Siddhartha Gautama

A NOVEL OF MYTHIC INDIA

by Heinz Insu Fenkl

KAPILAVASTU ∞ BODH-GAYA

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In the language of angels and serpents, faeries and daemons,
in human speech—I have taught the Dharma in every tongue
so that all beings may understand.

—*The Buddha*

Part I:
The Garden of Lumbini

The world . . . is like a passing cloud, like an imaginary wheel made by a whirling torch, like a castle of spirits, like the moon reflected in the sea, like a vision, a mirage, a dream . . . .

—*The Lankavatara Sutra*

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That night was the end of the festival, and now the streets were quiet once again. The last jingle of ankle bells had died down into the silence of the night, still radiant with moonlight. Seven days, and now the seventh night, and Queen Maya lay asleep, wrapped in fragrance and dream, her lord, the Raja beside her, breathing the calm breath of a man at ease. That day, fresh-scented from her morning bath, the Queen had robed herself in bright but muted colors; she had ventured out into the city where the people sang joyously, where the women raised their bangled arms to strew flowers into the air and the sunlight and shadow mingled among the luminous falling petals. It was the mid-summer Festival of the Full Moon.

To her sister, Prajapati, the Queen had smiled a wan smile tinged with longing, and she had said, “Oh, Prajapati, I am forty-five. Near half a century gone and I have yet to bear a child. If only I could share this happiness, if only I could be full like the moon we honor, and give my lord a son.” And Prajapati had said, “I know, in my heart, that the gods favor

you, sister, and you will be fruitful." And Maya, comforted, gave alms to the poor that day—forty thousand pieces of gold that caught the light of the sun and flickered like miniature lamps leaping from hand to brown hand—as people thronged the streets of Kapilavastu praising the name of Queen Maya and her lord, Suddhodana Gautama of the Shakya clan.

And now they lay asleep. The heat had waned. The seventh day of the Full Moon Festival, the seventh night, bathed in silver and touched by the breath of the gods. Maya dreamed.

She, whose name means illusion, lay in her bed at her husband's side looking up at the darkness, and yet it was not darkness. She could see through the high canopy of the bed, up through the ceiling of the bedchamber—there, the carved white alabaster of the moon, still nearly full, looked like the belly of a woman in silhouette. And in the heavens, near it, sparkled a star, rotating its golden light until six distinct beams shone down, six rays twirling, growing larger and larger; and she felt her bed being lifted. She was no longer with the Raja but alone up in the high mountains, and yet in the rarified air she was not cold. A light bathed her, silver and gold; and in its radiance she knew great comfort.

As she lay there wondering how her lord and husband had vanished, four luminous figures appeared, one for each of the cardinal points. She could not make out their features—their faces were masked in light. They were the gods of the four quarters, and as she realized this and gasped in surprise and fear, the bed rose, spinning, beneath her. She rose into the air, through the transparent ceiling, into the night sky. She ascended and flew northward to the very tops of the great Himalayan peaks, which are the abode of the gods.

She wanted to speak to those figures of light—one at each corner of the bed—but they were silent, and in her fear she clamped down her teeth and simply watched as the world

receded below her. Even in the darkness she could see. The fields and paths became a patchwork of greens and browns stitched with dark seams and the blue threads of water. Clouds turned to mist as the bed rose through them; they sealed themselves again beneath her, until what she saw below was a single solid surface of cotton batting that went on and on, farther than her eye could follow. Her hair grew disheveled and flew behind her as she knelt on the bed and squinted to see what lay ahead. She blinked her watering eyes, saw the snow-topped crags approach, and then they were through, and what lay below was a lake—pristine blue like the eyes of an infant. In the cold air that did not chill her, the gods lowered the bed until it rested on the lake's shore; and in that unearthly quiet, she heard the water lapping against the legs of the bed.

Now the four figures disappeared—or, rather, they changed radiance, from gold to silver—and Maya knew that who stood before her were the goddesses, the wives of the ones who had brought her. She was no longer afraid, but filled with joy and awe, and she began to ask something, but one of the goddesses raised a finger, as if to chastise her, and she remained silent.

There was music now. A low hum that rose in pitch until it resonated—a single perfect note—from everywhere at once. The goddesses took her by the hand and led her from the bed until she stood with her feet in the shallow water. It surprised her—so clear she could not even see it. She knew it was there from the cool wetness.

The goddesses removed her clothes, and at first she tried to cover her nakedness, but then they led her by the hands, into the water. They bathed her, anointing her with rare perfumes, washing her body with gentle touches of their silver fingers until the sensation made her shiver, as if from cold, though she was pleasantly warm. The sweet and minty fragrance of the

perfume, the refreshing air like the breeze from a waterfall, the sound of the single cosmic note—she became sleepy and a voice—sounding so close she turned her head to see—said, "They have purified you and now you are worthy to behold me."

She turned her head the other way. There, on the silvery peak of a mountain, stood a magnificent creature, so white its form was nearly lost in its blinding light. The star was gone and the moon was gone, and what stood before her was a bull elephant, pale and regal, greater than any elephant she had ever seen—greater than one could have seemed even in the eyes of a child. He raised his trunk as if to greet her, like a monarch acknowledging her presence; he raised his trunk, serpentine like the coil of a white Naga, and he turned that trunk and she watched, for she could not take her eyes from it. The tip of it seemed to mouth words at her. It was pink and sensitive as human lips, and she tried to hear. It was whispering, but as she drew her ear close—for now she was no longer on the bed—what came was not a sound but a beautiful lotus blossom, bursting open. It appeared so suddenly it scared her and she drew back. And now the elephant reared up, curving its trunk up high, suddenly revealing its six tusks of purest ivory, and he began to run, once, twice, three times around her coiled form, and when she looked—out of the corner of her eye, for she was afraid—deathly afraid, and yet deathly calm, unearthly calm—the elephant whipped its trunk at her right side. She felt the rush of air and she feared the power of the blow to come; but the blow did not come, and instead she felt something burst within her as if a seed had exploded, as if a bud had suddenly sprouted a flower. She could hear it pop in her ears and yet she knew it was in her womb, and then suddenly all the lights were there again and with them the sun-like radiance that outshone the white snows of the Himalayas. She saw it behind her clos-

ed eyes; she could hear it—a single wondrous note sung in tribute to her, and as she opened her eyes to see her husband sleeping at her side, she knew without a doubt, with certainty—with absolute dream certainty—that she was with child.

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"What is a dream, Gandiva? A dream is an illusion within an illusion if I listen to the rishis. And yet I listen to their readings as if what they say is real." Suddhodana looked, beyond the horses that drew his chariot, across the way to the hall of cedarwood, carved with scenes from the vedas. There danced the old gods—Agni of the flames, receiver of sacrifices with his seven fiery tongues; Indra of thunder and lightning, riding his four-tusked elephant; Varuna of the sky and waters, astride his sea monster, twirling his serpent lasso—of many aspects, multi-limbed, playing out the tales of divine wars, poised in scenes that displayed their power to please or make awe. Suddhodana recalled how he had watched the woodcarvers at their craft, how he had examined those scenes time and again until they were so vivid in his mind he need not see them again; but as he looked now, without the eyes of memory, what he saw was a writhing tangle, clinging to the wooden pillars like vines choking the trunk of a tree.

Suddhodana tapped the left shoulder of the chariot driver,

who reined in the horses; the wheels spun slowly to a stop and the plume of dust that followed them dissipated in the breeze. "Who are they that they can speak for a dream, Gandiva?"

"They are only men," said Gandiva. "Remember, O, Maha-Raja, not even the greatest of them is infallible."

"I know. I know, and yet I must consult with them for the sake of the Queen. If the bramins were so right as they say, it would be them running the kingdom with their portents and visions and signs, and not I, with my mundane human wisdom."

They stepped down from the chariot that had born them and walked between prostrated forms into the hall of cedar where the council of dream interpreters waited, where the light shone with a bronze sheen, reflected from the polished wood.

And as Gandiva had predicted, they did not agree among themselves. Some read the dream as truth, and some as being full of arcane symbols. Some said it was purely auspicious, and some saw danger even among the grand omens. Finally, came the turn of one named Surya, who—it was said—could walk in the dreams of others.

"O, Maha-Raja, we have listened long to the dream of our Queen. The memory scribes, who recall all things upon once hearing, have told us the Queen's words numerous times. Thirty-two times we have listened and meditated over the meanings. I, myself, have had the honor of interviewing the Queen. I have glimpsed her dream myself, from afar."

"Tell me your conclusion," said Suddhodana.

"A dream, O, Maha-Raja, is a reality not fully formed. It is still malleable by the hand of those who wake. A dream is a path—a possible path—yet unpaved by will and intention."

"This is all well and good, and my learned advisor may make much of it, but I am a simple man, great Surya. Tell me in simple words that a kshatriya may understand—is the dream

bad or good?"

There was a long silence, lingering so long it grew ominous, and then Surya said, "O, Maha-Raja, it is good."

Suddhodana smiled, the relief wrinkling the corners of his eyes until he looked like a man of his years. "It is good," he said. "It is good. Then let us celebrate."

A murmur went through the gathered sages. Some looked alarmed, their eyes round, and some appeared to feel great relief; yet no one cheered or made a sound of dissent until Gandiva raised his arms high and declared, "The Maha-Raja, Suddhodana Gautama of the Shakya clan, has said it! Let us celebrate!"

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It was a small celebration, to be sure, for such proceedings are deemed secret. Amidst the fine foods and delicacies, awash with cane wine and soma, the sages were happy. Even the ones who had spoken dire warnings calmed themselves and joined in the quiet revelry.

That evening, away from the public ear, the Raja summoned Surya to hear a more detailed reading of the Queen's dream. "You say you have observed her dream from afar," he said when the sage stood before his throne. "What do you mean?"

"The dreams of others may be seen, O, Maha-Raja."

"That much I can believe, Surya. But how could you see the Queen's dream unless you were there when she dreamed it? And if you were there at that time, what were you doing, uninvited, in the most intimate part of the Queen's mind?"

The old sage blinked, as if the question confused him. "Dreams—all dreams—exist forever in the great ether, O, Maha-Raja."

"That may be, but you have not answered my question.

What were you doing in the Maharini's dream?"

Surya blinked again, more slowly, his eyes wider. "I looked there, O, Maha-Raja, at your own request and at the bidding of the Queen."

Suddhodana's teeth clenched. The muscles of his jaw rippled under the skin of his face. Now Surya knew the Raja's displeasure, and his breath grew quick. A gloss of sweat appeared on his face.

"Surya, that request was made two days ago."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja."

"The Queen had her dream four days ago."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja."

"Do you play games with me, Surya?"

"No, O, Maha-Raja."

Standing at his side, Gandiva heard the Raja's long exhalation, and he stepped forward to stand between him and the old brahmin. "O, sage," he said, "What the Maha-Raja wants to know is how you could go into the past and see the Queen's dream. How can that be?"

"I do not understand, my lord."

"What is it you do not understand? Can a man step into yesterday to watch a dancing girl who has caught his eye today?"

"No, my lord, though it is said the greatest sages like Asita the hermit have such powers."

"And are you such a great sage?" asked the Raja.

"No, O, Maha-Raja. Though I may aspire to such greatness, I am but a humble reader of dreams."

"Do you know the penalty for spying, Surya?"

"Please, O, Maha-Raja, I beg of you. Do not be angry with me. I have done nothing wrong. If I have transgressed some law, it is only to do your bidding, for I am your devoted subject." Drops of sweat trickled from his forehead and pooled

in the corners of his eyes like tears. He squinted at the sting of salt.

"Perhaps," said Gandiva, "it is we who do not understand you. Is there some quality to the world of dreams that would allow you to look into the past? We are not sages, Surya. You cannot assume we share your knowledge of such things."

Now the sage appeared somewhat relieved, and his breath grew calmer. "In dreams there is no time. Those who dwell in dreams are not bound by past and present and future. All dreams exist forever in the great ether, and so all dreams may be seen at any time. The dreams of all dreamers exist perpetually as one great dream of Brahma, the great creator, just as this world of illusion in which we live is simply another layer of Brahma's dream. By practicing the yoga of dreaming, one may slip from this layer into the next without losing consciousness, and thus, being awake in the realm of dream, one may walk at will, though one is bodiless, merely a point of consciousness."

"Enough," said the Raja. "I do not wish to hear your discourse on the yoga of dreams. Tell me—simply—was your viewing of Maya's dream an intrusion?"

"O, Maha-Raja, what is it to intrude if all conscious—"

"Simply!"

"No, O, Maha-Raja, it was not an intrusion."

"It was not spying?"

"No, it was not spying, O, Maha-Raja."

"Good. Then I am assured. Now tell me the meaning of what you saw."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja." And with great relief, he explained the Queen's dream at length, in the most positive terms.

Had Suddhodana been a brahmin trained in the lore of the vedas, the detailing of symbol after symbol would have held great meaning. But now, even knowing the priests' proclivities

for things obscure, he found himself amazed by the layers upon layers of speculation upon things which, to him, seemed nothing more than what they were. And so, even with his interest keen, he found his mind wandering until the old sage reached his summation.

"Among powers that terrify, he shall be akin to the god of destruction," said Surya. "Among high mountains he shall be Himavat, the home of the gods. Among trees, he shall be the tree of life. Among horses he shall be the mount of Indra, chief of gods. Among beasts he shall be the lion. And among men he shall be king of kings. These are the meanings of the signs."

"This is good," said the Raja. "And I am pleased. But among all these wonderful signs, is there nothing bad?"

"We have debated this, O, Maha-Raja. We have thought and we have thought again over the meaning of the signs, and they are all good for your child, who will surely be a son."

"Is there no disagreement among you? You brahmins are a notoriously contentious lot."

"There is only one disagreement, O, Maha-Raja, but it holds no real significance for our reading of the signs."

"Tell it to me."

"Your son will be a great king, O, Maha-Raja. That is a destiny he may not escape. But our disagreement regards the nature of this kingship and the degree of his greatness. Some have said he shall be Chakravarti, the Universal Monarch. Some say he will defeat Maghada and Kosala and unify the kingdoms of the region under Shakya rule, making the Shakya name the greatest of the age. Some say his greatness will outshine the ages, and that the subject of his conquest shall not be kingdoms, but the world of samsara itself. They say he may be the Buddha of our aeon."

"And how likely is that, Surya? Do buddhas not come from among you brahmins? My child is a kshatriya, and I will

raise him a warrior if he be a son, as you say."

"A buddha may come from any caste, O, Maha-Raja. But those who see such a path for your son are among the most holy-minded. Even among them, they cannot say the reading is not wishful."

"Thank you, Surya."

"I serve you, O, Maha-Raja, with all earthly devotion." He prostrated himself and rose to take his leave.

"Surya, there is one other question."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja."

"If you are able to see the dreams of others, then is it possible that while dreaming, they may see you in those dreams?"

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja. That is a possibility in the realm of dreams."

"Then listen well, Surya. This I say to you and all of those among you who practice the yoga of dreaming. Should I or any of my court see you in our dreams uninvited, I shall take that to be an intrusion into our most private thoughts. I shall view such an intrusion as treason, and I shall mete out punishment in keeping with the gravity of such a crime. Do you understand, O, Surya, walker among dreams?"

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja. But in the world of dreams—"

"I have not time to hear another discourse. Is my meaning clear?"

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja, your meaning is clear."

"Then I dismiss you. Tell them they will be richly rewarded for their work."

"Thank you, O, Maha-Raja."

And the old sage took leave and walked on unsteady legs back to the rishis, the soothsayers, the readers of dreams. In the quiet of the throne room, the distant sounds of celebration could still be heard, and the whine of an occasional insect before it met silence at the jeweled whisk of a watchful attendant.

"My lord," said Gandiva, "You have frightened that old man too much. I could hear the rattle of his bones."

"I have a kingdom to attend to, Gandiva. I cannot have these rishis treading upon my dreams where I see my own secret thoughts. He will warn them all."

"I am sure of it, my lord. But I did not think you believed all the things the rishis claim. I, myself, can never know what I may see in a dream. A rishi may appear or, just as well, a monkey. Am I to think the monkey is intruding, and not just a vagary of thought as most dreams are wont to be?"

The Raja laughed. "It is true, Gandiva. One cannot know."

"And furthermore, my lord, if the rishis cannot truly see into the dreams of others, how can they know that I may not lie when I accuse them of appearing in a dream unbidden?"

"Your mind is sharp, Gandiva. But this is why you are an advisor and I am Raja. Do you not see how I may now charge any brahmin with treason at my whim? If dreams are without time as the great Surya claims, then it does not matter whether or not a rishi has willfully intruded into my dream or whether I fabricate such a charge. For we are only men, after all, and we are bound to live in the world of time. Who is to say that sometime in the past a rishi has not tried to spy upon my dreams? And who is to say that one may not do so in some distant future?

"I must bide by custom, as is proper to my station. But I tire of giving power to these men who quote the vedas, who speak obscure things, who know everything there is to know about the world and the cosmos. They know nothing about the world in which we truly abide. Let them perform their bloody sacrifices and watch the stars for signs from the gods. I will rule my world by means a man can know."

"But, surely, you respect their knowledge to some degree, my lord. Do you believe you are to have a son? That he is to be

a great king?"

The Raja pressed his lips firmly together, but the corners of his mouth still trembled with emotion. "That is my greatest wish and my greatest desire, Gandiva. That I *must* believe."

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Three seasons passed. It was spring, the month of Vaisakha, and the moon was growing full. When it came time for Maya to bear her child, she asked her lord if she could begin the trip to her natal home, as was the custom. Devadaha was not far—only two days to the east and northward. The Raja, though still concerned about her dream, gave assent, and preparations were made in the palace. There were horses and pack animals whose trappings were to be decorated—horns to wrap in colored streamers, flanks to paint in celebratory shades, manes to be braided and adorned with light-catching jewels and beads. The Raja would spare no trouble or cost to make his wife's journey both magnificent and comfortable. His advisors hand-picked the ladies in waiting and the servant girls; the bearers were the strongest in the land; the warrior guards proven in victorious battles.

