

DREAMS OF BHADDA

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D R E A M S O F
B H A D D A

A historical novella

BHIKKHU SUJATO

SANTIPADA

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Buddhism as if life matters

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They say that when we dream, our soul slips out of our mouth like a little bird. Off she flies, to worlds unimaginable in the clouds. She fights, plays, makes love; she traverses the past and the future in an instant. And when she's tired she pops back in, like a sparrow that folds its wings and returns to the nest. That's why you should never wake anyone while they're dreaming—who knows what would happen if the soul could not find its way home? What would happen to a dream in flight, if it took off from India in 500 BCE and, while it was still roaming the past and the future, its owner woke up?

AS BHADDĀ LAY THERE on the floor, her earliest memory came to her shining like gold, harder than reality itself. Not like a normal memory, sneaking around in a fog of vagueness, not quite sure of its own truth. Bhaddā's first memory was so exceptional, so utterly strange, that it blazed in her mind brighter than sunshine on water.

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And o! didn't she laugh, didn't she sing as she's tripping and skipping up the hills. A new lamb discovering life. Fairies fluttered under every bush, and under each stone was a jewel. She was too young to know what 'naughty' meant. She danced in the sun as it speckled the hillside, like the poppy seeds that popped in her Gran's hot pan. Heedless, she pirouetted over a shelf of rock and tumbled squealing over the far side. She rolled madly down; her forehead hit the rock, making a bloody gash; and she would have been badly hurt if she hadn't fallen into...

... a lion! Tumbling over the stone, hardly before she saw it, she fell right into its paws, cradled against its belly.

This was not a lion in the sense of ‘big cat’; but a lion in the sense of ‘the sun come down to earth, soaked in piss, and wrapped in hot fur’. *That* kind of lion.

Do not think that she was afraid. There are emotions that embarrass fear, so that it slinks away, shown up for the cheap and tawdry thing that it is. She was not caught in fear, but in wonderment, in a transport of awe, lost at that obscure crossroad where ecstasy romances horror.

That tiny child, in her little white dress, rested in the rank flesh of the sun. She rose and fell on the slow tide of its breath. The lion yawned, that furnace of old meat, and noticed her as if for the first time. Lazy and magnificent, he turned his head, with its halo of blazing mane, and looked in her eyes. His eyes were plates of liquid gold set with perfectly round pupils of black infinity. They held that gaze for an eternity. The sun rose in the

sky, and set, and rose again. A year, a thousand years of the gods, a cosmic æon passed in that gaze, which the literal-minded could have measured in seconds.

Then he leaned forward, opened his mouth and, with a rush of rancid breath, licked her face. His tongue was rough as sandpaper, but he licked the blood clean away. There was just a hint of a subterranean rumble that, in entirely different circumstances, might have been called a purr. Satisfied, he blinked, shifted a little, and went back to sleep.

Bhaddā thought this seemed like a wonderful idea. So she nestled against the warm, reassuring belly of the beast and took a little nap.

A while later, plaintive, gruff voices could be heard calling: ‘Bhaddā! Bhaddā!’ The lion tensed and stood up, rolling Bhaddā awake. It shook its mane and vanished in a heartbeat, so that you would not know it had been there.

They found Bhaddā a few minutes later. She ran to her father, saying happily: ‘I fell into a lion-

bed and went to sleep!’ They never believed her story, but the smell told them that something was wrong; and the scar on her forehead never quite disappeared.

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**

Bhaddā’s father never let her out of the house alone after that. So started Bhaddā’s enclosure. Hedged by love and fear, her horizons shrank as her body grew. Her wildness was contained, measured, tamed. She was instilled with ladylike virtues. As she approached womanhood, however, this was not enough. Her father decided, for her own good, that she must spend a period of time isolated, protected from her own impulses in a gorgeous tower that he had built specially for her.

But there comes a time when any wall, no matter how strong and sturdy, comes a-tumbling down.

*
**

Bhaddā’s mother stormed into the room, her exasperation barely hidden beneath her love.

‘Be with us, Bhaddā. We’re a family. We can’t lose you.’

‘Am I lost? Let me just check.... Nope, still here.’

‘Please, it’s been hours, sprawled on your stomach like a lizard. What are you trying to do, sink into the floor? You’ll send your old mum to her grave! Come back to us. Whatever happened to our little baby?’

‘Life happened. You might want to try it sometime.’

‘What on earth are we to think?’

‘Don’t think. Just do it!’

‘Bhaddā! The man Sattuka is a criminal! Do you have any idea what he did to that poor woman?’

Bhaddā fixed her mother with a livid eyeball and said, ‘If I can’t have him, I’ll die right here.’

*
**

‘Hadn’t we better be getting up now, my dear?’

‘Down’s good.’

‘Moving on, growing as a person—that’s what it’s all about. They all say so.’

‘Well, dad, if they say so...’

‘That they do. Now, about this fellow you seem interested in...’

‘You kept me locked up in this tower since my first period,’ accused Bhaddā. Her father shuffled uncomfortably; he really was not ready to deal. ‘Three years! “Young girls burn for men,” that’s what you said.’

‘Well, I don’t see what that has to do with...’

‘You don’t *see*? Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy! Hey, maybe if I’d had a “normal” life I would have turned out “normal”. But those words, hanging over my head like some Great Big Doom—I didn’t have a clue what you were on about. Stuck up here in this tower, all shuttered up, only Gran to talk to. How could I learn about life? I don’t know shit.’

‘Well, young lady, you seem to have learnt how to curse alright.’

She looked down and said quietly: ‘That’s all I have. That’s all you’ve left me.’

He sighed and sat down beside her. ‘Bhaddā, you’re a woman now. What do you want to learn about life for? All we ever wanted was for you to be safe. Safe and sound. We’ve given you the best—and we want you to have the best husband, too. You deserve it. Someone who can take care of you. It’s time for you to be thinking about a solid marriage with a good man.’ With his most winning smile, Bhaddā’s father said, ‘And, as it happens, I think I’ve found just the man for you....’

‘Bleccchg.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Just leave me alone.’

*
**

(The day before...)

‘What the!?’

‘I think it’s some kind of parade.’

‘Parade my ass, that’s a riot. How cool is that?’

‘No, it’s just the spring festival.’

‘Gran, that is so not the spring festival. Can’t I have just one peek?’

‘Now, Bhaddā, that is not the kind of thing a young woman should be interested in. Be quiet and get on with your spinning.’ Gran busied herself out of the room.

Bhaddā grabbed a blade and jumped up on her bed. She stuck the knife in the corner of the shutter and levered it open a crack. She’d tried this before; the shutters would give just so much, then they started with an ominous creak. She’d always been too scared to push it, afraid her father would see the damage.

From the street below, the yells drew closer. There was a crack, and again, like the snap of a twig, only squelchy.

‘Screw this!’ she thought. She jammed the knife in and bent it all the way. The shutter snapped open, broken forever—she’d never hide this from her dad! Ripping the shutters wide, she leaned out of the window and gazed down at the street, the street she hadn’t seen for three years.

It was a riot, all right. The street heaved with chaos. She could recognize some: Gopāla, Inda-

jālinī, little Kāmarūpā. But her friends and neighbours, who'd been part of her life until she was locked away in her room, were transformed by rage. They screamed and frothed, mad as the ocean.

In the middle of the mob a platoon of soldiers fought to keep ranks around a prisoner. He was barely visible under the rain of rocks, of sticks, of cow dung. Shackled and naked, his long hair straggled over his massive shoulders. A whip rended strips of flesh from his back. He was covered with dust the color of red brick, except where the blood or sweat cleared a track on his dark, lacerated skin.

Suddenly he looked up; and Bhaddā saw a certain stillness in his eyes, full of darkness and sorrow. She felt like someone tipped a bucket of wriggling fish over her skin.

*
**

(that night...)

Bhaddā and her Gran sat down at the sewing table and started their evening weaving. Their fingers held the yarn lightly, moving smoothly through the long-practiced patterns.

‘So where were we then?’ said Gran. ‘Oh, yes, I remember. We had come to the part when beautiful Sītā had been taken from handsome Rāma by the horrible monster Rāvana, who imprisoned her in his beautiful but terrifying palace in Lankā. And although Rāvana had hundreds of alluring women in his harem, he wanted only one: Sītā. And she was the only one who would not yield to his desire.’

‘Gran?’

‘Yes, dearest?’

‘What would happen if Sītā said yes to Rāvana? What if, deep down inside, she really liked him? I’d get bored being with Rāma all the time! And anyway, Rāma was supposed to be so good, but he didn’t trust her. He punished her and threw her out, even though she didn’t do anything with Rāvana.’

‘But Sītā didn’t know that, it doesn’t happen till later in the story. And anyway, if Sītā was not faithful, she wouldn’t be Sītā.’

‘Not Sītā?’

‘Exactly. Sītā is who she is only because of what she does, because of her faith and love for Rāma—even if he was a bit...’

‘So who would she be, then?’

‘It just couldn’t be, that’s all. I’ve been hearing the Rāmāyana since I was a tiny little thing, and Sītā is always faithful.’

‘But doesn’t Sītā have a choice? How can she be good if everything she does is fate?’

‘Sītā chooses Rāma: that’s her fate. That’s how it’s always been.’

Gran went on with the story until late. Yawning, they packed away their sewing, and Gran made sure Bhaddā was cosy in bed. As Bhaddā lay there so peaceful, Gran gently kissed her, as she always did, on the little scar on her forehead that had been there since the adventure with the lion.

‘That’s your luck, my darling,’ she whispered. ‘It will be with you always, like my love.’

Bhaddā lay for a long while chasing sleep. She looked around her room, glowing softly in the oil lamp. Her beautiful prison. The cloths (‘All the

way from Kāsī') hanging down vivid crimson; the murals that brought the old stories to bright life; the carved woodwork, with peacocks and dragons. Such surfaces! On the table was a polished silver mirror. She thought how funny it was that a mirror would show you anything, except itself. It held a whole world of appearances, but there was nothing to it. You couldn't feel the substance of things in the mirror—not like her silver bracelets, with their fine workings and studded pearls; or the gorgeous necklace that she'd wear just for the joy of it. They were solid, shiny.

