Arriving, in 1971

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Izmir, in the fall of 2020, is digging out from the catastrophe caused by an earthquake under the Aegean Sea. Buildings crumbled down on the population of this seacoast town, an ancient city long known by the Greek name of Smyrna. In late August of 1971 I arrived in Izmir, a new employee of the University of Maryland University College, to teach enlisted personnel at the NATO installation there. The American presence was supposed to be low-key: there was no designated base, and the places where Americans worked remained unmarked. Someone must have shown me the way to my classroom, a few poorly-lit blocks from my quarters in the Kordon Hotel, facing the Bay of Izmir. I stepped into the instructor role in my first university-level class ever, American History 101. On alternate evenings, I taught English Composition. There were about twenty-five men in each class.

One of my students in that first class had a severe disability. A corpsman and the student's father brought him in lying flat on a gurney and tried to position him so that he could see me. He was nineteen. The year before, in Texas, he had dived off a cliff into a river that turned out to be shallow: he broke his neck and damaged his spinal cord. He could not move, but he could whisper. His father listened to him and repeated what he wanted to say. His father was a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, who had brought his wife and son with him to his assignment in Izmir.

I began going to this family's quarters, in order to give my student quizzes and to include him in three-way discussions with his father and me. I learned that his father was stationed in

Vietnam in ’69-70. He was bemused by President Nixon’s denial of the bombing of Cambodia, which, he said, he had personally done. Surely there was no point in lying. To whom was he lying? He was the first of many people I would meet in this job who had fought in Vietnam, and I was grateful for his candor. His son listened to us avidly, propped up so that he could be fed and could see us better.

His mother did not come out of her bedroom. I met her by going in there to introduce myself, into the dark room where she lay in bed. She did not support her husband’s strenuous efforts to try to normalize their son’s life. Did I know that he had even taken their son on his gurney into an officers’ club stag night for a strip show? She was bitter about his son’s rescuer, who had yelled up to him that the water was deep enough for his dive.

The son did well in the class, yet his chances for the future were starkly limited. His airway had to be cleared often, and he suffered from contact sores. His style, however, was more like his father’s stoicism than like his mother’s despair over his blighted future. The parents’ dreams were destroyed. Yet the father was determined that his son know the gratification of a challenge, of studying American history in college.

I’m grateful I was his teacher.

Izmir made a powerful impression on me, though it was not easy to explore as a single woman, especially under the martial law of 1971. But I made a few friends, and my lectures and paper-grading kept me busy. I felt the responsibility of being a significant figure in the lives of adults, many of whom, like the young man on the gurney, were facing big challenges.