



VERNO KİTAP
Y A Y I N E V İ

Anatolian Adventure

by Neal DePaul



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Eserin tüm telif hakları yazara aittir. Yazar, bu baskı için basım-satış-dağıtım-tanıtım haklarını Verno Kitap'a devretmiştir. Yazar, eserin kapak dahil içeriğindeki tüm materyallerin (metin, görsel öge, tablo...) yasal ve fikri sorumluluğunu kabul etmiştir. Verno Kitap'ın kurumsal görüşü olmayabilir.

Anatolian Adventure

by Neal DePaul



To Libby, our children, and our students



Biography

Neal DePaul is both a pseudonym and an anagram, my nom de plume for the American expatriate who first set foot in Istanbul in 1979, ten days after getting married. Neal and Libby adventured around the world—first in Western Anatolia, then in the deserts of Arabia, among the tall peaks of Central Asia, along Coastal Morocco, and in the Sumatran rainforest.

American expatriate teachers, Neal and Libby took something from each adventure. When asked, “What was your favorite country?” it gives pause for reflection, since there was far more good than bad in those 30 years. Two children were born and raised in the best international schools in the world, lifelong friendships were forged, and adventures enough to form the memories of a lifetime.

All that said, however, our usual answer is “Turkey—we loved the country, we loved our Turkish students and friends, and we loved our Anatolian Adventure.”



Prelude: Arrival

Transcendent beings entered our solar system at the dawn of human civilization. They seldom traveled outside the Sagittarian Arm of our Milky Way. Their Homeworld, consisting of thousands of stars and planets, lay much closer to the galactic center than our Orion Spur. By their own reckoning, the Sagittarians were the Firstborn, the precursors to all life in our galaxy. By the time multicellular life first appeared on our planet, the Firstborn had already become its most advanced intelligence.

Our Milky Way is a big place, stretching more than 100,000 light-years across. More than 20,000 light-years separated the Sagittarian Homeworld from our solar system. A journey to the Orion Spur required indirect navigation through folded spacetime, a process in which the fabric of five-dimensional space is artificially warped to bring two distant points close together, reducing the distance between locations. Even with their highly advanced technology and ability to navigate through folded spacetime, the trip to Earth would be a stretch for the Sagittarians.

Our solar system, particularly the third inner planet, intrigued the Sagittarians. Our yellow dwarf, main-sequence star was the right size and class to provide enough gravity and energy to sustain various life

forms. From a distance, the planet's blue and green hues signaled the presence of water and a life-supporting atmosphere. Coupled with its tidally locked moon, the world offered more than just biological curiosity; it offered the perfect staging ground for their operations.

The Transcendents knew the odds were against the development of highly advanced civilizations. Even within a galaxy of billions of stars, societies as sophisticated as ancient Egypt were rare. The Sagittarians had witnessed the occurrence of sapience and civilization before. Yet they knew the odds diminished sharply along the galaxy's outer rim.

But a blue and green planet, like our Earth, is a planetary jewel. Any planet reflecting blue and green light absorbs other wavelengths of visible light. Radiant energy absorbed by autotrophs can be stored as food. A complex web of life evolves from absorbed light. Not only is a blue-green planet likely to support life, but the Transcendents knew from experience that these were the most benign and beautiful exoplanets.

The trip through folded spacetime demanded significant resources, reducing the 20,000 light-years to 997 light-relative years—still an immense journey by any standard.

The folded spacetime between the Sagittarian Arm and our Orion Spur consisted of a tangled web of gravitational gradients, wells, and bridges. Gravitational gradients are differences in gravitational force that affect the movement of objects. Wells are regions where gravity is especially strong, and bridges are stable pathways created by aligning gravitational forces. Once the decision was made to travel to our Earth, however, the Firstborn committed their most advanced navigational technology to deep spacetime navigation. Sagittarian

Artificial Intelligence (SgrAI), the most advanced form of sapience in the galaxy, was integrated into their spacecraft, operational bases, and surveillance systems. SgrAI was essential for navigating the enormous distances between us and them.

Traveling across the galaxy requires immense energy and expertise to accelerate to light-relative speed. Nuclear fission provided the initial energy to power their starship beyond their Homeworld. As the journey progressed, gossamer nanoFoilS were deployed to collect precious hydrogen needed for fusion. Nanorobots continuously repaired and replaced damaged sections, preserving the integrity of the system. The Transcendents integrated SgrAI into every aspect of their being, achieving redundancy and robustness.

