

# Going Places



Steve Owad

paperbytes

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## Going Places

**T**HE TRAIN PULLED into the Chiang Mai station and I felt bleary and bloated. Thirteen hours from Bangkok in third class. Even a bottle of whisky hadn't helped me sleep. Arthur, waiting on the platform, was shivering in the pre-dawn mist. His face was gaunt, beaded with cold sweat, and his cigarette trembled between his lips like an extension of his nervousness. When he spotted me, he rushed over, pulled my bag from my shoulder.

“Jesus, I'm glad you got the message. I don't know what to do about him.”

“You look terrible,” I told him.

“He cracked. Flipped.”

“He could never crack. It’s not within him.”

“Wait till you see him. Wait till you see what he’s doing. He’s killing himself.”

The fear in his voice was palpable. He really believed Harold had cracked. Which meant something really had happened. I’d seen Harold just a month earlier, when I visited him and his fiancée Mon in her family’s village in Esarn, on the Laotian border. Harold had met her in a bar at Bangkok’s *Soi Cowboy* red-light district. She was a rental, a girl for the night, and a week after meeting her, Harold informed her that he would marry her. He would move with her to her village, get her to sign some papers for him. He’d buy some land, become a farmer. That was how quickly he did things. He didn’t have time to “crack.”

“Wait till you see him,” Arthur repeated. “He’s gonzo. Out of it.” Red webs lined his eyes. It was clear he had yet to nail down the image he was trying to convey. I could understand why. Even in smooth times,

Harold defied fast description.

“Buy me a drink,” I told him. “Fill me in.”

We found a café outside the train station, a dim, mildly fetid place, and ordered a large Mekhong. The café was one of Chiang Mai’s few that stayed open at that time of night, just before dawn brought the street vendors and tourists and exhaust-spitting motorcycles back to their daily vortex. We drank without speaking. We’d learned the habit. Three years I’d been travelling with Arthur and Harold. Three years we’d spent traversing the mountain trails of Nepal, the rubber plantations of Malaysia, the scorched plains of northeast Thailand. We didn’t travel Asia, we assaulted it, eddies in a tumbling river, seeing all, digesting little, moving because in the movement was purpose. The unspoken mission was to live without the silent fears of settled people starting to look back.

Which had always been the greatest fear – being settled. There was nothing deeper to us than that. We all had ways of staving off stagna-

tion. Harold jotted his travels down on paper, sold them to American magazines that asked for broad horizons and an eye for local colour. He was good at it, making fair money and building an encouraging, if unspectacular reputation in the business. I had a propensity for the hit and run: teach English here, tend bar there, live coolly enough to leave doubts and aspirations to all those poor, immobile slobs trapped back home in their claustrophobic office cubicles. Arthur, whom we met early on, was our noncommissioned baby-sitter, a role he adopted not out of necessity but for some strange sense of filial satisfaction. Supported by his father, an insurance tycoon in Lansing, Michigan, Arthur seemed to need nothing more than the satisfaction that comes from keeping two lemmings from jumping blindly off a cliff. Apart from brief breaks in the last six months, he'd always been with at least one of us. If he wasn't trying a stint at my latest school, he was tagging along with Harold, who never knew what he'd be doing twenty-four hours before he did it. None of us actually hated anything, but lord, we



didn't want school or work, home or country, any of that. We refused to succumb, and Southeast Asia was a good place for not succumbing, good for beating scrutiny. We were untouchable.

"He's trying to kill himself," Arthur said, lighting a fresh cigarette. "He really means it."

"He's got a sporting death wish. You know the stunts he pulls."

"Hell yes, I know, but this isn't a stunt. He cracked up. Keeps babbling this stuff about Esarn. Doesn't follow a single thought through."

"Doesn't what?"

"The only thing he tells me – the only thing he says, I mean, without feeling some weird kind of funk – is that he wants to see you. Why? I don't know, he won't tell me. But I called you and you're here. Maybe you can do something with him."

"Sriyan took the phone message," I said. "Said Harold needs some money. That's all. You're being dramatic, Arthur."

He stiffened. "I'm try'na explain this to you. When we get here last

week, the second I get off the train I'm surrounded by cops. They start frisking me. I don't know what's going on but I put up my arms, let 'em have at it. They go through my pack. Right there on the platform. Just ripped everything out, put the microscope to it."

"Drugs?"

