

# *The Fiery Buddha*

*The Trans Siberian Across Russia to China and Japan*



*John Alexander*

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*Cover illustration: Acalanatha, the wrathful manifestation of Mahavairocana Buddha, and the principal deity invoked during the goma (fire-walking) ritual in Shingon Buddhism. Known in Japan as Fudo-Myo.*

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# Stockholm

## Prologue

*What are the big questions in life? Where you live, what you do and who you live with. So now at thirty something and I have no place to live, no job and a relationship gone sour. Sweden is not my country. After five years I get it. It never will be. No country will be. That's what it is to leave your own country. You can't go back, but you can never live anywhere else. Well, I can try. Back to Australia. It can't be any worse.*

*I'm taking the long way back. Via Finland through Russia and the Trans Siberian to China. Then Japan, Hong Kong and home. Two, maybe three months of traveling. No rush. Right now I'm on the boat between Stockholm and Helsinki. Planning visits to many people I've met over the years during my past travels. In Helsinki and in Leningrad. Take a walk upstairs to the upper deck and listen to the dance band, watch drunken people gyrating on the dance floor. Drunken fools having a good time. Is there anything more depressing than the desperation of drunken people having a good time?*

*Return to the cabin and find that a tall thin guy with long hair and drooping moustache on the top bunk. Wearing a Metallica 4-Ever T shirt, his head resting on folded hands and staring at the ceiling a few inches above his long nose.*

*Doesn't move. Lost in thought. I say hi.*

*His name is Håkon and he is from Tumba in the south of Stockholm. A truck driver. Going to Helsinki for the weekend to be with his wife and kid. An itinerant Swede with wife and child in Rihämäki, thirty minutes by train from Helsinki. Every Friday, he takes the boat. And Sunday night, takes the boat back again. The perfect marriage. One night a week.*



# Helsinki

*Helsinki 21.11.1985*

Follow the street from the harbour toward to the town. Pass a bookshop, turn back and walk in. Browse through the shelves looking for suitable reading material to keep me occupied for six days of train travel. The young woman behind the counter approaches.

'Looking for anything in particular?'

'Just browsing.' On the table are a pile of books on reincarnation, past lives, astrology, new age, massage. Here's a book called '*If You Meet the Buddha On The Road, Kill Him.*' Strange kind of new age philosophy. 'Good title,' says the woman. 'It's an introduction to Buddhism... you know, for Westerners.'

'Well, I like the idea of reincarnation. Lord knows I've made enough mistakes in this life.'

She picks up a book and on the cover a picture of a woman in death throes. The title says *Seth Speaks*. 'Do you know this one?' she asks. Look at the back cover. What to expect after death. How to contact dead friends and relatives. Past lives. Sure, why not.

Look around the shelves and all these books that can make your life better, and make you calm and wise and spiritual. If only. Also a section on *Sami* shamanism from Finnish Lappland. Fascinating. Books on tree spirits and bears and natural healing. A cabinet filled with mountain crystal, healing pyramids and tarot cards. Colourful if nothing else. 'Nice shop...' I look at the name plate on her jacket, 'Mervi? Is that right?'

'Thank you. Yes. Are you here long?'

‘Just on my way to the station. Travelling a bit, you know.’

‘I think you’re about to begin a long journey,’ she says.

‘That’s for sure,’ I tell her, the Trans Siberian train ticket rustling in my pocket.



*Era Nova Bookshop Helsinki (Mervi to the right)*

‘I mean in here,’ she says, pointing to her head.

‘Maybe. Who knows?’ Buy the books and she puts some postcards into the brown paper bag. Different pictures of Buddha. Including a Buddha covered in flames.

‘For the journey,’ she says. ‘Good for meditation.’

Nod my thanks and walk toward Helsinki’s Central Station.

The train leaves at 1200, midday. Every day of the week. Just a reminder of the over-shadowing proximity of the Soviet Union. Finnish travellers take the bus or the boat for the cheap booze - no special perks with the train trip. Not for the drinkers. For me the train represents a civilised form of transport.

Sit alone at a table at the central station cafe. Drink tea and watch the slowly breathing faces of half dead men. Ravaged by the excesses of alcohol. An old man weeps, grumbles and groans - his bottom lip pursed to his nose and strands of black hair greased back to his ears. Vacant tear filled eyes.



*Central Station Helsinki*

A young man, a boy, wide-eyed and drunk, pleading guilty as uniformed policemen drag him from the table to the cold outdoors. His crime? Drinking without lunch. At the Helsinki Central Station it is obligatory to order a sandwich with your beer - or in this guy's case, Koskenkorva vodka. And all he wanted was drink. Another poor fool unable to face another night sober. Nor meet another day.

I've met a few Finnish people - I think I understand. From Rovianeemi to the eastern border where the Karelian exiles still brood 30 years after their expulsion. Calm with nature, at rage with man. Finns. Once forbidden their language, forbidden their past; no politics, money or sobriety. The tired old men in the station cafe, born grass blades, trees and forest, as if some ancient mage of

Pohjola gave them life and now they seek to be unborn. *As if liquor will make me unborn. I will be forest and flesh of green blade, staring with vacant tearless eyes.*

A young man with a glass and beer bottle sits opposite and starts drinking. Desperate eyes registering nothing but the turmoil inside. A bouncer comes to throw him out. No drinking without lunch. Not at a railway cafe. Not in Finland.

'He's with me,' I tell him. 'We've ordered lunch.' The bouncer leaves and the man looks up.

'Thanks,' he says. 'Nowhere else open.'

'Sure.'

I look toward the platform. Outside some icy flakes fall to the ground - not quite snow. Pick up my travel bag and get up.

I get on the train at ten to twelve. The carriage is empty. One passenger. Me. At twelve precisely the train lurches forward. For the next five hours the window shows blurred images of snow covered conifers and grey sky.

Browse through the first pages of *Seth Speaks*. Given up reading novels. Too depressing. Ploughed through Russian literature years ago. The first book was a novel by Turgenev. *First Love*. About a Russian seductress who toys with a young man before he is sent off to the war. His final thoughts as he lays in a ditch, dying, of course, are of her. She reads his final letter, smiling at the thought that he has never once experienced a woman's touch in his short life, and that the thought of her would be the last he would ever have.

Yes, quite a few Russian novels over the years. *The Idiot*... that was my favourite. A soul too pure and too decent, that insanity is the only recourse. *The Fiery Angel*. *The Master and Margherita*. *Brothers*

*Karamazkov. Dostoyevsky. Briussov. Bulgakov. Russian stories, Russian madness.*



*Helsinki Railway Station interior*

*Russia*

**Viborg, 21.11.1985**

The train stops at the border at 5pm. Recollect earlier journeys to Leningrad and border stops up to 7 - 8 hours; by bus, by plane, doesn't matter; Russian border patrols go through everything. With their trained chilled look of contempt. What a system. To train pimple-faced seventeen year olds to be as unpleasant and dehumanised as a society can orchestrate. Tragic. Not to say extremely tiresome.



Prepare myself for the worst. The Soviet official in khaki uniform, wide brimmed hat and red Soviet star like a third cycloptic eye. Hand over passport, visa, immigration forms, customs forms and currency declaration form.

‘What books and magazines you have?’

I show him five books, all in English. He leafs through them, checks the spines, glances at random pages, then hands them back. Then leaves.

It can't be all, surely? Get off the train (we're at Viborg, formerly a splendid Finnish town, now a run down slum of a place), and change some money. Kronor to roubles. Return to the compartment, the train not going anywhere.

Shortly afterwards another uniformed official enters, dark blue, blue peaked cap, red trim. Must be customs I reflect. This is where they tear all my luggage apart, rip apart the camera and give me back the small pieces to reassemble (which happens a lot - too bad if you got film in the camera).

'You want some tea?' he asks. '*Chai?*'

Confusion passes after a short interval, clear the cobwebs from my head and says, yes, please. *Da, spasiba*. And within a few minutes he comes back with tea and biscuits, and - unbelievably - a faint hint of friendly smile. Maybe this is a good omen. Usually any kind of smile toward a Soviet official and they find some way to make you feel depressed. Strip away the last vestiges of humanity through bureaucracy and totalitarianism. The entire country under the governance of a wax replica. Rumours that Brezhnev died years ago and the politburo drag out his wax effigy once a month just to keep people in their place. A kind of reverse Lenin syndrome. Seeing as how, you know, Lenin's dead. Even if the wax effigy lives on in the Red Square mausoleum.

Germany is the fatherland and England is the home country; America is the land of the free and Australia is God's own earth, Russia is the great mother, *matr*, and maybe there is something to that. German patriarchal discipline, American lack of discipline, English colonialism, Australian patriotic fervour and Russian maternalism. Show any signs of happiness or contentment and mother Russia slaps you down. She has her own harsh version of reality. Aggressive officials, KGB paranoia, queues, endless waiting and an endless stream of grey and beaten faces on the footpaths, at railway stations, bus stops, in the stores.

But when you are reduced to the beaten down state of the average soviet citizen - melancholic, depressed, despairing, thoroughly beaten, Russia the Great Mother, puts an arm around you in consolation. Like my mother anyway. 'Son, you'll work till you die. Get used to it.' And; 'Son, who said life was meant to be easy. If you're miserable now it's going to get worse. Get used to it!'

So so... when you expect the worst, you get tea and biscuits.

I should arrive around 8pm and Tanya is supposed to pick me up at the station. Tanya is an old friend from way back. Risky business. In Brezhnev's Soviet Union it's illegal for foreigner's to have unauthorised contact with locals, and visa entry requires a hotel (for foreigners), booked and paid for.

Helsinki  
§•  
12:00

Leningrad  
•§  
20:30

# Leningrad

*Leningrad, 22.11.1985*

The chaos of Leningrad station. Yep. There's Tanya. I have two seconds to say hello before the Intourist representative grabs hold of me, places me against the wall keeping Tanya at a distance, next to one more foreign traveller, a Mrs Whitworth from Vancouver Canada. There are separate Intourist cars waiting for each of us. Tanya cannot follow (forbidden) and we arrange to meet at the hotel.

The black Moskavitch takes me to the Pulkovskaya Hotel. At the reception desk a severe looking young woman in red uniform tells me my name is not on the list. She makes some phone calls. There's been a mix-up. Mrs Whitworth has been sent to the wrong hotel. I'm supposed to be at the Moskavaya. 'Wait please,' says the girl at the reception desk.



*Hotel Pulkovskaya, 1985 - wrong size bath plugs*

Tanya (being Russian) is not allowed to enter the hotel and waits outside. Cold November air - darkness, light snow fall and about -5°. I go outside and explain the problem. She is not surprised. For Russian people everyday is problems, mix-ups, bureaucratic idiocy. 'Maybe five minutes,' I tell her.

I walk back to the hotel and the doorman holds out his hand. 'Card!' he says.

'I don't have card,' I explain, 'I'm not checked in.'

'Then you cannot enter hotel' he says.

'My luggage is at reception' I tell him. I point toward my travel bag.

'Njet. No card, not come in,' he says.

The argument begins to get hostile; between myself, Tanya, the doorman, another doorman, two Intourist representatives, and now a policeman has joined in. The snow is falling quite heavily by now.

Another doorman - he who let me in earlier - joins in, and confirms that I came in earlier. I go back in. This might take longer than five minutes.

Now its getting complicated and Mrs Whitworth a travel weary lady of sixty or so is no longer concealing her irritation. I must go to the Moskavaya, although that would be Mrs Whitworth's booking.

'Do you have a room here?' I ask the reception girl.

'Yes,' she says.

'May I stay here?, I ask.

'Yes', she says. Then gives me a key card for a room on the sixth floor.

I leave my bag and go downstairs to meet Tanya. She drives us to her flat in Kopchik one of the sprawling Leningrad suburbs. The windscreen wipers scraping against the scratched windscreen glass to brush away the snow flakes. Scraping and squealing. Tanya wrapped in her wolf skin fur coat and tight Levi jeans. A risky yet powerful symbol of her western allegiances. And a fox fur *ushanka*. Expensive, but less risky.



*Kopchik, Leningrad suburb, 1985*

Her flat is on the 14th floor. Slava is in the US. Her husband. In Chicago. 'I don't think he's coming back,' she says. 'You remember, he's Jewish. Better in America.' How did he fix a visa, I wonder? Turns out he has relatives in Chicago. But this is a conversation too complicated for my limited vocabulary. And current frame of mind. Not hard to figure their marriage wasn't going so well.

I struggle in broken Russian, give her a bag full of western commodities. Levis, Chanel, Burberry - brands are the only

currency of value in a country where everyone has money and money is worth zilch. A bag full of roubles might buy a few oranges, but they won't buy you a place in a queue a kilometre long. For that you need Levis. Or Adidas. Marina and Sasha drop by and I have some stuff for them too. Enough for a year of gratitude, kind words and Marina's tears. Tough to survive a Leningrad winter and amazing how a few H&M T-shirts and Adidas running shoes can help out. 'Where's Kostya?' I ask. 'We see him tomorrow,' says Tanya.

We drink samovar tea, Moskovaya vodka and fill up the plates from the spread Tanya has laid out - five different kinds of *pirogi*, and a dozen other plates of different salads, and... well, Tanya is famous for fixing anything, not least food, really good food.

Marina helps out with my failing Russian - she's a curator at the Hermitage (one of hundreds), and speaks passable English. Tanya - not a word. She drives me back to the hotel at 3am, through the empty endless streets of Leningrad, as the snow falls, and my whole being is tingling in the winter cold. A foreigner visiting a Leningrad flat till 3am. Maybe. But staying overnight? Strictly forbidden. And in every stairway, every entrance hall in every apartment block sits a KGB *babushka*, sitting, watching, informing...

Back at the hotel. Sit in the bath and add to the hot water two capsules of bubble bath to conceal the brownish colour and sulphuric smell. The water drains slowly as the bath plug is too small to fill the hole. Turning on the tap with my toe at regular intervals. Steam filling the room. Fogging up my image on the bathroom mirror. Who needs reflections?

## ***Pushkin 23.11.1985***

Today we are visiting Janna and Gaga at their *dasha* in Pushkin, an hour or so from Leningrad. Gaga is the artist and Janna, his muse. Janna's features are as oriental as they are slavic, not surprisingly, as she is originally from an eastern Soviet republic where east and west become indiscernible. She is strikingly beautiful in spite of some 40 years of soul destroying Soviet system. A system that turns people old and grey long before their time.

Being an artist in the Soviet system means you are paid by the state and thus must get a state seal of approval. Not that Gaga's work is political, just prolific. Sketches, drawings, acrylics, etchings, prints - he must be producing four or so in the morning and another five or six in the afternoon.

While Gaga is preoccupied in his studio Gaga, Janna, Kostya and myself take the twenty minute walk to the Pushkin Palace, the local tourist attraction. Five minutes is enough. It is minus 5° and with a chill factor twice that, so we hail a cab.

Officially the town is Tsarskoye Selo and home to the notorious Catherine's Palace. A long long queue but Janna has contacts - Gaga is after all secretary of the Union of the Soviet Academy of Artists and that counts for something. Not least walking past the long line of people standing in the snow and cold like we're KGB proxies or Politburo delegates. The old ladies in the cloak room take our coats, paying special attention to my NK department store winter jacket. We wander through the magnificent hallways of Catherine's Palace, passing by the tourist groups - all Russian - Tsarskoye Selo is off the winter tourist track.

The best room was the bedroom of Catherine the Great - not yet restored since when the building was virtually demolished by German bombs prior to the Siege of Leningrad in 1941. The interior restoration for the rest of building is typically Soviet mediocre, so

this room has an authenticity lacking elsewhere, and not least a compelling narrative...\*

This is the room where Catherine the Great entertained a bevy of young lovers, reputedly died while engaged in sexual congress with a horse. These Russian stories - most likely a malicious rumour circulated by Polish army officers.

As I'm trying to take in the ambience of an unfathomable historical epoch, Kostya is talking non-stop - he has some projects and directives; papers that must be smuggled to important contacts in the West. Also, he says - most important - the European Patent Office in Munich, Germany. He has a manila folder filled with his hand drawn designs. These designs will revolutionize the energy industry, and 'make millionaires of us all.' Janna tells him to shut up and leave me alone. He cannot of course so at one point Janna smacks his bald round head. '*Basta*', she says. Kostya spends 20 hours a day sleeping and four hours talking non-stop. He is quite mad, but he may well be a genius. How can you tell?

The buffet room is overcrowded and vile smelling, Jana decides we'll eat back at the *dasha*. We go to the cloakroom to get our coats. I hand over my number to the same *babushka* and she returns with a strange brown tattered Russian rag of a coat, far removed from the plush grey insulated coat I'd left there an hour earlier. Which was conspicuously western, and probably conspicuously warm, a precaution against the Siberian winds to come.

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\* *The palace was used as barracks and for target practice. Before retreating, the Germans set the palace ablaze. After the Soviets retook Tsarskoe Selo, "the Catherine Palace presented a terrible scene. The great hall, the picture gallery and the gala staircase had all collapsed... The Amber Room had been stripped and the gala rooms gutted by a fire... A most terrible sight was Ratsrelli's vista of golden doorways, now reduced to raw bricks laden with snow. Cameron's classic suite of rooms was not destroyed but had been much vandalised"* (Edmund Stevens, *Russia Is No Riddle*, Kessinger Publishing, 2005, p. 184).

I shake my head and hand it back. 'Not mine,' I say. The woman is insistent. 'Njet,' I tell her. So she shrugs and walks away. Now I'm concerned. Apart from the coat being warm it contains cash and passport, tickets... Janna goes behind the counter, starts shouting at the old ladies, and going through the coats. Now Tanya joins in and the dialogue is too heated to follow. A crowd begins to gather. Janna's performance is compelling and terrifying. The old ladies are cowering in trepidation. 'Old trick' says Kostya chuckling as the fight ensues, 'try to cheat westerner and maybe you get away with it...'



*Kostya at Catherine Palace, Pushkin*

Both Janna and Tanya are going through the coat racks one after the other, and right at the back corner... there it is, my grey Siberian winter coat. The *babushka* tries to grab it; *njet'* she says. But Janna is quicker, takes it and hands it over, glaring at the two terrified cloakroom *babushkas*. 'Check pockets,' screams Janna, 'check pockets.' 'Slooshya slooshya', screams one of the *babushkas*, her hands wringing in prayer, 'mistake, just mistake.' Janna screams something back, with her extended finger pointing long and hard that reduces the *babushka* to tears. 'Njet, njet,' screams the *babushka*,

who points to her colleague, who immediately cowers to the ground and begins to weep as well. Janna tosses a black lock of hair from her brow. 'Everything there?' she asks me, and I nod. 'Korosh. Davai' Good, she says, lets go. And casts a final scornful glance at the poor *babushkas* who have a long long queue of worried patrons waiting to pick up their coats. Ah this Russian propensity for drama.

Walking through the snowy gardens of the Catherine Palace - even covered in snow - the magnificence of the place is overwhelming. With my coat back I'm warm to enough appreciate the views of the Pyramid and the Chinese Pavilion.

We get a bus back to the *dasha* ('impossible to get taxi in bad weather,' says Marina); in fact a total of three buses, all of them falling apart, smelling of diesel, cold and jerking violently with every gear change. At two kopecks a ride what can you expect.

At the studio Gaga is at work on his fourth picture - we are frozen through. Janna heats up a bucket of water on the stove removes my socks and sticks my feet in there.

An artist from the studio next door, Volodya, drops in - a tiny summer house studio room, now with seven people, the lack of heating is a minor concern. Tanya makes borscht and theres plenty of bread. 'I have vernissage tomorrow,' says Volodya. 'You are all invited.'

Gaga has a video camera now, and Jana makes a video of Gaga painting a picture of workers in a coal mine. Volodya, the most depressing looking man I've met, with thin strands of black hair attempting to cover his bald scalp, and a Savonrola-like countenance enhanced by his black clothes and black cape - black fingernails.

Now Kostya has an inspiration for a film based on a little-known historical incident. 'This will provide an esoteric commentary of how Mongolian envoys payed honour to Lenin,' narrates Kostya. 'When Lenin was sick the Mongolian shamans offered him sacred medicine. They guarantee this would restore his health. But Lenin, whether out of paranoia or fear or discomfort, refused to take the medication and died soon after. The main ingredient of this medication was the excrement of the then Dalai Lama. It was proved to work miracles!' says Kostya. 'Lenin was a fool. He should have taken this sacred medication. Then he would have lived and spared the Soviet Union the horrors of Stalinism.'

We must return to Leningrad, which means pushing the car because the battery is dead. Probably 50% of Leningrad cars are started this way at this time of year. You just need to leave one light on and drain the intolerably weak battery, and there you are once again, with a group of friends or strangers, pushing through the metre deep snow, through grime and dirt. Kostya sits in the front seat with five of us pushing against a newly formed snow drift. 'He is like cat', says Janna. 'Sleeping 20 hours, waits for food then falls asleep again.'

'Absolutely true,' says Kostya.

Back at the Hotel Pulkovskaya. Outside is a statue - a huge shard of metal pointing upwards to the sky - a monument and tribute to the Soyuz space crews: 'We call it the dream of the impotent man,' says Kostya.

Another late night, or early morning, whichever way you look at it. Makes no difference when you can't sleep.

## **Leningrad 24.11.1895**

Meet Tanya outside the hotel, standing in the icy wind, together with Sasha and Marina. Drive to Kostya's miserable apartment, a single room full of paranoid chaos; papers, files, books pictures, tin foil, sketches, drawings, piles of newspapers...

'Bit of mess,' he says. 'They let me home only two days ago.'

'Home from where?'

'Home from lunatic asylum. Three months in lunatic asylum. I commit the crime of not working for state. So I must be mental dangerous criminal person...'

Kostya has a Russian way of talking, avoiding definite and indefinite articles, speaking in short staccato sentences, interjected with short nervous laughs, twitches and flickering eyes. The accent is Russian and the twitches and tics I guess are as well. 'Electric shock treatment', he says, and worse, although he doesn't talk about it, from the frequent occasions he has been locked up in asylums getting 'cured'.

We are on our way to meet Janna and Gaga at a vernissage, for an artist friend of theirs, Volodya. Janna and Gaga are two artists with their studio in the city centre. On my last visit I joined them at their *dasha* in the small town of Pushkin about 25 kilometres from the city. Gaga is high up in the Soviet Union Artist's Academy and his flamboyant eccentricities keep the KGB at bay. No-one knows what to make of Gaga. He shouts curses to the KGB into the 'hidden' microphones of art galleries and the Academy dining room. Tells them to 'go suck their own cocks,' (*Pasha ti na hoi!*) and violate their own mothers (the most common of Russian curses). But his art is considered to be 'in the service of the State' because to be an artist in the Soviet Union means you have to have their blessing in order to get the monthly pay check. Also his dad - a victim of the

Leningrad Siege in the Great Patriotic War - was also an artist of repute, and his dad before him — another sound reason to keep KGB investigators at bay. His wife, Janna, tall, elegant with jet black wisps of hair across her strong Asian features, is also a card carrying artist. She paints watercolors of famous sites and buildings around Leningrad.



*Samovar chai with Marina, conservationist at the Hermitage*

'Put scarf round neck' says Marina 'and wear this.' She gives me a typical Russian *ushanka* of black polyester; keeps my head warm and conceals my Western appearance. 'If car is stopped', she says, 'point to throat. You have sore throat and cannot speak.' Another regulation. No fraternising with Western visitors without a permit.

'Yes,' says Kostya with his permanent smile and nervous laugh. 'Most important. We do not want troubles with KGB.' Well, that goes double for me.

After twenty minutes of Tanya's navigating through tram tracks, buses, and black Moskavitch cars we pass by an imposing tall brick building in the middle of a modest park. 'We must stop here' says Kostya. Tanya parks the car and our little group of four follows

after Kostya whose tiny dwarf like body is racing ahead at breakneck speed.

It is the *Datsan Gunzechoinei*, Russia's northern most Buddhist temple. With its splendid Buddhist wheel and Buddhist *stupa* on the roof top. It's style and structure unmistakably Tibetan. Only right now it is not a Buddhist temple. It has been taken over by the state by the Soviet Academy of Sciences for the dissection and experimentation on live animals. 'Soviet mind is to desecrate anything that is holy,' says Kostya again with the nervous laugh. 'If Buddhism says to respect life, then Soviet state says we make you piss over your respect...'

It's a magnificent building, and I'm thinking this is the end of Kostya's talk when he pushes me up the stone stairs. 'Come.' Tanya, Marina and Sasha decide to wait outside.

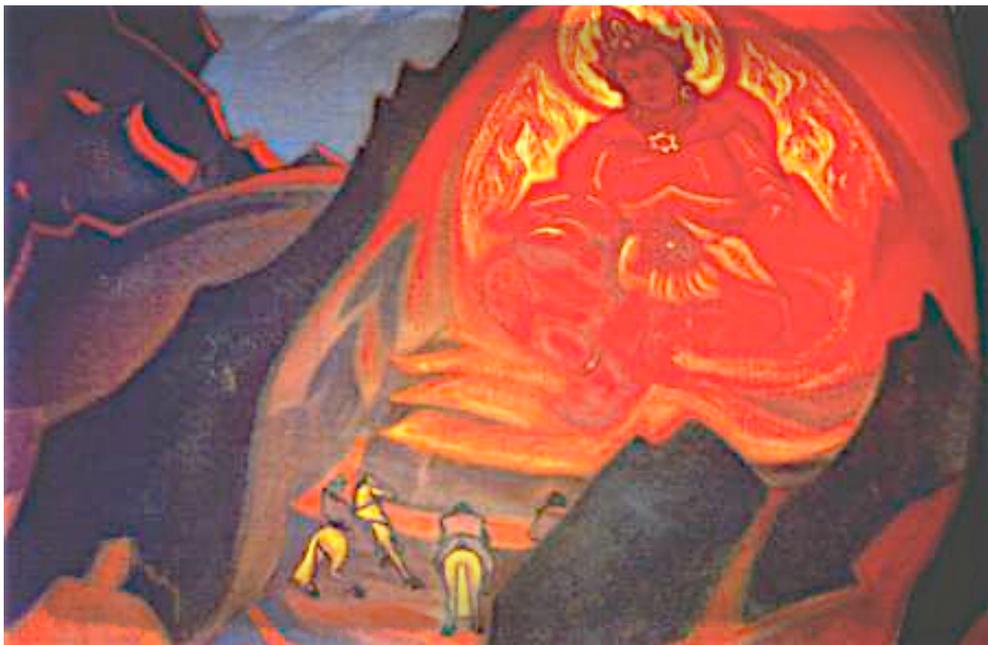


*Datsan Gunzechoinei, Leningrad*

So me and Kostya, we walk through the enormous doors and up to an armed Soviet Red Guard, and a room full of people in white coats, white plastic head caps, and white plastic shoe coverings. Kostya shows the guard, a guard brandishing Kalishnikov 47 over

his shoulder, a plastic card, and we walk past, Kostya and Tanya and myself, as he whispers to me ‘Speak only Russian,’ (heh heh heh), and the team of plastic covered laboratory people cast a cursory glance as walk up the staircase and to the temple balcony.

Tibetan *thankas*, scrolls, artifacts, stupas, piled up on benches and tables along the thin alcove that makes up the mezzanine floor. Below white robed members of the SSA place specimens in jars, examine microbes under microscopes, and the cages of ferrets, dogs, minks and mice observe from the cages piled up on the back wall. But up here... it looks like it has abandoned for decades. Which in fact it has been. Probably since 1937. And what’s left of the artifacts brought here by nine lamas in 1915, are piled up on tables, or on the floor, and covered in dust. Kostya picks up a painting which has fallen out of its frame, and blows off the dust.



*The Order of Rigden Djapo*

‘Painting of Nikolai Röerich’ says Kostya. ‘Original...’

‘Original? Is that possible...’

‘Yes, yes. Most Tibetan paintings Roerich finish in 1930s. First in National Gallery, then brought here when Nazis invade 1941...’ He

picks up the picture, its broken frame on the floor. I look down at the lab rats on the ground floor. With their white coats, plastic goggles and microscopes. Totally uninterested. As with all travels to the Soviet Union, as a westerner with Russians, most of the time you have no idea what's going on, what's true or not true, what is allowed or not allowed, nor when you'll get picked by someone in a uniform for doing something, and you have no idea what...

Most Roerich paintings I'd seen before are subdued blue pastel landscapes of Tibetan mountains, solitary horsemen on jagged peaks. This picture... it is Buddha on fire, a burning rage of a painting.

So how does a Tibetan Buddhist temple occupy this piece of prime real estate in Leningrad? A Russian born Tibetan monk Agvan Dorzhiev, from Ulan-Ede (a small dot on the Trans Siberia railway line near Lake Bajkal) comes to St Petersburg in 1909 as an envoy to the Dalai Lama. His mission? To build a Buddhist *datsan* (temple) in St Petersburg. It would be a residence for the first Buddhist ruler of Russia. Despite the protests from the Orthodox church the temple was finally consecrated in 1915, complete with a sitting Buddha (*Shakyamuni*), a standing Buddha (*Maitreya*) - gifts from the Siamese royal family and embassy, together with a staff of nine lamas.

The name *Gunzechoinei* means 'The Source of the Buddha's Religious Teaching that has Deep Compassion for All Beings.' Two years later came the revolution - the temple was ransacked and up to the present day has been a site of suffering and political abuse. Between 1935 and 1937 the Russian secret police NKVD had the remaining Buddhist monks deported to labour camps or rounded up and shot. Today white cloaked members of SSA have taken over the premises, dissecting animals as a demonstrative polemic on the part of the Soviet state — is it to say there there is no compassion for any being...\*

Walk out onto the roof where you see the Buddhist wheel and the two deer on each side. Before Kostya launches into a new monologue on the cosmic laws of Buddhism, I ask: 'What was the card you showed them... that they let us in?' He takes out of his wallet, incased in metal foil with pictures of butterflies covered in gold glitter. He removes the card from the tin foil covering; 'for protection,' he says. The card shows a picture of Kostya, his chubby Buddha like face, and the logo of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, listing Kostya's grading and position. Study the cyrillic letters: 'You're a physicist?'

I thought it was because Kostya was crazy. Which he is. But also because (I discover) he is one the top ten molecular physicists in Leningrad. Who, unfortunately for him, has authority issues. Not least when it comes to the Soviet defense programme. Hence the ELS and the tics, the twitches and the nervous laughs. 'Cos there ain't nothing funny. Might account for his passion for Tibetan Buddhism, astro physics and paranormal psychology.

Outside the temple we stop, at Kostya's insistence, watch as Kostya looks in all different directions on the staircase leading up to the entrance. 'Come,' he says, puts a rouble coin in the palm of my hand, waves his hand across mine in some kind of magical gesture, and he places the coin beneath a stone plate then gestures that I do the same. 'For protection', he says, 'from evil spirits.'

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*[\*In 1989 the Buddhist Community in what was to become once more St Petersburg, was officially recognised for the first time since the revolution, and the first service in fifty years was held here. Since 2013 the Temple has been re-opened by the Tibetan Gelugpa School and is open to visitors daily. After about a dozen trips to Leningrad in five years, I visited St Petersburg for the first time in 1992. Political slogans had been replaced by billboard ads for cat food, queues for buses not bread, and the datsan, restored to its original Tibetan decor an the Buddhist wheel painted gold once more. But still the same babushkas sweeping the streets with broken brooms. The things that change, and the things that don't.]*

‘Of course. What did you think? Why else they lock me up in insane asylum?’

On the steps of the Tibetan Buddhist temple, directly beneath the Buddhist Wheel (which the Soviet authorities have not yet removed), Kostya grabs my arms with intensity while taking out a black silk bag from his jacket pocket. ‘Now,’ he says, ‘very important.’ And he takes out five pieces of cloudy white mountain crystal, places them in my hand. ‘They have all been blessed with spirit of enlightenment, here at temple. Now filled with powerful energy. This one you must give to Edgar Mitchell, NASA parapsychologist. He will understand. This one you must keep for yourself and the remaining pieces, you must give to important people who can spread energy of world healing. You understand?’

‘Sure Kostya. Understood.’

‘When you meet such people you will understand. Remember, for world healing.’

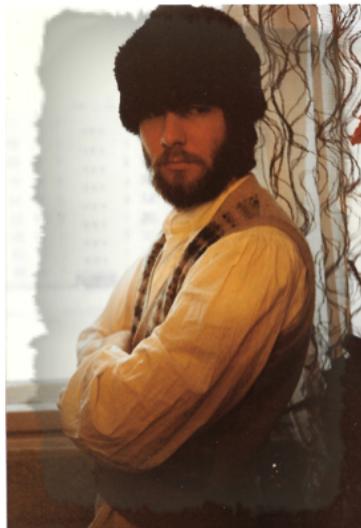
We return to the car where snow flakes are falling onto the steamed up windows and rejoin Tanya, Marina and Sasha. No-one complains about waiting - no-one ever does. Tanya slaps Kostya’s bald head. ‘One day they will find all those roubles’ she tells him. ‘Then what?’ ‘They will server higher purpose,’ he says, ‘no matter who finds them.’

We pass the Hermitage and drive beside the Nevsky River - some people walking slowly along the cold pathways by the water, wrapped in black clothes, and old ladies in blue serge head scarves sweeping the street.

At the artists’ academy there is - besides the vernissage of Volodya’s work - an exhibition of the life of Belentov. Belentov was a writer and artist whose life has been portrayed by Gaga’s grandfather. Gaga is the third generation of artists and his son, Leosha - a deep brooding introvert dark haired sullen youth - the very opposite of

his father - is carrying on the tradition. At sixteen, his sketches of Leningrad show a sombre city, always in darkness and in winter, old people in dark coats, half turned as if aware of the intruding eyes of the artist.

And I am supposed to blend in with the local people, a foreigner, a spy in a city of darkness and secrets, not least the one I now share with Tanya, walking a razor's edge and with an ego as big as Siberia. A room filled with Russian people who have lived their thousand lives - perhaps I've lived only a few. I recognise many faces, many spirits; Janna, Tanya... Maybe why leaving Sweden was not so difficult - a country of new souls and unlived lives, of IKEA kitchens and black coffee, and problems never too big that can't be put in the back of a Volvo and driven away.



