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THE WITCHES OF TIBET

by

ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་ Pema Kyi

ASIAN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVES (AHP) is a trans-disciplinary journal focused on the Tibetan Plateau and surrounding regions, including the Southeast Asian Massif, Himalayan Massif, the Extended Eastern Himalayas, the Mongolian Plateau, and other contiguous areas.

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SUMMARY: *THE WITCHES OF TIBET* is a fictionalized account of a Tibetan girlhood in Mgo log (Golok) in Qinghai Province. The narrative begins with how a little girl's life was saved by a gift of a mysterious pill from a kind, local woman who locals regarded as a witch. These and other magic moments are from personal experiences that relatives and others related about their own lives, and what the author dreamed and imagined. This text illustrates how a Tibetan woman is influenced by those around her, the natural environment, and her dreams. In addition, four stories are given, two of which only women tell among themselves. This work shows the value of recording local culture from a Tibetan woman's perspective.

COVERS: Photos taken by Jan Reurink in Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Used with permission.

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Every minute of my life, I think about and treasure the culture I grew up in. The natural environment and the people of my home area enriched my life and imagination. I sincerely thank all who helped me make this book possible.

FOREWORD: THE REAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN TIBET!

In this semi-autobiographical account of a Tibetan woman's personal and imagined experiences with Tibetan numina, Pema Kyi provides hitherto unrecorded stories about the Tibetan supernatural world. She also provides excellent insights into the experiences of young Tibetan women growing up in post-Mao China ranging from the mundane (bullying at the hands of students and teachers) to the fantastic (the author has an out-of-body experience in which, in her dream, she saves her adopted mother's sister, who was her daughter in her previous life). To a Western reader it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what is "real" and what is not. This is as it should be, for this book is not so much fiction as an in-depth narrative depicting the real world as Tibetans (traditionally) perceive it. Pema Kyi readily admits that the events narrated herein are not actually the sum of her own experiences. Some of the experiences recounted below, all from the perspective of a single narrator, are in fact the experiences of her relatives, or of others she knows.

Such tales are not unique to Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture's Padma County (the county from which the author hails). When I arrived on the Tibetan Plateau in the summer of 2009 to conduct the first of what ended up being five years of fieldwork, I was immediately struck by the sheer ubiquity of narratives about dangers, illnesses, and encounters associated with supernatural phenomena. Tibetans of all ages and from all across the Plateau seemed to have stories gleaned either from personal experience, or the experiences of those around them. Remarkably few such stories, however, ever reach publication.

When told in my presence, these accounts primarily took the form of personal experience narratives or hearsay. People in attendance were primarily friends of similar age groups. They were frequently inserted into everyday conversation, but once begun often came in bunches. These narratives were often told in mixed company and topics included spirit trees in which the spirits of supernatural creatures were said to dwell, sacred groves (some considered by the local community to be real, some specious),¹ stories proving the great

¹ Similar to those discussed in Coggins (2003).

powers of particular holy men, and to the potential dangers (and benefits) of sleeping on the grasslands.

I heard of how one family in Yushu became wealthy when a woman slept on the grassland and met a deity who then bestowed upon her a lucky pot. I heard another story of how a dream-inspired performer of the Gesar epic (also from Yushu) received his dream when he slept while herding sheep on the grassland after which he was able to sing vast tracts of the prosimetric epic without having received any formal training. I heard still another story about a woman falling asleep while herding and conceiving a child with a deity (in Sde dge County, Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture). The grassland is a liminal space that simultaneously provides essential sustenance for the livestock on which herders rely and exposes both humans and livestock to bodily and spiritual danger (to the extent that the two are separable).

From Tibetans from the Rgyal rong and Namuyi subgroup, I also heard narratives of soul loss and soul-calling that reminded me of the Yi rituals I had studied in class with Mark Bender (later published as G.yu Lha 2012 and Libu Lakhi et al. 2009). One elder told me about saving a copse of trees during the Cultural Revolution by placing piles of small white stones near the trees, leading locals to believe that the trees were sacred and therefore abstain from felling them. In the summers, I also attended the *klu rol* festivals held annually during the sixth lunar month in Reb gong County, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province in which trance mediums are said to manifest truly incredible powers, like the ability to drink impressive amounts of alcohol, jump incredibly high, and heal quickly from self-inflicted wounds when possessed.²

In these narratives and festivals, stretching across large swathes of the Tibetan Plateau, humans share a world not only with animals and other humans, but also with a host of beings including ghosts *the'u rang*, *btsan*, *gzhi bdag* 'mountain deities', *srung ma* 'protective deities', *thab lha* 'hearth deities', *klu* 'naga', and a host of other supernatural entities. Some humans, moreover, have a greater ability to interact with the spirit world. This includes witches, *bla ma*, and *sngags pa* 'tantric practitioners'. Many of these are well-documented in the Western Tibetological literature, but Tibetan witches, remain less-commonly studied.

Beyond the various sometimes-malevolent spirits surrounding them, Tibetans must also navigate a host of other phenomenological forces in their daily lives. These interweaving and

² For more on *klu rol*, see Snying bo rgyal and Rino (2009). A medium is often judged to be truly in trance - or not - judging by his actions and capacities.

interacting forces, which Da Col calls "economies of fortune" (2007) and, later, "cosmoeconomics" (2012) include *rten 'brel* 'omens' or 'dependent origination', *bsod nams* 'merit', *dge ba* 'virtue', *rlung rta* 'luck', and others (see also Clarke 1990, Sam mtsho skyid and Roche 2011, and Thurston 2012). Supernatural and human agents may all affect a person's bodily and cosmic fortunes.

For Da Col, researching Tibetan communities in Yunnan Province's Bde chen area,

the close association that Tibetan makes between hospitality and witchcraft highlights the critical role that non-human—or part-human—hosts and guests play in Tibetan sociocosmologies (da Col 2012:S177).

While Da Col focuses specifically on poisoners, a class distinct from witches, it is worth noting that both groups operate in the realm of fortune. Poisoners, for example, "aim not to murder but to affect one's vitality and 'field of fortune'" (Da Col 2012:S178). Meanwhile, one may pray to a mountain deity for *rlung rta* 'luck', and seek to accrue merit through virtuous action or praying to a *bla ma*. Whether it is the poisoner in Bde chen, or the witch in Mgo log, the interconnectedness, mutual influence, and indistinct divisions of the natural and the supernatural, and of sentient beings and fortune must be recognized for the reader to fully enter the phenomenological world on which this book is predicated.

In The People's Republic of China, stories such as those related here and below are frequently labeled *mixin* 'superstitions'.³ In the Maoist period and shortly thereafter, people would have appended (and sometimes still do append) the derogatory term *fengjian* 'feudal' to this, and those holding such beliefs might have been persecuted. Expressing belief in the existence of these fields and beings, and folk worship of these deities is generally tolerated, but such beliefs will not be taught in university classrooms. Even those folk beliefs not linked to *xiejiao* 'evil cults' are likely to cause students to laugh embarrassedly when speaking of them in classrooms. They may hedge or point out that these are just superstitions, thereby indexing their own modernity, distance from superstition, and recognition of the "backwardness" (Ch: *luohou*) of such things. Nonetheless, economies of fortune and belief in numina persist in

³ Anagnost (1987:43) distinguishes three types of *mixin* in modern China: *zongjiao mixin* 'religious superstition', which relates primarily to religions like Buddhism; *yiban mixin* 'normal superstitions' used to refer to individual practices like ancestor worship; and *fengjian mixin* 'feudal superstition', a catch-all category into which the stories of this volume fall.

narratives whispered outside classrooms and in dormitories. They are reality for many.

Leave your pre-conceptions about this mundane world behind as you read this book. Pema Kyi provides excellent entrée to the supernatural world, but readers must avoid the assumption that only the "natural" world is "real." Instead, things we might normally consider "supernatural" are also, in a Tibetan worldview, part of the real world. Enter this worldview and encounter myriad classes of beings of which only some, e.g., witches and gods, fit loosely into more commonly recognized Western forms. In this world inhabited by humans, animals, and a multitude of supernatural beings, your soul can you leave you at any time and you can be possessed by deities.

Witches are real.

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August 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Pema Kyi's (PK) extraordinary narrative of her Tibetan childhood in the 1980s-1990s includes dreams, experiences, and imaginings beyond what she terms the "real world." These representations of the "hidden realms" are interposed and mingled with autobiographical content.

One of nine children, PK was born in 1981 in a black yak-hair tent in Pema County, Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Golok is larger than the Republic of Ireland. Pema County, with an average elevation of 4,200 meters above sea level, borders Sichuan Province, and is one of six counties in the autonomous prefecture. Ninety-five percent of Pema County's population (19,000) is Tibetan.⁴

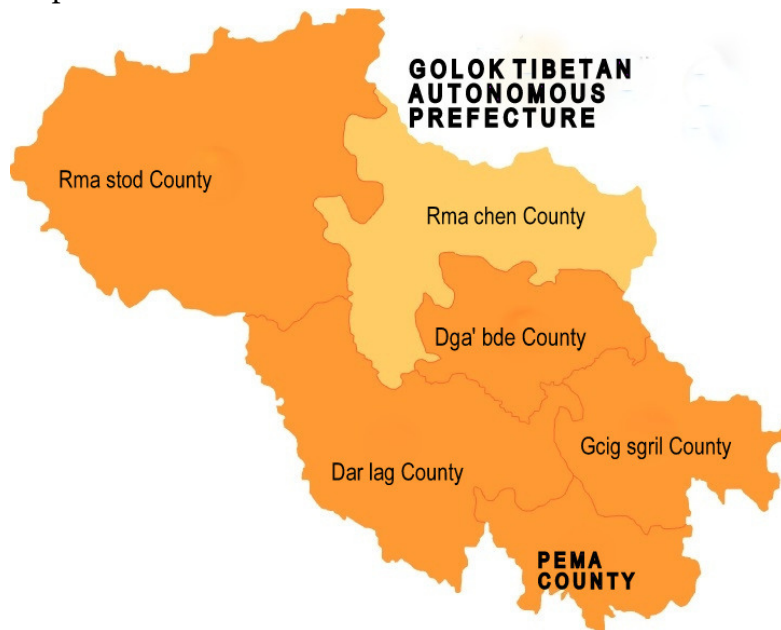
Map 1. Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province.⁵



⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/luzp3ps>, accessed 22 February 2015.

⁵ This is an altered version of "File:Qinghai in China (+all claims hatched).svg" by TUBS - Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported via <http://tinyurl.com/lns3nz2>, accessed 22 March 2015.

Map 2. Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.⁶



After early education in Pema County, PK studied in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, earning degrees from two different provincial level universities. She was later awarded an MA degree in English as a Second Language (ESL) in the School of International Training located in Vermont, USA. In 2015, she taught English to Tibetan children in a public school in Pema County.

During her early childhood, PK lived with her parents in the family tent on the grassland in Qinghai Province. She became very ill and was expected to die until "my life was saved by a gift of a mysterious pill from a kind, local woman people regarded as a witch." It was only because "[I] was so weak that I couldn't even turn over or cry" that her parents gave her the pill that the feared "witch" had left in their tent. As Wangmo (the witch) promised, the pill's miraculous power had PK on the road to recovery by the next morning.

What was Wangmo's interest in PK? It is not until much later in the narrative that we learn the answer: PK was Wangmo's mother and teacher in their previous lives.

⁶ This is an altered version of "Golog mcp" by Maggern87 - Own work. Licensed under CCO via Wikimedia Commons - <http://tinyurl.com/mlz9zjb>, accessed 22 February 2015.

Chapter Two 'Dreaming', recounts an out-of-body experience. The "I" is PK, now in the form of a fawn who enjoys lovely Nature with her doe mother until a hunter (her father) shoots and kills her. PK's consciousness shifts again as she observes her father skinning the fawn, cutting the flesh into pieces, and packing the meat into a bag. Her father makes his way to a cave, enters, and prostrates to a hermit wearing a red robe, "sitting cross-legged and chanting scriptures." After offering the hermit a bit of the fawn's flesh, the father leaves the cave.

The hermit is aware of PK's presence and commands her to follow her father, who makes his way back to the family tent where the fawn's flesh is cooked and eaten by the family, *sans* PK. PK later comes to consciousness while experiencing the sensation of "falling into a deep, dark, endless hole." She screams, wakes more fully, and is comforted by her mother, who tells her that her brother "found you next to a tree and carried you home."

Five years pass and we learn that PK now has three younger brothers. In an extended biographical sketch, we are introduced to the yak herders' daily life: PK's older sister rises early and helps the mother milk the yaks, other children get up, water is fetched, breakfast is eaten, and various duties are assigned to the children. We also learn that the father is a barefoot doctor treating both humans and livestock, sews well, and is a hunter.

When PK expresses a desire to learn how to hunt, her mother reminds her, "That is men's responsibility. Your brothers will do it soon." This is one of many examples detailing responsibilities and duties that are gender specific.

A vivid description of moving camp involves putting

the four youngest children on the back of a yak. Two of us were in one basket on each side. Covering us with a blanket to shade us from the sun they then herded all the yaks together.

During the trek to the new campsite, a rope holding the baskets to the yak slips as the yak wades across a river. Fortunately, the loyal yak stands still until the parents arrive to secure the baskets.

Wangmo appears again some years later when she visits the family tent to claim the girl whose life she saved. PK is very reluctant to leave her family, which angers Wangmo. At the prodding of her

mother, PK placates Wangmo by calling her "Mother" and thus is spared separation from her parents and siblings.

Our first detailed account of the "other realms" occurs in Chapter Five. A woman from the general neighborhood, Dadron, visits the family and, as she leaves, touches PK's head, leaving a sinister, barley-flour mark. Within a few hours, PK is suffering from a headache and then her entire body is bursting with pain. Putting her on a horse, her father goes on a health-seeking quest. En route, they stop at Lhamo Drolma's tent for lunch. PK looks at this woman and notices "a face through the dense mass of her hair. A pair of eyes was gleaming at us. That face was smiling with confidence as if she has just fulfilled something that made her proud."

PK immediately feels ill. Her father takes her outside the tent where she vomits, which provides a convenient excuse for the pair to immediately continue on their way. They eventually reach a cave "where a very thin lama dressed in white clothing was meditating and fingering a *mala*. His hair was so long that it brushed his thighs." PK's father prostrates three times and then takes out a white scarf from his robe and offers it to the lama as a token of respect.

The lama communicates that he is aware the family had a visitor (Dadron) who "marked her [PK's] head" with barley flour because she "is wanted for tonight. I can't save her. There is only one person who can help you, but I'm not sure if she will." Then holding the rein's of his visitors' horse the lama leads them, in the twinkling of an eye, to "Dartse Mountain where you will find an old woman. Show her the *mala* and tell her that I am asking a favor. If she takes the *mala*, do exactly what she says."

Father and daughter climb up the mountain and meet Madam Drakar, who agrees to help. She orders the father off the mountain until the next morning. The reader is then witness to a grand gathering of witches who "arrived on leather bags, brooms, sticks, staves, buckets, rugs, blankets, sheepskins, calfskins, dogs, wolves, wood-horses, and even stoves." The witches eat, drink, dance, sing, and entertain themselves on the occasion of their one hundredth anniversary. True to her word, Madam Drakar ensures that PK will never again be harmed by witches, the witch convocation ends, PK's father returns the next morning as promised, and they safely return to the family tent.

Chapters Six to Seventeen feature PK operating in the "real" world, struggling for a chance to attend school, her life at school, and her mother's deserting the family for a co-worker, who is also married with children. PK excels at school, but is distraught at her mother's departure, which results in bloody conflict between her father and her mother's new companion. This conflict is finally resolved, years later, through traditional mediation. These chapters also describe how older and stronger girls bully younger, weaker girls in their shared dormitory room, leading PK to conclude "'Evil made these three girls find ways of torturing us to entertain themselves.' Their awful brutality was inhuman."

This theme of violence against the weak also figures in punishment at school with a vivid account of the female principal punishing PK when she is caught smoking with other girls:

She reached under the table and picked up a flexible, thin thorny stick and proceeded to beat every part of my body except my head. It was so painful that I gritted my teeth. My hands were bleeding. There was no sign that the beating would stop. No longer able to bear the pain and humiliation, I cried out and dodged her stick. The door was closed. I ran below the stage and tried to hide behind other students. She dragged me back to the stage and continued beating me. I desperately struggled and begged her to stop, holding both my thumbs up in supplication.

School is also a site for the "other realms" PK mentions in her preface. Chapter Sixteen describes PK's friendship with a student she meets at night in a classroom to do homework. This friendship seems mundane until PK learns her study-friend has been dead for three years. This episode is an excellent example of how the other realms and their inhabitants are seamlessly interwoven with commonplace happenings and PK's ordinary life.

The remainder of the book follows the pattern seen above - the routine sandwiched between adventures in "other realms."

What are we to make of this narrative? It is not the first account of a Tibetan woman describing her childhood. Doomtso (2011), Kleisath (2008), Norbu and Stuart (2013), Li (2014), Nangchukja (2015), Tshes bcu lha mo (2014), and Wenchangjia and CK Stuart (2014), for example, are recent publications providing detail about girlhoods and being a woman in Tibetan areas in China, but these other works do not explore the "other realms."

I asked PK some questions through email in late February 2015. Her answers are revealing:

CKS: Where did you get the idea for Wangmo? What is the relationship between yourself (the fictional 'I' in the story) and Wangmo?

PK: Wangmo comes from an aunt who saved me with a single magic pill in this life. Local people think of her as a witch. Later on, I imagined her as my former life's older daughter who protected my magic and me in this life. That is why she wanted to be my mother in this life.

CKS: Where did the idea come from for the witch meeting on top of the mountain?

PK: For several nights in a row, I saw a light-blue fire flitting from place to place. My family members told me that it was evil fire. During the day, we could find no trace of the fire that we were seeing at night. In my imagination, Madam Drakar was Queen of the Witches who convened the witch meeting and later saved my life since I was the chosen offering at this same gathering.

CKS: Were the young men you meet in the other realms based on people you really know? Your imagination? People you heard about?

PK: Namgyal, the masked man from another realm, is based on a real life love story I heard involving a girl my age. The fireball horseman, Zan, who wanted to marry me, was based on what happened to a niece who vanished for three days when she was about three years old. We searched everywhere for her and then found her walking back home from a forested mountain on the third day. A lama told us a *zan* had taken her. I also heard from others that Zan took beautiful young women to his world to marry and young men to serve him. Consequently, sleeping on the mountains is taboo.

CKS: Do deities die? If they do, please explain how and why.

PK: Deities in Heaven live a very long time but they also have a lifespan and it eventually expires. They enjoy their time alive. However, when death seizes them, they become very foul-smelling. Other deities are unable to bear this and take them to an isolated place and leave them alone. Their death is a long, torturous experience. They suffer from hunger and loneliness as their body decays. Their spirit is unable to leave their body until the last bit of their body dissipates into thin air after rotting. Deities attain Nirvana or go to Hell based on their deeds while alive. If they did

many good deeds, they attain Nirvana. On the other hand, if they did many bad things, they go directly to Hell.

CKS: Wangmo marries a lama. Do lamas marry?

PK: Some incarnation lamas are *terdon* 'treasure revealers'. These treasures are hidden objects that help the lamas locate hidden treasure texts. *Terdon* marry. Their mates are key in finding the hidden treasures. They might not directly locate the hidden treasures, but their presence gives the *terdon* the power to find it. *Terdon* commonly marry a woman who has spiritual power, the power of a dakini, or the power of a witch. In this story, Wangmo had a witch's power, which is why the lama wished to marry her.

To paraphrase Erhard (2007), Pema Kyi's narrative is based on pre-modern systems of belief, local folktelling, and oral traditions in direct opposition to the concepts central to modernity. Well-educated in China and the USA, and deeply rooted in traditional Tibetan culture, Pema Kyi's account is a statement of how the modern and pre-modern converge and operate in a single individual, inspiring them to create and present a compelling story that deserves to be read immediately, as well as by future generations of young Tibetans to better comprehend their past.

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August 2015

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I was born in 1981 in Panyak, Moba Township, Pema County, Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China. I grew up in a big herding family with eight siblings, in a black yak-hair tent. We spent our childhood playing with lambs, colts, and yak calves and when we went to bed, we told stories about King Gesar, ghosts, marriage, tricksters, daily life... all kinds of things. The time before we drifted off to sleep was to relax and share.

I also have had an extraordinary life with my dreams and experiences defying the rules of the "real" world.

This narrative begins with how my life was saved by a gift of a mysterious pill from a kind, local woman people regarded as a witch. These and other magic moments are from my own experiences, what relatives and others told me about their own lives, and what I have dreamed and imagined. This text illustrates how a Tibetan woman of my age and background is influenced by those around her, the natural environment, and dreams. The accounts in this book are based on situations and beliefs that are integral parts of Tibetan culture that are being forgotten and, therefore, worth writing about. It is particularly meaningful to have a record of local culture and of a life lived from a Tibetan woman's perspective, which this book embodies.

I am eager to share these stories, because they are largely untold. Part of the reason for this silence is that they are, to some extent, shameful and personal. Stories about witches are generally not shared outside a circle of extremely close friends and even then, they are talked about for only a short time. Most people dare not talk about such stories for fear that evil spirits will possess them.

Local people in my home area use various terms to describe the entities that dwell in hidden realms such as witches, werewolves, demons, ghosts, devils, imps, and mountain spirits. These terms, both in English and Tibetan, have meanings that vary from person to person and area to area. The terms I use here are not intended to be true for all Tibetan areas, or even all of the area where I grew up.

Evil entities are believed to do bad things at night. Locals worry that they will be possessed by evil spirits if they upset them.

Simultaneously, locals believe that delighting evil spirits lures them to their home where illness or death may follow. Encountering evil spirits is to be avoided at all costs.

Each of us is born with a unique body spirit that protects our soul. If the body spirit weakens, evil spirits easily possess the body and then manipulate it to do evil. But there is also a chance that the possessed and spirit-manipulated body may do good things to comply with a lama's order and also, such a body may do good things for those they love and care about.

My early knowledge of the realms of ghosts, demons, and mountain spirits was through sharing ghost and witch stories with my siblings. We enjoyed these stories and sharing them made us feel courageous.

While writing, I used my imagination liberally. The result is a story that is not true in a literal sense but *could* be true in the sense that it depicts nothing that is beyond what I have heard and experienced in my Tibetan home. It may thus be considered culturally and historically accurate fiction and will help readers better understand Tibetan nomad life in the 1980's and also illuminate a segment of culture related to the internal world of Tibetan women that is often given too little attention.

REBORN

I was called Little Girl until I was eight years old.

I was born into a big Tibetan nomad family. I have eight siblings, seven brothers and one sister. Zangpo, Losang, Druksang, and Tsering are my older brothers. Sermotso is my older sister. Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi are my younger brothers. I am the sixth child of my family.

After I suddenly fell ill when I was about a year old, Father took me to nearby doctors, but none of their treatments helped. Father also visited monasteries and asked lamas and monks to chant scriptures. He thought this would make me well. However, my condition steadily worsened until I was so weak that I couldn't even turn over or cry. My parents could do nothing except hope for a miracle.

I woke up at noon one day and found myself in bed. I didn't remember how long I had been sick and in bed. But this didn't worry me. I was used to it. I saw a little white circle on my right hand. I moved my hand. The little circle moved, too. It was a sunray shining through the black yak-hair tent. I wondered, "When can I run outside in the sun? When can I run in a warm rain?"

I noticed my family members in the tent. Sister was busy making butter. Mother was putting yak dung in the stove to keep the fire hot. The tent was full of smoke from the fire. Father sat cross-legged on a rug by the stove, counting his *mala* 'string of prayer beads' with his left hand. A bowl of milk tea was in front of him. None of my older brothers were in the tent. I guessed they were playing outside. I thought, "What are they playing? Where, exactly, are they playing?" Then I heard our dog barking. It was angry. I heard the dog's chain rattling.

Father said, "Go out and see why the dog is barking."

"OK," Mother replied and stepped outside.

"Nyimo is coming," Mother whispered softly, but it was loud enough for us to hear.

It was not until a few years later that I learned Nyimo was Wangmo's nickname. Few dared to call her real name in fear she would hunt them down at night.

Father stood and went outside.

