

Jeffrey Mix

Last Night in Luang Prabang

The old man worked to heat the opium, mixing the paste with the powder and then rolling it between his palms. He broke off pieces from the roll, heated them on a metal poker over an oil lamp, and then positioned the goo into the tiny ceramic bowl at the end of his bamboo pipe. A ring of opium grease bubbled up from the tip. When it was nearly ready, the bald, emaciated proprietor handed the pipe to Michael and reclined on a pile of pillows that were either all of them dirty or dyed earthen beige. Neither the single candle in the far corner of this one-room home nor the oil lamp flickered, for no breeze rustled the thin veil hung across the entranceway.

Michael noticed that the old man had no intention of shutting the bamboo doors. They were left swung wide open to whoever might want to come and arrest them both. He eyed the entrance, where, if the doors had been shut and locked, he might be able to relax and enjoy his first experience with raw opium. He did not know this city, this country, or any of its unwritten codes.

He observed the owner, hoping to gauge whether his worries were valid. Glossy eyes stared back at him, eyes that had collected the same milky film of cataracts that Michael's childhood Rottweiler had in its later years. The old man had apparently dealt with many such wary travelers, for he smiled warmly and bobbed his head in a "trust-me" manner. The look of a mother offering her baby a new food for the first time. *It's okay...I would never put you in danger my lovely child.* This did not erase Michael's apprehension, but the man's blithe manner helped his want outweigh his worry.

Michael sat cross-legged in front of the oil lamp in the center of this humble room with a dirt floor, cinder-blocked walls and ceiling planks of scorched teak, stained black from decades of kerosene and pipe smoke. As instructed, he slowly rotated the hollow metal pipe over the flame. It wasn't long before the liquid vaporized into a steady flow of smoke.

The old man nodded once more, and Michael nodded back that all was adequate. Having seen that his guest was in want of nothing more, the man lay on his side against the pile of pillows and closed his milky eyes.

Michael inhaled, held it and then with pursed lips, exhaled.

The owner, with his head cradled in the nook of his elbow, stretched out atop the pillows. Not a wrinkle of stress touched his person. Nothing more was shared between the two.

Michael did not mind the man's lethargy. He had spent the equivalent of a couple of dollars for very good opium, and now with his mind free from having to make small talk, or rather, small gesticulations, as the proprietor spoke little English, the smoke was taking hold. His senses began to heighten as his chest slowly rose, and then fell. He became suddenly aware of the many miniscule hairs in his nostrils that rustled with each elongated breath, reminding him of wild grass in the wind. Things that would normally aggravate, now calmed: the man's acrid body odor, the hot, dead air, and the steady hum of scooters and three-wheeled tuk tuks that rattled across potholed streets of clay—all of it satisfied his nervous system like the scratching of an itch.

He studied a single candle's flame in the far corner, its red melting wax slow lava kissing the sea, hardening quickly once it touched the cool dirt floor. Over the next few minutes Michael glanced from one light source to the next. To the red candle in the far corner, up the shadowed cinder blocks, across the seared teak where a small neon-green lizard clung, then landing his gaze on the lamp in front of his sandaled feet, stained a rusted orange from his walk across town. Back and forth, his eyes followed this arching trail of dimmed light. He imagined himself watching a tennis match that served only lizard lobs.

"And would you look at that," Michael said to himself. There was a cat in the room. It lay curled in the corner. *Just as skinny as the old man*, Michael thought. *Is it high, too? Is it high day and night? Not a matter to think too hard on, this skinny black cat. But I wonder, Michael thought, will it survive vicious withdrawals when the old man dies?*

Michael's gaze fell to his dirt-creased hands and then his wrist, where his watch told him that he'd been staring at the two small

flames, the lizard, and now the cat for over forty minutes. "I want to die like this," he said aloud. The words ran icy bumps along his neckline and up the skin that is a delicate hallway behind his ears. *I want to be like this old man*, he thought. *I'll think of nothing but my cat and my next smoke. Who cares what I forget? I'll go peaceful like him. Look at the way he smiles. He'll surely go away with a smile.* "Only the cat will suffer."

