

Bkra shis rab brten ('Bri stod Nationalities Middle School)

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You come along a dirt path that runs by a row of adobe houses, each with a small yard. The houses and yards are made of packed earth mixed with yak dung. They are so dilapidated you worry a puff of wind will send them toppling over on the dusty earth from which they have come. Various paths meander in different directions to each family's courtyard gate. White smoke curls up from chimneys, turning the air foggy on sunny mornings and filling the air with a distinctive odor. Some people serenely circumambulate a pile of stones carved with the Six Sacred Syllables¹ and other Buddhist scriptures, surrounded by prayer flags of four colors representing the Four Elements.²

An old lady sits by the path, holding a string of prayer beads in one hand and turning a prayer wheel with the other. Her dark brown face is thoroughly lined, each wrinkle representing an episode from her life. The village is surrounded by sloping hills, decorated with colorful flowers and various alpine plants, stretching out in every direction. Clusters of yaks graze in valleys. A calf runs on the pasture in a circle and then races to its mother, its tail straight in the air. The occasional neighing of horses sounds in the valleys as prayer flags flap in the wind behind a line of adobe rooms.

Father Nor bu sat on a worn-out carpet under the eaves as usual, sewing white fabric into a tent at the request of another family. It was a bright sunny day with skies that glimmered as blue as turquoise. A cup of milk tea sat in front of Nor bu, which he had ignored since Mother Sgrol ma placed it there.

Nor bu was dressed in a modern-style coat that he typically wore at home. He wore a pair of leather shoes, locally called 'army

¹ *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*, a common six syllable mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

² Earth, water, fire, and wind.

shoes'. Father Nor bu was forty-three, three years older than his wife.

Mother Sgrol ma wore a Tibetan robe made of artificial lambskin. Most pastoralists no longer kept sheep and the price of real lambskin was so high many Tibetans couldn't afford to buy them. She wore a pair of gold earrings whose color had faded over the years. A round metal amulet decorated with fake turquoise was around her neck.

Three adobe rooms were built in a line. A cupboard with doors decorated with the Eight Auspicious Symbols³ stood at the back of the kitchen. There was a big Chinese metal stove with Tibetan vase patterns in the center of the room. An inlaid gold dragon wrapped around a pillar behind the stove. A yellow *kha btags*⁴ was tied to the neck of the pillar. The shrine was a small room featuring a wooden altar where images of a local Dge lugs monastery lama and a protector deity were displayed. Sgrol ma lit a butter lamp there every morning. There were seven water offering bowls filled with ice. Sgrol ma discarded the ice and filled them with fresh water each morning.

The wind carried the strong odor of something burning. You could hear the sound of children playing on their way home. Other children chased a tractor and climbed into the trailer without the driver's knowledge.

"You should prepare lunch quickly. The children will be home soon," said Nor bu in his usual gentle tone.

Sgrol ma didn't reply for a moment, squinted into the distance, and said, "That villain must have troubled them on the way home again. I'll go to his home and talk to his parents otherwise, he won't stop."

"Hush! Don't create trouble. I'm too stressed for such trivialities! I can't bear it if there is more trouble," Nor bu said.

Mtsho mo, the seventy-five year old grandmother, wore a robe that was reasonably new but never looked clean, though Sgrol ma washed it twice a week. Mtsho mo sat on a small stool, chanting scriptures, holding her worn prayer beads in her right hand. She

³ The Eight Auspicious Symbols consist of the parasol, a pair of gold fish, a treasure vase, a lotus, a white conch shell, a victory banner, an endless knot, and the gold wheel of the dharma.

⁴ A strip of silk given to a person, deity, or object as a sign of respect.

loved her grandchildren dearly, and frequently bought candies for her grandsons and little ornaments for her granddaughter. She grew increasingly anxious because the children hadn't returned.

"They should have returned by now. School children are naughtier these days," Grandmother said impatiently.

"I'm starving!" shouted Tshe ring suddenly. His sister, Lha mo and he parked their bicycles in the corner of the yard where five year-old Bkra shis, the youngest son, was playing like a cat, trying to catch a soccer ball. The two older children were middle school students in the county town, twelve kilometers from the township settlement. They rode bicycles to and from school.

Their parents were pastoralists who owned a few head of yaks that provided dairy products. Villagers earned much of their annual cash income in Spring from collecting and selling caterpillar fungus, a medicinal herb. The family went to collect caterpillar fungus every year, as did most local families. Local schools freed students to collect it during their summer holiday. Caterpillar fungus grew in the valleys and on the hills near the settlement. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo stayed at home, taken care of by Nor bu or Sgrol ma, while the other went to collect caterpillar fungus with the two older children. Nor bu also made tents and sold them to other families, adding to the family's income.

