

Buddha Behind Bars

By Daniel Hatadi

The room wasn't what Banjo expected. He was thinking fancy rugs, a lot of red and orange, candles and incense, hippy shit. But the walls were bare except for a black and white poster of a staircase. It was just another cell.

Banjo shrugged, nodded to the other inmates, stood in the back corner. Laid out in a grid on the floor were about a dozen blue cushions. Nothing fancy; plain.

The door opened. A huge bald man walked in, wearing a grey tracksuit with a picture of a poodle on it. Every part of him was big, almost like he'd never stopped growing. He nodded, looked around the room, eyes twinkling. "We'll wait a couple more minutes." He busied himself by rearranging cushions.

The others filed in, took a cushion each, crossed their legs and sat. Banjo stayed put.

"Okay," the bald man said, "Remember the Stairway To Heaven?"

A couple of the inmates laughed. One piped up. "How's that go, Sam?"

"You forgot? Don't know about you." Sam chuckled. "It's easy. Just think of the song. Imagine all the people you ever knew are up in heaven, and there's a stairway leading up to them, like the one on the poster. At the top, it's all white light. Imagine taking a step at a time, one with each breath." He clapped his hands and closed his eyes.

"Alright, I'll bite. Why won't you take a cushion?"

Banjo took a moment to figure out who Sam was speaking to. "Cause this is a load of shit."

Sam laughed in a gentle way that washed over Banjo like rain. "Maybe. But what I told the boys last week was this: you can handle most situations in two ways - one bad, one good."

Banjo said, "Pile it on."

"Your legs might get sore, maybe your back too. There's nothing stopping you sitting on a cushion and taking it easy." Sam opened his eyes. "See? Two ways."

Banjo noticed an empty spot in front of Sam. He picked up a cushion and took it over, sat down, stared at Sam for a few seconds, then nodded.

"That'll do," Sam said. "Now we'll try another exercise, one we haven't done before. To make it easier, get in whatever position you like."

Everyone shifted. Banjo kept his legs crossed, matching Sam.

"Up till now, I've told you all exactly what to do. This time, I want you to get creative. Close your eyes and breathe slow. While you're doing that, keep your mind on something else. That something else is up to you. A beach at sunset, a big old tree on top of a hill ..." He looked around. "Just don't make it tits and arse."

They all laughed.

"The point is to remind you of a time when your life was at peace. Five minutes, no talking, just breathing. I'll tell you when it's over. Has everyone thought of something?"

There were a few grunts around the room.

“Okay, start.”

Everyone except Banjo closed their eyes. Some of them looked like they’d swallowed a lemon. Others were smiling.

“This is bullshit.” Banjo stood up, walked to the wall by the door.

Sam said, “It’s open.”

Banjo reached out and tried the door handle. It worked. He went out, let himself fall back against the wall.

Outside in the corridor, there were three inmates on cleaning duty. One of them was a burly Maori that everyone called Kong.

“Big man Banjo’s gone to see the sky pilot,” Kong said.

The inmates on cleaning laughed like a pack of wild animals.

One with a bandana tied too tight around his skull let his mop go. The mop fell against the wall of the bucket, sloshing the dirty water around. He stepped forward, laughing at Banjo.

Banjo stared until the inmate backed away, knocked into the mop and tipped the bucket over, spilling dirty brown suds all over the floor. The water came up to Banjo’s feet. Kong wasn’t so lucky.

Kong glared at Banjo. “Now look what you done, robe-fucker, you messed up my boots.”

Banjo had had enough.

He leapt at Kong with a speed that startled the others, who scurried back to the wall, staying out of the way of the fight.

Kong was taller than Banjo and built strong, but Banjo grabbed Kong’s dark, curly hair, letting all of his weight rest on it. The speed of the attack and the pain of having his hair ripped brought Kong to the ground.

It was on.

Banjo didn’t waste any time. He balled up his right fist and held Kong’s head down on the concrete with the other hand. Banjo’s fist came down hard. Once, twice, again. He pummelled Kong’s face, cheek, nose. The third strike drew blood, but by then, Kong had twisted his larger frame around, kicking Banjo in the back.

A dozen shoes came pummelling down the corridor. The screws had their nightsticks raised, brought them down on the two fighters. Outnumbered and further bloodied, Kong and Banjo backed down.

On the way back to his cell, Banjo thought about the class. That thing about the stairway to heaven might have worked, might have given him some peace - if he knew what peace was. But Banjo couldn’t see himself setting even a foot on that stairway. No fucking way.

