

Kissed By a Deer

Margi Gibb

We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.

[Joseph Campbell: *The Power of Myth*].

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Part One: Impermanence

Loss is a fact of life. Impermanence is everywhere we look. We are all going to suffer our losses.

[Lama Surya Das: *Practicing With Loss*].



Kissed by a Deer (Gibb 2006)

The Day the Music Died

I don't think I'm going to make it this time honey.

These were the last words my father uttered to me before he died. I was sitting on the side of his hospital bed holding his hand. His other hand was gripping the metal triangle hanging from the lifting pole above the bed. His breath was laboured, his voice weak. There was nothing I could say. I knew he wasn't going to make it – he was dying. But I wasn't about to affirm his words. He was the person I loved the most; the one who'd always accepted, loved, and been there for me; now he was about to go somewhere without me. Gazing into his eyes I determined not to look at him with fear. It wasn't fair to send him on a journey into the unknown with trepidation in my heart. In this moment, more than ever, he needed my love.

My brother and his wife entered the room. Giving them the opportunity to sit with my father, I moved away from the bed, and then using the wall for support, slid my body down onto the floor, on the opposite side of the room.

They'd only been there a short time when the door opened, and Betty entered the room. Betty had been a family friend for over fifty years. She was a farmer's wife, mother to five sons: steady, solid, and dependable: the salt of the earth. Her husband, one of my father's closest friends, in his mid-eighties, rose one morning at 6 am and walked out to the paddocks to check the cattle as he always did. Then, rather than face the sufferings of old age, put a gun to his head, and took his own life.

My father, watching her enter the room, drew his last breath, and let go. On some level he must have thought 'now Bett's here the kids will be ok'. Betty exclaimed 'Well, would you look at that?' I leapt up from the floor threw my arms around him and wept. Deep inside the core of my being, I felt a part of myself being wrenched out of me, leaving with him. Flesh was being severed from flesh. It was over. He'd lived his life and lived it well. His death, like his life, had been simple and without fanfare. At ninety years of age, he died loved – without fear, fuss, or drama.

Losing my anchor

When my father died; my roots in this world had been pulled up and I'd lost the place I called home. I could easily spin out into the cosmos and become lost, afloat in a world of grief and disillusionment. He had been the one constant in my life, my

anchor. Now the strongest link to the world of my childhood had broken and life as I'd known it ended. By the age of forty two, I'd lived through the deaths of my mother, my father, my two sisters, and all of my ten uncles and aunts, bar one. The world around me had irrevocably changed – familiarity had dissolved into dust. Life as I'd known it had ended.

My friends, although caring, no longer lived in the same world as me. The veil of death hung between us, separating their lives from mine. They hadn't encountered major loss, their families were still intact. While I was busy burying mine, they were busy creating their own. Except for my brother, who I love dearly, but with whom I'd become distant through the grief process, I was completely alone. I had to keep moving. I couldn't afford to sink into a well of grief.

I immersed myself in creativity; painting mandalas and pursuing my passion for music. The world of music offered me the possibility of living a life beyond the limitations of my mother's but I didn't act on my love of music until after she'd died. My mother had grown up in a generation when female performers were viewed as just a few steps up the ladder from the world's oldest profession, at least in her eyes. While she was alive I didn't have the inner strength to break through the chains of her disapproval. But loss brings home the impermanency of life, giving us strength to follow our dreams, if we will let it. After she'd died I pursued my passion for playing music.

My father had a beautiful voice. My happiest childhood family memories were listening to him sing with his brothers. Trying to capture that happiness, I modelled myself on my father. While he was alive I'd written over one hundred songs, but strangely after my father died, I didn't write songs anymore. My band dissipated around the time of his death, my relationship with my partner came to a close, and the CD I'd just launched sat in boxes in my back room. I didn't have the strength to start again, to find and train more musicians, and continue on with my original music. It felt like I'd been climbing a mountain for the past decade, only to have gotten very close to the summit, and then be washed back down in a landslide.

In the months following his death I kept busy, never allowing the dust to settle. Living a creative life, I never knew when the next job would come. Needing to create a sense of security I said yes to everything that came my way, working on multiple artistic projects consecutively, keeping one step ahead of my grief. Staying

busy helped to keep me numb and to keep at bay my fear of being alone in the world without my family.

Are you going to San Francisco?

I stopped socialising, turning inward instead, and began to paint mandalas. Working with circles made me feel good and helped to still my mind. For most of the next year, apart from going out to work, I spent my time cocooned inside my studio, painting, letting the external world drop away.

Several months into the painting process a letter arrived from a university encouraging me to enrol in a Master's Degree. I hadn't had contact with the university for almost twenty years and found the arrival of the letter quite odd – wondering how it found its way to me at my current address. Intrigued, I decided to find out more. Pushing the boundaries of academia, I said I was only interested in studying if I could write my thesis on the Mandala. I was approaching an institution founded on the bedrock of logic, reason, and intellect, seeking permission to research a subject grounded in intuition, creativity and spirituality. Surprisingly they gave me the go ahead.

Excited with the possibility of a new lease on life, I planned a trip to America. I was going to interview two well known mandala artists living there. The first artist was the Mandala Momma: Dr Judith Cornell, recognised as a pioneer and expert in the field of the sacred art and spiritual science of the mandala. Her work had been inspirational for me. I was both excited and nervous to meet her. I booked to attend a six day workshop at the Mt. Madonna retreat centre in the Santa Cruz Mountains, California.

I flew to San Francisco and stayed in the city for a couple of days before travelling south to the retreat. Although I'd grown up in the Australian high country, I'd been heavily influenced by American popular culture. The beat generation, the bohemians, and the hippies had all made an impact on me and influenced my life direction. I tried to be a hippy when I was younger, but didn't quite cut it. I was just a tad too intense and didn't suit long hair. At the age of nineteen I settled into the life of a bohemian. Sleeping in a loft, in a small garret in Melbourne's inner suburbs; studying creative writing and philosophy and hanging out with other writers, poets and painters. I shunned materialism and capitalist culture and delved into eastern

and western philosophies searching for truth. I studied existentialism, entering the complex worlds of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus. I sat in dark theaters with Beckett, 'Waiting for Godot'. I lost myself in the theatre of the absurd with Genet and Ionesco, dabbled in Artaud's theater of cruelty, and contemplated 'The death of God' while drinking with Nietzsche. Beat writers like Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac entered my consciousness, battling for supremacy in my young, already overloaded mind. Inspired by intellectual curiosity and hedonism I followed the beat manifesto, drank copious amounts of red wine, smoked Camel cigarettes, and experimented with whatever mind altering substances came my way. Eventually Kerouac won the fight. Drawn to the ideal of freedom, I became a Dharma Bum and hit the road in search of enlightenment.

Looking back, I wonder how different my life may have been if the primary counterculture influences had been women. Female contemporaries of the male Beat writers were part of the creation of Beat philosophy and literature, but absent from the public eye. Patti Smith picked up the legacy in the 1970s, bringing home the raw power of stream of consciousness writing, heralding in the new wave of disillusionment that had begun to surface in the consciousness of America's youth. Defiantly she sang, 'I hold the key to the sea of possibilities', and I never doubted her.

For me, being in America was surreal. It was like living in TV land, visiting places I'd seen in movies and television shows, heard about in songs – *If you're going to San Francisco be sure to wear flowers in your hair* – and read about in countless novels. I did a pilgrimage to the City Lights Book store, the gathering place of the beat writers, and then caught a bus to Haight-Ashbury. I visited streets steeped in the cosmic history of the communes of free love, psychedelic drugs, marijuana, hippies, beatniks and rock 'n' roll. I walked past the former homes of some of the greatest musicians of that era – Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, The Grateful Dead, and Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane. Next I hired a bike and rode over the Golden Gate Bridge and around the bay area. Then I caught a free street car to visit Grace Cathedral. I wanted to walk the labyrinth, based on the famous medieval labyrinth of Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres, in France.

A labyrinth is designed to bring you into a meditative state as you walk its pattern. I entered, beginning a slow contemplative walk towards its centre. The

Cathedral was massive, peaceful and still. At the front end of the main hall a sermon was in progress. Just as I reached the centre of the labyrinth the priest began to pray out loud, announcing it was thirty five years to the day, since women had been acknowledged by the church, and permitted to become ministers. He prayed that this process would no longer be inhibited in any way. I stood contemplating the synchronicity of his prayer with my arrival in the centre of the labyrinth, expressed a silent Amen, turned, and began my journey out of the maze.

Mount Madonna

My pilgrimage in San Fran complete, I caught the bus to Watsonville and then hired a taxi to the retreat centre in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The Mount Madonna retreat centre, and residential community, manifested through the vision of Baba Hari Dassa (a Hindu Guru), and his followers. New people enter the community every year, seeking an alternative life style. Others have lived there for over twenty years. There is a main hall, residential, and administrative buildings, and a cluster of houses for visiting teachers and their clients. As much as possible the natural forest has been left untouched. You can walk amongst the redwoods, enter the communal garden and orchard, and help yourself to fruits of the season. Peacocks wandered the grounds; deer leapt freely, all adding to the sense of other-worldliness. The setting was idyllic

In the central area of the property there was a Hindu temple dedicated to Hanuman, the Indian deity, depicted as a monkey. Hanuman is worshipped as a symbol of physical strength, perseverance and devotion, and said to appease evil forces. The temple sat at the top of a hill – at the front of it a stone terrace where you could sit in worship had been built. Various sculptures of Hindu deities decorated the area – the sound of water flowing from the mouth of a lion in a stone waterfall added to the sense of tranquillity.

The Mandala Momma

The Mandala Momma had been given the name Rajita Sivananda by her guru, Ammachi. Ammachi/Amma, the *Divine Mother* or the *Holy Hugging Momma*, as she is popularly known, is a living Hindu Saint who has gained the devotion of hundreds

of thousands of seekers, many of whom are women who fought for liberation in the western social movements of the twentieth century. Rajita was one of them.

Her workshop, *Mandala-Creating Luminous Symbols for Healing*, was being hosted by the community at Mount Madonna. It was not a part of their everyday life. All the participants were women, most of them from California or nearby states, except for one woman who'd travelled from The Netherlands, and me. I was feeling overwhelmed with the prospect of meeting Rajita – she was my teacher; not that she was aware of this. I'd adopted her teachings through her books and website. I was anticipating we'd have a strong natural bond. But when we met there were no sparks, no evidence of any real connection between us. I struggled to reconcile my expectations with reality, gradually getting my feet on the ground.

On the first night, we sat in a welcoming circle and Rajita asked participants to choose one of the intentionality cards she'd created. Each card held a theme and a small message. I drew *Integrity*. The message was 'Be true to yourself and others, and have the courage to return to a state of childlike innocence and virtue.' Taking my intention card as a cue I relaxed deeper into my experience.

California was the birth place of many alternative health practices now embraced by mainstream contemporary western culture, including vegetarian and vegan diets, and was without doubt, the home of the beautiful people. I was struck by the vibrancy of the people at the centre. They looked so healthy: golden, carefree, young, and open. In California health equated wealth – not that anybody appeared to be lacking in material comforts though.

Rajita's work focussed, not on doing, but rather on becoming. Each day we created a mandala around a specific theme. We remained in silence until 3 o'clock each afternoon. Then we sat in a talking circle. Rajita held an elaborated decorated talking stick; when someone wished to speak, they asked for the stick. Holding the stick signalled they had the floor and were to be listened to.

I asked for the talking stick and was just beginning to express my gratitude to the Mandala Momma for all she'd unknowingly given me over the years, when suddenly I burst into tears, blurting out how difficult it had been to get this work accepted in Australia. Knowingly she nodded her head saying, 'You've been pioneering.' Finally I felt a connection.

Power animals

When we weren't drawing I took long walks in the forest amongst the redwoods, watching deer dance in the shadows and birds fly high above the trees. Over the next three days we created hand mandalas, word mandalas and gifting mandalas. On the fourth day drawing upon Native American Shamanic traditions, we were going to create a power animal. In most shamanic cultures a power animal is a totemic spirit guide that gives us the gifts of their qualities and strengths to help us through life and teach us the lessons of being human—vulnerable and seeking wholeness. The power animal reflects our inner most being and the qualities we need in this world that are often hidden from us. When you call upon the animal you are asking to connect to their strength and harmonise with their essence

Rajita asked us to lie on the floor. The sounds of Native American drums and flutes filled the room. She played the role of the Shaman, shaking a rattle over our heads and bodies, encouraging us to journey deep within and receive an image of an animal or a bird. We were to 'feel' this animal, welcoming whatever arose, and bring it to life in the mandala. Rajita emphasised the importance of accepting, not rejecting the vision, stressing this could be the most significant mandala any one of us would ever create.

Unsure, I surrendered and went along for the ride; lying on the floor with the intent of 'letting it happen'. The drums became more intense; the sound penetrated the very core of my being. My mind pulsed with the rhythm, and then something deep within me began to stir. The first image to arise was a deer. My intellect began to wrestle intuition and I rejected it, rationalising it was probably just a flashback to the deer I'd seen in the forest that morning. The deer image persisted, but I wouldn't accept it. I couldn't see how my power animal could be a deer. A deer seemed gentle, sensitive, sweet, light and elusive, not an animal I would associate with power. I was sure my power animal would be big, physically powerful, wild, and somewhat formidable.

I began to lift my body up off the floor – it had become heavy and awkward. I struggled like a water buffalo caught in the mud. I reached for my drawing materials, but could barely manipulate the pencil – my hands felt like clumsy, heavy, hooves. I spent hours in conflict and frustration in an effort to stay true to my intuitive process. I felt embarrassed and inept, struggling to break through patterns of low self esteem

and low self worth, battling the voice of the inner critic, who kept telling me 'You can't draw.' The process took all afternoon. More than once a participant burst into tears as some deep emotional blockage rose to the surface of their being.

When the mandalas were finished we placed them in a circle around the altar. Most of the women drew beautiful images – birds, tigers, and dogs howling at the moon; their drawings refined and controlled. Drawing was not my strong point. I was a primitive painter, naive and untaught. My image was clumsy, thick and uneducated. I'd drawn the head of a buffalo, and there was nothing beautiful, artistic or aesthetic about it. I felt like a fraud sitting there with the others. Their drawings were balanced, refined, colourful and full of light. I'd exposed my darkness and wanted to hide. Rajita asked us to lie back down on the floor while she completed her ritual.

The drums began again, and then came the sound of the gentle timbre of a Native American flute, piercing my heart like an arrow. Inside me something broke into deep sobs. All my pent up frustration burst like the wall of a dam. I couldn't stop the floodwater. I have no real conviction around reincarnation, but have experienced hints of a past life connection with the Native Americans – their music, their relationship with animals and nature, and their worldview. Often people told me I looked like an American Indian. Images of the faces and bodies of the Native American people covered in blood, strewn across the land, flashed through my mind. I saw the massacres, I heard them cry, and I felt their pain. I didn't know what was happening to me, but I couldn't stop it. I felt ashamed of our history with Indigenous peoples and that I, along with the rest of the people here, were embracing a spirituality that did not belong to this land and its people, erecting images of foreign gods on their sacred lands.

Vulnerable and raw I got up from the floor and made my way outside. I found a rock to sit on and drew on its solidity to steady my emotions, calm my breathing, and clear my vision. Low clouds hung in the air, creating a mild fog. I looked up, and there standing in front of me was a deer – its presence gentle, soft, graceful and calming, a relief to the conflict I'd been experiencing in the artistic process. I couldn't escape the image this time. I didn't understand it, but I was beginning to acknowledge to myself, that if there was such a thing, then my power animal must be a deer. For the Native Americans deer's medicine represents healing, gentleness

kindness and compassion. The deer enters our life to teach us to love with full consciousness and awareness, and to understand that love requires that we not only love others, but that we also love ourselves– that we learn to love what is ,not what we wish to be.

My sobbing subsided, my breathing slowed down, and the waves of conflicting emotions dissipated. I didn't want to go back into the room with the others, didn't want to voice my vision, didn't want to try and put my experience into words. My emotions settled and I walked back inside and sat in the talking circle. I didn't request to speak and nobody spoke to me. My collapse into tears wasn't questioned.

The following morning we created death and dying mandalas, and then were encouraged to burn all we'd created. Happy to do so, I dropped my extra baggage into the purging flames of the fire. The retreat had come to a close. My encounter with the *Mandala Momma* had been intense. A cancer survivor, she was a warrior at heart – both of her breasts had been removed. She carried her scars with dignity, turning her suffering into fuel to kindle the fire of her creativity.

Costa Rica

I had a free week between workshops, and had scheduled a short holiday in Costa Rica on a group tour. I flew to San Jose and spent my first day acclimatizing to the heat and humidity, exploring the city, visiting the museums and artisan markets, people watching in the Plaza de la Cultura, and trying out some of the local food. San Jose is ringed by volcanoes and jagged mountains and sits in the middle of a high valley known as the 'Meseta Central'. The city is a mix of historic architecture and renovated urban parks, plazas, and promenades – it is the cultural, political and economic centre, the capital city of Costa Rica. Although it was not chaotic, it was always bustling. Tired, I made my way back to the hotel for an afternoon nap before meeting the tour guide and other members of the group that evening.

Our tour guide, Sebastian, was from Peru; animated, energetic and engaging, accustomed to winning hearts. Most people in the group were young Americans – verbose, uneducated, uncultured, and full of self importance. Having come from the protected world of the retreat, I was abruptly catapulted into another dimension, one where I didn't belong. I'd gone from the world of peace, love and sensitivity into the

world of cigarettes, alcohol, and rock 'n' roll in a forty eight hour period. There were some quick adjustments to make. I had next to nothing in common with these people.

We left San Jose the following morning heading for La Fortuna, the base of the Arenal Volcano. The forests of Costa Rica are lush and dense; it is a nature lover's paradise. For me the richness of Costa Rica lay not in its culture, but in the natural environment. We had two days at La Fortuna. I spent my time climbing the hills around the volcano and then soaking in the luxury of hot springs in the evening. The springs were set up for maximum indulgence – you didn't even have to leave the water to sit at the bar. Being a non drinker this was of no real value to me, but the others in the group partied hard. Costa Rica is a playground for America's youth, much like Bali is for young Australians.

From La Fortuna we travelled further south to Monteverde. Here I walked along the sky walk canopies and zip wired across the roof of the steamy Monteverde cloud forest. The forests in Monteverde are similar to rainforests, but instead of relying on rain for moisture, water comes from the semi-permanent cloud that covers the region. Ecologists have suggested that the cloud forest was actually once two different ecosystems, straddling each side of the Continental Divide. More than 2,000 species of plants, 320 bird species and 100 different types of mammals live in the forest. Sadly, the surrounding pastures, once covered in dense forest have been destroyed, and now only a small protected section remains.

After Monteverde we headed for the Beach side town of Quepos and the Manuel Antonio National Park. We drove through high altitude coffee plantations, crossed rivers swarming with crocodiles, lunched in a local Reggae Café and chatted our way to Quepos. At least three of the young women were by now besotted with Sebastian who was excitedly calling out to look at the 'yoh chets' moored in the harbour – his phonetic pronunciation of the word 'yachts'.

We pulled into our hotel amidst a cacophony of bird calls and low flying bats. Hundreds of spider monkeys climbed the palms around the swimming pool. The biggest spider I'd ever seen, clung sinisterly to a pillar directly outside my room, keeping me on constant red alert per chance it found its way inside.

Kissed by a Deer

We arose early the next morning for a day at the beach in Manuel Antonio National Park. Because previous visitors had displayed a lack of ecological common sense, only four hundred people a day were allowed into the park. We paid our entrance fee and waded across a small river to reach the entrance. The landscape was straight from heaven: soft white sand beaches, tropical vegetation, swaying palms, and turquoise seas. Monkeys, armadillos, sloths and hundreds of birds lived in the surrounding vegetation. Sail boats, wind surfers, and kayaks colored the waves in the ocean. Longing to plunge into the crystal clear waters I ventured away from the group towards the low lying scrub surrounding the beach to change into my swim suit.

I was crouching down to change when, unexpectedly, a deer emerged from the scrub and walked towards me. Mesmerised by its sudden appearance, I fell to my knees on the sand. The animal showed no fear and walked directly up to me, stretched its head towards me, caught my scent, nudged me and then softly kissed me on the cheek. I sat in rapture, completely still. I'd never known a wild animal to feel so safe in the presence of a human before. The deer continued to sniff my face, pressing its muzzle against my cheek while I gently stroked its shoulder. I heard someone in the group exclaim 'look', amazed the group began taking photos. The deer, disturbed by the sound of the cameras, turned and walked back into the scrub.

I could barely contain myself, awestruck that such a magical encounter had taken place. In many cultures the deer can symbolise a regeneration of spirit and a call to new adventures. I tried to explain my recent experience with the power animal mandala workshop in California to a few of the people in the group – the connection, although perceivable, didn't register. No one was interested. In body we occupied the same time and place. But in spirit, and in mind, we travelled on different roads: the kiss of the deer called me to stand alone and walk an alternative pathway.

We continued walking deeper into the park. Monkeys swung their way around the canopy of the forest. Sloths slept in forked branches of the trees. The afternoon was spent lazing on the beach and sea kayaking. I was by now marginalized in the group. I didn't mind and kept to myself most of the time. I was flying to San Francisco in the morning, and then taking a road trip up north to Portland, Oregon.

Soul Sisters

I was going to Portland to meet Bailey; the second artist I'd arranged to interview. I caught the coach so I could lie back and take in the scenery. We drove through the wine country in the Napa valley and the gold fields of Sacramento, continuing north through the Cascade Mountains with Mt Shasta to our west, into the awe inspiring redwood forests that lead in to Oregon. Everything in America was big – highways, cars, homes, food, people, trees, buildings. Nothing was downsized.

My relationship with Bailey had begun almost a year earlier; two of my mandala images had been published in a book she'd written called *Mandala Journey to the Centre*. I arrived in Portland early morning and made my way to the Country Inn where she was holding her workshop. There was no other-worldliness about this place; it was more old-worldliness – rustic with a quaint charm and floral wallpaper and furnishings. Bailey had yet to arrive so I took the opportunity to shower and get horizontal for a while. The workshop was scheduled to run for the whole day.

The moment she arrived Bailey and I connected. She was warm, friendly and welcoming. She immediately threw her arms around me and introduced me to the other women in the group. They were all teachers. The conference room at the Inn had been carefully transformed into a creative and inspirational space; displays of books and educational materials were set up and various mandala images placed around the room. Bailey had a totally different approach to her work with the mandala, than Rajita. Born and raised in Los Angeles, both her parents were artists. In her words, 'She'd lucked out.' (Couldn't have been more lucky).

Bailey believed spirituality can be implied, allowing for more freedom than when something is set up for an obligatory spiritual experience. The workshop began with a general introduction to the mandala. Bailey was clear and precise and didn't enter into the realm of mysticism or esoteric philosophies. She explained the mandala as a pattern that radiates out and pulls you in, like breathing: it is the primal pattern of creation; everything starts from the centre and grows out. I felt totally at home in her workshop. There was no pressure to be anything but you, whatever that might be.

Bailey invited me to stay with her for a few days after the workshop. She lived with her husband and her dog Bear, in Anacortes, Washington State. I gratefully accepted. We piled our luggage into her four wheel drive and headed for Seattle.

Driving along the freeway I told Bailey about the experiences I'd had in the workshops with *Mandala Momma* and about my encounter with the deer in Costa Rica. The connection didn't escape her. She was excited by the story; being kissed by a deer she believed, had a greater significance than was immediately recognisable. I agreed, but I still had no understanding as to what this might be.

The Seattle skyline came into view. The familiarity of the cityscape, with the distinct outline of the space needle, gave me a feeling of home. The image had been appearing in my lounge room as the precursor to 'Frasier' (a popular sitcom), for many years. I thought, 'Ah, this is where Frasier and Miles live', and then snapped myself back to reality, Telling myself: 'No they don't, they're not real; they're only characters on a TV show.' My psyche, from a very early age had been saturated with American entertainment – I constantly had to switch channels in my mind between the real and the imagined.

Anacortes is situated half way between Seattle and Vancouver, in the Pacific Northwest, homeport to the San Juan Islands. The town and surrounds were stunningly beautiful. We drove through moss green forests, past blue lakes and snow-capped mountains until we arrived at Bailey's house. Her home was an extension of herself: warm, colourful and inviting. Tired from a long day we both retired early. In the morning we went walking through the woods with Bear.

My days with Bailey were spent enjoying life and the beauty of the country she lived in. We walked in the forests, sat by the lake, and hung out with her mum. On my last day we drove to visit a cemetery of the Swinomish Indian people. Their grief was expressed with flowers, pictures, and little objects that had belonged to the deceased. I'd found a new friend in Bailey, a soul sister, someone who understood my search and my creativity. I left the Islands rested and happy and began the long journey back home to Australia.

I've got a job for you

It was winter back in Melbourne, a good time for solitude and creativity. I had my thesis to write and a new series of mandalas to create for my next exhibition: *Symbiosis*. A few years had passed since the death of my father and I was beginning to trust that I would be OK: my creativity could and would sustain me. But emotionally I was still unavailable. I couldn't bear the thought of any more loss, on

any level, so just kept moving. I finished my thesis, held a successful exhibition, and was now waiting for the dust to settle.

A couple of weeks after the opening of my show I went to the opening of one of my friend's exhibitions and found myself in a conversation with the curator of the gallery. Keen to see if we could establish a symbiotic relationship, he took me for a tour of the various creative places and spaces. When we finished I returned to my friend who was accompanying me at the show. She was deep in a conversation. Upon seeing me, she blurted out, 'I've got a job for you.' My immediate response was, 'As if I need another job!' I was working on multiple projects as it was. Then she said, 'It's in Dharamasla.' She had my attention. I didn't need any more persuading.

Long service leave

I'd been saving money to buy a new car but decided instead, I needed respite from the machinations of the modern western world, and this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Grass roots artists don't get Super, or sick leave, or paid holidays, so spending three months living at the base of the India Himalayas, in Dharamasla, with the exiled Tibetan community, would be my version of long service leave.

By the time I'd finished researching the situation it became clear there wasn't really a definite job, but I'd already made the decision to go. I consolidated my decision by accepting a volunteer position, minding children after school for the women in the weaving cooperative in Dharamasla. Knowing I had more to offer I planned to set up a music program after I'd arrived. Before I left, together with some of my students, I held a concert raising enough money to take with me to fund the program in India. Beyond this, I had no real idea as to how I was going to do it - once I got there the rest of the plan would have to unfold a day at a time. I organised my stay in Dharamasla through a small volunteer recruitment agency. For one hundred and fifty US dollars they would meet me at the airport in Delhi, organise a guest house for my first night in Majnukatilu, a Tibetan settlement in Northern Delhi, purchase my bus ticket to Dharamasla, and then meet me at the bus station when I arrived and give me a guided tour.

Majnukatilu

I arrived at Delhi airport after midnight expecting to see someone standing in the terminal holding up a piece of paper with my name on it when I walked out through the arrival gates, but there was no one there. I'd received emailed instructions to stand beside a small flower shop, if the driver wasn't there on arrival and wait. I found the flower shop and stood there dutifully waiting fighting off every taxi driver in Delhi who wanted my business, until it started to register that no one was coming. I had a number to call but no access to a phone and was by now distressed. I'd been waiting at the airport for over two hours and doubting the validity of the organisation I'd paid my money to. The taxi drivers kept haggling for my fare but I couldn't trust they knew enough English to get me to my destination. Seeing my predicament, a young man who spoke English approached and asked if he could help. I explained my situation, showing him the instruction sheet I'd been given before I left Australia. He made a call assuring me the driver was on his way. He was a guide from a small tour company called *Footsteps*, based in Ladakh. I'd never heard of Ladakh and was fascinated by the name. I asked him about it, thinking it must be a Himalayan country I hadn't heard of before, but it wasn't. It was actually a part of India, the highest, most remote, least populated region in the country. Ladakh, he told me, was close to what Tibet had been like before it had been invaded. Many Tibetan people had fled to Ladakh when China first invaded Tibet. I made a note to self; this was somewhere I should go.

An hour later a driver arrived to collect me. Relieved I stepped out of the airport building into the heat of India, cooled only slightly by the darkness of the night, and followed the driver through the mayhem of airport traffic to his car. Tooting our way through a barrage of trucks and cars we set off for Majnukatilu. The fact that it was almost 3 am in the morning made no difference; the roads were still busy and jammed. India's homeless slept under thin blankets or sheets of cardboard, along the sides of the motorway and on the concrete dividers in the middle of the road. I arrived at my guesthouse and fell into bed exhausted, tired enough to sleep through the loud din of the air conditioning unit in the room. It was almost midday before I awoke. Thinking of what lay ahead of me, I felt a mild excitement, but after the airport debacle I wasn't sure I was in good hands. I spent the day drinking

honey/lemon/ginger tea in the Tibetan tea house in Majnukatilu waiting to board the bus for Dharamasla at six that evening.

Bruised knees

I began the fourteen hour drive up into the mountains with my legs wedged up against the wooden backboard of the seat in front of me. As always, my legs were too long for me to sit comfortably in a bus built in Asia. Resigned, I began to settle in for what was going to be a long uncomfortable journey. The full moon, hung golden in the sky, creating a silhouette effect around the trees. Occasionally I would doze off, only to be jolted awake again with another bump in the road. My knees were beginning to bruise.

Several hours into the journey the bus pulled in for a toilet stop outside a small dhaba (tea house). Grateful for the opportunity to stretch my legs and empty my bladder, I forfeited the opportunity to use the restaurant toilet and instead took a walk in the protective darkness. We had well and truly left the city by now – surrounded by mountain stillness. I sat drinking chai, rubbing lineament into my bruised knees and then boarded the bus for the last leg of the journey. The road became increasingly windy as we climbed higher up into the mountains of Himachal Pradesh. A few passengers slept on the floor in the middle of the bus. I envied their ability to sleep regardless of the conditions.

By now I was exhausted and agitated by the pain and discomfort. I sat there in a not-quite-asleep, not-quite-awake state, gazing out the window into the darkness, dreaming of being able to get off the bus. Gradually the sun began rising in the sky and the beauty of a lush green countryside began to unfold around us. It was only a couple more hours until we reached Dharamasla. We passed through small villages. On the outskirts of one village I saw an elephant tethered at the side of the road and wondered how it got there.

The bus began to climb, what seemed to be, an almost vertical mountain. The people sleeping in the aisle woke up as they began to slide down towards the back of the bus. Then the mountain panorama disappeared and we entered forests of towering trees. I could see Tibetan prayer flags strung between the branches and sensed we were approaching Dharamasla. We rounded a bend in the road and the trees began to be replaced with houses, shops and hotels. Tibetan symbols were

painted on the buildings, people in Tibetan costume walked along the side of the road, packs of dogs roamed the streets, and monkeys sat on the overhead wires. We'd arrived at Upper Dharamasla, commonly known as McLeod Ganj, home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community living in exile. I stepped off the bus, stiff and sore, wondering if this time there would be someone there to meet me. There wasn't.

Little Lhasa

The rest of the passengers had dispersed before a mild mannered young Tibetan woman approached me and introduced herself as the representative from the volunteer agency. She led me along empty streets to a narrow path which ran down the valley to my assigned guesthouse. Leaving me to rest, she said she'd be back in a few hours to show me around. I thanked her and opened the door to my room. The guesthouse was isolated from the town; there was no hot water and no in-house restaurant. I wanted comfort, unimpressed; I lay down on the bed, thinking to myself, 'What have I done? I should have bought a new car.' When I woke around lunch time, my guide was waiting and we began an orientation tour.

McLeod Ganj is a rabbit warren of hotels, guesthouses, cafés, restaurants, clothes shops, basic apartment blocks and internet cafés. The empty streets I'd walked earlier in the morning were now a buzz of activity. Road side stalls and markets had opened: monks, Tibetan refugees, tourists, and Indians wandered the street. There are three main roads around which everything centres: Jogiwara Road, Temple Road, and Bagsu Road. It is small enough to find most things easily; all you have to do is ask someone, so the tour didn't serve much of a purpose. We finished the tour at the organisations office. I was to return the following day to find out more about the work they wanted me to do. The organisation had only secured my accommodation for the day of my arrival, which meant I didn't have a room for the night. I felt grossly overcharged for the service but thought, 'well, at least it's going to a good cause...?'

I spent the next couple of hours trying to find a room, only to find there was very little available. Most places were fully booked. It was the Dalai Lama's 70th birthday in a couple of days' time. Thousands of monks and hundreds of Tibetan refugees and foreigners had travelled to McLeod Ganj for the celebration, and to

attend his teachings. The only room I could find at short notice was small, noisy and unclean, but it was closer to Jogiwara road where the restaurants and cafés were situated so at least I didn't have to climb the hill every time I needed to eat.

McLeod Ganj is one of the most amazing places I've ever visited. Nestled on the ridges in the foothills of the Himalayas, amongst forests of cedar and pine trees, the town was originally a hill station, where the British spent hot summers. The heavenly location gave McLeod Ganj a mystic aura, as did the diversity of its residents: a mixture of Indians who lived there permanently, Punjabis on holiday, Kashmiri traders and hotel managers, monks, nuns, Tibetan refugees, stoned Israelis (smoking up the shekels they received on being released from their time of compulsory service in the army), spiritual seekers, spiritual teachers, western Buddhists, yogis, English teachers, artists, massage therapists, beggars, madmen, travellers, monkeys and dogs. I'd arrived at one of the greatest cosmic circuses on earth to search for meaning, inspiration and direction. All I had to do now was to find somewhere to stay long term.

Haunted Hill

When it came to accommodation, I was in for a rude awakening. I needed a room for a couple of months – a place where I could feel safe, withdraw from the craziness around me and rest and reflect. In the comfort of my lounge room in Melbourne I'd dreamed of living in the Himalayas- in a quaint, simple, but aesthetic room, immersed in a deep sense of spirituality, peace and beauty. Finding this was like looking for an earring dropped in the sand at the beach. After hours of climbing up and down Jogiwara road, I found a room at the bottom of the hill, in a Hotel called the Hunted Hill. An Australian woman ran the hotel restaurant and this gave me the feeling it would be an OK place to stay.

The room available was situated in the back of the hotel on the ground floor, at the edge of a pine tree forest, with a panoramic view across the valley. This, I thought, would generate the peace and tranquillity I sought. Eager to get off the road and settle for a while, naively I paid a month's rent upfront. Then I climbed back up the hill one last time to collect my belongings. The room wasn't exactly the aesthetic sanctuary I'd imagined back in Australia-the walls were painted bright pink and had faded, floral pink polyester curtains, which had been hung inside out, draped across

the windows. The kitchen was about the size of a wardrobe, with just a sink and no cooking facilities. There only place to put clothes and other things was on a little alcove shelf lined with fluoro green carpet. The selling point was the blue bathroom, which had an incredible view of the surrounding Himalayas. As for sleeping on the bed, it was so hard, I may as well have slept on the floor; the only difference between sleeping on the mattress or on the floor, was the sheet. I set about rearranging my room, turned the curtains around the right way, removed the hair from the drain in the bathroom, put pictures of my cats on the fluoro shelf, and placed a candle beside the bed, making it feel a wee bit more like home.

What I hadn't known when I'd handed over a month's rent and then lovingly reorganised my room, was – I'd been put in the room directly across the corridor from the landlord: the king of the manor. I hadn't moved in to the Hunted Hill house at all; I'd moved in to the Haunted house and was about to receive nightly visitations from *His Highness*.

His Highness

Sitting there, in my pink room, in the foothills of the Himalayas I heard a knock at the door, followed by a loud 'Hello?' I suspected it was the landlord. I opened the door and there he was -a pot-bellied, middle-aged Indian man, with a fondness for the drink, who found himself irresistible, and I'm sure, thought everybody else did as well. Secretly I nicknamed him, *His Highness*. There was no doubt in my mind this was how he saw himself.

For the next month *His Highness* was to be my neighbour. 'Aah!' he said, as he slowly began pushing his way into my room. 'We are to be neighbours for a month. Yes? I thought I would be friendly and say hello.' Not quite sure what to make of his gesture, I managed to skillfully entertain him for a few minutes while I gradually backed him out the door.

Then I settled back on my bed to read. A couple of hours later there was another knock on the door. This time *His Highness* wanted to install energy efficient light bulbs. Why he had to do this at 10 pm was beyond me, but the picture was starting to develop and I wasn't happy about it. In the morning I mentioned my fears to the Australian women who managed the restaurant. She then promptly informed *His Highness* (who is her business partner), and the numerous male staff who are

working in his kingdom, that I would be moving into Room 4 when the Japanese couple, currently occupying it left. Having just settled in and organised my room, this abrupt suggestion that I had to move again wasn't exactly thrilling ,but at least Room 4 wasn't directly opposite *His Highness*.

After another three days of being kept awake most of the night by *His Highness* shouting on the phone, banging doors and firing the occasional gun shot into the valley, then having to wake up to the sound of HAAAAARRRRRK, HAAAAARRRRRK, HAAAAARRRRRK, TUU, first thing in the morning as he cleared his lungs, before beginning his morning ablutions. I was so READY TO GO.

But Room 4 was still being occupied by a Japanese bong-smoking couple who were in no hurry to do anything. Anxious to escape, I worked out an exit strategy, making sure the staff knew I was going to change rooms— well aware that telling them something and them actually following through with the request was not necessarily a logical progression. Afraid they'd give the room to someone else I remained on high alert, waiting and watching, preparing myself to take occupancy at short notice. In the meantime I stayed busy going about my business in McLeod Ganj, having constant bad hair days. No matter how hard I tried, I never looked anything but dirty and unkempt.

Teaching English to the women weavers

As well as looking after the children the volunteer agency asked me to teach English to the Tibetan women weavers, working in the collective in Lower Dharamasla. While I was at the office finding out the details I met a monk named Gaden Rapsal. He also wanted to learn English so I agreed to teach him as well.

Each morning around 9 am my fellow teacher, Chantelle, (a young woman from Montréal), would meet me in front of my hotel and we would make the thirty minute walk down the valley to the Tibetan handicraft centre in Lower Dharamasla. It was monsoon season, usually humid and raining, but the walk was always exhilarating and beautiful, the atmosphere magical, often eagles soared high above. By the time we'd arrived at the handicraft centre I'd be drenched in perspiration and disheveled, wondering why I'd bothered to make an effort in my personal presentation in the first place.

The handicraft centre was part of a local cooperative where the traditional Tibetan practice of carpet weaving was being maintained. The women were always happy to see us arrive. The class meant a lot to them. If for some reason we couldn't make it, we knew they would be disappointed and likewise, we were disappointed if we couldn't go. Each morning we arrived at the handicraft centre we entered into a special space. Often the women chanted while they wove. The sense of community, acceptance and support they had for each other was remarkable, creating an atmosphere of warmth and good humour. I loved teaching them, but the task was difficult. Even in their own language, many of them were illiterate, so teaching a language as complicated as English in both written and spoken form, was a real challenge – particularly when there was no course syllabus or teaching aids, and nothing but a piece of white chalk and a small blackboard to write on. I taught around twelve women, the majority of whom were carpet weavers. They had a genuine reverence and respect for learning and were wonderful to teach. They were willing, bright, enthusiastic, funny, and dedicated. Every evening they practised writing English: still too shy to practise speaking it.

After class each day Chantelle and I went to a different woman's home for sweet masala chai and whatever Tibetan baked goodies were on offer. Most of the women lived alone or with their children – their husbands worked in other countries. They only saw each other for a couple of months each year. None of the women seemed perturbed by this; they were happy in their community and didn't rely on their men folk for daily life.

Once the morning ritual was over Chantelle and I would climb up the steps from the handicraft centre to the road and then find another two people to share the cost of a taxi up the hill to upper Dharamasla. The taxi didn't go past the hotel where I was staying, so I would have to get out and walk the final quarter of a mile up, up, up, to arrive at my room in time to meet Gaden Rapsal at 'tewelff o'clock' for his lesson.

Gaden, like hundreds of other monks, had travelled from his monastery in the south to attend the Dalai Lama's teaching. He was a dedicated monk, committed to studying the Dharma and honouring the robes he wore. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, handsome and bright. His job was teaching what he referred to as, 'the little monks' living in the monastery where he lived. I was only

there for two weeks, and we didn't really achieve much in terms of him grasping any English, but he dutifully came for his one hour lesson every day. After we'd finished I'd have lunch and then tend to the usual bits and pieces before I went to the handicraft centre in Upper Dharamasla to look after the children. It was generally five thirty before my working day finished. By then I was feeling completely unattractive – smelly, dirty, tired and considering shaving off my hair.

What to Do?

Normally after a long day's work one would go home to relax! I had to go back to my pink room, which had now become a favourite haunt for the local spider and slug population, and brace myself for dealing with *His Highness*. The Japanese couple still had not left. At 6 am one morning they had an all-out argument waking me up with their shouting. My hopes of peace and quiet in the Himalayas were rather unrealistic, but I was still determined to make the most of it. In spite of suffering sleep deprivation, burning calf muscles, unwanted invitations from *His Highness* and daily negotiations with the arachnid family, I was getting into the swing of it.

A young Englishman who'd volunteered to care for the children at the weaving collective in Upper Dharamasla was getting ready to travel home. I was taking over the position after he left. That night there was a farewell celebration for him at the local music hangout, Café Karma Nirvana. Monday night was open mike night – not that there was a mike. The MC for the evening was Toby a young Australian who'd been in McLeod Ganj for some time who had become entrenched in the community.

Toby was getting ready to move on from McLeod Ganj and asked if I'd take over his role as the host for the open mike night each week. I happily agreed. Later in the evening I got into the spirit of things and performed. Then caught up in all the excitement I offered to lend him my guitar- probably the only decent western instrument there- to play the following evening, in a fundraising gig for the Tibetan Unemployment Association.

The next day I began to regret my decision. For one thing it meant I had to walk up and down the hill numerous times and, because I wasn't going to be at the gig, I was a tad worried about actually getting my guitar back. I'd arranged to meet him to hand over the guitar but he didn't show. I was about to head back to my room

when I ran into a guy who'd been at Café Karma Nirvana the night before and was on his way there again. He knew Toby and said he'd take the guitar there. Reluctantly I handed over my instrument, instructing him to tell Toby to return it that evening, adding I'd be up until midnight. Then wandered back down the hill to rest and read my book.

Mid-afternoon, I was lying on the bed reading, when without warning there was an almighty clap of thunder which bounced off the Himalayas and rolled on down the valley. Then the rain started. The monsoon had arrived: the rain was so heavy it sounded like water bursting through a dam wall. Midnight came but there was no sign of my guitar. It had been raining for over six hours and I was feeling nervous about my instrument being left in the rain. I waited, and I waited, and I waited, eventually deciding going to sleep was probably the best option; the guitar would more than likely be returned in the morning.

The following day was the Dalai Lama's seventieth birthday. There were performances at the temple all day. I knew Toby had his name down to perform; he was act number twenty three on the program. I had the sneaking suspicion he wanted to hold on to my guitar to avoid having to play his own.

The Dalai Lama's 70th birthday

It was still raining heavily when I awoke in the morning. I was now anxious and concerned about my guitar being out in the rain. Everything I'd put together to use over here was in the outside pocket of my guitar case – an art folio and a carefully collated song book. Horror at the thought that I may have nothing to work with for the next twelve weeks, should I lose my guitar and the contents of the case, began to take hold.

Braving the weather I set off in the torrential rain to attend the Dalai Lama's birthday party at the temple, with the added intent of finding my guitar and giving this young guy a piece of my mind. The roads were jammed with cars and people. I stood enmeshed in the Tibetan crush at the entrance to the temple: thousands of people with thousands of umbrellas stood patiently in a queue waiting to enter. After standing in the line for half an hour, security informed me I couldn't go inside; I had a camera. They suggested leaving it at the bookshop, but the bookshop was closed. I spent the next half an hour trying to find an alternative. Eventually a western guy

offered to hold my camera so I could go into the temple and have a look. I climbed the stairs to the upper level of the temple; an enormous banner with 'Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama' written across it hung between two trees.

The temple was so crowded; you really couldn't see much, which is usually the case when HH is teaching in the East. A huge canopy had been erected in the front of the temple creating a stage area for the performers. Tibetans, dressed in all their finery, mingled among a sea of monks, while lay people sat humbly in the crowd. I looked over to the right and there he was, the Dalai Lama. It was strange to see his face. I'd seen him in photos and on television so many times, but in real life he appeared to have a very large head. He waved and I waved back. Hey, he could have been waving to me!

The main acts had performed early and the Dalai Lama was getting ready to depart. I decided there was no point hanging around for too much longer. Even though I was at the birthday party of one of the greatest spiritual leaders of our age, I just wasn't feeling the love: the spirit of celebration wasn't strong enough to override my desire to locate Toby, and my guitar. Still on the hunt for my instrument I stood downstairs, taking shelter from the rain under a verandah roof, watching the procession file by, but no Toby. I began the long climb back up the hill and up the fifty odd steps to Café Karma Nirvana to see if anyone knew Toby's whereabouts. A group of young Tibetan men lay lazily on a mat on the floor. According to them, he was at the temple and would be back at the café at midday. I left strict instructions for them to tell him to leave my guitar there. I would come back and pick it up. They were visibly amused at my obvious irritation (on the Dalai Lama's birthday of all days), smiling, laughing and cajoling amongst themselves.

Walking in torrential monsoon rain, I continued my journey up the hill to change some money. At one o'clock I went back to the café. A traveler hanging out there said Toby had been but didn't have the guitar with him; he'd said he would be back around two. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled, as the part of myself I identified as 'she who must be obeyed', realised that she had in fact, been disobeyed. In disbelief I exclaimed, 'You mean he was here but he didn't have my guitar?' One of the Tibetans replied, 'No, he'd left it at the temple with a monk.' There were thousands of monks at the temple that day all in maroon robes and all with short hair; this wasn't going to help me find my guitar. I could feel myself visibly swell

with wrath as the guys laughed boyishly anticipating my encounter with Toby. My guitar had now been out of my possession for close to 24 hours, the original loan period was for two to three. My sense of impropriety had been stirred. I couldn't believe another musician could be so blasé about someone else's instrument. Feeling far from gracious, I made my way back down the hill to the temple, to try and find my guitar somewhere amongst the throng of people celebrating the birthday of one of the earth's most revered proponents of peace, love, and non-violence.

The top level of the temple was now accessible. It was OK to take the camera inside. His Holiness had left. I amused myself watching performances which were by now amateur and bordering on self-indulgent, and took photos of the Tibetans dressed in their magnificent traditional garb. I was just focusing the camera to take a shot when I spied a rainbow guitar strap moving through the crowd directly in front of me. It was attached to my guitar, which was attached to Toby, who was walking off into the distance with my instrument. So much for peace and goodwill – my street smarts kicked in and this boy was going nowhere.

My body took on a life of its own. With all the Dirty Harry I could muster, I walked up behind him clutched hold of the guitar strap and slowly started pulling him back towards me. At first Toby looked confused. Then, realising it was me said, 'Oh Hi Margi!' I didn't say a word, just disconnected the strap, took my guitar from him and started packing it away. He tried to make light of his actions and said, 'OK, gig's over.' I looked at him with disappointment: he had no idea how much energy his behaviour had cost me. He tried to build a bridge and said, 'Look Margi I'm sorry, I don't care about the guitar.' I thought that's an understatement. Then he added, 'But can we still be friends?' I looked at him and replied, 'Look Toby you don't even know me, you're not sorry, because if you were sorry you wouldn't have done it.' Sheepishly he replied, 'I guess I didn't think?'

The dialogue went on for some time, he continually saying sorry, and me just wanting him out of my face. Then as fate would have it, after waiting all this day, his number came up – the twenty third performer was called. Unbeknown to me he'd been walking towards the performance area at the very moment I'd dragged him back. He'd been there since 9 am. Now midafternoon, his chance to perform had come. The musician in me took over: he couldn't miss the opportunity to perform at the Dalai Lama's birthday, even if HH wasn't there. A story is a story, and a gig is a

gig, after all. The anxiety and frustration I'd been experiencing for the past 24 hours began to dissolve. Compassion and kindness arose in my being. Relinquishing my pride and a sense of injustice, I said, 'Take the guitar Toby, go on, go and have your experience.'

Toby took the guitar and walked out to the performance area to do his thing; he'd put music to a poem, written by some of the locals expressing their feelings about the situation in Tibet. The Tibetans cheered applauding him with gratitude. I took photos of him while he played, so he could take them home to Australia as a memento. Burning with resentment most of the day I'd missed the spirit of the party, now humbled, it seemed I'd been given a birthday present after all.

Moving to the Mount View

Mission accomplished, in the still teeming rain I made the journey to my room, climbing back up, up, up the hill. The Japanese couple had moved out, their room was empty. My adrenalin immediately started pumping. Do I just start moving my things in or should I check with the staff first? I decided, I'd better check first, before I moved anything. I told the Indian hotel worker Katut, 'I am going to move into Room 4, OK?' Looking at me, feigning ignorance in relation to my situation, he replied, 'Oh no Madam, I better be checking with my boss first,' knowing all along *His Highness* was the reason I was moving. I'd anticipated resistance but my mind was made up, I refused to be intimidated. I was going to change rooms. Nevertheless, I tried to be patient and went upstairs to the restaurant for lunch.

When I returned to Reception a couple of European backpackers had just walked in off the road. Instantly I thought 'God help me they are going to give them my room.' The phone rang. Katut answered, rambling on in Hindi for a while and then said, 'Come madam, it is the boss, he wants to talk to you, here you go', and handed me the phone. Acting surprised, *His Highness* asked, 'You want to change room, for what?' Remaining calm, I said 'Room 4 has a better kitchen.' 'Ooh', he replied, 'Well you will have to pay more for this room, it has two windows.' Astonished with the absurdity of this statement, but undeterred, I responded with reason, saying, 'One window looks on to a brick wall and I'm not going to pay more money for that. Besides I'm a good customer, I've paid for a month up-front and want to stay three. I should be allowed to change rooms.' I was expecting a long

drawn-out senseless argument, but much to my amazement he simply answered, 'OK'.

I was off, dashing down the hundred or more steps to my room – in the pouring rain, running between the old and the new dragging my bedding, even the mattress I'd been sleeping on, into the new room. This time I didn't have pink walls to contend with, but after nesting, I discovered once again, there was nowhere to put my clothes. I made a makeshift wardrobe by tying a piece of rope between the bars on the window. Then settled down to what I thought was going to be my first night of rest since my arrival in the mystical Himalayan town. I read for a couple of hours and then turned off the light to try for sleep. I think the universe may have been conspiring against me, however. As soon as I turned the light off a cacophony of noise started on the balcony upstairs. An Indian family of twelve had arrived from the Punjab. The party had started.

I'd only been staying in the Hunted Hill for two weeks, before the situation became unlivable. Added to the already intolerable situation, *His Highness* was feuding with the Australian restaurant manager, so the restaurant closed. Now I had to walk up the road any time I wanted to eat. Rooms had become available because the Dalai Lama's teachings were finished, so I decided to forfeit my month's rent and move further up the hill to a place called 'The Mountain View'. The hotel had been recommended to me by J, an American I'd started to form a friendship with. He'd been living there happily for the past month. I got a sweet little room, with a view of the valley, which came complete with a large male monkey who lived on the roof and occasionally, on my balcony. The main drawback this time was the water in the bathroom. For some strange reason the floor in the bathroom had been built so that the water from the shower ran in the opposite direction to the drain –creating a small lake every time I showered. A minor inconvenience compared to having to live in the presence of *His Highness*.

The Music Program

Although I'd found somewhere to live, I still hadn't been able to find a space to set up the music program. Thubten, the waiter at the Hunted Hill had an old guitar and would play a little in between his shifts. I'd talked to him about setting up a music program and he was very excited, saying he'd love to learn. As well, I'd met

another couple of young Tibetans sitting on the footpath playing guitar in front of an internet café and jammed an odd version of *Hotel California* with them. When I told them I was a guitar teacher; the lights went on, and I had another two students. I'd also met a few others through performing at the Café Karma Nirvana, who were keen to have guitar lessons.

Late each afternoon after I'd finished my shift minding the children; I would wander down the road to the Peace café for ginger tea and Tibetan bread. I met a Tibetan man who worked there. He was probably around my own age, but limped and walked with a stick. I sensed his journey had been far different than my own: his eyes held wisdom I had yet to learn. I wanted talk with him about the program and ask for cultural guidance. I thought learning a western instrument and some western songs might help to form a cultural bridge for the youth, but I was also very aware that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people in general were working hard to preserve their culture in Dharamasla. I didn't want to be responsible for bringing more westernisation into their already fading culture of origin. He thought teaching guitar would be OK, but stressed 'it was important that I didn't spoil the people, I needed to ask them to pay – they were working and could afford to pay some money'. He also told me he knew where I could buy guitars in lower Dharamasla and that he'd help me get them at a good price. Things were starting to take shape, but I still didn't have a room to teach in.

The buildings down Jogiwara Road were quite dense. There were lots of little shops, hotels, restaurants, internet cafés and a maze of stairs and laneways. I'm not sure what made me notice the sign that said *Tibetan Children's Education Centre*, plastered on the wall with hundreds of others, but I did. My intuition led me to follow an arrow pointing down a set of stairs into a rabbit warren of rooms. I found what looked like an office and knocked on the door. Jigmey introduced himself. He was in charge and responsible for the space. I explained that I wanted to set up a music program and needed a room. He nodded his head and then showed me a tiny little room across the hall. It was about four and a half meters square with whitewashed walls, a picture of the Dalai Lama, green carpet and a couple of cushions scattered on the floor. It also had a portable blackboard and some chalk – looked good to me. The room next to it was used by a Tibetan healer who gave massages. The room

across from this was where he and two others lived. In between the teaching room and the massage room was a tiny little kitchen.

Jigmey said I could use the room to teach guitar after the English and Tibetan cultural classes were finished, but added I would have to pay rent. I found that a bit odd: I was offering a free service but had to pay to do so. Regardless, the space felt right so I accepted the deal, deciding the money the students contributed could be used to pay the rent, which would in turn be used to support the Tibetan Children in Exile newsletter. I would put whatever was over towards purchasing guitars. The other bonus for me was that the room was located in a building only a few yards up the road from my Hotel. I thanked Jigmey saying I'd need to advertise the program and put up some posters; he said he'd do this and to come back in two days.

When I returned to the TCEC office in two days I was shocked to find the small office packed with young male Tibetan refugees. They looked to be either teenagers or in their early twenties, except for one older student Tenzin, the masseuse who lived and worked in the rooms next door. I hadn't expected to see him there and wasn't sure why he was, and in a surprised tone said, 'You want to learn guitar?' He nodded replying, 'Yes.' I don't know why, but in my gut, I didn't trust him.

Most of the young men were good looking with broad, open, smiling faces, slightly modernised and westernised, except for one. He looked less modernised, more nomadic, and his vibe didn't seem to fit the buzz that was Dharmasala 2005. He was wedged up in the back corner behind the others: his black hair wild and untamed, his face broad and open, his skin dark, his brown eyes wide and slightly worried, above his right eyebrow a dark brown mole. Thubten, was there, as well as the two boys I'd jammed with. They were the only ones that had guitars. There were twelve young men in the room; this meant I would need to purchase nine guitars.

I began telling them about the program, how it would work. I would buy them guitars and give half hour lessons twice a week for three months and then everyone would perform in a concert. To be accepted into the program they had to commit to showing up to their lessons twice a week, be on time, practise, and perform at the end of the program. Keeping in line with the request of the Tibetan elder I then told them it would also cost 600 rupees (\$18.00 AD), and asked if this was OK. Could they afford it? To my surprise they all nodded – yes, this was fine.

Buying Guitars

The next day I went back to the TCEC office to confirm which days the program would run. When I arrived Jigmey handed me a letter, written by one of the boys. He thought I'd know which one it was, but I didn't. I started reading the letter:

Dear Teacher,

I want to thank you for your offer to come to your program and learn guitar. I would really like to come to your program but I am embarrassed to tell you I don't have 600 rupees. I work at Amdo kitchen in Bagsu to try and save money so I can go back home to my see my parents in Tibet, but it is very difficult to make any money at Amdo kitchen...so I am sorry to tell you I won't be able to come to your program.

Turning to Jigmey I said, 'Tell this boy to come – I will buy him a guitar.' A tiny part of me was sceptical. I didn't understand why he didn't earn enough money from the kitchen to pay for the program, but the letter sounded genuine and pure of heart, and I was mortified that requesting 600 rupees had caused him shame and embarrassment and would prevent him from participating. The next thing I had to do was work out a timetable and buy the guitars which cost around 1700 rupees each.

I arranged with Jigmey to start the program the following week on Monday and Thursday afternoons. I went to look for the Tibetan elder but he'd gone to Lower Dharamasla, so set off with Dhargy, a future student and volunteer at the centre, to a music shop in McLeod Ganj on Bhagsu road. Surprisingly, there were two shops selling guitars – electric and acoustic. I had no amplification, so wasn't interested in buying an electric guitar, but some of the boys couldn't resist the lure of a sexy looking Fender copy. In their minds they were rock gods playing it on the stage. Most yielded to common sense; after all, you weren't going to hear an electric guitar. But one, Lobsang, insisted on buying a green electric Strat copy.

Lobsang was incredibly handsome, outgoing and energetic. He'd been caught without papers after fleeing Tibet and had spent two years in a Nepali prison. He'd shared his cell with two American drug dealers and consequently had learnt to speak exceptional English. He'd also been captured by the influence of Western pop culture. He had a few tattoos, wore his blue jeans low, so the top of his 'underdaks' showed, tied his long black hair in a pony tail, and hung out with his friend Sonam

(also handsome) at one of the local coffee shops, checking out the girls who passed by. The two of them pranced around like proud peacocks, flashing their youthful good looks and vitality. Lobsang was an amazing singer. He loved to sing big love songs, and of course, *Hotel California*. While I was there to accompany him, he would turn up on the open mike night at Café Karma Nirvana and sing, always bringing the house down. If he'd been born in the West *The X Factor* would have been his for the taking. He was definitely hot, with a capital H.

The grapevine was lightning fast in Dharamasla and word got out quickly; each day for a week I went to the music shop with different students to pick out their guitars. By western standards the guitars were appalling, but not to my students – they loved them. I wasn't sure how long these instruments would stay in tune. The strings were old and dull, the wood in the body thin and without resonance, the fret board coarse, and the necks wide with little action, but regardless, the students thought they were fantastic and, they would have to do. The guitars came in various colours: red, navy blue, black and natural. After everyone had made their choice, there was one navy blue guitar left. I bought this for the boy who couldn't afford to pay the 600 rupees and sent word through Jigmey to tell him that there was a guitar for him, and to turn up on Monday for a lesson. I still didn't know what he looked like but when he turned up I recognised him as the young man who'd been wedged in the back corner of the room. His name was Yonten, he was the one who'd written the letter. I wasn't sure if he would make the most of this opportunity, but Yonten fell in love with his guitar immediately. He couldn't believe he could own something so precious and thanked me over and over promising me 'he would look after it forever.'

Pemasto can learn

I anticipated the program would take a couple of weeks to settle, assuming when the reality of the weekly time commitment and a practice routine became real, there might be a few drop outs. Instead the opposite proved to be true. Two more students wanted to join. One of them was a young woman called Pematso. I was delighted to have a female student in the program: any form of education for women in the east is still not easy to access. Her desire to play an instrument in a male dominated program challenged me to want to help her succeed.

I suspected that for Pematso, simply because she was a female, a few barriers would arise in the learning process, and I was right. We were a few lessons into the program and she was struggling. Tears welled up in her eyes as she explained she'd never learnt anything before. 'It was different for the boys,' she said, 'because they had been to school and they knew how to learn.' But she'd 'never been to school and didn't know if she could learn.' She was sharing her lesson with Lobsang, who gently put his arm around her and consoled her with brotherly love. I took a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote her a sign that said PEMASTO CAN LEARN, told her to go home, stick it up on the wall and keep repeating it out loud and in her head, like a mantra. Adding when she believed it, to come back and we would keep going with her lessons. The strategy worked; she was back within a week, and wanted to keep going.

Don't worry about a thing

With the initial hurdles for setting up the program overcome, the next obstacle came in the way of selecting songs to learn. I'd brought material with me, but the songs were far from familiar for the Tibetan students. I tried songs I thought they might have heard with simple triad chords like *Let it Be*, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* and *Bad Moon Rising* but they hadn't heard any of them. *Hotel California*, *Have You Ever Seen the Rain* and a few Bob Marley songs were the only common ground we shared. I wouldn't normally start teaching a student how to play guitar with a reggae song. Picking up on the offbeat, before you knew how to hold your instrument or finger the chords was advanced, but their love of Marley's music was so strong they insisted that I teach them. I was hoping I hadn't bitten off more than I could chew.

Despite the difficulties, the students kept turning up for their lessons. I kept turning up to teach and within a couple of weeks we'd begun to make some sort of progress. *Let it be* and *Knockin on Heaven's Door* resounded throughout the town, the Tibetans bringing their own version of soul to the melody. After they'd grasped a few chords we started learning Bob Marley's song *Three Little Birds: Don't worry about a thing – cause every little thing is gonna be alright....* Even years after his death, his songs carried a message of hope, redemption, and freedom to the refugees living in India. I too never tired of playing a Bob Marley song. When you

love a song you will play it over and over and over again, trying to learn it. *Hotel California*, on the other hand, well...

Dhargy was a good-hearted young man with a gentle soul, long pitch-black hair and a weathered, unrefined face. He carried the look of the mountains and the plains with him. He 'lurved' Bob Marley and was determined to play reggae – his favourite song was *Buffalo Soldier*. He wore a Bob Marley T shirt and the other students called him Dhargy Marley, which was a great help in differentiating him from another Dhargy who also came for lessons. Many Tibetans have the same name, like Tashi or Tenzin, regardless of gender.

Dhargy Marley became my right hand man. He was always up for any job or request I had, and would sit in on *Three Little Birds*, *No Woman no Cry*, and *Knockin on Heaven's Door*, when I played at the open mike night, where I had now become a fixture. It was getting to the stage where travellers thought I owned the café. The place was always packed out, vibrant and happening. One of the reasons for this was because I insisted that the Tibetan people played their music. The café owners weren't happy about this because the Tibetan people generally didn't have money to spend in the café, but if they wanted me to play, then they had to be willing to let the Tibetan people stay. It was a fantastic night; people from all over the world played: rock, country, folk, world and traditional Tibetan music filled Temple road.

One young student Lhundop had an exceptional voice. Unlike Lobsang, who revelled in the glory of singing big western ballads to his doting female fans, Lhundop sang traditional Tibetan songs. He was 20 years old and lived in a very small room with his cousin Jamyang, a monk. Lhundop was like a little fawn with big doe eyes, a soft and gentle demeanour and a still, quiet presence, but when he sang, his voice was big, strong and powerful. He sang songs from the plains of Amdo in Tibet, about the people, about his mother, the snows and the land that he yearned for. It was impossible for him to sing these songs solo. As soon as the others heard the melody they'd join in. The sounds of their sorrow and their pride rang out across the night, like a beacon from a lighthouse, guiding ships towards a safe harbour.

