

ANDREW DEMETRE

**DRINKING AND DRIVING
IN ÜRÜMQI**



STRANGERS GATE BOOKS



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Drinking and Driving in Ürümqi

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ISBN-13: 978-0-615-76625-6

ISBN-10: 0615766250

Cover design by George D. Matthiopoulos

www.strangersgatebooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada

DRINKING AND DRIVING IN ÜRÜMQI

ONE

AN UNUSUALLY WARM and clear evening soothed riot-scarred Ürümqi, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the far northwestern province of the People's Republic of China, a place known to some as East Turkestan. It was October, and Rihangül and I were to meet an old friend of hers from college and go out on the town.

Rihangül, whose name translated as “fragrant flower,” and my girlfriend at the time, appeared from her room, fresh, sultry, an edge over thirty, and put together in a flamboyant silk blouse and tapered jeans between sleek black boots, storms of hair, and striking Egyptian eyes that stared right into you.

I paced around in her wake, disorderly in my jacket, un-

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shaven, travel-worn, caffeine deprived, a few lines traversing my face, some fat peeking over my belt—otherwise able bodied, but completely unfit for middle age. Rihangül was exuberant and decked out for good reason: her first time back in two years. She was home. I was also excited: it was my first time in Ürümqi.

Since arriving weeks earlier, I had learned that going out on the town in Ürümqi could mean almost anything. Rarely was I informed of any plans before getting stuck in the middle of them. Someone would fetch me—usually Rihangül's precocious nephew, Abdul—from Rihangül's apartment and whatever happened, happened. I knew my place as a guest. I handed over my trust and prepared for what came.

Already that week I had dined on boiled sheep's feet drenched in black vinegar, attended a grisly but moving sheep slaughter at an Uyghur abattoir, survived an Uyghur-style dry shave with a straight-edged razor, enjoyed banana ice cream in an Uyghur creamery sutured into a bombed-out alley, and met the most famous face in Xinjiang: the renowned comedian/actor Abdukerim Abliz—funny at first sight and larger than life, a chain-smoker, and fully present with his bountiful moustache and hilarious wagging finger. We met Mr. Abliz at Ciber Coffee, with its charcoal-fired brew, opulent private rooms, and white piano rotating atop a mirrored pedestal. No-internet-access Ciber Coffee had become my favorite local haunt because it was my one and only reliable source of coffee.

Other outings included convening with Rihangül and her family as they wept over a relative's death around a table piled high with lamb chops in a parkside Uyghur eatery, haggling at the bazaar with Rihangül and her Uyghur *sistas*, and, to soothe the lingering effects of jet lag, visiting a gargantuan Han-owned twenty-four-hour spa with Rihangül's sinewy teenage brother. There I donned diaphanous underwear—a hairnet for the groin—and enjoyed a hot bath in a subterranean pool populated by black fish who nibbled a subliminal fungus from between my toes while I polished off cans of insipid Chinese beer. I had also opted for a massage—more of a manhandling, really—by two Han Chinese masseurs, who attempted to charge me by the limb as they giggled in their own sheer panties at my attempts to negotiate with them.

Rihangül hadn't seen her friend, Ahmat, in ten years. Ahmat came from Aksu, a smaller city 669 kilometers to the southwest, half the distance to Kashgar. He had attended the famed and exalted, glorified and celestial Postal Service University in Beijing, graduated at the top of his class, and was now on the rise in the Escher-like ranks of China Post, the moniker used by the State Post Bureau of the Postal Service of the People's Republic of China. I didn't suspect China Post was a front company for a prison. If it was, it certainly had a less sinister ring to it than the Western Xinjiang Brick Manufacturing Corps or the Eastern Xinjiang Raisin Processing Center.

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Rihangül and Ahmat anticipated their reunion with hours of frantic texting and calling back and forth, which had us running all over Rihangül's flat, then running around on the dark road outside the steel gate to her apartment block. The gate had once served as a barrier between a clash of knives and iron pipes during the bloody Han Chinese and Uyghur riots of July 2009.

I didn't know what their relationship had entailed, but Rihangül had his admiration and, it was rather obvious, his wonder. Ahmat was keen to see her because she had gotten out—out of the Chinese Communist Party and its all-consuming bureaucracy, out of her cultural mold, out of China. She had become a liberated woman of the world. Her exit had, serendipitously, become my entrance, and I couldn't shake off the suspiciously prosaic way we had met a few months previously in a Manhattan bagel shop where, before I had interrupted her, she had been enjoying a bagel and writing backward, right to left, in flowing Arabic script, creating perfect stanzas—a yin to my yang of desperate scrawls that dwindle out toward the bottom in a torrent of black ink.

I wasn't looking to add more plaits to my knotty life, but she looked interesting, both severe and ethereal, and was engrossed in another interesting activity: whispering forth in an unknown, rhyming language. And as it turned out, she was tangled in her own knotty life: she had lost both her grandmother and a brother in the same year and was

still embroiled in an unhappy arranged marriage. She hoped to pick up the pieces in my hometown and move on.

One evening in the West Village, I recalled, we had attended a screening of Charlie Chaplin's silent classic *Modern Times*. In the film there is a scene where Chaplin, having become mechanized, extricates himself from his conveyor belt to take lunch, his arms still twitching with the mindless tics of an assembly-line hex-wrencher. Contorting along the street, he passes a buxom woman in a tight wool dress, hexagonal buttons deviously placed at the areolas. Your transgressive mind fills in the blanks. The hilarious scene had put us both in a good mood. After the screening, as we wandered the Village, Rihangül lit a piquant Chinese cigarette and reminisced about the night markets, the mountains and rivers, the grand bazaar, the hospitality, and the delicious foods of her hometown, a place I had never heard of: Ürümqi.

TWO

ÜRÜMQI—whose chantlike pronunciation “ur-um-chee” I found irresistible—was the capital of western China’s Xinjiang Province and sat in the tangled northern capillaries of the ancient Silk Road. It was the site, in 1870, of the Battle of Ürümqi, where Uyghur hero Yakub Beg, a Tajik by birth, seeking to expand his Turkic kingdom of Kashgaria, warred against the rebelling Chinese Muslims, the Dungans. In modern times, the city bloated with Han migrants from the east and pulsed as another chamber in the heart of China’s vast industrialization.

Rihangül’s evocative descriptions signaled she missed Ürümqi—they were captivating and had me missing Ürümqi too. She said I reminded her of the Uyghurs she knew there,

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she felt at ease with me, and she assured me I would make a wonderful guest. She didn't remind me of anyone I knew, she made me nervous, and I wasn't so sure about the guest part, as I typically traveled alone. A perfect match. To my surprise, she urged me to fly to Ürümqi to meet her friends and family. I was easily convinced—leaving for unknown areas of the world thrills me. Rihangül's invitation thrilled me so much that as soon as I got home from our evening out, I saddled up to my iMac and straightaway booked a ticket to her remote city. And now here we were.

We followed Ahmat's directives along a now familiar stretch of Ürümqi street, searching for a pearl-white SUV trying to veer its way out of the wicked currents of Ürümqi traffic. Before long, the two of us were jogging toward the gleaming four-wheel-drive juggernaut as it idled on the sidewalk near a main intersection. In Ürümqi you can park as well as drive on the sidewalk, even during rush hour.

Once the vehicle's occupants caught sight of us, it zoomed off the sidewalk and headed straight at us, led by retina-searing ultraviolet halogen lights. The handsome Land Cruiser bearing military plates—bold red Chinese *hanzi* characters, numerals, and a trail of red stars descending like tears alongside the last digit—rolled past and screeched to a stop near a huddle of suspended, bleeding sheep carcasses, a common, if initially jarring, sight in the city. We were about to be swallowed up into a vehicle belonging to the Red Army.

We approached and climbed into the rear seats, sharing energized but polite greetings with the evening's hosts: Ahmat and his friend, the surly driver of the vehicle, Aziz. Rihangül gripped the back of the seats, elated to be in the company of her Uyghur peers. The three of them exploded into a dizzying conversation, laying bare the sonic delights of the Uyghur language. I might as well have been wearing earplugs against their clamor (at my sharpest I caught, maybe, every twentieth word), but—over and over again—I conveyed my enthusiasm and appreciation, greeting them and introducing myself: “Yahkshimusiz! Americadin! New Yorklik! Ismingiz nimu? Mening ismim Andrew!” I wanted to test out a “Rahmat, Ahmat!” because I enjoyed the rhyme but restrained myself. *Rahmat* is the Uyghur word for *thank you*.

Ahmat beamed at Rihangül across the back of his seat, stupefied by her presence. The strapping guy was immediately comfortable to be around and a study in breadth with his broad smile, broad shoulders, big white teeth, giant hands, and the wide-open, slightly vapid charisma of a motivational guru. His monumental head grazed the ceiling, yet not a single hair was out of place.

As for Aziz—a roughly handsome wolverine of a man—if he weren't hosting us, I would have avoided him on the street with his feathered hair parted in the middle, lopsided crag for a mouth, grotesque scar mangling the lower lid of one eye, and a second scar thwarted by his cheekbone—and

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thank God, because otherwise it would have connected his far eye to the corner of his mouth. Still, he wasn't ugly. His generally homicidal demeanor obscured a peculiar charm. He studied us in the mirror, his head cocked at a painful-looking angle. He and Ahmat made an eccentric duo.

Rihangül whipped around to me. "Andrew guy my friends so excited to meet you. They never met an American before. You are they first. They said a friend of mine is a friend of theirs. You can be they brother because I am like they sister!" She spoke with a pleasant, quick, rolling cadence, even in broken English.

"Okay. Please tell them rahmat," I said.

"You tell them from your side, Andrew guy. You speak Uyghur very well."

Rihangül had started calling me "Andrew guy" as soon as we arrived.

"*Rahmat*," I said.

"Rahmat," they repeated, smiling politely and pressing their palms to their chests. Aziz thrust his hand into the back to shake mine. A pipe wrench would have had a friendlier grip.

