

WILL KELLY

Turkmenistan, My Love

We get as high as we possibly can, and the world starts to spin. It takes the right kind of click in just the right place to reach an appropriate velocity, and following several clumsy maneuverings of the mouse, we're off and spinning. After about ten seconds, someone yells "STOP," and we begin our rapid descent, closer and closer until our view is enveloped with blue, and the imagined splash occurs. Another ocean landing. We do the obligatory shot.

I can't remember how exactly this turned into a drinking game, but it's nearly 3:00 am, and Julia, myself, and several of our friends are amusing ourselves on Google Earth by spinning the globe as fast as we can, and zooming in on wherever we stop.

It's my turn, and as I watch the big blue ball spinning on its axis, I hope and pray for dry land, because I think another splashdown will make me violently ill. I breathe a heavy sigh of relief as Asia comes into view, and we plunge downward towards the continent's center. And the winner is...

Turkmenistan.

"Turkmenistan? That's not a real country!" says my friend, slurping every word.

I tell everyone it is indeed real. I attempt to explain something seen on a blog recently about this great big pit of fire in the desert there. Some kind of mine that caved in and ignited, and has been burning ever since. They call it "The Gates of Hell."

A few minutes later I cannot remember if I related the story coherently, but Julia is sold in any case. Her face lights up. She wants to know all that there is to know about Turkmenistan.

We're always talking about how much we'd love to travel, but

with student loans, insurance, and other expenses, it's unlikely we could even spring for the passport fee at this point. Still, one of our favorite things to do is plan detailed itineraries for imaginary trips, and we already have dozens lined up. They run the gamut from conventional (London, Paris, Rome), to exotic (Albania, Bhutan, Tristan da Cunha), to pure novelty (a week in Saudi Arabia followed by a week in Amsterdam).

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I'm thinking about all this an hour later, as we're huddled closely under the covers and the remaining guests have crashed in the living room. Right as I'm about to black out, she wraps her arms around me, turns me on my side, and stares at me with those crazy drunken eyes I've grown to know and love.

"Honey, let's go somewhere."

"Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know. But let's go somewhere for real this time," she says, twirling my hair around her finger.

"Okay. Anywhere you had in mind?"

"Let's go to Turkmenistan."

"You really wanna go there, huh?"

"Yes."

"You wanna go there before any other place?"

"Before any other place."

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The following morning, as we nurse each other's hangovers over a round of coffee and recreational Wikipedia browsing, we read more about the mysterious and reclusive nation of Turkmenistan. We learn all about eccentric former dictator Saparmurat Niyazov, a man who made the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il seem modest by comparison. Did you know he had all the months of the year officially re-named after himself and family members?

"Niyazov banned the use of lip syncing at public concerts in 2005, citing a negative effect on the development of musical arts incurred by the use of recorded music," I read aloud.

"A world leader dedicated to the cause of preserving live music? Sounds like a pretty cool guy," she says.

I read on:

"Niyazov requested that a palace of ice be built near the capital, though Turkmenistan is a desert country with a hot and arid environment. The palace was never built."

"So he's a dreamer. A visionary. What a great man."

"I'm sure whoever was tasked with building that ice palace would agree."

"If he's still alive, and in one piece," she adds.

We laugh.

Over the next two hours, we pour over the articles like high school biology students prodding and poking at the dismembered frog pinned to their dissection tray. Here we are, the sociopolitical analysts, the armchair anthropologists, clicking around the Internet and receiving a crash course in just about every aspect of Turkmen life and public policy.

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In 2001, Niyazov banned opera, ballet, and the circus, because he thought they were “unnecessary” for Turkmen culture.

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Later that afternoon, I'm at the grocery store, rounding the corner into the frozen food aisle, when I spot an old friend with whom I haven't spoken with since graduation; someone who all but disappeared off the face of the Earth. Her name is Christine Brigham.

Christine was one of the most all-around talented people I've ever met. She was ridiculously smart, one of those rare individuals who seems to possess no filter or separation between the right and left hemispheres of her brain. She was a musical theater major, but could have just as easily been a physicist. She had an absolutely beautiful singing voice, and an even more incredible stage presence. I thought I had heard something about her being accepted into grad school in New York, but don't know if she ever went, and seeing her here today casts further doubt on the matter.

I race down the aisle to catch up with her, and although she's delighted to see me, something has changed. She's much quieter and more modest than I remember, but this could just be the effect of several years' worth of increasingly diluted interactions through the social media circuit. I've come to realize lately that it's damn near impossible to stay in touch with people you were never fully in touch with in the first place, but I'm doing my best regardless.

“So did you ever go to New York?” I ask.

“Uh, no, not really.”

“Not really?”

“I was going to, but it never really worked out. I have a lot going on here at home, and thought it would be best to lay low for a while. That, and Isaac would hate to live in a big city like New York.”

I gather this is her boyfriend, and the way she emphasizes his name, it occurs to me that she may be misinterpreting my intentions. I quickly clarify by casually mentioning how things between me and Julia are going, but I'm not sure if this helps.

