



THE AWAKENED ONE
A Life of the Buddha



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Birth, Youth, Renunciation

SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA, THE AWAKENED ONE, recounted his own story to his close disciple Ananda.

Through countless lives, he was a bodhisattva, one who is on the path of awakening, who labored and sacrificed for the benefit of other beings. In a past age of the world, as a forest-dwelling ascetic named Sumedha, he threw himself at the feet of an earlier buddha, Dipankara, and resolved to become a buddha himself. Dipankara looked down and saw the bodhisattva lying in the mud before him, offering his body as a plank to be walked upon so that the Buddha would not have to soil his feet. He paused in his progress and prophesied to the multitude that accompanied him everywhere that after many eons this young ascetic would indeed also become a buddha. Through many subsequent lives, the bodhisattva practiced the ten transcendental virtues that prepare the way to buddhahood, complete enlightenment. Finally, when he had neared perfection of compassion and understanding, he took birth as a god in the fourth heaven of the desire realm, Tushita, the Heaven of the Contented. There, as Bearer of the White Banner, Shvetaketu, he shone as the teacher and king of a hundred thousand long-lived gods. That life in the Heaven of the Contented had already gone on for many thousands of years when the bodhisattva heard a

tumultuous sound resounding through the entire universe, the uproar caused by all the gods of the three thousand world systems telling each other that at last the time had come for the bodhisattva to attain buddhahood. On three kinds of occasions is such an uproar heard: when a world age is to end in destruction, when a universal monarch is to be born, and when a buddha is to be born. Now all the gods gathered in the Heaven of the Contented and implored Bearer of the White Banner not to let the moment pass, but to be born on earth and become a buddha for the sake of all sentient beings.

The future buddha deliberated. Was this the right time for a buddha to be born? As a world age progresses, the life span of human beings continually decreases. If a Buddha appears at a time when the human life span is a hundred thousand years, then old age, sickness, and dying, the alarm signals of impermanence, do not make a strong enough impression on people. There is little interest in the Dharma, the Teaching of the Buddha that conquers death. On the other hand, when the time has come when people live only twenty or thirty years, their few years are thronged with aggression and desire and clouded by depression. They are not uplifted enough to aspire to the Dharma, nor do they have time to practice it. Thus, when people live too long, they become intoxicated by eternity. When their life is too brief, they are crushed down by nihilism. A life span of about one hundred years is deemed ideal for the appearance of a Buddha.

As the life span of people on earth was not too far off the mark, the bodhisattva adjudged that his time had come. Then he deliberated further over the circumstances of his birth. On what continent, in what country, into what lineage, and to what mother should he be born?

When he had decided these things, the bodhisattva convoked an assembly of the gods of the Heaven of the Contented and taught the Dharma there for the last time. Then he announced his departure. Those Tushita gods were full of grief. They tried to persuade the bodhisattva to stay his decision. If he were to leave them, they pleaded, they would be bereaved of their teacher. There would be no luminary

to guide and inspire them in their incalculably long existence. Without him, their realm and life would lose its luster. In response, Bearer of the White Banner took the crown from his head and placed it on the head of the bodhisattva Maitreya, who was also an inhabitant of Tushita and was already destined to be the buddha of the future age. "Lord Maitreya will teach you the Dharma when I am gone," he proclaimed. And to Maitreya he said, "You, Wise One, will be the first after me to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment." Then he went to the Nandana Grove in the capital of the Heaven of the Contented, and there, mindfully and fully aware, he died. At the same moment, fully mindful and aware, he entered his earthly mother's womb.

Also at that moment, a boundless light appeared throughout the worlds. Even in the dark abysses of space where neither sun nor moon shines, this light shone, and the beings living in those places saw each other for the first time, and said, "It seems that other creatures have been born here!" Throughout all the world systems, the fundamental solid earth element trembled and shook.

