

# Novel Excerpt: Elliot Ackerman's 'Red Dress in Black and White'

*That evening, at half past nine*

To William, the question of his mother is clear. The question of his father is more complicated, because there is Peter.

The night that they meet, William is about seven years old and his mother has brought him to one of Peter's exhibits. She hasn't said much to her son, just that she has an American friend, that he takes pictures and that the two of them are going to see that friend's art, which is very special. That's what she always calls it, *his art*.

His mother doesn't drive, at least not in this city, and in the taxi on the way there she keeps looking at her wristwatch. It isn't that they are late, but that she's anxious to arrive at the right time, which is not to say right on time. The apartment she's trying to find is off İstiklal Caddesi, which is a sort of Ottoman Grand Rue running through the heart of Istanbul, the place of William's birth but a home-in-exile to his mother, who, like her friend Peter, is American. As their cab crawls along Cevdet Paşa Caddesi, the seaside road which handrails the Bosphorus Strait, she stares out the window, her eyes brushed with a bluish cosmetic, blinking slowly, while she absently answers the boy's questions about where they are going and whom they'll meet there. William holds a game called Simon on his lap. It is a palm-size disk divided into four colored panels—blue, red, green, yellow—that flashes increasingly complicated patterns, which reflect off the cab's night-darkened windows. The aim is to repeat those patterns. It was a gift from his father and his father has the high score, which he has instructed William to try to beat.



An allée of birch canopies their route and they skirt the high limestone walls of Dolmabahçe Palace. Their cab jostles in and out of first gear in the suffocating traffic until they break from the seaside road and switchback into altitudes of linden-, oak- and elm-forested hills. When the sun dips behind the hills, the lights come on in the city. Below them the waters of the Bosphorus, cold and pulling, turn from green-blue to just black. The boat lights, the bridge lights, the black-white contrast of the skyline reflecting off the water would come to remind the boy of Peter and, as his mother termed it, his art.

After paying the fare, his mother takes him by the hand, dragging him along as they shoulder through the evening foot traffic trying to find their way. Despite the darkness eternal day lingers along the İstiklal, flightless pigeons hobble along the neon-lit boulevard, chestnuts smolder from the red-painted pushcarts on the street corners, the doughy smell of baked açma and simit hangs in the air. The İstiklal is cobblestone, she has worn heels for the occasion, and when she catches one in the grouting and stumbles into the crowd, she knocks a shopping bag out of another woman's hand. Standing from her knees, William's mother repeatedly apologizes and a few men reach under her arms to help her up, but her son quickly waves them away and helps his mother up himself. After that the two of them walk more slowly and she still holds his arm, but now she isn't dragging her son, and when the boy feels her lose balance once more, he grabs her tightly at the elbow and with the help of his steady grip she manages to keep on her feet.

They turn down a quiet side street, which aside from a few shuttered kiosks has little to recommend it. The apartment building they come to isn't much wider than its door. After they press the buzzer, a window opens several floors above. A

man ducks his head into the bracing night and calls down to them in a high-pitched yet forceful voice, like air through a steel pinhole. He then blows them an invisible kiss, launching it off an open palm. William's mother raises her face to that kiss and then blows one back. The street smells bitterly of scents the boy doesn't yet recognize and it is filled with the halos of fluorescent lamps and suspect patches of wetness on the curbs and even the cinder-block walls. The buzzer goes off and William's mother shoulders open the door. Inside someone has hammered a plank across the elevator entry. It has been there long enough for the nail heads to rust. They climb up several floors where the brown paint scales from the brick. The empty apartment building meets them with an uproar of scattering rats and the stairwell smells as bitter as the street.

A shuttle of unclasping locks receives his mother's knock at the apartment door and then the same man who had appeared in the window presses his face to the jamb. His gaze is level with the fastened chain and his eyes are pretty and spacious, as if hidden, well-apportioned rooms existed within them. The honey-colored light from inside the apartment shines on his skin. His eyebrows are like two black smudges. William notices the plucked bridge between them, and also his rectangular smile with its brilliantly white teeth. The man is uncommonly handsome, and William feels drawn to him, as if he can't quite resolve himself to look away.

