

ROHTANG

a supernatural
story set in the
high Himalayas



Rohtang

1

Have you ever been
To Marseilles?
He was a painter
On the dockside
And he wanted
To paint me.
We drank wine,
In the lovely summer
And he painted me all day
And other people
Passing by
Thought how lucky
I must be to be
The only girl he wanted
To paint.
He sang me songs of travel
And we watched
The ships leaving for
Distant places.
He promised me the orient
And I was just a girl.
I loved Claude.
And he swam in my eyes
As much as in
The waters of
The docks.
We travelled into his dreams
And in the end,
Ended up here,
At Rohtang.
We sold everything

And built this place
Almost with our own dreams.
Then, after a few years we
Knew it wasn't going to work.
We worked alright,
But his dream was as shallow
As the water in a paddling pool.
In the end
The failure of his dream
Became too heavy for him
And he slid into death
And I laid out his body
For the birds to eat.

Michelle Lenglen, our host, was reminiscing. At the bar were Han, the wanderer, Erich Westrick, the German businessman, and Aleksandr Bubka, the mute. She continued:

And so,
I am here
And can hear the
Wailing of the mountain spirits
At night.
It's not like Wuthering Heights.
He does not call to me
When the icy winds blow,
And there are no branches to
Tap on my window.
Do you believe me,
About the spirits?
Or do you think I am
Just an ageing woman
Half mad with this coffin
Of a home?

The travellers mentioned, plus Mr and Mrs Austin, and the bus driver, were all staying for the night at Madame Lenglen's hotel. They were all headed for the Chinese border, but had got the dates slightly wrong. You see, the Rohtang Pass is the highest road in the world, and is usually clear of snow by mid May. They had all caught the only bus that travels the journey through the Himalayas to the Chinese border at this time of year. When the road is fully open, there is a lot of traffic until late October. But the army had put up roadblocks and turned them back for their own safety because the road was still unsafe. It was too late to head back into the lesser mountain ranges and so they had decided to stay at the only hotel for more than fifty kilometres, Madame Lenglen's.

If you hear,
During the night,
The calls of the spirits,
Don't look out
Into the darkness.
Don't interfere with nature.
That's what I do.
I just lay there
With my wide sleepless eyes
And follow the wailing
Across the room
And pretend that the
Spirit has melted through
The window
Back outside.

There were the beginnings of hairs standing up on the back of the necks of the guests, but Han, the wanderer said:

I know what you're talking about.
I have heard them also.

Erich drank back his drink and slammed down the glass on the bar; Don't be ridiculous. You are only thinking like this because you are usually on your own in this, he waved vaguely, this hotel. He said the last word with ridicule. This skeleton, he added. The road is the only important thing here, and if it wasn't here, there would be no-one here to listen to the spirits. The spirits only exist in your mind because you are half crazy with the loneliness. The reality is the road, and the fantasy is this, your husband's dreams!

Aleksandr, the mute, said nothing.

Han said:

When the spirits talk
In the deepness of
The dark
And even the wolves
Fall silent,
The heart is filled with dread
And also with wonder.

Do you hear the spirits in the summertime, asked Erich? Michelle said nothing and the sneer of success fell across Erich's face like an attack of a stroke.

Michelle saw deep into Han's heart and touched his arm, silently, without words or expression. Her eyes said:

We will listen in the night.

2
There are many kinds
Of doors
And some open into

Small rooms,
Or even cupboards
Full of sheets and towels.
The door of Marseilles
Is a swing door,
Opening one way into
North Africa and
The other into France.
And Claude's heart
Was a one way door
That opened into me.
And this is what it
Opens in to.

Michelle Lenglen was dreaming/describing how she ended up in
Rohtang, to Han.

Han:
Some doorways have no door.
They are naked and open.
Vulnerable.
You can see straight through
And see what's
On the other side.

Michelle:
Can you see what's
Behind my door?

