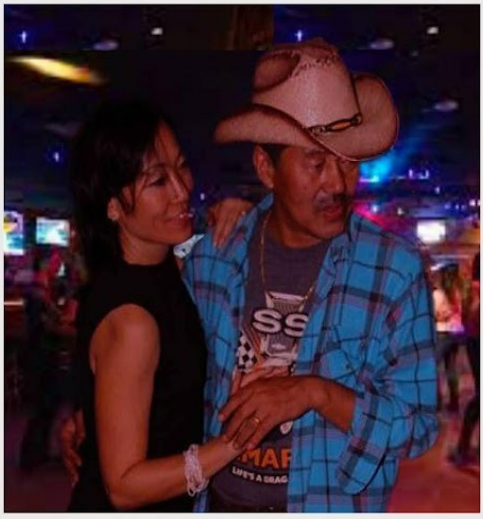
Virginia Is for Lovers

Losang Gyatso



I found the Polaroid recently while vacuuming under the driver's seat. It showed Tencho and me dancing, her in a black dress I'd never seen, me in clothes that looked borrowed from a Texas thrift store. What made my skin prickle wasn't just that I didn't remember us ever taking the photo—it was seeing us as we are today, when we hadn't taken a Polaroid in over twenty-five years. I put the picture on the fridge door like how they stick pieces of evidence on a wall in TV crime dramas. And sure enough, after a few days of seeing it several times a day, things started coming back to us; a moment here, an image there, that eventually helped us piece together what happened that Saturday night over three months ago, though even now, some parts remain hazy.

Others, I would do almost anything to forget. I've always written things down to try and gain some perspective on difficult experiences, if not a full understanding, and so this is my attempt to put down Tencho's and my collective recollection of that night.

It started out innocently enough. The sky was turning pink, losing light, and a light drizzle made the vehicles on Interstate 95 look like shimmering strings of pearls and coral. We were heading to Richmond to visit our son Tashi, an easy hundred-mile drive south from where we are in northern Virginia. I-95 can be treacherous, especially in the winter months—it runs from the Canada-Maine border down to Florida, mixing laid-back local traffic with speeding long-haul drivers who only had Miami and warm beaches on their minds. Let's just say that it's not a highway that you merge onto casually while fiddling with the radio. But we knew this stretch well enough. Tencho called Tashi as we approached Richmond. There was laughter in the background, and then our son's girlfriend saying, "Oh no, Tashi!" He'd forgotten we were coming. They'd gone camping for the weekend and were 100 miles away somewhere. "Oh well, we'll see them next time," Tencho said, ever the optimist and by far the more even-keeled of the two of us. Her actual first and middle names are Tenzin Chodon, but it's common practice in parts of Tibet to conjoin the first two syllables to form a hybrid name, as in Tencho. It sounds less formal and more endearing than saying both names in full. We also often add "la" as an honorific after names, especially in and around Lhasa, so she's "Tencho la," to me usually, but I'll drop the formality for the sake of ease of reading, though I must say it feels a little awkward and rude.

I realized we'd driven well past Richmond while talking to Tashi.

The window lights in the distant hills were thinning out, and a passing sign said, "Next Exit 20 Miles." Fuck! That's forty miles just to get back to Richmond, then another hundred to home. "Let's just enjoy the drive," Tencho said, "We'll get gas at that exit and head back. We have momos in the fridge for dinner." I was already hungry but didn't say anything. Instead, I nudged the cruise control higher until we started passing Canadian and New England plates. The darkness grew absolute, making the view on both sides of the road resemble black walls. The radio offered only country western, oldies, or 'end-of-the-world ' preaching. I settled on Patsy Cline singing "Crazy." It was a favorite of an old boss of mine at a New York ad agency, Don G., a native of Georgia who once, after a few Stolichnayas too many at an office drinks party, urinated full circle around the statue of a northern Civil War general. But enough with the monkey mind.

The exit appeared so suddenly I had to swerve to make the off-ramp. Instead of the expected cluster of gas stations and fast-food joints, we came to a T-junction in the middle of nowhere with a sign: Left to Pauwau, right to Fort Gregg Adams—a pretty Native American name or a fort which Don's forebears may have manned. I took the left. Nine miles on a narrow winding road without passing a single car brought us to some scattered houses, a few with lights on, but most either boarded up or falling down. After the last house, we came to a deserted intersection with just a gas station on one corner, a flickering fluorescent tube above its solitary pump. The credit card reader took its time while crickets chirped and large moths flapped around the buzzing tube light. Tencho went to get snacks while I stayed there holding the broken pump handle. Through the grimy window, partially covered with fading lottery tickets and tobacco ad stickers, I watched her approach a woman with

a bleached blonde bouffant. The scene, lit by that pale light falling on weed-strewn concrete, reminded me of an Edward Hopper painting—but eerier, and more hermetically-sealed-looking.