And there was another thing—a troubling thing—that Suddhodana attended to: the power of signs and portends to affect Maya's delicate temperament, for she was prone to visions and

dreams, too easily swayed by the words of rishis and soothsayers. Many a dream interpreter Suddhodana had expelled from the palace or had his lieutenants quietly dispatch, planting appropriate rumors of their sudden or unannounced departure for points unknown.

Maya still dwelt upon her dream. It haunted her, for the interpreters had been of many minds, and each time she noticed the snowy peaks to the north, she would recall the silver mountain and the golden light, troubling herself to know meanings that should not be known to any mortal.

Seven days before the full moon, the Raja called his advisors to him and explained the problem. They listened. They pondered. They made their learned recommendations, cast the Queen's horoscope to determine the most auspice course of action, provided wisdom from the vedas that might comfort or confound her; and to each response, Suddhodana said, "No." Indeed, there was only one solution if Maya's thoughts were troubled by the sight of the Himalayas.

"She must not see the mountains again until after she has delivered my son," he declared. "Her mind cannot be vexed so close to his arrival. The signs have all said he is to be a king of kings, and I shall not have his character made weak by his mother's anxious thoughts."

"O, Maha-Raja," they said, "The Himalayas are great, and we are but small men. Keep the Queen indoors and your purpose is achieved."

"She is no animal to be caged," said Suddhodana. "I shall not have her pleasure of movement impeded. Speak to me wisely, or you shall displease me."

"O, Maha-Raja, if the Queen must not see the mountains and the mountains can neither be moved nor hid, then it only follows that the Queen be moved or hid," said one advisor.

"Or, O, Maha-Raja, certain objects may be placed between

the Queen's eyes and that which she must not behold. Things pleasing to the eye may achieve this—colorful and decorative screens, the overlapping of fans, blinds of flowers or peacock feathers. Many things may achieve the purpose."

"Good," said Suddhodana, "let this be done. And let it be done in such a way that all of these obstructions seem not products of artifice, but of natural circumstance."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja."

"And let the diversions continue until my son has breathed the sweet air of this world."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja. . . . But—"

Suddhodana's eyes flashed at this word. He looked at the brahmin who had dared to bring up this suggestion of a complication. "*But?*"

"But—O, Maha-Raja—the Queen will be traveling outside the palace, on the road to her father's house. Are we to place such diversions and obstructions along the entire path?"

"I leave the particulars to you, since you are wise men. And I trust in your success, or you shall know my displeasure." And so Suddhodana dismissed them, and they scattered to their meeting rooms and courtyards and gardens to make real the illusion.

The advisors called together all the magicians, the engineers, the geometers, the dramatists, and the artificers—all those who worked upon appearances that confounded the real and the seeming. They might have called upon samanas and rishis rumored to control the minds of others, or those said to work their power over reality and dream; but Surya's word of caution had spread quickly among the brahmins, and no such assistance came forth.

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And finally, a great deception was organized. It was to be a grand theatrical production, in constant motion, performed all hours of the day and night. The Raja forbade the use of potions, which the herbalists said would make the distances appear but a blur to the Queen. He denounced the samanas who said they could sooth her thoughts to give her comfort. For how was he to know—he said—that the effect of the drugs would wane and his wife regain her sharp-sightedness; how to know that some ascetic, calming her mind, would not leave there thoughts to make her renounce this material world and become a mendicant herself?

Along the road from Kapilavastu to Devadaha, a two days' walk, runners surveyed the northern aspect. Wherever there appeared a gap in the northward forest, where a tributary road or path branched from the main trunk, wherever a clearing broke the green veil of the foliage, the royal gardeners planted lush new trees, tall and thick with leaves of dark green, and these would hide the blue-white silhouette of the Himalayas. Where the rocky earth proved too hard to dig, they placed hedges of tall bamboo in massive pots. And according to the geometers—and this confirmed by archers, to whom such concerns mean life and death—if the Queen's palanquin kept close to the northern screen, she would not see the mountains even if she emerged to enjoy the forest or stretch her limbs.

On those occasions, her attendants, who had rehearsed their motions like a dance, would draw close and fan her with peacock feathers or clear the air with specially-constructed whisks to obstruct her view even further. And so, when the time came, a troop of engineers waited in the forest along the northern side of the road with pots of wet wood soaked in the essence of plant oils—mint, jasmine, anise—to burn when the procession drew near; and this would provide the final assurance, in the form of a pale smoke, appearing like natural mist

to keep Maya's eyes from beholding the peaks.

On the day before the full moon, the procession left for Devadaha. The Raja said his good-byes to his wives, neither of whom knew of the grand charade, and he watched from the gates of the city as they set out, teary-eyed, for they would miss him. He marveled at the frailty of their emotions—even Prajapati, who had already borne him a daughter.

"This we shall never know," he said to his chief advisor. "How a spirit in the belly moves us to be so delicate—like a plume of incense smoke in a windless room."

"It is a divine mystery, O, Maha-Raja."

"And this is also a mystery," he said. "Until now I have conducted myself as if I knew with absolute certainty that Maya will bear me a son. But I am terribly afraid, Gandiva. What if it is a girl? The doubt has nagged at me from the first day."

"All the dream readers and astrologers have assured you, O, Maha-Raja. How can you doubt their combined wisdom?"

"Talk to me as a man and a friend, Gandiva. I have heard enough talk from my sycophants to last me this lifetime."

"Yes . . . As you please, my lord."

"I am a kshatriya, and my station is that of a warrior, but I am not an ignorant man. I make my sacrifices to the spirits of my ancestors, and I desire a son who will sacrifice to me when I am dead. That I know. And I know that the priests and astrologers and dream readers and rishis can be wrong as much as they are right. They do not know—any more than I—what my child will be."

"But they all agree this time, my lord. That is rare."

"It is because they all know as well as any plowman or serving girl in my kingdom that what I desire and what I need is a son."

"May I ask a terrible thing?"

"Ask me, Gandiva. What could be more terrible than this uncertainty? I have waited twenty years. My ministers, including you, have entreated me to have a son by another wife, and I have foolishly refused for my love of Maya. What could be more terrible?"

"What if the child *is* a girl?"

The Raja regarded his wrists, jeweled with semiprecious stones. "What is so terrible about that? Then I will have two daughters and things will go on as they have. I will grow older. Perhaps I will relent and listen to your rational advice."

"I was afraid, my lord, that with your hopes raised so high you might do something rash."

"If I wanted to purge my ministers or behead a few astrologers, what real difference would that make? I am a sober king and I know my duty to my people is to maintain my power against my rival kingdoms like Maghada."

"I have seen you disappointed before."

"I am older and wiser now, Gandiva. Should I become foolish, let me vent my anger in a safe way. And should I weep, be sure I do it not before my women or my ministers."

Gandiva bowed his head. "I know your heart is full of hope, my lord. And I tell you this—I too know that the dream readers and astrologers merely change their tales when they are wrong. They turn the blame upon the ones who consult them. So consider—if they are wrong about your child-to-be, who will they blame? There is great risk for them, for if they cast the blame upon you, they are likely to endanger their own welfare. And that is why I believe them this time. They—all of them—have taken on great risk."

"Oh, Gandiva, you merely show me how much your own heart has also been touched by this. If they are wrong, they will not dare to blame me or Maya. They will find a way to look past us and blame the stars. Or perhaps they will blame a

sorcerer from another land or even dare to blame the gods."

"You are wise, Suddhodana."

"Come, let us go enjoy some distraction in the pavilion. There is a new dancing girl I would like you to see." The Raja clapped his hands, and his anxious attendants came running. They fanned away the sheen of sweat that had covered him as he stood in the sun. They put cool drinks within his reach, and he handed a gilded cup to his minister. "Tell me, Gandiva, what do you really think of Maya's dream?"

Gandiva regarded the cup as if it contained poison, but he answered, "I do not believe it. I do not believe it was a dream."

And Suddhodana smiled an uneasy smile.

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No dust clouded the road to Devadaha, for water bearers had placed cisterns at intervals and runners had prepared the way by spreading water—just enough to dampen the dust, but not so much as to make the earth muddy. Leading the procession was a white bull elephant bedecked in jeweled harnesses and gilded fabrics to symbolize the auspicious dream and the glory of the Shakyas; but beneath its decorations it also wore armor to show the power of the Shakyas and to warn away the spies of neighboring lands. Inside the armored howdah mounted on the elephant's back rode keen-eyed archers who, from their high vantage, scouted ahead along the green plain, their eyes scanning the horizon, looking into stands of forest, vigilant for the slightest sign of something amiss. At intervals they signaled with bright banners to announce that all was well.

For leagues it stretched, this procession grander than any caravan, with camels and horses and donkeys all adorned in scarlet, saffron, silver, and gold, flashing with jewels and semi-precious stones, swaying with rainbow-feathered headdresses.

The Raja knew the value of such glory, but he knew also the risk of such endeavor, and so he had made it as much a military campaign as a customary journey for the mother of his son-to-be. To the north and south, unseen by the Queen or her sister, Suddhodana's elite warriors secretly followed through the forest. No possibility had been overlooked.

The procession of eight thousand moved slowly, oxen and horses taking deliberate steps. To mask the sound of creaking harnesses and clanking metal, musicians played soothing melodies around Queen Maya's palanquin. Prajapati rode with her to keep her company, to talk with her of pleasant things, to attend to the slightest sign of pain or distress—but there was none. Midwives and physicians, herbalists and chakra healers, they walked or rode, according to their station, near the Queen. Serving girls and ladies in waiting—as many as a thousand—all walked nearby, and to the front and rear of the procession marched the best of the soldiery wearing ceremonial armor, their weapons polished and gleaming in the sun.

"Oh, Prajapati, already I grow weary," said the Queen. "How will I endure this journey when I am so anxious that each league seems a thousand?"

"The brahmins say that time grows longer and shorter according to the speed of our thoughts. Slow your thoughts, sister, and time will seem to fly."

"It is all seeming, so they say." A lady-in-waiting fanned her, another adjusted the orange gauze curtain; Maya pulled aside her sari and the servants averted their eyes. "I am ready to burst. How he kicks and pushes in there, to be let out, but he has been quiet today." She lay back, on her right side, placing a hand gently on her round belly, as if to touch the child inside.

"Do not worry, Maya. All I have told you is true, but you have only to trust in the gods, for they have guided you each step of this path."

"I fear the pain. It comes so suddenly, and though I know it will come, I do not know when, and each time it strikes by surprise, like an assassin."

Prajapati waved her hand as if to shoo away the inauspicious words. "Oh, that is Suddhodana and not you speaking! An assassin! No wonder you are so anxious. Perish such thoughts and think of the son you are to bear. There is great happiness in your belly."

As the morning drew to an end, as shadows grew short and the heat grew thick, Maya looked out of her palanquin, moving the curtains aside. To the north she saw a late mist lingering above the trees, which were especially lush this year. "Prajapati, do you smell it?"

"Smell what, sister?"

"I smell sal blossoms. We must be near Lumbini, Prajapati. Let us stop in the garden there. It is so unearthly hot in this box."

Prajapati clapped her hands and an attending minister drew close to the curtains. "We will stop at Lumbini," she said.

"Lumbini? It will take hours to make preparations, Maharini. The Maha-Raja said we were to reach Devadaha as soon as possible."

"The noon hour approaches, and we will be stopping to rest. Let us do it at the grove in Lumbini."

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There, between the gauzy screens—light enough to let through the breeze—they walked, hidden from the eyes of the entourage. The orange-and-yellow walls of fabric led down the gentle slope to the water, and Maya said, "I want to bathe, Prajapati. Wait for me here." She left her sister at the water's edge; she drew off her necklaces, raising them with her long,

bangled arms. Metal chimed against metal. She unwrapped her sari, closing her eyes against the confusion of patterns; she dropped her veil; she stepped lightly over the green grass and descended into the pool.

She could hear the somnolent hum of bees, the cooing of doves, the warbling of other birds hidden in the grove. In the cool water she looked up into the branches of the sal trees, full of clustered orange flowers, and she thought of the child in her womb, floating, as she was floating now. She felt no weight, as if she too were suspended in a bubble of water—the child within her, she within the pool like the womb of her own mother.

When she felt refreshed, she waded out, feeling the water slide from her brown skin. She stood naked at the edge of the pool, holding one hand below her belly as the weight grew suddenly heavy and the water trickled from her, a rivulet down her thighs, not cool, but hot. She walked upward into the shade beneath the sal trees. She smelled the sudden intensity of the flowers, which fell now in a rain around her. "Prajapati!" she called, "The water—the water is so hot!"

Her sister ran to her and, hearing the commotion, the midwives and ladies-in-waitng came from around the screen bearing a couch and cushions for the Queen to lie on. But Maya walked to the sal tree and reached out to steady herself against a branch that had swayed downward in the breeze. She rested her right arm against it and called out—she did not know if it was in pain—the sound echoed in her ear. She took firm hold of the branch, her eyes on the clusters of bright orange-red flowers, and calling out again, she bore down until she felt as if she would burst and the whole world with her. She heard Prajaptai's voice speaking something to her, the midwives crouched at her feet babbling, and she bore down again, pushing and pushing until her vision grew dim and the

great pressure was suddenly gone. “A son!” cried a voice. “A son!” But Maya could only hear it vaguely. She was looking at the gauzy screens swaying gently in the wind, shimmering like colored water; she saw clouds roiling above, flashes of divine lightning in the distance; she heard a thunderous voice, like a lion’s roar, and it said, “I have come. I have come to bring the Dharma to this world, to end all suffering, and this shall be my last incarnation.” Maya looked down and saw her infant boy rise up and take seven steps northward, and in each of his footprints blossomed a lotus of purest white. He was beautiful, golden-skinned. She closed her eyes, her head tilted back, and saw the sun. She opened her eyes. “Oh, Maya, you are blessed,” came Prajapati’s voice. “He came without crying. He cooed like a dove, and not a mark of hardship on him. See how he shines like a jewel?” Maya smiled and said something to her son, held aloft in Prajapati’s arms, but she could not hear her own voice for the thunderous cheering, the loud murmur—like the sound of breaking waves—and it spread among the eight thousand attendants until it receded like a distant rain.

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There, under the carved archway, oblivious to the grandeur around him, stood the great sage Asita. He was naked but for a few stained rags and so emaciated that each individual rib protruded, giving him the appearance of a man carved from wood. His white hair hung limp, tangled into his gray beard and matted with the dust of the paths he had trodden for five days. Only the knobs of his elbows and knees were thicker than his staff, and an aura pervaded his body, fresh and slightly cool, as if he carried with him the air of the Himalayas. He regarded the gleaming floors, noticing his reflection with a frown, and he looked up with his bright, sunken eyes to meet the gaze of the Raja.

"Welcome, O, great seer," said Suddhodana, and he bowed before him. "What brings you from your high hermitage down to the world of my court? How may I honor your visit?"

The sage seated himself in the chair brought to him by a serving girl. He lowered his eyelids, as if to lapse into a half-sleep. "I was in my mid-day meditation," he said in his reedy

voice, “when I saw the devas on the summit of Mount Sumeru celebrating as I have never seen them before. They were joyful and elated, and they leapt and danced about wildly, waving banners, dazzling the eye in their pure white garments. I asked them why they were so full of joy, and they said to me, ‘The Bodhisattva, the jewel with no equal, has been born into the world of man. See him! There, in the land of the Shakyas, in the garden of Lumbini! Him, peerless, a bull among men! He will set the wheel of Dharma spinning and his words will resound like the roar of a lion. See him!’

“Upon hearing this I left my place of meditation and came as quickly as I could—here, to your abode—and I am here to pay homage. Where is the prince? I, too, wish to see him.”

“Then it shall be so,” said Suddhodana. He clapped his hands, and to his surprise it was the Queen, Maya herself, who brought the prince, wrapped in a silky red blanket. His flawless skin glowed, as if burnished, in the slanting rays of the sun.

As the Queen knelt to place her child at his holy feet, Asita stood and exclaimed, “No, Maha-Maya, please do not!” and it was he who prostrated himself, touching the floor eight times with his forehead. And then he rose to his knees and regarded the prince, who looked up at him with a smile. Asita’s eyes gleamed, his nostrils flared, and he wept, his frail body wracked by his sobs. He looked into the prince’s smiling face, and at the Raja, and at the Queen, and he cried as if he were a mourner keening to the gods.

“Please,” said the Raja. “Please, O, sage of signs, tell us there is nothing amiss with my son!”

“Tell us you see no danger in his future!” The Queen drew the prince protectively into her bosom.

“No,” said Asita. The tears coursed down his wrinkled cheeks and he did not wipe them away. “Oh, no! I see no danger for the prince. He is the paragon of this humble biped

race of man." The infant made a cooing sound, and now Asita addressed him. "Truly, thou art the one," he said. "I see the light upon thy visage. I see the thirty-two marks. I see the spiral between thy brows. I see the marks upon thy soles. I see the webwork of auspicious lines upon thy palms. Thou art a buddha!" And then he wept again.

"Why do you cry, as if you were the babe and my son the father? O, master of mantras, tell me there is nothing amiss. Is he haloed with inauspicious colors?"

"No, I do not cry for him. I weep not for the prince. I weep for joy. And my tears are selfish, though it should not be so. It is for myself I cry, for I am old and will not see the day when he is awakened. I will not live to hear his great teachings, which will bring comfort and illumination to multitudes. That is why I weep. And I weep also for you, Maha-Maya, for you shall not see your son grow into the most beautiful of men."

The Queen's eyes clouded, but only for a moment. Her heart was brave with the power of a new mother. "Then I shall die with joy in my heart for I have borne my lord a son. I have seen his face and I have seen his future in dreams."

"His fate will exceed your dreams by far, O, Queen. He bears all the marks of a buddha-to-be."

