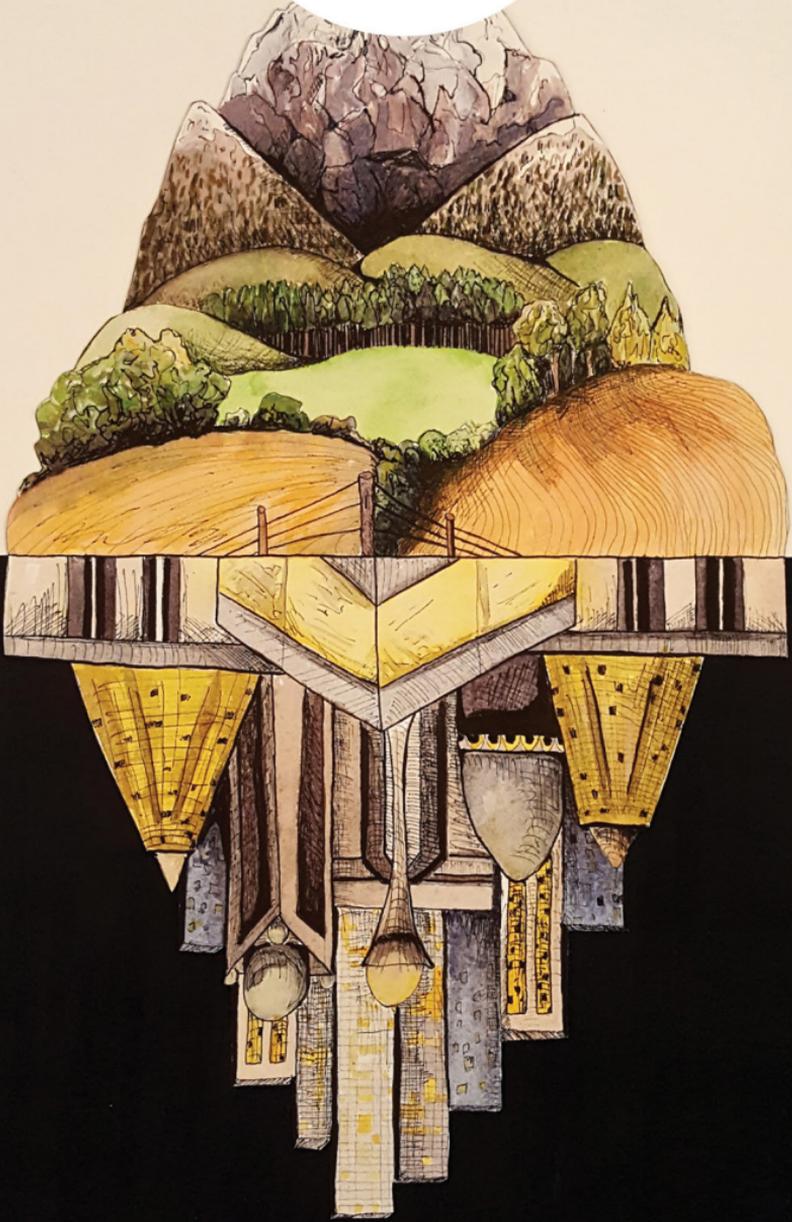


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SAMAL
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by

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When the building started to sway, Tolkin, who sat in the cubicle next to mine, grabbed my arm and pulled me down to the floor and told me to hold her ankle as we crawled to the nearest interior wall. We were dressed alike, in shiny white blouses, tight black pencil skirts, and pantyhose—we had gone to the bazaar together—though she was more beautiful. Finally, with my kneecaps sore and cold from the tile floor and my thumb and wrist bent oddly from gripping Tolkin’s thin leg, we got to the wall. It was a flimsy thing, like everything else the building was made of, and there probably wasn’t much point in making the effort to reach it, but somewhere in our hearts we were still socialist subjects needing to follow some—any—protocol to make us feel less scared. Everyone from the whole telephone floor was now lined up against it.

“In the Soviet era,” one older woman with hair dyed orange was saying, “this would never be happening.”

She was probably right, but not for the reasons she thought. She was lamenting that the schools now (“run by the Asians”) lacked the old disaster training, which helped to explain why we hadn’t been fast enough to drop to the floor and get under our desks, or why we hadn’t held our breath for ten seconds at a time, staggering our quick gasps with one another, and therefore we all believed we were doomed.

