

## Thanks

Dear Readers,

This book is dedicated with great honor to my beloved daughter, Defne. My professional journey has often commanded much of my time and energy, and I am deeply sorry for any moment I may have missed with her. Defne, I offer you my sincerest apologies.

My heartfelt gratitude goes out to my investors, Mehtap Özkan and Paul Doany. Their faith in me, and their support through challenges, have been instrumental in the creation of Grou.ps. In the same vein, I express my profound thanks to all who have collaborated with me and contributed to the growth of Grou.ps, including my teachers—many of whom were French. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge my family: my mother, father, and sister, for their unwavering support.

Lastly, I extend my profound gratitude to Fırat Demirel, the founder of girisimler.net, and Murat Kaya. Their assistance in the writing and publication of this book has been invaluable. As an immigrant entrepreneur, I hope to provide insight and assistance through my shared experiences and challenges, hoping it may be of help to others in similar situations. Should my words cause any offense, please know it was not my intention to harm.

Gratefully,

## SECTION 0

### Hello World

"If I don't burn, you won't burn, if we don't burn, how will darkness turn to light?  
Nazım Hikmet"

One of my most vivid early memories involves a family excursion far from home. We parked our car amidst the trees, captivated by the sight of airplanes taking off, one after another. As we embarked on our journey back home, my father directed our attention to a red Ferrari zipping by in the opposite lane. Our fascination was equal for both the planes and the speeding car.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this place was Yeşilköy. Little did I realize that the woman I would eventually marry, the mother of my child, lived just beyond my sight in one of the nearby houses. Nor could I have anticipated that I would reside in this very neighborhood for two years, frequently use the same airport for my professional pursuits, or that the Ferraris and planes we watched were emblematic of the emerging capitalist landscape in Turkey. Who can say what else I was unaware of in that moment? Life, after all, is brimming with surprises.

My full name is Emre Burak Turhan Mehmet Sokullu, but my American passport, obtained in 2021, carries the simplified version: Barack Sokullu. Despite the lengthy name, I am simply an entrepreneur. This book represents my endeavor to share my entrepreneurial journey, beginning from a meager three thousand dollars and marching ahead solo, with the intent of inspiring others. And so, let's commence this journey.

# SECTION 1

## Introduction to the Valley of Wolves

*And remember, where you have a concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control. History has proven that. All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

*-- Sir John Dalberg-Acton*

### **July 8th 2011, Friday**

In 2007, as Steve Jobs unveiled the first iPhone on stage, I found myself in a humble, mouse-infested room at the Biltmore Hotel in San Francisco. I was there working on Grou.ps, a company I had launched in May of the previous year.

While the world was captivated by the iPhone, we were on the cusp of a significant leap with Grou.ps. In a year when Facebook boasted three hundred million active users, Grou.ps was not far behind with eight million unique monthly visitors and twelve million registered members. The promising potential of Grou.ps drew the attention of bright, forward-thinking engineers from tech giants like Facebook and Yahoo, whose resumes filled my inbox daily. Digital advertising networks vied for our partnership, and we made nearly daily appearances in tech media.

Meanwhile, I was wrestling with our own struggles in the background. On a particular working day in July, I entered my investors' office in Istanbul, filled with anticipation and hope, expecting to hear that our needed bridge financing had been secured. This funding would enable us to continue working on Turkey's first global technology.

However, an odd atmosphere pervaded the meeting room. The absence of several partners from prior meetings was puzzling. The meeting began without the presence of the senior partners, and I couldn't spot the elderly man with the mustache as I glanced around the table.

At that time, we were among Amazon Web Services' biggest customers, forking out 60-70 thousand dollars every month. Add to that our monthly hosting costs of around 15-20 thousand dollars. These considerable expenses were due to Grou.ps' vast user base, heavy traffic, and the quality product we offered. Even Brian Hintz, the sales director for

Amazon Web Services, was taken aback when he visited our modest San Francisco office on a sunny summer day.

Meanwhile, our investors had guaranteed an additional \$1.5 million in a second round of funding. We were eager to write a success story that would make Grou.ps a 'unicorn', and we had found the support we needed from Turkey. We were fortunate in this regard as Golden Horn was Turkey's first venture capital firm investing in technology startups, and we were among its first investments. However, I could feel a palpable tension between the partners before the meeting started, hinting that something was amiss.

As the meeting commenced, I was shocked to learn that instead of discussing the financing Grou.ps needed to continue, I was facing investors who wanted a portion of their investments back to settle their debts. I remained optimistic, but I couldn't help feeling disillusioned.

Back then, Golden Horn was a fledgling VC company in Turkey with a substantial investment budget, though not as large as American VC firms. Given my understanding of the VC world mainly stems from the US, I assumed that a VC firm in Turkey would adopt American practices. I discovered, to my dismay, that the reality was quite different.

I guess the financial crisis of 2007-2008 had an impact on them as well. While it did not significantly affect the Turkish economy, it did unsettle our investors with branches in international markets. Perhaps that was the reason behind their hasty decision to pull out their investments.

As the meeting progressed, I found myself facing accusatory remarks and threats regarding Grou.ps, a venture I had dedicated myself to and that was well on its way to becoming a success story. Instead of discussing billion-dollar deals or exit strategies, I was being treated like a criminal, a far cry from the respect I should have received. As the saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished," and this seemed to be the case here.

Despite the tumultuous meeting, I left the room that day, undeterred and prepared to continue the battle. However, the incident had profoundly shaken my trust, and things would never be the same again. In hindsight, that period was the zenith of Grou.ps' success. I even marked the occasion with a tweet: "Marking Today -- .."  
(<https://twitter.com/EmreSokullu/status/89363397828820992>)

To our followers, it might have seemed like we had signed a merger and acquisition deal with Yahoo. However, the reality behind the scenes was vastly different.

## Section 2

# The Anatomy of an Entrepreneur

1983-2005

### Eleven Miscarriages and Me

When I was born in Istanbul in 1983 as the second child of Galip and Müberra Sokullu, my mother was devastated. She had experienced 11 miscarriages after the birth of my sister in 1977, and she and my father had been trying to have a boy.

Years later, when I asked my mother why she had so many miscarriages, she told me it was because of the toxoplasma disease, which can be inherited from cats and can prevent childbirth. As a child, my mother used to play with cats a lot, and this may have contributed to her contracting the disease. I'm not sure how my sister avoided it. In hindsight, it may be a self-deprecating thought, but the fact that I was born despite 11 miscarriages could also be seen as a sign of my innate combative nature.

Growing up in Turkey in the 1990s, I may have learned that I would have to struggle in life after my difficult birth experience. Even though we all wore the same uniforms and carried similar lunch boxes, I became aware of the gap between the Tofaş and Renaults on the streets and the Ferraris, which I mentioned earlier. The computers (Commodore/Amiga) and game consoles (Gameboy/GameGear) owned by my classmates also revealed a status difference.

As a child, my heart was set on an Amiga 500, but such tech gadgets were not readily available in stores. After persistent pleading, I received a second-hand Amiga 500 in my fourth grade (1993). However, it was flawed and wouldn't let me play my beloved game, Mortal Kombat. Even in Saint Benoit's secondary school, where students hailed from more homogeneous backgrounds, I grappled with understanding the wealth disparities I observed. On the few occasions we gathered, I sensed that my family's older generations were financially more comfortable than us. My dear father, a Turkish classical music artist, inherited from my grandfather, Turhan, who I never met. In the 1980s, as capitalism firmly established itself and widespread poverty prevailed, my father lived as if he had no future offspring, gradually selling his assets. As a result, my sister and I were left with very little. This financial circumstance even impeded my visa application to attend Paris Pantheon Sorbonne University, which I was eligible for. Not being able to attend Sorbonne altered my life plans, yet it steered me towards creating Grou.ps. As the saying goes, every cloud indeed has a silver lining.

## The Sokullu Mehmet Paşa Issue

What we do in life echoes in eternity  
- *anonymous*

Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is a well known Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, so my last name always grabbed people's attention in Turkey where I grew up. Ever since the first class roll call in elementary school, I was the student who stood out for my name, even when no one knew anyone in the class. There wouldn't be many people with three names. On top of that, my last name was Sokullu! Every year, every new class (and I've changed four schools until college) classes always started with this roll call:

457 - Anil, here

478 - Kamil, here

480 - Emre Burak Turhan

Silence ...

Teacher - Son, what is this name?

(laughter from the whole class...)

Me (shyly) - That's it, teacher....

Teacher - How so, why do you have three such names?

I'm in silence...

In the following years, I started to answer these questions jokingly and let the events unfold.

But the questions didn't just stop at my number of names.

Teacher: Well, son, what's your last name? Are you descended from Sokullu Mehmet Pasha?

These conversations would go on for about ten minutes, and by the end, all the teachers and my new classmates would know my name before anyone else.

In truth, I never really thought about whether I was a descendant of Sokullu Mehmet Pasha, but I faced this question a lot. Fortunately, my mother was very interested in this subject. According to her research, we are descendants of Hasan Pasha, one of the four sons of Sokullu Mehmet Pasha.

In the following years, "what does your father do" was added to these questions, and my answer of "singer" started to become irritating. The childhood I lived in was the time of the Turkish pop-stars; Tarkan, Burak Kut, and Yonca Evcimik. I got used to people laughing and saying "come on, honey" when I said my dad's profession, and I just lived with it.

To admit, the Sokullu lineage may have helped me in my career. I wouldn't have thought anyone would approach me considering or caring about my last name. However, in the following years, I was shocked when one of my investors introduced me to a bigtech CTO as "Sokullu's grandson." However, neither I told him that I was Sokullu's grandson, nor did anyone else. So, in the minds I was the Sokullu, and that just proved it.

## My Mother

- *You can topple forty scholars with one proof, you cannot topple an ignorant person with forty proofs.*
- – anonymous

I have many memories from my childhood, but one that stands out is of my mother and her friend Perihan, shaking me and Perihan's son Serkan on their knees and chatting among themselves. Another memorable moment was when my mother told me a fairy tale about a man whose mother loved him very much. In the story, the man marries a woman who is capricious and demands that he cut out his mother's heart and bring it to her, or she will leave him. The man is torn between his mother and the woman he loves, but ultimately decides to choose the woman he loves and cuts out his mother's heart. As he is rushing home to give it to his wife, he trips on a stone and falls. At that moment, the heart speaks and tells him, "Oh my son, don't run too fast, take care of yourself."

I cried when I heard this tale, and I will never forget the mischievous smile on my mother's face at that moment. Later, when I was living in America as an adult, I came across the term "Jewish Mother Syndrome," which I felt described my mother perfectly. In fact, many people in Turkey struggled with similar issues with their mothers.

My mother was harsh and sometimes ruthless, which might have been for the best. She would threaten to kick me out of the house if I didn't study and find a good job in the future. She would also tell me that if I didn't study harder, someone like Yasin, the son of the janitor in my class, would work harder than me and become wealthy, driving past me in a Mercedes and splashing mud on me. These lectures didn't do much for me except to make me believe that everyone who works hard will be successful. Despite her outbursts, I was a docile child and never responded. When I look at children today, like my own daughter Defne, even a fraction of the things my mother said would set them off. It seems that time and customs change in a sinusoidal pattern.

My childhood was not ordinary, and I was not the boy in the "happy family" painting as a "Norman Rockwell painting." I remember the fights between my parents and the police coming to our house to comfort me. When I was 8-10 years old, I wrote a poem that said, "Don't let death scare you / I'm dead, I'm dead / Just like before you were born / I am buried in darkness." It's not hard to see that a child who writes a poem like this at such a young age is not very happy.

Even when I was in university, my mother did not make things any easier for me. She was against my computer work and thought I should just study and then get a job at a big company. I will never forget the time when I was in my second year of university and working on the operating system kernel, and she burst into my room, trying in vain to get me away from the computer. I remember saying, "Mom, I'm working," but she just said, "It's like you're carrying a stone."



At that point, I realized that I couldn't continue living under the same roof as my mother and started looking for ways to get away from her. Despite all the drama, I am still grateful to my mother for wanting what she thought was best for me.

## My Dad

Si la jeunesse savait, si la vieillesse pourrait  
*Henri Estienne*

My father, Galip Sokullu, is a classical Turkish music artist who gained fame in his generation for regularly performing on TV. He is known for being an artistic, naive, and clean person, and I am proud of him for leaving behind a beautiful name and for imparting upon me the motto "If you work hard, everything will happen." However, as I have learned through my experiences documented in this book, this phrase is somewhat naive and not always true.

In contrast to my mother, my father was a quiet and private individual who was more focused on his own life than on family matters. While this caused tension between him and my mother, it made me and my siblings feel safer and more comfortable spending time with him, as his calm and tolerant nature provided a sense of stability.

## My First Professional Experience & First Entrepreneurship Lesson

You have power over your mind -- not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.  
- *Marcus Aurelius*

As a child, I had several entrepreneurial experiences that taught me valuable lessons. One of my earliest experiences was working at a grocery store during the summer while I was in elementary school. My parents apprenticed me to the store, which was located in our apartment building in Üsküdar. My main duties included killing flies and occasionally working at the cashier's desk, where I learned about the importance of freshness and expiration dates. I also enjoyed going on trips with the store owner in his pickup truck and eating kokoreç, a local Turkish food.

Another entrepreneurial experience I had was when I was five years old and my mom enrolled me in a soccer school. Although I wasn't very skilled at soccer, I came up with a plan to score goals by having my teammates assist me in front of the opponent's goalkeeper. However, my teammates were not interested in my plan because they saw no benefit in helping me score instead of scoring themselves.

My experience in the soccer school taught me an important lesson about entrepreneurship: it's not just about gathering the right resources and creating value, but also about satisfying everyone involved and promoting a sense of hope and opportunity. I learned that selfishness doesn't work in entrepreneurship and that it's important to plan and nurture resources, including human resources, in order to achieve success.

I encountered this lesson again in the early days of Grou.ps, a company I founded. It was not easy to build a successful business in Turkey, as there were no prior examples to follow like there were in Silicon Valley and the US.

## My Stashing Instinct

I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.

- Nelson Mandela

A crucial instinct that has profoundly shaped my entrepreneurial and business journey is my "stashing" instinct. This inclination was apparent even from a young age, as I consistently sought to prepare for any unforeseen situations. For instance, I was habitually attentive to the condition of the spare tire in my father's car, ensuring it was always maintained and stored securely. A vivid memory of disappointment still lingers from the time I discovered an old, unusable tire where the spare should have been.

Moreover, I have always had an affinity for saving money. My father gifted me a piggy bank in my childhood, igniting my passion for setting money aside, even expanding to the collection of foreign currencies. It was a hobby akin to my stamp collection. However, my thriftiness didn't signify stinginess. When my family needed financial assistance for my sister's private high school education, I readily offered the funds I had carefully saved, without any second thought. My stashing instinct is rooted more in a desire for security and readiness for any contingencies rather than an obsession with wealth. That might explain why my elementary school bag bore the sticker, "I don't like money, actually, but it quiets my mind" - a quote by Joe Louis.

Exploring the impact of early-life experiences on future professional endeavors can offer valuable insights. For instance, does a "backup" instinct similar to mine pervade among other entrepreneurs? Further research on this could lead to interesting findings.

## Mustafa Mazharbey Street

If friendship is your weakest point, then you are the strongest person in the world  
*<sup>1</sup>- Abraham Lincoln*

The street where I resided from eight until twenty years old harbors some of the most joyful memories of my life. Numerous friendships, forged during that period, continue to thrive even today.

As a child, I was reticent. The most telling testament to my quiet nature comes from the anecdote of our school shuttle driver. Amidst the clinking of ever-present milk jugs in the luggage compartment, on those seemingly interminable journeys, our driver, İpek, would point to me and another student named İpek as paragons of good behavior. Amid the clamor of rowdy children, she'd instruct, 'You should behave like them.' Those words filled me with a sense of pride.

Initially, this quiet demeanor was a source of pride. However, as time passed and I grew older, I began to challenge my quietude, striving to develop my ability to joke around. Indeed, my efforts bore fruit, and I gradually ascended the social ladder in the neighborhood.

A defining moment was when I stood up against a local bully and accidentally broke his finger. He had tried to attack me, spitting on his hands and attempting to scratch me as a cat would. In self-defense, I broke his finger. This incident served as a turning point; the bullies began to fear me, and I became a respected figure among the neighborhood children.

However, not all of my actions from that era are sources of pride. A game I invented during my adolescent years, termed "favorite four," involved daily ranking of the four most favored individuals of the opposite sex. Although I hadn't intended to hurt anyone, I now realize that such a game could have led to feelings of rejection.

In essence, Mustafa Mazharbey Sokak holds a special place in my heart. It was here that I first encountered social hierarchies, intrigue, and drama. It's also where some of my closest friendships and most cherished childhood memories were formed. Even the mere thought of it brings a warm smile to my face.

## The Integration of Entrepreneurship into My Life Framework

*Why join the navy if you can be a pirate?*

*- Steve Jobs*

Growing up, many middle-class families encourage their children to pursue careers as lawyers or doctors. However, the Galip and Müberra Sokullu couple took a different approach with me and allowed me to choose my own path. As a result, I ended up becoming an entrepreneur at an early age, albeit unintentionally.

There were a few factors that contributed to this outcome. First, my parents were liberal and never tried to influence my career choices. My father always told me that "if you work, anything can happen," which I took to heart. Additionally, my parents were preoccupied with their own lives and didn't give us traditional "family referrals" for career options. The only exception was my father's advice to avoid careers that could potentially lead to fame, such as being an artist or athlete.

Second, I had several wealthy role models in my life, including my cousins and my sister's future husband. These role models were from industrialist families, which led me to believe at an early age that manufacturing was a path to wealth. I began to look around and wonder what I could produce, and where there were gaps in the market. My schoolmates at Saint Benoit also reinforced this belief, as many of their parents had become wealthy through manufacturing. For example, my friend Omer's dad sold aluminum parts to premium car brands like Mercedes and BMW, and Cenk's dad supplied leather to textile companies.

Throughout my childhood, I spent a lot of time thinking about branding and design. I used to draw car and electronics brands and models on paper, and design cars and industrial electronic products, like TVs and stereos. For instance, I had a dream of starting a brand called Nakata as a Sony competitor from Turkey. While the Koç Group has taken steps towards this dream with their acquisition of Grundig, brands like Beko and Vestel have not yet reached the level I imagined as a child.

## Growing Up and Discovering Oneself During Turkey's Years of Struggle

*The power you need is present in the noble blood running through your veins.  
- Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*

Growing up in Turkey in the 70s and 80s, I was surrounded by a sense of national frustration with our lack of success in sports, science, and the arts. It was a time when the only thing we had to be proud of was Naim Süleymanoğlu's weightlifting achievements. The media constantly talked about how poorly things were going in the country and newspapers were filled with cartoons of the inflation monster. Even the absence of the Turkish League in my favorite computer game, Sensible World of Soccer, added to my disappointment.

This frustration fueled my desire to make Turkey more visible and successful on the global stage. I couldn't understand why we were falling behind other countries, especially when our French teachers were no different than us. The words of my father, a Turkish classical music artist, that "if you work, you will get anything you want," always stayed with me and motivated me to study hard.

The movie Sinbad of the Seven Seas (1989), starring Lou Ferrigno, had a significant impact on my childhood and future. I was particularly impressed by the 'scientist' on Sinbad's team and knew that I wanted to contribute to the world through technology. I couldn't have predicted that I would eventually meet Lou Ferrigno in person.

Fortunately, Turkey has come a long way since then. We have won the Eurovision, placed third in the World Cup, and won the UEFA championship with Galatasaray. News of championships in basketball and Olympic gold medals has become commonplace.

Throughout my school years, my academic performance was inconsistent due to the challenges of changing schools and adapting to new environments. In an effort to become a successful student, I searched for a unique study method that went beyond rote learning. I asked my classmates, including the hardest working student in my class, Emir, for advice, but no one could give me a clear answer. It wasn't until I reached secondary school that I discovered that summarizing by writing worked best for me, especially while listening to slow or jazz music on the radio (a technique I learned from my sister). This new method helped my grades soar in middle school.

It was fortuitous that I found this new study method at the same time as the eight-year educational system change that introduced a new examination system for transitioning to Anatolian High Schools. As a young nerd, I excelled in this exam and received a good score, which allowed me to attend the top school, Galatasaray High School. This was especially fortunate because we were having financial difficulties with private school payments. I

remember Madame Taniz threatening to take me out of Saint Benoit if my father didn't pay the installment on time. The fear of being removed from school and the stress of the exams left me shaking and praying during class. Thankfully, my busy father was able to pay off the debt that day, avoiding a potentially traumatic situation.

Attending Galatasaray High School was a dream come true for me because it was my favorite school. It was a relief to be able to start there and alleviate some of the financial burden on my family. However, adjusting to the new school was not easy. I struggled to make friends with the Galatasaray students, who were known for their arrogance, and often found myself locking myself in the toilet during breaks to avoid socializing.

## My College Years

*"Science without religion is materialism. Religion without science is blind faith." - Bahauallah*

After completing high school, I had three options for continuing my education. The first was to take the university entrance exams and aim for a good school. I took the ÖSS (Student Selection Examination) in 2001 and scored fairly well, ending up in the top 500. This was enough to be accepted into a number of universities.

My second option was to take a direct entrance exam from high school to university. I took this exam and was accepted into the International Relations department.

My third option was to apply to a university in France and study abroad. I was accepted into the economics department at Paris Pantheon Sorbonne after graduating from Galatasaray High School. I was considering both economics and genetic engineering as my major, as the economy in Turkey was in crisis at the time and genetic engineering was a popular field. However, I ultimately decided to apply for economics as I thought it would be easier for me to study in a French department.

Out of these options, my heart was set on studying at the Sorbonne. However, on the day I went to apply for a visa to France, September 11th, 2001 occurred and the Twin Towers were attacked by planes. The consulate was in chaos and my father's bank accounts did not impress the French authorities, leading to my visa being denied.

I always knew that I didn't belong at Boğaziçi University or in the chemistry department. The buildings didn't hold the same appeal as those at Galatasaray High School, and the crowded lecture halls felt soulless. To make matters worse, I hated chemistry. Instead of conducting experiments and observing the results, I would taste dangerous substances just for the sake of

finishing it up early and getting back to my programming routine, much to the concern of my friends. I didn't even care about the risk of poisoning.

Not being able to attend the Sorbonne in Paris because of a visa issue only added to my disappointment with Boğaziçi. The university, which was the dream of many students in Turkey, became a place where I felt I had to learn programming and pursue a career in informatics as quickly as possible.

I took as many computer engineering courses as I could as a chemistry student and taught myself as much as I could. When I had to attend classes that I didn't think would be useful, I would open my C programming book and study instead of listening to the teacher. I spent most of my time as a student in the bookstore and school library on the North Campus, reading all the computer books I could find.

Even when I was driving to and from school, I would have a book on my lap in my old Skoda Felicia (which my father couldn't sell officially because it was licensed to a bankrupt company) and continue reading whenever we were stuck in traffic (which was a common occurrence in Istanbul).

These were also the years when I was struggling financially. Turkey had just recovered from the 2001 economic crisis, and those working in the entertainment industry like my father were still feeling the effects. The entertainment industry was one of the first sectors where people started cutting back on spending, and my family was barely able to afford gas for the car. These financial difficulties only added to my sense of urgency to do something with my life. I would stay up all night working on the computer, and my classmates thought I was on drugs because I always looked tired and disheveled in class. But the reality was that I was just working hard to achieve my goals.

As soon as I graduated from college, I knew I needed to start a business and find a way to support myself. When I saw articles in local newspapers with headlines like "Bogazici (the Harvard of Turkey) graduates can't find jobs," I realized I needed to take action. My goal was to create employment and establish Turkey's Microsoft as soon as possible.

To get started, I needed a reliable computer that could handle my business needs. Fortunately, my mom gifted me a new computer as a college graduation present, on the condition that I use it to make money by designing a website. I took her up on the offer and headed to the Yazıcıoğlu Business Center in Kadıköy one evening to purchase a relatively high-performance desktop from a big shop there. This affordable yet powerful computer would serve me well only for the next couple of years, as Moore's Law was still in full effect. With this new computer, I began working on the following tasks:

#### **1) wouv.com:**

My first project was inspired by a British web service called 'bravenet.com,' which I liked but was not financially successful. Unfortunately, this project did not come to fruition due to my perfectionism. However, it was a valuable learning experience for me in terms of programming.

