
Sky-burial

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I never understand why my customer tells me that having sex with me is his liberation. 'No it isn't. It is your hunger *Ku-sho-la*. It is your body's food.' I want to say this out loud but I don't.

My cousin Pema *ah-cha-la* who has taught me all I know about pleasuring men says that our customer is our *Jambhala*, which is another name for god-of-wealth. He must not be corrected. The Dalai Lama used the word when he stood here once on the high rock with hundreds of people flocking around him. Liberation, he'd said, is our cry against the bondage of our men back home. And it is the cry of our people refuging here for decades in this land of seven rivers — away from our true home below the White Mountain. Our mothers liberated us from their wombs to discover the breath of life around us and yet we are stifled for the breath of freedom.

I don't know why the customer should use the word liberation for the sex, though. Ever since my people were chased away in thousands from our plateau of snow and mists we've been searching for this word. But I know that sex for me is my bondage. It chains me in with my need for my daily food, the clothes I wear, even the stone pot chicken I do Sundays and then have Pema *ah-cha-la* over to enjoy and exchange stories of the week with. The customer must be right after all, for without me there would be no liberation for him from the bodily desires that enslave him.

I often lie back and watch him when he awakens to the first drop of sunlight at the window. He is a big man, bigger than any in our Lachung village and takes up most of my bed. His skin dazzles like snow peaks when the beams fall on him. He told me once that I looked like a Latsu pup lying there next to him, I was so tiny. That made me laugh a whole day. He is not from these parts. His skin is white but still not quite. There is red in it too when he stands out in the sun too long or when he bends over the hot stone pot. The villagers call him the *firang*. The word derives from a decolouration malady of the skin. A girl in the village came up in blotches when she was five and now there isn't a spot of brown anywhere on her body.

'You take me to this other place pretty one,' the *firang* said to me one night after the sex. 'Money cannot pay for all of that you know.'

'Money pays for my food and my clothes,' I said to him. Often I don't understand what he says. Maybe it is because he thinks in his language first then renders in mine; or maybe, as all say, my mind is dimmer than my face is rosier. I'd refused to take him on when he first came to me.

'But why?' he had asked me.

'Because I don't want your disease.'

'What disease?'

'Your white skin and yellow hair.'

He had laughed aloud.

'But who told you this is a disease? It is how my skin is. It is how everybody's skin is in my land — my brothers, parents, neighbours. We're all made this way. Just as you're made in different shades of brown and peach.'

I had not believed him and he'd hung around on my veranda for some time, moving back and forth, palming his eyes and gazing into the mountains beyond the blue river. The next day he returned with another white man.

'See,' he said, 'this man is from my land too. He has the same skin colour as me and there's no disease.'

He told me then how everybody said I was pretty and knew ways to make a man happy. And he was ready to strike a deal. He would pay me 1,000 a month, come and go as he pleased.

'But I get fifty per man,' I protested. 'If I have more than two customers in one day I make more than 100.'

'How much do you want then?'

'But I don't want your disease.'

'I don't have a disease.' He'd laughed again. 'All right, if you agree I'll give you 2,000 a month. That would mean over a fifty a day. And I'm no fool. I know you do have some dry days. But you can have other customers too when I'm not around. I don't mind.'

'Two thousand five hundred.'

He thought for a while.

'You must cook supper for me then. I'll manage other meals. And when my work's done I'll go.'

‘How do you speak our language *Ku-sho-la*?’

‘I learnt it because I want to write about you all. I want to know more.’

‘What more is there to know?’

‘I want to know why your departed ones have no place on the earth and why must you be fed to the birds when you die.’ Then he chuckled. ‘And I want to know why I must refrain from sleeping with you if I’m to attain my nirvana. And why ...’

I invited him into the house and made him undress. Then I examined his flesh carefully, every inch of it, though I didn’t really know what I was looking for. I’d heard the disease spread in patches. His was fairly clear and there was nothing unusual about it — no weeping or bleeding in places. In fact he even smelled good, just like the orchids growing along the path to our Tibetan monastery. All the men I’ve been with reek of curdled sweat and *chhaang* liquor or of the tobacco they chew on all day. I knew he was telling the truth. It was good money for me too, though I did not tell him that. He took me that evening and the next, then disappeared for a week. Just when I’d given him up for a charlatan, he reappeared with a large suitcase and red backpack.

