

Alive Girl Walking

ANGELA MORALES

A few months before high school graduation, your classmates start talking about what they'll do over the summer, where they'll go before college—mostly week-long party trips down to Acapulco or Mazatlán. You announce that you'll go to *Siberia*, thinking that would be funny. But then you start *imagining* Siberia—grassy knolls of wind-swept nothingness, little villages, secret police. Even at the mall with your friends, visions of frozen lakes and tundra creep into your mind. You can't get it out of your head. Superimposed atop Mexican palms and L.A. freeways appear onion domes, tigers, babushkas, and snow-white birch trees. You keep hearing the word gulag and thinking about that scene from *Fiddler on the Roof* when Tevye says goodbye to his daughter Hodel at the railway station as she departs to Siberia to be with Perchik, her fiancé, who has been arrested and sent to labor camp. You imagine you are Hodel singing "Far from the Home I Love."

A portal in the universe begins to open up; Mrs. Konoske, your English teacher, assigns *Crime and Punishment*; Señor Hunt, your Spanish teacher,

tells the class an unforgettable story about how he drove his Volkswagen Beetle from Los Angeles to the tip of Chile—the *tip of Chile*—through Central America, past rebels with guns, through leech-infested rivers, over steep mountain ranges, to the place where the continent crumbles into the sea. Onto the projector screen, he beams colorful photographs of himself playing soccer with barefoot children, standing in rainforests with a monkey clinging to his head, smiling beside his partially submerged car as it dangles from the hook of a crane. Those photographs put you in a trance, and now the gears in your brain are turning full speed—cranking and shifting and calculating.

At the central library you check out books, wanting to know how a person gets past the Iron Curtain and to Siberia from Temple City High School. One book shows a glossy picture of a big, green train—the Trans-Siberian. On the maps, tracks snake across Eastern Europe, over the Urals, and through Asia—over taiga, over tundra—through eleven time zones and a distance of nearly 6,000 miles, through Yaroslavl, Chelyabinsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, Chita, and Khabarovsk to Nakhodka. You learn that at the port of Nakhodka one can purchase a ticket to ride on a Russian cargo ship and, three days later, arrive in Yokohama, Japan. How easy, then, to admire the cherry blossoms, eat soba noodles, and climb to the summit of Mount Fuji before returning home to begin the desk-bound existence of a college student.

Three months before you arrive—March 1985—Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko (a chain smoker since age nine) has died suddenly after only one year in power, this following the deaths of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 and Yuri Andropov in 1984. Upon hearing the news of Chernenko's death, Ronald Reagan said to Nancy, "How am I supposed to get anyplace with the Russians if they keep *dying* on me?" Mikhail Gorbachev, a healthy young man of fifty-four has just taken control of the Soviet Union. The world does not yet know that a new era is about to blossom—an era marked with words like *glasnost* and *perestroika*, meaning openness and restructuring.

But for now, in these last days of the Cold War, applying for a Russian

visa as a solo traveler most likely alerts the CIA (or the FBI) that a so-called traveler could actually be a spy-in-training, and what better cover than to be an eighteen-year-old girl from Temple City High School (a.k.a. “*Simple City High School*,” a.k.a. “*Simple Titty High School*”)?

You were ten years old when the Americans fled from Vietnam and a red wave spread south to Saigon. You did not grow up during a military draft, and patriotism seems old-fashioned and very *World War II*. Patriotism means putting your hand over your heart and mumbling parts of the flag salute during school assemblies or watching fireworks under spacious skies and feeling a pang of gratitude. You’ve never been hungry (except during periods of self-imposed fasting); you’ve never had to run for your life. Your government does not require membership in political organizations, unlike your Soviet counterparts, who are required to wear the red scarf for Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League, made to polish the graves of martyred soldiers and goose-step across Red Square for hours at time.

Your mother has raised you to be a “free spirit” and supports you 100 percent. She says that such a journey will make you a better person, *for sure*, by exposing you to all sorts of people and belief systems. So you mail in the visa application. Neda wants to come with you, but her parents say they didn’t escape from Tehran and the Ayatollah just to let their daughter go traipsing about with a bunch of Commies. Secretly, though, you are excited to travel alone. You want to prove to yourself that you are not afraid.