IT WAS IN the middle of the first millennium BCE that the bodhisattva took his final birth, on Jambudvīpa, the southern continent of this world system, in the country of the Shakyas, which lay in the foothills of the Himalayas in present-day southern Nepal. His father, Shuddhodana, was the king of the Shakyas. As befitted a king, he was of the kshatriya, or warrior, caste, and his clan lineage, that of the Gautamas, was ancient and pure. The bodhisattva's mother was Mahamaya, the daughter of Suprabuddha, a powerful Shakyian noble. Since the bodhisattva was born a prince of the Shakyas, after his enlightenment he was known as the sage of the Shakyas, Shakyamuni. Since his clan name was Gautama, he was later also called Gautama Buddha.

One night during the midsummer festival in Kapilavastu, Queen Mahamaya had a dream. In the dream she ascended a height, and a large and beautiful white elephant with six tusks entered her womb through her right side. Then a great multitude bowed down to her.

When she awoke, she had a feeling of great well-being and knew she was with child. Indeed, she thought she could already see the child completely and perfectly formed within her womb, as one sees the colored thread running through a clear bead.

When she told the king of this, he called his brahmin wise men, who were versed in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. The brahmins told the king that a son would be born to him who would have the thirty-two major marks and the eighty minor marks of a great being. If he remained in the palace and pursued a worldly life, he would become a chakravartin, a universal monarch. However, if he renounced his home, wealth, and position and wandered forth as a holy man, he would become a completely enlightened buddha, and satisfy all beings with the elixir of deathlessness. The king was very pleased with these predictions. He gave the brahmins rich gifts and distributed food and gifts to the people.

During the time the queen was bearing the bodhisattva, she was without pain or sickness. In fact, she was radiant with unusually good health and was able to impart health to others. Many were the sick or mentally troubled ones whom she healed during this time by her mere touch or by means of her herbal preparations. The king for the most part put aside the business of state and devoted himself principally to religious rites, austerities, and acts of charity. It was a prosperous and happy time in the city. The weather was good. Trouble and conflict faded from people's lives.

Mahamaya's pregnancy lasted ten months. It was springtime, in the month of Vaishakha, when she began to feel the imminence of the birth. She asked to be taken to Lumbini, a pleasure grove belonging to her family that she had loved as a girl. Shuddhodana gave orders, and a great train of nobles, courtiers, and servants issued from the city to accompany her there. Colorful tents housing comfortable living quarters were set up, and all preparations were made for the birth. In the middle of the month, on the full-moon day, Queen Mahamaya was walking in the grove when suddenly she felt heavy and raised her right

arm to take hold of a tree branch for support. Just then, as she stood grasping the branch, the bodhisattva was born into the world, instantly and painlessly. Once again a light shone through the worlds and the earth shook. Then the bodhisattva, who already had the form of a small child, took seven firm steps, looked into the four directions, and said, "I am the leader of the world, the guide of the world. This is my final birth." Two spouts of water, one warm and one cool, issued from the air above the bodhisattva's head and poured their pure and soothing waters over him. Thus washed, he was placed on a couch covered with silk brocades, and a white parasol was raised above his head.

At that time, a great rishi, a seer, named Asita was living alone in the mountains practicing meditation. He saw with his clear sight that a momentous and auspicious birth had taken place somewhere in the world. He performed divination and determined that this event had occurred at the court of King Shuddhodana, lord of the Shakyas. With his sister's son Naradatta he traveled to Kapilavastu. Being a renowned rishi, he was admitted at once to the court, and the king received him with deference, offering him water to wash his feet. When the formalities were at an end, the seer explained that he had seen visions of an auspicious birth, which he believed to be that of the king's son. He asked to see the child. Shuddhodana commanded his son to be brought. On seeing the child, the seer, despite his age and venerable status, rose from his seat and prostrated to the child, then placed the bodhisattva's feet on his head. Shuddhodana, stunned and impressed by this act of veneration on the part of the great rishi, also prostrated to his son. Then Asita examined the child and found on his body all the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a great being. He said that for a possessor of these marks, only two destinies were possible. Such a great being would become a universal monarch should he pursue a worldly life, or a completely enlightened buddha should he renounce worldly life and enter a life of homelessness devoted to spiritual truth.