Her best friend was sleeping now: a parrot in a gilded cage. He was a chatterer, always saying things that he couldn't understand, like the brahmins muttering their mantras. Funny how she could understand what he said, but he couldn't! Just before she joined him in sleep, she whispered: 'Not Sītā.'

*
**

The horse rippled and pounded beneath her, terrifying in its speed. Sir John held her hard, so she could hardly draw breath.

It had all happened so suddenly. He came from nowhere to their lonely home on the moors. Grave and gentle, he charmed May and her father over dinner. Afterwards, he sat at the piano and sang of midnight. Listening, May knew she was lost to him.

Sir John's references were impeccable. He was wealthy and educated, old landed gentry. All in all, a great catch. But there was a sadness to him. His previous marriages had ended in tragedy, as a series of unfortunate accidents had taken his wives. But he reassured May's father.

'Master Colven,' he said, 'do not fear for your daughter. I will see for her as for my own blood.'

Father was so delighted, he presented May with a priceless wedding gift: a golden necklace, studded with pearls. Then she was taken.

Sir John gripped her firmly in the saddle and wrapped her in his dark cloak. Over the swelling hills they raced to the cliff.

‘May, my pretty May,’ he said. ‘I bring you to your bridal bed.’

She screamed.

‘Silence!’ he ordered. ‘Or I shall show you my true form.’

Looking down there was the endless expanse of the sea, heaving in its foam. Far below, gulls were circling. She turned, her arms reaching towards him as she fell, the scream choking in her throat. She saw his outstretched hands clutching her necklace. And in the shadow of his hooded face she saw, one last time, his eyes: infinitely dark, and infinitely tender.

*
**

Bhaddā woke trembling. Her parrot squawked: ‘*Passāmi! Passāmi!*’ Bhaddā wondered aloud if her feathered friend would be so kind as to SHUT THE @#%^ UP!

Then she took a deep breath and lay on the floor.

*
**

Downstairs, in the living room, Bhaddā's parents were on the edge of despair.

'Dearest Devakittī, she's our daughter.'

'But what can we do? She's like a bunch of bones wrapped in skin. Three weeks! She'll really do it, you know. She will lie there until she dies.' Bhaddā's mother hesitated. 'You know, Vīraputta, they say that at his trial he claimed to be the leader of an independent village. That he was a just man, a scapegoat; that he had to be removed because he was a threat to the king.'

'*They say* he ripped the throat out of a young girl. *They say* he drank her blood. *They say* she was not the first....'

'Such stories! Don't they sound just a little... lurid?'

They sat in silence for a while. Then Bhaddā's father said, 'You know, my sweet, sometimes I wonder where in the six realms our daughter came

from. Perhaps if we hadn't kept her secluded for these years....'

'Sometimes she scares me.'

'I don't know... You know how she is. She's sixteen.'

'Our little baby...'

'All grown up...'

'Will we ever have her back again, such a darling little thing?'

'She needs a husband—but not that one.'

Bhaddā's mother said, 'Why don't they just kill him and be done with it?'

'Well, they take their own sweet time. Who knows when they'll order the executioner? And meanwhile... And if they do kill him, what'll she do then? Just get over it? Or play the devoted wife and join him in the next life?'

'Darling, you know the Magistrate. Talk to him, Vīraputta. You can work out something. *She's going to die.*'

Bhaddā's father had nothing to say. He just scratched the ground with a stick.

*
**

‘Have you really thought this through, my friend?’
said the Magistrate.

‘What’s thought got to do with it? It’s my daughter.’

‘I know. I know.’ The Magistrate sighed. ‘Well, I can free the man. That’s not difficult. Declare him innocent—new evidence come to light. The usual. But a life must be forfeit. Crimes have been committed—and the people will have blood. *She* will have blood.’

‘Is there anyone?’ said Bhaddā’s father.

‘There’s always someone,’ said the Magistrate.

‘Someone... acceptable?’

‘She’s not fussy. So yes, someone acceptable.’
He smiled darkly. ‘After all, that’s karma, isn’t it? Someone pays, everyone goes home happy. And then the wheel turns again.’

*
**

‘Bhaddā?’

‘What.’

‘We made a deal. He’s coming. He’ll be here tomorrow. Your Sattuka.’

Slowly, Bhaddā turned. Like a drowning woman, she clutched at the hem of her couch and hauled herself up.

‘What? But...?’

‘Please, have yourself something to eat. And clean up, tidy this place. There’s a lot to do. Get ready—it’s really going to happen. Tomorrow is your wedding day.’ Bhaddā’s father turned and left.

Under his breath he sighed, ‘And may the gods have mercy on us all.’

*
**

The day passed in a breathless flurry of preparations. Bhaddā threw herself at it as only she could. Her family dreaded Sattuka’s appearance, but at least they were relieved at the speed of Bhaddā’s recovery. It was late before she got to bed, to slip into an uneasy dream.

*
**

There were two wandering minstrels taking their song across the land. Everywhere a few stragglers came to listen for a while, then moved on. On they went, and nothing happened. It seemed like it was going on forever, and the song was always lost. Then all of a sudden one traveller came to listen, and the song sprang as clear as if heard through his own ears, like a memory of favorite things.

‘Springtime, and red kanavera blossoms

 He bore on his brow like a lion from the mountains.
At a window she saw him and straightaway loved him
 The thief, the killer, condemned to the stake.

‘She freed him, she served him, her old love abandoned,

 The flowers of springtime grew only for them.
But seeing two cockatoos roost in a cage
 The longing for freedom grew strong in his veins.

‘His passion was great, her neck was so fragile.

 She swooned and he left her to lie on the earth.
He took from her body the jewels of her trade
 And left her neck ringed with red flowers he made.

'When Sāmā awoke her lover had gone

She thought he could never have wanted her harm:
A gamble of passion, an excess of love,
And he fled, although innocent, fearing his life.

'Sāmā searched highways and questioned in taverns,
Everywhere seeking her love once again.

In the end of despair, she turned to we minstrels,
And sent out her message in song for the world.

'So listen you all: Sāmā still lives!

Sāmā who played with her love in the springtime.
Maybe among you is one who remembers
The fragrance of red kanavera blossoms.'

The traveller listened as a man stunned; then he
sang:

'No! This can't be! I refuse to believe it.

I saw her with these, my two trusty eyes.
Sāmā was dead, and dead she remains
And dead is all Sāmā can ever be.'

And the minstrels replied:

‘Sāmā’s alive, and pines just for thee,
She eats not, nor sleeps on a bed or a couch.
Take her, she’s yours in body and soul,
Without you her life is just fading away.’

But the traveller had the final word:

‘I can’t—I don’t know—I feel—I don’t know—
What am I to do, what is life now to be?
That Sāmā betrayed her lover before me—
I cannot return now to love her again.

‘Tell her, tell Sāmā, my good friends of song,
Her love has departed from these narrow shores.
As flowers in springtime must shed all their petals,
So I must shed Sāmā and make for the sea!’

*
**

But when Bhaddā woke, all that was left was an echo of melody and a mirage of feeling. Shaking off the dream, she thought: ‘Today’s the day. Well, Bhaddā, you’d better do it right.’

An Indian wedding is, quite literally, a divine affair. The bride is Suryā, the Sun; the groom is

Soma, the Moon; and their union is witnessed by Agni, the God of fire. Every detail of the ceremony is prescribed by tradition, and each detail has meaning. The ideal couple must be perfectly matched by birth, upbringing, and temperament; adorned with bright cloth and extravagant jewels, as they come together the gods themselves rejoice in the perfection of the divine law.

But given the circumstances, this was not to be a dream wedding.

No high ranking, pure minded priest would bless the couple. The only holy man they could find was a dubious, dishevelled brahman from beyond the black stump, all matted locks and weathered lines. His face was marked, and around his neck was a garland of bones. He shuffled unsteadily on his trident staff while a black leopard skin hung gloomily from his back.

He knew the mantras well enough, but as he prepared the wedding pavillion, Bhaddā's father was disturbed to hear him mutter them *backwards*, syllable by syllable. The sacred mandala he drew

on the ground with his left foot, while under the altar a toad squatted. Then with holy water poured from a blackened skull he consecrated the ground. Bhaddā's father grew uneasy.

‘Excuse me, lord brahman,’ he said. ‘What’s all this about, then?’

‘Arrggh!’ said the dark priest, ‘don’t you be questioning me!’ He scowled and spat on the ground. ‘This water cost me more than I care to think. I drew it from a well where a deformed baby was drowned! Gah! Best you not think about it too much, my good sir. You’ve paid me to take this burden on my soul—and yes, I shall accept it! Do you have any idea of the karmic price of such an unholy matrimony? Not a one would so violate the laws—unless they already carried a far heavier burden.... But the rites, they must be in accord with nature; and when nature is perverted the rites follow.’

Cowed, Bhaddā's father questioned no more.

When the brahman had finished his dubious preparations, Bhaddā's parents and grandmother

gathered in the center of the pavillion around the fire altar. No crowds of merrymakers were there, just a few awkward guests, visibly uncomfortable at taking part in such an inauspicious rite. No-one asked about Sattuka's family.

As the brahman chanted, Sattuka entered, carrying himself with silence and an impenetrable pride. Washed and oiled, wreathed in a pure white cloth, he was like one of the princes of old—Arjuna himself come once more to grace these diminished times. Bhaddā's parents waited by the altar to receive him, placing a wreath of red flowers around his neck.

Finally Bhaddā appeared. While they waited in the dim shade, she was framed in brilliant sunshine at the pavillion's entrance. She wore a cloth of bright crimson; and although the short preparation had not allowed for elaborate adornments, she wore a gorgeous *mangalasūtra*, the 'blessing-thread': a richly decorated necklace of gold and rubies. This was the first time Sattuka had seen his

bride, and she seemed to him to possess a beauty that was not of this earth.

Bhaddā's father presented her to Sattuka, and together they lit the Sacred Fire. She trembled to be near him for the first time; her face grew hot as the air fled from her lungs. Hand in hand they circled the fire altar three times, keeping it on their right.

She was secretly relieved to turn from him for the next part of the ceremony; at least she could get her breath back. She went to her mother, who helped her step upon the sacred stone. As she stood upon the rock, Sattuka recited the verses beginning with, 'Like a rock, may you be strong enough to face any dangers.' Perhaps it was just that the priest had not had time to place the stone carefully enough; but as Sattuka spoke these words, the rock trembled beneath Bhaddā's feet.

