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BIGFOOT
AND THE
BODHISATTVA
JAMES MORROW

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Novels
The Wine of Violence (1981)
The Continent of Lies (1984)
This Is the Way the World Ends (1985)
Only Begotten Daughter (1990)
The Last Witchfinder (2006)
The Philosopher's Apprentice (2008)
Galápagos Regained (2014)

The Godhead Trilogy
Towing Jehovah (1994)
Blameless in Abaddon (1996)
The Eternal Footman (1999)

Novellas
City of Truth (1990)
Shambling Towards Hiroshima (2009)
The Madonna and the Starship (2015)
The Asylum of Dr. Caligari (2017)

Short Story Collections
Bible Stories for Adults (1996)
The Cat's Pajamas (2004)
Reality by Other Means (2015)

As Editor
Nebula Awards 26, *27*, and *28* (1992, 1993, 1994)
The SFWA European Hall of Fame
(2008, with Kathryn Morrow)

BIGFOOT AND THE BODHISATTVA

JAMES MORROW

Tachyon Publications
San Francisco

Bigfoot and the Bodhisattva

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AFTER THIRTY YEARS spent eating the chilled coral brains of overachieving amateur climbers who believed they could reach the summit of Mount Everest without dying, a diet from which I derived many insights into the virtues and limitations of Western thought, I decided that my life could use a touch more spirituality, and so I resolved to study Tibetan Buddhism under the tutelage of His Holiness, Chögi Gyatso, the fifteenth Dalai Lama.

The problem was not so much that I nourished myself through cerebrophagy, but that I felt so little pity for the unfortunates on whom I fed. Chögi Gyatso, by contrast, was reportedly the reincarnation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Evidently he had much to teach me.

As far as I know, I was the first of my race to undertake an explicitly religious quest. Traditionally we yeti are an unchurched species. Our ideological commitments, such as they are, tend along Marxist lines, the natural inclination of any creature with a dialectical metabolism, but we try not to push it too far, lest we lapse into hypocrisy. After all, it's difficult to maintain a robust contempt for the *haute bourgeoisie* when their neuronal tissues are your preferred source of sustenance.

We live by a code and kill by a canon. Yes, kill: for the raw fact is that, while the typical cyanotic climber who winds up on the yeti menu may be doomed, he is not necessarily dead. We always follow protocol. Happening upon a lost and languishing mountaineer, I shall immediately search the scene for some evidence that he might survive. If I spot a Sherpa party on the horizon or a rescue helicopter in the distance, I shall continue on my way. If death appears inevitable, however, I tell the victim of my intention, then perform the venerable act of *nang-duzul*, hedging the frosty skull with all thirty-eight of my teeth, assuming a wide stance for maximum torque, and, finally, snaffling off the cranium in an abrupt yet respectful gesture. The *sha* is traditionally devoured on the spot. It's all very ritualistic, all very *in nomine Patris et Fili et Spiritus Sancti*, to use a phrase I learned from the left cerebral hemisphere of Michael Rafferty, former seminarian, bestselling author of eighteen Father Tertullian detective novels, and failed

Everest aspirant.

No matter how scrupulously he observes the norms of *nang-duzul*, the celebrant cannot expect any immediate cognitive gain. He must be patient. This isn't vodka. Two or three hours will elapse before the arrival of the *sha-shespah*, the meat-knowledge, but it's usually worth the wait. Typically the enrichment will linger for over a year, sometimes a decade, occasionally a lifetime. Last week I partook of a tenured comparative literature professor from Princeton, hence the formality of my present diction. I would have preferred a south Jersey Mafioso to a central Jersey postmodernist, the better to tell my story quickly and colorfully, but the mob rarely comes up on the mountain. My benefactor's name was Dexter Sherwood, and he'd remitted $65,000 to an outfit called Karmic Adventures on the promise that they would get him to the summit along with six other well-heeled clients. The corporation fulfilled its half of the contract, planting Dexter Sherwood squarely atop the planet, but during the descent a freak storm arrived, and it became every man for himself. I have nothing good to say about Karmic Adventures and its rivals: Extreme Ascents, Himalayan Challenge, Rappelling to Paradise, Jomolungma or Bust. They litter the slopes with their oxygen tanks, they piss off the sky goddess, and every so often they kill a customer. *My Parents Froze to Death on Everest and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt.*

I shall not deny that a connoisseur of long pork occupies ethically ambiguous ground, so let me offer the following proposition. If you will grant that my race is fully sentient, with all attendant rights and privileges, then we shall admit to being cannibals. True, we are *Candidopithecus tibetus* and you are *Homo sapiens*, but my younger sister Namgyal long ago demonstrated that this taxonomy is no barrier to fertile intercourse between our races, hence my half-breed niece Tencho and my mixed-blood nephew Jurmo. Do we have an understanding, O furless ones? Call us psychopaths and Dahmerists, accuse us of despoiling the dead, but spare us your stinking zoos, your lurid circuses, your ugly sideshows, your atrocious laboratories.

This agreement, of course, is purely academic, for you will never learn that we exist—not, at least, in consequence of the present text. I do not write for your amusement but for my own enlightenment. In setting down this account of my religious education, all the while imagining that my audience is your cryptic kind, I hope to make some sense of the tragedy that befell His Holiness. And when I am done, you may be sure, I shall drop the manuscript into the deepest, darkest crevasse I can find.

I did not doubt that Chögi Gyatso would agree to instruct me in the dharma. For the past four years my clan and I had faithfully shielded him from the predations of the People's Liberation Army during his thrice-yearly pilgrimages from Sikkim to Tibet. Thanks to me and my cousins, the true Dalai Lama had thus far enjoyed twelve secret audiences with his false counterpart in Lhasa. His Holiness owed me one.

"Why do you wish to study the dharma?" Chögi Gyatso inquired, knitting his considerable brow.

"My eating habits cause me distress," I explained.

"Digestive?"

"Deontological."

"I know all about your eating habits, Taktra Kunga," said His Holiness, soothing me with his soft hazel eyes. He had a moon face, a shaved pate, and prominent ears. Behind his back, we yeti called him Mr. Sacred Potato Head. "You feed on deceased climbers, extracting *shashespah* from their brains."

Although our local holy men were aware of yeti culinary practices, they'd never learned all the sordid details, assuming in their innocence that we restrained our appetite until the donor was defunct—an illusion I preferred to keep intact. "Every species has its own epistemology," I noted, offering His Holiness an intensely dental grin.

"For me you are like the carrion birds who assist in our sky burials," said Chögi Gyatso. "Scavenging is an honorable way of life, Taktra Kunga. You have no more need of Buddhism than does a vulture."

"I wish to feel pity for those on whom I prey," I explained.

A seraphic light filled His Holiness's countenance. Now I was speaking his language. "Does it occur to you that, were you to acquire this pity, you might end up forsaking *sha-shespah* altogether?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"I shall become your teacher under two conditions. First, each lesson must occur at a time and place of my own choosing. Second, you must forgo your usual cheekiness and approach me with an attitude of respectful submission."

"I'm sorry to hear you think I'm cheeky, Your Holiness."

"And I'm sorry if I've insulted you, Your Hairiness. I merely want to clarify that these lessons will be different from the banter we enjoy during our journeys to Lhasa. We shall have fun, but we shall not descend into facetiousness."

"No talk of James Bond," I said, nodding sagely. Like the fourteenth Dalai Lama before him, Chögi Gyatso was an aficionado of Anglo-American cinema. Until I began my study of the dharma, our mutual affection for Agent 007 was the only thing we really had in common.

"Or perhaps *much* talk of James Bond," the monk corrected me,"though surely even more talk of Cham Bön, the dance celebrating the gods."

