

This
FLAWLESS
Place
BETWEEN

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ONE WORLD

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Author's Note
on The Tibetan Book of
the Dead

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The original title of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is *Bardo Thödol Chenmo*, which can be translated as 'liberation through hearing during the *bardo*'. *Bardo* means intermediate state, intermediate world or interval; the *bardos* are periods of crisis and profound doubt that a person undergoes in the course of their existence. These transitory periods offer exceptional opportunities for raised awareness and liberation. According to Tibetan schools of Buddhism, a complete life cycle contains between four and six *bardos*. The first is the *bardo* that continues from the moment of conception to the moment of death. The second, one aspect of this, is the dream state. The third is the *bardo* experienced by those who practise meditation. Death and the days that follow it contain the next three. One occurs during the dying process: the *bardo* of the moment before death. The next is the *bardo* of reality, also called the *dharmata*,¹ which offers a moment of 'flawless'

¹ *Dharmata* means essence or intrinsic nature.

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luminosity, possible for everyone, but recognised only by some. The last is the *bardo* of rebirth or becoming, which leads to the next rebirth.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes the experience of the deceased from the moment of death until rebirth. In fact, to quote Sogyal Rinpoche, it is a sort of 'travel guide'. The descriptions contained in the book are astonishingly precise. Unfortunately, for readers uninitiated in Tibetan Buddhism it takes many hours of study to understand it, as the book draws on an enormous wealth of symbolism. It is therefore helpful to read analyses and explanations by other authors² to make the best sense of the text.

This Flawless Place Between was born of a desire to make *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* accessible to a wider readership, and to inspire readers to turn to translations and studies of the original text. The novel follows, as scrupulously as possible, the different stages of the book and transcribes the key moments into a narrative rooted in a world more familiar to Western readers. Particular care has been taken to respect the meaning and primary purpose of the book: offering guidance to the dying, helping them to attain enlightenment by liberating themselves from *samsara* – the cycle of existence –

² For those wanting to read further, a bibliography can be found at the end of this book.

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or, failing this, to orientate themselves towards the best new life possible.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead emphasises the weight of our actions in this life and the effects they can have on our future states. However, beyond the positive or negative influence of our *karma*³ on our lives and deaths, there are other opportunities.⁴ The book stresses that every *bardo* offers possibilities for liberation. Even if one does not attain enlightenment, it is still possible to direct our rebirths towards the most favourable outcome.

Ideally, the book should be studied before death; but it is also read to the dying and the dead, who can understand its meaning whatever their culture, language or religion, regardless of whether they speak Tibetan or understand Buddhist symbolism. The dead and the dying are gifted with exceptional perception during the days that immediately follow their deaths.

³ The term *karma* signifies action and denotes the totality of a being's acts past, present and future. *Karma* has a dominant impact in terms of cause or consequence on our cycles of being, our lives and deaths included.

⁴ In the course of his youth, Milarepa, one of Tibet's most important religious leaders, caused the deaths of dozens of people. This did not prevent him from achieving enlightenment and becoming a great spiritual master.

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The Tibetan Book of the Dead is universal. It is an intrinsically hopeful work that seeks to improve the condition of all beings, life after life, regardless of their belief systems or the actions they have committed.

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A wild rabbit sits in yellowing grass, surrounded by tufts of dandelion. Ears straining towards the sky, it turns its head and glances first left, then right. Behind it, a group of youngsters begin to explore. Carefree, oblivious, two of them wander across the white line dividing greenery from asphalt. A rumbling sound catches the attention of the adult; it cocks its head, staring blankly into the distance. It seems as unafraid as the kits at their games. The rumble grows steadily into a low roar and then explodes in a deafening blast. The young rabbits freeze; a powerful gust of wind ruffles their grey fur. A few metres ahead of them, six enormous tyres squeal off the asphalt. Crouched low to the ground, the pair on the runway watch the monster swoop past. As for the others, they have already returned to what they were doing.

* * *

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John F. Kennedy Airport, New York, USA. Flights scroll down the overhead board. Announcements crackle from loudspeakers. Baggage carts collide, spilling bags and suitcases. The departures area bustles with people: businessmen, housewives, backpackers, groups of pensioners, restless teenagers, policemen, air hostesses. Some eat, others drink, others read, make phone calls, chat.

In the midst of the chaos is Anne, a woman in her thirties wearing a leather biker jacket, waiting in the line at check-in counter 49, destination Kolkata. Kneeling on the tiled floor in a gap hemmed in by the legs of other passengers, she rifles through her backpack. On her right cheek is a small beauty spot. Her eyes are chestnut brown, like her hair, which is short and neatly cut.

‘Where did I put my damn passport?’

Standing over her is a young man, a few years older. He too is dressed in leather, and has very short brown hair. His name is Evan, Anne’s partner. He laughs.

‘We’re off to a good start.’

A couple in their sixties stand to the side. These are Anne’s parents, Rose and John.

John holds in his arms an eighteen-month-old girl. She is wearing a bright red cycle helmet with

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large black holes that look like the spots on a ladybug. This is Lucy, their granddaughter, Anne's child.

Rose smiles, amused, as she watches Anne going through her backpack.

'Well, Evan, you wanted an adventure. With Anne you won't be disappointed!'

'Thanks for the encouragement!'

At their feet, Anne feverishly pulls various things out of her pack and dumps them on the floor. Amongst them are photographs. In one of them, Anne poses beside an elegant well-dressed man in his fifties, holding a newborn Lucy in his arms.

The passengers ahead of them at the desk collect their boarding passes.

