

1. going home

I am staring out of the window in a mild hash-infused haze at the Chinese countryside which is passing like scenery cards, near then far, through our narrow frame to the world. The train seems to be climbing, and the pace is slow, rickety. We pass through a long dark tunnel and suddenly there it is, unexpected and at once exhilarating. The sun is low, yet unmistakably picks out the broken edge of a long stone wall.

"It's the fucking wall!"

We shout almost in unison, for we are both transfixed by the view. Kurt, with a flourish, reaches for our tape collection and produces of course, Pink Floyd: The Wall, which is hastily rewound to the title track on our ghetto-blaster. What follows is both sublime and surreal. For two hours, the train zigzags back and forth amongst the ruins of the Great Wall of China in perfect timing to a setting sun, in and out of the hills so we see it here then there, always mounting a crest then descending beyond. This impromptu show feels like it's played out in slow motion, intensified as it is by our tripped out state, and I can see in Kurt's eyes the same crazy wonder that must be reflected in mine. When we finally bid farewell, the wall is just a silhouette casting a thin black line across the hills.

It is in fact something of a happy accident that we are high, for shortly after leaving Beijing, and with no idea of what was to come, we sensibly decided to finish the remains of our stash in anticipation of reaching the Mongolian border later in the day. After waiting for the attendant to finish his ticket inspection and retire to his quarters, we had stood cautiously in the open doorway at the end of the carriage, smoking our joints disguised as cigarettes. And once this surreptitious disposal of the evidence was complete, so to speak, we could finally relax and enjoy the journey ...

It's the summer of 1988, and we have just boarded the Trans-Siberian express. Perhaps the word 'express' is misleading, for this will be a ten day journey broken only by a short stay in Moscow, and will take in China, Mongolia, Russia, Poland and East Germany on the way to our destination - Berlin.

We are on our way home.

I have been travelling for fifteen months, Kurt for two years. Both in our mid twenties, we met over a year ago completely by chance in a bar in Bangkok - Kurt looking for someone to share a bottle of Mekong whisky with, and I at once a willing accomplice.

He: an ex-dealer from Amsterdam, his six foot frame taut with lean muscle and topped by blue-grey eyes, five o'clock shadow and curly mop tied in a ponytail. With semi-sunken eyes, there is something to suggest a junkie past; but like the owner of a look-alike dog, it's hard to say whether his face fits the profile or the other way round. And I: six foot three, skinny and blue-eyed, two piercings in one ear and short spiky hair, a throwback to the late seventies of my teens. That late night drink in the Khaosan Road was the start of a long and lasting friendship, a bond that grew strong from both the intense shared experience of travelling together and what became a crazy amalgamation of both our sense of humours.

But now is a time for reminiscing, and there is a hint of sadness in the air; our journey is about to end. In Beijing, we have been busy preparing for this trip home with almost military precision. Here is a page from my diary that Kurt dictated to me one day:

Tomorrow, the 15th May, we, that is Jon and Kurt wake up at 8.00 a.m. precisely.

At 8.30 a.m. they will be on their way by means of bicycle (rented) towards the C.I.T.S. (China International Travel Service).

They will find their way by means of Sergeant Scout Jon (an experienced orienteer).

On arrival at the C.I.T.S they will make sure that their bicycles are safely secured.

After entering they will be utmost kind towards the person dealing with the reservation of their ticket.

THE TARGET - Wednesday 25th May, the Chinese train.

If this is not possible we will, if necessary, use violence.

If this is not effective, we will book the earliest possible train out of Beijing. Afterwards we will hold a meeting (wherever) with the results of the two answers. This will decide the way of approaching the Polish guy to get our ticket as soon as possible.

