Raw

by Sas Carey

Taiga. We come by horse. I never rode a horse until I was 58 and only then learned so I could do this. There are no roads, only trails. We ride over mountains and through mud and rivers, to arrive at a settlement of urts or Siberian tipis, with reindeer close by. The Dukha, a Tuvan people, the smallest minority ethnic group in Mongolia, welcome our team like we are family. They herd their reindeer at 8000 feet in northern Mongolia, just south of Siberia. I have been coming to this land of the taiga, high altitude boggy forest, for 12 years. Still, I wonder if I can meet the challenge of this remote and raw land now that I am 69.

The dogs bark from our arrival and as we sit in the urts belonging to my favorite family, I ask myself: am I still up to the challenges of living here? Can I get up off the floor where we always sit? How will I manage with no bathrooms or even outhouses? They offer milk tea—which by now they know I can't drink, being lactose intolerant. We catch up with news of births and deaths and changes. Then our hostess says, "Do you want to stay here, in the urts?"

I have lived in the urts before. I wish I could say that sleeping in one fills my need to be in nature, but it doesn't work for me. Between having the TV from the satellite dish on at all hours, with sports and dubbed movies, and it being a couple of feet from my head, I know I can't sleep. The taiga men sit around on skins and roll cigarettes out of newspaper and Russian tobacco and chain-smoke—never to be caught without rolled newspaper hanging from their lips. They cough. I can't breathe. The flames of the fire in the center of the urts burst out of the seams of the tin stove. I am always nervous that my sleeping bag will catch fire. And the sleeping space is so small that I won't be able straighten my knees. This is not why I have come here. In fact, I have made choices to avoid this kind of lifestyle by living in Vermont. I don't even *have* a TV there.

Twenty years ago in Vermont, a client went for energy healing from me. She held up a book about energy by David Eisenberg of Harvard and said, "You need to go to China." I told her I couldn't go because I didn't have any money, but she wouldn't listen. Somehow, she knew that I had to go. We traded. She gave me $5000 and I gave her weekly healing sessions for the next seven years.

The American Holistic Nurses Association tour to China included Mongolia. I stepped off the plane here and when my feet touched the ground, I felt a jolt of energy. I knew I was meant to be here—in the same way that I could see in energy readings what the soul work of my clients were. Our tour group met Dr. Boldsaikhan, a medical doctor as well as a doctor of traditional Mongolian medicine. He showed us a book he wrote on the subject of traditional

medicine's medicinal herbs, straight from Mongolian nature. In his office, a gold and saffron silk cover was folded back, revealing Tibetan sutras, which I knew to be Buddhist texts. They lay beside his computer and I thought, this is what my life's mission is—to harmonize ancient and modern medicine. Suddenly, as I walked outside with him and our tour guide, my heart beat as it does when I am supposed to speak at Quaker meeting. Out of my mouth came the words, "Would you take an American disciple?" And although this was not my normal way of speaking, he understood and agreed. This started my life's work in Mongolia and the next year was the beginning of almost yearly trips.

A couple of days after meeting Dr. Boldsaikhan, our group toured the Natural History Museum in the capital of Ulaanbaatar. I saw a tiny painting of a shaman with a reindeer and a tipi. Like a thunderbolt hit me, I realized that I needed to go wherever this painting was. I needed to know about shamans and feel life close to the land. I decided that I would wait until I was somehow invited to help.

In the Sixties in Vermont, Ken convinced me that a simple life in nature would be fulfilling. It was nothing like living in an urts in the taiga, yet it was there that my training for work in Mongolia happened. Ken and I talked about moving "back to the land" to avoid the majority way of life of excess, overpopulation, pollution, and disconnection. We wanted to move to where the air was pure, and where we could live a connection with nature. Our heroes were Helen and Scott Nearing, Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson.

I first saw the land in the spring of my junior at Keene State College. It was fifteen miles from Canada. My Connecticut eyes watched as we drove north through more and more snow. The road got narrower and narrower. After five hours of driving, Ken pulled over beside a snow bank, pointed over the top of it and said, "We're here." I looked around and wondered where "here" was, exactly. There was no road. The snow banks were as high as the car. Ken unloaded the snowshoes for me—the wooden rawhide kind, wide and heavy—and he put skis on.

The only sound was the wet crunch of snow compacting under our steps. I stumbled between evergreen trees. The smell of balsam matched a pillow in my father's drawer. We came upon a frozen brook where we could hear the water gurgling under the ice. And we walked up a grade to a field rimmed by more evergreen trees. The sun was moving higher in the sky, causing the snow to be softer. Ken had a spring in his step like a jackrabbit. I lagged behind, trying to follow. My legs really hurt. They ached from lifting and walking, from holding them so far apart, and slipping down through the thigh-high snow every few steps. Ever since I met Ken when I was 18, I felt as if my life were a test to see if I could keep up with the challenges and adventures he had in mind. I wondered if I would survive if we decided to come back and settle on the land.

