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# Beautiful Ghosts

Eliot Pattison

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## *About the Book*

Disgraced former Beijing Inspector Shan Tao Yun has been living in the remote mountains of Tibet since his unofficial release from a work camp. Without status, official identity, or the freedom to return to his former home in Beijing, he's lived with the forbidden lamas for the past year.

But now there's apparently been a murder in a ruined monastery and the very officials who exiled Shan are after his help. In a baffling case involving the FBI, Chinese Ministers, and British relief workers, Shan travels from Tibet to Beijing to the U.S. to find the links between murder, missing art, his former gulag, and his own long-unseen son.

## *About the Author*

**Eliot Pattison**'s numerous books and articles on international policy issues have been published on three continents. He is a world traveller and frequent visitor to China. *The Skull Mantra*, his first work of fiction, won the Edgar Award for best First Novel from the Mystery Writers of America. *Beautiful Ghosts* is Pattison's fourth novel featuring former Beijing Investigator, Shan Tao Yun.

*Also by Eliot Pattison*

The Skull Mantra
Water Touching Stone
Bone Mountain

# BEAUTIFUL GHOSTS

Eliot Pattison

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of*
Patrick J. Head, lama lawyer.

*Acknowledgments*

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# Part One

# *Chapter One*

There are sounds in Tibet heard nowhere else in the world. Hollow moans inexplicably roll down the slopes of snowcapped peaks. Rumbles like thunder course through valleys under cloudless skies. On moonlit nights in the mountain wilderness Shan Tao Yun had heard tiny ringing tones floating down from the stars.

At first, lying on his gulag prison bunk, Shan had felt fear at hearing such eerie sounds. Later he had decided they had to be the workings of the thin, high altitude atmosphere and the wind, of shifting ice formations and temperature changes between summits and valleys, had concluded there were scientific explanations. But after five years Shan was no longer certain. After so long in Tibet, he had abandoned most of his prior beliefs about the workings of the world.

Certainly the wrenching sound that now rose across the bowl in the mountains could have no explanation in the physical world. A young woman standing near Shan groaned, clapped her hands to her ears, and ran away. The first time he had heard the sound that came from the red-robed man sitting thirty feet away, Shan, too, had shuddered and wanted to flee. Throat chanting, the monks called the strange grinding moan, but Shan preferred the description used by his old friend and former cellmate Lokesh. Soul rattling, Lokesh called what Surya, the old monk, was doing, explaining that in the world below, souls were often so undeveloped that the only time the sound was heard was in those near death as the soul struggled for release. But in Tibet no one spoke in fearful tones of the death rattle. Here the sound was for the living. Here the devout had learned to make souls speak without tongues.

Shan watched the woman retreat with a pang of sorrow. It was a day of great joy, but one of even greater danger. The outlaw monks Shan lived with, who for decades had remained hidden in their secret hermitage, had decided not only to reveal themselves to the hill people but to lead the strangers in illegal rituals. This would be a day of wonderful surprises, Gendun, their senior lama, had declared, one of the days when the world was changed.

Shan had warned the monks about the danger of bringing these particular Tibetans to the ruined monastery. Gendun had replied by dropping onto one knee and turning over a pebble, invoking a teaching the monks sometimes used. The world could be changed by the subtlest of actions, so long as it was pure, and even the smallest of actions was pure so long as it was free of fear and anger. But these herders had been conditioned by fear all their lives.

Beijing had dealt harshly with the people of the rugged lands of southern Lhadrung County, who had stubbornly resisted the Chinese occupation long after Beijing's army had seized Lhasa. The ruins they now stood among were all that remained of Zhoka *gompa*, the monastery that for centuries had served the people living south of the county's central valley. Forty years earlier it had been attacked from the air by the People's Liberation Army, one of the thousands of gompas annihilated by Beijing. The brave, devout people who had futilely tried to defend Zhoka and the way of life it represented had been dispersed, destroyed, or simply hollowed out.

'We'll be arrested!' a woman in a tattered red vest had warned when Shan and Lokesh had met them on the grassy ridge above and motioned them to descend toward the half-mile-wide tract of ruined buildings.

'It's haunted!' another herder had protested as Lokesh had stepped into the maze of crumbling stone walls. 'Even the living become like ghosts here!'

