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**F\*CK, DRINK,  
SHIT**

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**KI HYUN PARK**

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# A NIGHT IN BEIJING

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**M**y name is Sam, Sam Iam.

When I was 25 years old, I decided to go on a backpacking adventure across China, starting from Beijing and ending in Tibet. I was at a crossroads in my life, trying to figure out how to forge a sustainable future with little more than my good looks and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. This alone was cause for despair, but deepening my anxiety was the fact that I'd spent the last two years coaching Japanese businessmen to pronounce "hamburger" properly and had utterly failed.

One thing to know off the get-go is that I could've easily passed as Chinese. This search to connect with my "Asian-ness" was, from the beginning, a blurry and generalized quest. I had no personal response to the traditional architecture or the tantalizing dishes I tried, no memories of grandma's dumplings to compare the street food with, nor fuzzy Polaroids to remember myself as a child posing in front of the Forbidden Palace twenty years later or anything like that.

Like so many of the American forms I'd filled out in my life, my understanding of self was more realized in what I was not rather than

in what I was. My main choices in life were “Asian American” or “Samoan/Pacific Islander”. Most of the Asians I knew then and know now belong to the former category. The latter category, as far as I understood, was reserved for the spectacle of inclusion. Sorry, Puerto Rico.

My trip across China began one early November in Beijing. On the other side of the country, freedom fighters were strapping bombs to their chests in a desperate cry for visibility while self-immolating Tibetan monks burned in the streets. Violent clashes with the police were censored from state media and there was a systematic displacement of Tibetans in Lhasa to replace them with Han Chinese. Islamic Uighurs were being shuttled into reeducation camps and detention centers daily.

As I milled around Tiananmen Square taking selfies, it was obvious that I had no idea what was going on. In this land without borders, politics were always in the background, but I couldn’t understand any of the grainy CCTV footage being looped on state-run news programs. I barely noticed the soldiers on guard around the perimeters.

As dusk settled, however, a spectacular monument rose from the mist like a gargantuan boner. I circled around this phallic symbol, almost laughing out loud, and was struck by the audacity of the Chinese to take one of our most precious symbols of Americanism and place it right here in Tiananmen Square. Was it a coincidence? Or was it some sort of mind game?

Curiously, the Washington Monument was taller and longer in its shaft while the People’s Monument was shorter and more ornate at its base. But there was no getting around it: the People’s Monument and the Washington Monument looked remarkably similar, like odd twins.

Everywhere I went, I saw Mao's benevolent smile. In China, Mao is Jesus Christ.

I went over to his mausoleum and stood in line for well over an hour to look at his corpse. He had a distinctly orange spray-tan, a shade of tangerine that I was already well familiar with as a native New Jerseyan. He looked like he could've been at a hotdog eating contest down by the Shore.

My visit to Tiananmen Square was just a warm-up. I wasn't interested in getting bogged down by souvenir traps to begin with, and my experience upon trying to leave the never-ending square further convinced me to stay off the tourist circuit. I was accosted by aggressive old ladies who tried to goad me into rickshaws. Peking duck was advertised with gaudy neon as the glazed and featherless birds hung in the windows. There was a wondrous air of history and culture mixed with the rush to sell whatever they could for cheap.

With my rucksack strapped to my back and enough yuan stashed in my socks to keep me fed and sheltered for a month, I was ready to get out of the city and go backpacking across the country. Beijing was just the natural starting point, but I didn't want to stay there for more than a night. I wanted to wander into the expanse without maps or guides of any kind. I didn't know what I would find, but that was the whole point.

As the sun set behind the gloomy brick buildings, I found myself in a sea of bicycles near Beijing Railway Station, contemplating the man's words trailing after me. "Two-stah hotel! Two-stah hotel!" The giant Chinese characters on top of the train station penetrated the twilight and colored the smog with a red glow as locals cycled their way home. Feeling famished, but not quite brave enough to sample anything that didn't have a corporate seal of approval on it, I entered a California

Beef Noodles chain restaurant and ordered whatever the first picture advertised.

Setting my rucksack down, I sat among local patrons loudly squawking and slurping from soup bowls paying me no mind—all except for a young, bearded white guy who peered at me with interest.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he said with a South American accent. “Where are you coming from? More importantly, where are you going?”

The bearded guy gave me an affable grin which assured me that I could relax; he wasn’t going to hustle me. I smiled back and we made introductions. His name was Lonzo, and like me, he was twenty-five years old. He was originally from Brazil, and he also taught English, and this led to plenty of rabbit holes as we compared our lives in Beijing and Tokyo, with a few laughs in between.

As we finished up our noodles, Lonzo asked me where I was staying, and I mentioned the two-star motel that guy outside was on the street barking about. Lonzo laughed and invited me to stay at his place. I almost refused, but when he mentioned that he was going to a friend’s goodbye party that night, I couldn’t resist.

“There’s always a goodbye party in China,” Lonzo said as we exited the restaurant and headed toward his place. “It’s just an excuse to drink.”

We got in a cab and rode for about twenty minutes to a neighborhood called Wudaokou where I felt the city shift into a younger, college-town energy. Lonzo lived somewhere nestled in a maze of backstreets in what seemed like a charming and rustic little alley lined with stone walls, old apartments, and a few of the traditional-style homes which were built with a courtyard at the center. He rented a basement in a brick and cement villa, but we only stayed at his humble

pad long enough for me to toss my things onto the couch before we went right back out the door.

“I’m here to learn Mandarin so I can take over my father’s factory in Brasilia. We do a lot of business with the Chinese.”

“I should’ve studied harder in Tokyo,” I confessed. “Get me inside any sushi bar and I’m your man. Outside of that, I’m pretty useless.”

“How do you plan on getting around in China?” asked Lonzo.

“I’m not sure. The only words I know are ‘shi shi’ and ‘nihao’. I should probably learn how to ask to use the bathroom now that I think of it.”

“I can teach you a few phrases, but tonight there’s only one phrase that you really need to remember. You can use it later at the bar,” Lonzo said, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “Wo a ni.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Just try it,” he said with a grin, then he proceeded to fire off a string of beautifully pronounced phrases in Mandarin to an idling taxi driver.

We got in the cab and sped off to the party. We were dropped off in front of a skyscraper located on a street pulsating with neon. We entered the building and rode a glass elevator to the top floor—the penthouse suite. Whoever his friend was, it was obvious that she was from a family of diplomats or something.

Lonzo liked to move fast, and it was my job to keep up. He knocked on the door and someone he knew let us in immediately. There was a lot of Spanish and the kissing of cheeks. I didn’t get a kiss, but received a brief appraisal followed by a swish of hair in the face and a trail of perfume as we were led through the foyer into a plush apartment filled with white foreigners, Latin music, and red cups.

I transitioned into soiree-mode and stood around, ready to jump into any conversation if the opportunity should present itself. It was

like the equivalent of watching a soccer match on Telemundo. Everything was in Spanish, and ball kept getting passed back and forth before I could make a move.

Lonzo neglected to introduce me as he was taken from one acquaintance to the next. These were friends he hadn't seen in a while, so I played it cool by a bookshelf. Suddenly, I was tapped on the shoulder and found myself face to face with a green-eyed girl who was intimidatingly beautiful, but decidedly hostile.

"Who are you?" she demanded to know.

"I'm Sam, Sam Iam. I'm here with Lonzo," I explained.

"Who's that?" she countered with a hint of disdain.

"I don't know," I stammered in surprise, glancing around the living room. "He's not here."

She quickly lost interest, but an air of suspicion remained.

I did my best to blend in, but it was hard to remain incognito at a house party with only one other Asian guy in it. It didn't help that this other Asian guy was a lot cooler than I was. He had a Latina girlfriend who did all his talking for him, was dressed in edgy street fashions, and wore sunglasses indoors which no one seemed to question even though it was nighttime. Eventually I found out that he was a deejay from Hong Kong, and for the rest of the night, it seemed as if we had a silent understanding that there could only be one Asian per room at this party, and we did not mingle.

There were a few Chinese girls also, but it was pointless to form any cohesion with them. I began to lose hope of ever seeing Lonzo again and began to drink copiously from the punchbowl. I would have to make new friends if I wanted to survive without even a couch to sleep on.

My efforts to socially lubricate began to pay off. I felt the punch and whatever was in it start to lower my inhibitions to the point that

I just barged in on any conversation I was in proximity of, forcing the language to switch from Spanish to English. Surprisingly, everyone seemed relieved when I began speaking English. Now that I was getting thoroughly sauced, I decided that everyone at that party was great. These were deep and philosophical people. Drifters from South America and Europe who'd seen the world and its nether parts.

Once a traveler gets started on a trip, you'll know their philosophy on basically everything. I found myself mimicking their behavior, taking on their political views, and even considered converting to their religions, which were strange hodgepodes of Buddhism and atheism. Suddenly, yoga seemed important. So did avoiding palm oil for the orangutans. I was invited to join them everywhere to see everything that China had to offer as more and more libations were poured.

Lonzo finally returned an hour later wielding a joint.

"Hey Sam, do you smoke?" Lonzo asked me with that boyish grin of his, and all was forgiven.

"Are you sure we're allowed to do this?" I asked before taking a puff. "I don't want to be sent away to some reeducation center."

This made everyone laugh, and more jungle juice was mixed in the large party bowl. The Spanish girls edged closer to me after I made a rather big show of shot-slamming and hitting the joint. "Call me Big Brother," I whispered to a pretty brunette from Catalonia. "Call me George Orwell."

But before I could walk down that road, it was decided that we should all leave the apartment and hit up a salsa club.

"There's a salsa club?" I nearly screamed.

Before I knew what was happening coats were being tossed to their owners and everyone vacated the premises.

Downstairs, there were a series of taxi-vans waiting for us. I piled into a van with Lonzo and a few others whose names I never caught,

and the taxi-driver sped us to the club like he was going for the high score in a video game. There was a plastic jug filled with what was left of the jungle juice and this was passed around as a million rolling r's ricocheted off the backseats. Everyone was in high spirits, and I'd never felt more Latin in my life. As we swerved around the corner, I took the bottle, took a huge swig, and screamed, "Arrrrriba!" in a perfect Spanish accent.

The van opened and we rushed towards a red light emitting faintly from an open door. The outside of the club looked like an unassuming industrial building, but once we were inside the heat swallowed us up like we were coals in a furnace. Everywhere I looked there was music and darkness, flying hair and twirling bodies. And just like that, everyone I'd come with was gone! Where the hell was Lonzo?

I was alone again, with no way of reconnecting with Lonzo. How would I find my way back to his place to retrieve my bag? I couldn't think straight surrounded by that many writhing bodies and the amazing Spanish rhythm. What was in my bag? Hmm...passport, cash, a slew of other worthless items. All meaningless now that I was free! Perhaps this was a sign from heaven. Maybe I was always meant to lose Lonzo and be stripped of my possessions. I'd simply have to survive for the present with whatever I had left in my pockets. It wasn't much, but I could still buy a few more shots!

I immediately forgot about my rucksack on Lonzo's couch and dove deeper into the steam of this heat. There were sizzling bodies, a fiery trumpet, and a singer in a half-buttoned silk-shirt with sweat dripping off his mustachio. The singer was Chinese, but it almost felt like I was in Mexico.

"Buy me a drink," a girl said in a Chinese accent from somewhere in the darkness. As I turned to see the owner of the voice, I saw her

round face, caked with foundation, appearing almost moon-like in its luminosity penetrating the lurid darkness of the nightclub.

“Wo a ni,” I replied confidently, as if I had any idea what it meant.

I then felt her chubby arms around my neck as she painted my mouth with her tongue and lips, and I went along with it for at least a minute. After breaking free for some words and a breath of oxygen, I ordered two shots of tequila with a snap of my fingers. I asked for her name, but even this routine exchange of information proved difficult in this wild atmosphere. “Cheers, Moon-Cakes,” I said and clinked her glass before we each took one down the hatch.

She was soon taken by some goofy British guy who seemed to be about seven feet tall. But I knew I could still win her back somehow if I really wanted. What if we ended up at her apartment? It was a place to sleep after all. Suddenly, I wanted to tell her everything about my life, and more importantly, my purpose in China, to wander at random to confirm the existence of a loving Cosmic Being through the act of aimless travel. I needed to know the deep universal truths of this existence, whatever that meant!

Maybe I just wanted her dumplings.

I ordered another round of tequila shots and took them both one after another. I found myself swept into the action. My shirt mysteriously vanished, and I was now doing salsa on the dance floor.

Back at the bar, I found that infantile creature making out with the goofy seven-foot Brit as I returned shirtless and sweaty. I felt jealous, and then touched as she released herself from his grip, sent him away, and cuddled up to me. I made out with her obscenely, just to prove a point.

Finally, in a swirling blur of Cuervo and shame, I stumbled out of the club and into the streets. I wandered all night, moaning to everyone I met about Lonzo and my bag. Miraculously by morning, I found

Lonzo's place. The door was carelessly unlocked, and my rucksack was still there on the couch, waiting for me like an angry wife, wondering where I'd been all night. Lonzo was nowhere to be found. It was evident that his mission for ass was a complete success.

Still drunk, I helped myself to a free roll of toilet paper and staggered out the door.

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# HARD SEATS

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I decided to get out of Beijing as soon as possible. I worked through my hangover with dumpling soup, and then after lunch headed back to Beijing Railway Station where I jumped on the train that headed south to Guilin. I'd never heard of Guilin before, but there were rules to follow, and I had to obey them. Part of my strategy for traveling was to just show up at any train station or bus station and jump on whatever was the first ride out of town. Doing this made plotting my course incredibly simple, but it also meant that the good seats were usually sold out.

Without realizing what I was in for, I bought myself a ticket for twenty hours in the “hard seats”. The only alternative to this section was the soft sleepers, and those were all booked. The hard seats are where everyone else sits. These seats have zero recline, and every car is by default a smoker.

I was excited about it at first, sitting there giddy with the sensation of a prep-school kid “roughing it” in the streets. I was among the people, the real people, I told myself. These were farmers and laborers and, perhaps to celebrate the lifting of the draconian One-Child Policy, a

plethora of pregnant women. The people I rode with seemed cheerful at the thought of travel, even if it meant slouching on each other's shoulders instead of laying horizontal.

As the train sped its way further south, it picked up new groups of young families who came onboard with the excitement of first-time travelers, happily throwing their bags onto the overhead stow as passengers made room for the newcomers and became more uncomfortable on their behalf. The seats were arranged in squares so that you and the passenger next to you faced the two seats across from you. This made the people you were sitting with your designated family for the rest of the journey, whether you knew them or not. Around the second or third stop, I was joined by a rugged-looking guy with a tattoo of a dragon on his hand and his wife who was very pregnant. Also with them was Grandma who spent most of the ride knitting a baby sweater, while I was the odd Asian in their midst who couldn't speak any Chinese.

The mother-to-be rested in the seat as her husband wrestled with their luggage in the aisle. Apparently, China didn't have U-Hauls, and this was their only option. One of their bags was jammed full of pots and pans, and after a considerable amount of effort we managed to wedge everything beneath the seats. A wok's wooden handle stuck out halfway into the aisle, but no one seemed to mind.

Every family was its own contained ruckus with the sounds of laughter, crying babies, and music being played from phones. The toilet was just an open hole at the bottom of a metal squatter, so whenever I did my business, my excrement splattered along the tracks below at blinding speed.

In the back of the train next to the toilets was the smoking section. The men spat everywhere and smoked cigarettes near the open doors as the rushing landscape whistled past. One misstep could've sent

us tumbling off the train to our deaths, but the men seemed more interested in the old Charlie Chaplin movie that was playing on the small screen. The whole carriage smelled like secondhand smoke. The men smoked nonstop.

For most of the day, I wrote in my journal while staring out at the passing scenery. I was trying to write an opener for my travelogue, something exotic and adventurous while striking a colloquial and casual tone.

The more I scribbled, however, the more lines I crossed out in frustration. I'd intended to write from the perspective of an Asian American traveling across Asia for the first time, but every angle felt false somehow. I backpedaled and started talking about growing up in America as an Asian-American, but this seemed irrelevant to my backpacking trip in China as I wasn't even Chinese to begin with. Instead, I started explaining how it was that I ended up in Japan, but then thought that this might become a whole different book.

