

Compilation 2 – From Chapter 5 – “Litang to Yong Zhr: Dorje”

I had known Dorje long before I had met him, for his reputation had preceded him. A local guide had told me an anecdote, one that helped explain the phenomenon that was Dorje Kandro. No description of him by anyone, came without a smile and tale of his deeds ... and his deeds ran the gamut of life. The story began with him taking some particularly well-heeled Asian clients on a hard climb virtually straight up. Dorje climbed not only with a huge supply pack but while chain-smoking. The clients had prepared for the trip by sleeping in oxygen tents, and had brought with them oxygen canisters, nose strips, pills, liniments, vitamins, and the latest in gadgets and gear. On the way up, two of the six people began getting headaches, so Dorje obligingly slung their packs onto his back as well. By the time he reached the summit, Dorje was hidden under three packs, with only a trail of cigarette smoke hinting at his presence beneath them. He then proceeded to take a swig of *arra*, barley whisky, while the clients gasped and gaped. Assuming that Dorje was taking the caterpillar fungus to “enhance” himself, they asked how many he consumed a day. He told them he didn’t use the fungus. They didn’t believe him, though – how else could he drink and smoke so much without being fatigued? He explained that he rubbed a yak-dung compress mixed with whisky on his chest every night. That was Dorje.

As we approached a wooden hut that hugged the mountainside, a hulking dog roared its warning. The fearsome Do Khyi mastiffs had been bred to defend, to hunt, and to bring down. Pound for pound few creatures could match them. But this was the first time on the trip I had seen one with a temperament to match its looks. Gorgeous and absolutely furious, it wanted off its chain. Black eyes and a handsome muzzle radiated menace. This was a creature that did not understand any fear or hesitation – all moving things were a threat to be dispatched. It launched itself at us repeatedly from its wide, flat paws. Dorje looked mildly uncomfortable as he wondered aloud why they needed such big dogs up here and, then quickly answered his own question: bears.

The dog’s owner could not have been more different from the raging animal. Whispering a little sound to silence the dog – though a throaty rage continued to rumble from it – the man welcomed us quietly into his home. He seemed ageless and almost transparent, and totally neutral – not tall, not short, not strong, not weak ... just very calm. His home was nothing but pieces of wood nailed together and a sunken fire pit, but as with all Tibetan homes I had visited, it comforted.

Six such huts made up the little community. They were summer homes for shepherds, who lived alone for months tending to yak herds and their prime grazing spots. In this tiny paradise I once again felt the diversity that the Tea Horse Road encompassed. Although their families might come once a month to

see them, usually the only company the men had was their five mountaintop neighbors. A part of me longed to just sling off my bags, fix up a hut, get a mastiff, and start herding. After peeking into the lives of others for so long, I wanted to experience it myself.

The sacred mountain of Reno Maya – known to Westerners as Peacock Mountain – rested above the cloud line. It was considered an auspicious location for grazing, and Yong Zhr shepherds had used the high pastures as long as anyone could remember. It has also been a pass crossed by caravans, and still the odd caravan destined for Deqin straggled in for supplies.

The fire warmed us as our serene host prepared a yak stew. The garlic he chopped in the palm of his hand, and then with the same knife he cut chopsticks for us from a fresh stock of bamboo, placing them neatly in front of us. Large green leaves served as potholders. As we ate, he and Dorje talked of the outside world, about what Dorje had seen, about his relationship with me. Our host was curious and attentive.

His life on this mountain was one of patient repetition, each day being as predictable as the last. When I asked him if he ever wanted to leave the place, he hesitated, carefully forming his answer, before saying that here he knew exactly his place and his purpose, and that he had what he needed. I was impressed by his straightforward thinking and insight, and I realized that as much as I longed to be a part of the land, I, like Dorje, was a ranger, a restless wanderer destined only for pockets of silence. It was not enough to belong to a place; I had to search and stretch my version of belonging. All the lados had spoken of this “plight,” and I, too felt it.

Our host had heard from his elders that caravans had long ago ventured through the valley, often to collect the prized *denè*, a type of evergreen, found in abundance here. He then produced a tiny wedge of the wood and placed it at the edge of the fire, where it crackled to life and released its camphoric aroma. Used for religious ceremonies and as incense in homes, it was another item that would make the long journey along the ancient highway, to be appreciated by someone faraway.

After eating, we piled into our sleeping bags. Lightning from a distant storm rifled through the night air. Since we were at an altitude of close to four-thousand meters, it seemed close and immediate. As the embers in the fire pit smoldered, I laughed myself to sleep to Dorje’s made-up songs about lonely men on tops of mountains with only their mules to love. Only one element disturbed and that was the unfortunate introduction to Dorje’s reeking feet that night.