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TIBETAN NOMAD CHILDHOOD

by

ཀམ་དོན་འགྲུབ། Karma Dondrub

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SUMMARY: Karma Dondrub's (Kar+ma don 'grub) life begins on the boundless Tibetan grassland in 1983 in Yushu (Yul shul) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai (Mtsho sgnon) Province. Living in a black yak hair tent, Karma Dondrub begins tending his family's yak calves as soon as he can walk, in a grassland so barren that he is startled upon first seeing a tree at the age of eight. Charlatan livestock-stealing monks, anthrax, death, birth, happiness, and encounters with modern education create a powerful, unparalleled account of Tibetan nomad childhood in the late twentieth century - a way of life that will soon be forever gone.

FRONT COVER: Driving pack yaks in Khri 'du County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China (photograph by Karma Dondrub, July 2010).

BACK COVER: A black tent and white tents on grassland in Khri 'du County, Yushu, Qinghai, (photograph by Karma Dondrub, September 2012)

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Karma Dondrub (2008)

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ACCLAIM FOR *TIBETAN NOMAD CHILDHOOD*

When I first read Karma Dondrub's lived experience as a nomad boy in Northeast Tibet, two books came immediately to mind. First, it reminded me of Urgunge Onon's *My Childhood in Mongolia* (1972), a similar attempt at capturing the spirit of nomad life as lived by a boy. Secondly, it irresistibly conjured up images of Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). The latter book's first chapter is significantly titled 'Being There,' and subtitled, 'Anthropology and the Scene of Writing'. There can be no doubt: Karma Dondrub was there, and in 'being there', he succeeds in inverting Geertz's subtitle, which becomes 'The Author as Anthropologist'. This is a major achievement for a twenty-two year old writing in a foreign language. Trying to establish himself as a writer, he inadvertently sheds light on a kind of knowledge that is not easy to come by in other accounts of Tibetan nomad life. The author has succeeded in portraying dimensions that must escape foreign observers, because they lack the mole's-eye-view of a resident insider. What strikes me in the first place is the omnipresence of the spoken word in negotiating problems in everyday nomad life. Legends and proverbs pervade family life, dealing with the herders' community at large, and ingraining into the individual's mind metaphors of caution and social responsibility. It is a necessary education, as the dangers of nomad life are many, natural, as well as human; wild animals, bad weather, shortage of water, sickness, banditry, and poverty, all conspire to make the nomad's experience a hard one. In addition, storytelling provides psychological and behavioral training, teaching people to deal with problems of life, love, and death. Secondly, I was impressed by the deeply religious quality of nomad life that also allowed, in times of social change, freedom to try out modern ways of warding off calamities, as on the occasion of the anthrax threat. Thirdly, I have learned more about the daily problems of Han-Tibetan relations in a frontier situation. Nothing is hidden in Karma Dondrub's description.¹ *Wim van Spengen*

¹ This is an edited version of Wim van Spengen. 2006. Ways of Knowing Tibetan Peoples and Landscapes. *Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 24(1&2):95-111.

A beautifully written and fascinating account of Tibetan life that anyone interested in Tibet will definitely want to read. *Melvyn C. Goldstein, John Reynolds Harkness Professor in Anthropology; Co-Director, Center for Research on Tibet*

Tibetan Nomad Childhood provides a rare first-hand account of the rhythms and vicissitudes of Tibetan nomad life in the 1980s. This lyrically simple book follows its author from childhood to the present, where he is studying English in Xining and working on a language and cultural preservation project. Most of the work dwells, though, on a short period of time before he goes to school in the county town at the age of eight. Karma Dondrub's vivid recollections portray not only scenes of friendship and community, but also danger and discord; they also include a valuable collection of traditional proverbs, folktales, songs, and stories. The stories delve into the most important aspects of pastoral life: the ever-important need for sources of water, grassland conflicts, livestock predation, trust, and betrayal. There are no platitudes here and the book does not romanticize nomad life or shy away from difficult topics, such as the low social status of butchers. Following the author's family and the larger community through a raid by bandits, an anthrax infection, the death of his older brother, and a visit by bandits disguised as monks, the narrative shows the richness and complexity of pastoral society. Through interspersed stories, vignettes from his life, and sayings, Karma Dondrub portrays the beauty and pain of a way of life that, as he tells us, is rapidly fading into the past. The pasture - its brilliant stars, rippling streams, and bone-chilling cold - comes completely alive for the reader. This book will be of interest to everyone who is concerned about contemporary Tibetan culture, society, and livelihood. *Emily Yeh, University of Colorado*

Karma Dondrub's novel is a heart-rending account of growing up in a stark landscape as a Tibetan lad. Particularly touching is how he deals with the disenchantment of his first love. This is a book that will definitely transport the reader into a different time, place, and mind. *Victor Mair, University of Pennsylvania*

A terrific debut. Karma Dondrub does not flinch from the cruelties, hardships, and sorrows affecting Tibetan nomads in tents, grazing lands, and Chinese-administered cities. But neither does he shy away from the beauty, friendships, and family feelings that enrich nomad life. The author celebrates the storytellers who enthralled him as a youth. With his gift for economic but vivid narrative, a light touch as narrator, and the descriptive lyricism of his prose, he earns a place among their ranks. *Rob Linrothe, Skidmore College, New York*

This authentic account of life on the grasslands is valuable for its detail and depth of insight, and more so because it is written in the first person, by a young Tibetan from a nomad family. Religion, social and political structures, and the realities of life and death in the Tibetan highlands are described in frank, straightforward language. A useful book for western students and scholars. *Paul Nietupski, John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio USA*

As China's long-overlooked minority nationalities gain voice through the spread of secondary and tertiary education, a new window is opening on the communal and personal histories of some remarkable people. One such individual is Karma Dondrub, a young Tibetan who was born in a yak-hair tent and spent his childhood tending livestock in a remote region of Qinghai Province. His life story is also the chronicle of a gentle, pastoral people who have been buffeted by forces, both natural and human, beyond their control. Even more remarkable is the fact that Karma Dondrub, who has only been studying English since 2001, wrote this memoir entirely in English. His is a story that cannot but move anyone who reads it. *Richard Baum, Professor of Political Science, UCLA*

Karma Dondrub narrates truly captivating tales of his life growing up on the grasslands of Eastern Tibet. He paints a picture that highlights the turbulent and wonderful experiences of youth. *Douglas Duckworth, Florida State University*

This remarkable memoir, presented in spare, straight-forward prose, by a young Tibetan man, offers the reader an extraordinary opportunity to peer into a way of life that has existed on the high plains of his homeland since time immemorial, yet still remains hidden from most of our eyes. Like many Tibetan nomads, Karma Dondrub is not certain of his birthday, just that it was sometime in 1983, in a black, yak-hair tent. He didn't see a tree until he was eight years old and has never received a vaccination. In an age of instant communication it is difficult for many of us to comprehend that millions of our fellow humans still lead such lives - and for that reason alone Karma Dondrub's book is essential reading. *Lewis Simons, Pulitzer Prize Winning Author*

At last, the high grasslands have a truly Tibetan voice. From bears, bandits, and anthrax to first love and school days, Karma Dondrub brings the harshness and austere beauty of the plateau to life with a wealth of fascinating detail. His unsentimental storytelling allows readers to go beyond stereotypes and discover the authentic lives of some of the world's last nomads. *Andrew Sewell, Langan University, Hong Kong*

A rare look into a little known part of the world through the eyes of a local young man coming of age. Interlaced with folktales, anecdotes, and real-life horrors and triumphs, the narrative stirs the readers' imagination and augments understanding of a remote and challenging way of life. *Keith Dede, Lewis & Clark*

With each turn of the page the color of the land, customs, and culture of the Tibetan nomad people playfully comes to life. Journey high on the Tibetan Plateau with Karma Dondrub as your guide, and experience life in this remote part of the world. Thoroughly enjoyable. *Dave Webb, University of Western Australia*

This is an extraordinarily revealing account of the true life of a young Tibetan man and of the lifestyle from which he has grown. A grand work of a true lived life. *Huadan Zhaxi, Humbolt University, Berlin*

Karma Dondrub's vivid recollection of his early years as a nomad boy living in the vast grasslands of Qinghai is a remarkable story that shows his deep affection for his family and the traditions that have helped him find his place in the world. He opens a window into a fascinating traditional culture that we know far too little about, and from which we have so much to learn. *Katherine Morton, Australian National University*

Above and beyond being a vivid description of a fascinating and fast disappearing lifeway, Karma Dondrub's autobiography is also a skillfully crafted coming of age story. As a child growing up on the Tibetan grasslands, Karma, always quiet, longs to say something, and also wishes that "more things [would] happen" so that "time would accelerate." In this well-told wish-fulfilling tale, Karma is drawn irrevocably into the modern world; more things happen, time accelerates, and he eventually finds his voice and learns to speak out. *Gerald Roche, Qinghai Normal University, China*

In unpretentious language, Karma Dondrub tells the story of his everyday life as a Tibetan herding boy. He shares the extremes of weather, his affection for his animals, and love for his mother. In delightfully deadpan style he narrates the dramas of anthrax, cattle thieves, tricksters impersonating monks, and of moving pastures to escape double taxation. Woven throughout are magical fables of lamas creating water sources, and bears eating people. Karma Dondrub succeeds in drawing in the reader to feel the normality of a life that might otherwise seem exotic to us. This book will attract those interested in Tibet, as well as all those who just appreciate a good story. I look forward to the next book, and hope he writes a whole series! *Susan Jolly, University of Sussex, Brighton*

Paints an intriguing and exotic picture of life on the vast grassland with the innocent and heart-warming vision of a nomad child. A wonderful read! *Yuwei Shi, The Monterey Institute, Monterey, California*

This work vividly recreates a way of life that will probably pass from the scene as China increasingly modernizes. Every effort must be made to preserve a record of vanishing ways of life in the more distant parts of a nation that is coming to play an important role on the world stage. This particular effort is a contribution to this larger goal, and its publication is to be greatly applauded. It is fascinating reading in its own right and adds to our knowledge of a culture and way of life very distant from what most readers will have experienced in their own lives. *David Bertelson, University of Hawaii-Manoa (retired)*



THE AUTHOR

I was born under Mother's robe in a black yak-hair tent in a family of nomad yak herders. My birthplace is in Chendo County, which is part of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, located in the southwest of Qinghai Province, about 800 kilometers south of the province capital - Xining City. We are Kham speakers while most other Tibetans in Qinghai are Amdo speakers. I can't tell anybody my precise birth date because Mother doesn't remember. No one in our community can tell his or her exact birth date. And deep down in my thoughts, I tell myself that if I knew my birthday's exact date, it wouldn't make any difference. What I am sure about is that I was born in 1983 in a herding family on grassland so vast that a galloping horse couldn't reach the end before tiring out.

I began herding livestock when I could walk and continued until I went to school at the age of eight in the county seat. I began learning English in 2001 at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City. This is my first book.



STORIES ABOUT A STREAM

Our summer pasture is located in the northeast of our county - Chendo. I can't tell you how many kilometers there are between the summer pasture and the county township, because we traditionally count journeys by days, not kilometers. It takes two entire days on horseback to travel from the summer pasture to the county town.

Our summer pasture is boundless emerald grassland with a pure stream glistening through it. There are countless stories about the stream...

The First Story of the Stream

Several centuries ago, this was a very nice place, a boundless verdant grassland where many streams flowed. There were also little lakes around. When an auspicious day came, certain lucky people saw buffalos coming out of the lakes and grazing with the yaks. People said this was King Gesar's² birthplace. Each year, the number of yaks increased and some yaks gave birth to buffalos.

I was very interested in buffalos, because I had never seen any. So I leaned against Mother's robe to hear better.

At that time, people could move anywhere they wanted. About fifty years later, thousands of families moved here with their livestock. There was no grass for the animals in late spring because there were too many of them and the grass was eaten down to the roots. Conflicts arose between local families and newly arrived families. The two groups began fighting each other with knives and dog beaters,³ resulting in the death of a few

² The *King Gesar Epic* relates the wondrous deeds of the fearless cultural hero of the legendary kingdom of Ling and is recorded in poetry and prose performed widely throughout Central Asia. The epic has many variants.

³ A piece of metal attached to a string or rope that is used to fend off attacking dogs.

people. They all were struggling for their lives, which was understandable.

One morning, a venerable lama crossed this land while on pilgrimage. He understood that much killing was going on and wanted to stop it. He prayed to Buddha, asking that there would be no water in this land. Several days later, his wish was promptly fulfilled. All the lakes and streams dried up day after day. The fighting stopped because all the people, now without hope, moved away. This place then became empty.

In about 1990, when the government divided the land, that place belonged to us. Before we moved there, some nomads worried about water. Others said, "In summer we can drink rain from the sky, in winter we can melt snow for water."

Some said, "We shouldn't obey this order. If we go there our livestock will die and perhaps that old danger will reappear."

Then an old man suggested, "We should ask our local lama to help us with the water," and everyone agreed.

Early the next morning, on the crooked footpath leading in the direction of a remote monastery, two men rode well-fed horses. On either side of one horse swung saddlebags loaded with butter and meat - presents for the lama. They vanished far into the distance without a trace. Since it was a great matter for the locals, elders stood outside their tents wondering if the horsemen would return with good news. Even if it was awful news, they were eager to hear it. This was the focus of the camp's discussion. All the potential outcomes, possibilities, and benefits were discussed and re-discussed. Youngsters climbed the mountain in front of their tents and gazed far into the distance at the path leading to the monastery.

Later that afternoon, the two speedy horsemen came riding their well-fed horses toward the camp. They told us that the lama said it was possible to mine water, and he would begin on an auspicious day. When the designated day came, the nomads should hold a very big ritual, which would help the naga 'water deities' feel happy. Then the lama would be successful in mining water. That evening, the nomads once again praised the lama - someone who sees everything, not just in the present, but in the future as well. When we have difficulties, we consult lamas for advice.

On a very auspicious day, all the camp men went to the designated place and participated in the ritual activity. The lama divined and concluded that the ritual should be held at a particular place where there had once been a spring. He chanted scriptures while burning incense and offering ritual sacrifices to

the sky. Three days later there was a stream. People say it is one of the streams from centuries ago.

The Second Story of the Stream

Long ago, an old couple had a single virtuous daughter whose beauty was renowned. Her only duty was to fetch water using a bucket on her back from a river that was so far from her home it was impossible for old people to fetch water easily. Every day, she fetched water in the early morning and again in the late afternoon. Her family therefore did not worry about having plenty of water to make tea, which her parents liked to drink more than anything else.

One day, a handsome young man was watering his horse when she reached the river. He looked at her intently for a while and then said, "I'm the son of the Chieftain of the East. I'll come to you and ask you to marry me one day," and then he rode away.

The beautiful young woman filled her bucket with water and carried it on her back to her home as usual. When she told her parents what had happened at the river, her parents said, "It is your good fortune to be the wife of a chieftain's son. You should wait for him to return."

She said, "I do not want to leave my dear parents. I want to continue to provide water for you for the rest of your lives."

Her parents persisted in persuading her by saying, "It is the local custom that a girl should marry and leave her parents' home at the right time. It is our dream to see your wedding party."

Finally, she agreed.

A year later, the chieftain's son still had not returned. As the days passed, her parents were becoming visibly older while anxiously waiting for him to come. The daughter, however, had little interest in seeing him.

One day, they saw a rider on a speedy horse trotting toward their tent. They all thought it was the chieftain's son, but it turned out that he was the chieftain's son's messenger. He said, "Tomorrow will be the auspicious day for the chieftain's son's marriage. Before sunrise, the chieftain will send his people to get you. Please be ready."

When the messenger left, the three of them sat in silence. At last, the mother helped her daughter dress her hair, and the father readied her best clothes. Feeling anxious about leaving her parents, the daughter thought, "After I go, how will they be able to get water? How many more years will they live?"

Will I ever be able to see them again?" Warm tears streamed down her face as she was pondering these questions.

"I don't want to leave you. How will you get water if I leave you?" she said.

"Silly child, what are you saying? I fetched water for this family until you grew up. I'm still strong enough to carry water," her mother said.

"Go child, go your own way. I never expected that you would help us as much as you did. I will pray for you," her father said.

Her parents prepared her dowry and put it beside her bed before they went to bed. She tried to sleep but could not. She thought over and over again, "Will I see my dear parents again? How will they get water?" These thoughts brought tears to her eyes and she cried like a child. Realizing that her sobs would only make her parents sad, she got up, walked outside, sat near the tent, and wept silently. She thought, "Beginning tomorrow night, I will be someone else. I will no longer be my dear parents' child." Her tears, resembling prayer beads trickling off a broken string, delicately fell into the soft grass. She wept there the whole night.

The chieftain's people arrived when dawn came, and the daughter left with them. When the sun rose, a spring had formed where her tears had fallen the night before, providing the old couple a water source near their tent.

The Third Story of the Stream

A wild yak once lived on this boundless verdant grassland and did not leave for many years. There was plenty of grass to eat when he felt hungry and a stream to drink from when he felt thirsty. For all this time, there were no other beasts that dared attack him. Every day, he proudly grazed among domestic yaks, as if he were the king of the luxuriant grassland.

But this changed one day when he saw a hungry lion drinking water from the stream when he went there one day. The presence of the lion kindled the fires of hatred in his heart. The lion was not welcome in this lush grassland where the wild yak wanted to spend his time. He butted his head against the earth and got ready to fight.

