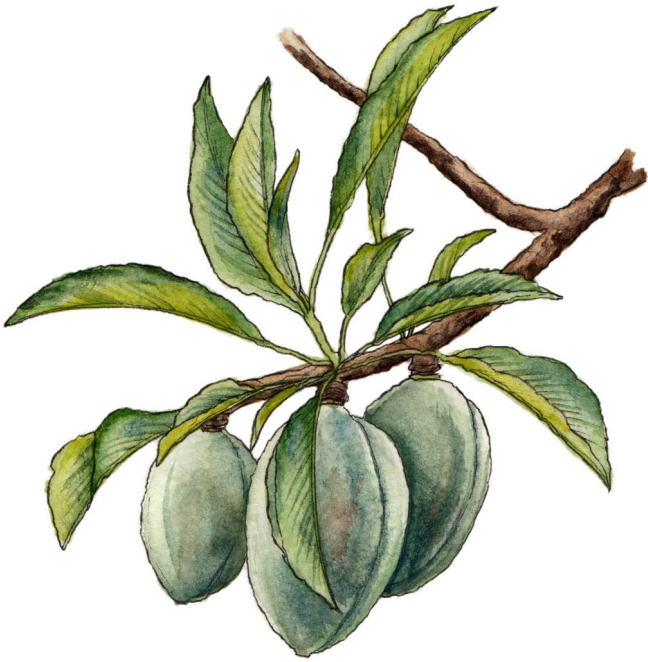


# Beneath the Almond Tree



*In Search of Connection*

Written and illustrated by  
Candace Rose Rardon

“If you’re twenty-two, physically fit, hungry to learn and be better, I urge you to travel — as far and as widely as possible. Sleep on floors if you have to. Find out how other people live and eat and cook. Learn from them — wherever you go.”

*Anthony Bourdain*



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## *Introduction*

**F**ive years ago, I published my first book, a collection of travel stories and sketches from Southeast Asia and Japan called *Beneath the Lantern's Glow*. Recently, I decided I was long overdue in putting another collection together. When it came to choosing a title, I looked to one of the five stories you'll find here for inspiration: "Beneath the Almond Tree."

For me, there's just something about the word 'beneath' that conjures a sense of being sheltered and safe. And as I traveled the world for years as a woman alone, so too did the people I encountered offer me shelter; they opened their homes and shared their stories with me without a moment's hesitation. I hope this short collection honors the lasting impact their kindness has made on me. ♦



# Travel's Three Gifts

INDONESIA

The first time I meet Rai is at the morning market in Sampalan, the largest town on the Indonesian island of Nusa Penida.

She says hello to me from behind mounds of mangos and bright green chilies at the stall she runs with her mother. Despite the heat, she wears a purple hoodie zipped to the neck. We chat for a while, her brown eyes glowing, her dark hair pulled back from her face.

I see her again the next night, at a dance lesson in her village. After the lesson finishes, she asks, “You come to my home?”

And because I have no other plans on this Saturday night, I say, “Why not?”

Rai sits behind me on my motorbike and directs me down an unlit gravel lane. The farther we go, the more the road disintegrates beneath my wheels.

I apologize each time we hit a bump.

“Candace,” she chides, “every day I am taking these roads.”

When we reach her house, her family is seated on their concrete front porch. I’m told to call her fisherman father Bapa, and her mother Meme. Her brother Putu and sister-in-law Kadek are also there. Putu is 21, his wife 20; already, Rai tells me, they have lost two children. One died “in belly,” another at 13 days old.

When I try to find the words to say I’m sorry, Kadek smiles an impossible smile and says, “No problem. It’s okay.”

“Tomorrow you can help me selling in the market?” Rai asks.

Again I say, “Why not?”

“And tonight, you sleep at my home?”

For a moment, I mumble something about my homestay at a modified hostel in Sampalan.

And then it hits me — I've just been offered an actual homestay.

