

An American Buddha



William Hrdina

Edited by Bonnie Honeycutt & Nancy Cassidy

Copyright 2018 William Hrdina and Fnord Publishing

All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 978-1537066097

ISBN 13: 1537066099

Preface

Nine months before the birth of Siddhartha Smythe, his mother Maya had a dream.

In her dream, she saw a beautiful albino elephant holding a lotus flower in its trunk. Upon seeing the magnificent creature, Maya felt compelled to drop to her knees in reverence and awe.

The elephant exuded a spiritual purity unlike any she'd ever experienced, manifesting in a white aura that hung around the creature like a mist. With a nod of its regal head, the elephant reached out with its trunk and handed the lotus flower to Maya. She took it, and without a word, the elephant shrank.

Soon, it became small enough to fit into a hole that opened in Maya's side.

Then, Maya woke up.



The next day, Maya discussed her dream with her husband Brahma. He believed it meant that Maya should immediately start trying to get pregnant.

Maya agreed, but in her heart, she knew it had already happened.

Nine months later, Maya gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Siddhartha. Seven days after Siddhartha's birth, Maya died.



Eighteen months later, Brahma met a woman named Mara Henderson. Mara's appearance reminded Brahma of Maya, his one true love, so he married her.

To Brahma's chagrin, Mara resembled his first wife only in appearance. Whereas Maya tended to be kind, wise, intelligent, and bold, Mara drank too much, spent too much money on frivolous things, praised ignorance, and acted in a generally unpleasant manner.

Loyal to a fault, Brahma stayed with her, but his marriage knew little love.

Part I

The Truth of Dukkha

The Velvet Prison

"Siddhartha, you need to go and pick up your father's birthday cake immediately. I don't trust the people at the bakery to get it here without messing up the frosting. I know they're talented artists and everything—but I think those people are goddamn hippies," Mara declared, waving her wine glass like a sword.

From his semi-concealed place behind a book, Siddhartha cringed at his stepmother's words. Why did she have to be so horrible about everything? She even managed to make birthday cake unpleasant.

Mara continued her tirade. "Without constant observation, I just know those bakers will ruin everything. Your father only turns fifty once. It's imperative we show him how much we love him by giving him the best birthday ever, and that's not going to happen if the cake looks like shit!" His stepmother swept a lock of hair out of her eyes and smiled with her uniquely toxic brand of pomposity.

Hearing his mother's angry tone, Tripitika, Mara's favorite pet macaque, screeched a warning.

Tripitika wasn't the only monkey on Taung Kaulat, the massive estate Siddhartha called home. The entire place was lousy with macaques. The overly playful monkeys perched in trees, jumped out from behind garbage cans and cannonballed unexpectedly into both the pool and the hot tub on a regular basis.

The luxurious California estate of Taung Kaulat found its inspiration in a Burmese monastery of the same name. Like its ancient counterpart, Siddhartha's father's estate sat perched on the top of a flattened mountain. The original monastery had formed naturally. In the California version, a team of engineers blew off the top of a mountain to create a similar effect.

Mara discovered Taung Kaulat on a trip to Burma where she had her first experience with the small, screechy macaques that roam everywhere. They kept coming up to her and demanding food by baring their teeth. Mara found the monkeys endlessly adorable.

Unlike everyone else, Mara never tired of feeding the monkeys vegetable chunks. She liked them so much, she decided to bring a bunch of macaques back with her to California.

Three years later, at the official closing of construction on the estate, Mara released fifty macaques to run free on the grounds. They immediately started reproducing at a wholly unsustainable rate, and within a year, the creatures had infested a decent-sized chunk of Southern California.

Mara spent most of her days walking among the beautiful mountaintop gardens, a bag of carrots in one hand and an expensive bottle of wine in the other. She would get drunk and yell at the monkeys like a queen ordering around her subjects.

Siddhartha looked at the clock. It read 10:14 am, and his stepmother already sounded drunk. He often thought that had his father never married her, everything about his life would be better.

Peeking over the top of his book, he asked, “Were you talking to me?”

He knew that she knew he’d heard her—the neighbors were a half-mile away and they probably heard her too.

“The bakery. Your father’s cake. Go get it. Now!” she repeated, her tone far less kind the second time.

He raised his eyes, curious. “Can I drive?”

Mara barked a laugh. “Don’t be stupid, you’re only seventeen. Chandaka will drive you.”

