

Excerpt from *Don't Go, Ramanya*

The train platform in Bangkok was crowded. Thonburi Station was an old railway depot on the banks of the river. Built in 1903, it was a long, open-air concrete and tin structure that for the past years only ran trains on a western-bound route. All other trains left from Hua Lamphong station, the newer, modern station in the center of the city. In keeping with the boom times, plans were already underway to convert Thonburi into a park and museum and build a new one just a few hundred feet away. But for now, dozens of vendors in their crooked stalls spread out along the edges of the platform as young backpackers from Europe and America mixed with Thai nationals, Chinese tourists, monks, and military alike.

Father Bob, holding three tickets in his hand, walked over to where Michael and Ramanya were standing. As he gave them out, he looked around the platform. On each far edge stood a pair of Thai policemen keeping watch. Nothing seemed unusual about that, but then something made him turn back to the ticket window where he had just been. Another Thai policeman now stood behind the cashier he had just purchased from. The policeman seemed to be looking directly at Bob, Michael, and Ramanya, then he picked up a phone and began speaking while still staring at Bob. After a moment, he left the booth. Nothing else happened. The two pairs of cops at the edges continued doing what they were doing. No alarms or sirens rang out. No whistles. No shouts. Probably nothing. He was probably just ordering a pizza.

“So where is *this guy* that came to you?” asked Michael.

“He said he would meet us at the border,” said Ramanya. “He had other business to take care of.”

The train to Kanchanaburi pulled into the station, right on time.

“Good Lord,” said Michael. “How old is this train?”

Decades of caked-on grease and dirt covered the peeling paint of the old, boxy train that looked more like a subway from the 1950s. A huge crowd swelled forward, and it took them awhile to finally get on board, and indeed the inside matched the outside as rows of dull, gray, padded booths stood against peeling teal-painted walls, and rows of small fans with wire grills were nailed into the ceiling.

“No AC on this trip!” said Bob. “No sleeper cars. No first class. No second class. Very proletarian!”

Michael, Bob and Ramanya moved through the entire length of the train to the very last booth in the very last passenger car. They sat down in a pair of facing benches, Michael and Ramanya on one side, Bob on the other.

“When I took the train down to Malaysia, it was really nice,” said Michael.

“Yes, I don’t know why they’ve never upgraded this route,” said Bob. “You can see it’s packed every day.”

“But there is a certain kind of charm to it,” said Ramanya “Old style. Lucky, the trip isn’t too long.”

They settled in, the deckhand on the platform rang out the large silver bell, and the train to Kanchanaburi pulled away from the station. The outskirts of Bangkok stretched on for several more miles, crooked shantytowns planted on muddy roads, until at last city gave way to countryside. Michael pressed his head to the window and watched as rice paddies rolled by, their brilliant green shoots rising from shallow water; then came plantations of papaya trees, banana trees, sugarcane, and small farms of lychee trees, their plump red fruit looking like giant raspberries. Inside the train, the small fans pointing down from the ceiling did little to push away the stuffy mix of humidity and body heat that seemed to soak into the old worn walls. Vendors walked up and down the train holding large plastic buckets filled with ice, bottles of soda, and cans of beer. Other vendors strolled along with bags of peanuts, dried fruit, or chips and some sold comic books and small toys for the bored children.

A good half hour went by with neither of the three speaking. Then Michael lifted his head off the window. “You’re never coming back, are you?” he asked Ramanya.

Ramanya waited a moment before answering. “No.”

“So when you go back to Burma, will you still be a monk?”

“No. I will disrobe. My time as this version of myself will be over. In many ways, I will miss it.”

“Could you come back to the temple if you wanted to?”

“You mean could I be a monk again? Yes. In our religion, there are no restrictions. A person may put on the robes and take them off when they wish. Although

doing so too many times is not well respected. That is why now during *Khao Pansa* we have so many extra people at the temple who have decided to temporarily become a monk. It's not like Father Bob's church."

"No, it definitely is not as easy in my church," said Father Bob. "Though I've done my bit to push the limits." As soon as he said that last remark, he realized he shouldn't have done so out loud.

"What do you mean?" asked Michael.

Bob looked at Ramanya and Michael as they stared at him waiting for an explanation. He sighed and looked out the window. He could just say it was nothing. A joke. But something inside him was pushing it out on his tongue.

"Well," began Bob. "Actually I did 'disrobe' for a bit. Many years ago... I left the church for a while."

"I didn't know you could do that. What happened?"

"Um... I suppose you could say I lost my way for a bit." Again Ramanya and Michael stared at him. Bob realized the last time he had spoken of all this was to Father Timothy six years ago when he first arrived in Bangkok. "Well, in the mid-1980s, I spent some time in Beirut. Working with a Catholic relief organization in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. Delivering food and medical supplies." He looked at Michael. "Lebanon was a harsh place then. You're probably too young to remember all that. A lot of bad things were happening there."