The “natives” leading the school system now had simply realized that much of the Soviet teachings were mind-control bullshit: army-creeping instead of kneecap-crawling wouldn’t have made the smallest difference. What was different was that the buildings were much taller now. After Independence, President (he had a name, but everyone simply referred to him as “*Prezidyent*”) had demanded a capital in the heart of the country, and selected a gray, wind-torn Soviet company town for his dream. Within ten years the city’s plat was doubled, the virgin portion filled in with buildings made of tile and glass of all colors, light shows and LED screens, immense bridges with iron ornaments, broad streets, new cars, and massive, blocks-long government buildings styled to hearken to both Stalinist Moscow and Washington D.C.

We, we and the whole building, swayed left, then right, in terrifying jerks. Our building was so tall that there wasn’t any debris to hit the windows—there were hardly any trees in the new section anyway—but we all had the same unspoken fear: that it was so cheaply built that a wind as strong as this could blow out the windows, douse us all in broken glass, and expose us to the frigid, powerful, high-up winter wind. Or, that at any moment the foundation would crack, and with one more gust, the whole thirty stories would capsize as if on a hinge. Tolkin placed her

hand on top of mine, squeezing my knuckles with her efforts to grip. It was delicate and soft.

“Promise me that everything will be okay,” she said. I wanted to. Instead I nodded, saying no words. I thought of my family, what shame I would bring on them if I died on the twenty-seventh story of a Capital skyscraper, wearing a synthetic-satin blouse, tight Polyester skirt, and makeup.

Back in the village, there was a joke that I couldn’t tell the different between rain and hail hitting the wool roof of my family’s yurt. From late May until early October each year, we lived in a *kiiz-ui*, “felt house,” while the cattle and sheep in my father’s charge grazed the high altitude pastures, where the grass grew above my waist. At that elevation, there were regular, nearby storms, whose loud claps of thunder had provoked the nearest thing I knew to the fear I felt now. None of us had ever been struck by lightning, though one of my father’s mares had and died.

During storms, I had to crack open the yurt’s two layers of doors, one woven grass and the other wooden, in order to peek out and answer for myself the question that my family, by then collected on the felt rug by the stove to keep warm, knew the answer to instantly.

“Samal!” they would yell in unison as the wet, cold air blew in. “Close the door!”

We ate our dinner, bread and butter and meat and potatoes, sitting on the felt rug around a low wooden table built by my father. The teakettle boiled by the heat of the stove. When we were finished, my mother wiped off the vinyl tablecloth and folded it, my father tilted up the table against the wall, and my brother and I unwound the bedrolls and lay them out in one long line, all their edges touching.

Sometimes after it hailed we woke up to snow, even in July.

In early October, we drove all the livestock down from the summer camp on horseback and returned to living in our house in the village. Every year I would catch my mother in the kitchen pouring tea and microwaving plov to serve to her clansmen from down the street, sneaking unladylike shots of Kazakh vodka (which came in cans back then), and laughing over forkfuls:

“Samal can’t hear the difference between rain and hail! She has to open the door and see it for herself to know!”

By the time I left for Capital, I had figured out a trick: if I placed my hand, palm-flat, against the wool roof, I could feel the difference. Hail bounced off like tiny rubber balls against concrete; rain drops collapsed into splotches.

But having one trick didn’t make up for having no memory for sounds. I was still useless for holding an ear against the water tank and knocking to find out whether the water level had dropped. I couldn’t tell you whether the solar groundwater pump was humming in a working way or in a broken way or in an off way. My father could tell if there was a leak in the irrigation ditch as soon as we’d turned off the truck; I had to get close enough to see the whirlpool drawing down into the hole. I had only learned to call cows by memorizing the shape of my mouth and the feeling of my tongue as I repeated my father’s call: “WAY-OOOOOOH!” Filling the truck up with gas, I couldn’t hear the change to gurgling that signaled a full tank. I could pass the task off to anyone else, telling them simply, “fill until the sound changes,” and they would get

it right on the first try. But every time I did it, I either turned on the car and found the tank still half-empty, or overfilled until the gas flowed out onto my gloved hand.

Of course, when I drove around for the day with my hand smelling of fuel, I knew exactly what had happened. I could recognize smells just fine. I could tell a true cedar, harvested by my brother, from a juniper grown at a farm in China and milled for fence posts, with my eyes closed. And in the Capital now I could walk into the stairwell of my apartment building and know whether the cafeteria on the ground floor was selling squash or mutton dumplings for dinner.

