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THE LONG WAY HOME, PART 2

The second half of one man's globe-spanning trek across six continents, 37,000 miles, eleven countries, and all of the people he met along the way

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IRKUTZ, SIBERIA, AUGUST 2

The phone rings at 9:20. You scheduled a tour of Lake Baikal for 9 a.m., a voice says. Oh Christ yes, yes, I'll be right down. No food, no coffee, the damp drizzly November in my soul matched by chilly wet weather outside.

But my guide is a cool-looking young woman in a black leather motorcycle jacket. It reaches 40 below in the winter, she says, but July gets as hot as 45 degrees Celsius. "We like such hot summers. Of course, there are rains, but drafts can also be experienced."

Her name is Olga. She says the average monthly salary for men is about 3,000 rubles, about \$100 dollars. The cost of a train ticket to the Black Sea. For women, it's closer to 2,000 rubles. "I have no words to say, this is very little."

At Lake Baikal, the bartender woman is wearing a DKNY T-shirt and listening to Dire Straits.

Olga says that you can always spot a foreign woman, because she dresses in comfortable pants and flat shoes. A Russian woman, unless she is hiking in the woods, will always wear high heels. "It's not so comfortable, but it's wonderful."

But we're here to see Lake Baikal, the clearest and deepest and largest lake in the world. Normally it is such a perfect blue and you can see a hundred meters down, it is so clean. But today the drizzle turned it slate gray and you can't see more than a hundred feet. So in the end you have to take it on faith, the things the tour guide says. Baikal is deeper than Lake Superior. It is deeper than Lake Tanganyika. At the bottom, there are fish as clear as glass. When they come in contact with the air, they melt.

I have four cigarettes left. I've been conscious of them in my pocket all morning. Now it's time to go to the promenade and smoke my last one in a ritual and flick the butt into the beautiful river and then throw the rest away. It was a nice little vacation, the first pack of cigarettes in 11 years. But I don't need to chainsmoke anymore. I'm not that person anymore.

It's this travelling thing, what every army brat learns early on, the trick of becoming the reed that never breaks but bends so fucking much you're not even sure if it's a reed anymore.

And now it's almost late enough for me to call home. It will be Friday morning for them.

I kill some time in the sauna.

My wife answers. I tell her that I love her and she says she loves me. She asks if I've been good and I ask in what sense and she asks if I drank the vodka. I lie.

I don't want her to worry.

Then my older daughter comes on and tells me that she loves me so much. What's Irkutsk like? You're going to Ulan Bataar next? She has to rush for camp and gives the phone to her sister, who slays me with her little girl voice. "I miss you so much, daddy. I love you so much." I tell her about the present I bought her today from this barefoot Siberian man at this ancient Siberian village museum – that's the custom back in the old days, going barefoot. "I don't want a present," Rachel says. "I just want you to come home."

In that moment, I realize why I'm not that worried about losing myself in some Siberian underworld of vodka, cigarettes and despair. I have a home now, not a physical place but something I built with my wife and daughters. It's that old corny thing, the place where the heart is. So this isn't really a journey around the world. I'm just going home the long way.

This thought makes me happy. Just like that, my mood breaks.

All the same, who was I kidding? No way I'm gonna stop at that last ritual cigarette. Out on the promenade again, I finish the whole fucking pack and make the last drag a deep one.

Farther up the main drag into town, there's a little park where they park their cars with the doors open and play music loud. First time I've heard rap since I left the States. A few more blocks and there's Stratosphere, the hot club in town, where Olga says that such things as meeting pretty student girls can be very welcome done. And in they go, in stiletto heels and tight dresses. Men with big chests and crewcuts follow. But not me, not me.

Back on the promenade, everyone watches the lights. A couple is dirty dancing, the girl a little drunk, going low, going close.

As I walk by, girls keep looking me over. When a particularly pretty one (short dark hair, dark eyes, cut features) stares in my face and just for an experiment I keep looking at her. She keeps looking back.

Ah, but you can't live everywhere. You can't marry everyone. You reach a point where life is no longer full of possibilities – when a trip like this one is really just an illusion. Is that why so many old people become tourists? For a taste of possibility – just a taste, because that's all they can chew?

Back in my room, even before I open the door, the phone is ringing. When I pick it up, a woman speaks. "Do you want to spend time with a beautiful lady?"

Uh, no. Pacibo.

In the disco downstairs, the music continues until four in the morning — exactly.

Thoughts in a sleepless night:

1. All through this trip I've been throwing things out: books, clothes, my shoes. There's a sharp ruthless pleasure in this. No second chances. The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on.

2. The important thing about pleasure is that it's *portable*. The buzz in the head and the burn in the belly, you can take it with you anywhere you go – to any city, any country. When you have left everything else behind, it can be your way of loving yourself a little.

3. I never realized there was so much morose delectation in Dostoevsky. All his characters take sick pleasure in their own misery. No wonder I connected with him so thoroughly as a teenager. But I'm leaving this book in Irkutsk – it's time to move on.

