

JENNIFER PASTILOFF



THE MANIFEST-STATION

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GUEST POSTS

CHICKEN IN TURKEY.

DECEMBER 15, 2014



By Debra Larson.

The only day I feared for my life began uneventfully. The sweetness of *chai* from the last rug shop lingered in my mouth. Savoring the last few moments before being car-bound again, I stretched, throwing my arms out wide and filling my lungs with fresh air. I blew out my breath, dropping my arms and eyeing the car warily. Soon I'd be trapped again with two smokers. And two cats.

My husband Michael and I were visiting his father, a retired Air Force Colonel who now lived and worked in Turkey. As a military attorney, Bill had made connections with a Turkish company that hired

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ABOUT JEN



Jen is a writer living mostly on an

him once his military stint, and his marriage, ended. Bill came to our wedding in the U.S. two years earlier, but we hadn't yet met his new Turkish wife, Mira, or her fourteen-year-old son, Derin. Or the cats.

Derin stood taller than Mira, whose petite frame belied her formidable presence. Both watched the felines gingerly paw the contents of their personal litter boxes, as if their cat memories couldn't register the purpose of the peculiar grit-filled squares. Mira barked at the cats, insisting they get on with it. Even the cats knew to obey Mira. They complied and she scooped out their messes.

For three days, we'd been traveling together, visiting historical sites and shopping. Our generous hosts arranged this jam-packed road trip, trading their marble-floored luxury apartment for an over-crowded sedan. When I first realized the two cats were coming with us, I was incredulous. Who brings cats on a road trip? I caught the hushed tones of Mira and Bill arguing about it before we left. And here the cats were. Surely, Mira made concessions in the marriage, as well. They just didn't affect me as directly. Or perhaps they did. Probably the last thing on Mira's bucket list was yet another tour of the local sites with another one of Bill's six children.

Now, we were preparing to leave our last stop, Yahyali, a town known for its naturally dyed yarns and handmade carpets, but on the fringe of tourist routes because it abuts a mountain range. We stayed in Yahyali longer than planned. A merchant had charmed us into a third rug shop and, as promised, it was the richest woolen topography we'd seen. Before Mira's hand was warmed with the customary *chai*, she flipped over a corner of the top carpet in a stack. In every rug shop we entered, she instantly assessed a specimen's worth by the size of the hand-tied knots visible on its under side. The smaller the knots, the finer the carpet. Yahyali's carpets were exceptional, but none could fly, which was the only interesting feature at this point. A direct flight to Bill and Mira's spacious apartment in Adana was the road trip finale I wistfully imagined.

Bill leaned over the BMW's trunk. His large frame blocked most of the space as he arranged overnight bags, pottery, and our most recent prize, rugs, carefully constructing the plinth on which the two litter boxes would sit.

"Derin," Mira said, pointing to the cats' boxes and then the trunk. Derin leaned his lanky body against the rear fender, arms folded across the Microsoft T-shirt we had given him. She yelled something in Turkish and jabbed her finger toward the trunk. Derin hastily grabbed a litter box and dropped it on top of the rugs. Litter flew. Mira marched over to the car and smacked the litter off the rugs while scolding him. Sullen and painfully slow, payback no doubt, Derin placed the second box in the trunk.

I appreciated Bill and Mira's generosity, treating us to upscale restaurants and luxurious hotels, and I was grateful for the tour. Still, remaining a gracious daughter-in-law felt like a hurdle inching higher every day we traveled together. Just four hours and we would be back in the land of modern amenities.

Michael and Bill leaned against our silver sedan with their heads bowed over a map. Bill blew out a white stream of smoke. "We *could* take a shorter route through the mountains," he said. "We'd probably save over two hours by not backtracking."

