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Opening Extract from...

Finding Gobi

The True Story of a Little Dog and an Incredible Journey

Written by Dion Leonard

With Craig Borlase

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FINDING GOBI

The true story of a little dog and an incredible journey

DION LEONARD

WITH CRAIG BORLASE

HarperCollins*Publishers*

This is a work of nonfiction. The events and experiences detailed herein are all true and have been faithfully rendered as remembered by the author, to the best of his ability, or as they were told to the author by people who were present. Others have read the manuscript and confirmed its rendering of events. However, in certain instances names of individuals have been changed.

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PROLOGUE

THE CAMERA CREW FINISHED UP LAST NIGHT. Someone from the publisher arrives tomorrow. I can still feel the jet lag and other side effects of forty-one hours of travel in my body. So Lucja and I have already decided to make this, our first run of the year, an easy one. Besides, it's not just the two of us we need to think about. There's Gobi to consider.

We take it easy as we pass the pub, drop down beside Holyrood Palace, and see the clear blue sky give way to the grassy mountain that dominates Edinburgh's skyline. Arthur's Seat. I've run up there more times than I can remember, and I know it can be brutal. The wind can be so strong in your face that it pushes you back. The hail can bite into your skin like knives. On days like those, I crave the 120-degree heat of the desert.

But today there's no wind or hail. There's nothing brutal about the air as we climb, as if the mountain wants to show itself off in all its cloudless glory.

As soon as we hit the grass, Gobi is transformed. This dog that's small enough for me to carry under one arm is turned into a raging lion as she pulls forward up the slope.

"Wow!" says Lucja. "Look at her energy!"

Before I can say anything, Gobi turns around, tongue lolling out, eyes bright, ears forward, chest puffed. It's as if she understands exactly what Lucja's said.

"You haven't seen anything yet," I say, pushing the pace up a bit in an attempt to loosen the strain on the leash. "She was just like this back in the mountains."

We push farther up, closer to the summit. I'm thinking how, even though I named her after a desert, I first saw Gobi on the cold, rugged slopes of the Tian Shan. She's a true climber, and with every step we take, she comes more and more alive. Soon her tail is wagging so fast it blurs, her whole body bouncing and pulsing with pure joy. When she looks back again, I swear she's grinning. *Come on!* she says. *Let's go!*

At the top, I soak in all the familiar sights. The whole of Edinburgh is spread out beneath us, and beyond it is the Forth Bridge, the hills of Lomond, and the West Highland Way, every one of whose ninety-six miles I have run. I can see North Berwick, too, a full marathon distance away. I love the run along the beach, even on the tough days when the wind is trying to batter me down and every mile feels like a battle all its own.

It's been more than four months since I've been here. While it's all familiar, there's something different about it as well.

Gobi.

She decides it's time to descend and drags me down the hill. Not down the path, but straight down. I leap over tufts of grass and rocks the size of suitcases, Lucja keeping pace beside me. Gobi navigates them all with skill. Lucja and I look at each other and laugh, enjoying the moment we have longed for, to be a family and finally able to run together.

Running isn't usually this fun. In fact, for me, running is never fun. Rewarding and satisfying, maybe, but not laugh-out-loud fun. Not like it is now.

Gobi wants to keep running, so we let her lead. She takes us wherever she wants to go, sometimes back up the mountain, sometimes down. There's no training plan and no pre-mapped route. There are no worries either. No concerns. It's a carefree moment, and for that and so much more, I'm grateful.

After the last six months, I feel like I need it.

I've faced things I never thought I'd face, all because of this little blur of brown fur that's pulling my arm out of its socket. I've faced fear like I've never known before. I've felt despair as well, the sort that turns the air around you stale and lifeless. I've faced death.

But that's not the whole story. There's so much more.

The truth is that this little dog has changed me in ways I think I'm only just beginning to understand. Maybe I'll never fully understand it all.

Yet I do know this: finding Gobi was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life.

But being found by her—that was one of the best things.

