UNBRIDLED:
RUNNING AWAY AND
FINDING MYSELF IN MONGOLIA

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UNBRIDLED:
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FINDING MYSELF IN MONGOLIA

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Thesis

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I am riding a horse. Or rather: I am a passenger in the saddle of a galloping Mongolian horse, an ancient breed that has remained unchanged—like the majority of Mongolia—since Chinggis Khan roamed the Asian steppe. This horse knows where he can go: anywhere he wants. I twist a section of the long, dirty gray mane around in my gloved left hand. Other than the thin leather reins, this is all I have to grip to make sure I don’t fall off my horse, a short, stocky, cannon of muscles covered with dusty white hair and black splotches. Most Mongolian horses never receive horseshoes and mine is no exception.

My horse and I gallop over the permafrost in Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, west of Olgii, Mongolia, where the family lives that my friends and I are staying with during our semester holiday. I quickly separated from the rest of our group. Our host’s teenage sons had taken the four of us out with them to show us how they hunt for small animals in the mountains with their massive golden eagle. Have you ever ridden horses our driver and translator had asked us. I looked at Amy, Tahlia, and Alexa, my travel companions. They all nodded their heads and looked expectantly at me. I know how to ride a horse, I said, shoving the toe of my cheap, Chinese hiking boot into the utilitarian
metal stirrups, swinging my right leg over, settling into the saddle. My history of horseback riding is encapsulated in a picture in one of my family’s old photo albums. My mom still insists on printing out pictures and affixing them into albums with the sticky, clear, triangular photo holders, even though they eventually fall off, and the majority of photos collect near the spine like bookmarks. There is a picture of me as a vibrant, towheaded child on a tired pony at a local fair. A bored-looking farmhand is blurred in the background as he leads us around a predictable, fenced-in circle.

Like most young children, I always wanted a horse. My afternoon school bus ride home from Chestnut Elementary School in Fairview, PA, part of Erie County, passed large swaths of farmland. There was a particular stretch of overgrown farmland with old, fallen fences that enclosed several large, unsaddled horses. As my yellow school bus meandered along the country road, I used to imagine that one of the horses would jump the rotting fence planks and race next to my window of the bus. I would open my seat’s window and jump from the bus onto my horse. I would wave goodbye to my seat partner as my horse charged past the school bus of bewildered students. Where does an eight-year old girl riding bareback on a horse then go? Anywhere she wants.

Fifteen years later, I get to do exactly this.

*Chuuuu!* I make the low, guttural sounds that urge my horse to go faster in Mongolian. Before I moved to Ulaan Baatar several months before, I knew none of the Mongolian language, let alone that the man everyone referred to reverently as Chinngis Khan and the man of the millennium, Genghis Khan, were actually the same person.
Chuuu! I heard our eagle hunters make this same sound when they took off down the mountain, veering left and right over the permafrost like skiers shooting through moguls. Mongolian horses have the confident footing of mountain goats. We are close enough to Siberia that the ground barely thaws enough to grow the sparse, dry grass that livestock feed on. Though it is only the beginning of November, in this part of the world the earth tenses up and begins to freeze as early as September. We kick up clods of frozen earth in our race that has no destination. Each time the hooves of my horse connect with the frozen earth, a shock radiates up from my feet, hitting every vertebrate of my spine like a xylophone, echoing out my head. This horse is my Pegasus. Each time we hit the ground, something releases from inside me, something that my cheap stocking cap cannot contain.

We are sprinting farther away from my group, but I don’t want to stop, I don’t want to turn around. Other than Amy, Tahlia, and Alexa, there is not a single other person in the world who knows exactly where I am, not the boyfriend I left in Texas, not my teacher/veterinarian/soldier siblings, and certainly not the two people I needed to get away from most: my parents. I start to let go.

I just want to keep going.

Our speed, combined with the wind that whips through the unsheltered steppe, makes my eyes water so much that the tears leave frozen tracks down my face. The world is a blur of browns and greens through my squinted eyes. My bright orange generic ski jacket, which I overpaid 60,000 tugriks for at Naraantuul Zakh, the Black Market in Ulaan Baatar, is riding up my back but I don’t dare take my focus off staying on my
horse long enough to reach behind and pull it down. Fortunately, my long underwear, navy blue with thin, light blue horizontal stripes on them and thick as a sweater, are made for a person with an unnaturally long torso, and are pulled up to the bottom of my bra. I do not know this now, but I will wear this pair of long underwear under my pants every day from now until the end of April, when it will finally be warm enough to wear a single pair of pants in Mongolia.

We are going so fast that it scares me. I am reminded of being seventeen, skipping out of school early to play chicken with myself. I pushed my 1986 VW Jetta into the red zone in 5th gear, passing cars on 180 in Pennsylvania, nearly an hour away from the school I should have been attending. I had walked out of school earlier that day so I could go to the Lycoming Mall to shoplift whatever I wanted, because I knew that I could never get caught, because the rules just didn’t apply to me.

I dared myself to give into the fear that made me erupt into a cold sweat as I edged near 100 mph. Slow down, pled the logical portion of my brain. I should have taken my foot off the gas and allowed my car to gradually slow to a speed where I could hit the brake without flipping my car. But it felt safer if I went faster. I crammed the accelerator to the floor. The speedometer shot past 100. I felt like I’d broken the speed of sound and gasped like I was climaxing with a new lover for the first time. I wanted to close my eyes. I wanted to feel this good forever.

It is impossible to ride a Mongolian horse hurtling forward at full throttle and remain in the saddle. Earlier in the day I took a cue from our host’s sons: I stand up in my stirrups and raise up out of my saddle like a jockey, hold the thin, leather reins in my
right hand, and squeeze the hot, panting beast below me with my thighs with all the force I have. I cannot afford to be thrown from a horse somewhere near the borders of where Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia, and China meet. There are no such things as ambulances here and we are at least 130 kilometers away from the closest hospital, in Olgii. We didn’t drive on roads to get out here. In this part of the world everything is off-road.

Back on my horse, I try to pull the reins to one side to attempt to turn around. It is difficult to determine distance when there are no landmarks, nothing but infinite mountains and possibility. I don’t know how far we are traveling from our host’s homestead. It is a speck on the horizon; we must have traveled at least a kilometer from it. Bare mountains loom around me, craggy and strewn with rocks. Trees don’t grow in the tundra, but if you ask a Mongolian why so much of the country is barren, they’ll tell you it’s because Chinggis Khan’s army cut down all the trees during their conquests. The terrain is made for hooved animals and birds that soar and I am grateful that my sure-footed steed was able to guide me over the topography of the mountains. Without him, I can only imagine that I would have stumbled and somersaulted back to the valley, becoming an orange blur with arms and unfortunate boots akimbo.

My legs are screaming, release me, release me, but I cannot relax my tensed inner thigh muscles because they are, truly, the only thing keeping me on this horse. If I give in, if I relax just a bit, I will lose control, and right now I know I’m dangerously close to losing control to this barely domesticated animal. I concentrate and think about the family’s golden eagle. It perched on the right arm of the oldest son, who wore a leather protector over his arm, like a gigantic oven mitt, so the eagle’s talons would not pierce
through his coat. His arm then rested on a smooth, vertical wooden support, much like a crutch or a cane, to help with the burden of the fearsome 20 lb. bird of prey. The bird was a brown female with butterscotch-colored feathers giving it its name. She wore a tiny leather hood, resembling an old football helmet, that covered her eyes when she wasn’t hunting. Our driver translated that eagles become agitated or fly off if they are allowed to see their surroundings. Tied onto the tail of the eagle was a string of feathers that belong to another bird. *To go hunting, the eagle must be reminded of the only bird that is more powerful: the owl,* our driver said.

I tell myself to be powerful, like the owl, as I will myself to slow down my horse. I scrunch my legs together and pull hesitantly against the reins. I am reminded of Bor, our Mongolian “fixer” telling us before we left UB that Mongolian horses only listen to actual Mongolians. If this is true, my horse will not stop until it runs itself to exhaustion. Mongolian horses are born with marathons in their veins. I am close enough to my steed to breathe in the barnyard smells wafting off him, though he has never known any sort of enclosure. There aren’t enough fences in the world to encompass Mongolia.

I am scared. I am scared I will not be able to stop my horse, that my legs will collapse and I will tumble off, my foot still caught in the stirrup. I will be dragged along the steppe until finally my leg breaks, and then my horse will be freed of me.

*Drerrrr.* I try out the slow down/stop command hesitantly, tugging slightly on the reins. His ears twitch like he has picked up something whispering in the thin, cold air. I take an encouraging breath and release it: *Drerrrrrr.* I feel the muscles in the beast below me quiet ever so softly. It is time to stop running. We have to turn around. I gather a
warrior’s breath and release it in a deep, rough tone: **DRRRRRRRRRR**. I feel the mountains murmur their approval. My horse immediately slows down to a trot, and then a canter. My leg muscles convulse and I feel at once spastic and ecstatic.

I lead my horse in the direction of the small stream that runs through the valley. He wades into it, but does not drink from it. Instead, he stands there, steam pouring off his flanks from the icy water. I pull off one of my gloves and press my hand into his neck. There is so much life radiating through him that I quickly pull my hand back, aware that I am part of this. He pulls his head up and shakes his face violently. I tug the reins away from the stream and point us in the direction of the homestead.

I pull down the ends of my hat tassels to be sure it will not fly off and adjust my boots in the stirrups. I hold the reins loosely in my right hand and the mane in my left. **CHUUUU! CHUUUU!** I command. My horse shoots off towards home. I crouch as close as possible to my horse as a buffer against the wind, which makes my eyes tear up so that I can barely see. This time, I close my eyes and trust my horse.

Now I know what it must feel like to fly.
CHAPTER II

MAGNOLIA IS FOR LOVERS

China was pissed off at Mongolia. China was so pissed off, that on August 25, 2006, citing “bad weather,” they delayed every passenger plane from Beijing into Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia. China was incredibly angry because Mongolia was hosting the Dalai Lama at the Gandantegchinlen Monastery, commonly referred to as Gandan, the main Buddhist center of the country. This wasn’t the first time China had retaliated vindictively against Mongolia. The last time the Dalai Lama was in Mongolia, in 2002, China cut rail connections with Mongolia for almost three days. Though the Dalai Lama was invited to Ulaan Baatar (UB) in order to initiate a group of monks into a higher level of Buddhist priesthood, China viewed the Dalai Lama as a rabble-rouser whose real purpose was to rally up support for an autonomous Tibet, free from China.

Normally, this wouldn’t have even registered as a news-worthy blip on my radar. It wasn’t reported in most newspapers, I didn’t know any Mongolians. I was not in the habit of staying abreast of Sino-Mongolian relations, but I suddenly had a really good reason to care about passengers being indefinitely delayed in Beijing: I was of them. It took me one year out of college to realize that my life wasn’t going the way I thought it
would. It was 2006. I was waiting tables in Austin, Texas, and my sister and her husband— the main reason I left upstate New York— had just moved out of state. I couldn’t get the job I wanted because I didn’t have a Master’s and I was saddled with a 28-year-old boyfriend — the son of a Mormon mother and Jewish father — who grew marijuana in his house.

I met him at Magnolia Café, the long-time 24 hour Austin staple where we both worked. He worked third shift with all the tattooed punk rockers, while I, as a Yankee transplant, was relegated to hustling steaming plates of migas, huevos rancheros and gingerbread pancakes to brunch and dinner customers.

“Who’s that?” I asked, ladling salsa, or hot sauce as it’s known in Austin, into a small Dixie cup, nodding my head towards a very thin, tall, guy outside the front windows of the restaurant. He was sitting on top of the picnic table in a trench coat. He had thin glasses and shoulder length dark brown curly hair. He was sucking on a cigarette as if it was an inhaler. Holly, the bossy blonde server who was working as the food expeditor, looked out the window.

“Him? That’s Mike Smith. He always works late night. Why, you like him?” She grinned and started poking my side. “You want me to introduce you?”

I turned red. Half of the staff at Magnolia Café dated each other. Holly, in fact, dated Evan, the sexy Mexican dishwasher. Two of the cooks, Heather and Adam, both heavily involved in Dungeons and Dragons, had been together for eight years. Isa, a host, and Django, a late night server, started dating when she was 16 and he was 23. There
wasn’t a single employee who hadn’t been caught with their hand down another employee’s pants. I felt like I was back in high school.

“Nah,” I replied, placing the salsa precariously on a stack of breakfast tacos. “I’m trying to date girls right now.” This was true. I had ended a three year on-and-off relationship with a man before I moved to Austin and was interested in dating women like those I had made out with in college. I was ridiculously attracted to all the androgynous BMX-riding lesbians of Austin, but they wouldn’t give me the time of day. Despite that I was a card-carrying rugby player and had short hair, they must have known that my sexual preferences were not solely Sapphic.

So I bided my time. I kept my eyes on Mike, who looked like the second coming of singer Jeff Buckley. Though we never worked the same shift, he often trudged into work around the same time that I did closing shift duties. I did my best to suss out as many details about him as possible. He was 27 and from San Antonio. He was an acerbic, self-deprecating film buff who had been heavily involved in theater in college, where he was an English major. He always had a cup of coffee in hand or nearby and smoked Camel filters at a staggering rate. He wore a lot of flannel and black t-shirts and seemed to be firmly planted in the grunge era, despite that it had ended almost a decade before. He equally loved Alice in Chains and Tupac. I wanted to make out with him.

I had a chance and I took it right before Halloween in 2005. Some coworkers were throwing a party and everyone at work was invited. I knew Mike didn’t have a car, but I did, a 2000 Buick Regal. I followed him out back one night shortly after he got to
work, under the premise of taking out some recycling. I sat down on the milk crate next to him and inhaled the October night air, which still had a hint of summer in it.

“You want a cigarette?” he asked, holding the soft pack out to me.

“No thanks. I actually just quit smoking because I’m training for a marathon in February.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Wow. So you’re a runner?”

“I don’t know, maybe. I am now, I guess.” My three siblings and I had decided to train for and run the Austin Freescale Marathon in honor of our dad’s upcoming 60th birthday. In hindsight, it would have been much easier to just get him a cake.

We sat together in silence, the plastic grids of the milk crate making lattice of the backs of my legs. I ruffled my short, bleached hair and watched him smoke his cigarette out of the corner of my eye. Each wispy exhalation wrapped around me, the same smoke that had previously been in Mike’s lungs crept into mine.

“So, Heather and Adam are having a Halloween party. Are you going?” I asked.

“I would, but I don’t have any way to get there,” he said, grinding the butt into the ground with his hiking boot.

“I can give you a ride, if you want,” I said. We stood and faced each other.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind picking me up, that’d be cool.”

I didn’t know yet that he lived by himself almost twenty miles north of downtown Austin, in a three-bedroom house in the suburbs. There was a lot I didn’t know.

We ended up going to the Halloween party together, listening to Le Tigre on the way. There were whispers and nudges when we showed up at the same time. Those
whispers and nudges were completely unfounded until later that night when we spent hours smooching on the couch back at his house. It had been months since I had become familiar with the inside of someone else’s mouth and body. He kissed me like, for him, it had been even longer.

He pulled away from me and whispered something in my ear.

“Wait, what did you say?” I asked, confused.

“I want you to lick my eyeball,” he said. He looked at me with dark brown, imploring eyes.

“What do you mean?”

He lowered his head and put his eye at my mouth level. His eyelid fluttered as he attempted to keep his eye open. “Just run your tongue along my eyeball. It feels really good.”

My first instinct was to put my shirt back on, excuse myself, and drive home. I was no stranger to kinks and quirks, but I had never had anyone ask me to lick their eyeball before.

“Please,” he whispered, “lick my eye.” I started questioning what I found so appealing about him in the first place.

“Ok, fine, fine.” I tentatively stuck out my tongue and ran it between his parted eyelids. It was like licking the salt off a peeled hardboiled egg. He moaned slightly. When he looked at me he had stars in his eyes and an eyeful of bacteria. He gently held my head in his hands, to kiss me, I thought. He swiftly brought his tongue to my eye and
swiped it sideways before I could pull away. I blinked furiously and rubbed my eye, pushing him away. It was probably the most unsexy thing I had ever experienced.

“Did you like it?”

“Not really,” I said. “I think I’d be ok if that never happened again.” He leaned back into his side of the couch, clearly disappointed.

“Hey!” he suddenly said. “Do you want to see something?”

I pulled my shirt back on. “Yeah, of course. Where?”

He stood up and led me to a door that connected to the garage. “Are you ready?”

After the eyeball incident, I wasn’t sure what to be ready for. He swung the door open and flipped the light switch. An entire wall of his garage was painted neon green, and not very well. I squinted, trying to figure out what I was looking at. “Your garage is green. That’s cool.”

He lit a cigarette and motioned with it. “No, no, no. It’s a green screen! I’m filming a movie in here!” He proceeded to tell me about the most important thing in his life: a short film he wrote and was filming in his garage, tentatively titled *Assault of the Planet Ravagers*. From what I gathered, it was about a robot invasion and how the few people that could fight them off gained their power by smoking magic joints. It sounded like something a stoner would come up with when stoned past the point of comprehension. He was so excited telling me about the plans for his film, and sharing the Russian accent of his character with me, that I couldn’t help but share his enthusiasm. He would share it at small film festivals! Someone would see it and love it and they would give him money to make more movies! He was going to be a famous director!
We slept that night on a mattress placed on the floor of his bedroom, the only piece of furniture in it. The piles of clothes, books, and DVDs were basked in neon light that came from his closet.

“Sorry,” he said, as I struggled to fall asleep. “That light has to be on from midnight to noon.” Neither of us mentioned the plants that were obviously growing under the artificial sunlight. I found out later that he grew plants in his closet and transplanted them into the hydroponic grow room set up in another bedroom.

I didn’t know anything about marijuana cultivation then and I didn’t know much more about being in an adult relationship with someone. But I knew this: it was lonely being a Yankee in Texas and difficult to make friends when you worked over 40 hours a week in the service industry. Mike was weird—I had no doubt about that—but when I really thought about it, I couldn’t decide if he was more or less weird than I was. I was 22 and idealistic and at that moment I felt like I was at the top of a really long sliding board, looking down at what could be my future. I could either climb back down all the steps or sit my ass down and shoot off into something a little scary and unknown.

I went down that slide so fast I got friction burns.

Mike and I started dating, though it would be several months before anyone at work figured it out. We spent most nights smoking pot and watching anime or kung fu movies, or played pool with his friends in shady Austin neighborhoods. I found out that I loved Cowboy Bebop and was a terrible pool player.

After dating for six months, I had finally met his family in May. It hadn’t gone exceptionally well. On our way down, Mike informed me that the only thing he had
thought to tell his mom about me was that in addition to working at Magnolia Café, I was an intern at a pro-choice non-profit. She was extremely pro-life.

“We thought you two were coming down here because you had something to tell us,” his mother said, shortly after we arrived. She looked back and forth between my left ring finger and my stomach.

“No, no,” I assured her. “No big announcements. I just thought it was time we all met each other.”

Driving back home on 35 north, I knew I would never be a member of their family. Between his Mormon, pro-life mother, and his father, who repeatedly cracked racist jokes about Mexicans until I excused myself to the bathroom, I knew they would never be my in-laws. Mike had told me, maybe one of the times that we took Xanax pills and drank cheap sparkling wine, that this—us—was it for him. He was done looking. At 28, he was ready to settle down. But I had had doubts about our future together, which he knew. He had watched me scroll through pages of teaching jobs in Asian countries as I fantasized out loud about living on the Mekong or in Bangkok, and I suggested we apply for teaching jobs together. But that wasn’t his fantasy; it wasn’t his adventure. All he needed to be happy was three shifts a week at work, the girl he loved, an always-packed bowl, and a Dragon Ball Z DVD. And that wasn’t enough for me.

“I applied to teach English in Mongolia,” I blurted out. I felt like vomiting as I waited for his reaction. I was thankful I had the road to focus on so I wouldn’t have to look him in the eye.

“Mongolia? What the fuck is in Mongolia?”
I tried to minimize the situation. “It’s not like I’m definitely going. I just applied to a private school called the Hobby School. It was the only school I could find that still needed teachers for the fall.”

He inhaled heavily on his cigarette. “When were you going to tell me? The day you left?”

I said nothing and accelerated on the highway, unnecessarily passing cars.

“I knew it,” he said, looking out the window at bobbing oil derricks. “I knew this would happen. I knew you would figure out you were too good for me and leave me. I’ve been waiting for this the whole time.”

My heart softened. I reached over and threaded my fingers through his hair, pulling him a bit closer to me. “Hey. Hey. Let’s not worry about this yet. I haven’t even heard back from them yet.”

But I did hear back from them. They emailed me back, offering me a position to teach primary school conversational English, contingent on negative HIV and leprosy tests, and other contagious diseases. After faxing them my negative test results, I was officially hired and sent a contract. Everything happened so quickly. Within three weeks of accepting the position, I received my Mongolian work visa, valid for two years. During the next eight weeks I booked a one-way ticket from Los Angeles to Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia via Beijing, weaseled out of my apartment lease, drove my cat, Pirate, to Tucson to live with my veterinarian sister, and sold all of my furniture and my car.

On Thursday, August 24th, 2006, my friend Imani picked me up in her old Honda to take me, and everything I would ostensibly need to live in the coldest capital in the
world, to the airport. Mike told me the night before that he wasn’t going to go with us to
the airport because he thought it would be too hard for him. The sun was just starting to
come up when Mike finished lugging my suitcases and backpack into her backseat. Imani
stayed in the car while I said goodbye to Mike.

I wrapped my arms around this person who, for almost a year, had loved me
better than anyone else I had ever been with. I was bossy, I had a big mouth, and I was a
brat, but he loved me in spite of it all.

“Hey,” I said softly. He shook his head into my shoulder. “Hey. Look at me.” We
were tearful, snotty messes. I placed my hands on either side of his face and looked into
his brown eyes. “Mike, I love you. And when I’m done, I’m coming home to you.”

I got into the car and as we drove out of the parking lot, I watched him walk back
into his apartment through the passenger side mirror.

I never saw him again.
CHAPTER III
WHAT TRANSIT VISA?

As sentimental and sappy as I had uncharacteristically felt saying goodbye to Mike in his apartment parking lot, at the airport I was all business. I had a plane to catch and at that moment, I just wanted to get the heck out of Texas. Imani turned her four-way flashers on and helped me haul my backpack, enormous suitcase and my somewhat smaller, but no less unwieldy yellow suitcase out of her car. I swung my pack onto my back and wiggled my shoulders to shift the weight. When I faced her I had a suitcase pulley in each hand and my green Krumpler computer bag crossing my chest.

“Imani, thank you for doing this,” I said, trying to hand her $10 for gas. She took the bill and promptly shoved it into my computer bag.

“Save it,” she said. “You’re going to need it in freakin’ Mongoria.” I snorted and shook my head. Since my now former co-workers had found out I was leaving them to move to Mongolia, they couldn’t stop referencing the one pop culture mention of Mongolia that they knew: an episode of South Park.

“Hold down the fort for me,” I called over my shoulder as I wheeled the contents of my life into the airport. She beeped her horn as she drove off. I was on my own now.

I checked in for my one-way flight from Austin to Los Angeles because it was cheaper to fly to Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia from the West Coast than anywhere inside the
Lone Star state. In the past two months I had received vaccines, been verified that I didn’t have HIV or leprosy, done all of the proper paperwork to make sure my mom was given power of attorney in case anything happened during my new life as an expat. I thought I had dotted all of the i’s and crossed all of the t’s. But what I failed to do before I attempted to leave the country was weigh my luggage to make sure it was within the allotted weight requirement.

I said a silent thank you as my backpack and yellow suitcase both teetered just under 50 lbs. on the scale. The woman behind the counter scrutinized the digital numbers before affixing destination tags to both and plopping them on the conveyor belt behind her. As I hefted my burnt orange suitcase, color chosen for its likeness to The University of Texas’s iconic hue, I knew there was no way it was going to be under 50 lbs. In the months leading up to my departure, my mother, a former teacher, had sent me boxes of new and used elementary school English workbooks, worksheets, flashcards, and mock lesson plans. I had a virtual school in a bag and it was putting me over the weight limit.

“It’s six pounds over. Something’s going to have to come out,” the woman behind the counter stated. I heaved the suitcase off the scale and opened it up on the floor, determined to extract just enough items to get me under the limit. When I turned around and saw the people around me crane to get a look into my suitcase, my heart began to beat faster and my face felt flushed. With my suitcase open, my life was on display. My brightly colored pairs of underwear were barely contained in the mesh zip-up pocket. My GloWorm, a green, raggedy relic from my childhood peeked his smiling, frozen face out
from among my belongings, identifying me as an adult who still slept with a security blanket of sorts.

What should I take out? What was the least important thing I would need in Mongolia? Among the school supplies was a wind-up flashlight that required no batteries that my mother had also procured. I felt like that would come in handy. Also tucked inside was a wind-up radio, which I later found out didn’t actually work without batteries. That stayed, too.

I looked up at the woman, who in turn was looking down at me curiously.

“I’m moving to Mongolia. I’m going to teach children,” I explained, as I began to stuff stacks of workbooks into my computer bag. I left the math workbooks that my mom had inexplicably sent on the floor outside of my suitcase. With several pounds of school supplies transferred to my computer bag and a stack of math books now on top of a trashcan, my suitcase was under the weight limit.

