

the
HANDSOME
MONK



and OTHER STORIES
TSERING DÖNDRUP

Translated by Christopher Peacock

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BLACK FOX VALLEY

ONE

About forty miles north of the Tsezhung county seat was a mountain pass with a small cairn and a few strings of prayer flags. If you looked out from the pass, you would see a valley opening to the north covered in a rich variety of dense thickets. In the middle of the valley, in a marsh about the size of a sheep pen, gushing springs were dotted all around, their waters merging and forming a clear stream that flowed down through the center of the vale. In July and August, its deep reaches became a dense wilderness of shrubs—spiraea, black and white dasiphora, rhododendrons—each with a variety of flowers blooming atop them. Up on the ridges, edelweiss and stelleria grew by the bunch, and gentians bloomed in the autumn. Both banks of the stream in the middle of the valley were covered in wolfsbane, lousewort and long tube lousewort, maroon snow lotus, and all sorts of other flowers. On the smooth grasslands down at the foot of the valley grew leopard plants, knotweed, lamiophlomis, white snow lotus, black and white gentians, Himalayan aster, Tibetan dandelions, white wormwood, potentilla, and countless other things that even someone who could boast of being an expert in botany would be

hard pressed to identify. Every few days, the hues of the landscape transformed and a new variety of fragrances filled the air. If the "Thousand Lotus Pasture" described in the *Epic of Gesar* really exists, then it must be this very place.

If you laid your eyes on the scene of the nomads' dwelling here—the air peppered with the occasional sounds of five or six hundred whinnying horses, lowing cattle, and bleating sheep, living peacefully and carefree—that phrase "exquisite pastures richly endowed" would naturally come to mind.

This valley had something of an unusual name: Black Fox Valley. This wasn't just because the foxes there were black—even the marmots were. No one in Tsezhung had ever really paid any attention to this, but when Sangyé's family was given a pasturage contract for use of the valley, Sangyé began to consider the matter seriously. *This doesn't bode well. Foxes everywhere else are red. Why is it that only the foxes in this valley are black?* he wondered, plucking his moustache. Once, when the people of Tsezhung had invited Alak Drong to visit the community, Sangyé came to kneel before him and seek his counsel. "Venerable Rinpoché, foxes everywhere else are red. Only the foxes in my family's pasture are black, and so the valley's called Black Fox Valley. Do you think we need to do a prayer service or something?" The reason he said "my family's pasture" was that some county and township officials had carried out a cartographic survey and, after making some marks on the map, had given him a booklet called a "Pasture Usage Permit." In this book was written, in both Chinese and Tibetan, the acreage of the pasture, its boundaries, and that it had been allocated to Sangyé's family for a period of fifty years.

Alak Drong handed Sangyé a piece of paper on which was written two lines of cursive script.

Sangyé took the paper, and along with one hundred yuan, handed it to a monk he knew at Tsezhung Monastery.

TWO

Sangyé was fifty years old and thin, and had a swarthy complexion. His jaw was covered all over in scattered whiskers of unequal lengths. Some years ago he had possessed a pair of tweezers with a bat design on it, and his facial hair hadn't been as abundant then as it was now. Unfortunately, however, either Sangyé, his wife, Ludrön, or one of their kids had accidentally trod or knelt on the tweezers, bending them out of shape and compromising their hair-plucking capacity. Even more unfortunately, one time when the family was moving camp the tweezers simply disappeared. Ever since then his facial hair had continued to grow longer and thicker. There was nothing else he could do. As soon as he found himself with idle hands he'd seize the opportunity, and with his left hand plying his prayer beads, his right would work at the moustache, plucking hairs between the nails of his thumb and index finger. This was especially the case when he was thinking or when he was worried—in the blink of an eye he'd be plucking his moustache. Sadly, his fingernails were far less effective than those tweezers.

Sangyé was normally a very quiet and gentle man, but he actually had a sharp tongue. Before he got his pasturage contract, he and the other guys from the community would get together just to brag and banter. Once, Gönpö Tashi, a big tubby guy with a dark complexion, had said to him, "Ya—skinny Sangyé the *makpa*,¹ Akhu Jamyang's family has got you tanned as soft as sheepskin. Won't even let you eat your fill! How will you last through the spring? You poor thing!" Everyone burst out laughing.

Sangyé responded, "Ya—fatty Gönpö. You ate your own portion and then everyone else's, now you've got a belly as big as a

1. A man who marries and moves in with his wife's family.

yak's and you can barely stand upright. If only that yak's belly was on the butcher's block—one little cut of the knife and you'd see yellow fat for sure. It's just a shame the smell would be so bad not even a dog would eat it, never mind a man." Everyone burst out laughing again.

Gönpo Tashi was on the verge of offering a rebuttal, but Sangyé didn't give him the chance. "Ya, fatty Gönpo, you been serenading your sister recently?" Everyone laughed even harder than before. Gönpo Tashi, realizing that he was no match for Sangyé, gave a chuckle. "All right, all right. You win for today."

"Serenading your sister" was a reference to an embarrassing episode for Gönpo Tashi. Not long after he got married, Gönpo Tashi was coming back from the county seat when he saw a girl riding a yak up ahead of him. Following behind, he serenaded her with a string of love songs, informing her of his bachelor status and inquiring as to whether or not she had a lover, and if not, whether she would like to form a romantic bond. The terrified woman spurred on her yak and tried to escape as fast as she could, but how could a yak possibly compete with a horse? In a flash he caught up with her, only to discover that this was none other than his little sister, who some time before had gotten married and moved to another community. With his face burning with shame and no idea what to do, he spun his horse around and galloped off.