Michael pointed at the skinny man asleep on his pillows, and he had unintentionally spoken this last bit out loud and startled at his own sentence, voiced to him in the little room as if on timed playback. There could have been speakers in the walls the way it boomed. It sobered him some, and he thought this must be some pretty pure stuff, and again he eyed his watch. Although the numbers were blurred, he was pretty sure it read 11:38 p.m. What was it that Dad had said? He tried to recall Bruce's earlier instructions, *verbatim*. 'Best be back by midnight? Two hours? If you're not back by morning I'll come after you?' None of it sounded quite right. Anyway, the watch was in a funny position making it damn near impossible to read the time. *Something's off here*, he thought. *For starters, the lamp was on its side and the old man was standing tall but still soundly asleep. But that would mean that I am standing as well*, Michael thought, *and that's not so*. He felt the cool floor press up against the entire length of his side. *I've got it all wrong*, Michael realized.

For some time now he had been lying down on his side much like the old man across the room, staring at everything wrong-ways. *That's some pure stuff*, he thought again, forgetting that he had just thought the same. He hoisted himself back up and pulled his legs into their original crossed position.

"Oh, look now!" Michael hollered, for the old man was sitting up and facing him. He even had his own pipe. *Good for him. No, what's this? That's not even the same old man*, Michael realized. *Where's the original? Oh, there he is*. The skinny old man was where he had been all along, fast asleep. *But this new one? He must have taken advantage of my distracted state*, Michael assumed, *slipped in unnoticed*. He was bald like the other and just as old, just as pleasant with a glowing smile all of his own. *Probably how he fooled me. Well, that makes three of us, if you discount the cat*. Michael blinked a number of times and finally saw that this new man was one of those that his father and he

watched cross the Khan River on a rickety-looking bamboo bridge earlier that day. The monk wore a bright orange robe so that one brown shoulder was exposed.

“You’re from the bridge!” Michael announced, startling the cat, which loped over and lay down close to his forever high and sleeping master.

“Sabai Dee,” said this new man with smiling eyes. The monk carefully set the pipe down so that he could place his hands, as if in prayer, in front of his face and bow.

“Sabai Dee,” Michael replied, mimicking the accent best he could and bowed the same.

The two stared at each other until, even in his loosened state, it became too uncomfortable for Michael. He looked back to the sleeping owner. Nothing new there except that the cat had fallen back to sleep; two separate skinny ribs moved in rhythm.

“Are you a Canadian?” the monk inexplicably asked in perfect English.

Michael set his pipe down on the ground. He blamed it for this unsettling turn of events. “Excuse me?”

“Let me guess. Vancouver?”

“New Mexico,” was all he could think to say.

What a smile shone from this monk then. His entire being beamed. “Oh, wonderful! Did you know Georgia O’Keeffe is one of my favorite artists?” The monk then set a smooth palm on Michael’s knee. “How could you know?” The monk’s laugh filled the room.

Michael shook his head and wondered what the fuck was happening. Why was there a monk getting high with him and talking perfect English while reminding him of a home that was supposed to be forgotten by now?

“You speak English good,” Michael said, hoping to change the subject.

“Well,” the monk answered. “I speak English well, yes?” and winked. It was the same wink his mother would offer after one of her lightning grammar lessons. It gave Michael the chills. He did not want the monk here anymore—he had not come to this country to remember the bad. Only to feel something different, something good before he sent himself off to a dark and silent end.

Michael had come to Laos on the pretense of assisting his

father who would mission, who would show the Communists, the Buddhists, and the Animists, a new way. That was all well and good for his dad. He had his reasons. Bruce had once killed in this land and his gospel is what he could offer in penitence. Throughout the Secret War in Laos his father had been one of those pilots who tormented these people, raping the sky and dropping cluster bombs like confetti across the fertile land. To this day, so says Bruce, his murdering continues because every time a hoe digs into an unlucky patch of earth and makes that pleasant “tink” sound another villager and part of his water buffalo goes to shreds and splatters red, white, and brown against the sloping hillside. Yes, Bruce had his motivations, his desperate clawing at forgiveness.