Asita proclaimed this good news to the king. But after a short time, when his first joy had subsided, the old man unaccountably began to

weep. Shuddodana's heart was touched with darkness. Could the good fortune that had come upon him hold a secret flaw? Had Asita seen some misfortune lying in his son's future? Anxiously he questioned the old seer. Asita, grasping the king's fears, was quick to reassure him. No misfortune lay ahead. He had experienced first joy and then grief, he explained, because first he had seen the greatness of the child. Then in a flash he had beheld his incomparable destiny. The child would surely renounce family, wealth, and position to seek spiritual truth. He would fully conquer delusion and become a buddha, a fully awakened one, such a one as appeared once in oceans of millennia. He would teach a doctrine that would free beings from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death. And then Asita had experienced unspeakable grief, for he had realized that he, an old man, would not live to benefit from this buddha's teaching.

"Though I have mastered the four levels of meditative absorption," he explained to the king, "I have not been fully liberated from grasping and fixation. I have not drunk the pure elixir of deathlessness. And since I will not live to hear the Buddha teach, I will die without attaining the ultimate realization."

Shortly, Asita regained his composure and took his leave of the king. After leaving the palace, he spoke to his nephew Naradatta. "Start now to prepare yourself for the Buddha's teaching. Renounce the worldly life and meditate in solitude. Yet keep well informed of King Shuddhodana's son. When you hear that he has attained buddhahood, go to him and receive his teaching." More than thirty-five years later, after the Buddha had attained enlightenment, Naradatta would become his disciple, and not long after, meditating again in solitude, attain the fourth stage of realization, that of an arhat.

On the fifth day after the bodhisattva's birth, Shuddhodana called for the traditional naming ceremony to be performed. Nobles, courtiers, and brahmins were invited in large numbers. Food and drink was plentiful, and generous gifts were made to all. The boy was given the name Siddhartha, which means "accomplishment of the goal." Then

eight skilled brahmins were asked to examine him and to augur his future. The eight brahmins all found the major and the minor marks, and seven of the eight predicted what the brahmins had predicted before. If he pursued the householder's life, he would become a universal monarch. If he renounced it and entered homelessness, he would become a fully enlightened buddha. But one of the eight, a young man named Kaundinya, clearly foresaw a single destiny for the boy — that of a buddha — and so proclaimed to the king. Years later, Kaundinya would become the first to attain realization through the Buddha's teaching.

Seven days after the Buddha's birth, Queen Mahamaya died. Her sister Mahaprajapati Gautami, who was also married to King Shuddhodana, was chosen to nurse and raise the child. Mahaprajapati was full of love for her sister's son and raised him like her own favorite.

For King Shuddhodana, all the wondrous events surrounding his son's arrival had been a source of gladness, but they had also been uncanny and had cast a shadow of awe and uncertainty. Queen Mahamaya's death again touched this darker side. In his moment of loss, his mind came to rest on the equivocal predictions of the brahmins. His son would be either a universal monarch or a buddha. True, greatness and glory lay with either, but it was now the former possibility that became enshrined in the king's heart. If his son succeeded him and became a great ruler, all the king's wishes would be fulfilled. But if the prince abandoned royal place and position, Shuddhodana would be without an heir — his house would be empty. This possibility now became a menace to be warded off. Thus he set about doing everything in his power to make matters take the desired turn. He carefully sheltered the prince from the world and surrounded him with luxury and pleasures. If the prince found nothing more to wish for, the king thought, the notion of abandoning the palace would never occur to him.

ONE DAY, WHEN the bodhisattva was still a small boy, a plowing festival took place. The king and queen (for Mahaprajapati now took her sister's

place), the nobles and servants, and much of the populace of Kapilavastu went out into the farming country beyond the city to a specially prepared site. The king and other nobles were to inaugurate the work of the season by plowing the first symbolic furrows. Gaily caparisoned teams of oxen, yoked to plows brightly painted and adorned with gold leaf, stood in readiness. Musicians played lively music. People shouted and laughed. Children ran here and there. Everyone was caught up in the excitement.

