

JOHN LEARY

WHY WE WENT TO CHINA

EVERYONE TOLD US NOT TO GO TO CHINA. My dentist told me I was making a mistake. My wife's sister said, "You're crazy. And really, I think you're being a bit selfish." Our upstairs neighbor said, "You're taking chances with things that are not yours to take chances with." My boss said, "Do what you want, but think about how people will look at you when we're dishing out promotions next winter." My mother sighed and said nothing. Everyone was scared of SARS. Before leaving, we bought fifteen mini-bottles of hand purifier and packed them in our pockets.

Bad things can happen when you travel. I started to worry the morning we left, as we were packing. My daughter Nell came into our bedroom and complained that she was hot. She found Maria, my wife, in our bathroom. Maria told Nell she could change out of her heavy, long-sleeved shirt because she was going to be wearing a sweater and a jacket on the plane. Nell was wearing her favorite shirt, the white one with the roses on it. She's five, and we adopted a policy of not arguing with her when she sets her mind to wearing something. Nell pulled her shirt over her head, or at least over her face, but the collar was up around her hair, so her arms were trapped sticking straight up as she came skipping through our bedroom. She skips when she is happy. There was a camera bag on the floor, and a strap, and she missed the bag but tripped on the strap and fell forward. Because her arms were trapped above her she could not brace herself and I saw her fall face forward onto the edge of an open drawer. It seemed she slammed into the sharp edge, cutting her face just below her right eye. I leapt up from the bed where I'd been sitting reading the China guidebook and went a step and a half to her

and knelt and turned her over and she smiled. There was no cut, no blood. Somehow, she missed the drawer. She looked at me and sighed an exaggerated sigh: “Whew! That was close.”

I’m a cross-regional compliance manager for a multinational corporation, so I travel three weeks out of every four. I try to take Maria and our two girls with me when I travel, because most months that is the only way we can spend time together. We build up frequent flyer miles and then take our vacations overseas. Our trip to China was a vacation—Maria’s brother Steve lived in Beijing, with his wife Giselle and two sons. For a couple years we’d been planning to meet in Beijing then fly west to Xinjiang and Kashgar, the ancient city that was once a stop on the Silk Road. As we were making our final preparations, SARS became more and more of a story. We decided to go anyway. When we left California on a Saturday morning, the Chinese government was denying SARS was an issue. By the time we landed in Beijing on Sunday night, the city’s vice-mayor and the national Minister of Health had resigned. Steve mentioned this shortly after we landed, and I felt all the muscles tighten in my neck, my back, my chest.

BEIJING

OUR FIRST DAY IN BEIJING, we went to dinner at a Beijing duck restaurant. Steve and Giselle invited some friends and their kids, including a biologist visiting from California. We discussed SARS, and the biologist said he did a lot of research before deciding to come to China. He said that the odds of him running into someone in Beijing who could infect him with SARS was very small, like winning the lottery but in reverse. We showed him all the hand purifier we were carrying. He smiled thinly and said that using hand purifier is like washing your hands with a Jell-O shooter. He said that the alcohol will only make the virus angry.

We had two enormous tables to ourselves and a team of waitresses hovering nearby. Steve said that the restaurant usually had a two-hour wait for dinner, but because of SARS, we were the only ones there. My father-in-law had been in the Foreign Service, so Maria and Steve had learned Mandarin as children. I was amazed how much Mandarin Maria had retained. We had walked through the Beijing dirt market with a group of tourists that morning and she greeted one of the vendors in Mandarin, but the woman looked at her with the big stone face. Maria turned to the group and said, “Sorry, I think maybe I just asked her for a condom.” She was relaxed and seemed to enjoy herself almost the entire trip.

During dinner Steve received a call on his cell phone. Grim news: a group of German tourists had become infected with SARS in Xi'an. They had been put on a bus and shipped back to Beijing. All twenty-four of them were infected, one had already died, and they were locked up in quarantine in one of Beijing's main hospitals. Apparently there were only six beds left at that particular hospital. I ordered another beer and drank it quickly.