“Have a safe trip,” the woman said, finally smiling. I trudged to my gate, my computer bag now uncomfortably laden with paper products. I felt like I had already put in a leg of my journey and I hadn’t even left the ground yet.

I hung back when it was time for general boarding of the plane from Austin to Los Angeles. I never understood to rush to get onto an airplane, only to have to wait for the requisite late passenger or tinkering of mechanisms by the pilot. I preferred to let everyone else elbow their way to the front of the line while I savored the last few minutes within a short distance to an actual bathroom and a drinking fountain.
It was the first time I had embarked on a journey that didn’t have a set return date. I shuffled down the aisle to my window seat and realized that no one was going to pop out from a cramped row to call bullshit on the first really major life decision I had just made. Despite that I had sold most of my belongings, including my Buick that fit three people up front and my amazing blue, red and yellow vintage dresser, moving to Mongolia had always seemed abstract, something that was just so far-fetched that I would never actually do it. But here I was, venturing farther than anyone in my family had ever been out into the world. I was doing it.

I settled into my seat and shoved my computer bag under the seat in front of me, cognizant that aside from the school supplies within, it contained my laptop, my wallet, my passport, an EpiPen and the *Lonely Planet Mongolia* travel guide: the five most important things in my life. My cellphone wouldn’t work in Asia, but I would be able to use my computer to email and Skype with people. My wallet contained what I found to be one of the most necessary items when traveling abroad: a credit card. My passport was the only thing that would get me through the Beijing airport to my connecting flight to Ulaan Baatar, and my EpiPen was my literal lifesaver. I had been deathly allergic to tree nuts since I could toddle around, and after a near death experience in Zagreb, Croatia, in college, I always kept it within reach.

My neck felt sticky; people were still straggling aboard and it was too soon to feel the full blast of air conditioning that only kicked on once the airplane crescendoed to airborne speed. I tried to discreetly turn my head to do a cautionary whiff of my armpit and then resigned myself to accepting the full effects of long-distance travel. I looked at
the passengers around me – fiddling with iPods, or wrestling carry-on bags into overhead compartments – and wondered what decisions they had made in their lives that led them to share an airplane ride with me. What was it that they were running away from? Perhaps they were music executives returning to LA after scouting talent in Austin’s dive bars, or millionaire moms jetting home after visiting defiant, tattooed children with secret dreams of concocting the best mole sauce north of Mexico. Or maybe, like my high school prom date from five years ago, they worked for Dell, and were on their way to compute and program in Silicon Valley.

I wondered what they thought of me. Was there anyone on that plane who thought that the young woman with short, bleached blonde hair, hazel eyes, a hoop in her lip and blue spirals through her stretched earlobes was abandoning her life in the United States to move to Mongolia to teach English to schoolchildren? I don’t think anyone would have believed me if had I told them.

When the flight attendant sealed the door, the final suction pulled the last bit of sweltering Texan air into the cabin, air I would breath indefinitely. If there was ever a time for me to feel sentimental and wistful about Austin, the beautiful, raucous city that had been my first home as a burgeoning adult out of college, this would have been it. Instead, I eschewed saying an internal, ceremonious goodbye to the crazy, wild, and expansive state and proceeded to ignore the flight attendant’s emergency instructions. I had been traveling for the majority of my life and always knew where to find exits when I needed to get out quick. I knew this was no time for emotional second-guessing. I had entered the no-man’s land of being in transit. I was on my own.
Besides, I had been leaving temporary homes since I came out of the womb.

* * *

When my family moved it was always in the middle of the night; it was easier with the help of darkness to pretend that all families moved as much as we did, to ignore that we never said goodbye to friends, or even told them of our departure, and to maintain our family motto: that we were embarking on another adventure. Moving became synonymous with packing up some kind of van: a maroon conversion van with a black and white television mounted in the back that never seemed to work, a blue Plymouth Voyager with wood panels that both of my older sisters learned to drive in, an aerodynamic-looking forest green soccer mom minivan that had, in fact, carted us to soccer practices.

My mom was always the one that tied up the loose ends because my father invariably would already be getting settled in our new location, working the job that required us to move yet again. She packed up entire households, supervised the burly, gruff men loading up long orange moving trucks, and shuttled four children, our Hungarian grandmother, a Labrador retriever, a pathetic mewling cat, and heavy, potted houseplants that were older than she was to our new house.

We had been settled as comfortably as we could be in a van that was packed as tightly as a clown car. It was my job to balance a 40 year old Christmas cactus on my lap for the duration of our migration from Erie, Pennsylvania to Wilmington, North Carolina. My mom handed an armful of highlighted maps to one of my perm-sporting older sisters navigating in the passenger seat, and turned around to survey us all as best as she could in
the predawn light: her 80-something year old *Magyar* mother, who in turn always loved a good adventure, the quartet of children in hand-me-down and consignment shop clothes, the dog that had pushed through the center of a tightly rolled-up sleeping bag that was wedged between the bench seat and the door and had became as immobilized as a mounted deer head. She remarked, “They’re going to think the gypsies are coming.”

Growing up with the aforementioned grandmother who, herself, grew up in Hungary, there was no shortage of stories about gypies, *czigany*. The nomadic gypsies of my grandmother’s youth had their caravans, late nights around campfires, haunting violin music, and a propensity to sneak into her henhouse to steal chickens. It was rumored that we, too, have gypsy blood in us. Somewhere within the family trees of Racz, Csoma, and generations before, another genetic line was introduced that caused the eye color of certain ancestors to deepen from blue to hazel, and skin to ripen from a peachy glow to a sultry olive. We were all born with wanderlust and mischief in our veins.

Despite knowing that I was somehow predestined to be a citizen of almost every place, yet no place in particular, it is a peculiar dilemma to be an adult without a childhood home. “Where are you from?” has always resulted in overly long explanations involving the city of my birth, where I went to high school, every place in between.

Was I an Army brat? No. While my father had been a member of the Army Corps of Engineers and had served in Vietnam until the Army put him on a plane home to Akron, OH, because his father died of a sudden heart attack, he chose not to reenlist when his time was up because his wife, our mother, had a premonition that if he went back over he would not return alive. Did my father work in corrections? This was,
unsurprisingly, asked of me frequently while we lived in Selinsgrove, PA. Much of the town was employed by the Snyder County Jail or the surrounding penitentiaries. No, neither he nor my mother worked within the correctional system.

It was embarrassing for me to admit why we moved so much, because the answer was neither interesting nor satisfying. We moved because we had to, because our father worked in banking in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s when huge bank mergers meant that the former administration no longer had a place within the company. The majority of banks on my now-retired father’s resume no longer exist. Firestone Bank, Bank One, First National Bank of Pennsylvania, Lebanon Valley Farmers Bank: they were minnows swallowed whole by more aggressive, predatory banks.

I learned quite some time ago not to direct laments about my lack of sense of home to my mother; she would inevitably retort, “Well, at least you got to go to only one high school.” She thinks I should be grateful: my brother John, seventeen months my junior, and my sister Sarah, nine years my senior, both went to two different high schools; my sister Emily, six years older than me, went to three. I had the self-absorption of an angsty teenager. I never thought about all of the things my mother must have given up, too.

Our parents told us after dinner one night, in our pineapple-wallpapered kitchen, that we would be moving from Wilmington, where we had spent less than a year, to a rural town in central Pennsylvania. Emily, John, and I all had the luxury of crying in different rooms in our house. Sarah was not as fortunate. Shortly after the announcement we made the four hour car trek to Winston-Salem where Sarah was a freshman at Wake
Forest University. The sole purpose of the trip was to break the news to Sarah that we were about to take off again and leave her alone in the land of sweet tea and antebellum estates.

At that time I was in 4th grade and outwardly jealous of Sarah because she lived in a dorm room with a Saudi Arabian princess and they had bunk beds. I had always wanted bunk beds. Unbeknownst to us, our parents concocted a new way to tell Sarah that we were moving. After exchanging hugs, my mom began to unload the groceries for Sarah that we had transported over 200 miles.

“What do you think?” Mom asked, winking at Dad. She had extracted a round, custom-decorated cake from the Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Wilmington. Fozzie Bear and Kermit the Frog were on it, grinning frosted smiles. It said, in thin curlicue letters: “MOVING RIGHT ALONG!”

Sarah stared at it for a minute. She had been the valedictorian of her high school class and was currently studying Chaucer and advanced German. But even she was hard pressed for an eloquent response.

“What are you for real?”

“We’re moving!” my parents shouted, in the same tone that expectant parents use to tell others that they’re having a baby.

I don’t think that any of us ate the cake.

* * * * *

But those moves weren’t my decision and this one – this whim that was about to take me to a landlocked former Communist country that used the seemingly geometric
Cyrillic alphabet – was all me. It was all new territory. I wasn’t following the same path of my older sisters and I certainly wasn’t playing it safe and settling down with a real job like my parents maybe hoped I would have. It was one thing for me to know that my life truly belonged to me and that I could hypothetically do whatever I wanted. It was a completely different thing to actually be sitting on an airplane with a two-year Mongolian work visa taking up a page in my passport.

I had never felt so free in my whole life.

* * *

When we landed at LAX, I hadn’t taken into consideration that I would have to transport all of my luggage from the baggage carousel at Arrivals all the way back to Departures to check into my flight to Beijing. I couldn’t have that far to go.

With my pack perched on my back, the seatbelt-like waistband clipped around my hips, and my suitcases in tow, I marched towards Departures as purposefully as I could in what felt like 100 degree heat. Maybe I wasn’t aware at the time that I could have stayed indoors in the air conditioning. Maybe I became disoriented in my search for Departures. I definitely was not aware that LAX was the sixth busiest airport in the world with almost 1,000 flights departing daily. Either way, in the late August, Los Angeles heat, I felt like my skin was melting off my body, exposing my blood vessels, bones, and nervous system to the nearly caustic sun. Had I remembered to pack sunscreen?

I was no country bumpkin, despite spending my formative years in a rural town in Pennsylvania, but I felt like a huge, ugly loser as I hustled past rows of Mercedes SUVS and sports cars outside the terminals, waiting to pick up those recently arrived.
Impossibly thin, blonde and busty women who barely glistened, much less appeared to sweat, sauntered past me. I looked down and saw that without a doubt, the buckled belt of my backpack gave me an epic muffin top. At that moment, I loathed those Los Angeles: their casually slung Marc Jacobs purses, wedge heels, and conspicuous wealth. I had never been a fan of L.A., not when I visited universities there with my parents and brother, John, when I was sixteen, and not when I returned with friends and a fake I.D. when I was twenty.

I felt like I had slogged around the exterior of the airport for miles, still not close to Departures. The weight of my suitcases growled behind me and I could feel the aura of sweat expanding on my lower back. What if I never made it to Departures? I would be doomed to walk circles around the perimeter of the airport, forever missing my terminal, the roar of jets always echoing in my ears. It was hard to envision a time when I wouldn’t feel this sticky. Feeling overwhelmed and near despair, I looked down at my dragging limbs. In a mix of royal and robin’s egg blue, I had “renegade” tattooed on the inside of my left wrist. I felt strengthened. I was a Renegade, a former member of Ithaca College Women’s Rugby Club. I could tackle just about anyone and had been kicked in the head during more matches than I could count. I had received bruises during rugby that made my mom cry. I was a tough cookie. A renegade defies conventions and makes her own rules. I had been a renegade long before I ever stepped foot on the rugby pitch.

I reminded myself that this – this airport, this climate, this city – was not my destination. I steadied myself and halted the cracks in my composure. If I was going to fall apart, it certainly wasn’t going to be in L.A.
Eventually, I made it to Departures and found Air China. I was not, in fact, going to be stuck walking around LAX for eternity. I checked into my flight without a hitch this time around. With my boarding pass for Beijing in one hand and my ID in the other, I got through security like I owned the place. Maybe it was the time I had spent outside in the sun, but I began to feel punch drunk. I was grinning like I held all the secrets in the world. *I was going to Mongolia.*

After I made it through security, I staked out a place to camp out near my gate where I could charge my phone and computer. I had almost five hours before my flight to Beijing would leave in the very early hours of Friday, August 25th. I looked around expectantly for someone to tell me what to do. I called Mike. *I’m in L.A., I said, waiting for my flight to China and I feel weird. I could turn around, I could get back on a flight to Austin and no one would know.* But we both knew I wouldn’t do that. I was more invested in Mongolia than I ever had been in Austin. *See you in a year,* I said. He didn’t laugh with me. I knew he wasn’t happy that I was leaving him indefinitely and wasn’t happy that we – he reluctantly – agreed on the possibility of the two of us dating other people while I was gone. I had made the mistake of staying tethered to an on-again, off-again boyfriend in college when I spent a semester in the Balkans. In what I admit was a heartless move, I broke up with the on-again, off-again boyfriend in an email halfway through the semester, telling him I didn’t think I wanted to date him when I returned. I was determined that, no matter what happened, I would not put Mike through something like that.
Maybe I should have just cut the cord completely before I left. Maybe I should have actually been honest and told Mike that I dreaded what my life would be like with him if I stayed. Maybe I should have acknowledged that I didn’t see myself being with Mike long term, but part of me needed an anchor, as tenuous and unsteady of an anchor he was, while I was in Asia. And he happened to be storing what was left of my possessions in boxes spread out in almost every room in his apartment.

From my spot, where I was sprawled out on the vaguely clean airport carpet, I left a new voicemail message on my phone. It said something to the effect of: Hi, this is LeeAnn. I cannot be reached right now because I moved to Mongolia. Please try calling back in approximately one year.

Satisfied with my own wit, I scrolled through the contacts in my phone to see whom I could call. I wasn’t sure about the logistics of making international calls when I got to Ulaan Baatar, so I felt a frenzied need to talk to everyone and their mother while I still could. I thought about, and suddenly missed, my own mother. The last time I had seen my parents was in June, when my immediate family and favorite relative, Aunt Shirl, vacationed on a houseboat on Lake Powell, between the border of Utah and Arizona. Calling it a “vacation” was a more than a stretch. My dad, an avid supporter of the National Park Service, jumped at the chance to put the family on a houseboat for a week when he found out that the lake would be at its highest level that summer for the foreseeable future. What my father failed to take into account was that traveling by houseboat was essentially like camping and our family didn’t camp. I was even hesitant to embark on anything called a “hike” because it reminded me of ugly boots and
complicated clothing. We weren’t campers; we were beach people. Other sporadic family vacations have found the Marhevskys lounging under colorful umbrellas on beaches in North and South Carolina, heavily lathered with sunscreen, reading books.

When the week on the houseboat was finally over, we were all ready to go back to our respective states. I had said goodbye to my parents, none of us knowing yet that I would be redirecting my life to Mongolia. I hadn’t been particularly close to my parents since around the time I hit puberty and turned into a full-fledged, complex human being, but sitting alone on the floor at LAX, watching families scramble to catch flights, I missed my family.

* * *

With the help of some Tylenol PM, I slept through about half of the twelve hour flight from Los Angeles to Beijing. My fitful dreams were interspersed with the cries of a small, blonde-haired boy several rows away and flashes of Steve Martin in the remake of The Pink Panther, the in-flight movie.

When we landed it was around 6:30AM in Beijing. My flight had left LA at 1:30AM. I had either lost a day or gained a day. I climbed the sloping walkway from the airplane and entered the gargantuan Beijing Capital International Airport. Holy shit. I am in Asia.

And for maybe the first time in my life, aside from studying political theory in college, I became aware of my whiteness. Though I had just come Texas, which has its own fair share of racial diversity, I had never before been in the apparent minority. I stepped aside and let the other passengers on my flight disperse throughout the airport as
I took a moment to get my bearings. My brain ricocheted around in my head as it tried to comprehend snippets of conversations in languages I couldn’t identify. Standing there, neck already aching from my overfilled computer bag, I felt a different kind of energy than I ever had anywhere in the States. Maybe I was exoticising the otherness during my first minutes in Asia, or maybe I was just really, really tired, but in that moment the air felt electric and alive. I knew in that moment that things had changed. I was no longer in the process of moving to Asia. I was there.

I chided myself for standing around with what was surely a dopey look on my face. *Get it together, Marhevsky, you have another plane to catch!* Though I had absolutely no idea where I was going, and wasn’t sure if there were any signs in English to lead the way, I picked a direction and marched toward it. If you look like you know what you’re doing, my mother had long instructed my siblings and me, people will think you know what you’re doing.

As I pounded the tiled floors, I felt like I had grown several inches. At 5’7”, I had never really considered myself tall. In fact, I was the short one in the family. My dad was just over 6’ tall, while my two sisters and brother all measured in somewhere between 5’9” – 5’10”. I stopped growing when I had just barely hit 5’7”, the same height as my mother, though for years I disputed it on my driver’s license and listed 5’8”. But in this international hub, I was the tall one. I scooted around other travelers, often an entire head taller than them. I finally knew what I was doing. I was going to strut through that airport until I found a bathroom. I may not have grasped any of the Asian languages yet, but like a divining rod, I knew how to identify bathrooms in a pinch.
After I freshened up and brushed my teeth, I set off to find my flight to Ulaan Baatar. Once my boarding pass was checked at international transfers, I was pointed down a hallway. I waited in a line for half an hour, presumably to move on to international departures, but once I finally reached the security guard, he just grunted and pointed me away from the line.

“Where am I supposed to go?” I asked. He just took the next passport and kept pointing away from him.

“But where do I go?”

He ignored me. I walked away and started crying. It was 7:20AM and my flight to UB was leaving in an hour. I found a different line for international departures and waited there for fifteen minutes with a bunch of loud, confused French people and a man traveling back to east Texas.

“So do you know if this is where I’m supposed to be?” I asked my fellow Texan.

“Did you get your transit visa yet?”

What was a transit visa?

Transit visa or not, I was still in the wrong line. I flagged down a non-Asian airport employee who told me where I needed to go: a little security station twenty feet away from the first international counter I had been pointed away from. I rushed to my gate and found that my flight to UB was pushed back to 8:50AM. I looked around the terminal at anonymous faces I would never see again, at the planes taking off at measured intervals, at China – real China – just beyond the airport windows. I felt a pang of regret that I was in China, but would never actually experience it from a street level.
I ventured into a nearby cafeteria that advertised it accepted US dollars. On shelves behind a pane of glass were dozens of dishes. Some were recognizable: spaghetti, a fruit plate, sushi, stir-fries, and pieces of cake. I pointed at a plate with honeydew, cantaloupe, watermelon, and random cherry tomatoes placed strategically around them, and an Asian dish of cellophane noodles with slivers of carrots and seaweed. I added a large bottle of spring water to my order, which was under $8.

When I returned to the gate after eating my odd breakfast, I was informed that the flight was delayed indefinitely because of “bad weather” and a “tail wind” in Ulaan Baatar. Nathan, an Australian man who introduced himself as a miner who drilled for copper and gold in Mongolia, saw the approaching panic on my face and informed me that the airline was thinking about shuttling us to a hotel in Beijing until we could take off. I looked out the window and saw only blue-gray skies. I was stranded in an international airport in a country for which I didn’t have a visa to even enter. I felt dizzy. What if the Hobby School, my soon-to-be employer, didn’t know that my flight was delayed and thought I wasn’t coming? How would the Hobby School, who often took a week to reply to my previous emails, know when to finally pick me up in Ulaan Baatar? What about my luggage?

I found a payphone nearby that was so technologically advanced that I had walked past it several times before realizing that it was actually a telephone. Clearly, my quarters would not work here. I dug through my computer bag to locate my wallet. I had no idea what kind of bill I was going to get hit with if I called internationally, but at that point I didn’t even care. I was stuck in China and just wanted someone to know that I was
okay, and maybe, if I was lucky, they could also give the Hobby School a heads up that their elementary school English teacher was going to be late.

I swiped my credit card at the payphone – a first for me – and punched in what felt like dozens of numbers. Somehow, through underwater phone lines and what I attributed to some kind of sorcery, my telephone in Beijing was going to magically connect to a telephone in Pennsylvania. I had no idea what time it was in Beijing, just that the sun was shining, and had even less of a clue what time it was on the East coast. If it was daytime in China it was probably nighttime in Lebanon, PA. I plugged my free ear with a pointer finger to drown out the noise of the terminal, held my breath, and hoped someone would pick up.

“Hello?”

There it was. From tens of thousands of miles away, sounding distant, but still automatically identifiable, was my mother. I swear she picked up after the first ring, like she always did whenever anyone called in the middle of the night, having sprung from bed, breathless, always assuming the worst.

I meant to keep it together, I really did. I should have done what all of my siblings and I knew to do when calling at odd hours: stated my name, that everything was okay, that I was fine. This was an unspoken, but widely understood Marhevsky rule and was necessary to keep our mother from keeling over in the middle of the night.

I hadn’t sought the comfort of my mother in almost a decade. I had tumultuous teenage years, filled not with the stereotypical angst, but with a heavy depression that
started at thirteen. It manifested into bulimia later that year and progressed to harming myself when I was fourteen.

“Sometimes you have to forgive the unforgivable,” Dr. Zillah Eisenstein, my most admired politics professor in college, said, regarding how survivors of war and genocide deal with experiencing such atrocities. I was a young, relatively privileged white woman, albeit with a mental illness, growing up in America. I was not a survivor of war crimes. I did not witness the systematic rape and torture of my ethnic group. But I was fighting a battle of my own and I was not yet ready to forgive the unforgivable.

Why was she the first one I thought to call? Any other time I was in trouble and needed help I always went to my sisters, Sarah and Emily, first. But I needed to break out the big guns if I was stuck in China and the big guns were Connie and Andy Marhevsky. They were the type of people who belonged to Rotary Club and volunteered with United Way. They did things like contact their Congressman, who contacted the State Department to make sure the Hobby School was legit. There was no way I was going to be sold into sexual slavery if they had anything to do with it.

“Mom –” I started, my voice quavering.

“LeeAnn? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

For years she had been asking if I was okay. But I was fine. I was always fine.

I had come to that deciding page in my own Choose Your Own Adventure novel. If I give into that rising panic in my belly and start to cry, turn to page 46. If I take a deep breath and let the universe work out the details of my immediate future, turn to page 11.

I freaked out.
“I’m stuck in China and my flight is cancelled and I don’t know what to do and I don’t know when I’ll get to Mongolia and no one will be there when I get there and I don’t know what to do,” I wailed.

This might have become the middle of the night phone call that my mom always feared. I wasn’t calling from the hospital after an accident. I wasn’t calling from jail needing bail money. I was alone in a Communist country with just a laptop and a spare pair of underwear in the zipper pocket of my computer bag. I would have preferred jail at that moment.

“Why are you stuck in China?” she asked.

At the time I didn’t know that China was pissed that the Dalai Lama was visiting Ulaan Baatar. I didn’t know that China’s foreign ministry had released a statement saying, “The Dalai Lama is not merely a religious figure, but a political exile who over a lengthy period has engaged in splittist activities and hurt national unity. China is resolutely opposed to any country offering him a stage to engage in the above-mentioned activities.”

I definitely was not aware that angry governments could halt all modes of travel from one country to another. Nor was I aware that China had done this exact same thing in 2002 by blocking all trains at the Mongolian border, refusing them to let them exit China.

“LeeAnn. LeeAnnie. Focus. What can we do for you right now?”

I rubbed my tears into my cheeks and took a big breath.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m just worried the Hobby School won’t know when to
pick me up and I’ll be stuck at the airport with nowhere to go. Can you try to email them?”

I felt my parents had a better chance of putting a note in a bottle, throwing it into the ocean, and having it arrive at the landlocked country than getting into contact with my employers. The phone number the Hobby School had previously given us was actually a fax number and the principal rarely checked her email. I hung up, knowing that while my parents would do the best that they could halfway around the world, I was on my own. I returned to the gate. Our plane went from being delayed indefinitely to a posted departure of 7:00PM, ten hours from now. Due to the inconvenience, the airline was going to shuttle us to a hotel where we could eat and relax until the “bad weather” subsided and we could leave for UB.

I sat down near Nathan, who was now surrounded by other English speakers: a German-Irish man named Mike who worked for the European Union and an unnamed Israeli woman who worked for the World Health Organization. She sobbed and rocked back and forth, not because our flight was delayed, but because she found out that Hamas just attacked Israel. She grabbed my hand and looked at me with wild eyes.

“We just want peace, but they want war!”

I didn’t know what Hamas was and I was in no position to comment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I just held her hand, a woman comforting another.

Our entire flight was led through a special security line to get us out of the airport and to the hotel. Each passenger in front of me had their passport analyzed, scanned, and was then allowed to go outside to the shuttle bus.
Not me. The security guards looked at me and looked at my passport. They flipped through the pages, looking to see if they had missed a faint stamp among other faint stamps. They had not. A line was drawn in the sand and I was on the wrong side of it. Nathan shrugged helplessly on the other side of security, gave me a thumbs up for encouragement, and boarded the shuttle bus. It pulled away without me on it. For the next hour I followed various uniformed men around the recesses of the airport while they handed off my passport and boarding pass to other uniformed men.