But when Lokesh kept walking, singing an old pilgrim's song, the man fell in behind his companions to enter the ruins. They had followed in an uneasy silence until they had emerged in what had been the gompa's central courtyard.

'A miracle!' the woman in the red vest had gasped as she clutched at an old woman beside her and gazed at the ten-foot-high shrine, obviously newly constructed, which stood in the center of the yard. The two women advanced hesitantly, watching Surya, who sat in front of the shrine. They touched the brilliant white structure, skeptical at first, as if not believing their eyes, then reverently sat before the monk. Others had slowly followed, some touching strings of beads that hung from their belts.

But now, as Surya's throat chant began, several of the hill people retreated toward the shadows. Those who remained seemed paralyzed by the sound, staring wide-eyed as Surya joyfully threw his head back, still chanting.

'Godkiller!' The shout came from nowhere and everywhere, echoing off the ruined walls. A stone flew past Shan's shoulder and bounced off Surya's knee. 'Murderer!' the same fearful voice cried. The monk's chant faltered, then stopped as he stared at the stone that had been aimed at him.

'Godkiller!' As the word was repeated Shan spun about to see a short, leathery-faced man in the tattered clothes of a herder, pointing at Surya with rage in his eyes.

By the time the herder raised another stone Shan was at his side, clamping a hand around the man's wrist. The man resisted, twisting his hand, pushing Shan. 'Flee for your lives! The murderers!' the herder cried out to the others who lingered in the yard.

A tall, lean Tibetan, a stubble of white hair on his scalp and jaw, appeared at the man's other side and the herder, studying him uncertainly, stopped moving. Lokesh pried open the herder's fingers, letting fall the pebbles they held.

‘Surya is a monk,’ he said quietly. ‘He is the opposite of a godkiller.’

‘No,’ the herder growled as Surya’s chant started anew. It was not anger, but despair that now filled the man’s eyes. ‘The government puts men in robes to trick us, to get us to act out the old ways, then they arrest us, or worse.’

‘Not here,’ Lokesh said. ‘Not today.’

The man shook his head then, as though to refute the old Tibetan, gestured into the shadows between the crumbling stone walls behind him.

A woman appeared, her hands behind her, gripping two corners of a rolled blanket. Two boys, the oldest no more than ten, walked behind her, solemnly carrying the other end of the long burden inside the blanket, their eyes gaunt and weary. As the three reached the herder they lowered their heavy load, the boys darting to the woman, burying their heads in her heavy felt skirt, the youngest releasing a long, silent sob.

As Lokesh knelt and slowly pulled back an edge of the blanket, a hoarse groan escaped his throat.

It was an old man with a thin, wispy beard. His left ear hung loose where it had been nearly ripped away, the left side of his face was caked with blood and sagging where his cheek and jawbones had been ravaged. His lifeless eyes seemed to look up at the sky in question.

‘They beat him to death,’ the herder declared in a low whisper, still eyeing Shan and Lokesh warily. ‘Just beat him and left him like that.’

Shan bent and pulled the blanket down. Both the man’s legs appeared to be broken, one turned at an unnatural angle, the other bloody at a tear in his trousers that exposed a piece of bone. ‘Who would do such a thing?’ he asked, looking at the empty brown eyes.

‘His name was Atso,’ the herder said. ‘Over eighty years old. He lived alone in a hut at the base of a cliff two miles to the east, toward the valley.’ The herder’s eyes filled with

pain and he paused for a moment, as if struggling to control his emotions. ‘Of all the people in the hills he was the one who knew most about the old ways.’

‘Someone killed him for following the old ways?’ Shan asked.

The herder shrugged. ‘They kill for a word in these hills,’ he said in a hollow, matter-of-fact tone that sent a chill down Shan’s spine. The man extracted a knife from his belt and with the blade pushed a twig of heather from Atso’s hair. The Tibetans were loath to touch the dead. ‘The only way he would let strangers near him would be if one wore a robe,’ he said in an accusing tone, casting a worried glance toward the woman and boys, who moved toward the throat chanting. ‘Murderers are among us,’ he whispered.

The words caused Shan to look toward the ridge above the ruined gompa. In a patch of summer flowers sat a solitary figure, a slender woman in black, scanning the landscape with binoculars. Liya, one of the few hill people who secretly helped the monks, was keeping watch.