ULAAN BATAAR, MONGOLIA, AUGUST 4

Saruul meets me at the airport, dressed in jeans and sneakers. She spent a year in Akron as an exchange student, which was fun except for Sundays – the Normans spent *five hours* in church. "It was, like, awful." Her sister is going to school in San Francisco.

For the next few hours we tour Ulaan Bataar, a humble tumble of plain buildings in a wide brown bowl trimmed by a weaving river. The poor live in the hills in gher, everyone else in apartments. The rich buy two apartments. There's a big power plant with twin cooling towers and long slab buildings built by the Russians. In contrast to Siberia, my hotel has big rooms with stocked refrigerators and the TV has not only CNN but MTV and even C-Span. On one of the floors, someone's listening to Destiny's Child sing *Say My Name*.

I learn some scraps of Mongolian: *saim bai no* is hello, *bayartai* goodbye, thank you *bayarlalaa*. And that it's not a good idea to be complimentary about anything Chinese. "Did you see *Mulan*?" Saruul asks.

It takes a minute before I figure out where she's going. "The Mongols were the bad guys?"

"Even their face was awful," she says.

And Genghis Khan – well, he may have cut off a few heads but he was a great Mongolian.

Imagine this small obscure country conquering the whole world!

Saruul is very pretty, with long dark hair crinkled a little towards the shoulders and a perky round face. Her eyes are especially lovely, curved in like they've got a delicious secret. She's a little stressed out because she broke up with her boyfriend two days ago. What happened was, she hacked her way into his email account and discovered he was trading messages with this stupid girl. So she told him it was over. He said it was a joke. And she said, "Even if it was a joke, I don't like that joke. Too bad."

As the day goes on, Saruul admits that she's very quiet and meek with Muk. He's so smart and she doesn't want to make a fool of herself. But he likes quiet and she likes discos and he has no right to have female friends.

She's 20.

After dinner, we go over to the internet café in the Revolutionary Party Building to check our emails. The café is clean and modern with ten or fifteen terminals and six or seven people surfing away. It seems perfect that the cash-strapped communists leased space out to this particular enterprise. She checks her first. "Oh, it's from him!" She's jittery waiting for it to download. It turns out to be an e-postcard, a photograph of the word love written on the sand captioned with a few lines asking if that's all her love was. But he can't stop thinking about her. She smiles. Should she respond? "Guess what, we can check his email."

She knows how to hack his email. She figured out his code. I've run into the Scarlett O'Hara of Mongolia.

And there's another note from the stupid girl! It's in Mongolian but she reads me snatches — how come you won't write to me just because of your girlfriend, your girlfriend is stupid and you shouldn't marry her. I start to feel guilty. This is wrong. "You can't do that kind of thing. You gotta give him his privacy."

She shrugs. So what now? Back to the hotel?

I ask her what young Mongolians do at night. Disco, she says, but that doesn't start till midnight. "Do you want to go bowling?"

So we go to a little alley with four lanes on one floor and four lanes above. Built just last year, the place crowded with smiling young Mongolians who clap for each other when they get a strike. They clap for us too. It's hot so Saruul takes off her jacket and plays in her spaghetti strap tank-top, cell phone sticking up in her back pocket. When I make a bad shot, she grins and teases me.

"You're a problem child," I say. "You hack your boyfriend's email and you insult foreign visitors."

She grins again. "And don't you like it?"

Oh man. Muk has no idea what he's in for.

THE GOBI DESERT, MONGOLIA, AUGUST 5

I'm sitting in a gher in the south Gobi desert and the sun's going down over the desert with clouds streaking the sky and off by the indigo mountains a bank of dark clouds blur down to earth in a distant rainstorm. And I feel joyous. My feet are peeling like layers of mica and there are deep purple wounds where these new shoes dig the heels — if they get infected, it could be real trouble. But my fever washed off in the clean air and it feels like I've made breakthroughs and even figured a few things out — like the point of all of this, the meaning of travel. But let me start at the beginning:

5 a.m., Tuul picks me up at the White House Hotel and we head out to the airport. She's a squat little woman with tiny eyes and an absolutely round face, quite self-contained in every way. Our plane is an old Russian plane owned by MIAT, the Mongolian airline. It looks

ancient and small. “Don’t think about bad things before departure,” Tuul says, like it’s a proverb.

When we get to the airport, it seems devoted to either foreign tourists with backpacks or traditional people in robes and the colorful Mongolian hats. Tuul talks about the snowstorm called a dzud last year when they lost two million animals. e tough up in the Gobi now, and she’s curious about the conditions. She talks about how the Revolutionary Party manipulated the media to defeat the democrats, exploiting a murder scandal that made the democrats look even worse than they were. Now three democrats are in prison.

Just after nine, we bounce down at the Juulchin Gobi-1 Tourist Camp (Amex and MasterCard accepted). And I mean bounce, because there’s no runway, just a track in the flinty desert. Soon we’re bouncing off into the vast brown plain. The roads are just the tire tracks of the cars that preceded you; if the ruts get too deep, drivers just veer off a few yards and start a new road.

