

THE
MONGOLIAN
HORSE,
THE
GIRL
AND THE
THERAPIST

A LIFE-CHANGING JOURNEY

HESTHER SELBECK

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For my parents and my sisters.
And the horses.
And in memory of Titia Henneman-Heering.

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Preface

Do you ever get that feeling... that you no longer enjoy your life... or that you feel so overwhelmed by the noise around you that you don't know who you are or where you stand in life?

That happens to me on my twenty-eighth. I'm in the kitchen dividing a set of pans between me and my ex-boyfriend, when I envision Mongolian horses. I see an expansive steppe; a vastness that leaves me speechless, a place I yearn for, and in that moment, I know – I feel – that Mongolia will be my destination.

In a twist of fate, exactly two years to the day I completed my training as a systemic therapist, I go to Mongolia. This turning point in my life has an impact on my personal growth and existence.

In the interaction with the horses in Mongolia, I feel the force field of connection and experience my human potential and vibrancy. And I discover an open connection with the universe. In its most literal sense, I gallop on horseback into the quantum field, into the reality of the infinite power of thought. And its manifestation.

I transform from a dependent and naive young therapist into an independent, self-confident entrepreneur who develops a therapy program for adults struggling to connect with their emotions. And for adolescents with complex psychiatric issues... and their parents. I have been leading this program, which I have come to

call Contextual Horse Therapy (CHT), in Camprodon, Catalonia for several years now.

My journey of a lifetime started on a horse trek in Northern Mongolia, where an encounter with a charismatic Israeli entrepreneur named Matz at the check-in line for a domestic flight from Ulaanbaatar to Khatgal puts all my senses on alert.

Together with a young Mongolian guide, I travel to the campsites of the Dukha tribe, the nomadic reindeer herders in Mongolia. Throughout my journey, I entertain the idea of living this way, in harmony with myself and the horses, in the expansive nature of Mongolia. And I don't know how or if I will ever return to society. However, I eventually return to Amsterdam... to the houseboat of my ambivalent boyfriend, Micha. But first, I attend a week-long dance and vocal expression workshop for personal growth at a castle in France.

Writing this book has been a long-cherished dream. It took me four years – and deep dives into my journals and memories – to complete. Revisiting my adventures through this book makes them that much more vivid in my mind. Out of an inner restlessness and discontent with my life, I have cultivated a more meaningful, grounded, and internally calm existence. This journey has led me to a deeper understanding of who I am and how I want to live: simply, authentically myself.

My journey was not without its challenges, marked as it was by countless moments of anxiety and insecurity. However, I still carry the positivity and strength of the Mongolian horses within me.

I hope my story inspires you. It's about how I took charge of my life, created the life I envisioned, and turned my dreams into reality.

Hesther Selbeck, Zuidschermer, May 2026

Prologue

HAARLEM, 2012

Journal entry

How do I find myself in this society? How can I create space to connect with my inner being, with my self, Hesther, and my feelings and thoughts? Without getting distracted by the hectic pace of everyday life, the rush of traffic, and the city sounds? But more importantly, who am I?

Most of the time, I don't feel like seeing anyone. I typically keep my phone on vibrate, which causes me to miss texts and calls from my sisters or parents. I'm often told that I'm difficult to reach. Seeing clients is pretty much the only thing that gets me out of the house. And when I do visit family or, on the rare occasion I meet up with a friend, I'm usually dressed in purple or blue sweatpants. It's such a signature look for me that my sisters can pick me out from a mile away, and my middle sister's boyfriend is always cracking jokes about it.

"What are you having?" my friend Renée asks as we sit at a window table in a lively Mexican restaurant in downtown Haarlem. Despite the mild spring weather, it's pouring rain outside.

"You probably won't be eating vegetables anytime soon in Mongolia!"

She wants to know why I am going away.

"I need space," I say. "I need to do this for myself. It's my journey to Ithaca, even though I'm in a relationship with Micha,

you know, my dark curly-haired boyfriend with the adventurous houseboat in Amsterdam.”

“How does he feel about it?” she asks.