The Polish guy is in fact the reason we are here at all. He and a small group of associates operate a business out of a travellers hotel in Beijing. It's a story we've heard on the grapevine, and it's been reinforced often enough for us to take the risk in coming here. This is how it works: he buys up as many return tickets as he can from his home town in Poland, and armed with these - and his own ticket of course - he sets off on the long journey to Beijing. The subsidised price of these tickets in Poland is negligible compared to the tourist prices set by the government in Beijing, and because the return portion is left open, this part can be sold on to a traveller and rebooked at the aforementioned CITS, the government ticket agency. The outward half of the ticket is thrown away. There are two trains every week for the traveller to choose from, and each takes a different route; we prefer the Chinese train which travels through Mongolia, rather than the Russian train which passes around it. The going price for one of these black market tickets is 80 U.S. dollars, a fraction of the cost of a flight, and with the added value of a Trans-Siberian adventure thrown in, it's an opportunity that can't be missed. For this reason alone, we've taken a big detour from Thailand to come here, taking in the Philippines and Hong Kong en route.

We locate the Polish guy in the lobby of our hotel with huge relief; it is in fact the only travellers hotel in Beijing, and everyone seems to be here for the same reason. He sits quietly going about his business on one of the plush sofas, as his potential customers stand furtively in the background awaiting their turn. It's a curious building, built in the Soviet style and set alongside a canal and a field that look almost rural in outlook. Holed up here are the few white faces to be seen around Beijing, apart from the whistle stop buses that turn up in the more touristic sites now and again - Tiananman Square and the like.

And next door to the hotel is the restaurant where we eat most of our meals. It's formal in presentation - a navy blue carpet, and tables laid carefully with two white table cloths, serviettes and stainless steel chopsticks - with a lengthy menu and waiter service. And it is here that we are taught some important cultural lessons.

The Chinese, who come from outside of the hotel, are loud and rude.

They shout to the waiters across the room and pick at their food, dropping unwanted morsels casually onto the floor. At first we are a bit disgusted, but after a while we decide to do as the locals do. My dish is full of gristle, and most of it ends up on the floor behind me - it feels appropriate and strangely satisfying.

And there are Americans here too; one evening, we are stuck on a table with two young couples, and they are not happy. The women complain that there are no public toilets in Beijing, presumably having been caught short earlier in the day. Then, as they peruse the Chinese menu, the conversation between them goes like this:

"I really miss the food back home."

"I like Pizza."

"Yeah! Which one? I like Pizza Hut."

"I like Domino's."

"Yeah, wow! I could really eat Domino's now."

Kurt says: "For fuck's sake you're in China."

There are in fact a number of missions we need to complete here in our mock-military-style, apart from securing those cheap train tickets. Visas are required for Mongolia, Russia and Poland, and thus the tortuous queuing and filling in of forms to get our stamps of approval from various far-flung parts of the city. We will have to visit them twice, once for drop off and once for collection. And this of course requires transport, for which the budget minded is left with only one choice - the bicycle.

At this time in Beijing, bicycles are an overwhelming presence; the streets are thick with them, and all manner of car-related issues apply to them too: traffic jams, disputes, collisions, road rage. Roundabouts are particularly perilous, with no discernible rules as to who goes first, and we find ourselves weaving this way and that, sometimes missing our turn. And not unnaturally, being amateurs at this game, we find ourselves one day in an accidental collision with one of the locals, slamming hard into his rear wheel as he cuts across us. With me riding pillion and Kurt pedalling - since to hire one bike instead of two will buy us an extra beer in the evening - we are pursued down the road by this angry Chinaman, who kicks at our wheels in an attempt to knock us over. At first we are a little

thrown by this act of aggression, but after a while I kick back, more in defence than anything else, while Kurt curses loudly in Dutch: "Kut! Godverdomme!" More insults are exchanged, though not understood by either party, and after several kicks he seems satisfied and is on his way. This display causes much amusement to the surrounding public who point and laugh energetically; it's something we've witnessed before in China - when a fight breaks out or a dog is viciously kicked, the reaction of onlookers is largely one of hilarity rather than concern. It's a disconcerting reaction.