"Yeah, but let me finish. Let me give you the whole story. It's so crazy. They go through the whole pack, even squeezing the toothpaste, then Harold gets off the train and ambles up to us in his best John Wayne. He's mean as hell and angry, but angry under his lid, you know? You suspect he's gonna go off but you don't know when or how?"

"Why?"

"I'll get to that. Turns out the cops were after some *farang* fitting my description. Some guy selling heroin at Chiang Mai guest houses."

"And they checked you and found it wasn't you."

"Sure they did, and that's the signal for Harold. When the cops figure I'm a false alarm, Harold launches in on this crazy tirade about the cops

being corrupt and dirty and soiled by the world. Those were his words: 'soiled by the world.' Terribly unoriginal, but he meant it. It was so loopy. Cops didn't speak a word of English. I thought he was joking. It was just like him, you know: hot spots just for a kick?"

"But he wasn't joking."

"No, that's what I wanna tell you. And I should've seen it coming. On the train he went into this mood, wanted to ... renounce things. He said the marriage is off. Said Mon thought she was too damn good for him. Said she was wrong but also 100 per cent right."

"The marriage is off?"

"Yeah, and damn good thing, if you ask me. What the hell'd he want to farm rice for, anyway? What kind of crazy idea was that?"

"He wanted to buy land."

"Those guys are starving to death. What good is that kind of land?"

"I don't know," I confessed.

Arthur exhaled wearily, then refilled his lungs with smoke. "On the

train,” he continued, “he started yapping, got on this kick about water buffaloes, of all things. Said we aren’t fit to clean a water buffalo’s horns, mud’s cleaner than money, that kind of noise. Loony as hell.”

“I see.”

“So on the platform, the cops laugh at him, toy with him. He’s a sun-burnt *farang*, right? and whatever problem he has, it’s not gonna be redressed? And I think this is cool. At least they’re not sadists. At least they don’t billyclub him. But then, out of nowhere, Harold smacks one of them.”

“No.”

“Yes. The place went crazy. The cops didn’t find it amusing.”

“They hurt him?”

“Not bad. They stopped when he turtled.”

“They throw him in jail?”

“Hell yes, they threw him in jail. They threw us both in jail. And you should see the Chiang Mai prison. I’m still washing the smell out of my

clothes.”

“How long were you there?”

“Day and a half. I got us out, but it took a helluva lot of politeness – that and every baht I had. I had to borrow from Gene until my next money order comes.”

“Harold had no money?”

“He gave it to some monk. Said the only thing it’s good for is charity.”

Arthur flicked the ash from his cigarette, blew some smoke from his nostrils. The monk bit didn’t surprise me. Harold had always despised money. He grew up in a rich Washington family, which he took as a weakness. He had a fear of selling out, of becoming careless or comfortable – though he never articulated it more clearly than that. That led to friction between him and Arthur. Arthur received postal money orders from his father every month; Harold didn’t even tell his parents which country he’d just hitchhiked through. Arthur lectured Harold on the

silliness of forsaking his inheritance; Harold lectured Arthur on how to look past the golden bars fencing in his father's mansion. I told myself that opposites attracted. That was the only explanation for the two travelling together. That and the bond of travelling. The bond of moving.

"I can give you enough to get him home," I said. "Maybe you should try to take him home."

Arthur pounded the table, tipping the whisky. He crushed the cigarette between yellow fingers. "You think I don't know that? You think I don't know he oughta be home before he kills himself? He's a danger, Jason. To himself. He does nothing but sit all day in that room and smoke those gawd-awful Thai cigarettes. It's been a week now. He's eaten maybe four times."

"Come on."

"Four times! And I walk in with some noodles or something and he shouts at me, tells me to get the hell out. And it's my room! I'm the one who's renting it on borrowed money!"

“I see.”

“Yeah? You keep saying that. You ‘see.’ You don’t see jack, buddy. Know what else he’s doing? He’s playing the ascetic. He’s butting his smokes out on his arms, his legs. Grinds ’em right in there. You should see it. Looks like he’s been in a fire. And he has this new trick. He smokes them down – right down to the filter – then rolls them over in his mouth and spits ’em out. He has these white blisters on his tongue. His mouth’s all puffed up. He looks like hell.”

“Goddamn.”

“Yeah, goddamn. Goddamn crazy. I don’t know how to handle him.”

“Where’s your guest house?”

“The Libra.”

“Where?”