Meeting Tenzin Palmo

Happy with my life in McLeod Ganj, I settled in to a weekly routine. I practised Yoga a couple of times a week, went for art lessons with a local Thangka artist, taught English to the women in the mornings, hosted the open mike night, and ran the music program twice a week, teaching vocals and guitar. I loved being a part of the community. I was totally in my element, just one of many seekers, visionaries, artists and teachers visiting or living there.

Every week I met someone new and interesting. I met a French film maker who wanted footage of the music program for his latest film, and an amazing woman artist who lived in the valley. Originally from America, she'd let go of her life in the States to live a life of simplicity in the valley. She'd acquired a block of land with a ninety nine year lease and built her own traditional Tibetan style house on it. She'd slowed her life down to 'one thing a day'; happy to achieve just one thing each day. She'd just finished writing her first novel and was about to travel to Tibet to paint the wildflowers. She assisted the Gutyo monks with travel arrangements for their tours to America, helped to raise funds and wrote grant applications. The Abbott of the monastery was deeply grateful and asked what they could do to repay her. She replied she didn't want any payment; all she wanted was to be allowed to die in the monastery when the time came. He obliged, granting her request.

One morning after I'd finished teaching at the handicraft centre in Lower Dharamasla, I made my way up to the road to wait for a taxi to take me back up the hill, only to find out that in the short time I'd been teaching, the taxi drivers had decided to go on strike. No one could tell me why they'd gone on strike. I guessed it was something to do with money. There was general mayhem and drama among the taxi drivers as more and more cars pulled over and began blocking the road. I was totally unimpressed with their actions – apart from myself and two nuns standing next to me I couldn't see any other impact of the strike and no one had an alternative solution for getting back up the hill.

We'd been standing there for some time when a four wheel drive sped past. Seeing the nuns standing by the side of the road, the vehicle stopped. They started running towards it and I followed, managing to claim a space in the back seat. The four wheel drive took off and the nuns began chatting in Tibetan. The nun sitting in the front seat was older than the others and not Tibetan. I thanked her for stopping

and asked where they'd come from. She answered in an English accent saying they'd come from Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery. I asked her if that was Tenzin Palmo's nunnery and she replied, 'Yes, I'm Tenzin Palmo.' My heart almost skipped a beat. I couldn't believe the fortuitousness of the present moment: meeting someone like Tenzin Palmo in a chance encounter was not a coincidence – it was a God-incidence.

Tenzin Palmo was one of the first western women to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun; long before it was fashionable to do so. Born and raised in London, in 1964 at the age of twenty, she decided to go to India in pursuit of her spiritual path. There she met her teacher, the eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche, remaining with him and his community in Himachal Pradesh, northern India. After many years of living in community, she decided to go into retreat and lived in a cave for twelve years. In all that time she never lay down to sleep. Instead she slept kneeling in her prayer box. At the end of her retreat, at the request of her teacher she re-entered the western world, and went to Italy where she taught at various Dharma centres. When she was asked what she gained from living alone in retreat all those years, she replied it wasn't what I gained it, was what I lost that mattered.

Determined to show that women could achieve enlightenment; she was the woman who was primarily responsible for dialoguing with the Dalai Lama and bringing about changes in the conditions for women in the monastic traditions. A few years after I met her, she was given the title of Jetsunma, which means Venerable Master, in recognition of her spiritual achievements as a nun and her efforts in promoting the status of female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism. Currently she was in the process of founding a nunnery for young nuns of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. After many centuries of neglect she was working to give nuns the opportunity to realise their intellectual and spiritual potential.

I didn't know what to say, but knew I had to say something: I couldn't just sit there and let this opportunity pass me by. She asked what I was doing in McLeod Ganj: 'Was I there to teach English?' I replied I'd just finished teaching English to the women in the handicraft centre. Then I began to tell her about the music program - playing the female card in an attempt to build a connection, I told her it wasn't easy to be a female guitarist. She asked 'Why not?' I explained guitar traditionally belonged to a male domain and there hadn't been a lot of opportunities or

encouragement for woman to learn guitar when I was young. She paused, thought for a moment and said, 'Yes, that could be a good practice.' I didn't really understand what she meant, but her words were so infused with power, wisdom, and clarity that instantly seeds of contemplation were planted in my mind. We came to the top of the hill. It was time for me to get out of the car. I thanked her. She smiled at me with clear, peaceful, brilliant blue eyes behind which rested a profound stillness and waved as the four wheel drive pulled out from the curb.

For love not money

My life in Dharamasla was equally as busy as my life in Australia. There was so much need, the demand was endless; I was beginning to feel very tired and depleted. I thought I might have to reconsider the whole idea of calling this long service leave; this was simply work without pay. Perhaps a better way of putting it was I was working for love not money. A new exuberance for life had been born in Dharamasla. Living with the Tibetan community came naturally to me. I didn't feel like a freak with them; they understood grief and loss, and they understood the search for enlightenment. I was just one of many.

The following afternoon I ran into Tenzin, the masseur who'd asked to join my program. He'd been a slight irritation for me: always hanging around, seemingly showing up wherever I was. He'd been trying, for some time, to get me to come for a massage. I wasn't interested and always declined. For one thing, I didn't think it would be a good policy to have a massage from one of my students.

Most of the boys in the program had spent time as monastics. Their bid for freedom was coupled not only with the diverse variables of other cultures, but with the complex transition of forming a new self. They could no longer rely on the monastery, or their family for guidance and support in this strange new world: they only had each other. Relationships between western women and Tibetan men had become common. Many young Tibetan males left their roots to marry into the west. I felt for the young Tibetan women and the families of origin they left behind, but the boys only dreamed of love and freedom. Marrying a western woman was, they said, 'their karma'. Most of the students were hoping to find residency in another country, except for a few who wanted to stay in India. Tenzin was one; he wanted to stay in Dharamasla. Like a lot of young Tibetan males he'd fallen into a pattern of partying

and smoking hash. He was easy going and gentle but I never felt very comfortable in his presence, sensing he wanted something more than guitar lessons from me.

Yak Nelo

My shoulder had become painful from continually playing guitar. Tenzin insisted after I'd finished teaching to come next door to his room for a massage. I'd had a few Tibetan massages— nothing special, but affordable. This was the first time someone in Dharamasla wanted to give me something for nothing. I was a little overwhelmed by the generosity of his offer. The massage room had pictures of Tibetan plants and trees stuck on the wall, as well as a picture of the Dalai Lama, and a Tibetan flag. Bottles of oils and Tibetan medicine sat on a small table in the corner of the room, along with small leather pouch filled with aromatic herbs and pills which had been blessed by high Lamas. The pouch was made from the membrane that surrounded the Yak's heart. The Tibetan word 'Nelo' means pericardium: the membranous sac enclosing the heart that ensures body and soul wellbeing.

Tenzin called his massage business *Yak Nelo*. The pouch also contained jewels and beads, which are supposed to have a cleansing effect. Using the pouch and its contents to apply pressure to certain parts of the body helped to ease tension and release positive energy.

From the moment he laid his hands on me I knew he had something different than the other healers I'd visited in India. Tenzin massaged me through my thin cotton shirt. I never once felt a sense of anything other than goodwill and gradually relaxed deeper into the power of his touch. He worked with dignity and concentration. Pain I didn't know I was holding on to, began to surface. My breathing turned to short sorrowful panting, and overwhelmed by the love in his touch, I began to cry. He remained focussed and undisturbed, encouraging me to continue letting go and open my heart chakra. Too tired to resist, and too worn out to doubt, I let it happen. By the time the massage finished I was feeling incredibly grateful. My shoulder had stopped aching and there was a new softness in my view of reality.

Tenzin invited me next door to the tiny kitchen and made me a cup of tea. I felt humbled as I sat there. He was giving me all he had to give and it was important that I let him. I didn't stay long, thanked him, drank my cup of tea and left,

saying, 'I would love to have a massage again but next time you must let me pay you.'

Could you be loved?

As the weeks passed there were very few drop-outs in the music program, and if there were, others came along to fill their places. The guitars held up and the playing may not have been in time, but at least it was in tune, my battery powered tuner saving the day. The spirit of Bob Marley had been resurrected in Dharamasla. *No Woman No Cry* was now the number one hit in the teaching program: everybody wanted to learn to play it. *Buffalo Soldier*, *Stir it Up*, and *Could you be loved* played continuously on the stereo in Tenzin's home, filling the airwaves at the TCEC.

Dhargy Marley and Tenzin shared their lessons, and now we played as a little trio at the Café Karma Nirvana, laughing our way through endless nights of fun. Tenzin had spent most of his life as a monastic but had now been out of the monastery for eight years and was still trying to find his way. He'd created a reasonable livelihood for himself in McLeod Ganj, giving massages and teaching and had friends from all over the world. He seemed quite happy in his life in Dharamasla.

One night I went to a farewell for a couple of women who were getting ready to return to Poland. After a night of celebrations and goodbyes we all made our way back up the hill to our respective hotels. Tenzin walked beside me. Just as I reached the entrance to my hotel he asked if he could come in for a massage. I wasn't sure if I'd heard him correctly and didn't know how to respond. I thought I'd just heard him ask me for a massage. Surprised, intrigued, and curious I thought, 'Well he was kind enough to help me'. Feeling compelled to say yes, I muttered 'OK, why not?'

I don't know if Tenzin was expecting an erotic massage but he didn't get one. I'd practised massage in the Adelaide Hills in the 80s, so I sort of knew what I was doing, and left the rest up to intuitive guidance. I applied the same principles to the massage he had. At the end he was astounded exclaiming, 'What have you done? You've placed a big rock on me!' This didn't make a lot of sense to me. I said, 'More likely I've removed a big rock from you!' He giggled, agreeing he had the expression back to front. We sat for a while watching hazy TV and holding hands.

Tenzin had been half-heartedly pursuing me for months, but I hadn't succumbed to his charms. When I'd first meet him I didn't like him. I felt there was something inauthentic about him and found his presence annoying.

Tenzin had an aura of mysticism and innocence about him. His voice was soft, peaceful and deep. He had a strong, gentle, slow, healing touch, an open face, big brown eyes, long black hair and a perfectly formed mouth. He was, evidently, irresistible to women yet somehow he had remained irresistible to me.

I hadn't allowed anybody to get close to me for a long time. I'd been too fragile. Maybe I needed to let my walls down, let someone in? I decided to take a risk, it could be fun: maybe it was time to believe in love again. I knew he wanted to stay, so I invited him to do so. We spent the night enjoying each other's company, talking, holding each other, and kissing, but there were no fireworks, no passion. He was younger than me, shorter, and I thought, reasonably inexperienced with women. Neither of us pushed anything, and he left early morning, climbing over the balcony and making his way across the tops of the apartment houses to his room.

Is this Tantra?

A couple of days later I caught the bus to Lower Dharamasla to visit Norbulingka, a centre established to preserve Tibetan cultural and artistic traditions. I arrived back in McLeod Ganj just after lunch and ran into Tenzin sitting on the steps of the Refugee centre. I hadn't seen him since our night together and felt slightly awkward. Trying to stay grounded and remain in my body I felt my defences kick into action as I walked towards him. I said hello and that I'd just been to Norbulingka. We chatted for a while, both avoiding talking about our attempt at intimacy. Then he invited me to a party that evening. I said I'd think about it and headed back to my hotel.

I decided not to go to the party, opting for a quiet night instead. Late the next morning I went down to the TCEC to drop off a few music charts. Tenzin was there. Happy to see me he asked why I hadn't come to the party. I apologised, saying I'd been too tired. He accepted my explanation and asked if I would like to have lunch with him. I said yes and we set off up Jogiwara road to a place I'd never been before. The restaurant was part of a maze of rooms and buildings a long way back from the road, set up to cater for the backpacking crowd, with low tables and cushions on the floor. Apart from one young woman sitting in the corner smoking hash, there was

nobody else there. I sat down with Tenzin. He lit a joint and her eyes diverted to him with interest as they nodded to each other in acknowledgement of their mutual pleasure.

Tenzin had a good grasp of English, particularly when it suited him; but not all conversations with him were easy. He was quite child-like in his approach to life; open to everything and everyone around him. He brought up our attempt to connect sexually, saying he thought we hadn't connected because he was too much like a woman, and I was too much like a man. I might be strong and independent, but a man I was not. Insulted, I looked at him and with the index fingers on both hands pointed to my body and said, 'This, this is like a man?' He laughed and said, 'No, I meant you're more outgoing and I'm more passive.'

We spent a lazy afternoon getting to know each other a little more. The sexual tension rising in intensity as the day progressed. We talked about massage and healing and the possibility of writing a manual together, and then we headed back to my hotel room to write the introduction!

There were no barriers or obstacles between us this time. Our sexual energy and chemistry exploded with such power we were both swept away into another dimension. I couldn't believe that previously I hadn't found him attractive. Now I found him totally irresistible. I sank into his eyes like water sinking in sand. He kissed me all over my face, holding me tighter than I'd ever been held before. There were no sexual politics at play, no power struggles, just a deep expression of joy and surrender. After hours of sensual and sexual pleasure Tenzin looked at me and said, 'Is this Tantra?' Amused I replied, 'I don't know, you're the one that was a monk.' Tenzin stayed the night, taking his leave in the early hours of the morning. McLeod Ganj is a small town where affairs of the heart struggle to remain private.

Yonten

Yonten had continued to turn up on time for his lessons twice a week. I didn't know it, but he would walk around 6 kilometres each way to get to his lessons. He always called me Teacher; I don't think he even knew what my name was, but he wouldn't have addressed me on a first name basis anyway. He was so polite, caring, genuine and earnest, it was almost disconcerting: there was no rock-'n' roll in this boy. He'd lived as a monk for 4 years in a monastery in Tibet and wanted to go back home. His

parents were yak herders living on the plains in Amdo. They missed him terribly, and he, in turn, missed them. He carried a burden of guilt because he'd run away to India and hadn't said good bye to them. He was doing all that he could to improve his English skills while he was in Dharamasla and trying to save enough money to travel back home to Tibet.

He wanted to express his gratitude and consistently asked me to visit him in his home in Bagsu at the *Amdo Kitchen* to eat momos (Tibetan dumplings), but I was always too busy or pre-occupied to accept. Now that it was getting towards the end of my stay in Dharamasla, I agreed to visit him. He was overjoyed. I'd been so busy that I'd never ventured very far out of McLeod Ganj by foot. I set out on a Saturday, deciding to have a quick visit with Yonten and then go to the local swimming pool. The walk to Bagsu took me close to 45 minutes, it was only then I realised the effort Yonten had been making to consistently attend his lessons. It was monsoon season, incredibly humid and usually raining, but he hadn't missed one lesson.

Bagsu is a small hamlet up the valley from McLeod Ganj. It was the primary hangout for the Israelis and other dope smokers. Charas, the name for hashish which has been handmade in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and India, was abundant, sadly claiming the minds and time, of many of the Tibetan youth, but mainly it claimed Israel's young. Fresh from compulsory military service, cashed up with their severance pay, disillusioned with life, they came to India where they lived like kings. They rode massive Enfield motorbikes, chests bare, hair flying, stoned, dazed, and confused, and hung out in small roadside cafes smoking chillums, engulfed by the constant vibrations of dance and trance pulsing through the music systems. Yonten lived a simple, honest life amongst them.

Amdo Kitchen

I was looking for the address Yonten had given me, expecting to see a reasonably sized dwelling with Amdo Kitchen written on a sign above it, but after walking up and down the small main street a few times I hadn't come across it. Most buildings had dwellings on the second floor; below was either a café or clothing shop. I was walking among this maze when I heard a voice call out 'Teacher'. I looked up and spied Yonten waving at me from the balcony above. He indicated to climb a small stairway with a laundry on one side and a tailor on the other. I was nervous visiting

him in his home; I didn't know what we would talk about outside the context of lessons. He, on the other hand was ecstatic I'd come and led me down a small passageway where two doors faced each other from opposite walls. Above the door on my left was the sign 'Welcome to *Amdo Kitchen*'. On the one opposite was the sign for the tailor. He opened the door and ushered me inside. Instantly I understood why he'd written the letter to me at the beginning of the program saying he didn't have 600 rupees to put towards the cost of his music lesson. *Amdo Kitchen* was just one small room, no bigger than the room I taught in. There was a single mattress on each side of a low table, a small gas burner for cooking, a few supplies, pots and pans, and a bare slate roof. His treasured guitar stood in the corner at the end of one of the mattresses. On the walls were posters of Lhasa and the Dalai Lama, as well as the odd car and pop music poster. On the back of the door was the menu for *Amdo Kitchen*: Thukpa, thentuk, momos and tea. For 150 rupees you could have a cooking lesson and learn how to make momos.

When Yonten had left Tibet, knowing his family would be deeply distressed if he told them he was going to flee to India, he didn't tell them. Like many young Tibetan men, he just left. His journey across the Himalayas had been long and difficult; he'd taken it on foot with four other young men. Somehow the four of them survived the hardships of the winter and the unrelenting humidity of the wet season living in this one small room. If they were lucky, in tourist season, they might make 150 rupees a week giving a cooking lesson, but lately because it was monsoon and not busy, they hadn't had much business, maybe one cooking lesson a month. My heart bled for them; how could they be surviving financially. Thinking of ways to generate income for him I said I'd like to take a cooking lesson but Yonten wouldn't hear of it – I was his guest, and we were going to make momos. Over the next couple of hours the others started returning home and preparations for a feast of momos got underway.

I was all thumbs when it came to making the momos. We were having vegetarian ones, filled with grated potatoes and spinach, but no matter how often I was shown the technique, I couldn't produce a refined looking dumpling. The boys found this hysterical and insisted that the momos I'd made be given pride of place when the food was placed on the table. Yonten made a delicious chilli dipping sauce and a cucumber and tomato salad as a side dish. There were over three dozen

momos on the table, and as custom would have it I had to eat first; no one would eat until I'd had my fill.

Happy to be giving everything they had to offer, they sat there, eyes shining with expectancy waiting for me to taste the momos. I struggled with mixed emotions feeling undeserving, but humbled and grateful. To express anything but thankfulness and appreciation would have been an insult. Their love and acceptance of each other, and the world in which they lived, outshone the hardships they endured. Their sense of community and sharing was so strong they didn't see what I saw; the poverty and scarcity around them. They saw the joy of laughter, the spirit of adventure and the opportunity to share their love of all things Tibetan, particularly momos. I dipped my first momo into the sauce and ate with gusto: they were absolutely delicious. Each momo I ate created a shout of joy among the boys. When they were sure I was no longer hungry they began to enjoy the food themselves, while still egging me on to eat, 'Just one more momo!' I was going to waddle, not walk, back to McLeod Ganji.

Yonten's Story

In amongst the laughter and festivities my eyes were drawn to a piece of A4 photocopied paper with something written on it stuck on the wall behind me. I began to read it.

My Story

My name is Yonten. I was born in 1980 in Zogay in the Amdo region of Tibet. I have seven family members: my father, mother, two brothers and two sisters. My family is nomadic. None of my brothers and sisters ever got the chance to study. When I was seven years old my parents sent me to our village school for three years. I learnt Tibetan and Chinese. During that time I got high mark in the examination and I was really interesting in studying. Unfortunately, after three years of village school I had no chance to study further, because my father was seriously sick for a year and all of his children were very young at that time. Because of this difficult situation my mother could not pay my school fees. After that I looked after yaks for six years. Although I was a cowboy, I never lost my golden aim to study. When I was sixteen years old I realised that to

become a monk would be the best way to study and become an honest person in my life, as that was also my parents wish. Therefore, I left home at the age of sixteen for the Kirty Monastery, which is home to more than seven hundred monks, where I practised the Dharma at the monastic philosophy college for four years. I escaped from Tibet to India in 2001 without passport or telling my parents. In India I had the good opportunity to join the Tibetan Transit school under His Holiness the Dalai Lama's assistance long with other Tibetan refugees. In that school I studied hard both Tibetan and English for four years. As a result, I was editorial member of the 'Kangre Zemdang Magazine' of the Tibetan class XIII. In 2005 I finished completely Tibetan class XIII and English class VIII. After I graduated from school I had no close relatives or support for my studies. So I cannot spend more time studying. That is why I have decided to go back to Tibet. I have a plan that I will join a school in Tibet at least for two years if I can. I want to be an educated person and to achieve my main goal. I want to work for many people in Tibet. To help the people is my main goal in my life. At present I work in Amdo Kitchen to make some money for my studies and my journey to Tibet. In my spare time I teach Tibetan language to foreigners as a volunteer teacher. That is all I can do to help others at the moment. I spend two hours doing this per day, except the holidays. I hope my teaching will be beneficial to them.

Good luck and best wishes for everyone.

I turned and looking at Yonten asked, 'How much money do you need to get home to Tibet?' He wasn't sure, but he thought it would be quite a lot, at least 4000 or 5000 rupees. By western standards this was only a couple of hundred dollars, it wasn't that much. But in his current circumstances, it was out of reach by his own means. I replied, 'OK you've got it. I'll give you the money to get home to Tibet.' His face went blank with shock as though he couldn't believe what he'd just heard I told him we'd go to the bank and get the money after his lesson the following week. He was deeply grateful; visibly overwhelmed that someone would give him that much money! He'd made the journey across the Himalayas on foot. It had been a long,

exhausting, difficult and dangerous journey, but he was prepared to do it again to see his family and the land he loved.

So many momos

I walked home from Bagsu full and happy. I'd eaten so many momos I couldn't imagine eating again for at least two days, but the following morning I went through a momo marathon again. This time it was with the women at the weaving collective. They each gave me a card they'd written in English to express their appreciation and collectively gave me a beautiful hand-woven bag. As I bent down for them to place the white silk scarves around my neck, I couldn't hold back the tears. We'd become family and before long we were all crying.

An older woman, Tharpa, stood next to me. She'd stopped coming to class in the first couple of weeks, deciding at her age it was too difficult to learn English. She preferred to stay spinning the wool and saying her mantras, but she had the English skills needed for this occasion. She squeezed my hand and looked me in the eye, then quietly said, 'Enough now.' I understood; it was important to keep it together. Already there was ample loss for these women to bear on a daily basis.

Just friends

I had less than a week left in Dharamasla. In that time I had to organise and perform in the concert; host my final open mike night; say my goodbyes; complete the massage manual and pack. Tenzin had been away in Delhi for three days. He'd gone to meet a friend who wanted to come to Dharamasla, but wasn't comfortable travelling alone and needed help catching the bus. We were close to completing the massage manual. My job had been to decode what he was trying to express and write it in English. We used photos to illustrate various techniques and hand placement positions, and needed a few more to complete the project. We'd continued to build our relationship and I was beginning to miss him, wanting to spend as much time as possible with him before I left.

I went down to the room at the TCEC to rehearse with Dhargy Marley and Lhundop. They hadn't yet arrived. Gently pulling back the curtain at the entrance of Tenzin's room I saw him sleeping on one of the beds. His friend, a woman who looked a little older than me, lay on the other. I was happy he was back in

Dharmasla, but his absence from rehearsals meant I couldn't include him in the final performance. Although we'd become intimate, I couldn't show him special consideration. I wondered how he would take it – whether he would accept he'd made his own choice. I'd never stepped over the line before; becoming involved with Tenzin meant I'd had to terminate my role as teacher with him.

Dhargy Marley and Lhundop arrived. After rehearsing for a couple of hours I popped back into Tenzin's room and woke him gently. If we were going to finish the manual before I left, we had work to do. Happy to see me, he said he'd already arranged to give someone a massage, so we made plans to meet up in a couple of hours time. His friend began to stir just as I left.

When I returned he was just finishing the massage. His client was the friend he'd brought back with him from Delhi – a French nurse called Josette; she'd been to Dharmasla before and become a student in his massage course. Tenzin picked up his guitar, getting ready to leave with me, when Josette jumped in saying, 'Oh can I come?' He discouraged her saying, 'No we're going to practise guitar', but she kept insisting she wanted to come along. I hadn't seen him in three days and was hoping for some alone time with him but Josette kept demanding – she wanted to come. Tenzin continued to say No, he was going for a guitar lesson, and she couldn't come. Josette continued to insist. I found her behaviour strangely aggressive and asked Tenzin again about the status of his relationship with her. He insisted they were 'just friends and she was acting crazy'. I'd had no reason to doubt him when he'd said Josette was just a friend, assuming because he'd been a monk, and was a practising Buddhist, he was honest and transparent. I accepted his explanation.

We made our way to my room and lasted all of ten minutes talking about the manual before we launched into another round of torrid love-making and pleasure. Lying back in each other's arms, Tenzin began talking about his feelings. He appeared bewildered by the experience saying he'd 'never felt this way before', he'd 'never had such strong feelings towards someone.' I was taken aback and began to question my motives, reminding him that I was leaving in a few days. I was travelling to Ladakh for a ten day holiday and then flying south to Goa for a week by the ocean.

Tenzin and I went upstairs to eat in the Tibetan restaurant, taking the manual with us. I was busy writing when Josette arrived, delighted she'd found us. She

asked how the lesson had gone. Tenzin and I looked at each other, grinning. He replied, 'Good!' I just smiled to myself. So far my emotional life with Tenzin had been easy sailing. Once Josette arrived this began to change. No matter where we were, or what we were doing over the next few days, Josette continued to turn up, always demanding attention, and acting as if she had an entitlement to Tenzin's company. I could tell she wasn't happy about my being there and I began to resent her intrusion.

Tenzin decided before I left that he wanted to spend a day together in the mountains, so early one morning we caught a tuk tuk and headed off for Dharamkot, a small hamlet in the foothills east of McLeod Ganj. It was quaint to be going on a date in India. I was taller than Tenzin and sitting next to him there in the little tuk tuk as it bounced its way over the dirt roads, gave me the feeling of being in a road runner cartoon. Trying not to laugh I looked at him and thought, 'I'm not sure but maybe this man's serious.' I hadn't considered this possibility before and decided to let my guard down a little further.

The tuk tuk driver dropped us off at a small tea house. We disembarked and then made our way further into the forest until we came to another tea house with a sign that read 'Welcome, you have arrived at the restaurant at the end of the world' and stopped for lunch. Tenzin and I sat holding hands looking out onto a forest of deodar cedar, oak and rhododendron, sipping tea and feasting on delicious Indian foods. I felt intoxicated with happiness. Drinking from each other's kisses I slipped deeper and deeper into the realm of possibilities. We spent the afternoon walking in the forest, then lay in a grass clearing where we talked and slept in each other's arms. When we awoke the sun was beginning to set. We made our way back down the valley arriving at the first Tea House just as it was beginning to rain. A storm had blown in, lightning filled the sky, thunder boomed through the mountains and the rain came down in sheets, heavy and unrelenting.

We caught a taxi back down to McLeod Ganj, and for the first time since my arrival, I felt wet and cold, not sticky, hot, wet and humid. We got back to my hotel room dreaming of a hot shower and a little warmth, only to find the storm had found its way into my bathroom and the place was flooded. Tenzin picked up a bucket and began draining the water out while I swept the excess across the carpet and out the door, grateful I only had to spend another two nights here. Once we'd dealt with the water we took a hot shower and then jumped into bed, snuggling up to each other for

warmth. I asked Tenzin if he would like to travel to Ladakh with me and have a holiday, adding that I would pay, but he said he didn't think he could get away, so declined the offer. A couple of hours later claiming Josette would be angry, and that he had better go, he made his way back to his room. I was too tired to care. The final concert was going to be held the following evening and I wanted to rest.

Treasure in Exile

My stay in Dharamasla had come to an end. I hadn't had time for navel gazing or blissing out with the cosmic community. I'd been too busy tending to practicalities, trying to make a small difference in the lives of my students. I'd heard someone say once that 'If it's not practical it's not spiritual.' I understood what they meant, grateful it wasn't me lost in a haze of hash in the cafés of Bagsu. Physically I was tired, but my mind and my spirit had been quickened and renewed. I felt satisfied. I hadn't just taken from India and the Tibetan people, I'd become part of the community and was able to give something back.

Tonight was my last night. The students were incredibly excited – this was going to be their show. I would be the MC and perform a number of tunes, but the real purpose of the evening was to showcase the students' hard work and talent. I'd found a vegetarian restaurant that offered to host the event and advertised the concert under the banner of *Treasure in Exile*. The concert was also a fundraiser for the TCEC. We advertised the night with the option of dinner and a show, or just the show, but had written in Tibetan on the bottom of the poster 'Free entry for Tibetans'.

It would be my last opportunity to instil pride and money into the community before I left. The students and I had been putting up posters and handing out flyers all over Dharamasla. By the time the concert began we had a full house and people were starting to spread out onto the street and the balcony. It was such a special evening. Tenzin Tsundue, a renowned writer and activist, started the evening off with a call for a 'Free Tibet'. His words were powerful and poignant. 'Tibet', he acknowledged, 'must now be carried in our hearts.'

The music was a mixture of Tibetan folk, soft rock, reggae, and a few country gospel numbers from me. Most of the students had made it through to the end of the program and could play independently, but I was still needed on a couple of Bob Marley songs. We raised around 15,000 rupees. I handed the proceedings over to

Jigmey. Gratitude was expressed, thankyou made and given, and the night closed with another cry for a 'Free Tibet'.

I made my way back to my room and waited for Tenzin. He'd spent most of the night on the balcony peering in through the door, wishing he could play. Josette sat tucked away amongst the crowd on the floor.

Exhausted and overly emotional, I lay down on the bed in my room. I was ready to leave Dharamasla: I had nothing left to give. Tenzin arrived and I began to cry. Holding me he asked, 'What are we going to do?' Then looking at me affectionately, he softly said, 'Don't worry, we'll work it out.' Confused by his words I didn't respond. I couldn't afford to fall in love with him, I was leaving.

My last day in Dharamasla arrived. The bus left for Manali that night, which left me the day to bring my affairs to a close. I had a lot to do. Through the generosity of my friends and family I'd raised 12,000 rupees to give to Lhundop to help with the production of his first CD. His voice deserved to be heard and shared. His cousin Jamyang invited me to visit their room for momos. I gave the money I'd raised for Lhundop to Jamyang. He received it with a rather nonplussed sort of attitude, as though it had been my duty to give him money. When I'd given Yonten the money for his trip home to Tibet, he couldn't have been more gracious or thankful and had dutifully taken the money to the monastery bank to keep it in a safe place until he began his journey. Jamyang was a monk, so I assumed he had integrity. But I wasn't sure the money would in fact go to Lhundop. We feasted on momos until we could eat no more, and I then set off to pack and tie up loose ends.

I'd met Martin, a young musician who would be staying in Dharamasla for a couple of months and had talked to him about keeping the program running. It was established now and, I was hoping, sustainable. He was happy to take on the role of teacher but I had my doubts about his abilities to put others first. He was a young, hotshot guitarist more interested in impressing others, than empowering them; but he was my only option. I left him with a timetable, student names and a book of songs, then made my way to the internet café to complete the massage manual for Tenzin.

I was madly writing away, more concerned about finishing the manual than Tenzin was, when he turned up. I wanted to help him in his struggle for independence, and honour the efforts he'd made to stand on his own two feet. While I was maniacally typing, he let it slip that he was going to travel to Ladakh in a few

days time with Josette. I looked at him in disbelief-What did he mean, he was going with Josette? I'd invited him and he'd said No, he was too busy. He defended his decision saying she wasn't independent like me and couldn't make the journey alone. She'd asked him to travel with her as a paid guide. Between his actions and his words I was starting to feel quite mad. I couldn't work out what was the truth and what wasn't, but I was leaving that night so let it go telling myself not to get so emotionally involved. It didn't matter.

My Dearest Music Teacher

Yonten arrived as I was trying to squeeze a couple of small woollen prayer mats into my already overloaded backpack. He fussed over me like a mother hen, making sure everything was packed correctly and that I wasn't getting too tired. He insisted on carrying my parcels to the post office, telling me he'd return to carry my backpack to the bus. Yonten had a very strong sense of moral obligation and right and wrong. He never once faltered in his behaviour towards me; he was always kind, respectful and considerate. I hoped the money I'd given him would propel him towards freedom and not place him in a position of moral obligation to me. For him, looking after me was not a debt of gratitude; it was simply a 'duty of care'. I was alone in a foreign country so he was stepping up.

Throughout the afternoon the students visited me in my room, bringing cards of appreciation. Some gave me stickers for a 'Free Tibet' with messages written by them on the back. Yonten had selected a hand-painted card with a small painting of the eight auspicious symbols on it, and had decorated the border, pasting a small headshot of himself in the bottom right hand corner. In his best handwriting he wrote:

My Dearest Music Teacher,

I would like to say my hearty felt thanks to you for helping me. I am really grateful to you for the help you have given me a lot of money!!! Really that is generous of you gave me such a lot of money.

My Dearest Teacher Margi, I must save the money for my journey home to Tibet and also I will give the gift to my mum which you gave her. My mum should be happy to get the gift from you. Dear Teacher, the main thing I study is to help some poor people in my village in Tibet. Really I think that there is nothing more important than to help poor people. This I

not only tell you from my mouth, I mean that I am thinking about this always. However, I will let you know when I will go and all my situations in my future life. Please don't worry more about my journey to Tibet. I think it will be alright.

Dear Teacher, I will never forget your kindness in my whole life. With much love and best wishes always for your happy life, yours sincerely, student, Yonten

My bags packed, I went down to the massage room to say goodbye to Tenzin. He handed me a delicate Indian cloth painting asking if I would like it. I thanked him and threw my arms around him to say goodbye. We both cried as we held each other. The last time I had felt the pain of letting someone go was when my father died. I was completely overcome with feelings; all my best efforts to be invincible had failed and I'd fallen into the fantasy of love, a victim to my own desire. I wept deeply while Tenzin held me. Swept up in a maelstrom of emotions my mind raced to the future; maybe this was real, maybe this was the direction my life was supposed to take. I had no roots to keep me in Australia. Were the Tibetan people and Tenzin my new family, my new life?

Three Little Birds

We made our way up to the street where Yonten was waiting with my bags, and began making our way to the bus stop. Dhargy Marley carried my guitar, Yonten carried my backpack, and Tenzin carried my daypack. We were all feeling the pain of separation. Walking along Temple Road we sang *Three Little Birds*: 'Don't worry about a thing; cause everything little thing's gonna be alright.' I was fighting to hold back the tears. I couldn't believe how much love I felt for these people – how at home I'd been living amongst them; how much joy I felt playing music with them; how quickly they had welcomed me; and how easily they had become family. Whereas others may travel to India in search of a guru, my teachers had come to me in the forms of two young men who had impacted my life deeply.

In Dharmasala the standard phrase when someone is leaving is, 'When are you coming back?' There was a *Hotel California* kind of atmosphere to the place: you might be checking out, but you could never leave! Tibetans don't believe in saying goodbye; instead they wish you Tashi delek (good luck) the same saying they greet

you with. When we arrived at the bus stop all the students were there, lined up to say goodbye. I bowed my head before each one as they draped a white khata around my neck.

Maintaining discretion, Tenzin slipped a piece of paper into my hand with his address and phone number on it, jokingly saying if I was ever back in Dharamasla to give him a call. Laughing I replied 'Contact me when you get to Ladakh, we'll have some fun.' We waved to each other until the bus had driven out of sight. Yonten's call to *take caireee* ringing in my ears- I'd considered correcting his pronunciation a few times but instead decided to let it be. I'd arrived in Dharamasla disillusioned. I left with vision and hope for the future.

Journey to Ladakh

The bus began winding its way down the mountain through the deodar cedars, stopping for roadworks only a couple of kilometres into the journey. Stepping off the bus into the darkness of the night I realised this was going to be a long slow journey. Jamyang and Lhundop were standing by the side of the road – their bus had also been delayed. Seeing me standing there they immediately came to wish me 'Tashi delek', presenting me with a beautiful white shimmering silk khata. Lhundop was travelling to a studio in Nepal to record; I was very excited for him and wished him well. They stayed with me until it was time to reboard. Peering out the bus window I watched both of them fade into the night as I set off on the next leg of my journey.

Miraculously I managed to sleep the night away, waking just as the morning sun was beginning to rise in the sky. We were in a valley on the outskirts of Manali. The bus drove through valleys of pines, past tiny fields of fruit trees growing alongside the crystal clear water of the Beas River. The landscape was breathtaking. In the distance I could see the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas.

We pulled into the bus station and I stepped off the bus with no real idea of what was going to happen next. The bus to Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, didn't leave until the following day. The general consensus was that it was wise to spend the night in Manali to acclimatise before travelling, but I wasn't interested in spending a day just hanging around waiting to hit the road. There were a number of people who had disembarked from the bus, who were also keen to continue on the journey, so I took the initiative and organised a driver to take us to Leh in a four wheel drive.

Counting the driver, there were seven of us in the car. It wasn't going to be the most comfortable of trips but at least we were on our way. We alternated between three in the front seat and four in the back. Occasionally someone would squeeze in the very back with the luggage.

We were travelling on The Leh-Manali-Highway and it wasn't long before we left the valley and began to climb. The highway had been built and was maintained by the Indian Army's Border Roads Organisation. It's only open for four to five months a year, in the summer when the snow is cleared. Once the snow arrives the high passes become blocked and the highway is closed, leaving Leh cut off from the rest of the world. We were travelling in the weeks just before the highway was due to close, heading up to Rohtang Pass which in Hindi literally translates as 'ground of corpses' – people die trying to cross the pass in bad weather.

We stopped at a roadside dhaba in Marhi for breakfast before we reached the pass. Climbing out of the four wheel drive I could feel the change in the atmosphere instantly. The peaks of the Himalayas towered around us, silhouetted in a brilliant azure blue sky. The lush green of the valleys had now been replaced with coarse patches of mountain grasses and slate, and the air was noticeably thinner. Altars draped in Tibetan prayer flags had been built to ask the Gods for a safe journey through the high passes and valleys. Our hunger satisfied, we got back in the four wheel drive and began climbing towards the pass. For the first time it dawned on me that all our lives were in the hands of a driver I didn't know. I said a quick prayer. The entrance to the pass was signified by a concrete sign which read

WEL COME TO GREEN PARADISE OF MANALI ALT 13050FT.

Even though it was a national highway, most of the road wasn't tarred. It was dusty, full of potholes and bumpy from the rocks which had slid down the embankments running along the inside of the road. The highway becomes very busy during the summer months, tourist vehicles, buses, trucks, goods carriers and military vehicles use the road. Traffic jams are common, as road users try to navigate the tight roads and rough terrain. Passing another vehicle felt like a life and death experience, knowing there would be no quarter if the driver misjudged the distance to the edge of the road. I sat squashed up against the window staring out at the vastness surrounding us, feeling the emptiness begin to strip my soul. I'd never seen a landscape like this before. The further we travelled the starker it became,

until eventually there was no green, no grass, no trees, no animals, just earth, rock and sand. We passed mountains of slate and shale etched into the deep blue of the sky. Deep in the valley below you could see the clear, light blue water of the Chandra River weaving its way through river banks, so sculpted through years of erosion they looked like they'd been decorated with stalagmites and stalactites of river sand. Nomad tents could be seen miles below: small white dots, in vast brown flat valleys, with no protection from the elements, surrounded by walls of mountains and hills scarred by the melting of the winter snows.

We were heading to Kokhsar, the first village north of Rohtang Pass. Indian labourers, both men and women, their skin tanned by the sun, as black as the tar they were laying, worked relentlessly on maintaining the road. I couldn't think of a more difficult job and made a quick note to self to 'never complain about my job again.' Amplifying the uncompromising and unforgiving harshness of the terrain, there was a military and police presence all along the Manali to Leh highway. The highway ran through Jammu and Kashmir State, where there had been political controversy and strife for over twenty years. These regions in the Himalayas were of strategic importance – Ladakh was flanked on one side by Tibet and China, and on the other by Pakistan. Foreign nationals have to show their passports with a valid visa at police checkpoints along the highway. We passed a number of military stations and then we were stopped for a passport check by the police.

Travel time to Leh is generally unpredictable: usually two or three days, depending on the weather, the condition of the road, and the driver. We arrived at Kokhsar, a little town with not a lot to offer, where we ate lunch and stretched our legs before getting back into the four wheel drive. We'd already been travelling for over four hours but had only covered a distance of about 80 kilometres and had many more hours of cramped conditions inside the car to endure before we stopped for the night. We drove for another couple of hours then pulled in to fill up with petrol at a small village situated at the bottom of the confluence of the Chandra and the Bhaga river valley. This was the last petrol pump before Leh. Leaving the village, we made our way out of the valley, continuing to gradually climb upwards, stopping for another police check, and passing through a few more small settlements before we reached Zingzingbar. From here we would begin the steep ascent to the Baralacha La pass which stood at 16,500 feet. As we drove I looked across the valley at the

mountain directly opposite. It was composed of what looked like treacherous gravel, dirt and rocks, and engraved with a ribbon thin, steep, winding road, across its flank. With consternation, I realised this was likely to be a mirror image of the road we were currently travelling on. We drove over the pass and then began the descent to Bharatpur where we would stop for the evening. As the sun began to fade in the sky, the colours in the landscape began to vibrate with a soft glow. Shapes and images appeared in the torn and tortured sides of the mountains, where the surface soil had been ripped away by melting snows and become scorched and coloured by the intensity of the sun. The spirits of the mountains made their presence felt, dancing between the shadows of light. We pulled into Bharatpur, our stop for the evening: a collection of tents and dhabas set up along the roadside next to the river which offered basic accommodation during the tourist season. Eagles soared high above the camp, the silence interrupted only by prayer flags flapping quietly in the wind.

Each dhaba was run by a family. There were a number of mattresses to sleep on, separated by cotton sheets, and a kitchen from which you could buy a home cooked meal, as well as a fridge filled with soft drinks and water. I chose a dhaba to sleep in, dragged my backpack inside and then crawled up on top of the mattress. Still acclimatising I lay back on the bed, releasing a deep sigh of gratitude for being able to stretch out my body and get horizontal -this was time to rest and let go.

No one in the dhaba spoke English and I didn't speak Hindi, I was left just to be. My mind drifted in and out of the present to the past and the future with thoughts of Tenzin running through each scene. Dharmasala felt a long way behind me now, but sleeping in a tent high in the Himalayas did nothing to help dispel my fantasy of falling in love. Every part of my being missed him. Exhausted, I drifted off into a deep Himalayan sleep.

Unbelievable is not it?

We started the day's travel early morning while the river could still be crossed. The Manali-Leh highway is a 475 kilometre roller-coaster ride of high-altitude passes, bad roads, landslides, glacial melts, broken bridges and acute mountain sickness. So far we had been lucky when it came to altitude sickness: a few people struggled with headaches but no one had vomited yet. I was feeling fine – I am always in my element when I am in the mountains. We left Bharatpur heading towards Sarchu.

Rock faces on the sides of the mountains shone, reflecting the morning sun, little tufts of mountain grass glittered as the ice from the night before began to melt. We were heading towards Pang and the Gata Loops, a collection of 21 hairpin bends that take you another 1500 feet to an altitude of 15,332 feet.

Before we began our ascent of the Gata loops we stopped for a toilet break and chai at one of the roadside camps. Going to the toilet was no easy feat on this journey: there was absolutely nothing to squat behind. We made our way up the hill behind the camp feeling the eyes of the Indian road workers following us in curiosity and did our best to ignore them and answer nature's calling. There was nothing I could do if people wanted to watch and I wasn't prepared to put my body through the agony of not going. Telling myself they were too far away to see anything anyway, I just went with the flow. Job done, I pulled up my jeans mumbling 'Show's over'.

There was a young fair-skinned boy working as a chai wallah (a tea seller) in the tent. He looked so out of place here. I found it strangely disturbing. I guessed his father had had a casual relationship with his mother and abandoned them both. He didn't speak English and was totally at home in his world in the barren wilderness of the Himalayas, but I knew there was a part of him that held a different heritage, a heritage I assumed he would never know.

We squashed back into the four wheel drive to continue our journey. The Gata loops weren't in good condition – road works were taking place, and slow moving trucks leaving clouds of thick smoke made the ascent feel tougher than it actually was. At the top of the loops we stopped at a collection of cairns (a collection of small stones and rocks) built from the flat rocks which had slide down the side of the mountain. Each rock had been meticulously placed on top of the other to create a large pyramid mound which had been decorated with prayer flags. Smaller cairns, built by travellers grateful to have survived the journey, had been built around the main one. I followed their example and built my own.

After our stop we headed towards the third pass, Nakee La, which stood at an altitude of 15,540 feet, followed by Lachulung La pass at 16,616 feet. My head was definitely beginning to feel lighter. One of the passengers developed altitude sickness. We pulled over a few times for her to vomit.

After Lachulung La, we started descending to Pang, another temporary tent settlement with a check post, to take a breather and eat something before the final

push to Leh. The tents at Pang were situated next to the river, a cooling presence amongst the dusty, brown, bare hills and mountains. Each tent served as a restaurant which had a sign with its name on it and sets of plastic tables and chairs outside. I couldn't imagine living and working here – there was no mercy from the elements, no softness, no comfort. The people looked strong and solid, with bronzed skin and broad wind-swept faces. The woman who served me wore a shawl tied on her head in a shape I hadn't seen in India before, giving her the appearance of desert royalty. I began to revel in the total anonymity of the place: the freedom of the wild. I could be anybody or nobody here. My past and my future didn't exist, only the stark present. The winds that swept the plains were sweeping my mind. My spirit expanded with the emptiness and vastness of the terrain, and my identity dissipated – only bare necessities were needed here. I wasn't in a hurry anymore, everything slowed down. We stayed at Pang for over an hour, and then climbed back into the four wheel drive for the final stretch to Leh.

The road from Pang took us across the Moore Plains, a relatively flat piece of land situated in a plateau at an altitude of 15,400 feet. The road across the plains was in good condition and it wasn't long before we began our ascent to the highest pass on the highway: Tanglang La. The last few kilometres up to the pass were rough and steep. The air was very thin and altitude sickness was taking its toll. We passed more than one bus which had pulled over so passengers could vomit. Reaching the top we were greeted with spectacular views in every direction. Brightly coloured prayer flags flew in the wind, an ornately painted sign read:

Tanglang La, Altitude 17,582 feet.

You are Passing Through the Second Highest Pass of the World.

Unbelievable is not it?

I posed for a photo. This was the closest I'd ever come to standing on the roof of the world. Tanglang La was the last pass on the Manali-Leh highway before we began our descent towards Leh. Gradually the snow on the distant mountains disappeared and the landscape of bare mountain ranges changed to green fields and small villages. *Jullay* – the refrain used in everyday life in Ladakh, meaning 'Hello, Welcome, God bless', greeted us as we entered the valley.

Leh

It was dark by the time we arrived in Leh. It had taken 36 hours; we'd only travelled 475 kilometres. I'd survived my rite of passage into what was once the Himalayan Kingdom of Ladakh, without incident. I checked into a reasonable hotel for the night, looking forward to what would be revealed in the morning light. Grateful for the comfort of a bed I decided to take it easy the next day, allowing myself time to acclimatise and explore the city.

In the morning I walked out of the hotel and stepped back in time to an unknown world. Buddhist stupas had been carved into the rugged, bare hills, which surrounded the town, ringed by the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas which were crowned with a vivid, dark blue, high-altitude sky. Leh was ancient but bustling. On one level it was a tourist town – travel agencies, adventure companies, souvenir shops, pizza restaurants, backpackers and large numbers of Kashmiri traders filled the city centre. But all of this was framed by antiquity and beauty. On the hillside directly behind the main bazaar, the Leh Royal palace stood majestically towering over the town. The palace, nine stories high, built in the 17th century, was now empty and crumbling, but still a symbol of pride and beauty. The sound of water, flowing through stone channels crisscrossing the town, lulled you into a deep sense of relaxation and wellbeing as you walked – softening the stark landscape.

Ladakhi houses are big, built for multigenerational family living – created from clay bricks and stones, with whitewashed walls and big wood-framed windows to capture the sun. Barley, alfalfa, wheat, or grass was stacked in neat bundles on the flat roofs of the homes, drying for winter. Around each house, grew vegetables and fruit trees, protected from the goats by a stone wall. Apricots lay drying on yak hair blankets. Potted marigolds created a blaze of brilliant orange, sunflowers danced in the wind, and cats slept lazily on the steps of the homes.

I wandered along the narrow paths, past fields of yellow sunflowers lined with poplar trees; smiling faces greeted me with *Jullay*. I was amazed people could prosper in such desolation, yet all the signs were there that they do. Everything had been done with care: fields carved out of the hillsides, were layered with immaculate terraces, one above the other; the crops were thick and strong, forming patterns an artist might have created; the gardens around the homes planted with love.

Unlike the rest of India, the Ladakhis' physique, facial features, and dress, look more like the residents of Tibet and Central Asia. They are mountain people; high spirited. Both men and women look strong, with endless stamina, and exude a sense of vitality and wellbeing. All their lives they have breathed pure air, exercised regularly working in the fields, and eaten whole, locally grown, organic, unrefined foods.

Leh accommodates many cultures and religions with harmony and grace. Although the West had reached Ladakh, its people and culture hadn't yet succumbed to the temptations presented by tourism. They had withstood the homogenising winds of globalisation. It was large-scale immigration from Tibet that had changed the cultural heritage of Ladakh, giving it the title of *Little Tibet*. Leh was dominated by Buddhists, with small numbers of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The original population of Ladakh consisted of Dards, an Indo-Aryan race.

Ladakh (land of the passes) is reportedly the closest you come to experiencing Tibet before China invaded in 1959. Although western dress had found its way to Leh, most of the locals were still wearing their traditional clothing, different from the traditional Tibetan clothing I'd seen in Dharamasla. The Ladakhis wore a goncha, (a thick, wrap-around, long sleeved woollen robe in maroon or brown, tied at the waist with a colourful cummerbund or scarf), loose pyjama type pants, a top hat, and thick-soled Tibetan-like boots made of felted wool. The hat they wear reminded me of the one worn by *The Cat in the Hat* in the Dr Seuss children's book: a distinctive stovepipe hat with an upturned flap on each side made of goat or lamb fur that look like wings. They wore their hats perched on the crown of the head, literally: they weren't pinned on, or sitting on top of piled-up hair. They just simply sat there.

The women wore a goat skin across their shoulders, or brightly patterned pashmina shawls. Tribal jewellery, pearls and semi-precious stones hung from their ears and around their neck. Kargil Muslims wore undyed clothes and a round knitted Balti caps with rolled brims. Dard women wore piles of plastic flowers pinned to their hats, which sat on top of two long thick black braids hanging, down to their waists. Everywhere I looked there was a photo opportunity. I spent my first day taking photos, walking around Leh, lazing in the cafés, drinking tea and locating a guesthouse further from the centre of the town, where I could spend the next couple of days.

Ladakh festival

My timing was perfect – I'd 'lucked out', as Bailey would say; arriving in Ladakh at the time of the Leh Festival and as well, the Dalai Lama was giving teachings at a location about an hour's drive from Leh. On my second day I joined the masses travelling to hear Him, squeezing onto the ladder at the rear of the bus with half a dozen others, holding on tight with every bend and bump in the road. The traffic was heavy and chaotic; busloads of people made their way to sit and listen to their spiritual teacher. The bus dropped us at the beginning of a dry, dusty road. Thousands of people walked the road to the teachings – rainbow umbrellas protecting them from the scorching rays of the sun.

It was six days since I'd left Dharamasla, Tenzin would be arriving in Leh soon; by my calculations he could already have arrived. I searched the river of faces looking for him, but knew, short of a miracle, I wouldn't find him. The incredible beauty and culture of Ladakh had done nothing to dissipate my feelings for him; instead I missed him more, longing to share the magic and wonder I was experiencing.

The teachings were held in a large, open field, hemmed in by a high whitewashed rock wall. A protected stage had been erected for His Holiness and his entourage to sit on. The rest of the people sat on the ground in direct sun. A number of tiered rows had been built at the far end, so that people could sit and see, and as always, a special place near the stage had been allocated for westerners. I bought a ticket to enter and walked in amongst a sea of colourful umbrellas covering the field. The robes of the thousands of monks, sitting waiting, created the impression a maroon blanket had been laid on the ground directly in front of the stage. Loud speakers blared out instructions in Tibetan – the English translation was difficult to hear and understand. I couldn't concentrate. I hadn't come prepared. I didn't have a cushion to sit on or an umbrella to protect me from the sun, just a sunhat and a shawl. Sweat poured down my chest and my face. Parched I bought a bottle of water from one of the hawkers who were working the field and drank it immediately, but it did nothing to quench my thirst.

I felt like an imposter taking up space near the front of the stage, while lay people and old people sat silently in the sun, hundreds of meters away from their revered teacher. I wished the experience meant something more to me than

discomfort, frustration and an overwhelming desire to find Tenzin but it didn't. My first attempt at hearing the Dalai Lama speak had been thwarted because I was so focussed on finding my guitar. Now in my second attempt, high in the Himalayas in Ladakh, I couldn't sit still in the harsh conditions, and was obsessed with finding Tenzin; I just couldn't convince my mind to participate. Eventually I gave up; it was too hot, too dry, too dusty and too crowded for me to sit still. Defeated I began making my way back through the crowd to catch the bus to Leh.

Back In Leh I spent a couple of hours lounging in a café beside a trickling stream and then occupied myself shopping for jewellery and souvenirs in the little trinket shops scattered throughout the town. Mid-afternoon I heard the sound of a strange horn signalling the beginning of the Leh Festival. I walked to the main bazaar. Throngs of people lined the main road watching a spectacular parade. It was an absolute cultural extravaganza, performers adorned with gold and silver ornaments and turquoise headgear marched through the streets; monks wearing colourful masks danced to the rhythm of cymbals, flutes and trumpets; village contingents, dressed in full ceremonial costume, sang to the music of a traditional orchestra; proud horsemen rode their sturdy ponies with dignity and poise.

The parade made its way to the polo ground on the outskirts of the town which was situated in amongst bare hills that housed rows of whitewashed chortens (monuments to distinguished lamas, often housing their remains) along their flanks. Then the horn was blown again, and the procession came to an end. Monks began to chant and dance, depicting legends and fables of Ladakh, which generally tell a story of the fight between good and evil, ending with the eventual victory of good. Religious mask dances are an important part of Ladakh's cultural life. The dance performed at the festival was a precursor to the masked dance festival to be held at the monasteries, in a few days' time.

After the monks' dance, the ethnic groups of Ladakh – the Dards, the Changpas and the Mons – showcased folk dances of the region. Each group danced in their unique traditional costumes, wearing robes of yak wool and silk, with brocade and goatskin capes, woven pashmina scarves and shawls, silk and felt hats, embroidered pants, fine felt sashes woven with beads, shoes with tie dye work, and woven aprons. Bunches of fresh flowers were worn by the men and the women, as well as jewellery made from red coral, white shell, blue turquoise, and silver. The

fashion, created centuries ago was mesmerising. The dances were graceful and vibrant, the costumes spectacular, the women sublimely beautiful, and the men proud and strong. The dancing continued well into the night, the crowd never tiring in their exuberance.

Women paraded in their finest costumes, wearing the most elaborate of the head-dresses: the 'Perak', an expression of identity for the Buddhist ethnic groups of Ladakh. Once worn on a daily basis by the old aristocracy, it's now worn only on special, formal occasions. The top of the Perak is flat, shaped to resemble the raised head of a cobra, and covered with turquoise and coral stones; the best and biggest stone is placed at the front, a crescent-shaped amulet with spirit-chasing bells hangs from the side. In Buddhist iconography the cobra with an expanded hood represents protection, by this analogy; the Perak, when draped over the head of the woman is believed to safeguard the wearer.

The base of the Perak is made from dyed leather or thick felt. Almost a meter long, it extends down the back to the waist. Laid flat it resembles a turquoise snakeskin. There can be between 100 to 400 stones arranged on the Perak, and it can weigh up to eight kilos. The number and quantity of stones indicates the wealth of the family. From childhood women begin collecting turquoise for their Perak's. A symbol of marriage for Ladakhi women, the Perak is passed down as an heirloom from mother to daughter.

A polo tournament was to be held on the main field where teams from across the region would compete for the *Ladakh Festival Cup*. Ladakhi polo is played at breakneck speed, displaying the power and precision of horse and rider. Behind the polo field an archery competition was taking place. Mesmerised, I stayed at the festival for several hours before making my way back to my guesthouse for the evening. The following day I had booked to go white-water rafting on the Indus River.

Walking on the Moon

The Indus flows North West to South East, passing through the Zaskar ranges in Ladakh, and then continues on into Pakistan. The backbone of Ladakh, the river originates near Mt Kailash and the Mansarovar Lake in Western Tibet. Beyond Leh the landscape took on even greater mystical qualities; the high altitude desert transformed to resemble a moonscape. It was easy for me to imagine I'd walked

across a bridge from the earth to the sky, and was no longer on the Earth, but instead had landed on the moon. The river was flanked by rugged mountains, vast barren plateaus, stark lunar valleys, massive boulders, shale, slate, and whitewashed chortens. It was only the historic Buddhist monasteries, colourful prayer flags, and an occasional green oasis of poplar trees along the river's subsidiaries that reminded you that you were still on the earth. In every direction you could see the snow capped peaks of the Himalayas – in the winter months absolutely everything would be bathed in mist, and white with snow. For me it was eternally beautiful, awe inspiring and foreboding. I found it difficult to believe that anything could survive here: most things don't. It is only the strongest and most resilient of plants, animals and humans that do.

I was rafting with a group of four strong, super fit Canadians. We rafted through steep gorges, carved out by the river, past small villages situated in fertile valleys, with imposing old monasteries nestled precariously on the mountain sides. Occasionally we tackled a bed of rapids, but mainly we rafted in quiet, calm waters, relaxing and taking in the majesty surrounding us. We passed the Indus-Zaskar confluence and then ended at a small village lined with poplar trees, surrounded by the snow capped Zaskar mountain range.

I sat by the banks of the river embracing the stillness. Surrounded by stillness, it was difficult to hold on to thoughts, they served no purpose. I exhaled allowing my mind to empty. Everything slowed down, images became bathed in an intense clear light, and sound became no more than an empty vibration. The world of politics, power and people seems centuries removed. There was only the eternal present to navigate and behold. Then, without warning, the stillness was interrupted as the river guides began packing up the equipment before they herded us into the van for the drive back to Leh.

Connection

Once there, I made my way to an outdoor café at the main bazaar and sat drinking coffee. A young woman in need of a seat asked if she could sit with me and I obliged. Like me, she was from Australia and travelling solo. Most of the tourists in Leh were European, French, German, or Swedish. Leh was to Europe what Costa Rica was to America, and what Bali was to Australia without the party element.

She'd come from Dharamasla and was travelling through Leh on her way to Srinagar in Kashmir. I still had a few days left and hadn't made any definite plans. I was hoping I'd find Tenzin. We shared travel stories for a while, I told her I'd met someone and was hoping to catch up with him in Leh. She replied she had a policy not to get involved with anyone while she was travelling, made sense to me, but in my mind this was no longer a fleeting thing. We parted wishing each other luck. She made her way back to her guesthouse while I wandered the streets of Leh looking for Tenzin. I'd sent him an email a few days earlier telling him where I was staying and asking him to contact me when he arrived, but hadn't heard anything. Even if it had taken five days to cross the Himalayas he would have been in Leh by now.

I love to travel alone, unhindered by anyone else's agenda, free to explore, move or not move as I please, but in the evenings travelling alone can be a very lonely time. I went upstairs to one of the open air rooftop restaurants to eat my evening meal. The moon was full: a huge shimmering white ball in a pitch black Himalayan sky. The exotic sounds of Indian classic music floated through the air. All around me couples, families and groups of friends sat enjoying their food and each other's company. I wanted to disappear into the blackness of the night but the full moon shining above me was like a neon sign highlighting the fact I was alone. I looked down from the ledge of the rooftop a few times, gazing out onto the square just in case he was there, but he wasn't. I sunk into disappointment, praying we'd meet, waiting hungrily for my food.

After what felt like hours my food arrived. Just as I stood up to take the water jug from the waiter the familiar green colour of Tenzin's jacket caught my eye. I could barely believe it was real, but it was – Tenzin was standing on the edge of the square by the roadside. Animated by a sudden shot of energy I walked over to the edge of the rooftop and called out his name. He heard me and looked up. We smiled and waved to each other and then he made his way across the road to the stairs leading up to the restaurant. My heart was racing. I didn't know how I should greet him. If it had been in the West I would have jumped up and wrapped my arms around him, but I had the feeling this wouldn't be culturally acceptable here; on another level I wasn't sure how he would feel about seeing me. My loneliness, the vulnerability of travelling alone, my feelings for him, all placed me in a susceptible position. I decided to play it cool. Just because I wanted to see him didn't mean he

wanted to see me. He walked across the restaurant roof, his face open, happy and beaming. He approached shyly – sat down opposite me, reached across the table and with eyes sparkling from the moonlight, took my hand in his, and said ‘Tashi delek, it is good to see you.’ I blushed like a schoolgirl, overwhelmed in his presence, so grateful and happy to see him I wanted to cry. I leant across the table and kissed him lightly on the cheek and said ‘Hello’. He smiled saying he was ‘happy the feelings were still there.’ I pushed the food towards him, encouraging him to eat, while I sat enthralled with the magic of the moment – what I’d allowed myself to believe, was God’s will.

An unguarded moment

From the moment Tenzin sat down and we’d reconnected, it was as though we were in our own little bubble. The outside world dropped away, nothing mattered other than being with him. Hearing his voice, seeing his smile, feeling his touch, everything felt right with the universe. I’d found where I belonged. I told him I’d been looking for him but given up on finding him; he’d likewise been looking for me. He’d arrived the previous day and had gone to the Dalai Lama’s teaching. He hadn’t been able to check his email, so had instead been going from guesthouse to guesthouse looking for me. We picked up our rhythm without skipping a beat, eating, laughing and sharing our joy, and then made our way through the streets of Leh to my guesthouse. The streets, the houses, the mountains, and the people: everything appeared to have a soft, magical glow around it.

I didn’t know the cultural practices of Leh, didn’t know whether having a man stay the night in my room with me would be frowned upon or accepted as a part of everyday life. But the room I was staying in was away from the main houses and none of the other rooms were occupied, so I thought it would be OK if Tenzin stayed. We lay together on the bed holding each other like we never wanted to let go. His kisses were deep, soft and warm. I was in heaven.

He lay back on the bed and lit a small joint of hash. I’d been bitten hard by the backlash of hedonism in my youth and no longer used any mind or mood altering substances, but provided it wasn’t problematic, I didn’t mind if other people indulged. Smoking hashish in India was the Aussie equivalent of having a beer: most people smoked. I hadn’t questioned the fact Tenzin smoked; it was his business. I was lying

back with my eyes closed when I felt him lean forward and kiss me. Then, he did something totally unexpected: he blew hashish smoke into my mouth. I felt the dense smoke find its way down into my lungs. My mouth hung open in surprise, and before I could say anything, he did it again. This time I felt the smoke swirl around my brain. I couldn't speak, couldn't say stop. I just sat there stunned. He grinned at me cheekily and then lent forward and kissed me a third time, blowing the thick hashish smoke deep down into my lungs and body.