Han:
You are an open book.
You crave love
And someone to love you.
Your door has already
Rotted away

And has fallen into
A heap of dust.
You are naked.

Michelle:
And who will that be?
Who will give me love?

Han:
No-one will give it to you.
You have to take it yourself,
Invite it in
Like a guest in
A hotel.
And ask the last guest
To leave.
He has overstayed
And has no more
To give you.

Michelle:
Can you love me?
Please.

Han:
I am love
But I have to wander.
Because I have no door.
Anyone can break my heart.
The price of love is
To be naked and be seen.

Erich needed to go to the bathroom and opened his bedroom door.
Looking down the passageway, he saw a flicker of a candle. It was

moving towards him. And behind the flicker there was the face, of an old woman, with wrinkles that left no room for youth. She was a spirit of the mountains, he thought, and the fear overcame his need. He closed his door and curled up foetus-like under the many duvets and blankets.

In the morning, Aleksandr was exuberant enough to emit a loud slurp from his cup of tea. No-one said anything about this intrusion into the silence. Even the snow, falling in huge amounts outside, did so quietly.

Erich, now relieved, was served his tea by the old woman he had seen last night, and he daren't admit it, even to himself, that he had been frightened, and momentarily believed in the spirits of the mountains. She was the only other person who lived through the winter months with Michelle, and Michelle looked at her every morning and thought that one day she would also look like that.

3

The driver had one glance outside and shook his head. Erich thought they might have had a chance of returning to the lower slopes if the bus had tyre chains. But the bus tyres didn't even have tread, let alone chains. Erich looked ruefully at the scene outside and dreamt of the wide road he was going to build out there. He was in this god forsaken place to win the contract to improve the link road to China. He could already smell the millions even though his success so far in his career had been a bit dismal.

At least, he reflected, he was free of Marie, his ex-wife. He ached when he thought of his two little children and how they were growing up, being poisoned until they thought he was the devil himself. But he would show everyone, one day, and wreak a revenge that she would remember until eternity. The hatred inside him was complete. And the last company he worked for. And the banks who let him down. And, and, and....

And then the old woman brought him some eggs, scrambled, spicy and hot. As he ate he glanced around at this motley crew he was accompanied by. Han, the idiot, who should get a job and be useful. Aleksandr, the useless one who should not be here if he was mute. He should be out of sight. The Austin's, rich and dreaming of realising their dreams, put on hold until their careers ended and now, travelling the world, collecting postcards to 'show the folks back home'. Stupid ignoramuses! Americans!

Then there was Madame Lenglen, Michelle, who was still quite attractive and, if she filled out a bit, would be desirable. He could keep her warm. But like the Sultan, deceived by his wife, Erich could also never have a wife again. The Sultan, of the 1001 Arabian Nights fame, spent only one night with a girl and then had her executed the next morning. Erich fancied he could have a version of that; sleep with her every time he was in the area during the road construction. But he didn't want the millstone of a wife, especially this Frenchwoman, screwed up by loneliness, imagining spirits in the mountains. Well, did you see any mountain spirits last night? He asked no-one in particular.

No-one responded to his challenge, asked mockingly. Erich sipped his cup of tea and wondered what he was going to do until they left this 'hotel'. Then he thought; what if we are stuck here for a while? He reconsidered his companions and realised that except for him, no-one else really had any reason to hurry or rush. They were the flotsam of life and would probably be happy just to go where the random weather and nature took them. He decided to pursue the matter with the bus driver, but he just smiled a lot and shook his head. The driver simply pointed out of the window in case Erich had missed the fact that a snowstorm was now in full swing. Erich briefly thought about the soldiers at the roadblock. They must get in and out somehow.

4

Michelle:

I had a dream last night.

We were talking

And you told me

To find love for myself

But when I asked you,

You said you were love

But didn't tell me

If you would love me.

Han:

If someone is standing

In the doorway,

Until he moves out of the way,

No-one else can hope

To get through.