‘Prayers must be spoken,’ Lokesh declared.

‘No,’ the herder shot back. ‘We have no rites in these hills. That’s how people get arrested.’

‘But you came today,’ Lokesh pointed out.

‘That woman up there,’ the herder said, gesturing toward Liya, ‘she rode a horse from camp to camp, saying in front of my family that a miracle was going to happen here today. How could I say no to Liya with the children listening? They were even singing on the way this morning. They never sing. Then we found Atso lying like that near his hut.’

It wasn’t the herder’s description of events that pained him the most, Shan realized, but the way his despair was somehow devoid of emotion, as if all his grief had long ago been used up.

‘And now a man in a robe waits to trap us,’ the herder added. ‘The way of godkillers.’

The expression tore at something inside Shan each time it was spoken. ‘Why would you use such a terrible word?’ he asked.

With his blade the herder lifted a small sack from the side of the corpse. As Shan took it and upended its contents onto the blanket another mournful cry left Lokesh’s lips. It was a small, delicate silver statue of Tara, the protective goddess, perfect in every respect except that her head had been flattened, destroyed by a violent blow. The herder prodded the statue over with the blade. The goddess’s back had been split open, as if she had been stabbed from behind.

The devastated statue seemed to upset Lokesh even more than the dead man. The old Tibetan picked up the broken goddess, cradling her in his arms a moment, his eyes glistening with moisture, before laying her back beside the battered corpse, whispering to her all the while. Shan could not hear the words, but the sorrow in his friend’s voice was unmistakable.

When Lokesh looked up again he gazed at the herder with an unexpected determination. He slowly rose and took the herder’s arm, leading him a few steps to where they could see Surya again. Lokesh would not let the herder’s fears destroy the festival.

‘Listen to that sound he makes. Look at that *chorten*,’ the herder said, referring to the shrine. ‘If he’s not from the government he is a sorcerer. I bring my sheep to these hills every spring. It was never there before. Built by ghosts.’

Built by ghosts. Shan and Lokesh exchanged a glance. In a way the man was right. For the monks of Yerpa, the hidden hermitage where Shan and Lokesh lived, had built the small elegant structure by moonlight, with one monk always praying as the others constructed the tiered foundation and its bell-shaped spire. It was to be a monument to the ruined gompa, a sign that the deities had not entirely forgotten the local people.

‘Ghosts and murderers, and Liya makes me bring my family here.’

‘I’ll tell you a secret,’ Lokesh whispered, an unusual edge of emotion in his voice. Shan knew how it pained his old friend to see the people of the hills react to them with such suspicion and distrust. Lokesh closed his eyes a moment as if to calm himself. They were on the brink of disaster, Shan realized. A few more words from the herder to the other Tibetans and they would all flee, some perhaps spreading word of killers, but others of illegal monks, which would bring soldiers into the mountains.

Lokesh pulled out the silver amulet box, the *gau*, he wore around his neck and carefully opened it. It was an extraordinary thing to do with a stranger, and the action quieted the man. Inside the gau, under several small folded pieces of paper which Lokesh emptied into his hand, was a tiny photograph of a bald monk wearing spectacles, his face serene but laughter in his eyes. ‘That monk who chants,’ Lokesh explained, ‘his name is Surya. He comes from high in the mountains, not the world below. And inside his gau he also carries a picture of the Dalai Lama.’ He pointed with a gnarled finger to the photograph. ‘Have you truly forgotten what today is?’

The man’s brow furrowed and he pressed his palm tightly against his temple, as if in sudden pain. He stared at Lokesh, then Surya, and the fear in his eyes slowly waned, replaced by a sad confusion. He reached into his shirt and extracted a prayer box that hung around his own neck. ‘I have one of those. My father wore it, and his father.’ He stared at his small, elegant silver gau. ‘But it’s empty,’ he added in a haunting tone. ‘When I was a boy my teacher burned what was inside.’ The words seemed to remind him of the dangers in the hills, and he glanced back at Atso’s body. ‘His murderer is out there, stalking old Tibetans. You must flee, too. In town they say there’s a bounty on

someone’s head. Soldiers are searching. We have to . . .’ His voice faded as his gaze returned to Lokesh.

‘What old Tibetans?’ Shan asked in alarm. ‘Who has a bounty . . .’ His own words drifted away as he glanced back at Lokesh.