Rai goes to take a shower, and afterwards asks if I'd like to take one, too. Bapa warns me — it's only a "manual shower," and the bathroom is outdoors, open for all to see, its walls barely reaching up to my chest. Still, it's far enough from the house — and lit only by the glow of Rai's flashlight — that I soon let go of modesty and strip down, dipping a plastic tumbler into a bucket and feeling the water cool my sticky skin. I tilt my head back, take in the incandescent sky above me, and thank the universe for this moment.

Because that's the first gift travel gives me — the gift of discovery, and the thrill of encountering a world so completely different from my own.

We set our alarms for 4 a.m., and I lie beside Rai on a foam mat on the floor. Her parents



will sleep in the living room. After they turn off the TV, the only sounds are the occasional calls of a gecko and the ticking of a heart-shaped clock on the cinderblock wall — and Rai's quiet breathing next to me.

I glance to my side and see that the frangipani blossom she'd picked earlier is still tucked behind her ear. I am slow to fall asleep, kept awake by gratitude and wonder at finding myself so at home here.

Because that's the second gift that travel gives me — the gift of belonging, and the thrill of journeying so far from home only to find a home in such a new place.

The following morning, we arrive at the market when the chickens are still asleep in the trees. Yet we're far from the first ones here. Women are setting up their stalls with flashlights held between their ears and shoulders like telephones. They roll back the

sheets of blue plastic that covered their tables overnight. Rai complains of moths eating her tomatoes.

Like a pot coming to boil, the market slowly heats up. Sandals begin to slap against the dusty paths, plastic bags rustling as they fill with corn and cassava and grapes the size of golf balls. While Rai sells produce — carrots and chilies, garlic and red pearl onions — I stand by her side, helping where and when I can. For the next three days, I return each morning, until the day comes for me to say goodbye and depart from Nusa Penida.

I'm still in touch with Rai — through Facebook, of course — and every now and then I'll get a message from her, asking how I am. I smile each time, remembering the market and the manual shower and how it felt to fall asleep in the damp darkness of her home.

Because that's the third gift that travel gives

me, and it's the reason I'll never stop traveling — the gift of connection, and the thrill of weaving an invisible web around us as we move through the world, and the world moves through us.

The connections that keep each journey alive forever. ♦



## *Rai*

Nusa Penida, Bali  
October 2012



# Lost and Found in Delhi

INDIA

When I woke up at 3 a.m. just two days after returning to India, I knew the churning in my stomach could mean only one thing: Delhi belly.

I had spent three months in India the year before, three months during which I fell hopelessly in love with the country while also becoming intimately familiar with the ailment that most often befalls its visitors.

This time I was moving to Delhi indefinitely. I had reveled in this freedom while packing and planning for the move — but now I found the lack of an end date terrifying.

As I spent the next couple of days in bed in my Paharganj hotel, I couldn't help but think that Delhi belly was merely a physical manifestation of my emotional upheaval. I felt cast adrift and alone in the world, a satellite that had strayed

too far outside its orbit.

By day three, however, I was ready for something a little more substantial than mango juice, salty crackers, and yogurt with coarse sugar. After some thought, I decided I was in the mood for noodles. Maggi instant noodles, to be precise, in their classic yellow package. They were easy enough to procure from a small shop around the corner — my options for flavors being Masala, Mega Masala, and Chinese Chow — but I suddenly wondered if hot water and a bowl might be harder to find.

“Yes, madam, we have a kitchen,” said the manager of my hotel. “Just pay 10 rupees for your water here, and then give the man upstairs 10 rupees to boil the water.”

Although I’d stayed here twice before, I had never ventured above my first-floor room.

“Kitchen?”

“Yes, madam. It is on the rooftop.”

Not quite believing him, I climbed an extra three flights up. The roof was a desolate space, the midday sun reflecting harshly off its concrete floor and a few gray plastic lawn chairs idling around a card table, their seats crisscrossed with duct tape.

But to the right, there was in fact a small, square kitchen. As I approached it, I could tell it smelled exactly like an Indian kitchen should, in all the right ways.



The piquant scent of chopped coriander swirled in the sticky air, as did fresh ginger, and flour from chapati dough; there were



vegetables sizzling over a burner and a man — the one who would boil my noodles — arranging garnishes of cucumbers, tomatoes, and green chilies on a silver plate.

