LETTER FROM TURKEY

THE VIEW FROM THE STANDS

Life among Istanbul's soccer fanatics.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

One cold, wet morning in December, I headed into Istanbul to watch the Beşiktaş soccer team play a match against Bursaspor, a team from the city of Bursa, the original Ottoman capital.

"You're going to hear all kinds of swearing," the taxi-driver told me. "You're going to hear unheard-of things that nobody should ever hear." He seemed genuinely worried.

"It's O.K.," I said. "I'm trying to advance my knowledge of the Turkish language."

"If you're trying to advance your knowledge of the Turkish language, I'm not sure a Beşiktaş match is the first place I would advise you to go." We drove for a while in silence.

Soccer is taken extremely seriously in Turkey. In 1981, a match between two Izmir teams, Karşiyaka and Göztepe, drew eighty thousand spectators. At a practice game between the rivals in 2003, a fan was stabbed to death. Even by the high European standard of soccer fanaticism, it's rare to find such large-scale, life-and-death investment surrounding a match by two second-tier competitors from the same city. Although virtually every Turkish city has its own team, the majority of Turks support one of the nation's "big three"—Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, and Beşiktaş—all of which are based in Istanbul. During the nineteen-eighties, the Istanbul teams were enmeshed in a ganglike feud, characterized by clandestine raids, lynchings, and street battles. A "truce" in the nineteen-nineties mitigated, but did not eradicate, violence. In 2000, two Leeds United fans were stabbed to death on the eve of a game against Galatasaray. When Galatasaray qualified for the European Championships, that year, fans celebrated by firing guns into the air, and stray bullets killed one person and injured four. The Danish goalkeeper Peter Kjær, who played for Beşiktaş in 2001, recalls being attacked by a man in a wheelchair when fans swarmed onto the field.

Each of the Istanbul teams has its own stereotype. Galatasaray, the old-

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est, is associated with the élite Ottoman-era Galatasaray Lycée. Fenerbahçe has the biggest budget and the most illustrious fan base (it includes Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk). Beşiktaş is the underdog, the working-class team, known for the ardor of its fans. According to one study, the Turkish stock market goes up when Beşiktaş wins a game—a sign, economists theorize, of its supporters' fanaticism. The filmmaker Zeki Demirkubuz, who cites Dostoevsky as his greatest influence, calls Beşiktaş "the most surreal team in the world." Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray "only care about winning," but Beşiktaş is "essentially irrational, and therefore essentially human." The language of Beşiktaş is characterized both by over-the-top profanity and by the poetry of longing and love—mad, unrequited love, love that drives you to death. "It was a rainy day when I saw you," one Beşiktaş lyric begins. "You were wearing striped uniforms."

On match days, the streets around Inönü Stadium, where Beşiktaş plays, become impassable, so I got out of the cab at a metro station and took the train the rest of the way. Inönü is situated on the western, European bank of the Bosphorus, near Dolmabahçe Palace, where the last six sultans ruled, and where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic, established his Istanbul residence. Two hours before the match, the stretch of road beside the palace grounds was already flooded with fans wearing the team's black-and-white scarves and hats. Every few yards were old men selling black-and-white Beşiktaş flags and rain shells. A gaunt young woman in a head scarf and a cheap trenchcoat stood pressed up against an embankment, selling Beşiktaş umbrellas.

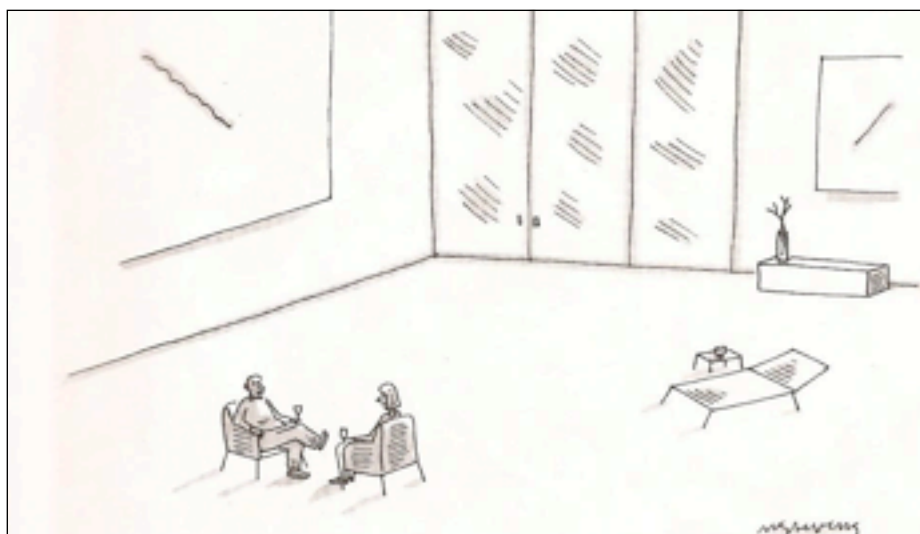
Fans of Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe are spread out over the city, but Beşiktaş support has its core in the working-class neighborhood of the same name, where, nowadays, boutique hotels, designer shops, and multi-story fast-food franchises encroach on old-school barbershops, gambling outlets, parks, and the tomb of Barbarossa.

The main Beşiktaş fan club is called Çarşi, which means something like "marketplace" or "town center." Nearly every open space in downtown Beşiktaş—the fish market, the Poets' Park, the square outside the Kazan pub—is a hallowed Çarşi meeting ground. In the Çarşi logo, the letters are scrawled in black or white, with the "A" replaced by a red anarchy symbol. Online and on cell phones, the favored orthography is "çArşi." Other staples of Çarşi iconography include the Beşiktaş symbol, a black eagle, and the face of Che Guevara.