Michael did not have these driving forces. He was a tag-a-long at best while his father attempted to show him the light before he'd a chance to switch it off for good.

Never mind how shamefully he had spent the years since his mother's death, awash in a boozy mist—a decade of grief, impulse and regret. Michael had to believe that even Bruce, for all of his good intentions, must know that this trip, this final desperate heave, was taking place in a game he had no chances of winning. The fix was in, Michael thought. After much badgering by his father, he had agreed to come to Laos because, why not? There was nothing left for him in Artesia besides his impending suicide. He ended it there, he ended it here—it didn't matter. His mother and now his girlfriend were gone, and even the memory of them floated away on the ever-shrinking balloon of his mind, a mind that would also be leaving him soon. His friends had dwindled down to that of a Mexican prostitute. *Was it Luisa?* Michael tried to recall her name. His tanned brow creased and he bit at his bottom lip while he worked to draw it out of the sludge. *Maria?* He had forgotten her name. *No*, he reprimanded himself, *stop thinking about it. Don't think about this monk that winks as she had. Don't think about Bruce's disillusioned dream for salvaging my soul.*

The opium had dissolved his self-deceit, and he understood his true motivations. He had allowed his father to talk him in to coming here for two simple reasons, so he could fornicate and so he could get high on the cheap. Yes, he would leave his nightmares in another place and time, and when he stepped off the rollercoaster, he would

end it. He would have his fun while he still could, before his disease took hold of him as it had her.

Michael often marveled at how this disorder that he had inherited from his mother could erase in a flash his debit card pin code and online passwords, while leaving crystal clear images of Mary in her end stages having just chewed off bits of two of her fingers before they could get to her. Or the many times he used a Q-tip to spread a coating of Vaseline under her restraints and across the dried blood-encrusted purple rings of her wrists and forearms. The same soft forearms he had once held so proudly when walking her to church Sunday mornings. He was a boy then with a bright and shining light inside of him. She was beautiful then. And he certainly had not forgotten that it was she, the one whom he had adored above all others, who had passed this Picks disease, this frontal-temporal nightmare, on to him as some mothers pass on wisdom or jewelry.

With the opium came a rush of honesty. And he realized then why he had truly come to this country—it went far beyond the opium and the women—he had agreed to the mission only so that he could stick his middle finger in the face of God, who dared say that these horrors were all a part of His great plan, that Michael must simply have faith.

With Michael's suddenly rigid posture, the monk stopped talking and looked to the floor. And he continued to stare mainly at the ground while getting his pipe going again. Michael noticed how dexterous the man's hands moved to sort out the paste and powder, run along the length of bamboo, tweak the metal tip across the flame until, again, the liquid vaporized and a dark smoke came pouring forth. Once he had it smoking, he passed it over to Michael, as if he knew that would help their newfound awkwardness more than anything. Michael took it, nodded and smoked.

The second pipe was quick to take hold, resurrecting and elevating any transcendence left over from the first pipe.

"I must apologize," the monk said. "It is very rude of me to lecture you about your own language."

"Not a problem," Michael said. "My mom used to do the same." He wasn't sure why he mentioned her. Maybe it was the second pipe swooping him out of that dark place, or maybe it was the way the monk's smiling brown eyes were so welcoming, so understanding. Regardless, he was feeling lighter again.

That is until the monk said, “She is a good lady. I can see it in your eyes.”

With that, every fiber of Michael’s being dropped and slid like wet mud into a gulch.

“She is a good lady,” Michael repeated, feeling how the words, much like his pipe, temporarily caressed. He then fell silent, searching for something, her voice, one of her quotes that would fit here. The opium climbed his cerebral cortex, and he suddenly found his mind sharp enough that he was filing through a quote Rolodex, one that had been long buried. The searching was a delicate business. It was almost there, just at the tip of his tongue, but if he focused on it too intensely it would crumble and follow the mudslide.

