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Lhakpa Sherpani

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# Runaway

## Lhakpa Sherpani

It was an evening in spring when one of our neighbours came along and asked my parents if I could work in his household for one year. He wanted to pay 100 Rupees. This was a lot in the early sixties, when 20-40 Rupees a year was normal for this kind of job. In addition, I was to get a new dress once a year, as was tradition. My family was not in a good economic position, and in spring, when the new harvest was still far, we usually did not have enough to eat. We already had the problem of not being able to repay all the money we had borrowed from other people. So my parents could not buy a new dress for each of us every year. This was the reason why our neighbour did not have to ask for long. My parents accepted his offer at once. The term of employment was set at two years. My own opinion was not asked for, but my parents knew that we children usually did everything they asked without protest. My elder brother worked for our neighbour for one year, but he never talked to me about that time.

### The Summer at Womi Tsho

The next day I went to the house of our neighbours whom we used to call uncle and aunt. They had two daughters and one son of their own. During the first weeks the neighbour's pretty wife was rather friendly. She was born in Pharak, the steep gorge between Khumbu and Shorong (nep. Solu). One of her brothers married her husband's sister before she married her husband. Her husband had been married before to a woman from Zhung (nep. Junbesi). Once, when he went to Zhung to work for his parents-in-law he sent his first wife to one of her uncles in Phaphlu, who married her to another man. When our neighbour later married his second wife, they got a great dowry, including 15 calves, many clothes and a lot of jewelry.

Immediately after my arrival at the neighbours' house I went with them to the alpine pastures at the Womi Tsho. There I did all kinds of work for the family, from the first light of dawn till late into the night. During the first days I was allowed to sleep with my employers in their hut, but later I had to sleep outside on the bare ground under the trees. All the neighbours' children were dressed like boys. The elder

daughter had the same vicious tongue as her father. All day long she swore on the *thangang* of Takshindu and Tengbuche.<sup>1</sup>

I had to do every kind of work my employers asked for: fetching water, collecting firewood, cutting grass, bringing fodder for the cattle, gathering stinging nettles, washing the dishes, and grinding flour. The dog and I were always the last to get some food. Whenever we moved to another place I carried all the pots and dishes in a big basket on my back, uphill and downhill. All these things were so heavy that my legs trembled. The basket's strap pressed so much against my head that I thought it was going to burst. To crown it all, I also had to look after my employers' young son, who was very lazy in walking. He always got very good food from his mother, so he was rather heavy.

My employers once bought a bull, whose only task was to cover the family's twenty *zom* [female cow/yak hybrids]. The bull was not taken by his many wives, and so it ran away at the first opportunity. Of course, it was my task to look for it. It was a very foggy day, and I did not find a single trace of the bull in the dense pine forest. Finally my employer found it at the place of its former owner, whose cattle were grazing nearby. In the evening my employer shouted at me for not having taken enough care of the cattle, but his wife stood up for me. It was the first time that I really despaired, and I asked myself, why I had to bear this fate. Was it only because there existed a paper I could not read?

There were already a lot of herdsmen at Womi Tsho when we arrived. Among them was a woman who had worked as a maid for more than twenty years. She told me it was not easy to work for other people. This was the year she wanted to consider her work finished, and go to Darjeeling. She slept on a rock huddled under her *kung* (an umbrella made of limebark or big leaves). The weather was so misty that one could not see very

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<sup>1</sup> *thangang* is the Sherpa word for temple. Takshindu is the place of a monastery and a nunnery above our village. Tengbuche is the name of a famous monastery in Khumbu.

far. The temperature was perishing, the sun seldom put in an appearance, but the acoustic spectacle was the most impressive. We heard avalanches thundering down and the sounds of the numerous animals.

