

(3200 words)

### Walking Backwards Together for Peace

On a simple and mostly unnecessary sojourn to his inbox, Grover V was assaulted by a familiar beeping. The beeping had never been so familiar, or thus problematic, until recently, when he'd made a simple and mostly unnecessary sojourn to a foreign country. Now the beeping came so often that his wireless connection might have been composed of eggshells.

It seemed friends and family most wanted to chat when you were more than a thousand miles away, never considering, not during one Skype or one email, that they were part of the reason you were more than a thousand miles away; it seemed all these people who were home and had sparsely left home before greatly believed in this indomitable disease called "home sickness," a term Grover first thought to be about the sick feeling one gets being home; and so it seemed, ultimately, that this well-meaning world of Grover's family and friends and slightest godawful acquaintances had suddenly decided to rig a vast alarm system all across the Internet, one which he couldn't help but trip every time he desired a hockey score or a scantily clad female. His face, like oh so much Pavlovian theory, scrunched in expected pain.

Twenty minutes later he was still conversing on Skype with his politically obsessed Aunt Marie who, with the upmost diligence in intelligence, was boring him about the recent presidential race. Of all her favorite soap operas, the presidential race was her most favorite.

“America this, America that—Aunt Marie, if you knew anything more about America you’d be Christopher Columbus. Haaa! Christ really.”

“Well I’m *older*. I remember what this country is. Or what it *was* and could *be*. *Again*. What it—”

“So why do you care then, if you’re so much older. You lived in the good times and now you’ll be lucky enough not to live for the bad times.”

“Well I still have my young relatives’ future to think about.”

“Don’t worry I’ve already left America,” said Grover.

“Yes and you need to come back. Eventually you’ll come back.”

She said it like a fortune and a fact all at the same time. Grover, not a fan of the future in any country, winced. Marie kept talking, adding the fact that she had more younger blood relatives than just him, later talking about how she loved all strangers so long as they were American and not an outright criminal.

“This is the best country in the world,” Marie went on. “After all.”

“What is your nationality, Marie?”

“American.”

“I’m just saying you might be a little biased.”

“Everybody knows it ‘s the best.”

“The Turks don’t necessarily *know* it. Funny what their opinion is about the best country in the world, Marie. It happens to be Turkey. Wonder what Chinese people think. Or Spanish pe--”

“They’re obviously *wrong*.”

“I happen to completely agree, Marie.”

“No country *has ever, will ever—*”

“Okay, okay enough I get the picture.”

“Be as influ—”

“Sheesh! Imagine! *Marie!* All this after you just got finished bashing this country to pieces. You are one puzzling gingersnap. We live on a globe.”

Grover eyed all the red exes on his monitor at once. A click. A little click! A little click was all that was needed. Why did this completely annoying aunt break his heart so much?

“Well that’s only how change *starts*, you know. By using our freedom of speech. We need people like you to *restore* America. Not give *up* on it! You don’t give *up* on it. We need *patriotism.*”

She was now pointing at her webcam like a Parkinson’s ridden Uncle Sam. This, for Grover, developed into the last straw of what had been a very fat scarecrow. He’d given up on far more significant things than his country. He wouldn’t hang up on her, but if she wanted to use a concept as an identity, just to have anything to hold onto, anything to talk to people about, then he would use his own worst comfort.

“Patriotism,” said Grover. “Now *that’s* an interesting thing, patriotism. You know, do you know how many different ways of being patriotic there actually are? You think patriotism is one thing, but then *boom*—it changes wherever you go. Some countries, it’s as simple as coming in fourth place in the World Cup. Other places need to build incredibly tall and pointy and mostly useless structures. But not all countries celebrate their patriotism like you are right now.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s hard to define the place where you grew up. You’d think it be easiest but it’s actually hardest. Take existence for example.”

“We’re free,” said his aunt.

“Oh I was grateful all those years in school. I was really grateful to be free.”

“Plus we went to the *moon*.”

Her nephew covered a laugh with a cough. If only because he was in a foreign country full of combative ideas on the issue of “World’s Best Country,” Grover did actually possess a good bit of love and allegiance to his country of birth; his allegiance to aunt aggravation, however, was a deep and complex thing.

“If Russia made it to the moon first all you’d talk about is how stupid they are showing off and ignoring—“

“Well they didn’t. Did they?”

“Have you ever considered that if you were born in another country you’d hate the United States and find a million reasons to love--“

“I wasn’t.”

“We’re such a young country, Marie.”

“Every country is older than its people.”

Grover lit a cigarette off camera.

“That’s true. Anyways,” said Grover. “By my subtraction of eight hours you need to be in bed in around ten minutes. So let’s have our patriotism talk really quickly and call it quits.”

Aunt Marie was caught looking to the top right of her screen, rather apprehensively.

“Go on then.”

So Grover leaned back, as far as a dingy hostel couches permit—which is often close to the floor—and in that instant even the most average of scientists might have been able to prove, perhaps only with a photo, that man had not in fact evolved from ape but wolf.