At the same time, the lion caught sight of the wild yak. He was very hungry and wanted to devour the wild yak in an instant. With a roar, the lion charged the wild yak and an epic battle began. When they tired, they drank water from the stream and

then continued fighting. A day passed and neither surrendered. On the third day, the stream dried up and there was no longer water to give them energy to continue. Too exhausted to continue fighting, they separated and walked away in different directions.

Three days later, the stream came back but the wild yak and lion never returned.



BEAR STORIES

Summer in the grassland is short but beautiful. The meadows are dotted with wild flowers and the grass takes on an altogether new and richer shade of green. The air is scented with the fresh and surprising perfumes of various flowers. We camped near the stream and lived in tents.

A square floor is enclosed within the yak hair tent. A stove, in the middle of the tent, divides it into two parts - right and left. Traditionally, men sat on the right side of the tent and women sat on the left. Nowadays, however, women and men sit wherever they like. The stove is between two supporting poles. Overpowering smoke continually soaks the roof. Dried yak dung is kept in the lower left part of the tent to conveniently make a fire. Food and clothes are kept in the upper left of the tent. One or two beds are on the right side of the tent. People sit on carpets of woven yak hair on the ground in the daytime and sleep on them at night.

Meanwhile, the livestock are kept within a circle that we make with our tents. This protects us from thieves and wild beasts, especially bears, which threaten both humans and livestock. Here are three stories about bears.

The First Story of a Bear

Once, when a woman untied her yaks and drove them out of the open yak closure, she saw a black thing as big as a yak lying nearby. Although she couldn't see clearly in the dim dawn light, she thought it was a yak that she had left behind, and approached it. She beat its back with her sling. Infuriated, it stood on its hind legs, raising its hulking awkward body. It was a savage black bear.

The woman who had upset the bear was paralyzed with fear. She screamed, upsetting the bear even more. It roared,

rushed at the woman, and slapped her with a paw. She fell to the ground, face up, and the bear then leapt on her and tore all the skin from her face. She never survived the attack.

I was so terrified after I heard this story that Mother or Older Brother had to accompany me at night when I went outside the tent.

The Second Story of a Bear

Some years ago, there lived a childless young couple. Every day the husband herded and the wife did the housework. That area was full of wild beasts such as wolves and black bears. Every afternoon, the husband called his wife from his herding area to see if she was OK, and every afternoon the wife responded. In this way, they each understood that the other was fine.

One afternoon there was no answer when the husband called his wife, which made him anxious. He called several times but still there was no response. He thought, "Something must have happened." In the afternoon, when he headed home, all his yaks were pointing their heads at his tent and sniffing. He realized something was unusual. He quietly approached the rear of the tent, peeked inside, and saw a bear sleeping in a corner, holding his wife's head. He then quickly caught a riding yak in his herd and rode to summon his neighbors that lived some distance away.

All the young men soon gathered. Each man stood near a tent rope, and then, at a pre-arranged signal, they cut the tent stays at the same time. The tent collapsed on the bear, and they then stabbed the bear to death with their knives.

The Third Story of a Bear

About a century ago, a poor old couple lived in our camp. They had no property but they did own some sacred sheep that had been given to them by camp members. They were not allowed to kill the sacred sheep, but they could butcher their offspring. Every day, the old man drove his sheep to a grassy place to graze. In the evening, the sheep provided milk for the old couple.

Summer arrived, and the camp moved to their summer pasture. However, the old couple remained in their winter camp, since they had few livestock. For the two mornings after the other camp members moved to the summer pasture, the old

couple found a sheep missing from their sheep enclosure. On the third day, the old man decided to stay awake all night to see what would happen to his sheep. However, he fell asleep before midnight. Deep in the night, he woke up and made out a huge thing moving in his sheep enclosure. All the sheep were huddled in one corner of the enclosure. He slowly approached the thing and patted it with his hand while holding a stone. With a roar, the thing ran away, shitting as it went. The old man realized that it was a bear. Luckily, it never returned to trouble the sheep.



HERDING ADVENTURES BEGIN

My herding adventures began one summer. My family owned 200 sheep, eighty yaks, and three horses. Nomad children are inevitably tied to the great hardship of herding their family's livestock. I was the main herder of my family's twenty yak calves. We herd the calves and other yaks separately in summer because we need to milk the yak mothers in the afternoon. If the calves are with their mothers, there is little milk for us. Calves are very disobedient animals. When they see yaks in the distance, they run to them with their tails straight up in the air. I had to chase after them when this happened. Of course, they were much faster than I was. When I got where they had paused, I could hardly catch my breath and tiny beads of sweat dotted my nose. I panted heavily, like a horse at the end of a long journey, and there was a bloody taste in my mouth.

Sometimes I couldn't stop them from scattering when there were no other yaks around, which made me burst into tears. At the time, I was extremely angry and threw stones at them, aiming at their thin, short legs, hoping that I could break them, although that never happened because my immature body was too weak to cause damage. Herding calves was the hardest thing I experienced during my childhood.

When Mother milked our yaks, she needed someone to help her untie the calves and pull them back as soon as they got a little milk in their mouths. I was not involved in this particular task, but I was very curious about things that I couldn't do or had never tried. One afternoon, I asked Mother if I could help her untie the calves and pull them back. She agreed. I eagerly approached the biggest calf. As soon as I touched the rope around his neck the calf jerked with all his strength, and I tumbled to the ground. I got up as if nothing had happened, otherwise Mother wouldn't have let me do this work again.

I finally managed to untie the rope but, when I pulled him back, he kicked my right shin. The pain was sharp and I burst into tears.

That worried Mother. She thought my right leg was broken. She summoned Older Brother and told him to call Tashi - an old man who had been our neighbor for years. He called himself a healer and treated people using religious methods. He had a very good reputation for healing people and never charged our camp members, although he did charge outsiders a little. Sometimes herdsmen from neighboring areas came to ask him to come and treat their ill relatives.

I lay in our tent, screaming. Tashi came inside and stood before me. He was very tall, had a dark red face, and looked ancient. He gestured with high self-esteem. He held a few small bags in his right hand and prayer beads in his left hand. He asked Mother what was wrong with me, while placing his small bags on a clean place. Mother said a calf kicked me. He laughed loudly, somehow suggesting that I wasn't very ill, but he didn't say a single word. My pain was gone as soon as I heard his laughter. I stopped crying. I noticed his half-closed eyes as he approached me. My mind took twists and turns and I realized there was no need to help me since the pain was gone. So I said, "Mother, I'm OK."

To my surprise, Tashi didn't turn away. Instead he said, "Just in case," and took herbs from his bags and burned them, soaking me in the ensuing pungent smoke. Next, he held my leg, pressed lightly with his thumb, and then gave me some Tibetan medicine. I said I was perfectly fine but he insisted I accept it, and I did. Mother asked him to sit and offered him a bowl of milk-tea. He sat cross-legged on a carpet near the fireplace.

"How have you been these days?" Mother asked.

"I have been very busy all this year," Tashi answered.

"You should rest," Mother advised.

"No, I can't rest. Some patients are beyond hope without my help," he said. Actually, he was not a skillful doctor, but we had no one else to call on.

"Thanks for coming today, otherwise I don't know what would have happened," Mother said.

"No, no, no, your husband is a very good person who has helped me before. I owe much to him. If you need help in the future, just call for me," he said.

Suddenly Mother looked at me and said, "Did you take the medicine?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine," I said.

"Do what Tashi tells you. He knows a lot," she said.

I insisted that I didn't need to take the medicine, but I was finally forced to. The taste was very bitter and lingered for a long time. When I looked at the 'healer', there was a triumphant smile on his dark red face. I didn't know what relationships were going on between older people and I worried life would be complicated once I grew up. I decided not to look at this dark red man again, buried my head in my little hands, and fell asleep.



FATHER RETURNS

The barking of our black watchdogs woke me the next morning. Father valued this dog more than a galloping horse. I went outside and heard horse hooves pounding the ground. I jumped and cried, "Father is back! Father is back!" Father and Older Brother had been away on a trip to our county town for almost a month to buy grain and other supplies.

It takes almost two days to ride from that camp to the county town. Father, Older Brother, several pack yaks, and two horses were trotting toward our tent. Mother was collecting yak dung in the yak enclosure.⁴ When she heard my shout, she put down the wooden basket and ran into the tent to warm the tea. When they got home, we unpacked the yaks. Father and Older Brother had brought everything we needed.

I was so excited with Father and Older Brother's arrival that I wasn't able to describe the adventure that happened the day before, even though the words were on the tip of my tongue. I just swallowed them, and Mother didn't mention it either. Father said that it was the right time to go to the county town, because we would have to move to our autumn pasture soon, and then the distance to the town would be much greater. Father also brought news that the township clerks would come to count the number of animals several days later for tax purposes. Father said that everyone in the camp needed to hear about the tax clerks' imminent visit and told Older Brother to tell the head of every family. The news spread very fast. An hour later, everyone in the camp knew about it. The elders decided we should move to the autumn pasture immediately, to avoid being taxed. Their decision was reasonable, since we had already paid taxes that year. The

⁴ The yak enclosure often featured walls of chunks of dung and a gate, which was opened in the morning to drive the yaks out to graze and closed at night when yaks were put back inside. The enclosure protected the livestock from wolves and harsh winter winds.

government had decreed taxes should be collected once every three years, but there was much corruption and policies often changed.

Each year, we moved from our summer camp to a winter camp, and sometimes we had a spring camp and an autumn camp as well. We moved at least twice a year, but often moved three times. Moves depended on the weather. If there was a winter snowstorm, we had to move to the spring camp, because in some parts of our winter camp, the snow would cover the grass and would not melt until summer. If there was a summer drought, the grass withered and became fragile. Passing herds broke the grass and trampled it into small bits. Even the slightest breeze blew it away, leaving only the yellow soil. In order to prevent this, we moved to the autumn camp if there was a drought.

I was thrilled at the prospect of travel and looked forward to the journey with a tremendous feeling of optimism. I liked to sleep outside the tent on summer nights, but it was impossible while Mother was at home. She worried that our dogs, which we set free at night to guard our livestock against wolves and bandits, might attack me.

We took down the tent the night before we moved camp to reduce the workload the next day. That night was the only sure opportunity for me to sleep outside in the whole year. I loved sleeping outside, especially under a cloudless sky sparkling with stars. Older Brother and I slept together whenever that time came. I remember those times clearly, because they are my happiest memories with Older Brother during his brief lifetime.

There is a star for each person. That night, I pointed to a very bright star in the boundless sky and said, "That is my star." I fell asleep counting the stars. Mother said if you can't fall asleep you should chant scriptures and you shouldn't think, because thinking keeps you from sleeping. I have found that this is true.

Early the next morning, we drove the yaks and sheep to the new camp with our pack yaks and horses. Packing the tent was difficult. It required two very strong men and a yak. Thankfully, in our camp we had the custom of helping each other whenever a family found itself in difficulty and needing assistance. Our neighbors came to help our family pack our tent because Older Brother was still young and not strong enough. When I was told to go round up the sheep with Older Brother, I asked Father to let me take Blacky, our

guard dog, with me. Father refused because the sheep would be frightened if a dog followed them. Finally I had to do as Father wanted. To argue with Father was wrong.

Mother told me that, before I could walk steadily, Older Brother and I were put in wooden baskets used to collect yak dung and then the baskets were loaded onto a gentle riding yak when we moved camp. I don't remember that very clearly, but since childhood I have never been afraid of riding yaks and horses. That day, I saw my neighbors putting their children, who were too young to walk for long distances, in baskets and loading them onto gentle riding yaks. To do this, the riding yak was saddled, a child was put in the basket, the child's belt was tied to the basket so the child would not fall out, the basket was tied to one side of the saddle, and finally something of equal weight was put on the other side. If a family had several children, they might have put two children in a basket on each side of the saddle – four children in two baskets. Some parents told their children to grip the saddle as the riding yak walked along.

The scenery on the way was spectacular. Hundreds of grazing sheep and yaks were scattered on strips of lush green pasture. The views were more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. Occasionally, Older Brother and I caught sight of herds of deer and gazelle. I loved watching them stand alert, nervously observing us approach, and then spring away on their lithe, sinuous legs.

Looking far off down the river valley, we could see an open area surrounded by small hills - our autumn camp. We reached our destination just as the sunset's brilliant hues were almost vanishing. The tents were quickly pitched and everything readied. Traditionally, we use a turtle – it doesn't matter if it is alive or dead - to draw a circle around the place where the tent will be pitched, so that the local mountain deity and the naga in the new place will not cause any problems.

We drove the animals into their new enclosures. Father counted them to ensure we hadn't left any behind. This counting was essential whenever we reached a new camp. Usually, if we lost animals, it was possible that they would come to the tents at night. But when we were in a new camp, the animals didn't know where to go, and would sometimes be lost forever. It was already dark when we entered the tent. We sat around the fire eating our supper by the light of flickering butter lamps and listening to the wind whisper outside.

After eating, we chanted our usual scriptures - Padmasambhava's teachings or scriptures praising Tara. Father began chanting and the rest of us followed. Chanting evening scriptures helps ensure a better life in the next incarnation. After chanting, we went to bed.



SKINNING A WOLF

Thankfully, the clerks didn't pursue us to collect taxes. People were deeply worried whenever a spate of wolf attacks descended upon the herd. During such times, wolves could bloodily kill a yak or sheep nearly every day. At that time, nobody in our camp owned a gun. Elders had the idea to catch wolves with traps, but nobody did that until one day...

Dark clouds drifted over and obliterated the sun. A wind blew noisily across the valley as flocks of homeward-bound birds flapped their wings like rags trying to free themselves on a line in a strong wind. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled as I herded sheep on a small mountain. I have always been terrified of thunder. I yelled at the sheep and they gathered. They always huddle together automatically at such moments. I tried to drive them home, but suddenly a bolt of lightning sliced through the sky. I closed my eyes, held my hands over my ears, and lay on the ground for some moments. I saw and heard nothing that made me feel safe. Once Mother said, "If there is lightning and thunder, don't scream because that will bring more lightning and thunder." I didn't cry out, and then torrential rain fell as the thunder died away. I wasn't afraid of the rain, and when I managed to pry open my eyes, I didn't see any sheep. Instead, I saw a dark rain-filled sky. I heard shouts from our camp. I had no idea what to do. Should I go home or look for the flock? I really wanted to lie down again and have a big cry, but concern for the missing flock made me walk on. I went over a hill to see if my herd was there, but failed to spot any sheep. I only saw hills rising higher and higher. I was as wet as if I had just been plucked out of water. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name in the far distance. It was Older Brother. I responded with a mix of great excitement and shame.

Some moments later Older Brother joined me. "I lost my sheep!" I cried out.

"Yes. The wolves chased them into a valley," he said.

I wanted to say that I was with the sheep, but instead I asked, "How many were killed?"

"Five," he answered. My Buddha! That was a big number. I thought Father would surely give me at least five heavy lashes that night.

"Does Father know?" I asked.

"Yes, he said he would set traps tonight, up where the sheep were killed," Older Brother replied.

Father had been a hunter when he was young and owned two Tibetan iron traps, which he never let me touch.

I was happy to hear what Older Brother said and thought, "Afterwards, there will be no trouble from these wolves."

I asked, "How do you know this?"

"Mother watched you and the herd constantly, so she saw everything. In fact, she sent me here," he replied.

I got home and found Father drinking milk tea from his small black pot. He didn't offer any comment. After he finished drinking tea he set out with his traps. We believed that a wolf would come at night to the place where it had killed something during the day. Father didn't come back when it was time to go to bed. The tent was soaking wet and the ground in the tent was wet, too. We had to sleep on the wet ground.

Later, the lambs' bleating awakened me. It reminded me of my coming punishment, and the fact that the lambs' mothers were gone. I began to chant scriptures and soon fell asleep.

The next day, I didn't know when Father got up to check his traps, but I realized he had failed to catch the wolves. Father didn't say anything, yet I knew that he was angry with me.

This day the wolves killed a yak that belonged to the camp leader. He came to my home to borrow the traps and promised that he would kill the wolves. Father agreed. That night he also set the traps.

People's shouting woke me up the next morning, and I ran immediately out of the tent. A wolf was trapped. The camp leader was standing atop the hill and calling for help. All the camp men went to help him. I went along too. I saw a big wolf caught in one trap. Gnashing his teeth, jerking his body, pulling his leg - the wolf was really in a difficult situation. From time to time, he trotted toward the people while leaping up and down. To my surprise a wolf didn't bark

like a dog, instead it gnashed its teeth constantly. Then a man hit the wolf's snout with a hammer, and the wolf fell unconscious.

They tied a rope around the wolf's snout. It immediately regained consciousness. Then they began skinning it while it was still alive. No matter how the wolf jerked and struggled there was nothing he could do. When they finished skinning it, they set the wolf free from the trap but didn't remove the rope from his snout. The poor beast limped away. I realized they hadn't even left his tail on his body. This was the camp leader's idea. I hated him more than I can say.

The same afternoon I was leaning against the pole in front of our tent, looking at the deepening autumn colors, the camp leader headed our way with the traps in his hands. This kindled fires of hatred in my heart. My eyes ached, a pain grew in my heart, my body began trembling, and I realized that I didn't want to see him again. I entered the tent and then asked Older Brother to take the traps from him. Until that moment, I hadn't known what real hatred was.

Father got back his traps. He had always refused to sell them when people asked to buy them. Later that afternoon, he broke them with his own hands and threw them away. I saw great sadness on his face that day.