"Vaguely. I was in high school. Geopolitics was not high on my radar at that time."

Bob smiled. "As well they shouldn't have been. Well... There were several kidnappings. You remember the American reporter Terry Anderson who was captured?"

"Yes, a little."

"Well... So was I."

"What?"

"Father, I'm so sorry," said Ramanya.

"February first, 1985. I was in East Beirut. Midmorning. Sunny day. I was unloading a truckload of penicillin. I never saw them. They came up behind me, pulled a burlap bag over my head, and pushed me into a car. They took me to a basement

somewhere. Chained me to a wall. And left me there.”

“For how long?” asked Michael.

Bob rubbed his wrists with his hands. “Sixteen months.”

“Oh my God.”

A silence fell over the three men and over the entire train car itself. Every other passenger was either asleep or sat silently looking out the window or a reading book.

“I never even knew why,” said Bob. “They never really talked to me. They didn’t beat me or torture me. They didn’t make me read a statement or record a video. I often wondered if they had made a mistake. If in fact they had been looking for someone else and ended up with me instead. I was just in that room. I had about two meters’ length of chain to walk around with. That was my exercise. They unchained me once a day to let me take a bath and use the toilet. Every month they gave me new pants. Every day they fed me the same thing: brown beans and rice with a spoonful of strawberry jam on the side of the plate... I had always loved strawberry jam. My whole life. With peanut butter on bread. Since I was a kid... I’ve never eaten it since.”

“How did you get away?”

“I didn’t. One day they just came in and led me outside and put me in a van. They drove me to the Syrian border. They took me out of the van, walked me to the line, and pushed me forward. It made no sense. I walked for about an hour, then a UN cargo truck came down the road and picked me up. I was flown to a hospital in Geneva. Spent a few weeks there getting my strength back and being endlessly questioned by British government, American government, CIA, I supposed. I couldn’t tell them anything. There were really only two people I saw the whole time, my guards. They were young, teenagers. Just lads.”

“And then you went home?” asked Ramanya.

“Yes. Eventually, I went back to England. This was now... middle 1986. I tried to get involved again, first working with another relief group at their office in London. Then I tried to get involved with a small church in the West End. But nothing felt right. I suppose I was shell-shocked. I had all the classic symptoms. I couldn’t sleep. When I did, I had nightmares. I believe today they call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Most days were like swimming through a thick British fog. Anyway, by early 1987, I asked for and

was granted a dispensation to leave the church, to leave my duties as a priest behind. I 'disrobed.' ” Bob nodded at Ramanya. “I continued to seek treatment and went back to university to get a degree in sociology. Got involved with a city organization helping refugees integrate into British life. Worked with this wonderful family who had escaped the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia...”

Bob stopped. He was now at the part in his life that until last night he thought only two people in the world knew about: he and Sarah Goodman. It was enough. Michael and Ramanya didn't need to know about it, and he didn't want to talk about it. Time to wrap it up. “So, I was actually sort of happy for a while, but after three years, I felt the need to go back. To 'put on the robes' again. Again I asked for and received a dispensation to return, which was not easy. I had to answer many questions and write many letters. But in 1990, I did come back. Soon after, I joined Saint Thomas Ministries. Went to Kenya for three years. Then came here in 1993... And now I have the great pleasure of sitting here with you two fine young gentlemen. And I mean that most sincerely.”

Michael lit a cigarette. Bob held out his two front fingers. Michael passed it to him. “I didn't know you smoked.”

Bob took one long, deep drag and handed it back to Michael. “I don't,” he said.

“It seems we all have some pain in our past,” said Ramanya.

“Most people do,” said Bob, looking at Michael. “And a lot of people spend a lot of time trying to run away from it.”

“In our language,” said Ramanya, “we have a thing we say: wherever a man walks to, he has already been there.”

Michael smirked. “We have a similar saying in my country: no matter where you go, there you are.”

“Cheers to that,” said Bob as he rubbed his wrists once again.

Michael sized up his two friends with even more respect than before. So Ramanya had wiped out an entire army barrack, then renounced that way of life. Bob had endured over a year of hell chained to a wall, lost his faith, wandered in the wilderness, then came back better than ever. What exactly had Michael done? Since graduating from college almost a decade ago with a near perfect GPA? Not much at all. *Squandered* is the word

that now came to his mind. He had squandered everything he once had going for him. He had spent the last several years roaming the earth, looking for that burning bush to tell him what to do, finding stale bottles of booze instead.

Time to fish or cut bait indeed.