At Womi Tsho I also met my cousin Sumi, who worked as a maid for another family too. Like me, she slept near the cattle on the wayside in the mud while her employers slept close to the fireside inside their hut. Her situation was even worse than mine. Her mother had died and her father didn't have a house of his own, so he went to Rai villages to look for casual work. My cousin's employers had only one child, a very spoiled daughter. She was the only girl in her village sent to school. Men had already asked for her hand in marriage. Among them was Danu, a *kapa* (painter; lit.: a man of genius) from Chiwang, but she was to marry an arrogant man from Chunagpo, who was given her family's whole land on the day of marriage. On this occasion he was told that the girl was now his possession, from her hair down to the nails of her feet. There was no talk of the man being in the possession of the girl. Nevertheless, the marriage broke up very soon. The man went to India where he worked as a taxi driver, while she hung around with other men.

Sumi's employers once had a son also, who had been recognized as a *rimpoche* (high reincarnation) during his childhood. He had crossed the Nangpa La (the 5716 m high pass from Khumbu to Tibet). One time he sent a letter to his sister asking for a special kind of medicine made of roots which were only found on the pastures near the Womi Tsho. The family decided to take them to Tibet together. Before their departure they celebrated happily for one week, but then they did not go at all. Later it was told that the young man had ended up in the Chinese ear-sacks.<sup>2</sup>

One day at the Womi Tsho I got help from a Tamang who always trembled. We called him "the trembler." It was told that he was affected by this illness because he once killed a cat. Sometimes he did not remember where he was going. Once when we went to the west, he went to the east towards Pharak. We laughed when other people told us that they had met him on their way. In the evening he finally joined us.

The Womi Tsho is a traditional place of pilgrimage for Hindus and Buddhists as well, so at night many pilgrims came and asked to stay overnight. There soon were so many people in the small hut that they could not lay down; everybody had to sleep sitting. One time, among these guests there was a cheerful young girl. She was in the company of an elder man who looked after her. Our trembling Tamang obviously had some feelings for this girl. He jumped all around the hut and shouted that he wanted *nani banaune* (nep.: to make a baby) with the girl. To bring him back to

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<sup>2</sup> It was always told that the Chinese cut the ears off the many Tibetans killed by them, so that they later could count how many Tibetans they murdered.

reality I attacked him with a burning piece of firewood. Our Tamang was not the only one to be shocked by my action I heard my employer asking, "Girl, what are you doing?"

One day one of our cows was calving. For days she tried to make the calf stand up, but it was too weak. My employers did not give it any food or milk because it was a male calf and useless for milk production. They waited for it to die. This happened on the seventh day. Its tail was cut and put in front of the cow's head so that she could smell and lick it whenever she was milked. Later I threw the tail away. Then the cow licked my head. It seemed that I had now become her child. I felt it was wrong how the women and girls on the alpine pastures abused the trust of the cows. Every year they were responsible for the death of so many calves. It was told that this was the reason that so many women in the hour of their death cry like dying calves.

### Near Pike

Some time later we moved to another hut, which lies in direction to Pike (a 4070m high mountain in Shorong). One night my employer's wife woke me up because she heard some suspicious noises. She asked me to bark like a dog. I did so and scratched with the soup ladle on the stones of the fireplace. Then we heard a loud noise outside. Stones tumbled down the slope. It seemed that a person or animal had been outside our hut. Maybe it was one of the Gurung's sheep that were grazing in great number in the area. Some days earlier I found a dead sheep lying between some rocks. Since nobody came looking for this animal we took it into our hut, carved it up and ate it. We saw no reason to let the vultures have it.

My employer's wife told me that her mother-in-law once, while on a pastoral feast, had got involved in an argument with a man from Pikyongma. Some days later eight men came and asked for her father-in-law. His wife was afraid that these men wanted to beat him up, so she quickly helped him to flee through the back wall of their bamboo hut. The men were very angry and took their whole butter store. This was the reason why my employer's wife was always anxious when she heard a noise at night.

Sometimes I became very homesick for my mother and for my village. The steady fog further intensified my depression. Often we did not see the sun for days. Down in our village it had been much lighter. I once asked my employer, who often went down to the village to transport goods there, if I could accompany him, but he fundamentally rejected this request.

