PARADISE

by

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I was spending my vacation this summer in Songino. There were few elderly people there, most of the vacationers being young, yet I managed to find two pleasant companions, Sanjid and Gonchik.

Sanjid was once visited by his son, a tall handsome youth of about twenty. Gonchik then remarked to Sanjid with envy in his voice, "You're a lucky fellow. I'm alone. But what's the use, you wouldn't understand anyway. You have a wife and children."

Gonchik sighed deeply and his face took on that sad expression which makes young people seem old, and old ones aged. Sanjid gave him a look of sincere sympathy, but though the latter's sadness evoked compassion, he couldn't restrain himself from saying proudly, "Yes, I'm blessed with children. My Gombo, the one who visited me, is the second in our family." And after a slight pause added haltingly, "But I'm his stepfather, as is the case with two other of our children."

"Tell us about yourself, Sanjid," I asked.

"Oh, what's there to tell..." Sanjid said shyly.

But Gonchik and I continued to press him and he finally gave in. We moved to an ivy-covered arbor, settled down comfortably, and got ready to listen to his story. The sun, filtering through the green foliage, had covered the earthen floor with yellow splotches. Sanjid's voice was coming softly, as if from afar, and there rose before our eyes a picture of long bygone years.

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I was a lama before the Popular Revolution and considered a scholar in those days. I was only a little boy when my father once
place me before him and, stroking my hair, asked whether I preferred to eat my fill and have all the boiled rice and meat I wanted or always go hungry. The former prospect naturally seemed much more tempting to me. "And when my last hour strikes," he added, "you'll pray that I be taken to paradise."

I agreed. I had hardly turned eight when Father took me to the nearest monastery and placed me under a lama by the name of Molom. This was on the eve of the revolution. The lama, a corpulent old man with a clean-shaven head, commenced my education with considerable zeal, and two years later I was already being sent with several other lay brothers, who had made particular progress in the ecclesiastical sciences, to Urga to continue my education at the famous Gandan Monastery. My good fortune so overjoyed my parents, they even tightened their belts to buy me a small four-walled ger so that I would have a dwelling of my own. My mentor in Gandan was a lama by the name of Shagdar whose nickname "Resembling No One" was considered flattering and suited him perfectly. He was then about forty and held to be very learned in the scriptures and ritual practices. Even his appearance was singular. The expression on his face was that of an innocent child, his arms and hands were thin and white like a woman's, and his voice was very quiet, though extremely distinct. He tutored many lay brothers, but I made friends with only one of them, a young man by the name of Namjil who had come from the western part of the country. He had a quick mind and phenomenal memory; he could memorize the most difficult prayer after only one reading.

After the revolution, schools and clubs began to be opened everywhere, automobiles appeared in the streets, and young people started to go to the movies in the evenings. This new life seemed amazing and held a growing attraction for us. Lay brothers gradually began leaving the monastery one by one. I also went to the city frequently, though my lamaist attire embarrassed me. Once, two young girls with bright ribbons in their tresses and bags full
of books came walking down the street toward me. One of them cast a curious glance in my direction and remarked out loud to her companion, "Look a real lama! Now, what will he do when he grows up to be a man? Surely not mutter prayers? Who needs them!" The girl chuckled scornfully, then both burst out laughing and continued on their way. I remember feeling how my face turned red, hot as if I had been scalded with boiling water.

The Gandan lay brothers were now constantly involved in rebellious talk. Instead of cramming prayers they spent long evenings exchanging bold dreams. Some dreamed of the army and an officer's career, others simply wanted to leave the monastery, set up a house, marry and start a family. I listened with interest and amazement to this talk, but my mentor Shagdar, noticing this, would immediately summon me to his ger and, placing some religious book in my hand, say, "Study and master Buddha's great wisdom. The time is near when our religion will again acquire its former power and strength. Don't become like those lay brothers who always hanker for the mundane. They'll know no happiness here or after death. But you, going in time to the next world, will find yourself in paradise."

Once my elder brother, who had just arrived from the eastern border where he was serving in the army, visited me. He was only two years my senior but much broader in the shoulders, and his self-confidence and buoyancy immediately won my heart.

"Don't you think you've been much too long in the monastery? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? A healthy guy like you steeped in idleness."

"Don't talk that way, it's a great sin!" I retorted in fright.

But he insisted.

"Don't stand in the way of my paradise!" I finally exclaimed in despair.

"Well, perhaps you could tell me where this paradise of yours is located?" he asked smiling.
I recalled everything Shagdar had told me and explained it all to my brother. This land lay somewhere down south. Silver trees with gold and coral leaves grew there, it was summer all year round, paradise birds sang songs, and only men lived there. The inhabitants of this paradise had nothing to worry about, no cattle to graze and no wheat to grow. All were equal, there were no masters and slaves.