On any given day Sangyé's wife, Ludrön, would talk nonstop until she fell asleep: the son of the local branch secretary had gone off to become a monk, the village head had bought a little car, the money that new family got for their fifty sheep was all counterfeit, we need to make a new winter coat for Mom this year, we need to decide whether we're going to marry our daughter to that harelip Mikyang, okay? She would go on and on like this, and today was no exception.

"Give it a bloody rest, will you? Even if your mouth's not hurting, my ears are."

"When you've got a mouth you've got a right to use it. If your ears hurt, then just don't listen."

Sangyé didn't want to argue with her, so he plucked his moustache and fell silent. Ludrön continued, "When we got our pasture-age contract, didn't they say it was for fifty years? Now they're saying, 'Return the Pastures to Restore the Grasslands.' What's all that about? If we move to one of those compounds, then where's the meat, butter, and cheese going to come from? Akhu Sönam's family said they've decided not to move to the county seat."

Sangyé became even more annoyed. "What's the point in bringing all this up now, eh? We've already sold some of the livestock, and we've paid our share, the zee-chow. The government's already built the house, and most of the families have moved to the town. And another thing—we just need to leave the pastures fallow for a few years, then the deeds will return to the nomads. If there comes a day when we really can't get by, then we'll come back. When your mom and dad get back from Lhasa, we're moving to the town."

"What? I thought we were moving after the new year."

"Most of the families have already moved to the county seat, so there won't be anyone here for the new year anyway. Besides, I heard the houses there are great. Wouldn't it be nicer to spend the new year in a new house?"

"..."

Ludrön's father, Jamyang, was seventy-two, and her mother, Yangdzom, was seventy. Though neither of them had completely lost the ability to work, all the authority in the family had long since been passed on to the son-in-law, Sangyé. For that reason, most of the people in the community didn't call them the "Jamyang family," but the "Sangyé family." Sangyé's son Lhagön Kyab had been sent off to school, and after finishing primary school he went to Labrang Monastery to become a monk, where he took the name Gendün Gyatso. A few days previously he had taken

his grandparents, his older sister, Lhatso Kyi, and her daughter to Lhasa on a pilgrimage.

Sangyé no longer had a single thing he needed to take care of, but this made him feel even more unsettled than before. He plucked his moustache vigorously.

THREE

One freezing cold morning, Sangyé hired two of the small hand tractors that the nomads called a "show-foo." In one he piled up sacks of dung, on top of which he laid a whole yak carcass, a bag of butter, and other assorted provisions. Then came the tent, bound up in a rectangular bundle; fur-lined coats and mattresses; pans, bowls, and other clothes and utensils. In the other tractor he laid down more sacks of dung, and on top he placed the altar, his family, and the dog. Amid the relentless chugging sound and the black smoke emitted by the engine, they set off on the smooth main road that led from the mountain pass of Black Fox Valley. Instinctively, the whole family turned as one to look back at the valley where their little adobe house lay. Just when they reached the mountain pass, Sangyé pulled a pack of prayer flags from his pocket and tossed them into the air, yelling "Victory to the gods!" as loudly as he could. Just at that moment, the driver pushed the tractor to full throttle, drowning out his cry.

At around three o'clock they finally arrived at the Tsezhung county seat. Here, there was one phrase that they absolutely had to remember: *Xingfu Shengtai Yimin Cun* (the Chinese for Happy Ecological Resettlement Village). When they stopped to ask someone for directions, telling him that they were one of those families that had Returned the Pastures to Restore the Grasslands and come to the county seat, his response was, "You need to go to the *shengtai yimin cun*. But there are lots of *shengtai yimin cuns*. Whereabouts are you from?"

"We're from Tsezhung."

"Tsezhung, Tsezhung . . . I think most of the *yimin* from Tsezhung are on the north side of town. Anyway, just ask where *Xingfu Shengtai Yimin Cun* is and you'll be fine."

"What?" Sangyé plucked his moustache incessantly. "Shampoo sheng . . ."

"*Xingfu Shengtai Yimin Cun.*"

At that point the tractor drivers interjected, telling Sangyé they had to get off. If the family wanted to keep on looking for the place, they said, then an additional fee would be required.

"How much?"

"Ten yuan for each *shoufu*, and we'll take you to *Xingfu Shengtai Yimin Cun.*"

"All right, we'll do that."

The moment the tractor did a U-turn, a traffic cop appeared and signaled for them to stop. The two drivers instantly turned pale. In the same moment, they hit the brakes and set their feet on the ground, ready to make themselves scarce. But the policeman, paying no attention to them, was looking transfixed at the tractor. "You selling antiques? Bronze pots, copper kettles, Buddha statues, *thangka* paintings, old rugs, used flints, teacups or hair ornaments from a dead relative, that sort of thing? Anyway, the older, the better."

"We've got a saddle . . ." began Ludrön, but before she could continue Sangyé cut her off. "Where is the shampoo sheng tai . . . house?"

The policeman didn't understand a word Sangyé was saying. He turned back to Ludrön: "You're selling a saddle? Does it have a metal inlay? Is it antique?"

"It's that one." Ludrön pointed to Sangyé's inlaid saddle, which was sitting on the other tractor. "We don't have a horse anymore, what are we going to do with a saddle? If someone wants to buy it, we might as well sell it. It's just getting in the way."

The policeman looked closely at the saddle. "I'll give you five thousand."

"We're not selling the saddle."

Suddenly, the policeman's eyes turned to the family guard dog. "How much for the dog?"