I was no longer anxious; I was annoyed. My teeth were furry, I was hungry again, and my armpits smelled. I stood before three security guards who looked no older than twenty. They glanced at my passport, put it down, and began to speak amongst themselves in Chinese. Now, my Chinese was as limited as my Mongolian, meaning nonexistent, but I knew visual clues when I saw them. One of the security guards nudged the other two and pointed at his lip. They looked at each other and laughed. Seriously? I had now resigned myself to being forever stuck in limbo in the airport. I couldn’t stop myself from giving them some sass.

“Oh, you like my lip ring?” I asked loudly, pulling it into my mouth with my teeth. They froze. I caught them!

“You speak Chinese?!” they exclaimed. I shook my head and rolled my eyes. They giggled and pointed at my earrings, huge blue spirals that weighed down my earlobes.

“Very special earrings!” one observed. I smiled at them, slid it out of my ear, and stuck my pinkie finger through the stretched hole in my ear. They gasped in horror. I
don’t know if that’s what did the trick, but they finally stamped my passport and shipped me off to the 21st Century Hotel, a twenty minute taxi ride from the airport.

I had no idea how I was going to pay the taxi driver, who was barricaded in a jerry-rigged metal cage in the front seat. I was too busy marveling at Beijing. The streets were as filthy as the skies were smoggy. Bike riders and trucks battled for control of the bike lanes. There were more VWs in that section of Beijing than I had seen in my entire life. Families squatted in huts a stone’s throw away from the highway. Prisoners in work uniforms did road construction as guards keep watch with machine guns. It was messy and dirty, a juxtaposition of ancient culture and skyscrapers. I couldn’t imagine that there was any way the infrastructure of Beijing would be ready for the 2008 Olympics.

We pulled up to a modern hotel with more stories than I could count. A porter came out and opened my taxi door. Not knowing what else to do, I showed him my Air China boarding pass. He paid the taxi driver, who drove off without ever looking me in the eye. The porter handed me off to a concierge at the front desk, who handed me a numbered key to a hotel room. The room was already occupied by an Asian woman who napped on one of the double beds. I took advantage of the empty bathroom and showered, putting on the clean pair of underwear I had the foresight to pack. I used the complimentary toothbrush and the miniscule tube of toothpaste to scour my teeth.

The hotel was clearly used to international travelers because it had Wi-Fi and an adaptor so I could charge my computer. I messaged my brother and told him to let Mom know that everything worked out and sent Mike some messages so he would get them next time he was online.
What was Mike doing while I was on my Beijing adventure? Had he even looked at the list of goals I wanted him to accomplish while I was gone? Most of my frustration with our relationship was because he couldn’t get it together as an adult. I didn’t want him to give up smoking pot or watching anime in his free time, but I did want him to think about going to the dentist, opening a bank account, getting a car, and establishing credit. I wanted him to be in a better position when I got back than when I left.

I put my stinky shirt back on and napped until the phone rang at 3:15PM. I was instructed to meet on the 2nd floor at 4:00PM for dinner and be ready to check-out at 5:00PM. Food!

I met up with Nathan and Mike, who were amazed that I got into China without having any form of visa. We entered a conference room that had a dozen different silver chafing dishes filled with steaming entrees. Even as a vegetarian I had plenty of options to choose from. I helped myself to some rice, a spicy tofu dish which Mike said was called Mother-in-law tofu, baby bok choy, and sautéed squash and cabbage. I was surprised at the extent of the spread offered to us. It was nearly impossible to get a $5 food voucher from a domestic airline if your flight was delayed and all of this was free.

We boarded the shuttle bus for our 7:00PM departure. I wasn’t surprised when we didn’t even start taxiing until 9:30PM. I was beginning to understand just how differently this part of the world worked.
CHAPTER IV

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

After eight weeks of planning and almost 48 hours of traveling, I was in freaking Mongolia. While the other passengers around me clambered to disembark with their carry-on possessions, I waited a bit to gather my things. Getting to Mongolia had been several months in the making and now I just wanted to savor the building anticipation in my gut. I spied an unusual amount of travelers carrying intricately frosted cakes in boxes, tied tightly closed with utilitarian twine, and more than one person exited with large bags of KFC, bought in Beijing (the closest one to Ulaan Baatar), parts of it darkened with heavy splotches of grease.

There was no connector from the plane to the terminal. Instead, I exited the plane with shaky legs onto the tarmac. It was incredibly dark outside, with a wisp of chill in the air that hinted at a quickly approaching autumn. The only light came from the spotlights that highlighted the large black letters that indicated the airport’s name in English: CHINGGIS AIRPORT. I turned all around and tried to identify what loomed in the darkness just past my vision. Ulaan Baatar was nestled in a valley, surrounded by barren mountains, one of many facts about my new home that I learned from reading *Lonely Planet: Mongolia* cover to cover. When I sucked in that first conscious breath of
Mongolia, I brought that ancient darkness into my lungs, along with a scent I couldn’t place at the time. There was something fecund in the air, a smell I would identify months later as millions of heads of livestock eating, sleeping, breeding, and shitting. The entire country smelled like sheep. I stood there, breathing the same air that Genghis Khan had, and felt my soul finally start to relax, maybe for the first time since I became a teenager.

I followed the scurrying passengers, the majority of whom wore dels, the traditional, brightly colored Mongolian coat-like garment belted with a contrasting color, into the terminal, the neon lights jarring my short-lived moment of zen. I hurried into what I thought was the line for Customs. Though there were four Customs agents scanning and reviewing passports, the Mongolians around me never separated into distinct lines for service. My first lesson in my new home: Mongolians don’t do lines. They don’t wait; they push forward with as much force as a rugby scrum. At one point I had been within arm’s distance of the Customs agent. I soon found myself at the very back of the free-for-all, unsure of what exactly happened. I hadn’t been jostled and pushed around so much by people who unabashedly did so since I had been in a mosh pit. I would need to learn how to be Mongolian.

When I finally got to Customs, my first thought wasn’t about the scrutiny my passport and visa was about to undergo, but how soon I could get to the bathroom just beyond the counter. The universal signs for the ladies room, a black figure wearing a triangular skirt, beckoned to me: *Come, release your bladder for the first time in your new homeland.* I stood there, stone-faced, as the stoic Mongolian man flipped through my
passport and lingered on pages filled with stamps from Hungary, Austria, Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, Serbia, Bosnia, and, most recently, China. He looked at me intently, and again at the picture of me, at seventeen, that loaded on his computer when he scanned my passport. The picture was over five years old, from my senior year in high school. In it, my short blonde hair is unruly and I am smiling broadly, something that is now discouraged in passport photos. Each side of my face looks slightly different, like each half belongs to a different face. One of my eyes appears vaguely wonky – lazy, even.

I did not pull on my body piercings, as I did in China for the appalled security guards, who were practically boys. I made my face hard, yet determined, like my great-grandmother’s must have been when she stood in line at Ellis Island with four children. She had been desperate to pass inspection to meet her husband who had gone to America many years earlier to work in order to bring his family over, until World War I left them stranded in Hungary. I, too, was about to enter a fearsome new land.

Finally, he stamped my passport and reached his hand out for the next one, without ever saying a word. I rushed to the bathroom, relieved myself, and somehow gashed several of my fingers on a piece of sharp metal protruding from the toilet paper holder. Dear God, I thought, as I sucked the blood off my fingers, I’m not even out of the airport and I probably have tetanus already. I staunched the blood with the scratchy, thin, paper, and finding no soap at the sinks, ran my hands under the water and hoped for the healing effects of saliva to do their job instead.
I wandered tentatively out from the bathroom, suddenly nervous to meet the unknown contact person the Hobby School supposedly had sent out to meet me. I entered baggage claim, a large, minimalistic room and was greeted by the sounds of dozens of people speaking Mongolian, a language I had never recognized before, as most of the passengers on my previous flight had been subdued and introspective during our nighttime travel. It didn’t have the cadence of the Chinese I had heard in Beijing, or pitch and tone of any of the Japanese kung fu and anime movies I had seen. In fact, it didn’t sound like any Asian language I had heard before. The sounds were heavy, weighted, like a mix between Arabic and German. I felt disoriented and woozy under the neon lights and searched the crowd for a familiar face, though I knew there wouldn’t be one.

The mass of Mongolians waiting to meet arriving friends and family members parted enough to make a narrow walkway, a catwalk really, for those who had just landed. Bored looking men and women halfheartedly held signs in front of them, written in Cyrillic, Chinese, and Korean. I briefly met their eyes, but knew as soon as they looked away that they were not there to retrieve me. I held my computer bag close to me as I pushed through the crowd that seemed on the verge of swallowing me. I should have left any opinion I had about personal space in Austin, because I was now amongst a population that had no qualms about being up in mine.

The crowd came to a bottleneck before it opened up to the actual baggage claim. I felt like I had just beaten my way through a gauntlet. Just ahead of me, standing in front of a thick pole, was a tall, slim man with olive skin and dark brown-black hair. He held a simple computer paper sign: HOBBY SCHOOL.
“That’s me!” I shouted, feeling absolute relief. “I’m a teacher for the Hobby School.” I walked toward him, smiling, and as I got closer, saw that he had luminescent yellow-green eyes. It was the first time I had seen an Asian with an eye color other than dark brown. I kept my eyes locked on his until I was close enough to reach him. I wanted to hug him.

“I am Bor,” he said, pronouncing it like the animal, while rolling the r. “I work for the Hobby School. Are you Amy or Lee?”

“I’m LeeAnn,” I replied, noting his completely Western outfit of jeans, sneakers, and a trendy button down shirt. His hair was shaggy with long pieces in front that were brushed to the side of his face, a style that made it difficult to determine if it was intentional or if he merely needed a haircut. He ushered me over to a row of hard plastic chairs and motioned for me to sit down.

“I will get your bags,” he announced. “What did you bring?”

“A big orange-ish backpack and a really big orange suitcase.”

The conveyor belt that was supposed to produce the plane’s luggage was noticeably quiet. I looked up at Bor and raised my eyebrows.

“It may take a little while,” Bor said. He sat down next to me and we tentatively faced each other. I felt like we were on a blind date. He cleared his throat.

“Are you maybe Asian?” he asked.

I had been asked many seemingly random questions in my life, but that one took the cake. I actually wanted to turn around to make sure he was addressing me, but I knew from how intent he was that this question was, in fact, aimed at me.
“Um, no?”

“I didn’t think so,” he quickly replied, “but some teachers at Hobby School thought you were maybe Chinese because your name. Lee is very common Chinese name and in Mongolia we sign our family names first. They thought maybe Lee was your family name and Ann was your first name.”

These words raced through my jetlagged brain as I tried to process the meaning. Were they expecting an Asian-American LeeAnn Marhevsky? I had sent the Hobby School a scanning of my passport, which included a picture, during the application process. I smiled faintly and shook my head. “No, I’m pretty much Hungarian and eastern European.”

He perked up. “Do you know Serbia? I was born in Serbia.”

“I do! I spent time there in college when I studied abroad.”

We were approximately 5000 miles away from the former Yugoslavian country and here I was talking to a Serbo-Mongolian. Or was he a Mongolian-Serb? I wanted to ask him more about his heritage but another wave of passengers entered the baggage claim from a connection in Seoul, causing Bor to jump up and display his sign.

“We wait for Amy. Her flight comes from Seoul. She is your roommate,” Bor said, scanning the new wave of passengers. “She is also white. Hobby School thought you two would get along so they put you together.” I later learned that the great minds behind the Hobby School roomed the other two American women together because they were both women of color and would, by Mongolian logic, have more in common than if they were paired up with Amy or me.
A tiny woman with long, light brown hair topped with a weary leather cowboy hat strolled up to Bor and me. Her petite size and light blue eyes made her resemble a woodland sprite. I knew without a doubt that this Amy.

“You are Amy,” Bor stated.

“I am,” she replied. She wore outdoorsy hiking pants, a thin, floral polyester shirt, and had an encased mandolin slung across her back. Even from an arms length away she exuded that waft of body odor that comes from traveling long distances in confined spaces. I was sure I smelled the exact same way.

“Amy, this is LeeAnn,” Bor said. “She is your new roommate.” When Bor went to grab our luggage, Amy and I made formal introductions. I found out that she was 27 years old and from Kittery, a small town in Maine.

“How did you end up in Mongolia?” she asked. I struggled to find an answer.

“Well.” There was the long version and the short version. Did I explain to this woman whom I had just met that I was floundering in my life and just needed to go somewhere? Or did I just tell her that Mongolia was the only country that would have me? I went with the short version.

“I was living in Texas and didn’t really have any other options there and by the time I decided to try to teach abroad, the Hobby School was the only place that still needed teachers.”

“Did you find their post on Idealist.org, too?” she asked. I nodded.

“How about you?” I asked.
“I’ve always wanted to go to Mongolia. I’m really fascinated by their nomadic and herding culture. I’m thinking about buying a horse and traveling across Mongolia when we’re done teaching.”

I stared at her. We both came from a country in which people had transformative, coming-of-age experiences in cross-country road trips, not on horseback. She clearly knew much more about Mongolia than I did and was the type of person who would actually buy a horse and travel solo across a mostly barren country. I was equally terrified and intrigued by her.

Bor came back, lugging my suitcase and our backpacks.

“Come,” he said, motioning with his head towards the doors. We followed him through the entrance of the airport and stepped back out into the night. I felt something special in those first moments in my new country, surrounded by darkness and possibility. I felt like I was finally starting my life.

Bor lugged our bags into the back of an aging Land Cruiser. I was surprised that such a vehicle had made it to a landlocked country. I had been expecting to see mainly Japanese and Korean sedans on the road, similar to the fuel-efficient Europeans models that occupied the streets when I lived in Zagreb. I didn’t realize then that though it was possible to drive outside of Ulaan Baatar in a regular sedan, it was definitely preferable to use a four-wheel drive vehicle on the roads, or what was called a road.

Bor motioned to the large, sullen Mongolian man who leaned against the vehicle while smoking a cigarette. He resembled an angry bulldog and looked at Amy and I with open disdain.
“This is Bayasaa. He will drive you to your apartment in Ulaan Baatar,” Bor announced. “But he does not speak much English.”

Bayasaa glanced over at us and hurled a huge wad of spit on the ground. He took one last, hard pull from his cigarette before throwing it onto the pavement. My stomach sank in dread. I hadn’t expected to get handed off so soon. Plus, I had thought that Bor would drive us to our new place. I made eye contact with Amy. She looked at the scowling Bayasaa and then at me, her eyes widening in uncertainty. Neither of us was in a hurry to get into a car with this man. Bayasaa lumbered into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. He started the car and revved the engine so aggressively that I could see a thick, dark plume of exhaust burst out of the tailpipe even though it was nighttime.

“Hey, Bor, who is this man?” I asked, hesitantly. “Does he also work for the Hobby School?”

“Oh!” he said. “Bayasaa is my cousin. His mother owns the Hobby School. He is just helping out today.”

I looked at Amy in astonishment. I hadn’t felt this much animosity from someone since the skinheads in my friend Tarna’s neighborhood in Zagreb found out I was American, not Croatian.

We said farewell to Bor and slowly climbed into the backseat of the Land Cruiser. Inside, Bayasaa had lit another cigarette and was listening to what sounded like melodic Mongolian music, complete with chimes, bells, and wistful singing. As soon as we got onto what I assumed was the road to UB, he floored the gas and took off like a checkered flag had just been dropped. I didn’t dare to peek around him to see how fast we were
going, but I felt like I had suddenly become an unwilling participant in a rally race involving one car.

Amy and I reached for our seatbelts at the exact same time, only to discover that the part into which they buckled had been completely removed from the car. I gripped the handle in the door to prevent myself from sliding across the bench seat into Amy. It was difficult to see anything we zoomed past because there weren’t any streetlights, just an occasional, brief glow from the spotlights highlighting billboards advertising cartons of fruit juice or beer.

“What side of the road do they drive on in Mongolia?” Amy shouted over the uncomfortably loud music. I had no idea because Bayasaa drove in both lanes and switched back and forth rapidly without reason. When he heard Amy yell, he turned the music up several more notches.

“I don’t know,” I shouted back. “But I think he’s trying to kill us!”

Bayasaa looked into the rearview mirror at our terrified faces and turned up the music even louder, making it impossible for Amy and I to communicate with each other. Though I wasn’t a particularly religious person, I shut my eyes and shot off a prayer to any god who felt like listening. Please, please, please keep this car on the road and let us get there safely. Please don’t let this madman kill us before we even get to the city.

In the distance, I saw a configuration of light. It had to be Ulaan Baatar. My heart beat faster in anticipation. As we raced closer to the city, I saw a dense layer of smoke draping the city. This would be the last time my nose would be free of the black particles my nostrils filtered out of the air from the horrible air pollution caused by burning coal in
the city. I thought Bayasaa would slow down when we reached the city, but if he did, it was negligible. We tore through UB, dodging potholes, trash in the road, and other aging, forlorn cars. I struggled to make sense of the signs on the buildings on the main road in UB, Enkh Taivy Örgön Chööö, known as Peace Avenue. The buildings were a mix of traditional monastery, shack-like bodegas, embassies that resembled the architecture in Vienna, and straight-up Communist-era Russia. We finally slowed down to a normal, city speed to turn onto a smaller street in the 11th District.

Massive, identical 10-storey buildings loomed on either side of the street like fortresses. As we pulled into an eerie little alley between two of the buildings, I realized that our apartment was housed in one of these drab, Soviet tenements. We came to a crawl as Bayasaa stuck his head out the window, craning to find the correct entrance to our building. He hit the brakes in front of a large, green metal door, illuminated by one of several streetlights. He threw the car in park, hoisted himself out, and began pulling our luggage from the back of the Land Cruiser. I exited the car and saw that we were in what could be considered a courtyard, with four tenements forming a rectangle around it. A sad little metallic playground occupied part of the courtyard. It looked like no one had played on the equipment in a generation. The rest of the courtyard was a giant, dusty dirt bowl ringed with crumbling sidewalks.

Bayasaa charged through the door with our suitcases, leaving our backpacks on the ground by the car. I hurried to get my pack and followed him through the front door of our building. Directly inside, in the triangular space under the first flight of stairs, was a tiny room. A large, plastic window that separated the room from the stairwell was
covered with a sheet of faded white lace. Inside, a figure sat up and moved the lace away from the window of the room to view us. Amy and I looked at each other in astonishment and then at the woman whose face greeted us with bleary eyes.

Several flights ahead of us, I heard Bayasaa huff and groan as he hauled our suitcases up to our dwelling. Amy and I took two stairs at a time to try to catch up with him, legs burning from the exertion. We finally reached an open door on the 8th floor. Directly inside the door was a little room, like a small mudroom or foyer. To the right was the door to a neighboring apartment and straight ahead was another open door. Bayasaa deposited our luggage roughly on the floor and grunted, indicating that we should come in. I stepped into our apartment and before I could even look around, Bayasaa thrust his hand out at me. Instinctively, I did the same. He dropped two sets of keys into my hand, turned around and left, slamming both doors on his way out. He hadn’t said a single word to us, in English or Mongolian, the entire time.

Amy and I looked at each other, bewildered. We were home.
I often dream that I am being chased. These dreams take place in my old house in Selinsgrove, PA, the rural town where my family resided for eight years. That’s the longest I’ve ever lived anywhere. In the muck of my sleepy psyche, I tear around the house to lock all the doors and windows before the approaching terror crosses the threshold. Inevitably, I end up trapped in a bathroom or a warped version of my teenage bedroom. I notice a window and escape from whatever is pursuing me by busting out the window and climbing to safety. These are the constants: I am always chased, I am always securing the house, and I always escape through a window. This happens so frequently that when I have to make an actual escape through a window at some point in my life, I will be ready.

Or: I am chased through the woods that abut a dairy farm behind the Selinsgrove house. I may climb up the ladder to the tree house that my dad, brother, and I built when I was in 5th grade. I push the tire swing out of the way (the one whose rope frayed and snapped while my brother, John, pushed me high into the summer air when I was 12; the one that sailed through the air with me as I flew, blissfully unattached to tree or earth, until I collided with the ground and lost consciousness; the initial cause of all of my back
problems that persist to this day). I hurdle over the same fallen trees and holes that I veered around as an adolescent. Whatever chases me is terrifying. It wants to consume me. When it comes close my soul starts to slip out through my feet, pushing off my sneakers, leaving me barefoot in my flight. Why am I running? What is chasing me? * * * * *

With Bayasaa’s hasty departure, we were free to explore. The apartment door opened into a wide hallway clad in wood grain linoleum. Directly to the right of the entrance was a closet. I fumbled up and down the closet wall to locate a light source to illuminate it until I made out a burnt out bulb, devoid of a pull chain, cowering in the back of the infinite space. In the dust of it all was pieces of splintered wood, trash, and lumpy shapes which resembled sleeping zombies. I shut the door before my jetlagged brain- or the undead- could get the best of me. I turned to Amy, who had been peering in behind me.

“Let’s not keep anything in there, ok?”

She nodded in agreement.

Just past the closet door was the opening to the kitchen. It was a small, square room with a ¾ sized refrigerator and stove. The stove was missing all but one knob to turn on the burners and the oven. The walls were adorned with peeling wallpaper and utilitarian cabinets. A door off the kitchen led to a balcony that had been turned into a tiny screened-in porch (which most of our neighbors used to store extra food, not patio furniture like in the States). It was now stuffed with a twin bed frame, a set of rusty metal bedsprings, moldy pieces of wood, and broken glass. It was all covered with a coating of
dust so thick that fur appeared to be growing out of the abandoned clutter. I stepped gingerly into the porch and tried to look out the dirt-coated window. The boxy room creaked unsteadily. I jumped back into the kitchen and closed the door gently, worried that the entire porch might crumble away.

“I’m pretty sure if we both stood in there the whole thing would fall off the side of the building.”

Amy opened the door again and examined the contents of the porch.

“This is really dirty. I don’t think we could ever clean it enough to be able to use it,” she said.

In Austin, the kitchen in my studio apartment had been an oasis that I crafted with contrasting colors: green metallic dry good tins, pink spatulas, and a black and white subway tile table pushed into the corner. There was just enough room for two chairs. One yellow, one blue, but I was generally the only person at the table. Mike had avoided my apartment because he was allergic to my cat, Pirate, and had an aversion to fresh vegetables; he ate a lot of fast food. On the shelf above the stove had been a framed picture of Tarna and me, and another of my best friend from college, TJ. I had an orange and red floral toaster prominently displayed next to the sink, though I didn’t eat much toast. I had been a vegetarian since I was 15 and loved the process of chopping vegetables: the sharpening of a Wüstof chef’s knife, the cleaning of the vegetables in the sink, the slicing of carrots, red peppers. It was about as close to a religious ritual that I had. I wasn’t an experienced home cook, mainly because Austin had no shortage of taco
joints. I had basically lived on tacos for a year straight, eating black bean, egg, and cheese ones for breakfast, and fish tacos for lunch or dinner, always with hot sauce.

Back in Ulaan Baatar, I opened the kitchen drawers, to see what we were working with. Big surprise, there weren’t any Wüstof knives. Actually, there weren’t any knives. The only thing the drawer contained was a few cheap forks, a large spoon, and some forgotten tea. The cabinets above the stove revealed one pot: the lightweight metal liner of a rice cooker. Where was the rest of the rice cooker? Had last year’s American teachers taken it with them?

“I’m going to start boiling water,” Amy said. “We’re not supposed to drink the tap water without heating it first.” She filled our pot with water and studied the stove. The only knob on the stove was the one that indicated the oven temperature.

“Maybe we can pull that one off and stick it on the one for the burner,” I suggested. Amy pulled off the knob and fit it over the protruding metal. She tried to turn it counter clockwise but it just kept spinning, without turning the metal. The threads were stripped.

“Hold on. I have something,” she said. She left the kitchen and soon I heard her unzip her backpack and rustle around in it.

I stared at the stove. I hadn’t expected luxury when I moved to Mongolia, but I assumed I’d have the necessities, like a working stove. But at least we had a microwave. I turned in a slow circle and searched the kitchen. Where was the microwave? It was a kitchen. All kitchens had microwaves. Right?
Realizing that microwave technology may not have advanced into Mongolia yet, I brainstormed possible meals I could prepare without a heat source. I could eat cold sandwiches, but vegetarianism limited my sandwich innards. I was a huge fan of peanut butter and jelly, but found when I lived in Croatia that some countries didn’t import peanut butter and also had absolutely no idea what it is. I had tried to ask grocery store employees in Zagreb if they carried peanut butter, but with my limited Croatian, I just repeated a bastardized translation, *kikiriki maslac*, over and over again with a questioning sound. My host family assured me Croatia had no such thing. What if Mongolia was the same?

I could eat salads! I would wash and chop veggies all day long. But Mongolia was a nomadic, herding society, not an agrarian one. If, as a country, they didn’t have farms, where did their produce come from? Oh my god. I was going to starve. Amy, also a vegetarian and already impossibly tiny, would waste away first, and I would shortly follow. The school would come looking for us and find two tragic skeletons, probably huddled in the scary closet. My Mongolia adventure would be over.

* * *

My family lived in a yellow house on Culpepper Drive in Erie, PA, when I was in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. We were the only family in our neighborhood with a Nintendo. As such, our neighborhood friends, John’s age and mine, would come over and play video games in our basement, or dress up, or hide and seek. We played Nerf football in the basement once, when I was eight. It was Monkey in the Middle-style and Johnny Taylor and I were in the middle. He was a cocky, popular boy a grade younger than me and
always wore Umbro soccer shorts. We both jumped up to intercept a throw and collided with each other. We tumbled down and I landed on him. His arm got broken in the mix.

