

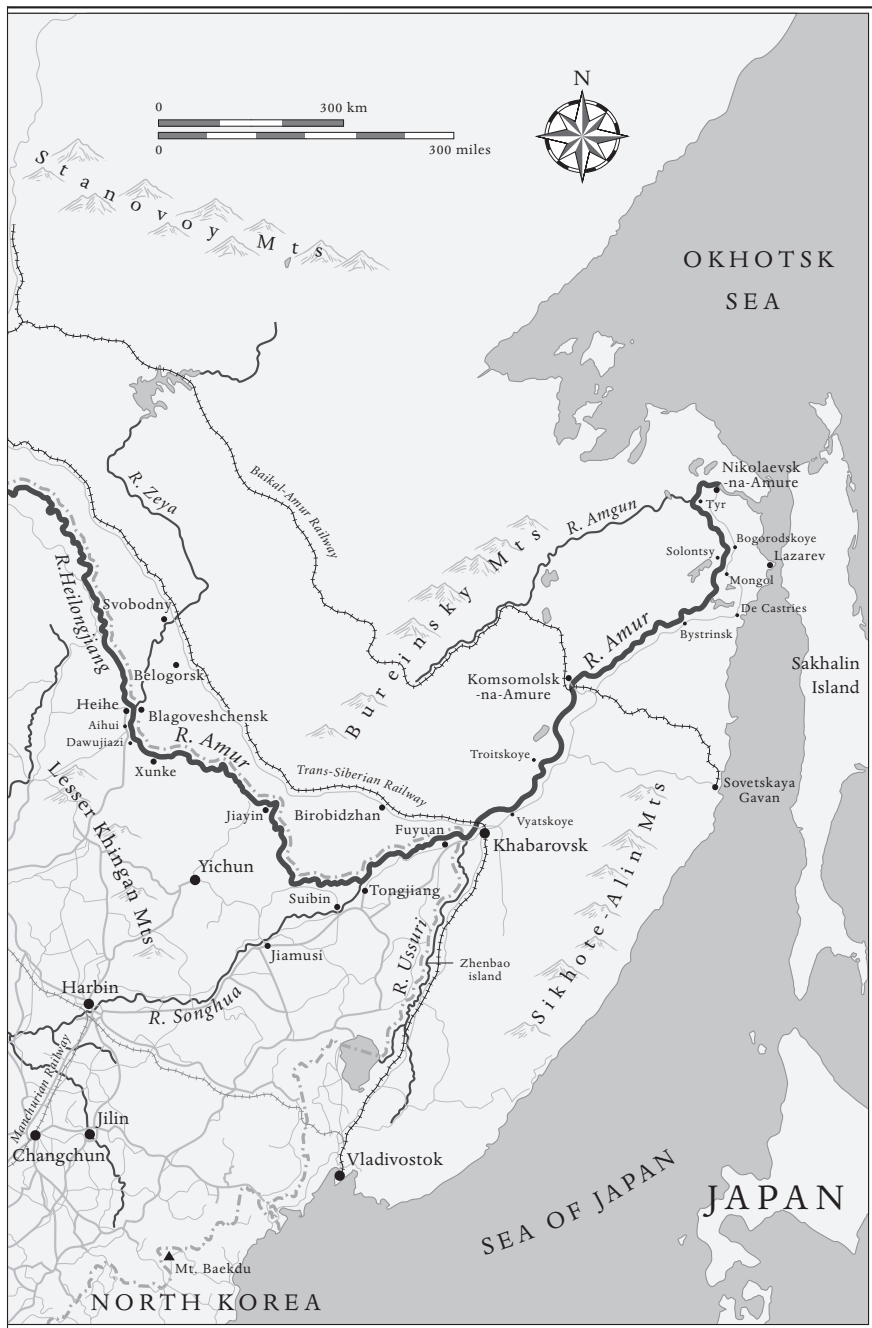


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# AMUR RIVER







# The Amur River



# I

## *The Source*

Across the heart of Asia, at the ancient convergence of steppe and forest, the grasslands of Mongolia move towards Siberia in a grey-green sea.

The land's silence is almost unbroken. It is barely inhabited. At its farthest reach, near the Russian frontier, almost five thousand square miles are forbidden to travellers. These mountains, once the homeland of Genghis Khan, are today a near-sacred wilderness. The solitary track that reaches them ends at a barrier and a rangers' lodge. And here we wait – a guide, two horsemen and I – to enter a region that none of us truly knows.

