

land of prophecy

by **Claire Scobie**

Last Seen in Lhasa is the true story of my friendship with Ani, a remarkable Tibetan nun. I met Ani in a place where the myth of Shangri-la was born. Accessible only on foot, this remote region in the Himalayas between Tibet and north-east India, is home to bears and snow leopards and Bengali tigers. I had first gone to the mountains in the 'Promised Land of Tibetan prophecy... hidden behind misty barriers where ordinary men do not go' in search of a rare red lily. I did not predict how that flower would interweave my destiny with a woman who lived differently to anything I believed still existed. We do not speak the same language, or share life experience or belief. Friendship requires patience, especially in a country where foreigners are mistrusted and political oppression is a daily part of life. For Ani to open her inner world to me, the vanishing world of a wandering hermit, took courage.

Ani set out on a life-long pilgrimage at the age of 29, walking from holy site to sacred mountain, a lone woman in pursuit of enlightenment.

On my fourth visit to Tibet in 2000, I set off for Ani's nunnery with a letter in my pocket explaining 'it's our karma from positive actions in previous lives to travel to Mount Kailash together' written by my friend Tenzin with poetic flourish, and a large bag of vegetables. After an hour, Ani appeared clutching some muddy

potatoes, wearing her thick claret-red chuba and peacock blue apron. 'Welcome,' she said warmly, without a glimmer of surprise, her voice tinkling like a bell in the clear sharp air. I walked through the hobbit-hole doorway into her kitchen, a six-foot-square area, a circle of charred stones for the stove. The house was soon filled with pungent smoke from burning yak dung.

Jewel of snows

It was one of the first hermitages to be built, close to a spring. I wondered how she could do prostrations in such a small space. As a novice nun, she did the Preliminary Practices *bum-shi* – literally 400,000 – every day Ani did 3,000 prostrations on the floor. Her hands bled, she lost track of time.

Ani came in holding two china cups. I produced the gifts: socks, a fleece jacket, a cherry-red sunhat, and a bundle of precious objects: photos of the 17th Karmapa, holy medicine and wooden beads blessed by the Dalai Lama. These she took eagerly, carefully stringing one onto her rosary; the rest she put aside to give to other nuns. 'I can't have photos of His Holiness. If the Chinese find them, they slap us. They rip up the pictures.'

I handed her the letter written by Tenzin. When she reached the words 'Kang Rinpoche', Mount Kailash and 'Precious Jewel of Snows', she leapt up in a state of great excitement. She began to pack a few possessions into a cloth bag: her knife with the yak-bone handle, the sunhat. 'The officials come back next month, so I have to leave. They're not here in summer, too many tourists.'

All the questions I want to ask dissolve into the kindness pouring from Ani's eyes. Two timeless days pass with rounds of butter tea. We went for walks, took a bus to visit a monastery, stopping at some hot springs on the way back.

Curled up in my sleeping bag, I heard her change the water bowls on the altar, a ritual she performs morning and night, and light a stick of incense. I could not have imagined how the search for a red lily would lead to a new flowering of consciousness, and the start of an enduring friendship.

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more information

• *Last Seen in Lhasa: The Story of an Extraordinary Friendship in Modern Tibet* by Claire Scobie (£10.99, Rider)

