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# Beneath the Mountain

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*Beneath the Mountain*

Bells tolled from the corners of the temple's caves, its empty crevices and cavities. By the time he heard this morning call, Bhim, the caretaker, had already swept the main cavern. He had wiped the statue's dais and polished the Buddha's golden face, even the long earlobes, because it pained him to think that, after all these years, it might be dust that kept the Buddha from hearing his prayers.

Bhim pulled charred incense stalks from the sand tubs, all the while listening for the suck and pop of a faulty speaker. There were no real bells in Wat Tum Nahm Bhang. He had installed speakers in all the caves that month, finishing the wiring in time for the monsoon rains, a true test of the speakers' durability over that of the moss-covered bells he had removed. Although many of the monks were aware of this change, the absence of physical bells went largely unobserved. Bhim's ministrations often went unnoticed, just as Bhim himself was regularly overlooked. He had been at Wat Tum Nahm Bhang longer than any of the monks, now that old Luang Poh Sri had passed, and had become a fixture in the temple. Bhim was like the limestone spires that stretched down from the ceiling, changing imperceptibly, long enough now that no one noticed the roots hidden up there in the dark.

Bhim tossed the stems and candle stubs into a bucket and covered the floor with plastic straw mats. Against one wall of the circular cavern loomed the Buddha's statue, facing the entrance that looked out across a valley. Small openings led away from this central chamber into the catacomb of tunnels that made an anthill out of the mountain. Most of the caves had long been abandoned, and it seemed to Bhim that nature was quickly reclaiming the mountain's hollows. In the main chamber, the rotten wooden shelving had fallen to termites. Snakes coiled in drainpipes. The few standing fans had rusted to a slow stop, and the unused power sockets were plugged with moss. These days it was all he could do to keep the Buddha clean.

Monks filed into the main cavern from outside and stood in clusters chattering like schoolchildren. They each carried the coils of their robes in one hand and in the other a *thalaphat*—a large fan on a broomstick stem held in front of them while they chanted, like horse blinders for monks. After them came the temple's visitors,

mostly locals, women whose sons had been monks in their youth in an attempt to secure their mothers an opening in the higher heavens. Having been promised one of the seven levels of paradise, the mothers returned each weekend to make sure they received their due. They leaned close and listened expectantly. Bhim watched them all. He knew their pale faces and their thick knees, puckered from the woven mats they knelt on. And then there were the laypeople from Bangkok who blinked endlessly upon entering the caves, never quite adjusting to the dim interior, their eyes trained by bright city nights. They came in T-shirts and hats like families on vacation.

As the morning prayers began, a woman bustled into the cave and knelt among the others from Bangkok. Her son entered wearily. Bhim knew the climb. For years he had counted the three hundred and twelve steps carved into the rock of the mountainside, a constant against which to measure the changes of a lifetime. He even adopted the count as his mantra. But eventually he realized that the steps had grown, not on the mountain, but in his knees, in the small of his back, and even in his imagination when he mulled over the climb down to the monks' canteen at the foot of the steps. The Buddha's teachings had always come late to Bhim: nothing lasts.

The boy approached his mother. He had a leftward lean, a crooked bow, head cocked to listen to the earth. His steps were jagged. Bhim had not seen this yesterday when he had caught the boy chewing on bread that was meant for the birds and the pond fish.

"I paid for it," the boy had said. He had been seated by the reservoir at the foot of the mountain. "And I'm feeding the fish as well." He threw a large hunk into the water then, as if to prove a point. The catfish snapped it up.

"It's old bread meant for animals. You will be sick," Bhim told him.

"Why?"

He was a chubby boy and could barely be ten. Thick hair fell into his eyes.

"It's not meant for people."

"Why not?"

Bhim drank from his water bottle and ran the liquid over his teeth. He gave the boy a sour grin. "Have you ever seen Phra Sangkajai's statue?"

"I've seen all of them," the boy responded lazily. "Mother brings us to a different temple every weekend."

