

FINDING — THE — BUDDHA

A DARK STORY OF GENIUS, FRIENDSHIP, AND STAND-UP COMEDY



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“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.”

ZEN MASTER LINJI

“The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

LUKE 17:21

PROLOGUE

Miriam Torreon caught her breath and pressed her fingers to her sternum, as if trying to slow her heart rate with her hand. She slid a key card through the electronic lock and pushed on the steel panel too quickly. When it didn't open, the psychiatric nurse repeated the process. This time the door swung wide, its doorknob ramming into the cinder block wall. What she found in that room that Sunday morning continues to confound her. The pink linen was folded and laid at the edge of the mattress, as if the last person in there were a house guest wanting to leave the place impeccable for his hosts. Two vinyl restraints were pulled taut and tied in a square knot. All wrinkles in the bottom sheet and pillow cases had been smoothed away. An IV hose hung around its stand, the loops held in place by a graying strip of medical tape. Hints of isopropyl alcohol, rose water, and patchouli lingered in the air. She drew up the shade, inspected the window frame for evidence of force, and scanned the grounds of the Northern New Mexico Behavioral Health Center. Everything remained in order: enamel-painted chairs resting against a metal table, ready to be sprayed

off with a garden hose, a newspaper broadsheet flapping against the chain-link, the gardener raking mulch in the lily beds.

Some thirty minutes earlier, Torreon, the graveyard supervisor, had stepped into that room where, for two days, Mark Wladika lay sedated. She had felt his forehead with her hand, instinctively checking his temperature as though he were her own sick child. She slid a blood pressure cuff around his bicep, punched a button on a monitor mounted near the bedside, and waited for the sleeve to inflate. She checked his body temperature and blood oxygen level. She noted on his chart that the patient was stable, that there had been little change in three hours, and as ordered by the attending physician, she administered another 70 milligrams of Librium and 30 milligrams of Abilify, a partial dopamine agonist. She gave the room one last glance, made sure the door latched, chatted with an orderly in the hallway, and returned to her work station downstairs.

Now, as she stood before the empty bed, she took a long insuck of breath. She imagined events that could have lead to this moment. She feared for her job and, thereby, the well-being of her six-year-old son, who had eleven days prior been diagnosed with a learning disability. She wondered what would happen if she were blamed for Wladika's disappearance. She turned, shut off the light, and let the cell door close behind her. She made her way through the hallway and down the stairs, as if unaware of the emergency. Back at her desk, she jotted the time down on her calendar blotter, telephoned the San Miguel County Sheriff's Office, and reported the missing patient before calling her boss at home.

Three months earlier, Wladika was considered the nation's fastest-rising comedian and on the brink of superstardom, a surefire heir to

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Richard Pryor and George Carlin, and a showman whose skills, genius, and refinements left the top names in the business both awed and exhausted. Today, Wladika's whereabouts and disappearance remain a mystery.

The following, compiled between February 2010 and April 2011, is drawn from a series of interviews with those best acquainted with Wladika and his contributions. They have been edited for grammar, style, fluidity, and clarity. Some of the names have been changed.

JACK

Stephen Paulson—jackass that he was—pressed the fingers of his free hand together like a fin. He pointed his whole damned arm into the onrush of air, allowing the appendage to rise and dip, as though imagining it were a dolphin racing through choppy water. Just a few minutes earlier, the twenty-eight-year-old psychology student had climbed onto the back bumper of a seafood delivery truck to hitch a ride.

What a dope.

The goon crooked his arm through the steel handle bolted onto the sidewall and braced himself as the sixteen-footer lurched up the onramp. Once on the freeway, Paulson waved at the driver of a vintage Ford Mustang coming up behind him. The motorist tapped his horn, downshifted, cut to the next lane, and raced up Interstate 25, going north toward Santa Fe.