Then there came the moment Bhaddā had been dreading so eagerly. To seal the marriage, Sattuka took her right hand in his left and they took

seven steps to the north. And they said the following vow together:

‘We have taken the Seven Steps. You have become mine forever, as I am yours. I cannot live without you— do not live without me! Let us share joy for all our lives. I am word, you are meaning. I am thought, you are sound. I am heaven, you are earth. May the night be honey-sweet for us! May the morning be honey-sweet for us! May the earth be honey-sweet for us! May the heavens be honeysweet for us! May the sun be honeysweet for us! As the heavens are stable, as the earth is stable, as the mountains are stable, so may our union last forever.’

They went to Bhaddā’s parents, bowed and touched their feet. The parents sang the traditional verses of blessing. Tears flowed, and the brahman fell silent at last, hanging his shaggy head.

*
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Afterwards there should have been a great feast, with music and dancing. But it was just the family;

even their closest friends had excused themselves from what promised to be the most awkward family meal ever. As they sat down, not a word broke the silence.

‘Mum, could you pass a knife, so I can carve the tension?’

‘Bhaddā!’

‘Can’t you at least try to be polite?’

‘Well, ah, would you like some chapati?’ said Bhaddā’s mother.

‘Thank you,’ said Sattuka. He took the oiled flatbread and languorously tore it into pieces. The family watched in fascination, their unease palpable. He noticed, put down the flatbread, and said:

‘Look, I know how you must be feeling right now. I’m the killer, she’s the virgin. It’s a classic, isn’t it? But it’s more complicated than that. I was set up. You all know the king these days....’

‘We’ve heard the stories,’ said Bhaddā’s father. ‘And I do know the king, what sort of man he is. Let’s just leave it at that.’

‘I was only saying...’

‘Well don’t say. She’s our only daughter. She is our world. Anything happens to her, anything at all, so much as a sour glance or a rough word, and you are going over Robber’s Cliff. Understand?’

‘Please, sir, do not worry,’ said Sattuka. ‘I love your daughter. I know we only met this morning, but just as she loved me at first sight, I have never felt anything like this. It must be our karma. How many lives have we been husband and wife? I don’t know, but the bond is strong. I could never harm her, even in thought.’

He looked into Bhaddā’s eyes; and she all of a sudden just wanted dinner to be over. Let the night begin.

*
**

And for a time, it was good. Sattuka had a dignity about him that few could match. Bhaddā’s family came to accept that his story was true: he was a just man condemned for political reasons. Bhaddā found him to be an intelligent and sensitive companion, one who knew when to listen and when to

laugh, when to caress her softly, and when not. He showed her the world, took her travelling, spoke of politics, of stars, of the real and the true. She loved him most when she caught that look of sadness in his eye, a tenderness that all his strength could not hide. And in his arms she finally knew the meaning of pleasure.

But things did not go so well with Bhaddā's family. Although Bhaddā hardly noticed, having a convicted killer at home was hardly a ticket to upward mobility. Her father's contract as a king's Minister was not renewed. Old friends found new reasons not to visit. Neighbours kept their children indoors, and some of them moved far away. Spells were muttered in doorways as he passed. Bhaddā's parents drew into themselves, isolated, and ever more dependent on their daughter and her outlandish husband.

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For a year her dreams stopped. But as spring came around again, and the flowers sent out their tender

blooms, something changed. One morning, Sattuka rose early and sat brooding by the window, looking out over the mountains. Bhaddā tossed and murmured in her sleep, then screamed.

‘Hey, my sweet thing, what’s up?’ Sattuka came and took Bhaddā’s hands. They were sweating.

‘What?’ said Bhaddā, only half conscious.

‘You were dreaming. Let me get you something.’

‘God, it was terrible, like—*death*—was hunting me. Some what thing?’

‘Something milky. It was only a dream.’

‘But it’s not like other dreams. I’ve had them before.’

‘Before?’

‘You know how when you dream, it’s you in the dreams—I mean oneself.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘But in these dreams, it’s someone else, someone not me....’

‘Then who?’

‘It’s some other time—past, future, I don’t know. I don’t recognize anything. There’s a girl... and a man.’

‘The man of your dreams? Call me jealous.’

‘No... he is the hunter.’

‘Hunting... what?’ Sattuka grew grim. ‘Is it you? Is there some—creature—that pursues you in the night?’

‘They’re only dreams.’ Bhaddā paused for a long while before saying, ‘I’ll get my own something, thanks.’

*
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All that day Sattuka was withdrawn, while Bhaddā was distracted. As evening drew close, Sattuka said, ‘Bhaddā, my sweet, I have an obligation to the gods.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘When I was condemned to die, I made a vow to the goddess of Robber’s Cliff. If I should, by some miracle, be freed, then I would go each year to make an offering of flowers.’

‘To the goddess of the cliff? But the criminals are tossed off there to die—doesn’t she get enough offerings?’

‘I know—the king the way he is, she’s never hungry. But she is a just goddess. That’s why I must fulfill my vow—to ascend that terrible height in person, and make a righteous offering of flowers, to thank her for my deliverance, and to atone for the needless blood.’

‘Then I’ll come with you.’

‘Bhaddā, you mustn’t. It’s a wild and dangerous place. I go alone.’

‘A wife’s place is by her husband’s side. Especially when he’s in danger. Remember Sītā!’

‘If anything were to happen, I could never forgive myself.’

Bhaddā laughed. ‘Nothing will happen. It’ll be a picnic. What flowers should I bring?’

Sattuka hesitated, and then said, ‘It’s spring-time. Bring the kanavera. And Bhaddā, it’s our anniversary, we should wear our wedding clothes. And bring your necklace.’

‘Well, that’ll be fun.’

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They stood at the cliff’s edge, out of breath from the climb, but still carefully holding the flowers. Bhaddā looked out at the view, enthralled.

‘It’s so amazing! You can see the end of the world from here. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?’

But Sattuka was silent.

‘Sattuka, you’re so serious!’

Still.

‘Is it something I said?’

Nothing.

‘Speak to me!’

‘This is it, Bhaddā. It’s over.’

‘What? What’s over?’

‘Us. Whatever happened, it just happened.’

Bhaddā was so shocked, she could only say in a small voice, ‘What? Was it me? Did I not do...?’

‘Oh, no, Bhaddā—you’ve been great. Top class professional service. No, really. A slave to love, up

there with the best. I've really been able to cut back on my visits to the working girls this past year. You could make a tidy profit with that skill set. Think about it.'

'How can you say these things? Sattuka, look at me! I just can't believe that you would... Why?'

'You cretin! I'm here for the jewels.'

He glared at her with eyes become pitch. His words hung between them like an lowering storm.

'You... what...?'

'Take off your necklace.'

'But my lord, I am yours! All this is yours! Why should you steal what is yours?'

'I steal because it is my nature. Love—maybe that is your nature, Bhaddā....'

Bhaddā was still for a long moment. Finally, she said, 'If it must be, let it be so. I will not be the first wife to die in faith for her husband. But allow me one last thing. Permit me to worship my husband, who has brought me life, who has rescued me from my prison, and who has shown me the

joys of love. Allow me to pay homage to my lord before I die!’

Sattuka stood proudly and said, ‘That is not too much to ask.’

With care and reverence, Bhaddā knelt before him and bowed as she had when they first met.

‘My lord, if I have done anything to offend you, by way of body, speech, or mind, may you forgive me.’

She stood, and with her hands clasped in reverence, she stepped slowly, worshipfully, circling Sattuka three times, keeping him to her right. And on the third time as she passed behind him, she shoved him off the cliff.

He half-turned as he fell, grabbing her wrist and pulling her with him. But she heaved back from the edge and for one still moment they stood poised: Sattuka teetering over the abyss, clutching Bhaddā’s hand in desperation as she struggled to keep her footing.

‘Bhaddā,’ he whispered. ‘Forgive me.’

Bhaddā put her free hand on his, feeling the strain of him gripping her wrist. She looked for one long moment into his dark, fathomless eyes; and ripped his finger off her hand, hearing it snap.

‘Asshole,’ she said.

Bhaddā watched his body break on the rocks. Then she tore her necklace from around her throat and threw it after him, muttering: ‘Well, that’s rooted, then.’ She was still holding the flowers.

She stepped back from the edge, turned and stumbled off, a blankness in her mind. She staggered through the bushes, not bothering to follow a path. The rocks stabbed her feet, and the thorns ripped her skin. The sun beat on her through the shadeless scrub. Shadows were fractured. Rage, confusion, and horror coursed through her veins in chaotic abundance, but none of them touched her. They just echoed in the emptiness, the void in her chest that kept on getting bigger and bigger until the whole world fell into it. As the grey day ground to a bleary night, she came to a dell, an opening in the trees. She cast herself down and

lay there, staring into the moonless night. It was brighter than her heart.

In the dark her love for her parents turned into bitter, hopeless ashes. She had destroyed their lives, driven by a compulsion of fate, or so it seemed. They would never recover. Shunned by all their friends, their social position destroyed, their family line ended, there was nothing left for them. And she had done this. She could never return, never remarry. Her childhood was gone, her adult life in ruins. Sattuka's words were a knife in her belly, for there was a truth to what he said. For an abandoned wife like her, prostitution was the only course left. Words like 'irresponsible' or 'ungrateful' just couldn't cover it. She, who had such a sharp intellect, had acted in the most stupid way imaginable. And yet... that nameless something she felt for Sattuka: it was still there.

Towards dawn she slipped into a thankless sleep.

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Thecla heard his voice from below. She could see in the street a crowd gathered around, all quiet and still. In the eye of the crowd was a man; small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, and full of grace.

‘Blessed are they that have kept the flesh chaste,’ cried the man called Paul, ‘for they shall become a temple of God. And blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God, and shall not lose the reward of their chastity.’

For three days and three nights Thecla did not rise from the window, neither to eat nor to drink. She sat listening as if enchanted. Her father became more and more worried, and spoke to Thecla’s fiancé, Thamyris.

‘My daughter is tied to the window like a spider. She lays hold of what is said by Paul with strange eagerness and awful emotion. Speak to her, for she is your beloved.’