I had hoped to meet before the Bur-

Beşiktaş supporters at the team's Inönü Stadium. One Turkish film director has called Beşiktaş "the most surreal team in the world." The fans are famous for the ardor of their love and for their subversive and earsplitting chants. Photographs by Kate Brooks.

toward downtown Beşiktaş.



"Only the rich can afford this much nothing."

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saspor match with Alen Markaryan, who is a Çarşi "amigo," meaning that he directs the fans' cheers during games. Amigo Alen is also the group's public face: he appears on television, visits universities, writes newspaper columns, and gives interviews. But when I tried to get in touch with him I was told that he was unavailable, having recently been shot. The culprit was another, less popular Çarşi amigo. Following a period of strained relations, the two amigos had arranged a talk at a pier on the eastern side of the Bosphorus. The talk had not gone well. Now Amigo Alen was in the hospital having surgery for a gunshot wound in his knee and the other man was awaiting trial.

That made two leading Çarşi members unavailable for comment. Instead, I arranged to meet up with a student named Deniz, a thin young man with shaggy straw-colored hair, who knew Amigo Alen.

"So this is it," Deniz said, grinning. "This is Beşiktaş." To our left was the pink façade of Dolmabahçe Palace and the silvery expanse of the Bosphorus, scattered with almost transparent freighters. To our right, Inönü Stadium hulked on a hill, crowds swirling around its base, while police lined up behind temporary barriers. The atmosphere grew more electric, the weather more dire. An endless stream of men between the ages of fifteen and forty-five marched through the gusting rain, intoning dolorous Beşiktaş chants. The chants would pass through the crowd and then inexplicably peter out.

Deniz drew my attention to the arrival of some Bursa fan buses, with the Bursaspor crocodile on their sides. Bursa and Beşiktaş fans had been barred from attending each other's games since 2003, when Bursa blamed Beşiktaş for getting bumped from the Süper Lig, Turkish soccer's top division. Bursa had returned to the Süper Lig three years later and had won the 2010 championship, challenging the hegemony of the three Istanbul teams. It had been ranked ahead of Beşiktaş throughout the current season, and, for the first time in seven years, its fans were entering Inönü.

"There's probably going to be an incident," Deniz said, squinting. When I followed his gaze, all I saw was a swarming panorama of tiny indistinguishable figures. "There's the police," Deniz said. "They're going to try to separate everyone. Now there's *definitely* going to be an incident." I began to differentiate various groups—the Beşiktaş fans in black-and-white hats, the police with riot shields, the Bursa representatives in crocodile green. "We'd better get out of here," Deniz said, making no move to leave. He lingered a minute and even stood on his

We headed to the Kazan pub, which was packed to overflowing, and sat in a windswept tea garden nearby.

"All kinds of people are in Çarşi," Deniz told me. "Professors, doctors, street children." Deniz attended his first game, in his brother's arms, when he was twenty-two days old. "On our street, every building but one is Beşiktaşli," he explained. "Beşiktaşli" may mean either a resident of Beşiktaş or a supporter of the team. It occurs in a very sad-sounding Turkish rhyme about the former N.B.A. superstar Allen Iverson, who recently signed a contract with the Beşiktaş basketball team: "The world is a vale of tears, Iverson is now Beşiktaşli."

Deniz has attended all but two of Beşiktaş's games, home and away, for the past seven years. He often thinks with regret of those two missed games. He characterized Beşiktaş as the team of the unexpected, the team of underdogs, and talked about Çarşi's slogans, which are unveiled on giant banners during matches. "We Are All Black," proclaimed one banner, after rival fans had made reference to the race of the French-Senegalese Beşiktaş star Pascal Nouma. When Fenerbahçe disparaged a Beşiktaş manager whose father had been a janitor, there were banners saying "We Are All Janitors." And when an international committee of astronomers removed Pluto from the list of planets Çarşi took up the cause: "We Are All Pluto."

"We're not hooligans," Deniz told me. "We're one level above hooliganism." We were sitting at a tiny table, rain beating on the canopy overhead, sipping tea from tulip-shaped glasses. "We're lovers, not fighters. But when a fight comes up we fight better than anyone. And we don't let anyone walk in the neighborhood wearing a Fenerbahçe or Galatasaray jersey."

"What do you mean you don't let them?"

"We make them take the jersey off." He said it was not uncommon to see rival fans walking around shirtless in the middle of winter.

I asked Deniz about Amigo Alen.

"He's Armenian," Deniz noted.

The first thing anyone tells you

headline in a political magazine once called the Beşiktaş stands "the only place where the Armenian problem has been solved." Popular cheers have included "Alen for Pope" and, on Easter, "Bless us, Alen."

Deniz said the shooting wasn't a big deal. "That kind of thing often happens with us," he said.

"It happens that people get shot?"

"Well, they don't often get shot."

The previous intra-Çarşi shooting took place in 2007, and stemmed from a byzantine contretemps involving a banner expressing hostility toward a former manager of the team.

Deniz was going to watch the match from Çarşi's stronghold: the stadium's covered stands. There are nearly six thousand tickets in this section, and almost all are bought in advance by season-pass holders. The remaining handful vanish within minutes once they go on sale, online. Across from the covered stands are the V.I.P. and press sections, but the bulk of the fans are in the open stands, the cheapest seats, where I had bought my ticket. Deniz dropped me off near my entrance and then vanished into the crowd. I saw a roiling mass gather itself up and hurl itself in waves toward the stadium entrance.

Soon I was embedded in a shifting wall of elbows, shoulders, and backs. At one point, I felt my feet lift off the ground. Despite my efforts to advance, I kept drifting toward one side, until a solid-looking man in a leather jacket shouldered me out of the line and into a mud puddle. A gust of wind blew my hood off, causing the man to stop in his tracks. "There's a lady here!" he called. "Everyone step aside! Let the lady through!" To my astonishment, everyone stepped aside and let me through. As in a dream, I entered the stands to the opening strains of the national anthem.

