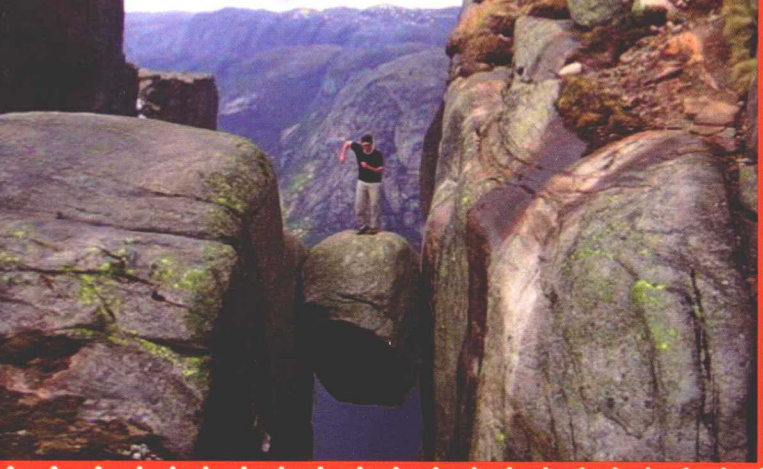

WHERE THE HELL IS MATT?

Dancing Badly Around the World

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Introduction

"Hey, stand over there and do that dance you do. I'll record it on your camera."

When Brad spoke those words near a busy street corner in Hanoi, he didn't know he was profoundly altering the course of my life. Over the next five years, standing *over there* and doing my dance would send me to seventy countries on all seven continents; to the ocean floor and to mountain peaks; to the poorest, most crowded places on earth and to silent oases where few other humans have set foot.

I did not plan to become famous on the Internet for dancing badly all around the world. It just happened. And it started with a spontaneous, goofy idea.

In the summer of 2003, digital cameras were just becoming cheap and portable. Internet video was on the cusp of ubiquity. And budget travel was easier and safer than ever, allowing backpackers to wander just about anywhere on the planet. When Brad, my friend and former coworker, made that simple suggestion during our trip through Vietnam, he placed me at a fulcrum. Culture and technology had converged to create an enormous opportunity. All that was needed was a visual hook to hold peoples' attention. Turns out, dancing badly was just the thing.

I've been dancing that way for as long as I can remember. It's the only dance I know—and I realize I'm using the term charitably. I jump up and down and swing my arms. It's what my body feels like doing when it's happy. Brad knew the dance because I used it to pester him at work when it was time to go to lunch. I'd hover in front of his desk, snap my fingers, and dance until he gave up on whatever he was doing and came with me to get something to eat.

In the beginning, the formula for shooting dancing clips was only a slight variation on standard tourist snapshots: pose in front of famous landmark, click, move on. I could've just as easily been carrying some stuffed animal, wearing a funny hat, or hanging spoons from my face, but it happened to be dancing, and that added something special. It was a long time before I understood what that something was. Back then it was just a fun, fast, and cheap way to capture mementos

from the interesting places I visited. I figured I'd enjoy looking back on down the road, and that it might amuse my friends and family.

It became a lot more. This book is the story of how that happened.

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Part One:
Nerd Wanderlust

"I'm quitting."

"You're quitting?"

"Yeah, I'm done. I've gotta go."

That was the first time I said it out loud. I'd known something was wrong for a long time, but I didn't know what to do about it. Until I told my boss, Andy, that I was resigning from my job, it hadn't occurred to me that I *could* do anything about it.

All my life, all I wanted to do was make videogames. Growing up in Connecticut, I was a terrible student. In my junior year of high school, my father told me he didn't want to send me to college because I clearly wasn't interested. He encouraged me to find my own path. So while my friends left home to pursue degrees, I worked as an assistant manager at a videogame store. That led to a job as an editor at a videogame magazine, which gave me enough knowledge and experience to land a position, shortly before my twentieth birthday, as a game designer at Activision in Los Angeles.

