

# **BLACKLISTED IN BHUTAN**

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*Love Lost and Love Transformed in the  
Land of Gross National Happiness*

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# MY STORY STARTS WITH AN ENDING

**T**he ending of a very long relationship.

Of 27 years of love, and excitement, and hope, devotion, commitment and hard work, and then of betrayal and deep depression.

But first, there is the ending. And it's pretty bad, as endings go.

## IN LIMBO

November 2016.

I was waiting in Bangkok.

I was used to waiting in Bangkok. Bangkok is where you wait for your visa to Bhutan.

Like so many times before, I had handed in my application at the Bhutanese embassy, and now I was waiting for approval.

This time, I was particularly excited. I was going to visit our hotel school, the school near Paro town that I had set up and worked so hard to get funded. A long relationship was coming to fruition.

Our hotel school in Paro was an old run down hotel built in traditional Bhutanese style with the 10 lucky signs painted on the walls. We had rented the building on a rice field near the airport and renovated it to become a three star hotel, restaurant and school. Every year, forty students from disadvantaged backgrounds trained there to start a career in the hotel sector. They were learning to become chefs, food and beverage managers and housekeepers for five star hotels. This project was my ultimate labour of love. A vision of many years had become a reality.

Over the course of 27 years, Bhutan has been a large part of my life. I went there twice for extended periods of anthropological research, in 1990 and 2008 (for my MA and then my Ph.D). I also worked there regularly as a guide for high-end tourism from 1999 onwards, helping many Bhutanese organisations. The hotel school in Bhutan was the biggest project of my life. It took years of dedication and hard work.

Although I was the one who brought in all the money, I never received any payment for my work. All the funds I was able to raise went into the creation of the school. And there it was. My beautiful school in Bhutan.

And here I was, waiting in a Bangkok hotel room on Sukhumvit road.

Although I love being in Bangkok, after a few days the heat, the traffic jams, the shopping malls and the city people became a bit too much for me. I was looking forward to the crisp mountain air, clear skies and beautiful views over the snow-capped mountains dotted with ancient monasteries in Bhutan. Even the four-hour flight has always been a joy to me. If the sky is clear, the view over the Himalaya mountain range is spectacular, and it is always fun to bump into Bhutanese people I know and haven't seen in a long time. On the previous flight I had met a friend who owned a hotel in Thimphu. He had gone to Bangkok to shop for a flat screen TV. These screens are very popular in Bhutan. At the Bangkok airport you can see many Bhutanese standing in line to check in, all with huge flat screen TVs, rice cookers and other items that are hard to get in Bhutan.

Throughout my years traveling to Paro, I often met famous people on the plane, like the writer Amy Tang or the actress Cameron Diaz, who was travelling to Bhutan to make an MTV video – she even stayed in the same hotel!

The flights from Bangkok to Bhutan are usually very early hour in the morning, but people are always willing to chat, which creates a friendly atmosphere.

My suitcase was packed, all my papers were in order. I had my flight ticket and the money that I needed to take to the school. I was brought a pasta machine and a waffle iron along for the students. I was excited about teaching the kids how to make Dutch waffles and Italian pasta. But right now I was waiting for an email from Mr Jigme, my Bhutanese partner for the hotel school.

Ping!! There it was, the message I was waiting for.

I opened my mail, and I couldn't believe what I was reading.

Mr Jigme wrote that my visa application had been rejected.

“What I have you done?” he asked.

I had done nothing. Except setting up a successful hotel school in the country, spending the last two years helping 150 marginalised young people to train for a good job, and working without payment for a long time to get this project off the ground! That's what I'd done!

I grabbed my phone and called Mr Jigme. He picked up immediately.

“Mr Jigme, what’s going on?”

“Oh Aum Rieki, I went to the immigration office today to get your visa, but they told me that you are blacklisted!”

Blacklisted! The word reverberated around my mind. I couldn’t take it in.

“What have you done?” Mr Jigme insisted.

“Mr Jigme, I’ve done nothing except fundraising, working hard to support the school. What is this about?”

“Aum, they refused to tell me why you’ve been blacklisted. Are you sure you’ve done nothing wrong?”

I wracked my brain. It had never occurred to me before that I could have done anything wrong in Bhutan.

“No, Mr Jigme”, I said, trying to keep calm because I could hear my voice wobble a bit. “I can’t think of anything. I’m not a spy, I’m not involved in politics, and I’m certainly not a criminal.”