PART 1

1

I STEPPED THROUGH THE AIRPORT DOORS AND out into China. I paused and let the chaos take a good hard whack at my senses. A thousand revving engines in the car park ahead did battle with a thousand voices around me as people shouted at their phones.

The signs were written in both Chinese script and what looked to me like Arabic. I couldn't read either language, so I joined the crush of bodies that I guessed were waiting for a taxi. I stood a foot taller than most people, but as far as they were concerned, I was invisible.

I was in Urumqi, a sprawling city in Xinjiang Province, way up in the top left corner of China. No city in the world is as far from an ocean as Urumqi, and as we'd flown in from Beijing, I watched the terrain shift from razor-sharp snow-capped mountains to vast stretches of empty desert. Somewhere down there a team of race organizers had plotted a 155-mile route that took in those freezing peaks, the incessant wind, and that desolate, lifeless scrubland known as the Gobi Desert. I was going to run across it, knocking out a little less than a marathon a day for four days, then almost

two marathons on the fifth day, and an hour-long sprint for the final six-mile stage that would bring the race to a close.

These races are called "multi-stage ultras", and it's hard to think of a more brutal test of mental and physical toughness. People like me pay thousands of pounds for the privilege of putting ourselves through pure agony, shedding up to 10 per cent of our body weight in the process, but it's worth it. We get to run in some of the remotest and most picturesque parts of the world, and we have the safety net of a dedicated support crew and highly trained medical crew on our side. Sometimes these challenges can be excruciating, but they're also life changing, and reaching the finish line is one of life's most rewarding experiences.

Sometimes things don't go so well. Like the last time I tried to run six marathons in a week. I ended up in the middle of the pack, in agony. At the time it felt terminal, as if I'd never compete again. But I recovered just enough for one last shot. If I could run well in the Gobi race, maybe I'd yet have some more running in me. After all, in the three years since I'd taken up running seriously, I'd found out how good it felt to be on the podium. The thought of never competing again made me feel queasy inside.

If things went wrong, as they had for another competitor in the same race a few years back, I could end up dead.

According to the Internet, the drive from the airport to the hotel was supposed to take twenty or thirty minutes. But the closer we got to the hour mark, the more agitated the driver became. He had started out grouchy when he realized I was an English-speaking tourist and quoted me a price three times as much as I was expecting. It had got only worse from there.

By the time we pulled up outside a redbrick building, he was waving his arms and trying to shove me out of the cab. I looked out the window, then back at the low-resolution image I'd shown him before we started the journey. It was kind of similar if you squinted a bit, but it was obvious that he hadn't brought me to a hotel.

"I think you need some glasses, mate!" I said, trying to keep it light and get him to see the funny side. It didn't work.

Begrudgingly, he picked up his phone and yelled at someone on the other end. When we finally made it to my destination twenty minutes later, he was livid, shaking his fists and burning rubber as he sped away.

Not that I'd been bothered. As much as ultra-running batters your body, it also assaults your mind. You learn pretty quickly how to block out distractions and mildly annoying things like lost toenails or bleeding nipples. The stress coming from an enraged taxi driver was nothing I couldn't ignore.

The next day was a different story.

I had to travel a few hundred miles out of the city by bullet train to get to the race headquarters in a large town called Hami. Right from the moment I arrived at the station in Urumqi, I knew I was in for a journey that would test my patience.

I'd never seen such security at a train station. There were military vehicles everywhere, temporary metal roadblocks funnelling pedestrians and traffic past armed guards. I'd been told to allow myself two hours to get on the train, but as I stared at the great tide of people ahead of me, I wondered whether it was going to be enough. If the previous day's taxi ride had taught me anything, it's that if I missed my train, I wasn't sure I could overcome the

language barrier and re-book another ticket. And if I didn't get to the race meeting point that day, who knew if I would even make the start?

