



Across Many Mountains: A Tibetan Family's Epic Journey from Oppression to Freedom

By Yangzom Brauen

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A powerful, emotional memoir and an extraordinary portrait of three generations of Tibetan women whose lives are forever changed when Chairman Mao's Red Army crushes Tibetan independence, sending a young mother and her six-year-old daughter on a treacherous journey across the snowy Himalayas toward freedom

Kunsang thought she would never leave Tibet. One of the country's youngest Buddhist nuns, she grew up in a remote mountain village where, as a teenager, she entered the local nunnery. Though simple, Kunsang's life gave her all she needed: a oneness with nature and a sense of the spiritual in all things. She married a monk, had two children, and lived in peace and prayer. But not for long. There was a saying in Tibet: "When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth." The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 changed everything. When soldiers arrived at her mountain monastery, destroying everything in their path, Kunsang and her family fled across the Himalayas only to spend years in Indian refugee camps. She lost both her husband and her youngest child on that journey, but the future held an extraordinary turn of events that would forever change her life--the arrival in the refugee camps of a cultured young Swiss man long fascinated with Tibet. Martin Brauen will fall instantly in love with Kunsang's young daughter, Sonam, eventually winning her heart and hand, and taking mother and daughter with him to Switzerland, where Yangzom will be born.

Many stories lie hidden until the right person arrives to tell them. In rescuing the story of her now 90-year-old inspirational grandmother and her mother, Yangzom Brauen has given us a book full of love, courage, and triumph, as well as allowing us a rare and vivid glimpse of life in rural Tibet before the arrival of the Chinese. Most importantly, though, *ACROSS MANY MOUNTAINS* is a testament to three strong, determined women who are linked by an unbreakable family bond.

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Editorial Review

Review

"...a lyrical account of how cultures can mesh and enrich each other." -- *Bookreporter*

"This book paints a vivid picture of Tibetan experience over the last eight decades, one of the most difficult periods in our history. Through the personal stories of three women from one Tibetan family, it recalls the imposition of Chinese rule in Tibet and the subsequent efforts of many Tibetans to preserve their identity and treasured values in exile."--- His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

"A moving reminder that the consequences of the Chinese invasion of Tibet continue down to this day. A lovely memoir of three generations of Tibetan women."~ Oliver Stone

"The lives of three women embody a tragic Tibetan era -- at once grim and uplifting. A necessary book."-- Colin Thubron, author of *To A Mountain in Tibet*, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, and *In Siberia*

"Yangzom Brauen's *Across Many Mountains* held my rapt attention from beginning to end. It is the saga that finally tells in vivid human terms the real story of the Chinese destruction of Tibet, the sixty-one-year long, continuing Tibetan holocaust and diaspora. It is historically, emotionally, humanly real, and no one can read it without opening a place in their heart for these long-suffering, brave, and yet joyful individuals. I heartily recommend this wonderful book." --Robert A. F. Thurman, Professor, Columbia University; author of *The Central Philosophy of Tibet*, *Wisdom and Compassion* and *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*

The journey of the refugee--Cuban, Vietnamese, Libyan, Darfurian, and in the old days of the Cold War, East German and Hungarian--has special resonance for Americans because this country has provided sanctuary for refugees as far back as its founding. The drama is that of life and death and survival in exile. This stunning memoir is vivid and compelling, a clear-eyed rendering of the experience. A must read."-- Diane Wolff, author of *Tibet Unconquered: An Epic Struggle for Freedom*

"Yanzom Brauen recounts a gripping true story of her family and has kept alive the dreams of her grandmother."--Kehdroob Thondup, co-author of *Dalai Lama, My Son*

"A multi-generational saga stitched together from memories passed down from her grandmother, Yangzom Brauen's *Across Many Mountains* has the tragic, epic quality of Kenji Mizoguchi's cinematic masterpiece, *The Life of Oharu*. With unadorned prose that is both searing and laced with verisimilitude, Brauen has written a book centered on the extraordinary journey of her grandmother that is one of both human suffering and perseverance in the face of it. *Across Many Mountains* is nothing short of a celebration of the human spirit."--Rex Pickett, author of *Vertical* and *Sideways*

"The story of Kunsang and Sonam and Yangzom touches my heart because it brings back memories of life in Old Tibet. It tells the world exactly what it means to be a Tibetan refugee who loves her homeland deeply but at the same time is capable of adapting to life in the Western World. The courage and integrity and

endurance of Kunsang and Sonam are astounding. I thank Yangzom for telling their story. I recommend this book to anyone who wishes to know about the real situation in Tibet.”--Arjia Rinpoche, Director, Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center and author of *Surviving the Dragon*