Sister moved close to me and reassured, "Don't worry Little Sister, I won't let anything bad happen to you."

I didn't understand what she meant. Her little face was very serious.

"Is all well with you?" my parents greeted.

"I'm well," a woman answered. "I was told that one of your daughters has been sick for a long time. I have the best medicine in the world for her."

"It's so troublesome for you. Thank you very much!" Father replied.

"Thank you!" Mother added.

"Come in, please. Have a bowl of tea," invited Father.

"No, not now. I must go back home. Here, give this pill to her. I'm sure it will make her well," the woman said.

"Thank you," said Mother. "Please come in. Stay for a bit."

"No, I really must go," the woman repeated. "I'll visit you later. May you have long lives."

"Long life to you," my parents chorused.

"Good, she's leaving. She won't hurt you," Sister whispered.

The dog stopped barking. A few minutes later, my parents entered the tent with strange faces. I didn't understand why. Father sat quietly near the stove. Mother stood by the stove and studied something in her hand.

Mother wondered, "Should we give it to her?"

Father said, "Yes," and then resumed chanting and counting his *mala*.

Mother cautioned, "But she is a witch. We even don't dare call her real name to protect ourselves. What if the pill doesn't save her? Maybe the pill will kill her." A few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Do you want our daughter to die?" exclaimed Father.

"No! I will try anything to save her. I really hope this will make her well," Mother replied.

Mother picked up a cup and poured in a little hot water. She added the pill, crushed it with a spoon, and mixed it in.

Sitting down next to me Mother explained, "Darling, here is some medicine. You will surely get well after you take it, OK?" She took me in her arms, put me on her lap, and held me with her left arm. She picked up the cup with her right hand, put her mouth to the cup, and put some of the liquid in her mouth. She held my mouth open with her right hand and spit the medicine in her mouth into my mouth. I could only swallow it. I was very tired after Mother made me take the medicine.

"Good girl. I know you're tired. Sleep. When you wake up, you will be reborn." Mother said, gently put me back in bed, and covered me with lambskin.

Sister looked at me curiously. "Mother, will Little Sister really be reborn after she sleeps?" she asked.

"Hush. Yes, she will be better," assured Mother.

As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered, "What does that mysterious woman look like?"

I woke up and heard my family members talking. My brother, Tsering, was jumping around my bed. I opened my eyes. Tsering exclaimed, "Mother, Little Sister is awake." Then he sat down and asked, "How are you feeling Little Sister?"

Sister came quickly to my bed and also asked, "Little Sister, are you reborn?"

I smiled. I was totally free from pain.

"Mother! She's smiling!" Sister shouted.

"Speak quietly. Don't scare her," Mother cautioned, and then took me out of bed. "Little One, are you feeling better?" Mother whispered. "Yes, you are. You look stronger now."

I smiled again. I started eating. I began speaking. Three days later, I was lying outside in the sunshine with Sister. She put me on her back and walked around our tent. Soon, I could walk with no one helping me. My siblings were free from worry. They took special care of me and kept an eye on me all the time. However, my parents worried. "Why did mysterious Nyimo give this miracle gift?"

DREAMING

I dreamed I was running on the mountains beside a big, gentle doe. She protected me from predators day and night and shielded me from thunderstorms and sunshine. She tenderly licked me, cleaning my soft, smooth fur. I had no desires or thoughts other than eating, drinking, and following her. I went with her everywhere. It was a peaceful, beautiful place colorfully decorated with all sorts of blossoming flowers. I closed my eyes and inhaled the fresh air that smelled of fresh grass and the flowers. This odor made me feel relaxed and calm. I lifted my head high in the air as a soft breeze caressed my face.

Suddenly, a thundering sound broke this peacefulness and I lost consciousness.

When I regained consciousness, my body felt as light as a feather. I saw myself lying on the ground. Father was wearing a white shirt, gray robe, white hat, and boots. A rifle was next to him. He was operating on me with a sharp knife. I felt no pain. His hands were red with blood. He separated my skin from my body. He cut me into pieces, and packed my flesh and skin into a bag. He put the bag on his shoulders and left. He stopped next to a stream and washed his hands.

Not knowing where to go, I followed him. He stopped again, near a cave. Putting down the bag, he took out a chunk of flesh, and carried it inside the cave. I followed him and saw a man in a red robe sitting cross-legged and chanting scriptures. Father prostrated three times and placed the flesh in front of him.

"Hermit, please accept this bit of food," Father beseeched. "I hunted it today. Please pray for this poor little deer."

After being thanked for the food Father left the cave. I stayed, wondering what the man would do with the flesh.

The man looked at me, chanted more scriptures, and said, "There is nothing here for you. Go! Follow that man. He is a good man and will treat you well."

I left the cave and followed Father. He walked over several mountains finally reaching a black tent in a valley. Light blue smoke wafted out from the tent hole. Mother, Sister, and my older brothers welcomed him. They cooked my flesh and ate it for dinner.

Darkness came. I felt dizzy. After a while, I felt I was falling into a deep, dark, endless hole. I screamed. I woke up. Mother was holding me in her arms. Sister was looking at me with big eyes. I was drenched in sweat.

"It's fine, it was just a dream," comforted Mother.

"Did I follow Father home from his hunting trip?" I asked.

"No, Losang found you next to a tree and carried you home," Mother replied.

I felt very relieved because I then knew they had not eaten my flesh.

My family's tent (July 2012, Pema County, Golok).⁷



⁷ All photographs in the text of this book were taken by Pema Kyi.

3

A POOR BUT HAPPY FAMILY

Five years later, I shared my bed with Sister. Mother had given birth to my three younger brothers and was busy taking care of them and doing family chores. Sister became her chief assistant.

A new day began. Mother called Sister's name again and again, "Sermotso! Sermotso! Sermotso!" She is the third child and my only sister. My parents and older siblings call her Sermotso while my younger siblings call her Sister.

"Sermotso! Get up!" Mother called.

I woke up when Sister answered, "OK."

She got up very quietly so as not to disturb me. When she saw my eyes were open she murmured, "Stay in bed. I'll be back right after Mother finishes milking the yaks."

I nodded gratefully and stayed in bed.

Mother and Sister went out to milk. I heard the sound of milking. Mother chanted scriptures while milking. She only stopped chanting to say, "Sermotso, next yak." This was done again and again until the sun rose.

The only thing I heard from Sister was, "OK."

"Sermotso, go wake Zangpo. Tell him to graze the yaks," Mother said.

Zangpo is my oldest brother. We all admire and look up to him.

"OK," Sister said and ran into the tent. Sitting down next to where Oldest Brother was sleeping she said, "Older Brother, Zangpo! Mother said you must get up and graze the yaks."

She repeated this until Zangpo replied, "OK." Then she returned to help Mother.

A few minutes later, Mother said, "Sermotso, go inside and make tea."

Sister hurried inside, took a kettle, and hurried out to get water. When she came back, she put the kettle on the stove and made

a fire with a bit of wood and yak dung. Then she came and lay down next to me saying sweetly, "I'm back, Little Sister."

I felt the cold air that came with her.

"Are you still awake?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied with a smile. I held her cold hands to warm them with my hands and belly. "Do you want to come inside?" I said, lifting my robe to welcome her inside.

Before she got the chance to accept my offer, Mother entered the tent with a bucket full of fresh milk. "Sermotso, go herd the calves. Make sure they stay away from their mothers," she said.

"OK," Sister replied, looked at me, and whispered, "I'll be right back." She got up and left the tent. After a minute or so I heard her whistling while herding the calves. Meanwhile, Mother poured milk in a pot and put it on the stove next to the teapot. She added more yak dung to the fire. "Everybody get up," she called and then helped my younger brothers get dressed.

When Zangpo and Sister returned, Sister offered, "Little Sister, I'll help you get dressed," and helped me tie my sash tight. "Sit down," she said and helped me pull on my leather boots. I liked my gray leather boots. The sharp nose of my boots always looked up at me. On rainy days I walked around barefoot because I didn't want my boots to get wet. When Sister finished dressing me, I saw that Father was already sitting in his usual place. Mother was ready with a breakfast of *tsampa* and milk tea. We each had a bowl. In each bowl, Mother put a chunk of butter, a spoonful of *tsampa*, and a bit of dried cheese on top.

Mother said, "Tea is ready." Father stood up, chanted an offering mantra, and tossed three offerings of tea into the open area of the tent above the stove.

"Time for breakfast. Boys, sit next to your father," Mother commanded and began pouring milk tea into bowls.

"Come, Little Sister," said Sister warmly. We walked hand in hand to Mother. Sister put me on a little white rug and then she sat next to me. Mother handed each of us our bowl after adding milk tea. We had breakfast quietly.

Soon after breakfast Mother said, "Sermotso, churn the milk."

"OK," Sister said.

"Losang and Druksang, herd the yaks. Make sure you don't lose any of them. Tsering, graze the calves. Little Girl, Karwa, and Rizen, collect yak dung."

We all started off as Mother began making butter.

Father started sewing a robe for Druksang. He put a piece of cloth on the rug and made white lines on it with a thread and ash from the stove. Making a robe often took a week. He worked on this robe for several days before it was finished. When he was done, he asked Druksang to try it on and made a few minor changes so it fit him better.

Father was a barefoot doctor. He was often away with his medical kit for one or two weeks at a time. Mother once told me, "Your father is a doctor who treats both people and sick livestock."

I said, "Wow! I want to help him treat livestock. I also want to learn how to shoot with him."

Mother said, "No, darling. That skill is not useful for you."

I asked, "Why not, Mother? Don't we survive because Father hunts?"

Mother continued, "Women don't hunt. I learned to shoot from your father, but wolves are not afraid of me even if I shoot at them."

"Did you kill any of them?" I asked.

"No, I was just trying to scare them," Mother said.

"I want to learn how to hunt. I want to help Father get more food for us. I can also go with Father on his hunting trips," I insisted.

"That is men's responsibility. Your brothers will do it soon," Mother said.

Father often brought sticky, very chewable resin he collected from juniper and redwood trees. The color and taste were different. I liked both. Each time Father went on a hunting trip, I waited for him to return with some resin. He understood this and never forgot to bring some.

Before Father left for a visit to the county seat, I asked Mother, "Will they get chewing gum for us?"

"Oh, yes," Mother said.

"Will my brothers help Father go to the county seat and buy food for us?" I asked.

Mother patiently replied, "Yes, my little one. They will buy barley flour, wheat flour, rice, cabbage, potatoes, candy, and clothing. What you need to do is help your sister with family chores."

I wanted to be helpful and tried my best to help Sister. Each morning, I got up when Sister woke Zangpo. I fetched water, made a fire with yak dung, prepared tea for breakfast, and swept the tent floor. Sometimes I grazed yaks with Sister and helped her separate the yak hair we had collected - the soft undercoat (*kulu*) from the coarser hair.

When summer was over, we moved from our summer camp to our autumn camp. Moving was very exciting. We took down the tent and slept that night under the stars. Early the next morning, my parents packed all our things and strapped them on the back of our yaks. Because we didn't have enough horses, my parents put the four youngest children on the back of a yak. Two of us were in one basket on each side. Covering us with a blanket to shade us from the sun they then herded all the yaks together. Our dog followed quietly. He understood that the road belonged to everyone and didn't bark when he saw strangers.

The yak we were on knew he was responsible for four lives and kept a safe distance from the other yaks. He plodded along at a steady pace. We sang, told stories, and played riddles. We listened to the sound of the yak's steps and guessed where it was walking:

"It's walking on the grassland."

"It's walking on rocks."

"It's crossing the river!"

"Let's count how many times we cross the river."

"Quiet! The yak is crossing the river for the fourth time."

Suddenly we heard a sound of something breaking. The yak stopped.

"Why did he stop?" Rizen asked.

I said, "Don't move. We might fall. It sounds like we are in the middle of a river."

We heard Mother praying loudly.

Father shouted, "Hurry! Hold it up."

I felt our basket lifted up.

"What happened Mother?" Karwa asked.

"The rope broke, but you are all fine now. Don't worry." Mother explained

Father addressed the yak, "Thank you! It's good you stopped, or the children would have fallen into the river."

"Did the yak know we would fall?" asked Chogyi

"Yes, he wanted to protect you. We will all get to our new camp safely," replied Father.

The yak resumed his steady gait. Karwa started to tell us a story, "Long, long ago...." We all fell asleep without knowing when.

"Wake up, little ones," Mother called. "We have arrived."

I opened my eyes and realized the blanket above us was gone.

"Give me your hand," Mother said, and held out her arms to me. She put me on the ground. My feet were numb and I couldn't stand.

"Mother, I can't stand," I said.

"Me, too," chorused my younger brothers.

"Sermotso, show them how to rub their feet," Mother said.

Sister showed us how to rub our feet and soon we could all stand comfortably. I thought Sister knew everything.

I looked around and realized we were the first things my parents had unpacked. The sun was setting. Zangpo was collecting wood for a fire and my other brothers were keeping the yaks together in one place. My parents were unpacking our things from the yaks.

"Sermotso, go get some water if you are done," Mother said as she unpacked.

After my parents pitched the tent, we put everything inside.

Father brought three stones and put them in the middle of the tent in a triangle. Mother placed some wood between the stones, made a fire, and put a kettle of water on top of the stones. We all sat in a circle around the fire and had dinner as usual. Before going to bed we gave some salt to the yak that had carried us, as a special reward.

Autumn lasts for one month. Leaves and grass turn yellow, orange, and then gray. It is a time of great beauty, and also a time that reminds me that change is constant. Light snow falls. The world becomes even more beautiful. I helped Mother and Sister separate *kulu* from the coarser yak hair. My brothers grazed our yaks.

When snow came, we knew it was winter and moved to our winter camp. Winter was long. It started in early-October and lasted until late April. In early winter, Mother was busy spinning yak hair.

She asked us to help her in turns with the spinning machine and taught Sister how to spin.

One mid-winter day, my younger brothers, Zangpo and Tsering, were grazing our yaks and Losang and Druksang were grazing horses. Meanwhile, I was collecting wild yams with Sister. Suddenly, a strong whirlwind pushed me. "Sister!" I called out.

"Sit down," Sister yelled back. "Cover your face with your hands."

The wind stopped after about a minute. "Sister... Sis..t..e..r..." I heard from far away.

"Who's missing?" Sister asked.

"Not me!" I answered.

"Quiet!" Sister said. "Listen."

We all walked to the source of the pleas for help. When we reached the top of a little cliff, we found Rizen hanging upside down. He was afraid and calling to Sister to help him.

"Don't move!" Sister ordered.

Rizen calmed down when he knew Sister was there. She went around the cliff and helped him get down safely. "He's safe now!" I shouted. We were jumping and running. We were very excited and happy that Rizen was uninjured.

When my older brothers returned from grazing our yaks and horses we excitedly told them the story.

Druksang said, "Sister is a hero. To celebrate, we should collect some delicious wild food."

"Yes!" everyone agreed.

"What food?" I asked eagerly.

"Come and you will know," he said mysteriously.

We followed him to the next valley. We were very curious. "Dig this one," Druksang said, pointing. "And this one and this one." After digging some he announced, "Now we have enough for all of us to share."

"Come sit," Druksang directed. "First we must peel off the skin. Then we can eat it."

A white thing emerged after we removed the brown skin. He gave a piece to each of us and we ate it.

"This is very odd," Druksang said, "It was sweet when I had it last time. But today it is quite spicy. We mustn't tell our parents we came here and ate this."

"Sure," we all agreed and began walking back home. I scratched my tongue with my fingers because my tongue was very hot.

"What are you doing?" Mother asked when she saw me scratching my tongue. "What did you eat?"

Everybody quietly looked at me. I lowered my head and glanced at my siblings. I didn't know what to say. Mother looked at them too. Then she said, "Tell me! What did you eat?"

"The thing Druksang gave me," I said nervously not knowing what it was. "It was very spicy."

"What was it?" Mother asked Druksang.

"Thorn roots. They were supposed to be sweet, not hot," Druksang said.

"Bring some to me," Mother said.

Druksang left and came back with the skin and leaves of the plant we had eaten. Mother was shocked and said, "This isn't edible. Who else ate it?"

"All of us," Druksang confessed.

"Everyone line up," Mother said. She picked up the bowls, rushed to the yogurt pot, poured yogurt into all the bowls, and handed one to each of us. "Finish it all," she said and looked at us nervously.

We all ate the yogurt quietly. The cold yogurt soothed my burning tongue. I soon finished my portion and felt a strong pain in my stomach. I vomited. Mother helped me. I felt exhausted. "Sleep for a while. You will be fine when you wake up," Mother assured and put me in bed.

"OK," I said and dozed off while thinking, "I will be reborn."

When I woke up I saw all of my siblings sleeping in bed. "We all are reborn together this time. This will make Mother very happy," I thought.

SHE'S MINE!

One cold, snowy winter day, I went with Sister to fetch water from the next valley. When we returned to the tent, a woman sitting by Father looked at us with a bright smile.

"She's so pretty!" exclaimed the woman.

I didn't know whom she was talking about. She held out her hands to me. "Come here," she beckoned. "Your parents gave you to me. I will be very, very nice to you."

Sister held my left arm and put me behind her to protect me. "No!" she protested. "She is mine! Mother gave her to me a long time ago."

"It was a joke," Mother comforted.

"I won't let anyone take Little Sister away," Sister declared.

"Dear, Wangmo saved her," Mother said. "Remember? Little Sister was very ill. Wangmo saved her. Wangmo is her second mother. A mother has the right to take her child."

I then knew she was the mysterious woman Mother had called Nyimo five years earlier.

"No!" Sister cried. "If she has to take a child, she can take Big-Head Boy."

"No!" Karwa cried. "I'm not going with her."

I held Sister tightly with sweaty hands. My body was trembling. I was terrified and unable to speak.

"Well," Wangmo started, "you can come visit her anytime you want and stay with us as long as you want. I will also allow your sister to visit you wherever she wants. How about that?"

"No. She's not going with you. She's staying with me here," Sister insisted.

"She will grow up and leave you. Why not let her leave now?" Wangmo said.

"She's too young," protested Sister.

Father watched and listened, and then suggested, "We will listen to Little Girl. We will let her decide. Is that OK?"

Everyone looked at me. "You want to stay with us, right?" Sister asked.

"No, that is a leading question," Wangmo said.

"Do you want to go with her or stay with us?" Father asked.

"I want to stay here, please!" I implored, my eyes brimming with tears.

"She might not be able to stay with you. Sermotso is right, Little Girl is very young," Father said to Wangmo.

"If I had known this," the woman said angrily, "I would have taken her away when she was sick in bed."

"We are really sorry!" Father said. "We understand you."

"I have been waiting to have her for five years," Wangmo complained.

"We welcome you to visit her anytime you wish," Father said.

"That's not what I want. I want her to be my daughter," Wangmo said.

"You have been her mother since you gave her a second life," Father said reassuringly.

"Call her 'Mother'. She is your savior. She deserves it," Mother told me.

I looked at Sister. I believed she knew what I should do. Sister looked at me and nodded. I looked at Wangmo and said, "Mother." It was an awkward moment for me. I said "Mother," unwillingly. Then I saw a mother's love in that woman's eyes. Her anger was transformed to happiness and excitement the moment she heard the word "mother." I was grateful she had saved my life and felt sorry for not going with her.

She embraced me and, as tears flowed from her eyes, said, "Yes, I will grant my daughter's wish." I wiped away her tears with my hand. She held my right hand, kissed it, and said, "Stay with your family, my dear."

"Thank you, Mother!" I said and hugged her in appreciation.

Everyone was very happy. We had lunch together. She left with a bright smile of satisfaction. This was a great relief for my parents. "Now Little Girl is completely safe," said Father. "In order to show our appreciation we should now call Little Girl 'Wangmo's Daughter' as a nickname. This will also remind our family of her kind help. Little Girl should also call her 'Mother' from now on."

WANTED

A woman named Dadron visited my family early one morning and had *tsampa* at my home. When she was leaving, she touched my head heavily and said, "Such an adorable girl."

The *tsampa* on her hand left a mark on my head. Sister helped me wipe it away.

A few hours later I had a headache. My entire body was bursting with pain. Father put me on a horse and we started off to consult a famous lama. On the way, we stopped at Lhamo Drolma's tent for lunch. Lhamo Drolma invited us in, washed a bowl, and cleaned it with her sash. I guessed that she didn't have a towel. As she turned to put *tsampa* in the bowl, I saw a face through the dense mass of her hair. A pair of eyes gleamed at us. That face was smiling with confidence as if she had just fulfilled something that made her proud. She turned to us and handed Father a bowl of *tsampa*. I was too terrified to eat. I whispered to Father that I was about to vomit and he hurried me outside so I wouldn't puke in the tent.

"Father, let's go. I don't want us to eat anything," I mumbled.

"OK!" he agreed.

"We must leave immediately, since my daughter is becoming more seriously ill," Father said.

"Sure!" Lhamo Drolma said.

We resumed our journey and reached a cave a little before sunset. Father carried me inside where a very thin lama dressed in white clothing was meditating and fingering a *mala*. His hair was so long that it brushed his thighs. Father put me on the floor, prostrated three times, and then took out a white scarf from his robe pouch and offered it to the lama.

"My precious lama, please save my daughter," he said.

"Before she got sick, you had a guest who marked her head with *tsampa*," the lama said.

I wondered how he knew this.

"Yes, Dadron visited us before my daughter fell ill," Father replied. "She touched my daughter and left some *tsampa* on her head as she was leaving."

"Bad. Very bad. Your daughter is wanted for tonight. I can't save her. There is only one person who can help you, but I'm not sure if she will. However, it's worth a try," the lama said.

"We will do whatever you say," Father answered.

"Get on your horse," urged the lama.

Once on Father's horse, the lama took the reins and, in a few seconds, led us over several mountains and rivers. It was as fast as flipping pages in a book. He stopped at the bottom of a forested mountain. "This is Dartse Mountain," the lama said. "You must now go on by yourselves. I'll wait for you here. Take this *mala*. Go to the top of the mountain. You will find an old woman there. Show her the *mala* and tell her that I am asking a favor. If she takes the *mala*, do exactly what she says. If she refuses to take the *mala*, there is nothing to be done and you should come back here as fast as you can, or both you and your daughter will die there."

Father thanked him and put the *mala* around my neck. We began climbing up Dartse Mountain, reaching the top just after sunset. There was a wide-open area there surrounded by little rocky peaks. An old lady was walking, or maybe I should say she was flying, because her feet weren't touching the ground. She wore a black robe without a sash. Her long, snow-white hair covered the upper part of her body. She held a walking stick in her left hand.

Father took a deep breath, walked near her, and in an abnormal voice said, "Excuse me, Drakar Madam." He now sounded more like the lama we had met a few hours earlier.

I wondered, "What happened to Father's voice? Did he and the lama exchange voices?"

The woman turned and faced us. Her face, neck, and hands were deeply wrinkled and her colorless, dry lips were cracked. Her ebony eyes brimmed with anger. But under the old, black robes she wore beautiful, pure-white silk clothing.

Father turned to me. His face was strangely red and swollen. He took the *mala* from my neck, held it out to the woman, and announced, "I, Namdri Renpoche, the owner of this *mala*, am here to ask your help. Please save this girl."

The old woman made a slight bow, stepped forward, reached out, and took the *mala* with trembling hands that ended in rough, long, and sharp nails. She gently held the *mala* high in the air and muttered, "You are handing this matter to me?"

She looked at us and mumbled angrily, "Give her to me! Meanwhile, you! You get out of my territory immediately and don't come back until sunrise or you shall die. Do not look back."

"Yes, Madam Drakar," Father said and kissed my forehead. His lips and hands were burning, but not sweating. He handed me to Drakar, mounted his horse, and raced down to the mountain without looking back.

Drakar put me under her black robe with her left arm. It seemed I was as light as a sheet of paper. Her arms were full of strength, yet gentle. She reached up with her right hand, took a handful of vapor, put it near my mouth, and told me to eat it.

I wondered, "How can I eat a cloud?" Still, I opened my mouth, the vapor came inside, and I swallowed. The pain in my body immediately vanished. I felt light and comfortable. We reached a higher place in a second. I saw a huge stone but, but when she got next to it, it became a throne covered with tiger skin and decorated with colorful silk. She held the throne with her right hand and put me down under the throne.