Not ten minutes out of the camp, driving along the flank of the Three Beautiful Mountains, we stir a herd of gazelles that kick up puffs of dust as they run. They glide in mid-air like cartoon animals in a Disney musical, then a dust puff and a dust puff and the last flip of high white tail.

This isn’t sandy desert, but flinty rock with little bushes and flecks of thorny green grass. Here are the Flaming Cliffs, where they they found dinosaur bones and dinosaur eggs.

And now camels. Two humps. Very cool looking against the desert, like sand dunes come to life.

Here and there, we pass dead animals melting back into the desert, a hank of matted fur and some ribs sticking up.

And mirages everywhere – water that disappears as you get closer.

Camels are ugly creatures, with oily fur and splayed toes and ugly teeth. They have sticks in their noses. But these Polish students want to rent them for an extended ride – two days. They have t-shirts hanging down under their hats, their faces are red and they stayed up till 2 having a “vodka party.”

They came down on the train through Siberia, which took ten days, bought the cheapest seats but there was beer in the stations so they were happy. In UB they stayed in the Ghana Guest House and it cost them \$2.50 a piece and they met people from Australia, England, Holland, Italy. The best thing they did was climb a mountain that was more than 4,000 feet high, the Otgon Tenger, a ten day trek. They have no such mountains in Europe.

Jarek asks how long I’m here. He’s a chemistry student with a very merry face. Four days, I tell him, and he gives me a look of pity. “Three weeks is just right for Mongolia.”

Then they climb up on their camels and get ready to ride off into the desert. They don’t have a clue where.

Now this is something I’ve never seen before. As we approach the Kongoryn Eels, there’s a beautiful green swatch of grass and herds of camels and horses, then a little stream and a marshy bog and a strip of dunes, real high sand dunes. They are so pure, so alien, so strange and beautiful. As I climb them I realize they are nothing as placid as they seem – the strong desert wind keeps break the ridges down, blowing a fine mist of sand. And there’s a sighing sound, a dry rustle. Guess that’s why they call this the Singing Sands.

I feel good, kissed by the strange.

Mongolians are not big on smiles and handshakes, so first meetings tend to be tentative. The rangekeeper’s wife hands me a glass of mare’s milk beer and we sit down. They have a TV and a sewing machine, a wind generator and a satellite dish. There’s a picture of the Dalai Lama. A girl brings over a bowl of dried curds, hard sour blocks of cured milk, and

some incredibly sour camel-milk yogurt. We sit without saying much. The TV? They got it in '96.

Then ranger Vaanchig comes in and sits down on the painted Mongolian bed next to his wife. He's a wrinkled brown man of about sixty, dressed traditionally in a Mongolian robe and Mongolian hat that looks like something Zeppo Marx would wear. Thick black boots to his knees, eight children, oldest son already off in his own gher and oldest daughter is studying in UB to be a teacher.

Vaanchig seems pleased by my questions and curiosity, answering with an authority placid and unhurried. Modernity doesn't threaten them, he says. This life has always been and always will be. But things were definitely better under socialism. The socialists sent him to Budapest to study irrigation. When there was a dzud, they would help with migration and restocking the herds. Now, there's no support.

My pen isn't working. The ink won't flow and I keep having to write big. Stalling, I suggest that with his TV and sewing machine and truck, he is perhaps a bit richer than he lets on. "Thank you for your compliment," he says, pleased and amused. "But we depend on nature, so in a disaster, animals can die. It is a fragile life, like glass. So we always pray to God to give us nice weather!"

He smiles again, flashing his gold tooth.

He seems pleased again when I nod at the picture of the Dalai Lama and ask about their religious practices. When he's finished, Tuul translates his answer. "They don't believe, but they respect."

I like this man. I like him a lot. If only my fucking pen would work!

Then Vaanchig mutters something to Tuul and I can tell he's amused by something. "He is surprised that you're an American and you have such a bad pen," Tuul says. Everyone laughs at me and I laugh too, and then there's more laughter. When I leave a few minutes later I'm a happy man: *This is the point of travel*. To be here in the Gobi desert making a connection, accepting hospitality, sharing laughter with a stranger. In this big lonely world, what could feel better? "I really liked those people," I tell Tuul.

"You can find many such people," she says.

I like Tuul too. She has a very dry way of relating to the world. Her father was so poor that even in the Mongolian winter he had no shoes and he jumped from warm cow pie to warm cow pie. But he became a historian and wrote many books, and he always told his daughters to study and excel and they wouldn't have to suffer poverty and they could always be independent. Independence, he was obsessed with that. So all five girls went to college and all five graduated with honors.

When she was working for Unicef, Tuul went to Brunei and other Arab countries. The men made her wear black robes. She asked why. They said it was because women are unclean. She said, then you men are dirty because you came from women. They said they couldn't eat in the same room with women and she said then how can you have sex with them – don't you have to be in the same room for that?

We stop for the night at the Juulchin Gobi-2 Tourist Camp, a collection of ghers overlooking the sands. Over a dinner of steamed goat dumplings, Tuul tells me about talking to her daughter on the computer. "Email is old technology for us now. Now we're thinking video communication."