Is it your imagination or are men in black suits *following you*? Under your bedroom window, parked under the big pine tree across the street, sit two men in a black Buick, windows rolled down, both of them *pretending* to read a newspaper. Every few seconds, they peer over their sunglasses and up at your bedroom window. Later, you’ll see the *same* men sitting on Lemon Street in front of Simple City High School, peering over newspapers, and then the next day, you’ll see the same men again, drinking coffee at Carl’s Jr., where you and Neda sometimes eat lunch. They’ve angled their heads toward you,

clearly eavesdropping on your conversation.

Too crazy to be true!—that *you*, an unremarkable girl from Simple City High School would be followed by the CIA. Impossible. But remember, this is 1985, and the Soviets have 10,000 warheads pointed at America, and America has 10,000 warheads pointed at Russia, and any compromise of information or shift in the balance could lead to World War III and all-out nuclear annihilation.

Being eighteen and from Southern California, you are not really alarmed by these men or by politics in general. Creepier things have happened. Plus, you're a tiny bit flattered that your government is wasting taxpayers' money to keep tabs on *you* and your boring life. You even consider buying some Groucho Marx glasses and wearing them all around town.

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In the Backpack:

Two thin cotton tank tops, khaki army pants, thick-soled boots, an over-the-shoulder burlap money bag, Babybel cheeses, Nature Valley granola bars, three bags of Oberto beef jerky, two blank journals, a handful of Bic pens, *The Portable Twentieth-Century Russian Reader*, Hedrick Smith's *The Russians*, Lonely Planet's *USSR*, American Express travelers checks, a wad of American dollars given to you by your father at the last minute, cherry Chapstick, one tube of Prell shampoo, Secret deodorant, toothbrush and toothpaste, a 35-millimeter Canon 135, twenty rolls of film in a lead-lined bag, Russian visa, passport.

NOT in the Backpack:

Emergency credit card, warm-enough jacket, a *Japanese* visa (oops!)

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The whole family accompanies you to Los Angeles International Airport. Your divorced parents tolerate each other for your sake. This is the last time the whole family will be in the same car. Neda comes, too, and the group follows you as far as the security gate. It's a red-eye flight, so everyone's yawning, but you're not tired. You feel nauseated and wired with adrenaline under these bright lights. You can't believe this little Siberia joke has reached such large proportions. Neda begins to cry. She says that this is the last day of your friendship and that soon you will go off to separate colleges and that you will change, as people do, and though you know she is right, the reality of that statement is simply too heavy to bear. *That's such bullshit*, you say.

Then that mysterious magnetic force pulls you down a long portal leading to International Departures. You wonder if you'll ever come home, thinking maybe you'll be shot with a poisoned dart or imprisoned under false charges. But you're thinking too literally. This is the opposite of *Dead Man Walking*—it's *Alive Girl Walking*. In your clammy hands you hold a Scandinavian Airlines ticket, handwritten in triplicate. You turn and glimpse your family one more time—where they're standing in a huddle.

Take a picture of this.

The security door closes, and you will eventually learn that behind that barrier remains your childhood, but there's no turning back from here, so keep on walking. Here's how you do it: one foot comes down and then the other. Eyes open. *Repeat*.

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Three kilometers before the Soviet border, yellow warning signs appear beside the tracks: a red hand, Seis! Stop! Rajavyohyke! Granszon! Border Zone! Grenzzone! ПОГРАНИЦНАЯ ЗОНА! Razor wire rolls out along the edges of the tracks; beyond that, a fairy-tale forest thick with white birch and spruce. (If only you knew then the battles fought for these lines, how countries grow and contract by invasion, conquest, and negotiation.)

Engines shut down. Russian soldiers, wearing heavily starched army green accented with red stripes and stars, climb aboard and squeeze down the narrow aisle, their wide shoulders bumping against the sliding doors.

They check passports, visas, and luggage. Pointing at your massive backpack, these soldiers with flushed cheeks and big guns signal for you to open it. But it's taken such a ridiculously long time to pack! Your hands tremble as they eye that American flag patch you've sewn onto the outer pocket. Are you *crazy*, waving your enemy status around under their noses? Who do you think you are?