When I had already tired elaborating on the bliss in paradise, my brother smiled ironically and asked:

"And how are you planning to get to that land where all are equal and live so happily?"

"I have to pray a lot and teach others to do the same," I replied confidently.

My brother burst out laughing. "That sure sounds great! So it's not at all hard to land in paradise. Say, have any of your lamas already been to that place? No? Then how come you're so well informed about life there?"

I got sore at him and refused to continue the argument. On leaving, he said there was no paradise, that the lamas had themselves invented it to fool such simpletons as me. There was no point in expecting happiness after one's death. One should achieve happiness in this life and not through prayer but creating it with one's own hands.

My brother stopped in Ulaanbaatar and called on me frequently. No matter how hard I tried to evade the subject of paradise, he kept reopening it again and again.

"They are building socialism in the Soviet Union, a country neighboring on ours. We are also building a new life, but you only want to peek through a crack at it," he once said to me.

He began to explain to me how fine life would be under communism, and that it would soon come if everyone worked hard and with a will. But I didn't understand the word communism then and said that communism probably was that very same paradise about
which I was dreaming. My brother agreed but the next day was again ridiculing my pronouncements about life in paradise and continued to tell me about communism.

"The main thing," he said, "is for you to leave this place as soon as possible. Just take a look around you and see how much has to be done!"

My brother did not stay long in the capital; he was again summoned to the border and left. Every new day brought fresh news about lamas leaving monasteries. And then a rebellion of counter-revolutionary lamas from among the upper clergy broke out, and that completely undermined the church's standing. The number of parishioners in our temples decreased steadily and so did the trickle of monetary donations. But religion still held Namjil and myself firmly in its snare.

After supper one day our mentor Shagdar, who had long been suffering some mysterious disease that had emaciated him so his skin had become thinner than parchment, suddenly fell flat on his back never to rise again. After his funeral, Namjil and I, being his most beloved pupils, began to go through his belongings and discovered hidden away under old manuscripts bound in wooden covers chests filled with worldly riches — ingots of silver and rolls of silk, velvet and brocade. The monastery's treasury took it all away, leaving us only some books. We decided to acquaint ourselves with their contents and found that instead of prayers and religious writings they contained accounts. Doubts began to assail me at this point. If Shagdar had counted on paradise after his death, what need had he to amass such wealth here in the vale of life? Soon Namjil and I were the only lay brothers in the monastery.

"All our fellow monks have found their road in life and only you and I are stuck in this monastery," Namjil once said to me.

"And what do you suggest?" I asked and was myself struck with amazement; not so long ago I would have considered asking a question
about action a terrible sin, let alone contemplating action itself.

"Have you heard about the local industrial combine? Well, I spoke to a certain man and he promised to help us get jobs in the mess hall there."

I was a pretty good cook and had long been preparing meat dumplings and pies for the lamas.

"Well, we could try. Do you think they'll hire me?" I asked.

So Namjil and I began working in the mess hall which was completely serviced by former lamas. Some of them continued to wear the lamaist robe, others had acquired lay garb, but on top of the latter all of us wore at work a snow-white smock. Our mess hall became famous for its pies and tasty aromatic tea.

In the meantime the old man on whose plot my ger stood decided to move to his daughter and sold his plot. I didn't know where to pitch my ger, and again Namjil saved the day.

"Look here," he said, "my kid sister owns a big plot. I'm sure she won't object for you to pitch your ger there. We'll call on her tomorrow."

His sister's name was Khanda. She had three little children: two boys, one five, the other four years old, and a baby girl a few months old. Namjil introduced me to her and then went off somewhere, saying he would soon return. I felt very awkward; I had never had any female acquaintances and simply didn't know what to say and how to behave. She, too, was noticeably embarrassed, but her little boys, very sociable kids, started a game, and we soon became friends.

"It looks like rain," Khanda muttered. "I better go saw some firewood and bring it in before the rain wets it."

She took up a saw and went out. I naturally followed. The log we had to saw up was very gnarled and we just couldn't get the saw going smoothly. Each pulled in his own direction, but we seemed to be getting nowhere and finally burst out laughing. Then I suddenly jerked, my hand slipped, and I cut a finger. It began
to bleed. Khanda cried out in fright, rushed into the ger, and immediately reappeared with some cotton and a box of matches. She put a match to the cotton and the latter to the wound. A searing red-hot pain shot through the finger, but the blood stopped. And then she blew on the wound tenderly, cooling it.

"Well, how is it?" she asked. "Mother used to teach me that a wound always had to be seared."

