



THE MAKING AND  
UNMAKING OF A  
BUDDHIST MONK

A MEMOIR

# turtle feet

NIKOLAI GROZNI

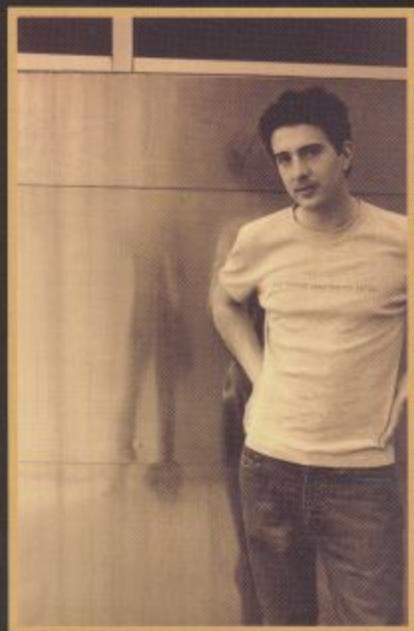
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In his early twenties, Nikolai Grozni, a celebrated Bulgarian music prodigy studying jazz piano at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, was struck by a malaise—some form of spiritual ennui—that suddenly robbed him of his passion for music and of any direction in life. He turned to meditation and Buddhism for answers, and eventually traveled to the Dalai Lama's university in Dharamsala, India, where he quickly became fluent in Tibetan and took the robes of a Buddhist monk.

Instead of finding answers, Nikolai fell in with an unusual cast of characters—feisty nuns, sex-starved monks, violent chess players, sadistic professors, and a fallen monk from Bosnia with a shady past. He struggled with Buddhist logic and philosophy and the thousands of small challenges to normal life that he had to overcome daily in the Himalayas. Grozni's wry, lyrical account of monks in their quest for the ultimate truth is insightful and revealing of an often mythologized world. His is a thoughtful, funny, and elegantly written memoir of searching for meaning and a higher power, but finding a world filled with chaotic, teeming, eccentric, and hilarious humanity.

*Turtle Feet* is a wonderfully bittersweet story of a spiritual journey and of the surprising people who can change your life along the way.



**NIKOLAI GROZNI** was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, and educated in the United States and India. In previous incarnations, he has been a piano prodigy, jazz musician, Buddhist monk, and most recently, the author of three novels published in Bulgaria. Grozni holds an MFA from Brown University. *Turtle Feet* is his first book of nonfiction.

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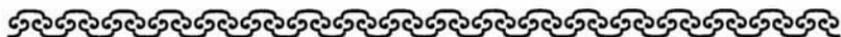
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For Tsar

*He has chakra wheels engraved on the palms  
of his hands and on the soles of his feet; he has  
perfectly aligned nails and turtle feet . . .*

—From the eighth chapter of Maitreya's *Abhisamaya Alankara*,  
describing the body of the Buddha,  
translated from the Tibetan by the author



## Prologue

**W**e tiptoed to the edge of the giant, kidney-shaped volcanic rock and looked down the vertiginous abyss. From up here the Himalayas appeared subdued, almost shy: their razor-sharp pinnacles were below us; their arms and vertebrae stretched to the horizon, exposed. Shimmering in the reddened six o'clock sun, the cluster of mud houses on the bottom of the valley looked like a reflection on a still lake.

"I have to jump *now*," Tsar announced, unbuckling the paraglider backpack. "As soon as the sun disappears behind the mountains, the temperature will drop, and I'll never get past the border."

I knelt on the ground and helped Tsar unpack the red-and-white-striped paraglider. Studying his face for what I imagined could be the last time, it occurred to me that if he were to die today, he would at least look romantic and adventurous—with a gray three-day beard, long sideburns, and an incongruous patch of white hair twisted over his forehead.

"Here," Tsar said, pulling the very top of the paraglider. "Hold this end and wait until the chute fills up with air. Then let go."

I stood up and stretched out my hands.

"If you don't hear from me in a month, send the letter that I gave you to the Netherlands," Tsar instructed me as he came closer. We held tight. He smelled of nicotine and cheap deodorant.

Looking quickly away to hide his glossy eyes, Tsar pulled a packet of India Kings out of his front pocket and stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"My last one," he said, smiling cynically. "Before I step in front of the . . . what do you call it?"

"Firing squad," I offered.

"Right."

Tsar took a few rushed drags, flicked the cigarette into the abyss, and, with his hands in his pockets, sauntered to the edge of the rock.

"I don't know why people are so afraid of dying," he said, dangling one foot over the void. "It only takes a moment."

"A moment for you, and a lifetime of nightmares for me," I countered, feeling like I was going to throw up.

I understood how Tsar felt, though. At this height the world seemed fixed and unreal, without the complications of before and after. Even the string of eagles and few daring crows tracing the slow-moving air currents high up in the mercurial blue seemed strangely stuck in time, their long ellipses suggesting a state of being in which things always *were*, again and again, from past into present, and from present back into past.

"Muzaffarabad must be somewhere in that direction," Tsar observed, studying his compass. "I'll have to veer to the right and glide between those hills over there."

"Do you think you could do that?"

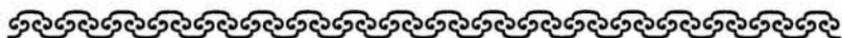
Tsar dismissed my question and put the backpack over his shoulders, pulling down the straps. "I'm ready when you are," he said, looking straight ahead with fierce determination.

I stepped over the deflated chute and put my hand on his shoulder. "Tsar, please think this over one more time. I know how badly you want to escape from India, but this is almost equivalent to suicide. The Indian-Pakistani border is the most heavily guarded in the world. On top of that, we are in Kashmir. There are thousands of soldiers on both sides waiting for an opportunity to fire their guns."

“Come on, Nikola,” Tsar said. “Don’t ruin my mood. Let me at least enjoy the flight.”

I picked up the center of the chute with both hands and walked backwards, allowing the chilly breeze to ruffle inside it. And then Tsar snapped away. It was so unexpected that I almost screamed *Where are you going?* For a second he seemed to fall straight down and I thought that the strings must’ve gotten tangled up, but the paraglider quickly filled with air and bounced up, veering west, in the direction of the setting sun.

I watched as Tsar entered the canyon that opened up onto what, according to our map, was the Pakistani-controlled part of Kashmir, then walked back to the mountain trail and started running down the hill. It was getting dark and I didn’t want to stand there, above the world, when the crackling of the first gunshots echoed throughout the valley.



## One

It was eight o'clock in the morning and I was wearing a long cotton skirt, or *shanthab*, a buttonless vest with two bizarre rags hanging under the shoulders like a pair of elephant ears—courtesy of the sixteenth-century Tibetan saint and fashion enthusiast Tsongkhapa—and a fifteen-foot-long prayer shawl, or *zen*, that wrapped around the upper body like a sari. Ani Dawa, a tiny Tibetan nun in her forties, walked ahead of me, leading the way.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked when we reached the ramparts of the Main Temple, where Jogibara Road opened out into a large square, covered with plastic bags and cow dung. “This is your last chance to go back.”

