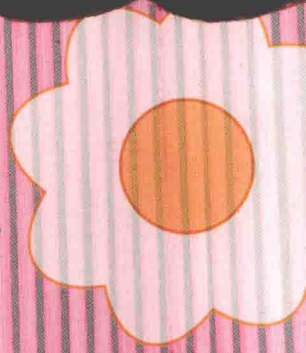
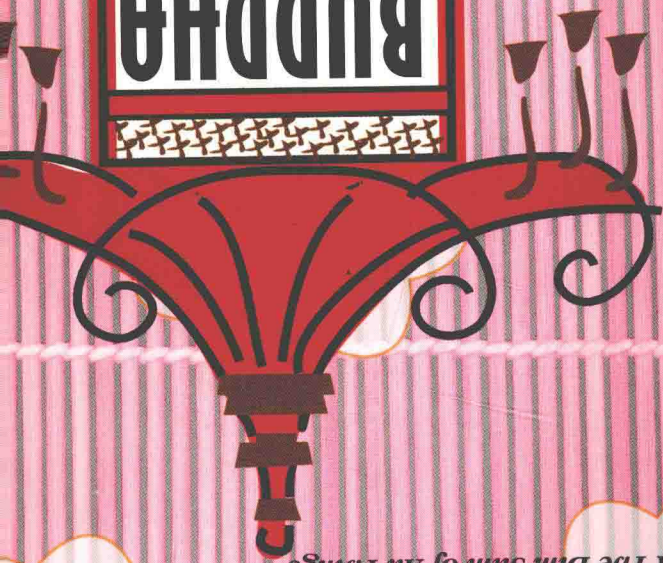
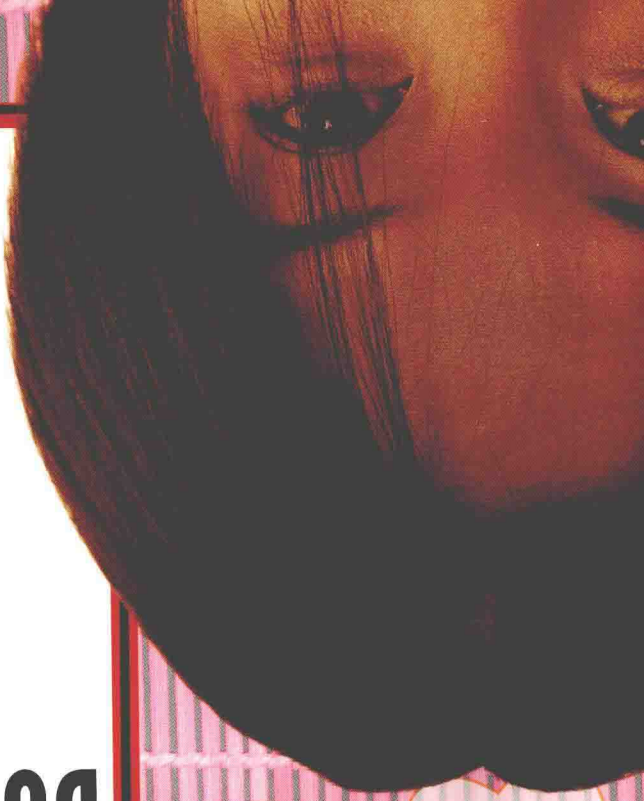


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LITTLE
BLACK
BOOK

**BUDDHA
BABY**



author of The Dim Sum of All Things

KIM WONG KELLNER



Buddha Baby

Kim Wong Keltner



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Buddha Baby

By Kim Wong Keltner

**BUDDHA BABY
THE DIM SUM OF ALL THINGS**

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Buddha Baby

Lindsey Owyang was about to learn a thing or two about Chinese people, Catholic nuns, and taxidermy. She didn't know it yet, but this spring would be a season of unusually warm winds, blasts from the past, and stone-cold foxes. She was just a Chinese-American girl with two part-time jobs, a tendency to daydream, and a penchant for Hello Kitty toys, but as the days grew longer and the beach water slightly warmer, she would find herself prying nettles from her family tree and testing her mettle as she struggled to make her peace with Chinatown & country.

