

Mudrooroo

Two Stories from Dharamsala

How I Tried To Change My Name

My name is Padma (pronounced Pema). It means Lotus as in our sacred mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum* (Oh jewel in the lotus), and in our religion it has many layers of meaning, one of which is purity, as a lotus thrusts itself out of the mud and ooze at the bottom of a pond, so are we to rise above the slime of the world; but like many young Tibetan exiles in these days exposed to all of – I shall call it the winds of change, for I don't wish you to think me holy or pious, like a nun. I enjoy being very much a part of the world and don't see myself ever entering a nunnery. No, I enjoy things too much. Yes, indeed, perhaps too much, but unlike my younger brother, Jamphel, I have a head on my shoulders. In fact, my dear mother considered me the little lady incapable of doing any wrong and bringing shame on our family as he had done.

I admit I tried to live up to my mother's estimation of me and even tried to be a good influence on my brother, even offering him a hundred rupees for every subject he topped in his class. He was a bit of a stupid, for he didn't once consider where in the world I would get what would amount to over a thousand rupees if he succeeded. Unfortunately, I under-estimated him, and he managed not only to top his class, but the whole school. After again making a fool of himself and bringing shame on us, he came to me for his money, and he had to be content with three hundred I managed to scrape together. He accepted the money and used it to run away south, just as he had before. He disappeared leaving us to clean up the mess he had left behind. Through him, we had lost our status in society, and it was then that my dear mother decided to send me away to finish my last year of schooling in Dharamsala. She believed that there, close to our beloved leader, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, I would be safe. I thought so too, for with one scamp in the family and with our father long gone into Tibet either smuggling or politicking, we certainly did not need another. We needed peace, though this was difficult to achieve what with Jamphel roaming somewhere or other and constant news on the radio of a Chinese crackdown in our poor homeland and many arrests. We prayed that father would be safe.

And so, I followed my brother south to Manali, then veered from his track southwest to Dharamsala. I had to wait in Manali for the connecting bus and sought to find him. At the bus station I even looked under the stairs where he had told me he had camped during a previous escapade. An Indian man was sitting there, and he stared at me until I grew uneasy and moved away. I went to my aunt's place to see her and learn if there was any news. There wasn't and she told me in no uncertain terms to leave Jamphel to his dreams and go to Dharamsala and concentrate on my studies. I promised to do this, but as soon as the bus

pulled away from her kind, but stern face, I could not help tears starting to my eyes. I felt ashamed of them and quickly wiped them away. I had to put all my energy into my last year at school, if I wanted to win a scholarship to continue on to college.

I thought that Dharamsala as the seat of our government in exile would be a very serious place and for some reason much larger than it turned out to be. Instead, it was the size of Leh, my hometown, but much greener and quite pleasant. Namgyal Monastery, the temple of His Holiness, was right in the center of the town and before going on to the school I went there. You can imagine the thrill as I looked through the gates at his residence, prayed at the main temple and wished for a long life for him. I also vowed to the Buddha that I would study hard and not disgrace my family as my brother had done. I lived up to my promise for some time.

The school was away from the center of town and its distractions. I quietly settled in and immersed myself in my studies. I didn't even go out in my free time. Still, I made friends, one of them was Yungtso who although she was the same age, sixteen, made me feel like a younger sister. She used to tease me about all the work I was doing, until finally she got me to go out with her. I was surprised when I met her and found her wearing tight American jeans and a light blouse under which a bra pushed up her breasts rather than flattened them. Her walk was marvelous to me. She swayed from side to side, pushing out first one hip then the other. I watched in amazement at the way her behind shifted; but what struck me most, in fact I was thunderstruck to stare into her pretty little face and see that she was wearing makeup and lipstick.

She noticed my reaction to her and the expressions chasing each other across my face. More pleased than annoyed, she trilled: 'Pema-la, this isn't Leh, it is the Capital of our Free Tibet and His Holiness has said that we must change our ways - why, we must become free spirits,' and she gave a giggle and shaped her mouth so that I had to see how pretty it was with the lipstick.

I tried to answer that older Tibetans, such as my father and mother, also believed in freedom, but still kept to our own customs and good manners. 'Oh,' she retorted, shaping her mouth again in that pretty way, 'they come from Tibet and I, I come from India. We're more modern, more *with it*.' As she said the English expression, she clicked her fingers and did a few steps of a dance that made me smile. Then she hugged me and arm in arm we went down into the streets of the town.