"He is the fat one." Bhim made a round gesture with his bottle as if he had not heard the boy. "And he liked to chew on old bread as

well, used to sneak it from the kitchen stores as a novice thinking the senior monks would not miss it.” The boy stopped chewing. “But old bread is hard and gummy. It does not break apart so easily.” Bhim tore a piece from the boy’s loaf and squeezed it in his palm until it was gray and sticky. “Instead it collected in Phra Sangkajai’s belly, clogging it like tissue in a drain. The bread sat inside and soaked up his morning broth, ate his eggs and rice, collected little fish bones for its own.” He let the fist of dough fall to the ground, where it squirmed and collected twigs and dirt as he rolled it underfoot. “The Phra didn’t notice until one day it started to kick inside of him, like a baby. It tore at his stomach with its eggshell claws, and the Phra was in such pain.” Bhim trailed off as if remembering the rounded stomach, the pinched and pointed flesh where a fish bone protruded.

“So what happened?” the boy asked in a rush.

“Well, this was Phra Sangkajai’s lesson in karma. It taught him that to steal is *baap*. He focused himself on making *bun* after that, until the beast stilled and only gave an occasional kick when the Phra ate too much at a meal.”

The boy brushed his hair from his face. “That’s not true. Is it? You made it up. What do you know about what Phra Sangkajai ate?”

“I know what I tell you.” Bhim leaned forward. “What do you know, Nong?”

The boy shook his head and the hair fell back into his eyes. He looked down at the dough creature curled by his toes.

Bhim left the boy. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs to take a bracing swallow from his bottle. Beginning to climb, Bhim heard a splash as the boy threw the entire loaf of bread into the water.

The monks picked up the chant, mouths popping open and closed like fish as they maneuvered the flow of the prayer, the low drone in a language that nobody understood any more. At one point the prayers were interrupted by the phone of a younger monk. He then dropped his *thalaphat* into the candles and leaped forward to pat out the toppled flames. The other monks turned, watched him openly, chanting by memory, habit, while their eyes fumbled along with the monk’s hands, their thoughts occupied. The phone whined through-out, a modern accompaniment to the prayers.

By the time Luang Poh Phaana—a monk whose bulbous belly rivaled Phra Sangkajai’s—stepped forward to recite the day’s teachings, the audience had wearied. Their limbs unfolded and their backs curled. The hard floor worried at their patience. Today Luang Poh Phaana

explained briefly the nature of the Mara, the temptress who intruded upon the holy man's meditations, seeking, through trickery, to steal him away from the brink of enlightenment, to deceive him to a fool's death. In order to escape the physical space, to transcend, the holy man must persevere and resist the seemingly easy path to enlightenment. The crowd nodded sleepily.

After the prayers, the people drained toward the light of the entrance, but the boy separated himself from his mother and plodded over to Bhim.

"You lied," he declared, sounding more impressed than annoyed.

"You cut your hair," Bhim responded. The boy's bangs had been cut right down to the skin, although the rest of his mop remained untouched.

The boy frowned. "Mother was told that my third eye must be kept open," he said sullenly, pressing fingers to his forehead as if to force open the skin.

"I don't see a third eye."

"It's here." He indicated a thin white scar. "It is for me to see the spiritual world more clearly."

"And have you?"

"You lied," the boy repeated, remembering his point. He looked at Bhim for confirmation.

"About what?"

"I asked some monks at dinner and they said Phra Sangkajai made himself big because he was too beautiful. They said that they had never heard the bread story. It's a lie." The boy studied Bhim.

"Those monks," Bhim snorted. "What do they know? Watching television all day. Playing on their pocket phones like children with toys."

"You are not a monk."

It was not a question, but Bhim answered: "No."

"What's your name?"

"Bhim."

"Pee Bhim, I'm called Medt."

"Medt like the seed that becomes a tree? And it's Loong Bhim to you. 'Pee,'" Bhim repeated. "How young do you think I am, Nong Medt? I could be your grandfather."

"You're not that old," Medt said, unabashed.

"Older than you think," Bhim said, and walked out through the entrance to sit on the stairs outside.