After dinner, a Mongolian folk musician named Tsetsegmaa plays a short concert on a guitar-like instrument called a Huuchir. She's dressed in a gold robe with a gold hat and she's very tall, six feet or more. She starts off with something by Brahms and then plays a ferocious Mongolian folk melody full of moans and whines. It's very strange and beautiful.

Back outside the moon rises over the dark mountains, scattering a riot of stars. Now that I've

rounded the mid-point of the world and I'm heading home, I don't feel so lonely anymore. In fact, in this emptiness, I feel a touch of the sublime. I go to sleep inside my cozy gher, lying on the thin felt mattress, listening to the walls creaking and breathing like an animal in the wind – within its wooden ribs my beating heart.

In the morning, before the glare of the sun, the desert is lost in its holy silence and you can see subtle purples and lavenders and greens. At breakfast Tuul opens a book on the legends of Mongolia and reads the legend of the place we are in: Mean old Mr. Ibex wanted a new young wife and the beautiful Khongeri was brought to him against her will. He was drunk in front of his gher when he received her. Revolted, she wrapped her green blanket around her and lay down, whereupon her green blanket turned into the oasis and she turned into the sand dune that always sighs.

On the flyleaf, it says this book was put out by a British foundation called Sacred Land Project International, a group dedicated to the idea that sacred lands are often the most useful lands and that folk wisdom has given them sacred status to protect them.

Maybe I've neglected nature on this trip.

Yes! This is *exactly* what I want to be doing right now. Driving off across the empty desert with the morning air still cool. And when the driver peels away from the track and heads straight across the desert, yes! Yes! Into the unknown! The uncharted! Let's go!

On the flank of this mountain, a herd of wild asses. "You are very lucky," Tuul says. "Some travel six hundred kilometers to see these."

We pass ghers with trucks and jeeps and satellite dishes. Pass a kid herding his camels by bicycle. And see that jeep, with the big roller it's dragging? They're making felt. In the old days they did it with a horse.

The roll of felt is wrapped around a long metal axle and wrapped again with cowhide. While they drive off rolling it behind them, we go inside a long building where a cooperative of herders is working on the felt, women pinching out pieces of wool and pushing them into the blanket of loose wool with their knuckles. They stop to pour out mare's milk and mare's vodka for the guests.

The men do the second layer, tearing loose larger sheets of wool.

When the jeep comes back, everyone troops out to see how the felt turned out. It's too hard and small.

We drive on. We get lost. We are found. We enter the most beautiful and narrow gorge, perfectly vertical. This is where our driver played as a boy and being here again seems to make him happy. Darting his eyes up to the ridges where I see nothing but rocks, he keeps spotting wild asses and sheep. He stops the car and honks the horn to make them move: see, this is my world. Isn't it beautiful?

And now we will drive 30 kilometers to a place rich in vultures.

Our jeep breaks down in the desert. The driver gets the wheel off and there's nothing he can do, he's going to need parts. Just then a Japanese couple comes by and offers us a lift. It's a man and wife from Nagoya, an aircraft engineer and a housewife, very pleased to meet you. He's got a long sweet face and she's a plain woman with splayed teeth. Domo arigato. Smiles all around.

We bounce across the desert, talking a variety of languages about what line of work we are in and how we like the Gobi and the meaning of the Japanese phrase *mono no aware*. We exchange addresses and cards and take each other's photos. When they drop us off, I clasp the man's hand in both my hands and when they drive off, he waves with both his hands. And it's goofy but I feel *love*. Goodbye, sweet Japanese couple! I'll send you an email!

It's a perfect example of *mono no aware*, the happy sadness you feel at something beautiful

and fleeting.

And there are more to come, at the Lamastery a gorgeous cage for a giant Buddha and the “throat singers” who growl and whistle a deep eerie blues and a astonishing contortionist who just about sawed herself in half and dropping by Tuul’s apartment, an oasis of grace in a decrepit building, to talk to my kids on her PC-to-phone connection – *I don’t want a present, I just want you to come back*. And through all this the good feeling of connection keeps growing and feeding on itself until I choose life instead of sleep and end up walking the streets of Ulaan Bataar in a dawn when the violet streaks in me bleed into the lavender edge of the sky as the cars start to rumble and the last two stars of the night gleam brighter and brighter in the dawn to which they share no part. And all I can say is that you earn the journey as you take it and create what occurs to you in your heart.

Even so, it’s good to be moving on.

But hell in the airport, everyone jamming in and no clerks and the tour group leader just ahead who suddenly produces fifty passports, time getting shorter and shorter and finally making the plane at the last minute. A four-hour layover in supermodern Osaka airport and on to Hong Kong on JAL the best airline in the world. Live orchids in first class. They remember your name. The inflight movie is *The Straight Story*, about the old guy who crosses Iowa on a lawnmower. When he says goodbye to a man who bailed him out of a jam with the words “thank you for your kindness to a stranger,” tears well up in my eyes.

I order the Japanese dinner. The Japanese man next to me orders the Western dinner.