“Ten minutes in a samlor.”

He wanted to go on, but I wanted to get there. We paid for our whisky, found a rickshaw, and took the bottle with us.

ON THE RIDE over, I tried to piece together a picture of Harold based on Arthur's description. I couldn't. Harold had brought unassailable confidence to everything he did. If what he was doing at a given moment didn't meet his specifications for personal involvement (whatever they may have been), he dropped the thing and moved on to something that did. His only weakness, his Achilles' heel, were those rich people that he spent so much time avoiding ("rich" being a relative term; anyone who wasn't worrying about his next paycheque was considered rich). He couldn't comport himself in the presence of monetary comfort. His mouth lost its mobility, his hands either fumbled for a prop or disappeared behind his back. Why he was cowed I don't know. If something – some rending, life-altering event – had long ago formed the phobia within him, I didn't know its name or nature. Nor would I ask about it. I reasoned that everyone has a frailty or two. The thing to do was to live within those frailties. Or outside of them. To forget them, focus on more amenable things. Which was what all three of us were doing.



And though it didn't meld with his life as a lonesome traveller, I wasn't surprised by Harold's reason for wanting to marry Mon. I wasn't even surprised he wanted to live in the northeast. He told me that moving there was a way of committing to the one thing in this sorry world that he knew for certain would never sell out.

"Who can accuse them of anything?" he'd said of the Esarn villagers. "They let the world thrive and struggle. It means nothing to them. The only people they hurt are themselves, and that's because they just don't know any better. It's only the little things they have to learn – and not so many of them, at that." He counted fingers: "How to get water in the hot season, how to farm more efficiently, how to do business without getting cheated ... ." The vision was idealized, sure. He'd been to Esarn, but he'd never looked beneath the smiles of the people living there. He didn't know them. He couldn't know them. Would they accept him? Remote communities tend to frown on outsiders, noble or otherwise. Would he accept them? Would he be able to live among them without

needing to reform them? He hadn't asked himself these questions. He simply saw the thing and was going to embrace it because it was clean and good. Which begs the question: what, exactly, had been dirty?

When I visited him in the village, he was getting along well, even thriving, though he'd had trouble initially. The villagers didn't trust him. Any *farang* who wanted to adopt a life of sowing and ploughing, of malnutrition and watching children catch lizards in the mud for food – any *farang* like that must have had some evil intention. But Harold pacified the villagers. He supplicated himself to the village headman, started learning the local dialect. More important, he made a deal: he promised to develop the village with his family's money, maybe help pay for a teacher so the children wouldn't have to walk through the heat to another village every day. (That promise was the real measure of his dedication, given his aversion to money.) He also guaranteed that in drought or illness, when bandits came, during the worst hardships, he would use his “powers from the outside” to support

the village and the village alone, because that was his only allegiance. All he wanted in return was the privilege to care for Mon's family, to be allowed to worship Buddha, to adopt a piece of land that the important people in Bangkok would only end up stealing anyway. I wondered how long the idyll would last. Hardship would likely shatter illusion; ignorance would defeat good intentions. Frustration would consume him when he saw their *paritta*, their ceremony to ward off drought, when what they really needed was irrigation. He would say, "Enough. Tradition is fine, but you people are wrong."

After hearing Arthur's story, I decided that that was what had happened. Harold had simply had enough, had decided he'd let himself be duped by his own need for change. In the old days, they called such self-understanding a nervous breakdown. Today, they call it mental illness. They haul them in for chemical rebalancing, tell them there are reasons why they do things like stub their cigarettes out on their arms and legs and tongue.

“Listen,” Arthur said as a squat Chinese man unlocked the door and let us into the Libra. “Take a hard look at him. He’s out of a horror movie. He’s got those blisters. He’s rambling about Esarn. What the hell was so special about Esarn, anyway? All he did there was run around with the peasants and learn how to plant rice.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I stayed with him, just after he went up there. I was bored out of existence. He’d go off to the paddies with the family, use Mon as a translator. I’d sit outside the hut and read. It was too crazy to look at. Mon’s mom had given her to a pimp when she was fourteen. Mon comes back ten years later with Harold, and Mom’s happy to have ’em both. It’s like Mon’s never done the things she’s done. It’s like Harold isn’t the last of hundreds of guy who slept with her for a few hundred stinking baht.