"Did you prepare lunch? I'm dying of hunger and we must return to school soon. None of the other parents prepare late lunches," said Tshe ring.

"Shut up or go to another home for your meals," scolded his mother.

"Be patient, boy. Don't complain just because you are a student," Nor bu said in a voice with equal measures of disapproval and kindness.

"You two mistreat your children. If they leave, I'll follow them," murmured Grandmother, coming to the rescue as usual, when the parents scolded the children.

Sgrol ma put two bowls of noodles on the wood table and Tshe ring brought two pairs of chopsticks from the cupboard.

Tshe ring and Lha mo were in grade three of junior middle school, would graduate in September, and then go to the prefecture

seat to continue their studies.

Tshe ring was fifteen years old and had attended school since he was six. He was tall with a crooked nose that resembled his father's. His hair was fashionably wavy with white and gray streaks among the black, the consequence of a Vitamin C deficiency. He obeyed his father, and took care of his attractive sister.

Seventeen year-old Lha mo was charming and always dressed in neat, clean clothes. She had bright eyes and her attractiveness tempted many schoolboys, and also brought trouble. She had started school when she was seven, and hadn't done very well. Nor bu then insisted she repeat grade one, which explained why she and her brother were in the same grade.

"Mother! Where did you put my lipstick?" yelled Lha mo.

"Behind the mirror," Sgrol ma replied.

Many boys tried to win Lha mo's heart but she rejected them all. When her classmates told her she was a beauty, she usually replied, "I didn't choose to be a beauty, the gods made me so." She was forthright in her dealings with every student except Don 'grub, her neighbor's son, a handsome boy of eighteen with long dark hair hanging above his broad shoulders, and a bit taller than Lha mo, which gave her a feeling of security. They were fated to be in the same school and shared the same hobby, photography. In time they walked together in the schoolyard during breaks, filling the air with murmured words of endearment. The progress of their relationship was rapid and surprised observers. They gave much attention to their appearance before meeting on the bank of a stream that flowed like a white silk streamer waving in the breeze. "I'll graduate soon and go with my brother to the prefecture seat for senior middle school. I won't see you then," Lha mo said sadly.

"Yeah, I'll miss you everyday," murmured Don 'grub. Lha mo took an amulet from around her neck, gave it to Don 'grub, and said, "This will protect you."

Don 'grub put it around his neck and pulled Lha mo into his arms. She leaned her head on his shoulder. They quietly remained together for two hours. When it was time to leave, Lha mo looked into his eyes intently, reluctant to part, then whispered, "Separation won't change our love. What matters is our hearts."

"I don't want you to leave. I can't live without you!" Don 'grub exclaimed.

"I must go. Father will scold me if I don't," Lha mo said.

"Can we both leave school and go where nobody will bother us?" Don 'grub said.

"Impossible. How can we live without our parents?" Lha mo said.

The shining stars quivered in darkness. Everything was deadly quiet, except for dogs barking in the distance. The crescent moon was shyly gathering strength amid thousands of shining stars.

Finally they stood. Don 'grub escorted her to her home, kissed her gently, and held her red cheeks in his palms for a tender moment. Then she walked inside the family courtyard. It was nearly two a.m. when Lha mo crept into her bedroom, but her mother heard.

The next morning, Sgrol ma came to the kitchen and demanded, "Where were you last night? Did you meet that boy? What did you do with him? Don't lie to me!"

"Nothing. I just went to his home and we chatted," replied Lha mo, her head down.

"Nonsense! Your behavior is worse than we imagined!" yelled Sgrol ma.

"Don't talk to your child like that. She'll leave home soon," said Nor bu calmly.

"Don't scold her! She's still young," Grandmother said, patting Lha mo's back to comfort her.

"I want freedom to deal with my own business. Mother forbids me to do anything," Lha mo sobbed, and put her head in her grandmother's arms.

Her mother scolded, "How can she talk about her mother like that? You aren't mature enough to make your own decisions."

During quarrels, Nor Bu kept as silent as though he were a guest. After breakfast, he resumed making the tent. Nor bu heard the dogs barking and said, "The dogs are hungry. Don't forget to feed them."

Sgrol ma continued scolding Lha mo.

"I'll take the child away from home if you hate her so much," Grandmother said.

