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EVEN KINGS KNOW THE  
FEAR OF DEATH*Emma Geen*

*The story of how a pampered prince called Siddhartha Gautama became the Enlightened One—in Sanskrit “The Buddha”—is set around 550 BC in northern India. When the crown prince was born there was a prediction that he would either be a great ruler or a great teacher. His father wanted a great ruler as a son, and so sought to prevent the boy from knowing that there was anything to teach about. He ordered that Siddhartha should be brought up closeted away from anything which could disturb his peace of mind, and that there should only be delightful, beautiful, uncomplicated things in his life.*

*This episode from Siddhartha’s story tells of how the prince comes to realise that life is more complex than just pleasure and that indeed pleasure can be the trap which prevents us from escaping from the reality of suffering and leading us towards enlightenment. The realisation that his life up until then had been an illusion led the Prince to go into voluntary exile in the forest leaving behind his wife and young son and all the wealth and delights of palace life. Only through this exile from all that was normal for him could he find truth.*

Prince Siddhartha wanted for nothing, if by nothing one means anything material. He had a good marriage and a healthy son, an army of servants, stables full of horses, enough gold and jewels to set his three palaces sparkling, not to mention the most decadent of foods and wines. Few men to have walked this Earth have owned more, yet as Siddhartha moved through his vast halls he would listen to the thin echo of his footsteps and feel that there should be something more.

When he turned twenty-nine, Siddhartha called his charioteer with the intention of meeting his subjects. Beneath the jubilant sun, the red earth buildings of Kapilavastu glowed like fire and the beautiful faces of the citizens shone. Basked in this glory, for a fleeting moment Siddhartha felt satisfied with life. Yet it was in this moment that he glimpsed a strange creature lurking in the shadow of a building. The chariot was halfway down the street before he recovered enough to cry out.

“Your Highness?” The charioteer baulked as he yanked the horses to a halt. “What is the matter?”

“Channa—” Siddhartha gasped, for that was the charioteer’s name. “I saw a creature. It looked like man but...it had skin like an elephant’s. Its arms were like twigs and its back was as crooked as a branch. And silver hair, as silver as the horse’s tackle.”

The charioteer stared down the street, his face wide with fear, but as Siddhartha watched, Channa’s expression creased into perplexity.

“You mean him?” he said, pointing.

Siddhartha whisked round and caught sight of the odd creature. Now that they had slowed he could see that it had

not been lurking but that its legs were so feeble that it had to lean against the wall to walk. Inch by inch it was dragging itself towards them, its expression splintered in pain. Siddhartha's skin crawled. What poor creature was this, so pathetic that it wasn't even sovereign of its own body?

"Your highness, that is but a man." Channa told him.

"A man? You're telling me that that creature is human?"

"My prince, he is merely very old and infirm."

"Old?" Siddhartha twisted his tongue around the odd taste of the word. "What do you mean?"

The charioteer could no longer hide his amazement. At Siddhartha's birth holy men had prophesied that the prince would either grow into a powerful king or turn from this life to become a great spiritual leader, and wishing to ensure the former, the King had sheltered his son from knowledge of human suffering. This was widely known amongst the servants of the palace. Yet Channa had never imagined that Siddhartha could be ignorant to such an extent.

"When a man has lived many seasons upon this earth he begins to slow and change."

"Everyone?" Siddhartha almost choked on the word. "You are saying that I will become like that *thing* in time?"

That moment of silence, as he stood trembling in anticipation for Channa's reply, was one of the worst of his life.

"But, is there no way of preventing it?" He stuttered when it became clear that no answer would come.

The charioteer twisted his leather reins. His hands were calloused and rough with hard work but the eyes he lifted to his master's were as vulnerable as a child's. "Life is suffering."

These words fell on Siddhartha like a physical weight.



He, like any man, knew the meaning of pain; despite the attentions of his father he had experienced grazed knees as a child, but he had never imagined suffering could exist on such a scale.

He shaded his eyes from the burn of the sun, finding himself suddenly queasy.

"I'm not well. Take me home."

Siddhartha had hoped to forget the old man, yet the more he tried to force the image from his mind, the more it haunted him. As he walked through the palace, the memory of that emaciated creature rang out with his every hollow footstep, chasing him from room to room.

*Old.*

One day, like unruly horses, these legs would refuse his weight.

*Old. Old.*

One day this back, the back of a prince, would bow to the winds of time.

*Old. Old. Old.*

There would be no rest until he had explored the matter further. He called Channa and set out into the city once more. This time he saw someone the charioteer called "sick", a form of suffering that could befall anyone, no matter how few or how many years they had spent on the earth. Hearing this, the horror Siddhartha had experienced upon seeing the old man doubled in his guts. To suffer after time was bad enough but for some to suffer longer and more cruelly than others seemed beyond unfair. Though the chariot was of sturdy wood and metal, Siddhartha felt as if the ground was giving beneath him.

*Old. Sick.*

Back in the embrace of his palace he repeated these new terrible words. All these years, whilst Siddhartha had enjoyed riches and good health, people in his city had suffered without his even knowing. Seeking comfort, he summoned his servants to bring him his finest gold and jewels, yet as he gazed upon them he only saw the dull reflection of his fearful face. He had to journey into the city again.