This product would have been the Turkish version of bravenet.com, a complete “web 1.0” service for web page developers. It allowed users to easily add classic features like guestbooks, e-mailing, and hit counters (the most basic form of analytics, which shows how many people visit a page) to their web pages using just a few lines of HTML code.

## **2) adak.com:**

I once attempted to create a website for a Muslim tradition of sacrificing an animal for God. After spending a month developing the site and its content, I showed it to my cousin Tolga, who is a businessman and investor. He was very interested, but when I thought about the practical aspects of the project, I realized I didn't have the resources to handle the animals involved and had to abandon the idea. Despite this, my cousin Tolga took notice of my abilities and later introduced me to a project creating a website for the district regional directorate of a political party and a commercial institution. This opportunity allowed me to make a living while I was still a university student. I learned that sometimes the work you do can pay off in unexpected ways, as was the case with my later projects Grou.ps and adak.com.

**3) Dilmaca:** My work with the highest academic quality. Since this is an important work, I will elaborate on it in the following sections.

**4) Turkix:** This was the most successful one of my early attempts. I will explain it in detail in the next sections.

In the projects I mentioned earlier, I did not mention monetization because I was not sure how to approach it at the time. While I was learning about technical aspects of building a business, two surprise guests visited our school as part of a Boğaziçi University Management Club event: Sedat Kapanoğlu, the founder of Ekşisözlük, and Ersan Özer, the founder of itiraf.com. When I eagerly attended the meeting hoping to learn about monetization, I thought they would discuss how they gained popularity and made money with their internet initiatives in Turkey. However, both Sedat and Ersan focused on the content of their sites and the confessions and funny user-generated material they featured, rather than the financial side of their businesses. I mustered up the courage to ask, "How do you make money from your internet business in Turkey?" The room fell silent and both Sedat and Ersan seemed stunned, while the students looked at me with surprise. I realized that they had not given much thought to monetization at the time, or perhaps they did not have any impressive numbers to share. Sedat responded with a "nonanswer," glossing over the core of my question. This moment gave me insight into the state of consumer internet in Turkey at the time (2002-2003).



## Dilmaca

*A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty*  
- Winston Churchill

While considering potential projects during a period of time, I came up with the idea of translating the Babelfish function of Alta Vista, a major search engine of the pre-Google era, into Turkish. Babelfish was a machine translation software that allowed users to translate texts and websites in any language, but there was no support for translation into Turkish. I was already using Babelfish to translate English texts and websites that I didn't fully understand into French, as my French was stronger than my English at the time. I saw the opportunity to translate English words into Turkish as a valuable project that could potentially earn money and benefit the seventy million people in Turkey who spoke Turkish. Babelfish eventually became a part of Yahoo, and the idea of machine translation has been further developed and globalized by companies like Google, Microsoft, and Apple.

Motivated by this idea, I became obsessed with entrepreneurship at a time when many of my peers were more focused on relationships or leisure. It wasn't easy, as machine translation was primarily an academic subject and there was no high-quality commercial work available for English to Turkish translation at the time. I worked tirelessly for a year, often mixing up my nights and days and neglecting my appearance. The only break I remember taking during that time was occasionally stepping out onto the balcony near sunrise to rest my eyes and look at Ozgurluk Park in front of our house. It's hard to believe that I was putting so much effort into such a project at a time when young entrepreneurship (and entrepreneurship in general) was not a widely discussed topic in Turkey.

After a year of hard work, I was able to produce a mechanically analyzed translation that yielded good results. I used a number of shortcuts (also known as "hacks") during the process, such as breaking an existing dictionary program to obtain a digital English-Turkish dictionary and then modifying it to work with my own application. The software is currently available as open source at <https://github.com/esokullu/dilmaca>.

While I was working hard on the Dilmaca project, I also met Müge, who would become my first long-term girlfriend at university. Müge was a kind and gentle person with a baby-faced appearance. For her, I ended another relationship that had just started (although I don't have any particularly proud memories of that decision when I look back on it with maturity). One day, I mustered up the courage to approach Müge, who had caught my attention when I parked my car at school. I told her about the Dilmaca project I was working on in the second or third month

of our relationship (other people I had told about Dilmaca included Tunga Güngör, one of the esteemed professors of the Computer Engineering Department and a mentor to me, and Taner Soner Şahin, a close friend). Müge was studying psychology and I had been neglecting her because I was so focused on the project. When Müge was offered the opportunity to participate in a university exchange program in Waco, USA, she faced a typical "family or work" dilemma. She chose to go to Waco, while I, along with some of her friends, urged her to choose family. I asked her to help me with the project while she was there, promising that she could assist with sorting out Turkish words for Dilmaca, just as her mother had helped pack perfumes in her father's perfume business (this story also inspired me). However, Müge did not follow through on this promise and offer the remote support I had hoped for. This disappointment not only ended our relationship, but also made me realize that she was not the person I wanted to marry. The sadness from this experience slowed the progress of the Dilmaca project significantly. While I normally would have hired freelancers to help with this part of the project, as a student I didn't have the budget to do so. However, the Dilmaca project did not end there. It also played a role in my next project, Turkix, and helped me become familiar with the Java programming language and subjects such as object-oriented programming.

## Turkix

*Truth happens  
- Red Hat*

Turkix was my first project that gained significant attention and made my name known in the tech community in Turkey in the early 2000s.

Turkix was a Linux distribution. For those unfamiliar, Linux is an operating system similar to Microsoft Windows or Mac OS X, but it is open source and free, unlike the capitalist Windows. Most of the applications you use today are built on top of this operating system. The reason for this is that a license fee is paid for each computer or server using Windows, while no license fee is required for open source, Linux-based solutions. It was this business model that kept Bill Gates at the top of the Forbes list for decades.

My introduction to Linux and the launch of Turkix would completely change my life, and like any life-changing story, this one was based on coincidence.

When I was starting out as a programmer, I was looking for a programming language like many young programmers. At the time, there were two popular options: PHP (open source and free) or ASP (part of the Microsoft empire).

When I went to a bookstore in Akmar Passage in Kadıköy, I intended to choose the easier option and buy an ASP book. However, there was no ASP book left at the store so I bought the

PHP book instead, and left the store with it, leaving the Microsoft empire behind and embarking on a journey into the open source field that would be more productive in the coming years. It is interesting how this big choice was so accidental.

At the beginning of this journey, I implemented my wouv, adak.com, and Dilmaca projects using PHP and Java on Windows. However, as I worked on Dilmaca, I realized that the performance needs of the application would be very high and it would not be able to reach millions of users on Windows. While researching the operating system that could handle a Java application with the highest performance, I came across FreeBSD, Linux, and Solaris. It was a tough process for me to pick one but Linux seemed like the best choice, so I decided to go with it.

Learning Linux was undeniably challenging. With limited resources, I often turned to the internet for information, but Linux proved to be a formidable subject and progress was elusive. Unable to install Linux on my computer using the online information, I ventured out on a frigid winter day, braving heavy snowfall to purchase the only Linux book available at D&R on Bağdat Street.

Though the book was somewhat dated, trailing behind the Linux technologies available at the time (for instance, the common Linux kernel version was 2.6, whereas the book pertained to 2.2), it was an invaluable aid. That day, despite the two-hour trek in the snow, I finally installed Linux on my computer. It was a defining moment in 2003.

While Turkix was not as scientifically groundbreaking as my Dilmaca project, it resonated more with the public. Turkix, after all, was a localized version of existing Linux distributions, whereas Dilmaca was an innovative technology that translated the entire internet into Turkish. Yet, Turkix garnered significant attention.

Entering the world of Linux, my initial challenge was to choose the right distribution for my computer, given that Linux wasn't a single-branded system like Windows. As I navigated this challenge, I came across a Greek operating system called Byzantix on DistroWatch, a reputable source for Linux distributions. This sparked a patriotic vein in me. 'Why isn't there a "Turkix" on this list?' I wondered.

After some research, I discovered that I could create my own Linux distribution with a straightforward program. In a single day, I translated the user-friendly Linux distribution, Mandrake, into Turkish and shared the image file of the resulting operating system on several online forums. This week-long project, code-named "Bismillah," soon made headlines on OverMesai, a popular tech site at the time. Consequently, I found myself in a whirlwind of media attention, from newspaper and TV interviews to countless collaboration proposals from small businesses and major conglomerates.

These developments were gratifying, casting a hopeful light on the future. I noticed an emerging national potential within Turkey, and I was at the center of it. Driven by the momentum, I decided to devote more time to Turkix.

My goal for Turkix 3.0 was to create an operating system reminiscent of Windows. This required a radical overhaul of the Linux graphical interface. Being a hacker, I downloaded the source code of the Linux desktop environment software, KDE, and embarked on a mission. It was a mammoth task, given the size of the source code and the internet speed of the time. However, after months of effort, I succeeded in simplifying the KDE source code, making the Linux "Start" button rectangular like Windows ME and XP, and modeling the Linux Menu structure after Windows'. Not only did I release Turkix 3.0 with these updates, but I also packaged and released the new KDE version I created, SimpleKDE, for use in other Linux distributions such as Mandrake and Red Hat.

This global perspective amplified my success. Turkix 3.0 was not only distributed via CD with computer magazines in Turkey, but it also garnered attention in the US. Notable sites like Slashdot featured SimpleKDE, and I was interviewed by The Modding Den. Job offers from Intel and KDE ensued, but as a student, I wasn't able to accept. I was fortunate enough to meet Ali Vargonen, the owner of Vargonen Hosting, who offered to host Turkix's servers free of charge, relieving a significant financial burden.

This international success was a source of pride. It was gratifying to see daily news about Turkix and to hear Turkey's name positively mentioned in tech circles. Turkix surpassed Byzantix by a significant margin on DistroWatch's list of popular Linux distributions. Soon, I expanded Turkix 3.0 to other languages with the next version, Turkix 10.0, code-named "Bonjour" (French for 'Good Morning'), and introduced it to a global audience.

Additionally, these developments resulted in me being appointed as Turkey's representative for the Apache Software Foundation, a decentralized community of open-source developers supported by companies like Apple, IBM, Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Tencent, and Huawei. With a small volunteer team, we translated Apache's English manuals into Turkish, following the main supported languages such as French, German, and Japanese.

Remarkably, all these achievements unfolded within six months of installing Linux on my computer. Everything was moving at an astonishing pace.

## Armador A.Ş.

*I've noticed three kinds of people in this world: those who make things happen, those who watch what happens, and those who wonder what happened*

- Socrates

Under increasing pressure from my mother to develop Turkix, a project I'd funded with my pocket money, into a viable business model, I found myself in a difficult situation. Despite my struggle with school and the lack of the promised income from the computer, my efforts were undermined at home. Newspaper interviews and television appearances meant nothing to my parents unless I brought home money, casting me as an aimless drifter in our Selamiçeşme home.

My father, living separately in his own house, was virtually absent. Meanwhile, I learned that TÜBİTAK in Turkey was leading the development of a similar Turkish operating system, Pardus. Despite being launched in 2004, a year after the "local and national" fervor had begun but hadn't yet become widespread, Pardus was a slow-growing but promising project.

Competing single-handedly against a state-backed project with at least fifteen engineers was a thrill. However, the magnitude of my competition didn't hit me until I encountered a massive Pardus booth at an open-source event at Bilgi University. There, I realized that I was metaphorically tilting at windmills, attempting to rival a far better funded adversary with nearly limitless resources.

In the wake of the event, I reached out to the project leader, Mr. Erkan, suggesting a collaboration that would integrate my machine translation project, Dilmaca, into Pardus and subsequently close down Turkix. I was met with silence. Despite being ignored by Erkan, I found some allies in the team, notably Barış (Metin).

Amid the turmoil, a company named Armador A.Ş. approached me through Görkem Çetin, a prominent figure in Turkey's open-source scene. They offered to incorporate Turkix into their infrastructure, promising a modest salary that was an exciting proposition for a college student like me. I promptly accepted.

My tenure at Armador started positively. I enjoyed working in my first real IT company. We operated out of a small flat in Kadıköy, where four or five of us worked constantly, with a few others visiting periodically. The relationships I forged there were invaluable, and I learned a great deal. My superiors were humble, and Görkem's presence was inspiring. Having clients like Tüpraş, providing Turkix as the OS for certain Datron laptop models, and executing projects for government offices filled me with pride. Nevertheless, I felt a need to own a stake in the company.

The topic of shares frequently arose in discussions with my superiors. When I consulted my cousin Tolga, he advised me to prioritize a salary increase over a share in the company. While many failed to understand my insistence on stock ownership, I was stubborn, perhaps due to my inherent instinct for security.

Eventually, my departure from the company became inevitable. The final straw came when Turkix was rebranded as "Armador Turkix" on a TV program, without my knowledge or consent.

Despite appearing unkempt on the program, the experience could have been a point of pride for a 22-year-old, but I was deeply attached to the Turkix brand and unwilling to be a part of Armador without owning a stake. This incident was a turning point, leading me to definitively decide to leave the company.



## Hello U.S.A

*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail  
- Ralph Waldo Emerson*

It was neither easy nor quick to leave Armador, especially considering that I was still a chemistry student at Boğaziçi University. Needless to say, my academics were suffering. My school, with which I always had a bit of a rocky relationship, would end up playing a significant role in my journey to America. Though my girlfriend Müge's unapproved departure to the US sparked my curiosity about the country, it was my university friend, Ozan, who truly inspired me to make the decision to go.

My close friend Taner, a few other friends, and I used to hang out together, studying in our downtime. One such gathering took place at Ozan's family villa in Sarıyer. His parents hadn't yet moved in as construction had just finished. That day, Ozan informed us that he would be going to the US for an internship, suggesting it was easy to secure one by corresponding with the right professors. This revelation was a turning point for me.

My mind was still preoccupied with Dilmaca, my machine translation application. I was facing a statistical problem, one I believed could be solved with a more comprehensive dictionary and the application of statistical algorithms (via artificial neural networks). This would lead to a translation success rate above 90 percent. I reached out to professors at the Wordnet project, a renowned semantic dictionary I found useful for this. This project, an academic endeavor at Princeton University aimed at ontologically mapping the English language, had been running for almost three decades. I received a positive response and was invited to spend a summer at Princeton. I felt like a champion.

However, I needed to get permission from Armador to participate in this program as I was a salaried employee and not a stakeholder. Fortunately, they didn't present many obstacles. Perhaps they were seeking a way to let go of my rebellious nature.

Promptly, I arranged my accommodation and flight ticket and embarked on my journey to Princeton. My plan was to complete a one-and-a-half-month internship and return, though I knew this could extend with a side trip to Silicon Valley.

I boarded the plane with a thousand dollars in my pocket, having only ever flown once before to Cyprus with my mother. Inexperienced with connecting or international flights, I ventured into unknown territory. Thankfully, my professor at Princeton had offered to pick me up, but out of a mix of shyness and a misguided sense of self-reliance, I politely declined. Little did I know, I was in for a nightmarish journey filled with surprises.

The transfer in Germany was fairly smooth. Luckily, a colleague from Bosphorus was seated next to me on the plane and guided me through my first-ever transfer. On the flight to America, I was seated next to a German girl who shared her travel plans with me. My excitement was palpable, especially when she held my hand during the turbulence. I flew to America countless times after that, but never experienced such turbulence again. Perhaps it was a case of beginner's luck.

The real culture shock occurred when I landed in America. I was taken aback by the large cars, towering people, and the racial diversity. I was alarmed when a man reacted rudely to my approach. To add to the chaos, my luggage was lost and I had to rely on my professor's husband's old clothes for a week. Apparently, my suitcase was held up because of the hookahs I brought as gifts for my professors. In the end, I managed to navigate the rest of the way with the help of a kind stranger on the Amtrak train.

When I finally arrived in Princeton, it was already dark. After a series of challenges involving a phone call and a taxi ride, I finally reached my destination: a massive villa. The next day I learned that I would be alone in this villa for the next month. I was welcomed by a tall young man, my soon-to-be roommate. Exhausted, I immediately fell asleep after stepping into my room.

## Princeton Diaries

Mercenaries work for money. Missionaries build for others. Artists create for themselves.  
- *Naval Ravikant*

As the year 2005 dawned, I found myself at Princeton. Awoken by the unfamiliar English conversations of girls in the neighboring house, I soon realized my own alien status in this setting. Turkish language was conspicuously absent here, a first for me.

Peter, a tall American boy who had greeted me on my arrival, held a Ph.D. in philosophy. He informed me that he would be moving out, leaving the villa all to myself. After a helpful trip to Walmart, he vanished, and the house became my own. The prospect excited me.

I began making friends at the Princeton campus, asking everyone about their origin. I met Loan Le from Vietnam and a Turkish girl, Çiğdem, from METU. Both were on short internships like me, and introduced me to their social circles. One day, Loan and her sister invited me on a canoeing trip to New York—an experience both fun and educational.

I hosted long, fireside conversations at my villa with these new acquaintances. A Turkish philosophy student, whose name now escapes me, had a significant impact on my thoughts regarding religious and philosophical matters. He noted similarities between my thought process and Spinoza's. While researching Spinoza, I stumbled upon a quote by Albert Einstein that resonated with me deeply:

“I do not believe in a God preoccupied with the destiny or actions of mankind, but in the God of Spinoza who reveals himself in the natural harmony of all that exists.” - Albert Einstein

That summer at Princeton was highly productive. I created a PHP extension of Wordnet, and crossed paths almost daily with the legendary John Nash. To study at an institution attended by such geniuses as Nash and Einstein was a source of immense pride. Additionally, the enlightening discussions I had with the people I met there greatly broadened my perspective.

Princeton was a place of immense learning and self-discovery for me, where I experienced the warmth of a community that would greet each other and compliment their clothes. This was



a stark contrast to what I was accustomed to in Turkey, and the desire to make this country my permanent home started to take root.

At the end of the internship, I felt a sense of liberation. Having made the journey so far, I decided to explore Silicon Valley as well. This led me to San Francisco via a connecting flight from Seattle. Unable to rent a car due to my age and lack of a credit card, I hired a Mexican taxi driver for fifty dollars.

The hotel I chose, despite its convenient location near Stanford University, housed mostly homeless people. This detail dawned upon me when I spotted my opposite neighbor begging on the streets. Despite the discomfort, I couldn't afford to switch places.

I found solace in the routine of starting my days early, working till noon over a cup of coffee at Starbucks, and spending evenings at the library. Most Americans I met were incredibly warm and friendly.

Caroline, a Taiwanese-born electronics engineer, broke my routine by offering to show me around in her old Toyota. Visiting campuses of Google, Lockheed Martin, and Yahoo was an eye-opening experience.

I was resolved to find or establish work in America. Despite constant rejections from venture capitalist firms in Palo Alto, I persevered. Reading a Forbes article on the wealthiest people in America, I discovered Turks—Magdalena Green and Barış Karadoğan—were in the VC industry too. Reaching out to them, only Barış replied, and this marked my initiation into networking.

As my stay neared its end, my financial situation worsened due to the non-payment of my final salary by my former company. I had to resort to asking my mother for money. However, I returned to Istanbul with an expanded perspective, albeit broke. My first order of business would be resolving the ongoing issues with Armador.

## Section 3

# GROU.PS Baby Steps

## 2005-2008

### Temporarily Back to Istanbul

*Starting a company is like throwing yourself off a cliff and assembling a plane on the way down*  
- Reid Hoffman

I embarked on a multi-leg journey from the USA back to Turkey. First, I traveled from San Francisco to New York with two layovers, but unfortunately, I missed my Alitalia flight from New York to Istanbul due to the delay. However, the Alitalia ground crew showed great compassion for this stranded university student, graciously rearranging my flight for the following day at no extra charge. Consequently, I spent the night at the airport, waiting for my flight. The subsequent day, I took a flight to Rome and from there, finally to Istanbul on Alitalia. During the journey to Rome, I fell into such a deep sleep that I woke up only upon reaching Rome, attracting curious glances from fellow passengers.

Upon my return to Istanbul, the first thing I did was visit Armador's office in Kadıköy to claim my unpaid wages for the hard work I had done - a situation that still provokes frustration in me today. Refusing to admit defeat, I boldly threatened the office staff with arson if they didn't pay my wages. They promptly did so. Our relationship soured after they reduced my role and salary to part-time, and I resigned soon after. I was now ready to embark on new adventures where I could create global projects, severing my ties with Turkey.

I had already lost hope in Turkix. Once I returned from America, I focused on two ideas that emerged from my trip. The first was app.com, a platform similar to today's Apple App Store for Windows. This open-source software system would distribute revenue from monthly subscriptions to software creators based on usage rates. However, anticipating substantial technical challenges during the design phase, I abandoned the idea.

The second concept was "Grou.ps". This entirely digital web 2.0 project had a fascinating twist – the .ps suffix signified Palestine's country code. This aspect resonated with me deeply as it allowed me to promote Palestine through technology, not conflict. Grou.ps aimed to combine

popular web 2.0 services and blogs, creating a social platform for online groups. It was envisioned to be a more sophisticated alternative to the email groups my high school friends and I were using. Grou.ps could provide a comprehensive, interactive experience, displaying photos and even showing who was doing what and where, similar to the Map feature on Snapchat.

This need extended beyond my high school group to include open source projects and internet forums I was involved in. The email groups we used were antiquated, lacking a user-friendly web interface. I barely knew the faces of many of these individuals, some of whom had saved me countless hours with their invaluable assistance.

I believed Grou.ps to be a visionary concept as it could provide a digital representation of the world's social relationships. The idea of knowing who was friends with whom, who influenced whom – all this information could be at our fingertips. It could potentially be as big an opportunity as Google.

Motivated by this vision, I dedicated myself to developing Grou.ps. My first task was to secure the domain name, which proved to be quite a challenge. Unlike a .com domain, purchasing a .ps domain was more complex, involving multiple phone calls to the Palestinian internet authority PNINA and negotiating with Arabic-speaking officials. Despite the steep price, I invested in the grou.ps domain name for three to five years because I had absolute faith in the project. I spent countless sleepless nights and long days building the website, finally launching it in three months.

On the first day of launch, the project was featured on Digg as the 'project of the day', attracting thousands of visitors. The traffic was so high that I had to rush to my sponsor Ali Vargonen's data center to keep the site alive. After a night of hard work, we had a conversation about my plans for Grou.ps at Ali's upscale house in Levent.

Good news kept pouring in; I had to purchase additional storage to handle the surge in email traffic. I received numerous interesting requests and propositions, including an email from the renowned investment firm Union Square, expressing interest in Grou.ps. Another significant contact was from Y Combinator. However, my location in Turkey seemed to be a roadblock.

These experiences underscored the necessity of moving the business to America. Pondering over the next steps, I reached out to Barış Karadoğan, my only Turkish contact in the Valley. He connected me with Cem Sertoğlu, a potential investor who would eventually play a crucial role in Grou.ps's journey.

## My First Meeting with Cem

Never love anyone who treats you like you're ordinary  
- *Oscar Wilde*

I made my way to Cem's office located in a villa with a Bosphorus view in Levent. The office had a homely feel to it, which was rather unique. I was greeted by neither an officer nor an assistant. It was just Cem and a friend of his present for our meeting.

Cem had a smart appearance and a comforting presence. He integrated a lot of English words into his sentences, which could be challenging to comprehend and might even be off-putting to some. I had no idea then that after spending fifteen years in America, I'd also become half Turkish and half American like him and that my speech would also involuntarily change.

From the get-go, it was evident that Cem was intrigued by my project. He was enthusiastic, believing, and understanding. I related to him quite easily since Cem was an entrepreneur himself. At the brink of the DotCom bubble burst, he'd founded a company called Select Minds in New York, initiating a social network that united the retired and current employees of his client companies. This experience with social networking and his work on Mondus at the time allowed him to comprehend what I was talking about (Grou.ps) without being bewildered. Cem had tasted success; he and his American partner had secured VC investments, but for some reason, he chose to exit the company by selling his shares as the company started to grow. I never inquired as to why.

Cem's new aspiration was to establish a novel VC structure in Turkey, as Barış had mentioned in one of his emails. Therefore, Grou.ps seemed like a good fit for him. However, with a more grounded mindset (and possibly due to his experience with Select Minds), he would wisely invest in initiatives such as YemekSepeti and gitgitgidiyor, but would only serve as a mentor/consultant for Grou.ps. During our meeting, he shared his current entrepreneurial venture which was a combination of LinkedIn and Facebook. Contrary to his expectations, this latest endeavor, named Mondus, wouldn't survive long and would wind up in a few years, following the significant proliferation of Facebook in Turkey (and the world).