The chain unlatches and then half a dozen or so men and broad-shouldered women spill across the apartment's threshold, pressing against William's mother, kissing her on the cheek, welcoming her. When they kiss William on the cheek, the harsh, glancing trace of the men's stubble scrapes against his fresh skin. The women begin a refrain of *Wonderful to see you, Cat*, and while they escort her inside they keep saying *wonderful* over and over in their guttural voices as if that superlative is the last word of a spell that will transform them into the

people they wish to be.

A blue haze of cigarette smoke hugs the ceiling. Tacked to the sitting room wall, next to a white hard hat displayed like a trophy, is a poster advertising this exhibit. It is a portrait Peter shot of one of the women. She was photographed shirtless from the shoulders up, her mascara runs down her cheeks, her lip is split, a small gash zigzags across her forehead, and her wig—a tight bob symmetrical as a rocketeer’s helmet—is missing a few tufts of hair. That summer, protests had shaken the city, shutting it down for weeks. Hundreds of thousands had squared off with the authorities. William’s dominant memories of those events aren’t the television images of riot police clubbing the environmental activists who opposed a new shopping mall at Taksim Square’s Gezi Park—seventy-four acres of neglected lawns with a crosshatch of dusty concrete walkways shaded by dying trees—or even the way so many everyday people surprised themselves by joining the protesters’ ranks, but instead William remembers his father pacing their apartment on his cellphone, unable to drive into the office because of the many blocked streets as he negotiated a construction deal on a different shopping mall across town.

By the time the protests had finished, the city’s long-persecuted queer community had assumed its vanguard. This caused one columnist, a friend of Peter’s, to observe, “Among those who struggled for their rights at the police barricades at Gezi Park, the toughest ‘men’ were the transgender women.” And so, Peter had a name for his exhibit. In the poster, battered though she is, his subject’s eyes hold a certain, scalding defiance, as if she can read the words beneath her: *The Men of Gezi, An Exhibit*. As William’s mother wanders into the apartment she becomes indistinguishable from the others, blending perfectly into this crowd.

. . .

Catherine and William have arrived at Peter's exhibit right on time, which is to say that they have arrived early. The apartment belongs to Deniz, the one who had appeared in the window to let them in. His date, who takes their coats, is a university-age girl with a pageboy haircut. She is as beautiful as Deniz is handsome. Her mouth is lipsticked savagely, and with it she offers Catherine and William a thin smile before retreating to the sofa, where she stares absorbedly into her phone. Soon others arrive and Deniz comes and goes from a small galley kitchen off the sitting room, where his guests pick at the food he's elegantly laid out on the thinnest of budgets. Not much wine, but carefully selected bottles from his favorite bodegas, a few plates of fresh sliced vegetables on ice bought end-of-day for a bargain at last Sunday's market, small boxes of expensive chocolates to ornament each table. William can't keep track of who is who, as there are several Hayals, as well as many Öyküs and Nurs. Their self-assigned names affirm their identity, but in this political climate also serve the double purpose of noms de guerre. Who knows if one Öykü was born an Arslan and one Hayal was born an Egemen. Why so many of them had chosen the same names, he couldn't say. What seemed most important was that they had chosen.

His mother makes him a small plate and sits him in a chair by the window. While William picks at his dinner, the scented and beautiful crowd swarms around her, saying *Cat that* and *Cat this*. To take her son here, without his father's permission, so that she can be called Cat instead of Catherine, which is what everyone else calls her, endears her to the Men of Gezi. She has made a choice, just as they have. Having lost sight of his mother, William removes the game Simon from his pocket. He sits by the window and he plays.

Soon everyone has arrived and the apartment becomes too warm. Deniz walks to where William sits and heaves open the window. William glances up from his game. His eyes are drawn to

Deniz's muscled arms, his rounded shoulders, how strong he is. A hint of breeze passes through. Deniz cracks a door catty-corner to the window and whispers inside, "Our guests are here." Nobody replies and he says it again. Then a man's voice answers, "Yeah, okay," and Deniz shuts the door and returns to mingle in the crowd, where William has lost his mother.