A couch was set up for Siddhartha in a sheltered area away from the bustle of the crowd in the shade of a rose-apple tree. He was left in the care of his nurses who were to take turns looking after him. As the festival progressed, the nurses too were drawn into the festivities. First one then another drifted away to watch the goings-on. After a considerable time, seeing one another, they suddenly realized that no one had stayed to mind the prince. They rushed back and found the boy sitting, composed and erect, in deep meditative absorption under the tree. To their astonishment, though nearly two hours had elapsed and the sun had changed its position, the shadow of the tree had remained stationary and continued to protect the bodhisattva from the intensity of the sun's direct rays.

The news of this wonder was brought to King Shuddhodana, who came in haste to see it with his own eyes. Seeing his son's radiant composure, he prostrated to the bodhisattva, saying, "So, my dear son, I bow to you for the second time."

As the boy grew older, the king redoubled his efforts to bind him to the palace. He surrounded Siddhartha with scores of unblemished beauties who were skilled in singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments. Beautiful women, in constantly changing variety, accompanied the prince always, seeking in every way to divert and entertain him and provide him with pleasure. Beautiful rooms with rich furnishings and lushly planted roof gardens with gorgeous silken canopies were the prince's daily haunts. Much of the time he did not even descend to the lower stories of the palace.

The Buddha recalled his youth in these words: "I was delicate, most delicate, supremely delicate. Lily pools were made for me at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lilies flowered in one, white lilies in another, red lilies in a third. I used no sandalwood that was not from Varanasi. My turban, tunic, lower garments, and cloak were all made of Varanasi cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me.

"I had three palaces; one for the Winter, one for the Summer, and one for the Rains. In the Rains palace I was entertained by minstrels, all of them women. For the four months of the Rains I never went down to the lower palace. Though meals of broken rice with lentil soup are given to the servants and retainers in other people's houses, in my father's house, white rice and meat was given to them."¹

When Siddhartha reached the age of sixteen, Shuddhodana decided that to forestall restlessness and draw him further into the householder's life, it would be good for the youth to marry. He had inquiries made among the noble families of Kapilavastu to see which among them might provide a suitable bride. In the business of arranging a marriage for Siddhartha, the king found that it was necessary to be able to proclaim the prince's accomplishments. A future king must be well educated and able to display prowess in the martial arts. But until this time, Siddhartha had done little beyond living a life of diversion and pleasure, shut away in one or another of his palaces.

Accordingly, much attention was now given to the prince's training, and it quickly became evident to everyone that he was exceedingly gifted in both intellectual and physical domains. He mastered all that could be taught him with astonishing speed. Contests among the sons of the city's gentry were arranged in which Siddhartha was to compete. In reading, writing, and mathematics, he not only far outshone all the sons of the Shakyans nobles, but even outstripped the teachers and erudite men of the kingdom. It was the same in the physical disciplines. In running, contests of strength, use of weaponry, and particularly in archery, he far surpassed all others. The nearly full-grown youth was

strong and fleet of foot, and he was also well formed and beautiful to look at.

Not long after the competitions, a suitable bride was chosen for the prince. She was Yashodhara, a dignified and beautiful young woman, the daughter of a Shakyan noble family. A royal wedding was held, and the young woman came to share Siddhartha's life in the palace.

For the next dozen years little changed in the conditions of Siddhartha's life. King Shuddhodana, always in fear of the prophecies of the brahmins, continued to spare neither trouble nor expense in sheltering and pampering the prince. He continued to embellish the comforts of the palaces and gardens where the prince whiled away the three seasons and to surround him with beautiful women who captivated him with music and song and sexual pleasures.

The prince was bound not only by this carefree life of pleasure, but also by strong ties of family and position. Nonetheless in the course of time the spell of the palace wore thin. When the sorrows and limitations of ordinary life finally began to beat in upon the prince, they struck him almost as an insult, an insolent intrusion. And they made an extremely strong impression on him.

The Buddha later recounted: "While I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an untaught ordinary man, who is subject to aging, not safe from aging, sees another who is aged, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted; for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to aging, not safe from aging, and so it cannot befit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is aged. When I considered this, the vanity of youth entirely left me.

