

The Escapist

By Lisa Mitchell

The sun was retreating behind the horizon. It's dying light dancing along the shores of Ao Nang. Glistening embers jostling on the back of ebbing peaceful waves.

Southern Thailand's Krabi Province had played 'home' for Riley for the last four weeks, but soon he would be moving on again. His short contractor job as a beginners rock-climbing assistant was almost at an end.

The month of July had seen Riley captain a small boat tour in and around the islands of Ko Hong, Ko Gai and Ko Poda before he was asked by Railay Beach's benefactor, Dang, if he would play translator for all the western tourists who came to rock climb. With a substantial raise in baht, he gratefully accepted.

Riley was, however, thankful to be moving on soon. He didn't know where to yet, but that's how he liked it.

Unpredictable.

Spontaneous.

Free.

He only had one more sunset to watch before it was the last time he would squat in the tepid sand and bid *la kon* to Ao Nang's answer to the perfect dusk. The wavering humidity clung to his skin and a steady stream of sweat slipped down his bare spine.

His well-worn swimming shorts had seen better days. They were the same ones he had brought with him when he first left London with his three best friends; Colin, Swedge and Tony.

They planned to travel around Southeast Asia for about three weeks, cramming in as much as possible. A hectic schedule with insane transport links, hectic roadside towns and cities with insane drinking all the while.

Jealous of the gap years they had heard people at university talk about, the 25-year-old graduates booked their tickets and packed their backpacks almost as soon as their mortarboards were sent flying into the air.

Colin was the planner. A graduate in law, organisation and order were his middle names. Even though somewhat uptight, Colin needed this trip. He was to start a graduate programme at one of the city's biggest firms in a few months. Soon, he wouldn't be able to aimlessly roam the world on a whim; he would be a serious career man. Hours upon hours of work funnelled into dividing

assets, finalising divorces and making sure contracts were kept to.

Swedge, the affectionate nickname for their friend Stephen Swanson, also needed this trip. On the cusp of becoming a professional swimmer, his training was going to kick into fifth gear after the summer. He needed to blow off some steam, give his body a break from the years of competing for their university before it started all over again. He wouldn't know the next time he would be able to have a real drinking session, be able to eat whatever he wanted or sleep with random girls. Soon, he would be in a strictly-regimented training routine. In the pool from dusk until dawn.

Tony, on the other hand, was engaged to his childhood sweetheart. He didn't care much about what he done for a living. He and Hayley were probably going to get married as soon as they got their hands on the deposit from their old student flat back. He needed this trip. Soon, the newlyweds would be shackled up in their new home, sharing a surname, starting a brood. Tony would use his degree in history to teach in a nearby school and, happily, they would never leave London again - exempt from the annual two weeks in Benidorm with their kids.

So they all left two days after receiving their diplomas.

Their trip was exactly what they had planned. They saw the sights, famous and hidden, they drank until their livers revolted, they ate old eastern favourites, as well as new local delicacies. They strived to see and experience all they could. Half a week in

Bali, a few days in Vietnam, some time in Singapore, a night or two in the Philippines, just enough time in Cambodia and Malaysia and an easy pass through Laos before finishing up in Bangkok.

The boys, contented with their walk on the wild side packed up their bags and their memories and were ready to return home and spend the rest of their lives reminiscing about everything they'd seen and done.

But not Riley.

He wasn't ready for this life to become just another memory. This exciting but slow-paced existence suited him. He wasn't going to give that up. He reasoned maybe he would never give it up. He didn't want to go back to London.

His friends pleaded with him.

"Just think about it! Be serious!" Colin whined.

"Come on, mate. We'll come back again in the future, no need to do anything rash." eased Swedge.

"Riley, what about your family? What about us? What are you going to do?!" cried Tony.

All three completely flummoxed by this out-of-the-blue revelation. But, no matter how they tried to persuade him, it made him all the more determined to stay. He wasn't budging.

After a long time of goodbyes and promises of Skype calls and Whatsapp messaging that he was safe, his friends left and Riley was alone.

It was around that time, many assumed, that's when he would realise he made a mistake and come home immediately. But he found it the opposite.

Riley felt that it was the first time in a long time that he could... breathe. It was cleansing.

Sitting there, on that beach in Ao Nang, he thought of that moment, and all the other moments since then, he knew he made the right decision. In fact, he would have went as far as to say he would sever all ties and never see London again. The place was like a cancer, eating away at him.

That's when he saw her, swimming into his view, disrupting the last crystals of light on the water.

How had he not seen her earlier? She had just, sort of... appeared.

She swam close enough that he could see her. A blonde, tanned woman about Riley's age, leisurely eased through the still sea. Standing in the shallows, he could just about make out the detailing of red birds on her bikini covering her voluptuous body.

Although he couldn't really see her face, Riley was going to bet that she was beautiful. He needed a closer look.

Riley raised himself out of the white sand.

"Hey!" he called out to her trying to get her attention.

She just stood there, her back turned to him, looking out onto the escaping sun.

"Hey!" Riley dared a little louder, his harsh East London accent carrying across the shore.

He began walking towards her and her head turned slightly, her chin hovering over her left shoulder.