“And you should see how they live. I lost five pounds in a week. They get nothing to eat. They’re out there morning to night, covered in mud

– even Mom, who’s in her sixties. Then they come home in the evening, eat a little buffalo fat and chilies, and go to bed with the mosquitoes. People are dying at forty. The guy lost his sense the second he decided to go up there.”

“But did he seem happy there?”

“Who the hell knows happy? He was pleased with himself, that’s all I can say.”

“What do you mean, ‘pleased’?”

“As if he’d pulled one over on himself, in a twisted kind of way. He said he could sit neck-deep and hungry in a mud bog and know he was doing more good for the world than all of the planet’s travel writers combined.”

“Yeah?”

“Like he ever worried about ‘doing good.’ I told him we’re on a ride, it’ll go on as long as it wants to. Nothing too ... intricate about it.”

“You said that?”

“Yeah.”

“And his response?”

“He called me a selfish bastard. Said I’m heading for a fall. You, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Also said he’ll never write another article.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not good.”

“No kidding. He got all religious, Jason. Thinks we’re scum.”

Not knowing what else to say, I told Arthur to wait downstairs while I went up to the room. As I neared the top step, I heard a half-hearted “Good luck.”

IT WASN’T EVEN five in the morning, but the light in the room was on and Harold was awake, sitting cross-legged where the bed met the corner. His thighs and forearms were pocked with blisters. Cigarette butts

littered the floor and dresser. The air was thick and foul from poor circulation. He hadn't bothered using the ceiling fan.

My presence didn't surprise him. "It's Jason," he said blandly as I walked in, "the roving tutor, knowledge for a baht."

I clicked on the fan. "Arthur said you're killing yourself up here."

"Ah, Artie," he breathed, re-remembering the name. "Cute fellow, Artie." Without moving his legs, he pulled a chair from the desk and slid it across the floor. "Have a seat, teacher. Wanna smoke?"

"Thanks," I said, taking one. "I heard Shire wants a story on Angkor Wat."

"I heard, too. Thrilled me. Really."

"Could be a couple hundred bucks."

"Or a waste of time."

"You could do it in a weekend."

He looked away, shrugged.

"Or even a day. You couldn't use the money? What's going on,

Harold?”

He pulled his checkered knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them. “Oh, teacher. Explain, explain. Always the explaining.”

“Look, Harold –”

“No, you look. I got a riddle for you. Water buffaloes, they never explain. Tell me why that is, you win a prize.”

“Water buffaloes? Come on, Harold.”

“Tell me why. Play the game or you’re out. I mean, they’re out there, slogging through the paddies, forty degrees beating down. They haul this little plough, get scrawnier by the minute. They eat next to nothing. Yet they never say why they do it. They never explain.”

“It’s no riddle, Harold. Buffaloes can’t talk.”

“You’re right, they can’t talk. And you wanna know why they can’t talk? I’ll give you a hint. It’s nothing to do with vocal chords or tongue shape or any of that. It’s a matter of they can’t ’cause they don’t want to.”



“This is silly.”

“Answer the question or you’re out. Why don’t buffaloes explain?”

“I don’t want to know why. I want to know what’s going on. What are you doing here, Harold?”

“All right,” he exhaled. “You don’t want to know, you don’t want to know. I guess you’re out then.” He buried his head in his knees, hummed something to himself. An act? Playing up the pain?

“What happened with Mon? Arthur said she won’t marry you.”

He kept humming.

“Harold? You flipping?”

“They won’t marry me,” he said after a while. “They. Not she.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m too polluted, that’s why. Because I know too much.”

“But Harold, what did you want with them in the first place? You don’t think you were being a little idealistic? Rice-farming?”

He shook his head slowly, looking lonely, also looking disappointed.

“They didn’t know Mon was a hooker, you know that?”

“I figured.”

“Mon first went to Bangkok when she was fourteen.” He paused. “God, listen to me. What a rotten habit. Explaining . . . .”

“It’s why I’m here,” I reminded him. “Arthur said you want to talk to me.”

“Yeah,” he said, “guess I do. One last time. Then zip it up for good.” He paused again, then continued in a monotone. “Mon’s trip to the big city, to a life of luxury. You know how they do it? A man came to the village, said he needed some girls for work in Bangkok. Didn’t say what kind of work, just work. He went from hut to hut, chose Mon and three others to his liking. The guy was slick: silk shirt, fake Gucci watch, the works. He charmed everybody. The mothers thought he was sent from heaven. They were flattered. He was offering to save their little girls from starvation, put them in big villas.”

