

# A Brief Word of Advice and/or Warning

There's a middle-aged woman rubbing slow circles on my decidedly un-six-packed stomach while her elderly, cane-assisted mother pats the butt I've been meaning to do more squats with. Pats repeatedly.

We three huddle close together, standing in the entrance of their tiny kitchen, and I might as well be a mannequin for all I'm contributing to the animated discussion they're having about my body. My friend, Nil, the daughter/granddaughter of this dynamic and overly-tactile duo, participates in the conversation from just outside what my older brothers might have called a classic "Amanda Sandwich."

In fact, *mannequin* is a good description as this three-generation Turkish outpost of the fashion police modified my outfit almost immediately upon greeting me at the door, right after expansive hugs and resounding kisses on both cheeks.

I thought I was coming for a cooking lesson, but it doesn't look like that's going to commence any time soon as the stomach-rubbing and butt-patting, with occasional full-body squeezes, has been going on for at least five minutes.

Nil hasn't felt the need to translate much of her kinswomen's remarks, other than letting me know the general argument consists of whether or not I've put on weight since moving into the neighborhood.

That's right, I moved all the way across the world from Boise, Idaho, USA to Istanbul, Turkey, and the first home that welcomes me is full of women standing in the kitchen arguing about my weight.

You might be wondering how a 36-year-old, Jesus-following, single, Caucasian, second-grade teacher from the City of Trees managed to find herself in a massive concrete jungle generally, and inside a room so highly *disregardive* of personal space boundaries specifically—and I would respond by saying that *that* is an excellent question! It seems like we might be here awhile longer, so I'll take a minute to catch you up.

So you know those stories that begin with a woman scorned and, more often than not, end with her sleeping her way across Tuscany or Appalachia or Vermont?

Well, I don't want to give you the wrong impression within five minutes of meeting, but I feel like I should probably be up front and tell you that, barring divine intervention, the 80-ish-year-old woman currently patting my butt is the only patting of my butt that you'll be forced to bear witness to for the duration of this, my tale of casting off the known and running into the wild. Oh wait, that title's already taken.

Regardless, this is *not* going to be a grand operatic tale where you cheer from the sidelines as I walk through a giant life crisis that causes me to pack up my things and hike across Turkey whilst entertaining you with all the men with whom I'm sleeping.

That's not to say I'm not susceptible to handsome men, because let me tell you, in my limited experience Turkish men are quite handsome and I might have to throw up a few personal boundaries so I don't accidentally *suscept* to one of them.

It's also not to say I wasn't having a life crisis, double-negative notwithstanding, because obviously something was going on or I wouldn't have made such a drastic choice—but the bottom line is that sleeping my way across any geographical region, foreign or domestic, is not really my cup of *çay*.

That's tea in Turkish, by the way. That wasn't too difficult, was it? Perhaps you'll find my tale to be educational as well as entertaining!!

And in honor of surviving your first Turkish lesson, I'll admit to you it *was* a sort of crisis that brought me here—but let's call it a single-Christian-woman-of-a-certain-age-who-struggles-to-find-a-place-in-the-wedded-bliss-family-first-American-evangelicalism-subculture type of crisis. Or maybe the hip-College-&-Career-pastor-callously-suggesting-that-perhaps-you've-aged-out-of-the-group-at-church-and-should-try-to-see-if-you-can-somehow-insinuate-yourself-into-the-Young-Marrieds-group type of crisis.

Ergo, #firstworldproblems.

What happened was, after the College & Career pastor—yes, that was more of a true story than creatively-fictionalized hyperbole—suggested I was too old for his group, in somewhat stereotypical fashion I possibly (and slightly) overcorrected by skipping right over Young Marrieds to a “Women's Night Out.” I'd always assumed, rightly or wrongly, that these evenings were geared toward the elder stateswomen in our congregation, and when I walked in the door my assumption seemed to be more or less correct.

