

WHO IS TO BLAME?

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The summer afternoon sun beat down so harshly that everyone underneath felt they were being boiled in a pot. That the sun's heat was destroying the annual crops was a universal complaint, though everyone knew muttering was futile. Only when clouds appeared would anything change. In time, everyone went about their business and complained about the heat less.

I was watching my favorite TV show at home one sweltering afternoon amidst this terrible heat. I felt relaxed and undisturbed. Just after eating one of my younger brother's snacks, I heard a wild cry from outside. Terror rose deep in my heart. I had never heard such an awful cry. I had heard babies crying for their mothers and children sobbing because they had been beaten, but never anything like this. Paralyzed by fear, I felt my heart pounding. My breathing seemed to have stopped. I listened, waiting for something more. Nothing happened. After a bit, I regained my composure, but the thought that something horrible had happened stuck in my mind. I stood slowly. The cry came again and my fear resumed with new intensity. I climbed up the ladder leading to the roof of our house to see what was going on. I saw many people surrounding someone who was crying. I was too far away to see clearly, especially given my bad eyesight, so I climbed down from the roof and ran to the crowd.

A man lay on the ground, his body covered in blood. He had stopped breathing and was as white as a clean bed sheet. His face radiated a sense of intense suffering.

He had been stabbed in the gut with a knife. He was beyond saving – not even the Buddha could have helped him. A woman held him. It was her wild lamentations that I had heard. She cried as though *her* life had ended, ignoring those consoling her. The dead man was her lover. Her eyes communicated that she was overcome

with grief; that even though her parents and friends were still alive, she felt her life was now meaningless with the man's death. Her lover had died, and she did not want to continue alone.

I heard people murmuring that she was crazy. "What a terrible fate those two had," some murmured. There was a long history between the couple that the entire village was privy to. Even children knew it all – Palden and Drolma had loved each other for eight years.

Palden was twenty-six when he died. Drolma was a year younger. Even though most villagers their age were married with two or three children, they had never married because of the long-running feud between their families that had begun when they were children. The two lovers were fully aware of this conflict, but dared love each other anyway.

The two families had initially clashed over irrigation water. Such issues were common and villagers thought the two families' relationship would soon recover.

At that time, Palden and Drolma were studying in senior middle school. They knew each other because they were from the same village and were classmates, but they did not know each other very well. Palden was a gifted writer, sang popular songs well, was good-looking, and was knowledgeable. Teachers complimented him and his classmates admired him. The school brimmed with gossip about who liked him and who despised him. Girls were as excited to talk to him as they would have been to chat with a Hollywood superstar.

Drolma, on the other hand, was academically in the middle of her class. Teachers and classmates treated her well. She was outgoing, humorous, and easy to get along with. Girls envied her beauty, which made her the focus of many boys' fantasies. To other girls, she was an obstacle to their finding a boyfriend. Palden and Drolma shared being kind to everyone and were never arrogant.

When the conflict between their families began, Palden and Drolma were in school and ignorant of village goings-on. Within two days, however, news of a conflict reached Palden.

"Hey! Palden! I heard your family was fighting Drolma's family yesterday," a classmate said confidentially in their classroom

after afternoon classes.

"What? Fighting about what?" asked Palden. He could not believe their families would quarrel. He thought there must be some misunderstanding as his mind raced through the possibilities.

"They argued about irrigation water," said his classmate.

"Oh, maybe it's true," Palden replied in a strained voice. Struggling over water is common as villagers take turns irrigating their fields both day and night in winter. Palden worried that if a fight came, his relatives might be physically hurt because Drolma had three elder brothers each strong enough to fight his father. Apart from his father, Palden was the only man in his family. They had no relatives in the village and would be essentially helpless if conflict came. After a while, he ran to a telephone kiosk outside the school and called his parents to ensure everything was fine.

"Hello, it's Palden," he said

"How are you?" his sister answered.

"I'm great. Is everything there OK?" Palden asked.

"Father was hurt in a fight yesterday," his sister sobbed. Palden suddenly understood what must have happened the day before, and a flame of anger rose inside him. He could not breathe normally.

She went on to describe how Drolma's father and three brothers had ganged up on his father. Fortunately, villagers had intervened – if they had not, his father might be dead. Palden's mother was caring for his father at home. As he listened, Palden decided that, as the only other man in his family, he must avenge the injustice done to his father. However, he realized it was impossible for him to fight four big men unless he had a gun or could study black magic like Milarepa.¹ Since both were unattainable, there was nothing to do but endure his shame and anger.