"The readers of dreams have told me he is to be a great king," said Suddhodana. "But you say he will be a buddha. Is that not a contradiction? Who sees true?"

"As you know, O, Maha-Raja, the future is many-pathed. The path of the Prince splits like the trunk of a great tree. To one side is he is the great king, paragon of all the kshatriyas of all time. On the other side is the fate he shall likely follow, and that is the path of buddhahood. That is the path I see for him."

"I do not know," said Suddhodana. "I know nothing of these paths and why one should be more likely."

"For the answer one requires no mystical insight—only

reason. There are four visions your son shall see. The sight of an old man, the sight of a sick man, the sight of a dead man, and the sight of a mendicant. The world is full of such sights. If, by chance, your son avoids these sights until he is raja, then he may become the king of kings. But should he see them, he is sure to leave your palace and take the path of a mendicant himself. What path is more likely, O, Maha-Raja? How can a man possibly be kept from such sights?"

Perhaps the Raja took Asita's question as a challenge, for in that instant his tone grew dark and ominous. "How dare you come into my palace and speak of old age and sickness and death at the celebration of my son's birth!" he said. "How dare you befoul the air with such talk before my wife, who is precious to me! How dare you announce a fate of mendicancy for my son, who is to be king of kings! Leave now before my displeasure turns to wrath. Leave now and I shall instruct my servants to give you alms for your return."

"Thank you, O, Maha-Raja," the seer replied. "I take my leave. But be warned that the fate you hope to change is the fate of your son and not your own. Do not place your dreams before his."

"My hopes and dreams befit one of my caste, old man. Take your prophecies with you. I bid you a good journey."

Once again, Asita prostrated himself before the infant prince. He touched his forehead to the polished stone of the floor eight times, and then he rose and turned, and before the Raja could see what had become of him, he was gone.

The Raja made a quick and silent gesture, signaling to his advisor that Asita should be followed. He turned to his wife.

"Oh, my husband, do not worry," she said. "Our son shall be our son, and what fate befalls him we shall receive with joy. If I am to die I will die in peace, knowing I have brought him into this world. I dwell in heaven even now."

Sudhodanna held his wife in his arms, feeling a sudden sickness in his heart; and looking down at the sleeping face of his son, he found no words to comfort her, for the both of them knew that Asita was the greatest of seers and their words were nothing in the wake of his. Maya's eyes were bright with tears, but the baby was still smiling, grasping, with his tiny fingers, at the air in front of his face, and the Raja Suddhodana could not help but lower his finger and feel his son's powerful grip. Again, he saw the smile in his eyes, and for a moment he might have been content.

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For a long time, the Raja paced in a circle in the hall of polished wood. The sun slowly descended in the west, and his shadow grew long and dark. He did not go to see his son, fearing his foul mood would bring discord to him.

"Where is the old man?" he said to Gandiva.

"He has vanished, O, Maha-Raja."

"That cannot be. Search the palace grounds to be sure he is not hiding here, for he may have designs on my son. Tell my captains the importance of this task."

Gandiva bowed.

"See to it that he does not leave the city," said the Raja.

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja. But know that it is dangerous to accost a sage of such renown"

"Let us say, Gandiva, that Asita has agreed to be our guest for a very long time. And that he has asked to be secluded in a small chamber of the sort hermits are known to enjoy."

"Yes, O, Maha-Raja." And Gandiva took his leave to carry out the Raja's wishes.

It was past dusk when he returned with two captains, who prostrated themselves before the throne. The Raja saw their

bodies were dusty and damp with sweat. He could smell on them the odor of anxiety and exertion.

"O, Maha-Raja," said Gandiva, "I have brought your captains here to make their report in their own words."

"Speak," said the Raja. "And tell me why your news is bad."

"O, Maha-Raja," said one captain, "Our lives are yours to command. We do your every bidding as a matter of life and death."

"O, Maha-Raja," said the other, his voice touched with true remorse, "We are not worthy to kneel at your feet, for we have failed you."

"Tell me, my captains, how my best warriors could not capture an old man with creaking joints."

"O, Maha-Raja, he is not a man. He may be a deva or a species of demon, but surely he is not just an old man! He had not gone far when we caught up to him—our horses were not even winded. I, myself, shot an arrow from a distance to stop him. A warning shot. I let it fly in a high arc and the arrow struck the ground two paces before him. He stopped and waited for us without turning around.

"I called out to him, 'Great Asita, the Maha-Raja has sent us to bring you back to the palace! You are to be his honored guest!' I thought I heard him laughing. We galloped forward—five of us—to surround him. We did surround him.

"'Tell the Maha-Raja I thank him for his kind invitation,' he said. And then he said, 'Tell the Maha-Raja that I regretfully decline his invitation, for I must return to my meditations. Tell him I know what is in his heart and that I will speak to no one from now until the time I leave this body.' That is what he said. Exactly those words.

"I told him that he could not refuse your invitation. He said nothing. I told him we were under orders to bring him back,

and that he must express his regrets directly to you, O, Maha-Raja. He said nothing. We dismounted then, for we knew we must bring him back by force. This is all I can tell you. The rest I do not believe myself."

Now the second captain spoke. "O, Maha-Raja, we are warriors and not priests or sorcerers. We do not believe what our own eyes do not see or what our hands cannot touch. But there is no way to explain what happened except to say that he is a demon. We surrounded him. I was one of the two who dismounted to speak to the old sage. I asked him respectfully at first, and then I commanded him. I did not draw my sword, but put my hand on the hilt in such a way that showed him I would not hesitate to use it—even against a sage if I must.

"He said nothing. When we stepped forward, one in front and one behind, the old man raised his arms high. He bid us farewell, and then there was a flock of birds where he had stood. Doves, crows, sparrows. The birds scattered and flew into the air. They were gone. He was gone. Where once the arrow pierced the ground there was a thin branch with flowers where the feathers should have been.

"We do not know, O, Maha-Raja, if it was trickery or magic. We tell you only what we have perceived with our own eyes and touched with our hands." And with this, he produced the branch, arrow straight, with roots on one end and a fragrant cluster of small orange flowers on the other. Nor was it a branch at all; it was a sapling—the slimmest of jambu trees.

The Raja received it and smelled its perfume, oddly light and cool, unlike the scent of a common jambu. "I understand," he said. "You have not failed through any fault of your own. I shall let you prove your honor and your devotion in our next campaign."

"We thank you, O, Maha-Raja. Our lives are yours to command."

"Now go and enjoy a night of leisure. You have seen and done much today."

When the captains had taken their leave, the Raja handed the sapling to Gandiva. "They could not have faked this," he said.

"Do you doubt their report, my lord?"

"I have yet to see a man turn into a flock of mismatched birds, Gandiva. But I have been entertained by magical amusements more remarkable. Perhaps Asita does truly possess such supernatural power. Perhaps he is merely a fine magician. But I know that my captains speak the truth about what they saw, and that is what matters."

"Are you not upset by his escape, my lord?"

"What can be done against such a powerful sage? And does not a man of his stature honor his word? He will not speak to anyone of what happened here. That is what he said.

"Here, take this arrow and plant it in a prominent place. And be sure that all the people—particularly the brahmins—know that this is a gift to my son from Asita, seer of seers. Show them how he has honored my son and see to it that the royal gardeners use their own magic to cultivate this sapling into a magnificent tree."

"Yes, my lord. I understand."

And that night, Suddhodana the Raja slept a fitful sleep.

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The Raja named his son Siddhartha, which means "he who achieves his aim." Though he himself and his fathers before him were all named for rice, the crop which fed the people, Suddhodana desired a son whose name announced his aspiration to be a king of kings, and so it was Siddhartha, he who achieves, he who attains, he who profits, he who conquers.

But the joy that accompanied the naming celebration, the festive air in the streets of Kapilavastu after Siddhartha's birth, the bright mood in the palace—all quickly came to an end. Two days after the naming, seven days after giving him birth, Queen Maya slept and woke no more.

They say she died of happiness, for having brought Siddhartha into this world, how could the heart of any mortal endure such joy? They say she ascended into Heaven and dwelt among the gods to await her husband and son, that she died with no regret or pain, that she had overcome the great wheel of samsara. But as Suddhodana stood before her funeral pyre watching its ruddy light play upon the bright eyes of his infant son, what did he feel then, in his heart, as all his life's joy was extinguished in those flames? What profound darkness lay there, revealed for the first time like the great abyss, what great suffering now, spawned by the loss of the one he had once desired more than anything in the world? It was not a sorrow he could cry out from the topmost Himalayan peak, like an elephant's mourning call, to resound among the high valleys; nor was it a sorrow to habor in the belly and bowels to grow dense and heavy and crushing like the weight of the world. It was nameless; it was empty. And Suddhodana resolved never to be so disappointed again.

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Part II:
The Four-Gated City

Though he may defeat a thousand times a thousand foes upon a field of battle, he who conquers himself has achieved the greatest victory of all.

—*The Dhammapada*

~6~

It is said that the Raja Suddhodana himself picked the nursemaids who cared for his infant son. He chose them, each from among royalty, with careful attention to their proportions: not too tall or slight of bosom, for his son should not strain his neck to suckle; not too short or full-breasted, for that might bow his body or smother him; not homely, for Siddhartha should not countenance any feature that was ugly. And so Suddhodana interviewed a hundred princesses of neighboring kingdoms, and he picked thirty-two for their bearing, their beauty, their temperament. Eight were to be nursemaids, eight would carry him; eight would bathe him, and eight were his playmates. And thus his infant son was properly attended.

Siddhartha did not cry, nor did he whimper or make any other unpleasant sound. His blue infant eyes shone with intelligence and wisdom. His grip was strong, and when he called out to be heard his voice rang from his small body as if from a trumpet. In each feature, he was perfect, and Suddhodana delighted in observing the wrinkles and creases in his tiny hands

as he grasped an offered finger. He would listen to his son's cooing, the quiet mumbling as Siddhartha observed the dance of his own tiny fingers before his eyes, their movement strangely reminiscent of an old samana's mudras.

It is said that from the time he could speak, Siddhartha learned the law at his father's knee; one day, when he passed a wise judgment himself the brahmins of the sangha fondly named him "Shakyamuni," sage of the Shakyas.

When it came time for his son to be educated in the things a prince should know, Suddhodana called upon Visvamitra, the wisest teacher in the land. Siddhartha went to school with other boys to learn from the great guru, but after only two seasons Visvamitra appeared before the Raja greatly anxious.

"What have you come to report, acharya?" the Raja asked. "Is my son a delinqent? Is he wont to daydream about archery and the hunt when he should be writing in his tablet and memorizing the vedas?"

"O, Maha-Raja, that is not why I come. Your son is a most excellent student. I come because I am unworthy of him. His mind is too quick for mine, which has ossified with old age. I teach him one thing and he learns ten on his own. He has far outstripped his classmates. He must have his own tutor."

"How can this be? He is hardly nine summers old. You are telling me that you, with your lifetime of training, have nothing to teach? Surely, you are being too humble."

"Today, O, Maha-Raja, I knew truly that I was unworthy. The boys are intelligent, so I teach them more than merely to memorize and sing back the scriptures to me. Today I asked the boys to write down a verse, the one called *Gayatri*, the mother of vedas, which is appropriate for the high-born. I quoted to them,

Om, bhur bhuvah svah

Tat savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dhimahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.

"'Acharya, I write,' they said to me, and they wrote upon their slates. I attended to another matter for a few moments, and when I returned to them, I saw some had finished and some still labored to recall a word or form its proper strokes. But the Prince appeared to be drawing in the dirt with his writing stick.

"At first I was compelled to reprimand him, for his mind often drifts towards things metaphysical when he should be engaged in the mundane. But I paused to look over his shoulder at what he had drawn on the ground, and my eyes grew wide. It was not one script, O, Maha-Raha, but many: Nagri, Uk, Mangal, Parusha, the ideograms of the East. In every language I knew and in some that I did not, the Prince had written the sacred verse. And he continued, absent-mindedly, as if he merely daydreamed, scratching pictures in the dust. 'Enough,' I said to him. And he stopped to look up at me with a shy smile, as if I had caught him at some prank."

"So he has a talent for languages," said Suddhodana. "That is good for a future raja, is it not? He will see through the wiles of intepreters and need no sly brahmin scribe to translate for him in matters of diplomacy and trade. That is good."

"But O, Maha-Raja, you do not understand."

"Understand what? What is to understand?"

"In mathematics, his peers are learning to add and subtract small numbers. But already he calculates in decads, centuries. He multiplies, divides, and squares. He knows of using pundarikas and padumas to enumerate grains of dust, the katha and the koti-katha, used to count stars and the drops of water in the sea. He knows to calculate the area of a circle, and he knows

the units of measure for the span of a single solar mote to the length of a yojana. And what is more, in a moment, without the aid of an arithmetician's chicken scratchings, he may reckon for you the vast number of solar motes one would line up to fill that yojana. I am unworthy of such intelligence."

The Raja stood up from his seat and walked to the doorway, where he paused for a moment, surveying the gardens below. He stroked his beard as he spoke. "Once again, you have told me good news. Is it not to the advantage of a raja to be adept with numbers? He will not rely on generals to calculate for him the provisions, the weapons, the monies he will need to mount a military campaign. He may calculate the strength of a hostile army, the time it will take for his cavalry to flank the enemy. All this is good."

He motioned for Visvamitra to join him where he stood, and he slowly swept his right arm across the vista, indicating the grounds of the palace. "In my own learning of calculation, did I not go from counting grains to the measures of the body? And from there to the length of the staff?

"I recall then I was taught to calculate a bow-length, a lance-length. I recall that twenty lengths of the lance are one breath, which is how far a man may walk on a single breath of air. A day's march, a day's ride. An arrow's flight. Teach him those measures that befit a boy of the warrior caste."

But Visvamitra prostrated himself and cried, "Please, O, Maha-Raja, it is he who is teacher of teachers. It is he, not I who is guru. There is nothing more I can teach him."

"Then I cannot force you," said Suddhodana. "Teach him until the end of the season, and then we will devise an appropriate pretense for a series of tutors. In that time you will shift your pedagogy to matters of military history and the values of good kingship."

To this Visvamitra agreed, and he left the Raja much relieved. So Siddhartha's education became the task of tutors who instructed him, one after the other, each exhausting his own wisdom and experience; and yet, with reverence for knowledge and respect for his teachers, Siddhartha learned from his tutors the ways of a prince.

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It is said that by his twelfth year, Siddhartha could ride like the wind, hunting the gazelle and the speckled antelope with his father's best huntsmen. He could drive a chariot like the divine Krishna, and in archery he was the equal of the great Arjuna, whose arrows never missed their mark. He was fearless, and yet soft spoken, modest, and gentle. And though he surpassed the skill of his peers, though he enjoyed the thrill of the contest, he began to let the hunted deer go free to spare its life, he would let his rivals pass him in a half-won race when he felt the painful laboring of his horse's breath. He would let his playmates win, knowing they would be sad to lose always to him.

And sometimes, it is said, having outstripped his peers in every way, his thoughts were also elsewhere, dwelling in distant places beyond their reach or comprehension.

Seasons do not cease their forward course even when peace and contentment are the rulers of a kingdom. Nor do troubles cease or hardships stop at the city gates. For Suddhodana, his son's early years were rich and quiet times full of both joy and regret, of happiness tempered by apprehension and the silence that lingered long after the death of Maya; and so Siddhartha reached the age of sixteen.

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~7~

In the early morning sun, in the spring pavilion, at the edge of the red lotus pool, Siddhartha sat with legs crossed, watching the light play upon the water. In this quiet time after waking, with the webs of sleep still dissolving, he regarded the morning and let it enter his senses. Before the day's lessons with the acharyas, before his visit to the council hall, before his mind grew busy with the many clamorous thoughts of the day, he would sit quietly and be with the world—though he knew his father disapproved, calling it idleness, calling it the sign of a poetic temperament.

With the breeze still fresh from nighttime, the sounds still crisp in the cool air, Siddhartha sat, the rays of the sun warming him, as he concentrated silently on his breath. He could hear the rustle of leaves, the sound of insects, the distant lowing of a bullock, the tinkle of ankle bells and bangles from women moving about. And today he heard the call of swans, the beating of great wings like a banner slowly flapping in the wind. In his mind's eye he saw the chevron flight of swans

moving before the sun, making wing toward the distant mountains in the north.

And then an anguished sound ripped the air, and the rhythm of wingbeats scattered into chaos, the cry still echoing. Siddhartha opened his eyes and saw the swan, a great white bird, fall to the ground at the edge of the pool. As it struggled to right itself, gouts of blood sprayed from its wing and side; its vain flapping only drove the arrow deeper, and the swan cried out in pain, a hoarse, soul-wrenching sound.

Siddhartha rose and approached the bird slowly, his hands open. The bird watched him with wide, frightened eyes, shrieking, until Siddhartha's soothing noises calmed it. Gently embracing the swan, holding it upon his lap, Siddhartha snapped the shaft of the arrow and drew its feathered half through the injured wing. When he pulled the other half, with the tip, from the swan's side, the blood flowed copiously and the great bird grew suddenly still; yet its heart was racing, its breath fast and shallow. The swan's wing was cleanly punctured, but the wound in its side was more ragged; it gaped like a bloody mouth forming an O. Siddhartha called out for a servant, but seeing none near, he tore his own dhoti to bind the wounds.

And as he sat with the swan on his lap, calling out again for help, a shadow fell across them. Siddhartha looked up to see his cousin, Devadatta.

"It is my bird," said Devadatta. "I killed it."

"It is still alive, cousin."

"That is my arrow you hold, cousin. And the bird claimed by my arrow is likewise mine."

"Take the arrow then. That is rightfully yours. But the swan you must leave with me."

"I say it is mine."

"Are you a hunter?"

"As this bird is my witness, cousin."

"Then let me ask you this. If two hunters should each hit a bird, one arrow injuring the bird, the other killing it, then to whom does the animal belong?"

"To the man who killed it, of course."

"And to the man who merely caused injury?"

