In Search of Inner Mongolia by Daniel Chernin

**THIS IS THE STORY** I told my wife on the afternoon that I first met her, about twenty-seven years ago.

The events themselves occurred several years before, while I was staying in Inner Mongolia, in a small encampment of yurts, with an extended family of nomadic shepherds. It was my last afternoon with them, and I wanted to go off for a while and see the land as if no one else were there. In those days I liked to see my life as a heroic drama: here was another episode. I picked up a wooden staff as tall as me, thick enough that I could just wrap my fingers around it, and began walking away. After half an hour the yurts were out of sight, and I sat down on a boulder, breathing in plentiful May breezes riffling across far-reaching slopes of tall grasses. I took out a pen and wrote on a postcard: “Everywhere I look, there are green hills rolling one after another. After a while, they all begin to look the same, and you get the feeling that they go on and on, all the way to Siberia.”

Looking back at myself from a distance of thirty-odd years, I feel compassion and chagrin. I watch myself leave the boulder where I wrote my postcard. I walked for about an hour, not coming across our yurts; I figured that, if I walked a bit more, they would turn up. An hour later, though, my yurts still were nowhere to be seen. My watch showed 5:00. The golden late-afternoon sunlight faded across the steppes.

Something was wrong. I could no longer deny it: I didn’t know where I was. My skin prickled—yes, your skin really will do that if, suddenly, you’re terrified.

**I was thirty-three** years old and fifty miles outside Xilinhot, a town of about 150,000, hundreds of miles from the next small town and three-hundred-and-fifty miles northeast of Hohhot, which is the capital of Inner Mongolia (an “autonomous” region of the People’s Republic of China, distinct from Outer Mongolia, also known as the Republic of Mongolia). The authors of *The Lonely Planet Travelers’ Guide to China* said that they had never actually visited Xilinhot, but they had met a Swiss couple who had; this was the place to go, they said, if you wanted to see “the vanishing Mongolian nomadic lifestyle.” I had read that passage a few days earlier while sitting outside Hohhot in a fenced “grasslands camp” provided by the Chinese International Tourist Service (CITS); I was in a melancholic state, as this was my last week of a sixteen-month journey alone through Asia, and this grasslands camp seemed a giant anticlimax. Xilinhot sounded like exactly the place I wanted to see—one last novel experience before I returned to Boston with my long-anticipated, once-in-a-lifetime trip behind me.

When I arrived in a twin-propeller plane at Xilinhot’s dusty one-room terminal, they pulled a thin, young, bespectacled English teacher named Joe out from school to translate my negotiations with a doughy-faced local CITS manager, already half in his cups at noon. I told Joe that I wanted to get out of the town and see how Mongolians really lived.

“I want to stay in real yurts,” I said, “not yurts for Westerners.”

“Yes, yes,” said Joe. “I understand.”

It is unclear to me exactly how we found these yurts. After the CITS manager took my passport (for “safekeeping”), Joe and I piled into a van, wound through Xilinhot’s ramshackle alleys, then out onto a narrow, newly paved highway running, suddenly, through thick swaying grasses sloping endlessly up and down a vast, seemingly uninhabited emerald landscape. The driver, reeking of alcohol, put on a cassette of Mongolian music: a woman’s lonely, ululating voice wailed over the far-flung grasslands, and I felt myself falling under a spell. An hour later, after many false turns off the road, a couple of brick buildings appeared as if in a mirage; Joe explained that it was a school for the nomadic children; someone jumped in the van with us, we doubled back, then turned off the road again. The high grasses swished against the sides of the van: fifteen minutes later, we rolled up beside a group of five white yurts. Three little children with red wind-chapped faces gathered around the van and peeked in at us curiously, then ran away. Large, muscular, dark dogs surrounded us, barking menacingly. A young man wearing high black boots, baggy blue pants, a matching blue tunic, and a yellow sash emerged from a yurt and ambled toward our van. He had the face of a boy. As the man from the nomadic school spoke to the boyish man in the tunic, Joe told me that no Westerners had ever stayed with this family before. This begs the question of how, or if, this family knew I was coming.