As the Sagittarian starship approached $0.10c$ —ten percent the speed of light—the hydrogen nanoFoilS (microscopic, ultra-thin sheets designed to collect hydrogen from space) collapsed into a diaphanous shell, resembling a long, sleek needle traveling through the vast emptiness of space. At its aft, a spherical honeycomb structure shielded the mission's most valuable cargo: biomimetic materials engineered to replicate and seed life.

A controlled series of antimatter bursts attained the next phase of acceleration. The energy released by each burst was significant, accelerating the starship to $0.33c$ through deep space. Rotational spin created microgravity enough to maintain stability beyond the Sagittarius Arm of the galaxy.

As the Sagittarian vessel entered deep space, SgrAI utilized gravitational gradients to accelerate to light-relative speeds, not unlike

a sling shooting a projectile through space. At light-relative speed, the Sagittarian needle looked like a radiant beam streaking through the empty vacuum of space.

During their long journey to our Solar System, the Firstborn deployed deep-space communication relays to transmit data to and from their Homeworld. Each relay used SgrAI to direct operations, including self-repair, information storage, and transmission.

Using the fastest rockets available at the end of the 20th century, it would take humans nearly 40,000 Earth years to travel just one light year. (The distance light travels in one Earth year is about 9.46 trillion km.) To cover the 20,000 light-years between Sagittarius and our distant Orion arm would take almost one billion Earth years at that same rocket speed. Traveling the 997 light-years required not only the technology to travel at light-speed (moving at the same speed as light: 299,792 km/s)—which we lacked—but also the knowledge to navigate the vast emptiness of the galaxy. The journey of 997 light-years that the Sagittarians undertook to reach us took over forty million Earth years in standard time, roughly the time it took for primates to evolve. The immense scale of time and space is nearly incomprehensible to humanity, but the time needed to reach Earth was merely a relative concept for Sagittarian Artificial Intelligence.

When the Sagittarians approached our Orion arm of the galaxy, their long journey was nearly complete. Antimatter bursts slowed the spacecraft as it emerged from folded space at the edge of our solar system, the Oort Cloud. In final maneuvers, the artificially intelligent needle redeployed hydrogen nanoFolds to decelerate to space-normal speed. Deceleration awakened the starship's advanced systems for the final approach to Earth's L2 Lagrange Point.

The Sagittarian starship emerged from folded space in the Oort Cloud, decelerating to 0.10c as it neared the Kuiper Belt. Settling at Earth's L2 point, about 1,500,000 km from Earth, the Transcendents observed our solar system for over a century.

But I am getting ahead of our story. Let me introduce myself, Neal DePaul, and my wife, Libby. Our Anatolian Adventure begins in Istanbul in 1979. Our story is more than a memoir or travelogue; it is a profound encounter that will change our lives entirely and irrevocably.

Part 1: Istanbul Honeymoon

Ten days after our wedding, Libby and I stand on a street in Istanbul waiting for a taxi. Istanbul is not a typical honeymoon destination, and ours is no typical honeymoon. A troupe of young, enthusiastic American teachers surrounds us. Outside our group, no one speaks English in this venerable city. Beyond the differences in language, cuisine, and culture, it's the Holy Month of Ramadan, a real eye-opener! Unlike most newlyweds, we have little privacy and almost no time for ourselves.

Our destination today is a Turkish language school. If we are lucky, our trip will take forty-five minutes; to be safe, we add fifteen minutes of travel time. On our daily trips to school, we travel from Asia to Europe and back again. To get there, we use several different modes of transportation. Each trip traverses Istanbul's sights, sounds, and smells.

Maggie Moe leads the way. Maggie lived in Turkey before, and although her conversational Turkish is rusty, it's the best we've got. Maggie's ability to communicate makes her our *de facto* leader. I am grateful to follow along. It removes responsibility from my shoulders, as I am the only male in our troupe, and it frees me to take everything in.

Libby follows Maggie through the busy streets of Üsküdar outside our dorm rooms as I tag along behind. Maggie waves down an empty *dolmuş*, a taxi shared by several people on a set route at set prices. Five of us slide into a spacious 1955 DeSoto Fireflite Sportsman. Vintage American Chevrolets, Dodges, DeSotos, and Plymouths are popular here because they are wide enough for five or six passengers. Maggie and her daughter, Mattie, slide into the front seat by the driver; Libby, Charlotte, and I share the spacious back seat. Our ride costs us 35 Turkish lira—\$1 for the entire troupe—that Maggie lays down in the *dolmuş* cash holder on the dashboard.

Mattie, a young teenager, follows Libby and me from morning to night. Young Mattie lost her father just a year earlier, and now, on the first days of our August honeymoon, Maggie has returned to Turkey with her daughter. Maggie is middle-aged, about ten years older than us, while Mattie is about ten years younger. Young Mattie attaches herself to us as we attach ourselves to her mother—a fair trade, considering that we need Maggie to attend language school. Charlotte Cassidy, a blond-haired, ebullient art teacher, completes our noisy troupe of four American women and me.