When he'd done it the first time I hadn't felt any effect, but by the third time I was totally stoned. I couldn't sit up. The room was spinning. I was trying to make sense out of what was happening. I wanted to be angry and scold him, but the part of me that had previously been in charge of acting responsibly was now sedated and not interested in participating. Instead I started to laugh. I was lying on top of the bed and looking up at the glass light shade, which in my intoxicated state appeared to have fish swimming in it. I knew it didn't, but the fact that I thought it did, made me laugh more. Tenzin shook me gently and said, 'What are you doing, what's happening?' I tried explaining I was stoned, but he wouldn't believe me. He couldn't understand how I could be so stoned just by him blowing smoke into my mouth. I assured him I it was. It was so long ago that I couldn't even remember the last time I'd gotten high. He wanted to go out and walk under the full moon but I couldn't move. My body felt too heavy and my mind couldn't concentrate long enough to send the right signals to my limbs. I was stoned by default, but I was definitely stoned, and it felt good. Sedated, I took a long draw-back on a cigarette: the smoke felt golden, silky and intensely relaxing. I wanted to experience as much pleasure as I could. I reached over and drew him to me. Sex stoned was amazing. Everything seemed so fluid, so connected, so easy, so enjoyable.

The sun was just beginning to rise, when exhausted we finally fell asleep. I was woken a few hours later by a loud bang outside my room, followed by the sounds of men's voices. Startled, I sat upright on the edge of the bed. The noise came again. I didn't know what or who was making it, but I sensed it was associated with displeasure. I wasn't stoned now and felt panicked. What had happened? I'd been practising a twelve step recovery program for over two decades and it had just gone up in smoke. I tried to stop panicking. Just because I'd gotten stoned once, didn't mean I had to get stoned again: it was an accident. I told myself it didn't have

to mean anything, to just accept it and let it go. But inside, I'd started to run. There was another loud bang. Tenzin went outside to see what was happening. He came back and told me it was just the guesthouse owner and his friends playing a Ladakh dice game, nothing to worry about, but I was wondering why they were playing it directly outside my room.

Abandoned

Tenzin had arranged to meet a friend for breakfast at a small café beside the stream. We dressed and made our way up town. I was feeling incredibly tired and disorientated. We ordered coffee and then I turned to Tenzin and said, 'You know, you really shouldn't have done that.' He just laughed. Persisting I made him promise he'd never do it again. He nodded and said 'ok'. Then I threw in a safety clause, adding: 'And if I ever ask you for a joint, don't give it to me.' This time he didn't laugh. I knew he didn't understand where I was coming from, but nodding his head, he replied he wouldn't.

Richard, Tenzin's friend from France, turned up at the café. Tenzin greeted him warmly. From the moment of Richard's arrival Tenzin disconnected from me, acting like I wasn't there. Eventually he introduced me to Richard as his guitar teacher from Dharamasla. The status of our relationship blurred and stalled. I could feel the blood draining from my heart. Confused, I shook Richard's hand and said 'hello'. We sat at the table while Tenzin discussed the possibility of running a short massage course while he was in Leh. Richard was very interested in attending and wanted to organize a massage for later that day. Excited, Tenzin arranged to meet him for dinner that evening, saying his friend Josette, also from France, would come along as well.

I hadn't thought about Josette until that moment. I'd been so swept away with seeing Tenzin again she'd dropped out of the picture. Now she was back in the frame and I was being pushed to the outside. He stood with his back to me making dinner arrangements without any indication that he intended to include me. I was reeling with the sudden change in the direction of our relationship. We'd moved from being inseparable soul mates to perfect strangers in a short 30 minute period. I'd assumed, while we were in Leh, we would spend the rest of our time together. I thought he felt the way I did and would want to share every moment. I guess I was

wrong. In normal circumstances Tenzin having dinner with friends wouldn't be an issue, but here he was the only social contact I had. Hurt and offended, I stood in silence until Richard left, and then turned to Tenzin waiting for an explanation.

He saw nothing wrong with the fact that he hadn't invited me to dinner with the rest of them. Saying he thought it would be uncomfortable if I was there because I didn't get along with Josette, 'there would be tension'. I was astounded. In my mind it wasn't a matter of getting along with Josette: she was hostile and unreasonable and, didn't want to get along. But he insisted it was for the best, it was business, and that he'd come to collect me around 9 o'clock after they'd eaten.

I was too tired to argue, so relented, replying 'OK, I'll see you then', and walked back to my guesthouse. The combination of lack of sleep, a hangover from the hash and an abrupt jolt in my emotional reality was beginning to take its toll. I dozed throughout the day, and late afternoon had a meal at my favourite Indian dhaba. Then I returned to my guesthouse and sat in my room waiting for Tenzin. Around 7 o'clock there was a power blackout; all the lights in Leh went off. I lay in the dark and waited, and waited, and waited. Nine o'clock had long gone and he hadn't come. There was nothing that I could do – I couldn't read, I didn't have access to a phone; there was no hot water, no heating, and nowhere I could go. I sat huddled in my blankets, feeling abandoned, angry, disappointed and confused. Nothing made sense anymore. All I wanted now was to go home to Australia.

Love is a decision

I arose early the next morning and made my way up to the main bazaar to find a travel agent. I wanted to change my departing flight to the following day, but everything was fully booked. I couldn't avoid what was happening, I had to stay. Angry I decided I'd had enough of waiting around for Tenzin: I couldn't depend on him for company or direction. I would have to step up and take responsibility for the rest of my time here. I only had a few days left and decided to explore the possibility of taking another day trip. I went into a tourist centre to collect information. There were only two other people inside, a female lama with an American accent and long blonde hair and, her male companion. They were organising a car and a driver to take them to visit some of the monasteries outside Leh. Intrigued, I introduced myself, asking if they would be open to me sharing the cost and travelling with them

for the day. Happy to have me along, the woman introduced herself as Lama Zik. Her friend, Jack, shook my hand saying, he would be delighted for me to come with them. Their inclusive spirit, warm nature, and immediate acceptance were a welcome relief from the cold sense of rejection I was carrying. We climbed into a van and headed out of Leh to visit Takthok monastery, one of the smallest and most remote monasteries in the region. On our way to Takthok we drove past Shey, Tiske and Chemrey monasteries all perilously built on steep cliffs, lone rocks, or perched on top of craggy mountain faces.

Lama Zik was the head lama of a Buddhist centre in California. Jack had been her friend and companion for twenty years. They travelled as one, completely at peace in each other's company. Theirs was an unconsummated love, but a love nevertheless, that had withstood the test of time and differences. I sat in the back of the van listening to them chat and began philosophising on the nature of love. Romantic love was hypnotising and fleeting, sold to us in song, story and film. I like many others, had a mystical belief in romantic love: it was something all powerful, all encompassing, bringing people together in another dimension and changing lives. But at the same time the human heart is so fragile and fickle that this love can easily change into something disappointing, painful and unpleasant. The love alluded to on the spiritual path, was the bare bones of love: the blood and guts of the pain and joy that dwelled in everyday existence. Every choice I made either led me towards living in the realisation of this love or led me further away from it. Love was a decision. I was responsible for the choices I made. I asked Lama Zik if she too thought love was a decision. She reflected for a brief moment and replied 'Yes.' I told them about my recent experience with Tenzin. Jack responded, saying with compassion, 'He abandoned you, how very painful.' It was soothing to have my feelings affirmed; I felt the wound begin to heal.

We arrived at Takthok, a small gompa built into the side of the mountain. It was quaint and beautiful and didn't take long to explore, but Lama Zik had travelled a long way to see it and wanted to take photos of all it contained. I sat outside in the sun and waited patiently until they were ready to leave. Then we headed back towards Leh, to visit Hemis, the largest monastery in Ladakh.

Hemis

The presence of whitewashed monasteries scattered in the mountains in Ladakh, surrounded by stupas, statues and hermitage huts, create a sense of magic, mystery, and awe throughout the whole region. It fascinated me to imagine a life lived in these majestic gompas high in the remote mountains of the Himalayas, so far removed from the pressures of the modern world.

I looked at Lama Zik and for a moment envied her, her robes. From the time she put them on in the morning her identity was formed. She knew her place in this world. Knew what was expected of her. She had the protection, and direction, of tradition to guide her way forward. I mentioned this to her, again she agreed, answering, 'Yes, they make a spiritual life easier, they are like a rudder that divides the waters, helping me to navigate my way through life.' If I could have fully aligned myself with the practices of Buddhism I would have gratefully accepted life as a nun. The reality was I couldn't.

We arrived mid-afternoon; there were only a few people there, a handful of tourists and a few very young monks. Tibetan monasteries are beautiful places. They vibrate with longevity, stillness, mystery, colour, and the sacred. I walked into the main hall. It was lined with low rows of meditation platforms, cushions, thangkas, tapestries, statues of the Buddha and sacred texts. The room was dark, with only a few splinters of sunlight penetrating here and there – the air hung thick, with the smell of butter lamps and Tibetan incense. The atmosphere felt heavy and pregnant with the remnants of prayer. The vibrations were so strong I couldn't help but enter into a state of meditation. The whole room demanded it. My body was compelled to sit in the timeless world inside the room; the world outside didn't exist. There was nothing but stillness, darkness and peace. I sat dissolving into a million tiny atoms, grateful for every soul who had sat chanting, praying and meditating before me – generating an energy field that was pulling me deeply into the present moment. I felt so at home, so peaceful, so still. I didn't want to leave the safety of this womb-like space, but I knew staying wasn't an option. Eventually I would have to leave.

Lama Zik, Jack, and I sat outside blissfully drinking tea in the late afternoon sun. A tourist walking by recognised me from the open mike nights at the Café Karma Nirvana in Dharamasla, and stopped to say hello. It felt strange to be identified in the middle of nowhere. The time had come to return to Leh. We finished

our tea and climbed back into the van. The closer we got to Leh the more frequent my thoughts of Tenzin became. Unable to hold onto the peace and tranquility generated within the monastery, my emotions took charge demanding all my attention.

Your friend Tenzin

Arriving back at my guesthouse I found a note from Tenzin stuck to the door of my room, saying he'd been trying to find me and would be back to collect me for dinner. He'd drawn a little heart with an arrow through it and signed the note 'Your friend Tenzin'. I wasn't feeling very friendly. When he arrived I was cold, formal and dismissive – resentful that I'd spent the night alone and in darkness. I'd never before emotionally distanced myself from Tenzin. I'd believed in his goodness, his struggles, and his capacity to create a positive future and, I was having difficulty reconciling his recent actions with his words, and his past life as a monk. I wasn't going to be abandoned by him again. I wanted to give him a taste of his own medicine – let him experience what it was like to be rejected and pushed aside. Richard had accompanied him so I deflected my attention away from Tenzin to Richard, engaging in civil and friendly conversation.

Tenzin could sense a cold breeze blowing between us but he couldn't join the dots and register why I might be upset and withdrawing from him. He continued acting as if nothing had happened and we were the best of friends. I kept him on the outside. Hurt, I wanted to punish him. I took it upon myself to play teacher, disciplining him for his actions, bringing the rod down across his back and, I wasn't going to stop until he acknowledged he'd behaved badly and apologised. Aversion continued to build between us: he was not someone who sought reconciliation quickly.

We went up to the polo grounds where the Leh Festival was coming to a close. Josette was there. Feeling victorious she was for once being cordial and inclusive. I'd made my mind up. I wasn't going to spend another night sitting alone in my room; she'd just have to deal with the fact that I had an emotional and sexual involvement with Tenzin. With Richard present Tenzin couldn't play us off against each other. While I remained aloof, continuing to keep Tenzin at a distance, Josette reveled in the attention she was receiving. He kept trying to reach me and pull me in,

until eventually he decided that because I wasn't behaving nicely, it would be easier to send me away than deal with the problem. We were walking, making our way through the crowd when he suggested I leave. Unperturbed, I simply said, 'No I'm not going, I'm staying for dinner. If you don't like it you leave.' Baffled I hadn't complied, and that he didn't get his own way, he looked at me dumbfounded. Sensing the tension, Josette and Richard went ahead to the restaurant.

Fights are such childish modes of communication, but we were about to have our first one and I wasn't going to back down. 'Well', he said, 'What's the problem then, why are you acting like this?' This time it was my turn to be dumbfounded. Could he seriously be so naive? 'You said you were coming back last night and you didn't. I spent the whole night afraid, on my own in the dark and I didn't like it.' His first response was to make an excuse – he'd been caught up with the others and lost track of time, he'd meant to come back but... I scoffed at him I wasn't going to let him treat me this way. Tenzin, distressed his charisma wasn't winning me over, eventually conceded he should have come and that he was sorry, promising he would never do it again. Accepting his apology I let down my guard and the ice between us began to melt.

We made our way to the restaurant to meet the others. Discerning that she was once again out of the driver's seat Josette worked hard over dinner to manipulate Tenzin in her direction, but he remained uninterested. I began to feel sorry for her – but not sorry enough to ignore my own needs. After dinner, Tenzin, Richard and I headed back towards our respective guesthouses. Josette's was in another direction. Disgruntled, she left alone. We made arrangements to travel to Lamayuru monastery the following day agreeing to meet in the morning.

Lamayuru

By the following morning Tenzin and I had moved back into a space of warm friendship and familiarity. We made our way up to the central bazaar for breakfast and then headed down to the travel agency to meet the others. Richard and Josette were already there, as well as another woman from France whom I hadn't met before, Laura. Richard had met her at his guesthouse and invited her to travel with us for the day. Much to Josette's displeasure, Tenzin and I huddled up close in the back of the van, holding hands like teenagers. She sat in the front and Richard and

Laura sat opposite us. Laura was a breath of fresh air; independent, intelligent, friendly and interesting. We connected immediately, talking and laughing in the back of the van. Believing that he was too dependent on her and needed to stand on his own two feet, she'd recently separated from her African husband. She still cared for him and was helping him financially, but was resolute in her decision to dissolve the marriage. She'd come to Ladakh to take a remote seven day solo trek, with just a guide, a cook and a couple of donkeys. Laura was the kind of woman I could admire; intelligent, independent, adventurous and open.

I enjoy the company of women, but through my relationship with Josette had begun to question my membership in the sisterhood. I'd never been in a situation like this before. Tenzin had told me they weren't in an intimate sexual relationship and I had seen no apparent evidence that they were, so I couldn't understand her reaction towards me. Part of me was still looking for redemption from Tenzin's claim that the difficulties were simply because Josette and I didn't get along; I was willing to get along. In my mind she was the problem, and he was setting us up to behave like jealous women. Travelling towards Lamayuru, Josette remained isolated in the front seat while the rest of us began to form group bonds. I felt for her. Tenzin was making no effort to include her, and the others didn't seem concerned either. Occasionally she would engage, but I could feel her smouldering with resentment.

We stopped in a small village for lunch and lazed in the shade while we waited for our meal to be cooked. By mid-afternoon the heat of the sun had forced everything to slow down. I was grateful we were travelling in an air-conditioned van. After lunch, less than an hour into our journey we hit roadwork's, forcing us to drive at a snail's pace and, eventually, to stop and wait. Josette's dark mood had been building, and unable to control her frustration any longer, she insisted on getting out of the van and walking. We all protested, but she wouldn't be pacified. Burning with jealousy, a sense of injustice, hurt, and frustration, she couldn't suppress her feelings any longer. My relationship with Laura prevented her from targeting me; instead she directed her hostility towards Tenzin. Demanding his attention she allowed herself to have a fully-fledged tantrum and then stormed off. Tenzin beseeched her to wait with the rest of us, but there was nothing he could do to stop her. Unaware of the series of past events, Laura commented, 'that woman has serious problems'. Working hard not to take responsibility for Josette's emotional life,

I filled Laura in on a little more of the story. This didn't change her perspective; she still felt Josette had issues. Eventually we were able to drive again and found Josette a couple of kilometres up the road. Trying to avoid any more drama, we remained as relaxed as possible as Josette climbed back into the van: she'd calmed down, but only slightly.

We began the ascent to Lamayuru, one of the most mysterious and oldest monasteries in Ladakh. Lamayuru had been built high up the mountains in one of the most awesome locations in the world. It is perched on the spur of a hill top, on a promontory which looks out over the valley below. Legend has it Lamayuru was once a lake that had been blessed by a high Lama, which resulted in the water of the lake receding up into the mountains, leaving a place for the monastery to be built.

The monastery is mostly in ruins. Only the main hall exists intact. It is filled with a collection of precious manuscripts, thangkas, statues of the Buddha, musical instruments, and colourful masks used for dance ceremonies and festivals. The hall is surrounded by a complex of buildings, shrines dedicated to different incarnations of Lord Buddha, whitewashed stupas, walls of Mani stones inscribed with prayers, rows of prayer wheels and the ever present prayer flags flapping in the wind. Monasteries in Ladakh are traditional centres of culture, religious activities and power. They are a religious place, not a museum, and like the Catholic Church in the West they own a lot of land. Originally the monasteries depended on donations from the villagers to keep them going. Now most of them charge a small amount of money as an entry fee which is used for maintenance and restoration work. Lamayuru had gone one step further and converted a section of the main building into a hotel.

It was already late afternoon when we arrived so we decided to stay overnight. Josette didn't want to and acted out by protesting loudly, insisting Tenzin return to Leh with her. I could see he was torn by some sense of loyalty, but he dug his heels in and said no: he wanted to stay at the monastery. I couldn't understand the hold she had over him. Neither could the others. Pulling him aside she began arguing, refusing to pay for his accommodation and, threatening not to pay him as her guide if he didn't do what she wanted. Bewildered and appalled, Richard and I said we'd pay for his accommodation. He was a refugee, not a prisoner. Continuing

to argue Tenzin and Josette moved away from the rest of the group, until eventually Josette walked off telling the driver to take her back to Leh.

We were all noticeably relieved that she'd gone, and happy Tenzin had stayed – especially me. Nobody spoke about it; he'd made a choice and I thought it best to let things be. We shared a pleasant evening together in the monastery restaurant, and then went to our rooms to sleep. Tenzin was in good spirits despite what had taken place. We talked, laughed and made love in the light of the moon that shone through the windows. Times had definitely changed; but it still didn't feel quite right enjoying sexual pleasure in a monastery.

Deer Dreaming

We were up with the sun the following morning, scrambling up a path on the mountain side to visit the meditation caves. Tenzin was diligently leaving a fine trail of sugar along the side of the path for the ants to eat. I love this aspect of Tibetan people, the reverence they have for all forms of life and the gentle way they expressed this.

We sat in the caves, contemplating the meditative life of the monks who'd lived there centuries before. I questioned whether I could endure such acute isolation. We stayed for a while and then made our way back down the hillside to explore the buildings, shrines and stupas, around the main hall. I stood at the top of the ridge, looking down on a myriad of white chortens, rock walls, traditional Tibetan houses, and a splay of huge boulders scattered throughout the village below. Strange esoteric sculptures – more Bon (the religion pre-dating Buddhism) than Buddhist – had been erected in the courtyard on the east side of the monastery. The golden symbol of the deer and the dharma wheel stood above the doorway.

I stood still captured by the awesomeness of the mountains, the monastery and the strange other-worldliness of the place. How did I get here? I'd never even heard of Ladakh until a few months ago and had never dreamed of coming here. For me, the whole of Ladakh was sacred and full of teachings, not just the temples and monasteries. I began considering my journey. The memory of being kissed by the deer in Costa Rica came back to me – the symbol of the deer and the dharma wheel began to vibrate with a strange intensity.

For Tibetan Buddhists the gentleness and grace of the deer represent the qualities of the renunciant, a homeless wanderer never resting in the same place.

In the 42nd Psalm, David refers to the deer as a symbol of purity, reclusiveness, and the solitary pursuit of union; the soul's longing for God.

In Celtic mythology, due to its graceful form, the deer is linked the arts, especially poetry and music. The deer is also linked to alternative pathways and symbolises an animal that lures adventurers to follow them into an array of unknown landscapes, places they've never been in before, where they find themselves not knowing what they are doing, suddenly immersed in an adventure. The hind (the female deer) is believed to call to us from the Faery realm, tempting us to release the material trappings of so-called 'civilisation' and go deep into the forest of magic, to explore our spiritual nature. Had I been kissed by a hind?

Think I'll come to Australia

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted. Tenzin was calling for me to come – the driver was waiting. Jolted back into the present, my moment of contemplation dissipated. It was time to head back to Leh. Laura had decided to stay an extra night so it was just Richard, Tenzin and I travelling in the van. This was my last day in Ladakh. I was flying down to Goa in the morning. Tenzin and I sat holding hands in the back of the van; Richard sat in the front seat chatting happily to the driver. We came across more roadworks and got out of the van waiting for the road to be cleared. Tenzin strolled across to the other side of the road and stood there deep in thought. I was leaning against the side of the van watching him, struggling with thoughts of having to say goodbye, trying to keep myself in the present moment. He bent down picked up a small stone from the side of the road and skipped in down the embankment, then turned and said, 'I think I'll come to Australia.' Stunned, I asked, 'How are you going to get there? Will you be able to do it yourself or will you need my help?' He thought for a moment and replied, 'I think I will need your help. Will you help me?' My egalitarian principles and willingness to help those in need were put on the spot immediately. I'd helped Yonten and Lhundop, and many others. Why shouldn't I help Tenzin? How could I say no? Nonchalantly, I replied, 'OK, I'll help you.' It was settled – Tenzin would come to Australia.

The driver tooted the horn; it was time to get back in the van. Tenzin's face beamed with happiness. He turned to Richard and said 'I'm going to Australia.' Richard responded positively saying, 'That's great, good for you Tenzin.'

Maybe

We were back in Leh by mid-afternoon and decided to visit the Leh palace for a little more sightseeing. A miniature version of the Potala in Lhasa, the palace is one of the major attractions in Ladakh. From the palace you can see the whole layout of Leh. We climbed up through the steep laneways running between the houses, stopping every so often to admire the view. There was a small gumpa, at the entrance of the palace, with a large statue, at least 30 meters high, of the Maitryea Buddha, the Buddha of the future inside. It is claimed that Maitreya is waiting for the time when he will achieve complete enlightenment, descend to earth, and then teach the pure dharma.

A monk sat at the doorway selling entrance tickets. We went in. Tenzin prostrated before the Buddha statue three times, as is the custom in Tibetan monasteries. Looking at him I said, 'That's your Buddha Tenzin, the Buddha of the future.' Intrigued by our presence the monk wandered into the room, and began talking to Tenzin in Tibetan. Then he turned to me and requested that I sing a song. I gathered Tenzin must have been telling him about my time in Dharamasla. I had no idea what to sing for him. I decided to sing *Amazing Grace*, knowing that the tune would at least, embody a sense of dignity and spirit. The monk clapped in delight, we exchanged 'Tashi delek' and then made our way back down to the bazaar.

I needed to return to my guesthouse to begin packing, Richard had to go to the post office, and Tenzin decided he'd better go and check on Josette. I said to Tenzin, 'OK I'll see you later then'. He replied 'Maybe.' Perplexed, I asked 'What do you mean, maybe? I'm leaving tomorrow and if you're coming to Australia we will need to make plans.' This fact, it seemed, had not registered in his mind. I didn't know whether to feel confused or amused.

We arranged to meet him for dinner and then we went our separate ways.

After packing my bags I made my way uptown to wait for Tenzin. Richard was already there. We sat and waited for what felt like a very long time, until eventually we saw Tenzin and Josette walking down the road. She appeared much

happier than she'd been the previous day but wasn't willing to join us for dinner, she was going somewhere else to eat. Richard decided to accompany her, which left Tenzin and I alone for our last meal together.

I Tenzin and I had only been apart for a couple of hours, but in that time it appeared that everything had changed. Sitting across the table from me he seemed sullen, quiet and sad. I asked him 'What's wrong, what's happened?' Sheepishly he told me he'd had a fight with Josette. She'd confessed, she wanted to be his girlfriend, and he'd told her no – he didn't want this. Angry, she decided she wasn't going to pay him the money she'd promised. Now he had no money and nowhere to stay. I was taken aback, but not overly surprised. I told him not to worry – he could stay with me and I'd give him enough money to cover his trip back home to Dharamasla. He dropped his head and quietly said, 'Thank you.' Then he looked up and said, 'I don't think I can come to Australia and that you can be my girlfriend, because I don't think you'll allow me to be free '.

I hadn't seen it coming. Before he'd left to find Josette we were about to make plans for a shared future – now they were disintegrating in front of me. The accusation I wouldn't allow him to be free stung, leaving a sickly feeling in my gut. Freedom was something I relished. I hated to think I could be thought of as someone who might take this away from someone else. I wasn't sure what he meant. Startled I looked at him and said, 'I think you're confusing me with Josette. I'm not her.' He didn't seem convinced. I pushed him to explain what he meant – he started shutting down, claiming he didn't feel well, that his stomach was hurting. I had no idea what Josette had said to him, but it seemed that she'd used everything in her power to sabotage my relationship with Tenzin and, apparently she'd succeeded. He was miserable and inconsolable. The more he pulled away, the more I tried to pull him back. We didn't eat much, choosing to walk instead. The abrupt change in direction was beginning to send my mind into a spin. I stopped trying to win him over and began to feel angry: he'd abandoned me again, placing me on another emotional rollercoaster ride.

We arrived back at the guesthouse and continued talking: I'd foolishly invested hope for the future with Tenzin. On a karmic level I couldn't make sense of anything, believing life balances out, and that after losing my family of origin, I could now create a family of my own. I started to weep. I cried for what had been and what

wouldn't be. He tried to console me saying, 'Well we'll have a family, we'll make a family.' I looked at him in utter disbelief, completely confused by his double messages, unable to respond. I didn't want to engage, deciding the best thing I could do for myself was to get some sleep. I had to get on a plane in the morning.

The next morning Tenzin came with me to the airport; we were both tired and sad; neither of us capable of steering a steady emotional course. I couldn't accept he'd really meant what he'd said, believing instead it was because of Josette's interference. I told him he should still come to Australia. He wanted to, but we both knew this wasn't a real possibility. We stood holding on to each other while the line moved forward. Tenzin's legs began to buckle beneath him with the weight of his emotions. Overwhelmed myself, I held him tighter. I didn't know why, but I loved this man and I couldn't let go. I spotted Lama Zik and Jack sitting in the waiting lounge and took Tenzin over to meet them. Jack gave me a knowing smile and Lama Zik encouraged me to keep in touch.

The line moved closer towards the exit doors. We both tried to be brave, to smile and not cry. I kissed him, saying, 'I'll see you in Australia', let go, and walked through the security doors, then turned around to wave – he hadn't moved, he waved back. I still couldn't leave. I asked the security guard if I could go back. He nodded OK. We held each other one more time, tears began to form in my eyes, then I slid out of his arms, turned and walked away.

I boarded and sat in a window seat. As the nose of the plane pulled up into the sky, all that could be seen out the window, in every direction, was row, after row, after row, of majestic mountains. I flew to Goa, booked myself into a nice guesthouse and spent the week eating, sleeping and thinking about Tenzin. I tried calling him every day but couldn't get through, which only served to make my desire to talk to him stronger. He'd moved into the primary position in my mind. He was all that I thought I wanted: the only thing that would make me happy. Thoughts of him sank into my consciousness like oil sinking into cloth. They were difficult to remove and I made no real effort to do so. I'd become convinced: he was essential to my happiness.

Part two: Attachment

Attachment is the very opposite of love. Love says, 'I want you to be happy.'

Attachment says, 'I want you to make me happy.'

[Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo: *No Excuses*].



Mudra -Healing Hands (Gibb 2006)

Losing my Bearings

Dharmasla, the Tibetan people, and Tenzin had impacted me so deeply it was difficult settling back into my previous life in Australia. I was grateful to be on familiar ground, but couldn't get my bearings. I caught up with friends, reconnected with my students, and went about the business of daily living, but a big part of me was still in India. My body had come home, but my heart hadn't. Apart from the fact that I'd been born here I couldn't see any real reason for staying. There was nothing holding me here: my spirit was somewhere else, wandering around in the Himalayas, searching for Tenzin.

I tried calling but couldn't get through. It was twenty days before I did. He'd stayed on longer in Ladakh, but was now back in Dharmasla. I guessed he'd used the money I'd given him to travel home to take a holiday instead. I was a little disappointed, but this did nothing to curb the happiness I experienced at finally speaking to him again.

It had been easy and natural, we hadn't become distant and laughed and fooled around on the phone. He was ecstatic to hear from me, proclaiming his love and stressing how much he missed me. I hadn't planned on returning to India, but when I heard his voice I was ready to drop everything and go. Having just received my income tax return, the option was there if I wanted to take it. I took a deep breath and then put a very carefully worded proposition to him about the possibility of coming back to India in a couple of months to attend the Kalachakra ceremony and, catch up with him. Asking how he felt about this. Did he have any 'special friends' who were visiting him at that time, because if he did I didn't want to make things difficult? He hesitated for a moment, then laughing, said No, there was no one special coming and he would be happy if I came.

All the stars seemed to be aligning. I had a six week break coming up, the money, and a friend who wanted to travel with me. I was dizzy with my new found freedom. The reality that I no longer had family members to care for, also meant that I was free to travel as I liked, something that hadn't been possible for many years. I threw myself into a whirlpool of activity getting ready for my return trip, trying to keep my heart and mind occupied. Not wanting to feel separated from Tenzin, in an act of devotion I painted a mandala he could use as a business symbol. I also continued to

work on the massage manual, imagining how happy he'd be when I gave him the printed copies.

Occasionally I would hear the voice of reason and question what I was doing, but the memories of emotional confusion and pain weren't strong enough to thwart my desire to see him again. I'd projected an idealised vision of love, and hope for the future, onto the relationship. I knew it was a risk – I wasn't even sure if Tenzin and I would be able to sustain six weeks together. I was asking him for time and attention. I didn't want him to feel suffocated or bound; I just wanted the opportunity to spend more time with him and get to know him better.

The day after I bought my ticket my friend changed her mind and pulled out of the trip, leaving me in a vulnerable position. I'd already paid for a tent at the Kalachakra and my airfare. Pulling out would cost me a lot of money, so instead, I spent vast amounts of mental energy convincing myself that everything would be OK.

With much love and miss

I'd sent gifts to all the students and was delighted when I found a package in my mailbox from Yonten. He was still in Dharamasla. It was winter, not the time to be travelling through the Himalayas. He'd written me a letter, and enclosed a CD of Tibetan music and a durga as gifts. The durga is a necklace the Tibetans wear for protection. It's about two centimetres square, made from hard, see through plastic, with a picture of a Tibetan deity framed inside. It's hung from a chain made of multi-coloured cotton threads that have been woven together. I wore my durga as a symbol of protection for Yonten in the hope that he would make the journey back to Tibet safely.

My Dearest Teacher Margi,

How are you and how are the things going with you? I hope you are happy and healthy as like before and everything going very well with you.

I would like to say my heartfelt thanks a lot for your CD with your own song and words! I'm sure that it is very nice and I love it. I am listening to it whenever I have time. My dear Music teacher, I am sure that you are really kind and generous to everyone. I am always very happy to have met you and become your student. Also I am very happy because you

solved one of my big problems. I mean that I have enough money for my Journey to Tibet. I am really grateful to you, for you help me with lot of money. I never forget your kindness in my whole life. Of course I will tell my parents and family members about how much kindness you showed me and how you helped me. I keep my mother's gift which you gave her. I'll bring it for her and I'm sure that my mum will be very happy to get it from you. Can you understand how happy I'll be when I'll meet my parents and family members!!! I love and miss all of them very much. I'm sorry have to say that we can't take music class at this moment because our teacher Martin is not as kind as you. I went to my music class three times and I was on the time, but he was not there. The other students don't always turn up on time either. So, there is a problem from both sides. I would like to let you know that I'm using my nice guitar which you bought me. I used it at Amdo Jigmey's wedding party and also some friends' birthday party too. I'm really happy with my lovely guitar forever, but I'm sorry to say that I can play only Tibetan! I try English at my home by myself, but without a teacher it is really difficult. I will try to continue. Recently I have no work. I am living with one of my friend and he's paying 900 Rs for our room per month and I buy something to eat for us. Unfortunately maybe I can't go to Kalachakra to listen to H.H. teaching unless I can get a job. These days I take three English classes per day except the holidays, I am happy to take it. I have sent you a CD I made. This CD is about Tibetan song and dance. I watched it and for me this is very nice. This CD is made in Tibet and most of the backgrounds are the beautiful environment of my motherland. So it made me homesick when I watch it. However, I hope you'll like to watch this and it will be very nice for you. Dear, now I am going to end here. I will write to you again. With much love and miss. All the best wishes always for your happy and future life. Take care.

Yours sincerely
Student Yonten.

I'd given him an Australian memento to give to his mother: a small koala which could be attached to the top of a pen. He was so sincere, so wanting to please, that I thought the task of taking something home to his mother might give him added determination in times of faintheartedness. It was sad to hear Martin hadn't kept his promise to keep the music program running. No amount of money could have bought me the love, respect, joy and gratitude that I'd received from my students.

Denial

Tenzin had travelled to the Camel Fair in Pushkar. A few days into his journey, he'd lost his phone. My last conversation with him had been at the hotel where he was staying. I needed to check travel arrangements with him: which airport I should fly to, days, times, locations, hotel bookings and the like, but he was very vague about his movements. All he could tell me was that he was going to Goa sometime, and we would travel to the Kalachakra ceremony at Aramavati from there.

He had no understanding of the western concept of time, no experience with booking flights (let alone connecting ones), and no understanding of the rigours of international travel. His difficulties with the English language, coupled with long periods where I couldn't contact him, were beginning to take its toll. I hadn't heard from him for five weeks and was feeling anxious, disappointed and a little foolish. My friends had watched me go from mooning about to moping around, and had been doing their best to help keep my spirits up. I was trying to reconcile myself to the fact that I was going to India to see him, but might not.

I didn't know why he'd stopped communicating but he had. I began working on plan B: what I'd do in India without him. I still wanted to attend the Kalachakra. Most of the people I'd met in Dharamasla would be there. It would be my third attempt at hearing the Dalai Lama, and it was an experience I didn't want to miss.

Then the day before I was due to fly out an email arrived from Tenzin, apologising for not having been in contact. He'd been at a meditation retreat in a monastery in the desert, and had only just gotten back. He was happy I was coming and would meet me in Goa. I almost cried in relief, but my previous feelings of excitement had been strongly tempered by anxiety and doubt. This trip would make or break the relationship. Although the signs were not great, I desperately wanted to

believe this was real, not just a passing fantasy. I hoped six weeks in India would give me enough time to resolve my feelings, one way or the other.

I'll Never Do It Again

I boarded the flight to Mumbai with mixed emotions; not knowing whether I would return hopeful, free, or shattered. This would be my third journey to India, a country that hadn't been on my wish list to begin with. INDIA, is an acronym for, **I'll Never Do It Again**. If only it was that easy: once India gets a hold of your spirit she doesn't let go readily. I arrived sleep-deprived, and spent my time in Mumbai taking advantage of the air conditioning and catching up on sleep. My plane left for Goa the following afternoon. When I got to the airport I found out my flight had been delayed by four hours. I'd told Tenzin to catch a cab to the airport in Goa to meet me. Knowing he had little, if any money, I told him I'd pay for the taxi when I arrived. I had no way of telling him the plane had been delayed and hoped he would wait. I spent an incredibly uncomfortable, impatient, irritated and anxious four hours waiting for my flight.

By the time the plane landed at Dabolim airport it was late afternoon. I collected my luggage and went to look for Tenzin. He wasn't there. I found a place to sit and wait and hoped for the best. Taxis came and went, but no Tenzin. I didn't know what to do; I hadn't anticipated needing another plan. I couldn't call him and didn't know where he was staying. So I continued to wait. Five hours had passed from the time we'd originally arranged to meet. Eventually I gave up and decided to catch a taxi to Armabol. I threw my luggage into the back of the cab, climbed into the back seat, and told the driver where I wanted to go. We were just pulling out of the car park when I saw Tenzin walking along a side road towards the airport. Excited and relieved I told the cab driver to stop, wound down the window, and called out to him. He looked up, but couldn't see where the call had come from. I opened the door and jumped out of the taxi calling his name again. This time he saw me, but there were no sparks. His expression was limp: he looked tired, haggard, skinny, sad and lost. His skin had turned a dark brown from the sun and his hair hung lifeless on his shoulders. I walked towards him smiling, and said, 'I'm so sorry, the plane was delayed and I thought you weren't here.' We embraced each other and then he asked, 'Where were you going?' I told him I was going to Armabol to look for him,

and said, 'Come on, I've got a taxi.' But he replied 'No you can't, I already have a taxi.' Unable to pay the fare he'd been sitting waiting with the taxi driver in the hot sun all afternoon; he'd had enough and I didn't blame him. Apologising to my driver I collected my gear and went with Tenzin down the side road to the taxi he'd been sitting in the whole time I'd been waiting.

Night was beginning to descend and it wasn't long before we were driving in the dark. Tenzin held my hand as we drove through small villages decorated with neon lights, on our way to Armabol. The Portuguese introduced Christianity to Goa in the 18th century. It was Christmas Eve and people were gearing up to celebrate. I was concerned by Tenzin's appearance, asking him what had happened. He said he almost didn't make it to Goa. He'd been travelling with a European guy, acting as a friend and guide, and things had turned sour, leaving Tenzin in a precarious position. Through a stroke of good fortune, someone had a train ticket to Goa they couldn't use and had given it to him. In Tenzin's version of the story he'd done nothing wrong – he'd done everything asked of him by his travel companion. Reflecting on what had taken place in Ladakh; I wondered if he was as innocent as he thought he was. In his mind he was always the blameless victim. Unable to resist the impulse I succumbed to the temptation to rescue him and jumped in, saying 'You don't have to worry anymore. I've got money, everything will be OK.'

The first time I'd stayed at Goa I'd stayed at Calungute and didn't see what all the fuss was about. There hadn't been much happening, no buzz in the air, but as the cab drove through the main section of Armabol, I realised I'd been there at low season, and a long way from the action. Armabol was pumping. The cosmic circus was definitely in town. Music rang out from the speakers of multiple outdoor cafés and shops, all decorated with colourful neon lights. The smell of incense filled the air, palm trees graced the road swaying from a gentle wind. The air was warm, the breeze pleasant, and the sound of waves could be heard rolling onto the beach. The atmosphere was electric, people buzzed about everywhere. Thoughts of drinking sweet Masala chai, eating banana pancakes, fresh seafood curries, mangoes and Lassi ran through my mind. I began to feel excited: I was in India again.

'Twas the night before Christmas

I'd just assumed that I would be staying with Tenzin, but to my surprise he asked me where I was going to stay. 'Did I want to get a room, or stay with him? He was sleeping in a room occupied by one of his Tibetan friends, but thought it would be OK for me to sleep there. Forgetting that he was a refugee, I'd just assumed he would have booked a hut or a hotel. I wanted to stay with him but wasn't so sure about imposing on his friend.

The problem was it was Christmas Eve and everything had been booked out – the only choice I had was to stay with Tenzin. He led me down a narrow path between a few dilapidated looking houses and stopped at a tiny room connected to a stable. I had no idea where we were, but it definitely wasn't tourist accommodation. He inserted a key in the lock and opened the door, then lit a small gas lamp. I stared into the dimly lit room. There was no kitchen, no bathroom, no bedroom, just a thin single foam mattress on the floor, a pile of blankets, and bags of jewellery and trinkets Tenzin's friend sold at his roadside stall. I was uncomfortable, primarily because I felt like I was intruding, but Tenzin wasn't concerned. His friend was away and wouldn't be back until the following day.

We dropped my backpack off and then headed down to the beach and went for a skinny dip. Until this trip, Tenzin had never seen the ocean. He couldn't swim – swimming wasn't a practice in Tibet – I was amazed he was prepared to go in the ocean, but he loved it. He told me when he'd first arrived and seen the majesty of the ocean he'd wept. He'd never seen so much water before, never seen the beauty of the white horses cresting the waves, never felt the magnanimous power of the ocean. Overwhelmed he'd sat on the beach awestruck for hours.

We stayed close to the shore, jumping in and out of the waves, beginning to find our way towards intimacy again. Then we dressed and made our way up to a beachside café for coffee. A group of Israelis, in party mode, asked us to join them. The air around them was thick with the smell of charas. I wasn't up for a big night, but for Tenzin the party was just beginning. He began smoking the charas, effectively ending our first night together. He'd entered another world: I sat on the outside.

It was after midnight before we moved and made our way back to the room. On the way we stopped at a small outdoor restaurant, flanked by rows of beach huts

on each side. We were visiting one of Tenzin's friends, a young woman from Spain, who was leaving Armabol the next day. She was checking out which meant her hut would become available. She said she'd inform the manger to keep it for us. We thanked her and decided to go there the following morning, before she checked out, to secure accommodation. Until then it was a night on the floor.

Once back inside the room I couldn't wait to show Tenzin the printed massage manuals. Excited I pulled them from my backpack, presenting them to him with pride and enthusiasm. He took them, and softly said, 'Thank you', but remained largely unresponsive. This hadn't been the reaction I'd been anticipating. I'd worked hard to invest in his future, but he'd lost the energy of his previous dreams and aspirations, and become disconnected.

Tired I wanted to lie down. Tenzin insisted that I sleep on the mattress and he would sleep on the floor. I said, 'No we could share'. But uninterested in sleeping, he replied it was Christmas Eve and he was going to a party. Was I coming? I thought maybe he's more stoned than I thought, it's 2 am, how can he be going to a party now? He must have the time wrong? I encouraged him to stay and get some sleep. But his mind was made up; he was going to party. He left with the key, telling me to keep the door locked from the inside. That evening I spent the night alone, in the dark, on the floor, with no water to drink, and nowhere to go to the toilet. Feeling uncomfortably close to the houses next to me I sneaked outside, in the dark, when I needed to empty my bladder.

Come sunrise, the sounds of sows and pigs, grunting and squealing, surrounded the room, along with the revolting sound of the Indian morning salute, as their owner emptied the phlegm from his lungs. I needed to go to the toilet again, but there was nowhere private outside. I would have to wait. I was sleep-deprived, disoriented, and very thirsty. I heard the man go into the house so braved the huge sows and found a place to squat. Then I went back inside to wait. Hours passed. Tenzin still hadn't returned. I was angry with him now. How dare he leave me like this? I didn't know where I was, and because I didn't have a key, I couldn't leave the room. I'd just spent Christmas Eve sleeping in the stable!

Lorenz

Finally, unable to handle it any longer, I left and went searching for a drink. I hadn't been gone any longer than half an hour, but in that time the room's occupant had returned. He was horrified to find his room, with all his possessions in it, had been left unlocked, and that nobody was there. I did my best to explain. He spoke very little English and was understandably confused and upset. I apologised, thanked him for letting me stay, grabbed my backpack and headed off towards the beach huts we'd visited the night before.

The beach huts were built around a large quadrangle hemmed in by palm trees. There was an outdoor restaurant at one end and a path leading onto the beach on the other. The young Spanish woman had already left but had asked the owner to keep the hut for her friend, Tenzin. As much as I tried to persuade him that Tenzin was my friend, he wasn't prepared to let me have the hut – an act I found strange in a country where the dollar frequently comes before honour. Irrate, I grabbed my towel out of my backpack and headed down to the beach to sit and wait for a few hours.

By now it was midday. I made my way from the beach to the outdoor restaurant, wanting nothing more than to convince the owner to give me the key to the hut. But before I could plead my case, I was swept up into the presence of an incredibly good looking young man from Switzerland who introduced himself as Lorenz. He was tall, strong and bronzed, with piercing blue eyes, a trimmed brown beard and long blonde curly locks, held in place by a bright orange bandanna. It was Christmas day. I'd spent Christmas Eve in the stable and now, standing before me, was a dope smoking replicate of the image of Jesus. Towering over me, a sarong tied around his hips, his chest bare, smoking charas from a chillum pipe and calling out 'Bahia come' to the Indian boy in the restaurant, he ordered some cool drinks. Trailing behind him was Tenzin; Lorenz's new found friend.

Lorenz already had a hut in the quadrangle. He'd been there a week after travelling down from Kashmir with his friend, on the back of a massive Enfield motorbike they'd named Felix. He was incredibly charismatic, talkative and mad: high on life, high on charas and high on Jesus.

While I had spent the night, strung out, tired, and distressed, sleeping on the floor surrounded by sows, Tenzin had sat on the beach meditating the whole night. Fascinated, Lorenz had befriended him. They were now inseparable.

Rejection

Lorenz's energy was welcome warmth to with the icy wind that was blowing between Tenzin and me. We barely spoke. Glaring at him, I asked him to tell the owner to give me the key to hut, hauled my luggage inside and shut the door. I spent the afternoon sleeping on the beach; Tenzin kept his distance.

I couldn't comprehend what was happening. He'd told me he wanted to see me and to come, yet within twenty four hours we'd become strangers and enemies. Both of us were tired, and in unfamiliar territory, but somehow we had to find some middle ground, there was a long stretch of time ahead of us. Tenzin came to the hut around dinner time asking if I'd like to go and eat. I accepted and we made our way up the hill to a large outdoor restaurant, with live music and a capacity crowd. Tenzin's Tibetan heritage created a myth of spiritual knowing in Goa; instantly, stoned crazed travellers, cleared a path for him to take a seat. I felt as if I was in a chapter of the *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, written by Tom Wolfe at the height of the LSD phase in the 60s. In Armabol, the 60s found its Never-never land. Attracted by the hippie atmosphere, for decades travellers have been drifting to this blissed-out corner of Goa, setting up camp and, in some cases, never leaving again. Everyone around me was out of it, caught up in a time warp, and oblivious to any other reality. A woman with long beaded hair, wearing a glittering sarong, who had to be nearing her 60s, stumbled on to the small stage. She passed a huge joint to one of the musicians, and then sat down and blissfully beginning to beat a hand drum in a rhythm totally unrelated to the music. Swaying with the music, Tenzin thought they were very good. I, on the other hand, was appalled. Maybe I'd just spent too much time in Melbourne's inner suburban music scene and was jaded. But no matter what I angle I took, I couldn't find anything in the music to appreciate: to my ears, it sounded like self indulgent, stoned schmaltz.

We waited a long time for our food to arrive, saying very little to each other. Tenzin looked different from how I'd remembered him. He appeared less naive, not as soft somehow. Now he had a hard edge and an air of arrogance about him.

Feeling uncomfortable, I got up to leave as soon as we'd eaten. Tenzin wanted to stay, and put the bite on me for money for cigarettes. I was shocked. I'd never seen this part of him before. There were no traces of his former life as a monk in this moment. I handed him some money and walked away. I didn't want to experience any more of the present; I wanted the oblivion of sleep.

I awoke the following morning feeling remarkably better. Life seems far less complicated when you're not tired; for the first time in over a week I'd slept well. I made my way down to the ocean for a swim and spent a lazy morning in the sun. When I came back to the hut Tenzin's backpack was sitting at the door. I guessed he'd spent the night sleeping on the beach or in his friend's room. It appeared Tenzin had also had a good sleep; he too was travelling a lot easier. He was sitting with Lorenz drinking chai, both of them in good spirits. Lorenz called out for me to join them, and then headed off to swim in the ocean. Tenzin and I made our way inside the hut to organise the space. We made love in a half-hearted manner, and then lay back on the bed relaxing and listening to the ocean. Lorenz returned, bounced into the room, climbed up on the bed and immediately offered Tenzin a joint. I left them to it and went to take a shower and dress for the evening.

Tenzin and I were both feeling more relaxed and beginning to find our old rhythm. But in my mind I kept hearing what he'd said to me in Ladakh: 'I don't think you can be my girlfriend, because I don't think you can let me be free.' It had wedged like a thorn in my psyche. Now that Josette wasn't around I had to ask if he'd meant it – if it was something she'd led him to believe, or a decision he'd come to himself? I sat in the shade of the restaurant waiting while Tenzin showered. Refreshed he joined me for coffee. We made small talk and then I asked him, 'Tenzin did you mean what you said to me in Ladakh?' He looked at me, bewildered, and asked, 'what, what do you mean?' Nervously I replied, 'That you didn't think I could be your girlfriend because you didn't think I would let you be free.' Looking at me nonchalantly, he replied, 'Yes I think so.'

I had my answer, but I didn't feel any less confused or satisfied. There were too many double messages to unravel and resolve. I'd set myself up. I felt like a wounded puppy kicked by its master. I was way too sensitive to rejection – I didn't handle it well. What he'd said and what I'd heard were different things. His words stung, triggering a chain of emotions over which I had no control. My heart was

beating rapidly. A maelstrom of thoughts spun inside my head, my dreams rose and fell crashing into each other. I felt my strength leave me as I regressed emotionally, reverting back to a vulnerable child. All this was happening deep inside me, yet on the surface I remained unmoved. Tenzin got up to leave saying, 'Are you ready? I need to drop into my friend's room and collect something before we eat.' Numb, I followed him up the hill, silently beginning to bleed inside as I lost my capacity for reason.

We went to eat. Tenzin remained the same, he was friendly now, open and talkative; I was just going through the motions. He'd pierced an old wound, a wound that ran deep, that had never healed; a wound he'd never known. After we had eaten we went and sat on the beach listening to the ocean. I was sinking deeper and deeper inside my pain and could barely talk. Years of compounded grief and loss were beginning to thaw inside me. His words had perforated my denial. Unable to accept the present I looked to the past. Like a little girl I wanted my mother and father, but they were gone; I wanted my sisters but they were gone; I wanted my youth but it was gone. Wave after wave of emotion crashed up against me, like the waves crashing on to the sand. I couldn't outrun the pain. I couldn't sit in it either. I didn't want to feel this way anymore. I watched him roll a joint, and then I turned in on myself. I became the enemy. I was the cause of my pain. It was my fault: I was a fool and a dreamer. I wanted out, just one moment of relief. In the ultimate tantrum, I gave up and sank into the quicksand of self pity. I got a bad case of the *Fuck it's* and *What's the use?* I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't stay present to life on life's terms.

Powerless

I asked him to pass the joint, wondering if he'd remember my request in Ladakh to say No, but he didn't. He handed it to me without a thought. I watched myself take it, hold it to my mouth and then draw the thick dark charas smoke into my lungs. It wasn't by default this time: I was attempting to cauterise the wound. The drug entered my system and the world changed immediately. I looked at the moon rising over the ocean and saw beams of light splintering off it in all directions, distilling the darkness, like the sun. Time stood still. People on the beach appeared like ghosts, lost, wandering in limbo, searching for something in the sand. In my mind an

illuminated image of the Dalai Lama, sitting in front of the Tibetan flag, appeared on the horizon, vibrating like a flashing neon sign. I thought 'Wow, this is going to be powerful,' then was interrupted by Tenzin depositing a gift of a small ball of charas in my hand. I looked at it dumbfounded, thinking, 'What do I do with that?' But the capacity to make sane choices had been taken. There was only one thing I could do now: smoke it.

Addiction

The Buddhists describe addiction as attachment gone mad. I was pretty sure I'd gone mad. I hadn't had any alcohol or mood altering substances for over 22 years, so what I was doing now was way off course, symptomatic of a collapse in my inner world and values. I knew smoking charas was no big deal – not in the greater scheme of things. It was only symptomatic of the problem. The problem was how I felt inside myself. Having exhausted my inner resources, I'd reached for something outside myself to do the job for me. I left Tenzin on the beach and drifted back to the hut.

In the morning I awoke resolved to the futility of my current reality. I knew I didn't have the strength to change it, I didn't have the strength to leave it, and I didn't have the strength to stay in it. Like those around me, I gave my energy to seeking an escape. I went to an outdoor café that looked out over the cliffs to the beach for breakfast, and sat and smoked. My shoulders hadn't felt this relaxed for a long time. This was a good thing, I thought. I must have dropped a weight I'd been carrying, but no matter how many joints I smoked, the rush from the first one never came back. Instead I felt a dull, low lying, drifting feeling, a slight detachment.

The novelty of being stoned, wore off pretty quickly. But that didn't free me from the cycle of addiction: the wheel was in spin. If picking up a joint was a subconscious act to try to connect with Tenzin, it didn't work. He spent most of his time with Lorenz wandering the back beaches, smoking chillums, beating hand drums and dancing at the Goa rave parties. The parties started at the oddest of hours, sometimes 4 or 6 am, and could go for up to 24 hours.

Started by the hippies in the 1960s, Goa's 'happening beach party culture', had become almost compulsory: no excuse was needed for tourists and locals to party. Sound systems pumping out Goa Trance music were set up on back beaches

away from the public eye. Youth from all over the globe smoked charas, dropped ecstasy and danced till they dropped, only to wake up and start all over again. Rumour had it the parties were hosted by the Russian Mafia – that they were the ones responsible for bringing the ecstasy and other party drugs onto the scene. I wasn't tempted to join them. Instead I spent my time sitting quietly under the palm trees painting, playing guitar on the beach, and drinking strong coffee to the pulsating beat of reggae. My inner hippie had found a home, but the rest of me felt like a fish out of water.

Fuelled by despair and resentment, I continued to sacrifice myself to the madness of smoking charas. Desperate to be accepted, the self-destructive impulse that had ruled my adolescence was once again in charge. I'd been catapulted back to a life of living a lie. It was the only constant companion I had. The main difference between me and others under the same spell was I felt guilty, ashamed and powerless.

I'd become the victim and wanted justice; I wanted someone to hear me, understand and acknowledge the deception. I wanted Tenzin to admit he'd lied, that he had told me to come, said he loved me, and then rejected and abandoned me. Not surprisingly, my cries fell on deaf ears. In the midst of one of our fights Tenzin drove the knife in even deeper, snarling at me, 'Why did you come, why did you come back?' We were trapped in the blame game, swinging between victim and persecutor. Lorenz played the role of rescuer.

Lorenz was always happy, singing God's praises, talking incessantly, rallying the troops, lording over the Indian cafe workers like they were his servants and, was frequently in the company of a beautiful young woman. But his main obsession was with Tenzin. He adored him. They were always together, revelling in their new found friendship, hanging out, smoking chillums, shooting the breeze and philosophising. Lorenz didn't care if I'd travelled from Australia specifically to spend time with Tenzin, at Tenzin's request – Tenzin was his friend now. Tenzin's former life as a monk meant he could do no wrong. His problem, Lorenz decided, was 'he had too many women and needed to learn to finish one relationship before he started another.' I was smouldering with resentment, blaming Tenzin for how I felt. In turn he blamed me for his own feeling. Neither of us was capable of breaking the chain. On

rare occasions Tenzin and I would spend time together, practising yoga, meditating, swimming or sharing a meal.

The days blurred together in a haze of smoke and repetition. Living stoned was natural for Lorenz. He'd lived that way for years and had no desire to change it, or reason to consider doing so. He appeared happy. His love for God was an umbrella under which I took shelter, his affection a balm to the shame of rejection. It may have been over twenty years since I'd last visited the land of the lost, but nothing there had changed.

The Bodhi Tree

One day Tenzin asked if I wanted to go with him to see the Bodhi tree. He was going deep into the jungle to visit a group of people who lived there under the Bodhi tree. I was curious enough to answer Yes. Bodhi is most commonly translated into English as 'enlightenment'. The Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree when he obtained enlightenment. In Buddhism, Bodhi means the 'unique consciousness of a fully liberated being', sometimes described as 'complete and perfect sanity', or, 'awareness of the true nature of the universe'. There are many Bodhi trees in India, Nepal and even Sri Lanka, said to have been grown from the seeds of the original tree.

We set off late. Leaving the main beaches we walked along a thin path running around the ridge of the ocean cliffs until we came to one of the back beaches. Then we followed an obscure path that led into the jungle. Walking deeper into the dense undergrowth, we passed groups of jungle dwellers, living in trees and caves. We'd entered the underground. Some of the people knew Tenzin, and called out to him, claiming him as a part of their strange new world, a world disconnected from the machinations of capitalism and the West. Here they lived with only the bare necessities, wild and free. Disillusioned and disenfranchised westerners, who wanted no part of a consumerist society, they created their own world tucked away in nature's womb.

It took us roughly two hours to reach the site of the Bodhi tree; a big and powerful tree; maybe 100 years old. The top of the tree formed a wide canopy across the roof of the jungle, its roots – long thick tubal creepers – spread out for metres across the earth below. We climbed up a steep slippery rise through the thick

undergrowth to reach the tree. A small tribe of travellers had made their home under this particular Bodhi tree. A large bell tied to a rope, hung from a branch at the entrance. It was customary to ring the bell when entering the space, signalling acknowledgement of the sacredness of the place. We rang the bell. One of the men welcomed us. He placed his hands into prayer position, uttering 'Om namah Shivaya', and then immediately put a chillum into Tenzin's cupped hands.

The ground around the tree had been cleared, a large water tank erected, and a small kitchen created to house and cook food. A family from Germany were the primary occupants. Two women and a man in their mid thirties, a few younger men, and a number of small children, all called this home. Except for the people who visited the tree, they had no contact with the outside world and didn't want any. The women wore sarongs or tie dyed silk petticoats, beads and bindis on their third eye. The men and the children were bare from the waist up, their hair long, matted or dreadlocked. The women registered our presence, motioning for us to sit on one side of a smouldering fire pit, and began heating water for tea.

I was astonished by their ingenuity: their ability to create a separate reality in which they lived and survived. Having let their visas expire they were living there illegally. They had willingly and without reservation, renounced their western heritage to live a life rooted in their strange adaptation of feral culture and Hinduism. They lived under the Bodhi tree smoking chillums and worshipping Shiva, a major Hindu deity commonly known as the destroyer or transformer, the one with great power.

Smoking charas was acknowledged as a form of religious practice and cleansing when worshipping Shiva. After smoking the chillum they would yell, 'Barn Barn Bhole.' (Praise be to the guileless god). We sat there for hours smoking chillums, the men shouting 'Barn Barn Bhole' after finishing each pipe. The women smoked as intensively as the men, their children played in the dirt around them. I tried to keep up with the ritual, but was soon exhausted and lay down in the darkness next to the fire. If complete and perfect sanity was one of the attributes ascribed to gaining enlightenment while sitting under the Bodhi tree, I didn't see any evidence of it here. I certainly wasn't feeling any more cleansed or enlightened. I was feeling more and more frightened, angry and disgusted.

The men smoked on throughout the night. The sound of 'Barn Barn Bhole' impacted my mind, like detonators exploding in a minefield. Through sheer

exhaustion I fell asleep, waking up a few hours later to find the camp silent. I saw Tenzin illuminated by candlelight, sitting in lotus position, meditating in one of the small alcoves in the roots of the Bodhi tree. My nervous system was totally overloaded. I wanted out of there. I didn't want to stay one more second. There was nothing in this experience I could reconcile with any aspect of a spiritual life: maybe it worked for them, but definitely not for me.

Stiff, I pulled myself up from the hard ground, telling Tenzin I was leaving – the implication being he was leaving too, because I couldn't find my way back in the dark without him – even though I was distressed enough to try. He made his way out from under the roots of the Bodhi tree. Holding the candle for light, he walked in front of me as we made our way down the slippery embankment towards the trail. I stumbled and fell a few times, but I didn't care, all I wanted was to be out of there. The sun began to rise as we started to walk out of the jungle towards the back beach. My sandal caught in a muddy bog and broke. Frustrated, I took the shoe off and threw it away in disgust, growled at Tenzin and said, 'Don't you ever take me anywhere like that again'. Then I stormed off and left him. He didn't follow. Grateful, I made my way back to the beach huts.

Our daily bread

I awoke mid-afternoon. Tenzin and Lorenz were sitting outside the hut, drinking tea, and as always, smoking charas. There was nowhere I could go to escape the madness: I'd fallen down the rabbit hole and landed at the Mad Hatter's tea party. Everywhere I turned there was a hookah-smoking caterpillar, twisting reality with words.

I couldn't wait to leave Goa. I'd spent enough time in Wonderland; I went and bought a ticket for the bus to Amravati; the site of the Kalachakra ceremony. It was leaving the following morning. Tenzin had been oscillating between staying and going, for days. It would be difficult to find my way there without him: Amravati was well off the beaten track. Lorenz decided he wanted to go, so Tenzin agreed to go as well. The decision made, they went off to purchase bus tickets, and then returned to begin packing their gear.

Lorenz started to dig in the sand behind his hut. Intrigued I watched him. He reached down and pulled a massive block of charas wrapped in plastic, out of the

hole and handed it to Tenzin, who then proceeded to bury it deep down inside his backpack. I was dumbfounded. I'd never seen so much hashish in my life. I couldn't comprehend how a Tibetan refugee, who'd spent years living as a monk, ended up with a block of hash the size of a loaf of bread, hidden in his back pack! Where did he get it and where did he get the money to buy it? I began to see the bond that kept Tenzin and Lorenz travelling together, and wished I hadn't.

The following morning Lorenz met us at a café for breakfast with a new request. He'd met a girl who wanted to come too: 'Would I mind?' I replied, 'Of course I wouldn't mind; why would I?' Chicero, a beautiful young Japanese princess, besotted by Lorenz, was going to join us. She was tall and slim, with long straight dark hair that fell below her waist, perfect white skin and a gentle demure presence. She appeared so delicate that I was amazed she was willing to travel alone, with people she didn't know, to an unknown location, but I was glad she was coming. Her presence separated Tenzin and Lorenz by a degree, breaking the triangle, evening out the group dynamics a little.

It was more than a full day's travel to Amravati. We boarded the bus and coupled up. Lorenz was riding high with his latest trophy, their playfulness contrasting the rigidity between Tenzin and I, which slowly eased, until Tenzin lay sleeping with his head on my lap.

Now that we were away from Goa, smoking charas was no longer a common practice. It had been so out in the open in Armabol, I'd forgotten it was illegal. We smoked our way across Andhra Pradesh, sometimes sitting up the front of the bus with the driver, passing joints back and forth. We were on a school excursion without the teacher, and the class had run riot. My identity, along with my integrity, was dissolving in a haze of smoke.

Amravati

Amravati isn't a tourist destination. It's situated inland on the east coast of India and lies on the bank of the Krishna River. It holds a special significance as an Indian holy town for the Tibetan Buddhists because of the remains of a 2000 year old Buddhist stupa, where, it is believed, the historic Buddha Shakyamuni gave the Kalachakra initiations. For this reason it had been chosen as the site where the Dalai Lama would conduct the current Kalachakra initiation.

Amravati itself is just a rural village with a predominantly Hindu population of farmers and shopkeepers, but with the advent of the Kalachakra being held there, it had transformed into a temporary bustling city. We arrived at night. Amravati was totally chaotic; cars, buses and people jammed the road. Thousands of pilgrims had travelled to be there. Buddhists from Tibet, Ladakh, Zaskar, Spiti, Dharamasla, Mussorie, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, Australia and Japan had made the journey. High lamas, monks, nuns, political dignitaries and world personalities had come for the spiritual empowerment. Shops and stalls had opened up to sell food, vegetables and fruit, along with Tibetan and local, arts and crafts. The State government had attempted to provide water, electricity and sanitation to meet the needs of between 60,000 and 100,000 people for two weeks.

Tent villages, from deluxe to simple, offered at a corresponding range of prices had been erected to house visitors. Hoping that it came with a degree of comfort, I'd booked a tent in the middle price range. The challenge was locating it.

A worker from the organising committee led us through a maze of people and tents and deposited us in a large four-sided tent, with a separate compartment at the entrance, a large general living area, and a single camp bed. This wasn't what I'd paid for. I'd booked a tent with two separate compartments and a couple of camp beds. Unimpressed, I tried to explain this to the worker, who left saying he would enquire into the matter.