"That man is a poor shot and does not deserve the animal." At that moment, Devadatta realized he had trapped himself. "But wait, cousin, you did not kill the bird. You mean to save it. Were you to leave it be, it would die and my arrow would be the killing shot. Your example does not apply."

"What is more important, Devadatta? To give death or to give life? To take life or to maintain life? To injure or to heal?"

"I know the answer and I shall not say it. You aim to trap me further by clever words. I say we take this matter before the brahmins and let their wisdom be the judge."

Siddhartha opened his palms in agreement, showing no resistance. He lifted the fallen swan and its blood covered him, staining his dhoti deep red.

They made their way past the reflecting pool, past the spring pavilion, where the breeze was tinged with the fragrance of lilies. Devadatta walked proudly, as if he were the hunter returning with his trophy and Siddhartha his manservant. And behind him Siddhartha bore the swan in such a way that he looked regal—not like a king bearing his vanquished foe, but like a royal supplicant bringing sacrifice to the temple.

A crowd was gathered there, waiting to be heard, the men impatient and anxious; some publically aired their disputes over property, irrigation, taxes. The Raja's judgments were binding, and so there were people pacing about, mumbling or chanting their cases to rehearse them before entering the hall. It was a restless crowd, and noisy, but when Devadatta appeared, followed by the blood-covered Prince carrying the swan,

all voices and motion ceased. Silently, the crowd parted to make a path up the stairs to the hall of cedarwood, where the Raja and his advisors made their rulings.

As they moved forward, people pressed close, curious to see, and Devadatta brushed them aside with his bow. At the top of the stairs, at the entrance to the hall, each boy made his case. And then the brahmins spoke:

"What comes first? Life or death? Generation or extinction? And what is more good?"

"Justice is not so easily divisible into two such simple categories! The problem is complex. Let us consider the possible causes and conditions."

"But we are human in a world full of suffering. Is it better for us to reduce suffering or to create more suffering?"

"And what is more suffering for the bird? To die swiftly or to endure long pain while it heals? And what if the healing fails and it must endure a long and painful death?"

"It is not our lot to decide such things—that is the purview of the gods!"

The brahmins lavished their wisdom on this issue, each quoting from the sacred texts to support his side. The argument continued—in favor of Siddhartha, then in favor of Devadatta. And Devadatta stood at the top of the stair holding his bow and quiver of arrows, waiting, for he was certain he would win and the swan would be his to take.

At the foot of the upper steps Siddhartha sat with the great injured bird, tending to its wounds, stanching the flow of blood. He sent for honey and a poultice—full of healing herbs—to bandage over the wounds. The arrow had pierced the swan's right wing and its abdomen.

When the drugs and dressing were brought, Siddhartha smoothed aside blood-soaked feathers, cleaned the wounds, and bandaged them. He poured a narcotic mixture into the

swan's throat. He felt its heart slow, its body relax, its breathing calm. And now the great bird lay asleep, and not dead, in his arms. From its matted feathers water trickled crimson and pink trails down the stairs into the courtyard. The air was thick with the cloying, metallic smell of blood.

And as the argument continued in the hall, Devadatta looked down, surveying the gardens from his height as if he were the Raja. He laughed at Siddhartha.

One of the brahmins examined the arrow Siddhartha had pulled from the swan and looked to Devadatta. "It was not your original intention to hunt," he said, "for the arrow is not a fowling arrow. It is one used to shoot at targets, and that is why it did not kill the swan. Had you used a proper arrow, had you been truly hunting, the swan would be dead, and thus yours. But the palace is not a place for hunting, nor was that your intention. You were merely practicing archery, and on a whim you desired to inflict harm. You are a cruel boy, not a bad hunter. You have accrued bad karma, Devadatta."

There were murmurs of agreement, but another brahmin said, "True, it is not a fowling arrow, but look at the skill of Devadatta's shot! He pierced a wing and the torso at once. What excellent timing! What a sharp eye! What quick calculation! I say he is enterprising and not cruel, for he seized a fleeting opportunity. His intention was, indeed, one of hunting, but he had not the time to change his arrows." The crowd cheered.

But then an old man appeared in the hall, a skinny rustic with sunburnt shoulders and dirt on his sandals. He pounded his staff on the floor, and the resounding echoes caught the crowd's attention—voices died to a murmur, then ceased. "We have been talking," said the old man. "We have been talking and talking, deciding the fate of a mortally injured creature. We have been talking and talking of mercy and generation,

death and extinction, the good and the just. And what is right? As we talked—until now—as words flowed from our lips, the life blood flowed from the creature whose fate we debate with such passion. Even had we decided that it was to live, we should have been too late, for it would have been dead. Our talking would have killed it. But there is one here who did not merely speak of its fate. Nor does he speak now. While we were talking, he tended to this swan, this great bird who can separate milk from water. He stopped the blood. He heals while we vainly flap our jaws."

All eyes turned to Siddhartha, who sat with the sleeping swan in his lap. He looked up at the brahmins and Devadatta standing at the top of the stairs and he squinted up at the sun, which had reached its apex in the clear sky. He saw only silhouettes as the old man pointed down at him; he felt an affinity, as if he should know him. And the sangha agreed with the old man's wisdom. He had pointed out the hypocricy in their conduct, and so they decided that death had had its chance— now life should have its way. They gave the swan to Siddhartha.

And Devadatta said, "You have bested me here, cousin. You have shamed me beyond the degree of my transgression. It is only a bird we speak of. A trivial life, after all."

"But all life is precious, Devadatta. All life deserves the same respect."

"I will avenge myself for this, Siddhartha. Someday I shall return this favor. I shall best you and I shall humiliate you. I shall cut you down and reveal to all that you are more suited to be a poet than a prince. Mark my words."

"The gods hear, Devadatta. And your heart hears."

"Goodbye, cousin." And Devadatta stalked away without another word.

When Siddhartha turned to say his thanks, the old man had

disappeared. Someone in the crowd below shouted, “A cobra!” and the people scattered like a wheeling flock of birds.

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~8~

It was the custom in Kapilavastu that, each spring, the first ritual plowing was led by the Raja himself. And each spring, Suddhodana's golden plow was polished and sharpened until it could cut the muddy earth and leave a furrow to be planted in rice, the staple crop of the kingdoms of the plain. In the early morning the royal procession made its way to the fields, bedecked in their silks and jewels, their necks stiff under their ceremonial headdresses.

Under the morning sun, while shadows still stretched to the west, the plowmen prepared. The Raja stood at their head, like the bird that leads a migrating flock. Behind him followed one-hundred-and-seven brahmins and kshatriyas with their silver-tipped ritual plows, and behind them—plowing later when the sun rose higher and the air grew hot with the steam of the fields—the farmers with their plows of wood and iron.

Siddhartha sat under the parasols with his mother, Prajapati, and his half-sister, Rupa-Nanda the beauty, witnessing the ritual of fertility. This was the welcome of the new season, the

aspiration of hope for a good harvest, the demonstration to all the people of Kapilavastu that the Raja, too, was a farmer (for after all, his name meant “Pure Rice”). All their lives, as one and the same, were built upon the nurture of rice.

Gleaming gold and silver tipped the plows of dark hardwood on which were carved images and words from the vedas, tangled like vines, depicting the progression of rice from seedling to grain. The bullocks that pulled the plows were thickly muscled, their flanks brushed to a glossy sheen, their horns tipped with precious metals and jewels, their harnesses bright and suppley oiled. They cut the earth and moved in a slow chevron across the fields until they had laid down the first furrows.

But this spring, Siddhartha saw that the royal plows had only scratched the surface. He had been too taken by the colors and the celebratory music, distracted by the attendants with sweet treats, who would fan him under the parasols; they would take him into the shade to nap and kept the insects away with jewelled whisks. But this year he walked out into the field and trod the dark soil with the farmers who came with their scrawny bullocks and their wooden plows.

These were not decorative, they were worn from years of hard use, scratched and gouged, polished smooth by labor. The bullocks grunted and strained, filling the air with their moist breath, making wide their wet, round eyes, upon which the flies swarmed. Their tails slapped at their haunches stained with excrement.

The farmers, in their best dhotis, were already sweat-soaked, wiping salt from their brows and squinting, pushing and guiding with all their might, their ropy muscles straining under their thin flesh. Their bare feet trod on clumps of dry dirt and mud. For the farmers it was no mere ritual of scratching the soil—they dug deep, turning the earth to reveal its dark and

fertile underbelly, and with it all manner of creeping and crawling creature.

Under the bullocks' split hooves, under the callused bare feet of the farmers, before the tips of their straining plows—earthworms and insects, frogs and other small creatures, were trampled and sliced until their bleeding and crushed bodies were turned into the soil. Beneath the gleaming surface of the spring ritual, death lurked everywhere—death and suffering and backbreaking labor. On this was his father's kingdom built.

This was the true nature of life—for every harvest a payment of blood. Siddhartha looked at his own feet, where he stood in the moist earth, and he dared not examine the soles of his sandals. He walked out of the field, past the place where the royal family and the brahmins sat, watching.

Siddhartha went to the large jambu tree at the edge of the field, by the road, and in the shade beneath it, he sat, crossing his legs. Is this the way of life? he thought. So quickly it ends—if it is the tread of a farmer or the point of a plow for the lowly worm, then what is it for a man? And he sat, calming his breath as he had been taught, and he pondered this question—the transitory quality of all life—and as his mind quieted, as the images of crushed chitin and severed pink flesh dissipated in his thoughts, fleeting images changing with the breeze, under the shade of the jambu tree, Siddhartha entered his first meditative trance. There he sat for the remainder of the afternoon, until the farmers had plowed the fields. And it is said that while the shadows grew shorter and then lengthened again as the sun arched across the heavens, the shade of the jambu tree did not move but remained still to shelter Siddhartha.

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"The son of a raja should be a warrior. He should delight in games of the hunt, in archery and wrestling and other arts that lend themselves to war. And what have I? A poet? A mystic?" Suddhodana stepped down from the dais to look out at the garden where the prince sat at the edge of the reflecting pool. "Look at him, admiring flowers and weeds. What am I to do?"

"He is yet young, O, Maha-Raja. The time will come when he does the things appropriate to a boy of his station. You yourself are in good health—there is no cause for concern."

"They talk about him, Gandiva. I know this. They have spoken of him from the time of his birth, and I have made things no easier by keeping him insulated from the world. But he is sixteen now. Look how slight he is when he should be robust. Look at the delicate lines of his face and fullness of his lips. That is not the face of a warrior—what I see is his mother's face. Each time I look at him, she haunts me."

"He is a wise boy, O, Maha-Raja. When he is moved to action, he is swift and precise. His mind shoots thoughts like an archer looses arrows from his bow. Give him a challenge."

"I gave him thirty-two nursemaids. A hundred tutors whose arts he outstripped. A new dancing girl each time I saw his gaze grow bored. I have spoiled him all his life. How shall I challenge him now? True, he is wise beyond his years, but a raja must also know when to be harsh, when to wield power, when to make war."

They sipped their soma. Siddhartha, in the garden below, reached into the water and lifted out a white lotus; water trickled down his forearms, dripped from his elbow tips down to the grass.

"There is a contest that will interest him, O, Maha-Raja. He is of marriageable age. Let us arrange for him to view his potential brides."

"And what will that achieve? He has before him the

greatest beauties in the world, all trained to please him."

"Who competes for them, O, Maha-Raja?"

"What?"

"There is a princess just come of marriageable age in Koliya. The daughter of your sister Amita. It is said that her beauty rivals that of the late Maharini."

"Have you seen this girl recently? I have, no doubt, seen her, but my memory for faces is vague."

"Her name is Yashodhara. A glimpse of her and I wept at my mortality. And yet I could not hide the ache in my loins."

The Raja stood, smiling. "Is she betrothed?"

"No, O, Maha-Raja. The rumor is that her father must wait for her consent."

"*Her* consent?"

"She is strong-willed."

"I have been thinking lately of our ties to Koliya. I have relied much on my sister, but this gives us good reason for direct discourse with Suprabuddha himself."

"Our alliance could use strengthening, for the kingdom of Maghada is growing in power."

"Then let us arrange a viewing."

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~9~

Princesses from the sixteen kingdoms and more came to Kapilavastu for the appointed day—to be viewed and to find favor in Siddhartha's eyes. They arrived by palanquin and carriage; they came over the course of many days and the palace was filled with their retinue and servants, abuzz with gossip about the beauty of this one, the wealth of that one, the defects that marred one's physical perfection, the qualities of mind that outweighed the homeliness of another.

A festive and tense air pervaded the palace at Kapilavastu, but Siddhartha did not pay it much heed. He went about his days knowing that to be the viewer, he, too, must be put on display. He could feel the gaze of attendants, and sometimes the piercing stare from behind a screen as he passed a certain quarter. The palace was thick with desire, and aspiration, and rivalry; it made the air heavy as musk, rich and stifling.

Then the ceremonies began. The princesses entertained; they showed off their skill in dance and in song while their fathers met privately with the Raja to make their secret offers;

and all this drew on for what seemed an interminable time.

On the day of the viewing, Siddhartha sat upon a small platform with trays of gifts at his side—necklaces, bracelets, bangles, tiaras—all inset with lapis, gold, and precious stones. It was the custom that the Prince should show his favor by bestowing the most extravagant gift on the one whom he most desired.

And the procession began; each girl approached him with tinkling steps, light-footed to demonstrate grace, swaying ever so seductively. All this Siddhartha witnessed, again and again throughout the day: the coy upward and sidewise glances to show off the beauty of the eyes; the sinuous exposure of the neck to hint at the skills of love; and sometimes the quick toss of the head, billowing a silky veil to let him glimpse the tantalizing beauty of a profile, the pouting fullness of lips.

They had been taught well; they had rehearsed; they presented themselves with calculated grace. Yet Siddhartha could sense the tension that surrounded them. It was in the air—the princesses with their breaths all shallow and sharp, held high in the lungs to accent the fullness of breasts. They trembled when his eyes met theirs. All this Siddhartha could not fail to notice, but it held no interest for him. He gave the gifts indiscriminately, by the handful, for he wished each girl to leave happy. He did not understand their need.

And as the day dragged on and grew hot, he began to notice the odor of anxiety mingled with the perfumes and musks. He could see the sweat beading on a smooth brow, the trickle of a salty droplet down a bare torso. He was tired, bored, overwhelmed. All the beautiful features began to blend together until what he saw, in his mind, was one vast collage—a girl made of parts, one indistinguishable from another, not the vividness of a single soul. There were not distinct persons before him, but merely ripples in a sea of illusion—for so

much of it was artifice.

And so the day drew on. Occasionally, a minister might whisper in his ear and ask if he favored a girl, or one might remind him of her name, what dance or song she had performed on a previous evening, from what kingdom she hailed, the name of her father, the relations between her clan and the Shakyas. And this was all a somnolent drone in Siddhartha's ears.

The day grew late, approaching sunset, and now even the feathered fans could not keep the heat at bay. Siddhartha found himself yawning as the last girl was announced. When she came, he gave her all that remained in the pile of gifts—an armload of jewelry—and she gasped.

"Here," he said. "Take this, for you are the first to make me happy today." She knew not how to reply, but hastily bowed, and made her way backwards to run off to her retinue, shouting excitedly. He did not give her a second look

"Now may I go?" Siddhartha said to the ministers. He rose and stretched the stiffness from his limbs. As he stepped down from the platform he heard a commotion in the courtyard, an argument, shouts of anger.

And then a minister entered, breathless and disheveled. He bowed, and when he had caught his breath, he explained that there was a late arrival from the kingdom of Koli. By all rights the party should be turned back, for they had not participated in all of the festivities, but the Raja himself had intervened to put the question to Siddhartha.

"It is yours to decide, O, Prince."

"She has come a long way?"

"Yes, O, Prince."

"She will be disappointed if she is not seen by me?"

"Gravely, O, Prince."

"Ah, then what is one more after this day? Let her in and

we shall be done with this charade."

"Thank you, O, Prince." And the minister withdrew.

Siddhartha stepped back to the platform and stretched once again, raising his arms, joined together, above his head. When he turned, she stood there at the top of the steps as if she had materialized from the air. She looked directly into his eyes—she was flushed, as if she had run there, breathing hard, perspiration dotting her bronze skin. She breathed quickly and her expression was surprised, as if she had just been caught in a game, unexpectedly. Was it defiance he saw? The curve of her lips? And instantly, as if he had been struck by lightning from her eyes, Siddhartha felt weak. He sat down on the cushions, dizzy, and she bowed to him, presenting herself, and a minister said, "This is Princess Yashodhara, daughter of the Raja Suprabuddha of the Koliya clan. Her mother is your father's sister, Amita."

Siddhartha nodded, absently, looking into her eyes. And now it struck him—she had bared her face—she wore no veil—and all of her features were there, naked, for him to see, as if he were gazing upon the face of a full moon on a cloudless night. There was a glow about her. He frowned as he tried to blink away his dizziness.

"Is the Prince well?" she asked. Her voice was matter-of-fact, yet truly concerned.

He nodded and rubbed his eyes. He had seen her face before. Had there been a party visiting from Koliya with this girl among them? Was this a dancing girl in disguise, sent as a practical joke? Had he seen her in his childhood? Now, after the procession of faces that had passed before his tired eyes, he could not tell. Perhaps he had seen her in a dream—or in a meditative vision, the sort that flashes sometimes, unbidden, into the mind's eyes. He could not recall, and yet he felt he knew her.

"What disturbs you, O, Prince?" she said, looking up at him.

Siddhartha shook his head. "It is nothing," he said. "It has passed."

She stood up to take her leave, and yet she paused to linger. "Do you find me so unattractive?" she asked. "Do I offend you in some way?"

Siddhartha looked at her again, as if for the first time. "What?" he said. And now he was certain he knew her. He had known her, but he had forgotten. He must remember, he thought, and yet it was so hard, reviving this memory. It eluded him like the wisps of a dream.

"Do you punish me?" she asked.

