

MY ISLAND IS BEAUTIFUL

MY ISLAND IS BEAUTIFUL

© Shah AD Sass

Scanned from the typed pages of AD Sass, posted in the year
2004 from Koh Lanta Yai, Thailand. Printed as sent...

“All across the world people are sitting on islands,
listening to Jazz and spinning through space”

*With thanks to: Mr & Mrs Reid-Shearer, Mr & Mrs Haggerstone
Kris and the dog- all of whom have their own sort of islands. AS*

CONTENTS

THE LIGHTENING	- 5 -
LONDON DOCKLANDS	- 6 -
THE ISLE OF DOGS	- 11 -
A TAXI THROUGH LONDON.....	- 18 -
HEATHROW AIRPORT.....	- 26 -
UNITED STATES	- 32 -
MANHATTEN	- 39 -
METROPOLITAN	- 55 -
BANGKOK.....	- 63 -
THE ORIENTAL.....	- 78 -
THE GULF OF SIAM	- 82 -
KOH SAMUI	- 90 -
BO PHUT.....	- 99 -
MY ISLAND	- 108 -
KOH SAWAHIL.....	- 126 -
CHALOKLUM	- 139 -
KRIS	- 146 -
THE ANDAMAN SEA	- 155 -
THE WASTE LAND	- 220 -

THE LIGHTENING

Brilliant storm, cloud so dark it crossed the sky like a blanket. Water suspended in the air, electricity cutting the curves. I am standing absolutely totally still while the world explodes around me. London Docklands. This is where I live, awestruck by the ropes of lightning reflecting in the glass. In front of my eyes, each bolt strikes once in three places simultaneously. The walkway is bobbing under my feet as little waves form, lapping in the direction of the rain. My shirt is clinging to my body and my hair is licking my face. I cannot move and I know that everything inside me has stopped. They used to say in religious studies class that the reason god never spoke is because if he did our ears would explode with the sound. Here, drowning in Canary Wharf, I think he whispered and I heard him. Or I heard myself, or something like that.

Sometimes in my life little moments happen. Totally without cause I will have an absolute urge to turn my head towards a certain view. At other times, without warning, my blood will fill with emotion. Elation, despair, regret, guilt, doom, joy. I have always put it down to the alcohol. Every now and then however it comes with no excuses, jolting me out of sober days. The day in Docklands was one of those.

LONDON DOCKLANDS

The Docklands Light Railway from Tower Bridge to South Quay. Funny Lego trains jolting along the track, curling like a cheap roller coaster over the roofs of East London. I would usually try to force my way to the front of the train so that I could sit and enjoy the weirdly sexual feeling of the carriage exploding out from the dark tunnel, into the daylight and then the uphill climb of Wapping. Crisp packets and bits of animals would fly out before us as we pushed the air forward. A rocket in a tube, slowed by the weight of suits. It always smells of fizzy drinks and sweat, damp dogs and catalogue shop perfume. No matter who I sat next to, or stood crouching beneath, my eyes would turn to those windows at the front of the train as we crossed from one world to another. West to East.

People dismiss East London, probably because they should, but it serves a crucial purpose for me. From the East, West London looks beautiful. Turning the twist between the Wharf and South Quay, one window right in the centre of the train captures London's most exquisite view. Crossing over the river onto the island, just for a second or two, the skyline of the city and the dome of St Paul's emerge from the mirrored towers and concrete castles.

There she lies, a pitifully elegant city, drifting on its own reflection, brown and white stone, marble, granite, limestone and glass. As if perfectly staged for only me to enjoy, the buildings form lines, one behind the other, tiered like the seats in a theatre seen from

the eyes of an actor. Each spire or boardroom a character in a great play, frozen but alive. I love this view, it's why I came here to live on The Isle of Dogs and play at being on London's island. London loves me and rewards me daily with this little splendour in-between the armpits of bankers and wet Evening Standard curtains. We have our own language.

That one wet morning, I left my house as usual, a little sick and dry from the previous evening's pub time. Having slept seven or eight hours I considered this a non-hangover day and even stopped to iron a shirt. I like the slightly see through kind that hang over shoulders rather than maintain their own shape. Mine were hand made by someone somewhere. When they started to stain or turn from white to grey, I threw them in the trash and ordered more. The shirts are what make us business people. We buy the shirts, wear them and work to buy them and wear them. It's a comfortably small life and often comes with a lot of fulfilling sex. Girls like the way shirts hang off shoulders, no matter the size of the body beneath them. Shoulders are what make a man. That morning mine ached. Probably slept across my pillow again, twisting into it like it was another body sleeping next to mine.

I boarded the DLR at around eight, waiting at the little plastic shelter with everybody else. The nameless souls that share my morning routine. Two of us always smoked, lighting a fag just as the train came into view. It had become a marker point in the day-the connection between the train's timetable and our own. I smoked. I sat. I stood again to retrieve my ticket from the floor. The train beeped and clacked and twisted up and around first-time-buyer-land. I sat back down and glanced outside just as the sky broke and the first heavy drops smeared into my window. I

hadn't even noticed the clouds being dark that morning, but the storm cracked as if it had been building up for a decade. Within seconds we were the only objects that existed, a tube of people sailing on tracks through a world that consisted only of moving water. As we turned to cross the river I instinctively looked towards the City. Just colour. Smudges of clay dribbling apart. I started to command myself as I always do when I get bored, or excited or remember to listen to my head. Breath slowly. The train was a little too full and the people were all staring at the floor. The rain was loud. The single thought in my head was loud. I stood, absolutely aware that I was about to feel a terrible and probably fatal pain. I stood, completely removed from the logic in the previous thought. Now I was standing. I sat. The water. My head hurt and I wanted air. The people were all around me and the sex in their shirts wasn't sexy. A man immediately in-front of me had his crotch in my face and I could see the outline of his penis folded into briefs. Everyone's shirt was white and none of them were clean. I stood again. A greyness with only one blade of light twisting like gas through the people. Perfect light, the yellow kind, reflected from somewhere to somewhere. Then just greyness. We all looked at the floor and then the thunder exploded and my head exploded and I was off the train.

I had absolutely no idea why I was off the train. Pacing under the metal columns of Limehouse station. Standing out into the open air I allowed the clean cold oxygen to fill me up. I pulled a cigarette and bit it in-between my teeth. No lighter. The buildings around me were all fronted by sheets of glass and I saw a little bit of me in each one. I had matches in my back pocket. The match book had a

number on it and the name of a bar I had never consciously been to. This wasn't unusual. Crackle of white smoke and a deep lungful of sulphur, bitter and strong like coffee in an alien world. Open eyes. Breath. I had no idea why I was standing on the edge of a pathway, ten feet from a railway station, staring out at a curve of mirrored buildings. Then the lightning came. A white line, like the little wire inside light-bulbs. The first line was so close I could see the hot air curl after it had been and gone. Lightning travelling from the water to the sky not the other way around. I was too close. I stood there for minutes, for tens of minutes, hypnotised and filling up with an emotion I hadn't planned to have. That's what this is all about. The time I filled up with the wrong emotion and got off the train and everything else happened. There is nothing unusual about the story of a man standing watching lightning reflect in glass buildings. But this was unusual for me, on my way to work in little Dot Com world. I don't get off trains and wait for something to fall out of the sky. I don't stand there and smoke a whole packet, without a thought for my journey. But I did. That day I stopped and became a little part of the world's reflection. I stopped being the solid dependable bit and became the unsure part. Standing on the edge of the water, I become the shore. The bit in-between. The link. The beach. The meeting point. The divide. The gap. I fell through the gap. Two text messages later I had quit my job and was in a taxi heading back home.

THE ISLE OF DOGS

The Isle of Dogs is a funny place. It works for me. One road on which there is a very obvious divide. Everything on the riverside of the road is good, expensive, clean, new, occupied, warm, secure, peaceful and lovely. Everything on the other side is not. One island, both the home of the British National Party and Rory's Champagne Bar. A place that has been bought and re-sold to the highest bidder. Gentrification at its most extreme and most enjoyable. For those who have moved in anyway. I was one of those who bid, who struck lucky, who went for gold and snatched up a little plot of land on the south of Millwall docks just before it made sense to. A perfect rectangle of mud holding up the one remaining wall of a printing works. When they dug the land to prepare my foundations they kept finding the letters. Little metal letters. The whole alphabet carved into blocks that fit together inside the metal crutches of printing machines. Fonts and sizes, used and new. I called the new house Alphabet House. Just two floors in an area where most people were beginning to build high, knowing that the Canary Wharf development had finally found tenants. Alphabet house had two flats, one on the ground floor and one on the top.

The garden was paved over and chairs and tables bought. Upstairs was mine, paid for entirely by the rent of the other. One huge space. My bed was on a little mezzanine built at the back. From here when sleeping, I could see every new building stretching up along the edge of the island.

From my window it really did seem like an island. I could see the river just before it became part of fancy Cabot Square. I saw it too as it emerged the other side, twisting right at Billingsgate Fish Market. One little line of water cutting us off from London. Neither north nor south. Not desirable, nor cheap. London Docklands was a risk, but for many people like me it had paid off.

As the rent on the ground-floor apartment went up and up with the market, I added more and more shiny things to mine. The kitchen (one line of cabinets the entire length of the east wall) was built to order by a company in Germany. I wanted absolute black. Stone so dark that your reflection wouldn't emerge no matter how much you polished it. Little blue lights under the edges, the only evidence that pots and pans lived inside. My sink was glass, smoked and lit from underneath. The water came through a slit on the side rather than a tap on top. I borrowed that design from a hotel in Florence. A perfect hotel with perfect light. I don't remember why I had gone there, but I know someone else was paying. I remember taking photographs of the fireplace, hoping to capture the colour of the flames reflecting in a silver plinth. The photograph hadn't done it justice, but it existed in my head.

One of many places with perfect light. I collect perfect light moments, recording them in my head. Here in my apartment the lights were usually off, the offices across the water being sufficiently bright to flood the room a gentle orange.

The colour of Sundays. Orange. Only the light in my flat was orange, every other orange item had been collected one night and put in a cardboard box labelled 'Orange'. I don't know why I did it. I do

things sometimes because I have to and it's better than cutting yourself. The box is probably still there, hidden under the bed so heavy it will never leave again now the roof is built. I loved my apartment and so did people who came home with me. My walls turned me from a man in a shirt to someone who did things, who had things, who was more than the others, who knew a little bit about something that might be valuable. I fucked and licked and fingered those poor souls who shared my orange light, cocooned in Egyptian cotton and talking like I was the king of the world. I was. My half of the road in Millwall Dock. Alphabet house, built upon every letter in every language. It's what I thought it was all about- houses, kitchens, bathroom products by Molton Brown. Drinking a glass of something Belgian while checking the time on your Mont Blanc. The Isle of Dogs has many facets, but I only saw one and I liked it. I understood it. I made it.

Coming home that morning, walking across the council estates and through the car-parks, the Isle of Dogs didn't seem so knightly. I had no idea why it had changed, but like everything in my head, the morning the thunder came down and I got off the train, the things I wanted I still wanted, but in a different way. Impossible to explain, it was as if the designs around me didn't make sense anymore. A straight line wasn't a straight line anymore and the rainbow was short of a few shades.

My kitchen was beautiful still, but it was only a kitchen. The stone become stone again and the bed became metal. My door had a lock and I had a key- probably the only thing that proved to me I had returned to the right place.

Orange things in a box. A tin of sweet-potato. A ball

that squeaks. The top of a bottle of juice and a plastic man that came inside cornflakes. The sticker from a battery and four unopened packets of memo notes. The logo torn from the corner of an electricity bill and seven M&M's. These were the orange things and they lived in the box marked 'orange'. I had the power to take them out of my world and group them together. To have or to hide. At that moment I knew that the reason I had stayed up one night fuelled with vodka and diet coke, crawling through the flat for things of one colour, was the same reason that I got off the train. I was and always have been absolutely aware that this isn't it. That life isn't life. It's not like I had a desire to do something I wasn't doing. Far from it, I had the desire just to stop doing things. Nothing was going to taste like anything and the air we lived in was suddenly just oxygen and nitrogen and didn't really have anything to do with my lungs. I loved my apartment in Alphabet House because it gave me an identity. The view over the building works gave me all my aspirations. Every floor those sky scrapers rose from the muddy gardens of docklands gave me hope that I was part of a select few. A media cult moving into a new world, creating currency and changing lives. We were Kings of this Kingdom and this was my castle.

In a way, London Docklands was a place of crusades, forced on the original population with as much brutality and ignorance as any other. But I was a crusader and in this apartment I rocked. But the walls were not walls anymore and the fruit would remain uneaten. As much as I knew nothing that day I knew everything. In seeing the reflection of light within itself and distancing myself from the routine I was comfortable in, I took the first step of many I would take over the next months. Like everyone who

sees what I saw, that day was only the first step. I knew nothing and everything. And the walls were not walls. To anyone watching me, although nobody had, I would have been judged as having some sort of breakdown. I would agree with the word-breakdown is what I was having. But it wasn't just me that was breaking down. The whole of my world and your world and their world broke down with me. Because I saw lightening in a day reflected in itself. For a millisecond I knew what you would see if you were a mirror and looked into a mirror.

I knew that when I put everything orange into a box that *I* wasn't in a box, everything else was. I knew the essence of knowing. Philosophy. The sphere. The connection between everything that ever happens or might happen. The being of a person reflected in itself. I was the world and you are me and I am god.

I drank. Heavily. Everything in my flat, including the bottle of supermarket crap my mate had bought promising we would open it only in "death or ugly fuck" emergencies. Then I called my office. I didn't say words really, just noises about words.

She spoke to me. I don't know if she was physically there or on the telephone but her voice was there. At least two more half sized bottles of vodka, and six or seven beer cans from the kitchen of the apartment downstairs. I know also that I had valium to try and sleep and then more to try not to. I know she was physically there the second time because she wrote me a note. "Get your fucking self together." She signed it as if there was the possibility that someone else had written it. I appreciated the command and slowly passed out. Possibly naked. I think when I woke up (drunk) it was Tuesday. I can't tell you much more about Tuesday because it was a dark and bad

time for me. The only important thing I need you to know is that on Tuesday I put a T-shirt and my passport and the contents of my bathroom cabinet in a bag and I ordered a car to take me from Alphabet House to the airport. I didn't lock the door and I didn't look back when I got into the cab. I left London Docklands with my mobile phone pinned to my ear, recording messages on my own answer-machine.

One after the other. Not really for myself. For her probably. For whoever was going to clear up the mess. The person who came to take me home. The soul that I would tell the story to about the lightening and the vodka and about quitting my job by text message. The one who would tell me how much I had fucked up my life in just twenty four hours and console me with caffeine and soap. It turned out that that person didn't exist, but I wanted them to.

I don't know if anyone ever heard the messages and I have absolutely no idea what they said. I imagine that they would have vanished with my mobile phone account when they cut me off seven months later.

A TAXI THROUGH LONDON

London looked dead. Little black drops of rain hitting stone. The water was undrinkable and the street lights illuminated only themselves. Curtains weren't drawn and all the lights were out. That night London looked like somewhere people used to live in. A town full of temples we no longer used. The special light just before darkness turned the river black and silver. Mercury flowing like blood through arched bones. The postcards never show this side, the view from Waterloo along Southbank, across the river to The Strand. There amongst angry pillars was Kings College, its modern, bold lines stark against the surrounding palisades. I was alive there, thrown into the labyrinth of London from the tiny villages of my childhood. Corridors and chapels like the folly of a mysterious cult. Endless stairs that led to nowhere. Medals and plaques, lists of names. Smokey dens and old pianos. Kings College London. I lasted four months before they noticed I wasn't coming any more. I would intend to go to lectures. Set off at nine or ten, thin in my cutely faded t-shirt, blue jeans and clutch of books. I would board the underground at Finchley Road and stand in the centre of the train surfing hands-free as it shuttled down the mole holes. Sometimes a few of us would travel together sharing a cappuccino or something stronger on a Friday if Thursday hadn't stopped. But I rarely made it to the lecture theatres of Kings College London. The Strand just took me away, I couldn't help it. The alleyways around The Savoy, secret doors to underground arches. Somerset House, bolder and richer than Buckingham. Great Halls of Great

Masters, none of which would be viewed by anyone other than myself each day. Little cafes in side streets connecting to Covent Garden. Hippy Neils Yard smelling of butter and cheap incense. The steps at Seven Dials where the gays wait for the gays and the girls smiles go unnoticed. My university was a place where people got lost for hours in rooms full of people, none of whom started out connected. I played it like a computer game or fantasy book. If you want to go east press space. If you want to go west press return. For years I lived life as if I was watching it in a movie rather than living it. Like the photograph of London my dad took as a lad and posted to me on my first day. Always the wrong side of the lens. Kings College London, where the pints cost less than a pound and the student union has glass windows overlooking the Thames. Young people with their fathers names would feel very important and slightly rebellious here. When I left nobody ordered an inquiry. I don't think they noticed. The ones I fucked looked the other way as I dragged a suitcase down the corridor. My room mate left a five pound note and a phone card his mother had given him. Sweet innocence. Those people never really entered my life and I never considered them anything more than a game. The first attempts at drugs, the first smoke of a cigarette. I was their dealer and their confidante. Slightly wiser and a little more alive than their Swindon and Orpington lives.

The confidence had come from a summer spent plodding around Europe, testing my freedom and a fair few of my limits. A taste for fine wine, limited by lack of funds. A few too many nights with beautiful views and the opportunity to explore under too many waists. With this air of youth and life, I came to London and passed quickly through Kings. That first

time I left town I sat on the ornate bench next to Embankment Station. I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going, but I knew I had to leave London in order to return. To go earn some money, to get a job, to become someone in order to walk back across Waterloo bridge with a name on my chest and a shirt on my shoulders. I did it too. Six months later I was working in a glass box in the middle of nowhere. Junior to the Junior, picking up note pads after meetings and typing up minutes. I had always known how to play with technology so I managed to slime my way into the job, fixing the bosses PC and introducing Web design to a company that only dealt with wires and routers. I was loud and fast. When they said no, I said maybe. When they rewarded me I asked for more. One crucial day, I got into a vodka game with someone high up, an investor or director or both probably at the time. I told him what I had learnt about the theory of knowledge from books I should have studied at University. We turned it into a theory for ‘information share’. It became the prototype of the Extranet. Clever people happened to be there to sell these things to other big people. Within two years I was called the “UK Web Development Manager” and the firm was making a killing. None of us knew what we were doing, reading up on terms clients had used in pubs at night. Our little Cotswold operation soon opened branches nearer and nearer to London. And then I left. Right when the firm was hitting the big time. I struck up a conversation with someone on a train back to the sticks one night. He ran a telecoms operation. They needed Dot Com. I was bored of trees and fields. We shook hands and I was back in London the next week on thirty or forty grand. I met up with people from Kings and they sneered at the suit. I bought the

drinks and they laughed at the mobile phone. I don't know who was winning, but I was back in London and I was making it. The Strand stopped feeling like a fantasy and The Savoy became lunch. I was playing the game and loving it. Now leaving it. The black cab pulling out of static traffic on black wet streets. The Houses of Parliament, precarious, like a sandcastle too close to the waves. I had drunk with the people that ran our country. I had slept with people who wanted to run our country. Soho bars with respectable names next to video stores with hidden doors. In the seven years I spent living in London, I had opened almost every door in the streets of Soho. Old Compton Street with its tourist gays, Abercrombie fresh, out in search of deep throat dick and text message dates. Greek Street, the meeting place of everything else. Expensive French restaurants next door to kebab shops. Newsagents stocking one copy of everything in the major languages. Bouncers on paths to copy-cat bars full of people paying five or six pounds for a pint of beer. I bought so many beers that I lost the taste for a while, trying everything new, creating a drink in my name. Eventually I settled on Vodka. When its good it has no taste at all, just a kick, a movement, something almost physical. Some people say they can tell a good vodka just from watching the way the air moves over it, interrupted by vapour. I kicked back vodka with so many women, a couple of men, some perhaps both, who gives a shit when you're drunk and it feels like the whole worlds your world, your religion, your species and you have evolved a little bit further than the rest. Nobody ever told me to stop. Why would they, it was my tab. I never held down a relationship for more than a week, not with them knowing anyway, not consciously. Nothing surprised me, nothing shocked me. Apart

from her. Her dark eyes dancing with me on my twenty first birthday. A guest of a guest. She hadn't said a word, just danced, smiled, laughed, sipped. In her silence I heard bibles. In her walk I saw legends. Its unexplainable love, but when it happens drunk, it's even more so. The daughter of someone with money she had noticed my watch, played with it while I smoked fags with the lads. She had been bought drinks all night, been handed cards, been eyed up and down. But she danced with me, silently, without telling me her name. I asked and she purred. Anya. It was the only conversation we had that whole night. Anya and I. Sitting on the bench near Embankment station, exploring her lips with mine. Anya was the only woman I ever loved in London and a week after we met she worked for me. We never kissed again, at least not that I'm aware of.

My taxi took over an hour to escape London. On the way I retched and sweated. The air in the cab was stale and it was hard to breath. Every time I opened the window he closed it again. Fucking cold, he said. I didn't feel it. I don't know if I was going somewhere because I was feeling different or because I felt different and then got drunk and was now going somewhere. The order of things was confused, but I knew I was too far from the house to survive turning around. I would have to spend the night there having quit my job and telling Anya to fuck off. Desperately I wanted my phone to ring, but I don't know who I wanted it to be. Probably Matt with his honey voice, telling me that it was a laugh and inviting me to something. Matt always invites me to things and I never go. I don't even make up excuses, I just don't go. I love him like a man should love his mates and probably a little bit more. He probably knew that, I told him enough. Funny though how little people

listen when you really speak. So many words fly through the air every day, but when it matters its hard to differentiate. It's all the same language. I don't know how we know each other. He is the opposite of everything I am. Well he was when we met. Him with a military background, me the salesboy. He was tall and broad, I wasn't. Women adored him. Somehow we looked the part, little and large, large and little. He needed a someone to protect and I needed someone who didn't talk tech. The very first night we met, friends of friends, we struck up a night long conversation. Something about buildings- having our name on sky scrapers. It became our thing. One day I would invent something and he would sell it or the other way around. We would always share the last few quid before pay day or spend hundreds the day after. It didn't make any difference as long as we ended up back at my place with a couple of bottles and six or seven random souls. He loved the attention of drunk women, pawing him, cooing at feats of strength or stupidity. I loved being the host to these little orgies. We drifted apart when he met the girl of his dreams and I had too many involving him. It didn't shock me, I have always been a bit half and half. But it's a choice. An option. Some people have the opportunity- most of those who do go all the way and become card carrying homos. I didn't. I couldn't- dick doesn't do it for me. But the solidness does. The white. The bricks and mortar. I understand why women love men and I love women. I love loving women who love men. I wanted Matt to call that night and say something meaningless and solid. He had arrived before when I had fucked up, lost clients, lost jobs, written too many cheques. None of that bothered him. We would turn the day with a beer and sleep on it. Tucking me in. He was the only person in

the world I told the truth to. And the only one who couldn't do anything with it. He didn't call. I didn't actually have his number. People move apart. Things fall apart. I probably don't remember the last time we spoke and I expect there is a reason. My mother has a photograph of him in the hall. He made me look good. I have no idea what he wanted or why he stuck around as long as he did. He must have really liked beer.

After a few miles all the cars are going the same way late at night. The sounds disappear and the engines and tyres are all around you. These spaces are scary. Motorway miles. Too far to walk. Uninhabited. Open areas of ground bordering roads. Stripped earth.

HEATHROW AIRPORT

After the divorce my father always took me to airports. It was our day out. One day every two weeks apart from Christmas. Three kids and the soon to be next wife. I don't know why we went, none of us had any interest in aeroplanes as such. I don't know if my father knew this- he didn't ask. Despite this I was fascinated by the airport. A space full of emotion. People leaving and arriving. The airport isn't a place, it's an in-between- a step, a pause, a heartbeat. I would sit for hours sipping juice, watching the people going through security. Husbands and wives, mums and dads, lovers and regrets all touching their delivery for one last time. The women would cry less than the men, turning their face to hide and wipe a solitary tear. Men would punch eyes into shoulders, scrumming the departing loved one. Children would bounce in frenzy, completely unaware of the act of leaving, focused instead on the idea of flying through the air in a metal tube. In those days you could see the planes from everywhere. Noses against glass against noses. Wings that looked as if they had been bolted together with staples, wheels no bigger than a car. I imagined people living on aeroplanes, sleeping upstairs and swimming in an onboard pool, water swishing around as they came in to land. I didn't want to be a pilot, I wanted to be a passenger. To be one of those people hugging my goodbyes or running to the open arms in arrivals. I wanted my name to be on the little boards the taxi people had or to be called out by the lost property man. It's what I wanted most in the world- to live in airports, coming and going, landing and taking off. A

place designed entirely for you, for your purpose and circumstance. I know why Dad took us to airports now- it was half way to being a holiday. But we never stepped through the gates. We never said our goodbyes. Nobody hugged and no tears fell. We just watched- spectators on orange plastic chairs. Of all the people in the airport, we were the only ones actually there.

My cab pulled in and the driver swung around barking something about money. I didn't have any money. It hadn't occurred to me I would need it. I showed him my business card and he charged it to account. Thank Christ I had used the company number in my phone. On the little piece of paper I signed my name and added a zero as a tip. I don't know if he cashed in, probably not as the pen and my hand had managed only a couple of lines and a dot instead of my name. Ironic now that at the time I found it easy to call transport and journey across cities, but I couldn't indicate my name. Only my passport said who I was, already filling up with the weird, frightening and erotic concept of vanishing.

Stepping out of the cab, my plastic bag broke, dropping pills and shampoo onto the pavement. Nobody stopped to help as I crawled on my knees collecting rolling tablets and cotton wool buds. After picking up about ten or fifteen I stopped and let my hand open dropping them all back down. What was the point of carrying a collection of cotton wool buds. Sticks with soft bits were not going to sober me up and take me home. Nothing in my bag was going to be powerful enough to clear my vision or better yet make me sick or sleepy. I stood up, adjusting my belt where my black trousers had sunk to my hips. My shirt was un-tucked and smeared with

mud and water. My hands were shaking. I remember looking at my palms and actually seeing the moisture of panic and alcohol mixing together. I had an absolute urge to scream or run or shower. I didn't do any of those things, instead shoving my passport into my back pocket, leaving the rest of the crap on the pavement.

Once inside, I walked up to one of those electronic check-in machines and fed it the first credit card I found in my pocket. Not sure why I was expecting the machine to recognise me or confirm a seat I hadn't booked, but I did it anyway. Kind of like running your finger inside the returned coin slot of a payphone. A kid at an arcade.

After regaining my card I turned and made for the plastic chairs that ran all the way down the side of the building. I sat there and contemplated lying down, waiting for my name to be called on the loud speaker or the police arresting me. Neither of these things would happen though, I hadn't broken any laws and wasn't missing. I was if anything else still where I should be. No where. A guy in a dirty shirt, travelling from one city to another. Probably mugged on the way or in-between a series of flights. A stopover. People walked past briskly. Trolleys loaded with cheap cases from Argos. Single women in black shoes pulling smart Samsonite.

The guy at the counter didn't look up at me when he asked my destination. I told him I wanted to get on the next flight. He asked which class I travelled and instead of answering I just pushed my company credit card over the desk. He glanced up taking in my tramped clothes, my sweating face and trembling hands. World Traveller. Four hundred and fifty five pounds. I signed something on the paper. My tickets

were issued and he was still talking as I walked away clutching the rectangles of paper.