"We're not selling the dog, absolutely no way!" the whole family cried, virtually in unison. "Shampoo sheng tai . . ." began Sangyé again. The policeman ignored him. He was ignoring the two drivers as well, so they started up the tractors and took off.

After about a mile the tractors came to a stop. "This is *Xingfu Shengtai Yimun Cun*. Get off, pay up."

FOUR

Seen from a distance, the countless rows of neatly arranged houses, identical in size and color, looked just like bricks laid out to dry in a brickyard. Each house was also enclosed by walls that were, likewise, identical to one another in color and size. At the main gate of the compound, there was a large sign written in Chinese: *Xingfu Shengtai Yimin Cun*. If you were looking for a family who lived here, it would be no good at all to adopt that backward old bumpkin method where you just say, "Hey buddy! Where's the Sangyé family from Tsezhung?" It was absolutely imperative to know the house number of the Sangyé family. For instance, if this Sangyé family lived at compound 21, row 17, unit 4, then you had to look for house number 211704. For an illiterate nomad, this was by no means an easy feat, but today the family was accompanied by Gendün Gyatso, their son who had left to become a monk. Even more fortunately, they bumped into someone from their community who had moved there about ten days ago. He took Sangyé to see an official who had hair as red as blood, a face as cold as winter, and hands as slow as a tortoise. Without much

trouble at all they soon obtained a big bunch of keys and a slip of paper bearing their house number.

Each family got a three-room house, in front of which was a little enclosure called a "garden." Iron sheets and tubing constituted the main door, above which was planted a red flag with five yellow stars; they were told that anytime it got dirty or worn out it could be replaced for free. The walls were made of whitewashed hollow cement bricks, upon which was painted a crimson border dotted with white decorations. The minute that Sangyé's family saw these houses—so replete with ethnic characteristics—they felt a warm glow in their hearts. Jamyang was especially moved. "The kindness of the Party! How can we ever repay it?" he uttered hoarsely, tears welling at the corners of his eyes as he surveyed the houses. "Not even Alak Drong's mansion is better than this! What have we done to deserve such good fortune?"

One of the rooms of the house was divided in two by a partition wall. One half appeared to be the kitchen, and the other must have been the bathroom, as a big toilet made of white porcelain had been installed in the corner. Sangyé and his wife thought at first that this was some kind of wash basin, causing Gendün Gyatso to snort with derision. "It's for doing your number ones and twos."

"What?" cried Grandpa Jamyang. "Pissing and crapping in a lovely basin like this? We'd use up so much merit our assholes would close up!" Yangdzom agreed. "If we don't know what it is, let's leave it be. Anyway, you're having a laugh if you say that's for number ones and twos."

"*Ab tsi!* I swear on the Three Jewels, it's for taking a crap in," Gendün Gyatso insisted. "Toilets like this are everywhere these days. I've used them loads of times." As it so happened, he was struck at that very moment by the irrepressible urge to do his business. Hoisting up his robe, he planted himself on the toilet and

was overcome with a great wave of relief as he dropped an enormous load. Much to his surprise, however, no matter how much he flushed, not a drop of water appeared in the bowl. When he took a closer look, he discovered that there was no pipe connected to the toilet. So it was left to his sister, Lhatso Kyi, to cover her nose and mouth with her left hand, and with her right dispose of the foul mess in the toilet.

Though the house had a toilet, it had no stove, so Sangyé had to go into town to buy one. He picked up a plastic bottle of milk while he was there, then hired one of the three-wheeled pedicabs they called a "three-legs" to get back home. By the time Ludrön went out to make an offering to the deities it was already almost dusk. The dog barked forlornly from the post in the corner of the yard where he was tied up, and only then did she realize he hadn't eaten anything all day. Overcome by pity for the poor thing, she rushed back inside and grabbed a half pound of boiled blood sausage, which she brought straight back out and gave to the dog. Apart from the fact that he couldn't speak and lived outside, the dog was just like one of the family, and he'd stuck to them like a shadow for six or seven years. How unexpected, then, that this was to be his last meal at home with them. The next day, they awoke to discover that the dog, along with his leash, had vanished as if he'd been swallowed up by the ground. The whole family was devastated, their only consolation being that at least he hadn't left on an empty stomach.

FIVE

Nomads call dogs that steal food "thieving dogs," and, in the same way, shameless thieves are also called "thieving dogs." But it's the thieves who steal dogs who are really and truly the shameless "thieving dogs." Sangyé, plucking at his moustache, was preoccupied with the question of who these thieving dogs could be, as

well as the matter of all the household appliances that needed to be bought: a television, a fridge, a bed, a thermos, curtains, and other things besides.

The Western new year had passed, and the Tibetan new year was approaching. Officials from the county and township authorities arrived, bringing the financial subsidies for the Return the Pastures to Restore the Grasslands program as well as a bounty of flour, rice, oil, tea, multicolored calendars, and other odds and ends to mark the "Two New Years" or "Two Festivals." They also asked people if they had any problems or needs—just let them know, they said, and it would be sorted out right away. Sangyé's family was deeply moved, Jamyang and Yangdzom especially so. "The great kindness of the Party! The great kindness of the nation!" Jamyang declared, unable to hold back the tears. "We didn't lift a finger and they give us all this money and all these things! Is this a dream? Praise be! Such kindness! Such kindness! We have no problems or needs, none at all." He was virtually prostrating himself. After the officials had left, Jamyang eagerly drummed into the whole family—Sangyé and his son especially—the lesson to never forget the benevolence of the Communist Party, to always keep it in mind, whether in tent or temple. "When you go into town," he added, "buy a portrait of the leader." By "the leader" Jamyang meant Mao Zedong, but when Sangyé went to the Xinhua bookstore, he not only bought portraits of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, he also got a portrait of Stalin, faded from its many years of lying there without a buyer. He stuck them above the altar, a space already filled with all manner of different-sized pictures of Alak Drong and other lamas and *trülkus*, and it seemed that a new splendor and radiance had been added to their home. When Jamyang turned his prayer wheel or Sangyé idly plucked his moustache, each would turn involuntarily toward the portraits of the leaders and gaze upon them with awe and reverence.

