

Two Roots



AT A CROSSROAD IN HIS LIFE, A YOUNG MAN JOURNEYS TO HIS MOTHER'S
NATIVE THAILAND TO FULFILL A FAMILIAL OBLIGATION.

BY JAED COFFIN '02

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARIKO JESSE

I HADN'T BEEN TO PANOMSARAKRAM in more than ten years, since the day I watched my Koondtha's body burn in the temple crematorium. But I was twenty-one now, and though I had never forgotten those black clouds of smoke, there was no question: I had become an American.

I was sitting on a metal chair in the middle of the temple grounds, naked except for a red and gold sarong. My hands were at my chest in prayer. About a hundred people had come to watch, and as I looked at the crowd of Thai faces, I wanted to tell them: thank you for coming! And why are we here? And how could we have anything to do with each other? I saw my sister, Tahnthawan, standing in the crowd. She'd come from Bangkok, where she lived with her husband, an English businessman. She was crying; he was taking pictures. My mother came forward with a pair of long metal scissors and started clipping off my hair. I could feel my head getting lighter and cooler as she put my hair in a pile on a silver tray. I tried to make eye contact with my mother, but she wouldn't look back. Then I started to feel invisible: to her and to the crowd, and even to myself. Everyone formed into a line and took turns clipping. When Tahnthawan cut my hair, she whispered to me, "Hey, Nongchai." Hey, Little brother. I could tell she was proud, and so I made sure to look serious. As my hair became thinner and thinner, my mother stood back from me at a distance, holding her hands in a single fist over her heart.

Luang Pa, the most senior monk in the temple, came forward with a razor. He put his fingers behind my ear to steady my head and shaved my hair down to the scalp. Then he put his fingers under my chin, lifted my head so that we faced each other, and ran the razor over my eyebrows. The blade wasn't very sharp, and it kept tugging my head sideways. Someone dumped a bucket of cold water over my face and shoulders. I blinked, studied the temple buildings, the bamboo trees along the banks of the canal, and then looked up into the empty, sunlit sky. The world felt still and quiet. I searched for my mother. She was staring at me now, like she wasn't sure that I was really her son.

Someone sprinkled gold powder over my head, and then Uncle Gaweepeat wrapped me in white robes. As he led me forward, he told me to repeat the name of the Buddha—Poot-toe, Poot-toe—over and over again. A man with long silver hairs growing from a mole on his chin stood next to me with a red silk umbrella so big he had to rest it over his shoulder and

against his hip. The crowd formed into a parade behind me; a twenty-piece marching band played at the back. I thought of my Koondtha's funeral, and for a moment I imagined myself entering the temple dressed in the same white fabric that he'd worn on the day of his cremation. Then all the women and girls came forward, dancing, singing, and twirling their hands to the music.

Inside the temple, a gold Buddha was sitting against the back wall. His head almost touched the ceiling; his eyes were half open and bright white. Incense and candles smoked at his feet, where thirty monks were spread across a stage in an orange fan. Luang Pa sat in the middle. He called me forward with a slow nod. I stepped up to the stage, knelt, and wai-ed the Buddha, and then did the same to Luang Pa. He wasn't so ugly anymore. He seemed important, and wise. He looked at me like we'd never met.

I knew my chanting wouldn't be very good. Two days wasn't enough time to learn the chants, but it was important for me to be ordained at Wat Takwean before my mother went back to America. Gaweepeat and I had practiced all morning, and for about ten minutes I did all right. The problem was that I had to kneel with my toes curled up beneath me—in a formal position called koo-kao—with the whole weight of my body pressing down on my ankles. My legs were my father's giant American ones and weren't made for sitting like that. The pain became more intense and made me tremble. My memory went slack, so that I couldn't chant without one of the monks feeding me the lines. Sweat dripped from my head and onto my praying hands, and soaked through my robes.

A monk led me behind the Buddha. He handed me my new robes and showed me how to wear them: first a skirt tied off with a rope belt, then a light shirt that hung over one shoulder, and finally a robe folded in several sections and attached with a sash and another cloth belt. I imagined myself as an ugly white caterpillar transforming inside an orange chrysalis.