Back at Steve and Giselle's, the evening paper reported 1,959 cases of SARS in China, and 109 new cases in Beijing that day, bringing Beijing's total to 448. The death toll in China stood at 86. The paper didn't say how many of these were children.

I couldn't sleep that night. When I travel, I dream of car wrecks on lonely African roads. That night I tossed and turned, worrying about SARS. I thought of packing up and going home, but feared it was too late for that. Midway through the night my daughter Josie couldn't sleep, so she snuggled into the bed between her mother and me. The rising and falling of her breathing soothed my way to sleep.

Before we left California, I took the girls to their doctor to get the latest inoculations. Their pediatrician disapproved of me taking them to China. She is a beautiful Chilean woman, and I always have trouble disagreeing with her. I tried to explain, "Look at it this way. Imagine you are in a field, you are standing in a field. And now imagine the field is in Bulgaria, a farm outside of Haskovo. The field is plowed, fallow; all around you is the fragrant earth. You stand there in the field with your daughter's hand in yours then the two of you bend down and look at the dirt. The dirt seems an awful lot like the dirt in your backyard in California, the same sort of grayish brown. She turns over a clod or two to look for bugs, and you hear a sound, a huffing. It's the sound of sawing. You look around and your daughter points and there at one edge of the field is a man sawing down a tree. You walk toward him, stepping awkwardly over the heavy clods, until you get near enough to comfortably watch. Your daughter points to the sawdust piling near the base of the tree, 'Look!' she says, 'Tree snow!' Now: does the scene have more resonance because it happens in a foreign country—do you remember it better or more fondly than if she said it around here?" She looked at me and did not smile. So many of the parents she meets each day do nothing but make her weary.

On our way to dinner our last night in Beijing, we stopped at a traffic light and I saw two police vans parked at odd angles in front of an apartment building. The vans' flashing lights at first distracted me from seeing a person standing about five yards in front of the vans. The per-

son stood motionless, arms lifted away from his body, facing the vans as if awaiting instructions. His face was obscured by a surgical mask, his head and hair by a white plastic hood and his body by layers of plastic. He seemed to be wrapped in cheap plastic, like plastic grocery bags or the plastic you use to wrap Christmas fruitcakes. The plastic was poorly wrapped—parts of it were floating in the breeze. He stood there in the dying light of the day, wordless and still, facing the police vans as if to move might cause him to come unwrapped. It was the sort of eerie tableau that would give me nightmares for years if I were a kid. I directed the kids' attention elsewhere, but of course they looked right at the plastic person and started asking questions. I tried to think of the most innocuous answers I could, but Maria was frank: she told them about SARS, and they didn't panic. It's possible that they simply didn't absorb the information properly. Or maybe they thought that risks, a danger like SARS, were a natural consequence of international travel, much in the same way as I want to associate traveling with being with them.

We gave the children the best answers we could about the plastic figure, but Josie wasn't satisfied. She's eight but she still thinks we should know everything. She asked one more time, "But what is he doing, why is he there?" and I thought of the best answer I could. I said, "He's obviously some sort of monster, like a werewolf. And the authorities sprayed him with some sort of marshmallow coating which has now hardened and so he can't move. The police are just waiting for him to fall over then they'll pick him up and take him away." Josie said, "Daddy..." in a warning voice, meaning that she realized I didn't know the answer, she realized I wasn't worried about it, and that was okay.

That same night, Steve told us that the rumor about the German tourists had turned out to be only a rumor. He mentioned that some other rumors were going around—SARS is biological warfare spread by the U.S. as a penalty for not adequately supporting the Gulf War; SARS is spread by the Russians, just because. I didn't sleep any easier.

