

**On Smoke, Horse Meat, and Very Large Men**

**A Travel Narrative**

By Carl '17

## ***Introduction***

I was sitting on the third floor of the behavioral science building— napping with my notes open on the table in front of me in a process that could be loosely called “studying”— when my phone buzzed. I instinctively clicked the home button and read the scrolling text from the email that had so rudely awoken me from my study session. My heart skipped a beat at the word “Boren,” the name of the scholarship I had applied to nearly four months earlier. At the word “Congratulations,” I might have been pronounced legally dead.

The amount of work that had gone into applying had been enormous. I’d written countless justifications and essays about why the US federal government should spend the money to send a college sophomore to Vladivostok in the furthest reaches of Siberia for an entire year. I’d referenced everything from my intermediate Russian skills to my Christmases spent in frozen South Dakota as evidence that I could—and would—thrive in the Siberian Far East. And so there, much to my chagrin, at the very bottom of the email framed in a cloud of asterisks was the sentence “Applicants to Russia MUST Contact the State Department for Reevaluation.” My heart sank.

The reapplication process was easy enough given that my options were limited to Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. I asked my roommate what he thought of my choices. “If you go to Kazakhstan,” he shrugged, “everyone’s just gonna make Borat jokes when you get back.” With that kernel of wisdom, I slapped together an application to what my father would come to refer to as “the Stan without vowels” and was approved within the week to spend the next academic year in the former Soviet capital of Bishkek.

I wish I could say I put in as much effort into researching Bishkek as I did to Vladivostok, but the fact of the matter stands that I hardly skimmed the Wikipedia article. I knew they spoke Russian, had a lot of issues with corruption, and experienced something called “Siberian winters.” The rest of the Summer passed largely uneventfully, with the looming specter of Central Asia rarely in my mind until the last week. With all my friends back in school and my job in recess, I was out of distractions, and, frankly, panicking a bit. The panic lasted the entire 25 hour journey through countless airport transfers and almost-missed shuttles until I finally touched down in Bishkek.

My watch said the local time was four am, but after sleeping through a flight to the other side of the world, I was more than rested, I was restless. A tired-looking driver holding a sign for my school greeted me with a terse nod and something that might have been a heavily accented “how-do-you-do” at the airport entrance. He introduced himself as Danar, asked where I was from, and we were off, motoring through a countryside that looked less alien than I expected and more like the back roads of South Dakota where I’d learned to drive. I repeatedly tried to switch the conversation to Russian, and on my fifth attempt he apologized, explaining that he was trying to improve his English. I hoped that this wasn’t going to set the tone for the entirety of my stay, given that his English was, honestly, pretty miserable.

Danar deposited me in the school dormitories—a series of ten rooms on the second story of the building—and left. I took in my new surroundings. The bars on the outside of the window weren’t a great sign, and the curtains were missing most of their strips. In short, it was more or less what I was expecting, right up until the rooster began to crow.

I opened my suitcase and dumped the clothes on the dingy mattress. There, at the bottom was the Bolder Boulder calendar from the race I'd run earlier that year. I opened it and flipped through to the months to May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and wrote "1". It took just a few minutes to number the days back to my arrival. 268 days total. I took a deep breath and checked the time. It was 6:00 in the morning and the rooster was still crowing.

### ***Pt 1. Brick, Rust, and Smog***

The same rooster that crowed me to sleep that morning never actually shut up, so it wasn't particularly jarring to wake up to those same infrequent calls. It did, however, take a moment to remember exactly where I was. The numbered calendar was flipped open on my small desk, and I made a mental note to try and find some tape to hang it somewhere.

In a perfect world, I would have thought ahead and brought some toiletries—or at the very least a towel. After what felt like weeks of flying, I wanted to forget about how itchy my bed was and just stand in the shower. That was asking too much. Seeing that my only option was a bathtub, I shrugged and resigned myself to a quick rinse before trying to find some food.