HONG KONG, AUGUST 8

And Hong Kong! It’s like stepping off the balloon into Oz, neon stacked on neon and traffic coagulating into blinking red clots every half block, Times Square times a thousand. Hello Mr. Richardson, we have a fax for you. Our business office will be happy to accommodate your internet needs. This button turns on the lights. This button opens the window curtains.

I crash into the perfect bed in the perfectly quiet room with perfect air-conditioning. Ten hours later I wake up and set off to conquer the city – and get about six blocks. My shirt is soaked. Need air-conditioning. Need breakfast. Egg grease good.

Ahh, the Mariner’s Club. White tablecloth, deferential waitress, the colonial life.

Says in the paper that yesterday was the second hottest day in recorded history and it’s going to be almost as hot today.

And there’s the Peninsula, a massive old castle where Somerset Maugham once hung. On every corner there’s a luxury store, Bally to Givenchy. The buildings drip money. The guide book says is the best first visit is up the tram to the peak so I take the Star Ferry to Hong Kong island and hop the first bus that says “Peak.” These hills are amazing, the way the mansions are set into the slopes like precious jewels. Makes Beverly Hills look like a slum. And I didn’t expect it to be tropical jungle with palm trees, banyans, big leafy ferns and flowered vines clinging to the trees. And through it all glimpses of this astonishing city, the glittering buildings all so finely cut down there through this scrim of jungle. And I’m the only person walking here – Severn Road, Plantation Road. Wonders of the world.

But man, it’s hot. I cut up a little trail called Lloyd’s Path and it goes straight up, the better to climb to the peak and get a coke because I’m dying here, my mouth is totally dry. Every hundred feet I have to stop to rest and the sweat is just dripping off me.

Finally I get to the Peak and there’s a mall up there, bars and restaurants and a Madame Tussaud’s. I buy a giant coke at a place called Shooters and fall into an orgy of picture taking, bang bang bang without any regard for composition or originality, my inner voyeur soaring free — with 12 million tourists a year, this as close as you can get to a place where tourists *are* the natives. Even the Chinese are taking pictures.

Then down the longest funicular train in the world down almost vertical hills through

stalagmite skyscrapers to the Central District, where I start walking again.

That's when it starts to hit me, first as exhaustion. Need food. Need air-conditioning. I duck into the nearest restaurant, a sushi joint. Back out on the burning street an hour later, I get half a block before I have to hail a cab. Flopped across the backseat, I feel my last bit of energy sputtering away.

Then the fever hits me. I get under the covers and close the blinds and turn off all the lights and lie in the dark for four hours, shivering and burning thinking what an idiot I am to walk around with a bare head in the tropics. There's a reason for those conical coolie hats, for all the air-conditioning and the chauffeurs and letting the natives do for you.

In the morning, they slip a newspaper under my door that says the cholera tally has hit sixteen and it's associated with eating raw fish. There's also something called vibrio parahaemolyticus, which causes bloody diarrhea and dehydration and often leads to dysentery.

Fuck. I gotta catch a plane at seven and do another all-nighter to Sidney-Melbourne-Tasmania. Three airports, no sleep, at heatstroke at the least. Now I'm waiting for the concierge to call and let me know the doctor is ready to see me.

The doctor looks at my throat. "White spots, very bad. I give you infection."

She's a nice old lady and quite gentle with the shot. Then she gives me eight bags of pills and tells me to lay a towel on the bed and when I start to sweat, don't move. Drink lots of water. I'll feel better in about two hours.

So I go back to my room and shiver away my last day in Hong Kong. At five I head for the airport, still so sick that the roots of my hair hurt. They delay the flight three times. Finally I got on and it's completely full and I'm in the second inside seat in a row of four. For nine hours. Swallowing razor blades. Then Sydney to Melbourne and Melbourne to Hobart – 22 hours later.

And it's only four in the afternoon.

TASMANIA, AUGUST 10

Feverish again last night, kept moving from wet spot to dry spot and back again. In the morning I wake to find on the bedside pad: "The Method of Leonardo. Practical and visionary. Light and dark. Virile yet tender. Balance of form."

I have no idea what this means.

I left two pair of pants in Hong Kong. I fried my laptop by leaving it in my suitcase instead of taking it carry-on. And I inaugurate the morning by forgetting to put my car in park and standing there dumbfounded as it starts rolling down the hill – thank god for the curb.

Hobart is a charming little place. Grass on the hillsides, bright green with the morning sun. Nice little houses. Trees in blossom. Walt Disney would have loved it. Hit the radio and the Supremes are singing Love Child. What a little burst of joy that is, driving a car and listening to the radio for the first time in five weeks. And Tasmania is getting more and more beautiful. The hills topped with trees, the plowed brown fields with big chocolate chunks of dirt and muscular pines lined up in field breaks, green fields laid over the flanks of the hills like blankets, wild looking eucalyptus trees scattered around, dead eucalyptus trees lying on their sides white as dried bones. The sky as blue and clear as you've ever seen it, sheep on the brilliant emerald grass.

