



A Tight Wide-open Space

Matt Krause

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Finding love in a Muslim land

Matt Krause

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For Doris Hofer

Put a koi into a fish bowl, and it will grow to three inches.
Put a koi into an aquarium, and it will grow to nine inches.
Put a koi into a pond, and it will grow to eighteen inches.
Put a koi into a lake, and it will grow to three feet.

The koi fills up whatever container you give it.

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INTRODUCTION

The young family walks together down to the neighborhood market. The boy scuffs his new Nikes on the pavement because later he will try to look cool in front of his friends, and when you are a 7-year-old boy brand new shoes are not cool. His younger sister skips along next to him in a pink sundress with matching ribbons in her hair. This is not a regular trip to buy the week's staples; the mother usually takes care of that alone. No, today the family goes together because they are going to kill a ram.

At the market hundreds of sheep are crowded into tiny pens, stinking up the air so bad the family began smelling it a mile away. The smell is foul, but it means the holidays have arrived. At the normally-empty lot next to the market the kids run up and down the rows of sheep, crying out, "Daddy, come look at this one," and, "Mom, I like this one the best!"

The kids pick out a ram they like for some reason only they know. Maybe they like the consistency of the ram's wool coat. Maybe they like the shape of its head or the unusual way its ears perk up. Regardless, they have decided this is the ram they want, much like children in the US pick out a Christmas tree when they go to a tree lot with their parents.

The father calls out to the lot owner and points to the ram the kids have chosen. He counts out what feels like a couple months' wages and hands it over to the lot owner. The lot owner's son wrestles the uncooperative ram unceremoniously into the back of a pickup truck, hops into the cab, starts up the truck, and drives away.

The family turns, leaves the market, and walks back home. By the time they turn onto the street where they live, the lot owner's son and his pickup truck are waiting at the curb. The ram bleats and squirms as the children's father and the lot owner's son unload it from the back of the pickup, just as unceremoniously as the lot owner's son loaded it into the truck back at the market. Feet on the ground now but held tight on a makeshift leash, the ram is unsure what to do with itself, and it takes a few tentative steps to and fro.

The father calls out for a rope, and his son runs into the house to grab one while the father walks the ram over to a nearby tree. The son comes running back out of the house with rope in hand. The father ties one end of the rope around the ram's neck, the other end around the tree. The ram isn't going to go running off anywhere, but the father is still thinking about how much money he paid for it, and he wants to make sure.

An elderly man with a long, gray beard and a knitted white skullcap emerges from the house. Perhaps he is a father-in-law or an uncle. In his right hand he carries a knife with a long blade and a knotted suede loop dangling from handle's end. He walks over to the ram with a confidence that says he has done this many times before.

He steps up to the ram, puts his left hand on the ram's head, and begins chanting a prayer to Allah. In mid-prayer, he grabs the ram's nose, tilts its head back, and expertly slits its throat with a quick, smooth draw of the blade across its neck. Hot blood sprays everywhere. The ram gurgles, drops to its knees, sways from side to side, and then collapses to the ground. It kicks desperately a few times as its blood flows out across the hard-pack dirt of the courtyard.

The two men stand over the ram until it stops twitching. They are waiting to make sure the ram is dead so they can go back into the house and join the festivities taking place in the living room. A few children have gathered at the front door to watch the killing, and as the men reenter the house they tell the children to stay put and make sure no stray dogs or cats bother the ram. Its body lies still now, but it will take a while to finish bleeding out.

Inside the house the living room is abustle with dozens of relatives of all ages. Elderly aunts and grandparents sit together on the couch reminiscing about friends and relatives long gone. Children play hide and seek, chasing after each other from room to room, laughing at the tops of their lungs. Sullen teenagers text friends they haven't seen in, like, forever (meaning yesterday). Middle-aged men stand in the hallway drinking tea and talking business.

Outside, of course, lies the dead ram. Stray dogs and cats come poking around every few minutes to see how close they can get, but children come running out of the doorway to shoo them away. Later, the ram will be butchered. The family will give one third of the carcass to the poor and one third to their neighbors. They will keep the remaining one third. Most of their one third will be packed into the

freezer for future use, but some of it will be roasted and will appear on the dining room table, where the women are assembling a feast to end all feasts. For now though, there is just a dead ram in the courtyard and a house filled with laughter and conversation.

That was the strange world I entered when I met a beautiful Turkish woman on a flight to Hong Kong and unexpectedly moved to Turkey in 2003. Over my six years there that country would change, at least in my eyes, from an unfamiliar and foreign land into one I would love and hate, respect and disdain, want and reject, and then, in the end, call home.

This is the story of that journey.

My name is Matt. I am originally from California, but I lived the first part of my adult life in Seattle until I moved to Turkey at the age of age 33.

Seattle was good to me. I had a great house, a great career, and great friends. I had activities I loved – kayaking, camping, snowshoeing. In fact, I am not a religious man, but for years I've said, “God lives in the desert, but He vacations in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest.”

So life was good, but it was missing something: I didn't have anyone to share it with. I had plenty of friends, and I was only alone when I wanted to be.

But I knew no life I could create would be worth a hill of beans if I had no one to share it with. And that part, well, that just wasn't happening.

My friends told me, "Matt, be patient, you never know where it will come from, you never know just how you will meet that person." And now I know that's entirely true. But at the time, I had no way of knowing my life was about to change dramatically, and of all things, the change would begin on that flight to Hong Kong.

I wouldn't have been on that plane, though, if my black lab Milk Dud had had better social skills...

1: NO DOG, NO TURKEY

I got Milk Dud in the spring of 2000 when he was an 8-week-old puppy. He was one of a litter of six, three of them yellow labs and three of them black. Milk Dud was a playful, energetic puppy. His siblings were too though, so that's not why he caught my eye. He caught my eye because he wanted nothing to do with me.

Milk Dud's brothers and sisters were friendly and outgoing in that indiscriminating puppy sort of way. The second I stepped out onto the fenced-in deck where they played at that house on Mercer Island, they came running up to me as outgoing young puppies do, greeting me and inviting me to join in their puppy games.

Milk Dud, however, stayed close by his mother's side. He didn't resist when I went over to pick him up and walk around with him in my arms, but as soon

as I set him down, he made a beeline straight back to his mom. Friends have told me they would be put off by shy behavior like this, but I saw it another way. I saw a loyalty and attachment that would eventually transfer to me.

As Milk Dud grew up he stayed true to his loyal, focused nature. He had room for only two things in his life: one human and one tennis ball. Being a lab, of course, if there was water nearby he could find room for that, too.

On one hand, this meant Milk Dud was a loyal dog that hung on my every word. But on the other hand, it meant he had little patience for anything that stood in the way of him and his human and his tennis ball, and that meant I had a dog that didn't play well with other dogs.

By the time he was three years old, Milk Dud had been thrown out of just about every open-air dog boarding camp in the Seattle area. When I would travel on business, I would have nowhere to put him except a traditional kennel, dog solitary with barely enough room for a big, muscular guy like him to stand up and turn around. I left him in a place like that once, and I couldn't bear to do it again.

In February 2003, I needed to make a short trip to China to inspect a shipment before it left the factory.

Having nowhere to board Milk Dud while I was away, I punted and did the next best thing – I called my parents and asked them if they'd take him in at their farm 1,000 miles away in California. My parents said of course they would watch Milk Dud, so I put in for vacation time at my day job, booked a ticket for a Hong Kong flight leaving from San Francisco, threw Milk Dud into the back of my car, and drove him all the way to my parents' farm in California. I had dinner with my parents, and the next day I left Milk Dud at the farm and took off for the airport in San Francisco.

I first saw her walking through the terminal in San Francisco, where we were both wandering around killing time before our flights. I thought she looked beautiful, elegant, and confident, but there was no time to strike up a conversation. My flight was about to board and I needed to get to the waiting area.

Imagine my surprise to spot her again just a few minutes later, coming down the escalator into the same waiting area. That waiting area was serving two separate flights though, so it was entirely possible she would board the flight to Melbourne instead. I kept my fingers crossed she would go to Hong Kong.

When they started to board the Hong Kong flight, she and I got into the same line. I smiled at my good

fortune and made a mental note to talk to her during the flight. My mind was on the business I would conduct in China, but this would be a long flight and I figured I might as well take advantage of the opportunity to socialize a bit.

She and I didn't sit next to each other on the plane, but at one point during the flight I saw her standing in the back stretching her legs. I got out of my seat and headed towards the back too. I figured I would need some sort of witty opening line, so I walked a few extra laps through the aisles racking my brain for something to say. I was so focused on coming up with just the right words that I let the opportunity slide by when, as I walked past her on one of my laps, she made eye contact and smiled at me.

I have never been known for being smooth with the ladies, and by the time I thought of something to say she had gone back to her seat. She had been standing in one of my favorite places to stretch my legs on a long trans-Pacific flight though, so I stood in the now-empty spot and kicked myself for missing out on a perfect opportunity.

There were plenty of other passengers that day who knew that that particular spot at the back of a 747 is a great place to stretch one's legs, so within a

few minutes another group had convened in that same area, and I found myself at the center of a party.

Lucky for me the girl came back to join the party, and since I feel more comfortable in a group conversation than in a one-on-one, this time I easily struck up a conversation with her. We only talked for about 10 minutes, but that was enough for me to confirm I was interested in her. Of course, being tone deaf about these sorts of things, I had absolutely no idea whether she was interested in me.

I have learned over the years not to let my tone deafness stand in the way though, so when the plane landed in Hong Kong I made sure she and I deboarded at the same time so we could walk down the ramp together. We chatted as we walked side by side, and at the end of the ramp I turned towards the terminal and she towards her connecting flight to Singapore. We said a friendly goodbye and as I walked away a voice at the back of my head whispered to me, “You need to contact that woman again.”

I didn’t have her phone number. I didn’t have her email address. We hadn’t even made the politest of non-committal plans to stay in touch.

But I listened to that voice. A few weeks later when I got back to the US I looked her up on Google. All I knew from our brief conversation was her first

name and the town in California where she lived. That was enough to find her email address. I sent her an email and tried not to sound too much like a stalker. When you haven't even said, "Let's keep in touch," to a stranger though, when she hasn't even given you her phone number or a business card, how do you not come across as a stalker? So I knew the odds were long.

Lo and behold, a week later I got an email back from her. One thing led to another, and we became an item.

After we had been going out for a few months we flew to Salt Lake City for a conference she was attending for work. One evening after her meetings had let out for the day the two of us went to dinner at an Italian restaurant. The food was excellent and the conversation was going really well, but she seemed nervous about something.

I already knew that she had been born and raised in Istanbul, and that her parents and brother and extended family were there, and that she had lived abroad all of her adult life. But after dessert she added that before we had met, she had decided it was time to go home to Turkey for a while, and now she had this relationship and didn't know what was going to happen to it.

I thought about the situation for about 10 seconds, and then I said, “Well, I’ll come with you.”

I had never been to Turkey before. In fact, I had never even been close. Turkey was one of those places I had figured I’d never visit in my entire life, not because I was actively resisting it, but simply because there would always be something higher on my list of priorities. And yet in 10 seconds I made the decision to leave my nice, cozy little cocoon in Seattle and head out into the complete unknown.

Over the coming weeks whenever I’d tell my friends about my decision, they’d say, “Damn, this must be some girl!”

Three months later I was preparing to turn my house in Seattle over to renters. I cleared out my belongings, giving most of them away and putting a few into storage. My girlfriend went back to Turkey ahead of me, and so between bouts of painting and clearing out the basement I would stand on my wooden deck in Seattle’s Indian Summer sun and talk to her long distance on the phone.

When I finally arrived in Istanbul, I found out my luggage had been lost on the flight over. Everything I brought had been stuffed into two bags and one carryon, and now most of it was somewhere else. I spent over an hour in the airport’s lost luggage area,

trying to establish through a language barrier that yes, they would try to find my luggage, and if they did, they would deliver it to me. Good enough.

My hands empty, I walked through the sliding doors into the greeting hall, and there she was, my girlfriend, waiting patiently for me. She had been sitting there for over an hour, long after the last of the other passengers had left the airport. She had had no way of contacting me, no way of knowing where I was or even whether I had been on the right plane. But there she was, smiling at me and happy to see me.

My baggage had been lost, but I felt safe. I knew I had come to the right place. I knew I had done the right thing.

We hopped in a cab for the ride home. It was an excellent welcome to Turkey.

2: BOMBS AWAY

Istanbul is a sprawling city of more than 15 million people. One of the first things I noticed about the city was its noise – Istanbul is far noisier than any other city I’ve been to. Its inhabitants seem to have decided that the best way to overcome the noise level is to make more noise. According to their logic, if they can’t hear their conversation over the music, they should talk louder. If their conversation gets so loud they can’t hear the music anymore, they should turn up the music. Then if the music is so loud they can’t hear their conversation anymore, they should talk even louder. And so on. Being in Istanbul is like being in a noisy nightclub all day long, every day.

Istanbul doesn’t have one central downtown area the rest of the city feeds into. Instead, it has half a dozen transportation and commercial hubs spread around the city. Taksim is one of these hubs. Just

north of Taksim is a neighborhood called Harbiye, and in Harbiye was my first apartment in Turkey.

I found that apartment online before I left Seattle. One day in Seattle I couldn't bear waiting any longer, so I jumped online and found a no-lease, month-to-month, small but clean building that catered to foreigners. I reserved one of the apartments sight unseen. That's how I came to live at the Istanbul Suites.

When I made the reservation I didn't realize how much my girlfriend wanted to be the one to find me my first apartment in Turkey. I considered finding that apartment over the internet a sign of eagerness and initiative. My girlfriend, however, saw it as a lack of trust in her and a usurpation of her duties. As is the normal practice in Turkey, she had moved in with her parents. The apartment I had found was on the other side of the city, and my girlfriend had hoped to find me a place nearer to her when the reunions with her family and friends subsided.

Now that I look back on it, I realize I had only needed to wait a few more weeks, but at the time all I knew was that I was in Seattle, and my girlfriend was in Istanbul, and I was eager to move on to the next phase of my life. Each additional week tooling around

Seattle waiting to go to Istanbul was feeling like a year.

My girlfriend never forgave me for finding myself an apartment before she did. Every time she'd bring it up in the years that followed I would argue that it just showed how eager I was to be with her, but I could never bring her around to seeing it that way, and eventually I just filed it away under “no good deed goes unpunished.”

Harbiye is a narrow neighborhood perched on top of a thin ridge running between the two much larger neighborhoods Taksim to the south and Sisli to the north. Harbiye’s streets are so small and cramped I could practically lean out my window and touch my neighbors across the way. On the eastern edge of Harbiye runs Cumhuriyet Caddesi (Republic Boulevard), a major thoroughfare connecting Taksim and Sisli. On the neighborhood’s western edge, a mere five blocks from Cumhuriyet Caddesi, is a steep drop-off at the bottom of which runs another major arterial, home to dusty car repair shops and used tire stores.

Harbiye is a gritty neighborhood, but it is centrally located and I could get to just about anywhere from it. It also has plenty of beauty once I learned where to look. Less than one block from my apartment was the

Vatican City consulate, and behind the consular walls grew a lush garden that spilled over the walls and pressed out into the street. Some of the neighborhood's restaurants and bakeries maintained open-air seating out back where I could step in off the street and enjoy a cup of tea while perching on a bench in a hanging garden.

Adjacent to the Vatican City consulate is a popular private school where, if I happened by at just the right time of afternoon, the sidewalk would be crowded with lively, freshly-scrubbed children in white polo shirts running around yelling and joking with each other as their teachers scurried around trying to herd them onto the school buses waiting to take them home.

On the morning of my fifth Saturday in Turkey, I sat in my favorite chair in the living room, my back to the window, enjoying a gentle breeze blowing fresh cool air into the apartment. I sipped at a glass of cherry juice with no ice, practically one of the national drinks of Turkey, and read a magazine.

I heard a loud cracking sound outside. It sounded like a power transformer blowing up about two blocks away. I didn't think much of it since there was some construction going on nearby and I figured

someone on the Saturday crew had just overloaded a circuit and blown it out.

I had planned to spend the day with my girlfriend, going over to her side of the city to hang out for the day and then have dinner at her parents' place. So about 10 minutes after I heard what I thought was a power transformer blowing up, I grabbed my bag and strolled up to Cumhuriyet Caddesi to catch a bus to the other side of the city.

I had only been in Istanbul for a short time, but even I knew enough to notice that Cumhuriyet Caddesi, usually a very busy six-lane boulevard, was unusually quiet. In fact, it was deserted. Deserted, that is, except for the ambulances that soon began screaming north along it towards Sisli. "Must be a pretty big car accident, shut down both sides of the road," I muttered to myself, but something didn't seem right. On a lark I called my girlfriend and asked her to turn on the TV to see if anything had happened. I hung up and kept walking south along the deserted street towards the bus stop.

A few minutes later my girlfriend called me back with the news. The big cracking sound I had heard a few minutes before leaving my apartment was no power transformer blowing up. Two powerful car bombs had just gone off simultaneously outside of two

separate synagogues, one in Sisli about 10 minutes' walk north of my apartment, the other in Tunel about 20 minutes' walk south of my apartment. The TV news said that many people were dead, and that there was a lot of blast damage in the blocks adjacent to each explosion.

In the days that followed the bombings the people of Istanbul weren't sure how to process what had happened. The older residents of Istanbul, and of Turkey in general, had experienced a great deal of political and social chaos in years past. In the 1960s and 1970s infighting between leftist and rightist political factions had gotten so hot it led to gun battles in the streets, and by 1980 the military had grown so tired of the chaos it overthrew the civilian government and instituted martial law. Then in the 1990s Turkey fought a bloody civil war in the southeast against Kurdish separatists. The country was no stranger to violence on its own soil.

But things had been relatively quiet for a few years, so most of the city seemed ready to write off the bombings as a tragic but isolated event, one it would get past, thanking god things like that didn't happen very often in Turkey anymore.

Then five days later it happened again, except worse.

On that day, a Thursday, I was walking home after a few hours of exploration in Istanbul's Kapali Carsi, the Covered Bazaar, a massive and labyrinthine collection of 4,000 small shops and kiosks selling everything Turkish and some things not.