Of course. Bill, the provider of Michael's shortcut gene. Worry pricked my skin. Adventure in our country might be exhilarating, but in a foreign country it could be dangerous, or just expensive. Surely, Michael would remember the bus driver in Izmir the week before who took our money assuring us he would take us to Pamukkale, only to learn it wasn't even on his route. We had even broken bread together, so to speak. The driver had invited Michael and me to share a head of romaine lettuce (with

airplane. Her work has been featured on *The Rumpus*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Jezebel*, and *Salon* among others. She leads her signature **Manifestation Retreats/Workshops** all over the world. She and bestselling author Emily Rapp are leading another writing retreat in Vermont in October 2015 as well as a "Writing + The Body" Retreat with author Lidia Yuknavitch in Ojai (sold out.) If you want to join the Tuscany retreat send an email letting us know. Jen will also be joining Gina Frangello, Emily Rapp, Rob Roberge & Stacy Berlein at "Other Voices Querétaro" in Mexico May 2015. Other cities Jen will be hosting her workshop in for 2015 include: Vancouver, London, NYC, Atlanta, Sioux Falls, Seattle, Dallas, Chicago, Princeton, and more. She is also the guest speaker at Canyon Ranch three times a year.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual New Year's Retreat in Ojai, California.

December 30, 2014 @ 2:00 pm -

January 1, 2015 @ 4:00 pm

Vancouver! The Manifestation Workshop: On Being Human.

January 17, 2015 @ 1:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Semperviva Yoga

Vancouver

Canada

Writing + The Body Retreat: Lidia Yuknavitch & Jen Pastiloff

January 30, 2015 @ 2:00 pm - February 1, 2015 @ 5:00 pm

Ojai Valley

Ojai

United States

Jen Pastiloff in London! February 14th, 2015. Back By Popular Demand.

February 14, 2015 @ 2:00 pm - 5:00 pm

Lumi Power Yoga

salt and lemon wedges). We talked and tore off leaves one at a time, enjoying a cool and quenching pleasure during the dry and dusty wait for our bus's departure. But Michael and Bill had navigated us well to this point so I didn't voice my concern about the shortcut. Michael would speak out as the voice of reason. Wouldn't he?

Not likely. One thing I liked about Michael was his sense of adventure, but his quest for exploration was practically impervious to most everything, namely, reason and a resistant wife. Honestly, he probably pushed to venture out as a defense against my frequent trepidation.

Michael's eyes were glued to the map in his father's hands. His mouth stretched into an impish smile. I leveled my best look at him but it was diffused, meeting only his ear. I steamed. A bad feeling about this settled in my gut.

We had two hours until sunset. That meant we could easily make it through the mountains before dark. Bill's driving had been fine so far, but we were always off the road by nightfall. I recalled his offhand mention of a night vision problem. I considered Bill's proposed route. Was I just being a chicken? Growing up, I had thought I would outgrow my fearfulness. But age hadn't cured me of being afraid and I knew my anxiety was holding me back in life. After not taking marching band and Spanish as a high school freshman because both seemed so foreign, and then missing out on an award-winning band that did a pro-football half-time show, and being bilingual, I had resolved to push myself. After college, I even took a sales job to force myself into cold-calling and out of my comfort zone. I doubled my territory my first year and was offered a promotion. Success didn't dispel my anxiety, but I did learn I could overcome it. I remained firm in my commitment to embrace adventure, even if it killed me.

Michael pointed out the squiggly line on the map. It was half the distance of the way we'd come. The fact that it was in print reassured me. Besides, Bill's and Michael's towering stature and baritone voices instilled confidence.

What was the worst that could happen?

We piled in the car, sliding on the black leather seats that had been cooled by the October air. Bill and Michael sat in front, with Derin sandwiched between Mira and me in back, his spiked black hair blocking her from my view. The cats knew their place; they insisted on it. They owned the back ledge beneath the car's rear window, putting them within striking distance of humans who did not fully understand their place. The black and white tom behind me had posed a constant threat to my face throughout the past few days. He had defined his domain within the first hour of the trip. If I invaded his space with as much as a backward glance, I would get a smack on my cheek. The last time it happened, his claws weren't fully retracted, not leaving a physical mark, but an indelible mental one. Even a slight turn of my head was risky, but I had bravely angled my head toward the window in hopes of taking in scenery and perhaps an occasional breath of fresh air.

