

THE RED BOAT

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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.

It was sometime in the long, slow year Willie spent preparing for his pilgrimage to Japan – somewhere between his daily meditation and his nightly unravellings – when Wasum, his young Thai neighbor, made an offhand observation that stuck with him longer than he'd admit.

“You and my aunt... you have the same spirit,” she said one evening over beers and late conversation. “Same quiet, same vibe. Same knowing smile.” Her aunt lived in Thailand, in a village so far-flung it barely cast a shadow. Wasum thought they might benefit from talking with each other – just simple chatter, she said, to see if anything clicked. Willie, still shell-shocked from the wreckage of Maria and clinging to his

solitude like a life vest, shut the idea down cold. “No more women,” he muttered, “Not even hypothetical ones.” That was about eight, maybe nine months before he left on his trip. Long enough for the universe to get clever.

Willie and Wasum had one of those rare, peculiar connections that didn’t lend itself to easy labels. It wasn’t romance – not quite – but it wasn’t platonic in the usual sense either. There was a kind of sophistication to it. Progressive, maybe. Quietly profound. Despite the twenty-year age gap and their stark contrast in style – Wasum with her polished, urban edge and Willie with his sun-worn denim and analog sensibilities – they met somewhere in the middle, on a wavelength few others could access.

She'd moved into the house next to Willie's RV some 18-months prior – the very same property he had rented years earlier from Tom, back when he needed four walls and a little distance from himself. Now, separated only by a hedge row and a sagging chain-link gate, Wasum arrived like some cosmic callback. She was vibrant, magnetic in that way some people just are – sharp-witted, sultry, and seemingly immune to the self-consciousness of youth. There was wisdom in her. The kind you earn early if you've seen enough of the world twist sideways. Willie took to her instantly, though he wouldn't have said so. And she, for reasons maybe only she fully understood, took to him.

She was fascinated by his dusty world – by his rituals, his dog-eared

notebooks, his obsession with expired rolls of Kodak and shuttered light. She became his muse almost by accident, appearing again and again in his viewfinder: in the desert at golden hour, wandering old motels, draped in gauze by a bedroom window. Boudoir, desert noir, cigarette smoke curling through a shaft of sun. Art for the sake of it. Nothing more.

There was no infatuation, no crossed lines. Just something symbiotic. They'd finish each other's sentences and share a glance that said everything. It was the kind of bond that made traditional couples look clumsy by comparison.

Wasum had come to Cave Creek to escape a bad scene in the city – an ex who wouldn't stay gone. And Willie, in his way, was still nursing wounds that hadn't quite

scabbed over. So they ran defense for each other. Looked out. Spent evenings on the porch sipping whiskey, swapping stories, dreaming out loud. They took road trips with no destination. Explored the dusty arteries of Arizona like outlaws on sabbatical.

Whatever they were, it worked. It held space for both of them. And maybe, in a quiet way, it made what happened next inevitable.

Now, unbeknownst to Willie – and this should surprise no one who knows him – Wasum had pulled a fast one on him during one of their nights out. Somewhere between a bourbon and the jukebox flickering out old Merle Haggard tunes, she'd taken his phone, installed WhatsApp, and quietly added her aunt's number to his contacts. Chitra. Then, with a twinkle in her

eye and the mischief of a matchmaker, she passed Willie's number along to her aunt as well, encouraging her to reach out. A soft nudge from the universe, she called it.

What Wasum knew – and Willie didn't – is that Chitra never would. That's not how traditional Thai women operate, especially those of a certain age and bearing. The idea of initiating contact with a strange man was unthinkable, even if he came pre-approved by her distant niece.

So the whole thing should've just settled there – an idle app, a couple of unread numbers buried in a contact list. But fate, it seems, has fingers of its own.

A few mornings later, Willie found himself on his usual walk. Always the same trails, the same meandering loops he and Louie used to follow back when silence didn't

feel so loud. On this particular day, something nudged him toward the Vortex – a winding path through a shallow desert valley, where the air felt charged with something older than language. Mesquite and palo verde trees gave way to monolithic boulders stacked in patterns that didn't make much geological sense, but somehow felt intentional. Like the gods had been building chess pieces and forgot to clean up.