Living in Los Angeles didn't suit me much, but I still thought I was the luckiest guy in the world. My life became a rhythmic migration from bubble to bubble: car, work, car, apartment, car, shopping mall, and so on. I found it hard to make friends. I found it hard to break my routine. I felt a need to grow and discover, but it just wasn't happening for me.

A few years later, I was working at Pandemic Studios when two of my coworkers, Andy and Adam, announced they were moving home to Australia. They'd had enough of Los Angeles, too. They were valued programmers, so the head of the company offered to start a satellite office down there, which would allow them to continue working for the company. When I heard the news, I begged them to take me along.

In 2000, I moved to Brisbane, Australia and my circumstances improved considerably. I had friends. I went out. I did stuff.

I learned two things from Australians that had a lasting impact on me: I learned to drink alcohol, and I learned how to travel. Growing up, travel wasn't big on my radar screen. My family went to the Caribbean every year in the spring, and there were frequent excursions to Disney World, but I had no idea you could simply hop on a plane, go somewhere strange

and distant, and sort yourself out once you got there. For Australians, this was a common rite of passage. They would finish university, say "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad," and then disappear for a couple years with little more than a vague plan and a shoestring budget.

As I got older, I got the sneaking suspicion that I was missing out on something. Sitting in front of a computer all day at the office, getting pastier and fatter, it seemed my attempt to find my own path had led me astray. I'd become increasingly aware of the larger world around me, but still I felt cut off. Suddenly, I wanted very much to be a part of it.

In late 2002, the game we were working on was canceled. It was a game for kids about cute little creatures that popped into balls and smacked into each other. My team was thrilled to be working on it, and we were crushed to lose it to the unfortunate reality that no one wanted to play it. By that point, tastes had "matured." A series called *Grand Theft Auto* had become enormously successful, and publishers wanted to imitate that success with more games that were explicit, brutal, and generally nihilistic.

We had the option to either come up with an original idea that we could sell, or get stuck churning out a game based on some third-rate movie or TV show license. Out of frustration, I proposed exactly what I figured publishers wanted. The pitch went like this: "You play an alien who invades earth. Your job is to blow up everything and kill everyone. We'll call it *Destroy All Humans!*"

Apparently, I was spot on. The game was greenlit and put into production. It eventually dawned on me that I'd self-sabotaged my career by conceiving a project that I absolutely did not want to make.

And so, at the age of twenty-six, I took Andy out for a drink and told him I was resigning. He was disappointed at first, but he knew I'd stopped caring and had become pretty useless at my job. The game got made without me, and it actually wound up being a lot of fun.

"Where are you headed?" Andy asked. "Back home?"

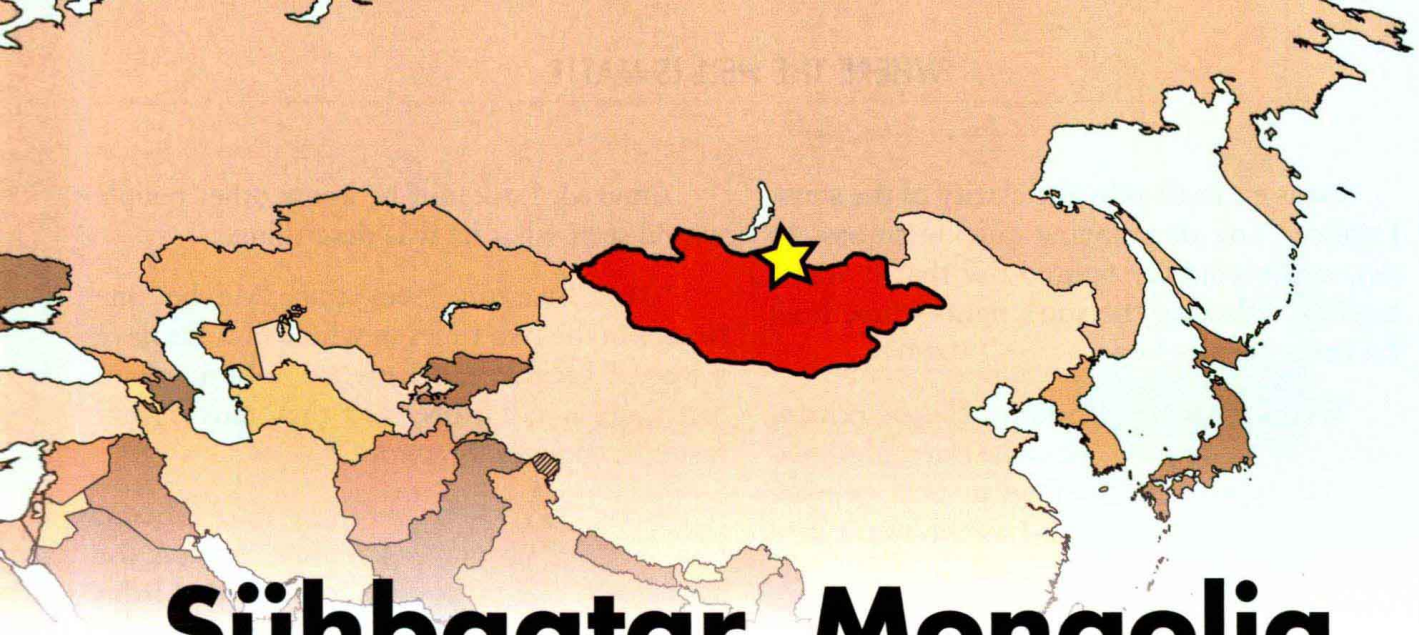
"Where's home?"