‘Where shall I put these?’ he asked.

I hadn’t expected this. I’d wanted him to come and go as he pleased. But it turned out the *firang* had traded with me for food and lodging too, not just the sex. I lived in a two-room shack that I’d come to inherit after my *Pah-la* died of the lung disease and his second wife left him for the man he’d stacked timber with. This is the only place I have ever lived in. The *firang* did not disturb any of my belongings and very soon blended in as part of the furnishings. He did bring back a foldable table one day but recompensed in money for using the vacant space below the window. He would sit there long hours filling his sheets with blue squiggles then rise and help me with preparing an evening meal. Often he would fall asleep quietly on his side of the bed without showing any signs of desire for me. He talked very little. When he did it was about strange things and ideas but they sounded like music to my ears. He used big words that held a murmuring to them, almost as though the wind was dancing among the trees. It was an easy arrangement really. I learned that my sexuality wasn’t the only thing that brought food to my plate or the roof over my head. Sometimes my body did not even matter. Once when my monthly cramps were too unkind to be subdued with the turmeric drink, he cooked some *thukpa* on my stone pot and made me eat it without asking for anything in return.

Whenever he did take me, he would fidget awhile before handing me extras for it, a twenty or fifty even. Twice he gave me 100 because I took him to this special place where he didn’t feel the pains of the real world. It was his Shangri-La he said. He would read me lines too from the black diary he carried at his breast all the time but I would often stop him halfway. His words were in another tongue yet they spoke to me about the rains over the riverfront, about love and dying. They were like the songs of our old flutist who lives alone in the Yumthang valley and plays into the mornings. They spoke to me of the last moon, of the yellow or lilac drops that come up in the grasses after winter and brought the river into my

eyes. Something live and strong seemed to stir and kick inside me whenever he began his reading.

I’ve had this happen to me once long ago when I watched a group of women swaddle my *ah-ma-la*’s body in white for her final journey. It was for her next living, they’d said to me. She had already left this world for the other and what I was now seeing was a cluster of flesh and bones wrapped up in skin. And soon she would be carried away, chopped up into tiny pieces, her bones pounded with a mallet and mixed with *tsampa*, a paste of yak butter and flour, to be fed to the hungry vultures waiting in the mountains high up. The birds were the sky-dancers or the *Dakinis* come to rid the earth of unwanted human remains. This was sacred, they said, and called it the sky-burial, and they laughed and chattered because they were meant to rejoice in the start of her life elsewhere. Her body was nothing more than an empty vessel now.

‘Who will give me food then?’ I’d asked.

‘You have to learn to get your own food now. You’re eight already.’

‘But what about my *Pah-la*?’

‘Your *Pah-la* does not give food to people. He gives them pain.’ And they winked and laughed among themselves.’

I had felt the river jump into my eyes then and it ran down my face in gullies. After her cooking and cleaning every new-moon-day, my *ah-ma-la* had dragged me to the riverfront and scrubbed me from top to toe whilst I’d bawled and thrashed about for fear of suffocation, but when at last she would wrap me up in old bed linen and bundle me back into the house, I’d felt safest. My fear of choking was my happy-place — because it promised me safety in her arms afterwards. I remembered her feeding me morsels with her fingers when I was in bed for many days and my body had turned hot like the fire she cooked on. Sometimes I still see her dark shape swaying back and forth by my bed, chanting the *Om Mani Padme Hum* over and over again.

Not until they’d carried her off into the mountains did I know that it lived here inside me, this river of salt water. And I didn’t know that its droplets arose from a place that would thrash and howl inside of me all night and many more after that.

Giving me twenties and fifties after the sex calms the *firang* and a light fills his forehead when he watches me finger the notes before pouching them in my midriff. I use the money to buy odds for myself. Last week I bought myself a *pangden* that the married women wear and I’m not even married. I like the reds and greens that are painted all over it in circles. Besides, he’d said I should go out and give myself a treat.

‘What’s a treat?’ I’d asked him.

‘Anything really that you like. Actually, something that you don’t need but like just for itself.’