*Blending in...*

Here is an etching of the great artist Belentov, as portrayed by Gaga's grandfather. Look at that face staring back over a hundred years of troubled history. The face of the tormented genius. Born November 8th. The same birthday as Dostoyevsky. Then there are the paintings of Volodya. Self portrait through a shattered mirror; family portrait with husband, wife and three children staring out of the canvas and into the void, a young woman with a manic gaze as if reaching out to give you the disease of her madness. Indeed, this is a country of tortured souls.

At the vernissage fellow artists, Gaga included, stand up with glass in hand and declare how fine these paintings are. Volodya beams with delight — quite a feat for the most melancholic man in the Soviet Union. A disposition no doubt that suits his artistic expression; his paintings are quite brilliant.

After the exhibition we push start Gaga's car through the snow and slush - a common sight on the Leningrad streets in winter - which says more about Soviet manufactured car batteries than the hardships of winter. Outside the Soviet Union Academy of Artists Gaga decides it's easier to leave the car running outside the building, but takes off the windscreen wipers anyway, because they are always the first thing to get stolen. Then the mirrors, then the wheels - car radios are portable, just like in Italy. You can always pick out a car-owner by the radio they are carrying under their arm.

On the way back from the vernissage Gaga is stopped by the police for diving in a bus lane, and gets fined 30 roubles. During the conversation I have the scarf wrapped around my 'bad throat' and careful not to make eye contact with the penetrating glances of the two police officers. Gaga's driving is appalling - he is truly an artist.

Now late evening, we visit yet another artist at his studio; Janna and Gaga return to their apartment and we will meet up later. So it is Kostya, Tanya and myself walking slowly through the slushy and crowded Nevsky Prospekt until we reach the home of Igor Smirnatov, artist and parapsychologist, and his wife Ira. Also present is Viktor, also a parapsychologist? It seems that all Russian people are parapsychologists, with their divining rods, and healing hands, crystals and pyramids, Tibetan *thankas* and Buddha statues; so much for the Leninist vision of the secularised state.\*

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\* *Before the Revolution there were more than 2000 spiritualist societies in Russia. For all of Lenin's and Stalin's and Politburo's brand of logical solutions to shaping an atheist state, is there anywhere with more superstition, paranormal psychology, divining, aura reading, faith healing?*

At 10 pm the door bell rings. In Leningrad there are no door codes, no telephone calls, no 'lets meet, say week 32 at eight...' 'Maybe make it eight twenty. So we get to watch Dallas...' Sweden is world away.... In Leningrad there are KGB *babushkas*, suspicious neighbors, tapped telephones and concealed microphones.

Our visitor is Sergei Sergeivitch, one more aspiring artist and as melancholic as Volodya. I'd met him two years ago. 'How are you Sergei?' 'I am depressed,' he says. 'Very depressed.' Igor provides a slide show of his work. A painting of Igor Tjarkovsky the Soviet pioneer of underwater birth technique. Babies are born swimming and remain harmonious for the rest of their lives. That's the theory.

His daughter was born underwater. The painting shows babies and dolphins underwater. He has a series of portraits of famous Russians, some slides of paintings on exhibition in Boston, and a slide of a painting he had to destroy. 'The devils in the picture were tormenting me' says Igor. 'I was forced to burn it. Otherwise it would have destroyed me.' He takes out a divining rod and holds them over one of his paintings. Then another, and another. The metal rod twists and turns over each painting. 'You see,' he says, 'different psychic force in each painting. Depending on energy in painting.' The divining rod spins wildly over a portrait of Russian poet Sergei Esenin. He comes to a painting of Mayakovsky - Esenin's rival poet. No movement.

A knock at the door. These strange Russian doors. The knock stifled by the thick plastic padding that covers the door from top to bottom. All Russian apartment doors have this padding arrangement - 'its for insulation,' someone tells me. But more likely some protection field blocking KGB psychic disturbances. Just a guess.

It's Vanya. A few years back Vanya used his psychic energy to cure a severe migraine attack. It was a short term remedy and much appreciated at the time. Whether it was Vanya's healing hands or just the luxury of another person's compassion - who can tell? I've

been plagued with headaches since age four. 'Don't be stupid,' my mother would say. 'You're not old enough to have headaches.' She'd say the same about my sleeping problems. But I still didn't sleep.

Vanya, then Janna and Gaga arrive, just within a few minutes of each other. Ira stacks more food on the table. Anything in the house; *pirogis*, mandarins, dates - the table is filled with plates and dishes and Igor uncaps a bottle of Moskavaya and fills a half dozen glasses. '*Nasdarovya.*'

In the kitchen Janna and I share secrets; my grief, her sadness. She is tall and lean and eyes as dark as a Leningrad night in December, with a sweep of black oriental hair across her brow, towering majestically like a high priestess from an obscure heathen past. 'I am afraid,' she says. 'I am so afraid because now I am old. And I am afraid for Leosha, my son. What is this world we have brought him into?'

She clasps my hand tightly. 'You are beautiful,' I tell her. 'Too beautiful for this place, for this unkind city.'

I am afraid too. Afraid because I am in a world so vast and cannot find a place where I belong. 'But you have the freedom to look for this place', Janna reminds me. 'Don't you see how much that is worth?' A single tear running down her high cheek bone.

## ***Leningrad 25.11.1985***

Lunch at the celebrated Hotel Angleterre at St Isaac's Square. Next month the entire hotel closes down for repairs. Much needed. Huge dining room; wallpaper peeling off the walls and paint flaking from the ceiling. The smell of disinfectant. Not many lunch guests and hotel patrons quite possibly already vacated. The sound of hammering and drills from the room next door.\* Regardless a bevy of waiters in purple uniforms march back and forth through the old panel swing doors. Order a vegetarian alternative which comes back with a sorrowful piece of veal on the plate. *Nje mesa*, I tell the waiter. No meat. And he picks up the piece of veal with two fingers and places it on his silver tray, then hands back the plate. Vegetarianism Soviet style. Where most people are vegetarian anyway because no-one can buy meat.



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*\* In 1985 the hotel closed and stayed closed till 1987 when it was decided to demolish the hotel and replace it with a modern building with a facade copying the original. A demonstration gathered on St. Isaac's Square to protest the plan — the first major public protest in Soviet Union history to go unpunished by the authorities. The current hotel opened in 1991.*

So, mashed potato and beetroot for lunch in these elaborate surroundings with echoes of Imperial Russia. Rasputin and the somewhere the ghost of Russian poet Sergei Esenin who committed suicide in a room on the third floor. Cut his wrists, wrote his last poem with his own blood, then hanged himself from the heating pipes with metal wire. That was December 28th, 1925 and he was thirty years old. There is also a theory that Esenin's death was staged by government agents. Anything's possible.

It was here he wrote: 'It's prostitutes I read my poems to / Bandits I toast in burning alcohol.' He married American dancer Isadora Duncan. They travelled to America together and on their arrival New York journalists asked for a poem. 'You want poem?' he shouts. 'You want poem?! Here it is... my poem to America.' And laughing like a madman he pulls out a revolver and fires six bullets in the hotel conference room walls. The journalists dived for cover.



*Sergei Esenin, poet of the Revolution*

Esenin's suicide is one of many of Russia's mythological deaths. The famous story that in the Nevsky River just outside the entrance, mad Rasputin, poisoned, shot three times, beaten bloody by Tsarist secret police, and thrown into the freezing January waters of the river, still managed to clamber ashore, stumble about in a rage, before having the good sense to lay down and die. But it's just a story. A British secret service agent pulled out a gun and shot

Rasputin in the forehead killing him instantly. But the Russians love their stories.

An interview on TV last night a US journalist is trying to analyse Russian politics. A Russian commentator remarks: 'You think we are supposed to be rational, but in Russia we are not.'

The Great Russian soul - a touch of madness and a desperate clinging to life even when life is intolerable. How did Dostoyevsky phrase it? Given the choice of clinging to a cliff edge, pecked at by predatory birds, frozen by howling winter winds, with only darkness and suffering to endure, still, he writes, still, we wretched humans endure any discomfort to cling onto the notion of life.



*Kostya's theories: from neutrinos to Tibetan bardo state*

Soon I must be at the Leningrad station, first pick my bag up from the hotel. I get in the taxi, Kostya in the front seat and Tanya and I in the back. As the taxi drives his violent race across the city, Kostya turns to discuss the importance of these papers and pictures now placed in a thick brown envelope that I must take with me. Arcane secrets ranging from Mongolian lamaism to neutrinos, but most important, the accumulated results of research from the Leningrad collective of parapsychologists. Strict instructions on registering a

patent at the European Patent HO in Munich, opening a Swiss bank account, and getting these papers first to Edgar Mitchell... ('I have written to him many times, says Kostya. 'He is important for the movement, most important.')

Kostya's staccato voice - one crazy thing after another: Mongolian lamas, neutrinos and charmed quarks, string theory and the Buddhist *bardo* - the intermediate state between life and death, and which size shirts to bring back on my next visit, preferably from the NK department store in Stockholm. The very same department store where V I Lenin bought a suit and cap just a year before returning to St Petersburg and rewriting history books. Sure, I say. Flannel, breast pockets, not long but wide, very wide - to cover his rotund Buddha body.

Kostya is thirty something and looks fifty. Short fat little body, balding head and ill fitting clothes. Tanya is thirty something but would pass for mid twenties. Curvaceous, tight fitting Western clothes, long flowing honey blond hair and wide voluptuous smiling mouth. Within five years they would both be dead. Neither of them get to see forty. Kostya, of a stroke, locked up in a mental asylum; Tanya of a brain tumour. Her apartment and her generous collection of Western contraband appropriated by her good 'friends' and associates from the Russian mafia. Who had decided to 'look after' her since husband Slava emigrated to the US. Poor Tanya. Glasnost would bide well for Janna and Gaga, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union even more so. They would hold exhibitions in Stockholm London Paris and collect western currency to support relatively comfortable lives in the new St Petersburg.

Right now, in the middle of a November snowstorm, 1985, Tanya walks me to the hotel entrance and no further. The door porter will have none of it. No card, no entrance. No Russian people allowed. So much for the Marxist ideal of a classless society. Tanya gives me a bag of Russian *pirogi* for the journey then disappears like a fading image in a movie scene.

I get my luggage and wait in the empty hotel foyer. The steely eyed girl at the Intourist desk says the car should arrive any minute. Actually she uses the Russian word 'now' - *sechas* - which translated literally means 'within the hour.' Which is the Russian concept of 'now.' Between one and sixty minutes. Maybe.

The ghostly image of Tanya's disappearing and my melancholic thoughts are interrupted by the doorman in his purple suit. 'Travelling long way?' he asks. 'Train,' I say. 'The Trans Siberian. *Kitai*. China.' 'Ah,' he says, 'you go to Novosiberisk, Irkutsk, then Ulan Baator. Population 995,000 peoples; almost one millions. Then you go Beijing, population 10.6 millions. Then where?'

'Home. Australia.' 'Australia? Melbourne, 3.4 millions and Sydney 4.2 millions. Not to mention marsupials... wombat, koala...'

A Russian girl waiting in the foyer standing not far away joins in the conversation. She is dresses to the nines, lot of make-up and perfume, and speaks a quite sophisticated English. She helps out translating words like 'platypus' and 'kangaroo rat'. Three strangers talking and laughing about kangaroo rats in an empty lobby of a Leningrad hotel at 11pm in the dire darkness of a November night. That does not happen often in Brezhnev's KGB Soviet state of the mid 1980s.

The Intourist car arrives - 40 minutes late - I hop in alone, and I can feel the burden of freedom. A night porter and a prostitute who, even if they want to leave Leningrad for another Soviet city, need a special permit, travel documents, pass, and get tied up with enough red tape to ensure the furthest they travel in their life time is an end station of the Leningrad metro. Which is why these two unlikely souls have their heads filled with all this stuff about Australia, New Zealand, Paris and French Polynesia — the furthest they will travel is in their dreams.

And that final look of sadness in the young woman's eyes, hanging around a hotel lobby desperate for a client. A sadness now

betraying her age. 'How I would love to travel' she'd lamented. 'But all I think about is my Sasha, my fifteen year old son. In two years they will send him to Afghanistan. Afghanistan. The place where young Russian boys go and never come back.'

The car driver is mean and silent... some pedestrians trying to cross the road as the lights change, and he speeds up and tries to run them down, swearing and cursing. '*Pazhalsta,*' I shout out, '*njet!*' *Bolsha moi,* for God's sake, as if there isn't enough misery in this country.

At the station two long trains, twenty or so carriages, on each side of the platform, both bound for Moscow. The 11.55 and the 11.59. Every evening these serpents plough their way to the capital, six berths to a compartment, filled to capacity. Two young Russian guys wearing uniforms of some kind on the bottom bunks, passing a bottle back and forth and slightly drunk. An older Russian guy in the middle, who has poured the contents of a cheap Soviet after shave over his body in a vain attempt to conceal the strong stench of sweat, and a woman in the other middle bunk, who strips down to her underwear and clambers onto the hard mattress. Everyone is a *tavarish* - a comrade - in today's Soviet Union - men and women are *tavarish* and thrown together in train berths. An old guy already snoring loudly in the top bunk opposite.

Haven't slept in an age so hopefully can sleep tonight. But not a chance. The compartment is overheated, the stench of bodies, perfume, aftershave and sweat, I am gasping for air. The windows are locked and snow is beating down on the glass and melting instantly. All night long, I toss and turn, listening to the pounding rhythm of iron wheels on iron tracks.

And then the horrible memories of that last visit to Moscow, a year and a half ago, and thinking how Kostya's envelope will get me to Siberia in ways I had not liked to consider...



*'Krasnaya strela' - Red Arrow has been running between Leningrad and Moscow since 1931, departing at 23.55 every night. Since 1978 Red Arrow 2 has joined the service departing exactly four minutes later. Every night as they depart Leningrad, the same song crackles over the loud speaker system: 'Hymn to the Great City.' It has been adopted as the hymn to Leningrad (and since 1989, to St Petersburg).*

Leningrad	Moscow
§•+++++	++++•§
23:55	08:30

# Moscow

## **Moscow, Easter 1984**

*I was a freelancer working for a UK publisher. My assignment was to look out for possible publishing projects from behind the Iron Curtain. Together with Tanya (who had contacts in Moscow), and an interpreter, Maria, we had come to Moscow to see Eduard Naumov a leading figure in Soviet parapsychology. At his request I take with me three pairs of Levis and a Nikon camera. To help with funding his research, he says. Which the Soviet State had decided to bring to a halt because they discovered - like scientific research centers elsewhere - that no-one could actually read people's minds. But if the KGB no longer believed this, Eduard Naumov did. Thus the Nikon and the Levis. Worth a lot on the black market.*

*With shaking head and empty wallet Eduard Naumov gets the Nikon and the Levis and I get a brown paper envelope filled with research material on Soviet parapsychology research. 'You must give these papers to Edgar Mitchell, former NASA astronaut, and he will know what to do with them.'*

*Half an hour after leaving Naumov's, I must say, quite comfortable apartment in central Moscow, we get pulled up by three guys in black coats and marched off to KGB headquarters, conveniently a three minute walk away.*

*Maria the interpreter, Tanya and myself are now seated in the waiting room of the dreaded Lubyanka, KGB headquarters in Lubyanka Square. On a hard wooden bench directly above the cellars. From where all the rumours of advanced methods of persuasion generated. As well as the disappearances, the executions, and the stories. Of how suspects are tied to a chairs with sacks covering their heads, pushed down stairs, connected to electrodes, bombarded with ear piercing sound waves. Not because the KGB want to make people talk. Just to let them know who's in charge.*

*An hour had passed. The cellars beneath our feet, did not bear thinking about. But one could not think of anything else.*

*A young guy with an expressionless face, a grey coat and a cap with a red Soviet star on his head, had gone through the papers in the brown envelope, thankfully all in English.*

*'Where you get these?' he asks.  
'Intourist,' I reply. 'Travel documents.'  
He gives them back and says nothing.*



*Lubyanka, KGB HQ Moscow - a cold day in April*

*Another hour passes.  
He comes back with two comrades. 'You two go' he says pointing to me and the interpreter. 'She stays,' he says pointing at Tanya.  
'We all leave together,' I say, with ashen white face.  
Then he and his two buddies leave.  
Another hour passes. Same guy returns. Alone this time.  
'OK', he says. 'You go.'  
Heart beating at a rate ready to burst as we walk out into the cold April air. Some tears running down Tanya's expressionless face. 'Spasiba,' she says.*

*'Spasiba balshoi.' I say clutching the brown paper envelope and looking up. There are more people believing in God in this godless country than just about anywhere. And today at least, even me.*

*Four months later, by coincidence, a former NASA employee and leading US spokesman for US defense is visiting Stockholm for a conference. We arrange a meeting at the bar of the Sheraton Hotel where he is staying. In 1984 he happens to be the foremost spokesperson for parapsychology.*

*It is 8pm and he is at the bar of the Sheraton with a very fine looking woman in a backless dress and a little more make-up than one is used to seeing in Stockholm hotel foyers. But the Sheraton has its reputation. Together with a publisher's editor we meet the guy and tell him about our meetings in the Soviet Union, with Naumov, with Kostya and other researchers in the field of diverse status and background. Research from Naumov. Research from the KGB centers of parapsychological research. Significant findings that should be published in the West. The former NASA employee was the only hope for Russian scientists and could be an important voice to endorse this research. A personal handwritten letter from Naumov himself.*

*'Let me tell you something,' says Mr Former-NASA in a low voice with a hostile undertone. 'I'm ten minutes away from fucking the best looking hooker I've met in a month. So fuck off. And take your fucking papers with you.'* Then he turns with a broad grin to the escort girl on the bar stool. *'Another martini?' he says.*

*There ended the West's flirtation with Soviet secrets in parapsychology. As far as my publisher was concerned anyway. Who wants to read minds when you encounter minds like those of our friends from NASA?*

## **Moscow 26.11.1985**

A blizzard howling against the train window and the platform covered with snow and slush as the train stops at 08:30am. Should be an easy day, I tell myself, even without the luxury of sleep. Exchange the railway voucher for a ticket at the Intourist office, get a taxi to the Mongolian Consulate, pick up the visa, return to the Jaraslavsky Station, a stones throw from here, and wait for train to Beijing. Departure time: 21.10pm.

But Moscow is a city of officially maybe 12 million people and unofficially maybe half as many again. With the rush of people on the platform, and the long long queue at the Intourist office it seems that way. So I'll get the visa first. Only the taxi queue is a kilometre long and the snow storm has reduced visibility to the next black coat and a line of red Moskvitch taxi tail lights.

OK. Lets try the Intourist at the Jaraslavsky Station next door. A giant hallway filled with empty bleak despairing faces - all wearing the same ugly hanging black overcoat, crowded around their string bags and tied up parcels of food and clothing. No Intourist office. OK. Return to the central station and take my chances. Waiting an hour and ten minutes until at last... except; strangely there are only Russian people in this queue and maybe I've made a mistake. Can there be another Intourist office for non-Russians? Only now I hear the unmistakable tones of Swedish, and sure enough, further back in the queue, two Swedish girls exchanging a few nervous words about the length of the queue and whether this is the right place? Another girl joins their conversation - now in English. Discussing how to get to the Mongolian embassy. My first glimpse of travelling companions for the next eight days.

We introduce ourselves - in English - and decide to go en masse to the Mongolian embassy. Safety in numbers, especially in a raging snowstorm. It's several degrees minus, and looking at the map, a maze like journey ahead through a tangle of streets and squares.

The third girl is from Peru, her name is Wilma and she is staying in Moscow to meet her brother and then fly back to Peru. So why is she also headed for the Mongolian Embassy? It turns out she speaks passable Russian and decided to help these two Swedish girls, Gunnel and Annika, find their way, who apparently didn't know a Cyrillic letter from a picture of Lenin.

Finally our turn at the Intourist desk. We get our train tickets ... the train leaves at 21.10 from platform one. Only the Intourist lady this morning said it departed at 1730 and from somewhere else. Must check.

The taxi queue has doubled in length. Easier to take the Metro. We check our bags in some baggage lockers and head for the underground. Wilma, in her thick Peruvian Spanish accent describes the underground route in meticulous detail, first once, then twice (it is a long and circuitous route), turns to walk away, then steps back. 'No,' she says, 'It's too complicated. I'll take you there.'

Twenty minutes later we get to the underground station Artbetskaya, and trudging through the blinding snow storm, asking people on the way. For even local Muscovite Wilma has given up by now. She shakes her head in despair, and in doing so catches sight of the tall iron fence with its Mongolian star planted in the middle, half covered by streaks of wet snow. We found it. Wilma, triumphant, leaves us to our own devices.

Filled with success at having finally arrived, and in jubilant mood we explain our mission to the lady at the embassy desk. Her level of comprehension - in any language - not least her own - is low to the point of exasperation. But we work out that her series of guttural wheezes and grunts, means that, yes, this is the Mongolian Embassy, but what we need is the Mongolian Consulate. Which is located on the other side of town.

Now engulfed with despair, increasing steadily as the ongoing parade of taxis, whether full, half full or empty, simply refuse to stop, the one hour before consulate closing time is withering away at breakneck speed.

In the midst of the chaos a black Muscovite taxi pulls over, we explain the situation to the driver, and though he is sympathetic, he is also soon lost, but vows on the memory of his mother that he will get us to this consulate before closing time.

We pass by Red Square and its now ten to one. The consulate closes in ten minutes. According to the Intourist travel documents, to board the Trans Siberia without the required Mongolian visa is a punishable offense, only they don't say what the punishment is. I guess that rather ambiguous wording opens all sorts of possibilities, but based on former experiences traveling in the Soviet Union, most likely a one or two week delay. Or a year in the mines outside Ulan Bator.

Now the taxi driver stops to ask another taxi driver. He starts driving again and we are passing the same buildings we passed fifteen minutes ago. Either he is taking us for a ride or the lady at the embassy was.

We stop. Here it is. The red star on a green ugly building and a plaque that reads Consulate of the Peoples Republic of Mongolia in Cyrillic and English letters. Five minutes to one. In five minutes the Consulate closes for the day. Inside people are friendly and efficient and after we pay the \$8.00US, provide us with visas. At \$8.00 a pop I guess they can afford to be friendly and efficient. The consulate at Ul Stamislavenko Nr 20 is a just a few minutes walk from Red Square and the Metropol Hotel. And the Intourist travel document reads Mongolian Embassy, not Consulate.



*Red Square in a November snow storm*

So it's the Metropol Hotel for lunch. First we get transit papers from the hotel's Intourist office which give us permission to eat there. The vegetarian menu is bread and cheese and tea. The bread is probably only a week old. Almost edible. Annika and Gunilla have something else - we're not sure what.

I've seen enough of Moscow over the past five years, though not in a raging blizzard before. Red Square, the Lenin Mausoleum, the Kremlin - through the white gauze of a heavy snow fall. It's a scene from *Dr Zhivago*. For Gunilla and Annika the appeal of the mummified body of Vladimir Ilyitch still dressed in his Stockholm PUB department store suit is an opportunity they dare not pass up. It is the suit with which he returned to St Petersburg and convinced the Russian workers to rise up, kill the Tsar and his family and create a new Bolshevik state. A feat inconceivable had he been wearing an inferior Russian made suit.

The enormous GUM department store close to the Red Square is a majestic building displaying wares one would normally associate with Oxfam shops and Salvation Army depots and secondhand stall's at church bazaars. With gloomy faced sales staff who would rather stack up empty boxes than offer any indication of customer service.



*Swedish quality - the suit Lenin bought at PUB, Stockholm on April 13th, 1917*

By now it's dark and as cold as Siberia, so we stand around the burning flame of the Unknown Soldier memorial just to keep warm, watching a humped back old lady shovel snow from the memorial tablet while all the young soldiers lean on their spades and smoke cigarettes. The same as every where else in the Soviet Union - women are working, cleaning the streets, shovelling snow, driving buses and lorries. The men drink Moskovaya vodka and smoke cheap evil smelling Russian cigarettes on street corners and alley ways. They are not vagrants, merely employees of the state. Maybe the difference is not so great.

As a non-Russian one has the opportunity of escaping the biting cold by standing at the bar of the Intourist hotel. No Russians allowed. Drinking tea and watching television. A tall fellow in Russian clothes and speaking American English approaches. 'I must talk with you,' he says, his eyes burning with intensity.

He drags me to a corner table and yes, he is drunk. And he needs help getting papers to the US embassy. Wants some papers taken out of the country. Wants to emigrate. 'Very difficult to leave the Soviet Union,' he says. No kidding. 'Very difficult even to get into hotel,' he says, his eyes glancing around nervously. Not surprised. Probably very easy for him to leave once KGB microphones have picked up this conversation. Most likely I'll be arrested as an accomplice. Sorry friend, I tell him. Can't help. 'Change money?' he says, desperately producing a wad of worn out notes from his coat pocket. I look at the clock on the wall. 'Leaving in an hour,' I tell him. He shrugs, walks away.

Annika and Gunilla still at the other table, open mouthed and wide eyed. 'What a terrible country' says Annika. 'That people can't leave when they want to...' 'Such hard lives,' says Gunilla. And so on. I'm surprised they're shocked. I thought everyone knew.



Get a taxi to the station. Driver charges five roubles. Which is about four roubles too much. At least one Russian goes away smiling into the blizzard coloured cityscape. '*Spasiba* crook,' I say and he smiles.

Get luggage. It's still there. Wait for train. Train arrives. Great excitement. Chinese letters on the distinguished green coloured wagon sides. Chinese conductors in blue uniforms standing in the open doorways as the train rumbles slowly into the platform. A film scene from the 1940s. The Chinese arriving like mighty warriors to save us from the unending despair of life in Mother Russia. No-one can get on the train quick enough.

Two soft class wagons. Nos. 3 and 4. Gunnel and Annika in No. 3. Me in No. 4 next door to the restaurant car. Many hard class wagons and Russian wagons that shall disconnect somewhere along the way across Siberia.



*Waiting for the 21.10 departure*

Checking into the compartment. Mahogany panelling and lace curtains. A tiled washroom and a velvet armchair facing the two bunks. A small table upon which sits an elegantly old styled lamp shade and two large porcelain tea-cups in white and blue. Lids to match. The smiling Chinese conductor brings in a thermos of hot water which sits inside the little wardrobe beside the washroom.

A well-dressed Chinese gentleman enters with three large suitcases and bundles tied up in brown paper and string. I slide my bag under the bunk and help him place as much as possible in the luggage space. His name is Zhang-lin. We'll share the compartment for the next seven days.

Look out the window. The snow covered platform and a clock that reads 21.10. The train sets off. Wander into the aisle-way and meet fellow passengers. Many from Sweden. A group of four Swedish girls in the top two compartments, and a Swedish fellow sharing the third compartment with a tall rough looking guy from Quebec who speaks only French. Myself and Zhang-lin in the next

compartment and the next three compartments filled with Chinese businessmen. Three compartments with westerners and three with Chinese. A sense of balance - eastern harmony - me in the middle with a western dressed Chinese gentleman about 60 years old.

In the aisle-way are passengers from Wagon #3, regarding our classical furnishings with envious eyes. Another Swedish girl, from Gothenburg, travelling with her mother. A German fellow, Mikael, who has been living in Beijing for five years, working on a German Chinese dictionary. Two Swedish fellows from Lund, just finished university.



*Wagon #3, Compartment #1: Myself & Zhang-lin*

Join Annika and Gunnel in their compartment for a feed. They have an Obs bag filled with Swedish food. Sleep at 2am. Zhang-li in the bottom bunk and me on top. He snores. It could be louder.

The Fiery Buddha: The Trans Siberia Across Russia to China and Japan

Moscow

§ •+++++

21:10, 26.11.85



*Siberia*

## *Siberia 27.11.1985*

Minus eight degrees according to the thermometer outside the window. The compartment is warm and comfortable, the bunk is soft, the temperature right. The lulling ever present rhythm of the train; the early morning quiet of the deserted train corridor; the utter blackness of 'out there'. Can't sleep. Awake till the first strains of light thinking out all possible scenarios.



Sleep comes and I'm awake suddenly to the aroma of Zhang-lin's breakfast. The Chinese travellers have all taken their own food, the reason for which I am soon to discover on my first visit to the Russian restaurant wagon.

'Good morning Mr Alexander.'

'Hm.'

Eat two of Tanya's buns and drink tea. Lie in the bunk and read a chapter from Seth Speaks. About a spirit who speaks through a

medium describing the world of the dead for the world of the living. Outside the window is a world of neither. The Siberian tundra. A ragged struggling quasi forest of pines, struggling through snow and ice. The snow and sky a grey undivided mass. Zhang-lin in the compartment with his Chinese colleagues. Make tea and play patience. A knock at the door. Annika and Gunilla pay a visit.

'Come in. Sit down. Tea?'

Annika looks at the cards. 'Are you so bored?'

'On the contrary. Patience is most engaging. It is a means of creating structure in an otherwise chaotic universe.'

Gunilla moves two cards. 'No structure here,' she says. 'It won't come out.'

We drink tea and share the last of Tanya's *pirogi*. Annika turns to Gunilla. 'Do you have your cards with you?'



### Trans-Siberia: Moscow - Peking

Moskva • 21.10	Tuesday 26.11.1985	Russia
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Kirov • 11.20 Balezino • 15.00 Permy II • 18.30	Wednesday 27.11.1985	Siberia
-----		
Ichim • 08.15 Omsk • 12.00 Novosibirisk • 20.20	Thursday 28.11.1985	Siberia
-----		
Krasnoyarisk • 08.30 Nijnedinsk • 18.00 (meet Chinese train) Zima • 22.00	Friday 29.11.1985	Siberia
-----		
Irkutsk • 03.00 Vliyodyika • 05.30 Ulan Udeh • 11.00 Nayashki • 16.00	Saturday 30.11.1985	Siberia
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Suh-Bator • 00.30 Ulan-Bator • 09.00 Cho-ir • 14.00 Saih-Chanda • 17.30 Zamin-Udeh • 21.40 (border)	Sunday 1.12.1985	Mongolia
-----		
Erian • 02.00 Da-tin • 08.30 Chu-laut • 11.00 Kan-chan • 12.30 Chin-lin-chay • 13.00 Han-koy • 14.15 Beijing • 15.33	Monday 2.12.1985	China

Gunilla smiles and takes out a small pack, rather more colourful than my own. 'Any questions?' she asks, spreading a cross pattern with the cards on the table.

'Strange pictures.'

'Tarot,' she says and looks me in the eye. 'Well?'

'I have to ask a question?'

'Yes.'

A Death card. Something ends. A Hanged Man. Enlightenment and wisdom. A six of swords. A man rows a boat across the sea. In the

boat is a body covered in a shroud pierced by the six swords. In the distance a stormy sky. Take courage as you face ordeals in the future. Or is it my body under the shroud. Having been stabbed in the back. Six times.



'Are you all right?' asks Gunilla.

Zhang-lin enters and I find myself smiling weakly.

'Cold isn't it?'

I introduce Zhang-lin to the two girls from the north of Sweden. We drink more tea, then, on their way out, Gunilla picks up the copy of Seth Speaks lying on the bunk.

'You believe in past lives?' she asks.

'Not me. Seth apparently does.'

'You never know', she says, and they return to their own compartment.



It is time. Myself, Gunilla and Annika join three other Swedish travellers and brave the Russian restaurant wagon. Vegetable soup,

bread and butter. No problem. The waitress cracks jokes and makes fun of the Swedish guy who complains about getting something he hadn't ordered. Is he kidding? It's a Russian menu. As if there was a choice. Today it's vegetable soup bread and butter. She digs me in the ribs with a wily grin. '*Gavorodje po ryski, maladets...*' Speak a bit of Russian do you, clever dick? Well, a bit. I could say 'vegetarian' and *nje mesa*, no meat, and a few stock phrases. Enough to entertain the wily waitress and her black market dealing associates. I also think it's funny that the Swedish guy thinks a Russian menu actually means you have a choice. That's a riot. He won't believe me for another three days. And four days to go before the Mongolian dining car is hooked up...

Also there had been some nasty rumours about how filthy the Russian dining car would be. All true. It's disgusting. Roll on Mongolia. Roll on China.

Back in the cabin and spend time gazing through the window. A favourite pastime. Endless landscapes of pine trees, tundra and the intermittent Siberian village. Little wooden shacks with blue painted eaves. Sometimes the glimpse of a black coated figure. Bent over and gathering wooden sticks. In minus ten degrees of frost. Old coat tied up with a piece of rope. Could be a man, could be a woman. Definitely old. So... the Trans Siberian is not the fastest train in the world. But provides opportunities for punctilious observation...



Of women working on the railway line, or women carrying buckets of water on poles across their shoulders. From the village well to their home. Through the snow and cold.

Some more conversations with Zhang-lin. We discuss the philosophy of Taoism, the I Ching and the Chinese classics: The Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, and Dream of the Red Chamber. 'You know your Chinese culture,' says Zhang-lin. 'If only,' I tell him. 'What I really want is to learn Chinese.'



*Non-stop hot water for tea - steward to Wagon #3*

'I will teach you Chinese,' he says. 'One lesson every day.' He begins with introductions and hands me a card. His name, then title. 'Professor in Railway Sciences. Beijing University.'

'You've made this trip before?'

'Seven times,' he says. 'Between Moscow and Beijing - seven times.' Zhang-lin turned fifty seven in May. He has just left his post as representative for the Chinese Railways in Paris after five years.

Me? I'm thirty three...

'Long year,' he smiles. 'We are both born in *long* year. Year of the Dragon. You are Water Dragon. I am Wood Dragon.' Twenty four years between us.

Zhang-lin takes out his food bag and joins two Chinese men in the next wagon. Like the other Chinese passengers he doesn't eat in the Russian restaurant wagon. The Chinese like food too much.

The Russian passengers have also brought along their own food. But for different reasons. They are not allowed in the restaurant car. They are only allowed to travel hard class. As if they've had it any other way.



Day one. Zhang-lin teaches a few basics. Learn to count to ten: *yi, er, san, si, hu, liu, qi, ba, jiu, shi*.

'*Dui*' means right, and '*bu*' means 'not', which is as close to 'yes' and 'no' as we get in Chinese. (There are at least five ways to say 'no' in Mandarin Chinese).

Learn the most important phrase for the trip. Test it out on the porter: '*qing ni gei wo shui*.'