Let's see if I can paint the picture of that night accurately. Professionally speaking, I was exhausted from a week of mandatory teacher in-service training, the endless bureaucracy of which made me want to pull my hair out even though I loved my second graders. I'd been at the same school for fourteen years, and this was the latest I'd ever waited to sign my contract for the following year. I'd waited so long, in fact, that the principal's last reminder email was a little testy, but I just hadn't been able to bring myself to sign on the dotted line.

On the personal front, I was more than a little depressed at having celebrated the nuptials of my very last single girlfriend the weekend before. And I guess since I've decided to be honest with you here in these pages we've come together to share, I must also rip off the Band-Aid and admit the worst of it—I'd found my first gray hair that morning and went straight from plucking it to making an appointment to get my hair colored.

So perhaps you can imagine my surprise—or frankly, my horror—when I was escorted to a seat at a table containing seven very lovely, very grey-haired women who kindly started inviting me to middle-of-the-day, middle-of-the-work-week Bible studies suitable for the clearly and obviously retired.

It gave me the strangest sense of vertigo, like I'd somehow wormholed my way from swinging 20's to creaking 60's, with nary a stop in between. Being assigned to that

particular table had me wondering if I'd missed some great big and divine detour sign offering me an off-ramp to somewhere more exciting, or at the very least wishing I could reach for an imaginary eject button to rocket myself out of the Dullsville trajectory of my life.

The next morning at church, two of those self-same grannies latched onto me and made me sit with them, which caused my attention to waver from paying attention in the strictest sense to a review of my options. And then a Mr. Darcy soundalike got up and started talking about belonging and calling and doing something meaningful with your short time on earth. In the state I was in, I doubt a dove descending onto his shoulder while a booming voice accompanied a ray of sunshine parting the clouds and blessing his brow could have made much more of an impression on me.

I didn't even wait for the final amen before leaving those grannies in the dust as I made a desperate dash for the table in back.

And here it is, my first piece of advice and/or warning to you in this book which, in all other ways, would most definitely not be placed upon the sacred shelves of self-help—if you find yourself in the mood I was in, when someone gets up for the World in a Minute segment, or anything like it, and starts talking about heroism, self-sacrifice, and exotic locales upon which you can fling your temporal earthly bodies for the sake of the Kingdom that never ends—for heaven's sake, plug your ears and start scrolling!

Trust me on this, my friend, or you might be liable to find yourself playing International Dress-Up Barbie with three generations of women arguing about your weight in a language you don't understand, while the third plumber in as many months is installing a (hopefully) brand-new toilet in your apartment after leaving you without one for three days.

I mean, just as an example.

I had a weak moment one lonely Sunday morning and fell under the spell of a British accent and the promise of a place to use my gifts for the glory of God. Now I'm in a contract I can't wiggle out of, teaching eighth graders—my least favorite demographic of humanity—at an international school catering mostly to expats called Istanbul International, sometimes referred to as I-Squared.

Eighth graders! I did *not* sign up for a course in how to most effectively martyr yourself in the pursuit of being a living sacrifice, but apparently I'm going to get it anyway.

By the way, the Mr. Darcy soundalike who, may or may not be the architect of my own personal destruction, is named Michael, and he's the principal of said international school. I'm still trying to decide whether I'm mad at him or owe him big time, but either way, you can be assured I'll let you know when I figure it out.

That's probably enough to get you started, which is good because I might need to pull focus so as not to choke on the previously-bitten, partially-pre-owned pastry grandma just shoved in my mouth. At least she's stopped patting my butt.

# Eylül // September

Suruden ayrılan koyunu kurt kapar  
*soo-roo-dawn eye-ruh-lahn coy-you-new curt ka-par*

*The sheep that gets separated from the flock gets eaten by the wolf.*

# Hoş Geldiniz

*hohsh ghel-di-niz*

*Welcome*

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I ask you—is anything more descriptive of the modern American experience than the cereal aisle? Or aisles, depending on where you shop. I usually buy the first box I see that has cinnamon in the title, but I’ll admit to you, at least twice in the past year when I was unable to find something *cinnamony* quickly enough, I abandoned my quest and grabbed a box of Pop Tarts instead. Although, in troubling news for the habitually indecisive, lately, new Pop Tarts flavors have been popping up like they have the reproductive cycle of a rabbit. PB&J? Pumpkin? Seriously?