My route home included hopping the Tunel tram to climb the steep hill between the Galata Bridge and Istiklal Caddesi (Independence Street). The tram station was shut down though, the lights turned off and the platform completely deserted. I was puzzled as to why, but I just shrugged it off and decided to hoof it up the winding streets to the top of the hill.

As I meandered up the hill I noticed groups of people huddling in storefront doorways listening to radios. As I passed each group its members glanced at me quickly and then went back to staring at the radio. They looked scared and bewildered. I had no idea why. I figured maybe they just liked listening to the radio in this neighborhood, and maybe I was being paranoid about their nervous glances.

When I got to the top of the hill, I saw the police setting up barricades and pushing back a gathering crowd of onlookers. I started asking what had happened. My Turkish wasn't very good, but I managed to latch onto and understand the word *bomba*. There had been a large bomb blast near the

British consulate just off Istiklal Caddesi a few minutes before. Some people were dead, many were injured, and the streets were quickly filling with ambulances and police cars.

Istiklal and the surrounding streets were littered with glass. The cell phones were down, so I skirted the barricades and stopped by my girlfriend's brother's workplace, about 3 blocks from the blast, to make sure he was okay and to tell him I was okay too and to try to get word to my girlfriend, who would be worried about us.

I stepped back out onto the street and saw the police busily cordoning off the area, so I cut through their barricades and quickly made my way home. I've never walked over so much broken glass in my life. I think there was so much of it that I walked a half mile without my feet ever touching the pavement.

After that second set of bombings the city was definitely on edge. A single set of bombings it could write off as a one-time event, but two? For a couple hours that day people didn't even know how many bombs had gone off around the city. At one point it was rumored there had been six. Later that day we learned it wasn't six, it was just two, the one at the British consulate, which I walked past, and another one a couple miles north at the HSBC bank building.

In the days that followed, the Turks did a lot of soul searching. The United States was fighting a war in Iraq, one of Turkey's neighbors to the south. Turkey and the US had been close allies for decades, so Turkey wanted to stand by its pal, but was this going to be the cost? Were things like this going to happen on a regular basis now? After years of relative peace and prosperity, was Turkey going to slide back into civil war and martial law?

I was confused, too. Did this mean I should go back home to the US, like some of the other Americans I had met were going to do? Would I have to walk down the streets of Istanbul now with teeth clenched, wondering if the next parked car was going to be the one with the bomb?

As nerve-wracking as the situation was though, I never gave serious thought to actually leaving Turkey. What captured my imagination more powerfully than thoughts of returning home was the idea of sticking around to see how the Turks were going to respond.

The next morning I walked back down to Istiklal Caddesi to check out the neighborhood. It was abuzz with people carrying brooms and trash cans and busily clearing the last of the debris from the streets. The sidewalks were not clogged with ambulances and

police cars anymore, they were clogged with trucks delivering new panes of glass for the shops.

After a major bomb blast that brought death, blood, and destruction, the city was busy cleaning up so it could be fully operational again 24 hours after the blast. And what's more, two days later a Turkish friend of mine was having a birthday party just a few blocks away from one of the blast sites, and the party was NOT cancelled.

The people of Istanbul did not need to know what was going to happen next. They did not need to know if attacks like this would become a regular occurrence. All they needed to know was that their world was a mess, and it needed to be cleaned up. They were showing the world that they were bigger than the men with the bombs. They were showing the world that they felt the fear, but would rise above it.

When I saw that that was how they reacted to an attack on their own soil, I fell deeply in love with that country and its people.

3: FUNDAMENTALIST LAMP STORE

When I stepped off the plane on my first day in Istanbul, I had no idea what I was going to do for a living. I had enough money saved up to tide me over for a couple years without earning a dime, but I wanted to do more than just sit around drinking tea and tapping into my savings. I was excited to be in a new country and I wanted to get moving. So within a few days of arriving I started scheduling appointments to tour the local workshops and factories to find out what Turkey made that I could buy and sell.

Sometimes larger factories will send out a car to pick up potential customers, even if those potential customers are so unknown they come with absolutely no references. When you're dealing with smaller workshops though, especially if they don't know you, transportation is up to you. For someone like me coming from a professional background where

someone else always scheduled the tours and I just hopped into a car's back seat when my guide told me to, this self-propelled method was novel. It was also a great way to get to know the city really fast.

Istanbul has a subway and that subway does an excellent job of serving a very busy corridor, but even in its expanded version it only has about 10 stops. The bulk of the city's public transportation is actually carried out by a patchwork of buses, minivans, trains, trolleys, and ferries. The system, like the city itself, is messy and chaotic, but most American visitors find it a miracle that in a city larger than Los Angeles, cheap public transportation can put them within a 10-minute walk of even the remotest destinations.

Plus, when they are late or lost, taxis are plentiful and relatively cheap, even though at \$12 per gallon Turkey's gasoline is some of the most expensive in the world. And there's no better way for a newcomer to practice his Turkish than to chat up a taxi driver.

Turkey makes some of the most amazing chiseled copper decorative items I've ever seen, things like vases, serving dishes, and tea kettles. Copper poisons food though, so serveware like rice platters and drinking cups is usually covered in tin, which makes the pieces functional but, in my opinion, far less beautiful. Fortunately, on request almost any

workshop will respin the item to buff off the tin plating and reveal the shiny copper underneath.

These days most of the copper workshops are on the western edge of the city. They used to be closer towards the city center, but as Istanbul grew and land at the city center became more expensive, the copper workshops moved to the outskirts.

The decorative copper items for sale in a retail store are incredibly shiny and beautiful, but as anyone who has visited a metal workshop will tell you, the work of actually making metal items is filthy, noisy, and dangerous. Copper work involves taking flat sheets of copper and hammering them against a mold. The mold is an even heavier piece of steel with a shape opposite of whatever is being made, serving a purpose similar to that of a negative in film photography. Sometimes the hammering is done by hand, literally with a hammer. Other times the hammering is done by a giant machine so powerful it could crush your skull and not even realize you had gotten in the way.

After it's hammered into shape the copper piece is taken to a polishing room. In the polishing room a worker holds the piece tight against a rapidly spinning buffering wheel to remove not only the grime and fingerprints, but the surface layer of the metal too.

No matter how good the polishing room's ventilation system, metal dust and polishing compound fill the air. Imagine a room at a health spa where dozens of people are having their skin exfoliated, except instead of their dead skin cells washing away in a shower, they get thrown into the air where everyone can breath them. That's what it's like in a polishing room.

From years of touring metal workshops in China and India, I was familiar with the grimy nature of the work. What I had never seen though was the hand-chiseling Turkey is famous for. After a piece is hammered but before it is polished, it stops off at an intermediate station where a craftsman chisels intricate patterns into the metal.

A copper vase is beautiful when it is merely hammered, but Turkish-style chiseling will turn it into a centerpiece your dinner guests will rave about for years. The patterns Turkish copper workmen chisel into their wares are fascinating geometric designs, intricate mazes of zigs and zags and shapes vaguely floral.

One day I asked one of the shop owners to show me how the workmen did this chiseling. He walked me over to an area where four men stood at individual workstations, their vases perched on spindles the

workmen could rotate as they chiseled patterns into the vases. Over the years I have been to dozens of Chinese factories where every step is automated with a jig or a template to ensure every piece comes out the same, and I expected this process to be similar.

To my surprise though, each workman was chiseling his pattern from memory, one hammer strike at a time. How on earth anyone could memorize an entire pattern and control its application like this was then and is still beyond me.

Handcrafted beauty like this reminds me of my brother Mark and the actress Shannon Doherty.

Mark is a psychology professor at a university in Oregon. Shannon Doherty was a star of *Beverly Hills 90210*, a teen drama popular on TV in the early 1990s.

In one of his lectures Mark points out that we humans tend to think the most beautiful or handsome people are the ones with the most symmetrical faces.

However, while nature can aspire to symmetry, it can never produce it with mathematical precision. We humans understand this instinctively, so we know that anything perfectly symmetrical cannot be natural. That's where Shannon Doherty comes in.

You see, one of Shannon Doherty's eyes is set lower than the other, so her face is clearly not

symmetrical. In Mark's lecture, Ms. Doherty serves as the exception that illustrates the symmetry rule. We see her eye's asymmetrical placement as a lovable flaw. We feel she is less intimidating and more accessible because of it. That is, that's how we saw her until her reputation as a confrontational bitch in public became more famous than her work on TV.

In the same way, the minute flaws in the hand-chiseled copper vases make the vases seem more beautiful than if the designs were reproduced perfectly by machine. In the hand-chiseled vases we subconsciously see Nature showcasing its perfect imperfection.

In addition to producing amazing works of chiseled copper, Turkey also makes some spectacular decorative glass. In fact, the country is one of the world's largest exporters of glass. Most of that export is the relatively pedestrian produce of everyday water glasses and fish bowls and drawer handles we can see at Target, Walmart, and Home Depot. Some of that glass, however, ends up in Istanbul workshops that run it through additional processing where they put their own exquisitely artistic touch onto it.

One day I went to visit one of these glass workshops. This particular workshop specialized in

frosted and faceted glass knobs for drawers and cupboards, taking products from one of the larger glass factories and transforming them into little works of art before sending them out into the world.

The workshop was run by a woman named Arzu (Arzu is a popular woman's name meaning "wish" or "desire"). While Arzu was showing me what kind of work her shop did, one of her suppliers dropped by unannounced, the father and son owners of a small business that made brass and copper bases for Arzu's workshop's glass lanterns. I had mentioned to Arzu that I was looking for decorative metal goods too, so she decided to introduce me to these suppliers.

The father and son duo didn't speak a word of English, but I had learned enough Turkish to break the ice and introduce myself. From my first day in Turkey I had learned that a smile and a clumsy but well-meaning attempt at the local language will turn even the steeliest Turk into an instant best friend. Sure enough, the three of us hit it off as soon as I began speaking Turkish.

Arzu left the room to make a phone call, so instead of asking her to translate, I somehow managed to pantomime to my two new friends that I was looking for metalwork suppliers. The three of us decided that when we finished our meetings with Arzu we would

drive together to their workshop in another part of the city.

Having finished her phone call, Arzu came back into the room. When the three of us told her that we planned to leave together, she shot me a troubled glance. Taking me aside, she whispered in English that maybe it had been a bad idea to introduce us. I asked her why, and she said these two were radical fundamentalists, and it might be a bad idea for me to be alone with them.

Perhaps I was being naive, and perhaps she was being overprotective, understandable since four car bombs had gone off recently. But over the years I have met plenty of people from around the world, enough to know that anyone in business has enough restraint to put their political convictions aside long enough to talk shop. Besides, Turks are proud of their famous hospitality, and I wanted to put that hospitality to the test.

So I whispered back to Arzu that if she saw fit to do business with them, so did I. I'd love to go see their workshop, and besides, this was an opportunity for me to get to know a new part of the city.

When we finished at Arzu's, the "radical fundamentalists" and I hopped into their beat-up Toyota sedan and took off for their part of the city.

The Toyota's suspension worked like it hadn't been serviced since the Reagan administration, and we could feel every tiny bump in the road as we careened down the road through a sparsely populated section of the city along the Halic.

The Halic is a river that begins on Istanbul's outskirts as a tiny rivulet visitors don't even notice unless someone points it out to them, and then it quickly grows into a wide body of water running into the Bosphorus. By the time it reaches the Bosphorus the Halic is crowded with ferries, cruise ships, heavily-trafficked bridges, and hundreds of fishermen casting their lines into water so polluted the fish practically grow extra heads.

On the drive to the fundamentalists' workshop we quickly exhausted my knowledge of Turkish. We had plenty of goodwill spirit left though, so we gestured and grinned our way through the rest of the drive. Much of the conversation was the same "America good, Bush bad" conversation I found myself enduring 20 times a day until Bush was reelected in November of 2004 and the rest of the world just gave up.

After about 30 minutes on the road we pulled up in front of a dusty old lamp store that looked like it was A) closed, and B) the last place anybody would ever go to buy a lamp for their home. The doors

were locked, the lights were off, and the store was completely unmanned, but my new friends insisted this was their factory, so inside we went.

A narrow set of stairs in back of the store led down to a cramped, poorly lit basement where a dozen workers stamped, shaped, and polished very plain-looking metal fixtures. There was no sign of chiseling or carving or the making of any of the decorative flourishes I was looking for. I knew immediately I was in the wrong kind of metal shop.

This was their life's work though, so I politely let them show me around before we went back upstairs to the "store." It was getting late and I wanted to go home, but they absolutely insisted we sit and drink tea together first. As the last of the daylight disappeared and the lamp store descended into darkness (yes, I am aware of the irony), we drank tea and talked busily even though we didn't understand a single word of each other's language.

When our glasses were empty the father-son duo insisted on driving me the three blocks to the bus station. We took the short hop in their car, they pointed to the bus I wanted, I hopped onto it, found a seat, and mumbled to myself, "Thank god that's over, what a day." The fundamentalist duo and I had parted

good friends, but we had nothing in common and we would never see each other again.

You know the saying, “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people”? Well, Muslim fundamentalists don’t want to kill us, Muslim fundamentalists who want to kill us want to kill us. I may not have found a workable business opportunity that day, but I did learn to laugh it off when people equate Muslim fundamentalism with violence, and any day we become less afraid of the world is a good one.

4: GOING STEADY

Before I had decided to move to Turkey, before I even knew my girlfriend was thinking of moving back there, I thought to myself, “Matt, if you’re serious about this girl, you know you’ll have to go to Turkey.” After all, the way I see it, a guy can’t marry a girl without meeting her family first and asking her father for his permission.

The courting and engagement process in Turkey is pretty similar to the one we have here in the US. In Turkey, as in the US, boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy asks girl to marry him. Boy gets family’s blessing. Boy and girl get married and live happily ever after.

There are some nuances in the fine print though, steps unique to Turkey that cannot be bypassed if the couple wants to do it right, steps like the *soz* (meaning “promise”).

The soz comes well before the engagement. It's like going steady, except it's going steady on steroids because it's a formal step involving both families.

For the soz both families get dressed up in their Sunday best. Everyone takes part — mothers and fathers, older and younger siblings, sometimes even grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. Men wear suits and ties, vests even, and if they have pocket watches and ascots, they wear those too.

The young man and his family go over to the young woman's house, where the young woman's family receives them like they are the most important guests who have ever crossed the family's threshold. Both families sit down in the living room and make nervous small talk for a while, and then the young man's father gets down to business. He talks on and on about how great both families are, on and on about how perfect a match the young man and the young woman would make, and then he asks the young woman's father for his consent to a union.

These days no dowry is offered. No one offers anyone any cattle, and no sheep are slaughtered. The two families just sit in the living room and interview each other. The young woman's parents ask themselves, "Will this young man be good for our daughter?" Similarly, the young man's parents ask

themselves, “Will this girl be good for our son?” And most important of all, both families ask themselves, “Will we be good for each other?” The soz is not just about deciding whether the young man and the young woman will fit together well, it is about the two families deciding whether they will fit together well, too.

While the two families are talking, the young woman is sent out of the room to make Turkish coffee. At a soz everyone’s social skills are on display, even the young woman’s skill at making Turkish coffee for guests. Well-made Turkish coffee has a creamy foam on top, and the young woman knows that everyone in the living room will be inspecting his or her cup to see if the coffee meets expectations. The young woman could be a world-famous brain surgeon or a Nobel Peace Prize winner, but what matters most at that particular moment is the foam on those cups of coffee.

The other family members monopolize the conversation, but the young lovers have a way of communicating with each other too. If the young woman does not like the young man, she can put salt in his coffee to signal to him, “Don’t do this, I don’t want to be with you.” When I heard about this little tradition, my first thought was that if you’re a young

man going out on a limb like this, you should be pretty sure ahead of time that your girl isn't going to salt your coffee.

When the coffee is drunk and the talking is done and the young man's father has asked the young woman's father for his blessing and the young woman's father has given it, the ceremony ends. Like most Turkish ceremonies, the soz ends abruptly.

The comfort with abrupt endings is something I like about the Turks. They are proud of their ceremonies. They are proud of their celebrations of life. They like to think they sit around together eating and drinking and dancing all through the night like a bunch of Italians. But the reality is that events end early and they end abruptly. It's not a rude abruptness that requires apologies, it's simply an abruptness that says, "We're done here, thanks everybody, move on."

After the soz the young man and the young woman are not engaged, but they are exclusive, and an engagement at some future point is assumed. It's like being pre-approved for a mortgage, plus both families will make sure neither of the two young lovers starts stepping out on the other. After all, by approving the match the families also make a commitment to watch out for and honor each other.

This was the ceremony my girlfriend and I would go through in order to make our relationship official in the eyes of her family and friends. But in a proper soz the kids basically sit back while the parents do the heavy lifting. If you're the young man, you don't need to work up the courage to ask your girlfriend's father for her hand in marriage, because your dad's going to do it! What could be better than that?

I was on my own in Turkey though. My parents were very supportive of our relationship, but they weren't planning to come visit for another few months, and my girlfriend had made it clear to me that the soz couldn't wait until then. She and I were spending a lot of time together, I was coming over to her parents' house to visit on a regular basis, and her extended family and family friends were starting to ask questions. One day she finally said to me, "My parents would like to know why you're here and what your intentions are. It's time for the soz."

Part of me was mildly insulted, thinking, "Wait a minute, I've thrown everything to the wind and I've moved halfway around the world, and they're not sure why I'm here?" But I knew how important the soz was, and one of the reasons I had come to Turkey was to properly ask my girlfriend's parents for her hand in marriage. So soz time it was.

On the appointed day I dressed up in a suit and tie, bought some flowers and a box of chocolates, and hopped the bus over to their side of the city.

When my girlfriend's parents greeted me at their front door, they too were dressed to the nines. I had seen them dressed nicely before, but I had never seen them dressed up quite like that. As I stepped inside into the entryway I felt even more puny, alone, and intimidated.

The five of us, my girlfriend's mother and father, her younger brother, and she and I, sat down in the living room. I felt awkward, sitting so formally on the same couch my girlfriend and I would lounge on together on any other weekend. The five of us made small talk for a bit, and then my girlfriend stood up and disappeared into the kitchen to make the Turkish coffee. I tried not to fidget, sitting there alone on that couch, everyone all dressed up, everyone knowing exactly what we were there to do but not doing it yet.