I'd come to the Capital six months ago. For years I had been dreaming of how much easier, more fun, and more interesting life would be here. I wanted an apartment with city heat and a job in an office. In the Capital there would be no need for a memory for sounds: all the sounds were man-made and unnecessary, extraneous. Everything had been engineered by people. Clubs, skyscrapers, buses, cars...I loved the world made by man.

For the first few months I was here, I was sure I wanted to live in the man-made place forever. Now I was feeling less convinced.

My father is the foreman of the Western Experimental Range, the *ZapEksZon*, one of the ranches that were developed in my country, Kazakhstan, around the time they began to build the Capital. After Independence, the old government collective farms were dissolved, and one way or another, almost all the livestock in the country died. Some people had no money for feed; others had no idea how to take care of stock. However it happened, suddenly we went from a country full of cows and sheep

to a starving country.

Some herders revived their work as small businesses, and continue their profession to this day in much the same way it was practiced by our ancestors a thousand years ago. But my father heard about a couple of large operations that were getting started with funds from rich countries with the goal of creating a real meat industry for the region, and got himself hired on. Unlike the other herders, who might be in charge of thirty or forty sheep, who have no fences or infrastructure or staff, and who share pastures communally, my father, Bulat, has the exclusive use of fifteen thousand acres and the charge of four hundred fat cattle. He has barbed wire, electric fences, fiberglass water tanks, and two staff members, not counting me and my brother, Ulan.

He also has a truck. When I went to the livestock bazaar growing up, there were always sheep being forced into the trunks of old, miniature-hatchback Ladas. The only trucks besides ours in this country seem to belong to the American military, and I never even saw one of them until I got to the Capital. We have a Toyota with a white sticker in the corner of the windshield: "From the People of Japan," under a red dot. Growing up I didn't know what it said, but now that I'm learning English, I know, and I've noticed other stickers, on all the equipment. The welder says, "From the People of Germany," my father's laptop says, "From the People of Korea," and every single T-post has a little American flag sticker.

Unlike me, my father has a perfect memory for sounds. He can tell the cows apart by the timber of their *möö*. He can tell if a horse is lame by the rhythm in which its feet touch stone. He especially loves the sound of wind. My name, *Samal*, means wind. My brother's, *Ulan*, is a

name from Kyrgyzstan, our neighboring country to the south. It is the name of a special kind of wind that blows east across Lake Issyk-Kul. I suspect that if my father goes to Lake Issyk-Kul, he will be able to tell the difference between a regular *shamal* (the Kyrgyz word for *samal*) and an *ulan*.

The name Ulan, a special wind, compared to Samal, the ordinary wind, might make it seem like my father prefers my brother to me. But he doesn't: he is even rare among Kazakh fathers in this way. He always treated me no differently than his son. He taught me to do all the ranch tasks as a young girl. He wanted me to live just like he does, in the village in the winter and on the pasture in the summer, to marry Eldar, and to take over his business.

By the time I left, I was pretty handy, as long as you factored out my memory for sounds. I was good on a horse and thorough with fencing. Kazakhstan is a country where women are assumed to be abysmal drivers, but everyone on the ranch and in my village knew that I was a good one, since I was used to controlled bouncing in four-wheel-drive as we crossed the wide, wide steppe pastures.

My favorite part of the work on the pasture was that at the top of the tallest foothill on the range, on the Toyota radio, you could pick up TGFM, Radio Tengri, all the way from Karaganda, playing American hits from every decade. When we moved the cows down to the lower country in the fall, I was always disappointed not to hear "Band on the Run" anymore.

It was to the tune of TGFM, in the cab of the Toyota, that Eldar and I snuck our first kiss. Eldar is one of my father's hired hands, a herder by birthright from a neighboring village, who heard that the *ZapEksZon* paid better than ordinary herding. Eldar was my first love, and

my father was in love with him too: he loved him as a son and wanted to see him become one.

For two months after I moved to the Capital, I tried to convince Eldar to move here too. I arrived in April with five hundred American dollars. It's a lot of money by almost any standard in this country—my father is wealthy—but it went quickly here in this city that even Americans find expensive, once I found a room to rent (the living room of an old woman's two-room in the dilapidated Soviet section) and bought some new clothes for job hunting. Then I learned that it was hard to get a job, especially if you had never gone to university. In the village, people had treated me with respect; many had been jealous of my ties to the *ZapEksZon*. But in the Capital people looked at me with looks of pity, as if I were just another one of the shabby, uneducated village people who comes to wander around the city as if it were a museum.