I descended the stairs into the school's main lobby and was met with a strange sight. A man about my own age was trying desperately to communicate with an older Kyrgyz woman via elaborate hand gestures, the word "like", and a lot of Google translate. I recognized the man, his name was Joel and was a fellow Boren scholarship recipient. Given that a requirement of the scholarship was two years of experience in the language, I was curious to see what problem had reduced the pair to gesticulating and sighs.

The woman was his host mother, and she was more than relieved when I confirmed that I could translate. Their argument was over curfew. Joel, having arrived a few days before me, had taken to exploring the city mostly at night when he was jetlagged and awake, an activity strongly discouraged by his host mother due to, well, his poor Russian skills.

Joel huffed his way out of the conversation and I, excited to meet another American, excused myself to follow him. I figured our career goals would likely be aligned, we might be put in the same classes, so we should at the very least get acquainted with each other.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t really take Russian before this,” Joel clarified when I asked what his experience with the language was. I had a brief flashback to my driver Danar insisting on speaking English and began to worry I was doomed to live in an English speaking bubble for the next year. Popping that bubble would prove to be my biggest challenge in the my time abroad.

After it became rapidly apparent that Joel had little else to say beyond what bars had the hottest bartenders, I was relieved to see two more presumably American students arrive.

Phil, a 27-year-old student from Kentucky, was also on the Boren scholarship. He had an easy laugh and generally amicable personality. It became clear that his favorite topics of conversation were his home state of Kentucky and Kentucky bourbon.

Faith, by contrast, seemed almost cold at first. Beyond introducing herself as a non-scholarship student from Georgia, she seemed unwilling to engage anyone besides her host brother in conversation. Joel stayed seated, playing on his phone.

Before long Danar appeared from somewhere in the depths of the school. We would come to find out later that he sometimes crashed on the couch in the teacher's lounge if he was too tired to make it home. He announced that we were all going down to the city's main square to watch the Independence Day festivities, and with little fanfare we shuffled out the door.

The walks in Bishkek are unkempt and irregular. Loose bricks jut out at odd angles, threatening to trip unsuspecting foreigners. The occasional pile of loose building materials we passed on our walk to the square rang ambiguous; was Bishkek a city slowly being picked apart, or one that was just about to rebuild itself? Either way, the narrow walks forced us into pairs of two, landing me next to Faith.

On a whim, I said a formal hello to her in Russian. She replied in kind, to my surprise. Phillip was a French major, and I had been again concerned that nobody in this country was actually going to speak Russian to me. Faith and I were soon chatting in broken Russian, switching to English when needed.

The festivities themselves were relatively unremarkable. I'd been hoping for a celebration of Kyrgyz nationalism, which I did see, but I did not anticipate all the speeches being in Kyrgyz. Danar, who was Bishkek born-and-raised, translated into Russian for us. I was beginning to note just how many holes in my vocabulary I had.

The crowds dispersed around the city. Some people set up stands selling hot meat pies, some began playing betting games in the streets. If there had been any rules of the road before

today they were gone now. Still, the air was thick with smog, an observation Danar wrote off with little thought.

“It’s the factory,” he said, waving vaguely to the east of the city.

“What do they make in the factory?” I asked, curious that there was any industry at all in what seemed to be an economically struggling city.

Danar paused, working over the grammar I assumed, before changing his mind and answering in Russian: “Nothing, it’s just the place where they burn the city’s garbage.”

Delightful.

We walked back to the school, deflecting or ignoring the merchants eager to overcharge to American accents. I bid farewell to all three of my countrymen at the school, as they dispersed to their respective corners of the city.

Danar snapped his fingers and pointed at me. He produced a small bag of soaps from the main office. It was enough to get me by until I had the courage to brave the corner store and buy my own. For my first week of classes abroad I used the previous days’ shirts as towels.

Class itself was taxing at best, and exhausting at worst. My schedule was that of a typical Russian student, which meant I was up by seven for classes that lasted until five. Multiple hours of Russian a day left me more capable in my everyday activities, but sick of rolled r’s.

