

ANCIENT HISTORY

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This dispatch is adapted from a chapter of *The Road Here*, a larger work chronicling the unlikely chain of events that carried one man from collapse to a village halfway around the world into a life he never saw coming.

Willie hadn't had time to make sense of much – his memory of the last four days was little more than a flickering slideshow: city lights bending sideways, train wheels hammering out Morse code in the distance, Tuk's silence bouncing around the cab of that beat-up truck like a ghost that forgot what it came to say. He wasn't sure if he'd slept or blacked out or just drifted like a balloon someone let go of. But there was no mistaking it now: he was far, far from anything resembling a handhold. No phone. No map. No definitive recall of how he'd gotten from Tokyo's back alleys to a dirt road somewhere outside Sisaket – or more importantly why – with a

stranger driving him deeper into the fold like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And yet, the last thing he expected – the absolute last thing – was to step out of that truck and fall straight into the eyes of Wasum. Let alone Chitra.

Wasum was supposed to be back on the porch minding the whiskey for his transformed return and he hadn't allowed himself to even think about Chitra for months. She was the ghost of a different kind of possibility, the road not taken because he couldn't afford another detour. Beautiful, magnetic, maybe even meant-for-him in some karmic ledger – but he'd let that thread go cold on purpose. He had to.

And yet here they were.

Willie didn't see it coming. Didn't even have time to brace. It was like catching

a left cross from a boxer you didn't know was in the ring.

One second he was blinking against the sun, trying to figure out where the hell he'd landed – and the next, he was flat on his back against a bundle of rice stalks, looking up at two faces that belonged to entirely different clouds of thought. Faces that shouldn't have been here. Faces that said everything and nothing all at once.

He tried to speak. Nothing came. His throat felt like he'd swallowed sand. His body was still in some kind of jetlagged, whiskey-laced shock, but his heart knew exactly what time it was. It was reckoning time. And somehow, somehow, these women – this strange village, this buffalo, this godforsaken tattoo – were all part of it.

Wasum was the first to move. Barefoot and steady, she knelt beside him without a word. No tears, no more theatrics. Just a hand – small, warm, certain – resting on his shoulder. Chitra followed. There was grace in her presence. She didn't speak at first, just tilted her head the way someone does when they're studying a long-lost face in an old photograph. She looked at him like she'd known for months he'd end up right here. Like this field had been waiting on him the whole damn time.

Willie tried to rise but the earth still had a hold on him. Or maybe it was the weight of what he didn't know yet. He felt a pressure behind the eyes, not tears, just... strain. Like every unanswered question was trying to punch its way out of his skull.

Wasum slid her arm under his, Chitra the other, and they gave him a gentle tug. “Come on, big guy,” Wasum said with that half-smirk he remembered, the one that always came before a truth you didn’t want to hear but needed to. “You’re safe.”

That word landed heavy.

Safe.

But safe from what?

Or worse – safe for what?

Because the moment he stood – propped between two women from completely different acts in the play – he felt the question hit him like a second wind:

Had he just been rescued... or claimed?

There was no answering it yet. Not here. Not now. But the look in Chitra’s eyes – part tenderness, part ancient recognition –

suggested this was no accident. This wasn't kindness, or coincidence. This was choreography. And he was late to the rehearsal.

He brushed the dust from his pants, nodded like a man trying to remember the right words in a foreign country, and followed them toward the stilt house ahead.

Behind him, the sun shown through the trees, casting long shadows across the field beyond the house.

In front of him?

A mystery old as the hills and written in a language his heart understood, even if his head didn't.

Not yet.

By now, Tuk and the old man had slipped away, their quiet departure unnoticed in the emotional static. It was just

the three of them now – three lives once scattered, now braided by fate and circumstance – ambling toward the house in a slow, reverent procession.

They guided Willie up the half-dozen stairs to a wide, wraparound patio that creaked like old floorboards in a cathedral. Wasum broke off without a word and disappeared through the front door. Chitra stayed close, her hand still on Willie's arm, gently steering him to a weathered chair near the far end of the veranda where the house gave way to open air and wide sky. She eased him down like a man made of glass, then settled beside him with the kind of grace that made you forget how much strength it took to hold yourself together.

Before them stretched a quiet sea of green – rice fields in regimented rows,

stitched with trees and crisscrossed with veins of water and raised earthen rows. Somewhere out there, a water buffalo groaned. Somewhere inside him, something deeper shifted.

Willie could feel her eyes on him.