The next day, two yaks died near the camp leader's tent, without any sign of sickness. Believing that the activity the day before had offended the local deity, the camp leader came to invite Tashi, the specialist in the healing arts. When Tashi arrived, he took out his prayer beads and a small book from his robe. The book was very dark, soaked in countless years of smoke. He closed his eyes and chanted something under his breath, while holding the string of prayer beads in both hands. Maybe he was paying undivided attention to this, or maybe the beauty of the scenery intoxicated him. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and divided the beads with his fingers. Then he opened the book and read something. He was divining. Tashi performed two divinations, and both showed something had offended the local deity. As soon as the camp leader learnt this, his face turned as red as the liver of a freshly butchered yak. Afraid something would happen to his family members, he asked Tashi what he should do to appease the deity. Tashi performed another divination and concluded that a ritual should be held.

Led by Tashi, the old men dressed in their best Tibetan robes and held ritual implements such as knives, bows, arrows, axes, and

swords. I was involved in the ritual, but only as a spectator, since the ritual required a number of spectators. As the rays of the rising sun were just caressing the mountain peaks, Tashi made up his face with yogurt and ash. He donned a four-colored hat (white, yellow, red and green) and played flutes and drums to the spirit of the local deity. He waved a white ritual flag into the sky. The other participants raised their knives and swords high in the air and walked around Tashi while shouting and yelling anything they liked. The place was alive with sounds. We spectators watched and helped by adding dried yak dung to the fire that they had made.

Tashi was exhausted at the end. As he wiped sweat from his forehead, he said he had invited the local deity at the beginning of the ritual and had just sent him back. I had neither seen the local deity dancing with Tashi, nor heard him summoned. That day, Tashi had shown that he was knowledgeable and powerful. I later learned that he had once been a monk, had broken his religious vows, and then had become a layman.

As a child, I couldn't comprehend all these things. Instead I felt Tashi was cheating us, however, I participated in the ritual, since I was a camp member, and a devotee of the local deity. When I returned to our tent, I took Mother's prayer beads, held them in both hands, and then divided the beads with my fingers to see what would happen the next day, but I failed to see anything. I told Mother that there was nothing to see in divinations, and Tashi was deceiving us.

Mother angrily said that people like me were unqualified to perform such religious rituals. She added that because of the little merit that I had accumulated in my previous life, I would never become a performer of rituals. I was very sad when I heard that, because I had believed I could do anything if I tried hard enough. I still wanted to invite the local deity to my home and have him change my dirty china bowl into a silver bowl.

Some moments later, Mother went out to milk the female yaks. Taking this opportunity, I put yogurt and ash on my face, and dressed in Mother's robe. Putting her winter hat on my head, I began to play Older Brother's flute as Tashi had done that morning. From time to time, I closed my eyes and yelled out like Tashi had done. An hour later, I was too exhausted to continue. When I opened my eyes, I found that nothing had changed - my dirty china bowl was still a dirty

china bowl. Disappointed by that futile performance, I cleaned myself up and went outside to help Mother.



A FALSE FRIEND

I don't know whether it was because of Tashi's power or some natural change, but the wolves stopped killing. Nevertheless, a nomad life inevitably has dangers that are like ripples on a pond; when one disappears another emerges.

It was still mid-autumn, the busiest time of the year, when men must leave the camp to trade butter and cheese. Women continue doing their usual chores while young people herd. Livestock bring a good price if sold in autumn. At that time of year, livestock provide much fatty meat if slaughtered. Female yaks also produce much milk in autumn.

At least one person must be with a herd, otherwise thieves or bandits will drive the herd away. Thieves and bandits are huge threats in autumn. They watch the herds, and if they notice there are no herders, they will surely drive the animals away. Sometimes they even use violence to get yaks and horses.

On one occasion, a man from Shichu came to our camp in the early spring. It seemed that he had no family. Namjom took him to his home and gave him food and clothes. They soon became good friends. The man helped Namjom to herd his yaks. He was a very good herder and always drove Namjom's yaks to the place where the most grass was. Gradually, the man became a member of Namjom's family.

That autumn, Namjom needed to go to the local town to buy barley for the family. On the day of his departure, the Shichu man said that he wanted to leave and asked for a horse to ride. Namjom asked why he was leaving so hurriedly. The man said that he missed his home place. Namjom thought it was reasonable to loan him a horse since he had helped his family for months. The man then rode away. The next day Namjom also left, leaving his two children and wife at home. His oldest child was fifteen years old.

Three days later, four men holding guns rushed into Namjom's tent at midnight and threatened that they would shoot whoever made a single sound. Two men stayed in the tent with guns, while the other two went out to cut the ropes that tied the yaks. Namjom's wife said their family watchdog didn't bark at all. After a while one man came into the tent declaring, "We're ready," and the other two followed him. She said that she peeked through the tent door and saw the four men driving away some of their yaks while another man lay by their watchdog. When the four men were some distance away, the man lying with the watchdog mounted his horse and rode after them.

Namjom's wife found that the thieves had cut four ropes and driven away twenty yaks. We all guessed that the man who was lying with the watchdog was Namjom's new friend. We could do nothing but take this as a lifelong lesson.



MOTHER'S PROVERBS

When the calves were old enough to graze and could walk a long distance, their short thin legs were submerged in the grass near the tent. I wanted them to stay nearby so I could watch them from the tent entrance while enjoying a bowl of milk tea.

Almost every day I had to run after the calves up the mountains and down along the rivers. Mother and my oldest sister were buried in work - collecting yak dung, milking, making butter, spinning yak hair, and braiding ropes. My older brothers had gone with the herds. Father was weaving yak-hair cloth. Everyone was busy, except Younger Brother. Still, I could easily find someone to talk to if I wished, but in autumn I had no time to do so.

Normally, I got up early. After breakfast, I walked out in the sunlight to see where the calves had gone. Since the sunlight was extremely bright on the pristine grassland, I pulled my hat down or put my right hand to my forehead to shade my eyes. A long time passed before I glanced at the sky. It is a very strange thing for nomads to not look at the sky because we predict the following day's weather this way.

I lay on the tender grass one day while grazing the calves and listened to the sound of gushing water in a nearby stream. I blankly looked up at the sky, where cottony white clouds were scooting south. While trying to ignore what was happening in the sky, I remembered a saying, "In the summer, when black and round clouds go south, they portend rain. In winter, when long thin clouds go north, they portend snow." It was clever and scientific, worthy of being written down. I wondered, "How many such intelligent sayings have disappeared in this nomad area, like dust scattered in the wind?" I couldn't answer that question.

Everyone in my camp said that I was a tough boy. Honestly, I don't care what others say about me. I just want to tell people what

kind of person I really am, and I want to express what I am thinking. Leaving behind unanswered questions pains my heart.

Not willing to leave the question unanswered, I decided to ask Mother. Ever since I can remember, I'd ask Mother whenever I had a question I couldn't answer. She always had the answers. Keeping that thought in my mind, I once again looked up at the sky. The white clouds had disappeared, and had been replaced by dark clouds. Hordes of insects that had just been busily crawling around me had also disappeared. Flocks of birds were flying swiftly through the sky. I looked at the stream and saw splashes.

Suddenly, a wind blew noisily across the grassland, laden with the fragrance of grass and meadow flowers. The wind raised surging waves deep in the sea of grass around me. I was intoxicated by the natural perfume for some moments, while the calves enjoyed the cool grass. Mother told me that when there was cool grass to eat in summer, the animals should be allowed to graze because they enjoy that moment more than anything that we can describe. It was the same for warm grass in winter. While pondering these things, I felt something wet on my head and shoulders. I realized it was raining gently. I stood up and took a long breath under the rain-filled sky, then drove the calves home.

When I got back, Mother offered me a bowl of warm milk tea. While having that, I could hear raindrops splattering the tent. Then I remembered the unanswered question. I desperately wanted to ask Mother but instead, I asked her where she had learnt insightful nomad proverbs and sayings. Mother told me that she had learnt them from her grandparents and parents. She also said that there were many she had never learned. Here are some proverbs I learned from Mother:

If the road is long, set out with a good galloping horse,
If you wish to live a long time, take a wife of noble birth,
If the spring day is long, eat a lot.

If you have a boy, send him to a faraway place to study,
If you have a dog, do not let it roam freely.

Wet wood still burns,
Dry stones never burn.

If you take a good wife, you'll have a happy time all your life,
If you take a bad wife, you'll be in constant sorrow.

Don't waste your daytime, kill lice at night.

Don't go out looking for missing yaks at night,
Since even a huge mountain can't be seen.

Words already spoken can't be taken back,
The stone that you dropped can be taken back.

If you are a wealthy man, everyone will respect you,
If you are a poor man, even your real brother will ignore you.

A good watchdog has yellow hair in its eyebrows,
A man who wants to marry ought to be capable.

The camel has a long neck but it never touches the stars in the sky,
The hare has short legs but can't be called an insect.

Each area has its own customs,
Each chieftain has his own rules.

Barley won't grow on farmland unless you plant it,
Children won't be obedient unless you beat them.

Beat the goat to scare the sheep.

A mole always leaves black soil behind him,
A bad person carries bad news with him.

If a furious snow-lion stands on a snow mountain,
He is the adornment of the snow mountain's.
If a furious dog runs down the street,
He's the target of thrown stones.

I never heard my grandparents' voices, nor did I see them.
However, mother learnt something from them, and she said she still missed them a lot.

When it was time to go to bed, the rain continued. I went to bed immediately after chanting evening scriptures. I can't tell you

how heavily it rained while I was asleep, but it rained the whole night. Everything was wet in the tent, including the tent itself, but nobody complained. Nomads believe that a gentle rain is good for growing plants and also for the livestock.



ANTHRAX

The next morning, I put on the same clothes I had worn the day before, even though they were soaking wet. After breakfast, I walked outside and discovered that it was misty. I couldn't see very far, but that didn't matter as long as I could see the calves. After a while I saw my calves circling a big, motionless yak near Tashi's yak enclosure. Usually when I got up I didn't see any yaks around our camp, and so I guessed something was wrong with that yak. But since it didn't belong to my family, I didn't pay much attention to it and went back inside our tent.

When the sun broke through the clouds and began beating down on the wet ground, I walked out of the tent holding a bowl of milk tea. It was about noon. Old nomads say that the best time to view mountains and grasslands is when the sky has cleared after a rain, because things are then dressed in their brightest colors and are bathed in the most delightful light. Standing in front of the tent, I enjoyed looking at the deep autumn colors in those precious fleeting moments. Camp members were emerging from their tents to dry out their wet things, which they put on patches of short grass and hung on tent ropes. Behind me, Mother was doing the same thing. Because I hadn't changed my wet boots that morning, my feet were sodden, and so I sat down to dry my wet boots on a patch of grass.

A bit later, Mother told me it was time to drive the calves home, because their mothers would soon return. The calves were scattered near Tashi's tent and the yak enclosure. When I got near his tent, I heard an unfamiliar sound. Maybe he was reading something. Because of his dog, I dared not approach his tent. Then I walked around and tried to see what was happening inside, but the tent door was closed. In daytime, nomads don't close the tent door unless it's windy or rainy. The big yak was still standing in the same place, as unmoving as a rock.

When it was time to milk, Older Brother got home from herding all day. He brought news about missing yaks from Tsering's herd. Tsering was Tashi's oldest son, and had left his parents' tent to join his bride's parents' household several years ago. Older Brother speculated that maybe bandits stole the yaks, and added that Tsering was now searching for them in valleys near his pasture. I didn't pay much attention to the report of missing yaks, since this is very common in nomad areas. I looked around and saw Father sitting on the grass, having a bowl of milk tea and looking into the far distance. Taking a bowl, I joined him. For as early as I can remember, I liked to have tea from Father's black clay pot, but Mother didn't approve. She said I would be deaf when I got old if I had tea as strong as Father's. As soon as I sat beside him, he poured me a cup of tea.

While sipping the tea, I caught sight of Tashi heading our way. He stood some distance away and waved his long sleeves in the air, meaning, "Come here." Father got to his feet and walked over. If it had been anybody else, I would have run ahead of Father to meet him. I don't know if it was because of the way he walked or some other prejudice, but I didn't even feel like looking at Tashi. Whether you like someone or not is more emotional than reasonable.

After a long talk, Father came back. Mother had finished milking and we all waited for him in the tent. Father wore a dumfounded look when he entered. Mother asked him what Tashi had said.

Father said, "Tashi asked me for medicine, because one of his yaks is sick." He added that, according to Tashi's description, the yak probably had anthrax. I had no idea what anthrax was. I wanted to ask, but Father hurried out with a bag tucked under his armpit. Father was our camp vet. I tried to run after Father, but Mother stopped me at the tent door. So then, I just waited quietly for Father to return.

Later, Father returned and had the same expression as before. He told Mother that he was sure that it was anthrax. Although anthrax had struck our area before, it was the first time in my life.

Father began by explaining, "Everyone in the camp should be aware of this, since it is contagious for both people and animals. All our camp members should meet and discuss this." Father then told Older Brother to call everyone for a meeting. When I walked out with Father, I saw that all the nomads had gathered near our yak

enclosure, waiting for Father, looking desperately at him, like a nursing child waits for its mother. Father began by explaining that Tashi's yak had anthrax.

Elders were flabbergasted. Youths looked blankly at Father's face. If I had been Father, I would have told a joke first and then gotten to the main point, but he didn't do that. I understood, because he was the camp vet and a family head. Father pointed to the sick unmoving yak and emphasized the seriousness of the situation. Everyone began asking questions.

"When did the yak get sick?" asked one nomad.

"I noticed it this morning," Tashi replied.

"Why didn't you tell us this morning? We could have thought of something, but now..." another person offered in a low voice, swallowing the second half of their sentence. I was sure that the unsaid half of the sentence hurt him terribly, like an arrow piercing down his throat and then pausing at his heart, before exiting through his chest. His face was pale, as though a brown bear were standing before him.

"After my boy told me the yak was sick, I chanted, to beseech the deities to prevent this disease from spreading," Tashi said. Everyone looked at each other silently. I remembered the unusual sound from his tent. It was actually the sound of chanting. I laughed out loud. To be honest, I had imagined all sorts of things about those sounds. Everyone looked at me at the same time. I was too embarrassed to return their glares, so I buried my head in my hands and stared at the ground through my fingers.

A woman stepped out of the crowd and began scolding Tashi, pointing her index finger at his face, "Tashi, we've experienced anthrax before. We know how serious it is. Do you remember how many livestock were killed last time? We nearly had to take beggars' sticks and begin begging, didn't we?" Large teardrops fell from her eyes and trickled through the soft grass into the earth.

She wiped away the tears with her sleeve, raised her voice once again, and said, "My dear mother sacrificed her life in order to save you. You shameless old dog, do you remember that? You never knew how much we suffered from losing our mother. Now the disease is here again, and you kept it a secret. Why didn't you prevent the disease spreading last time, if your chanting is so powerful? If you had told us, at least we could have protected ourselves. You only care

about your reputation." Then she spat on the ground, as a curse upon Tashi. Her husband rushed towards her, grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

The curse created an explosion in the crowd, like gasoline tossed on fire. Tashi was infuriated and rushed at the woman. He looked exactly like a ravenous beast that had just seen a piece of juicy flesh. Several men held him back. "A good man never uses fists to solve problems," one of them growled at Tashi. "Violence will only make things worse," added another man.

Some people blamed Tashi, while others insulted him. Others kept quiet, as if deep in thought. Silence reigned supreme until the camp leader blurted, "Elders, listen. Anthrax is here now. We need to think about how to avoid spreading it. Otherwise, it will destroy our livestock and it may even infect people."

The elders huddled and discussed what to do. On such matters I had no chance to share my thoughts, but I did have a good opportunity to listen.

I heard Father say, "We need to vaccinate all the animals that are not yet infected. But, I don't have enough vaccine for all animals in the camp, not even for my own livestock. Early tomorrow morning, some people from our camp must leave for the township to inform the government of the situation. Then, the government will give us the medicine that we need. For now, it is better for both people and animals to keep away from that sick yak."

Everyone agreed. Then another difficulty arose - who would go to the township? The camp leader volunteered and said that he wanted to take two people with him. One was Father, since he was the camp vet, so he knew something about medicine. The other was Yeshi, who would help the other two. The matter was settled. They decided to set out before sunrise the next day.

Someone asked what should be done with the medicine that Father already had. Everyone looked at each other silently. Nobody wanted to say, "I need it."

"We should divide it according to the number of people in each family," some people suggested. As soon as he heard that sentence, Father took a small bag from his robe pouch. He looked around the gathered crowd and said, "I swear - this is all that I have. You can do what you like with it." Everyone hushed when they heard that.

"How many yaks can be injected with that much vaccine?" someone asked.

"Around thirty," Father replied.

There were twenty-five households in our camp at the time. If we divided the vaccine, then each family would only be able to inject only a single yak. For a family, a single yak wouldn't make any difference in terms of being rich or poor.

The camp leader cleared his throat and said, "We have never paid him any salary, even though he has been camp vet for more than ten years. Whenever our herds are threatened by disease, he is the first person to respond. Now, I declare that the medicine he has in his hand belongs to him." That was that. No one disagreed, even though a nomad had nothing to lose by opposing his camp leader.

The meeting was concluded, and camp members scattered. Father put the bag back into his robe pouch and told Older Brother and me to drive our yaks home. I wondered why he would say that, since it was too early to bring the yaks back. I looked up at the sky to see if any change in the weather could explain Father's unusual command, but the sky was as blue as ever. I turned my head and saw the stream flowing through the widening valley, sending spray into the distance. Father explained that he was going to inject the yaks, which made me even more perplexed. I was eight years old. I had never had an injection, nor had I seen anyone injecting any creature. When we got sick, we would be patient until the sickness left. Sometimes we ate *byin rten*.⁵ If the sickness were beyond our patience, we were taken on horseback or yak-back to the county town, where doctors treated us.