URUMQI

MARIA AND I HAD PACKED OUR SUITCASES at Steve's in the morning full of excitement for our flight to Urumqi. Amazingly, "Urumqi" is pronounced "Wu-lu-MOO-chee." The explanation has something to do with Chinese and Turkic and the Roman alphabet, but I don't remember it. We felt like we were going to the ends of the earth, far away where nothing would be familiar, and something as simple as the taste of a butter-rum Lifesaver could flood the mind with associations, a mixture of homesickness and longing and satisfaction with one's adventure. Josie and Nell could feel it, they felt

the anticipation, and stayed at our sides, holding our hands, as we entered the airport.

Inside I saw something I've never seen in an airport before: a near-riot of people at the international departures desks, Chinese travelers in surgical masks pushing and shoving, trying to get the attention of a ticket agent, people tossing paper tickets at the agents, people pressing and panicking. The kids stuck close to us as we stopped and stared—it was like watching a slow-motion car accident over and over.

At that time, no one knew how SARS spread, no one knew whether masks were effective. One friend of Steve's told us that she thought the masks were only worthwhile if someone tried to cough in your mouth (I think I saw that on late-night German TV once) but we all wore masks in airports. Nell hated her mask—she kept tugging at it, pulling it down. Maria and I tried to reason with her, to tell her it was very important that she keep her mask on. She said, "It makes my face hot and it smells bad!" Maria and I looked at each other. We could explain wearing seatbelts in cars. We could explain wearing jackets in a rainstorm, or wearing oven mitts when taking brownies out of the oven. But we couldn't explain to her that we thought she needed to wear the mask because we were afraid she would die of an obscure respiratory ailment. We couldn't explain it because we both doubted the efficacy of the masks, and if it came right down to it, we couldn't promise her she would be safe.

Urumqi is a city of 1.5 million people, and the guidebook told us that it is the city farthest in the world from any ocean. From the air, we saw mostly gravel pits and boxy buildings. Upon landing, the Chinese passengers didn't clap. In some countries they do.

Some of Steve's colleagues met us at the airport and as we walked out to the parking lot, Josie held my hand. One time at the Addis Ababa airport when Josie was five she was nearly hit by a car. We had just arrived; we were crossing a street heading for a parking lot, and Josie wanted to walk with the two men who were carrying our bags, to see if she could communicate with them. She's the gregarious one in the family, always the first to communicate with new people. She dashed forward and I reached for her, the first knuckles of two fingers barely curling into the hood of her sweater. I yanked her backwards as a taxi streaked by, inches in front of her. She turned around and glared at me. I'm not sure she ever saw the taxi. I was angry and shaking and I glared back. When I could form words I said to her, "Stay close!" On vacation the girls usually stay close to us, holding our hands more in a week's vacation than they do the rest of the year.

We had a seven-hour layover in Urumqi, so Steve's colleagues loaded us into three cars, and we drove and drove. All around us Urumqi looked like a wasteland. We were never in the center of town; we seemed to loop around the bleak outskirts—lots of drab buildings, crumbling in the sort of post-Soviet affliction I always associated with National Geographic Specials on "Blighted Ukraine" or "The Belarusian Eco-Disaster." We passed factories made out of bricks, with tall brick smokestacks in their center, factory compounds guarded by dark heavy gates, like a postcard from nineteenth-century Manchester, like something from a series of Industrial Revolution trading cards.

Josie and I looked out the windows, looking for spots in the landscape where monsters might hide. Nell slumped against me, drowsy in the car. I put my arm around her, remembering the time we were in the room at the Hotel Metropole in Hanoi and Josie was saying, "Why do I have to sleep? Why do we need sleep?" It was the first day after we arrived and our internal clocks were still adjusting. All I could think to say was, "You need to sleep so you won't be sleepy tomorrow." This became a mantra in our family, we would say it to each other every night: "I need sleep so I won't be sleepy tomorrow."

We drove past gravel pits we had seen from the air. At the bottom of one I saw three people huddled around a small fire. We entered an expressway with no cars on it. We seemed to be heading farther into the middle of nowhere, with no urban center in sight. After about forty minutes we got off the expressway and passed along a bleak landscape of a fields, naked stick-trees with a few tumbling-down buildings strewn here and there—the buildings looked like they were simply resting until the wind blew them a little further along. We turned on to an unmarked dirt road and then some people emerged from the brush to greet the cars. There was no restaurant in sight. We stepped gingerly out of the cars, regaining circulation, while the greeting people led us to a bunker, sunk into the ground. I figured they had brought us here to kill us.