The guy who rented this car told me not to take it on "ungazetted roads." And there would be a \$50 fine if it was returned excessively dirty. Hmmm, there's a dirt track going into the bush...let's see if we can trigger the fine.

VRRRRRMMMMMM.

And now Russell Falls, approaching through the misty forest, everything covered with moss higher than my head, giant tree ferns ten and twenty feet tall. People pass by, lovely day, trees so tall, g'day.

Top of the falls, panting, still pretty weak. But worth it. There's such comfort in natural things because they are always perfect, doing exactly what they were meant to do.

In this misty valley, the eucalyptus trees grow to be 250 feet high. Eucalyptus Regnas, the tallest hardwood and tallest flowering plant in the world. Only the California redwood is taller. This particular tree is 98 meters tall and was certainly growing when Abel Tasman visited the island in 1642.

Birds screech.

A wallaby stops to let me take his picture.

And here's a sign: "In our culture there is too little time for contemplation. Why not take a seat? Or lie down and watch the clouds drift past the tops of the highest trees? Be silent. Imagine yourself as a part of the forest."

And another ungazetted road, a dirt track disappearing into mist and pine. You cross the saddle and bang, you go from rainforest to desert. Stunning.

And seriously ungazetted. Let's go through water!

And just as I'm reminding myself to look up Walt Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* when I get home – what's the line about meeting you there on the open road, my comarado? – I see a sign about a warm cup of tea by a fire and pull into a cute little craftsy-looking joint called the Possum Shed. Inside it's a hippie dream of cozy and funky, rough wood walls and a decorative scrap tin roof and craftsy carvings and potholders stuck into every cranny. Through an archway into another room, there's a woodburning steel drum stove and a few tables overlooking a rushing stream. Alison and Tony lived in the park for four years, taking tickets and running the store, but then they decided that they were living to work instead of working to live and they bought this place and transformed it from a stark butcher shop – here are the pictures – to this little fantasia of how things should be in a perfect world. And it's warm and there's the smell of woodsmoke and a under-grandma's-quilt feeling that makes me want to curl up and sleep away a winter. "And what brings you here?" she asks.

"Ah, well – it's a long story."

So I give them a quick version of my adventures over the last five weeks. And it turns out that they understand exactly how I'm feeling. A tall man with rumpled bearish quality, Tony set out decades ago on a six-month journey that ended up taking seven years on the road. He's been to Zanzibar. He's been to South Africa. Tramped up and down Europe and South America. Alison too. And then they came here to Maydena, the last town before the park and after all that it's just ocean all the way to Antarctica. So if you think of it, this is the last town at the end of the world. And here they are still.

"Were you just ready to stop? Or is there something special about this place?"

"It's the park," Tony says. "There's no place like it in the world."

The park I just went through? It didn't seem that special.

Starting to explain, Tony tells me that Tasmania has more examples of Gondwana plants than anywhere in the world, leatherwood and sassafras, myrtle and deciduous beech, kingbilly pines and tree ferns.

I have to stop him there. Gondwana?

Tony asks if I know about Pangea. I do not. Well, that was the name of the original land mass, when all the continents were one. It split through continental drift into two parts called Lurasia and Gondwana, and then that split into the continents as we know them now. In fact,

it was when he was travelling in South Africa when he first noticed how similar the plants were. Then he learned it was because of the shared Gondwana heritage. Later he saw similar things South America. And it's exciting when you see those connections, like when a scientist found the milktooth of a platypus in Patagonia. It puts things in perspective. It helps explain why things are here. So he came back and studied botany and biology, became a naturalist, took the job in the park. Because that's the best thing you learn from travelling, really – to appreciate your own home, and take care of it.

As he talks, the last of the sunlight leaks away and Alison climbs up on a chair, lighting the candles of the chandelier.

"It gives me a buzz to know that plant doesn't exist anywhere else," Tony says. "And it reminds me how important it is not to trash it – like this rally they had yesterday, did you see that in the paper?"

I did. Four thousand people protesting the cutting of old-growth forests by the Tasmanian forestry department.

Just as Tony's getting started on this, three new visitors enter. They're young and hippiesh, two men with long hair and a young woman with a black Prince Valiant cut. Their names are David, Helen and Barry and they were at the rally. And Barry's been to Irkutsk and Mongolia too – wonderful people, the Mongolians. And Helen just quit her job as a government public relations officer, "spinnig shit to people while making their lives a little crappier." She's heading on a trip to Europe, return date unknown. They talk about the poison the forestry department uses to kill unwanted growth and animals, about biomimicry and natural capitalism and an exhibition called One Tree where artists and furniture makers showed what could be done with a single tree otherwise destined to become woodchips in Japan. "There are only 13 percent of the old growth forests left and they're still cutting," Tony says.

Eventually, the conversation goes back to travel. "When I left, it was to see the Eiffel Tower and London," Tony says. "And then you realize they're nothing compared to the people you meet. And also you realize that the culture isn't as amazing as the natural beauty and richness of this world."

