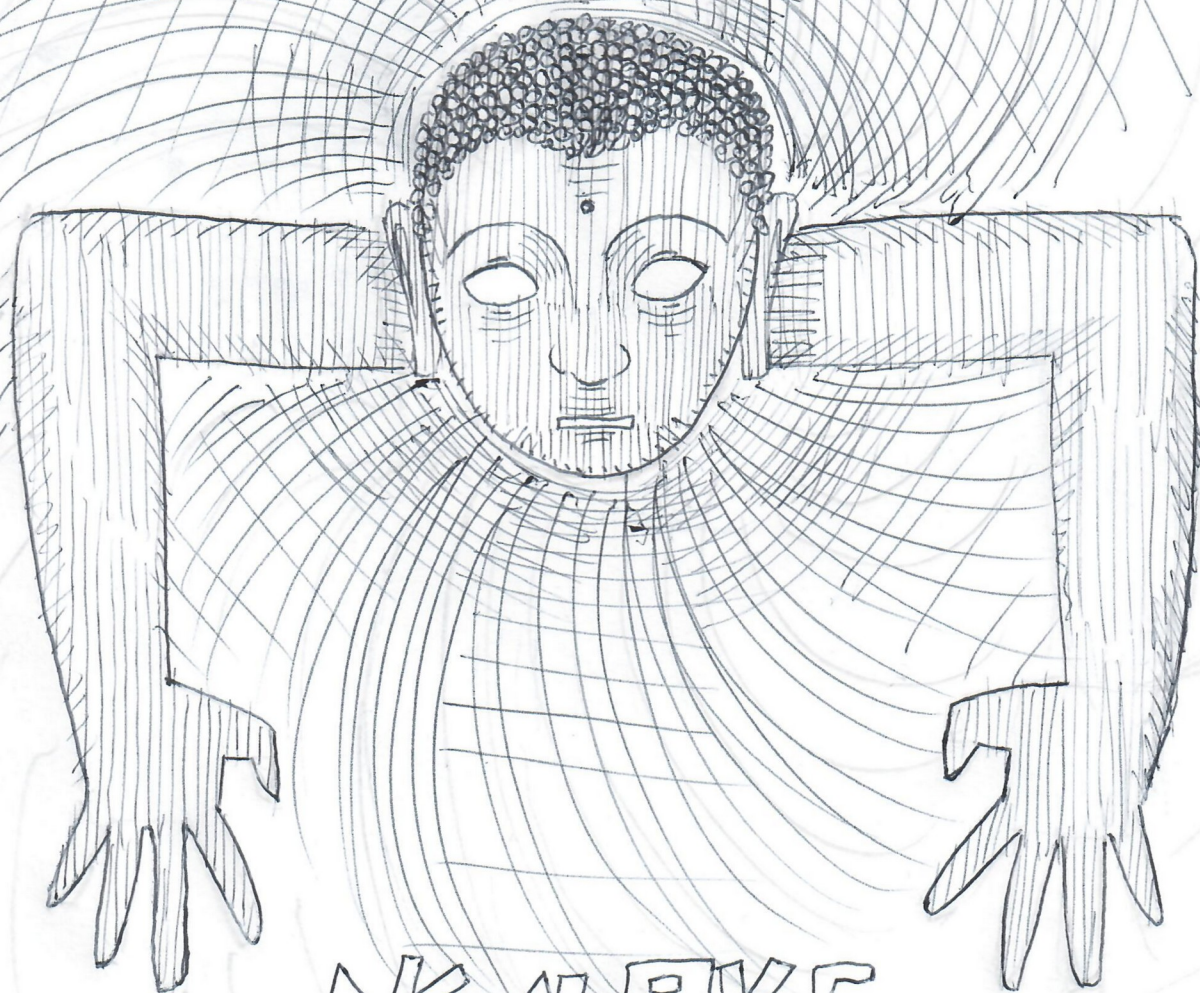


阿彌陀佛



AKALAKE

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## At the bottom of the Lake

2025, AM

It first happened in August, at the tail end of the summer vacation. Every news channel reported it, that at the lakeside beach, down from the wooden promenade in the midst of a waning crowd, playing, swimming and sunbathing the remains of light - a little girl saw a man lying halfway on the shore - black and grimy and covered in mud, and wearing a mask of the Buddha.

The mother recalls how her daughter hobbled over, and how she was about to call the police, supposing the man might've drowned, when her little girl started to scream. The man had locked his arms around her daughter's legs and she had fallen down. She rushed over as he dragged her daughter, slowly, into the water. Grabbing her hand she tried pulling back. The girl cried. Soon others rushed to help, but the girl was up to her neck underwater, and sensing it had attracted too much attention, the mask shook, it whipped its tail, and her daughter slipped from her hand. The water rushed into her mouth and silenced her. The girl drowned.