Perhaps I was one. I did wander around the city like that, stopping in my tracks to say *uauuuuuu* to the glassy new buildings, the brand new monuments, the LED billboards. I knew nothing more impressive than the lighted pyramid building I saw along my bus route, nothing more beautiful than the national patterns cut into the grass around the monument of the golden egg in the city center, and nothing more delicious than *gamburgers* from *Xapðeec*, Hardee's, the American restaurant adjacent to every gas station in the Capital. I was sure that all the man-made effects were things I had been deprived my whole life, and that I had to make up for my delay. But in the end, the only job I could find was outdoors: selling iced tea on the street. I brought home a pittance, a fraction of what my father paid Eldar, and usually in coins.

I learned that the way people survive in such an

expensive city as this is to tune out the attractions and live as though they were still in the village, where there's nothing to spend your money on but flour and carrots. So, much of my life was not so different. On Sundays I still rolled out dough and baked the same bread that would go stale over the course of the week, round loaves getting smaller and smaller as I tore off chunks to eat with jam until it was time to make more. There was the same hard water coming from the showerhead, making my skin break out in groups of tender zits. The difference was that it was a real shower, with a bathtub I could practically lie down in. My family just got running water in our house three years ago—until then, we had pumped it out of the frost-free, in front of the house along the dirt street, carried it into the house in buckets, and heated it up over a wood fire—and we had bought a shower at the bazaar, a Chinese-made freestanding one that looked like a space pod, or a giant prescription pill.

Even though my life was not as glamorous as I expected, I got used to the city. And I got tired of the repetitive conversations I had with Eldar as I tried to goad him, always conducted at five-thirty, before he went to work.

“What will I do in the Capital? I've lived in the village all my life,” he would say.

“I could ask you the same question and say the same thing,” I'd reply. “But I'm surviving.”

Something made a cracking sound. We swayed again. Two slim computer monitors fell flat onto the desks in front of them, three wheeled chairs rolled across the room, and a phone—my phone—fell out of its cradle and onto the ground, filling the room with its dial tone. I froze, calculating whether I should stay safe against

the wall or whether everyone on the floor was going to be annoyed with me if I didn't crawl over and replace it. Tolkin squeezed my wrist and whimpered, so I stayed. Weather pelted the windows.

After two months at the iced tea stand, job-hunting in all my free hours, I had gotten this job, in “*P-Arrrrrr*,” which just meant that I was a telemarketer of smartphones, something I still couldn't afford. But, finally, I worked in one of the brand new skyscrapers in the brand new city, with its bright lighting, elevators, and mod furniture, and I had a little spare money to go to clubs and English class. I quickly learned that going to clubs wasn't fun if you couldn't dance or flirt, and neither was getting up early to try to keep up a stagnant relationship with Eldar, who never wanted to leave the *ZapEksZon*, who couldn't appreciate all the new things I was seeing in the Capital, things he couldn't even dream of and didn't care to. I decided for myself that the relationship wasn't over, but it was at an *ellipsis*, a Russian word that I liked because it was the same in English. *Ellipsis*.

Then I met Zephyr.

It was Capital Day, not only the anniversary of the re-christening of Capital but also the birthday of *nash Prezidyent*. It is Kazakhstan's Fourth of July—fireworks everywhere, even in my small village, traditional dance shows, and electronic music shows. Nowhere is it celebrated more than in the Capital, where everyone has the day off to wander the parks and promenades of the city, and every park is outfitted with a sound system and has concerts all day, plus *batuti*, bouncy castles for kids. The firework show at midnight lasts an hour.

(All the other days of the year, the city streets are empty: everyone is at work or at home, and the weather

is terrible—it is, after all, the coldest capital city in the world, and racked constantly by steppe winds that blow through it like death.)

Tolkin and I met up on our side of the city and took the bus downtown. It was crowded with people dressed to celebrate: little children in their best clothes, girls our age in tube tops and miniskirts.