"You allow the children to go their own way. Be quiet and behave like a bystander. I have the authority to educate my own child," Sgrol Ma retorted.

"I won't let anyone hurt them until I die!" Grandmother said furiously.

"I'll see his parents tomorrow!" Sgrol ma said, then took a pot with leftovers and went outside to feed the dogs.

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"If they love each other passionately, I have nothing to say," Don 'grub's father said. "I know they're too young but, on the other hand, we can't forbid their minds from thinking, though we try to stop their actions."

"I won't let your son contact my daughter," Sgrol ma said.

"We have nothing more to say then," concluded Don 'grub's father quietly. "I don't want to interfere in children's business if they don't do silly things."

Sgrol ma left her neighbor's home as the red sun burnt the earth, which seemed to vibrate under Sgrol ma's tired eyes. The air stank and she blew her nose to clear her mind. Her slow pace gave opportunity for her to consider. "They'll leave soon. I won't scold my dear daughter anymore," Sgrol ma muttered. Her tired eyes filled with tears as sadness flooded her heart. She heard the feeble sound of distant laughing. Her children were waving and calling to her.

The sky rapidly vanished, conquered by large clusters of dark, ominous clouds that swept in low to the earth, quickly covering what was left of the sun. A big eagle circled Sgrol ma and squawked horribly. The dark clouds were moving west, mingling with the ends of the earth. The eagle seemed to be sending her a message. She quickened her pace and was soon panting. When she got home and stepped inside, nobody was in the kitchen. She pushed opened the bedroom door, and saw Nor bu lying on the bed. The three children were kneeling by him, sobbing dejectedly. They all looked up at Sgrol ma worriedly.

"What happened?" Sgrol ma asked.

"Father fainted from a sudden headache," Tshe ring said.

"Why?" Sgrol ma said.

"Our protector deity lost his temper because of your

quarreling," Grandmother said, sitting in a corner of the room, her hands busy with prayer beads and the prayer wheel.

"What should we do?" Sgrol Ma said.

"Invite monks immediately," Grandmother ordered sternly.

Sgrol ma and Tshe ring invited local monks. Ten days passed and Nor bu improved. As the monks were leaving the home after having completed various rituals, the head monk said, "Your protector deity is pacified. Nor bu will be fine. Don't upset the deity again, otherwise things will be worse."

Nor bu recovered and the two older children were noticeably more mature.

As time drew near for the two children to leave for the distant boarding school, Grandmother and Sgrol ma shed tears of sadness.

Sgrol ma brought out fire on a metal plate, added a spoonful of barley flour on the fire, and then sprinkled some water from the kettle lid. She put this incense offering outside on a big stone, chanting inaudibly. She prayed for her children while offering incense to the deity.

Grandmother's face flooded with tears and her eyes were red. She finally blurted, "Don't forget to chant every evening, and don't lose your amulets. I'll always pray for you."

Father Nor bu escorted the children to the bus station. Lha mo and Tshe ring kissed their mother and grandmother before leaving for the bus station. Sgrol ma and Grandmother stood at the house courtyard gate, watching the children disappear into the distance. Sgrol ma soon went inside the home while Grandmother still stood, rubbing her wet eyes, gazing into the distance.

"You two take care of yourselves. The most important thing is health. Education is secondary," emphasized Nor bu at the bus station, as he helped put their luggage atop the bus.

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Time passed. Tshe ring and Lha mo boarded at the new school, and were initially interested in their new surroundings. They were in the same class and both studied hard. Tshe ring felt fine and was never homesick. In contrast, Lha mo felt a bit nostalgic. Though her mother had forbidden her to contact Don 'grub, she missed her mother and sobbed in her quilt at night, wrapping her head in her quilt.

Lha mo soon regained her exuberant personality and got along well with all the students, especially the boys, who were drawn to her and eager to become more intimate. She was only attracted by Rin chen, who was tall, handsome, had a pale face, and wore fashionable clothes. He attracted many girls. Rin chen was a grade higher than Lha mo and was three years older. In the course of time, Lha mo and Rin chen became closer and met in the schoolyard one night when most students were dreaming in their beds. Lha mo and Rin chen sat close together on the stairway that led to their classroom. The universe seemed full of their sweet emotions. A sickle moon and an incalculable number of stars decorated a boundless sky, twinkling in the gentle breeze. Lha mo looked up, and saw a star fall. Feeling hurt and frightened, her brain was paralyzed and she couldn't speak for a moment. A bit later, with widened eyes and mouth, she managed to stammer, "Look!"

"What's wrong?" asked Rin chen.