I’d picked up the *pangden* at the fair that had been running for a week in the village square. Its colours sing to me all day long now. I’ve worn it around my waist since, even though the women giggle behind my back about it. I heard one say that I can well dream of being married but it is only the wastrels not wife-seekers that use me for the

nights then fling me away. I don't mind anymore. I have a yak's hide my Pema *ah-cha-la* tells me and she smiles and says it is good for me. And she says it's my talisman against pain.

I don't do weekends. I used to but not anymore. The *firang* doesn't mind. He doesn't seem to care so much for the sex of late. Neither does he ask for a drop in the rent for not wanting it. In fact my suggestion of having the weekends off even relieved him. He goes for long walks into the hills or sits at his table gazing outside then filling his sheets with squiggles. When I first began my contract with him I did have other customers over when he wasn't home, then I stopped. I don't know why I did. Maybe my body understood the weariness that comes from overuse. I'd never seen so much money before and wanted more, to ration away for the dry days just like the time when I'd wanted to go on eating even after my stomach could take no more.

I'd been starving a whole week after they took *Pah-la's* body away. Then one evening my Pema *ah-cha-la* found me out and took me back with her and she fed me until I cleaned up all the food she'd cooked. She said she would have looked out for me after my father's passing but she wasn't allowed near the funeral because she was an outcaste now. From the very day the man she'd been married to sold her to a vacationer for 5,000, then took off with the money and another woman to the city far beyond the borders, all had forsaken her. When the vacationer left, she knocked for days upon the many doors of our *pingyah*, who were our blood relations, but they turned her away saying she was a sinful *nphyon-ma* now and they didn't want her shadow to fall upon them and taint their homes. She then begged the menfolk to let her pleasure them in return for money so she could eat. And they did.

'Men are weakest for the sex,' she told me once. 'It is their bondage but they think they are free.'

'But isn't sex our bondage *Ah-cha-la*?' I asked her. It was the first time I'd addressed her as older sister and it brought a smile to her lips.

'Only if you let it be.'

'And how is that possible when they take you and crush your body into a mash every time?'

'They think they crush your body but they only really crush their own spirit with their hunger for our flesh. There is no healing for that kind of crushing. Maybe they are vultures in spirit and men in body.'

'But my body hurts for their crushing.'

'You can heal it with some salve, small sister. It is a body and one day the birds will eat it and wipe it out from this earth. You need to let your spirit remain untouched just like the lotus.'

'Is that why your elders named you Pema, *ah-cha-la*? You are the lotus girl. You are untouched.'

I laughed and rocked with my laughing. And she laughed with me too. She reached out her hand and put it on my shoulder and kept it there just as my *ah-ma-la* had done.

'I'll teach you how to please the men with your body then. If you know how to you can knead them like dough in your hands. Hunger will not touch you.'

'And will I still remain untouched then *Ah-cha-la*?'

'It will be your liberation.'

When I bought myself a *pangden*, I got one for her too, in purple and orange, which are her favourite colours. I've never bought a present before but I learned that it can bring sunlight upon faces. And it makes me happy too and light-winged, just like the swallows that do their loops and tumbles in the air.

I also feel happy when the *firang* comes back from his excursions now or when he stays home some weekends. I don't mind if he doesn't talk or just sits on the doorstep and puts the burning stick of tobacco between his lips and stares long hours into the blue river and the great White Mountain that he calls Everest.

'What do you search for when you stare so long at our White Mountain *Ku-sho-la*?' I asked him once.

'I wonder if it is the mountain that is holy or does my heart want it to be so?'

'You talk in riddles *Ku-sho-la*,' I said to him. 'That is the *Chomolungma*. It is home to the Mother Goddess of inexhaustible giving. She lives upon that white crown of the world and protects all. Would it be white if it wasn't holy?'

The *firang* had looked long at me before returning to his silence. Then later that night he turned over to my side of our bed with a smile.

'I am white too, tiny one. Does that mean I am holy?'

I did not have any answer to his question. Also I knew it was a question for which he was not expecting an answer.

At our next stone pot chicken Sunday I told Pema *ah-cha-la* that maybe she was wrong and that not all men were vultures in spirit.

She didn't answer immediately.

'Do not let the man in him crush your spirit,' she said at last. 'It is this kind of crushing that has no healing.'