Thamyris went to Thecla, kissed her and spoke kindly, and the rest of the family likewise. But

Thecla remained at the window, transfixed by the word of Paul.

Thamyris became enraged by Paul's preaching of virginity, fearing that his future bride would be lost to him forever. He went before the judge and said with a great shout, 'Honoured Sir! This man who calls himself Paul, he makes virgins turn away from marriage. He is destroying our families and our honoured customs.' The judge had Paul imprisoned and bound in chains.

That night, Thecla took off her necklace and used it to bribe the jail ward. Paul spoke to her, and she sat before him kissing his bonds. The next morning they took Paul from the prison, while Thecla remained, wallowing on the ground in the place where he had sat. When the judge heard the circumstances, he ordered that Thecla, too, be brought before him. She came, exulting with joy. He said to her:

'Why do you disobey Thamyris, to whom you are betrothed according to the law of our people?'

But she stood looking earnestly at Paul and did not speak. Her mother became distraught and cried out, saying:

‘Burn the wicked wretch! If she won’t marry, burn her, the ungrateful daughter!’

The judge was moved by this testimony. He had Paul and Thecla whipped and cast out of the city.

Thecla said to Paul, ‘I shall cut my hair, and follow you wherever go.’

‘These are shameless times, and you are beautiful,’ replied Paul. ‘I am afraid that temptation might come upon you.’

‘Only give me the baptism, and temptation shall not touch me.’

‘Wait with patience, Thecla,’ said Paul, ‘and you shall receive the baptism.’

They went to Antioch together. But Thecla was seen in the street by a man called Alexander, who would have her as his lover. He approached Paul with gifts, but Paul turned away, saying, ‘I

do not know the woman you speak of.' Then Paul left that town.

Alexander went to Thecla, and accosted her by force in the street. But taking hold of Alexander, she tore his cloak and pulled off his helm, so that he became a laughing-stock. Torn between love and shame, he denounced her before the court. The judge condemned her to the wild beasts. The women were appalled and cried out, 'Cruel judgement! Unjust judgement!'

Thecla's clothes were torn off, and she was thrown naked in the arena. A raging lioness was loosed upon her. Thecla stood firm as the crowd of women wept. But the lioness crouched before Thecla and licked her feet, so that all the people there were astonished. Thecla stood alone in the middle of the arena and declared for all to hear:

'I am Thecla, who has been baptised in your sight by the tongue of a lioness!'

The judge ordered her garments to be brought, saying, 'I release to you Thecla, the blessed.' The

women shouted aloud, and the foundations of the arena were shaken by their voice.

After this, Thecla left in search of Paul. She dressed herself in a man's cloak and took a group of young men and women with her. In Lycean Myra she found Paul speaking the Word. Paul was astonished to see her.

She said, 'I have received the baptism.'

And Paul replied, 'Go, and teach the word of God.'

Thecla returned to her home. Thamyris had passed away, but her mother was alive. She sent for her mother and said to her, 'Theocleia, my mother, do you believe in the Most High? For you desired a child, and I am standing here before you.'

*
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After an age the dawn saw fit to do its thing. In the half light, lying alone in the trackless wilderness, Bhaddā heard, very close, an old woman cackle.

'That's, uhh, a bit unnerving...' she ventured. A rock pushed into her hip.

‘So, the woman was smarter than the man!’ giggled a cracked voice.

Shocked, Bhaddā sat upright.

‘Clever enough to get rid of him—strong and mighty as he was. But is she smart enough for what’s next?’

‘Who are you?’ said Bhaddā.

‘She can overcome him—but can she overcome herself? Crying like a little baby—when we both know she’s a *murderer*.’

‘I’m not—a murderer! It was self defence. He was going to kill me.’

‘Maybe so, maybe so. But perhaps she could have run away, or tripped him over, or found some other kind of trick. But she didn’t!’

‘There was nothing I could do,’ said Bhaddā. ‘And anyway, who are you? I can’t see... You’re not—the goddess? The goddess of Robber’s Cliff!’

The voice giggled again. ‘Goddess? Is that really what you want? To make an offering of flowers, and beg for the goddess’s protection? She wasn’t

much use when the bastard tried to throw you over the cliff!’

‘He wasn’t a bastard. I loved him—I still love him,’ said Bhaddā. ‘He was just trapped in his karma—like all of us. Without the favours of the gods we are doomed.’

‘You speak half a truth, my dear Bhaddā,’ said the voice. ‘We are all trapped in our karma. But so are the gods! They are trapped, helpless, in the bonds of their past karma. Burn, burn, we must burn off our karma!’

‘Please,’ begged Bhaddā, ‘show yourself. I just can’t take it any more.’

Out of the bushes stepped the wildest figure Bhaddā had ever seen. A little old lady, starved almost to death, skin blackened by the sun, withered and broken, but with an unquenchable inner fire. Her hair grew in desperate little clumps, and she wore only a single white rag. She was utterly filthy and stank as if she hadn’t bathed for decades—which, Bhaddā later found out, was in fact the case. Over her face was tied a thin gauze,

and she carried a little brush with which she swept the ground before taking each step. Bhaddā could not have been more amazed if the goddess herself had appeared.

‘Your reverence,’ said Bhaddā. ‘You must be a saint. Or are you some being from another realm, come to bless me—or to punish me?’

‘I am neither. Not a saint, nor any apparition. Only a nun, a simple ascetic. My name is Candinī. I have gone forth out of faith in Purāna, the Great Hero, the Conqueror. For twenty years I have walked the path to liberation from all past karma.’

‘Can that be done? Killing my husband is a grave sin, I know. I can feel it sticking to my bones, like a cancer in my soul. I dare not think of what might be to come. And my parents...’

‘Do not fear, my child,’ said Candinī. ‘Come with us. You have overcome your evil-hearted husband. Now see if you can overcome yourself!’

Bhaddā looked up with hope for the first time. ‘And Bhaddā...’ said the nun.

‘Yes?’

‘Leave the flowers behind.’

*
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The Magistrate hated this part. But someone had to tell the grieving parents. Bhaddā’s father was struggling to take in the implications.

‘You’ve found... her jewels?’ he said.

‘Yes, the necklace,’ said the Magistrate. ‘My men were searching down there all day.’

‘But my daughter, where is she?’

‘I’m afraid,’ the Magistrate shifted uncomfortably, ‘it is unlikely we will obtain a positive identification. The, ahh, jackals, you understand. And the vultures. There’s not much left.’

‘My Bhaddā?’

‘Bhaddā’s gone. I’m sorry, I just—I’m so sorry.’

*
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Bhaddā followed Candinī to her small hermitage. Just a few little huts, really. The nuns looked curiously at this young girl, with her fine hair and her

proud step. A group of nuns stood perfectly still in the glare of the sun. They were terribly emaciated.

‘What’s with the fashion victims?’ said Bhaddā. ‘Trying to drop a dress size before Saturday?’

‘No, Bhaddā,’ said Candinī, ‘this is not about appearance, it’s about essence. These nuns are shedding the inessential. They fast for many weeks, sometimes longer.’

‘Whoa,’ said Bhaddā, ‘extreme nuns.’

‘These are the novices, Bhaddā,’ said Candinī. ‘The advanced yogis are not easy to see. You’ll train here first with the novices before seeking the deep wilderness.’

They passed by one of the young nuns, and Bhaddā said, ‘Hi.’

‘Hi, sister,’ she replied.

‘That must hurt.’

‘Well, you go kind of numb after a while. Then you need to find something else to, you know, do the thing, get the pain going again.’

‘Oh,’ said Bhaddā. ‘And do you ever get the feeling back?’

‘Some,’ she nodded brightly. ‘You’re new here.’

‘You could tell.’

‘The dress...’

‘What’s wrong with the dress? Ok, it’s a bit messy, what with my night in the forest and all, but it’s got these darling flowers around the borders...’ Bhaddā stopped and looked at the nuns’ raw hemp rags. ‘O, umm, you mean I should slip into something a little more... mortify-the-flesh-ish?’

Candinī exchanged glances with the young nun, raising their eyebrows, or, more correctly, the place where their eyebrows would have been if they hadn’t been torn out.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Candinī. ‘We’ll sort something for you. And over here is your hut.’ She took Bhaddā to a tiny structure with walls of spliced bamboo and a roof of grass. Horrified, Bhaddā looked inside. There was nothing, literally nothing, just a bare earthen floor.

‘Of course, we allow the novices a few luxuries,’ said Candinī.

‘Great—accessories!’ said Bhaddā with a gleam of hope.

‘Yes, such as a roof, for example,’ said Candinī. ‘Anyway, rest first. Tomorrow we start.’ She left Bhaddā staring at the earth floor, wondering just how she was supposed to rest.

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Candinī asked her what type of ordination she wanted. Bhaddā said she wanted the highest of them all.

‘All right, then, Bhaddā,’ said Candinī. ‘Just you sit here and don’t worry about a thing. I’ll get the pincers.’

‘Sorry? Pincers?’

‘Yes, dear. We grab your hair with iron pincers and pull it out tuft by tuft. That’s what you want, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, of course. But won’t it, like, hurt? Me and pain, we’re going through some relationship challenges right now....’

Candinī smiled as she got the pincers. ‘Well, it might hurt just a little...’

She grabbed a clump of Bhaddā's rich black hair, and jerked it out by the roots.

'OOWWAA!' screamed Bhaddā. 'Nnggrh.'

'... or it might hurt a lot.'

'Sorry, ahh, that wasn't very nunly, was it? Okay, let's try again.'

Candinī ripped out each hair of Bhaddā's head, and with each jerk of the pincers the pain grew.

When they were finished, Candinī said, 'How are you now, my dear?'

'I've felt worse. Oh, hang on—no I haven't.'

'Well,' said Candinī, 'you'd better get used to it. If you stay here long enough, things will get *really* painful.'

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Later, when her hair grew back, it came in tight curls, so they called her Kundalakesā, 'Curly-hair'.

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Candinī was nearing the end of her life. She fasted for longer and longer periods, defying her scrawny

body to survive another day. But when she heard that Purāna himself, reputed to be an Omniscient One, was nearing Rājagaha, she took Bhaddā to see the great man in person. As they approached, Candinī warned Bhaddā:

‘Bhaddā, remember, the men will be naked. Purāna has not worn a stich of clothing since I’ve known him all these years. And the other monks will be the same.’ She smiled. ‘Just don’t look, okay?’