One day I had an interesting discussion with a neighbour's child. We did not see that one of my employer's animals had started fighting with one of the neighbour's yaks. They were already fighting with their horns. Soon it was too late to interfere. Suddenly our

yak rolled headfirst down the slope. It overturned twice. I was relieved when it stood up again.

### Moving Again

After some time our pasture was grazed, and so we had to move again, this time eastward. On our way we spent the night in a cave. It was already dark when we arrived there and found that we were missing one of our cows. The next day we found her with a broken leg. We could not do anything for her even though she was still alive and mooing, so we abandoned her to her fate and moved on. Later we heard a small dog barking. Slowly we went closer. When only a few steps away we made some noise. It seemed that we surprised an unmarried couple doing their loveplay. Obviously scared, a half-naked young man jumped up and ran away. The young girl waited and exchanged some words with us before she left. Later we heard that she had given birth to a stillborn baby.

After some days I went back to look after the cow with the broken leg. On my way I met a man who gave me two roasted corn cobs. People knew that maids usually did not get enough food from their employers. That was why they sometimes gave me something to eat. The man wanted to know where I was going, but I was not allowed to talk about it. I only told him in which direction I was going. When I finally approached the place where we had left the cow, I heard a big noise. The cow had died and a great number of vultures had descended upon the carcass. I was afraid of the scolding big birds and ran back as fast as I could. Later, I met a man with a big basket on his back, but I pretended not to see him. I was afraid he was the young man we had scared a few days ago. With the sun already setting, I ran through a forest where hundreds of crickets were chirping. I remembered that one of my cousins had been raped by two men when she was only seven or eight years old. Remembering this, I ran even faster. It was pitch-dark when I arrived at our hut. My bare feet were bleeding despite the thick skin of my soles. The next day my employer went with a pack animal to fetch what meat the vultures had left. Later I had to cut it into small strips, which I smoked above the fire. Of course, I myself did not get a single piece of the meat to eat. They must have eaten it when I was out of the hut. I was only given hot curd cheese. Once I got an old dress my employer's wife no longer wanted to wear. I had to decide if I wanted the old dress then, or a new one later in *mangsir* (November/December). Since I always felt cold, I chose the old one.

### The End of the Rainy Season

The weather improved in September. The sky cleared and we could look down upon the valleys and villages. I heard that my parents had given their hay to other people, so that the neighbours' animals could graze on my parents' land for some days. They did this because they needed fertilizer for their fields. Once, I

met my little brother Dawa who was working for other people. I had not seen him for half a year and so I was very happy. I wanted to invite him into our hut, but I was not allowed. We talked and laughed for some time. He had grown and become self-confident.

One of my tasks was to look after the cattle, so that they did not drink out of hot springs. People believed that they would lose their calves or become ill themselves if they did. The animals would foam at the mouth, and it was told that they had got *tseta* (malaria).

Once, I went to a corn field belonging to a Rai, where I was to pluck some stinging nettles. I met two Rai boys who were guarding the field to prevent monkeys, bears and other wild animals from plundering the corn. I went to their tiny hut and asked them for a corn cob. But they refused, fooled around and ate their many cobs before my eyes. I did not understand why they refused to give me one of their corn cobs. I could have stolen one, but I didn't. I went away with my stinging nettles.

After some time, it was told that one neighbour, who had always been very kindly, had beaten his wife. The woman ran away, but returned home in the evening. These neighbours had a dispute with my employers over the boundary of their respective pastures. Before my eyes my employer's wife started an argument with the neighbour, pestered and pushed him. Later she falsely claimed that the neighbour had torn off her necklace. She wanted me to attest to this, but I refused. Later I was happy that the dispute was settled without my statement.

After monsoon everyone thought only about their hay harvest. There had been a great shortage in labour. Often people from Ringmo and some other villages, or poor families, helped in exchange for some buttermilk or grain. There was a lot of talk during these days and lots of rumours were spread. Once, we heard that a young woman was impregnated by her brother-in-law during the hay harvest. Another time it was told that a young girl had her first period.

