

Brain Trust

Twenty-nine years. It's been twenty-nine years since I lived in Istanbul, and now I find myself on a two-day business stop at a below average Istanbul business hotel. These hotels are dreary excuses for an existence at the best of times, but during a dank, dark February, a hotel at the end of the runway of Ataturk International Airport, turns out to be an especially unappealing option.

Foolishly I order the room service breakfast. Thirty minutes later it arrives. Lifting the cover reveals my long awaited and promised "crispy" bacon," the crispy bacon" which comes cold, not surprisingly because it is draped over a bed of damp lettuce.

The poor thing never stood a chance! Moving on, and ever the optimist I turn to what I find to be tepid, once, perhaps long ago, fried eggs. After raising one forkful to my lips, I give in and decide instead to risk my digestive tract at the "all-you-can-bear" buffet. I head downstairs, to grudgingly throw away another twenty Euros on the no doubt dubious fare awaiting me in the restaurant. It is disappointingly average fare for the price, and I compliment myself on my annoying prescience. Nevertheless, the restaurant is not without its consolations in the form of the sights and sounds one expects of such a business hotel. The place is festooned with every kind of delight and distraction you might want, just waiting for their next flight or using the place as a stop

off point before embarking on the next leg of their grand adventure. A gaggle of Chinese tourists move around en masse without stopping to take off their coats or sun visors. Smiling charmingly with wonder at everything, they break up the otherwise vanilla-like drabness of the place. Turkish businessmen, here from provincial cities, attending nearby conferences, huddle around their tables as conspiratorially as only they can be, their rich baritone voices rumbling in turn, a distinctively local gift bestowed by many years of inhaling the pungent regional tobacco. This, a benefit it seems provided regardless of sex, if listening to the ladies at the next table is anything to go by.

Quietly sitting over in the corner, yet rather hard to miss, was something, that for my digestion's sake I am happy to say, you don't see every day. Sitting quietly, eating their breakfast were four men. While I know four men at breakfast is not something one would usually notice, four men with their heads shaved, a large gauze pad stuck to the back of their heads, with a black strap wrapped around their crown holding it, certainly was. I caught wind of the furtive whispers of a nearby patron asking the waiter why these men were in the hotel. The unpleasant sight during breakfast seemed to be bothering a few of the guests, who looked surreptitiously towards the table, and then away whispering continuously. The waiter simply rubbed his index finger and thumb together in response, indicating in the Turkish way, that it was all about money rather than about considering the other guests' needs. I have to say I was a little intrigued by the sight of these men. It only took a few seconds of listening to them to tell me they were Arabic and not Turkish speakers.

I ran a few scenarios through my mind. I wondered why so many people like this, with the same condition would be here at the same time? I figured that if Turkey has so many good hospitals, then it's not unusual to have people from the surrounding regions fly here to take advantage of the local doctors' expertise, plus the medical costs are cheaper here. However, as hard as I might, I could not work out what the odds of four men, from the same place, of the same age, having the same procedure at the same time, staying in the same hotel would be. That was quite beyond me. In and case I had work to do, so I left my bandaged enigmas to their breakfast as I headed out for a taxi.

Later that evening, after work was over, I returned to the hotel. After a less than optimal experience like breakfast in the hotel, I decided I would search for dinner outside. I decided to take advantage of the hundreds of excellent restaurants nearby. The *Lokantas*, *Ocakbasis* and *Restoranleri* of *Kucukcekmece* were so much cheaper and better than the hotel's options. The hotel seemed committed to pricing themselves out of business, and to be honest, I could do with out the distressing cabaret

As I made my way out of the elevator I passed one of the men with the black straps around his head. He looked distracted and somewhat strange. I noticed a distant emptiness in his eyes. Maybe the operation had not gone too well. Either way, I did not speak Arabic, so I figured I would not be able to talk with him. I was still intrigued at finding so many examples of the same kind of physical issue together at the same time and I wished I could talk to him about it. My imagination was working overtime. Perhaps they were doing a Turkish special on traumatic brain injuries, or maybe they

actually marketed certain operations in specific countries and then treated them all at the same time. I admit to laughing a little at their expense as I headed out into the night, greeted warmly by the sights, sounds, and smells of this part of Istanbul. An hour or so later, my stomach filled and my painful breakfast memories erased, I made my way back to the hotel.