In the chemist I bought water and two packets of American sleeping pills. I don't know why but they can't sell them in the high street. Only in America or in airports. I guess too many people have seen the movies where desperate girls like to swallow a few hundred of them when dumped by stubbly boys. I didn't want to die, I just wanted to sleep. I was becoming two people, one a body travelling through an airport, reacting to security staff. The other a mind, drifting from moment to moment, catching screen shots of the things I had done in the last few hours. I walked automatically from one end of the hall to the other. Raising my arms as the bleeper went off. I didn't speak to anyone, didn't smile, didn't cry, didn't hug goodbye. The instructions came. Walk, step, step, breath, step, open, walk, breath, step, swallow, step. I knew that if I concentrated too hard I would stop knowing how to walk. It amazed me that my feet were doing the walking. Like a repeating announcement, I heard her voice in my head.

I heard the sound of the water in the sink when she had pushed my head under the tap. I felt the burn on my wrist where she had held onto it. She didn't hug me goodbye, she had tried to pull back without knowing I was going.

She couldn't stop me going now. My last call to her from the cab had gone unanswered or unheard. Such a big difference. Silence, often clever and always wise. The biggest statement in a world where it's so easy is not to communicate at all. Sitting at the gate, head against the glass. The silver tube looking at me like Snoopy. People prodded it and poked at it. Little bits of metal were attached to the wheels to stop it rolling

off. Cages of boxes were loaded into the belly and people with water sprayed it. The thing was just a tube containing everything we had. I sat for ages thinking about the problem of the apple. Take an apple, take away its stalk and its still an apple. Take away its skin and its still an apple. Take a bite out of it and its still an apple. How far do you go before it's not an apple. The plane was a plane. Take off the door and its still a plane. Take off the nose and its still a plane. Take off the wheels and the cages and the seats and its still a plane. Take everything off until it's just a strip of metal on stalks where hundreds of people are sitting expecting to be pushed through the air. It's not a plane anymore, we are.

They called the departure as I had my head down a toilet bowl. I was lying with my legs at my side, fingers on the rim, retching myself to be sick.

Nothing came. Two of the tablets were swallowed and then a third, condemned to my stomach with water. I had to know I wouldn't be sick or the tablets wouldn't work. I wouldn't sleep. It wouldn't be over. I wouldn't go home and not be at an airport.

Almost immediately the idea that the sleeping pills were in me made me tired. My eyes were heavy, full of blood. Then I was on the plane. The plane was moving. Somebody had their hand on my leg trying to open the window blind. The little screen in-front of me flickered on and a girl waved seat belts at us and pointed at doors. I fell in love with her a little bit and closed my eyes. Bits of my insides pulled back towards the seats. My head pushed backwards and then sideways, curling into the headrest. Somebody was sitting next to me, but they weren't now. The sound of the air changed and as I craned my eyes open and shut again I saw the outline of a country underneath me, pretending to be a place on a planet.

The rest of the journey from London to New York
did not exist for me.

UNITED STATES

I don't like being surrounded by people. Something happens in my head when I am stuck in a space with people I don't know. Even worse with people I know a little bit but not enough to touch. A lump rises in the back of my throat and I forget what to do with my hands. Being in line with people makes me feel nauseous, especially if they talk to me. Although my voice comes without me commanding it, I never think I will know what to say. When I was young I would have days that were totally blurry like this. Walking down the street after my parents or waiting in line for a bus would freak me out. I didn't tell anyone, I learnt to deal with it, to hypnotise myself. Focus on the sound of the air coming out of your nose. Feel the air on your lip. Know that the air is around you. Breathe slowly. I don't know how I knew to do this as nobody had told me but it worked. The space in my head, the layer of nothingness would subside. A bubble. I used to try and force the bubble out of my head by blinking and focusing the muscles above your eyes. The easiest way to do this is to yawn, but if you aren't tired you can do it anyway after a bit of practice.

When I was young they called this a nervous tick. There wasn't anything nervous about it. When I buzzed my eye muscles it made everything nervy go away, just for a millisecond. The sound of my blood in my body. It deflated my brain and because I expected normality to return it did. Every time. As I got older the gaps between blurry spells got longer. Normality became the norm. I didn't need to breathe anymore, it just happened.

There was no turning point, just a slow and certain numbing. A mental appreciation of air.

Now, a little older, I don't mind people so much. When it comes to sales meetings or addressing the staff I don't give a damn. It's easier, programmed, predictable. All I needed to do was to bring back my mental commands and turn them up a few degrees. When you know how to make the fucked up world normal through concentrating on air, you know how to go further. Because I expected to come out on top of any negotiation, I always did. Breath, wait, judge, reflect, talk. That's why I started to excel at that sort of thing- the corporate world is like a game that you have written yourself. You know all the rules, it's just a case of having the energy to play it. I could stand as I have done in-front of thousands of people and preach about software or some great new development theory, but I couldn't join those same people in line for the door afterwards. The sale has logic, the waiting doesn't. The sound of waiting scares me. That's what my mobile phone is for. I call people. I talk at them. Often for hours. Sometimes I keep the phone to my ear while watching television or having a bath, layering my conversation on top of whatever I am doing.

I hate not doing anything. I can't wait. Especially if people are watching. If people are late I walk away, even if they are only seconds late. I do this because you can't predict the future. One second might be an hour. I just can't stand there outside a bar or even worse inside with nothing to do and no purpose. It makes me shake and sweat and talk into my phone. People confuse me for someone with a great deal of control, truth is I have none, but I know the value of control. I mimic control. I have people in my memory

I have only ever spoken on the phone to, never actually met in real life. I play with them. Clients, companies, salesmen who have struck a deal and kept in touch. People you meet on chat lines but never get around to fucking. For months I would talk to them in my blank hours, at four in the morning or waiting for taxis. I never told them anything important, just talked, kept my mouth moving, listened to them melt over the days. With guys I would start out talking shop, edging them up, giving them the advantage. Then I would be there when they needed to talk about fuckups or girlfriends who had walked out on them. I knew when to talk and I knew when to listen. Slowly, gently I became the person they talked to about everything. They found after a while they had feelings, depths, emotions and regrets that had been silent all their lives. Quietly I fucked them up, made them want me, made them need me, made them need to be me. Then I left them alone, hanging, ringing, unconnected. I never actually met them. It would break the charm. I once invited two of my people to meet one another, each expecting the other to be me.

Watching from a window on the other side of the street, two people connected only by my telephone number and cigarette talks late at night.

They stood there, either side of a street sign, un-ware of their connection, flicking their shoes at sticks and looking at watches. They knew the other wasn't me. Couldn't be me. The wrong body. The wrong suit. The wrong clothes in the right place. In a way I was a little bit of both of those people. I was part of their story and part of their reason. Take their feet away. Take their face away. I was part of what was underneath. Our insecurities had brought us together. Buy and sell. Bond and lust. Everyone who knows someone else has weighed up the investment. Every

single person I know wants something from me and I expect something from them. Nobody wants nothing, there is no bond in nothing. If you wanted nothing you wouldn't answer the phone. I am you and you are me and now you are standing in the street waiting for something physical to happen that will never come. Nobody is going to answer the phone.

JFK, New York. I landed in the daylight. People waited for long minutes in the aisle of the aeroplane, fiddling with overhead lockers and twisting their backs to reach bags. For ages I didn't move, my eyes only registering light and not shapes or people. The engine's hum had gone and seats were being trodden on all around me. Flatbeds, cushions, empty bottles of wine. A carton of water tucked in-between my leg and the armrest. I don't know how I got to be sitting in business class. I don't know how I was still on the aeroplane. It confused me that we hadn't dropped out of the sky or flown around the garden like we usually did in my kid dreams. Literally seconds passed before the taste of aeroplane air fully pricked my dry lungs and I admitted to being physically onboard an aircraft, possibly not in the UK. The smell of my shirt and the taste of my tongue brought more memories back. My stomach felt solid and heavy as if I had eaten metal. The roof of my mouth was dry and every muscle in my body ached for moisture and movement.

Automatic. Reach. Stand. Sit. Unbuckle. Stand. Walk. Step. The light was white and cold. The air was real-lungfuls of it burnt me as I choked. Just inside the arrivals building I ran into the gents, jumped a line of people waiting with hand luggage and evacuated myself into the bowl. Reaching forward, trousers still around my ankles I bolted the door to the cubicle. Everything inside me wanted to come out and it physically hurt. As it did so my eyes began to stream

with new water and I brought my hands up to wipe the liquid across my face. On the back of my hand I had scratched the letters FLF. Freedom, Love, Faith—something from my teenage years.

The result of one summer night of hash, smoked in a tent somewhere near Cheltenham. The three ingredients of life. The beginning of a religion we never formed. A cult we forgot to join as we packed up our friendships and headed for universities and weddings and deaths and days. Fucking New York City. America. Fucking America. Fuck. The graffiti on the cubicle door consisted only of lists of names. People who had sat here arriving in the United States of America. Nothing more to say than their name. A last little declaration of their identity before they passed through immigration control. My little America, one metre by one metre. One toilet bowl. Used. It is impossible to remember the actual feeling I had at that time. Like the physical feeling of being cold. You can imagine how being cold makes your body react. You can imagine the shivering and the way your skin bumps. You can remember drawing air in and tightening your muscles, but you can't remember the actual feeling of being cold. Nobody can, it's how we keep going from one day to the other. At the sink I covered my whole face with handfuls of warm water. The guy next to me gently washed his fingers and looked at me only as he was turning away, flicking his digits to the floor. Knowing I was about to go through passport control I tucked my shirt into my trousers and flattened my hair to my skull. I was unattractive but not dangerous. Dangerous people have good hair. They give a shit what their hair looks like. Unless they are into fraud or some sort of computer thing. That sort of criminal gives up on his physical body years before finding his way to jail. It's

a power thing. Stepping stones. The fine line.
What ever you want to call it, at that point I hadn't
done anything legally wrong and the auto-pilot in me
took over as I went through the process of entering
the United States of America. Business or Pleasure.
Sir... Business or Pleasure. Pleasure.

MANHATTEN

Although I have travelled all over the world, I haven't really been anywhere at all. Meeting people in America meant flying in, catching a ride to Manhattan, checking into a hotel for a couple of nights and leaving the same way I came. It was the same in Singapore, or Bangkok, San Francisco or Boston. The places I travelled to and worked in consisted of rooms that looked exactly the same. This was no mistake, I planned it this way. Everything about the hotels, the cars, the money, the restaurants was part of my appearance. A multi layered fancy dress designed to inspire confidence, efficiency, strength and success. For years I aspired to be the kind of man who could arrive at The Four Seasons and ask for his usual room. Soon that wasn't enough, I wanted my usual view (blinds up before I arrive), my usual coffee (Italian), my usual driver (Nigerian), my usual seat at my usual table (corner, as far from the window as possible). Nothing was a problem when it was paid for. I even had someone to do the paying. People in London whose job it was to arrange my schedule and confirm my bookings. Telephone calls would be made telling hotels I was minutes from arriving. We did this only to create an impression. Something intangible that would spread like liquid knowledge to every other person I met. The font of my name and the paper of my card. Everything was planned, toned, created.

I made this my job more than anything else. The creation of my name. The whisper of my arrival. The air that surrounded my negotiation. I always won. Every deal or merger or sale or partnership was

concluded before I opened the door. Expectations were met and the physical meeting was simply the reward. At twenty five I was earning more than my parents had ever made. I was spending twice or three times this amount without much thought for the future. Moving money around the table. Making myself valuable by spending the currency. I had to be worth it, because I was getting it. Now I didn't have it, I didn't have anything. I didn't have a reservation, or money, or clothes. Nobody was going to call ahead to The Four Seasons or Soho House and fax me a schedule. There was no fucking schedule and nobody was part of this private negotiation. As I left the airport that day I was doing a deal with myself. How far. How long. How much. How hard. It didn't matter why I had left or what I had left, or even where I was. What did matter was that I was in a car, crossing a bridge, taking a journey and nobody knew. I had run away and it felt clever. It felt like cheating. It felt like a feeling I had forgotten how to feel. I was afraid and I wanted it.

Manhattan is the only city in the world that is exactly how you imagine it will be. Everywhere you walk you will see a frame from a favourite movie or experience a cliché from an advert. The first treasures I had were tiny models of buildings my father brought back from NYC when he flew over with the wife. Tiny green Statues of Liberty and finger sized Twin Towers. I knew the skyline off by heart and could name every hotel. Before I got here I knew my way around, having poured over maps of the avenues and streets as a kid. Every one of my favourite films included the low sweep of a helicopter view approaching Manhattan or someone spinning in the snow, skating across Central Park. New York City was the basis and the entirety of my dreams. So much so that my first

visit here many years before was edged with a fear that it would prove unfamiliar. It didn't. She rose, like a saluting line of soldiers, glass and steel, mankind born from the water. Crossing Brooklyn Bridge for the first time was the most fulfilling moment of my life. Not an easy thing to say. Strange in context. None the less, true. No matter what happened to me from that point on, knowing that mankind could create something so completely real and yet so awesome made every part of my life different. Like Darwin seeing his birds. Like Moses and the sea. The moment I saw Manhattan exist for the first time was the moment I knew that the Earth was as big as I had hoped it might be. I knew that people could create unlimited things. I knew that we all shared the same desires, the same protections, the same walls, the same symbols. I knew in seeing those buildings that we all wanted to be a child, staring up at the sky, reaching for heaven, climbing to the moon. I knew I wasn't alone in my gutter reaching for the stars. The feeling of that journey from JFK to Manhattan may subside a little after the tenth or fifteenth return, but it doesn't go away. I remember the same roads in reverse on September the twelfth- the air orange and burnt. I remember the reflection of the scene in the eyes of my sister as we left the city that year, vowing that she would never return. I had returned, as often as I could. Now I was here, free to do whatever I wanted, with no excuse, no ties, no limits. And no purpose. Freedom. Love. Faith.

Searching around in the pocket of my trousers I found two cards, one an ATM card for my own account and one a credit card for the company. My name was spelt incorrectly on the company Amex. Something nobody seemed to care about and so never corrected. I figured that my own account had only a

few hundred pounds in it, being so close to payday and sailing so close to the wind as I always did. Back in London I would have simply used the company accounts to play with, to drink on, to eat, to entertain. Nobody questioned my expenses as long as the money kept coming in. After all I worked for someone who didn't even carry cash. A guy who wanted to be famous. Someone who didn't have a noticeable skill or trade, but spent their life inventing their image, perfecting their scene, taking on responsibility and being in places. I don't want to tell you what I did for him, you wouldn't gain anything from that, but you can guess it involved communication. Internet communication. Controlling data. It wasn't illegal, but it was clever.

The movement of knowledge, the creation of identity. It paid. It paid very well indeed, so much so that he had become my sole client that year, buying out the majority share in the company I had formed to hold the technology I created and the client accounts I worked with. Although my work created him, he had ultimate control of my job. Having resigned in London the Amex wasn't likely to work for much longer if at all. I didn't even know the limit but I knew he wasn't stupid enough to leave it in-place. Unless he thought I hadn't left. Unless he thought I would come back. After all as his little guru, his little technical wizard, his witch, it wasn't likely that I would just up and leave. Not without warning. Not without a cry for help. Not without a demand for more money. So I texted him. "Apologies for communication. Too much coke. Must rest." He knew he took more than me. He knew he couldn't fire me for this. He knew I knew what he did when he took more coke than me. He knew I knew everything and the value of that knowledge was more than he would risk. For a couple

of days at least, no matter how fucked up my job was, it wasn't going to be over and the Amex would work. As long as he replied I wasn't technically fired. "Fuck yourself. Where the fuck are you." Sweet as pie.

Ordering the taxi to pull out again from The Four Seasons (I figured there would be people who I didn't want to play with), I continued down the canyons of midtown to Times Square. This area used to be a shit-hole. Neon lighting up brothels and one dollar stage shows.

They cleaned it up almost overnight, shutting up stores and shipping out the homeless. Times Square was now clean. Fucking bright, tasteless, meaningless, sterile, impotent, but clean. It was a place where I could vanish for a couple of days amongst the hundreds of thousands of other people who came here just to be here surrounded by logos. I got out of the cab under the Coca-cola sign and made my way on foot to a high end brand name hotel one block to the east. I had heard of it before, a high-tech place where anything could be ordered and nothing was a problem. I liked that philosophy and walked in through automatic doors. I used to test myself with automatic doors. Its how you tell if you are drunk or dreaming. Walk up to automatic doors when you are drunk and they open. Your reflection splits in two and the air is there. In dreams they don't. In my dreams anyway. They stay closed and I can see myself not existing in the reflection. Here too they had automatic check in machines. I slid the Amex in and pressed 'New Booking'. They asked for a name in that wonderful way that in America you can pay using anyone's card so long as it works. Not wanting to use my own initials I thought for a second and typed. FLF. It was kind of the theme that day and something I could remember. I was given a list of available room

types ranging from 'Comfy' to 'Awesome'. The cute descriptions didn't help. I didn't want anything comfy or awesome. I wanted solid walls and a bed and for nobody to know I was alive. I chose Awesome. Three hundred dollars plus tax. I selected two nights. The machine let me know that I could extend my stay by pressing buttons on my television remote. Fancy. A key card was issued and I suspect a photograph taken. This wasn't a future process, this was now. Today, this decade. Although several shiny chiselled people in Armani attire welcomed me, bowed their heads, opened doors, not one person really knew I was there. A human had walked in and checked his identity at the gate. With the rush of new surroundings and the created smells of the hotel enveloping me, I unlocked the door and located the bed. Crisp white linen. A grey cashmere throw. I slept without turning on the light or taking off clothes. I slept deeply and for a very long time.

I woke late the next day, sheets twisted around my legs. I hadn't drunk any water since boarding the plane, my throat felt dry and my mouth tasted terrible. Hopping from the bed with a blanket still half attached to me, I made it to the bathroom. As I opened the door the lights came on, a gentle white light above the bath and tiny pin pricks of light across the wall. The mirror had bulbs around it like the old backstage changing rooms. I sucked water from the tap and sat on the side of the bath staring at my tired reflection. Skin pale, eyes bloodshot and dark. My hair was flat on my head apart from one bit that stuck straight up where I had slept on it. I had that weird feeling you get if you take a nap during the day and wake up before bedtime. The same thing when you come out of a dark cinema into the light. As the bath filled up I walked over to the window and

pressed one of several buttons marked with little icons. The curtains opened smoothly revealing floor to ceiling glass and a view down the side of Manhattan. I could see straight into the side of a large office, people still hunched over their laptops and sipping drinks at desks. Another building curved, its far edge reflecting the dying sun with a brilliant flash of red light. I recognised the top of the Hilton Towers and further south one edge of the Woolworth building. Looking towards the pavement little monopoly people were walking around, tiny handbags swinging, yellow cabs weaving in and out of each others way. A long line formed around the low-cost-theatre shop, almost a block long from beginning to end. I couldn't make out individual faces, just colours, black or white, baseball cap or hair, umbrella or balloon. A shrill beeping broke my watch and I turned to the bathroom in-time to stop the water flooding. The room was perfect. A collection of shapes designed to cocoon me and serve my every need. The television concealed behind a dark wooden panel that sunk into the unit when you pressed a button on the console. Smoked grey glass desk and sleek black telephone. Noticeably there was no art in the room, only those huge windows flooding the carpet with more and more red, yellow, peach and white light. As I lay in the bath with the door open, the arch of the sunset moved across the room, reflecting and refracting in the mirrors of New York. Anyone who has travelled West knows the worst idea is to sleep straight away and wake up in the night, but here I was wide awake in the night-time, a thousand possibilities dancing inside.

I read a book once called the Diceman. All of the main character's decisions were based on the roll of a dice. East or west, buy or sell. I thought that was

dumb. How much more interesting and brutal to just go with the flow. To not make any decisions at all and just follow the day. Funny how days seem to revolve around people, not the other way around. I picked up the phone that hung by the side of the tub and instinctively telephoned my own answering machine back in the UK. Six new messages. It wouldn't play them. It accepted the code but wouldn't go any further. I figured they were all from me dribbling into my mobile in the London cab. I hung up and immediately picked up the handset again. The natural desire was to call people. Call Anya. Call Matt. Call Kate. Call someone. I started to dial the first number in my head, but half way through I hung up again. I didn't know what I would tell them. I couldn't explain that a couple of days ago something happened to me that made me feel different. I couldn't tell them that I had seen some sort of connection in things that made my world seem stupid. I couldn't admit to quitting my job, leaving my house, flying to New York and hiding in a hotel somewhere off Times Square. I battled with the concept of guilt. Someone soon would find my door unlocked. Someone would know I wasn't in the UK when they checked the Amex. Eventually people would work out where I was from the bill. Without reason, excuse, a calling, a need, a purpose, people can't drop out of the world and just be somewhere else. I had, I needed to and I wasn't going back. The only explanation I can give is that drunk or not my world didn't make sense any more and something inside me had been strong enough to allow me to walk away from it. As if through your life your cup fills up with experiences, with talk, with stuff and one day it's just full, there is nowhere to put anymore stuff, so the cup tips over and you are empty again. Now, without any stuff inside me, I was completely

free. Free but empty.

Over the next few hours, I lay on the bed staring out at the falling darkness. I had a complete sense of being alone on that island. Down on street level I knew hundreds of thousands of people would be leaving work or walking dogs, but up here so many floors away, I felt closer to the clouds than I did to them. I hadn't got dressed, wrapping myself instead in a towel. My clothes lay crumpled half way into the bin. Hypnotised again by the window, I jumped when the telephone rang. I didn't speak, just listened. It was the concierge, did I want my room cleaning. No I didn't. I went to hang up, but instead asked him to hold on. I needed food. Lots of food, fries, mayonnaise, nachos, a couple of diet cokes. I needed clothes, a T-shirt, some jeans. Within fifteen minutes the door bell rang and a kid in uniform pushed the trolley into the hallway. Little silver domes over chicken wings. A folded T-shirt with the logo of the hotel on the breast pocket. Levi 501's from the store across the street. I signed for it and winked at the kid. I didn't have any cash so I added a tip to the bill. His name was George and his accent was weird. Canadian maybe. Drunk maybe.

His white trainers didn't go with the look, probably caught minutes before the end of his shift. Couldn't have been more than eighteen- thin frame and tight black shirt. He left a card with the number for room service and a folded up copy of the menu. After he left I locked the door and started to scribble a plan for removing myself from the world. I had to find a way to achieve total anonymity just for a while. I didn't want London calling. It wouldn't work if I didn't have money. I needed to lose my identity and find cash. I also needed a story to tell people who needed one. I'd come to that later. Getting dressed

and pulling the slightly too tight jeans together at the waist, I made my way out of the room and into the elevator. Down in the shiny lobby people were milling about. Good looking people with casually expensive fabrics. Guys with clutch bags and girls standing around piles of shopping. Barneys. Banana Republic. Big white paper bags with Japanese symbols and rope handles. They scared me. I didn't want to be there anymore and I had forgotten how to walk. Without walking I transported myself to the front desk. Pulling my passport out of my pocket and handing over the Amex I asked the guy to cash up five hundred dollars. Without batting an eyelid he filled in a form, scanned the card and returned with a wad of bills, fifties and five tens. Asking if I needed a cab I instinctively said no, but I did. So I got my own outside the building and told him the first destination that came into my head. Central Station. I don't know why. It just came out.

Most people know this, but usually only being in places to get to somewhere else, I didn't. Under Central Station there is an amazing marketplace. Not like London- chips and sandwiches, but a real International Food Hall. The arched roof is painted a night sky blue, dotted with gold stars. Whilst still plastic, the chairs are moulded to look like huge rocking chairs and high stools. People sit for hours reading under Central Station. Waiting for people, passing the time, hiding. It's beautiful and the noise hugs you. White noise twisted by the bricks and marble floor into a hum. Like being under water in a huge library. I too sat, cradling an espresso. I had no idea where to go or what to do but I was waiting, comfortably. Then somebody spoke to me. "On vacation?" I didn't know how to answer. People don't speak in London. If they do they want to kill you, or

fuck you or take a little bit of your money. This guy didn't seem to want to do that. He obviously had money (suit, watch, shoes) I don't think he wanted to fuck me (women attached on right hand stool). "Yeah, yes I am." "How long you in the city?" "I don't know. A couple of days. A week, maybe longer." "Be sure to check out our museums, best in the world." "Sure, yes, thanks." I have never known how to talk to someone when the purpose isn't obvious. He made me want to move away, but I didn't. To my surprise I started talking to him. "Which museum would you recommend?" "Oh, the Met of course, an institution, the building itself." "And where would that be?" "You cant miss it. Central Park, West, go before the weekend, tourists, too many tourists, kids I mean." It was easy, the plan was easy. People would tell me what to do, where to go, how to be.

I could spend a few days wondering from place to place, trying new things, seeing the sights. Then I would return to London, resume my job, make it up with everyone I had fucked around. This would be a holiday, a vacation. It didn't quite work out that way, but the plan was a plan- I just followed everyone else, watched what they did. I became them, in order to become me.

Leaving Central Station, walking across the platform I was struck by how huge the place was. A cathedral. It's probably been called that many times, but it's the best description. A temple to travel. The place should have a dress code. Even the windows are beautiful, soaring, arched glass, leaded and stained. At the right time they spill beams of amber across the concourse. No flashing signs, no Body Shops or Sock Shops. No Dixons or Burger King, just one level of marble and glass, arches and pillars. I often feel that places like

this were built for another civilisation, all of whom left together at some point, their temples and train stations waiting around for millennia for us to eventually inhabit them. We don't fit. We couldn't have imagined these spaces and even if we could we wouldn't have built them for each other. Maybe it's because I'm British. We are programmed to think that America cannot have history, soul, civilisation. When we see it, it seems out of place. Monoliths next to complication. Efficiency with heart. The true beauty of course isn't in any of the buildings of Manhattan, but in the gaps in-between them. It's the wall of sky scrapers towering behind red brick townhouses. The stages of our lives. Reflections of one glass wall in another.

To know exactly what I mean, just walk down to East Ninth as I did that night. Thirty or forty blocks straight down. Through canyons, cubes, spires all the way to the little village in the middle of it all. There, sitting under the branches of a twisted old tree, sucking the vapour off vodka, the whole world seems summed up on Manhattan island. Spikes in the sky lit up to make them less scary. Apartments one hundred floors up. Hidden rooms in domes on top of empires. There used to be drinking dens in the roof of the Chrysler tower. An exclusive space where gentlemen came to stand on the shoulders of giants. Imagine being one of those men, taking a cigar in the hub caps. Your people, thousands of them slaving under your feet. Pyramids with less footprint. Castles in the sky. All of the usual clichés are not going to work, you just have to sip espresso under the branches of East Ninth. New York City is a game where you can see all of the levels. Anyone can see anyone else. The people who take out the trash can look up in the night sky and watch people making it. This is why New York

works- when you can see everything you might want to be, you can chose. You can take the option of becoming it. Or you can hide from it. Millions of people watching people being more than they are. That's what my life had been about- moving up levels, making more, becoming part of the club. Evolving. As I walked all those streets back to Times Square, the guilt started to set in. The guilt of not being where I was supposed to be, doing the things I was expected to do. Back in the hotel I started to drink and the feeling subsided, turning instead into desire. Hunger. Recklessness. I called room service and fucked George.

