Dateline Mongolia

An American Journalist in Nomad's Land

Michael Kohn

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

Six months prior to my arrival in Ulaanbaatar, Jenni Storey, my predecessor at *The Mongol Messenger,* mailed me the following letter.

June 17, 1997

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your interest in *The Mongol Messenger*. Unfortunately Otgongerel is no longer editor – our new chief is Ariunbold, who speaks little English.

Established in 1991, *The Mongol Messenger* was the country's first English language newspaper and at present remains under state ownership. However, since the fall of communism, property privatization has been all the rage and I have no doubt that one day (not in my time!) the media will become privately run.

That's the good news! The bad news is that because it's still a state entity, all staff receive wages are about 30,000 tögrögs a month (US$40). In fact, whether you're a neurosurgeon or a cleaner you'll still only earn Tg30,000 a month!

Since the democratic revolution of 1990, the Mongolian economy has taken a beating. However, in 1996 Mongolians elected their first 'democratic' government, finishing 75 years of rule for the communist party. Some people are optimistic, but with roughly half the country living in poverty, many have given up. This feeling was reflected in last month's Presidential elections when the communist party candidate was elected.

The wages are poor and the conditions basic compared to that of a Western publication. However, the office is more than adequate and thanks to the

British Embassy we paginate on two fairly new Apple Mac computers. I have spoken to the News Agency's general director and he says my replacement position would come with accommodation and you would be free to freelance. Official working hours are 9am-6pm Monday to Friday and half a day Saturday. However, things here are pretty relaxed and most of the staff don't get to work until about 11am and they rarely work Saturdays! The communist work ethic is alive and well!

The general state of life in Ulaanbaatar is pretty rough. Accommodation is basic and there are frequently hot water and power shortages. The sky is blue for 260 days of the year, but nine months of the year it's bloody cold. During the most intense winter months the temperature can drop to minus 30°C during the day. Most things are available here now, but they usually require a lot of searching. You'll need things like a torch (none of the dirty apartment stairwells are lit), lip balm (UB is at a high altitude and the climate is extremely dry) and don't forget a US-Mongolian power adapter.

I'll leave you my herbs and spices, multi vitamins and some basic medical stuff (gastro bugs are pretty common). Would recommend you get vaccinated for Meningitis, Hep A and B and Rabies, although I must admit I only had half of these and seem to have survived. There may be a chance the embassy will demand an AIDS test.

Good luck with your visa application and don't hesitate to contact me with any further questions.

Kind regards
Jenni Storey

PROLOGUE

The book in your hands is my personal account of three years spent living in Mongolia (formerly Outer Mongolia) in the 1990s. The chronicle begins eight years after the '1990 Democratic Revolution', when Mongolia was still very much in limbo, caught between its communist past and its capitalist future. When I began writing this book in late 2000, my intention was to create a time capsule for a rapidly changing period in Mongolia's history.

I was 24 years old when I first arrived in Ulaanbaatar to begin a job as editor for a local newspaper, the *Mongol Messenger*. An interest in journalism aside, I really went there because I was obsessed with traveling and wanted to live overseas. Since graduating from university (UCSB, English lit major) in 1995, I had spent most of my time backpacking around Europe and Asia, with an eight-month stint teaching English in Japan. Something about being in a foreign country, about dealing with life's little challenges while overseas, I just found irresistible.

I returned to the U.S. in 1997 to attend my brother's wedding, and immediately began planning where I would go next. I spent that summer in Durango, Colorado, working as a counselor at a summer camp that specialized in hiking and mountain climbing. I briefly considered looking for similar work but in the end I focused my efforts on journalism, and started by seeking employment with one of the dozen or so English-language newspapers in Asia. *The Mongol Messenger* had an opening for an editor and the match seemed a good one. For me, it was an opportunity to reengage with journalism while at the same time living in what surely was an offbeat, unknown corner of the globe.