With Lorenz preoccupied with Chicero, Tenzin had been turning more of his attention to me. I'd been under the delusion it was Josette who'd separated us in Ladakh. Then I'd thought it was the charas, Goa, and Lorenz, that had created a rift between us, and that once we were back in the midst of the Tibetan community, more of his former self would shine through. I was wrong. Worn out from the trip, dishevelled, and disoriented from the charas, I sat on the ground watching as Lorenz and Tenzin rolled up and smoked yet another joint.

Gaden Rapsal

I knew we were in the wrong tent, apart from one camp bed that Lorenz and Chicero were now lying on; there was nothing but the ground to sleep on. I didn't want to go about the business of unpacking my gear I had no idea what to do next, so just sat.

I heard the flap of the tent being drawn back and a couple of monks walked into the tent. I looked up, surprised and puzzled to see the smiling face of Gaden Rapsal, the monk I'd taught for two weeks in Dharamasla. I'd kept in touch with him via email, sending him money for his studies when I was able, but hadn't anticipated seeing him at the Kalachakra. I sat there in utter disbelief, trying to comprehend how in the midst of all the chaos he'd found his way to my tent: it was dark, there were tens of thousands of people wandering around, and as far as I knew, he didn't know I was going to be there. And yet within an hour of my arrival here he was sitting on the ground in front of me.

I couldn't work out why he was there, or if he had been looking for me. He didn't know Tenzin, so he couldn't have been looking for him. What was disconcerting for me was that, in the state I was in, I wasn't happy to see him. Instead, I was uncomfortable and embarrassed. I raised my hands in front of my chest to prayer position and said 'Tashi delek'. He smiled, returned the greeting, and began talking to Tenzin in Tibetan.

Gaden sat in the tent for some time, occasionally talking, but generally just observing. I wondered if he noticed the shift in my inner world. What did he think of me? I didn't feel worthy of being in his presence. This wasn't as I'd planned. I was there to attend a ceremony led by his revered spiritual teacher and had lost my ability to connect. I sat riddled with guilt and shame, longing for invisibility. Tenzin and Lorenz passed the joint between them, occasionally offering it to me, but I declined. Thinking it was disrespectful and sacrilegious, I was mortified they were smoking in front of the monks. Not that the monks seemed offended or shocked in any way. Gaden was there for what felt like about an hour, and then with no explanation, as mysteriously as he had arrived, he left.

The worker from the organising committee arrived back and announced that, 'Yes we were in the wrong tent, but we would have to wait as someone else had been staying in the tent I'd booked, and they couldn't find them.' We waited another couple of hours before we moved into the new tent. It was a little better, with a private compartment at each end, another single camp bed, two long narrow fold-up tables, a large rug covering the ground in the main section and walls covered with bright cotton Indian bed sheets. Lorenz and Chicero took the private compartment at one end of the tent. I went to the other. Tenzin slept on a small mattress in the main

section. Feeling dejected, I lay down on my blankets, pondering my situation; with no idea how I was going to get out of this one.

Tent City

The following day we set about making the tent like home. Now I was glad Tenzin and Lorenz had decided to come, because when it came to the practicalities, they were all over it. They acquired a small gas burner for cooking, carried a couple of 30 litre water bottles inside and turned the back end of the tent into a kitchen area. Lorenz found a camp bed in another tent and dragged it into ours –turning his end of the tent into a master bedroom with a double bed, effectively turning mine into the maid's corner behind the kitchen at the back. He placed his iPod speakers on one end of the bench and quickly filled the tent with trance music. Chicero sat rolling a joint while Tenzin decorated the tent with peacock feathers, white khata and Tibetan prayer flags. I went to buy bowls and a few basic essentials.

In the light of day the enormity of the makeshift city began to sink in. Rows, and rows, and rows of tents, erected in straight lines, ran from the road down through cleared fields for almost a half a kilometer. At the back of the fields 3,000 toilets and shower blocks had been erected. Tibetan stalls and restaurants had been set up along the side of the road, which were now crowded with thousands of people. There was a quick and constant trade in food, drinks, mattresses, straw mats and cushions.

The sun was fierce and hot, the air dry and dusty. People wore their scarves tied as masks across their mouth to filter out the dust. Announcements in Tibetan and Urdu blared constantly from a public address system. Indian police and officials wove their motorbikes through the throng of people. Thai monks in soft orange robes wandered through the crowd with their begging bowls. Temples for Hanuman and Sai Baba stood on the banks of River Krishna. Behind this there was a 27 metre high statue of Lord Buddha in Dhyana Mudra, under construction. Posters calling to free the Panchen Lama were pasted on walls.

I recognised a number of faces amongst the crowd from Dharamasla. Some of the women beggars, suffering with leprosy, sat at the side of the road. They'd caught the bus from Dharamasla to work at the Kalachakra; I'd never thought about begging being a transitory or seasonal occupation.

The Kalachakra empowerment itself was being held on a number of fields that bordered the River Krishna. A large tent serving as a temple, housed the sand mandala, and practice thrones. It had taken 20 tailors, working long hours, more than 3 months, to complete it on time. Seating areas in the temple pavilion had been divided into stalls, for pilgrims, monks and dignitaries, a special section had been sectioned off for western guests.

I found a small shop, bought a few bowls and other things, and then sat drinking chai, people watching. I spotted Toby amongst the crowds of people. Happy to see someone I knew from outside of my own circle I ran over to greet him. He was mildly receptive. We`d swapped roles: he was sober and focussed, and I was the one adrift. We exchanged pleasantries and continued on our separate ways.

The Kalachakra

A Kalachakra empowerment is a highly complex meditative ritual that only the most highly trained monks and scholars can follow, but just being present at an empowerment is believed to plant seeds for eventual rebirth in the pure land of Shambhala. Simply participating in the event is said to create an atmosphere that reduces tension and violence in the world. Tibetan Buddhists try to attend a Kalachakra empowerment at least once in their lives. Receiving blessings depends on one's devotion and dedication.

The Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) ceremony revolves around the concept of time and cycles. From the cycles of the planets, to the cycles of our breath, and the practice of controlling subtle energies within one's body on the path to enlightenment. The Kalachakra deity represents omniscience; everything is under the influence of time: he is time and therefore knows all. Similarly, the Wheel has no beginning and no end.

When the Dalai Lama gives the Kalachakra empowerment, it`s based on a sand mandala, made by the monks of Namgyal Monastery. The empowerment involves leading the disciples into the mandala, the abode of a meditational deity. Through following the instructions given during the empowerment, the disciple visualises the mandala in the form of a celestial mansion: Kalachakra's palace. This consists of three mandalas, the Body, Speech and Mind mandalas. Of these, the

Body mandala is the largest and situated on the ground level. Within it, elevated on a platform, is the Speech mandala, within which, elevated again, is the Mind mandala.

The Mind mandala includes two further elevations: the Exalted Wisdom mandala and the Great Bliss mandala. The colours depicting them are representative of the elements. The main Deity Kalachakra, with his consort, resides on a green lotus in the centre of the Great Bliss mandala.

At the end of the empowerment the public are allowed to view the mandala. This is considered to lay positive imprints in the mind and generate a feeling of peace. Then when the proceedings are over, the mandala is destroyed and the sand poured into a body of water as an offering to the subterranean serpentine spirits. The initiation was beyond my level of comprehension, but I was looking forward to attending the teachings and, viewing the finished mandala.

Refugee camp

The heat was unbearably oppressive. Inside the tent it was suffocating. Outside the tent it was crowded, dusty, noisy and busy. A constant barrage of announcements came over the public address system, inescapable, no matter where you were. I'd only been in Amravati for a day or two before I started to experience intense stomach pain and diarrhoea. The toilet blocks were a long way away from our tent. To go to the toilet, or take a shower, meant walking down between long lines of tents in all your morning glory, and then crossing a small field to where the amenities were. Requiring immediate access to the toilet was a tense situation, there was always a queue. I wasn't the only one experiencing diarrhoea: the overloaded system broke down frequently and within days the toilets were blocked and putrid. Buckets of lime were placed at the entrance of the toilet for sanitisation, but this was far from satisfactory. Even though 3,000 toilets had been built, this wasn't enough to meet the needs of the 100,000 people who'd come here.

I tried to shower at least once a day, which involved carting a bucket of water to an empty cubicle and then washing in it. The sicker I became, the harder this was. Added to all this was the constant threat of malaria. Every night around 5 o'clock, trucks drove along the roads spraying a foul smelling pesticide into the air. Looking around me, I thought it's as though I'm in a war zone, not at a major spiritual happening. I was living with thousands of refugees. Many had come from

settlements and monasteries in the south. Others had travelled down from the north of India.

The monks slept away from the tent city in big barn-like sheds. Low cost, very basic tents were occupied by Tibetan families. Mid-range tents, like the one we were in, housed a variety of families and groups. Those who could afford it, stayed in the comfort village – mainly westerners and dignitaries. I couldn't imagine having to live in these conditions day after day, like so many of the world's refugees did. Here at least, it was voluntary; there was ample food and you could leave. But for millions of people, living in intense heat, battling hardship, uncertainty, and the constant threat of illness, without much hope for the future, this was their daily existence.

Ambush

Even though I'd booked and paid for the tent, Lorenz had taken on the role of lord of the manor, bossing everyone around him, even Tenzin – who made little contribution towards the domestic chores. Chicero spent most of her time sitting around, meticulously rolling joints. She was the perfect geisha: silent, willing, polite and complicit. Occasionally she would dance to the music playing on Lorenz system, but most of the time she did very little, other than roll joints. Tenzin spent a lot of his time in the tent village with the Tibetan people who'd travelled to Amravati from either Tibet or Dharamasla. I mainly kept to myself or stayed in the tent with Chicero. Our tent offered us some respite, but not a lot. Tenzin used it to give massages, and as well, it had also become a place to hang out, for some of his Tibetan friends.

Dhargy Marley had travelled down to the Kalachakra. He was staying with a group of people I didn't know. I was so happy to see him, but without the teacher-student relationship we didn't have a lot to talk about. Lhundop had also travelled to Amravati. He was selling the CD he'd recorded in Nepal at a roadside stall. He'd acknowledged and thanked me on his CD jacket. I was so proud of him and for a moment I was also proud of me.

One afternoon Lorenz, Chicero and I were sitting in the tent eating noodles, when Tenzin showed up with a group of his friends – and to my shock and horror, Josette. She walked straight in to the tent, smiling from ear to ear, shook everyone's hands, sat down and then said, 'Hello Margi, how are you?' Amazed by her audacity and Tenzin's apparent dishonesty, I just managed to reply. I'd asked him specifically

if he had any friends visiting him at the Kalachakra, and he'd said No. If I'd known Josette was going to be here I would have seriously reconsidered my journey.

They didn't stay long, heading off to visit a family who had recently arrived from Tibet. Lorenz, Cicero, and I remained in the tent. Then Lorenz turned to me and asked, 'Is she staying here, because I don't want her to stay here.' I replied, 'No way, of course she's not staying here', to which he responded, 'Well she left her backpack here!' I didn't know what he was talking about, until he pointed to a mound of luggage Josette had deposited under one of the tables. I hadn't seen her put it there, but Lorenz and Chicero had. Both of them were adamant, they didn't want her to stay in the tent. I certainly didn't either. As dysfunctional as we were, we seemed to be cohabiting reasonably well.

I agreed with Lorenz and Chicero, she couldn't stay with us. I knew when it came to the bottom line; it would be me who had to draw it. I implored Lorenz to tell Tenzin, saying, 'He'll take it from you.' Lorenz may have been the acting lord of the manor, but when it came to something unpleasant like evicting someone, the responsibility was going to fall on me. Even though it was a group decision I had no doubt that I'd get the blame. Tenzin would be upset and Josette would be angry.

They came back just before dark. Lorenz, Chicero and I sat inside the tent in a united front. We poured tea and side-stepped the issue for a while, then surprisingly Lorenz pointed to Josette's belongings saying, 'Where are you staying? You can't stay here.' She retorted, 'Why not?' Tension rippled through the tent like electricity from a stun gun. He answered saying, 'There's not enough room, and you'll have to go somewhere else.' She snapped back, 'I don't have anywhere else,' then turned and looking at me said, 'It's you Margaret isn't it, it's because you don't want me to stay here?'

I was hoping Lorenz would cover my back, but he didn't say a word. Chicero did nothing: just sat, sweet and demure. Believing she had a right she said, 'No I'm not going, I'm staying here.' I knew she didn't have anywhere to go, but she'd put herself in this position, not me. I'd never turned someone away before: I felt sick. I wasn't responsible for the situation that had arisen, but it was being played out in such a way that I was going to be seen as a heartless, ruthless, villain. She hadn't registered anything Lorenz had said, couldn't compute this had been a group decision. She barked at me again, saying, 'I don't have any where to go Margaret,'

using my full name to try to assert some sort of parental authority over my 'bad' behaviour. In her eyes it was a personal vendetta against her. Tenzin didn't say a word, acting like the current situation had nothing to do with him.

I had to find my voice. I'd failed to care for myself many times on this journey, being carried along like a powerless victim trying to maintain a connection with Tenzin, but I couldn't remain passive this time. I looked at her and said, 'I'm sorry, but you're not staying here. I paid for this tent while I was in Australia. If you didn't have the foresight to arrange your own accommodation that's not my problem, you have to leave.' She made no effort to comply, just sat glaring at me with contempt. Then she looked to Tenzin, hoping he'd come to her aid. He didn't. I looked at her again, and with all the courage I could muster, said, 'Go now. Leave.' Recognising she'd lost the battle she stood up, grabbed her backpack, and stormed off. Tenzin followed her. He came back a couple of hours later, and lay down on the mattress, sulking and unwilling to talk with anyone.

Aversion

I knew cultural values had come into play when it came to sharing the accommodation, and they'd clashed heavily. Feelings of goodwill between Tenzin and I dissipated rapidly after this. He was sulky, sullen and silent. Even the fact that he was staying in the tent as a guest, never entered his head. In his mind you must share what you had. His lack of concern for material things had originally been appealing, but his inability to create boundaries, and engage in open and honest communication, far outweighed his simplicity. I was flabbergasted he'd set me up and then wouldn't take any responsibility for the consequences. Lorenz didn't tolerate Tenzin's moodiness for long, telling him to snap out of it. Finally he came around, but not towards me. I became more and more marginalised in the group.

Each morning the others would head off to the Dalai Lama's teachings; I'd wait until they'd gone and then go a little later. The teachings were broadcast over a public address system in Tibetan; this in turn was translated into multiple languages: English, Mandarin, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Tibetan Amdo dialect and Telugu, the local language of Andhra Pradesh and transmitted through FM radios.

I found a spot to sit at the back of the foreigners' compound, but as always, it was difficult to hear and to concentrate. I'd bought myself a small radio, a hat, and a

meditation cushion, but getting comfortable just didn't eventuate. I'd sit there for hours trying to take it in and then feel guilty because I couldn't. On top of that I was becoming sicker every day; the stomach cramps were unrelenting and my bowels had turned to water.

I took notes to refer to at a later stage, but most of the time it was difficult to follow the translation. His Holiness spoke of cause and effect, attachment and aversion, the process of change, and the process of decay, emphasising the second moment is dependent on the first. I wanted to, but I couldn't digest his words. My heart and mind were too full of sickness, anger, self-justification and disappointment. I kept going to the teachings but the results remained the same. This was my third attempt at attending the Dalai Lama's teachings and I was failing dismally.

Rescue

Lorenz had been losing interest in Chicero, and so we spent more time together, playing with the children who sold us a thermos of hot chai tea in our tent every morning. I also spent more time with Chicero. She appeared small and fragile in my eyes; living for charas and partying. In a rare moment she opened up and told me she was grappling with the aftermath of her Japanese friend's suicide. Instantly I understood her fragility. In the evening Chicero and I went to circumnavigate the Stupa. Originally built during the reign of the emperor Ashoka, it wasn't completed until 200 CE, the period in which Buddhism was declining; consequently it became neglected and buried under rubble. It was old and beautiful, surrounded by rows and rows of Tibetan prayer flags strung up on the periphery of the outer circle. The Stupa was made from brick, and decorated with carved round panels which told the story of the Buddha's life. There were still some panels around the Stupa but most of them had been transferred to the Museum in Amravati.

Pilgrims in their thousands were circumnavigating the Stupa. They carried candles or placed them on rock ledges, creating a field of flickering flames. We walked around the kora with the pilgrims, praying for peace, until we were too tired to keep walking, and then returned to the tent to sleep. The empowerment ceremony had been scheduled to coincide with the days of the full moon and it was getting close.

Follow the monk with the guitar

The moon waxed full. The empowerment ceremony had been held and the Kalachakra was coming to a close. I'd become weak with diarrhoea and constant stress; the sicker I became the more powerless and trapped I felt. I didn't know how to get out of this situation; where I would go, or how I would get there, and I didn't know if I had enough strength to make a journey on my own. The next morning Gaden Rapsal visited the tent, bringing a monk with him who could speak English. He'd visited a few times already, but unless Tenzin was there I couldn't speak with him: he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Tibetan. Gaden could see I wasn't well and asked after my health. I didn't know what to tell him, and burst into tears. He said something to his friend in Tibetan, who then looked at me and said, 'Gaden would like you to travel with him to his monastery in Mundgod. Would I go with him?' He was leaving the following day. A door had opened, allowing me the opportunity to leave. Bowing my head, I accepted.

For nearly two days a long line of people had been waiting patiently for a brief glimpse of the sacred mandala design. Before I left I wanted to view it. I stood with them, in the line for hours, until my time had arrived. The mandala was mounted on a small platform. Pilgrims were ushered onto the platform by attendants, given a few moments to view the image, and then quickly ushered off. Before I knew it, my moment had passed. I'd barely had time to take in the overall image, let alone contemplate the finer details. I and hundreds of others had waited long hours in the heat for a fleeting moment of viewing. Why human beings do these things and ascribe meaning to them is a mystery to me.

I made my way back towards the tent, passing tired pilgrims and monks carrying Kusha grass from the teachings. When I got to the tent Lorenz and Chicero were in the process of packing their belongings. They'd decided to return to Goa. Tenzin, Josette, and a few of his Tibetan friends were also going with them. It wasn't long before they had to leave, but Lorenz didn't know where Tenzin was. I didn't know either.

Nature called and I made one last expedition down to the toilet blocks. I could barely stand to go near them at this point, but I had to. My stomach tightened, and my head pounded, as I held my breath trying to escape the stench. When I got back to the tent Gaden and his friend were there. I was caught off guard, they were early;

suddenly I didn't want to go. Tenzin wasn't there, and once I left I might never see him again. I wanted to say goodbye. I zipped up my backpack. Gaden picked up my guitar case and slipped the straps over his shoulder. I asked Lorenz to say goodbye to Tenzin for me. Pleading for me to wait and say goodbye myself, he said 'Don't leave this way, Maggie.' I looked at Gaden. I didn't know where he was taking me, but I knew that he had my best interests at heart and I needed to follow him. I decided this was the best way to leave, to just walk away.

Josette had turned up at the tent looking for Tenzin. Once the issue of where she was going to stay had been settled, she'd been there a few times without any overwhelming tension. We were slowly making our peace. I said goodbye to her, hugged Lorenz and Chicero, wished them well, and then followed Gaden Rapsal. We walked along the dirt road. Gaden carried my guitar on his back. I followed a couple of feet behind him carrying my backpack on mine. My guitar was a beacon for me. Strapped across his back it was the one thing that identified him from the thousands of monks around him. We collected his luggage. By the time we were ready to leave; a small entourage had formed to make the trip back to the monastery. No one amongst them spoke much English, so every time Gaden picked up my guitar to make a move, I'd just follow. Arriving at the bus station, he motioned for me to board the bus.

I boarded and was sitting there waiting for the bus to fill, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up. It was Tenzin. For a moment, I thought he'd made an effort to find me and say goodbye, but he didn't say anything. Instead he pushed a pair of my undies into my hands, walked down to the back of the bus and sat down. In my hurry to leave, I'd forgotten to take them off the tent line; I wondered what Tenzin had planned to do with them? There was no reason for him to think he might see me again? Then I heard Lorenz's voice call out my name. He sat down beside me and started to chat. The bus was going to the railway station at Guntar, where they'd board the train to Goa and from where I'd catch the train to Karnataka with Gaden. Lorenz talked all the way to the station; happy I was going to stay in the monastery. He didn't think going back to Goa would be good for me. I agreed, but my heart wept for the holiday I'd dreamed of, and never had.

We arrived at the railway station and headed for our respective platforms. As I walked across the overpass with the entourage of monks, I saw the train for Goa pull

into the station. Leaning over the railings I saw them all standing there waiting to board the train: Tenzin, his brother Sangye, Josette, Lorenz and Chicero. Part of me wished I was going with them, another part was glad that I wasn't. Waving, I smiled and called out goodbye. Tenzin looked up, his chest puffed with pride and defiance. Not wanting to lose face, he made no effort to respond. In that moment I recognised we were both as stubborn and self righteous as each other. Ever cheerful, Lorenz called out, 'Bye Maggie, God bless you.'

Under house arrest

I sat on the grass at the front of the station with Gaden and the rest of the group, waiting for the train that would take us across Karnataka to Mundgod. When we boarded, Gaden led me to the first class section of the train. He'd bought a sleeper ticket days before and insisted, against my protests, that I take the bunk. Then he went and sat with the other monks in the overcrowded third class compartment. First class on an Indian train is no luxury, but having a place to lie down certainly is, eventually I fell asleep to the clacking rhythm of the train wheels. In the morning I climbed down from the bunk, gratefully accepting a drink of tea from a Tibetan woman, whose face held the traces of a hard life. Gaden came to check that I was OK, and pushed a Tibetan bun into my hands. I didn't eat much anymore. The cramps in my stomach were unrelenting. I thanked him, trying to put his mind at ease, indicating that I was fine.

The train clattered along amongst a landscape of water drenched rice terraces, crops, leafy trees, and palms. We were back in the South. We arrived at the station in Mundgod early afternoon and then boarded a small bus to travel out to the settlement. It wasn't long before we were driving in the countryside through rich grasslands, along near empty roads. I had no idea where I was, or where I was going, but I'd left the madness, and for that I was grateful.

The bus drove into the settlement and pulled into an undercover courtyard in the middle of the small monastery. I was shown to my room on the ground floor, directly next to the kitchen. There were two single beds, made from bare wooden slats with a thin foam mattress placed on top. Next to the bed there was a small nightstand with a mirror on the wall above it. A broken ceiling fan hung from the roof. The window had bars on it and didn't open to let fresh air in. The room was dark.

There was nothing particularly welcoming about the space, but the one thing it had going for it, was that the toilet and shower blocks were directly across the passageway, and I needed to be close to the toilet. The diarrhoea and the pains in my stomach were now nonstop. Acutely dehydrated, my head continually hurt, so I was grateful to have my own room within close vicinity of the amenities. That was, until I visited them.

They were squat toilets: dirty, smelly and unsanitary. No one had taken the responsibility for cleaning them, and they were filthy. Piles of human faeces lay on the bottom of the toilet; splashes of urine and diarrhoea covered the porcelain edges and the ground beside them. These men might be into enlightenment, but they weren't into housework. Like most men, monks appear to have a natural aversion to domestic duties. I was surprised. In a moment of weakness, I thought I'd practise karma yoga, earn some merit, express my gratitude, and clean them. But I couldn't bring myself to do the task. I'd cleaned my father's toilet for ten years when he was alive; that was enough.

Traditional Tibetan food was prepared in a large kitchen deeper in the monastery. We ate in a small dining room reserved for lay people, not monks. Currently the head lama's parents, and other relatives from Tibet, were visiting. There was also a German woman staying in the monastery who was in the process of making a documentary. I was glad to have someone to talk to, but we didn't see each other very often, primarily because during the day she was out and about and I had to stay inside the monastery.

What I didn't know when I'd accepted Gaden's invitation, was that it was illegal to stay in the monasteries in Mundgod without a permit. The refugee settlement is classified by the Government of India as a Restricted Area, and foreign visitors at the monasteries are required to have a Protected Area Permit. I didn't have one. This meant I wasn't free to go outside the monastery in the daytime, in case the police saw me, and I was arrested. After 5 pm the monks thought it was safe for me to go outside and I would wander the roads exploring the settlement.

Tashi

I was walking around the settlement one evening when a Tibetan who'd frequented our tent at the Kalachakra, pulled up beside me on a motor bike. His name was

Tashi. I didn't know he lived at the settlement and was surprised to see him. Through the grapevine, he'd heard I was staying at the monastery and come looking for me. Tashi was a big man – big-hearted, with a big voice. He had a moustache, and long thick black hair, tied in a pony tail, which fell down to his waist, framing a kind, smiling face, with sad eyes. He greeted me like a long lost friend, encouraging me to jump up behind him on the motorbike. I didn't know him that well, and wasn't sure if I should. Sensing my hesitation he assured me it was fine, I'd be safe. He wanted to take me to the lake and show me the birds.

After being cooped up in the monastery for a couple of days, I welcomed the opportunity, let go of my hesitation, and climbed up behind him. We headed away from the monastery, riding through the countryside until we came to a long paved road leading down to a man-made lake, created to supply water to the settlement. There was nothing for miles around it, just rolling hills, trees and bird life.

We got off the bike and sat at the edge of the road above the lake. Tashi lit a joint and passed it to me. I didn't want to smoke it and said no. I thought I'd left this behind, but it'd followed me like gum stuck to the sole of my shoe. He kept insisting. I felt compelled to take it and drew back on the joint. Time slowed. The lake took on a mystical ancient quality. The songs of the birds rang with antiquity, signalling a time forgotten. Tashi stripped down to his shorts and made his way into the water until he was waist-deep, then beckoned for me to join him, but I refused. He released his hair from the pony tail, bent down and pushed his head under the water, coming up suddenly. His long hair splayed in the air, shimmering with fine droplets of water, his chest expanded, and then he let out a warrior cry in Tibetan, his spirit merging with the natural environment; at one with nature.

We stayed until the sun set, then rode back to the monastery. Having had a taste of freedom I couldn't stay under house arrest for too much longer. I had less than a week left in India. I had to catch my flight to Australia from Goa, so decided I'd leave Mundgod in another two days.

Ganden Monastery, Mundgod

Gaden Rapsal was a senior teacher at the monastery. He had a day off and had arranged for me to visit the main temple. He invited his friend Lobsang, a fellow monk who spoke English, to accompany us. Ganden Monastery was the original

monastery of the Geluk order, one of the 'great three' Gelukpa university monasteries of Tibet. Ganden means 'joyful' – it's the Tibetan name for the heaven where the bodhisattva Maitreya resides.

The original Ganden Monastery in Tibet was completely destroyed when China invaded Tibet in 1959. The Tibetan population in exile re-established the Ganden monastery in Karnataka, India, in the Tibetan settlement at Mundgod. It's the largest settlement of Tibetan refugees of its kind in India. The settlement was first established in 1966 on 4,000 acres of land donated by the Indian government. Approximately 20,000 Tibetan refugees live there, about 7,000 are monks. The settlement, called the Doeguling Settlement, is divided into small villages and camps. There are around eleven camps, with seven monasteries, and one nunnery, as well as schools, homes for the elderly, the Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute, an agricultural institute and a craft centre.

The most important monasteries, Ganden Jangtse and the Drepung Loseling monastery, are situated exclusively in two camps, referred to as Lama Camps. The monasteries serve as universities, where a range of subjects are taught: Buddhism, Tibetan Medicine, English, Mathematics and Science. Students also undergo sessions in debate, discourse and recitation. The highlight of the Ganden Jangtse Monastery is the golden temple for Buddha.

I followed Gaden and Lobsang along manicured pathways through the temple compound to the stairs leading up to the main prayer hall. Large gold statues of various incarnations of the Buddha flanked the walls. A throne for His Holiness the Dalai Lama made of teak wood painted gold, sat centre stage. The hall was adorned by a series of large silk thangkas. Lobsang took photos while Gaden and I posed beneath them with our hands held in front of our chest in prayer position. A lot of money had gone into building the temple. Everything was lavish, shiny, clean and new. Internally I questioned the rationale of pouring so much wealth into places of worship, while everyday people continued to struggle to make a living. Buddhist temples don't stand alone in this practice. Churches and temples throughout the world stand in all their glory amidst the poverty surrounding them.

I walked over to the donation box, feeling the eyes of the monks following me and deposited a generous sum of money, bringing a smile to their eyes. I'd have preferred to give as much money as I could to Gaden, rather than the temple –

knowing that he in turn, would donate some of the money I gave him, to the temple as well. But I felt it was important to honour their traditions and beliefs and I was happy that I could make them happy. We returned to the small monastery for lunch and an afternoon nap. Because I was leaving in the morning, Gaden had organised a big day for me: this afternoon I was going to meet the head lama, his immediate teacher, and then in the evening, I was invited to Gaden's home for a special meal.

The head lama sat on a meditation cushion, on a small raised platform, in a large, almost empty room. He was deep in conversation with a number of monks. Gaden indicated for me to sit quietly in the corner until he'd finished. I'd never laid eyes on a more beautiful man in my life. Everything about him radiated strength, serenity, clarity, wisdom, gentleness and a kind heart. After he'd finished his conversation he beckoned for me to come forward. I knelt before him and he placed a beautiful white silk khata around my neck.

I could see scars on his arms and chest where the Chinese had tortured him before he'd escaped from Tibet, but there was no trace of hardness, bitterness or self pity in his countenance. Gaden took photos of me with his revered teacher. Then I took photos of them together. The session over, I asked Lobsang to tell him how honoured I was to meet him, thanked him for allowing me to stay at the monastery and took my leave. I could have happily remained in his presence for ever. I'd never felt this before and understood in that moment why people take on a Guru.

This is the way of Human beings

Just before dusk Lobsang collected me to visit Gaden in his house. Kelsang, a Tibetan woman from the settlement who spoke English, had also been asked to join us. Gaden lived in a tiny one room house, bordered by a wire fence, just across from the monastery school where he taught. The house was made of cement. The walls had been painted a soft yellow. The roof was tiled, and there was one window with a red painted frame opening on to a small garden of bushes planted around the house. A tall palm tree towered above.

Inside, there was a mattress on the floor, a small low table, and a bookshelf full of books. A large framed photo of the Dalai Lama hung above it; a poster of a flower garden was stuck on the opposite wall. I don't know how he did it, but Gaden had cooked up a feast. The low table in the centre of the room was covered with

large bowls of soup, vegetables, steamed Tibetan buns, chicken, rice, and a tomato and cucumber salad. He'd made all this in his kitchen, which was just a small bench with a gas burner, covered with utensils, pots, plates, food and drinking water.

He beckoned for me to sit down. Kelsang sat beside me. I was humbled that he'd gone to so much trouble and concerned at the amount of money he must have spent on the food. I still didn't feel like eating and wasn't going to be able to eat much. But to show my appreciation I was determined to make an effort and eat as much as I could. Despite my physical illness I did a good job of enjoying my meal. Kelsang and I consistently praised Gaden for his cooking, bringing him pleasure with each compliment. We had a lovely little dinner party. After the meal Kelsang left saying how happy she was to have made a new friend, and that we must write to each other and stay in touch.

There are all kinds of ways to avoid all kinds of pain, but unable to outrun my grief, I was feeling it. Now that there was just Lobsang, Gaden Rabsal and myself, I had an opportunity to talk to him about some important life matters. I'd come to India with the dream of 'love and living happy ever after', but instead had been met with rejection and heartache, breaking down on the beach in Goa. In my mind I had nothing to go back to and nothing to move forward to, but inevitably life was going to keep moving on. I was going to have to move on with it and leave the past behind. Through Losang I told Gaden some of my story and about the loss of my family. He listened intently, and then looking at me said, 'this is the way of human beings, they come and they go, they do not stay.' It was a simple answer, without sentiment or sympathy, straightforward, cutting through the illusion that we have any control over what happens to us in this life.

This was a fact: one of life's givens, and there was nothing we could do to change it. Gaden had also experienced loss – his life hadn't been easy. But he was embedded in, supported, and protected by the monastic tradition of which he was a part. I faced my life without this and needed his prayers to support me spiritually and give me strength. He understood, saying he would give some money to the temple and ask the monks to make a *puja* (an expression of honour or reverence) for me. I was glad I hadn't held back when making a donation.

Aum gora wora sche

There was a loud knock on the door, and without warning Tashi burst into the room, swaying unsteadily on his feet, calling out, 'Come on Maggie I want you to come to my house and meet my mother'. He was obviously intoxicated; the last thing I wanted was to go with him. But he kept insisting and I could tell he was going to continue to disturb the peace until I agreed to do so. I didn't know how to let Gaden know Tashi was someone I'd just recently meet, and that I was sorry for the intrusion. I could see he was mildly disturbed and was hoping he'd tell Tashi to leave, but Gaden remained silent and seated. Oblivious to the fact that he'd just gatecrashed our evening, Tashi offered no apologies to Gaden Rabsal who remained unperturbed, having no expectations of receiving any. Tashi had served in the Indian Army. He had never been a monk and didn't hold a monk's life in high regard. I may have found Tashi's behaviour socially unacceptable, but the monks didn't. They expected I would accompany him as requested. I thanked Gaden for the evening and followed Tashi outside, reluctantly climbing onto the back of the motor bike, clinging on tightly as we rode further away from the village, hoping that he was in fact, taking me to visit his mother. He was.

His mother was just like him: big-hearted, open and welcoming. Except for the moustache, they even looked like each other. He joked and teased her, insisting I take photos of them together, and then decided it was time to go back to the village. We stopped at a small bridge. Tashi got off the bike and went to relieve himself in the long grass, when he came back he pushed a lit joint between my fingers. I felt the tentacles of my addiction reach for me again. Even staying in the monastery surrounded by a monastic community couldn't protect me from my own powerlessness, my need for acceptance, and my inability to say no.

In the morning Gaden came to take me to the bus station. He picked up my guitar case, strapped it onto his back, and I followed the monk with the guitar once more. Sitting at the bus station waiting for the bus I had the sudden urge to move my bowels. Unable to explain the situation I left Gaden and began hunting for a toilet. There was a western style toilet at the back of the station, which cost one rupee to use. I pressed the coin into the hand of the attendant, walked in, lifted up the lid, and a rat the size of a large cat jumped out of the bowl, scampered over my feet and ran out the door. When I returned I found Gaden visibly distressed; he didn't know where

I was and the bus had arrived. Apologising, I held both his hands and pushed an envelope full of money between them. I wouldn't forget his kindness. He took my guitar off his back and put it with my backpack in the storage area under the bus. Gaden stood watching as the bus pulled away. I sat in a seat beside the window, waving until I couldn't see him anymore.

It was a six to eight hour journey to Goa, on rough roads, in an old bus. Anticipating that I would likely see Tenzin again, I was feeling anxious. Unable to get him out of my mind, I started to chant a mantra he'd taught me at the Kalachakra, *Aum gora wora sche*. According to Tenzin, chanting the mantra helped to create a vision of future direction. I chanted for hours and hours: *Aum gora wora sche, Aum gora wora sche, Aum gora wora sche...*

The party's over

It was midnight when I arrived in Goa. Almost a month had passed since I'd last been there; the breeze was cooler and the party buzz had left the atmosphere. Indian touts anxious to drum up business, surrounded the bus offering accommodation for the evening. I accepted a room in an old house that had been turned into a guesthouse for the summer; it was secluded and dark, without much character. I needed food and something to drink, so left my backpack and walked down towards the outdoor cafés. The vibe had definitely changed, the season had come to a close; everything was winding down.

I walked along the beach wondering where Tenzin was and what he was doing. After everything I'd been through with him, the ties that bind hadn't yet been severed – there was still no sense of closure – I didn't want to leave with the wall we'd built standing between us. It didn't feel right. I walked towards the beach huts where we'd stayed unsure if I should approach, circling around like a stray dog hunting for food. I could hear music coming from the huts and saw Lorenz sitting outside playing drums with a group of people I didn't recognise. Tenzin wasn't there. Welcoming as always, Lorenz saw me and called me into the circle, throwing his arms around me, shouting: 'God is good Maggie!'

Lorenz had fallen in love. In the week we hadn't seen each other he'd met a stunningly beautiful young woman from Ethiopia, who'd also fallen in love with him. I felt for Chicero. She had been dispensed with so quickly. He asked where I was

staying. I told him about the old house. He said the hut across from him would be empty tomorrow; I 'must come and stay there'. I was grateful but wary. I didn't want to continue the war with Tenzin. Lorenz assured me not to worry, Tenzin would be fine.

In the morning I moved into the hut directly across from Lorenz. It was the last hut in the quadrangle and closest to the beach. Tenzin had been sharing with Lorenz, but with the arrival of Lorenz's new girlfriend had begun to sleep on the beach. I came across him asleep on a mattress in the Om Beach Café. A man I didn't know, with long dreadlocks, dirty clothes, tattoos and piercings, slept on the mattress opposite. Looking at Tenzin I felt a twinge of sadness. Alcohol had entered the picture. He was lost in India, derelict, vulnerable, and disconnected from his roots. I woke him gently. He smiled when he saw me and said 'Tashi delek'.

The wall between us fell. I was glad I'd come back. The man on the mattress opposite woke up. We took an instant dislike to each other. He was annoyed by my presence: crude, arrogant, and dismissive. Realising he'd lost his hold on Tenzin, he withdrew to the beach. I assumed Tenzin hadn't eaten much for the past few days, and I was right. No longer wanting to punish him, or see him suffer, my maternal instincts kicked in and I had an overwhelming desire to take care of him.

A very big Fish

We sat at one of the tables and ordered a pot of sweet masala chai. There wasn't much to say to each other, the drama had played out. There was no value in pointing the finger and ascribing blame any more. There were only two days left until we would go our separate ways, and chances were we may never see each other again. Deciding it was time for celebration I said, 'Tenzin, let's eat fish.' He smiled. Before Goa, he'd never eaten a fish. Tibetans don't eat fish because of the practise of water burial. Often people are buried in waters around their villages, so eating fish is avoided because the fish might have eaten a corpse. Most fish in China are held captive in large glass tanks before they are cooked and eaten. So another reason for the aversion to eating fish is a Buddhist doctrine which encourages setting free captive animals.

I ordered the catch of the day, but the waiter didn't think it was suitable for just two people. His explanation being, 'It is a very big fish.' I assured him it would be

fine, but he wasn't convinced. 'It is a very big fish, too big for two people.' I assumed others would be joining us, so insisted, we wanted the fish. The waiter shuffled off to tell the cook, and Tenzin and I sat back relaxing and waiting.

Tenzin had decided not to return to Dharmasla. Instead he was travelling south to Mysore with Lorenz, who had rented a house there for a month. Tenzin's younger brother Sangye, and Lorenz's new girlfriend were also going. Silently I questioned his decision. The food arrived and the waiter laid the platter down on the table between us. I understood why he'd tried to persuade me from ordering the catch of the day, it was a VERY BIG FISH: big enough to feed half a dozen people. It was a meal fit for a king. We were almost too shy and embarrassed to eat it. Tentatively I began to break the flesh from the bones. Tenzin joined in, and we began our feast of fish. I watched him explore the carcass like an infant who has just begun to discover the wonders of food. Eating fish was a novelty for him; meticulously and slowly he ate the eyes, the head, the tail, the skin and the flesh; he'd never eaten so much fish. Mid-afternoon Lorenz and Sangye joined us. We spent a lazy afternoon feasting on fish, listening to the sound of the ocean and kicking back in the sun.

Tolerance

Late afternoon Tenzin wandered off with his friend from the previous night to climb the hill and watch the sunset. Lorenz left to find his girlfriend, and Sangye and I went back to the beach huts to feed sugar to the ants. It was eerie inside the hut now; the nights were chilly and the wind from the ocean blew up against the walls, threatening to rip the thin palm matting from the frame.

Josette was there when we arrived; she was staying in the same hut as Sangye. I hadn't seen her since I'd returned to Goa, but her presence was almost comforting. The party was definitely over. Tenzin, Lorenz and Sangye were leaving in the morning, Josette would leave in the afternoon, and I the day after.

It wasn't long before I felt the parasite inside me eating away at my intestines, robbing me of any nourishment I may have just derived from the fish. The cramps returned with a vengeance and I had to go to the toilet immediately. I'd had diarrhoea for close to a month now and was becoming skinny. The pain was close to unbearable. I went to the medical centre to see a doctor, who did no more than tell

me to drink six sachets of electrolytes three times a day for intense dehydration. I followed his instructions, hoping for relief, but none came.

In the morning the pain in my stomach was more than I could manage. Taking me by the hand, Lorenz said, 'Come Maggie, we are going for a swim,' and led me into the ocean. I stood in the ocean crying in agony. Lorenz held me, telling me it would be OK. I reflected on the irony of the situation. I'd had come to India to visit Tenzin and attend the Dalai Lama's teaching, but instead, through Lorenz, I'd been drawn to think about the teachings of Christ.

After the swim, Lorenz set about rallying the troops to travel. Tenzin was dragging his feet, and Lorenz, no longer fascinated with him, was taking control. Having become financially dependent on Lorenz, Tenzin had lost the freedom to make independent decisions. I sat at one of the restaurant tables, holding my stomach, emptying the contents of the electrolyte sachets into a bottle of water, watching them pack up their belongings. Josette came and sat with me. It was the first time we'd sat together since we'd met. Her devotion to Tenzin hadn't waned. I felt sorry for her. Like me, she'd been treated badly, but unlike me she'd accepted this. I asked if she would travel to India to visit Tenzin again. As I'd anticipated she replied Yes, explaining, 'Before I met Tenzin I'd never been anywhere before in my life. Now I'm a different person. Meeting Tenzin has changed me.' Looking at her from across the table I said, 'Josette you deserve more, you don't deserve to be treated this way.' But she was convinced – they had a spiritual relationship and this was just Tenzin's way. She replied saying, 'That's Tenzin. You'll see Margi, you will go back to Australia and you will look at this trip differently. You will see Tenzin more clearly.' I certainly hoped I would, but somehow I didn't think it would be in the same light as she did. Josette left to pack her bags.

The taxi arrived. I watched them pile luggage into the van. Lorenz came and hugged me, then climbed in beside the driver. Tenzin walked over held me and said goodbye. I looked at him and asked: 'Tenzin, did this ever mean anything to you?' He paused for a moment, looked up and said, 'I think so' and then got in to the van.

I waved as they drove away from Armabol. Tomorrow I would catch the plane to Australia. Today for the first time since I'd arrived I felt a sense of freedom. A weight had lifted; with Tenzin gone, I was free to walk around Armabol without fearing what might happen next.

Part Three: Emptiness

Emptiness provides the questions and the answers to all the questions, because it allows for movement and change. It allows for insight and realization.

[Tai Situ Rinpoche: *Awakening the Sleeping Buddha*].



Osmosis (Gibb 2013)

Practice

I arrived back in Australia sick, skinny, fragmented, and disillusioned. It took two months before the parasite completely cleared my system and my nervous system settled down. It took a lot longer for me to accept my fall from grace.

I was invited to participate in a multi-faith arts festival. The theme was to 'create sanctuary'. Half a dozen artists from different faiths and traditions had been asked to exhibit. I accepted and began creating a new series of mandalas. I called my exhibition 'Practice'. I hadn't stopped thinking about what Tenzin Plamo had said to me in Dharmasla: a seed had been planted in my mind when she'd said, 'Yes that could be a good practice.' I'd since realised that although I didn't identify myself as a Buddhist, a great deal of my life had been spent in practice. I wrote, played guitar, sang and created mandalas – every aspect of my creative expression required practice.

Every day I created: early in the morning before I went to work, and then in the evening when I came home, as well as on the weekends. The more I gave myself to the practice the more energised and centred I became. My ability to concentrate rose to a level I'd never experienced before. 'Absolute concentration transcendental meditation, absolute concentration transcendental meditation': lyrics from Nina Hagen's *NunSexMonkRock*, album buzzed in my memory. My mind began to still and clear. I couldn't get enough solitude. Slowly the fragmented pieces were being joined back together, piece by piece.

By the time the exhibition date had come around I had created fifteen new mandalas. In my life thus far I had explored Buddhism, Bon, Native American, Christian and Hindu beliefs through the patterns of the mandala. I reflected on the concept of a multi-faith arts festival, realising that for me, faith was the essence of life. The thing I needed most to live. My aspiration was 'to have and to practice faith', not of any particular denomination. I wanted to believe in the greater good. The dilemma for someone like me though, is that faith, foolishness and human fragility often seem to travel side by side. I can't always tell one from the other. The exhibition was successful on every level but once the need to practise had ceased, I felt restless again. Something was missing, something needed to change. Seeking new horizons, just out of curiosity, I attended an information session on teaching English overseas. Two days later, before I'd even acquired the credentials,

I had a prospective job offer on the table to teach at a University in China. My friends and colleagues thought living in China for a year was a great idea. I wasn't so sure. I had never been a fan of Chinese politics, food or culture, but thought, 'well nothing changes if nothing changes'.

Waiting

I'd been back in Australia for several months and Yonten still hadn't begun his journey back to Tibet. He was waiting for the winter to pass and spent his time studying English. His parents were fretting, worrying they'd never see him again. Every so often he'd write filling me in on what was happening and continuing to express his gratitude. Eventually he made the decision to begin his journey in the summer of 2007. Before he left Dharamasla he wrote, expressing regret- he couldn't take his 'beautiful guitar' with him, and wanted to give it to his friend. He was very sorry he couldn't keep it and hoped I would understand, and of course, I did.

He was going to take the Friendship Highway to Tibet which required travelling to Nepal first. When he got to Nepal he had to stay in Kathmandu for a month waiting for papers. He lived in a small room in a house belonging to a Nepalese family. To go outside the room placed him at risk of being arrested by the Nepalese authorities, so he stayed inside. Remembering what had happened to Lobsang, I knew the risk was real. To pass the time Yonten wove a small meditation rug.

His father was struggling with the Chinese authorities, trying to secure paperwork that would minimise the risk of Yonten being thrown immediately into a Chinese gaol. Thus far his father had only succeeded in navigating a maze of bureaucratic red tape, obstacles, and frustrations. Both he and Yonten were getting very distressed. Anxious because he couldn't get the official papers to cross the border, Yonten began to contemplate leaving in the middle of the night, and crossing the Himalayas on foot.

This idea didn't sit well with his family, or me. Just as I was getting ready to leave for China, Yonten emailed. He said he'd received the papers and was getting ready to cross the border into Tibet. Yonten had waited for close to three months in Nepal and had almost lost hope. Now he sounded very happy. When he began his journey I lost contact with him. I knew he wouldn't have access to the internet and

was in danger once he crossed over into China. I prayed he would make it safely home, and at some point in the future I would go to Tibet to visit him and his family. It was a dream that made the thought of living in China for a year more appealing. With this in mind I accepted the offer.

I decided I would step into the unknown by visiting a bit of familiar territory first, travelling to China via Thailand, where I was going to visit J. A few weeks before I was due to leave I received a phone call from Tenzin. It was completely unexpected and unlike him to make an international call. I didn't know how, but he'd travelled back to Tibet, and was calling from his family's home phone. He was very excited telling me he 'was coming to Australia.' Astonished I replied, 'Well you can come to Australia if you want, but I won't be here. I'm going to Thailand for a holiday, and then I'm going to live in China for a year.'

The irony of the situation didn't escape me. He was coming to Australia and I wouldn't be there. He didn't want to offer up any details about his trip, just that he had a passport and now he could come. I suspected if he was coming to Australia, it was through the kindness of a woman, but didn't make any more enquiries. Then laughing he said 'No I'm not really coming, I'm joking', he was just excited he had a passport. I wished him well, agreeing to contact him when I got to China. I didn't fully trust my motive for going to China, fearing self-deception may be hidden underneath my rationale for going. I took the fact that he had called as a sign and tried pushing away my doubts.

Vipassana in Thailand

I stepped out of the Bangkok airport into the sticky humidity of Asia and caught a cab to Koh Sang road. I found a backpackers hostel and paid for a small room with a wobbly ceiling fan that threatened to spin off its mounting at any moment. It felt good to be back in Asia. There's something about the chaos there that comforts me. I spent my day exploring the little shops and markets along Koh Sang road and then caught the overnight bus to Chiang Mai.

I was going to visit J. I hadn't seen him since I'd left Dharamasla. Disgruntled with the American lifestyle he'd made a new home in Chiang Mai. He lived in a in a modern apartment block with a swimming pool. He had a cleaning lady who came once a week to clean his small one room apartment and lived on locally

cooked Thai food. J spent his days by the pool or teaching English to Thai monks. He also served in the local Buddhist sangha, comprised mainly of American expats and seekers, and was happy and content with his new life.

We spent a couple of days together, swimming, sampling the local food, visiting temples and going for rides on his motorbike. Then I took a day trip on my own and caught the bus up the hill to Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep. The Wat is an hour's drive out of Chiang Mai, situated 1000 metres above sea level on Doi Suthep Mountain. From the Wat you can see the city of Chiang Mai sprawling out across the valley below.

According to legend, King Nu Naone was persuaded to build a temple on the mountain when the monk Sumana presented him with a bone relic of the historical Buddha. The King searched everywhere for a suitable spot to build the temple, but couldn't find one. So he resolved to let fate decide its location, and tied the relic to the back of a white elephant which was then released in the jungle. The elephant is said to have climbed up Doi Suthep, and then trumpeted three times before dying at the site. This was interpreted as a sign and King Nu Naone ordered the construction of the temple at this location.

The temple is part of Doi Suthep National Park and surrounded by dense forest rich with bird life. It was all very beautiful and very busy, with lots of tourists and Thais visiting the Wat. When I arrived, the sounds of pilgrims ringing large bells, said to bring good luck, filled the atmosphere of the terrace. A statue of the legendary elephant who'd signalled the site of the temple construction had been erected in the northwest corner. On the upper terrace enclosed by a frescoed cloister, there was tightly packed complex of dazzling gold-plated small shrines, bells, umbrellas and Buddha statues.

While I was wandering around exploring the complex I spotted a sign that read *International centre for Buddhist studies. Enquiries welcome*. Curiosity got the better of me. I opened the door beneath the sign and walked into a lovely, spacious room, with teak furniture and multiple windows opening out onto the forest. A nun sat at a computer in a small office at the end of the room. She waved me over, inviting me to sit and talk. I obliged. Her name was Mai. She was from England, and had been living in the temple for two years. We seemed to have a reasonable connection. I felt comfortable talking with her; it was easy for me to identify with

where she was coming from. Realising this I panicked, thinking, '*Awmigawd, I knew I was a nun*'. There was a part of me that wanted to explore this possibility and another part that wanted to run.

After talking with Mai for some time about what took place at the temple, I decided to do a Vipassana retreat at the Wat. This form of meditation is not for the faint hearted. I had to commit to getting up at 4 AM every morning, start meditation at 4.30 AM, then breakfast at 6.30, dharma talk at 8 AM, lunch at 11 AM, and then no food until breakfast the following morning. It didn't sound like a dream holiday, but I knew a lot of people who'd done a Vipassana retreat and recommended it.

I arranged to arrive at 10 AM the following day, signing up for only four days, against the advice of Mai who said you were just starting to get into it after four days- I should stay for at least seven out of the prescribed 21 days, but I stuck to four days. Mai said I could bring tubs of yoghurt to eat in the afternoon if I wanted, and I gratefully accepted the suggestion. I left the Wat and headed back down the hill for my final night in Chiang Mai and a farewell dinner with J. He'd done the retreat a few times and began telling me about his experiences. It didn't take long before the calm and confidence I felt sitting in the peace of the Wat dissipated, and I went into fear and the *what ifs?* J in his wisdom said, 'it's just an experience, and you can leave if you want to.' His logic calmed my fears and I settled back into my decision.

Later that night, sitting on the balcony of my guesthouse, I struck up a conversation with a guy who'd also done a Vipassana retreat. He confirmed what Mai had said –you're just starting to get into it after four days. In a moment of courage I decided to commit to seven days instead four.

Goose morning's everybody

The following day was Buddha day. Thousands of Thai people were at the temple when I arrived. By the time I'd climbed up the 309 steps at the entrance of the temple and reached the office, it was 10.30 AM. Mai welcomed me and then took me to the room I would occupy for the retreat.

The room was very light. It had windows on both sides, which looked out onto the forest, blue curtains, and a sky blue linoleum floor. I thought: what a lovely room, where's the furniture? Then it dawned on me: this was it. No bed, no chair, no cupboard, nothing – just an empty room. I put my backpack on the floor and thought

'ok, I can do this!' Then Mai, aware I would spend the next twenty four hours without food if I missed it, rushed me off for an 11 AM lunch.

After eating my final and only meal for the day, another participant led me to a cupboard full of white clothes, left behind by previous meditators. While doing retreat you had to wear white. The last thing I wanted was to have to buy more clothes and shove them into my already full backpack, so I welcomed the second-hand clothes and began rummaging through the pile to make a selection. It was much colder up on the hill. I managed to get a thin white polar fleece, white hat, a white shawl, a couple of white Thai style cotton tops and white pants – I was very grateful. My new wardrobe complete, I was then ushered into the main meditation hall to sit with the rest of the group in front of the teacher for my first Dharma talk. He was the only person we were permitted to talk to throughout the retreat. I thought I was hearing things when he welcomed us with 'Goose morning's every bodies', and had to work very hard to keep a straight face. Once a day we would have a private meeting with him. He was lovely, his spirit light as a summer breeze. But his pronunciation of English wasn't always easy to follow.

So began the days of early rising, walking, sitting, and noble silence. I actually enjoyed the days of silence and meditation. It was so good to rest, to not have to do; to have time to sit and think, and to have time to sit and not think; to have time to breathe and let go of some baggage. Maybe this would be the life for me: maybe I should become a nun. I developed my own routine – each night at 6 PM, after meditating in the hall all day, I went up to the temple area to practise walking meditation in the beauty of the temple surrounds under the light of the moon. I would practise between six and eight hours a day. I didn't mind, there was nothing else to do anyway – you weren't even allowed to read a book.

I grew accustomed to sleeping on the floor with a thin mat and some woolly blankets for comfort and most nights I had a good night's sleep. But towards the end of my stay I was sure I'd developed big bruises on the sides of my thighs. Adding to my discomfort was my acquisition of second hand clothes, which no longer felt like such a blessing. The rough cotton pants were giving me thigh burn when I practised walking meditation. They were too big, the excess material constantly rubbed my skin, so I'd have to clutch my pants at the crotch and pull them up while I walked.

Luckily I could hide this under my shawl. But apart from the physical discomfort the days passed easily. Everything was generally fine.

Except, for me, there were two irritations: 1) an obnoxious, arrogant, insensitive, loud, bald, American man and 2), Mai, the nun. The American was easy to work out, just difficult to tolerate. He and I seemed to be the ones practising the most. We practised in the long meditation hall where the dharma talks were held in the mornings after breakfast. As well as sitting in meditation, we practised a Zen walking meditation, moving slowly, placing each foot in a precise pattern, sort of like a Crane when you walked. When I first began to practise there were quite a few people who used the hall. But as the days went on it petered down to just the American man and me, with only the occasional visit from another practitioner. I began to suspect this might have something to do with the American. I did my best to totally ignore him – we weren't permitted to speak, and absolute concentration was needed for walking meditation, so I didn't feel bad about this, but ignoring him was challenging.

Each day he would bound noisily into the room like a Labrador dog, seemingly oblivious to the others in the room or what they were doing – which could only be meditating – and find himself a spot to put down his belongings. Then he would proceed to rustle around in his plastic bag, sigh and groan, rustle around in his plastic bag again, sigh and groan some more, and continue to carry on in this way until he felt ready to begin. When you are walking with your feet in a very particular placement pattern, this can be very disturbing. And as much as you want to tell him to *Shut the Fuck Up*, it's not on the agenda. Instead you just have to breathe, centre and continue on. Try as he might, if he was trying, he never got a rise out of me. Each day I went to do my practice he would be there.

Sitting next to him at meals was also trying. I never sat next to him willingly, but he seemed to be constantly in my orbit, like a moth circling a flame. It appeared this man could do nothing in 'noble silence.' Days one, two, three, and four, there was no change in me: I COULDN'T STAND HIM. Even when he talked to our teacher he was loud and self absorbed. On day five I noticed a slight shift: I'm appreciative that he's in the room because this means there is someone else to keep me motivated in my practice. I notice he's also starting to mellow. A space of quiet acceptance is beginning to open between us.

My feet have become calloused from all the walking. I have a rash on my inner thighs from the pants rubbing all the time. My body is tired from sleeping on the floor and constantly being cold and, I have flea bites all over me from various animals I've befriended at the temple. One day, in an effort to help myself feel better, I even went so far as to ask the teacher if I could vacuum the hall. I hate vacuuming, but I couldn't help it, the floor was filthy. I knew I would vacuum the floor, and he, the American, wouldn't even notice or appreciate it. He was a man after all. Nevertheless, I welcome his presence in the room: by day six I'm actually glad he's there.

Then on day seven, as we passed each other at breakfast, he looked at me and smiled. The miracle was, I smiled back. I was no longer irritated by his presence: the ego had been defeated, the battle won, and a new awareness shone through.

Sar-fir-ink

Not so with the Mai though. She was a sickly looking, thin, frail, waif of a woman, with a working class British accent, who was very into 'sar-fir-ink' and, for me, she was proving to be tricky. One morning she pulled me aside asking if she could confide in me regarding the 4.30 AM 'loving kindness meditation.' Each morning we would start the practise by contemplating and breathing in the 'sar-fir-ink' of others. Having put this meditation practice together herself she wasn't fully confident with how it was going. Interested that she'd asked me, I said 'it was fine', and then suggested a few modifications which she gladly took on board.

In truth though, while I'd been at the meditation session that morning, I'd thought that for me, it was a total waste of time. It was too difficult to sit still. I kept feeling things, real, not imagined, crawling on my skin. The cat kept jumping up and playing with the digital timer around my neck, making me stiffling giggles, and my stomach was constantly complaining about the fact that it hadn't been fed for close to 24 hours.

I was way too focused on my own 'sar-fir-ink' to be able to do anything for the suffering of others. For Mai loving kindness was about 'sar-fir-ink.' In fact the more I got to know Mai, the more I realised everything for her was about 'sar-fir-ink.' Personally, I don't think I have a hard heart when it comes to others' suffering, but I

was beginning to doubt her capacity as a spiritual teacher and to seriously question the validity of starting each new day with this particular focus.

My insight into Mai came on the second last day of the retreat. It was Buddha day again and the Buddhist clergy were shaving their heads. Mai asked me if I would do her a favour and shave her head, adding this act would earn me merit. The opportunity to shave her head didn't thrill me at all, and I wasn't interested in earning merit, but she implored me, stressing she couldn't do it very well on her own. Feeling obligated to help, I finally agreed.

Pleased, Mai presented me with a hand held blade razor. This seemed strange to me. I asked her why she didn't have an electric one. Apparently a monk had made the same suggestion to her, but Mai didn't think this warranted enough 'sar-fir-ink.' Not convinced by her reasoning I began to approach the task at hand, cautiously and slowly. I'd never shaved someone's head before and her hair was almost an inch long. I found it very difficult to do well. Every time I nicked her it was me who cringed. I really didn't want to do this. As I lathered her head with shaving cream, I tried imagining I was barber in the Wild West, confident and skilful with the blade, but the cream was too thick and the blade too blunt and no amount of imagination could make up for a real lack of skill and a general uneasiness about what I was doing.

About half way through the process I had to leave to attend my seven minute session with the teacher. I suggested to Mai that she should go and rinse her head to get the shaving cream and the loose hair out, saying I would finish it when I came back. She agreed. I went upstairs to talk with the teacher, a welcome relief from the task at hand. When I came back Mai was just coming out the bathroom. Her head wrapped in a towel. She sat down, unwound the towel and triumphantly said 'I tried to do some myself.' Shocked, I took a quick step backward. It felt like I'd just walked into a psych ward and was looking at a self-harmer: tufts of hair stuck out of an otherwise bald skull, covered in nicks, cuts, and blood. The whole thing looked gross and painful.

Looking her in the eye, I said, 'Where in the literature does the Buddha say to hurt yourself?' She couldn't answer. I felt somewhat cross with her. I'd been so careful, and in just seven minutes she'd recklessly lacerated her own head. Reluctantly I picked up the razor to finish the job. Trying to avoid the damage I

started at the back of her head. The next thing I knew she had tears streaming down her face. I'd obviously touched a nerve in more ways than one.

I spent the next half an hour counselling her, stressing she had to be kind to herself. For the best part of two years Mai had been sleeping with an array of hungry animals she'd adopted, in a tiny cold room near the kitchen. Every day she was surrounded by Thais who didn't speak English and Westerners who weren't permitted to talk. She didn't talk to anyone except to guide the meditation practice and, according to her, nuns were considered very lowly so she rarely enjoyed fellowship with any of the monks. I thought she must be incredibly lonely and suggested that maybe it was time to think about going home. She replied, saying she had been thinking about returning home. 'Maybe it was time'. I lay my hands on her head for comfort, suggesting she rub oil into her head and then leave it alone. I definitely wasn't going to do any more.

I took my leave and went back to my room to rest, only to be met in the hallway by young woman in her fourth day of retreat who had become highly distressed. She couldn't tolerate the food offered at the Wat and was now very low with hunger, loneliness and isolation. I spent the next hour bringing her to a point of emotional safety, until she felt strong enough to go outside the temple and get some food that she could actually stomach. My time in retreat was coming to close and I was glad I'd be leaving soon. Everything was beginning to feel harsh and hard.

The next morning I participated in a closing ceremony with two Vipassana graduates who'd done the whole 21 days. They were both very proud and excited by their achievements, and now, much to the teachers' displeasure, couldn't stop talking. We went through the ceremony and then started to say our goodbyes.

Mai didn't look at me for a while, then she came over and said, 'I woke up feeling a little groggy this morning and you know when you laid your hands on my head... well there are reiki points that connect to ... and when you touched my head it must have opened up the channel that ...' I could barely believe what I was hearing. When she had wept and told me how she felt it was probably the first time she'd gotten real with herself in years. Now, I listened astonished, as she spiritualised her experience, trying to protect a fragile sense of self hiding behind her long white robes. I had never seen the defence of denial so clearly before. She couldn't or

wouldn't feel the existential pain of her current situation. I thanked Mai for my time at the temple then walked away a little stunned. It really was time for me to leave.

What I didn't realise though, because I'd been so engrossed in my meditation, was that I'd mixed up the days. It was only after I'd packed my belongings and handed back the key to my room that it dawned on me that I was leaving a day early with nowhere to go. I'd planned to travel on to Pia for a yoga retreat after leaving the Wat and couldn't get there until the following morning, but it had got to the point where I felt I had to leave so I just trusted that things would work out and left.

But when I got to the bottom of the temple steps and was then faced with the reality of the big wide world and no accommodation I realised the best option was to go back and see if my room was still available. Reluctantly I returned. Luckily my room was still unoccupied so I paid for another night. But I didn't wear the white clothes again. Instead I dropped off my backpack and then went to the park opposite the temple grounds. I had a foot massage, drank coffee, ate delicious food, read a book, wrote postcards and enjoyed my day- looking forward to my 'release' the following morning and, the even greater release of having to consider becoming a nun.