Panic wasn't going to help me get anywhere. I took control of my breathing, told myself to get a grip, and shuffled my way through the first security check. By the time I cleared it and worked out where I needed to go to collect my ticket, I discovered I was in the wrong queue. I joined the right one, and by then I was way down on my time. *If this was a race*, I thought, *I'd be at the back*. I never ran at the back.

Once I had my ticket, I had less than forty minutes to clear another security check, have my passport stared at in forensic detail by an over-eager policeman, force my way to the front of a line of fifty people waiting to check in, and stand, open-mouthed, panting and staring frantically at signs and display boards I couldn't read, wondering where the heck I had to go to find the right platform.

Thankfully, I wasn't entirely invisible, and a Chinese guy who'd studied in England tapped me on the shoulder.

"You need some help?" he said.

I could have hugged him.

I just had time to sit down at the departure point when everyone around me turned and watched as the train crew swept past us. It was like a scene out of a 1950s airport, the drivers with their immaculate uniforms, white gloves, and air of complete control, the stewardesses looking poised and perfect.

I followed them onto the train and sank, exhausted, into my seat. Almost thirty-six hours had slipped by since I left home in Edinburgh, and I tried to empty my mind and body of the tension

that had built up so far. I looked out the window for something to interest me, but for hours on end the train just sliced through a bland-looking landscape that wasn't cultivated enough to be farmland and wasn't vacant enough to be desert. It was just land, and it went on for hundreds and hundreds of miles.

Exhausted and stressed. This was *not* how I wanted to feel this close to the biggest race I'd faced so far in my short running career.

I'd taken part in more prestigious events, such as the world-famous Marathon des Sables in Morocco, universally agreed to be the toughest footrace on earth. Twice I'd lined up alongside the thirteen hundred other runners and raced across the Sahara Desert as the temperature topped 125 degrees in the day and sank to 40 at night. I'd even finished a respectable thirty-second the second time I ran it. But fifteen months had passed since then, and a lot had changed.

I had started taking note of the changes during another 155-mile race across the Kalahari Desert in South Africa. I'd pushed myself hard—too hard—to finish second overall, my "first-ever podium finish" in a multi-stage. I'd not kept myself hydrated enough, and, as a result, my urine was the color of Coke. Back home my doctor said I'd caused my kidneys to shrink due to the lack of liquid, and all that running had left them bruised and resulted in blood in my urine.

A few months later I'd started having heart palpitations during another race. I could feel my heart beating wildly, and I got hit by a double blow of queasiness and dizziness.

Both those problems flared up again almost as soon as I started the Marathon des Sables. Of course, I ignored the pain and forced myself through it, all the way to a top-fifty finish. Trouble was, I'd pushed myself so hard that as soon as I got home, my left

hamstring went into violent and agonizing spasms every time I tried to walk, let alone run.

For the first few months I rested; then for the next few I was in and out of physiotherapists' consultation rooms, all the time hearing the same-old same-old: I just needed to try whatever new combination of strength and conditioning exercises they were suggesting. I tried them all. Nothing helped me to run again.

It took the best part of a year to find a physiotherapist and a coach who both had running expertise and knew what was going on to discover the truth: part of my problem was that I wasn't running correctly. I'm tall—well over six feet—and while my long, steady, loping stride felt easy and natural, I wasn't firing up all the muscles I should have been using, so I had sharp, painful spasms in my legs every time I ran.

The race in China was my first chance in a tough competition to try out my new, faster, shorter stride. In many ways I was feeling great. I had been able to run for hours on end at home without pain, and I'd followed my usual pre-race diet better than I ever had before. For the previous three months, I'd avoided all alcohol and junk food, eating not much more than chicken and vegetables. I'd even cut out coffee, hoping that would put an end to the heart palpitations.

If it all paid off, and I ran as well as I thought I could do in China, I'd tackle the prestigious race that the organizers were putting on later in the year—across the Atacama salt plains in Chile. If I won there, I'd be in the perfect shape to get back to the Marathon des Sables the following year and make a real name for myself.

I was the first passenger off when we pulled into Hami and at the head of the pack as we surged towards the exit. *This is more like it*, I thought.

