I awoke with a start as the train lurched to a halt at a desolate station. The sun was up, but only just, streaming golden light into the cabin. The older couple I was sharing a cabin with were already awake, pouring black tea from a dented thermos into plastic cups. When I sat up in my upper bunk, the man looked up with a smile, his eyes glinting in the light. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, and he poured a third cup of tea for me.

Outside, the sun was rising quickly above small, wind-worn mountains. There was nothing in either direction, save for the tracks that disappeared into the haze. In one direction, behind us, was the glittering marble and gold capital of Ashgabat. Yet ahead was the Caspian Sea, and the promise of cool breeze, squawking gulls, and my ticket out of here. But here, outside the window of this aging Soviet train, was a small compound of buildings and nothing more.

There was movement in the hallway. Some voices spoke softly. Bags thudded to the ground and footsteps shuffled past our cabin, fading as they traversed the train car towards the doors. The aged couple in the bunks below me watched through the window as most of our car stepped out into the sand, falling into rank.

"*Soldat*," a man at the train station had said to me the previous day. Several dozen boys, no older than me, hugging their tearful families before boarding the train. I boarded at the opposite end.

I was pulled back from yesterday's memories by a dull thud of a black canvas bag hitting the sand, tossed from the train. One by one, the boys shouldered their packs, and the train whistled. One or two looked back. The machine's mechanical heartbeat chuffed to life, slowly at first, but surely. The cabin lurched. Some tea spilled onto the communal table between the beds when we began to move. A few more of the boys looked back.

I watched them as long as I could, standing there in the open desert, pondering the next couple of years. The words of the soldier I met at the train station yesterday echoed back to me.

“I was studying, you know. In Romania. But I had to come back to serve. But we have this crazy fucking dictator, man. I’m done in a few months, then I’m going to England.”

I had only nodded in sympathy. I had read that sometimes people might trick you into disparaging the government to get you in trouble. Was that one of those times? I didn’t want to risk anything. But as the *soldats* faded into the dust and sun, I thought he might have been genuine.

The older man watched the boys fade away and sat back slowly. I wonder what he had seen. Turkmenistan has changed a lot in his lifetime. Had he been a Soviet soldier, conscripted like his predecessors and descendants? I wish I knew. There was no common language between us. We had taken turns playing music on our phones the night before. I suppose that was a common language. He had snuck a bit of hashish onto the train and threw me a *shaka* from his bed when he smoked it. That was a common language, too.

The train lurched on through the desert. I got up and walked the length of the cabin a few times, stopping at the doors to watch the landscape roll by with the smokers. I read a bit from my tattered copy of *On The Road* that I had picked up in Kathmandu. Slept some. It’s hard to tell how far you’ve gone when you’re in the desert.

After several more hours, the woman let out a happy sigh and smiled out the window. The tracks wound around a small chain of mountains, and up ahead was the glittering horizon. I felt my breath catch in my chest. The sea! Cool air and wind, and the smell of salt water. The landscape darkened as the train approached, becoming rockier and more vegetated.

The Caspian Sea, at last.

We all scooted close to the window as the train approached the station in Turkmenbashi. It had once been called Kyzyl-Su, Turkmen for “Red Water.” But that time is long past. It was Krasnovodsk under Imperial Russia. When the Soviet Union fell and Saparmurat Niyazov proclaimed himself President for Life, he renamed Krasnovodsk with his self-adorned title, Turkmenbashi, which means “Leader of All Turkmens.” Did the couple in my cabin still slip up and call it Krasnovodsk from time to time? In their childhoods, did their grandparents still call it Kyzyl-Su?

I was again jolted from my thoughts as the train lurched and slowed. Now was the time to think back to my loose plan. I racked my brain, trying to remember which ships carried passengers. Why didn’t I write them down? I groaned and looked out the window, wondering if things were about to get complicated for me as I scanned the ships in the harbor.

Then I saw it – the Bagtyỳar. That name was familiar. It was on the list of ships known to take passengers across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan. I breathed a sigh of relief. But how long had it been in port? Caspian Sea transit is fickle. Some cargo ships take passengers, but they operate on their schedule. Was the Bagtyỳar going to be in port for an hour, or a week? With less than 24 hours remaining on my visa, there wasn’t much room for error.

As soon as the train stopped, I grabbed my pack and rushed out. I only had a few Turkmen manat leftover, so I needed to see if there was a functioning ATM; there wasn’t. But I did see the white walls and winding streets of Turkmenbashi. The breeze from the sea rustled through the leaves, carrying the smell of salt and the sound of gulls overhead. When I closed my eyes, I could see my great-uncle’s dinghy in Port Clyde, Maine.

I would have stayed longer if I could. Every time a horn blared from the harbor, I was afraid that was the Bagtyỳar weighing anchor. There was only time to squeeze myself and my backpack into a small corner store, where I bought bananas, flatbread, a bottle of water, and a Snickers bar; my provisions until I reached Azerbaijan, whenever that would be.

A horn blared again, and I thanked the clerk and left, leaving behind some bemused smiles. The store was a few blocks up the hill from the train station, a grand white building that overlooked the beach. Taxis were congregated there, and one sped me to the ferry terminal. I gave him my last few manat, except for one which I kept as a souvenir.