Whatever this night is about exists just beyond that door, so William stands from his chair by the window. Carefully, he turns the knob. The hinges open smoothly, without a trace of noise. Inside there is light: white walls, white floor and ceiling. The room is transformed into a gleaming cube. The scent of fresh paint hangs heavily around Peter, who stands in the room's center, his back to the door, surrounded by his portraits. William steps behind him and watches.

Peter has almost hung the exhibit. A pair of photos lean one against each of his legs. They are printed in the same dimensions as the other portraits, twelve by eighteen, and the finishes are a monochromatic black-and-white matte. In front of him a single empty nail protrudes from the wall. He combs his fingers through his longish brown curls, which he often teases into a globe of frizz while concentrating. He cranes his neck forward, as if trying to stoop to a normal person's height, which bends him into the shape of a question mark. He has pulled his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and his alternating gaze dips into their lenses and then shifts above them. None of this seems to help Peter resolve the decision with which he's wrestling. William watches him for a while, until Peter feels the boy's eyes on his back despite the many sets of photographed eyes that encircle him.

Peter turns around. His scrutiny is slow and accurate. "Who are you?" he asks. As an afterthought, he adds, "And shut the door."

William does as requested but remains silent.

“Wait, are you Cat’s boy?” Peter combs his fingers back through his hair and he puckers his nose toward his eyes as if the remark had left a spoiled, indigestible taste on his lips. “She brought you,” he says, like an accusation, or statement, or even a compliment. William can’t figure out which, so, finally, he says, “Yes.”

“Come here,” says Peter. “I need your help with something.” He has transformed the cramped bedroom into a pristine gallery, and William steps carefully through the space Peter has created. “I can’t decide on the last photo.” Then Peter crouches and tilts out the two frames balanced against his legs. William crouches alongside him. One of the two photographs is similar to all of the others: a man with long, stringy hair wearing makeup looks back, a bruise darkens his cheek, a cut dimples his chin, he wears a hard hat like the one hanging on the other room’s wall by the poster. Though he stares directly at the camera, his eyes are not set on parallel axes—one wanders menacingly out of the frame.

The subject of the other photograph is beautiful.

Peter has shot this young woman in the same dimensions and lighting as the rest of his portraits. A sheet of dark hair falls straight to her shoulders. There is a bruise around her eye. Up from her chin and along her jaw she also has a cut. She wears a bright dress, whose shade in black and white is exactly the same shade as the cut. A tote bag hangs from her shoulder. Her eyes fix on William clearly, in a way that feels familiar to him, the reflection in her pupil serving as a kind of a mirror.

“This one’s a bit different,” Peter says. “She was born a woman.”

Being a boy, William doesn’t understand the exhibit, the nature of Peter’s subjects or why he would mix in a single photograph of this one particular woman. But William knows the

effect the second photograph has on him. He tells Peter that he likes it best. "You sure?" asks Peter.

He says that he is.

Peter hoists the last photograph onto the wall. As he takes a step back, he crosses his arms and examines it a final time. Then he crouches next to William. Peter has pushed his glasses all the way up his nose and his hands are planted firmly on his knees. "We'd better go find your mother," he says.

. . .

Twenty photographs hang inside of the gallery. About the same number of people mingle in the kitchen and sitting room. William recognizes many of the faces he has seen in the portraits. Peter's eyes shift among them, as if counting the tops of their heads. When it appears that he has found all of the portrait's subjects, he takes off his glasses and tucks them into the breast pocket of his corduroy sports coat.

A knife clinks against a wineglass. The noise comes from a woman who stands alone in a corner of the apartment. The party faces her. Around her neck on a lanyard dangles a blue badge with an embossed seal—a bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch between two furious talons. This places her in the U.S. diplomatic corps. In her photo on the badge she wears the same navy blue suit jacket with a boxy cut and powder blue shirt as on this night, giving the impression that she has only the one outfit, or maybe multiple sets of the same outfit. Her face is lean. Like that of Deniz's date, her black hair is cut into an easy-to-maintain, yet severe, pageboy. Her complexion is such that she could readily be mistaken for a native of this city. A slim and no-nonsense digital triathlete's watch cuffs her wrist. The crowd turns its attention to her. She glances down at her chest, as if she can feel the many sets of eyes settling on her badge.

