



Nomad Girl

Retold by Barbara Helen Berger

Anonymous | Tibetan Buddhist

White Tara

In eons past, before the divine lady Tara was known by the name of Tara, she sat at the Buddha's feet and listened to his teachings, made countless offerings, and meditated deeply.

Finally the monks of the great assembly told her, "You are so close to enlightenment, if only you would pray to be reborn as a man. Then you, too, could awaken and become a Buddha."

But she said to them, "In the enlightened mind of wisdom, there is no male or female."

Then she made a vow. "Since no one wants to become enlightened as a woman, I will do so. Out of compassion for all beings, I vow to fully awaken and always appear in the body of a woman."

ONE DAY ON A HIGH MOUNTAIN PLATEAU, a traveler stumbled and fell and could not get up again. He was alone, no more than a speck in the vast land. On his way home from a distant place, he had run out of food and his last strength. He lay where he fell. And a bitter wind swept over him.

He felt two hands grabbing his legs and dragging him over the ground. Surely the Lord of Death had come. All senses left him, and the traveler did not feel the cold anymore. Nor did he know how many nights passed into days before he stirred awake, a hand touching his cheek.

It was a warm, human hand.

He opened his eyes and saw the face of a girl who lifted his head and brought a steaming bowl to his lips, urging him to drink. Never had a broth of tea churned with butter and salt tasted so good.

Through a haze of smoke from a small fire, he saw only a dark cloth above and around him. Then the traveler knew he must be inside a nomad tent, sheltered from the wind.

While he drifted back to sleep, warm under a blanket of yak hair, the nomad girl went about her chores. She kept the fire lit and her eye on the traveler. Whenever he woke she came with more hot butter tea to sustain him. Soon, she hoped, he would be strong enough to eat.

Each morning early, she went outside with her bucket to milk the female of the yak herd. She made some of the *dri*'s milk into yogurt. And she stood at a tall wooden churn lifting and plunging the paddle to make the rest into butter.

Every day she led the yaks to another grazing place, and came back into the tent, her long braids dusted with snow, bringing more fuel for the fire. She roasted barley in an iron pan and ground it between two stones. The traveler woke to the good smell of *tsampa*. He ate hungrily. Then the girl smiled, assured he would be well.

Day by day as she fed and cared for him, the man grew stronger. In the evenings they talked and laughed together. He was happy listening to her voice as she hummed softly, spinning her prayer wheel into the night.

Then at last, the traveler was well enough to be on his way. With a broad smile, the girl gave him a woolen bag she had woven herself, filled with provisions. But he had nothing to give her in return, no way to repay all her kindness. He could only set out on his journey again, filled with gratitude.

Not far along his way, he turned for a last glimpse of the tent he had left behind. He saw no trace of it now in the vast land. But could the nomad girl have packed everything up, loaded the yaks, and moved so quickly to another grazing ground? Maybe a mist had come over the plain, hiding her tent from his view like a dream. Would he ever find her again?

Pondering as he walked, he thought of the girl's eyes glowing in the firelight. How strange—he had never seen anyone else there, no parents, no brother or sister to help with the herding. This one girl did the work of a whole family. Alone, she had saved his life. She had nursed him back to health. Even now she provided for him whenever he stopped to eat, for she had filled the bag with tsampa and yogurt and hard white cheese.

As he sat under the infinite sky he wondered, for the bag never seemed to run out. Every time he stopped to eat he found it as full as before, until at last he came to his home valley.

But he did not stop in the village. He turned and went up the hill to the temple first, to see the lama. There he made prostrations and sat at the lama's feet and told him all that had happened.

The lama said, "Without any doubt, it was Tara who saved you."

The compassionate Tara herself? If only he had recognized her! In all the time he was in her tent, he had never thought to honor the girl. He could have bowed to the ground and asked for her blessing, her wisdom.

Now he looked up at the lama and asked, "What can I do?"

The lama said, "If you ever hope to find her again, you had better clear the ignorance from your mind."

Then he taught the traveler how to contemplate the divinity, Tara, to recite her mantra, and dissolve her image into himself, like a rainbow melting into the sky. Then to sit quietly in the empty stillness.

So the traveler went home and did this.

He prayed for all beings who wander and fall in ignorance, like himself.

Day by day his heart grew lighter, his mind more clear. He began to see his mother, his sisters, his brother's wife, his aunt, his little nieces, his old grandmother, all with new eyes. How could he be sure who was Tara and who was not? He began to see her everywhere in the village. People noticed how respectful he was, how loving and kind. There was a peace about him.

"*Ah la la,*" said his lama, "you have found her."

Then the traveler felt a radiance flooding his heart, like the smile of the nomad girl herself in the tent of his own mind. ▮

This story comes from Tibet, the land where Tara is most known and loved. I found the seed of it many years ago in *TARA'S COLOURING BOOK*, by Jonathan Landaw, Andy Weber, and Nigel Wellings (Wisdom Publications, 1979). The essence of that seed stuck with me and grew, in time, into this retelling.