His name was Tara Singh, and he wore a dark-gray polo shirt that hung loosely over his small frame. His shoulders were thin and drawn in, like furred wings.

“I am from Rishikesh,” he said when I asked. “You know Rishikesh?”

“North, right?”

“Yes, not south.”

He told me he had worked at the hotel for three years, and when I asked him where he had learned to cook, he said, “In Goa, six and 14 years ago. I learn Mexican, Italian, Chinese, Continental, all foods.”

Our introductions established, I explained what I was looking for. Without further comment, he took a pot, filled it with water,

and emptied the two packets of noodles. But he didn't stop there. He rinsed a tomato under the faucet and began to dice it directly into the pot. After the tomato, he added a few pinches of coriander, and from the fridge, a handful of cut carrots and green beans.

Then he tilted the pot back and gave it a great stir with an oversized ladle, and as he did so, imbuing my instant noodles with far more flavor and texture than they deserved, I felt something inside me lock back into place; if I was indeed a satellite, it was as though I had suddenly realigned with my orbit.

Among the carrots and coriander Tara Singh had added to my noodles that afternoon was the missing ingredient I'd been searching for since returning to Delhi: connection — both with India and its people. I was overwhelmed by this man's kind gesture, and by how in a single moment he had given me the courage to

wait out my uncertainty.

While my noodles continued to boil, Tara Singh cooked chapatis for his own lunch, flipping them with a pair of tongs over the burner's steady flame. We chatted for a while about our families and lives, and when my lunch was ready he served it up in a silver bowl. We brought two duct-taped chairs into the kitchen and sat down to eat — me with my Maggi, he with his chapatis and vegetables — and I realized it was the first meal I had shared with someone since returning to India.

As I left the kitchen, I remembered what the hotel's manager had said and took out a 10-rupee note from my pocket. Tara Singh wouldn't accept it; instead, he simply invited me back up for dinner. ♦



*Tara Singh*

New Delhi, India  
September 2012



# Beneath the Almond Tree

MOROCCO

Roses aren't supposed to let you down. Neither are rose festivals, one of which had drawn my friend Liz and me to Morocco's Valley of Roses one May. There wasn't much written online about the festival, but what the guidebooks and websites lacked in details, my mind more than made up for in expectations.

Liz met me in Tangier's Gare Tanger Ville station, where we bought tickets for our overnight train to Marrakech, stretched out our nearly 6-foot frames across pumpkin-colored leather couchettes, and woke to fields separated by prickly pear cacti, a lone figure picking handfuls of grass at dawn. We were in Marrakech long enough to catch a bus 200 miles east to Kelaat M'Gouna, what we assumed, or rather hoped, was a small village, its dusty air perhaps sweetened by the presence of roses.

The train had taken eleven hours, the bus would be six, but what propelled us, urging us ever forward, were our expectations of the festival, an annual celebration to mark the rose harvest each spring.

We carry so much with us when we travel, much more than the neatly (or not so neatly) folded items in our suitcases. But the most dangerous thing we bring, tucked in between regulation-size shampoo bottles and extra pairs of socks, is expectation. The moment we begin to envision a new place, to believe how it will be, is the moment that same place begins to fail us.

In the title poem from her collection, *Questions of Travel*, Elizabeth Bishop writes, “Think of the long trip home. Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? Where should we be today?... Oh, must we dream our dreams and have them, too?” Bishop perfectly

captures the traveler's dilemma: Do we risk disappointment and failed expectations for the reality of somewhere different? Or would it not be better to leave our visions intact and live through imagination — not actual experience?

Such questions hovered uneasily in my mind as we set out from our guesthouse the first day of the festival. Crowds led us to a large amphitheater whose ring of concrete seats stretched several rows up. By ten in the morning, it was packed with flocks of young men perched on the top row, Berber women in their layers of crushed velvet and sequined chiffon, and men in colorful turbans and long white robes. Ice cream sellers hung coolers from around their necks, calling out “Hemeem, hemeem” in high-pitched voices, the rose-flavored cream already dripping from children's chins and dancing down their arms like drops of rain on a window.