Finally, when my girlfriend had finished serving the coffee and had taken her seat next to me, an expectant pause fell over the room. I turned to my girlfriend and whispered to her, "Can I start now?" She nodded yes, so I put down my coffee, straightened my tie, took a deep breath, and opened my heart.

I talked about how special their daughter was to me. I talked about how I had been looking for her for my entire life. I talked about how complete she made me feel and how I couldn't imagine living without her. I talked about how welcome I felt in their family's home, how thankful I was to have people looking out for me when I was so far from my own family. I talked about how I wanted to take care of their daughter and be at her side forever.

I spoke in English, and every few sentences I paused to let my girlfriend translate for her parents. While she translated I would look over at her brother, who speaks fluent English, and try to guess what was going through his mind. He was staring at me, watching intently to see what I would say and how I would act. I never asked him what he was thinking that night, but I imagine it was some combination of, "I'll have to do this someday too," and "This guy better be good to my sister."

While my girlfriend translated I also thought about her parents, especially about her father. How was he taking all of this? Would he feel insulted that my family was not here to do this in the proper Turkish way? Would he feel insulted that instead of speaking to the head of my family, someone his own age, he had to listen to a strange foreign kid speaking a

foreign tongue? I was doing my best that night, but I worried that my best would not be good enough. I worried that my girlfriend's father would not feel like I was respecting him properly.

I had nothing to worry about though. When I finished my speech, I asked if they would accept me into their family, and they burst out with proud, happy, warm laughter, stood up, threw their arms around me, and said, "Welcome to the family."

At that point the adrenaline drained from my body and I wanted to collapse from relief and emotional exhaustion. I didn't know what to do next. Fortunately this ceremony too ended abruptly. The deed was done. There was no need to draw it out. My girlfriend grabbed my hand and took me outside for a walk around the neighborhood to breathe in the fresh night air. We walked past video stores open late and green grocers whose neat piles of oranges I found strangely peaceful and reassuring. We went to a nearby tea garden where we could sit and unwind and watch ships float past on the Bosphorus.

When we got back to the house, I entered with a mixture of pride and self-conscious embarrassment, not knowing what to expect. But jackets and ties were off, collars were open, and the TV was on. I was family now.

5: MY COUSIN'S NAME IS JIHAD

When you hear the word “jihad,” what images come to your mind?

For most of us in the West, that word conjures up images of holy war. Suicide bombers. 9/11. Crazed lunatics running around killing the non-believers.

That's certainly how I thought of that word before I moved to Turkey and started meeting people named Cihat, the Turkish spelling of the word jihad. I met one person named Cihat. Then I met another person named Cihat. Then I met another person named Cihat. And they were all nice, friendly, good people.

So I couldn't help but wonder, my god, what are these people thinking? Doesn't anyone around here know what that word means?

In the Muslim world Jihad is a common name for a man. Being named Jihad is like being named Bob or

Steve, and when you meet a Bob or a Steve, you don't go running for the hills, do you?

So soon after starting to meet people named Cihat I began thinking, maybe I'm the one who doesn't understand what that word means. I decided to do a little research, and here is what I found:

The word jihad has multiple meanings. And yes, "violent war against an external infidel" is one of them. But that is not the primary meaning of the word jihad.

The primary meaning of the word jihad, the main meaning of the word, is "struggle against sin in your own heart." Never mind the heathens, just purify your own heart.

I did not have to go to some peacenik, Middle East-loving source to find this definition. I just went to Wikipedia. I went to wikipedia.org and I typed in "jihad." And then to verify what I learned there, I went to a couple other mainstream American websites like Yahoo.com and Ask.com.

Jihad is a word of peace and love. Jihad simply means to live God's word in your own heart.

I'm not saying that suicide bombers are a tragically misunderstood folk. I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying is that for every crazed lunatic eager to strap a bomb to his chest and go meet his 72 virgins in

the sky, there are thousands of gentle, loving souls who say jihad is about purifying your own heart. They say never mind the non-believers, our job is just to live God's word in our own hearts.

The “scary minority” phenomenon is common to every religion around the world. For every radical Christian who thinks his religion is about grabbing a sword and slaying the heathens in the name of the Lord, there are thousands of Christians who say Christianity is about peace and love. Thousands of Christians who say, “never mind the non-believers, God just wants us to purify our own hearts.”

Learning I misunderstood the bigger meaning of the word jihad reminded me I make bad assumptions about people all the time. I make bad assumptions about all Russians being in the mafia, all Mexicans being lazy, all Asians being mathematically inclined. Just because we know someone’s nationality, or someone’s religion, or in this case someone’s name, we don’t know what that person is about, and yet we make these kinds of assumptions about each other every single day.

When we meet someone else, someone from another religion, or another country, or even another profession or another social class, it is our duty to that

other person to remember that our understanding of that person is probably incorrect.

And it is our duty to ourselves to overcome that incorrectness.

After all, if we allow our mistaken assumptions to guide our actions, our actions will be misguided, and even if we do reach our goals, we will probably find out, too late, that we chose the wrong ones.

6: ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN

I'm not a very religious person. Other than going to weddings and funerals and occasionally visiting a cathedral as a tourist, I don't think I've been in a church for religious purposes for 30 years.

When I was a kid however, I went to my fair share of Sunday school classes, so I've picked up at least a passing knowledge of the main Bible stories. One of my favorites was always the story of Abraham and how he almost sacrificed his own son to God.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael, for various reasons, had been banished from Abraham's household. Isaac was the only son still living under the family's roof.

Abraham's faith in God was legendary. There wasn't anyone who believed in or trusted and loved God as much as Abraham, but God decided to test Abraham's faith anyway. God sent a series of dreams

to Abraham, and in those dreams He told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

We all know that a parent's instinct to protect his child is easily one of the strongest instincts a human being has. So for God to order Abraham to kill his own son was pretty severe. And what's even more severe, what's over the top fanatical, is that Abraham said yes.

Abraham didn't say yes immediately. He did have to pray about it for a while. Abraham prayed, and God sent him some more dreams, and when Abraham was sure the command was coming from God, Abraham said to God, "God, if you really want me to do it, you must have a good reason. You bet, I'll kill my own son."

Abraham took his son Isaac up to the top of a nearby mountain and laid out his son for the sacrifice. Moments before Abraham did the dirty deed, moments before he plunged a knife into his own son's body, God sent an angel to the mountaintop and the angel said to Abraham, "Whoa, stop, God is just testing you, you don't actually have to kill your son. Let your son go. Here's a ram, sacrifice this ram instead."

I imagine that Abraham and Isaac were both immensely relieved about this last-minute change of plans.

Growing up as a kid, reading this story in the Bible and learning about it in Sunday school, I assumed the story of Abraham was a Christian story. Of course, later when I learned how to put two and two together I realized that this story, one of the first stories in the first book of the Old Testament, was a Jewish story long before Christianity even existed.

Fast-forward 25 years and I was living in a Muslim land. In my first few months in Turkey I got to observe the Kurban Bayram (meaning “Feast of the Sacrifice”) holiday. This is one of the holiest holidays on the Muslim calendar. When you watch the news on TV and see millions of Muslim pilgrims descending on Mecca wearing white caps and white robes and sandals and converging on a stone square to throw pebbles at a pillar, that’s Kurban Bayram, known as Eid el-adha in Arabic.

The first time I encountered this holiday I learned that in observance of it Muslims slaughter sheep. They don’t slaughter the sheep in a polite, sanitized sort of way. The procedure is dictated by religious scripture, but it is still bloody, violent, and gruesome. Those of us who are accustomed to our meat coming

to us in shrink-wrapped styrofoam from a grocery store's refrigerator case would be shocked. An entire family will walk down to the market together, buy a live ram, and take it back to their home. Right there in their own courtyard where their children play they will grab the ram by its nose, tilt its head back to expose its neck, and slit its throat. Blood will spray everywhere, the ram will collapse onto the ground, and then the family will butcher it.

I saw this going on and I thought, "Oh my god, what kind of country am I living in? What kinds of people do something like this and call it holy? They're killing innocent rams with their bare hands, and calling it a holiday. Who are these people?"

Well, I found out they don't call this holiday "Feast of the Sacrifice" because they are killing a ram and eating it. They call it "Feast of the Sacrifice" because they are celebrating Abraham's devotion to God, a devotion so strong he would sacrifice his own son. They are celebrating the same story I grew up with as a kid. On their holiest of holidays Muslims are celebrating a story I thought Christians and Jews owned.

What's more, just like the Jewish and Christian reverence for Abraham does not begin nor end with that single story, the Muslim reverence for Abraham

doesn't begin nor end with that single story either. Ibrahim, the local pronunciation of the name Abraham, is one of the most common male names in Turkey and the Middle East. Being named Ibrahim is like being named Bill or Steve. Muslims have taken the same man Jews and Christians revere and they have placed him at the very center of their world.

When I learned that, it set the tone for my 6 years in Turkey. This is the tone it set:

If you think of the entire human experience as a pie chart, the things that set us apart from each other are a tiny piece of that pie. Maybe 5% at most. The things we have in common, the things that make us the same, make up the other 95% of the pie.

Human nature being what it is, we humans focus on and obsess over the 5%. We plaster our headlines with the 5%. We think the 5% drives the world around us. What actually drives the world around us is the 95%. When we allow our obsession with the 5% to control our actions, we let the tail wag the dog.

7: SCANDALS, ROMANS, AND JACUZZIS

Shortly after arriving in Turkey my girlfriend landed a plum job at one of the big multinationals. The job required she work very long hours, and we were still living in different parts of the city, so we didn't get to spend much time together during the week. On top of that the overwhelming crush of the city was getting to both of us. When a long holiday weekend rolled around we were itching to get out of the city together.

This was Turkey though, and we weren't married yet, so it was best that we travel in a group with some friends. We had started to meet some people from Istanbul's expat community and there were two in particular we enjoyed spending time with, Holger from Germany and Maarten from Holland. They were both new to Turkey too, and they jumped at the

idea of hitting the road for a few days of sightseeing along the Aegean coastline.

The four of us piled into Holger's car and left Istanbul on a very crowded, holiday-packed ferry crossing the Marmara Sea. Two hours after sailing from Istanbul we deboarded in the port town of Bandirma and drove a short distance to Susurluk for lunch.

Susurluk is a wide spot in the road that made a name for itself in the 1990s as the site of a scandalous, single-car but multiple-fatality accident involving the deputy chief of the Istanbul police, a high-ranking member of Parliament, a contract killer wanted by Interpol, and a former beauty queen turned mob girlfriend. In the trunk of their smashed car were found drugs, guns, fake passports, and a large amount of cash. Everyone in the car was killed except for the parliamentarian, who was later cleared of any wrongdoing.

Turks love a conspiracy theory, and the car crash in Susurluk made for a juicy one. It pulled back the curtains on the "Deep State," the notion that Turkey's elected government hides a seedy underbelly that holds the real reins of power in the country. Today Turkey's conspiracy theory itch is scratched by the Ergenekon scandal, but in the 1990s it was scratched

by the car crash in Susurluk. In fact, to this day Susurluk is more an event than a town in the minds of many Turks, much like Watergate is more a scandal than a hotel in the minds of many Americans.

After lunch in Susurluk we drove west towards the Aegean coast, and within a couple hours we were driving south along the sea towards a town called Ayvalik, where we would stop for the night. It was winter and the days were short, so darkness had fallen early and we drove along the coast but couldn't see the sea.

In Ayvalik we stayed right on the beach at a hotel called Otel Temizel (meaning "Hotel Clean Hands"). Ayvalik is a nice but second-tier resort town and we were there in the off-season, so the hotel was almost completely empty and entire wings had been mothballed for the winter.

Nevertheless, we had read that this hotel had a jacuzzi, and for the last few hours of our drive we had been looking forward to washing off the road grime with a warm soak. We were already irritable from a day on the road, and when we found out the jacuzzi had been drained for the winter, Holger, Maarten, and I became unreasonable.

The three of us summoned the hotel manager and insisted he turn on the jacuzzi the hotel had bragged

about. The manager explained that the jacuzzi was only available in the summer. We pressed him further, quite literally, the three of us surrounding him and backing him up against the front desk, insisting that he accommodate our request.

At that point none of us had been in Turkey for more than 3 months, and we were probably caught in the grip of a culture shock that made us prone to aggression and self-righteousness. In the years to come I would relax into the “When in Rome...” spirit that would help me cope with the unforeseen obstacles and frustrating events common to life in Turkey. But on that day, I took out my frustrations on the hotel manager.

Now that I look back on how I helped gang up on him, I am slightly ashamed of the arrogance I showed, surrounding a man who was in all likelihood a perfectly reasonable and accommodating hotel manager, speaking to him in a language foreign to him but native to me, thinking I would use my physical height and my easy command of English to intimidate him into turning on a jacuzzi that wouldn’t have been warm until the next day anyway.

The next morning, having survived the hardship of being unable to soak in a tub of hot bubbly water, I woke up, pulled back the curtains, and stepped out

onto the balcony into the blindingly bright sunlight reflecting off the calm waters of the Aegean Sea. In college we had been force-fed Greek classics for an entire year, so I had read many stories featuring the Aegean, but since we had driven into Ayvalik at night, this was the first time I had ever actually seen it. For the longest time I simply stood there on the balcony, squinting into the brilliant reflection coming off a sea I had imagined for years, but figured I would never lay eyes on.

After scarfing down a traditional Turkish breakfast of cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, and white cheese, the four of us climbed back into Holger's car and drove over to the memorably-named Seytan Sofrasi (meaning "Satan's Dinner Table"), a hill just outside of Ayvalik that offers a spectacular 360-degree view of the entire region, a view stretching up and down the coast, out over the sea, and back into the mountains behind.

At Satan's Dinner Table we took dozens of photos and drank more tea than people on a long road trip should, and then we hopped back in the car and headed south towards Kusadasi (meaning "Bird Island"), another seaside town further down the coast.

Kusadasi is a small tourist town most famous for its proximity to the ruins of Ephesus and the final

resting place of the Virgin Mary. We had taken our time on the drive down though, so we would have to wait until the next day to see those things. In the meantime we wandered around Kusadasi in the quickly disappearing daylight.

I was struck by the closeness of the Greek islands. There are places along the Aegean coastline where Greece and Turkey are so close to each other I could practically stand on the Turkish mainland, pick up a rock, throw it really hard, and watch it land on Greek soil.

Many times in the years that followed I witnessed Turkey's unique brand of prickly, thin-skinned national pride. Whenever I'd have trouble relating to it, I'd remind myself that there are places along the coastline where even a novice swimmer can dog paddle the distance between Greece and Turkey, and I would understand the Turks' prickly defensiveness. No one wants his mortal enemy living in the house next door where he can stand over his kitchen sink and stare into your bedroom.

After breakfast the next morning the four of us hopped into the car and drove the short distance to the ruins of Ephesus, one of my favorite historical sites in all of Turkey.

Settlement of the land that would become the city of Ephesus began more than 10,000 years BC. A river flowing out of the nearby hills and into the Aegean made an excellent natural harbor, and Ephesus was a popular Greek port town by 500 BC.

The city continued expanding through the transition of empires and reached its peak as a Roman port town around the time of Christ. In fact, it was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, second only to Rome itself.

Not only was Ephesus a major seaport for one of the most powerful empires the world has ever known, it was also a hotbed of growth for what was to become one of the world's greatest religions.

The apostle Paul lived in Ephesus, building the young Christian church there and organizing missions into the surrounding areas. In the first century AD he wrote Ephesians, the 10th book of the Bible's New Testament, urging the members of the fledgling church to get along with each other and maintain unity. The Virgin Mary is said to have spent her final years at a small stone complex tucked away into the hills nearby, and to this day Catholic popes are known to make pilgrimages to that complex.

The same river that had given Ephesus so much life, though, was also taking it away. As the river

flowed into the sea it slowed and deposited the silt it carried down from the hills above. That silt built up year after year, century after century, and gradually the coastline moved away from Ephesus until Ephesus was no longer a port city.

By 500 AD most of the city's inhabitants had decamped to other locales. Ephesus shrank to the size of a village so small passersby barely even noticed it, and by the time the Turks began piecing together the Ottoman Empire, Ephesus had been dead for almost a thousand years.

Today the people have been gone for a long time, but the dry climate has been good for the preservation of the city's ruins. Today you can walk amongst hundreds of marble pillars and building facades, some of the pillars still standing, others lying prone after having fallen over onto the ground many centuries ago.

You can also stroll along the same marble walkway that took vacationing Romans down the hill to a massive stone amphitheater where the great performers of the day held court, and if you use a little imagination, you can become one of those great performers for a moment, pushing your way through a gauntlet of fawning stage hands as you make your way out onto the center stage to receive a standing

ovation from tens of thousands of imaginary Romans clad in togas and sandals.

But as much as I enjoy learning about history and imagining fame and fortune, what I really love about Ephesus is the historical perspective it puts on Turkey:

Before the Turks were Turks, when they were just a people thinking about migrating out of their Central Asian homeland, Ephesus had already thrived for over a thousand years as one of the world's greatest cities.

Turkey, like almost every other country and especially like the US, thinks it is more important than it really is. Outsiders can easily spot hubris but the locals rarely can, because it's baked right into everything they say and do. Ephesus is a reminder that no matter how humble you are, you are probably not humble enough.

8: THREATENING THE KIDS

Istanbul has a handful of hubs. Taksim is the king of them all, hands down. I could walk through Taksim at 3:30 in the morning and it would be teeming with people, more people than I would ever see in an American city even at rush hour. I don't know where these people come from, or what they are doing at 3:30 in the morning when they should be home in bed, but there they are.

Taksim's main square is surprisingly small considering how important a hub it is. When I was still back in Seattle, before I had ever set foot in Istanbul, I spent hours staring at maps of the city. I imagined Taksim would be a huge open area like Beijing's Tiananmen Square, where the concrete seems to stretch to the horizon and on a hot summer day you might want to rest up for a couple hours before venturing out to cross the square again.

Taksim's square isn't like that at all though. You can cross it on foot, from one end to the other, in three minutes. The impressiveness of the square is not in its size, but in how well it moves huge numbers of people into and out of itself. At each of the square's four corners are major boulevards that carry a continuous stream of cars and buses into and out of the square, and in the center of the square stairs from the subway spew forth a never-ending flow of people like a natural spring disgorges water from the center of the earth.