“What the hell happened?” he asked, still looking down, his voice low and hoarse. “Every time a memory tries to surface, it just... slips. Kyoto Station is the last thing I can see clearly. After that, it’s like trying to grab smoke.”

“It’ll come, Win,” Chitra said softly, like she’d said it before, like she’d been rehearsing it in her heart every day since he vanished. Her voice was warm. Knowing. Tired. “Some things take time.”

“How much do you know?” he asked, turning to face her fully now.

A creak from the door cut the moment like a blade through silk, and Wasum reappeared, her arms loaded like a bartender at last call – pitcher of tea, two beers, a bottle of whiskey, and three mismatched glasses.

“Boilermaker?” she said, a dry grin curling at one corner of her mouth.

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Willie snapped, the familiar bark of humor giving him a flicker of self-recognition.

She set the drinks down and took her seat without ceremony. Willie poured, drank, and leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“So what do you guys know?” he said, voice rising now, the edge of panic starting to lick at the calm. “Help me fill in some blanks here, goddamnit.”

He turned toward Chitra, rolled his right arm over, and jabbed a finger at the ink just below the crook. The skin still slightly raised, the edges of the tattoo dark and deliberate.

“Let’s start with this tattoo.”

Without hesitation, Chitra spoke – within the first few syllables, the air seemed to still. Thoughts scattered. Joints loosened. The porch, the space, the whole earth seemed to hush like children around a campfire anticipating a ghost story.

There was something in her cadence. Not just the softness of her voice, but the certainty curled around each word. Maybe it was the quiet weight of broken English, shaped by intention and soul. Maybe it was the way she carried wisdom like jasmine carries scent – gently, invisibly,

yet impossible to ignore. Or maybe it was because, in that moment, she became something more than herself. She became truth in human form. And when truth speaks, you shut up and listen.

She turned to Willie, eyes glowing deep with time.

“The tattoo, Win... it is not just a tattoo. It is ancient vision. Given to you by most respected Phram in Thailand. It is... protection, clarity, blessing. A gift, very high.”

Gesturing upwards her voice floated, soft and steel all at once.

“From the moment I hear your voice, I know. You are the other half of my spirit. I was forced to marry when I was young. It is... our way, here. But even then, I

know you. I dream of you. Throughout my life... you remain.”

She glanced toward the field, as if retrieving something she'd buried long ago.

“I was given rare permission by the Monks to divorce when I was twenty-four. Because of you. Not you, in body – but because you were coming. For the next twenty-four years, I waited. Knowing. My grandmother – she knew you. When I was small, she told me of a vision: a farang from distant shore. My husband was coming. You.”

Willie blinked. The drink in his hand suddenly felt small. Her words, impossibly vast.

“I never get angry when you say no to me before, Win. I never worried. I knew

our story was already written. In this life. Or the next.”

She motioned gently with her hand, circling the air.

“When Wasum say I should call you... I say no. No need. You will call. You will come. I don’t push the river.”

She poured him more whiskey, not as a gesture of kindness, but as ritual.

“When you call Wasum from Japan, and she call my brother Dacha, we know. We all know. There is only one place for you to come: home.”

She leaned closer now. Her voice dipped low. Sacred. “But you were not going to make it on your own.”

“The Phram – the holy man – he was told it was time now by my father, also a well-respected Sage in Thailand. The same

man you met, with Tuk... my son. This Phram live in our village, Win. His family do the Sak Yant for many generations. Hong Kong people, Taiwan people, they travel to see him. Japan people come. He only choose a few.”

Willie said nothing. Couldn't. Just sat there, the sting of rice field dust and incense in his nose, the weight of destiny pressing against his ribs.

“Dacha arranged a flight for him to Tokyo. For you. To protect you. This would happen anyway one day – but now, it was urgent. He do meditation. Prayers. Chanting. And spirit tell him what to give.”

She paused here, hand to her own back.

“He is same Phram who give me the red boat. On my back. It means you will

return. For you... he give words. This is... very rare. Tattoo is always symbols. Always. Never words. He tell Dacha...before he prepare ink and the bamboo stick and needle to start the ceremony, he never see words before in vision. Only his father see before, once, many years ago.”

She nodded solemnly.

“To write words on skin in Thailand... it mean you invite gods to special part of your spirit. They may bless. They may tear down you. But it open a gate.”

Willie’s hands trembled just a little. He looked down at the dark etching on his arm. What had once seemed like a mistake now pulsed with ancestral gravity.