"You're nothing more than ordinary," she whispered angrily. "You are just lucky."

She threw her black robe over the throne and sat, clad now in only pure white silk. I was paralyzed. I couldn't move, talk, or breathe but my thoughts, hearing, and eyesight were fine. She sent out a very strong whistle that broke the dark silence of the mountaintop. Instantly, a chill wind whooshed from every direction, rushing to the throne. A big fire blazed up in the center of that rocky mountain, brightening the darkness. That rock mountain was now a richly furnished palace with a dark blue ceiling painted with glimmering stars.

Madam Drakar broke into laughter that echoed and re-echoed. It was a clear, delightful, and powerful sound. This sound was very different from the trembling voice she had used when she talked to Father. Many women began arriving on leather bags, brooms, sticks, stairs, buckets, rugs, blankets, sheepskins, calfskins, dogs, wolves, wood-horses, and even stoves. There were a few

familiar faces among them, but I couldn't recall their names. Of the familiar faces, I could positively identify three. Dadron came riding a broom. She had visited me in the morning and marked me with *tsampa*. Lhamo Drolma was riding a leather bag. She had a smile on the back of her head. Wangmo, who had saved me with a miracle pill and who was my second mother, was also there, riding a carpet.

All the women made three U-shaped movements around the throne, bent slightly forward and, in one voice greeted "Holder of the Throne, Madam Drakar! Mighty Lady Drakar! Graceful Madam Drakar! Long live Madam Drakar!"

Without her black robe, Drakar had become very beautiful. I thought, "Maybe her appearance changes according to the clothes she wears."

"Ha! Sit!" commanded Drakar.

"Yes, Madam Drakar," all the women chorused.

They all sat. Wangmo sat near the throne. I think she knew I was there because she glanced my way from time to time. She seemed to be wondering why I was there but later on, she appeared to understand.

"I knew her parents weren't able to protect her from this," Wangmo mumbled to herself. Then a sign of relief passed over her face and she muttered, "Fortunately, she came to the right place in time."

"Today is the one hundredth year celebration of our lives," Drakar pronounced. "It is a time of joy and happiness. On such a special occasion you will all receive an additional ten years of life in our realm and one year in the human realm. You know this means you have another home. You will come here immediately after your human death and live a happy life. You may also choose to live in both realms with my help."

"Long life to Madam Drakar!" everyone said in one voice.

"Dadron and Lhamo Drolma, bring the food," said Drakar.

"Yes, Madam Drakar!" And with that, Dadron and Lhamo Drolma sped off on their carriers, like shooting stars into the sky.

They returned after a few minutes, bent low, and muttered, "Madam Drakar, we couldn't find the offering we prepared. We searched for her in every corner of the human world, but she was nowhere to be found."

"No excuses! Bring her to me!" Drakar demanded.

"Somehow, she came to our realm and hid under your throne," said Dadron.

"If she managed to get under my throne, she is mine," Drakar said. "What is the rule of our realm?"

"No one is allowed to take anything of yours unless you allow it," recited Dadron.

"She is mine from now on if she is under my throne," repeated Drakar. "I will permit her to return to the human realm tomorrow. No one is allowed to harm her during the remainder of her life. Understand?"

"Yes, Madam Drakar," the women chorused.

"Tonight, I offer you Dadron's and Lhamo Drolma's ages in this realm," Drakar pronounced.

"No! Please have mercy!" begged Dadron and Lhamo Drolma.

"Don't worry. You two will live well in the human realm," reassured Drakar. Then a pale blue light emanating from Drakar touched Dadron and Lhamo Drolma, who became light gray vapor and disintegrated. A bright ball appeared and broke into little bits of light that entered all the women, immediately empowering them. They were suddenly very joyful.

"Long life to Madam Drakar! Long life to Madam Drakar!" they all exclaimed again and again.

"Now it's time to celebrate!" exclaimed Drakar Madam.

The women stopped shouting, "Long live Madam Drakar!" as various sorts of music began to play and the women started dancing and singing. Stars shone in their sky-ceiling. Glowing, transparent food and drinks appeared on tables. The women were delighted with everything. Drakar Madam sat on her throne, drinking and eating. They swallowed once for each piece of food and each cup of drink. I thought they must be swallowing air as I had done when Drakar gave me something to eat.

Drakar finally announced, "The night is over. Go live a good human life."

"Yes, Madam Drakar," said all the women.

Everyone left in a twinkling, each on her own carrier. Drakar Madam got down from her throne, put on the black robe, lifted up her throne, and held out her hand. I scooted out from under the throne and, standing up, whispered "Thank your Madam Drakar."

"Sh!" Drakar Madam said putting her wrinkled finger next to her mouth. "Sleep here. Your father will come get you at sunrise. Tell no one what happened here during the night. Understand?"

"Yes, Madam Drakar," I replied, nodding.

I found myself lying on her throne. She moved her hand and I was covered with silk cloth. Turning, she flew off without a carrier. "She's the only woman who doesn't need a carrier," I thought and fell asleep.

"Wake up and get up behind me," Father said.

I woke up with the sun shining on me. Father was there on his horse, at the boundary of sun and shadow. His voice and face were the same as yesterday. I lifted my head and realized I was lying on a big rock, covered with grass. I stood up. He pulled me up behind him on the horse. He didn't say a word or ask me anything about what had happened. We went down the mountain, following the border of sunshine and shadow.

The lama was waiting for us at the bottom. When he held out his hand, Father handed him the reins. He led us back to his cave, tied the horse, and went inside. Father dismounted and followed him inside, where he was sitting cross-legged. Father and I prostrated three times to him, sat on the ground, and bowed our heads. The lama chanted scriptures and flicked holy water on our heads.

Father thanked him when he finished. As Father and I happily rode home, Father sang. From time to time he paused and checked on me. He told me not to fall asleep or I would fall off the horse.

A REQUEST

Time passed. I was seven years old.

Zangpo was learning to read Tibetan one sunny winter morning. He was outside in a nearby valley reading loudly. The rest of us were forbidden to approach him while he was studying alone. I sat outside the tent, listening to Zangpo. I was full of admiration and also wanted to learn to read. With determination, I entered the tent. Father was sitting on his rug, chanting mantras as usual. I walked up to him and said, "Father, I want to learn to read Tibetan, too."

Father was stunned. He looked at me for a while, unable to believe what he had heard. Then, looking at Mother he asked, "Did you hear what she said?"

"Yes?" Mother replied and looked at me in a way that showed she was also very confused.

"What's going on in her little brain?" Father wondered, pointing at me.

"Come here," Mother said.

I walked over to Mother who, putting her hand on my forehead said, "She doesn't have a fever." She pinched my right arm.

"Ouch!" I cried.

"She isn't sleepwalking," Mother said.

"Do you want to be a nun?" Father asked me.

"No, I want to be more helpful," I said, not really knowing what a nun was.

"Nonsense!" Father said angrily. "Stop such foolish thoughts! Do more family chores if you want to be more helpful."

I looked at Mother. She looked at me and stuck out her tongue to show me that my question was a mistake. I didn't anticipate that my ambition would result in such a dismissive response. I was very disappointed, lowered my head, and slowly walked out of the tent. I trudged to the top of a hill from where I could see Zangpo. He was sitting cross-legged with papers on his lap. I watched him reading and turning pages.

Suddenly, a strong wind blew and the loose pages began swirling in the air along with a lot of dust. Zangpo ran and jumped, trying to catch the flying pages. Some pages blew near me and I chased after them. I helped Zangpo collect some pages, but some were lost.

"Keep memorizing the remaining pages. I'll buy you a new book soon," Father promised Zangpo.

"OK," Zangpo answered and started walking back to the valley to continue his study.

I followed, pleading, "Brother, please teach me how to read."

"Ask Father for permission or he'll scold us both," Zangpo replied.

"I told him I wanted to learn to read and he told me it was nonsense," I said.

"Don't be sad, maybe he'll change his mind," Zangpo comforted.

"Are you going to become a nun?" I asked.

"No. A nun is a female who leads a monastic life. Father wants me to become a monk," Zangpo explained.

"Hm. I see," I said.

"I'm going to study. Go play with our brothers and sister," suggested Zangpo pointing to where our other siblings were all sitting on the ground, their heads in a circle. They were talking excitedly. Occasionally they broke into peals of laughter. Forgetting my disappointment, I ran to them and impatiently demanded, "What are you all doing?"

They all looked up at once. "We're playing chess. Come join us."

"OK," I said and squeezed in between Sister and Tsering.

I saw a big square flat stone in the middle of the circle with many black and white pebbles. Many small squares were drawn on the stone. It was my first time to see how this game was played. I quickly learned the rules and was so entertained that I forgot my frustration.

TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT VISITORS

We moved back to our summer camp. Life didn't change much as we were growing up until...

One day, after Father came back home from town, Mother gave him milk tea and *tsampa* as usual. We all sat around him and waited patiently for him to finish his meal. He then announced that special guests - township government officials - would visit us in a few days.

"You children should behave well and play outside the tent. There isn't enough space here for both guests and family members," Father instructed.

My siblings and I nodded to show we understood and agreed. Father then opened his leather bags and began unpacking fresh food, candy, and other things he had bought in town. He gave one candy to each of us and handed the food to Mother.

A few days later, Father told my brothers to keep the yaks near our tent. After we had breakfast, he tied up one of the strong yaks and slaughtered it. We cooked all the meat and Father gave us some to eat. When we had finished eating, Father said, "We must keep the rest for our guests who will visit today. Remember to behave well. Don't interrupt elders when we are talking. Remember to play together outside the tent. Understand?"

"Yes!" we all chimed together.

I was playing next to our tent when our dog started barking. Five horsemen were riding toward our tent. "Father, are they our guests?" I called.

My parents came out of the tent with my siblings. "Yes, they are our guests," Father said. "Please play outside." He walked towards the guests and greeted them as they dismounted. Some were wearing Tibetan robes. Two were wearing a style of clothing that I had never seen before. Father helped the guests tie their horses and then led them into our tent. We, as agreed, enjoyed ourselves outside, playing riding horses. Zangpo crawled as Chogyi, Rizen, Karwa, and I rode on him. We all fell off when he started walking. We laughed and shouted

loudly. After a while, Mother came out and told us to play a little further from the tent. We then went to play near a small stream where there was a little cliff. We ran and jumped from there to see who could jump the farthest. My brothers were bored and suggested we compete by jumping over the stream. We all could easily jump over the stream, because it was small.

"Let's find something more challenging," Druksang recommended.

"Like what?" Losang asked.

"Let's go to the river and see if we can jump over it, although Little Girl, Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi shouldn't try, or they will drown," cautioned Druksang.

"Is that OK with you all?" asked Zangpo.

"Sure," the four of us agreed.

We all went to the river. Zangpo, Losang, Druksang, and Tsering jumped from a narrower part of the river. They almost made it, but got their shoes wet.

"How can we jump further?" asked Tsering.

"I have an idea!" announced Druksang.

"What?" asked Losang.

"We can use a tent-pole to vault over the river," suggested Druksang.

"Wouldn't that be dangerous," queried Zangpo.

"We can practice with the pole on the grassland before we try to jump over the river with it," said Druksang.

"How?" asked Tsering.

"Let's go get a tent-pole and I'll demonstrate," Druksang said.

He soon brought back a tent-pole. Holding one end with both hands, he ran as fast as he could, put the other end on the ground, and jumped.

"I'm not sure how far you jumped. Let's draw a starting line," Losang proposed.

Zangpo, Losang, Druksang, and Tsering practiced jumping with the tent-pole and also jumped without the tent-pole to see how much the tent-pole helped them. They could also then calculate the distances and see if they could leap over the river. Karwa, Rizen, Chogyi, and I watched, richly entertained by our older brothers' performances. They all managed to jump over the river and we clapped to congratulate them.

"You know what?" said Losang.

"What?" the rest of us asked.

"We don't have to cross the river in the future," Losang said.
"We can leap over with a tent-pole!"

"Yes!" agreed Zangpo. "We must always remember to bring a tent-pole when we need to reach the other side of the river."

Afterwards, my older brothers used a tent-pole to jump over the river when they needed to graze our yaks on the other side.

"Come home!" called Mother.

"Let's go! Mother is calling," said Zangpo.

Upon returning to our tent we found that the guests were gone. Mother had a lunch of *tsampa* and meat ready. Father told us, "Your mother will work for the township government as an officer. We will move our tent there. This is good news because our family will now have a stable income."

Ten days later, we moved our tent to the township seat where an official gave us several rooms to live in. My parents arranged for the younger children to sleep in the rooms and the older children to sleep in the tent. We had our daily meals in the tent and spent our daytime in the tent or playing outside. For me the rooms were just a place to sleep.

The eighth lunar month soon came and many people gathered for a big meeting near our tent. Three communities met and made a list of school-age children, and decided to select which children to attend school based on a lottery. Father unhappily came into our tent after the meeting.

An hour later Mother returned from her work and asked Father, "Did you get a place for our kids?"

"Two, but I only want to send one to school," Father said.

"Who should we send?" Mother inquired.

I prayed, "Oh Tara! Please let Father choose me."

After a long pause Father said, "Tsering and Karwa, I guess," and then stood and left the tent.

"Mother, please ask Father to send me to school," I pleaded.

"Go ask him yourself," Mother said.

I ran after Father, tugged his right sleeve with both hands, and pleaded, "Father, I want to go to school. Please send me."

"No!" Father said.

"Please!" I begged, following him.

"You cannot. We can send only two - Tsering and Karwa," repeated Father.

"Please!" I persisted.

I followed Father as he walked back into our tent.

"Why don't we send Karwa to school next year," Mother suggested, handing a cup of tea to Father.

"Mother! No!" Karwa cried. "I don't want to wait another year. I want to go to school this year! Please!"

"OK. You'll go to school this year for sure," Father said.

"Let's talk to the school headmaster. Maybe they'll accept one more child without a lottery," Mother suggested.

Father sat quietly, sipping his tea.

"Father, please!" I begged again.

"OK," Father said, finally agreeing.

"I want to go to school, too," Rizen and Chogyi said in one voice.

"You two are too young for school," Mother answered.

They both looked at each other. "Does that mean we can go to school in a few years?" asked Rizen.

"Yes," Mother agreed.

"What about Zangpo, Losang, Druksang, and me?" asked Sister.

"I'm sorry, you are all over school-age. They won't accept children who are over ten years old," Mother replied.

"No more questions," Father said.

Everyone kept quiet. Tsering and Karwa were very happy, but at the same time they understood that the rest of us were feeling low. Rizen, Chogyi, and I still had some hope. I prayed that the school headmaster would permit me to enroll. It took a little while for everyone to accept who could go, who might go, and who could not. But soon everything was as usual and we had lunch together.

A NEW NAME

Five days later, Mother took Tsering, Karwa, and me to the school's teachers' office to register. A short woman wearing a Tibetan robe opened the door.

"How are you, Teacher?" Mother greeted.

"Good. Come in please," she said.

"These are my children," Mother said. She turned to us and said, "This is Teacher Dawakyi."

"What is your name? How old are you?" Dawakyi asked Tsering and Karwa in turn.

She jotted down some notes when Tsering and Karwa answered. Then she looked at me and asked, "What is your name? How old are you?" and held her pen firmly, ready to record my answers.

"Little Girl. I'm eight," I replied.

"What did you say?" she said.

"Her name is Little Girl and she is eight years old," repeated Mother.

"Well, Little Girl is a nickname," Dawakyi said to Mother. She looked at me, thought for a moment, and asked, "What about naming you, Pema?"

I didn't know what to say and looked at Mother.

"That's a nice name," Mother said, "Let's name her Pema as you wish, Teacher."

"Do you like it?" Dawakyi asked me.

"Yes, Teacher," I said.

"Good," she said, "Call her Pema from now on at home."

"Sure, we will," Mother assured. "Is there anything they need to bring tomorrow?"

"You only need to get a schoolbag for your sons. For your daughter, you must buy two books, a pencil, and two notebooks since she is outside our registration plan," Dawakyi said. "It's a total of three RMB."

Mother quickly agreed and gave her the required amount.

"Now that you are registered, you may go home. Come back tomorrow morning at eight-thirty for the morning meeting. We will distribute books, pencils, and notebooks. We will also arrange classrooms and seats. Classes will start at ten a.m."

Mother thanked Dawakyi and we left.

"Little Girl has a new name," Tsering announced as he entered our tent.

"Really? What is it?" Sister asked excitedly.

Tsering, Karwa, and Mother looked at me, wanting me to announce my new name. All my family members raptly gazed at me. My new name was obviously very important.

"My new name is Pema," I said.

A delighted smile brightened every face as they repeated, "Pema, Pema..."

"Pema, Pema... such a nice name!" Father said. "It suits my girl."

"Everyone! Please call her Pema from now on," Mother said.

"Pema. I like it. It means lotus," Sister said. "What a beautiful name."

Everyone agreed, nodding their heads, and looking at each other with approval. At this moment I better understood how precious I was to my family and how much they all cared about me. My family members called me Pema afterwards. It was a special feeling to get a new and meaningful name. I will surely remember it all my life.

FIRST FRIEND AT SCHOOL

A different daily routine began the day after I enrolled in school. At dawn, Mother called Tsering, Karwa, and me to get up and go memorize our lessons by the nearby river. At sunrise we returned home to our rooms instead of the tent. Mother was ready with warm water for us to wash our faces. She had also prepared *tsampa* for breakfast. We then took our school bags and walked to school. After morning classes with our schoolmates from eight-thirty to noon, we went home for lunch. After lunch we wrote homework until two p.m., and then returned to school for afternoon classes.

I played with Tsering and Karwa at school during short recesses. Our schoolmates called us 'the Brothers' because we wore the same colored maroon robes and had identical hairstyles.

In a twinkling, I was already in grade two. Rizen and Chogyi were also enrolled. Three semesters passed. I was chosen as the best student of the school three times based on our final exam results. I became the favorite of all the schoolteachers. They praised me in front of my parents and peers. I finished all the assignments on time and obeyed all the school rules. I was naughty, but that didn't bother my teachers much. They gave me candies, pencils, and notebooks and also called me to help sweep their office, clean their desks, make a fire, and fetch water.

One day, I was cleaning the teachers' office as usual when most of the teachers arrived. They were soon busy working at their desks. "She is the most diligent student among the fifty we have now," said Gyatso, a Tibetan language teacher who taught my class.

"Yes, none of the other students do such a good job in both learning and working," agreed Dawakyi, the school headmaster.

"Have you finished memorizing new words for the lesson we will study today?" Gyatso asked me.

"Yes, Teacher!" I answered.

"Good!" he said. "I'll see you in class soon."

I finished cleaning, returned to my class, and played with my brothers for a few minutes before class began. Gyatso came in with his book and said, "Everybody take your seat."

"Teacher has arrived," said Tsering, and we all hurried to our appointed seats.

"We are going to have dictation of the new words in Lesson Nine," Gyatso said.

"Pema, come here," Gyatso called. "Everybody else get a pencil and put a piece of paper on your desks. Put your books inside your desks."

I walked up to the blackboard next to him. I picked up a piece of chalk and was ready to write whatever he might say.

He walked over to me and said, "Take this book," which was opened on Lesson Nine. He said, "Pema will read the new words instead of me. I want you all to listen quietly and write down the words you hear from her."

He turned to me and said, "Read the words randomly and repeat each words three times. Don't forget any of them. Walk around while dictating to see if they finish writing before you move on to the next word. Collect their papers right after you finish dictating and put them on my desk," he said.

"OK," I said.

"I will come back at anytime," he said, looking at the students in the room. "If any of you don't follow my instruction you will be punished. Understand?"

"Yes," the students answered in one voice.

He turned to me and said, "You may start." He then walked out of the classroom as I began. After I finished dictating all the words, I collected all the papers. Soon after my classmates started talking. Gyatso, our Tibetan teacher, then returned and we had class as usual.

After class, I talked to Tsomo, who was sitting right next to me. "How did you do on dictation?" I asked.

"It was fine" she said. "You dictated at an appropriate speed for me."

"Good!" I said, "We've been seat mates for one and a half years, now. Do you want to be my friend?"

"Sure, my parents told me we are relatives," she answered.

"Really?" I was surprised. "How?"

"Our fathers are cousins," she explained.

"Wow, sorry for not knowing that," I said in shame.

"It's OK," she answered with a big smile. "I didn't know how to tell you this."

When the math teacher entered the classroom, we stopped talking. It was a very happy day for me. Tsomo was the first friend I made at school. My family members were thrilled when I told them during the lunch break that I had made a friend at school. Mother suggested that I invite her for supper.

When I returned to school with Tsering and Karwa for the afternoon classes, I saw Tsomo was in her seat, ready for the afternoon class. "Tsomo, would you like to visit my home for supper today?" I said while getting ready for class.

"Is it OK?" she asked.

"Yes, I can get permission from our teacher," I said confidently. She readily agreed.

After the afternoon classes, I took Tsomo to see our Tibetan teacher who was on duty that week.

"Teacher, may Tsomo visit my family for supper? We are relatives. My parents want me to bring her to my home. We will escort her back before the night class."

"Make sure you aren't late for night class, OK?" reminded Gyatso adding, "You two may go now."

"Thank you teacher!" we chanted.

When we reached our tent, my family members were busy tying up yaks.

"How are you?" Mother greeted Tsomo.

"I am good. How are you?" Tsomo greeted in return.

"I'm very happy to have you over," Mother said. "Help us finish tying the yaks and we will have dinner."

"OK," I said. "Tsomo, come help tie the yaks in this row."

She followed me and asked, "Do they hurt you with their horns or bite you?"

"No, they're tame. They eat only plants," I said. "You don't need to be scared of them."

"OK," Tsomo replied without much confidence.

"Why are you so scared of yaks?" I asked.

"I don't know much about them, and I'm afraid they might not like me," Tsomo said.

I put some salt in her hand and said, "Give them some salt and they'll like you for sure."

Tsomo gave the yaks some salt. She laughed out loud as the yaks licked the salt in her hands. "Wow! Their tongues are really rough!" But she liked it. She made friends with the yaks.

We finished tying the yaks, and had a very pleasant dinner together. I introduced Tsomo to all my family members, who all welcomed her and introduced themselves. My parents invited Tsomo to visit my home anytime she wanted.

My family's horses (July 2010, Pema County).



GENDERED RUMORS

I started to spend more of my class break time with Tsomo.

Time passed. A few weeks later, I had an odd conversation with a classmate.

"One brother became a girl," said Desang watching me closely, judging my reaction.

"What?" I asked.

"You used the girls' toilet and you are Tsomo's friend," he said assertively.

"Have I ever used the boys' bathroom?" I asked.

"Oops! He - She is going to get angry," said Desang and ran away.

I didn't understand. I guessed he was just being naughty. I didn't care what he thought of me and played with Tsomo as usual. She introduced me to more girl schoolmates.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" asked Karmakyi, one of my new friends.

"Ask me anything you like," I replied.

"Were you a boy?" she asked

"I've been a girl ever since I can remember," I said.

"Why do you wear your robe like a boy?" Karmakyi asked

"It's easier to run and play," I said.

"Why do you have the same hairstyle as your brothers," she asked.

"Father decided," I replied.

"Why do you play with boys?" she asked.

I thought for a while and said, "They don't mind playing with me."

I then noticed that all the girls at school had hair that was longer than mine. Then, when I looked at myself, I realized my hair was cut like a boy's and that I wore my robe like a boy. I also observed that the girls kept a distance from the boys and did not play much with them. I thought, "It is not forbidden for girls and boys to play

with each other. If I don't play with my brothers, I won't have much fun."

A little girl (July 2010, Pema County).



PAIN AND PUNISHMENT

One bright Friday afternoon after lunch I went to school a bit earlier than usual. Most of the students were playing in the playground. Tsomo wasn't there. I went to look for her in the classroom and girls' dorm and found her in front of the dorm with Karmakyi and Metokyi. They were rolling small squares of paper.

"Hey! What are you playing?" I asked.

"We are going to imitate our fashionable fathers," said Tsomo.

"Does your father smoke?" asked Karmakyi.

"Yes, he does," I said.

"Here take this," Tsomo said, handing me a piece of paper.