The stadium officially seats thirty-two thousand, but big matches are typically overbooked by several thousand tickets. Every seat in the open stands had someone standing on it and someone directly in front of it. Wedging myself into an already full row, I turned to face forward. The field, under the floodlights, was gleaming green, like some precious object in a box. I had almost forgotten that there was going to be a soccer game. Even

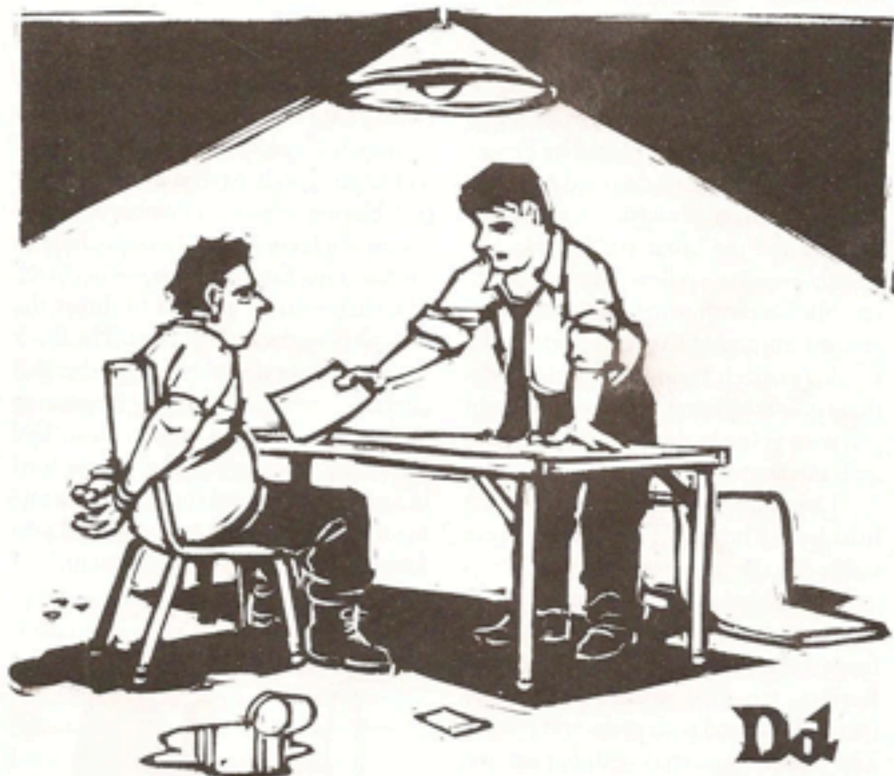
thought by the realization that someone was trying to strangle me. Glancing down, I saw a distinguished-looking gentleman with wild gray hair, a trimmed gray beard, and glasses—possibly, one of the professors or doctors—who, having seized my shoulder, was trying to haul himself up the stairs. With his free hand, he grabbed the neck of a young man on the other side of the aisle. The youth absently put his hand under the man's elbow and helped him up, never taking his eyes off the field.

When the national anthem ended, all the men around me raised their right arms, shook their hands in the air, and began to chant, "Hey—hey *you! Faggot* Bursa, *faggot* Bursa!" The Bursa fan group, Texas, was seated to our immediate right, in a four-sided metal cage designed to keep out projectiles. An ambulance and a fire truck were parked nearby, on the side of the field.

The players jogged into view, the Beşiktaş team in dazzling black-and-white striped uniforms. Radiating vitality as they shook out their arms and legs, they seemed to be of a different species from their supporters. It seemed strange

fans and the team—"represented" the other. And which represented which? For whom was all this more real? "The athletes are competing in play," Umberto Eco writes, in an essay about soccer, "but the voyeurs compete seriously (and, in fact, they beat one another or die of heart failure in the grandstands)." I heard a similar view from a Çarşi member. "The players only play the match," he said. "We *live* the match."

I hadn't watched soccer in years—not since 2002, when, to my own surprise, I regularly stayed up until four in the morning, in California, to watch Turkey fight its way to the World Cup semifinals. But on planet soccer it was as if no time had passed at all. The familiar rhythm drew you right back in: the seamless sequence of passes, quickening and subsiding, then breaking off and starting over. The fluorescent-yellow ball stood out so violently that the players seemed to fade into the air. The ball accelerated, stopped short, flew, bounced off the sky, rushed along the ground, hesitated, changed its angle, did an about-face, then whizzed in the opposite direction, seemingly spon-



"After you confess, can you fill out this survey to help us improve our interrogation methods?"

Then the yellow sphere got dangerously close to Bursa's penalty zone, flitting around it for several minutes, before hurtling at last into the goal. My body started shaking violently—the result, I realized, of a man behind me grabbing both my shoulders and shaking me. A second later, when the referee called offside, I heard some truly world-class swearing. I had to look up several words in the dictionary when I got home.

At halftime, the score was 0–0. Two giant cans of Cola Turka started dancing listlessly on one side of the field. A space opened up on my left. "Go stand next to the lady," someone urged, and a small boy appeared beside me. He stayed for the rest of the game, watching everything with bright eyes, missing nothing. In the sixty-fifth minute, the Slovakian striker Filip Hološko scored a beautiful, game-winning goal against Bursaspor, and everyone went wild, although somehow not as wild as for the offside goal. The boy next to me jumped tentatively up and down. Even after the game ended, everyone seemed to be waiting for something. Spectators were still singing and chanting, rhythmically pumping their middle fingers at the Bursa fans' cage. I slipped out of the stadium and back to the streets of Beşiktaş.

