



## A New Country

### khovd-tsa<sup>g</sup>aannuur-siberia

Our last night in Mongolia, we camp in a hummocky green field. A babbling brook runs along the perimeter, a few sheep with matted white coats and doleful eyes graze across the road. By Mongolian standards, it's positively bucolic. It refreshes me like watermelon on a summer day.

To get there, we've traversed high passes, bringing us close to the year-round snowfields I'd been seeing in the distance since yesterday. The closer we get, the bigger the mountains seem. For the first time, we are driving *upward* on steep gravel roads, with the horizon above us. There's a wonderful mystery to this, no clue what we'll see when we finally crest a ridge and look down the other side. There have been midnight-blue rivers to ford, glacially cold. On one crossing, I loll my arm out the window for the water to splash it. As the tires gain a purchase on the firmer ground of the river bank, I am again grateful that Bernard knows how to finesse Roxanne forward, not so fast as to flood her engine, nor so slow that we get stuck. Because it would have been me who'd have to clamber out of the door, tow rope in hand, and wade to the far shore through what I know would be skin-numbing water. We see more *gers* now, sitting in the shadow of towering, snowcapped peaks or next to a glittering alpine lake. Evidently this is summer pasture, because there are small herds of goats everywhere. Best of all, the organizers announce that the final time trial of Mongolia was cancelled. All the drivers are exhausted, and none of the cars are in condition to do it. No one complains. Besides, for the first time in eight

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days, we are in stunningly beautiful country. I'd hate to miss a minute of it staring at the route book instead of what's around me.

It's not just Bernard and me who are relieved to leave the tortures of Mongolia behind. When we coax Roxanne the final yards into camp, the general euphoria is visible everywhere. Relief is palpable. Who would ever have thought that entering Siberia would signify a good thing? Drivers skip toward the port-a-potties, navigators bubble over with enthusiasm. Everyone seems to be digging out carefully wrapped articles of clean clothes. For the first time in days, people stroll around chatting. A dozen cars have arrived on trucks, including Matthieu's. I'm feeling very upbeat, because we are now within half an hour's drive of the border, so when I see Matthieu as I wander around the camp, I stop. "What's up with your car?" I ask him in a spirit of general friendship and commiseration. He gives me his usual hug, which always makes me feel like we *are* friends, even though in between hugs he still doesn't much speak to me.

"It's still the radiator. We thought we fixed it in UB, but it gives me trouble. I hope I can get it to Novosibirsk," the city two days from now where we'll again have a rest day and where James's planeload of spares should be waiting. I can't help it. I gloat. Roxanne is still moving under her own steam, and that's nothing short of miraculous.

I set to cleaning the car again. It seems important to me to leave as much Mongolian dust behind as I can. In hauling our copious supplies out of the trunk, I discover a dusty, sealed, tube-like carton. It's a distinguished dark green, and even though the gold lettering on it is obscured by dirt I know exactly what it is: an authentic bottle of The Glenlivet single malt Scotch whisky. What seems like a lifetime ago, Bernard and I wandered through a Beijing supermarket, refusing the Chinese-made whisky, searching out something that would lift our spirits down the road, wherever that might be. We stuffed the carton under the spare exhaust pipe to keep it safe, then forgot all about it. "Hey Bernard, want a shot?" I shout, waving the bottle in his direction. When he shakes his head ruefully, I'm not disappointed. The truth is, neither of us is much of a drinker, and

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besides, we're both too fatigued. "I know someone who'd love this," I say and set it aside for the dinner hour.

For the last couple of nights, we've been too tired to seek out Robert, he of the jokes and constant laugh. I feel guilty about that. I'm beholden to Robert for being my first friend. Though we're only eleven days into the Rally, the memory of our first meeting in the Beijing hotel lounge is still vivid. During the first week of the Rally, just knowing he was out there, cheerfully fixing another flat, was a crutch that propped me up when I was especially down. So it surprised me that, as I sank further into exhaustion, his nonstop cheerful banter, knockout joke after knockout joke, seemed to weigh me down like cement boots. What I know about Robert is that he thrives on reaction and the more tired I get, the less I'm able to give him the satisfying audience he craves. The one person with whom it's restful to be is Bernard. With each passing day there's less and less I need to prove. Around Bernard I can be who I am.

That evening we enter the dining tent, which after its beating in the sandstorm no longer stands square and upright. It's easy to spot Robert. He's with Nick, Sybil, and others, and they're all laughing. I ceremoniously present him with the Scotch. "For you," I say. "Because I like you. And you need this. And you're my friend."