"Roll it like this," she continued, demonstrating how to roll it.

Karmakyi then gave me a bit of powdered tree leaves and told me to put it inside the rolled paper from the wider open end. Tsomo lit a match and announced, "Time for the fun part." We held the rolled paper. Karmakyi then helped us light the "cigarettes" we had prepared. She blew a cloud of smoke into the air. I took a long drag and coughed. Karmakyi blew out a sick-smelling puff of smoke through her nose and asked, "First time?"

"Um," I said and nodded. The smoke felt bitter on my tongue.

"It's awful," I said.

"Don't let the smoke get into your throat," instructed Tsomo, "Just suck the smoke in, hold it in your mouth, and blow it out the way your father does." Tsomo sucked in some smoke and exhaled, creating beautiful patterns with the smoke. This reminded me of Father, who relaxed when he smoked. I tried several times before I learned how to puff, and not breathe the smoke into my lungs. Then I tried puffing the smoke into the air so that it formed patterns and shapes.

"Look, I did it!" I said excitedly. I blew out more smoke. Suddenly, Tsomo ran into the dorm and Metokyi followed her. Karmakyi was looking at me and holding her cigarette behind her back. She ran into the dorm, too. I excitedly blew out more smoke. I thought, "The smell is horrible, but I can make beautiful patterns."

Suddenly, someone grabbed my shoulders. Unable to move my hands, my hands, I turned my head and saw Shawogya, one of the school cooks.

"Smoking?" he asked.

"Please don't tell the teachers," I said, smiling uneasily as my face turned bright red. I looked though the window near me, into the room. Tsomo, Karmakyi, and Metokyi were gazing out from the window. They had known Shawogya was coming but hadn't warned me.

"Don't smoke again," he warned. "It's bad for your health."

I readily agreed and threw the still smoldering cigarette butt on the ground and stepped on it.

He walked away.

Tsomo, Karmakyi, and Metokyi came out.

"Why didn't you guys tell me he was coming?" I asked.

"I apologize. I was too scared to say anything," Tsomo said.

"Me too," said Karmakyi and Metokyi.

"You all betrayed me," I declared.

"No. Please don't tell anyone we smoked," pleaded Tsomo.

"Fine," I said.

We then all left for the classroom.

The next day was Saturday. We had regular weekly meetings on Saturday mornings. The meeting room was jam-packed with teachers and students. Teachers sat on the stage facing the students, who sat below the stage. There was a podium on the right side of the front-corner on the stage. The school principal, Dawakyi, looked very serious as she stood and walked to the podium. We all listened silently and carefully to Dawakyi as she gave a speech as she always did. This day she looked even more serious than usual and her voice was firmer. She was clearly unhappy.

I felt very nervous when she suddenly said that smoking was absolutely taboo for students and whoever broke this rule would be severely punished. I sensed something very bad was about to happen.

"Pema!" Dawakyi called.

"Yes, Madam!" I said, jumping to my feet fearfully.

"Come up here," she commanded.

"Yes, Madam," I said and walked to her on quivering legs.

"She was smoking yesterday," announced Dawakyi, holding my shoulder with her left hand.

"This is unacceptable," Dawakyi continued, addressing the assembly. "Let's see if I let her go easily."

She reached under the table and picked up a flexible, thin thorny stick and proceeded to beat every part of my body except my head. It was so painful that I gritted my teeth. My hands were bleeding. There was no sign that the beating would stop. No longer able to bear the pain and humiliation, I cried out and dodged her stick. The door was closed. I ran below the stage and tried to hide behind other students. She dragged me back to the stage and continued beating me. I desperately struggled and begged her to stop, holding both my thumbs up in supplication.

"Are you going to smoke again?" she demanded.

"No, I would never dare smoke again," I whimpered.

She said, "This is a little warning. I'll punish you more severely if you smoke again."

"I promise I will never smoke again," I sobbed in great pain.

Exhausted from beating me, she looked at the students in the room and said, "This is a warning. You will receive more severe punishment if any of you dare smoke. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" answered all the students.

This was the first punishment I received from teachers at school. I was terribly humiliated. I covered my head with my robe and wept. Everyone left the room. When I thought about it, I realized that Shawogyia had told her about me. I examined my hands and saw the pricks where the thorns had broken my skin. Tsomo came and comforted me. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone. I kept weeping. I felt each of those thorns had stabbed my heart.

"Let's go wash the blood off your hands before you go home," Tsomo said. "If we don't, your parents will ask you what happened."

We went to the school water tub in front of the cafeteria. I washed my hands and face. Tsomo helped me clean the dust from my robe. I went home. My parents already knew I had been punished for smoking.

"You deserve it!" Father said. "I'm going to punish you too, if you smoke again."

"Shame on you!" Mother said. "Tobacco is not for girls."

I knew I had made a mistake. At the same time, I also knew that I couldn't express my deep sense of having been mistreated. I

lowered my head. Sister sat next to me and held me in her arms as I sobbed. She didn't say anything, but I knew she wanted to protect me.

I stopped talking to Tsomo, Karmakyi, and Metokyi for weeks. Finally, my anger and pain were gone and I became their friend again.

Wild flowers (August 2014, Pema County).



MY ANGEL OF A MOTHER ELOPES

It was a very nice, late summer afternoon. Five of us went home to tether the yaks after the afternoon classes. The sun was about to set. Darkness would soon come. My family had gathered all the yaks. We were tying them one by one to the tether line.

"Make sure you don't miss any of the yaks," Mother said. "I have to go to the county seat with a gift for my supervisor."

After a while I saw Mother leave with something on the back of her bicycle. We soon finished with the yaks and went to our rooms. It was a five-minute walk from our tent. Sister boiled tea. We waited for Mother to return so we could eat together. We waited as the sun set bit by bit. It was soon pitch dark. Several hours later, it began raining heavily. It seemed the sky was weeping.

Mother had still not returned.

"The county seat is only a half hour walk from here," remarked Father. "Do you think something bad happened to her?" he asked Zangpo.

"I don't know. Do you think we should go look for her?" suggested Zangpo.

"Maybe she fell off the bike," Father said anxiously. "Or maybe she was bitten by a dog. I have a bad feeling. Let's go look for her."

Zangpo started to get ready. "Here," he said, handing a raincoat to Father. They both were soon clad in raincoats and held flashlights.

Father looked at the rest of us and said, "Sermotso, have dinner by yourselves and then put the younger children to bed."

"OK, Father," replied Sister.

After Father and Zangpo left, Sister fed us *tsampa*. We all sat quietly. It was the most silent meal I have ever had. When Sister handed a cup of tea to me, I didn't even feel its warmth. I was in no mood to eat. I placed the cup in front of me and looked at my other siblings. They were all in deep, worried thought. I could see it in their

faces. None of them felt like eating. Sister was the only one who was moving around, trying to stay busy in an anxious way.

"Please eat," implored Sister.

No one reacted. It seemed no one had heard her. Then I saw Sister turn around to the wall and wipe away tears that she was no longer able to restrain. Feeling sorry for Sister, I tried to drink and eat a little, but the *tsampa* seemed unusually dry and hard, painfully scratching my throat. I stopped eating, ran to Sister, embraced her, and sobbed.

"I can't eat. My throat is so painful," I said.

"It's OK. It'll be fine soon," Sister comforted.

We opened the door wide and sat on the floor by the entrance, waiting hopefully. Other siblings joined us. We hugged each other, trying to feel stronger. We prayed nothing bad would happen to Mother, Father, and Zangpo. We waited. After hours, Father and Zangpo came into view, out of the darkness and heavy rain. We didn't see Mother.

"Did you find Mother?" Losang asked.

"No, she is not on the way to the county seat," Father answered.

"What's the plan?" asked Losang.

"We'll continue searching," Father said. "Losang and Druksang, get dressed for the rain. Sermotso, be sure the others are put to bed."

We watched the four of them walk and then vanish into the darkness and rain. We stayed at the doorway, waiting for them to return. Crying and praying was the only thing we were capable of doing. Our kindhearted neighbor, Dawatso, heard us crying and came over to reassure us, telling us everything would work out. She stayed with us. Chogyi sobbed himself to sleep. Sister carried him to bed and then came back to the doorway and joined us. After Karwa and Rizen fell asleep, Sister and Dawatso put them in bed.

I fell asleep at some point and dreamed that I consulted an old monk, Shangchub. I asked him to divine and tell me what had happened to Mother.

He told me that a ghost had snatched her and put her in the center of a deep, spiraling tunnel. He gave some holy water to Tsering and me. We entered the tunnel, chanting prayers, and sprinkling holy water on the ground. We were then able to save Mother.

I jumped out of bed and shouted excitedly, "Mother!" and then I realized it was only a dream.

Sister came and said, "Mother is still missing. Father and our older brothers are still searching for her."

I sobbed. Sister woke Rizen, Chogyi, Karwa, and Tsering. "Get up. You must go to school," urged Sister.

The five of us got up and set off for school without breakfast. Although I physically attended classes, my brain was full of worry.

Tsomo touched my knee in one of the classes saying, "Teacher is calling your name."

I stood up and put my head down. I didn't say anything. I don't know how long I stood there until Tsomo pulled my sleeve to signal that I should sit down. I then mechanically sat down and didn't listen to any of the remainder of the class.

When Tsomo told me it was time for lunch I waited until the classroom was empty and then went back to our tent. Father and my older brothers weren't at home. Sister was churning milk. Her eyes were red and swollen. A few minutes later Tsering, Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi returned, too. They were worn-out from worry.

"Pema, put some yak-dung in the stove and put the tea pot on it," Sister said. "We'll have lunch right after I finish churning the milk."

"Can we wait for Father to return?" asked Chogyi.

"Sure. Do you have homework to do?" inquired Sister.

All of us shook our heads. We each found a place to sit alone. Sister finished churning milk. We continued to wait for Father and our older brothers. At two in the afternoon they still had not returned. Sister suggested that we should have lunch so we each had a little *tsampa*. Sister was boiling milk when the five of us again left for school.

Five days passed. We still didn't know where Mother was. It was in the late afternoon just as we finished tying the yaks that Father and our older brothers returned. We had finished supper in the tent and then sat around the stove.

"Your mother doesn't want to return home," Father said with a sigh.

Our tent fell deathly silent as a cold wind sorrowfully muttered through the tent. We all gazed at Father silently and expectantly. He had more details.

"Today, I found your mother at the home of one of her acquaintances. She was on her way to her parents' home. She was not injured. I pleaded with her to come back home. However, she said that she was determined to leave us forever. I told her we had been looking for her for five days and that all of you were waiting for her to return. I'm sorry. I failed to bring her back. I'll visit her parents' home with some gifts and try to convince her to return, but you should all be prepared for the worst - divorce."

This heartbreaking news created an overwhelming sense of grief and despair in each of us. I lacked even the strength to cry out. It was true for each of us. Not one of us cried. We all sat silent and unmoving, as though we had been frozen, processing what we have had heard.

"Let's all sleep in the tent tonight," Father said, breaking the silence. "Sermotso, make beds for us all." She stood and made several beds. Karwa and I shared a bed with Sister. Rizen and Chogyi slept with Losang. Zangpo, Tsering, and Druksang shared a bed. Father slept alone.

I lay awake at midnight, unable to sleep. I couldn't think of anything. My mind was blank. It was very quiet. Normally, the tent was full of the sound of Father and my brothers snoring.

Karwa suddenly stood up, his eyes wide open. He didn't blink. It seemed he wasn't really seeing anything.

"Sister!" I called.

"Catch him," urged Zangpo.

"Oops, I missed him!" Sister said.

Karwa ran to the pile of dry yak dung in the lower, right corner of the tent and climbed up. Again Sister tried to catch him but missed. We heard "Bam!" as Karwa fell on the outer side of the tent.

"Zangpo, go help Sermotso," Father said.

Zangpo didn't have time to put on his shoes as he raced after Karwa. They were both running barefoot. I listened, waiting in bed. I could hear them running. Sister went out, too. They all returned to the tent soon after Zangpo caught Karwa. Zangpo was carrying Karwa in his arms like a baby.

"Go to sleep," Zangpo said. "I'll take him to my bed."

"Good, you got him," said Father.

"Yes, I got him. He's fast," Zangpo replied.

Sister came back to our bed and lay down. "Why did he run away?" I asked.

"He was sleepwalking," explained Sister.

"But his eyes were wide open," I said.

"Sleepwalkers walk with their eyes wide open," Sister continued.

"That's scary," I said.

"It's OK. Zangpo is a hero. Karwa will be fine," Sister said reassuringly.

We stopped talking. Everyone was quiet again. I slept.

A bright shining sun the next morning announced a lovely day. Sister came into the tent after she finished milking the yaks. We had breakfast. Father and Zangpo left to try and bring Mother back home. Losang and Druksang grazed the yaks and horses. Tsering and Karwa went to pile up fresh yak dung. I helped Sister churn milk. I prayed that Mother would change her mind and return home.

Father and Zangpo were exhausted and depressed when they returned in the afternoon. None of us asked anything. I was too frightened to say a word. I knew Father and Zangpo would have looked happier if Mother had agreed to live with us again. We finished tying the yaks and then all went inside the tent.

Father then explained, "I told your mother that you all needed her more than me. I told her that I would leave the family if she were running away from me. She still refused to come back. I'm sorry!"

This cruel reality meant Sister had to play the role of Mother. She had learned to milk the yaks when she was eight. Now, just a thirteen-year-old girl, she had to take responsibility for all the family chores. Such a role was too much for her. My older siblings helped. Four of my other siblings and I continued attending school. I felt abandoned. Mother was much of my world and now she was gone.

CHOICE

Two months later, my family was told we had to move because Mother, who was the one with a government job, was no longer with us. Five of us then had to live in a dormitory. I missed Father, Sister, and my older brothers. All these sudden changes broke my heart. My soul was gone. I was like an empty vessel. I was all sadness. It took a long time for me to be able to accept the unpleasant reality that I now lived in. My school marks went from the highest in my grade to the lowest. The teachers could do nothing to help.

I decided to run away. I escaped through the school gate after I finished the morning classes at noon one day. At this moment, I realized how big the world was. I was lost. I didn't know where my home was. I couldn't find the correct direction but I didn't want to return to school. I walked to a little cliff located near the schoolyard. I stayed there alone and cried for hours. I lost my voice from crying. My eyes were swollen. My heart was broken.

Then, I heard footsteps behind me. Gyatso called my name. I tried to hide my tears before he saw my face. He sat beside me and said, "Everything will be fine. Cry out all your sadness. You'll feel better."

My tears fell like heavy rain. I couldn't help it. He held me in his arms quietly and patiently.

"It is already late," he finally said. "I think we should go back to school now."

I followed him back to school. It was already time for supper. I didn't want to eat anything. Gyatso watched me to make sure I ate something. I ate quietly and slowly. When all the students had finished eating, I was not even half finished. Students weren't allowed to waste any food.

The next day, I also didn't want to eat lunch. When Tsomo asked me to go to lunch with her, I refused, saying I had no appetite. All of my classmates left for lunch, leaving me alone in the classroom. I stayed in my seat and sobbed. Gyatso was on duty that week and

came looking for me. He convinced me to have lunch. I couldn't disagree and went to the dining hall with him. Students were lined up. Gyatso told me to stand in line with my bowl. I stood at the end of the line. Gyatso went to help the cook give food to the students. As soon as he entered the kitchen, I ran back to the classroom. He came looking for me again.

Two girls who slept and ate in their homes near the school were in the classroom, reviewing their lessons. I told them not to tell the teacher I was there and hid behind the door. A few minutes later, Gyatso came asking, "Did Pema come here?"

They were afraid to lie and silently stared at him. When Gyatso asked again if they had seen me they both pointed at me. He took me back to the kitchen to have lunch and told another girl to watch me until I finished eating. I cried while I sat there.

Tsomo came and sat next to me. "I'm here with you," she said and stayed with me.

Two days later, Father visited, bringing sugar and yogurt from home. He borrowed bowls from a friend. We sat on the grassland outside the schoolyard and ate yogurt together.

"Your Mother left us for a man she loves. He divorced his wife and left his family," Father said.

I was very disappointed to hear that Mother had abandoned Father and us for another man. My family knew that man - Nyima. He was one of Mother's colleagues and often visited my home when Father was absent. He had two sons who were the same age as Karwa and Rizen. Mother treated them as if they were her own children. My siblings and I didn't like sharing our mother's love with them. When we quarreled with those two boys, Mother favored them over us and punished us if we made the boys unhappy. Now it was clear that Mother wanted Nyima more than our family.

Father said, "She has sued for divorce. The court has agreed and decided that she gets half of the family property and five of the younger children. I don't agree and am asking for a new trial."

We all silently and carefully listened to Father. He continued, "I have been notified that I am to appear before the judge to argue my case tomorrow. I will tell the judge that you children should make your own choice. I respect your choice. Whoever you choose - your mother or me - I will always love you in the same way."

Gyatso came to tell us it was time for classes. After saying goodbye to Father we went to afternoon classes.

Two days later, Gyatso called us out of the morning class and introduced a short man from the court. Gyatso told us to go with this man, who drove us to a building in the county seat. The short man told us to stay outside, went into a room, and then called us in one by one. Tsering was summoned first. I was called in next, after about fifteen minutes. There were two women in the room. A short woman holding a paper asked questions. The other was taller and wrote down what I said. The short woman asked me many questions. I remember the last three.

"Who do you like more, your mother or father?" she asked.

"I liked Mother more," I replied.

"Your father and mother are going to live separately. Do you want to live with your mother or father?" she said.

"I want to live with Father," I answered.

"Why?" she queried.

"Mother favors Nyima's children," I answered.

The two women looked at each other in surprise, not expecting such an answer. They didn't say it was the wrong answer. I felt very uncomfortable to have made such a choice. It made me miserable. I loved Mother so much. I wanted to have a complete family. I knew without Mother, my family would never be whole. At the same time, I understood that I wouldn't have a mother after I made that choice. Maybe no one understood that the choice wasn't just Father or Mother. Instead, it was a choice between Mother and my older siblings plus Father. I wanted to get the most out of the choice. Moreover, I knew we didn't share Father and older siblings' love with anyone except our family members.

The short woman then announced, "I have finished asking questions," looked at me, and said, "Follow him to the next room."

I followed the short man to the next room. Tsering was there. Later, we were joined by Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi. "Stay here for awhile. Your father will come get you," said the man who had driven us to court.

Father came after a few minutes and took us to lunch. We didn't talk about the choice we made. After lunch, Father bought some candy for us and told us to walk to school. He had to go back to

court. On our way to school we saw Mother, who had two strong guards.

"Mother is there," said Chogyi.

Mother saw us and called out, "Oh, my children!"

"We are no longer your children," Tsering shouted angrily.

She was stunned, not expecting our love to turn to hatred as the result of her choices and deeds.

We kept walking without saying anything to her. That was the last time I saw Mother. I never again had direct contact with her.

Life was different without Mother. I eventually accepted that I had just one parent. Afterwards, we were called 'living orphans' - children with only one living parent. Our tender hearts were seriously injured by Mother abandoning us. It took a long time for that wound to heal.

Anyimachen (August 2012).



MISTREATED

Before I enrolled in school, I yearned for night to come. Every night I dreamed peacefully of flying to a place: Everything was pure white. I met a little boy. We sat on a white bench between a beautiful white house and a pond full of lotus blossoms. We played games there until I woke in the morning. This dream was so vivid that it seemed real. I remember it as if it happened just yesterday. I never had that dream after I became a student and lived in a dormitory. Instead, I was terrified of the night and wished it would never come. I wanted the sunlight to shine longer every day - a wish that never came true.

Living at school meant I followed a rigid routine. I had to obey the teachers, the class monitor, and the dormitory room leader. They were the authorities. Nobody was allowed to argue with them. The teachers and the monitor were good people who treated students nicely.

The teacher on duty blew a whistle at six-thirty a.m. We got up, dressed, folded our quilt, washed our face, and combed our hair. This was all done in about fifteen minutes. We then lined up in front of our classrooms holding our books. When we heard a second whistle, we began memorizing material in our books. This lasted about one hour.

When the whistle blew again, it was eight o'clock. We ran to the school dining hall and lined up with our bowls. We had to finish eating and washing our bowls in less than thirty minutes. At eight-thirty, we had to be ready for morning classes.

After lunch we took a thirty-minute nap. We weren't allowed to talk to each other, even if we weren't sleeping. After the nap we went to the playground. We weren't allowed to return to the dorm or classrooms until it was time for afternoon classes.

Straight after afternoon classes we had ninety minutes of free time. Even though I could stay anywhere I liked in the school, I spent most of that time in the classroom doing homework and studying. I took little breaks when I thought about my home. I watched the sun

setting bit-by-bit and whispered, "Please stay a little longer," dreading what the night would bring. Maybe the sun was too far away and didn't hear me because it always continued steadily setting.

I had night class after dinner. This was a time for students to review their lessons, write homework, and prepare for the next day's classes. Even before becoming a boarding student I did my homework after supper, and did it well. However, once I began living in the dorm, I couldn't focus on learning at all during night class for fear of what the night would bring. This was why I chose to stay in the classroom before supper.

During the actual night class, I just flipped through the pages and daydreamed. Time sped by. The school bell clanged, and the other students began leaving for their dorm rooms. I knew my time of misery had come.

One evening as usual, I was the last one to leave the classroom. When I stepped outside, I saw something long and dark, connecting the earth and sky. I gazed up and fainted. When I regained consciousness, I realized I was face down on the ground. My body was as cold as ice. I wasn't scared of the darkness nor shocked by what had just happened. I cautiously stood up and lingered to delay the time of what would follow.

I slowly walked into the dorm room where most of my dorm-mates were already in bed, although a few were still busy getting into bed as quickly as they could. The dorm room leader, Tsoyang, was standing there. Having this position empowered her. In addition, she had the advantage of being taller and older than the rest of us. "I'm going to tell the teacher that you argued with me," was her power mantra.

"Everybody be asleep in five minutes," she ordered. Then she pointed at me and said, "You, Living-Orphan, speed it up. I'm going to report to the teacher that we are all in bed. I'll be back in five minutes. Anyone not sleeping then will be punished."

Tsoyang left. Before I could get in bed, my dorm-mates started asking me for favors:

"Pema, please help me to put my shoes under my bed neatly."

"Mine, too. Please!"

"Please bring me a cup of water."

I did as they asked.

"She's coming!" Tsono warned.

Everyone covered their head with their quilt. I jumped into my bed and covered my head with a blanket. I heard Tsoyang's footsteps as she came into the dorm and called to her two allies.

"Drontso and Lhamo, come here," Tsoyang said. "Here, hold this up."

Drontso, the oldest girl student, was tall and had long hair. But despite her beautiful external appearance, she was cruel. Drontso and Lhamo were friends before they became friends with Tsoyang. It was rumored that Drontso and Lhamo had beaten Tsoyang secretly. The three of them, the wicked queens of our dorm room, were busy with something for a long time.

Tsoyang said, "OK. Drontso, go outside and check if any light can be seen from our windows."

"Sure," Drontso answered in her usual sharp tone.

I heard the door open and close. I guessed Drontso had gone out. Everything was quiet for a bit. Then the door opened and closed, signaling Drontso had returned.

"It's fine. I couldn't see any light through the windows," Drontso reported.

"Let's check and see who is not asleep," Tsoyang said.

"Let's start here," suggested Lhamo in a rough, thick voice.

"You aren't asleep," declared Tsoyang, "Go stand next to the wall at the door!"

I heard Tsoyang say this six times. I was certain that I would be next.

"I'm sure, she isn't sleeping," Drontso said confidently.

One of them roughly jerked my blanket away. I lay unmoving. They tickled me. I did not react. I lay still as a corpse. I knew that was the way they had got others out of bed.

"She's asleep," Tsoyang said.

"Impossible," said Lhamo. "She was the last to go to bed."

When they poured a basin of water on my face, I was frightened and opened my eyes wide. My bed was now wet.

"Ha! I knew you weren't asleep!" announced Lhamo.

"Go stand with the others," ordered Tsoyang.

As I slowly got up I saw the windows were covered with a thick blanket to keep the light from being detected outside. The teachers would think we were all in bed.

"Tseringtso, bring some thin, flexible sticks and also, some thick, hard sticks," ordered Tsoyang.