Instead, they served us food. Maria and Giselle and the kids were led into one room of the bunker, a room with a table on a raised platform with a karaoke TV and a large poster of Santa Claus on the back wall. The bunker's other room had a large round table adorned with local businesspeople—Steve and I were to eat with them. A wall of heated bricks separated the two rooms.

I made sure that Maria and the kids were settled in their room and went to join Steve. A waitress shut the door between the two rooms and for a moment I felt very far away from them. For some reason as I sat down I remembered the time when Maria and I were in Senegal when Josie was

a baby. Maria was changing Josie's diaper and noticed a green rash on Josie's little sausage legs. We held her up to the fluorescent guesthouse light, held her this way and that, but there it was—faint but still distinct, a green rash, a green discoloration. Josie didn't seem to be feeling any discomfort and she could move her legs just fine, but when we woke up the next morning and the rash was still there, we panicked. We took her to the hospital. This was not an easy thing to do, to call attention to ourselves in this way, to admit that we were worried about some strange foreign green rash that perhaps could only occur in Africa. At the hospital, the doctors seemed as puzzled as we were, and we weren't sure if that was a good sign or not. We spent an anxious morning and afternoon. The pediatric doctor's office was in the basement of the hospital, near the morgue. The black corpses looked gray as the interns wheeled them past us. Finally one of the interns asked to see all of Josie's clothing, and Maria brought the clothing from our hotel. The traveling onesie that Josie had worn on the airplane in was recently new, and made of a green fabric. Some of the dye had bled onto her legs. "You must always launder your items before wearing them," the intern told us. It became a family saying: "You must always launder your items."

In the bunker, the waitress placed a new course on the table every few minutes. I remembered seeing a documentary on the History Channel, a grizzled U.S. army veteran recalled trying to defend a hill during the Korean War, talking about how the Chinese "just kept coming and coming and coming." The lunch was like that. I counted 17 different entrees. We started with fruit (a local pear) and ended with soup (mutton and tomato and rice) and in between it seemed that every sort of beast and plant within a hundred mile radius had made its way onto a plate. Even so, every other plate seemed to be lamb: lamb skewers, lamb parts (intestines, stomach lining, lung), cold lamb on the bone, and with a soup of lamb-filled wontons. During our stay in Western China, we had seven meals in a row (including breakfasts) that featured lamb.

Many Chinese who work for foreign companies will choose a foreign name so it is easier for their colleagues to remember and pronounce their name. At the table we had a Mary, a James and a Peter. The young woman sitting farthest from us seemed particularly proud of her name, bobbing back and forth with anticipation of telling it to us. She spelled it for us. "S-H-I-N-O." Pronounced "Shy-no."

Our hosts plied us with red wine and some sort of alcohol they all seemed to fear and revere that smelled like paint thinner. Toward the end of the meal we spent about an hour drinking shot after shot of the stuff, telling each other we were the best friends ever. "Ever ever ever," we all mumbled. Before each shot the Chinese would bow their heads as if praying. I felt

a burning in my side and I whispered to Steve, “Is it possible for your liver to catch on fire, even though it’s inside you?” I woke up in the car Steve’s company had provided, heading back to the airport. I jerked upright, looking for Maria and the girls—sitting up so quickly caused me to black out for a moment, but Maria patted my hand. She was fine. The girls were in the front seat and turned to look at me—they seemed very amused.

When we are home we all have our conflicts, our moments of irrationality. Some morning I might walk into the living room and look behind an armchair and I’ll find a small yellow sock. And under the sock I’ll find a half-chewed chocolate that had coconut in the center, and on top of the chocolate I’ll find ants. Then I’ll stomp around and yell about responsibility, consideration, hygiene and then some more about responsibility. But when we travel together, I don’t get excited about things that might otherwise irk me for hours: the gouging taxi drivers, the lazy lying hotel desk clerks, the haphazard waiters.