I felt the patch of unshaved hair on top of my head with my fingers and nodded.

We entered the monastery compound and started walking upstairs, past Tibetan monks who were pacing up and down the hallways, reciting their textbooks. The overpowering ammonia stench from the lavatories and the smell of insipid cauliflower curry wafting from the kitchen nauseated me, and for a second I caught a glimpse of what it must be like to spend your life in a monastery, waking at five, chanting prayers until seven, going to classes and rushing to lunch, metal plate in hand, followed by more chanting, dinner, an

evening debate session in the courtyard, and then your little cell and bedbug-infested sheets.

The abbot's main attendant, a bulky, middle-aged man with an intense expression, greeted us at the top of the staircase.

"Kirti Rinpoche is expecting you," he said and gestured at the open door.

Ani Dawa and I removed our shoes and entered the room. Kirti Rinpoche, the abbot of the monastery who, as his title *Rinpoche* indicated, was believed to be the reincarnation of an important Buddhist figure, sat on a throne made of stacked Tibetan rugs, drinking butter tea from a wooden cup and reading a *pecha*—a traditional Tibetan book consisting of long, loose sheets of paper. Ani Dawa bowed down. I followed her lead. Kirti Rinpoche leaned over and whispered something in his attendant's ear.

"Rinpoche would like to know whether your parents object to your decision to become a monk," the attendant announced solemnly.

"Well, they're not happy, but they aren't going to stop me," I answered. Receiving your parents' consent was one of the prerequisites for becoming a Buddhist monk. When I had called my parents to ask them, formally, if they approved of my decision to lead a celibate life, they had thought that I was being derisive. "If you want to spend your life like a freak, that's your problem," my mom had said.

The attendant relayed my response to the abbot, speaking cordially into his ear, pointing at me, and then pointing to the large world atlas on the wall next to the door.

Kirti Rinpoche tilted back and smiled. He was a frail seventy-year-old man with a gentle expression and a slight tremor in his fingers. When he spoke he lowered his head and looked over the rim of his glasses, as if they were an obstacle and not an aid.

"When did you arrive in India?" he asked me in Tibetan, enunciating carefully.

"Four months ago," I replied.

"You are very lucky to have her as your Tibetan teacher," Rinpoche

continued, pointing at Ani Dawa with an open palm. “She is one of the best language instructors in town.”

“It’s true,” I agreed. “She is a great teacher.”

Ani Dawa wasn’t just my Tibetan language teacher, she was the closest thing that I had to family in India. I practically lived with her and her mother. I went to my room—which was about fifty feet away from hers—only to sleep. When I first started taking lessons with her a week after I had arrived in Dharamsala, she had been reserved and somewhat suspicious, testing me to see if I was really serious or just another Westerner for whom studying Buddhism and Tibetan language was part of a vacation package that also included mountain climbing, spending a night in a cave, and spotting members of the Beastie Boys in local chai shops. After a month of lessons, when Ani Dawa was finally convinced that I was reliable (I hadn’t slept with any of her younger girlfriends and cousins, I never got drunk, I meditated, and I spent four or five hours a day memorizing new words) and that I wasn’t going to change my mind overnight and go camel riding in Rajasthan, she embraced me as her own son and began to prepare me for my ordination. She gave me a Tibetan booklet explaining the thirty-six vows of a novice monk, took me to a tailor who made two sets of robes suitable for my height, asked Kirti Rinpoche to set a date for the ordination, and, on the morning of the ceremony, shaved most of my hair and cooked a large bowl of rice, cashews, and raisins, which I was supposed to bring to the monastery as an offering.

“Now we start,” Kirti Rinpoche announced, placing his wooden cup on the table in front of him.

The abbot’s attendant pulled a razor blade out of a secret pocket in his *tonka* and, before I could react, scalped the remaining hair from my skull. Now I was bleeding, which I guess was fine because I was wearing all red anyway.

“Use this,” Ani Dawa offered, handing me a scrunched-up handkerchief.

Kirti Rinpoche pulled another voluminous *pecha* from a bookshelf next to his bed, unwrapped the saffron-colored cloth that bound the loose pages,

and began reading aloud. My knowledge of written Tibetan (which is archaic) was quite limited at that point, and so I turned to Ani Dawa for help.

“What are they doing?” I asked her.

“They are listing the circumstances that may prevent you from becoming a monk,” Ani Dawa replied, hiding her mouth with one hand.

“Can you please name some of these circumstances?”

Ani Dawa was hesitant. “Well, for instance, it is said that you can’t become a monk if you have green hair. Or yellow hair.”

“What else?”

“You can’t be bald, toothless, or have an elephant head. You can’t have two heads, pig ears, elephant trunk, one nostril, one tooth, or donkey teeth.”

Ani Dawa smiled at Kirti Rinpoche, as a way of apologizing for talking during the ceremony, and then lowered her head, signaling that she was done interpreting for me.

After spending nearly an hour discussing the different physical and mental flaws that barred one’s entrance into the monastic community (something I found quite shocking, since the divide ran clearly along caste lines: an untouchable stood a far greater chance of missing his teeth, a finger, or an eye than a Brahmin did), Kirti Rinpoche stopped reading and asked his attendant something that I couldn’t decipher. They spoke to each other in Amdo dialect, which was very different from the other two main Tibetan dialects—U-Tsang and Kham—that I had been used to hearing.

“What’s the matter?” I whispered.

“They are upset because they’ve lost their sieve,” Ani Dawa explained. “At the time of the Buddha, monks always carried a sieve to purify the water they were drinking. You need to have a sieve during the ordination.”

The attendant walked out of the room and returned with a metal colander in hand. “You have to bow down to Rinpoche now,” he ordered, out of breath.

I did as I was told, struggling with my *zen*, which spilled on the floor and nearly covered the entire room. The attendant helped me straighten my

sagging *shanthab*, annoyed with my clumsiness, and pressed my back, indicating that I should assume a praying mantis position. Kirti Rinpoche took a silver plate from the bookshelf behind him and began tossing handfuls of saffron-colored rice in the air.

“Rinpoche does this to appease the millions of angry goddesses present in the room at the moment,” Ani Dawa explained, lowering her voice. “They are angry that you are renouncing the world of desire.”

“How vengeful are these goddesses?” I asked Ani Dawa. “Should I expect a mob of naked girls breaking into my room tonight?”

Ani Dawa ignored my question and offered to refill Kirti Rinpoche’s cup with warm butter tea.

With that, the ceremony was over. Smiling mysteriously, Rinpoche’s attendant produced a miniature copper sundial, showed it to Ani Dawa and me, and stepped out onto the balcony.

“It is very important to record the time of your ordination,” Ani Dawa told me. “It’s like a birth date. Tomorrow at this time you will be exactly one day old.”

Kirti Rinpoche got off his throne, went outside, and bent down to take a closer look at what was happening. The attendant rotated the sundial, trying to catch a shadow, but the Tibetan numbers engraved on the copper disk remained uniformly dark. The sun was a gray halo wrapped in a thick monsoon cloud.

