire barricade to sit on a rock near the ledge. There were no streetlights there beyond the rope, and I felt that if I could just sit alone in the darkness long enough I'd be okay. Already, I was beginning to feel more at ease in the presence of the breeze, the sea, and the stars.

I rolled a cigarette and lit it, taking what felt like my first breath since the massage. But within seconds came the rustling of the wire rope and footsteps on the gravelly dirt. My shoulders tightened, but clinging to my solitude, I didn't look up—until the young man, probably having wandered out from one of the nearby clubs, settled onto a block of concrete only an arm's length from my rock. He asked in thickly-accented English if I minded if he sat there. But of course he already had.

"I'm leaving anyway," I said getting up. Even if I succeeded in getting rid of him, I knew I wouldn't be left alone. They always know when you've gone somewhere to be by yourself. They always find you.

“Why you’re sad?” he asked. “I can help. You talk to me.”

He couldn’t help. And I was annoyed, not sad.

“I really want to be alone,” I said, walking away.

“No, no, you shouldn’t be alone.”

I cleared the wire and headed back toward the pension, hearing the man’s footsteps close behind. Not wanting him to know where I was staying and still not ready to return, I passed our place instead of going inside. I hoped he’d become discouraged at getting no response, but he continued with me as I reached the end of the block and turned the corner. Suddenly I realized I was on the same street the hamam was on. This was my lot now. I couldn’t shake this man; I couldn’t shake the hamam. I felt like a piece of flypaper to which everything unpleasant stuck.

I rushed along, hoping not to see Andy and Scott—or worse, the tellaks on their way out for the night. The guilty tellak would think I’d returned for some perverse reason or would gain further satisfaction from intimidating me. And if I ran into the guys, I’d end up with them rather than alone—and I’d have to explain why I now had this stranger following me. I wanted to believe I could get rid of him myself, that I could still find the peace of mind I craved.

But the man continued to follow me, alternately trying to get me to stop and talk to him and keeping an ambiguous distance behind, perhaps trying to make me think he’d given up and just happened to be walking in the same direction I was. I wound through the narrow streets, trying to stick to lit ones, not wanting it to be obvious that I had nowhere to go. We came upon a group of French people, probably in transit between pubs. Dressed in the whites and stripes of the yachting set, they laughed together in playful drunkenness and took their frivolity with them when they passed. I realized I had no idea where I was. Though the streets seemed familiar, they all looked alike; less distinct at night than they’d been in the afternoon, the doors now closed to the courtyards of Ottoman houses, steel guards pulled down over rug shops and cafés. I continued on, turning corners, choosing arbitrarily at intersections, trying to avoid dead ends and empty alleys, now hoping that I’d happen upon the street with the pension.

I found myself before a row of restaurants. Welcoming lights glowed above arched doorways. Straggling diners wandered onto the street. A delicately spiced aroma hung in the air. I heard the

sound of violins. They were playing a classical piece with a melody that was soothing and sad. As I passed the door from which the music was coming, I glanced into the courtyard. Three violinists sat on folding chairs and a cellist stood beside them, all of them engrossed in their song. A waiter in a white uniform bustled through with a tray. I wished I was in there, seated at a candlelit table, protected by decorum.

But this night was far from decorous and at that moment it didn't occur to me that I could change it. I continued down the street with the man at my heels. But when the sound of the music started to fade, I realized how much even that small dose had made a difference. It had cut through my anxiety and calmed something inside me; it was as good as the glimmering sea and the sky full of stars. I turned around quickly and doubled back past my pursuer. I doubted this local guy would follow me into what had seemed like an upscale tourist restaurant. They might not even let him. I could lose him—for a while, at least—and get lost in that wonderful sound. But when I reached the restaurant, I became self-conscious. In frayed shorts and a t-shirt, without money to order a meal, I belonged there no more than he did. I stood in the vestibule instead of going inside. I'd listen until they told me to leave.

Soon one of the waiters noticed me and turned, heading into the back room. While I was searching for an explanation that would keep me from being sent back to the street, he returned with a bottle of water and glass and offered them to me. Then the song was over and one of the musicians got up, brought me a chair, and returned to join the others in their next song.

A few diners lingered at tables in rooms off the central courtyard. I felt awkward, seated right in front of the musicians, the only visible member of the audience. Thoughts of what awaited outside and back at the pension still nagged at me, and I was wary of accepting too much from these men for fear that something would be expected in return. I didn't want to be pressured to go home with one of them or to drink with them through the night, didn't want to have to extricate myself from yet another situation. I just wanted to listen.

The music made it easy to put my apprehension aside; the men were so absorbed in it that I began to trust that nothing would be demanded of me. As the restaurant cleared out, they played one

melodic piece after another. Their music washed through me, softening what had become clenched and guarded. It gave resonance and distinction to every object, sound, and odor in the courtyard, yet simultaneously made them all of a piece: Golden-flamed candles cast the scene in theatrical light, emphasized the grooved brows and enraptured expressions of the musicians, accented the swirls and striations in their instruments' polished wood and the shadows and contours of the cobblestone walls. The whine and dance of the bowing; the pressing, lifting, and sliding of fingers on strings; the heavy bass undertones, all moved and floated with the breeze through the restaurant's corridors, mingling with aromas of grilled seafood and herbs, melting wax, coffee, liqueur. And all swept through me, soothing and relaxing, bestowing the serenity I'd been seeking, along with the transcendence. This realm of harmonious abstraction knew nothing of grasping tellaks, men in pursuit, oppressive humidity, dirt, grit, sweat, strife, stress.

The cellist, the only member of the quartet who spoke English, chatted with me during a break. In strained sentences that betrayed his Georgian origins, he talked about his country with the same reverence with which he played and lamented that he and his friends couldn't make a living as musicians there. When he discovered that I was American, he had them comb their repertoire for a song in English they all knew. Finally finding one, they played it three times through, skeptical that I preferred their instrumentals to Morris Albert's "Feelings." The impassioned cellist insisted that I sing with them, also not believing I didn't know the lyrics, other than the one-word chorus and the whine that follows, which I felt ridiculous singing, not only because I didn't trust my voice with those "wo-oh-oh"s, but because of how absurd it seemed, given my recent experience, to be complicit in a song that so mawkishly presents the amorous man as sympathetic victim, rather than as a menacing leech from whom you'd best flee.

Soon they moved on to Georgian folk songs, followed by more classical pieces, playing until long after the last diners had gone. When the manager was ready to lock up, the musicians and I took to the dark street together and for a moment my anxiety returned. Did they expect something from me? Would they insist upon walking me home and find out I didn't know the way? Could the young Turk possibly still be lurking? But the musicians were content to

shake hands and say goodnight, and they set off down the dark street without me. There was no sign of the Turkish man. I walked in the opposite direction from the musicians and encountered no one. I soon found myself at the dead end near the cliff I'd started out at, a familiar half block from the pension.

The guys were sleeping when I arrived at the room, Scott on the single bed and Andy sprawled diagonally across the double. I recalled that that was the arrangement for the night, Scott having won the coin flip for the single. I washed up quietly, then curled into the small space Andy had left. I'd figure out what to tell them tomorrow.