We walked down the Arbat, the pedestrian mall downtown, which runs between the country's most important buildings—the bank headquarters, the telecom companies, and the oil firms. Our skyscraper is a kilometer or so off this main drag, surrounded by empty, tilled-up earth and cranes, construction paused until another upturn in the economy. The walking mall was filled with vendors: face painters, clowns on stilts, art galleries in tents, rollerblade rentals. We each knew that neither of us had the money for any of it, so we walked on by, admiring the largess of others.

We passed the monument of the golden egg, and thought of going up in the elevator, but the line was wrapped all the way around the lawn with the national patterns, and it would have taken all our pocket money. Passing through the circle of restaurants so expensive that we reasoned only Americans could eat at them—until we saw two of our own nationals, dressed in suits, heading in for Georgian—we arrived at the mall in the shape of a giant yurt. The steps leading to its entrance were crowded with families and friends shooting photos of one another. Tolkin held out her camera and snapped a photo of us flashing peace signs in front of the mega-yurt, then posted it to *Odnoklassniki*, Russian Facebook.

We wound through the mall, circling every floor though neither of us dreamed of going into any of the stores, until we reached the top floor, the food court. It

was chock full of people; every store had a long line. We sat down at a white plastic table whose other two seats were occupied by a little boy eating fries and his grandfather, who was taking photos of him. Tolkin took a photo of me, one hand on my purse, the other flashing another peace sign. We looked at our dining options.

“This is all expensive, and bad quality,” she said.

“*Iye*,” I agreed in Kazakh. “Let’s just go to Hardee’s. They have the best burgers.”

We left the mall and walked the hour back down the pedestrian mall, across one of the smaller bridges, until we got to the nearest gas station. It was only a little crowded.

Zephyr (“Zefeerrrrrr,” if you say it with my Kazakh accent) had come to the Capital not by bus, as I did, or by train from Shymkent, as Tolkin did, but on a surfboard at the end of a kite, screaming across the steppe through the straight, concrete canals of our Lenin-Desert Irrigation Project (*LenPustOro*). He had already tried to break the sailing speed record in California State, on the canals of the Central Valley Project and the All-American Canal in the Imperial Valley, only to miss the record by three miles per hour. He decided that he needed a bigger, emptier desert, and a wider, straighter canal.

Kazakhstan was the suggestion of his buddy, Ian, who was sitting with him at Hardee’s. After we got our burgers, we sat down in the empty seats at their table. They seemed surprised at first that we would invite ourselves to their space: I saw them look at each other and suck in their lips, and Ian mouth, “just roll with it.”

“You is Americans?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Zephyr, speaking very slowly. “I am Zephyr. This is Ian.”

“My name Samal,” I said. “She is Tolkin. She not

speaks English.” Tolkin waved at Zephyr and Ian when she heard her name. The Americans waved back.

Continuing slowly, Zephyr told us that when Ian suggested Kazakhstan, he had never heard of the place. On Google Earth it looked huge and barren and pockmarked, he told us, holding his hands stretched out in the air and repeating, “Empty!”

“It is because our *prezidyent* build faster than they do photos,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Ian. On the internet map, the Capital still looked small and gray and Soviet. It did not yet show the skyscrapers with glass of every color, the compounds of condominiums with names like “Venetsiya” and “Parizh,” styled to match their European counterparts, with outsized plaster florets and images of Europe screenprinted on their banners.

“Then we zoomed in on the *LenPustOro*,” Zephyr continued. “It was perfect: long, wide, and straight, and the longest in the world—a thousand miles!”

“One thousand six hundred kilometers,” Ian clarified.

“Yes,” I said. The *LenPustOro* passed through the *ZapEksZon*. Zephyr had probably zipped by my father’s cattle.

“He broke the record today,” Ian said.

“Uuuuuuu,” I said. Then I explained to Tolkin in Kazakh, and she said it too.

“I sailed down the canal on the kite,” Zephyr explained, and Ian followed me in the truck.”

“You have truck?”

“We rented it. We can show it to you, it’s in the parking lot outside.” We were finished with our burgers, so we cleaned up our trash and followed them. They showed us their rented black Suburban with a trailer hitched to it, and the surfboard and kite inside.

“Uuuuuu,” Tolkin and I said again.

“We’re here for two more weeks,” Zephyr said to me before he and Ian got into their truck. “Let’s get together.” He and I traded cell phone numbers, and we all waved goodbye to each other. Tolkin and I walked to the bus, and they drove to their hotel in the Suburban.