The guard manning the security checkpoint put a quick end to my joy.

"What you do here?"

I could see a long line of taxis outside the door, all waiting beside a vacant pavement for my fellow passengers to lay claim to them. I tried to explain about the race and say that I wanted to go and get a cab, but I knew it was no use. He looked quizzically back and forth between me and my passport, then motioned me to follow him into a trailer that doubled as an office.

It took half an hour to explain what all the packets of energy gels and dried foods were for, and even then I wasn't convinced he believed me. Mostly I think he let me go because he was bored.

By the time I got out and approached the pavement, the crowds had all gone. And so had the taxis.

Great.

I stood alone and waited. I was fatigued and wanting this ridiculous journey to be over.

Thirty minutes later a taxi pulled up. I'd made sure to print off the address of my hotel in Chinese script before I'd left Urumqi, and as I showed it to the driver, I was pleased to see that she seemed to recognize it. I climbed in the back, squashed my knees up against the metal grille, and closed my eyes as we pulled out.

We'd only got a few hundred feet when the car stopped. My driver was taking on another passenger. *Just go with the flow, Dion.* I didn't see any point in complaining. At least, I didn't until she turned to me, pointed to the door, and made it perfectly clear that the other passenger was a far better customer, and I was no longer welcome in the cab.

I walked back, spent another twenty minutes getting through

the inevitable security checks, and lined up once more, alone, at the deserted taxi stand.

Another taxi came, eventually. The driver was happy and polite and knew exactly where to go. In fact, he was so confident that when he pulled up in front of a large, grey building ten minutes later, I didn't think to check that I was at the right hotel. I just handed over my money, pulled my bag out after me, and listened to him drive away.

It was only when I walked into the entrance that I realized I was in the wrong place entirely. It was not a hotel but an office block. An office block in which nobody spoke any English.

For forty minutes I tried to communicate with the office workers, they tried to communicate with me, and the phone calls to I-didn't-know-who failed to get us any closer. It was only when I saw a taxi drive slowly past the front of the building that I grabbed my bag, ran out, and begged the driver to take me where I needed to go.

Thirty minutes later, as I stood and stared at the empty bed in the budget hotel the race organizers had booked, I said out loud my solemn vow.

"I am never, ever coming back to China."

It wasn't the frustration of not being able to communicate properly or even the muscle aches and serious fatigue that were bothering me. All day I'd fought hard against the urge to worry, but as one thing went wrong after another, I ended up getting nervous. It wasn't logical, and it didn't make sense. I'd reminded myself again and again that I had allowed plenty of time to get from Beijing to the race start, and I figured that even if I'd missed my train, I could have found a way to put things right. And I knew, deep down, that

any aches I'd picked up from the previous couple of days would soon shake themselves out once I started running.

Even so, by the time I arrived at the hotel near the race headquarters, I was more anxious than I'd ever been before any race I'd ever run. The source of my nerves wasn't the journey, and it wasn't the knowledge of the physical challenges that lay ahead of me. It was something far, far deeper than that.

It was the worry that this might be my last race ever and the fear that maybe I was never going to win a race—winning had been the only thing that motivated me to run competitively in the first place.

Tuesday, 3 January, 1984. The day after my ninth birthday. That was when I first understood how quickly life can change. The day had been a great one, soaked in beautiful Australian summer sunshine. In the morning I'd ridden my bike over some jumps I'd put together while Mum and Dad read the papers and my three-year-old sister played out in the yard near Nan's downstairs flat at the far end of the house. I'd finally managed to perfect my somersault on the trampoline, and after lunch Dad and I went out with our cricket bats and a few old balls. He was just recovering from a chest infection, and it was the first time in ages that he'd joined me for a bit of sport outside. He taught me how to hold the bat in just the right way to hit a ball so hard and high that it sailed way out over the scrubby grass and beyond the far boundary of our property.