For nine years I wondered how I would get to the place I found in the tiny shaman painting. I waited for a way to open so I could experience that life of reindeer and urts. It happened in 2003. I was unexpectedly invited to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC to join researchers who worked in Mongolia. I presented my experience with traditional Mongolian medicine. After I spoke, a researcher named Dan Plumley from the Adirondacks told me he

worked in the taiga on reindeer health and that the herders had requested someone to help with their own health care. They wanted someone who would respect their local medicine as well as know Western medicine. My eyes lit up. This was what I was waiting for.

We were to go to the taiga early that summer but were delayed due to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), so instead we went in October. On the way from Ulaanbaatar north to the taiga, we stopped for Dan's wild, week-long wedding to his Mongolian translator. More delay. By the time we were on our way, the rivers were frozen and there was snow on the ground.

In the taiga, we had to deal with deep cold. Yet the ground was frozen, so we traveled by car to the nearby winter camp instead of by horse to the far summer camp. At the time, I didn't appreciate how luxurious this was. I only knew that I met and interviewed my first taiga shaman. I interviewed the men of the East Taiga to start a health care assessment. I met with the women about birth and women's issues. And after meeting with the women, they said, "Can't we find you a taiga husband, so you can live here? No one talks to us like this." This made my heart melt, but my body was intensely cold that night sleeping in an unused urts at 0 degrees Fahrenheit. It was my coldest night ever, but I lived through it.

Back in Vermont in 1966, as soon as I finished my last exam, which was in Calculus, we climbed into the VW bus filled with a bed, table, tent, kitchen things, and our cat, Phobia. The dandelions were already white fluff in Keene but past St. Johnsbury, they hadn't blossomed yet. This reminded me that we were going north, nearly to Canada.

We rumbled over the pitted road where we had walked between the trees. It was an old road, actually. We parked just before the brook. Ken explained that our piece of the property was eight acres on this side of the brook, before the field. The land was dark green, even in May. There were evergreens on the steep hill behind a small open space. With each breath I inhaled balsam and earth smells. We set up the 10 X 10 foot canvas wall tent given to us by Dad. I was familiar with the tent. My sisters and I slept in it all the way to the West Coast and back, the trip when I met Ken. We put our mattress on some boards on the floor of the tent, then our wedding present, a double sleeping bag, and pillows over that. Out the tent door, we set up a food area—a screened-in table with a Coleman stove, a metal garbage can, some canned food—and we were ready to live here until our house was built. By us.

My definition of adventure and challenge was often related to nature. For the past 20 years, every February in the weatherized, sanitized, comfort and ease of my Middlebury life, my body craved the challenges of living close to nature. I looked out the window at the swaying branches of the willow tree in the snow and watched the weathervane on the gazebo where the wind blew from the north. It just wasn't enough. Like an animal with a yearly cycle that knew it was time for change, I began to look for a flight to Mongolia. I planned a trip to the taiga where I could be inside raw nature, like a bear in her den.

I am not accepting the invitation to stay in the urts. I tell the family that I will set up my tent and stay there. It is June, but eleven degrees Fahrenheit at night, so I need to pack myself in.

I use a technique like hay bales around a house in Vermont in the winter or as they do in the urts—fill the triangle between the ground and the low angle. They pack all their clothes, bags, food, ropes, bedding, saddles, toys, water, and wood in the area inside the canvas. This leaves a space where herders and guests are able to sit facing the center fire. In my tent, I use my packs of camera supplies, clothes, medicines and gifts on either side of my sleeping place. Outside, the ground is boggy and cold, snow having just left this spring camp. Inside it is cozy. The sparse larch trees and the ground are brown. Summer hasn't arrived yet. But with all the right equipment—a four-season tent, a minus 30-degree down sleeping bag, and a Thermal pad—I am comfortable now.

Ken knew how build, but we had no money. The friend who gave us the land bought a warehouse in Island Pond. Ken's contribution was the labor of taking it down for lumber for both our houses. I learned that the old lumber was especially high quality, un-planed, full width. Ken found some discarded storm windows, which we would use for the windows of the house. We had plans but were living in the tent.

The next day, I put on my hiking boots and my denim overalls, and drove with Ken to the warehouse in Island Pond. He had taken the walls down and his job was to take the boards apart and stack them. He set up a workstation for me. My job was to remove and straighten the nails for our house. For weeks, I stood in what I thought of as my combat boots in the sun or in the mist with a claw-foot nail puller and hammer. As I worked, I thought about how this was not what girls brought-up in the fifties like me were trained to do. Women were not taught to be tough. Women did not wear high boots. Women did not stand all day and prepare nails. Women stayed in the house to knit, sew, and cook. How did it happen that I was standing here pulling nails?

