

Chapter One

ARRIVAL

I was 55 when I stepped off that train into blinding sunshine and a new life in Kazakhstan, half a world away from the life I'd had in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Proud to finally be a Peace Corps volunteer, I was also determined to be successful, and for me that success would be simple: I'd make friends for America in the post 9/11 era.

To do this, I'd left behind a life I loved, given away a dog I adored, and abandoned the financial security that my work in Philadelphia had promised. I knew there was much I didn't yet know about Kazakhstan and her history, culture, and people, but with an MA in sociology, my more recent experience as a psychotherapist, and my husband by my side, I naively thought I had all I needed to succeed.

The day my husband Woody and I got off that train, we'd already been in Kazakhstan for nearly three months, been “trained” in the Russian language—he a bit better than I—learned about a few cultural differences we'd meet, and taken practice classes in how to teach English as a second language, our job for the next two years.

Our assigned destination was Zhezkazgan, a town once controlled by the now defunct Soviet Union and built with labor from the gulags to house the workers for the nearby copper mines. It wasn't much like my City of Brotherly Love, which had been laid out in a systematic grid pattern by the Quaker William Penn in the 17th century, and anchored by no less than five public parks. Nor was it at all like the

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

tiny seaside town of Chincoteague, Virginia, where we’d lived temporarily after our Philadelphia house was sold, while waiting for our Peace Corps departure. In Zhezkazgan, there would be no weekly curbside garbage pickup, no opportunity to walk the beach, and no sound of migrating birds overhead. We’d be there for two years.

As I squinted in the glare of the sun, a young woman with bright red hair and denim overalls broke through the small crowd of locals that had come to welcome us and thrust a huge yellow bouquet into my hands.

“Welcome,” she said in perfectly passable English, except that I didn’t understand her. “These are for you.”

Without thinking, I offered her one of the Russian phrases I’d committed to memory during training.

“*Meenya zavoot, Janet. Kak vas zavoot?*” (My name is Janet. What is yours?)

Why hadn’t I said the more appropriate “*S’paceba*”? I wondered immediately. Or, the even more appropriate “Thank you,” since she’d spoken to me in English?

At least I understood her answer: Natasha, the fourth Natasha I’d met since we’d been in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, she seemed neither to notice nor care about my *faux pas*, and melded back into the welcoming crowd, which was chattering in a language I could not recognize.

About half a dozen women and nearly that many men were there to meet us, and I let my gaze fall on each face, wondering how well I would know these people before my time there was over. I smiled as I

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

caught each eye. A few of the men had gone back into the train, directed there by the women whom I assumed were their wives, to fetch our luggage.

Our luggage. It had become an embarrassment to me over the three months since we'd arrived in the country. We simply had too much. I'd known it when we first flew out of Dulles International Airport and had to pay \$400 in overweight charges. I'd known it after our initial weekend in Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital (and, in 2004, still its major city) when we had to leave a suitcase behind with the Peace Corps staff in order to fit into the car to ride to our first homestay.

And I knew it then, as the men handed suitcase after suitcase down the train's narrow steps into waiting arms on the platform below. These Kazakh men were descendants of nomads, I knew. Nomads, practically by definition, traveled light. And here we were, so American with our too-much stuff.



Two of the women in the group had been on the train with us. They were our “counterparts,” local Kazakhstanis who worked where we would and were charged with helping us navigate the workplace. The previous week they had come to our training site in Almaty to participate in the Peace Corps' training for counterparts and to accompany us on the train to our permanent site. Having them with us, besides helping with tricky language challenges *en route*, had given us time to get to know each other.

Woody’s counterpart, Aniya, seemed to evaporate into the crowd. But my counterpart, Gulzhahan, found her husband among the many welcomers and brought him over to introduce us.

Darkhan, no taller than my 5 feet 4 inches, had an easy smile and the best set of dimples I’d seen in a long time. Still, he towered over his tiny wife, whose shiny, black hair fit closely around her round, *café-au-lait* face. Gulzhahan and her husband looked Western in both their dress and their mannerisms. They could have passed for American Indians, albeit very short American Indians. But when Gulzhahan spoke, out came the Queen’s English. I had found it disconcerting when I first met her. But now, after knowing her a full week, I noticed only how lively she was, happy. Our mutual nods and smiles and handshakes over, they too melded back into the crowd, now all suddenly on their cell phones.

Woody and I helped carry our luggage from the platform to the side of the nearby road—it was the least we could do, then we stood, waiting. I gave Woody a perplexed look, and he spoke (in Russian) to a woman who would turn out to be his boss at the University, to find out what was going on.

“We are looking for our taxis,” Zamzagul answered in friendly, understandable English. “They should be here.”

I was in no hurry. In fact, after our 36-hour train ride, I relished standing just a bit longer. Getting into a vehicle of any sort, no matter how short the next leg might be, was the last thing I wanted to do. I looked around, breathing in the cool late-summer air and appreciating that the ground beneath me no longer wobbled.

