

July 7th, 2004

Coming Home Soon

Dear Westerners,

Things have been pretty hectic for me the past week or so as my scheduled date of return looms closer and closer with every passing day. Yesterday I spent my entire afternoon and most of my evening packing my things to take home, and I'm not completely done yet. It's been a long and painstakingly tedious process, but I've done this so many times now in the past year that I've become used to it.

Before packing my things I first had to make an inventory of things to take home and what to bring back to China, and then I had to pack everything neatly into two suitcases, along with my backpack and my laptop bag. All this sounds rather easy, but as my other foreign teacher friends here in China and abroad can testify, this is really tough when you've been living someplace for an entire year. Some things have to go, other things have to stay. Planning exactly what should stay and what should go needs you to think hard in advance. . .where exactly will I be in a few months from now, and what will I need? What's not necessary, or necessary but just too much a pain to keep around? Some things have sentimental value and you don't want to part with, but need to be for the sake of saving or creating space for the upcoming year. It's really hard work. I also have to wash all my clothes that have piled up in the past two weeks (no surprise there) because I can't leave any dirty/smelly clothes in my apartment for two whole months, and I also can't let perishable foods expire either, so I have to either consume them all quickly or give them away to someone else. You have so much to do and think about, that sooner or later you look at your watch and realize that 4 hours have passed by and you've only accomplished half of what you intended to do once you got to work on all of this!

I could have finished it all last night, but by eight o'clock I was utterly exhausted, and my recently-purchased pirated DVD of Spider-Man 2 seduced me to call it a night and relax a little. On the brighter side, I'm almost done as I write this update, in the middle of Wednesday afternoon as the Beijing skyline is suddenly ambushed with a pretty sun shower.

Two weeks ago, at around the same time that I wrote my last letter, I got very sick with a stomach bug, so much so that I needed medical attention and was nearly hospitalized. For more than a week I endured some painful stomach aches that wouldn't go away, and by the weekend I couldn't stop vomiting and I became severely dehydrated. . .all the water I'd consume would be defecated or vomited in a matter of only a few minutes. The nearly 40 degree weather didn't help my situation, and I would sweat profusely every time I'd get out of bed. Worried that I might be seriously ill, I called Ms. He on a Sunday afternoon to tell her that I needed her help, and she drove to the school to come take me to Renmin Yiyuan. I felt very bad to disturb her on her day off to ask her for help, but I was very sick and very worried and I have anyone else to turn to in an event like this.

We went along with Mr. Xu, who took us to the hospital with one of the school's cars. I took a plastic bag with me (in case I needed to vomit), along with my work permit and my passport just in case I needed to show identification. This hospital is rather infamous among Beijingers, as the city's first cases of SARS were diagnosed there last year, and nearly half of the place was under quarantine as the outbreak grew worse over the weeks. Sameer told me many times that during this time last year, the entire neighbourhood was completely deserted, and the taxis wouldn't take him to the school, as they didn't want to drive near the hospital. Since then the hospital---while one of the most important in Beijing---still makes some Beijingers a little nervous, and I've personally been in a few taxis who refused to take me to my school because of its proximity to the place. The hospital has also been going through some extensive renovations, with an entire wing being knocked down at the moment by demolition crews.

We went into what I believe was the bacteriology ward in the hospital's basement, where I gave them stool and blood samples, and later underwent a quick check-up of my back and abdomen. I was given a series of (mostly herbal) prescriptions for each symptoms I was having: pills for the abdominal pain, pills for the diarrhea, a salt solution (to be mixed with hot water) to rehydrate, and some brown herbs (also to be mixed with hot water) to induce sleepiness and to hold down the nausea. I was also told to get as much rest as possible and avoid any cold beverages and food, as they would only aggravate my condition. The doctors were very kind and polite, and within less than an hour of coming to the hospital I was back in the parking lot. By then I was feeling really flushed, but I had fortunately avoided

throwing up at the hospital. . .of course, as soon as you feel you're ok, that's when everything goes wrong. VERY wrong.

We got back into the school car with Mr. Xu at the wheel, but the car was hot like an oven and within seconds it triggered my nausea, and I threw up in my plastic bag that I had brought with me. Ms. He winced with motherly concern as I retched in the bag, but I told her that I was ok and that it was a good thing I brought the bag with me. . .she was sitting right next to me when this happened, so she was quite in agreement with me. She was relieved that I was smart enough to bring a bag with me in case something like this would happen, but she was nervously fidgeting in seat all the same, silently hoping that I don't throw up on her. But then, things got worse. . .

The bag had a hole in the bottom, and the vomit started to leak out!

I told Mr. Xu to stop the car (we had only moved a few meters), and I got out of the car and threw the bag in a nearby dumpster. Then I had to throw up AGAIN, but this time I had no bag with me, and I was in a parking lot in broad daylight. What was I to do? I saw a large tree only a few feet away from me, and I crouched under the bottom branch and threw up under the tree. Ms. He and Mr. Xu grimaced at the sight of me up-chucking in the middle of the parking lot as I tried not to faint from the hot sun that singed my skull, all the while as the capillaries in my face burst from the pressure and turned my face as red as blood. Afterwards I tried to make best of the situation and joked with them that since it was just undigested water, I was merely "*watering the plants*". Once my stomach settled we raced back to the school and I went straight to bed.