When I returned to the stage, Luang Pa said my new monk's name—Jaed Da Wat Tat No Namat—to renounce my identity as a layman. I said the name back to him. All at once, the monks said my new name. Then I waited for something magical to happen: a pang of revelation, a flash monsoon, the leaves on the bodhi tree to turn golden. Nothing. The monks rose and filed out of the temple in an orange chain.

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STANDING ON THE TEMPLE STEPS, I posed for pictures with my family. Gaweepeat made sure I didn't stand next to a woman. I tried to pose in ways that I thought would make me look serious and contemplative, although I wasn't sure I was feeling that way. I couldn't decide how to feel. I didn't feel more Buddhist and had never believed that a religious ritual could suddenly change me. So I just stood there, trying on different expressions to see which one felt the most natural.

Only one monk stayed at the temple after the ceremony. He was thin, and dark like a Lao. He kept watching me, as if waiting for a secret sign. Then he came and stood at my side. From beneath his robe, he handed Gaweepeat a disposable camera. The monk didn't say anything; he just studied the features of my newly shaven head. Gaweepeat took the picture. The monk took his camera back and shuffled off across the temple grounds. There was something about his narrow silhouette that made me feel lonely.

The last time I saw my mother before she flew back to America the next day, I was sitting atop a platform while she was pouring water over my hands and into a gold basin. Everyone else had already taken a turn. I looked at her as though there was one last thing that I needed to tell her, but I wasn't sure what it was: I haven't disappeared. I'm still your son. We're just pretending.

But my mother didn't look up. When she had poured all of the water over my hands, she knelt below me. Graab is the word for when a layperson worships the holiness of a monk. Graab went my mother at my feet, bowing three times with her hands and face pressed to the floor. Never had she seemed so barely my mother, and never had I felt so barely her son.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, a light-skinned monk named Tee brought me to my dormitory. We climbed a staircase, went through a set of double doors, and into a large empty room containing a simple shrine: a sitting Buddha with candles and a pot of incense at his feet. A dozen young boys were lying on the floor watching a National Geographic special on an old black and white television set. The oldest of the boys looked about seventeen; the youngest looked no more than four. Some of the boys had their hair cut in the old way: a shaved head but for a single ponytail. They were dressed in cheap clothes from the market.

"Temple boys," Tee said. He showed me where they slept on straw mats on the floor of a large room. A row of school uniforms hung from a wire clothesline. The walls were bare except for a poster for the movie *Titanic* and a photo of a smiling David Beckham holding a giant gold trophy. "They work for the temple," Tee said, "and I send them to school." He paused. "They have no parents, no home. They are temple boys." Tee smiled and shrugged, like it wasn't so bad.

My room was in the corner of the dormitory. It was empty

except for a small standing Buddha statue on a short writing table. There were two windows, both closed up with wooden shutters. "This is a good room," Tee said, opening the windows. "Many years ago, your grandfather used to come to this room to speak with the old Luang Pa. This was the old Luang Pa's room."

I pictured Koondtha and an old monk talking to each other in low masculine voices. I studied the floor for their footprints.