The small train station suggested that no one had held a paintbrush in

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

a very long time. I paid it no mind, understanding that any country that would invite Peace Corps volunteers might not have the means to keep their infrastructure tiptop. My gaze drifted beyond the station to the oddest trees. Small orbs formed of spindly branches topped short but very fat trunks. With more shrubbery than a desert but not as green as a plain, the steppe, on which I now stood, was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

I was enveloped in magnificent sunshine, balmy breezes, a dozen or more of the world's friendliest people, and the bleakest landscape I'd ever known. And I smiled. I was right where I wanted to be.



If Kazakhstan were a dartboard, the city of Zhezkazgan would be within the bull's eye. I was standing 700 miles west of China and 600 miles south of Russia. Four hundred miles farther south lay the four other “Stans,” lands of the ancient Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Turkmen, which, along with the land of the Kazakhs, constituted what was now sometimes called Central Asia, sometimes Eurasia.

The Caspian Sea was 750 miles away along her western border, and contained one of the largest pools of oil outside the Middle East. I'd read that it was pushing Kazakhstan, ready or not, onto the world's stage. But in August of 2004, when I first arrived in Zhezkazgan, nearly thirteen years after Kazakhstan's independence following the Soviet Union's collapse, I saw few signs of modernizing.

Soon enough, three late-model sedans with phone numbers painted on their sides pulled up: our missing taxis. Each had four doors and

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

reminded me of the Chevy Nova my grandmother drove when I was in high school. In fact, they were Russian-made Ladas.

Woody and I got into the back seat of one these boxy sedans while an unidentified man hopped into the right front passenger seat, turned to look directly at us, and gave us a broad, happy smile. The rest of our welcoming committee went with our luggage, and we all headed into town on a paved but empty two-lane road. We were on our way to the home of our new “host family.”

I kept my face turned to the window to see what I could of the town while we drove. It was an early Sunday morning and it appeared the town had not yet woken up. As we curved around a traffic circle, a billboard caught my eye.

The pudgy, pondering face of Kazakhstan’s first and only president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, stared down at me, with 2030 in large, black numbers beside it. I’d seen these billboards during our training along the major roads into and out of Almaty.

I had once been an earnest PhD student in political science—ten years after I’d gotten my Masters in Sociology and ten years before I’d started my career as a Gestalt psychotherapist—and I relished the political intrigue of Kazakhstan. And, though Peace Corps policy specifically forbade its volunteers to engage in any political activity, I could observe. And I could read.

The ninth largest country in the world and strategically placed between Russia and China, Kazakhstan had long ago become adept at playing what some call “The Great Game,” as her monolithic neighbors vied

for power and influence with Great Britain, over control of Asia. Now, President Nazarbayev had vowed to bring his country into the 21st century.

Nazarbayev was a big unknown to me in those early months. Depending on what I read or to whom I listened, he was either a power-loving dictator acting in his own self-interest within a sham of a democracy; a benevolent buffoon, catapulted into the limelight by forces he couldn't control; or a strong and capable leader and just what this young country needed. All of this fascinated me, and I looked forward to seeing how the politics of this still-young country would play out in real life.

The “2030” I'd seen referred to the president's long-range plan: what the country would look like by the year 2030. The plan set out a number of priorities in ten-year increments: to double the 2005 GNP by 2010; to create a five-year development plan by 2020; and to be “one of the 50 most competitive states” in the world by 2030.

Each time I saw one of these huge advertisements along the roadside in 2004, I wondered who'd be held accountable,

twenty-six years hence, if the goals weren't met. Probably not the then sixty-three-year-old president.

My interest in Kazakhstan's politics waned as our caravan of taxis turned off the paved road and our car jostled over abundant potholes. We'd pulled into a residential area, and clusters of tall cement-block buildings rose from the sandy dirt; massive power-line towers stretched in one long row to our right. An empty, sparsely equipped playground stood in their shadow and bits of paper, from a row of dumpsters overflowing with garbage, danced in the wind.

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

“We’re moving to the projects,” I whispered to Woody, only half joking.

Raised poor, married to privilege, I felt up to meeting whatever challenge these next two years would bring.



Our taxi stopped amid a group of identical teal-colored cement block buildings, and parked on what might have been—long, long ago—a lawn. The apartments must have been painted blue once, but so many years before that the color had faded to teal green. And I couldn’t help notice that the front door of our new building was missing.

Woody and I grabbed what we could from the pile of our bags that now rested on the ground, and followed the rest of our luggage, easily transported by the men of our welcoming party, into a dark, damp stairwell that smelled faintly of urine.

“Where there are men, the luggage is light,” says a Kazakh proverb that Gulzhahan had taught me on the train. My “inner feminist” had privately scoffed at the time, but now I could see her point.

On the second floor landing, we passed an empty row of exposed mailboxes that reminded me I’d need to get a box at the post office if we wanted to get any mail. Still embedded within the concrete wall, the mailboxes’ few remaining front panels hung askew. Of greater concern, however, was that nobody in our little party made any apologies for the disrepair. No one even seemed to notice.