THREE

AZIZ'S LAND CRUISER was a superior ride—a Shangri-la on wheels. Outside it was as tough as a tank, but once inside, it gave you the impression of being in a high-tech marshmallow. It was a welcome relief from the tiny, unsafe-at-any-speed, street-scraping tin can Rihangül's family and I had been careening around in over the last few weeks—the music cranked, seven people distracted by song, not one eye on the road, no airbags (too expensive), not one seat belt fastened (bad luck), fueled by propane (the tank was bolted down right behind me), chance, and prayers, playing chicken with the hordes of *offensive* drivers jamming the city's network of roads and uncontrolled intersections, and dodging everything in sight from coal trucks, buses, taxis, bicycles,

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bean readers (Xinjiang-style fortune-tellers), schoolchildren, police, and the swarms of rickety tuk-tuk contraptions carting loads of jiggling, unsuspecting, deliciously fat-assed sheep to their demise. Our current vehicle was not that ride, and it turned the usual unhinged experience of driving in Ürümqi into a pleasure: quiet, powerful, pampering you in its slick leather interior with buttery, body-gripping seats, and protecting you with multiple airbags and a bump-eating suspension (as opposed to a bone-on-bone, nonexistent one) behind tinted—I assumed—bulletproof glass. The SUV's state-of-the-art surround sound system pumped out Uyghur Pop. The ubiquitous local genre juxtaposed ancient instruments with cutting-edge electronic ones and had its own Vegas-like star system replete with flashy, '70s Elvis-inspired silk and polyester stage costumes. U-pop blasted from every CD shop, and it had grown on me—an unrepentant pop-hater—with its frenetic mix of earthy tradition and synthesized modernity. Dramatic, heartfelt, unaware of its own nostalgia, the music was kitsch but not old-fashioned, and its lyrics writhed with love or sadness, seldom stewed with anger or revenge, never spoke of revolution, and throbbed with arresting beats below the soulful, tight-lipped cries of its singers. It was what remained after more traditional forms, often viewed as rebellious, were consumed and digested by the Party's censors. Buoyed by U-pop, the four of us floated un-touchable across Ürümqi's cutthroat traffic in our low-altitude Kevlar blimp.

I glanced around at the telling faces of my hosts. Ahmat, Aziz, and Rihangül were Uyghurs, the indigenous people of the Tarim Basin and Dzungaria, a people with deep, centuries-old, Buddhist-then-Muslim roots in the Turkic soils of the region, alongside other Central Asian peoples—Kazakhs, Tatars, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz. The Uyghurs had unified under the pressures of history, military campaigns, territorial feuds, and more recently, land grabs, demolitions of their homes, disparate hiring practices, racial profiling, and disappearances—among sundry other oppressions perpetrated by the Han-dominated Communist Party and its Beijing-controlled police state. They tolerated the encroachment of the modern Han hordes from the east on their own ancient land, as it was renamed and reinvented out from under them by Beijing as Xinjiang, the “New Dominion.” I sensed Aziz, Ahmat, and Rihangül had in one way or another suffered under the weight of that jagged, bloody history. It was the fiber holding the Xinjiang Uyghurs together, and I already felt it winding around my hubristic sense of individuality. An evocative breath captured the essence of this suffering: a deep, resolved exhalation I had in recent days dubbed “the Uyghur sigh.” I heard Uyghur sighs everywhere.

What I represented to them, I didn’t know. Aziz and Ahmat had never been to the United States or anywhere outside China. I had no idea what Beijing’s propagandists taught them about my nation’s history, culture, or people. It was all a flash in the pan compared to theirs.

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Ahmat startled me by asking in careful English, “Ar yu hun gree?”

“He’e,” I said. “Yes. *Siz chu?*”

“He’e,” Rihangül said and leaned toward Aziz. “*Maqul*. It is agreed,” she said. “Andrew guy is hungry, you are hungry, I am hungry. We are all hungry. Let’s go.” Aziz and Ahmat nodded. I nodded back. I hadn’t met an Uyghur yet without an enthusiastic appetite.

“Andrew guy, he can use chopsticks with he left or he right hand, andah he will eat or drink anything you put in front of him,” Rihangül said.

Her proclamations brought on more of Aziz and Ahmat’s admiring nods. I didn’t burn with my usual self-consciousness at being put center stage. Rihangül positioned me so the two men in the front could appraise me as I reposed in the external expression of my Greek–Norwegian ancestry. “Andrew guy he, ah, looks Uyghur, he’e?” she said.

“He’e,” they said, nodding. “He looks Uyghur.” Their eyes flashed, their faces lifted with pride. Three flattering mirrors had surrounded me. “He even walks like an Uyghur,” said Ahmat. They laughed.

My wide, ready for anything, urban gait had, apparently, already impressed them.

To be pulled into the embrace of the Uyghur fold in this way was a compliment. It had happened before and had puzzled me because from what I could conclude after padding around with the Uyghur Ürümqiliks, there was no

uniform Uyghur look. Except for having an enthusiastic appetite in common—in that respect, I was Uyghur—their compliment was a crown I wasn't sure how to wear.

Ahmat sat large, official, and incandescent in his seat, the constellation of high-tech dashboard instruments setting his dashing face and perfect white teeth aglow: he had been promoted. According to Rihangül, I was staring at the new Xinjiang Provincial Postmaster General. She had told me Ahmat had always done things by the book, was uptight even. Perhaps that was necessary to rise in the Party ranks, but tonight Ahmat was in a high, relaxed mood. How could he not be? The Party's media apparatus was spinning him into fame.

He had been making the rounds in a tailored three-piece suit, starched shirt, and silk tie, impressing everyone with his compliant nature and winning smile. It was big news for any member of the Uyghur minority to be promoted into a higher echelon of the Party. His eyes sparkled, and he had a good sweat going—whether from being baked under studio lights, from exhilaration or relief, I didn't know, but he was excited to meet us and eager to celebrate. His good spirits were infectious, and I liked him.

Our driver, Aziz, from Ürümqi, sat coiled behind the wheel. He had spent his entire adult life in China's army—the People's Liberation Army—and it showed. His sharp, uneven jaw laid the groundwork for dark, even sharper eyes, eyes that couldn't help but track you. His attention

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riveted to the task at hand, no matter how small, and he rarely smiled. He looked scrappy, but maintained a dead affect. Had he ever killed anyone? I didn't dare ask him—and I couldn't, given my anemic Uyghur. I assumed he was of rank, and that his deluxe vehicle was a PLA perk, one I was enjoying. Both men were of significant accomplishments. Ahmat and Aziz would have had to have either risen above or sold out to find their place in the “New Dominion” of Xinjiang. Aziz bullied through traffic—scaring every driver out of his way—and sped us toward the grand Erdaoqiao bazaar, the epicenter of Uyghur Ürümqi. Through the U-pop delirium, Rihangül and Ahmat informed me Aziz was an ex-champion boxer in the Red Army—information followed by Aziz himself cracking a smirk in the rearview mirror.

“Impressive,” I said.

The jabs and uppercuts of the Uyghur tongue already had me punch drunk, and then they knocked me flat to the canvas, at the mercy of my too vivid imagination . . .

. . . I filled with dread as we suddenly skipped dinner (unheard of in Xinjiang), diverted, and found some hidden, back-alley den of trouble. Aziz got in my face as soon as we got there. He didn't want to celebrate his friend's success, he didn't care; he wanted an English lesson. “You me English teach,” he said, brandishing stiff index fingers.

Across the trouble den, now in each other's arms, Ahmat and Rihangül smiled, threw their heads back, laughed, and

embarked on a pleasing conversational journey back in time, clinking their glasses of French wine.

“You me English teach!” Aziz bawled.

I froze.

The sad tale of Aziz’s dream to learn English, a dream killed by his own father, boiled inside him. Such a dream would only invite the heavy-handed scrutiny of the authorities—the kind that doesn’t knock first—and visit shame, misery, and punishment upon his family. Instead of encouraging him, Aziz’s father banished him into the red-and-olive-drab belly of the Party beast—the army—where he was still stuck, a career Communist dead ender.

“I can’t teach you,” I said.

“What?” he huffed.

“I can’t teach you English. Understand? *Can’t.*”

“*Can’t?* What is this *can’t*? Okay, okay. You me drink, we drink.”

We passed an entire bottle of liquor between us until it was empty.

The tension peaked.

“Well?” said Aziz.

“I already told you I can’t!” I said with a ruinous slur—I was so drunk I could barely speak English. “I’m sorry. Sa-ree,” I said.

“You me English no teach?!”

“Nope.”

At that, he pounded his fists on the table and erupted

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with a life's worth of frustration. He shoved me and, knuckles dragging, charged over and broke up Ahmat and Rihangül's tête-à-tête, clocked his best friend in the jaw and insulted Rihangül for inviting me there to shame him. He collared the empty bottle, broke it against the wall, and marched me out. In the alley, I had no choice . . .

—I lost, spectacularly.

Back to reality. Rihangül glanced over and noticed I had become glazed, mute, and sullen. “Woy! Andrew guy! What happened?”

“I lost.”

“Ay?”

“I lost.”

“Lost? Lost what? Wake up yourself Andrew guy.” She poked me in the ribs. “Aziz and Ahmat want to take us out forah wonderful dinner. They admire you. They brought along something very special to celebrate Ahmat's amazing promotion. They found it forah this occasion forah all of us to enjoy. They have to find the perfect environment. We cannot enjoy ourselves everywhere. Ürümqi has eyes may be watching because of my friends' respectable positions. I am a woman. They want me to enjoy myself too. That is another problem. We have to find a private room later. Okay?” Rihangül smiled.

“Okay,” I said. “Maqul.”

“Maqul, maqul,” she said.

I enjoyed Uyghur cuisine—from the staples naan and

hand-pulled *laghman* noodles, to the outré sheep-lung-and-offal soup, to the palate-numbing *da pan ji* (big plate chicken) where an entire rather resplendent two-toned chicken is slaughtered, chopped to pieces, and stir-fried—feet, gizzards, and all—with several types of scorching hot peppers, and then combined with long, steaming flat noodles to conclude the meal. The Uyghurs I had met were skeptical of the idea of machines preparing their food, so Uyghur cuisine is usually prepared—and, if necessary, killed by hand within eyeshot of diners—using fresh local ingredients and served without fanfare.

FOUR

ÜRÜMQI REVEALED its true byzantine character while we searched for dinner. We hacked through the streets as if trying to solve some elaborate, accidental maze, making sudden rights and lefts, coming to abrupt stops, scratching our heads, then switching our direction with jolting three-point reversals and U-turns—every abrupt movement admonished by Aziz’s exasperated groans. Ensnared in our luxury ride, it was all set to music.

Even during the day, charting yourself on a grid was next to impossible. You needed specifics: landmarks, odors, a uniquely shaped bank of rising smoke, a specific arrangement of coal trucks. Even in the heart of the city, you needed a rural sense of direction. Your travel guidebook couldn’t help you,

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neither could your mental map. Alleys became sudden thoroughfares that could arrive at a dead end or spill out into a congested plaza. The usual signs of road rage—cutting someone off or tailgating—didn't raise a hackle, they were the norm. Yet no one lost their temper or screamed.

