

Guest House

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When he climbed out of the truck the man was older than I had imagined. Sixty-ish. I picked up my backpack, dusted off my shorts and walked over.

There was yelling from behind. The little brown man from the store was fussing, pointing at my Pepsi.

‘What? I paid.’

He kept ranting and reached out for the bottle.

‘Look, mate, I’ve paid you already.’

‘Hang on,’ the tall man said, coming up behind me. ‘He wants you to finish it here.’ His accent was Australian but had a tired, dry quality to it. His eyes were green with flecks of yellow.

I sucked down the rest of the warm Pepsi and handed the store keeper the bottle. When he smiled his remaining teeth were brown.

‘Come on,’ said the Australian. He took my backpack by one strap and hauled it into the back of the truck. ‘Sawat’s in the front, so you can ride in the back.’ He tilted his head in the direction of my bag.

‘Is it far?’

‘Couple of hours.’

‘I thought Ubon was the closest airport?’ I said as he stamped out a cigarette and opened his door.

‘It is,’ came the reply through the window.

Town after tiny, dusty town whizzed by. In between were paddies of rice, plantations of cassava, fields of buffalo. Wind pounded my ears until my brain rang like a temple bell and I had to tie my jumper around my head for protection.

The Australian pulled the orange truck off the highway and it bumped down a dirt road. Another turn and we approached a lake. On the far bank was a peaked pile of rocks. As we crossed the bridge I watched a large white bird pull a fish from the water.

‘So, here we are.’ The Australian let down the tray and I slithered out. ‘You’re over there,’ he said, pointing across a courtyard to a small wooden hut on stilts. ‘It’s the old rice barn. Now it’s the Guest House.’

I felt a hand on my shoulder. 'Sawatdee Kaa.' The Thai woman was noticeably younger than her Australian husband. 'Sawat,' she said.

'Sawatdee Kaa,' I replied. 'I'm Meghan.' We shook hands.

She took my bag from the truck and set off for the guest house.

'Hey, what was that pile of rocks over by the lake?' I asked the Australian.

'It's a grave.' He butted his cigarette with his heel.

The rice barn was one small room. There was a bed, a wooden desk and a chair. Someone had placed a vase of dried flowers and some candles in one corner. Sawat lifted a wooden shutter and propped it open with a stick. She pointed to the mosquito net and spoke to me in Thai.

'Yes, okay,' I said, guessing her meaning. 'What are they for?' I pointed at the candles and the pile of dried flowers.

'Phi,' she said. She paused, thinking, then added, 'Ghosts.' She smiled and left.

Through the open window I watched the sun sink, orange and fierce, down into the lake. Music started up near by. Heavy bass, drumming, a gong and a man wailing gently. When the mosquitoes started humming I shut the window, pulled down the net and retreated in under it.

The sounds of crickets. Frogs. A far away bass beat and someone at the door. I sat up, pulled the sheet up over my chest. 'Who's there?'

A face appeared lit by a candle. 'Sorry, did I frighten you?' The stranger didn't wait for an answer. She pulled the door closed and ducked in under the net. 'The mozzies are a killer.' she said. She had long, blonde hair and green eyes that glowed in the candlelight. 'I'm Anna.'

'Meghan,' I said, trying to remember if I'd booked a private room. As I reached for my singlet Anna pulled off her own T shirt and slithered out of her shorts.

'Bloody hot, eh?' She licked her fingers and pinched the candle wick. There was a hiss in the darkness and then the smell of sulfur. 'You can come closer,' she whispered. 'I promise I won't bite.'

Anna had left when I woke in the morning. The rice barn was already heating up. I dressed and walked over to the main house.

‘Good morning!’ The Australian grinned around his cigarette. ‘Sleep well?’

‘Yeah, great.’ I wondered if they’d heard us. I wanted to grin back, but also to keep the pleasure of the night before to myself. I looked away.

Sawat handed me a bowl of boiled rice and an egg.

‘What’s the plans for today?’ the Australian asked.

‘Might take a walk out to the lake.’

He nodded. ‘Good idea. But be back by dark.’

‘Why?’ I asked as I peeled my egg.

‘Sawat here has a big night ahead of her. Didn’t you hear the band practicing last night?’

A flash back of our candle-lit hips rocking in time to the bass made me blush. ‘Oh, yeah. So, a party then?’

‘Sort of.’ The Australian lit a cigarette from the one already between his lips.

‘Sawat is set to join the village elder. Show the old crones what she’s made of. We’re having a ghosting.’

‘Ghosting?’

‘Hm. Her mother,’ he nodded to his wife, ‘is the town medium. Apparently the skill is passed down the maternal line. I’ve got to go into town and buy a heap of crap—booze mostly—so she can prove that she’s got what it takes, too.’

‘So she can see ghosts?’

‘Find out tonight, I guess.’

‘Is it a good thing if she can?’

He snorted. ‘Bloody oath. Great little money earner. Real competitive, too. Only one per village. Mei’s really cornered the market.’ He chuckled. ‘Of course, they all reckon it’s the real deal. Far be it for me to get my Western sensitivities in a knot.’

We both watched a woman herd three buffalos and a calf down the road. ‘So, come watch. You can decide if I’m being a crotchety old bastard or not!’

An ancient woman dragged a bag of cassava into the kitchen, squatted and began sorting and peeling.

I watched her work as I finished my rice. Sawat pointed at a pile of dirty dishes and I balanced my plate on the stack. On the wall above was a framed photograph. The Australian had his arm around a younger woman.