I left the temple the following morning and travelled to the yoga retreat in Pia. Along with some of the most incredible yogis I've ever met I practised asanas five hours a day. Physically I'd gone from one extreme to the other. At night I stayed in a little hut on the elephant farm next to the retreat and bathed in my own natural hot springs bathtub. After the retreat I caught the train down south, rented a motorbike, visited the Tiger temple in Kanchanaburi and walked over the bridge at the River Kwai.

At the end of my Thai holiday I caught a plane to Hong Kong, from where I'd catch the ferry to the Chinese mainland. Hong Kong was a flurry of consumerism. Within an hour of my arrival the Indian tailors had managed to pull me in to their shops with '*Madam, Madam come my shop.*' They saw me coming. I left Hong Kong two days later with a woollen suit, which, they assured me, I would need to wear in Southern China.

From zero to hero

I sat on the ferry contemplating the next year of my life, trying to keep an open mind, hoping my prejudices would prove false. There were a lot of things about Chinese culture I didn't like. I'd taken the job because it was easy, not because I had any burning desire to live in China.

Macca, an Australian who taught at the University, was coming to meet me at the Ferry terminal. I was curious to see what he looked like, thinking, 'You just never know.' I was the last one to pass through customs. Macca was standing waiting for me. Within ten minutes of meeting him, I knew. I guessed he'd been curious about me too because there was a general sense of disappointment between us when we met.

We hopped into a taxi for the drive to the University. Macca sat in the front with the driver; I sat in the back behind him. And so began my welcome to misery. Macca was coming off a three day bender, sleep deprived, hung-over and broke: he'd been across the border to the races in Macau, and blown his money. Frustrated and sick he was in no mood for polite interactions and expressed this continually to the Chinese cab driver (who didn't understand English), calling him a 'farkin Chinese idiot' and a 'dumb fuck', demanding that he 'farkin well hurry up.' The driver might not have known what he was saying, but I did. By the time we got to our destination I felt like someone had thrown up on me.

Macca was my immediate neighbour. He was either on a bender or coming off one. A stereotypical ocker male— every second word was 'fark'- 'farkin this' and 'farkin that'. He drank hard, smoked dope, gambled, womanised (when he could) and kept a supply of porn on his computer. Often I'd hear him arrive home well after midnight, drunk, cursing the guards, or trying to kick in the door to his apartment because he'd lost his key and couldn't open it. He was going mad with alcoholism, but true to alcoholic form, thought he didn't have a problem.

He'd avoided the damage of a failed marriage and long term unemployment by leaving Australia. In China he got what he wanted, when he wanted it. Did what he wanted, when he wanted to. The things he could get away with in China were not things he would get away with in Australia. His only responsibility here was to turn up and teach. Added to his status as a western teacher, was the fact that he played guitar. In China he was a minor celebrity. He'd gone from zero to hero: self-

confident, socially empowered, and sexually attractive, and he gladly bought into his own bullshit. He'd been living in China for five years and was 'happy as a pig in shit'. Macca was big on all things Australian, and taught slang in the classroom. The students loved him. I tried. The more homesick I became the more I appreciated him.

The other western teacher at the University was Morris; a Jewish New Yorker who'd lost a large sum of money on the stock market and was deeply depressed. He'd had it pretty rough. Both his mother and sister had been mentally ill; his sister suicided, by cutting not only her wrists, but her throat as well. His mother had asked Morris to euthanise her, and as far as I know, he did. Not surprisingly, he'd had two suicide attempts himself.

After losing all the money he'd inherited, the only thing that gave his life meaning was music. He played classical piano and musically was right in his element in China; he loved the food and, felt that for him, the added bonus of living in China was the affordability, and availability, of the prostitutes.

TIC (This is China)

Most Tuesdays, after teaching, I'd have dinner with Morris. I was struggling to stay and honor my contract. Morris exclaimed, 'It sounds like China doesn't agree with you?' He wasn't wrong: China and I were not a good combination. I was slowly going crazy. I didn't like the culture, hated the government, and couldn't stomach the food. It was Groundhog Day over and over: pollution, grey skies, chaos, humidity, faceless masses, endless traffic, glitzy shopping centres and constant isolation.

All I could think for the first couple of weeks was, *What have I done?* Every night I had a recurring dream - I had to leave my house before I had time to get all my belongings out, or find somewhere to live and, there was nowhere to move on to. I'd wake up tired, disoriented, restless and anxious, and then realise I was in China. It was another day. I couldn't go home: themes of dispossession and homelessness played nightly like a broken record.

The artist in me was dying a painful death in China. The deeper I sank into the isolation, the more I closed down. This was the first time in over 20 years I didn't create, didn't paint, didn't write, didn't play my guitar, and didn't sing. I had no social life, unless I wanted to spend time with Morris or Macca, so spent most of my time either teaching English, sleeping, smoking cheap cigarettes or watching DVD's. For

me this was unnatural: it was akin to criminal behaviour, especially because normally I didn't smoke.

Yonten's journey back to Tibet

I still hadn't heard from Yonten and could only hope that he'd made it back home safely. Tenzin was my only contact in China. I called him for his birthday. He was still living with his family in Tibet. His journey from Tibet to India and back again had been very different from the other stories I'd heard. While I'd been living in Dharamasla, I asked him if he'd walked across the Himalayas to India like the others. He looked at me with surprise, and grinning said 'No, I caught the bus.' The tone in his voice implied he wasn't interested in anything that would have been that difficult. I didn't understand how the journey could be so arduous for one and not the other, but assumed he must have had the necessary paper work. We chatted for a while, and I asked him to call me occasionally, saying I'd appreciate having someone to talk to. He assured me he would, but I didn't hear from him, and I didn't call again.

The only thing that kept me obligating my contract was the dream of travelling to Tibet. Yonten and I often joked about me meeting his family once he got home to Tibet. I'd assured him one day I would, but had no idea how I would find my way to the Tibetan grasslands. Living in China at least, brought me one step closer.

I'd been living in China for almost four months before I finally heard from Yonten. He'd made it home safely; his whole family had cried with relief. Now he was teaching English to the children in his village. He sent me a long email telling me about his journey.

When he'd written and told me he had the documents he hadn't been entirely honest about how he'd procured them. After months of trying to get border documents legally both Yonten and his father had failed. His family were extremely sad and distressed and Yonten was losing hope. One of his friends came to his aid offering him enough money to buy back a border document from someone who had already been to Lhasa and had crossed the border back into Nepal. He would also have to pay the bribe to a border guide and a traffic officer as well. Yonten was desperate enough to accept his help.

They managed to get a used document erase the original name, write Yonten`s name on it instead and changed the photo. Yonten called his father and told him that because he couldn`t get the document he wouldn`t try and return without it, because he knew that if he got caught and went to jail his family would be very upset. He told his father he`d decided to return to India and wait there until he could get the correct documents. Thinking he was returning to India, his father accepted what Yonten had told him. This would have been at the same time Yonten had emailed me telling me he had the documents and was going to cross the border. Neither his family nor I were aware of the actual circumstances. In his email to me Yonten wrote:

I left Nepal in a car with some other people around 3am and we got close to the border around 4:00pm. Then I walked in the High Mountains for about 7 hours. After that we got to the border river. Sometimes we had to walk by holding a rope. We were on rocks as high as a second floor building. If you slipped you would die. Fortunately, the river that we needed to cross was not as big and strong as it is in the summer. We crossed it by a bridge made of one single tree, it was great fear. It was around 11:00 pm when I got to Zhang mu, a small town on the Tibetan side of the border. When I was close to a street light I could see that all my clothes were very dirty, so I threw away my jacket and made myself clean. I was very thirsty, so I bought a Coca-Cola and walked through the town while I drank it. I was following my guide from quite faraway and he took me to a hotel. He wanted to let me stay there for the night but I didn't think that was a good idea. I know that some times in the night the police check all the hotels and guesthouse. So I told my guide thanks for everything and that I would go somewhere by myself and I said good bye to him...

Yonten then called a friend in Lhasa who gave him the number of someone in the town who would put him up for the night. The next morning this person arranged for Yonten to travel by car to Lhasa with three others: the driver, a girl, and an officer from the Chinese Army. According to Yonten the girl disembarked at Nyilam mu, the next town, which was also the first check point. Fortunately because the army officer was a Captain, apart from checking the

driver's license, the police and other members of the military didn't check any other documents and let them through:

I was very happy after I know that. The army captain told me that he worked in Lhasa for 8 years and 2 years at the border. He was going to Chengdu to see his wife and daughter on his winter holiday of one month. I had a little false speech to the army officer and the driver. I told them that I was selling Yak butter in Lhasa and one of my friends borrowed money and he didn't give it back to me on the time. So, I had gone to his shop in Zhang mu to get it back, but when I got there he didn't have it all yet. I am sorry for the lie, but they believe me. In Tingri we had noodle for lunch and the army captain paid the bill for all three of us.

At the second check point one army officer came to our car. First he paid respect to the captain and then came to me and knocked on the window and asked me for the border document and ID. I put my ID on the fake border document and gave it to him; fortunately he didn't open the border document. He looked on my ID for a while and then he handed it back to me. Of course, I was happy about it, but there was one last check point in Ls Ze.

When we got to the last check point it was getting dark. Normally at this last check point they seriously check the documents and many people are stopped there. I was nervous and prayed to the lamas and protectors from my heart. Our driver went to show his driver's license and the document at the office and I stayed in the car with the army officer. One man dressed in normal clothes came over to our car. First he showed respect to the army officer and then he asked me "Do you have the documents"? I said, yes, and tried to get them out from my pocket. He said, "Ok, good if you have them, Go" Wow! I couldn't believe it. I had cleared all the check points without any problems!!!

It was about 10:00pm when we got to Shiga Tse (the second biggest town in Tibet). The army captain told us he knew a good restaurant and

we went to have dinner there. He ordered some different Chinese dishes and again he paid for the expensive dinner. I was so happy for everything. Then we drove to the Lhasa airport for the army captain to catch his plane and he said good bye.

I was astounded to hear that he'd travelled in a car with a Chinese Army Officer and had been shown kindness. It didn't make sense to me. Not the fact that the officer had been kind, this only highlighted what so many of us believe – that it's the government and the politics, not the people – but that he was in a car with an officer from the Chinese army in the first place. I would have been beside myself with anxiety. I guess he was too by the way he described it:

It was around 3 am when I got to Lhasa. I paid the driver and said good bye to him. I booked a room and I was happy, over the moon and just shouted Yeahhhhhhh in the room and then I slept. Next morning I called my father. He didn't believe me at first. Then he was happy and cried. I met my old friend in Lhasa. He was very happy to see me again and bought me an air ticket to Chengdu. After three days in Lhasa I flew to Chengdu.

The next day I went back to Ruo er gai to my home. Finally, I was able to meet my dear parents, sister and brother, my cousins, and see my beautiful grassland, and lovely Yak and allllllllll,,,,,,, Your student Yonten

I was so happy that he had made it home safely and determined that I too would make it to Tibet.

Getting a permit

Not long after receiving the email Yonten called me. I was overjoyed to hear from him. We discussed the possibility of me travelling to Tibet in the summer holidays, to visit him and meet his family. He was beside himself with happiness with the prospect that I was coming, and so was I. From the time I was a small girl I'd been dreaming of Tibet. In the recesses of my mind and imagination, Tibet was an ancient, mystical, almost mythical Kingdom, nestled secretly away in the Himalayas.

My time living in India with the Tibetan community and my knowledge of the political climate had tempered my imagination somewhat, but deep in my heart there was still a sense of magic associated with the word Tibet, and the image of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. It was a long way from my place of birth in the Australian high country; in fact, it was a long way from my place of residence in China.

I was living in Zhuhai, a 'small' city in the South East, reportedly the cleanest and greenest city in China. Upon my arrival I'd thought if this is as good as it gets, then there's no hope: the pollution was so overwhelming. To get to Lhasa from Zhuhai, was a 59 hour train journey (three nights and two days). I would have to take a bus to Guangzhou and then board the train to travel north. It all sounded pretty straight forward, but nothing in China ever is. Everything is bound up in bureaucratic red tape and procedures, and it seems, protocol changes from one part of China to another.

All the guide books indicated that I needed a permit to enter the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Lhasa. Problem was, no one in the South of China had heard about the permit and, I didn't know what difficulties I would face if I was found on the train without one. Some travel agents didn't even know where Lhasa was. Added to this, was the irritation that you couldn't buy a train ticket until two days before departure, and there was no assurance that you would get one. I was hesitant to make hotel bookings and other plans if I couldn't guarantee dates, or if I'd actually be there.

The ignorance and lack of information around the protocol for travelling through China to Tibet was fuelling my anxiety. I definitely didn't want to do anything that might land me in the hands of the Chinese authorities. I had visions of being hauled off the train and taken to a Chinese jail simply because I didn't have a permit and wasn't able to explain to them I would happily have acquired a permit if only someone in THIS BLOODY COUNTRY knew where and how to get one. I was beside myself with the absurdity of the situation.

My dream of going to Tibet was thwarted with obstacles. Because I didn't speak Chinese I couldn't talk with any of the travel agents, railway workers, or hotel managers and was totally reliant upon the young Chinese teachers' assistant who'd been assigned to look after the needs of the Western teachers for all my arrangements. She was doing everything she could to meet my demands, but the

one thing she couldn't do was bring a logical order to the system. For her the system 'was what it was' and you didn't question it. For me trying to navigate the system felt like being in a Spanish run of the bulls; every barrier to effective communication stung like a dart, piercing my hide, making me even more frustrated and intolerant of the situation. I couldn't bear the thought of having come so far and then having to forfeit my dream because I was in a country that didn't lend itself to logic and reason. Equally I couldn't stand the thought of not being able to get out of Zhuhai. When Mao swept China clean of culture, he did a damn good job. Zhuhai had been built on 150 kilometres of cleared land. Everything that had gone before had been bulldozed and flattened to make way for the new. There was no heart and soul, no connection to anything but capitalistic roots and the American dream, disguised behind the facade of communism. I rarely saw a blue sky and the constant humidity, isolation, and the gruelling teaching routine was exhausting. I desperately wanted a break.

It was only two weeks until the summer holidays and I still didn't know if I was going to go to Tibet or not. I'd try emailing Yonten a few times but the internet connection had failed. Finally, a week before my projected departure date, an email arrived. He'd been trying to contact me also. He'd lost his mobile phone and consequently my contact and there had been no internet in his region. Like me he was happy to have finally made contact.

He'd been studying to become an official tour guide. He needed a certificate from the Chinese Government before he had permission to take tourists into areas of Tibet inside the TAR. Yonten wrote:

I took the tour guide exam and I got the certificate. I know that you will be happy to hear this piece of good news from me. Now I am in Langmusi as a tour guide but I don't think there are many tourists who need a guide. But I came here only five days ago. I will let you know how it goes. Please let me know when you can come to my home town and about you. Ok dear that's all for now. I will wait for you to meet in my area. Yours sincerely Yonten

The relief was akin to warm oil running down my shoulders. We had finally regained contact. I called him and explained the situation. He didn't know where I could get a permit either, but had a friend who was a travel agent. He would contact

him. Yonten did his best to get information via the Tibetan/Chinese grapevine but so far nothing solid had manifested.

Impulse

I couldn't envisage going to Tibet and not seeing Tenzin when I was there. This would feel too strange and avoidant. I had a gut feeling he was actually in India but on impulse called him a week before I was planning to leave. He was in Tibet and ecstatic to hear from me and asking why I hadn't called him. To which I responded, 'Why haven't you called me?' He replied that he'd lost my number but had been trying to email me, but my email address wouldn't work. I knew he was telling the truth because I'd changed my account in China and hadn't let him know. I hadn't seen Tenzin since the debacle in Goa and was still guarded but told him I was about to travel to Tibet and was planning to visit Xiahe, would he like to catch up? He was overjoyed that I was coming and said 'Yes, yes please come to see me.' Because I was traveling to Xiahe whether I caught up with Tenzin or not I remained largely detached. Then he called me the following night asking me to come to his village and stay with his family. I didn't actually know where he lived, but I felt somewhat honoured, to be invited. I accepted his offer thinking I would probably be the first Westerner to visit his family. Warily, I asked if he had a girlfriend. Not that I was thinking of getting involved. I simply didn't want any more dramas. He replied, 'No, there was a Tibetan girl but it's over'.

I still hadn't been able to get a permit to enter the TAR by the time the day came for me to leave. I decided I'd just board the train in faith – assuming that I would actually be allowed to get on the train. I was breaking up the 59 hour train journey by disembarking in Lanzhou, in Gansu province (formally Amdo: Land of the Snows). Yonten was meeting me at the train station and then we were catching a bus to Langmusi, the small village where he was now living. After spending a couple of days in Langmusi we would then travel to the grasslands to meet his family.

I ached for the company of the Tibetan people. No matter how much the Chinese Government tries to convince the world that Tibet and the Tibetan people are actually Chinese, the reality is, they are not. Tibetans have a way about them that links them heart and soul with heaven and earth simultaneously: their roots reach down deep into the earth and their spirit high up into the heavens. There is a

sense of gentleness, strength, playfulness, grace, humility and dignity about them that I find very endearing. They share physical characteristics with the Navajo Indians of North America. Both peoples live in the same latitude on the earth and share similarly beautiful strong facial bones and long black hair. Their way of life, relationships with their animals, connection to the land and commitment to cultivating an inner life, complement each others' cultural and spiritual tapestry.

Catching the train to Lhasa

I caught the bus from Zhuhai to Guangzhou, where I would board the train for Lhasa. I was expecting to leave one city and then enter another, but it never happened. Cities sprawled out for mile upon mile, with little or no distinguishing features between them. We passed the same row upon row of apartment buildings, offices, and shopping complexes – the only thing that changed was the density of the development.

I was really looking forward to catching the train, envisaging a journey with breathtaking scenery taken in laid back comfort. The reality was I scored the top bunk in a berth of four, housing a family of five and, a crying baby. Worn out from the past twenty weeks of teaching I was happy to just lie on the top bunk and sleep. In the morning I climbed down and looked out the cabin window. The scenery appeared not have change there was nothing new to see: the buildings hadn't stopped. There was nowhere for me to sit .The Chinese family had settled in and now had a number of visitors in the cabin. I climbed back on to my bunk and spent the rest of the morning dozing.

Apart from a few snacks, I hadn't had a meal for 24 hours and was ready to eat. I was the only Westerner on the train: nobody else spoke English. It was now lunch time so I braved my way to the buffet car to get some food. Although there was a language barrier, I thought ordering a meal, being a basic interaction, would be a straight forward process. I was wrong. My presence in the dining car appeared to be unwelcome; try as I might I couldn't get the waiters to give me a menu. They kept ignoring me. There wasn't a lot of food in China I liked to eat, or could stomach, but one dish I'd grown accustomed to was fried tomatoes and eggs, served with a bowl of white rice. I could see that this was on the menu because the family behind me had some on their table. I got up slowly, and as diplomatically as I could, pointed to

the dish to indicate that this was what I wanted. The family appeared amused by my behaviour, the waiter indignant. I was starting to lose patience and in loud English, knowing they couldn't understand me, expressed my dissatisfaction with the service. The scenario went on for quite some time with voices rising in volume from both sides. I was almost beside myself with frustration and hunger. My Western logic couldn't grasp the problem: what was the issue with ordering something to eat in the dining car? There was obviously some problem that I wasn't aware of.

Eventually I tired of the struggle and sat back down, poured myself a glass of green tea and gazed out the window, at what was now a landscape of cropped fields. The waiter must have tired as well; miraculously a plate of tomatoes and eggs arrived at my table. The whole carriage was amused and proceeded to watch with interest while I ate my meal. I couldn't understand why it was all such a big deal? Then when I tried to pay, the confusion started again: they had no idea what to charge me. I decided the easiest way to deal with the situation was not to deal with it. Confused but fed, I made my way back to the top bunk. Several hours and numerous visits to an incredibly overused and foul smelling toilet, later, I wished I'd never eaten the food.

Months later, when I was back in Zhuhai I found out what the problem had been. I had posed all sorts of problems for the staff on the train for a number of reasons. The first being that there was a set menu, meals had be ordered and paid for before the journey began. Secondly meals are not considered to consist of one dish only. My insistence to eat just the one dish was based on past experiences of travel in the West and in other countries. It made sense to me, but it didn't make sense to them. I wasn't fitting nicely into their social order and cultural customs, and this had caused confusion.

The concept of someone travelling alone and going to the dining car to order food, which hadn't been previously paid for, had yet to enter the realm of possibilities for tourist travel in China. I was acting outside the realm of the natural order of things, and this was more than they could deal with at the time. I don't know whether it was kudos to me for persisting, or kudos to them for bending, but our little incident was nonetheless, a tiny breakthrough in modern inter-race relations.

Reunion

It'd been a couple of years since I'd last seen Yonten. We'd both been on life changing journeys since then. Bleary-eyed and tired from the long hours of travel, I stood in the middle of the square outside Lanzhou station waiting for him. I was nervous that amongst the hordes of people at the station I might not find him. If he didn't turn up I didn't know what I would do. I was in the far north now, and didn't know the terrain or speak the language. My phone rang. I answered and heard his cheery voice: 'Teacher where are you'? Within five minutes he was there: his thick black hair, wild and shaggy, his face, broad, open and smiling. We hugged each other warmly. Then Yonten began to fuss around me protectively, making sure I was OK.

We picked up just where we left off. In his mind I was still his teacher, always to be honoured and respected. For me it felt quite strange. I was dependent on his knowledge now; it was I who was the student. It would take seven or eight hours to get to Langmusi. Yonten had arranged for a taxi to take us on the first leg of the journey. It was only 6am when we set off, and we both fell asleep. I didn't wake until we pulled in to a roadside restaurant for lunch. The landscape had changed dramatically from the South. There was no humidity in the air; just a hot sun in a blue sky and the earth was hard, dusty, and dry.

I was still paying the price for eating the food on the train and, I needed to go to the toilet badly. There was a pay toilet available at the back of the restaurant. I went to avail myself of the service but nothing could have prepared me for how disgustingly filthy and unsanitary it was. Why people had to pay for the privilege of squatting on top of a rectangular hole, cut in to slab of concrete that sat a couple of metres off the ground and was covered by the splatterings' and remnants of faeces, urine, blood and soiled paper was beyond me; but I had no other option. Trying to breathe as little as possible, I dry retched my way through the experience.

The restaurant was a stop for transport drivers and locals. I noticed a few more Tibetan people in the sea of faces. Lunch was brought to the table; a traditional bowl of tenthuk, with yak. Yonten ate with gusto. I wasn't sure if I could hold anything down and wasn't yet ready to eat yak. I slurped the soup and ate a few noodles, giving the rest to Yonten, assuring him that – 'yes, I was fine', and 'yes I liked it', and 'yes it was very good'.

After lunch we exchanged our taxi for a seat on the local bus. Both of us had woken up by now and were cheerful and chatty I was starting to feel the thrill of travelling in Tibet. We weren't in the Himalayan region; we were heading for the Tibetan grasslands, home to some of Tibet's oldest monasteries, nomads, mastiff dogs and yaks. The countryside had become rich with crops. Fields of yellow canola flowers spread out on both sides of the road creating the effect that a green and yellow patchwork quilt had been draped across the landscape. A few hours into the drive the hills began to give way to a more mountainous terrain. We travelled through valleys, driving alongside mountain streams, and pastures peppered with sheep, goats and yaks. My spirit danced as Yonten sang songs from his heartland welcoming me to Tibet. The intense isolation I'd been experiencing for months began to fade. I felt at home, back with a people I loved and with whom I belonged, back with the mountains, the animals and the majesty of nature. It was just starting to get dark by the time we arrived in Langmusi. Yonten took me straight to my hotel to rest, telling me to sleep well and that he'd collect me in the morning.

Langmusi

Cheerful as always, he arrived early to collect me for breakfast and then a tour around the town. We went to Leisha's, a well worn tourist café, to eat. Leisha's is a favorite with the backpacker crowds, boasting massive yak burgers, homemade apple pie, banana pancakes and coffee.

Leisha's is run by Chinese Muslims whose lifestyle sits somewhere between the Han Chinese and the Tibetans. The café walls were covered with paraphernalia and messages written by tourists from all over the globe recommending it. The familiar hint of counter-culture gave the café an edge and sense of comfort all at the same time. The relief I felt being able to breathe fresh air, see a blue sky, and eat food that wasn't saturated in oil or laced with MSG, felt akin to receiving the all clear after a mammogram: there was life beyond Zhuhai and it would go on.

After breakfast we made our way past an array of cafés, restaurants and tiny shops filled with Tibetan jewellery and souvenirs. Others sold Chinese manufactured Western style clothing and everyday items. Although the area is now called Gansu province and is recognised as part of China, we were not in China: we were in Amdo, the grasslands of Tibet. Langmusi is a small Tibetan village with two

Lamaseries cradled in a mountainous valley, straddling the border between Sichuan and Gansu.

The familiar maroon of monks' robes flecked the streets and the surrounding hills. Clad in traditional chubas Tibetan nomads rode their motorbikes down Langmusi's one main street – their wild black hair flying free in the wind, their mouths, and noses covered with whatever garment they had procured to protect them from the wind, the sun, and the cold. Tibetan women walked slowly, carrying loads of supplies, children, or both.

Yonten was almost beside himself with the thought of showing me his former monastery and introducing me to his friends. He led me away from the road down a laneway to a door at the entrance of a small quadrangle. He opened the door and we stepped inside. A number of monks lived in rooms built around its circumference. We were visiting Yonten's former classmates from the monastery. They'd continued in the monastic order: he hadn't. We stepped inside a small room. Two monks sat on cushions on the floor in front of a large, open, ornately painted wooden window. Their faces round, open, beaming brightly, like beacons on a foggy ocean. The room was small and dim. They didn't speak English but I was more than happy just to be sitting in their presence. Yonten would translate if we wanted to talk.

Dried yak dung had been stacked in a neat pile beside the door to burn in the fire. Freshly washed maroon robes were draped over logs of wood drying in the sun. Inside the room there was a small Tibetan stove, two low lying mattresses covered with traditional Tibetan rugs, and items needed for prayer, meditation, devotion and study – sacred texts, prayer wheels, butter sculptures, oil candles, and malas. Pictures of His Holiness and other high lamas had been placed on shelves around the room.

I was under the impression it was illegal to own or display any pictures of the Dalai Lama in China and that doing so put you at risk of persecution and jail. I was surprised to see them in the open. I knew it wouldn't be possible in Lhasa, but in this case love was stronger than fear. The monks made tea and chatted happily with Yonten. He introduced me as his teacher, and told them I'd helped him with his journey back home to Tibet. As a result they bestowed upon me trust, acceptance, and respect without question. When you are in the presence of evolved people you

can't help but be elevated yourself, which results in either a sense of humility or unworthiness. I found myself swinging between the two.

A black cat slept on the floor beside the window. I sat sipping tea, stroking a white cat lying next to me beside the stove. A fragment of my dream from the previous night flashed through my mind. I'd dreamed about two cats, one black and one white. I couldn't recall any more of the dream, but I was awake enough to realize that I was currently in the daytime version, whatever that might mean.

Kirti monastery

After visiting Yonten's friends we headed off to explore Kirti monastery. The monastery consisted of four colleges. Monks could study esoteric traditions such as Tantra, Tibetan Medicine, Philosophy, or Tibetan Astrology. Yonten had been a member of the Philosophical College. I had the good fortune of being a friend and a guest, rather than a tourist which gave me access to interact with the people on a personal level. On our way to the monastery we passed an older Tibetan woman who was walking with her two daughters, one of them a nun. Yonten introduced me to her as his teacher from India. She immediately invited us to her home for tea and Tibetan bread. Already full from morning tea with the monks I thanked her profusely and declined. Everywhere we went I was greeted with respect, warmth and trust.

We headed up the hill towards the monastery. The antiquity of the white washed walls, and their three tiered temple roof differentiated the monastery buildings from the houses surrounding them. Yonten knew the monastery intimately. He also knew many of the monks who lived, practised and worked there. Although old, the monastery in Langmusi didn't hold the same ancient vibrations as those I'd visited in Ladakh: while time was slowed here, it was constantly threatened by the ever turning wheel of Chinese development.

Yonten began enthusiastically telling me the names of the Thangkas painted on the walls at the front entrance to the meditation hall. Then he darted away, climbing over piles of shoes scattered around the entrance, beckoning for me to follow him. The monks from the philosophical school were inside chanting. Kirti monastery is an arm of the Gelug tradition of Buddhism – the yellow hat sect – a tradition that stresses scholarship, intellectual analysis, and dialectical debate. We sat quietly at the back of the room taking in the array of colour and sound. The only Westerner

and, the only woman present; I knew I was being afforded a rare opportunity that few others would have the chance to experience.

The chanting came to an end and the monks made their way outside to begin debating. Training in debate is one of the heart essences of the Gelukpa School. Although I don't speak Tibetan it all made sense to me. I loved the concept of honing ideas and sharpening your intellectual powers through the process of a throw down in front of your teachers. The maze of young monks debated diligently, while their teachers, wearing their regal yellow hats, walked amongst them nodding in approval. It could have been Plato's Academy in ancient Greece, or a contemporary lecture theatre in the West. This was a ritual dedicated to higher learning.

Typically one monk would present his ideas to a small group of three or four who sat crossed-legged in front of him. They in turn threw back their own retorts and questions. When the monk who was delivering had made his case, he would then slap his right palm against his left, shooting his hand upward and forward signalling 'Touché. It was the Tibetan version of a type of Eminem rap shout out, throw down, an incredible phenomenon to witness set against the background of the village and the mountains surrounding Langmusi.

Next we visited the Tantric section of the monastery. Smaller in size than the Philosophical School, the Tantric gompa appeared magical and foreboding. The front of the building was draped with a black cloth, which had been divided into nine panels. Each panel had a white border and an auspicious symbol, also white, in the centre. The middle panel above the door was decorated with the Dharmachakra, (the wheel of transformation or spiritual change) surrounded by an ornate pear-shaped scroll. On each side of the wheel, deer sat peacefully on top of lotus petal cushions. The deer park at Sarnath was the place Gautama Buddha first taught the Dharma.

The wheel is an ancient Indian symbol of creation, sovereignty and protection. Buddhism adopted the wheel as a symbol of the Buddha's teaching, and the wheel and the deer eventually became the standard emblem for an establishment where the Buddha's teachings are transmitted. Whatever was being transmitted here was highly esoteric. I'd never seen a building like it.

The remaining panels were divided into eight and decorated with four symbols duplicated on opposite sides of the wheel. The knot of eternity had been placed in the centre on to the two outer right hand panels at the top. Next to these, on each

side of the Dharmachakra there was another representation of the golden wheel. The eight spokes of the wheel emanating from the hub represent the Noble Eightfold Path comprising right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, action, effort, mindfulness and concentration. The two lower panels were embroidered with the Chinese symbols for longevity. The lower outer panels depicted a circular representation of the Chinese *shou* symbol: the Chinese god of longevity, Shou-lao. The inner panels depicted two symmetrical *shou* characters, painted in the form of a butterfly, a symbol of transmutation, resurrection and immortality. The intense imagery and the building itself emanated a protective energy – an invisible force field way more effective than the ‘Do not enter’ sign we erect in the West. Captured for a moment, by the image of the deer in the Dharmachakra I was happy to remain outside. I hadn’t thought about my encounter with the deer for some time. In China the deer is a symbol of happiness, longevity and good fortune. Its name in Chinese is a homonym for the word abundance. In China the deer is a symbol for longevity, the word for deer in Chinese is *lu*, which translates to mean income. When both of the meanings are combined the deer represents a prosperous long life. I was up for that, but I had the feeling that the lessons of patience, perseverance, and vigilance associated with the nature of the deer in shamanic cultures were more likely to be apt to me.

A stone in the hole

Yonten called for me to follow him, leading me towards a stream flowing through a small gorge in the valley. The sun was sparkling on the water as monks and villagers braved the cold to wash their clothes. The hues of the colours in the valley were vivid and deep, the maroon of the monks’ robes, draped over green bushes on the river banks, created the effect of a giant strawberry patch.

Yonten took me to a rock face at the side of the hill in the gorge entrance. There was a semi-hidden hole in its ledge. Tradition has it that, if you can throw a small stone into the hole and it doesn’t bounce out again, then you will go to Lhasa. Lhasa literally means ‘place of the gods’. It was considered very auspicious to travel there. Lhasa was the destination point of pilgrimage for the Tibetan People: the site of the Potala Palace, home of the Dalai Lama before he was forced into exile. I was going to land a stone in the hole, determined to go to Lhasa. It took me three tries.

Yonten laughed with happiness, assuring me I would now travel to Lhasa. So far I'd had no success in securing a permit. All attempts to legally obtain one had failed. My hope now lay with the black market. Yonten had his friend in Xinning on the case – who had a friend, who had a friend, who had a friend. We contacted him daily, but things were not looking great.

Yonten revelled in sharing his place of origin and, love for all things Tibetan: seeing it all through my eyes, he too had become a visitor. Pointing to a cliff-face high above, towards the head of the valley, he said that it was the site for Sky Burials and asked if I wanted to go there. I felt a surge of fear and said no, I didn't. He didn't either – we both found it uninviting. We spent the rest of the afternoon wandering along the river amongst trees decorated with prayer flags, enjoying each other's company, taking photos and sharing stories – building bridges between our worlds, both past and present.

Our walk culminated in a photo session posing on top of a tiger statue erected outside a cave on the bank of the White Dragon River. According to local legend the cave was once a tiger's den. The tiger had been a dangerous predator until the first Lama arrived to live in the monastery. He changed the tiger's mind, and instead of being a dangerous predator to the people living in the village, the tiger became their protector.

One more gompa

On our way back to town we visited one last gompa for the day. It sat alone, high up on a hill, on the outskirts of the town. The walls of the gompa were made from red clay and hadn't been painted white. Juniper smouldered in an altar at the entrance and thousands of Wind Horses lay scattered on the ground around it. A kora, well worn by the constant pilgrimage of many feet, ran around the outside. Two square repository's', stood to the left and right of the altar. They were around two meters high, made from red brick, painted with the standard Tibetan design of white circles, meticulously placed in equal measure, on a background of black lines bordered with mustard yellow. Inside were an array of spears – long poles with elaborately fashioned, brightly painted wooden sheaths, which looked like feathers, on their ends. Prayer flags had been draped around the spears. The Tibetan people do this to symbolise that they are a peaceful people. They place their spears high on the

hills so everyone can see they don't carry weapons. Every year a ritual is held to appease the Mountain Home Gods, and the spears are dutifully deposited in a brick repository on the hill tops.

The panels on the door at the entrance to the gumpa were painted with a wrathful, sword-wielding deity. Most of the bottom half of the painting had worn off. A white silk khata hung from a large brass ring on each door. Above the door was the golden symbol of the Buddha dharma – the wheel of eternity flanked by deer. One of the doors was slightly ajar. An elderly man came out and walked away. I peered through the opening. To my right I could see a plethora of dead animals hanging from a thick wooden beam in the stable. Each animal had some kind of abnormality. Carcasses of deformed goats, sheep, and yaks – some with two heads – tied with a brightly coloured cloth, hung from the main beam, above a bed of juniper. I asked Yonten if we could go in, but he didn't think it wise. We were both a bit stunned by what we saw. He couldn't explain it, but thought it had something to do with appeasing the wrathful protector painted on the doors at the entrance.

I turned my attention away from the gumpa to look out over the valley. The crest of a gold half-moon, mounted on the top of a Chinese Muslim Mosque, sat magically poised in an azure sky – against the backdrop of green rolling hills and red clay cliffs. The mosque was nestled amongst an array of houses with slate-tiled roofs, each tile held in position by a rock placed on top of it. Muslim Chinese, Han Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists lived here in what looked to be a complementary and peaceful existence. The Tibetan people, although constantly aware of the presence of the Chinese police, seemed to be living a life of relative freedom. Like so much of what is happening in China, most of it was appearances.

Made In China

The next day Yonten and I were travelling to the grasslands to stay with his family. Despite his protests to the contrary, I insisted on buying gifts for his parents. This gave me an excuse to shop, and rummage through the tiny shops of Tibetan wares and artefacts. 'Made in China' was stamped on most of the Tibetan jewellery, art, and handicrafts. I discovered that products, advertised as Tibetan, were actually cheaply manufactured imitations of the genuine article.

I began to notice a trend. Most of the businesses claiming to be Tibetan were actually run by Han Chinese. This was because Tibetan shops attracted the tourist dollar and Langmusi was becoming a destination sought by Chinese and foreign tourists alike. Tibetan culture was gradually being transformed into a Chinese business enterprise. The clothing shops, selling cheap replicas of Western styled clothing, were run by the Tibetans. The bakeries by Muslim Chinese; the restaurants and shops selling everyday items belonged to all three.

Yonten needed to buy supplies for his father, so we went into the Tibetan version of an Aussie disposals store. I busied myself searching through their wares: prayer wheels, malas, vajras, butter lamps, tea pots, and tea cups, while Yonten went about his business. Then we chose gifts for his parents. He decided a special tea cup, one with a lid to keep the tea warm, would be a suitable gift for his father. I was looking at some beautiful Tibetan necklaces and considering buying one for his mother.

Yonten laughed, saying his mother was ugly and probably wouldn't wear it. I scolded him for talking about her this way. He just laughed again. He thought they were all pretty ugly, including him. He began telling me in a half-hearted manner that because of this he didn't think he would ever be able to get a girlfriend and marry. Most of his friends had, but he hadn't! I was horrified to hear him speak about himself in this way, reprimanding and encouraging him at the same time. Yoten was far from ugly. I think he was equating refinement with attractiveness, and couldn't see the beauty of wholeness and purity shining through him. If it hadn't been for the twenty year age gap between us, and the embedded dynamic of student and teacher that existed on our relationship, I would have looked at him very differently. He was 29 years old, and by Tibetan standards was getting on in the marriage stakes. But I knew he would marry and, make an excellent father and husband. I just didn't know when. He still had a long way to go towards ensuring his survival in Tibet.

We ended up buying a red jasper mala for his mother to wear around her neck. After we'd finished shopping Yonten pointed to a small shop near my hotel. He was staying there with his friends and told me to meet him there after I'd rested. I retired to my hotel room and went to find him a few hours later. Yonten was huddled around the computer with a couple of other young men, using the internet. It reminded me of Dharamasla: the internet cafés were always full of young men and young monks:

who much to my amusement spent a large proportion of their day playing war games on the computer.

This wasn't an internet café, there was just one computer. It belonged to Yonten's friend Thundy, he looked slightly different than the others. His hair and his eyes were lighter in colour. He came from a village somewhere in Inner Mongolia. Thundy, Yonten, and Yonten's younger cousin Ackar, lived in the back room, sharing two beds. There was no bathroom and no separate kitchen. Nomads and the odd family member from the grasslands often stayed there as well.

We went across the road to a nondescript restaurant with a Sichuan cuisine and I shouted them all a meal. While we were sitting there, a monk wearing a hat that looked like a very long sun visor came to our table and began chanting. He was offering a blessing in exchange for money. He held up a small cardboard sign, which I was told, said he was chanting to raise money so he could go to Lhasa and fulfil his duty of pilgrimage. Giving money to him would ensure good karma for the giver. I'd never seen a monk beg before.

Langmusi had its share of beggars, and the mentally ill, who had no option but to beg, but I didn't give money – instead I'd buy food for those I could. He held out a tin cup. I was going to give him money, when Yonten stopped me. All the young men at the table indicated to ignore him. I thought this was rather odd behaviour, out of character with their reverence for the monastic. Yonten explained, some beggars dressed like monks to elicit money in the name of good karma, only to then spend it on alcohol and cigarettes. The man in front of me was not a monk.

After we'd eaten we visited another of Yonten's friends. He and his wife ran a small clothing shop and lived in the one room above it. Yonten's friend had gone to Xinning on business, only his wife Kelsang and their baby were there. True to Tibetan hospitality she immediately opened her home to us. Upon hearing I was staying in a hotel, she suggested I should stay with them instead, so I could save some money. There was no spare room, no spare bed, and no bathroom, but Kelsang was happy, and willing, to give up her space on the mattress. Touched, I recognised how much I took for granted, even being able to pay for my own room, my own bed, and my own shower. I graciously declined and returned to my hotel room for the evening.

The grasslands

In the morning we collected bread from the Muslim bakery and a few other fresh food items before heading off to the grasslands. Yonten had arranged for a car and driver to take us. I'm not sure how I thought we were going to get there, but the concept of getting a taxi to visit the nomads on the plains of Tibet didn't quite fit.

We crossed the border into Sichuan, driving for a couple of hours through long valleys formed by rolling hills, speckled with Tibetan farms and clusters of villages. Leaving the valley, we descended onto the plains, bordered by the blue haze of mountains far in the distance. It was wild flower season, but the green plains disguised the multitude of flowers carpeting them. We passed busloads of Chinese tourists taking photos at the 'flower lake'. Yaks, horses, sheep, goats, Tibetan mastiffs, motorbikes, children, and nomads were scattered across the plains. In the sky above us, nimbus clouds, lining up like transport trucks at a weigh bridge, threatened to release their cargo.

Nomads' black hessian tents began to appear in the landscape. Occasionally a white tent broke the formation. It wasn't as I'd expected— beautiful white canvas ornate tents, decorated with royal blue designs of the eight auspicious symbols, and draped in prayer flags. I don't know why I thought a people who lived so close to the earth, and worked so hard to survive, would live in tents like this. I found out that they didn't. These tents were designed and erected for tourists. Occasionally we would pass a small cluster. Generally they were Chinese-owned and served as makeshift tea houses or overnight stops. The Tibetan nomads, on the other hand, lived without adornment.

Yonten became more excited, pointing to a number of tents he'd identified as his family's. I couldn't see anything that differentiated them from any of the other tents, but he could. There were no fences or borders, but there was an unseen order in the layout I had yet to recognise. Each family had their own cluster of tents. The main tent housed the parents and unmarried children, the outer tents the families of their married sons and daughters. Traditionally, unless a woman had married a man from the same village as her father, she would move to her husband's village.

The driver turned off the main road and drove across the plains towards a large black tent, which had a smaller white one erected on one side. The main tent had been erected with strong guy ropes, over which items of clothing were draped to dry,

or for storage. Smoke rose lazily through a metal cylinder – a makeshift chimney poking through the tent roof. As the car bumped its way across the grasslands, people begin to emerge from the tents. Mastiffs raced towards our taxi, barking their protest at the intrusion. A lone nomad rode on a motorbike beside the car escorting us to the tent, swiping wildly with a stick if any of the dogs came too close or challenged his authority.

Amma

Yonten's family stood in a line outside the tent to greet me: his mother, sister, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, cousins and a parade of young children. His older brother was out with the yaks and wouldn't be back until sunset. His father was at the winter house, engaged in prayer, but would return shortly. Although I hadn't met her, I already felt an affinity with Yonten's mother. The gift I'd given him to take home to her when he was in Dharamasla had been lost on the journey, but this didn't matter. What mattered was he'd made it back to his family. I knew his return had lifted a weight of sadness from his mother's heart. It was this internal knowing that I shared.

I didn't know how old his mother was, and chances are nobody else did either. But I guessed she was older than me. I couldn't believe Yonten had called her ugly. She was so beautiful – not in the tradition of advertised beauty, which focuses on external transitory attributes and glamour – but in her presence and in her countenance. Her face was radiant, soft and strong, her eyes deep and steady. Her long black hair was braided into two plaits which were wrapped around her head like a crown. She had a broad open face, with high cheekbones sculptured by the elements. Her cheeks were ruddy red from the sun, the wind, and the chill of the plains. Her body was small and strong, moulded by years of hard labour. I understood why Yonten had steered me away from the more elaborate jewellery I'd thought to buy for her. It would have been completely inappropriate for her lifestyle. This woman didn't attend day spas, hairdressers, upmarket restaurants, dinner parties or the movies. Her life was rooted deeply in the earth of the Tibetan grasslands, with the animals and the elements. The mala we'd bought her was perfect: a rich earth colour, simple and uncomplicated. It complemented her perfectly. I was honoured to be with her, liking and respecting her instantly.

Mastiffs, yaks, nomads and tents

Inside the tent a veritable feast of Tibetan buns, sweets, apples and soft drink had been prepared for my welcome. Yonten's sister and sister-in-law sat shyly in the corner of the tent, next to a meter high pile of yak dung dried then stacked to burn in the fire. Their children and their children's friends sat with them. All eyes were on me. It is a strange phenomenon that in life we can look at each other from such distant perspectives. Often we find nothing special about our own presence, but what is familiar and uninteresting from one person's perspective is unfamiliar and fascinating to the other. I was as mesmerised by them as they were by me.

I didn't know how to situate myself in the tent. I wanted to take photos but felt this would be in bad taste. I wasn't there as a tourist. I was there as a guest of the family, and an honoured one at that. I sat on a blanket mattress next to the little pot belly stove, now blazing with yak dung. Yonten fussed around plying me with bread and soft drink, while his mother busied herself heating up a pot of milk tea. The Tibetan nomads have a unique way of straining their tea – they place a small bunch of twigs in the spout of the teapot, which stops the tea leaves escaping, and adds another flavour to the milk tea, already tempered with smoke from the fire.

The tent was stark – no adornments at all. In one corner, buckets, pots and pans used for milking the yak, making cheese, and cooking, lay strewn on the ground. Behind me there was a pile of blankets, rugs, and a few thin foam, roll out mattresses. There was a small camp bed in the corner at the front left of the tent. A fresh yak hide, the skin still red with blood, lay on the floor beneath it drying. Yonten told me his brother had killed a yak especially for my visit. Beaming, he informed me that that night we would eat yak momos. I was swimming in all sorts of emotions. My self esteem didn't deem my presence worthy. Couldn't they see I was just a western voyeur, seeking the mystery of the unknown, with no deep cultural roots to connect me to any tradition, and no one special. I knew it was important for the family to show their respect and to express their hospitality, but I didn't feel I deserved a yak! I didn't want my visit to impose on the family's resources in any way. Besides, I'd never eaten yak, and would have been happy to have kept things that way.

Tibetan nomadic women work hard all their lives. There are no days off for them. Every day they rise early to milk the yaks and collect the fresh yak dung then spread it out to dry. They rake up the dry dung from the previous day, gather it up

and store it for fuel. They spin yak hair they've collected to make blankets and clothes. They cart heavy buckets of yak milk to the tent and then make butter and cheese. Each day they tend to the children and their men folk. They don't question the demands of labour placed upon them. They just accept their lot and get on with it. Even the cup of tea I was about to enjoy was a product of hard labour. It was the women's job to collect the water daily, from a stream over a kilometre away, and then carry it back to the tent.

Yonten and his mother went to great lengths to impress on me that at night, I was not, under any circumstances, to wander off to the toilet on my own. In fact, even in the daytime I was not to venture too far from the tent and had to carry a stick with me at all times. This was because of the Tibetan Mastiffs. These were not pet dogs, pampered and prized. They were guard dogs; with no qualms about attacking anyone, or anything they perceived to be a threat or an intruder. Tibetan Mastiffs are big dogs. They guard the yaks and their human family with fierce loyalty and an uncompromising determination. No one could enter the grasslands without an array of dogs charging their vehicle. Many times I watched in amusement as nomads on motorbikes made their way from the camp to the main road, swiping and kicking at the pack of dogs escorting them. Every family tent had its family of dogs. I wondered what they were protecting, and from whom? The only other humans on the plains were fellow nomads. I couldn't conceive they would steal from each other, and there seemed to be nothing of any real value to take, but everything was crucial to life on the grasslands. And human nature being what it is, there would always be the temptation to make life easier through stealing the efforts of another's hard labour or good fortune.

Apart from a ray of light coming in the opening, it was dark inside the tent. The air was thick with smoke from yak dung burning in the fire. I was feeling a little awkward, not really knowing what to do with myself. No one, apart from Yonten, spoke English, and we could only sit around and look at each other for so long. My arrival had served as a brief distraction from the women's daily chores, but now, after the initial welcoming and tea, it was back to work as usual.

On the plains, apart from hard work, there was little to do, no comfort of any kind. I wandered outside the tent looking for a place to sit and contemplate, only to discover there was nowhere to sit. As there was no system for recycling or disposal

of rubbish, litter lay everywhere around the tents. My brain had been wired to equate living in a tent with being on a camping holiday, but there were no camp chairs here, no flowing stream to swim in, and no trees for shelter – just mile upon mile of flat grasslands dotted with black nomad`s tents, yaks and hundreds of tiny pikas, small lagomorphs that looked like gophers. They scampered across the ground disappearing down tunnels to their burrows below, and then popped out somewhere else a few minutes later. The children loved trying to catch them and had made a game out of it. One child would block the entrance to a tunnel, while another squashed flat up against the hard earth, an entire arm shoved down below the surface searched for the animal below. I found a pile of animal skins in a hessian bag and sat on them for comfort. It wasn't long before I realised I wasn't the only living creature taking refuge on the hides – they were infested with ticks – so I opted to sit instead on the hard ground.

Although the grasslands are beautiful, they are at the same time, harsh, barren and uninviting; not geared up for relaxation or enjoyment. They are home to some of the strongest beasts and people on the planet. Even the wildflowers growing on the plains, although beautiful, are without ceremony or pomp: they don't stand out or demand attention.

Pala

I watched a motorbike turn off the main road and start heading towards the tent. The Mastiffs, pulled frantically at the running wire attached to their chains, barking in frustration at their captivity. Yoten came out from inside the tent, watched for a moment, and said, 'It's my father.' I didn't know what to expect, but within minutes concluded his father was one of the most enlightened people I'd ever met. He wasn't a tall man, but very much a man of stature and dignity. He had an aura around him which allowed him to come and go in peace. His presence didn't create waves. His face shone so brightly, it was like rays of sunlight were emanating from his core. He looked young, despite the lines around his eyes.

I could see he was perfectly suited to Yonten's mother – they were two who had become one. They'd been married thirty five years: she was the earth, he was the sky. Unlike the rest of the family he didn't eat yak meat. A committed vegetarian he lived primarily on the sustenance he drew from eating tsampa, a Tibetan dish

made from barley flour, yak butter, yak cheese, tea and sugar. The Tibetans sift the flour between their fingers, while rubbing in cheese, butter, and sugar, moistened with a tiny splash of tea to make soft dough. Then eat the mixture raw with milk tea.

Yonten's father was happy to meet me but not overly intrigued by the western woman who'd befriended his son and come to stay. His mind was on other things: primarily prayer and meditation. He was a committed Buddhist practitioner who dedicated himself to long hours of prayer, fasting, chanting and meditation. The rest of the family didn't seem to mind that he wasn't at the tent working, or out on the plains with the yaks. I thought it was a tad unfair. Why did the women have to do all the menial work and hard labour? Why are they are not afforded the privilege of developing their spiritual life?

Yonten's father stayed for around an hour. He was pleased with the tea cup I'd bought for him and wrapped it up with the food Yonten's mother had prepared for him to take back to the winter house. He would begin prayers at 2 AM, praying through until 2 PM the following day. Yonten and I would go there the following day to visit. He left the camp riding back across the plains with a horde of Mastiffs on his tail.

Yak Momos

The afternoon sun sat lower in the sky; dusk was approaching. I'd fallen into the timelessness of the plains without realising it. Life didn't revolve around the clock here; it revolved around tasks to be done. I could see a figure on horseback, far in the distance and assumed it was Yonten's brother bringing the yaks` home for the evening. Gradually the black dots began to take form as they neared the camp. It was exciting to watch them come in from the grasslands – I'd never been up close and personal with a yak before. They were not compliant like cows – they galloped, snorted, romped and complained.

Yaks are strong powerful animals, with a short neck and a pronounced hump over their huge shoulders. Long, shaggy tufts of hair, fall from the front of their shoulders, chest and neck, giving the impression that they are wearing a skirt. Their flanks, thighs, and underbelly are covered with a dense woolly undercoat and their tails hang thick and full, like that of a pony. Most of the yaks were black or dark brown, with a greyish muzzle. Some were black with white heads, others grey, white

or roan. The women stood in formation ready to tie the baby yaks to the ground wire, ensuring their mothers wouldn't stray. The women were untroubled by the high spirited animals; the yaks were similarly unperturbed by the women. They had a symbiotic relationship, with an unspoken agreement between them; they belonged to each other, willingly cohabiting the plains. Once the calves had been tethered, the women began the process of milking the dri (female yaks). They milked twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening – there was no knock off time for these women.

Yonten's brother handed over the reins of his horse to one of the young boys, who then rode around dutifully bringing in strays and herding the bulls into yards fenced off with rope. His duties over for the day, he sat drinking tea and smoking a cigarette.

The Tibetan people love and honour their animals. Yaks have been placed at the centre of their culture for thousands of years. They are indebted to them for their livelihood on earth. The people are warmed by yak dung fires, their lamps are fuelled from the oil of yak butter. Yak bones are used to make jewellery and tent-fastenings. They make yak butter, cheese, and yoghurt, and eat yak meat. They use yaks for transport, and weave clothing, blankets and shelters out of yak hair. If there is any overriding principle showing clearly that the Tibetans are not Chinese and Tibet is not a part of China, it is their relationship with the yak. Chinese people don't have a symbiotic relationship with animals. They don't live side by side with animals; they don't have the same reverence for animal life. Animals are nothing more than a food source to be exploited and exhausted at all cost.

It was dark by the time the yaks were milked and settled, and the dogs fed and released from their chains. Walking around outside the tent was now out of bounds. Preparations began for the evening meal. The women fed the fire with yak dung and juniper and started to make butter. Being a guest I was not to help, which left me sitting with the children and Yonten's brother.

His brother was tall and lean, with shoulder length hair, and a thin moustache. He wore an orange coral necklace and had a troubled look about him. He offered me a cigarette and I accepted. We sat together smoking, sharing our bad habit. He was an interesting man, who carried sorrow in his heart and had deep

gratitude for the help I'd given to Yonten. Many times he would express his appreciation to me through the softness of his dark eyes.

Yonten's cousin arrived on a motorbike, and the pensive mood I'd shared sitting with his brother changed. An animated conversation ensued, and then his cousin looked at me wanting to know: 'Why wasn't I married? Had I come to Tibet to look for a Tibetan nomad husband?' I assured them I wasn't in Tibet to find a husband. They weren't convinced and began teasing me, recommending possible prospects. I didn't find the fact that I hadn't married strange. I had never dreamt about it when I was a young girl and I'd never desired it as a young woman. Maybe it was because I thought the women in my mother's generation had lived a life of domestic servitude, and this didn't inspire me. I don't know. From my perspective I'd just never had time. There was too much for me to do: surviving, creating, travelling, exploring, working and studying.

I had my one constant travelling companion with me – my guitar. I pulled it out of the guitar case and immediately it became a distraction from the subject at hand. You wouldn't believe how challenging it can be to find the right song at the right time. I've played some really odd gigs in some really strange places over the years, but conjuring up a song to sing in a tent in the middle of the Amdo grassland, to a group of nomads who didn't speak English, wasn't easy. Bob Marley hadn't made it to the grasslands and rock 'n' roll was off the menu. Before I could dredge up a song from my memory Yonten started singing *Let it Be*. From then on, there was barely a moment when someone wasn't singing a Tibetan love song.

The women worked away quietly while the rest of us sang and by 10 o'clock we had our momos. By now I was starving, praying to God I would like eating yak. No one would eat until I'd had my fill. Knowing a yak had been killed for this occasion I wasn't going to show disrespect by only eating a few momos. Luckily for me the momos were delicious. The yak meat was rich, and to me, tasted similar to lamb. Once Yonten's mother and brother were satisfied I could eat no more everybody ate to their hearts' content. I was perplexed that they stayed up and ate so late, when they worked so hard and rose so early. I guess the opportunity for a night of entertainment didn't come around often out there.

Prophetic dreams

Happily, so far, I hadn't needed to go to the toilet for any major business. I'd walked to a culvert on the other side of the road to find some privacy earlier that afternoon, but any business after hours wasn't going to be a solitary affair. Yonten's mother would accompany me with the torch. Tibetan clothing allowed for discretion when it came to bodily functions. They would simply squat, assured privacy by the covering of their long robes and chubas. I'd learnt to carry a shawl and was mastering the art, but I still wasn't ready for communal squatting. There were no trees to squat behind, no long grass, no designated area for your business, and no guarantee of privacy or safety from a dog attack. On top of that, I didn't have the language skills to communicate with Yonten's mother regarding matters such as shining the torch and turning the other way. You really had to let go of all your Western civilised ways in this part of the world or suffer the consequences. But still it would virtually have to be a matter of life or death before I would surrender to the necessity of having to 'go.'

Belly full, I retired to the small white tent to sleep. Yonten and his cousin were sleeping there too. Yonten had lectured me about waking him up if I had to go to the toilet, and I assured him I would. Still fully dressed, I snuggled into my pile of blankets. Although it was summer this was Tibet, and the night air was cold. Dogs barked intermittently, and occasionally you would hear a snort from one of the yaks, but apart from that there was silence. The stillness of the plains descended upon me like a heavy woollen blanket. Yonten and his cousin came into the tent and fell asleep almost immediately. I struggled to find comfort on the hard, cold earth and tried to ignore the pressure building in my bladder. I lay there for at least an hour, not wanting to get up, considering disobeying instructions and going on my own, before I finally woke Yonten to request an escort. Sticks in hand we headed away from the tent – me, self conscious and embarrassed, while he kept guard. This definitely wasn't an activity I would normally engage in with one of my students. Safely back inside the tent, tucked into all my blankets, I slept the sleep of the plains. I have never slept so deeply, and so peacefully, as I have on the plains in Tibet.

I have also never had such vivid and prophetic dreams. That night I dreamt I was on a bus with two other women. One was a young Chinese woman, the other, an older Caucasian. Both the women in my dream appeared innocent and naive. They were upset about a man. In my altered dream-like state I intuited it was Tenzin

who had upset them; he was seeing multiple women at the same time and deceiving them. Outraged, I rose to the challenge, and confronted him, asking if this was true. For the first time ever, he was honest, and said yes. Surprised by his honesty, and in defence of the women's honour, I then slapped him three times: once for each woman and once for me. In the morning, in the light of day, the intensity of the dream still hadn't worn off. I relayed the dream to Yonten's mother, asking if it was wrong to slap somebody. To which she replied, 'No, you were right to slap him, he cheated on you.' The plains, like the desert, strip the ego of all that is not necessary for survival, bringing you into a symbiotic relationship with the elements, the earth, the sky, and each other. I found her response, unfettered by political correctness, to be refreshing.

Women's Work

The yaks, along with Yonten's brother, had long gone by the time I crawled out of my tent in the morning. The women had already put in a couple of hours labour before I had my first cup of milk tea. Yonten's sister-in-law sat in the corner of the tent churning the milk, making butter. She was an exceptionally hard worker. I never saw her relax in the time I was there. She was an asset to the family, strong, wiry and lean, and like her husband she helped Yonten's mother tirelessly. Today Yonten and I were going to ride horses to the winter house. He was out with his young cousin catching the horses.

I wandered around outside the tent watching the women raking the dried yak dung into piles. Yonten's mother smiled at me sheepishly and held out a rake. I accepted the challenge and walked over to relieve her of her duties. Yonten's mother, sister, and sister-in-law laughed out loud. She'd only been teasing me, and didn't really expect me to work, but I figured why not? Why should I just sit around and do nothing? Besides I wasn't afraid of manual labour. And I didn't want them to think I was a spoilt lazy westerner who had nothing but money and curiosity to offer. I began to rake up the dry yak dung, some of it not so dry. The women watched me in amusement. It didn't take long for me to realise that this was not an easy or pleasant task. It was also a never-ending task, that had to be done day in day out. I persevered and kept raking for the best part of the next hour until Yonten arrived with the horses.

Riding to the Winter House

He was riding a flighty black gelding and leading a small docile, grey mare. Having grown up in the high country with the mountain cattlemen, I'd spent most of my formative years astride a horse. I wanted to ride the gelding. But he was deemed too risky for me to ride, so I was assigned the mare. She stood around thirteen hands and needed constant encouragement just to keep moving. We set off across the plains to ride to the winter house but the horses were none too keen for the ride. We spent most of our time and energy moving them forward.

Yonten's gelding insisted on travelling with a sideways gait – Yonten was constantly trying to turn him in the right direction. I was glad I rode the mare. I was right at home on top of a horse in the wilderness, at one with the sky and the plains. Yonten too was in his element, singing and whooping his way across the plains. Although they appeared flat, the plains were not even. Galloping the horses was risky. I was frightened my mare would lose her footing in one of the many pika tunnels that crisscrossed the ground, but we managed the occasional canter without incident.

We arrived at the winter house just after his father had completed twelve hours of prayer and meditation and was breaking his fast. He was sitting in dim light in a small unadorned room with his tsampa kit, (a small wooden box with different compartments for different ingredients), drinking hot butter tea from a bowl. His face glowing, he offered us tea. We sat for a while, Yonten and his father chatting happily, while I contemplated the depth and commitment of Yonten's father's spiritual practice. He rarely ate and he barely slept, dedicating as much time as he could to prayer and meditation. The family didn't question this. There was no undercurrent of resentment in the psyche of the women because he didn't engage in the same hard labour as they did. But I was still sitting on the side of caution, not sure there wasn't some form of injustice and favouritism for men here.

We finished our tea and Yonten began to show me the rest of the winter house. The main room was beautiful; big and bare, with a high timber ceiling and a large open fireplace for cooking. This was the room where they held all the big family gatherings and also stored their grain. There was a small room where his parents slept, no bed, just two single mattresses, and another room where the other family members slept. We went outside to visit his father's meditation room. It was like a

tiny temple. Framed pictures of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other High Lamas sat on top of a small cabinet. Thangkas and white silk khatas hung from the walls. Sacred texts, meticulously wrapped in precious cloth, were stored in the corner. A meditation box sat next to a small yak dung stove. Above the box hung a chord, which ran across the ceiling and connected to a larger prayer drum. A shaman's yak hide drum, sat next to the box, ready to be beaten. Small vases of plastic flowers and butter lamps decorated the altar. Next to this there was a shelf allocated to the basic necessities: a clock, a cup, a bottle of water, tea, a pencil and paper. A large mala (prayer beads) lay coiled in a circle at the foot of the box. The stillness of his room was reminiscent of the ancient monasteries I'd visited in Ladakh.

Dedicated Buddhist practitioners kneel in their prayer box at night to ensure they don't fall asleep when they're practising meditation. Yonten's father would kneel in his meditation box pulling the chord connected to the prayer drum while he prayed and meditated. The light radiating from Yonten's father, the purity, good will and his humility were the result of the thousands of hours he'd dedicated to developing his inner life. It was this life that kept his family strong – happy, respected, honoured and united. He stood solidly at the head of his family, a power of example for his children. He was in a time in his life now where he worked for his family through sacrifice and service, praying continually for their health, happiness, safety and protection. I understood now the division of labour. Even though I aspired to a regular spiritual practice, I had to admit my laziness and my strong will made me better suited to manual work.