When we boarded the school bus the next morning, our fellow riders inquired about the cast on his arm. He pointed at me and said, “LeeAnn broke my arm. She fell on me. She weighs a million pounds.”

It was the first time I ever felt ashamed of the breadth of my shoulders, my height— which always placed me on the top riser on class picture day—and my mass. It was the first time I ever thought of myself as fat.

* * *

Amy entered the kitchen, pulling me away from the brink of insanity. She held a foreign metal tool.

“Leatherman will save us!” she announced. “I used this all the time when I was a wilderness therapy counselor in Montana. We were always improvising out there.”

Leather what? I stared at the device as she unfolded it and selected pliers from a dozen compact instruments. Leatherman, she told me, was the brand name of this multi-tool, a souped-up Swiss Army knife. Using the pliers, she gripped the metal skewer and slowly turned the Leatherman. She held her hand over the round burner.

“It’s getting warm,” she said. It worked! So what if it had to be jerry rigged? I could simmer soups or poach eggs. I could even make toast in a pan. I would survive. I let Amy handle the drinking water situation and explored the rest of the apartment. The next room off of the hallway was a large living room that could be closed off with a set of doors. Blue, threadbare carpet lined the floor, while faded wallpaper covered the cement
block walls. An expansive particleboard bookcase/entertainment center took up most of one wall. A boxy television was placed on small table in the corner. Across from the bookcase was a table flanked with a straight-backed chair and something that resembled a cushioned, indoor Adirondack chair. Next to the table was a cot covered with a scratchy blue comforter. That must be our couch. Windows looked out onto the other ominous tenements and the dusty courtyard.

Directly at the end of the hallway were two doors. Perpendicular to each of those doors were the two bedrooms. I opened one of the doors. It contained a toilet. Other than a tiny plastic trashcan in one corner, that was it. Unlike American toilets, the handle to flush the toilet was on top of the tank and had to be pulled up for it to release the water into the toilet bowl. I was just happy to see a working toilet. To the left of the toilet room was the bathroom. A scrappy claw foot tub occupied the majority of the room. There wasn’t a shower curtain or anything to hang a shower curtain from even if I wanted to. If I wanted to bathe I would either need to run a bath or sit in the tub and hold the water nozzle directly over the part of me I wanted to clean. I touched the tub. It was freezing. A small hand sink protruded from the wall. The bathroom had neither a radiator or baseboard heaters. I refused to think of bathing in the already cold bathroom during the upcoming winter.

The two bedrooms were similar. Both had the same sad carpeting, windows that faced other apartment buildings, and stand-alone bureaus that acted as closets. But only one of them had a bed.
“Hey, Amy?” I called from the empty bedroom. “Come here. I think we’re missing a bed.” She surveyed the bedrooms and confirmed it. We had one bed. She left the bedrooms and scoped out the living room.

“Actually,” she said, “I think our couch is a bed. I think the Hobby School put the bed in the living room to make it look like we had a couch.”

We pulled off the blue comforter and mattress, which had more in common with a futon cushion than a real mattress, and hauled the bedframe into the spartan bedroom. Even the bedframe was just a low, rectangular box with metal springs in it. No box springs in Mongolia! After reuniting the bed cushion with the frame, we chose bedrooms. I took the one to the right of the toilet room and Amy took the slightly larger one to the left of the bathroom. I dragged my suitcase and backpack into my new room and attempted to unpack. I was so tired that my bones ached. I felt woozy as I pulled band t-shirts and pairs of jeans out of my suitcase. Why had I chosen these particular items of clothes to wear for the next year? I felt undone. I wanted a hug. I wanted a cold glass of water. I wanted something familiar.

“Do you want some tea?” Amy yelled. My soul brightened. That was exactly what I needed. I padded into the kitchen and saw that Amy had found some mismatched coffee cups. She handed me a steaming cup. I cradled it in my hands like a delicate birds nest. I needed this. I blew on it out of habit before taking a sip. I expected a vaguely tannic sip of black tea. But something was wrong. I ran my tongue throughout my mouth. It didn’t taste right. The tea left a salty, fatty coating in my mouth.

“Why does this taste bad?” I asked, hoping it was simply odd, Mongolian tea.
“It almost tastes like –” Amy put her cup down and examined the water in the pot. There was a definite film on top as she tilted the pot side to side. She dumped her tea down the sink along with the water in the pot. She sniffed the inside of it.

“I think whoever lived here before cooked mutton in this pot. It’s the number one thing they eat in Mongolia.”

I just drank greasy, mutton tea. I placed my full mug in the sink. I no longer wanted to be in Mongolia. I wanted to go home.
CHAPTER VI

HAVE YOU PEACE?

There is a saying in my family: Everything seems worse at night. The weight of the day is magnified in the suffocating cover of darkness, when demons come out to play. Everything seems worse at night. It is a reminder, when you are terrified to be alone with yourself, to hold on just a little bit longer until morning. My coping skills have ranged from nonexistent to self-destructive and the end of the day signals the end of my rope. The same must have held true for my cousins, several sisters, several generations back. When they found out their father, Otto – my great-great-grandfather – died in the middle of the night, they weren’t able to wait until morning. They dragged the contents of his house, including all records of their family’s immigration and ancestry, and burned them in an enormous pyre in the front yard in the Goosetown neighborhood, in Akron, Ohio. They destroyed everything associated with him. They stopped short of burning his entire house down. What had happened in that house? Older relatives, when asked about the motivation of his daughters, replied, “Oh, they were just crazy.”

Wanderlust isn’t the only thing that runs in our veins.

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Since I couldn’t get a cup of mutton-free tea, the only thing I wanted more than a solid twelve hours of sleep was to rid myself of any trace of body odor from my salt-encrusted skin. Back in my room, I peeled my brittle clothes off my body and shivered in my underwear. What was proper roommate etiquette? The last time I had roommates (six teammates from my rugby team) I traipsed to the bathroom with only a towel thrown over my shoulder. It might be too soon for me to subject Amy to a naked stranger. But I didn’t have a bathrobe. I didn’t even have a towel. If I had thought about packing one back in Austin, it was surely taken out and replaced with phonics and alphabet books.

I grabbed my toothbrush and toothpaste and, making sure that Amy wouldn’t see me streaking, scuttled into the bathroom. My ass was so cold as I lowered myself into the daunting tub that I hovered a few inches above the chilled surface, in crabwalk pose, before I could finally bring myself to connect with it. I fiddled with the knobs that protruded directly out of the water pipe until a weak stream of lukewarm water puttered out of the showerhead that dangled into the tub. I had no soap. No shampoo. No conditioner. My bare ass sat in the ambiguously clean tub, knees pulled into my chest, breath short from the chilly temperature in the room. This wasn’t the shower I dreamed of after traveling for almost two days, but I would take it. I directed the small nozzle over the left side of my body and tried to dissolve as much caked-on sweat as possible. Switching the nozzle into my left hand, I cleaned the right side of my body as best as I could. I tilted my head back to rinse the grime out of my hair and saw that more paint was peeling off the walls than was actually on it. I touched a flaking chip and pulled it off the wall. I wanted to peel all of it off, each scabby piece that threatened to tumble into the
bathtub with me, and send it back to the lead factory where it surely came from. This – the apartment, the city, my life – was not what I had expected.

Too scared to use the tap water to even brush my teeth, I trudged my furry whites back to my bedroom and crawled into my bed, still dripping wet. The bedding smelled like the smoking section of a restaurant, the side where I used to hang out with my girlfriends when we skipped high school to drink endless cups of diner coffee and share packs of Camel Lights. Back then I identified that smell with adventure, autonomy, and being smart enough not to get caught. Now, it repulsed me, like finding out someone stuck their dirty feet in my bed sheets. I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the mattress lumps, the metal coils sticking into my back, the ashtray I was in. I didn’t want to sleep in this smoky, lumpy bed. I didn’t want to be here. Why had I even come? I had a boyfriend in Austin who loved me desperately. I had been making $500 a week waiting tables. I had an apartment I adored and a cat that I loved. Was I a fool for giving that up?

I got out of bed, turned on the one overhead light, and threw everything out of my gigantic suitcase until I found what I needed: my GloWorm. I tucked him into the crook of my arm like I did every night and resigned myself to sleep.

When the late August sun streamed through the thin, lace curtains of my windows, I woke up. I looked around for a clock to identify the time before remembering that I didn’t have one. Though the muscles of my back ached from sleeping in a taco shell of a bed, the dread and fear from the night before was gone. Nothing had changed, yet, but just being awake in the sunshine made me forget about wanting to turn around and go right back to Texas. Sometimes it is enough just to make it through the night.
I have always had great appetites, be it for food, drink, music, love, or life, but food has broken my heart—and me—more than all of my loves combined. Something happened when I was young: six, seven, or eight. I began to eat, even when I wasn’t hungry. My family had two wonderful cooks, my mother and her mother, my Hungarian grandmother who lived with us. We all ate dinner together every night when my dad got home from work. Usually it was meals that could be stretched between seven mouths: spaghetti, pancakes, creamed chicken over biscuits, and homemade pizza. We often had Hungarian meals that my mom and Nana grew up on: chicken paprikash, cabbage noodles, cucumber salad, stuffed cabbage, and stuffed peppers. It was Hungarian peasant food and it was delicious. I never had Hungarian goulash until I traveled to Budapest when I was twenty. When I asked my mom why she never made goulash she told me that she ate so much of it growing up that she vowed never to cook it when she grew up.

We always had vegetable gardens in our backyards wherever we lived, and had fresh tomatoes, onions, and parsley to go into summer salads. We bonded over food. When John and I played outside in the summer and on weekends with our friends, Nana would leave a plate of crunchies on the counter for us to snack on as we ran in and out of the house. I didn’t realize until I was considerably older that these crisp, salty bits were actually chicken fat that Nana had fried and sprinkled with salt.

I began to eat compulsively. I would sneak soft, pillowy pieces of hearth-baked Vienna bread out of the bag from the kitchen counter and silently stuff them into my mouth around the corner in the dining room, where no one would see me. I did the same
with cookies, handfuls of chips, and slices of pizza in walk-in pantries, the laundry room, the living room. I crouched below counters chewing counterfeit food. I knew there was something inherently wrong and shameful with what I was doing and consuming, so I ate as quickly as possible, swallowing lumps of food I had barely chewed, struggling to push it down my esophagus. I never stood a chance.

My mother has always been slim. Standing 5’6”, she weighed 114 lbs. when she got married, at twenty, to my father. On their 25th wedding anniversary, she pulled her long-sleeved wedding dress out of the box, where it had been since 1968. It still fit her perfectly. There is a picture of me in her dress from that day. The dress pools around my ankles, but conforms to the rest of my body. I am holding the fake flower bouquet she had carried. I am looking off in the distance, smiling with my lips closed, trying to emulate the pictures I had memorized of my mother on her wedding day. I was ten years old and already had the broad shoulders and ribcage of my father.

* * *

I threw on pajamas and wandered into the living room. Amy greeted me with a large bottle of water and her copy of Lonely Planet Mongolia.

“There was water in the fridge the whole time last night,” she said. We hadn’t thought to open it. In the kitchen, I opened the refrigerator and found another bottle of water, two bottles of orange drink, a round loaf of bread, a partially consumed jar of strawberry jelly, and a container of margarine that looked like it had melted and then been stuck back in the refrigerator. I twisted off the cap to the water and finished half of
the two liter bottle in several gulps. I joined Amy in the living room, sitting across from her at the table in the wooden chair.

“What should we do today?” I asked. I was ready to face the day, but still wanted someone to tell me exactly how to do that.

“Well, last night Bor told me to call him when we woke up. He said he’d come over and get us. But I think it’s really, really early.”

A phone sat on one of the shelves of the entertainment center.

“I think we should find a bank and exchange money so we can start to buy stuff we need. I’m hungry, but not hungry enough to use someone else’s jelly and margarine,” she said. A bank! Of course that should be our first stop. I hadn’t thought about how I would go shopping without tugriks, the Mongolian currency.

“You don’t think we should wait until Bor comes to go out?” I asked. She stared at me like I had just asked her to snap a bib on me and fix a warm bottle.

“I’m not going to wait to explore until he gets here. He might not be ready until the afternoon. If you want to stay here, that’s fine, but I’m going out to see what’s around here.”

I considered my options. I could wait alone in the gloomy apartment and gnaw on cold bread or I could take a walk with my new roommate and discover our city. I wanted to crawl back into bed for six weeks and emerge only when things were no longer surprising and uncomfortable, preferably when I had magically learned Mongolian. Seriously, what was wrong with me? I had traveled alone to Sarajevo and Venice and now I was scared to leave an apartment I hadn’t even spent a full night in. I needed a
safety net, someone to hold my hand as I navigated this unchartered life. Amy looked at me expectantly. I made a decision.

“Let me put real clothes on and we can go,” I said. I put on the same pair of jeans from the days before and a fresh t-shirt. Using my bottle of water, I brushed my teeth for the first time since the hotel in Beijing. I wiped my mouth on my arm, leaving a faint streak of white foam across it.

Amy was waiting at the opposite end of the hallway when I came out, hand on the front doorknob. She was so tiny, the ballerina to my rugby player. She radiated anticipation bordering on impatience.

“Ready?” she asked.

“I’m ready.”

As soon as the apartment door closed behind me, the imaginary umbilical cord that tethered me there was cut. I followed Amy as we spiraled down eight flights of stairs, each floor’s landing laden with a different tile or style of linoleum. Each apartment had a different door. Some were solid metal stalwarts, a firefighter’s worst nightmare, while other doors seemed as though a drunken kick could splinter it inward.

The heavy metal doors that were closed the night before were now pushed open, allowing the bright morning sun to stream into the apartment’s entrance. We paused at the tiny wedge of a room beneath the stairs. The lace on the window was pushed aside, revealing a neatly made cot, a hot plate, and not much else. There was no sign of the woman we spied the night before. I wanted to go into the geometric room, to hunch into
the crooked space, sit on the cot, and warm my hands on the hot plate, but knew that
doing so would be akin to trespassing in a church.

“Who do you think she is?” I whispered.

“I have no idea,” Amy replied. “Maybe she’s just the woman who lives under the
stairs?”

What would it be like to have the inhabitants of 36 apartments watch you sleep,
when you were at your most vulnerable? I had been sleeping with knives under my
pillows for years, since before I knew what actual danger was, before I knew that
physical harm could be preferable to psychological. The thought of eyes on me, curled up
with my GloWorm, mouth agape, terrified me. How did she feel safe?

The playground that had seemed so abandoned and delinquent in the deep of night
was reassuring in the morning sun. The primary colors of the merry-go-round and jungle
gym exploded amidst the tan, packed earth and the stoic face of the tenement behind it. I
trailed behind Amy, who walked purposely toward an undetermined location. The small
stand-alone shop in the courtyard— a delguur — invited us in with its open door. It
mainly offered essentials: ramen, oddly shaped plastic bottles of Coca-Cola, round loaves
of bread, depressed root vegetables, and a wary Mongolian woman clad in pink plastic
slip-on shoes.

“Sain baina uu?” Amy said, engaging her with the most introductory phrase in
Mongolian: Are you well? From my thorough reading of Lonely Planet Mongolia, I knew
that this was how to say “Hello” in Mongolia, though it literally translated to “Have you
peace?”
“Sain baina,” she replied. She stood watch by the door, clad in an apron that covered her torso and signaled her shopkeeper position. If we had an acceptable form of currency, she would have added up our purchases on the basic calculator on the counter that was surrounded by packs of gum and loose cigarettes. After we toured the delguur, Amy nodded at the shopkeeper and waved before stepping outside.

“Bayarlalaa,” Amy called over her shoulder—thank you. I cleared my throat and attempted the same.

“Bayarlalaa!”

The woman’s eyes widened at my first try at the guttural language. I hurried outside.

“I don’t think I said it right,” I told Amy.

* * *

My mother’s worst fear is getting fat. She purportedly told our father when they got married that it didn’t matter if he lost his hair, but that it did matter if he got fat. If he got fat it meant he didn’t care about himself, and if he didn’t care about himself, he didn’t care about her.

When I was growing up, if she ever saw anyone overweight, she would catch my arm and with consternation, whisper, “Nagy, kövér asszony!” or “Nagy, kövér ember!” Big fat woman! Big fat man! Other than certain food items, these are the only Hungarian phrases I know.

That type of alarm wasn’t directed at me until I started to hit puberty as a preteen. If I started to reach for the serving spoon for another scoop of mashed potatoes or
macaroni and cheese, one of my parents would stare pointedly at me, under the interrogating lights of the kitchen table, and say, “Do you really need that, LeeAnn?”

The eyes of every member of my family were on me, my extended hand frozen in between my plate and the serving spoon.

Another time: “You don’t need that, LeeAnn.”

Another time, my sister, Sarah, as I reached for a second piece of pizza: “It takes your body fifteen minutes to feel full.”

Another time: “That’s enough, LeeAnn.”

I cut these meals short by leaving the table to go to my bedroom to cry. No one commented when anyone else wanted another helping.

I used to think that I was hideously fat during these years, but when I looked at family pictures to confirm this, I saw that other than my round face and some baby fat that would be redistributed as I grew taller, I looked like a normal adolescent, certainly not someone to point at in the grocery store.

* * *

We passed men and women in brightly colored dels, presumably on their way to pick up eggs and bread from the delguur. They looked as curious to us as we must have looked to them: two white girls, one tall, one small, whose only goal was to find an open bank in their country’s capital. Just past the delguur, closer to the road, was another shop, though much tinier. Though it wasn’t open, it looked like an enclosed farm stand with strands of unlit Christmas lights lining the thick, plastic-paned window. The majority of
the population was Buddhist and wouldn’t celebrate Christmas. What did they call those lights in Mongolia?

When we reached the main road we faced a decision that many other directionless travelers before us had: right or left? Though there weren’t many cars on the road, the majority of them came from the right, signaling some kind of activity in that direction. The cars that were on the road had seen better days, or even better decades. I imagined that Mongolia didn’t require a yearly inspection like Pennsylvania did, because so many of the cars pumped plumes of white smoke out of their tailpipes. White exhaust smoke meant that the car was burning oil, as well as gasoline, which meant an oil leak somewhere around the engine.

* * * *

What little I knew about cars came from working relentlessly on my former 1986 VW Jetta with my then boyfriend, Ben, one summer, so that it would pass said inspection. I had just graduated from high school and didn’t have the money to pay a shop to do all the work it needed. My parents wouldn’t help me get it road-ready because the night of my senior prom, they found my Camel Lights and some pot in my car. They made me quit my job at the Golden Corral, which I had held for a year and a half, and delivered me to a $150 an hour psychiatrist two towns away, because they thought I was headed down the road to drug addiction.

Looking back, I shouldn’t be surprised that their first instinct was to deal with the issue far from home. My parents didn’t want anyone they knew to see them near a psychiatrist. Like the unwed mother sent away to preserve the integrity of the family left
behind, I was taken where no one knew us. My parents had made calculated decisions to get to where they were, which was far, far away, from where they had come from. They were both kids who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in Akron and Copley, with fathers who worked in the tire factories. My Hungarian Nana had impressed on my mother from a young age that there were two types of people in the world: low class and high class. You didn’t hang out with people who were low class because it would prevent you from some day attaining the nirvana of being high class.

My mother grew up knowing that there was a huge difference between her father, who threw tires around at Firestone and came home exhausted, smelling of rubber, and her classmates’ fathers, who wore white shirts and worked in the offices at Firestone. In junior high, when a teacher asked my mother if her father worked on the floor of the factory or behind a desk, my mother lied and said that he wore a suit to work instead of the rough Dickies work clothes he donned every day.

As she began dating, my mother knew she wouldn’t get out of Copley with a blue-collar man, not that her parents would have allowed her to settle for one. She had told me about a man she dated; She had loved him but ended the relationship. When I asked why, because at the time I was sixteen and enamored with my twenty year old tattooed boyfriend in a metal band, she said simply, “He was going to be a plumber. I didn’t want to be the wife of a plumber.”

We often fought about the aforementioned boyfriend, whom my parents suspected was up to no good. Once, when I left the house to pick him up, because he didn’t have a driver’s license, my mother yelled after me, “Do you think I was allowed to date whoever
I wanted? I wasn’t even allowed to date men in the teaching program at Akron U! I could only date men enrolled in the business school! I did what my parents wanted!” She was so angry she had tears in her eyes.

I do not know what it was like to grow up the youngest daughter of immigrants. I only know what it was like to grow up as the youngest daughter of parents who deeply believed in the American Dream. They had worked their way up to solid upper-middle class territory and were not going to let anyone, including me, endanger that.

These weekly appointments with my psychiatrist, who looked like Jay Leno, were not our first introduction. We had met a year prior, in the spring of my sixteenth year, because I had been in such bad shape that I finally emailed my sister, Emily, herself no stranger to debilitating depression and eating disorders, and told her I either needed to get some help or I was going to end up really, really hurting myself. As soon as I sent that email I called her up and begged for her password so I could delete it before she read it.

The next day my mom picked me up from school and instead of taking me home, took me to a therapist far enough away from where we lived that no one would recognize us. She didn’t tell me where we were going. She didn’t ask me how I was. I wouldn’t have told her anyway. I don’t remember what sort of dialogue took place on that twenty minute car ride. Maybe we didn’t speak to each other at all. Maybe she told me to keep quiet about where we were going and not to tell anyone, like she did when Emily had a nervous breakdown in college and had to be brought back home, frail and nervous, from the University of Richmond to Selinsgrove, PA, in the middle of the night by my parents.
The next afternoon I came home from middle school and found my nineteen year old sister asleep in the bedroom next to mine.

“You will not tell anyone why Emily is home,” my mother instructed. “You will not tell anyone. She is fine. She will be fine.”

I was thirteen, and just beginning to go crazy myself, when I was told, with no uncertainty, that no matter what happened, you never let the rest of the world know that anything was wrong. I didn’t know then what was wrong with Emily. I didn’t know what was wrong with myself, but I knew then that appearances mattered, especially in a small town. I knew that my appearance mattered, that the highest compliment from my mother came after she hugged me, and- if it were true- would exclaim, “I can feel your ribs!”

Help me forgive the unforgivable. Years of cognitive behavioral therapy can’t get me past the moment when I came to the dinner table with several burns from the heated metal of a cigarette lighter on my upper arm. I was fourteen and hated my body and hated myself. I was going crazy in my own skin and tried to cope as best as I could. My mother, again under the bright lights of the dinner table, spotted them and sneered.

“What is that? Self-inflicted self-mutilation?”

I claimed to not know what happened. There was no way anyone could look at those burnt gouges and suspect it was an accident. I stared at my empty plate in shame. I hid my wounds better after that.

I had been on antidepressants for over a year when Dr. Grindlinger, the psychiatrist to whom my parents now delivered me weekly, saw me enough to diagnose me with Borderline Personality Disorder. He didn’t care that I occasionally smoked pot
or Camel Lights. He was, however, concerned that when I encountered conflict, the only way I knew to cope with it was by vomiting, cutting myself, burning myself, or bruising myself.

“Your coping skills are nonexistent,” he said. “The entire world revolves on two concepts: shame and pride. Everything we do is based on those two things.”

I normally spent the majority of our sessions with a steady river of tears streaming down my face while I kept a poker face, something he found fascinating.

“I’ve never met anyone who physically cried without exhibiting any other signs: sobbing, shaking, sniffing. Why are you so ashamed to cry in front of me?”

The only time I ever actually broke down in front of him was when he told me that my parents would never love me the way I needed to be loved by them. I knew this already because I had been throwing up after dinner for years and they knew. My mom intercepted me as I opened the bathroom door one night to ask, tearfully, if I was still making myself vomit. I didn’t buy her crocodile tears. I denied it and cringed when she tried to hug me, because it was all bullshit. I had an eating disorder and they ignored it because they wanted me to be thinner.

After they found the pot in my car they tore through my room looking for more drugs or other contraband. They came up with a mostly full box of generic over-the-counter caffeine pills I had used once or twice when I was scrambling to finish my graduation project. I had written and directed a one-act play my junior year and had to write an analysis of the process. It had a massive bibliography of all the plays and literature I had read in preparation.
“This is why you’re always up so late on the computer!” my mother screamed, shaking the box at me as I cried and cowered against my closet door. It was the spring of 2001 and every high school student was up late chatting each other up on AOL Instant Messenger. After they closed my bedroom door on me, I searched my underwear drawer, the same drawer they had found the caffeine pills in. I pushed aside the pastel polyester camisoles I wore before I fit into a real bra and felt a thin cardboard box. I pulled one out—there was several of the same in there—and read the side effects and warnings on the back: hypertension, increased heart rate, headache, anorexia, dry mouth, heart attack.

My parents left all of my diet pills for me.

With no money and no car, I retaliated against them the only way I could. I continued to lean out my bedroom window to smoke cigarettes at night and refused to take the English AP exam.