The soldier looks you over and raises his eyebrows. Then he goes straight for the books. Picking up *The Portable Twentieth-Century Russian Reader*, he inspects the cover: gleaming golden domes of a cathedral against a blue sky next to a picture of Solzhenitsyn. *Nyet, nyet, nyet*, he says, looking directly at you as he tosses it into a box of contraband. Then he picks up the other book, *The Russians*. Flipping through the pages, he confers with his partner about the title. He tosses this book into the box as well.

The injustice! What will you read? Suddenly, in one minute, you understand the meaning of *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*. Though they forbid Dostoevsky and Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn, they have not forbidden ballpoint pens and blank journals. Perhaps they did you a favor.

The soldiers nod to the conductors, the whistles blow, and the big green train groans onward. You did it! You are inside the very "Evil Empire" that Ronald Reagan and Caspar Weinberger have worked so diligently to save you from. Red, white, and blue warheads are pointed at *you*. Do you understand what this means, child of the free market, child of *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*, you who have never known hunger, never dreamed in black-and-white? In spite of your ignorance of politics and history, you begin to feel a sharpening of the senses. You see how sunlight falls at an unusual slant, illuminating the undersides of leaves, making them glisten. You hear every

creak in the train car as the steel wheels roll over the tracks. You feel every jolt in the couplings. All around you, strangers chatter in many languages, but you can't understand them, so you're exempt from chit-chat.

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Sputnik, the government travel agency for youth, was founded by Joseph Stalin in 1929, later staffed by KGB officials. You, along with several other tourists, are assigned a Sputnik guide to provide you with insight into Russian culture, to point out relevant monuments, and to arrange buses to Sputnik hotels when you arrive in cities along the Trans-Siberian route. Your journey will take one month, total, with nine of those days on the train. The rest of those days will be spent learning about the vast Soviet Union, with opportunities to visit places like the Hermitage, Red Square, Lenin's Tomb, and the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric power plant on the Yenisei River.

The Sputnik guide, Dmitri, a diminutive man of twenty-three, is so thin that his hip bones poke through his jeans. He speaks slowly, deliberately forming each word with textbook accuracy. His large, hollow eyes make you feel sad, perhaps because, unlike most Americans, he doesn't smile just for the sake of it.

Your fellow travelers turn out to be a friendly bunch—Canadians and Americans—a few married couples, several college students, a few teachers and professors. You, being the youngest of the group, enjoy listening to these *adults*, as the train lurches along into the night, empty bottles of Stolichnaya clinking under the tables. All talk is spirited and mostly good-natured—debates about Strategic Arms Limitations, the Defense Initiative, good old Ronny Reagan, hawks and doves, Three Mile Island, total nuclear disarmament.

Once in a while they ask you, "So, what is *your* opinion of this or that?" Your face gets hot, you shrug, and say in a voice that sounds too much like a little girl, "*I have no idea*," and someone says, drunkenly, dreamily, "*Ah, to be young and innocent*." You vow to educate yourself on political matters, though easier said than done without books.

Soothed by their chatter, you climb up to the top bunk, lie facing the window, chin propped up on your fists. You've strung a clothesline across the ceiling, and your tube socks bob to the rhythm of the tracks. As the train follows a curve, you see the whole arc of it, from caboose to engine, this legendary green beast with its gold stripe. Out there, nothing but fields of grasses dotted with daisies and wildflowers and mud roads deeply rutted by the wagon wheels of horse-drawn carts. Wind funnels through the open windows, bringing with it the scent of black bread baking in the train's ovens, coal ashes from the engine, and random smells from passing villages—manure, burning fields and rubbish, ripe flowers, and freshly cut grasses.