‘Anna,’ I said, pointing to the photo.

The old woman flicked her face to me. She squinted and chatted at her daughter.

Sawat nodded and watched me.

‘What is it?’

Sawat smiled. ‘Mei,’ she said, pointing at the old woman. ‘Phi.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ I said. ‘Your mother sees ghosts.’

Sawat smiled, pleased at our transaction.

But as I left I could feel Mei’s eyes on my back.

By the time I’d made my way around the lake it was already getting dark. The dusty road back to the village was lit sporadically with street lights, incongruous in the jungle and swarmed by flying insects. The sound of the band grew. The smell of curry made my mouth water.

The courtyard was packed. Scores of people sat on grass mats surrounding the band, Sawat and Mei. Both women wore traditional clothing, red silk skirts and fabric draped over one shoulder. Pots of incense, plates of tiny green oranges and animals made of folded palm fronds were scattered about.

A woman handed me a plate of curry.

‘Glad you could make it,’ the Australian said, offering me a bottle of rice whiskey.

‘Get that into you.’ His eyes were glassy.

‘Thanks,’ I said, juggling the bottle and my plate.

He tipped an imaginary hat. ‘You know, you remind me a bit of my daughter.’

‘Really?’ The whiskey tasted like acetone. I struggled to swallow. ‘Is she still in Oz?’

‘No.’

I looked up at him, interested now. ‘So she lives here in Thailand?’

It was his turn to swig whiskey. ‘She did. That’s her grave, over by the lake.’

‘Fuck. I’m so so—’

‘Ah, I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s this stuff.’ He clinked his bottle to mine.

‘Bloody rocket fuel gets me all sentimental.’

We watched the musicians while the moment passed.

‘Hear Mei doesn’t like you much,’ he said.

‘Hm. I’m not sure why.’

‘She’s a crazy old bat but normally alright with the tourists. Don’t worry, though.’
He took another mouthful. ‘Enjoy!’

I saw Anna sitting in a shadow on the other side of the courtyard. She waved me over.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘You got up early this morning.’

‘Did I wake you?’

‘No. I slept like a log,’ I said. I spooned rice into my mouth. ‘You must have worn me out.’

Anna giggled and the candles flashed yellow flecks across her eyes.

In the centre of the circle old women stood and began to dance. They moved their hands like fans, flicking and twisting. The music became more frantic and people clapped in time. Some men started chanting.

When Mei rose from the floor the chanting quietened. She threw fistfuls of uncooked rice out into the crowd as she repeated a mantra I couldn’t understand. Her voice was reedy and soft. She scanned every face. When she got to Anna and me she paused and raised a hand.

‘Looks like we’re in trouble.’ I felt a little fogged already from the whiskey.

Mei’s voice became louder, accusatory. Everyone turned to face our direction. Mei was yelling now, walking closer to us, her finger pointed like a wand.

‘Hey, Meghan.’ It was the Australian, watching from across the courtyard. ‘Maybe you’d better call it a night, eh?’

‘We were just going,’ I said, turning. But Anna had already left.

I picked my way back over to the rice barn. When I pushed the door open I heard a match strike. Anna lay on her stomach on top of the sheet, touching the flame to the wick. Her naked skin glowed. ‘You took your time,’ she teased over her shoulder.

Next morning I woke alone again and dressed. Mei squatted in the courtyard, smashing beetlenut with a pestle. She hissed at me. When she spat it landed, red and shiny, just short of my foot.

The Australian and his wife were eating omelettes in the kitchen.

‘I think I might head off today,’ I said and sat opposite them.

‘Don’t like it out here?’

‘No, it’s Mei. I think I’ve upset her. Something just doesn’t feel right.’

The Australian set down his fork. ‘I’ll go and have a talk with her if you like.’

‘Nah. Would you be able to drive me back to Ubon?’

‘Not a drama,’ he said. ‘Shame we can’t tempt you, though. I liked having you around.’

Sawat handed me a plate of eggs sprinkled with coriander. ‘Coffee?’ she offered.

I nodded. ‘Please.’ It was thick with sugar and condensed milk.

The Australian stacked his plate and walked to the door. ‘I’ve got a few things to do now. We’ll leave in an hour or so.’

Sawat began washing the dishes in a plastic tub on the floor.

‘Do you know where Anna is?’ I asked her, handing her my empty plate.

She looked confused again.

‘Anna?’ I repeated.

‘Chai. Anna.’ She nodded now, pointing in the direction of the lake.

The waterlilies were still opening in the morning sun. Men with shiny torsos swung nets out into the water and gently pulled them back in. I couldn’t see Anna anywhere.

I swatted flies with a branch and walked to the grave stones. There was a tiny plaque set into one side of the monument.

‘Lucksow,’ I read under my breath. I touched the stones, felt their warmth.

A horn tooted and I looked up to see the orange truck. The Australian stuck his head out the window. ‘You ready?’ From the distance I could make out the shape of my backpack in the tray.

I jogged over. ‘I haven’t had a chance to say goodbye,’ I said.

‘Problem?’

The passenger seat was empty, so I heaved open the door. ‘I guess not.’

We drove back along the bridge, the dirt road, then hit the highway. The drive was different watching it as it came, rather than as it went. Like seeing everything before rather than after.

‘I had another look at the grave today. I hadn’t noticed the plaque before.’ I kept my eyes on the road and could sense he did, too. ‘Was that your daughter’s name?’

‘What?’

‘Lucksow? Was that her name?’

‘Lucksow is Thai for daughter,’ he said. ‘Her name was Anna.’