After a month of classes, the school had organized a trip outside of the city to the “world famous” lake Issyk Kul. I politely pretended that I’d heard of the lake prior to the trip,

afraid that I might be left behind if they found out I'd never had any intention of coming to Kyrgyzstan in the first place.

Faith, for her part, was an excellent tour guide. As a non-scholarship student she had meticulously researched all her options and decided on Kyrgyzstan as her "adopted homeland." After a four hour ride across the dusty unpaved roads though, even she was out of fun facts.

We bumped across the mountainous territory well into the night, pulling to a stop in front of the modest beach house the school owned on the southern shore of the world's second largest alpine lake. Philip and Joel excused themselves to bed, leaving just me, Faith, and Danar.

"I have an idea," Danar said, surprising me by speaking in his native language. "Follow me."

Hesitantly, Faith and I followed our guide into the cool mountain night. At that hour of night, our lake house was the only one with lights on. In spite of the moonless night, we had little trouble picking our way down the rocky path towards the murmur of the lake.

Danar was waiting for us on the shore. He pulled a two-liter bottle of beer out of his bag and sat in the sand.

It was the closest to the middle of nowhere I had ever been. For a minute, on the shores of Issyk Kul and under more stars than I had ever seen in my life, I forgot about the grime and dust of the city. The air was crisp and clean, salty from the lake and pleasantly devoid of burned garbage smells.

The country, for the first time, wasn't so bad. Its beer, though, was another story.

***Pt 2. "Which one is Kostya?"***

Outside of our now weekly trips to various landmarks around Kyrgyzstan, life for me continued in a sort of patterned grind. Every day I was up early, double dosing on grammar classes before reading and conversation lessons. In my ten minute breaks between hour-and-a-half classes I spoke only English. At the end of the days when I was too tired to go out I would shoot the breeze with the school's English teachers or my fellow students from abroad. As a private language school, the majority of local students studying English were grade-schoolers who kept to themselves as much as we kept to ours.

Still, I was determined to pop the English bubble. Fall was closing in fast at this altitude, and the cold and darkness was beginning to get me down. It felt like all I did was wake up in the dark, spend all day in class, and get out at dark. I decided to join a gym.

My aspirations were twofold: goal one was to stay active enough that the season wouldn't get me down. Goal two was to trick some locals into being my friends.

I casually stuck my head into the three gyms that were within walking distance. The first gym had a pool and racquetball court. When I heard that the monthly membership fee was the equivalent of \$150 I chalked up the price to my poor number skills. I confirmed with my teacher that 15\$ was indeed a reasonable price for a monthly membership in the Kyrg', and proudly marched into the gym with my first month payment.

I was very kindly escorted to the front door moments later, and told to not come back until I had a more serious offer.

With 15\$ still in hand, I caught the local transit back to school and marched down the street to a large, gray building emblazoned with "FITNESS HOUSE" on the side. After some minor language barriers, I managed to communicate that I wanted to sweat in their building on a semi-regular basis.

The facility was pretty bare, more equivalent to Fitness 19 than the Lifetime I had just been walked out of. Still, on my first visit I managed a full leg workout and a run before calling it quits. In the corner of the men's locker room was a sauna that I'd noticed on my first tour through. It seemed to be permanently "off", but my legs were too tired to walk home so I decided to ask the receptionist how it could be turned on.

"Ooh," she said, looking over her shoulder. "You should ask Kostya, Kostya can turn that on for you no problem."

I asked, in halting Russian, just which one of the five men left on the training floor was Kostya, even though I knew deep down what the answer was going to be.

"Kostya is the huge guy over there."

Yup, there it was, the first time I had ever heard the word "enormous" to describe a human being. Kostya was the man taking a break from benching 250 lbs with some weighted pullups.

I cautiously approached the man with arms thicker than my waist and asked if he was in fact Kostya.

Unstrapping the forty-five-pound weight plates from his belt, he nodded stiffly.

“The, uh, receptionist said you can turn on the sauna?”

Again, he nodded. It unnerved me a bit that this hulk of a man didn’t even seem winded from his workout session.