On a whim, curious enough to carry the discussion out from between the banks of freezers, I ask if she'd like to get a cup of coffee or something. She seems nervous. Am I being awkward? She's reluctant at first, citing a number of petty excuses, but just as I'm about to give up she agrees, and fifteen minutes later we find ourselves at Maddie's,

a quiet little café down the street.

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In 2004, Saparmurat Niyazov passed a law banning long hair and beards among men. He also forbade women from wearing make-up, because he thought Turkmen women were “already beautiful enough.”

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As it turns out, there aren't as many things to talk about as I thought there would be, and I'm wondering if this whole thing was a mistake.

Her cell phone rings.

“Excuse me,” she says, digging through her purse.

I sit back and look over the menu, even though I know it inside and out. I pretend I'm not listening, but in such close proximity it's difficult not to. It's clearly her boyfriend, and it sounds like a pretty benign and unremarkable conversation.

And then, by some strange twist of what a religious person or citizen of Turkmenistan might call fate, the waitress arrives to take our order. Ignorant of the situation, I loudly order my usual beverage, and Christine nods indicating she'd like the same. Just as the order has been placed and the waitress is walking away, the volume of either her phone or the person on the other end increases considerably.

I can make it out clear as the Turkmen night sky:

“WHO ARE YOU WITH? WHOSE VOICE IS THAT?”

I look up at her, her head drops, and she bites her lip in defeat.

“What are you talking about?” she says.

Before I can pick up any more of the conversation, she bolts up out of our booth and begins walking towards the restroom, fast enough to turn several heads at nearby tables. She returns as if nothing had happened and smiles awkwardly. That voice. The tone. I've never heard anything quite like it. I'm closely surveying every square inch of her body looking for a sign, a bruise, anything. My heart is pounding. At this point I don't care if she thinks I'm checking her out.

The waitress approaches with our coffee but she gets up again.

“I'm sorry, I really have to get going. Something came up.”

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When I get home Julia is reading on the couch, and I immediately sit down and bury my head in her shoulder.

“Feeling any better?” she asks.

“A little. You're not gonna believe who I ran into today.”

“Who's that?”

“Christine Brigham.”

“Really? Awww, I haven't seen her in years.”

“Yeah. I convinced her to go to Maddie's with me, you know, to catch up and whatnot. But she was acting really weird the whole time. I'm not sure what her deal was.”

“Hmmm. Well, she does have that weird boyfriend, you know.”

“Weird boyfriend?”

My heart rate speeds up again, and suddenly I’m sick to my stomach.

“What exactly is weird about the guy?”

“I don’t know; I’ve never actually met him. I’ve just heard he’s kind of creepy. You know, real possessive and whatnot. I think he’s some kind of religious nut too; a Jehovah’s Witness or something.”

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Saparmurat Niyazov wrote a book known as Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which is still taught as a religious text to Turkmen students alongside the Koran. Somewhere in the capital city of Ashgabat stands a giant memorial to the work, an enormous, colorful statue of a book surrounded by fountains and trees. Every evening at approximately 8:00 pm, the big book opens up to reveal a video of the late ruler reading from the text. A number of foreign corporations desperate to do business with Turkmenistan have graciously helped out by having Ruhnama translated into various languages.

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“Are you okay darling? You look terrible.”

“No, I’m fine,” I lie. “You know what I’ve been thinking?”

“What.”

“Let’s go somewhere. For real. I’m completely serious this time.”

“Where to? Turkmenistan?”

There’s a brief pause, and the smile on her face gets wider as she gradually realizes I’m telling the truth.

“You really are serious!”

“I am.”

“Well... Where do we wanna go then?”

“Let’s go somewhere happy.”

“Happy? Like where?”

“I don’t know, somewhere like Denmark or Sweden maybe. In fact, yeah, let’s go to Sweden.”

GARY ARMS

The Moth

The Moth is dull and drab, with dirty wings.
The Air, who only cares for dainty things,
For lace-winged Flies and Butterflies and rare
Beige Seeds that float in clouds of mazy hair,
Does hate the Moth.

“Oh, sweetest Moth,” says Air,
“Do condescend to meet my friend, the Flame.”

“Who, me?” asked dazzled Moth. “I meet the Flame?”

“Poor Flame is starved. He has no friends at all.
Sad, bluish thing, he drinks—pure alcohol,
You know.”

“I didn’t know!” cries Moth, and flies
To meet poor lonely Flame. Through Air’s dark skies,
She drives her dirty wings to meet poor blue
And drunken Flame.

From out his bowl of glass,
Up leaps the Living Flame, so hot and bright—
For Living Flames are tall and upper-class,
Not poor and dull at all.

Poor Moth in fright
Does want to fly away—but who can fly
From bright, exquisite Flames? “Good-bye! Good-bye!”
She sings. But never does she go. Around,
Around the Living Flame as if she’s bound
By golden string. With every round, she closer flies.
She dives. She nearly nicks the lovely Flame.

“Oh, pretty Moth, do KISS the Flame!” Air cries.

And so Moth does. She dives to kiss the Flame.

“Oh, pretty Moth, I love your Blazing Wings.
For I am Air, and only care for Dainty Things.”