The finger was burning terribly, but I replied with a smile, "Oh, it's nothing. It doesn't even hurt."

Then I began chopping wood, while she started fixing dinner. Her graceful little figure kept reappearing on the threshold every now and then, asking me to bring some water or light the fire.

It had got quite dark outside in the meantime, the sky had become overcast, bolts of fire were piercing the gray clouds every once in a while, and blue and orange summer lightning kept flaring up in the west. The first tender, warm drops wet my face, and I sought shelter in the ger. It soon started pouring, and the next thing we knew rain was coming through cracks and tears in the roof. Khanda quickly brought out all her utensils — pots, plates and cups — and we set them out to catch the dripping water. The little ones were breathing quietly in sweet slumber on a broad bed to the right of the door, behind a curtain. We settled down opposite them, I on the edge of Khanda's bed, and she squatting near the hearth. Having exchanged a few insignificant remarks we fell silent. It was probably already late for she inadvertently dozed off and nearly pitched her nose into the fire. I couldn't help feeling at fault. Here I had occupied her bed and so inconvenienced her. I tugged her warily by the sleeve, muttering something to the effect that she should lie down and I would sit at the hearth. She opened her eyes wide and, raising her hands to straighten her hair, laughed softly.

No longer sleepy, I rose and sat next to her. Little by little we started up a conversation. To the accompaniment of the
patterning rain she began telling me about her not too happy lot.

"You know, I just had no luck in life," she said, her eyes glued to the fire. "It so happened that misfortune entered my life together with inspector Gonchik who arrived in our parts. I was living with my parents and was engaged to a nice guy, a childhood friend. But I had hardly turned eighteen, when Gonchik turned up, and was inexperienced and foolish. Gonchik's sugary talk about love and the wonderful life we'd live in the city bewitched me. No matter how much my father and mother kept repeating it would be a mistake to marry such a flighty ladies' man, I refused to listen to reason. In addition he began ingratiating himself with my parents, assuring them with honeyed words that he meant to be the truest and tenderest of husbands. That's how it happened that I left with him for Ulaanbaatar. Gonchik lived with his parents who received me under their roof. During our first months we were indeed happy. One could hardly imagine a more loving couple. Speaking of us, people would say 'they're like fish and water.'

Then fall came. The wind began chasing yellow leaves down the streets, house and ger roofs were covered with hoarfrost in the morning, and I was feeling very blue — I was expecting, but my husband, my loving Gonchik, had suddenly grown cold to me. He was rarely at home, always saying he had been detained at work, and coming late for dinner. At times, saying he was very busy, he wouldn't come home at all. I believed him until once a neighbor told me that she had been seeing him with a young and attractive woman. I almost went mad with grief. If he hadn't loved me, why had he brought me here? But love for him was still alive in my heart, and I didn't once reproach him, fearing he'd desert me altogether.

In the meantime a baby was born to us. My mother-in-law was very happy, but Gonchik ignored the baby completely as if he were not his father. This hurt me deeply, and many were the tears I shed in those days. Fearing that grief would dry up my milk, my mother-in-law began reproving her son. The tears and reproaches
sort of got through to him and his attitude changed. He would even take the little one in his arms and rock him. Peace returned to our ger. But when I gave birth to our second child, he again turned cold and morose. There were rumors he was meeting another woman. But the husband of this new paramour of his proved to be a very resolute person. He went to Gonchik's place of work and complained about him to his superiors. I learned about this later, but in the meantime I was happy that he was again coming home on time. But when another year had passed, his parents died, and he said to me, "I first thought we'd live a long life together, but it doesn't seem to work out. I'm probably not cut out for married life."

You just can't imagine my feelings then — anger and resentment choked me. I was full of despair — two little ones on my hands and a third one coming. But Gonchik cared for nothing. He didn't even say good-bye. He just got up one morning, had breakfast and left for good. I was told he had finally managed to have his own way; he got his paramour to divorce her husband, and they left together for some distant place. All that remained for me was to cry my eyes out. And that I did most diligently, the front flap of my deel constantly wet with tears.

Learning of the misfortune that had befallen me, Father came to see me. He reminded me of how Mother and he had tried to stop me from making this mistake, and reproved me for my foolishness, but what was the use, it was now too late to change things and his daughter had been deserted with three little ones on her hands. He gave me all the money he had with him and left for home. I didn't go with him, ashamed to return home in such a condition. How I survived those days I just can't imagine. I couldn't get work, being tied down with the children, yet we had to live somehow. Luckily for me, Namjil, my elder brother, then left the monastery. He got a job and began helping us a little. Things now look a little more promising." And she gave a deep sigh.
"Today is exactly a year that Gonchik deserted us. When I saw you with my brother, I was amazed how much you resembled my husband. You're of the same height and there's something about your face that resembles him a little."