The porter smiles and hands me the thermos of hot water.

Next phrase: *Ni shuo ying-wen ma?* You speak English?

The porter laughs and shakes his head. Zhang-lin also amused.

'Now we start with Chinese characters,' says Zhang-Lin. There are 165 *yi* characters. About 80 *wu* characters. Hm. Getting complicated. He writes out my name. Same character '*chi*' as in '*i ching*', is the same character as in '*John*'.



At six thirty the train stops at Permy II for 15 minutes. Some Chinese passengers stand around stamping their feet, and the western passengers are jogging on the spot. A couple of brave souls start to jog to the end of the platform. Until they are stopped abruptly by a station guard.

Too cold anyway. Return to the warmth of the train, and the warm inviting mahogany panelling, the thick creamy bed sheets, and green lantern with delicate fringe filtering the soft yellow light. The thermos of hot water on the table, and two cups emblazoned with bright Chinese characters and matching lids. *Lu-cha* tea bags in the bowl next to the thermos.

Say to the porter: *qing ni gei wo shui*. How many times will I use that phrase over the next week?

Sit in the armchair, drink more tea. Eat the last of Tanya's buns. A dog barks. The train lurches forward and starts down the tracks.

Go to visit Gunnel and Annika in cabin five. Gunnel talking a passable French with Eric the six foot three bearded guy from Quebec in his plaid red shirt and who claims not to speak a word of English. '*Pas en mot,*' he says. '*Seulement française.*' Now how can you live on a continent the size of North America and not speak a few words of English?

Gunilla grew up in the Congo, speaks French and even Congolese ('learned from the servants' she says). Me and Annika take a stroll down the train corridors, from Soft Class to Hard.

The Hard Class was genuinely hard-solid planks on benches, and on the benches, stacked four to the ceiling in three rows, like an army block, and on each bench Chinese guys, young and old, in

stained T-shirts and yellowing underwear, slurping noodles from bowls, or tea from mugs, or sticks to chew on. Half staring, half oblivious. Under, over and on the bed, the piles of boxes, plastic bags, and plastic sheeting all tied up with ropes harbouring the hopes and possessions of a lifetime. String bags filled with instant Chinese noodles and seaweed fill the aisle-ways. Two guys in the corner slurping from their bowls, dressed in blue serge and telling jokes and laughing out loud.

Over the catch-springs to the next wagon, and opening the door, a thick curtain of a stench, of sweat, urine, excrement. Now entering the train's Russian zone, and these guys haven't changed clothes for a week. From these bunks the faces that came staring back were like from Gulag camps; pale, undernourished; stony glares, silence and looks of desperation. This wagon and the next - the Russian hard class wagons - these will be disconnected at Irkutsk. Russian passengers likewise. But our Chinese friends will travel the distance - 6000 km to Beijing, with noodles in plastic bowls, slurping, drinking and telling jokes.

On the walk back we discover some Europeans in the Hard class - two Swedish youths from Lund travelling together and looking much worse for the wear after only two days. And a Swedish girl from Malmö, travelling solo. Why so many Swedes? Non Swedes are Eric from Quebec (speaks only French, he claims), and now we meet a young student, also from Quebec, Alina, who speaks both French and English. She disavows any knowledge of fellow Quebeccian Erik. 'Non non, I never met him.' Then adds: 'He look not so safe type, non?' Non, indeed. That's the truth of it. Eric looks like a killer. He carries a knife in his belt and stares at people as if measuring the thrust of the blade. And he resides in the cabin next door to myself and Zhang-lin.

Returning Annika to her dorm. It's been a fun evening; places to go, people to meet, all along one tiny corridor measuring a half metre in breadth. Zhang-lin's snoring resonates outside the cabin door, a

soundtrack to the dark shadows outside as I sit in the armchair, drink tea and stare out the window. Two a.m. and the blackness outdoors could be carved into bricks. Close my eyes but soon realise that this is no night for sleep. Just worry.



*Kirov railway station platform*

Kirov  
+++++++•+++++++Balezina ++++++ 15:00  
11:20, 27.11.1985

## *Omsk, Siberia, 28th November 1985 Thursday Full Moon*

Awoken from a drowsy state by the combination of a stationary train and full aroma of Zhang Lin's breakfast. Make myself some *miso* (Japanese soya soup) and *oolong tea*, and discuss more Chinese philosophy with Zhang-lin —Lao Tsu, Chuang Tzu, the I Ching, Confucious, or Kung tzu in Chinese. 'You know much,' laughs Zhang-lin, and I smile politely, knowing full well I am lost in a fog of not knowing anything about anything. Not least traveling on a train somewhere in Siberia, on the way to a place which was once home but is now a collection of ideas and memories and abstractions.

Morning tea time with Annika and Gunilla - a traditional Swedish *fika* (coffee break) with *kanelbulle* (cinnamon rolls) and Vasa crisp bread. I forgo their generous offer of Swedish caviar in a toothpaste tube. ('Really, you should try! It's very popular in Sweden!')



*Omsk - forbidden photograph of Russian train*

At midday the train lurches to a silent stop. In winter it could be a deserted Siberian town. In fact we have arrived at the Siberian city of Omsk with its million and a half people, today, apparently, all hidden away, hiding under their bedclothes. Standing on the cold

cold platform, passengers jog and walk briskly while police and railway guards and officials parade with a watchful eye. Clouds of vapour from all the mouths, Russian and Swedish, Chinese and foreign. We're all cold.

A hideous woman shaped liked a beach ball wearing a tight fitting dark uniform begins to gesticulate wildly waving her puffy little arms around and shouting out loudly '*njet njet njet*'. I follow her eye line to a young fellow with a camera snapping pictures at the young Swedes jogging by the stationary train.

Meanwhile I'm trying to take a picture of the huge railway building with the word OMCK emblazoned above it (Omsk). The well framed picture in the view finder is marred, suddenly, by the appearance of a swiftly descending hand. Her beach ball like visage is red with manic anger and I take a step backwards recoiling from her raised fist about to strike a hard and savage blow. She refrains. A mean looking fellow with a ferret like face, Russian *ushanka* and black leather coat, comes rushing to her aid. Her aid?! He holds out a red KGB card clutched impressively in his fist. Big trouble. Threats of confiscating camera. 'Just wanted a picture of Omsk - you know - in Cyrillic...' I explain. Politely. Hasten onto the train and hide the camera under the seat. No more pictures.

The train is stopping here for a while, so with camera safely out of the way I can go outside once more into the Siberian ice-box. Annika takes a picture of Gunnel standing in front of the train and the same disturbed woman descends upon her with tyrannical vehemence. Pushes the camera in to poor Gunnels nose just as the shutter clicks. She would have continued, but sees some other guy taking a picture - rushes up to him, grabs his camera, opens it up and rips the film from the camera's casing and dangles it in front of his shocked pale face. At least he got the camera back. Mean woman. She stands there now with the faint glimmer of triumph akin to an Auswitch commandant.

Back on the train, chugging out of Omsk and toward the even colder Siberian interior. Playing Scrabble with Annika and Gunnel, also Lena from Gothenburg who is travelling with her seventy year old mum. In Swedish Scrabble is called Alfabet - and it doesn't take long to realise that a native English speaker is at disadvantage. What do you do with letters like ö, ä and å? I lose. Lena's mum, aged 70, wins.

Try out the restaurant wagon. The menu shows a choice of six options. What they have is vegetable soup and bread. Fine.

Talk with Erik from Quebec in broken French, who is heading for Tibet. A huge guy, two metres tall, with thick black beard, a red plaid shirt and an intense look. And the knife in his boot. Plus, as we shall discover in a few days, no Mongolian visa.

Fellow passengers playing lucky dip with the menu. Order all sorts of things. They all get vegetable soup and bread. A Swedish girl haranguing the buxom Russian waitress (?) about not getting black coffee. Well well. We all have to make sacrifices. I gave up milk in tea long ago.

Back to the compartment for Chinese lesson #2 with Zhang-lin. He shows me the Chinese characters (and the right way to draw them) for:

*tao (the way)*

*chow (religion)*

*shao (book)*

Then:

rain, snow, sun, moon

And: human, humanity, man, woman

They make sense and are easy to remember. They are pictures of what they represent. (Verbs are more complicated). Zhang-lin

favours the 'pinyin' pronunciation which is not always what it appears. 'Qing' means please, is pronounced 'ching' (almost - you have to consider the tones - there are four of them).

Chinese writing seems impossibly difficult but after a few phrases the inherent logic of spoken Chinese becomes apparent. A logical simple language, without tenses, definite and indefinite articles and a minimum of prepositions.

'*Qing ni gei wo...*'; 'please, you give me...'

'*Shui*' is water and our steward breaks out into a broad grin and comes back with the pump-action thermos filled with hot water.



*Novosiberisk - light point in darkest Siberia*

At 8pm the train stops at Novosiberisk - a new city of about a million people. Which includes a large community of scientists and researchers. It's dark enough so as not to see anything, and cold enough to drive the hardest of Scandinavian travellers back into the warmth of the train compartment. I make some Japanese *miso* soup with the hot water and realise that its been dark since about 2pm this afternoon. Due in part to the train keeping to Moscow time for the duration of the journey to the Mongolian border. Unfortunately the lines of longitude are less successful in keeping to Moscow time, so I'm falling asleep at around 5am just when it

starts to get light. Go to bed at 11am when the sun sets. My impressions of Siberia? It's dark.

At midnight the train compartments are still with silence and most likely everyone has gone to bed, though who knows what goes on behind the compartment doors. I know what goes on behind mine. Zhang-lin asleep on the top bunk and snoring loudly.

I do a few stretching exercises in the silent train corridor - trying out tai chi in a corridor less than a metre wide. I turn to the left and the Chinese steward stands watching, hands on hips, grinning broadly. 'Shui?' he asks me. Don't those guys ever sleep?



Permy II

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18:30, 27.11.1985

**Siberia, 29.11.1985 (- 12°, Friday)**

Awakening to the sound of Zhang-lin's noodle bowl at about 8am. He keeps better time than me. Feeling very comfortable under the blankets. Finally got to bed around 5am. Get up and read for a while. Look at the scenery. Yesterday it was pine trees, today it's birch. And snow. Now and again a ramshackle village of a few black wooden houses and a church. And you wonder how it would be to live there. Wrapped in a coat tied up with a piece of rope. Wandering through the snow and -15° to get some firewood. And a dog barking at your feet. And a tractor parked out back but probably too cold to start. Probably for most of the year. Smoke coming out of the chimneys in a straight black line. No wind. Only frost.



An old woman bearing buckets with water from the well. A couple of kids playing with a dog. Houses looking like they are about to collapse into a pile of broken wood. In between the houses a blue building: MAGAZIN in big black letters. The general store. A motor car moving slowly on the road, and behind, two young men and a woman all pushing together. Is there no petrol?

No stops today until 6pm. Now midday and pitch black outside. Time for lunch. Some Swedish people already eating, including Gunnel and Annika and they invite me over. Feeling brave - order two fried eggs and bread and butter. The waitress is in a good mood today. She laughs hysterically. Wonder what I'll get? I get two fried eggs and the waitress is still laughing out loud. It's the same Swedish girl from yesterday resuming yesterday's argument about the black coffee. No wonder the waitress is laughing. Black coffee indeed.

Chinese lesson with Zhang-lin. Forms of address. Rather complicated he points out. After 1949 everyone was suddenly a comrade and no-one was allowed to call anyone a Mr or Mrs. Now its becoming popular again to talk about Mr and Mrs, but out of the question for a foreigner to greet a Chinese as 'comrade'. Ridiculous, as Zhang-lin put it, and he is not one to use strong words.

So Mr is; *xi-an shen*, and comes after the Chinese family name. So Zhang-lin becomes *Zhang xi-an shen*. Mrs is *tai tai*, a rather uncommon form of address, hearkening back to the days of Shanghai and the 'foreign devils' in the 1930s. The polite form of adress is 'miss', *neu-shu*.

More and more complicated. I continue calling Zhang-lin Zhang-lin and he is quite OK with this. However when saying 'thank you' to someone of high social position one should say *xie xie nin*, instead of *ni*, or just plain *xie xie*. (pronounced she-she (almost)).



At 6 pm the train pulls into Nindunchik. The stop is for half an hour in order for this train to meet the Chinese train coming from the other direction. We've travelled half way. And time goes so fast.

There's shop on the station platform that sells bread and buns and fruit. And it closes down just as the train stops. One more Russian

joke. A timeless ruse to prevent the sale of anything, and ensure that the ailing Soviet economy remains ailing. Who needs free enterprise? But it would have been nice with a banana.



*Moscow - Beijing; half way*

Passengers getting in their ten minutes of exercises, running to and fro on the iced up platform. It is deathly cold. A group of Chinese passengers, twenty or so, all in identical black coats and black caps, jump up and down, clouds of steamy vapour issuing from their gasping breaths. The air is so cold it stabs at the back of the throat like a little team of dart playing icicles.

Russian soldiers stand around - just as at other stations - in casual nonchalance, smoking cigarettes, stamping their Russian boots, oblivious to the cold, now down to  $-15^{\circ}$ . Winter has not yet begun. I guess it's like spring time to these fellows. I wonder what kind of political pamphlet they got caught writing in order to be posted here?

The Chinese train chuffs from the distance and we hop aboard our own train, pleased enough to be heading off in the opposite direction.

Zhang-lin has gone to chat with his Chinese friends a few wagon cars down the way. Only this morning the bubbling water of

Zhang-lin's noodles merged into my twilight dream state where I stood in front of a cave. Inside the cave was a burning red fire and the Buddha was burning up in flames. Probably an impression of the Roerich painting at the Tibetan temple in Leningrad. Kostya was standing there with me watching the flames, so was Janna and Tanya. Janna in a long black robe, a bowl of poison and a long blade. Images that did not bide well, and quite glad that Zhang-lin's breakfast rituals pulled me back into this world and out of that one.

Gunnel helps also to bring me out of my reveries. 'OK' she says, holding out her pack of cards: 'Take the top one. You must turn it over. This will be the card that describes your present state of your mind.' I turn it over. It was The Hermit. Hm. No commentary required. Three more cards - the past, the future, and.... Death. Wheel of Fortune. The Fool.

Well, well. Take your pick.

Last summer in London some friends pushed me into seeing a famous clairvoyant, a woman who had reputation for foreseeing the future. She'd been in the newspapers and on TV. 'Stop please,' I protested. 'It's all nonsense. It's reading body language, face twitches, and the dilation of pupils...'

Anyway - clairvoyant woman sits down. Seems a bit distracted. Takes my hand. Only her hand is trembling. 'You OK?' I ask. 'Well... well,' she says, 'I have to tell you... I just had the most frightful reading. Poor poor woman.' 'What happened?' 'Nothing I can do,' she says, 'Some people have cursed lives. No matter how bad her situation is now - and it's just terrible - it's only going to get worse.' I shake my head in sympathy. 'And I couldn't tell her, I just couldn't tell her. It was so horrible.' Now the clairvoyant woman is tearful, tears running her wizened cheeks. And she's apologising. 'So sorry,' she says. 'So sorry.' Crying into her handkerchief. We spend our thirty minutes discussing how it is to be the channel of

people's troubled lives. To carry all that grief and sorrow... talking talking. 'But we should really be talking about you,' she says. 'Do you have a question?' Hm. I tell her 'I'm thinking of taking a long journey. Starting a new life. Because right now everything seems meaningless. Will this journey help me find new purpose?' 'Show me your hand', she says. She looks at my upturned palm. 'No,' she says, shaking her head, and folding up her £20 fee and placing into her handbag.

There was that song 'And the Gypsy Cried.' About a young guy who just split up with his girl and visits a carnival side show gypsy. She looks into the crystal ball, and weeps uncontrollably. 'And the gypsy cried...' he sings. Who needs to hear your fortune told after that?

Back to the *chugachug chugachug* of the train wheels on the train tracks. Slowing down. Pulling into a tiny station. 'Looks,' says Gunnel, 'We're stopping.' And with a sweep the cards are gone, and with it, my future, my life, my destiny.



It is ten pm and our stop is called Zima. I'm the only person to get off and stroll along the icy platform. Like the deck of an abandoned ship. No lights, no people, and out there in the darkness, could just as easily be a frozen ocean as the frozen steppes of the tundra.

It looks like our fellow passengers have decided on an early night. At around 3am we should stop at Irkutsk, a proper city, and maybe they'll even have a kiosk that stays open.



*A quarry down the line from the Zima railway station*

Walking the dark empty platform in solitude. Lost in idle thought. And the gypsy cried. What about the young guy? His life that brings other people to tears? Is there any room for grief and weeping for the poor sufferer? Or the person marked out as The Fool by a ransom sweep of a pack of cards? Or do you just grin and bear it? I could walk this dark empty platform for ever and no-one would know or care...

Irkutsk is the largest of the Siberian cities, and the last stop before Lake Bajkal. I guess the effects of the darkness have made people restful. I can never sleep when its dark. There is always something out there in the darkness, night wraiths or some-such, and their intentions are not good.

Strolling past a few coupe windows. Annika in flannel pyjamas reading 'Kikki in Tibet' by candlelight. Eric from Quebec pacing up and down in his tiny compartment smoking frenetically. Zhang-lin asleep in the armchair. The steward pouring water into a pump thermos. Every compartment window, a story. Lena and her seventy year old mother arguing over a word in Scrabble. Walk past

some of vacant pale faces occupying Hard Class. Eight to a compartment - four bunks on each side. Cramped in like that for an eight railway journey. Shake my head and stroll all the way to the black steaming engine, then back again.

A dog barks. The train sets off. Into the unlit wasteland. Staring into the darkness through a clouded over window. Walk out in to the corridor and study the timetable. More stretching exercises much to amusement of the steward. He never sleeps either. Irkutsk at 3 am Moscow time. Now it is two. Can I nap for an hour?



*Train corridor*

## *Irkutsk 30.11.1985 Saturday - 14°*

The train arrives in darkness and leaves in darkness. Stop for one hour. Walk the platform for five minutes and return to the compartment. Too cold. *Holodna*. Like minus 15°. The Russian wagons are removed from the train and some new ones hooked up. Irkutsk is the one Siberian stop where Europeans can stop over. The Vladivostok train passes from the other direction heading west, we go east.

Breakfast at 5am. The restaurant wagon is open, its hours as inconsistent as its menu. Normally closed at meal times, and sometimes open, like now, at 5am. As is the Russian way.



*Beautiful down town Irkutsk, 0500am*

Two fried eggs and a cup of tea. Some Russian people sit at the other end of the wagon counting up apples and bags of sweets. Family friends of the waitress with a personality disorder. Black marketeers all of them. Picking up contraband along the journey and selling it off to unsuspecting westerners. Who said that free enterprise had died under the Soviet system? Just hiding away, that's all. Railway restaurant employees or relatives or... well, who

knows. For them it's the end of the line when the train stops at the Mongolia border later this afternoon.

On my way out when I meet the Swedish travellers who convince me to join them for breakfast. OK. Who knows when the restaurant when be open again.

At six am the train stops at the tiny station of Vliyodyika, significant for its view of Lake Bajkal, the deepest lake in the world. Steely blue against the white frozen landscape. Run outside for a brisk stroll of fifteen minutes. Only I forget my scarf. Minus 20° and my tonsils throbbing when I get back.



*Lake Bajkal from Vliyodyika*

Catch sight of three Europeans who boarded the train at Irkutsk. Two sinister looking types (Swiss apparently) and a guy rumoured to be from Holland. Wearing a red lumberjack jacket and a gangster hat to conceal his balding head.

Sucking tablets to temper the rage of my reddened tonsils. Feeling feverish. Look at Lake Bajkal through the window. Thick blue ice along the shore line pounded by heavy waves. The largest and deepest lake in the world which is probably why it looks like the sea. And an angry sea at that. White crested waves lapping on the shore and strangely dressed Siberian types standing like solitary

figures at intermittent interludes along the side, casting fishing lines into the deep waters. Sometimes a hut of straw in the round Mongolian style appears and outside one of them a wayward fisherman is crouched over a smoking fire. Such details. Says something about the speed of the Trans Siberian. Or lack of it.



Begin today's Chinese lesson with Zhang-lin. Difficulty with the pronunciation. Chinese diphthongs are a struggle but my swollen tonsils even more so. Point to my throat. 'Hungry?' asks Zhang-lin. 'Don't worry. Mongolian restaurant wagon soon.'

Have some soup with Annika and Gunnel. Brief stop at eleven but too worried about tonsils to venture outdoors. Last stop before the Mongolian border. Lake Bajkal disappearing into the darkness. Return to the compartment feverish, beads of perspiration on my forehead, like the condensation on the window. Zhang-lin casts a sympathetic eye toward my curled up form on the bunk: despondent, feverish and grasping at my throat. Produces a plastic bag from his varied assortment of luggage and takes out a tiny tube of silver pellets. 'Chinese medicine,' says Zhang Lin. He examines the tube closely and sighs with disappointment. 'Ah, he says, 'Only ten left. With thirty you would be completely cured.'

He rolls the little pellets onto my hand. 'Put them under your tongue,' he says. 'You must keep them there for thirty minutes.' He shakes a wagging finger. 'You must not taste them.'

Most difficult. Mouth shut but salivating copiously. Little devils rolling around all over the place. Between my teeth and gums; around cavities, under tongue, roof of the mouth. It's like a Japanese golf course in there. Slightly antiseptic taste flooding through the oral chamber. So much for not tasting. Exceptionally unpleasant. Smile bravely and Zhang-lin nods encouragingly. A knock at the compartment door. Lena from Gothenburg come to say hello. 'Mmm, mmm, mm' I say, and point at my mouth. 'Hungry?' says Lena. 'Don't worry. The Mongolian diner opens soon.'

Another twenty minutes before I can open my mouth. I point again and try to say 'Chinese medicine', but it comes out as 'blublurblur'. And with the mumbling two tiny silver pellets slip under my tongue making their acrid taste all too painfully apparent. God awful taste. 'Tonsils,' I say again pointing. Lena, talking, talking, and asking an unusual number of questions. Try to answer with closed lips as silver balls gradually melt away. The taste is so awful, like sulphur and urine and acid. Meanwhile Lena strikes up a conversation with with Zhang-lin.

'Problems with tonsils', says Zhang-lin. 'I give medicine.' Then he asks Lena's name and writes it out in Chinese characters. Lena most impressed and shows it to me while I clutch my throat about to collapse onto the floor.

'And what sort of Chinese medicine?' asks Lena.

'Ah', says Zhang-lin with a smile. 'Secret Chinese medication many hundreds of years old. And very effective.'

'But where does it come from?' asks Lena, not one to let a subject drop.

'Yes,' says Zhang-lin, 'made from small parts of Chinese gazelle.' He hesitates, struggling to find the right word. 'In English I believe called gonads!'

My eyes bulging, almost swallowing silver balls.

'Most precious,' says Zhang-lin.

'Gonads? What is gonads?' Lena is asking me.

I'm pointing to mouth, now filled with disgusting melting silver balls; mmm mmm. 'I get it,' says Lena. 'Still hungry.' And leaves to check-up on her aging mother, while looking up her English-Swedish pocket dictionary. She turns in the doorway. 'Balls?' she shouts out. 'You're sucking on goat's balls?'

'Gazelle,' Zhang-lin corrects her politely.

Meanwhile feeling overpowered by ancient Chinese medicine. Rest on the bunk and contemplate the cold airs of Mongolia.



Four o'clock in the afternoon Moscow time. Pitch black actual time. The Soviet frontier. At the edge of an empire. Weak with delirium, and now the train has stopped - a railway platform between the Soviet Union on one side and the Socialist Republic of Outer Mongolia on the other. Walking the distance to the money changing office located at the furthest possible point at the station from the passengers end of the train. Soviet organisation. Changing roubles to dollars. Return to train and help entertain Soviet customs officers as an entourage of eight uniformed comrades inspects under carpets and inside wardrobes. No one quite sure why.

Eric from Quebec in the wagon next door marched off by the militia to explain why he has Soviet envelopes. Soviet letters from Soviet

dissidents to be smuggled to the West? That's the rumour. He said as much to Gunnel and Gunnel is convinced he is a lunatic. Who can argue with that? 'No,' says Eric (who can suddenly speak English after all), 'I bought them at a hotel.' 'Which hotel?' 'Hotel Europa.' 'Why these envelopes?' ...and so on.

Two other officials are in the compartment next door listening to cassettes the Swedish guys had with them (checking cassettes is customary - I guess in this case for the subversive messages of Abba's greatest hits), and another uniformed stormtrooper picks up a camera from some poor guy from who knows where... 'You take pictures of railways station? You take pictures of railway stations?' he shouts. Then opens up the back of the camera and pulls out the film, unrolling it before the poor guys face. 'This is what we do with people who take pictures of railway stations!' Then hands back the camera. Delightful.

Eric is marched off and the train doesn't move for an hour and three quarters. Eric returns with two guards. Then the Russian wagons (including the infamous dining car) are uncoupled. The rest of the train rolls onward and into the dark. Six pm. Thirty minutes later pulling up at the platform of the unnamed station that comprises the Mongolian frontier. Thirty minutes delayed. Now the time is twelve midnight. A time zone leap of six hours. Ulan Bator standard time, coincidentally Beijing standard time. Now maybe we can make some sense of sunrise and sunset - if that's feasible in December.

The Mongolian border. Jesper the Swedish guy is dead nervous. 'What is there to be nervous about? I ask. 'Look,' he says. 'In the guide book it tells you that over-zealous Mongolian officials rip the film out of people's cameras, then smash them up.'

'Did you see what the Russian guy did to the camera in wagon number three? It can't get worse than that, can it.'

'Yes,' says Jesper, 'waving his Swedish Trans Siberia guide book. 'Yes, it can.'

Now there is a moment of unforeseen confrontation. Lena's mum from Gothenburg, 70 years old. She is shouting and screaming at a Mongolian customs official. 'No, you don't. No you don't.'

But they do. The Mongolian officials have found a Swedish language bible in Lena's mum's suitcase. They are confiscating it under penal code 413 (Mongolian officials explain) in regard to subversive literature. The two burly uniformed officials wave the paper angrily in Lena's mum's face. Well sure, a single copy of a Swedish language bible into Outer Mongolia - the consequences are too dreadful to consider. Bringing Christianity to the horsemen of the plains. In Swedish.

Maybe they know about the Swedish speaking village that still exists in the eastern province of Ukraine - still surviving in the 1980s. The entire population moved from Estonia in the 1920s. Courtesy of Josef Stalin. Now only a handful of villagers survive that still speak an archaic form of Swedish.

Next comes the Quebec Eric case. 'No', Eric tells the Mongolian official. 'I have no visa.' Eric is marched down the wagon corridor one more time, two Mongolian guards at each side. Zhang-lin, politely intervenes. 'Why did you not get a Mongolian visa?' he asks Eric in upper class French. Eric replies in rough Quebec French, 'Couldn't be bothered.' (I even got that, especially the '*foutu*' and '*merde*'). 'Ah, quite so', says Zhang-lin, and explains to the Mongolian officials (he tells me later) that Eric made every possible effort to get a visa but the consulate closed at the particular hour when he was there. He is most apologetic and would be happy to acquire a visa now. He apologises for any inconvenience he may have caused. The Mongolian officials exchange a few words, then stamp his passport.

Later I ask Zhang-lin why he would put himself out like that. He said the train would have been held up another hour at least waiting for officials from Ulan Bator deciding whether to arrest him, send him back to Moscow or just leave him on the platform.

‘Sounds like you’ve seen this sort of thing before,’ I say.

Hm, he nods, and starts reading a Chinese newspaper he bought at the station kiosk.

Eric, the bastard. Not only gets to travel across Mongolia without the hassle of getting a visa, he got out of having to pay up the \$8.00.

After an hour at the border the train, complete with Mongolian dining car, begins to rolls across the Mongolian plains.

At three am, head heavy with with weight of swollen tonsils and the long lingering aftertaste of Chinese medicine, I go to bed.



*Mongolia*

*Ulan Bator, 1.12.1985 Sunday, -16° (Advent)*

Awaken briefly at 6 am. Cold draught coming through the badly sealed windows. Glimpse of sunrise. Snow covered mountains in the distance and their snow caps a delicate shade of pink. The plains in the foreground filled with bright yellow spinifex. And the sky is coloured blue, not grey, for the first time since entering the Soviet Union. It is a curious phenomenon. This constant pall of grey covering the entirety of the USSR.

*The*



*forbidden photograph - Ulan Bator station*

Once took the bus - Sweden to Finland to Leningrad via Vyborg. At the Finnish border (late December), the vivid green pine forests against a blanket of pure white snow on the Finnish side. Courtesy of Soviet border officials we had two hours and 55 minutes to enjoy the view from the bus. And the same forest and the same snow transform within two minutes across the border. Withering trees, pallid, grey coloured snow. As if nature had given up in defeat. And now Outer Mongolia too, by comparison to the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, has colour.

Drape another blanket over my body against the cold and covering my wretched swollen tonsils, turn over and sleep once more. First of the month, white rabbits. Can go screw themselves. Probably do.

The train pulls into the Mongolian capital at nine and excited passengers leap out into the brisk cold of the day, ready to make the most of the hour and a half stop. Stories circulate of passengers who have strayed too far from the station, returned to see the train disappear into the distance, and wait seven days in the station waiting room till the next one.



*Restaurant and waiting room - Ulan Bator railway station*

It is fiendishly cold. Hard to breathe. Vapours of steam from passengers blowing into their gloved hands. Outside the station, a taxi rank, and a line of taxi cabs, their engines running. More than can be said for Soviet cabs. Two of the Swedish guys brave their luck, and hire a taxi for a half hour tour of the city. Prepared to pay with US\$. Risky business for all concerned but Mongolian officials busy watching for people with cameras.

Minus whatever, it is severely cold. Approximately - 20°. A two hour stop at Ulan Bator - chance for a short walk outside the station. A mix of Soviet high rise flats, political banners and

Mongolian tents - *gers* - on the ceaselessly flat plains. An over zealous woman guard tries to confiscate my camera. The Dutch guy, Juuls, who got on the train in Irkutsk, intervenes. I've not taken any pictures I tell her, but she is not happy. 'She wants to see the permit', says Juuls who has a broader Russian vocabulary than mine. We sorted it out in Soviet bureaucratic style (slowly), and the Dutch fellow, Jan, suggested this was probably not the time of year to see Mongolia at its best. A seasoned traveller, he told me about the *Nadaam* festival, or *eriyn gurvan nadaam*; Mongolia's biggest festival of the year.

It runs for three days in the middle of July, in all parts of the country and highlights Mongolia's finest, competing in horse racing, archery, and wrestling: Mongolia's three most popular sports. Women also compete. No time limits on the wrestling bouts, and no class divisions, so anyone can be pitted against anyone else. The wrestler who falls first, loses. The winner of the tournament is awarded the title of Lion, although one year there was a wrestler so exceptional he was awarded with the honorary title: 'Eye-Pleasing Nationally Famous Mighty and Invincible Giant.' Like Japanese *sumo*, Mongolian wrestling is highly ritualised, with due respect made to judges, and a ceremonial dance called *devekh*, (eagle dance) before the bout. The vests worn by competitors are called *zodog*, their shorts called *shuudag*, and boots, *gutuls*.



What a language. I remember watching a film once about Genghis Khan, when his father tells him: 'Listen to these words my son. Our language is the most beautiful language of all.' Considering his empire stretched from the Ural Mountains to the sub-continent, he had a few languages with which to compare.

The protocols and courtesies of visiting a Mongolian *ger* are as complex as they are important, especially for Europeans. Juuls has a copy of a government tourist office guide and it recommends the following:

*"Greet the family members and sit down. Mongolians respect by sitting, but Europeans show respect by standing. Do not sit putting one leg over another, or else people will think that you are looking down on them. Do not cross your arm over your chest while sitting. They would think that you are sick. Do not point at people. They would suspect that you bring them to evil. It is not allowed to show your palm to others, put up your shoulders, put up your nose and bending your neck because Mongolians dislike it and would think that they offended their guests and gave bad impressions. Therefore, they would start worrying about it. Women cannot sit on the place of honour where men sit. Most of Asian people respect men and give them a seat in the place of honour. Europeans let women sit in the place of honour. If one gives praise to the wife, the husband dislikes it and the wife feels ashamed. Being ashamed, she turns her head and hides her face with palms of her hand. If a present is given right upon entry in a ger, they will be upset and surprised and worried. The custom is to present a gift before leaving. According to European culture tea is offered at the end, but in Mongolian tradition tea must be the first thing to be offered. Mongolians dislike when people drink tea holding from the top of the cup and would think that they do not know Mongolian custom but will not have courage to tell it straight."*

Also good to remember; the east side of the *ger* is for women, and the west side for men. Inside the *ger*: 'Do not pass the place of honour while going out of the house; therefore, you can pass clock wise by the side... During formal celebrations or occasions, food, tea, or vodka should be given and received with the right hand extended and the left hand supporting the right elbow...'

Protocol regarding drinking vodka (or the local variation, *airag*) begins with; 'When offered *airag*, accept it...' and continues with a

long list of advice, including: 'You may also dip your ring finger into the drink, raise your hand above your head, and flick your finger to the four winds...'

Also, the government brochure advises, one should not whistle. Whistling brings bad luck. This is based on a legend from times past when 'whistlers' could summon evil winds and destroy the homes of their enemies. Also, when leaving the *ger*, it is rude to walk across an area where women are milking their cows!



Stroll outside the station and notice that here there are a few foreign cars; Mercedes, Volkswagon, even a Volvo. Old, sure, but foreign. Not permitted in the USSR. And people wearing fur hats and smiling. Also not permitted the other side of the border.

A few local eccentrics waiting for local trains on the the other platforms dressed up in goatskins - hats and boots, Ghengis Khan style. And some Soviet militia patrolling the station.

Ties between the two countries are apparently still quite strong - particularly now as the Trans Siberian railway passes through Soviet military bases. At the turn of the century the Mongolians abandoned their own colourful writing script and adopted the Cyrillic alphabet. Of which now all signs are made up of. Too bad. Because listening in to Mongolian conversations, and the strange sounds of Mongolian, it hardly seems a language suited to the matter of factness of pronouncing every letter as is the Russian mode. Lots of 'chuks' and 'tharls' from those two Genghis Khan types standing on the platform seemingly oblivious to twenty degrees of coldness.