Tseringtso returned with seven or eight sticks.

"Put the sticks on the floor," Tsoyang said.

"Now, hold out your left hands," demanded Tsoyang. We all held out our left hand. She beat us one by one with a thin stick. It was painful. I rubbed my hands. Then she asked Drontso and Lhamo to join her. The three of them beat us in turn until they were bored.

"Roll up your pants and long underwear," Tsoyang commanded.

We did so and faced the wall. The three of them then beat our calves with the thick sticks in turns. Some of us cried and begged.

Tsoyang said, "Take off all your clothing if you don't want to be beaten. Be quick! Don't waste our time."

"Don't you understand? Take off everything means no underwear and shirts!" Tsoyang bellowed.

We were all soon totally naked, covering our secret spot with our hands. I felt terribly shamed

"Get back in line," commanded Tsoyang.

"What do you want them to do now?" Tsoyang asked Drontso and Lhamo.

"Dance!" exclaimed Drontso.

Lhamo excitedly nodded in agreement.

Tsoyang turned to us and said, "Tsokyi, teach them how to dance. You others follow her."

"I don't know how to dance," Tsokyi replied.

"How dare you talk back to me!" yelled Tsoyang, picking up a thin stick and beating Tsokyi until she was tired.

"Follow her! Imitate!" Tsoyang commanded, thrashing us to make us imitate what Tsokyi was now doing.

We were all in a circle performing to entertain Tsoyang, Drontso, and Lhamo. They lay in their beds, watching us dance, laughing at our foolish actions. Lhamo whispered in Tsoyang's ear for a while.

"Stop!" Tsoyang shouted, "Everyone lie down where you are standing."

"Metokyi, lick theirs," Tsoyang said.

"No, please don't be so hard on me!" Metokyi begged.

Tsoyang said, "You're going to get even worse punishment if you don't lick." She jumped down from her bed and kicked Metokyi in the butt. Metokyi shivered in fear and knelt on her knees between each girl's legs to lick their secret part. She came to me. I was very nervous. I didn't want her to lick mine, but I knew I couldn't escape. Metokyi's tears ran down her cheeks as her thin little body shook like a leaf in the wind. As she bent down in front of me, I moved away, but her trembling tongue touched me. It was quick and light and over in an instant. I hated being violated in this way and hated what was being done to Metokyi. It was enormously unfair. I hoped that Metokyi and the rest of us would never receive further punishments.

It was not the end.

Tsoyang forced Metokyi to drink urine and eat feces after she was done with licking. They rode her like a horse and beat her with wet towels. It was horrible. I don't know what Metokyi had done to offend them. I couldn't imagine why Metokyi had received such hideous punishment.

Eventually Tsoyang, Drontso, and Lhamo grew tired of brutalizing us and wanted to sleep. They made me stand on empty petrol cans behind the door and told me to stand there the whole night. They said if I did not, I would be treated in the same way they had treated Metokyi. Seven of us had to stand that way for the whole night. We were forbidden to sleep or talk.

The moon shone through the little window above the door. I peered outside and saw bright stars and the moon. These soft lights kept me company in the stillness of the night. I was no longer afraid. I thought, "Evil has made these three girls find ways of torturing us to entertain themselves." Their awful brutality was inhuman.

I also realized that Tsering and Karwa often fought against injustice. I knew we were all suffering. Each of us was facing our individual hardship. As for me, I was not strong enough to fight these sadistic girls. They were much bigger than me. But more significantly, they were a group protected by the teachers.

REVENGE

A week later, Father visited again. After morning class, Dawakyi told us Father was waiting outside the schoolyard. I ran out excitedly and then heard people yelling. When I got to the gate, I saw Father and Nyima fighting. Father's friend's home was nearby. I ran there and asked him to come help. When I returned to the school entrance, I couldn't see Father and my brothers. I assumed Father had been killed by Nyima, who was waving a long knife with his right hand and staggering here and there. Consumed with anger, I picked up a stone and threw it at him. It hit his shoulder.

"Murderer! You killed my father!" I shrieked.

I picked up another stone, but Gyatso caught my arms behind me and said, "Stop. Let's go. Your father is OK. He is in the teachers' office." Gyatso led me into the schoolyard before Nyima got a chance to retaliate.

When I reached the office, Father was gingerly sitting on the edge of a chair. His head was bleeding and his face was bruised. Tsering, Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi were there. I cried. I thought Father was going to die. The teachers comforted me saying the township doctor was coming. She soon arrived and treated Father. Dawakyi brought lunch for Father and us. We ate together in the office. Father said they had moved the tent to the winter camp and that we would come home on the weekends. "I'll come get you next weekend," he said.

I was happy to hear this. At the same time, I was also worried that Father might fight Nyima again and be seriously injured.

It seemed ages before the weekend finally came. I anxiously waited for Father after the morning classes on Saturday. He came as promised and took us on horses to visit our grandmother and uncle on our way home. We had lunch together there and then we went home.

Zangpo, Losang, and Druksang were already back home from grazing yaks. They were outside the tent with Sister, waiting for us. We ran and enjoyed a big, happy group hug. I had missed them all so

much. Every night I had dreamed I was at home playing with them and then I would cry and wake up. This time I felt the warmth of my siblings' bodies and their breath. Knowing this was not a dream, I wept with joy.

"This is a time for laughter, not tears," Father said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I am just too excited," and wiped away my tears with both hands, and stopped crying. I knew Father didn't want me to cry in front of my siblings, because they would then think I was having a hard time at school and worry. We went into the tent and had *tsampa* and milk tea for supper. It was delicious. Then we chanted prayers and went to bed. I lay quietly next to Sister, listening to her breathe. I didn't want to sleep. I was worried I might wake up in my school bed.

I don't know how long I stayed wide-awake. The sun was already shining brightly when I awakened. It was time for breakfast. "Today, I'll take Zangpo, Losang, and Druksang to the county seat to shop. This is a reward. They have worked very hard over the whole summer," announced Father.

"Pema, cook lunch for Tsering, Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi," Father continued, "Tsering and Karwa, you two graze the yaks after lunch. We'll come home around four, have an early supper, and then I'll take you back to school."

"OK!" we all agreed.

They left after breakfast. Tsering, Karwa, Rizen, Chogyi, and I spread a big blanket on the ground outside the tent. We lay in a line on the blanket and did our homework together. After we finished, I boiled tea and we had *tsampa* for lunch. Tsering and Karwa went to graze yaks and returned. Rizen and Chogyi looked after our tent. I grazed the horses and then also returned home. Father and my older siblings had still not returned. The sun was setting behind the mountains as we waited for them outside the tent. At last we saw Sister coming back. She was alone on a bike and crying.

"Sister, don't cry. What happened?" I asked.

"Father was beaten by Mother and her brothers," Sister said.

"Oh no! How is he now?" Tsering asked.

"I don't know. He's in the county seat hospital," Sister continued. "The doctors are treating him."

"What about our older brothers?" I asked.

"Our brothers are fine." Sister said. "Father was alone when Mother and her brothers beat him. They ran away when our brothers and I arrived."

"What should we do?" Tsering asked.

"Zangpo told me to come here," Sister said. "He wants you to visit Father before going to school."

"I don't want to go to school anymore," I announced.

"Let's go to school or our teachers will scold you," Tsering cautioned.

We set off with our school bags. I didn't feel my feet as they touched the ground. I was shaking, afraid, and worried. I don't know how we reached the county seat. I don't know how we found the county seat hospital. I don't know how we found the room where Father was. I just remember the moment I saw Father lying in bed. His body was covered with white bandages like a mummy, and he couldn't move. Seeing blood on the floor I cried, thinking Father was going to die. Tsering, Karwa, Rizen, and Chogyi cried too.

Father was conscious and comforted, "Don't cry. I'll be fine. I'm not badly hurt. I just can't move because of these bandages."

"Don't cry," repeated Zangpo, "Father will be fine soon."

"Go to school. You are already late," urged Father.

"I don't want to go to school," I again declared.

"Don't say that. It will make Father feel sadder," chastised Zangpo.

"I promise I'll be fine." Father said reassuringly. "When you see me next time, I'll be back to normal."

"Father, please get well soon," I entreated.

"I'll be well soon if you all obey me," Father said.

I trusted Father and hoped that he would get better soon. We went to school. The dispute between Father and Mother had become violent. On the way to school, I decided to take revenge. I planned to study hard, get a well-paying job, save money, and buy a good gun. I would then find Mother, her lover, and his children and kill them all.

I started to study seriously again while constantly worrying about Father and my brothers being beaten by brutes. Hatred and anxiety were my constant companions.

Father, the victim, went to the Pema County Court and accused Mother, her brothers, and her lover. The court did not rule in Father's favor. Father then filed another complaint in a traditional

court and hired a local Tibetan lawyer. Mother hired a lawyer, too. The lawyers then agreed on who would be the judge. Divorce is the most serious issue in traditional courts. The case became more complicated as more and more people got involved: Mother's lover, her father and brothers; and Father, his relatives, and we, the children. I lost count how many meetings there were to consider this case. It dragged on for years without resolution.

I was worried about Father and my siblings' safety. I felt a bit better when I heard Mother and Nyima had moved to the most remote township in the county to avoid conflict. However, I was still concerned because I knew moving away was not a final solution.

The case finally ended when I was a senior middle school student. The final decision required Mother to provide a stipend for each child until they were eighteen. Nyima also had to pay Father's medical expenses. Mother received no property from my family because she had abandoned us for a man. Father wasn't very happy about the decision. He wanted Mother to pay compensation for emotional injury and the legal fees, but our relatives convinced him to accept the decision.

I understood Father's feeling. At the same time I felt great relief. It had finally ended.

HAUNTED SCHOOL

I enrolled in the Tibetan middle school in the county seat as a boarding student, along with Tsering. I followed the same rigid routine as I had followed in primary school. The only difference was that I didn't have to take a nap at noon and thus could focus more on study. My friend, Tsomo, became an off-campus student as her family lived in the county seat. My head teacher, Dondru, showed us our dorm, classroom, and the dining hall. The second year students' classroom was next to ours. We met them during breaks. On sunny days we lingered in the sunshine together and chatted.

One day, a second year student named Dawa asked me, "Did you know our school is haunted?"

"What nonsense! I don't believe in such things," I exclaimed.

"I'm not sure, but believing in such things might be good for you," he suggested.

I didn't think any more about what Dawa had said. That night I realized I had forgotten my teacup in the classroom. I went to get it, because I usually had a drink of water at midnight. When I got to my classroom, a candle was lit. The room was bright. A beautiful girl with long hair was studying there. "Why didn't she turn on the light?" I wondered. She was deep in her book. I coughed to let her know I was there. I also didn't want to frighten her. The room was bright enough that I entered without turning on the light. She raised her head, looked at me, and smiled in a friendly way.

"Studying hard?" I asked.

"Yes. I'll take the graduation exam in a few months," she answered.

"Are you are a grade three student?" I asked.

"Yes, my name is Kyitso. Nice to meet you, Pema. I have known about you for a long time," she said.

"I'm flattered. I'm glad to have the chance to meet you before you graduate," I said.

"Thanks!" she said.

"Why didn't you turn on the light?" I asked.

"The teachers on duty don't allow us to stay up too late," she said.

"I see. I don't want to disturb. I just came to get my teacup," I explained.

"Join me if you like," she said.

I thought for a moment before agreeing, "Actually, that's not a bad idea."

I started to study with her every night for an hour. Sometimes we chatted about this and that and at other times, we studied quietly.

One Friday night, I decided to take a break and go to bed early. I left the classroom with my roommates. It was pitch-dark outside. The lights were on in the dorms. We saw someone standing in an especially dark area between two dorm rooms. We kept walking. Hearing the sound of someone grinding their teeth we looked and saw a skull with red eyes and messy hair. We began screaming and lurched backwards. Two girls fainted. All the students came running to see what had happened. Then some boys came out of their dorm room, laughing at us.

"How sheepish girls are!" one said teasingly.

"These girls fainted!" I said anxiously. "Come help us carry them to their dorm room."

"I'm sorry, we just wanted to have some fun," Samdru confessed.

One girl who had fainted regained consciousness, sat up, shouted, "Ghost!" and tried to run away.

We held her tight and explained that there was no ghost. Many students had nightmares that night. The girls in my dorm were too scared to sleep alone so two or three girls squeezed into one bed. We chanted mantras aloud.

The next day, the first morning class was canceled and the school held a meeting. The principal announced that students were not allowed to bring frightening objects to school. The four boys who had brought the skull to school, were placed under surveillance. The boys had told the teachers that they brought it from a sky burial site. They apologized to the girls for frightening them.

The teachers agreed that the skull should be returned to where the boys had found it. Only a few female teachers were available and they were too afraid to take it back. Finally, the school cook's husband volunteered, tied it on the back of his bicycle, and

peddled off. The next morning the cook didn't appear. I heard that he had hung himself after he returned from the sky-burial site.

These incidents frightened me so much that I didn't want to walk alone between my classroom and dorm at night. I wanted to tell Kytso about my decision and went to find her. The students in the graduating class told me there was no student in their class named Kytso. I couldn't believe it. I thought they were kidding me. I found Dondru, the head teacher of my class and told him my story about Kytso. When I asked him to tell me something about her, he took out a graduation album, flipped through it, found one photo, and said, "Do you mean the Kytso in this picture?"

It was Kytso wearing a light green suit. Her braided hair, long and thick, was in front, hanging down her left shoulder, touching her waist. I thought, "This is exactly how she looks every time we meet, although her face has more color in this photo than when we've met in the classroom."

I pointed to the photo and said, "Yes, this is Kytso."

"I'm sorry to tell you that she passed away two months before her graduation. This picture was taken just before she passed away," Dondru said.

"But we've been studying together for about two months now," I insisted, and tried to convince him that there was a mistake.

"She diligently studied an extra hour in the classroom every night," Dondru continued. "She was kind and courageous. I was going to talk to you about this. The teachers on duty reported you weren't in your dorm room at night when they checked. No one knew where you were. I believe you were studying in the classroom, but you must be in your dorm room at the proper time from now on. Understand?"

"Yes," I agreed.

I felt very sad to hear that Kytso was no longer alive and thought, "Maybe she doesn't know she's dead. I'll meet her tonight and tell her that I am no longer allowed to study after night classes."

That night, I quietly got up and went to the classroom after everyone in my dorm room was asleep. I saw Kytso as I opened the door. It slowly creaked open on its rusty hinges. She raised her head and smiled when she saw it was me. I walked over and sat in front of her.

"Kytso, I'm no longer allowed to study after night classes," I said.

"I understand. I'm glad you came. I thought you might not come," she said.

"You're a good friend," I said. "I like studying with you. I didn't want to stop coming without saying anything."

"Thank you!" Kyitso said,

"It's so nice to know you," I said. "I'll always remember you."

I held out my hand to her. When she reached out to take it, her hand went through mine. "Why?" she asked in shock.

"Never mind! I felt you in my heart," I replied.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know we couldn't shake hands," I said.

"But why not?" she asked.

"I was told that you died three years ago, but you will never die in my heart," I said gently.

"That explains why no one will talk to me. Thank you, Pema! Aren't you afraid of seeing me?" she asked.

"You're a good friend and I know you would never harm me," I said.

As she gazed at me, it seemed she was seeing something through me. Then she collected herself with a deep sigh and looked calmer. "I know where I am supposed to go now. Goodbye Pema!" she said.

At that very moment, a strong wind extinguished the candle and the room went pitch black. I called out, "Kyitso!"

She didn't reply.

I guessed that she had left with the wind. It was hard for me to accept that she was gone forever. I felt depressed. Images of her studying alone under the dim candlelight swam before my eyes in the inky atmosphere. I said goodbye to her, found my way out of the classroom, and returned to my dorm room. I sighed and stayed awake the whole night.

BABYSITTER

Two weeks later I was reviewing lessons for the afternoon class. Tsomo ran into the classroom exclaiming, "The primary school's principal's daughter, Drolma, is looking for you."

I went outside where Drolma was waiting for me. We greeted each other. She told me that her husband, Pasang, was working in a township and unable to return home on the weekends. She thus needed help taking care of her one-year-old daughter, Meto, whose pet name was 'Little Friday'.

"Would you come stay with my family and help me?" she asked.

I thought this was a good chance to help me forget about Kyitso so I agreed. "Sure! You need to get permission from the principal and the head teacher of my class."

"Thanks! Let's go talk to them now," she suggested.

A few minutes later, the principal and Dondru had both agreed.

It was soon time for the afternoon class so I left for my classes and she went to work.

Drolma came to meet me after the afternoon classes, took me to her home, and announced, "This is now your new home."

A new routine began. I got up in the morning around seven-thirty, walked to school, returned to my new home for lunch, returned to school, and then came back for dinner and to sleep. I washed and cleaned before returning to school for afternoon classes. On weekends, I got up early, studied outside for an hour or so, went back inside, prepared hot water for Drolma and her daughter to wash, had breakfast, and then washed all the clothing by hand. Sometimes I finished washing before lunch but at other times, I didn't finish until suppertime. After I finished the laundry, I helped Drolma bathe her daughter. I learned how to cook and how to raise vegetables in their little greenhouse. I studied at night after I finished washing the dishes.

This new routine kept me busy and gave me little chance to think of Kytso. I felt quite at home with Drolma and was treated nicely in return. I liked them. I considered myself to be part of their family.

About a year later, I woke up in the morning around seven. I got up and suddenly felt dizzy. Everything in front of me seemed to be moving. Suddenly I could see nothing but vaguely heard the sound of my body hitting the table. When I regained consciousness, I found myself sitting on the floor with my upper body sprawled across a table next to my bed. My feet were numb and I was utterly exhausted.

I got up, dressed, made my bed, washed my face, and brushed my teeth. I was running out of time and couldn't have breakfast. I started off, slowly walking to school with my school bag on my back. It normally only took twenty minutes for me to get to school, but this time it took about forty-five minutes. I was so tired and weak that I had to stop and rest every few minutes. I saw my classmates walking by. A few asked if I wanted them to wait for me. I said that I was fine and told them to go on.

When I finally made it to my seat in the classroom, I felt very cold. As I waited for the class to begin, I began trembling. I put my arms around my waist to feel warmer, but it didn't help much. The first lesson was a Tibetan language course. The teacher, Dondru, came into the classroom and we greeted each other.

He looked at me and asked, "Are you OK?"

"Yes," I assured him.

"Are you sure? You look sick," he persisted.

"I just feel cold, but I'm fine," I said.

"OK, let's have class then," he continued.

We started class. I soon began shaking so strongly that my teeth chattered. My head, body, and face felt painful. Tears flowed from my eyes. Dondru walked to me, touched my forehead, and exclaimed, "Oh my! You are burning with fever. You need to go home immediately," he said

I couldn't say anything. I sat still and held myself tightly with both arms.

"You don't have to come back until you get better. I can't take you home. Will someone volunteer to send Pema home?" he asked.

"I can," Gesar volunteered.

"You know how to ride a bike, right?" Dondru asked.

Gesar nodded so Dondru gave him his bike and the key to the bike lock.

We walked out of the classroom. I felt very weak and couldn't walk steadily. Gesar held my left arm, supporting me, put me on the back of the bike, and off we went with him peddling. I didn't have enough strength to hold tight and told him that I was sliding off. He then held a handlebar with his right hand and held on to me with his left hand. When we reached Drolma's office, Gesar returned to school. Drolma took me to the county seat hospital where the doctors found that I had a high fever and diagnosed me with tuberculosis. They said I needed to have intravenous drips for a week and then take medicine for six months. I could choose to stay at the hospital or go home at night after my high fever was gone.

Drolma told me that my illness was contagious and that I could not stay at her home in fear I might infect her daughter and other family members. I fully understood that she was doing the right thing and agreed to stay at the hospital.

Drolma said that she would send a message to my father, who would then come and care for me. I stayed alone at the hospital the whole day. My body was a trembling container full of pain. My mind also began to shake and I decided that I would die alone in the cold, silent patients' room.

Sad and disappointed by such a conclusion, tears slowly rolled from the corner of my right eye. I thought that deities in Heaven experienced no suffering other than death. Sweet fragrance emanates from the deities and accompanies them until they are apprehended by the hands of death. Sweet fragrance then leaves and is replaced by a stink, which explains why family, friends, and acquaintances release the hands of those that are dying, leaving the dying one alone. Dying deities must also endure sadness brought by abandonment and miserably suffer from lonely death.

Then I reminded myself, "I'm not a deity. I'd rather die than be unwanted. I know I'm not a member of Drolma's family." I closed my eyes and thought of Father and my siblings. I felt their love and knew they would never abandon me. These last thoughts warmed my little heart.

I heard someone walk into the room and opened my eyes. A short young woman with long dark-brown hair changed the bottles of drips and took my temperature.

"Am I going to die?" I asked.

"No, you got here in time," she said with a bright, confident smile. "Your condition has stabilized."

"Thanks!" I said brightening a little.

After she left the room. I thought, "Joy and sorrow are so fleeting, coming and going." Neither happy nor sad, I lay in bed, hoping the pain in my body would soon leave.

I opened my eyes the next morning and found Father sitting by me, waiting for me to awaken. "I got the news late yesterday afternoon that you were hospitalized. I got here at midnight. You were asleep. You are a gift given to me by miracles. I know you won't suddenly leave me."

He had some rice porridge ready, lifted my head, and spoon-fed me. He nursed me in the gentlest way.

I left the hospital a week later. I was informed that the school was closed for a month and that I could return to school after that. I went home with Father. Sister and my brothers nursed me, not allowing me to do any family chores. I soon felt normal and completely regained my health. I was very glad to be back at home.

A month later, Father took me back to school. He told my head teacher that I shouldn't participate in activities that required physical work. I decided to board at school. I thought it was unnecessary to talk to Drolma about my decision, because I was still taking pills for the tuberculosis.

Three weeks later, Drolma visited me and asked about my illness. She wanted me to stay with her. Before I could say anything, two wolves fought in my heart. One wanted to go and the other wanted to stay at school. Drolma eventually convinced me to live with her. I resumed my former routine, taking care of Meto, washing, cleaning, cooking, and studying. I often wondered if I was just a live-in babysitter, but I really loved that little girl and her family.

Three years passed. I had to study harder and prepare for the entrance exams to senior middle school. Drolma gave birth to a second daughter and invited a new babysitter to come live with her. I was mentally prepared to move back to school, however, Drolma encouraged me to stay with them. Again I agreed, but did fewer family chores. In the afternoons, right after dinner and before night classes, I went to study next to the river. Sometimes Drolma gave me free lessons at night for one hour. She wanted me to enter senior

middle school. She knitted a woolen sweater for me. These kind deeds made me feel like I was a part of her family. I didn't want to disappoint my family members with low marks so I studied diligently.

A temple (May 2014, Golok Prefecture Seat).



A MASKED MAN

One day as I was studying alone by my usual river, I looked up and saw a tall man striding towards me. He was very neat and clean with dark-brown, neatly combed hair. His thick, dark eyebrows were slightly curved. He had long eyelashes and double-fold eyelids. His smooth fair skin, high nose, and deep-set eyes made him more attractive, adding to his charm. He was wearing a long black coat, dark blue jeans, and a pair of black leather shoes.

I was completely taken by his appearance and gazed at him with wide open eyes.

"Hi Pema! Studying hard as usual?" came a clear, strong voice from under the dark mask he wore.

"What?" I said in an odd, awkward voice and then looked down.

"It's OK, I've been observing you," he said.

My face flushed and I felt whatever was in my head leave. My heart was beating furiously. I could hear its urgent throbbing. I didn't know what to do or say. I held my hands over my heart. My body was not coping well with this exceptional man.

He slowly sat down on the ground, leaned back on his arms, and gazed into the blue sky. He patted the ground with his left hand, suggesting that I sit near him, which I nervously did. I looked at the river and saw moving reflections of him watching me studying, and watching him watching me. It was embarrassing. I made various awkward actions during the short breaks that I took.

"My name is Namgyal," he finally said.

"How... how... did you know... my... name?" I managed.

"I come here every day. Your splendid performances brought some fun to my boring life," he said.

"Are you being sarcastic?" I asked.

"No, no, I really enjoyed it," he assured.

I sat quietly.

"May I join you when you are studying? I won't interrupt you," he proposed.