"I thought: When an untaught ordinary man, who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted; for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, and so it cannot befit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health entirely left me.

"I thought: When an untaught ordinary man, who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, and so it cannot befit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is dead. When I considered this, the vanity of life entirely left me."²

Tradition tells us of four encounters that finally shattered the bodhisattva's contentment with his life of pleasure.

The prince had a charioteer named Chandaka whom he used to have take him on occasional outings. These outings were well orchestrated by those whom Shuddhodana had placed in charge of the prince's service. Care was always taken to clear and decorate the way, and especially to remove anything ugly or unpleasant that might disturb the prince's mood.

One day, when the prince was already in his late twenties, he commanded Chandaka to take him to a particular garden to spend the afternoon. On the way, alongside the road they encountered a man bent over with age. His hair was gray and sparse, his face wizened. His eyes were red around the edges and had cataracts. His hands shook and his gait was unsteady as he walked feebly, leaning on a stick. The prince asked Chandaka, "Who is that man? The hairs of his head do not seem to resemble those of other people. His eyes also are strange, and he walks so oddly."

Chandaka replied, "Lord, that is an old man. He is that way because of the effect time has on everyone who is born. What that man has are the afflictions of old age that await all of us. The skin dries and wrinkles, the hair loses its color and falls out, the veins and arteries stiffen, the flesh loses its suppleness and shapelessly sags. We are beset with pains. Our eyes skin over and get red. The rest of our senses grow feeble. In fact, as time goes on, our whole body winds up with little strength left in it, hardly enough to move along, as you see with that old fellow there."

When the prince heard this explanation, he became frightened and

upset. Instead of continuing on to the garden as he had intended, he ordered Chandaka to turn around and return to the palace.

King Shuddhodana saw the chariot returning and sent a messenger to inquire why his son had come back so early from his afternoon's diversion. When he heard the story, a cloud passed over his heart and he recalled the brahmins' prophecies. He ordered yet more elaborate entertainments to be arranged for the prince and an even greater number of beautiful women to be provided for his amusement. He also ordered a numerous guard to be mustered to keep watch on the palace.

Out driving in his chariot once again, by the side of the road Siddhartha saw a man suffering from disease. He was emaciated and pale. Parts of his body were swollen and other parts were covered with sores. He was leaning on another man for support and occasionally emitted piteous cries of pain. When Chandaka explained to Siddhartha what disease was, rather than continue with his outing, the prince returned to the palace deeply troubled.

When he heard the story of this incident, King Shuddhodana's concern deepened further, and he began to wonder what else he could do to fend off destiny. He felt that if only Siddhartha could be induced to remain at home for another short period of time, the crisis would pass and in the fullness of time, his son would become a great king.

On a third occasion driving in his chariot, the prince encountered a funeral procession. He saw a corpse being borne on a litter followed by bereaved relatives wailing, tearing their clothes, and covering themselves with ashes. He asked Chandaka to explain this horrifying spectacle.

"My prince, do you not know?" Chandaka answered. "This man lying on the litter is dead. His life has come to an end. His senses and feelings and consciousness have departed forever. He has become just like a log or a bundle of hay. Those relatives of his who have cared for him and cherished him through his life will never see him again. Without exception, everything that is born must die."

"But if everyone who has been born must come to this end," the

prince replied, "how is it that everyone is not afraid? Their hearts must be very hard, for I see everyone going about their business as though nothing were the matter." In deep distress, the prince commanded Chandaka to return to the palace.

Hearing of this, Shuddhodana doubled the guard and told them to watch night and day to prevent the prince's departure.

On a fourth occasion when the bodhisattva was out driving in his chariot with Chandaka, he encountered a mendicant with upright bearing and a serene and radiant countenance. Siddhartha was impressed by this sight and questioned Chandaka about the man. Chandaka replied, "This is a holy man who has renounced worldly life and entered upon a life of homelessness. Such homeless mendicants devote themselves to spiritual pursuits such as meditation or practicing austerities. They have no possessions but wander from place to place, begging their daily food."