At Home on the Kazakh Steppe, A Peace Corps Memoir by Janet Givens
CHAPTER 1 – “ARRIVAL”

Three flights up, on the top floor, we entered our new home. The Peace Corps policy was clear: we were to live with a host family for another six months. Designed to help ease our adjustment to local life, it was, I thought, a good way to meet the local people. One of my hopes was that these local people—who’d never met an American before—would like me. And through me, they would like America. Living with a host family seemed to be an easy route to that goal.

Woody, though, did not relish the requisite formality, as he put it, of living like guests in a stranger’s home. Still, he was willing to do anything to get closer to his goal: to teach English. Woody and I approached our Peace Corps adventure in different ways, and our attitude about the “host family” requirement was just one example. I would discover many more over the next few months.

Shoes filled the hall as the members of our entourage moved inside. Though we’d been in Kazakhstan nearly three months by then, the shoes-off-at-the-door ritual still felt new and it always took thought. The locals slipped theirs off easily, often without breaking stride, while ours had to be untied, unbuckled, or unVelcroed, and generally without a chair on which to sit.

My Teva sandals were off before Woody’s sneakers, and I walked with bare feet into the spacious and clean but sparsely furnished apartment. I found the women from our welcome committee busy in the kitchen.

My yellow bouquet from the train station had found its way into a jar of water, and I stood watching as the women bustled about as though they lived there. I knew they didn’t.

According to the information sheet our Peace Corps trainers had given us, this was home to three people: our new “host parents” and their

eighteen-month-old son. But I had no idea who they were or if they were even there. No one had introduced us and I hadn't seen a toddler.

Woody passed behind me and I followed him into what someone had indicated was “our room.” We set the baggage we were carrying down amid the pile of our bags already there and looked around.

Furnished only with a tall, narrow wardrobe along the wall next to the door and a small wooden table pressed against another wall, the room was essentially empty. I saw no dresser, no chairs and, more importantly, no bed.

Curious, I thought, and smiled to myself. But sleep was hours away. We had lots of time to deal with a missing bed. First we would eat. We would always eat first.

Woody and I left the bedroom and drifted back toward the living room. While he went in and sat down, I stopped and watched the women at work in the kitchen. “Well-oiled machine” came to mind. There was no bumping into each other, no questioning even. Each one had a job to do and was bustling about doing it, all under a steady hum of conversation and laughter.

My instinct was to ask if I might help. But I already knew better. Instead, I turned to catch up with Woody in the living room where the husbands were moving tables together and collecting chairs. I joined him on the sofa safely out of the way. As the honored guests, Woody and I were actually not allowed to help. And, on this day, I was grateful.

“Honored guest” is an understatement. In Kazakhstan, a guest is a gift from God. Really, it’s not a metaphor. And at that moment, I loved the custom. Tired from our extended train trip and overwhelmed at all the sudden activity around me, I relished the opportunity to just relax next to my husband and watch the others.

Soon chairs appeared on three sides of a long table covered with food. Flower-bearing, denim-clad, red-haired Natasha sat next to me on the arm of the sofa. And the feasting began.



Food is such a traditional way of welcoming guests anywhere. In Kazakhstan quantity is important. How full the tabletop is reflects the bounty of the family, and they would use all the food available for the week to fill it if necessary.

The table that day held plates of cold sausages, bread, cheese, salads, and *chai* (tea). There would always be *chai* and the white sugar to go in it, or sometimes honey, or, more often, jam. There were also hard candies and pastries of different shapes and sizes. Of all the things we’d given up to be there, the low-carb diet we’d followed for the previous three years was surely the easiest. We dove in.

The chatter during the meal was in Kazakh, for which I was oddly grateful. If everyone had been speaking English, I’d have felt compelled to participate; they’d be speaking for, if not to us. If they’d been speaking Russian, I’d have felt obliged to attend to the conversation, too, and at least attempt to identify an occasional word; I was too tired for that. But they spoke Kazakh and I was off the hook.

The Peace Corps had offered us just twenty hours of Kazakh language lessons over the same weeks we'd had 360 hours of Russian. Nobody expected us to speak it, at least not yet.

When the meal was finally over, sometime later, the women moved to the kitchen to clean up and I stayed seated with Woody and the other men at the table, strangely relieved that to offer assistance at this point would be insulting. I wanted more than anything to climb onto my bed and nap or, more to the point, to hibernate. Our bed—at least the frame—had arrived during the meal, carried in by three hefty and very young men, and it was calling to me.

Woody, I noticed, was engaging with the men in Russian. Already fluent in Dutch, French, and German, he'd been eager to add Russian to the list and so far, he was on track. I envied his facility with language but my exhaustion left me disconnected from my surroundings, from the men at the table, and even from my husband, a feeling I hadn't experienced for a very long time.

This was far from the life I'd known, and not only geographically. In the ten years I'd known Woody, we'd reveled in how connected we always felt, even when we disagreed. That abiding sense of connection—our manifest destiny—would keep us together, no matter what obstacle fell before us. At least that's what I'd believed when I'd married him four years earlier.

It's what I still believed as I sat there, numb, and very, very sleepy, while all around me swirled a bevy of activity.