Somewhere deep in this hinterland rises one of the most formidable rivers on earth. It drains a basin twice the size of Pakistan, and more than two hundred tributaries, some of them immense, pour into its flood in spring. For over a thousand miles it forms the border between Russia and China: a fault-line shrouded in old mistrust.

The Amur is elusive. Even the name's origin is obscure. To the West the river seems unreachably remote, and few people have even heard of it. There are wildly different estimates of its length, naming it the tenth or even eighth longest river in the world. Its Chinese shore is almost untravelled, while razor wire



and watchtowers shadow its Russian bank from end to end in the most densely fortified frontier on earth.

A day goes by, and then a night, while we wait to cross into these proscribed mountains. The rangers in this country, named the Khenti Strictly Protected Area, are reluctant to release us, although I have permits secured by the trusted agent who found my guide and horsemen. I feel a first twinge of unease. Our three tents, pitched in the meadow grasses, are beginning to look forlorn, and the elation of starting out – the visceral excitement, the tingle of apprehension – is ebbing into the fear that we may never start at all. At night I am woken by our horses cropping the grass outside my tent. It is that hour when the mind darkens; and suddenly the notion of following a river of 2,826 miles (the favoured estimate), as it flows through south-east Siberia then meets China, then breaks for the Pacific, seems little more than a fantasy.

I open my tent-flap on the cold dark, and catch my breath. My shadow falls black over the grass. The night above me blazes with stars, and across that immense Mongolian sky the Milky Way moves in an icy torrent of light.

Dawn spreads the thin radiance of another planet. The world seems still unstained. In the distances around us the sun is lifting a glistening mist above grasslands heavy with dew. It is as if a great fire were burning over the plains. For a while it obscures the hills that fringe the skyline, then its haze dissolves as though we had imagined it. The air grows warmer. Tiny diurnal moths are rising from the grasses, where invisible warblers sing, and the air fills with the click and whirr of grasshoppers. To walk here is to wade through a tide of wildflowers: multicoloured asters, gentians, butter-coloured potentilla, peacock-blue columbines. Over farther slopes, swathes of blown edelweiss make a frosty pallor for miles.

Then the horsemen emerge, heavy in their native *deel* overcoats, their daggers at their belts, to check our tethered mounts. It is well into morning before the rangers appear. They come to our tents on motorbikes, in their outsize boots and piratical headbands. They carry little briefcases. Batmonkh, my guide, a native of Mongolia's capital, says they are feeling important because the prime minister has arrived here on pilgrimage to Burkhan Khaldun, the mountain sacred to Genghis Khan. But they remain with us a long time, eating our biscuits and scrutinizing our papers. The country ahead of us is dangerous, they say, and almost impassable. The most distant tributary of the Amur, the Onon river, rises in remote marshlands, and the monsoons had been heavy that summer. Now, in late August, the ground is flooded and treacherous. And there are bears. Once inside the reserve, we will be beyond help.

Batmonkh listens to them without interest. He says they resent outside intruders in their land. I cannot understand a word they say, only silently hope they will not forbid us. Sometimes Batmonkh wanders away dismissively, while the rangers come and go, and our horsemen laugh at them with the despal of free men for bureaucracy. Eventually the rangers present us with a document to sign, absolving them of any responsibility, and at last they leave, bouncing over the steppelands on their Chinese motorbikes, after washing their hands of us.

We should have listened to them, of course.

For the last time before we depart the sky looms vaster and more restless than the plains. From end to end the horizon seems sunk beyond the curvature of the earth, and above us spreads a panorama of discordant clouds. On one side they are merely smears of mist, on the other an armada of cumulus rolls into infinity.

For a moment we halt at the edge of the reserve; the next we are in underbush, following the Kherlen river where it descends from its watershed in the east. Already the slopes are steepening and darkening into forest. A late cuckoo calls. Half unconsciously, we are crossing the divide from Eurasian grassland to Siberian taiga, the scent of crushed wildflowers fading under our hooves, and all of us elated by our release.

But soon the terrain grows sodden. Sometimes the horses flounder in bog-water that is still flowing. Once, ominously, the ground beneath the leading horseman gives way, and his stallion – a handsome roan – collapses into a mud hole, and struggles up as he remounts.