Thus, this meeting wasn't our last interaction with Cem. Although he continued to significantly impact my life post this meeting, he never became an investor.

## In Between Zombies

*A Ship is always safe at the shore - but that is NOT what it is built for.  
- Albert Einstein*

Back then, I decided to revisit America. However, there was a hitch; my first visa, which was a one-year student class, had expired.

When I approached the US consulate for visa renewal, I couldn't hide my excitement and my genuine plan (i.e., my aspiration to live in the USA). Consequently, it didn't take long for my application to be rejected. I didn't appear to have strong ties to Turkey given that I had neither a regular job nor a bank account.

At that juncture, Cem did me the greatest favor anyone could. He provided me a letter of recommendation when I approached him for assistance. Armed with that letter, I made another visit to the US consulate. This time, they were ready to greenlight my application. In August 2006, I obtained my first 10-year US visa.

It was my second trip to the USA, and my budget remained meager. I had three thousand dollars saved from web designing jobs and my Armador salary.

Due to my budget constraints, I found accommodation at an affordable hostel named the San Francisco Globe Hostel. My uncle, who is also a hotel manager, suggested I find a better place after seeing the photos. I, however, didn't heed his advice. My funds were barely sufficient, and I didn't want to rely on anyone. Thus, I chose that hostel, which cost fifteen dollars a day, where I'd share a room with six others.

When departure time arrived, I took another connecting Lufthansa flight, which I had become familiar with, and headed for San Francisco. I planned to reach the hostel easily by subway upon landing. Unlike my previous experience in Princeton, I had done thorough research and planning this time.

As planned, I alighted from the subway late at night at the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Market St. in SF. From there, I easily made my way to the city center. However, what I encountered after midnight in the SF city center was akin to a zombie movie scene. The city was pitch dark, devoid of people except for homeless ones who approached me for money. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that San Francisco, one of the world's wealthiest cities, housed such a vast homeless population. I was terrified! I quickly walked towards the hostel. My hostel was located at the intersection of Folsom and Seventh Street, in a lane called Hallam. It

took me fifteen minutes to reach the hostel, dragging my luggage. The room was dark when I entered, and I didn't switch on the light as someone might have been asleep. Pondering over the number of people in the room, I succumbed to fatigue and fell asleep.

When I woke up the following morning, I found only one other person in the room, a man in his early fifties who seemed Turkish. I was lucky that the room wasn't crowded! We started chatting. The man, whom I'd thought was Turkish, was Iranian. After the Shah's Revolution, he'd moved to America with a hefty inheritance, which he lost first to gambling and then to his American ex-wife. He was currently working as a taxi driver.

My astonishment didn't end there. As I stepped out of the hostel, I experienced a significant culture shock. A group of people carrying rainbow flags were parading in the streets, wearing leather items that barely covered their bodies. I had arrived on the day of the Folsom Street Fair, an event where homosexuality, fetishes like leather and BDSM are celebrated, and public nudity is considered normal. Of course, not every day would start with such a spectacle, but this unexpected culture shock was a prelude to the emotional rollercoaster that awaited me in the forthcoming months and years.

## Globe Hostel

*Stay foolish, stay hungry*  
Steve Jobs

This hostel warrants a unique discussion, as it was a significant element in my American sojourn. My primary goal was to secure an investor quickly and establish permanent residency in America. I understood the enormity of the task, but was determined to try nonetheless.

After a disappointing first night at Globe Hostel, I started spending most of my time in the lobby. Instead of continuously exploring the city, I stayed back to complete the Grou.ps codes I started in Turkey, make necessary calls from the quiet hostel rooftop, and contribute to increasing number of blogs. I would occasionally step out to locate nearby laundromats and grocery stores. My only immersion in city life was the daily walks on the renowned Market Street.

Despite my primary focus being work, the unique individuals at the hostel sparked my interest. There were people I'd never encountered before: a Chinese receptionist, a Russian mafia duo, a Polish woman with a distinct style, a thin, and intimidating American youngster, an elderly Jewish cleaning lady, a gaunt older man, and a grumpy Indian-American middle-aged owner. The latter inadvertently changed my life when he offered me a free stay in exchange for manning the reception desk, due to a staffing shortage. This allowed me to continue my search for investors in the United States without worrying about accommodation expenses.

I have countless tales from the Globe Hostel. Some of my acquaintances there provided life lessons, although I may not have grasped their significance immediately.

During the owner's absence, the Soviet duo turned the hostel into a hub for the drug trade. The owner trusted one of them, Ilya, enough to leave the hostel under his care. Although Ilya suggested that I could earn a significant amount by liaising with the drug lords frequenting the hostel, I intentionally chose not to join their group.

Among the hostel dwellers, Li, the Chinese man, turned out to be an intriguing character. A loner without any notable vices, Li worked in the hostel lobby. He opened my eyes to the fallacy of the American dream and strongly believed that China would rise as the next superpower.

Another remarkable character was Josh, the elderly Jewish cleaner. During our discussions about entrepreneurship, he mentioned his acquaintance with Netscape founder Marc Andreessen. If he had known that I would later cross paths with Andreessen multiple times, our conversations might have been different.

The most insightful lesson from Josh was about the concept of OPM - Other People's Money. He firmly believed that one should start a business with other people's money to maintain an unbiased perspective and not become blinded by their own investment.

Lastly, there was Jose from Brazil, a new arrival to the hostel who claimed to be an ex-manager at Renault. His unique personality, along with tales of his model wife and libertine lifestyle, were memorable.

These experiences at the hostel, as I worked on the codes for Grou.ps, were precursors to my meetings with notable figures like Paul Graham, Aydın Şenkut, and many Silicon Valley investors. My primary objective was to secure the investment that would propel Grou.ps forward.

## Paul Graham and Seed Stage Investors

I am thankful to those who said NO to me, it is because of them I did it myself  
- *Albert Einstein*

There were two individuals I needed to connect with to solidify support and maintain momentum for my project: Paul Graham and Aydın Şenkut, Silicon Valley's 'mysterious' Turk, whom I was introduced to by Cem.

At one point, there was a slim chance of receiving investment for Grou.ps from an angel investor team composed of Cem Sertoğlu himself, Barış Karadoğan, and Yonja's CEO Kerim Baran. I held on to this hope for a while, receiving updates from Cem, who acted as the group's spokesperson. One day, they organized a conference call, but I later found out the outcome was negative. As it often happens, no detailed reasons were provided, which left me unable to press further. I had a hunch that their courage was lacking, and this outcome confirmed it. Still, I appreciated that they seriously considered the opportunity.

On a sunny day, I was scheduled to meet Aydın Şenkut at a restaurant in San Francisco's Japanese quarter. As I was walking there, I saw a Lamborghini with a Google license plate and thought it might belong to Aydın, as he was part of the "Google rich." He had a reputation for seeding early-stage tech companies like Google and had invested in a startup called Webs, similar to Grou.ps. I considered the possibility that he might invest in me as well.

I had an unkempt look that day. This was before bearded appearances became a trend in San Francisco, where people were typically either cleanly shaven or had well-groomed beards. Although I may have appeared exotic or even homeless to some like my close friend Onur, I attracted some attention—there were even people who left their phone numbers on napkins for me. When I finally met Aydın, he seemed taken aback, perhaps because of my scruffy appearance or perhaps because of his highbrow attitude and apparent alienation from his roots.

Despite his cold demeanor, Aydın offered to introduce me to Paul Graham, a connection I already had, but I didn't object thinking an additional reference could prove beneficial. Interestingly, despite facilitating this introduction, Aydın didn't seem to fully believe in Paul and his model.

Eventually, I reconnected with Paul Graham, one of the founders of Y-Combinator. Paul invited me to his expansive Mountain View office, where he and his co-founder, Trevor Blackwell, were developing a robot. The welcome was lukewarm at best. After a rather unpleasant interaction with Paul, I had the opportunity to talk to Trevor, who was as intelligent as Paul, but less famous. He was interested in my project, Grou.ps, and particularly intrigued by my strategy for growth. But the next day, I discovered I had been rejected, with the reason remaining unclear.



In a twist of fate, I ended up surprising Paul at a startup event he organized at Stanford. His surprise was palpable when he saw me, especially as I had Brett Taylor, the founder of Friendfeed, by my side. Aydin also texted me during one of Grou.ps' high points.

In the end, Paul Graham faced his own fall from grace. Despite the success of Y-Combinator, thanks to investments like Dropbox, Paul was ostracized from Silicon Valley due to his unfiltered comments about women entrepreneurs in 2013. His sexism and xenophobia became evident, leading to his departure from his CEO position at Y-Combinator. The experience showed me that even the most established figures can face unexpected outcomes, and as an ambitious entrepreneur, I was prepared to surprise those who doubted me.

## First Meeting With Facebook

People who end up as 'first' don't actually set out to be first. They set out to do something they love.  
- Condoleezza Rice

Sure, the days I spent at the Globe Hostel weren't just defined by the intriguing characters I met there. Alongside this, I was investing time and energy into developing Grou.ps, often engrossed in phone conversations that unfortunately, didn't seem to produce immediate results. Back then, my English-speaking skills were far from perfect, but even so, I managed to engage some extremely important individuals who graciously accepted my call requests. This was already a triumph for me considering the value these investors placed on their time. Despite my language barrier, I felt a sense of incremental progress.

My days were filled with work, punctuated by explorations into various side projects that had a range of success. My strategy reflected the English adage, "throw it at the wall and see what sticks," trying different ventures and seeing what worked.

I perceived a future where privacy would become an antiquated concept, replaced by the unbounded openness of the internet. This notion, somewhat shaped by my longing for my lost university love, Müge, influenced the themes of my projects, including Grou.ps.

One of my most noteworthy projects was OpenHuman. Dubbed the 'Wikipedia for Human Beings,' it served as a platform for individuals to share and confess their most intimate truths. Despite the project's rapid launch and subsequent attention, its growth stagnated due to a lack of viral elements such as email sharing or friend additions.

Another significant project was undisposable, an API designed to verify the authenticity of accounts on websites. This project caught the eye of Facebook, who were deeply invested in digital identity verification. An ensuing series of emails with a senior engineer at Facebook resulted in an offer of \$2000 for a secure version of my database. However, I chose not to

respond, preferring to channel my efforts into Grou.ps instead. Had I accepted, I might have found myself as a 'Turk working at Facebook'.

When I shared this encounter with Cem, he could hardly believe it. After all, he had been trying to develop a Turkish equivalent of Facebook through the Mondus initiative. I showed him the emails to convince him of its reality. Had I accepted that offer of \$2000 and invested it in Facebook stock, it would have grown to \$5 million today. Though it may sound unusual to be paid with shares, Facebook has been known to do this with solution partners, including the artist who painted their first campus walls and their initial head chefs. This is a prime example of the so-called Silicon Valley effect.



## The Crying Man on the Sand Hill Road

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

—Elie Wiesel

During the formative years of Grou.ps, I dedicated my time to two key activities: developing our product and avidly reading all web 2.0 blogs. Reading these blogs helped me comprehend the competitive landscape and the intricate dynamics of the business world. I nurtured a hope that getting a mention for Grou.ps on these blogs, followed by potential investors, could help me overcome funding obstacles and catapult Grou.ps to a global brand. That prospect kept me motivated as I never missed a single blog entry.

As much as I spent my time in hostel lobbies perusing blogs, I dreamt of Grou.ps making headlines. I actively reached out to editors and writers, aiming to gain exposure for our work. The thrill of seeing news about Grou.ps on a variety of blogs worldwide, especially on Digg—a platform where news prominence was democratically determined by votes—was gratifying and heightened my motivation.

Since my arrival in America, I had been striving to establish connections with venture capitalists and their firms. I vividly recall the day I set foot on Sand Hill Road—the epicenter of venture capital—filled with excitement. Michael Arrington, a prominent figure in the industry, was the founder of the highly influential blog Techcrunch, which I faithfully followed. Despite my numerous attempts, my messages about Grou.ps to Arrington went unanswered. When I learned of the first event Techcrunch was hosting at August Capital, one of Silicon Valley's notable investment firms, I seized the opportunity to meet him.

I can still remember the peculiar sight that greeted me upon entering August Capital. A seemingly affluent man, around fifty or sixty years old, was weeping in a black Cadillac limousine parked in front of the building. I couldn't fathom why someone seemingly well-off would cry amidst such luxury. Maybe it was a family or health issue, but given his location on Sand Hill Road, it seemed plausible that it was work-related. As a young entrepreneur, I wondered why material comfort didn't alleviate his emotional pain. This poignant encounter profoundly changed my understanding of the emotional toll of entrepreneurship.

Fast forward to the event, I managed to collect numerous business cards that night, even meeting Kevin Rose, the founder of Digg. He knew about Grou.ps but seemed politely disinterested, possibly due to my status as a foreigner. Arrington, who I had hoped to speak with, was continuously surrounded by people and I never got a chance to approach him. Despite not reaching my main objective, I still felt like I made some headway. After all, I spent a night on Sand Hill Road, mingling with Silicon Valley's key players.



Later in the evening, as I was pitching Grou.ps to an interested party, I realized how serious I had become about my work. Everyone else was socializing casually with drinks in their hands while I was tirelessly showcasing my product on my laptop. Life, I realized, had become quite intense for me.

As the night wound down and I planned to return to my hostel in San Francisco, I realized I was stranded—it was too late for public transportation. When Atakan, a Turkish executive I had met, asked how I would get back, I told him I'd find a way. American norms didn't allow him to insist on helping, and we bid each other goodnight. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a way back and ended up sleeping on the street—my first and, thankfully, only time doing so.

Despite the difficult night, I woke up with the first light, unnoticed, and hopped onto the Caltrain back to Globe Hostel. Exhausted, I slept for over fifteen hours, just in time to start my reception shift the next day. While I didn't succeed in making headlines on Techcrunch that night, I walked away with an intriguing story and a deeper understanding of the emotional journey of entrepreneurship.

## ReadWriteWeb

*The future belongs to those who recognize opportunities, before they become obvious.*  
— Oscar Wilde

Having lost hope with Techcrunch, I decided to turn my attention to ReadWriteWeb, another respected blog that was just a step below the former in terms of popularity. I used a unique approach to gain the attention of the blog's founder and chief editor, Richard – by posting intelligent and insightful comments under almost every post. These comments were not born out of arrogance, rather they were designed to engage Richard, which they did. Not only did Richard respond to them, but other blog members and writers also took notice.

We eventually began corresponding, and I found Richard to be quite different from Michael Arrington. Richard, hailing from New Zealand (a nation well-acquainted with Turkey due to their shared history), was more accessible. I guess, the shared history between our countries, from the ANZACs at Çanakkale to Atatürk's mausoleum, made for common ground. With the rapport built, I proposed to contribute as a guest writer to the blog. Despite being a non-native English speaker and without backing from any big investors, Richard agreed without hesitation.

My initial article was well-received, and several others followed. In articles such as "The Impact of Facebook's Platform" and "Amazon HaaS Hardware as a Service," I made predictions about how the Facebook Connect Platform and Amazon's new AWS services would reshape the internet – predictions that were realized years later. My position as a writer enabled me to showcase Turkey's potential, and my articles helped bolster my reputation in Silicon Valley. Invitations from major companies such as Yahoo soon followed, and my articles were often the most read and commented upon, a fact I learned through our internal RWW email list.

An article of mine predicting Google OS even won the ReadWriteWeb readers' "Article of the Year." I began receiving comments from renowned individuals in Silicon Valley, including the founder of Debian Linux, Ian Murdock (RIP), and angel investor Jason Calacanis. Furthermore, I was invited to exclusive events, and the CEOs of some of Silicon Valley's most funded start-ups were eager to meet and discuss their products. I also received press passes for previously unaffordable events, which significantly broadened my network.

As exciting and flattering as all this was, I was not swayed. While journalism is a noble profession, I had my own product to offer to the world and dreams to fulfill beyond journalism and blogging.

Life is full of gambles, and when Techcrunch seemed unattainable, I decided to bet on ReadWriteWeb – a bet that proved to be a rewarding investment.

## Hakia

-  
The sum is greater than its parts.

- *Aristo*

One of the most significant decisions I made during my time in San Francisco and Globe Hostel was to attend a Web 2.0 event at the grand Palace Hotel on Market Street in November 2006. The tickets were pricey, hovering around a thousand dollars for a two or three-day event. However, I was set to meet with Melek Pulatkonak and Rıza Berkan there. Without the funds to secure a ticket, I found myself waiting outside the opulent hotel entrance.

I first came across Rıza and Melek in an article in Hürriyet newspaper. Fueled by a seed investment from mobile phone distributor KVK and Turkcell founder Murat Vargı, they were launching an ambitious startup to rival Google in New York. Their confidence was captivating. Their novel search engine, they claimed, would operate differently and outperform Google. While their ambitious words might seem fanciful to most, Hakia's vision enthralled me, and I was eager to meet this dynamic duo. What I didn't know at the time was that Melek had already reached out to me via an email to my ReadWriteWeb account, which I seldom checked due to an overflow of messages.

Half an hour into my wait at the hotel door, Rıza, Melek, and a tall American woman appeared as planned. With their tight schedule, they offered me a window to pitch Grou.ps while they grabbed coffee - an "elevator pitch" opportunity.

Before I could start my pitch, Rıza enthusiastically shared their recent acquisition of a ten-million-dollar fund and their expansion plans. Likely aware of my role as a blogger at ReadWriteWeb, he readily divulged this news. Once he concluded, I started discussing Grou.ps. I revealed my plan to name it "Social Cartography Inc," with an aim to map global social relations. Rıza seemed intrigued. Just like me, he appreciated grand, ambitious projects. Meanwhile, Melek played the devil's advocate, asking probing questions. Finally, they asked how much funding I required. When I stated "one hundred thousand dollars," their surprise was palpable. However, they soon excused themselves, needing to return to the hotel.

You may ask, 'What was the 'efficiency' in this encounter?' In life, we shouldn't always anticipate immediate results. The relevance of this seemingly unproductive meeting would become clear about six months later, at a critical juncture.

Internships are pivotal in entrepreneurship. The primary goal should be to contribute and create value. Your focus should be on giving, not taking, because giving equates to learning. Promoting this culture is also essential. When you finally start actualizing your big idea, you will

have a network of young people ready to support you. Hence, I strongly endorse the culture of internships.

## TABCON

Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood.  
- *Oscar Wilde*

One memorable instance from my time at the Globe Hostel came in the form of an offer from Erdem Ültanır, a young Turkish engineer from Intel. Despite never having met him, he approached me one autumn day as my hostel days were nearing their end due to my expiring visa and dwindling funds. Erdem informed me about a conference, Tabcon (Turkish American Business Conference), which I'd never heard of before. I learned that it was a gathering for Turkish professionals in America.

Erdem had become familiar with me through my articles on ReadWriteWeb and wished to meet. He even suggested that I could speak or moderate at the event. The meeting was quickly set up.

When Erdem arrived at the hotel I was staying at, he seemed surprised by my appearance. My scruffy jeans, unkempt hair, and punk style seemed incongruous with my strong academic profile, which included both Galatasaray High School and Boğaziçi University, two of the most selective schools. His initial doubt was palpable, but I immediately accepted the role. My task was to invite Turkish entrepreneurs to speak at my panel and moderate the discussion.

A few weeks later, Tabcon took place at the Marriott Hotel in San Jose. I was granted the use of the hotel's king suite, reserved for the conference, the day before because I lived the furthest away and had no transportation. The multi-room suite was a luxurious and spacious apartment, reportedly priced at \$5,000 per night, significantly more expansive than the entire Globe Hostel.

On the day of Tabcon, I tried to subdue my excitement by consuming copious amounts of coffee and chocolates, a strategy that proved unsuccessful. Among the panelists I invited were Barış, Emre Kıcıman, a leading Turkish scientist at Microsoft, Cüneyt Özveren, with whom I had been in contact since a TechCrunch article, and Kerim Baran, the founder of Yonja, who I contacted through Cem. Despite my nervousness, I believed we had organized a beneficial and enjoyable panel.

A highlight of the event was meeting Mehtap Özkan, who later became my investor. Mehtap, the tallest person in the room, was immediately noticeable. Despite finding her intimidating initially, I saw her as an elder sister figure, which gave me the confidence to

approach her. From the start, we shared a unique connection, fueled by my straightforwardness. I had seen Mehtap's personal blog posts before and, while I didn't fully comprehend the technical jargon she used, I found her relatable. We promised to stay in touch after the event.

In the end, Tabcon gave me an encounter that greatly influenced my life: my meeting with Mehtap Özkan.

## Return to Istanbul

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.  
- Theodore Roosevelt

After attending the TABCON event in San Jose, I set my sights on returning to my hometown of Istanbul. But, thanks to a suggestion from Cem, I decided to take a detour and spend some time in New York, a city where most of his contacts resided. I arrived in New York, eager to embark on a new adventure, coincidentally at the same time as Cem. While riding the NYC subway, we discussed our plans and updates. It was rewarding to share these moments with him in the city. Although he introduced me to a few consultants, I didn't gain much professionally from these encounters. However, I did manage to partake in some cultural exploration that I had missed on my previous visit to New York, visiting museums and sightseeing.

Eventually, I returned to San Francisco, preparing myself to say goodbye to Istanbul once again. As February approached, I bid farewell to my friends at Globe Hostel, where I had spent the previous six months. In retrospect, even though I had some issues with the hostel when I lived there, I now recall that time as one of the best periods of my life. It was full of learning experiences, friendships, and the thrilling pursuit of my dreams. As the poet Nazım Hikmet wisely noted in his poem "About Life":

This is the pain that will be taken now,  
The sadness to be heard already.  
This world will be so loved  
So that you can say "I lived"...



Upon leaving San Francisco, as my plane ascended towards Istanbul, I looked out the window at the city. It was night, and darkness was settling in. I found myself wondering if it was my last glance at the city. I had no clear signs or affirmations of my future, but I remember praying for an opportunity to spend the rest of my life there.

Back in Istanbul, I was met with a less-than-welcoming situation. I was penniless, and my academic life was in disarray, struggling with sophomore classes during my fourth year. My mother was not pleased with me. I had become a nuisance in her eyes.

One day, I spent the entire day at the Kadıköy Dock, lost in my thoughts. I clearly remember uttering, "Oh my God, what am I going to do, I'm done," as I headed home. No solutions or ideas surfaced in my mind. I was completely broke and jobless.

That evening, an unexpected miracle occurred. As I sat alone in our house in Üsküdar, attempting to calm my thoughts, I received an email. It was from Melek. She wanted to call. I hadn't anticipated this.

I picked up the phone immediately. I had no idea what the call would bring. Could this be the investment news I was waiting for?

Melek informed me that she had spoken to Rıza, and they wanted to extend an offer to me. She detailed the job description over the phone and stated an annual salary of thirty-six thousand dollars. My heart pounded with excitement. Without hesitation, I accepted.

She assured me she would handle the official paperwork and ended the call. The news was overwhelming. In my usual discretion, I decided not to share this news until the official documents arrived.

The offer arrived soon after. It was official. My excitement knew no bounds. This was unlike anything I had signed with Armador. It was a clear indication of progress in my life. New York was calling me back. Now, a new chapter awaited me, one that would literally send me soaring through the skies.



New York'taki Hakia etkinliklerinden birinde. Birleşmiş Milletler toplantısını aratmayan ekip.

## New Life in New York

I began to discover a little bit about the situation of black people in America and experienced immediate empathy with the victims of such senseless discrimination, because, although Turks were never slaves, they were regarded as enemies within Europe because of their Muslim beliefs  
 -- Ahmet Ertegün

During the time when Hakia was gaining traction, I was constantly traveling across the USA as a "Technology Evangelist". My role was to convey Hakia's vision and offerings to a widespread audience. As part of my duties, I often found myself at SEO conferences, a popular forum at that time, which were scattered throughout the country. Many small agencies that specialized in Google's technology frequented these events, providing paid support services to local businesses to optimize their Google marketing efforts. Our initial aim was to introduce Hakia's technology to this tech-savvy audience because if anyone were to understand it first, it would be them, and from there, we could spread it to the end-users.

It was quite a departure from my previous role at Grou.ps, where I was championing the cause of Palestine through technology. At Hakia, I was an "Evangelist", focused on propelling the brand's mission forward. My past performance at ReadWriteWeb had apparently impressed Melek and Rıza, which led them to choose me for this role.

After receiving their offer in Istanbul, things moved at a rapid pace. I was soon sent my flight ticket and hotel reservation. My excitement was palpable when I landed at JFK airport in New York and checked into the prestigious Millennium Hotel. The hotel's proximity to Wall Street and the under-construction Twin Towers was awe-inspiring.

