

SCATTERED MEMORIES OF A MISSPENT YOUTH

Pad ma rin chen

My village is located atop a high mountain in the northwest of Reb gong County, Qinghai Province. It is thirty-six kilometers from my village to the county town. We have much land, but drought for several years in a row is common. Gradually, we became impoverished and were designated as Lnga skyong families 'households with the five protections',¹ but we received only a sack of flour from the government at the end of the year, which was insufficient to liberate us from distress.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), my grandparents had six children – my three aunts, two uncles, and Father, the eldest child. The family was very poor and feeding six children was as difficult as finding gold in the deep sea. Grandfather was required to work as a local government official and received a small salary, which was only enough for him. Because of the constraints on his time, he had little opportunity to help Grandmother. He tried to leave his job several times but failed, because he was the only local person who could do accounting. Nearly everything fell on Grandmother's shoulders who, nevertheless, never regretted marrying Grandfather.

Ten years later, everything had changed and Grandmother was free from much hard work because her children had grown up and could do most of the chores. Meanwhile, Grandfather had retired from work and spent all his time with them. They then enjoyed a happy family life, as did most other local families.

Father graduated from school and became a primary school teacher when he was eighteen. He received a small salary that helped the family. He was gentle, benevolent, and his mind was sharp, which

¹ A designation for assistance provided to people/ households without income, old people without family members to care for them, and people unable to work. The 'five protections' are a stipend, clothes, health insurance, housing, and funerals.

made everything easy for him to learn. Villagers liked and respected him.

My parents met in Mother's village, fell in love, and married. Mother never attended school because she needed to care for her sisters. Mother worked very hard and did everything so well that everyone admired her.

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I was born in Father's home on 23 October 1987, clutching something in my left hand. My birth brought happiness to my family. Grandfather was very fond of me and did not allow others to touch me in fear I would be contaminated and made sick. Grandfather thought that I was lucky and would be a good person, because my birthday is a special day – Bcu pa'i lnga mchod, the anniversary of Tsong kha pa's death. My grandparents often took me to meet *bla ma* and visit monasteries on this day.

When I was three years old, I became seriously ill, worrying my family. Everything possible was done for me, but I became even sicker. I couldn't sleep at all. My grandparents stayed with me constantly and sang lullabies, hoping I would fall asleep. Meanwhile, my relatives hoped that I would die quickly, thus liberating my soul and my family from worry.

One day, Grandfather heard about a famous *sgom pa* 'meditator' who meditated in a secret cave and performed remarkably accurate divinations. My grandparents carried me to where the *sgom pa* lived, respectfully put their palms together under their bowed heads, and told my story.

When they finished, the *sgom pa* divined with his old beads, gave me a thick amulet, and said I should go on pilgrimage. My grandparents then carried me as they circumambulated monasteries and high mountains, burning *bsang* 'incense' and praying that I would be liberated from sickness. Eventually, I did recover.

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When I was seven, my parents sent me to study at the primary school located in the upper part of our village. It had only four classrooms and teachers' quarters. It was built of mud-bricks and not structurally sound. Students from different grades shared one classroom. My

class had five students, all of whom were older and stronger than me. They frequently beat and otherwise bullied me. Though this upset me, I still wanted to play with them, because they often played fun games. Our teachers were busy gambling and spent little time with the students. When I was in grade three, I had learned nothing except bad habits. Villagers chose some people to report the situation to relevant leaders, who did nothing. Roads and transport to my village were terrible, and it was far from the city, so none of the teachers wanted to be there. Being at our school was so undesirable that, when a class in another township scored the worst on township-wide exams, the teacher was punished by being assigned to our school. There was no class schedule. Teachers did whatever they liked. These factors led most students to drop out of school.

For these reasons, Father sent me to another school, where I had problems keeping up with my new classmates. I was very depressed, did not want to study, and thought that I had the worst karma of any boy in the world. Fortunately, with the teachers' encouragement and help from my classmates I didn't drop out. Gradually, I became a good student.