By early afternoon we are riding along hills above the river. Buzzards are dropping low over its swamp. For miles we brush through stunted birch thickets, while larches troop down the mountainsides like an invading army, and infiltrate the valleys. The only sounds are our own. As the air sharpens, I sense the deepening remoteness of our path, and feel an old excitement at entering another country.

My horse is a twelve-year-old stallion who has no name. To the horsemen he is simply ‘the White Horse’; any other label would be sentimental. He is tough and scarred. We ride in a straggling cavalcade of nine, our tents and food trussed on five packhorses. These beasts are strong and glossy after summer pasturing – not the sickly creatures of late winter. Short-legged and large-headed, they descend from the tireless horses of Mongol conquest, able to gallop ten kilometres without pause, and we ride them in the Mongol way, with legs bent back from the knees on short stirrups. The horsemen are in their early forties, herders and huntsmen, their faces wind-battered raw, their bodies pared lean. They too look tireless.

Yet their ancestors’ ancient habitat was not steppeland but forest, from which they first emerged millennia ago, and for a

long time our own transition is uneven, where grassy slopes still mingle with woodland as we travel back in time, and the early nomad hoof beats fade into forest silence.

Towards evening comes the first hint of trouble. One of our packhorses is still unbroken, and its wild energy unsettles the others. Ahead of us, in low woodland, they are suddenly thrusting and barging together, then they tear loose from their leading-ropes, three of them bolting back the way they came, their eyes dilated in fear, with the horsemen following.

Batmonkh and I tether the last pair to saplings, and wait. We wait for seeming hours. When the horsemen return with their charges, we find that the recalcitrant palomino has thrown off its baggage, which now lies somewhere – anywhere – in the forest around us. They return to search for it, while Batmonkh and I wonder disconsolately which of the giant saddlebags is missing. If it holds my rucksack, I realize, my passport and visas will be gone, and our journey ended. I tramp back along the way the horses disappeared, but the forest spreads around me in a glaze of concealing birch scrub. I hunt for panicky hoof-prints, smashed branches, and go down tracks that dissipate to the trail of some long-passed animal. The whinnying of the herders' horses sounds farther and farther away as their search widens. Sometimes in the undergrowth a fallen silver birch shines with a moment's hope – they are bright and smooth as china – but soon I cannot imagine finding anything at all in this wilderness.

Batmonkh, when I return, is surveying the leftover luggage still strapped on our tethered horses, alarmed that our food is gone and that we will have to start back at once. Tentatively, with our different hopes, we fumble open one of the mounted packs, but its stallion charges loose – they are all unnerved now – dragging its wooden saddle along the trail behind it. We can only round it up, and wait.

After an hour we hear a far-off shout. Batmonkh says: 'I think they've found it.' And soon afterwards the two men return, still inscrutable, with the lost saddlebags, as if their recovery were expected. And when we unpack that evening, on a tree-sown slope above the marshes, we find that the recovered baggage had contained our food.

We set up our tents at dusk on the rain-softened earth, the horsemen hacking down branches to frame a shelter of their own. Our possessions – food-boxes, water bottles, harness, hatchets, even a canvas chair – lie strewn about the grass, while the horses graze disburdened under the trees. It is strange, in this unpeopled solitude, to realize that our campfire is the sole human light, seen only by wolves or woken bears.

In the chill of nightfall the fire draws us closer, and its smoke repels the mosquitoes that are rising round us. Batmonkh cooks up noodles and scraps of beef on the portable stove, while the horsemen drink salted tea, and smoke. They seemed like twins at first, but now they start to diverge. Mongo looks older than he is, sashed like a brigand, hard-faced and talkative; Ganpurev keeps the appearance of a boy: but of a sharp-eyed boy who has given trouble. He is the youngest son of a family that became poor. They both wear peaked caps and high boots, and anoraks with pirated labels. Around the fire they talk about practicalities: horse-herding and money. In this terrain, eight hours' riding will cover only twenty miles, they say. Their cigarettes flare and die in the dark. Batmonkh, whose English is fluent, sometimes translates. But his world is not theirs, and he may seem as alien to them as I do. The silence, when we at last sleep, is the silence of exhaustion. Even the horses do not stir, asleep on their feet in the starlight.

The source of great rivers is often obscure. They descend in a confusion of tributaries, or seep from inaccessible swamps and glaciers. The Indus is born from six contested streams. The Danube, it is claimed, issues from a gutter in the Black Forest. As for the origins of the Amur, when a conclave of geographers from Russia and China met to debate it, they found to their chagrin that its farthest source lay in neither country, but in these remote Mongolian mountains. My horsemen know the river only as the Onon, the 'Holy Mother'; but if the mother herself is born somewhere, few but Ganpurev know quite where this is, and he has been there only once, ten years ago.