Awkwardly, she lifts the badge from around her neck, having

forgotten to remove it when she left her desk at the consulate. She then raises her glass. "Thank you all for being here," she says. Her eyes land with sincerity on Deniz, who's telling his date to put away her phone. When he looks up he seems startled, as if confused at receiving thanks for being present in his own home. "And thank you to my old friend Deniz, for lending us his apartment. He was one of the first people I met when I came here nine years ago—"

"The first and last reception you ever threw at the Çırağan Palace," interrupts Deniz with a good-natured smile.

Kristin gives him a look and he shrugs, settling back into his seat. Her gaze then turns to Peter and she speaks to him directly. "I want to congratulate you on this remarkable exhibit and say how proud the Cultural Affairs Section is to have helped, in our small way, to host tonight's event."

Everyone toasts.

"That's very kind of you, Kristin," says Peter, but his words stall in the forest of raised glasses, and before he can say anything more, Kristin continues her remarks, speaking over him, saying that she hopes Peter's photos will bring awareness not only to the events in Gezi Park but also to "this community's long struggle for equal rights and dignity." The room listens, politely, but by the time she finishes most of the crowd, including William and his mother, has migrated into the gallery.

Each person falls silent as they find their image on the blistering white walls. On one side are the portraits of the battered "men" of Gezi and on the other side are the women with their meticulously layered makeup and hair arranged as best as they can manage or covered with a wig for an evening out. Viewed from the doorway, a duplicate of Peter's exhibit begins to form among the guests. Then the finished product appears: a set piece, the exhibit itself as subject, portraits

in and out of the frame. William can't put words to it, but he feels the effect Peter has created.

"What did you help him with?" his mother asks.

Of the twenty portraits, the only one that nobody stands in front of is the girl in the dress chosen by William. He points toward it and his mother says nothing but leaves him and wanders to its spot on the wall. Now every portrait is mirrored by its subject, or, in the case of his mother, a nearly identical subject. William turns back toward the door, where Peter leans with his camera hung around his neck. He snatches it up and takes a picture of his exhibit. Then he departs into the sitting room.

Deniz and his guests circulate among the portraits, theorizing about themselves in Peter's work, honing in on different details within the photos. William can hear them teasing one another, saying that they look like hell, or some variation on the same. The quiet that had descended so quickly lifts. The party that began in the sitting room and kitchen now resumes in the gallery. William's mother has drifted away from the photograph of the girl in the dress, even avoiding it, instead finding protection with Deniz and the others, who keep her at the center of their conversation with their *Cat that* and *Cat this*. William has no one to stand beside, so he follows Peter.

Kristin has forgone the gallery and stands by the window. With her thumbs she punches out a text message. Peter sidles over to her and she glances up from her phone. "I have to go," she says.

"You liked the exhibit that much?" Peter says self-deprecatingly. "What's the matter? Problem at home?"

"No, nothing like that. I've got to get back to work." "It's almost midnight."

"Not in Washington it isn't, but the exhibit's beautiful.

Congratulations.” Kristin tucks her phone back into her overstuffed handbag, from which she removes a small bottle of Purell. She squeezes a dab into her palms, which she vigorously kneads together. Heading to the door, she nearly bumps into William, who is slowly angling across the room toward Peter. “It’s almost midnight,” Kristin says to the boy in a tender almost motherly tone, as if the fact that he is up at this hour is more remarkable than the fact that he is at Deniz’s apartment in the first place.

“That’s Catherine’s boy,” says Peter.

Kristin glances behind her, offering Peter a slight rebuke. Of course she knows that this is Catherine’s boy. “Don’t let your mother stay out too late,” she says to him, then touches his cheek.

“He won’t,” says Peter, answering before William can. Kristin leaves and Peter and William install themselves at the window, staring toward the streetlamps with their halos.

“Take a look here,” says Peter, lifting the camera from his chest. William tentatively leans closer.

“The portrait you picked was perfect.” Peter guides the boy next to him by the shoulder. With his head angled toward Peter’s chest, William stares into the viewfinder. The picture Peter took inside of the gallery is a symmetrical panorama, five portraits hung on each of four separate walls, with every person a reflection of their own battered image.