Ulan Bator station is completely open unlike the Soviet stations. Like a station from a Wild West movie of Sergio Leone. Take a stroll and no-one shouting '*shtotakoi*' ('what are you doing?') or 'stop

before we blow your head off.' Scarf wrapped tightly around my neck, take a stroll.

I'm wondering about those Swedish guys in a taxi. Sure, it's Sunday - not a lot of traffic, but...

There's a story circulating about a couple of tourists last summer attempting to make the most of the stopover, jump into a taxi and ask for a tour around town. The driver apparently misunderstood and drove them to the airport. Apparently quite a distance away. By the time they get back the train had gone, along with their baggage, passports, money. They were placed under guard at the station waiting room, forbidden to leave for the entire week before the next train. Well, one way to see Mongolia...



*Admiring the city views... -20°*

Consequently, together with the cold factor, everyone is back on the train well on time. Except for those two Swedish guys. What is there to see in Ulan Bator? From the station, there's a few Soviet style blocks of flats, long straight snow packed roads into the flat terrain, and a few Soviet style public buildings. Just like in Leningrad emblazoned with red stars and Russian slogans like:

'*slava kommunism*' ('Communism 4-ever'). One building with a picture of Lenin. And positioned indiscriminately some traditional Mongolian *gers*.

A quiet Sunday in December, minus 20° and winter has not yet begun. Back on board, Gunnel and Annika, holding fast to their Swedish traditions, have made each other advent calendars and taped them to their compartment wall. In their flannel pyjamas and red hats and slippers they serve some mulled wine (*glögg*) from their thermos, with that gentle warm sting of alcohol. Very cosy.

Both Gunnel and Annika have opened up the first window of their calendars, just as everyone else back in their native Sweden watching Yule calendar on of Sweden's Public Service television station, with television legend, Arne Weiss.

In total there are eight Swedish passengers (two of which are still missing) on board and - no doubt inspired by Gunnel and Annika's patriotic whim - are now threatening to hold an advent singing evening in the restaurant dining car. What is it with Swedish people and singing together? Lena, speaking in Swedish with the group, adds a comment as to why the choir night is so important. 'What did she say?' I ask Gunnel.

'That we must celebrate to be leaving the bloody Soviet Union in one piece,' she replies. Well, amen to that.

And now they are eight. The two Swedish university students, Sven and Lars from Lund, are back on board. 'What did you see?' asks Gunnel. Sven points out the train window toward the high rise flats and straight roads and Soviet style public buildings. 'That!' he says. 'For half an hour.'

So now, as the train pulls out of Ulan Bator, slightly faster pace, slightly more optimistic tone to the chugging of the train wheels on the slightly smoother railway tracks, our entourage of foreigners

head off to the newly attached Mongolian dining car for breakfast. Because whatever they are serving it can only be better, and the Swedish woman who has been without black coffee for five days now, is suffering signs of withdrawal.

It is a cheery and animated breakfast. Attractive young waitresses (plural) heavily made up, and dressed in brightly coloured national costume. They beam smiles (albeit artificial) as they hand out menus. These two women could be taken directly from a Chinese Revolution political poster. They serve up hot porridge is a breakfast entrée. And it's very good.



*From the railway track - new Mongolia and old Mongolia*

And after an excellent breakfast (levels of expectation are low at this stage), we discover another surprising dimension to our new found friends from Outer Mongolia. They are terrible communists. Because they are offering souvenirs and merchandise, Ghengis Khan hats and postcards and Mongolian vodka (duty free), all in US dollar prices. I pay for my breakfast in dollars and get change back in blocks of chocolate and a few small coins of local currency; mongres and triguks (100 triguks to a mongre).

Back in wagon three compartment one, Zhang-lin is reading another Chinese newspaper bought at the Ulan Bator station kiosk. I comment on the new dining car and yet still only foreign customers. No Chinese. 'Chinese people only eat in Chinese restaurant wagon', says Zhang-lin. 'Even you?' 'Most of all me', says Zhang-lin, who is flexible in most matters but demanding when it comes to food. The Chinese way.

Foreign passengers in the aisle-way jumping and down and pointing out the window. Come see. Come see. Come see what? A horse, then a cow, then another horse. Not sure how exciting that should be. True enough - no animals in Siberia. Apart from the odd stray dog. Nor birds, no flowers, and not that many trees. Mongolia is something else. Now a crowd is gathered at the corridor window to watch a Ghenghis Khan dressed horseman at full gallop across the plain herding up a group (a coral?) of twenty or so horses. A landscape of dusty plains and wild horsemen against a backdrop of purple coloured mountains. Straight out of a movie set. Or a painting by Nikolai Roerich.

Two o'clock in the afternoon and the train stops at a town made up of a railway station and two other buildings. The sun is shining outside, the air is dry, no snow. And a temperature of -25°. A handful of restless foreign passengers rush outdoors onto the platform to experience the Mongolian chill. Some staring school children from one of the two local buildings hastily called to go back indoors...

On the platform Juuls and I strike up a conversation with a German guy, Mikael, not more than thirty, tufts of black wild hair over a pair of thick rimmed spectacles. The train starts up its journey across the steppes of Outer Mongolia and we drink some tea in Mikael's compartment in wagon three. A Chinese speaking researcher from Hannover ('where,' he tells us, 'the purest German is spoken'), who is returning to Beijing to continue work on a German state financed Chinese - German dictionary. Lena from Gothenburg drops by to

tell us some story about deadly snakes, and how all the human characters get killed. But one of the snakes survives. Can't work out if this was a dream, or a film she'd seen, a Chinese folk tale, or something she just made up. Difficult to tell with Lena. Difficult to tell where her mind is at any given moment. Right now it's on snakes and each death by poisonous snake bite is recounted in hideous detail - the paralysis, the screams, the festering eyes, the sweats and convulsions. Juuls the Dutchman winces as Lena describes each gory death.



Story over. Juuls tells us a bit about Irkutsk. Takes about two sentences. Not much to see. Concrete blocks where people live, go to work, get watched over. Live, suffer and die. Under the omnipresent gaze of Lenin, red stars and communist slogans.

'So what do you plan doing in Beijing?' he asks.

'Two things planned so far,' I tell him. 'Avoiding the Great Wall. And a visit to the Beijing Film academy and film studios.'

'Why, and why?'

'Because it is a sad monument to xenophobia, to the first. And because I like Chinese movies to the second.'

Jules is a film producer from Amsterdam. He flashes a business card: Juuls Oosterbeek, Film Producer. I'm impressed.

The train stops at five thirty as darkness descends on the small town of Chi'an-da. Stroll outside. One building, and a horse tied to a post. Not a person to be seen. Quite literally a Mongolian one horse town. Mongolia may be sparsely populated but this seems excessive. Ulan Bator there were maybe twenty people to be seen within an hour and a half. Then again, it was a Sunday. And so far at least five more since crossing the border. How could so few people have so terrified the Three Kingdoms of China that they were compelled to build the longest wall in the history of mankind? Where are the Mongolian hordes?



*The steppes*

Big dinner at six in the Mongolian dining car - the Swedish passengers are making good their threat of Advent and with the aid of their purchases of Mongolian vodka the choir singing begins. First Swedish songs, then any songs. The Mongolian dining car's beer supply soon runs dry and I supply two verses of Australia's own Slim Dusty and The Pub with No Beer. It is a long evening and the Mongolian staff are enthusiastically locking the door as the last

guests depart, but the two Swiss guys insist that the party continues in their compartment in wagon #3. And yes, they sing 'I love to go a-wandering' (amazing!) and as the fracas descends into a Boy Scouts and Girl Guides jamboree, with clapping hands, and touching noses, whistling, thumping chests and shouting 'boom boom', Juuls makes a convincing impression of Stan Laurel from Laurel and Hardy. Some Chinese passengers, who have come to check out the commotion, stare in bewilderment through the open door (either amazed over the performances, or the fact that about twelve people have managed to incarcerate themselves in a cabin intended for two persons). I make a hasty exit, reflecting on the effect of six days and nights of confinement on a slow moving train may have on the human psyche.

Not least as we are due to reach the Mongolian border in thirty minutes time, and the Swedish passengers en masse return to their compartments to rewind the film in their cameras one more time. (Advice gleaned from the Swedish language guide book 'Travelling the Trans Siberia with Bert and Lena Jansson'). No-one else bothers.

Traversed the entire country in 22 hours.

Ten pm and the train screeches to an ominous halt. It is pitch black outside and austere Mongolian officials in green uniforms parade threateningly through the wagons one by one, then back again. They touch nothing then leave without a word having been uttered. The dining car is unhooked and the train proceeds another thirty minutes or so to the Chinese side of the frontier.





*\* The giant Buddha statue erected ca 2004. Ulan Bator was founded as a nomadic Buddhist centre in the 12th century. Since the Soviet collapse the Mongolian authorities have restored Buddhist temples, constructed a Buddhist library and museum and arrange specialist Buddhist tours.*

*China*

## *Erlian, Inner Mongolia (Chinese Border), 1.12.1985*

Music blaring from loud speakers - the Chinese national anthem. Flood lights illuminating the black night sky, and a parade of Chinese officials on the platform, wearing green uniforms, green peaked caps with the communist star planted firmly in the centre. And the train rolls majestically into the border town in Inner Mongolian, Erlian, the outpost of the Peoples Republic of China. A sense of jubilation fills the hearts of minds of us all on board. Not just the theatrics of the grand entrance, but the relief. To have traversed Siberia, Mongolia, and prevailed over their hard line officials, and now arrive, at last, in China. A new China we are told, of limited enterprise, and slightly reduced political oppression, and a party line that sees Mao firmly positioned in the mausoleum of Tiannamen Square, a reminder that the old days were passed and the New China was thoroughly new.\*



Right now, the mood, is imbued with a sense of achievement, the atmosphere, festive. Customs officials come aboard smiling and bidding greetings. No one is looking at baggage or inside cameras. Zhang-lin is cracking jokes with the customs official. the customs official is cracking jokes back.

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\* Three years later the name Tiannamen Square would enter world politics with a different message...

A new song is playing over the raspy but very loud speakers - the International - echoing up and down the station platform. A cheery woman's voice (rather 1984 cheery) proclaims: 'Welcome to China', in Chinese, Mongolian, Russian, then English. The formalities of passports and visas are completed within minutes. The train starts moving from the station - passing by the name Erlian in Mongolian and Chinese characters, the sound the International is fading as well as the bright lights, when suddenly...

...the train is slipping into a huge dark hall, grinding to a halt, with barbed wire spirals around a huge concrete wall, and only blackness at both ends. As if we have been confiscated as in some terrible scene from a James Bond movie.

'Do not worry,' assures Zhang-lin. 'Must change bogies. Chinese Railways, international standard; Soviet railways, Soviet standard - six inches wider.'



*Changing bogies...*

So the twelve wagon long Trans Siberian railway train is locked in a huge garage, with giant cranes on one side, and the railway line with Chinese bogies on the other.

A voice booms over the loud speakers: 'You may leave the train now,' in a tone that leaves no question of ambiguity or possibility of staying on the train should one so desire.

Walking half a kilometre back to the platform, very cold, very dark - midnight in China, waiting for the train to be fitted with new wheels.



*Old locomotives at Erlian - still running*

The platform is lined up with attractive Chinese women railway officials in smart blue informs, their hair styled the same, with official buns tied at the back and small blue caps peaking forward. This is a huge railway complex. Old steam trains are thundering too and fro. A gigantic black locomotive, of the kind one sees in Hollywood movies of the 1930s, with a giant red star in the middle of its circular frontispiece. Walk into the main hall of the railway station and line up to change money at the bank. A megalithic space

as if designed by Fritz Lang, as if one was the first earthling arrived on a new planet.

Time to stroll around. Stroll toward the back exit of the station hall where the lights of Erlan twinkle into the night. Only now a sweet tiny Chinese girl official with smiling face and wagging finger comes running up and steers me in the opposite direction. Same thing happens to Juuls who is walking not far behind. So we head upstairs to the lounge and buy some Chinese chocolate. Introduce Zhang-lin to Mikael our German translator friend from Hannover. Suddenly the lights go out. Total blackness. Power failure. Stand in blackness and total silence for two minutes, when the lights come back on with the humming noise of a generator from somewhere.

Move to the platform where the re-bogied train rolls slowly into view. At the same time another huge thundering black steam locomotive passing by in the opposite direction and acrid black smoke descends upon us all.

Back in wagon number three Gunnel and Annika are having a small get-together, together with Lena (her mum is in bed already) trying to persuade Juul and myself the virtues of their Swedish delicacies they preserve in their Obs shopping bag: Vasa crispbread, Kalles caviar in a toothpaste tube and some truly ghastly Swedish Explorer vodka, all of which must be finished off before reaching Beijing in 14 hours.

Before heading back to compartment one, we take a look inside the newly arrived Chinese dining car, which at 2am in the morning is packed to capacity with happy Chinese diners, the noise, the rice bowls, the paper table clothes, spilled tea and overturned rice... like a Wardour Street restaurant on a Sunday afternoon.

Return to the luxury of wagon four. Join the Swedish group at the end of the compartment. Whole train filled with jovial mood as it chugs its way through the dark Chinese landscape. China.

Convince the Swedish guys that spoken Chinese is really not so difficult. Soon they're all saying *ni hao, ni hani hao, ni hao ma?* to each other.

Return to the cabin at 4am. Less than twelve hours to learn the entire Chinese language before entering Beijing. Hope Zhang-lin brought his dictionary. Study Chinese phrase book till 6am. Learn one more phrase. '*Qing wao ni chu-en ma?*' Do you have a sister? Stock phrase for optimistic travellers. Who knows - could be useful. Then sleep.



\*

**Kan Chan 2.12.1985**

'MR ALEXANDER! ARE YOU SICK?' My bleary eyes confront Zhang-lin in an armchair opposite through a fog of uncertainty. Sunshine glaring through the window. Chinese landscape sweeping past. Zhang-lin dressed smartly in his suit and tie.

'Are you sick Mr Alexander?'

Where am I? Who? What? Yes... Train, China. What time is it? Eleven am. Missed the stop at Da-tin early this morning. And the stop at Chu-lat. A long hard sleep. Assure Zhang-lin of my good health. Get out of the bunk dazed and confused. The sleep of the dead. A real sleep. The first time in ages. Hurriedly collect wits. Stare out of the window. Yes, it's really China. Mountains and fields and many many Chinese people. On bicycles, in lorries, on bullock carts.

Morning chat with Zhang-lin over a bowl of tea. Curious about Zhang-lin's ancestry. Ancestors are of great importance in China. Seems the family tree of Zhang-lin goes back many centuries. But all records were destroyed during war time. War with Japan. Civil War. Another civil war. The 20th century has been none too kind to China. 'Not just China,' says Zhang-lin. All most all of the ancient orders destroyed in this century.

Great irony that the sacred cultures of Europe, of the East, of Russia - devastated, while the New World and culturally impoverished cities of Australia, the US, Canada - all untouched.

At midday Zhang-lin sitting in the armchair, hands folded under his chin, a slight smile of anticipation, gets up and goes to the Chinese restaurant wagon for lunch. Half an hour later the train stops at Kan Chan, a tiny platform of a railway station. Still, a thirty minute stop to breathe in Chinese air and stretch western legs. Michael takes us through a few *tai chi* moves, Juuls tries to keep up,

and some Chinese passengers look on with amusement. An elderly man goes through the entire sequence - *wu* style - speeded up, just to show us how it's done. Nice style. Nice day. The sun is shining and the old man's shadow moves about like tiny pebbles of the platform. Young Swiss boy going through some karate moves. The *kata* of *Kyo Kushinkai*, he says, and starts a sparring match with one of the Swedish guys. Chinese group of passengers now chuckling gleefully.

Half an hour of intense movement. Get back on the train near exhausted. Chinese guys chuckling like maniacs. Those westerners. Return to compartment. Zhang-lin still at lunch. the compartment radio blurts into life for the first time since Day One when Chinese musicians played and sang 'By the Rivers of Babylon', a big Boney M hit in Russia. Amongst other things. Now we listen to more traditional Chinese music and a woman's voice in a high pitched and fervent tone announcing... something.

Meanwhile staring at the landscape moving quietly past, as the dry plains of Mongolia, hidden under the cover of night, have given way to the slightly greener fields of, well, too dry for rice... but enough vegetation to warrant the tractors and the trucks and the farm workers in blue serge suits, on foot and on bicycles. Mountains in the background, more people, a village, a town, more people. On the radio the Chinese woman now speaking Russian, then Mongolian, and now, at last, some words in English.

'Ladies and gentlemen. Soon we will stop at the Great Wall - the most splendid achievement of mankind and of the Chinese people...'

One fifteen precisely. The train stops. The Chinese passengers seem the most enthusiastic, quickly forming groups with assigned photographers snapping pictures, quickly changing place with someone else to snap a picture. Group after group frantically assembling themselves in front of the mountain vista - the winding

wall of ill-concealed xenophobia disappearing over the grassy hills and into the distance. Juuls taking pictures of Chinese tourists taking pictures of Chinese tourist groups. And Chinese passengers in openly jubilant mood. Home at last.



*Keeping out the foreigners...*

Return to the compartment. Zhang-lin in his armchair, a contented Buddha-like smile across his Bacchian visage and a slightly crimson hue illuminating his complexion. Several glasses of celebratory Chinese wine to accompany a decent sample of native cuisine, courtesy of the long awaited Chinese restaurant wagon. A slight smile as he is about to doze off, after what seems to have been a very good lunch indeed. As a Paris-based Professor of Railway Sciences and seventh time Trans Siberian railway traveller, one has a sense that Zhang-lin has a certain degree of expert insight when it comes to the Chinese dining car.

'How was lunch?' I ask.

'Average,' says Zhang-lin and smiles. Which leads us into a broader discussion on Chinese cuisine. It is no longer popular to eat dogs and cats in the Chinese republic. Although snake and cockroach is still readily available in country side restaurants. However no more

breeding Chow dogs and Pekinese for the enhancing of the wok - those days are gone. 'Koreans on the other hand', says Zhang-lin, shaking his head sadly. 'Koreans. Now they eat dog.'

True enough. I met a Korean woman a year earlier - a manager of production plant in Busan on the south coast. 'But we don't eat our pets,' she explained. 'Only the dog we get at the butcher shop.' 'But you do eat dog?' 'Not every day,' she explains. 'Only for special occasion. Like when we have guest.' Like, then it's OK? 'And sure', she continued; 'We Koreans may be cruel. Very cruel. But look to the Japanese. They have made cruelty an art.'

Zhang-lin explains: it is a time honoured tradition in Korea to serve dog for an honoured guest. When the new Korean ambassador arrived at his post in Mongolia he requested dog as was his right as an esteemed visitor. The embassy staff were distraught. There were only three dogs in the neighbourhood, and these were the Alsatian dogs assigned as embassy guard dogs. The new ambassador was adamant and insisted that as honoured guest it was only good manners that he be served the highly valued dog flesh for the welcoming banquet. Reluctantly (Zhang-lin has an endearing Chinese way of pronouncing the word), the chef ordered that one of the guard dogs be killed, thus the Korean ambassadors wishes were fulfilled. However, the next day the remaining two guard dogs were listless, despondent, refused to eat, and also refused to obey instructions. With the situation unchanged for several days the embassy staff were forced to kill the other two dogs as well. From Zhang-lin's tone I guessed there were two morals to the story; Korean arrogance was one and canine sensitivity the other.

Zhang-lin places a hand on my knee. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'I did not mean to upset you.'

Explain that growing up in Australia that our dogs and cats were part of the family, that all creatures should be allowed to live out their lives. Isn't this the Buddhist way?

Hm.

I ask Zhang-lin for a favour. To write out in Chinese characters a request for vegetarian food. 'So I can show people in restaurants - in most countries I can explain (even in Japanese), but in China...'



*Chinese dining car - a return to civilization*

He writes down the characters on a small piece of paper. 'But you must learn to say this in Chinese,' he says. '*Wo chi su.*'

I look at the piece of paper. 'All those characters for that? This looks like a whole sentence.'

'Chinese language, very practical,' says Zhang-lin. '*Wo chi su*' - 'I eat vegetables'. I have written more detail - no chance for misunderstandings.'

'Thanks. *Xie xie.*'

With renewed confidence Juuls and I head off to the Chinese dining car for a vegetarian meal. Hand over Zhang-lin's written note and

the large friendly Chinese lady waitress smiles graciously and nods. 'Shu-zhe.'

The Chinese diners are all finishing up now with just we foreigners left and congratulating each other copiously at having survived six days to get a proper meal - the most substantial meal of the journey. Just an hour and ten minutes before reaching Beijing.

Last stop at two thirty. A little town called Han-koy. Take some photographs from the platform through the dining car window of hungry foreigners immersed in bowls of rice and *cha-sui* (marinated pork) and lemon spiced chicken.

And out here on the platform - the sun is warm upon the skin and our Chinese friends (I guess after a decent meal) are in jovial mood, talking, laughing, shuffling, yes, even dancing on the platform.



Return to the train compartment. One more hour of Chinese landscape, the mountains disappearing in the distance, and now the flat fields, rice fields, dusty roads, villages and lorries, bicycles and countless people, dressed in blue or green. Meanwhile foreign passengers dashing from compartment to compartment, swapping addresses.

Now the signs of the city suburbs. Houses, and blocks of flats, less green, more roads, more bicycles, more people. Say thanks to Zhang-lin for his company. Could not have wished for a more desirable travelling companion. Less snoring perhaps.

The train slows down and a myriad of train lines run into each other, weaving in and out, like lines of some gigantic puzzle. Blue dressed workmen swinging sledge hammers on train tracks dangerously close to the Trans Siberian rumbling into the station. Two workers brawling over something. Then a train passes from the other direction. A local train, filled to capacity, faces pressed against the window. Staring at our foreign faces, luxury train compartment with green fringed lanterns and mahogany panelling, the tea urns and tea-cups resting on the table. Some smile, some wave.

Slowly slowly the train coming into Beijing Central - the platform on the other side is filled to capacity and right to the edge. Yet our train is still moving, still slowly, past the hundreds of faces balancing precariously on the platform edge, passing slowly enough to pick out individual features.



The train will stop soon. Then we must get off and join all these people. A train journey — an allegory of life itself. Sitting in an armchair and watching the world go by. Watching the changing landscape and not having to think too much, just look. Drink tea and look. Philosophise a little. Confront disparately traumatic moments. Like Soviet customs. Or Mongolian customs. Overcome trials and tribulations. One or two obnoxious passengers, one or

two absolutely delightful people, and then a lot of others that simply pass by. And you learn to get along with most people. The journey continues, life goes on... Staring out of the window and looking, just looking.

The train slowing down. Passengers moving toward the exits. Packing up my bag slowly. Bid farewell to Zhang-lin. He waves to his family waiting on the platform. Put on my coat. Last to get up and the train has still not stopped. No hurry. Awful lot of people outside. Bid farewell to the steward. Leave the empty compartment and head for the exit. Reluctantly, reluctantly...



*[fr. left: Juuls, Annika + Gunnel, Lena + Mother; Quebec Eric at back]*

\*

# Beijing

*Beijing 2.12.1985.*

Foreigners and Chinese take group pictures in front of the Trans Siberia train at Beijing main station. Hasten away by taxi to a Chinese hotel booked through the Sweden China Association in Stockholm. Sitting in the back seat of a new Mercedes taxi regarding China through a closed window. Wide streets, diesel buses and bicycles. Thousands of bicycles. Pass Tiananmen Square and the entrance to the Forbidden City, the once Imperial Palace where now still hangs a giant portrait of Chairman Mao.

Arrive at the Lo Song Yuan Hotel, a small place in Chinese style. The receptionist, a man about 30, speaks no English. Compares the name on my passport to a letter of reservation hidden away in a drawer. Hands over the key and nods. Wander through a maze of courtyards, stone lions staring upwards. Room 12. My room.

Cold indoors and I turn on the electric radiator, run the bath - a Chinese style square shaped tub sunk into the floor - and make tea from the thermos supplied. Eight days of Chinese tea and I'm hooked.



Take a stroll around the quarter. Lots of stores, a market place, two large department stores and a market hall. Plenty of food if nothing else. Poor Russians. Who have to queue up for an hour for a bag of oranges. No queues here. Now the sun goes down and it is very very cold. From + five to minus. Return to hotel room and fetch scarf and gloves. Room not much warmer. Take note book with my list of essential Chinese phrases.

Walk down an alley way and past an apartment block. A young couple outside sitting on a bench on a cold and dark evening and arguing. Unlit bicycles weaving in and out between buses and bus stops. Looking out for a place to eat. Walking walking. Nothing but apartment blocks. Brisk walking pace and a strain on a tendon in my left foot. A kind of snapping sound. Ay. Very painful. Now I'm limping. Passing by some restaurants which are closed. The cold air has descended, so cold it bites into the skin. Tonsils are swelling and already swollen. How I am going to get the shoe off?. Come into another quarter, lit mainly by candle light and lanterns, where a few modest shops are open. Then an enormous temple, with some small chapels close by. Local people lighting up bundles of incense, placing them in sand dishes with Taoist deities before them. Bowing respectfully; one old man well versed in the rituals, clapping slowly three times.

Cold, hungry, and with swollen foot - I need to find my way back to the hotel. Looking for familiar streets but the truth of it is I'm completely lost. Walking from dusk to dark in a strange neighbourhood with only Chinese signposts and no landmarks on the map. Nowhere is this temple marked.

Walk into a small shop and buy some buns. At least the old lady understands the Chinese phrases I picked up from Zhang-lin. Some young kids in the shop watch and giggle in delight. 'Hello mister...'  
Lady in shop staring aghast. Well, I wanted to stay in the Chinese neighbourhood. Maybe they've not seen so many *geijo* faces - ghost faces - foreigners. Neighbourhood shop lady hasn't, that's for sure.

Limping toward ... what was the name of the hotel? Completely blank. The name of the street? Feel faint with hunger and the pain of a broken tendon. Huge towering apartment blocks like the ones I saw when I left. And who'd believe it... the same young couple sitting on a bench and still arguing. My bet is mother-in-law problems. Apparently number one source of arguments in Chinese households. Mothers love sons, hate son's wives; son's wives hate mother-in-law. Ceaseless games of power over controlling the unfortunate son/husband. This couple, still arguing. Two and a half hours later. Minus ten degrees and pitch black in this dry and dusty cold. At least I know where I am.



Find the narrow alley way leading to the hotel... see the sign, the red beams, lanterns and two stone lions - the Lo Song Yuan. Walk into the reception room to find that here is the meeting place for the local lads. Smoking, drinking, smoking, drinking. None of whom speak English. Grab the key, nod, *'ni hao, ni hao'*, then walk toward room number twelve.

Everything black, the courtyard black, room black. Turn on switch. Still black. No electricity. Return to reception and explain the

situation. Young assistant comes with a torch but can't find the fuse box. It's high up on the wall outside. I point it out and he nods and goes to fetch a ladder. I hold the ladder, trying desperately not to faint from cold. He climbs down again and turns on the switch. Still nothing. He laughs an embarrassed laugh. Laugh a little myself. About to die of cold. The numbed agony of a torn foot tendon. Faint with hunger. It's all so funny.

He climbs back up, tries another switch. Success. The lights go on, he smiles a broad smile, takes the ladder under his arm and disappears into the darkness. I open the door and walk into the cold cold room.

Slowly the heating begins to kick in. Boil up the kettle and make tea and *miso shira* from a packet I had with me. Japanese soup in a Chinese hotel. Fill up the thermos and make *lu-cha* tea with a tea bag in the same kind of cup with lid on board the Trans Siberian. Eat Chinese buns. Listen to Chinese radio. An emotional plot about a boy and a girl. Some romance involved. Lots of crying from the girl's side.

Massage the foot, wrap it up in a cold soaked towel to reduce the swelling and then in hot water to reduce the pain. It will be better tomorrow I am sure.

Please drive me to Beijing Lu Song Yuan Hotel, thank you.

请送我到北京侣松园宾馆，谢谢。

Address: No. 22, Banchang Lane, Kuanjie, Beijing

地址: 北京东城区宽街板厂胡同22号

## **Beijing 3.12.1985**

On clear December nights like this with the dry Beijing air, the early morning temperature is down to about  $-10^{\circ}$  and I've piled all available blankets onto the bed and turned up all the heating. As the sun rises the temperature will get to about  $+5^{\circ}$  by midday.

Limp painfully to the breakfast room on the other side of the courtyard and up one flight of stairs. Vow to walk as little as possible until the foot improves.



Alone in the breakfast room with a large Chinese breakfast - a curious mixture of rice gruel, pickled vegetables, tofu, jasmine cakes, dumplings - other items remaining unidentified, and tea of course, lots of tea. Show Zhang-lin's vegetarian note to the attractive waitress who has eyes as black as black can be. So far so good.

Walk to the local bus stop. Less walking and more public transport. One really crowded bus pulls into the bus stop - faces and limbs pressed and contorted against the bus windows - maybe a hundred bodies in a bus with a 35 max person limit. Some window panes missing and I can guess how. Another dozen souls squeezing into the aisle way. OK. Pass. I'll walk. Or limp.

Walk past the market and a Buddhist temple, uniformed school children marching in military columns through the school yard, led by a woman teacher and a man with tiny plasters covering one ear revealing a recent visit to an acupuncturist.

On the road a stream of cyclists, and thick smog. And the crammed buses that bark out strange commands through loudspeakers over the entrance door as they approach a bus stop. So many people. Boxes of Panasonic TV sets outside an electrical store - hundreds of them. A guy tying his 28 inch Panasonic to his bicycle carrier, and two other guys attempting the same feat. While another loads three 28" Panasonics into a van. 1985 - the year that colour TV sets came to Beijing. Another guy is struggling by hand, with rope around the box serving as a handle. That has to hurt.



What I need is a map, and I find some bookstores and ask for a map. No luck, but at least they understood what I meant. I think. Chinese is a blissfully simple language. No tenses, no definite or indefinite articles, only the most elementary of conjunctions and no impossible long words - just combinations of many many short

ones. It's the tones the cause grief. Four tones, and if you get one wrong you can change an entire sentence.

In the distance a white pagoda and walk towards it. It is the central point of a celebrated Buddhist temple called the White Pagoda. Could not have chosen a more suitable place for inspiration and repose for a swollen foot.



*White Pagoda Temple, originally named Miaoying Temple.*

Only in the last year have priests been allowed to return to the temples and some are here at the White Pagoda. People are once more allowed to worship, and there are some local people lighting bundles of incense and paying homage to the large Buddha statue.

The layout of Buddhist temple is in itself a book of wisdom, a kind of built in dramaturgy. The first chapel reveals a Buddha, statues, relics, then the walk through takes you to further advanced levels

through the other chapels. Only the initiate is allowed to enter the pagoda itself - there is no visible entrance clearly closed to all - a circle of bells high up around the outer rim which chime when a breeze rushes through them. God's whisper? who knows...



*Kuan Yin, Goddess of Compassion*

On the way out there is a final tiny chapel and concealed by heavy black drapes - a chapel you don't notice on entering because it is behind you, but now you have been through the various stages of initiation, here is the final test as you are about to leave. On drawing back the heavy black drapes, just before leaving, is an enormous mahogany framed mirror. Your own reflection. No escape. A picture of yourself in this place of quiet meditation - from Buddha to Kuan Yin to Dara - from wisdom to compassion to eliminating ignorance - then - your own image, an image of doubts and concerns and fears; maybe also a little insight, a little humility.

So it was for me. A solitary visitor in a temple that houses so many thousand spirits from a thousand years on this quiet cold December

morning. Leaving humbled, still limping through the alley ways and toward the city.

Limping solemnly toward the railway station. Must book tickets to Shanghai then Japan. Ask directions from a smiling youth at a tangerine stall by the roadside. Stumbling over some Chinese phrases. How far can one trust the Berlitz pronunciation guide? How long does it take to master the four tones?



*Beijing Central Station*

Now a crowd of eager-to-please youths have gathered offering different routes and pointing different directions. Tangerine stall guy gives me a tangerine and his friend says, 'try Metro.' Walk down the stairs to the underground. A few signs in English, enough to understand which line and which direction.

The station hall is spotless, like Moscow and Leningrad. Also the trains are packed with people, also like Moscow and Leningrad.

Feel like a real foreigner. Looking down over a sea of dark haired and dark eyed local people, and towering over them like some giant of alien giant. At the next station forced onto the platform by a wave of bodies and unable to get back on the train. Figure I may as well walk the rest of the way. How far can it be?

A long way as it turns out. Kilometre and kilometre of wide boulevards and every building looks the same. At last, Beijing Central Station. Was here just two days ago but no time to admire the spectacle of the building. Crowds and crowds of people. It turns out the travel office of the CCAC is not here, but at the Beijing Hotel - the main hotel for foreign visitors.

Wander through the park and the back streets and suddenly there it is - the Imperial Palace, the Forbidden City, Tianamenn Square.

The Forbidden City, like the Buddhist temple, is designed for acolytes to absorb certain levels of authority. The Chinese heaven and earth. And for the empress dowager a hundred years ago - most definitely earth. Housed up in the middle chambers where only the socially ordained were permitted to enter.

The sun goes down the the temperature quickly sinks to minus 10°. The rush hour of cycles fill the wide streets and pass the huge portrait of Mao hanging in Tianamenn Square.



Limp painfully to the nearby Hotel Beijing - as a foreigner immediately granted entrance by the Chinese doorman. No locals allowed. Sit down and massage my swollen foot.

'Painful, huh,' says a familiar voice. Juuls our Dutch friend who tells me that the entire entourage of Trans Siberian travellers are staying here. Would I care to join the group for dinner? Twenty of us in all, around a huge round table with rotating plate in the middle. Our Swedish friends, the Canadians, two Swiss travellers. All drinking Tao beer and ordering food.

We exchange stories, complain about the cold, and the bureaucracy and how the Swedish group have tired to arrange a visit to the Great Wall but got stuck at the 'great wall' of incomprehension and Chinese Bureaucracy. For me it was enough Great Wall at the railway stop. I'd prefer to see monuments to opening up the mind (like the White Pagoda) rather than the Greatest monument to xenophobia that civilised man has managed to create.