When these folks got behind their wheels, the polite masks I had seen at restaurants or in homes dissolved, revealing the nervy faces of fierce, apparent crabs thrown out of their bucket and into a maze, crawling and pinching and pulling at one another with red-handed derring-do. We weren't alone. We were part of the communal lost. Everyone we passed seemed caught in the lostness at different depths: behind their wheels, pushing their carts; crowding around a fight, a fortune-teller, or a street merchant; skulking out alone or in gangs, hard looks in their eyes, a blur of worn humanity spinning against another blur of hot coals, smoke, steam, soot, blood, flame, animal flesh, and the grim angles of crumbling walls. And as soon as I thought we had oriented ourselves or discovered a way out, we were dragged right back in by the other crabs.

Fences everywhere channeled pedestrians and traffic along the streets, roads, medians, parks, sidewalks, and pathways, dissuading free movement and, God forbid, jaywalking. Breaks in the fences allowed you to step out and cross the street without going blocks out of your way.

Checkpoints appeared without warning, without reason,

at all hours of the day. Military and police security, undercover vehicles, and every devising of personnel carriers coursed the streets, blinking with lights and blaring repetitive, soothing music and slogans appealing for social harmony from banks of loudspeakers. Areas designated as “troublezones”—that is, Uyghur neighborhoods—were assaulted by the strobes of an absurd number of motion-triggered cameras, clinging like bunches of mushrooms to the sides of utility poles and yearning to capture any sign of ethnic trouble. Constant surveillance badgered the citizenry and kept them on the move. It was unnerving.

A few days after our arrival, Rihangül’s younger brother, Rakipjan—a charismatic Bruce Lee meets Bugs Bunny sort of young man—and I had entertained ourselves amid the boredom of an afternoon traffic jam by punkishly raising our middle fingers at the cameras when the strobes went off. Our thrill seeking before the eyes of the authorities was more of a risk for him than for me. With China’s reputation for paranoid surveillance, I had to ask whether some Central Party someone, walled off in a cramped Central Party cubicle, was really scanning every image and tracing my wayward finger back to me. In the windows of the passing security vehicles, at least a third of the occupants were asleep, their foreheads bouncing off the butts of their rifles, or snoring at the tips of their batons, caught between the People and the Party.

We closed in on a restaurant called King’s Palace. Aziz

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informed us he could park anywhere he pleased because of his military plates. We parked at the base of the observation tower next to Erdaoqiao, a place where every spring Uyghur tightrope walker and national hero Adil Hoxur, the “King of the Sky” as he is known far and wide, takes his annual walk on high above the square, to the delight of everyone. Once he was to perform in Kashgar near the Id Kha Mosque, and so many people arrived from all the towns and villages across Xinjiang that the Party cancelled his performance, fearing it would spark a revolt, and it just might have. Hoxur is a hero to Uyghurs and an attraction to Han Chinese and the rest of China’s minorities. Many tightrope walkers in these parts are orphans and were trained to walk the rope at a young age in what is regarded as an honorable tradition.

Aziz killed the engine and we got out. We walked a short distance past a Kentucky Fried Chicken, where the smug Colonel’s Kentucky charm had once sold me on the worst cup of coffee I had ever drunk. There weren’t many options in town besides Ciber Coffee.

Rounding a corner, we passed a favorite pomegranate juice stand where—even though it was an inconvenient distance from Rihangül’s apartment block—I had been coming to fill up at least three times daily. Rihangül and I scurried to keep up with Ahmat’s upbeat, athletic lope and Aziz’s rhythmic, energetic limp. We walked under an archway and ascended the grand, banistered staircase into

King's Palace, one of Ürümqi's top Uyghur restaurants. It was a tony place, lush with ferns, vines, and potted trees, and furnished with rosewood booths, intricate carved walls, chandeliers, and kaleidoscopic, traditional *ikat* tablecloths. The polite host greeted us, hands clasped behind his back, surrounded by a coterie of male and female waiters, each dressed in a traditional Uyghur white, gold, and green tunic with a matching *dopa*, the square-faceted traditional Uyghur cap.

He seated us in a booth on the far side of a large aquarium—a majestic, glowing blue spectacle heralding the center of the dining room. In it cruised a trio of small sharks—some dogfish or other squaliform—swimming back and forth, circling around and through one another, unblinking, mouths open, teeth bared, both beautiful and menacing. Their ceaseless, balletic flying about in the water was mesmerizing, choreographed by nature itself. If you could imagine them without teeth, they might have registered as “cute,” considering their size. But these sharks displayed waiting regiments of serrated teeth. And despite the deadness in their black eyes, they were alive to the last nerve. They loved and hated one another, rubbing against each other's sandpapery skin, bonding and afraid to part, but quite willing to tear at each other's flesh. I had once reasoned if an animal was willing to eat one of its own or to eat you if the opportunity arose, it was quite acceptable to eat them first. But how detestable it seemed now to deprive

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a shark of its means of grace—its fins—and therefore, its life in order to sate an extravagant lust for shark-fin soup. And these poor sharks were far from home: landlocked Ürümqi was known as “the farthest place from any sea.”

Our booth orbited at the edge of the sharkarium’s atmosphere. Rihangül and I sat on the flank with a view of the streamlined beasts, leaving a gap between us so as not to rub signs of our relationship in our hosts’ faces. Ahmat and Aziz sat across from us. A dizzying Uyghur conversation erupted, and in the midst of it we perused the menu, made our choices, paid the bill, and waited for the food. That’s the way you do it in Xinjiang: you pay first.

A shining metal pot of floral tea and heaping plates of Uyghur cuisine arrived, and we feasted: freely slurping our noodles out from between our chopsticks like human vacuum cleaners, ripping at lamb chops and kidney kebabs with our teeth, smacking our lips, gulping our tea, tossing our leftover bones onto the table, filling our bellies, and wiping off our lips, chins, and fingers with the thin, useless tissues standing in for napkins. It was as much fun as you could have eating a meal—so much fun, I could have gone on to eat the table and the delicious-looking tablecloth as well.

Ahmat and Aziz kept my cup filled with tea—the local etiquette—and I drank cup after cup. I tried to return the favor but was prevented. I pushed a plate of food, a lamb and rice *polo*, across the table toward them, but they just shook their heads and pushed it right back to me, prevent-

ing me from reversing the host–guest equation, so I would be the first one to enjoy his food. A similar routine had happened minutes earlier when I had attempted to pay my share of the bill. Uyghurs do not split the bill. Proper courtesy is to win the race to your wallet and be the first to claim the honor of paying for everyone else.

Stomachs filled, pot of tea emptied, and plates long cleared, the topic of conversation drifted around to passports and visas. The visa held a magical place here, a golden key to the free world. “Aziz and Ahmat want to see your passport,” Rihangül said.

I was hesitant but agreed. “He’è,” I said.

I reached into my internal pocket and pulled out my dog-eared little blue book, the confident rival of Mao’s Little Red Book. I flipped to one of the visa pages at the back and perused a line of text near the top, above my China visa sticker: “The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or class. It is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity.” I flipped to another page toward the front: “The Secretary of State of the United States of America hereby requests all whom it may concern to permit the citizen/national of the United States of America named herein to pass without delay or hindrance and in case of need to give all lawful aid and protection.” The words brought tears to my eyes, and I became even more of an object of fascination as I sat there, my eyes welling up over my tea and plate of

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food, sharing a moment with my passport. I carry my passport with me more often than the average citizen, even in my own country.

Aziz and Ahmat glanced at each other, then at me, then at Rihangül. “What is wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. Let me ask,” Rihangül said, turning to me. “What is wrong with you Andrew guy?”

“Huh? Nothing,” I said. “I’m lucky in life. Explain to Aziz and Ahmat that I realize how lucky I am in life to have been born where I was. That is my fate. I appreciate their culture, their success, and their kindness toward me. I don’t know them very well, but in the future I hope we can be friends.”

A smile bloomed on Rihangül’s face. Ahmat flashed one even a dead-eyed shark couldn’t resist. Aziz’s only reaction was to gobble up the remaining food. I wasn’t sure what motivated it, but suddenly the two Uyghur men and I stood and congratulated one another over my passport, my chapbook of freedom.

“Rahmat,” I said, placing my hand on my chest. “And the food is delicious. *Bek oshapto!*” Rihangül beamed.

“Bek oshapto,” replied Aziz and Ahmat. They turned and spoke to Rihangül.

“They said you speak Uyghur very well, Andrew guy, andah they proud of you,” she said.

“Rahmat,” I replied.

We took our seats, and I handed over my passport. Aziz

and Ahmat leafed through it, perhaps searching for the line that had wrung water from my eyes. They leafed to the front and took in my photo.

“He looks dangerous,” Aziz said, eyeing me. “Invisible danger.”

They found the visa page and inspected the one-year, multiple-entry visa sticker China’s consulate in New York had granted me, peering into it as if they were discovering a new planet. Then, suddenly, they deflated. For me, getting that visa had been a breeze. You stand in line, pay your money, come back a day or two later, and voilà. A Chinese citizen would need good luck, good timing, and a spate of cash, most effectively delivered in the form of a bribe, to get a visa to the United States. If you happened to be an Uyghur Chinese citizen, you would also need to “know somebody.” Even in that case, the chances would be slim to none. The three of them conferred.

“They said Andrew guy he plan on coming to Xinjiang a lot. We wish we could visit America as many times. We can’t so please come back to Ürümqi often. They said they will protect you andah you will have not have to worry as long as you know them. You will be they brother!” Rihangül said.

I laughed. “Rahmat,” I said. “I will do that.”

Until then I wouldn’t have guessed I needed protection.

Aziz and Ahmat perused a few more random pages of my small, enigmatic book and handed it back to me. The four of us traded smiles.

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“My wonderful friends also want to tell you anytime you come to see them you can consider them to be your great friends. You are their brother now, and they will always show you good time and they will take care of you when you come. And you will never have to pay for anything because you are their guest,” Rihangül said, covering her mouth.

Their unearned affection shocked me. “Bek rahmat,” I said. “Many thanks.”

Another conversation I had no chance of following whirred around, paired with an even more whirring round of tea drinking. We must have emptied three pots.

Ahmat’s head disappeared as he groped around in the shadows near his penny loafers. He popped back up, produced an ornate box striped wild with color, and fixed it in the center of the table.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s a very special. My friends searched all over Ürümqi for it and it took a lot of effort. Mr. Aziz and Mr. Ahmat would have offered it to you before, but they are classy guys. Now that we have fed ourselves, we can go out and find a very special place to celebrate,” Rihangül said, becoming amused.

“Okay,” I said, unsure what was so amusing.