Getting food on the table and clothes on their backs without having to do a bit of work for it—this was something they couldn't have even dreamed of before. And so it seemed that Happy Ecological Resettlement Village was indeed a happy place. But, a short while later, Jamyang got it into his head that he should take a trip into town and ask around about their missing dog while he was there. Many years ago, he had been a grassroots-level cadre and had often gone to town to take part in "Three-Grade Conferences" and the like. In those days, he knew this little town like the back of his hand, but now, with development surging at the pace of a galloping horse, the place had changed beyond recognition. He wasn't at all confident he'd be able to find his way back to Happy Ecological Resettlement Village, and even if he could, there was no way he'd be able to remember that house number—which might as well have been written in hieroglyphics—so he lost his nerve. Now, deprived of the ability to go out, he began to feel like a prisoner in his own home. He spent every day sitting despondently in the doorway, his view curtailed by the rows and rows of houses blocking the horizon. Once, as he was staring at the corner of the yard where the dog used to be, the image of Black Fox Valley appeared before his eyes and the sound of barking rang distantly in his ears. From then on, Jamyang spoke less and less with each passing day.

Sangyé bought a color TV, a fridge, and a sofa. Now the family was able to watch TV shows in Tibetan, which brought a new joy to their lives. Most popular of all was the "New Year Special" they saw on New Year's Eve, a kind of variety show that completely captivated their attention. And now they could finally lay their eyes on the comedian Menla Kyab, whom they used to talk about like he was Old Man Earth himself.

There were two major events at New Year. The first was that their daughter, Lhatso Kyi, was married to Mikyang the harelip. The other was that, in keeping with Yangdzom's wishes, Lhari Kyi,

Lhatso Kyi's daughter from a previous relationship, would stay with her mother's family (that is, Sangyé's family) instead of moving in with the new husband. This was on the condition that she would be sent to school when the new term began in the autumn.

SIX

Spring arrived. All at once, men and women in what seemed like their thousands descended upon the Tsezhung county seat. They had come to do all manner of jobs: digging for caterpillar fungus, building houses, constructing highways. In the blink of an eye the grasslands, normally as still as yogurt, began to seethe like boiling water.

The meat, butter, cheese, and dung that Sangyé's family had brought from Black Fox Valley had gradually been used up. Now Sangyé and Ludrön had to take turns going to town for supplies almost every day, and what's more the price of food went up with each trip. As Sangyé was also looking for a job in town, a mile's journey away, getting a motorbike became an urgent necessity. Nomads, who love to exaggerate, have a saying about thieves: "As soon as you bend over, they'll steal your balls." In reality, though, what thieves really like isn't balls, but bikes. If you didn't want to offer up your motorbike to the thieves, then you pretty much had to keep it locked up in the house day and night. The three-room house, which at first had seemed huge and spacious, was now filled not only with their previous belongings but also with all the new things they'd bought since moving in, making the place incredibly cramped. Sangyé was left with no choice but to remove that big toilet, which was no use whatsoever, and put it outside.

"My god!" When the red-haired cadre who had given Sangyé his keys and house number arrived, she cried out in horror. "They've thrown the bloody *matong* outside! My god . . . and the *shicha* is coming tomorrow. My god . . . what a disaster, an absolute

disaster! These people will be the death of me!" She paced back and forth, having no clue what to do.

Sangyé was petrified. He stood rooted to the spot with his mouth hanging open. "It's just taking up space, it's completely useless . . ." said Ludrön.

"Even if it's useless, we still need to show it to the *shicha* when he comes! My god . . . this is no good. I'm done for!"

Ludrön was about to continue when Sangyé cried out, "Oh dear, oh dear, what on earth are we going to do?" He looked at the red-haired woman imploringly, as though hoping to take holy refuge with her.

"Do your dad's head! Go and fetch a *gongren* to reinstall it, quick. If the *shicha* sees this I'm done for."

"A *gongren*?"

"Yes, yes! Get a workman. And quick!"

Sangyé jumped right on his bike and headed for town. Without even asking the price he handed over one hundred yuan and got someone to come back with him. This man mixed one handful of cement with a couple of sand and reinstalled the toilet. When Sangyé thought about the red-haired woman's expression, he felt that the imminent arrival of the so-called "*shicha*" must be a truly terrifying thing. Filled with anxiety, he plucked his moustache ceaselessly and paced back and forth from the house to the gate.

Though the wind had grown so fierce you could hardly open your eyes, Jamyang still spent the whole day sitting on the doorstep spinning his prayer wheel. He stared into the corner of the yard where the dog used to be, growing more and more silent by the day. Sometimes Yangdzom would plop herself in front of him, raising a cloud of dust, and say a couple of words. But apart from a few monosyllabic responses, he paid little attention to her. She could do nothing but sit for a while, then hoist herself up in another cloud of dust, go back inside, and keep watching TV. She

didn't care whether the show was in Chinese or Tibetan, just so long as there was something to look at. She didn't really understand the formal Tibetan they spoke on television either, but she still loved to watch. For her, at least, it was easier to get through the days than it was for Jamyang.