Before gathering the yaks, I looked around to see if any were standing like the sick one in our herd, but none were. I had been told to leave any sick animals behind. Then, I ran to gather some of our yaks, while Older Brother did the same in another direction.

When we drove all the yaks home, Father said there were not enough vaccinations for them all. He first injected all the female yaks and then the male ones. Certain yaks jumped as soon as the needle touched their buttocks, as if we had set their buttocks on fire. Other

⁵ A holy person such as an incarnate lama or a highly respected monk may give a ball of *tsamba*, one of their hair, or a piece of their clothing. These sacred items are known as *zen ten* and may be ingested as medicine in the early morning to prevent illness and taken when illness strikes.

yaks didn't flinch at all, as if the injection was less than being bitten by an insect. I wanted Father to give injections to my calves, but he didn't. I wasn't happy about that. For the whole summer and half of autumn, I had been herding the calves and had developed great affection for them.

Father explained the symptoms of anthrax, "A sick yak will shiver, and mucus will run constantly from its nose. After it dies, blood usually comes out of every orifice, but some don't bleed when they die. Every yak that dies of anthrax points its head north. That is where the evil spirit that causes anthrax wants the yak to go." We believe that a disease has a 'master', an evil-spirit that causes the disease. "People will not get anthrax if they don't touch infected animals. Only the first person who touches the carcass of a yak that has died from anthrax will get sick, because the evil spirit leaves the yak's body and moves into that person."

Father pointed to Younger Brother and me and said that we must not touch any yaks. I nodded in agreement, even though I assumed it was impossible for me to get anthrax.

After Father's talk, I had some idea about anthrax, but I didn't consider it very serious. But even I realized that if anthrax were serious, we could never escape it, because we lived so close to yaks.



BORROWING A HORSE

Supper was ready. We sat around the fire eating by the light of flickering butter lamps and listening to the wind whisper outside. The dog chained to the end of the yak enclosure barked like mad. We all went outside to see what was happening. Someone was standing some distance away, yelling Father's name. We could all visualize the person without seeing him - Tsering. Tsering yelled for Father to come. Mother tried to stop me when I ran after Father, but Father said it was fine for me to tag along.

When we reached Tsering, an inquisitive look on his face told me what he was thinking. He was staring at us like a detective deciding if the person standing in front of him were a thief.

"What can I do for you?" Father asked, breaking the ice.

"Some of my yaks were driven away by bandits under the cover of mist this morning. I want to go after them tomorrow morning. I've come to borrow a horse from you, since my own horse will soon give birth," he said. As he spoke about his situation, I could see hatred burning in his eyes. Maybe that was why his voice was so hoarse.

"How many yaks?" Father asked.

"Ten," Tsering replied. For a newly established family, that was a considerable number.

"How do you know they've been stolen? Maybe your yaks are near the old herding area that you recently left," Father suggested.

"Since noon, I have been searching every valley in the herding area. Now, I'm convinced they were driven away," he said.

"Who is going with you?" Father asked.

"I asked Dondrub and he agreed. I promised if we found the yaks I would give him two. If we don't, I'll give him one," Tsering answered.

"Did Dondrub require a price for going with you?" Father asked. We nomads never ask anything from a person who needs help.

"No, that's what I offered him, since his life will be at risk if he helps me," Tsering replied.

"Which direction are you heading?" Father asked.

"This morning I met some herders from the next camp over. They said they saw some bandits coming from Shichu several days ago. So, I think I should go southeast, since that's where most of the bandits are coming from," Tsering answered. People from my camp believe that Shichu is the motherland of all yak and horse bandits.

Father agreed to loan a horse to Tsering, since my family had three horses. Tsering promised if anything happened to the horse he would compensate Father, even though Father had never requested anything from Tsering. Both Father and I wished him good luck. When we returned home, it was time to sleep.

The incessant barking of dogs woke me the next morning. After dressing and washing, I walked out just in time to see two mounted horses trotting southeast. I saw some people gathered near Tsering's tent door. I ran there and found Mother. I asked her who the riders were. She said it was Tsering and Dondrub. Our neighbors had seen them off.

They set out with a pair of good swords. I stood staring at their backs until they disappeared from view. I thought at least they would turn back to look at us one more time, but they didn't. They were gone like a beautiful rainbow that vanishes into the edges of the sky, with no indication of when it will reappear.

"Will they come back?" I asked. The words automatically slipped from my lips, even though I didn't want to say that.

"I don't know," someone said. Mother gave me a very fierce glance. Tsering's wife stared at me. I saw large teardrops welling in the corners of her eyes. On the way home, Mother told me that I shouldn't ask such questions.

When we got back, we found Father had gone to the township center to get the vaccines. I also discovered that I had gotten up earlier than usual. Normally when I got up, I walked outside to find brilliant sunlight filling the sky, but on this day the sun hadn't risen yet. Crystal white autumn frost covered everything. Mother told me frost was the morning clothing autumn borrowed from the sun, and as soon as the sun emerged, it took back its clothing from autumn.

Mother was collecting yak dung in our yak enclosure. I stayed there and looked around the camp. It was a lovely place, where endless singing and laughing usually filled the air. But that day, I heard neither. I caught sight of the sick yak near Tashi's yak enclosure. It hadn't collapsed yet.

I entered the tent where Mother was waiting for me to have breakfast. Then, after breakfast, I walked outside once more. This time, I saw the sky full of sunlight. Some old people were sitting outside, enjoying the sunshine. I went over and fell into a conversation with an old herdsman.

"Will they come back?" I began.

"Who do you mean? Tsering and Dondrub?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"They will surely come back empty-handed," he said.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"From past experience. People from our land have never succeeded when they pursue bandits," he said. I then learned that this was not the first time bandits had driven yaks away from our land.

"Do you mean that we're not brave enough to fight bandits?" I asked.

"No, but the bandits are poor enough to lose their lives over yaks," he replied.

"If they are poor, why don't they become beggars rather than bandits? I think it is fine to be a beggar if you are really poor. But it's terrible to be a bandit, taking animals from others and making them suffer," I said.

"But their custom requires a poor man to be a bandit. If he begs from home to home, the local people treat him like a dog. If he is a bandit and takes animals from other areas, local people praise him and consider him a real man," he explained.

"Will Tsering be a bandit? I think if he comes back empty-handed, he will be very poor," I said.

"No, our custom doesn't require that," he said.

"Are they black-haired Tibetans?" I asked.

"Yes, they are real Tibetans," he said. That was the first time I realized that it is wrong to think that all Tibetans have the same customs.

"Bang," a booming sound came from some distance away. My ears tingled. First, I thought it was gunfire, and someone had been shot in a distant place. I turned and looked in the direction of the sound, just in time to see the gigantic sick yak collapsing on the ground.

Taking a shovel and a pickax, Tashi slowly walked to the body. I couldn't tell what he was going to do. Normally, when an animal dies, we take knives and skin the animal. I ran after him to see what he would do. Since Mother wasn't with me, nobody stopped me. Tashi wearily began to dig a hole near the body. When I got where he was, I could hardly catch my breath. Tiny beads of sweat speckled my nose. I panted heavily, like a horse at the end of a long journey.

"Can I help you?" I asked him.

"No, you shouldn't touch anything here," he replied.

"Why not, since you can?" I said. I tried to argue with him, since he had been so stern with me.

"How about you just listen to me? I have more experience than you," he said. I agreed and didn't argue with him. But, I found something was missing.

"Usually, you speak arrogantly. Why not today?" I asked.

"These days, misfortune is befalling me. I don't even feel like looking up at the sky," he said with a pitiful smile.

He was digging into the ground. "Why are you digging?" I asked.

"To bury the yak," he said without glancing at me.

"Don't you eat meat? I think meat tastes good in autumn. If you don't want it, I'll take some to my home," I said, as I walked to the body to see how the yak had died, but Tashi grabbed my arm, stopping me half-way. Of course, Father had explained why I shouldn't get near the body, but I was very curious to see the dead yak.

"No!" Tashi yelled. At that moment I turned to see his face, and just then I caught sight of Mother and some camp members rushing towards us. Even though she was far away, Mother scolded me for getting so close to the carcass. When she got close enough, Mother tried to slap me. I ran behind the gathering people to escape her punishment, and she chased me. Tashi jumped between Mother and me and said, "He didn't touch anything!" Mother stopped, but was obviously still upset, which showed how much she loved me.

With Mother present, I dared not touch anything. I just stood aside and observed what they were doing. They dug the ground as deep as Tashi's height. I looked into the hole and felt that I wouldn't be able to get out if I fell in. After digging, Tashi took ropes out from his robe pouch. He told some people that they needed to drag the body into the hole, and the rest should use their pickaxes to push. Using ropes and pickaxes, they pushed and dragged the body. "Bang," came from the hole, but dust didn't rise into the air. They put back the soil. As soon as each shovel of soil struck the body, an unfamiliar sound rang out - Bi-bang! Bi-bang! Bi-bang!

Father had gone for medicine with two men, and Tsering and Dondrub were chasing bandits.

I began to count the days they had been gone. Every afternoon I climbed to the top of a hill, awaiting their return. To the south, line upon line of mountain ranges stretched as far as my eyes could see. To the north was an immense grassland filled with yaks, sheep, and horses. But I saw no mounted people coming to our camp.



TWO CHINESE BUSINESSMEN

Three days passed. What about Tsering and Dondrub? Had they been killed or were they driving the missing yaks homeward? Looking north, I faced into the wind, letting it sting my skin. After some moments, I found myself lost in thought, staring at the horizon.

More yaks died on the fourth day, and we buried each of them where they collapsed. Here and there, the number of small mounds increased as more yaks died. Now, we all waited for Father and the others to return, but time passes very slowly when you urgently need something. I now had no time to look at the sky. I found myself, instead, gazing into the horizon. People said that I was growing up and thought I was grieving over the dead yaks. They didn't understand that I hoped to be the first to see Father and the others return. I wanted to see them riding their horses, trotting towards our camp, bringing us hope.

On the sixth day, from some distance away, we saw three riders approaching. One was definitely Father, but we didn't recognize the two people who were riding with him. Several people said that those two others were surely Yeshe and the camp leader. But I wasn't convinced. Something seemed strange about the way they rode. We all ran to greet them.

When we got near enough to see the riders, it turned out that the other two were Han Chinese. At first, we thought the township government had sent two good vets to save the lives of both nomads and livestock. But Father told us that the two men were businessmen, and that he hadn't brought back any medicine because the township government didn't have any. Yeshe and the camp leader were still in the township center waiting for medicine. After hearing the news, a concerned look appeared on everyone's face - except for the two Han Chinese.

I wanted to tell Father that two of our yaks had died of anthrax, and we had buried them. But I decided that since he didn't get the medicine, two yaks didn't mean much, so I kept quiet.

Father said he had promised that he would sell some yaks to the two Han. This was the first time that I had seen Han people in my life, so I studied them closely. The older one's gaunt face sported a yellowish, pathetically scraggly beard. The younger one had a pale face, as though he had never had a morsel of real food in his life. He was tall and thin, and his legs resembled chopsticks. Neither of the men looked like businessmen, or at least what I imagined businessmen should look like. Both could speak a bit of Tibetan, since they had been living in Tibetan areas for a long time. We could therefore make simple conversation.

Older Brother returned from herding, leaving the yaks in the pastures, and Father told me to go drive the yaks home. I reluctantly walked to the herd because selling meant killing. Father recommended ten yaks to the Han businessmen. I realized those ten had not been injected. The two Han businessmen used their own language to discuss the price. We didn't understand a single word. To my ear, a noise made by the wind was more melodious than the sounds they were generating.

At that time, people said that we could sell a good yak for 300 *yuan* in the township town. But, when the businessmen came to our camp to buy yaks, the best one would only bring 250 *yuan*.⁶ I didn't know how much our yaks sold for. To tell the truth, I had little idea about money.

The two businessmen bargained a lot, since they knew about the anthrax. Finally, we reached an agreement. They put some colored papers in Father's hand and drove the yaks out of their enclosure. Some yaks tried to run back, but failed. I wanted to save their lives because I knew they were about to be slaughtered. I ran after them, but Father stopped me. I struggled against him with all my might, and he got angry and gave me a heavy slap that sent me tumbling facedown to the ground. Tearing at the grass, I felt sad that I had not saved the yaks' lives. My eyes moistened, and then fretful teardrops fell from my young eyes.

⁶ In 2005, the best yak sold for 2,500 *yuan*.

I ran back to the end of the yak enclosure where Father's horse was tied to a peg. Jumping into the saddle with the wind in my face, I galloped off for a quite a distance before stopping atop a hill, where the immense grassland rose up majestically below me. The blue sky was high and empty, and I could see for miles and miles. Suddenly, I felt that Yeshi and the camp leader wouldn't return until the first snow turned the land white. And when they did come, the medicine would mean nothing.

The two Han businessmen had been gone for a long time. I knew the yaks were fated to die soon anyway, whether from anthrax or a butcher, so I wasn't sad. As the wind caressed boundless green grass below, I felt that my heart could tolerate anything. The fragrance of grass carried by the wind intoxicated me.

I spurred the horse through the camp as restless nomads gathered after milking. I could hear them talking about my family - that it was Father's good fortune to be the vet of our camp, since some of our yaks were protected by vaccination, and he had used his intelligence to sell some yaks that were not protected. They also added that perhaps this wasn't a good thing and maybe, sooner or later, something would happen to our family, and make our situation in line with all the other camp members, who were suffering such terrible bad luck.

If Tashi had been around at that moment, I would have asked him for a divination, since people believe that imminent events can be seen in a divination. I looked around for Tashi, but failed to see him. So I said, "Fine, let it happen." At that moment, I desperately desired for something to happen and break the drudgery of life. I thought and hoped that time would accelerate if more things happened.

When I reached my home, my family was sitting around the fire eating supper. I told them what camp members had been saying about our family. Dark clouds gathered on Father's face, but he didn't utter a single word. Older Brother said that people envied our good luck. Afterwards, we ignored what people said, as if it was blown away by the autumn wind, leaving not even a shadow in our hearts.

More yaks got sick and died. Carcasses were buried everywhere.

Father didn't return to the township center. He said he had already told the township government how much medicine we

needed. As soon as Yeshi and the camp leader got the medicine, they would come home.

Camp members were engrossed in what they were doing, and it seemed that they had forgotten Tsering and Dondrub. I looked around and saw Tsering's wife gazing into the distance. Clearly, she longed for her husband. No one else was looking into the distance, which suggested that only she was missing Dondrub. I felt my heart suddenly gripped by a warm longing for Dondrub, something that I had never felt before. I looked to the distant horizon. The deepening autumn colors were losing their vibrancy. I stared at the horizon and saw masses of clouds being pushed across the heaven by a fierce wind. The fierce wind made me shed tears, for I realized that winter would soon arrive, and we needed our butcher, Dondrub, to kill animals for meat during the winter.



"IT'S OVER!"

Tsering and Dondrub showed up about a half-month later. The old man to whom I had talked was right. They had come back empty-handed, wearing embarrassed grins. But, they had brought a bunch of stories:

"Three days after we left, we saw the bandits driving our yaks down a ravine. We shouted at them to stop but they didn't. Then, two men dismounted and shot back at us while the rest of them drove the yaks away. The two men held us off until night came.

"The next day, we didn't know which direction they had gone in. We went along the ravine but found no trace, so we gave up."

To make a long story short, they hadn't spent a month chasing bandits but, instead, had been wandering lost in unfamiliar valleys. Tsering's wife shed some tears before saying it was all right that they had missed the bandits, for they were now home safely. Everyone agreed with her.

Several days later, Yeshe and the camp leader returned. The camp leader said, "It would have taken another month for the medicine to arrive, and we wanted to see what was happening in the camp."

Now, we didn't need anyone else from our camp to return.

Each day, fewer and fewer yaks got sick, while the wind grew harsher, seeming to blow the anthrax away. I still couldn't help staring at the edges of the sky, even though it brought tears to my eyes. Standing alone against a harsh wind, tears automatically flowed. People said something was wrong with my head. They didn't know that I hoped to be the first to see winter arrive. Then one day, the first snow turned the area white.

Even though the number of animal deaths rapidly decreased, camp members still urged Yeshe and the camp leader to go to the township center to get the inoculations. A big, heavy snow fell on the day they were planning to depart. Thick flakes rushed toward the

earth like birds. I stood under the snowing sky and shouted, "It's over!" Normally, my shouts were carried by the wind, but today there wasn't even a whisper. If I had pulled out a hair from my head and tossed it into the air, it would have fallen directly to the ground without wavering. Everyone in the camp might have heard my shout and have thought that a child was shouting in the snow like a dog. By noontime, the snow still hadn't stopped, so Yeshe and the camp leader cancelled their journey to the township center.

People said that anthrax would disappear after the snow, and it did.

I don't know the total number of yaks killed by anthrax. Two of my family's yaks died. Fortunately, none of our camp residents contracted anthrax.



THE CAMP BUTCHER

Winter arrived and we needed animals butchered to have meat to eat during winter. I heard my parents discussing which ones to kill. I interrupted and said, "There are several naughty calves. I'm sure they are fat. They can run very fast. I think this year we should kill them to eat during wintertime." They both laughed and so did I, without really knowing why. I saw an inquisitive look on Father's face that told me he was thinking.

He opened his mouth and said, "Go out and look for your calves." I went out and saw the calves happily grazing near the tent. Not wanting to go back inside the tent, I looked up at the sky. Brilliant sunlight shone from above. I could see far into the distance, and felt at ease.