The Swedish travellers all carry the same travel guide: 'Travel to China by Yourself.' And they have all followed the advice on page 85: 'On arriving in China the first thing to do is to buy your own chop sticks. Chinese hygiene is not up to Swedish standards and with your own chop sticks you minimize the risk of infection.' And they, en masse, proudly display their individually purchased chop sticks. An example of Swedish collectivism we've all so much about.

Apparently they spent the day together shopping for chop sticks and are now comparing styles, shapes and format. Apparently I have cast my fate to the wind of infectious diseases by investing trust in local eating house chop sticks. Right now I'm more concerned about my foot than my stomach.

No complaints about dinner - excellent meal, and afterwards we go to visit the hostel where the Swiss guys are staying, drink Chinese

brandy and cheap imported tax-free whisky and *lu-cha* green tea. (Although it looks like I'm alone with *lu-cha* green tea).

Get a taxi back to the Lo Song Yuan. It is now 11pm and the streets of Beijing are deserted. The city seems to close down at around 8 pm. Back at the hotel a group of Chinese hotel staff in the reception are singing songs together; the chambermaid is playing a guitar.

Make some more tea in my room, soak in the bath, listen to Chinese radio, massage my foot and think for a bit. As the Japanese poet, Basho, once wrote, travelling is a sad and weary business.



*Beijing, December 4th, 1985*

Too cold to sleep, so stay under the bed covers a while. Drag myself into the cold morning air and walk around the quaint courtyard with its statues of lions, dragons, and tigers. The well aligned *feng shui* — dragons on the roof and lions by the doorways.

Ask Lou Chun the receptionist to help out with my visit to the Beijing Film Academy. Sent a letter a month back so hopefully all is OK. The visit is arranged for tomorrow afternoon. I think. Communication in China always seems a bit vague. It's impolite to use the word 'no' in Chinese, so sometimes 'yes' is a maybe, and sometimes even 'yes' can be a no. Hopefully Lou Chun's 'yes' was at least a 'maybe'.

Lunch at a nearby restaurant. Pleasant part of town, authentically Chinese; no tourists, no English signs. Public lavatories at every street corner to compensate for the rarity of indoor conveniences. Disturbing story in yesterday's China Daily about a woman who was cast two metres up into the air following a methane explosion in the toilet block she happened to be attending.

A restaurant with a more traditional ambience of red and gold and proper chairs. Sit at a table with a menu in one hand and phrase book in the other. Zhang lin's note on four things to ask for in a restaurant: Number One — '*qing ni go wo cha*' (tea please), which I can say. Then go to note Number Two: '*wo zhou su zhi tai*' (I'm a vegetarian), which the middle aged woman serving tables reads. Only she reads out loud. Another waiter appears. People at the next table look up and repeat, then at the next table and suddenly I'm the midday floor show, an act at the Beijing Opera. A young man in a policeman's uniform gets up from his bowl of *wun tun* and nods politely and scours through the menu on my behalf. Picks out three dishes. '*Fy-ma?*' Rice? Sure. More water for the tea? '*Re-shui.*' Definitely. We have a conversation of sorts and when he returns to

his colleagues they give him a round of applause. He has a new status — the master of the English language. Chinese restaurant tables are always large and round, and at least 6 - 8 people sitting together. Except for this *gai-jo* by himself. Me. I guess you have to feel some sympathy. Policeman smiles politely from his table, all policemen from the local constabulary. Several people now join my table, including a young couple, where a young woman is giving a tongue lashing to the young man. Could this be the same couple I saw on the bench the other evening? Now the tears, and the shrugs and the admonishments. The young man pleading through his thick rimmed spectacles and grasping for her hand, and she pulling away. No phrase book necessary.

Three students seated at the other side, talking loudly and wildly, like everyone else. The noise level and pandemonium of a typical Chinese lunchtime. Meanwhile I'm served three absolutely amazing dishes - spiced *tofu* (called '*Old Lady's Stinky Tofu*' in Chinese), black Chinese mushrooms and Chinese green cabbage in ginger with a touch of garlic. *Xie xie*, I nod to the young policeman. Thanks for your help. Two hours of sheer culinary hedonistic pleasure. I salivate in gratitude.



*Trolley buses - unexpected stops*

Take an afternoon trolley bus to the CAAC office. Need to book a ticket for Shanghai. Standing room available thankfully. But after a kilometre or two the bus, just stops. Also dark. No power. Look

though the grimy window. All trolley buses have stopped. The driver looks over his shoulder toward the conductress. They exchange glances. The conductress hops out of her little conductress booth with a little black book in hand, and starts tinkering with switches next to the drivers panel. The driver shakes his head, opens up his window and shouts out to another driver in a nearby stationary trolley bus. The conductress shrugs and smiles and returns to her little booth at the back. Passengers look at each other. Dark and quiet. Ten minutes pass. With a sudden lurch the trolley bus starts up again. The lights go on. All the trolley buses start moving again. Power cut. A daily occurrence it turns out.



Arrive at the Beijing Hotel in darkness. A brief respite from the terrible outdoor temperature. The foreigners gathered once again in either of two restaurants and or a choice of three bars. Nowhere else to go. No tea houses. No late night restaurants. No pubs or nightclubs. In Beijing the working people have no time for such things. They go to bed early, get up early and work all day. A little disappointing. Considering I was expecting an entire along the lines of Melbourne's Little Bourke Street or Wardour Street in London's W1. Even the cinemas are closed by 7pm.

Our idle foreign entourage of about twenty persons are readily accommodated into the main restaurant, all seated around a large round table (Chinese style - usually large round tables). And, no question, an excellent meal, selecting items from the revolving inner table - Chinese black mushroom, bamboo shoots in ginger, a wild and generous selection of vegetable dishes.

The waiter is a good humoured young fellow who has certainly been put through the ropes of cultural stereotypes this evening: demanding Germans, nitpicking Swiss, indecisive Swedes - yet we've been able to joke and jest for the duration, and he made not

single mistake when it came to serving drinks to twenty different Europeans. Now all the currency certificates have been gathered, and there's about ten too many. Please, keep it, says Juuls. And a few of us say yes, please, for you - excellent service. But his joking face disappears, and he pales in trepidation. No no, he says, cannot take. We try insisting: please, for you - otherwise it gets too complicated. Nononono, he repeats in deadly earnest and shuffles back the excess, counting out an amount to the exact foreign certificate, no less, no more. There is no tipping in the Chinese Republic.



*Beijing Hotel, 1985*

Now it is just Juuls and myself and Annika and Gunnel who head for the bar and join some other non locals at a table. A brawny and forthright fellow introduces himself; Darryl from Perth WA, and he has been studying on a Chinese government scholarship for almost twelve months. A year in China. What do you do? asks Juuls. Apart from studies, he spends his days between the Beijing Hotel bar and the freedom shop (foreigners only). Perth - reputedly the most isolated city in the world - now holds a good deal of attraction. And Mikael from Germany whom we met on the train - he's been here for five years. That's a lot of translating and few diversions to be concerned about.

We exchange travel stories for an hour and a half. Annika and Gunnel have tried three times to get to the Great Wall but have yet to succeed. 'Yesterday, half way there, and the bus stops, then turns back', says Gunnel. 'First we haven't a clue what's going on and the Chinese guide stares at us: "Too cold," he says, "too cold."'

The previous day their trip was cancelled before they set off. 'Technical problems' said the tourist office. It turned that the 'technical problems' were not enough people to fill up the bus.

And the money system of course, every traveller's favourite subject of complaint. People's money is for Chinese people and foreign currency certificates for foreigners, at an exchange rate of about times ten; ie - anything for a foreigner is about ten times more expensive than for a Chinese person. So while travelling in China is not hugely expensive it sure ain't cheap, and the layer upon layer of discomfort - well, no discount?

Juuls and I have planned to visit Mikael the next day. As a privileged foreigner he owns a motor car and has offered to drive us out to the Beijing Academy of Film and Dramatic Arts. He is just a little curious about the place himself. After five years in the capital he figures he knows most places of interest, but, well, here is something new. And good for us that he speaks Chinese. So far all that those patient Chinese lessons with Zhang-lin have brought me are stares of incomprehension. And on one occasion, when asking for directions, a gathering of a small crowd, when they drag out a young guy with terrible complexion, who actually remembers a few words from his English classes. To the amazement of his friends he was able to blurt out; 'Yes, first you go right, then left...'

\*

## **Beijing 5.12.1985**

Meet Juuls at the Beijing Hotel and wait half an hour for Mikael to show up. Trouble parking, says Mikael. The only other cars on the streets are taxis or official government vehicles. By all appearances Mikael seems to have the only private car in Beijing. A Honda Civic he bought from a departing German colleague five years ago. Zhang-lin says there could never be private cars in China, won't ever happen. Mikael says there already are, but they are so expensive that only very high placed 'cadre' would even consider the idea. The first priority is a color TV set, then a VCR, a telephone, well, it's a long list.

We drive first to the Friendship Store where Mikael is able to purchase exotic foreign goods with foreign currency certificates. He and his wife are organising a party for some university staff faculty. A good Chinese host, on such occasions, will provide a minimum of 30 different dishes. Mikael tries to appear calm, but he looks anxious.

Juuls and I wander through the vast empty emporium - the food section is only a small part. In the music section we bump into Darryl, the student from Perth, wearing a Chinese army coat and limping. We compare limps. His is much better. Apparently he broke his foot falling down some stairs and will spend six weeks on crutches. Darryl seems distinctly misplaced. Like other resident foreigners his routine comprises of wandering from the bars of the Beijing Hotel (foreigners only) to the Friendship Store (foreigners only), and back to the Bars. Where he meets other foreigners. Nothing else to do. In a city of ten million or so.

Rejoin Mikael. Drive to a Chinese petrol station to fill up his Honda Civic. Petrol stations are located behind huge iron gates which are only opened with the approach of a car. Mikael displays the paperwork: driving license, car permit, fuel purchase coupons and government permit to buy fuel. Every day an adventure. Drive out

to the Film School, some thirty kilometres away. Same high rise Beijing suburbs after 15 kilometres, then about a kilometre or so of rice fields and countryside, and a view of mountains in the distance.

Arrive at the school and are met by an appointed hostess, a jaw-droppingly beautiful trainee actress, who bows, smiles and introduces us to the head teacher. Mikael translates. Who were we supposed to meet? asks the teacher. So sorry. No-one seems to be aware of your visit. Oh dear. The Head of the Film School and other members of the Academy have already departed for the day. A new meeting is arranged for the next day.

Drive back to the city at sunset. Mikael weaves through streams of cyclists, buses, taxis and people in the tiny streets. 'Why do you keep covering your face?' asks Mikael, me sitting in the passenger seat. Someone or something is going to hit us. Just waiting to see what...

Drive to Beijing Central station where Jules changes his railway ticket for the weekend. He's heading south, planning a boat trip along the Mekong River in Vietnam. Poor fellow has been suffering with the cold - even forgot to bring a pair of gloves and had never heard about thermal underwear.

Mikael says the best food in town is right here at the Central Station restaurant. So we head upstairs through the crowds, seemingly thousands of impoverished people train travellers queuing up for food. The rows upon rows of wooden tables and wooden chairs are filled to overflowing and there are as many people on the floor as there at the tables, all having dinner. Juuls and I feel a little daunted but Mikael is the voice of optimism. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'the expensive restaurant is at the far end.'

Far end is right. A long long walk and I am still half limping, through what seems to be like a refugee camp of the hungry and

downtrodden towards a sign (in Chinese) that boasts 'Restaurant.' There are also toilet signs and for a moment it seemed we'd be walking past the facilities, whereas in fact we are walking *through* the facilities. The only thoroughfare to our final destination means passing Chinese people attending to their business in doorless cubicles, some of them looking up to see three *gaijo* - foreigners - staring back as they defecate into metal buckets. Thus an overwhelming stench of human excrement, mingling with the smells of rice and fish and whatever, immediately past the toilets and as we enter the 'expensive restaurant.' It looks darker and dirtier than the gigantic eating hall at the other end of the station hall, but is less crowded, which is to say, one table has just been vacated, so we take our seats. Mikael, in rapid fire Chinese, orders the food by a strange system of queues and coupons, paying up, to get a new coupon to be delivered to a serving hatch and there be presented with your order. A limited number of two items - beef or pork, no vegetarian food. OK by me. Perfectly content to have boiled rice, particularly having just been assailed, rather too closely, to the final outcome of any meal. Boiled rice it is, and I will then order some tea. 'In fact,' I assure my compatriots, 'Tea mixed in with boiled rice is considered quite an acceptable meal in Japan...'

Order some tea, only to discover they have no tea. Only beer or hot water. Hot water? 'In fact,' assures Mikael, 'Hot water is what people usually have with their meals. Tea is more for special occasions.'

Boiled rice and hot water for dinner. Not bad. Juuls overly concerned.... quite OK, I tell him. Everyday an adventure.

Walk back through the station, through the toilet block (there is no alternative) exchanging curious glances with Juuls as we squeeze a pathway through the teeming thousands of people, finally returning to the car. Refreshingly cold outside, minus something, and Juuls clapping his hands together and pulling down the sleeves of his red plaid jacket. Limited sympathy. If you're travelling across

Siberia in December surely a pair of gloves is a consideration. Especially now as the Siberian wind, of which Zhang-lin spoke so disparagingly, is howling from the Mongolian plains to the city streets. A wind that beats down with a cold that cuts right through the skin - nature's own performance of the Chinese torture of a thousand cuts.

Crawl into the car for some brief respite - Mikael is taking us to his apartment, but gets lost several times en route. 'I've only driven this way twice before,' he tells us. 'For five years we lived in a hotel room.'

A cold evening to get lost. Michael's Honda Civic with heating full on, is still like an ice box on wheels. We come to a big gate, a gate which Mikael has already driven past several times. 'I think it must be this one,' he says not all convincingly. He drives through. 'It is!', he shouts, now jubilant as the nightwatchman shows himself. A huge compound with rows and rows of high rise flats. We park the ice box and go upstairs. Flats seem to be constructed in the Russian manner, which is to say, very badly.

Climb to the second floor and enter Mikael's apartment. Introduced to Erta, Mikael's girlfriend and Tao-fu, his fluffy white pussy cat. Talk all sorts of nonsense for several hours mixing German and English with random irregularity. Sample all kinds of Chinese teas, liqueurs while listening to risqué Chinese love songs from the 1930s, now only available from retailers in decadent Hong Kong or Tapei. The innuendo escapes both Jules and myself but Mikael and Erta laugh intermittently at the right pauses. 'Listen,' says Mikael. 'Now she is singing, *'lei lei lei'*; 'come come come', to a young man she has picked in a bar. And in Chinese that is something of a double entendre - you know, with two meanings.' Yes, I think Juuls and I get that one. Ah, those salacious Shanghai Chinese of the 1930s!

Turns out that Mikael and Erta, with their German government translation work subsidy, have invested in a small property in Provence, South of France, just a few kilometers from the same little village where I worked the vindage some ten years ago. Jules and I are invited. After five years in China Mikael and Erta have decided that Provence is the place to make home once they return to Europe. Not Germany? 'Never,' says Mikael. 'I hate Germans.' Maybe those five years of looking up German words for a Chinese dictionary has had a negative effect.



*Tea and cake with Miakel, Erta and Tao-fu*

Some hours after midnight and Mikael drives us back to town. 'You'll never get a taxi,' he says. Juuls and I very grateful. It's as cold as cold an be. The Honda Civic starts with some difficulty - Mikael blames the low grade petrol. Return to Juuls hostel and then through the empty streets of Beijing at 2am. Not a car, not a bus, not a soul to be seen in a city of ten million. Bid farewell to Mikael and watch his car disappear into the darkness. Stand outside the gate of the hotel entrance only to discover that the gates of the Loo Song Yuan Hotel are closed. So cold I feel I could collapse and die at any

moment. Pound at the metal gates with gusto and the noise echoes down the quiet alley way. Fists red with pounding until finally a bleary eyed Chinese night watchman looks into my white foreign face and unlocks the padlock and opens the gate.

'Room 12 please.'

Zombie like he stumbles over his fold out bed behind the reception desk and fetches my key.

Anxiously opening the door to room 12 and clambering into the cold damp bed heaped with covers and blankets. Most of my clothes still attached to my body. Cold cold cold.



## *Beijing, 6th December 1985*

An amazing film, but perhaps not in the way intended. Juuls and I have just watched 'When We Were Young' voted best student film from the Beijing Film and Actors Academy, 1984. The story briefly: three earnest young communist men factory workers fall in love with the same beautiful girl who has coincidentally started work at the same factory - as a welder - (shades of Flashdance). Which lucky guy will get the girl while following the true path of communist ideology? (Shades of Ettore Scola's *We all Loved Each so Much* - actually more plagiarism than shades). If I understood correctly it was Ning Pao who gets the girl (Juuls not convinced), but without the luxury of subtitles much of the narrative is left open to interpretation. (According to Juuls, no-one gets the girl - all the young men factory workers decided to commit their lives to communist ideology thereby sacrificing any of the transient pleasures of love. Given the circumstances, this is also a credible reading of the film).

It is a student film shot in 35mm wide screen technicolour - no expense spared. Thinking of the Stockholm Film School where I made a couple of short films struggling with b/w 16mm disused expired TV news film stock.

Movie is over, and Juuls and I, alone in the lavish cinema of the Beijing Film and Actors Academy, regard each other with a quizzical look. Not exactly subtle when it comes to delivering the party line message.

We return to the office of the dean, Xei Fei, who speaks no English, but the school's Professor of English, speaks a little (!). And little it is. His name is Wang Xiao and the conversation diplomatically veers toward the performances of the young cast.

'And, er, what was the name of the young actress?' asks Juuls, forcing an air of nonchalance, the veiled desire in his voice unable to conceal his lust filled intent.

'Her name is Gau Ling Wei. Why you ask?'

'Nothing special' says Juuls, but already he has handed his card reading Juuls Oosterbeek, Film Producer. 'If she happens to be interested - maybe I can think of a part in Dutch French co-production I'm working on.' (A complete fabrication).

Gau ling Wei is one of 285 students here - some learn drama, some learn filmmaking. Better in the former than the latter considering this sub-standard 'best' film Juuls and I have just sat through.



*Beijing Academy of Film and Dramatic Arts*

After an hour or so of awkward and constrained conversation with the Dean, something seems to click with the Dean that he is on to us. That maybe we're just a couple of weirdo tourists in search of something less mundane than a guided tour to the Great Wall. So he orders a taxi to take us back to town - praise be at the cost of the

Academy and that we don't have to endure the utterly horrendous bus journey back.

Because when we began our journey to the school at 9am this morning, out of the 30 or so kilometres from the city centre to here, I guess Juuls and I walked about 20 of them in search of a bus stop. For reasons best known to the Beijing public transport authority, these were either kept secret or simply didn't exist.



*Juuls, Xei Fei and interpretator - and the award for 'When We Were Young'*

We take some obligatory group photos of our visit in front of a glass cabinet containing the trophy awarded to 'When We Were Young', have final cup of oolong tea and return in style to the Hotel Beijing.

Now - around 2pm - feeling hungry, head into the main dining room and meet Annika and Gunilla and crazy Lena with her even more crazy mother. They're on their way to a guided tour to the

summer palace, and the irony escapes none of us considering the temperature is several degrees below freezing with just a hint of snow in the cold chill air outdoors.

Juuls and I take a stroll through the backstreets and look at authentic bizarre Chinese sights: an old man sorting through tube shaped briquettes for his outdoor stove; a government poster on a brick wall which shows two pictures: 1. a young boy dealing drugs; 2. same young boy in a Beijing football stadium on a Sunday afternoon about to take part in a mass execution - a sign around his neck 'criminal', kneeling on the ground head bent forward. His family would be sent a bill for the cost of the bullet. Outside one of the larger cinemas (they're all large) a poster for Rambo II. Playing to full houses in Beijing, and a life size poster of Sylvester Stallone, poised with machine gun and about to exterminate an onslaught of less than competent Asian soldiers. I can understand Chinese audiences watching Rambo I - outsider wreaks havoc upon US white middle class; but what do local audiences see with an American guy killing recalcitrant Vietnamese en masse?

Prompted by the cold sleet of a Beijing afternoon Jules and I watch a segment of a Chinese afternoon matinee, a film called *Xin Piang*. Whether in response to key moments of the film it is hard to tell, but at regular intervals members of the audience cough up mouthfuls of thickened winter spittle and hurled them uninhibited into the aisle ways and from the balcony. An old lady in front of us has coughed up a mouthful with voluminous gusto, rolls it around her toothless gums for a good half a minute before projecting it onto the wooden floor some yards away. This in spite of signs in Chinese and English inside and outside the cinema reading 'No Spitting.'

The film itself follows the story of some Chinese people discussing issues of importance with other Chinese people and then involving themselves in some kind of activity. Not sure what. Personally would have been able stay to the end, but when Juuls roll of Chinese toffees are finished he becomes restless and decides there is

more entertainment to be found on a crowded road of bicycles and buses interspersed with the grey lines of December sleet.

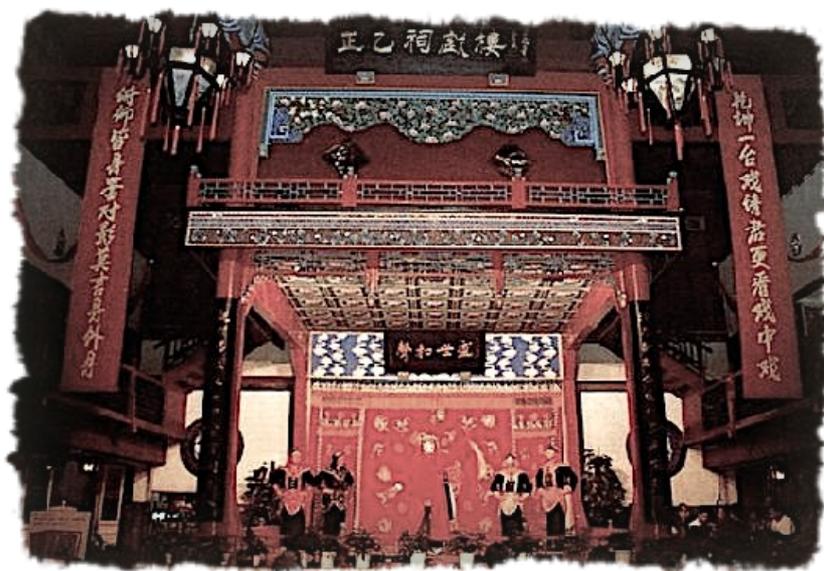


*Street life, Beijing*

He could be right. Drama on every street: At a street corner two middle aged men are claiming dispute over the same bicycle and a crowd soon gathers anticipating the escalation from pushing and shoving into full scale violence. Not to be however, and the crowds gaze falls upon the only two foreigners in the vicinity (no idea why - we were just watching like everyone else), so Juuls and I withdraw tactfully returning to one of the two sanctuaries for non Chinese - the Freedom Store (no need to buy anything), and the bar at the Beijing Hotel. Order some tea and discover that almost the entire party of foreigners from the Trans Siberia train journey are also in the bar, and en masse we decide to visit the late afternoon/ early evening performance of the Chinese Opera.

An hour later standing outside the wooden theatre in a little pedestrian back street. We have bought tickets but it is another hour before the doors open and before we can go in. Cold, cold cold. And

just a little mix of rain wind sleet and snow to keep things interesting. We stand and watch the many Chinese people going back and forth along the little street, back and forth, back and forth and always in a hurry. Now the sharply slanting sleet is creating a distinctive restlessness in the long line of waiting foreigners and some few Chinese patrons; Juuls provides a hopelessly version of *Singing in the Rain*, and attracts a large group on Beijing local onlookers. Those foreigners - what next? The quartet of Swedish girls stand in a line and perform several outrageously risqué versions of Swedish Christmas songs (my Swedish is adequate but their accompanying gestures suggest that this particular Santa has a very large penis). The Chinese audience get this one too and clap wildly in appreciation, in spite of the cold and the sleet. Just as the quartet get into the third number (with Lena and her crazy mother leading the vocals) the theatre doorman opens up the doors to see a huge crowd of Chinese passers-by in this tiny alley way applauding four Swedish girls singing obscene songs (with gestures), looking as bewildered as anyone can look. He starts tearing tickets and ushering us indoors and we find ourselves on the top balcony of an old theatre not unlike the Music Hall on Blackpool's Central Pier. (Yes, I've been to Blackpool). The torn and faded curtains, the wooden chairs, the squeaking raspy PA system...



*Zheng Yici Beijing Opera House - old style*

Personally I can't abide contortionists or jugglers or plate spinners or any kind of circus act that involves an entire childhood of discipline practice and self sacrifice, and for what? a few moments of spectators holding their breath and wondering whether this will end in a broken leg, or broken back or a pile of broken plates. How can 12 to 15 years of self deprivation be worth that?

So the first acts were acts of self immolation and physically gut churning acts of body twisting; one poor (teenage?) girl who balances twenty cups and saucers on top of each other, wavering precariously from her forehead, flicking them up one by one with her big toe, culminating with a climactic foot flung tea spoon into the top cup, except... she misses. She misses a first time, a second time, her forced smile all the more more painfully forced, the wavering cups and saucers in a teetering line from her brow, now dampened with a thick film of perspiration, the make up streaming onto her cheeks, her silk and brocade green top soaked with sweat, and every fibre of my own being, saying, look, forget about the teaspoon, we don't need to see the teaspoon - who cares if it gets into the top cup or if it doesn't? But my mental pleas ignored and now for a third attempt and with a flick of her foot the spoon shoots up into the air clatters against the top cup and falls to the ground. Who has sugar in Chinese tea anyway? An assistant runs out, picks up the spoon and places it once more between her two toes - by the third time, OK, it gets into the cup. Thankfully. After the tedium of the body bending and the contortionists and the acrobats, the evening culminates with a Chinese folk dance (announced off stage in Chinese and English) called the 'Taming of the Dragon'.

With a scenography and light setting straight out of 1970s Maoist propaganda posters we see a boy and girl dancing about the ferocious dragon (or rather the four people inside the dragon costume), almost consumed by him, finally with acts of love and kindness, winning him over, till the dragon collapses at their feet. A symbol of harnessing sexual energy? Or thwarting aggression with conciliation? A Taoist approach to an harmonious end?



*The Taming of the Dragon*

Outside the theatre we head off in our different directions - too cold to hang around at ten below, so we walk in our different directions, unlikely that our group of foreign travellers will meet up again.

As it is now after 7pm the streets of Beijing are deserted. I limp my way to a bus stop, wait 20 minutes in blistering cold and take the north bound journey through the half deserted thoroughfares.

Now realise I haven't eaten in a while, and walk around the neighbourhood in search of a food store or noodle bar, but by 8pm Beijing sleeps, ready to begin their working day at 5am. Reluctantly I follow suit, crawling under the heavy eiderdown, still dressed in thick socks and track suit, clutching my growling stomach and dreaming of breakfast.

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*Beijing, 7th December, 1985*

Breakfast ends at 0845 sharp so I am at the table bleary eyed and vague by 0840 clutching a chopstick desperately in each fist upright against the table, salivating in anticipation for rice gruel and tofu. The dining room is empty and white robed girl enters and crosses her arms before her, the Asian sign for 'not welcome.' Nonplussed and faint with hunger and cold and swollen foot I limp to the door which she locks and bolts once I'm on the other side. Despair. At the reception desk the two man weekend staff look at each other, shake their heads, ('restaurant closed'), shrug their shoulders and go about the business of filling in ledger forms for an otherwise empty hotel.

Take the bus to the Hotel Beijing - more or less running to the dining room - also closed. Last chance. Down the hallway to the off-hours dining room - open. Joy. Sit down to a long slow breakfast reading through the latest edition of the China Daily. The place is empty, the foreigners have left. Go to a movie at one pm - LA Crime - a French 'policier', subtitled but incomprehensible. Patrons gobbing indiscriminately in the auditorium, a distraction.



*The Lama Temple - Yonghegong Tibetan Temple*

Take a taxi to the Yonghegong Lamasery at the edge of the old city wall. Now reopened as a gesture of new Government policy on religious tolerance. Genuine Buddhist monks imported from Mongolia. Several of them in their purple robes are tending to a giant pot of burning incense, chanting meditations and spinning prayer wheels. A beautiful temple, silent and inspiring. Walk around for several hours and barely notice the limping.



*Yonghegong Temple - restful*

Consequently decide to walk back to hotel, and with throbbing foot, now realise that all is not well in the lower intestine. Return to hotel with raging diarrhea, throbbing tonsils, aching stomach and a foot swollen to the size of a pumpkin. Not the best of conditions for a flight to Shanghai.

Now mid afternoon and after a brief rest and an imodium tablet take the trolley bus to the CAAC airline terminal down the road. Endless confusion regarding airport busses, and several hundred passengers milling about in increasing confusion. Feeling frail, take the soft option of a taxi.

Beijing airport. Chaos. Queues of people everywhere; 50 - 50 foreign and local, yet the waiting room for the Shanghai flight is empty.

Flight delayed by an hour. Knew it. Should have taken the train. Only the train costs twice as much. From the stories one hears the Shanghai Express is so crowded that after a day and a half you end up with muscle inflammation. New announcement. Further 40 minute delay. Disconcerting to see a group of CAAC mechanics sitting at the canteen table and drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and reading newspapers.

Finally... plane boarding. A jumbo jet of Chinese passengers, men in black suits and white shirts and dark ties. A lonely white face on a plane full of Oriental businessmen. Two round eyes observing an almond shaped world. In a row of ten black suited Chinese guys, an odd man out. And the guy behind me. A lama dressed in a brown robe, with shaven head and beads in hand. Strangely comforting.



# Shanghai

*Shanghai 8th December, 1985*

Screaming noise of jumbo jet engines. The deafening sound that shatters a fragile Sunday morning. The three tiny bones of the hearing organ rattling to the point of breakage. Only myself to blame. Should not have opened the hotel window. Close it quickly and watch a Chinese computer program on TV instead. About BASIC and DOS. At 9am. Keen to learn these Chinese. Stare out the window and watch jumbo jets landing and taking off. As exciting as the TV...

Stroll briskly to the reception desk and leave the key. 'Have a nice day Captain,' says the receptionist. 'Hm yes, I mumble and depart briskly.'

Realised as a I checked in last night that I was mistaken for airline crew - it's a hotel just for airline crews. How was I to know? In Beijing they told me it would be impossible to get a room in Shanghai. Big International trade fair. Every room taken. And so on...

Here I am anyway. Subsidised by the airlines. Cheap, and, in Shanghai dialect, *mama huhu (relatively)* comfortable. Take the bus into town. Two Japanese girls hop on, bowing frequently and saying sorry; '*sumimasen, sumimasen.*' Chinese driver looks puzzled, hands over the bus tickets.

The bus stops at the CAAC HO. Walk across the road to a tall and impressive building. It's the trade centre. Big exhibition of machinery; maritime, agricultural and industrial. Free tea and sandwiches. Can't complain. The new China. Business and more business. Exhibits from Finland, Holland Germany, Japan. Try to be

impressed. Fail. Machines, industry, rising economy - is that so impressive?

Come to a big pharmaceutical stand. Crammed with oriental eccentricities. Ask for some Healthy Brain tablets as recommended by Mikael, the German translator, for curing headaches. Pretty girl behind the counter shakes her head. Something for sore throat? Cautious to avoid Zhang Lin's gazelle gonad medicine. She recommends some small orange tablets. Suck with anticipation. Delicious. Tonsils cured instantly.



*Peace Hotel - famous in the Shanghai decadent period of the 1930s*

Wander from the exhibition center toward the Bund. Have lunch at the famous Peace Hotel. Tofu and black mushrooms. Outstanding. Now a Sunday afternoon stroll along the riverside promenade. Together with hundreds of other Chinese people. Some guys follow me for half a mile then give up. Its 1985 and European faces are few and far between. It was a different story in the 1930s. Foreign architecture, foreign banks, foreign shipping companies, foreign investors, foreigners. Now on the Bund, even the sailors are Chinese. Some workmen working on ships and the spray of sparks from their welding.

A small crowd stands around two women in a heated argument. A young woman and an older woman. They are shouting uncontrollably. Crowd gets larger. The dispute ends with the younger woman picking up her wicker basket and spitting at the feet of the older woman then walking briskly away. So now the older woman continues to shout abuse as the younger woman strides toward the French section. Impressive to hear abuse in local Shanghai-nese - more abrupt, faster and punchier than standard Mandarin.

Continue walking, heading for the Yu Yuan Gardens to drink tea at the mid-lake tea pavilion. Found no tea houses in Beijing but Shanghai is famous for traditional tea houses. According to Baedekers.

Pleasant day for walking - hardly December weather at all, even if clouds are gathering and there's a slight chill in the air. More like spring. There is grass, it is green and the breeze is balmy and spring like. Arriving in Shanghai was like walking into a different season. All the ailments of throat and feet and swollen joints have disappeared.

Now I'm in the back streets of the old town. Endless alley ways and old wooden buildings. Long necked red glazed ducks hanging in pairs upside down in the side street eating places. Tiny streets filled with people, bicycles, stalls and shops of every kind with their wares and goods spilling out in to the roadway.

Walk through a demolition site where some kids are play amongst the rubble. An entire quarter flattened and in the distance a single shanty house remains. Which means this map makes no sense whatsoever now. Streets have disappeared. Lost in the largest city in the world. Ask a guy at local fruit stall for directions and get a blank look. Then he points north. Walk for ten minutes and hear some shouting behind me. Same guy. Now he's pointing south. Uhuh. Now totally confused. No landmarks, street names in

Chinese while others streets have been effaced by the intervention of the Chinese economic miracle.



*Peking Duck - Shanghai style*

Decide to compromise and walk west. Always something interesting to see. A man holding up a bicycle above his head and talking to a woman who is weeping uncontrollably. On the other side of the street a young man with his head immersed in the bosom an old peasant woman patting his head in consolation. Every street corner, a drama. Suddenly a porcelain cup shatters at my feet. Look up toward the sixth floor of an apartment block and a woman's head ducks quickly behind the window frame. Another step and I could have been maimed.

Walk to a street stall and stand in line. Local kids gather round apparently amused. Finally my turn.