As the hours fell to silence and the end credits of the Jackie Chan double-feature had long since gone blank on the monitors in the aisles, my fellow passengers drifted off to sleep while my pen hung limply in my hand. I sat there numb and depressed, mumbling to myself about how I was doomed to be a failure.

Falling asleep in the hard seats must be an acquired skill because my travel companions slept the entire night while I sat there like an insomniac. The husband and wife folded their necks so that the wife slept against her husband's shoulder, and he slept with his head leaning slightly against the top of her head. Grandma just tipped her head backwards and conked out somehow holding herself firmly in place while in a deep sleep.

I also felt tired, but I couldn't get my neck into any position that would allow for the z's to come. I pointed my eyes out the window

instead and could only see my own reflection staring back at me in the dark.

I felt the weight of failure on my shoulders all night long and there was no escaping it. I had to confront the truth: I wasn't simply here to take a vacation and have a good time. At the end of this journey, I wanted there to be something. I wanted to find a way to escape my life.

I must've passed out eventually, because I woke that morning to the mystical scene of heavy mist over the passing landscape. It hung like a thick white shroud turning rivers into faint outlines. The sun was just beginning to rise through the limestone mountains, revealing terraced rice paddies built on mountainsides with yellow fields of grain in the distance. Clusters of ghost cities appeared as oddities in the landscape, slowly being reclaimed by the green force of time.

We arrived at Guilin Station a couple hours after breakfast. By that time, the train was more than half empty, with most of the passengers having exited along the way. Guilin was the last stop, and my rucksack was up on the overhead looking lonely when I brought it down and hoisted its weight back on my shoulders.

I was glad to be getting off the train, but it meant that I would have to figure out what to do and where to go from there. Not having any plans, I disembarked with everyone else, but instead of leaving the station, sat in the waiting room for a while and stared at the bus schedule seeing which bus would arrive next.

The waiting room was smoky and crowded. Outside the windows was the platform where most of the awaiting passengers sat on the edge of the sunshine so the sun wouldn't darken their skin. It was noticeably warmer in Guilin compared to Beijing. We were closer to the equator, and it almost felt like early spring. People ran this way and that with tied-up suitcases, duffel bags, and Hello Kitty luggage. Women walked around with infants strapped to their backs.

Waiting for the next train were two guys and a girl. They looked like high school students, the kind who skip class and dream of being pop idols or something. It seemed like the two dudes were best friends and the girl was a little sister. As the train pulled up to the platform, I watched their wordless dialogue and wondered why they weren't getting on. They continued to talk while silently smoking. The kid with the earring looked like the kind of heartbreaker who didn't listen to authority, while the other guy looked like he played basketball.

I noticed a sideways conversation happening, the kind you have with your buddy without looking at each other, too tough to make it emotional. They exchanged a punch in the arm for a kick in the leg. I then understood what was happening. The kid with the earring got on the train and then there were only two on the platform. As the train began to chug forward, the girl ran beside it, waving goodbye. The taller friend stood there in defiance of the moment and spat on the ground, watching the train disappear into the concrete horizon. After the train was gone, I decided to get going so no one would see me cry.

My peregrinations eventually led me to a place called Yangshuo. I had no idea what to expect, but when my bus stopped in front of a traditional Chinese gate, I jumped up instinctively and found myself standing before a tall stone gate with red lanterns hanging from it. I thought it looked like the doorway to another world, or perhaps the best Chinese restaurant known to man. It was getting closer to lunchtime, so my motivation was a little blurry.

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# TWO-STRINGED VIOLIN

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The sun sets over West Street as I wander the cobblestone streets. The smell of sandalwood sprinkles the night and reminds me of places I've never been. Paper lanterns tell you there's only one way to go. The road, shrouded in night, looks beautiful, lonely, and mysterious. The only downside is there's nothing to do at night except shop and eat. That is unless of course I want to stand around an empty dance floor while pimps try to set me up. I'll keep that as Plan C.

I walked about picking frog-leg out of my teeth when suddenly I came upon a bustling little mob, everyone holding their cellphones up taking pictures of some celebrity. I was expecting an actress or K-pop star or something judging from the scene. But as I got closer, what I saw was totally different. He had the look of a master traveler, poised upon his bicycle like Don Quixote. I watched as he signed another one of his masterpieces for the buyer, who watched in anticipation as he wrote Chinese characters on a paper fan. He had a long wispy beard and a Fu-Manchu mustache, a long yellow poncho and a yellow headband tied around his long single braid like the Karate Kid. He only had one arm and one leg.

I stood there in the crowd and watched as he dipped his brush into a small jar of ink, wrote something with the automation of Jackson Pollock, then signed his name vertically in the upper left hand corner of the open fan. The buyer, an older man, bowed with his family in near prostration while the bicycle man cracked not a smile, unflinchingly accepting their admiration, all while sitting on his bike, a high-horse customized machine, making him seem like a giant. He leaned his weight on his leg of flesh and bone, while in the stirrups of his steed rested the foot of his unmasked prosthetic. His hand held the fans as blank canvasses while his other arm, cut off at the bicep, was strapped with a revolver fitted with different-sized brushes.

By some shifting of the sands, I was moved to the front, and suddenly found myself face to face with the master. He turned and looked at my speechless face, emitted something of a low rasp, then handed me a pamphlet from a stack he kept in a messenger bag. He couldn't seem to talk, but even if he could, I wouldn't have been able to understand him. Still, his face glowed with pride as he pointed to his bio and mumbled along as I read in English.

His name was Feng, and according to his pamphlet, he was the Guinness Book of World Records holder for longest distance traveled by a one-armed, one-legged man on bicycle. He had been traveling for eighteen years nonstop across China. A former gangster, he lost his arm and leg in a gun fight, devoted his life to Buddhism, and became something of a traveling monk. He sustained himself from the money he made off painting paper fans. If you bought one, he wrote something like a proverb or a verse of poetry in that wild calligraphy from the brush strapped to his bicep.

I told him I wanted to buy one, and he seemed to understand. I chose one with pink flowers growing off of a long gnarled branch as the motif, but the real art lay in watching him make it. With flash and

flourish, he wrote calligraphy across the fan like a fencer makes sword strokes, and read the characters silently to me one by one, mouthing the words and pointing right to left with his bent finger. I wished I could understand, but all I had was my imagination to ponder the meaning of his words as he repeated them again, looking straight into my eyes and searching for comprehension. It seemed that somehow, this total stranger, this lone traveler of the truest kind, could see something in me.

At that point, I became so overwhelmed with emotion I dropped to the ground before him. "Please let me be your disciple!" I burst aloud and clasped my hands together. Yes! This is what I had been searching for all along! A mentor, a master, someone to guide me into the ways of a wandering monk! I could see us traveling across China together and fighting whatever injustices we found. Some triads in Hong Kong threatening an old lady's grocery? POW! We leave tire-tracks across the roulette tables and scatter all the chips with our skidding wheels, both of us flying off and slapping five in midair before jump-kicking some gangsters in the face. I saw us in a flash, cruising upon bicycle, dressed like Buddhist monks in the mountains, practicing calligraphy and swordplay. But all I heard was that raspy chuckle, and when I looked up, everyone was looking at me like I was the one with one arm and one leg.

Later that night, pretty girls stand outside the bars inviting men to come in for a drink. It's low season now, and most of the bars remain empty. Every bar bumps their dance and rock and roll tunes, but not a single soul can be found funky enough to wander in. The bars may find a few flies after dinner, after the horny toads have had their fill and start tipping back a few shots of baijiu with friends to help aid their digestion. Afterwards, there's the happy voyage around the alleys acting magnetized to whatever voices happen to call them. The lust

is never quite so naked as it is discovered in a sort of serendipitous adventure wandering deeper into holes illumined with hot pink neon.

You see, one does not simply answer the call of toadiness so directly. One must first taste the wind. The perfume must tingle upon one's lips. There must also have been the obligatory slip of allowing oneself to have a few too many drinks at dinner before one allows oneself to be enticed by the prospects of getting cozy with one of the pretty little barmaids inviting you in.

The temptation to piss your money away on bar girls while traveling is insurmountable at times when you're alone with no one to stop you from making that ridiculous statement, "Maybe I'll just have one little drink". By the time you utter those words, it's already too late. The bar girls have sonar hearing and zone-in on you immediately. Before you even know you've bled into the water, they've got you in their jaws. Come in, handsome! they sing and grab your arms. Of course, the thought of it in your mind was just a faint notion, which could have passed just as easy as it is to keep walking. But once the words exit your mouth, it becomes a promise.

They sit you at a table- never the bar. The bar is too easy to escape. They sit you like a king in the empty room, and quickly try to compensate for your embarrassment at being the only patron by giving you full control of the music. This gives you a sense of power and ease. Now your drink has arrived and you're starting to feel comfortable. The girl beside you asks sweetly if you'll also buy her a drink. Oh, how inconsiderate of me! you say. Of course!

The conversation is just flirtatious enough to make up for the fact that you're not really having a conversation. Certainly not worth sticking around for and buying that second drink. Okay. You're satisfied. Time to settle up and go back to the room. But then, just as you get ready to pull out a few bills from a secret pocket sewn in your

underwear, another pretty girl walks in. This is her friend. The first girl calls her over. Introductions are made. Sit down, sit, sit.

One more round. But that's it.

Pretty soon that second drink catches up with you and one of the girls touches your knee and before you even order it, a third round materializes. Tequila shots? Fuck it. Why not?

Before the night is done, you'll have blown a carefully structured budget equivalent to about a week's worth of food, room, and transport on sugary cocktails, an eventual hangover, and a sad masturbation session. Wandering around West Street reminds me of this ancient wisdom passed down through centuries. I avoid all eye-contact with the lithe creatures singing me to my doom outside the neon-lighted bars.

But then, as I wander back towards the inn, I see a salesgirl in a jewelry shop who made the bar girls look like frogs. I find myself closer, and closer, until before I know it, I'm inside the shop. I quickly reassured myself, whispering to my penis that I was only here to look around, perhaps picking up some gifts for the family for Christmas.

At the moment, she was busy with another customer, an affluent-looking grandma standing by a display case full of silver. A smile was already on her face in the manner of a friendly sales-pitch. As I walked in, however, I saw that little extra glisten, twinkle, that faded just as quickly as she returned her attention to the rich old lady. I pretended not to notice and walked casually past her, making my direction towards the mini-gallery in the back of the shop.

The shop was spacious, dimmed and atmospheric, the display cases spotlighted to bring out the moonlight luster of the silver pieces laying on beds of black velvet beneath the glass. These were far from souvenirs. Everything was hand-made, produced by a vanishing tribe in Yunnan famous for the beauty of their silver. The designs of each

bracelet, ring, and necklace were elegant and intricate. I admired a row of long-toothed princess combs, just because they looked so royal, but the sheer amount of zeros on the price tags told me I couldn't even afford a keychain.

The truth is that the businessman hopes for the artist's untimely death, for he knows rarity creates value. With the extinguishing of a flame comes silver. If everyone had the gift, they'd just be stones. Time erases all. The lost and forgotten become priceless and locked away in a museum. All that remains is the beauty and the light.

It's hard not to want to fill up your castle with the splendor of all these earthly treasures. But the heavier you are, the harder it will be to ascend to heaven. You have to learn to appreciate beauty with your eyes only. The money you have is enough to buy you passage through the world, but this is a walk through the red light district, not a fuck fest. You come on a journey like this to exit the world, not to collect its pieces and fragments. Learn to appreciate life without wanting to take it with you. Let go of the ring, Frodo! We all want to live in the Shire, but in truth, we are all born Orcs. Traveling doesn't make you any less of an Orc.

"Hi! Can I help you with anything?"

I turned, thoughts interrupted, and found myself face to face with the belle of the silver-shop.

"It's a beautiful shop," I said.

"Thank you! It's my aunt's shop."

"Did you see anything you like?" she asked.

I blacked-out with the possibility of a hundred different responses. But luckily, my instincts took over. This is what I had trained for. I quickly transformed into Gallery Man. Cultured. Smart. Mysterious. Lonely. Able to have a decent conversation with a pretty girl without making his words drip with innuendo.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course."

"I read the, uh, description here. Very interesting. But why does it keep saying 'vanishing tribes'? Where are they going?"

"Oh, well, you know, these days, the girls in the villages want to live like the rest of Chinese. They don't want to wear those clothes and make silver. Now, there is only old people making them. But when the old people die, then maybe there will be no one left to make it."

"That's a shame. Such beautiful clothes and jewelry. The world will miss it."

"Yes, that's why we have our shop. We want to share with the world before they are all gone."

"They'll become dinosaurs."

"Yes," she laughs. "But not so scary."

Her name was Mei.

She led my penis around the shop and showed it some of the display cases. "Are you shopping for your girlfriend?" she asked.

"Oh no," I replied casually. "Just looking."

Still, she seemed to have no problem ignoring the other potential customers as she led my penis around the store. Soon, I had her taking out rows of bracelets and trying them all on. She seemed to enjoy it immensely, holding out her long smooth arm for me to hold and lower my face just close enough to smell the fragrance of her skin.

"Do you like?" she asks me, flipping back her hair, displaying chandelier earrings that reach down to her shoulders.

"Yes," I say, nodding like a dog gazing at a bone-shaped cookie.

Alright. Enough of this game. It was time to go in before I ended up playing the millionaire card, buying everything in the store like a degenerate gambler hoping she'll like me for my credit cards.

"What do you usually do after work?" I asked suddenly, as she modeled a silver wedding tiara.

We were now alone in the back of the store.

"Usually I just go home. Sometimes I go out for a snack."

"Anything good around here?"

"Do you like noodles?"

"I love noodles."

"There's a really good noodle shop nearby."

"Well, if you're not busy, I think it'd be easier if we just went together."

"Together?" she said in a sort of mock surprise.

"Yeah, you know. Just a little bowl of noodles between friends."

"Friends?"

"Sure, why not?"

"So. . . after work?"

Suddenly, without warning, I felt something rumble deep inside me. It was a sharp stabbing pain, followed by a sickening gurgle.

She mistook it for hunger. It was anything but.

Tiny beads of sweat began to break out on my forehead and nose. Her voice became mute and only her lips were visible, talking without words, the various lefts and rights I would need to take to get to the little noodle shop. I heard nothing. There was a flame growing within my belly.

"Wow," I gasped, as a gurgling fire-worm began to emit a lion's roar.

"It's okay," I whispered, reflecting now upon everything I had ever eaten. "I have to go."

"Here. Take this," she said putting the directions into my numb fingers.

"I have to go," I said again in something of a whimper. I was beginning to sweat profusely from every pore.

Without another word, I speed-walked and hobbled out of the shop, doing my best not to hunch over until I was out of sight, and then ran to the inn unashamedly holding both hands to my ass, trying desperately not to shit myself.

What happened next was the price of a lesson learned. Wash your hands always, always, always, after you play with farm animals. They're dirty beasts and treat mud like soap.

I guess the timing was just about perfect though because it took about two hours of running back and forth between the toilet and my bed when I realized it must be around closing time at the shop. Exhausted, pants around ankles, lying on the bathroom floor, I wondered to myself what she was doing. Was she thinking of me?

Imagine she could see me right now . . .

Despite the fact that my face looked as if I had been traumatized, there was a determined little smile within the shadows beneath my eyes. I glanced at my watch and saw it was about fifteen minutes to closing time. Perfect!

Of course I could've just given up and rested like a normal human being. It wasn't like I was in love with her or anything. But to not take a girl I would never see again out on a date? Impossible! I would soldier on, and carry with me the flag of her "yes" for all of my days to come.

Ten minutes later, I strolled back into the shop as if nothing had happened, as if I had just been strolling about, casually window-shopping and happened to come here once again. Mei was taking everything out of the display cases and putting them into boxes where they would then be locked away. When she looked up, she seemed genuinely surprised to see me. Not happy. Not annoyed. Just surprised.

I have to admit, I was hoping for some kind of smile in her eyes like the one she had given me when I first walked in. Now all I felt was the female instinct of defense and hesitation. Can you say "stalker"?

