

## Mongolia

Monday, April 16

No one is dining in the next car forward, the diner, and the door is locked, but they let me in. Sasha, I should say, let me in. He's friendly, about twenty three and blond. Is he letting in only people who look like they're spending hard currencies or is he letting in only young women?

I wouldn't mind so much if it's the latter. He's cute in that strong-and-gentle-woodsman kind of way. I can't help but think I could have my way with him and it would be so worth my while. It could be the vodka talking, or it could just be his blue eyes talking.

I'm slightly uneasy that there seem to be no other passengers in the diner. One table is covered with fresh red meat, an old man in a smock is feeding it through a hand-crank grinder bolted to the edge. The other tables have clean white tablecloths, but they're not set for dinner.

Sasha sits me down, offers me tea.

"Menu?" The way he asks makes me think there isn't really one.

"Dinner?"

He thinks. He nods. "Potato, beef."

I smile. I don't even care how much it costs.

By the time I've finished my first western-style meal in months, I've had beef and potatoes, (on a plate, eaten with knife and fork, thank you) fresh dill, a salad of cucumbers with a yogurt sauce, a glass of amazingly thick grape juice and some sort of cake.

Funny how you get used to things you love. I love Japanese and Chinese food, but to eat things that come on a plate and sit there all by themselves and don't all gush together and you have to maybe cut them up with a knife and a fork -- you never would have thought you'd be happy just to have that.

The cake was terrible, I suppose, but it all reminds me of pot-luck dinners in Maine, and that's pretty near perfect. I got so tired of those things when I was eleven, but what I wouldn't give right now to pop in to one of those churches and sample the four different kinds of spaghettis and the five kinds of fried chicken and Mrs. Knudsen's green beans and Mrs. Schlaughter's coconut mousse.

Meanwhile, out the window in Mongolia, I'm looking at men on horseback in the late sun. They look so calm and majestic sitting there, all golden and rugged.

The train is bending around the hill they're on so I can see other parts of the train, too. The sun is still setting but the windows are already glowing a little bit from within, each of them.

The train looks wonderful. All this time looking out the window at the landscape and I never thought about how we look from out there. We're such a thin line of train in the middle of all this land.

I wonder if those men out there are watching us go by and dreaming that someday they'll take this train somewhere. They might go to one of those places they've heard about, Moscow, Paris.

Maybe they've taken it already and they're remembering how much money they lost in Monte Carlo, or the girl they left on the beach in Morocco.

This is our whole world in here right now, but we will all be gone from their world in a few minutes. More likely they just watch this thing come through the fields and they think, "There goes the train."

Looking at those guys is like looking at a still pond, it depends what you focus on. You can see the surface of the water or you can see the fish below it, or you can see the sky, or you can see yourself. When I look at them I can see them, and I can see their world, and then I see tonight's train and all its glowing windows. There is a woman's face in one of the windows. She's looking out at the Mongol riders, but the train doesn't stop and soon she is past the riders and there is nothing out the window to focus on but grass and hills and suddenly she sees her reflection in the window. She sees herself looking in at herself from outside.

Work for the diner crew appears to be over but the old man is still grinding the meat. Sasha joins me at the table and gets casual. Is he coming on to me, or is this just the way a Russian dining car is run? An old and crusty Russian woman comes out and gives the old man hell, for what I can only imagine. He gets in a few words edgewise but never stops grinding the meat.

About ten minutes later Sasha's manager comes out and introduces himself. He's an older, bigger, nice guy. Uncle manager. His English is much better than Sasha's. He can form nearly complete sentences. After the introductions, his first sentence is, "Gladys, we are drinking."

"Good," I try talking like a Russian soldier in a Hollywood movie, "I am drinking." My chest almost resonates. Sasha and his manager think that's pretty funny.

After a lot of discussion and looking around and pulling down the shade at the door to the rest of the train, the manager gently places a bottle on the table.

“Vodka?” I ask in the soldierly way.

“Wodka,” he says, as though he’s ashamed he can’t do any better.

What’s wrong with vodka? He should know what we pay for Russian vodka in the US. “Good Good Good.” I say. “It’s been hours since I had good vodka.” If it had been much longer than that, I’d be sober and wise enough not to drink any more. There’s a border coming up.

Once again there is the peel-off cap. Once again I am amazed at how natives can drink the stuff. I don’t drink it nearly fast enough for either Sasha or Manager, but they don’t force me.

