



Miryam tugs gently at the collar of her blouse, fanning herself to drive away the sweltering August heat. Her head scarf is wrapped tightly around her head, yet strands of graying hair escape its folds and paste themselves immodestly against her sweat-beaded brow. “*Sıcak, değil mi?*” she says. It’s hot, isn’t it?

“*Evet.*” Yes, I reply. I am leaning against the house, bits of straw poking me through my shirt. The caked mud walls are crumbling in the summer heat. Even the local dogs are panting in the roadway, too lazy to swat away the flies.

We’re waiting for Miryam’s younger brother, Yalçın, to return from prayers at the mosque. I stare out across the broad steppe, deserted save for the endless fields of wheat bronzing under the sun. Mountains roll up along the sides of the valley like a gentle giant’s shoulders. To my left, a meager collection of houses constitutes the village, clustered around the single dirt track that is the artery connecting this rural farming community with the rest of Turkey. A hot breeze ripples the heads of grain, creating a darkened wave that fans out across the valley. It does nothing to relieve the heat.

Miryam points to a felled tree lying in the shade of the house, the branches stripped from the trunk and the surface sanded down. “See that tree?” she smiles. “That’s a good place to sit and drink tea.”

I test out the make-shift bench, admiring the view across the valley. Here in the shade of the house, sheltered from the sun by the overhang of the corrugated tin roof, a person could drink tea until he could no longer drink in the view. It was beautiful. “True,” I nod in agreement. “Very good for to drink tea.” My Turkish is broken and stilted, the accents in all the wrong places, the grammar non-sensical. She smiles with patient understanding.

The chug of an engine breaks the stillness as Yalçın pulls up the road, sending the dogs scampering in the wake of

dust behind the car. He sounds the horn and leans out the driver’s side window. “*Acele edin!*” Hurry up, he grins.

Miryam waves me off towards the car like a grandmother who affectionately shoos her grandchildren out of the kitchen before a holiday meal. *Go on, now.* Her smile seems to say. *Go have fun.*

I sidle down to the car and wave my farewell to Miryam and her tree-trunk bench. Yalçın spins the car out on the dirt, and we tear back down the roadway away from the village. I turn my head and watch as Miryam, wrapped in floral-print fabric, shrinks into the distance along with her one-room palace and the rest of her mountain valley paradise.

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**The ruins of the Temple to Diana at Side, Turkey (left).
A local boy in Antalya enjoys the shade on a hot day (middle).
Turkish tea, drunk black and sweet (right).**

Three months later, I sit here at my kitchen table, the summer heat of Turkey replaced by a blustery English autumn breeze that rattles my window frames as it passes by. Pumpkin seeds are roasting in the oven in preparation for Thanksgiving, and the whiff of a distant bonfire is carried in on the draft under the door. There is a cozy warmth wrapped up in the slow drift towards winter, helped along by my mug of tea steaming on the table beside me.

I like to imagine it once presided over a chapel in the Cotswolds, or perhaps graced a monastery library in Yorkshire. The table, I mean. It’s a solid affair — not one of these cheap, laminate imitations — but a real wood table, complete with lion’s paw feet and spindles expertly turned

Nate & Allison Ramsey on the Isle of Man



on a lathe. It has extendable leaves, pinned in place with wooden pegs. The carpenter's joins are expertly cut, and not a single screw or metal joist can be found in the entire work. Rescued from the forgotten recesses of a storage room at my workplace, I took the effort of refinishing it about 18 months ago. I invested days removing the tired, old varnish and sanding away the oil-darkened mahogany stain from the cracks and crevices to reveal a fresh, oatmeal-coloured grain. My friend Laura came around and helped breathe new life and color into the wood and complete the project with a satin finish. Where once I shoveled food while sitting at a forgotten relic, now I dine from an Indian Rosewood antique.

Placed squarely in front of my kitchen window, I can gaze out as the morning light warms the honey-coloured stone of the Norman church across the street. Overhead, timber beams stripe the ceiling, remnants of the original 1650 structure of my apartment. The parade of friends and family who have visited this year all marvel at the view. If Miryam were here to see it, I think she'd agree: It's a good place to sit and drink tea.

In fact, it seems the whole world has come to dine with me this year. Martin flew in from Germany with a recommended reading list as long as my arm. Tom celebrated the New Year — and new work — with a pot of homemade chili. Ezra imported fresh Ethiopian coffee beans and stories of

Charles Taylor climbing Snowdon



his work in Africa. Dar and I swapped travel tales over a plateful of Egyptian food. My mother swooned about the Royal Wedding, while my nephew celebrated his high-school graduation. Nate and Allison arrived from New York with news of their expected third child, and Charles carried me through the one-year anniversary of my father's passing. Life happened at my table.

Life really does amaze me. Six years ago, I stepped off a plane with a suitcase, the promise of a job, and the willingness to live wherever my employer could put me. My English life began with long working hours, charity shop bargains, and miles clocked on my own two feet. And despite having signed a two-year contract, I had secretly harbored the intent of leaving after two months if the transition had proved too overwhelming. Now, with the better half of a decade behind me, my single suitcase has expanded to fill my closet to capacity, my job has become a career and my residency status has become permanent.

Being surrounded by all the comforts of Western society in a country bathed in wealth, I can lose sight of why I came here in the first place: the promise of adventure, the thrill of a new discovery, the prospect of meeting new people, the joy of finding my way through the unknown. Six years of accumulating, settling, holding on and grasping tightly have left me wondering where I left myself

My mother exploring Hay-on-Wye



behind. I never intended to wake up one morning to the routine of feeding my goldfish, watering my houseplants, and worrying about my car payments. Some mornings, I forget to admire the view from my kitchen table.