Mary used to collect quotes. She would tape the “keepers” up on the fridge and kept little quote books in reach from the toilet seat. She even kept her “Big Book of Quotes” in the car and would bring it in with her to the bank or dentist office; wherever she was likely have a bit of a wait. She mumbled these quotes to herself as she went on her morning walks. She was a faithful Christian and read the Bible, too, but she spent much more time reading her quotes than anything else. She read them to him at night as a young boy, in addition to, and on certain nights, in lieu of children’s stories. With tears forming, Michael almost laughed out loud, imagining her flipping through her book, looking for just the right quote considering the day’s events.

“You still mourn her,” said the monk quietly, almost to himself. The room was silent again, and now a breeze did come and rustle the sheets. Somewhere outside, beyond the bamboo doors, a lone scooter whined in the impossible darkness where faint orange streetlights barely illuminated their own poles.

The candle in the corner flickered amidst the night’s newfound breeze that brought with it the smell of rotted fruit and wet leather. It had nearly blown out, but it recovered when the air again grew still. Michael had not noticed the old man wake and shuffle over to drag shut the bamboo doors, before lying back down and closing his eyes.

The words were a bursting star and before they were gone to the great black sky he said, “Nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium: its pleasures even are of a grave and solemn complexion.” The quote had found him.

With the midnight curfew having passed, the streets had gone quiet. Gone were the rattling tuk tuks, no more radios played Lao pop music, and even the many stray dogs seemed to adhere to government policy, for the layers of barks echoing across Luang Prabang had ceased. From out of this great silence the monk said, “de Quincey?”

“I think so.” Michael felt smart and proud of himself and imagined how his mother would’ve liked to have seen that. He was so enamored with what he had done that he was blind to what the monk had just accomplished, which, given their most humble of surroundings, was an even greater triumph.

Again there was silence while both men thought their own thoughts. Then the curious monk, following Michael’s lead, offered another quote, “Among the remedies which it has pleased Almighty God to give to man to relieve his sufferings, none is so universal and so efficacious as opium.” He then gave Michael a few moments to guess at the author, but Michael had no guess and he shook his head. “Sydenham.”

Michael smiled and then went back into the Rolodex, but try as he might, it was empty. His moment had passed and it frustrated him. His recent victorious mood deflated, he aimed his frustrations at this junky monk who knew so much. “So what made you decide to become a monk?” he said coldly. It was time to figure out this enigma, this man in orange who spoke like a professor.

The monk smiled self-deprecatingly. “My story is long and boring. I will not dare put you to sleep.”

Michael tried to put the matter out of his head, but the longer the monk sat there and smoked the more he grew curious. “Go ahead,” Michael said. “Put me to sleep.”

“The short version,” said the monk and set down his pipe. “My parents were very wealthy, part of the establishment in Ho Chi Minh...”

“You’re Vietnamese?” Michael interrupted.

The monk nodded that he was. “At seventeen I went away to school in Cambridge.”

Michael laughed an unbelieving laugh, as though the man had just said that he was half elephant. “Harvard. You’re telling me you went to Harvard?” The monk only smiled, but it was the kind of

smile that erased all doubt. There was no ego behind it, simply a confirming nod and knowing grin.

“How does a Harvard grad end up in an opium den?” Michael asked.

“How?” asked the monk.

“That’s what I’m asking.”

“Oh, I see. It sounded like the beginning of a joke.”

Michael tried not to laugh at the mix-up, but this second round of opium would not let him suppress it.

The monk also laughed so that his shoulders shook. He then went on, but not long into his story the monk’s jovial tone turned solemn.

“Upon my return, I worked in my father’s business for fifteen years. I’ll spare you the mundane details, but it was soulless work, and at thirty-six years of age I knew that I had died. I was walking around and going about my days as a corpse. There was one night where I contemplated taking my own life. I sat down in the middle of my sitting room with a bottle of pills and I closed my eyes. Do you know what happened?”

Though the question was rhetorical Michael shook his head no.