With a fingernail the old Tibetan was slowly prying the photograph from his gau. As the herder watched in disbelief Lokesh placed the photo in the man’s own prayer box. ‘We will ask Surya to write a prayer for it, to keep by your heart,’ he said.

The herder’s jaw opened and shut several times as if he was struggling to find words. ‘You truly mean it, that he is a real monk?’ Emotion flooded the man’s face. Confusion, but also gratitude, then awe and pain. ‘My name is Jara,’ the man whispered, not taking his eyes off Surya now. ‘In all my life I have never seen a monk, except the ones who visit from Lhasa once a year with the Bureau of Religious Affairs. They make speeches, not prayers. The children never . . .’ The words choked in his throat.

‘It’s too dangerous for a real monk,’ he continued in an urgent voice. ‘If he’s a real monk, here, then he’s an outlaw. Those soldiers will take him to that prison in the valley. He must cover his robe. Please, for all of us, cover his robe. You have no idea how terrible that prison is.’

Lokesh grinned and rolled up his sleeve. The herder stared in confusion, until his gaze fell upon the long line of numbers tattooed on the old Tibetan’s forearm.

‘You were there?’ the herder asked with an anguished groan. ‘You were a prisoner and still you risk doing this?’

Lokesh pointed to an old cracked metal brazier by the chorten, a ceremonial *samkang*, where a small juniper fire burned. ‘The fragrant smoke attracts the deities. They will protect us. You’ll see.’

Shan glanced back toward Liya, still perched high on the hill. Not everyone relied on the deities for protection. She was watching the west, toward the garrison at Lhadrung

Valley, and surely would have called out if she had seen soldiers.

‘That song he makes,’ Jara said, gesturing to Surya. ‘Is that what monks do?’

Lokesh shrugged. ‘It’s part of the celebration. He has found his serenity and is rejoicing,’ he added as he exchanged an uncertain glance with Shan. The day before at Yerpa they had found Surya destroying a painting of a god he had worked on for weeks. He had not acknowledged them when they had asked why, only silently slashed at the cloth, had not spoken to anyone since. But now the chanting appeared to have brought back the joyful Surya they both knew.

The words seemed to heighten Jara’s anxiety. He nervously looked back toward the slopes. ‘Tibetans don’t celebrate in Lhadrung, unless it is a Chinese holiday. This is Colonel Tan’s county,’ he added with a shudder, referring to the iron-fisted officer who ran the county, one of the few still under military rule.

‘No. You are at Zhoka now,’ Lokesh said, as if the windswept bowl constituted a different place, a sanctuary not part of Tan’s county. ‘There is so much to be thankful for.’

Jara surveyed the ruined gompa, without a single building left intact, and the frightened, impoverished group of Tibetans in the courtyard, then looked at Lokesh as if the old man were crazy. ‘I know what day it is,’ he said, whispering again. ‘A man with a tea shop in town was arrested for marking this day on the calendar in his window.’

‘Then call it something else. A festival, because the monks have returned.’

Jara swept his arm toward the ruins that filled the barren landscape. ‘From where? From the dead? In the country I live in monks don’t return unless the Bureau of Religious Affairs says so.’

‘Then call it a festival for the choice.’

‘Choice?’

Lokesh gazed somberly at Jara, then at his gau. ‘From this day forward you can choose the place you live in.’

The herder gave a dry, bitter laugh. As he looked at the old Tibetan, Lokesh’s features became distant, as if looking past Jara’s eyes, into another part of him. The herder soberly returned the stare then tentatively raised his hand as though to touch the taller Tibetan’s white stubbled jaw, the way the others, disbelieving, had first touched the chorten.

‘You will change forever the country you live in,’ Lokesh said softly, ‘by taking back a prayer in your gau.’ As he spoke another figure in a robe appeared, a tall, graceful man with a face worn smooth as a cobblestone. Gendun, the head of Yerpa, the hidden hermitage that was home to Surya and Shan and Lokesh, looked serenely at Jara, then gazed with a sad smile at Atso’s body. *‘Lha gyal lo,’* he said in a quiet, reverent tone toward the dead man. Victory to the gods.