“I know all this, Harold. I know how they get their girls.”

“They even threw a good-bye party, a *soo kwan*, a big affair. Everyone attended.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know. You didn’t see it.”

“Neither did you. What you’re describing, it was what, ten years ago?”

“Uh uh,” he mumbled. “The guy came back for more. Just before I came up here.”

“He came back for Mon?”

“Not for Mon. She’s too old now. Listen, I’ll make a long story short. I got into a fight with the guy. He ended up threatening my life and leaving. Without the girls.”

“That’s good.”

“And the village hated me for driving him away.”

“What?”

“He had them conned. He was a saviour, I was a meddling devil.”

I asked him if he hadn't told the villagers just what the rich man from Bangkok's "work" entailed. I asked him if he hadn't told them that the man's girls were threatened and beaten and made to wear numbered badges and do whatever things the *farangs* wanted. Yes, he said, he'd said all that. He even tried to explain AIDS, but still Mon's folks wouldn't listen. So I told him there still shouldn't have been a problem. Mon had been there. Mon could set them straight. She knew of shacks in Phuket that had caught fire and incinerated bar girls who'd been locked up for the night.

But Mon wouldn't take up the fight. She turned her head downward, hid her eyes and mouth. As a bar girl, she had sent money home every month, money that meant the difference between starving and subsisting. That in itself was proof of the Bangkok man's goodness. And the price for admitting outright that she'd been a prostitute would have been immense – though many villagers tacitly knew anyway and some of the men propositioned her. She would have brought shame on her-

self and her family with the verbal admission.

“But didn’t they see her as a kind of kept woman when she showed up with you?” I asked.

“They did,” he replied, “but I was going to be her husband. I wasn’t buying her, I was earning her. It’s fine to do it that way.”

So in the end, the villagers decided Harold had exorcised a saint. Any man who would vanquish a benefactor like the Bangkok man obviously had shady designs of his own. Perhaps Harold was a developer, sent to win villagers’ confidence, then steal something from them. They considered that possibility and worse ones, so Harold, desperate, flew in the face of his own fears. He got in touch with his family, had money sent to Esarn. He bought clothes for Mon’s family, initiated the digging of a new well. But the villagers avoided eye contact when they passed him on the dirt road. No one invited him to huts after the day’s work, though they would work alongside him as long as he was willing to give them his labour. He became a disease that would leave when it was

clear that it could do no more harm to the organism. These people he loved so much were casting him out.

“It became unbearable,” Harold said. “It got so bad that I told Mon to either tell them the truth or watch me leave on the next bus.” He paused, then chuckled sadly. “So I left. On the next bus.”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am. And I’ll bet you, as we sit here talking about her, I’ll bet you Mon’s back on *Soi Cowboy*, grinding her hips at wet-lipped businessmen.”

“You don’t know that.”

“How could she stay in the village without me? After the life she’s lived? When I left, my folks’ money left with me. I bet she’s back in some bar.”

“Would that change anything?”

He thought about it. “What do you mean?”

“Would you go back, rescue her? Go live somewhere else?”

“No,” he said. “I guess I wouldn’t.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. It was wet, greasy. He hadn’t washed it in days. I felt the story was only half told. I pointed to his burns. “So what explains those?”

His words slumbered in his throat, gathered the power to drone forth. “Jason, you teacher, you former of young minds, after all this I just got so tired.”

“Tired of what?”

“Everything. Sapped dry. Tired of walking, of talking. Tired of explaining. Like I’ve done too many things. Too many cities. Too many one-week plans.”

“Well you gotta do something, Harold. You gotta pick yourself up.”

“I know,” he agreed. “You’re right.”

“Maybe you should back off for a while. I can lend you enough money to get home.”

“Not going home, Jason.”

“You could relax. Work a few months, then come back. We could try Laos.”

“I’m kind of . . . shaky about things. I’d rather stay here.”

“And do what? Crack up?”

“No, Jason, I’m about finished cracking up. Run the cycle, so to speak.” His next words were flat and serious and hard to believe. “What I’m going to do is join a monastery.”

I laughed out loud. “Now there’s an option. You think the Buddhists’ll take you?”

“They’ll take me. I’ve already asked.”

“Maybe Arthur’s right. Maybe you are crazy.”