Sangyé was still worried about this "*shicha*." Finally, accompanied by a flock of county and township officials, cameramen, and photographers, he arrived. But he was not at all as terrifying as Sangyé had imagined; on the contrary, he was a kind and gentle man, round-bellied and wreathed in smiles just like those Chinese statues of the Buddha you always see. No matter what was said to him, he would respond with a "Ha ha ha! *Hao hao hao!* Good good good!" Even when he took a cursory glance at the useless toilet, the toilet that served no purpose whatsoever but taking up space, his reaction was nothing but a "*Hao hao!*" Only then did Sangyé calm down.

After the kind and gentle *shicha* and his entourage had left, all the other families eventually removed their toilets and dumped them outside, but this time the red-haired woman didn't seem to care. After a few days had passed, Sangyé too plucked up his courage and once again dumped the toilet back outside.

SEVEN

After two months of continuous gales there came the sleet, which gradually became an endless downpour. So much water leaked from the roofs of the houses in Happy Ecological Resettlement Village that they became unlivable. Even worse, as the water flowed down all four walls, outside and in, the residents discovered that the hollow bricks had been stuck together not with cement but with clay. Black muddy water stripped off all the whitewash, leaving the houses completely naked, and cracks began to appear all over the bricks. This posed a serious threat to the

portraits of the Party leaders stuck on the wall, and Sangyé was forced to take them down.

"We saved up all this zee-chow money for a house like this? And I heard the government's subsidy was even more than what we paid," fumed Ludrön. "The adobe houses in Black Fox Valley were ugly, but they never leaked. And they were warm too. Mom and Dad are going to freeze to death in this place!" All of a sudden, she was struck by an idea. "Hey, why don't we pitch the tent in the yard and put a stove in there?"

"We . . . I suppose we could do that. But . . ." Sangyé plucked his moustache. "But what will the red-haired woman say?"

"Listen to yourself. You make it sound like she's our boss! She damn well should have something to say if she comes to see this place. It's unbelievable, paying all that zee-chow money for a house like this!"

"I swear on the sutras . . . I'm terrified of that red-haired woman."

"What's there to be afraid of? If you're scared, then I'll go." Ludrön got up and went straight out the door. In truth, she didn't really know if she had the courage to confront the red-haired woman, but having so fearlessly declared to her husband that she would, she was left with no choice. Fortunately, when she got to the red-haired woman's office, the Tsezhung township secretary and other officials, along with a big crowd of nomads, were already gathered there. One of the officials who knew Tibetan was telling them that they'd already sent a report up to the county Party committee and the county government, and that the county Party committee and the county government were taking this matter very seriously indeed, and that when this bad weather had passed they would absolutely fix every single one of the houses. He entreated the broad masses to have patience in this matter.

"In that case, there's nothing more to say. Praise be to the Party and the nation," said a young man with a hoarse voice, seemingly

on behalf of the assembled group. He walked out the door, followed in succession by the others.

Ludrön returned home with a smile on her face and reported to the family. "The leaders said to be patient for a few days and they'll fix the house as soon as they can."

"The Party and the nation truly are like our mother and father!" Jamyang, who had been silent for some time now, finally opened his mouth to speak, his face a picture of joy. Sangyé stopped plucking his moustache and said, "I'll go the county seat and get some mutton. This town, it's really amazing. They sell lovely fatty mutton, even in spring!"

The heavy rain finally stopped. On every house, about five inches of moss had sprouted haphazardly at the feet of the sun-facing walls. Repair work began on the houses of the Ecological Resettlement Villages surrounding the Tsezhung county seat, which were now even larger and more numerous than before. The method of repairing the houses was extremely simple: they removed the tiles from the roof, laid down a few plastic sheets, spread about half an inch of black soil on top, then replaced the tiles. After that they coated the walls in a layer of cement about the thickness of the back of a knife, slapped on some whitewash, quickly repainted the vermilion and white decorations, and that was that. Finally, a group of *shicha* who said they were from the prefecture arrived, pronounced it "Very good," and left. Apparently it was indeed very good. For a while after that not a drop of water leaked in, no matter how heavily it rained. But, much to everyone's surprise, when the spring rains came the next year, the very same thing happened again.

Once more, the nomads gathered at the red-haired woman's office. Some demanded the return of their down payments and said that they were going back to the grasslands.

The county Party committee and the county government were taking this matter very seriously indeed. They said that they would

repair all of the houses for free. Sadly, their method of repairing the houses was precisely the same as the one they had used the year before. The nomads called this method "spreading mud on shit."

EIGHT

In the Tsezhung county seat, dung sellers were becoming more and more rare, but sellers of another kind of fuel were becoming more and more common. This fuel was coal, a substance that in the past had been the exclusive privilege of the Tsezhung county seat's high officials and wealthy work units. The price of coal was so high that the nomads referred to it as the "expensive black rock." Not only was it expensive, it was also dangerous. In Happy Ecological Resettlement Village alone, nine people from three different families had died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Once, four cadres from the county seat were drinking beer together and passed out in a drunken haze. One of them woke up thirsty in the middle of the night and staggered to the stove to grab the kettle, but he didn't put it back properly, leaving the door of the stove open. In the morning, all four were found dead. Tales such as this were a constant source of terror for the residents of Happy Ecological Resettlement Village. By the grace of the Three Jewels, no such tragedy had befallen Sangyé's family. Still, they were running out of money fast, and on top of that, about a third of the expensive black rock they'd bought recently had turned out to be nonflammable rocks and pebbles. As Sangyé fell deep into thought and plucked his moustache, Ludrön said, "The butter you bought the other day had completely gone off. Yesterday Dad ate some *tsampa* with butter in it, and he said he had a stomachache the whole day. This morning he had to eat plain black *tsampa*. You didn't even check if it was fresh . . ."