Mr Jigme couldn’t think of anything either, he said.

But there must be something!

“The only thing I ever did is to help Bhutan and be good to your country,” I repeated. Then my voice broke.

I put down the phone and sat down at the desk. My body started to shake. How could this possibly be true? So many years of hard work and dedication to the country and it ends like this?

Then the tears came. There I was, sitting in my Bangkok hotel room, looking out at the huge grey clouds of the rainy season, ready to burst open, and I cried.

Thoughts were racing through my mind. Who could have done this to me? Could there be some kind of jealousy because of the success of our hotel school? I couldn’t puzzle it out.

The first person I needed to talk to was my foundation board partner Paolo. His visa had already been issued.

Paolo arrived at my hotel in the evening. We went for dinner in a nice restaurant, and over a selection of delicious Thai food, I told him the bad news.

He couldn’t believe it either. “It must be a mistake,” he kept saying, “this is impossible. How can they do this?” Paolo is from a family of diplomats, so I thought if anyone could help me it would be him.

“I’ll try to do my best to find out what’s going on in Bhutan, and why they refused to

give you a visa,” he said. And, when my tears came back, he reassured me saying, “Don’t worry, I’ll see if I can fix this.”

I wished him good luck, and we agreed to meet again in Bangkok two weeks later.

I decided to stay in Thailand. I thought I could use my time to visit friends and try to lobby the Bhutanese embassy in Bangkok. But that proved very difficult. I called them and wrote to them, but they just kept saying: “Your local counterpart has to deal with this.”

The embassy worker I was talking to on the phone even told me: “You’re the first person I know who didn’t get a visa to go to Bhutan.” That made me feel even more miserable.

I tried to stay strong, decided to have a lot of massages, catch up on my reading and eat a lot of the amazing street food until Paolo came back from Bhutan, and we could assess the whole situation.

Nobody knew what had happened.

But there it was: after 27 years, my relationship with Bhutan had been cut off.

I could not go back.

## CHAPTER I

# MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH BHUTAN



**B**eing blacklisted after a love affair of 27 years with Bhutan felt like a nasty divorce. Suddenly your long-term partner doesn't want you anymore. Suddenly it's over. End of story. And the nastiest thing is that they don't even tell you why. Things are changing in Bhutan, I thought. Maybe Bhutan is no longer the country I once fell in love with.

My love affair started in a remote village in North West Bhutan, a 12-hour hike into the mountains from the "all weather" road. The name of this village is Tsachaphu, Hot Spring at the End of the Valley. In this village I experienced traditional Bhutanese life, unchanged for many centuries. The village was at the end of a valley in the midst of dense forests. At the bottom of the valley the *Po Chu* or Father River, a strong mountain stream,

provided the rice terraces on the steep slopes with water, and traditional farm Bhutanese farm houses clustered on top of the hill.

## FIRST ENCOUNTER

When the letter came I knew this was my chance. A rare chance for a Masters student from the Netherlands to experience real fieldwork in a place that was still “untouched” by westernisation.

I held the letter in my hand and started to dream. I imagined stepping into the footsteps of the anthropologists from the early twentieth century who suffered hardships in Africa or a remote island in the Pacific.

But Bhutan? I had never heard of it! I referred to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (in those days, there was no access to the Internet) and found only a very brief description of Bhutan. The encyclopaedia stated that Bhutan is an absolute Buddhist monarchy in the Eastern Himalayas. I also learnt that the people there carried swords and that it was inhabited by bears. Rather than putting me off, this lack of information intrigued me. There clearly was still a lot to be discovered about Bhutan.

I wrote back to my professor and told him that I would love to take up the opportunity to visit Bhutan. Shortly afterwards, I was selected. Bhutan was going to happen. To me.

We were a team of six students, three anthropology students and three students studying irrigation technology, and also three women and three men.

Marleen, Anita and Dirk were engineering students who specialised in irrigation, and I soon realised they were “hardliners”, used to conducting fieldwork in very remote places in Indonesia or the Philippines, and used to living in very Spartan conditions. Some of them had stayed in a mud hut in a remote village for months without any comfort, sleeping on the floor and eating only rice and chilli paste. Anita, especially, was very politically engaged and worried about the situation in Bhutan.

“Are we doing the right thing,” she said, “to offer our help to this country that is an absolute kingdom, which means it is a dictatorship?”

I told her that there would not be many countries outside Europe that were politically correct. She had to agree.