Conversation begins at the port of Yeltsin and proceeds slowly toward Zhirinovsky. Manager does almost all of the talking, and it takes him about a full minute to compose and deliver a sentence. This is fine with me, I don’t have any particular plans for tonight.

This is part of what’s so nice about smuggling large amounts of US currency on trains, there’s none of that rush, rush, gimme the dough business. I’ve got time, they’ve got time, let’s have some vodka and watch the countryside sail by. It’s the civilized way.

“Yeltsin was a people’s man,” Manager says. “But now he is only a criminal.”

“Why do you say he is a criminal?”

“Because Gladys, he is a rich man. In Russia, if you are a rich man then you are a criminal.”

“Yeltsin is rich?”

“Not so rich. But he is like us, the workers. He talks like us, like a factory worker. But he can not do anything for us now.”

Manager speaks like a manager, he makes long pauses, but not ones that are open for comments from others. He has a way of holding the floor until he has said what he wants to say. I'm impressed, because he doesn't do it in a pompous way.

All the while there is the soothing rhythm of the tracks and the gentle shaking of the diner.

"You know the islands of Japan?" he says.

"The Kuriles?"

"The islands of Japan."

"Russia has them."

"Yes, Gladys. Yeltsin says to give them back."

"He doesn't care?"

"What is the difference? We are a big country, we don't need these islands, but Gorbachev was not going to give them. He is big fat politician. Now with Putin, we can not give them and this is problem."

"Sure. Problem." I can't help talking like him.

"Gladys, what do you do?"

"Funny, now that you ask me. I haven't been thinking about it. I do radio."

"Are you happy?"

"I don't know. I really liked it when I started."

"And now?"

"Now I'm in a great big train in Russia."

"You are not going back."

"Is that a question or is it a statement?"

"I can tell you do not want to go back."

"If I go back I will make lots of money."

"How much money, Gladys?"

There's a twinkle in his eye. That's a rhetorical question. He doesn't mean how much dough, he means how much is it really? You know, really. Or maybe I'm putting thoughts in between his lines. Whatever. I'm looking back into Manager's eyes. The car shakes.

The old man grinding meat is in another world, an old one. Manager asks him over to our table and pours a goblet full of vodka. The old man rises and thanks manager, walks to our table, takes the goblet and downs it like it was O.J. No cough. No gasp.

I gasp. I've never seen anyone do that. He reminds me of my grandfather. What kind of life was it that made him so tough? I don't know how old he is, but if he did have an easy life, I don't imagine he'd be grinding meat on the Trans-Siberian Express.

"What's your cabin like?" I ask them. "I'll bet you have everything. You have a piano in your cabin. You have dancing girls in there, I'll bet." I know they don't understand. . . "Your cabin. Your room. Very nice."

"You want see? You want see my cabin?"

"No, no, that's not what I meant."

He stands up in the aisle, steady as a tree. "Come come, Gladys, see my cabin."

What the hell, I'm curious about their quarters; let him try something, he won't try it twice.

I follow manager back through the kitchen and then through a side door into a compartment pretty much like everyone else's but this one has bunks for six and there's no formica paneling, just metal walls. The door is on the side, instead of the end and it leads directly into the washing part of the kitchen, not the main corridor.

"Where is the bar?" I ask.

"No bar," he says. "Only bottle."

"Six men?" I ask. "One bottle?"

“Four men.” he says. “One, two, three, four.” Pointing to the bottom two and middle two bunks, proud of his counting in a way he’s not quite proud of his conversational English.

In the middle of the expository, the train begins to grind. “We must be in cabin,” the manager says. I look at him sharply.

“Border,” he says. “Go to your cabin, Gladys.”

I do that.

I’m into my cabin about sixty seconds before they come around with the forms to fill out.

This is going to be interesting. I can barely write well enough to stay between the lines. I’ve never done a border crossing while looped. I always wanted to try it but Oliver wouldn’t let me. He said it was a bad idea in the long run. Whatever. Oliver sure isn’t here right now.

When they come around to get the forms and stamp the visa for exit, I’m so cool I barely look at them, but they don’t give a damn. Why should they give a damn, anyway? This is only the Mongolian side of the border. What is there to steal from Mongolia? Fresh air?

