

The Laughing Buddha

by Teresa Shen Swingler

I.

When I was young, my best friend was only three inches high. He was chubby, always cheerful, and very funny. He didn't start out as anything much. I always imagined he came into being in a small factory, in China, at the mercy of two small, yellow hands and a chisel. A child's, perhaps, a child who, as she toiled, dreamt of the only time she'd been to the movie theater — *Gone with the Wind* — and wished she could wear flouncy dresses and suffer in a way so attractive like that. But the reality is, my little friend was probably stamped out of a machine-made mold, spit out on to a conveyer belt, and sent in a cardboard box to the tiny shop where my mother bought him. I remember standing at the counter, my eyes level with the tops of all those enticing little knick-knacks they keep on counters to tempt the impulsive — wealth frogs and good luck cats, moon cakes and jars of sour plums. The counter boy wrapped him tightly in brown paper, and secured him with scotch tape. My mother let me carry the bag home that day, and I wondered if she felt sorry for me. Our home was boxed up and so empty, it echoed when I walked through it, like it didn't recognize me anymore.

It was upstairs, in my cleared out room, that I first unwrapped my friend. I went into my closet and sat in the corner, and slowly removed the tape and unraveled him out of the paper. He smiled at me, and I smiled back, until I heard the shouting downstairs. The words were so hateful, I've long since blocked them out of my memory, but I remember the sound of their shoes scuffing against the hardwood, like an avant-garde tap dance with no rhythm but plenty of spirit. And though I've tried to forget, I remember my mom's screeching yelp, and how I jammed my friend into my backpack, and ran down the stairs so quickly, I almost tripped. Her fingers were ice cold, circled around my wrist, her nails dug into me, and she kept me in her grip until we were at the airport. My little friend stayed clutched in my hand all the way to America. I sat in the

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window seat on our transpacific flight. I pressed my nose and lips to the window, breathing hot air until I fogged up the plastic. It made the clouds in the sky look even more wistful. My mother sat in the middle seat, both of her hands clutching the metal seatbelt connector. She only said two words to me, "Sleep now" and I tucked my Buddha into the fold of my shirt, and we did.

II.

I can only imagine what people thought of the lump in the back pocket of my pink corduroy pants, not to mention the head peeking out of the top, looking backward at the steps I walked through my new school, to the principal's office, to enroll for entry at George Washington Elementary. You were white as ivory, and smooth too. And your bald head surveyed everything behind me, your laughing half-moon eyes, your earlobes thick as two doughy dumplings, your two hands raised up with your palms giving two "high-fives" to the sky. Before I sat down in a new classroom, with fifty eyes of green, blue, brown, on me, I pulled you out of my pocket and you sat in the pool of sweat in my palm. From beneath my desk, you continued to laugh. Ha! Ha! Ha! You didn't bother to close your shirt, you weren't shy. It remained open in the front, revealing those two droopy nipples and that round belly. As I shrunk at my desk, letting my shoulders fall toward my waist, letting my head look down toward my lap, you continued to laugh. Ha! Ha! Continued to raise your hands to the sky. Your skirt remained tied loosely around the waist, knotted into a big bow at your belly button. You angled your face up toward me. It was impossible not to look at that face — the thick lips of your smile, the raised cheeks, the pinches around the eyes — and not smile.

You were my lunch companion, that first day, sitting next to my hip, covered by the tent of a napkin. In all directions, everyone was talking so fast. They approached me but I didn't understand what they were saying, and eventually they got bored and went away. We sat there for a long time, staring at so many children with so many different hair colors: blonde, red, brown, and black. We stared at

their plastic lunch boxes, their sandwiches made with white bread, bologna, wilted pieces of lettuce. We stared as they stabbed juice boxes with pointed straws, as they swiftly opened milk cartons with their thumbs and pointer fingers. I waited until everyone ate and left, before I opened our lunch, before I took out the chopsticks and shoveled the rice and cold vegetables into my mouth so fast I almost choked. It was quiet and dark, and you remained laughing. After about an hour, the silence became too much — I heard a ringing in my ears. I gripped you by the feet and you continued to laugh, Ha! Ha! As my eyes began to fill up with tears and then started to drop on the top of your bald head. I wish I could have been as brave and happy as you. I rubbed your belly, and like magic, the doors swung open and a teacher walked across the room and asked me a question I didn't understand. She took my hand, and I jammed you back down into my pocket. She almost smelled like jasmine tea.

The teacher led us into a room. On the wall, there was a poster of a cat smiling in a tree and I recognized the words "How are you?" in our language. There were only two other kids in the class, Vladik and Mikito, and they stood there, their heads down, their shoes moving every which way. Together, we learned the words for "Hello", "I need to go to the bathroom", and "Thank you". I placed you in my palm again, but Mikito saw me, and I decided to put you on top of the desk. Mikito laughed, softly at first, and then Vladik looked over and started laughing harder. Then, I began to laugh. And they said to me "Thank You" and I replied, "Thank You."

III.

My arms were crossed and I clutched the hands of beautiful Shannon. Our forearms created a seat. And, in that seat, the butt of Miss Penelope Fine sat. We were parading Penelope up and down the soccer fields during recess, so her crush could see how very important she was. It was difficult, tedious work — but my cheeks blazed at the attention of these girls. I continued to go up and down the field, crouched low and arms aching.

The day before, I'd forgotten my Buddha at home. He sat on the bathroom counter, and when I returned, he smiled. Today, though, he was jammed into the back pocket of my blue jeans, resuming his normal place of importance. My arms ached more and more as Penelope waved her hand back and forth, blowing kisses to her crush. I began to bend farther down until my Buddha plopped out of my pocket. The boys kicked the ball out of bounds, and suddenly they were upon us. They rushed past, trying to grab their ball, until they realized that the ball went down a hill and into a sand patch. And, that's when they saw my Buddha.

Penelope's crush was the first to kick him. He kicked the Buddha square in the jaw, and it sent the Buddha spinning like a top, whirling up bits of dried grass around him. The boys gathered, and they began to careen him across the field — kicking his belly, his arms, sending him spinning. Shannon began to laugh, covering her mouth with both hands politely. Penelope laughed so hard, she started snorting. One kid kicked him up with the edge of his toe, and sent the Buddha flying through the air. I stuck my hands in my back pockets and laughed, too.

Then the bell rang, and we ran to the sidewalk to get into our classroom line. I waited there for a few moments, then decided to run back and pick up the Buddha, to dust him off with the sleeves of my jacket and kiss his forehead. I whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" into his thick ears. No, wait. That is not entirely true. That is not true at all. That is what I wished I'd done. Instead, I continued to wait in line, and filed into the classroom, and continued my lessons through the end of the afternoon, and boarded the bus and went home.

The next day, I returned to school. I walked out into the field and searched along the fence, looking at each patch of grass. I looked around the goalie posts, in the dirt, along the edges of the sidewalk. I went out to the playground, expecting to see him at the top of the slide, or sitting at one edge of the seesaw, or maybe even in the sandbox sunbathing. I searched from the top of the monkey bars,

down to the bottoms of holes that had been dug into the earth with plastic shovels.

And when I could search no longer, I walked around the back of the school, and sat in the corner where the two fences met. And all I remember about that moment is how my hair hung over my face, forming a cave. And in the darkness of that cave, I cried into a tissue, which I opened and reopened, again and again.