Like a spectator at an unsubtitled foreign movie, I looked on, uncomprehending, as the man from the school conversed with the young man in the tunic, until, a few minutes later, the conversation stopped and, apparently, something had been resolved. The children scattered the dogs. I took my backpack out of the van and followed the young man to one of the yurts, where we stooped to get in through the low front door. Joe pointed at the thick wooden staff leaning outside the yurt: “Take the stick if you go outside. The dogs can be dangerous.”

Inside, I found myself beneath a thick felt dome held up by a wide umbrella of painted wooden spokes. The center of the umbrella was dark blue, then radiating out were bands of light blue, orange, and green. The yurt’s circular walls were about four feet high, supported by a crisscrossed accordion of dark-green wooden spokes. Joe told me that when the family wanted to move on, they simply collapsed the wooden accordion frame, rolled up the felt skin, and packed it all in a truck.

There were no windows in the yurt, and light came in through the open door. Standing along the walls were wooden chests of drawers, painted brown and engraved with intricate interlocking yellow geometric patterns. The wooden floor was covered by oriental rugs. A rich, musky odor emanated from the dense felt, the odor of shorn sheep.

It was midafternoon by the time I was settled. A woman came in with a tray of sour white goat cheese, butter and cream, a pitcher of milk tea, and a bowl of dried millet. She was very serious, this woman, quiet and unsmiling. She didn’t join us in the food and drink but watched as Joe explained to me that I could put the millet and butter into the tea and drink it that way. The cheese was very hard, and crumbled like chocolate.

The little community of yurts, it seemed, belonged to three families, all of whom were related. The group moved their homes about three times a year, depending on the weather and the condition of the grasslands.

The head of the families was a big barrel-shaped man with a large dark birth spot at the corner of his nose. He arrived late in the day by motorcycle and came into our yurt. He wore a dark-blue tunic and pants tucked into high black boots. He shook our hands but he too did not smile when he greeted us. He was not unfriendly, but then, he was not particularly friendly either. He did, however, bring in a pitcher of fermented goat milk. We all drank it out of bowls. It was sour and seemed to have the strength of beer. It reminded me of *chang,* a milky liquid I drank months before in the Himalayas.

As we ate and drank, a small goat poked its nose through the open door. Behind him was a big green world.

**I remember** the sound of the windmill that first night. It was a small windmill, just a blade whirling atop a narrow pole behind the yurt.

The windmill was connected to two big dry cells, which powered a bare lightbulb hanging from the center of the yurt. Its whirring sound soothed me as I snuggled in my sleeping bag. Outside, winds buffeted the skin of my new home. In the middle of the night I needed to pee, but when I opened the door flap the dogs growled menacingly, so I decided it could wait.

When I emerged soon after dawn, I saw the headman’s wife and another woman squatting next to each other out in the fields. As they had the day before, they wore long robes with sashes about the waist. When they squatted, the colorful robes made a tent around them, giving them privacy even as they chatted in the early morning light.

Not wearing robes, I squatted behind a horse cart near the yurts. The dogs, apparently used to me now, eagerly snapped up my sewage; one of them poked its cold wet nose against my bare buttock.

The boyish young man from the previous day—a family servant, according to Joe—brought me a shallow white ceramic basin with a few inches of water in it. Joe told me that the family stored water in a barrel atop the horse cart. Every few days someone hitched up the cart and brought it over to a well about a mile away.

Kneeling outside the yurt, I splashed my face with cold water from the basin, as sheep baahed under a clear blue sky.

That first morning, after a breakfast of milk tea, millet, cheese, butter, and cream, the CITS came and picked up Joe, who said he’d be back in a few days. I was now alone with my hosts, and any communication would have to be done with our hands.

It was a crisp, windy day. Everybody was out in the sheep pen. For some reason they seemed to be trying to separate the baby sheep from the adults. Even the children were running around flapping their arms and trying to shoo the big sheep out of the pen.

A boy from the suburbs, I had never spent much time with sheep, and I noticed, for the first time, that they were comical creatures. They often seemed to hesitate at the open gate of the pen, staring out blankly at the fields. Then, suddenly, with a little hop, they bounded through the gate as if jumping over some invisible barrier. Usually, if one sheep went out, two or three would follow quickly, each with the same little hop at the gate.

Meanwhile, the baby sheep were scrambling up the stone and mud walls of the pen, trying to get out. The children would then run over and push them back in. I had no idea what the purpose of all this was, but I joined in, grabbing the larger sheep by their tough, warm, wooly curls and yanking them toward the gate of the pen.