Despite the whirlwind of events, I made it clear to Melek and Rıza that I would not abandon my commitment to Grou.ps. They were supportive, which was unsurprising as our relationship had begun through Grou.ps. I took on a part-time, remote role at Hakia.

Throughout my tenure, Hakia's reputation grew significantly due to our robust budget and extensive spending. The tech journalists I interacted with were genuinely impressed by our technology. However, I also witnessed how challenging it could be to merge an entrepreneurial spirit with a corporate structure.

During this time, I also moved to another hotel in San Francisco, the Biltmore Hotel. My previous hotel had been closed for renovations, and the Biltmore was conveniently located downtown. However, despite its central location, it was notorious for its occupants of drug addicts and prostitutes.

One significant aspect of my time at Hakia was their help in resolving my visa issues. As an immigrant who had arrived in the USA before completing university, it was a challenging time for me. With the help of Çiğdem Acar, who was Melek's friend, I was introduced to an extraordinary talent visa called O-1. Having a diverse portfolio of achievements and recommendations due to my open-source work, I was eligible for this visa.

Working in the USA under an "extraordinary talent" visa felt incredible, even though, in later years, this visa became more commonplace and lost some of its prestige. It was only at Çiğdem's funeral in 2017 that I realized she was neither Jewish nor Christian, which made me wonder how she was admitted into Papillon as a non-Muslim. Nevertheless, I am forever grateful to Hakia, Melek, and Rıza for their support and for paving the way for my work visa in the United States.

## Section 4

# RISE OF GROU.PS

## 2008-2011

### **The Unexpected Support**

*Success is where preparation and opportunity meet.  
- Bobby Unser*

I was a HAKIA employee living in San Francisco and traveling regularly. Once I came to Istanbul, Cem gave me his second biggest support after helping me with the US visa. "There is a person named Mehtap, he is trying to establish a new fund, they are about to do so, it would be helpful for you to meet him," he said. He said he could introduce you. "I already know Mehtap," I said. I didn't need his introduction, but this knowledge and timing was invaluable to me. Immediately after, I started our correspondence with Mehtap.

We arranged a meeting early in the morning to talk to Mehtap. In the following years, I would learn that Mehtap - unlike me - was an 'early person' and that our meetings with her would always be at half past six in the morning. The first meeting at Taksim Gezi Patisserie was short-lived. It was there that I learned that Mehtap had established a new fund called Golden Horn. When I told about Grou.ps, who knew us before, it looked like he had bought the plan from day one. I saw enthusiasm in him that I had never seen in any other investor before. He said that they made the decisions together with their partners and invited me to their office to give a presentation to them.

The presentation was to take place at the Golden Horn office in Zincirlikuyu. In this neighborhood, which has a homey environment and parking problem, there were two old men besides Mehtap who were waiting for me to listen to the presentation. I made my presentation unaware of how "magnificent" these men are. After all the English presentations I gave in America, it was a snap for me to present to these native speakers. The two uncles, in their sixties and seventies, sat with a confused expression on their faces, but they were frivolous and made no effort to understand. They seemed indifferent and seemed proud of it. Mehtap, on the

other hand, was looking proudly into my eyes with the air of a mother. I was presenting to a different audience, but I knew there would be that job and I would get what I wanted.

After the presentation, I returned to San Francisco to start my work at Hakia. The positive news came soon after. They wanted to test me. They wanted to send me thirty thousand dollars in advance (as a deduction for the investment that will come later) before the conditions and investment amount were discussed and to observe how I spent the money and what results I got. It was a kind of incubation payment. My mouth was in my ears. Finally, there was another person who wanted to be a partner in my dream. And unlike my very valuable mentor, Cem, these people were giving their support with money!

The first thing I did with the incubation money was to hire İlker, a mysterious blogger/designer I had seen before, and persuade him to redesign the logo and homepage of Grou.ps. I say mysterious because although he blogs very well, he insisted on not using a profile photo. I was good at writing code but didn't have extra time for design. On the one hand, I was trying to continue my life by working for Hakia. So I needed İlker.

Grou.ps now had a more self-explanatory homepage and a new logo. This new logo gave the difference in the domain name of Grou.ps (the .ps extension that replaced the usual .com suffix) to the site visitor with a game of color and paved the way for increasing the return rates to the site.

I made my second hire right after. My source of staff was blogosphere. When I searched for people from Turkey talking about PHP using Technorati, the popular blog search engine of that time, I came across a young friend named Mustafa, who was studying at Yıldız University, struggling. He must have been a good person to share his knowledge with the world via his blog, and from what I've read he was enthusiastic and knowledgeable enough. What more would you want to get hired? When I sent him an offer, Mustafa said he could do some free work. But now that I am the manager of a project with a budget, I did not accept this offer and asked him to do some work in return for his fee. The results were positive. The team was formed.

## Bye Hakia

Success is getting what you want, happiness is liking what you get  
- H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

The incubation process that we started with Golden Horn was successful. Now I had a tiny team and Grou.ps was brighter than ever. The number of 100,000 unique visitors per month was not a bad figure either. I had rented a room in an office building close to the hotel, as it was not ideal to develop a business in a hotel with prostitutes and drug addicts. The owner of the office, the Filipino aunt, was very sympathetic, she knew and loved the Turks, and was very

helpful in renting. Now that the rocket had fired, it was time to retract the rocket's latches to rise from the ground.

The e-mail I was waiting for came from Mehtap on December 10, 2007. He sent me the documents I had to sign for the first seed investments. I could not believe my eyes; There was talk of an investment of 500 thousand dollars. The weight of the terms was evident from the tens of pages of the contract, but my eyes were now dark; nothing could stop my dreams. However, as I am a cautious person, I shared this situation with my mentor Cem. On the other hand, I bought my ticket to the Istanbul flight to discuss this important issue.

The first thing I did when I came to Istanbul was to have a meeting with Cem. Thankfully, he had brought me together with a few investors before, but those meetings did not yield any results. So he knew how badly I wanted this investment and how desperate I was. He reminded me that I don't have many options when it comes to finding investors, and he said that I should accept whatever the terms of the agreement are, with a realistic approach and without being emotional. However, he could not stand my persistent questions and referred me to a classmate lawyer from Robert College. However, after my Robert graduate lawyer friend listened to me in his luxury office on Halaskargazi Street with a confused look (who is this kid and why is he getting an investment of 500 thousand dollars), I realized that I had no choice but to sign that contract as it was.

After months of negotiating with Mehtap, GHV, who asked forty percent of the company to invest \$500,000, prevents me from spending more than \$20,000, for example, without their approval, with privileged shares, but at the same time doubling their shares whenever they want with a "fuzzy" clause. He was gaining the right to own the majority of the company. It would take years for me to notice this "stake". This article, which I did not realize, must have escaped the notice of all the lawyers I consulted at that time. The agreement also gave them the right to "drag-along". With this right, investors not only got the right to sell their shares at any time, but they could also force me to sell the company. I wanted a minimum price set against it and a tag-along right (that is, if they sell shares, I have the same right to sell). These requests were considered reasonable and accepted. My request to establish the company in America was not accepted. This objection would come back as an extra cost to all of us later on.

We signed the twenty-two-page contract in the morning of 17 June 2008 at the GHV office. Inc. It was to be established that day. These were things I didn't know. A.Ş. to a person in the room. I gave a power of attorney for its installation, we went with him to a notary not far from the office. Group Bilgi A.Ş., the first company of Grou.ps. It was established that day.

Mehtap was very excited and full of energy as we officially started working together. This energy motivated me as well. What they said took me to the clouds: He said that they had put five hundred thousand dollars for now, but they would quickly increase it to one million dollars with the support of TÜBİTAK (which I was wrong here, it didn't happen!), and then they had another two million dollars to put into the company (this was going to happen). My dreams were

about to come true. For me, the only obstacle to my success was money and that problem was solved.

Not knowing what I was getting into, I quickly packed up my business in Istanbul and headed for San Francisco with the happiness of ignorance. Hakia was waiting for me; likewise, the Angels would soon be in San Francisco for an event. There couldn't have been a better opportunity to give them the good news. When I looked at the ATM before leaving Atatürk Airport, I had a few thousand dollars in my savings account at the bank, and this allowed me to move forward with more confidence.

On a sunny San Francisco day, I told Melek about this development at the event venue. They knew I was still dealing with Grou.ps, working part time at Hakia. I could read that this news did not make Melek very happy. He was surprised. I guess we came to a point where they wouldn't say no if I said 'I'm quitting' that day, because Hakia's hard times had begun. Pentti Kouri, one of the main investors, was unable to take care of the company as his health was deteriorating at the time. I could not report this development at the most ideal time for them, but I had no other choice. The angel welcomed it with understanding and maturity. We shook hands and wished him luck. In a few weeks, I would be leaving Hakia completely. This was the last time I saw Melek under the umbrella of Hakia.

## Bizarre Things

Quiet people have the loudest minds  
- Kurt Cobain

I initially thought that the company's financial injection would act as a daily sunshade, protecting us from potential struggles. However, unforeseen challenges soon began to surface.

The first issue arose with a senior engineer I hired. Mustafa was a passionate software developer I had discovered during my student years at Yıldız Technical University. Despite his enthusiasm, Mustafa was still studying and lacked the experience to meet Grou.ps's new needs. I needed someone to handle the coding entirely, allowing me to focus elsewhere. Upon a friend's recommendation, I hired a senior engineer for this task. However, like many software developers I knew, he turned out to be overly self-assured and quite cynical. Our discussions about the software's architecture revealed his fixation on how things were done over getting them done. At the initial stages of development, this approach was not beneficial.

This engineer's cynical side came out in my absence. One day, he approached our old investors, claiming he could do my job better than I could. Thankfully, my colleague, Mehtap, informed me about this. Consequently, his tenure at the company was short-lived.

Surprisingly, another individual, a popular Turkish blogger and friend, suggested to Mehtap that he could make a good CEO for Grou.ps! At the time, I was in a difficult position and couldn't afford to burn bridges. But I made a mental note of it.

As I kept encountering such incidents, my trust in Mehtap grew. Yet, sometimes I couldn't help but wonder if they were playing a 'good cop, bad cop' game with me. Her chronic lateness and last-minute cancellations raised my suspicions.

We once visited Ataköy, where Mehtap lived, to get to know each other better. There, she drove me in an American pickup truck, the likes of which I had never seen before. She said she drove it for tax reasons. That day, she asked about my family and revealed her ties to my cousins, Tolga and Tuğba, who attended the same school. We started learning more about each other as the person she had invested millions in and entrusted with.

While I was getting closer to Mehtap, the other partners seemed distant and arrogant. They treated me as a child who had been granted a great favor. They behaved similarly towards Mehtap, always driving in chauffeur-driven cars and viewing the company's financial struggles as bragging rights. They held high positions in major conglomerates, acting as board members, advisory boards, and CEOs.

They also insisted I establish the company in Turkey, even though I had already set up a company in the US in 2008. It felt pointless to establish another one in Turkey, but they were insistent. Years later, they would realize the absurdity of this decision and hire expensive lawyers to move the company from Turkey to the US. They spent around forty thousand dollars on this operation, called 'flip-up'.

My feelings about Mehtap were sometimes conflicted. She favored another startup they invested in, which made me uncomfortable. I felt as if we were their most prized company. Soon, I would be proven right: Grou.ps indeed deserved the most attention. Despite these circumstances, I kept my professionalism and remained dedicated to the task.

However, when I started looking for an office in Istanbul as Grou.ps began to grow, a series of strange events unfolded. I eventually rented the ground floor of GHV's office, but there was a surprising caveat: I had to pay rent to my investors. To make matters worse, we received complaints for sleeping in the office after working overtime.

The finance was also a major issue. Instead of providing the promised amount in tranches, they chose to give it in monthly chunks. There was always an excuse not to follow the contract. All financial control was in the hands of GHV's CFO, Zeliha. She questioned every bill, making it difficult to run a tech startup like a holding company.

Moreover, I struggled with networking, which I realized was as important as money in the business world. Grou.ps was growing rapidly, and we needed to connect with the right groups. However, I felt stuck in this area. Even Lior, our American lawyer, who we paid hundreds of



thousands of dollars, didn't make the introductions I had hoped for. In the years to come, I would learn how to navigate this landscape better.

## Exit Opportunities

Only the paranoid survive.  
- Andrew Grove

While I was going through all this with my investors, new exit opportunities for Grou.ps started to come my way.

### Conde Nast

During my early days at GHV, I received an unexpected email from a company called Conde Nast, sent by a woman named Erin Hakansson. Intrigued, I decided to meet with her and learn more about the company. As I researched Conde Nast, I discovered that they were one of the leading magazine publishers in America, known for publications like Vogue, Wired, and GQ. I also learned that they had acquired Reddit, a highly successful investment by Y-Combinator, which I was familiar with at the time.

When I arrived at Conde Nast's building in downtown San Francisco to meet Erin, I was greeted by a dynamic and slender blonde woman who appeared to be at least ten years older than me. Despite the language barrier (English not being my mother tongue or my primary foreign language), we managed to make a connection. Towards the end of our meeting, Erin suggested that they should consider acquiring Reddit and even offered to introduce me to the founding team right then and there. Excitedly, I agreed and went downstairs to a small room that had been allocated to Reddit within the building.

Inside the room, I encountered Alexis Ohanian, the founder of Reddit, whom I had previously known through email (as I had translated Reddit into Turkish). This room-office was quite similar to the one I would later occupy for Grou.ps in the following months. While Ohanian was warm and welcoming, Steve Huffman seemed cold and uninterested in my presence. Erin, who had introduced us, sensed the tension and quickly escorted me out of the room. She bid me farewell at the door, and I never heard from Conde Nast again, nor did I reach out to them (as I was unaware of the importance of follow-up networking at the time).

Looking back now, I realize that this meeting was not in vain. I am confident that our paths will cross again with Erin after many years. It would have been wonderful if Conde Nast had acquired Grou.ps back then. Inspired by News Corp's acquisition of MySpace, they were seeking to tap into the potential of young talents like myself to drive their transformation from traditional to digital media. This opportunity could have been beneficial for both parties. Both Conde Nast and Grou.ps were operating in the community space, and Conde Nast could have

provided Grou.ps with the same support and growth opportunities they had given Reddit. While Reddit remained in the background under Conde Nast's wing for several years, it is now preparing to go public and has achieved a valuation in the billions of dollars.

## Meetup

My first potential opportunity for an early debut came not from GHV, but from Meetup, a name I heard for the first time from Cem during our meeting at his office. The founder of Meetup happened to be friends with Scott Heiferman. Cem casually asked, "If Meetup offered you two hundred thousand dollars, would you sell your company?" My surprised reaction was all the response he needed. Indeed, when Grou.ps received its investment from GHV, the first email I got was from Scott, proposing a meeting in New York. I thought it was a casual get-together, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

I went to NYC to meet the team at Meetup. Their office, a loft-style space occupying two floors of a repurposed factory, was awash in their signature red and white. It was mind-boggling to see the money flowing in the virtual world. After a brief tour of the office, Scott ushered me into the CEO's room—a sunlit, minimalist space. I attempted to discuss Social Beans, a soon-to-be-launched protocol enabling seamless transfer of online communities between social media platforms. However, Scott seemed disinterested and interrupted me to ask: "Emre, would you consider selling Grou.ps to us?" I was taken aback, unable to respond. I wanted to ask "how much," but I held back. Discussing money has always been awkward for me—a trait that has often made people question my entrepreneurial spirit. The meeting concluded in a discomforting silence, presumably as awkward for Scott as it was for me. I couldn't help wishing Cem had been there.

While Scott and I never met again in person, we continued to correspond via email. Our paths crossed occasionally, but the opportunity for a reunion never materialized—either we had grown too large, or we were no longer within their scope of interest. Eventually, Meetup was sold to a different firm under the umbrella of SoftBank, named WeWork.

## Yahoo

In my mind, Yahoo was the perfect home for Grou.ps. I was mesmerized when I first saw their campus in Sunnyvale—it was as picturesque as Stanford or Princeton. With its massive, beautifully manicured grounds and free food and drinks, it seemed like an engineer's paradise. When I founded Grou.ps, I envisioned taking Yahoo Groups to its peak. My ultimate dream was to sell Grou.ps to Yahoo, providing it a safe haven—I was aware that establishing a business model would take time and incur significant financial losses. At the time, I did not anticipate the ease of securing VC investment due to monetary expansions, and hence, I was pessimistic. My ambition was to help Yahoo remain relevant and maintain its stronghold in the imminent Social

Web era. After all, it was the age of social networks, with platforms like MySpace reshaping the internet and online advertising landscape. I was confident that MySpace's reign wouldn't last due to its unappealing design, and personally saw Yahoo as the most promising player in the social media space. With its solid foundation—both in terms of content and product—and virtually limitless resources, I believed Yahoo had immense potential. However, the first step would be to revamp Yahoo Groups under my leadership. I dreamt that, with the integration of Grou.ps, Yahoo could become the leading figure of the social media era. However, it seemed that Yahoo's primary focus at the time, as a publicly listed company, was merely survival.

I encountered Yahoo's senior employees at various events and they were aware of Grou.ps. In the following years, we would have two more serious acquisition talks with Yahoo, especially in the context of efforts to platform Yahoo Mail.

While I would face different exit opportunities in the future, I was oblivious to the fact that a significant upheaval was on the horizon.

## Operation Gina

*Competition is over-rated. It enables you to get better at something narrow, but you might miss the big picture.*  
- Peter Thiel

In 2009, things began to intensify for Grou.ps. We found ourselves in competition with a Silicon Valley staple, Ning, led by its charismatic CEO Gina Bianchini. Despite Ning's considerable financial backing, Grou.ps was surviving and expanding with only two million dollars of support.

To motivate my team, I initiated what I called Operation Gina, the objective of which was to outpace Ning in the market. Looking back, I realize the operation's name may have come across as sexist, but it was designed to provide a tangible target for the team, personifying our competitor.

This operation indeed boosted motivation in our offices. We progressively achieved our software goals, adding social features to our platform such as user profiles and access based on friendship status.

When Ning began to make mistakes such as closing their APIs and shutting down adult sites, we seized the opportunity to position Grou.ps as a Ning alternative. These decisions from Ning led to a surge in traffic to our platform, which posed challenges in server maintenance but also led to the creation of new diverse groups on Grou.ps.

This influx of content also brought new issues. We started receiving copyright complaints due to some adult content, and even the FBI got involved. Luckily, I was able to find a lawyer who specialized in such matters and helped us navigate through these challenges.

Throughout these times, Grou.ps gained significant popularity. We were recognized for our efforts even without a PR advertising budget. It felt surreal, especially since one of Ning's supporters, Magdalena Yesil, had been my initial inspiration for staying in Silicon Valley. Even though Grou.ps was an underdog, we were far from being unsuccessful or unnoticed.

## **Secret to our Success: Growth Hacks**

We believe that technology is at its very best; at its most empowering when it disappears.  
*- Jonathan Ive, Apple*

Of course, Operation Gina was not the sole reason for Grou.ps' success. Several factors contributed to our success, including my experience at ReadWriteWeb, my reputation in the technology media, the development of a strong network over time, and the implementation of effective growth hacks. One crucial aspect of our success was the increasing media awareness we achieved. All the press releases I prepared became newsworthy in the media, which played a significant role in our growth.

I must highlight a pivotal moment in building this media awareness: my attempt to reach Techcrunch and Michael Arrington. However, despite my efforts, Michael consistently ignored me. There could be two potential reasons for this. Firstly, the Palestine (.ps) extension in our domain name might have offended Michael, although I cannot provide concrete evidence for this. Secondly, his relationship with our competitor, CollectiveX, could have influenced his behavior. CollectiveX was founded by one of Michael's close friends and was also one of his investments. Nonetheless, we eventually surpassed CollectiveX in the following years, and Michael abandoned his stubbornness.

Finally, I managed to catch Michael's attention during a Startup School debut at Stanford. Wearing a T-shirt featuring our presentation, Michael became fascinated by the idea and instructed his writers to report on it immediately. His affinity for "hungry entrepreneurship" stories played a significant role in this magical touch. Additionally, I established good relationships with other tech media writers. By attending various events and engaging in conversations, I gained insider knowledge, including their secrets, and this proximity made it easier for them to publish my press releases in the future.

In summary, these were some of my favorite growth tactics, also known as "growth hacking," that contributed to Grou.ps' success.

## **MyBlogLog**

During my time focusing on blogosphere, I played an essential growth game that contributed to the expansion of Grou.ps. My primary growth strategy centered on blogs, many of which utilized a popular plugin of the time called MyBlogLog. This plugin allowed the last visitor's photo to appear on the blog and showed the profile photo of the commenter within each blog comment.

This feature may seem trivial to Gen Z, but in the nascent stages of the internet, when identities were often mere names or nicknames, attaching a photo to a profile was a significant innovation. It gave the blogs a social network vibe, making them more interactive and lively.

I wrote a small piece of code to ensure that my photo, and by extension, Grou.ps, was continually visible on influential blogs using the MyBlogLog plugin. While the tactic was simple, the payoff was substantial. People were intrigued by my constant photo presence and were drawn to click on my profile, leading them to Grou.ps. This strategy worked effectively.

However, this approach came to an end when Yahoo purchased MyBlogLog and subsequently shut it down, consequently closing one of our essential traffic sources.

## **Craigslist**

I devised a growth strategy by writing a script that enabled a bot to respond to everyone who posted on Craigslist forums, directing them to the relevant Grou.ps group on that topic. This method allowed us to expand without the need to hire additional staff, making it an efficient and cost-effective approach. While this technique proved to be successful in attracting new groups and users, we were eventually detected and blocked by Craigslist. Nonetheless, the strategy worked quite well until that point, leading to substantial growth in our user base and the creation of many new groups.

## **Yahoo Groups importer**

Our primary objective was to enhance and transform Yahoo Groups, and to achieve this, I developed a feature known as 'Yahoo Groups Carrier.' This feature allowed those wishing to migrate from Yahoo Groups to do so effortlessly. By merely entering their username and password, they could transfer all members and content from their Yahoo group to us.

Furthermore, I created another script that could monitor correspondence within any group, provided the group founder authorized it. This allowed the transfer of communications to

grou.ps, enabling people to utilize us for multimedia needs while still using Yahoo Groups for their mailing list feature.

In addition to these functionalities, our integration with other platforms, including Flickr, del.icio.us, and my blog, further enriched our offerings, reflecting our commitment to delivering comprehensive and innovative solutions.

### **Press Release Tool**

We introduced a viral feature to Grou.ps that enabled group founders to effortlessly prepare and distribute press releases to the media. While this was technically a straightforward addition, it served as a valuable tool for those eager to expand their groups. As the groups grew, so did our platform. I must candidly admit that this idea was not my original invention; I was inspired by a similar feature I saw on Meetup and adapted it for our use. The simplicity of the concept, coupled with its practical utility, made it a meaningful enhancement to our service.

### **Facebook Apps**

We made a significant impact by integrating real-world applications with Facebook. When Facebook announced the launch of its new application platform, I recruited a friend to help with the project. Pınar, who was five or six years my senior, was taking a break from a prestigious job in Turkey to study languages at Berkeley. While enjoying San Francisco and adding to an already impressive resume, he eagerly accepted my offer to work on a side project with Grou.ps.

I first met Pınar at the Sugar Cafe, where I often went to work during my stay at Biltmore. Together, we began creating groups for schools in Turkey and promoting them on Facebook. Many people started to use our applications, and by extension Grou.ps, to display their school's emblem as a badge on their Facebook profiles. For instance, they might use the coat of arms of Boğaziçi University.

This effort not only swelled metrics like the number of groups but also led to the creation of numerous zombie groups. After all, those who came to us were interested in more than just showing their affiliation on their Facebook profiles. They were engaging with the content in new and unexpected ways. While this may have seemed trivial at the time, it expanded the potential of Grou.ps, enhancing its marketability to investors.

## I Kiss You

Don't mistake kindness for weakness  
- Al Capone

My primary growth strategy encompassed both media exposure and the development of technical growth games. I also devised a method to navigate the ever-changing trends in web 2.0 media, a concept best described as "blowing with the wind." A breakthrough idea emerged to leverage Mahir's internet fame as a means to promote our brand, recognizing Mahir as a national pride.