“Why do they have to establish the time using a sundial?” I asked Ani Dawa. “They’re both wearing wristwatches!”

“You have to do things the right way,” Ani Dawa replied.

Finally, Kirti Rinpoche looked at his watch and inscribed the date and time on a small yellow card: July 11, 11:07 a.m. He paused for a moment, thinking something over, and entered my new name: Lodro Chosang.

“You are now officially a monk,” Ani Dawa announced and bowed down to Kirti Rinpoche.

I thanked Kirti Rinpoche and his attendant and exited the room backwards—the proper Tibetan way.

Since it was July, the Himalayas looked like a collapsing mud cake: roads gave way to uprooted crags, fortifications yielded to sinking houses, electricity poles pointed to the horizon, water pipes burst and dug gullies. At the top of the hill, Ani Dawa and I paused to catch our breath. Dharamsala's main street was right below us—a narrow dirt road lined with rows of shops and restaurants stacked upon one another like towers made from a mishmash of incompatible construction sets. A web of telephone wires, dilapidated awnings, and dirty plastic sheets wrapped the street and all the buildings, giving the impression of a village seized by a monster spider. Homeless cows wandered between the vegetable stands, gnawing at cardboard boxes and rotten potatoes. Street dogs, pink and furless, lay about on the ground like bits of tattered rags. Crates of milk, packaged in small, square plastic bags, blocked the entrances to the chai shops and attracted clouds of flies and wasps.

Approaching the housing complex where Ani Dawa and I lived, I saw Purba, one of my closest friends in town, standing in the middle of the road, arms akimbo. Purba was a twenty-seven-year-old Tibetan from Tibet's Amdo region, a tough-talking, swaggering ex-monk with a skeptical smile, glasses, and smooth, chubby hands. Ani Dawa said good-bye to me and went into her house.

"So, you did it," Purba said with a big grin.

"That's right," I answered proudly.

He fell on his knees and bowed down to me, pressing his forehead against the street's mossy surface.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled at him, embarrassed.

"This is the first and last time I am showing respect to you," he replied, as he got up and wiped his hands on his jeans. "So, what's your new name?"

"Lodro Chosang."

"Don't tuck it in," Purba said and pulled my vest out of my *shanthab*. "Why did you do this to yourself? I told you that taking vows is a stupid thing to do."

"Well, maybe I'm stupid, but I had to do it. Life is short. I want to study the Tibetan texts, I want to take classes in the big monasteries. That's why I came here."

Purba walked over to the tiny chai shop owned by my landlord and sat on the front steps.

“Why are you holding yourself like that?” he asked, pointing at my crotch.

“You are not going to believe it but I’ve had a hard-on ever since I left the monastery. And it really shows through the skirt. It’s my own fault, though. I didn’t put any underwear on.”

Purba chuckled and opened a bag of betel and tobacco mix. “You better get used to it. It’s not going to go away for the rest of your life. And now you can’t do anything about it.”

Purba stuffed the mix in his lower lip and looked at his watch. “Today is Tuesday, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“And they shaved your hair?”

“The abbot’s attendant did. Just a small patch. I had shaved most of it last night.”

“Still.” Purba spat between his legs and covered the dark red splotch with his shoes. “It’s bad luck to cut your hair on Tuesday. Haven’t you noticed? None of the Indian barbers work on Tuesday.”

“It seems like I’m starting off on the wrong foot, aren’t I?”

Purba disappeared into the chai shop and returned with two cups of milk tea. He blew into his cup, pushing the dark brown layer of cream to the side, and his glasses fogged up.

“Did you know that if you go into a dark room with the intention to have sex with a woman named, say, Ani Dawa, but end up in the wrong bed and have sex with her girlfriend instead, you wouldn’t be breaking your vows, technically speaking?”

“Purba, where the hell do you get your information?”

“I’ve read it in the texts. In your mind you think you are having sex with Ani Dawa, but in reality, you are sleeping with a Tibetan girl named Pemo. You have no intention of having sex with Pemo. So, technically speaking, you are not breaking your monastic vows.”

“Okay, Purba, but what if I never find out that I’ve had sex with the wrong person? Am I still going to be a monk or not?”

“See? This is what you are getting into! The whole thing is a mess. You could have twelve judges and hundreds of witnesses, and you still wouldn’t be able to say who is breaking the rules and who isn’t. Technically speaking.”

Mrs. Lakshmi, my landlady, and her daughter Reena came out of the chai shop to witness my metamorphosis. After a thorough examination of my new outfit, each performed an affirmative head wobble (a sideways nod) and sauntered down the road, followed by the family cat, an emaciated gray creature covered with bloated ticks. Next came my landlord, Mr. Chandradas, a seventy-year-old man wearing ragged ashen *shalwar* pajamas and a traditional Indian linen cap. He stood in front of me, hands clasped behind his back, and stared hard into my eyes. He had never spoken to me before (perhaps because he had fought the British, or maybe because he just didn’t like Westerners) and I was surprised to see him suddenly animated, groping for words, eager to communicate his feelings to me.

“Look at them,” Mr. Chandradas shouted, pointing at his wife and daughter receding into the distance. “It’s nothing but trouble. If I was young like you . . .”

Unable to think of the right words in English, my landlord pretended to cut his penis and throw it across the street in the bushes.

“To the donkeys!” he cried, and Purba and I burst out laughing, only to realize seconds later that my landlord wasn’t joking.

“To the donkeys,” Mr. Chandradas repeated quietly, and just before he walked back into his chai shop, I noticed that his eyes were filled with tears.

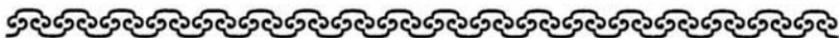
I should’ve felt inspired by my landlord’s display of contempt for the world of desire, but instead I felt embarrassed, like a thief who has been mistaken for a savior.

Purba and I walked into the chai shop, ordered parathas, and sat at a table by the window. Outside, the sky was rippled by a magnificent formation of heavy rain clouds advancing towards the Himalayan ridges like a fleet of battleships loaded with ammunition. The trees had flipped their leaves

upside down, changing their color to match the monochrome grayness of the monsoon sky. The air was steeped with an intoxicating sweet scent, a weather warning signal released by millions of anguished Himalayan flowers. More often than not, July rains started off with a devastating barrage of hail.

I turned around and looked at the newspaper clippings, empty liquor bottles, and jars of spices crowding the shelves of the large cupboard on my left. An old photograph of Mr. Chandradas showed him as a young soldier dressed in full military attire, a bayonet-topped rifle in his arms. I caught a glimpse of my own reflection in the windowpane, and the reality of what I'd done—the robes, the shaved head—hit me for the first time. Who was I now? An Eastern European kid who spent his childhood playing piano eight hours a day? A worn-out Berklee College of Music student getting stoned in Harvard Square and jamming with other musicians in the practice rooms? Or was I Lodro Chosang, a twenty-two-year-old monk who spoke Tibetan, memorized cryptic Buddhist texts, bathed in the muddy river, and made perfectly round chapati?