“Yangzom Brauen’s *Across Many Mountains*, a triumphant tale of three generations of Tibetan women as they journey from Tibet to Switzerland, teaches us that there is much to learn from those who persevere in the face of injustice and the unknown. The courage of these women as they cross borders and learn the language of survival gives us insight into a country that remains a mystery to many, as well as enlightens the even vaster landscape of the human heart.”--Kim Sunée, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love, and the Search for Home*

"An absorbing, multilayered account of the evolution of an enduring culture."--*Kirkus Reviews*

“If this was a movie you might accuse the writers of taking too many liberties with the truth. How could a young nun and young monk marry as Tibetan Buddhists? How could their young daughter survive the perils of a dangerous escape through the snow covered Himalayas and go on to marry a dashing Swiss academic? And then their daughter becomes the perfect blend of freedom activist and gorgeous Hollywood starlet--it defies belief. But not only is the tale that Yangzom Brauen weaves of three very different yet integrally connected generations a satisfying read, I guarantee that you will learn more about the struggle for Tibetan independence, the complexities of the Tibet-China relationship, and the principles of Tibetan Buddhism than you will glean from any Westerners' account. If you value exceptional storytelling, I urge you to read this book. If you care about human rights, women's issues and world peace, you *must* read this book.”--Christal Smith, *The Huffington Post*

"...a lyrical account of how cultures can mesh and enrich each other." -- *Bookreporter*

About the Author

Born in 1980 to a Swiss father and Tibetan mother, YANGZOM BRAUEN is an actress, model, and political activist. She lives in both Los Angeles and Berlin and has appeared in a number of German and American films. She is also very active in the Free Tibet movement, making regular radio broadcasts about Tibet and organizing public demonstrations against the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

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ACROSS MANY MOUNTAINS (CHAPTER 1)

TRAPPED

For fear of Chinese soldiers, they dared walk only through the freezing nights, with no light to guide them but the stars. The mountains were black towers before the dark sky. The group, numbering a dozen or so, had set out shortly before the Tibetan New Year festival, which, like the beginning of the Chinese calendar, usually falls on the second new moon after the winter solstice. New Year was deemed the best time to escape. The high passes were covered in snow, and icy winds whistled across them, but the snow was frozen hard at night and was sometimes even stable by day, in contrast to the warm season, when trekkers sank knee- or navel-deep into a mixture of snow, ice, water, mud, and scree. It was common knowledge that the Chinese border guards preferred to keep warm in their barracks during the winter rather than go on patrol in the biting cold. Everybody agreed that the soldiers would sooner spend the New Year festival, the most

important Chinese holiday, celebrating, drinking, and playing cards than doing their actual duties.

My mother's heart beat wildly as she struggled to keep up with the adults. She was only six years old.

Soon they caught sight of danger looming in the distance. In the valley far below their path, they saw large, brightly lit buildings. They could only be housing Chinese soldiers; Tibetans had no such huge and uniformly built houses as these, with such bright lights. Shouting voices, crashes of music, laughter, and sometimes terrifying screams emanated from the buildings, echoing off the mountain. The Chinese soldiers loved *chang*, Tibetan barley beer, and barley liquor, and they presumably had plentiful supplies. The sounds Sonam heard were bloodcurdling, like a herd of wild beasts gathering in the distance. But her mother whispered to soothe her. "It's good that they're celebrating," she said. "They won't come up here if they're cozy and warm and drunk."

The refugees' path was narrow and stony and barely visible in the darkness. Often the group had to pick its way through thorny scrub and fields of scree, and then carry on between low trees. The roots of the trees protruded from the ground, tripping them, and the dry branches scraped their hands and faces. All of them were covered in scratches, their feet bleeding and their clothes torn. The higher they climbed, the more often they had to cross snowfields.

It was the winter of 1959, the same year the Dalai Lama went into exile and a prophecy made by Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism, was being fulfilled in a terrible way. This ostensibly 1,200-year-old prophecy says: "When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth and Buddhist teachings will reach the land of the red man." The iron birds, or Chinese planes, were flying over our land, and the horses on wheels, or Chinese trains, had brought troops to the border, forcing my mother and grandparents to set out on their perilous journey.

Although the Chinese had invaded and occupied our land in 1950, it was not until years later that they dropped their initial false friendliness and began systematically arresting, torturing, and imprisoning Tibetans, especially Buddhist monks and nuns, and aristocrats. As my grandmother was a nun and my grandfather a monk, they were in great danger. Their monastery was attacked and pillaged by Chinese soldiers. The Chinese ran riot in the village below the monastery. They dragged aristocrats across the village square by their hair and beat them, made them clean latrines, destroyed their houses, stole their sacred statues, and gave their land to the peasants. They stole livestock, hurled insults at venerable lamas, and trampled on centuries-old village traditions. It was this barbarism that made my grandmother Kunsang Wangmo and my grandfather Tsering Dhondup decide to flee to India with my mother, Sonam Dölma, and her four-year-old sister. They planned to cross the Himalayas on foot, despite having little money and no idea of the trials and tribulations they would meet along the way. They were equipped with nothing but homemade leather shoes, woolen blankets, a large sack of *tsampa*—ground, roasted barley—and the certainty that escaping to the country that had taken in the Dalai Lama was their only chance of survival. This conviction was based solely on their unshakable faith. My grandparents couldn't speak any Indian language, they knew not a single person on the Indian subcontinent, and they hadn't the slightest idea of what awaited them—apart from the knowledge that the Dalai Lama, whom they had never seen in their lives but who was for them the supreme authority, had been granted asylum there.