By midmorning, all the grown-up sheep and goats were outside and grazing in the fields. Then, with repetitive sweeps through the pen, our hosts forced the baby sheep into a corner and built a small fence around them, using door screens wedged into the ground with small boulders. The little lambs and goats baahed and made a great racket.

After lunch (buttered noodles and dried lamb washed down with milk tea), the point of the morning’s work became clear. The men rounded up the adult sheep and goats and brought them back into the pen. A strong broad-faced woman in a green robe mixed water and some kind of serum in a big tub. Then, in the cool, gusting winds, the men wrestled the big sheep to the ground, one by one, and sat on them. They forced open each sheep’s mouth and poured a bottle of serum down it. Then they jammed a big hypodermic needle into its haunches, got up off it, and dragged it by the scruff of the neck out into the fields again.

They finished everything by the end of the day. The wind had died down, and I sat on an overturned wicker basket in the soft dusky light. The dogs were napping on the ground, and the sheep were grazing in the green fields.

Everything was quiet, except for the woman chatting softly as they milked two cows into buckets. It was a calm that surpassed any I had ever encountered—a peace that was impossible to find at home, assaulted by the sounds and smells of cars and gas stations, by supermarket trips, heat ducts, and hounding phones.

Over the next few days the faces of my hosts grew more familiar. One afternoon Joe and the head of the communal school came out to visit. We sat with the headman and his wife in the yurt, drinking shots of hard clear Chinese rice liquor, and I learned that they had two children in the school. The headman pulled out their pictures; they were young teenagers. I gave him a thumbs-up, and the corners of his mouth turned up.

Then he asked me where I was from. I took out my pocket atlas and pointed to the northeastern United States. It was almost as unimaginable to me as it must have been to him. Turning to other pages in the atlas, I pointed to the countries I had visited since leaving Boston—Nepal, India, Burma, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and China. Then I pointed to the route of the Trans-Siberian railroad, which I would board in a few days, and traced my finger through Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean back home.

He asked if I had a wife. I grinned. “I don’t think a wife would let me do this alone,” I said. Joe translated, and the headman laughed for the first time since I’d arrived.

Late in the afternoon, after Joe had left, I was sitting in my usual place, on the overturned wicker basket outside our yurt. The headman and his wife and another couple were sitting on the ground outside another yurt. The headman looked over at me and motioned for me to come sit down with them.

I pointed at a dog sleeping nearby and said, using my tiny Chinese capability, “Monjou-hua shi shenmo?” In Mongolian: *What is it?*

“Nahoi,” he said. Then he pointed at me and pointed at the dog.

“Dog,” I said.

“Dog,” he repeated.

The women laughed. He and I smiled at each other.

**On that last** afternoon, as I crested one green hill after another, I yearned to be sitting with them once again. At last, off in the distance, I saw a group of yurts across a stretch of plains. In this land, though, distances are misleading. It took a long time before I crossed that stretch of flat land. Dark clouds were now boiling on the horizon, and gusts of wind were swirling across the grass. I was fairly sure that the yurts before me were not my yurts—the landscape looked different. But perhaps someone there could tell me where my yurts were.

A quarter mile from the yurts, I came upon two men walking on a path beside a horse-drawn cart. Leaning on my walking stick, I waved my hand at them, and they stopped, looking at me warily.

Then, with a stunning shock that crackled throughout my body, I suddenly realized that I didn’t have any idea what to tell these men. All while I was walking toward the yurts I was thinking that once I reached them, I would be able to explain my situation. But now that I finally had some people to talk to, I realized that I had virtually no way to communicate with them. I knew only the Mongolian words for *goat, grass,* and *dog.* As for my Chinese, I could remember only about fifty words from the lessons I took before leaving home.

“Wode jia zai nar?” I said to the men in gruesome Mandarin. Loosely translated, it meant: *Where is my home?* The men looked at me with bewildered eyes.

I took out my notebook and shakily tried to draw a picture of the head of the family at our yurts, complete with the big dark birth spot at the corner of his nose. “Wode jia ren . . .” I said. *My home man . . .*

The men looked at each other, and then looked at me and shook their heads. One of them pointed to the dark, threatening clouds in the sky, and made a sign that it was going to rain. Then he pointed to the yurts, off the path a ways. He made an eating motion with invisible chopsticks, and leaned his cheek against his hands as if he were sleeping.