Very few people actually hang out in the square itself. The surrounding neighborhoods host one of densest concentrations of restaurants, nightclubs, retail stores, and hotels anywhere in the world, and almost all of the people in the main square are going to or coming from one of those establishments.

Taksim is one of those places where the rich, the middle class, and the poor all come together to enjoy life and see and be seen. It is a place where society types head to the ballet while punk rockers head to a club while transvestites head to wherever it is transvestites go. Taksim is a place where you can fill your belly with street food for \$3.00 while breathing exhaust fumes from a bus, or you can dine on the finest French fusion cuisine for \$1,000 while taking in

a stunning view of the city from a restaurant's penthouse patio.

Taksim sits at the north end of one of the main tourist corridors, so it attracts more than its share of naive, slack-jawed newbies and the shady characters who prey on them. The side streets a few blocks north of the square are home to some pretty questionable bars, and battle-weary backpackers around the world pass along stories of unexpectedly pricey glasses of scotch followed by strong-armed trips to the ATM. Sometimes the stories even morph into tales of foreigners entering a bar only to be drugged and then wake up the next morning on a park bench with a kidney missing.

I suspect the missing kidney story is a hyped-up urban legend, a cautionary tale passed down from generation to generation of traveler. Real life itself is far less dramatic, but far more fascinating, and one thing I always found fascinating, if slightly annoying, about Taksim was its street urchins, its beggar kids. Many different species of street urchins rub shoulders with each other in Taksim, but few are as spirited as the shoeshine boys.

The shoeshine boys are always boys, usually about 7 or 8 years old. They scurry around the square carrying beat-up old wooden shoeshine boxes that

look like they've been around for 50 years and always contain a few grungy brushes and at least one rusted tin of bootblack.

To the shoeshine boys it doesn't matter what kind of shoes people are wearing. They could be wearing running shoes, suede moccasins, or even plastic flip-flops. The shoeshine boys will come running up alongside them chanting, "Shoeshine, shoeshine, shoeshine." I never took any of the shoeshine boys up on their offer. I wonder what they would do if I stopped and said, "Well, yes, come to think of it, I would like a shoeshine."

The presence of these kids was rarely more than a minor nuisance. I quickly learned to ignore them in the same way I learned to ignore 95% of humanity in an urban environment, the same way I learned to ignore the shady characters in Taksim asking me where I was from or if I knew what time it was.

It would be too much, though, if any of these people broke the invisible barrier and touched me. And one day, one of the shoeshine boys made that mistake.

I don't know why I react so emotionally when a street person or a beggar touches me. Maybe it goes back to when I was a college kid in Chicago. I was coming home one night, entering the vestibule of my

apartment building. I heard someone ask, “Excuse me sir, what time is it?” and I turned around just in time to see two street thugs leaping through the air at me. They got me down on the ground, beat the crap out of me, kicked my head repeatedly into the vestibule’s stone wall, and then ran off. If they had taken my wallet, at least they would have picked up a few bucks for their troubles. But they just wanted to beat up on someone.

Maybe it’s because of that experience, or maybe it’s because of something else. I just prefer that strangers on the street keep their distance, especially when they are beggars.

Anyway, late one morning in Istanbul I was walking back to my apartment in Harbiye from a teahouse in Taksim. The normal phalanx of shoeshine boys started running after me, chanting, “Shoeshine, shoeshine, shoeshine.” After a block or two of me ignoring them they gave up and fell by the wayside, all but one who pursued me with unheard-of tenacity. This kid would not take no for an answer.

He walked alongside me for an extra block or two and then, from the corner of my eye, I saw him dip two of his fingers into one of his dusty tins of shoe polish. He scooped up a good-sized chunk of the black gunk and held it up in the air. He waited until I

glanced over at him, and then he smiled at me mischievously and glanced down at my shoe.

I knew what he was going to do next and I thought, "Oh no, you don't." But oh yes, he did. As we walked next to each other, he reached down and dabbed that big glop of shoeshine on the top of my shoe.

That was when I completely lost it.

I laid into that little boy with the longest string of obscenity I think any kid anywhere has ever heard. And when I was done cussing him out, I escalated my verbal barrage to threats of bodily harm. I threatened to kill him. I threatened to kill his friends. I threatened to kill his brothers, his sisters, his mother and father. I threatened to scorch every square inch of earth that kid had ever stepped foot on. I threatened to forever turn his world black and burn it to the ground like some post-nuclear hellhole.

When I was a kid that age, if someone had yelled at me with a small fraction of the fury I was showing I would have pissed my pants, but that kid stood his ground. He rocked back onto his heels and stared at me with wide-eyed shock and horror, and his face was white with fear, but he wasn't going anywhere. He was a brave kid.

When I was done with my tirade, I pivoted abruptly and stormed off down the street without looking back. I walked briskly and kept a stoic face, trying to hold back the shame and embarrassment welling up inside me, trying to look normal for each new crop of strangers passing me on the street.

The walk back to my apartment took less than ten minutes, but it felt like an eternity. When I got home, the moment I heard the door click shut behind me, I collapsed to my knees, dropped my forehead to the floor, and started crying. What on earth had possessed me to act like that? I had just blown up at a little kid on the street in broad daylight. I had just threatened to snuff the life out of a little boy barely tall enough to reach my belt. I hadn't even been in Turkey for three months yet. What was I becoming?

Even a traveler needs a change of scenery every now and then, and right there I decided it was time for me, too. The next weekend I hopped an overnight bus for Sofia, the capital of neighboring Bulgaria, for some much-needed R&R.

By the way, one night about a year later my girlfriend and I were walking down a side street in that same neighborhood. I had my arm around her and it was winter, so I had pulled my cap down low,

the brim hiding my face from the wind, my chin tucked inside my collar. There were some beggar kids hiding out in a nearby doorway, and as we approached we caught their eye. A couple of the older ones skipped out to approach us.

Spotting their approach in my peripheral vision, I slowly raised my head, showing my face and making eye contact with the beggar kids. They stopped dead in their tracks and their faces froze as they whispered a panicked warning to each other, “Stop, stop, it’s the crazy one.”

9: ESCAPE TO BULGARIA

Entering Turkey is extremely easy for tourists from the US and western Europe. All they have to do is land at the airport in Istanbul, slap down \$20 for a visa, and sashay through passport control. For Americans it's even easier than re-entering the US when their trip is over.

The visa expires in 90 days though, and in order to renew it, tourists have to leave Turkey and re-enter the country so they can pay another \$20 for a new visa. For many of the expats in Turkey this ritual serves as a thinly-veiled excuse to visit the neighboring countries. In mid-January of 2004, I had been in Turkey for almost three months and it was time to renew my visa. Plus, I was issuing death threats against beggar kids. It was time to get a little distance. It was time for a road trip.

Going somewhere new tends to strip away the built-up layers of civilization, taking us back to the basics of our existence. It forces us to ask questions like, “Should I take 3 shirts or 4?” “Where will I eat dinner?” and “How will I get to my hotel, and will my bed be ready for me when I arrive?”

Excited to be traveling again, I stuffed a change of clothes and a toothbrush into my daypack and went down to the main bus station on the European side of Istanbul, the station from which the buses to Bulgaria departed. Moments before the bus pulled out of the parking lot, I paid \$25 for a one-way ticket and climbed aboard.

Bulgaria neighbors Turkey to the west. Its capital Sofia is about 8 hours from Istanbul by car. I had been looking forward to seeing the scenery to the west of Istanbul, but mine would be a night bus, and I wouldn’t be able to see anything other than the blackness of night. So instead of staring out the window I went to sleep, waking up for only 20 groggy minutes to get off the bus and shuffle through passport control at the border.

After driving all through the night the bus pulled into Sofia about 6:00 in the morning. The sky was still dark and the mid-winter air biting cold. The bus station was like a big, freezing, poorly-lit concrete

hangar. I wandered around the cavernous waiting hall for a bit, feeling lost and bewildered, wondering what to do next. I hadn't thought this through very well. I did know where I was staying that night, but other than that all I knew about Sofia was that I would be there for 24 hours until the bus took me back to Istanbul.

I didn't even know whether to feel safe or not. The bus station was deserted and the streets outside were empty. I didn't know whether the streets were empty because it was cold out and the nice, friendly, hospitable Bulgarians were still sleeping snug in their beds, or whether the streets were empty because everybody but me knew Sofia was a dangerous place and no one in their right mind would step outside before dawn.

Telling myself the dark and deserted streets were no more dangerous than the dark and deserted bus station, I cinched up the straps on my daypack and started walking, moving south along one of the main boulevards towards the center of town.

In many ways, Sofia looked like I would expect an ex-Soviet bloc city to look. Wide, straight boulevards. Cold, imposing concrete buildings. Streets lined with old cars from the 1960s and 1970s. A city lurching forward on a crumbling infrastructure

it had built 30 years ago during more optimistic times.

The air temperature was well below freezing, but my body started to warm up after a few miles of walking. I started to ease into the rhythm of the streets. I passed dozens of coffee shops and bars which were of course closed, but they comforted me with their mere presence, telling me Bulgarians are just like everyone else, they like to hang out together and drink and eat and gossip. Paranoia began to relax its grip on my mind and I realized the streets weren't empty because Bulgarians were a cold and inhospitable people, the streets were just empty because it was dark and early on a January morning.

I reached one of the main downtown squares about 7:00 am. The sky was getting light and the city was beginning to wake up. I was relieved to see people appearing on the streets, commuters going to work just like they do in cities around the world.

Around 8:00 am I started to think of crashing at my hostel, but then I remembered it was just 8:00 am. The hostel owners were probably just getting out of bed, and the current occupants of my future room were probably still sleeping. It was definitely too early to show up at the front desk saying, "Wow, long

day, I sure could use a hot shower, a nice dinner, and a comfy bed.”

So I kept walking, heading east away from the hostel but towards the blinding light of the rising sun. That’s when the beauty of Sofia, the texture of Sofia, started to reveal itself to me. Sofia is practically littered with monuments. Some of those monuments are towering Soviet monsters left over from the communist era, huge bronze dioramas of soldiers and workers courageously leading society forward into the future.

But Sofia has another type of monument, smaller monuments that have been plopped down in the middle of traffic circles or tucked away into tiny parks. These monuments are often just plaques or small busts. They honor Bulgarian freedom fighters who fought against the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s and the 1870s.

These monuments were allowed to stand through the Cold War years because the Russians had supported the Balkan independence movements when the region’s countries were struggling to break free of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Russia was not backing these independence movements out of the goodness of its own heart. Russia was backing them

because it and Turkey had been rivals for hundreds of years, and the enemy of your enemy is your friend.

They are monuments to men like Vasil Levski, a national hero in Bulgaria who sought to organize the Bulgarian independence movement and establish a Bulgarian nation free of the Ottoman Empire. Levski was captured by the Ottoman authorities and executed in Sofia in 1873, but he became a source of inspiration for Bulgarian separatists.

In Turkey I had heard no end of the Turkish side of the empire story, which goes something like this: the Ottoman Empire was one of peace, love, and tolerance. Everyone was happy to be part of the Ottoman Empire, because they were free to practice their own religion and live their own way of life. Life under the Ottoman Empire was exactly like life before it, except sunnier.

Never mind the fact that the Ottoman Empire, like all other empires, including now our own, was at war somewhere on its outskirts every day. Throughout history empires have trained themselves to believe others love to see them coming, but the reality is humans like to rule over their own homes and they fight to the death to do so, no matter how well-intentioned the intruders think they are.

Those monuments may have been physically puny compared to Sofia's much larger communist-era monoliths, but they had a dramatic impact on me. They showed me my own country in a way I can't see it when I look directly at it. They showed me what my own country looks like from the outside.

Later that afternoon, after miles of walking and hours of exploring the city, I decided I could finally show up at the hostel where I'd be staying that night. I headed in its direction, and after a slight delay wandering through the wrong streets, I found it tucked into a quiet cul-de-sac.

I opened a creaky wooden door, stepped into its nice, warm lobby, greeted the manager, filled out some guest registration paperwork, and handed over my payment in Turkish lira. The manager looked at me apologetically and said, "I'm sorry, we only take Bulgarian lev, dollars, or euros."

I felt mildly insulted. "What," I thought, "my money isn't good enough for you? You'll take your own little podunk currency, but you won't take the currency of your much larger neighbor to the east who, by the way, used to own you?" I had only been in Turkey for 3 months, but I was already feeling a sense of its prickly national pride.

For a week I had been wearing my most composed, most stoic game face, but the truth was it wouldn't take much to send me spinning off into the lost confusion that had caused me to blow up at that beggar kid back in Istanbul. So instead of starting what I knew would quickly become a ridiculous argument, I simply smiled and said, "Certainly, of course. Can you tell me where I can get some local currency?" He directed me to a cash machine nearby, and I came back a few minutes later armed with a fistful of Bulgarian lev.

Having paid the manager with a more desirable currency, I dropped my things off in my room, smiled warmly at my bed, and thought, "I'll see you right after dinner, that's for sure." I turned and headed out for a bite to eat.

I walked to a nearby restaurant and picked out a small, sheltered table shoved back into one of the corners. I was feeling a little raw and worn at the seams, a lonely, disoriented foreigner who had left one foreign country to seek momentary solace in another foreign country. I ordered a plate of pork strips in cream sauce with shallots, something I could definitely not get back in Turkey, along with a little taste of "home," a Turkish-like Shepherd's Salad made

of diced cucumbers, tomatoes, and onions, with a little feta cheese sprinkled on top.

By the time I finished eating it was barely 7:30 pm, but I had started the day early and walked 20 miles exploring the city in sub-freezing weather with a pack on my back. It was time to call it a day, so I paid the check and walked the short distance back to my room. The next day I would get up early to hop a bus back to Istanbul, but in the meantime I would sleep. I set my alarm, collapsed into bed, and fell into the deep, dark, needy sleep of the desperately tired.

10: SELLING JEWELRY

When I first arrived in Istanbul I knew two things: I had come for a girl, and there was enough cash in my pocket to tide me over for a while. When I focused on those two things, my purpose seemed so clear, my life so simple.

On an intellectual level I knew it wouldn't always be that clear and simple. I knew I would have to figure out how to make a living in a foreign country. I knew I would need to learn a new language. I knew I would need to make new friends and find my way in a new city.

What I hadn't anticipated was how many other things would compete for my attention. I hadn't planned on walking over debris from large car bombs, threatening the lives of small children, and reeling from culture shock. I was definitely going to have to

dig deep into my reservoir of strength to stay focused and make this Turkey thing work.

At the top of my list of things to do was figuring out how to make a living in my new country. In my first months in Istanbul I really wanted to find a way to make a business work with those chiseled copper vases. I loved the fact those vases came from such a filthy, noisy, gritty environment, yet emerged so shiny and beautiful. I loved holding them in my hands and studying their every mark and curve.

But making a business out of them would be difficult. You can't airfreight something so bulky and heavy and expect to make any money. You need to ship it on the ocean instead, and when you ship something on the ocean, in order to keep costs low you need to fill a large steel shipping container that measures about 20 feet long x 8 feet wide x 8 feet high.

While filling a shipping container keeps the freight costs down, it also means you have to tie up \$20,000 or more for months while you wait for the product to get made, shipped, delivered to the customer, and paid for.

I had done something similar to that when I was back in Seattle, shortly before I moved to Turkey. I had some specially-designed springs made in China

from galvanized steel wire. I imported the springs into the US for some farmers who wanted to use them to hold open the branches of young trees to let in more sunlight. That transaction was worth \$45,000, and at one point every single dime of my own money was tied up in the deal. I ended up pocketing a nice sum of money from the sale, but if anything had gone wrong, I would have lost everything I had.

Over the years I had handled thousands of transactions much larger than that one, but I was always using somebody else's money. The container of galvanized steel wire was the first time I was using my own savings. I found tying up so much of my own money immensely stressful and I wasn't in the mood to do it again. Besides, I had a new girlfriend and I had just moved to a new country. My plate was full. The last thing I needed was the additional stress of large transactions that at best would take months to cash out and at worst could bankrupt me.

No, those copper vases would not work for me. I needed something else to sell, so to see what I could find I went back to the Kapali Carsi, the Covered Bazaar, the massive market I had been returning from the day that bomb had gone off on Istiklal.

Knowing that heavy, bulky items were out, I bypassed the sections of the Kapali Carsi that are

dominated by things copper and ceramic. I also bypassed the sections given over to leather jackets, knock-off Louis Vuitton purses, and cheap tube socks. I had passed through the jewelry section many times, but when I walked through it again, I started to see jewelry in a new light: big value in a small space. Perfect for shipping.

The next day I went back to the Bazaar with an empty backpack and a fistful of cash. I wanted to spread the risk as much as possible, so I stayed away from expensive stones like diamonds and rubies and I filled my backpack instead with silver, glass, turquoise, and amber.

I didn't know how I would sell the jewelry, so I took it back to my apartment, photographed it, and emailed the photos to former colleagues back home in the US to find out what they thought. Almost every one of my colleagues remarked on how beautiful and unique the designs were. A few years back I had dabbled in buying and selling things online and I thought, why not try selling these online too?

I knew how to write basic HTML and add and resize photos, but that was the extent of my web design experience. I had absolutely no idea how to set up a more complex website that could handle a changing inventory, a shopping cart, and credit card

payments. Those were skills I would spend the next three months teaching myself.

Initially I called my new business “Homesick Turk,” but someone mentioned to me the “sick” in “Homesick” made him think of vomiting. I did not want people to associate my business with puke, so I quickly changed the name to “Moda Jewels.” Moda is the name of the neighborhood on Istanbul’s Asian side I had moved to a few months before to be closer to my girlfriend. The word also means “fashion” in Turkish.

As I improved my website skills, I started putting the jewelry up on the site to see what would sell. I expected the silver jewelry to sell the fastest, but it barely moved at all. What did move, 20 times as fast as anything else, was something called the “evil eye,” a Mediterranean good luck charm I had scooped up in my experimental dragnet at the Kapali Carsi.

The evil eye, known in Turkish as the *nazar boncuk*, is a circular blue glass disk with a circle of white glass melted into the middle of it, and a circle of black glass melted into the middle of that. The three, or sometimes four, concentric circles look like an eye. The eyes range in size from tiny beads that would easily fit 10 to a hand to the size of large dinner platters.

