



Source: James Rainey, 'Five months, and a last-minute rush', *LA Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 22/05/06.

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She always wrote to me when she travelled—long, newsy e-mails or letters about the people she had met, outlandish stories which I'm sure she made up, sitting on long train journeys through parts of the world I had never wanted to go, though she was always inviting me. She took too many risks for my liking and though I liked to think I had an adventurous spirit, I always set out with a destination in mind and a place to stay, whereas she would simply set out without any plans, turning up in out of the way places late at night, looking for rooms and sleeping in bus depots and train stations if she failed to find anywhere. She always travelled third class ('hard seat') in crowded three-tiered carriages, while I would only ever go first-class ('soft seat') in trains.

Anyway, I remembered all this when I was sorting through some papers at the weekend and I came across the last letter I'd received from her.

Dear You,
You'll never believe it but I'm travelling first-class in this train to Harbin and it's luxurious! (compared to my usual standard). There's a special lounge at Beijing Station where you wait in comfort until you can go onto the platform. The attendant has just brought us our bedding for the night—crisp sheets, a doona-type thing with a silk!! cover and a soft pillow and small handtowel. I've just been to the dining car with one of my fellow passengers, a Chinese woman who's befriended me. She insisted on paying for my dinner (which wasn't that great) and we're communicating in the gaps which open up between the possibilities our different phrase books offer us. So far I've learned that she's going to Heilongjiang for the weekend. She's very well-groomed (she says she's a beautician) and is somehow not carrying any luggage for this weekend away, whereas I have as usual this ridiculous backpack, stowed under the seat. The other two people in our carriage have gone into the next compartment to sing patriotic songs and I can hear a jaunty rendition of Rodina being sung in Russian. Don't know how much sleep I'll get amidst all this enthusiasm.

Next day...

We've arrived in Harbin to a sea of people on the platform, surging forward, it was SO crowded. My Chinese friend shepherds me through the crowd to a waiting friend, a loud, very brash woman, heavily made-up, dressed trashily I thought and the two begin a very animated conversation, with me tagging behind, not knowing where I'm heading. We're going to take a taxi to my hotel, they tell me, but instead we arrive at an old wreck of a car, being driven by a man, who is presumably a friend, though he looks like a member of a triad gang, heavily tattooed, gruff and suspicious. When I'm inside and my backpack is stowed in the car boot, they tell me the hotel I'm booked into is unsafe—drugs, prostitution, they suggest, gesturing in various hand signals to indicate the dangers—so they will take me to a better hotel.

Okay, I figure, let's just see where this leads to; I'm travelling, you have to be open to possibilities. We arrive at a very nice new four star hotel not far from the station and we book in. The rooms are fine, much better than I'd usually choose, in that generic hotel style which is soulless, so we settle in, make cups of tea and plan the day. But now there is another change of plans. Let's go to Lake Jingbo for the night, they say, it's not far, it's a very beautiful place and we can go there, have dinner, do some sightseeing and come back the following day. Sounds fine to me, the prospect of having local guides always helps. But I'm tired and I need to take a shower so my companions say they will go off and get us some lunch.

At last I'm alone and relieved because it's all very well to have travelling companions but you and I both know the pleasures of travelling alone and the wonderful peace of a room to yourself. I go and check my guide book to see where Lake Jingbo is. It turns out to be about seven hours to the east by bus so perhaps this will take longer than one night. There's a marvellous story about Lake Jingbo, which my companions have told me and I can't resist going.

According to legend, a beautiful and kindhearted girl named Hongluo lived there. She had a magic mirror and wherever disaster occurred, she would flash her magic mirror and restore happiness to the people. The celestial empress wanted to get hold of the mirror and so she sent a deity to steal it away. But Hongluo was able to follow the rays of the mirror to the celestial palace, where, seeing the mirror in the hands of the celestial empress, she tried to take it back. In the scramble, the mirror fell from the sky to the earth—where it formed the Mirror Lake.

It's actually a volcanic lake which makes me think of Western Victoria. I'm posting this letter to you before I leave—and I'll write to you again from Lake Jingbo. The next time, you MUST come with me.

yours
B.

About four hours west of Harbin is Daqing, the centre of the oil industry, with thousands of sex-starved oil workers and a thriving sex industry and I wonder if she became caught up in some human trafficking racket, but that seems very far-fetched. Besides, the oil industry is almost exhausted now and there's talk of a new Angarsk-Daqing pipeline to bring in Siberian oil. It's more likely that she's teaching English somewhere.

The letter was written on letterhead from the Harbin Post Hotel and I haven't heard from her since.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.