Ben and I did so much work on my car in his dad’s shop that it did, in fact, pass inspection and zipped along for two more years. I drove that car like a tank, taking it off-road in harvested corn fields, sneaking friends into the drive-in movies in the trunk, losing my virginity in the front seat, sleeping off hangovers in the backseat. My parents sold it for a couple hundred dollars to a teenager who entered it into a demolition derby while I was studying in Croatia. I can only hope that my Jetta was the last car standing.

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Amy and I wandered down the street, which was built like no other I had ever seen before. If Ulaan Baatar had a city planner or architect, he had to have been drunk when giving the okay on potential structures. Shops and buildings were constructed
haphazardly. Some were built so close to the road that a step out the front door would deposit you into the street. Some buildings could only be accessed if you scooted down an alley. Random *gers* were erected in parking lots and seemed to operate as additional shops. Paved streets ended abruptly and trash swirled around the sidewalk every time a car drove by and stirred up the air in the gutters. There was not a trashcan in sight.

Amy pulled on the door of a bank only to find that it was locked.

“What day is today?” she asked.

I had left Austin Thursday night, spent a day in Beijing, and lost a day somewhere else.

“Is it Sunday?” I wondered.

“Maybe banks here are closed on Sunday,” she said.

“So this means we can’t exchange money.”

“Not unless Bor knows somewhere else we can go.”

“I’m exhausted,” I said. “I think I need to take a nap.”

We trudged back to the apartment. I turned my laptop on to check the time. It was only 8am. We must have woken up at 6am, meaning we slept less than three hours since Bayasaa dropped us off. I crawled back into bed, barely noticing the smoky covers. I slept like I was dead.
I woke up, groggy and confused, at 2:30PM. Amy was in the living room, hanging up the phone. She was equally dazed and only mildly more coherent than I was.

“We missed Bor,” she said. “I just talked to him. I guess he spent ten minutes ringing our doorbell when we didn’t call him.”

“We have a doorbell?”

“I think I heard it, but was sleeping so hard that it just became part of my dream. I don’t think I could have gotten out of bed then even if I wanted to. I was so, so tired.”

I wandered over to the window and looked down at what was basically our front yard. Children climbed on the playground equipment to the rhythmic off-beat of a basketball that bounced between hands during a pick-up game. The hoops were halos, missing their nets, just like the basketball courts in any American city. I opened the window and stuck my head out. To the right, a rusty television antenna dangled precariously away from the side of the building.

“Look at this!” I said. “Do you think that means we have TV?”

Amy poked her head out the window.

“That’s the oldest antennae I’ve ever seen,” she said. “I doubt it’s connected to anything.”
Did Mongolia have cable? Did they have sitcoms? The evening news?

“Bor is on his way over,” Amy said. “He’s going to take us somewhere to exchange money and then we’re going to meet the other two women teaching with us, Tahlia and Katie. They invited us over to their apartment for veggie stir-fry.”

Stir-fry was something I could definitely get behind. My stomach grumbled, but I knew it wasn’t just from hunger. The last time things had moved regularly through my guts had been in Austin, three days ago. I wanted to be able to poop for the first time in Mongolia in the privacy of my own home. I had dealt with a number of digestion issues since middle school, when I developed lactose intolerance, and later wracked up such bad gallstones that I had to have my gallbladder removed shortly after my 22nd birthday because it was close to killing me. I was no stranger to emergency bathroom stops, the kind preceded by intense stomach cramps that made finding the closest bathroom an absolute necessity.

But our toilet room intimidated me. It was cramped and threatened to rain crumbling plaster from the ceiling. It was definitely not the location to hole up for a while with a celebrity gossip magazine. The only thing that could be flushed down the toilet was bodily waste, hence the tiny trashcan in the corner. All used toilet paper had to be disposed of there, instead of just disappearing into the sewer system. Even the toilet paper was a relic from the Soviet era. It was brown in color, like industrial paper towels and was nearly impossible to tear. Instead, it stretched like crepe paper until it finally separated from the roll. On top of it all, the toilet hadn’t been cleaned thoroughly before our arrival so a toilet scrubber was high on our list of priorities.
This time when Bor rang the doorbell, we both heard it. He appeared, our Orpheus to guide us through Ulaan Baatar, with a light jacket and a backpack.

“First we go to bank to get money,” he said.

“We tried doing that earlier today but all the banks were closed,” Amy said.

“We will go to Chinggis Khan Hotel. It has international travelers and a shopping mall in it so the bank is open every day.”

Instead of turning right at the delguur, as Amy and I had done earlier in the day, we turned left and took a shortcut through a lot that held dozens of aging shipping containers. A path was well worn between the rows of haphazardly placed shipping containers. Catty-corner from the shipping container lot was a stark building with a wrought-iron fence around it and a prominent flagpole.

“Bor, what’s over there?” Amy asked, pointing at the fortified building. He paused to consider it.

“That is embassy. U.S.”

“Bor, what are these?” I asked, pointing at the fading red, yellow, and gray containers. A few boys in t-shirts played on top of them, screaming at each other as they skipped from one container to another. They paused, perhaps at our pale faces, and returned to roughhousing each other in shouts and bursts, leaping the gap from one container to another.

“Well that doesn’t look safe,” Amy observed.

Bor shifted the small backpack he wore on his back and shrugged. “I do not know. Storage, maybe?”
I turned my gaze from the shipping containers to the U.S. Embassy. I imagined that somewhere deep within one of the dozens of containers was a crackpot Soviet surveillance team that no one bothered to inform the Cold War had ended over twenty years ago.

I looked at the shadows the shipping containers cast in the afternoon.

“I wouldn’t want to walk through here at night,” I told Amy. There were just too many hiding places in an already isolated area. Though Ulaan Baatar had a very low violent crime rate, theft and pickpocketing was very common, especially of foreigners. According to *Lonely Planet Mongolia*, “Pickpockets often work in teams; two or three will block your path while another dives a hand into your pockets...If you feel a group of men blocking your way from the front, chances their friends are probing your pockets from behind.”

Like hell anyone was diving their hands towards any part of me. I had fought long and hard against myself, and others, to keep my body in one piece, even if my mind wasn’t.

We emerged from the shipping container lot by a small stream that ran north to south through UB. The stream was littered with soda bottles, dirty plastic grocery bags, and liquor bottles. Didn’t Mongolia know that littering was passé? Someone seriously needed to Adopt-a-Stream and attack it with rubber gloves and garbage bags. After dodging some muddy spots we were back on a sidewalk.

A dilapidated car pulled up to the curb. The driver leaned across the passenger seat and manually rolled down the window. The three of us leaned over to regard the
man, who was overweight and had a cigarette planted in his mouth. He said something in Mongolian to Bor, who shook his head and pointed across the street. The driver put the car into first gear and drove off.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“He asked if we needed a ride,” Bor replied.

“Did you know him?”

“In Mongolia, all cars are taxi cars. Everyone pays two hundred fifty tugriks for one kilometer.”

Are you kidding me? In what world does a sane person just get into a random car on the street? Mongolia’s entire taxi system basically went against everything that Americans are taught as children. You never get into a stranger’s car.

Bor looked left and right at the frantic traffic.

“When I go, you go,” he said. “Remember, when Mongolians cross, you cross!”

We dashed across the street like Mongolians, avoiding the ancient motorcycles with attached sidecars and decades-old sedans whose drivers actually revved their engines as they approached us. Once safely on the opposing sidewalk, I turned to Amy.

“Did you see that sidecar motorcycle?!?”

“We should probably get one,” she said.

“Hey, Bor, Amy and I want to buy a motorcycle. What do you think?”

Bor’s eyes widened.

“I do not think that is safe. Mongolia driving is very special.”
I had never been on a motorcycle, or even a moped, but even I knew that you would have to be insane to try to compete with Mongolians for a spot on the road.

We approached a massive, angular building. Unlike our tenement, it had a granite and brick front and appeared to have been built recently. Compared to the haphazard structures around it, it was stunning. A raised concrete bed near the entrance contained purple and pink wildflowers, an intentional instance of beauty in a utilitarian city. A large sign on the side of the building proclaimed that it was Sky Shopping Centre.

“This here is hotel, too. Chinggis Khan Hotel,” Bor said. “Here you exchange money.”

We bypassed the modern grocery store inside and went straight to the money exchange, where I was given approximately 120,000 tugriks in a thick stack of paper money for my $100 U.S. dollars. I rubbed the paper between my fingers. Each denomination was brilliantly colored and featured Chinggis Khan at different stages in his life.

“Let’s grab some wine to bring to dinner,” I suggested to Amy. “I don’t want to show up empty-handed.”

We wandered through the aisles of the grocery store, stopping to examine the pictures of the products to decipher what they were. Bor followed behind us, amused at our fresh eyes. We passed Mongolians who nonchalantly wore white cotton masks over their noses and mouths, even though they were indoors, as they did their own shopping, their dark eyes the only identifier on their faces. I stood in front of rows and rows of wine
seemingly from every wine-bearing country except the United States. How did Bulgarian wine end up in Ulaan Baatar?

“What do you think we should bring? Red or white?” I asked Amy. She shrugged.

“Oh, I don’t drink.”

“What?” I asked.

“I’ll split the wine with you, but I don’t drink alcohol,” she said.

Bor and I stared at her.

“For religious reasons?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m not religious. I just don’t drink. I never have,” she said.

Who was this woman? Did Amy have an XXX straight edge tattoo that I didn’t know about? I had been drinking regularly since I was fourteen. The first time I got drunk was when my parents left my seventh grade brother, John, and I home alone while they went to a bank conference out of state. I threw a party the same night as prom, locked my brother in his room, and ended up with practically the entire high school in my house. It still ranks in the Top 5 Best Nights of My Life. Of course, my parents came home early and busted open the fragile cocoon that sheltered them from the teenager I was.

At this point in my adult life, all of my friends were either social drinkers or hardened partiers. If you worked in the service industry, going out drinking afterwards and bitching about customers was how you dealt with it. It was just how we rolled.

“This may be difficult because Mongolians like alcohol,” Bor said. “Especially vodka,” he said.

“Maybe you’ll change your mind while you’re here,” I said, hopefully.
“No, I don’t think so,” Amy replied.

Amy and I were already an anomaly in Mongolia: two vegetarians and one teetotaler.

I chose two bottles of cheap white wine and paid for it with the colorful paper money. It came to less than $5 U.S. dollars for both of the bottles, way less than I was used to paying for a beer and a shot back in the U.S.

We left Sky Market/Chinggis Khan Hotel and trekked the rest of the way to our female counterpart’s residence.

“We are almost there,” Bor announced. Amy seemed to think nothing of the walking we were doing, but I wasn’t used to walking miles around a city. I wore a pair of bright green Saucony sneakers with yellow shoelaces. Amy trotted along in a pair of low Merrell hiking shoes with a wide toe that even I thought were cute. My feet hurt. I had been spoiled by the luxury of always having my own car and wondered if taking one of those sketchy cabs home was out of the question.

We arrived at an apartment building in a neighborhood much nicer than ours. The building wasn’t as big as ours and was in a much better state of repair. The playground equipment between two of the apartment buildings had a fresh coat of paint and was flanked with shrubby trees. We wound up several flights of uniform stairs until Bor knocked lightly on a door. A tall woman with black hair, dark eyes, and high cheekbones opened it.

“I’m Tahlia,” she said. She studied us solemnly as we entered the apartment.
“I’m LeeAnn,” I replied, smiling at the woman I hoped could be added to my stable of friends in Mongolia that currently numbered two, Amy and Bor. In the past I had culled friendships based on shared interests, similar work schedules, and affinities towards drinking whiskey. Now, I was ready to stake my friendship claim on anyone who spoke English and wasn’t a jerk.

“I’m Amy.”

Our names were all we could get out because we were too busy marveling at their space. A hardwood laminate lined the floor of the spacious apartment. The late afternoon light streamed in through a wall of windows in their sitting and dining area, which was outfitted with a full set of sturdy furniture. As Tahlia led the way to the kitchen, I peeked into the bedrooms and saw new bedding and Ikea-style wardrobes.

I turned to Amy and put my hands on my hips.

“Do you see this?” I whispered. “This is fucking bullshit.”

Amy pointed at French doors.

“Is that a balcony?”

It was, in fact, a balcony. But unlike ours, it didn’t contain random junk and the threat of a tetanus shot. While it wasn’t large enough to dine on, it could comfortably hold four adults admiring the view of the city.

“Bor, this apartment is way, way nicer than ours,” I said.

“Yes,” he agreed, “but you should see the boys’ apartment. The Hobby School will not even allow women to live there.”
In the kitchen, a petite Asian woman in glasses chopped and threw vegetables into a wok. She glanced up at us and then adjusted the temperature of one of the stove burners. Tahlia, Bor, Amy, and I stood in the doorway of the cozy kitchen and watched her cook.

“Hi, I’m LeeAnn,” I offered. She looked back at us again before peering into a pot of white rice.

“The rice is done. I’m Katie,” she stated, with an obvious American accent. “I need to finish cooking. You guys can start setting the table.”

Tahlia pulled bowls and chopsticks out of cupboards and placed them on a small table ringed with mismatched chairs and a little bench. Amy and I took our places on the bench while Tahlia opened a bottle of red wine. I reached down to my grocery bag of wine and pulled our bottles of white out.

“We brought some wine, too,” I said.

“Oh,” Tahlia said, struggling with the cork. “I normally drink red.”

I felt like I had just brought wine coolers to a wine and cheese party. I wandered back to the kitchen as Bor, Tahlia, and Amy started a conversation about Mongolia.

“Can I help you with anything, Katie?”

“No, I’m fine.”

I eyed her wok and spatula, jealous of her kitchen utensils.

“Where did you get your wok?”

She lifted the entire dish and brought it to the table, steam billowing behind her.

“I got it at a store,” she said.
“Which store?”

“Mercury Market.”

“What about your spatula? And chopsticks?” I asked.

Tahlia stared at me, mouth slightly agape, as I peppered Katie with questions. My kitchen and apartment were sorely lacking. I didn’t care if I was the new annoying girl who asked too many questions. I needed these things. Katie put the wok on the table next to a bottle of soy sauce and a container of spicy Korean bean paste.

“I got them at the Black Market,” she said, facing me. What was the Black Market? I would need to consult Lonely Planet Mongolia. I made a note of these places. If I didn’t want to cook in the mutton pan, I was going to need to procure some cookware.

We passed the wine and rice and took turns spooning stir-fry into our bowls. It consisted of tofu, beets, red bell peppers, and a green vegetable I couldn’t identify. Having spent my formative years in central Pennsylvania, the closest I had ever gotten to a freshly peeled and cooked beet was a pickled beet egg.

“What vegetable is this?” I asked, holding a section of green vegetable between my chopsticks. It had a mild garlic taste with the crunch of haricot vert.

“They’re garlic scapes,” Katie said.

Over dinner we took turns telling stories about our lives: where we’d come from most recently, where we wanted to go next. Katie was 29 and had been a psychiatric nurse at Johns Hopkins. She had recently been in Seoul, trying to find her birth mother, but came to Mongolia without results. Before Amy was a wilderness therapy counselor, she worked as a nanny in Switzerland. She had lived on a sailboat for several months
before deciding to come to Mongolia. She had sailed down the East coast with friends and made it as far as Bermuda when one of the couples on the boat found out they were pregnant. They turned the boat around and sailed back to Maine. Tahlia, who was 27, had spent a semester in India in college with the School for International Training, the same study abroad program that took me to the Balkans.

Amy and Tahlia bonded over surviving giardia, a parasite they contracted while in Turkey and India, respectively. I had never had a parasite, though I felt a psychological tapeworm in my belly devouring all the food I had just eaten. I eyed up the bowls of rice and stir-fry and my own emptied plate. Why wasn’t anyone else eating more? I wanted someone else to take a second helping before I did so I wouldn’t have to feel like the fat girl. But I didn’t just want a second scoop of tofu and veggies; I wanted a third and a fourth. I wanted to consume it all until grains of rice and partially masticated vegetables piled high up in my throat and spilled out of my mouth, a cornucopia of shame and weakness.

Tahlia told us stories of her travels to the Easter Islands and Patagonia. I had no idea that Patagonia existed outside the world of outdoor apparel. While she was in Patagonia she had met some crazy, blond American guy in a canyon. His name was Ian and he was basically hitchhiking all over the world. She told him he should come to Mongolia next because there was a school there that needed teachers for the upcoming school year. Ian Stout was the final American teacher that Bor was waiting on to pick up from the airport.
Tahlia mentioned her apartment in Argentina and how much she loved the empanadas sold on the street.

“Oh,” I said. “Are you Argentinean?”

Tahlia gave me a dead stare that was intimidating while still conveying that I was the dumbest person in the world.

“Oh, no. I’m Native American.”

Tahlia informed us that she was half Navajo and half Yavapai. Unlike people I had known in high school and college who claimed 1/16th Native American ancestry on their college applications, she had actually grown up in Arizona and spent summers on the reservation with her grandparents.

Who were these people? How was I, the girl who had lived and studied in the Balkans, traveled throughout Europe, and driven across America multiple times, the least traveled out of all of these people? I felt very small and very young. I took another helping of stir-fry without regrets and filled my wine glass to the rim. Amy turned towards Bor.

“So what about you, Bor? What’s your story?” she asked.

Bor was the son of diplomats and had spent the first four years of his life in Serbia. He went to college in Moscow and was fluent in Mongolian, Russian, and was almost fluent in English. Bor had worked most recently as a tour guide, driver, and translator for a touring company in Mongolia. Before that he had worked as a car salesman for Nissan in UB, but had been let go because he failed to sell any cars in nine months. We howled when he told us that.
“I was too honest,” he admitted. “If a customer asked if something was wrong with car, I told them!”

“Hey, Bor, why don’t you show them what’s in your backpack,” Tahlia said. Tahlia had come to Ulaan Baatar two weeks before us and had spent almost every day with Bor. Though Bor was going to start teaching math when the school year started, the Hobby School had commissioned him to be Tahlia’s guide and to keep her company until the other Americans got there.

“Oh, you don’t need to see!” he said, his olive complexion turning ruddy. Tahlia grabbed his backpack and opened it up. Inside it was a sweatshirt, raincoat, toothbrush, face wash, notebook, pen and pencil, a book of Sudoku, a 1.5 liter bottle of water, a mouse pad and headphones, and a CD, all the things needed to spend several days away from home.

“Why do you carry all of those things with you, Bor?” Katie asked.

“Sometimes I stay at home, sometimes with my sister, sometimes with my friend, Duggie. I never know.”

“Bor, what CD is that?” I asked. “You don’t even have anything to play it in!”

“It is very good CD,” he said. “Elton John.”

The four of us doubled over with laughter. It wasn’t just any Elton John CD. It was Elton John Live in Australia with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. It had been recorded in 1986.

“Bor, tell them why you have the mouse pad and headphones,” Tahlia said.
“So I can play Counterstrike with my friends,” he said, as if everyone carried around the accessories necessary to play a first-person shooter computer game.

“Where do you play Counterstrike?” I asked. I wondered, not because I was interested in gaming, but because I knew such games required internet access, something I was itching to find.

“We either play at internet café or in computer room at the Hobby School.”

Did the Hobby School also moonlight as a refuge for Mongolian gamers? What kind of school was I working for? I would find out soon enough. Bor was supposed to pick up Ian, the last arriving teacher, at the airport later that night. All the foreign teachers would meet at the Hobby School Monday morning to meet the Mongolian staff and receive our teaching schedules and materials. Bor had promised to scoop Amy and me up again at our apartment in the morning to help us find our way. Though we had a map of the city, not all streets and alleyways could be found on it.

Amy and I said our thanks and goodbyes to our hosts, who had started doing dishes and cleaning the kitchen. Bor braved the crisp, coal dust evening with us and retraced our route until he was sure that Amy could find the way back to Sky Market. I had a notoriously terrible sense of direction and was grateful that Amy knew a thing or two about urban orienteering. I hadn’t paid attention to any landmarks on our way to Tahlia’s and Katie’s that would have offered clues on my return trip. I was worse than Hansel and Gretel; I never thought about how I would find my way home.

At Sky Market I bought toilet paper, creamy peanut butter, bread, eggs, apple juice, ramen noodles, dish soap, and an international phone card. Amy navigated us home
quietly and with ease. I wanted to say something to fill the silence between our steps but we were still just burgeoning friends. I wanted to tell her how relieved I was that she was my roommate and not Katie, but I didn’t want to gossip about the people who just made me dinner. I wanted her to be my friend—a real friend—and allow me tag along on all the adventures I imagined she would take in the coming year. Most of all, I wanted her to like me.

I vowed to not be so brash, to not be such a spaz. I would learn how to think before I spoke, something I had been cautioned to do since I was a loudmouthed little girl. I wouldn’t be so polarizing. I would learn to look at the world as not just black or white. This wasn’t Austin; I couldn’t take off headfirst down this sliding board without looking to see what awaited me at the bottom.

It had been over 72 hours since I had left Austin and I had been in Mongolia for less than 24. I was weary. When we got home I let Amy use her international phone card first while I washed all of the dishes and counters in the kitchen. Who should I call first, my parents or Mike? Ulaan Baatar was eleven hours ahead of the East Coast and twelve hours ahead of Austin. After some calculations, I realized that at 9AM on a Sunday morning, Mike was probably sleeping after waiting tables during the graveyard shift the night before. That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to wake him up, but it did mean I would grant him a few more minutes of sleep while I let my parents know that I had actually made it out of China and into Mongolia.

When I heard his cellphone ring, faintly, 7,000 miles away, I held my breath. I would hold my breath as long as it took for my love to rustle himself out of his slumber.
or to put down his bowl and lighter and answer the incoming call from an unknown number. I would hold my breath until my face turned red, then blue, then white, a ghostly patriot passed out on frayed carpet next to an infinitely ringing telephone.

“Hello?”

He came through like a secret, the most important whisper I would hear over the phone.

“It’s me! I’m here! I made it!”

“Baby! My baby! I miss you so much!” he exclaimed. My heart ached. I briefly told him about my China ordeal, the apartment, and dinner with my fellow teachers.

“What have you been up to?” I asked. “How was work this weekend?”

“I am forlorn without you,” he moaned. “I don’t know what to do without you here. I don’t even want to leave the apartment.”

“Oh, love! I don’t want to hear that! Tell me what’s new at Magnolia.”

“No one’s allowed to take off next month during Austin City Limits. That’s it. The only thing different is that you’re not here. You’re not here but all of your stuff is.”

I bit my lip and wrapped the phone cord around my wrist, something I hadn’t done since cordless phones and cell phones took over America. I hadn’t just asked Mike to wait for me while I spent a year in Asia; I had left a hole in his life and filled the empty space in his apartment with boxes packed with my books, clothes, and photographs so I wouldn’t have to pay for a storage unit while I was gone.

“There’s not anything good going on that you want to tell me about?” I prodded. He sighed heavily.
“I might do a demo for MTV for some magician.”

“For a musician?”

“No!” he shouted. “A magician!”

Did we even know any magicians?

“Well, that’s great! That could really help get your name out there.”

A voice in Mongolian, and then English, interrupted Mike.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Hear what?”

“It was a one minute warning. We have one minute and then my phone card runs out. Well, less than one minute now.”

I didn’t want to get cut off in the middle of a sentence so I quickly sent him my love and ended the call. The first thing I felt when I hung up was relief.

“Was that your boyfriend?” Amy asked, poking her head through the French doors that didn’t latch. I nodded.

“His name is Mike. He’s still in Austin and he’s really, really sad.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m okay. It’s weird to be here and know that he’s still there. Everything has changed for me, but the only thing that’s changed for him is that I’m not there. I’m going forward and he’s stagnant.”

“How serious are you two?” she asked, sitting on the other chair.

“We’ve been dating for close to a year. He’s almost thirty and told me before he would never break up with me. We’re technically allowed to see other people while
we’re apart, because a year is a stupid long time, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled at the idea."

I had coaxed the agreement out of Mike before I left, persuading him that he might want to make out with someone else while I was gone.

“Are you kidding me?” he had scoffed. “Who’s going to want to smooch me? I’m lucky you want to smooch me.”

Later, as I lay in my lumpy Mongolian bed under the sheets that no longer smelled so smoky, I imagined Mike sleeping through the daylight hours, alone in his own bed, under his own smoky sheets, until he had to show up for his next shift. I knew then, even though it was never my intention, that eventually I would break his heart.

I threw off my covers, pushed open my window, and invited the night in to keep me company.
The apartment was chilly when I woke up. Bor had told us the night before that all buildings in Ulaan Baatar ceremoniously turned on their heat on September fifteenth every year. It would remain on, whether it was needed or not, until May fifteenth. Amy and I took turns using the skillet to make breakfast in the morning. I cracked the eggs I had bought the night before into the foaming butter that melted across the surface of the pan in streaks. The yolks were deep orange and glowed like amber. I let the whites solidify into an opaque film before flipping both of them over with a swift wrist flick, a trick I learned from watching the line cooks at Magnolia Café cook thousands of over easy eggs.

I placed a thick slice from the round loaf of dense white bread in the skillet, pushing on it gently to absorb the dregs of butter. Right when it made the transformation from bread into toast, I slid it onto a plate with my waiting eggs.

“What do you think the other American teachers are like?” I asked before setting my plate on the coffee table and taking the seat across from Amy. She had a cup of tea cradled in her hands.
“I actually met one of them this summer in Maine,” she said. “Joe McIntyre. He’s from Maine, too. He taught at the Hobby School last year and went home to see his family in Falmouth.”