'I'd like twelve tins of Tiger Balm' I say pointing. 'Cha-ni. Twelve.' The woman looks bewildered and the small crowd of kids look on wondering what will happen next. Twelve. She replies but I can't

get grasp the words. Settle for ten as that's as far my fingers extend. Ten fingers. 'Cha.'



*Souvenirs from China*

She counts them out and places them in a little brown paper bag and the kids howl in delight. Why? Tiger Balm is the ultimate panacea. A dab on the forehead cures headaches, a dab on the nose cures colds, and anywhere else cures aching muscles; feet, knees, joints, anywhere but the genitalia. To be avoided at all cost.

Now the kids are shouting at passers-by, looking at each other with stunned expressions and the woman looks at me with mouth wide open. Aha. It's the currency - Chinese foreign currency. Special money for foreigners to change on entering the country, and with an outrageously overinflated exchange rate, worth times ten the local currency. Must have made her day.

West is apparently the right direction. An English language sign post read Yu Yuan Gardens, but still seem to walk in circles around the tiny streets of the old town for about an hour, till finally an entrance, basically a doorway in a stone wall. Clouds gather and a few snow flakes fall in the chill air - so much for spring weather.

Wander the Yu Yuan gardens in quiet meditation and stare at the bright orange carp in the carp pond. Stand on the bridge which is a famous bridge, because here stood two Taoist monks many centuries ago to discuss a timeless philosophical dilemma. One monk said he would not the carp because the carp looked happy. The other monk asked; 'how can you know whether the fish is happy or not happy?' And, the story goes, there ensued a long and unresolvable discussion which continued over many years. How could it be? In Sweden even vegetarians eat fish, and when I refused to eat fish, my argument was the same as the Taoist monk. Those fish swimming in the water - they look happy enough. Why not eat something else? And who's to say they're not happy? Not even the two wisest Taoist monks could agree.

The tea house is filled with people so I stroll round the gardens. A group of Chinese soldiers in their green khaki and red starred caps taking pictures of each other. Sit on a stone bench and admire the dragon roof tops and watch local people feeding the bright orange carp swimming toward anyone with a piece of bread and a kind face. Every pavilion of the Yu Yuan gardens is adorned with dragon heads and there's another old story about how the fish aspire to one day becoming a dragon. Another good reason not to eat them.



*Feeding the carp at Yu Yuan Gardens - happy or not happy?*

Snow flakes slowly descending upon the rocks. A striped cat sneaks around the stone edifice, regards me with a ferocious glare and paces back and forth along the stone wall. Directly above him another cat passes, black as night and angry as a panther. He descends into the foliage and fern trees below and they both disappear into any one of a thousand secret paces the garden has to offer. The tiger and the panther. Slinking back into the jungle. As the snow falls...

Return to the tea-house but it's closed, so leave the gardens in search of some place to eat. Like the cats in the garden only without the teeth and the claws. Nor apparently, their charm. I am thrown out of a restaurant.

Seated at a table at an old town restaurant I show a matronly woman my note (as written by Zhang-lin) and she reacts with a violent outburst, starts ranting and shouting, and pointing at the door. Stunned, confused, I wonder what's going on. She shouts again, then goes upstairs. She comes back a minute or so later, then begins to shout all over again, walks to the table picks up the menu and slams it shut with all the vehemence of a Beijing Opera drama queen. OK. Feeling slightly intimidated. Depart slowly as a group of well dressed local patrons enter and take their seats. So it's not closed, then what? The restaurant is called The Old Shanghai.

Many years later a Chinese friend tells me what happened. 'Vegetarians are not popular in expensive Chinese restaurants,' she told me, 'especially Shanghai. In Shanghai they love money. Vegetarians don't spend enough money.'

True enough - a vegetarian in China eats well and pays little.

Night has fallen, and now find my way back to the Peace Hotel once more - have an excellent dinner, and not an unkind word. Read the Shanghai Daily and catch up on world affairs.

Get a cab back to the Airport Hotel. The room is like an ice-box. Go to reception and explain the situation. Hm. Heating broken down. Staff move me to another room. Watch TV for five minutes, try to sleep, but what's the point. Have to check-in for the flight to Osaka in an hour and a half.



*Shanghai bus passengers*

*Japan*

# Kyoto

*Kyoto, 9th December 1985*

Osaka airport midday - already two hours in the immigration office and facing deportation. 'Why you not have visa?' The simple truth being that the Australian consulate said a visa was not required. Misinformed apparently.

An immigration officer and three colleagues explain over a prolonged and unnecessary conversation that through great leniency on their part I would be granted a 15 day visa, but it would require filling in some forms and more grovelling.

After much revising, form filling, more interviews and explanations about the leniency of the Japanese government, around midday I can walk through the exit of Osaka airport and into the hands of the taxi drivers, one of whom grabs me by the arm, explains that he was worked in Chicago, and knows fully well the the ways of westerners and thus could transport me to the city centre.

'Please let go of my arm,' I tell him.

He persists in leading me away, I find myself resisting more strongly and repeat; 'Yes thank you. Please let go of my arm.' Shake myself free, and tell this oaf of a man I have alternative transport arranged. He is the size of a former sumo wrestler and a brazen assault on the sensibilities, not least smell, who at one point had his arm around my shoulder, so with some relief now walk off in the opposite direction and toward the bus stop.

Had a vague plan to stay a day or two in Osaka principally to see the renowned Osaka Castle, but the bus trip into town circumnavigates almost the entire estate, and on reaching the city centre I have a feeling that Osaka's possibilities have been

exhausted. At central station I buy a train ticket for Tokyo with a Kyoto stopover option. A day in Kyoto, stay overnight, then on to the Tokyo film school. Perhaps pursue career opportunities in the Tokyo based Japanese film industry. Sounds like a plan.



*Osaka Castle, famous for Western TV audiences of Shogun (1980)*

Osaka central station is vibrant with young and trendy urbanites. Traditionally Osaka and Tokyo are rival cities, like Melbourne and Sydney, Stockholm and Gothenburg. Osaka has a reputation for people who talk fast and walk fast and embrace trends. Grown up people with Mickey Mouse jumpers. A young couple walk past dressed in identical clothes - short leg jeans and bright pink and grey college jumpers. 'Typical Osaka,' says a Tokyo friend later. Then another couple in matching clothes, then another. Impressed, depressed, not sure which. Shows a sense of belonging, I guess. Right now reminded of not belonging...

The train to Kyoto takes less than half an hour. Very fast. For the first time since leaving Beijing a European face appears in the crowd and we exchange pleasantries. A fellow Australian. Who

would guess. Blonde haired and suntanned with a 'no worries' swagger to his gait. Turns out he's a student of architecture completing a PhD thesis on Japanese styles. 'Architecture here is appalling', he says. 'By Australian standards there's a not a building in the country that wouldn't be condemned.'

Know any good places to stay? I ask. He recommends a Ryokan - traditional Japanese guest house - about 20 minutes walk away.

Standing outside Ryokan Higashiyama. In a quiet street beside a canal. Little bridges over the flowing water. Inside a Japanese girl hands over the key. Shows me to the tatami room of eight mats. Sliding doors and screens. Kotatsu table in the middle of the room. A view over the canal and the sound of running water. Perfect.



*The Minami-za Kabuki Theatre*

An afternoon walk. Past the celebrated Kyoto Minima-za Kabuki Theatre. The annual Kabuki theatre festival is in progress and I stand and glare at the exquisitely designed posters attempting to

decipher which plays are performing. Ten hours of pieces and extracts of the best of *kabuki* - familiar Japanese folk tales, Benkai and Yoshitune and other familiar sounding names - performed by the finest Kabuki players of Japan. But ten hours!

An earnest young man in a suit approaches, no doubt noticing the intensity by which I'm reading through the bill boards. He offers a 13,000Y full day ticket for 2000Y. Urgent business matters. Unable to attend. Perfect chance for me. Severely tempted. However seriously doubt being able to get through one hour let alone ten. Still recovering from the ordeals of Shanghai, Osaka immigration officers, sleep deprivation, an ill tempered taxi driver, and not least, the sheer overwhelming experience of ... Japan.

After all these years. Finally. Of Japanese language lessons, Japanese film festivals, reading through every Japanese novel translated, now, finally, here. In the country that Roland Barthes described as 'an Empire of Signs.' Tomorrow maybe; yes, I have studied *Kabuki*, and *Noh* theatre and *Bunraku* - and wait.... Shanghai. That was this morning, and already the intensity of experiences have robbed me of any sense of temporal logic. Sincere thanks, I tell him. Tomorrow, sure. Today — well, my head is still reeling.

Kyoto is known as the most traditional of all Japanese towns. The former capital and home to traditional Japanese culture: *Kabuki*, *Noh*, *Shintoism*, Buddhist temples, TV studios producing Samurai soap operas, and the best vegetarian food.

Walk around the small streets and long arcades, the brightly decorated market halls - art design in every store, each detail masterminded by centuries of singular Japanese aesthetics. Enter an arcade with a kilometre long cavalcade of colour and spectacle, stand in wide-eyed open-jawed amazement, and nearby two policemen regarding me with a curious gaze. They chuckle - these foreigners. I chuckle back.



*Kyoto Nishiki Market*

Now dark. Stroll past a four story restaurant by the riverside - people eating on every floor, large open windows like scenes from a TV drama. Their speciality is *tofu* - a four story vegetarian restaurant.

*'Watashi wa sai sogu shugi des'* and the waiter gestures, *shugi des* - it's all vegetarian - no meat here.

A long slow and amazing meal and my senses still reeling as I amble back through the small streets and alleyways, heading in what I think is generally the right direction. The limping returned with cold weather and with accustomed regularity. Only now, for an unforeseeable duration. Lost. Completely. In the middle of an unrecognisable myriad of streets, canals and buildings that all look the same. Crushed with the realisation that I have absolutely no clue as to where I am. Where is the Ryokan Higashiyama? By a canal, right. Only there are dozens of canals running through Kyoto...

See a hotel sign in the distance, in English letters, and decide to go in and ask for directions. But the entrance is strangely quiet and there is no reception desk. Enter the lobby and a woman's voice speaks over a public address system. A recorded message - in Japanese. The message is repeated several times. A low and sensual voice. But where is the reception?

Walk down the corridors of thick red carpet and wood panel walls. Seemingly utterly deserted. The voice once again; 'Welcome honoured guest'. Look around for some sign of human presence. No-one. Decor is reminiscent of a luxury middle eastern bord...

Hm. Japanese Love Hotel. Have read about these places. They provide everything except the girl. Japanese Love Hotels are strictly BYO. For couples with no other place to go. Walk up and down a few stairs also covered in thick plush red carpet. If there are any people here they are well concealed behind locked doors. Leave as discretely as I entered. The automatic doors open up and the woman's automatic voice says: 'Farewell honoured guest and please come again.'



*A special kind of hotel; once called Tsurekomi yado - 'bring along inn.'*

Continue the late evening stroll through the quiet eastern side of Kyoto. Walk to the end of a street, looking in all directions. An old

man and his dog regard me with a quizzical eye. The old man in a kimono and wooden clogs which rattle on the cobbled street. At the end of which is a canal. Following the street hoping it will lead to the Ryokan Hagayishama. It does.

Enter, go to room and drink tea. Ten o'clock and a knock at the door. Humihiko, the young hotel assistant, invites me to join other guests for drinking tea. Sure. Awkward conversation with Japanese couple who don't speak English. Return to the room and drink more tea. In solitude.

An older woman comes in to make the bed. Unrolls the mattress.

'*Shihi-buton*' she says as she unrolls the mattress on the *tatami* mat. On top she places the quilt. '*Kake-buton*' she says avoiding any eye contact. She opens the sliding door - *fusuma*, still shuffling on all fours, turns and bows, says good night, *ikedemdeska*, and leaves.

Watching television. The after midnight programme shows topless women in a talk show.

Decide to sleep. Someone inside me decides not to. Fight each other all night long.



*Kyoto, December 10th, 1985 (60th Year of EH)*

Take the number 11 bus to Film City - Eiga Mura - Japans biggest film studios. Bus ticket system a complete mystery. Nice lady passenger gives me a ticket which I give to the driver with 100Y coin when I get off.

Eiga Mura is almost empty except for a few groups of school children. A curious place - a dream land to live out fantasies. Japanese tourist groups getting themselves photographed with geisha girls. No guided tours, just...

Well, TV screens everywhere. Showing film clips from the studios vast repertoire of movies and TV serials, mainly from samurai films. Eighteen studios here in all, and 300 TV series produced and five or six feature films per year. Reconstructions of old Kyoto streets, like the Bavaria film studios of Munich have reconstructed Berlin of the early 1930s for Berlin Alexanderplatz. A reconstructed studio set design of feudal Japan and we can watch a scene being filmed behind a glass panel. Real actors, real director, and real technicians, but... a fake scene. Just for show. No enviable position for an aspiring young director. Or aspiring actors for that matter. Next door, a cinema with a non-stop screening of a film about special effects, tricks and stunts. Drink tea at the studio cafe. Tea with milk, amazingly, and a piece of toast. Conspire to see the studios that are not open to the public.

Greet two young ladies at the information desk and speak in best British English, showing a business card: 'Stockholm Film School' in Japanese *hirigana* letters on the reverse side. 'One moment please,' says young lady in blue uniform and hair tied back in a bun.

Shortly after a middle age man arrives and directs me to an office. I am offered some tea - Japanese *ban-cha* this time. He arranges a private tour with the production manager. The production manager

takes me to Studio Six where they are currently shooting a weekly samurai series, *Abarenbo Shogun*, featuring the ever-popular Matsudira Ken. Prime time viewing every Saturday at 8pm on Nippon TV.



*Making movies at Eigamura - Film City - fake everything...*

Over in Studio Twelve a production team is busy with the filming of *Tokoyamano Kinsan*. Take some photographs of stunningly beautiful actress, *Hiroshi Mazawa*. The production team working manically. Just like in the other studios we pass by. No coffee breaks or time for scene break downs - just work. Carpenters, electricians, technicians, actors - all feverishly busy.

The Shogun TV series with Richard Chamberlain was made here, as well as *Yakuza*, a Hollywood film with Robert Mitchum and Takakura Ken. Also the exquisite *Narayama Bushi-ko - The Ballad of Narayama* - awarded the Cannes Film Festival Best Foreign Film Award, directed by Imamura Shohei.

The tour is over. Thank the production manager most heartily for his time. Then get directions to the studio film archives and look up clips from old Japanese films. The 1930s version of *Tale of Genji*;

Kurosawa's debut feature, *Those Who Tread on the Tigers Tail*, the most remade film in cinema history.

Take the number 11 bus back to the ryokan and ask Chiaki at the reception desk about the *furo* - a bath. Ten minutes later a knock at the door. Bath is ready.

Trying hard to observe Japanese bath etiquette. Wash first, then soak. The bath is for relaxing, washing is for cleaning. Most civilised. Removing a fallen hair from the hot water. Water stays clean. 'Do not remove plug,' says a sign over the bath. The Japanese Government publication, 'Rules and Etiquette in Japan', says the same thing. 'Do not remove plug.' Ditto in the Ryokan Guide Book. But no-one says why. Surely no-one can use the same water? For one thing it will be cold, for another... Finish bath. Stare at the water, look at the sign. The water cannot stay, or? Remove plug anyway. The water disappears.

Go down stairs for tea (*ban-cha*) and strike up conversation with Chiaki, the disarmingly attractive girl at the reception desk. By means of phrase book phrases, some remembered words of vocabulary and my Japanese - English dictionary, seek to determine the reasons for not removing the plug. (*Sashi-komi* = plug; *doshite*= why?) Her shy friend Kazuo joins in the conversation. Both girls giggling in that Japanese way, and Chiaki thumbs her way through my dictionary to find the right word. She finds it and reads out the English equivalent: 'Tradition,' she says. Still puzzled. Who else is going to use that water? How long will it stay hot? How many people can get in one bathtub?\*

[\* *Water in communal bathtubs can indeed remain several days and be used by many people - families often bathe together, as I discovered when staying at larger ryokan in Tokyo. Consequently it is in everyone's best interest to be thoroughly clean, removing all soap before getting into the tub. After the bath a cover is placed over the tub to keep the water hot. The bath is considered a source of relaxation - cleaning is done with a bucket on a wooden stool and a tap of hot water, soap and sponge.*]

Conversation moves to other subjects and Chiaki helps me out telephoning to the Tokyo Film School and confirming a meeting, sent by letter. A letter written in beautiful Japanese calligraphy by a good friend of mine, living in Stockholm, an artist of genuine talent, Yoshi Yukawa.

‘You write this?’ asks Chiaki with a look a feigned surprise.

Before I can reply she says: ‘Joke!’, makes the call and confirms the visit.

Maybe Chiaki would like to go to Ingrid Bergman movie showing close by? Politely she rattles off a series of phrases one after the other, smiling respectfully. In which case, probably no. As there isn’t a single word for ‘no’ in Japanese.

Kazuo and Chiaki catch sight of a photo album amongst my collection of maps, guide books and phrase books.

‘Can we see?’

‘Sure’

They look through the pictures - photos from Stockholm Sweden, from Sassafras Australia; family, friends, and our old Main Road general store. Chiaki ponders: ‘Home?’ she asks.

‘Was,’ I say. ‘Now, I’m not sure.’

‘But you still have photo?’

Still have photo.

Take a late night stroll around the back streets and canals. Without getting lost. On the way back to the Ryokan I buy an ice cream from

a vending machine and stand on a footbridge over the canal listening to the gurgling water. Sublime.



*Kyoto canal by night*

*Kyoto, December 11th, 1985 (60th Year of EH)*

Still walking. Walking off those terrible nightmares. If it is true that there are Japanese demons that attack when you sleep, then that's what happened. Those dreadful last weeks in Stockholm crowded into my tatami room between sleep and not sleep.

So. Still walking. In a foreign country ten thousand kilometres away. Look around to remind myself of just that. Breathe deeply. To my left a broad inlay of steps leading up towards the mountains. Start climbing. Trees and forest beckon. At the beginning of the upward climb the stone stairway is broad and well-kept and easy to climb. On the left is a large temple. Keep climbing - stairway gets narrower and steeper. Eventually a rough pathway stopping at some grave stones. Gasping for breath and looking at the view. Sunshine over Kyoto. Lovely day. Look upwards. Long way to the top of the mountain. A tiny track barely discernible, leads upwards. Must follow. City sounds becoming fainter as the sounds of birds rustling leaves and swaying branches become clearer. Resting in a glade. Pathway disappeared. Just hillside and trees ahead.

In pensive mood as view over Kyoto dwindles and hillside woods dominate. Nature and Japanese temples. Chinese temples peel away from the outside, till only the the poor seeker is able to finally enter the centre. The jewel within the lotus. With Japanese temples the journey is upwards, the path getting narrower and steeper until it disappears. There you are standing alone, facing yourself. In the Chinese temple you enter the final chapel and face your own reflection in the mahogany framed mirror.

Here in the woods the final victory belongs to the trees and mountains. As it should be in a Shinto land where spirits lurk in every stone and each blade of grass.

Continuing upwards determined to purge myself of the wicked dreams that sully the hours of slumber. Dreams like hills, always

wanting to know what lies on the other side. Almost at the top and a leafy pathway appears winding around the mountain side. Autumn colours under my feet and on the trees. Finding the path, and the climb is now a gentle one. As in Chinese the Japanese kanji character for path is about the same as 'tao' or do:

Begin to realise the allegorical nature of the morning walk; the stairway of the temple as a spiritual quest leading to self-realisation, the tao to higher self. But first you must understand the bond that ties the human spirit to the spirit of nature. The question now, is just where is this path taking us?

Kyoto disappearing from view as the path winds around the hillside. Somehow, where ever it leads, the place must be significant. For no other reason than I feel it must be significant.

Symbolising my restless seeking, purging my nightmares and the black lump of jealousy which sits in my belly like a stone. Seek Kuan Yin and you find only statues.

The pathway comes to a gate and a road leading off in another direction. On the road is a modern white building and a sign in English letters: Sho-ren Discoteque. Discoteque?? Walk through the gateway. A neat little building and a little man inside. He gives me a ticket for a 100 yen. Then a piece of paper in machine typed English. The typing is poor and the English difficult to decipher.

### *Sho-ren-nin Shogun-zuka Garden*

*The shogun zuka (a general's tomb) was piled up on the occasion of the Heian-kyo, as this place became capital Kyoto, being constructed by Emperor Kanmu in AD793.*

*A stone image of Mahavairocana (the Dainichi Buddha) was discovered at the top of this hill in the middle of the Meiji era, so they dedicated a Buddhistic chapel to enshrine the image, and we call it Dainichi-doh. Mahavairocana is the symbolised Buddha of the true figure of the universe, so is sitting in the centre of the mandala.*

*The people in the Heian era considered a huge mandala world their actual living world, and the top of this hill was the centre of it.*

*Therefore the statue of the Mahavairocana has been placed here as a materialised image of this thought, and its material stone has meant its eternity. This ideas is familiar with the theory of Borobudur in Indonesia and Angkor Wat in Combodia (sic).*

*When Emperor Kanmu decided to construct the Heain-kyo he viewed the configuration of Kyoto from this eminence and felt it was the best for the new capital construction.*

Read this leaflet as I wander around the Sho-ren gardens. Admire the view of Kyoto which now seems a long way off. A lone visitor regarding the valley as the founder of Kyoto once did. So many stories in these hills.



*Sho-ren-in Temple*

Return to the old man and his little house, and look at the shrine which now houses the ancient and time worn Buddha found here nearly 1500 years ago. The old man offers some tea and he talks about a trip he made to Europe so many many years ago. Counts off the countries he visited; *ich...enga-ran-do; ni...furando; san... shi...* (England, France...)

Drink tea as he invites me to look through his Shogun-zuka Garden souvenir box. 'Dozo.' A collection of key rings and amulets and postcards.

'Which one?' I ask. He picks up a key chain; a glass marble with an image of a fiery Buddha inside. 'Dozo,' he says and places it in the palm of my hand.

100 yen. I pay the kindly priest and thank him for the tea.

The fiery Buddha in the palm of my hand, a Buddha who does not smile, but holds a sword in one hand, and is covered in flames. More imagery to sow nightmares in the fields of my sleep? Or is there compassion in this ferocious and demonic spirit?



*A fiery Buddha - with a secret identity*

Walk off the path to go straight down the hillside through the forest. Steep descent. Harder going down than going up. Fall twice and twist the same troublesome foot. Still limping.

And you can climb out of the material quagmire and onto the spiritual path, but what's difficult is going back to the material

quagmire. Which we all have to do. Balance, harmony - *wa* - is the Japanese word.

Recollect Japanese ghost stories on the way down. Beautiful women turning into man eating demons - *onibaba* - with their snow white faces and raven black hair. Eyes so dark you see only night. They show themselves like holograms in the woodland mist. Hair stands on the back of my neck. Lose concentration in the downward descent and get tangled up in the vines and branches of the wood. Spider webs closing in from all directions. Have to get out, have to get to a road or a path... almost at the bottom of the hill but the wood keeps on going. Leap over a low fence brushing off spiders and leaves and the vapours of woodland spirits.

Find myself in a cemetery. An enormous cemetery with row upon row of Buddhist stones. Majestic stupas less imposing less sinister than Christian crosses. Alone on a winters morning in the presence of the countless dead. Walk slowly by the graves a lone visitor amongst a crowd of silent hosts. The plots are tiny because the bodies are buried huddled up with their chins to their knees. Returning to the void huddled up like the unborn baby about to leave it.

Finally approach the cemetery entrance. A hunchbacked old woman carries a pot of water staring at the ground and at the stone stairs she begins to climb. The sign at the entrance gate reads Yasaka Shrine. Which means I am back in the outskirts of Kyoto.

Soon I am amongst the living, on the streets and waiting at traffic lights that play the first few bars of the Cuckoo waltz as we pedestrians wait for the green man to let us cross the street.

We cross. Whistling the Cuckoo waltz beyond the first few bars to the rhythm of the metallic tapping sound that says it's OK to cross. Think of Laurel and Hardy. Think of afternoon tea. Postpone my trip to Nara. Decide to stay on in Kyoto a few days more.

\* \* \*

Drink *miriko* tea at a coffee shop and peruse the local temple book. The Sanjusangendo Hall. The hall of a thousand buddhas. A must-see housing an enormous Kuan-yin statue, Kwannon in Japan, and a thousand smaller ones. Check the map. Not far from here I think if I can read the signs right. San-ju-san - thirty three. My age. One more sign in a land of symbols.

Walk out of the coffee shop head buried in a street map trying to get bearings. Bump into a tall European girl. 'Excuse me. Sanjusangendo Hall?'

'That way,' she says and points.

'Is it far?'

'Not far...' She smiles.

'Excuse me for asking... where are you from?'

'Too complicated,' she says. 'Ask something else.'

'Have you got time for tea?'

She hesitates, shrugs. 'OK.'

Another street corner, another coffee shop. Her name is Inger, she is from Denmark and lives in Colorado.

'Where you were born?'

'Here. In Kyoto,' she says.

I must have looked surprised.

'I told you it was complicated.'

Talk for an hour with Inger. She is staying at a local inn before going back to Tokyo. Get her address. Ask her to join me to visit the Sanjusangendo.

'I've seen it so many times', she says.

'Can we meet tomorrow?'

'Maybe. I'll see.'

She goes one way I go another. Arrive at the Sanjusangendo at five past five. Closed at five. There's always tomorrow.

Take a long walk back and return to the ryokan. Phone Inger. Not back yet. Go out and eat. Return to the ryokan and phone Inger. It's past nine and she just got out of the bath.

'Can we meet tomorrow? We could see the Golden Pavilion.'

She hesitates. 'All right. One o'clock at the Miyako Hotel.'

Walk outside and buy an ice-cream from the vending machine. Stand on the footbridge and listen to the gurgling water. An evening ritual. Go back to the room and sit under the *kotatsu* (heated) table to get warm, drink some *ban-cha* and watch TV. Sean Connery doing an advertisement for Japanese ham. Puts his hand on his chest, smiles and says: 'My heart with Hito ham.' I guess it makes some kind of sense to Japanese viewers. Then a family drama and a late night show with girls in hot baths. John Travolta advertises Tokyo lemonade with Saturday Night Fever dance steps and Brooke Shields does a flower commercial in incomprehensible Japanese. Closing down time at 2am. Can't sleep. Too many ghosts.

*Kyoto, December 12th, 1985*

*(Day of Buddha's Enlightenment: 12.12.60)*

A clear day in Kyoto, the Day of Buddha's Enlightenment. Have breakfast while a party of Japanese schoolgirls whose *manju-bun* faces stare and giggle.

Two girls share my table, Aikiko and Michiko, and we exchange pleasantries as we slurp *miso-shira* and struggle valiantly with an omelette and wooden chopsticks. They are eighteen and from Yokohama. Kyoto, they tell me, is the place to come for Buddha Enlightenment Day.

'And your whole school class has come on this visit?'

'Yes, whole class, says Aikiko. Then searches for the right word. 'Tradition.'

'Many traditions in Japan,' I suggest.

'Many traditions,' says Aikiko.



*The long long hall with its 1,000 statues of Kwannon, Goddess of Compassion*

Walk to the Sanjusangendo Hall. Walk wide-eyed and open mouthed all the long way down the hall, trying to look into each face of the one thousand Kwannon images. In the centre an enormous figure of the Goddess of Compassion.

Walk out into the sunlight. Sit with eyes closed and feel the warmth of the December sunshine - eyes closed and still gazing at the one thousand faces of compassion.



*Kwannon - centre stage*

A group of schoolgirls ask me to take their picture. Then pictures with me. On the way out some schoolboys request the same routine. Sure. Why not.

Walk through Kyoto, past the Higashi-Honganji temple, also on a hillside and leading up into the woods.

Arrive at the Miyako Hotel at one and Inger is there. Fifty fifty she wouldn't show, but she has and I am pleased. We have lunch, walk through the park to the Heian Temple, a giant building in bright orange. Groups of school children here and there, school photographs taken before the shrine.

'Too symmetrical,' says Inger. 'Too Chinese.'

A modern shrine by Kyoto standards, about 100 years old. Walk on to the Nanjenzi Temple. Ancient, beautiful, built into the hillside

and surrounded by gardens and a large pond filled with carp. The grounds are deserted, just Inger and me. I show her the fire Buddha. From the Sho-ren Temple.

'What does a burning Buddha mean?' I ask.



*Heian Temple*

She shrugs, walks toward the two young zen priests working in the gardens raking the white stones and making lines like weather map isobars around rocks and up to the wooden walls. They wear long black robes, their heads shaven, exchange some words with Inger, laugh about something.



*Nanjenzi Temple*

'It's not a Buddha,' she says as she saunters back. 'This is *Fudo-myo*.' We wander through the gardens and temple verandahs. Famous silk screens of tigers drinking from a stream. Walk across footbridges, over small streams and follow a narrow path which leads upwards into the hills.

'So why is he famous?'

'*Fudo myo* is protector of Buddha. OK, sometimes he is Buddha too. But you can think of *Fudo myo* as the god of enlightenment. You see this sword? It is to cut through all that is superficial and false'

'And the fire?'

'To make you fearful.'

'Fearful of what?'

'Of cutting through all that is superficial and false. What else is left?'



*Statue of Fudo-myo at Kyoto National Museum*

Dusk. Beautiful sky over Kyoto, the air turns chilly. Look at the view and smile at Inger, she smiles back. Follow a water canal

which leads to an abandoned roadway, back down the hillside and into town.

Now dark, but bright lights illuminate the Gion part of Kyoto, where all the night bars and clubs fill up with salarymen leaving work, and *meiko* girls - trainee geishas. On cue two *meiko* girls in their full regalia and paint, pass by, their wooden sandals on the hard road as they cross from one club to another.

Taking in the night sights with Inger. A Kyoto art house cinema showing an Ingrid Bergman retrospective. Tonight it's *Casablanca* or *Arch of Triumph*. 'I love old movies,' says Inger. We'd both seen *Casablanca* at least six times, so we opt for *Arch of Triumph*, co-starring Charles Boyer. Starts in an hour so we have 'miriko tea' at the Colorado Coffee Bar nearby, most appropriate considering that's where Inger lives. We share a chunky slab of chocolate cake.

*Arch of Triumph* is set in Paris just before the German invasion, a kind of prequel to *Casablanca*. Ingrid Bergman plays an abandoned waif of extreme temperament, demanding to be adored by everyone and as capricious as a four year old. Confusing story line but Ingrid Bergman was a joy to watch and watching a film with Inger was a treat. During some scenes we would look at each other, synchronized to sharing moments of extreme melodrama, dips and dives in plot logic, or Ingrid's emotional gestalt when she's in the flow.

We head off for a late night coffee bar afterwards and rewrite the script with more credible characters and a more compelling storyline. We recast the Charles Boyer part with someone more sympathetic - not Bogart, that would be 'oba'- too much, (as in 'overdoing it'); maybe Robert Mitchum or William Holden?

'William Holden?' she asks.

'Yes, you know, *Sunset Boulevard*?

'Hm, haven't seen *Sunset Boulevard*.'

'You haven't seen...?'

'I'm 20', she smiles, 'can't have seen everything.'

She's 20. Of course. What was I thinking.

It's late now. We walk down the street a way and take in the busy Kyoto night life. So much nightlife for so small a town. A beautiful *meiko* girl in bright red and white kimono and high clicking wooden sandals, white painted face and bright iridescent red lips crossing the street from the Minamaza Theatre, on her way to one of the smaller streets. Gaze at the presence in a half hypnotic state - a character from an old Japanese silk print. She stares back.

'*Kamban-wa*,' she says.

'*Kamban-wa*,' I say back with open mouth and wide eyes as the *meiko* girl disappears down a small street, her wooden '*geta*' shuffling along the way. Inger smiles that enigmatic smile.

Offer to walk back with Inger to her ryokan but she declines. 'I like walking alone,' she says. We arrange to meet tomorrow morning - to take in some of her old haunts and memories of the town she grew up in till the age of ten.

I wander amongst the bright lit narrow streets, watching groups (always groups) of drunken Japanese businessmen, singing aloud and acting foolishly, bustling into taxis, returning to their long suffering wives after another evening with their salarymen colleagues from the office to saki-bars, sharing their woes with patient and long suffering *mama-sans*.

Now not far from my own ryokan I stroll into one of the quieter quarters of Kyoto standing on a footbridge over a canal listening once more to the water gurgling beneath the wooden planks. Here the streets are deserted and the night is as quiet as darkness allows. Return to my tatami room, and clamber into the futon clutching the rice filled pillow and give up waiting for sleep. Turn the lights back

on and stare at the patterns on the rice paper screens, listening to the canal water outside. Seems we can never get the things we want the most, like sleep, or love... mainly love.



*Meiko girls - and their late night wanderings in Kyoto's Gion district*

*Kyoto, December 13th, 1985 (60th Year of EH)*

Inger arrives a little after ten. Light blue jeans, light blue jumper, curly blond locks of hair and light blue eyes. We head off in the direction of the Path of Philosophy - a walkway which follows a canal and passes by several famous temples.

Stop at the Eikando Temple, the famous Silver Pavilion, the companion to the Golden Pavilion which was burnt down by a zen priest in 1950. Later the subject of a novel by Yukio Mishima, then a film. Both of these temples are closed. Along with two other Kyoto temples 'on strike' because of a threatened city council levy.

Persuade Inger to take a walk in the woods behind the temple to at least see the Silver Pavilion in the light of day. Today is like spring, the air tingles with freshness, the sun feels warm and the woodland landscape beckons the spirit even further from the confines of the city. Come to a big fence, then walk up a hill to get a view of the Silver Pavilion. And there it is. A factory. A factory for rubber tyres. Well. I guess not that far from the city.

Return to the Path of Philosophy and wander further. Inger tells me her strange story. Her father, a minister for the Lutheran Church in Copenhagen, and his wife (Inger's mother), come to Japan for a year as Christian missionaries. Inger is born, a single child. Her mother returns to Denmark and her father converts to Buddhism. Now he runs a Danish company importing Buddhist artifacts from all over the world.

'So your father is... well, a Buddhist missionary in Lutheran Denmark?'

'Uhuh.'

'And you went to school here - here in Kyoto?'