As we descend the busy streets of Üsküdar, we chat in English. Our shared taxi isn't yet stuffy. Since it's Ramadan, our driver refrains from smoking, allowing the Bosphorus breeze to enter the *dolmuş*. Filled with five passengers and our driver, we don't stop to pick up any more passengers. We watch the morning bustle of Ramadan as shop owners and street vendors open during the cool morning hours. As we reach the Üsküdar ferry landing, we slide out of the DeSoto, thanking our driver with "*teşekkür ederiz*." Although I can only say hello, goodbye, and thank you in Turkish, my efforts are rewarded with appreciative smiles.

Next, we tackle the ferryboat that will take us across the Bosphorus. The Bosphorus Strait separates Istanbul into the western European side and the eastern Asian side. The waterway teems with traffic. “*Beş bilet, lütfen*,” Maggie asks the ticket agent, who hands us our five tickets. The ferryboat is a double-decker with an enclosed lower level and an open upper deck. We choose the quieter upper deck, more for the open air than the quiet. “Let’s stand by the railing at the front of the boat,” Libby suggests. “The diesel fumes at the back of the boat make me queasy.”

I love standing by my wife, her long dark hair pulled back in the wind. Libby could pass for a Turk if it weren’t for her arctic blue eyes. We watch small boats and large ships navigate the busy waterway. My favorite time is the twenty minutes it takes us to cross the Bosphorus, with the glorious early morning light illuminating the great mosques of the Istanbul skyline. I love sharing these moments with Libby as much as I love the adventure of traveling through the historic city.

As we arrive at the Galata ferry landing, we stand in Europe. Istanbul is the only city in the world that lies on two continents. We can catch the bus to our language school near Taksim Square or pay more for another *dolmuş*. Galata is the urban center of Istanbul, so it’s harder for the five of us to find an open *dolmuş*. Maggie’s street savvy pays off as she flags down a taxi that delivers us to Taksim. “You can’t get anywhere if you wait,” Maggie tells us. “In Turkey, you push to the front of the line, or you wait all day by the side of the road!”

We arrive at our language school in forty minutes, and our trip is faster than usual in the light Ramadan traffic. The European side of Istanbul feels livelier than the Asian side, and I want to explore the old city. Our troupe separates as we enter different classrooms.

Maggie heads to the Intermediate Turkish class, while Mattie follows Libby, Charlotte, and me into Beginner's Turkish.

We, teachers, are usually good students. I thrive in science or math classrooms. Give me a good lab or lecture—or an engaging discussion—and make my day! But I would rather be locked in a dark closet than sit through a foreign language class.

All adventure drains out of the morning as we begin the tedium of recitation. Some students, like Libby and Young Mattie, respond enthusiastically. Charlotte's smile fades into benign confusion as our Turkish teacher pushes into the second hour of instruction. Other students, like Old Flo and me, struggle out of the gate. Flo is nearly deaf, so she seems lost after our initial introductions, which are in English.

I struggle with Turkish for three hours, feeling like a village idiot. Our *öğretmen* (the Turkish word for teacher) pronounces each new vocabulary word slowly, then writes it on the blackboard so that we can see the spelling. Our teacher pronounces the word again before saying, "*Şimdi hep beraber*," a common Turkish phrase that means "all together now." I survive the anonymity of group recitation fairly well. It's like singing in the choir: don't sing too loud if you don't want to be heard.

But my mouth turns to glue when our teacher turns her gaze on me. Even though I can see the Turkish phrase in my mind's eye, the words stick in my mouth. And I don't have an excuse like Old Flo!

I have always struggled with foreign languages. I detested Spanish in high school and went out of my way to avoid foreign languages in college. It's an ironic choice, considering I will spend my adult

life in foreign countries. I will bumble through Turkish, Arabic, and Urdu in the years ahead.

I struggle to hear the sounds and nuances of spoken Turkish: the words seem alien to me. Still, I am committed to memorizing basic phrases—the essential nouns and verbs—to help me navigate our first overseas assignment. Our Turkish teacher is patient, helping me iterate strange umlauts and diphthongs. Time dilates as three morning hours pass until I am finally free to explore Istanbul.

Libby, on the other hand, is a natural with foreign languages. She excelled at Spanish and French in high school and college, and she welcomes the challenge of Turkish. I pushed Libby overseas in search of adventure, but her linguistic expertise will save our hides more than once. Another irony here: by the end of our first week of language school, I am still in the Beginners' class with Charlotte, Young Mattie, and Old Flo, while Libby moves into the intermediate class with Maggie.