“Your mom filled the last spot.”

William vacantly nods.

“One of the first rules of being a photographer,” says Peter, “is that you have to take hundreds of bad photos to get a single good one.” He points back into the viewfinder. “This is the one shot that I wanted, understand?” He is inviting

William to be in on something with him, even though William doesn't completely understand what it is.

The boy offers a timid smile.

"Photography is about contrasts, black and white, light and dark, different colors. For instance, if you put blue next to black, the blue looks darker. If you put that same blue next to white, it looks lighter." Peter flips through a few more images on the viewfinder, pointing out pictures that demonstrate this effect. Each time that William nods, it seems to please Peter, so William continues to nod. "But the blue never makes the white look lighter and it never makes the black look darker. Certain absolutes exist. They can't be altered."

Catherine wanders over. She takes Peter's hand in hers, quickly laces together their fingers, and then lets go. "The exhibit is fantastic," she says.

William reaches for his mother's hand and grips it tightly.

Peter shrugs.

"You don't think so?" she asks.

He dips his gaze into the viewfinder, scrolling back through the images.

"I'm sorry more people didn't show up," she continues. "I'd hoped a couple of critics might come to write reviews. I know Kristin tried to get the word out through the consulate, but you know most of the papers are afraid to print anything on this subject."

"Meaning photography?" says Peter.

"Meaning them. Don't be cute."

He tilts the viewfinder toward Catherine. She tugs the camera

closer so that its strap cinches against his neck as she takes a deeper look. On reflex, her two fingers come to her mouth. "This whole thing was a setup for that photo?"

He takes his camera back and nods.

She glances into the exhibit, to where Deniz's guests revel at being the center of attention, for once. "Don't show them," she says.

"Catherine, I need to talk to you about something." Peter rests a hand on William's shoulder. "Give us a minute, buddy."

Catherine and Peter cross the room. They speak quietly by the front door while the party continues in the gallery. William reaches into his pocket and removes the Simon game. He plays for a few minutes, trying to match the elaborate patterns set before him, but he comes nowhere close to his father's high score. While he presses at the flashing panels, he begins to think about what Peter had told him, about contrast, about how one color might change another. He glances up from his game. As he watches Peter standing next to his mother, the two of them speaking close together, she is like the blue. William can see the effect Peter has on her. While Peter looks the same, unchanged by her, like the black or the white.

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# An Interview with Elliot Ackerman

*Elliot Ackerman is the author of four novels—most recently Red Dress in Black and White, set in Istanbul primarily during the 2013 Gezi Park protests—and a memoir.*

*Here's a synopsis of [Red Dress](#):*

“Catherine has been married for many years to Murat, an influential Turkish real estate developer, and they have a young son together, William. But when she decides to leave her marriage and return home to the United States with William and her photographer lover, Murat determines to take a stand. He enlists the help of an American diplomat to prevent his wife and child from leaving the country—but, by inviting this scrutiny into their private lives, Murat becomes only further enmeshed in a web of deception and corruption. As the hidden architecture of these relationships is gradually exposed, we learn the true nature of a cast of struggling artists, wealthy businessmen, expats, spies, a child pulled in different directions by his parents, and, ultimately, a society in crisis. Riveting and unforgettably perceptive, *Red Dress in Black and White* is a novel of personal and political intrigue that casts light into the shadowy corners of a nation on the brink.”

*Wrath-Bearing Tree is featuring an excerpt from Red Dress this month, and were glad that Ackerman agreed to drop in for a chat to accompany it. Here, he talks with WBT co-editor Andria Williams.*

*ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Hi, Elliot. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I just finished Red Dress in Black and White, which the Seattle Times called “cunning, atmospheric” and “splendidly gnarly” (!).*

*I'd love to hear about the writing process for the novel. I think I remember reading that you spent several years on this book. What gave you the idea for a love story set in Istanbul?*



Elliot Ackerman, author of  
'Red Dress in Black and  
White (Knopf, May 2020).