But there was no pageant this year as we'd read there would be, which meant no rose queen would be chosen either; all the handicrafts in the local market read "Made in China"; and the only roses we had yet to find were tightly furled buds that had been pierced by a needle, strung together in the shape of a heart and then hawked to tourists. Even Kelaat M'Gouna was far from the village we'd expected, its streets as clogged with festivalgoers and as difficult to navigate as any other big city. Liz and I shifted from the amphitheater to the market and back again, both of us filling the space with chitchat, forever avoiding one word: disappointment.

"Let's go for a walk," Liz said. I suggested the city gate as a destination. We'd passed it on the bus ride in, two sets of imposing square pillars on either side of the road painted a bright blush pink, but I hadn't been quick enough with my camera to get a shot of it. Now was my chance.

We left the festival behind, the tinny sounds of CD sellers' portable stereos slowly evaporating, the sun nearing its zenith above our heads. To our left, just beyond the town limits, dry, ochre hills rose away from us, appearing almost lunar with barely a few shrubs to break up the striated stone. To our right flowed the M'Goun River, feeding a lush riverbed of wheat fields, groves of olive, fig, and almond trees, and, finally, endless hedges of rose bushes. For the first time all day, our steps leading us ever closer to the gate, I felt a sense of purpose for being here.

And that's when I saw her. It was her dress that caught my eye first — the shade of blue I've always loved to call pavonine, after a vocab word from the sixth grade: *of or resembling the feathers of a peacock, as in coloring*. Although she was sitting in the shade of a billowing almond tree, perhaps 20 feet below the road

in the sunken riverbed, she still shimmered, a few stray rays of sunlight dancing off the silky fabric that enclosed her.

She waved, as did the woman sitting next to her, a wave that soon became a beckoning, *come-hither* kind of gesture.

“Do you think she means us?” I asked Liz.

“Who else could it be?”

Liz was off before I had time to think, exchanging road for scrubby hillside, leaping with her long legs over a crevice in the ground. Tentatively, I followed suit and raced to catch up with her, curious about where this unexpected invitation might lead. We bowed our heads slightly beneath the low-hanging branches of the almond tree and joined them.

The woman who'd waved first, the woman in pavonine blue, was named Hazo; the other was Arkaya, who was mysteriously introduced as Hazo's grandmother's sister, despite how

close in age they appeared. They motioned for us to sit beside them on a few tattered blankets.

With her back resting against the tree, Arkaya sliced chunks of turnips, cauliflower, potatoes, and onions onto her lap; Hazo sat across from us, bringing a metal pot to boil on a single gas burner and slipping in shards of sugar as large and pointed as daggers. She poured fresh mint tea for all of us, teaching Liz and me how to say it in Berber — até — but no matter how it was pronounced, tea had never tasted so sweet.



For the rest of the afternoon, we hardly moved from their sides. Their sons came

later, as did Hazo's husband, a civil servant in a village 60 miles away. There were more introductions, more glasses of tea and more Berber lessons. Emklee for lunch, harlti for auntie, and — my favorite — zuin. *Beautiful.*

We tried to leave before lunch, hesitant to overstay our welcome, but the idea was quickly dismissed. After the vegetables had simmered long enough with thick pieces of lamb, the air fragrant with saffron, they were served in a single bowl in the middle of the blanket. Arkaya ripped bread into pieces, and we circled around the food, our shoulders pressing together.

“Tch, tch!” Hazo said. *Eat, eat!*

“Eat the meat!” her husband insisted, chiding us when we drifted too far from the dish.

I lost track of how many times I said zuin about the meal.

When the last drop of juice had been soaked into bread, the blankets were cleared and Hazo

and Arkaya lay down. Arkaya rested her head on Hazo's bent knees, and then motioned for me to do the same on hers. My eyes were closed and the breeze was soft, but I found comfort in more than our human nap chain; I was filled with the warmth of their kindness, with a hospitality I hadn't expected. I wondered when I would learn not to let my expectations get the best of me — and when I would remember that our most cherished memories from a place are so often the ones we didn't know to expect. We said goodbye, and Liz and I once again began making our way to the city gate.