Xiao Wei---our *Ayi*¹---normally doesn't come by on Sundays but she happened to be there that day, and later in the afternoon she knocked on my door and entered my dorm, presenting me a hot bowl of noodle soup she made herself just for ME, loaded with large pieces of ginger to make me feel better. She told me (in Chinese, as she doesn't speak English) that she wanted me to get better, so she made me some soup, and made me promise her to get some sleep and drink some tea. My heart was touched by her kindness to the point where I nearly cried, and I told her

¹ see **Glossary**

that she really is my “auntie”, which made her smile with affection. She works so hard and has such a difficult life, yet she went out of her way to make me a bowl of soup.

Me. She probably wouldn't have done this for anyone else, unless maybe if she were asked to do so. She did this for me, out of the goodness of her heart. What had I done to deserve such kindness from this wonderful woman? I felt deeply humbled.

After 2 solid days of bed rest and medicine, I felt much better and bought Xiao Wei a box of chocolates to show my appreciation for her caring heart. I honestly think that when you're very sick with a bad illness you can be at your most emotionally vulnerable---I felt so terribly alone and isolated---but often the slightest gesture of kindness or generosity from someone can mean such a world of difference to your morale. The last time I was sick, back in late November with a 48-hour flu bug that lasted the weekend, I hadn't seen nor spoken to anyone (other than a brief call from Xixi), and stayed in bed the whole time, but couldn't sleep. I felt like I was a prisoner, and I went stir-crazy. Luckily it was different this second time around, as the Ayi and Ms. He checked up on me a few times during that week, and Ms. Wang also gave me a call and told me to contact her if I needed anything.

It's on days like those that I realized I picked the best possible school in Beijing to work for. Never mind the gulag-ish apartment and mediocre pay, or the fact that I live in a pretty dead part of town. . .when your boss takes time out of her Sunday afternoon to take you to the hospital---under no obligation to do so---and the maid makes you a bowl of soup because she personally worries about you, you know that you've come to the right place to stay. How many of us can say they've encountered such camaraderie from near-strangers, and at work of all places?

Since then, the foreign teachers' residence has become a starkly different place. Matthew was the first to go, packing his things when I was sick and heading off back to London shortly afterwards. Sameer was the next to go, spending nearly a week moving all his stuff to his new apartment which his new employers have offered him. He left without much ceremony or any real goodbyes, but I made my best to give him a hand and offer him my thanks for all his help, as he was the first friend I had made in Beijing when I arrived back in September, and he was of

tremendous help to me when I was still adjusting to living in China during those first difficult months. I probably wouldn't have made it without his advice, and I was sad to see him go.

Robert was next, although he's only leaving for a few weeks and will come back later this month. He's gone home to spend some time back home in Richmond, and then might spend a week either in India or in Burma before coming back to Beijing². Robert and I are both staying at the school in September and we'll still be roommates, so there was no real need for "*any meaningful goodbyes*", as Robert said.

Béatrice left just yesterday, which was as sad as it was abrupt. She had spent nearly 2 weeks packing her things and saying goodbye to everyone she knows. She had been living in China on-and-off for several years now, and she didn't know when she'll be coming back. In the years she'd been here she'd of course accumulated lots of stuff and couldn't possibly bring all of it back home, so she had to dump a lot of her stuff. Since only Juan and I were left in the residence, most of it went to us. Béatrice generously gave me a wide variety of delightful knickknacks and useful items, as well as some very good food. Among the many gifts she gave me were three beautifully decorated (but heavy) flower pots³, mosquito repellent, French books, her course plans in case that I teach French here some day⁴, candles, a broom and dustpan, two desk lights, and a large bag of ripe peaches. She also gave me some foods that were given to her from friends at the French embassy that either she didn't need or couldn't take home, including some wild honey, preserves, French cheeses, and Belgian chocolates.

² He went to neither country, and spent a month in Xinjiang instead. A brief summary of his travels can be found in the following chapter.

³ I gave them to Robert when we both returned to Beijing.

⁴ When I was first courted by the school to come teach for them, I was initially slated to teach both English and French for them. Shortly after my arrival they decided to find a teacher from France however, and hired Béatrice a month later. Not long after Béatrice's departure, Ms. He had hinted that perhaps she would ask me to teach French in the new school year.

I was very humbled by her gifts, but I felt dreadfully guilty as well since I didn't get her anything (I wasn't expecting to be receiving so many things from her), but she insisted that I don't get her anything as she had no room to pack anything else.

And before I knew it, she was gone. She left early yesterday morning without saying goodbye to neither Juan nor me. . .I suppose she must have been either in a hurry, or she simply just wanted to avoid a tearful goodbye. I was heartbroken when she left, and more so as I didn't had a chance to say goodbye to her. She had been of so much help to me, perhaps even more so that Sameer, who was always busy with extra work and his studies. Béatrice's maternal good-naturedness also added a great touch of pleasantness to our residence, and was fondly liked by everyone here at the school, teacher and student alike. She took quite a shine to Robert and I, as back home she has two sons of similar age to ours. Her absence will create a big void come September when the new school year begins, and she will be greatly missed by everyone, and that certainly includes me.

No matter how many times I do it, I still hate saying goodbye, and I don't think that will ever change. Unfortunately for me, goodbyes are a fact of life, no matter what side of the world you live on. Since September, when I first left home for China, I've said more goodbyes in the past 10 months than I've ever had to in possibly my entire life to date. In fact, that's all I've been doing in the past two weeks. . .saying goodbye to my students, teacher colleagues---both Western and Chinese---my Chinese teacher, girls I've been dating, Qin Shuang and the Qin family, the Rong family, the Chen family, and to China itself.

But for now, it's time to say goodbye to China, and prepare to say hello to everyone I've said goodbye to six months ago, back home in Ottawa.

Have a nice week, and I will see you all very soon.

Eric / Sun Yi
Laoshi