“Win,” she said, placing a hand on his knee, “the tattoo say, ชัมไล้ ลีออนซาน นิรันดร์... Chitra Lyonsan Eternal.”

There was no reaction at first. Just a silence that rang out like a bell. Then slowly, deliberately, Willie turned his head – not away, but through her. Past her. Then toward Wasum, who sat quietly, listening, a tear slipping down her cheek like a prayer.

She smiled, nodded.

A simple, affirming nod.

Willie blinked. Took a sip. Set the glass down like it had grown heavy.

And in that moment, the whole mad pilgrimage – the long flight, the drink, the alley, the blur, the train, the rice, the tattoo – all of it shrank into a pinpoint. Into nothing. It wasn't about any of it anymore. It wasn't about the collapse.

It was about the crossing. Chitra recognized his understanding.

In this moment he found himself on the sacred side of the great torii – the hidden gate only fools and prophets ever see. And on the other side, he was no longer Willie Lyonsan, the broken American, the grieving son, the vanished man.

He was *claimed*.

Not by Chitra. Not even by himself.

But by the story...

And not just any story – his. One that had been inked onto the bones of time itself, long before he ever stumbled into the illusion of authorship.

Behind the veil of everything he thought he'd known, he was beginning to see it:

His path hadn't been found.

It had been *remembered*.

After a long stretch of introspective silence, like thick air that lingers behind unspoken truths, Wasum finally cleared her throat.

“That ring,” she said softly, pointing at his finger. “And the marriage license... the one in that envelope you’ve been carrying around like a map back to reality... My cousin prepared it in Bangkok. Overnighted it to Dacha in Tokyo.”

Willie looked down, twisting the ring idly with his thumb, the cool metal suddenly feeling heavier.

“Getting you out of Japan through Haneda was risky,” she continued. “We wanted documents that would carry some weight if they ran into trouble at the airport. There are some official medical transport

documents in there too. All manufactured. Forged, but... convincing.”

A pause, not for drama but honesty.

“They’re not real, Willie. You’re not actually married.” A breath. “Not in a legal sense, anyway.”

Willie was quiet.

He didn’t say Oh thank God, or laugh in relief. He didn’t pull off the ring and toss it on the table. He just sat there, eyes dimmed with the weight of everything that had happened – and everything that hadn’t. And maybe that was the saddest part.

After all he’d just heard from Chitra – of spirits and visions, of names known before they were ever spoken – and with memories of the inexplicable dialing of her phone at the vortex all those months ago in Cave Creek now flooding back into focus, the

legal non-bindingness of it all felt... less than nothing. If anything, it was disappointing. Maybe even heartbreaking.

Not because he'd fallen in love with her in the last twenty minutes. Not because some romantic flame had rekindled. But because something ancient and ineffable had just wrapped its arms around him.

Chitra leaned in, and though she didn't touch him, it felt like she did. "Not by paper," she said gently. "But maybe by something more old."

Willie nodded, slowly. "Yeah," he said, voice low. "That's the part I believe."

From there, they didn't speak for a while. Wasum eventually rose and walked into the house, leaving the two of them alone on the porch. The breeze had shifted. The day was cooling.

Chitra refilled her tea and sat back down beside him. The mood between them didn't shimmer or flirt. It grounded. Anchored. They weren't two people caught up in the flush of fate. They were two halves of something that'd been adrift now coming to rest in the same place again. Not arranged by family. Arranged by the gods. And not for a ceremony. For a path.

"I always knew you would come," she said softly, almost to herself. "Not because I wait. Because I remember."

Willie didn't quite understand the words. But he didn't need to. Something inside him heard them anyway.

They sat in silence again. It wasn't heavy. It was sacred.

And when the sun finally dipped below the tree line and shadows stretched

long across the fields, Willie felt, for the first time, maybe since he was cast to solve the riddle as a child in Beaverton, that he hadn't just been pulled out of one life. He'd been walked into another.

Wasum poked her head out the door, "Let me show you where you're sleeping, Willie. You must be damn tired."

They stood – Chitra with an ease that seemed bred from the soil itself, Willie a little slower, like a man walking in borrowed bones. As they made their way to the door, Chitra motioned for him to go ahead, he did, but after a couple steps he stopped and turned, facing her.

He placed a hand – gentle but deliberate – on each of her shoulders. "Thank you," he said, his voice stripped of

armor, of wit, of anything but truth. A raw little offering.

Chitra looked downwards. Before she could respond he'd turned and continued his quiet march toward the doorway.