And Dharamsala, our Little Lhasa as I discovered did seem *with it*. Perhaps because it was the capital of our nation in exile, perhaps because of the many tourists strolling the streets, the number of beer bars, His Holiness looking down upon us from his house upon the hill, there was a sense of throbbing newness, of a modernity that I found I wanted to be part of. I let Yungtso drag me into a bar. I was filled with trepidation, then with a growing sense of being where it was all happening, where we belonged as we sat and sipped on our cokes and listened to the throbbing Western music that entranced us towards a different world.

'Don't look now, but that boy is staring at you,' Yungtso hissed in my ear.

I hung my head and glanced sideways. Yes, a boy was looking towards me, at me, for he saw my eyes on him and winked. I quickly removed my eyes, but his image lingered in my mind. He had long hair and a nicely shaped nose in a peaked face.

'He was, wasn't he,' my friend said, then she began to flutter as if she was a bird caught in the net of a hunter, though I was the one that had been snared. Finally, after the display, she said loudly, 'Come on, come on, there's a Julia Roberts film on at the video parlor. It's a new one. Let's go, let's go!' And she hustled me out to the exit, almost forgetting to pay in her haste. She stopped just outside the door. 'They usually follow,' she informed me with an authority that made me realize that such meeting of eyes had occurred to her too and that she knew the route to follow from such first glances.

But he didn't follow, and I don't know if I was relieved or not, though Yungtso was angry because she had thought that he would pay for our tickets if he was that keen. We went to see the film and it was then that I found another love: Julia Roberts! The only other films I had seen before had been of our struggle for freedom; but Julia Roberts was freedom! She was all that any girl could wish to be and, the thought came, all that any boy could wish for. She was sassy; she was strong, alert, beautiful, never frazzled and not only knew what she wanted, but how to get it. She was perfection and beyond anything I had ever thought to achieve. Now, instantly, I wanted not only to be like her, but to be her, *for sure!*

Now I was the one urging Yungtso into modernity and the changing of old ways. I got her to teach me how to apply makeup and lipstick and not content with her went to Zorba's, a beauty salon to study how to apply them properly and to the maximum Julia Roberts effect. I spent hours with Yungtso critiquing my complexion and examining my face in a mirror. All this took money, and I wrote home to dear old mother who sent me enough to satisfy my desires, for a time. Now I too had a bra that made my breasts stand out and jeans that showed my rounded bottom, which alas had not the flatness of Julia Roberts'. To seek for this perfection, I began to diet, to thin myself down and away from my Tibetan chubbiness. I walked her walk and attempted her American talk. I went to all her movies again and again and even bribed the video parlor proprietor to screen them constantly. I thought to have my hair done in her style though the school frowned on short hair; but in one of her movies she wore it long and I copied that style and even applied a reddish tint to it. Finally, I realized the ultimate and bought a pink tee shirt with her portrait on it and her name across my breasts. It fitted like a glove. Now I felt like her, that some magic came from her image, as I strutted my stuff, confidently striding the streets, none of that wriggling for me. I even tried a cigarette in our favorite bar and almost coughed my lungs out, but that was fine, Julia Roberts did not smoke. I gave a brazen laugh that made everyone look across at me as I stubbed it out.

Now Yungtso, my dear friend, became the tame one, India to my America.

'Don't you think you're taking this a little too far? If you are not careful, you'll end up in trouble and even expelled,' she tried to caution.

I knew that my studies were suffering, but what were they to me? I could always catch up. 'Hey, that boy still has eyes for me. I have a good mind to go over and say "Hi".'

'No, don't do that.'

'Why not, Julia Roberts would.'

'You're not *her*, Pema!'

'That's what you think, and call me Julia from now on. I hate that stupid Pema, it's so, so *unreal*.'

'Just be careful, have some sense.'

'I've got more than enough sense for both of us. Do you think that Julia Roberts ever lets a situation get out of her control? She knows where it's *at*, all of it and more than enough to have a good time. Hey, that reminds me, the Tibetan Students Association is organizing a dance - let's go, move our butts and dominate the floor. Perhaps he'll be there?' And I shot a wide-eyed glance at the boy; held his eyes and this time it was he that looked away. It was a small victory.