When I finally came inside in the late afternoon, I found the house to be full of the smells of Mum's cooking. She steamed her chocolate pudding for hours and made Bolognese so rich that I

would hold my head over the pot and inhale the aroma for as long as I could before the heat got to be too much.

It was a perfect day.

Like any nine-year-old, I denied I was tired when it came time to go to bed, but soon enough I was drifting off to sleep, vaguely aware of Mum leaving for her Tuesday night aerobics class while Dad watched cricket on TV with the sound turned down low.

"Dion!"

I didn't want to wake up. It was dark and my head was still half-stuck in its curious dream world.

"Dion!" I heard Dad's voice again. There was no other noise in the house, no TV, and no sound of Mum anywhere.

I didn't know why he'd be calling me like this, and I let myself drift back to sleep.

I couldn't tell you how much longer Dad went on calling my name, but at some point I knew I had to get up and go and see what he wanted.

He was lying on his bed, under a sheet. He didn't look at me when I came in, and I didn't want to go too far into the room. His breathing sounded all wrong, as if he was having to use all the strength he possessed to drag even the smallest lungful of air in. Something told me he was really sick.

"Go and get your grandmother straightaway, Dion."

I ran downstairs and knocked on Nan's front door.

"Nan, you've got to come," I said. "Dad needs you. Something's wrong."

She came right out, and I followed her back upstairs. I remember thinking that because she used to be a nurse, Dad would be okay. Whenever my little sister, Christie, or I was hurt, Nan would always make us laugh as she tended to our wounds, telling us stories

from when she worked in a war repatriation hospital as a head nurse in charge of the others. She was a tough woman, a fighter who I believed held within her hands the power to make any illness or pain disappear.

As soon as she saw Dad, she left to call an ambulance. I stayed with him while she made the call, but as soon as she came back, she told me to leave the room.

Christie was asleep in the next room. I stood and watched her, listening to my dad's breathing grow worse and Nan talk in a voice I'd never heard her use. "Garry," she said, a little louder than normal. "The ambulance is coming. You're having an asthma attack. Keep calm, Garry. Stay with me."

Christie woke up from the noise and started crying. "Dad doesn't feel well, Christie," I said, trying to sound strong like Nan. "But people are coming to help."

I raced across the hallway to open the door as soon as I heard the ambulance pull up outside. I watched as the paramedics carried a stretcher and breathing apparatus up the set of stairs. And I looked on in silence as Mum rushed into the house a few minutes later. I listened to the sound of Mum's sobbing coming from the bedroom, not understanding what it meant. When they wheeled Dad out a while later, I didn't want to look at him. He was still struggling to breathe, and his head was shaking. I could hear the noise of one of the wheels under the stretcher as it squeaked along.

I followed everyone outside, where the streetlights and headlights and blinking hazard lights all made the night look out of time. As the medics were loading Dad into the back of the ambulance, he told Mum he loved her. I stood by Nan's side, the grass cold against my bare feet. "Things will be okay," said Nan. I didn't know who she was speaking to.

Christie, Nan, and I stayed back while Mum went off with Dad in the ambulance. I don't know how long we were alone, or even what we did. But I remember that it was around midnight when the front door finally opened. Mum came in with a doctor beside her. Neither of them had to say anything at all. Nan and I both knew what had happened. Soon Mum, Nan, and I were crying. Not long after, the phone started ringing. Nan answered, her voice low, the calls never lasting more than a few minutes. When the doorbell rang and the first neighbours arrived and hugged Mum tight, I disappeared to my room.

On the day of the funeral, I watched as Dad's coffin was wheeled toward the hearse. I broke free from Mum's hand on my shoulder and ran out to stop it. I draped as much of myself as I could around the timber box, but it was no use. My arms couldn't reach all the way around. When my sobbing got so hard that it hurt my chest, someone peeled me away.

2

SOON AFTER DAD'S DEATH, MUM MOVED DOWNstairs, where Nan took care of her and Christie and me. It was as if Mum became a child again, and in doing so she couldn't be a mum to us anymore.