As the sound of weather hitting the windows intensified, I thought of when I first started working in the skyscraper and how I liked everything man-made so much that I wanted the sound of the wind licking the windows to continue all day. Now I wanted nothing more than to feel it abate, for it to lift its heavy burden off of us. Tolkin had progressed, in her fear, to hugging my shoulders. The armpits of her bazaar blouse were wet with sweat, and it was making my shoulders cold.

Zephyr sent me an SMS before I even got home that night: *nice to meet u! want to go to a club sometime this week?* I jumped up in excitement. A man wanted to take me out to a club, and an American, even better! (I had also thought that “club” started with a K. He was improving my English already!) I texted Tolkin and told her about my date, then stayed up all night imagining the life we could have together: living in one of the fancy apartments downtown, going to parties patronized by Americans and rich Kazakhs, taking him home to my village, my parents looking at him in awe, unable to communicate, riding horseback across the *Zona* with him, getting jealous looks from Eldar—oh, poor Eldar. Now I felt guilty. I hadn’t thought of him in a while.

We met at the club that Tuesday. In my apartment after work I fretted over what to wear—my one dress, or my one pair of short shorts? What kind of woman was he

looking for? A good, pure Kazakh girl, or one who was *gotova na vsyo*—DTF? Afraid of the latter option, I wore my dress. It seemed a little fancy for the club, but I didn't have many options.

As always, the dance floor was full of businessmen and scantily-clad girls my age who were trying to find a rich husband. I stood on the edge and tried to rock to the music, to make my body as invulnerable as possible while still passing for dancing.

"Come on, don't be so stiff!" Zephyr said, trying to lead me out further onto the floor. I let him lead me, then press his body against me, all the while feeling awkward for having worn my fancy dress embroidered in national patterns, and worrying how difficult it would be to climb out of it gracefully if he did expect to have sex back in his hotel room later, and how painful and scary sex would be. Eventually he gave up on dancing with me.

"Let's go have a drink!" he said, taking my hand and leading me to the bar.

"Okay," I said, but he didn't hear me. At the counter he ordered two of something by pointing at the menu. I sipped, but didn't like it much.

"So, Samal," he said, putting his hand on my knee (I tried my hardest not to flinch), "Does your name have a meaning in Kazakh?"

"It mean 'wind,'" I said.

"Really?" He broke into a smile. "That's what *my* name means!"

"In what language?" I asked.

"In English," he said. "It's a special kind of wind—like a soft, gentle breeze."

"*Uuuuu*," I said. I wondered if a *zephyr* was more special than an *ulan*. I wondered if we were soulmates.

“Are you from the Capital!” he asked, shouting over the music.

“No,” I shouted back. “I come from village!”

“What does your family do!”

“My father—herder!”

“So they are poor!”

“No we are rich!”

He looked at me strangely, like, how could a herder be rich? Then I realized he might be looking at me like I was naive and provincial. He didn’t seem very interested in my family’s work, so I changed the subject to him. “You from which state?”

“California! Southern California!”

“I only know New York, Chicago, Las Vegas! You are close to them?”

“I am close to Los Angeles—LA! You know it?”

“I have heard it! Hollywood!”

“Yes, Hollywood and traffic! Lots of cars!”

“Like this Capital! We have many cars here!”

“No, we have millions of cars!”

“Uuuuuu!”

He told me about how he taught surfing lessons and worked at a sandwich restaurant. I was confused when he said he worked at the sandwich restaurant because how could his salary be enough for a plane ticket to Kazakhstan, plus the Suburban and the trailer and the hotel? I thought surely he was a *biznesmen*. The drinks at this club alone were 2000 Tenge, more than I made in hours of work, and I worked in an office.

He told me about how he started kitesurfing because it was the world’s fastest way to travel without a motor, and told stories of the different rivers and canals he’d surfed,

the injuries he'd suffered, the close calls and escapades. He told me about the other countries he had visited—Mexico, Egypt, India. By the end of the night, my mouth was dried out from saying “*Uuuuu*.”

We left the club and walked a few blocks. I did not want to go home with him, but we were walking in the direction of his hotel and he seemed to be texting Ian. I felt frozen inside. Then we turned onto a main street and a bus pulled up at the stop on the corner.

“There is my bus! Goodnight, thank you!” I said, my dress flouncing as I waved and sprung onto the bus, which was going in the wrong direction, too quickly for him to get a kiss on me.