Oh god, was I one of those? The return to the scene of the crime always indicates something of an obsession. An inability to move on and keep it cool. I felt like a creep now, but what could I do? I had walked through the door.

A tinge of desperation began to discolor my aura and I immediately wanted to disappear. Who is this guy? I could hear her wondering. Doesn't he have anything better to do than bother the locals, insert himself into their lives for no good reason, only to disappear the next day? Well, no, not really, I don't. You got me. I'm a drifter.

"Did you get lost?" she asked me.

"Yes! I mean, yeah, I, uh. . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Were you looking for the noodle shop this whole time?"

"No, no. I just, well, I just kind of wandered around for awhile."

"Awww," she said sympathetically.

And with one fell swoop, I went from creepy stalker to lost little puppy. Amazing how women can change your entire identity with a sound.

"You want to go? I'm pretty hungry now," I said cheerfully, relieved that at least this part of the fiction could be true.

Mei turned and said something jokingly to Pikachu, who pretended not to notice us, despite her fur standing on end shooting bolts of electricity off its ends. I just stood there smiling sheepishly.

"Well, I want to go," she said, "but my aunt lives above the shop. If I don't come home, she might worry."

Still, I gave it a chance. I didn't push or pull. I said nothing, seeing what she would do. She looked at me a moment more, then turned and conversed with Pikachu for about five minutes. It was like I wasn't even there. I stared at the empty display cases and figured out the exchange for myself.

Mei: Pikachu, what should I do? If I say no, he'll think I was just flirting with him, won't he?

Pika: What do you have to go with him for? He's just a customer. He didn't even buy anything.

Mei: But he is pretty nice. Should I just go? It's just down the street.

Pika: People get kidnapped on their own street most of the time.

Mei: He's not a kidnapper.

Pika: He's an American. Don't trust them.

Mei: We'll have noodles and go back home.

Pika: Fine. You buy.

Mei: Okay.

After some moments of this intense private conversation in front of me, Mei turned to me and said, "Is it okay if Ling come?"

"Who? Pikachu? I mean, yeah, okay," I said hesitantly.

"I mean, sure! Let's all go!"

"Okay great!" Mei smiled. "But I have close up the shop first. You can wait a little bit, can't you?"

"Okay, sure. I'll just. . . wait."

Ten minutes and a phone call later, we were all walking down the cobblestone streets of Old Town making our way towards a famous noodle shop that Mei seemed to love so much. The stars sparkled above us in the autumn sky and it seemed a perfect night, but I couldn't help but notice the mood had changed somewhat between us. The flirtation we had enjoyed earlier seemed to be somewhere locked in the past sitting in the glass display cases next to the necklaces and earrings.

I tried to keep the conversation alive by asking her questions about life in Yangshuo, but it all sounded kind of forced, like I was asking her to become my tour guide or something. She didn't want to live out in a field like I did. She didn't live in Old Town either. She commuted from

nearby Guilin, perhaps preferring the anonymity of city life. Her eyes kept glancing here and there, trying to keep her voice down when she spoke, very different from the bright bubbly personality in the shop. I could detect a very tangible self-consciousness of the passersby in the street all about her. Pikachu padding along quietly behind us instead of together with us wasn't helping either. It felt like we were being chaperoned. And we were.

At least everyone else seemed to be having a magical night. Couples strolling together arm in arm down the red lantern lit streets in bliss, romance spilling from the sounds of a street violinist moaning sweet music from an ancient melody. I considered stopping for a moment to listen to the music, but Mei seemed to want to get to the noodle shop as soon as possible and then get out of there. She had heard that song a million times before.

The noodle shop was a little hole-in-the-wall which specialized in one kind of noodle soup. There didn't seem to be a menu. Mei ordered three and we sat down near the door. I went to the refrigerator and offered to get Mei and Ling a drink. They both politely refused. I took out a bottle of green tea and brought it back to the table and sat down, knowing now that I had no fancy descriptions of art or silver-work to rely on, I was screwed. Usually alcohol played point guard in these types of situations and made way for the easy assist, but neither of them drank. So there we sat in stony silence, wondering why it was so complicated to be human.

"Has your aunt ever thought of expanding her business?" I said, without zeal or even interest. The noodles were taking forever.

"No. What do you mean?"

"I mean like, if you opened a shop in New York City, for example, I think a shop like that would do pretty well."

"Really? Do American peoples like to wear those things?"

"Oh sure. That stuff is always popular. I mean, if it's real and authentic."

"What?"

"I mean, um, people who like fashion. They like things from other countries. You could make a lot of money."

"That sounds like a good idea," she said with forced cheer.

"Yeah," I agreed, but I could tell neither of us really cared.

Finally, the noodles came.

"Alright, let's eat," I said with utter relief. I shoved the noodles in my mouth like I had never seen food before, just so I could have an excuse to stop talking. They were pretty good, but a little spicy. I worried about my rectum again, but figured I would deal with it later.

I looked at Mei with curiosity and wondered about her life. My lust and attraction to this lovely creature were slowly becoming bitter-sweet. Maybe this wasn't her first time having noodles with one of the many travelers blowing in from the wind. They rode in on surfboards and kayaks and promised a lifetime of anything but here as they flowed and ebbed with the seasonal tides- learning, acquiring, collecting, disappearing, returning. And here she remained, as the seasons changed, in the most beautiful town I had ever seen. She seemed cheerful, but didn't she want to leave?

"Good noodles," I said.

"Yes, this is the most famous noodle-shop in Yangshuo," Mei said.

"Lot of foreigners here, huh?"

"Yes, many coming. More coming everyday."

I tipped the bowl of soup back and drank all of its contents like a savage. Somehow, I felt defeated.

"Do you ever get bored here?" I asked after a moment. "I mean, it's beautiful and everything, but do you ever get used to it?"

"I wish I could travel sometimes. But it is good for me here. I work with my aunt and uncle, have my own apartment in Guilin. I ride bikes. . ." she said. "But maybe I can travel like you one day."

"But you could never go alone."

"Alone?" she laughed. "Not safe for a Chinese girl to travel alone."

"Where would you want to go?"

"I want to go Europe, if I has some money. Maybe Japan. But you will see many good places in China," she said coyly with a smile, "You will meet many pretty girl."

"I think you're the prettiest girl I've met so far."

She laughed like a bell. Pika rolled her eyes.

"If I don't, I'll come back and tell you."

Mei smiled and looked into my eyes, and for a moment, she really wished I would.

"Listen, I know this sounds crazy, but why don't you come with me?"

"You want to go somewhere else?" she asked.

"No, I mean let's go together. Come with me! Leave the shop! Let's take a trip!"

Mei started laughing.

"I can't leave. I have to work silly. Thank you for asking."

"Come on. Don't you ever want to just leave everything behind for awhile?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know, just go out and explore the world. That kind of thing."

"You're real nice, but I can't."

"This is your chance," I said to her now, and wondered if it was her I was talking to, or myself. Suddenly, I transcended this shit restaurant and saw us actually make it. I saw us get on a bus and awkwardly try to feel as if this wouldn't be the worst mistake of our lives.

"Let's do it," I said, deciding for both us now that it would be totally worth it.

She smiled and shook her head no.

"Alright. I just wanted to see if you would really do it."

An awkward silence fell over the table as we sat with empty bowls. Damn it, Pikachu, this is where you say something funny. Can't you talk? Worthless!

Mei insisted on paying, saying I was her guest. I tried to refuse, but I didn't feel like ending the night by ripping open my underwear. I dropped Mei and Ling off back at the store. I waited as she knocked on the door and made a few comments to lighten up the mood knowing that we would soon never speak again. Finally someone opened the door. I smiled and said it was nice meeting her before she and Ling slipped into the darkness and left me standing alone.

I walked off into the fading lamplights of West Street accompanied by the song of a two-stringed violin.

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# THE BUS TO SHANGRI-LA

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The time had come for me to make my move. The signs were too clear. If I didn't act, I was a coward and a fool. All I had to do was stand up, walk over to the front of the bus, take the open seat next to her, and sit down. I didn't even have to ask for her permission. She had given me half of her onion for goodness's sake! If that wasn't an invitation to come and talk to her, then I didn't know what was.

I first saw the onion when we were at the rest stop. We'd been riding for several hours from Li Jiang to Shangri-la. The bus stopped, the doors opened, and everyone went to use the outhouses. We were surrounded by brown mountains that were the color of hashish. There was a fruit stand. I saw her and that big onion; she was washing it under a metal pipe sticking out of the dried grass. She had a sporty look, wearing ruby-tinted sunglasses, a baseball cap, and her ponytail came poking out. She was kneeling with the water running over her hands as she went to work washing the giant onion and peeling off all the skin.

It was a big onion, and when I walked over, I said, "That's quite an onion you got there, miss. Looks mighty fine, mighty fine." She

smiled and made a light comment about the laborious task of washing and peeling an onion of that size. We shouldn't have understood each other, yet somehow, we did.

Before I could say more, the bus engine was back on, and the driver yelled for everyone to hop aboard. I decided to buy some fruit, so I said bye to the girl and left her washing that onion. I bought two apples, and I got on the bus.

The bus went rolling on to Shangri-La, which I was beginning to believe was some kind of city built in the clouds. The sun was shining brightly through the thin atmosphere, and the bus repeatedly roared us up hazel mountain roads until we'd reach some peak and then come back down the other side, careening along a chalky green river snaking its way through the rocky cliffs.

I'd almost forgotten about the encounter with the onion girl, but as I was looking out the window she suddenly appeared and gave me half of that strange fruit. I was so surprised that I held the onion dumbfounded while she slipped back into her seat at the front of the bus.

As the bus bounced along, I analyzed the situation of the onion. Was this a gesture as layered as the onion itself? Was there some cultural meaning I was supposed to understand? Or was it merely a friendly gesture? I couldn't imagine giving an onion to someone without it meaning something.

I looked at my two apples and decided to give the onion girl the bigger piece of fruit. Before I did that, however, I decided to taste this strange fruit or vegetable or whatever it was. It burst with juice as I bit into it. It had a pear-like texture and was very watery. It wasn't quite sweet, but it was refreshing. I chewed and slowly lost my nerve to talk to her as we swerved in stomach-lurching curves.

There was no more time for deliberation. This was a diplomatic mission, I told myself. The giving of fruit to a stranger. No big deal.

I walked quickly down the aisle and sat down. The onion girl looked over at me with surprise and took her earbuds out of her ears. I offered her a misshapen apple. “Shi shi,” she said and accepted the apple but didn’t eat it.

“My name is Sam,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Lizi,” the onion girl replied.

Lizi looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She had a small, oval face, and her skin was pale. Her long hair was dyed a reddish color. She seemed like she was into fitness, but had a soft handshake. We smiled at each other as I mimed eating her onion and rubbing my stomach to show her how good it was. I said “shi shi” about three or four times, and this would’ve been as far as our conversation would’ve gone if I didn’t have some paper on me. I took out my pocket-sized journal and wrote, “Can you read English?” and showed her the page.

She nodded her head vigorously, and we were in business. She was able to read and write basic phrases in English, but her speaking was barely there. Obviously, we were in China, and she knew more English than I knew Mandarin, so I felt relieved to even be able to communicate with her.

Over the next hour, we passed the notepad back and forth. I kept my questions simple and direct like:

Do you have a job?

Where are you going?

How long are you staying there?

It turned out that Lizi was headed to Shangri-La for two days. She had a job, but she didn’t know how to explain what it was. Her hobby was photography, and she was going on a trip to the mountains to take

some shots of the landscape. She asked me if I would like to come with her to her friend's guesthouse, and of course, I accepted.

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We were high in the mountains where the pale moon faced the setting sun on the opposite end of the sky. It was quiet. Men rode their tractors on the mountainous highways but there were hardly any other vehicles besides. The mountains were deep and folded endlessly across the rugged landscape. When I breathed the air through the open bus window, I inhaled old jalopy smoke, but the air was clean, and the sunshine felt raw.

The bus dropped Lizi and I off on what seemed like the only street in this western town. Dilapidated concrete blocks held empty shops that looked like they'd been gutted long ago. We passed a butcher shop that had bloodstains splattered around the walls. The interior was dark, and a horse's head was mounted on the door for no good reason.

Our guesthouse was located on the edge of Old Town and built on the side of a rocky slope. We were greeted by a pack of dogs that went berserk as soon as we stepped onto the property. Most of the canines looked like they could be coaxed into friendship with a biscuit, but there was one black Tibetan mastiff the size of a bear that was separated from the others. He emitted a snarl more like a bear than a dog and pulled at his restraints so hard that I felt the earth rattle. Dangling from the concrete wall where he was chained were a series of broken links still attached to the eyebolt. I prayed he wouldn't break free and maul me during our stay.

Lizi's friend was a tall Tibetan guy with a scraggly beard and shaggy hair. I was stunned by his handsomeness, but he was indifferent to his dashing looks. He wore baggy clothes that looked like no fashions I'd ever seen before yet seemed at the cutting edge of bohemian style. His face was smudged with the ashes of a woodfire and later I'd see him rubbing his face with a handful of snow. If he'd been born in the city, he could've been scouted to be a model for some French designer selling man-purses, but at heart he was a rustic who could drink his own piss if he had to. With a brief whistle, he calmed his pack of wild dogs. Afterwards, they were as playful as puppies.

The guesthouse was a work in progress, much of it still under construction with tools and lumber waiting for their turn. Its owner seemed to whisper little prayers onto everything he touched, with silent songs on his lips stoking a fire. The lounge was in the between stages of becoming a ski-lodge or a restaurant. It was unlit, wooden, and cold. There was a computer sitting on a makeshift bar, so there was at least evidence of electricity. Tourist season was over, and soon the roads would be frozen and impassable. We were his only guests.

The Tibetan Bohemian, whose name I never caught, took our bags upstairs to our separate rooms. There was no official register or discussion of payment, but I wasn't complaining. We spent an hour on the computer, perusing a photo gallery on Lizi's blog. She showed me her work from seasons past featuring Himalayan landscapes and shots from her hometown in Sichuan.

"That's beautiful. Is that Tibet?"

Lizi nodded, replying in Mandarin.

"Let's go there!" I said excitedly, pointing at the screen displaying intense scenes of mountains, mist, and steppes bursting with red autumn flora.

Lizi laughed and pantomimed herself shivering and then dying.

“So, we missed our window, huh?” I concluded with disappointment.

“Cold, cold,” she said in English, and shook her head. Then pointing at me, she said, “Die.”

“You think I missed my window?”

Lizi patted my arm, looking sympathetic. Then, brightening up, she started typing quickly on the keyboard. She pointed my attention back to the screen and showed an image of a temple. She pronounced its name, which I couldn't understand given her natural pronunciation, but with a few strokes of the keyboard, she was able to produce an English translation.

“Sumtsenling Monastery,” I read aloud. “Is that where we're going tomorrow?”

She nodded and pantomimed the acts of sleeping, waking up, and riding a bike. I understood what she meant. Night was falling and it was too late to do any sightseeing.

It was anyone's guess what was available to eat in Hotel Shangri-La besides dog food and snow, so we ventured into Old Town for dinner. Before deciding on a restaurant, we stopped by the few souvenir shops that were open and spilling light into the otherwise black and frozen streets. There was one shop with an array of flashy, decorative knives that caught my eye, but there was no way I'd be able to get those through customs.

We decided on Tibetan hot-pot and ducked inside for both food and warmth. There was a firepit in the middle of each table for cooking yak stew, so for a time I was able to feel a thawing sensation in my feet and fingers. We ordered our meal and soon enjoyed the glow of a charcoal pot. The salty, heavy broth tasted fatty and nourishing, with big chunks of meat and stewed vegetables kept hot by a brazier. Lizi

alternated her attention between her food, her DSLR camera, and her phone as I busied myself with a week's worth of updates in my journal.

When I finished writing, I tried to think of something to say, but there was nothing that I could express that felt true in that moment. I wanted to tell her about how my trip from East to West had allowed me to see the beauty of China, and how I'd felt on this journey like a man painted into the landscape of an old Chinese ink painting, standing tiny and invisible before the mountains. There was the quality of silence, of being still, of being frozen, of having a respite from life's journey before being compelled to move on.