Medt limped out behind him. “Was the story your own story, Loong?”

“It is Phra Sangkajai’s story now.”

“I liked it.”

“Nong, where is your mother? She will be looking for you,” Bhim said impatiently.

Medt flicked a pebble down the mountain. “Can you teach me how to make up stories?”

“I don’t make up stories. I only tell them.”

“What’s the difference?”

Bhim leaned back on his elbows and stretched his feet out below him. His gray pants settled against gaunt legs.

“Take that story about Phra Sangkajai. It was not invented, it had just never been told before.”

Bhim pointed his feet and looked along the tongue of stairs that rolled down the mountainside from the cave’s mouth. At the foot of the mountain was the new temple that had been finished several years before. It was adorned with colored mirrors—small shards that reflected the world in different hues—and had curved-talon roofs that scratched at the sky. The sun was still partially hidden by the mountain, and monks were working quickly in the cool shadow below, before the noontime heat arrived. Soon they would be in their air-conditioned pavilions, watching chatty *lakorns* on television. Now that Luang Poh Sri was gone, Bhim was the only one who still slept in the caves at night, alone in the cavernous sleeping quarters that had once housed two hundred monks. Bhim slept under a net now that the bats had reoccupied the space. He spread his blankets in the very center and pretended that there was only him and a black sky with bats churning like stars, lulling him into a meditative sleep, their faint coming and going providing the rhythm that he needed, an ebb and flow like an ocean under the moon. He moved with the tide, swayed to an unknown pull, gave himself up entirely.

Bhim took another sip from his bottle and frowned at the little orange monks scurrying below.

“Why is your skin all red?” Medt asked.

Bhim’s skin was turning a deep red, and his sweat ran away heavy and thick like rice-water.

“I got it from my mother,” Bhim began instinctively. He coughed. “She died giving birth to me. My aunts—”

“Wait. Is this another story that hasn’t been told before?”

"It is a story that will never be told at all if I'm interrupted," Bhim said. "My aunts told me that my mother had turned paler as she pushed and pushed me out, the color leaking from her in a slow flood. Eventually, she was white as a dead tree with me between her legs, stained red by the life she had given away."

"That's sad," the boy said.

"It's a lesson. Death and birth are of the same cycle. To be reborn, one needs to have died."

"Do you always tell stories when people ask you questions?" Medt asked.

"No."

"What's in your bottle?"

"Water," Bhim told him flatly, after another sip. "You want some?"

"No," Medt replied. "I can smell it." He stood and, with cautious steps, started down the stairs. "Thank you for your stories, Loong Bhim."

The following morning, while Bhim was perched on the Buddha's shoulder polishing the nose, Medt entered the empty cave. Bhim didn't look up. He knew from the irregular gait, the scrape and stomp, that it was the boy.

"Do you think he notices?" Medt called from where he sat watching Bhim.

"No," Bhim called down.

"Then why do you polish it? I don't think the monks notice either."

"That's why I polish it, because nobody else notices, no one takes the time to notice. What are you doing up here? Are you never with your mother?"

"She's talking to the monks about the *baap* that she carried over from another life."

Bhim climbed down off the statue and brushed at his clothes. "How do you know that?"

"That's what she always talks about. She thinks she's being punished now for something she did last life." Medt shrugged.

"What happened to make her think that?" Bhim approached the boy. "What's on your face?" On Medt's forehead was a wobbly black eye in ink lines. It had a white scar for a pupil. "Did you draw it with a ballpoint?"

"I did it in the mirror." Medt grinned. "Look what it can do." He raised his eyebrows in a way that narrowed the panned eye on his

forehead. The third eye regarded Bhim suspiciously, or perhaps, given the long tendrils of eyelash, suggestively.

Bhim laughed. The boy had an imagination.

"Has it changed your perspective?" Bhim eased himself down beside the boy.

"No," Medt said a little glumly. "I don't know where to look."

"All around you. These caves echo with history."

Medt turned to Bhim. "You're not very red today, Loong Bhim."