I saw camp children playing in the open livestock enclosure, so I joined them. I had a very good time with them and slept well that night.

When I woke up and went outside the next day, three huge yaks were in the yak enclosure. Five sheep were in the sheep pen. I also saw Dondrub walking to the pen. In our camp, killing was taboo for everyone except for one man from the poorest family, who earned money that way. Dondrub was our camp butcher. To look at him, you would never have guessed that he specialized in taking animals' lives. He was in his twenties and a very handsome young man, but he'd had the bad fortune to be born into the poorest family in our camp. Mother told me his father was the former camp butcher and he had followed in his father's footsteps.

Whenever he was skinning a sheep, he constantly chanted something under his breath. I saw great sadness on his handsome face and realized that the world desperately pulled him into things that he didn't want to do, but over which he had no control. I felt pity for him. I walked over to help him, in order to scatter his sadness.

Not knowing where to begin a conversation I asked, "Do you like to kill animals?"

Before answering, he smiled. It wasn't an ordinary smile. It was neither happy nor sad. It was a smile of desperation.

He asked me the same question, "Do you like to kill animals?"

I wanted to say "No," but I suddenly realized nobody had ever asked me a question like that before. I spent some time thinking about it.

I found I couldn't say, "No," because I had once killed some small birds with stones for fun. But, I couldn't say, "Yes," because I felt very bad after killing the birds, and my parents forbade me to kill. I thought hard about it, carefully considering how to answer. My brain gurgled like boiling water. Not knowing how to answer my question and his, I said, "We could be good friends." He burst into laughter, and so did I.

People kept a certain distance from the butcher while trying to establish a close relationship with hunters. I spent some time figuring out why there was such a big difference. Later, I learnt that people could get things like bear gall bladders from hunters, while they gained nothing from the butcher. For me, this didn't make any moral sense. Later, I developed a very good relationship with Dondrub. He is still one of my best friends.

We lived in tents throughout the year. I remember every tiny detail of everything that happened that winter. I constantly felt cold. People's breaths frosted their hats and shoulders. Mostly, I stayed near the fire and listened to Mother's stories. Mother is a natural storyteller, and as a child I was her most devoted listener. Winter provided an excellent time for people to gather. In my home area, telling folktales was a common activity that everyone enjoyed. King Gesar stories were the most popular. People from my home area believe that without King Gesar, we would all have been ruined by demons. In our camp, no matter if you were young or old, you were sure of King Gesar's existence. Even a stone beside a road contained a good story of King Gesar, and that provided enough evidence to believe that King Gesar was not a legend. Men in our camp admired King Gesar's bravery and his deeds, and women had high regard for his wife's beauty.

Here are some of my favorite folktales that Mother told when I was a child:

Tashi and His Father

Long ago in a village, a poor man lived with his very clever son, Tashi. Their only property was a special horse that everybody admired and coveted. One day the richest man in the village thought, "Tonight I will take my white yak and tie it in the poor man's yard. Nobody will know. Tomorrow I will tell everybody that someone stole my white yak. Everyone will then believe that the poor man and Tashi stole the yak. I will then threaten to punish them and they will have to give me their special horse."

At midnight Tashi woke up and saw what the rich man was doing. "Father, wake up," said the boy. "The rich man tied his white yak in our yard. He wants to treat us unjustly and we must oppose him."

"What should we do?" asked his father.

"We will rub ash in the white yak's hair and it will become black. Then the rich man will not be able to claim it," answered Tashi. They rubbed ash on the yak and while it was tied near the gate, they beat it, so the black yak was then very afraid to go near the gate. Afterwards, Tashi and his father went back inside their house and slept.

The next morning the rich man came to the poor man's home and said, "You stole my white yak last night. Pay me double the cost of my white yak or I will punish you and take your horse."

Tashi said, "Dear fellow, my father and I did not steal your white yak. We have our own black yak so we needn't steal yours."

As the rich man hesitated, Tashi said, "If you don't believe me I'll show you," and gestured to the yard. The rich man walked into the yard and saw only a black yak in the poor man's yard. He tried to drive it out but the black yak was afraid to go near the gate. The rich man sadly left the yard, and the black yak then belonged to Tashi and his father.

They killed the yak and enjoyed good yak meat for many days. The rich man thought, "The poor man's boy is very clever and, if he were my assistant, I'd benefit greatly."

After many days the rich man invited the poor man and his son to his home. They eagerly accepted. Tashi said, "If they ask questions, I'll answer. You don't need to say anything."

When they reached the rich man's home, the boy entered first and sat. The rich man thought, "It is very impolite for a boy to go before his father." He asked, "Who is your father?"

"He is my father," answered the boy.

"A father is much better than his son so let your father sit first," said the rich man.

"That's right," said the boy.

"I will lend you one hundred mules to do business with. After one month please come to me with the income and I will reward you," proposed the rich man and then the boy accepted.

After a month, Tashi returned one hundred donkeys. He pretended to be very proud of himself. "I did a very good job, my boss. It was just like turning ordinary metal into gold. I exchanged the mules for donkeys because you said, 'A father is much better than a son.' Well, a mule's father is a donkey. The profit is unimaginable.

The boss was speechless. Afterwards, the poor father and Tashi became extremely rich because of the benefit from this business.

Washalamo

A mother and her beautiful daughter, Washalamo, lived together. A savage demon in their village wanted to take the most beautiful girl in the village as his wife. The mother then announced that whoever guessed her daughter's real name could have her.

One day the demon disguised himself as a beggar, came to their village, and begged from the mother and her daughter. When Washalamo smiled, there was a very auspicious sign on one of her front teeth. The beggar noticed this and his desire for her increased, but he didn't know her name.

A fox always slept on the roof of their home. The mother called her daughter's name twice a day. The demon asked the fox to learn the daughter's name and promised the fox that he would be rewarded with meat for helping the demon. The fox agreed. When night came, the fox went to the roof to sleep as usual.

After a short time, the mother called her daughter's name and said it was time to go to bed. The fox heard this and memorized the name. The next morning, the fox left and had to cross a very big river before he reached his destination. When he got near the river he was so afraid of crossing that he forgot the name.

The demon was waiting for him on the other side of the river. "What's the daughter's name?" the demon asked.

"I was so afraid of crossing the river that I forgot," the fox replied. The demon then slapped the fox very hard.

"OK, tomorrow I'll wait for you before you reach this river and help you cross. You should be able to tell me her name then," the demon said, and the fox agreed.

That night the fox returned to the roof to sleep and when morning came, the woman called her daughter. The fox heard the name and memorized it.

When he nearly reached the river, the demon was waiting for him. "What's her name?" the demon asked.

"Her name is Washalamo," the fox replied. The demon then helped the fox across the river, and rewarded him with a large chunk of meat. Next, the demon came to see the mother and asked her to give him her daughter. The mother asked if he knew her daughter's name.

He said, "Your daughter's name is Washalamo." Then the mother gave her daughter to him.

Before the daughter left home, her mother gave her seven seeds and told her to use them when she was in trouble. Then the demon took the daughter and left.

When they reached the demon's home, he gave her a gold key, a silver key, and an iron key. Then they lived together for a long time.

One day when the demon was out, Washalamo took this opportunity to open every door to see what the demon owned. When she used the golden key to open a door she discovered a room full of corpses. Among the corpses was an old lady who was half-dead. The old lady asked, "Are you the demon's wife?"

"Yes," Washalamo answered.

"When you are young, it is very pleasant to be the demon's wife. But it isn't when you get old. Once I was the demon's wife. It's better if you run away rather than stay here," the old lady advised.

Washalamo fearfully asked, "What should I do now?"

"It's useless to be afraid. Tear the skin from a corpse's face and cover your face with it. Make yourself look like an old lady. There is a room with an iron door that is full of jewels. Use the iron key to open that door and take all the jewels you want. You should also take a white stone that you will find there. Maybe you will meet the demon and perhaps he will stop you. At that time, you should use the white stone to beat him and then he will go away. Demons are deathly afraid of white stones," the old lady said.

Washalamo then did exactly what the old lady instructed. She also met her demon husband and used the white stone to beat him, which made him walk away. She continued on and finally reached a village. She asked the village leader if he could employ her. The leader then hired her as a yak-herder.

Every day when she reached the mountains, she removed her old-lady clothes and put on her jewels. One day the

leader's son went to sightsee in the mountains and saw a very beautiful lady walking after his family's herd of yaks. When he came home that night, he told his father, "I saw a very beautiful young lady walking behind our herd. Maybe that is our new servant."

His father said that it was impossible.

One day, the leader's son once again saw a beautiful lady herding his family's yaks. He then returned the next day and secretly waited for her. Washalamo had no time to change her clothes and was caught by the young man, who asked her how she had become such a beauty. She then confided everything that she had experienced. The young man was attracted by her beauty and asked her to marry him. She refused several times, but finally agreed. Then they married and had a very happy life together.

Father's Advice

There were two families. One family had only a father and a son. The other family had a father and two sons. These two families had been very close from the time of their ancestors.

One day the father said to his only son, "I will soon die. I have two things that you should keep in your heart. First, don't fully trust your friends. The second is not to trust your wife. Please remember these two things throughout your life."

Several days later, the father passed away and the boy was now alone. His father had saved a small bag of gold during his lifetime. It now belonged to his son, who decided to do business. It was not very convenient to take the gold with him and wondering if his father's advice was true, he entrusted the gold to his father's best friend. Then he did business for several years.

One day he visited his father's friend and said, "Now, I need to use my gold. Please give it to me."

However, his father's best friend had taken the gold out of the bag and replaced it with sand. The son looked inside the bag, saw that the bag was full of sand, and said, "Things are really impermanent. Gold has become sand!"

"What a pity! If you need any help afterward, please ask me," his father's friend said.

"OK, it doesn't matter that the gold became sand. In the next few days I'm going to build a house, so I need your boys to

help me," he said. His father's friend agreed and sent his sons to help build the house.

The man led the boys to a basement, provided all that they needed, and locked them inside. He also bought two monkeys. He called one monkey Dondrub and the other Tashi - the same names as his father's best friend's sons. Several days passed and then he went to see the boys' father. "You're sons are really helpful, and I have finished building my house, but things are truly impermanent. We never know what will occur. Several days ago gold became sand, and now people have become monkeys," he said.

When the father went to see his sons he saw two monkeys. When he called "Dondrub!" one of the monkeys came and greeted him. When he called "Tashi!" the other monkey came. The father of the two boys was very sad.

The father went to see a hermit for suggestions. "People have become monkeys. What can we do to change the monkeys back to people?" he asked the hermit.

"If you pay back what you took, then the monkeys will become people," the hermit answered. Then the father took the gold he had stolen and gave it back.

"Oh, you have changed sand into gold so maybe several days from now I can change monkeys into people," the man said. Several days later he took the boys out of the basement and took them to their home.

Years rushed away like the rampaging flow of a swollen river, and he married a young village woman.

Sometime later, he recalled his father's second piece of advice: Don't completely trust your wife. Quietly, he went to the king's palace and stole the king's peacock, secretly put it in a hole, and fed it without his wife's knowledge. At the same time he bought another peacock and took it to his wife.

"Now, we are going to eat the king's peacock so that we can have eternal life. If the king discovers this, I'll be killed, so don't tell anybody," he told his wife. Then they killed the peacock and ate it together.

When the king discovered that his peacock had been stolen, he announced that he would give a big reward to whoever found it. If the person was a woman she would be made queen, and if it was a man, he would be given a high position.

His wife went to the palace and told the king that her husband had stolen his peacock. The king then ordered the thief arrested and brought before him.

"Why did you steal my peacock and eat it?" the king asked.

"Dear King, I didn't eat your peacock. I took it because I wanted to test whether my father's advice was true," he said, and then he returned the king's peacock and told the entire story to the king. The king admired his intelligence and gave him a minister's position.



OLDER BROTHER GETS SICK

After supper, the camp children came to my home to listen to Mother's folktales. Most of the time, I occupied the best seat - in front of Mother's robe. Sometimes this was a big challenge. One evening, while helping Father feed the horses, a boy took my usual seat. When I came inside, I wasn't happy about that, so I grabbed his sheepskin coat and pulled him to the ground. He jumped up and pushed me away. My foot caught on the edge of the stove and I fell to the ground. Then I took a stone and threw it with all my might at his forehead. The stone hit dead on, and he cried out in a flood of tears as blood poured from a terribly deep gash on his forehead. Mother wiped away his tears with her sleeve, hugged him and gave my seat to him. She didn't let me listen to her stories that night.

I walked out of the tent feeling sad. I looked up at the sky, hoping to see my very bright star. The star wasn't in its usual position. The wind blew noisily, so I stood there motionlessly while the wind buffeted my face. When I entered the tent, all the children were gone, and Mother was waiting for me. I undressed and said, "Mother, blow out the lamp and tell me the story that you told them tonight." I listened very carefully at the beginning, but later lost interest and fell asleep.

Older Brother was sick the next day. Mother told me to herd the sheep as she prepared food for me. It was so cold that I felt as if my blood had stopped circulating. My heart trembled and my bones quivered. While opening the sheep pen, I saw Dondrub driving his sheep away from our camp. He had about twenty sheep - the fewest of any family in our camp. I told Mother that I would like to go with him that day. Mother agreed, and so I drove my sheep in the same direction as he was headed.

The turquoise sky was crystal clear. As soon as I got near enough to hear Dondrub's voice, he said, "It's a very cold day. Maybe the coldest day this winter."

I agreed, but I was too cold to utter what I had in my mouth so I just nodded. Thinking back now, I realize that I have lost many important opportunities in my life by not expressing myself.

"What's wrong with your older brother?" he asked.

"He's sick," I replied with the only mouth of warm breath I had at that moment.

"I know you are cold. You go home. I'll herd your sheep for you," he said.

I wanted to agree, but automatically my head shook "No." I continued walking with him, while cursing myself for not being able to say what I thought. He told me to collect yak dung to make a fire while he cut some plants that we always burn first as kindling. I was so cold that my hands and feet didn't seem to exist anymore. I even couldn't bend over to collect yak dung. Realizing that I was freezing to death, Dondrub told me not to do anything.

As I was stamping my feet on the frozen winter ground, the ground returned a painful echo that scattered into my bones. I regretted not having gone home when I had had the chance. Dondrub collected yak dung, cut some kindling plants, made a fire, and brewed a pot of tea. I stepped near the fire to warm up as the wind carried a thick plume of smoke to a distant mountain. My eyes followed the smoke as it vanished into the distance. The tea was boiling. I got warmer. Dondrub told me it was time to eat. I looked up at the sky, and saw that it was about midday. Of course, we herdsmen need no excuse when we feel like eating.

Tsamba is a common Tibetan food made of tea mixed with barley flour, butter, and dried cheese. At that time, the main foods in my home were *tsamba* and meat. The bag Mother had packed for my lunch had some *tsamba* and pieces of meat. I told Dondrub that he could have the *tsamba* in my bag. Suddenly he asked, "What do you think about the weather?"

"It's just cold," I replied.

"You children will get used to it when you grow up. What's your plan for your future?" he said.

"I don't know yet, but I won't herd if herding is this hard," I said.

He was a little sad when he heard that. "Yes, it is better to have ambitions but it's impossible for a wolf cub to become a lion. A wolf pup will be a wolf all its life," he said.

I knew that he was telling the truth, but I didn't like it somehow. I drank tea from his black pot silently. Our conversation stopped there, just like a finished poem with a mysterious ending. I was bored to death.

Then he began telling me tales and singing songs to relieve my boredom. I liked listening to his stories, but not as much as Mother's tales. I liked all his songs and learnt some of them that I still remember.

The First Song

In that distant grassland,
A white tent is pitched.
I think it is my beloved girl,
When the wind raises the tent flap.

The Second Song

Tell me what you want, my beloved girl.
If you want a star in the sky,
I'll make a rainbow ladder to take it for you.
If you want treasures from the ocean,
I'll make an iron-chained lasso to catch them for you.

The Third Song

It doesn't matter if the summer river swells,
And the winter river subsides,
My brown horse and I will come around the headwaters.

Like any adult nomad, most of Dondrub's songs were love songs. Soon it was late afternoon and time for us to head home. He looked in the direction of the grazing sheep and yelled several times. Slowly, the sheep gathered and started homeward.

I saw Mother feeding some scrawny calves. As soon as I got near her, she asked how the day had gone. I told her that it was very cold; otherwise it was wonderful. I wasn't sure why Mother's usual smile was absent. Before entering the tent, she told me Tashi was in the tent, because my older brother was getting worse.

I caught sight of Father when I entered the tent. Heavy wrinkles lined his face as he drank black tea from his clay pot. Father usually preferred milk tea, but that day he was drinking black tea. Unusually, he didn't ask me anything as I entered. Older Brother lay in bed with his eyes closed. Tashi was sitting on a carpet near the

stove. It was deadly silent, and the atmosphere in our tent was thick with a tension that I had never experienced. I untied the bag from my back and put it in a corner of the tent. I poured a cup of tea for myself and sat silently near the stove. As darkness slowly descended, I walked out of the tent into the darkness and stayed outside awhile. When I returned to the tent, Older Brother was sleeping. I wanted to say good night to him, but I didn't, because I didn't want to disturb him.