"Punish you?" said Siddhartha.

"I saw those who left this chamber before me all showing off their gifts. And nothing for me?"

Siddhartha smiled. He saw a light in her eyes. "Forgive me, Princess Yashodhara," he said. "I have been foolish." He glanced down at the empty trays and then, as the minister behind him made hasty retreat to produce another bauble, Siddhartha removed one of his own jeweled necklaces and placed it around her neck. It sparkled there, glinting in the light of late afternoon, the gold bright against her brown skin.

It was a ceremonial necklace—an heirloom worth the ransom of a princess—no mere gift. Perhaps Siddhartha misread her wide eyes, for then he removed another necklace, and another, putting these on her, and even more until she felt their weight upon her and he was bare of his jewels. "Take them all," he said. "With these I make good my apology."

And suddenly Yashodhara was struck by the magnitude of his gesture—or perhaps it was the magnitude of her transgression. She flushed in embarrassment and, as the color rose in her cheeks, she was even more beautiful. Quickly, she took her

leave and stepped backward out of the hall, but not without a final glance back at the Prince.

And when she was gone, Siddhartha felt suddenly empty—bereft—as he often did when he had seen a vision in his meditation. Once again he sat down, or rather, collapsed, onto his cushions, and he gestured for more soma to be brought so he could wash away the memory of Yashodhara.

◊

That evening, the Raja came with Gandiva to pay Siddhartha the expected visit. They came already knowing his answer, for everyone had seen what had transpired between him and the princess of Koliya. And so they stood with him, quietly, until he spoke.

"Father, I do not know what has come over me. When she looked at me I felt as if I had been pierced by a diamond-tipped arrow. If I must pick a bride, let it be her and I will be happy."

"What of the other girls?" said Suddhodana. "Siddhartha, there were many great beauties before you today. Many whose clans could benefit from a union with you, and many who could benefit us. You said you would conduct this viewing and select a bride as part of your duty as a prince of the Shakyas. On what do you base your selection?"

Now Siddhartha did not know if his father was toying with him—it was not the happy reply he had expected. Had the Raja made another selection? Had his advisors arrived at the most politically expedient union? Quickly, he considered a way to explain the mutual benefit of another marriage bond with the kingdom of Koliya. He could argue for economic and military advantages, though he had not truly considered such matters. He needed to justify his choice with more than just a

quickening of his pulse and a catch in his breath. “Father,” he said, “I have given the matter much thought during all those hours they paraded their charms. And this is what I have concluded . . . .”

At that, the Raja broke into laughter. Siddhartha’s eyes grew wide in alarm.

“You need not tell me your conclusion, my son, for with my deductive powers, I may look into your soul and tell you what you were thinking. You think it would be wise for my kingdom and clan to maintain and strengthen its already strong ties with the clan and kingdom of the Koliyas. That is of primary importance, you will say, and so it follows that the best choice for your bride is the princess Yashodhara, who is a Koliya. A purely political decision befitting Kapilavastu’s future ruler. Is it not so?”

“Indeed, a shrewd political decision,” said Gandiva, unable to check the laughter in his own voice.

“Tell me, Siddhartha,” said the Raja, “was that the nature of your reasoning?”

“Yes, Father,” said Siddhartha. “But how did you know so precisely what I would say?”

“You are sixteen, Siddhartha. That is an age when rationality follows emotion. I was sixteen once.” Suddhodana’s face was touched by a wistful smile. “When I was that age I believed I knew all there was to know—everything that was important. At that age I believed myself to be invincible. I allowed the vagaries of my heart to rule my behavior, sometimes to later regret. I was happy.” Now he turned to Gandiva. “Oh, great advisor,” he said with mock formality, “is Siddhartha’s reasoning not wise?”

“Most wise, O, Maha-Raja,” Gandiva said with a bow.

“And what would you have done, Gandiva? What bride would you have chosen had you been in my son’s place?”

"I, too, would have chosen the Princess Yashodhara."

"And for what reason?"

"For her beauty, O, Maha-Raja."

"And would you have explained your choice so honestly?"

"No, O, Maha-Raja. I would have given an explanation much like the Prince's." They laughed.

"Siddhartha, you are young. But as a man you must know that desire comes before reason. I applaud your decision, because both desire and reason converge upon this occasion. I shall send a messenger to King Suprabuddha tomorrow."

"Thank you, Father."

"Do not thank me yet, Siddhartha. I have heard that Yashodhara is a strong-willed girl. She must accept you."

"Do you think she will, Father?"

Suddhodana smiled and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "We have all seen her. They say she is hard to read, but the glow of such love is hard to hide. Now let us enjoy some soma before we retire."

◊

~10~

That night Siddhartha dismissed the musicians and the dancing girls. All the movement of sinuous limbs in the lamplight the gleam of perspiration, the reedy sound of flutes and the twang of sitars, though they were meant to soothe him, only agitated him. When he looked upon the dancing girls—even those he favored—he recalled once again the patchwork of features he had viewed all that day, and in his weariness and exhaustion, the limbs of the dancers blurred together into a many-limbed monster of flesh whose movements, designed to seduce, merely caused revulsion. “Away!” he said to all of them, and they dispersed like gazelles in the face of a lion.

Siddhartha lay on his couch of green silk and looked up at the stars. The sages said they radiated not only light, but still hummed the primal holy syllable of creation, filling the universe from end to end with the cosmic *OM*. He had chanted that sound as a mantra; it comforted him when he was troubled. And tonight he was much troubled by his desire. How unexpectedly powerful it was, how irrational, how illogical.

He could have any woman he wanted in Kapilavastu. For a prince of his station desire was but the fulfillment of a whim; but today he had sensed a profound hunger permeating the air as the princesses paraded before him. He could have consumed that hunger like a glutton, wallowed in it, but instead it had frightened him. How strange to be its prey, like a lamb in a cage of starving dogs.

A small taste of a rare wine, a few sips of soma—that was exquisite to the palate; but to drink a whole tub of it, a warehouse full—that made for nausea, sickness, and death. And yet how terrible, too, to be on the other side—to be the one to bear that hunger for another. It was like nothing he had felt before. In Yashodhara's presence he had been alive—almost terribly alive—and with her gone came a vast emptiness he could not fill. He must see her again under any pretext.

He could not sleep, and so he did a thing he had learned; he began to recite verses from the vedas—the ones he knew to be difficult and the ones he had not had occasion to speak or think in a long time. He began with lines from the first prapathaka of the *Khandogya Upanishad*:

> The essence of man is speech,
> whose essence is the *Rig Veda*;
> The essence of the *Rig Veda* is the *Sama Veda*,
> whose essence is *OM*.

And he continued, concentrating, droning until his overwrought mind calmed into the task, on and on until he began to drift pleasantly with the sound resonating in his skull.

He felt himself coming down from the high country, walking fluidly like water flowing downhill. He carried a staff and a bowl, a water jug and a sunshade. He had finished his study

of the vedas and now he was back in the world, standing at the gates of a city that was preparing for a festival. What is this place? he thought. Why have they decorated their city, why the lively music? Is it some holy man or raja they celebrate? Or perhaps they have heard that I have completed my studies and they celebrate me? As he entered the city he saw a young brahmin woman walking his way from the edge of the market. She carried a jar of water and seven pure white lotus blossoms. When she glanced at him, his breath caught. It was Yashodhara. She did not recognize him, and so he stopped her, asking, "What is this festival?" She turned to him with a smile and said, gaily, "Surely, you are a stranger here if you do not know what we celebrate today. The Enlightened One is coming. The son of the Raja Arcimat is visiting the city in which he was born, and we have come out to honor him." "Then I, too, shall honor him," he said. "Please, where did you find those lotuses?" "These?" she said. "Five of them I bought with fifty pieces of gold. Two I received from a friend." "Sell them to me," he said. In his robe he carried fifty pieces of gold—a donation from a wealthy brahmin in the mountains. "Sell me the five and you may keep the two that were a gift." The girl's brows arched at this, and her delicate nostrils flared momentarily. "Who are you, stranger that you are so impetuous?" "My name is Siddhartha," he said, but what came from his lips instead was the name "Megha." "I have completed my studies, and now I have come down to bide my time in the world in search of enlightenment." "I will sell you the flowers you desire," said the girl, "but under one condition. You must be my husband in this life and in every lifetime hereafter." She looked at him—a challenge—and turned to leave. "Wait!" he said. "But I am on the spiritual path. I cannot engage in a life of the flesh." "Marry me," she said playfully. "I will be your wife, but I will not hinder you in any way." "Then it is done,"

he said. He gave her the fifty pieces of gold and took the five white lotus blooms. Together they passed through the market and arrived at the main avenue, where a procession of 80,000 made its way through the city toward the palace. And there was the Buddha Dipankara himself—the Enlightened One, the Tathagata, Benefactor of the World. A golden light radiated from him as if he were the sun, and all sound, all motion in his sphere was richer, clearer, more fluid, more full of joy and grace. When they entered the glow of his light, they were filled with gladness; their expressions became tranquil and lucid. Together they threw their flowers at him, and at that very moment his gaze turned in their direction. The seven lotus blossoms stopped in midair, and then they encircled the Buddha's head like a white halo, slowly spinning, revolving around him like planets around the sun. And all the other flowers cast at him also stopped their flight, forming a multicolored canopy full of fragrance. Delicate pink and white petals shimmered in the air, translucent in His light. People prostrated themselves at the Buddha's feet, and Siddhartha joined them. He approached Dipankara, threw down his deerskin robe, and knelt upon it, bowing his forehead down until it touched the ground. And the Buddha Dipankara lifted his hand and said to him, "Rise." And again he said, "Rise," and instead of saying the name "Megha," as he expected, Dipankara said, "Rise, Siddhartha." At this the brahmin girl's eyes grew wide, and she slowly mouthed his name, "*Sidd-har-tha.*" He saw the pink tip of her tongue between her white teeth, but there was no sound, only the clamor of the festival and the roar of celebratory voices that all merged and blurred into a brilliant light.

Siddhartha opened his eyes. It was still cool. He lay on his couch and a woman leaned over him in a white sari that soaked up the moonlight in a soft glow. For a moment he thought it

was Yashodhara, then he knew it must be a dancing girl. And then a terrible sorrow and joy washed through him as he realized it was his mother, the Maharini. “Rise, Siddhartha,” she said. He leapt up, speechless, then knelt down at her feet and embraced her, sobbing into her belly. “Mother,” he cried, “All my life I have missed you. All my life….” She pulled him to his feet. She reached out and gently rubbed his tears away with her thumbs, her golden bracelets clinking softly as they slid down to her elbows. “Siddhartha,” she said, “I have watched you since the day you came into this world. My son, my beautiful, precious son.” He looked at her, at her smile, her gaze full of love and mercy. He could not take his eyes away. “Mother,” he said. “Help me. I am in love.” She smiled and embraced him, and he could smell the fragrance in her hair, feel the softness of her cheek. “Do not worry,” she said. Now she drew back from him, reaching out to touch his cheek once more as she receded. A radiance grew around her like a halo. Siddhartha reached out to her, suddenly anxious he would lose her again. He took a step, and another, and yet he seemed not to move while her form grew smaller and smaller until it was point of silver light; and then that light exploded into a brilliant, blinding white. He closed his eyes, hard, and when he opened them again, squinting, he realized he was awake.

The bright moon shone through his open window. It was only the moon.

Siddhartha sat up in his bed, feeling suddenly cold. He pulled the pelt of a snow leopard around his shoulders and rose. Outside, the moon was on the horizon, just beginning its descent behind the trees. Its light threw a bright silver path down the center of the moon pool, where its shimmering orb was reflected in the quiet water.

Though there were couches and benches, Siddhartha sat at the top of the stairs. He could hear the rustle of trees in the

wind, the chirring of crickets, the distant call of a night bird. He could hear the quick and quiet footfalls of his attendants, now alert and waiting to serve him. He sat with the heat of sleep slowly dissipating, remembering his dreams, terrified that he might wake again to find this, too, a dream.

◊

~11~

"That I cannot say, O, Prince."

"Why? If you know the name of the city and its features as if you had been there, why can you not tell me that?"

"I know it does not seem logical, O, Prince, but dreams are not logical, nor are most dreamers while they dwell in that realm. Since you could name the Raja as Arcimat and his son as the great Buddha Dipankara, I could tell you the festival was in the city of Dipavati. Any scholar of history could tell you this, although the events happened in great antiquity before this aeon.

"That the royal palaces of Arcimat were constructed of the seven precious things, that flowers strewn at the Buddha hung in the air, that there were attendants and mendicants and royalty numbering eighty thousand—all that is history and is known. But I cannot say whether a young scholar known as Megha was there, or whether he, too, attained buddahood in that life or one subsequent. Nor can I tell you the name or the clan of the girl you describe."

"But they say you are the master of dream yoga. You must help me."

"There are many who interpret dreams, O, Prince."

"But you are the great Surya, the Walker Among Dreams. There is no one else. Please, you must help me or my anguish will know no end."

"I have done all that I can, O, Prince."

"Then answer this. It is another dream I had that night. But at first I took it to be real. And when I recall it, the memory is clearer to me than my waking memories. When I woke from my first dream, my mother was standing before me. She was real. Realer than you are standing before me now."

"Then perhaps it was not a dream and your mother did wake you."

"That is not possible."

"The Maharini sleeps not far from your quarters."

"It was not the Maharini. It was my *mother,* my mother who gave me birth."

At this, the old man paled, saying, quietly, "Maya," so softly that only he could hear the name. "I beg your pardon," he said. "But you must remember, O, Prince, that dreams express our desires. They communicate to us also the thoughts we dare not think in waking. In them rise memories, which we do not even know we possess."

"What does it mean that my mother woke me after that first dream? Is her spirit reassuring me that all will be well, or have I been visited by some vile demon?"

"O, Prince, you were conceived on the night of the Full Moon Festival. Your mother, Queen Maya, had an auspicious dream that you would become a great king—perhaps the Universal Monarch like the Maharaja Arcimat. In your dream you promised to marry a girl whose features you say were those of Princess Yashodhara. I can only say it was most

auspicious, then, to see the Maharini and be awakened by the light of the moon."

"Then why am I so troubled? Why did I marry the girl for all time only then to vow that I would become a buddha? Why did I feel joy and also such grief to see my own mother? I can still smell her perfume."

"You are young, O, Prince. Strong emotion of one kind is often paired with its opposite, contrary to what we might expect. I suggest you meditate upon the dreams. In time you may reenter them and learn more."

"That is what I fear. To re-enter the dream. To wake up suddenly to realize this life I live now is yet another dream." And yet he also desired it more than he could say—to return to the dreams and dwell there, to live out the remainder of those lives, to be Megha with the brahmin bride, to know his mother, who in the waking world was no more than a myth. "I have been told," said Siddhartha, ". . . It is rumored that you can enter the dreams of others. Would you do that for me, Surya? To spare me the anguish of seeing those scenes yet again? They loom large and clear enough in my memory."

Surya bowed until his forehead touched the floor. "O, Prince, that I can no longer do. I am an old man not long for leaving this life. Do not ask me to do what I cannot."

"You read the omens in my mother's dream."

"That was sixteen years ago, O, Prince. Now I am an old man. My abilities have also grown old. Do not ask me."

"Such abilities are said to increase with age. Why are you so reluctant?"

"Please, O, Prince . . ." Surya raised his eyes, and his pain was unmistakable.

"Then I thank you for coming," said Siddhartha. He dismissed the old man with a gesture and sat brooding on his couch.

◊

On the following day an urgent message came from the Raja. Siddhartha went to his father's rooms and found him in a dark mood, pacing like a restless tiger. Gandiva stood in a pose he had come to know well—he waited, silent and patient, for the Raja's explosion or his return to reason.

"You called me, Father?"

"The news is bad," said Suddhodana. "This morning a messenger returned from Koliya, and this is what my *sister's husband* has to say." He gestured to Gandiva. "You tell him. I cannot befoul my mouth with the taste of those words."

"O, Prince, the news is, indeed, bad," said Gandiva. "The Raja Suprabuddha does not approve of the marriage without condition. We have learned through our spies that the Princess Yashodhara is smitten with you. She will approve if her father agrees to the union. But there are conditions."

"What are these conditions? I do not understand."

"He has . . . doubts regarding your potential as a ruler of a kingdom. He wishes his daughter to marry a prince skilled in the arts of diplomacy and war. He wishes his daughter to marry a future general, not a future poet. Those were his words."

"And what are his doubts about my potential as a general?"

"O, Prince, I mean no offense, but—"

"The people see you as a mystic, a poet. They say you are of a girlish temperament," said the Raja. "Look how you spend your time, Siddhartha. When are you seen hunting or racing or practicing the arts of the bow? When are you seen with a sword, or wrestling, or racing your favorite horse?"

"Father, the rumors are not true."

"And what is it you do? Are your actions befitting a future

raja?"

"Father—"

"You were enthused once, I recall. But now you spend your days being entertained by dancing girls and musicians. You stare into your lotus pools. You spend your time with flowers, not with weapons. And look at you—you appear frail and sensitive. Your skin is like a girl's. What am I to tell Suprabuddha? When were you last at a meeting of the sangha to listen to matters of state? When did you last argue the meaning of the vedas?"

"Tell me what he wants, Father. What are his conditions?"

"You tell him," Suddhodana said to Gandiva.

"He demands a public demonstration of your princely skills, O, Prince. A test of your learning and a test of your physical skills. Swordsmanship, archery, horsemanship, wrestling. He would pit you against his daughter's other suitors."

"Other suitors?"

"As you might know, many have made marriage offers and been rebuffed by the Princess. He shall invite them all to participate in a contest of skills, and to the winner he will present the princess in marriage."

"But what of *her* choice?"

"As you have probably guessed by now," said Suddhodana, "he does not approve of her choice. Nor does he now respect what he believed at one time to be her high standards. She will be forced to abide by the outcome of the contest." He stroked his graying beard. "So tell me, Siddhartha, shall I withdraw our offer and avoid humiliation, or shall we have you participate in this contest and show the sixteen kingdoms that you are what they believe you to be?"