The fifteenth day of *mangsir* was the date when all Salaka Sherpa were allowed to drive their cattle onto the harvested pastures. This was the time when all people met again, those who had gone to the high elevation pastures, as well as those who had stayed down in the villages. But it was also the month when all interests had to be paid, usually in the form of grain. And finally it was the month when most marriages took place or new relations were arranged. It must also be mentioned that this was the month when many children or servants ran away. Most went to Darjeeling.

In that very special year my cousin Maya moved to her husband for good. He had worked for his parents-in-law for some time. Her adoptive parents shared their harvest with them so that the young couple could celebrate the event appropriately. Maya did not get any land, even though her parents had a lot. All of their

land was for her brothers. She was given some jewelry, dresses, a few pots and two cows.

It was during this festivity that I saw my mother and my two little sisters for the first time in eight months. Late at night I went home with them. I talked with my mother until the early morning light. I told her that I did not like working for those people and that I would not hold on for another year. I would run away as soon as the first year was over. My parents would have to pay the money back, but this was already spent. My parents had bought a pregnant cow but unfortunately the cow had later died, and the male calf she had given birth to had sold for only a few Rupees. Surprisingly, I had my mother's fullest sympathy. She told me, when the time comes I should go to a family in Ringmo who had been our friends for a very long time. She wanted to inform them that I was to arrive in the near future.

Early in the morning I went back to my employer's hut, where I laid down to sleep in the hay. During those days I had to carry a lot of manure. It was a very exhausting task. At night I often had to stand up and look after the cattle. Sometimes I pretended not to hear when my name was called in the middle of the night. After I was awoken at dawn, I had to go out to cut grass for the cattle. Then I used to go to the other side of the small river where I cowered under a big tree until the sun came up. From there I could hear noise coming out of the hut. I heard the corn popping and the children chatting. I was cold and I afraid of wild animals. Early in the morning one should not run through the woods.

#### A Porter to Pharak

One evening my employer's father-in-law arrived with a little son and a heavily packed horse. They wanted me as a porter to Pharak. I was ordered to carry two things (about 60 kg), a weight only the strongest men used to carry. As this proved to be too heavy for me, my employer sent me to a neighbouring hut where my cousin Sumi was working. I had to tell her that her elder sister Kinzi had come from Pharak, even though it wasn't true. They wanted Sumi to come to their house. She did, but as soon as she arrived she saw that her sister was not there. Nevertheless she agreed to help me carry the load to Pharak. Later when her father came to her employers to claim the wage for his daughter's work, which he spent on drinks, he was told that he would not get any money since Lhakpa had taken his daughter away. He was very angry and shouted all around.

So, we left for Pharak. The old man prayed his *Om mani padme* hum all the way, and the little boy sang wonderful songs that echoed from the mountain slopes. The horse gasped because our way was not suited for horses, but the old man showed no fear. Our way seemed very short since my cousin had much to tell me. We talked about years of bad harvest and hunger (nep.

and sh.: *anikal*), but she said her employers always had enough to eat.

After crossing the Womi Tsangpo we came to a Rai village where we stayed in the house of a man who was the *mit* (friend) of the old man's eldest son. This Rai had two wives. The elder one had no children and the younger one was almost blind. This Rai family was later robbed. They had harvested a lot of corn which sold for a good price. They stored the money in a basket in the attic of their house, since there were no banks at that time. It was told that they had a basket full of money. One night thieves came and took all of the money away. It was a well planned burglary. Two very poor Tamangs were accused. It was thought that they were employed by some Sherpas to do the robbery.

There were only four houses in the old man's village. His house was by far the biggest. As soon as we arrived his wife told him that a calf was missing. The old man shouted at her and their children until she told him that she had been worrying about him, because he had stayed away for so long. He then calmed down. Both were widowed before they married. While I was delousing her she told me that she wanted to go to my village to look for daughters-in-law. I did not say anything since I thought she was talking about me. My mother was against such a connection. She said that these people may have a two-story house, but one cannot eat that. It seemed that not much of their former wealth remained.