I may have been just a nine-year-old kid, but any fool could have spotted the signs. The day I walked in on her in her bedroom, tears barely dry on her cheeks, confirmed the fact that she wasn't coping.

That was a few weeks after Dad's death. It took a few months for me to find out that her troubles were not just caused by grief. She and I were in the kitchen one evening. She was cleaning—a new obsession that had started recently—and I was sitting at the table reading.

"Dion," she said, "Garry wasn't your dad."

I don't remember crying or running off to hide. I don't remember shouting or screaming or asking my mum to explain further. I have no memory of what I said next. I have no recall of how I felt. A blank void exists where so many memories should be. I can only imagine how painful that news must have been for me to wipe all trace of it from my mind.

But what I know for sure is that the wound that had been inflicted on me by my dad's—Garry's—death became so deep that it changed everything about me.

Even today my mum will cry when she and I talk about Garry's death. She'll say it took only a twenty-minute ambulance ride for everything in our lives to change. She's right, but she's also wrong: it might have taken minutes for life to be thrown into chaos, but it took only four words for my grieving heart to be ripped completely apart.

I held tight to my secret. Within a year or two of finding out the truth about myself, I was ashamed of my past: not only was I the kid without a dad at home, but I was the only one I knew who also had a single parent. The regular stream of visitors that poured in after the funeral had long since stopped, and our dwindling finances forced Mum to go out and find work. Whenever she was at home, she spent hours repeatedly cleaning the house and listening to Lionel Richie songs played loudly on the stereo in the pristine dining room.

In my mind, it seemed like all my friends came from perfect families, and because they all went to church, I'd take myself on Sundays as well. I wanted to feel as though I belonged, and I also liked the fact that I could help myself to a handful of small cakes after the service. I didn't mind the sermons so much—sometimes they even made me feel better about myself. But the way people responded to me, as I hovered near the tea table at the end of the service, made it clear to me that they saw me differently from everyone else. I could hear them whispering behind my back. As soon as I turned around, the awkward silence and fake smiles would come out.

Mum started getting phone calls as well. I'd try to creep out into the hallway and watch as she stood, her face turned to the wall, shoulders hunched. Her words were clipped and the calls short, and sometimes when they were over, she'd turn around and see me watching and tell me about the latest gossip people were spreading about us in the town.

Soon enough I encountered the ostracism myself. When I went to a friend's house to visit one Saturday afternoon, I could see his bike on the grass out front, so I knew he was in. His mum, however, said he couldn't come out to play.

"You can't see Dan," she said, pulling the screen door closed between us.

"Why not, Mrs. Carruthers?"

"You're a bad influence, Dion. We don't want you coming around."

I walked away devastated. I didn't drink, swear, act up at school, or get into trouble with the police. Okay, so I was a little greedy with the small cakes at church, but other than that I was always polite and tried to be kind.

She could only have been referring to one thing.

I didn't have a name for it at the time, but I quickly developed a strong dislike for being made to feel I was being excluded. By the time I was fourteen, I was well aware of precisely where I belonged in life: on the outside.

I sat, as I always did, alone and away from everyone else as the race staff welcomed the runners and started the safety briefing. The race was organized by a group I'd not run with before, but I'd been in enough of these meetings to know what was coming.

The biggest danger for anyone running a multi-stage ultra in desert heat is when heat exhaustion—your standard case of dehydration, cramps, dizziness, and a racing pulse—tips over into heatstroke. That's when more drastic symptoms arrive, including confusion, disorientation, and seizures. You won't know it's happening; you won't pick up the signs yourself. That's when you end up curling up in a ditch or making wrong decisions at precisely the time when you need to be getting out of the heat, replacing salts and liquid, and drastically reducing your core temperature. If you don't, you can slip into a coma and end up dead.

The race organizers said that anyone they suspected of being on the edge of heat exhaustion would be pulled from the race immediately. What they didn't say was that six years previously, one of their competitors in the same race had died from heatstroke.