Roses aren't supposed to let you down. And beneath an almond tree one afternoon in the Valley of Roses, they didn't. ♦





## *Hazo & Arkaya*

Kelaat M'Gouna, Morocco  
May 2012



# Two Angels in Anatolia

TURKEY



When I decided to walk the Evliya Çelebi Way, a 220-mile trail across northwest Turkey, named after the 17th-century Ottoman traveler whose pilgrimage to Mecca it follows, I didn't exactly stop and consider whether doing so as a woman on my own would be safe.

I did question if my decision not to purchase a pricey GPS in Istanbul beforehand was foolhardy — the authors of the only guidebook to the route had deemed the item “essential,” after all — but for the most part, there was little that gave me pause before embarking on the journey. Not the fact that my backpack tipped the scales at nearly half my own body weight; nor the fact that sleeping alone in a tent along a mountainous path might prove more frightening than fun; nor the fact that I spoke no Turkish and would be passing

through remote villages where my chances of coming across anyone who spoke English were incredibly slim. In fact, my only real concern on the day I left Istanbul had been finding an appropriate pair of waterproof trousers to wear on the trail.



For the first three weeks, however, my time trekking through Anatolia was a brilliant success. I befriended farmers and shepherds, was invited to sleep in local families' homes, listened to the call to prayer ring out across the olive groves and tomato fields, reveled in

ruins over 2,000 years old, picked up dozens of new words in Turkish, and every day, grew a tiny bit closer to the route's final destination of Simav. And yes, the waterproof pants had held up remarkably well against all manner of rain, wind, mud, stream crossings, bushwhacking, forest navigating, and encounters with curious goats.

One Sunday morning, my twentieth day on the Evliya Çelebi Way and just two days from Simav, I arrived in the village of Gürlek. There wasn't much to distinguish it from the scores of villages I had already passed through. A small sign at the entrance to the town read Hoş Geldiniz — one of the first phrases I'd learned, Turkish for "welcome"; all the narrow dusty streets led to a silver-domed mosque with two minarets, the sapphire tiles on their pinnacles gleaming in the bright sunlight; and when I came to the village kahve, or teahouse, I was

quickly ushered inside by several gray-haired men for a steaming cup of çay.

Like the countless other villagers I'd met during the trek, they laughed away any attempt to leave a lira or two in the saucer of my tulip-shaped teacup.

By the time I left Gürlek, my belly was warm from tea and my heart from yet another gesture of kindness from strangers. I had heard stories about Turkish hospitality before arriving in the country, but it had been altogether different — and profoundly humbling — to experience it for myself, time after time.

So caught up was I in my reverie, reflecting over the generosity I had been shown on my journey thus far, that it took me longer than it should have to notice two young men following me out of the village.

They seemed to be in their early 20s, and I recognized one of them from the kahve.

He had offered to accompany me over a mountain, claiming it was a shorter way than the stabilized road I planned to take, but I'd declined. Apparently he hadn't accepted my answer. No matter how fast I walked, they held my pace. This went on for fifteen minutes, until I turned around and thought I might as well confront them head-on. I planted both feet in the ground, Superwoman-style, and held my walking stick as though it were more than just a long branch I'd found on day eight and carried with me ever since.

“What do you want?” I asked, hoping I looked far more formidable than I felt. “Why are you following me?”

Sly grins broke out across their faces. “We go to our fields.”

I couldn't argue with this, but still I was shaken. I passed a small farmhouse and saw an older couple sitting outside. We waved hello

to each other, and though I contemplated stopping and waiting for the guys to pass, I kept going.

Minutes later, a car pulled up and lowered its window. It was the same couple, offering me a ride to the next village of Üçbaş, some two hours away on foot. This wasn't the first time I had been taken as an unsuccessful hitchhiker. Drivers were constantly slowing down beside me, and I was forever having to tell them that I was "gezmeye gitmek," or taking a walk. A very long walk, you might say.