Yonten and I went for a walk and then visited the stables. Yonten climbed up onto the roof and I followed him. The house was made from red mud brick. The roof was tiled with wood which had been smeared with yak dung and now turned to pasture. The house grew out of the earth, it didn't dominate it. Yonten began to tell me that the family's winter house was under threat of demolition. The Chinese Government were in the process of developing the villages, re-locating the Tibetan nomads and taking their lands. This was being done in the name of progress and better living conditions. Tibetan families were being forced to move into government-built, roadside, brick houses, which sat 20 feet apart from each other and all looked the same. The Tibetans didn't like them, but the Chinese Government held tight to

the claim that they were improving living conditions. In reality it was about saving face.

The sky was starting to fill with menacing black clouds. Yonten's father decided it was time for us to ride back to the camp. He loaded up the grey mare with saddle bags full of supplies which made me feel a lot more important riding home. We gave the horses their rein, letting them run, and arrived back at the camp just as the yaks were coming in. Yonten rode off into the distance to help his brother bring in the herd. I dismounted and Yonten's younger cousin jumped on to the mare and headed off to roundup the bulls.

Do you think we are poor?

I'd acclimatised now. I was used to the plains, to not sleeping in a bed, not doing my hair, drinking milk tea, walking amongst the yak dung and cautiously avoiding the dogs. But we were returning to Langmusi the following day. After the yaks had been bedded down Yonten decided it was time for family photos. A special chuba was presented for me to wear. It was long and black; the hem, the base of the sleeves, and the front lapel were decorated with exquisite, colourful Tibetan weaving. The chuba was lined with white sheep's wool and was warm and comfortable to wear. I understood why they wore them. The women took great pleasure in draping it over my long body, then tying it securely around my waist with a red cotton sash. We took photos and apart from my shoulder length hair – short by Tibetan standards – and pale skin, I blended in beautifully.

That night, as we sat in the tent enjoying an evening meal of Tibetan noodle soup, Yonten asked me if I thought they were poor. I looked at the dung heap, the bare earth floor, the makeshift stove, and the lack of anything but the basic amenities. I glanced at the children, unwashed and unkempt, sleeping on thin mats for beds, and the adults wearing the same clothes day in day out, with no reason to change them. Then I answered, saying, 'Maybe by Western or material standards you are poor, but I don't think you are poor. I think you have one of the richest family lives I've ever experienced. No, you are not poor.' He understood and was pleased with my answer. We left the grasslands early in the morning, waving goodbye from the taxi window, amidst a pack of barking mastiffs as we crossed the plains to the road that led back to Langmusi.

I only had one more day left with Yonten. A small group of European tourists had hired him as their tour guide. He was going to take them to Kham and he was very excited. This was the beginning of a new line of work for him; his life in Tibet was beginning to take shape.

Reda Holy day

It was the start of picnic season. As we drove along the road back to Langmusi I could see families from the villages taking tents up to the hills to pitch on the flower-covered grasslands. They would spend the next couple of days relaxing, eating, sleeping and receiving guests.

The monks in Langmusi were also holding their version of a party. Each year a number of days are set aside for a holiday. Today was one of those days. It was Reda Holy day. Reda is the name given to a month of religious activity which focuses on philosophy and debate. Different schools of monks had set up tents in the hills around Langmusi to celebrate. The hills were sprayed with the maroon of their robes as little pockets of partygoers traversed the hillside, making their way to various tents.

They would spend the day visiting friends, drinking tea and soft drinks, eating bread, soup, noodles, rice, fruit, and sweets. We were going to party with a group of Yonten's friends from the school of philosophy.

Partying with the Monks

We climbed a winding path leading up to the grasslands behind the monastery. The tent we made our way to was an eight-sided white dome. Inside Tibetan cushions lay on the ground around a long, low, wooden table placed in the centre. Bowls, chopsticks, soft drink bottles, plastic bags, boxes and litter lay scattered around it – they had been partying for some time already. There were ten monks in the tent; the youngest was around eight years of age. The rest appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties. Yonten knew most of them. We were warmly welcomed and immediately given bowls of noodle soup and bottles of Pepsi cola and settled back to enjoy our food.

The wonderful thing about hanging out with Tibetan monks is they're not interested if you're married or not. I felt completely at home, sitting in a tent on the

grasslands in Tibet, with ten men I didn't know. A single woman from the West seeking spiritual enlightenment is totally within the scope of their reality and world view. My relationship with Yonten was embedded in that of teacher and student. This foundation in Tibetan culture would serve me for life. I also think sometimes the fact that I can't speak Tibetan works in my favour, because the Tibetan people can talk amongst themselves and ask questions about me quite openly, without having to engage me in the dialogue.

Yonten acted as an intermediary, answering the general questions thrown his way about where I was from, how did I get there, was I going to Lhasa, where was my family etc? I in turn, communicating through him, asked questions about their lives as monks. I mentioned that I was surprised to see pictures of the Dalai Lama in Langmusi, as I understood this was banned in China. They didn't think they were at risk living in Gansu province, but most certainly they would be, if they were in Lhasa in the TAR. One monk asked what I knew about the Dalai Lama, had I ever been to his teachings. I replied I had a great respect for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and had been to his teachings three times, in three different places. Numerous emotions crossed his face in rapid succession – surprise, awe, sadness, bewilderment and defeat. Hanging his head forlornly, he said he would do anything to attend a teaching with the Dalai Lama. It was then I realised the injustice of this situation: seeing the Dalai Lama and attending his teachings should have been *his* experience, not mine. The Dalai Lama was *their* teacher, *their* leader. It was him they followed, his life they prayed for, his love that guided their path, his instructions they obeyed, and yet they couldn't get access to him.

A part of me felt ashamed. I'd attended the Dalai Lama's teachings in Dharamasla, in Ladakh and at the Kalachakra and I hadn't gained much from the experience. Every teaching was crowded and hot. I'd had to listen to a translation of the message through a small portable radio and concluded that I'd rather read a book in the comfort of my own home.

One of the paradoxes with eastern religions and spiritual practices is they seem a lot more inviting and mystical in the comfort and safety of the West. It's easy for spiritual principles to become a lofty ideal when all your needs are being met. It's not like we are staring into the face of acute suffering, oppression, and mass need on a daily basis. We have ample opportunity for complacency and self service, and

often little interest in practising loving kindness and compassion. We live in a world governed by economic rationalism, fragmentation and isolation. Our leaders are not interested in our inner wellbeing; their focus, their inner and outer realities, are devoted to 'the system'. Kindness and compassion is not the message espoused by our leaders.

Pandora's Box

In the company of his former class mates Yonten also dredged up a few old feelings of shame. He hadn't fully reconciled within himself that he'd forfeited his life as a monk. For the Tibetan people, living in the monastic order is seen as the highest form of achievement. Most families will have at least one son who becomes a monk, bringing pride and honour to the family. Yonten regarded leaving the monastic order as a sign of failure. I'd said, 'You can always go back,' but to him this was impossible. He'd broken his precepts; he'd had a relationship with a woman. There was no quarter here – it was all or nothing. There was no room for repentance and change.

Life was in many ways black and white for Yonten. His understanding of spirituality was fully rooted in his religion: things were good, or things were bad, things were right, or things were wrong. This applied to people and human shortcomings as well. He didn't question this; one simply did the right thing. Looking at me he explained, 'Teacher, it is like a piece of raw meat, once it is cooked it can never be raw again.'

Sitting there, with ten Tibetan monks and Yonten, I reflected on my own life journey, my search, my shortcomings and failures. By Yonten's analogy I'd been cooked for a long time. I hadn't escaped the juggernaut of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll as it rolled over the youth of the West in the sixties and seventies.

While Tibet was being invaded by the Chinese – her monasteries destroyed and hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns, and lay people tortured and killed, I was being swept up and washed out to sea, in the waves of social change that had flooded the western world after the Second World War. Worshipping in the temples of rock n' roll, I bowed before our latest, greatest music idols. The Rolling Stones, embodying the power of raw sexuality and rebellion, danced and grunted our anthem...*I know it's only rock 'n' roll but I like it, like it, yes I do.* Jimi Hendrix,

taunting the unseen forces with his guitar, wailed *I'm a voodoo child...I stand up next to a mountain and I cut it down with the side of my hand...* The Doors enticed us to *come on baby light my fire...* Van Morrison led us *into the mystic...* Dylan voiced our confusion and called for change... *There must be some way out of here said the joker to the thief. There's just too much confusion and I can't get no relief...*we took a walk on the wild side with Lou Reed...*and the coloured girls go boop de boop de boop de boop...* while female counterparts like Janis Joplin crying...*Take another piece of my heart now baby...* were sacrificed young, tormented, and defiant.

In the name of liberation, Tibetan culture was being destroyed, her people forced into exile or captivity, her heart broken. In the name of liberation we marched against the war in Vietnam, calling for a world dedicated to peace. We created counter culture, held love-ins and danced in the mud. Martin Luther King *had a dream* and the civil rights movement was born. Women's liberation moved to centre stage demanding equal rights for women. We protested against uranium and nuclear energy and the environmental movement was born.

We turned our back on traditional religions and walked through Huxley's *Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*, dropping acid with Ram Dass and Timothy Leary, drank peyote with Carlos Castaneda and went on a magical mystery tour with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters.

In the seventies Asian drug lords began shipping their wares of heroin and cocaine to the Australian shores and thousands succumbed to living numb. By the beginning of the eighties, the New Age had permeated and cross pollinated our culture. In a search to find meaning in this life, we turned to reincarnation and past lives. We identified ourselves through astrology, numerology, and the Chinese zodiac, seeking answers through the I Ching (The Book of Changes), crystals and tarot cards. Moon calendars were posted on the back of the toilet door and the new relationship bible, *Sun Signs*, lay in the centre of every coffee table.

I knew nothing of Tibet, or what was happening to her people. My life was engulfed in a search for meaning and self centred indulgence. The only connection I had with Tibet was a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but at the age of nineteen this book was impenetrable for me.

All this searching had led me to this moment; sitting with ten monks in a tent on the Tibetan grasslands. I knew that although I may be able to enter and visit

aspects of their world and their reality, it would be virtually impossible for them to know mine. How could I explain to Yonten the deep psychological, political and existential reasons that drove my search and lay underneath much of my behaviour? I'd digested hundreds of books from all disciplines and cultures; I didn't have the simplicity of one religion, cultural belief or way of life to follow. I'd opened Pandora's Box and couldn't close the lid.

Will you tell me about Jesus?

My musing was interrupted when one of the monks asked if I was a Christian – would I tell them about Jesus. I was momentarily taken aback. Declaring you are a Christian usually invites all kinds of disdain, reprimands, taunts and disbelief. I find most people project their own understanding of what they think a Christian is, or should be, onto anybody proclaiming a relationship with, or belief in, a living God – Christians included. I believe. But didn't think the way I lived my life was a great power of example or testimony to this belief. I preferred to think of myself as a seeker, someone who was willing to believe – clay on the wheel of life turned by the power of divine creation. Like Yonten, I judged myself quite harshly for having fallen from grace.

Being asked to tell the story of Jesus to people who have never heard it before was a challenging request. I didn't want to be responsible for putting anything out there which might create conflict, confusion, or division. Added to my feelings of inadequacy was the factor that Yonten would have to translate everything I said. There was no guarantee things wouldn't get misconstrued in translation. However, I nodded and said 'yes, I'll do my best'.

It was difficult to know where to start. Jesus, I explained, was a great healer, the greatest healer to walk the earth – the Prince of Peace. He practised love, kindness, forgiveness and compassion; he was without blame and without shame. He did nothing wrong, nor ever hurt anybody. The monks nodded their heads in respect. I continued the story telling them he lived on earth 2000 years ago and proclaimed he was the son of God, but the religious leaders and political authorities of the time didn't believe him, so they crucified him by nailing his body to a wooden cross and let him bleed to death. This part of the story was visibly upsetting for them,

but the similarities between their own spiritual teacher being sent into exile and what was happening in Tibet made the story plausible for them.

I went on, explaining that three days after he died he manifested again on the earth. This is the miracle we call resurrection – they'd only destroyed his body, not his spirit. He rose from the dead and is still alive in the spiritual world today. A sense of awe came over them. For people who'd lived in a spiritual reality all their lives and had heard stories of reincarnation, the rainbow body, and ascension, there was no question as to the validity of this statement. He was obviously a Bodhisattva. Unquestionably, they accepted this as fact.

I explained, the reason he'd gone through this journey was to show us the reality of existence and the power of the spirit of love and compassion. They nodded in understanding. So far there was no confusion; what I had told them thus far made sense.

Continuing I said, it is claimed that if we believed in and accepted this, then we can have a living relationship with Jesus. A relationship existing in the unseen world based on faith, trust, and love.

I went on to say there was nothing we could do to earn this love; we just had to be willing to humble ourselves and receive it. We called this love, grace. Grace gave us the power to walk a spiritual path and seek the truth of our actions – helping us to accept our own shortcomings and penetrate the darkness of ignorance. I was beginning to feel a little evangelistic and hoping I had answered the question ok.

They sat in silence for a while digesting the words. Then one of them spoke: 'Yes- this was true and good and right. We must practise loving kindness towards ourselves, others, and all sentient beings.' I was happy they'd processed their own understanding and that we thought in a similar way.

I added that most Christians go to church; the Western version of a temple, a place where they worshipped God. Then I added that I didn't. I wasn't sure how this would go down with members of a monastery, but it wasn't an issue; their world view allowed for pilgrims, mystics, yogini's and practitioners who lived a hermetic life – not everybody had to go the same way to follow the same path.

Not fair

They wanted me to tell them more. I searched my mind for information and told them that one of the lessons Jesus taught, was to love and forgive our enemies, and to love and forgive ourselves. This was not a foreign concept to them. Forgiveness and compassion were deeply ingrained in their psyche. I think the Tibetans are one of the most forgiving peoples on the earth. In my time in Dharamasla, and travelling through Tibet, I didn't witness any outright hatred or hardness of heart from them towards the Chinese. There was sadness, some anger, and a vein of frustration, but they didn't live in a spirit of un-forgiveness.

I didn't see forgiveness as one of my own strong points. I was struggling with deep-seated resentments towards the Chinese government and their treatment of the Tibetan people. Even though the Chinese government had not harmed me personally, I'd felt the impact. I found acts of gross cruelty, ignorance, and denial, difficult to tolerate. I hadn't yet come to terms with one of the givens of this life: 'Life's not fair.' I still wanted to believe in the goodness of human nature and a level playing field. I was deeply disturbed that these people had been punished, killed, and victimised when they had done nothing wrong. But, like Christ, they didn't retaliate, they forgave. I carried the pain I felt for them inside me, disguised as anger for the Chinese. I didn't know how to let it go. Anger had become my primary defence for living in a country, that didn't recognise or honor human rights.

Although there was no question regarding the command to love and forgive others, I wondered if they would question the instruction to love and forgive ourselves. Tibetan people didn't suffer from self hatred; the concept of being at war with 'the self' and 'psychological wounding', wasn't a part of their belief system. It's no surprise that western psychology and Buddhist teaching enjoy a complementary union in our contemporary culture; we have borrowed from them the wisdom to help us unify our fragmented and torn egos but Buddhism borrows little if anything from psychology. I find it interesting that in the west, we have joined Buddhism and Psychology in our endeavours to heal and understand ourselves, but for the traditional Tibetan Buddhist there is no such union.

I finished the story by telling them I tried to practise the principles Jesus had taught: to love, forgive, help and serve others; and that I also practised prayer and meditation. Well I tried to at least: I was a long way from perfect in this practice. They

were happy with what I'd told them – Yes, this was the right direction. I was taking the right path and should keep going. I was gratified to have received their affirmation and encouragement. Connecting with them on this level nourished and strengthened me. I'd bridged the illusion of our differences. For the first time, after months of living in China on my own, I didn't feel lonely.

We'd been in the tent for a number of hours and the 'party' was winding down. I thanked the monks for having me. We wished each other 'Tashi Delek' and Yonten and I, both very happy, made our way back down the winding path towards the village.

Tashi Delek

Yonten and I were travelling to Xiahe to meet up with Tenzin the following day. I was going to go and stay with Tenzin's family in the village on the Sangke grasslands, and Yonten taking his first tour group to Kham in Eastern Tibet. We had a celebratory meal that night with Yonten's friends and caught the bus to Xiahe early the next morning. Yonten and Tenzin hadn't seen each other since they'd returned to Tibet – they were the only ones from the music program who had gone back. Most of the other young men had formed relationships with women from the West and migrated to European countries.

Not having seen each other since Dharamasla, I anticipated there would be comradeship and joy between the two men, but I wasn't sure how Tenzin would greet me. I hadn't seen him since Goa. He was waiting for us outside the bus station, and appeared unmoved by our arrival. Yonten, happy as always, threw his arms around him. Tenzin responded in a half-hearted manner and then, approaching cautiously, embraced me and said 'Tashi Delek.' He looked older, more centred than he'd been before, no longer lost.

Xiahe is home to Labrang monastery, one of the biggest monasteries still standing in Tibet. The town itself is much bigger than Langmusi, with a strong Chinese influence. A small end section of the main road houses the Tibetan quarter. We flung our backpacks across our shoulders and headed up the street to eat. Tenzin remained distant over lunch. He'd left his bad habits behind in India. Now he was hashish-free, rigid, and a strict vegetarian.

I was nervous. Yonten was leaving the next day and I'd no longer be in his care. Instead I'd have to rely on Tenzin. I wasn't interested in getting involved – I didn't want any complications. I was only planning to see him for a week or so and anticipated a platonic relationship with the added hope of some amends, understanding and healing. Not long after seeing him again I realised there were still a lot of feelings between us; it was probably going to be an all or nothing situation. I prayed for the willingness not to run, deciding to take it a day at a time.

Over lunch, Tenzin and I made arrangements to meet up in the morning to travel to his village, and then he left to visit his teacher at the monastery. Yonten and I went shopping. Yonten's energy never seemed to change. He was prone to worry, and his share of anxiety, but his general state of being was joy and readiness: he embraced life, he didn't recoil.

That evening Yonten went to party with some of his friends. Tenzin was staying at the monastery, and I dined alone. In the morning Yonten was up early, excited to be taking his first tour group and beginning his new life. Although I was sad to say farewell, I was also happy to see him moving forward. We joked that dreams had become reality and I'd actually come to Tibet and met his family. Using every ounce of strength I had not to cry, I hugged him, and thanked him for taking care of me. In keeping with the Tibetan tradition we didn't say goodbye. Not knowing if we'd ever see each other again, we wished each other Tashi Delek and went our separate ways.

Going to the Village

Tenzin had been busy getting supplies for his family's shop. He was more relaxed when I met him at the guesthouse after breakfast, happy to be travelling to the grasslands. We squeezed onto a small bus, fully laden with grains, bread, various other essentials, and Tibetan people, for the drive to their villages on the grasslands. I shared my seat with two beautiful young Tibetan women. Fascinated with each other, we looked at photos on our digital cameras, took happy snaps and laughed our way towards the village. Then they disembarked, disappearing into what appeared to be nothing but rolling hills.

The bus continued along the road, beside a meandering stream. Yak and sheep grazed in the fields. There were no nomads' tents, just pockets of small, brick,

Tibetan houses scattered along the base of the hills. After travelling for an hour or so the bus swung off the main road and headed down a dirt track to Tenzin's village. I was expecting the same aesthetics I'd seen in Ladakh – beautiful, double-storeyed, whitewashed, Tibetan style houses, with ornamental painting on their eaves, and barley stored on the roof landings.

The reality was vastly different. All the houses looked the same: single storey, long, red brick dwellings, with two doors and five windows. The bus stopped in the middle of a cluster of houses separated by the wide dirt road that ran between them. Litter was strewn everywhere. Dust filled the air. Motorbikes tore up and down the road filling the air with dust. A couple of horses were tied to a power pole and dogs lay lazily in the shade. The villagers disembarked from the bus. Others came to meet it.

People in the village looked tired as they went about the business of daily living. Cheap Chinese-manufactured western apparel had replaced traditional Tibetan attire. Only a few women, carrying milking buckets in their hands, wore Tibetan clothes: long woollen skirts, secured with a thick leather belt, studded with silver discs. Their long black braided hair fell down to their waists, accentuated by bright aqua jumpers, which were highlighted by a red fabric sash tied around their waists. I stood taking in my surroundings. This was not the type of destination you would see advertised in holiday brochures. The village had no redeeming features or qualities. There was no running water, no sanitation; no means for the removal of waste, and with no available medical help there were bound to be innumerable health issues as well.

Tenzin's Family Home

Tenzin began piling boxes of supplies into my arms. He carried the rest. Then we made our way towards his family home. I was feeling unsure about my stay here. There was no reason for his family to welcome me with open arms and there was still a degree of distance, and an undercurrent of tension between us, but I knew I couldn't pass up such a unique opportunity. I might never get the chance again.

Half a dozen motorbikes were parked outside the family home. A long white canvas, decorated with blue Tibetan auspicious symbols, had been erected at the front, creating a verandah and shade. The dwelling was divided into three sections.

The middle section was the shop, selling foodstuffs, drinks, toiletries and basic necessities. On the left side of the shop there was a small room with a billiard table; on the right side was an even smaller room serving as the family home.

Inside this room there were two single Tibetan beds – thin mattresses placed on a small platform raised from the floor which took up half the room. A yak dung stove sat in the middle, with two chairs on one side and a TV on the other. At the rear there was an old wall unit, filled with dishes, cooking utensils and food. Mounted just below, was a small bench where a manual steel l appliance, used for making noodles, was attached. Next to this there was a stool, and a small table pushed up against the side wall. A large picture board, full of family photos, hung above the TV. Photos of Tenzin when he'd been a monk took pride of place. The rest of the photos were of Tenzin's seven brothers and various members of their families. There were also some photos that Tenzin had sent home from Dharamasla. The walls were covered with brightly coloured, decorative wallpapers, some of which had been partially ripped off. Two windows looked out to the village – one window above the bed looked out on to the shop. We dumped our backpacks on the beds. I wondered where everyone was going to sleep.

The Family

Tenzin's family were so different from Yonten's. His mother was a tiny woman who looked worked to the bone. Her face was narrow, her brow furrowed with lines, her skin olive and worn by the wind, but her eyes were playful, alive and cheeky. Her front teeth were just stubs decorating an impish, mischievous smile. His father, on the other hand, looked liked he hadn't done a day's work in his life. He was slothfully obese. I was surprised. I hadn't seen an obese Tibetan before. Sitting on the edge of the bedding platform, with his legs splayed wide, he appeared to take up most of the room; everything else was small in comparison.

He patted the chair next to him, motioning for me to sit down. I indicated my gratitude and dutifully obeyed. Tenzin's mother scurried around shovelling dry yak dung into the stove to heat water for tea. A Chinese comic drama blared out from the TV, matched in volume only by the growl of the motorbikes speeding along outside. Straight away Tenzin began to busy himself with customers in the shop while his mother put away the supplies. I sat, dependent on his father for an expression of

hospitality. Occasionally another Tibetan male would wander in and chat, carelessly dropping cigarette ash and butts on the floor with no thought that they were adding to another's labour.

The kettle came to a boil and Tenzin made tea. His father made no effort to do anything. Tenzin relayed his connection with me to his father, explaining I was a music teacher from Australia, whom he'd met in Dharamasla. His father nodded approval, affectionately hitting me on my arm, indicating his acceptance. Tenzin's mother appeared indifferent about me being there, too busy to stop and entertain a stranger. We finished our tea, and then Tenzin took me through the back of the house, which was used as a storage area for the shop, to a tent which had been erected in the backyard.

I was relieved to see that there was some provision made for personal space and sleeping. The house and yard was surrounded by a high wooden fence with a steel gate which had been padlocked and led to the grasslands outside. I asked Tenzin where the toilet was. He led me to the back gate, unlocked it and suggested I find a place to go in the field behind the house. Tentatively, I stepped outside the gate. There was a quarry full of garbage, about fifteen feet from the fence, where a huge mastiff scrounged around for food. Litter, dead animals' hooves, and bits of paper lay strewn on the ground. A couple of kids played in the distance and a horse grazed nearby. The field was flanked by houses, so privacy wasn't an option. It was going to be sheer luck, as to whether you were the only one answering nature's call at the time she called. I found a small pile of rocks to squat behind, trying to remember their location for future reference. I didn't fancy coming out here at night, not knowing where I was going, or what I'd be standing on.

A Crying Kitten

The sun began sinking in the sky and the air became chilly – even in the summer months the grasslands were cold at night. I understood why the Tibetan people always kept their woollen clothing on. I went inside and sat next to Tenzin's father. Both he and Tenzin sat transfixed by the TV which was the focal point in the room. All the programs were Chinese, except for an occasional Tibetan music clip. His mother was still busy in the shop. Neither Tenzin nor his father made any moves towards preparing the evening meal. I suggested I could help and begin preparing

the vegetables .Tenzin replied no, his mother would do the cooking when she`d finished in the shop. Again I felt uncomfortable with the division of labour but nobody else seemed to question it. I didn't want to add to this woman's burden. Unlike Yonten's family, there were no other women to help in this home.

When it came time to prepare dinner, Tenzin's mother closed the shop and then moved directly into her duty as wife and mother, preparing a delicious, milky, vegetable soup for Tenzin, and yak meat for his father. His father ate yak ribs, tearing the flesh from the bones with his teeth, then when he`d finished, simply threw the bones on the floor in front of him. I guessed Tenzin's mother would be cleaning the floor later!

Tenzin, now a strict vegetarian, condemned his father for eating meat. Throughout the course of the evening they argued back and forth. He held his father in contempt for being lazy and chastised him for being overweight. Tenzin`s mother had given birth to seven sons and they`d all moved on. Tenzin's older brothers were farmers. His younger brother, Sangye, was still in India. Tenzin looked nothing like the rest of the males in the family who were rugged and unkempt in appearance, but he bore a striking resemblance to his mother. His alliance in the family was with her; he`d taken it upon himself to become her personal masseur and doctor. Every night he would massage her legs and back before she went to sleep.

I sat, drawing warmth from the stove, and quietly reading my book, occasionally talking to Tenzin, who after having invited me to the grasslands had failed to mention he was going away for a few days and had to return to Xiahe in the morning.

At the request of a friend, he was going to catch the bus to Xinning (a 10 hour trip) to pick up some people and bring them back to Xiahe. Having forfeited a very good and, hard to-come-by room, in the guesthouse that morning, I wasn't happy to hear this. He couldn't see a problem, saying I could stay out on the grasslands with his family for a couple of days and then he would be back. Exasperated I declined, asking what I would do, and how was I going to communicate? Nobody spoke English. He didn't see why this would be a problem. But I was adamant – I returning with him to Xiahe, and would stay there.

I went out to the tent to sleep, burying my head under the blankets in an effort to keep warm and block out the sound of a kitten, crying somewhere in the darkness.

It cried the whole night. In the morning we found it stuck inside the roof of the stable. Tenzin managed to coax it out. Once captured, he placed a rope around its neck and tied it to the centre pole of the tent. We went inside the house for breakfast and when we returned found his mother had immediately released the animal and ushered it off the property – she wasn't taking responsibility for another mouth to feed, no matter how cute. I packed my belongings assuring Tenzin's parents that, yes, most definitely, I'd come back to stay on the grasslands with them. Squeezing ourselves onto an already overcrowded bus, we headed away from the village, back to Xiahe.

Back to Xiahe

This time while I was in Xiahe, I stayed in a Tibetan guesthouse run by Tsering, a friend of Tenzin's family who had known Tenzin since he was a little boy. Tsering invited us into the family room for refreshments. There were a number of children and an older woman, probably the grandmother, in the room. Tsering was a clever business woman, who'd moved to New York, and left the running of the guesthouse to someone else. Each summer she returned to Tibet. I was given my own room but the bathroom was downstairs and hot water was only available for two hours in the evening. Tenzin disappeared to the monastery. Hungry I wandered off to find food, resentful at what I perceived to be, his avoidant behaviour, lack of consideration, organisational, and communication skills. Was it too much to expect we would have a meal together?

I decided to eat at the Nomad Restaurant. I climbed a narrow flight of stairs up three floors to the top where the restaurant was situated. Two sides of the room were completely encased by windows; you could see Labrang monastery and the hills in the distance. The restaurant was full of nomad families and monks, with only a few western tourists among them. I passed a woman around my age, sitting at a table on her own, writing in a diary. She looked up as I walked towards her. I could sense she had a desire to talk to me, but I wasn't in the mood for company. I was disappointed and annoyed with Tenzin, so chose to eat by myself and have an early night.

The next day I hired a bicycle and rode around the Sangke grasslands. In the evening I went back to the Nomad restaurant. This time I was the only westerner there. Back at the guesthouse I met a German couple who were planning to travel to

the villages on the Ganjia grasslands the following day. They invited me to go with them. I accepted. They were also considering travelling on to Langmusi. I was in two minds about staying on in Xiahe. I was happy to return to Langmusi, but was aware that I'd promised Tenzin's parents I'd come back to stay with them and, Tenzin was expecting me to be there when he returned.

Please Stay

I tried to call Tenzin before I made my decision, but the phone just kept ringing out. It was hours before he finally answered. I said I realised he was busy, and that I had the opportunity to go back to Langmusi. Did he mind it if I went, or did he want me to stay in Xiahe? He replied in a soft voice, 'Yes, please stay.' He said he was lonely and wanted to spend more time together. The change in his emotions seemed a little sudden, but I yielded and decided to stay, informing the German couple I'd head back to Xiahe after the Ganjia grasslands.

The following morning we drove through a sublime landscape of lakes, with soft babbling brooks, traditional villages, and large herds of sheep and yaks. Picnic season was at its peak. We stopped and had morning tea with a family in their tent. I sat and enjoyed a cup of milk tea and Tibetan bread while I looked out across the rolling hills, now speckled with white tents. The grasslands were subtly embroidered in shades of pink, purple, white, blue, and yellow from the wild flowers. We visited a village which came closer to the aesthetics of Tibetan villages I'd envisaged, rather than the one Tenzin lived in. Mud brick houses built into the side of clay hills, blended in beautifully with the landscape. Thick, raw wooden doors, led into immaculately clean, large rooms, with sunken earthen stoves, colourful altars and timber wall units housing clay cooking pots – the apathy and desperation I'd sensed in the village on the Sangke grasslands wasn't here. We visited a small restored monastery on the drive home. Apart from a group of Tibetan women and children, and one monk there was no one there.

Seeing a Tibetan as you do

I got back to Xiahe before the bus from Xinning had arrived. I called Tenzin to find out what time he expected to be there, but there was no answer, so I decided to take a nap. I'd only been asleep a short time when he called saying he was settling the

people into their hotel, and would be at the guesthouse shortly. I fell back asleep, waking up about an hour later. He still hadn't appeared. I decided to go to my favourite café for a coffee and wait for him there. I climbed the stairs to the cafe and walked inside. The woman I'd seen, a couple of nights earlier, writing in her diary at the Nomad restaurant, was the only person in the cafe.

As soon as I walked in she said, 'Hi, I'm Kelly', and called me over to her table. There was no avoiding speaking to her this time. Before I'd even sat down she'd asked 'Are you living here, or are you seeing a Tibetan, as you do? I felt cornered into a conversation and taken aback by the forwardness of her question. Cautiously I replied, 'No, I'm not living here, just travelling. I'm sort of seeing someone, but not really. We had a thing a few years ago but he's pretty confused after having been a monk for ten years. He's still trying to work himself out. I'm just visiting for a short time.' She nodded her head in understanding and invited me to sit at the table with her. I asked, 'You?' She replied yes, and went on to explain, she was seeing someone, but she wasn't sure where it was all at; he'd been distant the last couple of days. She'd come a long way to see him but was spending a lot of time on her own. Then added they'd just spent the past few days in Xinning, but now she wouldn't be seeing him for a week because he was going to be busy with the group of people he'd brought back from Xinning.

Alarm bells started ringing – this was too much of a coincidence. I suspected we were talking about the same person. I asked Kelly what this guy did for a living. Animated she responded 'Oh, he's this amazing healer who does Tibetan massage.' By now I knew we were talking about the same person. I asked her his name. She replied 'Tenzin.' Instantly, the dream I'd had on the grasslands when staying with Yonten's family came to my mind. I looked at Kelly; she was the Caucasian woman from my dream. Reaching over I held her forearm gently and said, 'I'm really sorry but we are here to visit the same guy.'

My dream had prepared me somehow. On a subconscious level I'd been expecting something like this and wasn't overly surprised. Not being in an intimate relationship with Tenzin at the time, I was more concerned for her than me. She looked at me in shock saying, 'What do you mean?' I said 'I'm here visiting a guy called Tenzin who is a Tibetan masseur. We were staying with his family on the grasslands but he had to go Xinning for a couple of days to meet a group of people

and bring them back to Xiahe.’ She stared at me wide-eyed, horrified when I told her that the following morning we were going back to the grasslands to spend a week with his family. Things were staring to sink in; the shock was wearing off and she was visibly shaking. I kept rubbing her arm saying it was OK, I wasn’t involved with him. But it was a different story for her – she was involved with him. She’d come all this way expecting to be his girlfriend; he was treating her like a hire car, parking her in the garage for a week, while he entertained me on the grasslands.

My phone rang, it was Tenzin. I didn’t want to answer and let it ring out. Kelly wanted to answer and confront him, but refrained. She was infuriated saying, ‘I should have known that he’d pull something like this. I went through a thing like this with him before, in Nepal. I wasn’t involved with him sexually at that stage, but because the woman he was with at the time was so awful, and he needed to get away from her, I allowed myself to believe it was OK.’

It was Kelly who’d partly paid for Tenzin to travel back to Tibet. She’d meet him in Dharamasla a few months after I’d left Goa. Kelly explained they’d been chatting about going somewhere, and Tenzin said he’d been thinking of travelling to Tibet; his mother was sick and he hadn’t seen her for five years. The next thing she knew, she’d impulsively said ‘Why don’t you take me to Tibet? Lets go, take me to Tibet’.Cooly Tenzin responded, ‘Oh I’d like to, but I don’t have the money to go’. Unpreturbed Kelly asked how much it would cost. He said he wasn’t sure.He, ‘had enough money for the bus fare to Kathmandu, but he didn’t think he had enough to get the rest of the way,maybe he might need a little bit more.’Kelly had replied ‘Well that’s ok, if that’s all you need,then I can pay, but I don’t want to pay for it all though.’

Kelly went on to tell me, that a few weeks after they’d made these arrangements she’d found out he was involved with another womenwho he’d also met in Dharamasla – Alishia.Shewas madly in love with him, had also given him moneyto get home to Tibet, and was waiting for him in Kathmandu –then travelling to the grasslands in Tibet to meet his family. Unaware of this, Kelly had been making her own arrangements to travel with Tenzin. Women were attracted to Tenzin like bees to honey. Before you knew it you were in a warm, sweet, gooey womb, feeding on the fruit of an exotic spirit – stuck, not knowing you’d been trapped.

Kelly had become aware of this after a chance meeting with Alishia and

Tenzin in Kathmandu. They'd walked into a coffee shop together where Kelly was sitting drinking coffee, watching people walk the kora around the main stupa. Kelly told me she'd recognised Alishia from Dharamasla, but didn't know her name. She said Alishia was about 10 years older than her and, Kelly thought 'she was up herself, loud and arrogant'. She said the two of them 'sized each other up' and then Alishia, mumbling something about 'needing a break' left immediately'. Tenzin had then said to Kelly that Alishia was just a friend, they'd bumped into each other and she'd been helping him find a doctor because he wasn't feeling well. Kelly, although a little perplexed didn't ask him anymore about it and hadn't suspected anything. Tenzin and Kelly had already made their travel plans when this happened – he was leaving for Tibet the next day.

Chinese law meant that Kelly couldn't cross the boarder independantly with Tenzin; she had to travel with a tour group to Tibet. Not wanting to draw any attention to himself Tenzin had arranged to travel to Lhasa with a group of Tibetan people. He was leaving before her and would wait for Kelly in Lhasa. The day after Tenzin left, the two women ran in to each other in Kathmanmdu. I was fascinated with the story, listening intently.

Despondently Kelly said 'I could have very easily never have run into her, and gone on my merry ignorant way. I wish I had frankly. I was walking down the street the day after he'd left and saw Alishia coming towards me. Hesitantly I said 'Hi'. Alishia replied 'Hi. Can I ask you something? Are you going to Tibet with Tenzin?' Warily Kelly answered 'Yes'. Then Alishia asked her 'Can we go for a coffee?' They'd talked and the truth had unravelled.

Hurt and angry, Alishia had returned to Dharamasla, threatening to put up posters of Tenzin and have him arrested. Kelly said she'd wanted to cancel her trip to Tibet, but this would mean that she'd loose a lot of money. So she'd thought 'Shit, I've come all this way, I'm fucking well going'. She hadn't expected Tenzin to wait for her but he did. She met up with him in Lhasa and confronted him about Alishia. He denied everything saying, 'Why'd she say that? She's crazy. No I have never had sex with her.' Looking at me, she said 'Up until this point Tenzin had pretty much made out to me that he was celibate. That sex was just ego gratification. So with his constant denials, many beers and his smiling gorgeous face I thought...oh fuck it...I can't be bothererd I just want to have fun...it's between the two of them.'

Enough drama

This wasn't a new story for me – it had a familiar ring about it. I'd gone through the same type of quagmire with Josette. I felt her pain and said, 'Kelly, I'm so sorry. I had a dream about this, and there's another woman, a younger woman involved.' Kelly didn't doubt the validity of my dream and asked 'Do you know who this is?' I replied 'No, I don't know.' She quickly concluded that Tenzin's nightly stays at the monastery were in fact visits to this younger woman and began telling me the saga, as it had been playing out for her.

Before flying to China, and then Tibet, Kelly was in India` doing her own thing'. Tenzin was going there to meet her. She`d been waiting for him in Dharamasla for a month. Tired of waiting she called, asking what his plans were. He`d replied that it would be ages before he`d be able to come. I calculated that this would have been around the time I`d made contact with Tenzin to tell him I was coming to Tibet. Kelly had accepted what he`d told her, thought about it for a while, and then called him again and asked, 'What would you think if I came to Tibet?' Tenzin responded positively saying's 'Yes, yes, of course, come.' She called back again a few days later saying that she would come, but needed to know that he`d look after her when she got there and, `that we are together.' Again he replied 'Yes...yes...we're together. You can come, we'll travel to Kham. The flowers are out on the grasslands, it is so pretty. You should come.'

Kelly went ahead and bought a ticket, but when she called Tenzin to give him the dates he`d asked 'Can you delay coming till the end of the month? I have work I need to finish and I'm still busy with my mother.' Annoyed, she acquiesced deciding to spend some time in Thailand at the beach beforehand. But Thailand proved to be more expensive than she`d thought and in her words `she wasn't really getting into it'. So she called Tenzin again and asked if she could come earlier. He`d said 'Yes that's OK.' Not convinced, she asked, 'Are you sure?' He`d replied 'Yes, yes, come. It's cool.' I sat there listening, enthralled with her story. There were so many parallels to my own.

Kelly went ahead and made the necessary travel arrangements, but didn't know exactly when she`d arrive in Xiahe. She told Tenzin she`d call from Shanghai and let him know. As fate would have it, when she got to Shanghai she didn't know how to use the phone, so she never made the call to Tenzin. Like me, Kelly found

China's cities ugly and expensive, and wanted to get to the countryside as soon as possible. She'd visited the grasslands before, so decided to catch the train from Shanghai to Lanzhou and then the bus to Xiahe. No easy feat for a woman on her own in China. As a result she'd arrived in Xiahe a week earlier than planned and Tenzin didn't know she was there.

Kelly went straight to the guesthouse and meet Tsering (who she'd met on her previous visit), who then went to find Tenzin. He was just finishing a massage. I deduced this would have been with one of the German couple. I'd recommended his service to them. By now Kelly was dragging on her fourth cigarette in a row. She'd stopped smoking five weeks earlier but the current situation was too much for her to handle without a familiar stabilising influence, and she'd succumbed to the temptation.

Kelly went on, telling me she'd been sitting on the couch with Tsering when Tenzin pushed the curtain aside and came in to the room. She recalled he'd been surprised, and that while he looked pleased to see her, he seemed a little unsettled as well. He'd given her a lukewarm hug and then after a few minutes of talking, whisked her off to the bus station to organise bus tickets and a hotel room for the guests he was picking up in Xinning. To Kelly's surprise Tenzin asked her if she wanted him to book her into the same hotel. Thinking they would have been staying together at the guesthouse, somewhat confused, she'd replied 'No, why would I?' Tenzin said he was staying at his teacher's house with the monks, so she needed to get her own room. She reflected for a moment then said she now realised he was trying to keep us separated – Kelly and I we were staying in the same guesthouse.

Tenzin had then asked her if she wanted to come with him to Xinning the following day. This, she now assumed, was so we wouldn't meet each other. She said yes. Then Tenzin left, arranging to pick her up at 5.30am the next morning. Then Kelly went to the Nomad restaurant to eat. This saga had been playing out just before I'd walked in. As I'd intuited, Kelly had wanted to strike up a conversation with me, but because, in her words, I seemed 'really pissed off', she'd decided not to.

When I'd made arrangements to catch up with Tenzin, I'd specifically asked if he was involved with anybody. Not because I wanted to become re-involved, but because I didn't want to get caught up in the type of scenario I was now in. Kelly was berating herself for being so foolish, saying she could see why her friends had said

she 'didn't love herself enough.' Now she thought they'd been right, or she 'wouldn't be in this situation'. I tried to comfort her and kept assuring her that I wasn't involved with Tenzin and was happy to step out of the picture. I was disappointed with Tenzin's behaviour – she was hurt and angry. She'd spent a great deal of money to come and visit him, and had been manipulated and lied to for her effort. We were forming a strange bond.

Having put the pieces of the picture together, Kelly wanted to call Tenzin and confront him. She called, he didn't answer. Then she asked if she could use my phone to call him, assuming that because he'd think it was me he would answer. I didn't think it was a good idea but said 'Yeah sure'. She called, Tenzin answered. Pleased she'd fooled him; she said 'Hi Tenzin this is Kelly, I'm calling you from Margi's phone.' It was on. She was up for a fight. Shaking Kelly handed me back my phone and said she was going to meet Tenzin to have it out. I figured that they had a lot to sort through. Telling Kelly to 'take care', I said I'd catch up with her later.

In the guesthouse that evening she told me she'd tried to talk with Tenzin but he'd been uncommunicative and dismissive, and that he was coming to the guesthouse in the morning to talk to both of us. I thanked her for the message, but said her I wasn't going to be there. I'd already had enough. I just wanted to walk away. So far, my dream had proved prophetic, except, I hadn't slapped him. The reality was I didn't trust myself not to slap him. Wanting to avoid the possibility, I decided to leave and catch the bus to Langmusi the following morning.

Lost in Inner Mongolia

Early the following morning, I lifted my almost full, 60 litre backpack onto my shoulders, and walked off into the proverbial sunset. I saw Kelly on my way out of the guest house and wished her good luck. She reciprocated with 'You too darling'. I caught the bus to Langmusi dozing on and off along the way. Tenzin called a couple of times but I didn't answer. I arrived in Langmusi mid morning. It didn't feel the same without Yonten there. I'd seen most of it and didn't fancy being a tourist. I booked a room in a guesthouse and spent most of the day reading and sleeping. I met a young English woman in the tea room and debriefed with her. She found the whole story quite distressing and encouraged me to keep resting, but I didn't want to spend my

holiday in Tibet hanging around a guesthouse. I was on my way to Leisha's when I ran into Thundy.

He told me was going to travel to the horse-races near his village, somewhere close to, or in Inner Mongolia – I couldn't work out which –and asked me if I wanted to go with him. It sounded good to me. I didn't know Thundy well, and he spoke very little English, but because he was Yonten's friend, felt I could trust him, and said 'Yes, I'd love to.' Thundy appeared pleased and managed to communicate that we would be catching a bus at 5 am the following morning and that I should meet him at the bus stop. I thanked him and returned to my guesthouse to prepare.

We were both bleary eyed when we boarded the crowded bus the next morning. We drove for a couple of hours before the bus dropped us off at a T junction, in what looked like to me, to be the middle of nowhere. Thundy couldn't explain to me where we were, just that we had to wait here for another bus. We waited for at least an hour and then boarded a small bus which I thought was taking us to his village. Hours later, we disembarked in a very dirty, very ugly, Chinese town – straight from hell. It was then the problems began.

We'd arrived too early for the horse-races; they weren't going to be held for another couple of days. Because of the horse races the accommodation in the town had been booked out. It took us hours of trawling through squalid dives with no toilet or bathroom facilities, before I finally found a room in a half decent hotel, but it was only available for one night. Then, much to my distress, I found I couldn't access my bank account; apart from the small sum of cash I had with me, this was it.

Thundy didn't appear at all perturbed by my dilemma, and decided that he was going to catch the bus to another village the following day. I wasn't in a position to travel with him, I had to get somewhere where I could access my money and would be assured of a bed. The only direction I could head was north, to Xinning. This was where I would board the train to Lhasa. Through the process of what seemed like hundreds of phone calls, I'd finally purchased a ticket on the black market. I had been given a name and a number to call – the rest was in God's hands.

I paid for my room and then Thundy left, saying he'd be back to collect me for dinner. Gratefully, we were going to dine on momos with one of his friends. There was absolutely nothing else I would, or could eat, in this town. I went out for a walk

towards the river, where a number of yurts had been erected to cater for the horse-races. I still didn't know where I was, or what town I was in. Everything was written in Chinese, but because of the yurts I concluded I must be somewhere near the border of Inner Mongolia. The dirt road was busy with nomads riding their horses and motorbikes in and out of the town. I was the only westerner there. Questioning stares about my presence were frequent and long. I wandered along the river bank entertaining myself taking photos of the yurts, and then made my way back to town.

Thundy came to my hotel to collect me and took me to the bus station to get my ticket to Xinning before we went to his friend's home to eat. I had just enough money for the ticket and a bite to eat. I was so relieved to have it in my hand. We made our way to his friend's home. His friend didn't speak any English. I sat eating momos and sipping tea, grateful I was being fed while they talked in Tibetan. Once the meal was finished Thundy said goodbye and I made my way back to the depressing hotel room.

I wasn't looking forward to travelling to Xinning I detested Chinese cities and didn't know anybody there. By now I was feeling sorry for myself – lost, and lonely, thinking 'What the hell have I done walking off into the sunset on my own in China?' I was also disappointed and resentful that I'd missed my week on the grasslands, imagining Kelly and Tenzin having a wonderful time in Kham. I lay down to rest and gradually the self-pity shifted and instead I began thinking that my situation, as well as being ridiculous, was also quite humorous and started to laugh. You couldn't plan events like this; you just had to dance to the tune of the cosmic choreographer. This is one of the reasons I like to travel.

Xinning

In the morning I boarded another small, crowded bus for the long trip to Xinning. There were a few women passengers, but I was the only Westerner. The men sat smoking at the back. I'd stored my guitar along the top of the seats at the back window and had to sit with them. Every time the bus hit a bump my guitar fell on someone, who would in turn push it back up again. Occasionally I had moments of panic, wondering if I was heading in the right direction, and on the correct bus. I just had to trust that I was. By the time I arrived in Xinning I felt like I'd just spent eight hours sitting in an ashtray, and stunk of cigarettes.

Qinghai is one of China's poorest provinces; Xining is the capital, the only really large city in the region and not the most aesthetic of places. It's populated by a mixture of different ethnic groups: Tu, Mongols, Salar, Hui and Tibetans. The Tibetan quarter blends in with the homes and businesses of the Muslim Hui Chinese, who live and work along the banks of the Yellow River. Xining is positioned on the edge of the Tibetan plateau; it serves mainly as a stopover for foreigners following the Qinghai-Tibet route, catching the train to Lhasa, as well as a trade centre and military garrison. I found my way to a bank withdrew some money and then booked into a hotel near the railway station. I was catching the train the following evening. In this part of the city there was a multitude of small eateries that sold soup, noodles, yoghurt, and Seven Heaven teas. Apart from this, there was nothing else to amuse myself with.

Crossing the Tibetan Plateau

The following evening I stood outside the train station waiting nervously to meet the man who had my ticket. He'd been told what I looked like and I just had to trust that he'd find me. Half an hour before the train was due to leave a young Tibetan man approached me and asked my name. The connection had been made. I handed him the money, more than three times the actual price, took my ticket, thanked him, and then walked into the station to catch the train. I still didn't have a permit but was told that it would be ok.

There had been so much publicity about the new train to Lhasa that I was excited to be catching it. I was expecting it to be quite spectacular and luxurious, but there was nothing modern or luxurious about it. I'd been given a ticket for a soft sleeper cabin, the equivalent of first class in the west, but far from it in reality. The cabin had four beds, two on the lower and two on the upper level. Luggage had to be stored on your bunk or under the lower level beds. Under the window was a folding table, a vacuum flask (to make tea and noodle soup using hot water from the end of the carriage), and a vase of plastic flowers.

I wasn't the only Westerner on the train this time. I was in a sleeping berth with a Dutch man, his daughter, and a couple of Chinese people. I struck up a conversation with the Dutch man and his daughter and found I was in good company. He'd had a multi-faceted career, primarily in the fields of leadership,

community education, and personal development. His daughter was an artist. We all got on famously. Both of them were committed to the Dalai Lama's teachings and had met him personally. They were journeying to Lhasa as part of a tour group, but hadn't connected with the other members, who were younger, and more of the party animal persuasion. Occasionally, their Aussie tour leader would 'rock up' to see how they were doing.

The train reminded me of a college dorm on rails. Hordes of Han Chinese stood chain-smoking at the ends of the carriages. Most passengers were accommodated in the uninvitingly named 'hard-sleeper' and 'hard-seat' classes. Not long into the journey a steward handed out passenger health declaration forms to sign. On the back were the Beijing Railway Administration's Plateau Travel Instructions. They advised against travelling above 3000 meters if you *have heart disease, pulmonary edema, asthma or a heavy cold, if you are a 'highly dangerous pregnant woman' or have 'diabetes out of control', the hysteria, epilepsy or schizophrenia*. There was no advice regarding what to do on board the train if you did have one of these contraindications! I guessed it was simply some form of a waiver against responsibility.

The journey from Xinning to Lhasa is a 26 hour train ride across the Tibetan Plateau – 1970 kilometres. This stretch of railway lays claim to being the highest ever constructed; most of the journey is 4000 metres above sea level. I got a good night's sleep, and awoke to see the vast expansiveness of the Tibetan Plateau – a harsh, uncompromising landscape, with majestic peaks dominating an infinite, empty, flatness. The train passed through Tanggula Mountain pass, the highest point, at 5072 metres and continued along past the turquoise waters of Qinghai Lake. From the window I could see the front of the train meandering like a huge python, across the plateau.

Lhasa and the Potala Palace

We arrived in Lhasa at 11 o'clock the following night. Thunder, rain and lightning filled the sky. My new friends left to join their group. Alone, I wished I was going with them. I had no idea where I was, or how to get to where I was going. The battery in my phone had died, and I couldn't ring the hotel. Bizarrely every time I approached a taxi, they wouldn't take me – I was told 'No', or I was pushed aside by a policeman. I

had no idea what was happening. Somehow, I managed to remain calm and eventually a taxi driver agreed to take me to my hotel. He charged me one hundred yuan, five times the actual fare, which I knew was outrageous, but I didn't care. Thankfully he got me to where I had to go.

I'd arrived in Lhasa with bronchitis, not a good mix with the high altitude and was feeling quite ill, but slept well and felt a little better in the morning. I had a city to explore and couldn't bring myself to rest. Lhasa had been neatly divided between the old and the new: the Tibetans lived in the eastern section and the Chinese in the upmarket western section. The first place I wanted to see was the Potala Palace. Somewhere in my childhood I had seen a picture of the Potala and it had remained buried deep in my mind: a magical, mysterious place, somewhere far, far away. It was a surreal feeling to finally be in the picture.

The Potala Palace was a magnificent and awesomely beautiful sight. I stood for over an hour taking photos and contemplating what it represented, but there was no way I would go inside. Once home to the Dalai Lama, the Potala was now full of tourists – primarily Han Chinese. The most sacred monastery of the Tibetan people had been turned into a tourist attraction. I couldn't image what it would feel like to have thousands of strangers tramping all over your memories. To go in you had to buy a ticket, which was expensive and difficult to get. People began lining up in the early hours of the morning to purchase them. Opposite the Potala, in a large public square, children rode in small amusement cars, modelled on Disney cartoon characters, to the sound of Chinese music being broadcast in the square. Their parents stood watching proudly, with no consciousness of, or remorse for, what had taken place there. My stomach churned with the thought that the Dalai Lama had been forced to leave, and hundreds of thousands of people had been slaughtered here in the name of liberation.

I walked away from the Potala back towards Bharkor Square. The sense of oppression in the air was tangible. The Tibetan people looked tired from their constant struggle to survive. There were hundreds of stalls all around the Bharkor, full of 'Tibetan' artefacts; most of them mass-produced Chinese copies. Pilgrims prostrated themselves outside the Jokhang temple, walked the Kora, burnt Juniper at the altar, and then congregated inside for teachings. Foreign tourists frequented the cafés and restaurants around the square. Like other westerners I was destined to

remain in the outer circle, snapping photographs, prevented from entering the inner sanctum.

Chinese-organised tour groups paraded around and through the temple, oblivious to the sacredness of the space and the sounds of the pilgrim's prayers. They marched behind the tour leader, who held high a little yellow flag, and shouted instructions in shrill Chinese through a treble-heavy, hand-held microphone.

Tired, I walked back to my guesthouse. I passed shops full of yak butter, and tea, and walked past huge, red-raw, yak carcasses which, butchers had placed on the sidewalk for people to inspect and buy. I rested in the afternoon and ate dinner in the guesthouse restaurant which was managed by Indians. Having eaten only Chinese or Tibetan food for months, eating Indian was a gift straight from God.

Drepung monastery

Discouraging independent travel in the TAR the Chinese authorities had succeeded in making it very difficult for the solo traveller. It was impossible to do anything or go anywhere, in or around Lhasa, without a permit, or without being a part of a tour group. I'd hoped to find a couple of likeminded people and trek between Ganden and Samye monasteries, but missed the opportunity by one day. Those trekking this route had either just left, or just returned.

I decided to hire a bike and ride to Drepung monastery which was only eight kilometres west of Lhasa. Minibuses ran frequently, but riding the bike gave me a greater sense of freedom. I set off full of energy, but the high altitude, bronchitis, steep roads, a shonky bike seat and no gears, made the ride up to the monastery a small feat of endurance. After I arrived I locked up the bike and sat in a small roadside restaurant drinking tea and taking in the panoramic landscape.

Drepung was perched high up in the hills above Lhasa. A cluster of meditation huts could be seen nestled even higher up on the mountain above. The monastery consisted of a number of large white buildings scattered around the hills. Images of an assortment of Buddas were painted on huge boulders protruding from the hillside. I spent an enjoyable hour or two exploring Drepung and then rode down the hill to Sera monastery.

I arrived in time to watch the monks debating but could tell by the looks on some of their faces, they were just going through the motions. They weren't paying

full attention and weren't really that interested – no different from students in their classes in the West. Likewise, the monasteries and the monks weren't holding a lot of my attention. The novelty was beginning to wear off. I cycled back to Lhasa ready for rest and Indian food.

Yonten's friend, Kelsang, lived in Lhasa, and we were going to have dinner together that night. I'd met Kelsang in Dharamasla; it was a real relief to have someone to talk to again. He worked as a tour guide in Lhasa. Over dinner I asked him about the possibility of travelling to the Yarlung Tsanngpo Valley to visit Samye Monastery – a monastery I did want to see. Samye's overall design was created to represent a mandalic configuration of the Buddhist universe. But after discussing this with Kelsang it became apparent that it wasn't going to happen; primarily because, I was travelling solo. You needed a travel permit to visit Samye and it would be difficult to get a permit without organising a tour and a guide. This would be an expensive and time consuming exercise. I felt a sense of frustration and injustice rise inside me. I was sick of feeling captive in Lhasa. I wasn't even Tibetan! I thanked Kelsang, said goodnight, and went to bed early.

Captive in Lhasa

The combination of bronchitis and the high altitude was taking its toll. I was becoming weaker and decided to rest for the day. The magical kingdom hidden high up in the Himalayas that I'd dreamed about as a young girl had gone: replaced with the stains of bloodshed, sorrow, poverty and greed. The police and the military were always present, as was a sense of fear and exhaustion. The Tibetan's living here, or on pilgrimage, weren't free; they carried the weight of grief on their shoulders, and a heaviness in their hearts.

I couldn't fathom what it would be like not to live in freedom; the thought of a group of people moving into Melbourne and taking away my freedom and my privilege was unbearable. What was even more difficult to grasp was, knowing that this is still happening and nobody does anything about it. I decided to leave Lhasa. I couldn't stay in the TAR any longer – I couldn't bear to witness anymore. I didn't know what I and the hundreds of other Western tourists were doing here: we weren't building a Tibetan economy or easing the burden of the people. We were voyeurs to their loss: even though some of us ached to make a difference.

It was time to go. I decided because I'd missed the opportunity to see the horse races with Thundy that I would travel south and attend the horse-racing festival being held in Macq; situated in the southern most corner of Gansu province. I didn't know how I was going to get to Macq. I'd never been there before and I didn't speak Tibetan or Chinese, but anything was better than staying in Lhasa. The undercurrent of oppression had permeated my spirit and cast a dark shadow on my mind.

Having almost come to the end of my holidays, I decided to save time and fly to Xinning, rather than catch the train. I checked for flights on the internet and then went to a travel agent to book and pay. According to the travel agent they'd stopped flights to Xinning some months before – no one had bothered to take it off the internet. As I couldn't fly, I said I'd take the train instead, but the travel agent thought this would be very difficult as train tickets were hard to get.

Chinese opportunists were running a scam. They slept at the train station all night, and then in the morning, within the first hour of the ticket office opening, would buy all the tickets and sell them on the black market. There were no tickets available for at least five days. I wasn't surprised that the only way I'd be able to get in to Lhasa was through the black market, but I hadn't expected it was also the only way I could get out.

Annoyed I said 'OK, no problem, I'll take the bus.' I was then promptly informed this was not a possibility. I was a foreigner, and foreigners can't take the bus. I hadn't anticipated such difficulty in trying to leave Lhasa. I couldn't believe the absurdity of the situation. I proclaimed 'Well I have to leave somehow, I don't live here.' The travel agent just shrugged his shoulders.

A Tibetan woman sitting next to me shook her head and exclaimed, 'They said the train would make everything easier, but now it's more difficult and more expensive. The cost of living has gone up, barley flour has gone up, and tea has gone up'. I understood her sadness. I might be finding it difficult to leave, but ultimately, I knew I was going to get out of there.

The Chinese government proclaimed to the world that the new railway was a means of bringing economic development to 'backward' Tibet. In reality it was just a way of speeding up the dilution of Tibet's population with Chinese immigrants, and gaining access to the valuable natural resources in the region. In Lhasa alone, Han

Chinese outnumbered Tibetans three to one. I'd seen firsthand how Tibet's most revered temples and rituals had been turned into tourist attractions for the five and a half million people, predominantly Chinese, who now visit annually. Tenzin had told me it was important for me to travel to Lhasa, that – I 'had to go and see for myself'. Now I understood what he'd meant. I didn't want to be part of the problem anymore – I wanted to leave. I was starting to become stressed and vocal. Overhearing my dilemma, a German man sitting in the travel agency tried to console me by expressing his own anger and frustration. He too couldn't get out of Lhasa and was overwhelmed with the stupidity of the situation. Unable to travel south, he was willing to travel the Friendship Highway to Nepal and leave Tibet that way, but the Nepalese border had been closed. Despondent, he exclaimed a lot of people wanting to travel in that direction were also stuck in Lhasa. We looked at each other in frustration and disbelief and vehemently agreed we would *never come back*.

I left the travel agent's office and began scanning guesthouse notice boards, hoping to find a way out. While I was standing at the reception counter, checking out the travellers' grapevine, a moment of grace and fortuitousness occurred. From the corner of my eye I noticed two westerners, sitting in a small room with a young Chinese man. It looked like they had train tickets. I walked over, excused myself for intruding, and then asked them if they'd just bought tickets and, if so to where. They replied yes they had; the tickets were for the train to Xinning the following afternoon and, there was one left. I was beside myself with relief and blurted out 'Please let me buy it'. Incredibly the price was only 50 yen more than standard market price. I was so grateful; finally I could leave. Burying my newly purchased ticket deep in my day pack I walked back to the guesthouse to begin packing.

The following day the yoghurt festival was being held in Lhasa. I wasn't catching the train until late in the afternoon which meant I could attend. The Nepalese restaurant owner offered to take me with him in his car, but we didn't get very far. Unable to forge a path through the traffic, madness, and chaos engulfing the city, we were forced to return to the guesthouse. With no regrets about cutting short my time in Lhasa, I rested until it was time to board the train and travel south.

Back across the Tibetan Plateau

The trip back across the Tibetan Plateau was without incident. This time I got to see parts of the landscape I'd previously travelled through at night. Although it was the height of summer there was still snow on the ground on parts of the plateau. I arrived in Xinning exhausted, but grateful to be out of the TAR and to have left Lhasa. I went to the bus station early morning, eager to leave the city and joined the Tibetan crush purchasing tickets.

Somehow I bought a ticket for the correct bus: I'd been allocated a window seat and squeezed in beside a particularly large monk. As always, there wasn't enough room for my long legs. I was tortuously squashed from every angle, sitting with my feet off the ground and my knees pinned up against the hard back of the seat in front. The rest of me was forced up against the window by the body size of the monk.

The bus pulled out of the station and we began the journey south to Gansu province. I knew I was in for a long, hard day, of uncomfortable travel. A couple of hours into the journey a Tibetan woman and her small child boarded the bus. There were no seats so she tried to balance herself and the small child in the aisle. I watched her struggle for a while and then decided to give her my seat. She was relieved and grateful. I moved up to the front of the bus and sat above the engine, balancing between supplies and luggage: thankful to feel the blood returning to my lower body. Several hours later I regretted my decision. The bus had no suspension, and I had nothing to support my back. I was using every available muscle I had just to keep myself upright. It was Pilates Tibetan style. By the time we got off the bus in Hezhou I could hardly walk.

The thought of boarding another bus to travel to Macq didn't thrill me. I decided to hire a car to take me the rest of the way. Fortunately I came across another woman who also wanted to go to Macq. I couldn't tell if she was Tibetan or Chinese. She was travelling alone and wore modern attire, so I thought Chinese, but I didn't think that this equated with travelling to Macq to the Tibetan horse-races. We made the journey without conversation, arriving in Macq just before dusk.

Macq

The driver dropped me in front of a small recreational park situated between the shops in the main street. Contemporary Tibetan music blared out of numerous public address systems. Scores of young Tibetan men sauntered around the park in an aura of bravado and manliness. They wore their chubas off one shoulder, tied around their waist by a sash, leaving the long sleeve swinging by their side. I sat on top of my back pack for a while watching the endless procession of nomads filter into the town. The horse-races were obviously a big attraction in the area.

Macq was not quaint; it was loud, dirty and busy. Although heavily populated with Tibetans, the flavour was more Chinese. Most rooms were booked, but eventually I found one in a budget hotel. The room faced the main road; it was loud, unwelcoming, drenched in light from neon street signs, and didn't have a bathroom or toilet. I'd been travelling for thirteen hours straight. It was going to be difficult to rest, but at least I had a room.