She had been born and bred in San Francisco, raised on Cocoa Puffs and Aaron Spelling productions. As a kid she never wore silk slippers or mandarin-collared pajamas, but rather was more often outfitted in checkerboard Vans and an "I'm With Stupid" T-shirt. Confucian proverbs eluded her, but she was well versed in the spunky aphorisms of great philosophers such as Fonzie and Fred Sanford, whose Nick-at-Nite reruns taught her handy phrases such as "Sit on it, Malph," and "Bring me some ripple, Dummy."

In high school she was more interested in *Tiger Beat* than

tiger balm, but her parents did occasionally attempt to blend Chinese and American cultures together by preparing meals such as *bok choy* with cut-up hot dogs, or macaroni salad with *pai don*, Chinese preserved eggs. When she played Monopoly, she passed Go as she ate *nian goh*, and cranking up the stereo after school, she danced to Bow Wow Wow while she munched on *cha siu bows*.

Her hair was straight and black, and she had a slight build with *chow mein*-noodly limbs. Pale and sun phobic, she was fairer than most white people, but her bridge-deficient nose and single-lidded eyes shaped like sideways teardrops proclaimed to the world that she was a descendant from the Middle Kingdom. China was a place she knew little about, but her face, her coloring, and her name led strangers to assume she knew more about her ancestors' country than she actually did. At any random moment, whether toiling as a retail drone, squeezing her butt into jeans at Old Navy, or ordering a venti mocha frappuccino at Starbucks she might be asked for detailed explanations about Ming emperors, imperial porcelain from Jingdezhen, or the secrets of Yo-Yo Ma's success.

Socially, she had spent her youth dodging the inconvenience of her Asianness, but in the last three of her twenty-eight years she was forced to wake up and smell the *bock-fa* oil. She faced her Chinese identity head-on, like a person in the center of a dodgeball game who eventually got smacked in the face with the big, red rubber ball that was her Chinese self. She was by no means absolutely comfortable with her ethnicity 24-7, but she was on her way. If you looked on a street map of San Francisco you could spot Lindsey where the avenue to nowhere met the cross street of somewhere. She wasn't a complete dope, nor was she burning a path to success like the next Connie Chung.

Cosmopolitan told her she should be a dynamic, career-climbing, late-for-Pilates, bright, young thing. However, on this particular Saturday night, Lindsey was a mattress-slouching, tube-sock-wearing lazy girl with rug burns.

She had lain down to take a short nap at four, but now it was almost six. Sitting up in bed, she rubbed a prickly swath on the back of one leg, the result of a pillow fight turned ouchy when she'd fallen off the mattress and skidded across the carpet. She pressed the small pink welt with her finger, then pulled the blankets up to get a bit warmer. Wearing only a negligee and a pair of white-and-gold tube socks, she looked like a cross between Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver* and one of the Bad News Bears.

Except, of course, she was Chinese.

Across the hallway she could hear the sound of an electric razor and running water. She smiled to herself, knowing that the guy who loved her was just a few steps away.

His name was Michael Cartier and he was a white guy. She'd become smitten with him three years ago and interracial hijinks had ensued. But alas, a twist.

Michael had come into Lindsey's life during the *Age of Hoarders*. By her own definition, a *Hoarder of All Things Asian* was a nerdy white guy in beige clothing whose good-guy demeanor camouflaged an insatiable hunger for Asian flesh. Hoarders came in many guises, such as co-workers offering to explain 401k plans or mall trawlers loitering around the Asian food court, and Lindsey had been hyper-vigilant about avoiding them. She knew a Hoarder's appetite was not satisfied by take-out dishes of sweet 'n' sour pork, but rather, he was fixated on the idea of Asian girls themselves as tasty dishes on the city's take-out menu. Lindsey knew that behind a Hoarder's innocuous façade, all he had on his mind was an evening of sweet-and-sour porking.