The motives behind our trips to see the false Dalai Lama were essentially political rather than religious, although in His Holiness's universe the art of the possible and the pursuit of the ineffable often melded together. Having once dined on Laurence Beckwith, a Stanford professor of twentieth-century Asian history, I understood the necessity of these furtive treks. The disaster began in 1950 when the People's Liberation Army crossed the Upper Yangtze and marched on Lhasa with the aim of delivering the Tibetan people from the ravages of their own culture. By 1955 the collectivization process was fully underway, with Mao Zedong's troops confiscating whatever property, possessions, and human beings stood in the way of turning this backward feudal society into a brutal socialist paradise. Over the next four years it became clear that China intended to dissolve the Tibetan government altogether and imprison Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and so on the evening of March 17, 1959, that regal young man disguised himself as a soldier and fled to Dharamsala in India, where he eventually established a government-in-exile, got on the radar of the secular West, and won a Nobel Peace Prize.

A mere two months after Tenzin Gyatso passed away, Beijing shamelessly appointed a successor, a bewildered three-year-old from Mükangsar named Shikpo Tsering. On his tenth birthday, Shikpo Tsering was taken from his parents, placed under house arrest in the Potala Palace, and ordained as Güntu Gyatso, the fifteenth Dalai Lama. No Tibetan Buddhist was fooled, and neither were we yeti. Güntu Gyatso is no more the reincarnation of Tenzin Gyatso than I am the reincarnation of King Kong. Among my race he is known as the Phonisattva.

Meanwhile, the monks in Dharamsala set about locating the genuine fifteenth Dalai Lama. When a chubby infant from Zhangmu, Töpa Dogyaltsan, passed all the tests, including the correct identification of the late Tenzin Gyatso's eyeglasses, prayer beads, hand drum, and wristwatch from among dozens of choices, he forthwith became Chögi Gyatso, the latest iteration of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. On Chögi Gyatso's twenty-first birthday, the monks relocated their itinerant theocracy to the austere environs of Gangtok in Sikkim. The Pachen Lama told the outside world that certain benevolent deities, communicating through dreams, had demanded this move. He did not mention

that these same gods evidently envisioned His Holiness periodically slipping across the border to advise the false Dalai Lama in matters both pragmatic and cosmic.

And so it happened that, one fine white day in February, my lair became the locus of a royal visit. The unexpected arrival of Chögi Gyatso and his retinue threw my girlfriend, Gawa Samphel, into a tizzy, and I was equally nonplussed. Had we known they were coming, Gawa and I would have tidied up the living room, disposing of the climber skulls strewn everywhere. We were fond of gnawing on them after sex. Death is healthier than cigarettes. To their credit, the monks pretended not to notice the bony clutter.

Gawa served a yeti specialty, pineal-gland tea sweetened with honey. His Holiness drained his mug, cleared his throat, and got to the point. As the leader of "the tall and valiant Antelope Clan"—an accurate assessment, the average yeti height being eight feet and the typical yeti heart being stout—I could perform a great service for the long-suffering Tibetan people. If I and my fellow *Shi-mis* would escort His Holiness through the Lachung Pass to Lhasa three times each year, doing our best to "peacefully and compassionately keep the Chinese patrols at bay," the monks back in Gangtok would send forth 800,000 prayers a week for the continued prosperity of my race. His Holiness promised to compensate us for our trouble, one hundred rupees per yeti per six-day pilgrimage.

"I want to help you out," I said, massaging my scraggly beard, "but I fear that in the course of shielding you from the Mao-Maos we shall inadvertently reveal ourselves to the world."

"That is a very logical objection," said Chögi Gyatso, flashing his beautiful white teeth. He had the brightest smile in Asia."And yet I have faith that these missions will not bring your species to light."

"Your faith, our skin," I said. "I am loath to put either at risk."

"Faith is not something a person can put at risk," His Holiness informed me, wiping the steam from his glasses with the sleeve of his robe."Faith is the opposite of a James Bond martini—it may be stirred but not shaken."

To this day I'm not sure why I assented to become His Holiness's paladin. It certainly wasn't the money or the prayers. I think my decision had something to do with my inveterate affection for the perverse—that, and the prospect of discussing secret-agent movies with a young man whose aesthetics differed so radically from my own.

"I had no idea you were a James Bond fan," I said as Chögi Gyatso took leave of our lair. "Now that I think about it, the titles do have a certain Buddhist quality. *The World Is Not Enough. You Only Live Twice. Tomorrow Never Dies. Live and Let Die*. Is that why you like the series?"

"You are quite correct, Taktra Kunga," His Holiness replied. "I derive much food for meditation from the Bond titles. I also enjoy the babes."

Whether by the grace of the Bön gods, the vicissitudes of chance, or the devotion of his yeti protectors, Chögi Gyatso's pilgrimages proved far less perilous than anyone anticipated. Whenever a Chinese patrol threatened to apprehend His Holiness, my six cousins and I would circle silently around the soldiers, then come at them from behind. The Mao-Maos never knew what hit them. A sudden whack between the shoulder blades—the blow we apes call *glog*, the lightning flash—and the startled soldier wobbled like a defective prayer wheel, then fell prone in the snow, gasping and groaning. By the time the patrol recovered its collective senses, Chögi Gyatso was far away, off to see the sham wizard on his stolen throne.

Our victories in these skirmishes traced largely to our invisibility. This attribute of *Candidopithecus tibetus* is highly adaptive and entirely natural. Like the skin of a chameleon, our fur transmogrifies until it precisely matches the shade of the immediate snowscape. So complete is this camouflage that we appear to the naïve observer as autonomous blazing orbs and disembodied flashing teeth. Set us down anywhere in the Himalayas, and we become eyes without faces, fangs without serpents, grins without cats.

Committed to conveying His Holiness to Lhasa with maximum efficiency, we eventually devised an elaborate relay system using modified climbing gear. Our method comprised a set of six grappling irons outfitted with especially long ropes. By hurling each hook high into the air and deliberately snagging it on the edge of a crag, Cousin Jowo, the strongest among us, succeeded in stringing a succession of high-altitude Tarzan vines between the gateway to the Lachung Pass and the outskirts of Lhasa. Once these immense pendulums had been hung, it became a simple matter for Cousin Drebung, Cousin Yangdak, Cousin Garap, Cousin Nyima, and myself to swing through the canyons in great Newtonian oscillations, gripping our respective ropes with one hand while using the opposite arm to pass His Holiness from ape to ape like a sacramental basketball. Cousin Ngawang brought up the rear, carefully detaching the six hooks and gathering up the ropes, so the Mao-Maos would remain oblivious to our conspiracy.

Naturally my clan and I never dared venture into Lhasa proper, and so after depositing Chögi Gyatso at the city gates we always made a wide arc to the east, tromping through the hills until we reached the railroad bridge that spanned the Brahmaputra River like a sleek tiger leaping over a chasm. His Holiness's half-brother, Dorje Lingpa, lived by himself in a yurt on the opposite shore. We could get there only by sprinting anxiously along the suspended rails. The passenger train made two scheduled and predictable round-trips per day, but the freight lines and the military transports ran at odd hours, so my cousins and I were always thrilled to reach the far side of the gorge and leap to the safety of the berm.

Dorje Lingpa worked for the Chinese National Railroad, one of four token Tibetans in their employ. Six days a week, he would leave his abode shortly after dawn, walk twenty paces to the siding, climb into his motorized section-gang car, and clatter along the maintenance line, routinely stopping to shovel snow, ice, stones, rubble, and litter off the parallel stretch of gleaming high-speed track running west into Lhasa. Whereas the typical Beijing technocrat had a private driveway and a Subaru, Dorje Lingpa had his own railroad siding and a personal locomotive.

