

SURGERY

Recreationally, Elder Kirby and I had found the local basketball team and had begun playing with them on a regular basis. We were very definitely a curious sight to the Thai players, many of whom had never met an American before. It always seemed gratifying to me that my being in Thailand and meeting so many people was in itself a service. Walls of suspicion, mistrust, and ignorance were routinely lowered as they out-hustled me for a loose ball or suffered the consequences of my pointy elbows crashing down on top of their heads after grabbing a rebound. I do not know that I could ever articulate how comfortable and at home I felt when I played ball.

One of the new assistants to President Morris, Elder Simmons, had previously spent some time with me when I was in Thonburi. He was about as wide as he was tall and had been an all-state high school wrestler in Idaho, I seem to recall, before coming to Thailand as a missionary. His chest was so large and bulky that he was often asked by Thais why he had breasts and was a man. Elder Simmons was about as good-natured as you could imagine, and never took offense. He would just laugh uproariously at the observation and then would respond in English with comments such as, "How can your mother love such a dirty child? You really need a bath." With his amicable smile, they always took his comments as being great compliments. He was always a favorite with the Thai people.

Be that as it may, Elder Simmons was assigned to test my language skills by listening to my presentation of one of the discussions. I never enjoyed being put on the spot. My hands became cold and clammy and I began to sweat, even though it was the middle of the cold season. We were seated on the deck upstairs at the house, and I remember getting no more than two or three sentences into the discussion when Elder Simmons eased my mind as much or more rapidly than had ever been done before. He climbed up onto his chair, crouched down low, and began to swing his arms back and forth and chant like an ape. The small children in front of our house began to gather around and watch. He became more and more animated, scratching the top of his head and under his arms. Elder Simmons danced from chair to chair, and I soon forgot how nervous I believed I should have been. That was the first and last language test I experienced in Thailand. I am not sure whether or not God intervened on my behalf in this instance, but I like to give Him credit for the help anyway.

Early on in my stay in Lumpoon, my longstanding groin pain began to get worse. After a month or so I had been reduced to walking around town with both hands in my pockets, keeping my fingers over the holes in my abdominal wall so as to keep my guts from slipping out. I hated when that would happen. The assistants to the president came to visit us in Lumpoon and ordered me to see a doctor in Chiang Mai (Chee-ANG Mai), a beautiful province just north of Lumpoon. One of the assistants, Elder Hallows, accompanied me as my temporary companion. (We were never to be without a companion.)

The doctor looked me over for no more than a minute, groping around my unmentionables, asking me to turn my head and cough. (This was a Wednesday.) He looked at me and assured me, "This is no emergency. You don't need hernia surgery immediately. You can come back on Friday if you would like."

Elder Hallows then asked the doctor if I could travel to Bangkok for the surgery. Happily for me, the doctor agreed.

Arrangements were quickly made for me to travel back to Lumpoon and pack a bag so that I could go with the assistants to Bangkok for the surgery. I remember feeling that I had no time to prepare for this. My hernia problems had accompanied me from the States, and I had preferred to take them back with me. The idea of surgery in Thailand was not something I liked thinking about. Unfortunately for me, the doctor, the APES (a nickname for the assistants to the president), and President Morris all agreed: the surgery should go forward. I just wished it could have been one of their groins instead of mine.

The decision to submit me to bilateral inguinal hernia surgery had been made. The trick now was to get me to Bangkok as quickly as possible. The last train out of Lumpoon to Bangkok would be leaving in two hours, which gave me fifteen minutes to pack, since we happened to be in Chiang Mai.

I had never been operated on before, and, in fact, I had never even had any kind of a major injury or illness that placed me totally into the hands of someone else. I was not a happy camper. As soon as I got to the Lumpoon house at 12 Sanbayang (Sun-buy- YANG) Road, I ran upstairs and packed what I needed for the trip. Just before running back down the stairs, I took a brief moment to kneel at my bedside and ask for God's help. Time limitations as they were, I could only say, "Dear God, I am scared to death. Be with me and see me through this. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

I simply didn't have time to explain the whole situation to God. I hoped that He would understand. I jumped up from the bed and ran down the stairs with my bag. I was immediately on my way to Bangkok.

The train ride to Bangkok from Chiang Mai took all night, and the chickens and other livestock that accompanied us did not make for a peaceful night's rest. Regardless, we arrived in Bangkok at about 8:30 a.m. and reported to the mission office. After I advised President Morris that I felt okay, he allowed me to travel over to Thonburi and work with the missionaries for a couple of days. My preoperative appointment with the surgeon was scheduled for Monday.

In Thonburi, I was reunited with my first companion Elder Peckham and the other two members of my first district Elders Judkins and Patterson. It was great to go tracting in the old neighborhoods again and to go back to the familiar traffic circle, where I had participated in so many prior street meetings. In just a month, my language had improved to the point where I actually could speak with the passersby without interpretive help from Elder Peckham. I was pleased that he was impressed. It was gratifying that my senior training companion took pride in the progress of his trainee.

The next day I was advised that the Bangkok missionaries were having one of their proselyting-type basketball games scheduled at a local trade school. I, of course, wanted to play, and every missionary present had to swear that the mission president's wife Betty could not be told of my participation. She was responsible for the missionaries' well-being and would have had a heart attack if she knew that I was playing on the eve of surgery, but the heart attack would not have come before she had wrung

every one of our necks. I must admit that I always felt that even if she weren't responsible for our wellbeing, she would have looked after our interests anyway. With four boys of her own, it seemed that taking care of us had become a part of who she was.