He flipped a few switches and the small room began to hum to life. I mumbled a thanks and tried to step inside, but his monstrous mitt held the door closed.

“Where are you from?” It was the first time I’d heard him speak, and his voice was somehow only made him scarier. Where most people I spoke with had a light Kyrgyz accent, Kostya’s deep tenor had all the cold precision of Moscow.

I won’t lie, I considered saying I was from Canada. But I confessed I was an American, studying just up the road.

He pulled his hand back from the sauna door and looked me up and down. I was taller, but I had no doubt in my mind that this man could snap me in half if he wanted to.

“There is no English in my gym,” he said. I kind of wanted to smile. I didn’t think it would take such a huge man to pop a bubble, but I was excited all the same.

“Agreed,” I said, and Kostya lumbered back into the gym without another word.

Later I would relate the story to Faith and Phillip, who would relate the same story to their respective host families. By pure chance Phillip's host brother recognized the name and correctly identified him as the Kyrgyzstan bodybuilding champion.

I came back from a workout session one night, trudging home through the unplowed slush on the streets and into the gray bleakness of the dorms and bumped into Joel. He was just standing in the hallway on the way up to the dorm.

"Everything alright man?" I asked. From day one I had never been close with Joel, but he frequently napped through classes and left the school wearing just his pajamas. His diet seemed to consist of donuts and coca cola. In short, we were all a little worried about him.

"Oh yeah I'm fine, just waiting for some friends to wake up." He looked tired, like he himself had just woken up. "We usually stay up and play Battlefront."

I offered to invite him the next time I went to the gym, since I knew he went often before Kyrgyzstan. He declined though, saying that he'd prefer to keep his nights free to talk to people back home. Can't pop bubbles that don't want popping.

### ***Pt 3. Uzbek Ambitions***

The New Year came and went, and with it came a host of new courses and students. Two more "Boreners" arrived in February. Colin, a relative novice at Russian, was chosen as a "backup Boren" which exempted him from the initial language requirement. The other new

arrival, Austen, was far and away the best Russian speaker of the American students. His time in Russia meant that he effectively tested out of the highest level of Russian at the school.

That didn't mean there were no classes for him to take though. Austen, Joel and I enrolled in a local politics and economics course, while Austen, Phillip and myself enrolled in the literature class as well.

Our politics class kept us firmly outside the English bubble. All the articles, homework, and discussion was in Russian, and it became quickly apparent that Joel was in for the rough of it. In the entire previous semester we'd been in Kyrgyzstan, Joel had yet to learn the Russian alphabet. In class he would rely on the two of us to act as interpreters to communicate with our teacher. Once, during a debate on who would succeed the Uzbek dictator upon his passing, Joel simply picked up his things and left. He stopped coming to class after that and started skipping his other courses as well. Any attempts to engage him in conversation were waved off. Someone heard his school had already been in contact about his poor academic performance.

For our part, Austen and I enjoyed the accelerated pace we were able to move through class again. Our literature class had us reading Bulgakov and Dostoyevsky, I spent weekends with Austen's host family, and I had a smattering of friends throughout the city who were all shy to speak English in front of a native speaker. It was far and away the closest I had come to popping the bubble.

In class one day, our teacher asked if we were excited to be visiting her home town of Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Austen and I shared a perplexed look.

"When do you leave?" she pressed. "Was it next week or the week after?"

It turned out to be next week. Our host school, for all their good intentions, were notoriously poor at keeping students informed of what trips were happening when. Once we had a two-hour notice that we were going on a six-mile hike through the snowy Kyrgyz Tian-Shans. This time we had a full two days to get our affairs in order for a two-and-a-half-week trip across Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

All grumbling aside, the trip north across the border was relatively smooth. Joel, who was making his first public appearances in what felt like weeks, was reprimanded by a border guard who saw him photographing the checkpoint. Austen stepped in with a flurry of Russian politeness, promising to have our comrade delete all the photos on the other side of the border. The incident earned Joel his first admonishment.