I sighed and nodded. It made sense to head for shelter and food. Then the men left me, looking glad to have me off their hands. I walked toward the yurts.

From about a hundred yards away I saw a robed woman emerge from the yurt. As she gazed out at me, I pondered what I could say when I reached her. In fact, I was so deep in thought that I was taken completely by surprise when two huge dark dogs leaped up from beside the yurts. In no time they were yards from me, barking viciously.

I stopped, looking plaintively toward the woman. A child came out from the yurt now and stood beside her. I waved at the woman to come out past the dogs and talk to me, but she only pulled the child toward her and stared out at me.

Then, as if invisible leashes had snapped, the dogs charged. They reached me in seconds, snarling.

“Help!” I shouted to no one. Then, by adrenaline-filled instinct, I raised my staff and rammed it into one of dog’s snouts. The stick shuddered.

Then I took a step back, and the dogs lunged without advancing. I walked back a few more steps, holding my stick out, watching them. Spittle still flew from their bared teeth, but they held their ground. It wasn’t until I was hundreds of yards away that the dogs stopped barking and headed back toward their yurt.

As the adrenaline settled, my legs got wobbly and my fingers trembled around the staff. Reason returned to me, and reason coldly told me: “You could have been killed.”

Far away, down a long valley, I saw another man on a horse, rounding up his sheep for the evening. But what would he do when he saw me? Who could really blame that woman standing outside her yurt with her child? A bearded white man carrying a big thick staff, I must have seemed like an apparition to her.

It was an hour later before I finally reached the man on the horse. I put my big stick down on the ground before approaching him. There was no need to make people more frightened of me than they already were.

“Dui bu qi,” I said to him. *I’m sorry.*

The man smiled. And then, once again I tried to explain my situation in Chinese. Once again, I showed him the picture I had drawn of our headman. And once again, I was met with bewildered, cautious looks. The man finally shrugged and headed toward his home. Without being asked, I followed him.

His house was a small, white, block-like structure. When I went in the front door after the man, the first sight that greeted me was four young men lying next to each other on a wide bed, their bare feet facing out toward the door. Seeing me, they all got up and gathered around or sat at the edge of the bed, staring at me. Then a middle-aged woman came in from the other room in the house. Presumably, she was the mother.

I went through tortuous attempts to explain myself, with predictable results. Suddenly I was limp from the past hours’ exertions. It was hard to speak without bursting into tears. I was also very, very thirsty. I had not drunk anything since I left the yurts more than five hours earlier, and I’d been walking for most of that time. So I motioned to my mouth and said, “Chya,” for tea.

“Chi fan?” said one of the boys, with a helpful smile. He wanted to know if I wanted to eat, but I wanted only water. I pointed to the barrel of water in the corner of the room, and they understood, exclaiming, “Ah! Ah!” They brought me a bowl of hot water, which soothed my aching throat.

The water barrel then gave me an idea. The well near our yurts! Using sign language, I went to the barrel and made a deep dipping motion. I made the motion over and over, and finally it seemed like they understood. I pointed to the water barrel and held my fingers close together: “Wode jia,” I said. *My home.* Then I looked at the friendly, smiling boy who had offered me something to eat. He still smiled at me. I wanted to throw myself into his arms.

Pointing to the water barrel, I said: “Women qu ma?” *We go?* At this point, the mother burst into agitated speech. At one point she pointed to the back of her wrist, as at a watch. She wasn’t wearing a watch, but I understood the speech anyway. It was the speech that mothers would give anywhere in the world: “Are you crazy? You’re not going to go all the way over there at this hour with a strange white man! It’s getting late! It’s practically dark out!”

When she was done, I stared at the small window in the room, which was covered with dirty greased paper. It is a moment to which I have returned many times. If I felt that the family was inviting me to shelter with them, would I have stayed? I am not sure, but with no ability to converse with them, I could only judge from nonverbal signs that the mother was annoyed. From that I jumped to the conclusion that I was not welcome there. But another feeling gnawed at me—that there was something ignominious about staying here in this safe block house with the unfriendly mother.

I got up from the chair I’d been sitting in and walked toward the door, seized by a foolish idea. I turned to the father and said, “Xilinhot zai nar?” *Where is Xilinhot?* Perhaps I could get on the road back to Xilinhot and hitch into town.