KASHGAR

WHAT I EXPECTED KASHGAR TO LOOK LIKE: low brown buildings, people in long flowing robes, donkey carts, a little village that looks like something out of the illustrated Bible. But this is China, modernizing China, so it’s a modern city—there are donkeys, but they pull their carts along the edges of broad avenues. Small red taxis and mini-trucks dominate the streets. The buildings ringing the traffic circles all appear to be department stores and fast food restaurants. Slowly but steadily the old mud-brick parts of the city are being torn down and replaced with new concrete and steel buildings.

We went to the main bazaar, the Kashgar Sunday market. It was a broad maze of corridors underneath ceilings of tarpaulins and colored cloth; a wild miasma of people selling everything from screws to bread to fabric to tires.

The kids were tense at first, pressed in the crush of people, the chaos, the horns and barking and clucks and bleats and the motorcycles and cars pushing through the grudging crowd, men with carts and wheelbarrows, women with bolts of fabric and stacks of flat bread. In the middle of everything men were barbecuing lamb kebabs over open grills, pulsing clouds of smoke into the throng. Everyone pressed through, pressed against each other, pressed along. In the clutch and crush of people we held the kids tightly against us, making movement slow and awkward. People coming through the crowd with a load of goods in a cart would clear a space for themselves by saying what sounded like “Push-push-

push-push-push-push-push!" By the end of the day we were all saying it. The people were polite and beautiful; none of the vendors were obnoxious, none of the people pushed more than necessary. Eventually we became used to the press of the crowd, the pulse of the market, and we all relaxed.

My mother—the girls' grandmother—was right. There are no guardrails in these countries. There are no "wet floor" signs in their markets. There are no helmet laws, or airbags or meat inspectors or lifeguards or fire marshals or elevator inspectors. Worse, there are burly men yelling in guttural tongues and rabid cab drivers and street butchers with bloody knives and rickety scaffoldings and untethered mastiffs and lead paint and airborne pathogens, and all the while our girls stay close to us as we do our tourist duties, examining market items and trinkets, snapping photos, smiling at everyone we meet. We stopped for a moment in a narrow alley, sitting semi-hidden so we could watch the market activity without drawing attention to ourselves, and Nell rested in my lap. She played with the hair on my arms, tugging it, smoothing it.

The next day at breakfast we had the latest SARS news: there had been one hundred new cases in Beijing each day for the last several days—and several buildings and blocks of buildings (including a section of the University) had been quarantined.

We spent a morning visiting some Buddhist caves outside of Kashgar. We drove a van into a riverbed then got out and walked for a while. The riverbed was a hundred yards wide, but there were only trickles of river here and there, and enormous mud puddles. The mud was very deep, very thick, and a rich milk chocolate color. The kids quickly discovered that a cool thing to do was to take a big rock and throw it high in the air and then watch it get embedded in the mud and make magnificent patterns, like a meteor striking earth. The mud splattered a little, however, and I realized pretty quickly that we were all covered in little splatters, little dots of mud. Josie looked at me and said, "You must launder your items."

On the walk back to the van, Nell and I tried to catch a little lizard on the side of a riverbank. We tracked it to a small sandy patch. I lunged for it, lost my balance and my hand landed in a thorn bush. About forty spikes of various sizes stuck from it. I pulled the big thorns first and blood came out of the holes they left. I pulled a few more, and then Josie was yelling for help. She had walked out too far into the mud, and couldn't extract herself. She seemed to be sinking. I ran down the bank then waded out to her, and grabbed her around the waist. I tried to lift her but she didn't come unstuck. Through a combination of twisting and tugging I finally

managed to lift her, but she came right out of her shoes. I held her in the air, her stocking feet kicking, and realized I was sinking too. I thought of saying something about a mud monster grabbing my ankle but my boots were stuck and everything was happening too quickly. I tried to sling Josie over one shoulder with one free hand (the non-thorn-embedded hand) while bending over and trying to dig her rapidly-disappearing shoes out of the mud. Josie was squirming because I was holding her at an uncomfortable angle. As I managed to nearly get one of her shoes out, Steve ran up to help, I passed Josie to him, and I lost her shoe. The river could have it. Steve set Josie on the bank then leaned over to help pull me out. On the banks of the river, as we were scraping off some of the mud, we were attacked by stinging gnats. Already I was thinking of how Josie and I would tell and retell this story to Nell and Maria.