He was stuck in Hell.

Banjo stared at the wall, his back to the bars. This whole place was already behind him. He would stay strong, keep it together. Kong was nothing, tough because of his size, not his will. He'd keep.

After a few days, Banjo started thinking about something that Sam had said. It ran around his brain, knocking against the sides of his skull, like rattling the bars.

A time in your life when everything was at peace.

At first, Banjo laughed at the idea. Of course he'd never had peace, his dad had brought him and his brothers up on his own. Mum left before he could remember her. Banjo's older brothers all remembered something, even if it was little. The smell of her hair, her yelling in the morning, the green dress with Hawaiian flowers - these were only things he'd heard about, never remembered them for himself.

Banjo's father had it hard, working in the mines, picking oranges, whatever it took. They moved around all the time, piled up in the back of dad's truck, bouncing on dirt roads, fighting with each other.

Sometimes they'd eat rice for a week, boiled from a huge ten-kilo bag. Dad would beat them up if they stole one of the other brother's bowls, but that was fair enough. You had to eat.

Banjo nodded to himself, started thinking about his brother, Darren.

Dazza.

Poor bastard. A smackhead, died the same way all smackheads did. Overdose. They'd lay off the stuff for a while, then they thought one more hit couldn't hurt, just for old time's sake. But the tolerance wasn't what it used to be. Didn't take much.

Banjo clicked his fingers. It echoed off the walls.

One of the inmates here reminded him of his brother. Kev.

Kev wasn't tough, couldn't look after himself. Tall and lanky, with that spotty skin that smackheads get, that blank look in the eyes. Someone had to look after him. Banjo wanted to, but he knew that it couldn't look that way. Kev would have to learn to survive on his own.

Maybe he could be taught.

Banjo held his head in his hands, crossed his legs, tried to relax.

Peace. Who needed it? Peace didn't make you strong, didn't help you out there in the real world. Or in this one.

When they let Banjo out for lunch, Kev was on the other side of the room, as far away from the door as he could sit. There was something different about him, something missing. That nervous, twitchy energy he always had. That was it. It was gone.

Banjo walked straight over to Kev. The conversation in the lunchroom stayed the same, but everyone listened, watched, waited.

Kev in his seat was almost the same height as Banjo standing behind him. The inmates at Kev's table stopped eating and the seat next to Kev was made empty. Banjo stared at Kev.

Kev chewed. “Hey Banjo. Aren’t you eating?”

Banjo stared some more until Kev swallowed.

“What did I tell you?”

Kev looked down, fiddled with his lunch tray.

“I dunno.”

“I told you something.”

“Nothin. You told me nothin.”

Banjo leaned over, slammed his hand on the table. The trays clanged and rattled.

Conversation stopped. The screws around the lunchroom pretended to look the other way.

Kev kept his hands on the tray. He had the shakes.

“I told you to quit.”

“I did, I quit. I told you I never do that stuff. Not again, no more.”

Banjo looked at Kev’s skin. It was parched. Cracked. Red. It hung on Kev like it would melt right off. Eyes like a bug. His hair wasn’t combed and it fell over his head like he’d just woken up. But Banjo couldn’t be seen to show sympathy. Not here, not for this.

“Who gave you the needle?”

“You know, I just get em where I can.”

Banjo backhanded Kev.

Kev spat out gravy, but kept looking forward. He was breathing heavily through his nostrils.

“Fuck! What for?”

Banjo leaned closer.

“I told you about survival, didn’t I?”

Kev nodded, his breathing slowed.

“To survive you have to be strong, you have to be clear. You can’t be getting messed up on smack. Who gave it to you?”

Kev turned his head enough to whisper. “Kong.” He turned back and spoke louder. “Okay! I won’t do it no more. You can count on me, honest.” He nodded fast, as if that made his words true. “No worries, Banjo.”

Banjo straightened and patted Kev on the head.

He picked up the tray and smacked it on Kev’s face, hard. Meat and potatoes spilled onto Kev, the table, the floor. Again, harder. Banjo hit Kev with the tray until Kev fell off the chair.

Kev was on the floor under the table, whimpering. “No worries, no more. No more.”

Banjo used the tray to flip a piece of potato off his uniform. Brown stains on the front of his shirt mixed with spots of blood. He put the tray back on the table and walked over to the counter, grabbed another tray that was already filled with food. Plonked the tray down with a clang on a table nearby and set to eating.