“What’s he like?” I asked, mouth full of toast.

“He’s…” she hesitated.

“What? Tell me!”

“He’s an odd duck,” she said, not unkindly.

“What does that mean? Is he a total weirdo?”

“Well, his email address was one of the ones the Hobby School sent all of us this summer if we had any questions an actual American teacher could answer,” she said.

“When I found out he was in Maine, I asked if he wanted to meet for coffee so we could talk about Mongolia.”

I had also emailed an American teacher who had just finished her year in Mongolia, but she never responded. Maybe I should have taken that as a sign.

“So we tried to figure out where to meet. Falmouth is almost 60 miles away from Kittery. He told me he didn’t drive, but he could ride his bike to Kittery, though it would take him a couple hours.”

I jerked my head up from my breakfast.

“He was going to ride his bicycle one hundred twenty miles round trip for coffee?”

“I think so. I honestly think he would have ridden his bike. I told him it was ok, that I had a car and would drive to him.”
“What kind of car do you have?” I asked, cutting her off. “Sorry,” I apologized. “I interrupt when I get excited.”

“It’s ok. A blue Volvo station wagon. One of the old, boxy ones,” she said. “I ordered a coffee and he just sat there. He wasn’t going to get anything to drink until I told him I would buy him something.”

“Is he cheap or what?”

“Well, he was going to become a Jesuit priest after college but then had some kind of epiphany and doesn’t believe in God anymore. But one of the big things about the Jesuits is that they take a vow of poverty, so I think that’s still very much a part of him. He’s very smart. He graduated from Dartmouth.”

I had so many questions about this mysterious Joe character but I didn’t want to interrupt Amy again. She continued.

“He’s tall and thin and wears thrift store clothes. But not the type of clothes that you or I would buy there. His were badly fitting and looked like they were about to fall apart, you know the t-shirts that are ten cents because they have holes or stains on them. And he might have a unibrow. We talked for almost two hours, more about our lives than about Mongolia.”

Jesuits, Dartmouth, and unibrows. What had driven Joe to Mongolia?

“How old do you think he is?”

“I think in his late twenties,” Amy replied. “Oh, and his dad is gay and recently divorced Joe’s mom so he could move to South American to be with his much younger male lover.”
I took my empty plate into the kitchen and washed it right away. I hadn’t had a roommate in a long time and wanted to be respectful of the home we shared.

Bor showed up, looking much the way he had the last time we saw him. Where had he spent the night? The three of us wound down the stairs. Bor cautioned us that the rickety elevator, barely big enough for two people, was systematically turned off at 9pm every night so we should get used to taking the stairs. I had no plans to step foot into that death trap. Maybe ascending eight flights of stairs every day would finally give my less than voluptuous behind the oomph it needed.

We passed white plastic grocery bags tied up into bundles outside several of the apartments.

“Why are all of these bags here, Bor?” I asked. Bor paused to consider them.

“It is trash. The people put trash outside their door and the woman throws them away.”

“What woman?” Amy asked.

“The woman who lives under the stairs.”

She did exist!

“Who is she, Bor? The woman who lives under the stairs?”

“She is just woman. Maybe single, maybe older. She works for building. She cleans. She sweeps. She locks door at night.”

“What happens if I’m out late and it’s locked when I get home?” I asked. I hadn’t had a curfew since I was in high school and even then I took it as a suggestion, not an absolute.
“You knock. She will open it.”

Almost every apartment building had a similar woman living in the cramped space that had no bathroom and at best, a hot plate and a cot. The Women Who Lived Under the Stairs were the cleaning ladies of the buildings and the only guards they had. They were armed with a broom made out of a bundle of sticks, or at best, a cheap plastic one made in China.

A woman was hunched over a broom at the mouth of our tenement. She whirled around when she heard us approach and welcomed us with an enormous smile and lights in her eyes. She straightened, which did not add much to her petite height. She was only slightly taller than Amy’s 5’1” frame.

“Sain ta, sain bain uu!” she sang, beaming as she greeted us with the standard Mongolian welcome.

“Sain bain!” Bor replied, before launching into a string of Mongolian. He motioned to Amy and me with his hands and pointed up, presumably toward the 8th floor where we lived. I studied the wrinkles in her face, which normally indicated a woman’s age, but it was impossible to tell if she was 45 or 65. She had short, very dark hair, and exuded the warmth of a mother duck tending to ducklings. I would absolutely be this woman’s little duckling.

She nodded during Bor’s explanation of us, shuffling her stockinged feet back and forth in pink plastic sandals, only breaking his gaze to look at Amy and me and smile broadly.
“Bayarlalaa!” Bor called, thanking her. We waved at her before she started sweeping the sidewalk again. We followed Bor down the bustling sidewalk, dodging women in similar plastic sandals and bathrobes returning from the delguur. They carried random pails and containers filled with a white milky substance.

“She will look after you,” he said. “She is happy you come to Mongolia.”

“What are all of these people carrying?” I asked, motioning to the buckets.

“Airag. It is milk from horses.”

My stomach heaved, tossing my eggs and toast around. Because I was lactose intolerant I hadn’t drank cow’s milk since I was 13. But horse milk? Who milked horses?

“It’s actually fermented mare’s milk,” Amy said. “It’s huge in Mongolia.” I didn’t care where it was huge. The thought of drinking a liquid that came out of a horse’s teat was repulsive.

We walked together down the main street perpendicular to Zaluuchuudyn Örgön Chölöö, which Bor told us translated to Young People Street, or Youth Avenue. Stray dogs trotted past us, scavenged animal bones clenched between teeth. I was only able to identify one storefront, some kind of club, because it was marked by a large sign that indicated KARAOKE. Though it was still August, already the leaves were beginning to wither off of the few, sparse trees that spotted the streets. I had never been in a city that, visually, was so bleak. Mongolians, traditionally animist herders, had such reverence for nature, but half of the country’s population lived in a city devoid of parks or greenery.
We turned right when we got to Youth Ave., and then jogged after Bor when he crossed the street. An advertisement for a bank, six stories tall, was plastered on the side of an apartment building. It inexplicably featured a stoic Mongolian sumo wrestler.

“Why is there a sumo wrestler on that ad?” I wondered.

“He is very famous,” Bor replied. It was the equivalent of using Michael Jordan to sell cereal, on a much larger scale.

We turned left down an uneven dirt alley littered with trash and empty glass liquor bottles. Pop up gers that advertised airag with handwritten signs were set up between buildings. Amidst this maze of cafes, language schools, bodegas, and sellers of fermented mares’ milk was the Hobby School. The square white building was five stories high and without pretense. It looked more like a blocky apartment building than a private bilingual school. Even the first floor windows had bars on them.

We walked up several wide granite stairs, a surprisingly upscale feature, to the dark red front door.

“This is Hobby School,” Bor said, hand poised on the door handle before he swung the heavy door open. As soon as I stepped over that threshold, I would become a teacher. I wouldn’t just be a server or a college graduate; I would have a real job, one that was considered a career. Never mind that I didn’t have a background in education and had never taught a class before. My life as a real adult was about to begin.

Welcome.
There was the Hobby School I had imagined—a respectable home of learning with long hallways, drinking fountains, a friendly librarian, a playground—and then there was the actual Hobby School.

We followed Bor through the red door and entered the lobby of the school. The first thing I noticed about the Hobby School was the lack of color. Its stark appearance implied that this was a place for education, not fun. The floor was covered in large tile blocks and the walls were painted a glaring white. Directly to the right was a small room with a round table and several chairs. The teacher’s lounge, perhaps? Straight ahead was a set of double doors that opened to the cafeteria, universally identifiable by the long, rectangular tables and benches welded onto them. A simple, flat desk adorned with a telephone was pushed against the left wall of the lobby. Sitting behind it was, ostensibly, the school’s secretary. Bor greeted her with a nod and some Mongolian and took us around the corner to the computer room.

If I had expected my arrival to be heralded by the other American teachers, I was sorely disappointed. Tahlia and Katie looked up from their computers in greeting as they typed away.

“That is Ian,” Bor said, motioning to a thin, scruffy American with dirty blond hair who looked up briefly, “and that is Tomasz.”

“You can call me Tomek,” he said, looking up from his computer. He also had blond hair and was so cute that he bordered on adorable. I found out later that he and his family were Polish and he had been born there, a bottle of vodka given to the doctor to ensure a safe delivery.
Amy settled into a chair at a free computer as I surveyed the crowded room for one of my own. Middle-aged Mongolian men occupied the majority of the twenty-odd computers crammed into the room. They all wore headsets and operated the mouse with one hand and smoked a cigarette with the other. I narrowed my eyes when I spotted my good friend from the other night, Bayasaa. He puffed heartily on a cigarette before spouting a stream of Mongolian to his fellow players, who chattered back at him. A cloud of smoke hung in the air just below the neon lights. Ashes were flicked directly onto the floor.

I finally found a free computer and squeezed past the boisterous Mongolian men who simulated reloading weapons and shooting each other in their computer game. I brushed the man at the computer next to me as I lowered myself into the hard chair. He grimaced at me, perhaps for disturbing his game, and I returned his look with my best eye roll. I didn’t know exactly who all of these men were, but had a feeling they were Bayasaa’s friends and had no legitimate business being in a school.

I logged into my email and shot off messages to Mike and my immediate family. I was most excited to email my small circle of girl friends from college. We all split up after we graduated from Ithaca College and were now living in different time zones and several different continents. TJ was in Portland working at a homeless shelter for teenagers. Sarina and Lauren were both working on Masters degrees in the UK. Stacy was working in television out in Los Angeles, while Abby was holding down the East Coast doing research at a hospital in Manhattan. Reina moved to Hawaii and divided her time between working at Hugo Boss, eating Spam sushi, and riding her scooter around
the island. We stayed in touch through an email chain that chronicled our relationship statuses, obnoxious coworkers, issues with our parents, and served as a link between our burgeoning adult selves and the college girls we used to be.

When Amy and I finished emailing, Bor took us up a flight of stairs to show us the classrooms where we would be teaching, and then took us back downstairs to show us the library, which also housed the two notoriously finicky copy machines the school owned. Though there was an actual library on the top floor for the middle school and high school students, the downstairs library contained elementary school teaching materials and stacks of decades old science books. I browsed the limited materials but didn’t see any conversational English books.

Bor mentioned earlier that he would take any interested American teachers to Naran Tuul Zakh, a huge market southeast of downtown UB. Naran Tuul Zakh literally translated to the Black Market, though Bor said it wasn’t as ominous as it sounded.

“What can we buy there, Bor?” I asked, as he rounded up the American teachers.

“Anything. You can buy anything there,” he replied.

“Let’s buy a Mongolian baby,” I whispered to Amy. “Have you seen how cute they are?”

“Oh God, the burrito babies!” she exclaimed. Mongolian babies were, in fact, wrapped up like burritos and were the cutest babies I had ever seen. They were swaddled so tightly in vibrantly colored blankets that the only visible part of their body was the tiny oval of their faces. A strip of cloth was knotted around their middle to keep their arms at their sides and to hold the whole system together.
“You want to buy Mongolian baby?” Bor asked. The American teachers stopped their conversations in the lobby and stared at me. “I do not think you can buy baby at market.”

“What? No. No! I was joking.”

Awesome. I just met my fellow American co-workers and now they probably thought I was a crazy baby trafficker. Katie stepped into the middle of our makeshift circle and cleared her throat.

“Today is Ian’s twenty-fourth birthday,” Katie announced. “We are going to celebrate it tonight at my apartment. Tahlia and I will make food and Amy and LeeAnn will get a birthday cake.”

The lobby disappeared. I could no longer hear Katie drone on, assigning party items to the other teachers. I locked eyes with Amy, who stood on the other side of the circle. Like a tin can telephone, we established a direct connection and began to have a conversation without speaking. I darted a look in Katie’s direction. Can you believe her? So bossy! Amy shook her head slightly and made a face to indicate she agreed with me. I raised an eyebrow. Do we bring the cake? Amy pursed her lips and rolled her head back and forth like a gentle metronome. Cake! she mouthed to me. I smiled. I like cake. She nodded. Me, too. It was decided.

“We’ll bring the cake, Katie,” Amy said. “Bor, do you think we can find one at the Black Market?” Bor assured us that there would be a staggering assortment of cakes to choose from.
Bor led us, a motley caravan of jetlagged Americans, through the frenetic city, past scruffy stray dogs that looked like German Shepard mutts, past solid Mongolian men and women clad in *dels* and traditional Mongolian boots in jewel tones with upturned toes, past cafes that sold *buuz* and *huushuur*, the two main national dishes of Mongolia. Bor pointed out the likeness of an enormous Chinggis Khan etched into rock on the mountain south of the city, just barely visible through the smog. We crossed streets without crosswalks and dodged sitting water because Ulaan Baatar didn’t have a street drainage system.

We passed men and women who wore the same white cotton protective masks over their faces that I saw on customers at the grocery store. These Mongolians, however, held blocky beige telephones—similar to desk phones in American homes in the 1980s and 90s—in their outstretched palms like an offering.

“How do they have telephones?” He turned around and faced all of us, skipping limberly backwards, still in line with Tahlia.

“They are cell phones. You pay them and they will dial the number you want.”

It was an occupation I never knew existed: cell phone owner. They wandered downtown Ulaan Baatar night and day and were equal parts telephone company and operator. What would happen to them when cell phones proliferated UB like they had in the States? What occupation would they slide into next?

I walked next to Amy and caught snippets of the conversations around me. Katie told Tomek that her brother, Mikey, was on his way to Ulaan Baatar from Beijing. He had taken a solo trip on his bicycle and had ridden from Istanbul, Turkey to Beijing, over
the course of half a year. I was already tired from pounding the pavement in my sneakers and could not fathom riding a bike through all the ‘Stans (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) and China.

The infamous Joe McIntyre had joined us wearing a pair of generic Teva sandals and a large empty backpack. Amy and I slowed down a bit to let him catch up with us. After introducing myself, I asked Joe to tell me what he knew about the Black Market.

“Well,” he said, “there are a lot of pickpockets.”

“Have you ever gotten pickpocketed?” I asked.

“They got me good. I had my wallet in my back pocket and they sliced open the bottom of it and got my wallet without me even realizing it. I reached for my wallet to pay for something and it was gone. And so was my pocket. But it’s a good place to buy grains in bulk. I’m going to buy some millet.”

I had no idea what millet was, but I was more concerned with the possibility of a knife being wielded anywhere close to my ass. I had my money in the thin, fanny pack-like pouch that I kept my passport in when I traveled. It was tan and was secured between my underwear and my jeans. Retrieving money out of it required me to stick my hand down my pants like a creep, but I was determined to get through my time in Mongolia without being pickpocketed.

After walking nearly 45 minutes through dirty streets and getting splashed with stagnant water by angry cars, we arrived at the entrance to the Black Market. It was marked by a sea foam green entryway and surrounded by a dozen old Soviet era trucks. Just outside the entry, vendors had set up huge displays of cheap sunglasses, labeled with
Gucci, Coach, and Vuitton, but with incorrect fonts. Half a dozen Mongolians had set up makeshift stands, all offering the same root vegetables. A woman with ruddy cheeks collected 50 tugriks, roughly four cents, from each of us, and squeezed us through the gateway. It had rained recently in that part of the city and the ground had melted into mud and puddles with no perimeter. I walked gingerly, worried about the wear and tear on my sneakers. I knew there was no way I would find another pair of sneakers in Mongolia to fit my size 9 feet.

Once inside the walls of the market we were approached by men who shoved dirty puppies in our faces, the same dogs I had seen scrounging through piles of trash near the sidewalks of UB for something to eat, while shouting numbers in Mongolian. When I shook my head, they motioned to a cage filled with fluffy rabbits and kittens. Next to it was a shallow plastic basin filled with small turtles, paddling through the water. I stuck my fingers through the metal wire of the cage to massage the forehead of one of the dirty, mewling kittens. Sensing he might have an actual customer, the closest man threw open the cage door and tossed the kitten at me. Its eyes were crusty, but blue. How was Pirate, my own kitty, doing in Tucson with my sister and her cat, Duckie? I wished that Pirate were in our apartment waiting for me to return, curled up on my burrito bed, lounging on my inadequate pillow.

I gently handed the kitten back to the man, who scowled and threw it back into the cage. I cringed. I was, essentially, a bleeding heart, but even I knew I couldn’t save all of these animals. I gave the kittens one last look and jogged to catch up with the rest of my co-workers.
“Hey, Bor, where do they get all those animals?”

“I think the dogs they get from the street. They collect them. The cats I do not know. Mongolians do not like cats.”

“Really?”

“They are very rare. Mongolians think they are bad for babies.”

Did they actually believe the old wives tale, which cautioned against cats that apparently snuck into cribs to steal the breath from babies?

“What will they do with the animals they don’t sell?”

Bor shrugged. “Maybe the dogs go back to the street. Maybe. I do not know.”

We split off in pairs and agreed to meet near the entrance in an hour. Bor would then show us where to buy a birthday cake. Amy and I wandered the narrow paths between hundreds of makeshift stands, some of which were covered with plastic tarps, cotton sheets, or pieces of corrugated metal, secured onto poles and other roofs with plastic rope. Stoic men and women stood behind their displays of notebooks and pens, or women’s underwear in clear plastic packaging and slippers, or an assortment of cheap flashlights. The wares that were sold divided the market. One section of the market was devoted to office and school supplies like folders that featured Korean pop stars and Britney Spears, calculators, flimsy notebooks, and packs of pens, while another section offered kitchen supplies like plastic basins, chopsticks, teacups, and soup spoons. Dazzling bolts of fabric were housed under an expansive permanent structure that offered a roof and not much else. It was possible to choose fabric and commission one of the talented tailors to design and sew a customized del. Farther away from the entrance were
rows of used clothing, a pop up Mongolian thrift store. Amy and I turned the corner from
the clothing and found a large area which sold solar panels next to the traditional,
handmade Mongolian furniture that was painted bright orange, with blue, green, and
white accents. Next to the dressers and short stools were angular wooden saddles. I
shuddered to think of mounting one.

We skimmed over the stalls that sold ancient Mongolian artifacts, Buddhist items
stolen from monasteries, military medals, and scrolls that featured the Mongolian
calligraphy that was used before Russian influence convinced Mongolia to adapt the
Cyrillic alphabet. *Lonely Planet Mongolia* mentioned that these antiques would be for
sale, but cautioned against purchasing them at the Black Market because the
documentation necessary for taking them out of the country would not be given, making
it illegal to attempt to bring it back to the States.

Amy and I perused a selection of used computer parts and accessories for
converters that would allow us to plug our computers into the unusual electrical outlets.
The woman behind the stall watched us like an eagle.

“Sain baina uu,” I said warmly, with a smile. She nodded her head and continued
to stare us down. I still had not seen a smiling Mongolian other than Bor. Suddenly, she
screeched, causing me to jump, and then took off after a scraggly young boy who
scrambled to lose her in the crowded market. She moved shockingly fast in her purple
del, a veritable sprinter in a complicated eggplant bathrobe. We watched as she caught up
with the boy, grabbed his arm and yanked him backward. She thrashed him with her free
fist while she shrieked at him. I looked around at the other shoppers, but nothing about
them indicated this was abnormal. When the shopkeeper was satisfied, she pushed him away roughly and walked back to the stall, triumphant, with a large pack of batteries that he had swiped.

“Jesus,” I said. “Don’t steal anything here. They’ll cut your hand off.”

Amy pointed at the converters we needed, careful not to touch them.

“How much is this?” she asked.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means ‘how much is this?’” Unlike me, Amy had clearly studied some useful phrases before jumping face first into a new country.

The woman answered in a string of guttural Mongolian. I looked expectantly at Amy.

“What did she say? How much is it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know any numbers yet!”

We smiled apologetically, shrugged our shoulders and shook our heads, the universal signs for I have no idea what you just said, but please take pity on me, because I am a stupid American, and help me out.

She replied again, this time in Russian. I winced and then shook my head again.

“American,” I said, in apology. The woman behind the display sighed and punched numbers into a simple calculator and turned it towards us so we could read it:

2500.
“2500 tugriks? So what does that mean? They are each…” I struggled to do the basic calculation in my head. What was the exchange rate? Around 1200 tugriks to a dollar, so that meant…

“Around $2,” Amy said. We nodded, satisfied. Before I could hand the woman the short, rectangular bills, another Mongolian woman came up, wedged herself between my body and the display, and began to select her own purchases. After she paid for them, she hustled past me, pushing me out of the way without a second thought.

There is no such thing as waiting your turn in Mongolia.

I gave my 1200 tugriks to the shopkeeper, careful to offer them to her with my right hand. Bor had been very clear that items in Mongolian were only ever to be offered and accepted with your right hand, preferably with your left hand supporting your right elbow.

“In Mongolia, it is very bad luck to give and take with left hand. Very, very bad!” he had warned. I had nodded solemnly to show him that I understood.

“We should buy towels while we’re here,” Amy said. We wandered through the market, trying to find our way through the labyrinth back to household goods. All around us was the sound of Mongolians viciously clearing their throats and expelling foul wads of phlegm onto the ground, regardless of who was standing near them. Men and women alike spat with violent vehemence. Any time I slowed down to browse a selection at a stall, impatient shoppers pushed past me, sometimes using both hands to physically move me out of their path. Though Mongolia revered what it called the Three Manly Sports,
wrestling, archery, and horseback riding, they wouldn’t be amiss by adding a fourth one: roller derby.

I saw Amy several booths ahead of me, looking at change purses.

“Amy!” I yelled. I didn’t want to lose her in the bustle of the market. I saw her turn around and made eye contact with the only blue eyes in the crowd, but just for a second. Before I could hurry to catch up with her, the crowd swallowed me whole at a busy intersection. I struggled to move forward but the tide of shoppers pushed against me. I attempted to step out of the apparent traffic jam, but bodies swarmed all around me.

A handful of burly men in front of me halted my progress. Their broad backs—clad in jackets, not dels—obstructed my view until all I could see was their closely cropped black hair and thick necks. They stumbled backwards into me, while several men behind me pushed their bodies into mine. Something in my spine, an electric current, twitched. Danger. I tried again to extract myself, but the circle of men communicating in grunts and rough Mongolian would not release me. Blood rushed to my head in echoes like a wah wah guitar pedal. The hands that pushed me forward and pulled me backward began to run over my back, down the legs of my jeans.

No.

I stopped trying to fight my way out of the front of the horde. Be a Renegade, I commanded. I took a quick step backwards, startling the men behind me, and dropped low like I was going in for a tackle on the rugby pitch. I threw out my arms, put my head down, and burst forward. I plowed through my would-be robbers like a rhinoceros. I didn’t stop until they had all scattered.
Suddenly, I was free. At that moment, I was the only person in the Black Market with any personal space around them. I swirled around, trying to identify my attackers, but they had all slunk back into the recesses of the market until they saw their next mark.

Amy found me and grabbed my arm.

“What just happened back there?” she asked, concerned. I breathed deeply, senses on high alert. I knew I had wild eyes.

“Those men. They just did that thing when they try to rob you. But I didn’t let them rob me.”

“Are you okay?”

* * * * *

There is no way for me to explain, without sounding completely crazy, that there is something inside me—clenched so tightly—that makes me, at a very basic level, not okay. This thing has been inside me from the moment I began to transition from an impressionable small person into an autonomous adult. At the same time my body developed pubic hair and a menstrual cycle, my brain tapped into the psychic memories of generations of Marhevskys, Garskes, Races, Csomas; it went back farther than recollection, farther than family names, and fixed a mainline from the mental unrest of my ancestors into my arm. If I received genes that assigned me the same exact nose as my Hungarian grandmother, and her Hungarian mother, then I also received the ones responsible for the gambling, breakdowns, suicides, alcoholism, and disordered eating that ran straight down to the roots of my family tree.
When this thing unwinds just a little bit, I contract all of my muscles violently inward, while simultaneously trying to push them out of my body. Every single day I am engaged in a brutal plyometric feud between my body and my mind. There are obvious casualties of feeling the urgency to peel my skin off my frame. Just like frostbite, parts on the periphery are the first to go. Pinkie fingers, pinkie toes, they don’t belong. They can be easily separated from the sinking ship that is my body. I used to be wracked with the desire to hear the snap of my toes breaking, but the body doesn’t make a sound when it bleeds.

“Don’t even think for a second that you’re the worst patient I’ve ever seen,” Dr. Grindlinger, my psychiatrist, had said. He picked at the skin around his fingernails, chewing down the cuticles like a goat.

“I don’t,” I said, because I didn’t. I didn’t feel the need to prove anything to him, to show off new scars on my arms and legs or brag about the missing enamel on the back of my teeth.

“Where do you like to harm yourself?” he asked, swiveling slowly back and forth in his wheely chair.

“My arms. My wrists. The outside of my right leg.”

“Not your breasts? Places where the sun don’t shine?”

“Ew, no.”

“Why not there? Most people want to conceal their shame.”

I wasn’t stupid. I had read the books, too, and I owned *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*. I stared him down.
“This isn’t a cry for help, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“So why do you do it?” he asked. “Really, I’m curious.”