We were in a small town waiting for some of Steve's colleagues to take us to lunch, and I wandered into an open-air market in search of tweezers. They didn't seem to have any, but a few of the locals helped me buy a packet of sewing needles. Over the next several days, whenever I was waiting for something (85 percent of travel involves waiting, I often think) I would dig into my hands with the needles and extract another thorn or two. Josie and I were walking past a quiet row of shops and we stopped to look at some of the beaded Uigur hats. An old man noticed me, a round, thick guy who looked like a cross between a Uigur and a stocky Russian peasant. He took a ladies' floppy hat, white fur with black stitching, from the wall and tried to place it on my head. I leaned back, so he placed it on his own head. Then he gave us the "thumbs-up," holding his hands very tightly against his chest, raising his eyebrows for approval. Josie and I both nodded solemnly: Yes, yes, it looks very nice. We scurried away.

When we are at home the girls can sometimes be sullen, mopey, tired. We fall into routines that run on their own energy and seem to leave us drained—tired of the pace, tired of each other. Meals become routine: the morning meal is always rushed, the evening meal a mere prelude to bath/books/bedtime—it all seems drained of human interest. Sometimes we see the girls looking at us observing our daily stress and small panics. We see them look at each other—you can see the wheels turning in their heads: is this daily life?

In the van on the way back to Kashgar, Josie talked to me about walking around in the old part of Kashgar the night before. A few people appeared to be commenting on her red hair.

She asked me, "Do you think the people around here have seen red hair before?"

I said, "Maybe not."

She said, "Do you think they have seen a little girl with red hair like mine before?"

I said, "Maybe not."

She asked, "Do you think it's possible that they may think... that I'm a god?"

How do you answer that question? (I thought of several responses: "No way—gods eat all their vegetables." "Oh, yes, definitely. They will worship you as we do." "Yes, though as the Uigurs are a monotheistic people, if you wanted to rule them you would have to topple their previous god, Allah. And I'm sorry, Honey, but we really don't have time for that on this trip.") Finally I said, "Well, probably not. I think they're a little smarter than that." I wondered how much hope she was going to lodge in that one word, the "probably."

On our last day in Kashgar, one of the government officials from our lunch in Urumqi came to our hotel to escort us to the airport. Steve and Giselle and Maria thanked him in Mandarin for all of his hospitality, then Josie and Nell and I thanked him in English, and his assistant translated. The official then presented Steve with a wooden box adorned with a photograph of Uigur tribesmen on horseback charging forward, each one holding a bird of prey on his outstretched arm. Inside the box was a whip made out of a goat's hoof. Maria looked at the whip and said, "Ooooh, someone's marriage just a got a lot more spicy!" No one translated this.

We flew back to Urumqi. We filled out health declarations upon arriving at the airport, and then completed another set while on the plane. The flight attendants came through the plane and took everyone's temperature by pressing a plastic strip against our foreheads. We were on a 757 with a capacity of over 200 people, flying a well-traveled route in the middle of China's biggest summer holiday. Counting us, there were fifteen passengers on the plane. We stretched out. When we collected our luggage, it was wet with disinfectant.

Steve heard from people in his office that there was a rumor going around that smoking more cigarettes can help prevent SARS.