ELLIOT ACKERMAN: I lived in Istanbul for about three years, arriving shortly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests that are mentioned in the novel and staying until 2016. Throughout my time in Istanbul, I could see how those protests—a political event—echoed in the personal lives of so many of my Turkish friends. I've always been interested in the fault line between the political and the personal, so it felt very natural to tell a love story not only set in Istanbul but also set within a society in crisis, which Turkey very much was during the years that I lived there.

AW: *One of the other Wrath-Bearing Tree editors, Michael Carson, and I both noticed some similarities – in tone, in the characters, in the use of a young boy as onlooker – to Graham Greene's The End of the Affair (but without the fatal dose of Catholicism!).*

*Is Greene an influence, or are these similarities coincidental? Who are your biggest literary influences?*

EA: I've always admired Greene's work and I think he and I are interested in many of the same themes, namely the intersection of the personal and the political. *The End of the Affair* is a great book but didn't directly influence the writing of this book, though I certainly see what you and Michael are talking about. William, the boy you mentioned in my novel, does serve as a more passive onlooker. The sections that are told from his point of view are important because they give us a glimpse of the principle characters from outside the many other biased

perspectives that occupy the novel.

As for other literary influences, it's tough to say because they're constantly evolving. There are, of course, those classic writers who you encounter when you're younger and constantly return to (Greene, Hemingway, Malraux, Didion, Balzac, etc.) but I'm always reading and being influenced by what I read, so of course that filters into my work. Recently, I've greatly enjoyed books by Renata Adler (*Speedboat*), Richard Yates (*Young Hearts Crying*), Catherine Lacey (*Pew*), Richard Stern (*Other Men's Daughters*) and Shelby Foote (*Love In A Dry Season*).

AW: *You write quite frequently from what could be considered an "othered" position: with close third-person perspective on characters who are Afghan, in Green on Blue; women, such as Mary in Waiting for Eden and Catherine in Red Dress in Black and White; as a Turkish businessman in Red Dress, and as a dozen or more other people across your work who aren't like yourself.*

*As a fiction writer myself, I'm interested in this part of the craft, and am wondering if you could speak a little about it. Some writers of fiction stick close to their own time frame, social milieu, and so forth, and that can work very well. But I think there's a certain bravery and liveliness to writing from a variety of perspectives.*

*Did this sort of wide-ranging style come naturally to you, or did you have to train yourself? What about the adjacent humor of being frequently referred to as a "journalist" when you so often write from completely different points of view than your own?*

Who is to say that I [even] am writing about the "other"? In *Green on Blue*, I wrote about a young man fighting in an Afghan militia; I spent three years embedded and fighting in the very militias I wrote about. Mary is a woman, sure, but she is a

military spouse; if you know anything about my life, it will probably come as no surprise to you to learn that military spouses who've lost loved ones certainly don't feel like the "other" to me, and in the case of Catherine nor does a woman living in the expatriate scene in Istanbul. Also, if you believe, as I do, that every person contains within them the "feminine" and the "masculine" it is no problem for a man to write from the female perspective or for a woman to write from the male one. As for Murat, he is Turkish, but he is also a businessman who struggles to balance his personal life with his professional life; and, well, let's just say I have plenty of loved ones who have faced similar struggles.

I only bring up these examples because the current fashion in so much of literature—and, sadly, in art—is to force writers into a cul-de-sac of their own experiences as defined by those who probably don't know them and are assuming the parameters of the artist's experience based on some superficial identity-based epistemology. That type of censoriousness makes for bad art and, in my view, bad culture.

AW: *Thanks for those thoughts!*

*Much of 'Red Dress' is set around a dramatic protest which took place in Gezi Park, when citizens rallied against the government's urban development plan. Can you talk about these protests? Were you present for any of them?*

EA: These protests—which occurred principally in May and June of 2013—began as a demonstration against the proposed development of Gezi Park—a greenspace in central Istanbul—into a shopping mall. The government reacted brutally to handful of activists and then the protests spread, becoming the greatest political upheaval in Turkish society in a generation.

I wasn't present for the initial set of protests but was present for the subsequent protests in the fall and into the following year. There are scenes in the novel that describe

the protests and I recreated those based on conversations I'd had with friends who participated, as well as the work I did as a journalist covering subsequent protests in the same parts of the city.

