

Leslie Hall

## The Golden Buddha

On the corner of Arcade and Thompson, right next to the dance studio and across from Jack-in-the-Box, was a photography studio called the Lucky Penny. But the Lucky Penny went out of business and that corner of the building has been empty for a month or so.

It didn't take long for the photographer to pack up and disappear. Once he was gone, the owner of the building, who lives in an adjacent apartment facing Arcade, started filling the place with furniture and paintings and wall hangings and knick-knacks, of a quality somewhere slightly above thrift store and far below estate sale.

Among these was an immense golden Buddha. From a distance I found the Buddha irresistible. Every day as I passed the abandoned studio, I reminded myself to get the owner's phone number and ask if the Buddha was for sale. I assumed the price would be low. This was partly wishful thinking and partly assumption based on that the owner of the building seemed to me to be a little down on his luck, living as he did with a faded yellow and black sign over the door to his apartment with *Cavalier Hairpieces for Men* in a showy script and driving as he did a car with a cracked license-plate-holder that identified him as *Brad the Hairpiece Man*.

Also, once I'd met the owner's wife, who looked homeless with that tan, the combination of involuntary unemployment and involuntary exposure to the elements. She also seemed bat-shit crazy. It was the day the movers had come to empty out the photography studio, and she got anxious about the moving truck and where I had parked and had come into the dance studio to find out who owned the Honda CRV and would I move the Honda. She left and returned literally three times in as many minutes because she was so anxious and because she didn't think I was actually going to move my car because how it took me those three minutes to get my shoes on and make my good-byes. For me, the takeaway from this experience with the bat-shit-crazy wife was along the lines of *Birds of a feather*.

Last Saturday the owner (Hairpiece Brad) and his bat-shit-crazy wife were having a garage sale of the furniture and paintings and wall hangings and knick-knacks.

I was so hopeful about taking the Buddha home that I mentioned it to the others and one, Mikelle, said *Oh, the golden Buddha?*

This got me all territorial. I made a hushing sound at her to indicate the Buddha was mine. I was kidding and I was also not kidding but I pretended I was entirely kidding. Mikelle said she wanted to come and look at it with me and I said all right, and two other people said to be sure to bargain, because the owner of the building charged unreasonably high prices.

Mikelle went into the abandoned photography studio to look at the golden Buddha. I went in search of Hairpiece Brad. I didn't have far to go. He and his wife were arguing in front of the garage.

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*I'm 80 years old*, said Hairpiece Brad, *I'm deaf. If you want me to hear you, you have to talk louder than the music.* He was shouting. I could hear him three doors down.

I told him I was interested in the golden Buddha.

*It's a hundred dollars*, said Hairpiece Brad.

I wasn't expecting that and I didn't say anything for a moment, then I said, *That's a little out of my budget.*

*Make an offer*, said Hairpiece Brad, and he returned to moving furniture onto the sidewalk, which was already crowded with dining room chairs, end tables, coffee tables, and bookcases, all in the same honey shade of varnish.

In the photography studio, Mikelle was examining the golden Buddha. She, too, was horrified by Hairpiece Brad's price and she pointed at a white spot on Buddha's head where the gilt had chipped off. I took hold of a torch to turn Buddha to the side and the torch broke off in my hand.

*Oh shit!* I said.

*Oh shit!* echoed Mikelle.

We stared at each other and at the torch in my hand and we both said *oh shit!* again. I tucked the torch in the crook of the Buddha's elbow.

Mikelle looked both ways and said, *Just go. Go. Go!*

And we both hurried out of the photography studio. Mikelle turned right and I turned left, where I came face to face with Hairpiece Brad.

Hairpiece Brad was smiling a big genial smile. *Do you want to buy it? A hundred is too much for me*, I said. *I was thinking \$30.*

Brad laughed. Out loud. *I paid \$60 for it, I'm not going to sell it for \$30.*

I smiled and shrugged and then I hurried away as fast as my legs could carry me and got in my car and drove away to an internal chorus of *shit shit shit shit shit!*

In my rearview mirror I watched Hairpiece Brad enter the photography studio. *Shit shit shit shit shit!*

He would know that the golden Buddha was broken, he would know that I broke it.