There wasn't much pulling me back to Connecticut. I knew L.A. wasn't the place for me. I only had one real obligation at that point, and I'd just relinquished myself of the burden. Suddenly I had nowhere in particular that I needed to be.

"I don't know," I said. "I've got some money saved up. I guess I'll just wander the planet for a while."

"Where do you want to go?"

" . . . Everywhere."



Sühbaatar, Mongolia

I did not order the boiled sheep's head.

Brent did. Brent is Australian, which means he's predisposed toward inadvisable behavior that results in a good anecdote. Brent and I stuck together from the moment we were introduced, but I had no interest in following him on the sheep adventure.

The head was brought to the table in ceremonious fashion, looking more or less how it would have when it was still attached to a body. The skin and hair were gone, but it still had its ears and its tongue. The eyes were white, like a zombie's.

Our guide went straight to work on his own sheep's head with knife and fork, carving off the cheek, the lips, the tongue, and finally digging into the brain. His cuts were fast and deliberate, disassembling the sheep's cranium and extracting every morsel. The rest of us just sat there with pale faces, Brent included. He tasted a bit of it, to his credit, but he was out of his depth.

After dinner, I strolled outside to lie in the grass. We were in a campsite of traditional Ger tents, far from the city among the endless rolling hills.

I was enthralled by the clarity of the stars. I noticed one star moving quickly across the sky, and eventually figured out that it was a satellite reflecting the sun's light—something I'd never seen before.

When our server, Chuluun, finished cleaning up after our meal, he came out and joined me. He spoke a little English and enjoyed talking to Western guests. I asked him if he'd ever seen a UFO. He was unfamiliar with the word, so I attempted to clarify: "Uh, spaceship. Aliens. Flying saucers. Men in Black."

There wasn't a trace of recognition. I tried a different approach.

"Have you ever seen a bright light that moved quickly across the sky in different directions?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I have seen."

"Not like that satellite," I said. "Bigger. Faster."

"Yes, yes. I have seen."

"Was it an airplane?"

He said no. He knew what airplanes looked like, and it was different. I asked him to describe what he saw.

"It is like a star, but it moves very fast and changes direction."

Amazed, I asked if he knew other people who'd seen what he was describing.

"Yes. Everyone sees this. Maybe one time. Maybe two times in whole life. We have a word." He told me the word in Mongolian. "In English it means 'star that moves very fast and changes direction.'"

Brent and I left by train into Siberia. Crossing the border is a tedious process for foreigners. Our train car was separated from the others and we were left alone on the tracks for several hours. During this time, we could not move from our cabins—not even to go to the bathroom. The Russian border guard came in to inspect us. We were told to never under any circumstances smile or laugh when talking to the inspector, or we could be denied entry.