Our Troupe

Maggie and Libby study Turkish each night at our appointed residence in Üsküdar, a girls' school dormitory. Maggie helps Libby catch up in the intermediate class by reviewing the material covered during the first week. Their practice moves back and forth from Turkish to English as Libby plugs the gaps. Seeing Libby jump ahead so quickly is discouraging as I proceed at my snail's pace, but we are already reaping the rewards of my wife's proficiency.

Moving at our beginner's pace, Young Mattie and I use flashcards to learn basic Turkish nouns and verbs. After an hour of review, Mattie tells me about her father. Usually, Mattie tags after Libby, but my wife is busy with Maggie, and I am a more attractive option than Old Flo. "I miss my father, Neal. He loved games, sports, and fun stuff. He was so cool!"

"What games did you play with him?" I ask our young friend. I can't imagine the loss of a parent, especially at her age.

"We played all kinds of games. Daa taught me card games like Hearts, Cribbage, and Gin Rummy. We played Monopoly and Life at night when Mom wasn't grading papers.

"Chess was our afternoon game when it was just the two of us. After the game, he set the pieces back up as they had been at certain

key stages. He never criticized my moves; he just wanted me to see my options.

“Some days after school, we went outside to shoot baskets or skate. We played H-O-R-S-E until there wasn’t any daylight left. My father called me ‘Mat’ or ‘Mattie Moe,’ and I called him ‘Daa.’ We were very close.”

Mattie’s dark brown eyes fill with tears that will not spill. Her smile is sad and crooked. Feeling her pain, so palpable and raw, I nearly cry too.

“I am an only child, Neal, so I had all the toys a kid could ask for. My father was my playmate when he was home, but he could be called away at any time. I dreaded the times when Daa was gone.

Nights were the worst because Mom and I were alone in our big house. It’s been like that every night for the past year.”

“Where did he work, Mattie?” I ask, now curious. My own father worked a twenty-four-hour shift every seventy-two hours and was away from home every third night. I remember the lonely nights all too well.

“My dad worked for the government,” Mattie replies. Maggie and Libby continue their recitation and review long after the rest of us have called it a day. Old Flo excused herself long ago, most likely for privacy in the shared bath.

“Daa was a great cook. He loved to prepare all the meats and vegetables. My father loved to bake, barbecue, and grill. He spent his mornings preparing lunch and his afternoons preparing dinner.”

“Who cleaned up all the dirty pots and pans?” I wonder aloud. One of my house chores was washing the dishes, a job I inherited as a kid because I cleaned dirty dishes better than either of my younger sisters.

“Oh, we all pitched in. Daa washed most of the pots and pans as he cooked, so cleanup was pretty easy. He made cleanup fun by drawing cards to see who did what.”

“I liked my father’s pies the best,” Mattie continues when I glance at my wristwatch. I cannot imagine my life without my dad; I want to be a sympathetic listener, but the night is getting late. “He made his pie crusts from scratch, and his fruit pies were the best!”

“Which pie was your favorite?” I ask.

“Apple pie, of course! You can’t come from New York and not like apple pie. Daa’s pies won a ribbon at the State Fair every year,” Mattie claims. “I can still smell his pies baking in the oven.”

When I tell Mattie it’s getting late, she hesitates before telling me, “One of my favorite memories of my father was playing Eeny, Meeny, Mattie Moe.” Mattie hesitates, then unnecessarily points to her toes: “You know, Eeny, Meeny, and then Mattie Moe.”

The conversation derails when Young Mattie’s eyes spill her tears. Maggie takes this as her cue to escort her daughter to bed, leaving Libby and me to ourselves. We’re ready to turn in when Charlotte Cassidy dances into the commons with a bottle of wine.

“How did you find alcohol during Ramadan, Charlotte?” I ask in amazement.

Charlotte winks. “Wouldn’t you like to know, Neal? And you can call me Charlie or Cassidy, but not Charlotte!”

Charlie is here to enjoy the art and architecture of this great, ancient city. As the rest of us practice Turkish, Charlie explores Istanbul's Bohemian clubs and restaurants. Her attitude seems to be: 'I will learn Turkish when I need it.'

Flushed from an evening in Cihangir, Charlie opens the bottle. The wine is fresh and fruity. We listen as Charlie narrates her evening on Istiklal Street, the cafes and galleries, the artists, the free spirits from all over the world. Although most bars are closed for Ramadan, Charlie assures us she can get "anything we want." Libby ignores the offer, but I make a mental note to ask Charlie to explain later.