A considerate if quixotic man, His Holiness's half-brother always remembered to leave the key under the welcome mat. My clan and I would let ourselves into the yurt, brew some buttered tea, purchase stacks of chips from our host's poker set, and pass the afternoon playing seven-card stud, which Cousin Ngawang had absorbed from a Philadelphia lawyer who'd run short of oxygen on the South Col. Chögi Gyatso and Dorje Lingpa normally returned within an hour of each other —the true Dalai Lama from counseling the Phonisattva, his brother from clearing the Lhasa line. Usually Chögi Gyatso remembered to bring a new set of postcards depicting the changing face of the capital. The Lhasa of my youth was a populous and noisy yet fundamentally congenial world. Thanks to the dubious boon of the railroad, the city now swarmed with franchise restaurants selling yak burgers, flat-screen TVs displaying prayer flags, taxi cabs papered with holograms of stupas, and movie theaters running Bollywood musicals dubbed into Mandarin.

Our fellowship always spent the night on the premises, Chögi Gyatso and his brother bunking in the yurt, we seven yeti sleeping on the ground in the backyard. Does that image bring a chill to your bones, O naked ones? You should understand that our fur is not simply a kind of cloak. Every pelt is a dwelling, like a turtle's shell. We live and die within the haven of ourselves.

Dorje Lingpa loved his job, but he hated his Mao-Mao bosses. Every time he hosted Chögi Gyatso and his yeti entourage, he outlined his latest unrealized scheme for chastising the Han Chinese. As you might imagine, these narratives were among the few phenomena that could dislodge Chögi Gyatso's impacted

serenity.

"I've decided to target the Brahmaputra River bridge," Dorje Lingpa told us on the occasion of the bodhisattva's tenth pilgrimage. "At first I thought I'd need plastique, but now I believe dynamite will suffice. There's lots of it lying around from when they built the railroad."

"Dear brother, you are allowing anger to rule your life," said Chögi Gyatso, scowling. "I fear you have strayed far from the path of enlightenment."

"Every night as I fall asleep, I have visions of the collapsing bridge," said Dorje Lingpa, discreetly opening a window to admit fresh air. Though too polite to mention it, he obviously found our amalgamated yeti aroma rather too piquant. "I see a train carrying Chinese troops plunging headlong into the gorge."

"It's not your place to punish our oppressors," His Holiness replied. "Through their ignorance they are sowing the seeds of their own future suffering."

Dorje Lingpa turned to me and said, "During the occupation, tens of thousands of Tibetans were arrested and put in concentration camps, where mass starvation and horrendous torture were the norm. When China suffered a major crop failure in 1959, the army confiscated our entire harvest and shipped it east, causing a terrible famine throughout Tibet."

"I have forgiven the Chinese for what they did to us," Chögi Gyatso told his brother, "and I expect the same of you."

"I would rather be in a situation where you must forgive me for what I did to the Chinese," Dorje Lingpa replied.

"Beloved brother, you vex me greatly," said Chögi Gyatso. "All during Mönlam Chenmo I want you to meditate from dawn to dusk. You must purge these evil thoughts from your mind. Will you promise me that?"

Dorje Lingpa nodded listlessly.

"Anyone for seven-card stud?" asked Cousin Yangdak.

"Deal me in," said Cousin Nyima.

"At the start of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards swarmed into Tibet," Dorje Lingpa told me. "They forced monks and nuns to copulate in public, coerced them into urinating on sacred texts, threw excrement on holy men, scrawled graffiti on temple walls, and prosecuted local leaders in kangaroo courts for so-called crimes against the people."

"Nothing wild, high-low, table stakes," said Cousin Nyima, distributing the cards.

"The Red Guards also went on gang-rape sprees throughout the countryside," Dorje Lingpa continued. "They usually required the victim's husband, parents, children, and neighbors to watch."

"First king bets," said Cousin Nyima.

"Two rupees," said Cousin Jowo.

"Make it four," said Cousin Drebung.

Three days later Chögi Gyatso sent an emissary to my lair—Lopsang Chokden, who eerily resembled the massive Oddjob from *Goldfinger*. He consumed a mug of Gawa's pineal-gland tea, all the while surveying the scattered skulls, which he called "splendid meditation objects," then delivered his message. His Holiness would begin my tutelage on the morning after the two-week New Year's celebration of Mönlam Chenmo, which I knew to be a kind of karmic rodeo combining sporting events, prayers, exorcisms, and public philosophical debates in a manner corresponding to no Western religious festival whatsoever. Chögi Gyatso suggested that I bring a toothbrush, as the first stage of my apprenticeship might easily last forty-eight hours. I should also pack my favorite snacks, provided they contained no Chinese dog meat.

As I prepared for my journey, it occurred to me that the mind I would be presenting to His Holiness was hardly a tabula rasa. My fur was white, but my slate was not blank. Owing to my ingestion of a dozen California pseudo-Buddhists over the years, I'd grasped much of what the dharma involved, or, rather, did not involve. I had particularly vivid memories of a Santa Monica mystic named Kimberly Weatherwax. Shortly before I stumbled upon this hapless climber, she had fallen from the Lhotse face, simultaneously losing her oxygen tank and stabbing herself in the back with an ice ax. Her blood oozed through her parka and leaked onto the snow like a Jackson Pollock painting in progress. She had perhaps five minutes to live, an interval she elected to spend telling me about her past lives in ancient Babylon and Akhenaton's Egypt.

"Are you by any chance the Abominable Snowman?" she asked, her brain so bereft of oxygen that she evidently felt no pain.

"My girlfriend thinks I'm insufferable, but I'm not abominable," I replied. "Call me Taktra Kunga, yeti of the *Shi-mi* Clan."

"A yeti? Wow! Really?"

"Really."

"That's so cool," she rasped, her voice decaying to a whisper. "An actual yeti," she mumbled. "This has been the most meaningful experience of my life."

"And now you are dying, which means I must eat your cerebral cortex."

"Heavy."

She wheezed and blacked out. From the subsequent *nang-duzul* I learned that, for tantric dilettantes like Kimberly Weatherwax, Eastern religion promised three big payoffs: solving the death problem through reincarnation, improving one's sex life through deferred gratification, and leaving the mundane realm of false values and failed plans for an axiomatically superior plane of relentless joy and unremitting bliss. Years later, trudging toward Gangtok for my first lesson with His Holiness, I decided that such spiritual avarice was the last thing my teacher would endorse. Obviously the dharma was not simply an exotic road to immortality and orgasms, not simply a gold-plated *Get Out of Samsara Free* card. Clearly there was more to infinity than that.

Dressed in his most sumptuous saffron-and-burgundy robe, Chögi Gyatso stood waiting at the gateway to his private residence, a stately, many-towered palace that the deracinated monks had constructed shortly after the Mao-Maos installed the Phonisattva in Lhasa. As His Holiness led me down the central corridor, I began expounding upon the dharma. "I understand that reincarnation is different from immortality, and I likewise understand that the tantra is not a means of erotic fulfillment. So we can dispense with those issues and get into something meatier right away."

A man of abiding forbearance, Chögi Gyatso listened thoughtfully, then looked me in the eye and unsheathed his epic smile."What you understand is precisely nothing, Taktra Kunga," he said cheerily. "What you understand is zero, less than zero, zero and zero again, or, to use Mr. Bond's epithet, Double-O-Seven, seven being the number of rightful branches that a bodhisattva will pursue while on the radiance level of his emergence, along with thirty additional such disciplines."

We slipped into His Holiness's private bedchamber, where a smiling nun hovered over a tea cart that held a ceramic pot and a *You Only Live Twice* collector's mug, plus a plain white mug presumably intended for me.

"I don't doubt that I am ignorant, Your Holiness," I told Chögi Gyatso."What are the seven rightful branches?"