At night, the train stops at rural villages with a solitary concrete platform and a single buzzing light. Flying bugs slam themselves into the white light and then fall to the ground, stunned. Under this light stands an old lady clutching shopping bags in both hands, a scarf tied neatly under her chin. You see this same old lady at multiple platforms along the way, same light, same bugs. The conductor's voice announces the stops in Russian, the syllables rich and mysterious. How you love being so cozy in your sleeping bag while spying on Soviet citizens and imagining their lives, their problems. For example, what troubles that man who presses his fingers into his neck as he paces the length of the platform, smoking his cigarette so desperately? And what will become of those little girls with their oversized hair bows and their little dog or those boys wearing such ill-fitting baseball caps, one-size-fits-all? You do not know, nor does anyone, that in less than a year—April 1986—the Chernobyl nuclear power plant will explode, emitting radiation from Pripjat into all of Ukraine and beyond.

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At the Dialogue Café in Irkutsk, a meeting arranged by city officials offers you a chance to talk with Communist youth, earnest college students who speak in carefully scripted sentences designed to teach Westerners about the benefits of socialism. They will talk about Marx and Lenin, and they will

delicately ask you about slavery in America, the lynching of black people, and the epidemic of homelessness. They praise Pushkin, calling him “our most famous poet.” They do not, however, want to talk about Dostoevsky. When you ask them what they think of *Crime and Punishment*, their faces freeze like they’ve had a sudden sharp pain.

Bowls of small, sour oranges lure you to sit for longer; in fact, you’ve heard enough of this sort of talk already, but you’ll pretend to listen as long as you can eat these oranges. You try to look interested while tearing at the skins and sucking up the tart juice, engrossed in the microcosm of The Orange. *These oranges are from Cuba*, they say, and you say, *Cuba has good oranges*, which seems to surprise them.

Oh, why have you taken food for granted? Why have you not gotten down on your knees and kissed the ground every time you walked through the produce aisle with your mother: the mounds of bananas from Costa Rica, the bins of unblemished apples—Granny Smith, Fuji, Jonathan, Braeburn, Golden Delicious—the cherries, white and red, and apricots, peaches, nectarines, kiwis, grapefruit, and not only oranges but blood oranges, navel oranges, Valencia, mandarins, and also tangerines, strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, and green and purple grapes, with seeds and without.

Soon you’ll meet Igor and Olga, two Soviet youths who will *not* speak in script and will rescue you from the wooden dialogue. One will carry a bottle of Stolichnaya under a trench coat. Secretly, they will gesture to you and the Canadian guy. They will say with their eyes, *These people are crazy! Come! Let’s split this joint, man!*

The four of you wander down some streets to the edge of the city, away from the spider eyes of the KGB that bubble up everywhere—in the walls, on the street corners, in the candy store, in the bushes, in the trees. You think, again, about poisoned darts. But soon, after a few shots of Stoli, you and your new comrades sit side-by-side upon a crumbling curb under a lone ochre streetlight behind the Iron Curtain, the *Evil Empire*. Everyone tells

jokes and everyone understands. “Siberia,” you are surprised to learn, is more a state of mind, not so much a place, as in gulags, as in exile, as in 70 below zero, white tigers, and mosquitoes big as hummingbirds. More of those flying bugs slam against the light and fall to the ground. More jokes, and you laugh so hard you roll back onto the sidewalk, feeling the earth of Siberia beneath your shoulder blades.

Igor pulls your arm with sweaty, calloused hands. He wants to take you home, to see if you’re real. He offers to swap Olga for you: *Take her*, he says to the Canadian, pointing to Olga, *She’s yours!* You think that this is hilarious—that girls can be traded—you can’t stop laughing, and—think about it—you are in Siberia—wild and mind-boggling! Olga clings to your other arm, the world a spinning globe, and what a miracle, right? To be eighteen and wandering in a strange land, and what are you doing here, anyway?