They came to him by a stream in the afternoon sun. Purāna was sitting with his devotees on the near side as Bhaddā approached, supporting Candinī. The two nuns bowed to the Conqueror, and sat down near him. Purāna said:

‘Candinī, your time is close. Strive on, and soon you shall exhaust all karma. Nothing is more important than this. Are you ready to take your final fast?’

‘O Conqueror, I feel I am ready,’ she said.

‘Then proceed, with my blessing,’ said Purāna. ‘And who is this new student with you? She has not long gone forth.’

‘Conqueror, this is Bhaddā, who they call Kundalakesā. She is from a minister’s family in Rājagaha. Hers is a story of tragedy: her husband tried to kill her, and she threw him off Robber’s Cliff.’

‘Conqueror,’ said Bhaddā, ‘I’ve made so much bad karma! I killed my husband, who I loved. It’s true he tried to kill me, but he was only following his nature. He was born as a brigand, and his past karma made him do it. I knew this before we married—I saw it in my dreams. But o! my family who I love so much. I can’t go back. What they must have endured. I carry such a weight of karma on my poor girl’s back—the death of my husband, the betrayal of my family. I was lost, crying in the wilderness. Then Candinī found me. She has been my teacher and mentor. She makes me hope that I can find peace from my wicked deeds.’

Purāna was silent. His monks looked on in astonishment—they had never heard such a story; nor had they ever seen their teacher at a loss for words. After a long pause he spoke.

‘Bhaddā, I’m not here to judge you. But to escape your karma, you’ll have to flay your flesh into a billion atoms of coruscating agony.’

‘What’s “coruscating”?’

‘Never mind. “Atoms of agony,” do you get that bit?’

‘Absolutely. I’m totally down with the whole “atoms of agony” thing. So this is a “torture the body, free the mind” kind of deal?’

‘Exactly,’ said Purāna, satisfied.

‘And do they serve chips with that?’ Bhaddā asked earnestly.

‘What?’ said Purāna.

‘I guess not.’

‘Bhaddā, you must understand this. The things you see around you, they are not yours. Your possessions, your family, your husband—they are not yours, and you are not theirs. Even the body that you carry with you, this is not you. So leave aside pride in your body! Now you are young and beautiful—soon you will be like Candinī, withered and decrepit. This body is but a nest of disease and de-

cay. It gives no pleasure, and must be subdued. To this end you must practice the most powerful of austerities. I see it—your nature is sensual, wanton. With your mind you must crush your desires.

‘Do not bathe. Wear but a single cloth. Tear out your hair. For food, take only the scraps that are offered from the poorest houses. Do not harm so much as a single insect—your karma is already crushing you, how much more so will be any harmful act you commit as a nun! Then you must pursue the higher austerities. Reach the limits of pain and go beyond them.

‘Bhaddā, your past karma is haunting you, and will pursue you beyond the grave. You must make an end of it! When you follow the highest austerities, you will feel the power of *tapas* burning up your limbs, raging like a furnace in your body. This is the feeling of karma being burnt off. It is karma that brings us back, again and again, into this world of pain. So by pain we can burn up our past karma. By doing no harm, we do not accu-

mulate new karma. And those who eliminate all karma will know freedom in this very life.

‘Remember this, Bhaddā: pain is your gift, pain is your skill. Pain is what the world has delivered you, and pain is what will deliver you from the world. Use your gift. Do not fear it.’

Bhaddā nodded slowly. They sat together in silence while the evening drew itself around them.

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After that meeting, Candinī gave up all food. She lay wasting away, slowly dying in accord with her beliefs. She called Bhaddā to her.

‘Bhaddā, my dear, my time has come. I am soon to depart. Remember what you’ve been taught. Do not doubt or waver! I look to liberation.’

Bhaddā hesitated.

‘What is it, Bhaddā? Don’t be shy! We have so little time together.’

‘I just wish... I wish my mum was here.’

‘Hush, child!’ said Candinī. ‘She would be so proud if only she could understand.’

‘Candinī, you are the mother of my spirit. You have given me hope, and I fully intend to pursue this path for the ending of my karma. But still, I doubt.’

‘Tell me your doubts. This is the sign of your past karma obstructing you.’

‘But if all is due to past karma, are not our present acts also due to past karma? How can we escape if everything is determined by the past?’

‘Bhaddā, do not worry, it will all become clear. Has not the Omniscient One taught us this doctrine? He has reached the ending of all karma, so his word is truth itself. Have faith, Bhaddā. You will see.’

‘I do not wish to trouble you, my mother and my teacher,’ said Bhaddā. ‘But I need to know! Tell me, although I know the question is impertinent: can you see this truth for yourself?’

Candinī smiled. ‘I’m afraid, Bhaddā, for we women it is a little different. You see, the male ascetics, like Purāna himself, go completely naked. But this is not suitable for women, so we must keep

a single cloth. Alas for our frailty! For this single cloth, this covering of decency, is the sign of our own past karma. As long as we carry this, we cannot give up all our karma, and can't know the bliss of omniscience in this life. But Purāna promises us that when we pass away, even we women may discard all karma and ascend to the pinnacle of Awakening. This is my only wish, now, Bhaddā.'

She took Bhaddā's hand; and Bhaddā watched as Candinī slipped from the bonds of this world.

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With the passing of her dear teacher, Bhaddā withdrew from the nun's hermitage and took to the remote hills, where she gave herself over to the most severe austerities.

She stopped her nose, mouth, and ears with her hand, and sat without breathing until her belly felt like it was being sliced up with a sharp sword, like her whole body was being roasted over blazing coals. She collapsed, heaving. When she recovered, she did it again. And again. And again.

Alone in the ragged hills, she fled all human contact. She stood on the black rocks in the mid-day sun, scorching her skin. For one day she stood, then for two days, up to one week. Later she would stand for a month at a time, without moving. The animals crawled over her skin, and she let them feed on her flesh. The weeds started to curl around her calves. For weeks on end she took no food. Her skin turned black, so that passers-by thought she was a charred corpse. Her backside was like a camel's hoof, her vertebrae stuck out like beads on a string, and her ribs were as gaunt as the crazy rafters on an old roofless barn. The gleam sank inside her eyes, like the gleam of water sunk far down a well. And when she broke her fast, she ate only cow dung.

Later, when she returned to a village for alms, filthy and bedraggled, the people abused her and threw rocks and clods of earth. Bleeding, her clay bowl broken, she departed in silence, the dogs snapping at her heels. She went to the charnel ground, where the newly deposited corpses were rotting,

and stood silent and still among them. This time, she stood on one leg. The vultures circled nearby.

*
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Purāna returned to Rājagaha, and the ascetics gathered to see him. Bhaddā came to see her teacher once more. As she approached the gathering, a hush settled over them. They drew back in awe at Bhaddā's pain. It was unprecedented for someone so young to have endured so much. Only Purāna himself, so went the whisper, surpassed Bhaddā's austerities.

Seeing her, Purāna smiled. 'My daughter, my true child, welcome! Here, see you all: this is the foremost of all my disciples in intensity and dedication. She has done all I asked of her and more, with no question or complaint. She is truly a master of the body, an accomplished one! She has burnt away very much of her past karma. Now she has only the subtlest traces of karma left. Soon she will have reached the pinnacle that can be attained in a female form.'

Bhaddā bowed, embarrassed by the praise. Inside her burned a ferocity of will, yet her pain remained. She felt like a fraud. Nervously, she gave voice to her doubts.

‘O Conqueror! You say I have burnt off much of my karma. But I cannot see this. I cannot see this karma that you speak of. I do not know how much karma I have burnt away, nor how much karma remains, nor how much longer I must continue with these austerities. I tell you truly, I will give myself until I die—I have no fear of destroying my body. But understanding eludes me. Please help me: I have done dreadful crimes and must atone for them.’

‘Bhaddā,’ said Purāna, ‘do not concern yourself with such things. Whether you see it or not, your karma is being destroyed. Persevere! It will not be long now.’

Bhaddā bowed once more and left. She went back to her little cave in the mountains. It was evening, and she watched the sun go down over the hills of Magadha, the sky blushing as if it was

embarrassed at the shamelessness of the day. She smiled at the thought.

In a tree nearby, two parrots were roosting. One ate the fruit, while the other just watched over without eating.

The next day, Bhaddā took her bowl and walked away from Rājagaha, and away from her life with the ascetics.

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She headed north, and the jagged hills of Rājagaha receded behind her. Coming to Nālanda, she wandered for alms and took her meal. Then she went to the town gates and made a little pile of earth. In the pile she stuck a *sāla* tree branch. Then, as people were coming and going about her, she cried out:

‘I am Bhaddā, who they call Kundalakesā! If there is any ascetic or philosopher in this place, let them come forth. Let them match their wits against mine!’

The people looked at her curiously; but this was India, and an eccentric ascetic was no unusual

sight. Word spread of her challenge, and reached the ears of a group of wandering philosophers.

‘I’m not going,’ said one. ‘She’s impossible! Did you hear what she did?’

‘Me neither,’ said another. ‘She murdered her husband— what’ll she do to me? Sañjaya, you do it.’

Sañjaya said, ‘I’ll never be beaten by a woman. I’ll wring her out like wet cloth through a wringer!’

Looking forward to a good debate, the three wanderers went to the town gates and approached Bhaddā. The passers-by gathered to watch the show.

‘O lady!’ said Sañjaya, the leader of the three. ‘I will debate with you. But I must know the stakes.’

Bhaddā looked him up and down, and said: ‘If you win, I will be your disciple. If I win, you must salvage your pride as best you can.’

Sañjaya cleared his throat. ‘All right then. As I have accepted your challenge, I have the right to start with whatever question I wish.’

‘So be it.’

Sañjaya looked about him at the expectant crowd, and said, ‘Lady, this great earth rests upon water, and the water rests upon space. But upon what does space rest?’

Bhaddā did not hesitate. ‘Space, my friend, does not rest upon anything at all. What we call “space” is merely the absence of the four elements. Your question is invalid.’

Delighted, the crowd roared its approval. Sañjaya inclined his head in acceptance of her answer. Now it was Bhaddā’s turn.

