

Dead cat

There was a man waiting for me at the airport. He waved his sign – my name misspelled, crossed out, misspelled again – then took my bag and gestured for me to follow him. The hot air hit as soon as we stepped outside; it was dusty, loud, chock-a-block with beat-up buses idling by the terminal.

We walked past the buses. Continued past the taxi rank. We crossed the airport perimeter and broke through the known limits of the universe, eventually reaching a sedan. He threw my bag into the trunk and got into the driver's seat. I slid into the passenger side and felt for a seatbelt but couldn't find one. He saw me struggling and laughed. I laughed too and it felt like we were friends; if not friends, then equals.

I asked how long the drive would take but he didn't reply. I asked again, and still, he didn't reply. Then I tapped my watch and said, 'Fethiye?', which was the town I hoped we were driving to. He nodded and held up two fingers – 'I come in peace,' or 'We'll be arriving at your desired destination in two hours.' Pleased with both possibilities, I smiled and pointed at the radio. 'Music?'

He nodded again. He nodded, but he didn't turn the radio on. I waited five minutes then reached forward and turned it on myself. He switched it off and we sat in silence. Minutes, hours, decades passed, until he suggested that our journey might benefit from some music. I smiled and nodded. 'Music,' he repeated, trying the word on for size.

'Music,' I confirmed. 'Turkish?'

'Turkish, yes. Everything Turkish.'

He pointed to the barren hills in the distance and said, 'Turkish.'

He pointed to the empty shops on the side of the road and said, 'Turkish.'

Then he took his hands off the wheel, pushed his thumbs into his chest and said, with the pride of a thousand sultans, 'Turkish.'

And I, I understood.

We soon reached a deserted town with a set of traffic lights serving no obvious purpose. Waiting for the green signal, my driver – my friend – spotted a sick dog splayed across a patch of sun by the road. He pointed at it and laughed. He turned to me and said, ‘Fuck-king Greek.’

Then he lost it.

Utterly lost it.

Hunched over the wheel, laughing at this sick dog, cackling and slapping the dash. The lights turned green but he was laughing too hard to drive, so we sat idling until he managed to wipe the tears from his eyes. Then he sat back and sighed, shaking his head. The lights had turned red again, but he put the car in first anyway and jerked through the intersection.

‘Fuck-king Greek,’ he said, glaring at the dog in the rear-view mirror.

So, this is how we passed the time. With me pointing at things that were objectively good – schools, houses, restaurants – and saying ‘Turkish,’ then pointing at things that were objectively bad – rubbish, stray animals, burnt-out cars – and saying, ‘Greek.’

And yeah, he loved it.

Oh, how he loved it.

His laugh grew louder and louder.

His belly shook harder and harder.

He had this big, gummy grin plastered across his face, his mustard teeth a metaphor, perhaps, for the decline of the Ottoman Empire. I asked him if his dentist was Greek but he didn’t understand. Just gave me a look like, Huh?

I dropped it. Concentrated on the road ahead, on what appeared to be a dead cat in the distance. It had been flattened and left to bake on the bitumen. I pointed at it as we passed and said, with a knowing nod, ‘Fuck-king Greek.’

And yes, this pleased him greatly.