He wandered through, alone but not lonely, inhaling that mineral-rich air and letting the stillness do its work. He made his way up and over a boulder and squeezed through into a little pocket where he always liked to sit. As he was about to sit on his favorite rock, cradled as if in the lap of Black Mountain, he heard it – a sound. Faint. Muffled. A voice?

He looked around. Again. This pocket of desert is usually empty, save for the lizards and ghosts. He instinctively glanced down and, out of habit more than logic, muttered, “Lou... where the hell’s that voice coming from?”

Louie wasn’t there, of course. But Willie still asked him things sometimes.

That’s when he reached for his back pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen was glowing. He’d somehow, miraculously – or absurdly – pocket-dialed the very woman he was never supposed to call.

Chitra.

He stared at it for a second, unsure if he should hang up or apologize or just throw the damn thing into the desert and walk home. But before he could decide, a soft voice came through the speaker.

“Hello?” she said.

He froze. “Oh, wow – I... I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to call you!”

He paused. “Wasum,” he muttered, like a man cursing a rain cloud that had just drenched his last dry cigarette.

She laughed – graceful, a little bashful. “Hello, Win”, she said. *Win?* he thought to himself, *who the hell is Win... maybe she can’t say Willie.*

They fumbled their way through introductions and soon unraveled the thread that connected them. Willie could tell instantly that Chitra was genuine, warm, even through the fractured bridge of their language. Her voice was gentle, but carried something...familiar, ancient. Not old – *timeless.*

Despite the hiccups of communication – half-sentences, guesses, laughter – they spoke. And then kept speaking. She told him a little about her family, her village, her ancestors – old landholders, medicine women, keepers of rice fields and stories. Her people were spread across Thailand like constellations: distant, proud, enduring.

Willie was still walking when the call started, but by the time he reached his RV, an hour had passed. And still they talked. Another hour, in fact. It was the kind of conversation that doesn't demand direction – it simply *is*.

When they finally hung up, he sat still for a moment, thumb hovering over the screen like it might disappear. Then he called

Wasum. Told her what happened. Gave her hell. Then thanked her, too.

“It really was a great conversation,” he said.

And knowing Willie, he meant it in that quiet, soul-level way of his – like a door cracked open just enough to let the light in.

It had been well over a year since Willie had seen Maria in person. They still spoke on the phone from time to time – Maria clinging to the frayed thread of something that once was, and Willie, ever the empath, unable – or unwilling – to sever it completely. I don’t think he had the heart. Or maybe it was the spine he lacked. In truth, I think he was still trying to salvage some fragment of dignity between them, to figure out how to remain friends without crumbling under the weight of all that had passed. But

he had made a pact with himself – three or four months prior, maybe more. No women. No distractions. Not until after Japan. Maybe. It was his clean break from the chaos, a vow carved in quiet desperation. And for once, he was sticking to it.

But the conversation with Chitra lingered.

Wasum, naturally, relayed her aunt's reflections after the call. She told Willie that Chitra had mentioned – more than once – the uncanny ease of the exchange, how they laughed easily, how the conversation felt... remembered, somehow. Not new. Familiar. As if it had been going on for centuries and they'd only just picked up the latest chapter. Chitra said – and this stuck with Willie, gnawed at him – that she felt their connection stretched back a

thousand years, that she knew him already by the name *Win*. That kind of language wasn't metaphor for her. It was marrow. Cultural. Spiritual. Inborn. Willie tried to laugh it off, but the echo of it stayed with him.

Wasum had a photo on her phone. A few years old. Grainy. But even in low resolution, Chitra's beauty was undeniable – striking Thai features, high cheekbones, graceful posture, long raven hair cascading like a silk banner down her back. She was petite, elegant. The kind of woman who seemed carved by wind and time. Exactly the type Willie had always found himself undone by. And yet – he held fast. He'd only just begun piecing himself back together after the collapse of the Maria years, after losing Louie, after years of slow self-erasure. He

wasn't about to derail that hard-earned progress for the ghost of a maybe.