I didn't say anything, but ladled out the chicken into her bowl. She slurped and hummed in approval.

'Did you know that your fingers are blessed with the sweet flavours small sister?'

'Yes I know,' I said after a while. 'The *firang ku-sho-la* says this of me too.'

After a month of wandering in the higher mountains and the valley of the dead, the *firang* returned one night with his clothes tattered and his arm ripped open and weeping. I took him inside and tended to him. For seven nights and eight days his body burned like the oven I cooked on and he trembled as though the dark spirits had found him out and were raging to possess him. They were the *dakinis*, I knew because he mumbled and shrank in his sleep and his mouth was violet as he lay there in the foetal position, which wasn't the most propitious of positions to be in, in a living state. I changed wads soaked in cold water from his forehead, made a poultice with turmeric root and a sprig of healing leaves ground together and applied it to his wounds. At night I swayed back and forth holding a string of beads close to my heart, chanting mantras in his favour. I would have implored the Lamas who lived in the Tibetan monastery to pray over him and ward off the *dakinis* that tormented him, but I knew I would be spurned, as all our kind were. I remember when I'd sat praying on the steps to the main entrance once, the village women chased me away

and got their men to throw the stones after me. I saw that two of those men were regulars at my shack and one of them was a *ku-sho-la* too, which was a gentleman of the highest order. I'd learnt that when men touched my body and drew their pleasures from it within the confines of my shack, it did not taint them; but when I stepped outside these premises of mine, even my shadow had the power to defile their dignity.

The *firang* took his own time to recover. It was only after the next full moon had passed that he was able to prop up against the pillows for his bowl of steaming *thukpa* and slurp on it whilst I held it against his lips. When Pema *ah-cha-la* came to see him she announced at once that he was afflicted with the very dark *dakinis*.

'They would have long eaten his flesh,' she said, standing by his bed. 'You have given to him two reincarnations in one life small sister. Only money can pay for that. But now he has none, who will pay for your next meal and the clothes that hide your skin?'

'I have some money still *Ah-cha-la*,' I said to her.

'But for how long small sister?'

Soon there did come a day when I emptied out everything from the pouch I kept under the mattress. I added some flour, water, and a condiment which I kept for special days, to the leftovers from lunchtime and cooked a bowl of soup for the *firang* that evening. His eyes brightened when he saw it and he lapped it up eagerly. During all of his illness he'd never shown any want for food so I knew now that he was recovering and hunger would soon prey on him.

'What about your bowl beautiful one?' he asked, stopping and looking around. This was the first time he'd spoken in all these days except in his delirium when he sometimes cried out about human flesh being sliced and pounded or when he shrieked in fear, pleading with the *dakinis* to spare him his life as he was not dead yet.

'I've eaten mine. I was hungry,' I lied to him.

He ate with labour after that as though every mouthful was weighing him down.

'Is it not good *Ku-sho-la*?' I asked him.

'No, your fingertips have the sweetest of flavours in them, kind one,' he said to me with a faint smile. That night he did not sleep well even though the fever had left him completely now. Once, when I got up to feel his forehead for the hotness, I saw his eyes open wide, staring at me in the dark.

The next morning as he lay in bed and watched me wrap my *bakku* carefully about me and pin it over my waist, he told me I must get new customers now.

'You need to get money. I'm no good for you.'

'Maybe Pema *ah-cha-la* will lend me some money.'

'But for how long? She needs to eat too.'

There was nothing to cook all of that day and I watched the *firang* curl his knees deep into his stomach and sleep off his hunger. When he stirred that evening I went to him.

'But you are in the house *Ku-sho-la*. My customers will be in the next room.'

He did not look at me when he answered.

'You can close the door between. I won't mind.'

Hunger crept into my head by the time night came. I saw visions of *thukpa* bowls and chicken everywhere and my gut grew angrier and fought with the walls of my stomach. When the smell of a neighbour's cooking travelled up the hill to my shack, I ran and closed the *firang's* window and stuffed clothes at the chinks to keep out the aroma.

That night I brought out the old red rag I had taken down some weeks after he began his contract with me and put it back up again. I'd always kept it nailed to the top left of my main entrance to let men know I was in business. It was only after a whole day had passed that a man knocked on my door. I'd never seen him before. He said he was passing by and saw my red rag and wished to be pleased.