"Correct mindfulness, correct discernment, correct effort, correct joy, correct pliancy, correct meditation, and correct equanimity, but don't worry about it, Your Hairiness. Perhaps you have the makings of a bodhisattva, perhaps not, but for now we simply want to increase your compassion quotient. Your education will begin with a simple oath honoring Sakyamuni, his teachings, and the community of monks and nuns he founded."

"Sounds good," I said, inhaling the sweet oily fragrance of the tea.

"Recite the following vow three times. 'I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the samgha.' "

" 'I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the samgha.' "

Twice more I repeated the pledge, and then His Holiness gifted me with a kata —a white silk scarf—draping it around my neck. The nun filled his mug with buttered tea, handed him the pot, and slipped away. He proceeded to load my mug beyond its capacity, the greasy amber fluid spilling over the rim and cascading across the tray, flooding the spoons and napkins.

"Might I suggest you stop pouring?" I asked.

Chögi Gyatso maintained his posture, so that the tray soon held the entire steaming, roiling, eddying contents of the teapot. "Like this mug, your mind is filled with useless musings and self-generated afflictions. You will not progress until you shed all such psychic baggage." He pointed toward a huge porcelain bathtub, elevated on four solid-brass lion paws to accommodate a brazier for heating the water. "And if you are to empty your mind, Taktra Kunga, you must first empty this tub, transferring all twenty gallons to the cistern we use for flushing the toilets. I was planning to take a nice warm bath tonight, but that ambition has now fallen away."

"Where's the bucket?" I asked.

"You will not use a bucket, but rather this implement." Chögi Gyatso reached toward the inundated tea tray and withdrew a dripping silver spoon.

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"Indeed,"said Chögi Gyatso. "Completely ridiculous. The cistern is at the end of the corridor, last room on the left."

"What if I refuse?"

"Taktra Kunga, need I remind you that these lessons were your idea? In truth I have better things to do with my time."

"How long will the job take?"

"About seven hours. I suggest you get started right after lunch."

"Do you want me to chant a mantra or anything?"

"You are not yet ready for meditation, but if you insist on chanting something"—His Holiness offered a sly wink—"try the following: 'That's a Smith and Wesson, and you've had your six.' "

"*Dr. No*, right?"

The bodhisattva dipped his head and said, "To become enlightened is to encounter the perfect void, the final naught, the ultimate no. Alternatively, you may wish to ponder the following koan: when a chicken has sex with an egg, which comes first?"

His Holiness laughed uproariously. Under normal circumstances, I might have shared his merriment, but I was too depressed by the thought of the tedious chore that lay before me.

"Evidently it would be best if I did not ponder anything in particular," I said.

"That is the wisest remark you have made all morning."

With an aggrieved heart but a curious intellect, I did as my teacher suggested, consuming my lunch, a bowl of noodle soup, then getting to work. While His Holiness sat rigidly in his study, alternately reading Tsong Khapa's *The Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* and Ian Fleming's *The Man with the Golden Gun*, I ferried twenty gallons of bathwater from tub to cistern, one ounce at a time. As Chögi Gyatso predicted, the task took all afternoon and well into the evening. Alas, instead of growing vacant my skull became jammed to the walls with toxic resentments. I wanted to put thorns in His Holiness's slippers. I wanted to break his drums and shatter his James Bond DVDs.

"The job is done," I told my teacher at nine o'clock.

"Go to your bedchamber, Taktra Kunga, first door on the right. An excellent dinner awaits you, mutton curry with rice. I would suggest that you turn in early. Come morning, the nun will bring you two oranges. After you have savored their sweet juices and exquisite pulp, you should begin your second labor."

"Which is?"

"Replenishing the tub."

"You must be joking."

"That is correct, Taktra Kunga. I am joking. It's a funny idea—isn't it?—filling the big tub you so recently emptied."

"Very funny, yes."

"However, please know that, come tomorrow afternoon, I may wish to bathe."

"I see," I said evenly.

"Do you?"

"Alas, yes. Might I use a bucket this time?"

"No. Sorry. The spoon. You should aim to finish by three o'clock, whereupon the nun will start warming my bath."

I figured I had no choice, and so the next day, right after consuming my two oranges, which were truly delicious, I spent another seven hours wielding my pathetic spoon, transferring the water ounce by dreary ounce. Midway through the ordeal, I realized that my anger at Chögi Gyatso had largely vanished. Here I was, receiving personal instruction in a magnificent religious tradition from the world's most famous holy man. It behooved me to be glad, not to mention grateful. At the very least I must become like a luscious female operative in thrall to Agent 007, surrendering to my teacher with a willing spirit.

"And now let me ask a question," said Chögi Gyatso after I'd finished drawing his bath. "What if I commanded you to empty the tub all over again?"

"I would gnash my teeth," I replied.

"And then?"

"I would growl like a snow lion."

"And then?"

"I would gasp like a dying climber."

"And then?"

"I would empty the tub."

"That is a very good answer, Taktra Kunga. Now go home to your woman and make love to her long into the night."

At the start of the third lunar month, the hulking emissary Lopsang Chokden reappeared in my lair and delivered a new message from His Holiness, but only after once again consuming a mug of pineal-gland tea and sorting contemplatively through our skulls. Chögi Gyatso, I now learned, wanted me to return to Sikkim forthwith and seek him out in the New Ganden Monastery. I should anticipate spending four full weeks with His Holiness—and pack my luggage accordingly.

"Twenty-eight days of celibacy," sneered Gawa. "Really, Taktra Kunga, your guru is asking a lot of you—me—us."

"Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder," I replied.

"Horse manure."

"Please try to understand. I'm not at peace with myself."

We passed the rest of the day alternately quarreling and copulating, and the following morning Gawa sent me off with her resentful blessing. I made my way south through the Lachung Pass, pausing to dine on Robin Balaban, an NYU film studies professor, then crossed the border into Sikkim. Digesting Professor Balaban's thoughts, I came to realize that he'd been troubled by a question that had often haunted me, namely, why has there never been a good movie about a yeti? *Man Beast* is atrocious. *Half Human* is risible. *The Snow Beast* is a snore. Only the Hammer Film called *The Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas* is remotely watchable, although everyone involved, including star Peter Cushing, writer Nigel Kneale, and director Val Guest, went on to make much better thrillers.

"During the first half of your sojourn here, you will experience intimations of the primordial Buddhist vehicle, the Hinayana, keyed to purging mental defilements and achieving personal enlightenment," said Chögi Gyatso as we connected, hand to paw, on the steps of the New Ganden Monastery. "During the second half of your stay, you will taste of the plenary vehicle, the Mahayana, which aims to cultivate a person's compassion for all living beings through the doctrine of *sunyata*, emptiness. In the fullness of time I shall introduce you to the quintessential vehicle, the diamond way, the indestructible Vajrayana."

"*Diamonds Are Forever*," I said.

"Probably my favorite Double-O-Seven. But let's not delude ourselves, Taktra Kunga. Whether *Homo sapiens* or *Candidopithecus tibetus*, a seeker may need to spend many years, perhaps many lifetimes, pursuing the Hinayana and the Mahayana before he can claim them as his own, and yet without such grounding he is unlikely to attain the eternal wakefulness promised by the Vajrayana."

"Given the immensity of the challenge, let me suggest that we start immediately," I said."There's no time like the present, right, Your Holiness?"

"No, Taktra Kunga, there's *only* a time like the present," my teacher corrected me. "The past is a tortoise-hair coat. The future is a clam-tooth necklace."