“And besides”, I said, “our six month stay won’t have a big impact on the country, we are not important.” The other two men, both anthropologists like me, were very different. Ian was a romantic, he was mostly interested in drinking tea with the king of Bhutan and

fighting bears. He was nostalgic and wished he had been born 100 years earlier to be a high official in the British Raj. Ralf was especially interested in photography, he was the most mature and down to earth of us all.

We were invited to join a programme organised by the Department of Agriculture of the Royal Government of Bhutan. The Bhutanese government needed information on how Bhutanese farmers grew crops, particularly rice, in order to facilitate the implementation of improvements in the agricultural sector and to find ways of increasing crop yield. We anthropologists needed to study the social organisation in the village and its effect on rice cultivation and irrigation. How did the villagers organise the whole process? How was the water management set up? How were the irrigation channels maintained? We also needed to know how the farmers organised the planting of the seedlings and the ploughing of the fields.

For the very first time, I was going to a research station in the field. It was unsettling. We didn't really have much to prepare because we didn't know what to expect. We assumed that Bhutan would look like Tibet, with towering mountains and lots of snow. So we tried to prepare for all kinds of weather but everything else was completely unknown. We had only heard that the meals and lodging provided would be very basic.

After a long journey by plane via New Delhi in India and Kathmandu in Nepal, we arrived in Paro, Bhutan, on a sunny day in February 1990.

Our small plane landed on a short landing strip between towering mountains. Paro International Airport consisted of one small building then, not much larger than a barn. The air was crisp and clean, and I felt as though I had landed in a fairy tale. We saw impressive buildings that almost looked like castles, surrounded by rice terraces. To me, the houses looked like Swiss chalets with Asian features. The city of Paro itself was mostly one line of old wooden buildings along a road, at the end of which was a gigantic fortress. To my inexperienced self, it all looked very oriental and very familiar at the same time. It reflected the mental image I had of Switzerland in the middle ages.

In Kathmandu airport we saw the first Bhutanese people: three men in what looked to me like colourful knee length skirts and two women in long straight dresses. Later we learned that the men were wearing a *gho*, the Bhutanese version of a Tibetan *chuba*, a bit like a knee length coat held together with a colourful rope. The women wore a garment called a *kira* that they draped around themselves, with a belt around the waist and two

silver buckles, one on each shoulder. We stared at them because we were excited to see them. They looked very different from the Indians or the Nepalese.

We walked out of the plane into the wooden shack that was the arrival hall. Huge posters of the King of Bhutan looked down on us. I saw Anita's face and had to laugh.

I told her: "Yes girl, we are under his guidance for the next few months, better get used to it!" Outside the sun was shining and it was very warm but inside the shack it was very cold and there was a strange smell that would stay with me for the rest of my life. It was the scent of freshly cut pinewood mixed oddly with the stench of rotten meat. At the time I didn't know what it was, but I later found out that this was the smell of betel nut, the smell that defines Bhutan.

The immigration officers were very friendly, their big smiles revealed red teeth and a welcome to Bhutan.

"It looks so nice when people wear traditional clothes instead of the boring western suits or uniforms," I told Marleen.

We got our passports stamped and went to pick up our bags from the landing strip. Outside the airport, two officials from the ministry of agriculture were waiting for us in front of their four-wheel drive Toyota Hiluxes and drove us to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan.

Our driver was very proud of his car and the highway that connected the country from West to East, the only road in the country then. To us, it seemed like a narrow track, something you might see in remote villages in Europe. But looking at the massive mountains around us, we started to get an idea of how difficult it must have been to build this road.

The drive to Thimphu was breath taking. We were surrounded by dramatic mountain scenery, and here and there we could see beautiful white buildings with a red line painted around them. "These are monasteries and temples," our driver explained. I realised there were so many, some very small, some big, but all very rustic and picturesque. We were very quiet in the car, all occupied with our own thoughts. I realised how special it was to be here, just driving down that road.

"It's karma that brought you here," said our driver, "you must have been Bhutanese in your previous life, otherwise you would not be here." We all looked at each other, could this be true? "You know we don't let many foreigners in, so you are special."

Wow! It was a lot to take in.

After four hours of a roller coaster drive - we were all car sick, that mountain road didn't

run in a straight line for more than a few metres at a time - we approached the capital Thimphu.