* * *

It was busy in the terminal. There was a line at the ticket counter, and I fell in, tapping my foot and scanning the harbor through the floor-to-ceiling windows until I could verify that the Bagtyỳar was still there. The man behind the window raised an eyebrow when I stepped up. He tentatively spoke Russian to me. I asked for a ticket to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan.

“Baku? *Nyet*, Alat.”

Alat? I didn’t know where that was. I asked a man in line with me. Baku? I pointed to him. Azerbaijan? He chuckled and nodded, and spoke to the ticket clerk for me. The clerk shook his head and looked to me.

“One-hundred dollar, Alat.”

That was more than I had thought. I thanked my lucky stars that I had the foresight in Beijing to withdraw that much cash as I went back and forth from my hostel to the Embassy of Turkmenistan. Slowly, I handed over the cash, and he slid a ticket across the counter to me. I thanked the man who came to my aid and sat down with my backpack. There was nothing to do but wait for the ship to allow passengers onboard.

I sat there for hours. There was a family with young children across from me in the waiting area, who ran around with the other children as kids do. Outside the window, ships lumbered across the water, fading off into the distance, bound for Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan. *What an interesting intersection of the world,* I thought to myself.

When some families began to stand, I rummaged through my backpack, wondering where I had left my Azeri visa. Travelers are required to print it ahead of time to present before boarding. For a horrible twenty minutes, I couldn't find it. I'm sure the woman sitting next to me noted my frantic anxiety as I checked and rechecked every pocket of my pack, muttering to myself. I did finally find it and held it up with an exasperated sigh. She chuckled and feigned relief by wiping imaginary sweat from her brow. That was a common language.

It was another hour before we were permitted to move through security. I thought we were boarding, but there were more benches awaiting us on the other side, where we sat for another several hours. We were only allowed through security in small batches. Our bags were searched. I assisted an old woman in scanning her passport at a kiosk before I scanned my own. The customs agent I spoke to was not an image of hospitality, though he gave me no trouble. For all the anxiety that I endured when researching Turkmen border crossings, they turned out to be the most painless of all.

One by one, we advanced through security and sat down in seats that were comfier than the ones in the terminal. By the time a man came to bring us onto the Bagtyỳar, the sun was already beginning to lower in the sky. It would be another 12 hours before the Bagtyỳar was to depart.

* * *

I woke around midnight. The ship had departed, but Turkmenbashi was still close behind us. Lights twinkled here and there up and down the rocky coast, the only way to find the horizon between the night sky and the dark waters of the Caspian.

Us passengers were only allowed on the top deck. There was a large room lined with rows of hard seats. No beds. At the front of the room, a portrait of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow hung on the wall. His eyes seemed to follow me around the room.

The voyage from Turkmenbashi to Alat is 30 hours. I could only walk laps around the top deck whenever I awoke from a fitful hour of sleep, shivering in the cold sea air. Water hung in the atmosphere and soaked my clothes, like I had walked through the mist of a waterfall. Outside, the stars covered everything and seemed like they were so close I could reach out and pluck them from the sky.

Whenever the air outside became too cold to bear, I went back in to try to sleep another few hours. I'd wake and walk a few laps, trying my best to avoid the gaze of Gurbanguly before going back to sleep again. By six in the morning, I was up for good, and sat against a wall outside, watching the ship come to life. A crew member stepped out of a door and lit a cigarette. It took him a few tries in the wind. I went back inside.

An announcement in Russian crackled through the PA system. All the passengers got up and filed down a hall, but I stayed back. I had no money, so I didn't think the food was for me. The

second time the announcement came, an older man tapped my shoulder and gestured to his mouth, beckoning me to follow. I was grateful for that; the food was included, and I had already eaten my bananas and bread before we even left the port.

I spent the rest of the voyage outside in the sun, watching the waves beat against the hull and the ghosts of ships fade out of the mist on the horizon. Occasionally, we passed great metal beasts of oil rigs looming in the distance. They were the only point of reference to gauge our speed. How fast were we moving? Where even were we?

An island materialized eventually. There were a few more oil rigs. Then more ships. I had read about a floating city off the coast of Azerbaijan and wondered if I could see it. The coast got closer. First there were just a few rocky islands, but then, the horizon began to darken. The darkness grew and took shape. There it was – my exit from Central Asia. It had been a long, hard road. I wasn't out of it yet, but the hardest was behind me, long faded into the mist of the Caspian.

Solitary oil rigs gradually turned into entire metallic forests dominating the horizon on either side. The other passengers had begun to come out onto the deck to watch the land get closer. After some hours, we could see details, and then roads and buildings. I presumed we were looking at Alat, the port town some 66 kilometers down the coast from Baku.

I looked back across the sea in the direction I thought Turkmenistan was. There was nothing to see, of course; we had crossed hundreds of nautical miles that night. It was in that moment that I began to understand Kerouac's words that I read on the road somewhere.

"What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-by."

I love that quote. And finally, having read it somewhere in Kyrgyzstan months earlier, I got it. The wind whipped through my hair, as I stared across the sea, feeling melancholic for the desert I was leaving behind. For the soldier who spoke English at the train station in Ashgabat, and the boys my age beginning their service, and the older couple in my train cabin who shared their tea with me. I still think about them from time to time.

But all that was left to do was once again shoulder my pack and look forwards, to “the crazy venture beneath the skies.”

And so I did.