The usual, boring answer. People had more freedom on TV prison shows. He scratched his head, stretched and set down his book. Arguing with Mara wouldn’t get him anywhere. When she made up her mind, nobody could ever change it.

“Do you care if I pick up Govinda on the way?” he asked.

“I suppose. Even if I say ‘no,’ that boy will simply materialize out of the woodwork, the little weirdo—he’s like your shadow.”

He didn’t take the bait. Besides, he couldn’t really deny her claim, Govinda was like his shadow—or in kinder terms, his brother.

“I’m going now,” he said.

“So go. Don’t let the door hit you on the ass on your way out.”



Siddhartha left quickly, before Mara could give him anything else to do. Tripitika the macaque gave him one last screech to send him on his way.

“I hate that monkey,” he muttered.

The feeling was mutual.

It took him five full minutes to make his way to the garage. Chandaka, his personal driver, sat outside the garage entrance in a large cushioned chair, his feet up. His mouth hung open and a line of sleep-drool sagged down from the right side of his lip.

“Chandaka, wake up,” he whispered.

The old man gave no response.

Siddhartha shook him by the shoulder and Chandaka let out a series of incoherent grunts, before muttering and rolling away. When he moved, his garage keys fell out of his pocket and hit the ground with a soft clank of metal.

Heart beating hard in his chest, Siddhartha bent down and picked up the keys, expecting Chandaka to wake up any second. He didn’t. He had waited for this moment for years. Although he’d earned his driver’s license a year earlier via a specially administered test that he had completed within the confines of the Grove, he had yet to drive alone on a “real” road.

He pictured himself speeding along in the electric Mercedes Benz SLS AMG parked in the garage. He would put the top down and feel the wind whipping through his hair while he sped along at ninety miles an hour, the radio turned up as loud as it went. He had dreamt of the sensation on plenty of occasions, but he’d yet to experience it. The mere thought sent him into pangs of longing.

As a little boy, he had never considered his confinement and isolation—the estate seemed as big as the universe, providing every entertainment he could need or imagine. But every day he got older and the walls closed in just a little more. In recent months, he spent a lot of time fuming impotently—trapped, like a bug in a jar.

Careful not to wake Chandaka, he took his pilfered keys and unlocked the garage door. His coveted Mercedes sat near the door, practically begging him to get in and take it for a ride. Heart pounding, he walked over to the box that held all the garage's car keys and took out the set labeled "Mercedes SLS." He approached the car. It inspired a religious reverence—just touching it sent a jolt of adrenaline up his arm. He put his hand on the door handle, and with a gulp of courage, pulled it open. The black leather seat called to him like a siren. He slid down into it and went so far as to reach out and push the ignition button. The electric motor purred silently into life—the only sign of ignition being the sudden illumination of the dashboard.

Siddhartha put his hand on the gear shift.

He stopped.

His parents never punished him directly for his behavior. Instead, they punished him through other people—a far more effective tactic. In the past, whenever he got into any kind of mischief, they punished the servants.

Stealing the car could mean Chandaka's job. They knew how much he liked the old driver, and Mara might fire him just for spite.

Groaning, Siddhartha removed his hand from the shifter, turned off the engine and got out of the car. The leather squeaked in protest of his departure. Shoulders slumped, he went back to wake Chandaka and ask him for a ride.

Ten minutes later, they were on their way to the bakery. He moped in the back, silent, while the car wound down the mountain. The road made two full corkscrew rotations before reaching street level. It wasn't narrow—two cars could pass easily, but it never ceased to make him feel nervous.

Once they came out on level ground, he asked, "Chandaka?"

The driver's eyes met his in the rearview mirror. "Yes?"

Siddhartha looked up at the matte black ceiling of the car. "If I confess something, do you promise not to get mad?"

Chandaka blinked. "Since I don't know what you are going to say, it's hard for me to guarantee that I won't get mad. I can promise to listen before I respond. Promising more would be deceitful."

"That's fair," he conceded. "My father told me he hired you because you speak honestly. He said I needed someone in my life besides him who would call me out when I do stupid things. Most of the people who work for my father go out of their way to agree with everything I say. If you get upset, I suppose it'll be because I have it coming."

"Go ahead, say it," Chandaka encouraged.

He paused and took a deep breath. "Okay, here goes. Before I woke you up—I found you asleep. Your garage keys fell out of your pocket and I took them. I got in the Mercedes and I even started it. I only stopped because I feared my parents would fire you. Well, I might as well admit—I really wanted to take the car. I nearly took it despite what I thought would happen."