‘Good sir, do you hold the doctrine: “All this is due to past karma”?’

‘It is generally accepted in the world that all we see, taste, smell, touch, and think is formed by our acts in past lives. This is evident to any thinking person.’

‘Leave aside the opinions of the crowd. I ask you for your own view.’

‘Then indeed, yes, I hold the view that all this is due to past karma.’

‘Then tell me,’ said Bhaddā, ‘how can any action that we perform in this life make an end of what was done in the past?’

At this, Sañjaya fell silent, enduring the geeful scorn of the crowd. Bhaddā scattered the pile of sand, threw away the branch, and left that town, choosing a path at random.

Town after town, Bhaddā repeated her performance, always seeking for someone to answer her question. Her reputation spread, and as she neared a town, the ascetics and philosophers left in fear, while the crowds came in. Only the boldest would stand up to her, but none could answer. Before long, though she followed every road, she could find no-one to debate.

One day, she arrived at the crossroads outside of a dusty, generic town. Standing all day long with her little tree-in-the-sand, she fell to chatting with an old merchant who happened by, hawking his trinkets.

‘These so-called “philosophers”—they say they love wisdom, but never a scrap of it do they have.

Perhaps we only love that which is furthest from us.'

The traveller said, 'I've heard of a new teacher in Magadha. He hails from the Sākyans, the Gotama family. They call him the Buddha.'

'The Buddha! "Awakened"—that's some title to live up to.'

'Well, he does have a reputation. They say that the thousand followers of the Kassapa brothers have gone over to him. And Sañjaya's disciples Upatissa and Kolita have joined him, too.'

'Sañjaya,' said Bhaddā. 'He's the dumbest of the lot. His students deserve better. So what does this so-called Buddha have to offer?'

'I'm not really sure,' said the traveller. 'But I overheard a conversation in the street between one of his close disciples and Upatissa. Upatissa—he was still with Sañjaya then—saw this monk Assaji wandering for alms. He went up to him and spoke, I just happened to be nearby.'

'What did they talk about?' said Bhaddā.

‘Not much, to be honest. I couldn’t figure out what was the big deal. Upatissa said he wanted to know what the Buddha was teaching, and Assaji said that he was only new, that he didn’t know much. But Upatissa wouldn’t be put off; he asked for just the essence. And Assaji said, I think it was something about causes—things that arose from a cause, their arising and something. It didn’t sound like much of a teaching to me; but Upatissa was obviously taken by it. He went straight away to his friend Kolita, and they left Sañjaya, taking most of his students with them. He was spewing.’

A gleam lit up Bhaddā’s eye. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘there’s no joy here. Looks like I’m off to Rājagaha.’

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Three days walking, and she was back in her home town. She returned to her old cave at the back of the Vulture’s Peak. In the morning she took her bowl and walked for alms. On a whim she took a road she had avoided for many years: the road past her old house. She walked slowly, permitting herself only a peek out of the corner of her eye. The

house looked sombre, run down. She had heard nothing of her parents since that day with Sattuka. How could she face them? Easier to face the torture of her body. Let them think she was dead, that Sattuka had done away with her. It was better so. They couldn't help her. Her karma took her beyond their reach.

But as she passed the door, it opened.

'Daughter,' came a call. 'Wait just a minute.'

Bhaddā hesitated. Since going forth, she had kept the strict ascetic rule not to wait when called for. But as she paused in indecision, a figure appeared in the doorway. Her old Gran! Now truly decrepit, bent double and half-blind, she shuffled along crookedly.

Bhaddā stood still as her Gran approached and dropped a spoon of rice in her bowl.

'Ahh, my dear, it's so nice to serve you,' said Gran. 'I am lonely now. All alone in such a big house—it's not right. Once there was noise and laughter, and games. But no more. My son died before me, it's not natural. He and his wife just

wasted away after... So then, you don't want to hear the prattling of an old woman. Begone, child, and bless you. But let this old woman give you a kiss first!

Bhaddā was startled—this was against all custom and etiquette for an ascetic. Before she could think, her Gran reached up and took her face in her withered hands, brought it down and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. Gran stopped in shock: her lips felt the shape of Bhaddā's scar, the scar that was left so long ago when she fell into a lion.

'But... it can't be,' she said. 'Bhaddā? My sweetest Bhaddā? Can it be you?'

The years of reserve melted, and Bhaddā took her Gran in a deep embrace.

'It's me, Gran,' she wept. 'I've come home.'

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They spent that whole day talking, catching up, laughing and crying at the silly sadness of things. As evening came, Bhaddā would not accept her Gran's offer of a comfortable bed. She returned to

her cave, promising to visit again. A great dream came to her that night.

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Princess Khemā woke and sat up, her arms reaching out, murmuring: ‘Catch the Golden Eagle!’ The sun softly peeped through the curtains, and she realized that it had been just a dream. Her attendants giggled a little at the silliness, but she ignored them. She stayed still in the memory for a time, then lay down again. The morning wore on and she remained on her crimson couch, all layered with silk and bedecked with jewels. Eventually her father, King Brahmadata, called to see her.

‘My dear, are you well? I hope nothing is bothering you.’

‘Father,’ she said, ‘I had a dream. I saw a Golden Eagle. He came here and ... and he gave me his heart! But now he is gone, and it is lost.’

‘That’s lovely, dear,’ he said.

‘No, you don’t understand. I must have the Golden Eagle.’

‘But Khemā,’ said the king, ‘there is no such thing. Golden Eagles aren’t real. It was only—’

‘I do believe,’ interrupted Khemā, ‘that if you say it was only a dream, I may well be sick. I will have it—the heart of the Golden Eagle. If I do not get it, I will die right here.’ She turned away from him and would say no more.

Sighing, King Brahmadata left. Thinking that there was no choice, he summoned a gathering of hunters. They came into the palace courtyard, rough unshaven men looking decidedly uneasy amid the royal pomp. The king told them of the quest, and offered a rich reward for anyone who could bring the heart of the Golden Eagle for his daughter. They scoffed, saying: ‘How can we hunt something that doesn’t exist?’ Disgruntled, they began to leave.

Then a latecomer arrived and forced his way his way to the front of the crowd. He was a coarse, ugly fellow, thick of body, with yellowed broken teeth sticking out at crazy angles, covered in scars, hairy and squat.

‘I will seek the Golden Eagle,’ he said. ‘But if I should succeed, I will name my own reward.’ The king agreed, and the hunter left by the northern road.

Khemā lay languorous on her couch, facing the northern window. She could see the town and the fields beyond, bounded by the great river. The far side of the river was dark forest, and on a clear day she could just make out, in the farthest distance, the mountains with their white peaks shining in the sun. Inside her was a yearning that would not die.

The hunter passed quickly over the inhabited lands and crossed the river. On the far shore of the river was a trading town. They dealt in the goods of the forest: timbers, metals, animals. Trade was brisk, as the wild things were always in demand, and the world of man spread ever wider. Coming to the central square, the hunter approached a group of merchants, drinking and making deals. He asked them about the Golden Eagle.

‘Golden Eagle?’ said one of the merchants, ‘I’ve been trading these parts for years, and I’ve not heard of it.’

‘Oh, hang on,’ said another merchant, ‘is that like a big yellow bird that talks?’

‘Yes, that’s it!’ said the hunter.

‘Sure, there’s one in the neighbourhood,’ he said. ‘Just go to the end of the square there, and turn right— into Sesame Street!’ Laughing and jeering, they pushed the hunter away. He got furious and lashed out. A short but vicious brawl ensued, from which the hunter emerged more than a little the worse for wear and tear.

He left that town behind and penetrated farther into the forest. He came to a second village, smaller, with tumbledown shacks and bored children. He asked about a Golden Eagle, and they just looked at him incomprehending. But an ancient crone, bent double as she squatted by the cooking fire, answered him.

‘Aye, me laddie, I’ve heard tell of a Golden Eagle. Me old gramma told me when I’s a young

'un like these here brats,' she said, slapping a little hand that was getting too close to the pot. 'All shinin' like the sun, so they say. But 'tis only stories.'

Thanking her, the hunter continued until he came to a third village. Hardly even a village, just a few leaf huts in the foothills, where simple people eked out a bare living from the forest. The children screamed and hid when they saw the hunter. They spoke an alien language, and he could find no-one who could understand his question, until one man arrived back from his foraging. Taller and more confident than the others, he was evidently the headman of the village.

'Im Gold Eagle? I seen 'im. Long time!' he said. 'Eagle, 'e come down, come down big hill...' Overwhelmed by the memory, he trailed off into silence and seemed to go into a trance. Suddenly he roused himself and said, 'Long time, no more!'

'Tell me,' said the hunter, 'where can I find him?'

But the villager just grunted ‘No more!’ and stalked off.

Pressing on, the hunter left the paths of men behind and climbed the foothills. The great mountains were so close now, they seemed to hang over him like a thundercloud. Although he had spent his life in the wilds, he had never been this remote.

At the very base of the mountains, he came to a cave where there lived an ancient hermit, a seer they called the Sybil. Long ago, she had been the oracle of kings, her prophecies widely renowned and her wisdom much sought after. But no-one came to hear her any more, for her prophecies had the disconcerting quality of being incomprehensible, and the even more disconcerting quality of coming true. Spurned as a madwoman, she had retreated to this remotest of caves, muttering her dooms to the four winds.

The hunter entered her cave, but before he had the chance to say anything, she cackled hysterically, ‘The Golden Eagle, the Golden Eagle!’ This

was, apparently, the funniest thing she'd heard in a while.

'Um, yes,' said the hunter. 'I seek the Golden Eagle.'

'Ring-a-ring-o-bed-bugs,' she said, still giggling. 'Bite ya tongue off and spit it on the daisies! Oops—cat's got it—ain't she? Run, ya buggers, run!'

'Okay, and that's all very nice, ma'am,' said the hunter, 'but I really do need to find that Eagle.'

Her face fell and she screamed: 'Death! Death! They're all going to die! Oceans of blood and mountains of bones...' Suddenly coy, she smiled and put out her hand. 'Don't go. Stay here... with mother.'

'Where,' he said grimly, 'is the Eagle?'