'Thank you.'

The woman responds with an obliging smile. 'You're welcome. Have a nice trip.'

'Ah, found it!'

Still on her knees, Anne proudly flourishes her passport.

'It was in the guidebook.'

'Thank goodness.'

Evan takes the passport, turns and hands it to the check-in assistant.

Rose watches, concerned, as Anne hastily repacks her things.

'Have you remembered the anti-malarial tablets? I don't want you coming back with malaria. And -'

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John cuts her off.

'Rose, don't start that again, please. They're grown-ups.'

Anne nods in agreement, fastens her backpack and gets up.

'Mom, Evan's a nurse, remember? And besides, there's no malaria in the Himalayas.'

'Oh, all right! Don't get at me. I worry, that's all. It's normal to worry about your children. You worry too, don't you?'

John intervenes again.

'Rose, I asked you to stop.'

Anne drags her bag to the counter, lifts it and drops it onto the conveyer belt to be weighed. The passengers behind her move up a few steps, treading on the forgotten photograph of the man holding Lucy as a baby.

'Mom, you're right. But I've got good reasons to worry.'

Anne lifts Lucy out of her father's arms and gives her a big kiss on the cheek, holding her close.

'Don't forget to shut the stair gate upstairs and to put her helmet on the moment she gets up, okay?'

John sighs. Rose frowns.

'Anne, you've already told us a thousand times, and what's more -'

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She extracts a typewritten sheet of paper from her pocket, playfully brandishing it in front of her daughter's face.

'– you've written it down for us too!'

Anne rocks Lucy in her arms, as if she needed to calm her.

'Like that's going to stop you doing whatever you feel like.'

Turning back from the counter, Evan interrupts them.

'Anne, do you want a window seat?'

'Sure, why not?'

Anne cradles her daughter, who is frowning at the adults' argument.

'Don't be sad, sweetie. It's hard for me too, you know. But I can't take you out there. You're too little . . .'

Pressed to her face, Lucy squints up at her.

' . . . And then we'll be home very soon. Three weeks isn't very long, you know. Grandma and Grandpa will look after you, you'll see. You're going to have a whale of a time . . .'

Anne hugs her daughter, kisses her again and murmurs in her ear, ' . . . I'll bring you back a beautiful present.'

The little girl clings to her mother's neck. Rose joins them and affectionately strokes Lucy's back.

'Don't worry, Anne. Everything will be fine.'

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Anne smiles, looking sad.

'I know. Thanks. I'll call you as soon as we've arrived.'

* * *

Four in the morning. Kolkata airport. A dilapidated red bus trundles down the asphalt, bathed in the dirty yellow glow of the sodium lights. Its windows are open. Inside, the travellers are squashed together like sardines. Shaken and jolted, exhausted by the journey, they are sticky with sweat. It's still pitch black, and already getting muggy.

Anne and Evan are in the back, crushed between an Indian family and a group of retired tourists. They stare out of the side windows, stunned. Anne takes deep breaths. She's trying to keep at bay the rising nausea brought on by the acrid smell seeping from the grey hair pressed in her face.

The bus halts, its doors opening. Free at last, the horde of jostling passengers bursts out and hurries into the starkly lit hall, in pursuit of luggage. Trailing behind, Anne and Evan rejoin the crowd thronging about the empty baggage carousel. Anne takes out her mobile phone and switches it on. The phone beeps a few times, then turns itself off.

'Shit, my battery's dead. Will you wait for me

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here? I have to phone Mom to let her know we've arrived okay.'

'Fine.'

Anne walks off, leaving Evan to wriggle through the tangle of passengers and crippled trolleys.

She comes to a large hall with pale blue walls. The floor is strewn with sleeping people. Faulty wiring makes the fluorescent lights flicker intermittently. The place is silent, save for the occasional snore. Anne, feeling ill at ease, picks her way between the sleepers until she reaches a row of wooden telephone booths along a wall next to the toilets. They're all stripped have except the last, which houses an old rotary dial telephone. Anne steps inside and lifts the handset. There's no tone. She hangs up and looks around. There, a few metres away and scarcely visible, a tiny opening in the wall: a public telephone office. Behind the counter, on a bare worktop, a cigarette smoulders in an ashtray, abandoned by a smoker nowhere in sight. Anne turns again and looks around her. Everyone is asleep, wrapped in cloths on the bare floor, wedged between linen sacks, sprawled across plastic chairs. Suddenly, a slammed door echoes through the hall. Anne jumps, startled. A smartly dressed young Indian walks out of the toilets, fastening his flies. Anne rushes over.

'Sir?'

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The Indian, embarrassed, hastily tucks his shirt into his trousers and turns to her.

'Yes, madam?'

'Excuse me. I'm looking for whoever's in charge of this telephone office.'

Anne points towards the gap in the wall. The Indian clears his throat.

'That is myself.'

He straightens his tie and returns to his post with a dignified air. Anne follows him. He sits on his chair behind the counter and retrieves his cigarette.

'You are wishing to make a call, isn't it?'

Anne nods, amused.

'Er . . . yes, I do.'

'Is it you are wishing to make an international call, madam?'

'Yes, please.'

'This is the telephone. Please to dial the number.'

He extracts from a drawer an ultra-modern handset and places it on the counter. Anne picks it up, punches the number into the digital keys and waits. The operator stares at her unabashedly. She gives him a little embarrassed smile. The number rings at last. Anne sighs with relief. The operator's stare turns lascivious and Anne sighs again, this time in exasperation. She turns around. The line keeps ringing. Nobody answers. In the hall, the