"You're in here," Wasum said, motioning toward what looked like an insulated box off to the side of a large great room, its white paneling a stark contrast to the weathered teak and woven bamboo of the rest of the house.

"You're putting me in the freezer," Willie said with a half-grin, the first in days.

"Yes, that is exactly what I'm doing," Wasum said, matching his grin.

"Need to cool your ass off."

Willie stopped short of stepping inside. He faced Wasum, the grin gone.

"Thank you," he said. Same eyes. Same tone.

Like gratitude had suddenly become his native tongue.

She gave him a pat on the back – not just friendly, but familial. “Sleep well, Willie.”

And he did. Not because the bed was comfortable (it wasn’t), or because the room was quiet (crickets and frogs ran an all-night symphony just outside the walls), but because for the first time in too long, Willie felt... placed. Like some small part of him had been claimed by the earth again.

The couple of weeks that followed blurred at the edges, not because they were forgettable, but because they were sacred. And sacred things, I’ve found, are often remembered not in order but in feeling.

Chitra took him riding on her motorbike – a little silver Honda that

coughed when it started and purred once it warmed up. She wore a baseball hat, backwards, glancing back every now and then just to make sure he was still holding on – not to her, but to the idea that this strange new life might not be a mistake.

They rode out past the village boundaries, past fields where water buffalo stood ankle-deep in muddy water like retired sentries. They stopped at makeshift, roadside food restaurants with rusty tin roofs and women who cooked with hands that didn't measure, only knew. He ate everything they gave him – no questions, no hesitation. Chitra teased him with mock suspicion, "Where you from, Win? Why you like Thai food so much?" And he'd just smile and keep chewing.

He never once got sick. Not even a whisper of stomach rebellion. She noticed. It meant something to her.

Temples marked every path like sentinels of stillness. Some were modest and worn, others were so ornate they looked like they'd been pulled from a dream and planted in the dirt. Two, sometimes three in a day. Monks would nod solemnly, their eyes soft, as if they recognized something in Willie he hadn't quite recognized in himself yet.

One monk, older than all the others, held Willie's wrist and rubbed the underside with his thumb before tying a white thread around it. The gesture was small. Sacred. Final. Willie didn't ask what it meant. He just nodded, and let the moment be what it was.

Everywhere they went, someone knew Chitra. Or they knew her family. Or

they knew of the quiet American who had somehow – without trying – earned their blessing. Smiles came easily. No one asked too much.

Chitra never rushed. She never explained more than necessary. She let Willie rediscover his body in silence. Let the sunlight and chili peppers and miles of open road do their work.

They didn't talk about Tokyo. Not yet. Not about what happened. Not about what it meant. They were still circling it. Like two people orbiting a fire neither one of them was ready to step into.

But something had shifted.

You could feel it in the pauses between words. In the way she let her hand linger just a little longer when helping him

off the bike. In the way he looked at her when she wasn't watching.

Whatever this was – they were starting to remember it. Or maybe they were reinventing it. Either way, it was beginning again.

They drifted farther than usual one day – past the rice paddies, past the familiar villages, past even the range of Chitra's easy confidence. South, toward the Cambodian border. The road got quieter. The landscape changed – denser, older somehow. More trees. Fewer people. As if the world had bowed slightly in reverence to whatever lay ahead.

The temple they found wasn't one Chitra recognized. It emerged slowly, as they rounded a bend in the road – part jungle, part myth. Portions of it looked as though it

had grown up from the dirt like trees. Stone worn smooth by time and footsteps. Other parts were clearly new – clean edges, fresh paint, the unmistakable scent of recent construction. Progress standing beside history like a younger sibling eager to be taken seriously.

They walked without speaking, letting their feet and whatever spirit lived there guide them. At one point they passed into the shadow of a tall, newly built structure – something grand and clearly sacred, though neither of them had context for what, exactly, they were seeing. The door to the building was massive, carved from wood so rich and dark it looked almost wet. Dragons coiled in the design, their eyes set with flecks of green stone. The place vibrated. Not loudly, but unmistakably.

As they lingered a short distance from the entrance, a monk from inside caught sight of them through a narrow window and paused. Two other monks were passing by just then – with long stares that didn't invite questions. Chitra stiffened.

“We shouldn't be here,” she said quietly, already turning to go.

But the monk from inside opened the door and stepped out, barefoot and calm. His face was lined like a Master. His eyes found Willie immediately. He said something in Thai – gentle, measured.

Chitra responded briefly, bowing her head.