I looked at the sharks. They hung in the water as if they were expecting morsels of chum to be tossed in. I caught myself intently considering if sharks might enjoy kebabs.

A sly expression creased Ahmat’s face. He peeled open

the flaps of the box and pulled out a gaudy crown of a liquor bottle. Into its curves and intricacies flowed a brown-gold liquid, more turbid toward the bottom. The very special drink: corn vodka, to be sure.

The “King of Liquors,” or “the wodka,” as it had been alluded to in my presence, had been slipped out of closets, pulled from under sofas, yanked out of drawers, and retrieved from the deepest, dustiest kitchen cabinets, usually by the eldest man at the social gatherings we had attended—a guilty pleasure if ever there was one. It had followed me everywhere, and I had been avoiding it at every turn. I had sampled it but had stopped its rude tang at the outermost edge of my lips. That’s all it took to concoct the many sobriquets I had—“Djinn Repellent” being my favorite—for the dodgy grog that made tough Uyghur men out of tough Uyghur boys. I didn’t even know if it was a true vodka. It was weirder than any vodka I had ever come across. It was too pungent, thick, and syrupy. A vodka by reputation or bootlegged Xinjiang moonshine derived from reptile blood, a desert ergot, or squill, who knew? Whatever its provenance, I had the suspicion it was mildly psychoactive and possibly illegal.

I had become the excuse to drink. A calculus of your age, your gender, your peer group, the place, the privacy of the place, your place in the family, your place in the culture, your profession, your level in your profession, and the strength of your religious beliefs suggested the proper cir-

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cumstances in which to indulge. The culture allowed excesses the religion didn't. The two practices, among the moderate Muslim Uyghur I had been with, could coexist. I was the guest; they had to offer it to me. To them, it was a complicated, shy dance. To me, it was simple: I was not looking forward to drinking it.

Ahmat kept the bottle out on the table long enough to make an impression then twirled it back into its prismatic shell and stashed it away. Well-known figures shouldn't be spied flirting with vice in public. Besides being practicing Muslims, minority Party members invited extra scrutiny.

"Andrew guy, Mr. Aziz andah Mr. Ahmat say they hesitant to ask andah they say they did not want to offend you by taking you drinking too fast before eating at this restaurant. I told them you from New York and love drinking, so now they have fed us, they want to hurry up andah find a private room so you people can celebrate Ahmat's amazing promotion. What is your opinion?" she said.

"My opinion is 'fine with me.' Rahmat," I said.

"Are you still hungry?" she said.

"*Yakh.* No."

"*Mubarek bulson.*"

The four of us brought our palms to our faces and hovered them over our foreheads and down to our chins in the traditional Central Asian way of giving thanks for bringing us together under pleasant circumstances. We performed it smoothly; at other times it had been performed with a slap

and a rubbing of the face. I enjoyed performing this gesture. It was a prayer, an “amen,” a spiritual punctuation that had a meditative, reverent quality meant to bring people together, so they might come together again.

FIVE

WE EXITED ONTO THE STREET. The tepid night throbbed with all the unyielding life of Ürümqi: families, traders, bakers, butchers, Sufis, soothsayers, police, soldiers, musicians, the sick, the destitute, and others out on the town. With the sights came the smells: burning coal, baking bread, running blood, searing flesh. The smells left their marks on you. The uneasy mix of peoples—Uyghur, Han, Uzbek, Kazakh, Russian, and Hui—stretched the imagination and could only occur in phantasmagoric Ürümqi. The Han–Uyghur post-riot racial tension—another sort of maze—electrified the streets and ranged from subtle suspicion in shops and restaurants to open insults at markets and food stalls that could explode into brawls. Everyone seemed tied to a hair trigger.

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It puzzled me that in New York, Rihangül and I had without fail gravitated toward Chinatown: she for the familiar, me for the local exotic. She was fluent in Mandarin, the language of the oppressor, and when she spoke it, because she didn't look at all Chinese, heads turned—not with suspicion and hatred, but with admiration. Even if the Chinese were your rivals, their ambient cultural presence in your host country could still provide the comforts of home.

We found the car and clambered in. Aziz fired the ignition and dialed up the U-pop to an ear-splitting level. We drove out of the Uyghur sector and prowled for a private room.

Aziz tacked across the gyres of evening traffic and accelerated onto a ramp feeding a suspiciously clear and unused arterial road. Within a few minutes we had driven into another sector. We parked in front of an installment of soot-covered military barracks protected by soldiers, gates, and razor wire. Ahmat, the new Xinjiang Postmaster General, cast a smile at us and stepped out of the car.

I opened the window and peered out. An incongruously spotless brick-tiled plaza spread out beneath us. Rumor had it that the plazas and certain roads were so clean because they had been scrubbed of the blood spilled during the riots.

Aziz kept his eyes on his friend, and I shifted in my seat so I could too. Ahmat changed his trajectory and materialized behind us and across the street, making a beeline toward a dirty dice-roll of storefronts. Arrays of colored lights lazily adorned their entrances, giving them the ge-

stalt of a faded jet-setter's decaying yacht. It was a shipwreck of a building. Ahmat climbed onto the wreckage, swam through a kelp bed of red lights, and dove into a watery shadow. The thought drifted into my mind that he and his coiffed hair, perfect teeth, charming smile, and precious bottle might never return. No more Ahmat.

Rihangül craned around with the same fascinated dedication as Aziz and I, and we were all relieved when Ahmat reappeared through another array of lights. He turned and waved at us with both hands as if he were greeting a throng of fans. His incandescence shone even in the dark. He paused, scanned himself, perhaps embarrassed by his exertion in dress pants, secured the striped box under his arm, and ran up a stairway to a door stenciled black with bold Cyrillic script.

Rihangül channeled a blunt statement from Aziz. "Aziz says you look like you are in good shape."

"I am in pretty good shape," I said.

"Aziz says he was a champion boxer in the army."

"So I heard."

Aziz stopped my glance dead in the rearview mirror and smirked.

It had occurred numerous times before with the first males I'd encountered in other foreign lands: persistent challenges to arm wrestle, grapple, box, spar, sprint, jump, and even dance.

I sized him up.

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Aziz, I'm afraid, despite his gnarly demeanor, had gone soft. Exhausted after raising a few disobedient brats (one of them illegal) with a depressed wife, the frustration built into the PLA taking its toll, his desk become a prison, I imagined that he sought comfort in food—at least I hoped so. At King's Palace I had noted the flab billowing over his belt. Unless he was an überlevel black belt, if push came to shove and my earlier delusion happened to materialize, I thought I could take him. It would never come to that, but from the beginning I had been curious about Aziz's rank.

Given his vehicle and his bearing, I assumed he was midway up the PLA totem pole.

"Rihangül," I said. "Could you ask Aziz what his rank is in the army?"

Before she could answer, Aziz shocked me by answering in English. "I am army. I am army man," he said, rubbing at his chest with his knuckles.

"What about your rank? Your *rank*," I said in English.

The word fell flat. He turned sharply to Rihangül for an explanation.

Aziz raised his chin. "Man *shao xiao*," he said.

"He says he is a shao xiao in the People's Liberation Army," said Rihangül.

"Shao xiao?" I said.

"He'e. Aziz is a colonel," she said.

The two of us pondered the ramifications of Aziz's rank. *Colonel* Aziz started buzzing with his own questions: Did

people drive in America? What did people eat? Was the meat fresh? Did everyone have a huge house? Did the police knock before they entered? Or did they just enter? How much did you have to pay before you could be admitted to the emergency room? Did it cost more if you were bleeding to death? Did you receive complimentary lifetime car washes for keeping a large balance in your bank account? Were there provinces between Hollywood and New York? Were women allowed to work? Were all forms of comedy permissible? Were there more Chinese than Uyghurs in America? Could you butcher and prepare sheep on the street? Was it legal to be Muslim? Could you go to a mosque without being searched? Could you sing and play guitar in public? Would you be questioned if you played a song about birds? How much did you have to pay for a visa? Who did you have to pay for a visa? Was it easy to arrange a marriage? How many wives could you have? What was *voting*?

The Colonel's tenacious curiosity surprised and impressed us, as Rihangül, eyes spinning, valiantly fielded his endless list of questions and translated two heaping earfuls of them so I could respond. I squelched my guilty amusement (and also the absurd idea he may have been sent to spy on me) and returned a set of cordial, if wobbly, replies. The truth was I had no solid answers for him, because the answer to all of his questions was either a definitive yes or no. America was difficult to explain, I explained. We had a

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culture, and we had no culture. It was what it was at the moment. Even to me, one of its own, apart from some assorted, staple irritants and pleasures such as bills, taxes, births, deaths, graft, a free press, bureaucratic waste, junk mail, e-mail spam, addictions great and small, the right to vote, an excessive, widespread narcissism, and freedom of expression, it was always changing. Freedom.

Rihangül translated my contradictory answers back to Colonel Aziz, who then leaned his chunky forearms against the steering wheel and let out an elongated sigh whose conclusion left the three of us treading in its wake. I couldn't have thought of a more apt reaction, and the more I ruminated over my explanation, the less even I understood America.

Ahmat reappeared carside out of the murk, breathing hard in his suit and damp with effort. He bore good news: he thought he had found the perfect place to celebrate. He described it for us in Uyghur, deploying some angling of his hands. From what I could decipher from his roller-coaster speech and motions, the perfect spot was up the main stairway, around a corner of the second-floor walkway, and up another flight of stairs.

We abandoned the car and paraded toward the building. Colonel Aziz became our leader and led us. Ahmat turned around and showed his grin. Rihangül and I followed it like a beacon.

SIX

WE SCALED A WRACKED SET OF STAIRS and entered a universe of cheesy posters, garish light, and blacked-out windows. Rihangül had warned me off such places: seedy, cramped, redundant, blank-looking “private clubs” that served as fronts for the illicit activities of criminal gangs—but I had sauntered into a few of them anyway, only to be met by their proprietors’ counterfeit greetings or murderous stares. Rihangül had yanked me out by my leash. I sometimes nose around as manic and naive as a gregarious hound. One of my favorite Uyghur words describes such behavior: *valakshirak*. It means “all over the place.” I wish it were my name: Valak Shirak.

We were with two members of what has been termed the

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world's largest criminal organization—two of the nicest guys you could hope to meet anywhere—so I wasn't worried. I would be taken care of.

We scaled a second set of steps and continued onto an open walkway past another lineup of storefronts mangled by bullet pings and shrapnel dents. A fist of mustachioed hooligans smoking cigarettes, dressed wild in open polyester shirts and stretch slacks with belts, stood glaring at us.

We glared back. They probably concealed knives, a tradition of young Uyghur men, one that was often necessary.