Thimphu looked like a small village to us. No traffic lights or commercial billboards. Again, my point of reference was an Asian version of an ancient Alpine settlement. The main road was a long stretch of pretty wooden shops, and at the end of the road the big *dzong* (a fortress from the sixteenth century) and many temples and monasteries looked down on us. Our driver pointed out that this was also where the government building was, next to a nine-hole golf course that belonged to the king. In the outskirts, a new part of town was under construction, mainly modern Indian style apartments for the growing population of Thimphu.

The Bhutanese government had rented an apartment for us in this part of town, in a big ugly concrete building. Almost immediately, and perhaps predictably for a young woman from Northern Europe, I started to worry about hygiene. Although the house was relatively new, the stairways were very dirty and there were red stains everywhere that looked like spit, and again I could smell that weird scent like rotten meat. Many dogs roamed around the building.

Our apartment was big, cold and empty, with only a table, chairs and a stove in the middle of the room. There was a basic kitchen and three bedrooms with six beds. All the windows had iron bars and our view was onto a square with a petrol station. Not the best view!

This apartment was where we would live for the first week of our stay in Bhutan, while we would be briefed about our research. We tried to make our “new home” a bit cosier by sticking posters and prayer flags up on the walls. The kitchen had a big concrete sink with a gas cooker and a water filter. We needed to boil the water and then filter it. We also had a small fridge.

We noticed that the air was crisp and thin. Thimphu is high up in the mountains. In February it was still winter and very cold, and we were very grateful for the wood burning stove called *bukari* in our living room. Dirk liked to make a big fire, and one night the *bukari* was so hot that the wooden floor around it burst into flames. We thought that was hilarious and teased Dirk about it for some time.

Dirk turned out to be a bit eccentric. He was the first of us to buy a *gho* and wear it day and night. He loved being in Bhutan and adjusted very quickly to the new lifestyle. I could see he had the ambition of being as much like the locals as possible. I, on the other

hand, struggled with being in Bhutan at first. Although I realised it was a big adventure I also was kind of homesick. Just before I left for Bhutan I had fallen in love and I missed my boyfriend so much. He had promised to wait for me but it was a very inconvenient moment to start a new relationship! On the other hand, I also saw it as a test to find out if the relationship would last. Marleen had the same problem, only she had known her boyfriend a bit longer. The fact that there was no phone or any other quick means of communication with the outside world didn't make it easier to cope with my situation. But there was a lot of distraction from my pining heart just by having to cope with the new situation. Being with the group was a lot of fun. We shared a sense of humour and we laughed a lot.

Practical daily life was something to get used to. Because of the altitude, it took forever to boil water for tea. There were frequent power cuts and we had to use candles for light. There was only one shop in Thimphu selling a very few Western products, called shop Number Seven. There you could get things like peanut butter, laundry detergent, shampoo, toothpaste, chocolate and cookies. Most of the items were out of date and the cookies tasted like mildew. The chocolate had a white film on it but to us it was a treat and we made the best of it, particularly when we learned that from now on our diet would be rice with melted cottage cheese, and chillies, of course, lots of chillies. Bhutanese people love chillies and eat them in large quantities. A special delicacy, we were told, was dried pork, especially the fatty part with skin attached and that, of course, was soaked in chilli oil too!

Our stay in Thimphu was a good first introduction to Bhutanese lifestyle. Because Bhutanese people were not yet used to seeing *chillips* (white foreigners), everyone was very interested in us wherever we went. So interested, that they came to visit us in our apartment day and night. Often in the morning when I woke up and went into the living room, a few monks were sitting right next to the stove. Nobody knew who they were and where they came from. We couldn't talk to them because we didn't speak the language, and there was no dictionary of *dzongkha*. Our door was open and people just came in to be with us and to check us out. That weeklong training on the do's and don'ts of Bhutanese society, provided by the government, was very useful. We had the opportunity to learn a lot. If we had wanted to, we could have qualified for a driver's license for a steamroller! Very useful. And even a license to drive a steam train engine – particularly useful, we thought, in a country where there are no trains, but we didn't say that aloud. We also learned not to wear black clothes because they attract evil spirits, and we learned that everything in Bhutanese society involved astrology and spirits, in addition to the official Buddhist religion. We would soon find out this affected daily life.

Dirk and Ian were going to be sent to a village in East Bhutan, and Rolf and Anita to South Bhutan. Marleen and I would go to a village named Tsachaphu, the place that became my first Bhutanese true love. Ours was the most difficult posting because the village was a day's walk from the town of Punakha. It had no access road and could only be reached by foot and/or on horseback.