"It is early still," he replied sarcastically. "I left the drink with my bedding."

"I thought you were born with it."

"Don't be clever, Nong."

Medt sat manipulating his eyebrows, practicing different forehead expressions.

"Well? Try that third eye then. I'll help you," Bhim said. "Remember with me. This temple looked very different when I came here, about thirty years ago. Look at the floor." They both studied the ground underneath. "It was not smooth and flat like this, not cool concrete." Bhim ran his palm against the surface. "It was pitted and sandy, and bat droppings were everywhere, so you had to watch where you sat. Go on, touch the ground. Can you smell it?"

"No," Medt said.

"What do you look at me for? Open that eye." He rubbed the boy's forehead with his thumb, smudging the ink lines. "It smells like bat shit and incense from the sticks that burn everywhere in the ground. Up now, stand up."

Bhim helped Medt to his feet and led the boy forward to the Buddha. Large spotlights on the ground lit up the statue from underneath, elongating the Buddha's eyebrows so that he had a startled expression, as if he had found himself raised suddenly onto the pedestal.

"And him, he was not always like this. They covered him with copery paint. But underneath is stone, hard and black. When people came they used to buy the square gold leaves and plaster them on him, the traditional way. The gold was coarse and crinkled like old skin, and when a wind blew, all the little pieces fluttered like wings, and flakes of gold floated in the air."

"I can smell it," Medt said.

"What does it smell like?"

"Bat shit," he giggled.

"All around us are candles, hundreds of fat and skinny yellow candles sitting in wax pools." They turned in a slow circle, populating

the cave with Bhim's memory and the boy's imagination. "And over there are all the smaller statues, seven of them, one for each day. Can you see them?"

"Yes!" Medt said.

"The people are different too. Thin and hard people, farmers all of them. Hardly anyone from Bangkok. You see that wiry man there? He is about the age I am now, fifty, and he has given up half of his food to the temple even though he has a girl at home. See how his hands shake? When the monsoon comes, he will lose his daughter. And still he will come to the temple. He will never blame the Buddha. And look at these monks." Bhim pointed to where slight leaves of men in sun-blached, orange robes were pushing themselves up from the floor, brushing ash from the folds of their sleeves and eyes. The monks looked at the pair and nodded encouragingly.

"They're old," Medt observed.

"Yes, exactly. Old *monks*. These three came here together, as boys. Together they grew old, together they died, faithful to the temple all their lives. *That* does not happen anymore." The monks smiled knowingly, the story familiar to them.

"Close your eyes," Bhim said. He left the boy in the middle of the cave and knelt by some wiring in the corner. There was a battered cassette player attached to black vines that crawled up the wall. Taking a tape from a cardboard box, Bhim loaded the player.

"Loong Bhim?" Medt called uncertainly, eyelids fluttering.

"Quiet. Keep your eyes closed."

Bhim twisted a knob slowly. Voices that started as whispers grew in size, populating the space, hissing and popping occasionally where the tape wore thin, so that a person's edges might waver before becoming distinct again.

"Can you hear the chanting?" Bhim asked, returning to Medt. They let the low hum of the prayers run through them. The caves carried the sound, so it seemed like the chanting came from everywhere. "It never stops. During the prayer times, nearly two hundred monks sit in wide circles in the main cavern. You can hear them all the way down in the valley like a single voice booming from a mouth in the mountain."

"Even in the valley?" Medt whispered.

"Everywhere."

They sat with the crowd, listening to the prayer without participating. The boy stared up at the dais. Bhim watched a small woman in the corner. She held her long braid in her lap and tugged and thumbed

it incessantly, as was her habit. Bhim knew that behind her ear three small moles made a perfect triangle, though he could not see it from where he sat.

Medt surveyed the room. "There are many monks here."

"That's right. For years the number of monks has been dwindling. There are few of them left today. And few of those are real monks."

"What about you? Where are you, Loong Bhim?"

Bhim sighed. "I'm here," he said. "I'm right here." He shut his eyes and lay back on the concrete floor.