Yungtso tried to bring me down to earth, down to the reality about me. She said: 'But don't we have to be in school then, Pema, I mean Julia.'

'Who cares, it's not often that there's a disco dance and that boy's been making eyes at me for far too long.' I gave my brazen laugh that made everyone stare at me, darted a look at the boy, then hustled Yungtso away so that we would have plenty of time to get ready for the dance.

It was the first dance that I had been to and when we entered, I clung to Yungtso and felt shy, that is until I remembered that I was Julia Roberts and must be the center of attention. The loud Western music pounded out as disco beat of fun, fun, fun and now I was up and dancing and taking that fun for my own. I was beautiful, I was sexy, I was bitchy, I was quirky and boy after boy asked me to dance, all calling me Julia. Then it was Nyima's turn. He was the boy from the bar, and I had long learnt his name. He swirled me off my feet and I forgot everything. He smiled at as he whispered: 'Julia, you're so *there* and *with it*.' And I replied, 'Nyima, stare at me as you did when you first saw me.' And gave my brazen laugh to hide my thoughts about how I wished that he had a trendy name to go along with his dark flashing eyes, his long flowing hair and lithe jean-clad body.

Julia led him on like a good fisherwoman leads on a fish and soon he was hooked, but so was she. He said that he adored her, and she replied with that laugh and accepted as her due, when she finally gave him what he wanted.

Love was a constant in the Julia Roberts movies, and it was supposed to be fulfilling, but I never saw her in the positions that Nyima loved me. In fact, at first I didn't like it all that much and even wondered if this was because I had never seen Julia Roberts in such a scene. Kisses were fine, I could practice my techniques with him, but the other? - and worse, it had consequences, as had my staying out nights and missing classes. Before I realized it, I was before the headmaster who threatened to expel me. I confronted him with Yungtso and a group of friends, with the result that I was expelled. My persona cracked and for hours I was poor Pema wondering what my dear mother would say. I escaped such thoughts by putting on my favorite tee-shirt, carefully applying makeup over

my skin which had become blotchy and going off to see Nyima who had said so many times that he adored me and cared for me beyond life itself.

He was in our favorite bar. I sat across from him and told him that I loved him more than ever and needed him desperately.

His face was blank, and those dark soulful eyes, seemingly fixed for all time on me, stared off at a blank wall, as he replied: 'How can I help and support you when I barely can help and support myself? See you around,' he muttered, the last words in English and abandoned the frantic girl.

At least Yungtso was a real friend and she urged me to return to Leh. I replied that I would think about it, not knowing then that she had already written to my mother. If I had, I wondered what I might have done, screamed, laughed or simply died feeling that I had been betrayed by all. Luckily, I did not know it then and so at a loss what to do, I decided to go to the temple where I had not been since that first day that seemed so long ago. As I walked along Temple Road, my heart gave a start, then collapsed. There was Nyima sitting at a table outside a cafe and he had only eyes for the girl sitting beside him with her hip pressing against his thigh. She was a Western girl and looked, I had to admit it, more like Julia Roberts than I had ever accomplished. He had found something close to the real thing and all that I was left with were tears streaming down and streaking my face.

I kept my head straight, my expression blank, but those betraying tears... Some men and women looked at me in curiosity and one or two even asked me what was wrong; but he had refused to concern himself with my distress. Now he was behind me and so was Julia Roberts. I was simply Pema, a Tibetan girl from Leh and one in trouble. My tears had dried by the time I entered the temple and bowed before the great image of the Buddha.

I sat and gazed at his large golden face serenely looking down on all the suffering of the world including my own and it was then that I became intensely aware of the life growing within me without any effort on my part. I saw it as a small golden ball incessantly forming into an image of a boy child. A wave of peace flowed from him and all through my body dissolving the Julia Roberts persona once and for all. The past began to seem like a dream, though the consequences were still with me and would be for a long time. It was then that a hand touched my shoulder and I turned to find my dear mother there beside me.

'It is my destiny,' I said to her with a smile.

'It is our fate,' she replied with loving concern.

As we sat gazing at each other, an old monk shuffled towards us and as he passed, he murmured, 'Om mani padme hum.' We put our hands together and bowed our heads. When we raised them, he had disappeared and it was only then that we realized that it had been His Holiness, our leader, the Dalai Lama. We had been blessed by his presence and now we knew that everything would be all right.