I passed the next seven days in the Tathagata Gallery, contemplating the canvases, four completely white, four completely black. His Holiness's expectations were clear. I must endeavor to fill the featureless spaces with whatever random notions crossed my mind—imperiled mountaineers, tasty yuppie brains, voluptuous yeti barmaids, crummy Abominable Snowman movies —then imagine these projections catching fire and turning to ash, so they would cease to colonize my skull. Despite my initial skepticism, before the long week was out I succeeded in slowing down the rackety engine of my consciousness, the endless *kachung, kachung, kachung* of my thoughts, the ceaseless *haroosh, haroosh, haroosh* of my anxieties, or so it seemed.

"I'm a much calmer person," I told my teacher. "Indeed, I think I've achieved near total equanimity. Does that mean I'm enlightened?"

"Give me a break, Taktra Kunga."

My second week in the New Ganden Monastery confronted me with a different sort of *sunyata*, the bare trees of the Dzogchen Arboretum, their branches bereft of leaves, fruit, and blossoms. This time around, my instructions were to focus my drifting thoughts on the here and now, the luminous, numinous, capacious present. Once again I profited from my meditations. Within twenty-four hours a sublime stillness swelled at the center of my being. I was truly *there*, inhabiting each given instant, second by millisecond by nanosecond.

"I did it," I told His Holiness. "I extinguished the past and annihilated the future. For now there is only today, and for today there is only now. I see nirvana just over the horizon."

"Don't crack walnuts in your ass, Taktra Kunga."

My troubles began during week three, which I spent in the Hall of Empty Mirrors, alternately meditating with closed eyes and contemplating with a rapt gaze the twenty-one ornately carved frames, each distinctly lacking a looking-glass. I was now swimming in the ocean of the Mahayana. It would not do for me simply to still my thoughts and occupy the present. I must also shed my ego, scrutinizing my non-self in the non-glass. Good-bye, Taktra Kunga. You are an idea at best, a phantasm of your atrophied awareness. No person, place, thing, or circumstance boasts a stable, inherent existence. Earthly attachments mean nothing. Nothing means everything. All is illusion. Flux rules. Welcome to the void.

"I don't like the Hall of Empty Mirrors," I told His Holiness at the end of week three, from which I'd lamentably emerged more myself, more Taktra Kungaesque, than ever. "In fact, I detest it."

"You're in good company," said Chögi Gyatso. "When the Buddha first spoke of the quest for *sunyata*, thousands of his followers had heart attacks."

"Then perhaps we should omit emptiness from the curriculum?"

"A person can no more achieve enlightenment without *sunyata* than he can make an omelet without eggs."

"I don't want to have a heart attack."

"To tell you the truth, I never believed that story," said Chögi Gyatso. "Although it's always disturbing to have the rug pulled out, the fall is rarely fatal."

"But if everything is an illusion, then isn't the idea that everything is an illusion *also* an illusion?" I asked petulantly.

"Let's not stoop to sophistry, Taktra Kunga. This is contemporary Gangtok, not ancient Athens."

Having acquitted myself so poorly in the Hall of Empty Mirrors, I anticipated even worse luck in the locus of my fourth and final week, the Chamber of Silence, reminiscent of the padded cells in which Western civilization was once pleased to warehouse its lunatics. My pessimism proved prescient. Much as I enjoyed meditating amid this cacophony of quietude, this mute chorus of one hand clapping, no foot stomping, thirty fish sneezing, forty oysters laughing, and a million dust motes singing, I was no closer to deposing my sovereign self than when I'd first entered the New Ganden Monastery.

"I'm discouraged, Your Holiness."

"That is actually good news," he replied.

"No, I mean I'm *really* discouraged."

"You must have patience. Better the dense glacier of genuine despair than the brittle ice of false hope."

O hairless ones, I give you my teacher, Chögi Gyatso, the Charlie Chan of the Himalayas, forever dispensing therapeutic aphorisms. And if His Holiness was Chan, did that make me his nonexistent offspring, his favorite illusory child, his Number One Sunyata? Raised by the Antelope Clan, I'd never known my biological parents, who'd died in the Great Khumbu Avalanche six months after my birth. In seeking out His Holiness, was I really just looking for my father? The more I pondered the question, the more mixed my emotions grew—a hodgepodge, a vortex, an incommodius vicus of recirculation, to paraphrase a Joycean scholar I'd once assimilated.

Chögi Gyatso bid me farewell. I left the New Ganden Monastery and headed for the Lachung Pass as fast as my limbs would carry me, sometimes running on all fours, eager for a sensual reunion with Gawa. Midway through my journey I again encountered the corpse of Robin Balaban, the NYU film professor. His gutted cranium taunted me with the void I'd failed to apprehend in the monastery. I averted my eyes and howled with despair.

My indifference to Professor Balaban's fate, I realized to my infinite chagrin, was equaled only by my apathy toward his bereaved loved ones. With crystal clarity I beheld my benighted mind. I would never awaken. Buddhahood was as far away as the summit of some soaring Jomolungma on another planet. And so I howled again, wracked by a self-pity born of my inability to pity anyone but myself, then continued on my way.

While Chögi Gyatso doubtless regarded me as a difficult pupil, perhaps the most exasperating he'd encountered in his present incarnation, the primary menace to his tranquility in those days remained his bitter, restless, firebrand brother. Although Dorje Lingpa had kept his promise to spend the whole of Mönlam Chenmo in profound meditation, his efforts had proved abortive, and he was now more determined than ever to strike a blow against the Han Chinese. Unenlightened being that I was, I framed Dorje Lingpa's failure in egotistical terms. If His Holiness's blood relatives had difficulty attaining *sunyata*, then I

shouldn't feel so bad about the absence of emptiness in my own life.

The intractable condition of Dorje Lingpa's anger became apparent during our next secret pilgrimage to Lhasa. In a tone as devoid of compassion as a brick is devoid of milk, he confessed that he could not shake his mental image of "the Brahmaputra gorge swallowing a troop train like the great god Za feeding a string of sausages to the mouth embedded in his stomach." He speculated that this vision might be "a sign from heaven," and that Za himself was telling him "to render a divine judgment against the evil ones."

His Holiness began to weep, the subtlest display of anguish I'd ever seen, the tears trickling softly down his face like meltwater in spring, his sobs barely audible above the guttural breathing of the seven hairy apes in the yurt. Dorje Lingpa remained adamant. The People's Liberation Army must pay for its crimes. Changing the subject, or so it seemed at the time, he said that shortly after dawn he would like to take His Holiness on "a brief excursion in my track-inspection vehicle," then turned to his yeti guests and declared that there would be room for one of us. I told him I would like to join the party.

Thus it happened that, shortly after sunrise, Chögi Gyatso, Dorje Lingpa, and I climbed into the open-air section-gang car and tooled eastward along the maintenance line at a brisk eighty kilometers per hour, enduring a wind chill from some frigid equivalent of hell. Dorje Lingpa wore his bomber jacket, His Holiness sat hunched beneath a yak-hide blanket, and I had wrapped myself head-to-toe in a tarp—not because I minded the cold, but because the surrounding gang car defied my usual white-on-white camouflage. Suddenly the harsh metallic bawl of a diesel horn filled the air, and then the train appeared, zooming toward us along the adjacent high-speed rails in a great sucking rush that whipped our clothing every which way like prayer flags in a gale. Each passenger coach was crammed with Han Chinese, some perhaps bound for a holiday in Lhasa but the majority surely intending to settle permanently, players in the government's plan to marginalize the native population. Five hundred faces flew past, lined up along the windows like an abacus assembled from severed heads. Each wore an expression of nauseated misery—a syndrome probably born of the thin air, though I liked to imagine they were also suffering spasms of regret over their role in the rout of Tibet.