“For the first time I heard the words of my guide. He spoke to me from the Pali Canon of my youth. He said, ‘Do not believe in something because it is reported. Do not believe in something because it has been practiced by generations or becomes a tradition or part of a culture. Do not believe in something because a scripture says it is so. Do not believe in something believing a god has inspired it. Do not believe in something a teacher tells you to. Do not believe in something because the authorities say it is so. Do not believe in hearsay, rumor, speculative opinion, public opinion, or mere acceptance to logic and inference alone. Help yourself, accept as completely true only that which is praised by the wise and which you test for yourself and know to be good for yourself and others.’”

The monk stopped for a moment and smiled at Michael, some with his lips but mostly with his eyes that were again bright.

“I tell you those words were a cold drink for a man wandering the desert, and I knew what I must do. The next day I told my father about this experience, hoping to convince him that I must take a sabbatical. That I must go and retrieve my soul while there was still

something to be salvaged. He begged me to stay. He said that I was crucial to the development of not only his own business, but the business of being a sound leader for my country. He would not give permission. And so I left.”

The monk paused and looked at the owner and his cat sleeping so peaceful. He then looked back at Michael, but it was obvious his thoughts were far away. “You have to understand, I loved my father, even with all of his flaws, and my dear mother.” He stopped again, his smooth face heavy and full of shadows in the candlelight. “With only the clothes on my back, I left my family and crossed over into Laos. This river and these mountains,” he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, as if to show Michael the vista of his mind, “called to me. For the first time in my life I listened. I stopped long enough, was silent long enough to hear. Not only was my own soul welcoming me back with open arms, but my guide...”

He paused to make sure Michael was following. “I call him my guide. This voice that is me but isn’t me and he will guide me when I need him most. Do you know I was meditating this morning and he told me to come here, to this place? This is not allowed, but I came anyway because the message was clear.”

Michael thought about how the monk had sightlessly worked the pipe. “I think maybe your ‘guide’ and your ‘addiction’ are one and the same.” Immediately, he regretted his words. He was enjoying the monk’s story. It had been the first time in a long while that he had felt at ease around another person and now he’d just ruined it. He tried to think of something fittingly apologetic, but his mind could only scratch around in the dark for so long before he gave up.

The monk smiled as lightheartedly as he had when they’d first met. Whether he had been offended or not, Michael could not tell. But the monk stopped his story there and did not resume. In the resulting silence, both men smoked and again thought their own thoughts.

Michael’s mind wandered from Luang Prabang back to Artesia, where he saw his mother’s headstone in the small plot behind their church. He then searched his youth, but he only saw her, and even though she was healthy and smiling then it hurt him to see her because he knew where she was going. So instead he fell forward into tomorrow when he and Bruce would navigate their longboat up the

Mekong and meet with the Hmong tribe at Pha Phang village. But he didn't want to hear Bruce proselytize anymore. He was through with all that. And then it hit him.

"I am through," he whispered. There it was. He decided that this night, with the old man and his cat, a pure opium high, and conversing with a monk, had been a pretty good night after all, as good a night as any. Yes, tonight was the night. He would go back to the hotel, explain to Bruce in a note slipped under their door, then walk to the bridge and jump. His disease would never own him as it had her. The Mekong would have him instead.

Michael lit his third and final pipe.

It was an hour or so later that one last quote slipped by the plaque that had for the last two years slowly spread across Michael's frontal temporal lobe. And before it could slip away, he shouted, "Opium teaches only one thing: aside from physical suffering, there is nothing real!"

The monk, who had been meditating, opened his eyes and spoke softly, "Andre Malraux," before adding one final quote in the same hushed tone: "Our suffering is holy if we embrace it and look deeply into it. If we don't, it isn't holy at all. We just drown in the ocean of our suffering."

Beyond high, Michael said, "Wonderful!" and fell over onto the dirt floor. He remained there unconscious until morning, when the old man swung open the bamboo doors and slid open the veil, allowing the heavy pink light of daybreak to fall in through the doorway.