OLDER BROTHER DIES

I slept and didn't know until morning came that he had quietly departed. Everyone wept. I saw him wrapped in white cloth. I felt very saddened by Older Brother's departure from this impermanent world, where everyone was so eager to live. My memories flood back as I write this. Brother was by far my most enthusiastic playmate. Nevertheless, I spent a great deal of time squabbling with him, and we often came to blows. When Mother learned this, she always found the same thing - Older Brother in tears and me with a big smile on my face. Despite the fact that he was older, I was always the winner. He was a very good-natured boy and very strong, but he couldn't bring himself to use all his strength against me. Even though he was my best friend and beloved brother, we were incapable of getting on well together. One of us would make a remark that led to an argument and then finally to blows. Throughout my childhood, he was my devoted friend and a constant source of fun. He never lost his great sense of humor for a moment. Somehow, without him, my life is missing something. I can't tell people what it is exactly, but I can feel it.

Back near the tent on that awful day, I looked up at the sky, my eyes brimming with tears, hoping to see Older Brother's soul. The sky was high and vacant. Nothing was in sight. The ground was a vast carpet of gray as far as the eye could see. Wind sailed across it. Standing alone, I knew I had no hope of ever seeing Older Brother again.

Father came from the local monastery that afternoon with monks and the lama to help send off Older Brother's departed soul. Our local monastery isn't far from our winter camp. The journey between them takes two hours on foot. We put Older Brother's corpse in the middle of a circle made by the monks and they chanted scriptures together. Older Brother was lucky to have the lama present. He was usually away when people died. I appreciated him being there.

An empty feeling stayed in my heart that night as I lay in bed listening to the wind blow across the sky. I tried to recall everything that Older Brother and I had done together in as much detail as possible. The memories of our shared past brought tears. I finally got up quietly and walked out and let the wind beat my face.

Older Brother was carried to the place of final departure three days later. I didn't personally participate, since Father took care of all the funeral arrangements. I knew there wasn't much use in grieving, but I couldn't help feeling sad whenever I recalled the past. I also realized that Older Brother's death, in a way, symbolized the end of my childhood. I was sad, but I realized that I wasn't as sad as my parents. They aged quickly. Their hair became as gray as winter grass. I didn't often see Mother's merry smile again. She cried frequently, and we knew why. One morning, not long after Older Brother's death, Father chose twenty-seven good sheep and a yak and drove them in the direction of the local monastery. Until that moment, I hadn't known Father would give a sheep to each monk and the yak to the lama for helping raise Older Brother's soul to Heaven. I then learned how many monks there were at the local monastery.

Throughout the winter, I sank deeper and deeper into sorrow over the loss of Older Brother. As I faced the wind, I remembered the imminent bad luck that people had talked about in autumn. At that time, I had said, "Let it happen." Now, I regretted having said that. If I could have retracted those words, I would have done so in a second, but according to local custom a man can't take back his words once he blurts them out. Tears streamed down my face as I thought about this. From the day of his departure, I had no desire to gaze at the sky. My head was heavy with depression and sadness.

One day as I lay in bed, Older Brother's familiar face floated before my eyes. He asked me why I looked so sad. I told him it was because he was dead. He said he wasn't dead and that his soul would endure until the end of the world. I asked him if we could talk and meet afterward, but all he said was not to grieve for him and not to let our parents be disappointed. I promised him that I would try my best to fulfill both of his wishes. When I opened my eyes, he wasn't there. I felt my heart ache.

SPRING AND A FAWN

I was looking forward to spring's arrival and, finally, it appeared. Everything became fresh and gay, with shoots of new green grass emerging. It is true that nothing lasts forever, for the grief in my heart was almost gone. Thoughts of Older Brother no longer saddened me the way they had before.

One afternoon on a clear day, light clouds bounced in the sky. I lay on the spring ground, sunshine caressing me, green grass tenderly supporting my immature body. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name. I could visualize him without seeing him. I got on my feet immediately and looked in the direction of the voice. It was Dondrub, who was standing some distance away, holding something in his robe pouch. He waved a long sleeve in the air, signaling for me to go to him. I walked to where he was standing.

Dondrub was on the way home from herding. When I reached him, he put his hands into his robe pouch and then, with a triumphant smile, took out a fawn. I like animals, especially baby animals. The fawn had dark round eyes and a pair of sharp ears that stood alert in the air. Their tips were black. It had light brown fur. As I held it, it struggled to get out of my hands. I asked Dondrub what he would do with it. He told me that he would feed it with his sheep. He went home to give milk to the fawn.

I ran back home and told Mother that Dondrub had caught a fawn. Mother said, "Oh Buddha. Its Mother will come fetch it as soon as she notices it is absent."

"How can the doe know where her son is?" I asked.

"She can smell where it is and then she will come get it," Mother said.

Dondrub's fawn became the centerpiece of our evening discussion.

At midnight, I was woken by fierce barking. The doe had come to fetch the fawn. Mother was right. As soon as the mother deer approached our camp, the dogs chased her away. She made an eerie,

persistent sound. Dondrub wisely decided not to release the fawn that night. If he had, the dogs would have ripped it to pieces.

I couldn't sleep, so I lay in bed listening to the clatter of the deer's feet on the spring ground when the dogs chased her away. I saw the crescent moon through the tent smoke-hole, rising higher and higher until it reached my very bright star. Then the moon captured the bright star, just like a mother putting her child into a robe pouch. I relaxed and closed my eyes, but I still couldn't sleep.

Millions of stars studded the boundless sky that night, only to vanish at dawn's approach. The wind blew fiercely outside. Dogs still barked. Mother got up in a great hurry, still nursing her youngest child under her robe, worrying that she was late. She looked around at her sleeping children. She chanted something under her breath, and walked out of our black yak hair tent with her milking bucket, quietly and slowly so as to not disturb her children's tranquility. She called her oldest daughter to help her untie the calves and hold them while she milked their mothers. She looked to the east to see what time it was, and felt happy that she could finish her job before it was too late.

She walked to the stream near our tent, washed her hands, and then hurried back to the yak enclosure and began milking the yaks. Every time she squeezed a teat turgid with nutritious milk, her vulnerable heart ached with pity for the calf tied to a nearby peg with a rough yak-hair rope. The calf would jerk on the rope with all his strength, looking hatefully in his mother's direction in its eager yearning for warm milk. After she finished milking a yak, Mother untied the struggling calf with deep compassion. She thought, "If we were a little wealthier, I would not take milk from this poor calf," and then she went to the next yak. After she finished milking, she strode to the tent, entered, and put the bucket down. She moved to the adobe stove in the center of the tent and began kindling a fire. Before she went out to collect more yak dung, she added pieces of fragrant dung to the flickering fire.

In the smelly yak enclosure Mother collected dung while chanting her morning scriptures under her breath. Next, she untied all the yaks and drove them out to pasture. They tore out toward the open grassland, switching their long bushy tails swiftly from side to side. Mother encouraged them on their way by expertly tossing stones at them with her sling. Then, she came back into the tent, roused the

children, boiled milk tea, made *tsamba* in a big pot, and gave a piece to each of us.

We happily enjoyed our breakfast. When the rising sun had dried the dewy grass, children came out of their tents to play.

Mother walked out of the tent after breakfast and began untying the calves, which she drove in the opposite direction that their mothers had gone.

My heart fills with boundless love for her as I recall this.

That afternoon, I learned about my birth from an old lady who was my neighbor. She is now in her seventies. I love her folktales. She is very kind and never lets beggars leave empty-handed. She regularly brought beggars into her home, offered them warm milk tea, and then gave them whatever they wanted when they left. Her compassionate attitude towards everyone inspires me. Whenever she had spare time, she came to my home to share her childhood memories with Mother.

As I leaned against the pole in front of our tent, I spotted her coming toward me. She didn't turn away when she realized Mother wasn't there, instead she told me a tale about the affection between a shepherd and a hornless ewe and her lamb:

Long ago, there was a king whose family had a shepherd. Every day, the shepherd took the king's sheep out to graze. There was a marmot burrow in the upper part of a valley, and every day the shepherd threw sheep-droppings into the burrow while praying to Padmasambhava.

One day, the burrow finally filled with sheep droppings, and Padmasambhava emerged from the burrow. "Every time the sun rises, you call Padmasambhava. I am him. What do you want?" Padmasambhava asked.

"I don't want anything. I just call your name when the sun rises and sets," the shepherd said.

"Do you want to be a rich man or someone who can understand birds' language?" Padmasambhava asked.

"I'd like to be someone who can understand birds' language," the shepherd said. Then Padmasambhava patted the shepherd's head three times with his right hand and left. From that time on, the shepherd could understand the languages of animals.

The shepherd liked a hornless ewe and her lamb more than the other sheep in the king's flock.

One day, the king's family discussed killing the hornless ewe. The hornless ewe later said to her lamb, "I am going to be killed. You shouldn't go to the back of the herd because the shepherd will beat you. Don't go at the front of the herd because wolves will eat you. Go in the middle of the herd."

The shepherd heard and understood what the hornless ewe said and felt deep compassion.

The next day the king's family was about to slaughter the hornless ewe. The shepherd said that he was leaving and asked for payment for his work. When the king asked what he needed, he requested the hornless ewe and her lamb. The king agreed and gave him the hornless ewe and the lamb. Then the shepherd drove them until he reached a mountain with a cliff. He rested there and heard a raven calling out from the cliff top. Sometime later the raven's mate came. "I have been calling you for a long time. Where have you been?" the raven asked.

"I found a little bag of something in the king's former camp, and I ate it. Now the thing is in my throat and maybe it is gold. If it is gold, I will die," the raven's partner answered.

The next day, the shepherd went to the top of the cliff and saw the raven's partner was dead. He cut its throat open and took out the gold.

Under the same cliff, a wolf and a fox spent a night together.

"What's wrong with the king's son?" the fox asked the wolf.

"Oh, there is an ant colony in his ear. People are really stupid," the wolf responded.

"Do you know how to cure him?" the fox asked.

"Oh, they need a very big copper pot full of warm water. Then they should sound drums, cymbals, and conches by the prince's ears. The ants will think spring has come and will come out. The prince will then be able to hear," the wolf answered.

The shepherd overheard this and understood. He went to see the king the next day and said, "I can cure your son."

"OK, if you can do that I will give you half of my property," the king promised. The shepherd then did what the wolf said. The ants' mother said to one of her sons, "Please go out and see what's happening. Maybe spring is here."

The son went out, looked around, and then went back inside, calling, "Mother... Mother... spring is here. The dragon is calling us." Then all the ants came out of the prince's ears and dropped into the water. He was cured. The shepherd then received half of the king's property and became very wealthy.

When she finished telling me this she said, "When you were born your father was away. Only your elder sister and mother were at home."

Berma - my elder sister - is ten years older than me. Imagine a ten-year-old girl helping her mother give birth.

"Berma realized that something was wrong with your mother, so she ran to my home for help. When I came, your mother was almost dead from the pain. I was very afraid," she said. She paused for a moment and looked at her tent, which was a hundred meters from ours. A thin plume of smoke went straight up into the deep blue sky above her tent. "Now I am leaving, otherwise my fire will go out. I need to warm up the tea for Tashi when he returns from herding. Please love your mother and don't make her sad," she said. That was how I learned about my own birth.

When nomad women give birth, there are no doctors to help. Older experienced women help them, or on some occasions, the husband helps his wife give birth. Whenever people ask about my birthday, I tell them that I haven't celebrated my birthday since I was born. Instead, I tell them that I feel very guilty when I think about how Mother suffered the day I was born.

When we were having supper by the light of flickering butter lamps, I told Mother that our neighbor had come to visit and that I had learnt about my birth. Mother said it was all true. I have no idea how to show appreciation when I face a moment like that. I walked outside and realized that thousands of stars were shimmering in the crystal sky. A wind blew gently, laden with the fragrance of summer grass. If Older Brother had been alive, I would have asked Mother for permission to sleep outside. Now, I couldn't ask Mother for such permission. I silently gazed at the starry sky for a while, and then walked back to the tent. As soon as I raised the tent flap, the moon rays shone in the tent. Mother asked where I had gone. I said, "Out looking at the moon."

THIEVES DISGUISED AS MONKS

The next morning, the sky was as clear as if it had rained the night before. I could see for miles and miles. We were all about to begin our daily work after breakfast, when suddenly, all the dogs in our camp began barking madly at once. Everyone walked outside and stared in the direction the dogs were looking. Five mounted cassock-clad monks were approaching our camp. One was wearing a yellow cassock. The others wore red. The yellow cassock-clad monk was bald and held a yellow umbrella above his head, shielding himself against the strong summer sun. The women began making prostrations while the men tried to stop the dogs from barking as the group drew near. The monks dismounted before entering our camp at the place where we children were gathered. The monk wearing the yellow cassock threw candies to us. While we scrambled for the candies, they passed on to meet our parents. As soon as we finished collecting the candies, we chased after them again, hoping to get more goodies.

The monks said that they were from Serda. Their accent was slightly different from ours but it wasn't an obstacle to communicating. We could easily understand each other. They wanted to build a temple in their monastery but had run out of cash after building only half of the temple. Monks in their monastery had divided into groups and gone to various Tibetan areas, asking for donations. They said that we could give them anything we liked - money, butter, or cheese. Everyone said what a pity it was that the temple couldn't be finished and said they would present what they had. Monks came asking for donations only once every several years. People invited them to their tents, but the cassock-clad monks refused, saying that they were short of time. They asked if they could eat with all of us. "Of course!" we all chorused, and offered them milk

tea, *tsamba*, cooked meat, dried meat, yogurt, butter, and cheese. We all sat around, watching them eat.

"What difficulties are you facing this year?" the one in the yellow cassock asked.

"Thanks to Buddha, we are not facing any difficulties," a man said.

"When we were passing through other areas, we heard many stories about bandits. Is anything similar happening here?" the lama asked.

"Yes, last year some bandits drove yaks away from our camp," Tashi said shyly.

"Oh, this kind of thing shouldn't happen. Didn't you pursue them?" the lama asked.

"Yes, but we didn't find them," someone whispered.

"It is certain that every bandit has a gun or a pistol. Do any of you have guns to use against bandits?" one monk asked.

"No. All we have are fists and knives," a mosquito-like voice hummed from the crowd.

"Do be careful," the lama said, bringing his palms together in a sign of prayer. The meal was soon over, but people still blankly looked at the cassock-clad monks, hoping to receive something.

"Before we leave to continue our journey, I will give a precious empowerment ensuring that you have a long life," the lama said. Everyone knelt while bringing their palms together to pray with lowered heads. The cassock-clad monks chanted something together loudly.

To be honest, I don't know what they chanted because I couldn't understand a single word. Their chanting didn't last more than three minutes. After that, the yellow cassock-clad monk put his right hand on everyone's head in turn. People who received this blessing didn't raise their heads for a while, as if the blessing was very heavy. Some old women shed tears.

"Now, we are leaving. Please present donations of whatever you like," the lama said, his hand still on the last person's head. Women headed to their homes immediately and returned with butter and cheese, which they presented to the monks. Everyone was represented except Dondrub. He had left and none of us expected him to return, since his family was the poorest in our camp. We thought that he probably had nothing to give. Our men helped the

monks load their donations on their horses. Except for the lama in the yellow cassock, the others were forced to walk. When they were about to leave, someone shouted at the back of the crowd. We all turned and saw Dondrub carrying a big bag of cheese on his back and holding another bag in front. He was standing beside his mother and staring back at us. It was very quiet. We all knew these bags of food were everything that he and his mother had carefully saved. We didn't know if he was going to give them to the monks or do something else. No one in our camp went to help him with the bags. He gripped his bags and passed through the crowd silently, and then presented them to the yellow cassock-clad monk, who accepted the donation and returned only a smile. Since all the horses were already fully loaded, the monks carried the bags on their backs.

We all stared at their backs as they left. They disappeared from our view without turning back to look at us even once. I wondered, "Why didn't they bring enough packhorses, since they are collecting donations from one camp to another? Maybe their visit had some secret purpose."

When I turned to look at the crowd, I discovered Dondrub and his mother were gone. People began saying how generous Dondrub's family was and how they would accumulate much merit in this life.

Several days rushed past. People didn't offer any comments about the monks after they were gone. Instead, they were engrossed in their daily life.

Some days later, we heard that some yaks had been driven off by bandits in a neighboring camp. Those bandits were the men in cassocks who had pretended to be monks in order to learn more about an unfamiliar area, the people who lived there, and their livestock. As soon as our people heard that, they gazed at each other in abject bewilderment, hardly able to believe it. I had never seen our people so disappointed before. They couldn't raise their heads, as if the disappointment pulled them down. Even when anthrax broke out or when our yaks were stolen, I had never seen anyone so upset, with heads so heavily weighed down. They said it was inevitable that people cheated each other, but it was terrible when someone used religion to cheat others. Everyone wagged their heads right and left except Dondrub, who blankly stared into the distance. People gathered automatically when a moment like this came and burst into discussion.

"They will come back to steal our yaks!" someone shouted at the back of the crowd. The crowd fell utterly silent.

"Why are you saying such a thing instead of praying to Buddha?" another person asked.

"Don't you remember how many questions were posed by those fake monks? Why? Man, they wanted to understand us, and they achieved their goal," someone said. The crowd once again burst into discussion. After a while, all of their faces became pale.

"We gave them what they wanted. If they return to steal our yaks, they are worse than ruthless wolves. If you give a dog in the street something to eat, it will later acknowledge you. If they are real grandsons of King Gesar, they will be too ashamed to return to our land," someone said in the crowd.

"Yes, that's true. They won't come back if they are real black-haired Tibetans," another person added. All the people agreed that that made some sense, while scattering in different directions.



I BEGIN SCHOOL

Three months rushed away. The fake monks never appeared again in our land, which at least meant that they were true Tibetans.

One morning as I sipped from a bowl of milk tea near the hearth, I heard my parents discussing if I should attend school in the county town. I rushed out of the tent in great excitement to tell my playmates that I was going to the county town to study. They all looked at me in great admiration but, from their eyes I could see that they had no clear idea what a school was. Traditionally, if we received any education, we received it from monasteries.