Siddhartha was silent, and then he asked, "When will he need his answer?"

"I am to send a reply tomorrow."

"What will you say, Father?"

"Siddhartha, you have expressed to me your desire for Yashodhara. I shall leave the answer to you."

"Then I will meditate on this tonight. I will have my answer tomorrow." Siddhartha took his leave and walked out of the hall.

◊

"Do you think I was to harsh with him, Gandiva?"

Gandiva was silent.

"You need not give me mindless affirmation. I have other advisors for that."

"O, Maha-Raja, he is anxious as I have never seen him anxious."

"Since the requisite qualities are not naturally forthcoming, they must be provoked out of him."

"But could this not turn against you? His mind is exceedingly rational. He may decide that the best thing for Kapilavastu is for him to avoid the humiliation of a public defeat. Then he may, perhaps, train himself for the future. Or he may withdraw altogether."

"I have faith in the heart of youth and in the pragmatism of politics. My brother-in-law knows that a union with Kapilavastu is the wisest course of action. And so one of the three from my city will surely be favored in the contest, which is to be designed by Suprabuddha himself. Add to this his desire to please his daughter, who is dear to his heart. And we shall see."

"Have you considered what might happen if the Prince loses?"

"All his short life I have given him everything he desired. Every whim of his has been fulfilled when possible. It is time

for him to learn that sometimes the object of one's desire must be won."

"You seem unusually confident, O, Maha-Raja."

"I believe in the prophecy, Gandiva. Has he seen a doddering old man, a sick man, a dying man, a mendicant? He has not. And so his path is still that of a great king. Of that I am confident. As for Ananda and Devadatta, they can be compelled, through their fathers, to downplay their skills in Siddhartha's favor."

"You would have his victory be a lie?"

"All life is a lie, Gandiva. It is a lie we participate in making. We will do what must be done."

"You seem already to know the Prince's answer."

"What would you do in his place, Gandiva?"

"Knowing my own weakness, I would withdraw."

"You are not Siddhartha. He does not know of weakness because he has always gotten the things he desired. His emotions rule him now with the invincibility of youth. He will go through with the contest."

"I pray you are right, O, Maha-Raja," said Gandiva. "But also, I shall pray you are wrong."

◊

~12~

The Raja had built Siddhartha three palaces. The great architects had designed them, each with particular temperament suited to its season—Ramma, of burnt brick and blue tile, pleasant at harvest time; Suramma, of veined marble, multi-hued and cool in the heat of summer; and Subha, hewn of square beams and cedar-lined, warm for the wet days of winter—with many pavilions and green lawns.

It was at Subha that the Prince abided now, among the beams hewn from giant hardwoods in the distant jungles, all around him the wood: painted, polished, carved and oiled, lacquered into red bronze, left pale and blond, light as desert sand. The craftsmen had inscribed the walls and illustrated the balustrades, rails, and moldings with elaborate tangles of text from the vedas, the teachings of the sages, so that Siddhartha would never be far from wisdom no matter how he turned. The geometry of the pavilion and its grounds—the meander of garden paths, the proportions of pools, the height of pillars, the length of beams, the diameter of circles, the area of squares,

the number of points in stars—all of it was carefully calculated and precisely proportioned by universal constants to reflect divine order, to relate the cosmic geometry to the nature of man. Here the Prince had spent the wet days studying, chanting the verses of the ancient sages. And here, his heart and mind troubled, he now meditated upon mortality and practiced the discipline of proper breath.

He recalled a suspended time that spring—just when the clouds broke and the sun returned, when the rain turned gentle and soothing, when the air was by turns cool and pleasantly warm—and he suspended his mind in that state

◊

Siddhartha dreamed.

Ten thousand people had gathered for the contest, and beyond them, in a bright circle of light, a hundred thousand devas looked on, the power of their presence permeating the air like the fragrance of spring. It was Devadatta who began, striding into the circle with arms upraised as the people cheered him. In the dream light he glowed a purplish red; vapor emanated from his body, from the crown of his head, undulating in the air like waves of heat. He called out for his elephant, and what came from his mouth was not human speech—he barked like a wild dog, but low, and the deep echo of that sound drowned out the murmur of the crowd.

Now the elephant came—an old gray male with crooked and yellow tusks. It walked heavily, as if it would fall at any moment from its own great weight. Devadatta strode up to the huge beast—his fists were wrapped in layers and layers of linen—and he stood before it, hands on hips, regarding the elephant as if from a great height. The elephant stopped. It looked as if it might kneel before Devadatta. It snorted once,

twice and, as it began to raise its trunk, Devadatta drew back his right fist and struck it hard on the center of its forehead. The blow resounded like a fleshy drumbeat and in its echo the elephant fell dead at Devadatta's feet. There was a momentary silence in the crowd.

As Devadatta raised his arms to receive his cheers, he was suddenly his cousin Ananda, radiating an orange and yellow mist. "Devadatta!" he shouted, for all to hear, "You are cruel! You have wasted the life of this poor elephant. May you be born one in your next life!" The crowd shouted, first in agreement, then encouragement as Ananda raised his arms to signal for his own elephant. It was a young bull, smaller than Devadatta's, but stronger. Its skin was a pale gray like the false dawn and the ivory of its perfect tusks glowed in the dream light. Ananda stepped up to the elephant and, as if to greet him, the elephant rose onto its hind legs. Ananda shouted something—a mahout's command—and the elephant walked to him like a man, looming over him, trunk swinging left and right. And then Ananda stepped under the beast; with a great shout he raised it over his head; he spun three times and hurled it out of the ring. The elephant flew through the air and landed with a mighty crash on all four feet, making the earth tremble.

The crowd cheered with the noise of ten thousand shrill birds, and then it was Siddhartha's turn. There was no sound when he went into the ring, only the slight rasp of his own breath catching at the back of his throat. He gestured as if he did not control his own limbs, as if he were a tree whose branches swayed in the wind; and when his elephant appeared, it was snow white, glowing, covered in a milky mist of light. It dazzled him until he squinted. As it approached, its ears spread apart like the wings of a swan and its trunk reared back like a cobra about to strike. It leapt toward him. To his own surprise, Siddhartha leapt to meet the elephant, raising his right foot. As

the elephant lowered its head, its tusks pointing upward in two bright crescents, Siddhartha kicked it between the eyes. There seemed to be no weight to the elephant; it was made of air and light; it was an illusion made of breath and thought in a world made of dream. Siddhartha extended his foot and the great white elephant flew like a giant bird, far over the field, arching like the pale moon across the heavens to splash into the center of the river Aroma. A great fountain of water rose skyward and came down again as cool rain upon the gathered crowd.

He felt the coolness, and Siddhartha turned, his fingers brushing the softness of the snow leopard's pelt on his bed. He roared like a lion and turned to face Ananda and Devadatta, who stood in a green thicket of bamboo, their expressions anxious. "I am afraid," said Ananda. "There are wild beasts here that might do us grave harm." "I am afraid," said Devadatta. "What I fear is that we might be separated from those we love. It is not death that makes me afraid. I am filled with sorrow for those left behind to mourn me." But Siddhartha felt no fear and no sorrow. He was filled, instead, with great joy, and he said, "My brothers"—for they were brothers now and not cousins—"My brothers, we are in the great forest, the abode of the sages. Let us all be happy, for a great thing shall happen today."

They found a trail in the bamboo and walked westward, into the green shadows, where they discovered a tigress with seven cubs. She was so weak from hunger that she could not even rise to protect her litter. Green stalks and shadow. Red stripes and black. Seven small cubs mewling with hunger, seven days old and near the end of their incarnation. "Poor mother," said Ananda, "she is so weak from giving birth she cannot even protect her young." "She will die of starvation, for she cannot hunt," said Devadatta. "Or she will eat her own cubs to give herself life." "What can we do?" said Siddhartha.

"If she dies, they will all die. To live, she will kill her own young. What can we do?" "Tigers feed on warm blood and fresh meat," said Ananda. "She must find prey." "She is in no condition to hunt," said Devadatta. "Who would hunt for a mother tiger? She may die or eat her young at any moment. Who would sacrifice himself that they may live?" Devatatta looked at Ananda and then at Siddhartha. "What foolish man would sacrifice himself for an animal? Let us go and leave nature to nature's course."

Devadatta turned and walked into the thicket, but Ananda paused. "If we were holy men," he said, "if we cared not for our own selves but sacrificed for the welfare of others . . . . Holy men are full of compassion beyond us." He lingered for a moment and then he, too, walked into the tall bamboo. "Come," he called to Siddhartha, but Siddhartha did not move. He could not move. "Leave me," he said to Ananda. "I will be a while." And Ananda left him in the thicket with the tigers.

Siddhartha felt a strange warm sensation in his heart. He moved as if he were full of air and lightness. He removed his cloak and hung it on the bamboo so that his brothers might find him later, and he lay down in front of the tigress, offering his throat to her. The seven cubs climbed his body, tumbling this way and that, licking him with their scratchy wet tongues, mewling, batting at his ears. But the tigress was too weak to move. Siddhartha rose, regretting he carried no sword. He found a sharp sliver of bamboo and he knelt in front of the tigress, who regarded him calmly with the yellow moons of her eyes. Her chest and her belly heaved with each breath. He looked into her eyes, and he said, "I go now to the place where nothing harms and nothing hurts." She seemed to nod at those words, blinking her large, vertically slitted eyes, and upon that signal Siddhartha thrust the bamboo through his throat and pulled it out again in a gush of blood.

He fell, and as his vision grew dark he felt the great tongue of the tigress lapping up the blood on his neck, and in the darkness he felt her fangs piercing his flesh, her great jaws cracking through the bones of his neck. And there was no pain, only flash after flash of light—light, dark, light, dark—like the striped shade of the thicket. The seven tiger cubs lapped up his hot blood as if it were their mother's milk, and he died.

◊

When he awoke, Siddhartha lingered in his bed with his eyes closed, letting the dream images pass before him again and again until they lost their power to trouble him, and when he rose he did not call the dream interpreters. Instead, he called for his chariot driver, Channa, who had been his most faithful servant from the time of his boyhood.

In the garden by the pool, where pink lotus blooms floated on the reflection of the sky, Siddhartha told his dreams to Channa. "You are not a rishi," he said. "You are not one preoccupied with mystical things or things beyond your station. Tell me, Channa, having had such dreams, what would you do?"

"O, Prince, do not burden me with such a puzzle. I am your faithful servant. It is not my station to be your advisor."

"That is why I ask you, Channa. If you will not tell me what to do, then tell me this. What do you do about your own dreams?"

"Sometimes my dreams are pleasant. Sometimes they are unpleasant. I enjoy the ones I may enjoy and put the others out of my mind. Otherwise, they are beyond my power. O, Prince, my duty is to drive your chariot. I have no time to ruminate over such things because my mind must be on my duty. My mind must be clear, for driving the chariot takes all my

attention. Would you have it otherwise?"

"No, Channa. And what you say has helped me."

"How can that be, O, Prince? I have not answered your first question."

"You have, Channa. Better than any rishi."

"Then I am happy that I could serve you, O, Prince." He bowed to take his leave.

"Channa."

"Yes, O, Prince."

"Before you go, ask me what I would do, having had such dreams."

Channa looked momentarily puzzled, but then he smiled. "O, prince, what would you do, having had such dreams?"

"My mind must be on my duty," said Siddhartha. "My mind must be clear, for it takes all my attention to be a Prince. Would you have it otherwise?"

"No, O, Prince."

"Do you think I have made the right choice?"

"How would a Prince choose?"

"How else, Channa? Thank you."

And Channa took his leave, much relieved. When he was alone, Siddhartha said to himself, "And what is your duty, Siddhartha? You are to be married. You must win your bride. You must prove you are a Prince worthy of your station. What is your duty?" He paused to look at the clouds reflected in the pool, drifting behind the lotuses, and then he sent a message to the Raja, saying he would face the marriage contest in seven days.

In the afternoon he called upon his father's captains.

What he did until the day of the contest is a mystery.

◊

The audience gathered at dawn in the wide field that stretched along the far bank of the river Rohini. The people of Kapilavasu and many, who had arrived early from Koliya, waited for the contestants to arrive. And as the sun rose to a handspan over the horizon, while the dew still clung to the grasses and flowers, the processions came: the retinues of Ananda and Devadatta and Arjuna, cousins of the Prince; riding upon their best horses. Devadatta's mount was black as night, Ananda's a rich brown, Arjuna's a dusky gray; their bridles and stirrups were embroidered in gold, their fittings polished, their manes brushed to a bright luster. Soon the procession from Koliya arrived with 800 servants and retainers, carrying bright banners before their palanquins; and to provide shade in the rising sun they carried canopies of colored silks that billowed in the light breeze. At the head of the procession came the Raja Suprabuddha and his queen, Amita, and behind them, beneath a white parasol, a shining litter bore Princess Yashodhara, their daughter and the prize of that day's contests.

On his white horse, Kanthaka, Siddhartha watched the procession from Koliya take its place upon the field.

"Do not look yet upon your prize," said the Suddhodana. "You have yet to win her."

"I know, father."

"You must concentrate your full attention on each contest. Your rivals are most excellent in their skills. There were many suitors, Siddhartha, but when it was known that Arjuna and Devadatta and Ananda were in the running, all others withdrew. Indeed, some have laughed to hear that you are competing at all. How is your confidence now? Now that you have seen the magnitude of this spectacle?"

"I am prepared, Father. I have observed the strengths and weaknesses of my cousins. I have seen them at their practices.

I have meditated."

"Arjuna's father named him with the hopes that he would be a great general like his namesake, whose arrows never missed their mark. But he is a fine horseman. Let him ride his own confidence and he will exhaust his mount too soon. Ananda is a master of the sword, but his skill is in strategy, not in sheer power. And Devadatta, as you know, is unrivalled in archery. Beware the grudge he bears you." The Raja drew his mount close to Siddhartha's. "Turn to me, son, and receive this." He held out a necklace and Siddhartha leaned in the saddle, bowing his head. The Raja placed the necklace over Siddhartha's head and pronounced a blessing. "I give you this, Siddhartha, because it will bring the favor of the gods. It is the charm I wore when I won your mother. It is touched by the power of Agni and Varuna. Wear it well, and may the gods help you win."

"Thank you, Father," said Siddhartha, sitting straighter in his saddle, looking to the west. Kanthaka snorted, and then came the call for the first contest.

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Siddhartha rode forward to join the other suitors at the starting line, and when they saw that he rode Kanthaka, they remembered. They remembered him wild and unshod, with his fierce eyes and wide nostrils, tossing his mane as the grooms had led him, bound by three chains. No rider had broken him; none had crossed his back. They remembered how they had each tried, three times, to mount Kanthaka and how he had reared and bucked each time, flinging them shamefully to the dust. Only Arjuna had held his seat. he had told the grooms to loose the chains and he had held on with a master hand through the stallion's rage and his fear as he ran in a fast circle around the

plain. Arjuna had imagined him tamed then, he had relaxed his guard, and Kanthaka turned his neck and grabbed him by the foot with naked teeth, tore him down and reared to trample him to death. But the grooms had rushed in, fettering the mad stallion once again. They had lost heart in that contest. “Fire runs through his veins,” said Arjuna. “No one can tame him.” But then, as they all remembered, Siddhartha had come forward, telling the grooms, “Let go of his chains and give me his bridle only.” And he had held it calmly, speaking softly as he laid a palm across the stallion’s eyes and drew it gently down his long face veined with anger. He had stroked the stallion’s neck, his heaving flanks, whispering until everyone saw the stallion bow his head and stand subdued, calm, as if he were bowing down to his lord whom he served. Siddhartha had turned him to face the sun so that he would not be frightened by his own shadow. He had mounted, quickly and lightly, while all who watched stood silent; and with a touch of his knees, Siddhartha rode Kanthaka around the *maidan*. They remembered how Kanthaka and Siddhartha had grown as one until he could outride them like the mythical beast of the west that is said to be half man and half horse. But they were prepared for this. They had rehearsed their strategy and though Ananda would not participate, Devadatta and Arjuna had worked out a plan they thought infallible against Kanthaka.

And now the murmur of the river close by, the murmur of the gathered crowd, the whispers of the horsemen to their chosen mounts. They began at the mark, a bright red-and-gold banner mounted atop a tall pole, their horses snorting and stamping restlessly with excitement, ears cocked and alert. And when the banner came down they raced westward, across the field, their hooves thundering, the smell of cut grass still fresh in the damp morning air. Devadatta spurred his mount viciously to win the lead, and they galloped down the course,

parallel to the river, until they were but specks in the distance.

Devadatta's mount tired quickly; white foam flew from its mouth, lathering its neck and flanks, and before the turnaround point Ananda and Siddhartha passed him, Ananda with quick knee jabs to his gray stallion, urging him forward. Siddhartha's white stallion, fleet and powerful, kept the pace easily. When they passed the far banner and wheeled around, they threw up clumps of grass and dirt. They saw Devadatta's angry grimace as they galloped past him, one of them drifting on the turn. Siddhartha rode alongside his cousin, pacing him, and then, halfway back on their return course, with a gentle nudge of his knees, Siddhartha urged Kanthaka to greater speed and they surged forward, leaving Ananda and his gray mount as if they were grazing in the field.

Kanthaka stretched out into a gallop, his head balanced easily; his wide eyes agleam. Siddhartha leaned over his withers, touching his neck for balance. The foam of Kanthaka's sweat flew into Siddhartha's face, his eyes teared from the dust flying in the wind. He heard the hiss and crack of Arjuna's whip, and he clucked his tongue. Kanthaka's ears pricked up, snapped back, and the veins of his muscular cheeks bulged as he surged forward, swift as a river in flood. He approached the churning hooves of Arjuna's mount, his arrow-straight legs all ablur as he clipped the brown stallion's heels and passed, galloping now full-out, his neck stretched forward, his head high, mane streaming behind as Siddhartha held to stay on; and as they thundered across the finish line, those who watched them saw only a single silhouette, for it is said the rider and his horse had become one.