Olga, your new friend and mortal enemy, slips her arm through the crook of your elbow, leaning on you with all her weight, murmuring mysterious girl-to-girl phrases in Russian—meaning something like, *I wish you could live here and be my friend forever. I would make you piroshkies; we could drink champagne; we could listen to music; wouldn’t that be nice? Isn’t it wonderful that we found each other?*

But how do you know the meaning of her words? The answer: You *feel* it. You’ll soon learn that the world is full of people to love; you will meet people with whom you have no common language, not a single word, but in an instant you’ll understand them, though you don’t know why, like what happens with the little girl in Adana, Turkey, who will someday scribble her address in your journal and will later send her school picture in a battered envelope that smells of spices. Or the girl who, in a few weeks, will rescue you from being lost on a Tokyo subway and will buy you orange juice and cake, or even that donkey, Susanna, whom you will meet in a run-down campground in Cairo. You will cry against that sweet animal’s woolly neck when you leave her, believing at that moment that travel is terribly unnatural, these travels that thrust us into places with our hearts cracked wide open, these places

where doors will soon shut tight. Someday you will cry for the donkey because you know she will die from neglect. All these moments you will keep like luminous stones, memories to recall when you are drawing your last breaths.

But for now, Olga elbows you and you elbow her back. Four random people, earthlings, sharing a moment, somewhere at the latitude 52° 16' N, longitude 104° 20' E, with the Buryats, the Yakuts, the Evenks, under a balmy sky, untouched for this moment by treaties or politics or history.

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In your research about getting *into* the USSR, you overlooked the manner in which you would *get out*. On the train, another American shows you a copy of her Japanese visa, required for entry into Japan, and therefore, for *exit* from Nakhodka. You feel hot and panicky.

Quietly, you inform Dmitri, and he listens to you with utmost concentration. He nods and nods with the calm concern of a man much older than twenty-three. He assures you that this problem may be solvable at the Japanese Embassy. Once the train arrives at its last stop, he will arrange to have you transported directly to the consulate. The problem, of course, is that the train will arrive at this final stop only *one hour* before the Felix Dzerzhinsky sets sail for Yokohama. A visa, he says, is possible, but it will be tricky.

What a long, strange trip it's been. On these last days, as the train reaches the Far East, you try to make sense of what you've seen in this massive, gray place: empty shelves in department stores, mile-long lines for bread, poorly made clothing, cars that need cranking, crumbling sidewalks. But what scares you most is not what people say but what they don't say. Souls gone dormant. Someone asks Dmitri, "So, Dmitri . . . what happens to people who are mentally ill? Do they live in special hospitals?" Without altering his expression, he blinks once, and then he blinks again, and replies quite steadily, "We do not have mentally ill people in our country. They simply do not exist because, you see, mental illness is a product of capitalism."

You pity Dmitri but despise him at the same time. How can he be such a robot? You want to smack his face and pour cold water on his head until he speaks the truth. Who cares if the walls have ears? Stand up, man! But what truth should he speak? What truths will you discover when you return home to “Lives of the Rich and Famous,” to the land of 5,000 cereal boxes at the supermarket, to the land of subliminal advertising and corporate sponsorships, to sweat shops and Skid Row?

As the others retrieve their luggage and line up for customs at the port of Nakhodka, Dmitri pulls you aside and ushers you into the back seat of a small, black car. He signals to the driver, and you speed off. You crane your neck and look out the back window, back at the Felix Dzerzhinsky, a gorgeous, sturdy vessel with three red smokestacks. There you go, in the back seat of a Lada driven by a strange man to God-knows-where. Back *into* the USSR, rather than out.

The driver skids and swerves down residential streets all balmy with cottonwood trees. The car bumps up the driveway of a large colonial-style house: the Japanese Consulate. He jumps out and runs to the wrought-iron gate, speaking into a little box. Nodding, he says *come, come*, so you jump out, just as a Japanese man with tousled hair, wearing only a bathrobe, jogs barefoot down the driveway. He glances at your passport and scrawls some Japanese characters onto a green sheet of paper. As he scribbles, cotton floats from the trees like snowflakes, and his bathrobe falls open and flaps gently in the breeze. You try not to look at his underwear as he takes your money and hands you the magical green paper. He bows to you, and you bow back. You say *Arigato*. You’re getting smarter.

On the way back to the ship, you slide around in the back seat, banging your head a couple of times against the window. The driver says, *Run!* The Canadian and the others lean over the rail and cheer for you as you run up the rickety ramp, waving your visa. *You almost gave us a heart attack*, they say, clutching their chests. It’s like *The Adventures of Tintin*. Someday your children will thank their lucky stars that they were even born.