We filtered through them, rounded a corner, and came to a door. Strings of blue and pink lights encircled it. Above it, a colossal billboard on the verge of collapse and scorched by white-hot spotlights—the mast of this wrecked ship—juttied out from the rooftop. Oversized Cyrillic block lettering ran across it at an angle, advertising food, private rooms, and enticements for vice and leisure: a pretty, smirking woman, a bottle of liquor, and the head of a horse. The horse head aside, the place had the markings of a brothel.

We opened the door, got momentarily lost in a stairwell, then found a third flight of stairs. Their pitch was ladder steep and had me gripping the handrails, off-balance, forgetting where I was at all for the moment. We ratcheted to the top and advanced through a field of purplish light. We reached the other side and found ourselves in the dimly lit hallway of a venue.

The dingy place looked depleted. Sordid something-or-

other mated with the air. We waited in a narrow corridor. Ahmat began pestering the female host—a pallid, bony girl, a shade younger than Rihangül—who appeared out of air as thin as she was. She was overly made up and dressed in urban Kazakh wear—a sassy, colorful, traditional hijab, designer jeans and boots ensemble. Her garb evoked the remarkable images I had seen online of the crush of Uyghur women and girls who had fearlessly rushed the Chinese security, chiding, wailing, and smoting themselves, demanding that their Uyghur men—their sons, brothers, husbands—be released from confinement after the rioting had ceased.

The girl led us to a door at the far end of the hallway. We pushed through it and entered—the sun. We squinted around, hands at our brows. A boardroom-style table occupied most of the room, sprawling out from beneath a large window, one with a lovely view of the billboard’s backside. The window stood between us and an errant spotlight beam. It appeared to be melting. I felt like one of four stray ants waiting to be fritzed dead under a lens at high noon.

“So uncomfortable,” Rihangül said, fanning herself. Perspiration didn’t suit her.

“Hai Allah,” said Colonel Aziz and Ahmat, beads of sweat dotting their brows. They turned to us and frowned for our opinion. “Frowning for an opinion” is a gesture, I thought, but I didn’t have one.

Rihangül did have an opinion. “It’s terrible,” she said.

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“Theys not enough space to relax. It’s boring, too hot, andah not private at all.”

She had a point. The room was set up for straight, cramped, even captive dining or other more nefarious activities. Truly uncomfortable.

Colonel Aziz and Ahmat recalled the girl. We almost knocked her over on our way back down the dim hallway. Beyond our group a rindy-faced, thick man with a thick moustache, smoking a cigarette, enveloping himself rather joyfully in a thick cloud of smoke, watched us from a back office—the boss, enthroned beside a small television tuned to a fuzzy channel. The girl looked at him nervously for some approval, but the boss’s eyes filled with questions. Who were we? Who was I? Where did we come from? Where did I come from? What did we want? Were we to be trusted? Was I to be trusted? Did we have money? I didn’t know what approval we needed, but we got it. The boss’s thick chin dropped into a nod and swung through the smoke back to his television.

We were herded into another corridor. A low sliver of silver-pink light glinted at its far end. Ahmat tightened his grip on his precious box, the sole material object among the apparitions. We were herded near a door. The girl gave it a push, but it wouldn’t budge. She groaned and pushed at it even harder using the slight flank of her body and her bony knee. It didn’t move. She backed away, defeated. Ri-hangül commenced pacing back and forth, massaging her

hands. A bad sign. Ahmat and Aziz chewed the girl out. The girl chewed back and fled down the corridor. The drumming of her boot heels diminished across the wooden floor. We waited in the dark, listening to each other breathe. The complaints of the boss and the girl volleyed back and forth. The drumming sound crescendoed, and the thin girl reappeared, out of breath, fidgeting with a set of keys. She jiggled one of them into the keyhole, turned the lock, and gave the door a final, abrupt shove. Nothing. The room was hopelessly off limits. The girl huffed and quavered while Ahmat, Aziz, and Rihangül berated her.

“She say it’s the wrong key. She say she doesn’t have a key for the room. We can’t go in,” Rihangül said.

“That’s strange,” I said. Maybe we were in a brothel.

“Not strange, Andrew guy. Ürümqi . . .”

“Do you believe her?”

“Doesn’t matter, I hate this place and I want to leave.”

The girl lingered, conjuring the time to find and light a cigarette, while the three Uyghurs debated whether we should stay or go. They settled on the latter, and we headed back the way we had come. My parting glance snagged with the girl’s, and our snag became a speck in Rihangül’s eye. She had caught us flirting and started grinding at the floor with the heel of her boot. The two women squared off. Rihangül leveled a dead-eyed stare at the girl; the girl emboldened herself to stare back.

The girl blinked first and took to staring at her boot tips

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while she suckled on her cigarette, mumbling in another language I didn't understand.

“Ooewf,” said Rihangül, rolling her eyes, throwing her hands in the air, and denying the two of us with her back as she stomped away. Ahmat, Aziz, and I followed her out. The boss never left his smoky office.

I had cold exited my share of establishments for any number of reasons, but this one, somehow, cut more deeply than a mere preference for this or that. The subtle complications, awkward (to me) moments, sensitivities, and allowances—the elements of a small, touchy drama I was not privy to, but perhaps played a part in.

SEVEN

WE BACKTRACKED ALONG THE WALKWAY. The hooligans now joked and laughed among themselves, paying us no attention. We descended, crossed the street, climbed into the car, and sulked. Relief doesn't come easy in these parts.

I took on the Uyghur way of self-blame. I pressed my hand into my chest, explaining to them it was fine, even that it was my fault we had to leave. I tried unsuccessfully to convince Rihangül I hadn't flirted with the girl. Or had I? Ahmat, Aziz, and Rihangül neither accepted nor rebuked my apologies or explanations. They grumbled in their seats.

"Mr. Ahmat andah Mr. Aziz are sorry they have not found the right location for you to celebrate," said Rihangül.

"No apology necessary. I'm the one who should apolo-

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gize. I'm having the time of my life," I said. Rihangül relayed my counterapology. Ahmat and Aziz fought to be the first to shake my hand. "I feel terrible for Ahmat andah Aziz, putting pressure on themselves to please us after Ahmat's promotion. We should be taking them out," Rihangül said. Her mouth cinched into a pout.

"Well, please tell them I'm easy to please and I don't want them to exhaust themselves on my account," I said.

"They can't do that," she said. "They have to do they best for you. You are they guest. They have to make everything perfect for you. That's the Uyghur way. Nothing too good for a guest. Especially for a guest we like."

Her words sunk in. The repartee of upstaging friends with generosity and effort was the complete opposite of what I was used to. I recalled my dread of having guests and the myriad ways I had conveyed my dread. In the future I would become a better host.

"You don't understand Uyghurs," Rihangül said.

"Huh?" I said.

"You don't understand us," she repeated. "It has to be perfect. Anything less? *Forget it!*"

Rihangül stared ahead then leaned into the front seat to relay the idea that I didn't understand any of them to Ahmat and Colonel Aziz. They sighed, and we exchanged nods and agreeable smiles.

Uyghurs. I didn't understand them. They probably didn't understand me either. But the four of us got along fine,

glued together by circumstance, in and out of the car, searching for a place to drink.

Ahmat turned around and gazed ruefully at Rihangül as if she were the crystal ball that could solve our dilemma and any other problems we might have. I couldn't blame him. I had done it too.

Behind his cheery face, the new Xinjiang Postmaster General looked deeply stymied. Rihangül wasn't up to date on Ürümqi nightlife, but she offered some options. Each was met with shaking heads punctuated by disappointed *yakhs*. Most of the places she suggested had been destroyed during the riots and shuttered, or gutted and renovated. They were simply gone.

Suddenly Colonel Aziz cranked the music and floored the accelerator, pressing us into our seats. He rambled and looked over at Ahmat, who had started nodding off and had his head in his hands. Ahmat's smile endured, but I could see he ached for the first relieving swig of liquor that would go into his mouth. He roused himself, rolling out his shoulders, extending his arms, and stretching his tree trunk legs. He and Colonel Aziz generated a *he'e/yakh* list of places where we might finally have our pleasure. Suddenly Aziz threw the steering wheel to the side, almost sending Rihangül into my lap. He and Ahmat discussed something and got on their phones. From the sound of it, they were getting advice from someone.

We turned back onto a main road and headed in the di-

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rection of the city's main power plant—a looming monstrosity that spewed a meringue of sick yellow exhaust over the hundreds of cookie-cutter housing developments being erected on Ürümqi's outskirts. Colonel Aziz coaxed all eight cylinders into frenzied left and right turns that had Ahmat as taut as a cadaver in the passenger seat and Rihangül and me flailing around in the back like a pair of crash test dummies strung up in a wind, squeezing each other's hands white.

Earlier I had thrown my fate in with the Uyghurs in their wearing-a-seatbelt-equals-bad-luck superstition. I regretted it the instant the Colonel floored it and, punching at the horn and grinding his teeth, rocketed his machine into a crammed intersection, destroying any semblance of trust between us. The routine daredevil maneuver had the other maniacs honking at us, hating us, and heading for the sidewalks. Had he lost patience with everything?

The answer was no.

Driving at the end of one's nerves was status quo in Ürümqi. Naked aggression and lawlessness—oddly non-verbal—were played out right at the surface. Any trace of caution appeared at the last second before impact, and I had yet to witness a single accident. Defensive driving? *Bosh!*

We braked to a stop. I was petrified but gathered the courage to unclench my jaw and open my eyes. Colonel Aziz had parked beside what appeared to be a random

family's small house. We tumbled out of the car. Rihangül and Ahmat were unfazed: Ahmat straightened out his suit and tie and reestablished his smile. Rihangül collected herself, dabbing on fresh lip gloss and smoothing out her silk blouse. For them it was just another day in hometown traffic, but Aziz's death run had rattled me and had me staggering stiffly in a tight circle, hands turned to bricks, mouth turned to sand, and breath shallow. Colonel Aziz got out, slammed his door shut, checked that ours were locked, and trotted ahead of us. We marched in an ungainly formation through the small house's flimsy door.

It opened into a small café. We ambled across the sparse dining area into a dreary private room in the back. A dimly lit lamp clung to the ceiling above a simple table and a collection of mismatched chairs. On the table drooped a designless tablecloth. No sharkarium, no sordidness enlivened the room. Brown paneling clung to its spartan walls.

We filed past Colonel Aziz, and he closed the door. We each dragged a chair over to the table. Plates of food, a dented pot of tea, and four glasses floated in. I hadn't spied a kitchen when we passed through the café area or seen any waiters, but like some telekinetic gesture of the culture, the food had arrived. Ahmat's bottle stood in the center of the table flayed of its colorful skin, its seal broken, emitting its bizarre, pungent breath.