A strange excitement seemed to flash in Jara’s eyes at the sight of the lama. No one could look into Gendun’s open, serene face, and suspect subterfuge. As the lama stepped back toward the courtyard Jara slowly followed, gesturing toward the body again. ‘There is still a killer out there,’ he said in a tentative voice, as if arguing with himself.

‘Not here. Not today,’ Lokesh said for the second time that hour.

To Shan’s surprise, Lokesh did not follow as Jara joined his wife and children in the courtyard, but motioned Shan back toward the shadows. When they stopped a few feet from Atso’s body Lokesh turned toward the courtyard and planted his feet apart like a sentry. Shan studied him in momentary confusion, then realized that none of the other Tibetans could see Shan or Atso.

He pushed back the broad-brimmed hat he wore then knelt by the dead man, working quickly, compiling a mental

list of his discoveries. One of Atso's hands was wrapped around a gau that hung on a worn silver chain, the fingers of the other hand entwined about a *mala*, a strand of prayer beads. The back of the hand with the prayer box was split open, a jagged wound that could have come from fending off a club or a rifle butt. The palms of both hands were scratched and abraided, the ends of his fingernails split and broken. At his waist a small plastic bottle half filled with water hung from a piece of rope. Pulling back the blanket, Shan exposed the left foot, revealing a tattered leather boot with a two-inch-wide band of heavy jute cord wrapped around the sole.

In his trouser pockets Atso carried two small pouches, one of freshly picked flower heads, the other of chips of juniper wood. A small pocket sewn inside his felt vest held a tightly folded paper, a printed announcement about a free children's health exam in the valley. On the back of the paper was inscribed the *mani* mantra, the prayer for compassion, in tiny cramped writing, row after row of miniscule Tibetan figures. Shan stared at the old man's face then looked back at the paper. The mantra had been written at least a thousand times, then the paper rolled and folded as if Atso had intended to leave it somewhere very small.

He lifted the ruined statue, the little silver Tara. It had a patina of great age, except for a patch of bright metal at one shoulder where the devout had rubbed it for good luck. Shan held it close, studying the dented, imploded head, holding it at various angles, examining the long gash along the goddess's spine, Jara's haunting declaration echoing in his head. *They kill for a word in these hills*. The goddess was hollow, and empty inside. Often the Tibetans inserted small rolled-up prayers inside such statues.

Shan looked back at Lokesh. Instead of beginning the death rites his old friend had invited him to study Atso's body – even though the hill people would not be happy that Shan had touched the body, even though they both knew

the monks would resist any effort by Shan to investigate the murder for, to them, the only investigations that mattered were those of the spirit. He lowered the goddess to the blanket then stepped to Lokesh's side. 'What is it you know?' he asked. 'What is it you're not telling me?' He extended the paper. 'What had so worried Atso he would labor for a thousand mantras?'

Lokesh studied the paper forlornly, as if reading every mantra. 'I met him only once, when I was gathering berries in the mountains above here two weeks ago,' he said, nodding toward the snowcapped peaks to the east. 'He asked what it was we were doing at Zhoka. When I told him it was a secret, that he should come today to find out, he grew angry, then sad. He said we didn't understand, that Zhoka is a place of strange and powerful things that must be left alone. He said that the most dangerous thing about Zhoka is not understanding what it does to people.'

'Are you saying he died because of something here?' Shan asked.

Lokesh turned back to look at the corpse. 'Somewhere gone is what he seeks,' he said quietly.

Shan studied his friend. The old Tibetans had a way of mixing tenses, of slipping over time, ignoring spans of decades, even centuries, when speaking, in order to express essential truths. As he was about to press him, a figure appeared in the shadows behind Atso. A young woman, dressed in black, her hair in a long braid down her back, knelt beside the body. She returned the broken statue to its bag without examining it, then pulled at the blanket, straightening it, patting it around his body, as if putting a loved one to bed. As she did so Shan glimpsed Atso's right boot. It, too, had a wrapping of jute, identical to that of the left boot. But the boot was not so tattered as the other, did not need the jute to bind it together.

'Liya,' Shan said, 'where have you seen the statue before?'

When she looked up Liya's eyes were full of tears. 'When I was a little girl Atso carried me on his shoulders so the sheep would not run over me. I haven't seen him for ten years, not since his wife died and he moved into that hut.'

'Where were they taking him?' Shan asked, not understanding why the Tibetans seemed to be avoiding his questions.