Prior to arriving in Mongolia, I spent a week in Beijing networking with reporters and editors who I thought might be interested in retaining a freelancer in Ulaanbaatar. Given the dearth of Western reporters based in Mongolia (I would be one of three) most happily agreed to stay in contact. This time proved invaluable as several of those editors would later offer me writing jobs that kept me busy throughout my three-year stay.

Having read up on Mongolia prior to leaving the U.S., I was aware of its painful transition from communism to democracy. The era of ration tickets was over by the time of my arrival, but poverty was still widespread, as was alcoholism, domestic violence, homelessness, prostitution and other social problems. The pain of this economic transition was somewhat softened by a newfound freedom and independence. All restrictions on travel and traditional customs and religion were lifted and Mongolians were taking full advantage of the opportunities now afforded by freedom.

I liked Mongolia from the start. The countryside was gorgeous and untouched. The people were good-natured, open and happy despite the challenges they faced. The fall of communism created a clean slate for them, and they seemed willing to try anything they world might offer. Their outgoing nature made them easy to talk to, one reason why this book was such a joy to write. My hope is that my interactions with the people described in this book will provide a clear picture of the challenges, the hardships and the rewards of this remarkable era.

RDR Books first published this book in 2006. This second edition is published by Blacksmith Books. For this edition, I rewrote the prologue and added an epilogue. The original text has seen some minor grammatical changes and corrections for the spelling of some names.

Michael Kohn
Oregon, March 2016

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THE FROZEN CAPITAL

It seemed that here in Mongolia we had discovered an American frontier outpost of the Indian fighting days. Every house and shop was protected by high stockades of unpeeled timbers, and there was hardly a trace of Oriental architecture save where a temple roof gleamed above the palisades.

– Roy Chapman Andrews

Roy Chapman Andrews' words resonated loudly in my head as my train approached the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar. It was true that 80 years separated his arrival and mine, but I wanted to believe that the timbers had not yet peeled and the temple roofs still gleamed with gold. As the train rounded the final bend and began rolling through the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar I pressed my face to the glass of the cabin window and watched as gray buildings marched past. Heavenly skies mingled with a hellish horizon as satanic factories belched smoke in the distance. Wire grew from the earth like weeds. Romantic images – an entire Asian fairy tale – vanished, as I found the old Mongolia buried under industrial estates and hideous housing blocks.

The Wisconsin-born Andrews, one of the greatest explorers of the 20th century, spoke of the 'dizzying chaos' he experienced upon entering the city. Red-robed monks, swarthy old nomads, and richly dressed noblewomen with outrageous headgear amazed him. My view was more apocalyptic and I could not shake the feeling that the idea to come here had been a mistake.

At last the train jolted to a halt at Ulaanbaatar's Central Station. The carriage emptied quickly as passengers scrambled to unload their huge boxes, crates and bags onto the platform. I too hauled my luggage down the grated metal steps and onto the icy concrete, pulling my wool hat tight over my ears as workers furiously shuttled cargo around me. Families emerged from the gloom to greet their newly arrived relatives. Within moments I could feel Mongolia's famed cold settling in, biting into my cheeks and nose, loosening my sinuses and freezing my feet. The mercury in my key chain/thermometer had bottomed out and miniature icicles were forming on my eyelashes.

Steam welled up from under the train as I hauled my duffel bags to one side. I had lugged more than 150 pounds of gear from China, mostly food, as recommended to me by Beijing expats who testified to shortages and barren shops in Ulaanbaatar. This was far less than the 38 tons of gear Andrews hauled into the Gobi Desert for his 1925 Central Asiatic Expedition, but an impressive load nonetheless.

Moments later I was approached by a Western woman in a large black corduroy hat and a long brown coat with furry lapels. We made eye contact and stood silently staring at each other for a moment. I hadn't seen any picture of her before, but knew it was Jenni.

Jenni Storey, an Australian journalist living in Mongolia for the past two years, had hired me to work for a local newspaper, *The Mongol Messenger*. She planned to leave in January and hired me as her replacement. We knew little of each other, having only corresponded by occasional letters over the past three months.