I still remember that day because my blotters had come in earlier that afternoon, five sheets total, and I'd taken two intending to relax, when the pixelated visage of that being, the fishman's Buddha mask, appeared on TV and I was assaulted by the horror.

The next incident was only a week later, and the beach was closed and summer came to a sudden end. Even so, despite that, during the first semester, the Buddha took more lives. Skinny-dipping teenagers, a hiker who had come too close, a child, and another one, a maintenance worker at the dam, and none of them were seen again. Whatever the Buddha did to them didn't leave corpses behind, only clothes or shoes that washed ashore.

Only having moved in recently, I knew none of these people, but other students sure did, or knew someone who knew someone who... Well, anyways, the mood turned sour. It became hard to make smalltalk; I felt I had to offer everyone my condolences, especially because I knew none of the victims. Nobody was interested in studying or in making friends anymore, instead every lecture turned into a funeral service, with a minute of silence and a speech from an acquaintance. The atmosphere became too much for me, I wanted to return to my TV and my blotters. *'Turn up, tune in and drop out.'* But even there I couldn't escape it. No sooner than I had dropped out the local station broadcast the news segment *'University in mourning; local students hold daily vigil.'* I wanted to turn cold, tune out and drop dead. I was going to need more blotters, and less TV.

I spent those weeks in a haze. For occasions like this I have a *'daily routine'* - schedule hanging on my wall to make sure I still brush my teeth, remember to eat and take showers. However, because I didn't want to return to baseline, and started taking more and more, everything outside turned dark, and I had no idea when to do these items on my list. Normally the TV tells the time and what I should do: morning news (brushing teeth), afternoon news (eating) and evening news (taking a shower), but I wasn't turning it back on again. Instead, I decided, I would just pick one of them at random whenever I noticed the list. And so at one point, after taking four tabs, I decided to take a shower, my favorite while high, because the droplets bounce around

and create a thousand rainbows, and the shower-head asks you how the water feels today, and you can ask him to turn up the heat a little. This time however I felt something painful in my ear. Maybe an infection, I thought, but then it spread, and soon I was having migraines.

‘Hey’ I asked the shower. ‘You seen something slip into my ear?’

‘I’m sorry, do you want me to do your back next? It was just a little accident. Don’t forget to use soap, it gets the skin right off.’ But it didn’t feel wet, but soft and meaty, like a pinky finger without the bone.

‘No it’s fine, we’ll remove the skin some other time.’

‘You’re the boss, mister bushman, not that I can see. You sure like my spit, could you put a digit in my mouth?’ When I jabbed my finger up the shower-head moaned ‘Yeah, right there, a little to the left.’

‘Sorry, gotta go.’

‘But honey what about the chil-’ I closed the door and muter the sound. The headaches returned with a vengeance. It felt like one side was compressing, getting pulled apart. I looked in the mirror. Something had slipped into my ear, some parasite, something alien, and it had nestled in the right half of my head, which was swollen and blue and pulling the corner of my mouth up into an involuntary smile. My eye bulged and the pupil grew. ‘Hello’ the alien said. It didn’t have a voice, it didn’t need one, it had attached itself directly onto my neurons. ‘Have you heard of the story of the princes?’

‘What?’

‘The prince of light and the prince of darkness are the chief observers of humanity, and on a rare day off they perched themselves on a fishing vessel, and wondered about what fish the humans eat.’

“Come” says the prince of darkness. “All this talking has given my mouth plenty of exercise, but nothing to taste, it has given me much too think about, but my curiosity it cannot sate.” And so they went down into the water, and they came upon a little carp, and asked themselves if man would have it for dinner.’

“No” said the prince of darkness “for humans, it must be too small.”

“Well” considered the prince of light “I bet fried it doesn’t matter, like with chips.” And they went further on down.’

‘Next they came upon a school of tuna, and again the princes asked themselves, whether it would end up on a humans’ plate.’

“No” said the prince of darkness “for human plates, it is too large.”

“Well” considered the prince of light “I’m sure they can cut it into little pieces.” And they went further down.’

‘Finally they reached the bottom, and came upon the corpse of a man, buried up to his waist in sand. And when they pulled him loose, a fish-tail was revealed where his legs should be, and neither had to ask, whether it was something the humans would eat. Its face was hard, its face was stern, its jaws were iron, and its eyes hollow, and the princes were unanimous in their verdict.’

“No” they said “this isn’t something they can eat, rather, this is something that eats humans.”

I woke up dressing myself piloted by the parasite. ‘What are you doing?’