“Well take here for example, good old Turkey. A curious strain of patriotism has enveloped Istanbul’s most celebrated and populated street Istiklal Cadessi. A very interesting phenomenon. It’s pretty beautiful on paper. Of course the paper has recently turned out to be the bathroom kind, erhrm, unfortunately.”

“What is it? Don’t bite your nails.”

“It’s very refined and sentimental—actually I think Turkey is further from joining the EU as they are Russia, with this type of behavior.”

Grover bit his nails for some more dramatic, purposive, moments.

“Anyways, it’s been causing a good amount of other trouble around here. The police have even gotten involved. And I’m sure you’re aware the police here carry semi-automatic machine guns, for whatever reason, maybe just in case Godzilla decides to migrate or any action-figure sculptors are on hand—I don’t know—of course they still can’t legally shoot anybody for being patriotic—just ask the PKK about that, wait never mind, inside terrorist joke—but it’s still, really, Marie, a bit annoying to be on a nice little walk with rows of machine guns for your flowers. And the ugly posters too. The government has slapped up a lot of warning posters on any

bare space that a stray animal isn't already pissing on—but these things are only slightly more peaceful than the guns and generally just as useful as the no smoking signs or the red lights and they could have at least used *color printing*. I'm frankly pretty glad the stray animals have taken the initiative before the people have. Anyways, Marie, they are frantically searching for the one who started all this trouble in the begin with. But, as with happens with these things, you know, nobody has any idea who started it other than that they were probably very drunk."

"I hope it wasn't you."

It was such typical Aunt-material that Grover, normally straight faced under accusation, had to smile.

"*Me?* Don't go making any rash calls to the CIA, Marie. No, no. I'm an American so I could never think of this by definition."

"Well what is it already?"

"It might take a little while to digest."

"I only have an hour."

"No. Hold on. Less than an hour."

"What is it?"

"They walk backwards," said Grover.

"They what?"

"*They walk backwards.*"

"What on earth does that have to do with patriotism?"

"You see? You're American so you don't get it just yet. Let me explain. Marie, in America we are mostly patriotic about *not* trusting each other, about cut-throat

competition, about our division, or our *diversity*, oh our freedom yeah baby, but our freedom to conquer and be all independent while we conquer, and as I see it that is how we are best united—but it's not like that in other places. Not so obvious. I mean in America we typically walk forward as fast as possible and God forbid you get in our way. I mean imagine if somebody was walking backwards on Broad Street, you know—eventually they'd either be pushed to the curb or whacked over the head with a bottle. And I bet you just got a little twinge of pride at hearing that, a little American patriotism. Well, you see, walking backwards is a trust thing. You have to get into the *feeling* of it. Imagine you are on an impossibly crowded street and you are walking *backwards*. That means you have to trust people to get out of your way, don't you? Or not smack you over the head with a bottle. You are totally in the hands of your countrymen! Marie, Marie. Walking backwards shows you trust the other people around you. It's a sort of beautiful idea, isn't it? It's similar to that military bonding thing where you fall backwards and your friends catch you, except this is far more dangerous of cou—”

“It doesn't sound that dangerous. It sounds—”

“Then you've never been on Istiklal Street obviously. Walking forwards on that street, let me tell you, is dangerous. If you go up onto many of the top floor cafes lining the street and look down at all the weaving black hair it will pretty damn closely resemble raisins on a factory belt. *Marie*. I'm telling you it's not a place to be walking blindly on. In fact, think of the stampede in *Lion King*. Sorry for that dark memory. I know you're a *Disney* fanatic and all. And sentimental to boot. In fact, as a self-proclaimed *Aladdin* super fan you might just—”

“So what happens to the people? Hurry up.”

“That’s where it gets beautiful, Marie. *Nothing* happened to the people. At least at first. While it was still new. Everybody got out of the backwards walker’s way. It was amazingly beautiful to watch. Now people, of course, had no idea why some moron was walking backwards but they all just let him pass, much as they let the tramway here pass right down the middle of the street. It could never last like that, though, no, never, of course.”

Grover let a laugh out, halfway off camera, then turned once more to his nails.

“So?”

“Well,” said Grover, now with another mysterious disappearance from his aunt’s webcam, and another pull on his cigarette.

“Where do you keep going?”

“Sorry, I’m just petting the hostel’s cat here. Oh she is a precious little—”

“Hostels have cats?”

“Even the fish stores have cats here. Even the dogs have cats. His name is Osama Bin Franklin. Well that’s what I call him. Very worldly, huh.”

His aunt was straining her neck to see the cat. She loved cats.

“Pick him up for me. Is he a Turkish breed? I love—”

“Anyways, Marie. Let’s stay on subject and schedule, just like school. Too many people started doing it. Walking backwards. At one time there were just as many people walking backwards as there were forwards. The masses always ruin beautiful things, you know. Take the world for instance.”

“My God, why haven’t I ever heard of this?”