But I’m *procrasti*plaining—procrastinating by way of complaining—a personality tic I’ve been working to improve for a while now. The cereal aisle currently in front of me consists of four options, and there is nothing immediately recognizable, nor is there anything that resembles the word *cinnamon*. I stare at my choices a moment longer before my stomach growls embarrassingly loud and spurs me to action. *Aha!* My gaze falls upon the word Nestle, I’ve heard of that one! Granted, I thought they were a chocolate company, but I think you’ll understand me when I say that steers me more toward them than away.

The milk is easier to choose; there’s only one glass bottle of the white stuff. This might be the place I was born for! I promised myself I’d only buy cereal, but *oh*, let me just grab that Pepsi on the way by. And that bag of Doritos. Please don’t judge just yet, my body still thinks it’s evening, and more to the point, that I’ve drug it along with me on some kind of cataclysmic, possibly extinction-level event, the kind for which our ancestors were known to *anticipatorily* pack on the pounds.

There are four short aisles in this grocery store, which is kind of refreshing. I head toward the front and see a lovely young woman with a smile on her face who greets me with something unintelligible. Or rather, Turkish. Same diff.

I exchanged some money at the airport two nights ago when I landed, so I hold out a 20 *lira* bill in my open palm, in hopes that that’s enough. She smiles, takes it out of my hand, and makes change. Something else unintelligible, smile, smile, and I make my exit.

Jet lag has had me upright more or less since 4 a.m., but I didn’t leave my apartment until it got light around 7 a.m. Even so, as I wandered, I didn’t see another human being

until around 8:00, nor did I find anything open until 8:30. That left me plenty of time to find a cute little park around the corner from my place, a few restaurants to try later, and what appears to be the bus stop I was told will take me to school.

With breakfast and second breakfast in hand, I turn back toward my apartment—officially mine for all of about 10 hours—and start climbing. Eight minutes, one hill, and four flights of stairs later, it takes me a couple minutes of jiggling the key around to get my door open. It might be the lock, or it might be that my vision is a little blurry from lack of oxygen. Either way, I'll have to work on that.

I think it takes about five minutes for my heart rate to return to normal, which is just about the time I hear it begin to rain.

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Email to Maria: > JET LAG! I woke up several times in the night, and then had just fallen back to sleep when the call to prayer woke me up. It seemed like the middle of the night, but I guess it was right before dawn because, according to Mr. Google, that's when the first one goes off. I have to say, it's kind of an eery sound. I got up and opened my window and stood for a minute or two trying to figure out what direction it was coming from. I was able to pinpoint three different versions, on slightly different timing. Speaking of timing, you're just putting the kids down. This is going to take some getting used to.

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It wasn't rain. And if you've never had to Google-translate your way through a phone conversation about the cascading waterfall flowing copiously down from your bathroom ceiling into an ever-expanding pool you're standing in even though simultaneously worried about death by electrocution—well, one might question whether you've even truly lived.

My own cascading-waterfall-Google-translation-possible-death-by-electrocution-telephone experience has begun, a mere 36 hours after having my freshly minted blue passport stamped for the first time at the International Grand Airport in Istanbul, Turkey.

Just to help you keep track, the drips begin approximately 11 hours after signing a rental contract during an evening I'd thought would involve maybe about a five-minute, hello-how-are-you-sign-here kind of thing with the landlord, but ended up being a three-hour marathon of smiling and nodding whilst not understanding a single word, compounded by jet lag so profound it caused the incomprehensible conversation swirling around me to sound a little like the *wah-wah-wah* teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons of my childhood.