Rihangül reached up and back and pulled her abundant hair into a tight, forehead-stretching ponytail. Her motion

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was disarming set against the drab walls of the room, and the bleak environment lapped up the small excitement. Ahmat and Aziz took to staring at her. Rihangül stared back. “How are your wives and children?” she said. Ahmat and Aziz nodded and smiled, reassuring each other. I had forgotten they had wives and children at home. Apparently the two devout husbands and fathers had too. Their wives would rarely mingle with the likes of us single, unmarried lovers and especially not with a vivacious, independent woman.

Rihangül’s seemingly loaded Uyghur pleasantries served as a stalling tactic. But her purpose here was obvious and inevitable: she was flirting—or putting her friends in their place. It was all so indirect. She relished holding court with three men—probably one of the few Uyghur women in Ürümqi who could get away with it. It must have baffled Colonel Aziz and Ahmat how I could gallivant around with her, while their wives remained home up to their headscarves in children and housework. One of Rihangül’s credos was “Allah gave me all the best qualities, and he wants me to use them.” And she did. The qualities, from her pleasing physiognomy to the fiery ability to negotiate anything, whether granted by Allah or not, gave her legs in two disparate worlds—hers and mine. The woman hadn’t worn anything resembling a burqa in a decade, so she managed to avoid some of the contradictions it embodied. The tradition of wearing one was—so the rumor went—

certain to be outlawed by Party decree, while at the same time it was becoming a rebellious fashion statement.

And how might Colonel Aziz and Ahmat, my fellow subjects in Rihangül's court, reconcile the image cut by the subdued man and woman they chaperoned in Ürümqi with the pulpy scenes of my first night out with Rihangül back in New York? Quaffing beer and playing billiards against a bevy of hipsters and Nuyoricans at a pool hall on Avenue C, Rihangül in her sexy black fishnet billiard glove, a glove that she insisted, despite my scoffs, was "good luck" (we did win every game); our quick exit after being accused of being hustlers; our elated sushi dinner afterward awash in sake and beer; our drunken stumbling; our public making out—tongues flailing—all over the street; eventually making our way into Central Park, where, atop a mossy boulder, Rihangül, chain smoking and gripping my hand, recited a breathtaking Uyghur poem. Her expression was so sincere, like that of other Uyghurs I had met since, there was nothing at all corny about it.

Of course I would never even hint at such anarchic scenes to Mr. Ahmat, Colonel Aziz, or anyone else in Ürümqi, but Rihangül had embraced her power both there and here, and it wasn't sordid. She was what my male friends and I called a "silencer." Something about her left you speechless. She was also a black belt. The incongruity was baffling.

I felt hot. I took off my jacket, hung it on my chair, and rolled my shirtsleeves up over my biceps.

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“Andrew guy are you showing how strong you are in front of my friends?” Rihangül said. She broke her own spell. Here we were. She smiled and adjusted her blouse.

“Yakh,” I said, and worked my sleeves back down past my elbows.

EIGHT

THE LIBATION COMMENCED. “Sister,” Ahmat said. “The last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable. But won’t you please enjoy yourself with us too? It’s a special occasion.” Then he turned to me. “Brother Andrew, is that okay with you?” I couldn’t stop the chuckle triggered by his assumption I was somehow in control of her.

“Of course. Rihangül, please enjoy a drink with us,” I said, going along and granting Rihangül permission to drink. A first.

“Rahmat,” Rihangül said, smiling at her friends.

The protoplasm writhed in the bottle.

“Ooewf! Terrible. I will not drink any of it,” she said in an aside to me, in English.

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“What? You can’t back out on me now,” I said. “I don’t want to drink alone with these guys. Maybe they don’t drink often, but I’m sure once they start, they won’t stop.” One of her warnings to me before I arrived had been to exercise caution when drinking with a group of Uyghur men, especially when they are celebrating with a male guest close in age. Another warning I traveled around with was that unknown things given to you by unknown people can easily kill you. Both applied.

“What will you do when it’s time to drink?” I said.

She maintained her smile. “I will sip it. To keep up appearances.” Her use of an idiom caught me off guard. Keeping up appearances was what it was all about in Ürümqi. “I’ll pour the rest into your glass under the table when my wonderful andah generous friends are not looking,” she said.

Another thing I had learned about Uyghurs was that they plan ahead.

Ahmat started licking the rough of his dry lips.

“Ahmat, brother, you look like thirsty dog searching for water in the middle of Taklamakan,” said Colonel Aziz. He snickered and lowered his head. Ahmat grinned and eagerly offered his glass. Colonel Aziz opened the bottle and poured two sizable shots for each of the men and one smaller shot for Rihangül.

“Rahmat,” we said.

The liquid glowed, a dull and sick green-gold. The vile stuff warranted a toast. We raised our glasses.

“*Hosh!*” we said.

Ahmat’s eyes widened. He brought his glass to his nose.

“Wooysh,” he said, sloughing off what I assumed to be a shudder of revulsion.

“I will not drink because I am driving,” announced Colonel Aziz. “Someone has to remain sober to control and protect the others. I don’t want to put you or our guest brother Andrew in danger. When I am not driving, I love to drink.” It was the first time I heard any color of arrogance in his voice.

Draconian penalties awaited those caught driving drunk in the PRC, especially, I supposed, for an Uyghur ranking PLA member. How anyone could dare mix alcohol or other intoxicants into the treacherous Ürümqi traffic cocktail was beyond me.

I brought the glass to my lips. A crud gathered at the back of my throat—antibodies moving in to defend me against my own morbid appetite. A metallic, rancid clove taste spread inside my mouth as I cleared my throat and prepared to ingest the contents of the glass. My throat shriveled.

Colonel Aziz seized my drinking arm. I glared at him. He turned to Rihangül; they discussed something. Rihangül seized my other arm. Were they arresting me?

“Wait, wait,” she said. “Mr. Aziz says you have to push out all you air first andah when you drink, drink with you deep breath, as deep as the earth.”

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She made it sound so poetic. Aziz's eyes pierced mine, and he nodded. I nodded back. They released my arms.

"He'e," I said. My mouth would serve as a carburetor. I breathed in, then emptied my lungs until I wheezed, and tried, as instructed, to inhale the drink with my breath. Instead of riding the current of my breath, the reagent's volatile fumes robbed me of it, and the entire shot spilled across my mouth. It was as awful as I had imagined it would be; it made unflavored mouthwash taste like fruit punch. It didn't really have a taste—it was pure palate-destroying effect. And it just got worse.

A surge of blood rushed to my face, and Rihangül shrieked.

"Woy my God! So red! So red!" She was so shocked at the sight of me that her face waxed pale, and her sharp eyes went fuzzy and rolled back. She was as close to fainting as I had ever seen her.

It was true. My face burned bright tomato red, and I commenced to melt. My hands went numb. One foot went hot, the other cold. A watery sensation rose from my toes up to my ears, over my eyes and head, coupled with a terrible, burning water-up-the-nose feeling. A yogic *bandh* broke out in my mouth and conspired to publicly animate all of my limbs and thus further humiliate me.

Politely contain yourself insisted a voice.

I did, but in so doing had to yield to a feeling of being dragged across a grove of low, expectant cactus. A hot tide

rose and fell in my mouth, searing and researing my taste buds and bringing painful form to the amorphous geography of my tongue. The tide swirled into the crook of my throat, now searing my tonsils, and glommed onto my uvula—which I didn't think had a nerve in it until then—and sunk a fang in. The fang caused an unbearable tickling, and I gagged, blushed, cried, moaned, laughed, oozed, and blathered. Palate ruined, and fully ashamed.

I clawed at my ribcage to make room for relief and to keep from vomiting. I considered requesting help or at least a glass of the boiled water everyone drank here, but I feared uttering a word because I knew I would either throw up or any words exiting my mouth would be garbled beyond recognition—not that it would daunt my non-English-speaking hosts.

I hadn't swallowed yet, and Ahmat and Colonel Aziz were already grinning from ear to ear.

I faked a smile and quelled my panic by tapping out a rhythm on the table with my glass. I wouldn't dare insult my hosts or shame myself by spitting it out. The oh-so-limber base of my tongue, in a heroic final asana of death, finessed what had become a hot plug of corn vodka off my uvula, against my pharynx, and up and over my epiglottis—and now I needed air or I would suffocate because a cramp had seized the abyss between my Adam's apple and larynx, and my windpipe had closed off. I was having a wonderful time.

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I thumped myself in the sternum while Rihangül pounded me—with apparent glee—on the back, thinking it would help, but it just caused more pain. *I was her baby and she was burping me* is how embarrassing it was.

Ahmat and Colonel Aziz were still grinning from ear to ear.

Finally the cramp let go, the gasps came, and air filled my lungs.

The rancid clove taste rose again in the back of my throat. I closed my eyes and listened, hoping to hear the plug slipping down, but instead it reamed my esophagus. Sweat seeped from me. Shivers came. My head pounded, my throat tightened, a surge of willpower again stopped me from vomiting. A lone brain cell considered how the plug might react with my stomach acid. Something punched at the soft undermeat of my diaphragm.

Then, suddenly, relief.

Warm, invisible hands cradled my guts, offering the same guilty satisfaction felt by a dog having his belly scratched low. Everything became languid. A final, scissoring pain gave way to a euphoria radiating from my innards to every cobweb in the room. A breeze, comforting as my mother's breath, wafted over me.

I was its new vessel.

“Has brother Andrew ever had a drink like this before?” Aziz asked behind his hand.

“Not sure. He from New York, so of course he likes to drink. Americans don't drink strong drinks like we do here.

We Uyghurs are very strong people. The drinks in America are like liquid candy for smallish babies. Not like this,” Rihangül said.

She had it wrong, but I had to agree with my Uyghur comrades: this was a very special drink. It was a quasi poison. And we were celebrating with it.

Rihangül laughed. “Maybe Andrew guy he drank a djinn!”

Her uncharacteristically booming laughter infected Ahmat and Colonel Aziz.

The eerie notion—that I had swallowed a djinn—was a not-so-far-fetched one in Xinjiang. I didn’t believe it, but I wasn’t laughing either.

“Hai Allah! Now I want to drink!” Ahmat said, rubbing his hands together. He threw his drink back—“Hai!”—and pushed his glass at Colonel Aziz for another. From then on, if Colonel Aziz poured it, Ahmat drank it.

Rihangül sipped at her thimbleful as if it were a martini, scanning for the first chance to sneak it under the table. It came, and as agreed I smuggled under my glass.