As the morning progressed, Dorje Lingpa's agenda become clear. He meant to give us a guided tour of recent outrages by the Chinese. Periodically he stopped the gang car and passed us his binoculars, so that we could behold yet another exhibit in the Museum of Modern Expediency: the bombed lamaseries, razed temples, trampled shrines, maimed statues—desecrations that the Beijing regime imagined would help stamp out the indigenous cancer of contemplation and

replace it with the new state religion, that cruel fusion of normless monopoly capitalism and murderous totalitarianism. Once again His Holiness's eyes grew damp, and now he wept prolifically, great dollops of saltwater rolling down his cheeks and freezing on his chest, so that he soon wore a necklace of tears.

Knowing of his brother's fascination with James Bond's Aston Martin, Dorje Lingpa asked if he would like to take the throttle during our return trip. For a full minute the grieving monk said nothing, then offered a nod of disengaged corroboration. Dorje Lingpa stopped the inspection vehicle, then threw the motor into reverse. We pivoted in our seats. His Holiness gripped the controls, and we were off, retracing our path westward through the scattered shards of the Tibetan soul. Drawing within view of the gorge, we again heard the blast of a diesel horn, and seconds later we were overtaken by another train from Beijing, bearing still more Han into the sacred city.

We reached the yurt shortly after two o'clock. My cousins had prepared a hot luncheon of steamed dumplings, but I was not hungry, and neither was His Holiness. The meal passed languidly and without conversation. At last Chögi Gyatso broke the silence, his resonant and reassuring voice warming the icy air.

"Beloved brother," he told Dorje Lingpa, "that was a good thing you did, taking us across the plateau. I understand you much better now."

"I am grateful for your praise," said the trainman. "Will you join my war against the People's Liberation Army?"

"What do you think?" Chögi Gyatso asked.

"I think I should not count on your participation."

"That is correct."

"I'm reminded of an old joke," said Cousin Ngawang. "A man went to a priest in the north of Ireland and confessed that he'd blown up six miles of British railroad track. And the priest said, 'For your penance, you must go out and do the stations.' "

"Very amusing," said Cousin Jowo.

"Decidedly droll," said Cousin Drebung.

But no one laughed, most especially myself, most conspicuously Chögi Gyatso, and most predictably Dorje Lingpa.

My third tutorial with His Holiness took me to the fabled Bebhaha Temple of

Cosmic Desire, the very loins, as it were, of the Gangtok Buddhist Complex, famous throughout Asia for its six thousand masterpieces of erotic art. Despite his celibacy, or perhaps because of it, Chögi Gyatso held a generally approving attitude toward the sex act, and he believed that, my embarrassing performance in the monastery notwithstanding, the meditation practices pursued in the Bebhaha Temple might occasion my awakening. Moreover, this time around I would be following a regimen drawn from His Holiness's specialty—the tantric path, the diamond discipline, the venerable Vajrayana.

The mystic principle behind the temple was straightforward enough. Tsangyang Gyatso, the sixth Dalai Lama, had put it well: "If one's thoughts toward the dharma were of the same intensity as those toward physical love, one would become a Buddha in this very body, in this very life." And so it was that I spent a week in Gangtok's spiritual red-light district, contemplating hundreds of paintings and sculptures depicting sexual ensembles—couples, trios, quartets, quintets, human, yeti, divine, biologically mixed, taxonomically diverse, ontologically scrambled—engaged in every sort of carnal congress, homoerotic, heteroerotic, autoerotic, even surrealistic: images of copulating trees and randy pocket watches, playfully signed "Salvador Dali Lama." I seethed with lust. I stroked myself to torrential spasms. At one point His Holiness suggested that I take up with the kind of sexual consort known as a karma-mudra, an "action seal," so named because the practice sealed or solidified the seeker's understanding that all phenomena are a union of ecstasy and emptiness. I declined this provocative invitation, feeling that His Holiness's syllabus had already put enough strain on my relationship with Gawa.

Even as I wrapped my hand around my cock, I sought to keep my eye on the ball. The idea was to gather up all this libidinous energy, this tsunami of seed, and, through diligent meditation and focused chanting, channel it toward detachment, *sunyata*, and boundless pity for the suffering of all sentients. From onanism to *Om mani padme hum*, oh, yes, that was the grand truth of the tantra, an ingenious strategy of masturbate-and-switch, and I did my best, O depilated ones, you must believe me, I truly played to win.

"I tried," I told Chögi Gyatso as I stumbled out of the Bebhaha Temple, all passions spent. "I tried, and I failed. Immerse me in the tantra, and my thoughts turn to wanking, not awakening. Let's face it, Your Holiness. I was not made for the Vajrayana, nor the Mahayana either, nor even the Hinayana."

"You're probably right. But I must also say this, Taktra Kunga. Your attitude sucks."

"So do half your deities."

"Might we try one final tantric lesson? At the start of the tenth lunar month,

come to the Antarabhava Charnel Ground on the slopes of Mount Jelep La, eight kilometers to the northeast. You will know it by the vultures wheeling overhead."

I shrugged and said,"I suppose I have nothing to lose."

"No, Taktra Kunga, you have *everything* to lose," His Holiness reproached me. "That is the whole point. Lose your illusions, lose your goals, lose your ego, lose the world, and only *then* will you come to know the wonder of it all."

O smooth ones, you might think that an ape whose lair was appointed with skulls would revel in the ambience of the Antarabhava Charnel Ground, but in fact I found it a completely ghastly place, a seething soup of shucked bones, strewn teeth, rotting flesh, disembodied hair, fluttering shrouds, buzzing flies, busy worms, industrious crows, and enraptured vultures. By Chögi Gyatso's account, two geographical circumstances accounted for this macabre ecology. Because wood was scarce in Tibet, cremation had never become the norm, and—thanks to the rocky and often frozen soil—interment was equally uncommon. Instead Tibetans had resorted to the colorful custom of sky burial, dismembering the corpse and leaving the components in a high open place to be consumed by jackals and carrion birds.

"Death, decay, and transmigration: the three fundamental facts of existence," said His Holiness.

"I want to go home," I said, my eyes watering and my brain reeling from the foulness of it all. The stench was itself a kind of raptor, pecking at my sinuses, nibbling at the lining of my throat.

"The sorrowful cycle of *samsara*," Chögi Gyatso persisted. "The wretched wheel of life, turning and turning in the widening gyre, but there is no rough beast, Taktra Kunga, no Bethlehem, only more turning, more suffering, more turning, more suffering. Sean Connery is reborn as George Lazenby, who is reborn as Roger Moore, who is reborn as Timothy Dalton, who is reborn as Pierce Brosnan, who is reborn as Daniel Craig, who is reborn as Brian Flaherty. It can be much worse, of course. A person might spend his life deliberately harming other sentient beings. Owing to this bad karma, he will come back as an invertebrate, a miserable crawling thing, or else a hungry ghost, or maybe even a hell being. Agent Double-O-Seven, if he truly existed, would probably be a dung

beetle now. So it goes, Taktra Kunga. You can't win, you can't break even—but you *can* get out of the game."

"*You* didn't get out of the game," I noted, staring at my feet."You keep opting for reincarnation."

"That doesn't mean I like it."

"If your brother sends a troop train into the gorge, how may lifetimes will he need to discharge his karmic debt? A hundred? A thousand? A million?"

"I don't want to talk about my brother," said Chögi Gyatso, placing his open palm beneath my shaggy simian chin and directing my gaze toward the open-air ossuary. "Behold."

Bearing a narrow palanquin on which lay a robe-wrapped corpse, a solemn procession shuffled into view: monks, mourners, tub-haulers, and a team of specialists that His Holiness identified as rogyapas, body cutters. Expectant vultures arrived from all points of the compass. After finding a relatively uncluttered space, the palanquin-bearers set down their burden, whereupon the rogyapas secured the corpse with ropes and pegs, "lest the birds claim it too soon," His Holiness explained. Availing themselves of the tub, the monks next washed the body in a solution scented with saffron and camphor, "thereby making the flesh more pleasing to the nostrils of its feathered beneficiaries."