Almost as soon as Michael *nee* Mr. Darcy had me sign on the dotted line, I'd started corresponding with another teacher, Francine, with whom he'd arranged for me to live. She was really helpful, telling me what to pack and what I could and couldn't find here. In

exchange for said helpfulness, and in pursuit of trying to bond with the complete stranger with whom I'd agreed to cohabitate for the next year, I even wasted three precious pounds of space in one of my suitcases to bring her the maple syrup she opined about for a good, long paragraph in one of her emails.

Wasted, I say, because Francine was really helpful right up to the point when she sent me an email a week before my departure informing me in glowing and hyper-enthusiastic terms I won't bother repeating that her boyfriend had proposed and she was planning to move with him to Yemen where, together, they could better serve the Lord.

She said I could still have the apartment and a friend of hers named Sarah had agreed to help me with the rental contract and anything else I might need. I arrived in the evening and stumbled my way into an airport hotel, then bright and early the next morning caught a taxi to my new neighborhood by showing the driver a written address.

Sarah endeared herself to me immediately by the fact that she was already standing on the busy sidewalk where the driver stopped, and I didn't have to have a moment's worry that I was in the wrong place. She helped wrangle three heavy bags out of the trunk of the taxi and trundle them up to the apartment via a very steep hill and a very narrow road, and then told me to suck it up as we hauled the bags up four flights of stairs in the blazing, wet-blanket heat of mid-August.

I was in such a stupor I fell asleep on the couch in the middle of my bags, only awakening when Sarah pounded on the door after returning to take me to the landlord's house. When I told her I was nauseated, she popped into a store and grabbed me a Coke that was surprisingly effective to the task. I sipped it during our journey, which included two bus transfers and a brisk walk, and felt fine by the time we arrived, which was good because I desperately needed all my faculties.

The entire confusing evening, Sarah chatted and yucked it up with the landlords, and very occasionally translated for me in quick asides. I mostly drank *çay*, which I didn't mind although I'm not a huge black tea fan, because I was able to add three cubes of sugar with each refill. The refills kept coming because I had no idea how to say, "No thank you, I've had enough."

The landlord's sweet, grey-haired wife brought plate after plate of unrecognizable items, carefully and slowly explaining to me what each thing was, which was about as useful as you might imagine given she was speaking Turkish and I hadn't had the pleasure of even hearing a foreign tongue until 8th grade foreign-language-requirement Spanish where I was forced to try to spackle *hola's* and *como estases* on top of my unwilling, mono-lingual tongue.

When she wasn't stuffing me with food and refilling my glass of *çay*, the landlord's wife sat on one of the extremely uncomfortable gold and brown couches watching TV, hordes of people attired in white walking around that big black box thing that's—I think—in Saudi Arabia?

I can just hear Maria, my best friend's, voice, needling me, *You've moved to a country that's 99.9 percent Muslim, perhaps you should have prepared a little more!*

*Yeah, yeah*, I reply to her voice in my head, *It's on my list!* But the mental list of research questions I've been compiling is already surprisingly long given my passport stamp is practically still wet.

While Sarah and the landlord continued to chat and I tried to make my way through the dizzying array of food, the landlord's wife, whom I would name for you if the name I'd been given when we were introduced hadn't been so foreign that my brain immediately chucked it out the back gate, spent most of the evening watching footage of people marching around the soon-to-be-properly-named black box as she sat with her arms raised about an inch above and kind of parallel to her lap. I think she was praying. Although I guess the mumbling of lips could have been her way of trying to reassure herself about renting to someone so clearly unsuitable. I wouldn't blame her.

After maybe an hour and a half of chit chat, Sarah leaned over and told me she'd dropped what she clearly considered her *piece de resistance* to seal the deal, "Amanda's an American, they always pay their bills."

That seemed to do the trick because the landlord slid the contract in my direction and I signed on the dotted line in total faith this woman I'd just met had not just arranged for me to sell my birthright for a piece of *baklava*.

