

Tibet, 1954

Dorje

My mother taught me how to do prostrations as soon as I could walk. *Bring hands together over your head, then to your chest, then go down like Abu on all four legs, touch your forehead to the earth. Hold your love for His Holiness in your heart every moment.* Abu was our little puppy, and my mother taught me prostrations in this way, with me pretending to be Abu. She brought me to the temple with her everyday, teaching me how to say prayers for all sentient beings. She said to me, “Even though your father is Chinese, you will learn to be a good Tibetan.”

When I became a little older, my mother noticed I could put myself in the place of others and understand them. She said, “Perhaps it is because you have two kinds of blood. It is your destiny to be the friend of the tiger and the rabbit, although these two are enemies.”

I suppose this is a good thing, being a friend to the tiger and the rabbit. When my mother told me this, I was too young to imagine the ways in which it would prove to be true. But we have come to a time in my country when we are feeling the jaws of the tiger. And the teeth can be very sharp, like the prick of many blades.

I am speaking of the Chinese. We Tibetans talk about the Chinese all the time. When we sit and drink our tea, I hear how Palden had his yaks taken by the Chinese. Or when we thresh barley on the roof, I hear about my neighbor Tashi, who had his barley taken by the People’s Liberation Army.

All the time when we talk about the Chinese, I remember my two kinds of blood. But I do not feel Chinese. Not the way my Tibetan friends think of them. My father was from Amdo, where there were more Chinese people close by than here in Shigatse. So he and my mother were married because their families knew one another, just living side by side, without any problem.

In these last years, the word Chinese has come to mean something else.

They have come to *liberate* us. At first, when I heard this, it made me laugh. Some other Tibetans laughed also at such a silly idea. We wanted to ask, *liberate us from what?*

But then it began to be different. There came to be a bad feeling, a hardness in the stomach, a feeling of anger. And we started to be afraid.

They came and they went, the Chinese. When they would leave, we drank *chang* to celebrate, and we told ourselves the trouble was over. But then they would come back again, soon enough. For a few years now, they have come and gone in this way. Each time they came back, they stayed a little longer, and we prayed harder for them to leave.

We didn't like it when we were reciting our prayers and we saw a Chinese person laughing at us. Openly, with no respect. Because there is nothing more important to us Tibetans than our religion.

So I felt the anger of my people, but I could also put myself in the place of the Chinese.

It was not hard for me to look into the face of one of these young Chinese soldiers, and see into his heart. He had pride. He believed he was bringing the superior wisdom of Chairman Mao to us. He looked at us and saw superstitious peasants with dirt on their faces. He looked at the soil under our feet and saw Chinese soil.

I speak Chinese and Tibetan, and so my people often come to me asking for help when they have had a problem with the Chinese. That is when I stand between the tiger and the rabbit, and I think of my mother's warm hand touching my cheek when she said this, so long ago.

This is very hard for my wife. She says, "You help other people, and put your family in danger." My wife is very wise, but I cannot say to my people, "It is sad that you have troubles with the Chinese. I cannot help you." When I give my word, as we Tibetans do, I put my hand on the person, and that is my promise. It is my destiny to help people in this way, as my mother said. But Rinchen says, "I don't care about the tiger and the rabbit and your destiny."

Some people here do not understand my wife. They say she does not have good manners. But she came from the province of Kham with her family when she was just a girl, and so she had the rough Khampa ways. It does not bother me that she is like this, because I know it is only on the outside. Inside, her heart is tender and sweet.

Lama Norbu told us Rinchen was a panda bear in her previous life, and I knew it was true. Rinchen was a she-bear, with a soft black coat and big black eyes, and also, long sharp claws.

I saw the bear incarnation one day in Rinchen. A communist soldier came on the street when we were walking to the temple with thermoses of *dri* butter to refill the butter lamps. He went over to touch our son Champa. The soldier was smiling, and I think Champa had charmed him. Everybody likes Champa because he is a clown. But with the soldier, Rinchen stepped in front of our son, with her hands in fists, standing very strong. I think she scared the

soldier, because even though he had a gun, he walked away very fast! Maybe he saw the long claws of Rinchen's soul ready to tear him apart.

I noticed Rinchen right away when she came here from Kham. All of us in Shigatse talked about her as the girl who could tame the wild dogs. Maybe it was because she was a bear in her previous existence, and the packs of dogs in the streets could smell the bear in her, and they were afraid.

I saw her walking the first time, carrying a large bag from the marketplace for her mother when she was only as tall as a sheep. In my mind, I called her small as a sheep, strong as a bear. When she walked by the dogs in our neighborhood, they became quiet. Everyone else had to throw stones at them to keep them away, but Rinchen needed no stones. I saw her from my window on the second story of our house as she came, and I watched her go by until I couldn't see her anymore, and the whole way she went straight and peaceful with no dogs to bother her.

So when I was twelve years old, I found out my parents had arranged a marriage for me with a girl in Shigatse, the girl who tames the wild dogs. I was very happy because she was a strong and brave girl, and I thought, we will have a good life together.

But my curious nature, this is something Rinchen does not like. My mother used to call me her little mouse, nosing around where I should not.

In those days when I knew so little of the hardship it would bring us, I was the little mouse. I nosed around, and held away from my wife the secrets of where I had been.

Like when I greeted our neighbor. The woman from America.

They had arrived the month before, a man and a woman, and had been staying next door in the house owned by the regent. It was astonishing that they were here in Shigatse. No foreigners were ever permitted to stay in Tibet by our lamas. I simply could not explain it in my mind, so it lived there like an itch I had to scratch.

I caught glimpses of them through the windows, and many questions burned within me. I had to know, was it true that they both had hair that disobeyed, curving up into waves like an ocean on their heads, instead of lying flat? Was it true their eyes were light-colored and clear so I might see all the way through their eyes if I looked right at them? Why were they here? I also wondered if I could be helpful to them. I speak English, taught to me by an Englishman I knew back when the British had a mission here.

Perhaps it was destined for us to meet, because one day I looked up and there she was. The woman with unruly hair out in front of her door with a broom, sweeping up dust. Her hair was pulled back, but shorter strands of it were indeed curled up around her face. She was tall,

and she wore a red silk *chuba*, I was surprised to see. She held one of her hands over her mouth shyly, but behind it I saw a smile.

I was ready to say, “Greetings, Madam,” but instead she burst out with “Tashi Delek!” in a perfect Lhasa accent. I was unable to speak from the shock, and I stood like a statue, staring into the green eyes. Next she bowed to me, and I bowed back to her. Finally I stammered in English, “Good day to you.” I wanted only to wish for her to have a good day, but then I remembered this was the way to say goodbye. So of course I thought I must leave. I bowed again, and she followed with her own bow. I felt that she was thinking I was very rude to leave so quickly. But I felt so silly, I simply walked away.

To make up for my rudeness, I decided to give them the ‘welcome *chang*,’ a kettle of butter tea and a kettle of *chang*. I planned to go while Rinchen was away at the river getting water for cooking. Rinchen would have yelled and tugged at her braids if she had known.

And if I had known the trouble I would bring to us all, I would have listened to my wife.