

## Our Next Lives

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THE TRAIN CUTS THROUGH the flat of central Thailand and the early morning fog. Above us, the sky is thick with lumbering clouds, and the first drops of rain specks against the glass. It is the beginning of the rain season, and morning showers are daily occurrences. Rain does not stop the monks, who traverse the countryside with their alms bowls ready for villagers to drop tightly bagged meals. It does not stop the roosters from announcing the coming of the day or the stray dogs that stretch and sniff for their first morsel along the tracks. My mother, leaning on my shoulder, says rain like this is a blessing from Buddha, an assurance of a safe journey.

We head north towards Chiang Mai, the city that will become my mother's future home. For over thirty years, she worked as a nurse and lived in Chicago, and since her retirement, she has been planning her return; America was only a workplace, never a permanent stop.

Even though this is one of many trips to Thailand since I was three, I have always been fixated by the landscape. The expanse of green is nothing like the pastures in rural Illinois, nothing like the prairies of Kansas or Nebraska. This is a lush and wet green, a wild green, a green that devours. So much of it is hypnotic, makes you want to disappear into the pigment.

When we zoom past water buffalo, my mother points and says the word for water buffalo in Thai, *kwai*. When we pass a bunch of lotuses blooming in an irrigation ditch, she points and says the word for lotuses, *dok bwua*. For the next few hours, before the land begins to climb up the mountains of the north and the earth becomes rich and red, she points and names. This activity does not bore her. She can do this until we arrive at our destination or when she succumbs to an afternoon nap.

I wonder, in her recitation, whether she is doing it more for herself than me, whether each object or animal or plant she sees in a blur is a remembrance of the life she once knew, a past life, a much younger one when all she thought about during her days were not of paying her son's college

tuition or calculating the right meds for patients, but of climbing rubber trees or diving off bridges into the murky creeks below.

"This is how we say in Thai," she says again and again. "*Dok gulaab*. Rose. *Ling*. Monkey. *Nok*. Bird."

I nod, my eyes fixed on the passing green.

I know the names of all the things my mother points at. I've known for years, but decide not to disrupt her. These are the moments, I believe, my mother still hopes for: the opportunity to teach and pass something important down to her twenty-eight year old son, to impart a lesson that will resonate in his next life.

Throughout my childhood, my mother often spoke of our future lives. This talk made its way into our daily language. Unlike my friends whose parents threatened them with punishments of groundings or two weeks of no Nintendo, my mother's threats were not immediate. If I were caught in a lie, my mother would say I would be reborn as a laughless hyena. If I didn't stop eating, I would be sent back as a pig ready for slaughter. If I received another B- in math, I would be the monkey who ate its own feces. For a child of five or six such threats were effective. Nothing put more fear into me than the thought of returning as a worm I liked to split in half with my sneakers.

The older I became, however, my mother's threats were of little consequence to me. My imagination created stories of my would-be future lives. If I were a pig, then I would be like Wilbur the pig in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, who, in the end, escaped the fate of the axe. If I came back as a worm, I would be the one that aerated the soil for the largest tomatoes this world would ever see. No matter how disgusting my mother described my next life, in my mind I found ways to make whatever I would become pleasant, to give it reason, to give it purpose.

It is spring, and spring always warrants conversations of rebirth. My wife Katie and I are in our garden in Upstate

New York. My mother will be arriving in a few days for a visit with her only son and white wife, who, according to her, is very Thai and thus deemed acceptable. Katie and I do regular maintenance to the garden, making sure we've pulled out all the weeds, planting annuals in the empty spaces, and mulching. Though we do not say it, we work quickly and thoroughly, knowing my mother loves to spend time on one of the Adirondack chairs in the early morning with her cup of instant coffee. This will be her last visit before returning home.

Katie believes there is a purpose to almost every living thing on this planet. Even though she was born in a Christian family – she claims no affinity towards any religion – she is more Buddhist than some of the monks I've known through all my years of attending Wat Dhammaram, the Thai Buddhist temple of Chicago.

As we work, I ask the purpose of a few of my least favorite insects. "How about spiders?" I say and shiver. I am a bit arachnophobic.

"They keep flies and mosquitoes in check," says Katie.

"All right, mosquitoes. What possible purpose do they serve in life?"

This one Katie takes a while to answer. She places snapdragons next to the red mini-rose. "To make you miserable."

"That's a cop-out."

"Fine. Birds eat them. Swallows. Purple martins."

I dig out a spent dandelion. "My mother thinks the things that inconvenience us, that cause us angst, are part of life, too."

"Isn't that a Buddhist concept? Suffering?"

"Hell yeah, it is."

Katie mulches her new plantings, while I get the hose ready to water them.

"What would you choose to be if it came down to a mosquito and spider?" she says.