Of course, I couldn't express any of these things to Lizi. I could hardly even think of what to say about tomorrow. The only thing that seemed worth expressing was the thing we had right then. The simplest of pleasures: Being warm, being full, and having light.

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When we returned to the guesthouse, the Tibetan Bohemian and his family were sitting around a firepit. Despite the freezing cold and pitch darkness, the fire was roaring, and its warmth was inviting. Lizi and I joined them as they sat by the fire sharing stories and laughing. I immediately got the sense that without TV or high-speed internet, this was their nightly form of entertainment. They seemed utterly content, however, and I began to question my own culture down to the wiring. In that moment, I was completely lost and at home.

The Bohemian was a father and held a swaddled baby in his lap. His wife was a homely-looking woman, but just from a glance I could tell she was nurturing and kind. Also with them was a guy I'd noticed lurking in the unlit darkness of the construction zone before Lizi and

I went to dinner. I took him to be the carpenter, but maybe he was a cousin or brother-in-law. He was a rough-looking sort, drunk and red-faced, and he made a lasting impression on me when I saw him brushing his teeth with a cigarette still in his lips.

The family took turns telling stories, full of animation, and laughing about things I couldn't understand. Lizi joined in at polite intervals, but it was clear that she was a frequent member of the guesthouse. For my part, I sat quietly without attempting to pass notes. It was easier to be a part of the fire in silence.

They talked for hours and shared their tea. The cousin carpenter had spiked his own mug, apparently, for as the night wore on, he got progressively more intoxicated, smoking cigarette after cigarette, and lighting them in the open fire while nearly burning his face off. According to Lizi's translation, he was adamant about his sobriety, proclaiming that no matter how much he drank, he could never get drunk. Before I called it a night though, I saw him burn off one of his eyebrows, and he finally admitted he was a little drunk.

I announced that I was going to bed, and they smiled and pointed the way up a dark stairwell. I bowed and thanked them for a pleasant evening, and then felt my way along like a blind man until I found my way upstairs. I was engulfed in total darkness and fumbled around like a drunk until I heard a creak behind me. Lizi touched my arm and led me to my room. I sensed her smile in the darkness as she whispered, "Good night" in English, and closed my door for me.

I stood there for a moment in the dark, realizing now that she was in the room across from mine. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking of possibilities. I wasn't in love with her or anything, but she was nice, and she did give me that onion. Maybe an onion was just an onion. What happens when you peel it layer by layer? What's in the middle, in its core, that defines it in the end?

These philosophical thoughts quickly waned into more pressing needs, like getting underneath a blanket. It was absolutely freezing in that room. I don't think I'd ever been colder in my life. I located my rucksack at the foot of the bed and began putting on as many layers of clothing as I could. I wore four layers of socks, three pants, three sweaters, and stretched my warmest clothes to the stitches. I felt like I was wearing a fat suit, and I still felt the wintry air getting down to my bones.

I jumped into bed and found the rough heavy blanket and got beneath it. The hardest part wasn't the cold itself, but the fact that there was no escape from it. When you're on the winter streets, your brain gets stimulated into action and sustains you with memories of warmth and soft little assurances that soon you'll be home thawing in the kitchen with a hot drink. But here, there was no such chance.

I pulled the fur-lined hood of my parka over my head and curled into a tight ball beneath the heavy woolen blankets. The blankets were far from smooth and were so heavy that it seemed like they could iron a wrinkled shirt if you laid it out properly. I rubbed my arms, legs, feet, and hands but it didn't seem to do any good. There was no part of my body that didn't feel the cold air stabbing at it with prickly needles of ice.

How can they sleep like this? Could it be possible that Lizi had some secret heater that I didn't know about?

I got out of bed and searched for a light, hoping that this whole no-electricity thing was a misunderstanding. I felt around the walls in my fat suit, blowing on my gloved hands. Was there a heater? I spanned the room's dimensions in the dark hoping to kick some space-heater over and find this golden key. "What a dummy I am!" I would say and laugh it off and finally be able to sleep in this subzero bedroom. All the

while, I tried to tell myself that this frantic activity would create some body heat.

Finally, I went back downstairs and signaled to the Bohemian that I was a tad chilly. Everyone else had gone to bed and he was just putting out the fire. He understood immediately. He led me back to my room, and moments later, walked in holding something in his arms. In his teeth was a pocket-torch. As the light skirted around the room from the flashlight in his mouth, I could see that truly, aside from wooden floors and walls, there was nothing.

The Bohemian laid out one more blanket on top of the twenty pounds of wool that already lay on the bed. He touched my shoulder and apologized, knowing that foreigners were delicate to these subzero conditions, but assured me that I would make it. I would live. I believed him. I had no choice but to believe him and crawled back inside the blankets.

Back under the covers, it was a tiny bit warmer, but felt as if someone were laying on top of me. For the next few hours, I played the breathing or freezing game. When you're cold, you hide your whole body beneath the heavy blankets. When you start to run out of oxygen, you take the blankets off your face and let that cold air slap you in the face. You can get creative and just raise up one side of the blanket a little so that only a sharp pinch of cold from the breathing hole can touch you, but this is hard to do, for as soon as the vacuum is broken, the cold begins to seep in, and little blue arrows start pointing down at your body like a winter forecast.

I wondered what Lizi was doing. I thought about knocking on her door and asking to get in bed with her, using the excuse of needing body heat to survive. I entertained myself with the thought of us holding each other for warmth, and her icy hand eventually reaching down to touch my shrunken gonads which by now were the size of

beans. No, I would suffer alone. I would suffer and be cold. I could not breathe.

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The next morning, I woke up feeling like a car wreck. I came downstairs and found Lizi seated in the lounge sipping a cup of hot tea. She looked as if she had gotten the best sleep of her life! I was tempted to go hunting for some secret thermal blanket hidden in her room, but decided to just be happy the sun was up, and that the temperature was warming to near-zero.

The Bohemian's wife offered me a cup of tea and I gladly accepted. Lizi bounced their little baby on her lap, and I watched through the window as the Bohemian tossed morsels of breakfast to his pack of dogs, their tails slicing the frozen air like propellers. The drunken carpenter was in the courtyard, shirtless with a cigarette in his mouth while taking a shower, spraying himself down with the hose. Even the Tibetan mastiff was enjoying the morning, gnawing happily on what looked to be a horse's leg.

After tea, we decided to head into Old Town to get breakfast. There were prayer flags flapping in the wind. In the center of this town circle was a white stupa capped in gold.

We approached the sight of steam and the bodies gathered around. In Shangri-La, there's no Starbucks. There's no such thing as coffee either. There's only one thing on the menu and one thing only, and if you're ever in these parts of the Himalayas, you'd better learn to love it.

Yak butter tea, baby!

Imagine my shock and disappointment when we approached the rising steam and found there to be zero dumplings or anything of the kind. I was handed a cup of yak butter tea and a piece of flatbread. The “tea”, or whatever it is, has the consistency of gravy. It’s a taste that’s hard to describe. It’s hearty, salty, and tastes like yak balls. And look here, a whole cup of it!

“When in Shangri-La, do as the Tibetans do,” I toasted out loud to Lizi, though she failed to understand the pun. I watched as she handled her yak butter tea delicately and gracefully. I could tell she didn’t love it, but she seemed okay. How bad could it be?

I took a foolhardy sip and nearly choked. “Whoa! This...this is something.”

I felt twenty pairs of eyes watching me to see if I liked it.

“How can this be a staple food?” I wondered. “What nutrition am I getting out of this besides salt? Is this real butter? Why is it so thick?”

I swallowed the cup down in agonizing gulps, going for speed. It was like liquified foie-gras, saltier than an over-salted fried egg, and in the worst way possible, like someone took a porkchop, threw it into a blender, and mixed it up until it dribbled like apple sauce.

The crowd which had now formed around me seemed to egg me on, loving the fact that I was downing the yak butter tea like there was no tomorrow. It was like I was in a beer-drinking contest.

After I finished, one guy with a rosy face and a jovial disposition smiled and patted me on the arm as if to say, “Get this guy another yak butter tea!” as he walked off with another round in his own mug.

The proud matron then offered me more. The pleased look in her eye made me not refuse.

I struggled with my second mug.

Lizi and I rented bikes as tour guides called out to us in friendly voices. Beside us, groups of tourists rode in packs decked out in bright mountain climbing gear and reflective sunglasses. Snowy peaks loomed in the distance, and before long, we reached Sumtsenling Monastery.

The monastery was surrounded by several large, important-looking buildings built on levels, like terraces. The temple's roofs were plated with a golden material that made it visible from miles away, like a mythical city gleaming in the sun.

When we reached the parking lot, we saw tour buses and a pair of Tibetan girls in their twenties sitting on a heavy blanket with a huge brown Tibetan mastiff and a puppy. Beside them was a costume for taking photos. I asked how much it was, but Lizi shook her head emphatically, indicating that it was a rip-off.

"Brother," they called. "Take one photo with Tibetan dog, won't you?"

Something about the way they called me "brother" made me unable to refuse.

"Well, I am a dog-lover, you know," I said chuckling and taking my place between the two pretty girls dressed in their traditional costumes. I felt the need to explain myself, to let them know the deal between me and Lizi. "We're just friends," I added as they arranged the leash for me to hold the mastiff. "We met on the bus. I hardly know her, but we're photographers. It's part of the job."

They handed me the puppy and got ready to take the picture. They stepped out of picture and one of them held up the camera.

"It's exciting work," I called out as they held up a one, two, three signal. "But you know what the best part is? Meeting new people."

"One more time, brother. You must not talk and smile!"

"Alright, get up, you fat fuck," I muttered and tugged on the mastiff's leash. He had decided to lay down in the middle of the shot. "Come on, let's do this."

Despite my tugs on its leash, the beast wouldn't budge. It only rose to its feet after one of the girls prodded him mercilessly. I held the squirming puppy, gripped the leash, and smiled.

Once inside the gates, we began walking through a small village that was composed of tiers and levels. I felt like I was inside of a retro arcade game, the way we had to go across and up some stairs, across and up some stairs, higher and higher up the levels to reach the temple.

We passed monk after monk as they strolled through the village. Some of them wore yellow woolen caps, others left their brown heads bare beaming in the sun. I noticed some of them did wear Jordan's, which I guess were gifts from the outside world. Besides that, they were penniless, without possessions, without women, and living together in this frozen heap. Most of the monks seemed undeniably cheerful, which I sort of expected, and in a way, understood. Could I ever do it? Could I give up...everything?

I mulled this over as Lizi struck a pose against a wall. I snapped a photo of her and thought about living with my right hand forever, the sound of one hand clapping, the loss of chaos, the discovery of unity and inner-peace when it knows that there is no woman to be had.

What was I saying? What was I thinking? Was I thinking about shaving my head and becoming a monk?

I can always renounce the world when everything fails me, my relationships and career. At least there's always that option. It's better than becoming an alcoholic or committing suicide.

At the top of the stairs, a little girl stood with her younger brother in their traditional garments. Their mom put a lamb in the little girl's arms and smiled, encouraging us to take a photo with her kids. I

checked with Lizi, but she was hesitant. We began to move on when the little girl started singing her ABC's and 123's and I basically fell apart.

"You guys are freaking adorable!"

I took their picture and squeezed their dirty little cheeks. When we began to move on, the mom became irate and started chiding us in Mandarin.

"What did we do?" I asked Lizi in horror, realizing that it might've been a cultural taboo to pinch their cheeks.

"Pay photo," Lizi replied flatly.

"Pay photo? I might not even get these developed! Pretty big assumption to think that I'd print a photo of you, don't you think? What do I look like, your dad?" I cried in outrage.

The little girl flipped on me instantly and began sticking her little hand out, demanding that I cough up the dough. Suddenly, she didn't seem so cute anymore. Her or her little lamb.

"I'm eating your lamb when I get back," I growled at her and shoved the money in her hand.

As we moved onto the final set of stairs, another little girl dressed in the same outfit popped out with an even sorrier-looking lamb, waiting for the leftovers.

"A, B, C, D, E, F—" she sang.

"Forget it, kid. We heard that one already."

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At the summit of the small mountain, a golden dome capped the high entryway. There was a heavy brown curtain parted in the middle to reveal a sanctuary full of burgundy-robed monks seated and chanting

meditations within the incense-scented darkness. There was a sunny courtyard outside where villagers sat gathered in a communal picnic. It seemed that we had happened to arrive on a holiday.

Lizi and I waited until the meditation session was over before we entered the sanctuary. The deep gravelly murmurs of “Om” ceased and soon after the monks exited the sanctuary with cheerful faces. Even so, the now silent sanctuary seemed to vibrate from the deep rattle of vocal cords.

Long sticks of incense burned and smoldered with spidery blue swarths of smoke rising into the gold-choked darkness. In the center of the smoky room was a large, seated Buddha. He was lean and mean in the traditional Tibetan-style.

Murals decorated every inch of space, and even the ceilings were bedazzled in mosaics. The images were like the pages out of a children’s book, like some dream or nightmare of heaven and hell.

Lizi was able to tell me as much as I could see with my own eyes, but beyond that, I had to decipher the images for myself. I was able to guess that the royal prince-like figure was Buddha, however, this Buddha had fighting skills, a mean mustache, and ripped muscles. This Buddha was out for blood.

We had our cameras out when a monk materialized and asked us not to take pictures. He was friendly and enthusiastic, and guided us around the room whispering to Lizi in what sounded like a passionate explanation of the different pictures we were seeing, which she then translated for me.

At the start of the story, Buddha is in heaven in a temple at the top of the clouds, surrounded by beautiful naked goddesses, doing whatever it is gods and goddesses do, which seems to largely consist of fornication and eating fruit.

On the next wall, a demon, perhaps an evil brother, appears with the express purpose of fucking it all up. Soon, a whole swarm of demons makes a mess of this once-perfect universe. The peaceful blue skies are run amok with winged half-man half-animal creatures which fly around and drop fireballs everywhere.

An all-out war breaks out on the third wall, and the fourth wall shows no clear victor.

The myth seems like others I'd heard before, but in its regard to birth and rebirth, the formation of the world, and the origin of man out of the cosmos, it's a bit different.

I wondered then if I could burn the pages of my journal once my journey was complete. Would I be able to set fire to this book and to myself as well?

I watched in silence as young monks, just boys in robes really, ran around as a white dog chased them, yipping and wagging its tail a thousand miles an hour.

Lizi and I rode our bikes into the afternoon as the sun hung high with the silver moon in the afternoon sky. A young farmer and his pretty wife rode the tractor in the field. Her headscarf was bright purple against the blue sky and a sea of yellow grain. We stopped by a pagoda along the road and ate ramen noodles.

"Don't go," Lizi said suddenly.

I looked up at her mid-slurp, coming towards the last of the noodles, the final bite. She seemed concerned, searching for the words in her mind, but finding nothing which could convey whatever she was feeling. I drank the spicy soup as she used her phone. After a moment or two, she began speaking in rapid Mandarin to someone on the other line. I took my last sips as she handed me the phone. "My friend," she said.

"Hello?" I said, taking the phone.

“Hello?” said the other line.

It was a girl.

“Hi.”

“Hello, I am Lizi’s friend. She wants me to tell you not to go to Litang. It is very cold and not good time now. Please don’t go to Litang.”

“Oh,” I said, somewhat deflated. “What’s your name?”

“Bye,” she said cheerfully.

I handed the phone to Lizi who smiled and then spoke in rapid Mandarin for about ten minutes. It was nice of Lizi not to wish me death in the mountains, but that wasn’t going to stop me from going to Litang. I was destined to go to Litang. Alex and Nick had told me, “Go to Litang.” How could I pass that up?

Lizi suggested we get a ride into town, to which I happily agreed. If I had to pedal up another hill, I thought I would die.

Lizi spotted an older man who she sweet-talked into giving us a ride. It didn’t take much. He instantly agreed to it as if he was just waiting around for someone to give a lift to. The funny thing was, he wasn’t even a taxi driver. Who knows what his real job was? He got right to it and started putting our bikes in the back of his truck. We hopped in and drove off watching all the countryside disappear down the mountains, the dusty road, and a single bus disappearing into the distance.