My mouth was still warm and tingling from the chili, sumak and grease of my Adana kebab. Through the dark dirty streets that parallel the E5 freeway near the airport, I made my way back to the hotel. A liter of Efes Pilsen helped lighten my mood considerably and I had now completely forgotten that sad excuse for a breakfast and the rather dreary February weather. Still, getting back to my hotel unscathed, and at night was never a given. Dodging the holes in the street, and missing manhole covers, evading the broken sidewalks and the odd manic taxi driver through the darkened streets, I eventually approached the lights that signaled the entrance of my hotel. About fifty yards from the front door I saw one of the black head-strapped men. As I got closer, I realized it was the man I had seen earlier at the elevator. He looked at me, but this time I could see he was looking at me differently. His face was changed. He seemed far more agitated and aware. He was very much present, even forceful in his manner and his eyes had taken on a cold seriousness to them. I tried to avoid his rather direct stare, but he persisted, and then whilst looking straight at me, he began to speak in halting, accented English.

"You speak English, yes?"

Surprised initially that he even spoke English at all, I blurted out my reply, not overly composed.

"Err, well yes I do. " Sounding none too convincing as an English speaker.

"You are American yes? Sir, can you help me? I am in trouble and I need your help."

Now, even less sure how to respond, I ask for more details.

"I am American yes. What kind of trouble are you in, and how do you think I can help you?"

"I do not have much time, and what I have to tell you is very important. Many lives are at risk because of it, but I must tell you about this. Many, many lives are in danger. If we do not act people will die. What is your name?"

I was understandably hesitant to share anything with this man at first, but my manners got the better of me, and despite feeling this was a very strange conversation I shared.

"Matt, my name is Matt," I told him, and then immediately wished I had used a fake name, but it was too late now.

"Matt, my name is Ali bin Aboud. I am from Syria. I am here with six others, though we are only four in this hotel. We are part of a delegation that will be meeting with some from your government. Our families have been taken by Daesh, or ISIS as you call them, and they are being held hostage so we cannot refuse to do what they ask."

"What, the hell are you talking about?" I blurted out as I looked around wondering where the candid camera was set up, or even worse, whether, this was true and that a terrorist was going to come out from somewhere to shoot us.

At first, I admit I was lost for words and unsure about what the proper procedure was in the circumstances. Who on Earth really was Ali? Was this all for real or was I about to feel plain silly as the truth came out that it was all a prank? While I have to say I thought it was strange to see these people together in the hotel, this was not the kind of strange I was expecting. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and I've had some pretty strange things happen to me in my travels over the years, trust me. With his mention of danger, my mind started to think about what I could do. Then I remembered a few years back being stopped at Minneapolis Airport when coming back from The Republic of Georgia. Homeland Security asked me why I traveled to this region so much. All very friendly of course, and I forgot about the whole thing until a few months later, quite unannounced, when during the middle of the day, two FBI agents turned up at my doorstep. My eldest daughter found this oh so amusing. In fact she found it so amusing that she called me during a conference in Dallas I was running. I was mid-sentence of a presentation when the call came through and she asked,

"What did you do dad? The FBI was just here looking for you."

Thankfully, I remembered the incident at the airport so I had a pretty good idea why the feds were calling. A few weeks later I went to their offices and talked about the region its culture, and politics. There and then we agreed, if I ever came across

anything that could help to them to protect our nation from any threat, I would contact them. I have to confess, it did not really strike me as particularly likely then, but now listening to Ali I was thinking to myself, you just never know. The senior of the two agents was called AJ, and I decided that it was probably around about now, that I needed to give AJ a call. I was going through my mental checklist of sensible things to do when Ali looked at me again, his eyes widening as he said.

"You cannot tell anyone. They will kill our families!"

"Well that is going to make things a little harder for me isn't it? How do you think I can help you then, Ali? Why should I trust you? I can't take a risk and somehow become part of a scheme that hurts my own government. I will be seen as a traitor. Why should I believe you?"

Ali pulled out his smart phone.