The cassette stalled. The same few seconds of prayer was chanted to them, making it sound inhuman, as if the machine were trying to communicate. A man sneezed repeatedly.

"Will you stop it?" Medt asked.

"It represents the cycle of rebirth," Bhim said callously, but he went to turn off the machine. It spat the cassette back out trailing a mangled tail of black ribbon. Bhim threw it in the box with the others and brought them over to Medt. The box was labeled "Blank Tapes."

"You see these? Several years ago I found these while clearing out one of the inner caverns. Recordings from twenty and thirty years ago. It was Luang Poh Sri's idea to broadcast them from the cave like the chanting in the old days. He would have liked to hear it."

Medt fished out a cassette and wound the tape backward and forward with his ear close, like he was able to play it on his finger. In Bhim's ears, a residue of the chant lingered like distant music. He had only recently installed the collection of patched speakers and had yet to test the system beyond broadcasting the daily bells, which now tolled on a timer. Bhim liked to pretend that now the bells would ring themselves forever, long after he had died and the caves had been abandoned, like a diligent spirit had returned to hammer the metal cones in vague salutation of the monks who had once occupied the space.

But Bhim knew that the ringing would die with him, just as old practices had been thrown to the river along with Luang Poh Sri's ashes. Upon coming to the temple, Bhim had worked with the old monk to rekindle waning interest in the mountain shrine. They had filled the cave floors with concrete and illuminated the main chambers with wired lights. They sullied the ancient hollow with modern comforts. Still, the other elders insisted on moving to the valley floor to better serve the laypeople, to be more influential among the townsfolk, they said. But influence seeped the other way, swam up the intended stream and punctured holes in the practices of Wat Tum Nahm Bhang. The temple evolved like a beast, shedding the old relics

from its fur. Eventually, Bhim and Luang Poh Sri were the only people still sleeping in the mountain, sharing a vast hall to themselves. The other monks returned solely for the morning prayers.

“Can you make a story come true by telling it?” Medt asked suddenly, surprising Bhim.

“What do you mean?”

The boy dragged his leg around in front of Bhim. Rolling up the pant leg, Medt revealed a misshapen knee with red scars coiled like worms.

“What happened?” Bhim asked. He had assumed that the boy had been born with the disability.

Medt shook his head. “No, *you* tell the story. Tell it but make it end in a different place.”

“I’m sorry, Nong. This isn’t my story to tell.”

The boy studied his knee. “Teach me then.”

“I can do better than that,” Bhim said eventually. “I know a place where stories go to swim and grow. Can you manage a short climb?”

“Down the mountain?”

“*Beneath* the mountain. Do you know where this temple got its name? Wat Tum Nahm Bhang. The *temple* and the *cave* part you know, but what about the *hidden water*?”

“What water?”

“I’ll show you.”

Bhim stood and led the way to a neighboring cave. In the corner was a round opening barred by a folding metal gate. The gate’s hinges were powdered with rust and squeaked a warning as Bhim slid it aside.

He stopped beside the doorway. “Did your mother ever tell you not to step on the threshold in a temple?”

Medt nodded.

“See that shiny spot there in the doorway? Where the threshold should be? Before I installed this gate, the monks used to take turns sleeping there each night, to guard the sacred space. The idea was that any holy man who tried to get in would know not to step on the threshold and therefore pass through the doorway unimpeded. The heathen, on the other hand, tripped over the monk, alerted the sleeper, and was fed to the bats.”

Bhim went through the doorway first, stepping high over an imaginary man. Medt followed, sideways, lifting his leg as if straddling a fence.

Bhim laughed. “Nong, I’m kidding,” he said. “These bats are vegetarian.”

Bhim collected the flashlight from a ledge inside and took Medt's hand as they climbed down the narrow tunnel. The cold stone around them collected the moisture in the air, donned the water like an expensive coat that winked lavishly in the light. Bhim's hand came away wet wherever he touched a wall. The stone stairs were slick. They moved slowly. Neither of them spoke.