Then she turned to Willie. “He's invited us inside,” she said, almost whispering. “He say... he see something in your eye. From the window.”

Willie blinked, unsure what to make of that.

They removed their shoes.

The staircase leading up to the door was wide, white marble veined with gold. On each side, two enormous naga – serpent-dragons carved in impossible detail – twisted up the balustrades, their scales catching the light like coins under water. Off to the right, a giant Buddha – calm, massive, and unmoving – watched them climb.

At the top, the monk opened one of the ornate doors. It groaned like a ship hull. Inside was a hall so grand it stopped them both.

The floors were rich red carpet. Chandeliers hung like frozen fireworks from a high ceiling. And at the far end – set high on a pedestal that almost glowed in the

filtered light – stood a golden Buddha that had to be twenty feet tall. Maybe more. Not gaudy. Not boastful. Just... undeniable.

They stayed quietly in the back and sat on the floor.

The monk stood with them.

It was still. Prayers murmured up front. Every so often, one of the monks would glance back toward them with a look that wasn't angry, but puzzled. Like a line had been crossed in the sand, and yet... no one stopped them.

After a time, the monk motioned for them to stand.

Willie and Chitra rose.

The monk approached Willie and spoke softly, rhythmically, as if reciting something not entirely his own. A few dozen

words. Eyes never leaving Willie's. Then he smiled.

Willie, unsure what else to do,
returned the smile.

Chitra bowed – deep and reverent,
her hands pressed together in prayer at her
forehead. Willie followed suit, though his
version looked more like a man clumsily
mimicking a dance he didn't know the steps
to. Still, it was earnest.

The monk smiled again. No
mockery in it. Just kindness.

Then they walked out.

At the base of the stairs, they
slipped their shoes back on in silence.

Chitra broke it. "You have magic
power, Win," she said, not looking at him.
"This never happens. Monk explained me –
this is the new Ubosot. Sacred building.

Center of the wat. Only monks allowed inside. Never regular people. Never farang. Never. This monk saw you from window. Saw something. He say... he saw vision. That he must bring you inside. He pray for you, Win.”

Willie said nothing.

He couldn't.

They walked slowly around the rest of the wat in silence, each step softer than the last. Not out of fear. But because something had been named inside that room – something he didn't yet have words for. And maybe never would.

But it was real.

As they approached the motorbike to head back, he could feel it in his chest, like a bell rung quietly in a deep cave.

Not much of a passenger by nature, Chitra had started letting Willie drive the motorbike. It wasn't a declaration, just something that happened one morning without ceremony. She handed him the keys like she was passing him a brush and a canvas he didn't know he owned.

Things were shifting inside Willie – subtle, tectonic shifts. Nothing loud, just a quiet rearranging of truths.

The ride back to the farm that day was... dreamlike. That was the word he landed on later, though it didn't quite do it justice. There was a kind of bone-deep freedom that buzzed through him as they drifted along those remote backroads – narrow ribbons of dirt and cracked asphalt threading their way through open fields,

sleepy villages, and a horizon that always seemed to lean toward dusk.

Bliss. That's what he called it. Not the cheap kind. Not the manic euphoria of a man escaping his past. This was different. This was arrival. A kind of quiet joy that lives at the cellular level.

Somehow, with almost no instruction, Willie navigated across a foreign countryside like he'd been born to it. He wasn't thinking. He wasn't planning. He was moving – through a place that should've felt alien but instead felt eerily familiar. Like muscle memory. Like maybe, just maybe, he wasn't lost out here. Maybe he was remembering.

When they finally rolled into the farm, the sun was leaning low and everything had gone gold. Chitra's phone buzzed as they

parked. She answered it, speaking Thai in the soft, half-laughing tone she used when it was family. It was Wasum. She had gone to Bangkok to be with her Mom and sister several days before.

Willie dismounted, stretched his back, and stared out across the fields – their endless rhythm, the soundless sermon they gave to anyone who would just sit still long enough to listen.

In the middle of Chitra's string of Thai he heard "Oscar."

He turned fast.

Chitra smiled and handed him the phone.

"Hey, Willie!" She said, "You have a visitor coming the day after tomorrow..."

He blinked, the gears turning.

"Oscar!" he beamed.

“Yep!” She said. “He gets in around midnight, gonna crash in Bangkok, then hop the train to Sisaket the next night.”

There was a beat of silence.

And then, Willie grinned. Big. Lopsided. Like a man who’d just found an old song buried in a dusty box.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.
“This’ll be something else.”

And he wasn’t wrong.
It would be.

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