I began looking forward to the journey to the county town with mixed feelings. I wasn't very happy, because the journey meant separation from Mother. I seized every opportunity to help Mother, because I knew I would leave her soon. Meanwhile, I couldn't stop imagining how beautiful the county town must be.

The day before I left to seek a new fate, Mother packed things that I would need in that strange place - a bag of *tsamba*, a medium-sized bag of dried meat, and a Tibetan sheepskin robe. She thought that I might be cold in the distant county town. That night, Mother told me several things that I should be careful about.

"Son, don't feel arrogant about being a pupil when you return. You are just like an unskilled eagle that needs to practice flying in the expansive sky so you can later travel wherever you want. Never forget to study hard and obey the teachers. You will stay in your uncle's home, so don't cause any trouble. Agree to whatever his family says."

In some way, I had the same fate as Mother, for when she was a child she was reared by her uncle. Now, I had to live with Uncle's family, even though I had my own family.

Father and I set off the next day. The scenery before me was the same as always. The land was covered with beautiful flowers that bobbed their heads in the soft breeze. There was an unforgettable scent of wild flowers. The sky was cloudless. As the sun's rays touched

a mountain peak in the distance, I told myself to remember that sight. Leading the packed horses on the gray path, I kept turning to look at the tent - the source of all my childhood memories, both happy and sad. Mother walked with us until we reached a trail. I embraced her, tears wetting her shoulders. We said goodbye. I kept turning to look back, as the horse carried me into the distance. I saw Mother still standing where she had seen us off, waving her hat at us. That sight brought tears to my eyes once again. While wiping the tears with one hand, I waved my hat at her with the other hand until I could no longer see her.

I was first preoccupied with my worries of not seeing Mother, but soon I felt cheered amid the beauty of that summer morning as wild animals enjoyed the morning grass. I had nothing to do but to imagine all sorts of things in the future.

We travelled on until the sun was about to set. Until that time, I never knew that our camp owned so much territory, which the government later divided into smaller pieces.

Father told me that we would spend the night in his sworn brother's home. We reached the camp where Father's sworn brother had lived for years and, as we neared his tent, Father called his name. He emerged in his red Tibetan robe, holding his prayer beads in his left hand, and greeted us with warm hospitality. Father told him that I was his son. We entered his gigantic black tent and sat on a carpet near the stove. He offered tea and *tsamba* first. I didn't want to eat *tsamba* that day, but offering *tsamba* first is our custom and I understood.

Father asked his sworn brother if his family members were fine and then asked if their animals had been able to eat enough grass that winter. Next, they exchanged thoughts on many different topics. I didn't listen to any of them, since I was often not interested in older people's conversation.

The black screen of darkness slowly clamped the earth in its familiar grip. As I lay in bed, memories flooded back as far as I could go, but soon I fell asleep since the tiredness of a day's riding lay heavy on me.

The following day, Father's sworn brother told me that I could stay at his home when I was going between the town and my home, and then we set out on the final leg of the journey to the county town,

which lies in a valley, surrounded by mountains. It was my first time there, and I was eight years old.

In the county town, most people lived in flat-roofed adobe houses. Some lived in stone houses built in the local traditional style. I saw several buildings that were government offices. The trees surprised me greatly. I had never imagined that a plant could grow that tall and large, as there was no such thing on the grassland where I grew up. Though the town was not bad, it didn't really interest me either. My mind was overwhelmed by memories of my camp and family, like a feather of smoke carried by the wind into the distance.

Father led me directly to Uncle's home, which was in the upper part of the town. While praying that I would have a good time, I entered through their giant gate. Father introduced me to Uncle's family members. Their family did not have a child my age. Uncle gave me a bedroom where I could sleep for as long as I stayed in his home. That night I did not sleep well, because I was in a bed with a quilt. In my own home I always slept on the ground with a sheepskin robe and I liked it, because I was used to it. The quilt was much lighter than my sheepskin robe, and without the familiar pressure, I felt uncomfortable.

I woke up in the early morning with nothing to do. If I had been at home, I would have found something to do as soon as I got up. That afternoon, Father bought me a pair of pants, a red jacket, and a pair of new shoes. He told me that I should wear them the next day. That was the first time I ever wore new clothes from a shop. When I was at home, I wore a Tibetan robe and other clothes made by Mother. When Father or someone else's robe wore out, Mother took the good parts of the robe and made a new child's robe.

Father took me to school and then left. I stood at the window watching him go, my heart full of sorrow as he rode into the distance.

I liked school because there were many children there. I thought that I could easily find playmates, but things didn't work out like I thought they would. All the students in the school called me *drupa* 'nomad', which has negative connotations. Later I realized it was my responsibility to change negative connotations into positive ones, but this realization came a little late.

When I was alone in my bed every night, I couldn't stop thinking about my earlier life. I remembered Mother's tales after dark, Dondrub's love songs on the grassland, and even the naughty calves.

Those things brought tears to my eyes and from time to time, I cried quietly under the quilt.

I built a personal relationship with my Tibetan and math teachers. Both were extremely kind Tibetans and always helped me whenever I needed. As a result, I was interested in the subjects that they taught, and I also did well in them. I am filled with a sense of gratitude whenever I reflect back on their help.

Miss Li was my Chinese teacher. She was twenty-five, very arrogant, and regularly denigrated students from poor families and students whose parents did not work in government offices. I was from a simple nomad family, and immediately became a target of her mistreatment. I am not sure if she was really a bad person, but she always got angry at me whenever I did anything wrong. Every time she entered the classroom, I visualized her angry-looking face without looking at her. Before she beat me, she always praised certain students whose parents worked for the government, although there was really nothing to praise. Then she mercilessly beat my bottom with her stick. That made me homesick more than anything else.

I only had Mother's occasional visits to look forward to. When she came the first time, Younger Brother accompanied her. I particularly enjoyed Mother's visits, as she invariably brought presents of local food. The first time I ate them all at once, because I knew if I told anyone about them I would have to share. The next day, I was extremely ill. It was a good lesson not to be selfish.

I told Mother about Miss Li's mistreatment. She said it was my own doing. I couldn't convince her, despite ample evidence, and an empty feeling in my heart stayed for many days.

A VISIT HOME IN WINTER

The days and nights dragged slowly by in unhappiness. Finally, the winter holiday came. Uncle sent a message to Father and said that he should come take me back home. I had been away so long that I needed to bring everyone a gift, but I didn't have enough money to buy gifts for everyone. So, I chose two people in my family that I liked the most - Mother and Younger Brother. I bought a pair of turquoise earrings for Mother and a small plastic pistol for Younger Brother.

Three days later Father came with three horses. He immediately asked for my final marks. He looked at the marks and said, "Tibetan and math are not bad, but your Chinese is the lowest in your class. But, that is understandable, since it is entirely a new thing for you." I wanted to say that it was because I was from a simple nomad family, but I realized that would embarrass him in front of his relatives.

Father bought two bags of grain early the next morning and packed them on a horse. We both had a horse to ride and headed in the direction of my home. I couldn't wait to see my family members in our black yak-hair tent.

It was very cold on the way home, and soon, I couldn't feel my feet in the stirrups. We spent that night in Father's sworn brother's tent.

Back at home, everyone said that I had become thin. Of course I was. For more than three months I had lived in constant fear of mistreatment. I took the opportunity that day to persuade my parents to let me be a monk instead of a student. Meanwhile, I described in great detail how Miss Li had abused me. Mother agreed to my suggestion, but Father offered no comment. One day, Younger Brother sidled up to me and said that Mother and Father were discussing sending me to the local monastery from the beginning of the New Year. I was very happy with this news, and thought, "From time to time, I can visit my family. Nobody there will mistreat me.

Best of all, I don't need to study Chinese." I then joyfully carried Younger Brother around the sheep-pen three times on my back just for fun.



I ALMOST BECOME A MONK

I couldn't stop imagining a new life in the monastery, but all those hopes were ruined by Nima. His abbreviated monk's life completely changed my future. I'll never know if that was good or bad.

Nima was a well-known monk in our local monastery who had been awarded the highest monastery degree and had earned many people's faith. However, he had broken his religious vow over a woman in a single night, and was now a layman. From then on, he was not much more than a nomad in the eyes of those who knew him.

Suddenly my parents changed their minds. They would not send me to the monastery. I insisted that I wanted to be a monk. They used Nima as a good example against me. Our discussion always became an argument.

"You will follow Nima's path, right?" they said.

"No. If you send me to school I will run away. If you send me to the monastery I will stay there and be a good monk," I replied.

"Nima stayed in the monastery for more than twenty years. When he was almost forty, he broke his religious vows. Who knows, maybe you will stay there for years and then break your vows. Then you will have nothing - no ability to earn a living," they said.

"Why are you so sure that I will follow his path?" I asked.

"You are too young to decide your life right now. Parents should decide children's lives. If you come back like Nima, we will be too ashamed to face other people," they said.

"Nima and I are different," I shouted, realizing I was losing the chance to become a monk. I tried many other ways to persuade them, but none of them worked. I always feel lost in moments like these.

The first thing we did every evening after supper was for all the family members to chant together for almost an hour. One time while Mother was chanting her scripture, I borrowed her prayer

beads and counted how many more days I could stay at home. Ten more days were left. That night, I asked Father if Younger Brother and I could make a bonfire outside. He agreed. I ran out in great excitement, but it was too dark to see our own feet, so we postponed the activity until the next night.

It snowed while I was asleep. The barking of dogs woke me. Usually, the barking did not really disturb my tranquility, but when it snowed, the barks changed completely. By listening to the dogs barking, we understood if they were barking at a person, or a wolf, or if it had snowed. I quickly dressed and went out. The vast land was covered. It was very white, as if all the light of the world had been gathered. I loved the pure, clean scenery. When it snowed, there was one big problem for animals - they couldn't reach the grass under the snow. Of course, that worried the elders.

That day, many little birds appeared in the camp. It was rare to see them unless it snowed. It was impossible for me to have the chance to kill birds with Mother nearby. Stuffing my pockets with ice-cold stones, I took Younger Brother and went behind our tent. Little birds hopped about looking for food in the sheep pen where there was less snow. We threw stones one by one into the flock of birds. We hit three with stones. The others flew over our heads. They were lucky survivors, and I wished them all the best.

At the time, Mother called to Younger Brother, telling him to change his boots. When we got back, she asked where we had been. Younger Brother couldn't keep any secret and told the truth. I'll never forget that day. Mother beat me with a rope for the first time in my life. I was hurt because I love her. Otherwise, I couldn't be hurt. It was painful, not where she beat me, but inside my heart. I cried without shedding tears. Later, I realized Mother was teaching me that killing was bad. She thought that teaching her children how to behave properly was important. When I had the ability to comprehend it all, I regretted being sad at that time.

MY STUDIES IMPROVE

When the time came, I knew I had no choice but to return to school. That thought helped me with homesickness in the county town. My Chinese did not improve, though the teacher kept me at school to do homework when the other students were gone. Sometimes, I escaped through a broken window and was sure to be punished the next day. From time to time, Uncle came to school to see what had happened to me after dark. When I had Chinese class in the morning, it was almost certain that I couldn't have lunch that day. In every Chinese class, the teacher gave us new words to memorize. At that time, I had no desire to learn Chinese. Sometimes I even didn't open my Chinese book after school.

I had no interest in being at the top of the class. I tried to ignore class marks and the teachers' comments. Whenever my Chinese teacher asked a question, I stood with nothing to say. That made me very ashamed. So, for a time I worked very hard out of sheer shame and anger. But in the end my good intentions were forgotten, and I slipped back into my old ways. It was not until Mother's lesson that I realized how important education was and thereafter began to take appropriate interest in every subject.

I soon caught up with other students in our class. The Tibetan and math teachers praised me in front of the class and encouraged me to persevere. But the Chinese teacher didn't say a single word. I wasn't surprised, because I knew her attitude towards me.

During those years, Father visited several times. Mother visited less frequently. I remember Mother's visits more vividly than Father's.

After six years of primary school, I passed the middle school entrance examination. There were two middle schools in our county town. One was a boarding school, but Uncle suggested that I attend the nonboarding school and continue to stay at his home. Without

Uncle I wouldn't have had much education. I happily agreed with his suggestion.

I had new subjects to learn in middle school, such as biology and physics. When I returned home during vacation, people asked what I had learned besides writing and reading. I told them I learned biology. "What is biology?" they asked.

"We learn about insects, frogs, and those sorts of things," I replied.

They all laughed and said that they had known all about such animals since they were children and if things were like that in school, then there was no point in studying.

We prepared for the normal school entrance exam at the end of middle school. After we graduated, we assumed we would be given permanent government jobs. It was very competitive. I spent many days and nights preparing. Hopefully, I would pass and enter our prefecture normal school, which was very far from my local area. Finally, after the exams, I was among the top students in our class and was chosen to attend the normal school.



FIRST LOVE

Since the distance was very great between my home area and the normal school, I should have gotten homesick, but I didn't. Maybe the reason was that I had left my home and had been living in a distant place since I was eight.

In the first term of normal school, I fell in love with a girl called Dorma. When I first saw her I didn't fancy her at all. It was not love at first sight. She was of medium height, a little plump, and had long black eyelashes. I was chosen to dance on the school dancing team at the beginning of the term. My teacher told me that every Wednesday morning and evening I should go to the school dancing area and practice with my teammates. I walked to the school dancing area with an anxious look on my face the first time. I was the last person to come, so I sat in the only remaining seat, which was next to a girl. She looked at me with a brilliant smile, exposing sparkling white teeth between red lips. That was our first meeting. I felt a little anxious but not attracted.

We met on campus the next day, and she greeted me. I gave her a nod and walked away. We were not in the same class, so we seldom met at school. But every Wednesday provided a chance for us to meet. Because of her easy-going nature, we quickly fell into conversation not long after our first meeting.

"We met quite a long time ago but I still don't know your name. Can you tell me right now?" she asked with a smile.

"Sure, my name is Karma Dondrub. You can call me Karma," I said.

"Your accent tells me you are from Chendo County, right?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, you are right. I come from the nomad part of Chendo County," I replied without looking at her.

"No! You're kidding. I don't believe it!" she said in great excitement, prancing about near me.

"Why?" I asked in surprise. I'm sure bewilderment covered my face.

"Because nomads don't dance," she answered.

"Oh, I have been living in the county town for years," I said.

"I see," she said, and walked away. That was our first conversation. I didn't ask her name. By her accent, I knew she was from Yushu County. Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has six counties. Even though we are all Kham speakers, there are differences in accents, and we know where people are from by their accents.

In the company of other students on the dancing team, we started playing games, having more conversations, and making fun of each other. Other students began gossiping about us. I was annoyed to hear that at first, but gradually I absorbed their gossip like enjoying bits of honeydew. Her sparkling eyes and friendly nature became very attractive. I missed them if I couldn't see them for even one day.

I couldn't help but think of her, and reviewed our old conversations every night when I returned to my dorm. To be honest, when other students were talking about my relationship with her, I enjoyed listening and wanted them to say more. Thoughts of Dorma were normally the first thing to pop into my head in the mornings. Afterwards, when I saw her on campus from some distance away, I would tingle from my toes to the roots of my hair. When I was near her, my face became red and my voice became husky. I was unable to speak or even think. Every time I met her, she always greeted me first. I wanted to say something back, but my mind was so befuddled that I just nodded. I began thinking about her the moment she walked away.

I realized that I had fallen in love with Dorma - a beautiful name in Tibetan. A gorgeous flower in my home grassland is called Dorma, and in Tibetan the female Buddha, Tara, is also called Dorma. "I'm too shy to admit to her that I love her with all my heart. And I'm not going to tell my feelings to anyone else, even Tsuchen, my best friend," I thought at first. Whenever we were together in the dancing area, time passed incredibly fast.

I stood at a window watching passing students after school was over late one afternoon, and caught sight of her with a boy. They were very close to each other, as if they were about to hold each other. I couldn't believe my eyes, so I moved against the window to see her

better. My forehead unintentionally hit the window and shards of glass shattered loudly on the floor. Now, there was no window pane. Seeing the scene, my heart ached. They walked on. I tried to look in another direction, but the blood from my forehead made me shut my eyes tight. Someone behind me handed me a piece of paper. I wiped away the blood while turning around. When I opened my eyes, Tsuchen was standing in front of me with a pitying look on his face. I hadn't realized that that he was behind me, otherwise I would have controlled myself.

"I have heard much gossip before. I tried not to believe any of it. But, now... Tell me what's going on!" he said. I should have told him that I had fallen in love with Dorma, since telling small secrets strengthens friendship. I realized how stupid I was. If I kept my feelings a secret, it was like I was wrapping fire in a paper. Sooner or later, the paper would burn and the fire would come out.

I took a long breath and said with great difficulty, "OK, I'll tell you - I'm in love."

"With whom?" he asked excitedly.

"A girl called Dorma," I said without looking at him.

"Yeah, I know her. Man, falling in love is not a big deal at all. Take it easy," he said.

"I can't, since it is my first love," I replied.

"What's the difference between a first love and a last love if it is true love?" he asked. Because of my limited experience, I couldn't answer.

"OK, in order to understand more, I'll ask you some simple questions. What is love?" he asked, leaning against me. I racked my brain but couldn't reply. Then, I realized that I had never really felt lonely before I fell in love with Dorma. Maybe love is the desire to avoid loneliness. But I didn't share this feeling with him. I walked over to my seat.