“Oh—goodbye!” he said. I got a seat on the bus and thought, maybe he will think that is normal for Kazakh girls.

We went out again two nights later, to a different club, then again two nights later, then again on the weekend, when he took me to the expensive Georgian restaurant on the Arbat. Our meal cost sixty American dollars, so I let him kiss me that night, tongue and all, right there on the walking mall—shame, big shame, for a Kazakh girl. But my family was far away and I was playing by American rules. American rules, and my own made-up ones.

The building was still swaying, but it seemed as though the movements were slower and steadier, and their distance smaller. The sound on the windows suddenly became different—like little splashes, rather than firm attacks. Tolkin relaxed her grip on me and I quickly stood up, realizing that I might have just heard the difference between hail and rain. Sure enough, I could see that there was hail on the ground, and drops of water

on the windows. Tolkin pulled on my hand, urging me to sit down. I obliged, smiling at my achievement.

When Zephyr left, I cried all night for two nights. Somewhere in my head I thought he was going to propose to me before he left, bring me home to California, proud of his Kazakh bride. Or at least promise to come back and see me, and suggest that he would propose then. I had adjusted my daydreams of our life together: they had started to take place in his Orange County, rather than in the expat section of the Capital, and I pictured celebrating American holidays with his family—Halloween, Thanksgiving. How much they would love their daughter-in-law, a good, pure, hardworking girl. Even though when I asked him about holidays, he shrugged, and when I asked him about his family, he shrugged. “They live in Reno.”

I had started to wonder if he wasn't very smart, but still I kept up the daydream. It's okay for a wife to be smarter than her husband! I liked the feeling of impressing Tolkin with my stories of our dates over tea in the cafeteria after work. Now he had been gone for months. He hadn't written to me at all, hadn't even liked any of the photos I posted to Facebook. I still passed my bus rides to and from work thinking about the future I could have had with him. What better future could I hope for than eating deep-fried turkey in Reno, California with my American husband?

Now that things seemed to be calming down, we were more shaking than swaying: the building was returning to its correct position in small, quick bursts. They were somehow more frightening than the large sways had been, even though they were a good sign. Tolkin and I leaned hard into the wall, hands clasped, pinning ourselves.

Suddenly there was an electric buzz in the air, and soon it crackled with a voice.

“This is TGFM, Radio Tengri, broadcasting from beautiful, windy Karaganda! Up next—” the voice cut out. I sighed in disappointment, but as I tried to will it back, other memories flooded my head. I thought of Eldar sneaking into the pod-shower one afternoon when my parents were out on the pasture, and the squeaking sound my feet made against its plastic floor when I jumped in with him, my giddy naked body against his. I thought of driving across the steppe with Eldar, and the sound of the Toyota’s high idle as he pointed to a long abandoned irrigation ditch and said, “You pass all this country and you think, it’s natural, pristine, untouched. Then you look harder and you realize that every square meter of it has been altered by humans.”

The crackling noise returned as the building settled down from its shaking. As it cleared, I heard the high whine of a synth trilling. The station was a minute in to “Band on the Run.” The rain was letting up and the wind had quelled; it was sweeping across the building like a tongue on an envelope. Deciding it was safe, I was the first person to stand up. At first the others shot me worried looks, but soon they stood up too, gingerly. As they began to put the fallen furniture, monitors, empty drawers, and telephone receivers back in their places, I smoothed out my skirt, gave Tolkin a kiss on each of her cheeks, switched my heels for the flats hidden in my desk drawer, and began running down the twenty-seven flights of stairs. I would live in a man-made place forever, but not in this Capital.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROLINE TRACEY graduated from Yale University with a BA in Russian Literature. In 2014-15 she held a Fulbright research grant to Kyrgyzstan to conduct research about grazing law and environmental ethics in Kyrgyz literature. She currently works as a cattle ranch hand in New Mexico, and in fall 2016 she will begin a PhD in Geography at the University of California, Berkely. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *[PANK]*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Cossack Review* (Pushcart nominated), *Sugar House Review*, *Public Books*, *Nowhere*, and elsewhere.

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SARAH SANDERS received her BFA from the University of Minnesota and currently resides in New Orleans where she continues to practice her art. Her work ranges from pen and ink to wood carvings. Sarah strives to capture the realities of the world while incorporating extraordinary storytelling elements to break through the restraints of society.