

Physician

a short story

by

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Physician

I was in McLeod Ganj an old British Hill Station in the state of Himachal Pradesh in Northern India carrying out research for a writing project when I first noticed a pain in the heel of my right foot. On examination it was immediately obvious I had an infection that had been sourced through a large crack in the hard skin. Having fairly recently arrived from the tropical beaches of South India - where my feet had been immersed most days in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean - they had not taken too kindly to the change of climate presented to them by the Himalia in winter.

Not, you understand, that day-time temperatures - similar to a pleasant English spring day - was the cause but to the clear skies of frosty nights that had been responsible for drying out the hard skin to the texture of pumice stone.

As I carried out this examination on the rooftop terrace of the Green Hotel I was in view to many of those gathered for the hotel's rich breakfast of sompa - a Tibetan grass grain not too dissimilar from wheat - served with dried apricots and hot yaks milk. It was to one of these Westerners that now joined me that my attention turned. Enquiring as to the nature of my problem I simply placed my leg on the table so that she could see for herself.

Jane was an American in her mid-30s of Jewish extraction and from her Tibetan clothes and pray-beads around her neck an obvious supporter of the Dalai Lama now resident just a few miles down the mountain in Dharmsala. She was also a mine of information. I very quickly learned that the Dalai Lama's old physician - now retired from his holinesses service as he was unable to keep up with his punishing schedule - had set-up a clinic in town.

Furthered with directions from my newfound friend I was soon standing in line waiting for an *audience*. I say 'audience' as this was how a Tibetan woman who was handing out wooden discs with numbers written on them presented it to me. Ascertaining that my condition was not life threatening she advised me that I should return the next day as the number suggested to her that I was unlikely to see the physician before then.

In a way this was a stroke of good luck for later that day it dawned on me that this physician might be able to help me in my research and that had I seen him straight away I might not

have seen the duel potential an audience with the Dalai Lama's old physician presented.

My research was for a work of historical fiction that was partly set in Tibet in the 19th century. I had previously been informed by a Buddhist that the 12th Dalai Lama's physician had been sent away by his Holiness because he did not want him getting the blame for his death by poisoning. And, what's more, that this physician had eventually written his autobiography. It was this autobiography that I was in the process of tracking down. Finding any form of mundane history relating to Tibet is notoriously difficult and somewhat curious considering the enormous quantity of historical records showing the entire evolutionary development of their spiritual endeavours.

I'm sure you can see, and probably a lot quicker than I did, the relevance an opportunity that an audience with the recent Dalai Lama's physician might present in regard to this matter.

So it was that when I was ushered into the small surgery and gazed upon an ancient face of benign intelligence that my own lit-up. If there was no reciprocal response from the physician, I was not to be denied, as this was to be delivered by his young female assistant who delivered an enigmatic smile of some charm. Unlike the physician who was dressed in long brown and gold robes she was dressed in jeans and trainers with a hip-length traditional Tibetan wrap-around top bound at the waist by a colourful band - as such her dress represented the cultural duality of most young Tibetans.

She greeted me on behalf of the physician explaining in perfect English that he didn't speak English and that she would translate.

Having thanked her I then proceeded to relate my problem while showing her the infection. They both examined the crack while carrying out a conversation of some length. The old man placing his fingers at various points around the ankle was followed by his taking my pulse at several places around my wrists followed by his young assistant carrying out the same procedure under his guidance - obviously she was his apprentice.

I was then furnished with a series of malteser sized balls of both brown and green colours with instructions on how - I must chew them before swallowing - and when to take them - 3 times a day before meals. Having concluded this part successfully I then turned to the matter of the 12th Dalai Lama's physician

and more specifically to his autobiography. The young girl related my question to the old physician to which I could see by the curious expression on his face that he was searching his memory. After several seconds he shook his head and said something to his assistant who turned to me with a slightly embarrassed smile and said that he could not remember.

I told her not to worry and thanked them for their patience.

Now that would have been the end of the matter if I had not bumped into Jane a few days later in the street market. The conversation veered between my recollection of consuming the medicine - where I imaginatively described the taste of the green balls as similar to dried yak's tripe and likened the brown ones to yak droppings - and to the remarkable sensation that had overwhelmed me 2 days into treatment that produced a mind state of extreme well being by the sheer force of the emotion it exerted. The healed heal being almost a detail compared to the psychological effect of this potent medicine.

Jane joked that it was probably the source of the Dalai Lama's endless bounty of mirth. And I joked back that if we could only find out the formula we could probably alter world history. Jane changed tack at this point enquiring if I was aware that the physician was a Tulku. That is: a returned one. Someone that has returned for another life to help others find their mystical path.

This new information was playing around the periphery of a yet unrealised insight when Jane took her leave. Her sudden departure on some errand for the Sierra monastery that she was closely associated with prevented me from enquiring further. I was left frustrated to the point of annoyance but could not figure out **why**, when I saw coming through the market none other than the physician's assistance. She walked right up to me and enquired about my heel to which I showed her the happy evidence and then showered on her so much praise as to make her produce the enigmatic smile that had so beguiled me on our first meeting.

She then rocked me back by confiding that perhaps I had not understood what she had said at our previous meeting, namely that the physician was in fact the reincarnation of the 12th Dalai Lama's physician and that when she had said that he could not remember, he had literally meant that he could not remember writing his autobiography.

This news rendered me speechless, and for those that know me, this is not a common occurrence. She then took her leave by

touching her forehead to my sleeve - an unusual mode in any culture.

As I gazed down at the touched material a thought sprang through my mind from my previous research and that was that Tulkus always take on as apprentices newly arrived Tulkus.

I slowly turned to see the physician's apprentice some 15 metres into the crowded market and just in time to see her turn to me with a smile that was changing into pursed lips and a finger being placed vertically to them.

And even through the market sounds I heard the whispered message: shhhh