Trailing behind Jenni was a group of Mongols in heavy black boots, large button-down coats and Russian-style fur hats. Somewhere along the tracks a train let off an apropos whistle, signaling the start of a journey.

"Michael?" Jenni asked, dusting some snow from her shoulders.

"Hello Jenni."

She smiled and removed her glove to shake my hand. Flecks of coal dust sparked in the air as she turned to introduce me to the Brobdingnagian cast of Asians standing behind her, my new co-workers at the newspaper.

They looked expectant, seeming as anxious as I was about our first encounter.

They each stated their names and I fumbled along, trying to repeat them. Like the Mongols I had met on the train, they were all imposing in size, much larger than the Chinese I had left behind in Beijing. While I was certain their winter clothing expanded them several sizes, it was impossible to ignore their broad, dark faces, all molded with high, prominent cheekbones, and formidable black eyes.

Each of them extended a hand to shake mine, but recognizing the severity of the cold, we did not linger long on the platform. My bags were gathered up and hauled out to an icy parking lot where we stopped behind a blue Ford Explorer. A hulking figure named "Bold" unlatched the trunk and swung the doors open, revealing the bloody carcass of a wolf. The animal was pushed aside to make room for my bags.

"Welcome gift?"

"Sorry, it's mine," announced Bold in perfect English. "Just back from a hunting trip."

Bold slammed the trunk shut and we climbed into the car. Jenni got comfortable in the back as Bold gunned the engine and barreled out of the parking lot. The streets were covered in a thin layer of oil-caked black ice, but there were few others using it, save the odd black Lada and trundling horse cart.

The ride to my apartment would only take a few minutes, they said, but that was all that was needed for us to get acquainted. Jenni, a confident and experienced journalist in her mid-30s, thanked me for coming from so far to relieve her from her post. She had enjoyed her time here, she said, but after 24 months of dark stairwells, mutton-fragranced banknotes and the vexations of a post-communist country, she was ready to return to the warm beaches of Perth from whence she had come.

Jenni had been dispatched here by the Australian Volunteer Association to work for *The Mongol Messenger*, a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 1,500 copies, designed to serve Ulaanbaatar's small expatriate community.

She had been looking for a successor, and responded favorably when I had inquired about a job the summer before.

Mongolia seemed like an unlikely place to break into the field of journalism. I had been hoping to land a job in a bigger Asian market such as Tokyo, Singapore or Hong Kong, but I had limited experience in the field, having only written for my college newspaper and a few small travel magazines. Competition for foreign correspondent jobs was stiff; I learned this quickly after receiving a dozen rejection letters from the biggest daily newspapers in East Asia. When my options seemed to have run their course, a brown envelope postmarked 'Ulaanbaatar' arrived at my house in California; beguiling stamps on the outside featured warlords atop shaggy horses. Inside, an application asked for little more than my name, date of birth and signature. It appeared that I had a job. I signed it, sent it back, and hoped for the best.

Bold wrestled with the wheel as Jenni passed me a copy of that week's newspaper. *The Mongol Messenger*, I soon learned, was launched in 1991 by the state news agency Montsame as a government mouthpiece for the benefit of Western embassies and foreign investors. Its brainchild was an English-speaking reporter at Montsame, Burenbayar, who now worked as the official interpreter to the President. In the absence of his leadership, Jenni had been hired to keep the English up to scratch and train the reporters.

The paper was tabloid-sized and grainy, but at first glance did not strike me as a weak-willed, good-news-only piece of propaganda. The lead story was a seriously aggressive piece of reporting:

> "Foreigners Treat Mongols Like Dogs": MP
> *Americans like to talk about human rights, but at the same time they are the most serious violators of human rights in Mongolia. We shall not allow foreigners to treat Mongolians like dogs. Disrespect will be met with destruction – we will blow up their planes and hotels. Over the last seven years we have come to understand that democracy and human rights are ignored when it comes to justice*.