"Sure," I answered.

From then on I met him there every afternoon. When I took breaks, he told me what he had heard, including ghost stories. We chatted about this and that. Time flew by. Two years passed. I was in love.

I graduated from junior middle school, took the senior middle school entrance exam, and was ready to leave for the prefecture capital in a few days to start classes there. I asked him to take off his mask so that I could see his face.

"No. Something terrible happened and I no longer have a chin," he said. "You are not prepared to view this reality."

I thought he was joking, but he insisted.

As he was walking me back home, a car dashed towards us. He shoved me to the side of the road. I fell. Brakes squealed and the car stopped. A middle-aged man with a terrified pale face came bounding out of the car. He ran to me, sat by me, and demanded, "Are you hurt?"

I lifted my head, using both of my hands to push myself up.

"Namgyal!" I called.

I rushed to the car. I didn't see him. I was very alarmed, thinking the car might be on top of Namgyal. I bent down, called his name, and looked under the car. I saw only a mass of gray air vanish and, an instant later, cold air brushed my face. Tears wetted my cheeks as I cried out his name and raced around the car.

I grasped the driver's arms and demanded, "Where is Namgyal? Did you kill him?"

"I didn't see anyone with you," he replied. He was in shock. His body began shaking. I lost consciousness.

A short time later I was awake. My body felt very light. I heard the driver shouting, "Wake up!" I saw my own body lying lifelessly in the driver's arms. He was shaking me and telling me to wake up. I was so horrified that I didn't know what to do.

I heard a very gentle, familiar voice say, "It's all right! Don't be afraid." Namgyal was standing next to me. I was so happy that I forgot about that other me, lying lifeless nearby. I ran to Namgyal. I looked all over his body to see if he was injured.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

"No, I move very fast," Namgyal said. "You don't need to worry about me."

"I thought I had lost you," I said, hugging him, and sobbing with happiness.

"Silly girl, don't cry. Let me give you a surprise to cheer you up," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"You will know soon. Close your eyes," he instructed.

I closed my eyes as he gently placed his hands over my eyes. His hands were very soft and gave me a sense of great comfort. When he allowed me to open my eyes, we were in a big inhabited area atop a mountain. A lady was saying, "I need to plow and plant three different grain crops here."

She saw us, turned, and greeted us with a little bow.

I saw a flying fish carrying a short lady up one side of the mountain.

I saw a group of people fighting over a pile of old shoes on the other side of the mountain.

Another group of people were lying on a little bridge that crossed a muddy river, picking up objects bobbing by in the current.

Everyone stopped and greeted us. Namgyal returned their greeting, waving his right hand. He told me that he had grown up here and knew everyone.

Namgyal showed me a colorful swing made of gum and wanted me to swing. I got on the elastic swing and rode it back and forth.

Namgyal invited me to stay there with him forever. I agreed. Just as we were about to go to his place a monk approached, greeted Namgyal, looked at me, and said, "You should leave."

"I want to stay with Namgyal," I pleaded.

"No, no, no, he is right. You should go back now," Namgyal said.

"What?" I asked.

"I know how much you want to be with me. That is enough for me. I shouldn't be selfish," he added.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We should say goodbye and live in our own individual worlds," Namgyal said, sorrowfully holding back tears. He embraced me and then put his right hand on my head. I didn't want to say goodbye but then, all of a sudden, everything went blank.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. Something was in my hand. I looked at it closely and saw a picture of Namgyal holding a beautiful lady in his arms. I knew he wanted me to forget him. I realized that there was no hope for me. I cried.

The driver was sitting by my bed. He looked at me in surprise. "Where is Namgyal?" I asked.

"I don't know who you're talking about. The doctors told me you can leave the hospital when you wake up," he said.

"Find Namgyal," I said, and showed him Namgyal's picture. "He was with me. He pushed me away before your car hit me. Now take me to him."

The driver looked confused. Finally he said, "I... I don't know who you are talking about, but I can take you to his home if you know where he lives."

I went to look for Namgyal with the driver. We eventually found his family's house. It was old and it seemed no one had lived there for years. The ceiling had collapsed. Dust and dirt covered the floor. Cobwebs were everywhere. The walls were crumbling.

I asked a neighbor if they knew where Namgyal and his family were. He looked confused and said, "Namgyal and his family died in an accident many years ago."

I was traumatized by this revelation. The feeling of losing another beloved one was hard for me to accept. I didn't explain how I knew him or how he had saved my life. My heart felt great pain. My body was collapsing. Tears filled my eyes. I felt weak. My feet were not strong enough to support me. I leaned against the wall and crumpled heavily to the ground.

"I think you should go home," the driver said helping me into the car. He drove me to Drolma's home and told Drolma that I was very weak and needed to rest. Drolma thanked him and put me in bed. She asked me if I felt sick.

I shook my head.

Drolma sat next to me on the bed as I stared at the ceiling. "Were you dumped by a boy?" she asked.

"No, he saved my life and I lost him," I said, bursting into tears.

Drolma was shocked and asked me to tell her everything. I told her the whole story. She listened patiently and comforted me. When I finished, she told me to cry as much as I needed. "Just

remember that your life continues his life. You should treasure it more," Drolma advised.

I was depressed and thought of Namgyal all the time.

I recovered from my depression the day I said goodbye to Father. I recognized that I was selfishly ignoring the feelings of those around me. I knew that I shouldn't let my grief disturb their lives and emotions. I also realized that I had thoughtlessly forgotten the revenge I needed to take on Mother and her lover. I gave Father a warm goodbye hug and bright smile. He was relieved and happy to see me smiling. My attitude made it easier for him to let me leave.

Nyanbo Yutze (August 2013, Jigdril County).



INNER CHANGE

An event at school triggered an inner change. It started with Tsomo and me, the only students in our classroom. She was studying quietly. I was thinking of Namgyal. I wasn't sad; I just missed him and the time we had shared. I was reflecting on how I had been ready to give up everything for him. He chose to give me up for my own good. I wondered if that was love's magic power.

"Pema, here is a letter for you," Drolmatso called with excitement. She was a kind, thoughtful girl and very friendly. We were in the same grade, but in different classes. We shared the same dorm room.

"A letter for me?" I asked. "Who sent it?"

"It's from your mother," she said, handing it to me. "Are you going to read it?"

I took the letter as anger flared up inside me. She had abandoned me for so many years without a word. She had been dead to me. How cruel for her to remind me of her existence in this way. I tore the letter into bits and threw them into the air.

"I will tear her apart like this with my bare hands!" I declared.

"I'm sorry," Drolmatso said, "I hesitated for a long time before I brought it to you. Finally I convinced myself that I should let you decide what to do with it."

"Hmm, you shouldn't have taken it in the first place," I said.

"But... I ...was..." she said.

"Just forget it. It's nothing," I interrupted.

We sat silently. A deadly coldness stole over me. I felt an electric vibration pass through my body. An inner voice suddenly asked, "Why are you so angry? What is the sin of being in love? Weren't you ready to give up everything, including your life, when love embraced you? Wasn't that crazier than running away? Weren't you prepared to cast away all your responsibilities for love? Weren't you about to break the hearts of those you loved the most by abandoning them?"

I didn't know which part of me was talking with that voice, but the questions were firmly verbalized, confident, and full of common sense and logic. It was not as simple as forcing me to put myself in Mother's shoes and understanding her choice. It was more. It was a sudden attack on my ideas that I had insisted on for a long time. It was also an unexpected eruption from the world of hatred I had lived in for years. I felt a great sense of loss. I lingered in slow mortification as my world disintegrated. I didn't know how to react. I fell into depression and had an acute feeling of inferiority. Shame, guilt, and sin came at me like thunder and lightning, shattering my determination to take revenge. I was dragged and flooded out of my world of hatred. I felt uncomfortable, as though I were standing completely naked in front of a large crowd. I could find no comfort zone in which to hide. I felt pain, as though my skin was being peeled off - as though my body was being sliced into tiny bits. I let loose a blood-curdling scream, "A...A.... H...H...H...!"

"Are you OK?" Tsomo asked in alarm.

"I feel uncomfortable," I said with a deep sigh.

"Maybe you should go get some rest," suggested Tsomo.

I agreed, stood, and was about to leave when Drolmatso again apologized, "I'm sorry! I shouldn't have brought that letter to you."

"Yeah! But done is done," I said. "Don't mention it again."

"I won't," Drolmatso promised.

Tsomo walked me to the dorm, holding my left arm to support me.

"Your face is unusual. I cannot read your emotion today."

Tsomo said, "Cry if you are sad. Kick the wall if you are angry."

"I'm collapsing," I explained. "I have no energy to do anything."

"Well, go to bed and rest well," advised Tsomo.

I lay in bed as Tsomo sat next me. I closed my eyes and sank into dreamy thinking as Namgyal appeared in a space in the darkness.

Profound love has no faults. Love refreshed my heart and spiritually energized me. Love healed me and made me forget my heart's deepest wounds. Love gave me hope in the most miserable of situations. Love is just that powerful.

I felt sorry for Mother. If she hadn't left us and had not beaten Father down, our love for her would never have become hatred. If she

had chosen an alternative way to handle her life, the outcomes would have been different.

I then understood the saying, "The more you love, the more you hate!" I had loved Mother more than anything before she had abandoned us. I hated her most after that. Hatred was such a powerful emotion. My misbehavior had made it become wicked, fueling the flames of anger and giving me energy to devote myself to exacting revenge.

However, neither love nor hatred changed the situation for me. Being unable to change the situation bothered me the most. Maybe giving up on both love and hatred was the way to live a better life. Thinking of it that way hurt terribly. Yet there was nothing I could do. That thought made my world suddenly become empty, aimless, and meaningless. I felt I was like a little wind, haphazardly floating in space with no destination and no control over anything.

I wanted to drop out of school and go home. If revenge was no longer my inspiration, I needed to find something to motivate me to study. "What am I longing for in life, if not revenge? Can I achieve it without schooling?" I asked myself. "Being able to help and take care of my family?" That wasn't good enough. My sister and other siblings were doing that well without having attended school for a day. I couldn't do better.

"I could not be a burden to my family members?" That wasn't good enough, because I could marry someone and no longer be a burden to my family.

"To live a better life that allowed me to repay the kindness of my family, friends, and people around me?" Yes, I accepted this, as I couldn't think of anything better. The only thing I could do was to face reality with a positive attitude.

Every night I prostrated and prayed to Vajra Buddha, confessing my sin of wanting to kill Mother and her lover. Each time I am angry at someone, I chant the mantra of Vajra Buddha and visualize his image in front of me. This helps me become less emotional. Hoping that what happened to me will not befall others, I prayed to Tara to save all sentient beings from suffering.

"You didn't read the letter from your mother, but from the day you received it you changed," Tsomo observed one day.

"I guess anger burned away all my negative emotions," I said.

The second semester would end in a few months. My family had no money for my second school year tuition fees. Father said he wouldn't stop me attending school, but I had to find the tuition money myself. I realized money had the power to determine my future.

I wrote to the school and Education Bureau several times, but I didn't hear back from them. I talked to my head teacher, who said he had discussed my situation during the teachers' meeting, but the school had no scholarship projects and also had rejected my request to not charge me tuition. He said there was nothing he could do to help me. This news and continuing silence from the Education Bureau made me realize my situation was hopeless.

"This might be my karma," I thought. "I'll have to go back home and have a life like Sister's." She got up around four or five in the morning, milked the yaks, made breakfast, churned the milk, made butter and cheese, piled up yak dung, made lunch, washed dishes and clothing, collected dry yak dung for a fire, milked the yaks again in the afternoon, and made supper. She didn't get much rest. She was the first one to get up and the last one to go to bed. She was the busiest person in our family and had the most responsibilities. There was never a day for her to be away from her duties. I appreciated her and so did my family members, but most people did not. I wanted a different life, one that would allow me to be more helpful to others and more meaningful for myself.

WEREWOLVES?

I was grazing yaks on a mountain-top one snowy day in mid-January. Sitting by a small path I was wondering if I was a little, fragile snowflake. Suddenly, a fireball streaked down from the sky and landed some distance away from me.

"Wow, a fireball! I would definitely have been burned to a crisp if it had struck me," I said to myself.

The fireball was transforming into something. A little later, a horseman surrounded by flames emerged from the fireball and came towards me along the path near where I was sitting. I stood and climbed up to a higher place to make way for the strange horseman. When he got near me, I noticed he had one eye and was riding a one-eyed horse.

"Oh, my!" I said in astonishment.

I rubbed my eyes and looked at him again. Nothing had changed.

"What a surprise," I said.

"You see me don't you?" he said. "Get on my horse."

"That's a strange command. Why should I?" I thought to myself.

"You will soon understand," he said.

In the blink of an eye, I found myself sitting behind him on the horse. I wanted to get off but I couldn't move or speak.

"Resistance is useless," the man said.

The horse took us into a deep cave. The flames emanating from the horseman pierced the darkness of the cave.

"A one-eyed horseman with flames on his body? How strange," I thought.

"Your body also radiates light, but you don't see it," the horseman explained.

"Oh! He knows my thoughts," I said to myself.

"You know my thoughts, too," he said.

"You are not talking to me, are you?" I asked.

"We are communicating without speaking," he said.

My attention was then attracted by red, blue, green, and yellow crystalline colors radiating from the cave wall.

"What are those colorful things?" I asked.

"They are holy talismans of this planet's energy and my treasures."

"Holy talismans? Yours?" I asked.

"In your words, they are minerals such as gold, coal, and crystal," he said.

"What is your interest in them?" I inquired.

"I keep them untouched. Touching them makes them lose their natural power and energy, and that destroys the balance of energy."

The horseman stopped, commanded, "Off the horse," and then I was standing on the ground next to the horseman.

It was like magic. When he said it, it happened. I took no action nor did I even feel like taking action.

"Maybe he is a magician," I thought silently.

"I'm not a magician. I am a mountain watcher," he said.

"A mountain watcher and a brain talker?" I thought in confusion.

"Thought communicator. In your words, I am Zan, a mountain being," he said as he dismounted.

He clapped his hands and the cave vanished. We were standing atop a little hill in an entirely different world. The hills and grasslands were lushly decorated with beautiful flowers of various colors and sizes. There were no trees. I could see far into the distance and I was attracted by this landscape.

"This is your new home!" he said, moving his hand in a sweeping gesture, indicating this vast landscape.

All the creatures of this place were one-eyed. The eye was in the middle of their forehead, right above their nose.

I began walking without thinking what he meant by "your new home." Flowers danced around me, moving away to avoid my steps. A gentle wind made them bob about. It was all in slow motion amid tender music. Colors and the music merged on this landscape beneath low white clouds that resembled animals. The clouds gently swayed back and forth in rhythm to the music.

"Everything dances here," I exclaimed.

"Yes, and my heart dances for you, too. Will you marry me?" he asked.

I wasn't sure what I had just heard. I turned and saw all sorts of colors pouring from his body, which was moving along with the flowers around him.

"That's sweet, but no," I declined.

"Your existence is wasted in the human world, so why don't you use your power and strength to protect the earth with me?" he said.

"Everything I care about is in my world," I said.

"Don't make such an important decision too hastily. I'll give you two days to consider it," he offered before vanishing along with the music, flowers, wind, and clouds. It was so quiet that I could hear myself breathe. I sat on the ground and looked at the mountain ranges around me. I thought of my family and those I cared about. I wanted to return to my own world.

I don't know how long I was lost in my thoughts when he returned. He was upset and said, "The lama and witches of your world are telling me to send you home."

"Will you do it?" I asked.

"I will send you to your home world, but not to your home," he said.

"I can walk home myself if I get back to my home world," I said.

"I'm sorry, but I'll keep you until it's time for you to make your final decision," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You'll know soon enough," he said, and holding my left shoulder with his right hand, we were suddenly flying through the air like shooting stars. After a few moments we were near my family's tent, standing on a rocky hill that was very near my family's livestock enclosure.

"I'm back home!" I said.

"Yes and no. You are here for just one more day," he said.

"What? Just here?" I asked.

"Lie down," he commanded.

I was suddenly lying on the ground. It had happened without my knowledge of any process of thinking about lying down or moving to lie down. I was just lying on the ground. He gave a long sigh,

suggesting that he was stressed. He picked up a little stone that was about the size of a prayer bead, held it between his fingers, and looked at it carefully. He gazed at me and gently put the bead on my chest above my heart.

"I'm sorry! I'll come tomorrow. I hope you give me good news," he communicated and then vanished again.

I tried to get up, but I couldn't move. Sister came, calling my name. Thinking she had seen me I answered, but she didn't hear me. She walked by without seeing me. She called my name repeatedly, anxiously looking here and there. She was losing her voice from calling my name so many times. Her eyes were swollen from crying. She was pale and thin. I knew she was worried about me.

I cried, struggled, and called to Sister, but nothing helped. I felt I was divided between two different worlds and that I belonged to neither. Afraid and lonely, I was numb from not moving. My body had lost all feeling. I felt no hunger, thirst, coldness, nor did I feel the warmth of the sun.

Sister came back with the yaks. She was still looking for me and calling my name. I was scared the yaks might step on me. I tried to shoo them away, but they also didn't see or hear me. Several yaks walked through my body as if I were air. One yak stepped on the ground through my face with its left feet and through my throat with its right feet. I didn't feel pain. In the world of the yaks, I didn't exist, yet, stuck between worlds, I could see them walking through me. I could see everything around me - my parents, brothers, and Sister herding the yaks into the livestock enclosure and then going into the tent. Blue smoke came out from the smoke hole. I saw the light of a lamp in the tent. I knew they were cooking supper.

My family members went to answer the call of nature, one by one, signaling that they would soon go to bed. Sister released my family's dog. It barked, ran in circles around Sister, barked again, and came towards me. Sister called my name, looked around, and listened, hoping to hear my response. Hearing nothing, she re-entered the tent. When the light in the tent went out, I knew everyone had gone to bed.

It was a clear, quiet night, except for the wind hissing through the grass. Stars twinkled brightly in the sky. It seemed everything had gone to sleep.

The dog stopped next to me, looked at me, and barked a few times.

"You see me?" I asked.

The dog sniffed me and wagged his tail.

"If you see me, please move the stone off my chest," I said.

He sat next to me and stayed with me the whole night.

At dawn, Sister came out of the tent and called the dog. He barked, but didn't run to her as he usually did. Sister opened the livestock enclosure and drove the yaks up to the mountain. The dog barked and stopped the yaks from walking through me.

Sister noticed and realized something was peculiar. She came over to investigate. The dog scratched at me with his front right paw. Sister looked at him and me, bent down, and scratched him.

"Nothing's here. Nothing's wrong. Good boy, let's go home," Sister said.

They left. I was again alone without the power to move. I waited, hoping Zan would return soon. I had decided not to marry him, even if I died there like that.

He came in the early afternoon, sat next to me, and removed the little stone.

"I heard your thoughts. Even if you agreed to marry me, the lama and witches of your world would continue disturbing me until I allowed you to return."

"You're letting me go?" I asked.

He sat silently. I felt happy and sorry. I felt happy to be able to reunite with my family, but I was sad and sorry for the loneliness Zan endured. "I hope I am reborn in your world in order to be with you," I said.

"No more talking or thinking, please!" he said.

Picking up a piece of grass, he tied me up with it, and rolled me down from the hill into a nest full of werewolves. It was horrifying. Under their tangled hair, their red eyes burned with a desire for food. Their filthy fingernails were long and sharp and their fangs jutted out from their wide-open, drooling, slobbering mouths.

As soon as my body struck their nest, they wildly came running, viciously fighting each other for my body. Each of their scratches was unendurably painful. It seemed hundreds of knives were slashing my flesh. I struggled in the most extreme terror and tried to escape. They untied the string restraining me and then four

or five of them held me down, but they didn't bite me. Instead, they forced lava into my mouth. My whole body was seared by this unspeakable violation as the lava travelled through my digestive system. I felt dizzy and then lost consciousness.

I woke up feeling very weak. The sunshine streaming through the tent hurt my eyes. I moved my head a little and saw all my family members gazing at me.

"She's good now," Father said.

The others were looking at me carefully. It seemed that something about me surprised them.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"What happened to you?" Karwa asked.

"What? How did you get me away from the werewolves?" I asked.

"Werewolves?" they chimed in a single, astonished voice.

"Were you tied up by werewolves?" Sister asked.

"My head hurts? What exactly happened?" I asked.

"You were gone for seven days," Father said. "We asked lamas to divine where you were and what had happened to you. They told us that you were... mmm... if we were lucky you would be back on the seventh day. As they had predicted, we found you next to our tent, tied with a thin rope, which was cutting through your skin and flesh. We could see your bones."

"The lamas gave us blessed holy water mixed with milk," Father continued. "They told us that we needed to give it to you as soon as we found you. We untied the rope when we found you. Your eyes glowed like red embers, your clothing was ragged, and your hair was disheveled as though it hadn't been combed for ages. You didn't recognize us. You said nothing and tried to escape. I don't know where you got the strength, but you resisted us with great power. It was a challenge for the five of us to hold you. Luckily your brothers and I were able to wrestle you to the ground. We poured the holy water into your mouth. You have been unconscious from then until now. The wounds just healed by themselves like magic, not even leaving scars. What happened to you? Tell us."

"I'm very tired," I said. Just at that moment, I heard the dog barking.

"It's OK," Father said. "Rest well. Let's see who is coming."

Father and my brothers went out while Sister sat next to me.

"Wangmo is coming," Father said, greeting her, and inviting her in.

She was burning with fury. She looked at me and said, "Hmm, back from unconsciousness? I've come to warn you about sleeping on the mountains. If you sleep on the mountains again, none of us will be able to save you, understand?"

"Yes, Mother," I said in a weak voice.

Hearing me call her "Mother" extinguished her anger. She calmed and sat next to Sister and me. She held my hand and said, "Child, I will not let anyone harm you."

"Thank you!" I said.

I knew she meant it from her expression. All my family members knew it too, and thanked her. She stayed for dinner. I quickly regained my strength. Everyone was happy. We all rested very well that night.

Moving to the winter camp (October 2013, Darlag County).



PILGRIMAGE TO THUKCHEN

The next day, Father announced his decision to take the whole family on a pilgrimage to the compassionate Buddha in Thukchen in order to show our gratitude for my return from another world. Our neighbor agreed to look after our yaks and tent while we were gone.

Losang drove his mini-bus that could accommodate eight people, including the driver. Ten of us somehow squeezed in and we set off. There were many new things for us to see. The mountains were higher and valleys were deeper. Trees were bigger and greener. There were fewer livestock. Houses were built of stone and wood. People were shorter, and their clothing and dialect differed from ours.

It only took one day for us to reach our destination. We stayed at a hotel, getting up at four-thirty the next morning to circumambulate the mountain and the monastery. We chanted prayers and prostrated in front of the statue of The Compassionate Buddha - Shenrizug.

Two days later, we started our return home. It was snowy. On our way back we stopped at the home of relatives, who warmly greeted us. We had lunch there. They wanted us to stay at their home for a few days. Father accepted while the rest of us set out on the road again. We needed to return and care for our livestock.

As we were passing by a forested mountain where the zigzag road was frozen and covered with snow and ice, Losang suddenly exclaimed, "I lost it!" as the mini-bus flew off the two-story-high cliff. Time slowed as the mini-bus struck a bed of rocks and made loud breaking sounds. Losang's chest struck the steering wheel with a worrying thump. Sermotso's head struck the windshield.

The mini-bus landed upside down and everyone's head hit the ceiling as it rolled over. This was unlike any of the car accidents that I had seen on TV or in movies. Everything was deadly silent except for the breaking, grinding sounds the mini-bus made as it hit and

skidded on the rocks. No one screamed or shouted. Maybe they were thinking, "What's the use of screaming?"

My head hit the ceiling of the bus and everything went black. The mini-bus rolled down to the riverbed and stopped, standing upright on its now weak, wobbly wheels. Everything was soundless other than the eternal flow of the river's water, too busy in its own world to notice or care what was going on nearby in the terrestrial realm.

"Are you hurt?" came a distant voice that I somehow identified as belonging to Losang.