It is the profiles of surrounding mountains that guide us, but to me, as the sun rises, they are only snowless shadows. The morning air is cold and pure. The dew on our tent roofs has glazed to ice, and the coats of the tethered horses gleam with frost, their breath pluming over them. All morning we keep to the uplands, riding through larch forests along the tank tracks left by Soviet military exercises decades ago. The Russian border is forty miles to our north. But now the tracks have blurred to rivulets of floodwater, and shrubs and grasses closing over them. Something has happened to the larch forests too. They bank around us in folds of sombre green, but sometimes we find ourselves moving along hillsides ravaged by wildfire. The trees remain upright in death, their charred bark falling away, until our path threads between blackened gibbets. Twice, along these faded trails, we come upon tall sheafs of stacked branches, hung with votive scarves, now turned to rags, left by rangers or poachers. These *ovoos* mark the summit of mountain ridges that fall within the purlieus of a local spirit. Such spirits are mercurial, and sometimes angry, and here they are unknown to us. Mongo and Ganpurev dismount to circle their *ovoos*, and sprinkle vodka in propitiation. They ask me to copy them, for our journey's safety.

But by noon we are mired in another terrain. Our track thins to a horse's width, and is almost lost among birch scrub, and we are brushing blindly through it. For hours we hear only the sloshing plod of our horses. Then we are plunging into steep-banked streams, tributaries to rivers we do not know, with the packhorses following. Sometimes we dismount and lead them. We sink in shin-deep. My waterproof trainers are useless, and the boots of the others filling with water.

The horses are not used to this. They are the heirs of nomad cavalry, bred for the steppes. Riding them, you forget anything you've been taught. I no longer rein in the White Horse when he nuzzles the buttocks of the packhorse in front. And you spur them forward not with your heels but with a hissing *Chu-chuh*. You never fondle their heads. As we reach higher ground we start to go faster, with relief. But the preferred gait of the White Horse is not a leisurely canter but a fast trot. For mile after mile he insists on this jarring bustle for which the Western rider's inured rise-and-fall in the saddle is hopeless – the tempo is too fast – and instead you stand in your stirrups as the Mongol raiders did.

It is after one of these furious trots that we stop and throw ourselves down in the grass. I remember its softness and the weight of my breathing. A few minutes later, standing up and suddenly dizzy, I recover consciousness at the foot of the White Horse, with my ankle twisted under me. With misgiving I feel its creeping pain. Then Batmonkh helps me into the saddle. For a moment I wonder if I've fallen because of altitude – but we are only at 6,700 feet. Wilfully I decide the ankle can't be broken, and that in the morning I'll be walking. Then I feel the ease of being on horse again, my foot weightless in the stirrup, and the valleys opening before us in a shining sea of green. And with this a chill descends: the cold wonder of travelling a land empty of the memory or scars of human history. Sometimes

russet crags break through the forested mountain tops with the semblance of man-made walls and forts, but this is illusion. Human tracks peter out, and the only flight path across the sky is the passage of vultures.

Yet even here this void is not complete. The poaching that broke out in the chaotic years after the Soviet Union's collapse has abated, but not gone, and Russian hunters still occasionally cross the border to feed the Chinese market in traditional medicines by slaughtering musk deer and bears. Yet my companions vouch that wildlife is returning, and for days the only trespasser we meet is an old man in rags gathering pine nuts.

Here the shadows of the past are older, deeper. For this is the Mongol heartland. Eight hundred years ago Genghis Khan decreed the upper valleys of the Onon and Kherlen rivers an inviolable sanctuary, permitted only to Mongol royalty, sealed off for their private rites and burial. It became the spiritual powerhouse of his vast empire. Even now, Batmonkh says, travellers to these mountains are resented. This is holy land. Somewhere to our east, a forested massif lifts to the rocky pate of Khan Khenti, revered as Burkhan Khaldun, on whose slopes the young Genghis Khan, destitute and alone, found a haven from his tribal enemies. On these protective heights, runs the Mongol epic, he sheltered as poor as a grasshopper, and later faced the mountain in grateful worship – a mountain already sacred to his people, close to the Eternal Blue Sky of their ancestral veneration. To this mountain, too, he dedicated the worship of his descendants for ever, and himself returned in times of crisis to breathe again its primal power.