The suffering had only begun. A few days later, Palden's mother could no longer endure the humiliation from her husband's beating by four men in front of all the villagers in broad daylight and asked help from her brother, an official in the county seat. She told

¹ Milarepa (1040-1123) was a well-known Tibetan yogi who achieved enlightenment in one lifetime. He was extremely thin because he ate very little during long periods of meditation.

him everything and begged for his help.

Drolma's family had been unaware that Palden's uncle was a powerful official and, while they were still savoring their victory, a clerk came to their home and ordered them to appear in court in a month. The four heroes then knew they were in trouble, but it was too late to avoid a court appearance.

"Father, what should we do next month in court?" asked the second oldest son, Losang, fear on his face.

His father didn't answer, because he had fallen deep into thought. Finally he managed, "I'm sure they will fine us, and... "

"Then what will happen, Father? Tell us," his sons asked nervously. They were afraid of the police and of prison, because they had heard other prisoners beat you and that you suffered terribly.

"I'm not sure if they will imprison us," said their father, but he knew, given Palden's powerful uncle, they stood a good chance of being jailed.

"Father, is there a way to avoid this?" the eldest son, Rinchen, asked, his voice now softer than a girl's, though he always raised his voice in arguments with villagers.

"No, there's no way, unless we beg that family to forgive us," replied the father.

"What? It's impossible to beg that monster! I'd rather go to prison!" said Losang angrily.

"Yes, I agree," the youngest son, Nima, interjected.

"Shut up! I know it's shameful, but it's the only chance we have. We've got to try!" shouted their father. He knew the villagers would denigrate his family if they asked their enemy for forgiveness, but maybe it was the only solution.

After talking it over further, they eventually decided to apologize to Palden's family. Two days later, Drolma's father took a bag with two bottles of liquor, some cigarettes, and a white silk *katag* in his right hand. In his left hand he held a sheep's hindquarters in a big, black plastic bag. But before he reached the door of Palden's house, he was accosted by a notorious village gossip.

"Hey! What are you doing out so early in the morning?" she asked. Seeing what he held in his hands, she had already guessed his purpose.

"You can see for yourself," Drolma's father replied, knowing instantly she would spread the news throughout the village. He knew there was no point in lying and continued on to Palden's home.

"Are you coming to beat my husband again?" asked Palden's mother angrily, when he stepped inside their courtyard.

"Please don't joke, Sister. I'm coming to visit your husband," said Drolma's father, using 'Sister' in the hope of appeasing her.

"How funny! Did you forget how the four of you beat my husband? And how you pushed away my daughter when she tried to stop you?" she said angrily.

"I'm sorry for all of that. I've come today to sincerely apologize for the wrong we did your family," he said in shame.

Palden's mother held a broom as she stood in the courtyard, and put herself between Drolma's father and the door to the house. "What? You bastard! Shameless wretch! Rubbish!..." she scolded endlessly.

He didn't know what to do and stood dumbly, holding his gifts.

"Anyway, I know I was wrong, so I brought these things for your husband," he said, holding out what he had brought.

She pushed his hands away and shouted, "We aren't starving! Get out of here! Now!" Her husband, lying in bed just a few meters away, said not a word.

Drolma's father knew his mission was useless and felt even more humiliated because he had been scolded by a woman. He silently swore to return the insult someday, angrily returned home, and told his sons what he had suffered from Palden's mother.

The three sons listened without suggestions. There was nothing to do but await the court's judgment.

When they first heard what was happening in their village, Drolma and Palden regarded each other as enemies. Privately, however, neither wanted their families' troubles to control their school life and determine their personal relationship. One afternoon Palden decided to have a straightforward talk with Drolma.

"Drolma, do you have free time now?" he asked after classes were over one afternoon, unsure if Drolma would agree to talk.

"Yeah, for what?" she said nervously. She knew Palden was

not the sort of person who would threaten someone, but she still hesitated.

"I just want to talk about what's going on between our families. Don't worry, I'll only talk," Palden said.

Drolma blushed when she heard him say that. Although she had never said anything, she was as infatuated with Palden as were all the other girls.

"OK, no problem," Drolma said.

"We don't have to be enemies because of our families, do we?" said Palden.

"No, of course not!" Drolma said.

"Great! In that case, we have something more to talk about," said Palden with a smile.

"What? I don't understand..." Drolma said.

"I think we should counsel our families to stop fighting," Palden said.