The car seemed to be growing weary of travel, as well, and for the first time, required a couple attempts before the engine caught. Bill vowed to have it checked out once we returned. He found the shortcut road and turned on it. No one expressed the surprise I felt upon seeing it was a pocked dirt road, dotted with small rocks. Perhaps everyone thought we wouldn't have to endure it for long. The car bumped along, tires crunching beneath us. My mind wandered to the intricate underground city we had seen and the natural land formations in Cappadocia that looked like Dr. Seuss-drawn chimneys. Before this trip the most I had seen of my middle eastern heritage were the fringed carpets on the floor growing up, which my parents had received as wedding presents. On this trip, walking the ancient lands moved me. How humbling to set foot on the same earth as people thousands of years ago.

London
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The Manifestation Retreat: On Being Human at Kripalu in Western Massachusetts.

February 20, 2015 @ 7:00 pm -

February 22, 2015 @ 12:00 pm

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March 7, 2015 @ 1:30 pm - 4:00 pm

Form Yoga
Decatur GA
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A few miles in, we came upon a fork that wasn't on the map. Bill stopped the car. He and Michael deliberated and then we continued. More unexpected forks appeared and the reasons for choosing a direction deteriorated to "the cats are looking that way." Eventually, Bill would commit to one without even slowing for discussion. His decisiveness almost gave the impression he knew where he was going. I hung on to the hope that perhaps he did, but I knew each fork we had taken further knitted us into the lost landscape.

The constant jarring seemed to unnerve the cats, but I wasn't foolish enough to turn back and check. It wasn't the bumpy road or the bully cat that kept me on edge. It was the sheer cliff out my window. My jaw ached from clenching my teeth and the soundtrack looping in my head was the "no more shortcuts" tirade I would unleash on Michael as soon as we had some privacy, which, as things were going, was due to happen never.

Nothing could lift our mood like civilization and we chattered excitedly as we approached a modest mountain village. The cats stood in anticipation. Suddenly, the horizon pitched and I was thrown against Derin. We were stopped, the car now tilting 45 degrees in a five-foot ditch. I was on the up end. The cats, thankfully, were on the down end, yowling.

Mira said, "What are you doing?" as if Bill had chosen this stop. "How could you do this?"

She probably suspected, as I did, that our ditch tour resulted from Bill's compromised vision, now that the sun was getting low. She spewed more accusations as we sat pressed against the earth side of the car. My patience vanished. "Stop yelling!" I yelled.

Mira stopped.

Slightly more composed, I said, "Just—get out—of the car."

Mira attempted to open the door but it was blocked by the ground. A cluster of villagers had gathered and they rallied around to help us climb out the high side of our vehicle. We emerged one by one. Before exiting, Mira carefully handed the wide-eyed cats to Bill and Derin, who placed them in a duffel bag, the stealth bag that had served to sneak them past the reception desk in the previous night's hotel. The cats seemed comfortable in their cloth shuttle and, like the previous night, quietly accepted their transformation to baggage.

The villagers' bright clothes stood out against the dusty pastels of mud-brick and granite homes and a faded sky. Teal and fuchsia solids paired with florals and plaids livened up the place. As had we. I smiled meekly at a woman in a blue headscarf who had the same complexion and mismatched garments as an apple-head doll I'd made as a girl.

I took a picture of our leaning car. One day, we might laugh about this. The villagers, clearly amused by the spectacle, helped remove our car from the ditch. They offered stew and their homes for the night. I enjoyed the meal and was hoping for another serving, until I learned I had just eaten goat. Suddenly I was full.

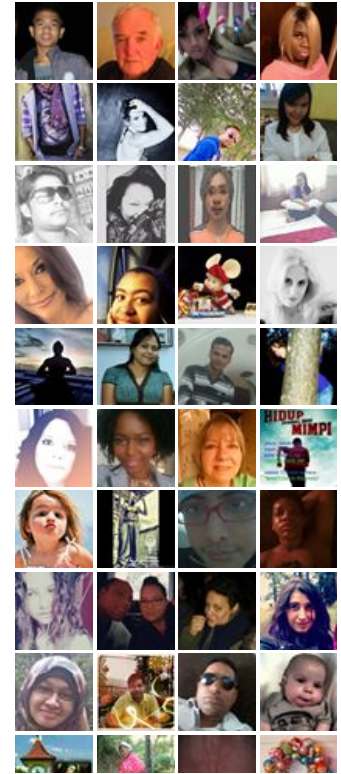
We discussed our options and easily agreed to push on, the promise of home in Adana stamping out everything else. The town we were shooting for was Saimbeyli at the base of the mountains and the beginning of paved roadway. *Pavement*. The mere thought made me giddy. The locals nodded and pointed enthusiastically; whatever they were saying, they were convinced of it. Mira translated: Saimbeyli was a direct half-hour shot from where we were and we would arrive home in two hours. "Only one road," the weathered leader insisted. Bill told Mira to explain "forks."