Riley couldn't help his wandering eyes fall down her back and land on her perfectly-round posterior. Her hourglass figure a perfect silhouette against the sinking sun.

Just as Riley picked up his pace, she dove into the water.

"No! Wait!" Riley begged.

He stumbled into the shallows, seawater splashing around shins.

But, she was gone.

Riley whipped his head from left to right to left again, looking for telltale ripples of a swimmer, but there was none.

The sea was still.

Like she hadn't been there at all.

"Hello?!" he bellowed into the bay.

Nothing.

Only silence screamed back.

Riley stood for a moment, letting the waves lap at his legs, perplexed.

"Where did she go?" he mumbled to questions to himself. "Was she even there at all? Surely I haven't smoked *that* much weed."

Perhaps it was the dimming of the light and his tired mind playing tricks on him? He *had* been burning the candle at both ends recently. Working hard, playing harder.

Screwing up his face in confusion, he dismissed the apparent apparition, about turned and headed back to his seafront shack, prescribing himself a generously-filled joint and an early night.

He settled into his makeshift bed on the floor and stubbed out the roach of his single-skinner in a novelty souvenir ashtray from Laos, peacefully closing his eyes.

His last thoughts, of the girl that probably didn't exist.

After a full day's work ferrying and translating for thrill-seeking tourists, Riley was ready for the night ahead.

Once every fortnight, the local bar owner in Ao Nang jacked up his prices and held a club night for westerners. Riley planned to make his last night there a memorable one. A girl would probably help with that.

He washed up quickly, donned a white linen shirt matched with khaki cargo shorts and flip flops. Sniffing the last of his blow, he patted himself down, flattening out the creases in his chosen outfit and left briskly for the bar about 100 yards away.

A few hours in and the rickety, old bar was packed. The alcohol was flowing, the music was fast and the morals were loose. Just the way Riley liked it.

He was laughing and drinking shots of God-knows-what with some of the rock climbers he had met that day. Two friendly American guys from Arkansas about Riley's age.

"Where are you guys heading next?" slurred Riley.

"Donno man. Gotta `bout a week left. Maybe head up the coast?" said Jerry, the tall and athletic looking one of the two.

"Sweet. Mind if I tag along? Just finished up here and looking for somewhere else to go." Riley explained.

"Awesome, man! Hell yeah!" Bruce, the bulkier, short one agreed fervently. He raised his shot glass. Riley obliged with a clink.

He would go with them and settle somewhere for a few weeks to make a bit more money, then he would start the process all over again, perhaps even move on to a different country. Japan, maybe?

Riley scanned the heaving watering hole, raising his glass to his lips.

In the midst of an ocean of many-coloured faces, dancing and drinking and smoking, he saw a very familiar pattern, stitched into a dress. A dress of a blonde woman with her back turned to him.

A black dress with red birds...

Riley focussed his gaze. She twisted her head a quarter, her chin posed over her left shoulder.

It was her!

It was the girl from the bay!

Riley froze.

Without a word to his new companions, he strode with purpose to the other side of the bar. Squeezing by revellers to get to

her. He was so relieved she was real! Riley thought he was losing his mind, but there she was!

It was now more than sheer attraction that drew him closer, it was more than curiosity. He needed to prove to himself she was actually there. He didn't take his eyes from her flowing, platinum waves and what he could see of her porcelain face.

He quickened his steps.

Then, some drunk idiot backed into him, blocking his line of sight.

Riley, enraged by the distraction, pushed the drunkard out of his way, causing a scene. As people complained about his rude behaviour, jeering angrily, Riley paid them no mind and snapped back to his mission.

He couldn't believe it.

She was gone. Again.

His cumbersome movements, exaggerated by his inebriation, were heavy and slow, but his mind had just been stunned into sobriety. His head darted around and he ran to the spot where he has *just* saw her.

"There was a girl! Here! Right here!" he jabbed his finger to the floor. "Did anyone see where she went?!" he cried.

Nearly the whole bar was staring at him now.

"She was wearing a black dress with red birds on it! She was blonde!" he ranted.

Amongst the strange looks that were being aimed in his direction, people started to part from him, not wanting to be anywhere near this crazed lunatic, like madness was catching.

"Who?" someone queried.

"There was no one here like that." another answered, stepping away.

"You've had a bit much, mate. You alright?" a well-built Irishman put his hand tentatively on Riley's shoulder and Riley jumped at his touch. His eyes still searching for the woman.

The concerned Irishman withdrew his hand quickly. Riley looked up at his new American friends, almost pleadingly. They were frowning, staring at Riley as if he had just grown horns.

Riley rushed outside. Maybe she just left and he could still catch her.

The street was busy and the faces of many local vendors flooded the dirt road. But she wasn't there.

This wasn't like the last time. He had definitely saw her. She was real. And real people don't just vanish.

Riley was breathing heavily, his chest was pained, he was confused and he felt like he was going insane.

What the fuck?

Who was she?

Where was she?

How did she keep disappearing?

Riley felt hot tears of confusion in his eyes.

How could no one have seen her?

No one followed him out of the bar. He heard whispers turn back into a steady level of joyous conversation, free from worry or concern.