“Uh-uh. You want me to write travel stories? Want me to wander around knowing most of what’s wrong and none of what’s right?”

“That’s not a question I can answer.”

“I’ve written enough stories on the Buddhists,” he said, his voice now matter-of-fact. “Might as well see what they’re really about.”



“You don’t just ‘try’ the Buddhists, Harold. It’s a religion.”

“They give you three days. If you want to stay after three days, they shave your head and you stay. If not, you leave.”

I laughed again. Now he was so calm. So unmeasured.

Out of nowhere, he said, “I belong in Esarn.”

“What?”

“Esarn. That’s the only place I ever really wanted to be.”

“Then go back, find another village.”

“Another village won’t take me. I’d go through the same thing again.”

“Then why the monkhood? You’re losing me, Harold.”

“Well it’s worth a shot, isn’t it? The village is clean. Maybe it’s the Buddhists who make it clean. You should see how those guys run the place. They’ve got sway there. Nothing to do with money, nothing about ... striving. Just ... something real. I haven’t quite figured it out yet.” He paused, then said sagely, “You know, the family that gives a son to the monkhood earns karmic fortune. The son who goes earns karma

and wisdom.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

He patted his chest. “I’m a village son, Jason.”

“You’re nothing remotely close.”

“I am,” he said. “If I want to be, I am. The beauty of personal choice. You can look at things the way you want to look at them. I talked to Chang, owner of this guest house. He knows this monastery for *farangs* outside Lampang.”

“You’d last a week there.”

“Maybe, but I’m trying it anyway. Once I get myself together. Course, I might have to start as an acolyte . . . .”

I laughed again, this time derisively. I couldn’t help it, and I saw that it didn’t bother him, which made me uncertain.

“This all sounds like a good story,” I said. “Maybe you ought to write it: *Jaded Man of the World Turns to Cloister*.”

He shifted down to the centre of the bed, stretched his legs out and

rolled onto his stomach, palming the sheet like a baby trying to use fingers that won't yet fully extend.

"That's not funny, Jason. Buffaloes don't explain. Like I said."

"You don't just 'stop explaining.' That's goofy."

"You do if you can't ... ." He stopped and scratched his head.

"If you can't what?"

"If you can't travel anymore. We've run the course, Jason."

"Then go home."

"To what?"

"Anything you want. Go back to school. Write free-lance. Run an ant farm. Anything."

"I don't think so."

"Yet you can't tell me why not? Doesn't that seem a little –"

"No, I can't tell you," he confessed. "I really can't." Then, after a thoughtful pause, he found an answer. "I guess it's just that ... work, school, all the things that people do just to live. Maybe that's it. The

pattern. That developed notion. I don't want to live, Jason, I want to live."

"You can't do that in the States?"

"They have *sanghas* in the States?"

"What's a *sangha*?"

"A monastery."

"Of course they do. They're just a different relig—"

"Then I don't want them. When a guy finds truth, he doesn't dress it up to fit some context. Course, you aren't interested in my particular truth, are you, Jason?"

"And why would you say that?"

"Don't want to know what I'm driving at. Why my buffaloes don't explain."

"Harold, get off the buffaloes, why don't you."

He grinned at me. In the grin was a threat. "I'll give you another chance," he said. "One more chance to answer the riddle. Then you're

doomed to ignorance forever.”

Out of arguments, I said at last, “All right, Harold. Why don’t water buffaloes explain?”

And here his voice turned a hundred and eighty degrees, became liquid. “Because explaining a meritorious thing is unnecessary. Because buffaloes are beasts of burden. They do plenty of good and no wrong and they don’t ruin it by recognizing it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s all? A kind of willful ignorance?”

“In a way. What better way of forgetting all the bad you’ve done?”

“You’ve never ‘done bad.’”

“Then all the non-good you’ve done.”

There was a short silence. “It’s too clean,” I said. “It’s a myth, somebody else’s myth.”

“It’s real,” he countered. “When I’m a buffalo, I won’t explain myself.”

“From village son to water buffalo? That’s a helluva –”

“If that’s the way you see it. Laugh if you want to.” He flicked his cigarette into the ashtray on the night table. I stared at it. “Think I was gonna grind it into my eyeball?” he asked.

“Arthur says you’ve been putting on a real show.”

“Buffaloes don’t engage in theatrics,” he said, and his face broke into a genuine smile. “Just figured that out. Just now, this very moment. Guess I been pretty silly. Sitting up here, getting all Hindu about things. Not the middle path. Wrong direction.”