'Yes. A Christian school. And before you ask — I am a Christian. Very much so.'



*Tetsugaku-no-michi (Path of Philosophy) coming from the Silver Pavilion.*

Stop by a little tea house. Traditional Japanese, and overlooking the canal, bamboo rushes growing by the wooden panels. *Koto* music playing inside and just now, no-one to be seen but the tea master (in this case a sweet old lady in traditional Japanese kimono). She serves us tea - ceremonial tea - and Inger goes through the rituals of *cha-no-yu*. She knows it well and does it perfectly. The matron of the house nods in appreciation and withdraws so that we are alone, sitting Japanese style (on knees) on a *tatami* mat over the *cha no yu* table.

'Turn the cup three times to the right, a sip, then three times to the left,' says Inger. Ceremonial tea contains twelve ingredients all precisely measured and mixed. It is a thick green grassy tasting concoction that takes some getting used to. There is rice paper and a calligraphy brush by the table, and - in accord with tradition - Inger writes down a few reflections in well-crafted Japanese calligraphy.

'Do you know this rhyme?' asks Inger as we sit in the tea house and drink tea.

*i ro ha ni ho he to  
chu ri nu ru wo wa ka*

'It is a Japanese rhyme which includes each of the 33 *hirigana* characters. It means: 'alas, the world is so sad and weary a place'. . You know the song by Ryu Sakamoto? He sings these lines.'

'You mean that big hit for the Tokyo Olympics. That was, hm, 1968, right.... *Sukiyaki*.'



*Tea house on the Path of Philosophy*

'Please don't call it that. That would be like calling 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' something like 'Sirloin Steak.' It was a silly title made up by some English record company.'

'What should it be called?'

'*Ue O Mute Aruko* - 'I Look Up When I Walk'. It's about a young man who just split up with his girlfriend. He sings how the world is such a sad and weary place - but while he's walking, he looks up at the sky and sees the stars, and maybe life isn't so bad after all.'

Walking further down the canal pathway toward the Ginkakuji Temple. Wandering through the forest this beautiful autumn day. Hidden away between the pathway and the forest and a lake.



*Ginkakuji Temple on the Tetsugaku-no-michi*

Inger speaks candidly about her past and her faith, and yet in doing so, keeps a distance. Perhaps she is concerned that our meeting will become something more than just friendly. Her Christian faith, stringent morals and US conservatism; that love can only exist within marriage, that the path of Jesus is the only true path, her disappointment with her father's rejecting Christian values. 'I am not sure about you', she says. 'Perhaps you are also a person without morals or values?' Maybe she is right.

We take a pathway leading up a hill and seem to be lost. The pathway disappears into the trees. Inger asks a Japanese lady with a little boy and a little dog and the Japanese lady, walks with us a

short way to show us a 'secret pathway' that leads across a cemetery and past an ancient Shinto shrine. Inger and the Japanese lady are talking together while I admire the view that stretches out toward the Kyoto temples, the tea-house and the long winding Path of Philosophy. Also these beautiful gravestones, tightly packed into this small space that makes a cemetery. Traditional Buddhist burial requires that the dead are buried sitting in wooden caskets. Stone sculptures of stone foxes and badgers along the cemetery pathway - magical creatures in Japanese folklore. The pathway leading to a long column of orange painted *shinto* arches. The Japanese lady returns home with the little boy and the dog following after, and we are alone in garden of ghostly presences. A little further along, a view that stretches out into the breadth of Kyoto itself.



*The gateway and the cemetery*

'I like Kyoto,' says Inger with an air of detachment, and says that over the past few days her enthusiasm for Japan has been rekindled. After three months in Tokyo she was ready to pack her bags and return to Denmark, then back to the US.

'Really?' I ask. 'Just like that? Leave Japan?'

'Wait till you get to Tokyo,' she says.

So now in contemplative mood we walk through some Japanese gardens which pass by the Japanese Baptist Church hospital. She stops, and we take in the silence.

‘This is where I was born,’ she says.

‘Should we go inside? Maybe we’ll find a copy of your birth certificate?’

‘Hm, no,’ she says, smiles and shakes her head. Then asks: ‘Would you have been surprised if I hadn’t shown up this morning?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘I almost didn’t. I had this strange dream.’ She looks at me with those crystal clear blue eyes. ‘I dreamt that you tried to kill me.’

‘How?’

‘Hm, I’d rather not talk about it,’ she says with an alluring smile.



*Contrasting landscapes - Kyoto's Gion district*

Now we're nearer town again, and we go to a bank and a post office and then to a coffee shop, and drink (western) tea and we talk for two hours, and the time waltzes past... It's dark now, and cold.

The day has gone, vapourised like the steam from the tea kettle. Inger is going back to the hotel. Alone. And tomorrow she returns to Tokyo. Maybe we could meet in Tokyo, I suggest. Maybe.

Wander back to the ryokan feeling like the guy in the song looking up at the sky. Now walking through the coloured lights of the Gion district and remember some of the words to that famous Japanese song. Something like - 'walking along the streets and my heart filled with sadness, knowing that my love can never be returned...' Ryu Sakamoto became world famous with that song. Then died in a plane crash.

A sad story — '*aware no monogatari*' in Japanese. The beauty and sadness of a passing moment. That there is sadness in all beauty, and in all beauty, sadness. This was Inger. This was our meeting.

Mori-san is standing in for Humihiko at the reception desk and when I get back and he is reading a film book and we talk about Japanese movies for an hour. '*Ichi-ban — Kurosawa,*' he says. Kurosawa, number one.

Watch TV and drink tea in my room, which is now very cold, so place myself under the *kosatsu* table and reflect...

Look out through the closed window, above the rooftops of Kyoto — a new moon. Sign of bad luck. Tonight of all nights. Friday the 13th. No sleep tonight...

*Kyoto Temples & Sites visited:*

*Yasaka Shrine*

*Shor-en-in Temple*

*Shor-en-in Shogun Zuka Garden*

*Chian-in Temple*

*Shijo-kawaramachi*

*Sanjusan Gendo*

*Heian Shrine*

*Imperial Palace*

*Nijo Castle*

*[Golden Pavilion]*

*[Silver Pavilion]*

***Kyoto, December 14th 1985 (Ronin Commemoration Day: 14.12.60)***

Come to Kyoto for a day and it's been almost a week. Beginning of a new lunar cycle. Feeling emotionally delicate. Today is Commemorative Day for the 47 Ronin. Important day for Japanese people - incomprehensible for anyone else. Tearful religious services for 47 warriors who sacrificed their lives 400 years ago. Only in Japan. Also it is the second Saturday of the month, which means banks are closed. Fortunately went to the bank yesterday. With Inger. Who is now on her way to Kyushu in the south of Japan before returning to Tokyo for Christmas. I'll be in Australia, she'll go back to Colorado and... then where? Who knows? Where, what, how or why... we grasp at straws, spend our hours somewhere between hope and despair.

Walk to a small temple next door to the Sanjusangendo. Maybe a hundred people gathered for the 47 Ronin service. Shinto priests handing out commemorative *soba* noodles accompanied by hand clapping, bell ringing and chanting. A few faces turning toward me. How foreign can a person feel?

Walk to the nearby hills where a commemorative march for the 47 Ronin is being held. A long way to walk. Take a wrong turn and end up near the station instead. OK, this a good opportunity to visit Nara, the old old town of priests and temples just twenty minutes train ride away.

Difficult for foreigners to understand why the story of the 47 Ronin is so important for Japanese people. It was the first film that Akira Kurosawa ever made (*Those Who Tread on the Tigers Tail*), and has been remade more than any other film in Japanese film history. Compare say to Hollywood films where the most filmed story is most likely that of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* - the inner conflict of good and evil. A rather westernised and Christian view of human nature. That 47 masterless samurai take matters into their own hands and

sacrifice themselves to avenge the death of their feudal master. It's all about *giri* - duty and obligations.

The train leaves in half an hour. Have tea at the station coffee shop. Gaze at a tall and beautiful Japanese girl, maybe waiting for someone, dressed in a long white dress, pale white face and sad eyes, long black tresses against white. And then she is gone.

Drink tea and look up to see the same girl enter the coffee shop, order green tea and place herself at the table next to mine, a wistful glance in my direction - maybe she caught my look. She is like the *onibaba* from *Kwaidan* (Japanese ghost stories) - a phantom lady - extraordinarily beautiful and somehow out of place at a railway station coffee shop. But I am staring because she seems so unbearably sad; her long fingers hold the cup to her soft lips. Nothing touches. She gazes through the window, anxious, distressed? A man enters - smartly dressed but with tussled hair and worried eyes. He sits down beside her and holds her hand, looks at her - nothing said. She looks down to conceal the tears... *aware no monogatari* - the first day of a new moon, and already a sad story, whatever it may be...



*Kofukuji Temple, Nara*

An hour later I'm walking from Nara station toward the Pilgrim's Walk around the temples and gardens. A cloudy sky for the first time in an age. How long since I last saw rain?

Arrive at the Kofukuji Temple. Awe struck. An ancient and wise old wooden building. A five story pagoda in green woodlands with a hundred or so deer roaming about in tranquil nonchalance. One of them walks up to me brazenly to nose at the map in my hand thinking its a bag full of bread crumbs.

Two young Japanese girls present their Temple Book to the priest at the entrance, who stamps the temple seal onto an allocated page, and writes a message in exquisite old style calligraphy.

A Temple Book. Good idea. Proceed to the souvenir shop across the park and buy a Temple Book, present it to the priest. Page One is signed and stamped. Buy two more pages (these are donations to the temple) for friends in Russia. Drink water from the brass cup at the temple drinking fountain and throw a coin into the well before the statue of Buddha. Might just save me from myself, who knows?



*Dai Butsu - Great Buddha - at the Todaji Temple*

It is neither possible nor even good manners to get temple stamps from all 80 temples of Nara in a single day. Temple visits are slow affairs. As they practice in Japan; less is more. 'When you're in a hurry, slow down,' as the saying goes. Walk a mile through deer filled parks to see the *Dai Butsu* - the Great Buddha, at the Todaji Temple. Said to be the oldest and largest wooden building in the world. Nara was the Japanese capital in the 8th century and was then and still today is the Buddhist centre of the nation.



*Todaji Temple*

Young boys practicing baseball in the park. Six of them swinging their bats backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, endlessly, tirelessly, beating at thin air. Young samurai with wooden swords. And the salarymen have swapped their swords for golf clubs...

The wooden building housing the *Dai Butsu* is extraordinary. And the enormous figure of the Buddha, awesome in the true sense of the word. Such eyes. Such beautiful hands. Walk round and round. Feel calmed.

In a wooden pillar on the right hand side of the Buddha is a smoothly worn round hole. It is the same size as the ear hole of the Buddha statue. He, she who fits through this hole, it is said, is holy. Nice idea. Enough room for children and very small grown ups. Little people have such complexes anyway that it is a good idea to throw them a Buddhist bone of righteousness. Me? No way I'd get through that hole.

At the four corners of the giant statue, two at the front gate and two immediately behind, are the Four Guardians of the Buddha. Ferocious beings bearing respectively, a sword, a staff, a pen and clenched fists. Outside a statue of Kwannon, goddess of compassion, and a well to receive offerings. Two coins, ten yen. What do I want? Not to want anything.



*Kagusa Temple*

At the exit a middle aged man sets up a camera on a tripod to take a picture of himself and his wife. The Japanese mania for picture taking. A voice calls from behind. In English. 'Please sir, please sir.' A young woman of classical beauty, runs toward me smiling. 'Please. Photograph.' she says. Her equally becoming girl friend stands beside her in front of the *Dai Butsu*. Take my time. Give the

camera a chance to absorb their smiling faces and pleasing disposition.

'Thank you, thank you,' they say in unison and we go our separate ways. I return to the well of Kwannon and throw in in two more coins.

Walk across another park, past more deer and more young boys swinging baseball bats into thin air, past couples on their Sunday promenades, and through a long avenue of sorrowful looking trees, upwards on a narrow pathway toward the Shinto Temple of Kagusa. The clouds open up ever so slightly, just as a I begin the first steps upward on the stone stairs toward the temple entrance. Tiny raindrops fall onto the leaves making a barely audible tinkling sound. Just a little rain, some restrained droplets to hint at the oncoming of late autumn, which in Japan is a season unto itself - one of eight.

Regard the temple alone, in the rain, think of the beautiful girl at the station overcome with sadness, think of Inger, of Tanya, Janna, Kostya - and a hundred more faces that fill my mind.

Tears and rain that all become water, just water, running into rivelets, then moments that can never be felt again, like now, as the rain falls onto the earthen steps, down the hill into little streams, and into the ponds and waterways that surround Nara. The waterways and canals that run into the streams and then the river that runs through Kyoto and out to sea... to Kamakura on the coast, before their own *Dai Butsu*, staring serenely out toward the Japan Sea, where you can scoop up a handful of water and watch it run through your fingers - the sad drops and not so sad, which ones are which?



*Nara Temples visited:*

*Todaji Temple*

*Kasuga Shrine*

*Daibutsu den*

*Kofukuji*

The rain stops and I walk down the hill and follow the pathway into town. Stop at a coffee shop, The Bronx, as vulgar and as tasteless as a coffee shop can be, decorated in chrome with the menu and lettering in misspelt black English letters. Tea and carrot cake, then a walk to the station and back to Kyoto in time to watch an episode of *Abarenbo Shogun* on the TV which I'd seen recorded at the Toei Studios a few days earlier. A vigorous and captivating story - far too sentimental of course, like most Japanese TV series - about a samurai avenging two helpless star crossed lovers who are assailed from all sides. Their two families, gangsters, the *daimyo*. Shortly afterwards a *yakuza* film about to start on TV6 with Okatagura Ken. A light knock at the door. Hikoro from downstairs. 'Please', he says, 'don't be lonely. This is your last evening...'

His way of saying please come downstairs and join the company. In fact quite happy to watch *yakuza* film but would not want to unbalance the '*wa*', the group harmony. Large groups of youthful Japanese from Osaka, Kyushu and Hiroshima visiting for the weekend. All the boys at one table, all the girls at the other. Hiroko serves tea.

'Dozo'

'Domo'

Sit at the table where there is some space - next to eight or so Japanese girls. Hikoro turns the TV6 *yakuza* movie and manage to

follow the beginning anyway above the rising babble and laughter of Japanese youth...

Otagura Ken has just been released from prison. He has been betrayed a by a rival *yakuza* and swears vengeance. His father has been killed and his sister, dishonoured. After the first fight scene the storyline becomes more difficult to follow - by attempting to redeem the honour of his sister, he has succeeded in bringing upon her even more disgrace.

Begin a cautious conversation with Japanese girls. Two sisters from Hiroshima, Keiko and Atsuko.

Tell them I have something for them, and take out Kostya's mountain crystal stones - healing stones - the pieces of crystal he gave me at the Tibetan Buddhist temple in Leningrad. I explain the story. That these stones have been blessed in a Tibetan Buddhist temple by a man who is a psychic healer and nuclear physicist. Very important they find a home in Hiroshima. Of all the places that need healing. Kostya will be pleased.

Atsuko runs upstairs. Comes back and gives me a postage stamp. Japanese tradition of reciprocal gift giving...

*'Domo arigato gosaimasu.'*

Last few minutes of *yakuza* film and Otagura Ken reeks vengeance, cutting down the rival *yakuzas* with a short blade sword one after the other. Yet at the end he is overcome with melancholy.

'You like Japanese film?' asks Atsuko.

'I like the sad stories,' I tell her. *'Aware no monogatari...'*

Go to my room and pack up my bag, regarding the late night shows of the floating world of television and expire around 3am.

## *Kyoto, December 15th 1985*

Strange breakfast. Surrounded by giggling chubby Japanese girls with *manju-bun* faces, together on their girl's college excursion to Kyoto. Difficult conversation on both sides.

Take a stroll to the Imperial Palace and take some photographs of the signs forbidden entry. Towering stone walls and the glimpse of the pagoda roof behind it. Families have picnics on the grass lawns in front of the palace, and others out for their Sunday walk.

Walk the outside wall of the palace behind which, some 700 years ago Lady Musashi put brush to rice parchment and recorded *The Tale of Genji*, a triumph of the Heian era when women were women and men were rather feminised. Tea drinking and *koto* ballads, romance and discretion.



*In the grounds of the Imperial Palace, Kyoto*

In contrast to the rough and martial Kamakura period that followed three hundred years later. During which period the *shoguns* built the close-by Nijo Castle. Hard edges and squeaking floors to warn

of intruders. Swords and armour on every wall. Military art. Just the opposite to the tranquil ambiance of the Imperial Palace.

On the way back to the ryokan stumble into a procession of white dressed *karate-ka* (martial artists). A bald headed leader heads the parade bearing a red and white flag and a young fellow takes up the rear beating on a drum. Another procession? It's a day late for the 47 Ronin commemoration and unlikely any connection to the Day of the Buddhas Enlightenment. (The Buddha was 35 years old at the time of his enlightenment, which is encouraging). In fact today's parade is a quasi nationalist procession of which there are many on the streets of Tokyo, in the shadow of Japanese author and militarist, Yukio Mishima and his doomed uprising of 1972.

Fetch bags from the hotel and give Hiroko a Swedish medallion key ring in gratitude who is overwhelmed with embarrassment. (This cult of reciprocal gift giving means that to not give back a gift bears with it the risk of losing face, but not giving something, can also be interpreted as bad form - poor Japanese people). By the bus stop a *shinto* priest with a traditional straw hat stands in line. Ask if I can take a picture. He bursts into an uncomfortable and high pitched laugh which I'm fairly certain means no.

From the bus to the station, and from the station, the Shinkansen to Tokyo. Four hours of speedy quiet railway. Stunning views of Fuji - rarely seen in the summer months due to haze or pollution. Fuji - the sacred mountain of Japan. Helsinki to Leningrad, Leningrad to Moscow, Moscow to Beijing. Osaka to Tokyo, and all those people along the way.

# Tokyo

Sunset as the train glides through the Tokyo suburbs, and they are long and wide. From the central station take the underground to Shinjuku station and wait for an age in the taxi line. Finally my turn. Hand over a card that provides the address of a nearby ryokan booked three days earlier. The white gloved taxi driver does not even look at it - just my face - and shouts abuse in Japanese, which I interpret as 'get the fuck out of my taxi.' Then shakes his head and opens the back door which is controlled from a lever by the gear stick. A long queue of impatient people outside and a long line of taxis all blasting on their horns. Leave and find myself pushed out of the queue line, a Japanese couple getting in the taxi which drives off - and me left with a forty minute taxi queue once again, and the risk of being evicted for reasons I know not why. A drunken vagrant suddenly jumps out at me and hurls abuse. He as well. I push him off and he shakes his fist - hurling verbal abuse and screaming with venom. Dangerous spot. Walk away quickly.



*Shinjuku, Tokyo, Sunday at 8 pm*

Now lost amongst the skyscrapers and motorways and overpasses of Shinjuku. Keep walking and hopelessly disorientated. Check the map and discover I have been walking in the exact opposite direction. Two young fellows point me in the right direction. Backpack and low spirits weighing heavily upon me. From the deserted skyscraper business area now find myself in the bustling streets of Shinjuku - car horns and police sirens, glaring billboard advertisements that shout. And the noise. Eight o'clock Sunday evening and the streets are filled. Push my way through several kilometres of crowded streets cursing Japanese taxi drivers with every step.

At last. On a humble side street, with its humble entrance and one floor up, the reception to the Yashima Ryokan and a gentle ancient Japanese man leads me to my room. Old and run down, but I have my own square bath tub. No problems with the bath plug at least.

Rest for five minutes and restlessness and curiosity drives me outside. Soak in the vibrant Shinjuku atmosphere - renowned as the Tokyo quarter for night life and bustling crowds. Bright lights and people. Endless traffic and layer upon layer of noise. A motor cycle gang of 20 or so, on HD choppers in glaring chrome - their leader waving an enormous Nippon Rising Sun flag. All dressed in black leather with Rising Sun flags patched into the back and on their headbands - Mishima style - in red and white. Shouting out patriotic slogans above the roar of their motorcycle engines as they control the flow of traffic for many blocks behind them. Japanese right wing nationalism, alive and well on the streets of Shinjuku. The problem of being foreigner in Japan is the difficulty of looking less foreign. A *gaijin* is always *gaijin*. Quite literally an 'outside person.'

Seek refuge in an ultra modern Clockwork Orange like coffee bar - all plastic and light and tastelessly hip. Sit in the corner with tea and toast. Now brazenly a gang of half a dozen *yakuza* enter the establishment with a walk that says 'we own this place', and

wearing synched purple and yellow jackets emblazoned with the motif: 'Gangsters Since 1947'. They walk around a few tables, stare coldly at a few patrons, eyeing up two *geisha* girls at the table opposite, then walk out again.

Realise I've been holding my breath for the duration. Breathe out slowly and sip tea and eat toast slowly. Take some time to look at the *geishas* myself. They drink milk coffee and eat chocolate cake with silver forks. Not a crumb goes amiss. Soon they leave and the taller girl in the light green rustling silk kimono turns around to catch my gaze. She places two finely painted finger tips to her ruby red lips and giggles with bowed head. Leave shortly afterwards and walk the dazzling Shinjuku streets feeling as foreign as a person can.

Walk back to the Ryokan stopping off at an automatic vending machine. Same ice cream as in Kyoto. Everything else is different.

Sit in the square tub for an hour with water too hot to bear, lost in thought. Now what?

### **16.12.60 Shinjuku**

The kindly ryokan patron gives me a ticket to a Japanese cultural evening in Akasuka as I leave for the airline office. Wait impatiently in the Garuda Airlines reception while the young woman talks with her boyfriend on the telephone. Some time later she hangs up and regards me with a suspicious eye.

*'Yes?'*

*'I want to reconfirm my reservation for the flight to Melbourne next week.'*  
*I hand over the ticket and she taps out some keys on the computer terminal. Short pause.*

*'Fully booked.'*

*'No. I have a reservation. It was booked in September. I am reconfirming.'*

*'Fully booked. You on waiting list.'*

*Pause.*

*'Does that mean I get on the flight?'*

*'Waiting list so far 200. You on bottom.'*

*'What chance do I have to get on the flight?'*

*She taps some keys, looks up. 'Hm. None. None at all.'*

*'And the next flight?'*

*More tapping on computer keys. 'Two weeks. Earliest. Maybe. Peak time right now.'*

*No apologies, no regrets, no smiles.*

Walk outside around the business district of Tokyo. Automatons walking in fiercely determined directions. As I idle by not knowing where to go, what to do.

Wander up the orange stairs to the Hie Shrine. A few moments quiet from the agony of Tokyo. Walk around the buildings and the grave stones then back down the stairs beneath the orange Shinto bridges. Pass a businessman in a black suit and glasses on the way up walking in brisk determined strides. Some strange incongruity.



*Stairs leading to the Hie Shrine, Tokyo*

Have lunch across the road at Anna Millers Coffee Shop across the road. Tiny Japanese girls in obscene pink and white micro-dresses. Performing like wind-up dolls. A waitress with dark eyes and a blank stare hands me a menu - 45 different kinds of Anna Millers home-made pie. Signs on table and walls read: 'Kissin' wears out - cookin' don't.' Japanese girl waitress recites half a dozen Japanese pleasantries, eyes somewhere else. No contact. Perfect skin beneath the tiny pink uniform, like plastic, covered by a tight fitting undersized frilly white blouse. Like being trapped on a film set filled with mechanical dolls. Dressed up as cherry pie with chantilly lace. Pay check. Another doll at cash desk. Out into the street. Automaton, zombies, machines. Scream. No affect. Which way to go? No matter. As depressed as a person can be.

Well, time rolls on. Call an old friend in Australia to make sure it's still OK to stay, even if I'm a week or two late. Turns out it isn't. An old friend in crisis. Who has split up with his wife and is now sleeping on the sofa at another friend's place. For an indefinite period. Might have to rethink travel plans.

Take the underground to the Akasuka district which has a distinctly more civilized feel than Shinjuku. A myriad of small family restaurants and narrow pathways that lead to the Kwannon shrine with its colorful stalls and lanterns and incense. Priests beating drums and local folk paying homage, wafting incense sticks, hand clapping, bowing, chanting.



*Obedient daughters of Anna Miller*

At five in the afternoon head off to Nippon TV studios and guided to the studio set. Directed by the production assistant to sit in the front row with some other westerners, in this case three attractive young women from Israel, and strike up a lively conversation with tall dark Shir. She is a photo model, stunning to look at, yet with a rough nonchalance that must drive Japanese salarymen to a frenzy. Also she has completed her service in the Israeli military and knows eight different ways to kill a person with her bare hands. Shir and friends work as hostesses at exclusive bars in Roppongi. 'No funny business,' she insists, but they get paid ridiculous sums of money for hanging around the bar in evening dresses and insulting Japanese businessmen who have more money than sense.

The TV show, the top entertainment variety show right now, includes acts of Japanese popular culture which aims to promote Japan at the expense of westerners such as myself and our friends from Israel.

I sit at the low table Japanese style and the producer rushes up in a fury. 'No no no,' he sours ' you must sit like westerner!'

'How does a westerner sit?' I ask.

'Like woman next to you!'

'You want me to sit like an Israeli fashion model?'

The assistant waves vigorously and counts down - *ich... ni ... san*, and the red light of the studio camera illuminates. Live transmission, broadcasting now. He walks off in a huff. The host and hostess introduce tonight's guests, and our little group of *gaijin*, here to experience and admire Japanese culture.

A Japanese bamboo flute player rolls up a cardboard tube and plays an exquisite Japanese folk melody. Then hands the tube to me. 'You play!' I can't get a sound. Japanese audience laugh hysterically. Then he continues to play an exquisite melody, finishes up, bows and points to me with a big grin. Very amusing. More acts of similar calibre. An hour long program accolading Dai Nippon.

Still, a nice bit of income at the end of the show and Shir insists I go with her to one of her Roppongi clubs. Free entry she promises, and free drinks.

End up sipping a *midori* and listening to (unbelievable but true) three Japanese salarymen, one after the other, singing 'My Way' to the karaoke machine.

Arrange to meet Shir the next day, go home at midnight, watch samurai dramas on TV and soak in a bath way too hot for human comfort.

### 17.12.60 Shinjuku

Today I visit the Film School, arranged some weeks back, hopefully with more success than the Beijing Academy of Film and Acting. Take the train from Shinjuku to Ikebukuro, then Seibo on the Kebukuro line and get off at Shiamachi: Higashi-Nagasaki line, get out at Ekoda. Complicated. Particularly when the English letters disappear from the station signs after Ikebukuro. Have to read the *hirigana* letters at every stop.

Met by Tadashi Ori, 25 year old course supervisor, then have lunch with Film School director Professor Shinken Yohokawe. He arranges a screening of 'best student film' of 1984, 'Loves Boundaries.' Say complimentary things afterwards because if I'm not getting to Australia there's a possibility of maybe running a few seminars here at the Film School.

Meet Shir at 5.30 and she invites me along to her Tai Chi class. Which means I meet Mitsuko, the tai-chi teacher, at the famous Nakayama karate dojo. Mitsuko is 40 something, but like so many Japanese women looks much younger; *unlike* so many Japanese women, she has a strong gaze and powerful presence. After the class Shir disappears to her nightclub; Mitsuko, it turns out spent a year in Tel Aviv, speaks excellent English, and is only too pleased to exchange 'cultural difference' stories. Which leads to...

...Mitsuko invites me to join her to a Christmas party with a group of Japanese people, members of a Buddhist Association who conduct evening classes in Shingon Buddhism, an esoteric Japanese Buddhist order. She inspects the key ring I picked up at the Sho-ren temple in Kyoto and nods. 'Fudo-ryo - protector of Buddha. He who brings enlightenment through pain and suffering.' She looks at me with a strong gaze.

'You think you choose Fudo-ryo? No. Fudo-ryo choose you.'

‘For what?’

‘When the time is right, you will know.’

Mitsuko, (I shouldn’t have been surprised) it turns out, is the leader of the Buddhist group, which this evening consists of about ten men and women. They have booked a Yakitori restaurant, and the yakuza-like chef in short sleeves, bulging biceps and a very large meat cleaver, arranges excellent vegetarian food.

(‘*Watashi-wa sai soku shugi des...*’  
‘*O-nihongo hanimash-ka Jon-san,*’)

I tell my new-found Japanese friends ...which, together with some formal phrases of social etiquette, is about the extent of my Japanese conversational skills. No matter - very nice group (Buddhists) and, until the point they have had too much *sake*, are quite OK about speaking English.

*Sake*, yes. Introduced to drinking *sake* Japanese style. As the long dinner proceeds, each porcelain flask (warmed to the temperature of human blood) is emptied into our *sake* bowls, then turned upside down. Many upside down flasks. Three hours later, twenty eight of them. And the Japanese sensitivity to alcohol becomes increasingly evident. Especially for two of the women, who confess to their unhappy married lives, begin to weep together, pass out together, and leave in a taxi together. For the rest of us, when we are leaving the restaurant, stepping out into the cool December air has some affect upon our sense of stability.

Walk with Mitsi and kind Buddhist man to Ueno station - discussing Japanese interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism (‘great wheel’, where the individual becomes their own source for finding the ‘four-fold path’), and why Japanese people are Shintoists at birth (old religion), and Buddhists at death. My head is reeling for all sorts of reasons; Mitsi makes sure I’m headed for the right

platform, and now at around 2am, I notice the salarymen who have missed their last trains to to the far-flung suburbs of Tokyo who are bedding down for the night on railway platform benches; their black brief cases serving as pillows.



### **19.12.60 Shinjuku**

My visa expires on the 24th. Today I check-in at the immigration office for an extension. Long queues of Koreans (who make up most of Tokyo's immigrant population) and scantily clad Filipino girls with their *yakuza* 'escorts.' A long and demeaning process for all of us. First threatened with expulsion, then sign papers to express regret causing inconvenience to Japanese authorities, and finally a new stamp in passport which means I can stay at least a few weeks in to the new year.

It's five days before my next session at the Film School, so take the opportunity to leave for a few days and visit Japan's most famous Buddha, the Dai Butsu of Kamakura. A huge statue that looks over the Japan Sea at the very site the Mongol invasion forces were wiped out by a *tai-fun* (great wind) in the 1200's.

But first...



...must telephone to Inger. Hope we can resurrect our friendship in spite of my apparent moral paucity.

It was not to be. A short telephone conversation - she is busy with household duties and studies. Also preparing for her return to Colorado for Christmas. Not a good idea to meet up, she says. Too bad.

Shinjuku Park, some minutes from the ryokan, is filled with afternoon strollers and young Japanese in mock 1950s rock'n'roll outfits and hair-dos. They stand around in groups like baseball teams, each with their own ghetto-blaster, pouring out Bill Haley and Little Richard, and each group trying to out do the other in outrageous dress and over the top rock'n'roll dance steps. As aggressive as the fighting gangs in the movie *The Warriors*, only they have greased hair, not bats. 'An empire of signs' Roland Barthes said of Japan. Not sure. More like 'a realm of the hyper' - Tokyo anyway. Like everything that assails the senses is cranked up five extra notches: sounds, neon lights, traffic, walking pace, stress, competitiveness, dress codes, nationalism, sexual repression, social rituals and the self-censoring of inner rage.



*Tokyo underground*

## 22.12.60 Zushi

The winter solstice. Wake at 8 am - a cold crisp morning, the sound of the train boom bells every ten minutes from the ryokan's *tatami* room - trains rushing toward Tokyo, some kilometers away. It's Sunday!! Head filled with strange dreams. One more troubled night. No sleep and a lot of anxiety. One thing I want, and the other not, and troubled by both.

One dream especially troubling - being devoured by a tiger. Just one week away from New Year. Which in Japan will be Year of the Tiger. In China that comes with a new moon in February, but Japanese attempting to accommodate diverse cultural influences, adopt the Western new year. The dream was like a violent movie: I watch my body ripped apart, emptied of blood and entrails, and look into the eyes of a staring tiger with bloodied teeth and lashing tail. The symbolism does not escape me.

Could also be under the influence of this dark and sinister Shindo-tei Ryokan. Heads of wild boars decorate the heavy wood panelling. Photos of hunters holding dead boars. A plaque announcing the HQ of 'The Boar Hunters League.' *Sake* served with breakfast! And a mama-san who looks like she's had a few flasks already to wash down generous helpings of wild boar, which, according to another sign, is traditionally served during season.

Also some other strange signs which I noticed when I checked in last night: 'Curfew at 2400 hours'; 'Shared bathroom from 1600 to 2200 and 0800 to 1100 - guests with tattoos not permitted!' An attempt to exclude the *yakuza* element, no doubt. Yet who else hunts wild boar? Notice later that the 'shared bath tub' is filled with floating yellow lemons - a delicate contrast.

Walk down to the beach. A man in blue serge trousers and open robe stands singing to the sea in a high wavering mournful voice.

At the far end a small gathering of wind surfers - some on the water, and others sitting around a fire; it can't be more than 5°. The wind is strong and the sound of waves and wind cause the singing man's voice to drift in and out of earshot. It begins raining.

Long long walks to the shrines and temples which make Kamakura a popular place for Japanese pilgrimages. Although not at this time of year apparently. A deranged man in a *yukata* singing to the ocean. Alone.



*To the right of this picture - a busy roadway...*

To the Tsuragaoka Hachimangu Shrine, which on the old postcards is a majestic shrine to the era of the samurai. Today, it stands next to a busy road and the constant noise of traffic - hardly conducive to quiet reflection.

Pass by two more temples taking the long walk up the hillside to the Tokeji Temple - Meigetsuin Temple and Engakuji Temple. At Tokeji resting to admire the panorama over the bay. Past the Kwannon Gardens at Hase - now closed. Kamakura, Zushi and the site of the attempted Mongol invasion.

But the real drawing card of Kamakura is the Great Buddha - this huge monument of the meditating Dai Butsu.

The strange man chanting to the waves has gone away and I can sit on the beach in solitude and stare up at this human monument to 'stay calm.'

A few days in Zushi and exploring the treasures of Kamakura in the cold and wet, and staring at stuffed boar's heads at night, pass quickly, punctuated always by the clanging bell of the train crossing, and the ringing of the pedestrian crossing chimes. In the realm of much noise.