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I was in grade six in primary school, and busily preparing for the final examination. Our score on this exam would determine the middle school we would attend. School rules were strict and I was challenged by life at school, and by other students. Relationships between students often soured and some classmates didn't speak to each other. I studied many hours each day and was confident that I would succeed in the examination. Some students never studied seriously, but instead, spent most of their time playing. During caterpillar fungus collecting season, a few students were ordered to leave school to collect this valuable medicinal substance. Examination results varied from student to student, and this gave students different opportunities. The top students were chosen by the best middle school and received awards and praise from the school, while other students had to repeat grade six and take the examination again.

Fortunately, I passed the exam. On the first day when I arrived at my new middle school, I was very surprised by the school

environment and conditions. The school gate was large and wide, and had Tibetan features. Two stone lions by the school gated added a sense of grandeur. The class buildings and office buildings were not as tall as I had imagined them to be, but everything was clean and tidy. Trees surrounding the school gave a nice green feeling. I liked the school immediately and very happily registered. Teachers kindly welcomed new students and introduced the school's history. Older students helped new students take their belongings to the dormitory rooms. It was totally different from my primary school.

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Teachers told the new students that we would meet at seven-thirty p.m. and added that all new students must attend to better understand school discipline. After dinner, I directly went to a classroom at around six p.m., sat in the back, and felt very lonely. I started imagining the things I wanted while recalling my happy life at home. I was homesick and unhappy. My new classmates trickled in one by one, speaking loudly and playing. They seemed happy, but their noise interrupted my reverie. I was very upset, but dared not tell them to stop, because we didn't know each other. I sat in my chair quietly, missing my family and my friends even more. Tears involuntarily filled my eyes. Worried that my classmates would see me and feeling deep humiliation, I put my head on the table, wiped away my tears with my left hand, and murmured, "Father, Mother," again and again, which brought me some comfort.

Students were from different villages, townships, and counties. I looked at each of them carefully. Some were obviously older than me, and some seemed very young. Most students were boys. At seven-thirty p.m., a teacher holding a packet of documents hurriedly entered the classroom. He was tall, very thin, wore a big pair of glasses, and was dressed in a clean suit. He looked to me what I imagined a professor looked like. We stood up and chorused, "Good evening, Teacher!"

He stood on the platform, told us to sit, and then introduced himself. He explained school discipline, class rules, and our schedule clearly and seriously. When he finished, he asked us to introduce ourselves. We then went to the platform in turn and introduced

ourselves. I was worried and had no idea what I would say, as I nervously listened to others. Some students were so shy that they couldn't keep their heads up, while others were brave and joyful. When it was my turn, I stood on to the platform as my face blushed and my legs shook. I couldn't get my voice to come out of my throat and sweat poured from my face. I whispered my name and then rushed back to my seat. I felt my chair was unsteady as I heard classmates whispering deprecating remarks about my pathetic presentation.

We gradually got to know each other better and our relationships improved. We had more conversations and often joked. We would say how beautiful our own home area was, which sometimes led to fighting.

A few boys started finding girlfriends. Most boys were naive and had no experience with romance, though they were happy if they did get a girlfriend. Some failed at finding girlfriends and looked sad and embarrassed. Every night, we could see couples tightly embracing in dark places, murmuring secrets. Some boys began drinking beer and doing other stupid things.

Rdo rje and I were close friends and desk-mates. We were often together and shared everything. He was a local boy from a rich family. He bought delicious snacks and drinks every morning. I had never seen some of those snacks and drinks before. He generously gave me half of whatever he bought. I was happy with him and did whatever he asked. I often praised him to my parents and friends. My parents liked him and thanked him for helping me.

Middle school life was very different from life in primary school. Study was challenging because there were many subjects. Students competed to see who could get up the earliest and study the hardest. I lay in my warm bed with Rdo rje, and almost forgot that I was a student. I never worried about study. I followed Rdo rje and his friends to dance halls. My companions had a lot of money and I started to drink and smoke, too. I was their servant and helped them buy beer and other things. In return, they gave me whatever I asked for. I felt I was lucky to spend most of my time with them.