The quote was from Member of Parliament O. Dashbalbar, a frowning, square-jawed man with jet-black hair falling over broad shoulders. The shooting death of a Mongolian man by his American employer in northern Mongolia was the incident that sparked Dashbalbar's outrage. Dashbalbar responded by organizing an anti-foreigner rally, where the demonstrators vowed to kick Americans out of the country.

As Bold dodged and weaved his way through traffic, I flipped through the rest of the paper. A police blotter described how two Cameroonian con artists had swindled $30,000 out of local moneychangers, assuring them that they had a 'magic chemical' that would triple their money. There was a classified section ('Money offered for real Martian meteorites' and 'Free bible postal course' were but a few of the ads). Page eight contained an Arts Diary ('The Hairdresser of Seville' was playing at the Drama Theater) and a story about a notoriously fickle analog clock that loomed above the Cultural Center. The clock had recently stopped functioning because the city could no longer afford to replace the bulbs illuminating its numbers. To say that time literally stood still in Mongolia was more than just a cliché.

Light bulbs, I would soon discover, were not the only commodity in short supply. Running water, electricity, petrol, hospitals and paved roads were also badly needed. Mongolia is one of Asia's poorest countries, with a third of its 2.5 million inhabitants living on a dollar a day. And in an overcrowded world, it even lacks people – roughly the size of Alaska, but with less than 2 people per square kilometer, Mongolia has the lowest population density of any country on Earth.

But Mongolia was also Central Asia's best young democracy. Peaceful protests in 1990, led by a young political science teacher named Zorig, had ushered in multi-party elections and free market reforms. They had also ushered in seven years of hyperinflation and snowballing job losses. But free and fair elections had also taken place; a recent one had knocked out the Communist party and brought Zorig and his fellow Democrats to power.

I looked up from the newspaper as Bold accelerated past Sükhbaatar Square, the central plaza where Zorig had led the 1990 Democratic Revolution. It was vast and gray, the ugly stepsister of Moscow's Red Square. Instead of St. Basil's Cathedral, the huge colonnaded Parliament House dominated its northern end. The Cultural Palace, National Museum, Opera Theater and City Hall (which had a big neon sign above it that read: 'Mongolia Will Prosper in Its Renaissance') flanked Parliament to the east and west. A statue of Lenin, with his obligatory furrowed brow, stood nearby.

The Square was named after Damdin Sükhbaatar, my Lonely Planet guidebook explained. He was the young revolutionary who enlisted Soviet aid to free Mongolia of White Russian occupation back in 1921. Thanks to Sükhbaatar and his comrades, Mongolia became the world's second communist country. He mysteriously died shortly after the Revolution (allegedly poisoned) and was subsequently described by Soviet propagandists at the 'Mongolian Lenin.' His stern but boyish face still adorns Mongolian currency, stamps and portraits that hang in the halls of government.

Sükhbaatar and I had one thing in common; we were both civil servants. Prior to his days as a revolutionary, he had worked on the east side of the square as a typesetter in the National Printing House. My office, I soon discovered, was on the opposite side of the square in the state-owned Montsame News Agency. Montsame was short for *Mongoliin Tsakhilgan Medee*, which is something akin to 'Mongolian Wire Service.' After a brief stop at my temporary apartment to unload luggage, Bold drove me to the agency, a whitewashed, Victorian-style building that sat ominously next to the headquarters of the Mongolian KGB.

Jenni led me through the blue glass doors and into the marble atrium. She flashed a red-colored Montsame ID card to a guard wearing green fatigues and medals on his chest. The guard stopped me but Jenni mumbled something to him in Mongolian and he allowed me passage.

We climbed the marble staircase to the fourth floor where a threadbare rug covered the baseboards. The floor undulated beneath my feet as Jenni

led me to the door at the end of the hall, room 401. I stepped inside my new office and found a large, well-lit room. There were seven or eight desks, a few battered wooden chairs and a coat rack full of enormous jackets, each made of fur, down, wool or leather. There was a balcony, and I looked out the window to catch a glimpse of the Government House to one side, and to the other, the sacred mountain known as Bogd Khan – the massif Andrews had called the 'gigantic guardian of the Holy City.'