Don't get me wrong, I don't fuck men in a gay way. Twice in my life I have let a guy play with me like a women does. The feeling of a guys skin is different. The smell is different, the hair is different. Very different. Women are wet and warm and kiss with their lips. Men are hot, rough, and bite and lick and fuck. There is nothing exciting about chatting up a women in a bar. It's a game anyone can play and anyone can win. It doesn't actually matter what you look like as long as you look like you might be able to walk and talk. Its all about making the women feel alive. Switching her out of one place into another. Turning a date into an experience she will 'never forget'. Romance is fucking simple. Words with multiple meanings, the right level of extravagance and a layer of vulnerability. Directness with silence. I'm not saying every women in the world will fall for this, I mean overall women are many times cleverer than men, but if you want sex, you can get it. Women will give you sex if you do the right things, there is a plan, a way, a method. Slightly different for each women, but they will all fall. Men will not. Not when approached by a man. Sex with a man is fulfilling

because it can go either way. You're going to get drunk, you're going to touch, you may lose an eye. Kiss or stab, caress or crunch. It's a game that I might not win. The fucking is just proof that I did. Animal sex, raw, two people doing physical things that they knew create perfect chemicals in the brain. Addiction and service. A guy cannot ever love a guy, unless he's gay. You cannot love someone that knows the rules. For gays the rules are probably different. I fucked George because I wanted to know I could. I wanted that kid to be naked and erect in my room. I wanted him to question everything he knew because my hand was on his shorts. Pure risk rewarded with sex. A pleasurable pain. Afterwards they leave, nothing is said, nothing is owed, nothing has been spent. After I fucked George I called Anya, she didn't answer so I didn't leave a message, just left the line open, my air and her air whistling through wires through space. Our jazz.

METROPOLITAN

On the way to the Met I stopped to talk to a dog. The dog wasn't actually there, I invented him so that I could walk him and have a reason for walking in a straight line down the west side of Central Park. The leaves were all orange, thousands of them, different shades of Sunday. We sat, the dog and I, on the steps overlooking the fountains. I imagined a piano playing in my head and closed my eyes to see the sun through my skin. Fingers tripping gently like a river of sound. It wasn't cold or hot, the whole world was the same temperature as I was. It made moving around feel lighter. My feet made noises in the sticks and stones. If my dog had existed he would be playing about in the water, shaking side to side and covering kids in crap from the lake. They would laugh and I would be a New Yorker.

The piano played in my head all day, scales rising and falling, hushing and twinkling as I made my way through the vaults of the Metropolitan. George's trainers squeaked on my feet, too big for my toes. He hadn't bothered to put them back on so I kept them. I liked that they smelt a little bit of wet newspapers. I liked wearing them with no socks. George would have walked the dog. I would probably have paid him to walk the dog. The Met sucks. What doesn't suck is the Natural History Museum. Across the park on the other side, they have built a huge glass cube and within it there's a ball. The Rose Centre for Earth and Space.

Pink granite and hundred foot plastic pillars. This is where the Thunderbirds go. Inside the ball is a

planetarium. A near perfect electronic representation of our universe. We sit, almost horizontal in plush chairs as the stars spin around the curved ceiling. The guy from Forest Gump narrates as we trip through the solar system. The big bang, the slow implosion, the white dwarf. Citizens of the galaxy. It's the sort of show that makes babies cry and adults become babies. After you leave the ball you walk down a spiral stairway representing our evolution in time.

Dinosaurs, apes, crap like that, then one last tiny slither- mankind. Look out of the glass cube at the landscaped lawns, the apple tree, the Masonic hall- a slither in time and space. After the Natural History Museum I got a cab to Soho House and got pissed with people who might have been stars.

The rest of the night was a blur. I drank some more in a bar I had been to once with a client. A guy walked up to me and told me all about his wife, how she had left him to go on a cruise with his brother. Fucked up. We had both smoked cigars and gone to a strip show in Bowery. He had a wad of one dollar bills in his sticky fingers. The girls came over one at a time, little giraffes leaning down low, bending their taught tummies so he could fold a bill into their pants. I didn't spend a dime, ordering drinks on his tab and laughing at his jokes. He literally dribbled. In the cab on the way back to Times Square I folded up his business card and shoved it in-between the seats. Upstairs I took all the bottles out of the mini-bar and lined them up, colour order and height order. Two of each. Vodka, martini, rum, dark rum, wine. George came up and we played the drinking game where you have to say countries that begin with the next letter of the alphabet. When you fuck it up you drink. He went downstairs twice, for more little bottles until it became boring going downstairs, so we

ordered room service, him hiding in the bathroom each time. He told me stories about all the staff in the hotel. The transvestite who worked in the gift shop, her pet puppy in a drawer. The chef who listened only to reggae and drank whisky as soon as he woke up. The manager who was simultaneously dating the cocktail waitress in the club downstairs and the girl who spoke six languages on the front desk, neither of whom knew about the other. George was gay, he thinks, but he had a girlfriend. Russian, they had met at his last place of work where he got fired for theft. He didn't like sex with her and wanted to find a nice American lad to settle down with. I think he would have settled for British but I made it clear I wouldn't be fucking him again. We kept our clothes on and snorted coke from a silver tray. At six in the morning we watched dawn from the rooftop pool of the hotel next door. Stripped to our wet jeans. He had a full on erection and was stroking my hair with his hand. I turned to face him and looked at this kid loving me. There was absolutely nothing in-front of my eyes that turned me on. Heaving out of the pool I grabbed my T-shirt and his, dried myself with one and put on the other. A few hours later I checked out of the hotel and moved downtown to The Hilton on Wall Street. A couple of nothing days passed. I ate in a deli opposite the hotel, listening into conversations about rent and the price of fuel. I bought newspapers from all over the world, sticking them with sellotape to the walls of my bathroom so I could sit reading without using my hands. My mobile phone ran out of batteries and I left it where it stopped working, on a bench somewhere near Church Street. One morning I ventured down to the tube, but it was completely confusing and full of people, so I went back to the deli, bought cigarettes and vodka and went back to

my room. Without such a great view the evenings turned to night-time without me noticing. I would drink, watch movies, drink, eat, scribble words on the newspapers on the walls. After the third night I decided to make it a project, sitting here, slowly vanishing from the world. I wanted to see how long it would be before somebody came to get me. I wanted to judge my worth, my value, my links to the rest of the world. To help them, I sent a clue, a voicemail to Anya. "I need you baby." Enough I thought to kick off the rescue efforts. I no longer used the Amex to check in anywhere, drawing a two thousand dollar advance from Citibank and then melting the card with my lighter. A couple of grand. One week, maybe ten days at the most. Then I would get paid and Anya would come out and meet me. We would take a dinner cruise or helicopter trip or something. I would probably propose. Tiffany, Fifth Avenue. Platinum. On the fourth day I went out to buy clothes and to check the messages at front desk. Of course there was nothing for me because I hadn't used my real name. Nothing for my real name either. Nobody had called. Why the fuck would they. I checked my voicemail back in the UK, still six messages, unable to play them. I figured that Anya or someone from work would have come over and reset the machine, which is why it wasn't playing anything back. They probably didn't know how to erase them.

At an internet café I logged onto my email. I had ten or twenty junks and just two from the client. One with some thoughts about a poll we should run, the other asking when I would be coming into the office. I set an auto-reply on all incoming mail that would send a message back if anything new arrived. "Dear Sir, I cannot read your email at the moment. Try alternative communication." I emailed myself. Infinite

loops. I hoped people would read more into my auto-mail than was there. People tend to do that. You might be telling a story about how a bus ride made you horny and they think you want to dump them. You might tell them about a promotion at work and they think you hate the way they dress. We all speak the same language, but we very rarely listen to it.

On the fifth day I didn't go out at all. I ordered room service and drank beer in the bath. I played with the foam, making little mountains on islands. I imagined little populations sailing from one to the other, being killed in eruptions and drowning at sea.

As the hours and the days passed I became more and more like the imaginary bath people. Alone on my island, surrounded by sea. It angered me that nobody had found me. It pissed me off that people didn't know New York was where I would go. It couldn't be hard to remember the bars I might drink in or the airline I would catch. Nobody came. I knew that I had left knowing that nobody would come. That's what I had seen in the reflection during the storm, a picture of myself standing in the rain, unconnected with anything. Absurdity. Irrelevance. Life goes on. Ask yourself the same question- if you dropped out of life today, would they come and get you? Are you so in control that people don't need to invite you, you just arrive. Are you the host? What would happen if you left your island and crossed the seas? Sink or swim.

That night I got more and more angry with myself. I started drinking in-between sips, chain smoking and pacing the room. I wanted to identify the point at which my life had stopped mattering. I wanted to know the day that I stopped knowing who I was and became my work, my job, my drink, my seat in my bar, my table in the restaurant, my room in the hotel.

I wanted to cut every person I had fucked for pleasure and shared myself with. I wanted to scream at the people who had drunk on my tab and eaten my food. Where were they now when my life stopped having logic and the lights had gone out. I stared out of the window with the lights turned off. There it was, my shadow, my ghost on the other side of the glass looking back at me. I ran down thirty flights of stairs and out into the street.

My cigarette lit itself as I walked to the end of the pier. Closed up wine bars and Gap. Behind me everything civilisation had built sparkled and in front of me just waves, black and dead. I was everything in-between. A choice, sink or swim. A body and a ghost. No money, no drug, no rush to the head could make a difference to the decision. The knowledge. Sink or swim. I stood there for a long time, watching my ghost ripple in the sea. Neither was correct, the physical body or the image in the water. Nothing was me. I was the journey, the turns, the corners, the bits in-between other peoples lives. The rolling ball. My name was a part of the context of others. The reason people picked up phones or jumped off piers. That's what I saw inside the lightening. Its reflection. Its effect. Our stuff. This is why Jesus wept.

On the first morning in May I caught a cab to the airport. I had been in New York two months. When the money ran out I had arranged to sell shares I held in one of the big media corps. I had earned them in lieu of pay some years before. To my name I had about five thousand pounds, the majority of which I carried in cash, leaving only one hundred pounds in my bank account. In America this would only last months at best, so I decided to move on. Somewhere cheaper. Somewhere less tall. Before leaving the hotel I sent a single email to the Evening Standard. It asked

them to print in the dating section an advert for me and gave my credit card details. “Man seeking island.” It was a little joke to myself. I know they printed it, I have the receipt. It was time for me to leave Manhattan and see what the rest of the world was about.

I wanted to understand what I was slowly learning. Cause and effect. How mankind wasn't unique in himself, but in his relationships, in his populous. What that knowledge was and who it was for. I wanted to listen into 'The Sphere- the bigger story, the higher meaning. In a weird way I wanted to find a place where I was ok, where it wasn't difficult to walk, where it felt right to be sober and alive. At the airport I wrote a letter to my parents telling them I was fine and working on a project that would last a while. Having written their address on the front I paid a kid in the departure lounge ten bucks to post it from the airport back in the UK. I no longer wanted to be found by other people, I wanted to do all the finding myself. I wasn't angry anymore, just open to the idea that I might be on a bigger journey than I thought. I was going home, wherever that was.

BANGKOK

I don't remember how I chose Bangkok. Standing at JFK looking up at the plasma display, columns of cities and departure times. I guess I figured it was far enough to go, another third of the way around the world. It was also a place I had been to before, if only for two days and then entirely spent in a hotel complex. Bangkok was one of those destinations I thought I knew, but probably didn't. Somewhere with a new language, temperature and network. Waiting at the sales desk it struck me for the first time that this might be a one way journey, the ticket costing half of the money I had left after weeks in New York hotels. For years now money was something that came at least every thirty days. There's a barrier you go through somewhere between forty and fifty thousand- it becomes impossible to spend it all on food. Easy enough to just get bigger and bigger houses, but that didn't occur to me. I couldn't even drive, so a car was out of the question. In-fact, it happened so fast between my first job and my first five thousand pay cheque, that as corny as it sounds, I really didn't know what to do with the money. I spent my first two career years living in a shared house. An ex-girlfriend and someone random. They were both still studying, pooling their funds every Friday to buy a bottle of wine or a round of drinks. We lived in North London, somewhere commutable to Liverpool Street. The only reason we picked the house was that it had a double lock (the ex had a thing for locking doors) and the shop downstairs stayed open twenty four hours. That truly is a wonderful thing- orange juice, Pringles, beer, monkey nuts at four in the morning. Feta cheese

and spring onions at midday. Light-bulbs, rat traps and bleach. Even then I was the host, bringing home the bacon, renting the television and arriving back from the pub with four or five new strangers. It was a good time, a real time. Beer tastes better when you can't really afford it. Cigarettes stronger and more personal when you only have five. I loved living in that house, catching a cab to work, driving past the people, heads down in the wet bus queue. I wasn't rubbing anyone's face in it, in-fact most people that lived with us came along for the ride. Dinners without limit at the local Chinese, a tab at the pub, weekend trips to random cities to see friends who hadn't made it to London yet. Three or four of us in Travel Inn bedrooms, living it up. We never discussed the money, they never took the piss and I never stopped providing. They were my family.

Then the real money came. I remember all of us, the ex, her friend, the flatmate and my shag, crowding the lounge in our boxers and pyjamas while I joined the board meeting by telephone. I had to tell them I was in a restaurant with a client, not hung-over and chilling with my kids. They suggested a six figure number, I accepted and added an expense account, they limited it, I accepted the limit and added a flat. Months later they didn't even remember having the conversation- both investors fucked out of their brains on a boat near Dubai. That would always be their argument in years to come "I don't recall speaking to you about this"- a pointless remark, they didn't remember whole years of their lives.

I envied them and despised them in equal amounts. I think if we had just agreed to let me spend what I wanted they would have got a whole better deal. Ever since waking up on my seventeenth birthday in a flat with three walls, I had vowed to just spend everything

I had. Live every day to its limits. A promise I kept.

At the time I had a hag- a female buddy that spends her life with you because you don't threaten her. Like brother and sister. Except this one had ideas for me, plans, stages. She took me to look at flats- converted warehouses with glass bathroom walls. She took me to see penthouses with people on doors and swimming pools in the basement. Her smile widened into a giggle and her hands clapped. We moved in together to a massive studio space in fashionable Clerkenwell, white brick walls and heated floors. I think we were probably a little in love, but for some reason, namely that she knew I was continually fucked and fucking, it became a pet and master thing, best buddies, trophy wife and cash card husband. I was in my element with my project, seeing how each new appliance made her shine. She probably wasn't. But she still shined. She cooed, she cradled. Everything was rented- the art on the walls, the L-shaped leather sofa and the plasma TV. When I came to move out, the place felt as alien as the day I moved in.

Everything I owned fitted into a cab- it always has and always will. I have never seen the point of really owning anything. An illusion of identity. Changeable, mouldable, inflatable. Separate beds and dinner at nine.

Years later when I was building Alphabet House, my hag came back. She saw my plans for the building and sailed with me around the dock. Through the day her eyes opened wide and began to sparkle like they did that first time looking in estate agent windows. A perfect partnership- provider and womb. But it wasn't enough anymore. The money wasn't ever going to be enough. I think she had been waiting, for the money to buy a ring, or for the chequebook to take us away, outside of the London that fucked me and kept me

fucking. But it never did and she stopped shining. A gift should never be given with rules, but it always is. The investment. The deal. The unspoken law. As I have said before, nobody you know wants nothing from you. We stopped bumping into each other after a while, her people never getting into the places mine were at. Her fishing line cast in another pond. She probably imagines that she used me. I wish she had. I missed her every day she wasn't there telling me why the objects were beautiful and the hotels sumptuous. That was the deal, the investment, the rules. The flight to Bangkok is intolerably long. About seven hours is my limit, anything after that and my head gets fucked up. That infinite loop again-nowhere to go. Moving without moving. I can never sit next to the emergency exit for fear that I won't be able to stop my curiosity opening it. I am sure they have some sort of lock once you are in the air, but it looks so easy. A turn of the handle for fresh air. I often have thoughts like that- drastic things I am only a tiny line away from doing. My life is full of big red buttons I have been told not to press. Sometimes I can't help myself, selecting one hundred pounds instead of ten at the ATM. Ordering the broker to buy when I should probably sell. Snorting when I should definitely sip. Nobody stops me. One day I am going to be on a plane and the handle will be in my hand. I'll have it in my fingers and lean on the door, presumably it won't open, but that won't matter at the time. In a tube, above the ocean, the handle will be in my hand and I will be turning it. Never let me have children.

It was dark when we landed, the wings bouncing a little too much in the wind. The rain was coming in sideways and the streets below looked like lines of parked cars. The worst congestion problems in the

world, curling pointlessly around temples. Even the airport has a temple. Every building ever built in Thailand stands next door to a tiny house created for the displaced spirit. Little guilts living in dolls houses. By this time I had acquired a small rucksack, something that made me feel I fitted in with the little groups of travellers lingering outside Bangkok airport. Those on their own were being escorted off by 'travel agents' to take double price cabs into the city. People everywhere were smiling heavily with calculators in their paws. Even the Buddha was plastic, here in the heart of Asia's colliding worlds. Toll booth roads and skyscraper hotels. Shopping malls and opium dens. Nobody honest will tell you that Bangkok is a beautiful place. Parts of it shine of course, but as a whole it's a mess. A mistake, something not entirely planned that has grown past its limits. The ugly baby that just keeps getting bigger. The shirts come and book into luxurious hotels, swept off their feet into the land of plush carpets. Nobody knows how to hypnotise the entrepreneur quite as well as the Asians do. Private water taxis to the Shangri La and the Peninsular Bar. Siam has fallen into the trap of becoming whatever the traveller desires. Boys who are girls who like girls to be boys. You can select how to live, to eat, to drink, to lick- and nothing comes with much of a fee. The first time I was here, drifting aimlessly out of the hotel, I got lost in a town within the city, somewhere near the university. The intense blanket of heat denying you air. The smell of fish everywhere, in the food, in the gutter, in the river- which itself visibly moved from water to gas. There I was standing on a bridge, soaked to the skin in my own extract, trying to find a landmark to head towards. There are none. Bangkok has no direction, no true centre, no edge, no end point.

Most people who can, leave as quickly as humanly possible, riding above the roofs in the new skytrain cars, never touching the ground with their non-fake Gucci shoes. How funny that everyone in Bangkok has a Rolex, it makes the design itself flawed. Nobody is special, only the money talks. I can have it, you can have it, whoever has it rules. Everyone is anyone living under the King.

The royal family are everywhere, giant posters of them smiling across city squares and on traffic island plinths. TukTuk drivers comment on how well the Queen is carrying new weight. A true admiration born from people who feel they know their owners. A link that I have to admire, somewhat confused as a westerner would be as to the rules involved. Even the rich wont fold up a note, aware that the kings face is printed upon it. God help the gap year kid who drops his change to the floor.

My first stop in Bangkok was Wat Pho. The temple of the reclining Buddha. I came straight from the airport in the early hours of morning, my extra large shirt billowing in the wind and clapping its cold wet sheets against me with the rain. The temple is more a theme park, a wonderful place full of life, children, animals, tourists and of course monks. Unlike European religion, Buddhism allows for life, welcoming the visitor, encouraging laughter, spills and mess. Of course there are rules, many of which the tourists give little or no credit to. The taking off of shoes, covering of shoulders, bowing of the head as an elder passes you by.

Those who had read up in the Rough Guide or Lonely Planet seemed even more obvious outsiders, over emphasising steps over holy doorways and touching their hands a little too close in a respectful

Wai. Fancy dress, playing at soul. I wanted to approach the temple at night, to see those gaudy curls glitter in the moonlight, just as I supposed they had been built to do in a time without street lamps. I wanted to sit quietly without reverence and absorb a place I read about so often in travel books bought at airports during business trips. I had never made it to Wot Pho before this point and now I wanted to understand it. My whole world seemed to be calling out for some new version of logic and I hoped the orange monks would offer me some. It's a huge place and I started at the most obvious point- the café. Thais eat all the time. Not just the set meals during the day, but snacks- 'Nit Noi', a little bit, anytime they can. Miraculous machines turning this conveyor belt of fuel into lean, lithe bodies sprinting about under the sun. The monks were at it when I arrived, being the early hours of the morning, dark reluctantly becoming light, they were feasting on their main meal of the day. I sat on the side with other tourists, eating chicken on skewers and blue lemonade sipped from a bag. The monks chatted away to each other and to us, one or two looking a little too eagerly at the cigarettes in our hands. A kettle pouring water over ginger stumps in bowls. How funny that we imagine religious folk not to use electricity.

The reclining Buddha himself (one of hundreds on the sight, most of which go unseen by the hordes) lies like a fairground attraction in a long building near the entrance. A golden whale, resplendent, magnificent. Even his toes, carved and inlaid with pearl were bigger than my torso. There we plodded, in hushed tones, white feet slapping on stone. Photographs were taken, from the foot upwards, never the other way around, or perhaps the reverse-snapped quickly so as not to be seen. The monks laughed, how funny that

we should be so edgy, the thing wasn't moving.

In Bangkok I didn't need my imaginary dog. Away from other Westerners I stuck out enough to make any form of action seem obviously weird. My clothes, my skin, the fag stamped out under foot- all of these made me a Ferang. A cute word, used amongst foreigners themselves. Sweet little aliens with their funny ways. Ferang. Sweating and glugging and sliming. The rules of the game seemed obvious to our Thai hosts and elusive to us, glad only to be able to buy our chapters.

I consulted a fortune teller before leaving the temple. Five hundred Baht and my palms were read. The old man used a ruler to measure the exact point of my death and a book to compare swirls on my hand with statements of fate. His friend, younger, smelling of balm, translated for us. I will live a long time, possibly past eighty, but only if I never travel to Afghanistan. Timely, I thought. "Life like an ocean wave this year-falling, rising." I stopped listening, knowing I was reeking of the journey I had been on. But of course he was right. Everything he said in the next half an hour was right.

"You are looking for something you will never find. But you cannot and must not stop looking. You know why." I loved the un-English translations, the way the words didn't fit. Haiku. He told me that unusually I had the power to have kids. Not that it was written in my destiny- I could chose if I would have them, dictate my own fate. It was statements like this that made me think he had read a little more than I thought possible. In the context of the world he lived in this was his way of saying things. In mine, it meant more, that I could make decisions over my life, the people I was with, the roads I took toward the norm,

or the queer. I thanked him, thinking that he had probably told me many things I didn't hear and re-assured that at least someone in the world knew where the hell I was. Up and down, like the waves.

Having not made a booking anywhere and arriving at the same time as a world conference in something or other, I found it difficult locating a room.

Automatically I had gone to a web café and run my usual Expedia search. Bangkok is cheap, but the four and five star hotel rooms the machine brought up would have used up everything I had in a week or so. Already I had the idea in my mind that I would probably move south, away from the city, so I just needed a base for a couple of days. Giving up the internet search, I jumped on the back of a tuktuk and asked the guy to take me to Siam Square- the only area I knew, the meeting point of shopping malls and western brands. Being unfamiliar with hailing my own transport, the guy wrote a figure on a piece of paper that equated to about his whole days salary.

Of course I paid it, not giving the amount a second thought. It was literally days before I knew the true cost of transport, of food, of rooms in Bangkok- I had blindly been doubling or tripling it as I am sure most people do when they first arrive without a clue. Walking for about fifteen minutes east of Siam Square, following the traffic, I eventually came to an area where the shop-fronts looked more typically Asian. Caged birds hanging outside, bits and pieces of motorbike on the pavement. Smiling old women, creased and weathered, tapping their feet on wooden stools. Shelves and shelves of retro packed medicines, bottles of coloured fish, some with only the room to swim in one direction. Entering one store, I was immediately drawn to a door at the back where western men were coming and going, one after the

other, waiting like people at a photo booth. Lines of tuktuks and taxi-bikes were waiting outside, shipping them in and out again, each one fiddling with something in his hand. Mistaking it for a brothel or drug exchange, I turned to walk away, but stopped as the door opened. Inside a guy was sitting behind a wooden table, placing watches on a square of velvet. A little lamp and magnifying glass were placed on the visitors side. A stern looking women, maybe forty years old, with black gloves for effect, was polishing another watch in the corner, her face hidden by the dark. I took my place in the queue of two ferangs outside. Every time someone went in, the others would peer around the door, trying to see what he had bought. Again I was suspicious that only some of us were here for cheap watches.

There was laughter inside the room, the sound of someone slapping his hand down on the table. Shuffling of paperwork and then the door opened. A pale guy, no more than my age walked out the door, his hand gripping a black leather case. I think he had probably bought a whole batch. When it came to my turn, I sat down and looked at the square of velvet. Rolex, metal strap, face perfect, stamp on the winder, text on the reverse. Gucci, square with leather strap, hologram on the paper tag. I asked the man if he had anything a little more unusual. The women in the corner leant in to hear our conversation. "What does gentleman like". I told him I wanted something more ordinary, something that people wouldn't guess could be 'duplicated'. He stayed motionless for a moment, then smiled, reaching under the table for another case. For a moment I couldn't work out what he was showing me, each box was bigger than a watch and had no logo or mark on it. Pushing one across the table, he waited for me to open it. A small carriage

clock. Silver, the face etched very gently with roman numerals, the feet twisted into claws. It was hallmarked and stamped. I almost missed it the first time I held it in my hands, the crisp black font of Tiffany. “How much”, “How many does gentleman want?” “Gentleman wants one now, one hundred in the morning”. I don’t know where it came from. Not only did I not have the money for one hundred ornaments, I had no desire or need for them. I think I just said it because it sounded like something I should say. Fuck, why not play a little, fuck it up a bit. “Where you keep them, where they go.” I told him I didn’t know, probably back to the UK. Gifts for people I worked with.

He didn’t seem certain and put the sample away in its box. Nodding at the lady in the corner, he stood up, walked to open the door and said “I bring you one Tiffany today, you pay me fair money, I bring you more Tiffany tomorrow. Now you wait so I see if you are police. If you are not police we make money.” I walked out the door, no idea what he meant, how much the clock was or if I could have one. In the street I pulled out a cigarette with my teeth, lit it and walked off in the direction I had come. Fucking Asia. A few minutes later I stopped to stub the smoke out under my shoe. There she was, the older lady from the shop, waiting, looking straight at me from underneath her silver sun umbrella. She didn’t make any effort to pretend she wasn’t following me, just waited impatiently for me to get going again. I smiled and walked on, down past Siam Square again and towards the river. Turning left for no particular reason I found myself in another alleyway full of motorbikes outside a hotel. I love Chinese Hotels. Hotel Kite, with a sign indicating Karaoke, restaurant and swimming pool. A huge old fish in Reception and

the smell of cabbage. I paid the rate card, about fifteen pounds for the night. They took my passport and I took a key, not a word exchanged. The lady waited outside. When I went down for breakfast in the morning, I expected to see her hovering by my table with that umbrella, but she had gone. There was a note at Reception explaining in perfect English that it would be fine to sell me 100 Tiffany clocks and I could pick them up at my convenience. Again no price was mentioned and no location- I presumed the little shop I had visited the day before.

The note was signed Mr. Anton. The script and grammar was perfect, almost old school. The paper crisp, fragile and lightly scented. I wanted to lick it, but stopped myself remembering I was sane and in a hotel lobby.

That night, I drank in the hotel bar, the only white face, completely ignored by the other clients, mainly Chinese men in town for business and a couple of giggling Thai girls taking it in turns to sing badly at the television screen. The barman brought me cigarettes when mine ran out, adding the amount to my bill without me asking. Sangsom Coke, sweet whisky, almost like rum. I finished the dregs of the bottle in my room, a hot long room, blue trodden carpet, brown blanket on a basic bed. The television crackling in-between Asian channels. The lamp by my bed had a bare wire hanging out the back and no bulb. So I sat on the floor, flicking ash at it, swallowing the last measures of alcohol. Little songs came through the walls, humping, fucking, singing. Muffled giggles, both voices high pitched. I too sang to myself a little bit, sticking my head and shoulders out of the window, cigarette between my teeth, grin on my face. Fuck you. Fuck you all. Fucking love it mate. My face was burnt and my tongue numb from

the juice. I just wanted to giggle, let the laugh out. There was a perfect little Tiffany clock on my bed, a bottle in my hand and money in my pocket. I had sold another clock to a guy waiting in the lobby for his girlfriend. He hadn't seen anything like it before, only ever seen watches, presumed the Tiffany mark wasn't easy to do.