My vision gradually returned in the same way dawn comes. Slowly the darkness receded and I could make out what was around me, although I couldn't remember what had happened or where we were. The mountain was very high and the valley was deep. We were next to a broken mini-bus. Snow dusted the ground and stones. It was still silently snowing. My siblings scrambled here and there. A white scarf was tied around Losang's chest and he was moving very slowly. He seemed to lack strength as he picked up things.

Zangpo's left eye was badly bruised. Sermotso was weeping. Her arms were full with Chogyi, who had scratches on his forehead and a bloody nose. He seemed lifeless. I felt great regret because this trip had been done on my behalf and now, all my family members' lives were in danger. I saw everyone, but Druksang.

"Where is Druksang?" I asked, "Is he injured?"

"No, he's fine." Tsering said, "He went up the cliff to get help."

I found it hard to believe he wasn't injured when I saw how broken the mini-bus was. I wasn't afraid of dying, but I had come to realize that death could come without warning. I also understood that I could take nothing with me when death came. There was nothing permanent that I could hold on to. These rather depressing insights made me think death was a lonely, solitary journey.

Druksang got some people to help us. I was so happy to see that he was uninjured. It was a miracle that everyone survived such a mishap without serious injury. We all returned home with the help of several kind people.

THE PE CLASS

A new semester started. We had a new teacher for our PE class, which was one of the most popular classes at our school. Most students liked it because they could be physically active and they never felt bored. When the bell rang, we excitedly waited for our PE teacher to come and escort us to the playground for some fun plans.

A tall man wearing jeans and a cap walked into our classroom. He seemed very serious. What he was wearing and his appearance didn't match. "We will surely have a very different PE class this semester," I mumbled to myself.

"Today," he started in a thick, somber voice, "I am going to make two assignments. First, I will assign a spot for each of you to stand on during every PE class of this semester. Secondly, you will write a paper reflecting on our class at the end of the term. I swear that you will regret it if any of you dare disobey. Now move! Get in line and follow me to get to your spot."

Everyone stood and followed him in a line.

I said to Dronkyi, "Let's call him Mr. T since he didn't give us his name."

At this moment Mr. T pointed a finger at me and said, "You stand here. Take your next step when you hear the school bell ring again."

I stopped. I heard him repeating the same order until he had said it to everyone in my class. I thought standing on an assigned spot in each PE class for the whole term was senseless and writing a reflection paper about it was bizarre. This thought grew stronger when I saw the students of other classes enjoying basketball on the playground. Another class was learning basic painting skills in an art class. We were the only ones doing nothing but standing on assigned spots. I felt bored and hated him, but I dared not leave my assigned spot since I felt his eyes were on me.

Thinking of this odd teacher made me achy all over. To feel better, I decided to think about what I could see around me.

The school bell rang. Time had passed faster than I thought. I tried to move, but couldn't. Summoning every bit of my strength, I took a step - a mysterious step that brought several challenges.

I saw some purple and light-blue colored eggs. I felt great interest in these eggs and touched them to see if they were warm. The moment I touched them they became little girls.

"Mommy! Mommy!" the little girls squealed, clutching my clothing with their tiny hands.

I was scared. I wanted to get away from them so I ran to my dorm room. Though they were small, they ran very fast and followed right behind me. When I reached my dorm room, I climbed up to the top bunk and hid behind a sheet, but they were not fooled and followed. I then ran downstairs and stepped through a tall, narrow gate. I was strangely confident they would not follow me inside.

I was right. I had successfully eluded the little girls, but now faced a more dreadful challenge - angry, hissing snakes were slithering all over the yard I had rushed into. I didn't want to get out of the yard from the same gate. I knew the little egg girls would be waiting for me there.

I saw another gate, a wide low one, on the other side. The angry snakes did not want me to go there and swarmed together in an angry, hissing mass, their heads raised, forked tongues darting here and there. They moved forward, encircled me, and began lunging at me. I looked all about, trying to figure out where I could safely go next.

My hair suddenly came alive. It was full of eyes and talons. The snakes pursued me, but they didn't dare attack me because the eyes on my hair stared at them and the talons were ready to fight back. Slowly I stepped forward and reached the door on the other side of the yard.

Not knowing what lay on the other side, I stepped through the doorway and found a labyrinth of passages. The ground was soft and very fragile. I took two lucky steps, but the third step was an awful one. The ground shattered when my left foot touched it. I then saw that thousands of mice and rats were packed underneath. They swarmed around my foot. I jerked my foot up and realized that I would have to step very carefully or the rats would bite me. They observed me from the dark holes that imprisoned me, but for reasons I didn't understand, did not come above ground. They only swarmed

around my feet when I broke the surface. Guessing that they might be afraid of the sunlight, I made sure to stay in the sunshine. I walked very gingerly and lightly.

When I finally emerged from the alleyway, the only way forward was a path leading up to a very steep cliff. Although uncertain that I would be able to climb up to the cliff, I didn't want to return to meet the ugly rats, scary snakes, and annoying little egg girls so I was determined to climb it.

Above me a giant bird with sharp claws and long beak was attacking smaller birds. When I picked up some stones to throw at the bird, it skillfully zoomed towards me with its huge flapping wings making such a whoosh of air that I almost lost my balance. I knew I might roll down the cliff. Once I regained solid footing, I threw the stones I had collected with the last one hitting its head. The big bird then turned and flapped heavily away.

Though I was safe, I thought it might return so I focused on climbing. Reaching the top of the cliff before the big bird returned I gave a huge sigh of relief. However, it wasn't the end of the journey. I needed to cross a river to reach a valley that I somehow knew was my final destination.

Each step that brought me nearer the river, made the river widen, deepen, and flow more swiftly. I knew I couldn't walk or swim across. Realizing that the river desired to drown me, I decided to go around it and walked along the riverbank for a while.

As I was walking, I met Ozer, one of my cousins. I told him all about my journey and the crazy PE assignment. He patiently listened and then wisely advised, "Walk up the mountain on your left. When you reach the top, you will meet a famous Amdo scholar - Gedon Chopel.⁸ Interview him and write about it for your PE assignment."

I looked to the left and saw that the mountain was not too high or too steep to climb. I was excited to find a way to do my assignment after such a long, danger-filled journey. I thanked Cousin Ozer and turned to what I hoped would be my final destination. Then, in the blink of an eye, everything had vanished and I was in an entirely different world.

⁸ Gedon Chopel (1903–1951) was a Tibetan monk and writer. He was an original, controversial figure and is considered an important Tibetan intellectual of the twentieth century.

My classmates were gawking at me. I didn't know if I was looking up at them or they were looking down at me. I blinked my eyes again to continue my journey. Nothing happened.

"Hi! Are you awake?" said Yongba.

"Yes. I was about to reach the end of my journey and finish my PE assignment," I said.

"You fainted three hours ago," Dronkyi said. "We carried you to the dorm. How were you able to work on your PE assignment?"

I touched my head with my right hand and told them about my unfinished journey. That night I wrote about how mentally challenging and boring such a class was for me and handed it in before the next class. I thought Mr. T would get mad at me after reading it, but he didn't. He was happy that I had returned from my unfinished journey. He admitted that he was too extreme and that he had decided not to make students stand still any longer for long periods of time. Instead, we were told to play basketball.

THE GOLDEN FISH

After returning home for the holiday, I helped my family with the chores as I usually did. The day after I returned, I herded the yaks to the top of the mountains to graze. Tired from my trek up the mountains, I lay down for what I thought would be a short rest and soon fell asleep.

A shooting star hit me, awakening me. Feeling very thirsty, I walked down the mountain slope to a stream and drank water for a long time. Weirdly, I still felt thirsty, like my throat was on fire. I went home still feeling extremely thirsty.

"I drank a lot of water, but I can't quench my thirst," I complained to Sister.

"Drink some tea," she said.

"It's not helping much," I said a bit later after gulping down several cups of tea.

"Try some milk," she said.

"That made me feel much better, but I need more," I said after downing a big mug of milk.

Early the next morning I woke up still feeling very thirsty. Unable to find any water, I consumed a cup of fresh butter, which made me feel very comfortable. My raging thirst was gone for the rest of the day. I then had a cup of fresh butter everyday.

Father was worried that something bad might happen to me during the winter or during my time at school because I wouldn't have fresh butter. He then consulted a famous fortune-telling lama, who said a golden fish was in my stomach. He added that this was fortunate because it would bring good luck to my family.

Father asked, "Is it possible to get the fish out of her stomach?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't. That would result in a great loss to your future fortune," the lama replied.

Father returned home hugely disappointed. He took me to see a traditional doctor, who repeated what the lama had said.

"Is there some way that you can get that fish out of her?"

"Yes, but are you sure that's what you really want?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, I'm sure," Father replied.

"Then don't let her eat anything for seven days starting from right now. I will come see her on the seventh day," the doctor said.

We returned home. Father didn't allow me to eat anything. I was fine for the first two days, but then became progressively weaker. I thought I was going to die, but I somehow made it to the seventh day when the doctor came as promised. He was accompanied by his son.

Father greeted them, invited them inside, and asked the doctor what we needed to do next.

"Now let her eat as much as she wants," the doctor said.

Father was puzzled, but agreed. I was literally starving so I ate a huge amount of food. My stomach was in such agony after I finished eating that I began to vomit and eventually out came the golden fish along with the food I had eaten. The golden fish was clearly distressed, flipping here and there. The doctor picked it up, showed it to Father, announcing, "Here it is!"

Father was happy and no longer worried. The doctor turned to his son and said, "Swallow it without hurting it." His son obeyed. Then they left and I lay down to try and regain my strength.

Mother Earth was enraged with what we had done and sent a flood. Sister tried her best to protect me, holding me tight in her arms as we floated along in the rough floodwater. After floating on a river for days, we finally came to a riverbank. I was only half-conscious.

Sister, clad in a beautiful white silk dress, was tenderly holding me in her arms like an infant. As we walked away from the river, a big shadow rose from the river and began chasing us. Sister ran quickly, dropping crystal stars from her sleeves. As soon as Sister moved away from the stars they exploded and became fog, which meant the shadow could no longer see us. I realized that Sister was an angel and was protecting me. She hid me in a little cave and ran incredibly fast to draw the shadow's attention away from me. Running from one point to another, more distant point took just the blink of an eye. When the shadow couldn't catch her it then carefully observed Sister, calculating how it could get in front of her. Noticing that I was no longer in Sister's arms, the shadow looked around and saw me.

"Fortunately, whatever is hidden in the shadows is visible to me," it said, sniffing ominously, and then clutched my shoulder, and jumped. When we landed we were in a totally different world - a valley of shadows and ice.

We started sliding down the mountain as soon as our feet touched the ice. I tried to hide from the shadow man several times, but could not elude it. When we neared the foot of the ice mountain, we found a little ice hill that many people were trying to cross. When I saw a big stove atop the hill I asked, "What is that burning stove?"

"The stove of Hell," I heard in response.

I looked around and saw Namgyal standing next to me.

"You are here too?" I asked.

"Yes, I have been here for a while, waiting for you. I'm so happy to see you! You are the power source for Dorjie and me," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In order to escape this icy world, we need to jump over the stove, but as long as the sun and the moon are trapped there, no one has enough strength to jump over it. We must release them from the stove. I am the one chosen to free the moon and Dorjie is chosen to free the sun, but neither one of us can do it without your presence, which gives us enough power to do what we need to do," he explained.

"I can get the sun out now," declared Dorjie

"Let's do it," said Namgyal.

Dorjie took the sun out of the stove. It was so hot that it burned his skin, but before the sun had enough time to burn him into dust, it flew up in the air, paused for an instant, and said, "Thank you! You will be my deity in your next life," before flying high into the sky.

Then Namgyal lifted up the stove and took the moon from underneath. The moon flew up in the sky. "Jump over now," Namgyal commanded. "You must be the first."

As soon as I jumped, I landed in a dry valley. Dorjie, Namgyal, and all the others followed. I then saw an old lady making a clay statue to honor me. Seeing me she said, "I don't remember this face. You didn't have that face when you were jumping over the stove."

"I'm sorry, but it's OK. The statue you're making is really beautiful," I assured her.

"No, I must have remembered wrongly," she said in disappointment, tore up what she was making, angrily threw the clay pieces at me, and gripped my left arm. Her hand was covered with wrinkles and her fingernails were long and rough.

"It is you who stole my memories! You must now stay here with me so I can be strong," she demanded.

"Old age and death come to us all. It's just a matter of time. Please accept it," Namgyal said.

"Yes, and there is little here that I am attached to," she agreed and then became dust. Only her clothing was left on the floor. She was gone.

"Let's go!" said Dorjie.

We all returned to our homes. Sister was there with my other family members, waiting for my arrival.

"The fortune-telling lama told me you would make it!" declared Father.

"Welcome home! I'm so happy you aren't hurt," said Sister as she hugged me.

SLEEP WALKING? IMPOSSIBLE!

I was drying cheese on a cloth spread out on the ground in the sunshine. Father was busy sewing Tibetan robes for my siblings.

"Father, an ascetic is coming," I said.

Father came out of our tent.

"Good afternoon!" Father greeted. "Please come in."

"Thank you!" the ascetic replied, "My name is Shadralwa. I am here to humbly ask for a bowl of food."

"Sure," Father responded.

Shadralwa came into our home at Father's invitation. When Father asked him to stay a few days to chant some scriptures he readily agreed. He was very calm and had a pleasant smile. I saw no pain in him. "Such peace of mind. How beautiful!" I secretly thought, admiring him.

The full moon that night made everything bright. My family made a bed for Shadralwa in the tent. We all went to bed. After a while, the sound of light footsteps awakened me. I saw our guest totally naked. He was walking. I was shocked and, at first, felt it was bizarre but then thought, "Maybe he is sleepwalking like my brother used to."

I then suddenly thought, "He might be ashamed to return naked." Grabbing a piece of his clothing I followed him, keeping a safe distance between us. I didn't want to scare him or otherwise disturb his peace of mind while he was sleepwalking.

After a few hours of walking, he reached a sky burial site. I watched and observed from some distance as he chanted offering scriptures and then saw him begin to rip himself into small pieces with his own bare hands. It looked like he was picking up things and then throwing them on the ground.

"How amazing for a man to tear himself into pieces so easily," I marveled.

Vultures came flying in a single line to receive these offerings. They circled him three times, and then started to eat his flesh. I could

see how hungry they were from the way they ate his flesh completely without leaving even a bit of flesh on the bones.

Overall, this all made me feel quite miserable.

When the vultures were done eating, they piled up the bones, circumambulated three times, and then flew away in one line.

"Is that how they pay respect and show appreciation?" I wondered.

Realizing I was the only living creature near the sky burial site, I decided to walk back home but, before I moved, I saw the bones twitch and reassemble, forming a skeleton sitting cross-legged. Next, flesh began rapidly growing on the bones. To my utter astonishment, Shadrilwa revived in a very short time and started walking back to my tent along the same route he had come to the sky burial ground.

"This sleepwalker is capable of the impossible," I thought, recalling an old Tibetan saying.

I followed him back. He went to bed and so did I. When I woke up the next morning, I wasn't sure if what I had seen during the night had really happened.

But the same thing happened the next two nights. I began to wonder if he was actually sleepwalking. On the fourth night of what I've described, the hungry vultures flew away after they had paid respect and shown appreciation as before. Then the bones moved to their proper bodily locations and were soon covered with flesh. At the moment Shadrilwa was fully revived, I saw something horrible. My guardian witch mother, Wangmo, using a long sharp knife, and chopped the living Shadrilwa into pieces.

"How brutal!" I muttered.

When she finished, she left so quickly that my eyes could follow her movement only for a couple of seconds.

"That's new for this routine or what?" I wondered sadly when I had somewhat recovered from the shock of what I had just witnessed. By this time Shadrilwa had revived and had started to walk back to the tent as though nothing had happened.

"Oh! Such relief!" I murmured as I followed him from a distance as usual. Still, I felt guilty and uneasy about what I had witnessed.

The next day, Wangmo came to visit, holding a long, white scarf in her hands. She briefly exchanged greetings with Father and

then directly approached Shadrilwa. She prostrated three times and apologized for what she had done the previous night.

I was very curious to hear her explanation for her previous night's actions and listened to their conversation with great attention.

"I'm awfully sorry for what I did to you last night," Wangmo said.

"Please explain what you are talking about," Shadrilwa said in puzzlement.

"Please don't be angry with me," Wangmo pleaded, tears in her eyes, holding her hands together in a gesture of supplication.

"I really need to know what you are talking about in order to forgive you," Shadrilwa replied.

"I shouldn't have done it. In order to show how sorry I am, I will marry Lama Lhadri," Wangmo said, "Please forgive me for my stupidity."

"Isn't Lama Lhadri the most well-known lama in our village?" I whispered to Sister.

"Yes. Shh..." she murmured.

"You know what that means for you, right?" Shadrilwa asked.

"What does it mean?" I asked Sister.

"If she is a witch, which we assume she is, then she will no longer be allowed to do the bad things we think she might be doing," Sister whispered.

"Yes, I do," Wangmo answered.

"You are forgiven, but I do need to know what you did last night. You deserve to be forgiven for anything you did as the result of your sincere and profound apology and promise," Shadrilwa said.

"I have been watching my daughter in order to protect her," Wangmo said.

"I knew you were protecting her, but she isn't your daughter, is she?" Shadrilwa asked.

"Well, she's not my biological daughter, but she was given to me," Wangmo explained.

Shadrilwa looked at me and at Father to gauge our reaction. Father nodded, agreeing with what Wangmo had said.

"OK," Shadrilwa said, and waited to hear more.

"She followed you to the sky burial site," Wangmo said. "I was desperate to prove that what she was seeing wasn't real."

"And?" Shadrilwa encouraged.

"Last night, I went there with a long sharp knife and cut you into pieces," Wangmo sobbed. "But you returned in one piece. Then I realized that I was wrong. I mistakenly thought the very precious offering you were making was evil magic to attract and harm my daughter."

"Oh, I see," Shadrilwa said, "I thought it was an attack from a mountain deity."

"I'm terribly sorry!" Wangmo said.

"You are forgiven as I said, but I must die because of it," Shadrilwa said.

"Please don't!" we all exclaimed.

"We will do anything you ask," Father said.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped," Shadrilwa said and, as soon as he finished, his body collapsed. Rainbow lights emanated from his body and then the bits and pieces of this light coalesced into a single rainbow and vanished.

"I didn't know this was coming or I wouldn't have confessed," Wangmo said with great remorse. "I have killed him twice. It is such a great loss to us all."

"You did it for her. Your confession and sincere remorse will atone for it," Father said.

"I hope so," Wangmo sighed, her eyes full of tears.

Gazing at me in great disappointment, Wangmo said, "Would you like to come stay at my place for a few nights? I have much to tell you and ask you before I marry."

"Yes, sure Mother," I agreed.

"Great!" she said with a sigh of relief, trying her best to hold back more tears. "Come to my place tomorrow, please."

"I'll be there in the afternoon," I assured her.

She then left.

The next day, as promised, I went to her place. She told me that she would marry four days later so I decided to stay until after the marriage. She told me she was a witch, which I already knew, and also said that I had been her mother in my former life, which I had not known.

Wangmo told me witch stories every night. Most of them were about her and me. I learned about good witches who were full of love, and merciless witches who were full of cruelty.

When she married, I was the maid of honor. Three days after her wedding, I returned to my home. My family members were overjoyed to have me back. They were worried that Wangmo might somehow have persuaded me to become a witch. However, when they saw the amulet I wore around my neck, they no longer worried. My family asked me many questions about how we spent our time together. Of course, I only told them about cooking, singing, and going for short strolls because I wanted to keep beings in both worlds safe. Nevertheless, my time with Wangmo lingered in my mind.

Yaks on winter grassland (February 2014, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province).



MY WITCH MOTHER'S MARRIAGE

There were some things I didn't tell you about Wangmo's wedding. I will do so now. On the first night of her wedding, she woke me up. She was sick and scared. "I don't know what to do," she said.

"Sh! It's OK. This is a safe place," I comforted. I knew becoming very ill was a normal reaction when witches first marry a lama. Wangmo began vomiting, throwing up bloody thumbs. Some still had the nails attached.

"This is a normal reaction for being on a holy diet," I said without thinking.

"Yes, but it hurts as though I was in Hell," she complained.

"You know what happens when a witch marries a lama, right?" I asked.

"Yes, an enormous price must be paid," she replied.

"Exactly. Otherwise it wouldn't be such a special occasion for both worlds," I said.

"You're right. You used to tell me stories about marriages between witches and lamas when I was a little girl," Wangmo said. "You told me that a witch no longer can use her magic by herself."

"And?" I encouraged.

"Her magic can only be used with supervision from the lama she's married to," Wangmo continued. "That means she is only allowed to practice her magic for good causes, like helping her lama husband do positive things."

"That's good, right?" I said.

"Vomiting now indicates the weakening of my black-magic powers," said Wangmo.

"What happens if all your black magic power is gone?"

"I must become accustomed to the diet of this world," explained Wangmo.

"That's good," I said, reassured.

"I must not practice any sort of magic for the first three days as I regain my strength," Wangmo said.

"You can survive for three days, right? Three days is not so long," I said.

"I'm scared. I've been in the witch's world for thirty years," confided Wangmo.

"Try and regain your human strength, rather than using your witch power to survive," I said without really knowing what it all meant. However, she got worse and threw up a basin full of bloody thumbs and then became unconscious.

Lama Lhadri chanted purification scriptures and administered holy water. "She will suffer for the next three days, but she will survive and do many good things afterwards," reassured Lama Lhadri.

As the lama predicted, Wangmo suffered great pain the first three days - a cycle of vomiting and fainting. Though I was worried, the lama's words were comforting and gave great hope.

"I feel my whole body is burning in Hell," Wangmo said, vomited, and fainted again.

"Actually, she's not fainting, she's experiencing death. Each of her deaths is payment for her sins," explained the lama.

"How many more times must she die?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I don't know," Lama Lhadri said.

"Will she be able to survive all these death experiences?" I asked.

"Yes, she is a strong woman with a lot of good in her," Lama Lhadri said confidently. "If she had agreed to marry me earlier, I would have been able to stop her from killing that lama."

"I'm so sorry. I was there, but I was paralyzed with fear and unable to do a thing," I said.

"He is a great loss to all beings, but no one was capable of stopping it. Stay here with her while I go greet my guests," Lama Lhadri said and walked out of the room.

Wangmo continued her excruciating ordeal of multiple deaths. I stayed with her, and felt great sympathy. On the fourth day, she said her pain was greatly relieved, she gained much energy, and became more beautiful.

WOLFED AWAY?

Wake up, Mother!" I heard while asleep, but it woke me up. I opened my eyes. Wangmo was sitting next to me and crying. There was something different about her. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, other than the light around her body. No one else in the tent heard her. I wondered why she was calling me "Mother." I mean, I was supposed to call her that. I was confused for a moment and then I recalled what she had told me earlier when I had visited her.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"You must save my sister!" Wangmo said.

"What?" I said.

"Yangtso, the second daughter of your former life," she said.

"What? I have another daughter?" I said, feeling increasingly puzzled.

"She has been wolfed away by her family. I'll give you the details on the way. Please come with me now," she persuaded.

I got up. Looking back at my bed as I walked out of the tent I saw everyone sleeping heavily. I also saw my human body peacefully lying in bed.

"Again? Walking without my human body?" I inquired.

"Only in this urgent circumstance," Wangmo said.

"Why didn't you ask help from Lama Lhadri?" I asked.

"I did. He told me only you could help," she explained.

"Mother, I know you don't remember these things, but you taught us our special family magic in your former life," Wangmo said.

"Tell me more," I said.

"Mother, you began teaching us how to assume other forms when we were about nineteen. You know that Yangtso took the form of carnivores to satisfy her insatiable hunger for meat. The time for making a final determination came after your death. Yangtso chose the form of a wolf. I decided to take the form of a vulture so that I could easily follow her. I tried everything to stop her from killing

animals for years, as you wanted me to do. She behaved herself before her marriage and for about ten years after her marriage. However, she has started hunting again and has killed more and more livestock in the local area in the last few years. She has become a ravenous, bloodthirsty predator. She never killed livestock from her own family as she didn't want to risk losing her magic. Eventually, however, her neighbors began to suspect her. These rumors have travelled back to the ears of her family members."