I end my story here, which marks the end of my time in Dharamsala. I finished my studies back in my old school in Leh and now I wait with my dear mother for the birth of my child. We both hope that he will grow up strong and

straight and in a Free Tibet. *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Oh, the jewel residing in the lotus of my womb.

25 September 2001

School Boy Hero

The dust of Leh settled on my steel skin and the ruined palace usually scowling over the town smiled as I and my companions recounted our adventures in the huge city of Manali. I grew and grew in each retelling until it became Metropolis filled with ice cream and video parlors and whatever the fertile minds of young boys could invent to dream away the hours in the school where the masters did not welcome me back as a returning hero. This was left to the other students. I strutted and told my stuff, ignored my lessons and felt even less the punishments meted out. I didn't even attempt to bluff my way through the mid-year examinations. What was schoolwork to Superboy, for nowhere in all the comics and film and TV series that have been made can you find that the original Clark Kent excelled in schoolwork. He was too busy saving the world to worry about such stuff as homework. He was too much the hero to worry about any torments the school masters might inflict and smiled as he secretly basked in the glow his flashing form evoked from his school chums. How I wished that I could fly, a blue streak flashing red in the blue sky. *Is that a plane, is that a rocket? – No, it is Jamphel!* However, alas, I could not ascend into the heavens and had to make do with my only super attribute, a skin of steel. No super strength, no x-ray vision, no faster than a speeding bullet, just a Tibetan boy with a super hard skin. No, I refused to admit that, for had I not already had an adventure, journeying to Manali to enjoy the sights of that fabulous city. I knew there would be more adventures and meanwhile I bided my time and put actions to that word, 'Thief!', father had flung at me, before he left for Tibet either to smuggle or politick, one or the other, for he loved both.

In the night I squirmed under the high fences surrounding the army bases and stole bits and pieces of trucks to sell for what else but ice cream and films. Indian Bollywood blockbusters were filled with heroes, and I dreamt my way through many an epic. Then came a reckoning of sorts. I slouched into the examination room and the papers didn't frazzle me one bit, or did it when I achieved the ultimate low, zero, zero, zero, zero in all the subjects I sat for. Yes, it was a school record, one that I could brag about; but my big sister, Pema was aghast. Her smooth brow wrinkled her small face in despair and disgust.

'Zero, zero and all zeros, how could you disgrace our family like this. How could you get only –'

'Yes,' I broke in, 'zero, all zeroes, it is a feat unheard of before –'

'It is no joking matter, think of your poor mother, your father doing his duty for his country –'

'Or for himself. He - '

'You are lazy and - '

'Well, I did try hard.'

'-lacking in, well, not confidence, you have enough of that, but diligence.'

'Perhaps the teachers - '

'You need to set yourself a goal.'

'You mean ascend from zero. I do want to fly and that is a goal.'

'Again, I say that you have brought shame on us. Mother is worried almost to distraction.'

'She has no need to be.'

'But I have a proposition for you.'

'You have?'

'Yes, for every subject you achieve a distinction in, I will give you one hundred rupees.'

'A hundred rupees; but that'll be more than a thousand,' I exclaimed, suddenly gloating over my good fortune.

'Twelve hundred to be precise, but I doubt that you will even be able to claim one hundred.'

I at once agreed, though not from greed. It would be more than enough to subsidize another trip south, why even to Delhi. With the glow of the rupees ever before me, I studied and studied, even improved my handwriting so that I would not lose any marks. The end of year examinations came and I was ready. I sailed through them with ease and ascended from zero to 99.9 percent in every subject. No one had ever come near to my feat, but then I was a superhero, was I not?!

The masters of the school failed to consider this. How could a boy that had been at the bottom of all his classes suddenly be at the top? They held conferences and poured over my test papers. They failed to find a single item they could fault. It was obvious that I had not cheated. They had to let my results stand. I gloated in my knowledge and my ability. I was a hero, just like, say Napoleon, down and up and sideways, then down for ever, but I did not let that worry me.

I still wasn't flavor of the month with my teachers, especially Master Tenzin Samdup, the headmaster that fancied himself a cut above all of us just because he had managed to find large donations for our school in America. In fact, he had been to that land of opportunity more than once or thrice and to show his importance and knowledge of the English, he always carried two or three fat English language tomes about with him. Danielle Steele and Joan Collins were his favorite writers. I knew this because once I had run into him, made profuse apologies and picked up his books. He had snarled at me then: 'Stupid fellow' before strutting away. He walked as if he had a stick stuck up his rear hole and perhaps he did, for he was up himself.