"Didn't check if it was fresh?" Sangyé interrupted her. "Fresh butter's as expensive as the heavens!" He plucked his moustache irritably.

"I think it's time to sell the saddle. What's the point of having a saddle when you haven't got a horse?"

"Don't you know the saying 'The horse is easy come, the saddle's hard won'?"

"Well, what about 'If you're blessed with the horse, the saddle's easy to source'?"

"Maybe it's easy to get an ordinary saddle, but mine's no ordinary saddle."

"Well anyway, if we can't get any fresh butter, it's going to be tough for us, let alone Mom and Dad."

"Doesn't matter how tough it is. Without the pasture compensation money, there's nothing I can do."

"Tea with no milk, rancid butter—the poor old things."

"Let me go buy some milk." Who knows if Sangyé felt sorry for the old folks or was just tired of Ludrön's grumbling. Either way, as he got to the door, he saw his son Gendün Gyatso enter the yard.

It seemed as though Gendün Gyatso grasped the whole situation just from seeing his parents' faces. He greeted his grandparents and gave them each a kiss, and without even sitting down he pulled two thousand yuan from his pocket and placed it in his father's hands.

A lot of monks and nuns nowadays are returning to lay life, and when they do, many of the young men gamble and steal, while many of the young women turn to prostitution. In Happy Ecological Resettlement Village alone, five or six men had been arrested and three or four women had disappeared just in the last two years. Not only had four or five monks returned to lay life, one of them actually went back to his monastery and stole a precious black *thangka* of Pelden Lhamo that was even older than

the monastery itself. He got caught as he was preparing to make his getaway and was still in jail. Various shocking events such as this had occurred, and they continued to occur. But Gendün Gyatso dedicated himself solely to prayer and the cultivation of merit. He declined the extravagant lifestyle led by other monks, instead saving up all the alms donated by the faithful and using them to help his family. When he thought of all this, Sangyé wanted to squeeze Gendün Gyatso to his chest and kiss him. But not having kissed his son once since he'd grown up, he felt it would be awkward to do it now. Feeling so moved that he might cry, Sangyé excused himself by saying that he was going to buy some meat.

Ludrön followed him out the door, shouting, "Don't forget to buy a bottle of milk! But don't get it from the store by the gung-shang-joo, it's all fake!" This fake milk came in all varieties; the most common was the kind that had been mixed with water and skimmed, as well as the kind that was yak milk passed off as cow milk. There was one kind even demons couldn't think up: during the hot summer months, people would put antibiotics in the milk to stop it from turning.

Sangyé, revving the engine of his bike, didn't seem to hear her. In any case, he didn't respond. "He's going to get fake milk again," Ludrön mumbled to herself as she turned to go back inside. She saw her father, Jamyang, staring at the corner where the dog used to be, and tugged at his sleeve. "Dad, let's go inside."

NINE

As soon as Jamyang entered the house, Gendün Gyatso rose to greet him. Jamyang cast an eye over his grandson and asked, "Who is this monk?"

Gendün Gyatso, completely taken aback, looked over at Ludrön. "Grandpa's confused," she whispered. At that point,

Yangdzom intervened. "*Ab tsi*, what's the matter with this old man? It's your grandson, the monk! He came to say hello to you just now, remember?" But Jamyang didn't accept this at all; in fact, he grew angry. "*Ab tsi*, when did our little monk get here? Why didn't you come say hello to your grandpa?" Gendün Gyatso, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, could only put his arms around his grandpa and give him a kiss. Only then did Jamyang, seemingly satisfied, sit down on the floor.

"Your grandpa's confused," Ludrön whispered again. "Every evening he stands in the doorway saying things like 'Have you fed the dog?' 'Is the old brown *dzo* back in her pen?' 'Tie up the old gray horse with the black one that always bends its head.' I don't even remember us having any animals like that. I asked your grandma, and she said that the old brown *dzo*, the old gray horse, and the black one that always bends its head were all animals they had when they were young. . . ." Her words were flowing like water, but she was brought to a halt when little Lhari Kyi flung open the door and rushed in, panting. "Is Uncle here?"

Before Gendün Gyatso could say anything, Ludrön cut in. "*Ab tsi*, what are you doing home from school so early?"

Lhari Kyi put down her backpack, and in a mix of Tibetan and Chinese announced two unrelated items of news. The first was that the roof of one of the classrooms had caved in, crushing two children to death and injuring four more. The second was that yesterday a student had gone into one of the teacher's houses and stolen some money, and the teacher had beaten him black and blue. So today the kid's older brother had gotten some of his friends together, and they'd beaten the teacher until he couldn't stand.

"The *xiaozhang* said we didn't have to *shang ke* today," said Lhari Kyi, concisely concluding her explanation of why they were released from school early.

"*Ab ho!* What if our little baby had been crushed . . . that's it, no more school from now on!" said Yangdzom with an iron resolve,

squeezing Lhari Kyi tightly to her breast. Of all the members of the family, she was most attached to Lhari Kyi. When Lhatso Kyi had married into another family, Yangdzom had been absolutely insistent that the child not be taken away, and she'd also been reluctant to send her off to school. For this reason she now seized the opportunity before her in the hope that that she could keep Lhari Kyi by her side day and night.