I wished I could see what was in store for me. I could sense the future reconfiguring, events taking form and gathering momentum. It was all there, in my landlord's flour-covered hands, in the steady rumble of the kerosene stove, in the smell of fried chilies, and the cold kiss of the monsoon fog streaming into the chai shop. Everything leading to my encounter with Tsar and the fantastic events that took place at the house on Jogibara Road had already been woven into the present.



## Two

**M**y journey from Boston to New Delhi took almost ten days. In addition to layovers in Prague, Athens, and Rome I also spent a few days in Sofia, my birthplace, where I was dragged by a mob of aging and increasingly demented relatives to a series of ritualistic family dinners, during the course of which I was informed that I had wasted my life and talent (I had won my first international piano competition, in Italy, at the age of nine) and that I would be wise to prepare for a premature and very painful death.

“People in India drop like flies,” my grandmother Mila, of Slavic origin, told me, after consuming half of the baklava she’d made in my honor. “You’re going to die there for sure. And we’ll never see you playing the piano again!”

“What are you going to India for?” shouted my grandfather Dimitar, of Tatar origin, between shots of ouzo, his fingers still greasy from cutting up a baby lamb, which he’d baked whole. “If you want to see India so bad, go to Istanbul! It’s the same thing, and it’s only a few hours away by bus.”

Dimitar, a sworn pacifist (he’d fought in the Second World War, first on the side of the Germans against the Serbs, and then, after deserting, with the Serbs against the Germans, without firing a single bullet), was famous for, among other things, experiencing timelessness when, at the age of twelve,

he'd met the Devil face-to-face in the small village near the Black Sea where he'd grown up.

My uncle Yurai—a Czech—seemed more upset with me than anyone else. Yurai was a philosopher and eccentric, and was known for harboring strange hobbies. When I was a teenager, for example, he'd memorized the entire Chinese-Russian dictionary—two large volumes—despite the fact that he had no interest in reading Chinese literature. Yurai seldom spoke, but when he did, usually after sufficient alcohol, his words rushed out like a hurricane and his persona—a cross between a mad Nietzsche and a despondent Samuel Beckett character—suddenly filled up the entire room, as he knocked glasses and dishes to the floor. “Nikolai, you cannot, you will not, I repeat—and I apologize, forget everything I've said, I've said nothing!—you have something extraordinary, you owe it to the world and no matter what you do—forget everything I've said, it's all an unbearable drivel, bullshit, I'm an idiot—you'll always regret giving up the only thing you're good at, the piano, that is. . . . I remember attending your concerts, a little kid—ten, eleven maybe—playing Debussy. . . . Damn it! You have to go back to playing or I don't know what's going to happen!”

The only one of my older relatives who had a somewhat positive reaction to the news of my going to India to become a Buddhist monk was my grandmother of Jewish heritage—a retired cardiologist and religious hypochondriac who, for the past twenty years, had never failed to remind her visitors that she was dying.

“So tell me, my dear, do the Tibetans have some mantra that can cure the tingling sensation in the lower parts of my torso? Ask them about an ointment of some sort, or maybe a visualization. My legs are atrophying, I can barely move my toes—see, watch. Did you say something?”

“I said nothing, Grandmother.”

“What did I tell you? I can't even hear. And I'm losing my vision in my right eye.”

On my third day in Bulgaria, after countless servings of baklava, stuffed grape leaves, oily Turkish casseroles, moussaka, buffalo yogurt, deep-fried

animal organs, and endless lectures on the unfathomable intellectual powers of the average Eastern European (even our taxi drivers can talk about quantum physics and Dostoyevsky!), I found myself kissing my airplane ticket to New Delhi and swearing that I would never again return to the land where Orpheus allegedly descended into the Underworld.

The day before I left, as I was walking through downtown Sofia, during one of the rare occasions when I wasn't surrounded by relatives, I bumped into an old girlfriend of mine, also a piano player, whom I hadn't seen in five years. Though it was March and quite cold, she was already wearing a summer outfit—miniskirt, tights, blouse, high heels. She told the man accompanying her to take a walk and then peered hungrily into my eyes.

"So," she began with a lascivious smile, "you're back. How was Boston?"

"It was nice," I said. "But I'm leaving again. Going to India."

"India!" she repeated, shaking her head in pity. "I always knew you were going to end up in India—with the Hare Krishnas."

"It's not the Hare Krishnas," I said, angered by her condescending tone. "I'm going to study Tibetan at a monastery. I'm also going to become a Buddhist monk. Buddhists don't believe in God, by the way."

"Poor Niki!" she sighed, pouting. "He is angry at the world again!"

"Of course I'm angry at the world! The world is fucked up. And I'm getting out."

"What you need," she said quietly, checking to see if her boyfriend was looking at us, "is a week of really hard sex. Are you staying at your parents' apartment?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I told her apologetically. "But I'll keep in touch."

THOUGH THEY WERE severely disappointed by my decision to drop out of college shortly before graduating and abandon a promising career as a jazz pianist and composer, my parents made heroic efforts to rein in their scientific misgivings about organized religion and remain somewhat upbeat during my visit.

“At least you’ll get to climb a tall mountain,” said my dad, a heart doctor and science fiction writer, who had published a novel in which Jesus traveled to ancient Greece in a time machine and had sex with the beautiful Helen of Troy while the Greeks scurried around in a giant wooden horse.

“And you’re going to see live elephants,” my mom, a dentist, added.

My sister, fourteen, giggled from some far corner in the apartment. Growing up in a family of total lunatics hardly makes for a dull adolescence.

After leaving Sofia, I spent a night in Athens, roaming the streets confused and disoriented until one o’clock in the morning. I suddenly found it hard to remember any of the compelling reasons why I’d decided to go live in India in the first place. It was too late to go back to playing piano now, and yet my future as a would-be monk seemed completely sealed, impenetrable. The only things that propelled me forward were a gut feeling that India was the place where I needed to be and a memory of the hundreds of Tibetan words I had memorized while living in Boston.

At the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, the passport control officer pulled me aside and called his superintendent.

“Who is this man?” bellowed the superintendent, dressed in full military attire, pointing at the photograph of a stern eighteen-year-old boy with shoulder-length hair and bangs covering a large part of his face.

“Well, it’s me,” I replied, realizing how absurd this assertion must seem in light of my new haircut, which had left an inch of hair sticking out in every direction.

“This passport is fake,” the superintendent concluded, putting it in his coat pocket. “Give me your real passport.”

“But I can prove that this is me,” I said, dropping my backpack on the ground. “Look at my lips—very full lips, right? Then look at the protruding Adam’s apple.”

The superintendent and the officer examined my Adam’s apple and the fullness of my lips and shook their heads, unimpressed.

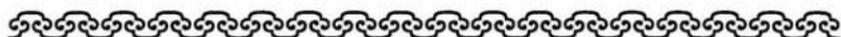
“Do you see the tiny black dot on my lower lip?” I continued. “And what about the small scar on my chin—do you see that?”