The true site of Burkhan Khaldun is unsure, but beyond us, in the watershed of the Onon, its valley fills with the adversities of the future conqueror. Here, in about 1162, he was born into the clan of a minor chief. On its banks, after his people had abandoned her, his mother dug for roots to keep her children



alive, while the boys fished its streams; and here, after escaping from imprisonment by enemy raiders, Genghis submerged himself in the Onon waters, keeping his head afloat in the wooden halter by which they had confined him, then slipped away.

We camp on a shoulder of firm ground. Beyond our firelight the air is cool and still, the forest utterly silent. We eat our mutton stew, and talk, while the sky fills up with stars. Sometimes the horsemen's faces lighten into wry smiles and laughter. They share some old affinity. In the dark their features and ages seem to converge, both born in the Year of the Horse (although they say this means nothing). Batmonkh interprets from the desultory gutturals and aspirants of their exchange. They tell stories of national victimhood: of a Russian robber-baron long ago, who stole Mongolia's gold along a road laid by Chinese slaves. 'Our ancestors told us this.'

Batmonkh gives a ghostly smile. From the vantage of our camp, under that glittering sky, he suddenly starts to talk of natural wonders, as if to replace the horsemen's legend with something stranger and real. Somewhere up there, he says, Titan, the moon of Saturn, has yielded the first signs of life in the solar system.

The horsemen nod silently. It is impossible to tell how this strikes them, or if it seems no more than a distant tale, like many others. It does not, after all, help feed their families, or the horses shifting round us in the night.

But Batmonkh is different. He has a wife and child back in Ulaanbaatar, yet his mind is filled with reflection and dreams. He looks like no Mongolian I've seen. He is dark-skinned and handsome, with large, swimming eyes. Slighter built than the horsemen, he seems at once lithic and more vulnerable.

'People think that I'm Indian.' He speaks softly, although the horsemen cannot understand. 'My father is Angolan, you

see, from southern Africa. My mother met him in Moscow during Soviet times, as Third World students.' He smiles at the term. 'And I am the result.'

Those had been the years, I remember, when Moscow's Lumumba University took in select students from less developed nations, many from Africa, and gave them a free education, steeped in Soviet ideals. I wonder: 'Where are your parents now?'

'My mother came back to Mongolia, but my father could not follow her. Our government would not allow it, an impoverished African country . . .'

His mother had married again, he says, and had more children, while he gained a place at Harbin University and a degree in geography. 'But when I came back, good jobs were impossible to find. You needed a hook, and I had none . . .'

I guess: 'A contact?'

'Yes.' His voice holds a spark of rebellion. 'It's a kind of corruption.'

I wonder aloud what prejudice festered back in Ulaanbaatar, and if his parentage had hampered him. For a long time he does not answer, then he says: 'No, I don't think so. It's not my colour. It's my family's obscurity. We don't know people. We don't have power.'

Sometimes in that first intimacy, he looks obscurely troubled and goes silent; then his smile returns with a kind of gentle apology. 'It was my grandfather who took my father's place, and brought me up,' he says, and I feel I already knew this. The old man had died a few days before our departure; Batmonkh had shared with me his funeral meats. Now he loads more branches onto our fire, stares at the flames. He says: 'I loved him.'

It happens suddenly. We come down in forest shadow, splashing over streamlets of recent rain. Pink rocks, swept down by

meltwater in another age, press up from the alluvial earth. It is almost noon. To our south-east we see a blur of irregular mountains: the two-peaked mass of Mount Khenti, where Genghis Khan may lie. I cannot tell how far away it is. Then the terrain levels out and we go through lashing thickets, our heads bowed, advancing blind. Twice my riding helmet deflects the blows of low-hanging larch branches.

Then the scrub clears before a margin of feathery grass. And here, without warning, we come upon a trickle of water, a yard wide. The horses ahead have already crossed it, and are out of sight. I shout to Batmonkh: 'What is this?'

He calls back: 'The Onon.'

I rein in. Here is the infant Amur. It is, of course, scarcely different from any other runnels we have crossed: only narrower, purer. It has a faint peaty tinge. Upstream it does not bubble whole from the ground, but emerges in a glinting coalescence of marshland waters, edged by fescue grass and willows. I want to drink from it, but as I start to dismount my ankle winces and I cannot stoop. In this river's infancy I feel suddenly old. I imagine a foolish tenderness for it, as if for a child who does not know what will happen. In time it will cease to be the Onon and become the Siberian Shilka, changing gender to the Russians' 'Little Father', before it transforms at last, on the border of China, into the giant Amur.