Mahir's fame largely stemmed from his humorous slogan 'I kiss you' and his simplistic one-page website. Some even argue that the character of Borat drew inspiration from Mahir. For a brief period, Mahir enjoyed worldwide attention, making guest appearances on various American talk shows.

Before meeting Mahir to discuss our project, I waited for days to receive the contract documents prepared by our attorney. I then flew to Izmir, where Mahir was teaching. Unfortunately, it was the bird flu season, and Mahir was sick. We met at Reyhan Patisserie, a place I knew in Izmir thanks to my sister. Our goal was to transform Mahir's famous website into a humorous group on Grou.ps. Negotiating with Mahir was a day-long endeavor, where I encountered an individual filled with pride, somewhat amateurish, but eventually agreeable to an affordable price. Our next plan was to jointly announce this collaboration at one of Europe's biggest internet events, LeWeb in Paris.

Traveling to Paris with Mahir proved an unusual experience. While our outbound journey went smoothly, sharing a hotel room with him led to discomfort, necessitating me to book another room. Additionally, we had to find Mahir appropriate attire for the event, settling on a suit from a bargain shop.

At the event, Mahir became the center of attention. I had the chance to reconnect with industry titans like Loic Le Meur and Michael Arrington. Although Mahir's stage presence was initially considered, it was eventually declined. However, networking opportunities abounded, with introductions to legendary investor Yossi Vardi among others.

The pretext of collaborating with Mahir led to enjoyable nights in Paris, even visiting the Eiffel Tower. However, I reserved reaching the top of the Eiffel for a special moment with a cherished woman in my life.

Mahir's eccentric personality and interactions with people, especially women, were often reminiscent of Borat, a comparison Mahir himself recognized. He even mentioned pursuing legal action over commercial rights.

Mahir's collaboration was a unique experience, yet it foreshadowed the complexities of working with celebrities, a challenge I would face again in the future.

## Scaling Pains

A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them  
- Steve Jobs

One of the most fortunate challenges that an early-stage startup may face is a technical scaling problem. This means ensuring that the service can handle heavy traffic, and encountering this issue is a positive sign. It often means that the startup has surpassed the critical hurdle of product/market fit—a challenge that leads to failure for ninety-five percent of early-stage ventures. This stage is indeed a rarity.

Fortunately, Grou.ps arrived at this juncture after OG. The site's traffic figures were limited only by our capacity to serve the visitors. Such was the influx of people that the site frequently slowed down, indicating a product/market fit and viral growth that many startups never achieve. Without these slowdowns, our growth could have been two or three times faster. I was ill-equipped to tackle this problem initially, frantically attempting to solve it with whatever talent was available. Our investment funds were disbursed monthly, leaving me without the luxury of hiring freely. Problem-solving fell largely on my shoulders, even as job applications from notable Silicon Valley companies filled my inbox. Though savvy engineers saw opportunity with us, I hesitated to work with anyone outside my close circle, those who understood our unique situation.

Amazon Web Services alleviated some of our issues, like hosting photos and videos, but couldn't yet address the scaling of the application and database itself. Amazon officials, visiting our office, mentioned a forthcoming database product, but we needed an immediate solution. My previous acquaintances, like Ali (Vargonen, who assisted with scaling Turkix) and Tolga (a colleague from Armador), were beyond their depth with our specific challenges. Even installing MySQL Cluster, a then high-tech solution, failed to inspire confidence and remained unused. A consultation with Yahoo engineer Jonathan yielded some insights, such as avoiding the costly "include\_once" in our code. Though we implemented this advice, the results were unimpressive. Jonathan was willing to work with us, even rejecting an offer from Zynga, but I was unable to meet his salary expectations.

During this period, friends like Taner from Facebook offered suggestions on using CDN and email systems, resulting in minor cost savings but not the desired impact. My interaction with the Yahoo Groups team, specifically Mark Risher and Gordon Strause, led to interesting discussions about Grou.ps's potential acquisition, but without tangible assistance. Erbil Karaman, a friend working at speeddate, a Silicon Valley startup, provided email reach tips, akin to what Taner had said, without truly addressing our core issue. Despite their limited



effect, I want to acknowledge these contributors, as we were part of a small minority in Silicon Valley during that time.

The ultimate solution came through collaboration with a consultancy firm named Percona, which included the founders of MySQL. By altering some queries, they significantly increased our site's speed. Though their services cost \$15,000 for a brief intervention, they successfully addressed the problem, earning every penny.

In retrospect, the technical scaling problem was both a triumph and a trial for Grou.ps. It signified success in a domain where many fail, yet it required innovation, collaboration, and persistence to navigate through. The journey underlines the complexity and dynamism of early-stage startup growth, where every problem solved opens a path to the next opportunity.

## Private Life Pains

*A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave  
- Mahatma Gandhi*

The challenges of technical scaling were not my sole concern during the 2010-2011 period. My personal life was in a state of flux as well.

In those early American days, while involved with Grou.ps since college, my relationships outside of Ariuna had never flourished. My focus was elsewhere, and I hardly had time for myself. With the closure of the relationship chapter with Ariuna and Müge, and some stability found in Grou.ps, I began to desire a meaningful relationship. The past trauma with Ariuna also weighed heavily on me.

During this period, I engaged with nonprofits, universities, and expat communities to promote Grou.ps, providing the platform for free and supporting it with minor sponsorships. While sponsoring an event aimed at bringing Turks together in San Francisco, I met a Korean-American woman named Tamara. She was a polished Columbia graduate working at Bloomberg, and after a brief courtship, we started a relationship.

This new romantic connection led me to move from temporary accommodations into a decent flat in North Beach. I furnished it comfortably and began to lead a more settled life. Though Tamara kept her studio in downtown SF, we lived together in North Beach. Life in San Francisco became more enjoyable, and yet I never allowed myself to lose focus on Grou.ps. Tamara and I often met for lunch and attended events together, even meeting Mark Zuckerberg at a web 2.0 gathering. Later, we sat together at an event called Crunchies, where I introduced

Tamara to Mark. I couldn't help but compare Tamara's overly enthusiastic demeanor to Priscilla's more reserved nature, something that didn't sit well with me.

The difficulties of scaling Grou.ps were mirrored in my relationship with Tamara. Strains emerged, partially fueled by Tamara's German-descendant stepmother, who exhibited racism, a trait I had encountered with other Germans in America. She sought to separate Tamara and me solely because of my Turkish background. Tensions peaked during a phone call, leading me to confront her directly, only to find a xenophobic and hostile response.

Our relationship with Tamara subsequently ended, partly due to her inability to stand up to her stepmother and her career ambitions of moving to Bloomberg's New York and London offices. My commitment to Silicon Valley meant that our paths were inevitably going to diverge.

This painful experience was not my last encounter with racism in America. As I will detail later, even investors questioned the .ps (Palestine) suffix in Grou.ps, dismissively stating that "There is no such state" when I explained its meaning. These challenges, both professional and personal, served as a constant reminder of the complexities of navigating life and business in a foreign land.

## Earthquake at the Summit

Power always thinks... that it is doing God's service when it is violating all his laws  
<sup>2</sup>- *John Adams*

{the tower}

One way or another, we overcame the scaling pains and rose to become the second-largest social network in the market, trailing Ning. We boasted over 8 million unique monthly visitors, which accounted for 5% of Facebook's traffic—a metric comparable to today's Facebook and Snapchat numbers.

Our increasing popularity led to groups with broad and diverse interests gathering on our platform, from LGBT communities to church groups. This pattern was not unusual, mirroring the spread of technologies like the internet and BitTorrent. Today, content that might be considered 'underground' constitutes nearly half of the internet's bandwidth.

Our content policy resembled platforms like Tumblr, Blogger, and WordPress. We allowed various content within certain limits. With more than 350,000 communities hosted, everything

seemed fine until we received startling news connected to Gina's return from the Davos event in Switzerland.

Facebook's rapid rise impressed investors, and they began to believe in the winner-takes-all logic in the social networking market, akin to Google's dominance in search engines. With Facebook thriving and Ning struggling to generate revenue, Gina either submitted her resignation or was forced out.

Mark Andreessen, one of the company's founders and a member of Facebook's Board of Directors, played a significant role in this shift. It wasn't difficult for him to choose between Ning and Facebook.

Starting Operating Gina, I could never have anticipated such drama. When Ning transitioned to a paid model, I saw opportunity for Grou.ps to gain users. The following days proved me right. Unexpectedly, Ning's collapse also impacted us. Although our user numbers increased, and advertising agencies showed interest, we appeared as a "loser" in investors' eyes.

Despite adult content hindering advertising revenue, we found success among ordinary people, including many teachers. Various languages highlighted educational content, with a significant traffic share from Brazil, Japan, Malaysia, and the USA. Fantasy role-playing games became an important theme for Grou.ps.

Although success seemed close, our financial reserves were dwindling. Meetings and trips intensified, and personal life moments like family visits and movie outings were treasured escapes.

Upon returning to Istanbul, the investor hunt continued. I encountered unfamiliar investment firms and bizarre interviews. A gloomy mood settled over me as I recognized that some meetings were fruitless and undermined my confidence.

My living situation changed, and I faced immense workload, sleep deprivation, and challenging presentations to investors. Even broken glasses and impolite rejections did not deter me. I pressed on, driven by the need to find solutions and secure investment.

The situation was paradoxical: prestigious funds responded professionally, while lesser-known ones were often dismissive. Their failure to recognize opportunities left me frustrated and perplexed.

The turbulent global financial climate, including the U.S. mortgage crisis and the 2000 dot-com bubble burst, added to the difficulty of securing funds during this period.

## Catapult Memories

*The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts*  
- Bertrand Russell

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer, so I left my three-square-foot room and got into my old-fashioned red Volkswagen Jetta and started touring Silicon Valley. It's what I always do in times of stress. Driving still feels like meditation and therapy to me.

When I woke up the next morning, all my worries turned out to be empty. Facebook wasn't interested in Grou.ps, as Ron mentioned. They were looking for a team of engineers based in Silicon Valley. Not long after, they bought a start-up company called Hot Potato Media; it was a nice product, but it was very new to the market and didn't even have a fraction of our user base. We heard it was a ten million dollar purchase. Their CEO, Justin Shaffer, continued to serve as product manager at the head of Facebook Groups until 2020.

A great opportunity had been missed, but I was not fully aware of it; on the contrary, I was happy that the name Grou.ps would not die. My thinking at the time was that by integrating ourselves with Yahoo and leveraging its vast resources, we could put Yahoo back on the strategic map against Facebook. Or we could do the same with MySpace. I believed these two would be better buys, where the potential of Grou.ps would be unlocked more.

But contrary to my belief, it would emerge in the coming years that, although it might sound bad at first, the best financial scenario for Grou.ps would be a Facebook purchase. Because the amount spoken for the deal was around ten million dollars; if some of it had been bought as stock (which Facebook always bought), the total would be nearly a billion dollars today. Less than a month after the Facebook negotiations, we were also talking to MySpace at the highest level. At that time, MySpace had two co-CEOs. Although this situation was criticized as double-headed in the media, the reins were in the hands of Mike Jones. My first meeting with MySpace was with their director of product development, Christina Wodtke. It was a meeting that I prepared very well for, having rehearsed with Catapult many times before. Christina gave a very good report to both our Ron and her senior management, making MySpace seriously interested in the purchase. On the financials, they delegated jobs to April Henry, head of corporate development. And Mike and I were e-mailing every day. However, all of a sudden, MySpace started to drag its feet. I couldn't understand why. Even though they had all the financials, and it was going to be a simple purchase for them, we hadn't heard from either Christina or Mike. However, they had been very eager to buy at first. Was this a bargaining tactic? Since Ron couldn't come up with an idea either, he soon got one of Christina's former coworkers involved. It was about to turn out that just then, News Corp (which owns MySpace) issued an internal ultimatum and decided that it would no longer fund MySpace and put it up for sale. This information would hit the world media in less than a month. The entire top team of MySpace, with whom we were not in contact, had been kicked out of the company within a few months.

Like a bride waiting for her fate, we kept meeting with other potential suitors. Another of these, Jive, was a similar product to Grou.ps but had a different business model and customer base. They were selling our free service to technology giants like Apple and Oracle for hundreds of thousands of dollars a month with better customer support and service. Unlike other meetings, we met with their CTO, Matt Tucker, at a bar in Palo Alto in a very friendly atmosphere. He bragged that Jive would go public and become a billion-dollar company. After seeing our financials, Jive realized we were struggling and tried to buy me instead of buying the company. This offer that Matt made privately to me seemed like a bribe, and I rejected it without thinking. Wasting no time, I relayed the situation to Mehtap, expecting her to make fun of Matt in her usual self-confidence, but she remained strangely silent. I was surprised. The Mehtap I knew would have given a more assertive answer. I guess she knew that Jive was the best option for me, but without me, their brightest and most salable company, the only company that could save the fund, would have disappeared, so she chose to remain silent. As a matter of fact, a few months later, she would reach the fund to save GHV thanks to Grou.ps. I think this was the most concrete exit opportunity I missed.

This loyalty of mine has cost me dearly, as you will read later in the book. Yes, it led to this book being written, and I gained a lot of experience, but my life was going to be ruined, so to speak. If I had known that day that the fund I thought was behind me was so 'depleted,' I would definitely have chosen the Jive option and moved on with my life. But my battery wasn't dead yet; I was just warming up to the game, as a serial entrepreneur, ready to work on a new and bigger idea. Finally, our big competitor Ning. When the calendars showed the end of 2010, we also talked to Ning, we met, and I met the whole management team. Ning wanted to buy our groups, not our company, so they would transfer our groups to themselves and pay per group. Since the paid model is a model that I don't trust anyway, I rejected this option from the beginning. Mehtap agreed with me, so we eliminated this option.

At the end of the year, the Mavi Marmara crisis in Gaza, which caused problems between Israel and Turkey, started to make itself felt. The big picture affected us too. I remember Ron approaching me, reminding me of this development, saying "sorry we can't sell Grou.ps anymore" like it was yesterday. I couldn't understand; I was so focused on my own work that I was not aware of what was going on in Turkey; I could not even imagine that macro balances could affect us so much.

The Catapult story did not end there. As a final effort, we studied the financials with Phil Wohl. Among these financial plans was the development of a new subscription-based model on Grou.ps, which was completely free until then, just like Ning. In the plans we prepared, this model looked like it would bring us hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue in a few years. Even though I thought it was early to implement the plan, these financial projections would be our lifeline. Because we would soon meet an investor with a telecom background who would be familiar with and love this model. But whether the end would be good, I will leave that to you in the later parts of the book.

## Managing Staff

As boys, they said they would die for each other. As men, they did  
- *Once Upon a Time in America*

I had assembled a strong team, Mustafa being a standout. An engineer and a savvy recruiter, he was my Greek-immigrant right-hand man, exuding the very essence of a “Director of Engineering.” Despite his youth, he surpassed expectations, though his frequent sick leaves, incessant questioning, and salary demands often weighed on me. In 2010, when Turkish companies like Gittigidiyor, Yemeksepeti, or Trendyol were nonexistent, our journey to create a world brand was perceived as madness. Nonetheless, we were a committed and inspired team. Mustafa's first recruit was İsmail, an Economics student at Yıldız Technical University, who handled customer service—a role we rather underestimated. He was talkative to the point of it being costly, and I often found myself needing to caution him. Still, İsmail's honesty contrasted sharply with Mustafa's guardedness. İsmail's candid nature sometimes unintentionally exposed Mustafa's excuses.

Over time, office greed surfaced. Salary became everyone's focal point, and the positive news that Grou.ps was funded paradoxically spawned a negative environment. In the hustle of work, I neglected even to consider new resumes. Perhaps my mistake was relying too heavily on Mustafa for human resources instead of transforming Grou.ps into a 'developer factory.' Had I read Ben Horowitz's "What You Do Is Who You Are" then, I might have heeded the wisdom that your company's culture is how decisions are made in your absence.

Focusing on optimizing Grou.ps for an acquisition, I ignored building 'company culture.' Faith in my investors waned, as did my optimism for new investment opportunities.

The true lesson here is recognizing the importance of having multiple founders. They provide backup, support, and reassurance, especially if one is single. Even Jeff Bezos, seen as a 'sole founder,' wouldn't have reached such heights without his trusting wife by his side.

Despite my personal feelings toward him, I must acknowledge Y-Combinator founder Paul Graham. He had reservations about me being the sole founder of Grou.ps. While his lack of faith seemed like a missed opportunity, Grou.ps and my tenacity were indeed exceptions.

Though I was irate at the time, I later understood the complexity of being a sole founder, conceding that he had been right all along.

## Violent Days

Build courage when courage seems to fail; regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith;  
create hope when hope becomes forlorn  
- *General Douglas MacArthur*

The most adventurous period of my life, and indeed for Grou.ps, took place during the tail-end of 2010 and the early days of 2011.

Times were tough. We were struggling to secure the funding we needed and our resources were dwindling. I felt like I was the only one truly concerned about our dire situation. At a meeting of investors at Plug'n Play, I made what felt like a last-ditch effort to secure funding. I was so distressed that my speech became a jumbled mess. I doubt anyone truly understood what I was trying to convey. Why was Grou.ps, a company frequently featured in Techcrunch, struggling to make its case among the smaller startups? This wasn't about ego, but a matter of self-respect for me. Despite all my efforts, I was losing my dignity. How could it be that Grou.ps, a titan in its industry, couldn't secure funding?

In desperation, I returned to Istanbul and met with Cem. He invited me to the Pronet office in Haliç Flatofis, an unattractive and gloomy office where he spent time with his close friend Alp Saul, the founder and CEO of Pronet. He made me an offer – one that felt wrong at the time. He claimed he could secure a million-dollar investment, but at a steep cost: the investors would take majority stake and crush the existing shareholders. This seemed absurd to me, considering Grou.ps was far from a sinking ship. I felt threatened by this offer, as it seemed more like a "recap", but it was inadequately explained at the time. In hindsight, a recap might have been the right course of action, but Cem didn't delve into details when he saw my negative reaction. Out of desperation, I decided to visit the office of Emre Kurttepelı, the founder of MyNet and a well-established name in the Turkish internet world. Emre, a graduate of Columbia University, was not particularly interested in my pitch. Despite our strong numbers, he didn't seem enthusiastic by the end of our brief meeting.

As I was dealing with these issues, I was also handling a series of legal complications forwarded to me by GHV. I was threatened with new injunctions and suspension from the company on a daily basis. This led to the engagement of a New York attorney named Joe, who was also dealing with threats from GHV.

While I was focused on product development, I was oblivious to the civil war brewing among the investors, which was having an immense impact on the company's progress. Some investors wanted to pull out while others wanted to maintain the company's structure. This internal conflict was confusing to me. Why was this happening when the company was doing so well? As things spiraled, I found myself relying more on Mehtap, who organized a pivotal meeting when the company was at its lowest point. This was a meeting with Emre Gürkan, the right-

hand man of Paul Doany, the CEO of Türk Telekom. Paul, who had a background in telecom, understood the significance of social media early on. This meeting paved the way for Grou.ps to transition from a free advertising model to a "Freemium" model, which allowed us to monetize our service.

Despite our struggles, we managed to secure Paul Doany as an investor towards the end of 2011. However, the \$3 million investment he made wasn't going to be sufficient. Even as we began to see light at the end of the tunnel, I knew that we were still going to face significant challenges. We needed a much larger investment, and I regret not being more assertive and vocal about this need.

This period was full of ups and downs. At times, it felt like I was in the middle of a war that I didn't understand, with my personal security threatened and fears of serious legal repercussions due to tax debts constantly looming. Nevertheless, we soldiered on, and though the journey was fraught with challenges, I learned invaluable lessons and experienced some of the most memorable moments of my career.

## Acquisition of Social Project

*It always seems impossible until it's done*  
- Nelson Mandela

One of the proudest moments in my career at Grou.ps was when we acquired a competitor called Social Project (SP) from MTV (company name Viacom). SP, originally known as TagWorld, was a well-known Silicon Valley startup that had been acquired by MTV for eighty million dollars three years prior to our purchase. This acquisition made headlines as it was the first time an internet company in Turkey had bought a foreign company.

At the time of the acquisition, SP was in a bad shape due to the volatility in Ning, which had affected both our company and SP. MTV, the new owners of SP, were no longer willing to invest more money and energy into the product. Despite having significant financial backing, SP was struggling in the market against us and Ning, leading Viacom to lose hope and seek a buyer for SP. As the second largest company in our field, they approached us with an offer.

Although Grou.ps was not in a strong financial position, we were considered competent by MTV. Realizing we needed the money, I had multiple phone conversations with MTV executives, and they invited me to a face-to-face meeting at the Wynn Hotel in Las Vegas. While they were in formal attire, I attended the meeting in jeans and a T-shirt, which did not seem to faze them. We had a productive meeting, and I proposed that we incorporate SP into our structure while MTV invested in us. They acknowledged the difficulty but agreed to provide cash through a bridge financing of 100 thousand dollars.



In essence, we acquired an eighty million dollar venture for free, expanded our user base, and MTV gained a tax advantage by recording losses on their financial statements. This acquisition proved to be a lifesaver for Grou.ps. Without the financial injection from MTV, we would have faced closure, as our critical service provider, Amazon, was on the verge of cutting off services due to our debts.

## Enter Censorships

True friends stab you in the front.  
- *Oscar Wilde*

Grou.ps had evolved into a global phenomenon. News had spread that it was banned in Iran, and that access to it was being deliberately slowed down in China. However, I never anticipated that we would hear of a site-closure from Turkey. On January 21, 2011, the same day I went to the hospital for laser surgery to correct my nearsightedness, Grou.ps was shut down. Arda Kutsal, the founder of Webrazzi, one of our prominent technology blogs, made the announcement:

"The decision to block the service, which enables users to create social networks according to their interests, was enacted under an administrative measure by the Telecommunication Communication Presidency on January 14, 2011, with decision number 421.02.00.2011-016019."

I immediately contacted Başak Purut, the attorney representing Grou.ps, to inquire about the blockage. Purut indicated that they did not have any information about the rationale behind the decision but assured me they would take appropriate action.

The blocking likely resulted from potentially objectionable content within one of the social networks hosted by Grou.ps. If our assumption is correct, the fact that the hosting provider was blocked due to an issue on one of its subsites follows the same logic as previous blocks on platforms like Wordpress.com and YouTube.

Since the service was blocked on a Friday evening, I anticipated no developments or statements from the site administration over the weekend. In the following week, I expected that the questionable content would be removed, and the provisional blocking decision lifted. This pattern has become standard procedure in such precautionary measures, as evidenced by various past examples.

We will update this article as soon as there are further developments or official explanations on this subject.

The decision to block Grou.ps was not entirely incomprehensible. After all, the site had massive traffic, and legal teams from platforms like YouTube and Wordpress had been grappling with similar issues. However, during those already stressful days when I felt overwhelmed, this event was an additional strain on my hectic schedule. Fortunately, thanks to the diligent efforts of my lawyer Başak, we were able to restore access to Grou.ps in Turkey within a week.

## Section 5

### The Light At The End of the Tunnel

2011-2019

#### **It all started well; marriage**

*I never learned how to tune a harp, or play upon a lute; but I know how to raise a small and inconsiderable city to glory and greatness*  
- Themistocles

At the close of 2010 and the dawn of 2011, my life resembled a roller coaster, mirroring the tumultuous ups and downs of Grou.ps. Despite the overwhelming stress and fatigue, I began to devote time to my private life. This period of struggle made me realize that being alone was no longer an option for me. As the sole founder of my company, I was already grappling with the challenges of forging ahead with limited resources, both in my professional and private life. Now, at the age of twenty-seven, I thought it might be the right time to get married.

I harbored the belief that if I waited to marry until after I had amassed a fortune, women might be attracted to me solely for my money, casting doubt on the authenticity of their feelings. From this perspective, I considered this the ideal time to find someone who would love me for who I was, rather than for my wealth. Although my mother had always advised me, "Don't get married before thirty-five," marriage had never truly crossed my mind until this pivotal moment.

I promptly joined the Mac fitness club in Kanyon AVM to get in shape. My limited social circle in Turkey meant that I was mostly drawn to people I already knew, like a few old friends from college. A relationship seemed to blossom with one of them, but her blunt remark that I was "weak" shattered me from the outset. She was aware of my financial challenges, knowing that despite running a million-dollar company, I didn't have a high salary or even my own place in Istanbul, and that I didn't come from a wealthy family. Her comment was harsh but not entirely unjust. Painful as it was, I had to move on from that relationship.