◊

Ananda began the contest of archery by piercing a brazen

drum at six gows distance. But he drew only a murmur from the crowd. Arjuna was next, and everyone knew he was named for the great archer of antiquity who never slept, whose arrows never missed. He called for his target to be moved another gow, and when he pierced it, with a loud boom, the crowd cheered. And now it was Devadatta's turn. "Move it back!" he called. "Take it to six gows and I will show you the skill of a real archer." He looked at Siddhartha then, his eyes recalling the boyhood promise he had made when he had lost the injured swan.

Siddhartha acknowledged him with a calm smile that brought fire to Devadatta's eyes. At eight gows the face of the drum looked no larger than a coin held at arms length. Its brass shone dull in the sunlight, not bright enough to blind. All could see its bloodred center even at that distance.

The bow was of lacquered cane bound with sinew, strung with twisted silver wire; only the strongest of men could draw fully back. Devadatta thrummed the string once and its one note made the air vibrate like a swarm of bees. Then he drew back the arrow and let it fly—it blurred through the air faster than a diving hawk and struck so cleanly in the center that it hardly made a sound. It hit the drum so hard it pierced it and its point emerged on the far side. The crowd marveled as Devadatta raised his arms, already declaring himself the winner of the contest. "Better me if you dare, cousin," he said to Siddhartha. He turned his back momentartily, and then spun around and tossed him the bow.

When Siddhartha took the bow, Yashodhara drew her golden sari across her face, fearful that he would lose. And when she heard him command that the target be moved two gows farther, she crossed her arms over her breasts and closed her eyes.

Siddhartha drew an arrow from the quiver. Looking at the

target ten gows down the field, no larger than a cowry shell held at arms length, he notched the arrow and drew the bow in one swift motion, pulling the cocksfeather to his cheek, so far the tips of the bow touched. And then, just as he prepared to release, the bow snapped in two at the grip. The sound cracked like lightning, and the halves of the bow flew apart, smashing into each other again, and the arrow—sent awry with sudden force—moved too fast for any eye to follow and pierced the ground between Siddhartha's feet.

As Siddhartha let the string of the broken bow drop from his hand—before anyone else could speak—Devadatta shouted, "Bring the Prince a new bow worthy of a Shakya Lord!" There was confusion for a moment. Other bows were produced, but Devadatta slapped them all away with contempt until someone said, "There is Sinahanu's bow, kept in the temple nearby. It has been there for ages, but it is said that no man can string it or draw it." "Bring it," said Devadatta. "That is a weapon worthy of a warrior!" And though Siddhartha and even the Raja insisted that any bow would do, Devadatta had roused the crowd, and now all awaited the mythic bow of Sinahanu, chanting, "A bow worthy of a Lord! A bow worthy of a Lord!"

When they brought the ancient bow to Siddhartha, holding it up for all to see, a great cheer went up, but there was silence among the Prince's family. Suddhodana's countenance grew grave, and Gandiva said to him, "O, Maha-Raja, the archery is but one contest among many. The Prince need not win this to win his bride."

"That is not what concerns me, Gandiva. It is the thought of humiliation that makes my heart cold. No man can draw Sinhahanu's bow. Devadatta has orchestrated this to avenge himself for losing the judgment of the swan. He means to leave a bitter taste in Siddhartha's mouth for the rest of his days. I

must stop this." He turned and called, "Siddhartha!"

But it was too late. The Prince made a gesture, with a smile, and accepted the bow from the courier—black steel inlaid with vines of gold; unstrung, its curves played out in perfect symmetry with the grace of a maiden's lips.

Siddhartha tried the bow once against his knee, and with all the strength in his arms he could barely bend it. He braced one tip against the earth and wrapped his right leg around the bow, and then, leaning upon it with the full force of his body, he bent it far enough to place the ancient string, made of unknown metal, over its notches. The string held. He thrummed it once as if it were the string of a lute, and the sound pulsed deep, loud, and clear—everyone there, and even those far away could feel the vibration in the air. "What is that sound?" they said. Those who had seen answered, "It is the voice of Sinahanu's bow." But those who did not know said, "It is the echo of OM."

"Here," said Siddhartha, holding out the bow to his cousins. "I offer you the chance to use this bow and hit your targets again. It is only fair that we use the same weapon to fire our arrows." But one after the other, they declined, saying there was no unfairness in Siddhartha being the only one to use it. To Devadatta, the Prince offered the bow a second and third time, and each time Devadatta drew farther away as if the weapon repulsed him.

Siddhartha selected a perfect arrow from his quiver, fitted it, and drew the great bow in a single, smooth motion. Those who stood near him saw every muscle in his body strain, they felt his body quiver with fatigue as he aimed, and then there was a sharp hissing sound as he loosed the arrow and it split the air, blurring faster than any eagle, so fast they imagined it might burst into flame like the magic arrows of the ancient vedas. It flew so fast they saw it as a line, only faintly arched,

that stretched from Siddhartha to the target; it pierced the bullseye in front, punctured the back, and skimmed into the plain beyond, father than any eye could follow. And the long echo of the bowstring was drowned by the cheering of the crowd.

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"If not the bow, then let it be the sword by which I defeat you," said Devadatta. And though he was but an average swordsman, he drew first, slashing through a talas tree six fingers thick. But Arjuna cut through one of seven fingers thickness with ease, and Ananda through one of nine fingers. Siddhartha took a tree of four fingers' thickness. "You admit defeat so easily?" said Devadatta. But Siddhartha was not done. He selected another talas eight fingers thick that grew close and had the squires pull their trunks together and lash them into one.

As the squires moved away, Siddhartha drew his sword, its blade flashing an arc of light, reflecting the sun; and in the same single stroke he slashed the trunks. The talas trees remained upright. "He turned his blade!" cried Ananda to hs cousins. "Siddhartha!" But the Prince did not turn to look. He strode calmly toward those gathered from Koliya, sheathing his sword. The crowd made no sound.

"Siddhartha!" It was Devadatta this time. Now the Prince raised his hand as if to silence him, and a gentle breeze blew from the south. The smallest of gusts, and both trees crashed to the earth, cut cleanly through. Before the echo of their fall could end, the gathered crowd erupted into wild applause and cheered the Prince, "Siddhartha! Siddhartha!" and he raised his arms as his cousins, in defeat, honored him and acknowledged his victory.

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Now Suprabuddha approached from among the Koliyas. "From the beginning, Siddhartha, you were the one in our hearts," he said. "You are dearest not only to Yashodhara, but to all of us. But to see you this day, to see your prowess in the arts of the warrior, that is truly a surprise. What magic is it? How have you learned more about manhood among your lotus ponds and poems than your cousins have learned under the tutelage of heroes?"

"I have meditated and I have practiced, Uncle. And I have been moved by my love of your daughter."

"And I give her to you, Siddhartha. Accept now the treasure you have won."

Yashodhara rose from her company and approached the Prince with a garland of mogra flowers. She walked past the other suitors—past Arjuna, Ananda, and Devadatta—who watched her with remorse and envy, and when she reached Siddhartha she bowed low, touching his feet. Then she looked up, unveiled, her naked face radiant with joy; she rose and hung the garland around his neck, and she whispered, "Take them all. With these I make good my apology." She placed her face against his chest. More loudly, so that other could hear, she declared, "Behold me, my Prince, for I am yours!"

And the assembled throngs rejoiced.

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As the festivities drew on into the night, Gandiva approached the Raja.

"O, Maha-Raja," he said, "By your leave, may I speak?"

"Speak," said Suddhodana. "Speak while your tongue may

still move. Before you are stupefied by the soma on this happy night." He made a show of lifting his goblet in a gesture toward the revelers.

"O, Maha-Raja, I have watched you throughout this happy day and I have seen your face. When others are looking it is full of happiness. Indeed, you seem radiant with a joy I have not seen since the birth of Prince Siddhartha. But when you believe no one is looking, your face is full of gloom. Why are you so apprehensive, O, Maha-Raja?"

The Raja smiled a guilty smile, and then he laughed bitterly, gesturing to the feast. "All this," he said. "All this is but the shimmering of the water on the skin of the river. It is pleasant to look upon, it is distracting. It is entertainment mixed with ritual. It passes. It matters little." He put down his goblet and stared soberly into it as if examining his reflection on the soma it contained. He saw the broken-hearted expression on his own face. "What matters, Gandiva, is the current of the river. Its direction. Its strength. Today Siddhartha brought honor to my name, but today is the day that I know I have lost him."

"Lost him? O, Maha-Raja, how have you lost the Prince? You have gained a daughter."

"When a boy is young, his father can see into him, knowing the cause of every action and the origin of every thought. But today, when he won each contest, I was surprised. Truly surprised. My spies have told me how he prepared for each of the events, but they did not anticipate Devadatta's trickery with the bow. Tell me, Gandiva—you yourself are named for the bow of the great Arjuna, who was a son of Pandu. How did he do it?"

"Perhaps the answer is simple, O, Maha-Raja. Perhaps he has the favor of the gods."

"No man could shoot that bow. I tried to draw it myself

after the contest and could not pull it more than a hand's span."

"You are no longer young."

"My strength has yet to leave me, Gandiva."

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~13~

The Raja did not put his trust in love alone. He commanded that a new pleasure palace be built for his son, a marvel the likes of which the earth had never seen. It was called Vishramvan.

In the center of the palace grounds rose a green hill that followed a curve of the river Rohini. To the south, to shut out the world, was planted a stand of tamarind and sal, thick with pale sky-colored ganthi flowers, so that even when the clamor of the city carried on the wind, what was heard there was no louder than the hum of bees in a thicket. To the north rose the great Himalayas, their ranks white against the blue heavens, and beneath their snowy crests and crags and precipices could be seen dark forests laced with cataracts and veiled with clouds, and below them stands of rose-oak and groves of fir.

The architects and masons built the pavilion on the terraced hill, with towers on it flanks and pillared cloisters in the center. Its beams were carved with ancient tales told by the

rishis. The inner gate, wrought of pink-veined marble, was reached by winding through the garden and the court until—There!—the threshold of alabaster, the lintel of lapis lazuli. And then through doors of sandalwood, paneled and carved with scenes from the secret book of love, and on into the lofty halls and shadowed bowers, up stately stairs, through latticed galleries, beneath painted roofs through clusters of columns where cool fountains, fringed with lotus and nelumbo, harbored fishes of scarlet, gold, and blue. Outside, in the gardens, one could see great-eyed gazelles among the red roses, birds of rainbow plumage fluttering among the palms, green, gray, and white doves with their nests on gilded cornices. And peacocks with their splendid trains, and herons white as milk, and small house-owls, and plum-necked parrots, and yellow sunbirds. Lizards basked without fear in the garden lattices, squirrels fed from human hands, monkeys chattered with the crows while musk-deer played below. Even the shy and auspicious black snake sunned its sleepy coils under the moonflowers, for all was at peace there.

And the Raja commanded that only the fairest and the sweetest of servants attend in the palace of pleasure, those whose voices were pleasant to the ear, whose proportions were pleasing to the eye. Vishramvan was to be a place beguiling, where life would glide like a smooth stream banked by perpetual flowers, and Yashodhara would be queen of this enchanted court.

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But in its innermost heart, beyond the richness of those hundred halls, there lay a secret chamber whose entrance was a cloistered square vaulted by the sky. It was of polished stone cut and chiseled by master masons, inlaid with sacred symbols

and texts, with reliefs depicting the worldly pleasures. At its center lay a bathing pool of white marble bordered with agate-stone inlay. The stone was cool, even in summer, and to walk upon it was like walking on snow. In quiet niches, golden sunbeams softened into shadow, silvery, pale, and dim, as if the day itself paused here to become silent evening at the gate of the secret chamber.

Here it was not possible to know whether it was night or day, for it was always bathed in that soft light, brighter than dawn but as soothing as the sunset; and the air, more joyous than morning but as cool as the breath of midnight, was always sweet. Day and night the music played, the banquet spread with dewy fruits, sherbets chilled with Himalayan snow, subtle sweetmeats, with ivory cups of tree-milk and palm wine, and soma.

Night and day, everywhere, the nautch girls, cup-bearers, and cymballers, delicate, dark-browed, and trained in the arts of love—they fanned the sleeping Prince, and when he woke, they gently led his thoughts back to bliss with music: amorous songs and dreamy dances, the bright chiming of ankle-bells, the sinuous waving of arms; musk and champak and the blue haze spread from burning spices soothed his soul again to drowse by sweet Yashodhara. This is how Siddhartha was made to forget the world outside.

And the Raja commanded that, within those walls, no mention would be made of old age, sickness, death, or renunciation. If a dancing girl were to lose her vitality in the lovely court, if her glance became dim, if her limbs became sluggish, though guiltless, she was exiled from that paradise like a criminal—lest the Prince should notice and suffer at her woe. Sharp-eyed attendants kept watch for the smallest signs: brows knit in pain, tears of suffering, wails of fear, the keening of mourners outside the walls, the grim plumes of funeral

pyres at the ghats. Every dawn, before the Prince rose, each dying flower was plucked and the dead leaves hid, all unpleasant sights removed at the Raja's command, for he was determined that Siddhartha would become Chakravarti, the great King of Kings to rule all lands.

In truth, the palace was a prison. Love was its jailer and its bars were made of pleasure. All around stood a massive wall with brazen folding doors that took fifty men to roll back, whose opening could be heard for half a yojana. And inside this gate was another, and yet another, each bolted and barred and each guarded by watchmen faithful to the Raja. And Suddhodana said to them, "You shall allow no man to pass these gates—not even the Prince. This on your lives! Not even my own son!"

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The chained elephant, thought it may live in luxury, longs for the wild jungle; and so it was for Siddhartha. Though the trance of happiness lasted many years, in time the pleasures of the palace bored him, and he felt keenly the presence of the walls. He announced to his father one day that he wished to see the world outside.

"What is it you wish to see?" said the Raja. "There is no beauty outside to compare to the palace. There is nothing to be had that you cannot have here."

"The bird wishes to fly free, Father, no matter how beautiful its cage. The world is great, and I have seen little of it. I have not even seen Kapilavastu, my own city. I have not seen our subjects in the place where they live. How can I be their Prince if they are but an idea in my mind?"

"Then you must see the world," said the Raja. "Let us find an auspicious day for you to set forth."

At first the Raja delayed, plying Siddhartha with more lavish diversions, but even the most exotic of them—a dancing girl with hair the color of the sun—did not hold his attention long. And so the Raja made preparations for the inevitable day when Siddhartha would see the outside world.

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"They said it could not be done, but I have done it!" said Suddhodana. "Did I not hide the Himalayas from his mother? Did I not keep him from the visions his entire life? Do not tell me it cannot be done!"

Gandiva spoke into the silence of the gathered brahmins. "O, Maha-Raja, what you say is indeed true, but I must remind you that you have yet to avert what was prophesied. What the great Asita said has thus far come to pass. The Maharini, may she abide with the gods. . . ."

"Bring me no more pain!"

"O, Maha-Raja, when the great Asita spoke of the four visions he did not say whether they would be of particular men or of men in general. As you well know, for it has brought you great anxiety, the Prince has seen old age and sickness. He himself has been ill. He has been injured. He has even seen death, though not that of a man. But all this does not mean that the great sage was wrong."

"A road may be easily controlled, O, Maha-Raja," said a brahmin. "The Himalayas are low on the horizon and do not move. But a city is full of people whose motions and speech are the stuff of chaos. The vagaries of so many lives are beyond control."

"The people of Kapilavastu are your loyal subjects, but they are not your puppets, O, Maha-Raja."

Suddhodana laughed. "You say they are not puppets? We

are all puppets! You! Brahmins! Why do you make your sacrifices? Do you enjoy the blood and entrails of the animals you slay? Do you love the stench of blood and burnt flesh?"

"We do it to find favor with the gods, O, Maha-Raja. We follow the law of the ancients. It is our proper dharma. We are not puppets."

"Do not offend the gods, O, Maha-Raja!"

"I mean no offense. I speak only the truth. If you say it is your dharma, then what is your dharma but the rules that govern your proper behavior as brahmins? To behave properly is to be a puppet of your dharma."

"We may choose, O, Maha-Raja, whether we follow our dharma. We are not puppets."

"Then your dharma is a script and you are actors. Indeed, that is more apt, is it not? I am a kshatriya and Raja. That is my dharma. But to be a father is also my dharma. And as I am puppet to my dharma, let the people move to my command, for it is as much for them as for myself that Siddhartha must be Raja after me."

And seeing his expression and the light of passion—verging on madness, it is said—in Suddhodana's eyes, the brahmins of the sangha did not argue.

"O, Maha-Raja," said Gandiva, "We each will do what we must do." The brahmins eyed him and glanced at one another, uncertain of the meaning in his words.

"Then send out the criers," said Suddhodana. "No noisome or evil sight is to meet Siddhartha's eyes. No old age, no sickness, no death, no mendicant. No blind man, no cripple, no madman, no beggar. Let all the streets be swept clean and decked as for a festival. Indeed, it *shall* be a festival! Let all homes along his route be freshly painted. We have done this before and it shall be done again. The fine points of the old man's prophecy do not trouble me!"

◊

It was midday when Siddhartha emerged in his jeweled and parasoled chariot drawn by a team of four white horses. The water carriers had just sprinkled the streets of the city; the women had brightened their thresholds with auspicious red powder, strung new wreaths and multicolored ribbons; the trees along the avenues were thick with flags waving lazily in the gentle breeze; and at the four-ways, in the shrines of the gods, the icons gleamed so bright with new gilt that Kapilavastu seemed a city of the gods.

"Why did my father keep me from my own people for so long?" said Siddhartha. "I do not know what he feared. Kapilavastu is beautiful and the people are happy. Look at them, Channa, they must love me to be so joyous at the sight of their Prince! It is good to be the son of the Raja."

