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An American's qualms melt away in the steam of a Turkish bathhouse, under the ministrations of the graceful Nurgül.

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ISTANBUL, Turkey - "You must go," insisted my Turkish friend Sule. " *Hammas*, Turkish bathhouses, are important social gathering places all over the country. They're like your coffeehouses. When I go home to my village in Anatolia I ring up my girlfriends and arrange a meeting at our favorite *hamman*. My husband and brother do the same."

I hesitated, thinking about what some of my friends had reported. Sue and Mark had slid around on dirty, oily floors when visiting Budapest. I could not fall on this trip. When in Germany, Kate understood enough to know that the large, well-endowed women at a German bath thought her svelte figure would prevent her from having babies. Joan complained that a masseuse in a bath would not stop when she felt her bones were being yanked from their sockets. Ouch.



"Americans are shy about being nude," I said to Sule, "strange as that may seem with all the exposed skin in movies."

"I kno-o-o-w," said Sule. So she'd heard this argument before. "But Cemberlitas Hamman is a good place for foreigners. It's right in the heart of the Old City, near the Grand Bazaar and the historic sites."

"Do you have to go nude?"

Sule giggled. "You can wear your bathing suit if you want."

Deal clinched. What did I have to lose?

"Women's entrance?" I asked when I reached the street corner a few short blocks east of the Grand Bazaar. I saw the Egyptian obelisk Sule had told me to look for. She said the tall, tapering monument, at least three stories high and several feet wide at the base, was brought here in the fourth century A.D. during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine.

The large entry room was flooded with light from a high domed ceiling, typical of many historic buildings in Istanbul. Cemberlitas is the oldest functioning bathhouse in Istanbul, and has the largest marble platform for steaming up the body and getting massages. The famous 17th-century architect Sinan did some modifications after part of the building was cut away to build a road.

"Here is Nurgül," said the English-speaking hostess. "She will lead you to your locker, and will be with you during your stay."

Nurgül, dressed in a long, flowing tunic, was a thin, graceful woman with a 50-year-old face, longer-than-waist-length shining hair that shimmered when she moved, and the lithe body of a 20-year-old dancer. She cupped her palm under my elbow, and with small, delicate steps, led me to a room with new wooden lockers. She then presented me with a small red silk bag containing black bikini underpants and a red and white checked towel, and placed rubber clogs on the floor. As she held up an elastic bracelet with a key, she motioned that I was to place my clothes in the locker, insert the key, lock the door, and wear the bracelet. "Till you dress," she whispered, and then walked out with a graceful gait.

Horrors. In a packing frenzy, I had brought the wrong black suit. This one had gotten fried in the trunk of the car; it had all sorts of worn spots and the top hung out like a sack of potatoes. And I wanted to look elegant! The other bathers would be looking at me! Quickly I put it on and wound my towel around, tucking the edges of the towel into the top.

Nurgül returned and with a reassuring smile let me know that everything was fine. Again she gently put her hand under my elbow and we walked in slow motion to a large, circular marble slab, at least fifteen feet wide, in the middle of the room.

"Up, lady, up," she said, with an undertone of humming in her voice.

She arranged the towel on a spot near the edge, smoothed it out, and eased me up into a horizontal position, with one cheek resting on the top of my clasped hand. "Relax, lady, relax," she said, pulling the top of my bathing suit down, rolling it, and letting it rest on my hips like a bikini. Oh, well, not to worry. European women sunbathe nude on beaches and boat decks all the time. Lying here on my stomach, with thick steam rising all around, was not that different.

Before slipping into a semi-trance, I looked around the room and saw how the walls in the octagonal room had sparkling blue and white tiles like those in the Blue Mosque and the Topkapi Palace. A wood fire under the marble slab kept the stone at an even temperature.

Without my thick-lensed glasses, a cluster of young Turkish women looked to me like thinner, shorter-haired versions of women in Monet's impressionistic paintings. One rested the back of her head on the stomach of another, while a third and fourth linked legs. Their soft, relaxed voices sounded like the adagio

section of a musical piece with the volume turned down. I thought of my college days when groups of us would sit and talk for hours in relaxed conversation.

Several pairs of women friends - British, French, and Russian - lay alongside each other and whispered, while a small crowd of Japanese women reclined on their sides. They seemed to be telling jokes or making ironic commentaries on events because their voices would rise and fall, almost with the rhythm of the noises in the room, and then lapse into delicate waves of laughter. A few women were alone, as I was.

After a half-hour the pores of my body were supposedly opened and my muscles were supple enough to begin the bath process. Nurgül returned, her hair up in a neat French twist anchored with a chopstick-like wand, and, using a large cup (*tas*), poured warm water over me. She then began rubbing my body with a slightly coarse mitt (*kese*), oozing with soapsuds. Huge white bubbles rose from her hands. After a thorough cleansing, I was doused with cooler water, and then given a massage.

This was the part I'd been dreading. I've never been one for body treatments, preferring to spend an hour walking out of doors than lying still and letting someone knead my muscles. But Nurgül's hands were like firm cushions, and the pressure and pace were comforting.

It was only when she stopped the massage that I noticed there were many more bodies on the marble slab, all heating up for sudsing and rubbing. It was like having the lights come on after a movie, and seeing the crowds.

The massage over, Nurgül led me toward an arch leading to a swimming pool. We winced as one of the young Japanese women sprinted past us, light as a fawn, and dove into the warm-water pool we were heading for. Nurgül's voice turned loud and stern, and she shook her finger at the woman. "Massage first, massage first," she kept repeating in an angry voice, pointing back to the marble slab in the middle of the large room. The episode broke my trance.

"Relax, move," Nurgül motioned as if to tell me to swim. I exercised in the warm water while she waited with a towel.

She then escorted me, her hand gently under my elbow, to a fountain on the side of the room where she began to pour cool water over my body with a *tas*. Without warning, Nurgül pulled my old, withered bathing suit off with one quick motion and guided it down my legs, and in less than a moment had the towel wrapped around my body and tied in a half knot. Did anyone get a view of my body in those few seconds? I was too relaxed to care.

"Go, lady, go," she whispered while leading me to a large circular room with cushions along the wall. "Apple juice, orange juice, tea, lady?"

"Are you German?" I asked the young woman beside me, hoping to strike up a conversation if she spoke some English.

"No, I'm from Cincinnati, but come here whenever I'm in Istanbul."

After I finished the last sip of my tea, I made sure the towel was tightly wrapped around me, and ambled over to the locker rooms. When I think back to the baths, what I remember is not how I looked, but Nurgül's queenly walk.

Since then I've rarely worried about what Nurgül, the young Turkish women, Germans, Brits, Russian or Japanese women on the marble slab thought of my advanced middle-aged rolls, or my attempts to hold up the drab bathing suit, which I tossed into a trash can when I reached a busy street. Nurgül's soft, reassuring voice, her soothing, imperial walk, the shards of light darting down through the glass dome ceiling, and the hum of women's voices keep coming back to me. For an hour or two, I had been a Turkish lady back in Constantinople.