Heartbroken, I resolved to invest in myself. I rented a six-month residence in Kanyon to be close to our newly leased office, decorating it with my parents' old furniture. I was now living in one of Istanbul's most elite areas.

Fortune then smiled upon me. Driven by a newfound fear of loneliness, I resolved never to be alone again. I hired my best friend from middle school, Ahmet Tatari, as the company's COO. However, I was unaware that Ahmet was also grappling with family health issues at the time.

One afternoon, Ahmet invited me to meet the girl he intended to marry. I was introduced to her friend, Sena, completely unaware that I had just met the woman who would become my first wife. I was instantly taken with her beauty and grace. Four months later, we were married, a whirlwind of preparations and rituals unfolding during that time.

Buying the ring was a personal experience, undertaken with Ahmet rather than my colleague, Mehtap, who had offered to help. I even planned to invite all the Golden Horn people to the wedding during a turbulent period, but none would come. The Mustache Old Man, an early investor, had once joked, "don't get married." Perhaps his advice was serious.

I would later realize that marriage wasn't a decision to be made so hastily, but I can never say I regret it. This marriage brought the brightest light into my life—my daughter.

Furthermore, my marriage paved the way for Ahmet, helping him convince the family of the girl he loved to agree to their union.

Our own intimate wedding was held on May 15, 2011, in Istanbul's Sultanahmet district, marking a new chapter in my life.

## The Important Meeting at Swissotel

*You can recognize a pioneer by the arrows in their back  
- anonymous*

On May 16, 2011, the day after my wedding, I woke up early to attend one of the most pivotal meetings of my life. It was set to take place at the Swissotel, a place I had heard much about but never visited. This time, I abandoned my usual 'Steve Jobs fashion,' donning my most elegant suit and the Rolex Submariner, a wedding gift from my wife's family, before jumping into a taxi.

The meeting's significance lay in the fact that GHV's Limited Partners (LPs - investors of the fund) wanted to meet the companies in the portfolio. It would be our first face-to-face with the owners of the GHV fund, and the gravity of the situation had weighed on me for the past year. Arriving at one of Swissotel's grand halls, I was greeted by prominent faces like Ali Koç, Güler Sabancı, Murat Özyeğin, Osman Kavala, and others. Everyone, it seemed, was there except for Paul, who at that time was only an investor in Grou.ps, not GHV.

We settled around a vast meeting table, a mix of LPs and startup representatives. Ali Koç presided at the head, while Güler Sabancı sat beside me. The room's atmosphere was tense, and I could see stress on the faces of the other entrepreneurs. In contrast, I felt invigorated and at ease, brimming with a confidence as though I were the one who had gathered everyone around the table.

This self-assurance carried into my speech as I proudly presented Grou.ps's numbers. No one interrupted except Güler Sabancı, who engaged me in a brief and curious conversation. Murat Özyeğin and Osman Kavala remained silent, with Kavala, in particular, observing me as though he were an extraterrestrial studying humans.

The stress amongst the others might have stemmed from the realization of our dire situation, but I felt accustomed to this tension. It might have been because I was the only startup to have received fresh investment from outside of GHV. Despite my strong performance, it became clear during the meeting that GHV's dissolution was imminent. As the best-performing startup in the fund, we were not yet generating revenue, but instead 'burning' money. Some investors, lacking a Silicon Valley vision, saw this as a negative sign. Perhaps they were still scarred by the dotcom bubble burst of 2000 or the financial crisis of 2008.

Among the LPs, Ali Koç left a distinct impression on me. According to Mehtap, he was one of the few who decided to remain with the fund. This didn't surprise me; both he and Kavala seemed most in tune with Silicon Valley thinking.

Today, tales abound about how major capital groups in Turkey missed the emerging technology economy (e.g., Rahmi Koç's telecom regret, Ali Sabancı's recounting at events). The Koç group is no exception, but Ali Koç struck me as a businessperson with foresight and patience. I fondly recall discussing Apple shares with him and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman at an Endeavor meeting in Çırağan, an experience that must have been a highlight of my life.

## The Kanyon Office

*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger - Nietzsche*

With Paul's involvement, the money deposited into our safe fell short of the full three million we had agreed upon. Unlike GHV, which sent payments little by little every month, TIMAR sent a significant amount right away. I was struck by a massive "one million dollars" statement in our bank account. However, within days, this amount was directed to pay off our \$150,000 AWS debt, our ballooning legal bills from GHV internal conflicts, salaries owed to staff, and Mehtap's company loan. Almost half was used up on the first day.

On the subject of Mehtap's loan, as Grou.ps transitioned from GHV investment to TIMAR, Mehtap took his place in the story as TIMAR's partner. During financial difficulties with GHV, he bailed me out by personally investing the funds needed to continue our services without interruption. Mehtap's contribution came at a time when Grou.ps was generating excitement from Techcrunch coverage, while accumulating warnings about service interruptions and AWS expenses. Although GHV later confused me by claiming they had paid the debt, not Mehtap, I was primarily focused on keeping the service running. This was vital, as even short interruptions could spell the end of Grou.ps. A lesson learned from the fall of Friendster, which lost its crown to MySpace due to site slowdowns.

The first thing I did with the new funds was to set up a new office and attempt to rehire my old colleagues. It wasn't easy, as we had damaged their trust once before. They now viewed us as a 'company on the brink of bankruptcy,' even though many were just starting their careers (myself included).

After a temporary stay in Maslak Giz Plaza, we settled in Kanyon Apartment. Despite the name, it was a typical building, but the address added prestige. Later, this location became the hub for several tech initiatives in Turkey, including Groupon. Perhaps we initiated this trend.

As expected, some former staff declined to return. My essential engineer, Mustafa, agreed to return but with reluctance and high salary demands. I acceded because I needed him but also began seeking a more reliable alternative. I found Engin, a talented former put.io employee and CTO. I also enlisted Volkan Özçelik for front-end development and others to create a dream team.

This team made significant progress, enhancing the software's durability and design. We made a major infrastructure investment, reducing our monthly expenses.

But I knew we needed more. Seeking an English-speaking American expat in Turkey for customer support proved challenging. After one rejection, Roberta (Davenport) accepted, elevating our customer service.

Chen, a Chinese-born US citizen, was assigned CFO duties but fell short, causing problems with investors and within the company.

A famous VC once told me that a CEO's duties were hiring the right people and defining the vision. But I learned that in Turkey, the real challenge was not human resources but money. Overindulging employees could inflate their egos, leading to subpar work.

Such a team was expensive, and our operating costs soared. This was contrary to my "underfunded" philosophy. But two factors swayed me: Mehtap's assurance of limitless funding, and the disproportionate funding among portfolio companies. It felt as though I was competing with them. I sensed that funding was not aligned with targets or success but was distributed like uniform wages among football players.

The signal was clear: spend money faster. Despite acting sensibly and achieving high goals, no one seemed to care. We were serving millions with a 10-15 person team in a humble apartment in Kuştepe, while others lounged in villas with fewer responsibilities. The financial landscape was an inconsistent and perplexing game, challenging our principles and strategic thinking.

## Persistence

*I have a belief that life isn't about balance, because balance is perfection. Rather, it's about catching the ball before it hits the floor.*

Carol Bartz, Yahoo CEO'su

In 2012, we launched a Freemium model for Grou.ps, which seemed promising initially. But over time, I recognized an urgent need to adapt. Driven by financial desperation, I made one of my career's biggest mistakes by abruptly switching to a fully paid model (Premium). This was something I neither believed in nor approved of, but it was necessary to avoid running out of money.

The move led to a revenue range of forty to sixty thousand dollars per month in 2013, reaching an annualized revenue run-rate of one million dollars. While this was an encouraging figure, considering the near-zero cost of the product sold, we faced issues. Although we were "gross profitable," the platform's development and maintenance required employing many people, causing us to burn through cash. This situation is common in tech companies and is not typically problematic if growth continues. Yet, our lack of easy access to funding created a more pressing challenge for us.

Our monthly income dwindled to ten thousand dollars, and I found myself facing military service and relocation to the USA. This coincided with a moment when we were about to deplete our first million dollars in the safe after TIMAR. I urgently contacted Mehtap to request the remaining funds, only to find her unusually reluctant. This communication problem reminded me of Malcolm Gladwell's example of Korean pilots in "Outliers." My subsequent arguments with Mehtap led to tension, mistrust, and unfulfilled promises, further escalating our financial crisis.

Thankfully, Paul, another involved party, intervened and resolved the situation. His professionalism reassured me, and the remaining funds were soon in our account.

Despite these challenges, I felt like a champion, having brought a struggling company closer to profitability without substantial investments in monetization. Nevertheless, I couldn't ignore the fact that our shift to the Premium model had eroded trust with many users. I realized that Robert Bosch's statement, "I'd rather lose money than lose people's trust," should have guided our actions.

We needed to start a new investment round, but this required convincing our current investors, who controlled over sixty percent of the company. Conversations with other

investors, such as Numan Numan, highlighted the importance of backing and belief from our primary stakeholders.

Sadly, Mehtap's erratic behavior persisted, coupled with personal struggles and new partnerships. In an attempt to convince Mehtap, I presented data about Wix's financial standing and introduced a new Social PaaS vision for Grou.ps. But all of these efforts seemed futile, as either they were weary of investing further or misjudging my intentions.

Reflecting on those days, I'm still baffled by the behavior and decisions of some involved. We worked tirelessly to keep the company afloat, navigating complex negotiations, investor relationships, and personal challenges. Yet the lack of support, understanding, and alignment with our investors nearly led to bankruptcy. Looking back, I can see the lessons learned but cannot fully grasp the underlying motives or rationale of those tumultuous times.

## Google+

Ideally never absorb information without predicting it first. Then you can update both 1) your knowledge but also 2) your generative model.  
- *Andrej Karpathy*

In the background, my main investor, GHV, was rocked by volatility. Partners dispersed, the Wise and Mustachioed Elders moved away, and Paul bought the majority stake in GHV. The threatening messages ceased, but the conflict between Cem Sertoğlu and Mehtap continued to affect me.

One day, Tim Draper, one of GHV's LPs, invited me to the office at DFJ on Sand Hill Road, where he and another tall DFJ member questioned me about Cem's complaints concerning Mehtap and the fund. Their inquiries were incisive, but I maintained objectivity in my responses. I felt respected by Tim and wondered why we hadn't connected sooner. I lamented missed opportunities, such as a failed introduction to Yahoo CEO Carol Bartz. Instead, we were introduced to questionable characters like Iranian Reza.

Tim's charisma soon paid off. Months later, he made an invaluable introduction for me, forwarding a letter I had written about Grou.ps to Google CEO Eric Schmidt. Eric's response was quick, and within a week I was meeting with Vic Gundotra, CEO of Google+. This led to promising conversations with others, including Neeraj Arora, who



would soon leave Google+ for Whatsapp. Our discussions were encouraging, and I quickly assembled my team's resumes to continue the process.

However, a series of unfortunate events stalled our progress. We faced unexpected rejection from Google, seemingly due to internal politics, possibly tied to Eric's impending departure as CEO. Larry Page was set to take over, shifting the company's dynamics and resulting in our efforts falling through.

I took a substantial risk, moving my core team members to Palo Alto to prepare for an acquisition that never came. It was a frustrating experience, made even more so by the knowledge that we were an exceptional team. We had even attracted attention from Facebook, yet our efforts seemed cursed by misfortune.

In retrospect, the tumultuous transition of power within Google at that time might have been the cause of our failure. Eric soon left, followed by Page in 2019, paving the way for Sundar Pichai. The instability of those years may have been the underlying reason for our disappointment. The bright promise of collaboration was left unrealized, a reminder of the unpredictable nature of the tech industry.

## LoveBucks, Babyzilla & Kontextful

*Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm*  
Winston Churchill

We were in the throes of reinvigorating Grou.ps, stationed at the base of Kanyon AVM. While my colleagues focused on the continuity of our site, I was wrapped up in thoughts of increasing share value and making the company more fluid to satisfy both investors and myself.

The sale of Grou.ps was stalling. We faced fierce competition from industry giants and new entrants alike, and efforts to break into the Turkish market met with disappointment. Grou.ps was no longer considered an innovative business; it had a product/market fit, but competitors were multiplying. The path forward seemed to lie in new products and projects.

One such venture was LoveBucks, an idea I personally coded. It was a content monetization system, involving a "Love" button akin to Facebook's "Like," but with direct

financial benefit. We offered a tiered membership system, allowing users to “Love” content, which in turn rewarded publishers with a share of the revenue. Though the concept was promising, getting quality publishers on board and converting consumers into paying members proved challenging.

<https://techcrunch.com/2012/06/29/grou-ps-launches-lovebuck-a-new-monetization-platform-for-online-publishers/>

Despite early agreements with well-known blogs, the number of members grew slowly, and investor appetite remained unstimulated. Our plan to reinvent social media business models and potentially sell to Facebook fell flat. Facebook's refusal to share revenue felt like a dead-end, and we were only able to garner attention in the tech media. LoveBucks had the potential to become something significant, but we lacked the budget to back it.

Following LoveBucks, I experimented with Kontextful, a Chrome extension for sharing content within specific Facebook or Grou.ps groups. Despite utilizing AI technologies, it failed to attract Facebook's attention.

Lastly, we pivoted to launch Babyzilla, a mini social network for families, inspired by my own need to share private family moments. Though reported on Techcrunch and garnering interest from Ox Group, it too failed to achieve significant traction.

In the end, these new products were insufficient to deliver a triumphant sale. We appeared too “hungry” for a deal, our desperation for an exit and limited cash supply leaving a negative impression. Our consumptive appearance held us back, and the breakthrough we needed remained elusive.

## AltayOS & Yahoo

*I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.*  
Thomas Edison

LoveBucks, Babyzilla, and Kontextful Tiny were breakthroughs showcasing our innovative prowess and agility as a startup, likened to the rapidity of a cheetah. After missing the merger and acquisition (M&A) opportunity, Facebook's interest eluded us. Initially, I sneered at Facebook, intrigued but uncommitted. My primary target was

always Yahoo. I believed I could make a significant impact there, potentially turning around a rich but failing company.

The acquisition discussions with Yahoo in 2009 and 2010 were not the end. My hopes were rekindled when I discovered my MySpace contact, April Henry, had moved to Yahoo as COO, under newly-appointed CEO Marissa Mayer. I promptly emailed April and set up a dinner at Il Fornaio Restaurant in Palo Alto, inspired by the venue's connection to Steve Jobs' negotiation with Apple. The meeting was not merely about an M&A offer, but a chance for me to present a vision to save Yahoo from competitors like Google and Facebook.

Although Grou.ps was operating smoothly, the absence of new investment and exit opportunities led me to focus on innovation. Lovebucks, Kontextful, and Babyzilla were small ventures; Yahoo needed something bigger. AltayOS was an operating system that would unite all my experiences and work on smartphones like Android, transforming Palm's open-source WebOS. AltayOS's focus was social interaction, offering a new and different approach to user engagement.

Before discussing the project with big companies, I began applying for patents. This added expense was essential, a lesson learned from previous missteps. With April, I adopted a more assertive and almost aggressive stance. After Yahoo acquired Citizen Sports, I openly questioned April's management strategy. This uncharacteristic bravado caught Marissa Mayer's attention, leading to more intense discussions.

However, my persistence also led to some awkward encounters, such as an attempt to engage Marissa's husband at a conference. Nevertheless, our dialogue with Yahoo progressed slowly. As time went on, Marissa Mayer's era ended abruptly, heralding the decline of Yahoo. I would see it sold to Verizon for \$5 billion, with its remaining assets managed by Altaba.

The situation in 2017 became a farce, with Altaba's holdings in Alibaba and Yahoo Japan worth \$40 billion, almost ten times the size of Yahoo's own assets. My dream of saving Yahoo and promoting AltayOS ended, leaving me with lessons about humility, value creation, and not being blinded by power.

While Facebook grew into a global giant, Yahoo, my once-beloved dream, collapsed. The story showed that even the seemingly indomitable could be defeated.

Reflecting on my early schooling, I recalled "domestic goods week," which encouraged support for local products. As I matured, I recognized that preference for foreign

products often prevailed in my home country. But I held hope for AltayOS, even though the "domestic-national" concept was not yet popular in Turkey. Perhaps, had it been embraced sooner, AltayOS could have become an internationally recognized brand originating from Turkey.

## The Fall Season

*In the long run, the power of the people is much stronger than the people in power.*  
- Bono, U2

It was 2014. With the start of tweeting in Turkish during the Gezi Protests, I lost half of my foreign followers and, due to political content, half of my domestic Twitter followers. Negative comments were being written about me on Ekşisözlük (a Turkish social network and online community). I had lost the little morale I had left. Perhaps I should have kept my opinions to myself and not become involved in politics, just as my mother had advised me when I was little. But the inner voice that didn't keep quiet when founding Grou.ps wouldn't be silent here either. Twenty-five thousand accounts unfollowed me within a few weeks. Maybe I had fallen into the trap of social media manipulation; I don't know, but I thought something was wrong in the country, and I chose to speak up, drawing strength from Atatürk's Address to the Youth.

Grou.ps continued to hemorrhage financially, and I had to intervene. First, on my father-in-law's advice, I moved the office to Istanbul Vision Park in Yenibosna, close to our home. Then, gradually reducing staff, I eventually wound up alone again, laying off my colleagues. Even someone who has never managed can imagine the bad feeling of having to fire staff, especially since these were the people I had fought side by side with for a long time. The days when I had to beg them to work long hours in the office were not far behind.

On the other hand, we were living in my wife's house in Yeşilköy. Even though I didn't know what the word meant at the time, I had actually become a complete moocher. Like the 'founders' who did the same job as me but produced much lower-level projects, I still couldn't even receive a decent salary. Besides a few thousand dollars I'd scrimped and saved for a rainy day, I had neither a house nor a steady income. I wasn't living the life I had dreamed of, and my investors didn't care.

From the start, Cem, who I turned to when I was in a bind, had grown more and more distant from me because he was devoting his time to the new investment fund, EarlyBird. Since our last meeting, we only texted occasionally. Previously, since he didn't manage a professional investment fund, I could understand his not putting up money or offering any financial support, but the fact that all the investment talks we had after EarlyBird fell through, with no results, had left me utterly disheartened. I had thought that with EarlyBird, he would have more extensive resources and would take an interest in Grou.ps, of which he proudly claimed to be an advisor and even an investor. My wife Merve, after reviewing our old correspondence, told me that Cem would not help Grou.ps and encouraged me to give up hope. She was not wrong.

Moreover, I was about to become a father. My wife was pregnant.

I couldn't handle this emotional intensity. When things were not going well at work, and I couldn't figure a way out, I heeded the advice of my close friend and veteran entrepreneur Onur Günday and buried myself in computer games for a while. It was like meditation. I understood how gamers felt and thought I was getting closer to the audience I served by experiencing this. I had lost a lot of motivation in life; I never remember being so far removed from productivity. But at least I thought I was still maintaining my sanity.

Merve, perhaps due to the effects of pregnancy and changing countries, withdrew into herself. It seemed as if she was in love with her life in Istanbul, and I was in love with my work. And her increasing silence was not helping me. During this period, I tried things I had never done before to make her happy. Holidays, various activities... But she seemed to see that the Titanic was going to hit an iceberg; she had lost faith that Grou.ps would succeed, and this was affecting our family life. My continued management of the Istanbul office over the phone or talking to investors even during our "honeymoon" must have also played a role, of course.

I gained a lot of weight during this challenging period. I was clinically obese. Like any entrepreneur who sees a problem and focuses on the solution, I went straight to the nearest hospital to see a dietitian. She asked if I drank too much alcohol; my liver was incredibly fatty. When I told her I never drank, not even a sip, she said, "then you must be under a lot of stress." She was right. Being a father divided between two countries at 29, and the founder and CEO of Grou.ps were not easy tasks. The real diagnosis came from an internal medicine doctor in Nişantaşı. After jokingly suggesting liposuction, she examined me and said I had insulin resistance. A strict prescription awaited me, involving diet, exercise, and diabetes pills.

So I began spending time in the gym. I was unaware that the thoughts I had while using the boring exercise equipment would inspire the next big idea and that Grou.ps' new course would be charted here. Steve Jobs said we could only connect the dots looking backward; I was continuing to plot new ones for the future. The new product we were going to develop foresaw a significant change in the sports/health industry.

## The Winter & Divorce

*There is no such thing as work-life balance. Everything worth fighting for unbalances your life.*  
- Alain de Botton

I was increasingly feeling that something had gone wrong in my marriage. I also confided in Mehtap, whom I met a few times at Ataköy Plus, about this family situation. I thought that maybe they would not be insensitive to the personal difficulties I was experiencing if they didn't care about the company's blood loss. But Mehtap had an indifferent demeanor. What I was saying seemed to be going in one ear and out the other. Either she didn't believe me, or she wanted to punish me for the disagreement we had had earlier, I'm not sure.

In the Bible, Genesis 2:24 says, "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Maybe the lesson I needed to take in my marriage was this. Spending most of my time in the USA for work was wearing on my relationship.

Finally, the distrust in financial matters would be the last blow to our relationship. Naturally, I had confidence in myself and my vision for technology. From the cloud to social networks, whatever technological leap I had believed in until that day had shown great growth, and the market values of the companies I was interested in had soared on the stock exchange. The first angel investment opportunity came up in December 2013 when I was invited as a speaker to an event in Istanbul. One of the listeners approached me. The Lebanese-born, dark-skinned, bespectacled man with curly hair was clearly different from his comments. After sharing my contact information, we arranged a meeting at Kanyon Mall to hear about his new venture. He looked very excited, and the

business he was doing was similar to Uber's at a time when it was just emerging, and I hadn't even heard its name. I didn't have much money, but I wanted to invest a small amount from my savings as an angel investor in this venture. But this "brilliant" idea was too fanciful to be approved by our family council. I missed this opportunity, which was Ali Halabi's Volt Lines. The venture, which would later include Çiçeksepeti founder Emre Aydın as a partner, became part of Dubai-based Swvl with a successful exit in 2022. Thus, I had missed an early angel investment opportunity and had seen clearly that I could not 'be myself' in this relationship.

Not much time passed before I was invited to an event at Bahçeşehir University's Bosphorus-view Beşiktaş campus. I spoke at the event and answered questions, but I was quite uncomfortable. Because things were not going well in the background, neither in my private life nor in my professional life. There's a recording of that conference on YouTube, and even today, watching it reminds me of the fatigue I felt that day. I barely got through the conference. I had finished my job and fulfilled my duty. I usually don't answer calls from unknown numbers, but that day I felt like answering, and the call was like a cold shower for me. It was an old woman's voice on the phone. She was a lawyer. She was calling to convey the divorce request.

Having seen constant fighting in the family I grew up in, I was in favor of unhappy marriages ending. So I accepted without any fuss.

Naturally, I was unprepared. I didn't know what was going to happen. After the event, I turned the steering wheel towards Bakırköy Courthouse, where the lawsuit would be opened. I didn't know who to talk to or what to do. I couldn't tell my parents about it, as I didn't want them to get upset, and what could they do anyway? My mother would turn it into a big drama, and my father wouldn't, couldn't help. Another task had fallen on me. I walked into the first law office I found, looking at the lawyer signs across from the Bakırköy Courthouse. There were two young lawyers inside. I briefly mentioned the situation. There was an approach that was the complete opposite of the professionalism I had seen in America. "Ooo you're doing good," said one. "Why would you stay married, just let it go," said the other. We agreed on a price without even signing a contract, and they said they would defend me. It was clear from every aspect of them that they were jackals looking only at the money they would receive, but I didn't have the time or connections to look for a better alternative.

It wasn't long before I attended the first hearing in my life. My head was filled with nothing but this; I was scared the day I went to the courthouse. Just as I was beginning to think about backing out, a yellow ladybug I saw on the ground strangely encouraged

me. The tiny creature I stared at for a long time seemed to engrave in my mind the sentence 'This must be for the best.' The hearing ended in a few minutes.

I was not aware of the challenges that awaited me in the future. But it seemed as if the elderly lady who was the opposing lawyer knew or sensed it. I remember her looking at me with genuine compassion as I left.

It wasn't long after the divorce that I began to experience great difficulties. There were times when I came from America to Turkey and couldn't see my daughter Defne, times when she wasn't shown to me. Later, attempts were made to take Defne's custody from me; in court petitions, I was depicted as a monster with slanders. It even reached a point where, in 2017, after leaving Defne with them during a weekend visit, I was assaulted by ten people in the heart of Yeşilköy - no exaggeration. A group first rear-ended my car and then attacked me when I got out. I got away with a broken nose. Naturally, because of the timing, I suspected my former wife's father in this attack, filed a lawsuit, and the incident was referred to the court. But in the end, the incident turned into an 'unidentified perpetrator.' As I lost the cases one by one, my trust in our legal system would also be eroded.

