

BLUE MARKS UNDER MY EYELIDS

In 1993 I was six years old. Late winter on the grassland. The dry yellow grasslands were changing in response to the call of spring. Green was coming, but I could not open my eyes one morning. They were glued shut. I was very afraid and began crying.

"What's wrong?" Grandmother asked anxiously.

"I can't open my eyes. I'm scared," I whimpered.

Grandmother rubbed my eyes with her soft, wet tongue. An excruciating pain attacked my eyelids, and I cried even more loudly.

"It's OK. Crying so loudly over such a small problem! That's not what a man should do," she said softly, stroking my head. She picked me up and put me on a sheepskin cushion next to the adobe stove and went to make tea for our breakfast. I sat in my sheepskin robe without wearing underwear. My back was cold, my forehead was painful, and the pain was intensifying. I didn't feel at all ordinary.

"The tea is boiling," Grandmother said from the doorway and stooped to hurriedly wash her hands in the basin next to the door.

"Grandmother, where did you go a moment ago?" I whined.

"I went to the sheep shed to put wet dung in the sun to dry," she said, rushing to take the bubbling, splattering kettle from the stove. She brought a plate of fried bread and put *rtsam pa*¹⁶ in three bowls.

"Sonny, sit still on your cushion. Your grandfather is returning from herding," Grandmother said. I sat motionlessly until Grandfather arrived. His sheepskin cushion was thicker than mine and very comfortable.

¹⁶ Hot tea is poured into a bowl. Butter is added. After the butter melts, roasted barley flour, dried cheese, and (depending on personal preference) sugar is added. This mixture is mixed so that it has the texture of stiff cookie dough and is then eaten.

"Get back on your seat. I'm tired," Grandfather bellowed. I hated it when he yelled and scolded me. I jumped back onto my seat and didn't say anything.

"He's still a child, Seng grogs. He's afraid when you yell," Grandmother said.

Grandfather said nothing, only took the bowl of *rtsam pa* from Grandmother who then put me beside her on her cushion near the adobe stove. We started eating. My head continued to throb.

"I still have a terrible headache, Grandmother," I whispered.

"Where does it hurt?" Grandmother asked warmly.

"I have a headache," I answered.

"Your eyes were glued shut and hurting this morning. Is that the problem?" Grandmother said.

Grandfather stared at my eyes for a moment. "What happened to your eyes? They're swollen. Didn't you notice, Lha sgron?" Grandfather said sharply.

"We need to take him to see a doctor; otherwise, it's going to be worse," Grandmother said worriedly.

"I'll take him to the clinic today on our horse. You herd the sheep today. We'll be back late this afternoon," Grandfather said.

Uncle Bsod nams was in school so herding our flock and doing housework were troublesome chores for my grandparents. They encouraged Uncle to drop out and help them at home, but my father refused to agree to this.

Grandfather put me behind him and we rode off for Dgon thang Village at the foot of the mountains on which we lived. There was only one clinic there where everyone went when they needed to see a doctor. It was about ten kilometers from our home to the clinic, which we reached at around lunchtime. Grandfather told the doctor to give me injections and other medicines. That was my first time to get an injection, and it was the most terrifying thing I had experienced in my young life. We stayed some hours at the clinic and then returned home in the late afternoon.

My eyes continued to be painfully ill. The medicine wasn't helping. Days passed and my condition worsened. My anxious grandparents finally sent word for Father to come.

My eyes became as swollen as two eggs. Father and Grandfather took me to the clinic several times, but the pain continued.

It was winter. Nearly a year had passed, and my eyes were occasionally swollen and painful. My grandparents and parents were very worried for they noticed my eyelids were becoming blue as though they were bruised.

"I'll go to town and invite Lama Kho tshe to come. He can help," Father said and left. All the locals believed that Lama Kho tshe was very helpful and knew everything. He visited a few days later. Before his arrival, Grandmother thoroughly cleaned and tidied the house. When the lama arrived in the afternoon, we all prostrated three times in front of him. After he seated himself, he chanted till late in the evening. When he finished, Father led me to the lama, who closely examined my eyes. Then he took a long, thick Tibetan scripture book out of a yellow bag, put it on my head several times, and chanted loudly and rhythmically.

"Let's see his eyes tomorrow morning," Lama Kho tshe said reassuringly.

"*Ya...lags*,"¹⁷ Father replied, bowing and clinching his hands together over his heart piously.

"Is there anything else that we should do, Lama-lags?" Grandfather asked.

"I don't think so. He'll be better tomorrow," Lama said. "This eye problem is because his mother walked in ashes barefoot when he was still in her womb. You should all take care of this sort of thing in the future. Your son's eyes will not be normal like other people, but they will not ache and swell."

I had a comfortable, heavy sleep that night. The next morning, the swelling had diminished and my eyes no longer ached. Grandmother did not need to rub my eyes open with her tongue, however, blue marks remained under my eyelids.