TURPAN

WE TOOK A VAN FROM URUMQI TO TURPAN, passing through a spot that seemed to be the windiest place in the world. The driver stopped and we got out to feel the wind. We took a few steps, and then the wind blew us right along. I have no idea how to measure wind velocity, but I would put this several notches above “blustery,” and probably a notch or two beyond “gale.” We walked around in the wind a little, and I realized I could lean forward on the tips of my toes, at about a 45-degree angle, and the wind would hold me up. Josie ran with the wind and it picked her up and carried her and she had a spill. She skinned her knees. She was crying, though I could barely hear her over the sound of the wind. I wanted to take her back to the van with me to clean her up, and realized I couldn’t quite pick her up, unless I did some sort of fireman’s carry or piggyback. I looked at her: when did you get so big? I realized that this was not the sort of conversation she wanted to have at that moment, so I put my arm around her and helped her limp, leaning into the wind, back to the van.

Down the road, we saw a two-humped camel standing on a hill. Then we reached a checkpoint, and soldiers stopped the van. We waited by the side of the road until a woman dressed in plastic, wearing a mask, handed us all thermometers to stick under our armpits to take our temperature. None of us had a fever, so they let us proceed.

We found that Turpan was famous for wells, and we visited several. We saw a place that made raisins. We visited the ruins of a city razed by Genghis Khan. We found a stall selling snacks and bought a bag of cookies. Turpan is an oasis town; a hot desert town with streets shaded by grape arbors. Aside from being the hottest spot in China, it is also the lowest spot in China. That didn’t mean much to us, but we wandered around, trying to be good tourists.

Early one evening at the hotel in Turpan we were getting ready for dinner when Josie said she felt sick. I touched her forehead: she was flushed and warm. She crouched near the toilet then threw up. She said she had a terrible headache. I gave her half an ibuprofen and some water but ten minutes later she threw that up too. I felt her forehead again: she was cold and clammy. I tried to comfort her, but inside I was sure that one of us had finally caught something, something strange and exotic. I started looking through the wallet hanging around my neck to see if by any chance I had a Medi-Evac card, so we could airlift her to a hospital in Tokyo. I did not. I worried that if we let on to anyone in China that she was sick, she might be placed in quarantine for SARS, when what she really needed was anti-dengue fever pills or something similar. I had a

few visions of smuggling her out of Turpan, out of Urumqi, out of Beijing, swaddled in one of the carpets we had bought. I picked up an empty plastic water bottle and started figuring out how to drill holes in it so she could breathe while she was locked in an aircraft cargo hold. My head was pounding and the stress was making me want to throw up, too. Then I looked over at her. She looked a little better. I reviewed what she had eaten that day. She had eaten the same as the rest of us, except she probably had eaten about twenty-seven teddy bear animal crackers. Maybe that was it. Sure enough, after a while she said she felt well enough to go to dinner. Nell met us on the way to dinner and said, "Josie! Dancers!" Maria told us that there was a show with dinner featuring some native dancers. Josie loves shows; she's a fool for dancing. She let go of my hand and ran into the restaurant. Fifteen minutes later she was up on stage, dancing during the audience participation number. She was fine.

The meals we'd had in China were mostly extraordinary, except the breakfasts. The one in Turpan continued the trend. While I sat moping over my Spanish peanuts and thin tea, I wondered if the breakfasts are objectively bad, or if it was merely me being dietarily uptight. The girls were thrilled to have something as exciting and different as peanuts for breakfast. I went over and looked at the buffet table. Some stale rolls. A plate of limp stringy green vegetable thingies. A shallow bowl of cold porridge. Some thinly sliced tofu. Hard-boiled eggs. I realized why I was disappointed with the breakfast—there was no lamb, and I missed it. Also, for some reason we had thought that the coffee would be extraordinary in Western China. It wasn't.

We were leaving that morning to drive back to Urumqi to catch our flight to Beijing. We needed to wake up early, but we overslept. A courtyard separated the restaurant and the hotel. Our cars were parked in the courtyard, and every time one of us passed through the courtyard, our driver pointed to his watch and shook his head. I did a rough calculation; I figured we had plenty of time. I thought about arguing with him, challenging his calculations, but realized I was cranky because that morning we were beginning the trip back home.