"Let me show you something." I watched him cautiously as he tapped at the screen.

"They sent this to us before we had the operation. It is my family home. I was at my university where I work when it came to me."

Ali held up his phone for me to see. What I saw made me gasp. The phone played a video that showed a group of men breaking into a room with several women and an older man. They beat the older man with their rifle butts before dragging him and the women out of the room. The men then turned to the camera and began speaking angrily in Arabic. As they spoke, Ali translated for me.

"He is saying: do what we ask if you ever want to see them alive again. This is my father Matt, my sisters and mother. They will kill them, but I cannot kill others for them, they just would not want that."

My thoughts raced. I felt terrible for Ali. Why should anyone have to make such a dreadful choice? I saw the anguish he was going through, no wonder there was such pain and loss in his eyes. At the same time who was I to help, and why should I get involved? I needed to know more. Thankfully, Ali was quick to oblige.

"All those you see here with me who have had this operation, they are my friends. They work on the same technology team as I do in Damascus. They are here because they work at the university with me. Matt, we just want to keep our families alive, and if we can, ourselves too. We work on nanotechnology for medical applications, but Daesh wants to use it to detonate the explosives they have planted in our bodies. That is why they made us have these operations. We have been awarded a special prize as a university for our communications technology and our team will receive it from your Secretary of State. This is why we go to America. Daesh found out and decided to use us as a bomb to kill your people. When we receive our award we will be close to the Secretary of State, and they will detonate the explosive they have put in our bodies using our own nano technology."

It was becoming more and more apparent to me that I did not want to be involved. No doubt sensing my hesitance, Ali stepped closer, his voice lowering to a whisper.

"What they do not know, is that I can make the detonation fail. They won't even know I have done it because we do not need to touch our bodies at all. When the bombs fail, maybe then they will let our families go. Will you help me, my friend?"

I sighed deeply, suddenly exhausted by the weight of so much hatred in the world. Most days it was easy to ignore, so far away, someone else's problem, happily, but now it had just knocked on my door and was smacking me in the face, and was inescapable. Could I help this man? Should I? I have no doubt the pilsner I consumed earlier helped, but before I could think of a good reason not to, I had gathered up every ounce of bravery within me, Dutch or not, and agreed. Ali explained simply how his technology worked and how he was going to stop it working, with my help.

"The nano receiver requires a special coded signal to activate the detonator, and that signal requires a specific computer code I was part of designing at the university. I have been working on a transmitter that can corrupt the code in the receiver so that it will not recognize the signal when it is sent. All that is needed to disrupt it, is for the transmitter to be held near the head of the person for two minutes. If I do this it will be too obvious, but if you, a stranger can find a way to do it they will not notice."

"How can you be sure that the receiver code has been corrupted? I would want to know for sure its been successful."

"The machine has a red light on it that glows when the process is fully complete, so there is no chance of mistake."

I was not really sure about the mechanics of the process, but more importantly, from what he said, there seemed to be very little risk to me, so I thought I could give it a try and if there was any problem I always had AJ in the wings.

"You said there were three others, Ali, where are they?"

"They are in a nearby hotel staying with other guards." Come to think of it I wondered where Ali's guard was, and so quite instinctively, I began to look around. Ali quickly registered my concern and responded.

"Don't worry about him, he is, how do you say, busy, in the bathroom, ha! I put something in his drink, so he will be there a few minutes. Here is the address of the other hotel, and here is the machine." He handed me what looked like a small black cell phone, with a pull out antenna on it. I began to thank my lucky stars that it was not a three-foot high blue contraption with multiple arms and flashing lights on it, because that might have been harder to conceal. He handed me a small piece of paper with the address of the hotel on it.

Ali repeated the instructions for the techno-dummy to avoid any misunderstanding.

"Just get to within five feet of the men and press button five for two minutes and the red light should come on. When it does, you know the receiver code has been corrupted and the people, including my friends carrying the bomb, are safe."

"But look Ali, how do I know that I can trust you?"

Ali looked at me with a pair of sincere dark sunken tired brown eyes. I could see he was carrying much of the weight of the world on his shoulders. He could not have been more than twenty-nine, but he looked far older from carrying such a burden.