An 80-year-old neighbor Fred Tangway often stopped to see how I was doing. After a couple of weeks of checking, he said, "I never got married, but, Mister Man, if I had met a woman like you—could pull nails and straighten them up—I would've."

The town road commissioner, Alfred Cole, was upgrading the road to the property. He was checking on us, too. He offered to let us use the Town of Newark's dump truck to carry the stacked lumber to our land—on one condition. The law, he told us, says that you need a Vermont license to drive it. I was the one with a Vermont driver's license. No sooner was I thinking, "Me? Drive a dump truck?" when I was in the driver's seat headed toward Island Pond. Beside me, Ken shifted the gears. The vibration and noise of the truck covered up the butterflies in my stomach.

Back in the tent that night in Newark, after transporting the wood and piling it on the ground nearby, we awakened to a screaming sound. It pierced the silence of our land. It was too close, just outside our tent. I didn't dare move. I lay rigid like one of those pieces of wood, not breathing. I was sure that this was some strange animal from the edge of the earth. I had never heard such an ear-splitting sound. I opened my eyes and stole a glance at Ken, and he at me, at the same moment. I then knew that I was not imagining this. We moved a little closer, though, and waited for the sound to die down. It wasn't until morning that we realized what the sound

was—Phobia in heat. We had no idea that she was old enough—or that there were other cats here at the end of the world. This was my most terrifying night.

In the taiga, lying in my tent, I hear the dogs barking. I have been told that when the dogs bark at night, it means that we are surrounded by wolves. Herders get up with their rifles and guard the reindeer. I am not nervous. This sound is mild compared to the howls of Phobia. No matter if there are wolves and bears, being in the taiga feeds a space inside me—a need for challenge, adventure, and adrenaline. I crave the moist earth and expansiveness of the big sky, surrounded by the snow-capped mountains and the sound of the river flowing beneath ice. The shamans' drums and mouth harps, and juniper incense open my heart. Taiga people know that everything is alive and One. I can feel this.

A year after building our home, to help with the contractions, I walked around the garden, held onto Ken, and finally went back into the bedroom. We had things prepared—oxygen, a letter from a friend who told about her birth, a book called *Husband Coached Childbirth*, and a thick textbook for midwives. A sheet was over a layer of plastic on the bed. With these in place and Ken's experience with animal births, we were ready for a homebirth—just the two of us. Even though I had read the books, I knew nothing about how long it would take or what the labor would be like or who would come. I was not scared, though. I was sure my body knew what to do. Ken and I settled on the plastic covered bed and dozed off and on. When I got the urge to push, I thought it will soon be over, but, no, it took five more hours—24 in all.

Finally at 3:20 in the morning on that July day in the house we built on our land—with the door open to the balsam trees and the sound of the brook—our baby came not with a cry but a *Whoosh!* and was born into this place. Born into the light of an Aladdin lamp, cleaned with water with from the brook. Soon the birds started singing. It started to become light and I had our baby on my belly. Out the open door the balsam trees were swaying in the breeze, more fragrant than ever before. The birds were louder than ever. My son was beginning to latch on to my breast with a force that I never thought skin could survive. When the sun came all the way out, it was brighter than any light I had ever seen.

At this age, I don't just go to sleep and stay asleep all night, even in the taiga. I have to get up and pee on the ground in the moonlight and starlight. I have given up lying under layers of covers to see if the urge will go away. It is too bad to disturb my little nest, but I don't complain about being older and having to go out at night any more.

I step out to "see the stars" and as I glance at the sky to the north, the clouds have a special design. In fact, they pulsate. I know, although they aren't in color, that I am seeing the aurora borealis. Three even rays radiate from a snowcapped mountain. The rays move, but not the way the trees or the clouds are moving. I have seen a green pulsating sky in Vermont. These shapes move the same way. I don't notice the cold. I just watch over the silhouette of the bare larch trees. I hear the "no-ah" sounds of the reindeer, a cough from someone in a nearby urts, a

dog's bark, the howl of far off wolves, and the song of a taiga bird that sings all night. Then I methodically pack myself back into the tent.

When the first light comes and the reindeer, having been milked, wake me by scratching their hooves against my tent, I realize that even though I am the oldest person here, I can live with the challenges of nature. I am still up to the challenges of the taiga—of surviving here. I even miss it when I am in my safe, weatherized home in Vermont. I am grateful that I have the strength to experience the feel of the hard ground, the sound of clicking reindeer hooves, and the smell of moist, cold earth and juniper. I appreciate the wide expanses here and the big sky above me. They let me feel a connection with everything that matters.

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