The scar and the black dot caught their attention. They called another passport officer and the three of them began dissecting the photograph, arguing loudly, and then pausing to stare at my face.

“Go,” the superintendent said in the end and waved me away. “But you need to get a new passport. Next time we might not let you through.”

Later that night, on the bus to Dharamsala, my final destination, I recalled the passport incident and tried to excavate its deeper meaning. Being hopelessly superstitious, I couldn’t help but invest my first experience on Indian soil with the power to foretell my future in the Himalayas. What did all this mean—the discrepancy between my photograph and me, the three pairs of eyes studying my scar, my moles, and the shape of my lips and eyebrows? Did it symbolize a battle of identities? Did it suggest that in my future life as a monk I was going to pretend to be someone that I wasn’t? That I would never be able to change my personality? Or was this a sign that in order to become someone new, I had to first completely erase my past?

At five o’clock in the morning, as we entered the Himalayan foothills and the air became significantly colder, the bus briefly skidded off the road. Catching a glimpse of the open gorge below my window, I was quickly reminded that this was all real: I was in India, the air smelled of kerosene, the bus driver was smoking *biddies*, the windows closed only halfway, my luggage was tied to the roof with a rope, my mouth was dry and full of dust, the metal frame of the bus squeaked and bent as if it was about to crack open. Time itself seemed to be made out of rubber, stretching and retracting without reason, as minutes turned into hours and hours flickered by like trance-induced images. I remembered my grandmother Mila wearing an apron, sitting behind a large plate with stacked baklava pieces, and looking at me with a mixture of anger and disappointment. She had warned me. She’d seen how it ends. *We’ll never hear him playing the piano again!*



## Three

I don't know if it had to do with shaving my head on a Tuesday, but when I woke up the morning after my ordination I felt so depressed and disoriented, I couldn't get out of bed until the afternoon. I looked at the *zen*, *tonka*, and *shanthab* folded neatly on the chair next to my bed. I touched the smooth surface of my head and tried to determine the precise moment when the jazz pianist had ceased to exist and the Buddhist monk had taken over. The feeling of euphoria that had motivated me in the weeks and days leading to my ordination had evaporated overnight, and even the thought of venturing out the door in my new outfit made me cringe. Was I shy? Insecure? I recalled the time when my mother used to beg me to go outside and play with the other kids in the courtyard. I must've been no older than three, but I remembered perfectly how scared I had felt to face the world.

At exactly eight-thirty, Ani Dawa knocked on my door and glued her face to the window.

"Lodro? Are you coming for breakfast?"

"No, thank you," I yelled, sitting up and grabbing a book.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I am just in the middle of memorizing *Sherab Nyingpo*."

Ani Dawa remained by the window for another minute or so, and then walked back to her room.

*I am going to be fine*, I told myself as I stared at the crack in the long wooden beam that ran across the ceiling above my bed. I tried to calculate how long it would take me to jump out of the way should the beam snap under the weight of my three-hundred-pound landlady, Mrs. Lakshmi. Upstairs, Reena was playing the latest Bollywood hit single, *Tujhe Dekha To*. The only time Reena was not blasting Bollywood music was when she was asleep, and that didn't usually last more than four hours.

At noon, Ani Dawa knocked at my door again and offered to bring me lunch. I thanked her and told her that I was fasting. At two o'clock it started raining and I thought that this was a good opportunity for me to leave my room and go to Upper Dharamsala, since I'd be hiding my face under my umbrella and no one would know whether I was a Westerner or Tibetan. I tied my *shanthab* with the saffron-colored monastic belt, flung the *zen* over my shoulders, and walked out the door.

The first thing that I usually did when I got to town was run into the post office. I didn't have to go through the towering pile of new letters—the postal worker, a sari-wrapped Indian woman dwarfed behind an enormous wooden counter, was always kind enough to let me know if I had any mail as soon as I walked through the door. She responded to any question or challenge from the outside world with a head wobble. She performed two kinds of head wobbles: with a smile (*Yes, a new letter arrived for you today*) and without (*There are no letters for you with this morning's mail, sir*). Conversely, to the common question "Do you have any stamps?" she responded with a head wobble and a blank expression, meaning, *We've been out of stamps for a month, what do you expect from a post office?*

Today the post office was deserted. There was no pile of newly arrived letters on the counter. It appeared that the postal truck had never made it to town. I sat on the front steps, a foot away from the open sewer that ran alongside the street, and weighed my options. I could buy a bar of soap and take a

shower for ten rupees at the Green Hotel, or I could wander around inspecting all the chai shops and restaurants in the hope of bumping into some friends. There wasn't much to do back then, in those listless months before Tsar came along.

At the end I decided to go to Smiley's chai shop and wait for Damien—a twenty-two-year-old guy from L.A. who talked about Eastern philosophy the way rappers talk about the 'hood: *I dig the dharma, bro, dig that shit, you know what I'm saying, emptiness, reincarnation—you can't mess with that. These Indian motherfuckers finished off existence two thousand five hundred years ago, you know what I mean? They fucking killed it. They killed the self, bro, the atman. No one can do that now, people are fucking pussies.*

Walking past the small Buddhist temple opposite the whorehouse, I was nearly knocked over by Hans, a German monk, who jumped—his hands spread out, karate-style—from the top of a giant prayer wheel and landed on my toes, his monastic garment getting wrapped up around my head. Hans was not really a friend of mine. You could befriend Hans no more than you could befriend the homeless cow with the broken ankle who camped out in front of the post office. Hans was just an integral part of the local scene, and despite his karate performances and his claim to possess knowledge of Tantric spells that could dry up the Ganges or flood the Rajasthan desert, he was really a benevolent soul who never tired of offering practical advice and helping others along their path to spiritual awakening. Hans was in his late thirties, with heavy glasses, a protruding jaw, a crooked nose (perhaps broken), and monastic robes that were too big for him.

"Hans, man, you almost killed me!" I complained, massaging my toes.

"It was a good jump, wasn't it?" Hans said, smiling in self-congratulation. "I can show you a different move, if you vont."

"Thanks, Hans, really. That was enough for today."

"How is your Enlightenment coming along?" Hans asked with fatherly interest. "Are you vorking hard?"

"Oh, well, you know how it is. I've been experiencing some difficulties."

"Like vot?"

"Well, I'm just a little confused about what it means to be a monk. Maybe I am having an identity crisis of sorts."

Hans winked at me and pointed at his shaved head. "Zeh key is in zeh brain, my friend. In zeh brain."

"Yeah."

"Do you see zeh big gray cloud crawling over zeh sharp Himalayan ridges?"

"I see it."

"Very good. Now votch carefully."

Hans squatted in the middle of the street, teeth clenched, and started pumping his fists as if he were milking a cow.

"Is it moving?" he said, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

"What?"

"Zeh cloud!"

"No."

"Votch carefully."

I stood and watched obediently as Hans unleashed his telekinetic powers. Ten minutes later, the cloud was above our heads, curled up and heavy with water. Hans got up and wiped his foggy glasses on his zen.

"You did it, Hans." I congratulated him.

"I know," he said, looking up. "I am zeh master."