"My friend, do you honestly think that I want to have my head blown off? If I am telling the truth, you have done a very great service for your country, for my friends and my family. If I am lying, you have risked nothing and lost nothing but time and some dignity."

With that, he turned around and headed back into the hotel. I have to admit it was a pithy and compelling argument. I followed him into the Hotel. There, sitting together in the lobby bar were Ali and his three friends. I was unaware if he had shared his plan with them, so I just assumed he had not. The four men sat facing each other around a small cocktail table. All of them were a similar age to Ali and they were chatting quietly in Arabic. Each of them wore the same somber, sad demeanor, sharing their heavy secret. I walked over to them and pulled a chair up close, about as far away from Ali as I could. I tried to eyeball what five feet was and reckoned if Ali was any further than that I could "fix" him later. I took the machine out of my pocket, and extended the antenna. I pressed the number five, holding it to my ear as if making a call. I kept my eye fixed intently on the small light on the number pad, eager for the small red light to shine. They say a watched kettle never boils. How long two minutes can feel when your finger is pressed hard on one key. My finger began to feel numb, just as a small red glow started shining the middle of the keypad. It works! Not a second too soon. I thought my fingertip was going to explode with the pressure. I told myself not to press so hard next time. Call it beginner's nerves, or a fool's elation, but I was so pleased. Perhaps this hero stuff was going to be simpler than I thought. My self-congratulatory, backslapping jubilation lasted just the few seconds it took me to notice

that one of the men had got up and left the group to fetch a drink from the bar. He had not actually been with the group when the light went off. Great! I almost groaned out loud, when I realized I would have to do the whole thing all over again. I went for a drink, steeled myself and came back to reposition myself in another place closer to the man who had left the group so inconveniently. As nonchalantly as I could, after ordering one of their grossly overpriced wines, (ah the things I do for my country), I gently pulled out the faux phone, drew out the antenna, pressed number five and attempted corrupting the code again. A little less than ninety seconds into the process, a rather washed out, drained-looking man of middle -eastern descent, appeared from the direction of the restrooms, looking rather uncomfortable and queasy. He looked over at the men's table and mumbled something rather grumpily in Arabic. Without a moment's hesitation, the four men rose from the table and obediently walked away, presumably to their rooms. Ali looked at me sideways, his face full of resigned desperation. It was hard to hide my own frustration, but I knew this meant there would be no more little red lights shining in our hotel tonight. There was however the other hotel. I looked down at the piece of paper with the address on it Ali gave me. The Royal Inci Hotel was only a few hundred yards away. Since the evening was over for me here, I decided to go and see if I could find the men Ali told me were staying there.

A few dark, pollution-painted streets later I arrived at the Royal Inci Hotel. The low roar of traffic from the nearby freeway was a constant soundtrack to my reluctant adventure. Even inside as I made my way to the lobby it seemed as if I was never far from it. I knew this was a long shot but I could only pray that the remaining three men

would be out of their rooms. One thing was for sure they would not be hard to spot. They were always together, their handler made sure of that. The lobby and the lounge showed no sign of them so I continued to the disco bar. There, after a few short minutes of searching, it seemed like lady luck was going to be on my side that night. Over in the darkness of a corner to the left, I spotted the three men and their guard, furtively scanning the room for threats and danger. Finding them was going to be the easy part, but making it over to them unseen, that was going to be the trick. They were surrounded by people, with no open spaces close by. I began to wonder how this was going to work. Japanese tourists on one table to their left were clearly enjoying the local raki or "lion's milk" a little too much, treating everyone to their fine singing voices. To their right, a large group of Turkish good old boys was making the most of the pretty young things facing them, trying to convince them they were more boys than old, and still worthy of their time and attention. Just at the point I was about to give up, someone's favorite song came on. To a man, the three Syrians got up and made their way to the dance floor followed by a wary watchdog in tow. I began to smile like an idiot. Who could know that Syrians were big Saturday Night Fever fans? Perhaps the proximity of imminent death had brought out the disco dancer in the Syrians. Whatever it was, every man amongst them felt the need to release their inner Travolta that night, and who can blame them. I won't sugar coat for you, what the image of three bald men with bandages on operated heads dancing looks like, but let's just say, a space around them cleared very soon, and that was all that was needed for me to approach, dancing as badly as they did to blend in. I pulled out the code corrupter, held it close to my side