An evil eye protects its owner from the jealousy of others. The underlying assumption is that the owner's life has enough richness in it that other people look upon the owner with jealousy. Their jealous gazes release evil spirits that would bring bad luck to the person on the receiving end of the gazes if it weren't for the evil eye staring back at the evil spirits and scaring them away.

Since the evil eyes are made of glass they chip or break often. Legend has it that when one breaks it is because it was doing its job, absorbing bad spirits before they could harm the owner.

The evil eye is not just a Turkish traditional belief. Persians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Italians, even Central and South Americans all have versions of the evil eye. The Greeks call it *matiasma*, the Persians *cheshm nazar*, the Jews *ayin hara*, the Italians *mal occhio*. Everyone considers the evil eye native to his own land, but it is so ancient a concept I suspect it predates all the people who claim it as their own.

Evil eye charms come in many forms – earrings, bracelets, key chains, even wall hangings and floor tiles. These days most of them are made in Turkey no matter where in the world they are sold. When people buy matiasmas on the streets of Athens, or

cheshm nazars in Los Angeles, chances are they were made in Turkey.

Selling evil eyes taught me a lot about Turkey, but it taught me even more about my own country. For example, I learned that by conservative, United States Census-based estimates, 350,000 Iranians live in the US, the biggest concentration of them being along the northern edge of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. Over half a million Armenians live in the US, and in true Diaspora fashion twice as many Armenians live outside of Armenia as live inside of it. Ten times as many Greeks live in the US as do Turks, even though Turkey is five times larger than Greece.

And just like there are clusters of people in Los Angeles, Miami, and New York who grew up seeing evil eyes every day in their grandmothers' living rooms, there are people in other parts of the country who have never even heard of the evil eye. For every 50 orders I shipped to Iranians in the San Fernando Valley or to Hispanics along the Florida coast north of Miami, I shipped one, at most, to my old stomping grounds of Seattle. I for one had never heard of the evil eye before I went to Turkey.

I worked really hard on Moda Jewels for three years, but sales plateaued at the end of the first year and I couldn't figure out how to get them up to the

next level. What was particularly frustrating was that the plateau came at the break-even point, which meant the business wasn't losing money, but I was working for free.

Some of the revenue was going to Google for ads I was running. Some of the revenue was going to the third-party fulfillment house in Michigan I started using because the unpredictable international postal service was causing me too many customer service headaches. Some of the revenue was going, of course, to my suppliers, and what was left was going to a handful of smaller players in my business' operations. After those people were paid at the end of each month, there was nothing left over for me.

For the first two years I could reassure myself that this was normal for a new business, and whenever I needed money I could just dip into the savings I had brought with me to Istanbul.

In the third year however, those savings began to run out. After three years of me pulling back harder and harder on the joystick and praying the plane would take off before it got to the end of the runway, the plane was getting to the end of the runway. It was going full speed, but it hadn't gotten off the ground yet, and it was about to go skidding off into the grass where it would disintegrate into a million pieces.

One day I walked into a McDonald's and realized the teenagers behind the counter were working fewer hours and making more money than I was. It was time to admit Moda Jewels wasn't going to work. It was time to give up, at least on this, at least for the time being.

The decision to shutter Moda Jewels was a gut-wrenching one. It didn't just mean walking away from a lot of hard work. It meant walking away, at least for a while, from the dream of owning my own business. It meant walking away, at least for a while, from the dream of being able to work from anywhere. Moda Jewels was a virtual, internet-based business, something I could run from anywhere in the world. I was about to have family on two continents, and I figured life would be a lot easier if I had an income independent of my location. I had made it my mission to make that happen, and shutting Moda Jewels meant giving up on that mission, at least for a while.

When we embark on a mission, if we hold something back and the mission fails, we can tell ourselves that we could have succeeded if only we had given it everything. We might be deceiving ourselves, but the illusion allows us to continue feeling good about ourselves. It gives us a place to hide.

However, if we don't hold anything back, if we give the mission everything we have, if we dig deep and find within ourselves resources we never even knew were there, and the mission still fails, we have nowhere to hide. There is no shield to protect us. We have to live knowing full well that our best was not good enough.

Knowing our best was not good enough strikes a wound that scabs over but never truly heals. If we find it within ourselves to get back up on our feet and commit fully to something else in life, we will do it stronger, more capable people. We will do it with a feeling of freedom and confidence we would not have if we had not previously rolled the dice and lost everything.

There will still be days, though, when all we will feel is pain from the price we paid for that feeling of freedom and confidence.

11: FRIENDSHIPS AND HEMATOMAS

Soccer is huge in Turkey. In Istanbul alone there are three major professional teams. Many Turks, especially the men, are loyal fans of one team and profess to despise the other teams like a die-hard Yankees fan heaps scorn upon the Mets.

Love for the sport unites Turkish men across social boundaries, even when those men would otherwise have nothing to say to each other. When talking to even the most buttoned-up, no-nonsense analytical businessman, I would barely have to mention soccer to see his inner child emerge and his passions flow freely.

When the big teams played, their games were completely sold out and emotions ran so high in the streets around the stadiums I could cut the tension with a knife. If I tried to walk or drive past a stadium during a game, the hair on the back of my neck would

stand up and I would feel like I was carrying a lit match over rags doused in gasoline.

Bonding over soccer is a way for Turkish men to quickly connect with other men from around the world, too. Since Brits, Italians, Brazilians, and men of just about every other nationality are equally passionate about their own teams, soccer can turn complete strangers into instant friends.

The closest thing we Americans can compare it to is how we can bond over a love of baseball or a love of American football. The comparison can help us begin to understand the bond over soccer, but it doesn't come close to helping us understand its intensity. That we have to witness with our own eyes.

Here in the US, if we put 10 men in a room, 4 of them will be passionate enough about baseball to bond over it. The other 6 will turn up their noses at something so pedestrian and find something else to have in common.

In Turkey however, if you put 10 men in a room, 8 of them will within moments, because of soccer, be laughing, swapping stories, and debating passionately. The other 2 will just smile nervously and try to feign an interest.

The passion for the sport doesn't stop at watching it. Most men grew up playing the game in the streets

and every neighborhood is dotted with miniature soccer fields where weekend warriors play until late at night.

Half the time the fields are occupied by young men working out the frustrations of being young men, but the other half the fields are occupied by flabby accountants and widget-pushing salesmen working out the frustrations of a week in the office, and doing so with friends they have been doing so with for 20 years.

Being that I was in a country infected with the fever like this, I was not surprised to receive an invitation, shortly after my arrival in Istanbul, to join a weekly game.

This particular game was made up of a mixture of foreigners and Turks. The invitation to join it came one night when I had gone out for a beer with some foreigner friends. They told me about a weekly game they had organized. They played every Saturday afternoon at 2:00 pm on a city-owned field in Kadikoy, one of Istanbul's main residential neighborhoods.

When they asked me if I'd be interested in joining the game, I told them I had played soccer maybe once in my entire life, and that had been 20 years ago. They said that would be no problem. I repeated that I

had no skill or experience in the game, and they repeated that that didn't matter. All I had to do was say yes and I was in, so I said yes, and I was in.

We played on a small, fenced-in, astroturfed field tucked away between the backsides of apartment buildings and a mosque. There were some very noisy cats that were always fighting in the bushes near the apartment buildings. I never figured out if those cats fought on a schedule every Saturday at 2:00 pm, or if they fought when we weren't there, too.

Language-wise we had to be on our best behavior, because many of the nearby apartments' balconies were filled with children watching the crazy foreigners run around. And, of course, there was the mosque. For the sake of the children and for the mosque we tried to keep our language clean. Also next to the field was one of the city's impound lots, but I suspect the guys who worked there didn't care what kind of language we used.

Since some of the players had been playing since they were kids, and others had barely ever played at all, our games were like a mixture of soccer and roller derby. When the skilled players had the ball, they played soccer. When the rest of us had the ball, we played roller derby.

One of the most intimidatingly-skilled players was named Serkan. Serkan was a Turk, but he had an uncannily American accent. He sounded like he had been born and raised in New York. One day I asked him about this, and he mentioned that he had gone to college at Cornell.

Serkan had excellent ball handling skills. If you took the skills of half the people on that field and put them together, it still wouldn't be enough to give Serkan a run for his money. Serkan had a knack for putting the ball where I least expected him to. If I thought he was going to send it left, he'd send it right. If I thought he was going to send it right, he'd send it left. If I tried to think one step ahead and anticipate that since at first I thought he would send it left, and therefore he would probably send it right, so I should trick him by going right, he would somehow know and send it left. Whenever I played goalie, all I could do was hope Serkan would be on my team, or if not that at least someone would knock him down before he made it to the goal.

Ben was another one of the skilled players. He was an Iranian from New York City who wrote musical scores for Hollywood movies. One day Ben decided he could do that kind of work from

anywhere, so he and his Canadian wife Valerie decided to do it from Istanbul.

Ben was fleet of foot and when he had the ball he would look like a tap dancer moving down the field. However, his fancy footwork came at the cost of stability, and he had a reputation for falling down a lot. Half of the time when he got the ball he would score, but the other half he would end up losing it and tumbling onto the ground like a loose bag of balsa wood sticks.

Another player was Marc, a Scottish ad man who had come to work in Istanbul. We all knew Marc by his nickname, “Gilly,” and even months after meeting Marc I had no idea who they were referring to when I heard someone call him by his real name.

The Saturday game had a rough side to it, and it was completely normal to send at least one person limping home at the end of each week’s game. Strangely enough, the injured tended to be the newbies, the fresh blood we would invite whenever our ranks grew thin.

Holger was one of those victims. Holger worked for a quality inspection and testing company and had recently relocated to Istanbul from Japan. He was the German friend of mine who drove to Ephesus and

joined me in ganging up on the hotel manager in Ayvalik.

I invited Holger to join the game because I was eager to prove I was a well-connected expat who could introduce other expats to life in the city. I was nervous because I knew recent arrivals tended to get injured, but I invited Holger anyway.

Holger arrived at the game expecting a gentlemanly game of skill. What he found instead was a bunch of hacks basically playing roller derby, and he ended up getting a horrible hematoma and never joining the game again. Six months later he would still grimace whenever I'd mention it.

If newbies could get through their first few games without injury though, they got a pass from the soccer angels to play injury-free soccer. With that pass they could play week after week for months without running into major problems. Some months after Holger hobbled off the field I decided it was time to see if another one of my friends could successfully run the gauntlet and receive one of the soccer angels' injury-free passes, so I invited a friend of mine named Jeremy to join us.

Jeremy was an insurance salesman from Cleveland who somehow ended up part owner of a Peruvian gold mine and had used the proceeds from that

venture to move with his wife and two pre-teen daughters to Istanbul. In Turkey Jeremy saw entrepreneurial opportunity in ownership of a growing fleet of taxis in a border town near Syria, and we teased him that Americans weren't supposed to come to the Middle East to run cabs, it was supposed to work the other way around.

Like me Jeremy was new to soccer, but unlike me he had played sports all his life, including varsity football in high school. He was far more athletic than I was. What he lacked in soccer-specific skills he made up for in natural ability and competitive instinct, and within his first few minutes he was outshining me, even though technically I had been playing soccer longer than he had.

Another regular player at our weekly game was Ali, a Turk schooled in Germany who spoke English better than I did and who had a freakishly large encyclopedic knowledge of pop culture, combined with a sophisticated understanding of global politics and economy such that he could rattle off lines from cheesy British sitcoms and then hop a plane for the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Ali was a welcome addition to the group, even if his obscure intellectual commentary made him sound like Dennis Miller dropping Sylvia Plath references

during Monday Night Football games. But what made me most happy to see Ali join the game was that when he was there I wasn't alone in anchoring the lower end of the skill curve.

There was Simon, a British naval architect sent to Istanbul to design and inspect ships at the shipyards east of the city. Simon and his girlfriend Emma lived on the top floor of an apartment building just a few minutes' walk from the soccer field, and since Simon was one of the game's main organizers, I suspect the field's proximity to Simon's apartment was one of the reasons we played on it.

One of my favorite defensive moves was to shove someone from the opposing team into the chain link fence, trap him against the fence, and just start kicking at the ball. Eventually, one of my teammates would run up to steal the ball from the poor guy I was attacking. Unfortunately for Simon, because he was so patient being on the receiving end of unskilled blunt-force tactics like these, fence-based harassment became my go-to move for dealing with Simon whenever he got the ball.

And then of course there was Jan, a towering and solidly-built Dutchman. Every time I ran Simon into the fence or otherwise made up for my lack of skill by physically disrupting the movements of others, I knew

I would have to pay the piper. Jan was the piper. Running into Jan was like running straight into a brick wall. When I saw him coming towards me I knew exactly what kind of pain was on its way, but I knew I had to pay for my transgressions, and getting battered by Jan was how I could do it. So I ran towards him as aggressively as he ran towards me.

Since he was built so solidly, on impact Jan would gain control of the ball like nothing had ever happened, while I would bounce off of him like a fly bounces when you hit it with a fly swatter. I would sail through the air and land on the ground splayed out on my back. I'd pop right back up but I could feel the impact in the roots of my teeth, which felt like they were going to fall out even though they had not been hit, they had merely been inside the body that had been hit.

After a couple years I stopped going to that game. Even though the soccer angels had given me an injury-free soccer pass, I figured I had tempted fate long enough, and each time I played I was getting closer to the day when I'd come home with a horrific injury. I knew that eventually I'd blow out my knee or shatter a cheekbone and have nothing to show for it, no bragging rights other than, "I got hurt being stupid." If I was going to permanently damage my body, I

should at least be doing something worthwhile. Playing a hack game of pickup soccer wouldn't cut it.

I made many good friends at that game. In fact, many of them were at my wedding. When I think back to my time in Turkey, that Saturday soccer game ranks right up there as one of my fondest memories. The players were a merry band of rowdies who simply accepted me for who I was. I couldn't understand half the things they said to me, since I'm terrible with any British accent that isn't the London one. I drank peach-flavored Lipton iced tea while they slammed back manly draughts of ale. I couldn't dribble a ball to save my life. But I showed up every week, and I popped right back up whenever I got knocked to the ground. I think sometimes that's all people want.

For the longest time I thought the only thing we had in common was that we were all foreigners, even the Turks. But now I realize they were teaching me something very important about the meaning of home, because four years after I last played with them, I don't have fond memories of that soccer field. I have fond memories of the people who were on that soccer field.

We usually associate "home" with a geographic location — Seattle, California, Texas, Ohio, or

Kathmandu. But when we do so, we stick the label “home” on the wrong thing. Yes, human beings being what they are, the people we love tend to cluster around certain geographic areas. But home is not a place. Home is not Seattle, California, Texas, Ohio, or Kathmandu. Home is the people we love. Home is our parents, home is our wives, home is our husbands, home is our children, home is our brothers and sisters, home is our friends.

Not as in, “Home is where those people are.” As in, “Home IS those people.” If the tuition I had to pay for that lesson was 100 painful hits from Jan and 100 cans of peach-flavored Lipton iced tea, I got off pretty cheap.

12: ISTANBUL (NOT CONSTANTINOPLE)

In the 1990s the band They Might Be Giants covered a catchy pop tune called “Istanbul (Not Constantinople).” The song is one of those tunes so catchy that once you get it stuck in your head you can’t get it out. If my mere mention of that song just now started it running through your head, I apologize.

If you are not already familiar with that song, consider yourself fortunate. Do not seek it out. I have no bone to pick with the band They Might Be Giants. But because that song has such a penchant for getting stuck in peoples’ heads, it crosses the line from catchy to annoying.

When people find out I lived in Istanbul they often ask me if I’m familiar with that song. I laugh and say, “Yes, of course,” and then I want to ask them, “But

are you familiar with the story of how Constantinople became Istanbul?” Because that story is even more fascinating than that tune is catchy. The story pits a brash, ambitious young man against a dying empire, the up-and-coming against the down-and-out, the young against the old. The story is about patience, brains, and brawn knit together brilliantly.

No city is easy to conquer. That goes double for a city like Istanbul. Istanbul sits on two narrow, 20-mile-wide peninsulas that run east-west and almost, but don’t quite, touch at their tips. The peninsula on the west juts out from the European continent, and the peninsula on the east juts out from the Asian continent. Modern-day Istanbul spreads out over both peninsulas for 50 miles in each direction, but in early Ottoman days the city was much smaller and could perch comfortably at the edge of the European peninsula.

Between the two peninsulas flows the Bosphorus, a strategic and highly sought-after waterway which has played a role in stories real and mythical going back at least as far as the ancient Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts, explorers who passed through the Bosphorus on their quest for the magical Golden Fleece.

The Bosphorus is about a mile wide. Its Turkish name, Bogaz, means “throat.” Control someone’s throat, and you control their entire body. Control the Bosphorus, and you control the only waterway connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea and the warm-water ports of Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia.

Constantinople was perched on the shores of the southern end of this waterway. Not only did the city occupy one of the world’s most strategically important locations, it enjoyed a harbor known as the Golden Horn. In Byzantine times Europeans called the Golden Horn “the finest harbor in the whole world.”

Constantinople had already served as an imperial capital for over a thousand years before the Turks first showed up in that part of the world. The city had been a capital of the Roman Empire, then the Byzantine Empire, then the Latin Empire, and then again the Byzantine Empire.

Now let’s talk about the Turks for a bit. Long before they arrived in the land we now call Turkey, the Turks had started off in Central Asia in places like northwestern China, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. In fact, back in Central Asia the Turks weren’t even Muslims. They didn’t start converting to Islam until they had

worked their way southwest far enough from their homeland to start bumping up against the great Muslim empires of the Middle East, where Islam had already had hundreds of years to establish itself as the region's dominant religion.

Four hundred years before the Ottoman Turks conquered Istanbul in 1453 their predecessors, the Selcuk Turks, arrived in western Turkey and started to take control of a small amount of land. Their hold on the land was fragile though, and they spent a few hundred years battling with the Byzantines, the Mongols, and a disorganized assortment of local tribes for the privilege to live there.

Eventually the Selcuk Turks started to set down some roots, and in 1326 they established a capital in a city called Bursa. Bursa is still today a thriving city in northwestern Turkey less than 100 miles from Istanbul.

After setting up their new capital the Selcuk Turks spent the better part of a century extending their control south to the Mediterranean and east to the Caucasus. However, a group of upstarts known as the Ottomans declared their independence from the Selcuks and set up a new capital northwest of Bursa in a city called Adrianople. The Ottomans quickly assumed the Turkish imperial mantle and began

consolidating Ottoman control over the same lands the Selcuks had been working on to the south and to the east.