My favorite places were usually determined by ease of access. I was right handed so I had more control when I extinguished matches on the pale white of my left inner arm, by my elbow. It left my skin mottled with ugly scabs and fading scars, a reminder—my secret—that I read, with pride, like Braille. Other scars: the unnatural albino spot the size of a quarter that I earned by pressing the heated metal tip of a lighter into my leg repeatedly over the course of an evening, bruises on my wrists from hitting them on the edges of desks or my hipbones when I couldn’t find anything hard enough to dent, diagonal streaks near my wrist I made one night after sneaking downstairs into the kitchen to drag steak knives over my skin until I felt the teeth catch and rip my flesh; I put the knives back without washing them. I didn’t eat meat, anyway.

I watched as Dr. Grindlinger plucked the hangnails off his fingertips and stripped them down to the next joint. I squinted to look closer. Band Aids covered several of his fingertips, but the exposed nails were all bitten and ripped down to nubs, the skin around them was red and inflamed.

“Holy shit. What are you doing to your fingers?” I asked. “That is a definite form of mutilation.”

He quickly folded his hands and put them in his lap, hiding them from me.

“That,” he said, “is none of your business. We all have our issues we’re working on.”

Apparently.
“So why do you do it?” he asked. Why did I do it? It was, instinctually, the opposite of a normal response to conflict. Normal people avoided pain. I sought it. It made me feel better, these lulls filled after, not before, the storm.

“It’s what I do to feel comfortable in my own body,” I said. It was my version of carving initials into a tree. LeeAnn wuz here.

When had I last been okay?

*       *       *

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go buy some towels.”

I purchased thesoftest towel I could find, a pink one that was just as scratchy as any over-bleached hotel towel I had used, and an orange and yellow washcloth. Amy and I had decided to acquiesce to the Mongolian custom of removing shoes at the entrance of an apartment to prevent tracking in the dirt, shit, and germs from the outdoors. I found the biggest pair of women’s slippers at the Black Market, which were still only about a size 8. They were pink and fuzzy and had a red apple embroidered on the top, accompanied by the text, “Apple Pradise”.

I had showed the typo to Amy. “Some day I’m going to get a job for an Asian company and be their English proofreader.”

She pulled a new wallet out of her coat pocket. It was green, sealed with Velcro, and had a little cartoon dog head on it. Below the dog head, in large letters, was DINGA.

“Is Dinga the dog’s name? Or is it a brand?” I asked.

Amy shrugged. “Who knows? But now I have a Dinga!”

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Bor and the rest of the American teachers were waiting near the entrance of the Black Market. Joe’s backpack was no longer empty.

“What did you buy, Joe?” asked Amy.

“Millet,” he said, smiling and giving two thumbs up. “Twenty-five kilos of millet.”

“What are you going to do with twenty-five kilos of millet?” Katie asked. “You know there are other grains out there, right?”

“Man, that’s a lot of millet,” Ian said, shaking his head.

“But I save a lot of money if I buy a large amount at once,” Joe explained earnestly. “This should last me the whole year.”

I looked at the other American teachers. A line was beginning to form in the dust of the Black Market. On one side stood Joe with his bulk millet and on the other side were the rest of us with our supermarket peanut butter, fresh vegetables, and indulgences like wine and Twix bars imported from Russia.

“What do you do with millet?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a tiny grain that looks like couscous. You cook it like rice,” he said.


“I don’t eat meat, unless it’s about to go to waste. So I just eat millet. That’s it,” he said. This millet exchange reminded me of a story my friends, Kelly and Paul, a couple that worked on PhD’s at Columbia College in Chicago had told me. They simultaneously worked as R.A.’s in a beautiful pre-war apartment building overlooking
Lake Michigan that housed graduate students. They had had to take a graduate student to the hospital because he contracted scurvy—and consequently jaundice—from eating nothing but white rice for several months to save money. I imagined that nameless graduate student with the pirate disease also had a 25 kilo bag of white rice in his kitchen, next to stacks of philosophy books and take out soy sauce packets he had snagged from the dining hall. I examined Joe’s complexion as inconspicuously as possible. He did not exhibit a yellow tint, yet.

I, myself, knew a thing or two about appearing jaundiced. Shortly after moving to Austin, I had to have my gallbladder removed. Even though I was barely 22, I had terrible gallstones that blocked my bile duct, causing the bile to backwash throughout my body. My skin grew sallow and the whites of my eyes turned a watery shade of lemonade. I lost ten pounds in a week before the surgery because I wasn’t allowed to consume food that contained any fat. It was a miserable week on the BRAT (bananas, rice, applesauce, toast) diet. I should have been thrilled that I lost weight but was so unbelievably sick I couldn’t even rejoice when I saw the numbers on the scale at the emergency room. The experience was made more harrowing because I didn’t have health insurance; I had been on my parent’s plan until the day I graduated from college, and then the insurance company dropped me.

It’s not an uncommon story. There is truly nothing different about me than anyone without insurance who has a surprise medical emergency. Because I had just moved to Texas and was unemployed, one of the nurses told me to apply for Medicaid.

As she skimmed my application she asked, “How many children do you have?”
“None,” I said. “I just graduated from college.”

Her face fell.

“Oh honey,” she said. “The only way you’ll qualify for Medicaid is if you have children.” I had been going to Planned Parenthood since I was sixteen years old. I had very intentionally not allowed myself to become pregnant.

When my parents found out that I had put the surgical deposit on my credit card, because the surgeon required a 10% down payment from patients who didn’t have health insurance, they worked something akin to magic and bought me retroactive health insurance for the previous three months. I didn’t even know that was a real thing. All I know is that when push came to shove and the emergency room doctor told me my gallbladder was just short of killing me, my parents came through so that I wasn’t left with crippling medical debt. I still do not know what strings they had to pull to put me back on their insurance plan retroactively.

After the surgery, I was so upset that the state of Texas wouldn’t let me keep my dissected gallbladder, pulled out in parts through my belly button, that I didn’t pay attention when the surgeon discussed things I should avoid now that I was gallbladder-less: alcohol and fatty foods.

Bor motioned for all of us to follow him as he walked towards the one actual building in the Black Market with doors, a roof, and walls. It resembled an enormous airplane hangar and housed the butchers, perishable produce, and baked goods. Once through the doors, we passed women sitting on stools on either side of the exits selling flowers out of buckets. Before I could appreciate the surprisingly vibrant selection, I was
almost knocked flat by the encompassing aroma of the meat market. The air was filled
with the mineral bitterness of blood and organ meat. Directly to the right of the door was
a skinned, hacked up adult camel, spread out over several blue tarps on the ground. The
double hump of the Bactrian camel had also been skinned to show off the milky fat that
surrounded the meat underneath it.

I clutched Amy’s arm.

“That’s a camel,” I whispered. A vegetarian since I read Upton Sinclair’s The
Jungle at fifteen, I was appalled and intrigued at the same time. I couldn’t look away. I
wandered closer and saw that none of the meat was packaged or refrigerated. Instead,
large, primal hunks of meat were displayed on metal counter tops next to giant scales,
blood pooling beneath them. The floor and counters were littered with skinned goats and
whole sheep heads, lips pulled back in a grimace.

“How is this sanitary?” I whispered to Amy. I didn’t want anything I observed to
be taken as a criticism by Bor.

An equal amount of men and women worked behind the meat counters in red or
white aprons, wielding weighty cleavers and strong arms. Handwritten signs indicating
the prices were stuck in heaps of animal hearts or spiny backbones with chunks of flesh
clinging to the vertebrae. Entire animals hung off the wall from metal meat hooks like a
row of Christmas stockings from a mantel. Amy and I walked up and down the meat
section, fascinated and mildly repulsed. Unlike the sterile, neatly packaged chops and
roasts in grocery stores of America, the meat here actually resembled the animals it once
was. That didn’t make me want to return to an omnivore lifestyle, but I did appreciate the presentation. If you wanted to eat it, you had to acknowledge where it came from.

“Want to buy a goat butt?” Amy asked, referring to the skinned, fatty double mound of goat ass staring at us. Bor and the American entourage joined us.

“That is delicacy in Mongolia,” Bor said, referring to the goat’s posterior. “It is traditional to serve it during Tsaagan Sar, the Lunar New Year.”

Bor pulled us away from the carcasses and led us to the much more sedate bakery area of the indoor market. Dozens of cakes dazzled from inside boxes with a cellophane window, much like the ones I saw when I disembarked from the airplane when I landed in Ulaan Baatar.

“Ian, go look at something else,” I instructed. “I don’t want you to see your birthday cake yet!”

“It’s cool, I’ll just go look at the dead camel again,” he said, looking at me with bright eyes a second too long. As he returned to the meat department, Katie trailed half a step behind him.

I considered the display of cakes. It was impossible to tell what kind of cake was hidden beneath the elaborate globs of icing flowers, animal heads, and Cyrillic script.

“Bor, we want a cake that says ‘Happy Birthday’ on it,” I said. “Can you help us find one?” Bor bent over the cakes to read the detailed script on them and pointed at several of them. Amy and I decided on a beautiful cake with a heap of white frosting and two elephant heads made of icing on it.

“What does it say, Bor?” Amy asked.
“It says, ‘I wish you happiness,’” Bor replied. It was close enough. We nodded, satisfied, and paid the woman behind the counter.

We all walked back together to the Hobby School before we went our separate ways to our respective homes. Katie told us to be at her apartment at 7pm, several hours away. It was only when Amy and I got to the main street that led to our house that I made an admission.

“Amy, I am so tired and so thirsty. If I don’t take a nap when we get home I think I might start crying.” Not only was I meeting new people and learning how to navigate my new city on foot, I had also been doing it while incredibly jetlagged.

“I feel like a zombie.”

“Me, too,” she said, with tired eyes. We turned into the driveway of our cluster of tenements. A tiny toddler played alone with a stick in the dirt in front of a neighboring tenement. She stared at us, tiny mouth agape as we walked by, two stubby pigtails sticking out the sides of her head. She wore a little royal blue del with an orange sash.

“Maybe we’re the first white people she’s seen,” I said. I waved at the little girl. She giggled and hit the ground with her stick.

“Could be,” Amy said.

We scaled eight flights of stairs to our apartment. I couldn’t wait to put my slippers on. I was sure they would feel like paradise, even if they were misspelled.

* * * * *

“LeeAnn?”
I knew before I even opened my eyes that the naps Amy and I took after returning home from the Black Market had extended into the nighttime. Amy stood in my doorway, groggy in a thermal shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, illuminated from behind by the light in the hallway.

“LeeAnn, we’re missing Ian’s birthday party.”

“What time is it? How badly did we oversleep?” I asked.

“It’s almost 8:30PM.”

I groaned. We should have been up hours ago. “Let’s just go back to sleep.”

“I know,” she said, as I rolled over to shield my eyes from my artificial light. “I thought the same thing.”


“LeeAnn, we have his birthday cake.”

I threw my legs out from under my comforter. “Crap. Time to rally.”

We walked as fast as we could to Tahlia and Katie’s apartment but still arrived more than two hours late to the party, way past the point of being fashionably late.

“Nice of you to make it,” Katie said wryly, taking the cake from my hands. She ushered it into the kitchen and quickly adorned it with candles. We all sang a spirited “Happy Birthday” to Ian, whose eyes were shiny from drinking wine for the two previous hours. I poured myself a glass of Bulgarian Merlot from an open bottle that had a picture of a bear on the label. Maybe bears were big in Bulgaria.
I sat at the end of a bench pulled up to their makeshift kitchen table and observed the group of people who had been installed as my automatic friends in Mongolia. Would I have befriended any of them if we had met in Austin? Or Ithaca? Other than Tahlia and Ian, none of us knew each other before something propelled us to the coldest capital in the world at the same time. Even Tahlia and Ian didn’t really know each other; they just happened to be two travelers who connected for a brief moment in Colca Canyon in Peru.

I watched, and smiled, as Bor’s face became splotchy and red from drinking wine and telling stories. Around him, we laughed, interrupted each other, and poured more wine into glasses that weren’t ours. Amy, who drank water out of a teacup, traded outdoorsy stories with Ian, who had once worked as an ocean kayak guide in Alaska. Joe discussed teaching philosophy with Tomek, who had actually gone to school to be a teacher.

“Just do the best with what you have,” I overheard Joe say, “and don’t expect too much.”

I openly eavesdropped on these conversations with googly eyes. We were one week away from the start of the school year. How was it possible to already feel the swell of platonic love for people I had known for two days? It could have been the wine, the jetlag, or that I was as far away from my family as I could ever hope to be, but for the first time in a long while, I began to feel okay.
CHAPTER IV
WELCOME TO HOBBY SCHOOL

I woke up on Tuesday with a rock in my stomach. Bor had told us the night before to meet at the Hobby School at 9AM. Not only would we meet some of the Mongolian teachers, we would also receive our teaching schedules and lesson plans from the previous year’s teachers. I assumed we would also go through some kind of teacher training to prepare us to teach in Mongolia, which, I was quickly learning, was not like the rest of the known world.

We were all under contract to teach twenty classes a week, with each class being 50 minutes. I would teach conversational English to the primary school students, while Amy would teach geography to the 5th-11th graders (Mongolian schools only went up to the 11th grade). Katie would teach science to the middle and high school students and Tahlia would teach English literature to the same. Bor would teach English math (math taught in the English language) to the primary school students, while Joe would teach English math to the middle and high school students. I couldn’t remember what Ian and Tomek were supposed to teach, but they had both mentioned feeling more comfortable with mature students, rather than younger students.

Joe had also informed us that Tony, a 50-something white man from Tasmania, would round out our group of “foreign teachers”. Tony had taught upper level
conversational English at the Hobby School for three years and previously lived and taught in Thailand.

“He’s a real character,” Joe said. “He hates Mongolia, absolutely hates it. But he can’t go back to Tasmania for a couple more years because he’s in trouble with the law. Evading taxes, I think.”

When Amy and I arrived at the Hobby School, an effusive Mongolian woman with a black pageboy haircut greeted us.

“Welcome! Welcome to the Hobby School,” she said, shaking our hands. “I am Boda. I am the head of the English Department.” She spoke overly enunciated English with a hint of a British accent. She ushered us into the teacher’s lounge where the other foreign teachers were waiting. I noticed Tony right away. He was thin, balding, and reeked of cigarettes. He looked like he was at least 70 years old. His hands trembled like moths.

“This is our vice-principal, Chimgee,” Boda announced, motioning to a petite Mongolian woman wearing a fashionable skirt suit and heels. Chimgee ducked her head and delivered a nervous laugh.

“My English is not so good,” she said. “I am happy you come to Hobby School in Mongolia!”

Boda introduced another Mongolian woman, this one stocky and stern. “This is Maya. She is… Joe, how do you say?” We all stifled giggles; she had pronounced his name “Joy”.

“Joy, tell about Maya,” Katie said with a straight face.
Tony tapped his fingers impatiently on the table. “She’s the mean fat one,” he muttered under his breath. I tapped Amy’s ankle under the table and received a tap back from her. Communicating without speaking: we were on it.

“Maya is the disciplinarian. She takes care of the bad kids,” Joe said. Maya laughed.

“Yes. Bad kids, yes,” she said, laughing. Chimgee quickly said something in Mongolian to Boda.

“Ah, yes!” Boda said. “Chimgee wants me to tell you that the Hobby School does not have many bad children. They are very well behaved,” she said, nodding her head in emphasis. “Very good children here! They are the best students in Mongolia!”

Chimgee again said something to Boda, who translated. “Chimgee and Maya must be on their way now. They have much to do for the new school year!”

The two women nodded slightly and disappeared. We looked to Boda expectantly.

“And now,” she said, clapping her hands together. “We go for photos! Come.” We followed her out of the Hobby School and down the street.

“Joe, why are we getting our pictures taken?” I asked. The people we passed on the street looked curiously at us, a ragtag group of English speakers trailing behind one fast-paced Mongolian teacher.

“The Hobby School frames our pictures and hangs them in the lobby. You know, to sort of show off all of their foreign teachers.”
Had I known I would have worn something other than jeans and a pink plaid short-sleeved shirt. I checked out Amy’s outfit. She wore a light blue t-shirt with a bird on it with a corduroy blazer over it. She definitely looked like a teacher. Ian wore a vintage navy blue polo with a thick rainbow stripe running across it. At least I wasn’t the only one unprepared for my close up.

After our photos, taken by a serious man with an enormous camera, we returned to the Hobby School to receive our schedules. I watched as my American and Tasmanian co-workers received a sheaf of paper, presumably a teaching schedule and previous year’s lesson plans. One by one they scanned the documents that would dictate the course of their days for the entire semester. I waited to receive mine until everyone had left the room to explore classrooms, libraries, and teaching materials. Everyone except Amy and me. We sat alone in the teacher’s lounge with Boda.

“Ah, Amy and LeeAnn!” Boda said, smiling broadly. “There was a mistake in the hiring process. Amy will not be teaching geography. She will be teaching first grade conversation English. And LeeAnn will now be the primary school science teacher.” She looked down at the paper in her hand. “And also primary school conversation English.” Boda beamed at us like we had just won a sweepstakes.

Who did she say would be the science teacher for all of the primary school students? Me? Oh, no, no, no. I had a B.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Women’s Studies. I wasn’t a math and science person. I had taken exactly one science class in my entire four years at college. Now the Hobby School wanted me to teach impressionable
young minds everything they needed to know about science? The last real science class I had taken was chemistry as a sophomore in high school. I got a C in it.

I fulfilled my college science requirement by taking a lecture class on dinosaurs. The only time I ever spoke during the 200 person lecture was to ask the professor how dinosaurs had sex. During that semester, I spent more time on a bar stool drinking whiskey and cheap beer and playing rugby than I ever spent in a classroom. I could tell you the difference between bourbon and scotch but could barely remember the difference between the Pleistocene and Holocene epochs. But, hey, in Mongolia that qualified me as a science teacher!

I sat there and processed this “mistake in the hiring process”. I had packed my suitcases and backpack with stacks of primary school reading and writing materials, not science worksheets. I had nothing. Boda searched for any sign that we had acknowledged this change of plans. Not knowing how to respond, I looked to Amy for guidance.

“No,” she said firmly. “I signed a contract to teach geography. That’s why I came to Mongolia. I want my geography classes. Geography. That’s what I went to college for.”

“That is no longer possible,” Boda said, simultaneously furrowing her brow while maintaining a smile. “Tomek is teaching geography.”

“Then have Tomek teach first grade. He’s just as qualified as I am. I have a geography degree. I signed a contract.”

“Sadly, that is not possible,” Boda said, shaking her head. “We decided that you would be better suited to teach the first graders.”
Amy focused a death stare on Boda that put my own to shame. The tension was so palpable the paint was going to start peeling off the walls. I needed to do something to end this battle of determination that Amy and Boda were engaged in.

“Boda, I’m really not prepared to teach science,” I said. “Do you have the materials and lesson plans that last year’s teacher used?”

Her eyes, narrowed at Amy, quickly changed to benevolent pools of holy water when she looked at me.

“We do have some science books in the library downstairs!”

What did “some” mean in Mongolia?

“Ok, what about lesson plans? Everyone other than Amy and me received lesson plans from last year’s teachers.”

Boda waved her hand breezily. “Ah, yes! Last year’s science teacher is sending them to us. We just do not have them yet.”

I scanned the schedule, which was a master of every class at the Hobby School every day. Lunch for the primary students started at 10:45AM and lasted fifteen minutes.

“Boda, when do the primary students have recess?”

“Re-cess?” she asked, rolling the R. “What is recess?”

“Recess. It’s when students go outside and play and run around.”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“We have no such thing in Mongolia at Hobby School. Our boys and girls are very studious!”

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She stood up and ushered us out of the teacher’s lounge. “Go see what such materials we have in the library. I will be upstairs. I am very busy! Very busy! There are many new students this year!”

Amy gave Boda a stony stare as she ascended the stairs to her office. The panic was rising inside me. The anticipatory rock I had felt in my stomach when I woke up had now gone off like a grenade in my belly.

“What are we going to do?” I asked. “I don’t think I can do this. I’m not a science person. Seriously, the last real science class I took was in tenth grade.” Amy shrugged.

“In a normal school I would talk to the principal, but I don’t think Chimgee knows enough English to understand what’s going on. I think she would smile and nod and have no clue what I was saying.”

“And I sort of thought that maybe we would have some kind of training this week to teach us how to be teachers.”

“Have you ever taught anything before?” Amy asked. I thought back to the resume I had sent the Hob by School several month before.

“I was a day camp counselor a couple years ago. I used to teach safe sex seminars on campus with Planned Parenthood and the feminist group I belonged to. And I was an after school nanny for two Montessori school kids whose parents were Cornell professors.”

“I was a nanny, too,” Amy said. “For a family who lived in a small mountain village in Switzerland.”
We slowly walked down the stairs to the teacher’s library, where the two copy machines were housed. We passed a Mongolian woman with side-swept bangs in full make-up. She wore skin-tight black leather pants with knee-high pointy stiletto boots.

“Sain bain uu?” she inquired. I froze mid-flight, gripping the banister for support. Her pants clung to her like Saran wrap.

“Sain bain,” we replied in unison. I couldn’t stop myself; I turned around and watched her conquer the stairs. There wasn’t a panty line in sight. Another Mongolian woman, also clad in Western-style clothes, descended the stairs and stopped Leather Pants. The second woman greeted her enthusiastically and rubbed her hand over a leather-bound thigh. I didn’t know Mongolian, but I knew from her intonation that she appreciated the hip style that Leather Pants was rocking. I imagined that they discussed where the new pants had been purchased, how much they cost, and then thanked whoever had zipped her into them. Amy and I flattened ourselves against the wall as the second woman continued down the stairs.

“Sain bain uu?” she asked.

“Sain bain!” I shouted. I lowered my voice. “Sain bain.”

We listened as Leather Pants’ heels clicked several flights above us before the staccato disappeared completely.

“LeeAnn!” Amy whispered. “That woman was wearing—”

“Leather pants!” I finished. I once owned a similar pair of pants in high school, though they were pleather and I had stolen them one of the times I skipped school with my best girl friends.
We found Bor in the downstairs library using the copy machine. Poor Bor never had a chance. We pounced on him.

“Bor!” I shouted, making him jump. “Boda just told me I’m the primary school science teacher! I’m only supposed to teach primary conversation! And we just saw a woman wearing skin-tight leather pants in school!”

“And I’m the new first grade conversation teacher,” Amy said. “I’m supposed to be teaching intermediate and high school geography.”

Bor processed our attack as the copy machine continued to spit out math worksheets as a slower pace than a dot matrix printer from the 1980s.

“That woman, she is fourth grade teacher,” he said. My fourth grade teacher in Wilmington, NC, did not wear leather pants.

“Let’s forget about Leather Pants for now,” Amy said. “Bor, I just found out I have to teach first grade.”

“But the first graders are so cute!” he squealed. “They come in on their first day all dressed up and confused and they cry because they miss their mothers. So you have to be really nice and give them hugs because they are so small. They are so cute,” he said, mimicking pinching their cheeks.

“So if they come here for first grade, where did they go for kindergarten last year?” I asked.

“What is kindergarten?”

As anxious as I was about teaching science, at least I wasn’t the teaching English to children who didn’t speak any and had never been in a school before.
Amy wandered around the sparse library. A single, sad chapter book was propped up on a bookshelf, the only item in that space.

“Bor, I signed a contract. I should be teaching geography.”

Bor shrugged and gave us a rueful smile. “This is Mongolia.”

And we now lived in Mongolia, the country where legally binding contracts were not actually legally binding.

I searched the library for anything science-related. I still had two classes of conversational English, 4A and 4B, but figured we could spend the first week having conversations about ourselves. I still wasn’t entirely sure what conversational English was, but thought it has something to do with how Americans speak colloquially. If my students were in fourth grade, I could probably just come up with a different topic every day for us to discuss and spend the class correcting pronunciation and grammar. Or maybe we could have story time. The only books I had brought to Mongolia for myself to read were Lonely Planet and a thick issue of McSweeney’s.

I got on my knees and rifled through the bookshelves. I found a stack of science textbooks that were published in the early 1990s. There were only eighteen of them. That was it. It was the only science book in the library. The book itself looked familiar. It was probably the same science book I used in second grade at Chestnut Elementary. Maybe I could teach the same book to all of my classes and just go at a slower pace for the younger students.

Amy and I returned to the teacher’s lounge with the materials we scrounged up to get a start on lesson plans for our first week. It was Tuesday; school started on Monday.
Katie was already situated at the table, intensely typing at her laptop. Amy slid the sole beginner conversation book she had unearthed onto the round table.

“This book is terrible,” she said. “I’m actually amazed at how terrible it is. I don’t even know what to do with it.”

I flipped through the science book I found. The first chapter was, inexplicably, on dinosaurs. I turned the book towards Amy to show her.

“Dinosaurs! The only science class I took in college was on dinosaurs.”

“Maybe you can just teach dinosaurs all year long,” Amy suggested.

“Dinosaurs are so cool,” I said. “I read in Lonely Planet that the Natural History Museum here has a ton of fossils. Maybe I can take my classes on a field trip.” I imagined trekking to the Natural History Museum with a classroom of dutiful students holding hands behind me in a neat line. I could do this. I would be the fun teacher.