He’s indifferent to it, I tell her, and I hate that he’s letting me go so easily. We’d argued about it. While we were at a party in Westerpark, his best friend asked him what he thought about me going to Mongolia. He was very matter of fact about it, stating that it was my decision, and I could go away for as long as I wanted. Then he took a sip of his beer and didn’t look at me, but at his bottle instead. And then he looked at his best friend. That look... the look he didn’t give me. That decisive statement. It hurt so bad. I cried all the way to his house, sitting on the back of his bike, with his bike bags chafing uncomfortably against my legs. I considered going home and not having dinner with him. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. The need for love – his love – was too immense. Too overwhelming. My friend is aware that Micha doesn’t really make time for me and never wants to get together during the week.

“Will you be careful in Mongolia, Hesther?”

Ithaca

When you set out on the journey to Ithaca,
pray that the road be long,
full of adventures, full of knowledge.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
the raging Poseidon do not fear:
you'll never find the likes of these on your way,
if lofty be your thoughts,
if rare emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
the fierce Poseidon you'll not encounter,
unless you carry them along within your soul, unless your soul
raises them before you.

Pray that the road be long;
that there be many a summer morning, when with what
delight, what joy, you'll enter into harbors yet unseen;
that you may stop at the Phoenician emporia and acquire all
the fine wares, mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensuous perfumes of every kind, as many sensuous
perfumes as you can;
that you may visit many an Egyptian city, to learn and learn
again from lettered men.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your final destination.
But do not rush the voyage in the least.
Better it last for many years;
and once you're old,
cast anchor on the isle,
rich with all you've gained along the way,
expecting not that Ithaca will give you wealth.
Ithaca gave you the wondrous voyage:
without her you'd never have set out.
But she has nothing to give you anymore.
If then, you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
As wise as you've become, with such experience, by now you
will have come to know what Ithaca means.

- C.P. CAVAFY

Translated by E. Sachperoglou, in C.P. Cavafy, *The Collected Poems*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford 2008

PART I
Before Mongolia

**ENERGY – ANXIETY – EMOTIONS –
PHYSICAL QUEST – DEATH**



The Last Straw

Discontent

THE HAGUE, 2008

I'm sitting in the flexible workspace at the Children, Youth, and Family Services. My coworker is busy and looks stressed out. She's hunched over her computer screen, speaking rapidly into her headset mic. Her vibrant, woolen scarf catches my eye. We have a connection. Both of us have traveled extensively in our lives, each having backpacked through Nepal and India.

With keen interest, I follow her throughout her workday as she argues a case before the juvenile court and holds a meeting with a social services agency. Impressed by her self-confidence, I wonder if I can ever be bold enough to set boundaries and make decisions like she does. The effortless way she connects with people and provides leadership is truly remarkable.

It's my first day of work as a child protective services worker, which means that I have to arrange professional help for children and adolescents under State protection who live in unsafe environments that put their physical and mental health at risk. It basically means that, as a public employee, I am endlessly writing plans and typing out court petitions. So, I don't understand how my coworker manages to keep track of all her tasks. And when is the work truly 'done?'

On my third day at work, a coworker on my team informs me that my friend has resigned and that this is her last month on the job. I'm stunned. Why didn't I know this? Why didn't she tell me this herself? I'm hurt and feel a sense of anxiety building up

inside me. Already? I think. It's as though a cloud of incomprehension is settling over me. An intangible reality of the complex and challenging work environment, of the absence of control and boundaries. From the very first days of work, I feel my self-control slipping. And an increasing uncertainty about the tasks I am expected to carry out.

How is this possible?

And where do these feelings of uncertainty and discontent come from?

Despite the unsettling feeling brewing in my gut, I become close friends with Judith. I'm instantly captivated when I see her standing there in her boots and purple tights under a short denim skirt. I'm also filled with a perplexing sense of awe as she appears so cheerful and effortlessly cool.

Through Judith, I join the annual Ardennes Youth Care Camp, where I confront my innermost self in a brutally harsh way. I struggle to assert my authority over the adolescents in juvenile rehabilitation. A male colleague, who resembles a military recruit, consistently offers feedback on my interactions with the adolescents, urging me to be more decisive and self-assured. It drives me nuts, but I know he's right.

One day, I catch a boy relieving himself against the tent in our primitive camp, where there is no running water, and the toilet is just a hole in the ground. I'm at a loss for what to do. My strength lies in fostering a sense of childlike joy within the group, cheering them on during sports and games, and providing support when they're feeling down or need to vent. Setting boundaries is a struggle for me. However, I eagerly embrace the challenge of hosting the variety show, where I have the audience in fits of laughter.