Every night we noisily returned to our dormitory rooms very

late, disturbing our roommates, who didn't like Rdo rje and me, but who dared not report us to the teachers, because Rdo rje's parents were important people. I often dozed before our classes finished.

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One hot summer afternoon, Rdo rje and I were bored in math class. I put my head on my desk and tried to sleep, but couldn't. Then we decided to leave. I had two *yuan* for the bus fee to take me home that weekend. We had already spent Rdo rje's money the day before at an internet bar. I used the rest of my money to buy five cigarettes at the school shop. We first planned to go swimming but, when we reached the Dgu chu, we saw some naked girls swimming. They didn't see us as Rdo rje and I peeked at them lustfully. Suddenly, strong rough hands grabbed my ears. I turned and saw an older woman. She hit me hard, knocking me to the ground. I was angry because Rdo rje seemed to have disappeared. At first, I thought he'd seen the woman and escaped without warning me, but then I saw him. He looked like he had been beaten more seriously than me. We cursed the woman, saying we hoped she would soon die.

A few minutes later, Rdo rje took me to his home, which was near the school. The door was locked when we arrived and he had no key. So, he climbed up the courtyard wall and jumped inside, while I remained on guard outside to warn him if any of his family members came. When he returned, he gave me an expensive packet of cigarettes and showed me 200 RMB in his pocket. I was shocked because I had never seen so much money before. We headed to the dance halls and spent all the money there in the next few hours.

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I spent a year having a good time with Rdo rje and his friends, even though bad activities and bad thoughts contaminated me. I became another person. Only Rdo rje wanted to be my friend. I put my head up arrogantly, confident I was a lucky man. When the second semester began, the school leader organized a meeting with parents. I was afraid my family would learn my secret so I tried to escape the meeting. I talked to several of my teachers in their offices and lied about Father's inability to attend the meeting, telling them that my home was far from school, transportation was inconvenient, and so

on.

My head teacher didn't believe me, because I had failed almost all my subjects. He said that whoever's parents did not attend the meeting would be expelled. I lost hope and gloomily waited for the meeting. I began to imagine what would happen and was very worried about Father's bad temper. Finally, I phoned Father and told him that he needed to attend a meeting. He was happy with such news and was eager to come. I had changed all my marks and he had no idea how poorly I was really performing. All my family members thought I was a good student and were proud of me.

Father arrived at school early in the morning the day of the meeting, bringing bread and fruit. I took Father to my dormitory room where we waited for the meeting to begin. At ten a.m., parents gathered and sat by their child's desk in the classroom. My teacher began by talking about the class situation, complemented the best students, announced whose score was highest, and gave awards. The teacher also read some of the bad students' names and explained what they had done and expressed the hope that their family would educate them. I fearfully looked at Father's increasingly red, angry face. A few minutes later, Father left the classroom and then zoomed through the school's big gate on his motorcycle without a word to me. I was disappointed with myself and vowed I would start over and do my best.

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I stayed home during the winter holiday. I never reviewed my subjects and did nothing to help my family. My parents never talked about my study because they knew the results. Except for playing basketball, I had nothing to do. In fact, I thought I shouldn't do anything to help my family because I was a student. I spent much of the daytime playing basketball and every night I went to the small village shop where many people gathered after supper. Children came with their fathers, who often gambled. Young people my age drank beer and talked about their romantic adventures. I didn't like talking about my secrets, but still, I somehow couldn't control myself from revealing all of them. Our conversations were enormously exciting and filled the small shop with noise. Meanwhile, the gamblers

quivered and grimaced, waiting for their chance to win, while their children stood behind them, nervously watching, each praying their father would be successful.