The screws were still looking the other way.

When Banjo walked into the meditation class this time, everyone was already cross-legged on their cushions, eyes shut.

Banjo snorted and walked to the front of the class, looked around, didn't find an empty spot. A few cushions were leaning against the wall behind Sam, but Banjo wasn't in the mood for squeezing past. He grabbed a young inmate by the scruff of his uniform. The inmate took in a sharp breath.

Some of the others opened their eyes, but Sam kept his shut. The inmate looked up. Banjo tilted his head, pointed it at the back of the class. The inmate understood, walked over without a word and sat on the cold concrete.

Sam breathed out. "That's five minutes, everyone." He looked around the class, skimming over it, looking at Banjo as if he'd been there the whole time. "Did anyone get further? Who held the image for the whole five minutes?"

Troy, a young Italian, his voice pitched high with excitement. "I did it, boss. Held her in my mind for the five. Fully sick. She had all this light around and I felt, like, this energy all through me. Tingly."

"Who did you hold on to this time, Troy? Megan Gale?"

The inmates laughed, a little too loudly, Banjo thought.

Troy didn't say anything, his face flushed red.

Sam looked at him with that twinkle in his eye. "Seriously, Troy, what was the image you came up with?"

Troy waited for the chuckles to die down. "Well, I know you're Buddhist and all, but I was brought up Catholic, so I thought, who's the most holiest person I could think of? She came to me, straight up, the Virgin Mary. Don't get no bigger virgin than her, Sam."

Even Banjo couldn't help letting out a snigger.

Sam said, "Troy, there's nothing wrong with using the Virgin Mary, or any other religious icon. It doesn't have to be Buddha, that's not how this class works. The image that is the best for you is all that counts." Sam paused for a moment. "What image would you pick, Banjo? Who makes you the happiest, or brings love to you?"

Banjo had been waiting for Sam to say something to him, but not this. He expected Sam to complain about taking the cushion from the other inmate, the inmate now sitting at the back of the class, not saying a word.

"No one brought us love, we didn't have to be happy, just had to survive." It was more than Banjo had planned on saying. How did Sam get him like that?

Sam uncrossed his legs. "You say 'us', and 'we'. Who's that? Your brothers and sisters? Is that it? Maybe something happy-"

"That's none of your fuckin business."

There wasn't a breath to be heard in the room, not a single movement.

"Your life can't have all been this, Banjo. I can see that in you, see the way you take care of the others."

“Fuck this. And fuck you.” Banjo stood, picked up the cushion, clenched it tight. “You like spending time in prison, do you? You got no fuckin idea. What is it? You like boys in uniform?” He looked around the room, everyone watching him, Troy’s face red again. Sam didn’t move, but the twinkle had left his eye.

Troy said, “Hey Banjo, don’t get pissed off at Sam, it’s his job. He doesn’t ...” Troy trailed off into silence.

Banjo looked back at Sam. “Looks like you’ve got them all on side, sky pilot. Fuck me if I’m gonna join them.” He spun around and walked straight out, throwing the cushion in the corner of the room. It bounced off Troy’s shoulder, but Banjo didn’t look back, and no one said anything as he left, not even Sam.

After another week in the dry cell for refusing to do the class ever again, the screws let Banjo out to lunch. A group at one of the tables chattered. They were excited about something. Banjo watched them as he fiddled with his food.

Kong carried his lunch tray past Banjo’s table, stopped, then backtracked a few steps. He looked down at Banjo, tipping his head in the direction of the talkers. “Looks like your boys are all robe-fuckers now.”

The guards were at the other end of the lunchroom, laughing and talking. Banjo didn’t look at Kong. “Keep moving.”

Kong looked behind him. The guards stopped talking. Kong moved on.

Banjo picked up his tray and took it over to the group of talkers. He didn’t like being out of the loop. “Troy, Kev. What’s all the excitement?”

Kev said, “Hey, Banjo. It’s all good. I been clean. Nothin to worry bout.”

Banjo smiled and patted Kev on the back. “That’s good to hear.” It was as if nothing had happened the other day. He looked at them all. “What I want to know is what’s got you boys covering your mouths, like no one can tell you’re talking.”

Troy said, “Nothing much, boss. Just that class, with the monk guy, all in robes and shit.” Troy looked around, the others laughing. “Maybe not, but it feels like he’s got robes on. Fuckin weird. But good.”

Banjo stopped smiling. “Didn’t seem like a big deal to me.”