House Call

I've been working as a child protective services worker for two years now. On a Monday afternoon, I make a house call that I have scheduled in my planner.

The leather couch gleams in the sunlight, while the pungent scent of cigarettes hangs heavy in the air, causing me to hold my breath. I eye the tea mug with the ADO Den Haag football club logo, hesitant to touch it for fear of what lurks inside. Is it coffee? What is that? A cigarette butt?

A no-nonsense social worker with chic salt-and-pepper hair is also present. Thank goodness I'm not alone. My clients, a young intellectually challenged couple from a blue-collar neighborhood, find delight in the playful presence of newborn kittens frolicking in the kitchen.

The parents don't exactly roll out the welcome mat for me. They see me as the enemy, a wolf in sheep's clothing, which I totally get. I maintain a professional and empathetic demeanor toward them, but I'm here to advocate for the interests of their child, who is currently in the care of a foster family under my supervision.

As I sit up a bit straighter, adjust my sweater, and clear my throat a couple of times to discuss the formal position of the Children, Youth, and Family Services in the upcoming court case about their son, a piercing scream shatters the air. My heart drops and my mind races to process the sound. Is it from an animal or a human?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the woman dart to the kitchen, letting out a piercing scream as she leans her hand against the wooden coffee table and accidentally knocks over her coffee mug in the process. The steaming mug shatters into pieces as it hits the tiles. Her husband rushes after her, only to find their pit bull with a kitten in its mouth. As the dog proudly tries to show off its catch, the man frees the tiny creature from its jaws. The animal, seeing the man's hand as prey, sinks its teeth into his hand with a loud growl, causing the wife to scream and bolt into the street in full panic at the sight of her husband's bloody hand. Her husband chases after her.

Without saying a word, I look at the social worker. I feel inclined to intervene, but the parents have vanished. I sympathize with them, feeling pain in my heart over their family drama. A myriad of thoughts run through my mind; I am frustrated with the bureaucracy and red tape of Child Protective Services, but at the same time, I want to silently convey to the social worker just how relieved I am that the son of these vulnerable parents is under the guardianship of the Children, Youth, and Family Services. In my role as the 'wolf,' which I sometimes find myself identifying with, I am the protector of this sheep who lives in a Christian foster family. And that's really the most rewarding aspect of my job that I'm grateful for.

In a month, I will begin my two-year training program to become a systemic therapist in Haarlem. In my work as a child protective services worker, I miss the deep connection with my clients. I find myself spending more time on the futile task of filling out forms than interacting with the children and young people in my caseload. Some of my coworkers also recognize the absurdity of the situation.

The endless paperwork and unnecessary red tape drain me.

I grow weary and frustrated by the illusion of safety and the use of forced interventions. When procedural actions or involuntary interventions are documented, they become a matter of verifiable record, which helps protect the family case worker and the child protective services from unforeseen incidents, like child battery or sexual abuse by either parent. In short, the children continue to grow up in unsafe environments. Not devoid of love, but love in a different form. In the midst of navigating the intricate web of complex family dynamics and the near-impossible task of maintaining control, there's an overwhelming sense of fear that seems to be intertwined with it all.

As I sit in front of my computer, I can't help but wonder what parent would genuinely be interested in yet another revised version of their therapy plan when they feel coerced into these interventions? Parents who don't seek help, but are pushed to change by Children, Youth, and Family Services. To do what, gain new perspectives? A change of heart about themselves or their approach to parenting?

It's a paradox, like wanting to lose weight while consistently adding heaps of sugar to your tea every day. To me, the detailed plans with endless lists of the physical and mental health risks posed by parents to their children, which impede a safe upbringing, seem as futile as trying to carry water in a sieve.

Where does my desire to help these often-vulnerable parents and wanting to be on 'their team' stem from? And why am I so critical of this burdensome and impractical procedural bureaucratic regulation?

It all boils down to my lack of confidence in our societal intervention system. I find it excessively organized and overly fixated on control and management. It's a display of bureaucratic control and authority over individuals who are inherently fearful and distrustful, individuals who have been harmed by their interac-