Several staff members lingered about, having beaten us back from the train station. I was first introduced to Ariunbold, the Editor-in-Chief. Ariunbold was a tall, well-built man who nervously shook my hand and greeted me with a halting "How do you do?" As Jenni had indicated in her letter, Ariunbold was fairly new on the job, a recent appointee of the Montsame General Manager and his close friend, Mr. Amarsanaa. Ariunbold moved to one side as Jenni resumed the introductions.

One of the office translators, Bayarmaa, a pretty young woman with a lanky frame, dimples and shoulder-length hair, was busy pecking away at an Apple Macintosh keyboard. She had a beautiful smile and I was instantly attracted to her.

The computer was donated, she said, by the British embassy after the office had suffered a fire two years earlier. Meanwhile, two older journalists, Indra and Baatarbeel, were busy pounding on tank-like Russian typewriters that had clearly survived the blaze. Jenni explained that Ariunbold had a laissez-faire approach to management. Most reporters came and went as they pleased and wrote whatever they wished. Communist work ethics prevailed and some reporters went days without turning in any material. While I found this thought a little worrying, Jenni promised I would get used to it.

"Here is where the wire stories come in," said Jenni, pointing out an adjacent room that held ancient-looking yellow machines spitting out reels of white tape. Dour women in technicians' smocks sat close by, mechanically tearing the tape from the machines and decoding the little dots into actual words and stories.

The clacking typewriters, reels of white tape and the buzzing Bakelite telephones stirred visions of *Citizen Kane*. I spent the next hour or so going over some logistics with Jenni before we parted ways so that I could go home and get some sleep.

As I discovered in the next few days, the obsolete state of the agency was on par with other government offices across the city. The disappearance of Soviet subsidies had resulted in an overnight failure not unlike the 1929 crash on Wall Street. Yet I didn't mind; the agency actually exceeded my expectations. It was a comfortable, welcoming place and I found the Mongolians that worked there to be a sociable, friendly lot. They were neither the grim communist stalwarts I had expected nor were they the wolf-like barbarians of medieval lore. The 13th-century chronicler Roger Bacon called the Mongols the anti-Christ, but my new colleagues seemed surprisingly laid-back and open-minded. It was this attitude that made for a fairly easy entry into my new life at the news agency.

* * *

After Jenni left Mongolia I moved into her old apartment, located behind the State Department Store. (This was a department store owned by the state, not, as one friend from California suggested, a store for the U.S. State Department). The neighborhood was called *Doochin Myang*, "the 40,000s", because of the 40,000 apartments built by Chinese laborers in the 1950s. It was considered an affluent area (by Mongolian standards), centrally located and sought after by speculators and entrepreneurs trying to bank on new laws that allowed private ownership.

The apartment was simply furnished with a desk, pullout couch and a chair. Bare floorboards were painted bright orange and the faded flowery wallpaper and pink curtains epitomized 1970s Soviet chic. The kitchen included a hot plate, a Russian stove and more cockroaches than I cared to count. There was no washing machine so I scrubbed my clothes in a red bucket, and hung them over the radiator.

Every morning I was woken up by an itinerant milk seller who stood in the courtyard below shouting at the top of his lungs: "*Suu-arooo*! *Suu-arooo*!" ("Miiiilk! Miiiiilk!")

He'd shout until my neighbors trundled into the freezing cold and bought a liter of milk for 50 cents. Rising stiffly, I'd migrate to the bathroom to check the water pressure. Nine times out of ten it did little more than dribble cold water. I boiled pots of water on my electric range, and washed in the tub as though I were in a Japanese bathhouse. Having been brought up in a Jewish household in a San Francisco suburb, *Doochin Myang* Apartment Block 8b felt a long way from home. Yet I had come to the country with fairly low expectations and the fact that the apartment had a solid roof overhead was enough to put my mind at ease.