The half-moon rose on the blue horizon when we said goodbye. There was a single bench waiting in the mountains on the edge of the world. We stood in silence, unsure of what to say to one another now when we had already run out of things to say. I wanted to wish her luck with her photography. Perhaps the next time I gazed at my desktop wallpaper of the Tibetan steppes in autumn, it would be Lizi’s photo

sending me to serenity through the window of my screen. I guess I wanted to say thank you, but no words came.

“Well, this is it,” I began as Lizi’s bus approached, but Lizi didn’t seem to hear me. She reached for the journal which I held in my hand, wrote her email address in my notebook, and pleaded with me once more not to go to Litang.

“Okay,” I said in a way that meant, “I have heard your utterance and processed your words. I understand what you’ve said.”

Lizi came close to kiss me on the cheek, but at the last minute she pulled away, perhaps not wanting to kiss a dead man. I watched her get on the bus, feeling as if I still held an apple in my hand. Behind a dusty window were her face and those red-tinted sunglasses, her white baseball cap, and her palm waving me goodbye, and then this memory was obscured by a cloud of dust.

As the bus trundled off toward the mountains, I glanced at the page in my journal where she had written her contact. There was no email address or phone number or word of farewell to be found. Instead, there was a childlike drawing of an onion.

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# THE POOL HALL KID

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Litang was far from easy to get to, which made it the perfect destination. There was no direct bus route, and only one bus from Shangri-La which left at the crack of dawn. I learned this fact the hard way. The thought of spending another freezing night at the Hotel Shangri-La made me want to jump off a mountain, so I decided to hitch a ride. I hung around the only bus stop in town, utilizing my now fluent pantomiming skills and receiving much guffawing and snorts of disbelief when the drivers learned that I was trying to get to Litang.

I was not to be dissuaded. Turning around felt unthinkable, as if I'd be failing in my mission, whatever that meant. I didn't even know what was in Litang except for more monasteries. Yet an undeniable sense of destiny compelled me like someone was waiting for me to arrive. How would I know unless I went into the darkness, into the unknown, and risked my neck doing it?

Of course, this made perfect sense since I was now running on fumes. I had slept poorly the last two days and was freezing my ass off.

I was dirty and disheveled on the edge of the known world, comprehending little, untethered from reality, and absolutely loving the ride.

I was just preparing to shoulder the weight of my rucksack to walk the road once again when a stocky man donning a Siberian hat appeared.

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“Xiangcheng?” he asked, perhaps having heard from his comrades that this weird English-speaking Asian guy was looking to freeze to death in the mountains. He was surrounded by a ragtag group of seven Tibetans in weathered coats, some of them looking like outlaws, but in a good way.

“Litang?” I asked.

“Xiangcheng,” the man in the Siberian hat repeated. He pointed his finger to his open palm and then pointed out to the distance and said, “Litang.”

I nodded and followed them out into the dusty streets. We piled into a small red sedan that normally would've seated six, but somehow saddled two more than its recommended capacity. It was something like a game of Tetris or a circus act, but fortunately for me, the Tibetans knew the score and arranged themselves in such a way that none of their cigarettes would burn their comrade's faces or mustaches. I was very glad to be seated comfortably on the passenger side. I knew these were privileges handed to me as the only foreigner in their troop, and possibly out of respect that I was the only non-smoker.

The roads were smooth despite the rugged scenery and elevation. No, they weren't, what the hell am I saying? It struck me at some point that I'd never been so far from an ocean before. This epiphany came and went as we avoided another head-on collision with a lorry as a

Himalayan game of chicken ensued. Let's see who pulls over first, you cowards!

Trucks blew their engines at full speed around narrow mountain bends that seemed like they were designed by a sadistic child with a Hot-Wheels demolition derby set. Relentless honking occurred wherever drivers raced each other downhill.

Cigarettes were lit almost as if on rotation. Our soundtrack for this roller-coaster played some sweet, feathery little pop song, the kind of tune listened to on repeat by schoolgirls dreaming of their high school crushes. This Chinese pop song comforted the Tibetan band of revolutionaries in what was otherwise a politically alienated existence. But maybe they just didn't have any other songs, because after a couple hours there were technical difficulties, the tape popped, and then we simply rode in silence.

I was initiated into the gang when we pulled over for a piss-stop. We all lined up and let our streams fly into the churning ice-green water below. Our urine mingled like a blood oath and then we hit the road once more.

"Bamu shan," the Siberian-hatted driver said later and pointed into the distance. It was the highest mountain on the horizon, a king rising above shorter mountains and the only one that was tall enough to be covered in snow. From Shangri-La, we continued towards it like a beacon of light in the perfect blue sky.

We drove higher in elevation where the blue shadows of evergreens surrounded. The tall trees bore autumn needles and yellow berries and the hills were rugged and sandy. We could see small towns in vast fields of reddish-brown expanse. Fortress-like homes were built upon the tall cliffs overlooking a green river. Stupas with prayer flags colored the scene.

Along the banks where the green river would flow a little more calmly were explosions of autumn unlike anything I had seen before. I could do little to capture the scenes on my Canon with the jolting speed our driver preferred. These were scenes of ordinary life for everyone in the car. I was the only one who wanted to slow down and take pictures of an orchard of apple trees and their yellow leaves, or the red and orange deciduous colors swaying above the green waters, wild cascades over rocks and falls.

Along our drive, we passed by cows and goats and pigs which wandered the streets unattended as children sat outside of a small soda shop and workers picnicked underneath the shade of an autumn grove. Young men and old timers sat outside a saloon, smoking cigarettes with unflinching eyes, the wild dust whirling behind us.

It was evening when we arrived in Xiangcheng, my gateway further west. I thanked the Siberian-hatted driver and gave him his pay plus some loose cigarettes which I'd learned to carry around as gifts in these situations. He grunted in appreciation. I bid farewell to my comrades as they grinned their goodbyes and faded into the liquid dark, each to his own destination; disappearing finally, leaving me to wander the street alone.

There was only one main street that ran through the entire town, with not a single traffic light to slow anyone down. There was no intersection, and it wouldn't have made sense to have one. It was that kind of town. I could see where the town began and ended as I stood in the middle of Main Street. The action seemed to be right where I was standing, in front of a seedy-looking motel. A stone's throw away, there was a bleary KTV bar and a noodle restaurant. That was about it.

Across from this impression of a downtown, the residential area was built upwards along a hillside that was sprinkled with concrete

block houses, a small hospital, a school, and a monastery at the top of the slope. It had the simplicity of a child's vision of a town, complete with impenetrable mountains surrounding it on all sides. There would be no way out of here until the crack of dawn.

I stopped in the only restaurant on the street and set my rucksack down on the concrete floor. I gave my order which didn't take much time, as there was no menu, and the noodles only came in one flavor: mystery meat and greasy broth.

As I settled in, I took in my surroundings. It almost felt cliché how third-world it felt with the naked lightbulbs, wooden tables, and the eclectic assortment of battered chairs. The lighting was bad, and the walls were painted turquoise in a way that reminded me of toothpaste.

An old man and his grandson were watching a Chinese drama on a small TV set mounted in the corner next to an umbrella stand. Grandma, I assumed, was making my noodles in the back. In what was starting to become my signature optimism, I started to perk up. I even felt excited. "These might be the best noodles I'll ever eat," I thought. "Think about it: a tiny restaurant in the middle of nowhere, the cheap price, the crappy color on this wall job, the donated furniture. It's perfect!"

I could almost hear Anthony Bourdain's ghost saying something like, "Here we are, on the western edge of Sichuan Province. Surrounding us are the majestic Himalayas. Everywhere you look you'll see stupas with colorful Tibetan flags rippling in the ferocious wind. Monasteries bid you to do some soul-searching while you're here, but when you're not contemplating your former lives or self-immolating in protest of an authoritarian government quietly removing the Tibetans from their homeland, be sure to stop in this noodle shop in a town called Xiangcheng. The noodle shop has no name, but you'll know you're here because it's the only restaurant in town..."

I imagined Mr. Bourdain expounding further on the merits of different styles of noodles, but then my dinner appeared, and I stopped monologuing to myself in another man's voice. It was time to eat.

The noodles came in a plain white bowl filled with brown soup and meatballs. "How unassuming!" I thought excitedly while guessing what four-legged creatures had been mashed together to create these charming little spheres of protein.

I inhaled the aroma from the steam and detected a scent somewhat chemical in nature. I proceeded like an epicure, tasting the soup daintily and swished the greasy soup around my mouth. After a moment of decision, I reached for the spices on the table and went heavy on the cumin.

If I'd entered the restaurant with any hopes, I exited two dollars poorer with a belly full of MSG bringing me back to my senses. The slummy little inn I'd visited two doors down was a bit like that soup. It was a room in theory, but was it really? No, it was worse. I would've asked to sleep in the noodle restaurant if I could've. At least then I would've had access to a TV.

The front door greeted me dark stains with a matching color splattered on the wall in the foyer, looking exactly like someone had been shot and then stumbled backwards through the door, and then bled to death against the wall in a slow collapse. Upstairs, a horrifying odor punched me in the nose. Behind the front desk were five different clocks telling different times with no indication of what time zone they would be representing if they were even working, which they weren't.

The lady in charge was with some of her friends in the backroom, all of them seeming to be experts in ignoring the utter stink. They were laughing, playing cards, and watching the same drama that the grandfather and the boy were watching in the restaurant. The innkeeper wore gold-rimmed glasses, a fur hat, and a mountain-climber's parka

to keep herself warm. There was no heat in the hallways, and I suspected she was keeping costs low in the rooms as well.

“Hi, I’m looking for a room,” I said in English, knowing that this much communication was a mere formality. She knew that I had no options. My voice sounded defeated as it exited my body, and the innkeeper’s eyeglasses seemed to glint as she read this in my faltering tone. She smiled and wrote a number on a piece of paper which showed me that the room was very cheap. I could’ve haggled, certain that I was the only guest there, but I decided to wait until I saw the room. She said a few inviting words in Mandarin, took up a big key ring, then led me upstairs.

I followed her up a creaky wooden staircase that felt like I might fall through with one misplaced step. My only consolation was the self-assurance that I would just pass out and wake up as early as possible.

As the matron led me into the guestroom, however, it was so bleak that I was rendered speechless. It seemed more like a hospice than an inn. There was a big room with two rows of identical beds, each one alike in their undesirability to be slept in. Even in the poor lighting I could tell that laundering the sheets was not a priority in this establishment. I also noticed a nail sticking out of the floor that was so big that it could spike my feet clean through, despite the rubber soles of my sneakers.

It was clear that this lady had a real racket going. I knew that I was cornered, but in desperation I told her that I would think it over and hurried back out into the streets, frantically searching up and down for any place that would offer a room and a bed. Within minutes I was back. She had me right where she wanted me. It was kind of her not to up the price, seeing that I was totally hopeless. But then again, she knew from the beginning that I was just a fly in her web. I accepted the room without further debate. She said something about the missing

floorboards, to which we both had a laugh, but inside, I was gagging at the evil piss smell coming from the bathroom.

There was only one course of action now: I would have to get as drunk as possible, come back, pass out, and then leave before daybreak to escape that horrible smell. I decided to check out the KTV for some guaranteed happiness in a bottle when I noticed light spilling out from a corner and heard the soft clacking of billiard balls.

It was a smoky little pool hall with six shaky-looking tables in varying degrees of disrepair. Some of the tables had broken legs and were depending on botched surgeries to remain level. The felt was torn on most except for one where it seemed to be run by the neighborhood gangsters. Regardless of these inadequacies, the local pool-sharks played a good game. It seemed that they'd learned to play with the table, curving their shots around the frays and tears.

It seemed like the place where the local roughs learned to smoke their first cigarettes and have their first sips of beer. The older guys wore Puma jackets and hoodies with slim gold chains. These were the hustlers of this border town, though what they hustled exactly was uncertain. The hustlers-in-training stayed at their places on the sidelines, doing more trash-talking than playing, gambling with the meager sum of coins they had among them.

This was just the story I'd created in my head. I had no one to talk to, and no one who could understand anything that I said. I hung around in the back and watched the action with the local guys paying no mind. It wasn't until The Pool Hall Kid called me over to his table that anyone seemed to notice that there was a foreigner in their midst.

The Pool Hall Kid was racking balls when I heard him calling me over. He had a quiet voice, not shy, but trying not to draw everyone's attention to me either. "Hey," he seemed to say in Tibetan. "Wanna play?"

The Pool Hall Kid was good-looking, with long black hair hanging in his eyes. He probably would've been popular with the ladies if he didn't have so much on his plate. He had a way about him that made him seem a lot older than he was. Like one of those guys who's all aloof and then you find out that he's the hero of the movie.

"Where are you from?" he asked in Tibetan, which I could not understand.

"Huh?" I shrugged.

He responded in Mandarin, figuring I must've been Chinese.

"USA," I said, giving him a "V" sign with my fingers to show that I came in peace.

"Got it," he said, nodding. For the rest of the game, we spoke in our own native tongues, not understanding each other, but not really needing to either. We talked to each other the whole time, even though we didn't understand a word the other was saying. All I knew was that I'd never played pool without chalk before, but I now understood its purpose. After I lost the third game, I decided to take a break from billiards and get drunk. I told The Pool Hall Kid that I'd be back later, and I drifted back out into the street looking for booze.

I walked over to the KTV sign burning in red neon. In case you've never been, a KTV is a place where songs are sung, and drinks are drunk. One of the bar girls will surely join you and pour you beers, all the while helping herself to a little charity as well. If she likes you, trusts you, and believes everything you say about how the light just sparkles off her eyes, she'll tell you a sad story about a sick grandma at home who may or may not exist, hoping you'll drop a couple bills on the table as you fumble for your wallet in the dark.

I was greeted by a blast of music as soon as I walked in. Three girls in cowboy hats and traditional Tibetan dresses whisked me inside and sat me by the bar. I was surrounded and questioned, then teased when

they realized that I was a foreigner. “Just another tumbleweed,” they joked. “He’ll be easily lured by our dark eye-shadow and fake-gold tassels. Bring the beer!”

The bar was empty, save one table of Chinese businessmen who looked as though they were already lit for Christmas. The saucy monkeys were belting out tunes to a big karaoke screen which cast silvery shadows on an otherwise empty dance floor. Bottles populated their table along with foam-ringed beer mugs. In the middle of the table stood one empty bottle of whisky whose price-tag would keep this place afloat through another long winter.

The girls tried to entertain me with conversation, but the music was too loud. There was also a lack of shared vocabulary, and the effort was too exhausting. I opted for silent reflection as the girls looked at their phones. By the time I washed down my third Tsingtao, the businessmen left the club. The bar was quiet without the wailing of their power-ballads, and I was secretly hoping one of the girls would say, “Finally, they’re gone. Let’s get nasty!” and either get on top of my lap or hit me in the back of the head with a pool cue. I was beginning to hope for a concussion just to sleep through the night without having to smell that evil dark odor again.

I was debating whether to get another beer when the DJ, also donned in a cowboy hat, came down from the booth and began flirting with the ladies. He seemed to pick their spirits up, and why not? He was clearly the sexiest man on this Himalayan peak. I couldn’t deny the guy was handsome, and clearly, he could have his pick of the three. He went for the same girl I was gunning for, the one with the curves and the golden tassels hanging from the tiara she wore; the one with the cat-like eyes.

When I noticed the lingering smile he reserved for the girl with the tassels, I felt my ears burn ever so slightly and began to sink into a

jealous stew. Something about his whole demeanor left me in a winter of discontent, and I was now determined to remain at the bar until I relieved him of some dignity. There was an excess of rhinestone and sparkle on his cowboy vest and that hat that was simply too much! He made a crack aimed in my direction that made the girls all laugh, then glanced at me to see if I got it. Oh, I got it alright.

The silence was tense, and I grimaced in a drunken leer muttering something about sissy cowboys. Of course, the diamond cowboy had an answer. He went back to his booth and threw on a circle-dance record.

I felt myself being abandoned at the bar as the three girls rushed to the dance floor, the four of them now moving gracefully in a circle, kicking, and turning and waving their arms in perfect unison. The way they danced was so natural it was like a swirling wind pattern they had memorized and cultivated as part of their DNA. They looked beautiful, dancing there like that, without the slightest hint of sexual desperation, self-consciousness, routine, or boredom. They invited me to join them, but I sensed something happening between him and the girl with the gold tassels, and I felt depressed as she exchanged looks with him before spinning away with that little smile. I suddenly wanted them to get married, have children, and live the rest of their days in a little wooden home on a green hillside at the foot of the majestic Himalayas.