AFTER AN HOUR OF WANDERING around town and drinking chai, I suddenly realized what I had to do. I rushed to the taxi stand, hopped in a beat-up white minivan, and told the driver to take me to Mr. Chandradas's paratha shop on Jogibara Road. When I got out, Mrs. Lakshmi peeked out of the paratha shop and pointed at the courtyard surrounding Shiva's sanctuary. "Ani Dawa was looking for you," she told me.

Climbing Ani Dawa's doorsteps in a rush, I forgot to duck at the entrance and smashed my head in the door's upper threshold, which had been designed for people under four feet tall.

“*Kugpa!*”—Idiot!—Ani Dawa’s mother, Ama-la, cried as I knelt on the floor, seized with pain.

“Are you okay?” Ani Dawa asked, squatting beside me. “Let me see.”

“I’m going to live, for now,” I assured her, showing her my fingers: there was no blood.

“He can’t even fit through the door,” Ama-la mumbled, dipping her pinky in her cup of butter tea to check the temperature. “When he sleeps, his feet stick out of the bed.”

Despite her cranky personality, raging superstition, and inherent contempt for Westerners, Ama-la was a good-natured woman, never too stingy to offer her guests a piece of desiccated, rock-solid yak cheese, considered by most Tibetans a priceless delicacy.

“Tell him to have some,” Ama-la said, placing a slab of yak cheese at the center of the table.

Ama-la never spoke to me directly, though I understood everything she said. She had two teeth, gray-blue eyes, and waist-long white hair, interlaced with colorful threads and knitted in braids. When she laughed, she stuck her tongue in the space between her two upper teeth and threw herself backwards, onto her pillow. Although she never missed a chance to ridicule me, I’d come to love her the way one loves an eccentric. I saw her as an artifact from a world that no longer existed, a world where Buddhist monks flew in the sky, riding on top of Tibetan yaks, where thunder was the sound of burping dragons, where the earth was a square copper plate carried by four elephants, and where people prepared to exit their bodies by opening a crack in their craniums.

“Ani Dawa,” I said, out of breath, “I need you to take me to the Mo Lama, now. Please.”

“Why?” Ani Dawa asked, rinsing her hands over a bucket of water. “What’s wrong?”

“I need someone to do a *mo* divination for me. It’s going to make me feel much better.”

“Have you changed your mind about being a monk?”

“No, that’s not it. I just have a lot of anxieties about the future.”

"He is going to go crazy, just like the rest of the *Engies*"—Westerners—Ama-la snickered. "Give him a month."

Ani Dawa looked at me intensely, and grabbed her *zen*. "Okay. If that's what you want to do, let's go."

Terchen Migme Rinpoche, the Mo Lama, lived in a pink four-story mansion that functioned as a guesthouse, monastery, and private residence. When Ani Dawa and I arrived on the third floor, we were intercepted by a beautiful Tibetan woman in her twenties, who gestured at us to be quiet.

"My father is seeing someone at the moment," the Tibetan woman said. "Maybe you should come some other day."

"Please," Ani Dawa pleaded. "It will only take a minute. Rinpoche knows me."

The woman shrugged and ran downstairs.

"She knows who I am," Ani Dawa said with a smug smile. "When Mother was sick, I used to come here every day."

I leaned against the yellow balcony railing and tried to make out the familiar buildings and streets of Lower Dharamsala, which was spread out like a satellite map six thousand feet below. Enclosed by the arching horizon, the Kangra Valley looked like a slum city crammed in a crystal ball, with tiny feather clouds swimming, spinning, and then landing on houses, Hanuman temples, and black Shiva lingams.

The door to Rinpoche's room opened and out rushed two sobbing Tibetan women, each with a white *katak*—a traditional Tibetan silk scarf—slung from her neck.

"Ready?" Ani Dawa whispered, holding the door open.

The audience room was dim and for the most part empty. Terchen Migme Rinpoche, a sixty-something man with noble features and a weary gaze, sat cross-legged on a throne of stacked-up Kashmiri rugs, facing a lacquered cabinet that served as an altar and a library. The grainy, mustard-colored walls were decorated with traditional Tibetan paintings depicting historic Tibetan figures sitting on clouds and centipedic Tantric monsters dancing on top of choked-up Hindu gods.

Ani Dawa and I offered Rinpoche our *kataks* and sat on the cold, glazed cement floor, preparing our introductory speeches. Rinpoche was in no hurry to find out why we had come to see him. Smiling like a little kid posing for a camera, he put on a pair of thick-lensed glasses and inspected the objects placed on the low table in front of him: a tall, leather-sheathed cup, an astrological booklet, a second pair of glasses, a bowl filled with chunks of yak cheese the consistency of limestone, a mahogany butter tea cup, a few chewed-up pieces of yak jerky, a tiger-eye rosary, a dozen tiny plastic bags of Tibetan medicine, an ancient radio with a missing antenna, and a long metal stick with a white plastic hand affixed to its tip. Noticing that the silver parasol-shaped lid on top of his butter tea cup had tipped to one side, Rinpoche chuckled, and held the lid in the light.

“*Ale-e-eh!*” he exclaimed with sudden clarity as he examined the lid’s intricate design closely.

He returned the lid to the butter tea cup, and after spending a whole minute trying to make it stay level, he leaned back on his pillow and held his index finger in front of his nose.

“*Ale-e-eh!*” Rinpoche repeated, this time with a self-reproachful tone.

He took off his glasses and grabbed the second pair from the table.

“Oh!” he shouted as if he had just seen us for the first time. “The weather is really nice, isn’t it? Especially the sun.”

“It is most wonderful,” I agreed, nodding respectfully.

“Rinpoche . . .” Ani Dawa began, pointing at me with an open palm.

“Especially the Indian sun,” Rinpoche interrupted her, unable to contain his excitement. “Every year, it gets hotter and hotter!”

“I wonder why,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“They say it’s getting bigger,” Rinpoche informed me, wiping his forehead with a white handkerchief. “When I was a child growing up in Tibet, the sun was very small. We didn’t need a bathroom or toilet paper: everything turned into ice. It was very clean.”

“Rinpoche,” Ani Dawa intercepted cautiously, “this boy here, his name is Lodro Chosang.”

"Ale-e-eh!" Rinpoche intoned. "Would you like some butter tea?"

Before I could answer, Rinpoche took the plastic hand from the table, reached out, and started scratching the mosquito net covering the window, to attract the attention of his daughter. A minute later the door opened, and in came Rinpoche's daughter, carrying a two-gallon thermos and two porcelain teacups.

"That's better," Rinpoche commended me as I filled Ani Dawa's cup with butter tea.

"Would Rinpoche like some more?" I asked, approaching the table.

"Just a little," Rinpoche answered, smiling, and then, suddenly, smacked me on the head with the plastic hand. "Oh! I am sorry. So many flies! I need my reading glasses."

I topped off Rinpoche's mahogany cup with tea, screwed the cap back on the thermos, and looked on and around the table for the second pair of glasses.

"They were right here a minute ago," I noted, pointing at the center of the table.