and pressed button five. I calculated that each of the men was close enough for me to be no more than five feet away from them. I began praying that the song would last longer than two minutes. It did. The red light came on, no one walked away, and no one noticed the awkward man nearby with the cell phone, dancing almost as badly as the bandaged headed men were. Six sevenths of "operation save the free world" was now accomplished. I could go back to my hotel with some degree of satisfaction for a job well done.

However, I could not get the idea out of my head that one man was still roaming around with a live bomb in him. That meant the night passed sleeplessly for me. I couldn't get the fear out of my head that the man I missed could leave at any time. I tossed and turned in bed. The anxiety so powerful at times it drove me to feel physically sick. This was not the night for relaxation. I knew that peace for me meant finding the remaining guy, and watching that little red light glow.

As the dawn's light began glinting its hello through my curtains, I got out of bed, showered, dressed and prepared myself for the day. Following my morning routine, it was down to the breakfast room, to resume the hunt for man number seven. Outside of my room, I was surprised by two of the bandaged men, sadly, not the one I was looking for. To increase my dismay, I noticed they had packed bags in their hands. Was I too late? Had I already missed my chance? I walked past them, jumping down the stairs two at a time, to the lobby where I came across Ali and the others. They were all lining

up for the shuttle to the airport, their bags in their hands. Fear was etched in Ali's eyes; he knew that even one bomb not prevented was enough to undo all that he had tried so hard to prevent. The man I wanted stood to the back of a mercifully long line. With no time to waste, I seized my chance. Walking purposefully, I crossed the lobby through the crowds and took a place in the line behind him. Machine in hand, I quickly pulled the antenna out and pressed number five. I was praying for the kind of disruption I needed for the bus driver while loading the people. Just at that moment, a man at the head of the line tripped and fell. The bags in his hands dropped, their contents went rolling far and wide, assorted jars, fruit and pottery everywhere. Everything stopped while he chased around after his things. Though it was not a long delay, a minute at most, it was enough for me to see a little light in the middle of my faux phone glow red. I turned to look at Ali, a happy smile on my face. He looked relieved, even somewhat peaceful, perhaps for the first time since we had been brought together. I cannot imagine that kind of pressure imposed on a man. I walked away feeling incredibly sad for him, and hoping this small help from me would be enough to ensure his family's safety.

Ali and the others boarded the shuttle bus and headed to the airport. Wisely, I resisted the urge to wave. However, a silent respectful acknowledgment, and a solemn bond of brothers in arms, passed between us. I wished him well, though hardly imagining things could truly end well for him.

I returned to my hotel room so glad to be leaving later. I finished off the rest of my working day's assignments. My flight back home to a rather humdrum life awaited me,

and to be honest, that was fine by me. This would make a great story for the grandkids; something to show my life was not quite so boring. I packed my clothes, passport, and computer and set off to the airport. Still raining, still dreary and still covered in a blanket of mist and clouds. Istanbul in February does not show at its best.

The ride to the airport was short and uneventful. Hotel shuttles to airports are the same the world over for me. After check in, I passed through passport control and walked casually to my gate. As I prepared to board the plane I glanced over to the gates on the left and the right of mine. The planes parked there would soon be departing to Paris and to London. I noticed amongst other things in the lines waiting to board, four distinctly Middle-Eastern looking men in line on either side. Each of them had a large gauze pad attached to the back of their shaved heads with a large black strap circling the top of their crowns looking as if it was holding everything together.

A strange, uneasy sickening déjà vu feeling rose in the pit of my stomach and I gulped. I began feeling around in my pocket for the small faux phone Ali had given me. I steeled myself, and with the small mock mobile phone in one hand, and my real cell phone in the other, I calmly, but purposefully walked over to the line waiting for the departure gate for Paris. To all who were looking on, I seemed to be making a mobile phone call.

As I pressed button number five, I thought to myself, after I have dealt with these guys, perhaps I had better call AJ after all.