"I don't know," she replied, and then he walked her to her dormitory. Once in bed, she thought about the falling star and couldn't sleep. "It's an omen. Something bad will happen to me," she worried. She slept finally, and dreamed an old man was calling her. She was awakened by this disturbing dream and didn't sleep well the rest of the night.

Rumors flew about their relationship. Tshe ring heard but concentrated on his studies and, as usual, said nothing. He recalled his father's advice and worked hard. His honesty and diligence attracted many girls, but he ignored them.

Finally, however, Tshe ring felt he should say something and one evening said to Lha mo, "You should think about our family. We are their hopes and wishes. Don't disappoint them."

"I know what I'm doing. Don't order me," she replied, stormed out of the classroom, and slammed the door behind her.

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Lha mo and Rin chen drew ever closer and spent some nights together in hotels. This relationship continued until Rin chen graduated from senior middle school and went to college. Lha mo still loved him though he called less often as time passed. Lha mo thought he would marry her if they got their families' permission. She

naively clung to the belief that they would have a romantic life together in the end. Rin chen visited her a few times after he graduated from senior middle school and they spent some romantic nights together.

When she and her brother were preparing for the college entrance examination, each student was given a health check. When it was Lha mo's turn, she uneasily and timidly entered the room. She was pregnant! This news swept through the school like wild fire. Her bright future dimmed. She was now eighteen and seemed to have fallen into a deep hole surrounded by darkness. She could see no hope. She was enraged at Rin chen, who never called her after this news. She recalled his gentle words and loving expression when they were together. Everything had changed. The only thing in her mind was hatred and helplessness.

When the news reached her family, Nor bu came to school by bus. The stench of the town assaulted him and made him uncomfortable. He heard thunder in his mind, combined with exhaustion and anxiety. He went to meet the school director and other teachers. "You should think about her future. She is too young to have a child. She should have an abortion," the school director suggested.

"I have no right to kill an innocent life," Nor bu said.

"We have some responsibility for this situation. We can pay her to work in the school as an entrance guard," the school director said.

"Thank you, but first I want to take her home and let the baby be born there. I need to discuss this with my family," Nor bu said.

Nor bu and the teachers went to Lha mo's room, pushed open the door, and found her hanging from a rope tied to a metal bar in the ceiling. They immediately rescued her.

"Please don't care about me. I'm not worth your concern," coughed Lha mo. "I have no value. I can't live in this world."

"What foolishness!" her father cried.

"We decided to allow you to work in the school as a guard. Take this chance to find a new life," comforted the school director.

She cried desperately. Her father hugged her to his chest and comforted, "My child, don't cry. We are going home."

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Lha mo and Nor bu returned home. The family was very upset by this mishap. "I knew this would happen. I told you to stay away from the guys," Sgrol ma said, pointing at Lha mo, who was sobbing quietly by the stove.

"Who is the child's father?" Nor bu asked Lha mo.

Lha mo said nothing.

"He should be responsible. Tell us whose child it is," Sgrol ma said.

"It happened to me and I don't want other people to know more. I will obey you in everything. It's my fate, and I accept it," Lha mo said.

"Listen to her. She is sad enough," Grandmother said.

"At least we should let his parents know," Nor bu said.

Sgrol ma took Lha mo to the bedroom.

Over dinner that evening, the family discussed consulting a local lama for a divination. "Let the child be born first. Then we'll ask the reincarnation lama if she should accept the school job or continue her study," Sgrol ma suggested.

"It is wise to accept the job since it's very hard to find a job, even for college graduates. Since our daughter had this misfortune, I think it is hard for her to concentrate on her studies," Nor bu said.

"We should ask the lama for advice. It is very important for her life," Grandmother said.

Darkness attacked and the world became quieter, a world in which thousands of stars glimmered in the sky amid the sound of flapping prayer flags and barking dogs. There seemed to be life in the world after all. Falling stars streaked through the sky.

Who will see them fall?

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Bri stod འབྲི་བསྟོད།, Zhiduo 治多
Bkra shis བཀྲ་ཤིས།
Bkra shis rab brten བཀྲ་ཤིས་རབ་བརྟེན།
Dge lugs pa དགེ་ལུགས་པ།
Don 'grub དོན་འགྲུབ།
kha btags ཁ་བརྟགས།
Lha mo ལྷ་མོ།
Mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།
Nor bu རོ་རབ།
oM ma Ni pad+me hUM ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ།
Rin chen རིན་ཆེན།
rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།
Sgrol ma སྐྱོལ་མ།
Tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།