For the rest of the day, in and out of sight, we follow its gleaming passage eastward.

How still it is. No jungle cries start up at night, or cicada raspings. We are nearing the forest quiet of Russia. In my tent's pitch dark, I'm grateful for my body's weariness that disregards where it sleeps (on a thin foam mat), and I savour our fleeting triumph. The Onon meanders through the night outside, while

this dreamy felicity descends, and I lie oblivious in the mosquito-whining air, and sink into sleep.

At dawn a light rain falls, like someone throwing grit on the tent roof, and carries a chill of foreboding. All morning the ground grows slushier under us, as if the whole terrestrial world were turning to water. The Onon is sunk invisibly in its wetlands beside us, where yellowing grasses trace its slow descent. Hour by hour my delight at our finding it dissipates with the splosh of the White Horse's hooves in the deepening morass. Where we are riding no rain falls, but on every side the sky is bruised amber and grey with half-lit clouds. Once only they part to shed down a beam of yellow-gold, which spotlights the river like a benediction.

Towards evening we come upon the only habitation we see in six days: a ranger's cottage and a crude log canopy above thermal springs by the river. The ranger is taciturn, as if we have disturbed him, and assigns us a rough-built hut beyond his own. Mongo and Ganpurev had heard rumours of these springs. Their habitual quiet turns to muttered anticipation, then to boyish glee as they clamber down to bathe. The foliage along the riverbanks has receded before flat grasslands by the springs, where the river flows faster and darker. The springs are four or five pits, edged with planks and sheltered by log ceilings. They look abandoned. Mongo and Ganpurev are already emerging from them in the dusk when I descend. Naked, they do not show the taut bodies I'd expected, but are smooth-muscled, hairless. Ganpurev is growing a belly. Soon they start back to our hut, leaving me alone.

I strip and lower myself into the warmth, hoping to ease my ankle, which has turned amber and black, like the sky. For a few minutes, half floating here, I feel the aching release of my body, and marvel at the strangeness of this thermal eruption into the cold river. Its waters seem already used and cloudy.

Above me, in the gaps of the log roof, a few stars are shining. Then I heave myself out. For an instant I am standing upright in the darkening shelter, above the enigmatic pool. Then the ankle's pain stabs upwards, and I'm falling. I've underestimated the labour of our riding, the insidious weakness, and my ribcage smashes on the solid log bench behind me. For a minute I lie wondering what will happen if I move. What is fractured or punctured? Gingerly I stir and begin to dress, hopelessly trying to avoid pain, and at last climb back towards the hut, clutching at handholds of fescue grass.

Our hut is hacked from raw wood, with twin platforms for sleeping. A rusted stove pushes its chimney into the roof. The place is littered with the detritus of whoever last passed through: discarded cigarette packets, ash, empty bottles. That night, from the upper platform where I try to sleep, with Batmonkh and the horsemen below, I look out at my bitter compensation – the Onon pale in the moonlight, curved below a solitary larch tree. Framed in the rough-hewn window, it has frozen to an engraving, its banks shorn bare, its waters halted in mid-flow: a lost river, winding out of nowhere.

I've borrowed Batmonkh's satellite phone, our only contact with the outside world that cannot help us, and I call my wife in London to say that all is well except for the heavy swamps. There comes the searchlight of her voice. Why do I sound strange? Something has happened. Yes, I've had a couple of falls, but luckily I didn't break my glasses. She laughs. Is this a bad phone connection? You seem far away. Something to do with the satellite orbit . . . I must be sounding sad, because she insists: 'Don't think of me until you come home.' Her voice carries a low, delayed echo. 'Think of your journey.' The roses are blooming in our garden, she says, and will last into winter.