Colonel Aziz held the bottle close to me. It may have been boring a hole in my stomach lining for all I knew but it didn’t smell so bad. At close range it had a sweet aroma about it.

I grabbed the bottle by its slender throat and glared at it in the way drunken men do. The shapely crown refracted back the image of none other than horned Beelzebub the

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Deceiver himself. Glory and virtue, blame and evil, nourishment and gratification. Observed it, smelled it, tasted it, felt it—the djinn repellent and I still didn't understand each other. I released the bottle back to Colonel Aziz, sucked a breath through my teeth, and pushed my glass forward. "Another one," I snarled.

The Colonel obliged me. I exhaled and tilted it in with my next breath, taking it like an Uyghur man.

Ahmat floundered around in his small sea of drinks, a leer having overtaken his usual grin, his face as red as Mao, in turmoil.

"Ahmat, brother. I hope you will not be so red-faced when you have to go on television tomorrow. A shame to us all," Colonel Aziz said.

Ahmat didn't speak. He hulked over his elbows, his temples flexing in and out. Was he savoring it? Impossible. His cheeks inflated. He had the nerve to swish it around in his mouth. Would he gargle it next? A scowl tore at his face. He gulped and let loose his own relieved gasp, less desperate than mine. He turned his glass in his fingers and stared into it. A sigh leaked from his nostrils.

NINE

AN HOUR OR SO LATER we were still gathered around the elixir. Ahmat and I sat mired in our chairs with our matching red faces, more like brothers than ever, contemplating what we had done to ourselves. Two regretful wasps caught in resin. Rihangül and Aziz marveled at us the same way parents marvel at even the most deranged habits of their children. A worried line wriggled across Ahmat's forehead. Another wriggled across mine.

I had experimented with my share of intoxicants. This one you had to reckon with. It made you question yourself, your life, decisions you had made, the truth of your relationships—it all kicked around in your mind. I wanted more.

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Colonel Aziz asked Rihangül if I liked the drink. He had interrupted me as I had been composing a brash argument in mumbled, pidgin English convincing them all I was as sharp as a tack. Aziz inched himself away from me. Was he afraid I would start a fracas?

“Go tell the Colonel I don’t like it, but I like drinking it,” I said. She tried to explain. I wasn’t convinced they understood. “And I like to drink it, because then it is gone!” I said.

I slammed my glass on the table.

“Another one, brother Andrew?” Colonel Aziz inquired. He redirected the bottle’s glistening mouth at me.

“He’e,” I said. “Brother Andrew wants another one.”

Colonel Aziz poured it and blurted something out.

“Aziz say he want to make another huge toast to Ahmat’s promotion andah to you too Andrew guy. They so happy to meet you andah you are they first American they have ever called they brother,” Rihangül said.

“I’m all for it,” I said.

We stiffened in our chairs for the “King of Toasts” and clanged our glasses together.

“Hosh!” we exclaimed.

I hijacked the next one.

“To my brother Ahmat and his promotion to Xinjiang Provincial Postmaster General. To my brother Colonel Aziz and his sustained career in the People’s Liberation Army. To Rihangül and her safe return to her homeland. To Ürümqi and all the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. Hosh!”

“Woy my God,” said Rihangül. She covered her mouth again.

“Hosh! Hosh!” we said.

My aplomb brought on wild laughter and rapping knuckles. Our drinks sailed back. Ahmat inhaled his latest with such effort I thought he would fall out of his chair. He slammed his glass on the table, becoming aggressive, and emerged from his red-faced worry. He fleered at Colonel Aziz.

Would I have to scrap with the new postmaster general now too?

Colonel Aziz smirked. His uneven chin reclined on the palm of his hand, his finger tapped his cheek.

“Comrade Ahmat, where is your smile now? You smiled so much today. I have never seen you smile so much in your life. You must be tired of smiling. Smiling here, smiling there, smiling everywhere across Xinjiang. Now you will have no choice. You will always have to smile,” he said. A thundering, stuttering, unreal, saved-up laugh blasted out the side of Aziz’s mouth. It hushed the room, then set off a chain reaction, as the Uyghurs and I shamelessly cracked up.

But Ahmat wasn’t finished.

“Give me another. A double,” he said.

Colonel Aziz tilted his forehead toward me for my approval. I gave it, and he refueled his friend. Ahmat inhaled his drink.

Now a deep carmine rash spread across his face. He re-

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quested further drinks by merely lifting his index finger. Colonel Aziz always obliged him, and one after the next into Ahmat's throat they went. Soon the polite man yanked off his silk tie and went haywire. His mouth revealed itself as the animated hole it was, as it gaped open like the maw of a doomed rat when he drank and puckered shut as if he had bitten into a lemon when he swallowed. Suddenly a shell-shocked stare overran his sunny gaze. His teeth protruded from his mouth. His tongue lolled, his hands clutched at the air, he hung off his bones, looking flammable. Gone was the charming composure. The slick-and-smooth new Xinjiang Postmaster General now sat gnashing his teeth.

The djinn repellent had transformed him into a lobster-eyed, indolent galoot.

"Woy my God, Ahmat now too," Rihangül said. She ditched her frown behind her billowy sleeve.

"The new face of Xinjiang!" Aziz announced. His arms floated above his head, as if all of life's ballast had dropped away.

And like a python unhinges its jaw to devour prey larger than itself, Ahmat's drunken smile devoured the room—a grinding, sodden, teary-eyed facebreaker whose afterimage persisting in my mind, appearing on-screen and off, here and there across the province, extolling the benevolent virtues of the People's Post Office, dragged a broad smile onto my drunken face that was, still, no match for his.

The symptoms, and they were *symptoms*, waned. Colonel

Aziz offered me another drink, but after witnessing how obliterated Ahmat had become, I declined. But he insisted—he couldn't enjoy himself, so I would do it for him. There were countless ways to, but I couldn't bring myself to say no. I acquiesced and proceeded to nonchalantly pour yet another drink into my mouth.

Like riding a bicycle or using chopsticks, once you learned how to “enjoy” the djinn repellent, you never forgot. There was only one way: cold disregard. Emotions and histrionics only made the process more excruciating. It reminded me of the mandatory and ritualized oral polio vaccinations I shivered through as a boy—exposed, no choice but to trust, imbibing a strange liquid. But in this case the ritual was taken to a willful and, thankfully, fully dressed extreme. A wavering morality of rudeness and gratitude between guest and host required you to weigh avoidance, revulsion, and suffering against pleasure, denial, and relief. And what pleasure doesn't disguise a component of pain?

To put it another way: I had become a connoisseur of the awful. And it didn't matter how exotic or daring or dangerous it sounded at the beginning, the concoction, whatever it was, got you drunk. I was drunk in Ürümqi.

Then things took a turn. Ahmat's dégringolade amid my swelling camaraderie with the Uyghurs erased any remaining delusions I harbored about having a go at Colonel Aziz. He had further gained my trust because he refused to drink and drive. And, I recalled, while he had had the

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nerve to strap himself in with a seat belt while we jaunted around in the mechanized scrum of Ürümqi, the rest of us surely didn't. He wasn't a loose cannon; he just looked like one. Behind his gnarly exterior, he reminded me of my mellow older brother, an infectious disease specialist I was certain to call for medical advice the next day. I was the looser cannon.

Colonel Aziz and Rihangül revved up another Uyghur conversation and discussed the possibility of Aziz securing a visa and traveling to America to check on his son, who, we were shocked to learn, was attending a prep school in Maine.

Rihangül probed Colonel Aziz for answers. How did his son get out? All we could wheedle out of Colonel Aziz was that he had discovered a placement service run by a murky pyramid of Chinese agents who arranged visas and enrollment in private schools along the East Coast of the United States. The schools featured a primarily Turkish student body, and because Uyghur and Turkish are similar languages, it promised a segue into American life. He didn't divulge any specifics or express much concern about his son's exact whereabouts. Any opportunities outside of the People's Republic of China must be better than the ones in it, right? An education in free-for-all America could turn you into either a shining diamond or a freedom-pining, troublesome monster when you came back, if you came back. The PRC's internal and overseas communication system — a temperamental faucet the government could turn

on and off—ensured Colonel Aziz could never reliably contact his son and, judging by the shrug of his shoulders, I assumed he had flat out given up.

Rihangül was lucky to have slipped through the emigration restrictions imposed on Chinese citizens, Muslim women, and Uyghur artists—she had escaped the *wǔ xīng hóng qí* (the “Five Star Red Flag” of the People’s Republic of China), a patriarchal culture, and creative repression in one fell swoop. Her sort of luck was next to impossible. All I knew was that a distant relative had helped her secure an invitation letter to enter the United States and study English at a school in Queens. Rihangül’s nascent literary ambitions provided the perfect alibi. I was sure there was more to the story.

Then the stony PLA colonel, perhaps rendered fragile by the memory of his son, cracked.

Through the cracks glinted the only light I had seen shine from him, and he began to regale us with visions of a dreamworld. A dreamworld I was certain existed in three bold colors: red, white, and blue. Where a person could walk right up to the front door of the White House to express a grievance and be invited in and greeted by the smiling Obamas, rather than being duped, dragged away in shackles, and thrown in prison. Where, simply by virtue of freedom itself, one could have all of one’s needs satisfied and even become a rich man. Where a man and a woman could procreate at will, raising as many children as they

pleased. A dreamworld without intrusive government controls or interference. Where raising a bountiful family of emancipated children would be highly incentivized, and where each rising generation of that family would do the same and enjoy even greater privileges than the last. This policy of family rearing was a far cry from that of Xinjiang, where such freedoms might never be won.

As Colonel Aziz spun out his utopian dream like so many strands of colored silk, the melodious drone of his voice sent my mind wandering into a landscape, a newly alien land of plenty: America. The boring suburb of concepts transformed into the most exotic place I could imagine. Shining, glorious freedom sat just on the other side of the earth, a scant twelve hours away, across the lower rim of the Arctic Circle. One day Aziz might walk into it with his wife and family. He would take a stroll in one of the many New York Cities dotting America, each one filled with blithe, sashaying, starry-eyed, free citizens who had all of their needs and expectations met, whose sole burden was the weight of unlimited potential.

Rihangül and brother Ahmat joined in. My brain still tried to make sense of their sonorous buzz: the trills, the rolled *r*'s, the ululations, a comforting sound like talking sand, the *üp*'s and the *kha*'s, the sublimely urgent cadence as resonant and dreamlike as an ensemble of cicadas, distant hammers, desert winds, cellos, and songbirds.