"Well, you're not going to let a man drink alone are you?" he booms. Maddy looks at me and winks. Sybil scoots over and pats the seat beside her. Over my protests, Robert slops some Scotch into my plastic cup, passes another to Bernard, then doles it out all around. We raise our glasses. "To Mongolia," someone shouts. "Long may we be rid of her!" We drink. Someone else bellows, "And to Siberia. May her pavement be smooth!" We drink again. Bernard, sitting across from me, drains his cup, snatches mine, drains it too, then leans across and kisses me. "Stop it now, you two love-birds," Robert shouts, before giving Maddy a long hard kiss on the mouth.

Already more penetratingly tired than I've ever been, I nudge Bernard to leave the dining tent early. Outside is a moonless night, inky black and so still I can hear the tearing of grass blades by sheep across the way. Grass

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mounds form a minefield of ankle-twisting obstacles across the field to our tent. It's the first time I've needed my mini-Maglite, and I wave it around, CSI-style. "Look Bernard, a weapon!" I exclaim, shaking the wrench someone left outside their car.

He bends to the grass with his own CSI-style light. "And hair!" showing me a tuft of sheep fleece. I squat next to him to pore over the evidence. Then we blind ourselves by shining our flashlights in each other's eyes. "I'd like to take you to my tent for questioning."

Later, as I lie naked in my sleeping bag, the Altai's cold sharp fingers clutch at me through the seams and zipper. The sack is for summer, which is what I thought it would be in Mongolia. It's much too lightweight for the freezing temperature of the high mountains. My wool sweater and watch cap are somewhere, but rustling around to find them would wake Bernard. I resolve to bear it, forcing my body to lie rigid. The featureless dark presses its smothering nothingness on my face. Soon I'm shivering miserably.

At dinner that evening the organizers warned we could be subjected to hours of petty paperwork the next morning. The Mongolians have never let so many strange cars out of their country in one day, and the Russians have never let so many strange cars in. What will happen is anyone's guess. Once through the border, it's 450 miles to the next night's stop, a drive that in the best of circumstances would take seven hours. We've yet to encounter the best of anything on the P2P, and there's no reason to believe that happy times will start now. Like demented djinns, all manner of time-wasting situations now leap about my brain: missing documents, Roxanne's engine overheating from standing in line too long, flat tires that will occur simply because we are due. Outside an owl hoots; Bernard snores beside me. Instead of kicking him as I sometimes do, I let him snuffle on undisturbed. But not before wrapping my sleeping bag tightly around my goose-pimpled skin and scooting close enough to spoon around his body.

When a pale freezing dawn glows weakly through the tent walls, I pull on the woolens and jacket that I now can see were next to me all along and crawl outside, sleeping bag wrapped around my shoulders. The air is so

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sharp and clear it freezes my nose when I inhale and reemerges from my mouth in clouds of icy steam. There's a lovely calm in camp before others are up, and I stand still, savoring my last day in Mongolia. The sun has barely taken the chill off the air. All the beautiful cars look perfect, and it's easy to believe for a moment that all's well on the Rally.

Over in the dining tent, there's a quiet bustle of breakfast preparations. I can smell the coffee's ready. I fill a mug and bring it back to our tent. "Bernard, coffee," and hand him the steaming mug. "Oh, merci ma cherie," he says and gives me the drowsy morning smile I love.

I have to marvel at what we've accomplished so far. True, I'm still not reconciled to the fact that none of the P2P measures up to my expectation. Nevertheless, a year and a half ago, we were so hopelessly mired in refashioning Roxanne that it seemed unlikely we'd be ready for the Rally, let alone that we'd remain civil in the close quarters of a rally car. Now look at us. Eight of the longest days on the most unforgiving dirt roads I'd ever experienced, and we are still smiling. Sometimes. Not only that, I'd just brought him the Rally equivalent of breakfast in bed.

Back at the dining tent, I fix two mugs of sweet black tea and carry them to Robert and Maddy's tent. I scratch on the flap, forgetting that they've probably been up late finishing that Scotch. From inside comes a muffled "What the hell . . .," then the flap is unzipped and Robert's tousled head emerges. His eyes are puffy and he looks like an angry bull. "Tea, monsieur," I say and offer him a steaming mug.

"Well, aren't you a wonder!"

"That's for Maddy. This one's for you."

He retreats back into the tent and I hear him say, "Tea, my love, from our dear friend Dina."