Traveling, though, keeps the positive part of me alive: it taps into my curiosity, puts a drip to the artery of raw human experience and draws me out of the coma of complacency. I'm under no illusion — I'm incredibly lucky to have traveled so extensively. And while this marks me out as rich by the world's standards, my true wealth is invested in the encounters, opportunities and sheer chance I've had to experience life in different cultures. My travels have taken me to some unique places to experience some extraordinary things, and my routine party pieces are the anecdotes I've picked up from along the road: well-meaning French hosts carving up castrated rooster for Thanksgiving dinner, dancing by firelight in the Sahara under a starry sky, or tempting fate at the border with North Korea. But the real gravity that pulls these experiences together are the people. Stored in the cupboard of my memory are the endless cups of tea I've had with people all over the world: People like you with whom I've shared my life.

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Back at Yalçın's house, a small clutch of neighbors, friends and family sits

on the balcony engaged in convivial party conversation. Knotted silk rugs with faded floral motifs create a rampant patchwork of chaos on the floor underneath our crossed legs; and overhead, the heat of the day dissipates into the clear, starry sky. The clinking of silver spoons against the fluted tea glasses creates a musical undertone as Yalçın, seated beside me, asks me about England.

I strain to decipher his question using my very rudimentary grasp of Turkish, gleaned from 10 days of wild guesses, countless nods, confused faces and gestures that even Neanderthal man would have found patronizing. I'm reduced to the linguistic capacity of a chimpanzee here, but I am also enjoying treading water in the deep end of the language pool. I pick out the words for "weather" and "England" from his question, and presume he's asking what the climate is like in my part of the world. Putting on a smile, I cobble together my reply with a string of vocabulary words like "rain", "cold" and "sheep", hoping he would understand that I live in the countryside, and England is rainy and cold.

Yalçın pauses in momentary confusion, until Özcan — seated on the other side of me — leans over and interprets for me. Smiles all around. Success.

I'm eager to keep the conversation going, so I ask Yalçın what he likes to do. Rather, I ask "Like do?" and mime a few of my favorite activities of playing music, reading and exercising.

Yalçın quickly understands, and lists his hobbies. Özcan, keen to be of assistance, speaks over him and translates simultaneously. Frustrated that he was pre-empting my language-learning opportunities, I turn to him and tease, "Be quiet! I'm trying to learn Turkish!"

Özcan breaks into wide grin, and a sudden, good-natured laugh rattles past his nicotine-stained teeth, breathless and throaty. His laugh is funny and triggers in me a piercing counterpoint staccato in response. At this, tea sprays out from Yalçın's mouth and he rolls back with a loud, belly-fueled howl. The infection catches, and soon, the whole party is crimped with laughter, spurred on by one another.

The following morning, while we hurtle down the motorway towards the airport, Özcan says to me, "Thanks for everything you did last night."

I'm taken aback. Özcan was my host; I simply played the role of guest. "What for? I don't think I did anything."

"You certainly did. Especially for Mourad. You helped bring him happiness last night."

My mind replays the events from the previous night. Which one was Mourad? There had been so many people there on the balcony. "The one about my age — with the wife and two

kids?" I asked to confirm. "He seemed pretty quiet all night. I don't think he said much."

"Maybe not. But it was the first time I've seen him smile since his father died last year."

My heart quivered in my chest. Snapshots of the evening flicked past my eyes, and I remember how he had entered the party, singled me out of the crowd and immediately sat down opposite me. "You told him about my family before he came over, didn't you?"

"I did. I told him you'd lost your father, and that he could relate to you."

Mourad hadn't mentioned anything about his father to me. He did, however, watch me the entire evening, reading my actions and clinging to my fumbled words. Like the specter of hope lingering in the bottom of Pandora's box, Mourad sat quietly by me all evening, waiting for the weight of his world to fly away. Our simple, contagious laughter had lifted his burden of grief, if only for a short while.

Silence filled the car apart from the drone of the tires speeding along the pavement. I settled back into the seat and watched the distant mountains glide past my window. The roadway dipped and curved through a final valley, and I caught a glimpse of the sea as we began the long descent to the coastline. Overhead, an airplane mimicked our route from the air. Signs of urban sprawl appeared by the roadside.

I imagined coming home, tipping my suitcase into the laundry machine, running a hot bath and collapsing into my bed after the long flight. I'd have a closet full of clean clothes to choose from, and cupboards stocked to bulging after a quick drive to the supermarket. Suddenly, the trappings of my modern life seemed to be just that: trappings. And I didn't want them. I wanted Miryam's kindness, Yalçın's hospitality, Özcan's honesty. I wanted to see Mourad smile. I wanted to go back to that balcony, pour another glass of tea, and laugh a while longer. In ten short days, I'd rediscovered myself here: my sense of adventure, my curiosity about people, my discovery of the unknown. I wasn't just leaving Turkey; I was leaving myself.

For now, I'm back home in the UK. But I hear the road calling me again. Something deep inside me is stirring. The car, the flat, the career: I can do without these. While they may be nice, they are only excess to requirement. For all the world's wealth and possessions, it's really the moments with people that make life valuable. It's time to drop the worries, spend time with a friend and admire the view. In short, a person doesn't really need much more than a good place to sit and drink tea.

🕒 Joel Bond, 2011. <https://linktr.ee/bondventures>