And into this paranoid world of hers, Michael Cartier had traipsed. She had initially suspected he was a Hoarder, but was surprised to find that not only was he not a pervo-goat in sheep's clothing, but he was, in fact, a Secret Asian Man. He was, as it turned out, one quarter Chinese. His non-whiteness was not readily apparent to the naked eye, and he'd grown up culturally removed from his Asian heritage. But his slice of life was not made completely of Wonder Bread, she'd learned. Blending easily into the Caucasian population, in his thirty years he'd been called lots of names, but not the same ones as Lindsey: chump instead of *chink*, jerk rather than *Jap*, geek but not *gook*. Asians had called him *round-eye*, *straight nose*, *haole*, and *gwei-lo*.

In their two years together, Michael had held her hand as they swam against a tide of cultural differences. And like every couple, they had to work some shit out. At first she was reluctant to show him her world of Chinese customs, organ meats, and odiferous ointments. But as time passed, they stuck together and she discovered there was no mountain of chicken feet too high for them to climb.

Of course, there had been bumps in the road. He once pinned Chinese couplets to the wall with the characters upside down, and on her dad's birthday he served a short-noodled pasta instead of the kind that would have represented long life. In an attempt to speak Cantonese when ordering crab in a restaurant, he once used the wrong intonation for *hai* and ended up asking the waitress for the cracked "pussy" smothered in black bean sauce.

And Lindsey hadn't been perfect either. She was hyper-germ-phobic as only an Asian girl could be, and sometimes drove him nuts with her refusal to touch public doorknobs unless her hand was mummified in swaths of paper towels. In spite of herself, she was superstitious, and when they changed

to a new phone number they had to pay extra because she insisted on plenty of eights and refused their neighborhood's exchange of 664 because her dad had told her that in Chinese that number sounded like "roll over and die."

In learning to accept Michael's background, Lindsey eventually got off her multi-culti high horse and opened her mind to the fact that "white" was not really an ethnicity but a general catchphrase that didn't begin to describe the various cultures as proud and distinct as her own. In honor of Michael's Irish side, she reluctantly yet gradually accepted the lowly potato as a culinary staple.

These details aside, she knew that all her Chinese New Year lucky envelopes had done their job. She had hit the loverboy jackpot. Michael wasn't one of those lousy, just-pretending-your-ass-ain't-fat, I'm-throwing-out-this-damn-Anthropologie-catalog kinda guys with a channel-changing finger glued to the TV remote control. Michael Cartier was a you-look-great-with-no-makeup, let-me-hold-your-hair-back-while-you're-sick, should-I-run-out-and-buy-more-toilet-paper kinda dreamboat.

Still lying in bed, Lindsey craned her neck and peered across the hall. She could see him now, innocently scrubbing a bicuspid. Scooting to the far edge of the bed for a closer view of him, she watched him with a blend of admiration and deep affection. But then her relative calm was disrupted when her pulse quickened. She suddenly felt a surge through her blood and sat bolt upright. An urge to protect Michael overcame her, and she was gripped with the feeling that she would instantly kill someone with her bare hands like a trained ninja if they ever tried to hurt him.

It happened sometimes, this protective feeling. She readily admitted it bordered on the psychotic. She loved Michael so intensely, nonsensically, and possessively that sometimes she felt murderous. Not that he was ever in danger, or even de-

fenseless. Nor was she particularly skilled in martial arts. It's just that she loved him so much that she wanted to be the only person privy to his stupid jokes, Christopher Walken impersonations, and retro stash of Bjorn Borg era hosiery.

Yes, it was official. She was twitterpated.

She knew that sounded pathetic, sickeningly cutesy, and *Fatal Attraction*-esque. When she was single, if anyone had ever told her she would fall so hard for a guy that she'd be willing to wear his tube socks, she would have balked. But hey, here she was.