A hundred dire fantasies played out in my mind about Hairpiece Brad. He would storm into the dance studio looking for me. He would lie in wait for me before dance class and then pounce. He would catch sight of me leaving dance class and then would run after me shaking his fist.

I should turn around. I should turn the car around and return and shamefacedly tell Brad that I broke the torch on the golden Buddha and I should prepare myself for the consequences.

Possible consequence: \$100 that I would have to pay for the broken golden Buddha.

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Possible consequence: Hairpiece Brad scolding me or even shouting at me.

Possible consequence: Too horrible to even be conceived of.

I did not want to pay \$100 for the broken golden Buddha, I did not want to get scolded, and I did not want to experience anything too horrible to even be able to conceive of.

And still contemplating the possibility of consequences too horrible to even be able to conceive of, I continued driving homeward. I did not turn my car around, I did not go back. Once safe at home, I did everything I could do to forget about the broken golden Buddha. I dug up dirt, I planted wildflowers, I stood still amid the pink blooms of cosmos until a bee appeared to gather yellow pollen and I watched the bee. When it got dark, I drank half a bottle of wine and watched a show on Netflix and bought a bracelet on Amazon and then I went on Facebook.

And yet. In spite of all the distractions, in spite of the Zinfandel and the agate bracelet, every once in a while a thought unbidden would arise, a thought about the broken torch on the golden Buddha would shimmer in my consciousness and even then, even before I admitted it to myself, I knew what I had to do.

I knew what I had to do: I had to talk to Hairpiece Brad. I had to tell him that I broke the torch off the golden Buddha and then I had to throw myself upon his mercy.

It all reminded me of the time I'd gotten arrested for shoplifting when I was eight years old and my mother made me write a list of everything else I'd ever stolen and then sent me back to the stores to confess my thefts and repay the money but I was too shy and also too ashamed and so instead I wrote little notes that I wrapped around money and left on the nail polish shelf at the drug store, notes to the effect of *here is money to pay for nail polish I stole and I'm sorry I'll never steal again*.

It all reminded me of the time when I worked as a dishwasher in the kitchen at a conference center in the Santa Cruz mountains when I was in high school and I was always stealing food. I stole cans of pineapple juice, I stole cookies, I stole any bit of sweetness that I could and I suffered so terribly from scoldings from my conscience and yet I kept stealing, I couldn't stop and it tore me apart inside.

No one ever knew. No one ever found out or confronted me. And what I stole had so little value really. But still I suffered. At the time I didn't understand what compelled me to steal and what compelled me to steal what I stole. And now I see and have so much compassion for that thieving girl I was.

Now here I was again. I hadn't stolen anything, true, but I felt shame and guilt. I've spent the last oh so many years of my life unpacking and discarding various shames and guilts. For the last oh so many years of my life my primary aspiration has been to conduct myself in such a way that I can look myself in the mirror and feel good and whole, in such a way that I can lie at rest in the bed at night with an easy mind. With an easy mind because I know that I have done that which I ought to have done and I have not done that which I have ought not to have done.

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And now the broken golden Buddha made my mind uneasy.

If only I could just write Hairpiece Brad a little note. But I wasn't wrapping no note around no hundred dollars.

Sunday morning I woke up and did what I always do: I made coffee and got back into bed with my coffee, a pen, and a notebook, and then I set a timer for seventeen minutes and started writing.

This is a habit I started at the beginning of December when my intuition—not me, my intuition—saw the writing on the wall about the end of the relationship I was in. Me, I was happy. That is, when I was happy, I was happy, and when I wasn't, I was so terribly sad, and that's when I started writing for seventeen minutes every morning while I had my coffee.

Mostly the writing is so incredibly tedious and boring. Mostly it's about my feelings. It clears the debris. This one habit that I've had now for about six months has helped me so much it's like magic. I write whatever is on my mind or in my heart and then I finish with a formula:

I feel [identify the feeling].

I want [identify the desire].

I need [identify the need].

On this Sunday guess what I wrote about.

On this Sunday guess what I felt, wanted, and needed.

After I was done writing, I made another cup of coffee and took it out into the backyard and stood in the sunlight and gazed upon the pink blooms of cosmos with the bright yellow centers and upon the spiky red flowers of the pineapple guava and upon the pale delicate blooms of thyme. My dog Sophie limped after me and then lay down at my feet and I petted her sun-warmed fur.

