

The Buddha Smile

By C. Forrest McDowell

It was a sad stormy day, and a gust of wind shoed our funeral party through the heavy, oak-hewn church doors, as if we were truant children. I, for one, was an eight-year old child totally bewildered by the events of the past week that began with the death of my beloved Grandma Shultz. Stepping now into the sanctuary, I was overcome with both awe and curiosity, noticing first the enormous quantity of flowers placed by the altar, as if they were a colorfully robed choir ready to sing. I was then amazed at the shimmering light of dozens of candles reflecting on the stained glass windows. Only then did I notice the throng of friends and relatives. Finally, my eyes were drawn to the front and the elevated black-with-gold-trim casket, the lower half of the lid closed and the upper half propped open revealing, to my horrid shock, Grandma!

Father had commanded me to be quiet and stay close to my grieving mother's side as we made our way down the center aisle. My eyes were riveted on the open casket, and as we neared it at the front of the sanctuary, Grandma's distinct facial profile loomed ever larger: rouged cheeks cupping a noble nose delicately balanced atop ever-pursed red lips, as if Grandma was always puckered to kiss. In spite of the increasing sobs of my approaching mother, my attention was unexpectedly directed to the upper balconies of the hall where I was certain I heard the audible laugh of a familiar voice, a voice still alive and well in my eight year old mind . . .

"Go ahead, rub the Buddha's belly and make a wish." This was always the first utterance from Grandma after I burst into her studio apartment and showered her with hugs and kisses. I loved visiting Grandma weekly with my mother and two sisters. After our embrace, and following my glance across the room, she guided me to the corner in front of the dresser. We performed the same ritual for years, as she scooted over a stool and helped me up. The Buddha sat on a lavender crocheted doily atop the dresser, as if he were King of the earrings and bracelets, bus tokens, apartment keys, spare change, and a few framed family pictures. He was carved from a massive piece of jade, a "Jade Buddha" Grandma informed me. His bulbous baldhead humored me, as did the fact that he sat cross-legged in his underwear, or loincloth, as Grandma instructed me again. I was most captivated by the Buddha's face: an indescribably happy face that emitted a deliriously happy smile. A child knows such a smile. I imagined Buddha was very happy where he sat, but admiring him was only part of my ritual. The true delight was to rub his massive bare tummy and make a wish.

Gently rubbing the Buddha's belly, I always made the same wish, imagining that magically he would tell Grandma what I wanted. And it always came true: in no time the apartment smelled like hot dogs boiling away; the added fortune was that Grandma would later walk us down the block to buy a jelly donut.

An equally sad type of organ music matched the ether of sadness in the sanctuary. In my mind, however, I could hear Grandma's radio in her apartment crooning Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra. Now that we were but a few feet away from Grandma's reclining form, I reeled with confusion and wanted to rush up and shake her awake, to ask her about the Buddha I missed so much in the month since she had been hospitalized. I wanted to tell her how much I missed her, how much I missed hot dogs and donuts, and that I had been nice to my sisters, and . . .

"Grandma, who is Buddha?"

"Ah, my dear one, Buddha is the great dream of goodness inside us all. Have you ever noticed how he smiles at you? Well, it is because he only sees the goodness inside you, and of course that is why you only wish for nice things to happen, right?"

"Yes, Grandma, but one time I did something awful . . . I wished for something bad to happen."

"And what became of that, or dare I ask?"

"Well, I wished for Jimmy Bindle – he's a troublemaker at school who doesn't like me – I wished for him to fall off his bike and bloody his knee. And you know what, that didn't happen to him at all! The very next day I fell off my bike in the backyard and bloodied my knee really bad."

"I can't remember exactly, but was that the visit where you were too ill to eat any dogs?"

"Yes, Grandma, and that was when I wished for Buddha to hurt Jimmy."

"So, dear one, what do you make of all this?"

"I guess it's not nice to ask for someone to get hurt because that may happen to you. But Grandma, if that's so, couldn't the Buddha really see inside me and know I am a good person; couldn't he make nothing bad happen to me?"

"I know it is somewhat difficult for you to understand at your age. But maybe you could rub Buddha's tummy again before you take a nap and ask him to help you with your question. Sometimes

our wishes are not defined by our sweet tooth or tummy, or even by getting even with someone, but by the sincerity of our heart. Of course, you already know what I mean, eh?”