When it was over, we were allowed to step off the train for a bathroom break. Having neglected to shoot a clip during my visit to Mongolia, I snuck around the corner of the immigration building and got Brent to hold the camera while I danced a few feet from the border.

Siberia, Russia

I spent the next six days on the Trans-Siberian Railway (or as I prefer to call it, the Bleak Streak), traveling to Moscow. Brent and I were thrown into a cabin with two other passengers of a similar age and circumstance: Rohit, an American film student, and an Irish girl named Rose.

We ate a lot of cheese and sausage. We drank a lot of vodka.

The size of our cabin made us all get to know each other intimately. My bunkmate, Rohit, had a snoring problem. His middle-of-the-night wheezes reduced Brent to fits of bleary-eyed hysteria.

After a few nights of it, I turned on the microphone built into my laptop and recorded Rohit going full blast. I then boosted my speakers to maximum volume, set the laptop behind his head, and played his noises back to him. He jumped out of bed and asked, "Who's snoring?"

Gleefully, we all shouted back, "You! It's you!!!"

Each car is assigned a *provodnitza*. *Provodnitzas* are invariably female, and seem to be a vaguely defined combination of conductor, maid, and prison guard. They are notoriously punitive. At one point our *provodnitza* got fed up that we were not fully closing the door between carriages, so to teach us a lesson she locked us into the dining car while we were playing cards. We found this deeply alarming, as theft is fairly routine on Russian trains and our cabins were easily accessible to other passengers. She waited for several minutes while we banged and screamed before letting us out.

Lesson learned.

We had brief opportunities to step off the train once or twice each day. Usually, all we could do was pick up grim offerings like smoked fish and boiled eggs from old ladies who wait by the tracks. Occasionally, we'd get a chance to wander a few blocks into the larger cities before the train departed.

As we approached the station in Omsk, I read in my guidebook that it was home to the world's largest Lenin head. I have a condition that renders me incapable of turning down an opportunity to see the world's largest anything, so I convinced Brent to come with me and find it.

We arrived at 2 a.m. and we had forty-five minutes to explore before the train was to leave. We set out with no map, no money, no passports, and not even the slightest idea where this Lenin head was to be found. We were soon lost.

We wandered toward what felt like the city's center, but I was truly winging it. At long last, Brent stopped and asked me, "What *is* a lemonhead, anyway? And why do they make them so big here?"

I realized he hadn't the slightest idea what we were doing, but was no less enthusiastic for not knowing. If you have the opportunity, I highly recommend traveling with an Australian.

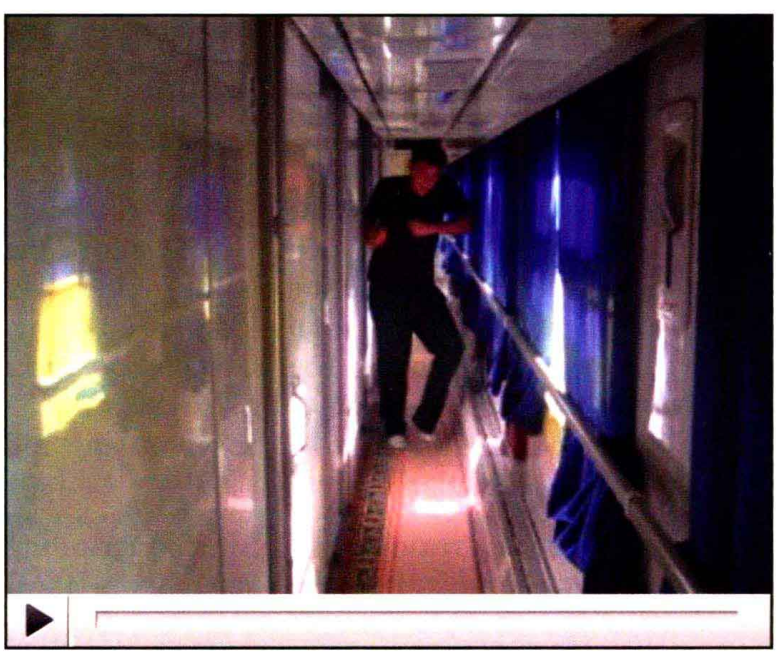
We eventually wound up finding the world's largest Lenin head. It looked like Lenin's head and it was really big.