#### Talks with Kinzi

I stayed with this family for one week. It was a rather comfortable time for me. During the day I tended the cattle with their sixteen year old daughter. She told me that my cousin Kinzi was treated badly by her sister-in-law, whom she was working for. For example, when she was late with the fodder her employer used to shout, "Are you looking for your mother's or your father's stiff or for your own?" Sherpas used to take such words as an insult.

The old man's wife once invited me to her house for dinner. My two cousins and I were given some corn soup with buttermilk. Later we talked for many hours. Kinzi, who was much older than me, had been eleven or twelve years old when she was sent as a *laom* (maid or servant for other people, but also used as a swearword) to another family. The people said that she liked her job so much that she stayed for many years. But actually she was fed up to her back teeth with it. Many times she would have liked to have run away, but she did not know where to go. Also, her father came to fetch her pay, which he used for drinks or to repay his debts. He always told his daughters that he needed the money to have a bridge built for their mother who had died many years ago. My cousins wanted their mother saved from *nyala* (hell), and Sherpas believe that building a bridge can help. They worked for many years to bear the costs, but now Kinzi wanted to consider it

finished. She wanted to keep her next payment to buy some earrings with. Many years ago, before she came to her current employers, she had worked for two other families, but she had run away.

I remembered the time when I was a little girl when Kinzi and I had to bring *bangsa* (mush, that is left over after distilling *arak*, spirits, and then used as fodder for the cattle) from Yawa to the pastures high above Panma. On our way we deliberated about how to reduce our burden. We decided to pour out the liquid and throw away a bit of the mush. We covered it with leaves so that grandmother would not see it when she came along. Later in spring Kinzi told me that it would be nice if there were berries all throughout the year, then we would not have to work all the time. But there were berries for only two months in the year. Kinzi also told me that there would be no life on earth if the sun and the fire did not exist. Such remarks made deep impressions on me. I don't know why my cousin had such philosophical thoughts.

Kinzi also told me tales about witches who owned guest houses into which men were invited. When the men were sleeping the witches abducted them and ate them. In one tale, a witch could change herself into a precious young girl. When a young man came to take her as his bride she sat behind him on his horse. On the way back home the young man recognized that his young bride had turned into an ugly old witch. The enraged man drew his knife, but the witch changed into an old boot which tumbled down from the horse's back.

Once in my childhood, I helped Kinzi's mother harvest hay. Kinzi came along and talked to us for a while. At that time she was working for other people and my aunt told her to be hard-working. I was surprised, because my mother would never have said that. In fright I swallowed the dumpling I was eating the wrong way. I still hear my aunt's nasty remark, "Don't eat and talk at the same time, else you may die."

Later Kinzi, supported by her father, ran away from her first employer. They came to us looking for shelter after spending a week in a Rai village. Unfortunately there was a traitor in my family who betrayed them for a lice-ridden blanket. My cousin's father then sent her to work for another family. But soon she ran away again. She came to us and her employer called from outside our house to see if she was there. My mother denied this and we hid her in the hay. Later her father came and objected to us persuading her to run away. My father had no right to decide about her. Only her father did, and if he should die, only then would it be his brother's task to decide about Kinzi. My uncle took Kinzi away and brought her to her current employers in Pharak.

My grandmother once told me that her husband gave Kinzi's mother away for a litre of *chang*. My grandfather's motto was that people who grew up under hard conditions would always be able to work hard. In

his opinion Kinzi's father, who had been an orphan since his early childhood, was such a person. In the beginning grandfather had even promised to give some land to the young couple, but he did not keep his promise. It was told that my aunt became ill the very day she was given away. They settled in Akang. One day I was sent there to ask my aunt to come to Yawa and help my parents till the fields, but she was already too ill for work. She gave her one-year-old daughter Sena to a Rai-mit, because she felt that she was going to die. My parents went to Akang with some good food to help her recover. Later grandfather and his sons carried her to Yawa, where she died after some days. Her body was cremated without any pomp. I heard the music of the funeral procession, but I could not go to it because I had to tend the cattle. My grandparents had the monks of Takshindu pray for their daughter.