'There were strangers in the mountains last night when I was riding, between here and the valley.' Anguish rose in Liya's eyes. 'I dismounted, thinking I could hide. But suddenly they aimed lights at me and began shouting. They said I was not allowed to go to the east, as if they owned the land around Zhoka. I thought they were herders passing through, worried about pasturelands. I thought the monks would be happy to have as many as possible here today. When I said there was to be festival here, with monks, two people began speaking in English, very excited. A man and a woman. A man put a light on my face, then he apologized in Chinese and they all backed away. It made no sense. What would a Westerner know about Zhoka? What Chinese even would remember the place?' Liya scrubbed at one of her eyes. 'I should have known better. I should have warned people.'

'The work they did here was famous all over Tibet, famous even with the gods,' a deep soft voice suddenly interjected. Surya was a few steps behind Shan, standing at what had been the entrance to a small building. He was intensely studying a piece of rock in his hand. Not a rock, Shan saw, but a piece of plaster, part of a painting. The front half of a deer was plainly visible, a familiar image from a scene of Buddha's first sermon. 'Here,' the tall, thin monk said, speaking to the deer in a voice that was strangely apologetic, 'here you must be nailed to the earth.'

As Shan approached him Surya stepped into the ruined building, still seeming unaware of any of them, like the day before.

In the silence that followed the monk's odd words Shan surveyed the rubble in which Surya stood, a sudden, terrible sense of premonition making him desperate to understand. Part of one wall remained erect, the rest was nothing but stones, shards of plaster, and charred debris. Surya took another step, then seemed to weaken, falling to his knees. Lokesh rushed to his side then froze as Surya extended his long fingers toward the sky, opening and closing them repeatedly, as if trying to gesture something down from the heavens.

After a moment the monk reached toward a pile of rubble a few feet away. Shan stepped uncertainly toward the pile, a heap of burnt timbers and broken roof tiles. Liya stepped forward to help and in less than a minute they had uncovered a small cracked, wooden chest with two drawers, eight inches high, nearly twice as long. Surya's eyes gleamed with excitement as Shan handed it to him, as if the monk, who like the rest of them was a stranger to the ruins, knew the chest. The brittle wooden front broke as the monk pulled the bottom drawer. Surya reached inside and extracted a handful of long graceful paint-brushes, gripping them tightly, holding them toward the sky. He closed his eyes as if praying a moment, then began passing out the brushes, one to each of those present. 'Today will be the end of all things,' he declared in a dry, strangely joyful whisper, then smiled as he handed the last brush to Shan. 'Blessed Atso. Blessed protector!' he cried.

Shan stared at the monk, his confusion greater than ever. Surya knew about the dead man. Had Surya somehow been trying to explain what had happened to Atso?

'Listen to that little girl,' Surya blurted out. 'She is understanding.' The monk abruptly stood and stepped back toward the courtyard. Shan and Lokesh exchanged a confused glance. There was no little girl. The only children they had seen had been Jara's sons.

*Today will be the end of all things*. Surya's words echoed in Shan's mind as he stepped back into the courtyard with Lokesh, the long narrow brush in his pocket. It would indeed be the end for Gendun and the monks if soldiers came.

He forced himself to focus on the chant and the reverent Tibetans in the courtyard. Jara stood with his wife ten feet from the chorten, watching the young monk who had taken up the chant, nodding as Surya settled beside the monk and joined the chant. Lokesh nudged Shan's arm. Jara's wife had one arm around a young girl, no more than eight or nine years, who huddled between Jara and the woman.

'She is my sister's daughter,' Jara explained as Shan approached with his gaze on the girl. 'From a city in Szechuan Province, hundreds of miles to the east, come to us to learn about life in Tibet. Her parents were from these mountains, but they were sent to work in a Chinese factory before she was born. She has never been here, never even been with Tibetans except her parents.'

'That statue,' Shan said. 'Do you know where it came from?' As he watched, one of the old Tibetan women, then a second, rose and walked back into the shadows, toward where Atso's body lay.

'There are many like it, if you know where to look,' the herder replied. 'That one found the first god that was slaughtered, the big man,' he said, nodding toward a huge ox-like herder in a dirty fleece vest standing thirty feet away. 'He said godkillers are the worse kind of demons. He brought one of the dead ones to us, in case someone in my family could heal it.'