"Your religion is good with details," I noted.

"In giving his body to scavengers, the deceased is performing an act of great charity," Chögi Gyatso explained. "Even as we speak, that person's hovering consciousness negotiates the bardo, the gap between his present life and his next incarnation. He is presently confronting a multitude of confusing sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes, as well as hordes of tantric deities, some peaceful, others wrathful, each spawned by his mind. It's all in the *Bardo Thodol*."

"We should try selling it to the movies."

"Taktra Kunga, shut up."

After drawing out their sharp gleaming knives, the body cutters went to work, opening up the corpse's chest, removing the internal organs, and slicing the flesh from the skeleton. The rogyapas mashed up the bones with stone hammers, then mixed the particles with barley flour, a proven vulture delicacy.

"What are we doing here?" I moaned, seizing His Holiness by the shoulders.

"We are here to relieve the suffering of other sentient beings. Haven't you been paying attention?"

"No, I mean what are we doing *here*? Why are we in this demented alfresco cemetery?"

"We are here to meditate on *tathata*—suchness—the true nature of reality."

Only after a large quantity of flesh and bone had been prepared were the vultures allowed into the ceremony, a precaution that kept them from fighting among themselves. The rogyapas carried the offerings to a large slab of rock decorated with a geometric representation of the universe, then systematically pitched the portions, one by one, toward the center of the circle. Meanwhile, one particularly athletic rogyapa swung a large rope across the inscribed outcropping, discouraging the raptors from entering the mandala before the proper time.

"Take me away!" I wailed. "I can't stand this place! Class dismissed!"

"Is that truly your wish?" asked His Holiness.

"Yes! It's over! *Allons-y!* I'm the worst student you ever had!"

"That would appear to be the case."

The rope-swinger stilled his cord and stepped aside. Fluttering, shrieking, squawking, and—for all I knew—chanting praises to their patrons, the appreciative vultures descended.

"I don't want to be enlightened!" I cried. "I want Gawa! I want my cousins! I want onion bagels and pineal-gland tea and Prokofiev and Fred Astaire and the Marx Brothers! I want all my stupid, worthless, impermanent toys!"

The bodhisattva shrugged and, taking my paw in his hand, began leading me toward Gangtok. "Taktra Kunga, I am disappointed in you."

"I don't doubt it."

"Let me offer a word of counsel," said His Holiness. "When lying on your deathbed, strive mightily to release these negative energies of yours. You won't be reborn a buddha, but you won't come back an insect either. Speaking personally, I hope you remain a giant ape. You do that very well."

The earth turned, the wheel of life revolved, and, exactly one year after hearing Dorje Lingpa declare his intention to wreck a Mao-Mao troop train, my cousins and I once again found ourselves huddled drowsily behind his yurt on the eve of Mönlam Chenmo. We did not expect to get much sleep. Chögi Gyatso and his half-brother had stayed up late arguing over the necessity of destroying the Brahmaputra bridge. They had found no points of accord. Bad karma suffused the gorge like the stench of a charnel ground.

I awoke shortly after sunrise, tired, bleary, and miserable, then stumbled into

the yurt. My cousins occupied the dining table, playing seven-card stud. His Holiness and Dorje Lingpa sat in the breakfast nook, eating oranges and drinking buttered tea.

"A flush," said Cousin Jowo, displaying five hearts.

"Beats my straight," said Cousin Nyima, disclosing his hand.

The plaintive moan of a diesel horn fissured the frosty air.

"A troop transport," noted Dorje Lingpa. "Over the years I've come to know each train by its call, like a hunter identifying different species of geese by their honks."

A second mournful wail arose, rattling the circular roof.

"The train is exactly nine miles away," said Dorje Ling-pa."It will be here in six and a half minutes."

"Dear brother, your mind is crammed with useless knowledge," said Chögi Gyatso.

"That horn is a death knell," Dorje Lingpa continued. "Listen carefully, brother. The train is pealing its own doom."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

A long, malevolent, Za-like grin bisected Dorje Lingpa's melon face. "I'm talking about a bridge bristling with sticks of dynamite. I'm talking about a detonator attached to the high-speed track. I'm talking about headlines in tomorrow's *Beijing Times* and the next day's *Washington Post*." He brushed his brother's shaved head. "And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

Nothing. His Holiness's favorite concept. Long live Double-O-Seven. You can imagine my surprise, therefore, when Chögi Gyatso leapt up, fled the yurt, and dashed toward the railroad siding.

"Bad idea!" I yelled, giving chase.

"I think not," His Holiness replied.

I drew abreast of Chögi Gyatso, surpassed him, depositing my furry bulk in his path. He circumnavigated me and lurched toward the rusting turnout connecting the maintenance track to the Lhasa line.

"*Om mani padme hum*," he chanted, seizing the steel lever and throwing the switch.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

Actually it was quite obvious what he was doing. He was contriving to reconfigure the rails, so that he might drive the gang car west along the high-speed line, hit the bridge, and trip the detonator.

"Pacifism is not passivity," he noted, then headed for the gang car. "The explosion will warn the engineer to stop the train."

"No! That's crazy! Don't!"

Now Dorje Lingpa appeared on the scene, grabbing His Holiness around the waist with the evident intention of hauling him to the ground.

The diesel horn bellowed, louder than ever.

I was there, O shiny ones. I saw the whole amazing incident. For the first time in seven hundred years, a Dalai Lama decked somebody with a roundhouse right —in this case, his own bewildered brother. James Bond swinging his fists or a yeti delivering a *glog* punch could not have felled Dorje Lingpa more skillfully.

As the trainman lay in the snow, stunned and supine, my clan arrived, grappling hooks in hand, climbing ropes slung over their shoulders like huge epaulets. Cousin Ngawang placed a large hairy foot on Dorje Lingpa's chest.

"Your brother is a brave man," the ape declared.

The diesel horn screamed across the valley.

His Holiness climbed into the inspection vehicle and assumed the controls. "After I've passed over the turnout, kindly throw the switch to its former position," he instructed me. "We don't want to save the train from my brother's vengeance only to derail it through negligence."

"You don't understand!" I cried. "All is illusion! That train isn't real! The soldiers aren't real! There is no suchness except what exists in your mind!"

"Don't be silly," said His Holiness, putting the motor in gear. "I love you, Taktra Kunga," he added, and he was off.

The gang car rattled out of the yard, frogged onto the Lhasa line, and raced away at full throttle. I planted myself squarely on the maintenance track, the better to see Chögi Gyatso depart his present incarnation. An instant later the car reached the bridge and continued across, a caterpillar crawling along a hissing firecracker. The wheel flanges hit the detonator, and there came forth a deafening explosion that catapulted the car and its passenger a hundred meters into the air. A plume of fire and ash billowed upward from the shattered span. Flames licked the sheer blue sky. The vehicle succumbed to gravity. My former teacher hung briefly in the swirling smoke, as if suspended on the breath of a thousand thwarted demons, a miracle truly befitting the bardo of a bodhisattva, and then he fell.

I am pleased to report that His Holiness's scenario played out largely as he'd imagined, with the troop train's engineer slamming on the pneumatic brakes the

instant the ka-boom of the dynamite reached his ears. The wheels locked, flanges squealing against the icy rails, leaving five hundred Mao-Mao soldiers at the mercy of the fickle friction. The gargantuan locomotive skated crazily, dragging its fourteen coaches toward the abyss.

By this time my cousins, no strangers to the laws of physics, had arrayed themselves along both sides of the tracks, gear in hand, waiting for the train. I threw the switch as His Holiness had requested, then climbed a snowy knoll, from which vantage I beheld my worthy clan improvise a grand act of salvation.