He'd given me twenty dollars- I didn't ask for it, he just happened to be there when I unwrapped mine and offered the money. That day I had only taken ten, just what would fit in my rucksack. The lady had walked me to the front of the little queue and pushed me into the room at the watch shop. Things had been scribbled, notes exchanged. One hundred dollars for ten. I figured that if I wanted to, I could live at this crappy hotel, shifting one a day, pissing each night away. But I wouldn't. Crime didn't appeal, not even shoddy little counterfeit crime. It wasn't me. Boxes and dollar bills. I never dealt with anything real, spending the whole of my working life moving data around and saying clever words about technical design. Both were bullshit- the art of the fake, the copy, the con. But I liked that I had sold a not-Tiffany clock at a profit to an American in the lobby of a Chinese hotel in Bangkok. I liked that. That was good. A month later I shipped two hundred and ten not-Tiffany clocks to a little shop in Victoria where they made their way across EBay and various wedding lists to the mantel pieces of two hundred and ten well to do brides. I made about sixteen thousand dollars. To those who may have or will now get in shit for that- sorry.

THE ORIENTAL

Money changes everything. Money is confidence, beauty, accomplishment, meaning, ownership. Money is love. Things are not love, objects are not love, but purchasing them is. I used to believe this, -it used to be the reason I got up every morning. I know people who won't buy something they want because someone else with less money has bought one. Money gives you a place in the world, a language, a goal. In my life I have had a lot of money and I have had no money. There have been days when bits of paper said I was a millionaire and others when the change in my pocket wasn't enough for a bus. I have walked home, I have flown home, I have sailed home and been carried. One day after my twenty fifth birthday I spent more than you probably earn on dinner. Myself and five friends. Bottles of wine twice our age, fungi so expensive they shave it onto your food. A private table in West Street, just in-between being hidden and on show. I didn't even see the bill, you don't sign for amounts like that, you just acknowledge that the end of the meal has come and whisper your intentions into an ear. The company paid for all of it. I don't really know what 'the company' was, apart from a legal agreement at Companies House and my name on bits of paper. None the less, I protected the company, I nurtured the company, I slept, stroked and preached the company. I was the company. Four months after I left London, a quick check on a website confirmed that no accounts had been filed. Legally this means we were months from bankruptcy. Without me there to explain the future or to hand over the baton, 'the company' would just stop

existing. A lot of people who thought they might retire on my bright ideas would never get their money. People I employed would stop getting cheques and the digital things we made would stop being there. In leaving London I had effectively pulled the plug on many little people who had trusted me and this was my only regret. In theory the company owned me, it owned my ideas, my words, my thoughts. That's how I had raised the investment in the first place. Sold my soul. When the company stopped being alive, I could no longer legally own my identity. So I stopped that happening. In an email from a temporary account, I sent a form hiring my secretary onto the board. Digitally signed and filed, this was followed by my official departure. I waved all unpaid wages, share options, ownership and rights in return for one piece of paper, the one that gave them the rights to everything I thought. Intangible assets they call it. Knowledge. They kept everything else- every piece of code I had designed, every client I had met, every network or database I traded with. But I kept me, my words, my future, my this. I don't know who got the better deal. I saw something about one of my projects going on to be listed on the exchange. If only they knew, technology gets out of hand when you don't nurture it, maintain it, cuddle it. Things fall apart, infinite loops that need to be solved, holes that need to be filled. Clones that need to be explained away. I sometimes feel guilty for the things I left them to own, waiting one day to see their real value revealed. I knew in London that I was trading on my ability to talk, to explain, to negate the need to have a product in place. We had copied, we had taken, we had stolen. Parts of the code weren't even there- bridges we planned to cross one day. But the trade was legal, final, complete. They got the past

and I own the future. They have the product and I have the story.

With cash in my pocket and my resignation from London sent to all the right places, I took myself to dinner at the Oriental. It had been months since I sat somewhere expensive surrounded by 'my own kind'. I had taken to wearing the clothes of the businessmen I 'worked' with in Thailand. Asian attire, silk shirts, long loose trousers, sandals or slippers. Sitting at the bar, I longed for a tie. My clothes and the colour of my skin told everyone exactly who I was- nobody, someone from here, a guy living in Bangkok and trading within the city. Every other soul in that gilded room had just stepped off a plane, or was killing time before catching one. I twitched nervously, remembering the rules. I may have been the only person that year to address the waitress in Thai and to acknowledge my meal with the appropriate gestures and graces. Even the Thais were playing at being American- toasting with beer, flashing the cash, tipping the staff. Even though I had money in abundance, I no longer fitted into that machine. My brow grew hot and the shivers came back. What I thought might be an hour or two of self congratulation turned into loneliness.

Once again I was waiting nervously for a friend. Inventing dogs and mobile phones. Before my dinner arrived, I overheard a guy talking to his colleague. "Upscaled the account, took them totally for a ride. Be in the bag by Thursday." His mate stroked his beer, making little lines on the glass as he twisted it around. "Get them over your lap mate. Close it tonight and we touch Singapore in the morning." I wanted to slap them. I wanted to take them over my lap and make them repeat their silly phrases as I whipped their arse. Boys, playing blindly with

Thailand. By midnight they would both be in bars paying people to suck dick. I hated them because I saw myself in them. The thrill of zeros, the negotiation, the deal, the close. When you succeed at making money, that's how people judge you, not on anything else. Not on your face, not on your background, not on the things you do to each other. Money counts. It was time to do what I had set out to do- to walk away from that, to see what else there was. I had to be totally away in order to see why I wasn't at home. With a slight dip of the head and a finger to the lips, I was as they say, out of there.

THE GULF OF SIAM

I'm not sure why, but I no longer wanted to fly everywhere. I could afford to, but it didn't seem right, hoping from one place to another, re-joining the commuters and the transcontinental salesmen. I think more than anything else, I didn't want to be in an airport with London on the screen. It would have been hard at that point, with cash in my hand, not to fly back to the UK. At no point did I consider going back to life how it was, walk back into the office and join the boys in the pub, but I did have a weird urge to watch it all again from the sidelines. Kind of like faking your death and attending your funeral. I wanted to see Anya- to remember her face again. I wanted to attend the launch of one of my projects, listen into conversations about my absence. More than anything I wanted to go back and tell people what I now knew, how I had changed, what I really meant to say to them so many years ago. Too tempting to hear the judgement before the paintings complete. By this point of course I had made some contact- told a few people that I was away, not dead, not insane. Text messages from borrowed phones. The sanity part was kind of rhetorical, but I needed people to know I was still on the face of the earth so that the feelings I was collecting all belonged to me. You know the thing- when someone dies, they are suddenly the most amazing person in the world. The deceased become beautiful, strong, brave, unique. I didn't want them to have stories to tell about times they spent with me. I didn't want them to be the one I confided in, the one I slept with, the only ones who truly loved me. I didn't want people I didn't give a

damn about to use me in their character, their spiel, their pulling speech. In the early days of vanishing from London I had been angry that nobody had stopped me, but now, more sober, a little more alive than I had been, I couldn't imagine anyone stopping me but myself. I just didn't want people to think I was dead, not yet, not now that life was something I could taste every day. Something I was starting to like.

The ship left the coast at night. I stood in the lobby with everyone else, glass in hand to toast our departure. Buying my ticket the day before we sailed saved me a fortune, but this was still the most expensive purchase I had made so far. The perfect use for the money I made in Bangkok- I planned to spend all of it leaving, recycle it back into the hands it came from. The ship would take just over four days to sail slowly from the coast, straight down through the Gulf of Siam, past Pattaya and the mindless neon resorts, south to the island archipelago of Samui. There, I planned to wait quietly until someone told me the next step. My obsession with Islands completely fuelled- crossing the ocean by sail, surrounded by water. My company, a mismatch group of tourists, mainly eastern and a crew of two for every soul on board.

After the welcome speeches, the cheers, the champagne fountain and the obligatory buffet food, I toured the ship looking for a bar. Having never been onboard something quite this size before, I expected only what I had experienced on ferry crossings or days onboard boats. Not so, here on The Crystal we had a choice of twelve places you could get drunk, four restaurants, two pools, a shopping mall and casino. It was comfortable and friendly- the people onboard typically older than me and not interested in talking shop. Most people these days opt for the hour

long flight from north to south, or the overnight coaches if you are the backpacking type. The passengers of The Crystal were here to sail, slowly, gracefully, majestically-kind of like the first people to complete this trip, one lifetime ago. Of course they had planks and I had a liner but I expect we both had whisky.

Taking my glass onto the deck, I allowed the cold conditioned air in my lungs to mix with the hot salt outside. Everyone was elsewhere and the sea sounded quieter than I had imagined, little tufts of white the only evidence that it was there at all in the darkness. Walking right to the edge, I looked out for a horizon, noticing that it was 'black moon' that night. Nothing at all- just the taste of the whisky, the air, the rail and the movement through blackness. We could have been on a spacecraft- the glitter of the sea matching the stars. It was overwhelmingly romantic and I yearned for someone to share it with.

I think for the first time since leaving home, I consciously shed a tear, drastically aware that I wasn't with people I loved, people I knew, people to twist around my legs at night and whisper my words to.

Each morning they slid a tiny newspaper under the door. Headlines from the country printed in your passport and a list of activities and dining options through the day. Card games for old people, ballroom dancing, computer skills for beginners. I spent the hours pacing the decks, sitting with nothing much on my mind, staring out to sea. Most people tipped their hat or cranked a smile when they walked past. Retired couples hand in hand, younger singles, binoculars and expensive cameras hung around their neck. It was wonderfully hot, the sweat kept at bay by our motion through the sea air. At dawn or dusk the light was at

its best, rising and falling quicker than it does in colder places. I waited each evening for the last flame to sink under the horizon, filling the sky with purples and reds. The frequency of the colours calming me and holding me still. Always I have felt the language of the sun is drowned out during the day, the words only getting through for a millisecond right at the beginning or end, just like that tiny mark on the timeline where humans burst into existence and everything made sense. Inhaling slowly, burning the cinders of my cigarette.

I guess my routine had been noticed by other passengers on the ship, commenting at the bar on the sunset or rise, the mix of colours or the intensity of the light. It was warming and wonderfully human to focus conversation on the nature of earth rather than the silly things who plod upon it. I wondered how strange our blue and white craft would look to an alien, swooping in on his quest for samples. I wonder if he could imagine why we travelled the way we did, hulled up in steel, sipping champagne, staring at the edges of our planet. I hope dolphins and fish appreciate the sunset, the slow tones of gold, reaching the tips of mountains under the ocean.

On the third and final night at sea I struck up a conversation with a waiter. I had eaten late and was one of only a few left on the deck. As he was pouring the dregs of a bottle into my glass he asked if I had enjoyed the fish. Caught that day he said right here from the ship. I had seen the nets being brought in at dawn, silver whips leaping on top of each other for freedom. I asked him if he was a good fisherman, his eyes darting around before answering me. "One of the best sir. I catch enough fish to feed this whole ship if they didn't make me also wash the bar in the morning." Soon, seeing as I was the last still dining,

he saw fit to join me, accepting the other chair as I pulled it from the table. His name was Bao. Dark skinned, high cheek bones more African than Thai. Tight black hair, high on his head. When Bao smiled it cut his face in two, wide and bright.

We talked that night about the ship, about the other customers- the eccentric old lady who wore formal dress each night and the girl who had brought various bugs in glass bottles on with her luggage, loosing most of them as we sailed, bottles breaking in her room with the tilt of the hull. He had been dispatched on the second morning with a list of insects to collect or replace- some he said didn't exist in Thailand and had probably been brought from Laos. Beetles that pump out a gas when frightened, butterflies with the wingspan of a hand. He said it was easy to find the common ones as we were never far out to sea- the thin strip of Thailand lying to our right, only just out of sight but always there. I loved the idea of Bao running the ship each morning, fish in one hand, butterfly net in the other. He probably made the story up just to entertain me, but I laughed anyway, enjoying the image.

We drank late into the night, taking a bottle of wine to the bar. Most of the passengers retired early, so nobody noticed us getting happily drunk, our glasses spilling with each exaggerated hand movement indicating the size of a fish or the hang of a breast. I liked Bao, he had an openness rare in the Thais- I felt I could read his mind through his face, his smile, his laugh. Often I found conversation with Thai men or women overly polite, gentle, a little reclusive. Bao laughed tilting his head back, almost Parisian in the way he held his cigarette. He had lived most of his life around Ferangs, moving from place to place with the cruise line. Originally he had wanted to be an artist,

selling charcoal images of his home to tourists, but it hadn't worked out.

People had come down from the north, from Chang Mai, with truck loads of paintings, bright colours, thick lines of oil, yellows and blues just like the Americans like to buy. He said they were mass produced in factories near the ancient city, one big version in-front of ten or twenty kids, slapping away with paint. His drawings were too gentle, too real, too much like the actual scenes he portrayed and nobody bought them. When his brother was killed by a falling tree he had to make money for the family- never married, never fathered a kid. Each month he made a fair sum here on The Crystal, sailing between the shore near Bangkok and down to Samui or sometimes further, right the way to Singapore and Borneo. Once a month he spent a few days on land, always in Bangkok to buy clothes or to visit friends in bars he had worked in. I asked him if he had worked in the 'better' bars of the city. He knew what I meant and closed his eyes, shaking his head like a wet dog. He had done things for money, but only to women. He said that German women paid most, often offering to hire him for a week, just to drive them around and to fuck them at night. I couldn't imagine women paying for sex- it seemed so pointless, but apparently it happened everywhere. Older women, maybe divorced, always travelling on their own back to the places they had got married or seen as a teenager. He had no respect for his clients, saying they didn't tip like men would or buy gifts- didn't even pretend to be interested in him, just fucked and paid and dismissed like owners to the slave. He had lasted three months in Bangkok's bars, before following a friend onto the ship.

I asked Bao if he ever visited his family. He was quiet

for a little while, staring through me, inhaling his drag. “My mother is angry” he said. “I send money back, but I have never married. Our family is stopped with me.” Later I thought it quite ironic that Bao and I had met, both of us escaping our islands, our way of life, our barriers and boundaries. We both had at some time chosen money over life, over wife, over family. Neither of us had maintained links back to the places we were from, our identity, our home. Travellers into each others population. He told me he grew up on a tiny island, not many people lived there because the land wasn’t good for growing trees or coconuts. North of a place called Koh Lanta Yai on the Western coast. He said that one day he would return and marry and maybe run a little guest house for the divers or tourists. “But I am more like you now, little island would be silly place to be.” I didn’t see Bao again, but imagined him the morning after, tripping up the boardwalk, hungover and looking for butterflies.

KOH SAMUI

Nathon harbour- Chinese junks full of backpackers in from the mainland, catamarans doing the island hop, private yachts bobbing about, waiting their turn. On the pier, hundreds of hands groped for yours, wanting to pull you into a taxi or truck heading for the beaches. Little women and smart Thai guys waved cardboard prints of their hotel or their huts, all with the sea bright blue and the sand stark white. Stepping onshore from the largest landing, we were mostly ignored by the rabble, probably presuming that we had cars waiting and hotels booked.

It's obvious as soon as you get close that Samui is no longer a pretty island. Of course the beaches are pristine and the sand the perfect shade, but that's all. Everywhere you look the hillsides had been flattened, American villas and modern pavilions sprouting up in neat little lines anywhere there was a view. Only small coconut plantations remain in-between, every acre of forest and jungle cleared and re-used. Four wheel drive vehicles, packed to the seams with traveller types, backpacks and boxes, or dark shaded Mitsubishi's, back window painted with the logo of five star hotels. It's a simple drive- one circular road, jutting inland at the airport and crocodile farm.

Not having a plan, I followed everyone else, my little bag hanging off my shoulder and sunglasses clinging to my head.

By now my hair was long with a natural twist that had never been allowed to emerge back in the UK. I guess to the untrained eye I could have been a tourist,

probably here for sailing or diving- thin enough and dressed in the smart-casual clothes I had bought on the liner. A black t-shirt, a little too large, chinos and belt, black leather sandals.

Four of us paid a driver to take us out of Nathon, around the coast clockwise to Lamai. This was the beach raved about in airline magazines and travel brochures. Family fun, brand name hotels, all you can eat buffets. I didn't know what else to expect but a hotter, cheaper version of Greece. That's what I got. Just two long streets- entirely taken up by hotels on one side and restaurants on the other, just a couple of '24 hour suit' stores and CD markets dotted down side streets. It wasn't attractive by any means- a dusty road, pitted with the remains of pizza boxes and drink cans. Hotel gates suspiciously tall and manned by bored looking security guys, over dressed for the forty degree relentless sun. Everywhere I looked the men wore bandanas and union jacks- the women bulging out of bright swimming attire, white and red in equal amounts. This was the sort of place I would have paid not to go to, if only I hadn't been 'away' so long. New York and Bangkok had been my home for literally months and the one thing my soul craved was stupid British company. People to talk crap with, eat chips with, order pizza with, watch football with.

It amazed me that this was my shopping list- Stella Artois and the Cup Final, but I couldn't concentrate on anything else. I was a guy, on holiday without ties, a few notes burning holes in his pockets. The Central Samui Hotel was built for people who have a very small concept of paradise. From the beach it looks impressive- towers of Thai style concrete, wooden detail curling in the right places. Square pools in the middle of courtyards, fountains sprinkling water over the rocks, through palm trees so tall they could never

have grown here. The local law allowing the tallest roof to come only to the coconuts, rumour has it they were shipped in from Cambodia. Nobody cares, it's simply too late to save Samui from development. After all, it's not a terrible place- Samui delivers what the majority of people in Western Europe demand. Simple, bland, craftless-romance. More Disney than oriental, I forgave its excesses and slumped into an overstuffed quilt, sipping cold beer from my in-room fridge. On my first night in Lamai, I drank at least fifteen beers, one after the other, tripping without fear or thought down a line of bars. In a small way I think I was celebrating my travels, half way around the world, alone- one little man escaping the world. At four or five in the morning, I was fighting some guy in an alley- his wife standing on, hurling single syllable abuse at me and my team. At some point I think he had dropped a pint on my lap- or I had on his, probably both.

His name was John and he floored me with a single blow, right across the eye. Within hours we were best of mates, him holding ice cubes onto my head in a one armed bear hug, showing off his pal to unimpressed Thai girls finishing their shift.

I don't know why we bonded, I don't know if I had a choice. To be honest, I have no idea if any of this happened, it's just the most natural link between the evidence I found in the morning (namely no money, obvious intake of alcohol, a black eye and johns T-shirt, signed 'To my best mate, the shit head'). White light throbbled into the room, air conditioning having been on all night, chilling me to the bone. It took all week for the black eye to subside and I stuck out like a sore thumb- British guy on vacation. Every time I walked through the hotel John and his wife would be there- urging me to join them for dinner, steak and

chips, or to come in and try the water. I hated John and his wife- their accent, their happy loud grins, the drinks they drank through curly straws and paper umbrellas. I hated that they thought the barman liked them and left him the equivalent of half a days wages as a tip every night. I despised their beach towels and their flip flops and the way they seemed to absolutely adore me. "So you just quit Huh. Just texted the bloke and left London. Fucking ace mate. We should do that Jean, always said we should." I don't even remember telling them the details of my journey but apparently I had, even at one point crying into Jeans shoulder, wailing that Anya was the love of my life. "You were right to leave her chicken. If she loved you she would have called. They have phones in Thailand don't they John?" I hated them and I hated me and most of all, I hated Koh Samui.

Days passed slowly, the majority of my brain plotting an easy return to the UK. I considered plans and explanations. Scribbled flow charts- a possible romance, a secret wedding, the death of my mother. In the end it came down to pride. If I was going back, I had to face the fact that I was at the bottom rung again, had achieved nothing in my mad few months. I guess I would have a little more edge, more mystery and a darker tan than everyone else, but that was about it. I didn't even know if I still owned my house- probably not. If I left that week it would give me time to try and rent somewhere with the thousand or so pounds I had left. I could maybe take a room in one of my less adventurous friends houses, preferably someone quiet who could cook. Maybe I could go back to the UK but not to London, start again in another city, use the people I knew to develop some sort of data development firm, Manchester or Birmingham. They didn't have to know I was back

until I had made money again, bought myself a car and learnt how to drive. My morning after doom was extreme and shocked me. I wanted it all to finish, before it was too late. One thousand pounds to my name. An air ticket and five days in a hotel. Fucking fuck.

Saturday night in the bar of the hotel. John nursed his pint- the last he would have in Thailand before he and Jean flew back to Manchester. They had spent their days on the beach, their nights in bars and would now return to sensible jobs, a two bedroom house and the family Ford. As I listened to him telling me about his son, the A-level results, a place at university to study Politics, a little envy welled up in me. I've never been close to my family- both adopted, both with a blurred history that connects only as far as vague grandparents. I nodded and smiled as John told me about his sons smoking habits and the girlfriend the family had loved but that he had suddenly stopped seeing. Jeans wish that maybe little Jack would come back to Manchester after university and settle in the city like she had done, meeting John at the wedding of a random neighbour. This is how life sounds for millions of couples from our little island in the cold sea. Simple desires and duplicate goals. I knew that John loved Manchester, his mates, his pub, his job at the local car dealership. They had saved for two years to fly out for a week- the honeymoon they never had. I imagined them telling the neighbours back home about the azure seas and fifty pence pints. John and Jean were everything Great Britain was built around- they were the people who built the country, who the flag stood for, the battles fought for. The simple and fair life of John and Jean, its worries, pains and depths hidden from me by a language barrier. We clinked our glasses and shook our goodbyes as they headed out of

my life, promising to invite me to BBQ's on the front lawn. Hours later, I packed and headed to the airport. Koh Samui airport is sweet. There is no other word for it. Thatched wooden buildings and coconut trees. Built and paid for by the little airline that runs between here and Bangkok, its every inch the airport Robinson Crusoe would have built, his kids gathering leaves for the roof and routers for the web kiosk. There are no waiting lounges or formal security checks, just a window for tickets and the usual airline desks. People sit on patches of grass in the middle, close enough to watch the planes landing and people walking down rickety steps into arrivals. A dollar a head by minibus to the beach or twenty cents to go by truck. Simple and efficient. When I arrived, just after eight, I was told that the last flight to Bangkok had left, but I could catch one to the mainland and travel on from there. Not wanting to extend my journey unnecessarily, I opted for a standby ticket for the first flight of the morning, six fifteen, direct to the capital. From there, I hoped to go straight to the International terminal and stretch my funds far enough for a ticket to the UK. I had heard that the cheaper flights, via Arabia sold on the day for less than four hundred pounds, leaving me maybe two hundred for when I touched down. I would go to Anyas, stay there for the night and make plans after that.

Rather than sleep at the airport with its caged monkey and parrot, I made my way by taxi-bike to the nearest town. A tiny place, BoPhut, one line of old Chinese fisherman's houses, cowering on silts over the sand. No international hotels, just a couple of guest houses, a bungalow resort and rooms above restaurants. As we turned the corner into the main road, we passed under a sign. "BoPhut Fisherman's Village,

Warm Wind Bring You Back Again.” The beautiful non-English, full of sweet hope. I paid for my ride and walked towards the pier- a dangle of planks, three wide and about thirty long, pitching into the sea. Two boats, the kind you might rent for a day, little sails and plastic hulls were tied to the supports. I sat a while sipping dark thick Thai coffee, taking in the amber sunset and listening to people babble in French. Coffee Junction- a perfectly eccentric and ridiculously expensive place, European and Thai all at once, hulled out of a fisherman’s house on the corner by the pier. The owner joined me at my table, asking if I was here for the festival. “No sorry. Flying out in the morning.” “Oh no problem, it’s the first time we have held the festival here, didn’t think word had got out, that’s why I asked anyway.” “I’m just here for the night.” “Need a room?” Upstairs, directly above the coffee house were two studio flats. Huge beds covered in white cotton and blankets. White painted floors, wicker table and chairs. Each room had a pillar in the middle supporting the roof and a balcony all the way around the front and down the side. I paid about twelve pounds to stay there the night, planning to leave at five and walk to the airport. For about a pound more he threw in dinner- a baguette filled with prawns and a glass of red wine. Everywhere I had been in Thailand people were drinking wine- strange considering it costs more than a basic room or a good meal, but I guess it was the big thing that year. Italian wines, usually red. I twisted the Merlot in my hand, warming the glass instinctively. My cigarettes were an unfamiliar, strong brand, kind of like Marlboro Reds but a little darker, like the smell of wood. I loved my room above the coffee shop, sitting alone, watching the Chinese women hang sheets and clothes across roofs and the men gather next to the

pier, cigarettes and tea brought to them by cute little kids. It was peaceful and comfortable. Even the mosquitoes buzzed with a rhythm until squashed in my hand. As the last rays cut through the sky, an island offshore came into view. Previously hidden by the daytime mist and falling light, it became a dark silhouette, soaring high and sharp into the centre of my vista. From here you could see the whole shape of the island, its mountains and boundaries, its depths. This was the view I came to Thailand for. BoPhut was the Samui I wanted, a little bit eccentric, smoky, spicy and sweet. Wooden balcony views and distant lands, more and more magnetic as the wine ran through me. Soon the bottle was done. I slept in, soothed by the sound of boats till almost midday, my plane ticket crumpled in the ashtray.

BO PHUT

My days in BoPhut were long and lazy. Staying on at the coffee shop I woke up late each morning and went to sleep only when the noise of boats coming and going subsided. I had no plan, just a softening down- a slowness that came over me, making it impossible to leave. Each day I ate fresh bread bought from the French bar next to the pier. Each night I put on a shirt or a scrappy t-shirt and walked up and down the two streets of the village. In time I got to know everyone there- John the American, been in the village for five years since his divorce, successful little beach bar serving the tourists who came for their week of diving lessons. Malcolm and Guido, Italian and British, wonderfully expatriated to their new life running a European restaurant with wonderful Thai food- spices and chillies removed. Brian, the Author, who drinks red wine after eight and something stronger at eleven. These were the kings of the village- the men in suits, the money. Around them a small population of Chinese and Thai carried on fishing, and scrubbing babies in the street. Every house at one time a huge fisherman's lodge, built for several generations of the same name, now either sold on to the tourist business or carved up into a little shop, a bar and an internet café. It sounds like it shouldn't work, but it does- the old women sitting, legs swinging from the tables, crinkled Thai faces wearing a permanent grin. Men in circles at the pier, one or two tourists stopping to buy the chicken on skewers they cook all day long on make shift BBQs. The whole village had been preparing for the festival. Since the rise of the resorts on the east cost of the

island, quaint little BoPhut had lost its steady flow of adventurous tourists and travellers who had been put off by the commercialisation of the island. In an attempt to win back trade, the villagers, bar owners and sheriff had planned a food festival that would be covered by the local papers and feature on the agenda of some of the sailing fraternity offshore. It was the talk of every bar as I made my way in a developing routine from the French bar (where we slated Thailand and praised Vietnam, none of us having been there) to the American bar (where we slated Thailand and praised America) to the little restaurant run by Malcolm and Guido, where we usually just praised each other and forgot about Thailand. I had my own place, a stool at the end of the bar next to the door- just the one I had first sat down upon the night I decided to wonder in. Ever since, when I walked past, hands would beckon for me to come and sit, a glass of something strong would be poured and matches thrown my way. The cooks were planning to compete at the festival and as the opening night drew nearer they would come to the bar speaking of European vegetables they had arranged to fly in or oils and spices they had purchased from the mainland. Fresh yellow lemons would appear dumbfounding the cocktail guy who presumed lemons were green. Steaks from New Zealand, fish from the harbour- everything was coming together, paraded like a prize catch through the street and into the ice box of each restaurant. Guido prepared pasta, fresh and salty- little bowls with three or four spirals sliding to my end of the bar to be tasted and appropriately congratulated. BoPhut was all about food and the festival was a chance to compete, friend against friend, country against country.