Inside the shop, the air smelled stale and there was muffled music drifting in from somewhere distant. The woman behind the cash register, wearing a tangerine-colored print dress and a drawn face, rang up the snacks and cracked a brief smile, like a tired game show hostess. When Tencho asked about a bathroom, the woman pointed with an open palm to a narrow door beside the counter. "Right through there, honey." We exchanged glances, both thinking we should probably forget the bathroom, but before we could retreat, the woman lifted the counter section and stepped out. I couldn't help noticing her light blue ankle strap shoes and thinking, "She must be going out later." She pushed open the door, and the music came closer. "It's in the back," she said, leading us down a corridor with worn damask wallpaper and framed pictures of rodeos and milk glass sconces. At the end hung a heavy velvet curtain. Tencho pulled the curtain back slightly, and we might as well have seen the Potala Palace or the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. Before us stretched a dance hall with a live band on stage, a long bar running down one side, and couples line dancing across the floor. And somehow, between the store and that curtain, we'd undergone a wardrobe transformation. I thought that I was looking at somebody else in the mirror—cowboy boots, western shirt, the whole nine yards. At least Tencho's wearing something that she might have actually picked. She caught my eye in the mirror and mouthed, "This is crazy!" A waitress in cowgirl gear collecting empties passed by. "You guys look cute." Just like that, the disorientation and sense of being off kilter went away, like a toothache ending abruptly.

We got beers at the bar—Budweisers, since the bartender looked at me funny and said "There ain't no such thing as a Bud Light." I let it go, paid, and we turned around to watch the dancing. After a few minutes I was about to suggest we leave when a boy, no more than twelve, wearing thick glasses and a tucked-in checkered shirt, scurried up with a Polaroid camera hanging from his neck. "Would you like a photo on the dance floor? It's instant." I started to decline, but then those opening piano tremolo notes of "Crazy" came on. I swear to the three Buddhas. Tencho was already on the floor, swaying to the music, with arms outstretched and fingers beckoning like in a Bollywood film. I gulped down my beer, always needing a little buzz to dance, and then joined Tencho on the dance floor. The kid circled us, one eye on the viewfinder and a finger on the red shutter button. Just as a young soldier dropped to one knee in the middle of the dance floor and held up an open ring box to a girl in an orange print dress, we heard the shutter click and the grinding whir of the photo emerging. The boy set his Casio digital watch to a grave ceremony. "Two minutes," he announced, as if counting down a rocket launch. We watched our image slowly emerge through the chemical mist. "I hope it will help you remember us," he said, which I thought at the time sounded both funny and sort of sad coming from someone his age.

The neon Marlboro clock showed midnight when we made our way through the dancing couples toward the velvet curtain and then back through the corridor. But at the door, the woman in the store blocked our path, hands high on the doorframe. "Now why are you people leaving so early? The party's just getting started," she cooed, raising one eyebrow. Her makeup was heavier now, her voice more intimate. Whereas earlier she had looked a little drawn and distant, she now appeared renewed

and her movements more physical. However, when we insisted that we had a long drive ahead and appeared undeterred, her playful smile turned desperate in front of our eyes. And in a voice that was more frail-sounding and more manic, she said, "Won't you two stay with me a little longer... my... all of my friends have gone away." The temperature seemed to drop. My skin went clammy. I couldn't breathe. The woman's face contorted and morphed between livid rage and grief as she held me with her eyes. I felt myself giving in to the cold and to the pressing pain in my chest. Next thing, I felt Tencho squeezing my fingers hard and shouting my name although she sounded very far away. Suddenly, my lungs exploded and I heaved and coughed before I could breathe again. Then Tencho did something I didn't expect—she removed the green glass mala from her wrist. "Thank you for letting us see the beautiful dance hall and meet all your friends," Tencho said. "Please take this rosary... it's from a Green Tara initiation... we believe she manifests unconditional love for all beings." I doubted that the love and light talk would go anywhere with the woman who a moment ago was taking away my breath. I'd actually started glancing around for something I could use as a weapon in case things turned worse. But the woman's eyes calmed and fixed on the green beads, and then she reached out with both her hands to take it. And as she moved aside to let us pass, I could swear that I had heard her say, "Unconditional love," as if she was trying to remember something.

We drove around the lot once before leaving, looking for... I don't know. Probably anything that would help make a sliver of sense. Our headlights swept across the empty space—just weeds growing through broken concrete and a few charred beams. We didn't know why, but an overwhelming sense of sorrow washed over us at that moment, and

we both started whispering, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” The next thing, Tencho is shouting something and I narrowly avoid hitting the gas pump before finally getting away from that place. Back on I-95, at a 7-Eleven past Richmond, the guy at the register asked where we were coming from. “Pauwau... is that how you say it?” Tencho answered, which is when I noticed that she’s back in her regular clothes. The guy’s face fell. “Not much there these days. Not since that terrible dance hall fire near forty years ago. Most folks left or died off after that.” We drove home in silence, lay awake until dawn before drifting into sleep. And when we woke up in the middle of the day, we had no memory of the night before—until the Polaroid surfaced two weeks ago.

And that was where the story ended until this morning when a package arrived from Dharamsala, India. Inside was a green glass mala, sent by Tencho’s friend to replace the one given away. As I handled the beads and watched the light moving on them, a memory rushed back like a flashback in a film: We had driven around the empty lot and were passing the store, when I looked into the window one last time and saw the woman. She was opening a cigarette carton and I could see that she was wearing the green mala on her wrist. She swung around to start stocking the shelf behind her, turning her back to us. That’s when I saw it—the absence of skin and fabric from her shoulder blades down to her waist. It was like looking at an amorphous hollow, with dry organs still quivering, and a desiccated spine and rib cage moving as she worked. I heard Tencho scream, “Gyatso la!” and yanked the steering wheel hard to avoid crashing into the gas pump and blowing us up in a ball of fire. Some things, once seen, can’t be unseen. Some things are just crazy.