'Aaargh,' she said in exasperation, and of a sudden became lucid. 'There are seven circles—unclimbable mountains, sheer and hard, with peaks of treacherous snow. Between each circle is an impenetrable barrier. The first is a thicket of thorns hard as iron; the second is quicksand; the third is a plague of monstrous spiders; the fourth is a moat of molten rock; the fifth is rent by howling tornadoes;

the sixth is the haunt of flesh-eating, blood-sucking giants. The Golden Eagle is the most terrible of all: no man may look upon him and live. He lives in the seventh circle.'

'Thank you kindly, ma'am,' said the hunter. He left, with the banshee screeching of the Sybil echoing off the mountain side.

He approached the first mountain and began the climb. The rock was frozen and brittle, with barely a crevice for hand or foot. Inch by inch he made his way. Higher up, the rock was covered in slippery ice. By the time he reached the peak his fingers were all bleeding. Frozen near death, he barely managed to force his way across the deep snow of the peak. Half stumbling, half crawling, he made his way down the far side of the mountain, only to be confronted by the first valley: the valley of iron thorns.

The Sybil had not exaggerated. He had expected a dense jungle, but this was like tangles of barbed wire. After hours of hacking with his sword, he succeeded only in clearing a few brambles. Ex-

hausted, he stopped to rest and catch his breath. Then he noticed something: the bright sun seared the ground. An idea came to him. Focussing the reflections from his sword and knife on a little dried grass, he kindled a flame. Carefully he nurtured it until the thorn bushes started to catch, then he retreated to a safe distance up the mountain and watched as the valley burned. When the smoke cleared, only ashes were left.

He crossed the valley and started up the second range of mountains. It was higher than the first, and steeper and harder.

At the second valley he stopped at the marsh, and mindful of the Sybil's warning, he carefully tested it out before stepping into it. He tossed in a stone, and it sank. He sat by the side of the mire and waited. After a while, he got up with a smile. There were reeds growing at the side of the swamp. He cut one and tossed it in: it floated clear above the mud. So he set to with his sword, harvesting the reeds and tying them in bundles so that he could make a bridge across the quicksand.

And that is how he crossed the second valley. Then there was the third mountain; which was, of course, incomparably tougher than the first two.

Coming down to the third valley he could see the spiders. No ordinary arachnids were these, but bloated black monsters, each as big as an ox. The place was full of them, sitting on webs spun in a dense maze through the entire valley. The hunter sat down to watch. He noticed that whenever a bird or bat, or even a little moth, would fly into the web, they were stuck fast and the spiders, sensing the vibrations as they struggled, would swiftly descend to consume them.

After some time, a plan occurred to him. Coming to the edge of the valley, he stripped naked and wrapped his few possessions in his robe. Taking his sword, he carefully shaved his entire body so that he was as bare as a baby. Then he took out the tube of oil that he used to moisten his cracked feet, and smeared himself all over. Finally he wrapped all his possessions in his robe and, whirling it around his head, tossed it clear across

the valley. Stepping forward with extreme care, he slipped between the strands of the webs. Each step was precarious. He gently bent a strand to make his way through, and just as gently brought it back into position. He made no more movement than the slightest of breezes, and the spiders did not know him as he passed among them. Across the valley he recovered his possessions and put on his clothes; but he had to leave his beard behind!

Then there was the fourth mountain, in comparison with which the previous mountains were like a stroll through a carefully tended park with a good friend on a warm, pleasant day, after a delicious lunch and a glass or two of red wine, all the while looking forward to a cosy evening snuggled by a fireplace in a rocking chair with a good book.

Standing at the peak of the fourth mountain, he saw far below the moat of molten rock, burning and bubbling with a fury, and completely covering the valley floor. After some thought, he hit upon a plan. He scanned the mountain range and crossed over to the point that seemed least stable and most

treacherous. Setting to with his sword, he levered a huge rock out of place and tumbled it down the slope. It quickly built into a thundering avalanche, which plunged into the moat with a roar and a hiss as great clouds of steam exploded out. Meanwhile the hunter made his way down the slope as quick as he could. As the steam cleared, there was a tentative bridge of frozen rock left across the lava moat; but it was quickly melting into the stream. The hunter leapt on the bridge and made it across, just before it collapsed.

The fifth mountain range was very, very tough. So tough, there's no point even mentioning how incredibly tough it was because no-one would believe it anyway.

Climbing down to the fifth valley, he could already feel the winds tugging at him, wanting to pull him off the cliff. But the valley itself was a maelstrom of shredding gales, with dust and rocks tossed around like dice in a casino. He watched it for a while, then slowly circled around the valley, searching. Eventually he saw what he knew must

be there: a little black hole under a rock. Smiling he said to himself, 'There's always a way!' and he crawled into the hole.

It was scarcely big enough to wriggle on his belly. The thin light from the entrance hole soon faded away, and the darkness was more absolute than he had ever known. The ground was uneven, rocky and muddy. Invisible creatures writhed in the darkness with him—worms, bugs, centipedes, and nameless things that squirmed over his skin. He crawled through the endless night, until he collapsed exhausted in the thick blackness.

'How far have I come?' he thought. 'How much further to go? Does this tunnel even have an end?' And he cried to think that his journey would end there, unknown and uncelebrated.

'No-one will sing your song,' he thought. But then, as the tears rolled down his face, he felt a slight breeze cool their wetness; and he knew that the tunnel opened somewhere ahead. Finding new strength he struggled on, and eventually he saw the light of day before him.

After that he had to cross the sixth mountain range. Forget about describing it, even thinking about it is brain-searingly agonizing, so you'll forgive me for not.

Before him lay the sixth valley, the valley of the cannibal giants. These were primeval monsters, remnants of a more brutal age. Each one was as huge as a hill, with thick green skin covered in warts, and yellow fangs like sabres. They carried clubs made of the trunk of a huge tree. The hunter crept up to the valley, and sat down to watch their habits. They ceaselessly patrolled the valley, and squashed even tiny beasts that ventured in. They never slept. The hunter waited for a plan to occur.

It didn't. Thinking, 'Bugger this!' he leapt out, sword in hand. A giant roared 'ROOAARR!' and rushed at him, smashing his club down like a mountain; but the hunter skipped aside. The club made a hole you could park a bus in. Other demons rushed in, and they crowded around trying to get a good swing, but the hunter was too fast. He darted between them, and their blows didn't come close.

Getting ever clumsier in their fury, one club missed its mark and split the skull of one of the giants. The monster crashed groaning to the ground.

‘Oi! You hit Bill!’ said another giant. ‘He’s me brother, you stinkin’ lump!’ And he swung his club down on the first. Then it was a free for all; and before the giants realized it, the hunter had scampered away.

Before him was the seventh circle of the mountains, which... oh, forget it.

And then there was the Garden. The jagged mountains were left behind, and all was gentle undulations. Soft grass was adorned with abundant flowers, and everywhere grazed beasts of every description: deer, horses, zebra, rabbits, kangaroos. Peacocks and lyrebirds strutted about, while parrots and nightingales filled the air with colour and song. The hunter wandered out in a daze, and in the warm air his hunger and exhaustion faded away from him. He jumped when he came across a tigress; but she was content to rest, feeding her kittens. Lambs suckled together with the tiger cubs.

The hunter passed lakes of purest water, filled with rainbow coloured fish, and covered with endless varieties of lotus and lily. Swans landed in a rush, and leisurely pulled up the water plants. Butterflies fluttered by, while bees fed on thornless roses, and mangoes, peaches, and durian were all in fruit.

In the centre of all this abundance, the heart, as it were, of the valley's life, was a Crystal Mountain. It was taller than all the mountain ranges, and perfectly sheer; height upon staggered height, with nowhere a crevice or a flaw. It soared up to the very heavens, and on the top was a platform. But the platform was empty.

'That must be the roosting place of the Golden Eagle,' thought the hunter. 'He will return in the evening. But what manner of Beast can this be? Surely he will not be overcome by strength or by cunning. I shall have to rely on treachery.'

The hunter removed his clothes and gear, leaving them hidden, and wore just a ragged loin cloth like a harmless ascetic. But in the cloth he slipped

a small knife. He went to the clearing before the Crystal Mountain and sat cross-legged in the open. As the day passed he remained perfectly still; for stillness is the supreme art of the hunter.

As evening drew down and the sunlight withdrew from the valley, the Golden Eagle returned. He swept down from a great height and rested upon his platform. At such a distance he seemed no more than a speck, but the hunter knew he must be a beast of prodigious size. As the sun's last rays struck the pinnacle of the Crystal Mountain, the Golden Eagle spread his wings and uttered a hymn.

‘Hail to the One King, who sees all,
Whose divine light dispels the dark.
Homage to thou, Glorious One!

‘From delusion lead me to Truth;
From darkness lead me to Light;
From death lead me to the Deathless!’

The hymn resonated through the entire valley. As the echoes died away, the valley grew quiet and still, and all creatures slept.

All except the hunter. He stayed, unmoving, erect through the night, and was still there as the dawn slowly crept into the valley. Far above, the Golden Eagle shook himself and spread his wings. In the first rays of the morning sun, he sang his hymn before launching off and soaring into the sky. When he returned in the evening, the hunter was still there.

For six days he sat; but on the dawn of the seventh day the Eagle descended with a mighty rush of air. The trees bent over and the lakes tossed up in waves as the Golden Eagle landed in the Garden, his massive body overtowering the hunter.

‘Lord of the Skyways,’ prayed the hunter, ‘in whom is woven the Light and the Dark, I come to you as a humble servant. Long have I searched for you, though others scorned, saying you did not exist. I have paid a great price, but never have I doubted.’

The Golden Eagle possessed the Eye of Truth, and for him the hunter’s lie was as transparent as a wisp of fog in the morning light. And yet he said:

‘For one of great faith, who has not faltered before any task, I must grant a boon. Ask—whatever you wish will be granted.’

‘Lord,’ said the hunter, ‘if it were my wish, then it would be nothing. Having seen you I would die a happy man. But I come at the will of Princess Khemā. She will have your heart.’

‘Ahh,’ said the Golden Eagle. He paused for a long moment. ‘Then so be it. Long have I lived. In the ages before mankind, I was sole Lord over all. And then the men came, with their axes and their bows. My creatures were slaughtered and my forests destroyed. I withdrew to this, my last sanctuary in this world. But now my doom has followed me. She seeks for my heart, for she craves immortality. I will give it, although you came to me falsely, as a deceiver. There is no protection in this world. All my devices and conceits have proven hollow, for you are standing before me.’