And still... she stayed in his thoughts. Not loudly, but persistently. Like a whisper that refused to fade.

A few more days passed, and that same unnameable pull gnawed at him. A hum just beneath the skin. Willie couldn't shake it. He kept telling himself: What's the harm in a little conversation? She's 9,000 miles away. It's not like we're grabbing coffee at Janey's tomorrow. What's wrong with a friend? So he called. Told himself he'd keep it light. Casual. Said he just wanted to be friends – though who was he trying to convince, really?

They talked for hours. Again. Regularly.

There was that ease again. That uncanny fluency between them that didn't make a lick of sense. With Willie, less was always more when it came to women. For all his long-winded barroom yarns and front-porch philosophy, when it came to matters of the heart, he listened. He didn't over-explain himself. Didn't feel the need to. If someone couldn't intuit what he was about from the silence between his words, he figured it probably wasn't worth spelling out.

With Chitra, there was no pressure to perform. He let the conversations drift where they wanted. No real personal details, no confessions. He liked the safety of that distance. She was beautiful, yes. Striking even. But she lived in another world entirely. He could feel for her, even deeply, without worrying about falling too far.

But Chitra... she wasn't looking at this like some late-night call across oceans. She was a different kind of woman, anchored in traditions older than America itself. And she didn't need to tell Willie what she felt. That wasn't the way of things where she came from. You don't spill your heart at the first stirrings. You consult the ancestors. You burn incense. You kneel and listen.

So she did. As a confirmation. She spoke with her village's medicine woman. Sat with her father, a local sage. Visited monks at the temple. Prayed at shrines older than memory. And when she felt the answer whisper back through all those channels, she took one final step – down to the tattooist. An elder Phram who, after deep prayer and chanting, would ink visions from the gods onto the skin, not for decoration but for

destiny. This was a critical ceremony in her old Isaan culture. It could sometimes mean the difference between life and death if not performed, or performed in misaligned timing.

She emerged with a red boat etched at the small of her back. A sign, the Phram told her, of someone known coming across great waters. She believed it was Willie. Not metaphorically. Not romantically. Spiritually. Viscerally. As certain as the sunrise. But she didn't tell him. That wasn't her way. This was between her, Buddha, and the gods. Willie was simply drifting toward something he couldn't yet name. But it was already in motion.

For several months, Chitra and Willie kept up a quiet rhythm of communication. Not daily, not performative,

but steady – like two tide-worn stones
occasionally knocking together in a riverbed.
In Willie's mind, they were friends. Close
ones. In Chitra's, they were already wed.
That disparity – odd as it sounds – gave their
connection a kind of purity. No pretense. No
demands. It allowed their bond to form on
something deeper than romance. Something
closer to soul recognition.

I'll give Willie credit. He was
sticking to his guns. In his younger years,
he'd have been on the next flight out,
probably married by Tuesday, divorced by
Labor Day. But this time? He held the line.
And I don't think it was willpower. I think
the gods stepped in. I think they whispered,
Not yet, not like this.

Because he was about to torpedo the whole thing and force it right out of his mind.

It was early June – maybe three months after that cosmic misdeal had sparked it all – when Chitra, in her calm and reverent way, began to share more of what she felt. Just small pieces. How her ancestors whispered to her. How the village's spirit guides affirmed her sense that she and Willie were bound by lifetimes, not months. How the red boat tattooed on her back was a symbol, given through prayer, of his arrival. She wasn't trying to scare him. She was telling the truth as she understood it – unembellished, unpressured, but profoundly sincere.

Willie, for all his deep empathy, didn't handle it well. He panicked. Told her

his life was upside down. That he was trying to rebuild from rubble. That he would never drag someone so serene and whole into his fractured world. He cut her off mid-thought. Shut the door before her words could finish settling in the room.

But she didn't protest. Didn't cry. Didn't accuse. Not her style.

She simply said, with a kind of soft certainty that unnerved him, "I understand, Win. But it's not up to us. It's already been written."

That quiet confidence? It rattled him. After five years of hurricanes with Maria – where every conversation was a collision – this woman's calm felt almost supernatural. *Who is this*, he wondered. And that scared him more than anything else.