The cars in the courtyard were all covered with a thick layer of dust. The boy at the front desk told us that there was a dust storm the night before, and the highway to Urumqi was closed. He said that it might be open in about three to four days. Our flight from Beijing to San Francisco was to leave early the next morning. We worried that the flights leaving Beijing were packed with fleeing expatriates, and if we didn't catch our flight to Urumqi that day, it might be some time before we could leave Beijing, maybe weeks. I felt all the muscles in my back tighten. My head sud-

denly seemed improperly screwed onto my torso. I took a deep breath. Then I realized that we liked Beijing. Staying in Beijing wouldn't be so bad. Staying in Turpan might be more of a hardship (the guidebook said Turpan is notable for having "nothing to see, nothing to do") but we were confident we could muddle along.

We weren't sure if the highway was closed because of SARS or because of the windstorm, but we decided to try to get through. We piled everything into the van—and by "van" I don't mean the solid American passenger-type vans; I mean one of those Chinese flimsy mini-vans, the sort of thing that looked like it would flip over if a kitten sneezed at it—and left. When we reached the outskirts of town, we ran into the tail end of a long line of trucks. There were two lanes on our side of the highway (the sides were separated by a large ditch) and one lane was full of stopped trucks. They had probably been sitting there all night. We went along in the passing lane until we could go no farther, because the second lane was filled with stopped trucks too. There was no way for us to even get up to the front of the line to see if we could get through.

After some consultation, we drove down the side of the ditch that divided the highway and found a path up the other side, then proceeded along in the passing lane of oncoming traffic. It was windy, but visibility was good, so it wasn't too dangerous. We drew even with the truck at the front of the line and crossed back over the highway. A policeman stood at the head of the line, eyeing the trucks, the traffic. Steve got out and talked to him, and he let us go through.

Soon we were on the open road, the windy road. However, conditions were not "windy" anymore. It was "windy" times ten. It made "windy" feel like the sigh of a cricket. I could tell how windy it was by watching the driver. He had a plastic jewel on the top of his steering wheel, at twelve o'clock. As we drove along the straight highway, the jewel was never at twelve. It was always between one and two, and sometimes, when the wind was particularly bad, he had to turn it all the way to three, just to keep us going straight. We were being nearly blown off the road while going as fast as we could for two hours in order to get to the airport on time—my perfect Third-World car-crash nightmare. We talked and talked as a way to try to cut the tension, taking turns telling the kids stories from our travels, our lives. As always, the adults were more nervous than the children. I pointed to the mountains, and Josie and Nell took turns spotting snow-trolls.

We reached Urumqi about twenty minutes before we had to be at the airport, but the town seemed to have tripled in size. We went from freeway to freeway, zipping in and out of traffic, speeding along. Nell was

sitting close against Maria in the back, talking and playing quiet games. Josie was sitting next to me, and for the last half hour she had been asking every few minutes how much longer we had to go until we reached the airport. Her tone became more urgent, and I asked her if perhaps she had to pee. She did. Steve told us we were about fifteen minutes away from the airport. Josie didn't think she could wait that long. The adults discussed: if we had to stop the van to get off the expressway and look for a bathroom or a gas station or something, we would probably miss our flight. On the other hand, Josie was turning pink. We stopped in the middle of the freeway. The van door slid open, I grabbed Josie and we dashed across a lane of traffic and an exit ramp then climbed over a low concrete divider, until we reached some sort of building. It was impossible to tell if it was an office or an apartment building, but there appeared to be a garbage pile over to one side. We dashed over to the garbage pile and she peed. A young woman came out of the building, glanced toward us and then averted her eyes. I helped Josie with her pants, and we scrambled away.

I was very well-behaved as I hustled Josie across traffic and back into the van, in that I never made any comment to her about whether or not, after she peed on the side of the road, the people of Xinjiang would be more or less likely to view her as a god. Instead, Josie curled against me, and I pulled her toward me. In the seat behind me, Nell was curled into Maria's lap. We sped toward the airport, we had the girls in our arms, and we held them close.