I decided to leave them in the KTV bar, feeling like shit now that the dark hole in which I could soak in my sorrows seemed much happier than I had imagined myself to be. I wanted to get the hell out of this town where they had nothing material and yet seemed perfectly content within themselves. I was just a loner, wandering in the darkness.

I reentered the pool hall, a little more intoxicated, slightly depressed, and watched The Pool Hall Kid finish up a game with one of his friends, a short baby-faced jokester with his cap on sideways.

"Gentlemen! How doth the tide ride tonight?" I called out lushly.

I stood beside their table, joining them, but not really joining them; just hanging around for lack of a better plan.

"Looks like this guy's been to the KTV," The Jokester said to The Pool Hall Kid, which gave them both a chuckle.

"We'll show him a good time," The Pool Hall Kid said. "It's our duty."

He then skipped a shot across the fray and clicked the 8-ball into the corner pocket.

"Let's do it," The Jokester agreed.

The two of them dropped their sticks onto the table and ended the game. The Pool Hall Kid motioned for me to follow, and the three of us went out into the street. We walked five minutes down the road towards the end of town where Main Street disappeared into blackness. The Pool Hall Kid dipped into a mom-and-pop shop and came out with some sodas. There we stopped and they smoked cigarettes for a while, the three of us sipping sodas. I started to sense that we'd reached our destination.

"So, this is it, huh boys? Another night in front of the mom-and-pop shop," I rambled drunkenly. "I'm prepared to do anything with you guys. I just want real experiences! If hanging out, smoking cigarettes, and hawking loogies is it, I'm right here with you, guys."

A few more of their boys materialized from the darkness. The Pool Hall Kid introduced us vaguely, and I shook hands with each of them. We trucked up the hill through a dark alley and arrived at what appeared to be a PC Room that had forgotten to pay its electric bill.

As we entered, I began panicking, fearing that I'd unknowingly agreed to participate in a burglary.

"Whoa, Pool Hall Kid! Talk to me! Where are we going? I don't want to spend the rest of my twenties hammering rocks in a quarry! I know how these things work. The next thing that'll happen is you'll toss me a mask and a flashlight and tell me to keep an eye out for the cops. Alright, fuck it! Let's steal some computers. What's the score?"

But there was something else happening entirely. We were far from alone. There was a vibration, a veil of sweat and a wave of heat which grew in intensity as we ascended the stairs. Whatever that sound was, I knew we were being taken there. It felt as if we were being sucked into a blackhole, the darkness swallowing us, and before I knew it, the humidity in the air began to taste like beer, the music was no longer a distant rattling but a complete jarring of bone structure, and finally, a door.

We were confronted by a bouncer who was at that moment tossing out some inebriated lightweight in the middle of throwing up on himself. The bouncer gave us a nod and we went inside.

The club was popping off like one hundred bottles of beer were being shaken and splashed in the air to the beat of some truly horrendous techno. It reminded me of a rave, only without the glow-sticks or Ecstasy. The techno was upbeat, happy, and sounded like a demented dentist was playing with his drill and blowing whistles at the same time.

I'd been to nightclubs before, and there were all the familiar markers even though we were in the Himalayas. There was a long line of girls waiting for the bathroom, combined with a busy combination of cigarette smoke and blue light as they texted on their phones. Inside the dancehall, disco-lights splashed the room with rainbows in a fog

filled with dancers, and long black hair was flung back, with hands waving in the air and bodies jumping like a mosh pit.

The Pool Hall Kid led us through the club to a VIP section set just apart, but in no way different from the rest of the club. He then introduced me, or explained me rather, to the members present. I saluted and ninety-degree bowed with such a fervor that I hit my head on the glass table. The Boss was a fat guy with a ponytail, mustache, and wore mirrored glasses reflecting blue light. He gave a throaty chuckle indicating I was to sit down. I could only guess what The Pool Hall Kid told them to explain my presence. "I don't know who he is or where he's from, but he's alright."

This seemed to satisfy them, and the flunkies began filling my shot-glass with beer. That was how they did it here, shots of beer. "Genius!" I proclaimed after the first shot. "You get a little more bang for your buck. It gives you more oxygen to the brain, and besides, who wants to spend a thousand yuan on a bottle of vodka, am I right boys? Am I right?"

They all cheered merrily and clinked their shot glasses with mine. Everyone was drinking except for The Pool Hall Kid, who had some kind of business to take care of with The Boss. I could see his liquid eyes intense in the darkness, staring beyond the dance floor, listening carefully to whatever conspiracy The Boss had him in on.

I wanted to tell The Pool Hall Kid not to do it. Whatever it was, it wasn't worth it. I could see it in his eyes. But before I could open my yap, I was distracted by The Jokester who poured me another shot and encouraged me to go to the dance floor.

"Alright! I will if you will," I spouted, "Fuck it, we'll all go! We're all dancing! Who's with us?"

They all cheered, and we rushed to the dance floor. The Pool Hall Kid stayed behind with The Boss, and when I turned around again,

they were both gone. I thought of chasing after the Pool Hall Kid and intervening in what could end up becoming the biggest mistake of his life, but all that would get me was a nice two-by-four bopping me to bed in the street, and then I'd miss my bus to Litang. There was no way that I was staying here another night. Let's dance!

By this point, all the oxygen burst in my brain, and I felt the abandon that can only come when you forget yourself and let go of everything. Be in the moment. Dance the night away!

It rained on us then, this feeling of oneness with the mosh pit, sprays of perspiration in the dark. The Jokester put his cap on my head sideways, grabbed my shoulders, and the two of us jumped up and down like fools. There was a freedom that only comes with a total lack of pretension.

Back at the table, after more shots of beer, that awful techno (which I admit that I was starting to enjoy) suddenly switched to Tibetan karaoke and everyone cleared the floor. A large, immaculately dressed man in a white suit and sparkling silver glasses appeared on a stage that I didn't even know was there. He was a towering figure, standing there glowing—angelic even—in the spotlight. He was a heavy-set man with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. His suit shimmered like rays of light.

As the traditional strings and keyboard built to a climax, he began to sing in a soft croon that seemed to be out of touch with this generation, but to my surprise, everyone knew the words.

"Get off the stage!" I heckled him drunkenly, but he only took this as encouragement, and everyone cheered as he did a little shimmy to show us that he still had it, whatever "it" was.

The singer held the mic up to the air to the delight of his fans to reclaim his place in karaoke glory. He held a final note, his voice all

vibrato, as one by one seven girls in matching white dresses placed a scarf around his neck, until in the end, he wore seven scarves.

The crowd went wild.

After this sensational and seemingly random performance, the karaoke star began talking on the mic, perfectly at home up there in front of this audience. Whatever it was, the crowd was hushed out of respect and burst out in laughter at all the right cues. He was good, this karaoke star. He was a real pro.

It seemed to happen in an instant. Before I knew it, the entire club moved to the dance floor and formed a big circle that went around the entire club. Bargirls stopped wiping glass, the doorman left his post, and the lightweight who was just a moment ago puking his brains out in the bathroom came wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve ready to start stepping.

They all crowded to form an outer circle and an inner circle. Exes rejoined hands for the first time since breaking each other's hearts; rivals settled their differences and slights were forgiven. All except me and The Pool Hall Kid began dancing and waving their hands. I still remember this vision of the entire club circle-dancing, moving in unison to the gentle tunes. They danced side by side, moving clockwise a few steps, and then counterclockwise a few steps, like a spinning wheel, unchanged by the countless revolutions of the sun. They danced in perfect unity until it was hard to see any individual in the circle anymore. The karaoke star and his finely dressed women were right there among the people. Everyone moved as one.

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# FALLING

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Of course, I woke up hungover with the sun shining treacherously in my eyes. The evil piss smell was all around me, doubled in strength by the UV rays, and I knew without having to check the broken clocks that I'd overslept and missed my bus.

I would have to get to Litang on foot. Things seemed almost pleasant at first. Maybe this would be a chance to get intimate with my Himalayan surroundings, I thought. Kiss a yak or fuck a goat. Smell the old folk up-close with their curdled milk and fried dough cologne. I passed through several villages and the country road was peaceful and quiet with the occasional tractor or truck passing by. There were pigs and cows and chickens foraging through the bare grasses. It seemed nice, but then three hours later, I began to feel the weight of the bag on my shoulders and couldn't stop adjusting the straps to get the blood flowing through my arms again. The road started going uphill mercilessly.

Finally, after a few more hours of marching, I saw a Tibetan man sitting cross-legged by the roadside eating sunflower seeds. He was well into his sixties with silvery hair and walnut skin marked with deep

cracks in the places where he smiled. He wore an old Chicago Bulls winter jacket that looked like it was made back when Michael Jordan was still playing.

As I approached, we exchanged hellos and he motioned for me to come and join him. We spoke in gestures, but it almost felt as if he were my uncle. When I told him I was headed to Litang, his eyes grew wide in disbelief. "Litang?" he asked.

"Yup," I said.

Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Chicago Bulls guy repeated, "No Litang. No Litang."

His face was grim and set. He showed me on two fingers laughing that it would take me at least two days to get there on foot. He seemed worried.

"Don't worry, Uncle. I got this!" I said confidently and laughed, but the expression on Chicago Bull Guy's face made me feel like a popped balloon. We rested there for about fifteen minutes before he stood up and motioned for me to follow.

"No," I refused and grinned. "I'll be fine, Uncle. You go on ahead!"

He shook his head, cleared his throat, closed his eyes, and ordered me to get onto the back of his bike. I understood what Chicago Bulls Guy was saying: "I'm heading in that direction, but I can't take you all the way. I'll take you to the top of the mountain. From there, you'll have to get another ride."

"Thank you, Uncle!" I cried and hopped on.

Chicago Bulls Guy mounted, and then turned and gestured for me to zip up my winter coat. It was going to be cold.

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Chicago Bulls Guy was right. Riding on the back of the motorcycle was a lot colder than walking. The wind cut at us like a hundred knives. I was bundled to full rotundity with my Canada Goose zipped all the way up and the fur hood over my head, a pair of gloves on each hand, and a pair of mittens over those, and my knuckles still caught frostbite.

We rode deep into the afternoon, passing under the kinds of white peaks I'd only seen on National Geographic or The Discovery Channel. These were the Himalayas, and true to what Alex and Nick had told me, this was as real as it could get. Maybe reality meant being alive because you were so close to death.

We stood together, Chicago Bulls Guy and I, and urinated together, watching our pee dissipate into ethereal nothingness before touching the distant valley below.

Carpets of pines spiked the distant mountains like little pins. A natural stream trickled behind us as we lay there, looking up at the blue sky above. We were at the top of the tree line, and I was filled with that certain peace that comes with knowing you're floating above the madness of the world where nothing can touch you.

We took our time and rested for a while. We didn't have to exchange words or attempt conversation. The absence of words was filled by the breathtaking view of the Himalayas. Chicago Bulls Guy shared his sunflower seeds, and I shared my tangerines. We gave our humps a rest in the grass, chewing slowly as if in thought, but there were no thoughts, and it was the most peaceful I'd felt in a long time.

Finally, Chicago Bulls Guy seemed to make up his mind about something. He pointed to the fork in the road. He pointed one way for himself, and to the other he pointed and said, "Litang."

I understood and began to gather my things. He shook his head and pointed back at the road and through gestures made me understand that he was going to wait with me until my next ride appeared. In the

meantime, I tried to give him some gas money, a symbolic gesture, but he closed his eyes and shook his head. We waited in silence. There wasn't a soul but he and I. No one for miles and miles and miles.

Finally, the silence was broken by the rumble of a passing lorry, but despite Chicago Bulls Guy trying to wave the driver down, his gestures were duly ignored. It took another hour of waiting before we saw a motorbike approach us.

Chicago Bulls Guy waved the motorbike down and did the talking. The New Guy took off his balaclava as he idled, and right away I got a bad feeling. He looked exactly like the kind of guy in the movies that you shouldn't trust. Scraggly mustache and shifty eyes.

He gave Chicago Bulls Guy a blank stare and looked out at the road as if considering how much he should shake out of my pockets for this favor. He certainly wasn't going to give me a ride for karma. The New Guy was Han Chinese. The only thing he believed in was red paper.

Chicago Bulls Guy seemed to talk him down to a reasonable price. Then, somewhat satisfied, he turned to me and gave me the nod. I felt like a puppy being handed over to its new owner.

"I wish I could take you farther," Chicago Bulls Guy seemed to say. He put his hand on my shoulder and said words that I couldn't understand.

"You've done more than enough, Uncle," I told him, and gave him a quick hug while the New Guy just looked at us wondering, "Do these guys even know each other?"

I got on the back of New Guy's motorbike. With a shout in the air, Chicago Bulls Guy wished me luck, and we buzzed off in different directions.

The higher we went, the colder it got. Snow-white peaks seemed to scrape the bright blue sky. A sea of mountains looked to be as far below us as the ocean itself. At this elevation, we passed only one mudbrick shanty to mark any sign of human existence, and it didn't look like anyone was home. Huge stacks of prayer stones were piled along the roadside in the Buddhist fashion. Prayer flags waved colorfully, tangled, and tattered by the fierce wind—hanging on, surviving.

We had just surmounted a ridge and were on our way down when the unthinkable happened. We were coming down the snow-covered road and I remember the way the road wove in and out like a snake. I remember thinking, “Hey, we should probably slow down.” But I wasn't the one in control of the motorbike. I alternated between worrying over the “S” curves of the downhill road and being awestruck by the magnificent peaks.

I saw the mountain in the distance miraculously tilt, as if God had picked it up and tipped it to its side to show me that it really weighed nothing. Nope. In fact, we were flying downhill at an angle where neither one of the tires was in contact with the road. We were moving like a Frisbee gliding down the slope. We'd lost control of the motorbike. We hit the ground and slid uncontrollably. I knew we were going to die, so I did what any other sane person would do: I used my hand as an emergency brake to keep us from flying off the mountain's edge.

As soon as my gloved fingers touched the gravel, the thick wool of my mitten was shredded to pieces. The second layer of gloves disintegrated into nothingness. My fingers were left bare, digging into the ground until there were only my nails and raw flesh, clawing the rocks and ice until I blacked out.

I have no idea how long we were hanging there, but I was first to regain consciousness. A few inches more and that would've been the end of our story. The front wheel of the motorbike juttred precariously out into space, while the other half of the machine smothered our legs. I tried to pull back from the edge, but with the motorbike on top of me, and my legs tangled up with New Guy also trapped beneath the bike, it only proved possible after I lifted the motorbike just high enough to crawl out from under. I immediately dragged New Guy back so that the front wheel of the motorbike and his legs were no longer hanging over the edge of the cliff. This effort caused him to stir and he was able to roll himself away from the edge.

As New Guy sat there in a daze, I used my one good hand to pull the motorbike back from toppling into the chasm. My hand was wet. I took off my tattered glove and inspected the damage. What I saw looked like an abstract painting of torn flesh and gravel mixed in with the blood. My hand looked like something at the end of a horror film. I tried moving my fingers and found that I couldn't do so without warning bursts of fire shooting through the numbness.

I moved like an Eagle Scout and took out the first-aid kit that I had in my rucksack. I tied up my hand as tightly as I could with gauze to make a tourniquet. It worked well enough to slow the bleeding. There was nothing to do about the open wounds except to let the blood soak into the gauze. New Guy didn't bother to help me. He just stared in shock and lit a cigarette. After I finished dressing my hand, he seemed to come to his senses and got up to inspect his motorbike.

I would've thought that after what we'd just been through, New Guy would see the miracle that I saw, the fact that we were still alive. But instead, he started cursing at his broken taillight. His rearview mirror hung by a coppery thread. He crouched on the ground, groan-

ing while rubbing his elbow in pain. The sight of his sniveling set me off.

“Fuck your elbow! What about my hand?” I yelled.

He looked at me reproachfully, but he had no idea what I was saying. It was like he’d forgotten that I was even there.

