KEVIN BUBRISKI

THE ROAD TO LINZHI

MICHELLE CACHO-NEGRETE

We're marooned in a bowl of mountains on the road to Linzhi, Tibet. Unlike the mountains of home, which are settled, full-grown, and staid, the Himalayas are brazen, thrusting themselves into the sky. These mountains are an epic in the making. These mountains humble us: forty-four American and European scientists and their spouses, led by a Tibetan guide, Sangkar, who has lived here all his life.

We began our trip this morning with a bus and a driver who, even in this country of reckless drivers, was intolerably reckless. A twenty-something Chinese man with smooth apricot skin and a bowl haircut, he had a cockiness befitting his status

of privileged conqueror in this land his country has invaded. His T-SHIRT said, MIND YOUR OWN FUCKING BUSINESS, and he exhibited a terrifying determination to own every curve of the road, pass every car, defy every traffic regulation. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, swayed to some song in his head, shouted into a cellphone, and slowed only when he neared a Chinese checkpoint. He blasted his horn and laid siege to bike lanes, sidewalks, and lanes going in the opposite direction. Yaks, sheep, pigs, goats, motorcycles, bikes, and pedestrians narrowly escaped his tires. We held on to our seats to keep from sliding side to side. My husband, Kevin, and I leaned into each other on the curves. Sangkar repeatedly ordered the driver to slow down, but to no avail.

Two hours into our trip, after a near collision with a tractor, Sangkar gripped the driver's shoulder and ordered him to pull off the road. We skidded to a stop far too close to the rocky slope of a mountainside. Sangkar turned to the group and said, "Everyone off the bus." Kevin and I stood on shaky legs and stepped out into cool, thin air infused with golden light and perfumed with Tibetan sage. Sangkar lit a cigarette, watched all of us disembark, then quietly fired the driver. Disbelieving and sullen, the driver yanked open the cargo door of the bus, threw our knapsacks and luggage into a pile, then roared off in a blaze of oily exhaust and yellow dust.

We waited.

Sangkar, a compact, handsome man in his late thirties with dark eyes and the characteristic sun-reddened face of a Tibetan, assured us, "I will get another bus driver. I will tell you that, though life is suffering, life is precious, every moment. I want my life, every moment that I have. To take a life is wrong, any life: human or animal. I would go back to Lhasa sooner than ride on these mountain roads with this driver. Ahead is higher, narrower, steeper. Too unsafe with a man who doesn't care about taking life. You understand?"

People nodded, shook his hand, touched his shoulder, said, "*Thoo jaychay*," (Thank you) and "*Ha ko song*" (I understand). Sangkar wasn't reassured. He lit another cigarette and repeated, "Life is sacred." I wondered at his belief that we would blame him rather than thank him for his decision.

"You probably saved our lives," someone said.

"You made the only choice possible."

Finally our guide was satisfied. He turned away and switched on his cellphone to tackle the problem of hiring another bus and driver. Everyone wandered off to find a rock to pee behind.

So we are marooned — temporarily.

I am grateful to be marooned right here, among boulders and rocky corridors and mountains rising in waves of color. A brilliant sun drapes the land in light and shadow. A glacial blue river undulates across a pebbled beach, the clear, shallow water a mirror that reflects the languid white clouds above. The grass is sparse and bleached, the hillsides scattered with boulders that over time have split from the mountains and tumbled down. A few trees languish in the arid climate. Goats sidestep rocks and yaks graze on the other side of the lake, indicating nomads nearby, although none are evident.

I am excited. Everyone is. The geologists gather rocks to examine. The geographers unpack their instruments and take measurements. The anthropologists examine the rock walls that encircle the trees and look for other evidence of human habitation. My husband, Kevin, the only botanist in the group, joins John, a spouse who runs a university botanical garden in Canada, and they locate tiny flowers, strange leaves, and brilliant grasses. John, a good-natured, lanky fifty-year-old with a crown of vanishing gray hair, is as knowledgeable as any of the PhDs in the group. He towers over Kevin, who is small, compact, broad-chested. They wander, heads down, pausing every few moments to drop to their knees and peer closely at a find. Tibet is a botanist's delight, one of the few remaining places on earth with unclassified plants.

I join a circle of spouses that includes Ellen, a former tour guide, who tells us she has never encountered drivers as foolhardy and fearless as Asians. I lean back against the rocks on this arid plateau with its thin air and aggressive sun. We're fifteen thousand feet up, and the diminished oxygen induces an almost hallucinogenic sense of colors, sounds, and smells. I drift in and out of the conversation, contemplating the slashed mountain terraces whose scarlet and gold bands interrupt the sky like fire.

I have been calmer here than I have been anywhere else in my life. There is something about these mountains, the chanting of pilgrims, the endless cups of green tea, the astonishing acceptance displayed by Tibetans, who continue their lives in the presence of Chinese soldiers and under a regime so oppressive that possessing a picture of their exiled Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, is cause for imprisonment. I rarely look at my watch, have no idea what day it is, eat when my stomach growls, sleep when I need to. With each passing day I grow more accepting, less convinced of the need to solve the uncertainties and contradictions of life. I seem to understand myself both more and far less than ever before. I'm beginning to see the world as it really is, stripped of the projections we weave into it. This has all seeped into me somehow through the air, through the ground, through the sound of the wind and the chants and the traffic, through the smell of incense and yak butter and raw sewage.

Sangkar turns off the cellphone and announces that he has hired a bus and driver, and that they will arrive shortly. Once again he apologizes for stranding us. He lights another cigarette, meets the eyes of each of us, and repeats that life is suffering, but life is sacred. He wants each moment promised him.