Pick up my bag at the ryokan and get the train back, this time to Tokyo's Ueno district, about a 40 minute train ride. A walk through quiet Ueno Park in the darkness, and contrasting vibe to busy Shinjuku. Still raining. Check in to the ryokan in a back street behind the park, and ask for tea. The woman stays and serves. Exchange a few sentences of politeness. Beginning to learn the prescribed scripts of social etiquette.



*'Fury' Prisoner of War, David Bowie, embracing Japanese culture*

Watch *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* on TV. David Bowie adapting to the whims of Japanese culture. A haunting soundtrack by Japan's Ryuichi Sakamoto. Who also plays a prison camp commander in the film. Roll out and onto the futon at 3 am but can't sleep. Remember the floating yellow lemons in the bath water and the glass eyes of the wild boar's stuffed head.

## *25.12.60 Ueno Xmas Day*

Up at 7am to meet Tadashi from the Film School at a Roppongi coffee bar at nine. An hour and a half too early. Watch people going to work. Christmas is not a holiday in Japan. Christmas is an exercise in the vulgarity of commercialism. Christmas is a chance for retailers to sell stuff. And coffee shops to play tacky Christmas music non-stop. After the third round of muzak versions of Jingle Bells and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, I can't take any more. Go up to the counter and ask the guy behind the counter to turn off, or turn down the music.

*'Sumimasen, wakarimasen...'* Sorry, don't understand, he says.

Repeat, repeat, repeat... 'turn off the music!' No, this guy's eyes are as empty as the obedient daughters of Anna Miller. Peer behind the counter looking for the sound system control module. Prepare to pick it up and throw it through the window. Tadashi shows up and I'm embarrassed over my uncharacteristic behavior. 'Feeling a bit down today Tadashi,' I tell him: 'Tokyo is getting to me I think.'



*Morning rush hour - Hachiko Square*

'There's a saying about Tokyo', he says. 'Tokyo has everything except principles.'

Watch the final stages of the office workers procession to their respective Roppongi office buildings. From 7 am to 9 am is a non-stop stream of salarymen in black suits and secretaries in pastel coloured dresses. By 8:30 only the office secretaries and their pace increasing as the clock ticks closer to nine. Now two minutes past nine, and only the over weight and under disciplined secretaries are rushing, rushing, their faces contorted into the frightful anguish of failure. Not one or two... but twenty, thirty, maybe more...



Tadashi catches my look. Laughs. 'Same every morning?' I ask.

'Same,' he says.

We go to the sound studio nearby and do a few voice-overs. Then Tadashi directs me to the offices of Toho Studios who have said yes to my request for a visit.

Walk to the subway heading for Seijo Gakuen and attacked by a deranged woman in long skirts and *banruku* hair flying in all directions. Passers-by quicken their step and I shake off the woman who is still screaming profanities as I hasten down the stairs.

At Toho Studios I am greeted by the Chairman's niece - most honoured - and they have arranged an afternoon program. First a

private screening in their luxury studio cinema. I am an audience of one watching clips from some of Toho studios greatest achievements: clips from Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro*, *Hidden Fortress* - all favorites; then clips from famous *kaiju* (monster) movies - Japanese monsters: *Godzilla*, *Mothru*, *Gigan*, *Gaira*, *Gezora*, *Baran*... lots of Japanese monsters. Films that always end the same: Tokyo gets flattened and the monster is destroyed. Some cathartic release for Japanese audiences and the constant threat of earthquakes and this generation's collective memory of nuclear devastation.



*Tora-san's Love in Osaka, 1981*

Then some clips from Tora-San films. Some of which I have seen. I met the director, Yoji Yamada, some years back when he visited Stockholm. The Chairman's niece is most impressed. 'Also he made a film called *Tie a Yellow Ribbon*,' I mention. 'You know this film?' she asks. 'Yes, quite famous. An entire feature film based on a pop song...' It was 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree', by British pop group from the 1970s. Tony Orlando and Dawn. About

a guy who comes out of prison and writes to his girlfriend; if she wants him back, to tie a.... well, you can guess. Classic schmaltz. The Japanese film version even more so. Since 1969 Yoji Yamada has made 35 Tora-san films; two a year, for summer and New Year. Number 36 will premiere in two days time.

We go upstairs to the board room to meet some Toho Studio executives. A long cherry wood table and plush chairs - twelve executives in black suits and serious looks. Why are they going to all this trouble? I just thought I'd visit the film studio - something to do for an afternoon.

An executive stands and invites me to be seated - calls me honoured guest and a young man with a tray enters to bring tea (*ban-cha*) to we who are seated in the conference room. Here I notice something strange. He walks first to an elderly man on the far side of the table, then all the way across over to my side - so I get tea - then zig-zags himself around the table until everyone is served.\*

I am introduced to the man who is served tea after me, and Executive #4 who is chairing the proceedings, suggests that perhaps I know him? (*Ichi-ban*, by the way, the Chairman of Toho Studios, says nothing throughout the entire session). I shake my head; *sumimasen*, I don't think we've met before.

Executive #4 smiles, together with his colleagues seated around the table, and gestures toward the framed portraits neatly aligned hanging on the boardroom wall; Akira Kurosawa, Shohei Imamura, Tora-San (Kiyoshi Atsumi), Godzilla, Star Man - stars and directors from the celebrated Toho Studios.

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\* Later this ritual is explained to me. Tea is served first to the Chairman - *ichi-ban* - (Number One), second to honoured guest. Then in order of importance according to the hierarchy of the organization. Last served knows he is at the bottom.

The man I am introduced to is an elderly mild-mannered gent with thick lens glasses, who looks more like an accountant than a film director or movie star. He looks at me with a sheepish grin and Executive # 4 claims proudly: 'Allow me to introduce you to Toho Studios most esteemed Haruo Nakajima.'



*Haruo Nakajima, before and after make-up*

'Uhuh,' I smile like an idiot - the name means nothing...

'Better known to you, perhaps,' he continues pointing triumphantly to the portrait on the wall, 'as Godzilla.'

'You're Godzilla?' I ask the timid little guy at the end of the table. He beams with embarrassment and his colleagues chuckle at the collective joke.

But Godzilla indeed he is - 'the man in the rubber suit' - a special effects assistant who made his debut in the first Godzilla film in 1954. Our afternoon program continues with an excursion to the Toho Studios backlot and the miniature of Tokyo city, about half the size of a football field. Executive #4 explains some of the more famous sequences from the Godzilla franchise. Nakajima-san doesn't speak much English, but on cue from Executive #4 he

moves around the backlot set waving and flailing about with his arms as though he were inside the rubber suit. One of the suits (I assume there is a wardrobe of Godzilla suits) is hanging in a glass cabinet at the Toho Studios entrance - the original 1954 Godzilla.

The Chairman's daughter bids me farewell, and arranges a taxi back to Ueno. A taxi? Then expresses her hopes on behalf of Toho Studios that the Studio and the Swedish Film Institute can continue their ongoing and mutually profitable arrangement. Uh, sure. Well, well. They thought I was from the Swedish Film Institute. Hence the VIP treatment. No complaints from my side.

Back at the Ueno ryokan I share a bath with a dad and his young son and listen to the splashing and wild laughter from the women's shared bath on the other side of the wall.



*Abarenbo Shogun ran from 1978 to 2008; 831 episodes*

On television they show an episode of *Abarenbo Shogun* — the program I had watched being made in Kyoto. In this episode a samurai warrior saves hapless lovers belonging to rival clans from the wrath of the Shogun - same plot as the last episode I saw. As often is the case in these stories many young women are violated, slaughtered, sacrificed or forced to commit *jigaki*, Japanese women's own form *seppuku*. (A sword to the throat and not the stomach).

So only too glad to welcome the light relief of Tora-san film #27, especially after today's visit to Toho Studios.

When I met Yoji Yamada, author and director of the Tora-san films, during his Stockholm visit, I'd asked if he had seen a British TV comedy series, Hancock's Half Hour, with celebrated comedian, Tony Hancock. He feigned ignorance but I'm convinced Tora-san is the Japanese version of Hancock, right down to body build and trilby hat. A number one loser who doesn't quite fit in, slightly eccentric, out of tune with the rest of society, unlucky in love, and a comic figure with a large dose of melancholy. For Tora-san, in such a conformist society as Japan, being the guy that doesn't fit in is especially poignant. But maybe Tora-san is someone many Japanese people would like to be — hence the enormous popularity of the series — he is a non-conformist, without obligations or commitments; no *giri*, which for most Japanese people is society's way of keeping everyone in their place.

However, half an hour of Tora-san is enough for my cynical westernized value system — too sentimental by a long shot. His sister is weeping copiously when once more he leaves Tokyo's Ueno district, and the safe haven of big sister's *soba* stand, this time to find love in Osaka of all places.

Three am and stare at the ceiling, listen to the blowing wind shaking rice-paper screens. Somewhere down the corridor the sound of a closing door. Time to leave Tokyo.

## 26.12.60 Ueno

Decide on a trip to the mountains and to visit an island in the north. A chance to clear my head. A new year? A new life? What next?

Get up at 7 am and walk to the nearby Bentendo shrine. Have *soba* noodles for breakfast at the lakeside cafe. Sun shining and more and more people spill out into the sunlit Ueno Park promenading in their best clothes and gravitating toward the Bentendo shrine to make their New Year wishes. Bentendo is the Goddess of Good Luck. A goddess taxed, I imagine, and world weary from placating the multitude of Japanese people making wishes to pass exams, get salary increases and membership cards to golf clubs.



*Bentendo Shrine, Ueno - for good luck*

Walk around Ueno, around the lake, in and out of the small streets and alley ways, as quiet as they'll ever be. Not many holidays in Japan. People work hard, and sometimes work themselves to death. *Kurisho* - death by work. Thirty year old salarymen found dead at the desks, working, working, two weeks in a row, 14 hours a day.

Return to the ryokan, pick up my bag and walk toward Ueno station. Visit a Japanese coffee shop for the last time, called (aptly)

The Last Resort. Elegantly dressed couples still up from Christmas celebrations - the percentage of Japanese Christians who go to church and see a dimension to the festivities beyond Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer and exchanging cards. Stroll around the shops - a few them open now, and try to buy a pair of shoes to replace my worn out pair. Holes in each foot. The same shoes that have traversed Scandinavia Russia Siberia Mongolia China and a good portion of Japan. The salesman, a big tubby guy in a short sleeved shirt, look at me, looks at my feet and crosses his arms. The big no. Not a chance. Feet too big.

Three hour train journey to Nagano, then a 30 minute bus ride up a rough and bumpy road to Kusatsu.

Mountains, snow, hot springs.



*Kusatsu Onsen - hot springs - in the middle of town*

# Kusatsu

Check in at the Kirishimaya Ryokan at six - with a stunning view from the window - then walk through town as darkness descends. Hot running water from springs and fountains, and steam rising through the streets. Ski lodges and snow flakes like tiny butterflies, white against black. Turn up the collar of my pullover to keep out the cold.

Soak in a hot bath for an hour - *furo* in Japanese, one more ritualized pastime. Thankfully the luxury of my own tub.

Read from the book from Mitsuko's Buddhist group; this one is the 'Great Compassion Darani'.

*'Iki iki shino shino. Ovasan. Furashiri. Haga haga furashaya.*

'We implore thee, we implore thee. For the pure substance of flawless purity in which the Three Evils of Greed, Anger and Stupidity are annihilated.'

The three evils.



The *mama-san* has left a thermos of hot tea (*genmai-chai*) on the *kotatsu* - a table covered in a thick quilt with a heater built in underneath. Most necessary in the cold unheated rooms with thin walls that prevail in Japan. Here in the mountains, colder than most places. Falling snow flakes, a rustling sound in the still of night - the kind of silence that the mountain gods bring.

### **27.12.60 Kusatsu**

Wake up to the sublime view - like a Hokusai painting - mountain peaks and snow covered cherry blossom trees.

Take a table in the breakfast room and soon joined by a Japanese couple. Many people here for the weekend and all wearing the same blue and white pattern *yukata* - robe - as if we are all members of the same club.

Yoshi and Waiko introduce themselves, she is an English teacher - and they are in Kusatsu for a weekend break. 'Popular place for stressed out Tokyo office workers,' says Yoshi, who is an engineer.

'You are dressed like a dead man,' says Waiko, and explains that my *yukata* is tied on the wrong side. Which means I've been a 'dead man' since I arrived in Japan. Every morning I've been tying the *yukata* on the wrong side.

Strike up a conversation with a man in his 30s with an uncharacteristically enthusiastic disposition. Well, a kind of conversation. He speaks no English, but Waiko the English teacher is only too happy to interpret when I get stuck for words. As a 'dead man' this happens quite a few times.

His name is Gary, and even on his business card his name is Gary; strange for some-one who speaks no English. Even stranger - he is the inn-keeper, he owns and manages this mountain resort ryokan; most honoured, he says, to have a guest from so far far away.

The honour is all mine I insist and we agree to meet later in the afternoon. He wishes to show me the finest of Japanese culture.

Walk down the hill and into the small town centre and the famous local spa - an outdoor lake of green mineral water with steam

vapour like a humid mist covering the stones and wooden platforms.

It is a mixed gender arrangement, although everyone wears small towels for the sake of decency - for men they are often like loincloths in the mode of *sumo* wrestlers. Find myself alone in a thermal pool but for one older man at the far end, a forlorn expression on his wizened face. I notice as he turns that his back is covered with a well-worn dragon tattoo, in faded blue and red, that extends over his arms and down to his wrists. As he slips into the water his hand holds firmly onto a stone revealing only four fingers - his little finger is severed at the joint. A *yakuza* sign of contrition that goes back many centuries tied into the hierarchy of Japanese society and the codes of honour and *giri*. Imagine how impossible it must be to leave the *yakuza* life when your body is branded so conspicuously. More aesthetic than prison tattoos, but the affect is much the same.

Walk through the village and now find myself in the midst of a snowstorm. Take shelter in a small coffee shop, and as the single guest soon realize a mistake — this is some kind of *yakuza* place, with a huge woman behind the counter, dressed in vivid black, bright red lipstick and bearing the nonchalance of a harlot. The tea is tepid, the glass not clean, and I leave quickly to brave out the ensuing blizzard to the top of the hill. Return to the *tatami* room, sit under the *kotatsu* and drink *genmai chai* supplied by the more kindly disposed traditional Japanese ladies of the *ryokan*.



Gary, dressed in a more formal *tanzen* (like a winter *yukata* - thicker material, less 'dressy' than a *kimono*), invites me to see the ryokan *dojo*, his personal training room. Quite magnificent. Beautiful perfectly smooth dark varnished floor, Japanese calligraphy decorating the walls, but in the centre of a large podium, a huge *taiko* - ceremonial drum, or quite literally, a 'fat drum.' Gary, it turns out, is the head of the local *taiko* team.

He shows a picture of himself and his team, decked out in ceremonial *taiko* dress, posing like a football team, hanging in a place of honour on the *dojo* wall. Mountain District winning *taiko* team, 1984.

He pounds the drum with huge club like sticks with the stylized strikes of a *taiko* drummer. Booming sound resonates throughout the *dojo* (and possibly through the ryokan and into the mountains. I wonder how it sounds when the whole team is practicing?) I saw a *taiko* performance once, during a Japanese festival - it's a breathtaking spectacle. A whole group pounding those huge drums in unison. 'Dozo,' says Gary. 'Your turn.' And he hands me the clubs.

Hard to overcome feeling clumsy and timid. Gary says forget about the drum - focus on the *kata* — the movement of the body. Just like in *karate*.



The two arms must form a straight line; the stance of the legs, like in *karate*, fixes the body to the ground. The first club parallel to the outstretched thigh and the second club parallel to the front leg. Strike, pull back. Strike, pull back. Gary proves to be a patient *sensei*

- a good teacher - and after some practice I'm pounding a *taiko* drum with some confidence at least. For Gary it's a way of life and in a few days he and his team will be sounding in the new year.

I am constantly surprised over the significance and insignificance of language. Where fluent conversations can be so meaningless and forgettable and exchanges with people where words are superfluous, and our minds tune into something quite different. Why it is that some people we like instantly and others not at all. Language, culture, background are marginal. The kind of kinship that makes a mockery of supporting your school team or national army, when there is most likely as many kindred spirits on the opposing side.

The snow storm has passed and there is a full moon tonight, filling up the whole room with its luminescence. No sleep tonight. Amazingly the TV is showing another Tora-san film; tonight it is # 9 in the series. I guess TV is cashing in on the new Tora-san film to be premiered for the new year. This one is *Otoko wa Tsurai yo Tora-san* from 1972. Tora-san returns home from his travels, stays with his sister in Ueno (where she runs a *soba* stand), and falls in love with his childhood sweetheart. But, as usual, love does not come to Tora-san, and once more he goes off... somewhere.



*Tanzen*



*Yukata*



*Kimono*

# Sado

31.12.60 Sado

Last day of the year. Whichever way you count it. The sixtieth year of Emperor Hirohito, or the one thousand nine hundred and eighty fifth year after (supposedly) the birth of Christ. Have been in Sado now for two days and feel as isolated as isolated can be.

Have breakfast in the *tatami* room. I'd taken the bus from Kusatsu, then the train to Nigato and a three hour ferry trip to Sado. The short train rolls onto the deck.

They served *soba* on the boat and I sat outside under the light of the near full moon. Arrived at 8 pm in darkness and checked into a ryokan in Ryotsu. There must be a Tora-san festival on the TV this week - another was shown last night.



The ryokan has bicycles available and yesterday I took the coast road north past a fishing village, fishing boats and lines of nets hanging on the beach. Places with strange names: Sawadi, Ogi... Sado is all about the fishing. The locals serve 'fish tea', go fishing in their strange round fishing boats, like floating bath tubs, and serve

fish with just about everything. For me it's been a simple diet of boiled rice, plain *soba*, sea-weed and *ban-cha*. Feel hungry pretty much all the time.

It's daylight and cold, and droplets of thick mist drifting in from the sea. The last day of December, a wintry chill slicing through clothing, through layers of skin... An empty beach, not a soul or a shadow to be seen anywhere. A graveyard on the hill, some fishing boats turned upside down on the beach. Others tied up to the pier.



Yesterday at the village I could watch the local people engaged in their daily routines. Fisherman's wives bundled up in clothes watching over three young diver girls in loin cloths submerged beneath the cold water. Men on boats, watching as well.

Now watching the waves through something in-between rain and mist, see only myself, five years ago, ten years ago, then too long ago to be of this lifetime.

Today the ground is wet from last night's rain, I cycle east on the lakeside road heading for a shrine on a hilltop overlooking the sea.

It's an isolated spot. Not a person anywhere. Sado is an isolated island. The fourth largest in Japan, once a place of exile, and at this time of year, just empty. A row of gravestones by the shrine, of fishermen (fishermen?! - it seems there are more women fishing than men); gravestones of those who have died at sea. Find myself overwhelmed with feelings of melancholy. Lose myself in a kind of trance, a reverie. The Greeks call it '*exstasis*' - to be outside yourself.



Yes, this *exstasis* — a sense of living just one more life — of travelling to many different places to complete some kind of cycle. What Buddhists call the *samsara* — a cycle of lives. All these journeys and all these places; so strange, yet all so familiar. In this state of reverie, of *exstasis*, the images of other lives come flooding into my mind; a fisherman in a coastal town, a cobbler in a moorland village, a drunkard in some city of cobblestones and alley ways, where an entire lifetime disappears in the transient haze of trying to get out of it... faces of people seen once, yet seen before; familiar faces from other times and places; friends, wives, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, all in a myriad of interlocking lives — how they begin, and pass, and fade away.

A lifetime of traveling - because at the end of the journey the journey continues, only somewhere else.

## *Epilogue*

Many months and many destinations later some mail arrives, forwarded on via three changes of address. A post card from Gunnel. She and Annika continued their travels in China, met a guy in Chengdu. He told them about a European guy in a local hospital. Who had lost three toes and two fingers from frostbite. His name was Eric and he was from Quebec. Trying to cross into Tibet illegally, on a local bus that got stuck in a blizzard. Rescued by locals and sent to Chengdu. Local doctors were trying to save his foot.

From Inger a letter sent from Tokyo the day before she leaves for Colorado. A postcard picture of Kwannon, goddess of compassion. Sorry, she writes - wanted to meet... but felt confused, angry, troubled. Returning to the US, she says, but not sure if that's 'going home'. Still looking...

From Gary in Kusatsu - a little package. A porcelain tiger. Happy New Year of Tiger, he writes. And now the Tiger is devouring me, just like in the dream...

It would be another twelve months before I made it to Australia. During which time I spent time in London, Stockholm, Munich, Amsterdam and Paris, Helsinki, Reykjavik, then Hollywood California — and finally Tahiti. All those places, and all those journeys — life changing experiences, as journeys always are.

## *Appendix 1: Conversation on the Path of Philosophy*

Inger and I have had tea - cha-no-yu - at the Tea-house on the Path of Philosophy. A tea-house that overlooks the stream that flows through Kyoto and past Kyoto's many Buddhist temples and shrines. Inger is a devout Christian, had a Danish Lutheran upbringing and a father who was a minister in the Lutheran church. But she has also had the cultural experience of a Buddhist country, and a father who converted to Buddhism, so she is well versed in both Christian and Buddhist teachings. As we continue along the path our conversation explores the different aspects of these two faiths...

*'So tell me again... how is it you were born in Kyoto?'*

*'My father was a missionary. He set up a Lutheran School here in Kyoto.'*

*'Is it till here?'*

*'No. It closed down after I was born. He decided to become a Buddhist. Now imports Buddhist art to Scandinavia.'*

*'Have I got this right? Your father - a Christian missionary comes to Japan to convert Japanese people to the Christian faith, becomes disillusioned, and adopts the faith of the Japanese. But his daughter, who grows up in Buddhist home in Japan, comes of age and adopts the Christian faith?'*

*'Something like that.'*

*'That's quite a story.'*

*'There's some bits in-between. School in Kyoto, in Copenhagen, moving to Colorado...'*

*'And you moved to Colorado because?'*

*'Well, let's just say that Colorado is more Christian than Copenhagen.'*

*'I guess it is. And your dad?'*

*'Lives in Copenhagen. He opened a Buddhist centre for a while but decided that art could tell the story better.'*

*'A missionary comes to change Japan, but Japan changes the missionary. Well, well.'*

*'No need to sound so glib about it.'*

*'It's just that... well, I've never met your father, but I think I understand... I grew up in a small Australian township. Every week church and Sunday School and Bible Class. At thirteen we went off to confirmation camp where we should all confirm our faith in Jesus. And at the end of the week, I told the pastor I couldn't do it. He was shocked. 'Why not?' he asks. I showed him this book, The Life*

of the Buddha. I said in this book there's all the same stories that Jesus told, but with a big difference. 'What's that?' he asked. I told him. I said I can believe these stories. 'They make sense. The Jesus stories didn't make any sense.' He got really mad. Said I wasn't worthy to be a member of the Christian church. Said I was heathen and I would go to hell. Told him, I didn't think so. That most likely I would be reborn, maybe as a better person, maybe as a cat or a dog, I didn't know. It depended on what kind of life I live now.'

'If it's any consolation, I don't think you'll go to hell.'

'Thank you. That's a comfort.'

'But I think you would live a better life following the teachings of Jesus.'

'I would have to disagree with you there Inger. It comes down to this. Buddha told better stories.'

'You think so? Like what?'

'Well. Start with Lazarus. Lazarus dies and his wife appeals to Jesus. Lazarus has been dead for three days but Jesus brings him back from the dead. Lazarus is on his feet again. A miracle. Who needs the miracle? To show that Jesus has magical powers? What do we learn? Now there's a similar story about the Buddha. A man dies and his wife is beside herself with grief. She appeals to Gautama the Buddha. Please, bring him back. Gautama says it can't be done. But she is frantic with grief. So Gautama tells her this: "Fetch me the tears from recently bereaved widow. Place them in this jar and bring the jar to me." The grieving widow sets on her quest and some days later she returns. "I understand," she tells the Buddha. "That death comes to us all. And there will always be widows to grieve. We have to learn to deal with the loss."

'Isn't that the issue?' says Inger. 'Buddhism isn't a religion at all. Just a set of ethics and values for people to live by.'

'Yes. But that's a good thing. There is no magic or miracles to Buddhism. Buddha provides an inspiration to a balanced life, nothing more. Think of it. At the age of 84 he meditates under a tree and passes away peacefully. The big problem I had going to church when I was young was that image of a man nailed to a cross, the crown of thorns, blood from his wounds. All that pain and suffering. And we were told that he died for our sins. I was ten. I hadn't committed any sins. Not that I knew of.'

'The point is that we are born into a world of sin. It's the Christian faith that absolves us from sin.'

'And that's why you have Commandments - so that people will leave 'good' lives?'

'That's the idea.'

*'See, I have a problem with these Ten Commandments. A list of things you **can't** do. And how many of them can you really not do? Not taking the Lord's name in vain? How many times a day do you hear people saying: Oh my God or God help me or God Almighty; not least during making love! In Buddhism you have the Eight-fold path. Guidelines. Not commandments. Guidelines to help you lead a better life: right view, right thought, right speech, right behaviour, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. These are guidelines, and sure they can be interpreted in different ways. Theravada Buddhists maybe be more strict, and Shingon Buddhists and Zen Buddhists more abstract - but I'm not sure you can make someone a better person by giving them a list of things they're not allowed to do!'*

*'I think your trust in people is a little naive. The Commandments provide a set of values, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, that people can agree upon. If you are virtuous person then you follow these rules. It's not more complicated than that.'*

*'Well, I think I'd rather stay naive than risk damnation for paying homage to another deity; you know, like Lady Luck, or Fortuna, or whatever....'*

*'That's being a little extreme...'*

*'But anyway, you know how it works in Buddhism; 'the Eight-fold path', 'the Four Noble Truths.'*

Outside the Golden Temple - unfortunately closed, but visible from the pathway - our discussion probed deeper into some of the interesting comparisons between Buddhist and Christian teachings.

For example - the Temptation of Christ. Christ wanders through the desert for forty days and forty nights tempted by the devil. Who was this devil? And what's so bad about offering a guy lost in the desert some food and water?

The Buddhist parable relates that Gautama, so fed up with his followers, and disciples, and the pettiness and greed of human behaviour, goes on a 'retreat.' (Still an essential aspect of Buddhist doctrine to the present day). He retreats into the forest to live a pure life, unsullied by petty human behaviour, and lives with the animals and the trees and the plants for forty days and forty nights, in order to purify his spirit.

In Christian teachings there is an entire cult around the Virgin Mary (principally the Catholic church), which represents the unlikely idea of 'immaculate conception'. Also that a woman should sacrifice herself for the sake of others. No passion, no love, just holy duty.

In Buddhism: Kuan-yin in China, Kwannon in Japan, is a goddess of compassion, representing feminine qualities of nurturing, forgiveness, compassion.

*'The Buddhist canon is no dance on roses you know,' says Inger. 'Buddhist monks abstain from worldly temptations as much as in the Christian church.'*

*'True. There are some difficult teachings in the Buddhist canon for the western mind. That the body is just 'a sack of bones' and submission to sensual pleasure is spiritual weakness... there are many aspects to Buddhism that I can question, but my impression is that it is OK to ask such questions. You end up with some interesting conversations. The Christian ministers and Bible Class teachers I've met preach the dogma - questions not invited. I had a lot of questions then, still have now...'*

*'Such as?'*

*'Such as... the design of a Buddhist temple compared to that of a Christian church. In the Japanese temple you enter through the gate - **san-mon** - and into the temple - **goju-no-to**. Respectfully, the visitor regards the statues - **kondo** - and finally, furthest inside the temple against the back wall, study the scriptures - **kodo**. My experience of Buddhist temples, in China and Japan (also Thailand, India, England and, yes, even Sweden), is that one enters and is welcomed to a place of harmony and tranquility. It is an invitation based on respect. Entering a church or cathedral is often an overwhelming experience - the darkness, the power, and of course, the cross. Even the pulpit - all designed to humble the visitor into a kind of submission - 'the power and the glory'; an intimidation.*

From the pathway outside the golden pavilion, we can see the zen priests tending to the stone gardens. They are creating beautiful patterns in the white stones, with their wooden-toothed rakes. Creating patterns that emulate waves in the sea, and the larger stones like small islands.

I cannot help but feel like something of an acolyte discussing these things with Inger. Her background - a father who is Buddhist, and schooling - a Christian church in a Buddhist society - she knows these teachings in more detail than I do. While I was struggling to remember the 'four noble truths' she could list them without hesitation:

1. Suffering: man is in a state of suffering, illusion and ignorance. There is no escape from this on the human plane as they constitute the very nature of the human condition.

2. Attachment: the cause of this suffering is ego - a preoccupation with self-gratification - greed for more; desires, wanting - whether its happiness, money, sex, love. All these constitute attachment to the physical world

3. Acceptance: How to avoid or be released from this cycle of desire. Freedom from suffering means being free of desire, of constantly wanting things. Simply accept and appreciate the way things are.

4. Selflessness: Freedom through relaxation, selflessness, compassion, wisdom. Everything is impermanent - it is better to find satisfaction from within rather than from material objects, positions, forms of self-gratification, as these are illusions and will soon disappear

Inger looks at the key ring I'd picked up at the Shendo-ren temple a day earlier.

*'So this is your quest,' she says. 'To cut through ignorance with wisdom — like Fudo-myo. Each life better than the next?'*

*'Not so sure about that. Maybe we are born and re-born... who knows?'*

*'According to Buddhism there is not an after-life, only the void; what Buddhists call 'emptiness.'*

*'So I understand. But there are many interpretations of what Buddhists mean by the void or 'emptiness.' Who knows? Maybe it is just 'nothingness'?*

*'Really? And you think that's better than Heaven?' she asks.*

*'At least I can believe it', I tell her.*

## *Appendix 2: Fudo-myo - God of Wisdom & Protector of the Buddha*

*Buddhism has its origins in northern India and various schools of Buddhist teachings now prevail through Asia. While Indian and Nepal have Hinduism as a principle religion there are Buddhist groups there as well.*

*So **Fudo-myo**, Protector of the Buddha and God of Wisdom, is the Japanese representation of a Buddhist deity that can be found in China, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, throughout the Buddhist regions of the Far East and Buddhist communities anywhere. This was the image that followed me throughout my travels, starting in Finland, through Russia to Mongolia, China and Japan. A kind of 'moment' for me was at the Shendo-ren temple in Kyoto. I drank with tea with a priest, shared a few stories, and he hands me a trinket - a key-ring - with the image of Fudo-myo. I know a little about Buddhism, but this particular deity was new for me. Already in Finland, three postcards of the 'Buddha', and one of them is **Mgyoba**, the Tibetan Fudo-myo, the image on the cover of this book.*

*In Tibetan Buddhism **Mgyoba** represents the eighth of the ten stages of the path to 'enlightenment' - remaining calm in the face of adversity. For me it was timely advice - a reminder, if you like, that I could take with me in my travels - the kind of simple advice any of us need to be reminded of now and again. But being number eight, one of course is curious about the remaining nine; this is the list of ten stages on the development of **Bodhisattva** - to be as wise and compassionate as the Buddha:*

- 1. Pramudita (joy) - joy at having overcome the difficulties and sufferings, now entering on the path to Buddhahood*
- 2. Vimala (purity) - freedom from all possible defilement*
- 3. Prabhakari (enlightenment) - stage of further enlightenment*
- 4. Arcismati (wisdom) - stage of glowing wisdom*
- 5. Sudurjaya (no difficulty) - stage of mastering the utmost difficulties*
- 6. Abhimukhi (open way) - transcendent wisdom*
- 7. Duramgama (proceeding afar) - placing others before oneself*
- 8. Acala (unperturbed) - remaining calm in the face of adversity*
- 9. Sadhumati (discriminatory wisdom) - knowing intuitively right deeds and action*
- 10. Dharma megha (law cloud) - attainment the wisdom of 'law cloud'*



*Tibetan Mgyoba, 'the immovable one' and King of Wisdom*

*At the Tibetan Temple in Leningrad, not only could we see Nicholai Röerich's interpretation of the fiery Buddha, but also a Mongolian **thanka** brought by the Mongolian monks in the 1930s.*



*Acala (sanskrit) protector of all the living, bringing enlightenment by burning away all hindrances*



*Arya Achala (Sakya tradition, one of Tibetan Buddhism's four main schools, dating back to the 11th century). This thangka is from the Potala place in Lhasa. The sword in the right hand, and amulet in the left. Apart from the snake around his neck, he is wearing a tiger skin, which, having been devoured by a tiger in a vivid dream, I found intriguing. In the approaching Year of the Tiger, I am presented with an image of the Wisdom King wearing a tiger skin and carrying the tiger's head under his arm. No idea what it means, but intrigued by the symbolism.*



*Chinese Budong Mingwang, 'The Wisdom King'*

*But it was in Japan where the Wisdom King - 'the immovable one' - developed into a sect, brought to Japan from China by a priest named Kukai (d. 835 AD), the founder of Shingon Buddhism.*



*Hasedera Fudo-myō at Kamakura*

*Fudo Myōo (Myōh-oh), the God of Fire, is a personification of Dainichi Nyorai. Kurikara (the devil-subduing sword) is in his right hand, and a rope to bind demons is in the left.*

*The cult was important in Kamakura as Japan's one-time capital and a period when samurai values of inner calmness and strength were highly valued. Thus too the frightening face provides a contrast to inner qualities of wisdom and compassion.*



*Fudo-myō shrine*

*Fudo-myō (O-fudo-sama, the honorific) is often referred to as the Fire Buddha, and he is included in one of the Thirteen Buddhas of Shingon Buddhism. More accurately Fudo-myō is the Protector of Buddha and Wisdom King; the sword is to cut through ignorance, and the rope to tie up those who are ruled by violence and uncontrolled emotions.*

*Many Japanese Shingon temples arrange annual fire festivals dedicated to Fudo-myō where the priest walks bare-footed over a bed of burning coals.*

*Shrines, paintings, statues, ceremonies and rituals... all representations of a desirable state of mind. Reminders to prod our conscience - that in the face of adversity to stay calm and think noble thoughts. A tacky little key-ring from a hillside temple in Kyoto; still use it to hold the key to the front door.*