Chandaka drove in silence for a long time. Finally, he said, "Siddhartha, I appreciate your honesty and I can appreciate your desire for freedom. I am proud of your decision to tell me—it couldn't have been easy."

In the backseat, Siddhartha allowed himself a smile of relief. He hated disappointing Chandaka.

"Do you mind if I stop the car and speak with you man-to-man?" Chandaka asked.

His stomach burbling, he answered, "No, of course not."

Chandaka pulled the car over to the side of the road and came around to the back of the long black town car. He got in and sat down on the backseat, half-twisting to face Siddhartha. The normal formality of the old driver's demeanor dropped away, indicating they were talking as friends, not as employer and employee.

"How many years have I been driving you around?" Chandaka asked.

A shrug, "I don't know—my whole life I guess."

"Exactly. Your whole life. Through my rearview mirror, I've watched you grow up from a little squirt to the nearly full-grown man sitting next to me. In my own way, I love you like my own son. Because of this, I'll be honest—I've been worried about you."

Surprised, he asked, "Why? I'm doing alright."

Chandaka's face looked gentle and kind. "I know you are troubled, but you're not troubled enough. That's why I'm worried about you."

Confused, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“You’re seventeen. Where is your rebellion? I’m worried because you don’t seem to have any fight in you. I wonder, have you ever heard the word *institutionalized*?”

“No.”

Chandaka nodded, “That doesn’t surprise me—if I were your parents, I wouldn’t want you to know the word either. Being ‘institutionalized’ means you become so used to being in a prison, you stop aspiring to freedom. You lose the human need to discover. I don’t want this for you. But, you’re not my kid. All I can do is watch you and hope for the best. It’s been difficult. But, on the other hand, this thing you did this afternoon, the fact that you got in the car—that you wanted to go—it brings me hope. There’s a whole wide world outside, but you’ve never seen it. You might as well have grown up in Siberia or on a deserted island.”

The Smythe estate featured a full-size movie theater where Siddhartha could look at the Grand Canyon, the International Space Station and the Amazonian rain forest, all in high-resolution, top-quality 3-D digital video. He could explore in virtual reality too. But he never actually went anywhere, he only saw digital facsimiles. He didn’t know what the Grand Canyon smelled like. He didn’t know if the breeze felt cool or warm in the rain forest. He’d never hung out with the local residents, never had an opportunity to eat the local food—all things he wanted to do but could not in his purloined prison.

He had ready access to tablets, computers and cell phones. He could watch television and read books. His parents had flown in endless waves of scholars who lectured him about the ways of the world. But the computers he used had more filters and safeguards on them than a low-level bureaucrat in the Chinese Communist Party. An internet search for the term “sex,” “nude,” “tits,” or “penis” brought back zero search results on his laptop—an omission on par with writing an entire book without the letters E, T or S. It didn’t stop there either. The topics censured are simply too numerous to mention.

He had a cellphone with internet capability, but it was locked down as tightly as the laptop and the tablets. The television showed heavily censored programming, all designed to “spare” him from undesirable ideas and content.

Despite several futile attempts to get around the team of IT professionals who monitored everything he did online all day, every day, he still had not managed to watch an R-Rated movie. Siddhartha’s physical books also went through a vetting process by a set of censors trained personally by his parents. It wasn’t uncommon for him to find pages—or even entire chapters—missing.

Chandaka said, “Surely you’ve realized, your parents will never let you out of here. This is your life, a velvet prison.”

“What are you saying? I should’ve stolen the car and gotten you fired?”

“Well, no, I’m not saying that. I need my job—I’m not Gandhi. But the part of me that thinks of you as my son? That part? Yes, that part *does* want you to steal the car. Maybe there’s a way for you to get some freedom and for me to keep my job.”

He looked at his friend. “Okay. What would you suggest?”

Chandaka shrugged. “Maybe you could try ordering me to drive somewhere you’re not supposed to go.”

“The same problem applies—you’ll lose your job.” Leaning forward conspiratorially, Siddhartha continued, “But sometimes doors are left unlocked, right? And the box that holds the car keys, you lock that at night too, don’t you?”

“Yes, but it is just a cosmetic lock. There are plenty of things in the garage capable of breaking it.”