What was happening to him?

He looked longingly at the bar. He couldn't face going back in. He walked back to his shack feeling frustrated, confused and isolated.

The road turned to sand as he made his way to his abode, the tinnitus in his ears buzzing against the quiet of the deserted beach.

The next day, Riley woke up late. His phone barren of texts or calls.

He wasn't exactly surprised he hadn't heard from Jerry or Bruce, they probably thought they had dodged a bullet if Riley's behaviour from last night was anything to go on.

He sat up, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands cradling his swirling head.

He thought of the girl. His mind scarcely wandered to anything else. Riley searched his memory. There was something familiar about her. She was like an echo of a dream he'd had, long ago.

He heard rain batter down on the roof of his corrugated iron ceiling, thick drips falling through the cracks at the edges. The noise was deafening. It was doing nothing for his swollen head, thumping from dehydration.

He forced himself up, thinking standing in the rain would be good for him; wake him up a bit, clear his thoughts, escape the racket above him.

Riley swung the wooden door open and was faced with the heavy droplets thudding into the sand. A million ripples forming on the once still sea. A faint growl of thunder ominously beckoned, foretelling of a coming storm from across the water.

He closed his eyes and pointed his face towards the clouds. Cool rain crashed down on him. Feeling a bit more focussed, he opened his eyes.

And there, not forty paces away, was the woman. Dressed in a black trenchcoat and holding a black umbrella decorated with red birds above her head. She was looking out onto the angry clouds of the horizon.

Riley was stunned. He couldn't believe it.

He took in his surroundings, only those two populated the abandoned bay.

He rubbed the rainwater from his eyes and returned his gaze to her. She was still there.

Without another delay, he sprinted at her. Tripping over himself in the wet sand.

Just as he reached her, she turned her head, just to about her left shoulder.

"You!" he bellowed over the thunder and the rain. "Who are you?!"

This time he would get an answer.

The woman began to turn her body around. Riley was about to finally see what she looked like.

The umbrella still elevated, Riley developed an uneasy chill throughout his whole body. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. There was a horrible, tumultuous sensation in his stomach.

Something wasn't right.

The woman faced him.

She was, indeed, beautiful, the face of his dream woman. BUT, there, in the middle of her forehead, as clear as day, was a hole.

A bullet wound.

Riley fell back in fear.

The woman's eyes, a once stunning mahogany, were glazed over and had no living shine.

Riley let out a scream of terror.

All the while, the woman smiled.

As if rammed by an 18-wheeler, Riley's brain filled in the gaps, as his memory flashed back to the time where he had seen this before.

A time where he had seen *her* before.

He was walking back from a friend's house in London. Passing by the Houses of Parliament.

He caught sight of a beautiful lady from the corner of his eye.

As a slight drizzle cascaded from above, she pulled her black trenchcoat closer and hugged herself tighter under her umbrella, dotted with tiny crimson swallows.

There was a commotion behind him.

His senses heightened.

A van careered off the road and made a beeline straight for him.

His adrenaline pumped through his veins and he leapt out of the way, just in time.

It crashed.

People were screaming.

A young man with deranged look shining in his eyes approached from the driver's seat.

Riley, in a pile on the wet pavement, panted hard.

The driver shrieked something in a foreign language, but in an english accent and brought forth a semi-automatic rifle.

Riley swore and screamed, rolling himself into a ball, covering his head, as shots were fired.

He wept into the street as he heard panicked voices and terror-filled screeches.

People were running over him, he could feel their shoes on his back, trampling him.

The sporadic bursts of gunfire filled the mourning air.

Something clattered on top of him, it's whole weight pinning him to the ground.

He didn't look up.

He was so scared; he felt warm urine run through his jeans.

Suddenly angry voices replaced the sound of bullets.

"POP! POP!"

Two efficiently delivered shots.

Then all was quiet.

Still, he didn't move.

Riley lay still and sobbed.

After what felt like an eternity, someone touched his sweating, gripped hand.

He shuddered.

Riley bravely looked up.

A paramedic was moving his lips and making noise; they called to someone.

Riley couldn't process anything. He had no idea what she had said.

It was then that he turned to the weight on top of him.

There was the pretty woman, her umbrella beside them.

It had done nothing to protect her from a direct headshot.

Her eyes wide open.

Staring into him.

Lifeless.

Riley remembered everything.

Every smell, every sound, even the taste of the air that morning. Everything his brain had tried to suppress.

Lying there, sprawled on the wet sand, he couldn't look away from the woman.

His tears heavier than the rain. Riley bawled. Just as hard as he had that day in March, almost one year to the day.

"Riley." the woman spoke softly. "It's okay."

Riley couldn't move, his grief was overwhelming.

"You can't escape this, Riley. You can't run away from what happened." she cooed.

"I can't! I can't deal with this!" Riley choked on his ragged, emotional breaths.

"It's time to face it. It's time to heal," she said, hauntingly. "It's time to stop running."

Riley vomited on to the sand. A typhoon of emotions crashed into him at once.

His manifested trauma hovering over him.

He couldn't escape it.

No matter where he went.