"One day, when her husband and son saw her walking at midnight in wolf form, they accepted what the neighbors were saying was true. They were scared and didn't know what to do. They went to see Lama Nyima in the monastery. He told them to put prayer flags all around the tent after she had walked out in wolf form. He also said they must absolutely not leave the tent regardless of what they heard until the sun touched their tent the next day. They did this earlier tonight. Now, she cannot enter the tent and is howling in pain. She will be burnt to dust by the light of dawn. You are the only one who can save her."

"Is she worth saving?" I asked.

"Never doubt that. You told me that she would do much more good than bad in her life. She must be saved for the sake of all beings. You also told me if this happens I should bring you to our home," Wangmo explained.

"How can I help her?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I believe you will find the answer by yourself when we get home," she said.

We came to a towering rocky mountain, climbed up the west side, and a door opened.

"Our home? This is a cave. How strange that it is not dark," I said as we walked in.

"Our bodies are lighting it," Wangmo said.

"Nothing's here," I said.

"Everything in here is sealed with a spell. We can only see them after the spell is removed," explained Wangmo.

"Then do it," I ordered.

"Only you can do it at the right time," Wangmo said.

"Hmm," I sighed.

We reached a hearth where a small shiny mirror hung above the dusty fireplace. Wangmo held it in her hands and said, "Precious,

precious, precious mirror, please give my mother her memories and power so she may save her child."

She handed the mirror to me.

"Mother, you are our only hope," Wangmo said.

The moment my hand touched the mirror, a powerful wind entered my body in tandem with the light from the mirror, making me strong and energetic. Pieces of memories hit me, hurting my head. I saw my adorable daughter, Yangtso, and then I saw a helpless, howling wolf. I knew it was Yangtso. I looked into the mirror, closed my eyes, and started chanting without thinking:

Precious, precious, precious mirror
Allow me to gather the mighty night's power through you
Allow me to turn wrong to right
Allow me to change bad to good
Allow me to cleanse sin from my child
Ne De Lala Oh Khara hongda Mo Ye

All my attention was focused on the mirror. I finished chanting and slowly opened my eyes. I looked into the mirror and saw prayer flags fluttering in the air all around Yangtso's tent, giving off blazes of light that kept Yangtso away from the tent. A horse grazing nearby was not affected by the fire. I also saw three talismans hanging on a wall near where I was standing. Several layers of lights with blue inside and red outside were shining. I then knew what I should do. Buddha had given these talismans to me centuries earlier. I put one on my body and handed two to Wangmo - one for her and one for Yangtso.

"Let's go save her," I said.

"Yes, Mother," said Wangmo.

"Go bring Yangtso near her tent," I said.

I went near the horse and asked, "May I enter your body for a very short time please?"

"Hhooo whoo whooo... yes, you may if you promise not to harm anyone," he neighed.

"Thank you! I promise I will harm nobody," I said.

I possessed the horse, walked to the tent, and rubbed my back on the tent robe. It broke forcefully, breaking the rope holding the prayer flags.

Wangmo and Yangtso walked to me. I left the horse. Yangtso held me, and cried like a newborn baby.

"Darling, we nearly lost you," I comforted.

"It's all my fault," Yangtso said remorsefully.

"Your nature is not evil," Wangmo said.

"Learn to let the good control the bad," I advised.

"Mother and Sister, I appreciate this chance. I'll never ever hurt living beings again," promised Yangtso.

"I'll help you," offered Wangmo.

"That's really good," I continued, "We don't have much time left. Please go inside your tent."

"Goodbye for now, Mother and Sister," farewellled Yangtso.

I pushed Yangtso into the tent. At the same time I took the magic and the dark air I saw inside her. Wangmo and I quickly returned to our cave home in the mountain. Wangmo handed me the mirror.

Precious, precious, precious mirror
Allow me to thank you for the power
Allow me to present you my daughter's power
Allow me to cherish you with all that is good
Allow me to accumulate morality in my child...
Ne De Lala Oh Khara hongda Mo Ye.

All my former life's memories and power rushed back into the mirror in the form of light and wind. Once again it shone brightly in my hands. I handed it back to Wangmo.

Taking it she entreated, "Precious, precious, precious mirror, please preserve my mother's memories and power. May no one see you without Mother's presence." She hung the mirror back above the dusty hearth and then we left. After we climbed down from the mountain, I looked back and saw it gradually disappearing into thin air.

"Why is the rocky mountain fading?" I asked.

"Mother, please forget this place," Wangmo said.

"Why?" I asked.

"You have sealed the entire mountain with your spell so that no one will be able to enter it or harm it," Wangmo said. "You told us the more we use it, the more fragile it becomes. It has been disappearing very quickly."

When we reached my home, everyone was still deeply asleep. Wangmo pushed me into my human body and said, "Call me Mother when you are in this body."

I nodded, "Yes," and dozed off as Wangmo returned to her own home.

I resumed my normal life as dawn broke. Wangmo invited Yangtso to visit her and her master. They taught Yangtso how to practice the Dharma. Yangtso then began to develop a totally different inner world. Since then she has never harmed a single sentient creature.

BEDTIME STORIES

A few years ago, when I asked my sister to tell me a story she said she had forgotten all the stories she once knew. This is a common comment and it makes me sad. My own memories of the bedtime stories my siblings and I told when we were children are also fading. Therefore, during the Lunar New Year period of 2015 I decided to write the few stories that I still remembered.

There are four stories. Two are 'ordinary' stories and two are "naughty" or "dirty" stories. "Dirty" stories were never told between siblings in the presence of both boys and girls. Girls sometimes shared such stories very secretly among themselves.

A POWERFUL PRAYER⁹

Long ago, an old lady named Lhamo lived alone in a depression on top of a high mountain. One day, she saw a monk coming towards her black yak-hair tent to beg for food. After hospitably inviting the monk to stay in her tent for the night, she prostrated to him and asked, "Do you know any powerful mantras to keep away thieves?"

The monk knew no such mantras but, seeing how eager Lhamo was, he felt it would be cruel to disappoint her. Just at that very moment, the monk saw two mice scuttle under the tent. "Two mice have arrived!" he said in surprise.

"Two mice have arrived," Lhamo repeated.

When the monk heard Lhamo repeating after him, he thought, "I can't disappoint her by telling her that this isn't a mantra."

He continued observing the mice. When they suddenly stopped after finding a bit of food, the monk said, "They've stopped."

The mice heard the sound of the monk's voice and listened, twitching their ears back and forth.

"They are listening," said the monk.

One of the mice turned back. "One turned back," said the monk. The mice saw no danger so they started eating more of the food that they had found.

"Mouths are moving," said the monk.

Startled again by the monk's loud voice, the mice ran away.

"They are running away," said the monk.

The monk left the next day. Meanwhile, Lhamo faithfully chanted this "mantra" throughout the day.

One day when two thieves really did start to come under Lhamo's tent, they heard her say, "Two mice have arrived."

"Did she see us?" they wondered, stopped, and listened carefully.

Lhamo said, "They've stopped. They are listening."

⁹ CK Stuart retold all four stories in English. The English versions do not exactly match the Tibetan versions.

One of the thieves turned back and said to his companion, "I think she sees us."

At this moment Lhamo said, "One turned back. Mouths are moving."

"She saw us for sure. Let's run!" said the other thief and they started running away.

They heard Lhamo say, "They are running away."

None of Lhamo's yaks were ever stolen after that. Lhamo continued to devoutly chant this powerful mantra and lived a happy life.

THE HEART

Long ago, beautiful Nyima Lhamo lived with her parents on a forested mountain. Her family was poor, but happy. Everyday, she went into the forest and sang as she collected firewood. All sorts of animals came to hear her beautiful voice. In time, these animals also became her friends.

A rich family lived at the foot of the same forested mountain. That family had a young son, Dawa Dondrup, who liked hunting. One day, Dawa Dondrup set off on a hunting trip with two servants. They climbed the forested mountain and were almost to the top when Dawa Dondrup heard a beautiful song. They stopped and listened, then slowly began walking toward the source of the song. As they got nearer, they saw various birds and wild animals gathered around a beautiful woman singing to the animals. As she sang, she gently and affectionately touched each animal.

Dawa Dondrup told his servants to wait and then walked up to Nyima Lhamo. It was love at first sight. They talked for a long time and then Dawa Dondrup helped Nyima Lhamo collect firewood. He didn't want to leave Nyima Lhamo when it was time for her to go home so he helped her carry the collected firewood to her home. He was still reluctant to leave, so he stayed at her home. Nyima Lhamo's family's poor condition didn't affect Dawa Dondrup's affection for her.

The servants eventually returned to Dawa Dondrup's home.

"Where is our son?" Dawa's parents asked them.

"He went off hunting by himself," they replied, not daring to tell the truth.

Dawa Dondrup went to collect firewood with Nyima Lhamo every day, not noticing how the time passed. After almost two weeks had passed, his parents worried that something bad might have happened to their only son. "Where is Dawa Dondrup?" his mother asked the servants again.

"We are going to kill you both if you two don't tell us the truth," said Dawa Dondrup's father.

The two frightened servants then confessed, "He is with the poor family's girl."

"Go tell him that his mother is seriously ill and she wants to see him before dying," commanded Dawa Dondrup's mother.

"Certainly," the two servants said, and set off to deliver the message to Dawa Dondrup.

Dawa Dondrup decided to return home as soon as he received the bad news. He reassured Nyima Lhamo, "I'll come back tomorrow if I can. If I can't come back tomorrow, I'll be back on the seventh day." He then went home with his two servants. When he entered his parents' house, he found his mother was well and sound.

"Forget that poor family's daughter, your father and I have arranged your marriage," counseled his mother.

Meanwhile, Nyima Lhamo waited for Dawa Dondrup to return. Looking pale and thin, he came to see her on the night of the seventh day.

"What happened to you?" Nyima Lhamo asked, somewhat shocked.

Dawa Dondrup said nothing about what had happened and left before dawn.

Seven more days passed and then Nyima Lhamo asked her parents, "May I go down the mountain and see what happened to Dawa Dondrup, please?"

"Maybe his parents don't want you two to be together," her parents said. "Anyway, to better understand what is going on, you can go, but don't go to his home."

When Nyima Lhamo reached the foot of the mountain she heard lamas chanting scriptures at Dawa Dondrup's home. Approaching an old man sitting crossed-legged and chanting in front of Dawa Dondrup's home, she took off the only coral she had. Handing it to him, she said, "Please tell me what happened to Dawa Dondrup's family."

"About fifteen days ago, Dawa Dondrup's parents arranged his marriage. Dawa disagreed because he said he already had a lover. His parents then wouldn't allow him to leave his house. He then refused to eat and eventually died."

Nyima Lhamo first laughed in relief, for she now understood how much he loved her. And then she cried in great sadness, feeling that his love for her meant she would never see him again. She went home weeping.

The same night, Dawa Dondrup came to see her as usual.

"Now that I know you would starve to death for our love, I'm determined to live no longer," declared Nyima Lhamo.

Dawa Dondrup replied, "Maybe you can save my life. If you succeed, we can take care of your parents together for the rest of our lives. If we fail, we can be together in the other world."

Nyima Lhamo told her parents everything, including her lack of willpower to live any longer. "I am going to save Dawa Dondrup's life," declared Nyima Lhamo. "If I don't come back tonight, don't wait for me. I will probably have died." She prostrated to her parents three times and set off on her journey.

She climbed up to the top of the forested mountain and down on the other side. When she reached a river, she saw a beautiful white stupa. "What an ugly, disgusting stupa," she said spitting, and then circumambulated it three times in a counterclockwise direction.¹⁰

She walked along the river and came to an ugly black stupa. "What a beautiful stupa," she exclaimed, took off her hat to show respect, and circumambulated it three times in a clockwise direction.

She crossed a bridge over the river and continued walking. When she came to two sheep with their horns locked together, she untangled their horns and kept walking.

She next met two dogs fighting over a single bone. After dividing the bone into two pieces, she gave one piece to each dog.

When she reached a towering, red, rocky mountain she saw two paths leading inside the mountain. One path was gray and the other was black. Following the gray path, she came to many beating hearts hanging in the cave. "Save me, save me please," pleaded the hearts. But one heart beat very slowly and said nothing. Somehow knowing it was Dawa Dondrup's heart, Nyima Lhamo picked it up and started running back home.

Then she heard shouted very loudly, "Hold her! Don't let her run away! She stole my heart!"

Nyima Lhamo realized she was being chased. When she got near the dogs, the pursuer shouted, "Dogs! Hold her! Don't let her escape! She stole my heart!"

"We had been fighting for ages. Only she was kind enough to split the bone. We can't catch such a compassionate girl," declared the dogs.

¹⁰ Spitting is equivalent to cursing. Counterclockwise circumambulation is understood, in many Tibetan communities, as disrespectful.

When Nyima Lhamo got to the sheep, she heard, "Sheep hold her! Don't let her run away! She stole my heart!"

"Our horns were locked together for ages. She was the only one kind enough to help us. We can't restrain such a kind girl," bleated the sheep.

When Nyima Lhamo reached the black stupa, she heard, "Black stupa, hold her! Don't let her run away! She stole my heart!"

"She was the only one who ever showed me respect. I will not restrain her," replied the black stupa.

When Nyima Lhamo reached the white stupa, she heard, "White stupa, hold her! Don't let her run away! She stole my heart!"

"She was the only person who was brave enough to disrespect me. I dare not hold her," whispered the white stupa.

Just as Nyima Lhamo finally reached her home and went inside, she slipped and fell. Realizing she had lost the heart, she cried, "Mother, I lost the heart!"

Her mother came to help her up, saying I'm so glad you returned alive!"

"Mother, I lost Dawa Dondrup's heart," Nyima Lhamo sobbed.

"What are you talking about?" said her mother, "Didn't you bring him back?"

Suddenly, Nyima Lhamo saw Dawa Dondrup smiling, standing in front of her. Understanding that she had succeeded in saving him, she joyfully embraced him.

They lived the rest of their lives together very happily.

THE MONK'S EARS

A nomad couple, Tashi and Drolma, lived far from their nearest neighbor. One day they invited a clever monk to chant scriptures for their family. After several days, Tashi told the monk that he had to go buy food from the nearest town and wouldn't be able to return until the next day. As he rode off on his horse, Drolma and the monk stood outside the tent, waving goodbye.

As soon as Tashi was out of sight Drolma went back inside the tent. Meanwhile, the monk continued standing outside. Suddenly, the monk shouted, "Oh, yes!" and entered the tent.

"What did my husband say?" asked Drolma.

"Your husband said he hadn't made an ear for the baby and he wants me to help him make it tonight."

"Oh! I see! What a shame to trouble you about this," said Drolma.

That night, the monk had sex with Drolma, who then became pregnant.

The months passed. Some days after giving birth, Drolma was holding the baby while she nursed him. "Thanks to that monk for making such beautiful ears," Drolma said, while gently touching the baby's ears in turn.

"What did you say?" Tashi asked in surprise.

"Wasn't that your idea?" asked Drolma.

Tashi suddenly understood that the monk had tricked his gullible wife. Not wanting to upset Drolma, he said, "Right. Yes! I forgot about that." He kept this secret to himself and treated the baby like his own. They lived a happy life.

DROGEN LENPA

Long ago, a herdsman known as Drogen Lenpa 'Stupid Herdsman' fell in love with wise Ganglha Methok 'Snowland Flower'. Ganglha Methok knew Drogen Lenpa was stupid, but he was kind and honest and she loved him anyway. After several months of visiting and flirting, Ganglha Methok agreed that Drogen Lenpa could visit her at night. Later, each time Drogen Lenpa had sex with Ganglha Methok, he did it on her belly. Ganglha Methok wanted to enjoy real sex, but was too embarrassed to say so, and also worried that saying so would offend Drogen Lenpa. She spent a lot of time wondering how she could solve this problem.

A few days later while she was squeezing a freshly-made butter ball to remove excess liquid, the butter slipped out of her hand. She realized butter would definitely be a big help and, that night, when Drogen Lenpa visited her as usual, she covertly rubbed butter from her belly down to her secret place.

Drogen Lenpa had an erection as usual and, as usual, rubbed his penis on Ganglha Methok's belly. His penis then slipped down along the butter and entered Ganglha Methok, who screamed in pleasure to have her lover penetrate her for the first time. Drogen Lenpa was terrified at being so deeply inside Ganglha Methok, and her screams just increased his terror. Worried that he might have punctured her belly, he panicked, got up, and rushed out of Ganglha Methok's tent without even tying his sash.

Drogen Lenpa fell while he was running through the yak enclosure, covering his moist, buttered penis with dry yak dung. He ran and until dawn broke. He realized that he had reached a mountain cliff above a tumbling, twisting river.

Full of guilt and remorse, Drogen Lenpa tied a string around his penis, put a stone on the other end of the string, and dangled the stone over the cliff. He pulled out a dagger from his clothes and got ready to cut off his penis.

"It's all your fault," Drogen Lenpa said to his penis. "My dear Ganglha Methok is dead, because you were so hard, sharp, needy, and greedy."

At this moment, a herder shouted very loudly to his herd of yaks that were grazing nearby. This so frightened Drogen Lenpa that he suddenly cut off his penis, which fell down from the cliff and floated in the river under the cliff.

Meanwhile, a nun fetching water downriver was astounded to see the penis in her ladle. She muttered, "How strange! Ahh...!"

At this sound, the penis leapt to life and thrust itself into her vagina. She was scared and ran this way and that way. Finally exhausted, she gave a long sigh, "Shh...!" The penis then came out of her and became still. Thus learning the secret of the penis, the nun kept it for her own pleasure.

One day, a nearby neighbor invited her to chant some scripture for their family. She politely accepted. After reaching the neighbor's home, she chanted the whole day. When she was ready to return to her own home in the evening, her host said, "What's the hurry? Please stay here for the night!"

"I cannot. I must go back," said the nun.

"Why? Please stay here for just tonight!" the neighbor pleaded.

"I can't stay here without my secret talisman," said the nun.

"That's easy! My daughter will go fetch it for you!" said the neighbor.

The nun told the young woman where she kept her "talisman" cautioning, "Don't, under any circumstance, open the box that contains the talisman."

The neighbor's daughter dutifully went off to get the talisman. Starting back home after having found it, she wondered, "What is so special about this talisman that the nun can't sleep without it? I've never heard of such a thing before." Overcome by curiosity, she thought, "It's OK to take a peek, right?" She then opened the box and saw something wrapped in a piece of yellow cloth. Unwrapping it, she discovered the penis. Astounded, she exclaimed, "What a shocking talisman! Ahh!" The penis then flew out of the box and thrust itself into her vagina as she ran here and there while shouting and squealing.

After she was exhausted from running about, she gave a deep sigh, "Shh...!" and the penis disengaged. Hating it for stealing her virginity, she crushed it between two stones until it was flat and dead.

She then put it back in the box. When she got back to her home, she handed the box to the nun.

That very night, the nun coaxed again and again, "Ah... Ah... Ahaha...!" Finally, when the penis did not come out of the box, the nun opened it to discover that her secret talisman was dead. "Oh, no! Why? I told that girl not to open it!"

As the nun sobbed quietly in her bed, the neighbor's daughter giggled with a deep sense of satisfaction in her own bed.

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥
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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

A

Anyimachen, a mye rma chin ཡ་མྱིས་རྩ་མེན།

C

chogyi, chos rgyas ཚོས་རྒྱས།

D

dadron, zla sgron ལྷ་ལྷན།

darlag, dar lag དར་ལག

Dartse Mountain, ri bo dar rtse རི་བོ་དར་རེ།

dawa dondrup, zla ba don 'grub ལྷ་བ་དོན་འབྱུང།

dawa lhamo, zla ba lha mo ལྷ་བ་ལྷ་མོ།

dawa, zla ba ལྷ་བ།

dawakyi, zla ba skyid ལྷ་བ་སྐྱིད།

dawatso, zla ba mtsho ལྷ་བ་མཚོ།

demon, 'dre gdug pa can/ bdud འདྲེ་གདུག་པ་ཅན་འབྲུང།

desang, bde bzang བདེ་བཟང།

devil, demon, gdon 'dre གདོན་འབྲུང།

dga' bde དགའ་བདེ།

dondrup, don 'grub དོན་འབྱུང།

dorjie, rdo rje རྣ་ཇེ།

drakar, brag dkar བྲག་དཀར།

drogen lenpa, 'brog rgan glen pa འབྲོག་རྟན་ལྷན་པ།

drolma, sgrol ma ལྷོལ་མ།

drolmatso, sgrol ma mtsho ལྷོལ་མ་མཚོ།

dronkyi, sgron skyid ལྷོན་སྐྱིད།

drontso, sgron mtsho ལྷོན་མཚོ།

druksang, 'brug bzang འབྲུག་བཟང།

G

ganglha methok, gangs lha me tog གངས་ལྷ་མོ་རྟོག

gcig sgril གཅིག་སྐྱིལ།

Gedon Chopel, dge 'dun chos 'phel དགོ་འདུན་ཚོས་འཕེལ།

Gesar, ge sar གེ་སར།

ghost, dre འདྲེ།

golok, mgo log མགོ་ལོག

gyatso, rgya mtsho ལྷ་མཚོ།

I

imp, the'u rang རྗེ་བླ་རང་།

J

jigdril, gcig sgril གཅིག་སྐྱིལ།

K

karmakyi, dkar ma skyid དཀར་མ་སྐྱིད།

karwa, bskal ba བསྐལ་བ།

King Gesar, ge sar rgyal po གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོ།

kulu, khu lu ལུ་ལུ།

kyitso, skyid mtsho ལྷིད་མཚོ།

L

lama, bla ma ལྷ་མ།

lhadri, lha sras ལྷ་སྲས།

lhamo Drolma lha mo sgröl ma ལྷ་མོ་སྐྱོལ་མ།

lhamo, lha mo ལྷ་མོ།

losang, blo bzang ལྷོ་བཟང་།

M

mala, phreng ba འཕྲེང་བ།

meto, me tog མེ་རྟོག

metokyi, me tog skyid མེ་རྟོག་སྐྱིད།

moba, 'bo spa འབོ་སྤ།

N

namdri renpoche, gnam sras rin po che གནམ་ལྷན་ཤིན་པོ་ཆེ།

namgyal, rnam rgyal རྣམས་རྒྱལ།

ngawa, rnga ba ར་བ།

nyanbo yutze, gnyan po gyu rtse གཉན་པོ་གཡུ་རུ་ཚེ།

nyima, nyi ma ཉི་མ།

nyima lhamo, nyi ma lha mo ཉི་མ་ལྷ་མོ།

nyimo, gnas mo གནས་མོ།

O

ozer, 'od zer འོད་ཟེར།

P

panyak, pan yag པན་ཡག

pasang, pa sangs པ་སངས།

pema kyi, pad ma skyid པད་མ་སྦྱིད།

pema, pad ma པད་མ།

Q

Qinghai 青海

R

Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

rizen, rig 'dzin རིག་འཛིན།

rma chen ར་ཆེན།

rma stod ར་སྟོད།

S

samdru, bsam 'grub བསམ་འགྲུབ།

sermotso, gser mo mtsho གཤེར་མོ་མཚོ།

shadrilwa, bya bral ba བྱ་བྲལ་བ།

shangchub, byang chub བྱང་ཚུབ།

shawogyā, sha bo skyabs ཤ་བོ་སྐྱབས།
shenrizug, spyān ras gzigs ལྷན་རས་གཟིགས།

T

terdon, khri ston ཁྲི་སྟོན།
tsampa rtsam pa ཚམ་པ།
tsering, tshe ring ཚེ་རིང།
tsokyi, mtsho skyid མཚོ་སྦྱིད།
tsomo, mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།
tsoyang, mtsho dbyangs མཚོ་དབྱངས།

W

wangmo, dbang mo དབང་མོ།
werewolves, evil spirit of wolves, wolf ghost, spyang 'dre ལྷང་འདྲེ།
witch, female ghost, mthu gtad 'jug mkhan 'dre mo མཐུ་གཏཏ་འཁྲུག་
མཁན་འདྲེ་མོ།

Y

yangtso, dbyangs mtsho དབྱངས་མཚོ།

Z

zan, mountain spirit, btsan འཚན།
zangpo, bzang po འཟང་པོ།