The young man repositioned his feet on the textured metal and swung his body out to look at the road up ahead. He seemed to enjoy both the thrill of the ride and the way the wind pressed his curls against his scalp. As he readjusted his stance, his right foot slipped. He

caught himself, held the grip with both hands, and leaned out again, invigorated by the excitement. Maybe he was just having fun. Maybe he was late getting home. Or maybe, just maybe, he was pretending to fly.

That night—or, really, that morning—I drove behind him, returning home from my job at a greasy burrito stand on Central Avenue in a part of Albuquerque called EDo, short for East Downtown. My ditzy boss was slow counting the cash register money and zipping it up in a canvas bank bag, so when I dropped my apron in the laundry barrel, waved goodbye to her and the airheaded cashier, and climbed into my mother's Corolla, I was tapped out. Who wouldn't be after six hours of high school and eight hours of slogging over-seasoned, high-fat beef into deep-fried taco shells for the street slugs trolling along Albuquerque's main drag? Tell me that won't take the wind out of your sails. I double dare you.

My T-shirt was splattered with chile and reeked of taco spices and trans fat-laced grease, and I felt about as sharp as a bowling ball. Still, once I stuck the key in that ignition, I did everything by the book, just like that anal-retentive driving instructor had told me to a few months before. I checked my mirrors and looked over the space behind me twice before releasing the emergency brake and easing out the clutch. I drove out of the parking lot, turned up Central, and down toward the highway. At the one-way, I looked in both directions, making doubly sure some drunk wasn't coming against traffic. With all the psychos out, you never know. At the Martin Luther King Avenue stop sign, I counted to three, just like Mom always insisted. I followed the rules to the letter.

On the interstate, vehicles sped by: an eighteen-wheeler, a station wagon, a motorcycle, and some sports car. Then the Seattle Fish Company truck with plenty of room behind it and that idiot riding its

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bumper, holding on with one hand, leaning out, and smiling into the wind. I zoomed up the incline and shifted into fifth gear. That's when Paulson, in his beatnik glasses and denim jacket, stuck his arm out like a wing, that imbecile acting like a twelve-year-old going for a joyride on the back of his grandpa's camper.

Like I said, what a dope.

As the rider played airfoil with his hand and reset his feet, I tried to change lanes. Just then, the truck driver swerved to avoid a corrugated carton in the middle of his lane. Paulson's foot must have slipped again because he lost his grip. I turned back from checking my blind spot just as the man's arm shot out and his hand clutched at empty air, all desperate-like. His head crashed into my windshield. It didn't bounce. It slammed into the glass, splattered like a cantaloupe on concrete, and slid down, leaving a pie-sized contusion of shattered glass, streaks of blood, and grated skin.

The car behind me swerved to the other lane, and the refrigerated transport full of oysters and salmon or whatever continued northward, maybe to Taos, Walsenburg, Colorado Springs, or Denver, the driver oblivious to the destruction he just played a major role in. Paulson clawed at the hood of the car, his mouth open, blood gushing from his nose and ear, and one green eye turned up, asking how I could be so cruel. Like I planned all this. Like you don't take a major risk when you do something so damned boneheaded. By the time I got the car to the shoulder, red and blue lights flashed behind me. Within thirty seconds, another squad car arrived, and a minute after that, another. In the distance, a siren wailed.

The first officer, the witness, was a sergeant named Roman—this guy with a lantern jaw and blond crew cut, who two hours before ordered diet sodas at my drive-up window. He stepped over, asked if I

was all right, and I said I wasn't the one who just got plowed into. He asked my name, and I said John David Marison, and then he asked if my car was drivable. Before I answered, he stepped out to the roadway and motioned for a Buick to slow down. He checked over his shoulder, directed the ambulance to the body, and sent the sedan on its way.

While the rescue team worked, I planted myself on the concrete safety pylon. Drunk drivers whizzed by at about a hundred thousand miles an hour, and this gibbous moon dangled over the West Mesa. The Russian olives and honeysuckle were in bloom, lending a fairy tale fragrance to the Albuquerque night. Downtown, the Wells Fargo building was alive with green lights that shot from its lawn up the length of its twenty-one stories. Lights sparkled along the western hills. The night held this certain tranquil beauty—if you could ignore the labored breathing of the dying man in the middle of the road.