Tibetan horse races

On my way to the horse-races the following day I came across the woman who shared the car with me from Hezhuo. She seemed equally as pleased to see me, as I was her. I so wished I could talk with her but we didn't share a common language. We managed to communicate enough for me to learn that she was Tibetan and her name was Tashi. She beckoned for me to go with her and we made our way out of town to race track.

I saw the Tibetans as I hadn't seen them before. There was something so ancient, primitive and tribal about them. Accessories were big – one elderly man wore a massive, silver pendant studded with coral which hung on a chain and covered most of his chest. The pendant looked close to a hundred years old. Something about him separated him from the others. I wondered if he was a shaman.

Hundreds of tents and umbrellas were erected around the racetrack and adjoining fields. Whatever connections Tashi had, worked in our favour – we got to sit on seats in the one and only grand stand, reserved for the chosen few. Juniper burnt on an altar in the middle of the racecourse, paper wind horses covered the ground, creating the appearance of snow. Flags flew in the breeze, on top of long poles which had been erected on the tops of the tents. Groups of nomads sat in

small circles on the ground around the field. Young males zipped around on their trail bikes leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. Male spectators strutted past in long fur robes. Finely decorated Tibetan knives, flints, snuff bottles and silver coins hung from sashes tied around their waists. The women wore their biggest, most elaborate, coral necklaces, earrings, and headdresses. Precious gems; turquoise, coral, gold, silver and copper adornments hung from their long braids and draped down their backs. They dressed in traditional robes, long-sleeved silk shirts, and brightly coloured striped aprons, fastened at the waist by an array of huge, heavy, silver belts.

The jockeys were young Tibetan boys. They wore black track pants, white T shirts, and black, white, red, blue, or yellow helmets. They rode bareback, their heads held high. It was time for the race. Men shouted out what sounded like a war cry, and then thousands of wind horses were thrown into the air. The horses pranced and swayed amidst the human throng, their edginess and anticipation rising, as the build up to the race mounted. Then the race began, the horses galloped around the grass track. The first horse reached the finish line but didn't stop: I felt confused: The riders kept their horses galloping around, and around, and around the racecourse. The race appeared to be a test of endurance as much as speed. After a few laps the energy in the crowd dissipated and lulled.

The race lasted at least twenty minutes and then without warning, it was over. Men and young boys raced out to the riders and wrapped long blue, green, or yellow silk khatas around the necks of the winning horses. Wind horses were thrown again, and cries of victory filled the air. The winning horse was led out into the crowd. More young men gathered around, and endless khatas were tied around the horse's neck. I was expecting that there would be more races to follow, but there was only one race, and for today it was over. The horses would race again tomorrow. Tashi and I made our way back to the town. We shared a meal together, struggling through the void of spoken word, with body language, smiles and handholding and then parted company. The following morning I began my journey back to Zhuhai.

Home Sweet Home

After twenty hours on the road I arrived back in Zhuhai, feeling wild, scruffy and quite mad. The battle with the intense heat and humidity began immediately. I was so

looking forward to the security and sanctity of my apartment, dreaming of taking a shower, and sleeping in my own bed. But the dream was quickly shattered. I was greeted with exactly the opposite.

The apartment block where I lived was being renovated over the summer holidays. I'd been assured the work would be finished by the time I was due to arrive back. It wasn't. It looked like a bomb had gone off – dust, concrete and rubbish lay everywhere. Exhausted, carrying my entire luggage I climbed up seven flights of stairs to my room, only to find I couldn't get inside. A worker explained the manager had the keys and couldn't be located until the next day. At midnight, complaining loudly, I was shipped off to spend the night in yet another hotel.

I arrived back at my apartment the next day. The manager had been located and gave me the keys. Relieved I opened the door and then gasped in horror. The whole place was covered in fine concrete dust; dead cockroaches lay on their backs, their legs in the air, bodies scattered across the floor. A pungent, fetid odour saturated the room. A brownish grey, liquid was seeping out from the freezer at the bottom of the fridge, onto the floor. The electricity had been turned off and nobody had thought to inform me that this would be happening before I left. I hadn't emptied the fridge. I opened the door and nearly fell to the floor from the intensity of the smell – *fish!* Six weeks of rotting, decaying fish, in a closed space, in tropical heat. A parasite or fungus had spawned and was growing all over the fridge itself. I tried, believe me, to clean it, but after three hours I gave up and asked for a new fridge. I spent the rest of the day trying to settle back in, but I still couldn't make contact with the English speaking world. The power kept going on and off, and the computer and the phone were down. It took days before the smell of fish was completely gone and a lot longer before the renovations had finished.

I had 20 weeks of teaching to get through to finish my contract. I began marking the days off on my calendar. I spoke to Yonten when I could. Now busy in his new line of work, he was often in remote areas without phone coverage. Tenzin called a few times, in need of conversation I'd taken his calls. He'd travelled to Kham and wanted to study Green Tara meditation at the monastery. One night he called suggesting that instead of returning to Australia I should go back to Tibet, and start a healing centre with him in Xiahe.

Once I would have jumped at the opportunity for such an exotic life, but not now. I'd believed him when he'd told me he loved me and wanted a future together – undoubtedly, I wasn't the only one who'd fallen for his words. It had been a long and painful journey separating reality from the fantasy, and I didn't want to get lost again. I always hung on too long, trying to look for the good in people, believing they would change, but you can't change other people. You can only become willing to change yourself.

Part Four: Acceptance

`As we look into ourselves we see more clearly our unexamined fears, conflicts, our frailties and confusion, in this way our life might appear as a series of mistakes...One famous Zen master actually described spiritual practice as one mistake after another'.

[Jack Kornfield: *A Path with Heart*].



Uprising

A month after my return to Australia, Tibet surfaced in the headlines of world news. The oppression and suppression I'd witnessed in Lhasa had begun to boil over. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games brought with them an opportunity for the Tibetan people, human rights advocates, and pro Tibet supporters to send their message to the world. It was now 48 years since the Chinese occupation of Tibet. To mark the anniversary, there had been an uprising in Tibet on a scale it hadn't seen for 18 years. Protests spread beyond Lhasa to include the Tibetan areas of China outside the TAR. Almost 80% of the demonstrations took place in Amdo (Gansu Province), where both Yonten and Tenzin lived. The demonstrators included students, nomads and everyday people, as well as monks and nuns of all ages.

Most of the protests were peaceful, but in Lhasa violence had broken out. It was rumoured a number of Han Chinese dressed as Tibetans, attacked Chinese police, sparking violence and chaos. I watched the news in horror – bullet holes were sprayed across the windows of restaurants I'd sat in only months earlier. According to Chinese government figures, 22 Chinese and one Tibetan were killed in the protests. The headlines screamed *China condemns 'vile' Olympic torch protests*. The Chinese media drove home Beijing's message – *Tibetan separatists were acting as terrorists – Innocent Chinese were the victims of looting, burning and assault*. The Chinese government on the other hand had responded with restraint?

The Tibetan Government in Exile put the Tibetan death toll at more than 200. For me, this wasn't just a political event somewhere far away in a distant country, it was personal. People I cared about were at risk. I tried calling Yonten often, but couldn't get through.

In a military crackdown in the Tibetan areas thousands of people were arrested in house-to-house searches. There were clashes at Kirti monastery in Lhasa – thousands of monks joined with laypeople and students demanding the release of two monks who'd been arrested for replacing a Chinese flag with a Buddhist one. Around 572 monks, including 10-year-old boys, were arbitrarily arrested. There were reports that between 15 and 30 people, including women and a 16 year-old schoolgirl died in the shooting. One monk stated, 'I do not want to live under the Chinese oppression even for a minute, leave aside living for a day', and then committed suicide by self immolation.

One of the biggest protests took place in Xiahe, at Labrang monastery. Close to 1000 monks and laypeople had gathered for a religious ceremony which erupted in protest after monks draped in Tibetan flags began to call for the Chinese to leave Tibet. The police fired tear gas and warning shots, and dozens of Tibetans were detained or injured— up to 160 monks were arrested. There were accounts of monks being tortured and of others escaping, afraid to return to Lhasa and the TAR. As far south as Macq, protesters took to the streets. There was no legislation or accountability that could protect them. Phone lines and internet connections were cut. Regulations were put in place banning people from walking in groups of more than two. The whereabouts of many were unknown.

The Chinese government reacted with hostility and contempt towards the riots, and to the international criticism of its handling of Tibet. They claimed the violence was instigated by the Dalai Lama and Tibetan separatists. Qin Gang, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, issued a statement declaring, 'The rioting was deliberately manipulated by the Dalai Lama clique', and the Chinese government had 'taken legal actions to return Lhasa and other places to normality.' A statement of accusation directed at the Dalai Lama ludicrously claimed that 'he wore a religious coat and held the banner of peace while trying to separate China and destroy social stability and national unity.' One year after the uprising China had still failed to account for the identity and whereabouts of more than 1000 Tibetans who had been detained.

Hearty felt thanks

Every day I became more concerned for the safety of Yonten, his family, and the community of Langmusi. It was more than a month after the uprising before an email came through.

Dear teacher,

First of all, I really want to say my hearty felt thanks a lot for your E-mails and for thinking about me and the Tibetan people. Actually, I have been trying to contact you, but since all the trouble happened in Tibet there was no way until today! All this happened before I started my journey to Lhasa, therefore, I am still in Langmusi. Me and my family are safe. I know that I am really a coward man! I mean I couldn't do anything for the Tibetan people, even

though I know more about the Tibetan situation than many other people do. I just had to stay at home and all I could do was to pray to HH for the people who lost their lives and are suffering under Chinese rule and for peace in Tibet and all over the world. The police came to see me twice and checked my rooms. The first time they took some of my CDs and, also they asked for my cell phone and telephone numbers, and then there was no connection with my computer! OK Dear, I will end my mail from here and I will write again if I get chance. Please say thanks a lot to anybody who works for and thinks about the Tibetan people.

I found it touching that Yonten never referred to me by name, it was always teacher or dear, but I was saddened to hear him refer to himself as a coward. It was difficult enough living under a blanket of powerlessness and oppression, without adding the weight of guilt and shame. I sent him a reply immediately, telling him how happy I was he was safe, and assuring him, he was not a coward. It would be a couple of months before I heard from him again.

The TAR and neighbouring provinces with large Tibetan populations were under tight military control and roadblocks and house-to-house searches continued. Foreign journalists were forced to leave Lhasa and government blockades were erected to prevent them from reaching Tibetan areas in neighbouring provinces. Inside China, the state-owned media published images of Tibetans burning and looting Chinese shops and attacking ethnic Han Chinese, inflaming community anger.

Common sense, human rights, and the Tibetan cause were overshadowed by the blind arrogance of patriotism stimulated in China and flowing through to the Chinese communities abroad. In Australia about 4,000 Chinese students were bused to Canberra by the Chinese Embassy to support the torch relay. The counter-protesters overwhelmed the protesters; in many countries the number of pro China supporters was greater than the number of pro Tibet protesters.

Written by an expert

The plight of the Tibetan people was weighing heavily on my mind. I watched the events unfold through the various media channels, saddened by the apathy

engulfing so much of our world. I wept for the Tibetans, and for the ignorance, stubbornness, and blind obedience to authority of the Chinese people. Although no longer in China, I was working for a Chinese organisation in Australia and this felt like it kept me there to a degree. I tried to sidestep the political domain, being careful not to bring my personal feelings to work, and steering clear of the issue. My primary concern was for my friends and a people I loved. I had no tolerance for, or interest in, political rhetoric and propaganda.

I was at work one day, standing at the photocopier waiting for documents to come through, when a young Chinese woman came in to the room. She hadn't been in Australia long. Previously she'd lived in Chengdu, one of the gateway cities in China for travel to Tibet. She knew I'd lived in China and began trying to engage me in conversation. Earlier that morning when I'd been talking with a Chinese colleague, I'd revealed to her that I'd cried for both the Tibetan and the Chinese people. She was impressed by my concern and we'd found common ground and understanding for discussion. She must have mentioned this, because this young woman opened the conversation stating she was surprised I cared.

She'd attended a pro China protest in Melbourne and asked me if I'd heard about it. I answered 'No, I hadn't.' Annoyed; she claimed this was evidence that China was being unfairly targeted. She was outraged that the protest hadn't received any media coverage and, wanted me to acknowledge China's innocence. I suggested perhaps the media didn't think the protest was newsworthy; it had nothing to do with nationality. But she wouldn't listen – the western media were guilty of defaming China. China was the victim. Angrily she exclaimed, 'Why was China singled out? The whole world recognizes that Tibet is part of China.'

I found the counter protests by young Chinese people living in the safety of western countries – who'd signed the international treaty of human rights, and exercised the right to free speech, abhorrent. These people weren't living under an oppressive Chinese government without an avenue for complaint or protest. They weren't marginalized or being forced to forfeit their land, or renounce their religious beliefs, language, history and culture.

To my way of thinking, China had lost her heart and soul when, in the name of the Cultural Revolution, Mao stripped her, destroying all that was unique and beautiful. Individuality, and thinking for yourself had been driven out of the Chinese

psyche, creating an endless landscape of sameness. This young woman from Chengdu was just one of millions.

Seeking to diffuse the conversation I made the mistake of trying to use reason, acknowledging, 'Yes, the media are biased, but not just against the Chinese. The media are biased against a lot of things.' She retorted that my ignorance of the protest 'was *proof* China wasn't being represented fairly.' I'd heard enough. I wanted to leave the confined space of the photocopying room which was now feeling quite oppressive. But she had a captive audience and wasn't going to miss the opportunity to address the error of my ways. She told me she knew for a fact that 'the Dalai Lama was aligned with the CIA. He wasn't a peaceful man; he was sinister and clever.' Shocked by her madness I asked, 'What makes you think that?' To which she replied, 'I've read a book.' Looking at her in disbelief, rhetorically I exclaimed, 'You've read one book?' 'Yes,' she replied, 'It was written by an expert.' I began to push back a wave of grief and anger arising inside me, asking who was this expert, she was referring to. She didn't know his name, but, she explained, 'he came from Taiwan.'

I was astounded by her total conviction that what she was saying was true. She never questioned what she'd been taught – China could do no wrong. I asked her how old she was, and how long she'd been living in Australia. She replied, she was '23 and had lived here for two months'. I excused myself and left the room; I had to get out of China – somehow I was still living there. Two weeks later I left my job with this organisation.

Everything going fine with me

After the Olympics the Tibetan issue disappeared from the eyes of the world media very quickly, but the effect of the uprising and the protests were still being felt by the Tibetan people. Nothing had changed for them. In fact, things had become worse, and it was still not safe. I'd written to Yonten a few times, expressing my concern, asking if everything was OK, but his reply was slow in coming. After finally receiving a second email from him, I realised our friendship was putting him at risk. It was better if I didn't write.

Dear teacher,

how are you? I hope you are going well. I am fine and trying to open a small

restaurant because this year there is no tourists to take on tour in my area. Therefore, my massage room is free so I want to use it for a restaurant. I will make Tibetan buns and dumplings. I've attached some photos of my shop and the restaurant. I know you want to know about the things that you asked me, but you know if you write more about these things it will be hard for us. You know that these things are happening in our areas in this year,,,, I am sorry about it, I hope you understand me. Thank you. With best wishes Yonten.

Thankful he was OK, I too left the Tibetan situation behind and got on with my life in Australia. A couple of months passed before he wrote to me again. The danger had passed.

Dear teacher,

how are you there? Thank you very much for you emails. I am so sorry that I have not been able to reply to you for a very, very long time, but please understand that after the uprising we cannot get the internet in our area. However everything is going fine with me and my family. My shop is going well too. Today I am in Ruo Er Gai and here I can check my mail and reply to you. I came here for one of my friends' wedding party and it's great. I hope you will be able to come to my wedding party hahaha!!! I am sure that I will be so happy if you do it. Thank you dear teacher, I will try to get more chances to write and let you know about things.

Yours sincerely Yonten

Many of the young men from the music program in Dharmasala were now married and living in other countries. I hoped Yonten's time came soon. I also hoped I'd attend his wedding party.

Gates of Hell

I continued to assimilate back into my life in Australia and my new occupation teaching International students Community Services, but it was difficult. It's easy to confuse our identity with what we do, instead of who we are. The death of the artist that had begun in China, continued in Australia, and it was a painful death. Not having a guitar in my hand every day was strange. I felt like I was going through a divorce: being separated from my first love.

Gradually I caught up with friends and was starting to settle again, when I received a phone call – one of my dearest friends had died. I was only a few weeks away from catching up with him, but the door had closed. He died from liver cancer and his death forced me to face my own health issue. Both my sisters died in the mid stage of life: my oldest sister passed at 48 with multiple myeloma and my second sister passed at 53 with breast cancer. I was coming up to my 50th birthday and had hit the family legacy. My liver had been ravaged by hepatitis and I no longer had an option – I had to undergo interferon drug therapy for six months. Luckily for me I had one of the better genotypes that didn't require twelve months of therapy. This isn't a treatment to be taken lightly, many people don't make it, some give up, some take their lives, and others go through months of pain and hardship only to find out they didn't clear the virus.

My inner life went into turmoil and I entered the dark night of the soul. I didn't know it, but the gates of hell were just about to open for me. That year it was the longest, coldest winters in Melbourne for ten years, and I barely made it through. The treatment regime was gruelling. The drugs not only affected my body, they affected my mind. My head took on the characteristics of Satan's Theme Park with demons running the show – I was on the emotional equivalent of a daredevil rollercoaster, terrified, going around and around, and they wouldn't let me get off. A couple of gargoyles perched outside, above the entrance at my front door of my house – every time I walked through it, they greeted me with, *Ah good, you're home, come inside, there's something we want to talk to you about.* Then they would roll out a long list of all my shortcomings, mistakes, and failures and taunt me with them. The drugs caused crushing depressions; my head felt like it was constantly in a vice, with the screws being wound tighter every day.

Taken over by the drugs, my body was no longer my own. It became heavy, lifeless and full of pain. The reality of my own mortality rose up, slapping me across the face, showing me clearly that everything, including myself, was impermanent and in a constant state of change. There was nothing in this world I could hold on to. Illusions of invincibility and power gave way to the knowledge of the vulnerability and fragility of life. I saw vividly the many moments I'd squandered, taking life for granted, wasted in fear, self pity, remorse, regret, shame, and guilt. I didn't want to waste any more but felt powerless to make a change.

Memories of moments I'd experienced enjoying full health, laughing with friends, travelling, revelling in the beauty of nature, caught up in the rapture of creativity, sat in the forefront of my mind like sparkling jewels. I'd thought this would be mine forever. Now, I saw the reality that it could finish at any given moment. None of it was in my control. I'd tasted the magnificence of being alive, the endless possibilities, the diversity, the mystery. Trying to make peace with powerlessness, I desperately wanted to transform. To live and enjoy my life to the best of my ability, regardless of who I was, who I wasn't, what I had, or what I didn't have. I was undergoing spiritual shock treatment: waking up from the dream. Life was the gift – anything else was a bonus.

Kindness

Yonten continued to write. His emails brought me pockets of joy. His life, was starting to blossom. He now had a girlfriend.

Dear teacher,

I am so sorry you are undergoing medical treatment! Could you please tell me about your problem? I think I will go to a Tibetan doctor and get some Tibetan medicine for you, maybe it will help you.

Dear teacher, do you need money? Please tell me if you want and I can send some money to you as well. It's impossible to forget that you gave me money when I was in difficulty, so it's my turn to do my best for you.

Dear, you can believe me if you need any help from me please, please, please let me know. I will be happy to help you.

Do you know I now have a girlfriend? We are fine and in Lhasa. She was working in a restaurant in Lhasa, but it was too hard and not a good job so she stopped but she's not happy to stay without work because she thinks that I earn money but she wastes it, but I don't mind. Now she is planning to sell some Tibetan necklaces and earrings she made herself. She started this evening. I don't know if anyone will buy something from her?? I hope so, that's all for now. I will keep contact.

Wishing you all the best and happiness. You're Yonten

His kindness and concern touched me deeply and kept me believing in the goodness of humanity. I wrote back expressing my gratitude, saying how happy I was for him, and not to worry, I would be OK – one day I would come to Tibet to visit him again.

Ku Nye

I was almost at the end of treatment; my body felt like it carried the weight of many lifetimes. Every single part of me was in pain. All my joints ached. I'd developed peripheral neuritis in my hands and feet. Arthritis was attacking an injury in my neck. My shoulders were tight and felt hunched up around my ears, like an old buzzard. My brain had become toxic with the drugs – there were times I'd find I'd been staring vacantly into space for over an hour.

It was a long six months but I completed the treatment and cleared the virus. My doctor said he thought anybody who went through interferon therapy was a hero! 'Now', he stated, 'all I had to do, was sift through the smoldering ashes of my life and find out what was left'. As the effect of the drugs wore off, so too did the numbness, created by the toxicity in my brain. The pain was unbearable, every joint ached, every nerve in my body felt raw and on fire. Sure I'd never be anything but tired again; I felt I'd aged 30 years. My thinking and my world view had also changed, and in some areas become distorted. I was in survival, not living mode, feeling constantly vulnerable and threatened.

At the end of my treatment I meet a woman who practised Ku Nye, a form of Tibetan massage. She insisted that I should visit her for a special session; a bath based on the principles of the Tibetan practice, Dhutse-Ngalum: combining water, fire, and medicinal herbs. Dhutse-Ngalum bath therapy is like soaking in a natural hot spring. There are many healing claims associated with Dhutse-Ngalum; the ones that interested me were that it helped to ease mental restlessness and stiff limbs. Tibetan medicine begins from the premise that all suffering, and therefore all illness, results from ignorance. I'd been a teenager when I'd contracted my disease, definitely ignorant, but even more so, vulnerable and self destructive.

When you engage in a form of Tibetan therapy you begin from the base acknowledgement that you are responsible for your own health or lack thereof, and

therefore are responsible for your own healing. The practitioner is there to guide and enable your process. I was willing.

I went for a Tibetan massage every two weeks. It was magnificent. At the beginning of each session, cotton wool, soaked in warm oil was placed in my ears. Then my head was wrapped in a towel, creating the sensation of being inside a warm, safe, nurturing cocoon. After this my body was rubbed with oil, pressure points were weighted with warm crystal salt packs, and then treated with moxibustion a traditional – a traditional Chinese therapy using moxa made from dried mugwort. It is moulded into the shape of a thick incense stick used to warm the meridian points. The aim is to stimulate circulation and induce a smoother flow of blood and qi. The burning moxa is removed just before the skin burns. She applied moxibustion to the joints in my hands and feet. It took time to surrender, relax and receive, but very slowly I let go and began my journey back to health and wellbeing. It was Western medicine that saved my life and Tibetan medicine that brought me back to life.

Life out of exile

Yonten was by now well on his way to establishing a life out of exile. He wrote to me with good news.

Dear Teacher,

How are you? I really hope you are well and very healthy again. Please tell me about you as soon as possible. I am fine and back in Lhasa from western Tibet. I was quite busy for the last month with my tourist groups. Me and all my family are very well. Yes, at the end of last year I took my parents, my sisters and my nephew to Lhasa and we visited about 13 monasteries around Lhasa and two other monasteries in Amdo. I paid for the whole trip and I am so happy that I could do it for them.

I have good news to tell you!!!! Do you know what that is? he he he My girlfriend Thokmay is pregnant! We are very happy about it. This is the first child for both us, yesterday we went to the people's hospital in Lhasa and checked her body, the doctor said both her and the baby are good! Actually, we planned that this year we'd work hard and save money for our wedding party during the winter time, but now we don't know what's going to happen

for us. Maybe it's better to get married next year. However, I will tell you about us, and really hope you can come to our wedding party. Tashi delek!

I really hoped that I'd go as well, but I was far from recovered and Tibet wasn't a romantic destination; it was hard travel. All the stars would need to be aligned for me to make another tough journey.

Time passed and Yonten still didn't have a wedding date. They wanted to marry in the summer on the grasslands with lots of animals around, but his father had to consult with Tibetan Astrologers before the date could be decided:

...of course I will send an invitation to you, and if you are able to join our wedding party we will be very, very happy... we do not know the exact time yet but I will let you know. We are fine and Thokmay's belly is getting bigger and bigger day by day. There is only one and half months until we have our new baby! We are so excited... you know this is our first baby in our life. We are very happy and today I am in our town and trying to get the wedding documents and permit for having a baby, but it's not easy and we need to do lots of work for it. I hope everything will be fine for everybody, with love and best wishes, Yonten

His next email brought with it no wedding date, but the good news that Thokmay had given birth to a baby girl.

*My dear teacher,
Happy New Year!*

I'm sorry I haven't been in contact. I have been with my parents in our village for one month after our little baby girl Palden Dorje was born. Now I am back in Langmusi and have the internet connection. Everything is fine with us and especially our gorgeous little Palden Dorje, she is so nice. She was born on 2010/12/17 at 9.50 pm weighing 3.kgs. We got her name from HH D and we are so happy about that.

Today is 30th of December in the Tibetan calendar and the day after tomorrow is the first of January, our new year. You know that we have a big party for the New Year. I think I've told you about that? We are in our shop in Langmusi and tomorrow we are going to our village and we will have the New Year celebration with our parents. We haven't decided the time of our

wedding yet. I will send our invitation to you for the wedding as soon as we know the date; it will be during the summer time of next year. After three days the people in my village are going to collect grass for the animals to eat during the winter time, so I think I will help my family to do this. Its hard work for the nomadic people and takes about 15 days, first we need to cut the grass and then make it dry. After that we collect it and put it all in one place. Finally, all the best wishes to you for the coming New Year. I wish you health and happiness. Your Tibetan friend Yonten

Months later Yonten's father announced a date. They would marry in July, before the yak herders left the village to take the yaks to the mountains. Attending a nomad wedding was not something on the tourist agenda – it was a privileged opportunity and I wanted to be there. At the same time I was hesitant, July was only seven weeks away. I was still in the process of recovering from the interferon treatment; often tired and feeling physically unwell.

Struggling to make a firm decision intuitively I began creating a new mandala. I hadn't felt an urge to paint since my last exhibition. At first I found it difficult. My eyes seemed to have become dim and I couldn't focus. My hands and fingers were stiff, and my movements sluggish. The voice of the self-critic chatted away, nonstop inside my mind, constantly reminding me that 'I couldn't draw' and 'shouldn't be wasting my time'. I consoled myself with the thought that 'it doesn't have to be perfect' – I wasn't working towards a show and, it was ok` just to have fun'. Oddly I appeared to need permission.

It took willingness to surrender into the process completely, but gradually the voice of the inner critic diminished, often to be replaced by the voices of doubt and fear, until eventually I let go unconditionally, and went with it. In the centre of the mandala, surrounded by hues of vibrant, bold colour and tribal designs, I'd painted a golden deer looking up at the crescent of a new moon. Vulnerable, not yet strong on all of its four feet, the deer was pushing itself up off the ground, struggling to stand. Subconsciously I'd been working hard, wrestling with the decision as to whether I should travel to Tibet or not. Looking at the mandala I knew I would go – how could I not? Four weeks before the wedding I made the decision – I was going. A surge of energy flooded through my being.

Good qualities

I began the process of organising my trip. I would fly to Guangzhou and then catch a domestic flight to Lanzhou; from there I would travel by car to Langmusi. Yonten was making the arrangements for me at the other end. He sent me an email saying he was so happy that I was coming to his wedding. He had asked one of his cousins about the cost of a car and a driver to pick me up at the airport and take me to Langmusi, saying:

He has quite a nice car and he is good driver as well. He told me that it will cost 1500 yuan from Lanzhou to our village, what do you think about it? Do you think that is good? If you think the business is fine I can also send one of my friends who can speak English well in the car to Lanzhou to pick you up. Please let me know what you think about this? Thank you teacher, see you soon
Yonten

Having had little income for the best part of the year, 1500 Yuan seemed like a lot to me; I hadn't paid that much last time I'd visited Langmusi. I thought that maybe his cousin was thinking the 'Western foreigner equals money' equation and replied saying it was a little high, maybe I could catch the bus? Having lived in China, and travelled in the region already, I thought I'd be able to manage it. Instead of encouraging my independence he replied with an offer to help.

Dear teacher,

There are lots of cars for hire in Lanzhou, but I really don't know how much you should pay to hire one from Lanzhou to Langmusi. If you take the bus, its 70 Yuan from Lanzhou to Hezuo and then you need to change buses in Hezuo, you will arrive in Xizang (bus station) and then you need to take a taxi to the Nanzhan (the other bus station in Hezuo) and there you can get the bus that leaves for Langmusi. There are three buses leaving to Langmusi each day. The first leaves at 6:30Am, second leaves at 7:20Am and the last leaves at 12:20 in the afternoon. From Hezuo to Langmusi is 33yuan, its much cheaper compared to the cars? But sometimes you cannot get the bus ticket from Hezuo to Langmusi because lots of tourists and local people have already bought them. Then the cars ask double the price to take you to Langmusi.

Dear teacher, I really don't want to make things difficult for you, I will pay 500yuan and you pay the driver the rest money is that ok? I am really happy to pay for you. I always remember how you helped me when I was in difficulty in my past time. I know that you couldn't work for a long time because you were sick. I am really happy that you are recovered from your sickness and that you are coming for my wedding. Please let me know what you think and thank you for coming my dear teacher, I am am so happy and excited to meet you again. That's really everything from me. I already booked the 14th and 15th for you in the new hotel and 16th we go to our village and sleep in the tent,,,,, Yonten see you soon my teacher

After reading his email I was ashamed I'd doubted his sincerity and allowed economic insecurity to enter into my correspondence with him. It takes an open, willing, and giving heart, to thaw out a cold one sometimes – my reservations and mistrust of all things remotely Chinese began to subside, as did my struggle for survival. I wrote back immediately, declining the offer, saying I would be happy to accept the amount his cousin was asking and thanked him for all that he was doing. The name Yonten means good qualities – he had been aptly named.

Welcome to Tibet

There'd been a few political scuffles in Tibet in the weeks leading up to my departure, but as far as I knew they were in the TAR, and I wouldn't be travelling there. I slept on the flight, arriving at Guangzhou airport feeling rested, and then made my way to the connecting flight for Lanzhou. Standing in the queue, memories of living in China began to surface: intense isolation, unrelenting humidity, frustration, loneliness, and the regret I'd lived in for the year I was there. I had to work hard to bring myself into the present moment and see things through fresh eyes. I knew I held prejudices that had warped my perspective and shaped my experience – I was going to have to work hard to overcome them, and melt the barriers. I'm not sure when they started or why. I'd hoped that living in China would help to change my point of view, instead it had solidified it

Yonten had arranged for his cousin Ackar and a driver, to meet me at the airport. I couldn't remember what Ackar looked like, but trusted the connection would

be made. I walked out to the front of the air terminal and heard someone call my name. Scanning the crowd I saw two beaming Tibetans, with colourful silk khatas in their hands waving at me. I recognised Ackar straight away and walked towards them. They welcomed me warmly draping the khatas around my neck and wishing me `Tashi Delek`. I felt at home, back with my people. Like long lost friends Ackar and I couldn't stop talking to each other.

We drove to the centre of the city to locate one of the few handy banks available so I could withdraw money. Remembering what had happened when I was travelling with Thundy and I couldn't access my money, I withdrew more than I thought would be necessary – just in case. Then we began the long drive to Langmusi, leaving the northern plateau behind, heading south towards the grasslands. Ackar was full of energy –singing, chatting, and laughing for the whole journey. The first time I'd made the trip with Yonten, I'd slept most of the way. My only vivid memory was of the bright yellow canola flowers that covered the landscape. This time I took in the changes.

Massive Chinese billboards lined the highway. The hills were dusty, barren and brown, occasionally speckled with small green bushes. A number of traditional Chinese houses and small temples were scattered amongst them; a few remaining traces of an ascetic China. Traditional Chinese structures, with curved multi-inclined roofs, were built on the principle of balance and symmetry. The Buddhists believed this helped ward off the evil spirits, thought to reside in straight lines.

We drove for three or four hours and arrived in Hezuo for lunch. Hezuo is the regional capital of southern Gansu, a transit point for travellers taking the route between Gansu and Sichuan provinces. It's not a pretty place, but Tibetan culture begins to manifest here. The Milarepa Palace, a nine-storied Tibetan monastery, exquisitely decorated with Tibetan brocade and designs, is in Hezuo. We stopped for photo opportunities, spun the prayer wheels and watched pilgrims perform prostrations in front of the temple, before climbing back in the car to continue our journey.

We still had a distance to travel before entering areas traditionally Tibetan. The further south we travelled the more familiar the landscape appeared to me. The bare, brown hills became green with grass, and trees. Cattle and sheep grazed beside small babbling streams, and the patchwork quilt of yellow canola flowers

covered the fields. A bright, light blue sky framed the picture. Gradually the canola fields disappeared, replaced by a green, undulating landscape, criss-crossed with the black dots of grazing yaks. We crossed a small stream and then Ackar, turning around from the front seat, his face breaking into a smile, said, 'Welcome to Tibet'. Then he began singing in Tibetan – I felt his spirit soar, rising up into the mountains now surrounding us.

Teacher, 'tashi delek'

The sun had long set by the time we arrived in Langmusi. It had been a ten hour drive. Although I'd been travelling for over 28 hours I didn't feel tired. I was too excited. Soon I'd be seeing Yonten, his wife to be, and his little baby girl, Palden Dorje. We pulled up outside Yonten's shop; he lived there with Thokmay and their baby, in a tiny room at the rear. Opening the car door I could hear him calling out 'Teacher, teacher, tashi delek'. I jumped out of the car, walked forward and threw my arms around him, a few tears welling in my eyes. He'd grown into a man: his youthful frame had filled out, giving way to a solid, strong body. His face seemed to have opened even more. His smile, broad and full, was as infectious as ever. A flurry of greetings began. His uncle was there, with a small boy and a teenage girl – young cousins. Thokmay appeared holding the baby; she was shy and not quite sure how to approach me. I liked her immediately. She had a gentle presence and, like Yonten, an infectious smile.

Yonten beckoned for us to follow him upstairs. His brother ran a restaurant on the top floor, which also served as a family room after hours. Thokmay had prepared a meal of rice, yak meat, eggs, and vegetables, to welcome me. Grateful for her labour and knowing they wouldn't eat until I'd finished, I ate with zest. Yonten, smiling continually, kept asking if the food was OK – smiling back I assured him yes it was delicious.

Guests from the West

Yonten had invited some other western friends to his wedding: Mark, his English teacher in Dharmasala, and three others were arriving later that night. None of them had ever been to the grasslands in Tibet before. Thokmay set about cooking more

food, while Yonten, Akcar, and his uncle began to eat their meal. I sat on the couch nursing Palden Dorje, enjoying the ambience and family atmosphere.

A couple of hours later the other guests arrived and the night began anew. As well as Mark and Linn, his poised, quiet, Vietnamese girlfriend, there were two mature age women from New York: Anna and Janice. They'd previously hired Yonten to be their tour guide while they were in Lhasa. I hung back to allow them all some time and space to spend with Yonten. Mark ran his own small agricultural business in Australia, he seemed laid back and relaxed – I could tell Yonten was very fond of him. Linn was currently undertaking a PhD in Malaysia – exploring differences between various strands of Buddhism, and was very quiet and reserved. Anna and Janice were exactly the opposite, far from relaxed and demanding constant attention. They took pride of place at the table. Before they'd even finished their meal they'd asked Yonten a myriad of questions and planned their first day in Langmusi, with Yonten acting as their unofficial tour guide. It was decided that he would take the group to visit the monastery in the morning. Yonten didn't appear to mind.

Both Anna and Janice had worked as teachers; Janice a school principal. They were highly educated, well-travelled, and financially independent women; now retired and travelling without their husbands. Tibet and her people were new to them; Buddhism the current fascination. Having already visited the monastery, I was happy to rest and explore on my own. I wasn't here on tour and didn't want to become part of a tour group – I cherished my autonomy, but had a sneaking suspicion that, for the rest of my time in Langmusi, I was going to have to work for it.

We said goodnight to Yonten and his family, then headed to the monastery hotel where we were all staying for the next two nights. The hotel was fairly new, the best accommodation in Langmusi. I looked forward to a shower and a clean bed; soon we would be sleeping on the grasslands with no creature comforts. In the morning, excited to be back in Tibet, I leapt out of bed and pulled back the curtains. The view was stunning. My room looked directly onto a multilevel white and gold stupa, standing boldly in front of green rolling hills, rugged mountains, and a sapphire sky.

Energised, I began getting ready for the day. I was looking forward to real coffee and pancakes so headed to Leisha's. After breakfast I made my way to

Yonten's shop. He sold basic, Chinese-manufactured, western style clothing: wind jackets, jeans, and jumpers. The others had congregated for the morning tour. Fighting back a barrage of concerns that I wasn't going with them, I insisted all was well, and that I'd join them later.

The Wheel of Deluded Existence

I met the others for lunch and then spent an enjoyable afternoon exploring the shops, buying jewellery, artefacts and trinkets. I was on my way back to the monastery hotel when I bumped into Yonten; he'd been busy all day entertaining the others and making last minute preparations for the wedding. He suggested going to the monastery to watch the monks debating. I jumped at the chance. The monastery is a man's world; women and children generally have to remain outside when the monks are chanting. Fortuitously, because Yonten knew the Chant Master we were allowed to go inside and sit quietly. The monks sat in long rows that ran from the altar to the rear of the room. The Chant Master and High Lamas sat nearest to the altar. We sat in the back, absorbing the sounds and the atmosphere. One of the monks made his way towards Yonten, talking softly he indicated to follow him towards the front of the room. We climbed a few stairs to an area at the front surrounded by huge statues of the Buddha.

I could see that for many of the monks, this was just another day of going through the motions, doing the drill. There was nothing other-worldly or mystical about this for them – this was just what they did. Like any routine or ritual it could become boring and inconsequential. For me it was captivating. The chanting started to fade. A number of young monks leapt up and ran from the room. They returned carrying enormous metal tea pots, and then began running up and down the rows pouring tea.

Yonten and I went outside and began to explore the panels of Tibetan thangkas painted on the walls at the entrance. Many had been restored since I'd last visited and were vibrating with the intensity and luminosity of fresh colour. Yonten pointed to one of the thangkas, 'The Wheel of Deluded Existence', commonly known as 'The Wheel of Time' and began to explain the story behind it. The Wheel of Deluded Existence is usually painted to the left of monastery doors, depicting realms of existence, or psychological states, associated with an unenlightened life, acting as

a mirror for spiritual aspirants to look deep into their essential being. I was more interested in exploring the artists' skills, the use of colour, subtleties, intricacies, and the incredible degree of concentration embedded in the work than the philosophy. Thangka artists train for at least ten years to learn their craft, having to memorise fine details, measurements and colour exactly. There can be no variation – all aspects must adhere to tradition.

The monks flooded out of the building. It was time to debate. When they'd finished, a few walked over to say hello. I recognised some of their faces from my previous visit. They were Yonten's former classmates. We exchanged greetings, posed for photos, and sat chatting. There was no aura of sanctity, purity, or righteousness separating us; we were just friends hanging out together. We stayed for a while and then left to collect the rest of the group for dinner. Excitement levels were high; we were travelling to the grasslands the following day.

Change in the weather

When I awoke the following morning it was raining. This was the day we were leaving our creature comforts and travelling to the grasslands, not a good day for rain. It was also the day before the wedding. I hoped the weather would change in time for Yonten's special day. I met him after breakfast. He was anxious that our luggage would get wet while it was strapped to the roof of the car, and wanted to buy a large sheet of plastic to tie over the top of it.

The others were panicking and buying wet weather gear from his shop at a discounted price. I was happy to see that he was getting some business – he may not have had any for weeks. At the same time I was disappointed to see them accept his discounted, already low prices, when they had the money and an opportunity to give. I set off with Yonten to buy the plastic, insisting he let me pay. It didn't sit well with me to think that it would cost him because we were there.

We loaded everything into and on top of the car, and set off. Yonten drove. He'd only been driving for a few months and was very proud of his ability to do so. I teased him about his newfound skill and asked if it was difficult to get your licence in China. He replied 'yes it was, it was very expensive', and for that reason he didn't have one! It didn't bother him that he was driving without a licence – I guessed he wasn't the only one in this part of the country.

An hour into the drive the rain stopped and the sky cleared a little. Yaks and nomads' tents began emerging on each side of the road. I couldn't believe, that in a landscape that was so vast and empty, I still remembered landmarks along the way – I even recognised the family's camp from the road.

God is good

Yonten's mother, father, sister, sister-in-law and a number of children greeted us – only his brother wasn't there. He was out with the yaks. Both his mother and father embraced me, his mother commenting that I looked younger. Having finished my treatment only several months before, I responded, 'Yes, God is good.' She nodded in agreement.

Yonten's sister-in-law went inside the tent and set about making tea, while the others went through their introductions. I was happy to be staying in a group on the grasslands. There wasn't a lot you could do out here, unless you were working, and Yonten was the only one who spoke English. The family had erected a separate tent for us to stay in. We set about the business of organising our sleeping arrangements – everyone happy and excited to be among the nomads. Satisfied with our layout, we then made our way back to the family tent for lunch and Tibetan milk tea. Inside the tent I watched amused. Everyone was awkwardly, reticent in accepting the family's hospitality. I think they thought that they were on a tour. Almost every moment was a photo opportunity for them; I wondered how I'd feel if a group of people came into my home and took photos of me preparing lunch and doing the housework. Shy and perplexed, the Tibetan women found their celebrity status quite amusing, and a hindrance to their work. A feast of yak meat and vegetables were laid before us for lunch. A number of the family's yaks would have been slaughtered to feed the wedding guests and visitors; this was no small cost. Knowing this I accepted the food graciously, as did the others who had now relaxed into the experience.

After lunch we were left to entertain ourselves. Yonten was travelling to the village with his father to work on wedding preparations – the women would be busy with their work as normal. Even though tomorrow was her son's wedding day, today Amma would work like any other day. There would be no trips to the hairdresser or

beauty parlour, no new shoes or expensive outfits. There were yaks to be milked and food to be cooked, as always.

Walking across the plains

I took leave from the group to take a walk across the plains. The sky had clouded over again, the wind had risen, and it was starting to get quite cold, but I didn't care about the weather – I just wanted to move my body. I'd decided to walk down to a bridge crossing the small stream where the women collected water, grateful that this was not my daily toil.

I walked along the side of the highway as nomads zoomed past on motor bikes, and cars and transport trucks headed to their various destinations. About 40 minutes into the walk I came across Thokmay and Yonten's young cousin, Champo. They'd been riding a motorbike over to the village, and it had broken down. Thokmay was pushing the bike, trying to get some speed up so Champo could kick-start it. I jumped in, lending a helping hand, and miraculously the bike started. Laughing, the three of us climbed on and headed down a gravel road away from the highway. We only made it about fifty meters before the bike stalled. Champo tried kick-starting it again but with no success. Finally accepting it was out of petrol, he began pushing the bike the rest of the way. Thokmay and I left him to it and started to make our way back across the plains towards the camp.

The wind had turned bitterly cold. Following the style of the nomads, I wrapped my scarf around my face, leaving just a slit for my eyes. Thokmay was wearing only a thin polyester cardigan on her slight frame, and shivering. Pulling my wind jacket out of my daypack I offered it to her, but she kept insinuating that I should wear it. I already had a weatherproof insulated vest on and wouldn't hear of it. Eventually she accepted my offer and slipped the wind jacket over her slender frame. We linked arms and walked side by side, keeping our bodies close for warmth. Thokmay didn't speak English, and I didn't have enough Tibetan to engage in a conversation, so we just pretended we understood each other, chatting, laughing, and taking pictures of the wild flowers covering the grasslands as we walked. This was the first time I'd been alone with Thokmay, and I was grateful for the opportunity. Yonten had chosen well. I was so happy she would be Yonten's

partner in this life. She was an endearing young woman – sincere, humble, warm, and kind, never demanding any special attention.

We crossed the highway to head for the camp. A young boy, only six or seven years old, riding an old bicycle, came to the road to meet us. He was barely able to reach the seat, but was beaming with pride that he could ride. Just for fun we all piled on the bike. The young boy sat on the bike rack above the back wheel, Thokmay sat on the seat, and I stood at the front holding the handle bars and pushing the pedals. We made our way towards the tent shrieking simultaneously every time we hit a pothole until the bike toppled over and I handed it back to its rightful owner. Back at camp the others were still sitting dutifully outside the tent. They found the grasslands beautiful, but only to observe.

A charging yak

I sat outside the family tent drinking tea and watching the sun begin to set. Far off in the distance, I could see Yonten's brother bringing the yaks home across the grasslands. Champo rode out to meet him. The women congregated outside the tent preparing for their arrival. Mastiffs barked excitedly pulling at their chains. The dri and calves came first. The women walked amongst them without fear, tethering the calves to guide ropes running along the ground, ensuring that the mothers wouldn't leave. Champo, mastering his horse ducked and weaved amongst the herd, driving the bulls into small wired pens.

I loved watching the herd coming in, and wondered why the others were holding back. They were standing reticently in front of our tent, a safe distance from the action. Sensing they were shy and unsure I waved to them, encouraging them to come over and join the family and get a better view. Timidly they began making their way towards the family tent. Just as they started to move a young bull broke away from the herd and began galloping towards them. The group stopped walking and stood, dead still, in a straight line. The yak, undeterred, continued to head directly for them. I didn't understand why they were just standing there, but trusted they'd move eventually. I was wrong. The charging yak was now no more than six meters away and they were still standing there frozen. As loud as I could I yelled, 'RUN!' Finally they realised that standing still while being charged by a wild yak wasn't a particularly smart option, and took off in all different directions. Startled by the

movement, the yak swung away from his target and was skilfully intercepted by Champo on horseback and herded towards the pen. I went over to the group to check they were OK. By now everyone was laughing with relief – it seems someone had thought the best strategy to adopt when being charged by a yak was to stand still. I think they'd confused this with a charging bear strategy! Fortunately, common sense had prevailed. Amused by the incident, assuring them that they would be safe, I guided them over to the family tent to watch the yaks being milked.

Hard labour

I was happy to see Yonten's brother again, and I greeted him saying 'tashi delek'. Recognising me, he shook my hand warmly and replied 'tashi delek', and then made his way into the warmth of the tent. He looked different than on my previous visit; he wasn't as drawn or worried looking. I suspected he'd stopped smoking, not an easy feat for a man in China or Tibet.

We watched the women milk the yaks and then went inside to watch Amma and Yonten's sister-in-law begin the process of turning the milk into butter and cheese. It was a long slow process. To make the cheese the women strain the milk through thin muslin cloth, and then they would churn the filtered milk by hand to make curd. The curd is laid out on sheets of plastic to be dried by the wind, and matured by the heat of the sun. The cheese forms into tiny clusters, like granola, and is incredibly hard, without much flavour. After they'd finished making the cheese they would then begin preparing the evening meal.

Yonten returned from the village and began fussing, making sure we were OK. We teased him reminding him that tomorrow was the big day, trying to build up the excitement. But for the family it was another day of hard labour.

It was close to midnight by the time we'd eaten and headed off to our tent to sleep. The moon was full, the air and the earth bitterly cold. I tossed and turned most of the night trying to get warm, eventually falling asleep as the sky was beginning to lighten with the rising sun. When I awoke I was the only one still in the tent. The others had risen early and gone to watch the women milk the yaks.

I walked over to the family tent for a cup of tea and Tibetan fried bread and saw Amma and her young granddaughter gathering yak dung. Her granddaughter scooped up the wet dung from the earth with her bare hands, and then plopped it

into a basket, strapped to Amma's lower back. Amma was almost bent double with the weight of the fresh yak dung – work didn't cease just because today was her son's wedding day.

No beauty parlour on the plains

While Amma toiled, we fussed around getting ready for the wedding, turning our tent into a makeshift beauty parlour: bathing in tiny bowls of water, applying makeup, and brushing our hair. The people from the villages would be intrigued by Yonten's western guests and I wanted to look the best that I could – it was imperative we brought him honour. I'd brought a long cotton, white lace jacket with me to wear over my everyday black pants, and a pair of riding boots. Not something I would normally wear to a wedding, but this was the best I could do. I completed my outfit by wrapping my head in a new style Tibetan pink pashmina scarf, and hung turquoise earrings from my ears. As glamorous as I was not, I was good to go.

Yonten arrived in a car with a few of his friends and cousins, bounding towards us like an excited Labrador. He had special gifts for us: traditional silk jackets to wear at the wedding. I was conflicted because I wanted to wear the garment I'd brought with me, but didn't want to appear ungrateful or rebellious. The others were happy to wear their jackets. Mark actually looked regal with his bald head, white skin, and red silk jacket. Eventually we were all ready, and along with our belongings were bundled into a couple of four wheel drives and driven over to the wedding ground.

A Nomad's Delight

The wedding was to be held in the Tibetan equivalent of a public park. A couple of acres of land in the middle of nowhere had been sectioned off by a string of flags to form a quadrangle. The top end had been left open and the sides were flanked with small white tents. Some would house guests; others were used for storage, makeshift kitchens, and dressing rooms.

We were ushered into a tent which had been set up to entertain guests before the wedding party arrived. Small thin mattresses to sit on had been placed around long, low tables piled high with food and drink. Large cuts of cooked yak meat, and

sausages made from the offal, were placed in the middle, along with small knives to cut the flesh. It was a nomad's delight; no expense had been spared.

After a drink of tea and some general chit chat, I made my way outside to explore. A massive Tibetan marquee had been erected at the bottom end of the quadrangle, where the wedding ceremony would take place. At the front of the marquee two Tibetan girls, dressed in royal blue silk chubas, stood holding trays of sweets.

Inside the marquee there were six long rows of small tables, roughly two feet high, built with bricks and boards, running from the front of the tent to the back. Each table was piled high with yak meat, sweets, fried breads, soft drinks, sweet milk, and Chang (Tibetan beer). Space had been left between the two middle tables allowing for access to the altar at the back of the marquee. The altar was decorated with bowls of fruit, butter sculptures and white khatas. Two teapots draped with silk khatas and a tsampa kit, were placed on the ground at the base. At the side of the altar, a monk sat on a meditation cushion chanting.

Outside the marquee to the right there was a long wooden table surrounded by wedding guests registering their gifts. Gifts are given in the form of money, with the name and the amount given by each guest recorded in the register. The money is then used to defray the costs of the wedding. It functions similarly to a door charge, but also ensures that the wedding is a community event.

A whitewashed altar made from dried yak dung had been built in the middle of the quadrangle, positioned roughly 25 meters from the entrance. A large bag of wind horses lay next to piles of juniper branches at its base. Yonten's father was in the process of getting it ready and decorating it. He wore a stylish grey vest and a white silk Tibetan shirt. His chuba was tied around his waist in traditional style with one sleeve left loose hanging by his side. A blue windproof fur-trimmed hat framed his face. He looked so cute; I formed a crush on him. He placed a mound of yak dung on the altar and then put juniper carefully on top to form a pyramid. Blue, red, white, green and yellow silk scarfs were draped from the top of the altar to the ground.

The Wedding Party arrives

Wandering between the tents, I watched women from the village cooking, making momos and soup, or braiding each other's hair. Dozens and dozens of bottles of

cola, orange, lemonade, juice, iced tea, and Chang were stored in the tents, along with boxes of biscuits, breads and sweets. Tibetan weddings can last for days. This one would only go for 24 hours.

The others joined me in the quadrangle which was now filled with guests. Someone in the crowd shouted excitedly, they could see the wedding party far off in the distance. People began to congregate on each side of the altar. Amma and the other women in Yonten's family were just arriving. Not a lot had changed in their attire. Yonten's young niece wore a soft orange and white lace dress over the top of her everyday clothes. Amma wore a maroon silk shirt jacket on top of her everyday skirt and a navy blue woollen scarf on her head.

The atmosphere hummed with anticipation. The wedding party came closer; there were about a dozen riders. Yonten rode at the front of one small group. Thokmay, led by Yonten's brother, rode in another. Both Yonten and Thokmay rode light grey horses, differentiating them from the other riders who were mounted on blacks, bays and browns. Traditionally the bride rides a white horse to her future husband's household on the wedding day. The wedding party arrived. I anticipated a cacophony of cheers, but both the guests and the riders, remained solemn, without evident emotion. Yonten dismounted. Amma and Yonten's sister-in-law moved forward and took the reins of Thokmay's horse, and led her into the quadrangle towards the juniper altar.

Thokmay slid down from her horse and stood tall, calm, and proud. She had completely transformed from the slight young girl who'd walked across the plains with me the previous day. Now she was a Tibetan Goddess: poised and regal. Her long hair had been meticulously woven into dozens of fine braids. Several strands of deep orange, coral beads draped her forehead like a necklace. A silver and red coral pendant, attached to a string of larger turquoise beads, hung in the middle. Around her neck she wore a big, orange coral and amber necklace. Large gold and orange earrings hung from her ear lobes. Her jewellery and headdress complemented the rest of her outfit perfectly: a Tibetan style orange silk brocade jacket, trimmed with gold, worn on top of a delicately woven, woollen white and grey checked chuba.

The chuba was secured at the waist with a thick silk sash and an ornamental Tibetan belt, which had a pewter and orange coral belt buckle, at least six inches long and three inches wide. Traditional milking straps, studded with large pewter

discs and coral, hung on each side of her waist. Under her garments she wore black leather, high-heeled boots. The overall effect was simple, elegant, and stunning.

Yonten too had transformed. He looked strong, noble and handsome. Tied around his waist, over jeans and long boots, he wore a cream silk jacket, trimmed with gold brocade, on top of a three-quarter length chuba, made from the same fabric as Thokmay's. A long leather belt, attached to an ancient knife, adorned with pewter and coral, dangled loosely from his waist to just above his knees. Around his neck he wore a necklace of black, orange, yellow, and white gems. By Tibetan standards he was dressed quite modestly

Maintaining solemnity, Yonten's father placed white silk khatas around the necks of each member of the wedding party. Then the guests began throwing wind horses up into the air, and the juniper was lit. Both the bride and groom placed fresh branches on the altar. The rest of the group and I hovered around the proceedings, madly taking photographs. Yonten took a colourful array of wind horses and threw them into the air, now thick with the smoke of burning juniper, while his father performed a small ritual at the altar. The wedding party then made its way towards the marquee.

Watching Yonten walking towards his future, I was overcome with tears. Part of me was letting go, another part, the mother in me, didn't want to let go. I was experiencing a flood of mixed emotions, overwhelmed with gratitude and a strange sense of pride. Mark picked up on my mood and threw his arms around me. I welcomed Mark's shoulder to cry on muttering, 'Just one, it's so good to see just one. Just to see one make it through – make it back to the land, and the people, and the home they love.' Mark understood. There were tears in his own eyes – we'd both been moved by the plight of the Tibetan people. Often when Yonten called out 'Teacher', I would turn to see what it was he wanted only to find he was calling Mark. Together we shared a moment of acceptance and release. I realised I'd only played a minor role in Yonten's life, but that he'd played a major role in mine. It was I who was enriched from meeting him, not him from meeting me.

The Wedding

We were the first guests to be ushered into the marquee. We had been given a position of honour at the top of a side row. I sat at the end of the row, next to Janice.

Buzzing with the occasion she expressed her delight that we were sharing it together. Responding to her enthusiasm I replied that I was likewise happy to be sharing with her, but after a brief interlude she turned to talk to Anna, and I spent the rest of my time at the wedding out on a limb with no-one to talk to.

Yonten and Thokmay stood proudly behind the altar, flanked by their bridesmaid and groomsman. I'd anticipated what the next step in the proceedings would be – for the Lama to perform a wedding ritual, but his role had ceased with the pre wedding chanting. Instead an MC, maybe an older cousin or uncle, made a lengthy speech welcoming guests on behalf of the family. Special acknowledgement was given to our attendance at the wedding – noting we'd travelled far and, spent a lot of money to be here. This elevated Yonten's status in his community and was a source of kudos for the family. I was happy we added flair to the wedding, but it was we who were blessed to be there.

The speeches went on for a long time; there were many people to thank, and many people made speeches. After this a long line of guests standing at the entrance of the marquee, carrying a bright green silk khata, easily 10 meters long, made their way forward to the altar and began wrapping it around the bride and groom. Then, one row of guests after the other, made their way forward carrying khatas and bound the couple together, until you could barely see their faces – hundreds of khatas were offered. We followed suit. I felt so honoured to bow before Yonten and his beautiful new wife. I offered the khata, watching as it was wound around them, each thread of silk binding them together ever more strongly.

I love Tibet

The ceremony now complete, it was time for festivities to begin. Small plastic bowls of hot noodle yak soup were brought to our table, along with tea and momos. The entertainment started. The singing was spellbinding, the sound system distorting and grating. One person after another got up to perform. Yonten had asked me to sing at his wedding but without my guitar I was limited in what I could offer. I decided that it would be more memorable if we sang as a group and chose an old American gospel tune to perform. I knew the words were irrelevant to the Tibetan people. They didn't speak English – it was the melody they'd respond to. I loved to sing for the Tibetans – we had a similar timbre in our voice, and came from a similar place in our spirit

.The MC called us up to sing. I took the microphone while the rest of the group stood nervously behind me, terrified at the thought of singing in public. I opened my heart and sang, watching the eyes of different guests come alive as they connected with the spirit of the song. Sensing the audience appreciation the rest of the group began to let go and enjoy the experience. When we'd finished we received a warm round of applause.

Having overcome their fear, the group was now high with the thrill of performing. Mark had caught the performance bug, and wanted to sing again, solo, with me there for a safety net. He was going to sing 'Mercedes Benz'! What else would you sing at a nomadic wedding on the plains in Tibet? Now it was my time to be horrified. I stood behind him while he sang, jumping in when he lost his way. Of course, nobody cared – we were just a couple of westerners making fools of ourselves, in a language only half a dozen people understood – but I've never enjoyed babysitting people on stage, and I've done it a lot.

The eating, drinking, and merry-making had just begun and would continue for hours to come. The MC and the singers changed every couple of songs. There was a small break in the proceedings and then, to my surprise, the next performer to get up was Thundy. I hadn't seen him since he'd left me somewhere in Inner Mongolia a couple of years before. He was wearing a white T shirt with 'I love Tibet' printed on it in black letters with a big red heart symbolising the word 'love', in the middle. Like Yonten he'd filled out, but he still had the same youthful mischievousness about him. I looked forward to catching up with him later, to give him an Aussie style ribbing for leaving me to fend for myself when I didn't know where I was and couldn't speak the language.

The lucky ones

Late in the afternoon Yonten wanted to have group photos taken. This also gave us the opportunity to present him with our wedding gifts. The group hadn't wanted to register at the wedding table; they wanted to give their gifts personally. I'd followed suit. We made our way out of the marquee and spent the next half hour swapping cameras and getting group photos taken. I had my photo taken with Thokmay, with Yonten's mother and father, and with little Palden Dorje , but nobody took a photo of

me with Yonten. I was just a face in the crowd now; my personal journey with Yonten had been replaced with a myriad of other faces.

Then we each began to hand over our gifts. Through the generosity of my friends and family I'd raised a large sum of money. Knowing this would help contribute towards sustaining his family in the future I was so happy to present it to him. I was hoping the others would also dig deep when they gave. But was disappointed when I heard them discuss the amount that they 'thought', was appropriate to give: they still related to Yonten as a tour guide. He received each gift with genuine appreciation and grace, thanking us all profusely.

Having given our gifts outside the traditional parameters of the wedding protocol, we now all seemed a little lost and awkward. To mark the occasion, I made a speech on behalf of the group, thanking Yonten and his family for having us, telling them how deeply grateful we were for their generosity and inclusive spirit. Attending the wedding made us the lucky ones, not them – meeting Yonten had given each of us an opportunity to become better people. The rest of the group nodded in agreement then showered Yonten with hugs and appreciation.

Time for Dancing

The older guests and families had begun to leave, but the young Tibetans, especially the single males, were only just beginning to warm up. It was time for dancing. Folk music rang out of the PA, filling the quadrangle with song. A Tibetan version of a maypole stood tall in the middle. Rows of small, colourful flags were strung from the top of the pole to the ground, creating the effect of an open teepee, with an inner circle, around which the Tibetans danced.

They formed a circle around the circumference of the maypole, dancing one behind the other in a simple pattern of steps and turns. Their left hands were placed on their hips, their right hands held out from their sides, were bent at the elbow with their fingers pointing up to the heavens. They danced as one, in a meditative harmony, their faces beaming with joy. In the clothes they wore day in and day out, the nomads danced with the pride and grace of people dressed in princely regalia. The dancing was beautiful and mesmerising. I couldn't resist the opportunity to be woven into the invisible threads holding the dancers together, and joined them. The rest of the group, still shy, watched for a while until they too joined in.

The sun began to fade in the sky. Yonten and Thokmay had departed. His family had returned to their camp to tend to the yaks. The only people left were the serious partygoers. We were sleeping in one of the white tents erected around the quadrangle, right next to the marquee. Going to bed early wasn't going to be an option. The night air was piercingly cold under the full moon. There wasn't much to do in the evening, except watch the partying and the dancing which had now moved back inside the marquee. I sat quietly in a darkened corner trying not to impose on the young people's fun. A couple of times I was beckoned to dance, but the moment had passed for me. I was happy to just sit, immersed in the present moment. The party went on long into the night— sounds of breaking glass from discarded bottles of Chang became more frequent – but never once was there a hint of aggression or hostility in amongst all the drunkenness. Surprisingly when I went to bed, I slept peacefully the whole night.

No more yak, please

Yonten was at our tent early in the morning. He was bouncing with energy, speaking rapidly, anxious to please and ensure that we were all being well looked after. Small bowls of hot water were brought over from the kitchen for washing. Then we went to another tent where breakfast was being served— hot noodle yak soup – a hearty beginning to the day – which I had neither the desire for, nor fortitude to, consume.

I'd visited the kitchen built a couple of hundred yards away from the marquee, the previous day. An annex had been erected on a small strip of raised land lying between a dirt road and a small dug-out quarry. Three vertical fire pits had been built into the dirt walls of the quarry, creating a stove top. Massive pots of noodle soup or boiling water sat on top of each hole. It was an ingenious design. The pots actually sank into the earth. Vertical logs of wood, pushed into the opening of the earth oven, burned away beneath them, keeping everything warm. But one thing the kitchen wasn't was clean! Litter and food scraps lay freely amongst the pots, and a thick layer of oil, from the fat in the yak meat, had formed on top, making the soup look far from inviting. I couldn't stomach the thought of eating any more yak – my bowels had been groaning and complaining for days. No more soup for me – definitely not for breakfast.

The group began to discuss the impoverished spirituality of the West and the merits of Buddhism, which I gathered they saw as the solution to the impoverishment. I excused myself and went outside.

I saw Thundy sitting with a group of his friends, not far from our tent. I'd been waiting for this moment. This was the perfect time – I had an audience. I walked over and greeted him. For a few seconds he didn't know who I was, then he smiled and said 'tashi delek'. I told the others the story of how years before, he'd left me, lost somewhere in Inner Mongolia – scolding him light-heartedly. The boys roared with laughter. The more I pointed out Thundy's shortcomings as a tour guide, the more they laughed. Loving all the attention, Thundy played along, insisting we have our photos taken. I continued to joke and cajole with them for a while, picking up snips of travel information in the process.