New Guy stood up and picked up his bike. I misread this signal and grabbed my rucksack, prepared to continue our descent. Instead of waiting for me to hop on the back, he continued limping down the hill with his motorbike. His motorbike wouldn’t start, and it also had a flat tire.

He got on his motorbike, and I watched dumbfounded as he rode it downhill, flat tire and all, with the engine dead and gravity on his side until he disappeared onto the horizon like a small puff of dust in the frozen tundra.

I was hurt, in the middle of the Himalayas, and completely alone. How would I get out of this place? Going back the way we’d come was out of the question. The sun was beginning to set, and soon it would be below zero. I looked down at my broken hand and decided that I had no choice but to walk to the bottom before dark.

I decided my best chances were to cut the distance by going in a straight line down the mountain through a field of Himalayan cactus. The spineless cacti, as it would turn out, were taller, stiffer, and thicker when seen up close. The brush was so dense that even after an hour of climbing through the stuff, I was hardly any closer to the bottom than when I’d started. The tough vegetation captured me in wrestling holds along my way back, at times leaving me stretched and hanging like a scarecrow.

Eventually, I returned to the crash site, defeated, and now in some serious pain. My adrenaline had run dry, and the frigid air wrapped around my fist like a blanket of raw nerves. My hand was absolutely

throbbing. All I could do was squeeze my wrist to cut off the blood flow as if I could choke my hand to death and kill the pain. I began to head down the winding road, knowing that there was no other way but the long way.

Hours passed as I trudged in silence. I thought about giving up and laying there under the starry evening and letting myself just freeze to death. All things considered, there were worse ways to die. The way Jack London described it in *To Build a Fire* didn't sound too bad. First you felt frostbite. Then hypothermia. Then you felt nothing. I wasn't quite there yet, but my feet were definitely numb.

The moon and the constellations glowed brightly above me yet there was still blue sky fighting against the darkness. The bottom of the mountain was beyond reach and there was no shelter in sight. I decided to lay down and rest, for it made no difference now.

With the waning bows of sunshine pointing to the horizon, I decided to use what remaining light there was and write. I reached into my rucksack and sat before a blank page, full of frustration as even now, in what seemed to be my final moments, I experienced writer's block.

"I just want to leave behind some utterance that'll justify my existence and give meaning to my life!" I screamed at no one. "Is that too much to ask? Where's my *Into the Wild* moment? This is my chance to be immortalized in the *Vagabond Hall of Fame*. Come on, give me something."

I wish I could tell you that I'd acted more dignified in what I thought were my last moments on Earth, but you'd be surprised at how pathetic you can become when you know there's no one to record your whining.

Anyway, I did end up writing something, so there's that. What I ended up writing on that page, however, wasn't full of profundity or

existential truth. It turned out that I didn't really have much to say about life and death. I wasn't ready to die at all.

I thought about a girl I'd met in Tokyo not long before leaving for China. We'd spent one drunken night together listening to jazz in an LP bar before wandering through the first snowfall of the year. She was a Thai girl. She'd never seen snow before. I remembered the way she tried to catch snowflakes on her tongue and how happy she looked under the neon glow of Shinjuku.

We went to a love motel.

The next morning she asked me to bring her noodles for breakfast, and I told her I'd be right back. Instead, I left and never saw her again.

"I wonder how she felt that morning when I never came back," I said out loud.

Silence.

"Alright fine!" I yelled out, to the empty sky and the mountains. "Fine, I deserve to die!"

My voice echoed out into the tundra. And then, once again, there was silence.

"I'm sorry," I whispered finally. "I'm really sorry."

I sat up and stared into the distance. I didn't know why. But at that moment, I saw a flash on the horizon and a small trail of dust beginning to rise.

No, it was the glint of a sunray's reflection against the glass of a windshield and a trail of exhaust coming closer. It was a Chevrolet Suburban. It slowed and stopped to pick me up. It was painted gold of all colors, and inside the cab sat a truckful of Tibetans, their faces brown and rosy, inquisitive, and smoking cigarettes with the windows closed, cancer apparently ranking low on their list of concerns.

I began babbling and showed the driver my wrapped nub. He nodded and the rider on the passenger side made room for me in shotgun. I got in truck, and we sped off.

Inside it was warm and smoky and thawed my bones. The sun seemed to hang in the air just above the horizon, painting this landscape, which was to be my burial ground, into a shining array of peachy and yellow hues. I saw a white city glowing in the distance, the golden SUV speeding into the nothingness with wild horses running across the plains.

Along the way, we passed New Guy still coasting along on his battered motorbike with the dead engine. He had motoring goggles over his eyes, his mustache frozen with crusted snot all over his face.

"Fuck you, buddy!" I screamed out the window as we roared past, laughing like a maniac. The Tibetans gave me puzzled looks, wondering what kind of psycho they'd picked up off the road.

"You don't understand," I explained. "I know him. We crashed together. He left me for dead."

My explanations swirled like cigarette smoke around the driver's head, who closed his eyes while driving somehow, and in a deep gravely voice, chanted prayers of a mystical power and energy. Snow and winter grass stretched into eternity. Finally, I passed out against the window.

Om

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My Tibetan angels dropped me off at a clinic. They'd saved my life. We'd driven for hours before arriving in Litang.

At the clinic, I was attended to by a kid. He looked like the Nepalese version of Doogie Howser, M.D.. He unwrapped the gauze around my hand and had me wincing and gritting my teeth as he pulled out bits of gravel with the preciseness of a diamond jeweler.

After he cleaned my wounds, he dressed my hand in fresh wrappings and gave me some painkillers. I took two pills and gestured that I had a fever to the doctor, who seemed to be getting younger by the minute. He explained in perfect English that I had altitude sickness.

“You came up the mountain too fast. Your blood cells are deprived of oxygen. Your body is deprived of oxygen, but there is nothing else wrong with you. All you can do is wait and give it time. You will feel better.”

“I feel like I’m dying,” I groaned shamelessly to this kid who was at least ten years younger than me.

“We are currently at 4,000 meters. You will have to give your body time to acclimate. You may have trouble breathing. Now, it is time to rest,” he assured me and led me into a quiet room.

I allowed Dookie to take me to a cot where I lay down and felt myself slowly float into nothingness. The painkillers were kicking in.

After a spiral into the darkness, I woke up in the middle of the night. The painkillers had worn off, and though I was still dressed in every article of clothing I had on before, I was absolutely freezing. This was even worse than the Hotel Shangri-La. At least there I had that heavy blanket to suffocate under. In the sick room, all I had were thin sheets to wrap myself with. I lay there in a fetal position, shivering, trembling, whimpering, and occasionally crying out in pain and misery; clutching my wrist to stop the throbbing that made my hand feel like it was going to explode.

My head was on fire. Dookie was lying. I was going to die.

I thrashed around in my bed like a tormented monkey, with just enough energy to flop around like a fish who expects freedom is around the corner. Freedom is what we want, freedom from the present, the hope and promise of the morning, the dawn where the light breaks the darkness and all the suffering in this world comes to an end.

I wrapped myself feebly in sheets of ice and tried to cry myself to sleep only for the tears to freeze my eyelids shut. All I wanted at that moment was to go home. I wanted to hack my way through the universe and invent some sort of teleportation device so that I could return to my bedroom in New Jersey and be attended to by my loving parents. I wished at that moment that I didn't lose so much time trying to run from them. Being sick or hurt in a foreign land where no one knows or cares who you are is one of the scariest things you can ever go through. As trite as it sounds, I wanted my mom.

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## MR. ZEN'S

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Rising from bed the next morning was like having my teeth knocked out, waking up smiling, and asking for more punches so I could see the pretty birds flying around my head like a Looney Tunes cartoon. Of Litang, I only have spotty recollections, due to altitude sickness. Mostly, I remember that shooting pain in my hand, the driving wedge through my skull, and the sensation of being constantly out of breath. Yet I saw the world around me with a quivering ecstasy.

I left the medical clinic of my own recognizance and stood in the threshold of dilapidated doors, beholding the morning vista, and thanking God that I had made it through the night. If it weren't for the bandage wrapped around my hand, I would've thought it was all one crazy dream. At least I could tick having a near-death experience off my bucket list. Perhaps it was just the fever affecting my brain, but I felt a wild and unbridled spirit fling itself out of my nostrils. I let out a yawp that would make Walt Whitman proud.

Litang was like no place I'd ever seen. It was like the Himalayan version of the Wild West. Old folks sat on their stools spinning their prayer wheels while early morning cowboys strutted about

with leather boots, long hair, and missing teeth. Women wore silver nose-rings and multicolored shawls. Everyone seemed to have some rainbow-colored aura about them despite their nonchalance.

There were no tourists here. I was the only outsider among them, and what made me even weirder was the evidence of some accident, my torn parka and bloodied jeans, and the fact that I wandered about with a look of ecstasy. Maybe it was the painkillers. Or maybe it was Happy East Street. I felt so alive, so distant and beyond the clouds. I almost forgot that I was supposed to be looking for someone. Fortunately, he found me before I found him. It was on Happy East Street that I came face to face with the man, the myth, and the legend. That round face and ticklish giggle, calling me from the other side of the street.

Mr. Zen's was the only place where you could find banana pancakes on this side of the Himalayas. It was the only restaurant that served western food in Litang, and this fact naturally made him a legend among backpackers and pilgrims who'd found their way to Litang over the years. Even if I hadn't heard of him from Nick and Alex back in Li Jiang, I would've eventually met him anyway for his habit of coming outside and shouting at strangers in the street.

He had a round head, shaved clean, and a pink flowery apron which remained neatly tied around his stocky waist. He had the kind of face that would make you assume something was terribly wrong if he wasn't positively beaming at you.

"You come bad time. Why come now? Come in spring. You can see everyone laughing, drinking, eating. Lots of people from all over the world. Europe, America, Australia. Everyone come to see horses in spring and eat at Mr. Zen's!" Mr. Zen declared with pride, apparently fond of speaking in the third person. "Lots of horses. Horses everywhere. Lots of pretty girls, too!"

“I think I’m dying,” I croaked at him, when he asked me what was wrong.

“You look like you got altitude sickness,” he said sternly, and like a local physician gave me his prescription. “One fried-rice and ginger tea coming up!”

It wasn’t my business to order food in his restaurant. I was simply in his care.

His restaurant was small and homely, with a big front window to let in all the light with a view of the street. The sunlight warmed my body as I sat with brittle bones and tried to regain my strength one trembling spoonful at a time. As I sipped the ginger tea with T-Rex arms that seemed to tremble from the weight of the mug, my eyes roved over Mr. Zen’s Wall of Fame. The whole place was covered in postcards, fan art, and forget-me-nots, but Mr. Zen’s most loyal followers had a special place on the back wall. These were the travelers who made it a point to visit him year after year, even bringing the children which were begotten since the time they’d first met him.

Mr. Zen jumped up mid-conversation with a huge grin on his face and went to the door. I turned to look out the window and saw him yelling, “You! Hey you! Hey! Come here!” gesticulating fervently all the while.

“Do you know him?” I asked Mr. Zen as he returned, cackling with glee.

“Look, he coming! He coming!” Mr. Zen said laughing, pumping his arms, and waving like a madman.

A moment later, a youngish guy with a shaggy beard, a rainbow-colored sherpa hat, and a guitar strapped to his back, entered the restaurant with a smile.

“Hello, hello! Where’re you from? Come, sit, eat!” Mr. Zen shouted all at once to this newcomer as he stood in the doorway. Mr. Zen led him to the booth across from mine and sat him down.

“Hello, my name is Ari,” the traveler said shyly, setting down his guitar. “I’m from Israel. Wait, is that what you wanted to know? Or did you want to know where I came from? Oh, hello there.”

“Hey,” I said, sitting up a little while trying not to look like whatever I had was contagious. “Don’t mind me, I have altitude sickness. Try the fried rice.”

“Oh, you speak English. Excellent!” Ari said with his eyes brightening. Then turning to Mr. Zen, he said, “I’ve heard that your banana pancakes were worth crossing the Himalayas for, so I’ve come from Nepal to try them.”

“One banana pancake, coming right up!” Mr. Zen declared and went to the kitchen to prepare his famous specialty.

“Have you ever been to India?” he asked in a non sequitur after he’d set and reset his silverware the second or third time.

“No, but it’s on my bucket list.”

“I was in Varanasi, practicing transcendental meditation for a month,” Ari said. “At one point, I took a vow of silence and didn’t open my mouth for a week. You’re not allowed to have your phone, you can’t write anything, nothing other than hand gestures or facial expressions. Mostly, you must sit and meditate, or be quiet. Anyway, it’s nice to talk to someone in English. If I seem a little odd, don’t worry.”

“No worries,” I assured him. “Since I can’t speak Mandarin, I barely even talk these days. Besides Mr. Zen over there, this is the first conversation I’ve had in English in weeks.”

“A journal is a traveler’s finest companion,” Ari agreed.

“I was carried in last night,” I said with a laugh, and proceeded to explain how I’d nearly died by falling off a motorbike. I showed him my bandaged hand.

“You must’ve acquired some good karma,” Ari said solemnly. “Seriously, you should be dead.”

“I know,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t think it was karma though. If anything, the Universe is asking me to pay it forward.”

“Where are you staying?” Ari asked.

“Just some piece of shit guesthouse. The rooms here are dirty and freezing.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” Ari asked.

“Not at all. If you don’t mind being in a piece of shit room,” I warned him.

“My friend, I’m coming from India. Believe me, I know how to stay in a piece of shit room.”

“You know what? I’d love it if I had someone to look around Litang with. In case I collapse in the middle of the street.”

“Absolutely! Say no more! I am your happy companion,” Ari agreed.

“I love this!” Mr. Zen cheered, returning from the kitchen with a plate of steaming hot banana pancakes. “You come from your way, and you come from your way, and you meet here and go together!”

We all looked at each other and smiled. Mr. Zen was right, of course, you must go with whom you can. If the company is willing, then the journey is sweet.

After breakfast, we sat around Mr. Zen’s for a while longer weighing our options. I spotted an ad for a “Sky Burial” viewing, in which Tibetan monks take a newly deceased member of the community and allow vultures to consume the body, even going so far as to crush the

bones into powder so that by the time the vultures are done, there's nothing left, and the energy of the deceased returns to the lifecycle.

Booking a ticket for the viewing was tricky though, mostly because there needed to be a fresh body, and Mr. Zen hadn't heard of anyone in town who'd died recently. There was only one person who seemed like he might die soon, and that was me. The vultures must've known, because I swore, I could see them circling the air above us for the rest of the day.

We left for the monastery around noon. The monastery was a good hike away from Mr. Zen's.

"It's worth the experience, but it's intense," Ari said. "Nepal is way more chill. Just don't do Everest unless you want to risk your life. There are hundreds of bodies frozen on that mountain."

We reached the end of the road. A pack of street dogs, a collective which had steadily grown during our short journey, trotted behind us until we reached the end of the road. Faced now with a dusty stone stairway that reached straight into the bright blue sky, they silently lost heart and went trotting back toward the city.

"I guess this is a canine's Everest," I quipped to Ari. "Maybe we'll see the carcass of a dead mutt on the way up."

"We could offer it to the monks for a sky burial," Ari said grinning through his beard.

"Of course, they would build the monastery on the highest peak," I wheezed. Getting to the top of the first set of stairs was only the beginning.

"They must make sure that we are worthy," Ari said with a nod.

As we climbed the stairs, we took frequent breaks during which Ari continued to fill me in.

"According to tradition, the Dalai Lama was an ancient soul who, instead of attaining Nirvana, chose to recycle his soul over and over.

He's always reincarnated as an infant to continue leading the Tibetan people."

"What are your thoughts on reincarnation?" I asked.

"Sometimes I trick myself into thinking that maybe I'm a Buddhist, but personally I cannot accept the idea of reincarnation," Ari admitted. "I don't believe we can come back."

We looked out at the expanse which led to the mountains, which led to the land whose name we were not allowed to say in the streets.

"What's China's deal?" I asked quietly. "Why are they so obsessed with this place?"

"I saw a protest in Lhasa," Ari said soberly. "I came here from Tibet. I saw a monk burn himself in the street."

The wind whipped across the mountain pass between us. Somewhere below, a dog barked at nothing.