*AW: Do you see reverberations of the Gezi Park protests in the current and enduring protests that have surged in the United States this summer?*

EA: The way the protests have captivated the public consciousness is certainly similar, but American society isn't Turkish society. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests led to the re-writing of the Turkish constitution, a failed military coup, the creation of an executive presidency as opposed to a parliamentarian one where Erdoğan can stay in power indefinitely, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of anti-Erdoğan intellectuals and the state takeover of the majority of media outlets. We're far from there, and I think it's important not to engage in hyperbole, as if the situation in the U.S. (troubling as it may be) is analogous to Turkey.

*AW: In an interview with The Rumpus, you speak very eloquently about your time in the Marine Corps, and how much of it is essentially about "building love" for fellow Marines, but then being willing to tear this down – that the mission supersedes even such a strong love.*

*I see elements of this thinking in both Waiting for Eden and Red Dress. Can you speak more about this idea, in military service, life, and art?*

EA: Art is the act of emotional transference. How often have you gone to a museum and been overwhelmed by a work of art? Or seen a film and cried? When I am writing—if it's going well—I am feeling something as I put the words on the page, and if you read that story and feel some fraction of what I was feeling then I have transferred my emotions to you. That we both feel something when we engage with the subject matter is

an assertion of our shared humanity and that is an inherently optimistic act.

To create this type of art—in stories—you have to learn to love your characters. In the military—to serve, to sacrifice—you have to learn to love the people you are alongside. My time in the Marines taught me how to love people across our many seemingly profound but ultimately superficial divides. That impulse has ultimately found its way into my writing. My hope is that it finds its way to my readers in the stories I tell.

*AW: What are you working on next?*

EA: I've co-authored a novel with my friend Admiral James Stavridis, whose last position was as Supreme Allied Commander Europe; it is a work of speculative fiction (so a bit of a departure for me) which imagines what would happen if the U.S. and China went to war, primarily at sea. It is a story told on a broad canvas with a large cast of characters. It's been a lot of fun to write and will come out in March 2021, with Penguin Press. These calamitous events take place in the year 2034, from which the novel takes its title: *2034*.

*AW: That sounds like lots of fun. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, Elliot.*

[Red Dress in Black and White](#) is now available wherever books are sold.

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## **Dispatch: Istanbul, Spring**

# 2017

I found myself in Istanbul late March on a 17-hour layover; my ultimate destination being a small island off the coast of Venezuela. I figured that while I was in the “Gate of Felicity” I had some obligation not only to explore the city, but to give you a brief snapshot of it as it is in 2017.

I’m not Anthony Bourdain and I don’t work for the Travel Channel. I do not need to tell you “Istanbul is an old city”, you know it is an old city. Nor do I need to tell you that Istanbul used to be Constantinople, as I’m sure you have gathered that as well from any number of documentaries devoted to the place. I need not tell you of my feelings of awe as I gazed at the Hagia Sophia in the following hours, nor do I need to extrapolate on my feelings of warmth— physical and emotional— as I sat in the oldest bathhouse in Turkey (Çimberlitaş Hamam, 1584 C.E.). I also do not need to subject you to my dumbstruck wonder as I stood looking at the giant dome of the Blue Mosque. You can hear about all of these very same places watching Rick Steves or typing “Istanbul” into YouTube’s search bar.

What I do need to tell you is that Istanbul is in trouble— and it finds itself in peril alongside the rest of the country. Nearly three months ago I wrote for Areo Magazine about Erdogan’s “quiet cleansing” of military personnel suspected of disloyalty, and how this purge resulted in the suicide of a Turkish officer on the base where I resided. Since then, I’m afraid to say, the situation in Turkey has not improved.

To be clear, Istanbul still does an excellent job of projecting the facade of modernity. Western visitors— like me— frequent night clubs, hotel bars, and raves to our leisure. We freely enjoy the historical sites. We walk on the cobblestone streets undisturbed, where, it seems, every other business is a coffeeshop that plays smooth Jazz and has wacky furniture.

But behind the curtain and through the smoke, one will find signs of the regime's Islamist authoritarian influence creeping in, "soft" though it may currently be.