This time Siddhartha saw a group of people weeping over a prone man. He is sick, Siddhartha thought to himself and dismounted, questions readied on his tongue. As he stepped through the crowd he saw that the sickness had eaten the flesh from the man's face leaving it sallow and yellowed. He reached out to smooth the tortured brow but Channa caught his arm.

"My prince, do not disturb the dead."

"Dead?" Siddhartha's echo came out as a whisper. Though he had never heard the word he could see its seriousness on the faces surrounding him. Was this 'dead' the worst suffering of them all?

"All men die, my prince. It is—" Channa's mouth moved silently as he struggled to find an explanation. "It is a sleep from which no one wakes."

Never wake? All men?

Siddhartha grasped the charioteer for support, as if he had been struck as feeble as the old man. The city was bled of colour on their return to the palace. Even the laughter of the children that chased their chariot seemed to hide tears.

"What is it?" his wife asked him when she woke that night to see Siddhartha bowed at the edge of their bed. Her melodic voice, muffled with sleep, kindled warmth in his thoughts, but when he looked back at her silhouette in the dark, he saw a visage of the corpse. One day "age" would steal the colour of her hair and eat the plump flesh of her beautiful cheeks. One day his wife would die.

He rose from the bed before the sun and called for Channa. Old age, sickness, death, there had to be an answer to such suffering. As they set out into the dawn, he drooped against the side of the chariot, his limbs weak but eyes as wide as a man compelled. Into this bleak state there flashed a shock of colour and Siddhartha looked down to find himself staring into the clear eyes of a man sat upon a reed mat. The man was naked save for a rag around his loins and the bright paints upon his face.

“He wasn’t old, or sick or dead, I don’t think.” Siddhartha mused after they had passed. “Yet there was something strange about him.”

Channa bit his tongue before replying. Out of fear of the prophecy, the King had sought to hide religion from Siddhartha as well as suffering. Yet the charioteer could not ignore the pleading of his master’s eyes. “He was an ascetic. An ascetic is someone who has renounced the world, seeking release from the fear of death and suffering.”

At this, a firefly of hope lit in Siddhartha’s heart. So there was a way to escape the horror of mortality! He almost embraced Channa in his joy.

When they returned that night, Siddhartha found that young women had been ordered to dance for his pleasure but where before he had beheld only beauty, now he saw the sweat glistening on their faces and the weariness in their steps. By the end of the performance his decision had made itself. He left the palace the next day.

And so Channa drove him to Rajagaha. There they lived as mendicants, begging for alms in the street. Though the riches of his youth had swaddled his senses like a baby, in the raw elements Siddhartha came to know the grip of real existence. And so, just as Channa had taught him the meaning of old age, sickness and death, now he learnt the fundamental meaning of hunger, exhaustion and bodily discomfort. Whereas in his palaces the nights had been made of sweet caresses, in the street cold dug its talons as deep as bone. Whereas as a prince hot days had been cooled by servants working fans, as a mendicant the sun seared and a drone of flies drank from his sweat. Within a week his palaces seemed to him like figments woven of cloud.



Yet whilst he had forgotten royal life, it had not forgotten him. King Bimbisara of Rajagaha had heard of Siddhartha’s disappearance and when his men reported seeing the prince begging, he went to talk to him. At first he couldn’t comprehend that Siddhartha’s exile was truly self-imposed. Why would a prince willingly leave his riches and power behind? Other royalty had waged wars to prevent such a fate. Yet as he listened to Siddhartha, his disbelief turned to awe. After all, even kings know the fear of death.

King Bimbisara’s white trousers kissed the red dust and, bowing his head, he offered Siddhartha his throne. Yet the mendicant just smiled. He had learnt much since the day he had first seen an old man. He knew now that a throne could not slow the passage of time, that jewels can’t cure a man of

his sickness and that, even were every kingdom on earth to marshal its armies, death could not be inflicted a single wound. Most importantly, he understood that everyone becomes an exile before the end, an exile from the dearest home of all, that of his body. And so Siddhartha politely refused the King's offer, requesting only that he and his men leave him to his peace.

When they had gone, Siddhartha lifted his head to the clear sky. A single bird traced a path across the blue and he strove to clear his mind.

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## AND ONE FOR OUR NEW FRIEND

*Emma Geen*

*According to the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament of the Christian Bible, when Jesus was just a few weeks old, the Angel of the Lord appeared to his father Joseph. He told him to take the child and Jesus' mother, Mary, down into Egypt to escape the massacre that King Herod, King of the Jews, had ordered when he had been told that a new king, the Messiah long foretold in Jewish tradition, had been born.*

*Whether or not such a massacre ever took place, the tradition that Jesus and his family fled to Egypt is as old as the Gospels which were written down some sixty to ninety years after his birth—between AD 60–90.*

*Central to the teaching of Jesus was the importance of care for the stranger, the outcast, the downtrodden and the poor. This reflects core Jewish teachings. However Jesus' own special development of this—reflected in the Lord's Prayer and in many of his stories and teachings, such as Matthew, 25: 31–46 (the story of the Sheep and the Goats, in which he says that on the Day of Judgement people will be divided as to*