Kev, all nervous and twitchy, said, “Hey Banjo, we can’t take the dries as good as you. I’d go nuts in there. Make me wanna, you know. That thing I can’t do, cause I’m all cleaned up.”

Banjo’s face tensed for a moment, then relaxed.

“Fair enough, Kev.”

While the inmates were talking, a couple of screws walked over, stood behind Banjo. One of them tapped Banjo on the shoulder, bent down to speak in his ear. “Warden says you’ll do the class, or Kev’ll be spending a few nights on his own.”

Banjo stared at his tray, silent.

Kev moved back in his chair, eyes darting between everyone at the table. He sputtered and coughed.

The guard stood up. "Tomorrow. 11am."

Banjo was early to the class, taking the front cushion for his own again. If he couldn't avoid doing the class, he would make it his own. He wouldn't let it beat him.

The inmates filed in, sitting a respectful distance from Banjo. A minute before 11am, Sam walked through the door.

He wore maroon and yellow, the fabrics draped around him like a robe. His head was shaved clean. He walked straight over to Banjo and sat next to him, facing the front of the room.

"Hey there, Banjo." Sam said.

Banjo grunted a reply.

"Look mate, I don't want you to do this class if you're not into it, but the warden makes the rules. I'm happy for you to sit in a corner and do whatever you please, as long as you don't disturb the class." He paused for breath, adjusted his robes. "Some of the boys are really getting somewhere with this, and if that can make their time in here easier, then I've done my job."

Banjo looked at him, and up this close he could see that Sam meant every word. Had to respect him for being straight up. And the warden knew that the boys would follow Banjo. Maybe Sam was right, maybe Banjo had to give the guy a break.

"What's with the robes?"

Sam laughed, that twinkle back again. "This getup?" He looked it over as if it was the first time he'd seen it, shrugged. "Politics. We've got a visitor coming from overseas. I'm heading there straight after this."

Banjo nodded. "Fair enough."

The room had filled out while they spoke, so Sam got up and took position at the front.

He clapped his hands together. "Okay boys, we'll start off with a quick five minutes on the Stairway to Heaven. You all know the drill."

The class went quiet, except for their breathing, which slowed down to long and deep. Banjo kept his eyes open, staring at the poster on the wall. A white staircase wound its way up to a faceless robed figure lit by a halo. In the distance, the land joined billowing clouds in the sky. Banjo tried closing his eyes and he could get the poster in his mind, but it didn't give him any sense of peace or happiness. It was just a poster.

"Having trouble, Banjo?"

Banjo opened his eyes to see Sam staring at him, looking relaxed. It was hard to get angry at the guy.

"How'd you guess?"

"You're the only one not taking deep breaths." Sam flung his hand in a dismissive gesture. "But that doesn't really matter. The point is to find something that works for you. Meditation is always personal." He looked at Banjo for a second. "Stick with the staircase, but forget about the idea of heaven. I want you to try imagining

someone standing at the top of the staircase, holding their hand out as if they're going to help you up. Pick someone you trust."

Banjo narrowed his eyes, pulled in his lower lip, chewed on it some. He thought about all the people he'd ever known, images of them flashing in his mind. Kev, his brother, a couple of buddies from the outside, even his father. None of them were exactly trustworthy.

Sam said, "They don't have to be perfect."

The sentence unlocked something in Banjo's mind. He closed his eyes and saw the staircase again, but it wasn't in black and white. It was wooden and crumbling, leading up to a loft. A place he lived in at about the age of six, a time when his dad had the cushiest job of his life, mowing lawns in a decent neighbourhood. Dad appeared at the top of the staircase, holding his hand out, just like Sam said, but it wasn't just an image. He was moving, and Banjo was moving too, up the staircase, taking his dad's hand and stepping past a hole in the stairs. The staircase creaked and buckled, but never broke. When they reached the top, the room faded away, Banjo's dad faded away, and so did Banjo.

White light flooded everything, but it wasn't bright, and it felt warm. For what seemed like only a second, Banjo felt like he wasn't there, he wasn't anywhere, he simply wasn't.

When he came out of it and opened his eyes, he saw Sam's twinkle staring back, and when Banjo looked around the class, everyone was staring and smiling.

Banjo turned back to Sam. "What happened, what's everyone-?"

"We finished the five minutes, Banjo, but I told the class to keep quiet. You were out for another five."

"What? It was a second. There was that white light, but it was only a second."

Sam nodded, a warm smile spreading across his face.