The way the game was set up, seven elders could play in the game, while five more elders would circulate through the ranks of the spectators, introducing themselves and the message of our Christian faith. My yellow jersey bore the number " 10," the same number I wore in both high school and college. My name was spelled out in Thai letters over the top of the number.

The sky was blue and the weather warm (unlike Lumpoon) and I was playing basketball. Life couldn't get much better. I would like to say that we lost that game as a goodwill gesture, but we didn't. Still, it was great fun. The next morning we arose early and, it being Saturday, proceeded to Sanaam Luang where we all participated in the by-then traditional street meeting. I had missed the hustle and bustle of Bangkok and the camaraderie of so many missionaries.

I attended church on Sunday, and then spent that afternoon studying Thai vocabulary words which I had never dreamed I would have needed to know before then. Words for bilateral inguinal hernia, recovery time, anesthesia, and the like, were all placed on a fairly long list that I pocketed in preparation for my meeting with the doctor the next morning.

I arrived at my doctor's appointment early and was shepherded into an examination room almost immediately. Before I could even pull out my vocabulary list, the doctor ambled into the room with an outstretched hand and as friendly as could be, said, "Hi, how 'ya doin'?"

This Thai doctor spoke better English than I did. It turned out that he had studied medicine at Ohio State University after having graduated from college at another American university. I didn't have to look at any of my Thai medical terms. That was a wonderful relief. The evaluation lasted less than ten minutes, and I was then given the rest of the day to work around the mission office.

I reported to the French hospital in Bangkok early Tuesday morning and was shown to my room. I changed into one of those idiotic backless hospital gowns that apparently is universal garb throughout the world in the hospital business. As I lay in bed waiting for the next step in the process, I thought about what a break it was to not have to eat fried rice for a couple of days. I was actually looking forward to hospital food for a change.

As that pleasant thought floated through my mind, an absolutely stunning nurse came through the door pushing a cart ahead of her. This nurse should have been on magazine covers rather than teasing patients in a hospital. On top of the cart I noticed shaving cream, a razor, and a hypodermic needle. I immediately panicked. There was no way I could allow a woman who looked that good shave my private parts in preparation for surgery. I simply did not have that kind of self-control. As I tried to figure out how I was supposed to keep blood in my toes and in my brain and out of other body parts, she came up alongside of me and smiled. She then began to fumble around with the cart and the items thereon.

I sheepishly tried to make conversation by saying, "Hello, ma'am, how are you?"

She was pleasantly surprised that I had addressed her in Thai and immediately began to talk to me as if we were old friends. Now I felt even more uncomfortable about what I believed she was about to do to me. Christians believe that God will not tempt them beyond their ability to resist. I believed that if this particular nurse had progressed any further in her efforts to take care of my surgical preparation, I would have had to write to Salt Lake City and tell them that I no longer believed in that particular tenet of faith.

Finally, the nurse grabbed hold of the hypodermic needle rather than the razor. She lifted it and squirted a drop or two out of the end of the needle before inserting it deeply and directly into my right buttock. After removing the needle, she set the hypodermic down on the cart, smiled at me, and then wished me good luck. With that, she turned and exited my room. It turned out that God was smarter than I thought. He wasn't going to tempt me beyond my will to resist and had saved me from a very embarrassing situation.

After a male orderly took care of the shaving duties, I was placed on a gurney and rolled off toward surgery. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the feeling I got as I was rolled down the hallway toward an elevator at the end of the hall. One orderly was at the foot of my gurney and another was at the head. They, along with myself, were the only ones in the hallway. Nevertheless, I felt the distinct presence of someone else, though I saw no one. At once, I realized that my brief supplication to God in Lumpoon had been answered. A guardian angel, as it were, had been with me from the moment of that prayer all the way up to my being rolled into surgery. He had comforted me and protected me. As afraid as I was at the time of my prayer, I had not given it another nervous thought since leaving Lumpoon. I had gone tracting, participated in a street meeting, gone to church, and even played basketball, and I had had no problems. God had not only heard my prayer, He had answered it.

The surgery went smoothly-at least that is what I was told-and my recovery was uneventful and complete. However, as a part of the recovery, I had to spend two weeks in the mission home. Now it is not that President and Sister Morris were not great hosts, nor was it that their four sons were any more trouble than any other four sons might be to a house guest. Rather, what bothered me was that I was spending two weeks away from what had become a way of life for me. I read every Archie comic in the house, along with some other less-noteworthy titles. I also caught up on all the letters I owed to people, and after a couple of days began playing ping-pong with the boys. Almost immediately, one son, Todd, observed that once my body became planted in a particular spot behind the table it was there to stay, and I could only play balls hit within arm's reach. While I do have long arms, they aren't long enough to extend to the outer edges of the table. Todd took full advantage. Because Todd was as mean as I was in extracting victories from helpless victims under any circumstances, I took great pleasure in routinely knocking him off later on in my recovery, when my mobility began to return. Once I began playing football in the yard with Todd, Layne, Collin, Rhen, and the gardener, it became clear that I was ready to return to Lumpoon and the job of being a missionary.