"You also realize the responsibility of the traveler," Barry says, "the common thread of humanity and the responsibility we each have to join our local struggles."

David mentions a time in a ski resort in Eastern Europe when the gangsters were so out of control that there was a machine gun killing on the slopes. "A ski-by. Quite common in the Eastern European countries."

"And Bond movies," Helen says.

By this time, there's such a warm feeling in the room. But it's well after eight and it must be way past dinnertime for Tony and Alison, who long ago closed up the place, so I get up and say thanks and good to meet you and Tony says it's too bad there's so little time because he'd love to show us the park. And I think for a second and realize that I skimmed through the park today and I have skimmed through the world, and what better way to end this trip than to go back and see this one place again and this time see it deeper, see it through the eyes of someone who knows it and loves it.

We make plans to meet the next day — my last day as a free man.

The last morning comes up as clear and bright as mornings get. Tony's waiting for me at the Possum Shed. We pick up the others at their hostel and head up into the mountains, quickly leaving the paved road to drive deeper and deeper into the forest on dirt roads maintained by the state forestry department, Hills rise and plunge, pine and eucalyptus and here and there a clear-cut, a blackened tumble of left-over stumps and root systems. "That's what's left after the first burnoff, so you can imagine what it looked like before," Tony says. "They just waste anything that isn't easy to process."

Forestry Tasmania says once they cut down the old growth forest, they will be able to

manage the replacement forest more efficiently. But that would mean maintaining it as a “monoculture,” controlling other growth with pesticides, all so the lumber harvest will be cheaper. They seem to have a special fondness for a pesticide called 10-80, which also wallabees and wombats and other little critters.

Finally we stop and walk into the woods on a little path, barely marked by a sign put up a year when Forest Tasmania realized that trying to keep people out of here was worse publicity than letting people up here to see what they were doing to the forest. Up the path a short way, we reach a stand of giant eucalyptus, almost the tallest trees of all. They’re magnificent things with mossy trunks wide as a house and little spindly tops reaching way way up into the sky — truly a natural cathedral. It’s very moist and there are giant ferns everywhere and lots of green moss all over everything.

Tony’s love shines in his eyes. Did I know that these eucalyptus leaves are “sclerofil”? That’s a Geek word that means hard-leafed and refers to the fact that a lot of Australian vegetation has a thick waxy cuticle that reduces moisture loss and also helps retain heat in the higher elevations. “That’s a fairly common adaptation amongst our Australian flora – remember I said we had Gondwana which is these guys here, the nothofagus and tree ferns the sassafras and the like? That’s definitely an Australian plant because the fossil record indicates that eucalyptus evolved in Australia from Gondwana rainforest species as we got hotter and dryer and fire became more frequent.”

Still talking, Tony strikes out into the woods where no path is visible, leading us down the length of a fallen giant upholstered with green moss. The green trunk comes up to our shoulders. He’s looking for the actual tallest tree in Australia. They thought it was the ones behind us and did a survey of the whole nation to prove it and then a year or so ago turned up a taller one just a little bit deeper into the woods. Which shows you how well Forest Tasmania knows its forest.

And there it is, the tallest of all, not much different than the others except that it stands alone and therefore seems a little more magnificent. Shreds of bark hang down from its trunk, draping over the smaller trees and bushes. Tony says that’s to help the tree burn — the “stocking” of bark that goes up thirty feet or so protects the tree against small fires, but if a bigger fire comes along the strips of bark lead it up the tree to encourage a crown fire. Then the seed pods explode and spread far and wide, and the fire warms the earth covering the pods that have already fallen over the years, and the tree spreads its gene despite the death of the tree itself. It’s the “selfish gene” principle.

The selfish gene principle?

“You know how Darwin’s survival of evolution was saying that survival of the species is what’s of the utmost importance? TK stepped forward and said that individuals don’t give a rat’s ass about the survival of the species, they just want to pass on their own genes. This is one example in favor of the selfish gene principle.”

Insects are part of this too. When the seeds drop normally, the insects carry them into the earth. Especially acacias, which produces seeds with a little fleshy bit on the side of their seeds that’s tasty to ants. So the ants pick it up and carry it into their nest deep in the ground and when a fire comes along and warms them enough to germinate, a new tree shoots up from the soil where it has been planted by the ants.

Back in the van, a Forestry Tasmania jeep goes by fast, splashing a wave of muddy water across our windows. “This van is about as popular back here as a pork chop at a bar mitzvah,” Tony says.

A few miles farther on, a chain blocks our way. A chain across it and a sign that says “Special Management Zone For Fauna.”

“That means they must have poured 10-80 over it,” Tony says.

“They do this all the time,” David says. “This is our land, this is national land and we can’t go

in. They just throw up gates.”