Danar explained, in Russian, that these countries were not as safe as Kyrgyzstan, and in the case of Uzbekistan, far less friendly towards American accents. Joel shrugged off the warning, muttering under his breath that he couldn't understand Danar's accent. Someone translated for him, and a tense truce hung over our heads on the remaining drive to Almaty.

After nearly half a year in the post-Soviet greyed-out lawless city that was Bishkek, Almaty was the freshest breath of air since Issyk Kul. Clean, new cars all drove on the correct side of the road and obeyed the traffic signals. The people refrained from spitting on the sidewalks. I even saw a KFC, though I could only imagine how awful Kazakh fried chicken would be. Since we only had two days in the city, I made the case that we should do something we couldn't do in Bishkek and visit the local Burger King.

After a considerable amount of campaigning against the crowd who wanted authentic Kazakh food, I won out, and was soon seated in a bright red booth, enjoying an Asian approximate of a whopper.

Across the restaurant from us was a table of three young ladies. They were easy to spot; given they were decked out in neon snowboarder's gear. I smiled at the thought of young people hanging out in restaurants. Young people in Kyrgyzstan didn't go snowboarding and hang out in restaurants. As far as I could tell, between the ages of 10 and 25 the Kyrgyz simply disappeared, reappearing only when they were old enough to spit, squat, and play backgammon in the street.

One of the girls leaned to her side and gave an affectionate peck on the cheek to the other. The second girl caught my eye and whispered something to her friends, who all seemed to get a kick out of the joke. I realized I'd been staring and quickly dove back into my mayonnaise-soaked burger.

In all the time I'd spent trying to pop the bubble and integrate into Kyrgyz society, I'd heard a lot of opinions and viewpoints that ran contrary to my own. In most cases I would just chuckle awkwardly and try to move past the uncomfortable topics. Here though, I realized just how much I had inadvertently come to accept local views as "normal". It had been so ingrained in me just how uncommon homosexuality was that a peck on the cheek seemed like an alien and brazenly open public display of affection. I was homesick fairly often while in Bishkek, but it was always for food or reliable amenities. Sitting in a Burger King in Kazakhstan, I felt homesick for my own culture for the first time. My rat was full and I wanted to go home.

But we didn't go home. We escorted Joel through police stops and ancient mausoleums in Uzbekistan. If one thing can be said about the Uzbeks, it is that they are an incredibly tough people. In Kyrgyzstan there was a sort of pervasive fear that the Uzbeks wanted the fertile land in the West and were gathering forces to seize it. I could see for the first time just why the Kyrgyz were so intimidated by their neighbors. In spite of a weaker currency and markedly harsher climate, the Uzbeks thrived.

The Kyrgyz had no idea what to do with themselves after the fall of the Union, and seemed content to live in the concrete shells left behind by the Soviets. The Uzbeks set out immediately restoring their state to the full splendor of their middle-age empires, tearing down concrete and erecting apartment buildings adorned with turquoise and murals of national heroes. The national founder, Timurlane, replaced statues of Lenin. The schools stopped teaching their culture as an exotic but inferior curiosity and began restoring a sense of pride in the people.

This sense of national pride meant a couple of things were inherently more difficult for visitors. Buying alcohol was a hassle, as was moving about within the country. Anyone without an Uzbek passport was treated suspiciously and subject to random searches. Entering Uzbekistan was a relatively easy affair, leaving was a bit harder.

I was stopped no fewer than four times trying to leave the country. Every attendant at the airport expected a bribe or document that had been taken at the previous checkpoint. At one point I was rerouted to the beginning of the whole security process for forgetting a customs slip in my checked bag. After forty minutes of tracking down the bag and securing the

slip, I was one checkpoint and two minutes from catching my flight back to Bishkek when passport control stopped me.

A younger Uzbek officer took my passport and checked the status of my visa. We'd been given small receipts for every hotel we'd stayed in, and the authorities at every checkpoint inside the country had checked them to ensure we had no suspicious missing time within their borders. The border guard stamped my visa and flipped to the inside cover, where all my details are written.