They heard the sound of a motorbike pulling up outside. Not long after, Sangyé entered, followed by a middle-aged woman carrying a heavy saddlebag on her left shoulder; it was Yudrön, Sangyé's younger sister. The region in which Yudrön lived hadn't yet undergone "ecological resettlement." Not only did her family not have to buy livestock products, they'd actually been able to sell some, and Yudrön, with great generosity, had even given some things away for free. It was for this reason that, every time she came to the county seat, she brought meat, butter, cheese, milk, yogurt, and other things besides for her brother's family. This time too, she came bearing a whole rump of mutton, four pounds of wrapped-up yak offal, an eleven-pound block of butter, seven pounds of cheese in a black plastic bag, a plastic tub of yogurt, and two plastic bottles of milk. On top of all that, as she greeted Jamyang, Yangdzom, and Lhari Kyi, she gave each of them ten yuan.

Sangyé had also bought a few plastic bottles of the sugary soda they called "kow-lah" and seven pounds of yak meat. Lhudrön set straight to chopping meat and kneading dough for dumplings. She put a generous heap of coal in the stove, and soon it was burning with a red flame that filled the room with warmth. They began to chat about this and that, and the sound of laughter, which had become a rarity, rang intermittently through the house. The troubles that had so burdened Sangyé and Lhudrön only a few hours before, as well as the terrible things Lhari Kyi had told them about the school, were all seemingly forgotten. Jamyang was the first to turn in, followed shortly by Yangdzom with Lhari Kyi

asleep in her arms. The others all stayed up for a good two hours past their normal bedtimes.

At the end of this joy-filled day, Sangyé went outside to relieve himself one last time, but was greeted by an unpleasant surprise. "*Ah ho! Ah ho! My mow-tow! My mow-tow! Those thieving dogs, the thieving dogs . . .*" he cried, pacing around the yard hopelessly looking for his missing motorbike.

TEN

The red-haired woman—as she was secretly referred to by the inhabitants of Happy Ecological Resettlement Village—came to Sangyé's house to demand immediate payment of the electricity and water bills. If they didn't pay, she told them, the electricity would be cut off and they wouldn't be allowed to draw water.

Sangyé had grown in confidence of late, and his mood had also turned darker. Without a hint of fear, he responded, "When you pay me the pastures subsidy, I'll pay the bills. Otherwise you can go ahead and cut off the electricity. I'll use a solar generator. And if I'm not allowed to draw water, then we'll just get it from the Tsechu River."

The red-haired woman laughed. "Haha! Everyone knows the Tsechu is so *wuran*-ed that not even pigs will drink from it."

Sangyé was about to retort when Ludrön unleashed a shrill, heart-rending cry and dashed forward three or four paces. She turned around, mouth agape, as though her spirit had left her body.

Sangyé swung around and saw Jamyang collapsed face down on the ground. He leaped forward and lifted Jamyang's head, but the old man's body had already turned cold.

According to Ludrön, her father had been sitting straight as a rod, and when she tugged at his sleeve to take him inside, he fell straight forward. When she touched his head it was as cold as a rock, scaring her out of her wits.

"I was sitting right next to him when he breathed his last. I couldn't even raise his head. I couldn't do a thing," sobbed Ludrön.

"Don't cry, don't cry, recite *manis*, recite *manis*," said Sangyé, trying to stop her tears.

"I couldn't even get a cup of milk tea for him before he died. Not even a bite of *tsampa* with fresh butter. This morning he didn't eat anything but a bit of plain black *tsampa*. My poor dad . . ." Ludrön wept even more bitterly than before. Unable to bear it, Sangyé began to cry too. It really was awful that he couldn't manage to get his father-in-law a cup of tea or a bit of fresh butter before he passed, he thought. He felt ashamed at what a useless son-in-law he was. But it was no use having regrets. The best thing he could do for him now was to prepare the proper funeral rituals. Leaving Ludrön to mourn, he removed the inlaid saddle from the old piece of cloth in which it had been wrapped, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and prepared to head into town. But now he felt that he couldn't just leave the two women alone with the body, so he set the saddle down on the ground. He went outside, and just as he did the couple from the family next door, having heard the cries, came to see what was going on.

"My father-in-law passed away, all of a sudden," Sangyé told the husband. "Please, could I trouble you to stay with my wife and her mother for a bit while I go to town? I need to tell my family the news and see if I can find Alak Drong." Picking up the saddle again, he turned to leave, but stopped in his tracks and came back as though he had just realized something. Slowly raising the coat covering the body, he saw the old man still clutching his prayer beads in his left hand and a prayer wheel in his right. He was about to remove them when his older neighbor stopped him. "*Ah tsi ah tsi*," he exclaimed. "This is a pious man. I think it's best if you leave them alone. If you want them removed, better to have a lama do it." So Sangyé covered him with the coat once more.

"We by you're used gods—best offer garanteed!" A sign in Tibetan filled with spelling mistakes hung outside the pawn shop, the letters resembling ant tracks in the dirt. After the owner had carefully examined each of the items brought by Sangyé—the saddle, stirrups, and other accessories—he raised a single finger, offering one *wan*—ten thousand yuan. Sangyé, misunderstanding, shook his head. "Well, how much money you want for it?" asked the owner in his crude Tibetan.

"Eight thousand."

"Eight thousand?"

"Eight thousand."

"Eight thousand. Eight thousand." The owner shook his head, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, and counted out the money.

Just as Sangyé left the pawn shop feeling quite pleased with himself, he saw Alak Drong getting out of a car. Rushing over, he told the lama that his father-in-law had suddenly passed away and beseeched him to pay a visit to his bedside. Much to his surprise, Alak Drong jumped back in the car, saying, "Come on then, let's go!" This put Sangyé in a fluster. "Of course . . . but . . . we haven't prepared anything . . . perhaps tomorrow . . ." Alak Drong barked his response as though he were issuing orders. "I'm going to Xining tomorrow. If you haven't got a vehicle, then jump in my *qiche*!"

