

Chapter 54

THROUGH THE GOBI

WEDNESDAY, 30 APRIL 2003

The day has arrived. I've heard nothing from Monkey Business. No news is good news. The Trans-Siberian is still on schedule. But I'm so anxious. Borders may still close. If they do, I won't be able to take the train or fly out of here. Momoko will have to cancel her flight to Moscow. I will have to wait it out in Beijing until the borders reopen. That could take a year. Longer. Even if I board the train and leave Beijing, it will take all day to reach the Chinese-Mongolian border, which may be closed on arrival.

Standing with my backpack outside Zhaolong International Hostel, due to close down two days later, I look at Tabia, Jenny and Bretta. They're all wearing facemasks, hiding their apprehension. We're all waiting for Chris from Monkey Business to show up.

'Hi guys, sorry I'm late,' he says from behind his facemask.

Every muscle clenches as I anticipate bad news. I'm convinced he's about to tell us the borders have just closed, and the Trans-Siberian has been cancelled. If so, I'm too far down the rabbit hole to do anything.

'The taxi should be here any moment,' he says. 'How are you feeling?'

'Nervous,' the German girls say.

‘Here are your tickets. Good news, you’re all in the same cabin.’

The taxi arrives, and it’s only a nine-kilometre taxi ride to Beijing Main Railway Station. It’s another huge station and looks like a stadium from the outside. There are four stations at China’s largest railway station: Beijing Main Station and the Beijing West, North and South stations. It’s crowded inside. It’s good to see more people wearing facemasks, finally taking SARS more seriously.

We flash our tickets at the inspector and stand on the platform. I’m eager to get going. Frantic. *Let me on the train.* This is more than an extended train voyage or an overland adventure.

This is an evacuation.

No, this is an escape.

The Trans-Siberian rolls out of Beijing Main Railway Station at 07:40, right on time. The train is about seventeen carriages long. We are four carriages from the back. It’s another beautiful day. I have six days on this train, and the more it moves, the further I get from this damn virus and Cockney Paul, still undecided which is worse.

The Trans-Siberian Railway first began services 100 years ago in 1903, transporting passengers and cargo from Asia to Europe. The longest train journey in the world is about connecting people and their history, a train spotter’s wet dream. It’s not a luxurious train. It’s nothing like the Orient Express or the Belmond Royal Scotsman. The carriages rattle, the wheels grind, the brakes squeak. The interior design is old-fashioned and basic. There are no tea or coffee-making facilities, exquisite dining cars or waiters at your beck and call. There are four beds with bedding, a pop-up table in the middle of the room and a big window. It’s all I need. It’s perfect.

I throw my bags onto the top bunk and sit on the bunk below next to the German girls with the relief you only feel when you wake up for work and realise it’s Saturday. The happiness is overwhelming. The four of us cannot stop panting with joy.

‘Get me out of fucking China!’

Tabia throws her hands into the air. ‘Take us home!’

Beijing’s classless society has almost disappeared, but the train offers a glimpse of its past socialist values. For example, first- and second-class

accommodations aren't offered. Alternatively, passengers can choose hard or soft seat, and hard or soft sleeper for overnight journeys.

I'm completely disconnected from the world right now. I can't contact anyone and cannot *be* contacted. For the next six days, I will live in this rectangular tube. Just the thought of having all these hours to daydream excites me.

We soon pass a section of the Great Wall on the outskirts of Beijing, snaking across the mountains. In no time, as we chug through the towns and villages on Beijing's periphery, we witness China's proverbial poor side. Clusters of filthy shacks form large communities beside the tracks. Half-naked kids run around, wrestling and playing games. Adults sit on the dusty roadsides in groups talking and drinking and watching the Trans-Siberian roll by. Further out of Beijing, large dumpsites are home to scattered graves marked by crosses sticking out of rubbish mounds. It's hard to believe the Chinese have buried their dead in refuse. Perhaps my Western eyes deceive me.

Summer is not too far away, and Beijing is warm. All the windows are down along the carriage corridors, and a gentle breeze ventilates the train. Many passengers are poised at the windows, enjoying the view. Most people on the Trans-Siberian are Chinese, but there's a group of seven Mongolian males and a female going to Ulan Bator a few compartments down. They occupy two rooms and are drinking. The party is getting louder and more boisterous. I think they're celebrating their escape from Beijing. The men are big and butch. The German girls are intimidated by them. Mongolia has a long history of aggression and warfare. Genghis Kahn was their most famous leader and warrior. He led invasions against the Chinese. It's one of the reasons the Great Wall of China was built.

Other than the Chinese and Mongolians, there's me, the German girls and one American.

'Hi, I'm Jim,' the American says. 'How good is it to be out of Beijing?'

'It's like escaping from prison,' I say.

'I was convinced the train would be cancelled,' he says. 'God knows what I would've done.'

I nod, sharing the same sentiments.

'So, where are you guys off to after Moscow?'

‘We go to Latvia,’ Jenny says, ‘then through Europe to Germany.’

‘We are all from Germany,’ Tabia says, pointing at her girls.

‘Me too, I mean going to Latvia, not that I’m German. Not sure where I’m going after Latvia, though.’ He looks at me. ‘You off to Latvia, too?’

‘St. Petersburg, then Finland. I’m also on the way home to the UK.’

‘So, everyone’s going home. It’s a long way home for me.’

I step into the corridor and walk through the train to the toilet, happy to find the latrine isn’t a knee-breaking squat pit but a conventional flip-seat in a tiny cubicle. There are no showers onboard, but that’s fine, I can survive six days without a shower. As I relieve myself, I stare out of the window at Inner Mongolia, though, technically, it’s still Chinese territory. The land is desolate and drier here as we have reached the tip of the Gobi Desert, covering an arc of land over a million square kilometres, making it one of the largest deserts in the world.

I hear someone rattle the handle, followed by a heavy thud on the door.

‘There’s someone in here!’ I say calmly.

Dong ... dong ... dong ... dong.

‘There’s someone in here!’

The handle rattles again.

Dong ... dong ... dong ... dong.

I feel my blood boiling with the continuous knocking. It just makes me rebellious. So I dally, easing back the flow streaming out between my legs, short bursts, leisurely shake, slowly drawing up my zip.

Dong ... dong ... dong ... dong.

I slowly wash my hands and fix my hair, glancing at the desert view one more time, then open the door, preparing for a blazing row, and I’m met by a well-built Mongolian, topless and drunk, and he looks furious as he bellows Mongolian language at me. My Mongolian is not the best, but this is not polite conversation, so I frown because he’ll understand that this means *be patient* and *wait your turn*, and his frown deepens, so now we are facing off, trying to out-frown each other, and I was taught never to throw the first punch, but if this angry Mongolian has no such morals, I fear I might not wake up if he clobbers me on the chin with his meaty mallet. When I glance over his shoulder, I see four more angry-looking Mongolians behind him, likewise topless and drunk, looking menacing, staring at me as

if I've wronged one of their sisters, which I haven't, trust me, she's a right minger. I presume from their semi-nakedness that they don't give a damn what people think of them, but I'm unable to back down because I'm not at fault here, so I shake my head to show I'm appalled and walk quickly away before someone wallops the back of my skull.

It's times like this when you must be careful. Is it worth an altercation? What is the point of fighting over it? What is achieved? It can only end badly. It's also important to try and be empathetic. Perhaps this guy has a Mongolian lamb curry about to explode from the final section of his large intestine.