At this point the Ottomans, like the Selcuks before them, were content to leave Constantinople alone. The Europeans, however, were not. European Christians on Crusade attacked and mortally wounded Constantinople. For Constantinople, it was like being jumped by a cousin who decided to strike you down rather than defending the family honor against a more intimidating rival clan.

Having sacked Constantinople, the Europeans decided they didn't even want it. They left it for dead, like a cat attacks a mouse, bats it around for a while, and then loses interest and strolls off to play with something else while the mouse dies.

Before the European attacks, Constantinople had been a lively, prosperous city of almost 500,000 people. After the European attacks it began a long decline, and by the time the Ottoman Turks finally set their sights on the city, its population had dwindled to 50,000 people hiding behind stone walls and chaining their harbor shut.

As weak as Constantinople was, when the Turkish attacks began it fought back like a cornered rat. The city had two things going for it that allowed it to fight

back so tenaciously. One was the city's walls, which were designed so well the city could be defended with an army tiny compared to that of its attacker.

Second, and especially important when it was the Turks doing the attacking, the city was surrounded by water as much as it was by land. To conquer the city, an attacker would have to be as good at controlling the seas as he was at controlling the land, and the Turks were not good at controlling the seas. Their long journey from Central Asia had been entirely overland. They had spent hundreds of years becoming brilliant at building land-based supply chains and trade routes that stretched thousands of miles across lands made hostile by man and Nature. But they had never had to learn how to fight on the water.

The Turks spent decades trying and failing to conquer Constantinople. They laid sieges that lasted for years and sent wave after wave of well-armed soldiers to try to scramble over the city's walls. Resisting the Turks' relentless onslaughts so impoverished Constantinople that even its emperor lived in poverty. But the city would not fall.

The Turks could not conquer Constantinople, so between campaigns against it they had to content themselves with extracting tribute from it. And then

along came Mehmed II, a young Ottoman sultan who had seen his father, his grandfather, and even his great-grandfather, try and fail to take the city. Mehmed II decided that it was finally time to finish Constantinople off for good, and that he would be the one to drive the stake through its heart.

Mehmed II knew that in order to take control of the city he would have to control the waters surrounding it, and in particular he would have to control the Bosphorus north of the city. If he could do that, he could cut off one of the city's principle supply routes.

So along the shores of the Bosphorus Mehmed II built an elaborate stone fort called the Rumeli Hisari. The fort was built quickly, from start to finish in only 4 months. Playing on the pun that the Turkish name for the Bosphorus is the same as the Turkish word for throat, the Rumeli Hisari was nicknamed "Throat Cutter."

Seeing that Mehmed II was about to attack, the people of Constantinople yet again fortified the walls around their city and reinforced the chains across their harbor. Knowing that Turks before him had tried unsuccessfully to go over the city walls or to break through the harbor chains, Mehmed II decided he would need to take the city another way.

So one night he and thousands of his men pulled their ships off the Bosphorus and dragged them overland through a lightly-traveled valley towards the city's harbor. There was no red carpet through the valley, no well-worn path, no smooth highway across which they could slide their boats. They had to pull them through thick forests, over rocks, and across streams.

Shortly before dawn they reached their destination, an unguarded piece of the shoreline inside the city's harbor. They would not need to break through the harbor's chain, because they were already inside the harbor.

For decades Constantinople had successfully fought off one Turkish assault after another. That morning, however, the city awoke to find its enemy standing over its bed, looking down at it, waiting silently for it to realize what had just happened. The battle for the city was over. The year was 1453, and after years of trying, the Turks had finally taken Constantinople.

Mehmed II later took the name Fatih Sultan Mehmed, "Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror." He would go on to conquer lands in Asia and even part of Europe, but at the tender young age of 21, he had

already staked his claim to fame as the man who took Constantinople for his people.

13: THE WEDDING

When my girlfriend was little she was a ballerina. Today she has the long, lanky, body and graceful manner of a natural dancer. One sunny summer day in Santa Barbara, in our early days of dating before we moved to Turkey, we went out to her car to drive over to a party and meet some friends. She was wearing a light blue tank top and jeans, her hair pulled back in a girlish ponytail. As she started up the car she realized she had left her cell phone back in her apartment.

I stayed in the car while she got out and walked back towards the apartment to retrieve her phone. As she crossed the front yard she came upon one of the small bushes dotting the landscaping. I expected her to walk around it, but she hopped over it with the effortless grace of a gazelle, her ponytail flying, her tanned arms casually extended for balance. I'll never forget that moment in time, that mental snapshot of

her in midair, because that's when I said to myself, "Matt, don't screw this up."

Our wedding was in Istanbul, outside at a grassy park perched on top of a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. From the park we could see Istanbul's massive second bridge a few miles to the north, its traffic crossing silently high above water flowing south from the Black Sea. North of that bridge the Bosphorus makes a major dogleg turn. One of the great pleasures I draw from the Bosphorus is watching the ships go by, and because of the many turns the waterway makes, a sense of suspense always accompanies that activity. I never know what will turn the corner next. Will it be a tiny fishing boat tossing about like a cork, or a massive Ukrainian tanker making its way to the Mediterranean?

Directly across the Bosphorus from the park was Bebek, an upscale neighborhood of fancy coffee shops and expensive restaurants lining the waterfront. Bebek means "babe" in Turkish, and I've always had an affinity for that neighborhood because "babe" is what I call my wife.

In Istanbul today to have a Bebek address is to announce to the world, "I'm doing very well, thank you." Years ago though, when Istanbul was a much smaller town, Bebek was a bucolic fishing village on

its outskirts. Today the quay is lined with retired fishermen casting their lines into the water and kids who descend on Bebek from the poorer neighborhoods nearby to swim in their tighty-whities.

Looking further to the south from the park's marble wedding dais we could see the office buildings of Sisli and Taksim stabbing up into the sky. And down below us, of course, was the Bosphorus, flowing from right to left and becoming ever more silvery as the sun fell low towards the horizon and the lights of the city began to reflect off the water's surface.

This was the backdrop against which we would have our wedding. It was the backdrop against which I would stand as my bride's father escorted his daughter down the aisle.

Few things in life have brought me more peace than seeing my girlfriend happy. One of her favorite things to do is wander around a foreign city with a camera in hand. The city itself doesn't really matter. It could be Rome, Paris, Singapore, or New York. She loses herself, completely existing in the moment with an expression on her face that says there is nothing else she would rather be doing than exploring this place, right here, right now.

A favorite photo of mine is from our trip to Amsterdam in 2004. We had just come out of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam's Museum of Art and History, having enjoyed the works of the Dutch master Rembrandt and the Frenchman Degas before taking lunch in the museum's cafeteria.

In the photo you can see the Rijksmuseum in the background. My girlfriend is walking happily down the street in a red sweater pulled over one of her favorite red and white checkered shirts. My camera caught her mid-step, smiling broadly, head cocked off to one side taking in the sights. She is scanning the scene in front of her, drinking it in as if it were a tall glass of the freshest, purest water she had ever tasted.

The woman walking next to her is clearly another tourist, but her brow is furrowed and she looks off into the distance, her expression telling the world she is feeling lost and she wants to know what will come next. My girlfriend, on the other hand, is so caught up in the moment that whether or not she is lost would be completely irrelevant to her, and if I asked her where she was she would simply say, "Can't you see I'm right here, silly, now look at that building."

Over the years I have gazed at that photo so many times it is burned into my memory. In fact, I can recall it so well I barely even need to take it out and

look at it anymore. It is my girlfriend in her natural environment – wandering a foreign city, camera in hand.

In the moments before the wedding ceremony, she and I stood alone in a plain little white waiting room with hardwood floors. I was in my black tuxedo and she in her white wedding dress, looking more beautiful and elegant than anyone or anything I had ever seen. The crowd outside had built to capacity and was growing restless. In a few minutes someone would knock on the door to tell us it was time for the ceremony to begin. But for the moment it was just the two of us, standing together in that small room, holding hands and waiting.

In an American wedding, a traditional one at least, the bride and groom are not supposed to see each other on the day of the wedding until the bride walks down the aisle. In a Turkish wedding there is no such taboo. In a Turkish wedding it is completely normal for the bride and groom to wait outside the wedding hall together, and when the ceremony begins they enter hand in hand and stride to a small, rectangular table with two witnesses and a civil servant who presides over the ceremony while the guests gather around to watch.

I like that approach because the bride and groom get to spend the last few moments of their single lives together. Getting married is like stepping through a portal into the unknown. It is a major milestone in one's life, and the Turkish practice allows the bride and groom to support each other through the nervous anticipation rather than endure it separately.

While we were waiting in that small white room together we realized it was a perfect time to exchange rings. In an American wedding the ring exchange is part of the public ceremony, but in a Turkish wedding it is almost an afterthought. I pulled the rings out of my pocket and we smiled at each other as we slipped them onto each other's fingers. The knock on the door came. It was time for the ceremony to begin.

My girlfriend loves to swim. I call her "my little fish" because she loves being in the water more than she does being on land. When she sees a pod of dolphins surfacing for air or a school of fish meandering near the surface, she looks at it with bright-eyed, childlike eyes that say, "I want to jump in there, too."

When we first started dating in the US we would meet up at the university swimming pool at the end of the day. It was summer, so the days were long and the sun was high in the sky late into the evening. My

girlfriend would slip into the pool and begin swimming lap after lap with a smooth, relaxed stroke as naturally as if that were exactly what she had been put here on this earth to do. With a single stroke she would cover the same distance others would cover with two. I, on the other hand, would thrash around like a drowning man and exhaust myself in 10 minutes before propping myself up on the cement deck for what seemed like hours while she finished gliding through her lap routine.

In Turkey we took almost all of our vacations near the sea. Our favorite spots were little towns along the Aegean, places like Assos, Bodrum, and Marmaris, places where sandy white beaches border water so clear I couldn't tell whether it was one foot deep or ten. I never ventured far from the shore, swimming parallel to the beach and getting nervous the moment my feet couldn't touch the bottom anymore.

She, however, would swim straight out from the beach and end up so far from shore I'd have to strain my eyes just to spot her. She would stop and turn around to look at me, bobbing up and down with the tide, laughing happily and calling for me to join her. I would take a few tentative strokes in her direction to show my good intentions, but I couldn't bring myself

to venture that far from shore. After a few moments she would give up on me and go about her business communing with the sea.

After our wedding ceremony came the wedding reception. The ceremony had been a hybrid of American and Turkish styles, but the reception was full-on Turkish.

A Turkish wedding reception is a lot like an American one, with plenty of eating, drinking, and dancing. But it's different in some very important ways, and one of those ways is that instead of the bride and groom standing at the head of a line receiving the guests as they arrive, the bride and groom walk from table to table greeting the guests. In my opinion, this is a reminder that a wedding is not for the bride and groom, it is for the community that surrounds them. A wedding is about acknowledging the community's support and thanking them for it.

The standard Turkish greeting, at a wedding or anywhere else, is a kiss on each cheek. It's not an air kiss but a full kiss with lips on skin, first on one cheek, and then on the other. There is no standard procedure one can follow, no rule like "first go left, then go right." Turks seem to know instinctively how to do it gracefully, but even after six years of

observing and practicing I was still bumping noses with people.

There are a few situations where Turks don't kiss each other. For example, when they meet each other for the first time, Turks rarely kiss. They also rarely kiss in the workplace, but there is no hard and fast rule against it. This kissing is not a sexual thing. Men kiss men, women kiss women, and men and women kiss each other.

Foreigners are not required to participate in this custom, but if you ever want to see a Turk light up, go for the kiss. One thing I learned early on about Turks is that you can never go wrong with a big smile and an enthusiastic introduction. Hello, my name is Matt. Say it like you mean it and don't be shy. You don't even need to wait for someone else to introduce you. The impulse to be friendly is strong in Turks.

One way you can kiss someone hello is to shake their hand first, and then lean in for the kisses while your hands are still clasped. But then you have to think about where your hands are, and that can get awkward. It's better to just reach out with both your hands, grab the other person's shoulders, pull them in towards you, kiss their cheeks with gusto, push them back away from you, steady them for a moment in

case you've taken them off balance, make eye contact, and then go for the handshake just for good measure.

You might only greet that person for 5 seconds before moving on, but during the exchange greet that person as if he or she is the only person in the room, the only person you have ever wanted to greet. You might only cross paths with that person one time, but you will both walk away feeling surrounded by strength and love.

I say when in Rome, do as Romans do. So at the wedding reception I kissed all 300 guests, 600 cheeks in all. I didn't discriminate. I kissed everyone, whether I recognized them or not. I threw myself into the activity as if I were a fish thrown back into the water. After all, I figured, if I was going to open up and show people they were important to me, I should go all the way.

Like any married couple, my wife and I have had our share of fights, and some of them have been doozies. In one particular fight I will never forget, as the arguing reached its crescendo, I yelled something that was so completely true, and yet so completely untrue, and she responded with something that was so completely true, and yet so completely untrue, and I angrily pulled on my jacket and stocking cap and stormed out into a cold, wet February night.

I walked Istanbul for three and a half hours that night, but I was only mad at my wife for the first 30 minutes. For those thirty minutes I was so worked up I would have eagerly taken on any malicious thug who tried to mess with me, but as the anger subsided I found myself continuing to walk simply because I loved walking Istanbul at night.

That night I walked first to the waterfront neighborhood Suadiye, crossing the narrow bridge above the commuter train tracks where during the day traffic bottlenecks and the gypsy kids wash windshields with a dry squeegee.

From Suadiye I walked west for miles along Baghdad Street, a major boulevard completely deserted at night but packed during the day with people who come out to see and be seen. In my mind Baghdad Street is forever tied to a vivid memory I have of cruising down the street in a convertible one gorgeous sunny Sunday afternoon, leaning back in my seat as we passed under palm trees, the radio playing and the wind blowing through our hair. The weird thing is I don't know where that memory comes from. I have never actually ridden in a convertible in my entire life.

I walked past the massive Fenerbahce soccer stadium where during a game the streets clog for

miles and a hundred thousand fans amped up on testosterone and alcohol make just being nearby dangerous. At 3:00 in the morning though the neighborhood was completely deserted. I could hear a discarded newspaper rustling in the wind from two blocks away as I walked past the lifeless hulk of the empty stadium.

At 3:30 am my cell phone rang. It was my wife, calling like a beacon to tell me to come home, handsome, it's cold out. I'll be home soon babe, I'm headed that way now. Our desire to be together was stronger than any fight we could have. When you have something like that, you guard it as if your life depends on it, because it does.

At our wedding reception the eating, drinking, and dancing ran late into the night and the crowd took a while to dwindle down to just my wife and me and our immediate families. The wedding organizers told us it was time to shut down for the night, and when they turned off the music the silence was deafening.

As we gathered our things and made our way towards the parking lot we approached a young man and a young woman who were clearly wedding guests, two stragglers who hadn't left yet. It was very dark at that point so it wasn't until we drew closer that we realized the two were my friend Marc, the

Scottish ad man whom I knew from the weekly soccer game, and a young woman, one of my wife's friends. The two of them had just met that night at our wedding. They hit it off immediately and now live in Bangkok with their two children. Our wedding had spawned another.

14: FILL THE CUP

I have chronic heartburn. A half dozen times over the past 15 years I have had some dramatic but short-lived complications due to it. The complications come in the form of incapacitating abdominal cramps that last for a few hours. When the cramps are in force it's not a pretty sight and uninitiated witnesses worry that I'm having a heart attack. When the cramps subside though, they subside completely and I look like nothing ever happened.

In January 2007 I had an attack of these cramps one evening while my wife and I were watching TV. It was the first time she had witnessed them, so she got worried and called her parents. That is how I came to find myself trying unsuccessfully to pee in front of my father-in-law.

My father-in-law, Mr. E, is a former Turkish naval officer. He joined the navy as a teenager, spent 20

years working his way up the officer ranks, and retired before he was forty, having already dedicated two decades to something at an age when some of us are still trying to figure out what we want to do with our lives. For more than 50 years he has had a standing weekly lunch date with his old navy buddies. They meet every Wednesday at an officers' club on the shore of the Marmara Sea. Fifty years. Half a century. I live in awe of that kind of dependable consistency, probably because I don't think I will ever have it in my own life.

When Mr. E retired from the military, he and his brother took over the produce wholesaling business their father had started when they were just kids. The two brothers grew the business and even started one of the first grocery store chains back in the days when grocery store chains were unheard of in Turkey. Mr. E is a wise and visionary entrepreneur who thinks years ahead of everyone else.

Mr. E retired from the produce business almost 20 years ago, and he and his wife have lived very comfortable lives since then, traveling the world and enjoying a way of life working people decades their junior can only hope to have some day.

Twenty years ago, about the time he was getting ready to retire, Mr. E and his wife bought an

apartment in a new building that was about to go up near Mr. E's office. Midway through construction the builder went belly-up. Residential real estate financing in Turkey wasn't then, and isn't now, as developed as it is here in the US. Builders don't finance construction with loans from banks, they finance construction with pre-sales to future residents who pay cash in full, meaning that if a builder folds mid-project the future residents lose everything.

Instead of seeing this builder's collapse as a problem, Mr. E saw it as an opportunity. He and some of his prospective neighbors doubled down. They took over the building, finished it, and divided up the apartments amongst themselves. Mr. E sold most of his apartments, cashing out of the deal and making himself whole plus some.

A few of the apartments he kept though, and over the years he has used them to house pretty much any extended family member who needed a home. He also put aside an apartment for each of his two children, one for his daughter and one for his son. After my wife and I got married and moved into the building I spent the better part of a year just learning who in the building was and was not a relative.

For decades Mr. E has watched over his family like a protective hawk, providing love and support

wherever it has been needed. Mr. E usually doesn't even offer his help, he just shows up at your door and starts providing it.

When I first arrived in Turkey, Mr. E took me under his wing even though I wasn't his son-in-law yet. He took me to buy my first bus pass and showed me how to find the right bus. He showed me where to buy soap and shampoo and toilet paper. When I needed to open a bank account, he helped me translate and sign the papers. When I needed to buy curtains for my apartment in Moda, he took me to the curtain store. When I needed to register at my neighborhood's residential registry office, Mr. E drove me there and warmed up the surly clerks behind the desk so they'd lend a helping hand if any rules needed bending.