Instead, Libby asks about Charlie's sleeping quarters. "Our room is hot and stuffy. What's it like in your dorm room, Charlie?"

Charlie sleeps in an open dorm room with other new teachers. "It's not very private," Charlie confides. "But a cool breeze keeps us comfortable at night. I bet they assigned you to your room because it's more private." Libby and I are tired from a long day, and the wine makes us sleepy.

There is no air conditioning or fan to move the still, heavy air in our sleeping quarters. A private room, yes, but comfortable? No! We open our small window, hoping the cool night air will help. We're not entirely comfortable falling asleep but are tired beyond caring.

By midnight, mosquitoes are buzzing in our ears. At first, we try sleeping through it, but the buzzing worsens. "Let's turn on the lights so we can get rid of these pests," Libby suggests. When I switch on the stark, incandescent light bulb, we see large, skittering mosquitoes. Recoiling in disgust, we begin smacking our tormentors with a rolled-up newspaper. Great gobs of red insect goo splatter the fresh

whitewash. Unsavory mosquito gunk and blood—our blood—remind us that malaria is a genuine concern in this part of the world.

Angry welts cover our bodies. “So much for our honeymoon,” Libby laments. As we close our small window, we decide a warm, stuffy room is preferable to a room full of mosquitoes. We pull the sheets back, strip naked, and fall into a fitful sleep. Not another hour has passed before drums, tambourines, and calls from the street below awaken us.

“What in God’s name? It’s three o’clock in the morning, for Christakes!” I growl. The drums are no accident: there’s no way anyone could sleep through this noise. There’s not going to be any sleep for Libby and Neal tonight!

The next morning, we prepare for another language school day and ask about the drums. Maggie explains that drumming is a Ramadan tradition. The Dawn Awakener, *Mesaharaty*, rouses observant Muslims for their last meal before the start of the day’s fast. In exchange, people share their morning meal with the drummer before the long day of fasting begins.

Bleary-eyed, Libby tells Maggie, “*Yorgunum ve uyukum var*,” as we flag down our first ride. When I ask later, Libby says she told Maggie she was tired and sleepy.

Hagia Sophia

After language school, we lose ourselves in the labyrinth of Istanbul. Free from the tyranny of language lessons, my favorite part of the day is exploring the historic, august city. Istanbul boasts multi-layered archaeology, with one slice of time upon an older layer and that upon an even older layer. I lead the way as Libby and I cross the Galata Bridge, making our way to high ground.

Looking over Istanbul's skyline, we see modern buildings between Ottoman mosques and even older Byzantine antiquities. The Bosphorus slices north to south through layered archaeological treasures. Looking over the layers of Istanbul at sunset, I imagine the armies of young Alexander crossing from Macedonia into the steppes of Asia or, 200 years earlier, the Persian armies of mighty Darius moving westward into Greece to wage war on the Scythians.

More than any other Asian city, Istanbul's great mosques define the city. The Blue Mosque, Süleymaniye Mosque, The New Mosque, The Fatih Mosque, and ten more great mosques delineate this ancient city's skyline. Our destination today, however, is the oldest edifice, *Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami*, known to the Western world as Hagia Sophia.

On this Ramadan weekday, Hagia Sophia is quiet. Other visitors are here, but the massive dome dwarfs all. Built 1,500 years ago, the

cathedral was designed for Byzantine chants. The perfect acoustics of the central dome and marble colonnades reverberate for more than ten seconds, causing the chants to resonate into an intricate harmony. By comparison, St. Peter's is only 500 years old. Twenty of my lifetimes would not add up to the age of this architectural masterpiece!

Hagia Sophia was the biggest church in the world for 1,000 years. As the great cathedrals of Europe were under construction in the 15th and 16th centuries, Sophia was converted to a mosque by the powerful Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. In 1935, Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum, a nod to more progressive times. A museum it will remain for eighty-five years, when a conservative Turkish regime redesignates Sophia as a mosque.

Does the age or the size of this structure impress me more? Libby pulls me to the famous wishing column in the cathedral's center, where she puts her thumb in the hole and then rotates her fingers around the marble. "It's wet to the touch, Neal. That means my wish will come true. Come on, try it!" I comply and make my wish.

Libby's wish is to move on. After our long, sleepless night, we agree that an afternoon nap in the privacy of our small, stuffy room will make things right. Anyway, I prefer to explore on my own, avoiding the guided tours and talkative tourists. I wish to return to the quiet corners of Hagia Sophia, where I will follow the fleeting early morning light and listen for the past whispers of the ages.

The Hippie Highway

We celebrate Libby's success at the end of our third week of language school. Maggie Moe tells me that Libby has the 'perfect ear' for languages. That, along with her hard work, makes Libby an ideal student.