“Yes, Grandma. I don’t always have to wish for hotdogs or jelly donuts.”

The casket was much bigger than I knew Grandma to be. How can a child be prepared to see his Grandma lying dead in a tufted box, on parade to hundreds of people? No amount of mother’s prodding for good manners can prevent that innate sense of curiosity that, in its innocence, is confused for lack of respect. As a young boy my heart did not have the capacity yet to grieve. My joy for life was germinated anew each day, and by each day’s adventures – even this adventure of witnessing my grandmother’s funeral. For all I know, Grandma could have been napping in that casket.

She lay there beautiful, the ageless Grandma I always knew: rouged cheeks, red lipstick, grey-streaked black hair. More than anything else, however, I detected this curious little smile on her lips that not even a mortician could imitate. This smile, like the Buddha’s, seemed embedded in her face, and that is what always attracted me like a magnet to Grandma’s beautiful energy as a human: her playfulness, coy, charm, and beaming laugh – the Buddha Smile. I stood in awe peering at my Grandma, trying to convince myself she was only sleeping.

“Grandma, Grandma, can you hear me? I think I saw Buddha wink at me, just like you said he would. Psst, Grandma can you hear me?”

She lay across the bed on her back with hands folded over her heart. A faint snore came through her slightly parted lips. We always took a nap together after returning to Grandma’s studio from an outing in the park after lunch. My two sisters and I would sleep on the floor at the base of the dresser, on thickly folded blankets. My mother and her mother rested on the bed. I would sometimes stand at the foot of the bed gazing at these two women asleep. They looked so much alike and I always wondered if Mom would look like Grandma when she got to be in her late fifties.

The truth is, I never took much of a nap. I mostly stared at the Buddha from the floor hoping to catch him winking at me like Grandma said he would. I suspect Grandma knew what I did and found no harm. But this one hot summer day, I found it absolutely inconceivable that, in their sleep, everyone missed out on this fantastic event: THE BUDDHA WINKED! The Buddha finally winked at me!

“So he did, eh?” Grandma eyed me carefully with her question, after I frantically jumped on the bed to awaken her with the news. “Now, how do you know it for sure?”

“Why, why I saw it! What do you mean how do I know it, he just did and I saw him,” I affirmed defensively.

“Yeah, but maybe you were dreaming in your sleep.” Grandma paused with that knowing tilt to her head. “While you were *napping*,” she added with an upward glide to her voice. Her tone said it all: she knew all along that I didn’t take afternoon sleeping seriously. Then she gave me a big wink. Thereafter, whenever I brought up the Buddha’s winking at me, Grandma cleverly dodged conversation by saying, “Just like this, eh?” followed by a wink. In truth, I never saw the Buddha wink at me again.

I stood at the coffin for what seemed like an eternity, praying to Grandma to wake up and wink at me just one more time. My father gently urged me to continue past her visage, to let my sobbing mother kneel over the casket. Something inside me suddenly needed to be said and I turned half around, raising my hand in one last wave goodbye. In a low but clear voice, so that Grandma could hear me, I said: “Say hello to the Buddha for me, Grandma.” I glanced up into the eyes of the presiding minister who stood alongside the casket. I expected to be shamed. To my shock, he twitched one eye at me.

The graveside ceremony was short and swift – rain showers and a stiff wind seemed to crowd in on the discomfort of grief. My grandmother had many friends. Mostly, I remember standing next to my mother, in the shadow of her sadness. As we drove away later, I watched her peer fondly and sadly back at the grave in which Grandma’s casket had been lowered. The plot was garlanded with all those exuberant flowers from the church service. My mother uttered just a few simple words that still echo in my heart today: “Goodbye Mama, goodbye Mama, I love you.”

There was something to the tone of Mother’s voice that seemed forlorn, and this caught the attention of my own heart; it was the expression of a child feeling abandoned in the world for the first time without her mother. I watched her place her forehead against the window, her anguish fogging up the glass near her nose and lips. In those moments I finally understood my mother’s grief and, gazing back to the plot piled lusciously with flowers, I silently bade Grandma goodbye, too. With her eyes still perusing the ceremonial setting, I heard Mother finally say: “They were beautiful flowers.” I silently repeated the truth: they *were* beautiful flowers. I like to imagine they put a smile on the Buddha’s face.