



Goleo

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A couple of months earlier:

Geral stepped from his old grey Russian jeep and relieved himself with a great sigh. As the urine drained from his bladder, he took in his surroundings. Off in the distant were the vast rolling plains of the Mongolian steppe, treeless and covered in a low lying green scrub. Above was stretched the immense blue Mongolian sky with occasional white clouds making their way from Russia to China, casting hurrying shadows that animated the landscape below. Squinting his dark wide eyes upwards Geral could make out five, no seven, circling birds high above. Golden Eagles, he thought, but it was hard to tell at that distance. Looking down he watched his piss splashing over the shining crystal and apricot coloured Agate that the hillside was covered with. He inspected the thinning dirty grey tee-shirt stretched too tightly over his large belly. I can't even see my own cock any more, he thought with disgust. It's all those fried potatoes she keeps giving me, but how can I say no, they taste so good.

Before he became a seaman Geral was a fighter, a good one, the illegal kind, in fights that go on in back rooms and warehouses, or out in the countryside at quietly whispered locations. His own style combined the Mongolian wrestling he had learnt as a child with the kick boxing he had seen in movies. The knuckles of his slab like hands still showed the scars of the many bare knuckle fights. His brain seemed to struggle sometimes after all the blows it had taken and his nose was wide and flat, partly from his Mongolian heritage and partly because of the amount of times it had been broken. He was still a huge man, but in his prime he was bigger and more muscular, the strongest man in

Mongolia they used to say. Nowadays most of that muscle seemed to have turned to fat, because of his wife's tasty potato snacks but also because of the sedentary life of a ship's cook. He was often at sea these days for many months at a time, with only the ten metre walk from his cabin to the galley as exercise.

His bladder now empty, Geral shook and zipped up, unaware of the dribble of urine that spread down his trouser leg. He climbed back into his jeep, and before starting the engine, he glanced into the back. He felt immense satisfaction at the sight of the limp body of the large grey wolf strewn across the back seat, its dark congealed blood matting the fur down its left flank. Last night, up in the hills, fifty kilometres from here, Geral had hunted down and killed this animal with just a single shot. After slitting its throat he had drunk an inch of its blood, as was his custom, to ward off winter colds. In a few days, when he got back to Ulaan Baatar, he would sell its skin for as much as thirty dollars. Its meat he wouldn't eat himself, he could sell it to the Koreans. 'Those Koreans eat anything, they even eat black dogs,' he had been told once.

During the long spells of leave from the ship, when he was not at home eating fried snacks, this is what Geral did. Driving around the Mongolian countryside, making a little extra money by either slaughtering peoples cattle for them and selling on the meat at the larger towns, or hunting wild animals, deer and gazelles, wolves and bears. He could get sixty dollars for the skin of a bear, the insides of which he sold to the Chinese for their medicines and the meat he liked to eat himself.

Geral wanted to spend that night at a lake he had once visited around here but was unsure quite how to find it. He spotted some familiar round white dots in the distance and decided to head for them to ask for directions.

Pulling up outside the pair of gers, the round tent like homes that most of his countrymen lived in, he stuck his head out of the window of the jeep just in case there were any rabid dogs around protecting it. He had been brought up in a ger just like the one he is was outside.

Now, however, he had a warm comfortable apartment in the capital city, and looked upon this traditional way of life with a detachment that comes from having seen so much of the world. His feelings about the people that lived liked this were mixed, unsure whether to pity their basic hand to mouth existence, or to respect them for their pride and great sense of tradition. The shit of goats, sheep, rabbits, horses, camels and humans covered the ground around these gers, and it revolted Geral, so used was he to the spotless cleanliness of the ship and his own galley. A small child stood between the gers, its dirty face showing no sign that it was aware of the yellow liquid shit that was dribbling out the bottom of its pea green knitted trousers and onto its foot.

A man that looked fifty, but who Geral knew would only be about thirty, ducked out of the left ger. He was followed by a hardened looking woman who scooped up the child, either oblivious to or uncaring of the foul yellow leakage. Geral knew that it would be customary for him stay the night here, it being nearly night fall, but these days he preferred to spend his nights alone in the countryside.

‘I am looking for the round lake that sits under the cliff. I know it is close to here. Can you tell me where?’ Geral asked after the customary greetings.

‘It has gone. The water has all gone,’ was the man’s reply.

‘But there has been so much rain this year. I have seen terrible floods not three hundred kilometres from here. How can this be?’

The man just shrugged. Geral, after a moments consideration, decided it will still be the best place to spend the night, and so got the man to point him in the direction of the now dried lake bed.

‘Do you have any food and drink I can buy from you?’ Geral asked as a second thought, having remembered he was down to his last couple of cans of bully beef.

The man looked at his wife who answered ‘We have a cooked marmot and arag’.