I then proceeded to make my first-of-no-doubt-many cultural *faux pas* by trying to shake hands with the landlord. He pretended not to see my outstretched hand, so I ended up sort of bowing at him and meekly followed Sarah out the door. We caught a taxi back to the neighborhood and parted ways with Sarah saying, "Call anytime if you have a problem."

I went back to my new apartment, so excited I could hardly believe it, and despite all the cups of *çay*, fell asleep pretty soon after downing a couple Tums I silently thanked my mother for insisting I pack since the unrecognizable items I'd feasted upon were tangling uncomfortably with the jet lag nausea that returned with a vengeance.

This morning after hunting and gathering for cereal, I came home and found the source of the rain sound originated in the bathroom. While I watched in disbelief, the gentle rain coming from the ceiling transformed quickly from a steady drip into the aforementioned waterfall. To say I was stunned is an understatement. I don't even know how long I stood there staring, watching the pool on the tile floor growing wider and wider by the minute.

I was severely jet-lagged, but even if I'd woken fresh as a daisy, I would have had literally no idea what to do in the situation. Finally seeing the water reaching toward the burnt orange bathroom rug set me in motion, and I went running to the kitchen to find something to set at the bottom of my new water feature.

I found a big pan in one of the giant overhead cupboards and put it in place, then dialed the number Sarah gave me yesterday. I didn't begrudge even one cent of the \$3.99-a-minute robbery my American cell phone company was charging for international calls. No answer. I went looking for towels and packed them around the pan, called again, no answer.

I made myself a second, very large cup of coffee to match the one I'd had at 5:00am, then with a brain newly renewed, devised a scheme whereby the water fell onto the moldy shower curtain I strategically propped in such a way that the water drained into the



bathub. Mental note: *replace moldy curtain as soon as possible. Also find some bleach for the tub.*

My engineering father would be proud of my invention. I was proud! But I was also a little alarmed at how long this could go on before the ceiling became waterlogged and the already suspect-looking tiles started raining down on my head. I fruitlessly called Sarah again, then decided to see if I could get a neighbor to help. I figured I could pantomime my way through getting them to come down and look, but no one answered the door on the floors above or below. Do they sleep late around here or does everybody go to work before dawn? More questions without answers.

So I think that about brings you up to speed. It's 11:00am now and I've decided there's nothing else to do but call the landlord whose number is helpfully listed on my new rental agreement, right beside all the things in the apartment he agreed to fix within the next month.

I dial and my landlord (presumably) answers. I don't understand a word, I just carefully sound out the words I Google-translated before the call, "I'm Amanda. The American. Water. Ceiling. Leak. Bad."

He says a few words and then hangs up. Did he say, "I'm coming?" Did he say, "Wrong number?" Did he say, "Fix it yourself!"

All plausible responses, all equally incomprehensible, and a giggle sneaks out as I wipe the sweat caused by that simple interaction off my hands and onto my sweatpants, which reminds me I should probably change. I can't stop the giggles as I walk toward the living room where I dig through my already open suitcases looking for a more reasonable pair of pants. Although again, how am I supposed to know what's reasonable?

I entertain myself for awhile poking around the apartment, coffee mug in hand. Sarah didn't give me much of a tour and I've been asleep approximately 95 percent of the time I've been here, so I walk over to one of the windows and am surprised to find I have a balcony! It takes a few moments to figure out I have to pull out a couple nails, kind of like a double hinge, before I can open the door and step out, but it's worth it! I'm immediately charmed.

There's a small chair and table and when I sit down I'm quite comfortable. I can see blue sky in several directions in and around the buildings that surround me, and even spot a tree when I crane my neck around to the right. "Just the spot," I announce to two black crows watching me from a power line about ten feet away. I used to read my Bible in the mornings on my postage stamp balcony back in Boise, and love that I'll be able to continue the tradition. "In fact," I say to the crows, who no longer look interested, "there's no time like the present!" I go back inside and grab my Bible.

About an hour later, I hear the surprisingly loud ring of the doorbell and see through the peep hole it's the landlord. I turn the lock three times, like Sarah showed me, and open the door.