“They were too busy reporting about the earthquake. And America can only mention Turkey in the news so many times, you know. It wouldn’t look good if Americans found out there was a modern, safe, and widely secular Muslim country. Could you imagine? Plus most of the country has become very embarrassed about the whole thing. The older people. It’s only the young people who do it, you know, the walking backwards. And it’s usually after drinking. ‘Let’s all walk back to the metro backwards; let’s grab some doner kebab backwards,’ and such. That’s what I mean, Marie. Once it lost it’s meaning, it’s significance, and just became another fun thing for drunk guys to do when soccer’s not on then there started to become some...problems. That’s what I mean about Am—”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Tons of them.”

“Oh—”

“You know there are few things more dangerous than walking backwards on one of the biggest, busiest pedestrian streets in the world, but one thousand people walking backwards on that street is surely one of them.”

“There were collisions?”

“Now you’re starting to get the picture. Like I said it’s hard enough to walk forwards on this street, dodging all the darn people—imagine if you had a hundred or so virtually blind, idealistic people walking in *addition*, even *more* on Saturdays. They do it, you know, similar to that flash mob thing back home. A virtual army of backwards-walking people singing patriotic songs and trusting their neighbors. Of

course, patriotism only goes so far Marie, and once you trample somebody's toddler it very rarely goes further."

"Oh my God."

"Yes. Many nights I just sit back with a non-alcoholic beverage and watch the many collisions. There is no set direction for the walking backwards, of course, so if an elderly forward walker doesn't clobber you then a young and equally spirited backwards walker might fly right into you, knocking the both of you out. There were a couple comas I saw."

"My God! Are you serious about this, Grover? That's ridiculous. It's just," she shook her head, "*backwards.*"

"I know, Marie, trust me, I know. But they can't seem to kick the habit, no matter how many incidents occur. It's the Turkish spirit. They just think it's so darn beautiful, they really do—this being so vulnerable to your countrymen. Every male does his time in the army here, you know, Marie. And that does amazing things for a country, brainwashing wise. And this is definitely about camaraderie damn it!"

"Well it's only a matter of time before somebody gets seriously hurt."

"I didn't want to mention that, but I was getting to it. I have to take your sleeping tonight into consideration, of course. Would you like to hear it, Marie?"

"Go ahead. Tell me. Go ahead."

She began to fan herself with a pizza brochure. Her face was the same as it was before digesting one of her not-so-famous homemade health shakes of fifteen years in a very capitalistic drawer labeled "business plans" fame: twisted in apprehension. She had such empathy concerning matters that didn't in the least

concern her that if one of her immediate family were ever to die it was completely doubtful whether she'd have a tear left, or else the willpower not to run off into the woods forever.

“Well okay then. There were also five young guys, teenagers, who, since they were walking backwards and singing so loudly about trust that they couldn't hear the bell, were run over by the historical tram. They all died. Except for one. He might still be walking backwards today if he wasn't paralyzed from the waist down. He now rolls backwards for the unification of the country. He's become a symbol for the youth movement in Turkey.”

“You must be joking.”

“Foreign countries are very strange, Marie. I think you're very wise never having left New York.”

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Marie might have never left New York, but she did leave the video chat fairly earlier than expected. Grover had won his own fight for independence, without even clicking the atomic red x bomb, and was now prepared to celebrate in his own patriotic fashion.

Later, at the bar of his choice, he told a Turkish friend, “If I ever catch the nephew who taught her how to video call me every single day I swear to God I'll wring his little pimply neck. Imagine that sort of woman unleashed on technology. There will be no article on the entire web without a chastising comment from TeaAunty76. *Really*. Her most poignant question so far has been whether they have turkeys in Turkey and, if so, whether they are the national *bird*. Okay I made that up.

But I mean come on! I used to live less than three hours away from her and we only spoke on Christmas...now I move halfway around the world and I'm suddenly her best friend after the TV. Poor thing. Why does she have to be so godddamn heartbreakingly sad! It just doesn't make *sense*, man. I don't get superior people and places. Why do they do it to themselves? Why do they make themselves into these things they constantly gotta worry about keeping pristine and superior and mighty? All she wants to do is create guilt! Guilt, guilt, guilt! Do I sound guilty about leaving my home? Huh? No. No man. My home's my mind and thank god it ain't hers, thank god, thank god. Next time she calls I think I'll just tell her a rebel pack of camels have begun smashing their humps into the country's Internet and I'll just put some damn tinfoil over my webcam and call it a—“

“Whazziz teenfoil ding?” asked the Turkish friend.

Grover had no idea what tinfoil was; his aunt would have no idea how a country could possibly get along without it.

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“But what do they wrap the leftover turkey in?” she, in fact, asked four days later when notified, mid conversation, about the phenomenon.

“Toilet paper,” answered Grover. “It's not like in America. They use toilet paper for just about everything here. Some of their homes are built almost entirely from toilet paper. It's good for sand storm deflecting.”

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“No. You're very, very, very lucky. You are an American.”

“Toilet paper?”

“Yes.”

“My *God*. How can you stay in such a place?”

“It has its charms,” said Grover.

Just then a rebel pack of camels interrupted their conversation.

The camels, of course, were only cigarettes.