\* \* \*

We were entering a region that even the horsemen did not know. For four days they guided our way by the mountains that now surrounded us. To our south stood the massifs of Mount Khenti and Asralt – not Alpine peaks but ashen silhouettes eight thousand feet high. Ahead of us the Onon flowed invisibly – its course low and flat – through valleys of knee-high grass. Sometimes fir and pine trees descended to the marshlands, or retreated before lawn-smooth hills. From a distance the ground looked innocent, almost landscaped. But to either side of the river its tributaries seeped through a widening waterland where peat-moss and ground-smothering grasses – fescues, needlegrass – had rotted over the millennia into fathomless bog. We crossed to the river's south bank, then back again. It was higher now, faster-flowing, its banks clotted with willows. Our horses plunged in reluctantly. The riverbed was soft under their hooves. Soon I lost count of the tributaries we forded. Often they seemed as full and deep-sunk as the Onon itself. Batmonkh waved me away from the more precarious crossing places, but Mongo and Ganpurev charged in like centaurs, the current streaming over their knees, their cigarettes still dangling from their lips. Once, dropping down the Onon's banks, the packhorses panicked and refused, and had to be rounded up again, the horsemen clouting their flanks in retribution. The White Horse was old, and I felt a clutch of fear each time he descended, but his tread never slowed in midstream, and did not stumble.

We had no track to follow. Beneath grass the subsoil was a squelching morass that seemed only to deepen as we went. Each day, in eight hours' riding, we covered barely twenty miles, as the horsemen had predicted. Often the ground disappeared under a sheen of low-lying scrub, so that neither horse nor rider could see where it was treading. Sometimes this uncertain earth, mined with hidden quagmires, opened

like a trapdoor under us. Suddenly the horses would be dropping to their withers and the peat-laden water brimming over their backs. Then they began to struggle out, their eyeballs white and bulging, their forelegs scrabbling for a hold, their hind legs kicking in panic, while we were thrown back and forth in the saddle.

It was in terrain like this that the White Horse sank into a hole and lost his footing. Tilted sideways in that rotting earth, he rolled and threw me. For an instant I found myself trapped beneath his heaving flank, my feet still in the stirrups, my ribcage screaming. Then he started up in fear, and began to bolt. I wrenched one foot free, but the other stayed wedged in its stirrup while he dragged me forward. But my trainer was loose-fitting, and I wrenched my foot out of it as he gathered speed. For a moment I lay in the marsh, oddly at peace, while the trainer went off on its own. But it wasn't funny: I had only one pair.

Batmonkh, on the far side of the swamp, saw the riderless White Horse emerge with only a mud-clogged plimsol in the stirrup. While the horsemen went to round it up, he called into the emptiness: 'Where are you? Can you stand up?'

I heard his voice plaintive and small across the wetland. I got up and walked towards it. There was something a little comical, I thought (but only later). My cut-price trainers, too loose to trap my feet, had saved me. While the other men wore knee-high boots which filled with swamp water, my plimsols became squelching pouches of warmth. We had long ago ceased to care about the mud and bog water that sprayed up round us. Only at night our discarded footwear steamed by the camp fire alongside the horse blankets.

These hours became a time of drowsy companionship. On a tree-sheltered ridge or knoll, under the waxing moon, Mongo and Ganpurev would talk of their hunting expeditions, guiding

oligarch Russian sportsmen in search of game. There was always a tang of danger, they said. In early spring, when bears came out of hibernation, they could be hungry and a little mad. After pillaging ants' nests, the formic acid went to their heads and they ran amok. You had to watch for wild boars too, which turned savage and cunning when injured. Mongo had a deep gash down his thigh to show for it. 'You think you're hunting them, but after they're wounded they will be hunting you.'

No, they didn't mind the Russians. The Russians weren't like the Chinese. Mongo admired Putin, even Trump. He revered rulers with a semblance of strength. Ganpurev stayed silent and Batmonkh shook his head. The horsemen wondered who governed Britain. Wasn't it the royal family? Strange that in this Mongolian fastness they had heard of a British royal prince marrying a mixed-race American. And she from a split family . . .

Batmonkh suddenly said: 'That was my mother's situation too, and mine. Her father was angry with her. "You know what people will say," he told her. "Everyone will say it. Marrying a mixed-race man. Third World Africa. And your children" – that's me – "will show it too. But if you want to do it, all right, you do it." And she did, although they had to separate, and my grandfather supported her to the end.' He shared this with the horsemen in terse phrases.

Hesitantly Ganpurev said: 'I think intermarriage is good. In Mongolia we are too enclosed.'

Suddenly, beyond the thickening darkness, came the cry of a wolf. At first it was only a thread of sound, like a distant scream. Mongo got to his feet, circled his hands round his mouth, and answered it. And the cry came back, closer, from the thickets a hundred yards away: a disembodied howl, pitched high and fluting, then falling away in an inconsolable lament.