"Hello," I say with a smile. If I was being charitable, I'd say he sort of grimaces, then gestures like he wants to come in. I point to the bathroom, wait as he takes his shoes off, then follow him through the hall.

He looks the situation over for a few moments, grimaces again, grunts a little, then heads back to the door without saying another word. I watch him trudge upstairs and hear him pound on the door. Wouldn't you know, the neighbors answer for him, and I hear some brief Turkish and what sounds like him going into their apartment.

I guess I'll wait here?

A few minutes later he stomps back down the stairs, sees me at the open door and says, "Okay," then keeps on going down the stairs.

"Okay, what?" I say, but he's already gone.

I barely get the door closed before bursting into laughter. I hope it's not offensive, or that if it is he can't hear me—but, really, what kind of *ludicrousity* is this?

Only last night, Sarah said she'd help me with whatever, but she's not answering her phone. And Michael, the only other person I know in Turkey—the one who got me into this mess in the first place—had an email waiting for me when I landed that he'd had a problem with his flight and wouldn't be arriving until tomorrow.

I guess there's no choice but to wait here and see what "okay" means. I pour myself a bowl of cereal and walk back toward the balcony. With a happy sigh I slouch down and prop my legs up on the railing and take a bite, which I'm immediately forced to spit back into the bowl.

Either this milk is a month expired, or it's not milk at all. It's thick and sour and pretty salty, all taste sensations which do not belong to the realm of my expectations. I stand up and walk back to the kitchen, open the fridge door and take out the glass jar of what I didn't even think twice about purchasing because *it looked like milk!*

I take a minuscule sip directly from the jar on the off-chance that it's the cereal that's done me wrong, and another offensive blast rolls over my tongue. Nope, I was right the first time—gross!

"Down the drain with you!" I pronounce, turning the bottle upside down and feeling a sense of control for the first time since leaving Boise. Sadly, watching it disappear down the kitchen sink, I regretfully add *slow drain* to my ever-growing list of home improvements.

Continuing on the theme of exercising control over my life, I brew and pour myself a third giant cup of coffee with the French press I was thrilled to find made it intact, using the beans I brought with me. It's my preferred blend from a small shop in Portland, and the bag will most definitely not last long at this rate, but I'm not going to worry about that right now.

I take my cup to the living room and rustle through the sprawl of two 50-pound suitcases, one overweight carryon and one obscenely overweight backpack until I find a granola bar I packed but didn't eat on the plane. Armed with sustenance, I head back to the balcony and plop down. If I scootch my chair just a little—ah yes, my bare feet propped on the wall are receiving a little sunbath!

My coffee is half-done and I've just decided the green bird who replaced the crows is a parrot when there's a bang on the door. I hop up quickly and run back inside to peek through the peephole again. It appears the landlord has drug some sort of handyman along with him this time. When I let them in, they go through the same pantomime—looking for a

few moments at the waterfall, then grunting and trudging upstairs, whereupon after only a few short minutes a tremendous racket begins echoing down. I finish my coffee, leaning against the bathroom doorframe, and watch in fascination as the waterfall slows to a drip, then stops altogether.

A few minutes later the landlord comes down and hands me his cellphone. "Hello?" I ask tentatively.

"Hello," a voice responds in a thick accent, "Your leak will be fixed next week. We told the neighbor not to use his toilet. Okay, thank you."

Before I can respond, the mysterious voice hangs up, so I hand the landlord back his phone. He waves and leaves without another word.

I close the door, walk to the living room, and sit down on the couch. I should go to the store and make another attempt at breakfast, but I think I'll just sit here for a minute first.

*I mean, really!* To think I could be in my snug Boise apartment right now with an apartment manager on speed dial for the slightest thing going wrong. And not to put too fine a point on it, but I'm pretty sure his solution to the problem would not be *don't use the toilet!*

"You wanted adventure," I say to myself, and start laughing until tears run down my face.