Rinpoche grew somber and started fumbling in the folds of his maroon robe.

"Ale-e-eh!" Rinpoche sighed, pulling a box of cookies from under his legs. "Very surprising! Do you like butterscotch cookies? We should have some."

"Rinpoche," Ani Dawa began for the third time. "We came to ask you to perform a *mo*. Lodro Chosang became a monk yesterday and he'd like to know what his life is going to be like from now on. If there are going to be obstacles and so forth."

"I see," Rinpoche said with a grave expression. "This is a very important question. Perhaps we should have some butter tea."

"I am afraid I can't find the lid for your teacup," I informed Rinpoche with a sorrowful smile.

"Very surprising," Rinpoche murmured, looking under the table. "Sometimes things start rolling around, especially round things—they fall on the floor and then disappear, rolling."

Absorbed in thought, Rinpoche took the plastic hand and began scratching his back. When he was done, he opened his astrological booklet and, pretending to read, gestured for Ani Dawa to move closer.

"Is he Tibetan?" Rinpoche asked her, whispering. "I can't see very well."

"No," Ani Dawa answered in a low voice.

"Is his mother Japanese?"

"No, he is an *Engie*."

"*Ale-e-eh!*"

Rinpoche adjusted his robe and upper garment and reached for the leather-sheathed cup on the table. With a distant look in his eye, intended to announce the beginning of the *mo* ceremony, he pulled three dice out of the cup, held them above his head, and mumbled a long mantra. After a moment of silent contemplation, he dropped the dice back into the cup, shook it violently, and slammed it upside down on the table.

"Very strange," Rinpoche mumbled, as he lifted the cup. "There is only one dice here."

He leaned back on his pillow and held the cup in the light, to see if the missing dice weren't somehow stuck to the bottom.

"They must be in the room somewhere," I said, crawling about on the floor.

"Now," Rinpoche began, looking up at the ceiling fan, "there are some signs that seem to suggest that your monk path is free of obstacles. However, staying in Dharamsala for some time might lead to a lot of unfavorable circumstances, and even disaster."

"What kind of disaster?" I asked.

"You might come under the influence of a hungry ghost who will lead you astray and shorten your life span."

"Where will I find a hungry ghost?"

"He will come to you," Rinpoche assured me, nodding.

"So what should I do?" I wondered.

Rinpoche smiled and pushed the bowl of yak cheese to the end of the table.

“Have some *chura*,” he encouraged me, while he himself went for a stick of yak jerky. “I will tell you a story, if you are not in a hurry.”

“We are not,” Ani Dawa and I answered in unison.

“In my home village back in Tibet,” Rinpoche reminisced with a blissful smile, “lived a man by the name of Tenzin. He was famous for making the best *chura* in the entire Kham region. One day another famous *chura* maker, from Amdo, passed through our village and tried Tenzin’s yak cheese. Now, the man from Amdo was also a *ngagpa*—a magician—and when he realized that Tenzin’s *chura* was much better than his, he secretly cast an evil spell on Tenzin and then disappeared, never to be seen again. Soon Tenzin began experiencing strange things. One time he bought a cucumber from the market and came home with a snake. Another time he was followed by a hungry ghost. Finally he went to the abbot of a nearby monastery and asked him to do a *mo*. As long as you stay in your house and don’t go out, the abbot told him, the spell is not going to hurt you. Tenzin stayed at home for three years. On the fourth year, a yak dropped on top of his house and killed him on the spot.”

I looked at Ani Dawa and she nodded: it was time for us to leave. I thanked Rinpoche for the *mo*, placed an envelope with fifty rupees on the table, and edged toward the door. It had stopped raining and the pale pink sky was dotted with countless black clouds, burning coals ignited by the setting sun. The nunnery gong, a soft but insistent A-flat, reverberated across the valley. It was only fitting, I thought, that a sound so lonely should come from a place where solitude was the goal.

I filled my lungs with the crisp, ozone-scented air and looked at the cluster of shanties and mud-brick houses that composed my landlord’s family compound. It was stupid of me to expect that the Mo Lama would tell me why I had experienced a panic attack on my second day as a monk. Clairvoyant people, as it happened, spoke only in indecipherable parables.

I wasn’t disappointed, though. Seeing the Mo Lama had helped me realize something very important. As I had sat on the cement floor, listening to him talk about hungry ghosts and yaks falling from the sky, it had occurred to me that trying to identify completely with my new self and my new way of life

would only drive me insane. What was the use of replacing one painful identity with another? It made a lot more sense to step back and allow things to happen. It was wiser to be an observer, an anthropologist stranded on a virgin island.

They say that a Buddhist monk has to change three things: his clothes, his name, and his thoughts. I had changed my clothes and my name. My thoughts I wasn't giving up yet.



## Four

When people talked about Dharamsala, they usually referred to a general area that included about a dozen or so localities. Lower Dharamsala, situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, was an Indian village with two year-round bazaars, a bus station, government offices, banks, and a cricket ground. Above it was Gangchen Kyishong, a quiet and well-kept Tibetan neighborhood built around two small monasteries, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, a Tibetan-run hospital, and the many offices of the Tibetan government in exile—one of them wishfully called the Tibetan Parliament. Climbing up the road above Gangchen Kyishong, one passed through Gamru village (where I lived for the bigger part of my stay in India), then the Dalai Lama's residence—which was connected to Namgyal Monastery and the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics—and finally arrived in McLeod Ganj, a former British hill station and at present a gathering place of backpackers, junkies, and dharma tourists.

Despite the presence of a Tibetan parliament filled with ministers, many of them monks and lamas, the existence of a Tibetan government was largely an illusion. Since the Dalai Lama's escape from Lhasa to Dharamsala in 1959, and the annexation of Tibet's territory by the communist Chinese government, the Tibetans living in India have been struggling to find their identity: they didn't want to go back to their home country because it was part of

communist China; the Indian government refused to grant citizenship even to the children of Tibetan refugees born in India; and the so-called Tibetan government in exile lacked the legislative power and wherewithal to protect and provide basic services to its constituents.

On the surface, the relationship between Indians and Tibetans seemed congenial, but in reality both sides harbored a great deal of resentment. All the Tibetans I met were unanimous in their disdain for the customs and lifestyle of their Indian neighbors—despite the fact that a large part of Tibet's cultural heritage, from its alphabet to its philosophy, scholarship, and art, had been imported from India in the seventh century A.D., when the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo made Buddhism the official religion of his kingdom. Not many Tibetans would look at an Indian holy man, or *saddhu*—barefoot, soiled, dressed in rags, with a Rastafarian hairdo and a wild look in his eyes—and think, hey, this is what the Buddha probably looked like when he emerged from the jungles of Bihar twenty-five hundred years ago and postulated the four principles encapsulating the Buddhist worldview: that all compounds are impermanent; that all physical and mental states, born out of a misconception about the ultimate way of things, are in the nature of suffering; that all phenomena are devoid of objective reality; and that Nirvana is peace.