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One night, I was frightened by storm winds, which blew the whole night and then stopped the next morning. Fortunately, the accumulated paper and plastic garbage had disappeared from every corner, making our village as clean as my school. The sun rose from above Gnyan chen Mountain that morning, pouring bright sunshine onto the ground, warming everyone it touched. I got comfortable and then walked straight to the front of our temple gate, looking for friends, because this was the place we gathered in the morning. I took a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. I then switched on my cell phone, played some music, and checked the outgoing calls I had drunkenly dialed the previous night. Wondering what I had said, I felt intense regret and humiliation. My friend had introduced me to a pretty girl who was easy to communicate with. I intended to call her and thought about what I should say.

Meanwhile, Uncle Tshe b+ha arrived, murmuring scriptures as he began circumambulating the temple. After each round, he touched his head to the temple gate, closed his eyes, and prayed. I saw from his face that he was unhappy. Suddenly, he gave me a big smile and sat in front of me. I took a cigarette from my pocket and respectfully offered it to him. He took out his lighter and asked me about my school and study. I gave a simple response and gazed at him, hoping he would tell me about our village history. He knew a lot about my village because he was the oldest person there. All the villagers respected as him as much as a *bla ma*. He was wise and had resolved countless problems in my village.

Uncle Tshe b+ha told me how important school was, and said that society was not as simple as many imagined. He added that life never went as you expected. I paid little attention. I was much more interested in his romantic adventures, which I had heard about from his nephew, who was my best friend. Finally, he took a deep breath and absent-mindedly said, "What an evil boy G.yang skyabs is..."

The account below is partly what Uncle Tshe b+ha told me

and what most villagers know about G.yang skyabs:

G.yang skyabs's father was in prison and would have to stay there for two more years before he could be released. He had illegally sold guns, and had been sentenced to six years. His elder brother had become a monk when he was seven, and did very well at his studies in his monastery. Every year during the *ma Ni* festival, he returned home to visit his family members. During his most recent visit, he had discovered his family's miserable situation, felt unbearable anguish, and then had returned to his monastery.

His Uncle Rdo rje encouraged him to become a layman and help his mother. Realizing his mother's life was as difficult as that of a slave, he consulted a *bla ma* and finally resolved to become a layman. His grandmother was as angry as a mad elephant when she heard this and announced that if he became a layman, she would commit suicide.

The grandmother held a high position in their family. She never liked losing anything that belonged to her and wanted to keep everything, even old, useless things. Her children and relatives discussed creating merit for her next life and then invited a high *bla ma* and monks to read scriptures. Meanwhile, they prepared food and milk tea for villagers and other guests. The grandmother had even kept a tea brick from her wedding during the Cultural Revolution and thought this was the time to use her bridal tea to demonstrate her generosity. Unfortunately, the tea had turned to dust when she took it from the locked box where she'd stored it.

The family understood the grandmother's insistence on the older son remaining a monk. They waited with hope for the second son, who had roamed aimlessly in Lha sa for three years. His mother often heard of his bad behavior from others who returned from pilgrimage in Lha sa.

One day, G.yang skyabs's mother was delighted to hear that her son was returning and impatiently waited, telling everyone that he would soon be home. G.yang skyabs's relatives and friends gathered at his home to help clean it. His mother couldn't concentrate on work because she imagined her son had become as important as the greatest man in the local community. She smiled graciously at everyone and prepared nice food.

The grandmother said nothing as she sat on the warm bed, constantly spinning her prayer wheel. She took deep breaths and gazed at the gate, expectation etched on her wrinkled face. Eventually G.yang skyabs arrived, reeking of

alcohol. Only his mother recognized him. He was taller than before, skinny, and his face had numerous scars. He murmured unclear, simple auspicious words to everyone in the local dialect mixed with the Lha sa dialect. Ignoring the local taboo on drinking in front of elders, he disrespectfully took two bottles of beer from his bag and started drinking alone.

His grandmother was so disappointed and humiliated by his behavior that she recited *ma Ni* more quickly than usual, and then left for her youngest son's home. G.yang skyabs continued drinking beer and speaking in the Lha sa dialect. Everyone listened carefully but didn't understand much of what he said. No one responded. He got drunk and passed out within two hours. Then the guests then left. His mother's heart became as cold as ice, but she still regarded him as her son.