So he did what scared men do. He faded.

Stopped calling. Stopped picking up. Every so often he'd respond to a message with something terse and apologetic: *My life is a mess. I can't be with you. Please understand.*

And she always answered the same way. "Ok, Win. I understand. Don't worry."

No bargaining. No bitterness. Just... regal elegance.

Weeks passed, then months. Every so often, Willie would get a message from Chitra. Just a few words. *Everything will turn out okay. I'll always be here, waiting.* That kind of grace sticks to a man's ribs. But eventually, even those stopped coming. No hard goodbye, no flurry of emotions – just a

quiet tapering off, like the last notes of a song that knew not to overstay its welcome.

By then, Willie was locked in. There was a clarity to him I hadn't seen in years. He wasn't chasing epiphanies or trying to outrun heartbreak. He was on a mission. A resurrection, really. He was pulling himself out of the ashes with both hands, and Japan – of all places – was the forge. I couldn't help but wonder what he'd find there. Couldn't help but wonder if he'd come back at all.

He'd booked the trip nearly a year in advance. One of our friends – an international pilot – who coincidentally lived in Japan for several years and had a fondness for sake and well-timed advice – told him to look into multi-city bundles, the kind airlines quietly offer if you know how to dig. Sure enough, Willie found one through a Japanese

carrier that included a leg up to Sapporo: a three-day jaunt. Oddly enough, it was cheaper than a straight round-trip ticket.

And – because when Willie goes in, he goes all in – he booked it business class. Last of his money. No regrets. If this was going to be the trip that reset his soul, he figured he might as well sip good whiskey and stretch his legs on the way to the fire.

Interesting thing about Willie, for all his fire and bravado – for the daredevil stunts, for the bar fights he avoided with wit and the women he couldn't – Willie Lyonsan was deathly afraid of flying. Not turbulence or hijackers or crashing in the Andes – though I'm sure he'd have made friends with the rescue dogs if it came to that. No, it was the sheer helplessness of it all. The sealed doors, the stale air, the lack of an exit

strategy. Being boxed in, strapped down, trapped at 35,000 feet with no wheel in his hands and no way out? That's what got him.

Now if you let him *fly* the damn thing, he'd probably be fine. Probably. But sitting shoulder to shoulder with 300 strangers, packed in like cordwood for twelve hours or more? That was a whole other thing.

He knew this about himself. Had known for years. Eighteen or so, to be specific, when he flew to Hawaii with a woman he'd proposed to – on the beach, no less. She'd said yes, because of course she did. The man could sell rain to a thunderstorm. They made it to the islands just fine. Had a picture-perfect wedding. Then came the return leg.

Just as the inter-island jet was being pushed back towards the taxi way to take them from Maui to Oahu – just a quick 20-minute hop to the international terminal – Willie unraveled. Spectacularly. Hit the help light above like it owed him money. “Get me off this fucking plane right now!” he said, loud enough to earn glances and probably a few prayers. The flight attendant leaned toward the cockpit and spoke in hushed tones, but they were close enough to hear the pilot respond flatly.

“Bring the stairs back. Get him off.”

So they did. Bride and groom, still sun-kissed and lei-wrapped, walked back down the steps and into the terminal like two characters in a romantic comedy that had veered sharply into absurdist drama. Willie turned to her and said, with absolute

sincerity, “We’re gonna have to get jobs and move here. Because I’m never getting back on another goddamn plane.”

Six hours later, after a Xanax and a few pep talks from deeply compassionate airport staff who had clearly seen it all, he was airborne again. No incident. No freak-out. Just Willie, silent as the clouds, gripping the armrests with white knuckles and a vow never to speak of it again.

Until now, of course.

Maria. Lou. The devastating losses. The fallout. The tumble that teetered too close to the abyss. It was all ever-present in his psyche like a spirit cloud, but he was in a much different head space. Focused. The pilgrimage, the reset, the promise of resurrection, it was all bigger than any flight. Because the truth is, even the biggest spirits

get caged by something. And for Willie, that something came with a boarding pass.

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