My mother's shoes were hardly adequate footwear for climbing mountains in the winter. The smooth leather soles slid across the snow, sending her slipping or falling to the ground every few feet. The snow gradually soaked through the roughly sewn seams, making the hay she had stuffed into her shoes in place of socks cold and slimy. She wanted only to sit down and cry, but she had to concentrate all her willpower on placing her feet, one step at a time, into the footprints left by the adults ahead of her. Just don't get left behind, she repeated to herself. She knew it would be the end of her.

It became harder and harder for Sonam to continue. The water in her shoes had long since frozen. Her feet felt like big, heavy clumps of ice that she had to drag along with her. Her little sister was much better off; although she could walk, she would never have been able to keep up with the trek, so Kunsang carried her younger daughter fastened to her back like a rucksack, tightly wrapped in blankets to keep her warm. The little girl never cried or screamed. She sometimes reached a hand out of her blankets to stroke her mother's head as she walked, whispering a soothing "*ela oh*" in her ear, meaning something like "Oh, I'm sorry" in the language of Kongpo. It was as if she wanted to apologize to her mother for adding to her burden. Sonam sent yearning looks up to the warm bundle on her mother's back. How envious she was of her little sister!

When another joyless morning dawned after a long night's trek, the group sought shelter under a rocky outcrop, beneath which a narrow cave opened up, just high enough for a small child to stand. At least the wind wasn't blowing in their faces and nobody could spot them here. Yet it was bitterly cold in the small space between the smooth walls of the cave. My mother's feet were completely numb, although she couldn't tell whether the numbness was from the pain or from the ice and the cold. Cautiously, Kunsang freed Sonam's feet from the ice-caked leather, now more like tattered spats or gaiters than shoes. With even more care, she plucked the frozen, crushed straw from Sonam's blue-tinged soles, and placed her feet deep into the warming folds of her own dress and onto the bare skin between her breasts. What a shock those freezing feet must have been for my poor grandmother, and what an indescribable relief for my young mother.

That was the only pleasant part of the short rest the group granted themselves. Nobody was allowed to light a fire, so they were unable to melt snow for drinking water, and they were running low on food, since nobody had expected to be on the road for weeks.

The only way to quench their burning thirst and soothe their chapped lips was to gather water in their cupped hands at an ice-free spot where a rivulet ran across the rock, or to shove snow into their mouths. This allayed their thirst but left a terrible icy feeling in their throats and chests, and later in their stomachs.

Rocks and ice and snow were not the only obstacles nature had placed in their way. Every few hours, a stream, a foaming waterfall, or a wild river shot out from between vertical rock faces on the flanks of the mountains. Most of these rivers were only partially frozen and gave an impertinent display of their strength. Wading through them and continuing onward with their clothes soaked up to their hips was a miserable experience. Walking on the pebbles frozen to the thin soles of their shoes made every step a hellish torture.

A few hours after they left the cave, they heard the distant rushing of a raging stream, which grew louder and louder as they approached. The torrent sliced through the rocks, leaving a deep ravine with a rope bridge suspended above it. Their immediate feeling was relief—until they saw the condition of the bridge: Four ropes were stretched across the canyon, tied together at the bottom with thinner ropes intended as rungs. These were far apart from each other, and through the large gaps you could see spray and foam and the rocky ravine below. My mother was terrified, certain that she would lose her grip and plummet from this phantom of a bridge into the bottomless depths below.

Kunsang left her daughter no time for thoughts like that. With a jerk, she pushed her toward the precipice, then led the way, clinging firmly to the ropes but always leaving one hand free for Sonam. The bridge began to sway terrifyingly, the water roaring so loudly that even Kunsang, directly in front of my mother, could barely hear her piercing screams. She grabbed her daughter as the girl slipped, holding her up on the ropes and pulling her along, struggling to keep her own balance and trembling with fear. Step by step, they made it to the other side of the ravine.

Once they had crossed the swaying makeshift bridge, the familiar tortures began anew for my mother, tramping one foot after the other through the ever-snowier and ever-icier mountain wasteland with no

destination in sight. She could see nothing but snow and ice and rocks. She had seen nothing else for days. To make matters worse, it was growing colder and the wind was becoming...

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