He can either take a step back

Or a step onwards

But he has to clear the space

For someone else

To enter it.

Michelle:

Do you mean

You will love me

If I ask him to move?

Han:

I will not be stopping here

For long.

Will you ride with me

Until we get to Tibet?

Will you live with me

In my tent?

Michelle:
We built this with
Our own hands.
There is also a
Part of me in
These walls.

Han:
You cannot carry stones
On a pony.

Michelle:
Can I take just
One little stone?

Han:
No.

5

Aleksandr hadn't always been mute, and in fact, there was no medical reason why he should be now. He never slept easily at night and that is why he was known for 'propping up bars'. When he was drunk, at least he slept for a few hours. Then he would pace his bedroom for the rest of the night. He had passed this way a few times but had never stayed the night. It didn't matter to him where he stayed as long as there was somewhere to sit, with people, in the early hours of the morning, to scatter the pictures in his head.

He remembered the holy man in Jawalamukhi, in India, who used to light a fire from the rubbish thrown away by people the previous day. He wanted to be there because the holy man lit the fire at three in the morning. It was just about early enough for Aleksandr. And the holy man never spoke to him and they could just both sit, and watch the flames ebbing and rising until the cruel dawn arrived; cruel because it took so long.

Aleksandr was a happy young man, well almost a man, when the government called him up. It was exciting to be going to serve the nation in Afghanistan; the Russian operation to protect a loyal government of socialists in Kabul. It was in 1984. The plane loaded with young men landed at Kabul airport on April 21st and they emerged from its belly into the almost forty degrees of their mission, and were sent to Jalalabad. They were all so young, with guns and bullet belts.

The first time Aleksandr saw a comrade with his head blown off, and the blood shooting out and melting into the sand, he was sick, and hid himself away. There was so much killing. They went into a village and killed everyone; old men, and women. But the worst was when they were told to kill the babies. But to save ammunition they were told not to shoot them. The commander went away and left them with babies, the mothers already splashed in the sand, dead. Aleksandr thought they could just leave the babies to die from starvation, but other didn't agree. They thought someone might come back and save them. So they smashed their skulls against walls.

He was relieved when he was captured by the Mujahadeen, because he wanted to leave this life, and all the nightmares he had every time he closed his eyes. He couldn't hold a gun without seeing the faces of victims, flashing in front of his eyes. The only solace he had was that the mothers had been killed before the babies. He thought about his own mother and wept silently. Some of his comrades just didn't care. He was taken as a prisoner and kept tied up in a small sandstone room. He couldn't remember for how long this went on. He was beaten so many times, it no longer mattered; the pain was there always, in any case. And he deserved it because he had killed the babies of these people.

He was moved over the border into Pakistan, and to Peshawar. The people there were kinder to him and let him move about in their

compound. Some of them took pity on him because he couldn't speak. Eventually, one day, he walked out of the compound and wasn't ever followed or hunted down. He was brown, like them, because of the years of heat. He had been Aleksandr the mute, ever since, crossing borders and travelling from one place to another. He begged for food or took things, if the opportunity arose. And when there wasn't any alcohol, there were always marijuana plants.

It was a good job he couldn't speak because he only spoke Russian and would have been quickly identified as an alien. He wanted to see his mother, in Kiev, but never tried to make contact because he didn't deserve to have a mother, or a life.

And now he was here in this hotel. He didn't judge the others because he couldn't, after what he had done. He had heard Erich close the door when he had seen the old woman with the candle, and seen the old woman, like him, unable to sleep away her memories. He was the first to go down in the morning, and sat by the kitchen fire, next to the old woman, neither of them speaking. He didn't want to know her story.

6

Michelle:

I never had any dreams
Of my own,
Just Claude's dreams,
And they were enough
For me.

Han:

Where did your dreams go?
Did you leave them
In the wind like
Buddhist prayer flags?