"Caaahrl," he said, puzzling over the Latin letters. He confirmed that I was in fact the same as the person in the photo and continued. "Cahrl... James. James... Bond. James Bond!" His face lit up and he ducked into the next booth to show his friend. I couldn't hear anything they were discussing, but both seemed greatly entertained by the American 007 trying to leave their country. If I wasn't already 2 minutes late for my flight, I imagine I would have found the whole situation just as amusing.

"Where are you going?" He asked, settling himself back into his own booth, once again composed and dignified.

"I study in Bishkek," I explained. "We were only here for a few days as a school trip."

He nodded, checked his watch, and commented "Your plane should have left 3 minutes ago."

The bulletproof glass between us was the only thing that kept me from snatching back my passport and making a run for it.

After taking the time to flip through and check all the other stamps on my passport, he finally relinquished my passport back to me. In his best British-Uzbek accent, my border guard wished me luck with a somewhat strained “Rahn fest, dable-oh-syeven.”

And run I did. All the way to the bus waiting for me, then all the way across the tarmac when I realized that was not the bus I was supposed to take.

In the 45-minute flight back to Bishkek, I had a little time to reflect on how my last two and a half months were going to look. I had reveled in the nationalism and history of Uzbekistan, yet the European feel of Kazakhstan had me missing home more than ever. I missed my bubble, that secure feeling of knowing what everyone’s thoughts are going to be, and knowing what words and manners they’re going to use to express them.

#### ***Pt 4. Part of this Complete Breakfast***

Smoking was not a habit I took with me to Kyrgyzstan. Maybe I’d had the occasional hookah, but the cost of those, combined with the relative difficulty it took to even find one, was discouragement enough. Bishkek was another story.

Every café, restaurant, and bar sold them. Oftentimes I would sit in a coffee shop in the mornings to get some homework done. I always ordered whatever potato-based dish was on tap, as well as a cup of coffee or whatever juice was actually in stock. More often than not the waiter would hover awkwardly after I’d finished my order. In their minds, a breakfast without a

coffee-flavored hookah was just plainly incomplete. Sometimes I'd see other customers smoking their morning bowls on hookahs that had juice or milk in place of water.

Faith, whose Russian was greatly improved by this point, was a fan of a local hookah spot/bar. The place's name could be loosely transliterated as Deem Vostoka, so for short we took to calling it the DMV.

The staff at the DMV were young, all in their early 20's, and before long our little group of students from up the street were fairly established regulars. We spent far too many hours in a room that couldn't have been more than twenty feet across, sometimes convincing the staff to come and sit with us for bonus Russian practice.

A second group met in the same bar nearly as often as we did, and we often mixed groups and chatted with Bishkek's First Last and Only Socionics Club. Here was where I found my niche. A collection of people my age, all speaking Russian, and all surprisingly liberal by Kyrgyzstan's measure.

This crew of four to seven post-university twenty-somethings became my lifeline in my last weeks. They only ever wanted to talk in Russian despite their generally impressive English proficiency, and their favorite topic of discussion was as Russian as borscht and babushkas. Socionics, for which an accurate English translation is impossible to find, is a social-aperture pseudoscience invented in the seventies in Russia. Its closest approximation in the States is probably the Myers-Briggs test. In Kyrgyzstan the movement is still alive and well, and companies would often pay certified professionals to evaluate their teams' personalities and

recommend strategies based on vague terms like “attitude cohesion” or “four-point compatibility.”

For my part, I put about as much stock into the whole practice as I did to internet personality quizzes. They had some fair points, and “evaluating” the DMV staff and other classmates was always an entertaining affair.

My lack of vocabulary in Russian was repeatedly a center of discussion. The group was hesitant to pin me as any one of the 16 possible types, since I couldn’t instinctively react to their questions. Every type had its own “mascot,” a sort of short-hand way of calling a person based on a famous person of the same type. They floated the idea that I might be a “Dostoyevsky” or “Trotsky” based on my work ethic or intrinsic motivation. It wasn’t until they showed up late and watched me interact in my English bubble with other students that they made the final judgement.

