



A Brief Disruption

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The seven Buddhist monks chanted Vajrayana verses, their bright burgundy-coloured robes a contrast to the grubby yak-hair garments of the villagers. The steps of the monks were measured, their deep throaty voices gentle and calming. Two street vendors were plying their trade and when the monks reached them the vendors brought out offerings and wrapped them in scarves. They bowed as their contributions to the monastery were handed across. The Lama, who was at the head of the line, unwrapped the scarves and passed the contents to the monk behind him. The scarves were then draped around the necks of the street vendors who, heads still bowed, expressed gratitude to the monks for the bountiful harvest.

Further along the road children were playing, their faces covered with a mixture of dirt and skin sores. As the monks approached, the mothers came out and marshalled the children into a line. They were to stand respectfully with their hands in prayer and their heads bowed. The mothers too sought the blessings of the Lama. From their limited resources each woman had found some item of food which they then wrapped in a scarf. Sometimes it was the only food that they possessed, and that night they would go hungry, but without the blessing of the Lama their hunger would be absolute.

Several families owned chickens that were allowed to range freely along the village lane during the daytime and were confined within the houses at night. These chickens were valued for the eggs they produced until, their laying days at an end, they would be consigned to the cooking pot. Meat was a rare addition to the village diet, but high on the Tibetan plateau very few managed to stay healthy on a purely vegetarian diet. A short distance from the village a herdsman tended goats. From time to time the word would go out: "The butcher has come." A strict Buddhist could not take the life of an animal, so 'butchers', Tibetans who did not have a strong allegiance to Buddhism, would move from village to village pursuing their trade.

After the butcher had visited the goat herder the women of the village would carry eggs, tsampa or whatever they could spare to barter for a piece of goat meat. The goat hoofs might go for five

eggs, whereas the shoulder meat might go for four times as much, but a cut of meat such as that could only be afforded by the wealthier villagers.

Stalks of barley that the men of the village had harvested were stacked on the flat roofs to dry. A good harvest of barley would ensure that the storage bins were full of tsampa for the long months of winter. The dried barley was winnowed and dehusked before being roasted. It was then pounded in a stone mortar using a long handled pestle. Once a mortar-full had been completely ground into flour its contents were added to a large brass container so that the process could then be repeated.

When the monks' line approached an elderly woman making tsampa she was pleased to see that she already had an abundant amount of the flour in her brass container. She scooped some out with a small pottery dish. Her face, savaged by countless years of exposure to the relentless Tibetan sun, beamed as the Lama stopped in front of her. A brass receptacle appeared from under the robes of the last in the line of the monks, and having made her contribution she received the blessing of the Lama.

As the monks receded into the distance life continued along the dusty street of the village. The autumn sunshine still carried heat and the village dogs sprawled in the shadow of the street vendors' barrows.

A distant sound brought the villagers, one by one, out of their reverie. They looked at each other, seeking an interpretation as a drumming sound built in intensity, slowly but steadily. From time to time came the faint sound of bells, but it was the drumming sound that made them alert.

On the top of the flat roof of a house at the very edge of the village some fire wood had been stacked. A woman had climbed onto the stack to get a better view. "Ma Qi!" she shouted. The warning, "Ma Qi! Ma Qi!" was echoed from one to another down the village street. Mothers rushed to gather in their children, carrying or pulling them to the nearest open doorway. The street vendors too sought refuge before the doors were slammed shut and bolted on the inside.

The sound built in intensity – the sound of horses' hoofs combined with the tinkle of small bells tied to bridles and saddles. A hundred horses, two hundred, and yet more as on they came, seemingly without end. The troops of the Muslim warlord Ma Qi were renowned for their brutality and they were always very well armed. The villagers shivered in fear as the militia thundered past. Dust kicked up by the clattering hoofs seeped through gaps in the doors, settling on the cooking pots and sleeping pads, and on the clothes of the crouching villagers.

Eventually the sound receded into the distance, in the direction of the Labrang monastery. The villagers stayed behind their locked doors for an hour until one woman picked up enough courage to check that the danger was past. The word spread along the street, and as the doors were unlocked the villagers stepped out into the sunshine, clearing their lungs of dust while surveying the damage. Two of the dogs were dead along with at least a dozen chickens. The contents of the large brass tsampa container had been scattered irretrievably through the dust. Both of the street vendors' barrows, together with all the food that they had contained, were destroyed, and beneath one lay the trampled body of a small girl whose mother had overlooked her in the rush.

Once the extent of the damage had been assessed the villagers worked together and supported each other, helping rebuild the barrows, helping with food where that which had once been a bounty had now been replaced by a shortage.

Following the sky burial of the small girl the villagers returned to life as they knew it. They still needed the blessings of the Lama for a bountiful harvest, and when next the seven Buddhist monks in their bright burgundy-coloured robes chanted Vajrayana verses down the village street the villagers would wrap offerings of food in white scarves and bow their heads in respect.