Jennifer Pastiloff

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“No forks,” the man said, against a backdrop of smiling people, except for the apple-head woman, who appeared to have lost her smile decades ago.

Armed with villager-approved directions, we climbed into the car. I took my seat eagerly, imagining our room and the flushing toilets in Bill and Mira’s apartment. The cats seemed to understand things were looking up and settled quietly onto their ledge. Not even the bumps in the road or the cliff’s proximity now in near darkness could dampen my spirit. Bill’s night vision problem didn’t come up. Besides, from the sounds of it, we were practically home.

Then a fork appeared. Our car rolled to a stop, our morale diminishing with each slowing rotation of the tires. We lamented our familiar predicament, with Bill and Mira volleying accusations from backseat to front.

“You are the driver!”

“You know Turkish, for God’s sake!”

Headlights approached and the bickering ended. Bill flashed the lights at the nearing vehicle and it stopped. In the dim light we could see a fenced-in flatbed truck. Its load, women.

“Probably workers coming back from the fields,” Mira said.

“To cook dinner,” Bill said, scoffing. “The men are exhausted from hours of sitting in coffee houses playing backgammon all day.”

“The men don’t work?” I asked, unsure if Bill was joking.

“Well, they do drive the women to the fields,” Bill said.

The unsmiling villager came to mind, her leathery face. Two men emerged from the truck’s cab and ran over. They appeared friendly but worked up. In excited Turkish, they gushed and flailed their arms in grand gestures. Mira, growing agitated, glanced at Derin—the only other person in the car to understand. My eyes followed hers. Derin, always eager to appear cool, looked worried. As Mira talked with the men, Bill asked Derin what they were saying.

Derin imparted the men’s warning. “They say there are terrorists,” he said, his voice cracking. “Roaming the mountains.” Derin paused and listened to the men. “No one’s safe,” he added, with the briefest look at me. “Especially Americans.”

I looked at my American Eagle T-shirt. If that didn’t tip them off, my shorts would, in this area of tented women. I had worn shorts following Mira’s lead, but now realized that standards in Adana were probably vastly different from rural areas. My heart raced. How could this be? The news had mentioned increased PKK activity. Armed Kurdish rebels were resorting to violence in the name of independence. Bill had looked at a military report that indicated the risk to travelers was in the Southeast area of Turkey, not in the south-central area where we were. Our route was supposed to be safe.

The cats slept, clueless.

A third vehicle appeared and slowed. I swallowed hard. They didn’t look hostile but words flew between the men standing at our car and the driver. More warnings, it seemed. The car sped off, leaving a puff of dust in the stream of our headlights. The men at our window shouted something at Mira and pointed emphatically after the retreating car.

"Follow that car!" Mira yelled to Bill. "It's going to Saimbeyli."

The men ran to their truck as Bill tried starting the car to follow our escort. The engine didn't start. He tried again. The truck with the workers raced off in the direction of the goat stew village. Bill turned the key once more. Nothing. Like before, we were alone at the fork, but now we possessed frightening information.

Our guide's taillights faded into the distance, our only hope for a safe escape dimming as we silently watched. In my cramped section of the back seat, I slipped into a layer of existence I had never before occupied, extreme fear. Far different from the anxieties that usually festered in my head, this threat enveloped my body. My knees shook uncontrollably.

Mira yelled at Derin and cuffed him, angry he had alarmed us by sharing the truth. I reached forward and touched Michael's arm. He lay his hand on mine.