In the afternoons, after work, I'd visit the public library, a behemoth built by Japanese POWs after World War II. It contained more than a million books, plus the largest collection of sutras anywhere in the world. There were Manchu-era government documents, Russian diaries and antiquarian novellas. It was here that I gave myself a crash course in Mongolian history and culture. Besides my Lonely Planet guide, the only other significant source of information I had read on Mongolia came two years earlier in the form of a Peace Corps acceptance packet.

During my senior year of college at UC Santa Barbara I had entertained the thought of joining the Peace Corps, hoping to be assigned to an exotic island in the South Seas, where I'd live in a bamboo hut with a coral reef as my backyard. Someone in a Washington DC office seemed to think I was better suited for a landlocked country in Asia. The packet included detailed notes on Mongolia's political structure, geography and economy. Among its standard advisories about the lack of hygiene and scarcity of goods was a warning that recovering alcoholics not accept this assignment 'due to the high prevalence of vodka and social pressure to drink.'

I pondered the possibilities, and the sanctity of my liver, for some time, before finally passing on the Peace Corps in favor of a more financially viable option – teaching English in Japan. Still, the Mongolian seed

had been planted in my mind, and when the completely unrelated job opportunity at the *Messenger* came up two years later, I had to accept.

Among the books at the Ulaanbaatar library, my favorites were those written by Roy Chapman Andrews, who had come to Central Asia to find the "missing link" but instead uncovered huge quarries of dinosaur bones. He was a brash, swashbuckling character. He hunted for fossils, fended off attacks by hostile bandits, and schmoozed with New York socialites, all with equal aplomb.

Andrews spoke mostly about the Gobi Desert, but that was not my home. I was living the life of the urban Mongol, and one day Amarbat, a colleague from the *Messenger*, offered to show me around town.

Amarbat arrived at my apartment dressed in a thick overcoat and cap, his hands buried deep in his pockets. Like me, Amarbat was 24, but he was very shy; in the office he went about his business in silence, never speaking to anyone. He had been hired as a translator but was relegated to gopher duties, such as developing film, buying supplies, delivering papers, bringing the proofs to the printer and occasionally picking up lunch for the other staff members.

I learned that he had spent most of his life in Zavkhan, a remote western province, where his family followed their herds of cattle, horse, sheep and goat. He was now married and had a three-month-old son. His childhood memories were filled with romantic scenes of charging across the steppes on horseback, rounding up wayward animals and delivering fresh milk to market.

He had been lured to Ulaanbaatar a few years earlier with the promise of a good education followed by a furnished downtown flat and a high-paying job in the private sector. But economies-in-transition being what they are, he had to settle for a $40 a month gig at *The Mongol Messenger* and a *ger* (yurt) in a tumbledown suburb two miles and several worlds away from downtown.

Together we meandered between Stalinist apartment blocks, past smoldering trash bins, and across open plazas where day laborers chipped ice from the concrete. We eventually reached Gandan Monastery, the

biggest monastery in the country and the reason for the city's existence. Since the city was settled here nearly 200 years earlier, Gandan had stood at the center of all religious and social activity, but after 70 years of communism, most Mongolians were now atheist. We found only a few elderly folks mumbling prayers, thumbing their rosaries and walking the pilgrims' path around the temples.

I tried hard to get something out of Amarbat. I knew he spoke English because he had studied it for four years in college. But whenever I asked a question about Mongolia's history or culture he just smiled broadly, gave a shy laugh and uttered "*Medekhgui*" ("I don't know").

Amarbat and I walked back towards the news agency. We passed through *ger* districts whose inhabitants stood patiently, somberly, in the freezing cold, waiting to collect icy well water and rations of coal like characters from a Charles Dickens plot. While they do have electricity, the districts lack paved roads, running water and most other services associated with urban life. The *ger* neighborhoods faced chronic alcoholism, frequent burglaries, a 50% unemployment rate and breakouts of tuberculosis.

Within these districts, each family owns a plot of land (about the size of a basketball court) surrounded by a *hashaa* (a word that means both wood fence and property). Within the *hashaa* is the *ger* itself and oftentimes a small house made of wood or concrete. (The warmer *ger* is used in winter and the house in summer). The *hashaa* will also contain a pit toilet (not the easiest things to negotiate in winter) as well as a cow or two, plus a ferocious (sometimes rabid) guard dog.