The man came to the door with me and pointed to the dirt path leading by his house. He motioned up the path.

“Xilinhot?” I asked, pointing at the path.

“Xilinhot,” he repeated.

I started walking.

**My watch said** it was 8:15 p.m. In the US, it was Saturday morning. It occurred to me that every Saturday morning my buddies went over to the New York Diner in Watertown, Massachusetts, for breakfast. They probably were getting ready to go right now. And my parents were wandering around their Manhattan apartment in bedroom slippers and pajamas. They didn’t know I was in trouble. No one knew.

In the dusk, a motorcycle approached up the path. I put down my stick and began to wave. But the motorcycle veered thirty yards off the path to avoid me, and disappeared down the road.

I had thought there would be other cars coming up the path to Xilinhot. But instead it just got darker, and soon I began to realize that there would be no more cars.

“What would Odysseus do in a situation like this?” I asked myself in a low voice. Then I answered myself: “Odysseus would never have gotten himself into a situation like this, you idiot.”

I decided to walk to Xilinhot. That would be my goal. That would keep me going through the night. I whispered: “Just let me survive. That’s all I ask. Just let me be alive in the morning.” I don’t know to whom I was whispering. I’ve never been able to believe in a supernatural being who listens to plaintive humans. But perhaps it’s true that there are no atheists in a foxhole.

By 9:30 it was completely dark, except for a pale glowing strip along the horizon. Exhausted again, I lay down by the side of the path. But thinking of the dogs that had attacked me, I decided not to sleep. With night having arrived I realized that, strangely, people’s yurts were now something to be feared and avoided. Because where there were yurts, there would be dogs.

I had been resting for a couple of minutes when it began to thunder. Lightning split the darkness, illuminating the silhouettes of the hills ahead of me. Then big, cool drops of rain began to fall. They plopped against the hood of my thin Gore-Tex windbreaker.

“Terrific,” I said. Black humor comforted me, pushing away the terrifying prospect of spending the rest of the night in cold, windy rain. The vision was so frightening that I magically believed it couldn’t happen to me; a few minutes later, when the rain stopped, I had the feeling that some parental force had protected me.

I kept walking. I had to because it was getting more and more chilly, and if I stopped for too long, I started to get cold. But I kept an eye on my watch, and as a reward for all my walking let myself rest for ten or fifteen minutes at the end of each hour.

Lying on the soft-packed dirt along the side of the path, my hands folded behind my head, I closed my eyes and saw fantastic creatures—magnificently detailed birds, a hawk with multicolored talons. I opened my eyes. Above me, pale violet clouds sailed swiftly across the wide sky. I remembered a morning years before, a woman I was just getting to know. Call her Kathleen. She had awoken early to go on a trip with a folk-dance troupe. I had awoken too, sorry that she was leaving, and I lay in bed, listening to her putter around her apartment. I had told Kathleen that I was hungry but was surprised when she came back to the room with a bowl of apricots in syrup. Silent in the early morning light, I leaned against her bare white shoulder, and she spooned the apricots into my mouth.

Kathleen and I broke up four years later. It was one of a series of relationships that started with great promise, only to fizzle. About a year before I finally took off on my trip, I fell hard for a woman. We spent our first night together on a New Year’s Eve. I was so smitten with her that I decided to stay with her the following night as well, something I had never done so early in a relationship. On that second night, I awoke in a terror—I was being attacked by about a dozen black wolves. We laughed about it that night, but six months later we were in the throes of our last conversations.

“When I ask you a question,” she said, “sometimes I feel like I am going down a maze of hallways, and finally, when I get to the end of the last hallway, there’s a door with a big sign on it that says: Do Not Enter.”

As I recall, she had wanted to talk about buying a house. She said that she didn’t want to piss her money away on rent anymore. The image of adult financial responsibilities alarmed me; it made me imagine myself wearing a tie. Marriage, houses—that was something that would happen way off in the future. First, I needed to go off on the adventure I had fantasized about for years—the trip around the world, on my own, with no schedules or obligations, to cities with magical names: Kathmandu, Calcutta, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Kyoto. Then my heart would be unlocked at last and life would flood in.

Alone under the Mongolian sky, though, all my complicated defenses seemed suddenly irrelevant. I was euphoric. Remembering the apricots and Kathleen’s bare white shoulder, I had a wonderful epiphany: all I really need is a woman who simply is kind.