She felt her face get hot as her eyes brimmed suddenly with tears. Looking across the hall once again, she watched Michael as he finished up his various grooming rituals. Overcome by the enormity of their domestic happiness, her tear ducts and sinuses began to feel prickly, and without warning she began to weep. What followed were not big sobs, but almost worse—the kind of crying where there was no sound at all, just hot tears and swollen, puffy eyelids, the kind that would require ice packs and teabags to look like a normal person again.

Michael came in and found her scrunched in the bed's corner, mashing Kleenex into her eye sockets.

"What's wrong?" he said, pulling the blankets up over both of them and wrapping his arm around her.

She didn't know how to explain her feelings. Instead of trying, all she could think to say was, "I forgot to tape *Zoolander*."

He hugged her for a moment, then said, "C'mon, we don't want to be late for your grandmother's party."

About an hour later, Lindsey found herself sitting in her parents' living room, staring at the prominently displayed statue of Buddha atop the television set. No Chinese home was complete without a fat-bellied, porcelain Buddha with children clamoring over his legs and shoulders, clutching his sacred love handles. But wasn't he supposed to be an ascetic who survived

on only one grain of rice per day? This porcelain figure looked less like a holy man and more like Re-Run from *What's Happening!* She imagined if there was a pull-cord on the back of the statue's head, rather than, "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," he'd say, "W'as happenin', Raj!"

Then he'd breakdance.

Lindsey's older brother, Kevin, suddenly emerged from one of the bedrooms, came down the hall and wandered over. He looked at the figurine and said, "I hate Buddhas. They scare me." Meandering away, he left Lindsey alone in the living room.

As she waited for Michael to come up from the garage, where he was replacing a washer on a sink at the behest of her mother, she slouched in the La-Z-Boy recliner. Fully sunken into the fake leather, she wondered what to expect this evening, not having spent time with her Owyang side of the family in quite some time. Her dad, Earl, was retiring and quiet like her grandparents, Yeh Yeh and Yun Yun, but her Auntie Geraldine and Uncle Elmore could always be counted on for entertainment.

Tonight being the occasion of Yun Yun's eighty-eighth birthday party, there was sure to be a certain amount of drama as relatives she hadn't seen for years would be coming to pay respect, offer lucky money, and devour all their *arare* crackers. Also, Yun Yun could always be depended on to spice up any occasion with a handful of well-timed, persnickety barbs, and Lindsey wondered which innocent bystanders would be stung this evening.

The first guest to arrive was Auntie Geraldine. Notorious for stealing food at parties, she scanned the room as soon as Lindsey opened the door, as if deducing which handy-sized hors d'oeuvres might fit conveniently inside her Louis Vuitton purse.

When Lindsey was younger, her aunt had looked like a Chinese Elizabeth Taylor circa 1973, and she hadn't been as obvious in her thievery. At family get-togethers she wore chiffron dresses and head scarves and took home regular portions of leftovers like everyone else. When Lindsey's parents hosted summer barbecues and roast beef dinners during the holidays, Auntie Geraldine used to politely ask, "Are you sure you have enough?" before taking small portions on a Chinet paper plate covered in foil.

Then one Fourth of July a whole platter of fried chicken disappeared, and shortly thereafter, on Labor Day, a clove-spiked ham evaporated, leaving just an ironstone platter with a puddle of rapidly coagulating gravy. Lindsey had quietly noticed a trail of crushed pineapple bits that led from the tablecloth to Auntie Geraldine's Le Sportsac.

Over the ensuing years Auntie Geraldine became quite adept at creating diversions to hide her culinary stockpiling. She would breeze into parties covered in jade and gold baubles so exquisite that everyone was fooled by her dazzle camouflage. They oohed and aahed at her perfectly manicured fingernails, like Barbra Streisand's at the end of *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, and were further distracted by the pamphlets she distributed about the joys of selling Amway products. Shortly thereafter, slabs of roast beef would disappear and rivulets of brown mushroom sauce could be seen dripping from her bell-shaped sleeves.