And so they passed far beyond the gates, down the avenue where the cheering people thronged about the chariot, caressing its golden frame, stroking the flanks of the white horses. Siddhartha looked upon everything like a drunken man, overwhelmed by the crowds of people, the cacophony of sounds, the riot of colors. As the chariot made its way through the sea of bodies, as the snorting horses pushed them out of the way, Channa called out, "Make way! Make way!" and another chariot came to go before them and clear the street with whip and goad, which Siddhartha, lost in his intoxication, could neither hear nor see.

They moved forward, slowly; and under the fierce rays of the sun, so hot it pricked the skin when an arm emerged from under the parasol shade, Siddhartha began to feel as if he were witnessing everything from a great height. He wiped his brow; he was still excited; he called out to the people; he saw the

hundred thousand reflections of the midday sun glinting in their eyes; and then, in front of the chariot and to one side, entering the avenue from an alley just behind the first chariot, Siddhartha noticed an odd stillness. It was a lack of motion that drew his eye, a spot of calm in the crowd.

It was a man, an old, old man whose shriveled and sun-burnt skin clung like an animal's hide to his fleshless bones. In one gnarled hand he clutched a staff, propping up his bent frame as he looked up with dim eyes occluded by cataracts. His toothless jaw wagged with palsy and now, struck with fear at the sight of the Prince in his chariot, he broke into a fit of coughing, doubling over from the pain, holding one hand against his protruding ribs as he choked out gobs of phlegm into the dust. He reached out a bony hand, calling something Siddhartha could not hear, but even from the chariot he could see the old man's wet mouth and shriveled gums.

Soldiers came forward and grabbed the old man to remove him from the chariot's path. He struggled with them, flailing his thin arms, kicking feebly with his legs as they lifted him into the air.

"Stop!" cried Siddhartha. "Let him be."

The soldiers put the old man down and stood in front of him to hide him from view, but the Prince motioned for them to stand out of the way.

"Channa," he said, "who is this man so miserable and so sad? Is he starving that his ribs protrude so? Was he born so thin and wretched?"

The question surpised him and Channa did not think before answering, "He is merely old, O, Prince."

"I have seen old men, Channa. Surya is old. My father grows old. But in all my life I have seen no man as pathetic as this."

"He is much older, O, Prince, and his life outside the

palace has been full of pain and suffering." Seeing the Prince's expression, Channa paused and said in a more deliberate tone, "His lamp has run out of oil and now the wick burns black as he struggles to keep alive the last spark of life."

Siddhartha frowned. "Is this the fate of my father? And of me? And what of Yashodhara? When she has lived eighty years, will she be such a wretch? Will I see the same grey film upon her eyes?"

"Yes, O, Prince." Channa lowered his head, as if in shame. "It is the way of the world. We all grow old, and at the end of our days we are all as wretched as he."

"Take me back," said Siddhartha. "Today I have seen too much. What joy can I take from these festivities when I have seen what I have seen?"

They returned by the South Gate, and that night Siddhartha could not sleep; he lay restless, like a bull made anxious by the sound of close thunder. Just after dawn he called for his chariot and went out again into Kapilavastu, this time by the West Gate.

And that morning, with the sun at his back, Siddhartha saw a man lying mortally sick at the side of the road. "Stop," he said, and before Channa could prevent it, he had stepped down from the chariot into the street.

The people moved aside to let him pass to the sick man, who looked up with eyes full of fear and pleading. Siddhartha could see how he lay contorted, his body disfigured by the disease, his skin covered in pustules and raw sores that swarmed with flies. The man trembled and gasped for breath; sweat gleamed on his creased face and he made as if to reach out, but his arm hung almost languidly at his side and only his fingers moved. Siddhartha smelled the sharp reek of urine and then, as he drew closer, a thicker stench he did not recognize; it hung in the air like a cloud of invisible insects.

"He has soiled himself," said Siddhartha. "Clean him."

Only Channa heard. No one else stood within earshot.

The sick man looked up, attempting to speak, but only a groan passed through is parched lips. When Siddhartha stood over him, casting shade across his face, the man's expression grew calm.

"Do not touch him, O, Prince! He is lowborn!"

But Channa was too late, and Siddhartha knelt down and tenderly lifted the man's head. "Bring me water," he said. "He is thirsty." He could feel the man's fever, the shocking lightness of his bones. Behind him, Channa motioned to the soldiers, who now approached, and one took a jug of water from a woman to give to the Prince.

"O, Prince, this man is sick with some plague. The elements of his body are confounded. You must not touch him, or you may catch his disease!"

"Surely, I could never become like this!"

"Even you, O, Prince, even you!" Channa cried in alarm, pulling him away. "All men can succumb to the plagues, all castes, all ages. All of us who have bodies can fall victim to disease."

By now the soldiers had surrounded them. Two of them made as if to wash the sick man, but under their breaths they spoke prayers to ward off demons and to protect them against pollution.

"We must go back," said Channa, taking the Prince by the hand, back onto the chariot, and he did not resist. Siddhartha continued to look toward the sick man as if he were witnessing an unpleasant but fascinating dream from which he could not wake; and Channa urged the horses on, away from the scene, back into the grounds of the palace where Siddhartha's mind slowly calmed once again.

Just before sunset they set forth once more, this time by

the North Gate. They had not gone long past the festive sights when they came upon a procession carrying a bier on which lay a body. The air, light with the scent of fresh flowers, now took on the cloying thickness of incense and perfume, and under it, the unmistakable stench of death.

Siddhartha shuddered when he saw the four men who walked slowly with their burden. "Who are these people?" he asked. "They carry garlands of flowers and yet they are overcome with sadness. And what has become of that man, Channa? Why does he lie so still and stiff like a wooden statue, and why have they wrapped him so tightly from head to toe?" Siddhartha pointed with an unsteady hand. "Ask them where they go, Channa. And what is this foul wind that blows from them?"

Channa pulled the reins, and the horses stopped, snorting and restlessly stamping the ground as the procession passed. "O, Prince," Channa said, his voice catching, "I need not ask where they are going, for they carry a dead man. His body is stiff because it is lifeless. These people are those who once loved him. They carry him to the charnel grounds to the ghat where they may burn his corpse before it decays and becomes even more foul."

Siddhartha was full of awe, and afraid. "What has he done, Channa? What has he done to be a dead man? Is he the only one, or does my father's city harbor more men of his kind?"

"Please, O, Prince, do not burden yourself with such concerns!"

"Tell me, Channa!"

"He has done nothing, O, Prince. All men will die one day. All who are born into this world must die to leave it. He has done nothing. No one escapes death."

"No one?" said Siddhartha.

"No one, O, Prince."

"And what happens after death, Channa? Tell me."

Channa remained silent for the longest time, so long that Siddhartha grew impatient and grasped him by the shoulder, turning him to see his face. There were tears in his eyes, welling up, trickling down his dusty cheeks, leaving trails of pale skin. Channa reined in the horses and the chariot drew to a stop. The people, though they had been commanded to keep away, began to gather round, gazing up at the Prince, squinting as if his image blinded them.

"Tell me, Channa."

Channa's lips quivered. "Why do you ask me this, O, Prince? You have your father, the great Maha-Raja. You have all the rishis, the akaryas, and the seers of Kapilavastu. Ask *them* what happens!"

"But I want to hear from you, Channa. You are my friend. I trust you to tell me the truth."

Channa made an anguished sound in his throat. He wiped the tears from his face. "You will punish me."

"I will have you punished if you do not answer!"

"Then I will tell you the truth, O, Prince. I am not a sage. I do not speak to the gods. I do not practice the mystical arts. I am not a brahmin. I do not make sacrifices. I do not know what happens after death.

"But I will tell you what I have seen. I have seen the dead grow foul and bloated until they burst. I have seen them infested by maggots, just like rotting meat. I have seen them bound in shroud cloths, covered in fragrant flowers that hide the stench. I have seen them taken to the cremation grounds and lighted with wood on the pyre until they are roasted, burnt, and crumbled to ashes. I have seen their bones gathered and ground to dust.

"That is what happens after death, O, Prince! That is what has been hidden from you by your loving father the Maha-

Raja. That is what awaits me when he learns what I have told you."

Siddhartha felt strange sensation in his heart, as if it were being crushed by the weight of his own flesh, as if it had grown suddenly weak and could not endure the pressure of his lungs as he drew breath. He felt a profound weakness from his throat, to his bowels, to his feet. His vision grew momentarily dim. He gestured to Channa, a feeble gesture. "Go back," he said. "I have seen what I have seen." And Channa snapped the reins to urge the horses back to the palace.

Now the crowd parted; some leapt out of the way for fear of being crushed under the hooves of the four pale horses and wheels of the golden chariot.

"Channa," said Siddhartha, "I will not tell my father what you have said to me." He felt a sensation of heat against his face, as if he were standing near to a flame. He felt a pressure against his body—he was cradled in large arms, his father's arms, and the red light of the fire flickered, the heat blew against them in waves as the wind shifted, and the rushing sound, the roaring of the fire, the crackling and popping of the wood, the glint of light on his father's cheek as a tear rolled down from the corner of his eye. Siddhartha could not remember knowing this, the meaning of this, the feeling of this. "Why is my father crying?" he thought. "I have never seen tears in his eyes. I have never heard him weep or show any weakness unbecoming to a king." But now the memory grew, and he saw his father mouthing a name whose sound was lost in the roaring flames. It was a sound whose meaning he could not have known then, but now that the image lived again in his memory, he could read his father's lips pronouncing the name of his dead mother. "Maya," Siddhartha whispered.

When they reached the palace gates, whose metal fixtures blazed in the setting sun—when they closed behind him, the

mechanisms clicking, the great bars of wood thudding loudly into their slots—Siddhartha knew with certainty, for the first time, in his heart, that he was locked inside as surely as the world was locked out. He looked at the road into the palace—whose dirt was different from the dirt outside—and he felt sick in his heart.

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As the chariot passed the buildings of the outer compound, Siddhartha saw his beautiful cousin, the maiden Kisha Gautami, watching him from her upper window. Struck by his royal bearing, not knowing why he returned so soon, she sang out:

Nibbhuta nuna sa mata
Nibbhuta nuna sa pita
Nibbhuta nuna sa mari
Ya sya yana i disa pati!

"Blessed is the mother, blessed is the father, blessed is the wife of one so glorious," Siddhartha repeated in a whisper from below her window. But how were they blessed? "Nibbhuta" also meant to be serene, in the calm of Nirvana, a calm like nothingness. And now that he loathed the joys of life, now that pleasures had lost their flavor, it occurred to him—*that* was the true blessing: to achieve the state of Nirvana in which everything is extinguished, every flame of desire and craving blown out, all illusion of permanence exposed as delusion. That was the glory he must seek.

He looked up at Kisha—Kisha the Frail, so delicate, so prone to sickness, so easy to tire—and she shyly pulled back into the shade of her room. "Stop," he said to Channa, and he

removed his necklace of pearls, worth a thousand pieces of gold. “Take this to my cousin,” he said, pointing up to the shadowed window.

Channa obeyed without question, and in a moment Siddhartha saw Kisha’s pale face again, radiant with joy, framed in the shadows. But when he saw her fragile beauty, the trembling of her full lips, a pang of sorrow struck his heart, for suddenly he saw her older, her skin wrinkled with age and grief; she was distraught over the dead child in her arms, and she was looking up, pleading, through eye full of tears, and Siddhartha turned away before she could see the cloud come over his expression. When Channa snapped the reins and the chariot moved on, Kisha Gautami gazed longingly down upon the Prince, holding the necklace against her breast and caressing its beads; and Siddhartha, lost in his thoughts, did not know that now, in her heart, she believed he was in love with her.

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S Y N O P S I S

Part II
The Four-Gated City
(continued)

On the same day that Siddhartha resolves to leave the palace, his son is born. When Channa brings him the news, the Prince despairs. “Call him Rahula,” he says, “for now there is another fetter to bind me to this life.” Siddhartha knows that if he sees his son and his wife, they will weaken his resolve and compel him to stay. Anguished by his decision, he waits until late in the night to see them while they are sleeping.

Entering the palace after the extravagant celebrations, Siddhartha sees the beautiful courtesans sprawled about the royal apartments asleep. They are drooling and snoring, their limbs in awkward poses, and it seems to him that he is seeing piles of corpses. What was seductive and sensuous in daylight, by the dim light of the lamps, is now grotesque and repulsive to him. “I have been living in a graveyard, and I did not know it,” he says.

When he enters Yashodhara’s chambers for a last look at his sleeping wife and son, he finds that her hand has fallen across the infant’s face. Because he is afraid to awaken her, Siddhartha dares not move Yashodhara’s hand away. He leaves without seeing Rahula’s face.

Siddhartha takes his horse Kanthaka and, accompanied by Channa, he rides out of the palace and into the forest. There he cuts off his hair and trades his regal clothes for the humble rags of a wandering mendicant. He sends Channa back with his horse and a message for his family: “I will not return until I have conquered old age, sickness, and death.”

Part III
The Forest of Wandering

In his six years of wandering, Siddhartha meets many ascetics on many spiritual paths, and he practices much of what he sees. There are saddhus who practice severe disciplines and forms of self-torture to attain mystical states; there are those who perform austerities in the hopes of gaining merit and rebirth into a heavenly realm. Siddhartha rejects these approaches. Why should pleasure come out of pain? Why should one undergo austerities in this life in the hope of indulging oneself in the next? To privilege one state of consciousness over another, to privilege one incarnation over another—where is the virtue in that? Siddhartha rejects self-torture and self-seeking as worthless if one wants to end the cosmic cycle of suffering and pain.

Siddhartha then studies with two great masters of meditation. The first is Alara Kalama, who has achieved liberation from the material world in the state of Nothingness. Siddhartha achieves this state under Kalama's instruction, but it is not what he is seeking. He leaves Kalama and studies under Udraka Ramaputra, who is able to enter into a state in which there neither perception nor non-perception. But this is also a disappointment for Siddhartha. He sees that merely withdrawing from the world to achieve altered states of consciousness does not provide any meaningful solutions to life's basic problems. He leaves Ramaputra, taking with him five of his best disciples, and he continues on his search for true liberation from birth and death.

Now, with his band of ascetics, Siddhartha lives an unbelievably austere and reclusive life for six years. His hope is

that a life of self-denial and severe discipline—as opposed to self-torture—will give him the clarity he needs to find an answer. But after six years of intense fasting and meditation to clarify his mind, his body is so weakened and emaciated that he is close to death. One day, as he reaches down to feel his belly, he feels the knots of his spine; reaching to feel his back, he feels his belly; when he rubs his skin to regain circulation, his flesh peels off in clumps. And still, he has come no closer to his goal. He passes out from hunger, and he is saved from death by a woman who finds him under a tree. Stirred by compassion, she nurses him back to health with rice-gruel.

When his five fellow ascetics learn of this lapse, they are profoundly disappointed, for they believed him to be their leader. How could he let himself be ministered to like that by a lowly woman? How could he forsake his discipline? The five ascetics abandon him and leave for the deer park at Varanasi.

Part IV
Under the Pipal Tree

Siddhartha realizes that self-denial and extreme asceticism are as much of a hindrance to achieving enlightenment as self-indulgence. He resolves not to return to asceticism or self-torture. After regaining his health he goes to the base of an ancient pipal tree (a species of fig now known as the Bodhi Tree) near the town of Gaya, sits upon a grass mat and vows, "My blood may become exhausted, my flesh may rot, and my bones may crumble, but I will not leave this spot until I achieve enlightenment."

Now, this arouses the ire of the devil Mara, "Stealer of Life." In Indian cosmology, he is the being in charge of all existence which involves passion and desire; he is also known as Kamadeva, the god of desire whose weapons are the sensuality and longing that keep sentient beings from achieving spiritual liberation. It is his responsibility—as a kind of cosmic warden—to keep all sentient beings trapped in the karmic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. He ensures that they are constantly transmigrating, always bound by desire and craving.

Mara is very concerned that Siddhartha is on the verge of enlightenment, for if he learns the secret of spiritual liberation, he might teach it to others. As Siddhartha takes up his meditation beneath the pipal tree, Mara summons his daughters and his demonic armies to stop Siddhartha from achieving enlightenment. First Mara sends his daughters to seduce Siddhartha back into a life of sensual pleasures. But even their most feminine wiles fail, and Mara then turns to fear and force—he releases his army of demons. Once again, Siddhartha remains steadfast. Though the demons shoot volleys of flaming arrows

and throw mountain-sized boulders at him, he remains still in his meditative state. The projectiles transform into a rain of flowers that float harmlessly to the earth.

As a last resort, Mara himself appears to Siddhartha and personally confronts him in a battle of cosmic proportions. Mountains crumble, stars fall, the earth splits asunder; and yet Siddhartha now knows all this is illusion and he sits calmly. Finally, Mara asks, "What gives you the power to presume that you can leave my realm of desire?" Siddhartha's reply is to touch one hand to the ground, calling upon the Earth itself to witness his realization and his resolve to save all sentient beings. Mara can do no more, and so he slinks away with his demon army.

Now that all obstacles are gone, Siddhartha begins to achieve greater and greater insight into the human condition. He recalls his own life in every detail; he recalls all of his previous lives; he sees now all the interrelated circumstances, the chain of causality that brought him to the pipal tree. Now his consciousness expands to that of all sentient beings—he sees their lives determined by the causes and conditions which they themselves, through their will, have set in motion—and he contemplates the chain of causation, whereby all sentient things come into existence and forge their own destiny. He sees that the root cause of suffering, the ultimate cause of the karmic cycle, is ignorance—the illusion of self, the pursuit of selfish desire, the misapprehension of reality.

With the rising of the morning star, Siddhartha awakens to the truth. He is enlightened. As the sun rises, he sets out into the world to bring his teachings to all sentient beings. A passing merchant, awed by the radiance around him, asks, "Are you a god?" "No," he answers. "Then are you an angel?" "No." "What are you, then?" "I am awake," replies the Buddha.