I looked away, felt my resolve melting. “What can I say to you, Harold?”

He lit another cigarette and inhaled slowly. “I don’t know. You can say good-bye. That’s about it.”

“Why’d you want to see me? Just to say what you just said?”

“Partly.”

“You could have written me.”

“I also wanna give you something.”

He rose from the bed, crossed the floor and picked his pants from a pile of clothes in the corner. From his wallet he pulled a piece of paper and what appeared to be a postal money order. I unfolded the paper and read it. It was the name and address of his Lampang monastery. The other was a money order for one thousand dollars, from his father. It was from more than three years ago, no doubt expired.

“The address I want you to send to my folks,” he said. “In case they want to get in touch with me.”

“Why not do it yourself?”

“I’ve been trying to for three days now. Decided it takes too much ... energy.”

“Then why didn’t you ask Arthur?”

“If Arthur knew the address he’d follow me there. You know the guy. He’s a puppy dog.”

“And what’s with the money order?”

“My old man sent me that. My second or third day in Bangkok. He knew I had no money, was damn sure I’d need it.”

“Yet you didn’t?”

“I kept it in my wallet for three years to prove I wouldn’t.”

“So why give it to me?”

“Because now I really don’t need it. An act of symbolism, Jason. Travels are over. I’m making my stand. Arthur – he has his own gold mine. You – you have nothing. I signed the order over to you. I doubt they’ll cash it, but I suppose it’s worth a try.”

I couldn’t give him a response. That sentence was still ringing: “You have nothing.” He’d said it so calmly, so unselfconsciously, a universally accepted fact.

Through the wall I could hear voices and rattling pots and pans. The guest-house girls were awake, preparing for breakfast. Like Mon, they were village girls who’d come to the city for a better life. They too hadn’t found it. I didn’t know what to do or say next. I stared at the money



order, thought of no argument, no persuasive tactics. This was a hell of a way to end things after three years.

“You might as well go,” he said after a while. “You’re worried about me, come see me in Lampang. The monastery welcomes all visitors.”

“I don’t know, Harold.”

“Maybe it won’t work out,” he said, sounding hopeful for me. “Maybe you’re right: I’ll hate it and leave.”

He went to the door and opened it for me. He wasn’t the person I’d known for three years. Despite the burns and the raw-boned visage, despite the luxurious pain, he was somehow focused, had a kind of dominion – though over what I couldn’t say. I shook his hand, said something hollow and salutary, and walked out.

AND OF COURSE I visited him in Lampang. I did it three months later, and brought Arthur with me. Harold was still talking about buffaloes and selflessness and karma. If anything, he was “crazier” than he’d been

back in that room in Chiang Mai. He talked about the four noble truths, about the essence of meditation and the virtue in humility. He said one day Arthur and I would follow him. Either in this life or in the next one. And how could we argue? There was no reason to. As the visit was winding down, Arthur dropped his travel bag and announced that he, too, would give the monastery a whirl. I knew he'd leave in a day or two, and so did Harold, but it was his choice. I ended up leaving – alone – and going back to doing what I did best, which was to move, to keep going in that one direction. I went to Phnom Penh and took a U.N. job teaching English to government bureaucrats. The work was fine, but the money was bad. Often my pay didn't come at all, and there were rumours my job would be cut. After a few months, I got that old familiar itch again. I packed my bag, went to back to Thailand, which is where I've been ever since, teaching. I've thought about going home. Thought long and hard about it, told myself all sorts of things. But I know if I go, it'll mean an end. An end to the movement. It'll mean

job and routine, a new/old environment that I'm not sure has within it what I need to survive. I know you can't travel forever. You can't skim along from place to place, move whenever the mood strikes. I've seen what that does to people. It grinds them down, makes them old and alone, fast. Only problem is, sometimes you can't give up one thing without replacing it with another. You can't live in a void. You have to be somewhere.

## About the Author

STEVEN OWAD is a freelance journalist and editor from Calgary who has lived in Thailand and now resides in Warsaw, Poland. His short stories and poetry have appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, *The New Quarterly*, *The University of Windsor Review* and *Siam Journals*. He is also the author of the play *The Homecoming Clan*, and writes regularly for *The Changemakers Journal* (Changemakers.net) and *The Warsaw Voice* (Warsawvoice.com.pl).