At the end of the passageway was a low entrance that Bhim stooped through. They passed into a cavern with a high domed ceiling that ended somewhere out of sight like the sky on a horizon. Short stone spines stabbed downward. The lake that stretched ahead of them was a pane of black glass. It had been Luang Poh Sri's dying dream to build a shrine here. A place where people could come and meditate, learning from the still water, using it as a standard for how the mind should behave. It was not the new comforts, the lights and plumbing and wiring of speakers up above that would bring people back, it was the return to the essentials, the roots. And Wat Tum Nahm Bhang had roots of water. The lake was its soil. But the idea had waned as Luang Poh Sri faded, and now both were dead.

Medt moved to stand beside Bhim, and his feet crunched on the wide crescent of pebbles that made a beach by the entrance.

"This is the place where stories swim and grow?" Medt asked.

"Yes."

"What's special about it?"

"The water has history. It is ancient. It once ran through the world in rivers and soaked up the stories of centuries." Bhim knelt and ran his palm across the surface, rustling the quiet. "Now, it is all gathered here, in a pool that waits to be stirred by a storyteller. This is why there are no new stories; this hidden water has collected everything already. But you can pull them from the lake. You can be the first to tell them."

"Do you come here alone?" the boy asked. Bhim lifted his dripping hand from the surface.

"Yes. I come here at night sometimes."

"What stories do you tell?"

"Stories that remember this temple the way it used to be, or about what it will become when I am dead and this cavern is forgotten. Sometimes, stories to recall my wife."

"Where is she?"

"She's dead." Bhim looked at Medt apologetically, as if he had disappointed the boy.

"No," Medt said definitively.

"No?" Bhim laughed.

“Not like that. I don’t want to hear it like that. Tell it like a story.”

Bhim went to squat by the water. He dipped a finger in, sucked on it, and let the water settle on his tongue. “Yes, I know this one.” He sat back beside the boy and placed the flashlight facedown on the uneven stones. The cave dimmed and the water thickened.

“Have you seen the *paa-yan*, the sheets of colored cloth that the monks wrap around pillars and trees?” Bhim asked. Medt nodded. “Well, there was this young woman who fell very sick, so ill that she could not even lift herself from bed. It seemed that she was going to die. So her husband came to this temple for help, bringing a large ribbon of *paa-yan* each day to be blessed by the monks.”

“He came to this temple?” Medt watched the lake intently.

“Yes, right here.” Bhim pointed ahead of them, and the water curled and undulated like ribbons of *paa-yan* in a wind. “And at home he wrapped his wife in sheets of red, green, yellow, blue, and white. The cloth fanned out like paper petals with her at the center.” Bhim shifted the light to obscure the room further. A ribbon of deep blue seemed to enfold them. There were other sheets too, their colors muted in the dark, flowing and blending with the black cave so Bhim and Medt could not see where the fabric began exactly, or if it ended.

“Little by little, with each layer of *paa-yan*, she grew healthier, but as she did so, the cloth began to enclose around her like a flower bud. One day, the sheets enveloped her entirely, and when her husband undid the layers of fabric, all that he found was a single bougainvillea flower. It had five petals, each in a different color.” Bhim opened his hand like a blooming flower and turned the light up at the ceiling. The cave cleared. The water was quiet.

“I like that story,” Medt said. “What was her name?”

The light hollowed Bhim’s features. “Fah,” he said softly. “But I used to call her my Fueng-Fah.”

“Fueng-Fah,” Medt repeated. “Like the flower in your story.”

That night Bhim was drunk. Bats flitted out through the tunnel, abandoning him. His skin burned red with life. He lay on his back by the lake and spoke into the dark. He told it stories. He did this often, talking earnestly, as if it were essential for the emptiness to imagine with him. Some nights when he drank, people would visit him, story characters that offered him the warmth of their thoughts and ephemeral bodies. But they were not the people he wanted. They were too intricate and exquisite; their hair was filigree. Tonight, it was Medt who visited him. His white pupil was luminous.