Katie stopped typing, looked up from her computer and cleared her throat. She had several science books spread out around her and pages of neatly typed lesson plans from last year’s teacher. Lucky.

I stared at the short chapters in my own science book and the blank pages of the thin notebook I snagged from the library. I wanted to ask Amy something, a teacher question, but I didn’t want her to think I was the dumbest person in the world.

“So,” I said, “if you were doing lesson plans, what exactly would you do? Because I have absolutely no idea what a lesson plan actually is.”

I was relieved to see a lack of judgment on Amy’s face.
“They’re really not that big of a deal. Basically, a lesson plan is just what you’re going to do in class that day, so you’re prepared.”

“Oh, okay, so—”

“Ahem.”

We both looked up. Did Katie really just say “ahem”?

“Ahem,” she repeated. “Look, you guys,” Katie said, pushing up her glasses, “if you’re going to talk, you’re going to have to go somewhere else.”

I waited for Katie to laugh or tell us that she was joking, but she continued to stare at us across the table like a judge delivering a sentence. Amy leaned forward slightly and cocked her head.

“We’re talking about curriculum. We’re working on lesson plans, too.”

“But I was here first so it’s only fair that you two find somewhere else,” Katie replied. There were few things in life I hated more than being scolded or chastised by another adult.

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “This is the teacher’s lounge. It’s for all of us.”

“And you two are distracting me,” she said, not backing down in her conviction.

“You need to go somewhere else because I was here first. I have real work to do.”

Katie stared at us with the smug triumph of a former nerd telling off a bully years after high school. I wanted to lunge across the table and slap the glasses off her face. I would not be inviting her over for stir-fry any time soon.

Amy stood up and gathered all of our things.

“Let’s go, LeeAnn. We’ll do our work somewhere else.”
Katie didn’t take her eyes off us until we left the teacher’s lounge. Only when I began to close the door behind us did I hear her start typing again.

Amy and I faced each other in the lobby, dumbstruck.

“Well, she isn’t very nice, is she?” Amy said. I had other choice words.


We took a seat at one of the long tables in the 20’x 40’ cafeteria. Sunlight streamed in through the wall of windows opposite the entrance to the cafeteria, a welcome addition to the standard fluorescent lights above us, even if the view consisted of other blocky, hastily constructed buildings. Other than a glass display case filled with candy and chips, and a freezer cooler next to it, there wasn’t much to the cafeteria. What was missing?

“Where’s the lunch line?” I wondered. “Where do they get school lunch?” Amy surveyed the room and came up the same conclusion I had: there wasn’t one.

“Maybe the kids bring their lunch to school every day,” she suggested.

Our mom packed lunches for all four Marhevsky kids every day until we graduated from high school. Buying school lunch was a treat. We were allowed to pick out a choice meal, like French bread pizza or chicken patty sandwich, once a month—unless we wanted to use our own money—from the lunch menus sent home in between permission slips and graded tests with stickers and smiley faces on them. In middle school I was envious of the students who always seemed to have dollars for splurges like pouches of Capri Sun and bags of chips. In the years before we realized I was lactose
intolerant, my mom included a quarter, or two dimes and a nickel, in my lunchbox so I could buy a carton of milk to drink with my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Sometimes I went without and saved my 25 cents until the next day, when I could partake, like my classmates, in my own pouch of artificially flavored sugar water.

My lesson plans weren’t the greatest, but at least I had a rough idea of how many pages to cover each day. I assumed that my students, at least the older ones, would be able to cover a chapter a week. The sentences and concepts in the book were very basic; no compound sentences here. Besides, the Hobby School was a bilingual school. To gain entrance all students had to pass written and oral English exams. Their families also had to be able to afford the $1200 U.S. dollar tuition each year. Bor had told us that the Mongolian teachers, including him, made 100,000 tugriks a month, around $90 U.S. dollars. A year of tuition was more than their annual salary.

I heard the voice of a booming and distinctly American man in the lobby. Amy and I poked our heads out of the cafeteria like a couple of nosy neighbors. Taking up the majority of the school’s lobby with his presence was a terribly handsome blonde-haired blue-eyed man with a bicycle. He had a faded backpack slung over one arm and a short brimmed bike messenger hat on his head. His clothes were dusty, like he had just come from an adventure. I wanted to bathe him and deposit him directly into my bed.

“Who is that?” I whispered to Amy. “He is so hot.”

“Mikey!”

Katie rushed out of the teacher’s lounge and hugged him so fiercely it almost knocked his bike over.
“I can’t believe you’re here!” she exclaimed. Some of the other foreign teachers wandered into the lobby from the computer lab to check out the commotion. With one arm still around him, Katie made an introduction.

“Hey, guys, this is my brother, Mikey.”

I knew Katie had a brother. She had told us over stir-fry. I also knew he had ridden his bike all over the world, something that perplexed me as much as it intrigued me. I just didn’t expect him to look half Viking and half corn-fed Midwestern white boy.

“That’s Tomek,” she said, pointing. “And Ian and Amy and LeeAnn and Tahlia. The only foreign teachers we’re missing are Joe and Tony, but you’ll meet them later.”

Boda, on her way to the cafeteria, strolled into the lobby, spotted Mikey, and stopped like she had run into a wall. Her eyes widened as she appraised him. Contrasted with Katie, he was even more striking. He was a full head taller than she and even from across the room, his eyes sparkled.

“Katie,” Boda said slowly, pronouncing her name in two distinct syllables, “who is this?”

“This is my brother, Mikey. He just got here. He rode his bike from Turkey to China.”

Boda shook her head like she didn’t quite understand. She inspected Katie like she had just seen her for the first time and then examined Mikey, the positive to her negative.

“Ah, Katie, so are you adopted?”

Katie looked flustered and didn’t respond.
“No, I’m the one who’s adopted,” Mikey said quickly, with a wry smile.

“Mikey, you were adopted?” Boda asked, his sarcasm not registering.

“I was adopted,” Katie said. She said it so firmly that there was no question that this topic was off limits in the future.

“Mikey, how long are you in Mongolia?” Boda inquired.

He looked at Katie, smiled, and shrugged good-naturedly. “I don’t know,” he said. “Until it’s time to go home.”

“I think Katie has a cool brother,” Amy whispered. “How did that happen?”

“Katie, you have brought to us our new teacher! Mr. Mikey can teach in the primary school!”

Boda clapped her hands, delighted. “Chimgee will be very happy!”

Just like that? No HIV test? Leprosy screening? Mikey considered the offer.


“Honestly, Mikey, you might as well. You’re going to be here a while any way,” Katie said.

“However long is fine,” Boda promised.

“You can have my first grade classes,” Amy offered.

“And my science classes,” I said. Boda ignored us.

“No, really,” Amy fake whispered, “take my first graders.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll teach conversation. I’m in.”

“It is decided. Mr. Mikey will take the second and third grades in conversation,” Boda said.
We cheered. We had another teacher on our team. Maybe we could convince him to stay for the whole year. But who would have taught second and third grade conversation if Mikey hadn’t shown up?

Later that night I stayed home while Amy went for a walk. She had invited me to go, but I hesitated and told her to just go without me. I wanted to witness UB at night again, to be encompassed by the filthy air, to seek out other fair-skinned expats with knowing eyes, but everything was happening too quickly. My right eye had been twitching spastically since I got home from school, a harbinger warning me to take care of myself before I slid below ground. I had been too many places in the past five days, met too many new people. When had I last taken my medicine?

The last time I lived abroad, in Zagreb, Croatia, the majority of my time was structured with school and planned trips with the other six people in my program. At the end of the day I went home to my host family in Sesvete, a district in the eastern part of the city, who had dinner waiting for me. Even when I moved to Austin I had the social cushion of my sister, Sarah, and Matthew, her fiancé. They included me in their weekend and after-work plans until I got a job and had made friends of my own.

It was only my third full day in Mongolia. I could go anywhere and do anything in my new city. I could follow one of the walking tours listed in Lonely Planet, eat soft pretzels at Brau Haus, the German-style beer hall, or hit up Dave’s Place, a bar run by an Englishman in Sükhbaatar Square, the center of the city, but was overwhelmed with the liberty to do so.
When I heard Amy close the heavy outer door behind her, regret rose in my belly. What if she never asked me to hang out again? I would spend a year alone in our inhospitable apartment with the television that offered three channels: CCTV, one of China’s state-run stations, Fashion TV, which broadcast fashion shows and news with little transition, a station that played Asian soap operas, and one that featured the French soap opera about a hair salon, Apollo and Eve. All of the channels had subtitles scrawled across the bottom of the screen, except for Fashion TV, which wasn’t necessary because the listless models stalking the catwalk needed no translation.

I opened the prescription bottle and swallowed a 20mg Celexa. Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro, Celexa: I had been on one or the other since I was sixteen. I imagined that my brain housed dozens of black holes. The medicine I had been on for almost seven years whittled the black holes down to mere pinpricks. But when I forgot to take my pill at night, the black holes opened up and swallowed me from the inside out. I shook the white, opaque bottle. When I lived in Austin my insurance company sent me 90 pills-three months worth- at a time in the mail. I refilled my prescription before I left but wasn’t able to get more than a 90 day supply to take with me. I also had what was left in my previous prescription bottle, about 30 pills, but that was it, around four months of pills.

I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and flopped on my bed with a book Amy had lent me, Jamie Zeppa’s memoir, Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey Into Bhutan. Zeppa, too, had abandoned a stagnant life in the States and took off for Bhutan.
when she was 24. I was still reading it hours later when Amy returned home, invigorated, cheeks as rosy as her puffy red Patagonia jacket.

“This is good,” I called to her. “Really good. It makes me wish I had gone to Bhutan instead of Mongolia.”

“But if you had gone to Bhutan, how would be become friends?” she asked, smiling. “Mongolia’s not so bad. You’ll see.”

Amy told me months later that during that first week she didn’t think I was going to make it. She expected to wake up one morning to find that I had slipped out in the middle of the night, already a passenger on the next flight back to America by the time she realized I was gone. I didn’t tell anyone at the time, not my friends and family in the States, not my co-workers and new friends in Mongolia, but I thought about packing up and leaving every day the first two weeks I was there. Once I found the airline’s office in downtown UB- plane tickets had to be reserved and purchased in person- I thought about marching in, elbowing the Mongolians out of the way, and throwing my credit card on the counter. Get me out of here, I would say, jerking my thumb for emphasis. Get me out on the next flight. But not only would I need a native speaker to translate what I had just said, I also didn’t have anywhere else to go. I knew, less than a month after I had left it, that I couldn’t go back to Austin. Mongolia may not have been what I expected- it was more Russia than China- but I made my lumpy burrito bed and I was going to sleep in it.
CHAPTER X

THIS IS HOME

On Wednesday Amy took me to Hypermarket, a large grocery store in our neighborhood she had discovered the night before. It was tucked away behind an apartment building across the street from us. A tiny shoe store was located in the vestibule between the outside and inside doors of the grocery store. Some pairs of high heels and strappy stiletto sandals were propped on the boxes they belonged in, on a long, skinny table, while knock-off athletic shoes, like Adidas sneakers with two stripes, stuck out from narrow shelves on the wall. Other, perhaps less desirable, shoes were piled up in a heap on the tiled floor. All of the women’s shoes looked impossibly small, fit for Amy’s size 5.5 feet and not my own size 9s.

“I want to buy some vegetables,” I said. “I feel like all I’ve eaten since we’ve been here has been eggs and peanut butter and jelly.”

We wandered around the grocery store, which was less hectic than Sky Market, the one in Chinggis Hotel. We walked the perimeter of the store, passing a cooler with yogurt, packaged milk, and huge hunks of butter wrapped simply in wax paper. We found the meat department before we found the produce. Just like in the Black Market, animal carcasses were sprawled on display. I stared into the dead eyes of a sheep’s head and
watched as flies settled on the skull before taking off and landing on another butchered animal.

We picked over the limited selection of fresh vegetables and chose a large head of cabbage, carrots, garlic, onions, potatoes, garlic scapes, and a head of green leaf lettuce.

“I wish they had avocados,” Amy said.

“Me, too.”

“What do you wish you were eating right now?” she asked. We added some oranges and apples to our basket.


“I wish we were eating tacos, too,” she said. “Or green curry.”

We found tofu in vacuum-sealed bags and threw several in as well. There was another item next to the tofu in a similar package, but the inside contained spongy brown oblong strips pressed together.

“What do you think this is?” I asked, examining it. “It doesn’t look like real meat. It looks like fake meat.” I sniffed it, as though my olfactory sense would somehow be able to translate the ingredients inside. I needed to learn the Cyrillic alphabet soon, and Mongolian, if only to know what I was actually eating.

Amy turned the package over in her hands. “It actually looks kind of like seitan.”

We got a couple packages of fake meat, a bag of rice, and a carton of apricot juice. I stood shoulder to shoulder with Amy in the checkout line. I wasn’t going to let anyone hustle past us. I had learned how to be a defensive driver in driver’s education many years before. Now I had to be defensive of my personal space and spot in line.
There was a metal stand with newspapers and magazines in it near the checkout line. Amy studied the titles and pulled out a slim newspaper, The UB Post.

“It’s in English,” she said. She leafed through the weekly paper. “And it has a crossword puzzle.”

A crossword puzzle? That sealed it for me. “Put it in the basket!”

When we got home we devoured the crossword puzzle. We huddled over it like old ladies pouring over Bible passages, discussed the poorly worded clues, and wrote the answers in pen because neither of us had a pencil. Together, we chopped vegetables for stir-fry and steamed some rice, ignoring that we had to cook it in the one pot we had, the mutton pot. We used a plate for a lid and drank bottled water out of tea cups while the food cooked.

“What are you going to do today?” I asked, leaning against the table we used as a cutting board.

“I want to see what’s north of here,” she said. I must have looked confused because she followed it up with, “You know, turning right on the main street instead of going left like we’re walking to the Hobby School.”

Right and left were directions I could handle at this point. Unless I had a compass, cardinal directions in UB were no good to me until I got my bearings.

“Can I come?”

She looked me at me like the answer was obvious.

“Of course you can.”
We were assaulted with a rotting stench as soon as we got to the bottom of the stairs. The doors that held the contents of the trash chute were flung open; refuse tumbled out of the space like corn from a silo. We paused on the sidewalk outside our building to watch men with dirty faces shovel it, one putrid scoop at a time, onto the back of an old Soviet work truck. Their metal shovels raked against the concrete of the sidewalk as they struggled to heft each load upward. I had never seen a waste management system like it. I snapped a few pictures with my basic point and shoot film camera.

“Where do they take it?” I wondered.

“They take it somewhere and burn it,” Amy replied. “That’s one of the reasons the city has such terrible air pollution.”

Together we walked north, past blocks of tenements that looked exactly like ours, past restaurants with yellow and red Chinese signs, past abandoned, partially constructed buildings, stepping over broken vodka bottles and wads of expelled phlegm on the sidewalk. Every car, every person, every stray dog seemed to move faster than I could process. I identified as much as I could, marking it in my brain so I could hold onto it forever. I would never again see this area with fresh eyes. In the sunlight, on the edge of autumn, even the trash in the gutters seemed gilded in magic.

We arrived at a hectic intersection filled with stop signs and yield signs, though drivers ignored all of them. Further north, as the city pressed outward and up the hillside, was the ger district, a sprawling encampment of yurts, each one pumping plumes of smoke into the sky through narrow metal chimneys. Traditionally, Mongolians moved their gers several times a year when they herded their livestock to new pastures. The
word itself translates, literally, to “home” in Mongolia. My ger, my home. Gers were meant to be dismantled and transported, parts stacked up high on the backs of camels like a gypsy caravan. They were not meant to rest permanently on the outskirts of a city, the equivalent of projects in metropolitan America. Sometimes life was just too much: too beautiful and too heartbreaking at the same time.

“Which way do you want to go?” Amy enquired. “Left or right?”

“I need to go home,” I said suddenly. “I have to go back.”

“Which home?” Amy asked. I only had one.

“Our home.”

“Already?”

I wanted to explain to her that I wasn’t always such a flake or a spaz. I wanted to tell her that I was tough as a rhino but needed to be grounded somewhere when I felt overwhelmed, even if that somewhere was our crummy apartment. I wanted to tell her that I got anxious when I didn’t know where the closest bathroom was. I wanted to tell her that right now the sky felt too tall, the world too unpredictable, and if I didn’t turn around now I might not be able to find my way back. I wanted to tell her that I had no idea what I was doing here. I wanted to tell her all of my secrets. I wanted to take a nap.

But instead, I just asked if she would be okay if she went on without me. She looked at me like I had just asked a very silly question. I had momentarily forgotten that I was talking to the woman who had worked and lived alone on a particularly remote section of the Appalachian Trail when she was twenty.

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll see you at home later.”
Amy turned left and I turned around. I was a dog that had strayed too close to an electric fence. I wasn’t ready to burst through that arbitrary boundary. At some point I would be able to take off that collar and roam, but for now I just wanted to go home, look out the window, write in my journal, and think quiet thoughts.

* * *

My maternal grandparents, Nana and Papa, had their first child, a son named Frank, on August 5th, 1928, precisely nine months after they got married. Frankie, as he was called, was born with a hole in his heart. Today, there are surgical procedures to repair this congenital defect, but in 1928 the doctors told my grandmother to take her son home and love him as much as she could until he died. Frankie lived twenty days.

There is a black and white picture of Nana in her Sunday best outside her home. She wears a coat wrapped tightly around her, but even still it is apparent how unnaturally thin she is. A small, open casket, no bigger than a shoebox, is propped up on the ground next to her. It looks like there is a doll nestled inside wearing a long, white baptismal gown; it is Frankie. Nana looks off in the distance like a ghost, floating next to her dead son. She wasn’t even twenty years old yet.

Their next child, Mary Lee, was born eight years later in 1936.

My mother, a surprise baby, was born in 1948 when Nana was almost 41 years old. My mother was a scrawny baby and a sickly child. She couldn’t put on weight, even though Nana and Papa had special milk delivered to their home, milk that was rich with clotted cream on top. She was so sick that Nana left her job- she had assembled fishing reels at Pflueger’s since she was fifteen years old- to care for her full-time.
I, too, was a sickly child. Eczema scrawled, red and angry, across my hands and knees like doctor’s cursive. At school I hid my hands, ashamed, and covered my knees with culottes that my mother insisted were fashionable. I knew that itching it would only make my skin more enflamed but the temporary reprieve it brought was worth it, at least until I saw the vicious, cracked skin. The only moisturizer that provided any relief was Bag Balm, originally used on chapped cow teats, which my mother bought in 10 oz. green metal tins. She smoothed the salve- which smelled as medicinal as Vicks VapoRub, but without the eucalyptus- on my hands at night and then rubbed my arms and fingers, telling me that her Nagymama- grandmother in Hungarian- used to do the same to her when she was little.

An unfortunate incident involving cashew butter was the first indication that I was deathly allergic to nuts. This warranted a skin test administered on my back by an allergist. Not yet five years old, I squirmed on my stomach and howled as the doctor injected allergens under my skin. I begged my mother to make him stop. She had tears in her eyes, too, as she petted my hair and cooed in my ear. In addition to tree nuts, I was allergic to cats, dogs, dust mites, chalk dust, and had hay fever.

Most of these things I could avoid. I learned to ask everyone- classmates distributing birthday cupcakes, lunch ladies doling out cookies- if an item contained nuts before I ingested it. I’m sure I sounded weird to my peers and precocious to adults, but even then I was vigilant in identifying things that could possibly harm me. But I couldn’t avoid breathing.
For years I slept with three things: GloWorm, a nightlight, and a green humidifier that pumped cool moisture into the air to help me breathe at night. Whenever the seasons changed my lungs constricted and I was wracked with a tubercular cough that awakened me, wheezing, from my dreams. Doctors told my mother I had “sensitive bronchial tubes” and prescribed Ventolin, a syrup I called Kool-Aid medicine because of its sweet flavor, for my belabored breathing.

If winter was the worst time of year for my breathing, then February nights were the apex. No matter where we lived in Ohio or Pennsylvania (I caught a break the year we lived in temperate North Carolina), the sound of my coughing would shortly be followed by my mother’s voice and presence. Years later I would be properly diagnosed with asthma and prescribed several inhalers, but in the early 90s my mom had to come up with other treatments for my asthma attacks.

“Here, LeeAnnie,” she whispered, so as not to startle me, “drink this.”

She put a hand behind my back to help me sit up and tilted the medicine spoon, shaped like an alligator, until the Ventolin, tasting like fruit punch, emptied into my mouth. I held it in my mouth a second longer than I needed to just to savor the taste. She reached over, grabbed the other pillow in my bed, and propped my head up with it. I covered my mouth with my palm and sat up during a coughing jag. She rubbed my back in circles and pushed my hair out of my face.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You’ll be okay, LeeAnnie.”
I coughed like I was expelling all of the badness in the world. I coughed for so long I couldn’t remember when I had last breathed a normal breath. I coughed until it was impossible to tell if I was wheezing or hyperventilating.

“It hurts,” I gasped.

“Hold on,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She moved like an ice skater, fluid in a faded bathrobe and slippers, past my little wooden desk and into the hall, where she passed Sarah’s bedroom. I heard her descend the carpeted stairs of our Culpepper Drive house. I knew she would walk past the living room and enter the kitchen, turning on the overhead light that would illuminate the black wallpaper with strawberries on it, a gift left from the house’s previous owners. I scrunched the mini blinds that hung on the window next to my bed until the thin metal bowed, and looked out into our back yard. The moon shone blue on several feet of snow. The world was so, so still. I flattened my hand against the window, absorbing the freezing outside temperature and then pressed my hand against my bare chest.

I heard the freezer door open downstairs, then the twist of an ice cube tray to propel them onto the counter. I knew she would place the ice cubes into a small plastic bag and then wrapped it in a dishtowel. I settled back onto my pillows. I felt my chest tighten and opened my mouth wide to inhale as deeply as possible. I hauled air into my lungs like a fish on the deck of a ship.

_Hurry. Please._

From downstairs came a violent pounding that rattled the whole house. It did not belong in the stillness of the night. The pounding paused before echoing its earlier sound.
I knew this act of violence, that surely awakened everyone else in the house, was for me. She crushed the ice with a hammer, John Henry in the kitchen. I heard a cupboard open and close, and then the clip of her slippers on their way back to me. Soon, the darkness of my doorway was filled with a figure in a bathrobe.

She sat on the edge of my bed and clinked the crushed ice around in a plastic cup.

“Here, LeeAnnie. Open up.”

I opened my mouth, the baby bird to her mama bird, and felt the freezing, oblong shape of ice. I parted my lips and breathed in, pulling the ice-cooled air into my lungs. I swished the ice from cheek to cheek until it was small enough for me to comfortably swallow. It melted as it descended down my throat into the thick of my body.

“Here’s a big piece,” she said. The piece could be no larger than a shooter marble but it felt like a golf ball in my mouth. I spit it out.

“Too big.”

“Try this one, it’s smaller.”

In between fits of coughing she fed me slivers of ice, some so small they melted between her fingers before I could swallow them. Yet, I still wheezed when we got to the bottom of the cup.

“Put on your tôches and your bathrobe,” she said. “We’re going downstairs.”

I opened my closet, put on my slippers and robe, and followed her downstairs. I waited in the kitchen while she gathered several crocheted afghans from the family room. She dumped the remaining crushed ice into the cup.
“Come on, angel,” she said, sliding the glass door open between the kitchen and
screened-in back porch. The cold swept against my calves and snuck up the bottom of my
nightgown. I began to shiver. She closed the door behind us.

We navigated around the wooden table we ate at during the summer. Fake grapes
spilled over the rim of a bowl on the table. These bunches of plastic grapes- one with
large green ones, the other with smaller red ones- belonged to Nana and were one of the
odd things she kept before selling her house in Copley, OH to move with us to Erie, PA. I
liked the way they felt, that thick, rubbery plastic, and sometimes sat alone at the table in
better weather and pinched all the air out of the grapes just to watch them slowly reflate.

I stood and wheezed while she swaddled the blankets around me. She settled into
a rocking chair and pulled me onto her lap, making sure all of my exposed skin was
swathed in the afghans Nana had crocheted. I closed my eyes and placed my head on her
shoulder. There, in the crook of her neck, was her mom smell.

It didn’t matter if she had spritzed a dash of perfume on or had just come in from
gardening, if she got close enough to give me a hug, I could always smell a whiff of
something exotic, like peaches and leather, emanating off her.

I alternated breathing in the freezing air and sucking on the shards of ice she
provided. She kissed me softly on the temple and sang quiet lullabies to me.

_LeeAnn, LeeAnn, stars for your eyes,_

_LeeAnn, LeeAnn, please don’t you cry,_

_For Mommy is here, and Daddy is too,_

_LeeAnn, LeeAnn, stars for your eyes._
The ice, along with the freezing temperature, had relaxed my bronchial tubes. My breath swirled around us when I exhaled. I was finally able to steady my breathing. My cough subsided to an afterthought. She put the cup of ice down and held me tight, rocking us slightly. This rhythm, combined with a hint of wood smoke from a far away neighbor, lulled me to sleep. We stayed on the porch for a long time, maybe twenty minutes, maybe an hour. She might have closed her eyes, but she never dozed. She just kept rocking, her foot pumping the floor like a church organ pedal.