A few hours later, I was on a ferry to the Asian side of the city, in order to catch an evening game played by Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş's most despised rival. My cousin Evrim, an obstetrician-gynecologist, picked me up at the ferry in her Honda, wearing a yellow Fenerbahçe jersey. She was with some colleagues, who seemed impressed that I had watched a Beşiktaş match from the stands. "Was there ever a moment when you thought you were going to die?" a urologist asked with interest.

"Listen to this," Evrim said, peering into her iPhone. "Two people were stabbed at the match you went to."

The stabbings had taken place just as Deniz had predicted, when the buses from Bursa arrived. Thousands of Beşiktaş fans had swarmed the police barricade, armed with rocks and bottles. The police countered with batons and tear gas. By the time the skirmish died down, four people required hospitalization: three Bursa fans, two of whom had over the head with a bottle.

The sociologist Ahmet Talimciler, the author of a book on Turkish soccer fanaticism, recently asked fifteen hundred Turkish fans how important their team was to them. For sixty-two per cent of respondents, the team came "only after family and nation"; for a full thirty per cent, it was "more important than anything else" in life. According to another estimate, seventy-six per cent of Turks are active soccer fans.

Soccer was brought to the Ottoman Empire in the eighteen-seventies, by British merchants in the port cities of Thessaloniki, Izmir, and Istanbul. Its arrival coincided with the start of the Period of Despotism, during which Sultan Abdülhamid II repealed the constitution, disbanded the parliament, and instituted a network of detectives to safeguard Turkish values against Western cultural infiltrations. Turks were effectively banned from playing soccer. But the game caught on with the local Greeks, whose friendly matches with the British were attended by an increasingly large Turkish audience. For Turks, soccer was thus originally—and, for some years, exclusively—a spectator sport.

The first Muslim Turkish soccer team was founded in 1901, by a naval student called Fuat Hüsnü Kayacan, who one day managed, allegedly by virtue of his excellent English skills, to acquire a used soccer ball. Having recruited a number of youths from a neighborhood coffeehouse, he gave his team an English name—the Black Stockings—in an attempt to throw the Sultan's detectives off the track. The Black Stockings were nonetheless apprehended after their very first game, a 5–1 trouncing by a Greek team. Kayacan, who had scored the Stockings' only goal, was tried in a military court and convicted of "wearing the same clothing as Greeks and performing exercises in ball projection," but

In 1908, the Sultan's absolute rule was curbed by the Young Turks, who went on to encourage soccer as a means of Westernizing and nationalizing Turkish youth. Some Muslims still disapproved of the sport, perceiving the kicking of a head-size ball as the symbolic restaging of an Islamic historical trauma; namely, the 680 A.D. decapitation of Muhammad's grandson Hossein, whose head was then kicked around on the ground by his murderers. However, by 1910 there were enough Muslim footballers to start a Friday League, in addition to the non-Muslim league, which played on Sundays. After the First World War, when the Allies occupied Istanbul, Turks took particular pride in victories by Fenerbahçe, Galatasaray, and Beşiktaş against the British forces' teams.

Soccer acquired new political uses in the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état: a milestone in postwar Turkish history, when a junta dissolved the government, purged and imprisoned all "extremists," and instituted three years of military rule under nationalist-secularist principles. On the ground that Atatürk's capital deserved a premier-league team, the leader of the junta, General Kenan Evren, personally manipulated the rules of the Turkish Cup to promote the Ankara team to the Süper Lig. A few years later, before the 1987 elections, the incumbent President, Turgut Özal, promoted the Kocaeli and Bursa teams from the second to the first league, midseason, invalidating all the games they had played so far—a plea for the votes of northwestern Anatolia. Özal also helped reinstate the defunct third professional league, which Talimciler calls the "political league"; now every city in Turkey could be manipulated through soccer.

The most recent soccer-political scandal emerged from last year's WikiLeaks materials. A leaked American diplomatic cable claimed that, after the ruling conservative-Islamic party lost the 2004 mayoral race in the Black Sea city of Trabzon, Prime Minister Erdogan appointed his friend Faruk Nafiz Özak chairman of the board of the Trabzon soccer team and also transferred "several million dollars from one of the Prime Ministry's hidden reserves" to finance new player purchases. Erdogan dismissed the leaked cable as "gossip," and Özak in fact already had a

long history with the team. But the story testifies to a real and enduring tension between Anatolian conservatives and cosmopolitan Istanbul, and to the notion of Turkish soccer as the surface manifestation of a deeper game being played under the table.

According to Talimciler, in Turkey soccer is the true opium of the people. In the years after the 1980 coup, when political gatherings were barred, the government "used soccer to fill the vacuum left by politics." And yet Çarşi, which formed during this time, developed many of the external characteristics of a political party. The group's stands on national issues are reported in newspapers. Its representatives are invited to parliament and to political rallies. One senior member confessed to me that he was never really that into soccer, and had been drawn to Çarşi by its leftist social programs. Çarşi makes an interesting case study for Umberto Eco's theory of soccer fanaticism, which he views as a systematic, one-to-one parody of political consciousness: you critique the record of soccer players instead of the record of parliament, second-guess the coach rather than the minister of finance. Sports thus drains the same resources—"possibilities of judgment, verbal aggressiveness, political competitiveness"—that the citizen would otherwise use for political debate.

Does Çarşi express political energies or merely absorb them? Is it a political group or the simulacrum of one? When I asked one of the founders why Che Guevara's picture was on his hat, he replied in a conversation-ending tone: "Che has been on my hat for twenty years." Another fan told me that, while many teams revere Atatürk, Beşiktaş loves him for his "most human" traits, such as the great leader's weakness for alcohol: one rhyming chant goes, "In our father's footsteps/We'll die of cirrhosis."