The microphone was passed to an American woman. I recognized her as the founder of the race. "This year we've got some great runners competing," she said, "including the one and only Tommy Chen." There was a round of applause from the hundred runners in the room, who all shifted focus to a young Taiwanese guy who had his own personal film crew standing beside him, capturing the moment. We then listened to a whole load of stuff about how Tommy was going for the win, how he already had some great results behind him.

When I was back home, I had researched the runners I thought were the main contenders, so I knew Tommy was one of the best around. I knew he was a genuine multi-stage superstar and would be tough to beat.

Before I'd left Scotland, I'd read an e-mail from the organizers listing the top-ten runners they expected to do well. I wasn't mentioned at all, despite having beaten a few of them in the past.

A bit of me was still annoyed about it but not because my ego was bruised. There was no reason why they would have expected me to do well. Having not raced since a 132-miler in Cambodia eight months before, I felt I had become a forgotten nobody, and I didn't blame them for passing me over.

I was annoyed with myself. I'd started running only three years earlier but already had enjoyed a few podium results. Coming to the sport so late, I knew I had only a tiny window in which to prove myself, and taking eight months off to recover had felt like a waste of precious time.

Before the briefing we had a kit check to make sure we each had the mandatory equipment required for the race. Even though we carry all the food, bedding, and clothes we will need for the entire six-stage, seven-day race, the aim is to keep our bag weights to a minimum. For me, that means no change of clothes, no sleeping mat, and no books or smartphone to keep me entertained at the end of the race. All I bring is a sleeping bag, a single set of clothes, and the absolute minimum amount of food I can get away with. I bank on 2,000 calories a day, even though I know I'll burn closer to 5,000. I return home looking like death, but the lighter bag is worth it.

Later that day we were boarded onto buses and taken to the site where the race would begin, a couple of hours outside of Hami. I made small talk with a guy next to me, but mainly I kept quiet and tried to block out the noise of the three guys who had come from Macau behind me who were laughing and talking loudly the whole way. I turned around and half-smiled at them a few times, hoping that they'd pick up on my subtle hint for them to shut up. They

just grinned back and carried on with their party. By the time we stopped, I was pretty fed up and hoping to get off and find some peace and quiet to start mentally preparing for the race ahead.

The locals put on a beautiful exhibition of regional dancing and horse riding, including a game that looked like polo but was being played with a dead sheep. I snuck off to find the tent I'd be staying in to claim my spot. On most multi-stage ultras, runners get assigned tent mates to camp with throughout the race. You never know who you're going to get, but you can at least make sure you don't get stuck with a terrible sleeping spot.

I stood in the old army surplus tent and wondered where to put myself. I never liked being near the door because of the draft, and the back of the tent often got a little cold too. I decided to chance it and take a spot in the middle, hoping that my fellow campers wouldn't keep me awake by snoring or making a fuss.

I gave my kit a final check as the first three tent mates arrived. They looked sound enough and didn't cause a ruckus as they chose their spots.

My heart sank when I heard the sound of laughter, looked up, and saw the three guys from Macau walking in.

Even though it was summer, the temperature was noticeably colder when the sun started to set. The local mayor gave a speech that I couldn't understand, but the display of Mongolian dancing and high-speed horse riding was enough to keep me occupied for a while. Some of the runners were sitting around, eating their evening meals, but I wandered around. I got sidetracked looking at Tommy Chen's film crew, but soon enough I was thinking about getting back to the tent. When people started asking one another what type

of shoes they were running in, how much their bags weighed, or whether they'd brought any extra supplies, it was definitely my cue to leave. Getting involved in those kinds of conversations on the day before a race starts is never a good idea. The minute you encounter someone who is doing something different, you'll end up doubting yourself.

I checked my watch—six thirty. Time to eat. Even though waiting can be hard when I'm nervous and it's dark already, I always make sure I eat at the right time the night before each day's race. You don't want to eat too early and have your body consuming the calories before you're actually running.

I got my food, climbed into my sleeping bag, and ate in silence in the tent.

I made sure I was asleep before anyone else came back.