So I was not surprised when, the day after my attack of abdominal cramps, Mr. E insisted on escorting me to the hospital for testing and diagnosis. Since I had marginal-at-best health insurance and I had had these cramps a half dozen times before in the US and never saw a doctor who did anything except shrug and tell me to take antacids, which I already did, I didn't feel much of a sense of urgency about getting checked out. But Mr. E considered me his charge, and he was determined to make sure his son was okay.

The health care system in Turkey is quite good. In fact, it's downright impressive when you compare it to the health care system here in the US. In the US I've never been to a hospital where I haven't left feeling like I do when I sit through a bad movie, except instead of having lost two hours of my life, I've lost ten, 9.5 of them spent waiting and 0.5 of them spent receiving care. I've been to Turkish hospitals a number of times (all of those visits except this one being to accompany other people), and that 9.5 hours of waiting is reduced to 30 minutes, meaning that a hospital visit in Turkey is heavy on the care and light on the waiting.

Because the quality and the efficiency of the care is so good, and because it's delivered for a fraction of the price it is elsewhere, Turkey has developed a thriving medical tourism business. Germans, French, and British fly to Turkey, stop off in Istanbul for a few days of eye surgery, kidney dialysis, or hip replacement, and then hop on over to the coast for a week or two "recuperating" at a Mediterranean health spa. Many Turkish doctors are certified by the European and American medical boards and the hospitals are affiliated with big-name players like Harvard and Johns Hopkins.

I was only marginally insured though, so I went to see a doctor at a government hospital. Turkey's government hospitals are dirt cheap, but they are packed and the bureaucracy hard to navigate. I was very happy to have Mr. E with me.

One step of the diagnostic process was to get an endoscopy. I had had these done before. In an endoscopy a medical technician sticks a probe with a tiny camera down the patient's throat to record what's going on in the patient's throat and stomach. I'm sure technicians around the world think those probes look like dainty little filaments, but to the people about to swallow them they look like stainless steel firehoses with spikes on the end. As soon as the technicians came near me with the probe I began gagging heavily. The scene only got worse when they tried to jam the probe down my throat and I began choking and flopping around on the table like a seizure victim.

Mr. E stood by, watching and translating, doing his best to not insult what little dignity I had left. The technicians eventually gave up on me and put me under so I'd sleep through their second attempt. Knocking me out did the trick, and after what seemed to me like mere moments I found myself sitting groggily in the doctor's office while the doctor and

Mr. E examined my stomach on a video monitor. The doctor even gave me a copy of the DVD to take home as a souvenir.

After he reviewed the video the doctor gave me a plastic urine sample cup and asked me to go to the bathroom down the hall to fill it. Unfortunately, one of the side effects of these abdominal cramps is that in the days before and after them I hold water like a sponge. I can pour a seemingly infinite amount of water down my throat, but nothing comes out the other end of the pipe. I don't know where the water goes, but it certainly doesn't come out. So for almost three hours I sat next to Mr. E in the crowded hallway outside the bathroom, trying to work up enough urine to fill at least part of the cup. I was still feeling mortified that my father-in-law had seen me gag and writhe as med-techs struggled to shove a metallic firehose down my throat, and now I was sitting next to him unable to piss into a cup.

There was a drinking fountain near the bathrooms. I went over and stood next to that fountain like it was my new best friend, drinking and drinking and drinking some more. Every few minutes I walked into the bathroom to try to coax something out, but each time I came skulking back out into the hallway with the cup still empty. Mr. E, normally a model

citizen in the patience department, grew increasingly exasperated and each time I emerged from the bathroom he motioned me over to the drinking fountain and told me to keep trying. I was a fully-grown man in a hospital gown with an ex-military father-in-law coaching him on how to piss into a cup.

After nearly 180 humiliating minutes, I was finally able to fill part of the cup, but just part of it. The lab technician had witnessed my repeated failures to pee and, being less diplomatic than my father-in-law, made sure I saw the condescending smirk on his face as he took the cup from me.

As embarrassing as that experience was, it drilled into my thick skull that Mr. E stands by the people he loves, and that I was one of those people, and that sometimes allowing someone to love you means letting them take care of you. It's not an easy lesson for me, someone who can be a little too independent for his own good.

I already have one father, and he has been teaching me how to be a man since I was born. But I have a second father now too, and he also teaches me how to be a man. Sitting next to him in the hallway, I realized everything I had gone through to be with his daughter, from selling my house, to saying goodbye to my dog Milk Dud, to struggling to find my way in a

new land I had come to sight unseen, all of that was nothing compared to the sacrifices Mr. E would make for me. His selflessness reminds me that I owe a huge debt to the world around me, and that the most noble thing I can do with my time on this earth is to spend every day repaying it.

15: THE CALL TO PRAYER

I awoke with a start. A man was standing next to my bed yelling at me through a megaphone. In a panic, I instinctively rolled to the other side of the bed and dropped to the floor. I scrambled to my feet, my body crouched down into a squat so I could lunge towards whatever escape route might open up.

The room was dark, but within moments my eyes adjusted and I could see I was the only one in the room. There was no man with a megaphone. The noise was not coming from inside the apartment, but it was loud enough to occupy every square inch of my brain and blot out all thought like a screaming smoke alarm in your living room blocks out all thought until you turn it off, or at least swat it off the ceiling and rip out the battery.

No, the noise was coming from a loudspeaker outside. The loudspeaker was putting out a sound so

scratchy and distorted it took a few moments before I realized the sound had a rhythm. Someone was singing. After what seemed like an eternity, the singer fell silent and I could hear only an electronic buzz and then a click as the singer switched the mike off. My room fell silent, but my heart continued pounding away a mile a minute.

That was how I woke up on my first morning in Turkey. I had read about the *ezan*, the call to prayer, but I did not imagine it would be that loud. Later I would find out the *ezan* is only that loud when the loudspeaker is right outside your window, and that after a few days you grow used to it anyway, ignoring it like so much background noise. On my first morning though, it sounded like a trumpet calling forth troops to attack me personally.

The *ezan* comes five times a day in the Muslim world. It is a reminder to the faithful that it is time to bow down towards Mecca and pray to Allah. At first I assumed it was the imam stepping up to the mike and singing to the faithful, but I learned later it is actually a man called the *muezzin*. The *muezzin* is not a cleric, but he is chosen for his pious character and his ability to contribute to life at the mosque and, fortunately, for his ability to sing.

The muezzin may be calling the faithful to prayer five times a day, but in a big city like Istanbul his call falls mostly on deaf ears. In six years in Istanbul the number of people I met who went to mosque five times a day could be counted on one hand. I've met visitors who swear they've seen people in Istanbul close their eyes for a private moment with God when they hear the call to prayer, but all I ever saw was people ignoring it.

Over ninety percent of Turkey's population is Sunni, and most of the rest are Shia. With that many Muslims you'd think there would be more religious observance than there is. But Turks in Istanbul are about as likely to be regular mosque-goers as Americans in New York are to be regular church-goers. In the heartland of Turkey you will find more people going to mosque regularly, just like in the heartland of America you will find more people going to church regularly. But Islam is to most Turks what Christianity is to most Americans — always a cultural and social touchstone, but only a spiritual connection to a higher being in times of need.

After a few months I didn't notice the ezan anymore. In fact, within a half year I had learned to tune it out so well that I didn't even notice when it was gone — I had been a resident in Moda for months

before a visitor pointed out to me, “It sure is quiet in this neighborhood, there’s no call to prayer.”

On days when a bad case of culture shock had me feeling particularly cranky though, the ezan would magically reappear to chase me through the city. One day I was sitting on a bench outside the huge Nautilus shopping center in Kadikoy, hating the world and everyone in it. When the ezan came it rattled through my head so violently I felt like my brain had been plugged directly into the loudspeakers, even though the offending mosque was more than three blocks away.

Moments of culture shock aside, within a few weeks I learned to get past the intrusiveness of the ezan, and I started to see the gentler, more human side of it. For example, on days when I would climb to the top of Camlica, one of the tallest hills on the Asian side of the city, I would wait for the call to prayer to begin and then listen to the muezzins at the different mosques in the neighborhoods below competing with each other to see who could chant with the most religious fervor, who could hold a note the longest without stopping for breath.

Or, every once in a while, a muezzin would forget to turn off his microphone after the call and I could hear him chatting candidly with his friends at the

mosque. I'll never forget the time the muezzin at the Ortakoy mosque forgot to turn his mike off, and when he was done calling out to the faithful he proceeded to tell his buddies how he couldn't wait to go home that night to a special birthday dinner his wife was preparing for him. He rattled on about savory mutton in tomato sauce until someone reminded him his mike was still on, and I could almost feel his embarrassment as he switched it off.

Turkey is well over 90% Muslim, but it has a secular constitution which provides for freedom of religion. Because we in the US associate secular government with the separation of church and state, we think Turkey shares, or at least we wish it would share, America's brand of that separation, and therefore be less threatening than officially Islamic republics like Iran. Americans are not alone in confusing these two concepts. Many Turks also tell themselves secular government means church and state are separate. But the reality is more complicated than that.

For hundreds of years the Ottoman Empire was home to the Caliphate, the supreme authority over all that was Islam. Istanbul was the Vatican City of the Muslim world and the Ottoman sultan its Pope. But in 1923 Mustapha Kemal Ataturk established the

secular republic that is Turkey today and moved the capital from Istanbul to Ankara. Ataturk was staunchly in favor of secular government and over time his name has become something of an icon for secularism in Turkey, such that today the most radical secularists consider themselves the true heirs to his legacy.

In 1924, just one year after the founding of the secular Turkish Republic, the Religious Affairs Directorate was created. The new Republic had relinquished the Caliphate's claim to worldwide authority over Islam, but the Directorate was the Republic's way of maintaining control over Islam within the new national borders.

This created a very uneasy and volatile situation where the same people who were claiming to push religion out of the sphere of government were also regulating the day-to-day operations of the country's mosques. As an amateur historian, I suspect this was a compromise move, a means to an end that allowed the unfamiliar notion of a secular nation-state to piggyback on religious affiliations that were already familiar to the populace.

Whatever the reason for the compromise, it introduced a tension that has never gone away. Mosque and state are not now and never have been

separate in Turkey. Even today the Religious Affairs Directorate regulates the day-to-day operations of Turkey's mosques. Imams are on the government payroll. They are civil servants, just like employees at the post office. At the same time though, because the government wants to be staunchly secular, it prohibits women wearing headscarves in government offices, state-run universities, and any other public building.

People in the US often ask me if Turkey is becoming more religious or more secular. Turks ask themselves this same question too, ad nauseum. Americans, and many Turks, frame the religious vs. secular debate in Turkey as a conflict needing resolution and, depending on who you ask, the only positive resolution would be a definitive move in one direction or the other. Westerners uneasy about Islam think a secular Turkey would be a neutralized entity that would play nicely with others on the world stage. Secularists in Turkey live in fear of a boogeyman which threatens their freedom and goes by the name of "religious fundamentalism." They like to think the country would be more free if it were more secular. Religious fundamentalists in Turkey live in fear of a boogeyman which threatens their freedom and goes by the name of "secularism." They

like to think the country would be more free if it were more religious.

In my opinion, this is the wrong way to frame the religious vs. secular issue in Turkey. The issue is not a conflict needing resolution. Religion and secularism in Turkey are like two stones in an archway holding up a roof. The weight of the roof pushes the stones together, making the arch stronger. If the stones stopped pushing against each other, the arch would collapse and the roof would fall. The structure is supported not by the elimination of tension, but by the perpetuation of it.

16: BIG HEAD BASIBUYUK

When I want to explore a city, I love to walk, just walk, hour after hour with only the vaguest of notions where I am going. Walking a city is one of the best ways to get to know it. It gives me an intimate understanding of the city's rhythms, its traffic flow, its lively spots, its dead spots, its ritzy areas and its ghettos. Walking has a way of morphing unnoticed into wandering, wandering which will take me into parts of the city I would have never explored if I had let my brain and a map determine where I went.

In smaller cities a couple days of walking will show me almost everything. But in a massive, sprawling city like Istanbul I can spend years walking and still find nooks and crannies I had no idea existed. I had already been in Istanbul five years before this kind of

wandering led me to a neighborhood called Basibuyuk (meaning “Big Head”).

I hadn’t intended to walk to Basibuyuk that day. In fact, I hadn’t intended to go for a walk at all. I had simply stepped out of the apartment to buy a candy bar from the corner market. It was a nice day though, so instead of eating my candy bar back home on the couch, I decided to eat it while walking around the block. One block turned into two, two blocks turned into three, and before I knew it I was miles from home and had settled into a nice long-distance walking rhythm.

Settling into that rhythm requires making the mental transition from walking for the sake of stretching the legs to walking for the sake of exploration. And when my mind has made that transition it feels natural to just keep walking to infinity. I become like a rocket leaving the earth’s atmosphere for outer space. A tremendous amount of energy goes into lifting the rocket off the ground at the very beginning of the flight, but each additional foot of altitude comes easier than the one before it, and by the time the rocket reaches the outermost edge of the atmosphere it can practically be propelled by a can of Lysol.

On that particular day my transition to infinity came while I was walking along a new road that had just been built a year before, a road that curved around one of Istanbul's urban forests in an arc so long I could walk "just around the bend" for a full half hour without actually reaching the end of the bend.

On my left, rising up the slope away from the road, was the urban forest. The forest was surrounded by a fence and it was officially off-limits to the public, but every once in a while I passed holes in the fence revealing well-worn footpaths that disappeared into the forest. Since the road was deserted and there was little to think about, my mind got the best of me and I imagined the forest was populated with feral humans who might come running out at any minute, grab me, and drag me off into the forest, never to be seen again.

On my right I looked down onto a large infantry training center nestled right into the city. I had passed the training center many times on the coastal highway at the bottom of the hill, but this was the first time I was seeing it from the higher perspective. I figured the center must have been established decades earlier when Istanbul was a much smaller city and this whole area would have been just a vast tract of open land. Now, however, the obstacle courses and firing

ranges were surrounded by car dealerships and office buildings and, higher up the hill where I was, a government-owned forest populated for all I knew by feral humans.

About two hours into my walk the urban forest on my left began giving way to views of another hill, a hunched over, misshapen mountain that reminded me of Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. At its top was a large rock outcropping and what looked like a park of some sort. I love few things more than a good stiff climb, so there was no question in my mind that I would find the road up to the top of that hill.

When I arrived at the bottom of the hill I saw the neighborhood was typical lower-class urban Istanbul. There was a mom-and-pop market on almost every street corner, bakeries selling baked goods that looked like they had been discarded by the bakeries that bought discarded baked goods, and green grocers selling wilted lettuce and scarred tomatoes.

The neighborhood was downscale, but it was clearly an integrated part of Istanbul's urban grid. City buses ran along the streets. There were no BMWs, but there were plenty of 1970s Datsuns. The people didn't look like they were going to or coming from office jobs, but they did look like people who would draw weekly paychecks of some sort.

At the bottom of the hill I also came upon a very wide, very new four-lane arterial running away from the hill towards the main coastal highway. I figured this new road must be what carried the people who lived higher up the hill to work each day. Those neighborhoods up the hill must be growing really fast to warrant such a fancy new road, I thought to myself, let's go see what's up there. I turned towards the hill and began climbing.

Instead of climbing through neighborhoods that grew progressively more upscale though, I found myself climbing through neighborhoods that were becoming more and more run down the higher I got. Some of the houses were downright decrepit and shanty-like. And then I came upon the riot police.

The riot police were protecting the construction site of two large apartment buildings. Parked outside the construction site's gates were three armored riot control trucks with big knobby tires and water cannons mounted on top. I was not entering a land of rich people living high on a hill. I was crossing the border into *gece kondu* land.

Gece kondu literally means “built at night,” and it refers to houses or neighborhoods that are built illegally. *Gece kondus* are shanty towns, neighborhoods built by people who would otherwise

be homeless, people who live at the edge of Turkey's economic life. People who live in gece kondus don't go to school, they don't have regular jobs, sometimes they can't even afford to ride the bus. They sell flowers at busy intersections or rummage through garbage cans at night looking for recyclable cans and cardboard boxes.

A large portion of Turkey's economic activity takes place in the black market, and the gece kondus are real estate's black market. Conservative estimates of black market activity in Turkey usually start at 25% of the country's total economic activity. Some academicians even say it's as high as 75% of the total. Whatever the percentage, the government is in a tough position. Wrestling black market activity into the legal fold would raise tax revenue dramatically, but it would also anger a very large voting bloc.

The Basibuyuk apartment buildings were of a very simple, utilitarian design. Construction had just started recently and the exterior walls weren't on yet, but there was no sign the apartments would be anything other than plain old "rabbit hutches," as my grandpa and grandma call urban apartments.

It was clear the riot police were not there just to protect the construction site. They were there to

convey a message to the *gece kondu* residents: “This is city land, and we have come to reclaim it.”

As Turkey’s economy, legal and otherwise, grows, Turkey needs somewhere to house the swelling ranks of young families fueling that economic growth. The government prefers to see residential construction take place on land already firmly under government control, but sometimes the need for new construction is so intense the government has no choice but to direct it into parts of a city where government control is marginal at best. That means bulldozing a *gece kondu*.

I didn’t know what these new apartments would sell for, but I did know that no matter how cheap they would be, they would be too expensive for the current residents of Basibuyuk. The residents of Basibuyuk could not afford even the cheapest apartment if they saved all their money for a million years. Given how fast their neighborhood was deteriorating as I climbed the hill, most of them could probably barely even afford a bag of potato chips.

I climbed past the riot police deeper into *gece kondu* territory. The houses at the edge of the *gece kondu*, the ones nearest the riot police, had tapped illegally into the city’s electrical grid, and leading from each power transformer was a rat’s nest of wires

strung to the nearby houses. As I climbed further, even those amateurish attempts to wire the homes for electricity dissipated, and soon there was no sign of any power whatsoever going into any of the homes. Some of the homes had doors propped open and I could peer inside to see kitchens with no appliances and living rooms with no TVs. Even the old Datsuns had disappeared and I could walk in the middle of the street with impunity.