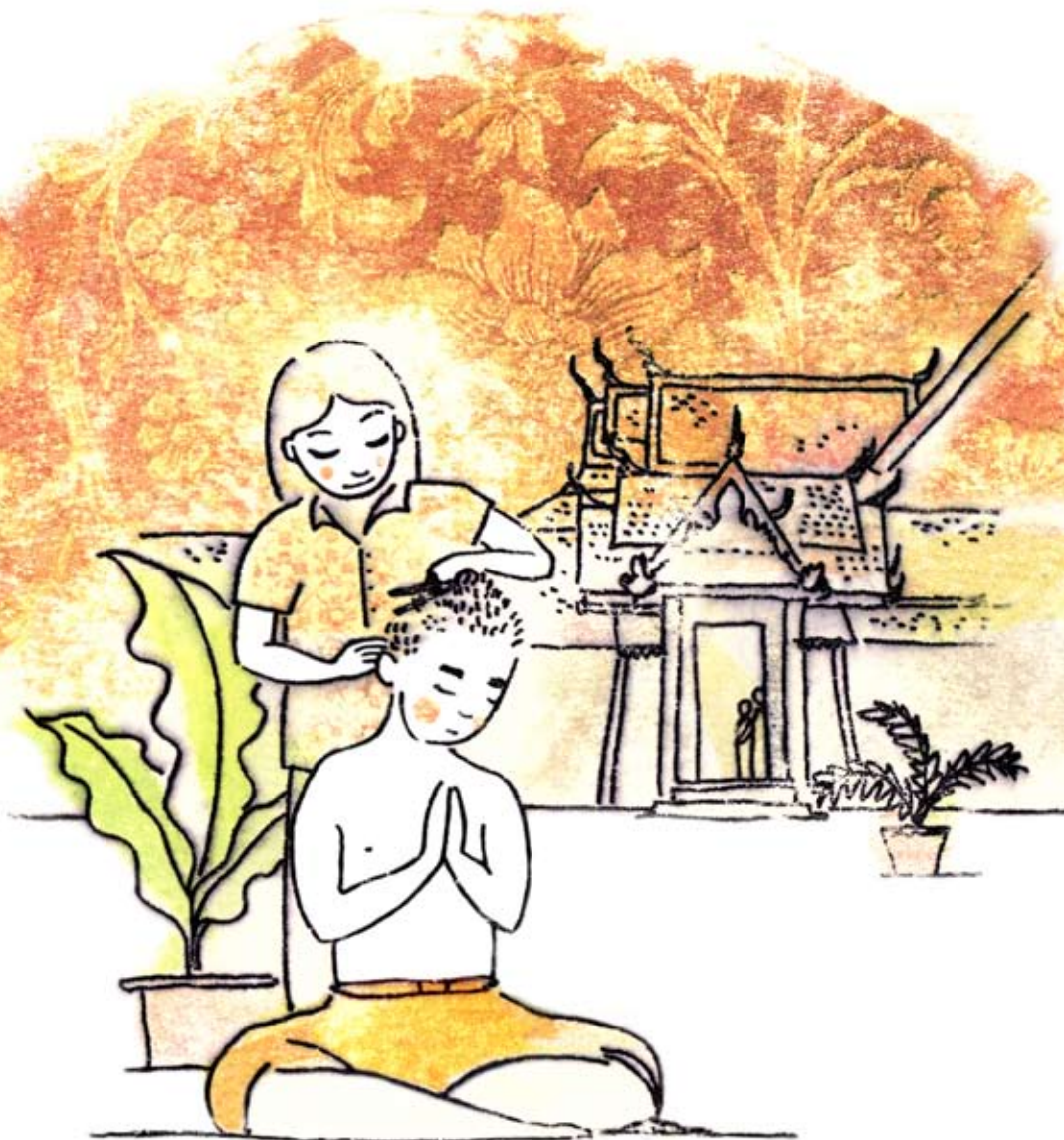
For the rest of that night, Tee left me alone in my room. From my window I could see beyond the temple to the bodhi tree and the stilt houses along the canal, and even to the metal roof of our family house. I looked at the yellow sky, half expecting to see a giant symbol forming in the clouds—some sign to verify that now everything would be different. I wanted my revelation to come all at once, with a bang or a burst of color and light. I stood there for what seemed like a long time, and as I waited, I kept running my hand back and forth over the crown of my hairless head.

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IT WAS STILL DARK when Tee woke me the next morning. My new alarm clock read five a.m., and I felt as if I hadn't slept at all. He turned on the light and showed me how to fold my robe over my shoulder and then pinch it, roll it, and tuck it under my armpit so that it pulled tight across my chest and fit snugly around my neck. I gave it a shot, but after a few tries Tee smiled and did it himself. He showed me how to wear the strap of my alms bowl over my shoulder so that the cover wouldn't fall off, which Tee told me was bad luck. He pointed at my feet and told me that I couldn't wear shoes. As we set off across the temple grounds in the dark, Tee kept pointing out piles of dog shit so that I wouldn't step in them. I had no idea what we were doing or where we were headed.

Four monks waited for us beneath a street lamp. Two of them were sitting on a crumbling wall with their alms bowls in their laps. A temple boy sat on a bicycle behind them. The bicycle was rusty, the tires were almost flat, and there was a plastic milk crate tied over the back wheel. The boy's face was tough and handsome, and his cheeks and eyelids were still puffy with sleep. He was watching me, but not in a suspicious way. I looked back at him and nodded. He kept staring. Tee walked to the front of the line. The other monks fell in behind him, and I walked last, in front of the temple boy. The sun was rising.