Not many weeks ago, I read an article about the largest spider web found in America. It was in Texas and was as big as a football field. The reporter described the web as fairy tale white. Though I loathed and feared spiders – something my mother thinks I acquired in a prior life; perhaps I had been bitten by one and died – to be that particular spider, to spin that web, would be a life well spent. I tell Katie so.

"That," my wife says, "is true purpose."

I ask her if she would like to be born as *her* biggest fear: June bugs.

"Not in a million years. I hate those fuckers."

While surfing the internet, I found a website called Reincarnation Station. It's a site that has a simple quiz you can take to find out what you would be in the future. I do not remember the exact questions, but some were about personality, like, *Are you a social person?* Others were simple what ifs? *What if you only had two dollars and a friend asked to borrow*

*exactly two dollars, what would you do?* After answering about 10 questions, Reincarnation Station took twenty seconds to calculate that I would return as a rhino, which meant, according to the website, that 27% of people will be reincarnated as a higher form of life than me.

The trip to Chiang Mai is about twelve hours long. We are halfway there. The rain ceased an hour ago, but my mother hasn't stopped pointing and naming. In the states, when we were in the station wagon, she would read every sign or billboard we passed. When I was younger, this was our favorite pastime. We went from block to block, yelling out the name of streets and the numbers on mailboxes, smiling and laughing as I leaned against her chest. Then I didn't correct her English, didn't criticize how she never rolled her R's. When I became an insubordinate teenager, I found the game childish and complained. I was a complaining master. I told my mother she was annoying. I told her her English was atrocious. I told her she was acting like a child. This, however, only made her do it louder.

Once I asked her why – besides getting on my last nerve – she insisted on reading every thing we passed?

"Practice English. Learn by saying out loud. Good for memory."

In the train, my mother has stopped trying to teach me the Thai words for the world outside, not because I wasn't listening, but because, for her, this repetition became an act

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of relearning, and perhaps, an act of reliving. Lulled by the sound of the tracks and the occasional burst from the train horn, my mother reacquaints herself with

Thailand, not as someone who took six-week vacations every other year to visit family, but one who is preparing for a permanent stay. She speaks more to herself, under her breath. Thai words slip through her lips in a barely audible whisper, like a blossoming prayer.

Despite myself, I want to hear her voice. I want to be that child again, cuddled against her chest, sing-songing every road sign, every number on a mailbox. But those moments are lost, tangled in the wild green of memory.

"I know I am deathless..." Walt Whitman wrote in *Song of Myself*. "We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers, there are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them."

We measure time in seasons. We cross off days on a calendar, watch ourselves age in the mirror – one new wrinkle, one new gray, one less strand of hair. We wait for indications in the sky, the fluctuating temperature of the wind, to tell us that, yes, we are indeed moving forward; yes, the world

around us is evolving as steadily as we are.

But we come back.

We live again.

It is a continuous cycle.

My father might have been Whitman in a former life, if he wasn't already positive he was born the same type of man each and every time.

I wondered if one could be stuck living the same tragic life over and over again.

He claims to have always been a soldier. In his sleep, sometimes he hears the clashing of swords, feels the undulating motion of going into battle atop a great elephant. He tells me he always died tragically but honorably.

In this life, however, he was a wanderer, and it was his wandering that eventually led him onto a different path from my mother and me. Like Whitman, my father loved words, though he never wrote anything other than chemical equations and numbers on fortune telling grids. When he wasn't a tile chemist, he made extra money as a fortune teller.

Once, when I was eight, I followed him to a Thai restaurant on the north side of Chicago. The owner of the restaurant was having a difficult time staying above the red, and hoped my father could help with his future.

When we arrived at the restaurant, it was desolate, but immaculately decorated. I felt as if I had walked into a temple in Thailand, with angels dancing across colorful Thai silk, the candles flickering off the jeweled inlets in the walls. The owner had whipped up a feast for us: stir-fried chicken, beef and potato curry stew, scrambled eggs with crabmeat, cellophane noodles with jumbo shrimp cooked in a clay pot. He was a kind man, the owner, with mournful eyes. He possessed the look and build of a Thai Mister Rogers.

As I ate bowl after bowl of rice, my father said it wasn't the owner's future that was the problem. It was his past, his former lives. The same wrong was repeating itself over and over again. My father went on to describe what had happened in the man's former life in vague details: he had spent too much money on a dream that didn't come to fruition, a dream that eventually sapped him of all he had – his house, his wife and kids, and eventually his life.

Similarly, in 1980, psychologist Dr. Brian Weiss met his new patient, twenty-seven-year old Catherine, who suffered from severe panic attacks. His experiences with Catherine are recounted in his book, *Many Lives, Many Masters*. Dr. Weiss decided to use nontraditional forms of therapy, like hypnosis, to uncover regressed or blocked memory. What he found astounded him. Catherine not only recalled events in her current life, but ones from her other lives. She stated that she had lived eighty-six times. She even remembered how she died in some of them – stabbed, drowned, illness. The causes of Catherine's panic attacks were not solely because of her

current past, but unresolved issues in her former lives. The restaurant owner was suffering the same fate. "What should I do?" he asked, sighing heavily. This poor man had spent an hour listening to my father, hung on his every word because when my father spoke, excluding my mother, people listened.