G.yang skyabs's return was big news in the village and everyone excitedly talked about him. Even the elders paused while chanting scriptures and commented on G.yang skyabs's return.

After a week, G.yang skyabs became a regular at the small village shop, drinking the days and nights away. Young men surrounded him and listened to his exciting stories. We all admired his boastful, imaginative accounts of his exploits and, somehow, we trusted what he said. His stories astounded us and we scrambled to pay for his beer. Meanwhile, G.yang skyabs's life was happy for it was as though he were at a never-ending feast. Who knew what secrets he was hiding?

His mother lived in grief and mourning after his return. Though she was terribly disappointed with her son's behavior, she still tried to imagine a bright future for G.yang skyabs. This seemed increasingly hopeless, because he never listened to her. On the contrary, he forced her to give him money and grain, and wandered everywhere. He stayed in expensive hotels and ate expensive foods when he had money, which stayed in his hand only as long as it takes paper to burn. His mind was focused on money and he was never calm without a little cash in his pocket.

One dark night, he climbed over the courtyard wall belonging to Aunt Bde skyid, who was nearly seventy years old. It was rumored that her father had been rich. Aunt Bde skyid had married a rich man at her father's command when she was seventeen. Her husband had died during the chaotic days of new China. Unfortunately, most of Aunt Bde skyid's father's life was spent in prison where he starved to death. The government searched for, but never found, his treasures. After becoming a widow, Aunt Bde skyid lived alone and never remarried. Her life became like a living Hell. None of her relatives helped her much

and many people abused her. However, as she got older and her relatives imagined that she would soon die, they began struggling with each other to care for her, because they thought she had kept her father's treasures and they wanted to inherit them.

After jumping over Aunt Bde skyid's courtyard wall, G.yang skybs rushed into her home, grabbed her by the neck, and demanded that she give him her secret jewels. She was shocked, screamed, and then she gave him the small amount of cash that she had. Awakened by her shrieks, her neighbors rushed in and saw a tall man wearing black clothes and holding a dagger, standing behind Aunt Bde skyid. He tried to escape but they caught him and discovered his identity.

The next morning, Aunt Bde skyid's relatives planned to take him to the local police station and lodge a formal complaint. Aunt Bde skyid felt sympathy for his poor mother who came several times to apologize. Aunt Bde skyid then pardoned him. G.yang skyabs's relatives thought imprisonment was the best way for him to change, but his mother didn't agree.

G.yang skyabs left and then returned with a friend a month later, bringing vegetables for his mother, which pleasantly surprised her. He told his mother that he would find a job the next day. His mother was doubtful, but happily cooked nice food for him and his friend. G.yang skyabs and his friend went to the village shop after dinner. His mother prepared some clothes for him, and then went to bed.

The next morning, Uncle Tshe ring shouted and banged on the door. G.yang skyabs's mother felt like somebody had grabbed her heart and was squeezing it. She could hardly breathe. Uncle Tshe ring's face grew as white as a corpse's as he told how G.yang skyabs had stolen Uncle Rdo rje's entire harvest of caterpillar fungus for that year. After hearing this, G.yang skyabs's mother fainted.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Bcu pa'i lnga mchod བཅུ་པའི་ལྷ་མཚོ་དཀ

Bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།

bla ma ལྷ་མ།

bsang བསང།

Dgu chu དགུ་ཅུ།

G.yang skyabs གཡང་སྐྱབས།

Gnyan chen གཉན་ཚེན།

Lha sa ལ་ས།

Lnga skyong ལྷ་སྐྱོང་།

ma Ni མ་ཌི།

Pad ma rin chen པད་མ་རིན་ཚེན།

Rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།

Reb gong རེབ་གོང་།

sgom pa སློམ་པ།

Tshe b+ha ཚེ་བ་མ།

Tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།

Tsong kha pa ཚོང་ཁ་པ།

yuan 元