When I ask my wife for tips, she laughs at me. "Neal, you don't even care about learning Turkish. You make excuses instead of studying!" That is true enough, but when I press Libby for more information, she tells me that Turkish is quite simple. "Learn 50 nouns and 50 verbs, work out your syntax, and then practice."

The relentless monotony of Mattie's flashcards lingers in my mind, like the image of mosquito goo on our dorm walls. "What do you mean by 'work out my syntax?'" I want to understand Libby's success—and my lackluster performance.

"Turkish grammar is simple," Libby explains. "You just add suffixes to your nouns and verbs. Turkish syntax is very regular, so you build the conversation from the noun or verb root, adding *-im* for 'I am,' *-iz* for 'we are,' or *-ler* for 'they are.'"

I suspect Libby's ear has more to do with her success than her ability to memorize new words and master syntax, but I keep that opinion to myself.

We celebrate with Charlie at the Lale Restaurant, Charlie's favorite eatery, between Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque. Instead of the fancy, formal Turkish restaurant we expect, Charlie leads us to a small red-and-white sign advertising The Pudding Shop. Our friend leads us to a small, open table—one of the few available—and tells us we are lucky to find an opening.

Although Ramadan casts its shadow over Istanbul, it's business as usual in The Pudding Shop. The atmosphere is distinctively European, filled with a mix of languages and cultures, seemingly untouched by the strictures of fasting.

"I know the place looks like a dump but look around for a minute. What do you notice?" Charlie's impish grin invites conspiracy.

"Well, bulletin boards with travel information cover the walls," I offer. Looking around, I comment on the obvious: "The other difference is the people here. No one is Turkish except the servers and kitchen staff. Everyone here looks like a hippie."

"And there's the smell of hashish," Libby says, disapproval written across her face. Charlie giggles.

Charlie's patched bell bottoms and bright paisley blouse fit right in here. Her vibrant green eyes sparkle with a mischievous glint that promises trouble. The casual suede boots and floppy hat she wears are stylish yet bohemian. Charlie continues, "Listen closer, and tell me what you hear, Libby."

Libby notices several different languages spoken in the restaurant. "I hear German, French, Spanish, English, and Turkish, of course."

“These are not the European tourists you would expect to see on the beaches of the Mediterranean,” I add. “These folks are a hardier bunch; they look different somehow.”

“You’re both on the right track,” Charlie agrees. “We are sitting at the wellspring of the Hippie Highway, and the people around us are the travelers and adventurers on that road.”

Since neither of us has heard of the Hippie Highway, we encourage Charlie to continue. “The Hippie Highway traverses the exotic lands of Asia Minor and Central Asia. It follows the ancient roads of the Silk Route to the Indian subcontinent.”

“Damn, Charlie! How do you know so much about this?” Libby smiles, happy to let me ask questions. That’s my thing: questions and more questions.

“My mother told me all about it,” Charlie answers. “Mom lived in India growing up, and I always imagined myself traveling with her in those stories.” We nod as our friend grows more animated. “Don’t tell anyone, you guys, but the Hippie Highway is why I took this job!”

“Why would that matter?” Libby jumps in. “The reason you took this job is your own business! We all have our reasons for coming to Turkey.” That’s my wife: fiercely independent!

“Honestly, I don’t think my mom would mind if she knew I was here to explore, but I don’t want her to find out from anyone but me.” After some reflection, Charlie adds, “After all, my mom traveled to India, so what can she expect?”

“That’s fair,” Libby agrees. “Let’s grab a waiter. It’s a celebration, after all.”

When the waiter comes for our order, Libby says, “*Şiş kebab, döner kebab, patates kızartması ve içecek alabilir miyiz lütfen?*” In less than a month, Libby’s Turkish sounds fluent to me.

Our waiter compliments my wife’s Turkish, “*Çok güzel. Türkçeniz mükemmel.*”

“What did you order?” I ask.

Libby points to two vertical rotisseries, one for grilled lamb and the other for grilled beef. “I ordered *şiş kebab* and *döner kebab* with French fries and drinks,” Libby explains. “I don’t like lamb, so I’ll eat the *şiş kebab*.” Both entrées are served with yogurt and butter served over baked flatbread.

“Where does this highway go anyway?” I ask as we dig in.

“The Hippie Highway is not a specific road, but an overland route connecting the ancient cities of Asia to the highest mountains on Earth,” Charlie explains as she picks through her French fries. “From Istanbul, the highway goes through Tehran, Herat, Kabul, Peshawar, and Lahore. Then, travelers either head south to India or east to Kathmandu.

