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❧ FOR THE BUDDHAS ❧

According to his spirit guide, Lewis had lived five times before: as a warrior Eskimo queen, as a ditch digger in the Zhejiang province of Northern China, as a master carpenter designing racks for the Inquisition, as a sharecropper above the white cliffs of Dover and, most recently, as a Tibetan prince who slashed his wrists the night after his arranged marriage. This suicide had so unsettled his karma, he was told, two centuries passed before he was allowed to take human form again. In this life his name was Lewis Zukowski, son to Saul and Pamela Zukowski, and sole heir of Zukowski's Discount Furniture off Route 1 in Saugus. His real name, the one that followed him from life to life, he might learn again if the Buddhas showed mercy, so Lewis spent two evenings a week sitting on the cold bamboo-covered basement of the Brookline Meditation Center, located six blocks from his parents' house and four doors down from the pharmacy where he stocked shelves part-time.

Lewis practiced his *koan* as he walked to the pharmacy each morning before work. He tried to empty his mind or fill it with the answer, either was correct, but on this

day, Lewis was so irritated with his parents, he could think of nothing else. His *koan* came out in long streams of breath that evoked, to each passerby, the sounds of a ceiling fan threatening to pull loose from its moldings.

Lewis had purchased, with his own money, an adult men's magazine. Nothing distasteful, it included articles on how to setup one's high fidelity stereo system and interviews with national figures such as Henry Kissinger. His mother had found the issue, stashed in the bathroom closet, while putting away some towels and had given it over to his father who, against vociferous objections, burned it in the fireplace, even though it was early May and he struggled to open the flu.

Lewis took the long way to work. "I should be able to make my own decisions," he explained to Maharishi, his spirit guide.

Maharishi brushed a ringlet of blonde hair from his face. 'I do not understand why you would waste time looking at women you could never hope to meet, in situations you will never find yourself in. One shouldn't offer a starving man a cookbook.'

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Lewis had heard all of this before. But Maharishi, having no body, lacked the experience of waking up each morning with a painful erection.

Maharishi folded his hands across the billowy expanse of his dress. 'You must detach yourself from need. Need is your enemy.'

"Give it a rest," Lewis snipped.

Maharishi fell silent with a little pout. Lewis learned he could ask his spirit guide to assume any form and so, he selected Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like it Hot*, a decision he now regretted. It seemed to Lewis, despite Maharishi's claims of being sexless and beyond gender, this assignation had produced a quality in their relationship Lewis

associated with his parents: whenever Lewis (the man) became angry, Maharishi (the woman) would withdraw. Maharishi's explanation was that raw emotions interfered with the astral link, an explanation that left Lewis feeling his spirit guide lacked some essential leadership skills.

Also, Maharishi refused to show Lewis his breasts.

Buddhist meditation had taught Lewis three things: to detach from the world in moments of desire, to seek an end to suffering, and that in all things, the mind ruled over the heart. Before that, he'd been Hindu, or something close to it. Lewis felt that a fundamental absence in both systems was practical advice on women. Lewis needed all the help he could get, which was why, in the stockroom a few days later, he was listening to Maharishi again as he began to unload a palette of diapers.

'The Second Noble Truth.' Maharishi held up two fingers, having changed into a black dress with a fringed hem and pearls. 'The Second Noble Truth: desire leads to suffering.'

"I'm sure before Siddhartha transcended sexual urges," Lewis said, "he got action."

Maharishi, who claimed to be above religion, still held the Buddha in high regard. 'You have already ensnared yourself in your own thoughts,' he said curtly – an aphorism straight from a pocket-sized book Lewis owned, *The Little Buddhist's Guide to Nirvana*.

Lewis cut through the plastic packing wrap. "What do you know about my thoughts? You only know what I tell you."

Then Lewis heard a voice – a real woman’s voice – interrupting them. “Who you talking to?” it demanded. A shiver traveled down Lewis’ spine. He turned to see Roberta Hwang standing in the doorway, removing a key from the lock.

Lewis reached down and sliced the wrapping at the bottom of the palette, blocking her face from his view.

“Oh,” she said, “it’s you.” Her purse hit the floor. “I’m filling for Marcy for *one day*. This is not going to get weird, understand?”

Lewis raised his head and nodded so she could see it.

‘Talk to her,’ Maharishi said. ‘You’ve been waiting three months.’ At Maharishi’s insistence, Lewis had invited Roberta out seven times; seven times she’d refused. The mere sight of her compounded each rejection into a lump of clay within his bowels, a feeling that returned to him with great force. He kept his eyes on Roberta as she selected a red smock from the hangers and fished a nametag from her pocket. She had transferred, recently, to another store.

“Stop *watching* me,” Roberta said, slipping a pack of cigarettes into the front pocket of the smock.

Lewis sunk back on his heels, afraid.

‘Ask her!’ Maharishi barked. Roberta and Lewis had shared a lifetime in Zhejiang. Maharishi felt it was important for Lewis to clear things up, karma-wise. By all accounts, it’d been a rough marriage.

“I need—I would like to ask you something.”

“You’re not going to leave me alone, are you? I knew it was a mistake to come back here. I told myself, don’t go back. Then Marcy calls me up for a favor.” Roberta sighed. “Make it quick.”

Lewis wiped his hands on his jeans. “Please tell me why you wouldn’t go out with me.”

She snatched her purse up off the ground. “We are not going to have this conversation. No. Nuh-uh. We’re not going there.”

“Please,” Lewis said. He came around the palette so there was only air between them. “I promise, after this I’ll leave you alone.”

Roberta stiffened. She looked down, scraped a bit of polish off her fingernail, ran one hand up her forearm until she reached her elbow and left it there. Then she pinched herself. “You frighten me. Okay? Look, I don’t know. I’m already a half-hour late. I need to go, alright?”

Lewis nodded weakly.

“See you,” Roberta said and slammed the door behind her.

The pain in Lewis’ gut dropped lower; shame cooked his fear to stone.

‘Some residual anger is to be expected,’ Maharishi said. ‘You drowned her after all.’

Roberta’s lingering perfume triggered a memory of science class: breeding fruit flies. The anesthetic Lewis used to drowse the flies before examination had a similar odor. By accident, he’d left them in the trap too long and killed half his sample set. Lewis associated the smell with personal failure and couldn’t understand what his mind

was trying to communicate, whether he was the fly or the scientist or if the murder of the insects was now avenged.

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