I didn't know if this couple was merely being kind, or if they had seen the guys on my trail and taken it upon themselves to convey me safely to Üçbaş. As we talked, I watched the pair come into view and turn down a side road between fields. I watched them until they crouched to the ground and disappeared out of sight. I thanked the couple, explained that

if at all possible, I wanted to walk every mile to Simav, and continued on the path. A little voice inside me asked if I was being stubborn or just stupid.

After a few minutes, I glanced behind me and saw the men cutting across the field, once again heading in my direction. That's when my annoyance turned to fear.

It isn't something I experience often in my day-to-day existence as a writer and artist, sitting at my desk or sketching on-location. But here there was no mistaking it — the pulse-quickenning, blood-thickening instinctual feeling of fear, pumping a steady surge of adrenaline into every cell in my body. I could feel it at the tips of my fingers, coursing through my veins, making every hair stand on its unwashed end.

The last time I'd felt fear so physically was at the edge of the Nevis Highware Platform in

New Zealand, as I was about to throw myself off the country's highest bungee jump. But there had been a safety cord around my ankles then, and despite official warnings and waivers, I had every reason to believe I would be just fine.

There was no such assurance on the road out of Gürlek. Again I had thrown myself off the edge of a safe life into the unknown, and for three weeks, by the grace of God or chance or some uncanny combination of the two, I had stayed out of harm's way. The villagers I met never failed to warn me of the dangers I faced — of dogs and bears, wolves and wild pigs, and those they called “bad people.”

The first question they always asked was, “Korku?” Was I afraid? Every time, I blithely assured them I was not, said I had met nothing but good people, but deep inside me that same voice spoke: Was I trusting or just naïve?

I couldn't help but think that maybe my



luck had at last run out. Had the limits of my innocent faith in the world and its ability to take care of me been stretched too far? I was alone on a deserted road in rural Turkey, I hadn't checked in with my family for days, and I didn't even know if the road I'd taken was the one I needed to be on.

Behind me were two guys whose intentions for following me were anything but clear. Did they have their eyes set on the expensive camera swinging from my neck? Perhaps the wallet one guy had seen me take out of my backpack in the kahve? Or was their objective much darker?

As a woman who usually travels alone, I am all too used to conjuring up a hundred worst-case scenarios in my mind.

I didn't want to let the guys know I was worried, so I forced myself to keep my gaze fixed straight ahead. I walked as fast as I could



until it would be considered running. I came to a stretch in the road where it partially bent back on itself, and when I crossed a short bridge that was sheltered by oak trees, I cast a quick glance behind me through the branches.

Not only were the guys still there, now they were the ones running.

And so I did what I'd done a few other times on the path when things were getting

desperate. I stopped walking, looked up at the big blue dome of a sky stretched out above me, and said three words: “Please help me.”

What I had hoped would materialize was another car — preferably one aiming for Üçbaş — but what I couldn’t have known to pray for were two middle-aged men suddenly emerging from the forest, walking sticks clicking in time with their stride, ambling towards my path as though this were a perfectly normal place to be on a Sunday morning stroll.

“Merhaba!” I called out to them. *Hello!*

I waited for them to reach the road, and was relieved when they said I was heading in the right direction. We said goodbye and went our separate ways — me to Üçbaş, they to Gürlek.

I felt some of the stress begin to fall away, knowing there was now a buffer between the two guys and me. I was even wondering what the guys might say if they encountered the

men when I heard a loud voice booming from above.

I looked towards the top of the bluff and saw it was the same two men. I didn't understand what they were saying, but again, I stood there while they made their way down the road. And when they got to where I was, they carried on walking with me as though we hadn't just parted ways five minutes earlier. I didn't get it. Had they, like the couple from before, come across the guys and realized I might need help?

Or had they simply discussed the situation between themselves — this blond-haired, fair-skinned female foreigner walking on her own — and decided she could use some company to the next town?

They walked with me for an hour, and as we walked, I got to know them. Their names were Ismail and Murat, and from what I could tell, they had been friends since they were kids.

Ismail was 62 with salt-and-pepper hair and a matching mustache. Murat was five years younger and several inches shorter.