"I see. I tried to counsel my father, but your family accused him. My father and brothers must go to court in a few days," Drolma said, not knowing how she could help.

"Yes, I know. I also tried to stop my parents, but they were very angry and wouldn't listen," said Palden.

He had called his parents that morning. His father had angrily said, "I'm wondering if you are my real son?" Palden doubted if his father would ever listen to him again.

Palden and Drolma talked about their families and their school lives for some time. Both felt better. Drolma had always liked Palden and her attitude towards him only improved as they chatted.

Fifteen days after the conflict, the two families met in court. The judge ordered Drolma's family to pay a fine, and also put the three sons and their father in prison for forty-five days. The two families then became irreconcilable enemies.

When their time in prison was over, Drolma's father and brothers returned home. They said they had not suffered much in prison because they had always stuck together. Their enmity toward Palden's family had increased. They never talked or greeted Palden's family members in the village, and they did not conceal the extent of their hatred. Villagers tried to pacify them, but all peacemaking

efforts failed because of their stubbornness. Though they were enemies, at least the two families did not come to physical blows.

Time passed like the wind. Drolma and Palden entered their final year of senior middle school. If they passed the university entrance exam they would enter college. Palden was now nineteen and fascinated everyone even more than before. He was busy all year preparing for his college entrance examination and hoped to enter a good college. Drolma was also a good student and her reputation as a beauty had spread far and wide.

Since their first talk, they had been on friendly terms and never blamed each other for their families' problems. Drolma thought Palden was thoughtful and kind, and gradually fell in love with him, keeping her feelings a secret until their last year in senior middle school. She wanted to tell him of her love but, for what seemed like an eternity, she lacked courage. One evening at a school dance, she decided it was time to act. She called Palden after the dance finished, not knowing where such courage came from. "Maybe I love him too much," she thought.

When they met, she touched Palden's back lightly and said, "You danced very well tonight."

"Really? Thanks Drolma. So did you," he said, smiling.

"May we have a talk?" asked Drolma. She felt that this sentence was almost impossible to say. She had no idea what to do next and was nervous about expressing her feelings.

"Sure, why not? You're not going to eat me, are you?" said Palden.

"No! Just follow me," Drolma said and walked to the playground. The sky was filled with stars and everything was beautiful. The mountains were like a big picture under the night sky and the moonlit playground where couples were romantically strolling seemed to belong only to them. A cool breeze blew, giving them respite from the hot summer temperatures.

"Hey, it's time for you to say something," said Palden. She did not know how to tell him, except to come right out and say it. For a girl it was embarrassing, but her friends said that nowadays such untraditional things were common.

"I... I want... you... to be... my boyfriend," she said, taking a

long time. She blushed, shocked by her own words. Everything became deathly still, as if the whole world was deep asleep.

Palden liked Drolma and had not been brave enough to tell her. Now everything was like a dream! For a long time he did not break the silence, but finally managed, "Hey Drolma, today is not April Fools' Day. Don't joke with me, OK?"

"Oh... I know today isn't April Fools' Day. I'm serious," Drolma said.

He knew she was in love with him, and he realized how lucky he was. They confided their feelings and, with a laugh, became lovers that night. They did not tell their families. As time passed, they helped each other in school and prepared together for the college entrance examination, which was rapidly approaching. They were both excited, believing that they had a good chance of passing.

Unluckily, Drolma's score was low, but Palden was accepted into a good college. Drolma wanted to take the examination a year later, but her illiterate father thought she would be unable to pass and ordered her to return home.

Palden went to a college far from the village and from Drolma, but their love kept them close. They secretly called each other, and sometimes exchanged letters. When Palden returned home during holidays, they went on secret dates. This continued for four years until Palden graduated. During his college time, many girls asked him to be their boyfriend, but he ignored them. While at school, he became increasingly sophisticated. Meanwhile several families sent marriage proposals for Drolma, but she rejected them.

Her father said, "I don't know what the hell you're thinking! Who is it that you think you're going to marry?"

Drolma's only reply was a smile.

After Palden returned home, he found a high-paying job in the county town. He thought it was time to ask Drolma's parents to allow Drolma and him to marry. He worried they would disagree and also might cause trouble, because the conflict between the two families had never really been resolved. Drolma and Palden still met secretly when he returned to the village on the weekends, but no secret can be kept forever, and their families eventually learned about their relationship.

"Son, do you really like Drolma or are you just playing?" said Palden's father, hoping the relationship was a passing fling, not understanding that they had been in love for eight long years.