We heard the train whistle blowing in the distance. We immediately began sprinting. I'd lost over twenty pounds since I started the trip, but I still wasn't much of a runner. My legs gave out and Brent took off ahead of me. He got onboard and begged the *provodnitza* not to let the train leave until I returned. She didn't understand a word he was saying and didn't particularly care.

As the train wheels started grinding along the rails, I reached the rear carriage,

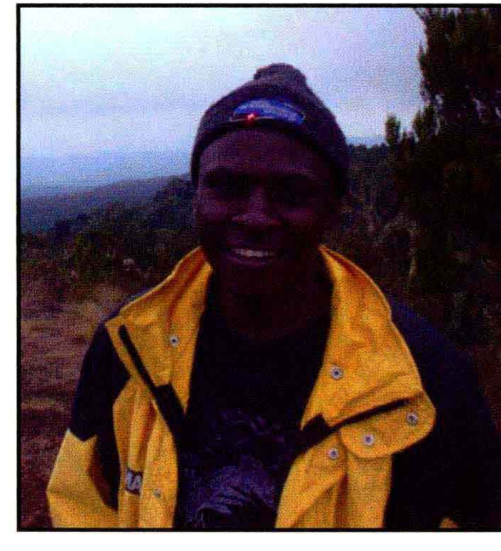
grabbed hold of the handlebar, and climbed inside.

Ideally, I would have been able to shoot a dancing clip with the Siberian tundra framed in the train's windows. Unfortunately, the floor plan left limited compositional options. I enlisted Brent to hold the camera for me again while I squeezed into the corridor and let loose with all the jubilance the space would allow.



Kilimanjaro Summit, Tanzania

Months later, in Kenya, I met up with Andy, my close friend and former boss. Soon after I left to go traveling, it dawned on him that he could do the same thing, so he re-signed and invited me to join him on a hike up the tallest mountain in Africa.



At the base camp, I rented most of the gear I lacked: a sleeping bag, warm gloves, two metal walking poles, a headlamp and balaclava for the final ascent, and a pair of almost-sort-of-close-to-fitting mountain boots.

We met our guide, Mecke.

We were also supplied with three porters. These guys have the grueling job of lugging all our food and cookery, as well as up to fifteen kilos of our luggage—the loads balanced effortlessly on their heads.

The first thing Mecke told us was to go "*pole pole*," which is Kiswahili for "slowly." Climbers feel overconfident, walk briskly, and get nailed by altitude sickness (vomiting, headache, dizziness, lack of coordination).

We passed a steady stream of climbers going in the opposite direction. You can't help but stare—these people were on their way down from the summit.

Did they make it, or were they retreating in shame?

I was tempted to ask, but I realized the only answer I wanted to hear was "no." I wanted to maintain my feeble illusion of exploration and conquest, despite the well-trodden path and the hundred or so climbers coming down from the top each day.

The path wound on through lush green forest for several hours, at points intersecting with the straight, wide dirt road the porters run back and forth along.

In time it got colder, the trees a bit sparser and lower. By early afternoon, we reached camp.

On that first night, less than halfway to the top, I had already started feeling the effects of the higher altitude: a light walk from our cabin to the meal hut and I'd have to pause for a deep breath. This was a serious concern. Fortunately, Andy and I both had our bottles of acetozolamide, the standard medication for preventing and treating altitude sickness.

Not long after leaving camp the next morning, we got our first glimpse of the summit. I found myself drifting in front of Mecke more and more. "*Pole pole!*" he'd warn at regular intervals. But off I went.

At a rest stop, I met a porter named George and his friend, Yaphet. George invited me to continue on with him.