They were each dressed in the standard male villager's outfit — button-down collared shirt, pressed pants (or jeans, in Ismail's case), and a blazer with patches on the elbows. Although they both grew up in Gürlek, Ismail said he now lived in the seaside city of İzmir, and was back for two weeks seeing family and friends.

Walking with Ismail and Murat, I'd never felt safer on the trail. In an instant, the pendulum of my fear had swung to the other side. I could relax and finally notice how beautiful the countryside around us was. The open rolling hills, which before had seemed almost too open, too quiet, were once again inspiring, their slopes a pastoral patchwork of autumn's glory.

The two men laughed a lot, and I imagined

it to be the laugh of old friends ribbing each other. They introduced me to a few shepherds we passed, and every so often, Murat would stop and dig around in the soil along the road with his walking stick. I didn't know what he was looking for until at one point, he kicked away dirt from what appeared to be a round white stone, reached down, and wrenched from the ground the largest mushroom I had ever seen. He carried it with him proudly, his walking stick in one hand and the mushroom held high in the other. It took Ismail 45 minutes to remember he had a plastic grocery bag in the front pocket of his blazer, which he then ceremoniously fluffed open and gave to Murat to transport his prize in.

Soon after Üçbaş came into sight on the horizon, we arrived at a junction. I would go right, the men would go left and return to Gürlek. I wanted to hug them, but settled for

modest handshakes. With each man, I placed both my hands on his and tried to communicate — through osmosis if not by words — just how much I appreciated their company, just how much of a gift and a godsend it had been. I'm not sure they understood, for when they walked away, I only saw them shake their heads and mutter, "Maşallah, maşallah."

*God has willed it. God has willed it.*

I will always wonder why Ismail and Murat turned around that morning, why they decided to go two hours out of their way to walk with me. I will always wonder what would have happened if they hadn't.

One of the things I've learned in my wanderings is that travel demands a certain amount of trust from us. This trust may sometimes seem naïve, but if we were to let our fear of fear have its way, we would never set off on a trip — indeed, we might never leave

our homes. For as soon as we step out the door, off the edge, and open ourselves to the world, we also open ourselves to the possibility that things may not always be safe.

But I have found the rewards the world offers us are almost always worth the risk. As they were on that Sunday morning in Anatolia, when two angels walked with me on the Evliya Çelebi Way. ♦





*Ismail & Murat*

Gürlek, Turkey  
November 2013



# Around the World in San Francisco

UNITED STATES

Do you like fortune cookies?” an elderly Chinese woman named Maggie asks me as I sketch one afternoon.

We’re sitting on a sidewalk bench outside a store specializing in woks, rows of red paper lanterns strung overhead between buildings. On a nearby street corner, a man plays a two-stringed erhu, often called the Chinese violin, that fills the air with plaintive melodies. And when I give Maggie an affirmative answer, she stands up, heads into the wok shop, and returns with a bag of individually packaged treats.

As soon as we each crack one open, Maggie begins regaling me with stories of growing up in Hong Kong — only we’re not on Chinese soil, but in San Francisco, nearly 7,000 miles from her birthplace. Maggie moved to San Francisco, settling in its Chinatown district

four decades ago, but I have called the City by the Bay home for only a matter of months.

After traveling and living overseas for seven years, I decided to slow down and plant a few roots. San Francisco felt like a fitting new home base, for as Leonard Austin writes in the preface to his 1940 book, *Around the World in San Francisco*:

“No other American community presents such an interesting mosaic of authentic colors — the foundation and pattern of San Francisco’s famed cosmopolitanism. Here, in a world condensed, is a veritable cyclorama of international customs and cultures.”

Since experiencing different cultures is the lifeblood of why I travel, it was the thing I was most afraid of losing as I settled down again stateside.

What would my days look like if they weren’t filled with the constant discoveries

that traveling in an unfamiliar place yield?

To hold onto this sense of wonder, I created a quest for myself, vowing that, even as I established new everyday routines in San Francisco, I would make time to explore the city's many cultural districts — from Japantown to Little Italy. With my sketchbook in tow, I wanted to experience as much as I could of San Francisco's global élan — and hopefully, as a result, sustain the traveler inside me.