She touched me inadvertently and the next thing I knew her head was on my chest.

When I woke up, Khanda was still fast asleep, her arms around my neck as if afraid of losing me. I lay thinking: what did I get myself into last night, heaven or hell? I tried to free myself from her embrace, and she immediately woke up, sat up, rubbed her eyes open and, seeing me, laughed happily: "My, I've slept long!"

The sun filtered into the ger. It was probably a very nice day outside, and Khanda's face seemed to me very beautiful, as if freshly washed by the rain. Her dark brown eyes shone brightly and her smile revealed glittering white teeth. Strange that I hadn't noticed last night what a beautiful woman she was! She sat on the edge of the bed, carefully combing out her long black hair which descended to her knees. Finishing the combing, she coiled the hair into a big knot, pinned it high on her head and turned toward me.

"A haircut wouldn't hurt you," she declared. "Your hair's unruly, but it's nice and thick," and she passed her hand tenderly over my head. I couldn't say a word so full was my heart.

"You can stay in bed a little longer, while I make breakfast."

I lay there, revelling in this new yet unknown bliss. Then I rose, washed, had some hot tea straight from the fire and left for work.

Arriving at the mess hall, I put on my white smock and approached the stove. But my thoughts were all day with Khanda. I hadn't promised to come back nor had she asked me. But after work my feet took me in the direction of her place. So what, as if I couldn't walk past her place? The gate to her place happened to be open, and the next thing I knew I had entered her yard.
She was sitting on the threshold of her ger.

I hardly thought about my paradise that evening. I was with a wonderful woman, and I loved her. And so things continued. Going to work in the morning I would think about the great sin I was committing by living with Khanda, and in the evening I'd return to her. The bell would tinkle at the gates, Khanda would come hurrying to greet me and the little ones would stop playing and rush toward me. Looking into Khanda's eyes and caressing her soft arms, she seemed to me a being from paradise. I couldn't imagine anything sweeter and more beautiful. Not saying anything to anybody, I soon moved over for good to Khanda's place, and we began living together like man and wife. One of my friends, Basan, once started to make fun of me, saying I was incapable of having children of my own so I had picked up someone else's. Though we eventually made up, I was then very much hurt. Someone else's or my own, what difference did it make? And then Khanda once said to me, "You know what, Sanjid, I think I'm pregnant."

I was taken aback with surprise.

"What will happen to me now," I muttered in fright.

Looking into my eyes, Khanda burst out laughing:

"To you? Nothing, my dear. It's I who'll have to suffer some."

She kissed me tenderly, pressed even closer to me and soon fell asleep. But I was unable to sleep a wink all night. Not only had I found myself a wife, but I would soon have a child of my own. My dreams of life in paradise after death now seemed altogether unrealizable. And you know it's not easy to give up a dream you cherished all your life.

Twins were born to us. Two tiny boys. Instead of three we now had five children. Well, I thought to myself, now my friends will really start making fun of me. But it all turned out quite differently. Even evil-tongued Basan congratulated me:

"You're a real he-man, Sanjid," he said. "It's no easy job to bring up two at once. But I think you'll make it."
The boys grew fast and well, round-faced like their mother but with tough unruly hair like mine. They were so alike that at first only their mother could tell them apart. I learned to do it a little later. When the twins were a year old, I gave up my job at the mess hall and went to work with a carpenter's team, becoming in time quite skilled. Khanda got a job at a garment factory. We both worked hard and soon earned the title of shock workers. Our earnings began to increase, and the first thing we did was to purchase a new large pentagonal ger. Then more children were born. There were ten of them under our roof already. It wasn't easy at first, but then, as the children grew up, things eased up too. The older ones enrolled at institutes, and my stepdaughter married. We weren't after all alone. The state helped and is continuing to help us bring them up. I no longer dream of that paradise. My friend Namjil is also long a married man with grown-up children.
We meet every once in a while and can only regret that our childhood and youth had been wasted behind monastery walls. Had we been brought up like our children we would have been no less educated than they.

Sanjid fell silent. The sun had already risen high in the sky. Dinnertime was close, but none of us rose.

"Tell me, Sanjid, where exactly did your woman's ger stand when you first met her?" Gonchik asked.

"Why, near the Sunegov well."

"Are you sure?"

"I won't forget that spot to the end of my life," Sanjik replied with deep emotion.

"Perhaps, you remember, whether the gate was red?" Gonchik asked again.

"Of course, it was... Say, you aren't by chance that Gonchik who deserted Khanda?"

He didn't say a word but just rose and silently moved away. We followed his bent figure with our eyes but didn't call him back.