'Are the godkillers the ones you meant,' Shan asked, 'the ones who kill for a word? What word?'

The question seemed to hit Jara like a physical blow. He recoiled, then pressed a fist against his mouth, as if he feared what might escape, and stepped away.

'What is it?' the girl blurted out, her eyes locked on Surya, who sat only a few feet away. 'What is wrong with these

poor men?’

‘It’s just a sound that souls make,’ Lokesh explained with a satisfied grin. The words sent the girl deeper into her aunt’s apron.

‘They don’t teach how souls speak in those factory towns,’ Jara’s wife said, warning in her voice.

‘But something in her is trying to listen,’ Lokesh observed as the girl straightened, her head slightly cocked, her fear seemingly replaced with wonder as she gazed at Surya. One of the old Tibetans reappeared, her face clouded with worry, but she did not spread alarm. She was trying to control her fear, Shan saw. Despite Atso’s death she did not wish to disturb their first festival in many years.

‘It scares me,’ Jara’s wife confided in a nervous voice. ‘All these monks. If anyone from town . . .’

‘My mother said each year this day is full of miracles,’ Lokesh said, rubbing his grizzled white jaw thoughtfully. ‘Saints could appear from some *bayal*, she told me,’ he said with a twinkle in his eye, referring to the traditional hidden lands inhabited by deities and saints. ‘It is a time for joy, not fear. When is the last time you celebrated this day?’

The woman turned her head away, but Shan could not tell if she was embarrassed or just trying to ignore Lokesh. After a moment her head slowly turned back toward Surya. ‘I was just a girl,’ she said with a tiny, distant smile.

Lokesh turned toward a clay jar on a flat stone behind them, one of several scattered around the old courtyard, dipped his hand inside, then extended it toward her. She pulled her hands behind her back as though afraid, then, hesitantly, brought one hand forward and let Lokesh pour some of the white flour from the jar onto her palm. The woman stared uncertainly at her hand.

Lokesh grinned and made several small, upward motions with his open hand.

‘I have a cousin who is in prison for doing what you ask,’ the woman said, gazing solemnly at the flour Lokesh had

placed in her palm. She sighed, then abruptly threw the contents of her hand into the air, a gleeful cry escaping her husband's lips as she did so. In the next moment Lokesh did likewise, so that they were enveloped in a small cloud of barley flour.

The woman's tense face cracked with a smile as Lokesh danced a little jig, his arms outstretched at his sides, looking so light it seemed he might float away. She flung more flour into the air, then clapped her hands as she raised her face to let the flour drift onto her skin. 'He is alive for another year!' she called out. The cry was taken up by several of the older Tibetans, who began reaching into the jars themselves.

Throwing barley flour into the air was a traditional act of celebration, but the government had made it a crime for Tibetans to do so on this particular day. For today was the birthday of the exiled Dalai Lama.

*'Lha gyal lo!'* Lokesh called toward the sky. 'Victory to the gods!'

The woman paused, looking over Shan's shoulder and he turned to see the girl standing behind them, worry back on her face. Her aunt threw a handful of flour over the girl, who backed away from the cloud as if frightened of it.

As the woman studied the girl, her glee disappeared. She motioned the girl back toward Surya and the younger chanter.

But as Shan retreated several steps, the girl followed him. He lowered himself onto a rock and after a moment's hesitation the girl sat beside him.

'Is it all right?' she asked him in a timid voice. She had switched to Chinese.

'All right?' Shan replied in Tibetan.

'May they do this?'

Suddenly Shan could not bear to look into the girl's face. When he did not answer the girl began to nervously wipe the flour dust from her cheeks.

He reached out and gently pushed her arm down. ‘They did not have to ask me.’

‘You’re Chinese.’

He recalled a day five years earlier when soldiers had heaved him from a truck into the gulag compound near Lhadrung. He had lain facedown in the cold mud, semi-conscious, not knowing where he was, bleeding from one ear, pain spiking from his arms and belly where electroshock clips had been fastened, his eyes and mind struggling to focus because of the interrogation drugs still in his system. ‘From this day forward, your pain will subside,’ a quiet voice had suddenly whispered, and Shan had forced his eyes open to gaze into the serene face of an old Tibetan who, Shan soon learned, was a lama in his fourth decade of imprisonment. ‘In all your life it will not be so bad again,’ the lama explained as he had helped Shan to his feet. But during the year since his release Shan had discovered a new pain that not even the lamas could cure, an agony of guilt that could be triggered by the innocent question of a young girl.