Fortunately, Sangyé got home to find that some of the former inhabitants of Tsezhung County who now lived in Happy Ecological Resettlement Village had been phoning around and were already gathered at his house. Without much trouble at all they helped Sangyé arrange a date for the funeral and other matters with Alak Drong.

Alak Drong said a few words to guide the consciousness of the deceased to its appropriate destination and prepared to leave. "Venerable Rinpoché, please look at this," said one of the elderly neighbors, lifting up the fur coat to show him the beads and the

prayer wheel clutched in the old man's hands. Unfortunately, apart from asking why on earth they hadn't removed those things from his hands, Alak Drong offered no other auspicious remarks.

ELEVEN

After the death of her husband, Yangdzom didn't get out of bed until late in the day. She no longer watched TV like she used to. Instead, she would go outside and sit where her husband used to sit on the doorstep, and there she would stay, staring toward the main gate, just waiting for Lhari Kyi to come home from school. When Lhari Kyi did get home, she always had even more news to report than the TV. Sadly, it was always about utterly horrifying events. For instance, she had had two pieces of news the day before. The first was that a number of students who boarded at the school had gotten food poisoning. Although they were sent to the hospital, five of them were beyond help and died. The second was that one of those many coal trucks, which were as big as mountains and flowed like rivers, had hit a small car containing four people and squashed it as flat as a steel plate.

Every time Yangdzom heard one of these stories she would close her eyes, clasp her hands to her chest, and offer a prayer: "By the Three Jewels, may all sentient beings be spared disasters like this." But how could she know that just such a disaster was about to befall her own family? It was a freezing cold, frosty morning. Lhari Kyi had left for school earlier than usual and Yangdzom was still in bed. Sangyé and Ludrön were outside, ripping up an old sash into strips of cloth and stuffing them into the cracks in the walls. Sangyé's mind wasn't on the work in front of him; it was on the news he'd heard that a place in town was looking to hire a security guard. At some point they both felt an unsteadiness in their legs, and in that instant, the entire row of houses collapsed before their very eyes, sending a cloud of black dust into the air

that blocked out everything. They stood rooted to the spot, completely stunned. Somewhere nearby a man ran past, yelling, "Earthquake! Earthquake!" The two of them finally came to their senses and, almost in unison, called out "Mother!" They clawed desperately at the tiles and bricks as if they'd lost their minds. When they lifted off some beams that had collapsed over the folded-up tent, Sangyé and Ludrön were overjoyed to find Yangdzom lying in the space underneath, not so much as a scratch on her. Barely able to believe their eyes, they helped her up, asking repeatedly if she was hurt. When they were finally convinced that it was real, they thanked the compassion of the Three Jewels over and over again. Just then they saw a man running past, wailing at the top of his voice. "*Ah ho! Ah ho!* The students have all been crushed to a pulp!" Once again, almost in unison, they called out "Lhari Kyi!" jumped to their feet, and started to run.

To Yangdzom it seemed like a year, but in reality it was just an hour later that Sangyé returned, staggering as he held the lifeless, blood-soaked little body of Lhari Kyi. "Heaven is blind, heaven is blind . . ." he kept on moaning. Strangely, Ludrön didn't weep as she had when her father died; she simply shed a few silent tears and sighed.

As they later learned, this was only a magnitude 4.0 earthquake. Except for the Ecological Resettlement Villages and a few schools, it hadn't caused much damage. The government speedily arranged relief aid for those affected by the disaster in the form of emergency tents and food supplies. Not only did they provide compensation payments for the injured and the families of the dead, they promised that new houses would be built as soon as possible, even better and sturdier than the previous ones, and free of charge. The nomads were once again moved to tears of gratitude. But Sangyé's family had long since lost the desire to live there. They had only continued to put up with it for the sake of Lhari Kyi's schooling, but now that she was gone, there was no longer anything to keep

them. And so, one morning, they hired a hand tractor and set off for Black Fox Valley.

The road home was clogged with those coal trucks that were as big as mountains and flowed like rivers, stirring up huge clouds of dust as they rushed back and forth, almost trampling—or rather flattening—the little tractor as they went. Ludrön, feeling even more dejected than before, rubbed her chest and sighed. It seemed that Sangyé too was feeling dejected. For the whole journey he plucked his moustache, not saying a word.

Since there were so many trucks, the tractor had to drive extremely slowly, and since they were driving so slowly, it wasn't until almost sunset that they finally arrived at the mountain pass of Black Fox Valley. Then they were confronted with a sight even more shocking and incomprehensible than that of Lhari Kyi's crushed little body. The entirety of Black Fox Valley had been dug up and turned into an expanse of pitch black. Everywhere you looked there were diggers, loaders, dump trucks, and tractors scurrying like ants from a nest, a seething maelstrom of activity. The roar of the machines sounded like a thousand thunderclaps booming at once.

So many new paths leading from the pass into the valley had appeared that the driver didn't know which one to take, so he hit the brakes and waited for instructions from his passenger. But not only did his passenger fail to utter a sound, he even forgot to pluck his moustache. After a moment he regained his senses and began to look around, thinking they must have taken a wrong turn. But apart from the fact that the cairn and the prayer flags had turned black, everything was the same, confirming that no, they had not.

"Now I understand why the foxes in this valley are black," Sangyé said.

Ludrön, who'd been silent the whole day, finally spoke. "So this is where all that expensive black rock comes from."