The *ger* districts have a temporary feel; a gold rush tent city at best, a shantytown at worst. It felt as though the residents might just pack up their *gers* and move back to the countryside at any moment; which certainly happens when work opportunities are low. Until the 1830s, old Huree really was a nomadic city, packing up its *ger*-homes, *ger*-shops and *ger*-temples, and moving when the livestock depleted the surrounding grasslands. But by the middle of the 19th century, permanent buildings were put down, and the modern city started to take shape.

Amarbat resided in a *ger* district like this one but said nothing when I asked him what it was like to live there. I thought maybe he'd been instructed not to answer any of my prying questions, but really it was just the overwhelming shyness of a country boy not at all adapted to urban life.

We trudged through the icy streets together – my jabbering English filling in the blanks of Amarbat's Mongolian silence – while the daylight quickly faded away. Back in the city proper we ducked into a *guanze* (canteen) for a meal. These late-night eateries, especially the ones around the bus stand by the Ulaanbaatar Hotel, attracted a horde of woebegone souls. Like us, they had come in to escape the cold, but many just stayed there all night, passing around bottles of moonshine. As I stepped gingerly over a man passed out on the muddy floor, Amarbat ordered our dinner.

"Zurgaan khuushuur," he said to the waitress. ("Six mutton pancakes, please.") "*Khoyer undaa.*" ("Two drinks.") It was the most I had heard from him all day.

As we ate, two homeless boys, unimaginably filthy, poked their heads inside and extended scabby fingers from torn jackets. I passed them each a mutton flapjack and they charged out the door with their meal. When we finished, Amarbat and I parted ways with a "*Bayartai*" (goodbye) and I returned home, the howls of a thousand mongrel dogs accompanying me on my way.

* * *

Come daylight, I'd start my routine all over again. My main concern in those early days was how it was I was actually going to put out a newspaper. The job requirements ranged from grammar and fact checking to writing, photography, layout production and finally sending it all off to the printing house. What I quickly found was that most of the stories needed to be completely re-written, which is what occupied most of my time. This was much more than I had signed up for but I had always been

something of a workaholic and didn't mind putting in the extra hours if it meant a better-looking paper. Layout also occupied a lot of my time, as I had never done it before. Jenni had given me a crash course in Pagemaker when I first arrived but it took a few more weeks before I finally found a rhythm for it.

Getting accustomed to Mongolia-style journalism and local business-acumen was another cup of tea. The concept of an advertising department, for example, had not yet arrived in Mongolia, and when I suggested starting one I was met with a wall of disparaging faces. My colleagues considered the $6,000 we made per year from our 120 international subscribers sufficient enough, and there seemed something profane, unethical, and revoltingly capitalistic about including the ads of local businesses, as if we might be unfairly taking sides.

As a revenue loser, we had to tighten our belts, which included distributing the paper ourselves. Every Tuesday afternoon each member on the staff would roll up a stack of papers, shove it under their arms, trudge out into the snow and deliver them to news stands on the way home. For all this, I was paid $60 a month, twice that of my colleagues, plus the rent for my apartment.

Reporting and writing was another area of culture clash. There were two kinds of writers: the first group included the older journalists who had trained during Soviet times. They reported with great accuracy, frequently handing in the complete transcript of a press conference as their story. Quotes from other sources were frowned upon, as were elements of analysis. They preferred factory production numbers, livestock population figures and other statistics. It was bland, uninspired reportage that dated from the School of Stalin: don't ask and don't tell.

The second class of journalists included those that had grown up in the post-communist era. These young reporters were free-thinking, opinionated, scandal-seeking and often downright reckless, giving no regard to common journalist ethics of privacy, impartiality or accuracy. They reflected the general lawlessness that came in the wake of communism.