What the three of them were saying or what images they

were conjuring, I didn't know. Judging by the noisy fun being delivered up, it was easy to infer that the other two were adding to the growing skyline of Aziz's utopian, far-off Western dreamworld. Demolitions might have been occurring as well.

I found the energy to make my own contribution to their fantasy. Dreamworld Aziz needed one improvement—a system of credit whereby anyone could get something for nothing: automobiles, homes, children's toys, any thing you wanted, the month's food, advanced education, car and health insurance, even emergency medical attention. Heck, go out and get hurt, you're covered!

In the streets of Ürümqi, as in wider China, cash was king. Everyone packed fistfuls of folded-over, baguette-thick rolls of Chinese currency. Hell, I did too, ever since I had become a living, breathing extension of Rihangül's purse—her designated cash mule—upon our last visit to the black money-market thriving on the very steps of the downtown Ürümqi branch of the Bank of China. A fat, coal-soot-and-god-knows-what-else-covered worn wad of red yuan was stuffed in my jacket's internal pocket at that very moment. It was reassuring, even thrilling, to have it there—as reassuring and thrilling as discovering you had a backup heart. Had someone seen me in my Manhattan neighborhood, pockets bulging with cash, I would have been mistaken for a *baller*!

I begged Rihangül to translate a system of credit into their brainstorm. She began to, but I couldn't muzzle my-

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self anymore, and I recklessly blurted out the idea in English, their certain lack of comprehension be damned. Rihangül waved her hands across my mouth trying to shut me up; I swatted her hands away in order to continue. We must have looked insane to them.

I slipped a credit card out and placed it on the table in a dreary patch of light. Ahmat and Aziz fell silent. The something-for-nothing card, a plastic miracle available in silver, gold, platinum, or any other color you so desired. I explained to these denizens of the ultimate cash economy how one thin plastic card, tattooed with numbers, could contain such streamlined power. It could almost bring you back from the dead. Who needed cash?

Aziz and Ahmat picked up the card and took turns holding it as gingerly as they might hold the hair of a baby. What was the function of all the numbers? I couldn't explain how it worked, only that it did. My credit card was the perfect machine. My confident articulation of the word *machine* drew smiles out of them, because *machine* is the word for *car* in Xinjiang. It's not used for any other machine—exclusively for the automobile. I had been insisting my credit card was the perfect car. *Machine* is one of a handful of Uyghur words having remotely the same meaning in English. Another is *man*, which means *I*.

They handed back my credit card and stared at me with nonplussed indifference. I wiped the card off the table and unleashed a wide, depraved yawn.

Ideas still churned in Aziz's eyes, and I swear the Stars and Stripes overcame his irises, waving gloriously in some imaginary wind. He spoke in that elegiac way they do here: an aura of politeness forming, eyes bright and animated, gaze unfocused, tongue adept, leaving the listener wondering if he is the one being addressed at all.

I didn't comprehend a word of what he said. My ears had surrendered, and I had become effectively deaf, so I could only watch. But I wanted to stay awake—the polite thing to do—so I focused on their lips as they stretched into radiant smiles and puckered around umlauts like so many kisses. To them it was everyday speech, this Uyghur language. To me it was poetry, a poetry that had corraded me into submission. Soon my eyes and ears retreated to their own private rooms. . .

TEN

I DIDN'T REMEMBER THE DRIVE HOME. I assumed it was very late. I remember falling down from Aziz's Land Cruiser in a daze, something shucking my skull.

The oyster-like mass inside, my mind, ached. I had a mindache. I remember staggering into the chilly embrace of the cold fog advancing on Rihangül's apartment complex. We exchanged exhausted *hosh amzas* ("until next times") with Ahmat and Colonel Aziz. They didn't even set foot out of their machine. The hosts and their guest were zonked.

Rihangül and I loitered at the spot on the sidewalk where her friends had first rolled up. Now a fire burned there, its fiery arms reaching into the fog. One of the sheep carcasses

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had been converted into kebabs and soup. Their fragrant smoke and steam mixed with the thick night air. The sheep's hide lay in a pile, its head balanced on top. An Uyghur man tended to the food, clad in a traditional dark suit, a dopa, and a bushy moustache—the uniform of Uyghur men of the streets. His children and a blood-and-soot-coated knife swung from his waist. The children observed us with their prescient eyes.

Up above stared the moon, full and amber through the coal-soiled clouds. The first such lunar appearance since I had arrived and a grand one, soon to be rubbed out by those same clouds. Thoughts as dense as the fog that was reaching into every corner of Ürümqi crowded my mind. Had I passed their tests? Was I man enough? Was I suitable for marriage? Could I fit in? Could I restrain myself enough to get along? Did I offend anybody? Was I a trophy? Did I represent my country well? Rihangül wrapped her arm around mine, and we entered the embattled gate, turning onto the winding path that innervated the austere complex. We passed a monkey metal, faux-Han Dynasty gazebo, crossed a cold gray square encircling a fountain gone dry, and came to the entrance of her building.

She handed me her keys, and I opened the door. We entered, trailed by a small bank of fog, and trudged up the stairs to her apartment, where we stood in silence.

Rihangül swayed in and out of a shadow, her eyes falling sad. “Good night,” she said, her voice low. “Sleep well. I

hope you enjoyed yourself Andrew guy. My friends they really like you.”

She pulled away and vanished. Her footsteps receded into the stairwell. The entrance door squeaked open on its cheap springs then slapped shut, almost in spite, as all doors seem to in Ürümqi.

I had hoped we could share the same kind of freewheeling times we had shared in New York here in Ürümqi, but it could never happen. Rihangül had to keep me at a distance. The culture demanded it, and I couldn't blame her.

She would return to her family's apartment in an adjacent building, its rooms filled with slumbering piles of brothers, sisters, mother, nephews, and her new niece, Zumret, a rosy-cheeked, living cherub. The day of the week and the family mood would determine their sleeping combinations. They would be disrupted or soothed by their mother's snoring or Abdul's restlessness. Where would Rihangül sleep tonight? Who would she lay her head next to as a comfort, advisor or advisee, or for late-night banter? She would have her choice.

The feeling Rihangül pined for was a feeling I had left behind long ago. A Dutch word best describes that comfortable feeling: *gezellig*—the ideal domestic setting, cozy and inclusive. She would be *gezellig* with her family. I would sleep alone.

To me, the difference between imagination and a dream is I seldom dream of a place if it doesn't exist somewhere. My rented apartment at 106th and Columbus, New York

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City, the United States of America, my distant home, seemed like a dream.

I stared at Rihangül's door; it stood familiar, part of the same dream, in the same orientation in her building as mine was on the now sunny side of the earth. The number on it was the same too: 5. I might unlock the door to Apartment 5, push it open, appear in my foyer, pull off my boots, stumble through my hallway, slip across my living room floor, strip off my clothes, slide into my own bed, and wake the next morning to the dim New York sun of autumn. Perhaps with a hangover.

The logic of a dream.

You can take the girl out of Ürümqi, but you can't take Ürümqi out of the girl . . .

These words repeated in my mind like the chorus of an unfulfilled song.

Our times together were like disjointed scenes out of two other people's lives. Not the two of us, but two people from the same dream. I wished Rihangül would surprise me by coming back to her apartment. I couldn't remember how we had met or why I had come here, but I knew someday I would return to Ürümqi.

I remembered how I could at the age of four unfold and read a map of the world. To this day I have difficulty folding any map back up. Something inside me wants it to stay open. Rihangül's coming home had become part of my ongoing departure.

ELEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING, inert and hungover in Rihangül's bed, I wondered if Colonel Aziz would ever have the pleasure of traveling to my homeland. Even through the nausea I could remember the pleasant tingling in my stomach and the longing that collects in my throat every time my plane enters New York City airspace and takes a high arching turn over the Statue of Liberty—a monument I have never visited. Wings flexing, pushing at angles against the updrafts and crosswinds, soaring down and across in its majestic nighttime descent through the underlit clouds covering the island of Manhattan like so many silver pillows. Then there it is below, immense as a sudden galaxy: Gotham. No better feeling in the world exists as we fly up

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the length of the island, and I lose all sense of time, still adrift in the memories of the journey but energized by the bright, flickering sight of my home. I feel weightless, elevated, excited. All boredom and anxiety leave my being, and I am floating alone, ecstatic, in the night air. That's why I insist on booking the window seat despite my claustrophobia: for this beautiful, hard-won return.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing has never come easy to me. The process of materializing this book would have been far less enjoyable if not for the guidance, skills, inspiration, encouragement, or friendship generously offered by Ilan Greenberg, Aisha Kashgari, Liz Byer, Theodore Poulis, Richard Garvey-Williams, Mary Taveras, George D. Matthiopoulos, Laura Westlund, Angel Horn, Mod Panyama, Hassan Melehy, Maria Lixourioti, Olivier Conan, Kana Kimura, Robert Chambers Pullman, my family, Veronica Liu, Paul Assimacopoulos, Bob Holman, Nisha Asnani, Olivia Custodio, Robert Weisberg, and Leah Taylor. Without these individuals' belief and contributions, I might not have even considered the recording or expression of my experiences worthwhile. I am particularly indebted to the Uyghur friends I made, who took me in, showed me around, continuously fed me, watched my back, entertained me, or otherwise attempted to educate me—an at times belligerent guest and student—about their culture.

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I greatly benefited from the published works of Colin Thubron, Peter Hopkirk, James A. Millward, Martin Amis, Richard A. Lanham, Carolyn Drake, Paul Theroux, Gardner Bovington, Lisa Ross, Gregory G. Colomb, S. Frederick Starr, Paul Bowles, Mahire Yakup, Arienne Dwyer, Susan Sontag, Tarjei Engesaeth, Gore Vidal, Graham Greene, and Yukio Mishima.

A.D.



Andrew Demetre is a writer, speaker, and occasional stage performer currently residing in New York City. He has lived and worked in cities across the United States, and has traveled extensively throughout North America, Europe, the Balkans, China, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. This is his first book.

Andrew Demetre traveled to Xinjiang, the far western province of China, for the first time in 2009 and has made several return trips since. In *Drinking and Driving in Ürümqi*, the writer enlists an adventurous spirit and exuberant prose and carries the reader through an unpredictable night out in that region's restive capital city—a remote place that was, at the time, still new to him. Within a narrative mixing elements of memoir and reportage, Demetre manages to balance a journalist's eye for detail with the sensibilities of a novelist in capturing an evocative portrait of a place, a time, and its characters with insight and conviction. An entertaining and illuminating initiation.

“... a lively travelogue Anthony Bourdain would kill for ...”

Leah Taylor, *Flavorpill*

Strangers Gate Books, New York
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