What did I have to fear? What could anyone take from me? I am whole I am solid and as long as I tell the truth I will remain whole and solid.

It would not be fun to go talk to Hairpiece Brad. But however not fun and inglorious it might be it would only last a moment. However not fun however bad that inglorious moment might be it would only be a moment and then I would be free to be whole and solid again. My wholeness and solidity shimmered in front of me.

At 11:15 I left my house and when I parked to go to dance class I saw that Hairpiece Brad and his bat-shit-crazy wife were holding the garage sale another day. I prayed that Hairpiece Brad would not see me and I intentionally parked in front of the dance studio instead of on Arcade where I usually park so I would not have to walk past Hairpiece Brad to go to the dance studio.

And then I went into the dance studio and I realized that I was no longer a small child confronting the monumental weight of the problem of how to live a moral life all alone. I was a grown-up and I had friends and I could ask for help and so before class started I asked my friend Caroline

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who teaches the class if she would go with me to talk to Hairpiece Brad. I told her the story of the broken golden Buddha.

*You're so good*, she said.

Is this what goodness looks like? Because it feels really bad. I don't think I'm good. I just don't want to feel bad, I just don't want any dishonorable burden to carry with me. I cannot bear any such encumbrance.

I know not everyone feels this way. I understand there are many people who would be able to shrug and walk away and say to themselves *Oh, he can write it off* and *Oh, there must have been something wrong that it broke so easily piece of crap Buddha it wasn't my fault*. I know there are people like this and how I envy them but I am not of them.

In any case Caroline kindly agreed to provide moral support, which made me feel so much better already, and after class we went in search of Hairpiece Brad.

His bat-shit-crazy wife approached and I said I wanted to talk to her husband about the Buddha. She said he was at Carl's Jr. across the street but he would be back in minutes. That Buddha was nice, though, wasn't it.

Caroline and I went to look at the golden Buddha.

On closer inspection it got stranger and stranger. The Buddha's naked nipples were oddly pointed and quite prominent. Buddha had heavy earlobes that hung full and low like scrotal sacs, one on either side of his broadly smiling face. And that smile: Buddha's smile of big square flat teeth made him look like he'd benefitted from years of orthodontia. Then there was that chip on his forehead. Not to mention the broken off torch, which was nowhere to be seen, there was just the jagged gray edge where the torch had been.

I really didn't want the golden Buddha anymore, and I especially didn't want to pay \$100 or even \$60 or even my original offer of \$30, but I had the \$60 in my wallet at the ready and that's what I was going to offer Hairpiece Brad.

Caroline and I waited. We waited and waited. What strange paintings there were. What bland furniture.

Finally Hairpiece Brad appeared, carrying his large soda and his paper bag of food from Carl's Jr. He was smiling his genial smile at the prospect of selling the golden Buddha. The smile never left his face, even while I confessed.

*I was looking at the Buddha yesterday*, I said, *I broke it and then I panicked, so I left. But I felt really bad, so I wanted to offer to buy it.*

*It's \$100*, said Hairpiece Brad with his genial smile.

*I can't pay \$100. I can pay \$60*, I said.

*Why would I sell it for \$60?* asked Hairpiece Brad. He sounded genuinely curious.

I explained how I broke it, I felt like I needed to pay for it—

Hairpiece Brad interrupted me to say that he hadn't glued it properly

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or hadn't used the proper glue, that piece had been broken before, and I must have pushed the weak spot—

—*that changes everything*, I said.

Oh the relief. Oh the relief. I hadn't broken the golden Buddha. It was broken already. Hairpiece Brad wasn't upset. On the contrary, there he was right in front of me, smiling his genial smile, optimistic that someone else would be more than happy to pay his original price of \$100 for golden Buddha, broken torch, obscenely pointed nipples, ball sac earlobes, evidence of orthodontia and all. He didn't want to sell it to me for \$60.

I was so happy I almost rushed at him and hugged him or at least shook his hand but as he seemed perfectly happy with the arrangement, I realized my gratitude was all out of proportion.

I hugged Caroline instead and thanked her.

*That worked out so well*, she said. *Everybody did the right thing.*