Sometimes, when an evening was well under way, Auntie Geraldine would go a-missing. After having spent the evening sauntering back and forth between her Buick LeSabre and the party, incrementally stashing plates of filet mignon, turkey legs, and five-layer dip, she would save the most difficult items for last, perhaps trying to figure out how to safely and inconspicuously insert a five-layer cake under her muumuu. Lindsey

watched everything from underneath the dining-room table.

The most daring of Auntie Geraldine's capers had been the Christmas when she crammed a pyramid of shish kebabs complete with skewers into her Mary Kay cosmetics travel case. She apparently thought no one was looking, and with her eyes twinkling with holiday mischief, was tiptoeing away like the Grinch stealing the Whoville Christmas tree when Lindsey suddenly woke up from a nap and asked,

"Where are you going with our dinner?"

With big eyes she waited for an explanation just like Cindy-Lou Who, or rather, Cindy-Liu Hu.

"Go back to sleep, dear," Auntie Geraldine said, and then stole into the December night.

With all the different things Auntie Geraldine had made disappear, Lindsey had figured the woman missed her calling as the best magician this side of David Copperfield. As she chuckled at the memories, she got up to replenish the celery sticks and Ranch dip. Restocking the baby carrots, she wondered why Uncle Ran, Auntie Geraldine's husband, wasn't here tonight. Since it had been years since she had last seen Uncle Ran at any family gathering, she figured that maybe he had developed agoraphobia, or maybe he was just buried in his living room under a mountain of hoarded party snacks.

Hmm. Uncle Ran was a recluse and Auntie Geraldine stole vats of Swedish meatballs. Lindsey wondered if all marriages dissolved beneath the weight of a couple's idiosyncrasies. Rumor was that when Uncle Ran and Auntie Geraldine first got together, they were great party hosts who danced the limbo and made killer mai tais. Then they got hitched, made the beast with two backs, and the next thing they knew there were a couple of *leen yoong bows* in the oven. Over the course of several years they went from serving Brazil nuts and rum in coconuts to buying Beechnut baby food and Nutter Butters. And now,

they were just plain nuts. Was marriage really a journey that required an emergency stash of candied yams inside your dented sedan's glove compartment?

Just then, Lindsey heard a voice call out to her, "Don't be a jive turkey, give your uncle a hug!"

Uncle Elmore had arrived. He walked over and grabbed Lindsey's hand, then spun her around and dipped her. He hoisted her up, and she gagged in a cloud of Brut by Fabergé.

Uncle Elmore was so thoroughly absorbed in his disco persona from 1975 that even now, thirty years later, he still danced the Latin Hustle and bemoaned the disappearance of fern bars. His personality was a blend of Boz Scaggs's aging cool and Bruce Lee's mystique, with a drop of Maurice White from Earth, Wind and Fire added for good measure. Tonight Lindsey noticed his perfectly blow-dried hair and his polyblend shirt, which was unbuttoned one notch lower than what was currently considered respectable. Completely tan since the seventies, this evening he was sporting the "Crockett-Tubbs" look from *Miami Vice*.

"Dy-no-mite!" he exclaimed, to Lindsey's amusement. He added, "I might be getting older, but my niece still knows I'm ba-aad!"

Uncle Elmore was bad, all right. He wasn't technically divorced from his wife, Dee, but he haunted places like T.G.I. Friday's and asked girls half his age what their astrological sign was. At weddings, he always got embarrassingly drunk and either splashed wine on somebody or tried to make out with them, even if they were his blood relative.

Uncle Elmore often boasted of being mistaken for various movie stars such as George Hamilton and John Travolta, regardless of the fact that they weren't even Chinese. Although he was obviously deluded and his moral fiber was clearly made of macramé, he was generally accepted by the family as just an