“Now I think we’re getting somewhere,” he grinned. Then, the grin faded and was replaced by a frown. Siddhartha said, “So what if I steal the car? I still have to get out of The Grove and that’s basically impossible—there’s only one way in and out, and the guards at the gate know not to let me through.”

Govinda nodded, “Lucky for you, there’s a secret road.”

“But you’ve always told me there is only one road into and out of The Grove.”

Chandaka ran his fingers through his hair. “Well, *officially*, that’s true. But there’s a back door. It’s a very narrow access road running between two estates. I’ll show you where. If you follow the road, it leads to what looks like a wall. Only, it’s not a wall—it’s a secret gate.”

He’d never heard of such a thing, not even a vague rumor, the thought astounded him. “Why on earth would they put in a secret entrance?”

“There’s a back door so residents can bring people and things in and out of The Grove without subjecting them to the guard’s review process. There is a chip that automatically opens the back gate installed into every resident’s vehicle.”

“Why would you have to sneak in people?”

“That’s a conversation for another day,” Chandaka said with a wry smile.

It had to have something to do with sex, considering how quickly Chandaka brushed off the question. Sex was another thing Siddhartha found quite interesting, but knew almost nothing about.

Too focused on escape to pursue the sex question, he asked, “After I go out through this secret gate—then what?”

Chandaka shrugged. “Only you can answer that question. For your first outing, I wouldn’t do anything crazy. Go out, see the world, and come back home. The gate works from either direction.”

“Just go out, drive around and come back?”

“Look, I know some people advocate jumping directly into the deep end of the pool to learn how to swim, but not me. I prefer to enter the water from the beach, first walking in and getting my feet wet, then wading. Eventually, I get around to swimming once I’m comfortable and acclimated to the temperature. This is the same thing. Get a taste of the infinite freedom out there. Come back home and process it. The world isn’t going anywhere. Don’t get overwhelmed or freaked out. You should know one more thing before I encourage you do this: there are a whole lot of people out there, folks who would like nothing more than to get a picture or an interview with you. Most of the vultures have given up after seventeen years, but not all of them.”

He didn’t understand. “Why would anyone want a picture of me?”

“See, this is what I’m talking about. You need to understand this stuff. You’re the only heir to America’s richest man. You live on the top of a flattened mountain in the most private and well-guarded community in this country. You’re the closest thing to royalty America has, and no one has ever seen a picture of you without it being released through your father’s press office. I’m sure you don’t know this, but you were six the last time that happened. Believe it or not, there are a considerable number of people convinced you aren’t real—that your father just made you up to get a tax break.”

“Nobody believes that,” Siddhartha laughed.

“Thirty-four percent, the last time I saw it polled a few months back,” Chandaka replied, crossing his arms.

Siddhartha’s mouth opened wide like a fish gasping for air. “You’re kidding!”

“I’m not. It doesn’t help that you’ve grown up to be a handsome boy. It’s just going to make it worse for you whenever you finally emerge into the world. Your parents chose to shelter you. If you were my child—and you are not—but if you were, I would’ve done things very differently.”

“Why is this the first time you’re saying this to me?” he asked.

“For the same reason that this is a one-time conversation. Talking this way is inappropriate and a breach of the contract I maintain with your parents. Guilt and love for you has forced me to say this once, and I simply couldn’t live with myself without doing at least that much. What happens next is going to have to be up to you.”

As a child, Siddhartha used to hug Chandaka all the time. Sometime around age eight, he’d stopped. Moved by his old friend’s words, he hugged him again. He said, “Thank you for your advice. I will think very hard on everything you have said.”

Chandaka smiled, “I know you will. So where do you want me to take you now? New York?”

“No, for now, we can just go to pick up Govinda.”

“Right away, Sir,” Chandaka saluted. “And Siddhartha—”

“Yes?”

“Thanks again for thinking of me and not just stealing the car. You’re right—your parents probably would’ve fired me and believe it or not—I really like my job.”

He blushed. “Thank you for being my friend, Chandaka. My parents don’t pay you for that, but they should.”



“What’s up with you, Siddhartha?” Govinda asked, tossing an M&M at his head.

It bounced off and fell to the floor.

“Huh?” Siddhartha replied, looking up and seeing his friend for the first time, even though he’d been in the house for ten minutes.

“Seriously?” Govinda laughed, “Did you take one of those purple pills your mom leaves laying around again?”

“That only happened once. I was eight, and I thought it was a candy,” Siddhartha protested.