In the morning long tail boats arrived (like the sort

you might go punting in, but with a motorbike engine on a long pole sticking out of the rear) from Koh Pha Ngan with hordes of hippy-type travellers and backpackers. Groups of bronzed Australians gathered in the bars, bags heaped up at the door. American kids with rags of clothes and obligatory guitars lined the little beach swigging Red Bull and Chang, the local beer guaranteed to floor untrained western drinkers. Each boy a little buffed by his months away from home, toned and muscled by the weight of belongings carried on shoulders through the world. The girls had outgrown hair and the oiled confidence of young women who had taken on the planet and cleaned up at their A-levels. Usually hidden from the agenda of the traveller through fear of expense and from the eyes of the tourist through simple lack of knowledge, BoPhut was filling up quickly with souls that night from every country and every budget. Next door to me a whole family had rented the second studio- their swimming things blowing off the balcony into the street. Towels around babies crawling precariously around the wooden deck, playing with the lines of ants attracted to our rubbish. Nobody really knew why they were there or what the festival was about, but on an island like Samui, everyone follows the next- and so we were all here, faces on balconies, bodies on beaches, babies on roof decks. At sundown the chefs came through the village, each wearing traditional dress (Thai, American, French, whatever they felt they belonged to) carrying a huge metal plate of their prepared delicacy. They were followed by the families, regulars and staff of each venue, cheering and handing out flowers and leaflets to the crowd. Each dish was placed on a long table in front of the pier, the sheriff and a monk presiding over the tasting (nobody pointing out the irregularity

of a monk eating at night time). My boys Guido and Graham came in- a bowl over flowing with pasta in a white sauce. As if to sway the vote, glasses of wine, spirits and fruit juices were placed by each bowl by its owner, wives and daughters bowing before placing flowers and beads onto the festival Buddha. The sheriff took each dish into his consideration-looking through the crowd for its owner, making faces of anguish, pain and disgust in return for laughs from the crowd. The pasta was hilarious, glooping from his chop sticks down his silk shirt and onto the floor. Somebody ran to bring him a fork, taking his crumpled shirt and letting him continue half undressed. Of course the local Thai dish won- a green curry served in a bowl made entirely from an Aubergine, its purple skin the same colour as the sky as dark came over us.

I drank with Graham, little shots of an Italian spirit he had saved for the night. Cigars dropping from lips and growls all round. "Bloody Thai fix". They were already planning a statement to the local paper announcing their plans for next year. Thai noodles rather than spaghetti, chilli rather than garlic. Fusion cooking was being born but I was too drunk to notice. We polished off six or seven shots, swapping the cigars for the Marlboro Menthols that were cheap to buy next door. The music was a little louder than usual, romantic operatic clashing with squeals of Thai Pop and the random ringing of bells (we never found the source). By the time the sheriff came to thank our chef we were all pissed, Brian falling off his stool when he tried to stand and shake hands with the local dignitary. Even the sound of one of Guido's prized glasses ("Each one I picked in Italy") crashing to the floor only being met with laughter and gentle growls. At some point without

reason we moved onto the beach, Guido sitting on the side of his little sailing boat, the rest of us on the sand, bottles in buckets of ice from the bar. People had lit fires all the way down the beach, some setting off fire crackers every few minutes, or rockets held in the hand until the very last second. As we sat or lay, the hours passed under the white milky moon and tail boats began to arrive from the darkness to take people away. Little green lights bobbing between islands. Empires forming in our heads. Names forgotten, drinks spilled and alliances made. This was their little kingdom- six men, six bars, since houses, the white men of BoPhut and their kitchens of war. The emperors of a little corner of a simple and flattened island, entertaining their people with food and wine. I lay flat, star fished into the sand, stars spinning a little too much for my eyes. Dark hot heat of BoPhut night, waves lapping log fires and little explosions echoing off islands. I could taste Europe on my tongue and smell Asia in the air. Inhaling the last of my cigarettes I mentally thanked them for playing with their lives on Samui.

I praised them for their little festival and for letting me have a stool at the bar. For just that last second as my heavy eyes closed, I could imagine that I lived there, breathing and being, on BoPhut Beach.

The morning after the festival I woke up in my bed above the coffee shop, sand in my hair and without shoes. There was a commotion outside, vehicles revving and people shouting in English. Bleary eyed I staggered over to the window. Twenty or thirty guys were struggling with bags, trying to unhook rucksacks from the roof of a minibus and throwing them to each other. The guy on the roof unhooking wire mesh from over the luggage was the most American of all of them. Broad shouldered, baseball cap on

backwards, knee length shorts and a whiter than white grin. Alpha male. His gathering consisted of what looked like most of a baseball team, although each seemed to have a different team logo on their clothes. The girls were hanging back, taking photographs of the coffee shop and the aquamarine water lapping our little harbour. An hour later they waddled one by one along the little pier onto a ferry waiting to take them over the twenty minutes or so to Koh PhaNgan. I had learnt from Malcolm that once a month a few thousand foreigners gathered on the beaches of Hat Rin on the south side of the island for what is basically Asia's biggest rave. Over the course of the night usually two or three would take too many mushrooms and attempt to swim out to their doom or wake up face down in their own regret. People would be coming through BoPhut all week making the crossing to the party, trying to find a room or setting up camp.

The idea of it made my head hurt, hiding my red eyes under dark glasses as I climbed downstairs to the coffee.

Most of the people I recognised from the competition gathered for coffee, toast and the pork mulch the Asians liked to eat for breakfast. Guido and Malcolm brought their wives- gentle fragile women, both carrying dubious Louis V bags over their shoulders. Apparently sixty five year old Brian had last been seen kicking about in the sea at two in the morning with the Sheriff's daughter, a match that would probably result in his imprisonment if he showed up at all that day. I planned to down as much caffeine as possible and return to bed, air-con on and water nearby. The table next to mine obviously had a similar idea- the guy from the minibus roof resting his head on his arms whilst his attractive girlfriend stirred a mug of

black liquid. Realising I had been looking over at her for a weirdly long time, I piped up a good morning, raised my mug in greeting and returned to the conversation about Brian's latest love match. When her coffee was finished, the girl stood from her table and asked Malcolm for directions to the currency exchange, explaining that her friends were going to the Full Moon but she was looking for somewhere to stay here at BoPhut. Whilst wondering why she was holding back from her group, I suggested asking upstairs- which in a hungover and fuzzy kind of way is how I met Lucy, my neighbour and new playmate in Thailand.

Lucy was my age but that was the only similarity in our backgrounds. Brought up in Perth, she had spent her childhood messing about on beaches and fishing with her dad in the creek. A bit of a tomboy, she rode mountain bikes by the age of eight, was surfing at ten and had begged her parents to allow her to take her first bungee jump on her twelfth birthday. I could imagine her squeals of delight as her body fell vertically to the concrete, blond curls flying back from her freckled face. That was the kind of girl Lucy was- frizzy, curly, beautifully fearless. The guy with her at the coffee shop turned out not to be her boyfriend, but her cousin, whose parents had raised him in the USA, encouraging them to meet up in Asia on their gap year. Lucy had tolerated Eric's all night drinking for six weeks, nursing hangovers and international incidents through China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. Finally they had agreed that being the only female in a travelling group of fifteen wasn't Lucy's ideal vacation and they would split for the last week, Lucy staying somewhere comfortable, preferably with a Spa and Eric passing out as frequently as possible on Koh PhaNgan. She enjoyed a drink as much as the

next, but it seemed Eric wasn't quite used to the tittle he was so fond of- the drinking age in America restricting his previous experience and leaving him a bit of a light-weight when it actually came to keeping his beers down. They had been arrested in China after he fell backwards through a hotel window and threatened by an armed guest house owner when he was sick in a fishpond somewhere near Siem Reap. Each time Lucy had been there to pay bribes, to replace windows and to telephone embassy officials when his passport was ripped up in-front of his face. She had absolutely no doubt more would follow, but had handed over the reigns to his college pals, waving them off at the pier. Her last two weeks would be spent on the relatively civilised island of Samui, here in BoPhut, probably doing nothing more than enjoying the cheap massage and sunning herself with a glass of something strong. That was the intention spelt out on our first night sitting on the coffee shop balcony, sipping coconut rum, the little divider taken down between my half of the deck and hers.

MY ISLAND

By the time Lucy joined me in the rooms above the coffee shop, the owner had realised I wasn't going to leave any day soon. Each morning he left me an English newspaper (a week or so old, not often in any order) outside the door and even offered to have his wife clean my clothes for the equivalent of about two pounds a week. With a few hundred pounds left (all of it now in cash), I didn't have to think about money, so long as I banished any thoughts of how to get home. Food cost less than a few pounds each day, even if I ate at Malcolm's restaurant, where a bowl of Italian pasta was about ten times the price of the rice or noodle dishes served up in the Thai cafes. The only thing that ate into my budget was beer- costing about the same as a three course meal. Two options, Singha or Chang- both strong, full beers that should be imported to London where they would make a killing in Soho. The answer was to drink the local whisky instead, bought in a one litre bottle for about two pounds- downed straight or mixed in with half a can of Coke. Together, on the balcony we would drink a good half bottle each night before wondering down to join Malcolm and the others or walking the dirt roads around the coast. Lucy spent the days on her own, reading and emailing friends back in Australia, but seemed to enjoy my company as darkness fell. After dark her voice would come through the wall demanding whisky or sending me to beg some ice cubes from downstairs. On the fifth night after her arrival however the knock didn't come. I sat waiting till ten, then assuming she wanted some peace that night made my way down to the store, planning to do

nothing more than eat crisps and read old newspapers. Stopping me in my tracks, outside the door was an empty beer bottle holding a lit candle. The wax had melted down onto the doorstep and over the corner of a piece of paper tucked underneath. Seeing my name, I retrieved the note and read the scribbled words underneath a little picture of a palm tree- "Hey kid, don't get too pissed tonight, I bought you an island". I had absolutely no idea what she meant, but recalled the conversation from the night before. We had stayed up till the early hours talking about my journey, my fucked up years trapped in the drinking dens of the city. I told her about the weeks I had spent in New York waiting for people to find me and convince me to come home. She had listened quietly, her head tilted to one side as I explained about my games in hotels, playing at vanishing and drinking my way to oblivion and reality in equal measures. Lucy told me how her wonderful childhood had been ripped apart when she found out she was adopted. She admitted how knowing that the father she loved all those years wasn't actually her dad, made her feel a little cheated, even a little lost. She told me she thought she didn't know how to have close friends because her dad hadn't let her play outside the house, creating games for her within the walls instead or taking her with him when he went climbing, surfing or fishing. He had been the only friend she had- probably why she felt older than her age and different from other girls who spent their time playing with make up or boys. By the end of the bottle we had agreed that nothing much had made up for the end of childhood with its innocent escape, its freedom, its partial reality. Both of us felt that we were on a journey to find out what we were made of- in Lucy's case, her actual

parents who she had learnt might still be living in Bangkok, following a search at the adoption agency, but who had proved impossible to track down during the week she spent there. Her father allowed the trip presuming it was a simple gap year break, knowing his brothers sensible son Eric would be there to 'keep her safe'. He had adopted Lucy just before his wife died, making him an overprotective, but loving dad- one that just didn't find the time or right place to admit to his girl that she wasn't really his daughter. I felt I was searching too- not for someone, but something in me, a solution to the question I didn't yet know how to voice. We had shaken on it- we should leave the world behind and begin our own universe. A place with our own rules, our own philosophy, our own religion...an identity we could own. Lucy hadn't really understood when I tried to explain the night with the lightening (no doubt nobody could) but she had promised me we would lie there on our island at night looking into the dark sky and watching the fire- we would make our babies and walk around naked. At some point we had kissed, I don't really know who made the move, but we held it for a while, hand in hand, whisky bottle tipping and breaking our lock as it crashed on the floor.

Her laughter was wonderful, bubbling out like a volcano. She was the first person who I thought felt like me, someone with no identity, someone trapped on the wrong island, mentally and physically. We kissed only the once that night, the mood broken by the shattering glass and shouts from our Thai neighbours downstairs. That was the last I saw of her till the candle arrived on my doorstep.

I knocked on Lucy's door but she wasn't there. Down at Malcolms nobody had seen her, but Brian mentioned there was a market on the edge of town

that day and maybe she had gone with the other tourists. It was only a ten minute walk along the path, following the beach- there she was, arms curled around rolls of material, a cigarette in her mouth. “Hey kid. You ready?” – “What for?” “To go to your Island mate, here, grab this”, she thrust one roll of material towards me and bent down to pick up a hessian bag at her heel. On the way back to the coffee shop she explained, tripping over the words as she did, pulling me a cigarette from her packet and lighting it for me, my expression obviously demanding one.

The night before Lucy had gone back out after we finished drinking. She didn't want to leave the broken bottle in the street. Downstairs she had got talking to the coffee shop guy and his Thai wife, telling them how much she loved the rooms and one day wanted to come back to spend more time in BoPhut. The wife had made her some ginger tea and told them about their own journey to BoPhut, her father coming over from a little island off the coast of Koh PhaNgan twenty years before to pay his yearly taxes on Samui. He had fallen in love with a local girl, the daughter of a fisherman and moved into the building the coffee house now occupied. The house was left to her on his death, with the more fertile land back on the island going to the sons. Lucy had listened on, a little buzzed by the whisky and the ginger tea as the old women explained how a lightning storm had started a fire on the island, burning down their house and killing both children, one immediately and the other later after trying to save his brother from the flames. The family had been afraid to return ever since, relatives going there only once a year to bless the spirits with flowers, sad in the knowledge that they had been so angry by the fathers departure that they must have sent the

lightening that killed both sons. Lucy had been moved to tears, holding onto the old women's hand as she explained the situation, the husband translating words the lady didn't know. They had talked for hours, apparently hearing my snoring from upstairs- Lucy told them I had run away from London after reading some sort of sign into a lightening storm. Of course they put one and one together- agreeing that the old lady should allow Lucy to take the flowers and incense over to the island, saving them the trip and giving Lucy a chance to spend her last few nights in the 'real' Thailand. Somehow over a couple of stories and a bottle of whisky, my night with the lightening had become a map in Lucy's head, away from London, across the islands of the world, to a place where I could truly find out who I was- my own island somewhere off the coast of Koh PhaNgan. The price- Lucy had paid the husband the grand sum of twenty five Australian dollars to use their longtail boat- enough for the family to buy the necessary tools they wanted us to take to the island and leave ready for people to come and rebuild the house in the low season. And so it was- Lucy had bought me an island, if only for a week, it was our island- ready to be conquered. The name of this place- Koh Sawahii, roughly translated it just means "beautiful island".

Having only known Lucy for less than a week and being pretty hung-over, I wasn't initially thrilled at the idea of taking an old women's flowers across the Gulf of Siam to a place we didn't even know existed. Even if we could get to the island, I explained to Lucy that we would have no shelter apart from some burnt out old house where two people had died. Her mobile wouldn't work away from Samui- there would be no way of calling for help if we got stuck. But Lucy was going, with or without me. Like a scene straight out of

The Beach, she had a map in her pocket and an image in her head of swaying palms and white sands. We talked there on the roadside for half an hour or so, me introducing reasons why fairly sane western people don't get into longtail boats and make off for tiny Thai islands. She smiled at each point, agreeing to its logic and waiting for me to exhaust the list, then she moved in a little closer, her blue eyes staring into mine, her lips almost brushing my cheek and said "but you want to don't you kid". I did, I definitely did. I wanted to get in a boat and sail off to Sawahii Island- who the fuck wouldn't, but it just seemed surreal, too much like a movie, too little like real life and I said as much.

"Real life kid, what the fuck is real life? You are probably going to get fucking arrested in real life, shipping fake crap to England and totalling that credit card of that mayor bloke. Real life is why you are here, why you got in that cab, why you like the stupid train thing at Canary Wharf, why kids go on swings and you live here in BoPhut in a coffee shop snogging Aussie chicks who walk in with their cousin." She had a point. We kissed, slowly, right there on the edge of the market, surrounded by the blankets she had bought us and a big bag of rice, which I presumed were our 'rations'. The crazy thing is, this actually happened, this wasn't a dream or a script. I had become the kind of person who sat on the side of the road kissing Aussie chicks and preparing to sail off into the sunset. As weird as it is to write about it now, it felt completely normal, acceptable, completely possible and in every way- real. We stayed up all night, packing our stuff into waterproof bags, throwing away old clothes and books we couldn't take with us. I unwrapped the one little silver clock I kept from the Bangkok shipment and left it on the table next to the

bed, a gift to the next owner. Then we threw a dice and drank that many shots. Dawn had never been so far away.

It was agreed that as soon as light broke we should follow line of sight to the south coast of Koh PhaNgan, stopping at Hat Rin to pick up cheap tinned food and cigarettes, taking advantage of the Full Moon party that would bring market stalls onto the beach. From there we would shadow the coast along the east side, past the small traveller resorts towards the relatively unpopulated, rugged north eastern tip around the village of Chaloklum. From the north it would be only an hours sail straight out into the Gulf of Siam to Koh Sawahii, assuming the tiny little engine kept spinning the propellers. The old man gave us a tin of fuel and let us store most of our belongings in the coffee shop. We packed everything else (two plastic bags of clothes, one of rice and noodles, one full of little sachets of spices from Guido's kitchen, one of bathroom products and toilet rolls, a first aid kit, two boxes of candles and matches and two bottles of whisky all stuffed into two rucksacks) into the longtail and pulled up the metal anchor from the sand. Apart from the coffee shop couple, nobody was awake as we let the engine rip and chugged out from the BoPhut pier onto the gentle waves between the islands. I stood on the foot of the boat, turning the pole that propelled us through the water, Lucy lying in the centre on her back, hands supporting her head, huge grin joining up the freckles.

The feeling of the air rushing through my hair and the spray from the sea was wonderfully cooling in the early morning heat.

As the sun came up over Samui behind us, it reflected pillars of white and gold through the waves, the crests

of which glistened like millions of crystals across the horizon. We were not the only boat out in the Gulf, Thai fishing vessels pulling in circular nets, the top decks overloaded with people grabbing at the ropes. As the nets came near to the surface, long fish would leap free into the air, twisting and catching the light. One or two would make it free of the trap, leaving the bubbling circle of water behind. Lucy clapped and stood rocking our tiny boat as one after another made it over the wall of rope. I imagined how weird that must be, breaking the surface of their world into another completely unbelievable one, then crashing back down again into the sea. Even here in the deep water, small colourful fish could be seen swimming not far below, shoaling and turning as we approached. The dawn was stunning- whites, silvers and hints of a misty glowing orange pulling everything together. I loved knowing I would remember the exact feeling and frequency of the light beaming down on me, a little camera in my brain capturing it and wrapping it up, one of hundreds of three second memories I store in my head. Everyone I love has one of these in my personal library and this was Lucy's- jumping for joy, hands in the air applauding the fish as they escaped their captors.

Landing the craft on the sunset side of Hat Rin, we dropped the anchor and waded onto the beach. The little boat tilted, nearly flooding as we grabbed the side and jumped over into the shallow water. People took no notice, probably not seeing that ours was the only longtail of the ten or so lining the beach that wasn't piloted by a Thai. The others would be used to make the trip back and forth between Samui and Ko Pha Ngan all night as the Full Moon party kicked off, later being joined by a whole fleet of tiny boats bringing people from around the coast of the

island. We didn't want to get stuck in Hat Rin, a fairly unattractive settlement of concrete bars and lanes stuffed full of DVD copy stores and mis-match pizza outlets. At some time it must have been an amazing place, a little town occupying a thin strip of land between two beaches, an outcrop hill at one end and soaring mountains the other. Time and trance had taken their toll- a palpable air of Eurotrash and anger drifting through the dirty lanes. Everywhere we stepped people grabbed out at our clothes asking if we wanted hash, red bull or taxi-boats. Even the menu of the little outdoor café we stopped at advertised magic mushroom shakes. In a gentler setting it would have been exciting and exotic, but an unclear level had been breached and Hat Rin failed to be anything more than a foreign outcrop of everything Balearic. Knowing it was cheaper than Spain and positively encouraged by the local owners leant a depressing air to the fate of this little corner of Koh PhaNgan. Where little guest houses once were, multi story blocks of concrete were appearing, unstable and rushed, a little like the town itself. Precarious and a little sweaty. We grabbed bottles of water from the store, material to wrap around sunburnt heads and a few reels of fishing line and hooks, hoping to catch squid for bait somewhere along the way.

As we turned through the alleys and out onto the beach again, shaking off the taxi-boat boys along the way, I could see the sky was turning. We had set off without a cloud in the sky, but now thin layers had formed, swirling slightly before turning darker and thicker in the distance. It didn't take any great experience to know that the rains were coming and being on the open water wasn't going to be fun. Loading up, we decided to get as far away from Hat

Rin as possible, fearing the Full Moon party would essentially trap us in the harbour if we didn't leave before nightfall. If the rains started strong they could last for days, meaning Lucy would have to return to the mainland to catch her flight without setting foot on Sawahii. The only option was to try to get half way and pray the storm would pass.

Twisting my way around other boats waiting to dock at Hat Rin, we followed the coast for a mile or so to the East. Just beyond the mess of the town was another bay, visually cut off from the first by a sheer wall of rock. Here instead of a mass of bungalows, just a few huts and a larger wooden buildings hung onto the steep slope, wooden walkways and rope bridges connecting them up. As we buzzed through the water I saw people waving from the rocks, sitting or fishing from huge curves of hard stone, under which it was a freefall to the ocean. Two or three bays later there was no sign of tourists at all, just long empty beaches, palm trees twisting in the right places and thick jungle rising behind. In the more sheltered inlets, individual huts had been built on stilts over the water, red tiled roofs and wooden walls looking totally oriental.

The side facing the island was usually open to the air, with just a piece of material or a sheet of plywood placed across it to keep babies in or the wind out. One or two boats bobbed in the distance, but otherwise, within only thirty minutes we were alone out there. The little waves soon turned into sizable curves of water, throwing us from side to side and pushing the boat up as the motor pushed us forward. Lucy held on to the curved wooden figure on our mast as we crashed down and rose up with each wave. I kept fairly close to the shore, aware that the rocks I could see forming small islands to our right could be

anywhere below us, ready to breach the hull or worse still rip off our little engine. Then it began to rain. Little drops at first, a gentle mist coming over us from Samui, blanketing the island and the water surrounding it. Within minutes the mist turned to rain, pelting my body and face as I stood trying to control the propeller. Lucy pulled one of the blankets over her head and lay almost flat on the wooden deck, face turning to me with a half grin half grimace every few minutes. Over the growing sound of water on water she shouted that we should pull in when we next saw buildings. Almost as she said it the lights came into vision through the mist on the cliffs to our left. A little tangle of windows lining a high stone rise, a smaller building with open sides and lanterns swinging in the wind down on the seafront, jungle hiding everything else. Hat Tien, a steep, curved bay, the water dotted with giant boulders before turning to sand.

We pulled the boat as high onto the sand as we could, a couple of guys running out from the building to help us drag our stuff over the side and onto the land. Inside we learnt we had appropriately reached a place called "The Sanctuary". This was one of the original hippy resorts, fifteen or twenty years old, hiding in this distant, quiet corner of the island. As we stood dripping wet in the main house, people were tying sheets of plastic over the open walls and moving cushions and tables away from the beach into the dry interior. Five or six guys sat watching the entertainment, pulling long draws on rolled cigarettes and sipping tea. "Welcome mate, you been here before?" "No, we just need a room for the night" "No rooms mate but you can stay in the tree house" "You serious?" "Yeah mate, don't worry its safe, got a roof, 450 a night." I handed over the money (about

seven pounds) in soggy bundles of notes and took the padlock and key from the hook the guy pointed to. “Fucking hippies” I muttered to myself or Lucy, not sure which, plodding through the communal eating house and up steep stairs back out into the rain and walkway behind. Lucy was laughing, already half in conversation with the key-guy, wringing out her head scarf and asking him about his tattoo. I stood waiting at the top of the steps as she played with the little paper bird he handed to her, the restaurant menu printed on its wings. “Fucking hippy fucking rain.” Everything I had on was wet- my trousers turning transparent. My bag cut into my back with its thin plastic strap. Lucy turned to follow me when I shouted down, grabbing her hand and pulling her and her bag up the stairs. We followed the little lights in the trees, up the ramps, through about ten minutes of near vertical forest pathway and on to edge of the cliff. There it was, a ladder rising up to a little deck, beyond that a hut, all on its own in the middle of the branches and leaves. Lucy went first, pulling up the bags and fiddling with the door. Inside was damp, hot and smelt of sweet incense. A real hippy treehouse in Thailand, with hammock dripping outside and candles instead of lights. Out the back was a hole and bucket instead of a bathroom and a pipe hanging in the air, the twist of its metal indicating a showerhead. It was kind of romantic and hellish simultaneously. Lucy took off her top and pulled a dry set of shorts from the bag. I did the same and closed the door, huddling into her on the bed. We stayed like that, smoking, saying nothing while the rain thundered on the metal roof. Even as it got dark we didn’t move, just leaning across to reach a smoke or look out of the door to see the shape of the sky. Without going down for food (it wouldn’t have been possible to find our way in the

dark, the electricity cutting off at about nine), we lay there chewing tuna chunks from our supplies and splitting a heavily loaded joint we found in the ashtray into two and smoking them slowly one by one. In the pitch black Lucy looked both strong and vulnerable, her little legs dangling off the mattress and her blanket pulled close around her. I loved the way she smoked, holding the paper close to her lips and closing her eyes as she inhaled.

Tilting back to blow out a steady silent stream of grey air, she paused. I leaned in and kissed her while she finished the spliff, sharing the cloud and doubling the buzz. At some point we passed out like that, her wrapped in a blanket, me half naked on top, the cigarette falling safely through the planks to the forest below. It was a deep sleep, full of dreams I can't recall and the shrieks and hoots of the forest around us.

The drum beat of rain getting slower and louder as it eased, softening gently until at some point it was replaced by my heartbeat. A couple of times I opened my eyes thinking I could hear the distant echoes of the Full Moon party over the mountain, closing them again when I worked out where I was, shuffling my head back into the blanket of her hair. We closed our bodies up, cradling each other until silence came and light came and morning came.

There is nothing more comfortable than waking up naked with the sun across your body. Lucy had left the tree-house but her outline was still there in the curls of material. The sky was blue again and the trees were rustling with a gentle breeze. There was no reason to move so I didn't, just stretching my fingers up in a cat like yawn. For a few weeks it had been the only alcohol free night I had, having got back into a steady routine in BoPhut, passing the hours with Graham and Guido. It felt great to wake up without

the taste of spirits on my tongue and beer somewhere deep inside. Lucy came back with two lumps of home made bread from the main house, both thickly smeared with jam. She handed me one through the window before untangling the hammock.