"See, you have no idea what love is and yet you say you are falling in love. So, why do you love her?" he asked. I couldn't point out a single thing about her that I loved most. She wasn't very beautiful either, but anyway I loved her more than I could say.

"Love is more emotional than reasonable," I said.

"What do you want to do with her if you get her?" he asked, gazing through the broken window.

Yes, all I wanted was to get her, but I had never given serious thought to what to do with her if I did get her. Eating? Walking? Wasting golden time? Chatting? What else could a poor student do with his girlfriend? If this was all I could do, then having a girlfriend didn't mean much to me. I could do all these things without loving her and trying to get her. But strangely, I felt my heart suddenly gripped by a warm longing for her. I realized I wanted her very badly.

Tsuchen said, "It's not worth falling in love with her. I know her a bit, and I hear that her reputation is not good."

I didn't care. I would have loved her even if she had been a prostitute. I had deep feelings for her, and it didn't matter what kind of reputation she had.

"Why should I care about that?" I asked.

"Of course, you shouldn't care if you really love her. But the problem is... I mean other people will gossip about you," he said tensely.

"I don't care what others say about me," I said.

"Then why don't you tell her your feeling?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said, putting my head in my hands.

"Act like a real man. Find courage and tell her," he said. I didn't reply and walked away.

Thoughts of Dorma kept me awake at night. I felt how strange life was - I should have missed my dear parents and home area, since I had left them behind and had come to this strange place. I was born under Mother's robe, and she was the first person to hear my first cry. She was the first person to give me hopes and dreams. How many times had we shared happiness and sorrow? How many times had she used her tongue to clean the dirt from my eyes? Mother should be the first thing that popped into my head every morning, not a strange girl whom I had met only a short time ago. Missing my home place, childhood playmates, and departed Older Brother should have kept me awake at night, not a girl with whom I had no relationship. But reality was different.

Loss of sleep over a girl made me walk in the moonlight. The moon was high and bright. The schoolyard was empty and quiet, except for the whisper of the autumn wind. I saw a vague light in front of the school gate. Usually, when my friends asked me how much I loved her, I couldn't find the words to describe my feelings. As the moon shone on my head, I thought if I compared Dorma to the

bright moon, then the other girls I had seen didn't even equal the light hanging in front of the school gate. I once again looked up at the moon and discovered that it was a full moon, the most precious night in a month in terms of our religion. I chanted prayers under my breath while walking around the yard. When I got back to the dorm, all my roommates were sleeping deeply, their snores lingering in that familiar atmosphere. I chanted more scriptures in bed and fell asleep.

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"What?" she asked eagerly. She thought that I had something to give her, a material thing. Tsuchen told me many times that I should tell her if I truly loved her. "Not expressing love in your heart causes more pain than the refusal of love," he told me.

Every night, I would tell my friend that I was going to confront her the following day. I was taught some strategies of how to face a girl under such circumstances. But, when the following day came, I postponed it to the next day. I wasted much time. Some roommates began to think poorly of me and even accused me of lacking courage. "Are you a real Tibetan man?" they asked.

One Wednesday evening, only we boys were practicing dancing. The girls were watching. I caught sight of her wearing my lambskin coat that I had removed before dancing. When we finished dancing, she gave me back my coat and thanked me. I told her not to go with her friend because I had something to tell her. She waited outside for me. I felt my heart beating faster and faster as I approached her. For many nights, thoughts of her had kept me awake, and had given me plenty of time to imagine this scene.

"What do you want to tell me?" she asked.

"Actually, I have something to share with you," I said. These words slipped easily from my lips, as if I were scarred by experience.

"My feelings," I said. Anyone but an idiot would have understood what was coming next.

She pretended not to understand. "Oh? You have feelings about what?" she replied.

"About you," I said with some difficulty.

"Sorry, I don't understand," she said.

"OK, to make a long story short, I have fallen in love with you," I said, without looking at her face.

"Sorry, I'm not interested," she said, and walked away. I wanted to hold her back, but I realized that I shouldn't do that. I truly loved her, and I realized that I needed to try to win her heart and her faithfulness without force. I stood and watched her go. She didn't even turn back to give me a single glance. My heart ached as she disappeared.

Back in my dorm, Tsuchen asked me how the meeting had gone. I said that I saw no hope. He explained that girls always refuse the first time, even if they like the boy very much. He added that I shouldn't give up once I had started. I pondered, "If she has no feelings for me, should I still cling to her? Wouldn't my love be putting pressure on her?" Honestly, I didn't want any of that to happen. Putting my right hand on my chest, I silently stared at the ceiling while thinking about another time to confront her. I also realized that the final exams were coming soon.

The next day, the Tibetan teacher in charge of our class came to our classroom. He said that there was not much time until the final exams, and students from the dancing team would cease practice for that term. After that day, I didn't see her again on the school campus. A dull pain in my heart was then my constant companion.



HOLIDAY AT HOME

Finally, the winter holiday of that year came. I didn't know how much I had learnt during the term, but I felt terribly lonely.

I went home. My appearance put a sparkle in my family members' eyes. "I worried that you wouldn't be able to return to spend the winter holiday with us, since it has snowed heavily," Mother said.

"When I saw someone in the distance coming toward our home, I hoped it was you," Younger Brother added.

I was back, but I had brought a dull pain in my heart. I had met a girl, but she had refused to accept my love. I felt lonely and empty.

We all sat around the fire and ate the best food - wild baby yams with butter and wild baby yams with yogurt. We usually don't eat them unless it is a special time. My family asked me how my life was in the normal school. Before answering, I wondered if I should tell them the truth. When I was in primary school and middle school, I had had a very strong desire to be a monk. But now, that desire was gone. I still had two choices - stay in school or herd. I told them life was good, and I was eager to continue studying.

Unexpectedly, I discovered to my great surprise that my childhood playmate, Wonpo, had married earlier that year and had become a father. When I visited him, we talked for a bit, and I discovered that he had lost the wonderful sense of humor that he had had as a child. Poor Wonpo! He was only seventeen but already burdened with a family. Not until that moment did I realize that I led a totally different life. He suggested I marry as soon as possible. In that way he said, I would get many benefits, which he listed, but I had no interest in any of them.

A LOVE STORY AND A LETTER

I was sitting by the fire when Dorji came in with a bizarre letter one snowy night. He handed the letter to me with trembling hands and asked me to read it to him. I was quite puzzled by his unexpected visit and request. I asked him what it was all about. He said that Ringchen's disappearance had made Tsormo's illness worse. I asked him to tell me the entire story. I was unable to comprehend the total meaning of the letter without background knowledge of the situation, which he gave.

You know my boy, Ringchen, right? Three years ago, Ringchen fell in love with Metog and they were lovers. Tsormo - his mother - and I have told him many times that he should give up this relationship. You know Metog right? Her family is not clean at all. My father told me that they had leprosy from the time of their great grandparents, and that disease still troubles their family. Last year, when you were not here, her father almost died from that disease.

Everyone in our camp knows how kind Ringchen is. Therefore Metog's family took every opportunity to convince him by saying that he should ask Tsormo and me to approve their marriage. Whenever we said that Metog's family wasn't clean, Ringchen would storm into a rage, run off, and wouldn't return home for several days. Sometimes, he wouldn't eat or talk for several days. That made life very difficult for us. I was very afraid if I refused to approve their marriage he would commit suicide. One night, Tsormo and I discussed if we should approve. She said that she was also afraid of losing her beloved son, and if it did happen, she could no longer live in this world. So, we both had to grant his wish.

Then the next thing, the heart of the whole matter, was where should the new couple live? Metog's parents said Ringchen should come to live with them. Tsormo said that she would never let Ringchen live under the control of others. She added that it was better if Metog came to live with us. I asked Ringchen his idea. He said he wanted to live with his parents. But I couldn't agree, since Metog comes from a family seriously

affected by leprosy. I was afraid of ruining our claim to a clean lineage if she came to live with us. What I wanted was for the new couple to set up their own home. I told my wife several times what I thought. She refused at first, but finally, she agreed.

One day, I went to Metog's home to discuss the marriage with her parents. They told me that they couldn't let Metog leave their home because they had already agreed to let Metog's younger sister marry and move to her husband's home. They said Metog should bring her husband to their home and care for them, and then later, they would inherit the family's property. I told them that Tsormo and I couldn't agree and suggested they let the new couple set up their own household.

They said, "No. Metog is the kindest among our three daughters. Since she was a child she has been the most obedient. We parents have already decided that she will inherit our family property."

I replied, "My wife and I are getting old. I don't know how much time is left for us. Being a parent means we must do our best for our children. Although Ringchen is the only unmarried son in my family, we wouldn't stop him from being with his beloved girl for the rest of his life. And I can't force him to marry someone he doesn't want. I don't agree with sending my boy to your home, nor do I hope Metog comes to live with us. Both families should encourage the new couple to establish their own household."

Her parents said that they needed time to think that over and that I should visit the next day.

The next day was beautiful. Brilliant sunlight filled the sky. I thought it was a good omen for a successful end to the discussion. I put on my best robe and red-tassel while praying for my son's good future. Three eagles swooped through the sky as soon as I stepped out of the tent. Her parents had been waiting for me impatiently in their silent tent. I broke the silence by asking, "What is your decision?"

Dark clouds gathered on their faces and then her father said, "We discussed our daughter's marriage last night. We can only agree to bring her husband to our home to live with us. If you want to establish a new home for them, we won't give her anything."

I realized they were determined. "Don't you ever expect my boy to come live here with you, you ruthless animals!" I shouted and stomped out.

When I returned to my home, my son and wife asked me how the meeting had gone. I told them that they wouldn't agree to the marriage unless Ringchen married and moved into their

home. Tsormo said it was absolutely unacceptable. Ringchen said he didn't want to live with Metog's family. Afterwards, we didn't say a single word about the marriage, even though Ringchen and Metog continued their relationship.

One morning, I saw Ringchen and Metog driving their yaks in the same direction with some other yak-herders. I gazed into the distant herding place to see what might be happening many times that day. In the late afternoon, I saw someone driving a large herd of yaks toward our camp. As the herd neared, I recognized they were our yaks and the herder was Geri, Ringchen's best friend. I was worried something had happened to Ringchen and our herd. I went toward the herd. As I neared, I also realized Metog's yaks were in the same herd. That created more worries in my heart.

I met Geri near our camp and asked him where Ringchen was. He handed me a letter and said it was from Ringchen. "Metog is with him," Geri said.

"Where are they exactly?" I asked.

"He didn't tell me. Later, I'll herd your yaks. That's what Ringchen hoped," Geri replied and walked away.

I unfolded the paper and looked at it, but I can't read. As soon as Tsormo heard about Ringchen's disappearance, she wept and then fainted. Finally, she was bedridden with heartache. Now, the only medicine for her illness is some news about Ringchen.

I walked near the sputtering butter lamp to read the letter:

Dear Parents,

When you get this letter, you will realize that I have gone a day's journey. Father and Mother, please don't grieve for my disappearance and don't come after me. I will go to some distant place to seek my own fate with my lover of some years. As long as I have the chance to be with her, I will find happiness.

Dear parents, maybe you think I have stopped loving you and being concerned about you, but that is not true. I still love you, and I believe that you have done the best for me since I was a child. Now I owe you a great debt of gratitude, but please think about my situation. I asked Geri to herd our yaks during my absence, and he agreed.

As I write this letter, tears stream down my cheeks and a tremendous pain is in my heart. I promise that I will return some day to visit you. Please chant some scriptures for your next lives,

instead of getting upset and disappointed. Mother and Father, please take care of yourselves in the days of my absence.

Your son,

Ringchen

After I finished reading the letter, Ringchen's father lightly patted my shoulder, and announced that he would leave. I heard myself reply, "Mmm." He walked away, stepping into the vague moonlight.

The holiday passed quickly. At the end, neither with willingness nor with reluctance, I left home and returned to school.

Once back in school, my attention was captured once again by the girl that I loved. I couldn't help feeling sad whenever I saw her with other boys. If she was forced to go with them, I could stop it from happening again. If she was willing to be with other boys, then I could do nothing. One day, she came to me and told me that she was engaged. I was sad when I heard that.

"That is the reason you won't accept me, isn't it?" I asked.

"My father arranged my marriage. So I can't disappoint him," she answered.

"I love you, but I hope my love won't disturb your tranquil life afterwards," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry doesn't make me feel better, but I will try my best to understand you," I said.

"At least we can be good friends," she said.

"No, my purpose is not to be your friend," I said.

"Then what can I do for you?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. Putting my hand on my chest, I felt that my heart was pounding, as if it were ready to jump out of my mouth. I looked away, and she left.

Later, I learnt that she had lied. My friends told me that she had several boyfriends. My love for her was beyond doubt. I had done all I could for her, but she still betrayed me. I thought, "So fine, Dorma, from now on, I will no longer be concerned about you. I know that in life I must sometimes cut myself off from some people and things. You are the first person that I cut myself off from. It is

finished." Our relationship and my concern for her snapped like a lute string that day.

Some days passed. The school held a meeting and told us that the government wouldn't offer jobs for school graduates. Tremendous sorrow rose inside me. I was frustrated, and I didn't know what to do. It was almost impossible for me to seek further education, because I was too ashamed to continue asking for money from my parents. They had always done their best to provide my tuition and living expenses. To do so, they had sold some of our beloved livestock that they had herded for years. If I couldn't get a job after graduation, I wouldn't be able to repay what they had done for me. For many nights, thoughts about these issues kept me awake.



STUDY IN XINING CITY

One day, good fortune fell on the person who had trouble sleeping. All my classmates were called together in a classroom. Some strangers were there when we entered. They looked like Tibetans, but I couldn't understand their dialect. Our headmaster was there and he explained the purpose of their visit - to select the three best students to study English in Xining. They explained that the students who were chosen would not pay anything. In addition, each student would receive 200 *yuan* each month. I was excited! I told myself, "Don't let this opportunity slip away."

They gave us three examinations. First, we wrote a Tibetan composition in a half hour. Secondly, we translated Tibetan into Chinese, and Chinese into Tibetan. Thirdly, there was an oral exam in both Tibetan and Chinese. I was chosen to go to Xining and study English.

My first trip to Xining in a bus soon ensued. It took two days and a night. At the end, I was quite exhausted, but I had no time to relax.

One autumn morning, when I entered my new class, the golden youthful sun had just started its long daily trek. I was a little late for class. As soon as I took my seat, the teacher gave me a small white piece of paper on which was written "Issac" in black ink. That was my English name given by my very first English teacher, Dr. Kevin Stuart.

I didn't know how to pronounce my new name. I raised my hand, and the teacher came to me. I did not know a single word of English, so I pointed to the paper. He pronounced my name slowly and clearly. I followed him, and felt like I knew it. But I forgot the moment he walked away.

From that day, I began learning A-B-C. During the first semester, I had a very big problem understanding what the teachers were talking about. I knew that I had no better environment to study

English than in this program. Every night, I studied by candlelight until two or three a.m. As a result, it did not take long before I could make simple conversation with my classmates. I have now been studying English for three and a half years.

I am also doing a language-culture preservation project. During one winter vacation, I went home and collected folktales from old people in my home area. This project has four stages. I write the folktales in colloquial Tibetan, transcribe them in the International Phonetic Alphabet, write them in literary Tibetan, and translate them into English. These folktales have almost disappeared in my local area because nowadays, children don't sit around with their grandmothers or their mothers, listening to their folktales. They are all interested in newly invented high-tech stuff, such as TV and radio. It is heartbreaking to see many traditional things vanishing so quickly. It is necessary to preserve a thousand-year-old traditional culture we belong to that is now being threatened.



BLACK BEARS AND DARKNESS

It was a summer morning, and the new golden sun sparkled across the cloudless sky, while soft breezes blew the unforgettable scent of wild flowers across the limitless grassland.

It was here that my memories of life began, herding my family's calves. It was the place where I was born and had left for a long time. Today, I am here to relearn local songs and folktales that I used to know when I was a child. I lean into the gentle winds while looking at the stream that flows westward. I remember how I used to be in this pure land. At that time, I was afraid of only two things: black bears and darkness. Nothing else could make me worry. But now, many things fill me with worry.



NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Amdo, A mdo	ཨ་མདོ།
Berma, pad ma	པད་མ།
Chendo, khri 'du	ཁྲི་འདུ།
Dondrub, don 'grub	དོན་འགྲུབ།
Dorma, sgrol ma	སྐྱོལ་མ།
Geri, gu ru	གུ་རུ།
Gesar, ge sar	གེ་སར།
Karma, karma	ཀམ།
Karma Dondrub	ཀམ་དོན་འགྲུབ།
Kham, khams	ཁམས།
Metog, me tog	མེ་ཏོག།
Mtsho sngon	མཚོ་སྔོན།
Namjom, rnam rgyal	རྣམ་རྒྱལ།
Nima, nyi ma	ཉི་མ།
Qinghai 青海 Province	
Ringchen, rin chen	རིན་ཆེན།
Serda, gser rta	གསེར་རྟ།
Shichu, rdza chu kha	ཇ་ཚུ་ཁ།
Tashi, bkra shis	བརྟ་ཤེས།
Tsering, tshe ring	ཚེ་རིང།
Tsormo, mtsho mo	མཚོ་མོ།
Tsuchen, tshul khriims	ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས།
Washalamo, wa zhwa lhamo	ལ་ཞལ་ལྷ་མོ།
Wonpo, dbang po	དབང་པོ།
Xining 西宁 City	
Yeshi, ye shes	ཡེ་ཤེས།
Yushu, yul shul	ཡུལ་ཤུལ།
zen ten, byin rten	བྱིན་རྟེན།