I looked at Ari and saw his face full of sadness. I patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about me," he said, and pointed to the city below. "Worry about them."

We climbed and climbed, pausing to look out at the awesome panoramic views. The beauty lay in the way that the sunlight etched the edges of the ridgelines, the patches of pure white snow against the dusty brown earth. The golden winter grass and the tiny horses grazing in the valleys below.

The monastery at Litang was less of a temple and more like a walled city, or a compound decorated with white stupas, golden roofs, bright mosaics, and burgundy-colored walls to match the robes of the monks who populated the grounds. The courtyards were vast, and the walls towered to the sky.

We headed inside the monastery searching for warmth and found ourselves cloaked in the darkness of an empty prayer room. Despite

the number of monks who walked about outdoors, the prayer room seemed recently vacated, and we could almost hear the echoes of chanted mantras.

I compared this monastery to the one I'd visited with Lizi back in Shangri-La. The monastery at Litang was likewise full of color, but surrounding the images was a background of intense red, making the otherworldly images seem like rainbows trapped in hell. The artwork featured demonic deities which bared their teeth at us like the wild beasts of the underworld.

"This room represents samsara," Ari murmured, "the realm of endless cycles."

As we ventured deeper into the temple, we entered a room that looked to have once been a throne room, only it was filled with broken statues, the many faces of Buddha crushed, crumbled, and broken beyond repair.

"It's psychological warfare," said Ari softly.

A giant bronze Buddha lay on its side before us, its fingers still curled in that symbol of eternal peace.

"Tashe delek," a voice spoke from the darkness. An oldish monk stepped forward from the shadows. "It means good health and happiness. I'm afraid we are not open to tourists now."

"Oh, we didn't know we had to pay," we stammered simultaneously, exchanging glances and looking for our wallets.

The monk laughed softly. "It's a joke. Come, I show you around. My name is Jamyang."

Ari and I introduced ourselves and followed Jamyang into the monastery's inner chambers, which were colorful against the dim atmosphere, and scented with mysterious incense.

The inner chambers of the monastery seemed less like a temple and more like a royal palace. The amount of detail in the mosaics

that covered every inch of the walls and ceiling was too mind-blowing to accurately describe at the pace we were walking. Clouds, flowers, gods, animals, trees, warriors, demons, heaven and hell, all locked into symmetrical circles and spinning wheels of oriental patterns.

“We heard that a few of the Dalai Lamas were born here,” said Ari.

“This temple was built more than five hundred years ago,” Jamyang spoke slowly. “The 7th and 10th Dalai Lama were born here. Long time ago, during the revolution, the Chinese soldiers came and desecrated our temple. Many people died.”

He gestured toward the broken Buddhas.

“If we speak out against the government, they send their police to come and beat us like dogs. They try to make us lose courage, lose hope, lose heart.”

Jamyang then led us up a dark stone stairwell and pushed open a door framed by white sunlight.

“We live in a world where violence is perceived as power,” Jamyang continued. “But true power is in love.”

Outside, the wind carried the smell of incense and snow. Monks crossed the terrace in silence.

“What can we do to help?” Ari asked.

“Come, I show you something.”

Jamyang led us to an area of the terrace where a gathering of monks crowded under the bright blue sky. Kneeling in the center of their circle there were three monks busy at work sprinkling trails of colorful sand between their fingertips and forming patterns in dyed powders of emerald, ruby, sapphire, and golden hues. The mandala was nearly complete.

As the observers stood in respectful silence, the mandala took shape by the artists' hands. When it was perfected with not a single grain

out of alignment, the monks collectively bowed their heads and folded their hands in prayer.

Then they began to destroy it.

“This always hurts,” said Ari, wincing at the sight of the colored grains being brushed away one section at a time.

Jamyang nodded. “To stay whole we must understand that there are things in this world which we cannot hold onto. There are also things in this world which we cannot change.”

“All that work,” I stammered. “They didn’t even post it on Instagram.”

The artists continued to break the image until grains of sand numbering in the millions were given in vivid handfuls to the monks who had participated in the prayer.

“What will they do with the leftover sand?” Ari asked.

“They will offer it to the nearest river, to bless the whole world,” Jamyang said.

Finally, one of the monks came and offered Jamyang, Ari, and I a handful of sand.

The mandala was now obliterated. It was like nothing had ever been there. I opened my hand and looked at that precious mix of red, blue, and green sand glittering in my open palm. Then a sudden gust of wind scattered the colorful grains into the air, and the monks began to part.

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# AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

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I was minding my own business, handwashing my underwear, when an opportunity to gain some karma came knocking at my door. I figured I could use as much karma as I could get considering where I would soon be headed, down into the depths of opium highways where reality and illusion are blended into cocktails served in buckets.

In any case, I was feeling adventurous and brimming with an odd combination of listlessness and generosity. Maybe it was that Big Mac that I'd eaten upon my return to "civilization", or that faint rendition of Imagine by John Lennon playing unironically on the McDonald's speakers as the teenage workers decorated a Christmas tree. I felt like doing some good in the world, so I hopped on board to deliver some computers to a school in need, recently damaged by an earthquake which occurred in Sichuan not long before I'd arrived.

The whole thing was set up by Maki, Slim's wife, the young matron of Comfy Hostels. She was originally from Japan and had met her Singaporean husband while the two of them were doing solos across the world. Long story short, they fell in love with backpacking and

each other, and that's how Comfy Hostels was born. Maki was in her mid-30's and found more things charming than not, but she was a sharp lady, and brave, too. She alone understood the full scope of the mission. She alone spoke English and Chinese.

The other guests joining us were Aviv, the Beethoven-haired Israeli, and his two friends Thalia and Moran, two Israeli parachuters who could've easily bench-pressed me. They were gentle girls. Not very talkative, but what they didn't say they showed with little gifts of generosity. I felt Thalia's strong hands steady me once on the mountain. Moran helped clean my bandage, having had some nursing skills. They were all ex-military, confirming what I'd heard from Ari. It was a tradition, they said. You did your service and then went backpacking with your friends. It's not real hard. You just have to make your bed real neat and stand up straight and always answer every question with, "Yes, drill sergeant!"

Besides us was Dru Hong Gu, the young fresh-faced computer tech in whose father's village we were going to be staying overnight. He was a bright young kid, and from looking at him you would've never guessed he grew up next to a pigsty. Literally. Their family kept a sow named "Cookie" (in Mandarin) and supported their income with her recurring piglets.

Dru Hong Gu had hair like an anime character and wore the latest hip-hop fashions. But somewhere in there, I guess he was country through and through. He spoke a little English.

Besides the drivers, that was our crew, with Maki at the helm keeping an eye out for the cops. The mission was simple: Deliver some computers to a school in the mountains of northern Sichuan Province. The drop-off was close to the epicenter of the quake. Along the way, we passed long gray rectangular buildings with sky-blue roofs, lined up on the sides of highways. Who knows how long the displaced

would be there? Maybe forever. A basketball net had been jerry-rigged to a telephone pole for the kids; neighbors warmed their hands beside trashcan fires; a hanging clothesline chain stretched between the buildings. That's why there were so many soldiers and police. There were a lot of checkpoints and roadblocks. "So, I put the Israelis in one van and us in another," Maki admitted. "It doesn't look good, foreigners in a van full of computers."

We had about ten desktop computers in our backseat stowed and loaded for a delivery that would save Christmas. The only thing we had to do was get past "the Man." The combination of detailed searches at each checkpoint meant hours of slow-moving traffic. Some highways had vanished completely, buried beneath piles of rubble. Bridges had collapsed and lay at the bottom of riverbeds as twisted hulks of metal. There were steel skeletons ripped apart and hanging from the sides of gaping chasms where once lay the connection between two cities.

The school was located at the top of a mountain that was shaped like a wedding cake. The vans seemed to be going vertical, and the drivers' handling of the situation was both terrifying and impressive. It was around four o'clock in the afternoon when we arrived. School was out, but the kids were running around rosy-cheeked in the cold. We were surrounded by blonde mountains, now painted pink and orange by the setting sun. The sky glowed bright blue and the red-bricked school, despite being nearly cracked in half, looked warm and vibrant.

Dru Hong Gu's father, the village schoolmaster, came out and shouted his greetings, waving an ever-present cigarette in the air. He was a short wiry man who liked to wave his butts like pieces of chalk to emphasize his points. He was doing this now, to point out that a jeep full of local authorities was approaching, apparently following a tip that two vans filled with terrorists had been spotted by the school. The occupants consisted of two members of the Israeli women's volleyball

team, a guy who looked like the Hebrew Beethoven, a mute Chinese double-agent (that was me), and a snoopy Japanese reporter. They'd caught us all red-handed. It was a miracle I didn't drop a monitor and blow us all to hell when they stepped out of the jeep. Their boots were shiny, and their faces were grim. Maki did the talking. The schoolmaster joined in. They wanted to inspect the computers for contraband. The schoolmaster, Mr. Dru, raised a customary stink. We waited while the bomb-squad flipped over, and carefully shook, one computer at a time.

That night, we were driven to the top of the mountain where we would be staying in Mr. Dru's village. The sun had already fallen, and it was dark by the time we reached the peak. It was a quiet place, distant from any town or city. The stars glittered in the twilight as we hauled ass up the winding curves to the summit where the few unbroken domiciles which remained standing sheltered aunts, uncles, and their visiting adult children. These were surrounded by other brick homes which were violently split in half, crumbling, and of little use to anybody anymore. In between these were makeshift wooden shacks and heavy tarp tents that acted as shelter in their stead.

After warming our hands by a fire, we were called to a different place on the mountain, this one down the path from one small house to another. Inside what looked like a mud hut was the glow of a big woodfire and a great metal wok sitting on top of it. This was the kitchen, and intoxicating aromas of Sichuan cooking smoked in the oil.

Mr. Dru's wife, a strong woman in blue traditional dress and wearing a head-wrap, stood in partial fire-lit darkness putting the finishing touches on our five-course dinner. In the middle of the small earthen room, there was a simple wooden table. A skinny tree with leaves like yellow spearheads grew out of the ground and shot right through the

middle of the table, spreading its naked branches beyond an opening in the ceiling above us. The opening was a vent.

“Can you tell her she has a beautiful kitchen?”

“And that her cooking smells amazing?”

“I love this tree. I think I need a tree in my kitchen.”

The Israelis were very polite and armed to the teeth with compliments. Maki translated and the lady of the house was pleased. She set down seven shot glasses and a bottle of baijiu. Mr. Dru poured each of us a shot. Some of us were concerned about losing temporary vision, but it was fine. There wasn't any electric light to see by anyway.

The liquor was clear and burned and tasted like cleaning products, but the insides of my stomach felt like melted candy. We had one shot more. Now came the main course. Spread upon the table were steaming platters laden with the most delicious Chinese food I've eaten to this day. Up until that point, a square meal for me were a few skewers of roasted vegetables and pieces of chicken dusted with cumin. I'd eaten every animal on Noah's Ark that could be cut into pieces and served with a bamboo skewer shoved up its ass.

But this was something else. This was a meal fit for dictators.

“This sauce is spectacular!” Thalia enthused.

“This meat has such an intricate sour tang, a delicate aftertaste and crispiness that inspires love songs under oily moons,” declared Avi, waxing poetic.

“I love these sautéed greens and this sweet and spicy garlic glaze mixed with meaty mushrooms,” Moran the vegetarian added.

“It almost tastes like seafood,” Maki agreed with a nod. “Be careful when you try the Sichuan chicken. There are the little red peppers that will light your mouth on fire if you bite into one directly.”

“I'll take that as a challenge!” I cried and then literally cried as the inside of my mouth was set aflame.

After dinner, we were invited to hang out with the family in the big house, which was located on a lower tier of one of the rice terraces. We followed Dru Hong Gu, who appeared suddenly from the darkness with a smile to lead us down the rickety ladders that connected each field in a continuous descent until we arrived at a big one-room home where the grandparents lived. Built near the entrance was a large firepit where a roaring blaze ate through a heavy log, illuminating the smiling faces of the Dru family seated around it. Five generations of Dru's sat from oldest to youngest around the firelight. The old grandfather was dressed in a Siberian fur-hat and overcoat; the grandmother sat beside him with her head-wrap and homespun dress. Mr. and Mrs. Dru and their son Dru Hong Gu sat beside them, and burly Uncle Smoky, his wife, followed by a cousin who looked like a football jock, sat with his wife and their little boy.

The fire licked the air and filled the room with a wonderful odor that also made us a little blind. No one else seemed to notice this stinging sensation and the men smoked despite the excess carbon-monoxide. Jing, the football jock, acted as the family representative and did most of the talking while Maki served as translator. Respectfully, we probed the Dru family about the earthquake and how it had affected their lives. They were being cornered by the coming winter, but there was a reluctance about them leaving the mountain they had called home all their lives. Grandfather Dru and Grandmother Dru were both born there, grew up there, and their people before them, back when their tribe had sought refuge up in the mountains from the surge of warring Hans hundreds of years before. They disappeared into the clouds and never returned. And now, grandmother and grandfather were supposed to leave their mud-brick homes on the mountain for the first time in all their lives. They were destined to rejoin the modern world, a wake-up call that had literally shaken them off the mountain.

We listened to the story of Grandmother and Grandfather, telling us in their mix of short all-encompassing descriptions and impassioned tangents, the history of a childhood running in the sunshine and catching dragonflies as a main hobby of the times. We followed their gazes as they recalled their first glimpse of man's triumph as a rocket streaked through the sky in a loud buzzing drone, deafening, like the sound of a tornado, and later a sound of war. After so many bombs later, they remembered the reshaping of the people and landscape, from this unchanging hamlet at the top of the mountain, overlooking the revolutions occurring at the bottom.

"So, when they move to their new home, what are they looking forward to the most?" Aviv asked.

Maki translated this to the family, and each took a turn sharing, smiling sheepishly at their answers.

"A good education for my son," Jing said.

"New clothes," his wife added.

The boy smiled and hid his face shyly in his mother's lap.

"He likes to watch TV," they spoke for him. "We will have a TV in our new house."

"Coca-Cola," the little boy added.

Everyone laughed.

Oddly enough, the thought of soda got everyone talking all at once about their new lives in the city. If there was apprehension about becoming part of modern society, there was excitement as well. Privately, I wondered at the unseen struggles that they might face and wished that one of us would stay there on the mountain. Perhaps I would volunteer to change places with them for a while and forgo indoor plumbing, to hold down the fort so that in case they ever needed to return, so that their home would still be there.

I was happy for them, for the TV they would have, the new clothes they would wear, and the education the little boy would receive. But something inside me didn't want to see this bonfire go out. I wanted there to always be a place like this one, where people were surrounded by family and laughter and sharing—not having conversations be replaced by blue lights and screens. But perhaps this is the language of the privileged, and my nothing is still more than what they have among them, materially-speaking. Perhaps I can give up all that I have because I know that it'll still be there if I ever go back to find it, in some electronics store, updated and with a new version. But what do I do with this longing to wake up and be where they are now? How do we go back to the mountain, to a place of nothing, where we have everything, and things feel real?

“They say we are the first foreigners to visit this village,” Maki informed us.

“The first and the last,” Aviv noted and poked the fire until the logs broke apart in a shower of brilliant embers.

As the fire burned on, I decided to step outside and get some air. The doorway stood right on the edge of the mountain. If I wasn't careful, I'd fall onto the terrace below, two or three meters down. In this impenetrable darkness, it seemed as if I'd fall into an abyssal time-warp. Where would I end up?

Jing came out and offered me a cigarette. We stood side by side staring out into the starry night, the silvery shapes of mountains in the distance. There were so many stars, it felt as if we were standing on the edge of a new galaxy, ready to explore it. But there we were, still contemplating the old, the place where we'd come from. Perhaps we were never meant to stay there after all—there were so many stars to explore.

Tiny fireworks exploded in the sky. I pointed them out to Jing, who in gestures and Mandarin, communicated that there was a wedding on the next mountain. It was a giant leap across space. I fathomed how our purest instincts would always guide us through the impossible in search of love.

I stared at the sky and saw more stars than I'd ever imagined, all of them displayed in a dazzling field of distantly dying light before our eyes.