Nobody can tell you how big Çarşi is, how one becomes a member, or how the leaders, who aren't called leaders, acquired their power. When pressed for details, Çarşi members begin to quote from or paraphrase a long poem called "What Is Çarşi?," which they all seem to know by heart:

> Çarşi is in the question "What's the score?," asked in the first breath of a man rescued from a landslide at the Zonguldak mine. . . .
>
> It's the people in the stands: a doctor, a worker, a businessman, an illiterate street child, a professor.
>
> It's the leftist, rightist, atheist, the pilgrim, the Muslim, the Armenian, the Jew, the Christian, who jump up and down, shoulder to shoulder, with tears in their eyes, shouting at the top of their lungs, "My Beşiktaş, my one and only darling!"

I gradually came to appreciate "What Is Çarşi?" for its distinctive, human way of telling you at once too much and not enough—of multiplying, rather than resolving, contradictions. Çarşi is "the people in the stands," but it is "not a group of people." It is an incorrigible rebel spirit, a philosophy of black and white, a madman lover, a form of death, a witticism, and the eagle on the nose of an F16.

Çarşi insists that it has "no hierarchy" and "no leaders." It doesn't hold elections or even official meetings. "In fact, we aren't really an association or an organization. We don't have a head," Amigo Alen has told reporters. "Çarşi isn't a group—it's a shared spirit."

Still, Çarşi does have an inner circle, with several "big brothers," whom I eventually managed to contact through the administrator of the official Çarşi Web site, Alaattin Çam. A bureaucrat in his forties, Alaattin lives and works five hours from Istanbul. He attends every Beşiktaş game, and coördinates various Çarşi outreach programs in children's hospitals and seniors' homes, along with fund-raisers and blood drives. After a forest fire in Antalya, Çarşi raised so much money that the forest was renamed Beşiktaş Forest. Çarşi members love donating blood, and talk about it constantly. Alaattin later sent me an enormous zip file filled with photographs of men in Beşiktaş jerseys lying on cots with tubes in their arms and grimacing like wounded soldiers.

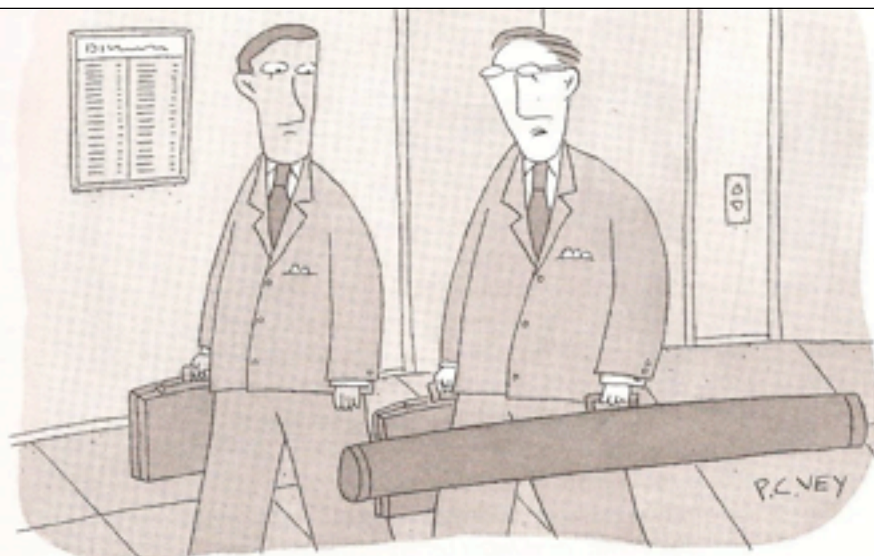
"I'll take us somewhere we can talk," Alaattin said when I met him, near the Kazan pub, and he strode off into the drizzly, twilit winter afternoon. I pursued him along several narrow back streets near the stadium, into a three-story ice-cream parlor, and up three flights of stairs to a deserted rooftop. A waiter ran after us, and turned on the heat lamp. We ordered two glasses of tea.

"I want to be helpful to you," Alaattin said, lighting up a Marlboro. "But I wanted to meet you first and see what kind of person you are."

I must have seemed sufficiently harmless, because Alaattin soon introduced me to the Çarşi big brothers. They meet at the Eagle Café, a teahouse in downtown Beşiktaş, whose white walls are dotted with items of Beşiktaşiana. When we entered, old men in black-and-white scarves were playing cards under fluorescent lights; a younger man in an overcoat was hunched over a newspaper. The Çarşi group was sitting around a big table in the back.

Ayhan, a soft-spoken man of unguess-

"It can also run on recycled cooking oil, but you have to be careful, as it has a severe peanut allergy."



"Nobody needs to know it's a snake till it's too late."

able age, with youthful features but copious gray hair, came forward to greet me. "People think we're working from a three-story building with computers," he said. "They don't know it's just five or six people in a café."

He introduced me to two of Çarşi's founders, Hakan and the Camel, and a younger man called Autobahn. Many Çarşi members are known primarily by their nicknames. "Over there is Dervish," Ayhan said, indicating a stocky man with plastic-rimmed glasses, who turned out to be the group's lawyer, "and that's Tatar."

"We may speak in English if you like," Dervish said in English. "I think it will help you relax."

"He's a lawyer and a Beşiktaş fan so he helps us out when we need it," Ayhan explained. I asked whether Çarşi had frequent need of legal counsel. Everyone at the table nodded.