And that's when it hit Banjo: his dad didn't have to be perfect, no one had to. And if that was true, it didn't make sense for Banjo to stay angry.

The exercise yard was filled with small groups in green huddled in corners, lone walkers pacing their way around the confines of the fence. A few of the inmates played cricket with a garbage bin as a makeshift set of wickets.

Banjo walked around the yard, nodding and smiling at everyone. Most of them didn't know how to take it, few smiled back, but Banjo didn't mind. He understood. His head was clear for what felt like the first time in his life. He felt alert, all his nerves on fire, but relaxed at the same time; almost as if he were falling asleep.

Kev and Troy were lazing around at the corner of the fence, leaning back against it, throwing pebbles at a rock on the ground in front of them. Laughing, seeing who could get the closest. When Banjo was near, they stopped laughing, looked up at him. Not scared, but unsure.

"Hey boys, good class today."

Kev looked at Troy, didn't say anything. Troy wasn't as self-conscious.

"Sure, boss. Good shit. I almost *flew* outta there." Troy's eyes lit up, not a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Banjo liked Troy. The kid had heart, seemed like he didn't care much what people thought of him. Kev had heart too, but it was all messed up. Banjo wanted to say something to Kev, make Kev see things as clearly as Banjo could. But nothing came to him. So he just stood and laughed with them as they played.

He hadn't noticed it, but while the boys were playing, Kong had made his way across the yard with a handful of his gang in tow. They were all Maoris, built like brick shithouses, and rough as guts. There's something about tribal tattoos on a Maori that can put the fear in, but it didn't bother Banjo one bit.

Kong walked up to Banjo. Their faces were only centimetres apart. He said, "Now you're bum chums with the sky pilot, eh?"

Banjo's head was still clear. He could see how Kong was trying to move up in ranks, become the biggest gorilla in the jungle. So Banjo was the one he had to fight first.

"There's two ways of handling this: one good, one bad. Which one today, King Kong?"

Using that name might have come across as loaded, but there was something in Banjo's voice that surprised everyone. It should have started a fight, but it didn't. Kong creased his forehead, not sure what to do.

Troy came forward, big smile on his face. "Hey boys, what's the deal here? What's the score, what have we got?" Troy really put it on, swaggering and gesturing like a mafia henchman in a cheap movie. One of the Maoris in the gang let out a chuckle. Kong silenced him with a glare.

The group went quiet. Banjo and Kong hadn't moved. They stared at each other.

Two ways of dealing with this, Banjo thought. One bad, one good.

Kong moved his head to the right, just a touch. Two of the Maori boys stomped over to Kev, grabbed him on either side. A third came with something in his hand. Banjo caught a glint off it. Something shiny, sharp. The Maori stuck it into Kev's neck.

Before Banjo could move, Kev shouted out a quickly muffled scream. The Maori moved away and threw the needle over the fence, holding it with his sleeve pulled over his hand so he wouldn't touch it. Kev crumpled to the ground, eyes glazed, saliva sliding down his chin.

Banjo turned to Kong, jumped, flexed his whole body and threw a fist at Kong's face, connecting with a wet crunch. Kong's head snapped back and his body lurched, staggering, but he held his ground.

Kong flew at Banjo and they fell, Kong on top, hammering away at Banjo underneath. A jab to the ribs, a full fist in the temple. Banjo shifted his weight and sent Kong over his head. They were standing again before the dust settled.

Banjo shook his head. "No, not doing this." He had a huge melon of a bruise puffing his right eye up, leaking blood, but he didn't move to wipe it away. He just shook his head again.

“Not doing it, Kong.”

Kong’s face was twisted up in a way that made him look a demon from Maori mythology, the tribal tattoos running down the side of his neck seeming to glow with anger. He shook his head like a hellhound, shaking the anger off, relaxed a little, then stepped towards Banjo.

He came right up to Banjo’s face and said, “Got to be strong to survive.” With the last word, Kong moved his fist in a flash to Banjo’s gut. When he pulled away and let his fist open, there was a knife in his hand, blood on the point.

As Banjo crumpled to the ground, Kong stepped forward and threw the knife over the fence. “Being strong means being first.”

Banjo smiled, holding his side as blood oozed around his dirt-caked fingers.

Too right, Banjo thought.

Strong.

Strong enough to take that first step.

The first step up the stairway to heaven.

Daniel Hatadi has been a musician, a petrol station attendant, and a software engineer in the poker machine industry. All great fuel for a career as a writer of crime fiction.

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