He put his hand on the girl’s arm to stop her. ‘I wish the Dalai Lama was with his people,’ Shan said in a near whisper. ‘I wish him a long life.’

‘You mean you’re Buddhist?’

A bowl of buttered tea was thrust over Shan’s shoulder.

‘Something like that.’ Lokesh chuckled and squatted before them, sipping a second bowl. ‘When I was young,’ he continued, gazing solemnly at the girl, ‘my mother would take me deep into the mountains to see old suspension bridges over bottomless chasms. The bridges connected us to the outside world. No one knew how they were made or what held them up. They seemed impossible to build. When I asked, my mother said they were just there, because we needed them. That is our Shan.’

‘But is it all right?’ the girl asked Shan again in her meek, earnest tone.

‘What is your name?’ Shan asked.

‘Dawa. My father is a model worker in a Chinese factory,’ she added quickly. ‘He saved all year to be able to send me here. He could afford only the bus fare for me. I have never been out of the city.’ Shan glanced at Lokesh. Listen to the little girl, Surya had said as if in warning. But Dawa did not even know Tibet.

‘Dawa, I want it to be all right. Do you want it to be?’ Was that Surya’s point, Shan wondered, that they could only understand the day’s strange events by looking on them as an outsider?

The girl shyly nodded, searching Shan’s face. ‘How can a Chinese do such things?’ she asked. ‘Be a bridge. Does he mean you are part Tibetan?’

‘Other Chinese put me in prison, not because I committed a crime but because they feared I would tell the truth. I wanted to die then. I was going to die. But Lokesh and others like him taught me how to live again.’

The girl seemed unconvinced. Shan lifted a jar of flour and extended it toward her. She slowly shifted her gaze to the jar and then, her fingers trembling, she pulled some flour from it. A shiver of excitement seemed to course through her, then she threw the flour over their heads and solemnly studied it as it drifted downward. ‘I saw where they go. I think I know the way to the hidden land,’ she declared uncertainly, looking at Surya, who had risen from his seat beside the younger chanter and was now moving across the yard in a slow, graceful gait.

Shan looked at her, not understanding, then watched as the girl followed the monk into the ruins. A sudden unfamiliar sound caused him to turn toward the chorten. Laughter. Several of the older Tibetans were laughing, throwing flour over each other’s heads. The festival was truly under way.

But then a hand closed around his arm. Liya was at his side, her face pale. She gestured with her head toward the

old stone tower on the ridge above the ruins, nearly a mile away.

At first Shan saw nothing but then something green at the base of the tower moved and his heart leapt into his throat. There were soldiers at the tower, at least a dozen. He quickly surveyed the yard. No one else had noticed that the army was watching. If the Tibetans were warned they would panic and try to flee, though most lived to the west, above the valley, and their path home was now blocked.

'You have to tell him,' Liya said. 'You have to try,' she added in a forlorn tone.

Shan slowly nodded, watched as Liya disappeared into the nearest alleyway, then gazed upon the joyful Tibetans. They may have finally forgotten the hard existence they eked out of the rocky slopes, forgotten the fears that always shadowed them, but their jubilation would be short lived. He began searching for Gendun.

He found the lama five minutes later, sitting in a small clearing at the northern edge of the grounds, looking into the five-hundred-foot-deep chasm that abutted the northern edge of the ruins. Strangely, Gendun sat with his legs casually extended over the edge of the chasm. He was watching a hawk soar in the updrafts above the gorge, his eyes shining with pleasure. He did not turn but patted the rock beside him, inviting Shan to sit. 'I have not known such a day since I was a boy,' the lama said. 'We would erect a white tent by the monastery in the mountains where I was born. We sang all day. The monks would fasten a secret blessing to the top of a high pole and we would take turns climbing, trying to retrieve it.'

'There are soldiers,' Shan said quietly, studying the tattered lines of ropes and splintered wood that hung from the edge of the opposite side of the chasm, the remains of the old bridge that had once connected to the clearing, the northern foregate yard of the old gompa.