

TWO

It is so exciting! I will be welcoming a colleague from the Netherlands. This is great; it also gives me an opportunity to travel there. I am meeting my Dutch colleague Sofie next week already. I am sure we will have fun, she will love my school, and we will get along swimmingly. I'm already mentally preparing myself to pronounce Dutch words incorrectly and smile confidently while doing so.

I have already made a program for her, detailing what to do, which lessons to follow, and where to go. She seems to be a modest person and says that she is fine with following everything I have planned. We will also travel around on the weekends and explore my surroundings. There shouldn't be a huge culture shock for her, I suppose—unless she expects everyone here to ride bicycles through the drive-thru.

I work at Midford College in Urbana, Illinois. I love my job; I am an English tutor and professor. Teaching has always been my passion. I work with Samantha and Charlotte. Charlotte has been with us for a couple of years and is two years younger than I am—young enough to still have energy, but old enough to already look tired during staff meetings. She's efficient, sharp, and has that quiet confidence of someone who knows exactly what she's doing... most of the time.

Samantha, on the other hand, is a woman with years of experience. The kind of experience that doesn't need to be mentioned because it's already sitting in the room before she walks in. She is so deeply absorbed in her work that it can feel slightly intimidating, as if she might start grading people in-

stead of papers. When Samantha concentrates, the atmosphere changes—you suddenly feel the urge to sit up straighter, speak more intelligently, and question all your life choices.

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I live alone in a lovely house in a suburban neighborhood. I am surrounded by beautiful nature, lots of squirrels, and tennis courts. I am definitely a dreamer. I hope to meet my other half soon, but it's just so hard these days. Online dating is not for me—I don't even want to try. I want to meet someone in person and fall in love, but it hasn't happened yet. Apart from Jonathan... he could be my love. But I hardly know him. I should keep trying—though if love were like music class, I'd probably need a few scales before hitting the high notes.

My parents live nearby, as does my sister Caroline. She is three years older than me and recently welcomed her second child, a baby boy named Lucas. She also has a four-year-old son named Patrick. They are such treasures. I love visiting them—though sometimes I feel like I need a manual just to survive the toy explosions and endless snack negotiations.

My sister is nothing like me. She isn't very romantic; she is very realistic. I think her husband is more romantic than her. That's fine—if they're both happy, why not? Caroline met her future husband at university. They've been together for ten years now. My sister also works at a school, but at a different location. She got her master's last year and is now tutoring older students. Now she works fewer hours because of her young children—though I suspect her main job is refereeing toy wars and negotiating nap-time treaties.

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When this exchange program with Sofie came along, I couldn't say no. I mean, who wouldn't want to travel all the way to Europe for free? So, I applied, and through this program, I was matched with Sofie van der Molen from the Neth-

erlands. She is more or less the same age as I am, and we have similar interests. The biggest difference is that Sofie is married and has a daughter, whereas I am still single. Who knows—maybe I'll meet a handsome Dutch guy, marry him, and settle down in some tiny faraway country in Europe. I'm already dreaming. Or at least until I realize I'd have to learn to like cheese with every meal... and I'm more of a chocolate-and-chips kind of person.

So, the Netherlands. What do I know about the Netherlands? Not much, really—except that some drugs are legal there, and I've heard of Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam. What else? Well... nothing. I'm probably just an average American who knows what everyone knows. I'm fully prepared to overpay for cheese—and pretend I know the difference between Gouda and Edam.

Wait—if some drugs are legal there, do I still want to date a guy from the Netherlands? Probably not the best idea. We'll see. I don't think everyone there is into drugs...are they? Although if he offers me a joint instead of flowers on a first date... maybe I'd need a tutorial first.

One of my students visited the Netherlands and was really impressed by it. So, I guess it's an okay country after all... as long as I stick to tulips and cheese and leave the "other stuff" to the locals.

The Netherlands wasn't even my first choice—it was my third. My first choice was Finland, the second was China, and my third was the Netherlands. With so many applications, I was lucky to be matched with someone from the Netherlands. I guess every educator from the USA wants to visit Scandinavian countries or China because their education systems are completely different from ours. I've never been to Europe, so I'm fine with this. Besides, how bad can it be? I mean, they have tulips and windmills—what more could a first-time tourist ask for... besides maybe speaking Dutch.

I found out that I'm the only one from my college who got matched, so that's not bad for a start. A few years ago, two colleagues were matched and they were very enthusiastic about their journey. I should contact them sometime—maybe they have some handy tips for me. Or at least tips on how not to get lost chasing windmills and tulips.