The boy shone a light in Bhim's eyes.

"Hey! Nong! Not in my face." Bhim brushed the flashlight aside and pushed himself upright. He squinted. "What are you doing here?"

Medt pointed the light at the ceiling. "I came to tell you my story."

"Your mother let you wander up here at night?" Bhim pushed his crinkled water bottle underneath the mat.

The boy shook his head vaguely. He sat down on Bhim's bedding.

"Tell me this story in the morning instead," Bhim said.

"We're going home tomorrow."

Bhim pressed his palms into his forehead. He shuffled on his knees to the lake's edge and crudely thrust his face into the water with eyes open. Drips ran down his spine when he straightened, and his clothes clasped him weakly.

"All right."

Medt stooped by the water and carefully dipped a finger into the surface. He sat, looked up at Bhim, and, taking a deep breath, stuck the finger in his mouth, all the way to the knuckle. He switched off the light.

"Did you know that monkeys are actually just little boys?" he began. "I learned this in a classroom. Men were once monkeys too, only they grew."

"Why do little boys and monkeys look so different then?" Bhim interjected.

"They are a *little* different. Boys are monkeys who have forgotten how to fly."

"I didn't know that monkeys could fly," Bhim said solemnly.

"Of course they do. Anyone who has seen a monkey in the trees knows how they can fly among the bamboo. You know, like the warriors in Chinese films."

"Are Chinese warriors monkeys too?"

"No. Only little boys. Most don't even know it. When they were monkeys, they all used to live in the same tree, a big one the size of Bangkok. One day this tree was hit by lightning so bright that the monkeys' minds went white, blank. And when the monkeys stood up from the ashes, they walked away instead of flying, because they had forgotten what they were."

Medt leaned closer to Bhim. "Do you know what else?" he whispered. "I'm a monkey too." Bhim could feel the bedding dip as Medt shifted. "Only I've forgotten how to fly." The boy took a breath as though he meant to continue.

Then he sniffed. "The end," he said. The light snapped on.

Bhim nodded. "A good story. But what have you learned?"

"Learned?"

"All stories are lessons. The story of the Buddha's life, for example, teaches us how we might live. So what have you learned?"

Medt bunched his face as he thought. "That little boys cannot fly."

"No. Not that a boy cannot fly like a monkey. But that a monkey can walk like a boy. Those are the two faces of the same lesson. To see both is what it means to tread the middle path. Did you hear what that fat monk this morning said about the Mara?"

Medt shook his head, embarrassed.

"That's probably best. Some say that the Mara is a deceiver, seeking to trick people to their deaths. But that is wrong—she is a teacher." Bhim held out his open palm. "She offers the false so that you may see the true." He turned his hand over, saying, "There cannot be one without the other. She guides the misguided to their deaths, but for the few, she is also the guide to enlightenment.

"Do you know why a temple was founded here, in the caves? When the first monks found a lake underneath this mountain they also discovered that the Mara dwelled here in the form of a *naga*."

"How do you know that?" Medt said.

"When I moved to the Wat Tum Nahm Bhang, Luang Poh Sri brought me down here. He told me that from this lake, I could learn all the Buddha's lessons."

Medt nodded. "All stories are lessons. And the water is full of them?"

"I learned about the temple's naga from Luang Poh Sri. He told me that here I would be closest to her. He said that one day, she would carry me away."

"She takes you away from your body?" There was awe in Medt's voice.

"Yes. Escape the physical world, step right out."

"How big is this naga?"

"Big enough to swallow you whole," Bhim said.

"But that's just dying."

"No. The body is only a husk. You leave it behind. The spirit transcends the body, the world."

"I don't believe it," Medt said. "Do you?"

It was not his own skepticism that the boy expressed, but Bhim's. Bhim could hear the belief in the boy's voice, and so Bhim brushed the light onto its side, dimming the cave. He stared ahead at the water.

Eventually, the boy followed Bhim's eyes. Then Bhim cupped a handful of pebbles and threw them far out into the lake.

"There! Hear that?" Bhim whispered urgently.