‘We’re getting down there, cut it off, cut it loose, cut it up, salt the fish. Didn’t your father ever take you fishing? I don’t care. Don’t answer.’ It wriggles around, slips its tail out and slaps my cheek. ‘We’re flying there.’ The window blows open and he hurls me through into the sunset.

Far from anything flying’s supposed to be – spreading your arms like wings of a bird and floating up – I’m tumbling around and getting flipped over, side to side, up and down. The alien blames my body weight.

We float by the office buildings where the workday has just ended, over the traffic jam and the waterfront boulevard towards a pier. The beach has been barred with red lint, next to it a warning sign of the beast in a red circle, hands up and halfway out the water, the fish-half submerged. That’s the new traffic sign, from the evening news, the parasite recalls. How considerate of the humans for all those who race down the pier and sink their vehicle into the lake. Few as they are, they’re probably not expecting the Buddha to be there.

He steps over the lint and I’m moved down to where boats float abandoned. He’s planning to steal one and wonders if I could pilot it. He seems to be confident it’ll be fine because I once drove a scooter. This will be way easier, you don’t have to balance a boat. Why would we even need one? Well he won’t come out to play. Swim there and you’ll be too tired. We’re not on vacation, trying out the temperature with a toe, or wading around the shallow parts, we’re plunging in the deep. I can’t play around with you in the water, you do that on your own time.

‘Hey’ a voice calls ‘Whatcha doing there?’ We should run.

‘Can we get a boat ride to the middle?’

‘Didn’t you see the sign?’

‘Right to the center, I’m gonna kill it.’

‘You’re gonna kill it?’ she laughs ‘Well if you cover the fine, I could talk to dad about it.’ What a bargain, no skin off my back. She patted down her jeans and searched her jackets for her phone. When she found it she turned six hours counter-clockwise. Not a person you meet in college. University is buying time, something only uncertain people do. I should jump in the water. The clouds should shudder and lightning should strike the pier, break the wood and I should drown. The parasite threatens to make me suffocate forever. I just wanted a taste. My mouth’s a bit dry.

‘Hmm? There’s a vending machine around the corner?’ See? Take it as a cue to give her some privacy, to limbo under the tape. She saw and just smiled, when we return we better commit to the bit.

After figuring out what buttons to press we returned with an armful, half of which fell down doing the limbo and rolled into the water. They were all shapes and sizes, but what made it take so long was that the blue cans said ‘Either the red cans lie or we do, but I’m the tastiest, and I’m telling the truth.’ There was some perfectly logical solution to this riddle, but I couldn’t remember, and that’s how I had ended up with two of each.

‘Which one do you like?’

‘Red, but most people go for blue.’ she wiped her hair aside ‘they say it tastes better.’ She was lying, I tasted nothing.



‘He says he’ll do it, because it’s a funny ask.’ We sat down.

‘Aha.’ I took a sip. An ant crawled down my leg.

‘Why do you want to kill it?’ Every step left a little yellow mark that grew bigger. The little guy stopped. ‘I don’t want to go down.’ he squeaked ‘I was so high up, but soon I gotta be underfoot.’ He moonwalked in place.

‘What?’ Of course.

‘We’ve got to be there before dark.’

‘Ah. Don’t worry, he’ll be right here.’ She looked back. The old man was leaning over me.

‘You kids wanted a ride?’

‘Yeah’ I stood up ‘I agreed to cover the fine.’

‘Don’t ya worry ‘bout that.’ He waved the proposal away. ‘Doing stuff thas illegal makes ya feel younger.’ and he slapped my back.

We were nearing the center of the lake, it was dark and muddied and night would come soon. The ant was now on my shoelaces and bemoaning its fate while I paced around the deck. The old man was at ease, navigating by nothing. He had put on a ‘*captains cap*’ with a NY logo and gray curls bristled around the edges, but you could see he was once blonde. She sat on the edge dangling her feet in the water and holding her hair out her face. Straight locks blowing in her eyes. So I asked him, the captain, if she was *his*. His child and daughter, and I already knew.

‘No, she’s not mine.’ he laughed ‘One day, maybe ten years ago? Well, I pulled up my net and she was there, with silt and mud and not a whole lot of fish. Whats it matter?’ he laughed again. He turned the engine off. ‘You got your swimming shorts witcha?’ I had forgotten.

I stripped the body naked and stood at the edge. With the parasite I knew I’d hold out longer but the body held back.

‘You going? It’s almost dark.’

‘I don’t want to stay at the bottom.’

‘You won’t, even corpses float. You’ll be back up next morning.’

‘Could you, push?’

‘Sure.’ she said ‘Ready? Off you go!’