Someone turned the sound system on – the speakers pumped out Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' at full volume. It was time for the cleanup. A working party began dismantling the tents. Others picked up rubbish. The quadrangle was strewn with litter: empty bottles of Chang, plastic wrappers, bowls, and soft drink bottles lay scattered on the ground. The ground had to be cleared to ensure that the family got their bond back. I found an empty plastic sack and began to help. Dozens and dozens of bottles lay on the ground, young Tibetan men watched me labour, too tired or too hungover to lend a hand.

We moved in to the marquee and began clearing the tables – still covered with soft drink, sweets, Chang and boiled yak, and boxed up the excess to return to the shops. After everything had been cleared it would be time to dismantle the marquee. This job was left to the men.

Modernisation

Anna came to tell me that we'd been invited to accompany Yonten and his father on a small tour to the winter house. There wasn't enough room in the four wheel drive so I climbed up behind one of the villagers on his motorbike. Riding through the village I could see that much had changed in the few years since I'd last visited. The first time I went to the village I'd arrived on horseback. This time we drove on newly paved roads, flanked with the occasional street lamp.

There were a few whitewashed houses with ochre roofs and Tibetan flags hanging from poles, but for the most part, the Tibetan feel of the village had diminished. The Chinese Government had built new houses for the Tibetan people, whether they'd wanted them or not. The architecture of the majority of the houses rendered them exactly the same. Large glass windows, with panels of green painted steel frames had been erected at the front of each home, forming a small sealed verandah and sunroom. Throughout the rest of the house, windows, which once had old wooden shutters and opened, now had aluminum frames and glass that didn't open. The main room that had been used to store the grains and hold family celebrations, which had housed the beautiful earthenware stoves was gone.

Now, each house consisted of only two rooms for sleeping, and a small combined living and kitchen area. In the living area, a modern white large wall unit spanned the whole of one wall. A big flat screen TV took pride of place in the middle of the unit, a poster of a Tibetan landscape hung above it. Tibetan flasks, teapots, china, a framed photo of a High Lama, a pile of khatas and a couple of CDs sat on the shelves on each side of the TV. In one way I felt the situation had improved for the villagers. Having decent roads, lights, sealed rooms, and a form of solar heating must in some way make life easier for them. On the other hand, the heart and soul of their village and homes had been removed and replaced with conformity.

I suggested to Yonten's father that he show the others his prayer and meditation room. This was the only original space left in the house. I knew they would love it and they did. Dozens of photos later, we piled into the four wheel drive and drove back to the wedding site. The marquee had now been completely dismantled and packed away –only a few white tents were still standing.

The jewel in the heart of the lotus

We were returning to Langmusi in the afternoon. After packing up our belongings, the family requested that we gathered inside the one remaining tent for formal farewells. Yonten and his parents stood at the opening of the tent. Thokmay and the rest of the family sat in a line at the back. We sat on the ground in a semi circle around the edges. Yonten's father held a plastic bag, full of yellow silk khatas. Yonten stood beside him, his arms full of rolled up thangkas. Amma stood quietly beside them. His father thanked us for coming so far to attend his son's wedding,

then stepped forward and bowed to each one of us as he placed a yellow khata around our necks. Yonten stood beside his father translating – presenting each of us with a thangka after his father had draped the scarf around our necks.

The image on the thangka was Avalokiteshvara an archetype of boundless compassion; a celestial being who returns to the world to bring others enlightenment. In Buddhist legends, Avalokiteshvara vowed to liberate all beings from suffering. Upon realising the magnitude of his task, his head exploded into countless pieces. His body was then reassembled by the Buddha Amitabha (his spiritual guide) and the bodhisattva Vajrapani (the wielder of the thunderbolt), into an omniscient form consisting of eleven heads and a thousand arms. He is usually painted white with multiple arms; his first two hands are pressed together in prayer position at his heart. The most common mantra chanted all through Tibet is the mantra of Avalokiteshvara – Om Mani Padme Hum – translating roughly as ‘The jewel (compassion) that dwells in the heart of the lotus (wisdom).

We were overjoyed to receive our gifts, but the thangka was just a precursor to the most special gift of all: a small wooden bead, threaded on a yellow cotton thread for each of us. Yonten’s father explained the bead was from the small mala he’d used in his meditation practice over the past seven years. Each bead held the vibration of thousands and thousands of Buddhist prayers. This was a very precious gift. We were all overwhelmed with gratitude. This was too much kindness for any one of us to bear. Yonten’s father looked on in confusion as tears started to roll down the faces of some of his guests.

I knew in material reality that it was just a little wooden bead. I didn’t believe it was imbued with any mystical or magical powers, but what it did represent was a desire to express deep felt gratitude and love. He’d given us a symbol of all he held dear to him. Nothing we’d given matched this. After all, money is just money: it comes, it goes. We were all deeply moved, each one of us was visibly humbled. No retelling of the story could ever capture the pure simplicity and spiritual potency of this moment.

Gratitude

Flooded by a myriad of feelings, the group sat in silence. No one quite knew how to respond. Then with tears welling in her eyes, Anna began to speak, expressing how

grateful she was to the family for extending their kind welcome to her. Holding the bead in cupped hands, she held it out in front of her, announcing she would cherish it, and then raised her hands up to her third eye in a gesture of gratitude.

I went next. Knowing the family found them difficult; I was fighting back my tears as I expressed my gratitude. I'd said what I needed to say the previous day, so I kept it simple. I thanked them for putting on such a wonderful wedding and receiving me as a guest, adding how pleased I was to see that they were all well and, how happy I was for Yonten. And that I hoped he would enjoy prosperity and a healthy family in the future. Yonten's father and brother nodded in affirmation.

Next to express gratitude was Mark. He was very excited, thankfully not crying, and wanted to go to the car and retrieve his laptop, to show photos he'd taken of Yonten when he'd first met him in Dharamasla. We'd already been in the tent for over an hour; the thought of him spending at least another half an hour in memory lane interested neither the family nor the rest of the group. Diplomatically we managed to intercept his impulse. Comprehending, he complied, bowed his head and raised his hands together in front of his third eye and gave thanks.

The next person in the circle to express gratitude was Janice. Animated by the opportunity to say something she launched into a speech about compassion. Stressing how much Yonten's father had taught her about it, how she was so fortunate to receive such great compassion and, how incredibly compassionate he was. Now, she gushed, she had not only read about compassion, she'd experienced great compassion first hand. Yonten's father looked puzzled. The longer she spoke, the more uncomfortable Yonten and his father became

I was feeling a little embarrassed, trying to work out what she was actually talking about. She appeared to be confused – we had been privileged guests at a wedding with no need of compassion in the present circumstances. Janice finished by presenting Yonten's mother with a bag of sea shells. Amma accepted them gracefully – what she would do with them I had no idea. Fortunately the last member of the group to give thanks was Linn. She thanked the family quietly and quickly and the ceremony finished.

The river of life

It was time to leave. Everyone in the group was in high spirits, but I could see the family was tired. They'd had a long couple of days, never once faltering in their duties. Yonten asked us to line up with his family for a photo. I placed my small daypack on the ground, leaning the rolled up thangka against it. Then I went and stood in line with the others. Seeing that the bottom of the thangka was touching the ground, Janice, after having just given a speech on compassion, looked at me with disdain, and scolded me saying, 'You can't do that, it's sacred.' I had no idea what she was talking about, and asked her what she meant. Pointing to the thangka, she said, 'You can't put the thangka on the ground. For the Tibetans it's sacred.' Taken aback I replied, 'So is the earth. The earth's sacred.' She turned away unimpressed, leaving me wondering whether I did indeed need to take a Chinese, mass-produced replica of Tibetan art, off the ground. I decided I didn't. Looking around me I couldn't see one Tibetan person who was offended or upset about where I'd placed the thangka – they weren't the least bit interested. But for some strange reason I had offended her, breaking an unwritten, hidden law, of moral and spiritual conduct in Tibet.

The photo session over – it was time for final embraces. Knowing it was unlikely I'd stay with the family again, I was experiencing a mixture of emotions. I decided that it wasn't appropriate to cry and found the inner fortitude I needed to hold back my tears. It was time to let go and let life take me where it would. Yonten's father held both my hands and looked me in the eye and said 'tashi delek'. I looked back at him smiling, and similarly replied 'tashi delek'. There was no reason for sadness. Remembering what Gaden Rapsal had taught me, I was learning to accept the flow in the river of life and I'd strengthened. He nodded in recognition.

Tired and intolerant

Janice, Anna and I squashed into the back of the four wheel drive. The car began to pull away. I leant out the window waving goodbye to my Tibetan friends, knowing I'd never see some of them again. I searched my mind for last words, wanting to express my love for them, and leave them with a positive affirmation. Waving animatedly I called out, 'God bless you.'

The moment was instantly hijacked – Janice corrected me again. Looking at me with a wry smile, she said, ‘Dalai Lama.’ Startled, turning to face her, I said ‘What’? She replied, ‘Dalai Lama, not God. For the Tibetans it’s the Dalai Lama.’ I had no idea that the Dalai Lama and God, as I understood God, were in conflict with each other. Evidently, while consciously intending to create a loving farewell, I’d just committed another crime. From her perspective the Tibetan people were in no need of God’s blessings and, it appeared, needed protection from me and any belief I might have in a loving God. Politically I’d been incorrect!

Hurt by the insinuation, something inside me hardened. I replied, ‘Please don’t. Don’t do that. These people love and accept me exactly as I am.’ She responded in a self righteous tone and said, ‘I can see that.’ Not satisfied, I challenged her, claiming, ‘There’s enough oppression in Tibet without you adding to it.’ We sat in silence. I could feel her swallowing her disapproval. Anna sat between us absorbing the tension.

Slumping back against the seat I stared out the window. I knew she hadn’t meant to offend me, and that my reaction had caused tension, but I was tired of being told what to do and wanted out of her classroom. Unable to turn the other cheek, I’d sharpened my tongue. A friend told me once: *You can have a spiritual experience just by keeping your mouth shut* – a practice I was a long way from mastering. I was sorry I’d reacted. But I was more distressed by her need to correct and control.

Negotiating daily life, personal space and differences, with people you may not know well, can be one of the biggest challenges when travelling. Tiredness erodes tolerance, one of the first virtues that either develops or dissipates on the road. Even when you think you know yourself, or the other person, the road uncovers strengths and weaknesses in your character and exposes you, leaving nowhere to hide.

In the intensity we’d rubbed up against each other like two pieces of dry wood, igniting a flame: one piece of wood couldn’t produce a fire on its own. I was mature enough not to let the tension fester and began to engage Janice in light hearted conversation, talking about the scenery and the Tibetan people. Janice likewise was mature enough to let it go and we chatted away for the rest of the journey. The more

she told me about her life the more I realised I had very little in common with these people.

The driver dropped us off at the monastery hotel. I made discreet and quick amends to Janice and then made my way to my room. I'd started to resent the pressure I felt to conform to the values and beliefs of others in the group. It felt suffocating. I wondered how the Tibetan people must feel, living with this every single day of their lives. Every one of us has the right to self determination and autonomy.

I met the rest of the group for our evening meal which, thankfully, passed without incident. We were all in the process of working out where to from here. Mark and Linn only had a few more days left, so weren't planning on travelling anywhere else. Janice and Anna had longer. I suggested they travel to Xiahe and visit Labrang monastery, but they couldn't make up their minds. Tired, and thankful for the comforts of a bath and a bed, I retired early. My body was feeling the strains of travel. My immune system was still not strong, and my strength was diminishing. I had diarrhea and my chest was tight and sore. I desperately wanted, and needed, a day of rest.

Teacher, Teacher

The following morning I went for a walk and visited Sertri Gompa, the more modern of the two monasteries in Langmusi. I spent my time walking, meditating and contemplating, – seeking **Good Orderly Direction**. I hadn't decided on a set itinerary for my time in Tibet and I didn't fancy spending the rest of my stay with the group – but knew once I left Langmusi, I'd be back in to the mayhem and harshness of China. There would be no more quaint little villages.

I sat for a while, gazing at the Dharmacharka, flanked by the deer on the roof of the monastery. Everywhere I'd travelled I'd been drawn to the image of a deer. Whatever had happened in Rajits workshop in California years before was somehow, still playing out in the external world. I knew that for the Native Americans the deer was revered for its gentleness and tenderness. Deer knew how to find the best medicinal herbs and lead the people to them. They are a symbol of generosity, and the ability to sacrifice for the higher good. In their culture deer medicine' teaches

gentleness of touch, grace and determination. If this was the lesson, then I wanted to learn it.

I considered travelling to Xiahe, staying a night, and then travelling to Rebgong to visit the artist studios and, from there on to Xinning, to visit Tenzin. He was now working as a masseur in the hospital there. I'd had intermittent contact with him on the phone over the past couple of years. There appeared to be a psychic bond between us, keeping us connected. Once I'd had an intuitive urge to call him, and found out his mother had died a week earlier.

I decided to discuss the practicalities of me travelling on to Rebgong with Yonten, and then call Tenzin later that evening. Then I left the gompa and went to a cafe to read before meeting the others for lunch. I was reading 'Singing for Freedom', the life story of Ani Choying Drolma. From the age of five she'd struggled to survive a harsh life with an abusive father. She escaped and found sanctuary in a monastery in Nepal, eventually becoming a nun, but continued to uphold her duties as a daughter.

She has a sublime voice and while she was living in the monastery, a jazz guitarist from America heard her singing, and invited her to record an album with him. It became highly successful. The money she made from the royalties gave her the opportunity to fulfil her lifelong dream of opening a school for young girls, who like herself, had been denied an education. Eighty percent of women in Nepal are illiterate. Ani Choying Drolma now tours the world giving concerts, and uses the money she earns to fund her charities in Nepal. Her story is one of the strongest testaments to the reality of living a spiritual life I'd ever heard. She's down-to-earth, practical, generous, and dedicated –honouring her duties as a nun, a teacher, a singer, and a daughter simultaneously.

I was sitting reading, absorbed in her story when I heard Yonten calling out, 'Teacher, Teacher!' Looking out of the window to the street below, I saw him standing there, madly waving his arms and calling out to get my attention. He'd arranged for the group to have lunch with one of his friends who was a Tibetan doctor, and was anxious I might miss out. I made my way downstairs to meet him. Yonten appeared stressed and agitated. He'd spent the morning showing the group around Langmusi. Everyone had been in a fluster and Anna had fallen and hurt

herself. He was speaking rapidly, obviously over tired. I held his hand for a moment, calming him, saying everything was fine, he didn't need to worry about me.

My need to separate out from the rest of the group perplexed him. I guess people the world over are similar – when it comes to culture and race, we assume people want to be, or belong with, those who are the same. Until we know people individually they can appear all alike. Part of my resistance towards the group was that I didn't want to be pulled into a vortex of tourism. My journey with the Tibetan people and Tibetan culture had begun many years before; they'd become a part of my life and my psyche. I wasn't there as a tourist, I was there as a friend.

Yonten relaxed a little and took my hand. Then he pulled an exquisite Tibetan necklace of jade, turquoise, red amber, and coral from his pocket and placed it in my palm. A large white stone, in the shape of a half moon, with a Sanskrit inscription, sat in the centre. It was a gift from Thokmay. She'd made it herself. Yonten said Thokmay liked me the most, and wanted to give me the necklace privately, so as not to upset the others.

In amongst all the flurry of activity and people in the past couple of days Yonten had had little, if any, time to give to me. Apart from his responsibilities with his own family, he'd constantly been at the beck and call of the others. I was so touched – needing to know I still had some sort of special place in his heart, if not in his life.

I understood that my connection with Yonten was taking a different form now. Whereas at one point in his life I'd been a primary, behind-the-scenes player, now I was moving towards just being an observer in the back row. Even though I wasn't, I wanted to feel special. The gift of the necklace did the job.

The final feast

The doctor's wife had gone to great efforts to prepare a feast for us. When Yonten and I arrived everybody was devouring their food and talking loudly. The others had spent the morning in a whirlpool of activity and confusion. The military were in town. It was the third anniversary of the Olympic torch uprising, and the Chinese Government weren't taking any chances.

Word was out that monasteries in the surrounding areas had been closed and Xiahe was off limit to tourists. The military were monitoring who came in and out of the town; consequently we couldn't travel to Labrang monastery as planned. Expecting to travel to Xiahe, we'd all checked out of the monastery hotel that morning, and it was now booked out. Anna and Janice had become highly anxious and discombobulated; panicking they'd booked a couple of rooms in a Chinese hotel at the end of the town. According to Anna it was the only accommodation available. They'd thought it looked fine and had booked me a room as well. I was thankful that they'd thought of me, but felt pressured to accept the offer. I didn't trust the Chinese hotels in the town, and believed with a little more patience, and less worry, we would have found something more suitable.

Now that I couldn't go to Xiahe I decided to travel straight to Rebgong the next day. The others were still in a quandary, changing their minds every couple of minutes, going in several different directions at once – generally creating more and more anxiety and mayhem. I needed Yonten's help to organise a driver and to book a hotel in Rebgong, but he was caught up in the group's indecision and try as I might I couldn't get a word in.

Finally, the group settled on travelling to Thokmay's village the following day to visit her mother. It's tradition that the bride returns to her village after the wedding, generally to visit her father. Thokmay had severed ties with her father; he was a drunk and a violent man. Now that they had decided on their itinerary, Janice was strongly suggesting that I go with them, and started bundling me into their arrangements, adding that, of course I was 'free to make my own decisions.' Still trying to avoid enmeshment, I replied, 'I know', a little too curtly, thanked her for the offer, and stated for at least the fourth time, that I was travelling to Rebgong in the morning and needed to talk with Yonten.

Happy he'd organised the group's itinerary to their satisfaction, Yonten settled back to eat some food, saying he'd help me after lunch. I noticed Anna and Janice had also received a necklace, smaller and less ornate but still very beautiful. Even though I found the others overbearing and demanding, Yonten didn't seem to notice. These women were his clients; this is how their relationship had started and this is how it would remain. They would provide him with valuable connections for future business. They would travel to Tibet again, and he would guide them. They were his

future now, I was his past. I'd been a part of his journey when he was a young, exiled refugee. He was no longer homeless and without family. He no longer doubted he'd find love, and he was no longer reliant on the kindness of strangers for his livelihood. Now he was a strong, proud, independent, competent man.

Frustration

I took my leave from the others, collected my luggage and began the walk along Langmusi's dusty main road to the Chinese hotel in the most aesthetically unpleasant location in the town. The foyer appeared clean; the staff were apathetic, uncaring, abrupt and unfriendly. I felt uneasy.

I began climbing the four flights of stairs up to my room, glad I had a backpack not a suitcase. The atmosphere in the hotel was a long way from the joy of the wedding. The whole place reeked of cigarettes and urine. On every floor I passed an armed soldier sitting in the hall. As soon as I unlocked the door to my room I realised the cleanliness in the foyer had been a facade. The carpets and bedcovers were stained and dirty, the wallpaper was peeling off the walls, and there was no bathroom, only communal facilities in the hall. Apart from one broken chair there was nothing to sit on, but at least there was a window that opened, and a view of the hills.

The military were performing drills at the back of the hotel, in a large concrete square below, which I assumed was a carpark. The reverberations of shrill commands and the sounds of rifles shuffling were loud and intense. The mood was intimidating and unsettling. I couldn't stay in the room for more than ten minutes, so I decided to go to the Tibetan café I'd been to that morning and read. I hadn't been there long, before I felt an overwhelming urge to move my bowels. My body had been struggling for days. I had very little time to act. The café didn't have facilities but I knew there was a toilet in the hostel across the road; I'd been there that morning. I took off down the stairs, ran across the road and entered the hostel. I desperately needed to use the toilet. I was only four feet away from relief when a large Chinese man stepped in between me and my desired destination, stopped me from going any further, and indicated that I should leave.

He spoke Chinese, I English. Horrified, I pointed to the toilet and through a series of humiliating gestures indicated that I HAD TO GO, it wasn't an option. Unmoved he shouted at me and pointed to a notice pinned to the wall, which was

written in Chinese and meant nothing to me. I took money from my purse and held it out towards him, indicating I was quite willing to pay to use the toilet, but even this couldn't change his mind. He just kept shouting and pointing to the notice. Whatever was written was law, and he wasn't going to bend the rules. I started begging him. He shouted more loudly, thumped the notice and waved the back of his hand at me, demanding I leave. I was appalled, and angry by his rigidity and apparent disregard for human needs. My frustration boiled over. I started yelling too, telling him he was a 'stupid, rude and unkind man and how the hell could I read a piece of paper with Chinese writing on it, if I couldn't even understand what he was saying? He yelled louder. Realising I was in a fight I couldn't win, I started heading up the dusty road to where I knew there was a makeshift toilet behind one of the buildings over 500 meters away. I was terrified I wouldn't make it, and soil myself in full public view.

Just as I arrived someone stepped into the toilet before me. I'd missed my chance – my body took over and, to my horror, I lost control of my bowels. I stood there humiliated and defeated; resentful because this could have been avoided, if only he'd yielded to reason. Entering the toilet I held my breath trying to escape the stench, as tears of exhaustion rolled down my face. I cleaned myself up as much as possible then headed back to the hotel to shower and change.

Janice and Anna were in the hotel foyer when I arrived. Overwhelmed by the lack of hygiene and the military presence at the hotel, they wanted to check out. They were visibly distressed, arguing with the receptionist trying to get a refund. They told me they weren't willing to remain in the Chinese hotel for one more minute, and had paid top price to get the VIP room at the monastery hotel we'd checked out of that morning.

I didn't want to stay there any longer either. My day had turned into a nightmare. I made my way up the stairs, past the soldiers, to my room, grabbed some clean clothes and headed for the shower. The sounds from the military performing drills below saturated the environment with fear and oppression. I was feeling angry that I'd allowed myself to be manoeuvred into my current situation – I never would have booked a room in this hotel. After I'd showered I went to the monastery hotel to enquire about a room. Fortunately one had become available. I'd only had the room in the Chinese hotel for a couple of hours and like Janice and Anna decided to try for a refund, but it was a waste of time.

The same scenario I'd faced when begging to use the toilet resurfaced – the hotel manager began shouting and pointing to a piece of paper. Paperwork held all the power in China; bureaucracy reigned supreme. Everything had to be done by the books, whether it was logical, reasonable, practical, or not. Disgruntled, I headed off to the sanctuary of the monastery hotel. Much to my surprise the room had a bath in it. I ran the water and lowered myself into the warmth and comfort. Every part of me was tired and aching. My day of rest was beyond redemption. That night, the group, without Yonten, shared a final meal together, then worn out by the events of the day, retired early.

Take Care ee

When I awoke the following morning, my chest felt like a truck was parked on top of it. I'd developed a chest infection and my energy was low. I was glad I'd be spending the day in the back of the car – I could rest. I'd read the lungs and chest are where we store grief in the body, and suspected grief might be behind my sore chest. I was saying goodbye to Yonten today. He'd organised everything for me for my journey to Rebgong, continually apologising for not being able to go with me. I kept assuring him I didn't mind. I liked travelling alone and that Tenzin would meet me in Xinning.

I went to Leisha's for breakfast. When I arrived back at the hotel, I saw Yonten in the carpark cleaning the cars that had been used at the wedding. I went over and began to help. We joked and laughed together. I kept reminding him he was now a married man – something he'd thought would never happen! Yonten kept apologising because he wasn't coming with me to Rebgong. I assured him it would be OK – I'd lived in China for a year and would be fine.

My guide and the driver for Rebgong pulled into the carpark. It was time to go, and time to let go. We may never see each other again, but in the cosmic drama of life, we'd met at the right time. We held each other, and I promised him I wouldn't cry. He thanked me, said 'tashi delek teacher' and then opened the car door for me to get into the back seat. As I drove away Yonten shouted out *Take Care ee Teacher*. I laughed, knowing he was playing on an earlier conversation we'd had, when I'd finally pointed out to him, that care was pronounced like air, you didn't pronounce the E.

Driving to Rebgong

We drove slowly down the dusty main road and I saw the others coming back from breakfast, making their way towards the hotel and asked the driver to pull over. He stopped the car and I said my goodbyes and wished them well. Then we drove on and pulled up in front of Yonten's shop for me to say goodbye to Thokmay and have one last cuddle with little Palden Dorje .

A few hours into the drive it began to rain. My guide and the driver were worried that the rain might become heavier and flood the roads. I trusted that we'd be ok, hoping that resting for a day, in the back of the car would give my body an opportunity to regain strength – my head ached and my chest was tight and painful. I relaxed into the journey, allowing the rhythm of the windscreen wipers to lull me into a half sleep.

We took the back roads driving through scenic valleys speckled with nomad camps and small villages. As we travelled further north, the yaks gradually diminished and were slowly replaced with Tibetan sheep. A couple of hours into the journey we'd reached the outskirts of Xiahe, all roads into the town were sealed. I found it difficult to reconcile the current political situation with the drama that had played out on my last trip to Xiahe, when there had been nothing but personal politics acted out. Now there was a surreal feeling, knowing I didn't have access to this part of the country because politics on a much larger scale were being played out. I prayed the people there were safe. We drove past a small group of soldiers stationed along the side of the road. I drew my shawl over and around my head, disguising my white skin.

A couple of hours north of Xiahe the road became steeper as we made our way towards the Tibetan Plateau. The green panorama was behind us now. The air was hazy with dust from traffic on the road. An array of red karsts, set against a teal blue sky, burst out from the ground like candles on a birthday cake. I imagined that we were in the Tibetan equivalent of the Badlands in America – home to the Lakota Nation. Both groups of people dwell on two of the world's highest inhabited plateaus, rising at an identical latitude and nearly the same longitude, but on opposite sides of the earth. Tibetans and the Navajo Indians share many similarities; they view life as a spiritual journey, dedicated to the integration of matter and spirit, to achieve wholeness, harmony and well-being. They believe through individual and community

effort, this leads to a person developing into the best possible version of who they can be. Both traditions create sand mandalas which express the sacredness of all life, and the mandala view of self and the cosmos: the cyclical nature of spirit.

Rebgong

What I'd been led to believe would be a seven hour journey, came closer to ten. We arrived just before dusk. Rebgong (now known as Tongren) is situated in the midst of dry, dusty hills, and sprawls out on flat plains on both sides of the Rongwo River. The hotel Yonten had booked for me was big, sterile, uninviting, and a long way from the centre of the town. Nothing was in walking distance. I'd have to hire a taxi any time I wanted to go somewhere. I wanted to change hotels, but the guide didn't have any suggestions or contacts in Rebgong. He called Yonten in Langmusi, who found a Tibetan hotel across the river and booked me in. We piled back into the car and drove across to the new accommodation. I offered to pay for a room for the driver and my guide but they both wanted to drive back to Langmusi that night. I thanked them, waved goodbye and then went inside to the reception to sort out the accommodation.

Waiting in the lobby I met a young male Tibetan who was working as a guide. Rebgong was too big for me to find my way around on my own so I asked if he was available. He was working as a guide for a French woman and was leaving the following day, but he said his friend Lobsang who lived in Rebgong and also worked as a guide could help me. On my behalf he called Lobsang, who agreed to meet me at 9am the following morning. Satisfied with the arrangements I made my way up to the hotel room for what turned out to be a cold shower, and then went across the street to a small restaurant for dinner.

Thankfully there were pictures of the food dishes on the wall. The menu was in Chinese, so without pictures it was impossible for me to order. I knew there was no guarantee that what I ordered, and what I received, would be the same. But nevertheless I was willing to try. I ended up with a mystery dish of meat, vegetables, and noodles. I thought I'd ordered tofu.

Except for a few people, and a hawker selling trinkets, the restaurant was empty. I engaged with the hawker for a while and then an old man approached, holding out an empty metal dish. Realising he was hungry; I took my mystery dish of

meat, noodles and vegetables, and emptied it into his bowl, and then placed a few slices of bread in his hand. Delighted with his good fortune he grinned in appreciation and took his leave. I settled for a familiar bowl of rice: it was much safer.

Lobsang

After a reasonable night's sleep and a cold morning shower, I was ready for my first day in Rebgong. I made my way down stairs and saw a Tibetan man at the reception. I assumed he was my guide and walked over to meet him. I asked him if his name was Lobsang, he said yes, and then I shook his hand and introduced myself. Lobsang held no trace of a nomadic existence in his countenance, he was citified and business like. But when I asked what he charged, he kept avoiding the issue, deferring the conversation to another subject. I needed to ensure I had enough money to get to Xinning and kept pressing him for a price. He kept feigning a lack of comprehension. I sensed something dishonest and shifty about him and became uncomfortable. When he finally named a price, it was higher than what I'd been told to expect. I had to accept that on this day I was a tourist: I wasn't in Rebgong for personal reasons. I was just passing through and he wasn't a friend. This was business. I accepted his price. Then I mentioned I'd lived in China and travelled through Tibet before. He picked up on my signal, but I don't think I deterred him from any future manipulations.

We began planning the day's activities, the first of which would be to visit the home of a local thangka artist. The villages outside of Rebgong are famed for their artistic inhabitants, renowned for their creation of Tibetan statues and thangkas. Generally most of the artists' villages are highly commercialised stopovers for Chinese tourist buses and independent travellers. Lobsang wanted to take me to a village where he knew the artist personally; assuring me that buying direct would save money. I wasn't necessarily wanting to buy anything but I was interested in meeting the artist and visiting the studio so agreed to go.

We caught a taxi to a small village on the outskirts of town that had a distinct Tibetan flavour – a number of thangka artists lived and worked there. It appeared the people here enjoyed a good standard of living; the houses were large and the environment cared for. Lobsang led me to two large wooden doors, decorated with the images of protective deities, which opened into a small compound where several

families lived. Above the doors, bunches of dried barley hung from a small roof crowned with intricately carved wooden images of the dharma wheel, lotus flowers, conch shells, and other Tibetan motifs. Inside the compound, life was peaceful and orderly.

Ngakpa

We entered the front room of one of the houses to view the thangkas. A small ceremony was taking place in a corner of the room. A strikingly attractive man, wearing a royal purple silk shirt, sat on a Tibetan rug, beating a brass chime. He wore his long, thick, black hair coiled around the top of his head in the shape of a turban. Two men sat in front of him behind a low table, beating a large wooden drum, ringing prayer bells, and chanting scripture.

I pointed to my camera, indicating my desire to take a photo; he willingly complied, stopped what he was doing, adjusted his posture to sit in an even more majestic pose, and then turned and faced the camera. The intensity of his gaze was bewitching. He had an inner power that was tangible. His eyes were mischievous and his mouth curved in a knowing smile. I'd never seen anyone in Tibet who looked like this man. Lobsang informed me he was a Ngakpa

The Ngakpa are a non-monastic spiritual tradition of the Tibetan people. The founder, Padmasambava, developed the Ngakpa so laypeople could receive a spiritual and cultural education. Ngakpas are tantric sorcerers and exorcists. They are purported to have mastery in the realms of mantras, spells, and invocations, and can command the spirits to do their bidding. They are said to enter into other worlds where they search for fragments of the soul of an afflicted person that has been stolen by deceitful spirits, or imprisoned by a black magician. After their search the Ngakpa returns with the knowledge and power needed to diagnose the causes of disease and to prescribe the methods to effect a cure.

There are roughly 6000 practising Ngakpa and 250 Ngakpa houses in Tibet. The first person to be considered a Tibetan Doctor, through the Ngakpa tradition, was a woman (Ngakma). The tradition is currently practised in China, Nepal, India, Mongolia, and more recently in the West. A large Ngak Mang community lived in the Rebgong region.

Further down the room, an array of deities sat in large, ornately decorated, wooden box thrones. The thrones were mounted on two long poles running horizontally along their sides. Four men, two at the front and two at the back, would carry the thrones on their shoulders.

Offerings of grapes, apples, butter sculptures, sweets, drinks and flowers had been placed on a low red, wooden table in front of the deities. The deities were the 'Mountain Gods', part of the Lurol festival beginning that afternoon – a shaman festival with roots in the animist Bon religion, practised by Tibetans before Buddhism was introduced. As luck would have it I was there at the right time to attend.

Green Tara

An array of beautiful thangkas was brought out for me to view. The prices seemed reasonable enough but I wasn't really in the market to buy one and wanted to see more studios. We visited a few more and I still didn't make a purchase. Then Lobsang suggested visiting his friend, who was a monk, and a very talented artist. I agreed and we set off for the monastery. When we arrived, the monks were in the main hall chanting. Lobsang's friend was the Chant Master. We waited outside. The grounds were empty apart from an elderly monk walking slowly around the buildings, and a couple of monks making sculptures from barley flour and butter.

The chanting finished and Lobsang's friend came out to meet us. Originally from Mongolia he was strong, tall, and handsome. He had clear, kind eyes, set in an open broad face. We followed him inside to the main hall of the monastery. The whole room was vivid with thangkas and decorative hangings made from Tibetan appliqué – creating a warm, rich, lush feel. I'd never seen a monastery like this one before. The intensity of the colour glowed in the darkness of the hall.

Lobsang's friend invited us to visit his room to drink tea and look at thangkas. He had a short window of time before he had to return to the temple and lead another chanting session. We followed him across the monastery grounds, through a wooden door into a small courtyard, where he lived along with a small number of other monks. The buildings were made from wood and stone, the architecture ascetic, simple and pleasing. The whole environment emanated serenity. He poured tea while a number of younger monks went to get some thangkas. Translated from Tibetan, thangka means 'recorded message'. Thangkas are an artistic medium used

to teach Buddhist philosophy. They serve as an aid for meditation, through the visualisation of the deity.

The thangkas the monks showed us were bigger than the previous ones, and absolutely stunning: alive with power and presence. I found one thangka so beautiful, I gasped out loud as it was unveiled. The beauty and luminosity of the colours in the appliqué overwhelmed me, and tears formed in my eyes. I exclaimed, 'If I was looking to buy a thangka, this is the one I'd buy.' The image was Green Tara – the protectress – a goddess whose loving kindness radiates outwards to lead all beings away from worldly and spiritual peril.

As much as I admired it, I wasn't planning to buy it, but in Lobsang's mind my response indicated that this thangka was 'meant for me.' I didn't know if the thangka was 'meant for me' but the use of appliqué had captured my imagination and I wanted to learn the technique. I asked the monk if he took students. He said he did. I showed him an image of a mandala I'd created, asking if he'd accept me as a student. He looked at the image and said 'Yes'. I was very excited and began planning a return trip in my mind.

Lobsang walked over to the thangka of Green Tara and asked me if I wanted him to negotiate a price. I said 'no thank you', I didn't want to buy it. I wasn't comfortable with iconic images. He chose to overlook this statement, the general consensus being that, because I'd had such a strong reaction to the image, I 'must buy it'. I was 'cosmically connected to the piece.' I did like it, but was now feeling pressured into making a purchase. Lobsang negotiated a good price, but I told him I didn't have enough cash on me to pay for it. Undeterred he replied no problem, he would pay for it on his credit card, and then I could transfer the money into his account. A monk's room in a monastery in Rebgong was, I thought, a most unlikely place to be making purchases on a credit card. I gave in and said 'OK'. We headed back to town to eat lunch at the only pizza shop in the region.

Lurol festival

After lunch we travelled out of town to the location of the Lurol Festival. Monks aren't permitted to attend the festival. It's held mainly for laypeople, to help them improve their behaviour and receive a better rebirth. Through the practice of fertility dances, villagers believe the spirits descend from the mountains and enter the

bodies of the shamans. The Lurol festival has a distinctly pagan feel; villagers sacrifice to the Gods in the form of body piercing. Men and boys have their cheeks pierced by the shaman with long steel needles as part of a blood sacrifice ritual to exorcise disease. I was up for going, but the possibility of observing a blood sacrifice was a little unnerving.

We travelled about twenty kilometres out of Rebgong to the festival location. The taxi pulled into a narrow laneway flanked by whitewashed walls. Around thirty small boys were lined up against the wall. They were dressed for the festival in white silk shirts underneath rich and colourful silk chubas, bound by red, green, white, or yellow silk sashes which had been tied across their chests. On their heads they wore white, pointed cone hats. Fine, red cotton tassels, hung from the point of the cone and red cotton lined the inside of a white, wide, round brim at the front. The boys had been arranged in a line from the youngest to the oldest, which continued to grow until there were close to 100 boys and men. Some of the older boys and young men had thick, long steel needles, at least 14 centimetres in length, protruding from the tops of their hats. Tassels of blue and yellow were attached to the ends of the needles for decoration. If the spirit led the shaman to do so, he would take the needle from the hat, and drive it through the cheeks of the man wearing it.

The crowd began to swell and then made its way towards a distant hilltop temple where the ritual would take place. We followed them for a while then took a short cut up a steep, winding path to the top of the hill. The sun was directly overhead, its heat amplified by the altitude and the dusty air.

Only a few people were there when we arrived – a couple of European tourists and some local villagers. An intricately carved, colourful bell tower, housing an enormous brass bell, stood on the roof, at the entrance of the courtyard. The front of the temple was sealed with large sheets of opaque plastic. Rows of spears, in different shapes and sizes, decorated with silk scarves, stood in front of the plastic. Access to the inner sanctum of the temple was only for a chosen few.

I heard cheers and turned to see the beginnings of the procession making its way over the last steep rise of the hilltop. The men carrying the Mountain Gods were breathing heavily under the burden of the weight, their faces covered with perspiration and dust from the steep climb. They made their way to a small verandah at the front of the temple. Then they carefully placed the Gods in front of the images

of sword wielding warriors, which had been painted on the wall at each side of the entrance. The silk cloth hanging across the front of the box thrones had been pulled back to reveal the faces of the Mountain Gods enshrined inside.

A Bonpo Shaman

The line of boys and men formed a procession which began circumnavigating the outside of the temple grounds in slow, hypnotic steps. I watched mesmerised. I heard shouting coming from the front temple where the Mountain Gods had been placed and went to see what was happening. A shaman was performing a ritual,

He was dressed quite simply in a cream cotton Tibetan shirt, brocade boots and a brown chuba tied at the waist. He held a large, painted, rice-paper fan, which he waved in front of him while weaving and lunging in front of the Gods. A villager stood on each side, holding him upright. I watched for a while, took a couple of photos and then made my way inside to find an optimum position to observe the rest of the proceedings. The small courtyard was almost half full, bustling with anticipation and a peculiar sense of apathy at the same time. It wasn't long before the ritual outside the temple finished. The shaman came into the courtyard and sat near me. I studied him, looking for signs of the supernatural, but he just looked tired and quite normal. Whatever had possessed him outside had left him now. The skin on his face was dark from the sun. Deep lines furrowed his brow like rows of terraced rice fields that ran down the length of his face across his cheeks to his neck. His hair was short, except for one long thin plait which hung from the crown of his head to below his shoulders. What did stand out for me was that he looked like the Tibetan equivalent of Keith Richards, minus the pirate headband and beaded hair – made sense to me: Keef is a shaman in his own way.

In Tibet the shaman is known as Bonpo – a healer in the lineage of Bon Religion, who uses techniques of ecstasy and ritual magic to treat and cure the illnesses of the soul and bring about transformation. For healing to occur all obsessive and negative thinking blocking the free flow of energy, needed to be dissolved – fragmentation and alienation transformed into wholeness and wellbeing.

The crowd inside the temple grounds began to build in size and intensity. A large number of young boys were dispersed amongst the throng. I struggled with the thought that their innocent faces may be pierced. For the younger men this was a

sign of status. The older men began to gather in the front of the temple, filing into the inner sanctum. Not a lot was happening in the courtyard. All the action was taking place inside. I wasn't sure if I was disappointed or relieved. I'd never been a spectator at an event which might involve blood before. Fascination with another's pain as a form of entertainment wasn't something I understood – but expectations had been raised, curiosity aroused, and the desire for blood, however minimal, evoked.

Young men continued to congregate at the front of the temple. There was nothing to see but their backs and the occasional display of pomp and pride. Then an array of shouts went up from the crowd. Boys and men scurried away from an unseen force, creating a passage way between their bodies. A shaman in all his magnificence stood between them. This wasn't the shaman I'd seen earlier – this was a younger man, with strong, broad shoulders and a solid build, full of vigour and power. He wore a small, embroidered silk, sleeveless jacket accenting his strong frame. His chuba was made from deep orange and gold silk. A heavy pewter disc, at least 25 centimetres in diameter, hung from his neck. Tibetan felt boots covered his feet. Strutting with the pomp of a peacock while snorting like a bull, he huffed, puffed, and pushed his way through the crowd. If he suddenly changed direction the crowd reeled backwards, trying to get away from him. I was terrified that at any moment he might remove one of the long steel needles from the top of someone's hat, and drive it through their flesh. Even though I was just a spectator, he was so erratic I felt a little afraid of him. Sometimes it's good just to be a tourist.

The shaman focussed his attention on a small sapling growing only three feet away from me. Lunging forward he began ripping small branches from the tree, throwing down unwanted specimens in disgust, until he found one which satisfied him. Then he turned and huffed and puffed his way back through the throng of fleeing bodies to the inner sanctum of the temple. This was repeated a couple of times with the same terror and intensity each time until the ritual came to a close.

Tea towels, needles, and drums

The participants formed a line again, and then began circumnavigating the temple to the rhythm of pulsing bass drums. The men leading the procession lifted the Mountain Gods back onto their shoulders and walked to the top rise of the hill to

begin the journey back down. Then the ceremony took a dramatic turn as followers, one by one, ran as fast as they could as if possessed, over the edge of the hill and down the dusty path in front of them.

Lobsang and I made our way down the hill following the procession through narrow, walled walkways, into the assembly area of a school playground. Then we stood with other observers around the side edges. The men carrying the Mountain Gods placed them against a side wall behind tables laden with offerings.

Men and boys gathered at the rear of the compound and then began to dance in single file, to the hypnotic pulse of drums. They swayed from side to side, meditatively placing each foot in a careful formation as they danced. The older men led the way, carrying spears and banners. The first two wore headdresses: one a Buddhist crown, the other an imitation tiger head. The rest of the men wore folded tea towels on their heads, strapped on with black fabric bands – creating a comical and surreal twenty first century feel to the performance. Younger men used tea towels as a prop in the dance. Folding them into triangles, they held alternate corners between their outstretched arms, as they gracefully moved their bodies to the rhythm of the dance. Others danced with tea towels scrunched up into balls.

Gradually the dancers formed an inner and outer circle around the compound. The pulsations of the drums continuing to rise in intensity, smoke from juniper branches burning in an altar in the middle of the compound infused the air. The sun was unrelenting, scorching and strong. Lobsang stood against the wall, trying to find some shade. Wanting to take photos, I took the force of the sun. We sat watching the dancers for over an hour. The pace never changed. The rhythm was slow, concentrated and hypnotising, each circle of the dance generating more energy.

A surge of power rippled through the compound. The shaman was present. Flanked by two villagers, whose role seemed to alternate between bodyguard and intercessor, the shaman strutted around the circles, pouncing on dancers at random – pushing them roughly, lifting their arms, inspecting their very beings. If he became too aggressive, the two villagers pulled him away and he'd move on. His actions were erratic and unpredictable – there appeared to be no apparent rhyme or reason behind them.

Some men had long needles protruding from their hats, others didn't. So far no one had been pierced but there was anticipation that this was coming. The drums never stopped beating – a slow, strong, heartbeat, lulled the crowd into a deeper and deeper state of placidity.

The shaman turned his attention to the Mountain Gods and paraded up and down in front of them with an air of equal authority. Then he turned his attention back to the dancers, snorting and flailing his arms. Each time he selected a dancer I wondered if this was it – the time for sacrifice. But there was no rush to reach a climax, or to achieve one. It was the ritual that was important. It was high drama Tibetan style, theatre of cruelty in its most absurd form – Artaud and Genet would have been enthralled.

The Ngakpa house

The ceremony would continue for many more hours without much change. Lobsang asked if I wanted to visit a Ngakpa house before the sun set. I was in two minds. I didn't want to miss the final act, but at the same time didn't feel compelled to stay, so I accepted his offer. Lobsang hailed a taxi and we began climbing out of the valley into the hills behind Rebgong. We drove past small villages of mud brick houses through flourishing rice terraces and forests of pines – a stark contrast to the dryness of the valley below.

When we arrived there were half a dozen workmen taking a break in the yard. A baby slept behind a curtain on the verandah, a couple of children played by its side. A Ngakpa house is the non-monastic version of a temple. In contrast to the elaborately decorated monasteries, the Ngakpa house was simple, earthy and raw in appearance. There wasn't a lot to see – a few faded thangkas and a picture of a favoured teacher. This house was old and somewhat neglected. The villagers had little money to put towards its maintenance, but donations had been raised in the West from those who followed the teacher and they were in the process of slowly renovating the building. I wasn't inspired to spend much time inside– it was dark and all there was to see could be seen from one position. I made my way outside instead to enjoy the beauty of the natural environment and the view of the valley.

Tibetan yogis

I began talking with a young man from the village who could speak English. Pointing to the speck of a white flag, high up in the mountains above us, he told me this was where the Tibetan yogis lived. Tibetan yogis relinquish all worldly possessions and pursuits. They spend their time meditating and developing paranormal abilities such as tumo— the art of Warming Oneself without Fire. They live naked, or wear a single thin garment in winter, dwelling under trees or in caves, in the high regions of the forest.

The young man told me his mother went to the mountains to practise meditation. Once she had seen a yogi achieve the rainbow body at his death.

I was beginning to feel hungry and decided it was time to leave. Lobsang asked the taxi driver to drop us at a monastery on the outskirts of the town. In stark juxtaposition to the Ngakpa house there was no shortage of money at the monastery. An enormous gold plated stupa, flanked by four smaller ones, stood next to an even bigger multi-storied stupa with exquisite images of Buddhas and protective deities painted on each level. Monks and laypeople wandered the grounds. Tourist buses waited in the carpark while hundreds of visitors wandered around taking photos.

I decided not to visit the monastery, opting to visit the artist studios in the area instead. Each studio housed hundreds of mandalas and thangkas. There were thousands of hours of concentrated work scattered on tables or hanging on the walls. Lobsang was right. The studios we'd visited in the morning were far more affordable than those servicing the tourist trade, but no matter the price, the money would never cover the skills and time invested in the work. We hailed a taxi to take us back to the town. I thanked Lobsang for his service, wished him 'tashi delek' and then made my way to a Tibetan tea house for dinner.

Detached

After I'd eaten I returned to my hotel room. I was tired, run down and vulnerable and didn't want to put myself at risk, but I had to call Tenzin. He knew I was coming, I'd called him from Langmusi. I needed him to take care of various travel idiosyncrasies in Xinning. The sounds of the drums from the Lurol festival were still beating inside my mind, penetrating deeply into my psyche – I was receiving a psychic houseclean.

Remnants of obsessive thinking regarding Tenzin were being dissolved—feelings of betrayal transformed into neutrality. I let go of expectations, trusted myself and made the call. He was happy I was coming, but there was no anticipation in our conversation, just a general familiarity. He was working during the day so we arranged to meet in front of the train station at 5 o'clock. I'd never thought of Tenzin as a 9 to 5 man, it was a foreign concept for me. I guess responsibility catches up with all of us eventually.

In the morning I rested. Buses left for Xinning every half hour, so there was no rush. I was feeling the rigors of travel now. My chest was tight from bronchitis and my sinuses were full of dust and pollution. I made my way to the bus station with a scarf tied across my mouth trying to filter out the dust, but couldn't protect my eyes which stung from the pollution. Sharp pains ran across my forehead to my temples. The hospital in Xinning practiced Tibetan bath therapy; I hoped I could take a bath.

I bought my ticket and sat waiting anxiously for the bus. I didn't like Xinning, it was a harsh unrelenting city, and I was going to have to rely on Tenzin when I was there. The bus arrived, I boarded and amongst endless stares of curiosity found my seat; once again I was the only foreigner.

We left Rebgong and travelled higher into the plateau. Trying to remain detached, I watched my emotions rise and fall. I gazed out the window at the landscape, and visualised absorbing the elements into my being – the flowing waters of the lake, the strength of the mountains, the clarity of the sky, the healing green of the forest – and began calm.

Little by little the spacious mountain landscape diminished until eventually we entered into the dense, intense, chaos of the city. Xinning was too big for me to remember particulars but I was hoping that I'd at least recall some landmarks around the bus station that would help me find my bearings. But when the bus pulled into the terminal nothing looked familiar. I knew the bus station was close to the train station, but I couldn't recall anything – nothing looked the same. I searched for the Yellow River and the little shops selling noodle soup and Seven Heaven Tea, but I couldn't find them – they seemed to have disappeared.

I walked around the block in the scorching sun, tired, disorientated, and slightly panicked, looking for the statues outside the train station, but they weren't there. The train station had been pulled down. It was being rebuilt somewhere else.

This was why I didn't recognise anything – it had all undergone change. Development in China literally takes place overnight. Buildings are forever being constructed and deconstructed. I stood still, trying to get a sense of north, searching my memory for clues. Gradually it dawned on me that what I'd thought was the back of the bus station was actually the front. The cityscape began to take on a form of familiarity. Relieved, I realised I wasn't very far from the Tibetan quarter, the place I wanted to be. I had four hours to wait before I met Tenzin. He hadn't thought to tell me the train station had moved when we arranged to meet in front of it. Now I wondered if I was in the right place and if he'd find me.

The place of softness

I made my way across the road and wandered down an alley towards the market. There were a maze of shops selling Tibetan carpets, jewellery and religious artefacts. I found a place to rest in the shade outside one of the carpet shops and sat on the ground leaning up against the shop wall, people watching. A few people looked my way, but nobody disturbed me. A young nun walking by stopped and sat down next to me. She picked up my backpack and began rummaging through my things, exploring the contents. I was accustomed to Tibetan curiosity, but it felt odd to have a perfect stranger, uninvited, exploring my personal belongings.

Then she turned her attention to me and carefully studied my face. After a few minutes she decided we looked similar and should have our photo taken. I was happy to entertain her, glad for some company. Laughing, she took my camera, gave it to a shop owner and positioned herself next to me, and then waited for him to take a photo. Like me, she was in no hurry to go anywhere. We sat together for some time. Then a few more nuns arrived, laden with sacks of grains, and it was time for her to leave.

I began to feel restless and walked deeper in to the market. I passed a shop stocked with monastery supplies: sacred texts, monks' robes, thangkas, door hangings and statues. A cloth wall hanging, with the image of the Dhamacharka on it hung behind the counter. Next to it hung a mandala, remarkably similar to the one I'd painted before I left for Tibet with a golden deer in the centre. I stood still captured by the image, deep in contemplation. I could feel the deer beckon me; I couldn't turn away.

I remembered falling onto my knees and stroking the deer in the scrub in Costa Rica. How captivated I'd been by its gentle presence and lack of fear – the softness of its kiss as it pressed its muzzle to my face. I recalled the lesson from Native American cultures—to find gentleness of spirit, stop pushing others to change, to love and accept them as they are. Something inside me began to shift. The hard outer shell of my being created by fear began to break and dissolve. Everything around, and in me softened.

I realised that it was softness that had initially drawn me to Tenzin, and it was softness that made me want to remain with the Tibetan people. Not mysticism. In amongst the hardship and persecution they suffer, their hearts remain soft and open, giving them strength and courage. In a moment of insight I saw that fear is our only enemy. It is fear that drives, imprisons and separates us – and fear that we have to conquer – no one is exempt. Love lives in softness and does not reside with fear.

I was tired of struggling with the existential realities of life, with the things I couldn't change. Life wasn't always fair, and as much as we try, pain cannot be avoided. If the Tibetan people could practise compassion and forgiveness towards the Chinese, why couldn't I? Being angry about the situation didn't help. It only hurt me. My prejudice was just a defence to protect me from a way of life I didn't understand and a political system I abhorred. The barriers dissolved and I let go of my anger. Like everyone I had to learn to live life on life's terms and stop being so hard on myself. The only person I had to spend the whole of my life with was me. I had the same challenge as everybody else – to love and accept myself as I was, with all my strengths and weaknesses. I was a human being – no better, or no worse, than anyone else.

In the revelation of that moment I received the grace to acknowledge and accept my own imperfection, and in doing so, to accept the imperfection in others. I surrendered to being human – to not knowing. I remembered the gentle nudge of the deer and the spirit of forgiveness flooded my being. The world around me changed. The tension, aggression and chaos I'd felt in China dissipated. I'd opened the door to the ultimate refuge – peace.

Making amends

I made my way out of the market across the busy road and stood waiting for Tenzin. I never knew where I stood with Tenzin – I could never be sure if he was telling the truth or if he had a hidden agenda, and would weave a web of lies dragging me back into mental and emotional confusion. But I remained centred and calm. It was well over an hour before I saw him walking through the crowd. His long hair had been cut, his beard was now only a faint shadow, and his expression was open. No longer lost, or carrying the heavy weight of grief, he looked younger. Smiling, we embraced, both a little wary, uncertain as to where this encounter might lead us.

He hadn't been able to book accommodation in the Tibetan quarter, so had booked a room for me in the Qing Hai Moslem Mansion Hotel – an elaborate, high rise monstrosity that was going to stretch my budget. None of the staff spoke English so I was glad Tenzin was there to help me. He sorted things and the receptionist gave me a key. We caught the lift up to my room on the eleventh floor. As always the room didn't reflect the grandeur of the foyer, but it was clean and comfortable, and I was grateful for that.

I boiled the jug to make tea, not sure where we went from there. He appeared happy to be living in Xinning. His life in the village had terminated with the death of his mother. He couldn't go back – the shop and the family home in the grasslands had been sold. Unable to care for himself, his father had moved to Xiahe to live with one of Tenzin's brothers, and was now spending his time happily occupied with his grandchild. Tenzin was living with a Tibetan woman in Xinning. I asked if they were in a relationship. Cagey as ever, he replied he, didn't know, she had trouble with her feet!' insinuating her need for help was his reason for being there. Not much had changed on that front. I never understood why he couldn't be frank, it was as though he was compelled to lie. If he'd found a woman from his own culture to share his life with I was happy for him. He was no longer the man of my dreams.

Tenzin started suggesting tourist attractions I might want to visit the next day. He'd never treated me as a tourist before and I was taken aback. Declining his offer, I thanked him, saying I'd prefer to visit him at the hospital to see where he worked, if that was OK. His face lit up. He would be very happy if I came to visit him at his work. He proudly pulled his employee identification badge out of his wallet, and showed it to me. He was such a free spirit – I'd never envisaged him working in an

institution, but this job had somehow given him greater freedom. I congratulated him and he thanked me.

Remembering all the drama, hurt and despair we'd put each other through, I looked at him, and with tears in my eyes said, 'Tenzin, I'm sorry.' He looked back at me softly replying, 'So am I, I'm sorry too.' We didn't say any more about the past, didn't dig up old hurts and bruises, claims, blames and accusations. We let it rest and moved on. My relationship with Tenzin wasn't the first one to have failed – we all do the best we can at the time. When it comes down to it, forgiveness is only enlightened Self-interest. It might take time and a lot of willingness, but it wasn't optional if you wanted to be free.

Tenzin began explaining how to get to the hospital and, how to find him once I was there. I asked him to write the address in Chinese so I could give it to a taxi driver. The task finished, he said, 'Well I'd better go.' For a moment I felt my old feelings of neediness return, thinking but I've come all this way and... Then the feelings and thoughts dissolved as quickly as they'd arisen. I had no claim to his time or what he did with it – he owed me nothing. He was free to do as he pleased. I was free to accept it. We caught the lift down to the foyer and headed off in different directions, agreeing to catch up the next day.

Visiting the Tibetan hospital

In the morning I went to the dining room for a buffet breakfast. The whole room was pink: pink table cloths, pink chair covers, pink curtains, and pink uniforms on the staff. It was like sitting in the middle of a roll of candy floss. The waitress brought me some tea giggling nervously in my presence – meeting a Western person was out of the ordinary. There was a buffet breakfast on offer but nothing I wanted to eat, so I settled for hot water and heavy Muslim bread.

Breakfast finished, I hailed a taxi and handed the driver the address. I had no idea where I was going but trusted the driver did. The hospital was a long way from what I'd assumed to be the city centre. It was located in a part of Xinning I hadn't been to before. There was less chaos, less intensity, and glimpses of the surrounding hills. The hospital buildings were similar to those in the West – large, formidable and sprawling. There were three sections in the hospital where they practised three kinds of medicine: Chinese, Tibetan and Western.

It wasn't going to be easy to find Tenzin – all the signs were written in Chinese and, I didn't know which section was which. I asked a few people for help but no- one spoke English. Intuitively I felt I was in the wrong section so walked across the grounds to another, but again nothing made sense. I was beginning to get anxious. The time I'd arranged to meet Tenzin had passed. I had no idea how to find him. I walked back across the grounds to the third section of the hospital but it was much the same as the other two. I was standing outside the foyer, hoping for some kind of miracle when a young man dressed in a hospital uniform approached me, asking if I was Tenzin's friend. Noticeably relieved, I replied, 'Yes'. He shook my hand and told me to follow him.

We took the lift up to the fourth floor and arrived in the foyer of the massage clinic. I followed the young man into a standard hospital ward with six beds, all empty, except for one at the end of the room. An old man, frail and in pain, lay on the bed. Tenzin was massaging him. A monk sat on each side chanting. After a few moments Tenzin registered I was there and greeted me saying, 'I thought you weren't going to come, thank you for coming'. I could see he was happy that I was there and apologised for being late, explaining I hadn't been able to find the correct section of the hospital. He nodded and turned back to his patient.

The old man in the bed was also a monk. One monk held his hand while Tenzin applied deep tissue massage. The other sat quietly praying, turning the beads on his mala. Tenzin was wearing a white starched hospital jacket; his hospital ID badge was pinned to the chest pocket. He worked slowly, with compassion and care, totally dedicated to the task at hand. When it came to massage, Tenzin had extraordinary powers of concentration. Fully present in the moment, he would apply acute, steady, and consistent pressure to various points in the body, constantly maintaining and releasing the pressure, until he felt what he believed to be, energy blocks dissipate in the body.

I reflected on when I'd first met him in Dharamasla, years before. Like Yonten his life had changed. He'd found his way back to his beloved Tibet and was no longer exiled, or living on the margins of society. He'd found his place and his vocation outside of the monastery. Now he was standing proud and independent on his own.

The power of touch

A Tibetan woman, full of vitality and health, entered the room. Like Tenzin she was dressed in a hospital jacket. She was his co-worker, a skilled practitioner and traditional healer. He introduced us and she gave me a warm welcome. Tenzin asked me if I'd like a massage. She would give me one in the other ward for a discounted price. I accepted gratefully. She began massaging my back and legs. I drifted, deep inside my body, letting go with each breath. The outside world began to fade. Only my senses of touch and hearing were active.

I heard Tenzin's voice. For a moment I felt fear. His hand slipped on to my shoulder and I froze. I'd never escaped the power of his touch before and didn't want to fall back under his spell. I tried not to resist. His fingers began to search my body as he checked for blocks in the flow of energy. He spoke in Tibetan to the other masseuse, who was by now massaging my feet. Remembering she was there, I relaxed again and felt safe – my heart, while open, was not in danger. He didn't stay long, working only on my arm and shoulder, and then he left, letting the Tibetan woman finish.

The massage over, I sat drinking green tea with a group of women who were happily chatting away in the waiting area. To my surprise my day in Xinning was turning out to be quite enjoyable and I had not succumbed to any fanciful thinking.

Free

Tenzin's work had finished for the day. I needed help to buy a ticket for the bus trip to Lanzhou so we made our way back to the city, to the busy bus station. Lines of people stood queuing to buy tickets. Everything was written in Chinese, without Tenzin's help I'd have no idea which queue to stand in. I purchased a ticket and put it safely in my wallet. Then we walked across the road to a tea house, tucked away in the Tibetan Quarter. The waiter ushered us into a private booth with a view of the street. We sat down and ordered a number of dishes for lunch.

So far we hadn't talked about anything personal. There was a general feeling of avoidance between us regarding this area. I asked him more about his job. He loved to talk about massage – it gave him a sense of identity. And in all fairness, he was good at what he did. He was always present when he worked – totally committed. I never once saw him place time, or money, ahead of people's needs

when he practised massage – their well being was more important. That was the confusing thing about Tenzin. When it came to his work he often had deep spiritual insights, giving all he had to the person who'd asked for his help, but when it came to personal relationships, he could be cold, calculating, and cruel.

Behind his personal mythology there was a narcissist, who appeared unable to distinguish between his own pseudo intentions and the genuine responses of a normal person. Relationships for him were things of the moment – out of sight, out of mind. In the short time I'd spent with him he'd made no attempt to ask me anything about my life or shown any appreciation for visiting him. Nor had he asked anything about Yonten's wedding. I realised this wasn't personal. This was who he is.

The waiter arrived with our food and we began to eat lunch. An elderly Tibetan woman came into the booth and sat next to Tenzin. Holding out her hands she began talking to him. From what I could gather, she was in pain and wanted his help. Next an old man with a begging bowl appeared at the door. I invited him to sit down, filled his bowl with food, and pushed it across the table. Bowing slightly, his tired face broke into a smile as he sat to enjoy his food. I knew if we stayed the people would keep coming. Something happened when Tenzin and I were together, a kind of kinetic energy formed, drawing people in need to us. Once I'd thought this was all part of a mystical union that bound us together for the greater good, but now I recognised that it was just that neither of us had the heart to turn people away, or the strength to say no.

Tenzin loved the attention and took it all in his stride. The pain, the poverty, the sickness, and the suffering didn't seem to break his heart the way it broke mine. The difference was I knew another life – he didn't, he'd only seen the world through the lenses of India and Tibet, and the people who travelled to these countries. He'd never experienced the comfort and cleanliness of the West. Nor could he conceive of what it meant to live in a developed country with welfare and community services. For the people living in rural Tibet there was no running water, no sanitation, little access to education, and innumerable health issues, with no suitably available medical facilities. Development was viewed in expressions of tall buildings and wealth. Access to health care, education and services for marginalised people were not placed at the top of the list.

Tenzin knew only the reality of what he lived in, not the reality of what could be. This insulated him from the impact of the poverty and suffering around him. I, on the other hand, wore my heart on my sleeve and felt responsible for what I saw. There was so much need, and I didn't know who was going to help these people. If I'd wanted to give my life to a cause here was the opportunity.

We finished our meal. It was time for Tenzin to go back to his home. We walked outside and stood in the busy street and said goodbye. For the first time there were no tears, no long drawn-out dramas. We embraced each other, let go, turned, and went our separate ways. I don't know if he looked back, I didn't. I was clear about who he was. There was no unfinished business between us; our karma was clean. We had closure. I wasn't bound to the past by longing, resentment, or a lack of forgiveness, and I wasn't bound to the future by dreams, desire, and expectations. My heart was free. I was fully present, with and for myself.

I'd travelled a long way searching for meaning and a place to belong. I didn't find it in the East. Life was no different there than anywhere else: suffering was still suffering, pain was still pain, loss was still loss, love was still love, and peace was still peace.

A spiritual life may be presented in different packages, but it existed in the same place – deep inside our self – residing in every thought, action and decision we make. I was far from perfect, often wrong – but as my father had said to me once, 'It's alright honey. We all make mistakes.' I had no regrets. The most I could hope for is spiritual progress, not perfection. The past – was the past. The future offered infinite possibilities.