All along Panom Street, groups of two or three people were kneeling on the sidewalk, holding steaming bowls of rice over their heads. Tee stopped before each group, chanted a short prayer, then waited while they spooned rice into our alms bowls. Sometimes they gave us bags of curry or paper cartons of eggs and meat, which the temple boy kept in the crate on his bicycle. The old people studied me with skeptical faces, and asked Tee who I was. He said I was the grandson of Somboon Muncharoen. They searched my face for a familiar curve in the shape of my eye or cheek and then smiled and nodded their



heads as we moved on to the next person. I felt proud that people could see the features of Koonthia in my face. It made me want to act like a first-class monk.

A woman came out to meet us in front of the bright but empty 7 Eleven. She was covered in orange and green light and looked artificial, or painted. She held her baby son, whose face was covered with a white cooling powder. He looked like a happy little ghost with shining black eyes. As I watched the woman guide her son's hand to a spoonful of rice and then show him how to empty the rice into our alms bowls, I felt myself wanting to tell him: Believe in this. I didn't grow up believing in this, and now I can't convince myself that it makes any difference.

Just before we entered the temple grounds, I saw my uncle, Venai, approaching us on his motorcycle. My cousin Awm was riding on the back, and behind her was a girl I'd never seen

before. I was sure she hadn't come to my ordination ceremony. As they slowed down to meet us, I remembered what my mother had always told me: that I shouldn't trust Venai. He liked to gamble and had used our family's land to pay off debts. He had a difficult personality, was stubborn, and had been born somewhat deaf, which made him seem even more stubborn. But Venai was the only one of my mother's siblings who'd stayed in Panomsarakram. He lived in our family house with his wife. Neither of them had a steady job.

My cousin Awm made her offering first. She was my age and, as children, even though we couldn't say much to each other, we'd been very close. It was an honor to stand before her as a monk. Venai made his offering next. As I received it, I found myself questioning the sincerity of his gestures. Do not trust him, I reminded myself, but a part of me wanted to like him.

When the girl I didn't know knelt before me, she kept her



head bowed down so that I couldn't see her face. I sensed that she was about my age. As she spooned rice into my bowl, I studied her shining black hair and noticed how her thin and delicate fingers looked strong and capable too. I kept looking at her while trying not to be too obvious, and before she rose, I caught a glimpse of her eyebrow and the top of her nose. As she disappeared across the temple grounds on the back of Venai's motorcycle, I kept looking at her, although I knew I shouldn't.

When we got back to the temple grounds, the temple boy emptied our alms bowls into a metal cauldron. He was still looking at me, studying me shamelessly like I was blind. I finally asked him his name. "Cheua alai?" The boy smiled, and shrugged, as though it was of little consequence. "Boi," he said.

I thought to myself: Boi. Boy. I thought of telling him how his name meant what he was. But as I watched him unload the food from his crate, I decided against it. He didn't have time for some clever American pun. Boi looked at me and smiled. "Luang Pee," he said.

It was the first time I'd been addressed by the honorific title of a monk. It was like being called Holy Brother. I nodded at Boi and said his name again. He nodded back and again said,

"Luang Pee." I winked at him just to let him know that now we were buddies. Boi stared at me for a moment and then jogged off across the temple grounds as if he were running across water.

Then I heard a bell ring in the distance. A soft, swinging note. Tee called me over, and we followed a procession of monks through the temple gates and into the temple. It was cool and peaceful inside. The monks took their seats on the stage in order of seniority and status. Tee led me to my place in the far back corner, in front of several rows of nayns. I had the last spot on the stage. The new kid. I could hear the nayns talking about me behind my back, how I was so big and could only speak a little bit of Thai. I knelt and bowed to the Buddha, and eased myself onto my toes. They hurt immediately.

That first morning in the temple, despite the pain in my toes and even though I didn't have an English book of chants to follow along, I felt very pleasant just sitting there in the quiet morning light. I listened to the chants as if they were echoes from my memory that had gone off and finally returned. The old monks were grumbling their prayers in subterranean voices, while behind me, the nayns sang out their own version like a falsetto chorus of songbirds. 🌸