"If that driver killed a yak or a sheep," he adds, "precious to the herder and farmer, the villagers would have come to our bus. They would have stoned it, turned the bus over." He puffs furiously on his cigarette.

Is what he says true? I don't know. Tibet is a country with a history of violence against foreigners.

"Sangkar," I say, "you made the right decision." Everyone chimes agreement.

"You are OK here, waiting?" he asks.

"We're a group satisfied with small pleasures," I answer. Everyone laughs, and after a moment he does too.

The morning passes. A small goat that has been separated from his herd grazes the steep mountainside. Some scientists see how close they can get to him. The goat continues eating as they approach, then steps back at the last moment so that he is always more than an arm's length away. His pursuers slip on loose rocks and laugh at each other.

Somebody breaks out a package of cookies and passes it around. Sangkar hands out water. "The driver will be here soon, and we'll find a restaurant," he says. "I have just spoken to him." He waves his cellphone at us. "He was given a ticket hurrying to get here, but he is on his way again."

Incredulous, I turn to Kevin and say, "A *speeding* ticket?"

Kevin shakes his head. John playfully takes bets on the driver's speed.

"Let's walk along the river," I say, taking Kevin's hand. We scale the small boulders. The water is pristine. The pebbles beneath it seem to shimmer. Yaks dip their heads and drink, then step in with surprising grace to cool themselves. The breeze carries the scent of their dung, valuable in this land of little wood. In the frigid cold of winter, yak dung can keep a family warm and alive. We bend and put our hands in the water, and my wiggling fingers spread slivers of liquid diamonds. Since we've come here, Kevin and I seem to have shrugged off the superfluous disagreements that nag any relationship. We've become more tolerant of each other, more loving.

We return to the group just as two nomad men saunter by dressed in *chubas* (traditional black wool tunics) and leather sashes. Silver-tipped knives bump casually against their legs. They stare at us in amusement. We are indeed a strange sight on this rocky plain, in our windbreakers and sock hats and visored caps. Dusty and pale-skinned, we fill bags with commonplace rocks and foliage as if they were treasure.

Sangkar greets them in Tibetan, notices one of them carries a slingshot, and asks to borrow it. A nomad's slingshot is made of horsehair and wool. An experienced hunter, Sangkar says, can kill an animal with one at fifty yards. Obviously adept, he demonstrates, swinging it in a wide, swift arc, the *whoosh* of air loud and urgent. The stone flies and hits the rock at which Sangkar was aiming. Then he passes it around to anybody who would like to try, demonstrating each time it reaches a new volunteer. Fritz, a German, does his able best, but the rock drops to the ground like, well, a rock. The Tibetans laugh good-naturedly. A number of people try under Sangkar's patient tutelage, but it proves remarkably difficult, and nobody has mastered it by the time the bus finally pulls up. We've been stranded here four hours.

We thank the nomads, who say goodbye and wander off. The new driver, a young Chinese man in chinos and shirt sleeves, stows the luggage away. On the bus, Sangkar introduces him as Mr. Chan and tells us that our journey will now be safe. We all clap. Mr. Chan waves hello with a confident smile, settles into his seat, and turns the key in the ignition.

A half-hour later we hurry through lunch. Sangkar helps the bewildered restaurant owner, who is unaccustomed to having forty-four tourists drop in for a meal. Because of our delay, Mr. Chan will later be forced to drive in darkness over steep mountains to reach the hotel. Back on the bus we stare out the window at the vegetation, purple mountains topped with snow, the occasional ruins of monasteries destroyed by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. Devout Tibetans have adorned the ruins with prayer flags.

Mr. Chan is a cautious driver at first, but as the afternoon goes on, he begins to speed up, pass cars, veer onto the wrong side of the road. Within an hour, Sangkar has admonished him at least six times. Mr. Chan obeys, but then, as if of its own volition, the bus accelerates again. We rock back and forth and in a few places rise off our seats. Mr. Chan claims a larger and larger portion of the road, forcing other drivers against the mountainside or, in one instance, into a ditch. We remain silent, trusting that Sangkar will handle this. Mr. Chan swerves widely around a car pulling out of a dirt road, and it spins out in a cloud of dust behind us. He twists around a narrow curve, blasting his horn, and then there is a sickening thud. The bus stops with a jolt that throws me against the seat in front.

Sangkar's voice rises in anger, and Mr. Chan's response is cowed, rather than his usual rapid Chinese speech. The bus door opens. Sangkar turns to us and says, "Stay here. Inside." He and Mr. Chan step out on the unpaved road. We crowd to the windows and look out: a smashed motorcycle, a young man groaning beside it, holding his head.

A flood of dread washes away the serenity of the last two weeks, leaving behind the knowledge of how tenuous that peace actually was. I have never been in a vehicle that has hit a human being. I feel enormous concern and guilt at my involvement, however incidental. I wonder how far the nearest hospital is. The dented chrome on the motorcycle creates a fractured prism of light.

Ten minutes pass. We huddle together as a group, unable to look away. The bus grows steamy with our body heat and the sun beating down on the metal roof. Kevin remains in his seat, eyes closed, sweat pouring down his face.

I whisper, "Are you OK?"

"Yeah," he whispers back. "Why doesn't anybody in this country wear a helmet?"

I squeeze his shoulder and return to the others. We force open the windows to a flood of sultry air that offers little respite. Sangkar is on his cellphone. The motorcyclist, stretched out on the ground, continues to groan. Mr. Chan is silent, impassive.

"Is Sangkar calling a hospital?" I mutter.

The Finnish scientist beside me replies, "I pray so."

Ten more aching minutes pass. Villagers begin to arrive in small groups. I feel a worsening fear. If a bus might be stoned over a yak, cow, or goat, what about a human being?

(end of excerpt)