“Hippies from all over the world come to Turkey for good hash. Further east, it’s easy to find opium. Many young people seek alternative lifestyles in India or Nepal. Others are adventurers, traveling on the cheap.” Charlie ends her narrative with a cautionary tale. “But the Hippie Highway isn’t as safe as it was in the 1960s. Traveling through parts of Iran and Afghanistan is dangerous.”

No one is in a hurry to leave the Lale Restaurant. After our dessert of Turkish rice pudding—the namesake of this hippie hangout—Libby and I read travel notes posted on the bulletin boards. Most

notes solicit transportation, but some are more poignant. Libby translates a note written in French: “I am sorry for the way we parted in Crete. I am traveling east to Kerala in a light green Volkswagen van with Belgian friends. If we meet again, I want another chance to be with you.”

* * *

As we cross the Bosphorus at sunset, we view the Asian side of the strait. Looking at the size and extent of the medieval battlements of Anadolu Hisari—the Anatolian Fortress—we glimpse the wealth and power of Ottoman Turkey. At the height of the Ottoman Empire, powerful sultans ruled an area twice the size of the continental United States. From Asia Minor westward to the Balkans, eastward to the Holy Lands, and southward to Africa, the Ottomans ruled for 600 years. The Anadolu battlements are a small slice of the Ottoman Empire, a window into the transition from the Dark Ages to the Age of Reason.

Libby and I talk more about Istanbul and the Hippie Highway. As is usually the case, I do most of the talking, and Libby listens. We make a good pair: me, the adventurer, and Libby, the anchor.

“We’ve been in Istanbul for three weeks,” I tell Libby, “and we’ve only seen the top layer. So many travelers and explorers have passed through this ancient city! We could spend three months or three years in Istanbul and still not see it all.” Libby nods in agreement: she knows I am just getting started.

“Before we were married, I told you that I wanted to see and explore the high peaks of Central Asia.” The lights of the Golden Horn shimmer across the Bosphorus. “Don’t tell anyone, but that’s

why I signed up for this job!" I wink at Libby as we share our inside joke at Charlie's expense.

"The Hippie Highway attracts free spirits and adventurers for the same reason big peaks attract me. In centuries past, traders followed the great peaks of the Himalayas from the Orient to Asia Minor along the Spice Route. Desert caravans brought frankincense and myrrh from Southern Arabia to the Holy Lands." I pause, trying to decipher my feelings, "Something pulls me to Central Asia, Libby. I can't explain it better than that."

"Before we signed on for these teaching jobs, we had no idea how rich Turkey's history would be. Nothing in America prepared us for the antiquity we see around every corner. Our adventure starts here, Libby."

Libby considers everything before adding, "We have a lot to explore here, Neal. Our adventures are just beginning. But in five years, I want to start a family, and I will hold you to your end of the bargain." Her smile reassures me and reminds me that we each have our dreams. Libby will share my adventures, and I will share her dreams.

The Night of Power

On Tuesday, August 21, 1979, Libby and I are lucky enough to be selected to attend the Night of Power at Sultanahmet—the Blue Mosque. Only ten teachers, including Maggie and Charlie, are invited. We only understand what a big deal it is when the others voice their complaints for not being selected.

The Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia are two of the most remarkable architectural designs in the world. Sultanahmet is just a short walk from Hagia Sophia, so the two landmarks are often visited together. While they complement each other, the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia are equally distinct and impressive.

As the month of fasting draws to a close, the Islamic world celebrates the end of Ramadan. Libby and I will see many Ramadans in the years ahead, but we will never again witness the Night of Power. We dress modestly and remain quiet and respectful in deference to the gathering of the Muslim faithful.

Unlike most mosques, Sultanahmet is a practicing mosque and tourist destination. Maggie tells Young Mattie that most mosques don't allow Westerners to witness the Night of Power. Constructed in the early 17th century, the interior of the Blue Mosque features predominantly blue Iznik tiles, supported by green, red, and gold

tiles. Sultanahmet is the pinnacle of Ottoman design, the culmination of 200 years of architectural development.

The Night of Power commemorates God's revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims worldwide reckon the revelation as the most crucial event in history. Being invited to this special commemoration at the Blue Mosque is a unique opportunity. We are puzzled as to why we are invited while others are not.

Libby, Maggie, Mattie, and Charlie are expected to dress conservatively and cover their hair. Libby blends right in; she might easily pass as one of the faithful, but for her blue eyes. Maggie and Mattie, both dark-haired, remain inconspicuous. Charlie's blond hair stands out, even with her hair covered and her conservative dress.