There is a cynical voice within me that looks at this as the kind of profundity that I used to have when high on pot: “The radiator is hot!” But in moments when I allow myself the vulnerability I felt that night, the insight warms me once again.

I wanted to lie there then and cling to this new feeling. But the night continued getting colder, so after a yearning thought of my sleeping bag lying unoccupied in the snug yurt buffeted by these winds, I told myself that it was time to get up again. It was at this point that a new persona emerged within me. This persona was me but somehow was outside of me, as if in an outer portion of my skull. It spoke in compassionate, parental tones to some part of me that I envisioned as deeper inside—the part that was desperate with fear. I watched him, longing for his sleeping bag, forcing himself up from the ground, leaning on his staff. “C’mon Danny,” I said aloud in an ineffably tender voice. “We have to keep moving, buddy.”

It is astonishing what kinds of stratagems the lonely mind will devise when facing peril.

**As the night** wore on, the path seemed my only friend. As long as I was on the path, I felt a bit more secure. At least, I thought, I was heading somewhere. I occasionally saw bright lights off in the distance and thought that perhaps there was a village there. Then, around midnight, the path suddenly disappeared. I seemed to be in a salt flat. I walked frantically back and forth over the ground, trying to pick up the path again without success, before sinking down to my knees, hopeless at the loss of my road, the end of the illusion that I was walking toward Xilinhot.

It was while I knelt on the ground that a giddy idea kindled and gave me new hope: perhaps the lights in the distance were actually flares. They seemed to get very bright for a few minutes, then go off, then come back on again. Maybe people were out looking for me. I jumped up and headed with new energy in the direction of the lights.

About a half hour later, they went out once again.

It was 1:00 a.m. when I heard dogs begin to bark. The sound carried in the breeze across the rustling high grass. How far away were they? I began to breathe more shakily. How long would it be before these dogs, roaming outside someone’s yurt, tracked me down? They must be smelling me. I needed to get to a place where they couldn’t smell me anymore. Suddenly I was thinking clearly. The barking came at an angle from behind me—the same angle from which the wind was blowing toward me. Like a high school math student who has to solve one last problem with a minute left in the test, I nervously analyzed the situation. If the wind were no longer blowing my scent along a line that led to the dogs, they would lose track of me. Carefully, I tried to move so that the wind was blowing my smell to a different spot in the vast steppe. To my astonishment, the barking stopped.

“A real outdoorsman,” I joked aloud.

When I was sure that the dogs really were gone, I sat down, cross-legged, and looked out toward the horizon, waiting for the lights to appear again. It seemed a long, long time, but then there they were again! Now I hopped up and began to trot, hoping that I wouldn’t step into a rut and twist my ankle, or worse.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Hey!”

But the lights were far away, and nobody heard me over the dark land. At around 1:30, the lights were extinguished once more. I continued to walk toward where I thought they had been, but after an hour, I started to realize that the lights were gone forever. My left knee was aching, and I had started to limp. A cruel, icy wind began to blow across the grasslands. I imagined that it blew out of Siberia.

Nauseous from exhaustion, I lay down again on the hard ground. The wind was cutting through my thin jacket. My nose was cold as a dog’s; my teeth chattered. I began to shiver in my thighs, my shoulders, down the trunk of my back. It was too cold to stay lying there, but I was too tired to walk anymore without resting. I sat up and looked around. I saw a ridge of high grass a little ways off. I wondered if maybe it might block the wind. And sure enough, when I walked over there and lay down behind that wall of high grass, it was warmer.

“This is incredible!” I exclaimed giddily. “It’s like prehistoric man! I’m learning something!”

I put my hands behind my head and looked above me. The sky had cleared, and now I saw the stars as never before—a dense, luminous shawl unfurling through the pitch-black firmament. Seemingly close to each other, yet incomprehensibly far away, the stars in their loneliness pierced me. I held up my hand in greeting. Starlight, traveling for so long, stopped at my fingers.

“Hello,” I said, affectionately. “Hello.”

The wind brushed through the tops of the sheltering high grass.