Govinda laughed. “I’ll never forget that day. You asked me if I ever thought about what it felt like to be an elephant. You said you thought it would be pleasant—except for the sore feet. You were awesome.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re hilarious. Now shut up and be serious for a minute. I need you to ask your parents if you can stay at my house tonight.”

“It’s Saturday—they won’t care.”

“Good.”

“Why?” Govinda leaned forward and stared, “What are you up to?”

A smile crept across his lips. “We’re going to get out of The Grove tonight.”

Govinda gave a snort. “That’s a good one.”

“I’m not kidding—at all.”

“We can’t leave—we’ll get caught,” Govinda protested.

“We won’t get caught. We’re going to drive out. I have recently come into possession of the location of a hidden electronic gate. It is completely unmonitored—on purpose. We won’t have to see a single person.”

“Where did you learn about this magical gate?”

“A little bird told me.”

He wasn’t going to tell anyone—even Govinda—about his conversation with Chandaka. It would be a breach of trust.

“Okay, so did this little bird tell you how to get a car?”

“No. I figured that part out on my own. I took a walk around the house today and in the garage, there is a box with all the car keys. It’s locked, but I looked around and there are all kinds of thick wrenches and stuff for when the mechanics work on the cars. I think I can easily use one to break off the lock.”

“And where do you want to go?”

“I thought about this a lot and I think you’re probably going to laugh at me when I tell you.”

“I won’t—unless it’s funny.”

“I want to go to a grocery store.”

Govinda laughed.

“Hey—you weren’t supposed to laugh.”

“I’m sorry Siddhartha, but of all places, why a grocery store?”

“For my entire life, I’ve relied on other people to do everything for me. Did you know most days I don’t even pick out my own clothes? Every morning, a person I’ve never actually met leaves me an outfit on a chair in my dressing room. I am perfectly capable of looking around and picking my own clothes out of the closet. It’s right next door. I could, but I don’t. Most days, I wear what’s sitting on the chair. For example, the clothes I’m wearing now were sitting on the chair this morning. It’s the same way with food. Someone prepares food for me and I eat it. I never make it myself. If I want extra butter or something on my pancakes, I get it—or not—depending on my weight and how many calories I ate the day before. Someone else makes that decision for me. I want to go to the grocery store and buy stuff to make a sandwich. Then I am going to put all the meat, cheese, veggies, mayo, everything I want on it and nobody is going to stop me. If I get a stomach ache—then so be it.”

He looked up at his friend, unsure of how he would react to his declaration.

Govinda looked worried, but then his face changed, and a broad smile came over it. “Okay, let’s go to the grocery store and get some stuff to make sandwiches. You have cash, right?”

Shaking his head, he said, “This is why I need to have you around. No, I don’t have any money at all. Ironic, huh?”

Govinda laughed, “You’re a mooch, no doubt about it! Seriously, don’t worry about money. I have plenty of cash and a credit card too. My parents haven’t raised me to be quite as naïve as yours.”

“Oh yeah, you’re a real man of the world,” Siddhartha laughed.

Govinda had been out of The Grove exactly twice—which meant he’d left two times more than Siddhartha.

“I’m just saying, I know about money and how to use it and stuff.”

“Well good. You can teach me as we go. Do you know the best part about this whole business?”

“What?”

“If we get caught—there’s not a whole lot they can do to us in terms of punishment. What are they going to say? We can’t leave The Grove?” The tone of anger returned to his voice.

“Let me go and talk to my parents and get their permission to spend the night. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Govinda left to get the necessary permissions. Siddhartha went over and picked a book from one of the three bookshelves lining the wall before sitting down in a comfortable seat built into a large window overlooking the immaculately landscaped property. He read a few pages before Govinda came back in.

“All set?”

Govinda nodded. “Permission secured. What are you reading?”

“Poetry—Blake. ‘Once a dream did weave a shade O’er my angel guarded bed.’”

“Wait—huh? I fell asleep for a minute there,” Govinda laughed.

“I found it on *your* bookshelf,” Siddhartha protested.

“Sure, but I never intended to actually read it. I just have it there to impress the ladies.”

“You’ve never impressed a lady in your life.”

“Exactly, so when I finally get a chance, I want it to go well.”

Siddhartha laughed. “Well, I admire your forethought. Are you ready to go? My mother’s head might explode if I don’t get back with my dad’s cake soon.”

They went.