Just after three a.m., the EMTs inserted Paulson into the ambulance, the legs of the gurney collapsing easily and automatically, the bed sliding smoothly into its slot. One of the medics, a short and stout woman, slammed the door, tested the latch, and pounded twice just below the window with the flat of her hand. With emergency lights still flickering, the GMC rolled toward Lomas Boulevard in no particular hurry.

Roman and another cop exchanged a few words before the sergeant nodded, glanced up the Interstate, and then over to downtown—at the glowing pyramid atop the Albuquerque Plaza Tower, at the illuminated windows across the eighth floor of the Lovelace Medical Center. He let a car pass, stepped over to me, and tucked his cap under his arm. All his initial hardness was gone. He asked my age, and I said I'd be seventeen in a month and that I worked the late shift at the Pup 'n Taco most weekend nights. He said oh, that's where he'd seen me. An

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old Ford pickup rattled by, some geezer at the wheel. After he took my statement, Roman clicked his pen, closed his metal binder, coughed into a fist, and said Paulson was apparently high on something and had two marijuana cigarettes—I guess cops aren't allowed to say "joints"—in his jacket pocket. That his nose bone shot up into his brain. That he never had a chance.

I covered my face and stepped back, all dramatic-like. Roman said something like "We know it wasn't your fault" before giving a one-pump nod, replacing his cap, tugging it into place, and quickstepping back to his slick top. I turned, braced myself against the concrete barrier, and held my body steady with both arms. I didn't want him to see me laughing.

Once back in my bedroom, I couldn't sleep. Diffused morning light turned the curtains blue-gray. I pulled the bedspread under my chin and turned on my side as the room brightened. I smiled, thinking of Paulson's last minutes. The events reassembled themselves in my head until they became something like a film loop. The frayed sleeve of his Levi jacket flapping as a car passed him and his seafood truck. The blue stars on the heels of his basketball shoes shifting as he reset himself on the dimpled chrome. The rocking and fishtailing of that clumsy diesel-powered transport. The squeak and wisp of smoke from the back tire as it lost and regained traction while avoiding a harmless piece of litter. The horror on Paulson's face as he flew toward me. The way he clutched, squeezed, and bent the windshield wiper, digging his bleeding fingernails into the white paint of the Corolla's hood. How he summoned his last particles of strength up from his gut just to stay alive a few extra seconds.

The events replayed themselves again, and I giggled. Soon, the images became more vibrant. The paramedics lifting the body on the

stretcher. The hinges and swivels of the gurney clanking, clicking, and humming as the ambulance cavity swallowed that shattered body. The medic pounding the back door, telling the driver to go.

A chuckle rose through my chest. Then another and another. I stuck my pillow to my face to muffle the guffaws so I wouldn't wake Mom.

Before that, I never considered what it would be like to extinguish a life, to participate so fully in catapulting another person into oblivion. I knew right then, while lying in that bed after a sleepless night, that I could do it again. Although I was just a kid, there was already one person I was sure the world would be better without. I knew I could get rid of her, even if it meant spending the rest of my life in prison. I wasn't sure I would, but at that moment, I knew I was capable. That made me laugh. So I switched on the radio next to my bed and lay there, listening to the blending voices and harmonized electric guitar licks that rose like smoke through the thinning darkness. The singer crooned, going on about African dogs barking in the night, about how he looks up at Mount Kilimanjaro and gets all freaked because visiting the Dark Continent has unleashed some demon from deep in his gut.

And I wondered what it would be like to spend my life trying to get away with murder.

Today, the memory of killing Stephen Paulson remains as fresh as it was that morning during the first month of my junior year of high school, and whenever I think about it, I have to choke back giggles. Today, there is only one person I am sure I want to kill.

His name is Mark Wladika.