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Brotherly Defense in a Foreign Land

The smell of polluted snow and smoke filled my nostrils as I slipped from the toasty minivan onto the grungy and frigid streets of Almaty¹. Through the soupy night air, I could see red and yellow lights flashing from the traffic that edged down the street. I heard the sounds of rubber skidding across snow, and engine belts screeching against the cold. Horns honked and roared as maniac drivers tried to cut in front of each other in a futile attempt to escape the traffic. Men squatted suspiciously in groups along the sidewalk—their cigarettes glowing red in the darkness—as they faithfully drank their vodka and kvac². Black ushankas³ shielded their raven heads from the moaning wind as they shivered in their grey trench coats and pointed black shoes. Their shadowy faces and black eyes moved back and forth as they dismally observed their surroundings.

It was a typical night in Almaty—pollution inhabited the air and I smiled as I glanced at my companion. Andrus Nesbitt—in my heart a brother, but in reality only a friend— escorted me from the running car to a tiny киоск⁴ rooted beside the screaming street of traffic. His six-foot build stretched above me like a tower as his arms dangled at his sides. On many occasions growing up, Andrus had protected me, warding off various obstacles that stood in my way. I reminisced as I watched him walk... Friends since childhood, Andrus was present in every major

¹ A city located in Kazakhstan

² A cheap drink found in stores all over Kazakhstan

³ Traditional Russian winter hat—very stylish and usually made of animal fur.

⁴ “Kiosk” Russian word for a small store

moment of my life. As we grew up, my sister, his little sister and I forced Andrus to play with Barbies, paint our nails, brush our hair, play dress up, and participate in other girlish activities. He did these things willingly, yet he was the true leader. He always led our pack in constructing gigantic snow forts, participating in massive stuffed animal fights, learning every board game ever invented, playing hide-and-go-seek in the dark, and many other games that only Andrus could invent. He and I also rehearsed our future wedding ceremony as he and his sister passionately argued over who would be our flower girl. However, as we matured, our puppy love grew to friendship—a friendship deeper than most can fathom. He understood my sporadic personality because he had the same one. We could battle to no end, yet could laugh until we cried. He was my older brother. It had always been that way and he had always been at my side through the cultural experiences we faced in Kazakhstan. He protected me. Little did I know that this next encounter would stay inked in my memory like a stamp on a postcard.

As we scurried toward the run-down structure, beady black eyes focused on our white figures. I was accustomed to this, however. Standing out was the norm for me in the foreign land I lived in—so much the norm that I rarely noticed it anymore. As we stepped into the musty магазин⁵, the warm air engulfed us like a blanket—a relief from the frigid robe of frost that awaited us outside.

As we stomped our feet and shook our limbs like horses, I glanced around the familiar киоск. It was a typical киоск. The taste of cardboard and old cheese crept in my mouth as my eyes scanned the scene. Nothing extraordinary came to sight. The crammed rows of various alcoholic beverages, candy wrapped in gaudy golden colors, the overly sweet печенье⁶, a limited supply of carbonated drinks—so limited that most Americans would be appalled, multiple

⁵ “Magazine” Another Russian word for store.

⁶ “Pechenya” Russian word for cookie.

packets of курт⁷—hardened balls of fermented horse milk which is quite the delicacy to Kazakhs, yet quite loathsome to the average Joe, random objects ranging from hair combs to rubber cleaning gloves lined the shelves in a jumble of products. Behind the counter stood a skinny Kazakh girl wearing a short pink shirt with cheap overly-blue blue jeans. She wore the traditional black high-heeled “snow” boots so often found on the women of Kazakhstan—perfect for slipping regularly on ice. Her opaque eyes sat sunken in her face as she solemnly stared at us, her eyes appearing to question our very existence.

A group of five smelly парни⁸ cackling and carousing in the corner caught our attention. They appeared drunk as I noticed cans of vodka in their hands. The men wore their stylish black jeans, black trench coats, and their pointed shoes—worn by local men if fashion was a necessity. Unhindered by their snow garb, they continued to flail their arms in various directions, expressing their hilarity over each other’s jokes. My eardrums throbbed as I eyed them cautiously. Wary of the situation, I stood closer to Andrus as he communicated with the woman.

“Сколко стоит⁹?” he inquired as he held up the bottle of coke and dug into his wallet.

“Сто тенге¹⁰.” She replied with indifference as she rolled her eyes.

Meanwhile, I began to hear bits and pieces of the drunken talk taking place behind me. The men conversed louder and louder and I heard words like, “Красивая¹¹” and “Милая девчонка¹².” Alarmed, I glanced at them and realized they all stared at me with flirty and frisky expressions plastered on their faces. Most of them were young, yet one stood in the middle—

⁷ “Koort” small hardened balls of fermented horse milk (eaten like candy in Kazakhstan)

⁸ “Parin” Russian word for guys.

⁹ “Skolka stoit” Russian phrase for ‘How much?’

¹⁰ “Sto tenge” Russian phrase for “100 tenge” (tenge is the Kazakhstan currency)

¹¹ “Kraceevaya” Russian word for ‘Beautiful’

¹² “Meelaya devchonka” Russian phrase for ‘Cute girl’

obviously the leader of the gang—that appeared to be in his early forties. He had a large beer belly and several gold teeth that glittered as he smiled disgustingly in my direction.

Repulsed by this behavior, I began to tap Andrus on the back. Suddenly the fat, gold-toothed man lunged at me! A terrified shriek escaped my lips. I hopped behind my tower of a guardian as the younger men captured the beast. His stomach blubber jiggled between their fingers as they refrained him. Hooting and hollering followed this scene as the gang exploded in slobbery laughter and I clung to my skyscraper—a cat clinging to a tree for dear life.

As my olive eyes bulged out of their sockets in fear, I stood in disbelief as I saw Andrus—my belfry—glaring maliciously at the offender. Never had I seen my dear friend standing in such a pose: back arched, arms out, lips pursed in a tight line, eyes blazing, and nostrils flared—a bull facing red cloth. Immediately the drunken fool's laughter vanished from his eyeballs and they turned from arcs to large round moons. The room began to shrink as tension emanated from their bodies. With their gazes still fastened together, I took my chance to escape and silently scurried out the door into the iced night.

Less than ten seconds later, as I began shivering in the cold, I turned my head when I heard the *кюок* door open. As Andrus held the door ajar, I saw his back, still crouched in his snake-like position as he continued to deliver his death glare to the one who threatened my dignity. He backed out of the store as the men followed him cussing in both Russian and Kazakh. The herd raised their fists in the air and continued shouting as my heroic champion gallantly and dramatically turned away, his blue eyes blazing.

Then, with a smirk on his face he chuckled and whispered, “Come on, sis!” Laughing hysterically, we both sprinted back to the warm vehicle and friendly company that awaited us. The stars broke through the pollutioned sky and I welcomed the smell of smoggy snow as I

drank in my environment. The men still squatted in clumps around the street, yet laughter echoed to my ears as we scurried along. The night felt different as I pressed my fingers to my rosy cheeks and climbed into the car.

I often look back on that night now that I have left that foreign place, and I remember with hilarity and joy the uniquely absurd moments we had in Kazakhstan...the cultural moments that the average Joe rarely experiences.