So, when I achieved what they saw as an impossibility and in fact tried to deny it as much as possible, I foresaw trouble ahead and decided to plan some to counter it. Headmaster Tenzin Samdup and his cohorts did not treat us students at all well and we were to put it mildly "pissed off". As a natural leader and hero, it was simple for me to fan these embers of discontent into flickering flames that

were ready to burst forth with a little more wind. I kept the flames low, for it would have to be the masters that applied the bellows.

The day of the prize giving arrived, and there promised to be more entertainment than was usual at such a gathering. Parents filled the main body of the auditorium. We students sat to one side and the masters, in national dress for the occasion, were arrayed on the stage. Now my moment was at hand. As befitting my new status, I was to be called onto the stage first to receive my prize, a plaque of some sort of metal, from the headmaster himself. He glared at me as if I should not have been there, the dummy of the school that had lucked into top spot. I smiled at him shyly and slyly, and then my eyes went to the plaque. Something about it made me uneasy.

Now the headmaster began his spiel. Even on this occasion, with all the parents before him, he could not conceal his dislike for me. His main weapon was sarcasm and he made use of it.

‘Wonders will never cease, and at my side I truly have a boy wonder, though it can only show that under my direction our teaching methods have vastly improved. I use the latest techniques from the United States of course and this young man, this Jamphel, who once was the school dummy and a troublemaker to the nth degree has finally come under their influence and methodology. Before in all his classes, he loafed, misbehaved, and slept, that is until now when under my compassionate persistence, he has outdone himself and not only topped his class, but the whole school. It is something that I can be proud of. His aggregate of marks is a record and there is little doubt that he did this through his own work as we checked and double checked his test papers, and though we are not completely satisfied, we have given him the benefit of our doubts and sincerely hope that he will continue to do well -’

He might have droned on in this manner for the next hour or so, but I was already tired with being held up as an example of his imported teaching methods. I stepped to him, took the plaque from his hand and was about to dash it to the floor, when he lost control and slapped me right in front of the parents. What was worse and a surprise to me was that it stung as slaps had never done before. My hand relaxed and the plaque fell to the floor and shattered like cast iron, though it wasn't. The other teachers came to their feet, rushed towards me, and indeed were pummeling me, when there was a roar from the rest of the students as they rushed into the fray. This was what I had expected, but I was in no condition to exult as I was being mercilessly beaten. Then it was the masters' turn, though not exactly, for they quickly went on the offensive and being fully-grown men and women prevailed. The riot was quelled and when all was quiet, I still held center stage lying there battered and bruised and aching all over.

I suppose by now, you must be wondering about my vaunted skin of steel and how could such puny blows and kicks inflict harm on me. I give only one word to explain it: Kryptonite!

Yes, the dreaded bane of superheroes! The headmaster, whatever and whoever villain he might be, had made the plaque out of the metal with dreadful results on me. From the Boy of Steel I became the boy of flesh and – what was more! – in terrible trouble.

I was beaten and bruised, sad, though not disheartened. Perhaps in time my super skin might return, perhaps one day I would be able to fly, perhaps I would learn not to be so trusting, so gullible. How could I think that my sister could have a thousand rupees? Have you ever heard of a student having so much? No, and still I have not come across one. I confronted her and demanded my due and although it was difficult for her she managed to collect together three hundred rupees which she eventually handed over to me. This raised my spirits considerably, for I could escape south again, and if I traveled far and long enough, I might get away from the baneful effects of the metal, though for all I knew and it now seems likely, a meteor had flamed through the atmosphere seeding the entire planet with Kryptonite dust. Still, with or without a super skin, I remained sure that I was a hero with a thousand faces, a thousand tasks to perform and a thousand tribulations to pass through. I had just begun and what I had already done, what had already happened to me revealed beyond doubt that I was on my way to my high destiny. I was no Bizarro, Superman's ungainly alter ego always creating havoc, but the real thing. One day I knew that I too would flash through the sky. 'Is that a plane, is that a rocket? - No, it's Jampel who is faster than a speeding bullet.' And so, putting on a heroic face, I continued on, doing task after task, suffering tribulation after tribulation, knowing that sooner or later my day would arrive, and I would be complete.

26 September 2001.