The Indians, for their part, found many Tibetans to be hypocritical and opportunistic. They couldn't understand how the Tibetans, who had arrived in the late fifties in India with nothing and had presented themselves as the last survivors of a dying culture that needed to be saved, now controlled large portions of land, ran hundreds of guesthouses and restaurants, employed lower-caste Indian boys and teenagers as slaves, sold jewelry and antiques, and refused to do any labor-intensive jobs, such as working construction or plowing the fields.

Lobsang—one of the hundreds of Tibetan refugees who crossed the Chinese-Indian border every year—lived near the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, in a detached, flat-roofed stone room cracked in half by an earthquake, one part of the building apparently on its way down the slope. Barely sixteen, he was a chain-smoker, the tips of his fingers browned by filter-

less cigarettes. His long, curly hair, pale pink lips, and cute boyish face were a bit deceiving: Lobsang was an old soul, one that didn't get too hung up on things like food, or tomorrow, or dying.

Even though he was six years younger, I had come to look up to him as a mentor. He had taught me how to drink water from a leaking pipe sticking out in the middle of a road. He had taught me how to fix my kerosene stove: working on his knees and elbows, kerosene tar smudged across his forehead, he had taken the whole stove apart and showed me how it worked. This is the valve: it gets clogged. This is the piston: when the insulation rubs out, the pressurized air escapes.

He had taught me how to eat at the cheapest, and invariably dirtiest, chai shops in the vicinity, using my fingers instead of utensils (as Indians do) and swallowing chilies by the pound—to protect myself against the amoebas.

Lobsang was the first person to point out that my habit of extracting the cooked flies and stones from my food, and arranging them in a long row on the table, could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. “The cook is going to get offended,” Lobsang explained, nodding at the chai shop owner, a fierce man presiding over an array of roaring kerosene stoves, stirring a pot of *aloo gobi* with one hand and massaging his testicles with the other.

Aside from teaching me basic survival skills, such as handling snakes and scorpions, Lobsang was also my ultimate guide into the workings of Tibetan society. He didn't withhold any information. He told me that the stray dogs around town were believed to be the reincarnated souls of former monks who had broken their vows. He told me that in Tibet people wiped their asses with stones. He told me of a matriarchal Tibetan tribe where women apprehended occasional male wanderers and raped them. He said that he knew a Tibetan girl from that region and proposed to introduce me to her.

When I visited Lobsang one Sunday afternoon, I found him stooped over a pile of books, memorizing a list of irregular English verbs. The room was filled with a pungent odor.

“It's tiger oil,” Lobsang explained. “When I rub it on my temples, it increases my memory.”

Unlike most people I met, Lobsang never made me feel self-conscious about wearing robes. He understood that being a monk was just another job, like driving a rickshaw or squeezing sugarcane juice in front of the post office for three rupees a glass.

"Yesterday I saw your teacher, Ani Dawa," Lobsang informed me, as he pumped the kerosene stove to make tea. "She thinks that you are trying to pick up some of the young nuns that she is friends with."

"No!"

"*Kun chog!*" Lobsang shouted and burst out laughing.

*Kun chog* is part of the Tibetan expression *kun chog sum*, which means "three precious ones." The three precious ones are the Buddha, his teaching, and his enlightened followers. In conversation, *kun chog* is used to mean *I swear!* whereas *kun chog sum* has the connotation of *Jesus Christ!* or *Goddamn it!* Tibetans love to overdramatize every bit of news they present or receive, interchanging *Really?* with *Kun chog!* the way gospel singers trade phrases at the culmination of a song.

"I am not trying to pick up anybody," I told him. "She introduced me to her nun friends."

Lobsang sat on his bed, one leg over the other, lit a tattered cigarette, and pointed at me, scrunching his eyebrows.

"What's your friend's name?"

"Which one?"

"The one from Los Angeles, with all the tattoos."

"Oh, you mean Damien."

"Damien," Lobsang repeated with pleasure. "He's got a nun girlfriend."

"No!"

"*Kun chog!*"

"How do you know?"

"A friend of mine told me. He saw a nun go into Damien's house and stay overnight."

"I don't believe it."

Lobsang stubbed his cigarette in a tin can and produced chewed-up bubble gum from behind his ear.

"I have a new girlfriend," he told me, squatting by the stove to pour the tea.

"Another American, ten years older than you?" I suggested.

"No, a Tibetan. An ex-nun."

"What's with you and nuns, man?"

"You know the song," Lobsang replied with a wicked smile. "All the pretty girls are in the nunnery."

There was, in fact, a popular Tibetan song that went "All the pretty girls are in the nunnery," and I happened to know it quite well—it was one of the first things I ever memorized in Tibetan. The frustration of adolescent Tibetans was understandable. According to one figure, prior to 1959, the monastic community in Tibet had comprised almost sixty percent of the population.

"So how does it feel, dating an ex-nun?" I asked.

"She tells me stories you wouldn't believe."

"Like what?"

"Like how nuns do it together."

Lobsang looked at me intensely, gauging my reaction, and then exploded with laughter.

"You are full of shit," I told him, adjusting my zen. My stomach was aflame, my heart fluttered. "Tibetan nuns would never brake their chastity vows."

"*Kun chog!*" Lobsang jumped, suddenly dead serious. "She tells me everything."

I knew I shouldn't ask any questions but it was already too late. "And how do they do it?"

"With an egg," Lobsang confided, thrilled that he got me begging for more information.

I was completely baffled. Of all things at their disposal, an egg!

"What kind of egg?" I wondered, realizing that I must sound like an idiot.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know—a raw egg, or a hard-boiled one?"

"A raw one," Lobsang declared with authority.

I felt anxious. My hands were sweaty. I finished my tea and looked out the window. At one time, before the last major earthquake split it in half, Lobsang's room had been a government office. Now the windows were broken and the rain poured through the crack in the ceiling and disappeared into a crack in the floor.

"Lobsang, man, you are going to kill me," I said, conceding defeat. "How can they possibly do it with an egg, and a raw one at that?"

"You know: two nuns and an egg. Think about it."

"I am thinking about it," I replied. "I will probably stay awake thinking about it for the next five years."

"Maybe you should ask Ani Dawa to explain it to you," Lobsang proposed, giggling.

"Actually, I will," I said. "I will tell her how I got the information, too. Then she will lead a delegation of elderly Tibetan women and whip you to death with bundles of poison ivy."

"She will," Lobsang agreed.

Laughing, we exited the room and headed downhill, to catch a bus to Upper Dharamsala. I needed to buy kerosene for my stove and Lobsang assured me that he knew a man who might be able to sell me a few gallons on a Sunday. Passing near the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, we saw a Western man in his sixties, sitting cross-legged on the glazed cement floor of the spacious portico, an open book in his lap. He had long, curly, reddish-blond hair, a prominent mustache, and wore a discolored T-shirt and a pair of gray-and-blue-striped linen pants.

"*Ni hao*," Lobsang greeted him in Chinese.

The man responded in Chinese with a thunderous whisper, and my attention was immediately drawn to the pink scar on his neck.

"This is Vinnie," Lobsang explained. "He is fluent in Chinese."











































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































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