Geral's flat round face screwed up involuntarily with distaste. Arag was what he was bought up on, a sour pungent mildly alcoholic brew of fermented mares milk. It was something that he lost the taste for years earlier. The marmot he considered. Only the other day he had been reading about the latest outbreak of plague that had been caused by these creatures, but the woman had said it was cooked. His stomach grumbled and he decided it would do. 'I'll take the marmot, and fill this up with arag,' said Geral as he reached behind his passenger seat and pulled out an empty five litre jerry can.

An hour later Geral crested the small rise that surrounded part of the lake and stopped his jeep. It was true that it was almost empty of water like the local man had said, but now a striking red weed had completely covered the lake's bottom, making the scene look like some Martian crater. Coming from across the lake were the loud unmistakable trumpeting mating calls of the Common Crane. Taking his field glass from its leather pouch Geral could see at least one hundred of them on the far shore of the red lake of weed, performing their wild mating dances, waving their heads and making their clumsy leaps. Outside the jeep the rough low scrub that Geral had been travelling across for so long had given way to a carpet of late flowering wildflowers. It was a field of purples, violets and blues with all of their many hues complementing each other perfectly. The sun was low, and in half an hour it would be dark. This'll do just fine, thought Geral. He was enchanted.

A couple of hours later and Geral was letting out a long watery belch as he settled down for the night. He had really rather enjoyed the dark fatty meat of the marmot, and had scraped every last piece from the leathery skin. The arag had also, unexpectedly, gone down a treat, and the jerry can now lay empty near the jeep. The night sky was absolutely cloudless and the air was cold but Geral had decided to sleep outside with just his sleeping bag for warmth nevertheless, as he always liked to sleep out beneath the stars whenever he could. Zipping himself in snugly he quickly entered the land of Nod.

Sometime later, during the night, a Goleo made its way up the slope from the dried lake and slowly skirted around Geral's large snoring form. Its heavy insect body trundled along like a miniature armoured vehicle. Pausing by the back wheel of the jeep to look up at the sky, its eyes flicked from star to star, making out the various constellations, and the galaxies beyond them. In recent weeks the Goleo had noticed the faint orange glow of Mars getting stronger and stronger and now the planet sat low and bright in the night sky (see front cover illustration) above the dark circle of glistening red weed.

Suddenly Geral's snoring abruptly stopped, and he started to make a horrible deep gurgling noise, quickly becoming a painful choking sound. Half conscious of the vomit blocking his windpipe, he struggled and squirmed inside his sleeping bag unable to breath, unable to remember where he was and unable to unfasten the zip. Rolling onto his stomach he let wave after wave of vomit rush from his mouth, splashing back into his eyes and hair and, when at last he felt it was over, dropping his head and letting his chin rest in the pool of sick around him, too weak to move. As he rested he began to feel the unmistakable stirrings in his colon of an unstoppable surge of diarrhoea. His sphincter (see front cover illustration) was useless against the fast approaching tidal wave. Now more awake he was able to unzip the sleeping bag and scrambled twenty or so metres from the jeep. Whipping down his trousers he was just in time to save them from the awful yellow liquid that was uncontrollably purging itself from him. He was finding it hard to squat though as his head was spinning, and although the diarrhoea was still shooting out of him he felt he was going to vomit again. Crumpling onto his side, his guts convulsing, his stomach retching, he thought, I've been fucking poisoned, but he could not have guessed by who or rather by what. Geral felt the overpowering need to put his head on the cool ground and close his eyes, and it was there, in a puddle of his own shit and vomit, that he fell sleep for a second time that night. It was to be a much deeper and darker sleep than anything he had ever experienced before.

Back by the jeep the Goleo continued to look up at Mars. 'I wonder what it is like there,' it pondered. 'I would so love to visit some time.' The Goleo was so lost in its galactic dreaming that it didn't notice the small white forms hopping towards the collapsed Geral, nor did it pay any attention to the sounds of quiet industry continuing through the night.

The sun was high when Geral awoke to find himself laid out amongst the wildflowers. It didn't take him long to remember the dreadful night he had had. Slowly rising to his feet he found he was a little shaky and had a pretty bad headache, but none of the terrible cramps and spasms he had experienced during the night. Looking around for signs of last night's illness, he could find none. 'That's not so strange,' he murmured and put it down to dogs or birds eating it in the night. The only evidence that it was not all a dream were the dried dribbles of sick down his tee-shirt, and light yellow splash- es up his trouser legs. But as he slowly walked back over towards his jeep a new thought sprang into his mind, 'I am going to give the company a call. It is time to go back to sea,' and within a couple of minutes he was in the jeep and on his way, spurred on by a new urge to get back on the high seas as quickly as he could.

As the sound of the jeep's engine faded into the distance the Goleo sighed, its insides hanging out behind it and the tracks from the jeeps tyre running right over the back part of its body.

'Mars will be at its closest soon, and I so wanted to visit it, but I feel I shall be dead in a short time,' it lamented.