My cabin mate is a Mongolian woman who speaks no English whatsoever, but we communicate well enough. Her name’s Dina, I figure she’s about thirty-five and she looks well-dressed by Mongolian standards. She has that poise that I saw in all the Mongolian women in Ulan Bator, a classy look about them and a lack of the fear of men or foreigners you see in other places. If this is some sort of Mongolian princess, or daughter of a politician, wouldn’t they have made sure she had a cabin to herself? Perhaps she’s too high-class to ride with any of her fellow countrymen. Could be they figure she’s safer with me in the cabin than alone. I don’t know what I’m talking about.

Now that we're through that, I can start to get nervous about the Russian border. Shit. Just saying "Russian border" is scary enough. I'm picturing a smooth black wall, a hundred feet high, stretching to the horizon in both directions. Or train is lumbering toward it at five miles an hour.

I'd better do something to keep myself from going insane. It could be hours between border stations here, for all I know.

Up in my bunk with my new fake Swiss army knife, I manage to hack into a can of mackerel and tomato sauce without cutting myself open. I shouldn't think about what's in my jacket, but of course, it's impossible to *not* think about something.

Don't think about how much money you're carrying. Don't think about what almost anybody on this train might do to you to get it if they only knew about it. Don't think about what might happen to you in a Russian jail. Don't think about what might happen to you just on the way to a Russian jail.

The fish from the can tastes like industrial waste and plastic by-products. It also takes forever to chew. Then when I'm done chewing it up, it's hard to make my throat swallow. What a pointless exercise. I really should find something better to do with my time.

I'm in the middle of a mouthful when a short, olive drab woman in high heels throws open the door. She fills the doorway with her attitude. It's not aggressive, but it's insanely serious. She's the first border agent I've seen that makes it look like this means more to her than it does to me, and believe me, it means a lot to me. Dina and I freeze. I try to swallow the mackerel. I'm happy to find that I'm not trembling uncontrollably, just sweating.

She stands at pinpoint attention and waves her hand above her head as if she were signaling a plane, "Grovskenik. Robis gurten passport."

So we hand her our passports.

She scrutinizes the photos and our faces like I've never seen anyone do before in my life. First with me, and then with my roommate. It's a funny feeling, being scrutinized. Not much you can do about it. I guess the thing to do is just hold still and not look arrogant or guilty or wise-ass or plague-infested.

When she has completed the scrutinization she says, "Please go out."

Dina and I go into the corridor and the woman closes the door. We stand in the hall and look at each other. Dina's really scared. That's good for me, I guess; if everybody looks scared when this woman comes around, I don't stand out so much.

In thirty seconds the olive drab woman emerges and says, "Thank You." We file back in and she closes the door on us. She has our passports.

I wish I could say something to calm Dina down. We make eye contact and I shrug my shoulders as though it were pretty funny that they have our papers and all we can do is wait. I climb back into my bunk. Sometimes I feel the money more than at other times. Right now it feels like I've got twenty encyclopedias inside my shirt.

How long ago was it that I ordered Graham to give me this run? Just ten days ago? What was I thinking? Now that I've had a little time away from Tokyo maybe I'm a bit more reasonable. I didn't need the money. It's not normal to be so fed up with a place that you turn to international contrabandage for relief. That's it. I needed a contrabandage on my psychic wounds. Oh, how dramatic.

Listen, you hate a place, you hate a place. Sometimes you just gotta take a breather. You're not normal, Jane. But who the fuck is? No one that you'd want to hang out with, right? Just fucking chill, ok? Chill out and think happy thoughts. Do that Ronald Reagan in a tutu and suspenders thing in your head. Now laugh.

It's an hour before the olive drab woman comes back. She opens the door and I realize I'm almost paralyzed on my back staring at the ceiling. What a wimp I am. I'm

all ready to just say, “Take me away, folks, I can’t handle this waiting any more. Here’s the money, to hell with it.”

I don’t know what she says, but she says it really loud. I find myself standing at attention with Dina. How did that happen? Is there an atavistic “stand at attention” response in homo sapiens?

The olive drab woman holds up my passport and does the same photo scrutiny exercise, but I can tell everything is fine. What a relief. I want to kiss her, but probably I shouldn’t. I make a little face when she’s scrutinizing me and it makes her smile. It’s a funny smile she makes, like she doesn’t get many chances to smile.