I began to notice the residents were staring at me, not because I was a foreigner, but simply because I obviously had no business to conduct there. No one just passed casually through that neighborhood, because there was nowhere to go. There was only one road winding up the hill at that point. It was the road I was walking on, and it had narrowed from a two-lane road to a one-lane road, and that was narrowing to a half-lane road.

I was almost at the top of the hill, with less than forty vertical feet separating me from the huge rock outcropping I had seen from below. What had appeared from below to be a park at the top of the hill was just an empty lot next to the rock, a place where the locals hung out at the end of the day, drank themselves silly, and left behind their beer bottles.

They couldn't afford to ride the bus, but they could apparently afford to drink.

As poor as Basibuyuk was, it was high enough up the hill to have one of the most spectacular views of the city I had ever seen. Looking west from just below the top of the hill I could see the skyscrapers in Taksim and Sisli, and the long ridge that forms the spine of Istiklal Caddesi. Panning to the left, I could see dozens of tankers and dry cargo ships queuing up for a chance to pass north through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea. Further left along the Asian side of the city I could see the neighborhoods of Kadikoy, Fenerbahce, Bostanci, Maltepe, Pendik, huge parts of the city where millions of people live and work. I could even see urban forests I had never realized were there because they had been so easily lost in the urban sprawl.

With only a few vertical feet left before reaching the top of the hill, I began feeling exposed and vulnerable. I was starting to feel a little freaked out by all the locals staring at me. I stopped climbing, turned around, and started hiking back down quickly, trying to keep a lid on the panic suddenly welling up inside of me. I became acutely aware of the fact that there was only one road out of this neighborhood, and I wondered what would become of me if some drunk,

testosterone-pumped teenagers decided I needed to be harassed. I began to long for the safety of riot policemen and witnesses who might speak up if they saw something happen to me. I was anxious to duck back under the safety blanket of the state, eager to return to a place where legal electricity, televisions, and city buses would tell me I was in the arms of a society I knew.

Once I descended past the riot police I knew I was safely back in the maw of Istanbul. As beat-up old Datsuns and taxis and city buses began passing by me I relaxed back into the rhythm of the city. I reached the bottom of the hill much faster than I expected, and I walked quickly along the completely deserted four-lane arterial leading out to the coastal highway. Within 20 minutes I was standing next to the highway, happily breathing exhaust fumes and waiting to catch a bus home.

17: DON'T CALL THE COPS

I mentioned earlier that at one point I had an apartment in Moda. Moda is a relatively quiet residential neighborhood on the Asian side of the city. It is a neighborhood of artistic elites, of the well-educated and the theater-going types, of the worldly internationals. I loved that neighborhood, and I loved that apartment. The apartment was three times too big for me, but I had never lived in a place with marble hallways before, and it was just two blocks from the sea so I could walk down to the water in the mornings and listen to the waves lapping at the shoreline while I drank my tea.

Life in Moda wasn't always idyllic though. In the apartment above me lived a couple that, shall we say, didn't get along. One day they had a particularly nasty fight that went on for hours. There was more than the usual amount of yelling, and when the verbal

argument turned physical, the yelling turned into screams of terror. The walls and ceilings of that building were not particularly thin, but that day they seemed like they were made of paper.

When I hear a woman scream like that, two alarms go off in my head. One alarm tells me there is a damsel in distress and I as a self-respecting man must provide assistance. The other alarm, however, tells me to not be the one who provides that assistance when the dispute is domestic, because an enraged husband will kill anyone intervening in “his” business. There’s a good reason cops around the world say domestic violence calls are the most volatile, and potentially the most dangerous, in the business.

Not sure which alarm to heed, I wandered out into the hallway to see what my other neighbors were doing. They were all standing in their doorways whispering to each other, saying, “What’s going on?” “Should we do something?” and “I wonder if she’s okay?”

In halting Turkish I stammered out a suggestion, something I was almost too embarrassed to say because I assumed that of course they would have done it a long time ago. I said, “Should we call the cops?” Their whispering stopped dead and they looked at me expectantly, as if they thought I was

about to deliver a punch line. Then a moment later when they realized I was serious, they burst out laughing.

Confused, frustrated, and angry, I wandered back to my apartment and a few minutes later walked down to the sea to calm myself. I couldn't bear the crashing sounds of the fight any longer, and I couldn't understand why my neighbors had laughed at my suggestion to call the police.

A few years later I found out, through first-hand experience, why they had laughed at me...

One day my wife and I drove over to her parents' place for lunch. We were excited to find a parking space just around the corner from their home. Istanbul is a congested city and it's rare to find a public parking space anywhere near your final destination. My wife was driving, and as she maneuvered the car into the empty space the owners of the neighborhood market we were parking in front of ran out to shoo us away, telling us no, we couldn't park there, that that space was reserved for customers of the store.

In Istanbul this practice is quite common. Markets block off spaces at the curb outside their front doors, even if the curb is public domain and anyone is theoretically allowed to park there.

My wife ignored the shopkeepers that day. She was fed up with this very common Istanbul practice, and she had decided that she was going to park in that space come hell or high water. It was, after all, a public space, she was a taxpaying citizen, and who were these shopkeepers to claim that space for themselves?

So as the shopkeepers stood at the curb and yelled at us with increasingly-offended self-righteousness, my wife finished pulling into the spot, turned off the engine, got out, slammed the car door shut, and started walking away.

“Uh oh,” I thought, “this is not going to go well.” My wife was hell-bent on seeing through this particular course of action, and I knew from experience that there was no stopping her. I unbuckled my seat belt and got out too, shutting the passenger door behind me and hustling off to catch up with her before she got too far away.

We weren’t half a block from the car when I heard footsteps rushing up behind us. Within seconds a furious, hulking lunatic of a man brushed me aside and went straight for my wife. He was in crazed animal mode, and he grabbed my wife’s hair and started kicking at her.

In my mind at least, the scenes that follow play back in slow motion with a muffled soundtrack, because as soon as I saw that bald-headed thug grab my wife's hair with his thick stubby hands, I was aware of only one thing in the whole world, and that was a man attacking my wife. I too went into crazed animal mode. I launched myself between them and tried to separate them, furiously prying the thug's hands from my wife's hair as he redirected his kicks at me.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a small crowd running towards us from the direction of the market, and I was relieved to realize the crowd included this thug's father, an elderly man with a long beard who I thought would surely put a stop to this insanity. What father, after all, would allow his son to beat up on a woman? If I saw a son of mine beating up on a woman, I would kill him myself right there on the spot.

But this old man didn't come running towards us to stop his son. He actually began egging his son on, and his other sons, not to be shown up in front of dear old dad, joined the melee.

Within moments my wife and I were surrounded by the brothers and their buddies from the street in a scuffling, confused mass of humanity. At one point

someone threw a punch at me, but there were too many bodies knocking each other to and fro, and the fist merely glanced off my cheek.

Thug #1 continued to kick and scratch at my wife while his brothers and their buddies pulled me away from her, threw me into the street, and surrounded me like a pack of wolves. I quickly realized what was about to happen and I thought, "Oh man, this is not going to go well."

As the wolf pack closed around me, my wife began screaming at the top of her lungs. It was a piercing, desperate, terrified and terrifying scream no human being should ever have to hear. I had never heard anyone scream like that before, not even when that woman upstairs was getting thrown around by her husband, and I hope to god I never hear a scream like that again.

Evidently, everyone in the crowd was as startled by her scream as I was, because for a split second they stopped what they were doing to look over at her and see what could possibly be issuing such a horrifying sound. Recognizing the brief window of opportunity and knowing what would happen if we let it pass, I pushed through the crowd, grabbed my wife by the shoulders, lifted her halfway off the ground, and pushed her backwards towards the corner. "Go, go,

go," I yelled at her, knowing that if we didn't disappear around the corner in the next couple seconds, the crowd would snap out of their disorientation and come after us again.

Badly shaken but safely around the corner, we rushed the remaining half block to her parents' vestibule, pushed our way through the door, and ran upstairs to be greeted by a pair of confused parents bewildered to see their daughter and son-in-law appear out of nowhere pumped with adrenaline, crying hysterically, and stammering out a bizarre story of parking and assault.

As we told our story to my wife's parents her father grabbed the phone and called the police, who told us they'd be right over and we should go downstairs to wait for them. While we waited on the street below, I began to calm down, confident right would soon be restored.

A few minutes later I was happy to see a cop car turn the corner, but my heart sank quickly when I saw the two cops inside lazily smoking cigarettes and looking at us with expressions that said our petty call for help had annoyed them. I was about to find out why my neighbors back at that apartment building in Moda had laughed at me when I suggested we call the police.

The police sauntered over to the market and began asking the shopkeepers what had happened. Then the police, instead of asking the shopkeepers why they saw fit to beat up on a woman, turned to my wife and asked her why she had tried to park there when the shopkeepers so clearly hadn't wanted her to.

My wife and I, and now her father, who had lived in that neighborhood for over 40 years, reminded the police that this was a public curbside and anyone could park there.

When my father-in-law told the sergeant to do his job and defend the public spaces, the sergeant grew silent, looked down at the ground, dropped his cigarette, stubbed it out with his toe, and looked back up at my wife and repeated, "Why did you try to park here?"

Eventually, seeing that we weren't going to give up easily, the cops sighed and told us that if we wanted to press charges we could, but we would all have to go down to the precinct station.

So to the precinct station we went, my wife and I to the offices inside to press charges while the Thug Brothers hung around outside the station smoking cigarettes and joking with the cops.

Inside, the desk sergeant took down our report, but then he set down his paperwork, looked at us, and

sighed and said, "Are you sure you want to do this? You know how this will play out, don't you?"

We had been in Istanbul long enough to know exactly how it would play out. My father-in-law, supportive as he was, knew exactly how it would play out, too.

Many times my wife has told me I am stubborn, but she is a pot calling me a black kettle. When push comes to shove, I will usually adopt a "When in Rome..." way of dealing with the world. She, on the other hand, will grab onto her principles tighter than ever and will insist on seeing them through to their logical conclusion, even if reality is going to steer that conclusion to a place that isn't so logical.

Knowing that pressing charges would lead to three years of lawyers and court appearances and would result in nothing but the thugs' exoneration and no jail time for anyone, but would bring repeated aggravation to my wife and I and to her parents, I saw an opening when the cop asked us if we wanted to proceed. I took it. I talked my wife down and persuaded her to drop the charges so we could go home and forget about it.

When we got back home to my wife's parents' house, my wife's mother served us tea and snacks and tried to soothe our rattled spirits. She, too, though,

was shaken. She knows her daughter better than anyone else on this planet. She knows how headstrong her daughter can be, and she knows that there have been, and will continue to be, times when that strength will become a weakness that puts her daughter in harm's way. She also knows from decades of experience with her daughter that there is absolutely nothing she can do about it. But because she was angry and scared she scolded her daughter anyway, wagging her finger at her and reminding her that this was not her country, that it belonged to the *magandalar*, to the uncouth ruffians, and that she should never, never forget that.

Before I move on to the next chapter, I need to say something else about this incident...

When I look back on that day I have very mixed feelings about how I handled myself. When my wife was attacked, I tried my best to protect her, but my best was not good enough.

Then when we were at the police station and she was deciding whether or not to press charges, I used my knowledge of her to talk her down from her principles and steer her in another direction.

You see, I knew that the only thing that would trump my wife's desire for justice was concern for her

parents, and in the police station I played on that concern to get her to drop the charges.

I reminded her that her parents lived right around the corner from that neighborhood market. I told her that if we pressed charges, the case would drag on for years, and then, this being Turkey, we would lose. That meant for years, her parents would have to live around the corner from someone they had an open criminal court case against, and then they would have to spend the rest of their lives living around the corner from someone whom they had pressed criminal charges against, and then lost to.

Looking back on that moment in the police station, I think if I had to do it all over again, I would handle myself in the same way. I would be the compromising voice of reason using my knowledge of my wife to talk her down from her principles. It did not make me proud to seek anything less than justice, but I think there are some situations in life where no matter how we act, we will never be proud of ourselves. Sometimes we get caught between a rock and a hard place. We never forget those times, and we rarely get over them.

18: ODE TO ISTANBUL

When you love something, you understand its good side and its bad side are two sides of the same coin. Whether your love is for a person, a place, or a thing, you have no choice but to accept that person, place, or thing in its entirety. You have to take the bad with the good. You don't get to cherry pick the parts you want in your life.

As we grow old, we want someone next to us who knows our history as a human being, someone who understands our actions today against the backdrop of our past. When the wrinkles are spreading across our faces and our stomachs are sagging and our butts are heading south, and east, and west, we want someone next to us who will see the youthful exuberance we had so long ago. In order to have that in life, you need to come to understand that love is a nuanced

thing, that you can't be with someone unless you learn to accept the bad along with the good.

Just like you can love a person, you can also love a place or a thing. I am not a city person. In fact, in my more extreme moments I will thump my chest and loudly proclaim that the truest beauty in all the world can only be found when no man is present, and that cities are nothing but cesspools of human filth. The more subtle truth, though, is that I love cities in general and Istanbul in particular. Despite the scuffles over parking and the cops who don't care and the cats who fight in the bushes and the exhaust fumes that belch forth from buses and the warbling screeches that come out of the loudspeakers, Istanbul is one of the most beautiful places on earth. It is where natural beauty and man-made beauty come together to build on each other.

Istanbul is the Beyaz Firin bakery and the beautiful buttery crispness of its pastries. It is the tall glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice so fresh they don't even cut the oranges until you order it. It is the blond, creamy grain of the bakery's wood block tables. It is the professional and courteous, but not obsequious, deft hand of the counter help who load up your tray and ring up your sale. It is the tiny bubbles that rise from the sugar cubes you drop into your tea, sugar

cubes so fresh they begin breaking up before they even land on the bottom of your glass.

Istanbul is a cool summer night when the square just north of the Ortakoy mosque is filled with people young and old, milling about, chatting easily with each other, enjoying the clear skies and the brilliant full moon as it rises over the hills across the Bosphorus. It is sitting in the square's tea garden, mere inches from the currents of the Bosphorus, using a toothpick to munch on a late night plate of french fries while a massive tanker from the Black Sea sails silently down the Bosphorus, so silently that you only know it's there because its silhouette blacks out the twinkling lights on the other side of the river as the ship glides smoothly towards the open sea.

Istanbul is knowing that on Sundays between eight in the morning and noon, you can hop in the car and see the city before the masses awake and return it to its crowded chaos. It is knowing that during this time you only have to drive 20 minutes in order to stumble upon a peaceful, sparsely-populated pocket of the city, a place where goats still graze and vegetables still grow, and chances are you will have to slow down for a cow standing in the middle of the road, refusing to budge and looking back at you like he's challenging you: "What are you going to do now, huh?"

When you are crowded onto a standing-room-only bus and a soccer game just got out and traffic isn't moving an inch and you are watching old people with walkers speed past you on the sidewalk, you think of the expression on that cow's face. You think of the juice so fresh you can still feel the orange essence dancing on top of the liquid as you lift the glass to your nose. You think of Fatih Sultan Mehmed, someone who lusted after the city so much he was willing to pull his ships overland in the wee hours of the morning just to have it for himself.

When the city tries your patience, when it makes you fight just to be there, these are the things you think of, and that is how you love it.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes love just isn't enough. After 8 years together, 5 of them married, my wife and I split up. In fact, we split up while I was in the middle of writing this book.

Our love for each other did not go away. Our relationship just didn't work out. It was always off-kilter. We spent years trying to figure it out, years trying to solve it, but trying to solve it was like trying to punch our way out of a gigantic paper bag. We made a lot of noise and we exhausted ourselves trying to escape from the bag, but the bag just flexed one direction when we punched it one way, and then it flexed in another direction when we punched it in another. It never tore open. We never saw a sign that said, "This is the way out of the paper bag."

Perhaps we put too much strain on the relationship too soon after meeting. Perhaps it was too much to

expect we could uproot ourselves and move to a new country and embark on new careers and learn new languages and do all the other things we had to do in order to make it in Turkey, and build a healthy relationship too.

There are many things I don't understand, but what I know for sure is that when I write about how she is as graceful as a gazelle, or about how much I loved watching her explore Amsterdam, or about how I called her "my little fish," none of that is diminished by the fact that we are not together anymore. Our splitting up does not negate the memories I carry with me. What is done is done though. Some balls of string are just too tangled to unravel. Sometimes you just have to walk away.

I originally went to Turkey for her, but even though my relationship with her is over, my relationship with Turkey is not. Turkey is a timeless land where I see stories layered upon stories layered upon stories. It is a land filled with surprises, a place where I can turn a corner and see something completely not what I was expecting. And perhaps best of all, it is a land that showed me that just about anything can happen and I will be fine. There is nothing more freeing than knowing that.

In 2010 I moved back to the US. I spent some time with my family and with Milk Dud, the black lab whose unruliness led me to board that particular flight to Hong Kong back in 2003. Milk Dud, by the way, is my dad's dog now. My parents took him in when I decided to go to Turkey, and he has been with them ever since.

Shortly after returning to the US I found a job in Seattle and moved back to the city I had left almost eight years before. For the first time in eight years I was back in an office, answering emails, sitting in meetings, shifting widgets. It didn't feel right. I had done that already, and I had left it. I had left it to explore the world.

Taking that job was me aborting that exploration so I could jump back onto Track A, the default track in life that goes something like this: "Get a job, then get a bigger one. Get a car, then get a bigger one. Get a house, then get a bigger one." Trying to jump back onto Track A had me feeling like I was wearing shoes that were too small. I couldn't bear sitting in meetings, shifting widgets, trying to pretend I cared.

So less than a year after taking that job, I left it. I'm not sure what's going to come next, but it's going to be more Track B, the alternative track, the track I started going down when I left Seattle the first time.

Track B is the path we blaze when we realize Track A isn't going to work for us anymore.

For me, Track B is probably going to involve living in Turkey, at least for a while. I like it there. It's not easy living there, but it doesn't need to be.

When I tell people I plan to go back to Turkey, they quite understandably ask me what I'm going to do there. And I don't know what to tell them. If I could say I'm going to go back to Turkey to sit at a desk and answer emails and shift widgets, perhaps people wouldn't look at me as if they wanted more of an answer. But at this point the only honest answer I can give them is, "I am going back to Turkey because I still have work to do there." That answer is cryptic, and it is evasive, but it is cryptic and evasive because even I don't know what that work is yet. I would rather find out than not, though. I am not done with Track B.

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