Take for example what is happening to Istanbul's red light district in Karaköy. Like the city of Amsterdam, Istanbul used to be known in part for its legalized prostitution. As far back as the Ottoman empire sex workers in the region enjoyed relative freedom, and it's been no secret that the beautiful "window women" of the Beyoğlu section are major drivers of male visitors to the city. But under the Erdogan regime's political blend of nationalism and religious conservatism, state-run brothels are finding that their licenses to operate are not being renewed, and sex workers fear that once they are out on the street they will face violence and harassment.

A second example occurred when my taxi driver was giving me a driving tour through the city. I began to look at the apartments, shops, ancient walls, hospitals, and skyscrapers, and found that what they all had in common were large hanging banners displaying the face of President Erdogan—often in a triumphant pose looking off into the distance. Ubiquitous iconography celebrating "the leader" is a feature common to all burgeoning or well-established dictatorships. In Saddam's Iraq, for example, a mural or statue of the tyrant was practically on every street. The same was the case in Cuba under Fidel Castro. In North Korea it is still this way. The self-appointed gods demand their tributes and public worship, and it appears that a year after the attempted coups Erdogan is walking this particular well-worn path.



Many citizens of Istanbul and Turkey love their leader so perfectly that they spontaneously hang giant banners of him from

their window. It is  
considered a great honor

I ask my driver what Turkish news is available to an English reader, and he points me in the direction of the state-owned newspaper Yeni Safak. I suppose this is one of the few sources of news he can point me to, seeing as how the regime has forcefully closed down all other dissenting publications. As I begin to scroll through the English version of Yeni Safak's website, it doesn't take long for me to find worrisome anti-Western sentiments. One piece floats the accusation that Germany supports terror attacks on Turkey. Another preaches to its readers that Erdogan "thinks only of Turkey's present and future, not of himself ", and that the reality for Turkey without Erdogan as president would be the Qur'an and hijab banned.

Beyond the crackdown on sex worker freedom and freedom of the press, there is also a rise in antisemitism in Turkey. The regime regularly treats its Jewish population with suspicion, accusing them of having more loyalty to Israel than to the country in which they reside. Lest you think that this anti-Jewish fervor lies only with the regime and its citizen loyalists, think again. It has become a part of the culture as well. Famous Turkish pop singer Yildiz Tilbe made headlines three years ago when she tweeted "God bless Hitler" and "If God allows, it will again be Muslims who will bring the end of those Jews." To which the mayor of Turkey's capital Ankara replied "I applaud you." According to a 2015 poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, 71% of Turks harbor antisemitic feelings.



Mein Kampf has an an  
enthusiastic following in  
the former Ottoman Empire.  
It's been a bestseller for

many years

It turned out I didn't need any of this foreknowledge of rising antisemitism in Turkey to get a clue, during my brief stay, that it was happening. When I returned to the airport at the end of my layover (a bit more sober than when I left it), I found that every single media shop was selling Mein Kampf on their front shelves beside recent releases. Since seeing a book by Adolf Hitler sandwiched between new Clive Cussler and Lisa Gardner novels isn't a normal sight (especially when these stores only possessed about 15-20 books in total), I asked one of the managers about why it was there. It turns out the infamous work has been a consistent bestseller in Turkey since its publication in the Turkish language in 2005. That's twelve years as a bestseller.

Again I should stress that this so far is a rather "soft" form of authoritarianism when compared to past dictatorships like Stalin, Saddam, Mao, etc. A tourist may notice Mein Kampf in the airports and see Erdogan's face everywhere they turn, but overall they could go through their entire stay in Istanbul without feeling any "dark clouds overhead". At least for now. My time in the city resembled nothing like, say, Hitchens in Iraq or in Bosnia.

But this is because Turkey is only in the beginning stages of its totalitarian hell ride. The situation will get worse. Much worse. If I were still a gambling man, I would put all my money on it. In mid-March, Erdogan made a statement that "Europeans will not walk on the streets safely" if the attitude of European governments toward the regime does not change; a threat that further isolates his nation from the international community. Human rights activists and journalists should not take their eyes off of this part of the world for a second.