Most of the younger journalists were employed by any number of tabloid newspapers that had surfaced in recent years. These papers were usually piled high on streetside magazine racks. I could not read any of them but Bayarmaa, the young translator at *The Messenger*, offered to read me the headlines.

An uncomplicated girl with freckles, razor-sharp bangs and a full wardrobe of homemade ankle-length dresses, Bayarmaa had only left the city a couple of times in her life. She had recently finished university with a degree in English and landed a translating job at *The Messenger*, but now doubled as the staff secretary; taking notes, answering phone calls and running errands for the senior journalists.

Down at the newsstand one day, a quick review of the tabloid papers had Bayarmaa blushing. She skimmed one paper and then quickly put it down, covering her mouth with her hand.

"What's it about?" I asked.

Giggling, she opened up the paper, revealing pictures of naked women and small crude drawings of stick figures in various kama sutra positions.

"It's called *Hot Blanket*," she said, her cheeks growing redder by the moment.

A crowd gathered around us, staring with wide eyes.

"And this one?" I asked, pointing to a colorful paper with photos of Russian *GQ* men posing with Mongolian *Cosmo* women.

"*Binoculars*," she said, "It's about the rich and famous."

The number of onlookers had grown. They hovered over us, huddled up against the cold, eating up all the raunchy details. Mongolians are insatiably curious people by nature and these tabloids helped to feed their fix. Collectively, Bayarmaa said, the papers were known as *Shar Sonin,* the Yellow Press.

If Bayarmaa represented the suburban innocence commonplace among families living in the *ger* districts, another friend from the news agency, Ariuna, portrayed the other half of Ulaanbaatar – a savvy, streetwise attitude that only came from growing up in downtown wealth and urban

sophistication. Ariuna, a girl with knockout looks, purple streaked hair and a different color of lip gloss for each day of the week, was always looking for another gig to help pay for her cigarette and alcohol habit. She probably should have gone into modeling but had an extroverted personality that steered her towards journalism and part-time work at a yellow press paper called *Disgusting Crimes*.

Ariuna and I went out on a few dates, unbeknownst to her co-workers and mine, and once while walking down Peace Avenue we stopped at a newsstand so that she could show me the latest issue of *Disgusting Crimes*. The lead story featured pictures of a man lying by the side of the road, curled up in a pool of blood. A hitchhiker had bludgeoned his driver to death with a crowbar, raped the driver's wife, and run off into the mountains.

"How did you get the pictures?" I asked.

"Oh, that man is just our office driver," she chirped. "Our editor made up the whole photo sketch and story."

The daily papers were only slightly more reliable. Alien sightings, Bayarmaa told me at the office, had recently featured in the country's top newspaper. One article, titled 'UFO Lands in Sükhbaatar Square,' was published in *People's Right* the day after the grand opening of the Manhattan Night Club. The event featured high-powered searchlights that waved across the night sky. An intrepid journalist took this to be an alien invasion and ran a full-page story on the coming 'War of the Worlds.'

We didn't have any of those freewheeling writers at Montsame. The state news agency was the last resting place of the old guard. Although their feelings about communism had changed, their writing style hadn't. I wrestled with this. Young, ambitious and naïve, I assumed they'd quickly adopt my lessons on Western-style reporting ethics. I tried mini-workshops and skills sessions with the journalists. I went over their stories, discussed format changes and encouraged them to develop interesting angles. It was not easy. The older journalists resisted training by someone half their age. I questioned how I could deal with the alcoholism, the half-baked

stories, and a financial department that barely had enough money to buy printer ink. I struggled with their personal issues, knowing some of them didn't have enough food to eat. Some took home our unsold newspapers for kindling to keep warm at night. I had trouble drawing a line between the needs of the paper and the hard facts on the ground.

Yet through these early hardships came small personal victories. I started to notice more engaging leads and creative stories. A trickle of paid advertisements seeped through without too much backlash (the proceeds going towards film and much-needed printer ink). There was more content coming from junior staffers (Amarbat and Bayarmaa) as their confidence improved. There were challenges ahead and we were still a long way from a Pulitzer, but it was certainly a start.