

## The Fairy's Tree

I closed my eyes and pursed my lips as a strong gust of wind sent particles of rock flying towards me. The chalky outcrop scraped my hand as the rock ledge crumbled in my grasp. The sea of trees far below me surged in the wind and my stomach lurched as if I had dived into the choppy swell of forest. For a moment I was afraid to breathe, feeling as though I were swimming to the surface through the faint glitter of sunlight. The fading crack of falling shards interrupted the murmur of the wind through the trees, and my sudden shriek of laughter surprised me almost as much as it did Byamba.

“Are you OK?” The head lama had agilely traversed the path along the cliff face and peered back at me from inside a carved out grotto further along.

“I love it!” I shouted, “I almost didn’t recognize the rustle of the wind through the leaves, it’s been so long.” The whispers surrounded me, and Byamba smiled as if he understood all of the wind’s secrets. He and I were planning a seminar at the monastery for regional school teachers; we wanted to help them incorporate environmental issues into their lesson plans. The main buildings of the monastery complex were further down the slopes but he was giving me the full tour, including the isolated temples near the peak.

“Do you know the literal meaning of our province?” Byamba asked as I sat on the cold stone.

“North’ *Khangai*?” I answered, peering over the ledge. The chill of the cavern air was a relief from the hot wind outside.

“*Arkhangai* means ‘northern hilly wooded place’,” he stared across the valley, squinting in the sunlight. It was hard for me to believe that the province was named for the forest. I’d been in Mongolia for a year and this remote mountain-top reserve was the first place that I’d seen trees. The

landscape that I was familiar with had more in common with the moon than with any forest I knew. In the town where I lived, the endless steppes of short grasses were swallowed by the sky.

I taught English in a nearby village, nearby in distance but not in travel time. We traveled in ancient Russian military jeeps, relics of the nation's communist past. The beige jeeps blended into the clouds of dust that they created as they traversed rutted pathways that passed as roads. The Mongols could read the steppes in ways that I couldn't. The landscape seemed unchanging to me, driving hours in any direction left me feeling as though the jeep was heading the wrong way on a conveyer belt.

The sky enveloped us in its many layered shades of deep blue. The sky that I'd grown up with had corners, it was interrupted by mountains and oceans and native bush. The sky in Mongolia had no interruptions, it curved around us like a blanket tucking the landscape in tight. To me the only discernable landmark was the herd of camels, at the camels the driver would make a right and I would know that we were almost home. My village sat alongside a small stream that meandered through rolling hills and rocky outcrops at the foothills of the mountains. I'd sent my mother a picture of the entire village and she'd asked for another one, sure that I was mistaken. She said that the picture that she'd received wasn't a town, just a field of dust. Local friends have told me that the stream was once a river and the dust was once lush grassland.

Byamba explained the recent problems with desertification, "Our environment has been destroyed by over-grazing, deforestation, corrupt mining practices, foreign powers profiting from our natural resources," he grimaced, "and in some cases our own people selling out." He continued the tour, his trailing voice echoed against the walls of the grotto as he walked, "...and the monk remained in this cave for twenty-five years, eating cheese."

“Twenty-five years of cheese?” I tried to picture it, “...even in winter, when dairy products are scarce?”

Byamba’s roar of laughter filled the cave, “No, no... not *byaslakh*, but *byalaslakh*. You know, *byalaslakh*, it’s like when you sit and reflect!” I sighed, making my embarrassment palpable. “It’s ok, our words for ‘cheese’ and ‘meditation’ are quite similar,” Byamba explained. “Or maybe you are thinking of the monks in my home province of Khentii, who reach nirvana through cheese consumption. They have the best dairy products in the country!”

“Oh, of course,” my exaggerated nod belied the affected confidence in my tone, and I laughed with him at his joke of the stately monks of Khentii amongst piles of cheese.

We continued to a clearing tucked beneath the mountain peak, thorny berry bushes giving way to the temple of the *luusiin naga*<sup>1</sup>. The bright reds and blues of the temple glowed softly; a dollhouse replica of the palatial complex further down. The temple seemed to shimmer and expand as I stared at it, I was mesmerized. “The *naga* are always around, they take any shape that pleases them,” Byamba explained. “Could be that rock or that flower, anything really.”

Byamba directed my attention to a gnarled old oak tree, its tangled roots rose from the rocks, and its branches held the whole clearing in their grasp. “That’s the fairy’s tree. It has an ear just there,” he pointed to a misshapen knot with a small hole in the middle. “Ask it anything, maybe the fairies will grant your wishes!” The tree loomed over me, luring me closer. I crept through the stones and shrubs, wondering which were fairies in disguise. I scrambled up the roots and stood tippy-toe, leaning into the trunk to whisper into its knotty ear. The rough bark scratched my cheek and the earthy smell of the wood enveloped me as my whispered wishes dissolved into the rustling of the leaves.

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<sup>1</sup> Fairy spirits