The current subject of debate was some long-delayed anti-hooliganism laws that were now being rushed through parliament in the wake of the Bursaspor stabbings. They included proposals to jail fans who tried to take guns, knives, and other weapons into stadiums. Someone from Çarşi had to go to Ankara to make a statement before a parliamentary subcommittee on sports violence. Who would go, now that Amigo Alen was confined to his bed? Everyone seemed inclined to send Ayhan, except Ayhan, who appeared to be the one in charge. (He ended up going anyway.)

When it comes to politics, Ayhan prefers to remain on the sidelines. At one point, he jokingly suggested that Çarşi could kidnap me, in order to extract concessions from the American government. "We'll put you up somewhere nice for a week. What do you say?" My head began to swim as I contemplated the effects this plan might have on my personal and professional life. Meanwhile, Ayhan and Hakan had already begun to discuss the terms of my release. They would ask for all their friends to be let out of prison, and they wanted Guantánamo Bay to be closed.

Ayhan spoke with pride of Çarşi's quick response to Orhan Pamuk's Nobel Prize. Pamuk had fallen into political disfavor for comments he had made about the Armenian genocide, and the immediate domestic reaction was perhaps slightly lacking in warmth. So, even though Pamuk supports Fenerbahçe, Çarşi made a pro-Pamuk banner before Fener managed to say anything at all.

"Do you like Orhan Pamuk?" I asked.

"What—as a writer?" Ayhan shrugged. "He has some good books. He has some I don't like."

Conversation turned to the history of

yellow mansion belonging to a member of the Ottoman administration. Students in the nearby officers' school met there to exercise on the parallel bars. "Most of them later died in the Balkan wars or the First World War," Ayhan said. The way he told the story, these acrobatic young officers of Beşiktaş were already underdogs: infantrymen of the waning empire, holding out one last time against Europe.

"We're the first fanatic group in Turkey," Dervish said of Çarşi. "We're Turkey's first hooligan organization, going back to 1982."

"Do you see yourselves as hooligans?" I asked, recalling that Deniz had said they were not hooligans but one step above.

"We do," Dervish affirmed. "Furthermore, we don't recognize anyone else as hooligans here in Turkey."

"Here in Turkey, no," Autobahn concurred. "Abroad, they have some."

The men who founded Çarşi started attending Beşiktaş games as children or teen-agers, in the late nineteen-seventies. During much of this time, the Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe stadiums were closed for repairs, and all the big-three matches were held at Inönü. There were no assigned seats, and Beşiktaş fans made it a mission to keep their rivals out of the covered stands, which were considered to have the best views and the best acoustics. In what became known as the "Inönü war," as many as two hundred Beşiktaş supporters would sleep in or around the stadium before a match, in order to defend their seats. They used fists, sticks, and rocks, and, as hostilities escalated, switchblades, meat cleavers, and the razor-sharp, sword-size knives used to slice döner kebap.

For a while after the 1980 coup, the Inönü war went underground. With the security forces maintaining curfews until five every morning, you couldn't spend the night in the stadium anymore. But, at 5:01 A.M. on every match day, regiments of fans would hit the streets. Beşiktaş eventually conquered the covered stands, and Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe returned to their stadiums, but the fights continued to escalate. By the mid-eighties, people were using Molotov cocktails and guns.

"Istanbul was divided," Ayhan said. "This went on twenty-four hours a day. We lived hooliganism, seven days a week.

Nobody went home at night, out of fear that their families would be hurt. Everyone would sleep in the same place. At three or four in the morning, phones would start ringing. There would be news of a fight. Five hundred people would head straight there, some with guns. Have you seen the movie 'Braveheart'? It was exactly like that."

"Nobody here has an undamaged part left in his body," Hakan said. He spoke in a drawling but precise voice and resembled a Chekhovian intellectual, with glasses, a close-shaved beard and mustache, and a slightly sallow complexion. "You could go there with a samurai sword."

In 1991, a Beşiktaş supporter was kicked to death by some forty Galatasaray fans. Soon afterward, Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe approached Beşiktaş with an offer of a truce. Ayhan and Hakan recalled that sixty or seventy people turned up with guns at the meeting place, in Abbasaga Park. "It was like in American Mafia movies," Ayhan said. Under the truce, which holds to this day, there was to be no more camping outside the stadium, no more ambushes, and no shooting in the street. If you were walking somewhere with a lady, nobody could say anything to you.

Ayhan ordered another round of tea, and for a few moments the only sound was the clinking of spoons as the men stirred sugar cubes into their tea.

When I asked what had changed in Çarşi over the past thirty years, Hakan said, "What's changed is the dead now outnumber the living." Fifteen of the original big brothers were dead, only five of natural causes.

"Some lost eyes, or had other injuries, in the stadium wars," Ayhan said. "Some fled to other cities. Some died in accidents, by murder, in parks. Even the ones who died of natural causes—they wasted away because of Beşiktaş. They became alcoholics, they had accidents, they got sick from neglect and alcohol. Young people now watch matches from the covered stands, and they don't know what it cost us."

Ayhan took me to watch a match in the covered stands, a relatively low-stakes game against the Austrian team Rapid Wien. It was a chill night, and there was a ten-o'clock kickoff. In the streets near Inönü, police in black hooded rain cloaks had blocked off several pedestrian crossings.

"Fascists," Ayhan observed. "Come on, let's go." He crossed the street, in the middle of traffic. Our boldness availed only to get us stuck for ten minutes on a walkway behind two people dressed as gigantic Twigy-brand bedroom slippers. It was impossible to sidestep these plush colossi, who strolled around, shaking children's hands and waving at the stalled traffic.

As we shuffled along, Ayhan told me that he attended his first Beşiktaş match in 1981, in his home city of Ankara, and had felt inexplicably drawn to the team. At the age of thirteen, he started making frequent trips to Istanbul, and hanging out with Beşiktaş fans. After his second year of high school, he ran away from home and settled for good in Istanbul, where he became a part of Çarşi—at that time, a loose group of Beşiktaş fans in their late teens and early twenties.