"Hurry!" I shouted superfluously.

Moving in perfect synchronicity, the apes hurled the six grappling irons toward the rolling coaches, smashing the windows and securing the hooks solidly within the frames.

"Such lovely beasts!" I cried.

Having successfully harpooned the passing train, my cousins allowed the ropes to pay out briefly, then tightened their grips. Still skidding, the locomotive towed the six yeti along the roadbed like an outboard motorboat pulling multiple water-skiers, spumes of ice and snow spewing upward from their padded heels. In a matter of seconds the momentum shifted in compassion's favor. The train slowed —and slowed—and slowed. I shouted for joy. The Bön gods smiled.

"'Tiao!" cried my clan in a single voice. "Tiao! Jump! Tiao! Jump! Tiao! Tiao! Tiao!"

The soldiers rushed toward the coach doors in a tumult of brown uniforms, gleaming rifles, and wide-eyed faces. They jumped, spilling pell-mell from the decelerating train like Norway rats abandoning a sinking steamer. My cousins, satisfied, released the ropes and headed for the hills, determined that this would not be the day of their unmasking. Sprawled in the roadbed, the perplexed but grateful Mao-Maos gasped and sputtered. The engineer abandoned his post none too soon, leaping from the cab barely thirty seconds before the coasting locomotive and its vacant coaches glided majestically across the burning bridge, reached the rift, and hurtled off the tracks. Seconds later the train hit the river, the thunderous crash echoing up and down the gorge.

Before the eventful morning ended, my clan and I, along with Dorje Lingpa, managed to sneak within view of the Brahmaputra and observe the twisted consequences of His Holiness's courage. Having shattered the river's normal sheet of ice, the hot locomotive and its strewn coaches clogged the current like vast carrots floating in an immense stew. I scanned the steaming wreckage. The corpse of Chögi Gyatso was easy to spot. His saffron-and-burgundy robe rose vividly against the bright white floe that was his bier.

"Forgive me, brother," said Dorje Lingpa.

"Goodbye, Your Holiness," said Cousin Ngawang.

"Farewell, beloved monk," said Cousin Jowo.

"I hope you've gone to heaven," said Cousin Drebung.

"Do lamas believe in heaven?" asked Cousin Yangdak.

"Rebirth," Cousin Garap explained.

"Then I hope you've been reborn," said Cousin Drebung.

"Though they don't come any better than you," noted Cousin Nyima.

I attempted to speak, but my tongue had gone numb, my throat was clamped shut, and my lungs were filled with stones.

The clan and I bore Chögi Gyatso's dead body far down the frozen river and secured it behind a boulder, lest the People's Liberation Army come upon it while investigating the loss of their train. As I knelt before the dead bodhisattva and began to partake of his brain, I decided that this *nang-duzul* would mark a new phase in my life. No, I did not forswear meat-knowledge, to which I was addicted and always would be. But from now on, I promised myself, I would cease to kill my prey. I would instead become like the charnel-ground raptors, leaving my nourishment to the whims of chance, consuming only such human flesh as my karma merited.

Yes, O glossy ones, eventually I realized that I should not simply demur from devouring a stranded climber—I should also summon a rescue party. So far I haven't endeavored to save anyone's life, even though such altruism would hardly compromise my species' security, for the Sherpas already know we exist, and they would never dream of betraying us to either a Mao-Mao patrol or an Everest entrepreneur. But old habits die hard. Give me a little time.

I wish I could say that some political good came of His Holiness's deliverance of the Mao-Mao soldiers. In fact the ugly status quo persists, with Tibetan culture still withering under the iron boot of the People's Liberation Army, may they rot in hell. As for Dorje Lingpa, he was never officially fired from his job with the National Railroad. Instead he was arrested, tortured with a cattle prod, imprisoned for five years, tortured again, and hung. The moral of his sorry life is simple. If you want to be a successful insurgent, don't practice on Chinese Communists.

When I told the Pachen Lama where to find Chögi Gyatso's body, he did not

at first believe me, but then I began laying out evidence—a grappling iron, the *Beijing Times* headline, His Holiness's white silk scarf—and the monks dispatched a recovery team to the Brahmaputra River gorge. No sky burial, of course, for Chögi Gyatso. No vultures for His Holiness. The monks cremated him on the grounds of the New Ganden Monastery, then set about searching for his reincarnation. At last report they'd located a promising three-year-old in the village of Gyanzge.

So what is it like to be enlightened? What rarefied phenomena does a bodhisattva perceive? I regret to say that the gift was largely wasted on me. To be sure, shortly after eating Chögi Gyatso's cerebrum I found myself praying compulsively, chanting incessantly, and meditating obsessively, much to Gawa's consternation. For a few incandescent days I saw the world as he had, lambent and fair and full of woe, abrim with beings who, without exception, every one, each and all, deserved my unqualified kindness.

But my wisdom did not endure. It faded like the westering sun, and what I recall of ecstatic emptiness cannot be framed in any language, human or simian.

I suppose this loss was to be expected. As these pages attest, I was always a lousy candidate for wakefulness. In my heart I'm a child of that other enlightenment, the one personified by such cheeky contrarians as Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Franklin. At the end of the day I'm a *carpe diem* creature, a rationalist, really, the sort of primate who can't help wondering whether a compassion born of emptiness might not be an empty compassion indeed. I love my life. I treasure my attachments. That is not about to change. True, this ape may eventually evolve, in the Darwinian sense, but for now I shall leave transcendence to the professionals.

That said, I am endlessly honored to have been his student. My gestures of remembrance are small but constant. Every night, after making love to Gawa, I stare into the blackness of our lair and give voice to the lovely words he taught me, saying, "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the samgha."

And then, relaxing, drifting, I lay my head on the yak-hair pillow. Gawa snores beside me. The dying embers crackle. I close my eyes, quiet my mind, and dream of my friend, His Holiness, the fifteenth Dalai Lama.

About the Author

HAVING ARRIVED on the planet in 1947, James Morrow spent his adolescence in Hillside Cemetery, not far from his birthplace in Philadelphia, pursuing his passion for 8mm genre moviemaking. Before going off to college, he and his friends used their favorite graveyard location for a half dozen fantasy and horror films, including adaptations of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "The Tell-Tale Heart."

After receiving degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University, Morrow redirected his storytelling energies toward the production of satiric novels and stories. His acerbic assessment of the nuclear arms race, *This Is the Way the World Ends*, was a Nebula Award finalist and the BBC's selection as best SF novel of 1986. His next dark comedy, *Only Begotten Daughter*, chronicling the escapades of Jesus's divine half-sister in contemporary Atlantic City, won the World Fantasy Award and the animosity of theocrats everywhere.

Throughout the 1990s, Morrow devoted his energies to killing God, an endeavor he pursued through three interconnected novels: *Towing Jehovah* (World Fantasy Award), *Blameless in Abaddon* (*New York Times* Notable Book), and *The Eternal Footman* (*Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire* finalist). Having grown sick of his Creator, and vice-versa, the author next attempted to dramatize the birth of the scientific worldview. Critic Janet Maslin called *The Last Witchfinder* "provocative book-club bait" and "an inventive feat." A thematic sequel, *The Philosopher's Apprentice*, was praised by NPR as "an ingenious riff on Frankenstein." Morrow's most recent irreverent epic, *Galápagos Regained*, narrates the adventures of Charles Darwin's fictional zookeeper.

The author's acclaimed stand-alone novellas includes *City of Truth* (Nebula Award), *Shambling Towards Hiroshima* (Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award), *The Madonna and the Starship*, and *The Asylum of Dr. Caligari*. Morrow's work has been translated into thirteen languages. He lives in State College, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Kathryn, and two enigmatic dogs.