"Father, I swear my relationship with Drolma is real. I want her to be my wife," said Palden.

"Son, are you crazy? We are enemies! How could you?" cried his mother.

"Please don't think that way, Mother. That was several years ago. Let's all move on!" Palden said.

"My poor little son, do you think Drolma's father will agree?" asked Palden's mother.

"I'm not sure. I hope he will," Palden said, unconcerned about the consequences, and sent someone to ask Drolma's family for her hand in marriage.

Drolma's father was furious when he heard this. He could not understand how his own daughter could love his enemy's son. He thought she would be treated as an enemy by Palden's family. As an official with a stable job and a good salary, he could choose anyone he wanted to, but somehow he had chosen Drolma! Drolma's father refused Palden's proposal, and warned Palden never to contact Drolma again.

Palden could not help but disobey and the two lovers continued seeing each other. Even though their families hated each other and disagreed with their marriage, the couple led a happy clandestine life, both believing that their families would eventually agree to the marriage.

They were wrong. The marriage never happened. Life is often short and unpredictable. Bad luck crept up on the couple slowly and quietly. They were deeply in love and blissfully ignorant.

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The summer afternoon sun beat down so harshly that everyone underneath felt they were being boiled in a pot. That the sun's heat was destroying the annual crops was a universal complaint, though everyone knew it was futile to mutter. Only when clouds appeared would anything change. In time, everyone went about their business and complained about the heat less.

Drolma's brothers, Rinchen and Losang, were drunk after

drinking beer with some other villagers near the corner of a small store. One pointed into the distance and said, "Who the hell are those two?" The couple wasn't far away. They quickly realized it was Palden and Drolma.

"Hey Rinchen, is your sister going to marry that guy?" said a man who had proposed to Drolma and was now jealous that she was with Palden.

"Impossible! I'm that girl's eldest brother. Our family and that guy's family are enemies," Rinchen said, anger welling up inside him as he recalled the conflict between their families, how he and his brothers had been humiliated, and how the conflict had remained unresolved, casting a shadow over their lives. In particular, his mind returned to a terrible day in prison, when a group of at least ten prisoners had ordered them to wash their boss's feet. Drolma's brothers and father refused, were then beaten, forced to wash the boss's feet, and then drink the dirty water.

Tibetans consider feet to be the dirtiest part of the human body and to drink such water is the most humiliating thing imaginable. They buried this humiliation deep in their hearts and never told anybody. Now, seeing his own sister with his enemy's son, all of Rinchen's pain and humiliation surfaced, coursing through him like an electric shock. He stood up and ran at the couple, jerking his dagger from his belt.

Drolma and Palden did not even notice him coming. By the time Palden felt the knife in his gut, it was too late.

Rinchen took Palden from Drolma without a word. He plunged his dagger into Palden's belly again and again and again. Drolma was stunned. When she saw blood spurting from Palden's body, she revived and roared like a dragon, terrifying all who heard.

Rinchen fled.

We came when we heard this cry, but there was nothing we could do. Drolma and Palden's parents arrived soon after me. Palden's mother saw her son lying on the ground, his body bathed in blood. She snatched him from Drolma's arms and screamed in agony. Palden's father stood by his wife. He did not cry. It was not that he did not want to; it was just that he was deep in thought. His heart was bleeding.

Drolma's parents worried about Rinchen. They knew he would be executed. That was the law, and there was no escape.

Palden's parents lost their only son because of an inconsequential quarrel over water, and Drolma lost her future husband. Soon she would lose her eldest brother. Because of a simple quarrel, two families lost sons and gained nothing but permanent anguish and regret.

A month after Palden's death, Rinchen was arrested and sentenced to death for murder. He was trembling when the sentence was handed down. His family did not come to hear the judgment.

Palden's parents have not stopped grieving. The wrinkles on their faces deepen.

Drolma went to a nunnery to spend the rest of her life.

Now, looking back on things, exactly who was to blame?

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Drolma, sgrol ma ལྷོ་ལ་མ།

Hualong 化隆

Hui 回

katag, kha btags ཁ་བཏགས།

Klu rgyal 'bum ལུ་རྒྱལ་འབུམ།

Losang, blo bzang ལྷོ་བཟང་།

Nima, nyi ma ཉི་མ།

Palden, dpal ldan དཔལ་ལྷན།

Qinghai 青海

Rinchen, rin chen རིན་ཆེན།