"Did you know right away that Çarşi would become such a big thing in your life?" I asked.

"No. I always thought I would be an archeologist."

The walkway ended in a plaza, and Inönü rose before us. We found a spot in the stands next to Autobahn, the Camel, and a few old-timers. The team ran out and began warming up. The fans recited a chant featuring the names of individual players; the player who was called would jog toward the stands in time with the rhythm and wave at the fans. It was one of the rare intoxicating moments when the world of the fans overlapped with the world of the team. Five thousand men shouted, "Guti," and Gutiérrez Hernández, a tiny bright figure, was drawn away from his teammates like a puppet on a string, raising his arm as if in surrender.

Unlike Çarşi's unconditional love for the entity of Beşiktaş, its feelings for the actual players seem ambivalent and volatile. There are stories of Çarşi members striking up friendships with players by first slashing their tires and then giving them a ride home; of trashing the players' facilities, and then turning up the next day with baklava and flowers. In 2002, the training grounds moved to the Anatolian suburbs, so Çarşi's abusive love can now express itself only at matches. "You demand billions of dollars, but you don't earn the uniform," one chant begins, and continues, "Take it off and play naked." The most complicated chants involve various calisthenic components; you have to bend down, stand up, even turn around and shout toward the back walls of the stadium. Those who fail to turn their backs to the field are harshly rebuked: "If you want to watch the game so much, I'll get you a plasma-screen TV."

When an opposing team comes up with an anti-Beşiktaş cheer, Çarşi tries to turn it against that team on the spot.

"First, I did things for my parents' approval, then I did things for my parents' disapproval, and now I don't know why I do things."

where its beloved Armenian was now. Çarşi replied with a rhyme to the effect that Alen was with Galatasaray's mother.

During the course of the Rapid Wien game, the covered stands recited several anti-Fenerbahçe chants, a staple of the repertoire no matter what team Beşiktaş is actually playing. The most famous anti-Fener chant, sung to the tune of "Those Were the Days," consists of three lines pledging an end to swearing in soccer, followed by the chorus "But one last time, suck my dick, Fener." A mind-boggling proliferation of YouTube videos show the so-called Opera to Fener, performed by Turks and non-Turks, in locations ranging from the Vatican to the Arctic Circle. You can see Sudanese people singing it near some parked trucks, and a French person singing it outside the Taj Mahal. Cubans, in a square in Havana, accompany their version with a guitar and bongos. There is a terrifying, half-whispered rendition by a drunk Macedonian in a banquet hall, and one by an Israeli paratrooper, recorded on his cell phone after he jumped from an airplane. There is something at once touching and disturbing in the liberation from the soccer field of this internecine Istanbul obscenity, its transformation into a joyful global chorus.

Beşiktaş ended up beating the Vienna team, 2–0. During a particularly bombastic chant involving Fenerbahçe's lently, he watched the game with total fixity, the cigarette between his fingers turning into a column of ash.

I finally met Amigo Alen two days before New Year's, at his apartment, in Üsküdar, a residential neighborhood on the Asian side of the city. I shared a taxi there with Ayhan, Hakan, and the Camel.

Alen's wife, Çigdem, a pretty brunette in her early thirties, opened the door. In the living room, a collapsible wheelchair leaned against a hospital bed. A flat-screen TV was mounted on one wall, next to a giant ceiling-height space heater, the kind used at outdoor restaurants. In the adjacent dining room were numerous trophies and plaques and a Christmas tree with flashing lights. A giant bronze eagle stood on the table, under a large, heavily airbrushed wedding photograph that showed Amigo Alen and Çigdem in three-quarter profile, gazing dreamily into the distance.

The amigo, a bull-like figure with a thick neck and muscular shoulders, lay on a sofa under the window, wearing the incongruous, bewildered expression of a strong man on a sickbed. "But look at it, just look at it," he kept telling his friends, throwing off the sheet that covered his legs. I received the impression of heavy masculine thighs and a blackish scab, before turning away.

"That's nothing," Hakan said. "Remember when Optik was shot? The doctors said he would be a cripple."

"When a wine rates over ninety, this is not alcoholism."

ing his way up from apprentice to master over a period of sixteen years. Ten years ago, he fulfilled a lifelong dream of opening a kebap restaurant in Beşiktaş, where he now works most days. The Beşiktaş allegiance runs in families; Alen inherited it from his father. "Ninety per cent of Armenians are Beşiktaş fans," he said. "It's because Armenians are craftsmen. Beşiktaş is the team of artisans."

Hakan quoted a much repeated cliché: "Armenians support Beşiktaş, Jews support Galatasaray, and Greeks support Fenerbahçe." Nobody ever says whom the Kurds—Turkey's largest minority—support.

Amigo Alen began participating in the Inönü war when he was about sixteen. "I left high school after my first year, and became active in Beşiktaş," he told me. Alen became an amigo at twenty-five. His most wildly adored cheer is called "Pulling the three": the fans count in unison to three, clap their hands, and shout "Beşiktaş!" It wasn't immediately clear to me why everyone loves this cheer so much, but it evidently creates a tremendous sense of unity.

Ayhan gave Amigo Alen a parcel wrapped in newspaper: a glass sculpture, a trophy for Most Fervent Fan Group, which Ayhan had accepted in his absence. Alen turned it over in his hands, seeming pleased and sorry at the same time. They debated where to put it. Alen noted that the plaques in the apartment were only a fraction of the total; the rest were in storage or at his kebap restaurant.

"Even this fraction is difficult to dust," Çigdem remarked.

"I keep wanting to hang up more plaques, and she won't let me," Alen complained. "It's the Gestapo here."