In many events spread over the next five years, I would learn how justice had collapsed in Turkey, how even official institutions had become degenerate, how capitalism had corrupted Turkey, and the importance of the family concept. But it seemed too late to learn some of them. Despite all this, I did not give up on either Turkey or Defne. She shouldn't grow up without a father, and she certainly shouldn't grow up in difficulties like I did.

## Working with Telcos in Turkey

None are so hopelessly enslaved as those who falsely believe they are free.  
3

- Goethe

I had previously mentioned how different an investor Paul Doany was. The reason was his effort to introduce us to someone using his connections, not just investing money. Before this, only my mentor Cem had done this, but he was not an investor at the time.



Paul was going to make an effort to add value to the telecommunications sector and make money for us by introducing us to people he knew at Turkish Telecom, Turkcell, Superonline, and Vodafone during that interim period.

We had dozens of meetings in 2013-2014. In every meeting, while there were ten or fifteen corporate employees across big tables, I was always alone. They would ask questions, sentences would go back and forth across the table like a ping pong match. In these meetings, I saw how rigid the bureaucracy was within the companies and how intrigue was everywhere. For instance, I found a security flaw in one firm. I also revealed that the name of a social project prepared by a big brand was the same as an old Armenian king, causing the product's name to be changed. Like this, I may have provided many companies with a lot of services for free...

Ultimately, we were unable to gain any benefit from these meetings. It would not be wrong to say that my not being a good salesperson may have had an effect on this. But the fact that Grou.ps had become something that could now be called a commodity was also an essential reason. After all, we now had open-source alternatives. Although none were as experienced as us in scaling, evidently, the telecom companies didn't think their traffic would increase that much. Project managers probably operated under the belief that this was just a passing fad.

My other predictions for why all the talks were fruitless include:

- Engineer Rivalry: Fear of losing their jobs may have been a factor.
- Sometimes CTOs were being difficult. "We can do this in-house anyway," was their classic attitude. Instead of quickly getting service from outside, these engineers acted with the thought, "give this budget to me, I will develop." The decision had to be approved by the person in charge for it to move forward, but these attitudes were clearly confusing them. Without the top person, it was impossible for those below to take responsibility.
- There were also those who took our proposed solution and 'stole the idea'. I had intended to do in Turkey what our competitor Edmodo did in America. After taking all the documents, videos, and entire plans related to the educational product we were going to make, one of the companies I met with (a digital education service owned by Telekom and also working with the Ministry of National Education) had me sign an NDA (non-disclosure agreement). I thought they had done this for the company-specific information I accessed during the process, but their purpose was to lock us in and prevent us from realizing the idea. They released the same application themselves within a year.

- The Facebook case was such a dominant example that just as a single search engine could dominate the market, it was believed that there would be only one brand's living space in social media. This theory was shattered first by Snapchat and then by TikTok.
- There were also foreign companies' Turkish offices that said, "but the global wouldn't allow this." These answers tickled the nationalist vein within me. I thought about Turkish companies that had been sold and came under foreign control, leaving their local business partners 'orphaned'. The sold companies were not only handing control to someone else but also leaving the opportunities (and thus thousands of potential employments) they would create in the local ecosystem to someone else's pleasure. So I developed a more conservative perspective on these issues over time.

What we experienced was not limited to telecom companies. When we intended to enter the education sector, we went to meet with our big brother, who was most prone to saying 'we need to pave the way for entrepreneurs' and who promised at every entrepreneurial event. He could have provided great support by introducing Groups to the university he managed. Nothing came out of the talks in the end.

## The Sprouting of Hopes

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.  
- Eleanor Roosevelt

In understanding the necessity of taking a different financial direction, I realized our company wouldn't join the ranks of major internet giants like Google, Yahoo, or Facebook. Comparing corporate acquisitions to marriages, where large companies like Google and Facebook are rich spouses, it became apparent that we had missed the huge opportunities provided by consumer-internet space, and the capital had shifted towards B2B players like Salesforce, Slack, Google Apps, Alibaba.

I first shared these insights at the eTohum event in San Francisco, where I was invited to speak along with other entrepreneurs like Udemy founder Eren Bali and CitusData founder Umur Çubukçu. My predictions about applying online user interfaces to real-world industries such as health, tourism, and education signaled my shift towards GymGroups, while others like Eren entered the healthcare field, influenced by this shift from consumer internet to B2B.

While planning GymGroups, the enthusiasm from my earlier venture, Grou.ps, had diminished. My main driving force was to recuperate the investments made by my backers, and I sensed that this might be my last chance, necessitating the formation of a new team.

During the early Web 2.0 era, the focus was on virtualizing relationships, friendships, and other real-world assets, with Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Instagram being prime examples. But the focus had now shifted to transforming real industries, such as taxis and hotels, into internet-based models, with Airbnb and Uber leading the way.

In the niche market of closed social networks, companies like Edmodo and Yammer found success and outcompeted us. We needed to find a new vertical opportunity, and that's when I discovered the potential in gym groups, providing us a more execution-friendly and future-oriented sector.

As we focused on gyms, I quickly prepared a presentation and discussed the idea of GymGroups with my investors, Paul and Mehtap. While Paul was excited, Mehtap was less enthused.

After securing new investment from TIMAR, we met at Ataköy Plus to discuss the terms. The company was now valued at thirty million dollars, and Mehtap informed me that my salary would be one hundred and twenty thousand dollars—a fair startup CEO salary in the U.S., aligning with the ideas from venture capital investor Ben Horowitz's book "The Hard Thing About Hard Things."

In the following agreement, Paul made a significant transfer of his Grou.ps shares to Farrah Capital. As a significant shareholder in both Golden Horn and Grou.ps, he wisely understood the value of having a part of something substantial rather than a majority in nothing.

Upon learning of my divorce, Paul showed sincere empathy. Mehtap's reaction was more indifferent, but in time, I would realize that this event was not insignificant in my business-centered life.

## GymGroups Days

*What's very dangerous is not to evolve.  
Jeff Bezos*

When GymGroups was started in late 2014, I held hope for the future. Though I had abandoned the consumer internet, I believed that an exit from the corporate/B2B sector might allow me to return the money invested. My salary suddenly jumped to one hundred and twenty thousand dollars annually, a source of funds I did not recognize, possibly an advantage brought by other portfolio companies. Living frugally already, I planned to save by using this new salary sparingly.

Continuing product development at GymGroups was a goal, but investment was scarce. Without my old team or a substantial budget to build a new one, I faced challenges. Recalling a previous downsize at Istanbul Vizyon Park, I found myself alone once more.

I planned to rejuvenate the platform with a touch of mobile technology, creating native apps for both iOS and Android. Following Facebook's example, I recognized that making mobile apps web-based had become an outdated solution.

We then explored the integration of the newly released iBeacon technology, which deeply impressed me. We secured patents, and everything was set.

The GymGroups application would allow gym-goers to see profiles of other users in the gym, as well as display data like equipment usage, calories burned, and training time. This technology created a motivating competitive environment within the gym, a feature now common in health apps but original in our implementation. In fact, our solutions were tested in gyms globally, including Macfit in Turkey.

Our team worked tirelessly, with me opening the office at six in the morning. To inspire the sales team, I'd bring coffee and bagels, adding some fun to our early hours in Santa Clara. Our sales-driven setup required us to start work at 6 a.m. on the west coast to match the 9 a.m. start on the east coast. Managing the relatively undisciplined salespeople required a level of military discipline, new to me, in a field also new: sales.

I partnered with an HR firm to hire from Jive Software, finding a valuable marketer named Sara despite my dissatisfaction with their sales candidates. When seeking a top salesperson proved too expensive, I instead began working with Steve Tonella, who I could only afford part-time. My previous sales team had a knack for hitting targets, but the new, low-paying hires lacked discipline. The high "churn" rate, though common in

sales, led me to hire at least three at a time for competition's sake. Eventually, I found JR Anciano, a decent employee, and later added Daryl and O'jay from Intuit.

Learning from past mistakes, I shifted from a high base salary to a commission-based model, aligning with the insights I would later find in Ben Horowitz's book "What You Do Is Who You Are."

Still cautious about overworking the team – a fear rooted in my schooling and personality traits as a Capricorn – our results were not as strong as desired.

The situation necessitated more marketing and a recognizable brand face to attract gym CEOs who had been ignoring us.

## Working with a Hollywood Star

*A customer is the most important visitor on our premises, he is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so.*  
- Mahatma Gandhi

Mahir was far from the only whimsical "star" I worked with. Given that the firms I was to work with were on a global scale, it became necessary for me to seek a globally recognized figure as the face of our brand. I spent extensive time searching the IMDB database for Hollywood celebrities. Although we were unable to secure big names like Tom Cruise or Jennifer Lopez, we did find several suitable niche candidates. After locating their manager's contact information on IMDB, we reached out, only to find that their fees were either prohibitively expensive or that they didn't respond at all. Ultimately, we struck a deal with my childhood hero, Lou Ferrigno. Known from the movie Sinbad and as the first Hulk in Marvel, he was still a well-recognized name, especially among gym enthusiasts.

After a substantial payment was transferred to our accounts, my colleague Mehtap began pressuring me about how I would use the funds. This was the first time we'd received a large sum all at once, and it drove me to quickly finalize an agreement with Lou and schedule a photo shoot.

The shoot was to take place in a Los Angeles skyscraper's top-floor studio. Arriving with our Marketing Director Sara, we found a large team awaiting us, including Lou, his lawyer, assistants, a make-up artist, and a photographer. Throughout that day, I noticed Lou's reticence but eventually signed the contract. Our agreement included Lou starring in GymGroups' advertisements and serving as the face of GymGroups at sponsored events. During the signing, I felt a strange tension between Lou, his lawyer, and Sara, something that would become more apparent later.

Lou's manager soon began causing difficulties, displaying an uncompromising attitude regarding schedules and accommodation, acting more to assert their value than to contribute. Even after explaining that GymGroups was a startup, my pleas fell on deaf ears. Sara, our sales manager, seemed to take their side, possibly out of admiration for Lou.

In spite of these challenges, we began using Lou in our advertisements. However, ongoing issues made me lose trust in Sara, leading me to involve Neesha Sridhar instead.

Our campaigns with Lou, targeting gym managers, focused on the message that enhancing gym sociability through digital technologies would lead to increased memberships and income.

Our investment in advertising and event sponsorship, including an expenditure of nearly \$100,000 at the IHRSA event, gained us significant credibility. It helped us secure meetings with major fitness chains like 24 Hour Fitness, my primary target. But despite my dreams and preparation, our meeting with their Australian business development manager ended disastrously, with our company being belittled and treated with disdain.

Other significant negotiations included Equinox, an upscale chain. After a long period of communication, they shockingly stole our idea and released a similar application.

We continued to engage with hundreds of other companies during the months-long sales process. To facilitate these efforts, I equipped the office with advanced phone equipment and Salesforce's CRM systems. We even sent personalized holiday gifts to top managers, working tirelessly to make our mark.

Despite our progress and acquiring smaller clients, we were unable to secure a large chain that would provide a significant leap forward. We grappled with the dilemma of whether to charge for our product or offer it for free to attract big customers.

During this period, we hosted a gathering for GymGroups' clients in San Francisco, attended by staff, investor Mehtap, and some friends.

I continued to pursue a potential deal with 24 Hour Fitness, even enlisting Mehtap's help for a meeting. Although the meeting seemed promising, it did not lead to a sale.

Finally, driven by desperation, I took a bold step, entering a 24 Hour Fitness location at night to attach iBeacon stickers to their equipment. The CEO responded swiftly, threatening legal action and demanding no further contact.

In retrospect, I realize I had become an overly aggressive entrepreneur, but at the time, it seemed I had no other options.

## The End of the GymGroups Story

*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.*  
Winston Churchill

As we approached the middle of 2016, alarm bells began to ring in GymGroups. We had eleven customers with five hundred gyms, some thirty thousand gym users, but sales weren't closing fast, and we were running out of money. Once bitten twice shy, I started to approach things cautiously; as soon as two-thirds of our budget was spent and we did not turn to profitability, alarm bells began to ring in me. Would we sink again?

With this panic, I had to restart the sales process of the company without waiting for the capricious CEOs of Australian Plus Fitness and Turkish MacFit, the biggest opportunities, to come to a decision. Just at this time, Mehtap introduced me to Gloria Gavin, a former senior Yahoo employee, to sell the company. Gloria was tasked with selling us to Yahoo in a last-ditch effort, but when things didn't work out, Gloria became cranky. At one point, she made fun of our office's simplicity, and I had to cross her off. She herself, however, billed the company tens of thousands of dollars for peacefully ending the contract.

I had now entered a period when I started to default on our debts, something I would never have done before. Even if someone didn't deserve the money, because it was in our contract, I would pay every penny and then never do business with him again. Things were not working with the dream of "innovate, then join free lunches, money follows" as in the Google Story book.

Things started to go bad with Lou. I decided to try a nuclear-effective option to terminate the contract, which was becoming a burden. Of course, I had to consult my lawyers before doing that. I was going to say harsh things to Lou so that he wouldn't want to work with me anymore. So I was going to try some kind of mobbing option. I was going to apply to my law firm Perkins Coie again. Lior summoned a seasoned, gray-haired litigation attorney in his seventies to one of the huge meeting rooms of the stately office buildings in Palo Alto, and we discussed the situation. I was right; I could do this. So I expressed all my feelings towards Lou, without hesitation, in a very heavy way. It worked. We reached a compromise by canceling several shows in the future.

The worst part was that Lior even billed us for casual questions. It had cost us dearly to get out of this business, but I had some peace of mind.

At that time, Mehtap had begun to voice the idea that "We must find an American CEO." I hired an American manager named Mike Ferreira from Maxim Integrated, one of the important chip manufacturers of Silicon Valley. This transfer would be costly, but I got this sign from Mehtap and considered it my duty to keep the company above my ego.

Lior was good enough to do the job, too, but he blew it at a meeting and asked Mike a rude question. Maybe I should have been more aggressive, but I kept my cool and kept working with Lior because we needed it. Lior was over for me with that word. Such unprofessionalism, in my opinion, was not professionalism.

The GymGroups ads we placed on the 101 road just before entering the Facebook campus from the north direction

I said my goal was to sell the company and return the money to the investors. When things didn't work out, we had this roadside advert in a final M&A effort that cost us an extra \$16,000. Even a single billboard titled 'We are looking for staff' proved effective; I received e-mails from my friends working at Facebook, some investors contacted me by phone, but all to no avail.

Opportunities afterward were slim. Just in this period, the news came from the Moonlights that money could come again, and it could be a large amount. I had to come up with a mega plan. GymGroups had to incorporate a gym chain and radically change the fitness industry.

My chain of thought was simple: We were trying to transform gyms with technology, just as Uber turned the taxi industry upside down. We could buy a bankrupt gym chain and come up with something great. After a little research, I came across a chain on the



east coast of America and commissioned Mike to study this model. But I never got the approval I was looking for from Mehtap.

While I was looking for a chain with which we could apply the model, I came across Anytime Fitness, but its CEO and owner, Chuck Runyon, was not convinced to meet. During this period, not only us, but also a company called Zume, received an investment of \$375 million from SoftBank and wanted to change the game in the pizza business. How to transform gyms was still an unresolved issue.

The situation was that the company was now trying to produce something from scratch in a new field. But we were still carrying the bankrupt Grou.ps on our back because we couldn't find enough money.

I was starting to think that Grou.ps was cursed. Almost all business aspects had become a mess.

## Seattle

*Success is dangerous because often you don't understand why you succeeded.*  
- Mark Pincus

In the summer of 2016, I was feeling quite trapped, and I decided to go and visit Mehtap at her new home in Seattle at her invitation. Our schedule was packed. I had last seen Mehtap three or four months earlier when we went to 24 Hour Fitness in San Francisco. She no longer wanted to live in Turkey. She had said that she had become increasingly frustrated in Turkey since the Gezi Park protests. But she wasn't comfortable in San Francisco either, because there was no stable place for her to stay. She had stayed in one of Silicon Valley's expensive hotels for about a month. We helped her with the hotel expenses for a while, but it was not sustainable. It was clear from everything about her that Mehtap wanted to restructure her life, and when she saw that San Francisco was not the solution to her search, she moved to Seattle, where Microsoft's headquarters is located and where she had worked and lived in her youth. But I had no idea what she ate and drank or how she lived.

When I arrived in Seattle, I took a taxi to the address Mehtap had given me. There, Mehtap and her business partner, someone named David, greeted me. David was an

immigrant who had moved from Israel to the United States at a very young age, and he had once served as Microsoft's CTO. He was one of us, in that sense, and he seemed very polite to me at first.

Among the neighbors near our meeting point, close to Bill Gates' house, were Microsoft's then CEO Satya Nadella and Hungarian programmer Charles Simonyi, the creator of Excel. Being right next to my childhood idol Bill Gates' house felt like I was on top of the world.

Mehtap seemed happy in Seattle. Returning to Seattle after many years and getting her life in order had done her good. During my first visit, we had gone to an Italian restaurant. Perhaps because I had been eating alone and quickly for a long time, the surprise on Mehtap's face when I devoured the food in front of me like an "animal" remains etched in my memory.

But this trip had also helped me shed light on some behaviors in Mehtap that I had seen but could not understand until that day. Mehtap's acquaintance with David dated back even before GHV. I suppose she was making most of her connections through David. David, on the other hand, was a typical boss. Just as Steve Jobs had gained a reputation at Apple for his 'slyness,' David had displayed a similar attitude towards Microsoft's technical staff. But now I understood how Mehtap could go to dinner with Yahoo CEO Carol Bartz but couldn't introduce me to her.

Tony Fadell says in the book *Build*: "The venture capital business turns on human relationships, not money."

VC work is not just about putting money, but also about helping the entrepreneur with connections.

## Tumultuous Days in Austin

There's no sense in being precise when you don't even know what you're talking about  
<sup>4</sup>- *John Von Neumann*

By the time we reached October of 2016, neither the GymGroups plan was going the way we wanted, nor had we received any feedback from the telecom companies that Paul had introduced to us as a last hope. Even though we still had money in the bank, I

was more cautious due to my experiences. So I did something that was probably rarely seen in the VC world.

When a firm in Palo Alto decided not to fund us because of our company's ledger, I had sent an email to the Mehtaps (a name used here, presumably a nickname or internal code name for a group of people) about it. When I didn't get a reaction, I called Mehtap. Her voice and reactions were different. The reason became clear as the conversation progressed: I became enraged when she mentioned another entrepreneur who had recently surpassed us, even though they had not even one-tenth of our users, thanks to seed investments, connections, ten million dollar investments, and all kinds of support. I wanted to say, "Where were you when we had ten times their traffic, woman! You are the cause of this situation that you blame me for today, can't you see?" but since I couldn't say it, I hung up the phone on her. That entrepreneur had told Mehtap, after learning about our financial situation, that they "used to look up to Emre" with envy. I was furious. I had realized that they were talking behind my back. I felt as if I had been stabbed in the back.

This was the biggest example showing me that those around Mehtap were trying to manipulate her. She had previously relayed to me that someone had told her "building a platform company is stupid." It was as if we, like people who are proficient in both technology and business like Marc Andreessen, were trying to do something 'stupid.' Ning, owned by Marc Andreessen, was also a platform company. Apparently, someone wanted to subtly manipulate things related to Grou.ps by targeting platform companies. A great way to send the message, 'Invested money is unnecessary!' Anyway, a communication problem was arising between Mehtap and me, akin to the communication issue among Korean pilots.

That day, when I experienced all those negative feelings in one phone call, I sat down and wrote a letter thanking Paul and Mehtap for their faith and support up to that point. I wrote that they had been like a mother and father to me and Grou.ps, but now I couldn't see a reasonable way forward, that I had lost faith, and that I wanted to return the remaining money and end the operation. This was a complete cold shower for everyone in October 2016.

Soon after, I went to Austin. My goal was to find a place where there would be no new tax in my next life (if there was to be one). I had been there before in 2010 for SXSW, and I went to meet my distant relative Türker Sokullu, the CEO of a Canadian hosting company, to consult on a board. I even bought robot parts. I had planned to develop a robot named DefneBot, designed to help in baby care, carrying diapers, analyzing first aid needs of the child, and assisting parents. Now I was 35, feeling that "my talents are

being wasted by these careless/negligent investors." But I couldn't hide behind that excuse. The task had fallen back to me.

I suggested various alternatives. Making Grou.ps a seed investment company with its remaining money would be my main strategy. Mehtap belittled this plan when I proposed it. Perhaps because she was an investor herself, she couldn't reconcile the idea with me - who was I, a young brat who had just lost his venture, to be able to do this?

By the end of 2016, we were out of cash to keep us afloat for another year. To be sure of what I was going to do in 2017, I sent them a written notice. It was sort of a warning.

I was also afraid. What would I do next? I only had a car and a little savings in the bank, most of which was not cash but investments; I had sunk all my money into investments, primarily Bitcoin. I had also once sent about 30,000 dollars to my ex-wife even though her economic situation was much better than mine, because she had worked very hard for Grou.ps, and I didn't want her to be pushed around by her family or talked about behind my back for not receiving compensation for her work. In America, especially in places like Silicon Valley, you couldn't survive even a year with such savings. My financial situation hadn't changed much since the divorce; I was still broke. If I applied to work elsewhere, no company would hire me because I had spent almost my entire career as an entrepreneur and had no corporate experience. I wasn't good material for sensible employers since it could be thought that I might steal the company's idea and apply it on my own (you are born an entrepreneur, not made!). Therefore, I was in deep concern again.

Presumably, they were also thinking, 'what is this crazy person trying to do?' and were trying to make sense of it, so the silence was unending. They even stubbornly refused to provide a bank account to return the money. Not getting any response at all was worse than getting a bad one. The silence drove me to new thoughts, and another plan came to mind. According to this plan, a new company would be established: FitLogged, to which Grou.ps and GymGroups would be sold. FitLogged would be a new firm created from scratch for the artificial intelligence product we developed for GymGroups, and we would find money for this fresh/clean structure. Because in my opinion, the biggest obstacle to our finding money was now our ledger. Peter Thiel, one of the founders of PayPal and now a famous investor, has put forth a law in his book "Zero to One" called the Thiel Law: "A company with a flawed foundation cannot be saved." We had indeed faced the same situation with GHV's crippling 50% Series A entry, and this was felt even more on the days we needed money.

## Yellow Ladybug

*Strength does not come from physical capacity it comes from an indomitable will*  
- Gandhi

My dream of waking up to a new Grou.ps company structure in 2017 and the notes I sent while I was in Austin had not worked. A new 'solo journey' was awaiting me. That is - yet unnamed - the "Research in Social Graph" journey.

No voice had yet been heard from the investors for a new company structure and I hadn't been able to establish a new structure, but I could start working on new ideas with the remaining budget.

After returning to the house in Palo Alto, it was not easy to decide on my next step. I left my messy house and went to Greer Park across from me. This vast green field, where little girls always play soccer, was empty that day. I sat under a tree I found and started thinking about what I would do next, just as a 'bankrupt merchant shuffles old books'. While rummaging through the old books in my mind, I remembered the idea I had written down on napkins while sitting in a cafe on a winter day in NY, where I went for the event of the Bosphorus Graduates Association in 2012, about how APIs would shape on social networks. This idea would not be rejected by the Mehtaps in the context of being a natural extension of Grou.ps, I could sustain it with Grou.ps company resources, and I also thought that the idea was now steeped and needed to be implemented. However, this new product should be such a thing that it should reinvent all software development processes, it should simplify software development as if you were drawing your idea on a whiteboard. After brainstorming on this issue quite a bit, I came up with a model. It was such an idea that (developers curious about the details can look at <https://www.phonetworks.org>), in my opinion, if Facebook is developing its own cloud platform today, it should build on such an original thing instead of making a Google Cloud or Amazon Web Services.

I got stuck on this idea with a 'small' coincidence. One of those little yellow ladybugs I saw when I was getting divorced before was still there and landed on me. I guess I was at a turning point in my life again. Although I can't even stand seeing bugs, I have always found it interesting that I am not disgusted by ladybugs at all. This yellow bug was maybe telling me something. It was encouraging me at a moment when I was confused again.