**I was still** walking an hour later when the sky started to lighten. Now I could see around me, but there was not very much to see. I was standing near a dirt path that disappeared into the hills. There were no yurts around. No Xilinhot. Nothing. Nonetheless, now that it was light again, things seemed not quite so terrifying. But, as my fear began to recede, so did that mysterious sense of tenderness and awe. My old self, like a person rising slowly to consciousness from a dream, began to reemerge.

“This is just fucking wonderful!” I said aloud. “I’m in the middle of nowhere on a road with no cars. And if there were any cars, they wouldn’t stop for me. And if they did stop for me, they wouldn’t understand a fucking word I said. This is just great!”

This little speech cheered me up, and I decided to start retracing my steps, thinking to find the well near my yurts.

It was about 7:00 in the gray morning when I saw a jeep approaching me from a distance. I lay down my staff, so as not to appear threatening, and waved my arms. Amazingly, the jeep seemed to be slowing down. Even more amazingly, it pulled to a stop in front of me. And most amazing of all, when it stopped, and I looked at the back seat, there was the headman of our yurts, with a pair of binoculars in his lap.

I felt like sinking to my knees.

When I climbed in beside him, I said: “Dui bu qi.” *I’m sorry.*

“Dui bu qi,” he repeated in a soft, bemused voice.

Once we got going, he pointed to my legs and gave me a thumbs-up sign. For a moment, I felt proud. It took us almost an hour to drive back to the yurts. Apparently, I had walked more than forty miles.

Back at the yurts I was fed bowl after bowl of milk tea with millet and cheese, and then bowls of noodles and dried lamb. Then shots of rice liquor. Then I dropped into my sleeping bag and slept for three hours.

When I awoke, there were many people at our yurts. People from the commune, Joe the translator, even the CITS manager. We sat in a circle in the headman’s yurt and offered toasts. Through Joe, the headman said to me: “You are very brave.”

“I am very stupid,” I said.

When it was translated, the headman’s wife’s mouth raised into a small, quiet smile.

Pictures were taken—me standing next to the headman with my staff in hand. All of us together, all the families from our yurts, Joe, and me.

And then it was time to say good-bye. The headman told me to come back sometime. “Bring your family,” he said. We shook with both hands, gripping each other’s wrists tightly. When we got in the car to go back to Xilinhot, one of his red-cheeked little girls peeked out shyly at me from behind the little door to her home.

Driving back to town that morning, I asked Joe about the lights I had seen while I was walking last night.

“Were people looking for me?” I said.

“No,” replied Joe. “Those lights are spirits. They come from the bones of dead people in the grasslands.” Then he said, “I think you got lost on purpose. You were looking for the real life of Mongolia.”

At the time I dismissed that, thinking it a ridiculous idea. But now, thirty years later, I wonder whether there wasn’t something to what he said. After all, why else would I have abandoned the shelter of the block house where I had been greeted by the bottoms of four pairs of feet at the end of a bed facing out the door? They were not going out of their way to welcome me—but, on the other hand, they were not throwing me out into the night. I could have stayed there until the morning; someone would surely have found me. So why *did* I walk out the door of their house onto the path where the motorcyclist steered a wide berth around me?

I think Joe was right. I was looking for the real life of Mongolia—the real life of my heart.

**Five years later,** I encountered the woman who would become my wife. We were on an Appalachian Mountain Club hike, walking around Sandy Pond in Lincoln, Massachusetts; she caught my attention from a distance—her graceful profile and brown curls, her lithe stride. I first heard her voice as a few of us stopped by a memorial plaque to a young woman named Aureet Bar-Yam, who, one winter day, saw her dog fall through the ice of the pond, went onto the ice to save the dog, then fell through herself, and died. The plaque read:

*Shiver to think of her light, her warmth,  
Forever frozen in this clear cold pond.  
May its glimmer give you pause . . .  
For ice broke hearts the day she drowned.*

Beside the poem, a butterfly was etched in the stone, floating upward. One fellow said, “Why a butterfly? Why not a doggie?” Inwardly I rolled my eyes, and then I heard my wife to be speak for the first time.

“I think the butterfly is her spirit,” she said. Our eyes met, and I nodded. Then, in a wonderfully compassionate voice, she said, “Yeah.” With a sudden pang, the sad warmth of that one syllable brought me back to that epiphanous moment beneath the Mongolian sky, longing for a woman who was kind.

When we left the plaque, I walked beside her. And then, as the afternoon went on, I began to tell her my story