"Don't talk nonsense—this house is full of black eagles!"

The amigo began to discuss with his friends the difficulty of getting a wheelchair into a car, the possible benefits of physical therapy, the fine points of scab formation. He reported a long conversation with his doctor involving shattered cartilage and knee-replacement surgery. Everyone seemed confused.

"You just rest and eat a lot of calcium," Ayhan said, finally.

"But look at it," Alen said, pulling at the sheet.

it up."

"So this, too, is one of the ways to enter 2011," Hakan observed philosophically. "What can you do?"

"Here's the thing about Alen," Ayhan said after the visit, as he and Hakan and I were having dinner at a meatball joint in Beşiktaş. "He receives awards. He talks to the television hosts."

"It isn't easy, what he does," Hakan said. "Alen knows how to talk, and he knows how to control himself. He probably doesn't know how *not* to control himself. Let me give you an example. Sometimes someone will mention the Armenian genocide around him—someone will say, 'Oh, I don't acknowledge the genocide.' They say that just to bother him. Well, Alen turns white as a sheet as soon as the word 'genocide' is mentioned—but he says nothing. Can you imagine what that means?"

"If I was Armenian, people wouldn't be able to mention the genocide around me," Ayhan said. "They would know not to."

"That's what I'm saying. Someone able to tolerate that can tolerate a lot," Hakan said. "He isn't going to lose his cool over something some TV host says. And he's such a sweet man—he's incapable of making anyone angry at him. That's why it's so wrong that he got shot. Something like that should never have happened."

"Meanwhile, Hakan, the Camel, and I stay in the background—we throw rocks from the background," Ayhan said. "We organize things, and watch the results. We don't get worked up about anything. We like to watch others get worked up."

They talked about how Çarşi was becoming mainstream, how they didn't have enough obstacles anymore. Young people now come to them for advice—Greenpeace, and some kids who wanted to protest against NATO. I was reminded of one of the group's more baffling slogans, "Çarşi is against itself."

"You'll understand when you're older," Alaattin Çam had told me, when I asked about its meaning. "As you live longer, you have to turn your back on things you used to believe in. You change your identity. Çarşi isn't fascist, so it doesn't resist those changes."

It was getting harder every day for

said that his dream was to watch Beşiktaş from the outside, from the farthest possible place—Nepal, Tibet, maybe even the moon. He felt certain that there is life elsewhere in the universe—that it can't possibly be "just us."

Hakan shrugged. He didn't care about extraterrestrials. "Even if they exist, they're hardly going to be Beşiktaşli."

After dinner, we went back to the Eagle Café, to learn the news about the sports-violence laws. Autobahn, a part-time construction worker, who is in charge of Çarşi's banners, came in with an evening paper. There was a full-page spread on the proposed sports laws. Anti-hooligan measures being debated included a one-year prison sentence for bringing a weapon to a stadium, and two years for obscene, racist, or profane chants.

"How do they decide what's profanity?" Hakan asked, mentioning several borderline-profane phrases.

I left the Çarşi leaders debating this point and headed back to the metro, accompanied by Autobahn. Autobahn is an anachronistic-looking character with a ponytail, a goatee, an exceedingly mobile face, and a wide smile that exposes a missing front tooth. He got his nickname from hitchhiking to away matches. Speaking in a nasal singsong, he told me that he was going to start work the next day on a two-hundred-metre-long banner, his biggest yet.

I asked what a typical match day was like for him.

"I get up in the morning," he said, "and the first thing on my mind is that I'm meeting my beloved. I wear black-and-white pajamas to bed, so when I look in the mirror it's the first thing I see." He said that his love for Beşiktaş is best characterized by an old Turkish expression: "I have one problem and I wouldn't exchange it for a thousand solutions."

We turned off onto the main boulevard, and Autobahn lit a cigarette, talking and gesturing extravagantly. He spoke about his vision of the future, a world where nobody would say "thank you," because nobody would feel unworthy of receiving kindness. He talked about

taşli—being from Beşiktaş. I'm not *from* Beşiktaş; I *am* Beşiktaş. What's Beşiktaş, if it isn't me? A piece of dirt. Beşiktaş is people."

We had neared the stadium, and just around the side was a lit-up one-room snack bar, a place I had never seen before. Out front, under the stars, a young round-faced man was standing at a large charcoal grill, tending to kebaps, green peppers, and tomatoes. The smell of grilled lamb filled the air. Noticing Autobahn, the young man beamed from ear to ear. The two embraced with tremendous warmth and kissed each other's cheeks. The round-faced man seemed about to hug and kiss me, too, from a sheer excess of good will, but he remained in place, smiling, turning the peppers with a pair of tongs. Autobahn made a tour of the premises, greeting a woman at the counter, and some men who were sitting and smoking cigarettes.

"These people are amazing. They run this kebap stand twenty-four hours a day," Autobahn said. "They sleep here and take turns running the stand—just in case somebody wants a sandwich." He shook his head in wonderment. "Listen, is it O.K. if we stop in and take a look at my banners?"

The stadium doors were shut, but some side doors were standing wide open, despite the cold. Two men in shearling jackets sat behind a counter, watching some unknown soccer match on a tiny television; over their heads hung a huge, illuminated black-and-white eagle sign. "It's O.K., don't get up," Autobahn said, breezing past them to a windowless concrete storage room. Propped against the walls, which were covered with Çarşi graffiti, stood several bolts of fabric. Autobahn began sorting them according to his own inscrutable criteria. Remembering the Rapid Wien game, I thought of how the new banner would come alive at the next match. It would unfurl itself over you and you would beat at it with your hands as it rolled over the crowd in a great wave, its slogan facing the floodlights and the night sky. ♦

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A conversation with Elif Batuman.