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The ship seesaws across great mythic waves resembling Katsushika's woodblock paintings. Crests of water reach out with foamy fingers as the bottoms of waves sink into flat valleys. The ship rises and falls, rises and falls, tossed about by the wild currents. Fellow travelers turn green and clutch the railing as they vomit over the side and wish for Dramamine. In the mess hall, the nightly dinner of meatballs, rice, and bitter cucumbers sits untouched.

After three days, the ship arrives in Yokohama, and you disembark onto solid land, into warm breezes, sunshine, and a farmers market. Everywhere you look you see pyramids of produce: bananas, broccoli, green beans, lettuce, carrots. Less is not more, you think, *more is more!* The world shifts from sepia to Technicolor.

And, behold: a peach! You cradle it in your hands; it's the size of a softball, tinged with rosiness, and *soft*, the first real fruit you've seen in weeks, not counting the sour oranges at the Dialogue Café and the misshapen crab-apples bought for a few kopeks from that old lady in Irkutsk. The peach vendor tells you the price in yen. *Seven dollars?* Not bothering to haggle, you buy it. Shrugging off the eighty-pound backpack, you are consumed by the microcosm of The Peach. Juice runs down your arm as a soft wind cools your face. You think of all the Soviets who might never taste such perfection. Olga and Igor fade away, as do Dmitri's hollow eyes, the potholed streets, and the smell of rye and stale vodka. The peach catapults you into this new land of cherry blossoms, Hello Kitty, and speedy trains.

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Time and geography warp again, and you keep waking up in places that amaze and confuse you. Here you are, atop Mount Fuji, admiring the mountain from thirty-six views including—but not limited to—in a rainstorm, with a clear sky, from the summit, and at sunrise.

You are trying to reach the summit, at 12,388 feet, just before dawn. How you hate this mountain for making you suffer. The Japanese hikers wear bells like mountain goats and carry walking sticks and sing *Gaijin, Gaijin*, as they pass, which means Foreigner! Foreigner! Why are they so cheerful? Walking through volcanic gravel is a nightmare—rough black sand into which your feet sink and slide with every step. The Canadian has come with you, but he is cheerful and physically fit, wearing his Russian fur trapper hat with earflaps, and a plastic raincoat. The Japanese children think he's a funny guy; he does little dances for them on the trail, and they laugh and point like he's a creature forged from the mountain.

Finally, finally, *finally*, you pass through a wooden gate and arrive at the summit, high above the clouds. Seconds later, an icy fog creeps into your denim jacket, freezing your fingers and the tips of your ears. Japanese hikers sit on benches all bundled up and sipping soups or slurping hot steaming noodles. Neither you nor the Canadian has brought any money, thinking it wise to leave it at the base of the mountain in rented lockers. Now it's 35 degrees, and wouldn't you like a hot cup of noodles to warm your hands? You've been sweating all night, and now your teeth are chattering, and you feel the chill of death. No food between you, not a single morsel, and your muscles ache. No hat, no gloves. How angry this makes you. *Ah, the innocence of youth.*

But look how the clouds swirl around in golden curlicues as the sun barely peeks above the horizon. Some people believe that sunrise atop Fuji-san is sacred, gives one special healing powers, special good luck. Buddhists believe that this mountaintop is the portal to another world. But you're shivering and miserable, and you couldn't give a damn about all that nonsense. Enough is enough. All this American girl can think of is a hot, soapy shower, clean clothes, and a bowl of oatmeal with cream and brown sugar.

The Canadian had the good sense to bring his sleeping bag, and now he's putting his feet inside of it. "Here, share my sleeping bag," he says. "No," you grumble. "I'm fine!" But you are *not fine*. You are stubborn and hungry and freezing your ass off.

Soon you will learn that life consists of a series of unrevisable moments. So now, if you can manage it, get into that damned sleeping bag. *Enjoy* this sunrise. Let it roll over you. Inhale it. Dare to enjoy this day because in a minute, it will all float away into the icy mist. Take the edge of that sleeping bag and pull it toward you. Say *thank you*, and then say *thank you* again, and then absorb as much as you can of these strange and brief, brief moments.