Following my first foray into Chinatown, I venture south to San Francisco's Mission District, a neighborhood noted for its vibrant Latino community.

As I walk down Valencia Street into the Mission, shop signs soon read in Spanish and taquerías frequently appear. But having recently visited El Salvador, it's a pupusería called Panchitas that draws me in. After all, pupusas — fried corn tortillas stuffed with a



range of fillings — are the country's national dish.

Sitting down at a long wooden table, I'm struck with a case of traveler's déjà vu. After my first bite of a cheesy pupusa, which I've smothered in salsa and a coleslaw-like topping called curtido de repollo, I'm instantly transported to South America. I had forgotten how food has the ability to do that.

I devote another full day to exploring North Beach, a neighborhood shaped by the wave of Italian immigrants (including a young Joe DiMaggio and his family) that flocked to San Francisco as the city was being rebuilt in the wake of the 1906 earthquake. After sketching the classic Molinari Delicatessen for a few hours, I leave my post in Little Italy in search of a bathroom, heading toward the National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi, devoted to the patron saint of the city. While the cathedral's

main doors are closed, an adjacent building catches my eye.

“Welcome to the Porziuncola,” a volunteer named Kathleen says as I enter.

I feel it again — that familiar rush of discovery that defines the experience of traveling. When I ask Kathleen if she would repeat her greeting, she explains that porziuncola roughly translates as “little corner of the world” in Italian and is the name for the small, fresco-adorned chapel housed in the shrine.

“It’s an exact replica of a chapel in Assisi, Italy,” Kathleen tells me. “A prominent local politician named Angela Alioto had the idea to build it here [in 2008]. It’s a gift to the city.”

Kathleen then leads me through each architectural element of the chapel’s construction — the wooden doors that were hand-carved in Italy; the altar’s iron railing, created from a wax model of the original railing

in Assisi; and the red marble floor, cut from the same quarry that supplied the namesake chapel, shipped by barge to the U.S. from Italy, and shaped by a local stonemason in San Francisco.

There's nary a piece of the porziunca that lacks authentic origins, giving me a far richer taste of Italy than I'd ever expected to find.

The final destination of my quest is Little Saigon, a two-block stretch of Larkin Street (between Eddy and O'Farrell streets) in the Tenderloin district that received official designation in 2004 to recognize the 13,000 or so Vietnamese-Americans who live in the city.

Following the recommendation of a Vietnamese taxi driver, I home in on a sandwich shop called Sing Sing — and it doesn't disappoint. From the moment I step down into the low-ceilinged establishment, I am transported to Southeast Asia. All around me,



customers converse in Vietnamese; a piquant potpourri of incense, coffee, and cilantro floats through the air; and the click-clacking of tiles echoes from the shop's back room, where men in jackets huddle over dominoes.

But the moment that sticks with me most from my tour around the world in San Francisco occurred just after I left my apartment and began walking toward Little Saigon.

I paused on the sidewalk to pull out my camera, which I then carried slung off my shoulder in anticipation of what I might stumble upon along the way, and in that moment, I felt a transformation take place.

I realized that it wasn't each individual cultural district that had allowed me to sustain the feeling of being a traveler despite having put down roots — it was my own decision to step out of my front door full of curiosity, openness, and awe.

I thought back to meeting Maggie in Chinatown at the very start of my quest. As we exchanged goodbyes, the last thing she had said to me was, “Enjoy your travels.”

I was tempted to remind Maggie that I wasn't in the city on a trip, but wondered if perhaps she had gotten it just right.

Whether at home or on the road, we're always traveling — if only we greet each day as a journey ripe for discovery. ♦



*Maggie*

San Francisco, USA  
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## *About the Author*

Candace Rose Rardon is an award-winning travel writer and illustrator. Her work has appeared on Longreads, National Geographic, BBC Travel, and in Lonely Planet literary anthologies, among others. Originally from the state of Virginia, she spent a decade traveling and living abroad before settling in Montevideo, Uruguay, with her partner José. For more information, visit [her website](#). ♦

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“Wherever you go becomes  
a part of you somehow.”

*Anita Desai*