We stayed at the Sanctuary all day and one more night, spending a couple of hours standing neck deep in a tub full of water hidden in the rocks that made up the Sanctuary Spa. Annoying Californian guests came and went, whispering about evening chants and yoga positions. I disliked the concept of people like this, high-paid executives and girls in public relations, coming to Thailand for a week to claim some sort of spirituality. By now I mentally separated myself from them, having not looked at a watch in several weeks or even attempted to check email. Lucy couldn't see why I disliked our fellow travellers, reminding me that not so long ago I wouldn't be seen dead without a new shirt every day and Armani underpants. She laughed at my current attire of faded blue boxers which I tended to wear all day, coupled with a thin cotton vest, a little blue elephant on the label. I hadn't noticed the change in my physical appearance but she had commented on the olive colour of my skin and the blond lines in my hair- apparently thinking I might be an Aussie when we first met in the café, only my accent telling her otherwise. It was true that I felt healthier, my stomach now almost flat rather than hanging a little way over my jeans. Her little make up mirror showed me eyes that were whiter and stubble that was fluffier than I remembered it being. Even the veins in my arms were showing through where I had lost a little weight. In London I had eaten out every day, usually twice if clients wanted to meet in the evening. In New York I had continued eating junk and drinking beer, but here in Thailand I usually ate

only when something was being handed around or from road side stalls where everything was grilled. I imagined Anya back in the UK, surprising her at the office and seeing her reaction to my new shape. I wanted her to be here, flicking petals out of the water and scaring off lizards from the rocks where our clothes lay. Lucy was the perfect companion, bubbly, interesting, brave, completely willing to live every day without comparing it to others, but I doubted if I could develop any deep rooted sexual feelings for her. She played with me like a sibling would, allowing my daft dreams to waffle on in the night. Anya wasn't like that- she needed structure, a plan, a promotion schedule. They would have hated each other if they ever met. I kind of liked that. With thoughts of the two women in my head, bells rang indicating that the communal dinner would be served in the main house- I hid my physical excitement and climbed out of the tub, dripping through the forest towards the hut. I felt comfortable with Lucy- she was a girl with a guys mind, something I probably have always wanted. Sometimes though, even at dinner with her knelt next to me feeding me noodles with chopsticks and Anya still on my mind, my eyes would wonder to the guys in the room. Shirtless tarzans with Buddha tattoos and the dark skin of dudes who plays in the sea all day. Lucy, Anya and Tarzan. Now that would make the perfect pudding, here in the silly commune, drums and spliffs sucked and bashed, instead of the sex in my head. I don't know if other people do foursomes for fun. If they do, I don't know if the guy is supposed to check out the other guy, but it works for me. Just the right amount of excuse and spunk. It doesn't matter who he's fucking, the expression in a guys eyes when he's getting his way is the most enigmatic thing I can imagine. The eyes of a guy who

is releasing his genes through his dick. I long to be looking into those eyes as well as reflect them. This was the pattern of thought in my head while I let Lucy play that night, enjoying a secret slideshow.

KOH SAWAHII

We left The Sanctuary a day late, meaning that if we reached Koh Sawahii within one more day Lucy could spend only three nights on the island before returning to the mainland. Even if we had wanted to change her flight we had no means of doing so now, being half a day from the nearest telephone or internet connection. Still assuming we would find an inhospitable destination I figured three nights was plenty- not enough to starve and just long enough to say we had stayed on our own island, rather than visited one like a tourist. The tree-huggers came down to the beach to help us get our boat back into deep water and our plastic bags and rucksacks back onboard. Twisting the boat around, we waved them off and slipped around the rocks into the open Gulf. There were more random rocks jutting out of the sea here, so I took the boat out further, keeping the island within eyesight, heading north east. We passed tiny clumps as we went, each big enough only for a couple of trees and some small scale vegetation. It occurred to us that we had no idea how big Sawahii would be when we finally reached it- knowing that the family had used it for farming it couldn't be terribly small, which begged the question of why nobody in The Sanctuary had heard of the place. It was quite possible that we were sailing to somewhere that just didn't exist.

I figured that if we didn't find the described milestones by nightfall we could return to Koh PhaNgan and spend the rest of Lucy's nights playing at being Yoga freaks or giving up on anything adventurous and sipping vegetable broth in the Spa.

According to the map, if we passed Chaloklum village in the north of Koh PhaNgan, we could continue almost exactly north east for only an hour before seeing the twin peaks of Koh Sawahii-identified specifically by a line of three trees on an otherwise fairly desolate beach. Lucy kept searching the horizon for the shape of the island in the distance as I focused on the water around us, weaving us between rocks and avoiding hitting the rolling surf straight on. A few times my navigation brought us sideways onto larger waves, causing both of us to fall if standing, more than once actually over the side into the water, the little piece of rope around my wrist cutting the engine when I did so. I didn't like being so far out with such a tiny boat- I suspected the engine, recycled from a motorbike wouldn't survive being entirely submerged. Usefully, Lucy pointed out that if we did lose the engine we didn't have any oars, meaning we would have to rely on the tides to deposit us back on dry land. Whilst Thailand is hardly unknown terrain, I still didn't fancy trekking over the Jurassic Park interior of Koh PhaNgan to summon assistance.

Finally, just as the feeling of the sun on my neck was becoming unbearable, Lucy started to jump and point- "Two bloody peaks. That's it!" I took us in closer to an island that must have been about a mile long and half a mile wide judging from where we were. The land did indeed have two peaks- like two giant breasts connected by a strip of sand and rubble. As we came in, approaching the island from the western side, I saw the trees- a little like olive trees, dried up branches close to the ground. Three of them in a perfect row to the right hand side of the beach. Lucy jumped out while we were still a good hundred yards off shore, paddling her way in, material dragging behind her from her make shift toga. I dropped

anchor when I could see the sand under the water and followed her onto the shore. Koh Sawahii had yellow sand, almost like corn, fine grains mixed in with crystals and pebbles. When Lucy stood on one side of the thin strip of beach, she could still see me on the other. Only the two peaks gave protection, explaining why the beach itself was so bare, taller trees being flattened by the violent storms that came through this part of Thailand in the summer months.

We needed shade from the midday sun, so brought in the rolls of cotton Lucy bought in BoPhut and strung up a length of it between the biggest of the three trees. The ground wasn't comfortable, littered with sticks and rocks, but it was a fine place to sit and re-hydrate for a few minutes. There were no signs of animals on the beach, no tracks in the sand or droppings on the ground.

Aware that there were could be snakes and maybe scorpions in the undergrowth however, we kept to exposed areas, following a natural rocky pathway up the side of the gentler slope. From the higher ground we could see that a large area of the island behind the big hill was planted with coconut trees, the straight lines and equal heights giving away the human influence. There were also square areas of marsh that would have been used to collect irrigation water and feed animals in the middle of the plantation. The old women had said the house were the brothers lived was in amongst the coconuts, so we headed that way, crossing the beach again and twisting around the biggest slope. The house was there, a small box of wooden walls and material windows, raised on stilts about two feet of the ground. Next to it were the remains of a camp- an old tent frame without its canvas and a couple of oil drums, burnt out in a pile of rocks. Despite the slightly eerie history of the

place, we decided that this was the safest area to set up camp, knowing that the house had survived any weather or flooding that could happen. Lucy went back for more rolls of material and plastic and I searched the hut for utilities. The water tank behind had cracked and was drained empty, but several plastic containers, about the height of my knees were full of water, two of them completely clear of fallen leaves and insects, having been covered by a very fine net. The water tasted fine, but I added a couple of drops of chlorine anyway. There was no power or any sort of fuel, so we lit a fire using a little twist of cotton and some wood that had been stacked under the house.

I knocked my head on the floor area above, jumping out of the way of a massive spider, dropping the kindling in my hands- she had to go to fetch it after that, letting me reserve my manly skills for fire making. With matches and a little petrol from the boat, lighting it was easy. The wood burnt with a lot of smoke and little heat, perfect for keeping the mosquitoes at bay.

By seven it was dark. Lucy and I sat around the fire drinking whisky and watching the last rays of light vanish from the horizon. A slight mist kept Koh PhaNgan out of vision, giving us a sense of being totally alone. Again we ate tins of tuna and drank water we had brought with us, using the supplies in the plastic containers just for washing. The waning moon was bright, casting a cone of grey over the water and sketching the outline of the trees and smaller hill in front of us. It was magnificently stark- an island you couldn't imagine people living on, with hardly enough flat space for a game of football and water collected only from the rain. Even the two hills were less green than the other islands, bushes and

vines covering the stone rather than true forest. It's possible that it was more dense before the incident, but weirdly we couldn't see evidence of that, apart from the stump of one burnt tree near the house. It may be possible that the story of the fire was exaggerated to save the face of the brothers who may actually have simply left Sawahii to work on the mainland. If this is true, I don't think the old lady needed to know and we planned to tell her the place was razed as her husband has told her.

As promised we took the little garlands of flowers and wrapped them around the stone structure that sat next to the house. We had been told that this is where the spirits of Sawahii lived, displaced by the building of the house and upset by the departure of the man of the island. It seemed appropriate to sit quietly for a few minutes, burning a candle and incense at the little temple, Lucy bowing her head to the ground before getting up to return to camp. In retrospect it seems strange that we didn't do more that night, rather than just wrap up in the blankets and sleep. It seems to be such a common dream to have an island to yourself, the ideas of how you would spend your first night come thick to anyone who imagines, but in the exhaustion of the journey or perhaps in the mellow mood of our little ceremony, it seemed right just to close our eyes and let sleep take over that night, waking and readjusting the material each time the wind blew off or a bird frightened us out of dreams.

I have no idea how early we woke up, but I will never forget that dawn. Leaving Lucy asleep, I pulled on a vest and walked bare foot around the hut, out of the campsite and down the slope to the beach. It was still dark, but I could tell the light was coming, everything seeming so thin, so paper-like in the in-between hours. I sat near the water, leaning back into the sand,

playing with pebbles in each fist. As the sun broke the horizon directly in-front of me, it was unbearably bright, a single ray of pure energy cracking through the night towards me.

It was rising directly behind one of the larger islands, beams of light coming across hills and lowlands, like the hand of god emerging from the earth. I saw a colour I had never seen before that morning, like peach but gentler, a skin or blood colour, diluted and made softer by the huge expanse of space. It was mesmerising. Rather than wake the girl, I waded into the water, letting my shorts get wet as I sat down and bobbed with the little waves. You could almost hear the colour of the light, its high spectrum vibrating through the oxygen and onto my skin. It was a wonderful and private moment, greeting the sun from Koh Sawahii. In many ways, the dawn on my beautiful island melted me. The opposite of the thunder in London, this was an appreciation of quietly remarkable beauty that had no reflection in man-kinds creation. I adored the sun that day, whilst knowing deep within my soul that it had nothing to do with me.

For breakfast we ate noodles. Little plastic pots we bought in Hat Rin, filled with hot water from a tin over the fire and eaten with plastic forks. The containers had cute cartoons of Thai kids and names that translated into flavours like “Happy chicken eating” and “Pork with good feeling”. Everything else on our island became named the same way. “Rock with nose lovely” and “Hill with happy nipple”. I became “Burnt with skin lovely” and she was “Girl with freckle party”. We giggled through the food and spent the rest of the morning paddling about. Little clownfish and triggers swam at about one metre deep, with hundreds of smaller fish, some with blotches of

glowing blue, schooling on the edge of the sea just behind the brake of the waves.

I tried stabbing at larger fish with a sharp stick, but they fled before it even hit the water. We agreed that even if we caught anything we wouldn't have a clue how to prepare it or know if it was poisonous. Along the shore, dried up evidence showed starfish, jellyfish and sea cucumbers. A dead puffer looking like a Martian with huge goat eyes and wings. We buried it thinking that things with big eyes were things that needed funerals. It rests now under two sticks formed into a cross, onto which Lucy painted the ying/yang, covering a couple of god options. I expect he'll be swimming now in puffer heaven, or re-incarnated as a balloon.

By the afternoon I was restless and wanted to create a more elaborate camp. Lucy was nervous about sleeping in the hut where the brothers had lived, so wanted us to build something outside along the shore. I can't remember why but I knew you weren't supposed to camp on the sand- something to do with the insects probably, remembering a chapter from *Castaway* when they get bitten all over after sleeping on the beach. My legs and arms were already pock marked and swollen from mosquito bites so I didn't want to add to them. We decided the most comfortable way to sleep would be to swing the long roll of material between the two stronger trees, using plastic sheeting above hanging on a rope to make an A-shape tent and hammock. Surprisingly the contraption held the weight of both of us, bending the trunk of the tree, but keeping us off the ground.

Our roll of plastic sheeting wasn't long enough to cover us entirely, but hung above us protecting us from the wind and any gentle rain in the night. During the day it was too hot to lie under the sheeting

so we climbed up to the tallest area of the island and sat on the rocks overlooking our kingdom and down again to patches of beach or scrub we wanted to explore. A couple of birds were circling below, flying close to the ground along the beach and up around the second peak in concentric circles. Every few minutes one of the birds would swoop to the sand or the shallow areas of water, go to catch something and miss or give up at the last second. The target was probably the skeleton crabs-thin white things that ran almost invisibly across the beach, vanishing into their tunnels as soon as you got close. You could see them at night better, a match thrown to the sand causing little bundles of legs to go scampering in every direction. The same matches if thrown into the water would cause tiny fish to rush to the surface before the flame hissed out, where they could be scooped up in net or a cup. Too small to eat, I tried to use these as bait, hooking the prong of metal through their writhing bodies. After two tries I gave up feeling completely nauseous and evil. The rest of the fish, bodies still intact became Lucy's pets, swimming about in the cup next to the stones we used to balance cooking things on. Unfortunately we underestimated the power of the sun which on another long walk up around the two peaks, dried up the cup, leaving them exposed, dry and with rather shocked expressions on their open lips when we returned.

Ironically, when dry they became rather easier to crunch onto the bait wire and fulfil their purpose, much to Lucy's anguished pleas for a decent burial next to puffer. Leaving them on the wire for a few hours, hooks hidden inside, resulted in me catching a long eel-like thing which we were too scared to even touch and a much larger crab who clung onto the

flesh as I pulled in the wire. He was wasted too, neither of us willing to throw him in the fire. By nightfall we were certain that Koh Sawihii was indeed beautiful, but that without supplies of plastic cup noodles and tins of tuna, we would probably die fairly quickly, or at least result to bringing in a nice Thai person to kill things and fry them.

By the time it was dark we were hungry but smoking through it. Lucy swung on our double hammock and I sat on a flat rock that we had moved next to the camp. We both had damp hair and clothes from an evening swim, cooling our skin in the constant heat. Even in the darkness the air was heavy, making it difficult to do anything physical and leaving the body with a permanent sheen. It felt most comfortable sleeping with only shorts on, but the constant biting insects encouraged us to wrap loose material around limbs or to cover ourselves with layer upon layer of oil infused with citrus or balm to drive them away. Where a bite had infected the skin in the early days of Thailand, healing up over time, it would leave a little circle of white amongst the tan. Together, these looked like the reverse of freckles. I counted more than twenty on each leg- twenty times I had been eaten by a bug.

At night you felt them crawl on your skin, and heard them buzzing through the air, zipping back and forth in-front of your eyes. Sitting on my rock I blew the cigarette smoke around my legs and onto my skin, hoping it would put them off the nights feast. Lucy was showing me shapes in the stars, trying to convince me that she could read our future in their patterns. As she pointed telling me about the sign of romance and the star of long journeys, I began to feel a little selfish. To me Lucy was someone who had come along for the ride, hitched a lift on my weird

journey away from home to nowhere in particular. I hadn't seen that at some point she too had been on a journey, one interrupted by my presence. Here on our island, reading fate from the stars, my journey and hers had intertwined and she was imagining a future with me in it. It happened a lot in my life, people jumping on my wagon, not telling me that they thought after a while it was their wagon too. Truth is my life just wasn't available to share. I had never known a time when I had imagined anyone else really being there. Till the day I left London I felt like I was the one in control, the one who called the shots, announced the party, called last orders. That's why nobody had come for me when I wanted them to- nobody would have imagined it was their role. I even had a habit of throwing mobile phones away, switching numbers every few months to cull dead wood. This was how I lived, how I existed, constantly craving the company of others, but never really allowing them in. There she was however, swinging on our hammock, telling me how many babies we were going to have and what we might name them. I stood and left her there mumbling to herself "Noah, that's a nice name. I like names from the bible. Maybe Moses. Moses is a nice name..."

Sitting on the hill alone, I could see the whole island below me. From up here it looked like just the top of something much greater submerged beneath the waves- which of course it probably was. That's kind of how I see life- the sensual part of something much larger, much deeper, almost impossible to comprehend. Like the fishes who jump out of the ocean and see a whole new universe, I think people sometimes skip under the waves of their world and get a flicker of its true magnitude. Little mountain tops, pinnacles of canyons. Everything we do, just a

tiny part of what has led to it or what it will cause. When people die the peak just dips under the sea-its all still there, the big stuff, waiting for the tide to turn. The smoke from my fag twirled in the air, proving the point in my head. Since London I had begun to feel the largeness of everything, the depth of my identity, the unknowable mass of my actions. Since leaving London I had begun to listen to the thoughts in my head, slowly appreciating stuff that came from nowhere, bubbling up from the deepness below the skin. I wanted more of that. I wanted to keep going, to come to some sort of conclusion, to know what I was for. I knew that night, sitting alone on the island Lucy had bought for me, that her grain of sand and mine were not part of the same beach, we had just been blown together here and would shortly float away again.

In another life she would have been the one I settled down with, maybe returning with her to Australia and having kids. In this one she wasn't.

I will never forget the night she came and sat next to me on the rock, high up on that hill. She had stopped mumbling baby names and was quiet. Everything was quiet. Even the sea seemed impossibly far away even though it surrounded us. Conversation was pointless, when we became for a split second, the only man and the only women to exist in the world.

CHALOKLUM

The last day on the island it rained continually. We woke to the sound of water dripping onto the plastic from the branches above, soon intensifying into a downpour. There was no choice but to ride it out, leaving the make shift tent only to ensure our bags were all inside the hut and the boat was still firmly anchored where we left it. For hours we lay there talking about people we knew back home, Lucy's mates in Perth with whom she would be sharing a flat when she returned. I talked about university friends I hadn't seen for years and kids from school who had gone on to be Barristers and Wall Street traders. We imagined them all meeting and trying to work out the connections in the room. Her best friend, a hairdresser who surfed at weekends with his dog, my old flatmate, the programmer who spent all his days in a dark room drinking Pepsi Max and surfing porn. Her trip had taken her away from Australia for almost two months, but every week she had emailed home or called her father from the nearest hotel. I hadn't spoken to anyone, just sent a couple of almost anonymous emails and written my parents a note. We agreed that when she got back to Perth she would send her new contact details to a new email address. I wanted to know if an old friend from home had had her baby and if Anya still worked for the firm. She would email me to let me know without me getting directly in touch with anyone else.

For the life of me I don't know why I didn't just write home, but I still feared making the contact directly. It was as if a tunnel would be opened between Thailand and London and I might suddenly be sucked back to

the UK the moment I spoke to someone. She understood why I wasn't ready to return without asking, suggesting only that it might be an idea to keep her number in-case I desperately needed cash wired out to me. Without a pen and paper between us we had to memorise each email address, name and telephone number, repeating them over and over until satisfied they had been condemned to memory.

Late in the afternoon when the rain cleared and the sun re-emerged, we took the bags from the hut, buried our rubbish and extinguished the last of the burning embers in the fire. Retracing our journey we crossed the water between our island and the next large outcrop, passing directly on to the coast of Koh PhaNgan. We were quiet all the way, looking back at Koh Sawahii as it passed out of view behind the rocks. Lucy dangled her hand in the water as if to slow us down a tiny fraction, useless against the push of the motor. Within two hours we were on dry land, sipping weak tea in Chaloklum village.

I waved Lucy off outside the petrol station, the truck crammed full of travellers, backpacks and boxes. The Full Moon crowd had left the island-these few souls being the last that would be seen here until the next monthly event. Rather than returning to BoPhut immediately, I stayed in Chaloklum, renting a simple room in the main line of houses. Bigger than BoPhut but without any of the expat facilities, Chaloklum remained a typically Thai village. It was the natural stopping off point for fishermen returning from the huge expanse of sea between here and northern Thailand, many hundreds of miles to the North. They would approach together, following the weather, long lines of green lights and baskets closing in on the harbour each dawn. I watched them leave again at nightfall from my little balcony, sons and daughters

sitting on the seafront waving them off. For a while I was the only white face in town. Everyone knew a few words of English, but my Thai was also improving, ordering food from simple road side grills and chatting about the heat with the guy from the diving school. Where we didn't have words we gestured, him animating manta rays and me demonstrating the burial service of a puffer fish. His name was Eddie, a Thai guy who looked Spanish, fattened up by the profits of his dive shop and boat trips. Eddie knew everyone, which of course meant that I suddenly knew everyone. Unlike BoPhut however, there was a gentle politeness to each introduction, rather than the commercial suction into their social circle. In Chaloklum you were a stranger until you had lived there for several years, married a daughter and had the monks bless your boat. In a simple way it was a very cosmopolitan place, with its own rules, structure and hierarchy. Only the dust roads, wooden houses and chicken feet hanging on string outside the shops told you this could be nothing else but a Thai village. The bay of Chaloklum is picture postcard stuff- the beach shelves very gently into the water, meaning that when the tide is in, it assumes the impossibly blue colour you see in holiday brochures. When the tide retreats again it forms a series of streams and pools, some of which remain hot and deep all day, perfect for a public bath. Around these pools the kids played during the day time, poking at pets and kicking balls made from twisted up rubber tubing. My favourite spot was a little book shop behind the fish market, where an old man served sweet tea and sugared dough on his roof. This place was the centre of my new routine- several hours each day, reading old romance and science fiction books left behind by visitors, followed by a

beer on my balcony and then bed. Seven days of this later, I checked the email address Lucy had asked me to memorise and saw her message in the inbox. “Hey, thank you for taking me to the real Thailand. I will never forget Sawahii. I have made contact with your friend- there is no baby yet. No email yet from your old company, if they do reply I’ll pretend to be a techie. Stay in touch and visit me if you come to Australia. Your island lover, Lucy.” I read the email a couple of times before deleting it and closing down the account. Lucy was home safe, that was the main thing I needed to know, funny dreams of plane crashes having kept me awake.

I extended my stay, going back to BoPhut for only an hour or so to return the boat and pick up my passport from the coffee shop. After a simple ferry crossing and an overland trip by motorbike, Chaloklum became my base, walking further and further each day into the surrounding forest and deeper and deeper into the sea with Eddie as my guide. Everything was sweet and simple, my plan being that I would stay until the next wave of backpackers arrived for the Full Moon. It didn’t quite work out that way.

One afternoon returning from Eddie’s dive shop, I noticed that the door to my room was ajar. Not thinking much of it, presuming the old man had wanted to change the towel or something, I took off my shoes and climbed the steps to the landing. As soon as I sat on the bed however I knew something was wrong- my bag wasn’t leaning in its usual way against the wall, it was lying on the floor near the door. Routing around I found only my clothes remained, I had no passport, no money and no cash card, everything stolen. I panicked, the thought of losing my last money knocking the breath out of me.

My first reaction was to go to Eddie to ask him if he had seen anyone on his way out to the dive. He said he hadn't, but that westerners had been drinking in the bar the night before, loud American kids, ten or twelve of them who had come through on bikes from Hat Rin. We guessed it was probably one of them, the local children being too scared of my landlord to go near the place.

There was nothing I could do- I obviously had no travel insurance and even if I did get a replacement cash card there would be nothing in my account, relying as I was on the little wad of 1000 Baht notes I kept rolled up in a sock at the bottom of my bag. I was totally fucked- a dark realisation that without money my little adventure was at an end.

Sitting on Eddie's kitchen table we went through all the options- I could contact the police, but with the Full Moon approaching they were pretty unlikely to be able to do anything. My bank in the UK could be contacted, but having not paid my mortgage in months or pumped anything into my overdraft, I wasn't keen on my chances of getting them to send anything. My only option was to call home, to ask for funds, to give in and plead for a link. I stayed up all night thinking of who to call. There was only one whose number I still knew- "Anya, is that you." A pause, "Yeah, who is this." I was surprised she didn't know my voice, maybe even that had evolved a little- "Erm... babe it's me, look, I'm sorry I left you like that in London, I..."

Her shrill accent was breaking, all full of anger and confusion. The sound of her time delayed words felt alien and plump on my ears. I paused when Anya asked when I was coming home, the conversation quickly jumping through to her asking my exact

location. Suddenly I couldn't do it, I didn't want to make the link, to have her send money, to fail in what ever the hell it was I was doing and be in debt to her for it. She just kept repeating "Just tell me where you are. Do you need a plane ticket? Just tell me where you are."

I hung up and went to sit on the beach, trying to blank my mind and hide the sound of her voice far down where it had been filed before I phoned her. Eddie brought me out a beer and sat with me.

"English fool. Guess you want a job huh." "Yeah Eddie, I do." "Not going home huh." "Nope" "Why you not want to go home?" "Because the lightening is angry there Eddie." "Ok". That was that, he employed me in the dive shop and I lived in Chaloklum. The pay phone in the village called several times into the night that day and the one after, until eventually an old women wrapped it up in a nappy and it was quiet.

KRIS

Two more months passed in Chaloklum. I woke happy, looking forward to the days work. The little dive shop with its wooden seats and ink well holes, looked like the school I went to when I was young. Eddie had posters of all the different fish on the walls and photographs of everyone who had completed their course and got a badge. Most of the divers were Thai, only a few Ferangs coming up this far from the bigger towns and islands. Around Full Moon each month we got busy, not just with the dive shop, but driving the travellers between the port and the party in Eddie's truck. In the UK I had never driven, but here after several days fucking about around the port, I had the basics covered and could manoeuvre the Mitsubishi down the potholed single road from one end of the island to the other, Eddie pulling the gears when I forgot. When I wasn't driving around or sitting in the dive shop waiting for people to sign up, I helped out at the book store, wrapping up second hand books and putting them on the shelves in alphabetical order (the old man had arranged them by colour, he couldn't read). In return I got to borrow which ever I wanted, learning a bit more Thai, pricing it up and filing it when I was done.

With my first months pay I even moved out of the guest hostel, renting a little two room house on the outskirts of town near where Eddie kept the truck. It was a simple design, just a wooden box on stilts with a pointed red roof. One room had a mattress and a big fan dangling overhead, the other an old sofa and radio on top of a metal box. There was a bright painting of people playing around a fountain, framed

and hanging on the wall. Even the bare wood floor was covered by a hand woven rug. When I moved in they tried to do the place up a bit, putting a material curtain around the outdoor squat toilet and shower pipe. The family next door also hooked up an electricity feed for a bulb in each room and a plug in kettle. In return I paid them a few pence a day and spoke in English to their ten year old son who wanted to work in a hotel when he left school. Chaloklum- even the sound of the word was happy and innocent. Chaloklum Bay, Koh PhaNgan, Thailand. Two months became four.

Sometime before Christmas Eddie went out of town for the weekend. He wanted to visit friends in Bangkok and pick up more equipment for the boat he was renovating. The drive overland would take two days, so I asked to stay in the village using the time to finish painting the shop while he was gone. I was in there, stripped to my boxers, white paint on my hands and arms when Kris knocked on the door. Kris was Dutch, travelling alone through Thailand. He had stayed on after the last Full Moon party and asked if he could leave his bags for a few minutes while he went to find a room.

I said it was fine, motioning for him to leave his stuff in the back office. There was something fresh and attractive about his accent- each word tilting a little somewhere between American and French. I didn't think much of it, expecting people to drift through the village in the days before and after each party, but hours later when he didn't return I went walking down the street to find him and get the stuff out before I locked up for the night. He was at the bar, asleep in a hammock, baseball cap drawn down over his eyes. "Hey mate, you awake." He stirred, pulling his head up and lifting the cap, obviously exhausted

and confused as to where he was. "It's me, from the dive shop, I've got your stuff." He smiled, made to apologise and fell out of the hammock. Staying on in the bar, we drank half a bottle of whisky and a couple of beers, before going back to my house. He paid me a couple of pounds to crash out on my sofa for the night, knowing the nearest guest house was at least an hours walk, the rooms in town having filled up through the day. Kris had travelled over from Holland on his twenty fifth birthday, walking away from a marriage he had rushed into when he was only twenty years old. The idea was to have some time alone in the world following five years of being tied to a wife he had regretted marrying days into their new life. She was from a wealthy family and as soon as they had moved in together had moaned about the limitations of their house, their car, his job. For five very long years he sat in an office in downtown Amsterdam selling car insurance and promising her he would be up for promotion each year. One night he had come home to find her in bed with his senior at work. Bags were packed the same day and Kris had been on the road ever since. Italy, Greece, Croatia, India, Turkey, hopping over to India and finally flying into Bangkok, coming over the mainland in a tourist bus and catching a ferry to Samui and onto Koh PhaNgan. The divorce had come through by fax in Turkey- the first thing he did was to announce to friends and family that he would never marry again and would be gone for one year doing only what he wanted to do. That night it included getting drunk with me, an over complicated game of dominos and attempting handstands on the sofa. Kris had moved in.