"Sell this restaurant," my father said with confidence. "Open a small gas station."

I do not remember what happened to the man, whether he was able to break the cycle and live a happy life, whether my father helped him in the least. But what I heard that afternoon carried with me. I began to wonder if I was making the same mistake, whether I suffered the same anxieties as I did before, like poor Catherine, like my mother's theory for my fear of spiders. I wondered if one could be stuck living the same tragic life over and over again.

It was a distressing thought. I did not dwell on it too long.

There is no real scientific or religious answer on how one becomes reincarnated. No easy step-by-step guide. There has been talk of a light. There has been talk of a waiting room where the soul prepares to plunge into another body. There has been talk of doing good deeds in life to accumulate a wealth of karma, which will spill over into the next existence. Every text I have read is riddled with theory and philosophy, thick and dense and head-spinningly confusing. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, says that when his soul departs his physical body it will house itself into another; it will be up to his disciples to find him again. This, I imagine, would be a tough job.

For a long time, I was under the assumption that, once dead, we could hand pick what we wanted to become. Maybe it was not an assumption. It was my hope.

To be reincarnated seemed almost like preparing for Halloween. When I was younger, Halloween was serious business. Ideas about the next costume happened the day after October 31<sup>st</sup>. It was a year-long process, where I began to jot down all the characters I wished to become. There were infinite options on what one would want to be.

Here are the odd numbered years:

At three: Chewy, from *Star Wars*.

Five: Darth Vader.

Seven: Luke Skywalker.

Nine: The basketball great, Larry Bird. (On a side note, I had two costumes that year. My mother entered me in a costume contest at temple as a rice field worker. I took first prize, beating out Ananya the Nurse.)

Eleven: Yoda, Jedi Master.

Your decision about what to become in your next life would be like deciding on a costume, only you had a lifetime to ponder, to really think things through. And when the moment comes, your soul will rise into the sky, and arrive at a place in the clouds. Do not worry; it will seem

like you are on a 1983 B-movie set, with a fog machine set somewhere hidden. And behind that fog you will find a man in a waiter's outfit, ready to take your order, pen poised above a pad.

This has been the moment you have planned for your entire life.

"Plant or animal," he says.

"Animal," you say.

"Species of choice?"

"Human."

"Gender?"

"Flip a coin."

"Where would you like to be born?"

"In a galaxy far, far away."

The Sufi poet Rumi wrote: "I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as a plant and rose to animal, I died as animal and I was a man." But when you died as a man, Rumi, what was there left to become?

Chiang Mai will be the beginning of my mother's third life. In the first one, she was a girl who paddled to school in a canoe, who listened to bombs falling on Bangkok during WWII, who accepted her nursing degree from the Queen of Thailand. Her second life is one of disappointment, of homesickness, and according to her, of her greatest joy. Here she woke up each day in a country where she felt lost. Here she loved and learned heartbreak. Here she gave birth to a son, who kept always close to her side.

Now, beyond the train window, she can see her new life approaching. In this life, she vows to do nothing but read and relax. In this life, she says she will travel to all the places she's never been – India, China, Laos, Singapore, Australia. In this life, she will no longer speak English or shop at grocery stores with mediocre produce and packaged meats;

it will be Thai, only Thai, and open-air markets. In this life, she will see her son every other year for two to three months at a time, and when he is back in the states she will call once a week. In this life, she will prepare for the next one, whenever that may be.

The train slows. The mountains of Thailand are not like the jagged and rocky peaks of the Himalayas. There are no snowy peaks, no slate gray of rock. These are jungled mountains; they begin like the gentle curve of a tortoise shell, swaying up and down, higher and higher. Despite the change in landscape, the green doesn't leave us. It follows.

Since we left Bangkok early this morning, my mother keeps her eyes pointed out the window. When the train descends into a valley, my mother nudges my arm and points at a giant golden Buddha, shining mid-mountain in the distance. The Buddha is striking amidst the green. He looms large, facing the direction we just traveled. His eyes are half open, and I wonder if he is waking up or falling asleep. The setting sun reflects off his gold skin, as a few sparrows fly from his meditating palms.

"Pay respect," my mother says. She puts her hands together, and I do the same. Every Buddha we pass she always instructs me to pay my respects, even the fat ones we find in Chicago's Chinatown, even the ones we see at gaudy souvenir stores. I've become accustomed to this ritual. My mother believes with every show of respect, we attain good karma.

I want my mother's new life in Chiang Mai to make up for all her disappointments. I want her new life to be filled with happiness.

"Pray," she says.

I do.

"Ask for good fortune. Ask for comfort. Ask –"

I know the script well, but this time, before my mother finishes her last request, I do it for her. "Ask for another life together."