In deep thought, the prince had himself driven back to the palace.

To divert his son from his preoccupations, the king decided to send him on a visit to a nearby farming village. He hoped that Siddhartha would take an interest in the methods of the farmers. But when he got there, the delicate youth saw the toiling workers, dirty and half-clad, streaming with sweat as they struggled in the heat of the sun. The oxen were laden with heavy yokes that rubbed the hide from their shoulders. The plows they pulled bruised the earth and destroyed worms and insects in their progress. To force the beasts to work, the farmers had to prod them with iron goads that made their straining flanks run with blood. Slaver and foam dripped from their mouths as they were forced to drag the heavy plows over long distances. Thick clouds of gnats and stinging flies never ceased to torment them.

The prince was overcome with revulsion. When he learned that the laborers were his father's slaves, he freed them on the spot, telling them, "From today, you will no longer be slaves. You are free to go wherever you like and live in happiness." He also released the oxen, saying to them, "Go. From now on be free and eat the sweetest grass

and drink the purest water and be fanned by cool breezes from every direction.”

THE BODHISATTVA HAD reached his twenty-ninth year, and his wife Yashodhara was with child. But he was now thinking in earnest of leaving home. Old age, sickness, and death, and the suffering that seemed to be everywhere, cast restrictions on existence that he could not accept as final. Somehow he had to triumph over these enemies of happiness. Yet he could not hope to do so by whiling away his life in the palace. His encounter with the mendicant seemed to show the path he must follow to come to grips with these profound vexations.

As he later explained, “Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement, I sought after what was also subject to these things. Then I thought: Why, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement, do I seek after what is also subject to these things? Suppose, being myself subject to these things, seeing danger in them, I sought after the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme surcease of bondage, nirvana?”³

And again: “Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, I thought: House life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, living in a household, to lead a holy life as utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell. Suppose I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow cloth, and went forth from the house life into homelessness.”⁴

One night in the women’s quarters, after an evening of entertainment, the prince woke up, and in the still-flickering lamplight saw the beautiful women lying about him, asleep in various positions of abandon. One young woman, who still held her lute, lay drooling from one side of her open mouth and snoring loudly. Other women lay propped against the walls or against pieces of furniture. Some had wine stains on their clothing. Others with their rich costumes thrown open lay in

ungainly postures with their bodies exposed. In the stupor of sleep, they looked like randomly heaped corpses. The seductive vision of their beauty, which had so long captivated the prince, was shattered.

That same night, Yashodhara had a dream that Siddhartha had left her. She awoke and told him the dream. Then she said, “Lord, wherever you go, please take me with you.” And thinking that he was going to a place beyond suffering and death, he agreed, and told her, “Where I go, you may go too.”

Soon a son was born to Yashodhara and Siddhartha. Siddhartha gave the boy the name Rahula, which means “fetter.”

It was a night not too long after the birth on which the bodhisattva chose to quit the palace forever and enter the path of homelessness. He decided to have a last look at his son Rahula before leaving. He found him asleep next to Yashodhara, with her hand resting lightly on his head. He knew that if he picked the baby up, he would wake his wife and leaving would become difficult. He turned on the spot, vowing to see his son again after he had attained enlightenment. All the palace women and all the guards and their captains, even those on watch, seemed to be sleeping soundly, for no one appeared to hinder his departure. The bodhisattva woke the charioteer Chandaka, commanded him to saddle his favorite horse, Kanthaka, and to accompany him on foot.

Legend recounts that in sympathy with Siddhartha’s departure from the palace, this decisive step toward buddhahood, the gods cast a stupor over the palace. Kanthaka silenced his own neighing, and gods supported his hooves in their hands so that they made no noise on the paving stones. The gods it was also who opened the locked gates and swung them silently on their hinges, allowing the bodhisattva to depart unheard.

It was the full-moon night of the summer month of Ashadha when the bodhisattva, astride Kanthaka and with Chandaka at his heels, left Kapalivastu and struck out south through the forest. He was twenty-nine years old.