And while we are out negotiating the hazards of these busy streets, we also need to stock up on provisions for our trip. So far, buying things in China has rarely been straightforward, and we believe this to be related to a number of issues. First, there are two currencies in circulation - the local yuan and the tourist yuan, two different sets of notes with the same face value. The tourist yuan (known as Foreign Exchange Certificates) is the one exchanged in banks, and its rate is fixed by the government; these can then in turn be swapped on the streets for local yuan at the black market rate, almost two for the price of one. So we maintain two sets of currencies and pay with the local one whenever possible. When any particular trader is confronted by a foreigner offering local currency for his wares, his inclination is to hold out for payment with tourist yuan where there is a clear profit to be made. Alternatively his motive may be noble, for we are not officially allowed to have local yuan at all. Nonetheless, the result is the same, and there is no sale. We move on to a different shop.

But on some occasions this explanation is not sufficient. In many places we are simply ignored, and the money is not even seen leaving our wallets. In one shop we point furiously at the racks of cigarettes in a nicotine-starved panic, while miming the act of inhalation and exhalation with two fingers to our lips. The shop keeper does not even meet our eyes. And many a time in restaurants we have had to leave after a period of futile waiting, watching all and sundry being served around us while our stomachs rumble enviously at the food on display. The theory we have heard to account for this behaviour is a deep rooted mistrust of foreigners, which is framed in some historical context such as the opium wars. Suffice to say that the word they use for foreign visitors is a literal

translation of the word 'barbarian'.

With perseverance though, and this being Beijing where perhaps the more enlightened Chinese reside, we manage to stock up on the staples for our trip: beer, cigarettes, batteries, tea, and a rather uninspiring selection of tinned meats and crackers. Most of the tins we buy are completely unfathomable to us apart from a small picture to represent its contents, so we are particularly pleased when we find one that we recognise: alongside the Chinese symbols on the side, this one says in plain English - Peking Duck. This motley collection of tins with their mysterious contents could have been catastrophically unappetising were it not for our trump card: Filipino sweet chilli sauce. This magical substance we discovered in the Philippines, a country where bland food prevailed, and one particularly good brand of sauce came to the rescue. Armed with two bottles of these, there would be nothing that could faze us, not even dog food; the chances of us having bought this by accident are slim, however - the Chinese tend to eat their dogs rather than feed them.

The imported items for our trip are no less important. Vodka, bought duty free on the Hong Kong to Guangzhou ferry - two bottles. Valium, bought in Bangkok (we have considered the fact that we may get bored on such a long train journey) - forty tablets. Also from Bangkok - denim and music tapes to sell for roubles in Russia (the official exchange rate there is also artificially high), though I am doubtful that the cheap unfashionable jeans that Kurt has bought could be desired by anyone, anywhere; we will see ...

And souvenirs - we can carry more luggage now that we are on our way home. For some reason we are taken with the local art. There are sellers crouched by the roadside near the hotel who, in clandestine fashion, unroll their works of art before you as you pass. Always watercolours with bold strokes on thin rice paper, but with different subjects - a Samurai warrior, a Chinese garden, a plain Chinese symbol with some spiritual meaning. They are so cheap, we buy them up enthusiastically; unfortunately we do not consider that they will be viewed differently through more discerning eyes, and thus are unaware of their true destiny - unwanted gifts left in the cupboards and attics of our extended families back home.

Then amongst all this preparation and day to day existence, a shock. I am in the hotel room, rolling up my latest works of art into a neat tube, when Kurt comes in. His face is ashen, and if it weren't for my lack of superstition in this regard, I would say he had actually seen a ghost. More likely, something really bad has happened.

"Jon, sit down," he says.

"Why? What happened?" my mind is spinning with all the possibilities, but nothing is registering yet.

"There's someone downstairs in the lobby. You won't believe it."

"Who?" and this time another spin, but still no click of the wheel to register a name.

"It's Stacey."

It was then that I sat down.