"I don't know what the car's problem is," Bill said, turning the key. I closed my eyes, focusing on Michael's touch as Bill continued his efforts. Finally, perhaps sparked by desperate prayers, the engine caught. We proceeded down the mountain in eerie silence, each of us alone in our fear.

I strained to see the dirt road beyond the dim glow of the headlights, but the darkness was absolute. Bill drove too fast, given the precipice defining one side of the road and his poor night vision. Still, it felt painfully slow, knowing the danger lurking in the mountains. I tried to push away thoughts of what might happen if armed militants suddenly appeared in the lit path ahead, but couldn't. Would they just execute us or would they hurt us first? I kept one hand on Michael's arm and prayed for Saimbeyli.

Finally, a cluster of lights shone ahead. *Oh, God, please be Saimbeyli.* A car was stopped on the paved road not far from us. In the faint light of a street lamp, I could make out a man standing at the car's window. My knees had stopped trembling, but fear clutched my throat. Was this a checkpoint? Was he looking for Americans? I squinted, hoping to see if he had a weapon in his hand. We crept toward the lights. Clusters of men wandered in the street beyond the stopped car. Even if this was Saimbeyli, our supposedly safe point, it felt threatening.

It was our turn at the street lamp. We slowed and got a shock. No one seemed to care. Not a soul even glanced our direction.

"I remember now," Mira said. "It is a holiday. These people are celebrating." Their party had spilled out into the street. Our mountain-battered car slipped on by. Again, we rode in silence. I sank into my seat as relief settled into my bones, wondering if the others felt as beat up as I did from the intensity of the past hour.

The cats were due for a litter box stop and once into town we pulled over. Derin set both boxes on the ground and the cats focused immediately on their task. As we stood, stretching our legs and breathing the safety of Saimbeyli, a group of young men slowly ambled toward us. They didn't seem threatening, but a vibe of urgency from Mira prompted Derin to a pace I'd never seen before in a teenage boy as he snatched up a litter box. Bill grabbed the other box and hastily threw it in the trunk. With a cat under each arm, Mira ushered us into the car. Bill sped off.

Around midnight, we arrived at the apartment in Adana. The cats mewed their approval, then disappeared down the hallway. With a yawn, Mira directed Derin to bed and said goodnight. We hugged and I was reminded of her kind first-day offer of the master bedroom. She had also insisted I keep the jewelry I borrowed when we dressed up one evening. She was a pleasant woman when not

under the influence of a road trip. I realized the same was probably true for me.

Bill, Michael and I sat at the kitchen table, each with a beer in front of us. We sipped in silence at first, the only noise being the bottles meeting the table. I spread the circle of condensation with my finger.

“At least we have a picture of the car in the ditch.” I said.

Michael shook his head. “I checked. The camera’s battery was dead.”

Figures. But better a dead battery than a dead me, or us. Clearly, the shortcut had not been the most prudent call. Even so, I was glad we’d taken it. Glad to have gone there. Why, I’ve often wondered. Perhaps there’s a comforting faith in embracing the unknown, a salute to the truth that, ultimately, we are not in control.


I downed the last of my beer and bade the men goodnight, kissing Michael lightly on the lips. We parted and our eyes caught, the slightest look heavy with meaning. Gratitude.

I later learned it was after I left the kitchen that Bill told Michael that the gang in Saimbeyli was murmuring about having their way with the American woman. Me. Again I thought about how much our fate is not in our hands. The only actual danger that harrowing evening, it turned out, was not only in an unexpected, “safe” place, but also, I was at most risk when I wasn’t worried about my safety.

With the men’s low rumble of quiet conversation behind me, I walked the sleek tiled hallway to our bedroom. Now warmed by the beer and the comfort of the apartment, I was ready to melt into bed. The door was ajar and a soft light glowed from within. Mira had probably turned on the reading lamp so we wouldn’t have to fumble for light in the darkness. I pushed open the heavy wood door. I smiled. On my pillow, curled asleep, was the cat who obviously had grown to love the back of my head.

Debra Larson lives at Lake Tahoe and her work has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *skirtl*, and *Sasee*, among other publications. Visit her at www.DebraLarsonOnline.com.

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