“Hamlet!” one of them called from the adjacent table. The group all murmured their agreement.

“And what, exactly, is a Hamlet?” I asked.

“Your type is a Hamlet,” Dan, their de-facto leader explained. “You have characteristics of all the others, but Hamlet suits the way you tell stories.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell every story from start to finish, like you’re giving a soliloquy. You’re probably very comfortable speaking in public and taking matters into your own hands.”

I confirmed that I was, and was ready for them to continue stroking my ego when he concluded his thought.

“Some other famous people from this type are like... Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, most dictators actually. Hamlet is really the best example they could come up with.”

So moving right past that.

Studies were winding down. My literature and politics classes had finished out a month before my departure and I settled into an easy end-of-class routine. A coffee here, hookah night there, sprinkled with some Russian grammar lessons and I was a happy camper. The DMV offered me an under-the-table job working the bar for them and I was more than happy to accept.

One night I was standing behind the bar when the manager announced that he was going to leave early. He had some other things to attend to, but the waitress would help me close up. This was all well and good, until the waitress also excused herself to make a shopping run. For a full hour I was the sole worker at a tiny hookah bar in Kyrgyzstan.

Every patron who came in would greet me, shake my hand, and place their orders. Most stayed at the bar to chat until their drinks or hookah was ready. Only once did someone ask if I was “a foreigner or something, maybe French?” Explaining that I was, in fact, and American was always met with good-natured utterances of “ahh, a spy then.”

If I was a spy I'd work in a nicer bar.

### ***Conclusion: Only a Sausage Has Two***

The last two weeks didn't hold any excitement. Every day I dutifully struck off a date on the calendar and went about my day. There were no more surprise excursions, no more last-minute essays, even Joel's mood had dramatically improved to the point that he joined us a full two times at the DMV, though he declined to be evaluated by the socionics club ("Ah, the hermit," Dan muttered under his breath).

I had high aspirations for my time after the Stan with no vowels. A three-day layover in Switzerland before returning to the States to look at a grad school, the thought of Mexican food, and the allure of Western plumbing were all within my grasp. The closer my departure date came though, the more I realized that I didn't want to leave. It had taken a full half year for me to pop the bubble, and even though there were aspects of the country I wouldn't miss (looking at you, squat toilets) I felt for the first time like I had established something of a home for myself. America didn't have lengthy oral epics, and the prices in stores were always set in stone. Life in Kyrgyzstan was something of a hot bath to me; I couldn't just plunge in, I had to test the waters a bit and ease into it.

Since my flight wasn't until four AM, I spent my last night at the DMV with the socionics club and all the other friends I'd made both in class and out. I gave the staff a single American dollar to hang behind the bar with the Kazakh tenge and various other foreign currencies. In return they gifted me a tiny jade elephant keychain and damn if that wasn't the closest I came to shedding a tear in that country.

The staff brought out a round of drinks on the house, and everyone raised a glass for one final Kyrgyz tradition: the lengthy toast. The other students shared their stories and toasted to their host families and friends who couldn't make it. Frankly, by the time it was my turn I was scrambling to think of an anecdote that hadn't been shared yet.

There was a lot I could've said in that moment about Kyrgyzstan. I could've talked about the nights I hated it, the nights I loved it, and the nights I wished I'd stuck to studying Spanish. I could've talked about every victorious pub quiz night (about once a month), or all the times I accidentally ate horse (also about once a month). There was no story about the time spent at Issyk Kul, the time spent browsing bazaars, fighting off pickpockets or ducking out of rogue cabs could ever come close to describing the hole that Kyrgyzstan was going to leave in me. It was the discomfort of the country that gave it its charm; its smoky backrooms, its dubiously lit allies and side streets. All of those were things I wasn't done experiencing. I wanted my countdown to start over, or at least jump back a few months. In the end I raised my glass to an old German proverb my grandfather had always been fond of.

"Everything has an end. Only a sausage has two."