By the time Eddie returned, Kris and I had finished painting the inside of the diving school and were

starting work on my place, building a proper platform for the mattress and trying to fix an old fridge. When his truck pulled up outside we went out to meet him, jumping on the back to unload sacks of food and diving stuff before introducing him to Kris properly. Eddie politely shook his hand and said he would meet us later at the bar when he had dropped everything off at the dive store and eaten with his family. I didn't detect it immediately, but from their very first meeting the two men didn't seem to click, Eddie's polite conversation continuing that evening as if a little nervous by Kris's presence.

I had taken his usual chuckling way for granted, but suspected that Eddie found it hard to understand Kris's unusual accent or to fit into conversations that tended to drift back to European pop groups, places and famous names. I enjoyed spending time with Kris, his face full of expression, wide eyes shining as he tried to teach the bar the Dutch football songs. Later in the night I noticed that Eddie had slipped away, his beer unfinished but his shoes gone.

I asked him the next morning while working in the shop what he thought of Kris. He said nothing at first, carrying on with his paperwork and tugging on his cigarette. When I pressed him for an answer he said "He live with you?" When I said he was staying over before moving on, Eddie looked happier. "Don't want make Chaloklum Ferang kind of place."

Nothing more was said about it, but I was careful to try and speak more and more Thai in the bar and keep my drinking sessions and football chat for home. Kris understood this, trying to be useful in the dive shop but otherwise just chilling out on the beach in front of the house and going for little adventures in the forest around the village. As the days drew on I began to enjoy our unusual arrangement, working and

speaking with the Thai's during the day and coming home each night to listen to European radio, smoke a spliff and play with my new buddy. Although Kris was the kind of guy women find attractive, slim, toned with a cheeky grin and fluffy hair, I hadn't thought there was anything remotely sexual about our closeness.

Although I had fucked guys, Kris was more like my buddies from the office in London- a play mate, someone to talk to about girls and fight for in pubs. He knew through our drinking sessions that I wasn't your typical heterosexual hero, but seemed satisfied with my stories of Anya and Lucy that I was straight enough to be his pal. In-fact the sexuality thing became a favourite topic of his, asking me again and again when he was pissed how come some people turn gay and others didn't. I rose above the question coming out with some shit about all people having levels of grey. On the third time he asked, I told him to shut the fuck up about it or I'd show him exactly what it was like turning gay. He threw an empty beer can at me, so I jumped him and planted one right on his lips. Silent for a second or so, he burst out laughing, struggling so hard the sofa tipped over, both of us landing on the floor. From that point on he didn't give a shit about my background, praising women who walked through the village and grinning at me when a pumped up traveller came past with a backpack on or heading off with Eddie on a diving course. More often than not I ignored his teasing, blowing him a kiss or throwing something across the room, but inside I secretly liked our play jealousy. Given the choice between Lucy and Kris, I knew which one I would prefer to spend my nights alone on a tropical island with. Each day I hoped it wouldn't be the inevitable morning he decided to

pack up as planned and continue his journey through to Malaysia, but days turned to weeks and Kris and I stayed on in the little house.

As time passed, Eddie came over less and less, my days splitting into the two different tongues of work and play.

Living with Kris reminded me of the first days in London, sharing a house in Stoke Newington where the rent was cheap and the lounge always full of guests. I was always the host, pouring out vodka to tea total friends and inventing games that usually involved dares and shots. Often people would come over on the Friday night and leave only on Monday morning, having spent the whole weekend with us in the lounge, sleeping under blankets on the wooden floor, sharing pizza's and beers, gradually checking their inhibitions at the front door. This was the happiest I remembered being in London, avoiding work and looking after my little commune. I could see it happening again in Chaloklum, Kris and I becoming like husband and husband, cooking for each other, getting pissed every night and failing more often than not to make it to the dive school or truck shed at the times we promised to. I wanted to be like Kris, running away from something specific, spending a period of time without inhibition or regret. When he asked about my reasons for leaving, I had tried to explain, but he summed it up "So you just got pissed with your world and fucked it up a bit" which was basically right. Often it only takes a stranger seconds to explain stuff you have had mulling around your brain for months. However, unknown to him, Kris's presence in my house was turning Chaloklum village against me and would itself be the new fuck up I hadn't planned.

Two weeks after he moved in a couple of his Dutch

friends came down from their travels in the country. They stayed over too, erecting a little tent in my back garden and drinking with us at night. One of them had too much to drink one night and propositioned one of the girls at Eddie's diving school, flashing her before we could escort him back to the house and sober him up. Eddie confronted me after that, suggesting that either I work for him, coming to work sober and kicking Kris out to go back to Hat Rin, or I find myself a new job. I apologised to Eddie, sitting with him a long time knowing that his confrontational words must have boiled up over a long time and be very hard for him to share. I knew Eddie had helped me out when I needed it most, coming to my support without any restrictions or limits, but I just couldn't kick Kris out. If I did I knew he would leave Koh Pha Ngan and my play buddy would be gone. I needed Kris because he made the thoughts in my head easy. He expressed the things I wanted to and gave me a reason for my days. I loved the village of Chaloklum and had spent many happy months pretending to be one of the population, but I knew that I had to go. In bringing in my half of the world I was threatening to destroy the only thing it had left- the fact it wasn't everywhere else.

Kris and I packed up the little house the week before Christmas, letting the neighbours have my old fridge and giving Eddie a photo for his wall. Our last night in the village was spent on the beach around a fire, people coming and going with bottles of beer and fire crackers to see us off on our journey.

Eddie sat with us, toasting us in Thai and offering to drive us with our bags down to the port in the morning. We thanked him for the offer but said it was just as easy to get the taxi-truck that would be coming by with the months Full Mooners. I don't know if

Eddie really did think I would turn Chaloklum Bay into the next Blackpool, but I know he had very strong feelings about anyone who wasn't Thai. I think it was only that I had been robbed by the Americans that made him view me as one of the locals, vulnerable and acceptable. I don't blame him for moving us on- we were piss heads, loud European guys drinking all night and scaring the kids. But if Kris hadn't dropped into the dive shop that day, I might still be living there in Chaloklum, diving each morning and reading all night. I remembered the old man's words in Bangkok- "Up and down like the ocean waves..." Our plan was to travel all day, across the Gulf to Samui, onto the mainland and over the thin strip of Thailand to the Andaman coast. From there we would go where the wind took us. Anywhere that was, but home.

THE ANDAMAN SEA

Our ferry crossing was rough- wind whipped seas crashing across the lower decks, the open sides letting in water. Kris and I sat upstairs, surrounded by our backpacks and bags. Every time the ship crashed from one wave to another, I felt my stomach lurch. Thai's carried on around us, their sea legs a little more established. In the indoor lounge, a boxing match entertained a hundred or so people on a big television screen. Elsewhere kids ran around in various states of undress, jumping over legs and sucking on bags of highly coloured juice. My skin went from tan to green, Kris holding my arm as I leant over the side of the ferry to throw up. Even on the mainland, in the hot minibus, the sickness didn't subside, exhausting me with each retch. They put me at the back near the only open window, but the sense of being trapped inside and the sweltering heat made the illness worse. By the time we reached the city of Trang near the Malaysian border, I was lying across the seat, my head on a rucksack and Kris's baseball cap over my eyes. Everything inside wanted to be out and my throat ached from the constant burn of acid. Even my vision was blurred as we climbed out of the vehicle into the dark of the city. Kris went ahead leaving me with the bags on the pavement while he looked for a room. He returned via a chemist, throwing re-hydration pills my way and taking both rucksacks on his shoulders. Our room in Trang looked like some sort of prison. The long corridors had bare concrete floors and light bulbs hanging every few metres- blinking and fizzing on bare wires. Avoiding the tiny lift with its exposed rope mechanism, we made our way up endless stairs

to the sixth floor and twisted the big metal key in the door. Two army type beds with brown blankets and a little square towel. The television was already on, ghosting pictures of an Asian game show squeaking away. I lay down on the nearest bed and closed my eyes, swallowing constantly to try to stop the rising vomit. Kris sat on the end of my bed, dabbing a wet cloth onto my forehead and adjusting the fan to cool my skin. At some point in the night I lost it completely, retching into the toilet, sweat dripping off my body in rivers. I had started to hallucinate, clouds of colour and flashes filling my view. Kris was panicking presuming I had something much more serious than travel sickness or sunstroke. In the early hours a Thai doctor appeared at my side, taking my temperature and shining a torch in my eyes. His English wasn't good, but I could understand most of what he was saying to Kris- pointing out that the colour of my eyes suggested I only had a very serious case of food poisoning. If I wasn't better in two days having taken the pills the doctor left, I should check into a hospital, especially if I showed Malarial symptoms. Of course having left the UK without a plan I didn't have any injections and could in theory have caught anything.

I woke the next night, the room dark and Kris gently snoring in his bed. He was fully dressed, his hand clutching the towel he had obviously been using to keep me cool. At the time I didn't know how many days I had slept for. My boxers were in the bin, obviously having not been sufficient to keep everything where it should be. Everything was disgusting and I wanted nothing more than to be back in my nice white room on BoPhut beach or my expensive New York hotel. I was grateful to have someone in the next bed, keeping the water coming,

but at the same time I wanted to be alone, just existing in my own mess waiting for my body to recover. I closed my eyes again, drifting through sleep and wake for the next few hours till daylight. When I finally fully woke, Kris was in the shower, emerging with a towel around him that he had unpacked from his bags. "Feeling better? You were scary yesterday. Thought you might die." "Yeah, thanks, I know, how long was I asleep?" "A whole day. I couldn't make you sit up or anything, but the doctor said your temperature was ok now." "Thanks for calling him mate." "No problem, I was scared, you better now yeah?" "Yeah, I think so. I need to shower." I stayed under the cool fast water for several minutes, washing the film of sweat and illness off my body. When we were both dressed, we disposed of the towels I had used when ill and packed everything else up. It was time for one night of decent air-con, provided by the big international hotel about a mile outside the city. We pooled the cash we had, holding back the equivalent of about one hundred pounds to use on the rest of our journey.

Fifteen quid bought us a twin room in The Amari, a monolithic white building complete with posh lobby, piano next to reception, huge outdoor/indoor pool and air-conditioning in every room. Leaving Kris to jump straight into the water and mess about in the gym, I poured a warm bath in the cold clean bathroom and sunk into the bubbles, can of diet coke from the fridge refuelling my tired stomach. From the window of the bathroom you could see the city below, several miles of suburbs- a jigsaw of metal and tiled roofs, ornate wooden walkways between buildings and market stalls along the winding streets. It looked like the pirate towns in kids books- turrets and oriental temples, gold and glitter. Here on the

border, the different religious influences mixed in a heady maze of domes and Buddhas. We had read stories about attacks here, Muslim on Buddhist, Malay against Thai, both against the police- several people had been shot when gunfire caught people in the street after the forces tried to arrest a local gang leader. There was no sign of tension from up here in the polished haven of the hotel, but we were aware of being the only western faces in the building. Having travelled overland from Holland, Kris wasn't bothered by stories of conflict, but I remained a little nervous as we ventured out into the city that night for food. I ate boiled rice, flicking it from a little ornate bowl. Kris had meat dumplings and noodles, steamed for us on the side of the road. I liked being here, a little outside the tourist track, playing at being adventurous in Kris's steps.

We returned after eating to enjoy the cool of the hotel, drinking at the bar (coke for me, straight vodka for him). Later that night, Kris would start explaining more about his problems back in Holland, switching between Dutch and English as he did so. I listened patiently, refilling his glass as he told me how his wife had spent his savings on a flash new car they couldn't even insure and a honeymoon in Mauritius. Before meeting her he had planned to work only part time, spending his spare hours on the track where he competed professionally in long jump. He had even considered joining the forces and travelling the world that way as a soldier. He asked if I had enjoyed my work back in London. I hadn't really thought about it as something you enjoyed or not- it was just what you did. In my case technology. I couldn't remember the time I had decided to work in the industry- I don't think it was a conscious decision, just the result of a need for money and opportunities arising. Kris made

me promise that when we returned to Europe we would set up a little company together, he could do sales and I could create the product. We shook on it, his glass refilled a couple more times. Lying on our beds, we continued mulling over our various jobs, people we had worked for, offices we had gone to every day for years without truly knowing a soul there. Finishing the dregs of the bottle, Kris let the glass drop out of his hand, cuddling up into his pillow. With one eye open he looked over to my side of the room. "This is good yeah. Good being here doing what we do." He closed his eyes and started to breathe the deep sounds of someone drifting into dreams. I stayed awake, thinking about it. I didn't really know what it is I did anymore. I didn't really know how long Kris would be around or where I would go if he left. Being so ill the night before had scared me and made me long for a flight home to the cold air and damp safety of Britain. All I knew was that I could no longer be the person I was back in London. Even if I ran out of money and was forced to go back, I would remember this as the time I was allowed to be myself. This would be the reference point against which other things would be measured. When I thought about it I had no regrets, about anything at all. Not leaving. Not hanging up on Anya. Not giving away my company or leaving Alphabet House. For the first time since London I mentally moved from running away, to being here. For the time being I lived in Thailand, with Kris and the bugs and the vomit. It was ok. It was what I did.

On Christmas Eve Kris and I walked into town, everything we owned back on our backs and looked for a travel agent. Unlike Europe with holiday brochures, computers and flashy offices, a travel agent in Southern Thailand consists of a desk in a

food store or café with lots of photos of bungalows and huts they can book you into and a pad for writing out travel bookings. Our options were limited, Christmas is an expensive time in the well known resorts like Phuket and Samui. If we wanted our cash to last we would have to continue somewhere fairly obscure and wait till the westerners retreated. Finding a photo of a sweet little beach hut, palms leaning either side and steps onto the sand, I asked for information.

The girl, about twenty in a smart shirt and little metal framed glasses told me about the beach- “Long beach, Koh Lanta, about two hours away by truck and car-ferry.” “Is it cheap?” “It can be, not many people go there at Christmas, no hotels. Muslim place.” The name of the island rang a bell- it was the place Bao had lived, the guy from the cruise ship. Intrigued to see where he grew up, I urged Kris to go for it. We paid 1000 baht each (about fifteen pounds) for transport and two nights accommodation in the beach hut, leaving from the town square at six that evening.

The minibus was empty, meaning we could spread out, keeping our bags with us rather than stacking them on the roof. Our driver didn't seem too impressed with the idea of taking just two people down the coast and onto the car ferry. Explaining in Thai that I knew someone from Koh Lanta he cheered up a bit, telling me he had also grown up there, going to the little island school and working on the fishing boats till he got this job transporting travellers to and fro. As he drove he told us stories about the island- the monkeys that were reincarnated from Monks, the old elephant in the forest that had been too sick to work on the mainland and spent its last days transporting the more adventurous Ferangs

through the jungle interior. His brother owned a shop in the little town of Ban Saladan, where all the ferries docked and most people stayed. Showing him the picture of our beach house, he said it was fairly isolated, about two miles along a seven mile beach. A lot of people stayed there in the summer, but the weather changed in the other seasons, meaning swimming and sunbathing wasn't always possible, hence it being cheap and available at Christmas.

We passed the Trang city limits as night fell and drove on for another hour to the first ferry port. An old flat steel boat was loaded with crates and cars, heaved back and forth across the tiny stretch of water that separated the first of the two Koh Lanta islands from the mainland. Totally unlike the islands on the other side of the coast, those in the Andaman sea looked quite ghostly, bush land and forests instead of tropical foliage. The first island was almost completely flat and uninhabited, a single road running its entire length to allow cars from the mainland to connect to the next ferry. According to our driver the tarmac was fairly new, but heavy rains had already washed away its surface, leaving craters and flooded patches along the route. I immediately liked the look of Koh Lanta Yai, more like the banks of the Amazon than an island, its gentle landscape fringed with swampland and submerged trees.

Saladan itself was a two street town, restaurants and houses jutting out on stilts over the water, all seemingly deserted. The second street headed inland, with a bank, a covered market and pharmacy. After another mile the school appeared- a long low building with a temple in its grounds, Thai script in big golden letters along the wall. Motorbikes and scooters lined its entrance, a couple of them converted to take a

second and third passenger in a simple sidecar. Eventually we reached Long Beach (Phra Ae), nothing more than a collection of market stalls, a couple of wood/metal huts and signs for two bungalow resorts. Ours was very basic, ten little bungalows with their own decks and steps down to the beach. There was no communal eating house, the owner living in the first house, selling tins of food or cans of beer from his deck. We took two huts but used only one, throwing the bags into the one without a fan and occupying the second. The room had obviously been shut up for a long time, spider webs over the doorway and leaves in the semi-outdoor toilet. I undid the window latch and let more hot air in, circulated by the big ceiling fan and little ornate machine next to the first mattress. Kris immediately claimed the bed near the window, kneeling on it to look out at the beach in-front of the house. In the gentle darkness the waves looked large and ferocious, their sound constant and loud. Bats flew through the open sides of the deck, just missing my hair, their high pitched sound only just audible. Mistaking them for insects I tried to swat at them as they flew, stopping only when a particularly large one curved in, flashing the extent of its wings in silhouette by the bulb. We turned off the light, hoping the insects they were catching would find another home. In four hours it would be Christmas day, so we took a long sock from Kris's bag and filled it with two cans of beer we could open after midnight. I had also saved a packet of Pringles from the hotel which I crammed on top.

Kris explored for a while, walking back up the track to the market area, all of which was deserted apart from a little bar at the end of the street. Two girls were standing in-front of a little television,

microphones in their hand belting out Thai love songs. They giggled and ran away when Kris poked his head inside. Alerted by the change in tempo, the bar tender, an old woman with a big round face, came over to give Kris the menu. He explained that we were staying at the huts down on the beach and paid her for a bottle of whisky and a bag of lychee fruit. On his way out, apparently she tried to say Happy Christmas, but it came out as “Happy your Christ day”. We laughed about it back on the deck, loving the way the Thai’s accepted our weird traditions and stories about people from Galilee who parted oceans and came back from the dead. At the stroke of midnight we switched the whisky for beer, drinking the cans in two or three swigs and threw them aside to paddle in the sea. Huge waves, so big they knocked Kris off balance, pushing him along back to the shore. I jumped around, kicking him with water and ducking under each one as they reached me. The phosphorescent algae sparked in the water as you disturbed them “Like Tinkerbell” as he put it. Dripping wet we returned to the deck, him falling asleep in the hammock, me looking out to the dark ocean for hours, listening to the moo-ing of frogs. Beyond the waves there was nothing but water till the Eastern coast of India. I imagined sailing there, fishing for food and lying under the sun all day. I fell asleep too sometime before dawn, whispering a good night to the boy and falling onto my mattress, the Christmas sock pinned to the wall above my bed.

THE SPHERE

An old man in Cambodia told me once about the theory of the seven levels. He said that the world existed on seven planes, some of which most people never experienced or knew about. He drew me a picture of the world with seven rings around it, spheres in space. According to this belief system, we exist on all seven levels, communicating, enjoying our senses, feeling the world around us as it feels in its most simple form. The things we see all take form on the first level. He said it didn't matter if the world was flat, or round or a planet or whatever, the way it was seen and felt and experienced would change depending on the levels you reached. You can't just get in a space rocket or aeroplane and move through 'The Sphere', to reach the higher levels you have to allow yourself to hear them. He taught me that it's possible to shut out the sounds, feelings and movements of the physical world and begin to experience the higher plateaus of this entity he called 'The Sphere'. People often experienced this certain kind of dream, when they had near death experiences or what many western people call 'out of body experiences'. With training and practice however you can move from one level to another, understanding the data around you in a different way. Like looking at skin underneath a microscope, seeing individual cells and the links between them, zooming out to see the pattern of a fingerprint, out further to see a hand and further yet to see the human body, signals from the brain moving the hand to feed us. The whole world is like this- tiny objects, people, words, feelings, that make sense on the small scale as

the daily lives we lead, but when seen as a whole become something bigger, a common understanding or philosophy. Zooming out further to the outer spheres, he explained that our lives, our actions, our words and regrets made up a tiny part of a growing and evolving common consciousness- an entity in itself that couldn't be understood by its constituent parts but only as a whole. Sometimes people trip into a moment of understanding, feeling their link between the smallness of their lives and the bigger picture. When they tune into the highest levels of The Sphere, they are aware that their actions, their feelings, their little banks of knowledge are linked to a much greater, very much alive kind of universe. People could even be born with knowledge of it- a sense that they were aware of information they couldn't possibly have learnt. In a way The Sphere knows everything we have ever done, because it is composed of the things we are. You can't turn it on or off, you just contribute to it and download from it as you live your days. It was always there and even after your death will still contain the very thing that you are, the twists and turns of your steps. The old man in Cambodia meditated every day to try and feel the power of The Sphere around him, to touch its being and let his body and the limits of his own tiny mind drift away so that he could hear it.

Some people don't need to meditate to do the same thing. They get to touch The Sphere without trying- it just happens. A thought you have or a feeling in your body, something new, something that fits the puzzle and connects you to the bigger story. I have seen The Sphere. I have felt my own life being a part of The Sphere. I have heard the sound of it and experienced the movement of my world shifting into it. Some people never will, some people can't, no matter how

much they try. But they keep on living, they keep on talking and eating and breeding. Cells in skin. Blood on bone. I believe that the man is right and the world does exist on many levels. I believe that because of The Sphere, the things I feel have to be explored, they have to be lived- it's my job and my contribution. That's why I write, hoping to understand the links between the words that come out when I type and the history I have known. Somewhere in there is the journey I am on, the things I understand and the facts I know. In putting them on paper, I can resolve them, hear back from the page the person I think I am and how you see me. It's like being outside The Sphere, looking in. It is much quieter this way.

KOH LANTA YAI

We spent Christmas day walking the coast of Koh Lanta. The island is just over twenty miles long, most of the Eastern shore fringed by white sand. At the southern end the land rises up into rolling hills, the road wearing away into a mud track with a sheer drop on one side. It rained gently through the morning, the dark clouds coming in from the sea and covering us by midday. It didn't dampen our spirits, walking on with soaking wet shorts, caps keeping the water out of our eyes. The rain in Thailand is warm, like a slow falling shower. At one point we lay down outside a roadside kitchen, letting the water fall, cleaning our muddy legs and washing the sand off our skin. Late in the afternoon the sun made a dramatic return, burning through the mist and rising the temperature by several degrees. Clothes soaked from the walk were dry within ten minutes, hanging stiffly on the deck.

Back at the beach huts, we met a couple staying in the bungalow at the end of the row. Both French, they had stayed here for a week, like us unable to afford the better known resorts on the mainland or in the gulf. They had seen us drinking and messing about the night before but stayed inside, smoking and sipping champagne they had bought in Singapore. She had a sharp face, long pointed nose and defined cheek bones. He was gentler, boyish and completely clean shaven. Tristan and Anna joined us on the deck that night, playing card games and comparing war stories. Tristan had a little scar from where a parasitic worm had been removed- apparently you could feel it twisting under the skin, crunching on flesh. Anna had

suffered also, drinking unclean water in the highlands of Malaysia and lying sick for several days. Ever since she had boiled everything with a little travel kettle or fire tin. Kris instantly bonded with them both, relaxing in their company and sharing our alcohol supplies. I sat back, a little more reserved as I always was, not quite as fluent in the ways of the traveller. The small talk continued past nightfall before Anna and Tristan made their way hand in hand down the steps, along the beach to their hut. We could hear them laughing later in the night, the smell of coffee drifting thick through the air from their deck. It was an easy day with no agenda, one of many to follow. When we were tired we slept- usually several times through the day. Kris would often call for Tristan, knocking a ball about on the beach, leaving Anna and I on the sidelines, cheering them on. A few drinking hours into one evening Anna took the opportunity when the other two had gone for supplies, to ask me about Kris. "Trist says you two are together, are you together?" I laughed, breaking the incense coil I was trying to light. "No, we are not together." "But you are gay yes." I lit the coil and refilled my glass. I hadn't known it was so obvious that I wasn't entirely heterosexual and was thrown a little by her question. "No. Er... well, I play. Kris doesn't. He wouldn't. I don't know." She smiled, acknowledging that I wasn't entirely comfortable chatting about it and nodded, ending the conversation.

Later that night I caught Anna looking over at Kris whenever Tristan was busy or looking the other way. Kris was completely unaware, but I could tell she liked him, pouring his drink first and laughing a little too loudly at his jokes and songs. I couldn't really work out how to feel about that. Kris was totally single, totally straight and had every right to hook up

with any girl he wanted, but inside I knew it would change things. I enjoyed being the other person in the hut with him. I liked making his breakfast and sharing a smoke in the dark of night when animals woke us up. In my weird little way I had conjured a contract between us, unspoken rules that we had come to Lanta together- buddies, pals, people connected. The feelings got stronger through the week, Anna and Kris going off together in the mornings to buy food and bottles of water, leaving Tristan to swim and me to do nothing on the deck. In his own way Kris made up for it by becoming physically closer to me, wrapping an arm around my neck in the drinking circle or ruffling my hair when he walked past me sitting. I don't know if he made the connection between my growing reserve and his spending time with Anna, but when it came time for the couple to move on, I cant say I wasn't secretly pleased. Kris wasn't mine, but I didn't want him to be hers either. The irony is the truth of the situation had not once revealed itself, the last night together bringing everything to light.

As usual we were sitting on my deck and Anna and Kris had gone off down the dirt track to buy drinks, cigarettes and fruit from the little store. Tristan was smoking, looking out over the sea, taking long deep breaths of nicotine.

After a few minutes I went to stand, intending to grab a smoke for myself from the box Kris had rolled up earlier. As he stood he stopped me. "Hey, you mind if we talk for a minute." "Sure yeah. I just want a smoke." "Ok yes. Get a smoke, when you get back lets talk you and me." I returned a minute later with my cigarette burning and sat down against the wall. "What's up." He looked a little nervous, his face lower than mine, looking at the floor and then to the

sea. "I want to talk to you about Kris." I mentally prepared to defend my pal, presuming he was about to suggest that he and Anna were spending too much time together. "What about him?" "I thought, well, I thought when you arrived, that you and Kris were with together." His French wasn't perfect, which made it even more sweet. "Ha! No, its ok, Anna asked me. Kris is straight. I mean, I am straight too, but not the same. We are not together. I thought Anna told you." "Yes she did. I wanted you to say it." I smiled, a little confused, inhaling on the cigarette. "Why do you ask mate?" He looked out to sea again, pulled the last drag on his smoke and flicked it to the dark sand. "I ask because I like you." He was looking straight at me, dark curls falling over his eyes. "What do you mean mate? How do you like me?" I was very slowly throwing away all my logic, working out as I said it why Anna had left us alone so often. "I want to kiss you. Can I kiss you?" I was silent. Anna and Tristan were not together at all. In their own way they were a mirror of Kris and I. It was obvious Anna loved him from the way she pawed him all day and grabbed for his hand whenever they walked anywhere, but Tristan wasn't entirely what we thought he was.