After some time my father visited the Rai family who took Sena. She did not recognize him and asked her foster parents who the stranger was. She behaved like a Rai and did not speak a single word in the Sherpa language. The Rai language had become her mother tongue. Some years later her sister Sumi went there and wanted to take her little sister with her, but she did not want to go with the strange girl. The Rai family treated her well. Later, when Sena had grown up, they explained to her that Sumi was her sister. She went away with her then.

### Running Away

We talked about all these things while in Pharak. It was late at night when we finally laid down on the floor to sleep. The day came when I had to return to my employer. That was very hard for me, because I had enjoyed those days in Pharak. A friend of my parents who lived in that village gave me some potatoes for the way. I went back to Shiteling. In one of the villages en route I cooked and ate my potatoes. In another village I met a woman who was selling *chang* on the wayside. I told her that I didn't have a single *paisa*, but she only laughed, gave me two jars of *chang*, and said for that I could become her daughter-in-law later. At night I slept in a cavern with seven or eight other girls I met there. Since I didn't really want to go back to my employers I walked very slowly the next day, so I only came to the Rai village of Yapil. There I slept in the house of my father's *mit*.

When I arrived at the place where I left my employer's family about two weeks ago, they had already gone to another place. The hut, as well as the cattle, had disappeared. A neighbour told me that they had gone to a cave above Akang. When I arrived there I was only given some burnt popcorn. Some days later we moved again, this time to a place high above Akang. From there I had to go with my employer to Shiteling to weed the corn field. It was already late at night when we returned to our hut. On our way my employer asked me to go faster; else the *zig* (leopard) would come and

eat me. He ran ahead and hid behind a tree. When I came near he imitated the sound of a zig. I cried out and called for my uncle, as I used to address my employer since he was my father's cousin, but I got no answer. Later at the hut he made fun of me in front of his family, because I had been so afraid. This incident hurt me a lot. Since that time I have no longer liked the family.

Once, my employer's younger brother came along with his little dog. We sat around the fire while the dog barked outside. My employer's sister called from outside that a zig was stealing around the cattle. My employer took a burning piece of wood, made a lot of noise and ran to his sister's hut which was near by. After throwing some stones he returned to our hut. We sat some time around the fire and ate our soup. Suddenly we heard the dog whimpering and then everything was silent outside. The uncle jumped up again and went outside, but the dog had disappeared. The zig took his food.

After some time I was ordered to take a hoe to the house of my employer's parents in Yawa. This I did, but then I decided not to return to my employer's hut. First I acted as if I was returning. After meeting some other people who later attested that they had met me, I went to my uncle in Shiteling. I told him that I wanted

to run away. He gave no comment. The next day I went to Phuleli and then up to the old nunnery of Takshindu of which today only a few ruins are left. There I met four women of a related family. The eldest one was a nun and the others were also unmarried.

They gave me something to eat. Later two Sherpas came along with a white man. He was the first European or American I had ever seen. One of the Sherpas cooked while the other had to run behind the white. The white man said that the place near the hut was too dirty and so he went towards Takshindu La. Of course, it was not dirty at all. The cattle had only made the ground sodden knee-deep. It seemed that the white man could not distinguish between mud and dirt, so we laughed about him when he sat down with a grim expression and picked on his typewriter.

That same day I went to the family in Ringmo my mother had mentioned. Only their youngest daughter was at home. The others had gone to Darjeeling. I stayed there for ten days and helped the girl to gather fodder in the woods. I then returned to my parents' house in Yawa. After some days my employer came along and made a big fuss. He shouted at my father and asked for the second years pay back. But my father had nothing to pay with . . .

*Runaway* is an excerpt from Lhakpa Sherpani's book *Sherwa Mi—viel Steine gab's und wenig Brot* (Sherwa Mi—there were many stones and little bread) (1994).

*Lhakpa was born in 1950 in Yawa, a small village near the Takshindu Monastery in Solu. She joined a team of German anthropologists working in the area in 1965. Later that year she moved to Germany. She met and married Karl-Heinz Krämer in 1973. With Krämer, she has worked for the German Foundation for International Development as a Nepalese tutor since the mid-eighties.*