Then we start to climb up switchback roads, higher and higher into the forest. This is the amazing thing about this place, Tony says — in a few minutes we’ll have gone up a thousand meters, from near rainforest to alpine meadow. Dogwoods! Silver wattles! Tree ferns! Mountain ash! See the eucalyptus seeds, as tiny as the eye of a needle and they grow to be the tallest flowering hardwood trees in the world! And there where a fire burned, see the saplings racing to the light! And now as it gets alpine, see how the eucalyptus get squat and brambly? Stick your head up into these harsh elements and you’re likely to get it snapped off! The twists give them strength. If you cut a piece of firewood on a knot in the grain, it’ll just about jar your arm off. That helps with the snowloads. And these trees, you won’t find them any place else on earth! See the waxy shiny leaves! And see this cube-shaped poo? Wombat poo. Do you know why it’s cube-shaped? Because the wombats leave it on flat rocks as a wombat hello and if it’s round it rolls off so nature came up with this miraculous thing, cube-shaped poo!

And look, there across the lake, a platypus! A rare event. Do you know how he eats? He shuts his eyes and ears and he has an electric receptor on his beak that picks up electric currents off the things swimming toward it. And here’s a eucalyptus seed. Do you know why we call eucalyptus? It’s a Greek word that means well-covered. See the cap over the bloom?

And now we enter the amazing Pandenni grove, home of the largest heath plants in the world. Those Pencil Pines are truly ancient, dating back to Pangea itself, when the world was one. Now they only exist in Tasmania. And here we have the world-famous lyre birds, which can imitate car alarms and camera clicks? Ah, it’s a wonderful place. Truly specky. The last frontier. It’s a pity so few people come to visit.

HOME, AUGUST 12

And that’s it, the end. One more tag-team of planes from Hobart to Sydney to San Francisco to New York and I land at JFK. It was an easy flight and I’m feeling great. For five weeks, I was a free man, unfettered and alive. Every exit sign had my name on it. If I had ever really known that feeling as a younger man, I had long forgotten it. And it changed me, I’m convinced of that. I feel so strong. But I’m also full of love for my family. All this time, I’ve only thought about the good things, how loving and smart and funny and beautiful and talented they all are. They are my home. And somehow I’m going to put it all together, the rush of freedom and the tug of family, on fire with the lesson Tony taught me in the town at the end of the world: that the best thing you learn from wandering is how to come home, and what to do when you get there.

But nobody’s here to meet me. Did I give them the wrong flight information?

I wait an hour, my joy steadily drooping. It’s nine in the morning for me and I didn’t sleep a blink on the plane.

I wait half an hour more.

I give it up and hail a cab.

When I get to my little ranch house in the trees, it’s dark. Nobody home. I pry off a screen and slide through a window onto the sofa. My dog yaps and licks my face.

It’s so quiet. I go through the house turning on lights. Take a shower. Sit on the porch. Go back inside to make some coffee.

Then I hear a car door shut and the squeal of high girlish voices and there are my daughters, running down the path with their arms wide open, behind them my wife with her tangled dark hair and a grin on her face.

I’m home.

Of course, it’s not that easy. The bathtub and laundry room sink both have gushing leaks

and the lawn is so wild I have to cut it twice. Certain bills didn't get paid. It's the end of a long summer and the kids are squabbling. The dog pees on my office rug.

There are domestic strains. Confessions. Arguments. Honest discussions. Romantic moments. Stupid squabbles over stuff like a new fence.

The dog poops on my office rug.

When I have to go into the city for a day, it's a relief. What's happening to me? The strong feeling is going! Freedom leaking away!

How do I hold on to it?

Do we go camping or to the beach? Do we cancel the TV when school starts or just figure out how to regulate the kids more? In which case I'll have to do it because I'm the one who always has to discipline the kids and ... ahh, fuck. What was I trying to hold onto again?

One night I get dragged to an African music festival in Brooklyn, and the crowds and disorganization and all the African costumes bug me. White men should not wear dreadlocks or skullcaps. Of course I'd be thrilled if I came across a scene like this in Africa.

But in Africa, I could leave.

Then one night, my 11-year-old sits next to me on the sofa and lets her head fall on my shoulder. I take her sister to the jacuzzi and we have a good talk in the steam and bubbles, our bodies sliding together slick as seals.

Either the squabbling is toning down or I'm getting used to it.

My wife and I are pals again.

Even the dog seems to have adjusted – at least he's not using my office for a tree.

But late that night as I lie awake, I keep returning with insomniac compulsiveness to all the things I forgot to put into my notes: the man in Irkutsk who asked me if I were American or English and when I said American the big smile that exploded across his face. "American? I am an artist!" And pulled a beautiful drawing out of his bag. He asked five bucks but I ended up paying eight – interesting negotiation – and he was so happy he slapped my hand hard in triumph and ran to join his friends. And the Bollywood movie I saw in Zanzibar with a guy who leaves home to go to school and gets a job as a taxi driver, with the big production number of taxi drivers singing and dancing to welcome him. It was called *Desire* and the tagline was: "All She Wants Is Everything." And Saruul learns I love you in every language and beer is more popular than vodka in Irkutsk because of the students and the Mongolian diet is eat your breakfast for yourself, share your lunch with your friend, and give your dinner to your enemy. It's not exile, it's sexile. And the parking lot for bicycles in Amsterdam, four stories high. Ah, it's a beautiful world.

When can I go back?

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