The grandeur of the Blue Mosque captivates me, not only for its beauty but also for the sheer size of the building. Though only half as large as Sophia, the five main domes and eight secondary domes create an enormous enclosure. Filled with 10,000 praying Muslims, Sultanahmet is a spectacle. As the service begins, we stand together at the perimeter of the vast interior. (Muslim women are not allowed in the same area as men; women always pray in a separate area.) As the faithful move in unison, we feel the power of *salah*. We hear a great whoosh as thousands shift from standing to kneeling to bowing. It is a sound we have never heard before and will never hear again.

In the vacuum of that great whoosh, Libby nudges me to get my attention. I follow her gaze to a small, nondescript man staring at us. The man isn't much bigger than Libby, and when we both return his stare, he nods, placing one hand over his chest.

After prayer, we regroup outside of Sultanahmet. As thousands of faithful Muslims exit, hurrying home to celebrate the end of Ramadan, the small, nondescript man suddenly emerges from the crowd, and approaches Libby. “*Tekrar görüşeceğiz*,” he says, softly but clearly, before disappearing into the night.

When I ask Libby what the man said, she repeats his Turkish before translating: “He said, ‘We will meet again.’”

“Meet where?” I ask. “How will he find us? Who is he?”

When we ask our group about the stranger, no one else even noticed him. Maggie confirms Libby’s translation but appears just as puzzled as we are about the stranger. Charlie shrugs off our question, observing that one strange man among thousands of strangers isn’t so odd.

It’s not until years later that Libby and I understand that the Night of Power is the beginning of our adventure. We recall an immense whoosh and a stranger’s stare, his words following us like a whisper across Anatolia.

Lost in the Grand Bazaar

With Ramadan behind us, we near the end of our one-month Turkish immersion course. For me, each day has been a debacle of croaky consonants, difficult diphthongs, and unusual umlauts, but for Libby, each day is an opportunity to shine.

After our last class, we are rewarded with a guided tour of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. Guided tours offer ease and safety in numbers. Our guide tells us that the Grand Bazaar is the world's oldest and largest covered market, immense and labyrinthine. Visitors get turned around and lost for hours.

Libby and I will eventually visit many of the great souks of North Africa and the Middle East—Cairo, Fez, Riyadh, Muscat, and Peshawar—all notoriously difficult to navigate, day or night.

Despite our guide's efforts to keep the troupe together, Charlie and Grace soon venture off on their own. Grace, a music teacher scheduled to work with us in Izmir, wants to purchase a *bağlama*, a traditional seven-stringed Turkish folk instrument. An intrepid adventurer, Charlie finds the excuse she needs to set off on her own.

While guided tours offer ease and safety, they also eliminate all adventure from the experience. I advocate leaving the group. "I am good with directions," I argue. "Besides, your Turkish is good enough

that we can always ask for help if we get turned around.”

“Let’s stay with the group,” Libby persists. My wife tends to follow rules, while I tend to break them. It irks me that Charlie and Grace are off on their own while Libby and I are stuck with Old Flo and the others, scurrying to keep up with our guide.

And so it goes until I lag behind the group, looking at some trinket or another. Libby leaves the security of the tour group to fetch me, but by the time we return, the group has disappeared.

“They can’t be far,” I assure Libby. “Let’s keep walking straight ahead. We’ll catch ‘em, you’ll see!”

Thirty minutes later, we are hopelessly lost, and Libby is pissed. “You and your sense of direction,” she snaps. “I don’t want to hear your dumb-ass excuses. The guide warned us to stay close, and you diddle-daddle around and get us lost!”

“Lucky for us,” I tease, “you’re the best student in your Turkish class.” When Libby’s eyes flash, I decide on a different tack. “Okay, how do I say, ‘We’re lost?’ It can’t be that hard to get out of here.”

“*Kaybolduk*,” Libby spits.

After two failed attempts to get help, Libby looks at me with disgust. “You’re not saying it right. No one can understand you. It’s pronounced ‘*Kaybolduk*.’ Libby says the words twice more for emphasis, although it doesn’t help: ‘*Kaybolduk*.’ ‘*Kaybolduk*.’

“You’re going to make me beg, aren’t you?” I am in the doghouse now, and with no sense of direction, we can either wander through the 4,000 shops in the Grand Bazaar or hope Libby takes pity on me.

Libby shakes her head in disgust, then marches up to the first merchant she sees, disarming him with her quick smile and precise Turkish. “*Kusura bakmayın. Biz kaybolduk. Yardımcı olur musunuz?*”

With those magical words, the merchant turns, tells his second to mind the shop, and leads us out of the bazaar. I can only follow along, like a whipped dog, while Libby makes small talk that I barely understand.