The hunter stood amazed. Hesitating, he said: ‘Lord, I-I can’t... reach. P-please, would you....’

The Eagle lay his great bulk gently on the ground, and allowed the hunter to step on his radiant golden feathers. He raised his claw and pointed to his chest, 'Here; my heart is here.'

The hunter got out his knife. His lips were dry and his hand trembled. He brushed aside the massive feathers to find the Eagle's flesh, until he could see the steady pulse of the heart. He readied the knife, and looked once more at the Eagle. A single tear welled in the corner of the Eagle's eye, and dropped to splash like liquid gold on the ground. The hunter hesitated. He had killed countless beasts before, and yes, men too. Never had one offered himself up like this. He thought of the Eagle's grace, his power and benevolence; and love, so long buried by his hard life, sprang up and filled his heart. He dropped the knife.

'I cannot,' he said, falling to the ground sobbing. 'Forgive me! I cannot take your heart.'

But the Golden Eagle whispered: 'You already have.'

The hunter blinked; and when his eyes opened he was back in the palace, in the very chamber of Princess Khemā. She rose from her couch and went to him, saying, 'My prince, my prince....'

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Bhaddā awoke in the early dawn. Far in the distance she could hear the brahmans sing their morning hymn: '*... dhiyo yo nah pracodayāt....*' She knew the Buddha was staying in his favorite cave at the very top of the Vulture's Peak, and would soon be descending with a large group of monks. She wanted to be ready.

She washed in a little cold water, and swept her cave. She could feel a palpable sense of light that grew with the dawning. Inside the light was something unknown. She carefully arranged her single cloth around her body. Breakfast was a glass of water fresh off the mountain. She rearranged her few possessions, and ran through a couple of mantras. For all her courage and independence, she felt as nervous as a girl on her first date. She

realized that she was just fussing around to put off the inevitable, so she steeled herself and set off.

Coming down the mountain, she saw, way up in the sky, an eagle, lit by the sun's first rays, and heading north. She laughed and said to herself, 'Well, if I believed in omens, that would be a good one!' Still laughing, she rounded a corner, only to stumble in shock: she knew this place, she had been here before, long ago when she was a little girl, maybe four. The time she ran away from home and fell into a lion.

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As Bhaddā stood, absorbed in her earliest memory, the Buddha came and stood by the stone. He could go no further, as Bhaddā stood right in the middle of the path.

The Buddha stopped in front of her and said: 'Bhaddā, you're blocking my path.'

Bhaddā pulled herself together quickly. 'So,' she said, 'it seems the Monk Gotama, although he himself blocks the path of many, can't stand having his own path blocked! The Monk Gotama has

no problem with blocking the path of the group of five ascetics, or the fire worshipping Kassapa brothers, or Upatissa and Kolita and the followers of Sañjaya, but he can't stand having his own path blocked by me, a solitary woman!

'There is a sense, Bhaddā, in which you could say that I have blocked the paths of all those people. For after hearing my Teaching the path to suffering has been blocked for all those people. But perhaps that's not what you meant?'

'If what you say is true, then it seems that your teaching leads to the end of all suffering—for men!'

'Don't say that, Bhaddā! I do not teach thinking of "man" or "woman". Anyone who thinks "I am a man", or "I am a woman", they are the student of Māra the Deluder, not the Buddha. For my part, I teach for one who feels. The concepts of "manhood" or "womanhood" are irrelevant. But by practicing the Middle Way one can leave behind all suffering in this very life.'

'So it seems,' said Bhaddā, 'that you teach a Dhamma for all beings, not just for men. But leave

that be. Monk Gotama, I ask about karma. Do you teach a doctrine of karma?’

‘Yes, Bhaddā, I am a teacher of karma.’

‘But,’ said Bhaddā, ‘if all this is due to past karma, how can present action make an end of karma?’

‘You overstep the mark, Bhaddā,’ said the Buddha. ‘I did not say that all this is due to past karma. If this were so, then the spiritual path would indeed be closed, for, as you say, by acting in the present we can never make an end of what was done in the past. One’s present choices would be fixed by past causes, and the cycle of karma would be endless.’

‘Take illness, for example. It is apparent that some illnesses are caused by an imbalance in the body’s elements; some illnesses are caused by a change in the weather; some by unaccustomed activity; and some by accident. Some illness, I say, is also conditioned by past karma. But since a variety of causes is observed, how can all be caused by past karma?’

‘In that case,’ said Bhaddā, ‘what is karma?’

‘Well, Bhaddā, let me ask you a question. You may answer as you wish.’

‘Whatever,’ said Bhaddā.

‘What do you think, Bhaddā,’ said the Buddha, ‘is karma formed by the body or by the mind, or by both, or how do you see it?’

‘Karma is formed by both the body and the mind,’ said Bhaddā.

‘But Bhaddā, if a flood arises and drowns a city, does the water create any karma due to that?’

‘No. The water has no mind, no intention. A flood arises because of an imbalance in the forces of nature.’

‘In the same way, Bhaddā, it is *intention* that I call karma. Having formed an intention, a person commits a good or bad deed through body, speech, or mind. The result of that karma will be experienced in this life, or the next, or sometime after that.’

‘Do we always experience the results of karma?’

‘It is like a spoonful of salt. If we place it in a glass, the water is very salty. But if we place the same salt in a great lake, there is no taste at all.’

‘But can there be an ending of karma?’

‘How can there not?’ said the Buddha. ‘Karma is a condition, and like all conditions, it passes. It will go by itself—if you let it. Let go! Don’t hang on to your past any longer—you have suffered too much. Allow yourself to find peace.’

‘How can I do this?’ said Bhaddā. ‘How can I learn to let go?’

‘This is what I call the Middle Way. Avoid both the indulgence of the body and the torture of the body. Develop the noble eightfold path: right view, right motivation, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right tranquility of mind. This is the way that leads to the ending of all suffering.’

As Bhaddā listened to the Buddha’s words, they seemed to sink into her heart. She felt an opening, and watched as the dead weight of her guilt and dread just drained right out of her. There

came a lightness that she had never felt before. And as she stood there, a vision of the truth arose before her: Everything that has a beginning must also have an end. With tears of joy, she knelt before the Buddha and said:

‘Forgive me, Blessed One! I did wrong in that like a fool, blundering and confused, I tried to obstruct your path and trap you with words like daggers. May you accept my confession out of compassion so that I may restrain myself in the future.’

‘Yes, Bhaddā, your conduct was rude and disrespectful. But I forgive you, since you see your fault as a fault, and wish to restrain yourself in the future. Bhaddā, you cannot doubt the truth any more—you have seen it for yourself. You have no need for blind faith, and no need to be dependent on another.’

Bhaddā said, ‘I wish to receive the going-forth under the Blessed One, I wish to receive the full ordination into the state of a bhikkhuni!’

And so the Buddha said to her: ‘Come, Bhaddā! The Dhamma is well proclaimed. Live the holy

life for the complete ending of suffering!’ That was Bhaddā’s full ordination.

For the rest of that day, Bhaddā sat silently, rapt in blissful meditation. In the evening, entering her cave, she washed her feet. She watched the stream of water wash the dust off her feet, and saw as if for the first time. The water was just water, the ground was just ground, her feet were just feet. When the dust clung to her feet, it was simply following its nature; and when it was washed from her feet, this too was simply its nature. When feet are unwashed, they cannot be clean; and when they are washed, they cannot be dirty. As the water disappeared into the ground, her mind was freed from all grasping.

At that time there were five nuns living in a nearby hermitage, engaged in painful and difficult ascetic practices. When they saw Bhaddā, they said to her: ‘Your face is serene, sister, the colour of your skin is bright and clear. Can it be that you have seen the Deathless?’

Bhaddā replied to them in verse.

‘Formerly I wandered in a single cloth
 With plucked hair, covered in mud,
Imagining flaws in the flawless
 And seeing no flaws in the flawed.

‘I came out from my day’s abiding
 On the mountain Vulture’s Peak.
I saw the spotless Enlightened One
 Accompanied by the Bhikkhu Sangha.

‘He taught me the Dhamma
 The senses, the aggregates, and elements.
The Leader told me about impermanence,
 Suffering, and not-self.

‘Having heard the Dhamma from him
 I purified the Vision of Dhamma.
When I had understood the true Dhamma
 I asked for the going forth & full ordination.

‘Then I humbly bowed down on my knees
 And in his presence bowed to him.
“Come, Bhaddā!” he said to me—
 That was my full ordination.’

‘When I was fully ordained, I saw

A little stream of foot-washing water disappear.

I understood rise and fall, and reflected

That all things were of the same nature.

Right on the spot my mind was released—

Totally freed through the end of grasping.’

While Bhaddā was speaking, the vision of the truth arose in those nuns: ‘Everything that has a beginning must also have an end.’

And those nuns said to Bhaddā, ‘We also wish to receive ordination in the Buddha’s teaching.’

So Bhaddā took the five nuns to where the Buddha was staying. She bowed, stood to one side and said to the Buddha: ‘Blessed One, these nuns also wish to receive ordination.’

Then the Buddha said: ‘Come, bhikkhunis! The Dhamma is well proclaimed. Live the holy life for the complete ending of suffering!’ That was those five nuns’ full ordination.

Then Bhaddā said to the Buddha: ‘Blessed One, when women ask for ordination, what should we do?’

And the Buddha replied: 'Bhaddā, I am free from all fetters, whether human or divine. You, too, are free from all fetters, whether human or divine. Well then, Bhaddā, you yourselves should give the ordination to women.'

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From that day on, Bhaddā felt no weight of confusion or remorse in her heart. In lightness and ease, she travelled the land of India, teaching the Dhamma for those who would hear. For a full fifty years she wandered, crossing Anga, Magadha, Vajji, Kāsi, and Kosala. Even after the Buddha himself passed away, she continued the work of freedom. Having plunged to the depths and ascended the heights, her swiftness of wisdom was unsurpassed.

Centuries later, tales were still told of the indomitable woman. Names and places changed, details were redrawn, but her spirit shone through. And dreams of Bhaddā followed the sun, wreathed in clouds that glowed like a mane of gold.