'I am not an easy one to please,' he laughed loudly. He was like most other men I'd been with and the smell of *chhaang* and his sweat filled the room in black fumes. 'I will pay you what I feel you deserve.'

'But I take fifty from my customers.'

'Thirty-five and no more. If you're not happy with that I'll find myself another *nphyon-ma*.'

When the customer left the room two hours later, I picked up my body from the floor and covered it with my *bakku* again. I rolled the rug from the floor, put it back in the black chest by the back door. Then I squatted on the floor by the window and counted the notes he'd left me. I knew that the pink had not gone from the sky and if I was quick I could buy meat and flour before the butcher closed for the night. It was only when I was halfway down the hill I realised that the river that lived deep inside of me had come alive again and was running down my face in streams. I didn't know why; this had never happened to me before. Also, I didn't know why I stopped by the blue river and bathed my body over and over again in its icy waters before returning to my shack. A group of women passing by sniggered, saying I was losing my mind to be washing myself in such freezing weather.

I cooked stone pot chicken for us that night with paprika and spices and also added to it a large tomato that the grocer had dropped into my shawl when his wife was looking the other way. I could see he knew I'd put my red rag back up again. I also realised when I finished my cooking that even though I hadn't eaten for nearly two days, the hunger didn't bite into my stomach anymore now.

When I opened the *firang's* door and took his bowl of chicken to him his eyes wouldn't meet my gaze.

'You go and eat too,' he said to me in a voice that no longer held the music of the wind and rains. 'I'm strong enough to eat by myself now.'

'But your hands tremble for the weakness *Ku-sho-la*.'

'Go now. I'm fine.' He spoke louder and his eyes still did not look into mine.

After that, whenever I had a man visiting, I closed the door between us and when it was over I would walk to the blue river and bathe myself before I went home to cook for the *firang*. Two moons went by. He could stand, even walk about the room in small steps now. But his face was yellow and his eyeballs large and lifeless as he gazed out of the window. And he never looked into my eyes again.

One morning as I sat at the fire preparing the *po cha* for him, a tea rich in butter because I knew it would help rid

the sores around his mouth, he opened the door between and came out, pulling his suitcase and backpack after him.

'Are you going somewhere again *Ku-sho-la*?' I asked him.

'I'm strong now. I have to go back.'

I looked at his face and saw that the sunrays did not kindle it to fire as they had always done.

'The *dakinis* have not left you completely *Ku-sho-la*.' My voice had a plea in it but he did not appear to hear it.

'Perhaps you should go when they do.'

'There are no *dakinis*.'

His eyes still wouldn't meet mine and he stood there looking into nothing.

'I've made *po cha* for you *Ku-sho-la*. It will heal your broken skin. You should have that then before you go.'

I palmed clean the stool for him to sit on.

'You mustn't do that pure one,' he said, flicking his eyes towards the window. 'Your hands are too clean for that.'

I ladled out a skimmer full of steaming tea for him. Then I squatted once again on the ground by the fire and stared long into his face, white like the snowdrops in late spring.

'*Ku-sho-la*,' I said to him after a long pause and I felt as though a boulder were weighing my words down. 'Were you able to know all that you wanted to know when you came here?'

He sat still looking long towards the White Mountain. I saw raindrops glisten among his golden lashes when he spoke.

'I know that my body has no place on this earth and that it must be chopped into pieces and fed to the big birds,' he said to me gradually. 'But I do not know all else. I do not know much of that which I knew. I do not know the source of my suffering still. I do not know my liberation.'

'I am sure you will find all your answers one day *Ku-sho-la*,' I said to him gently, wishing to ease the criss-crossing on his forehead. But nothing in his face changed. I heard the thrashing and howling in that place deep inside of me once more but did not know its beginning nor its end.

When he left I followed him at a distance for many miles, then watched him clamber down the hill, dragging his belongings after him until he was a moving speck among the needle pines beyond the blue river. I sat upon a patch of damp earth and gazed for hours at the cloudlike blotch from where he had vanished completely.

Late in the evening when a customer knocked on my door, I asked him to wait outside until I had dragged the old rug once again from the black chest, laid it out on the floor, then closed the door between.