Medt had leaped up and was stumbling away from the water.

"Don't be afraid. The naga won't hurt you. Go look."

Medt nodded and crept forward until he standing with his toes in the water. His crooked shadow leaned into the shallows.

"The naga has been underground for so many years that looking at our light is like staring into the sun. I'm going to turn it off," Bhim whispered from behind the boy. "Maybe the naga will come closer."

Bhim chose a larger stone this time, the size of his fist. He had it in his hands, ready to throw, but when the light went out he allowed himself a moment in the familiar darkness. He thought back to the story he had told Medt about his wife. What he hadn't revealed was the true miracle of it, that he had layered paa-yan around the pillars and plants of their house until they couldn't even see the concrete and wood underneath. Luang Poh Sri had blessed the sheets himself, washed them here in water as cold and black as night, thinking that if the Mara could bring death, then perhaps she could also carry it away. His wife had recovered, not quickly, but she had lived to ride the motorcycle that killed her months later in a mundane, earthly collision with a neighbor's car.

Bhim had chosen to forget that magic. He told stories, but he treated them as fantasy. Thirty years had thinned his faith. The water held no more lessons for him. Instead, he drank deeply in the night, called forth spirits from their resting places but could not tell anymore whether those places were in caves or bottles. Before Medt had arrived, he had forgotten what it was like to believe something so willingly, to give entirely. But now, in the moment when the light switched off, when Bhim heard the lake's surface stir—the loud slap of water followed by soft rasping sounds, like scales rubbing together—he allowed himself to believe that perhaps the naga was down there with him and the boy, swimming through a black sky, conquering their imaginations.

Then the moment passed, and Bhim realized that he no longer held the stone in his hands. He turned on his light. The room lit up like a photograph, naked and raw. Water lapped against the stone beach. The boy was gone.

Bhim stumbled into the water, panicked. He yelled Medt's name and floundered in the shallows, thrusting his light ahead of him. The water was at his waist when his legs came up against something soft and warm. He aimed the light at his feet expecting to see the naga's

scales, but it was only the boy, smiling up at him from where he had anchored himself on the lake bed. Bhim dragged him up to the surface by his shirt collar.

“Nong, what do you think you’re doing?” Bhim gasped.

Medt was up to his shoulders in the water. His wet hair clung to his head except where it had been cut away to reveal the white pupil. The boy looked startled, and he squinted like he had been woken suddenly.

“She was here, the naga.” He blinked and looked down at the water. He rubbed his forehead. “She was right here,” Medt whispered, and held a hand delicately above the surface.

“Come on, we’re leaving.” Bhim took the boy under the arm.

“We have to find her again.” Medt squirmed and tried to pull away. “I was with her. She was going to take me.”

“You were going to drown. She’s not coming back, and neither are you.”

“But she’s blind now,” Medt argued. “How will she find us again?” The boy twisted like a netted fish, jerked his arm back and kicked at Bhim. Bhim slipped on the stones. His knee came down hard against a rock as they both fell into the water.

When Bhim stood, the cold water was in his skin and voice. “Enough,” he said and lifted the boy roughly. “Stop kicking. It wasn’t a naga, just a stone I threw. Understand?”

“No, *you* don’t understand. She’s there in the water,” Medt cried and pointed back at the lake as Bhim carried him to shore.

“She’s not. The naga doesn’t exist. I made it up to amuse you. Stop now.”

Medt went limp as Bhim hoisted the boy onto his shoulder and moved to the entrance.

“You cannot make up stories,” Medt whispered as they ascended through the tunnel. “You can only tell the ones that have never been told before.”

Bhim left the boy at the entrance of the tunnel. But as Bhim walked away, he noticed how Medt turned to the threshold for a moment to regard the shiny divide, how the boy then lifted his leg up, high enough to straddle a sleeping figure, perhaps, but also wide enough to cross a much larger threshold, extending a foot far out so that he might be able to transcend the doorway completely, to step beyond the physical space and, as Bhim had promised him, walk out of this world entirely.