Michelle:

I don't remember.

All I know is that I

Was a girl

And he was so sure of

His dreams, that's all.

And why have dreams

Of your own when

The dreams of another

Are perfectly formed.

Han:

Like a man who

Falls under a bus

And loses a leg,

Or in your case,

His life.

Michelle:

His dreams were good

Because he built them

Into this hotel.

Han:

Where is he now?

Did you ever ask him

What to do

If you were ever left

Holding his dreams

In your heart?

Michelle:

Tell me your dreams.

Han:

No.

Michelle:

Why not?

Are they so futile?

Han:

Yes,

You will find them

Futile.

7

The old woman, with a scowl, dropped the plate of food on to the table in front of Han. He ignored her. No, that's a lie; he ignored her outwardly, but inside there were concerns. He wanted to wrap up his concerns and drop them in the fire. What had it to do with him, if someone else, anyone else, was feeling grumpy? As he ate, he mentally dropped the concerns one by one into the fire. Each bite and a bit more disappeared, both of food and concerns.

The old woman had seen the Rudraksh Mala around Han's neck, mostly hidden by his shirt. It had been people like him that had taken her man away, thirty nine years ago. They told him about the Buddha, and he listened. How many times had she told him to just say the prayer, make the offerings, eat the food and then turn on his heel and return home? But he had wanted to know more and could feel the pulse of life thumping through him. He had told her. She knew she couldn't compete against the Buddha. And then, one clear spring morning, the calling was too strong, and he just walked away.

Now, this Han, walked calmly into the hotel just as calmly as her man had left their home; not a care about anyone else. She had noticed Michelle looking into his eyes, trying to find another one whose

dreams she could embrace. Silly girl! And he, in his spiritual ignorance couldn't see that he was poisoning her just as the Buddhists had poisoned her man. She had heard him say to Michelle, and heard in her dreams:

Han:
You cannot carry stones
On a pony.

Michelle:
Can I take just
One little stone?

Han:
No.

She could hear all sorts of things; age teaches you that. So, beached like a boat on the lakeside, she had watched for thirty nine years for her man to appear over the hills and mountains, to tell her he was ready now to be back in the world. The call of the spirits of the mountains that Michelle could hear at night, were her own cries into the wilderness for him to return. Just like the Buddhist flags float prayers into the winds, she was sending out a constant call for him, just in case he heard, in between moments of nirvana, and felt the sympathy for the living as he did for the dead scriptures.

Michelle had only been calling out for ten years or so, and yes, one day she would also be wrinkled and old like she was. Destiny for a woman is too hard to follow and too easy to rely upon.

8
Michelle:
Where will your road go to
And why do you need

To build it wider?

Erich:

Without roads, people can't travel where they want to go. It is all progress and whether you like it or not, if I didn't apply for the contract, then someone else would.

Michelle:

But roads also take
People away.
My husband Claude....

Erich:

He would have died anyway, if it was going to happen. It's not the road's fault, is it? And besides, if the road hadn't been here, you two wouldn't have stopped to build a hotel, would you?

Michelle:

And he wouldn't
Have achieved his dream.
But he would
Have been alive.
We would have been
Able to live together.

But without a dream
Is the world worth it?
I haven't had a dream
For the last ten years.
I have been keeping his
Dream alive.
There is only enough
Space for one person's dreams.

Where has he gone

And why don't the
Spirits of
The mountains
Tell me about him?

And what I should do?

Erich:

Life goes on and you should too. People live and die; dreams come and go. But the road is tangible. At the end of all the construction I will be able to tell you exactly how long it is, and how long it will take you to get from any point to the one you want to travel to. And how many people can travel on it. Whilst you listen to the spirits, the world will pass you by. It already has, even with this little road you have now. Even this road is your lifeblood; paying for your food and your needs. Someday, huge trucks, and tourist buses and cars will all stop at this hotel, not because of you, but because of the road.