While thinking about its name, I said it should be Pho Networks, derived from the "Phoenix". And in this way, I focused on making a distributed social PaaS product for

developers with the Pho Networks strategy. Grou.ps had to die, and it did. The Mehtaps who finally gave a voice did not approach this idea coldly. We had even jointly chosen the open source license as MIT, the option I wanted.

I shelved life in San Francisco and returned to Istanbul to start building the new idea. I started paying installments to a modest 1+1 house outside Istanbul with my savings. I lived in this house for two years, withdrawing completely, working only with zero social life. In order to be able to produce the product, I had started writing code day and night again. Someone looking from the outside might think I was crazy, but I often remembered that there was no one to look from the outside. I lived without leaving the house except for going for a run to keep my new body shape and using the site's gym. My ritual was so simple that I had become like brothers with the workers at the Simit Sarayı I went for breakfast.

I was also dealing with family lawsuits on the other hand. They wanted to restrict me from seeing my daughter. I was constantly going to see my child with bailiffs.

One day, a designer friend I had helped before, Ozan, reached out to me. His intention was to establish a venture together or to be a founding partner. When I told him that I was not open to a new venture, that I already had a project I was dealing with, and that I was working on it and added that I could pay him a salary, he became interested.

Ozan was a designer, but when he said he could do front-end, I shifted him to coding. That is, a discipline between coding and designing. He did code. But his coding was not the quality I was looking for. He was still new and one day he would code and the next day he would say it should be done in another way. Still, it served our purpose. What can he do, it wasn't an easy job and he still did a really good job.

Something interesting happened during this period. I had implemented the investment strategy I proposed to Mehtap for the remaining funds with my own money. I had turned all my savings into three types of assets. These were Bitcoin, Nvidia, and AMD shares. The prices of all three increased incredibly. Just like in the Forrest Gump movie where the character played by Tom Hanks buys Apple shares, I had owned the three financial investment tools that would appreciate the most in the next five years. But of course, I was unaware of this at the time. I had just played instruments I technically loved and believed in.

In 2018, while returning home after dropping off Defne over the weekend, I experienced the attack I mentioned earlier. A car had rear-ended me. When I got out of the car to see if there was any insurable damage, five people jumped out of the car behind and

attacked me. I realized something else was going on and yelled, "police." Many people saw what was happening but did nothing. It was like living in hell. I couldn't fight back. They tried to force me into a car. That's when I began to defend myself. Another black Mercedes Vito arrived, and five more people got out and started attacking me. According to camera records, this incident lasted about ten minutes. When I yelled, "I came to see my child," some people came from outside, and the attackers began to scatter in panic. The police arrived much later. They had achieved their goal. I didn't want to stay in Istanbul another day. I slowly shelved my plans to settle in Istanbul and headed back to America.

This time, for economic reasons, I had moved to Reno in Nevada instead of San Francisco. Reno had appealed to me due to the tax benefits, living conditions, and being only three and a half hours away from SF. In Istanbul's simplicity, it offered a life where I could focus only on work.

Months, even years, passed between Istanbul and Reno for me. I was working at full speed, but now I needed to find new resources for a new project. Reno had also started to feel very dull after SF. Feeling overwhelmed one day, I rented a house in SF and temporarily returned, missing my days there. My main goal was to see Lior. I no longer had money to give Lior, but he was the only one who knew these things. We had previously worked intense hours and paid him large bills. "He must owe me a favor," I thought, and that's what happened; Lior accepted my meeting request.

We met. A lot had changed in the life of Lior, who had maintained his youthful appearance. I used to run into him in cafes on University Avenue in Palo Alto; he'd sit with young entrepreneurs, conducting meetings with Californian ease. Now he was going to do the same with me. He had moved to a new office and divorced his wife. Since we had gone through similar situations, he might have looked at my situation more sympathetically. I was open with him. He knew I had no money. We started a friendly conversation. He treated me to dinner at a nice restaurant in SF. Another night, he and a friend of his and I went to a concert together. At one point, I talked about the developments in me, the shareholding issues in the company, and the plan I had found. When he heard about the current share distribution, he agreed with me, stating that funding the company this way would be futile and impossible. No investor would look at it, he said. The plan I had found turned out to be a very classic method that these types of companies often resort to: It's called a Recap.

Based on this, I contacted Mehtap once again to reconsider the company's shareholder structure. With the new information, my confidence was now complete. Mehtap's life had put the company on the back burner; she was returning phone calls very late and

sounded increasingly indifferent during conversations. She seemed to support just out of goodwill, behaving as if she had no real say in the company. In our recent conversations, she emphasized that she wasn't taking any salary from the fund. Nest's founder and the inventor of the iPod, Tony Fadell, says in his book *Build*, about this very subject, "You can do without a co-founder. You can get by without a team for a while. But you can't survive without a mentor."

My mentors were both Mehtap and Cem. I had seen Cem's departure first because he had fallen out with Mehtap. Now Mehtap was also distancing herself.

Fadell continues:

"And if things don't go well, you find yourself in a forced marriage. You are still legally bound, but you don't even talk. When an investor gives up hope in your company, they start to neglect you. They don't help you. They don't introduce you to other investors. They don't talk to other partners in the company to defend you. They stand by and watch as your company drifts into bankruptcy."

Events developed just like that with us. Now we were like a depleted marriage, and Mehtap was standing on the sidelines, focusing on her family, children, and life.

While all these developments were happening on the financial side, we never slowed down in real work. Ozan and I were apart, but we were working hard. He had newly met Kuşadası. I was shuttling between Istanbul and Reno. From time to time, his designer wife supported us, and I always tried not to leave these supports financially unanswered. During one of my visits to Istanbul, we met in Taksim. I looked at this couple with envy; they had been able to build a cute family while working towards a goal. I didn't even have time to scratch my head from work. Yes, I had a child, but now I couldn't be a father to her even a bit. You can imagine the feelings I had when I realized that her grandfather had trained Defne to call him "dad," claiming I wasn't her father, during a summer day when Defne stayed with me.

## It's Called "Recap": Research in Social Graph

*In the realm of ideas, everything depend on enthusiasm... In the real world, all rests on perseverance.*

*- Johann Wolfgang van Goethe*



After hard work, the product was ready to be released on ProductHunt. From the first day, the smiles of hundreds of paid subscribers appeared on my face. But a strange thing soon caught my eye; most of them did not use the paid subscription products. I did not immediately understand why. Either they were negligent, or the product wasn't readily available enough. In my opinion, I had done what I could in terms of product development, and it seemed like a support team would have to do the rest. I had created a good product and attracted people's attention. It was necessary to find an investor in order to establish the team and move the business forward. Only then could I establish the "customer success team" that we encounter in most software companies doing B2B business. These units enabled customers to take full advantage of the products they purchased, requiring technical support to install, thus helping them recommend them to others and helping companies grow.

But I wasn't going to approach all VC firms as I used to. I intended to collaborate with either Sequoia Capital or a giant name like Andreessen Horowitz. I also despised VCs in Turkey (except for a few) or didn't believe they could add value globally. They say "numbers game" for sales; the more people you reach, the higher your chance of success. Finding investments is also a sales process, so the same rule applies here. But I didn't see it that way, and I didn't want to. I chose to send emails to very few companies.

Before going to these, however, it was necessary to clean the share ledger. I wouldn't make that mistake again. After all, a Palo Alto seed investment firm recently turned us down for just that reason.

It required a "recap" (short for English recapitalization), the corporate phrase that Lior introduced me to. I got this right, albeit with difficulty, two years after my unsuccessful experience in 2017. One day when I was in Reno, Mehtap and I had a difficult phone call and correspondence. Moonlight was always throwing the ball to Paul. I, on the other hand, was not as comfortable with Paul as I was with Mehtap, and frankly, I was hesitant to contact him. Since Mehtap had been the mediator in our communication until then, our meetings with Paul were limited to due diligence meetings. Paul had an engaging, charming, and comforting style, and I had seen him get the job done many times over, but his deep and mysterious nature also gave me chills. On the other hand, his presence was always a last resort for me. I felt like I shouldn't have bothered him too much, since he was neither on the board of Group.ps nor the GP (General Partner) in investing companies. With the role of LP (Limited Partner), he should have been one step behind in principle and procedure. Mehtap and I had become like sisters. We were a couple that could not be separated from each other, and loved each other, just like my sister Emel and me.

After Paul, with his usual constructive pragmatism, approved the restructuring of the company's shares, Mehtap remained silent. When I realized that this was going to happen, on that sunny Reno day, I went out for an Americano at a random cafe to name the company and digest this happy news, as I do in every stressful moment. While on the road, I thought of Research in Motion, whose founder is Greek from Istanbul. Inspired by that, I chose the name of the new company as Research in Social Graph. We were also going to conduct further studies in the field of "social graph". Social Graph was the name I had wanted to choose as the company name when establishing Group.ps, but could not choose it with the guidance of the lawyer. Nobody said no to this idea, and we said hello to the world again with our new name and new shareholder structure. Everyone signed the decision of the joint board of directors, and the assets were transferred to the newly established company under a new, clean shareholder structure. Thus, as a company established from scratch, we would set out to find investments in the model where former investors remained below 25 percent.

Andreessen Horowitz, one of the few places I contacted, showed interest. I had an hour-long phone call with a woman who was one of the partners. I talked about how we were reinventing social apps, just as Github is reinventing the coding space. I felt that she was impressed, even over the phone. But this partner left shortly after our conversation, and our communication was cut off there, and I could not get a response from the other partners. There was no word from Sequoia. Salil, my contact at Bain Capital, the other firm I emailed, used to know and respect me. She was the first investor I met in Silicon Valley in 2006. In that meeting they attended as two people, while I was speaking, Salil was taking proper notes, while the other person next to him was listening to me with an expression as if he was making fun of me.

He didn't hide his respect, as he must have seen that it was one of the most talked-about initiatives in the bunch. But this time, he was pulling back, claiming that he had a similar investment. Indeed, it was unfortunate that we were competing in the same field, although not one hundred percent alike.

Around the same time, I corresponded with Magdalena Yeşil, who inspired me to stay here when I first came to Silicon Valley. Magdalena had invested in Gina's new venture just as she had invested in Ning, and she told me I needed to talk to Gina. (By the way, for those of you who haven't read it, I recommend Magdalena's "Power Up: How Smart Women Win in the New Economy".)

I had a face-to-face meeting with Gina one evening when she came to Istanbul at the invitation of Endeavor, when she was my rival from Ning before. After Ning, she had established a startup that did the same job on mobile, and she was still getting plenty of

money from investors. While I was doing the same work on mobile as before, I was now doing it for developers. The only thing that didn't change was: she was overwhelmed with money again, and I was again struggling with a lack of money. Still, it was a friendly conversation. I still admire her for her stubborn, faithful, and passionate nature.

I wasn't stopping either. I was uplifted when I learned that an instructive article I wrote was on the main page of Hackernoon and that a resort like a famous one in Thailand started to use our new product exactly as I had imagined. The resort in question was bringing its loyal customers together by creating a social network on its website, and instead of building a social network from scratch (using a platform like Group.ps or Facebook Groups), they preferred to use our GraphJS product by adding a few lines of code to their website. Using GraphJS, they created a mini Instagram for the resort regulars.

These developments motivated me to reconnect with the media again through press releases. Once again, I was an entire team on my own. After a night of coding, I would write the press release in the Reno cafes, where I'd wake up at noon and settle down for breakfast, and when I finished towards the evening, I would spend my days delivering these bulletins to the press. Like a fisherman, I was casting my fishing rod and waiting for some hope to move it. Phone calls and actual correspondence would begin when the fishing line twitched, but this didn't happen very often. Life for a startup has always been grueling, and I had been living it for decades.

One of those days, when I received an email from a journalist, I thought that I had overextended myself and should stop now: "Emre, I've been following you since Group.ps and I appreciate your endless perseverance for decades. But this is still not in my area of interest. Thanks."

To explain why I was so negatively affected by such a simple response, I need to take you back a little further. If you remember, I mentioned having much bigger goals in my childhood chapters and the reason why I started entrepreneurship and continued despite all the kicks and obstacles was the big goal I set for myself in childhood (I detailed this in the last section). Just in those years, I began to feel the concerns of "Did the entrepreneurship phase take longer than it should have?" My ego was also quite bruised; since my startup, which I believed should be worth billions of dollars, could not reach the necessary capital, its CEO—I mean, myself—was still chasing media. Having no financial power at the end of nearly two decades of entrepreneurial life—I admit—was starting to wear on me at that time.

Another issue that pained me and made me feel tired at that time was the separation from Ozan over financial matters. What used to be almost as generous (but more restrained, subject to resources, of course) as emulating Silicon Valley offices was now fighting with my own co-workers over a few thousand dollars. Because I had been slapped so many times in life, and my old 'Google-like' dreams were now shattered.

As 2019 began, I went to Seattle again, next to Moonlight, at Christmastime. I was so used to Reno's shabbiness that being in Seattle for Christmas made me feel like I was cool again. The people, the restaurants, everything seemed different to me at the time. However, similar luxury could be found in Istanbul in Levent or Etiler. I think I was now an American peasant in Reno.

Mehtap was once again optimistic about the future of the new company. David's eyes widened for a second as he listened to my plans, but I still sensed something holding him back. I guess because of his protective nature, he didn't like me being in their lives all the time. While in their office, they introduced me to a man named Gary, who was in his fifties but appeared quite vigorous. Gary Flake had not lost his youthful spirit and had been working on a new programming language and compiler. After meeting him, I googled his name and discovered that I had been introduced to someone who has a Wikipedia page. He was the founder of Live Labs, which developed Microsoft's most advanced web technologies.

Gary, who previously served as VP of Technology at Yahoo, most recently sold a company he founded to Salesforce and became Salesforce's CTO in Charge of Search. As someone with a good understanding of technology, he could be a really good partner because he was knowledgeable, caring, and understanding. Gary had said exactly the words to me: "This is a great opportunity because it can save developers billions in development and billions in maintenance." So, he said, "this is a very good opportunity because it not only saves billions in development costs but also creates a new multi-billion dollar market in terms of hosting."

But the rift between Gary and me occurred during a meeting that same week. After he told Mehtap that he liked the idea, we were going to talk seriously about our partnership this time. We walked into a room in David's office. I asked him how many shares he wanted to join us. The conversation broke down. He walked away, angry like a child. Mehtap explained that it was because of Gary's illness and his own personal problems, but I never felt that way; I thought that discussing these cold subjects made the man uncomfortable. When I told Mehtap that I was uncomfortable before entering the meeting, he had said something like "you go talk, I won't interfere." I wish Mehtap had mediated the terms of working with Gary. The result was that the disturbing

conversation took place, and after that, Gary was irreversibly alienated from the company and the idea.

Just a year after this incident, in the early days of Covid, one of our first and most ardent users, Diego, contacted me by phone, right after receiving a \$50 million investment in his company Rock Content, and this young Brazilian friend seriously wanted our GraphJS assets. I understood. Though it was going to be a small deal, I sold it without a second thought.

## Conclusion

*A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.  
- Joseph Campbell*

So the Grou.ps story has concluded. Yes, today the Grou.ps brand rights and site are completely under my ownership at Sokullu Ventures, but of course, far from its former glorious days. Whether it's distributed social networks or the nationalizing/regionalizing internet area, Grou.ps could still have had a great opportunity, but after the blows I've taken, I think I've made the change I could make in Turkish internet; entrepreneurship is more popular today than ever before. Where is the lady officer who left a hundred-page document in front of me saying "go away, I need to do my work" when I was studying at Boğaziçi and went to the office for state support, and where are the ministers who advertise with loud grants today? My interest in Grou.ps is not as emotional and intense as before; I look at it as a player in my investment portfolio. But who knows, perhaps we will achieve a success like Audi's resurgence under state-supported Volkswagen, after its founder August Koch published his biography and couldn't get it to where he wanted for years. I sincerely wish this for both Turkix and Grou.ps.

Famous angel investor Naval Ravikant says, "The world is a very efficient place. There are many authors, athletes, and other professionals. But the successful ones are those who are irrationally passionate. Those people don't do their job for the money; they are just patient. Raising a child takes ten years; even building a career takes ten years."

I think I've demonstrated enough "irrational level of passion," but sometimes geography and conditions are your destiny.

So, as I finish the book, alongside all the aphorisms I've collected and been inspired by throughout my career, let me add one I've made up myself: "If you're crying, don't worry, it's because you're still a baby, meaning your time hasn't come yet."

## Section 6

# FINAL THOUGHTS

## Advice

The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice  
- *Martin Luther King Jr.*

In this section, I want to share again some advice 👍

The secret of success is tolerance for failure. Just like the often-told story of Edison making thousands of unsuccessful attempts/inventions before discovering the light bulb. If you are doing something new, you will fail more, and this is very natural. Just like artificial intelligences, we humans also learn through trial and error.

Set your goals so that it becomes something you want to fight for in that endeavor. Thus, even if you fail, you will have spent your life in a rightful and regret-free struggle.

Prefer "losing money over losing people's trust." Everyone and everything is interconnected, and you never have the luxury of burning bridges. You can make money again, but if you lose people's trust, it's tough to regain it.

You may have to spend a lifetime with the idea and venture you choose. It may seem surprising in today's world, where overnight success stories constantly make headlines, but it is not abnormal at all. For those interested, read the founding stories of the first car brands like Renault, Peugeot, De Dion Bouton. In an emerging country like Turkey, where capital power has not yet settled like in the West, the stories of the Western 20th Century will be more realistic examples for us. This situation should not pressure you to the point of not daring to undertake any initiative, but you must face this reality.

Never forget the people who walked with you before success. Don't take the fools who enter your life with success seriously. Also, as an anonymous proverb says, "You recognize a leader by the arrows in his back." If you are venturing into something new, you will need to grow thick skin, or else you'll give up too soon.

Success consists of two things; (a) Making the right decisions (b) Allocating sufficient resources for the right decisions. To make the right decision, you need to read the past and present well and go through a rational education system. Concerning sufficient resources, time is the most crucial asset an entrepreneur can provide. If you're not a salesperson, don't waste time on unnecessary and non-goal-serving things like football. (For salespeople, football is a good tool, as "common experiences" help them succeed. See: "The Pursuit of Happiness").

You must work hard. The best advice is "Work, work, work." I cannot stress enough how important this is. However, there is a limit... Take one day off a week for non-work-related things and never think about work. Otherwise, you will dull your senses. It's vital for human relationships, mental health, and continuing to function as a normal individual. If you work seven days, you harm yourself, and you may have to pay the price in the long term.

What keeps an entrepreneur standing on his stressful and struggle-filled journey? According to research presented in Lorenzo Carter's "Venture Capital Valuation: Case Studies and Methodology," the answer in Silicon Valley is almost equally drugs, sex, or a conservative lifestyle. And surprisingly, the only sustainable method is a robust family structure and turning to religion. Indeed, faith will be an essential branch you'll want to cling to, both to keep your venture standing and to maintain your mental health during these challenging times.

Treat the people you leave behind while climbing the ladder of success well. It is highly likely that your paths will cross again, either when you come down or reach higher levels.

If possible, enter into a business with partners. Both for "reality checks" (i.e., confirming you're on the right path by sharing with different people) and because, truly, "two heads are better than one"... The thing is, an entrepreneur must be both visionary/original and able to make sales to survive. But one person can't be both a visionary and a good salesperson, and you can neither hire a "visionary" nor a good salesperson as just an "employee." Visionary nature requires dissatisfaction with the existing, and thus, a sad and depressive mood. A salesperson, by nature, needs to be happy, constantly in communication with people, spreading joy. These two coexisting in one body is an exceptional situation, like a flawless, high-carat diamond. On the other hand, being a single entrepreneur brings resilience, which is also true.

## Entrepreneurship is a Lonely Undertaking

It's what you do in the dark that puts you in the light  
- *anonymous*

Those who will embark on this adventure should not forget that entrepreneurship is only a profession. There is only you and your founding partners. You are solely and only against the whole world.

- You will negotiate shares with your investors.
- You will negotiate salaries, hours, and rights with your employees.
- You will always be in price negotiation with your customers.

In the end, you will always be in a war of interest.

No matter how much money you earn in the end, or even if you earn nothing, you will see that only your friends and family are with you.

So whatever you do, never ever neglect your friends and family. Everything passes; phones, text messages, emails go silent, but only those you always trust, those you want to spend time with, will not pass. If they leave or are no more, no matter how much you achieve your goals, life becomes a tyranny.

Always embrace those who love you unconditionally. Even in religions, it is said that God created man in six days and rested on one day. Therefore, one must definitely take time to rest at least one day a week. Otherwise, your battery runs out and you neglect what you should never neglect with ambition at work, your family, and social relations.

Despite all the problems with Mehtap, I found what explained our ability to stand together until the last day in the book "Riding High" by Soulcycle founder Ruth Zukerman: You don't have to be friends with your business partners. They don't even have to be people you definitely want to socialize with, but there needs to be a certain level of mutual respect. Ask yourself this: Will these partners treat me equally? Do they respect my ability and expertise to have decision-making authority? Do these partners understand my need for life balance and the importance of break time when I need it? What is their approach to conflict if we have a disagreement? From your expectations of who will take on which responsibilities to how you will resolve conflicts, especially on issues such as money problems and time constraints, communicate clearly with your business partners. Make sure your ideas are heard and valued from the beginning; the partnership's chance of success will be higher.



## Me Currently

A diamond is merely a lump of coal that did well under pressure  
- *Henry Kissinger*

Since I returned to Istanbul during the pandemic process, I hear proposals from people I know or don't know almost every day, saying 'I want to start an initiative, will you join?' or 'let's do this initiative together.' It seems that entrepreneurship is now very cool compared to the time when I left Turkey in 2005.

But, like Shunryū Suzuki's words, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few," the possibilities in my mind are now much fewer. Therefore, I am also more cautious in choosing ideas in entrepreneurship.

The subject that interests me the most right now is the new social media architecture called fediverse. The internet censorship we encountered in Turkey, China, and Iran since the early 2010s has whetted my appetite to develop distributed social media applications that are resistant to censorship. In this context, I conducted various advanced research and applications, studied all kinds of Bittorrent-like "p2p" (peer-to-peer) architectures. But the most intriguing work developed independently from me was an open-source project called Mastodon. I am now supporting this project as well. With my newly established company, we are one of the biggest sponsors of the project, and I am personally involved in its improvement and translation into Turkish.

You can see a Turkish example of Mastodon at [mastoturk.org](http://mastoturk.org) or by searching the word MastoTurk in mobile applications. This server operates just like Twitter, and you can access it even if Twitter is banned in Turkey. But it's local and national... Currently, you can follow and reach intriguing content reflected by all party leaders and famous journalists on this platform, such as astrology, technology, current affairs, and wise sayings.

Another Mastodon work of mine is the MastroRocks.com service, which allows anyone around the world to easily set up their own Mastodon server, offering the best prices and service for this. You can access it from [mastozone.com](http://mastozone.com) and provide your company or alumni group with a platform, website, and mobile application. And all at very attractive prices.

Mastodon successfully continues a trend started by Grou.ps, and I am supporting this formation.

Apart from that, another venture I'm working on is a AI initiative called ReplaceFAQ.com. The aim of this company is to eliminate the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) sections often found on websites. We do this through AI-supported bots. Those who want to renew their website can try this product from ReplaceFAQ.com.

For those who want to follow me, I am sharing the addresses of my personal website, blog, and Mastodon account:

<https://mastoturk.org/@esokullu> <https://www.emresokullu.com>  
<https://emresokullu.blog>

I have agreed with my publisher to share a free digital copy of this book at <https://emresokullu.com>, so that everyone can benefit from it. If you like the book, I would appreciate it if you could share it on social media and with your friends.

I will continue writing books. See you in a new book again.

## APPENDIX

### About

**Welcome to the story of Grou.ps. In an era when the term “unicorns” had not yet been coined in the startup world, our success shone brightly. We grew into a significant social media platform, with 8 million unique monthly visitors and a market valuation of up to \$30 million. To put that in context, this achievement came at a time when Facebook had barely reached the 250 million monthly active users threshold, back in 2010. Although we never attained the heights of giants like Facebook, we did share similar traffic numbers with Reddit for a time, establishing our place in the industry. Our journey, however, has its unique charm and identity. You may have read about Reddit and Facebook, but our story is distinct; we never aspired to be second best. Filled with rich narratives and valuable lessons, this tale is particularly insightful. If you are an immigrant entrepreneur aiming to make a splash on the global stage, this book could prove to be an invaluable resource for you.**