He leant forward, took the cigarette out of my hand and threw it to the sand. We just sat there, him leaning across the deck, my hand in his- his eyes looking sad like a puppy dog, my face probably blank. "Er... I don't know. If you like. But I'm not gay mate." He laughed quietly, let go of my hand, shuffled up next to me against the wall and turned to face me. In one movement he ran his fingers through his curls, pulling them away from his face and kissed me on the lips. I didn't move, didn't react, just sat there not knowing what to do. He sat back, grinning, his bare chest rising and falling with his heavy breathing. I

pulled a second cigarette from behind my ear and lit it, drawing the hot air in and blowing it out again. He laughed a little louder. "Did you like. I am sorry, I just wanted this week to kiss you." I didn't answer, just put the cigarette down on a stone and leant in to kiss him again. My hand on his neck, the other in his hair. We stayed like that, breathing slowly, kissing deeply and warmly. He whispered into my open mouth that we should meet later. I mumbled something indefinite and broke the kiss as I heard the others footsteps disturbing the gravel path.

Anna and Kris bounced up the stairs, throwing their bags into the middle of the deck and sitting down. Anna kissed Tristan on the forehead, pulling a packet of Marlboros out of her pocket for him. Kris sat down right behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders while he took the drink orders.

In bed that night, I asked Kris if he knew much about Tristan and Anna's relationship. He let a chuckle out and said that he probably knew as much as I did. Turning to face me he looked for a reaction, smoking for a few seconds before piping up. "Did you kiss him then?" I stopped breathing. Kris knew, probably knew all along that Tristan was gay and Anna he were just mates. "Er... yeah. How did you know. Is that ok?" "Hey mate, not my fucking business. Anna said we should leave you alone to have a little chat. Can you believe she thought we were an item." "Not such a weird guess in her eyes I suppose." "No mate, suppose its not. So are you going to do him?" Not wanting to continue the conversation, I got up from the bed and walked out to the deck. Kris followed a minute or so later, grabbing me from behind, hugging around my neck, looking out to the dark waves with me. "Do you think it's weird Kris?" He waited a few

seconds, ruffled my hair and grabbed my cigarette transferring it to his mouth. “No. It’s not weird. You are fine mate. Do him.” “I don’t want to do him, I want... I don’t know what I want.” “Listen to me buddy... you should do what you want to do with the French guy. He looks like he wants you to do the gay thing. I watched him when you swim. It’s ok with me. You can be the gay thing.” “I’m not gay Kris” He let go of the shoulder hug and went to stand next to me. “Man, I know the way you look at me when I shower. You get fucking horny” His grin was playful and his tone was playful. “That’s because you walk around me like you aint had a shag in years mate. That’s why. I’d fuck anyone who walked around the hut naked who hadn’t had a shag in years.” He laughed, accepting the response, gave me my cigarette back and went inside to open the last beer. After that we didn’t need to talk about it anymore.

Kris didn’t care how I looked at him as long as I didn’t touch. I didn’t shag the French guy either, although I saw him walking past along the shore later that night, the glow of his cigarette dancing like a firefly. In the morning Tristan and Anna were gone and we moved into their big room, taking advantage of the two double beds instead of the singles in ours. I wasn’t jealous anymore when people took Kris’s attention. My admiration for him had limits I could live with. He naturally seemed to know when I wanted one of his backwards shoulder hugs, or when he was going too far, stroking himself off at night in full view of my wide awake eyes. Now, if he knew I was awake, he would go out to the deck, tossing himself off under the shower out of my sight. Drunk chats would always still focus on girls, people we knew, what we had done, where we had done it, what they did back, but there was an unspoken level under

that that Kris knew not to cross. They weren't the usual limits of two guys hanging out. In-fact we went way passed the classification of good buddies, but it worked, it was comfortable, it was enough.

After a week of body surfing and going to the little karaoke bar, we decided it was time to have a house meeting. We needed to sit down and work out where we were going to go, how long we would stay on Lanta and how we would pay for it. We held the meeting on the beach, both of us putting on a T-shirt to indicate the formality of the occasion. Lying on the shore, making beach angel patterns in the sand with our arms, we started the proceedings.

Kris told me he wanted to stay on Lanta as long as we could, having done plenty of real travelling in the months before he met me. I told him I wanted to stay too, but didn't think I could find work in the tiny village of Phra Ae. We were down to only a few pounds, Kris having a little more in the bank but my funds completely dried out. We talked for a long time about what we would do if we returned to Europe, maybe him staying in London for a while, both of us looking for work in one of the Internet companies or cyber cafes or we going back to Amsterdam, where we could stay in his family house right in the city. He had friends he wanted to introduce me to and bars he wanted me to see. The thought of going back to a city, even one as cosmopolitan as Amsterdam scared me a little bit, but I said it sounded like a cool plan to think about. Whichever way we looked at it, we couldn't stay on Lanta much longer without work, even if Kris spent what was left in his savings accommodating and feeding us. Realising that this seemed to be an insurmountable problem we decided to leave it for the night, go to the karaoke bar and hold another meeting in the morning. I wanted to stay

on Lanta forever, but knew I had thrown away my chips when I closed the business in London and ignored my drying up bank account. Whatever we did now it would rely on Kris and that made me feel vulnerable and guilty. He knew I felt that way and cheered me up, reminding me on the walk up the path how I had lost my job because of his mates and how either of us could have moved on at any time but chose not to.

When we turned off the path towards the little bar, we saw the door was closed and the lights were off. A couple of Thai kids were outside so we asked them if it would be closed all night. They told us most people had gone to Saladan to watch the Thai Boxing and the bar wouldn't be open for the whole night, but there was another bar further down the beach. Usually we only walked along the exposed bit of the sand, stopping where the rocks piled up blocking our path, but we knew there was more beyond, presuming it just to be empty or reached only by boat. Seeing that we looked confused, a little boy ran ahead, shouting for us to follow. Ten minutes down the road he turned straight into the bushes, emerging on the other side on a steep pathway that led around the rocks and down to the other beach. Kris flipped him a coin and we lit our torches to illuminate our descent. It was a difficult climb in the dark, littered with pebbles that made it easy to slip and twisting around big old trees. Just as we were nearing the beach around the headland I heard a shuffle and a whoosh- the sound of a coconut falling out of the branches and splitting open just in-front of Kris. The size of footballs, the hard nuts could crack open your skull if you happened to be standing under one when it fell. It was the most common form of injury behind motorbike incidents, right across the archipelago.

Jumping out the way he landed awkwardly, twisting his ankle and falling to the ground. We limped on in the dark, one of the torches broken, deciding that even if there wasn't a bar at the other end, spending the night on the beach would be easier than making the climb in reverse.

The shore stretched on into the dark, a completely deserted curve with no obvious buildings anywhere in sight. We sat down to rest Kris's damaged ankle and listen for any sounds of human inhabitation. It was hard to detect, but amongst the whistling trees, crashing waves and warbling insects, I could hear the beat of music. Slow and deep bass, almost like drums. Leaving Kris to rest, I walked on in the direction of the music, two or three hundred metres along the beach. There it was, a long single hut, the doorway framed by little lights and a dog sleeping inside. It was obviously once a bar, a couple of plastic seats lying in various positions in the sand and a big oil drum full of empty bottles under a hatch. Approaching the door I wondered if I should shout out, but didn't want to wake the dog. The inside had cushions on the concrete floor, material on the walls and two or three little storm lamps glowing on the shelf. I coughed, trying to indicate I was there desperate for a drink. On the second cough a head popped up from behind the counter- someone was lying down behind, a bottle of something in their hand. I helped them up and asked politely in Thai if the guy knew where I could get a drink for me and my friend. He grinned a ridiculous grin and moved in to grab my hand, tripping over the bar as he did so. Our new pal was Walter, a Canadian guy who lived here in the bar, his long fluffy beard and dirty body indicating that he generally didn't expect guests. "First person in three weeks to ask me that. Want a drink do ya! Sure, come

on in, the bar is open.” He staggered about behind the bar, plugging in the fridge and trying to light more candles.

I told him I'd be back when I told my friend it was open and ordered two beers. Walter, Kris and I drank the bar dry that night- which wasn't difficult as he only had six beers, a small bottle of whisky and a jug of something we couldn't identify. The dog woke up and jumped about, fetching sticks and bottles thrown for him across the dark beach. Walter was amazing- a total Robinson Crusoe. He had come to Phuket on holiday with a few mates many months before, meeting a girl in a bar. Although she expected money, he fell for her and followed her back to Lanta where she lived. Their relationship had lasted three weeks after the girl realised Walter who was still at college didn't have much money and couldn't pay her family enough to keep her from working on wealthy Phuket. They had used his savings, a total of two thousand pounds to buy this little bar in the middle of nowhere, the girl saying it would get busy at Christmas and bring them in more than their investment. Turned out the girl's family owned it and Walter hadn't seen her again since handing over the money. But the bar was his- he even had a contract drawn up by his friends in Vancouver, signed by the land owners for the next ten years. As he wasn't a Thai national, this was the best he could get, renting the building from its owners, but long after the girl left he consoled himself that they wouldn't be coming back, not now, not in ten years.

It was an amazing story- made more amazing still by the fact Walter was still here, growing his beard and feeding the dog. He said he hadn't spoken to his parents in years and didn't have any way to get back home, sleeping and eating here instead, passing the

time between guests. One or two people only had come on the busy days, Thai's with their kids from the village further down the island and older men who came in by boat, sleeping onboard but coming into the bar for whisky and rice. He didn't even speak Thai, but got by with the universal language of pointing and smiles. Kris helped Walter fix up the speakers that kept cutting on and off due to a loose wire, meaning we could play music at least. All the CD's were the same, endless tracks of ambient music, trance and a couple of Bob Marley- the same stuff you heard all over the islands, probably all copies of each other. Although we had a little money and Walter obviously needed it, he wouldn't accept our cash. Instead we agreed to help him out the next day by hiring a motorbike from the village to bring in the supplies and new music from Saladan. We kept our promise, sleeping on the floor of the bar and climbing back to Long Beach at dawn. It took us all day, but we found music CD's for sale, unmarked disks costing about one pound each. We picked three from the 'Club' pile and one from 'American'. Those along with several bottles of whisky and a crate of beer were transported back to the bar in convoy and carried on shoulders down the slope, around the headland and across the beach. This time we agreed prices for everything, giving them to Walter as a gift for the night before and then buying them back, one by one. After midnight we declared a sale, halving the cost of whisky and pumping up the sound system. Any passing fishing boats would have had a laugh, watching us dancing away in our own private worlds to Elvis, REM and whatever else came on. Whenever we knew a song, we sang or shouted along, a mixture of Dutch, Canadian and my nothing accent merging together. Half way through a song by ABBA, I asked

Walter what the bar was called, not having noticed it didn't have any sort of sign before that point. "What mate?" He asked, going to turn down the blaring music. "I asked what the bar was called. Does it have a name?" "Er, no it had a Thai name she used, I don't know how to say it, something about stars." We sat on the sand looking up at the doorway with its little line of fairy lights and the dog dribbling on the doorstep. Kris came over to join us, filling our glasses with a high poured line of whisky and plonking himself backwards into my lap. "We should name it. It should be called What Bar" he announced, lying backwards and stealing my smoke. "Why? I mean, why would we call it What?" Walter asked. "Coz you cant find it mate. Because it's not even there. Because this whole life is fucking ace and nobody knows we are here. You know, like... oh there's a bar down there. What Bar? You know... like lost people." He almost made sense and Walter liked it. We stood, him rolling off my lap facedown into the sand and toasted- "To What Bar, the best fucking bar in the world." And so it was named. And it was the best bar in the world that night. No drinks left, no cigarette machine, no funky people dancing the night away, but it had us and we had it and that was cool.

THE WHAT BAR

In the days that followed, Kris and I moved our stuff out of the huts, cleaning out the rooms behind What Bar and digging a proper toilet hole in the bush behind the bar. There were two small rooms-each big enough for a hammock hanging from nails inside and another larger room which one day could be a proper kitchen. Kris and I took a room each, Walter continuing to sleep on the old mattress behind the fridge. The dog took to sleeping in my room, yapping every time a crab or creepy thing made it across the beach and into line of sight. He even had a habit of catching the huge flying beetles in his paws, chasing them across the floor, buzzing like a remote controlled toy as they went.

I had some experience of managing events back in London, so Walter nominated me in charge of attracting people to the bar. My first decision was to clear the pathway up the hill and cut an opening in the bushes at the top. Kris painted a sign with a big question mark as the logo and the word BAR in bright red. We stuck it in the ground on the main road pointing down to the pathway- a second one nailed to a tree half way down the slope. Inside the bar we re-arranged the fairy lights into question mark symbols and bought black-lights units from Saladan for the outside area. The glow illuminated big stars and moon symbols we painted on the wooden walls and stripes of red yellow and green we put around each tree.

When the electricity worked it looked pretty good-certainly bright enough to be seen from the outcrop or by passing boats returning from the fishing run. It

had the desired effect- the same night, two Thai guys emerging from the slope, drinking a beer with us and asking who owned the bar. Walter showed them his contract and they seemed happy enough, returning only to tell us we should pay a tax to the local sheriff if we were staying open and making us promise not to sell drugs on the premises or buy a karaoke machine because then we would be in competition with the place up the hill. Turns out they weren't random guests at all, but both guys working in the police station who had seen our sign and come down expecting to close us down. For some reason they didn't, probably because I chatted away to them in my basic Thai, giving them most of their beers for free.

After a week of cleaning up the bar and cutting down branches from the path, Kris asked me to go for a walk with him. As Walter was asleep behind the fridge I didn't see any harm in leaving for a while, so followed him out towards the outcrop.

Sitting on the rocks Kris asked me if I was happy on Koh Lanta, if I wanted to move on or stay here for a while messing about with the bar. I told him I didn't have any plans to do anything else, asking him if he had taken the walk to tell me he wanted to move on. "No. I want to stay here. I think we could make it happen properly." He explained that owning a little bar was something he and his mates in Amsterdam had always wanted to do.

Kris had even been offered shares in a place in the red light district, but had never had the money to invest because his wife spent the lot before his wages cleared every month. Back home, in the months before they split he had secretly pocketed the bonuses he sometimes won in the office for selling more than his target and deposited them in a bank account only

he had access to. By now the amount should be at least a couple of grand and it wouldn't be hard to have it wired over to Thailand. Of course I thought he was crazy as the bar wasn't worth anything, not even a couple of grand- I told him so, pointing out that even in the time we had been there the only beer we had sold had been to the policeman. He didn't care, he wanted to make the offer to Walter, give him the money to return to Canada and go back to college. In his head he had already worked it all out- we could print up leaflets, drop them in the travel agents on the mainland and offer commission to the boat-taxis and motorbikes that ferried the travellers around. As I knew some Thai he thought I could serve all the locals that came in and he could build up the outhouses into proper bungalows- maybe his mates or mine from London would come down and stay, paying for their keep. I really wanted to agree, but it felt weird, reminding me of being back home doing little deals with pals. They always say never work with your friends and this was a friendship I didn't want to lose, not when my money wasn't involved and the risk was all his. We returned to the bar, Kris agreeing he would sleep on it for a week and I would mull it over in my mind. We didn't even know if Walter wanted to sell, thinking the approach might even offend him.

Nothing more was said for the night, but we both kept thinking, the idea turning over and over in our own separate ways.

That weekend two more locals came down to the bar, staying for a bottle of whisky between the five of us and encouraging us to buy our food supplies from their store further down the track. They had a motorbike and said I could borrow it for free if we purchased everything from them instead of at the

port. Their prices were low, so it was agreed as usual with a handshake and a gulp of fuel. As word got around, more and more people came, just two or three different faces each night, but enough to make the beer profitable and the trips to the store worth it. Every now and then I would sit with the dog, watching Kris smiling from ear to ear with a bottle opener in his hand and some new girl to talk to. Of course most people were only on the island for a few nights, a short break between cities or on the route over the border, but it passed the time and kept a little bit of cash flowing.

The night before Kris's birthday I slept in his room, talking through the bar concept all night. We could arrange a monthly party, maybe a little like the Full Moon parties, but smaller. Just a sound system on the beach and fireworks in the bay. Kris said that if we bought it we should go up to Bangkok to buy proper tables and chairs- maybe a new fridge and some stuff for the kitchen, drive it all back overland. By the end of the night it was a done deal- we would approach Walter in the morning and if he agreed, transfer the money when the bank opened.

Rather than go back to my room and sleep with the dog, I shared Kris's hammock, lying head to toe, hardly able to sleep wondering about what Walter would say. It seemed totally improbable and daft to spend Kris's cash, to really start a business here and accept Lanta as home, but I wanted to do it. I loved learning more and more of the language and just having Kris buzzing around so happy made me feel good. It was a long night, both of us pretending to snore, but secretly full of ideas.

Walter woke us up knocking on the door frame. I clambered out of the hammock, grabbing one of

Kris's t-shirts from the floor. Walter had made a big birthday card out of the side of a cardboard box and had half a melon in his other hand. We ate the fruit on the beach, Kris looking to me and me back to him not sure who should start talking to Walter. Turned out neither one of us did. "I am going back to Canada." He said it as if it was a totally normal announcement, like going to the store or round the back for a piss. We stopped eating, melon juice dribbling down chins. "How come mate?" I asked, looking to Walter and then back to Kris. "I heard you talking guys. It's cool. I know you want to give me the money and take What Bar for yourselves. It's an ok idea. I don't know if will work out for you, but its ok if you want it." Nobody said anything for a couple of seconds, having planned to tell Walter our idea slowly, building up to the finale about buying the lease from him. Kris spoke first- "We don't want you to go, only if you want to. It's just I have the money and we thought you might want Canada."

I held back, wanting to re-assure Walter that it wasn't about us staying and him going, but an idea we had had, nothing more. He looked at me, lit a smoke, inhaled and then passed it over to Kris. "Don't worry. I know. Look I didn't come here looking to be on an island like this. I dont want to spend my life serving two beers a day and making no money. I just fell in love with some girl and got ripped off and then you guys came along. If you want it its yours. You love What Bar and I don't. I want to go home." That was that, the cigarette got passed in a circle and Walter went off to shower. Kris stood up, grabbed my hand and then tripped me again to the floor. I swung at his feet, sending him crashing down. We wrestled for a couple of seconds, then just lay there, backs on the sand looking up into the blue sky. He laughed and I

turned and sat over his lap. “So we gonna do this then mate. You gonna buy a bar with your fucked up gay mate.” He smiled, pushed me off back onto the beach and pinned me down. “Yeah mate, I am. We are gonna buy the bar... And you mate, just said you were gay.” I stayed pinned under him not sure what to say. The words had come out of my mouth bypassing my brain. I had said them and for some reason it didn’t matter. I shifted from under him, sat up and looked into his eyes, scared and a little lost for words. “Sorry, yeah, I...” he held onto me, pulling me into his shoulder and a whole big part of my world melted away. Years of logic welled up and fell out of my tear ducts, floodgates of emotion soaking into his shirt. I don’t know why I said it or even knew it clearly for the first time at that moment, but it just came out. I couldn’t take it back.

It was the truth. Walter came back a few minutes later to find Kris ruffling my hair and me drying my eyes on my arm. “What’s up guys. You changed your mind?” “No mate. We are buying the bar. Me and the poof.” He sat down, sighed dramatically and lit a cigarette.

BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL

We made the journey to Bangkok together, Walter with his luggage and us with a shopping list. It took all of the first day to cross to the mainland, waiting for a car ferry willing to take us over the water and then into Trang. Not wanting to stay over in the city, we drove on, Kris and I in the back and Walter at the wheel. In the dark we passed endless miles of coconut plantation and villages out in the middle of no-where. Each town seemed to begin with a petrol station and end with a temple. The roads were quiet-usually passing only a couple of other trucks or buses every minute. As we neared Krabi the buses improved in quality- huge two level things with toilets on board and televisions visible through the window, taking divers and holiday makers down to the Krabi beaches for their week in the sun. Past the resorts, we continued to wind through dense forest and marsh land, chickens and goats running across the road wherever people had homes. After eight hours at the wheel Walter pulled over and we hired rooms in a town without a name. It was the usual set up- a roadside kitchen with a few brick buildings behind it, each room with two or three beds and a sink. Kris came running out of his in the middle of the night, shouting the house down- we jumped out of beds joining the owner in the street. Kris was jumping around in his underwear screaming something about snakes. I stepped back, my fear of anything snake like shooting shivers down my spine. It was a palm snake, nothing especially poisonous, but a big one that could give a nasty bite. The animal had curled up behind water bottles and been

disturbed when Kris grabbed one for a drink. He wasn't bitten, but decided to crash out with me for the rest of the night, both of us poking at corners with a broom handle and flashing torches under the beds.

Already Walter was adjusting to the idea of returning to Canada. With cash burning a hole in his pocket he brought us packets of crisps and cans of Coke from the petrol station and a disposable camera he immediately used up, snapping pictures from his turn in the back of the truck. The road continued for hours, becoming busier as we neared Bangkok at noon. Vegetation gave way to messy lines of houses, some nothing more than rectangles of concrete with doors every few yards and painted numbers on the walls. Replacing the suburbs were towers, rough blocks like the council houses of England, some with neon company logos, others with hundreds of lines of washing dripping on balconies. I've never liked Bangkok, its air noticeably stagnant, the roads stationary with vehicles once you cross the city limits. Even the temples looked glitzy, more like Vegas than Asia, sequins and glitter sparkling in the headlights. The plan was we would stay near the airport, seeing Walter onto his flight and then loading up at one of the out of town superstores with everything we would need back on Lanta. Once again the rooms were cheap and basic, but the airport hotel, within earshot of the runway, still came as a shock to the system. We looked like vagrants in our ripped shorts and faded vests. The Asian business men wearing impeccably starched shirts and creased black trousers, seemingly immune to the sweat inducing heat. The women were sharp dressers too- tight skirts and high collars. I could see Kris's eyes bulge at the neat line of check in girls, each one perfectly made up and bowing

in the traditional, polite manner. By the time we sat for dinner at the twenty four hour restaurant he had made a list of his favourite girls, two or three of which he mentally grouped together in his dream orgy. You couldn't blame him- the poor lad had spent the best part of the Winter hanging out with me, Eddie, his visiting mates from Amsterdam and now Walter. We urged him on over a glass of vodka to go talk to the girl behind the bar. He finally plucked up courage when our plates were cleared, asking her if she had met anyone else from Holland. She smiled, giggled into her hand and turned away. Mojo depleted he returned to the table, shoulders low and vodka shot replaced for another.

An hour or so later we were the only people in the restaurant, toasting Walter every few seconds and scribbling emails and messages we wanted him to send. Walter himself seemed on top of the world, leaving the table every now and then to ring people he wanted to meet him at the airport. When the time for his flight came however, the mood changed. I was tired, unused to vodka and suffering from the long drive, but I followed the other two out of the hotel across to the airport terminal. The sheer number of people threw me, making it hard to keep up and rising a little panic in my throat.

The others felt it to, all of us stopping inside the main building, turning again and having a cigarette outside. "So this is it boys. Back to the real world." I couldn't imagine him actually leaving, the third voice in our daily chat, the other face at the table. "You know you can come back mate, if college doesn't work out." Kris grabbed his hand and patted his back. "Yeah I know, thanks all the same but I think I'll make a go of it. You know, houses with water, babes in the bars that kind of thing." Kris let him go, picking up his

suitcase and dragging it over to the X-ray machine. “So you look after the bar ok man. And look after Kris, he really respects you man. Look after each other.” I didn’t say anything, just nodded and gave him a hug. Without dragging it on any further, Walter turned to check in, indicating for us to leave him and giving us the thumbs up. We stood for a while, not saying anything, hands in pockets and faces drawn. “Should we wait for his plane to go?” I asked Kris. “No mate. Let him go. I hate goodbyes and stuff. Come on lets go.” We turned to walk away, both of us glancing back a couple of times to see Walter fiddling around with his passport and tickets at the desk. As the electronic doors closed behind us we stopped, instinctively giving each other a punch on the shoulder and pulling out a smoke. I sat down on the pavement and inhaled, looking around at all the cars and bodies streaming around the building. Kris sat too- threw me a little smile and smoked with me in silence. We must have stayed there for a good half hour, watching people heave cases out of cars, waving off sons and daughters from the roadside. I had flashbacks of the days with my dad, watching the planes and witnessing the goodbyes.

Kris broke my thoughts with a cough, a jump to his feet and a mumble about getting back to the hotel. I followed him, catching up and riding piggy back across the car park, through the lobby and into the lift. “Fucking weird huh. Cant believe he’s gone” Kris kind of summed it up, but for me it seemed even bigger. Without Walter we were truly alone, just us and the bar on an island thousands of miles from anyone else we knew. Being so close to the airport and the sky scrapers brought all that home, not a feeling of regret, but definitely a pang in my stomach, something I didn’t want to express for fear of

upsetting Kris. After all, he had just sunk everything he had into building a little life out here and I was part of the plan. We walked down the long corridor and on into the room, instinctively opening the mini bar and grabbing ourselves a couple of miniatures. That night, when Kris was asleep, I quietly got dressed and unlocked the door, going down in the lift to the lobby and the internet machine. I sent two messages, one to Anya “Sorry for everything, I have been a bastard to you” something along those lines and one to Lucy “Staying in Thailand, you’ll never believe the story...” As they vanished into the ether I made my way quietly back through the hotel and climbed into bed.

KRABI

In the daylight everything seemed easier. My head was lighter and we had a shopping list to fulfil. Skipping the free breakfast of pork and toast, we drove out of the airport complex to a hypermarket just off the motorway. Huge warehouse buildings in the middle of nowhere with endless rows of everything the hotelier might need. Beds in every shape, air conditioning units, duvets, plastic plants and bathroom suites. It was just like the stores back in the UK, except everything was cheap and well dressed assistants followed you around noting your selections on handheld computers. We chose simple wooden chairs that folded up, a bit like deck chairs but bigger, all in blue material and dark wood. To go with them we bought a couple of white umbrellas and two plastic tables that could sit in the sand. For inside the bar we bought ten huge cushions, two lamps and a couple of desk fans. We had just enough left for a new fridge and a box of glasses. Once we paid, Kris drove the truck round the back of the warehouse and helped the guys load our stuff into the back. It didn't seem like much all flat packed into boxes, but that was the whole of the budget gone, save the petrol money and enough for supplies. Those too we bought half way home near Hua Hin, bulk boxes of whisky, vodka and a range of flavoured drink mixers. We knew we would have to buy the beer from the store on the island or face the wrath of the local system. I slept most of the way home, the truck not stopping until we reached Krabi, twelve hours solid driving. Kris was exhausted and we checked into a hotel in the centre of town. Because I slept all the way there I had

energy left to spend, wandering out into the night market with a couple of notes in my pocket. Thai night markets go on for miles- hundreds of stalls selling everything from goldfish to clothes, sticky rice to handbags. With my limited funds I picked out a couple of new T-shirts, one for me, one for Kris, his with the Red Bull logo on it, mine plain. I also picked up some more lights, tiny battery operated strings that I figured we would leave on along the walkway down from the main path to the beach.

Stuffing my face with sugary dough on the way back to the hotel, I also stopped off in a little shop advertising printing. Even though it was late at night, a young guy was still there, running off photo copies of menus. Together we designed a little flyer with a big red question mark and the WHAT BAR name on the front, a map and promise of 'Island paradise beach front bar' on the back. He ran off a thousand of them overnight for me to pick up in the morning. When I came back with Kris, he had also made us a little set of business cards and a hat with the logo. He included them in the bill, but I didn't care, the black hat with a big red question mark was brilliant and didn't leave my head for days afterwards.

When we finally made it back to the island, we wanted nothing more than to strip off our clothes and run into the sea. The bar was how we had left it, a storm having brought bits of wood and seaweed up close to the deck, but leaving everything else intact. Rather than clear it up immediately we swam for a while, diving under the water and surfing the waves flat on our chests back to the shore. Kris swapped his dirty clothes for the new T-shirt I bought him, jogging up to the truck to begin unloading. I stayed at the edge of the sea, enjoying my nakedness and feeling the quiet hot air surround me. Kris shouted for me to help him,

but I left him to it, lying down on the sand, letting Koh Lanta surround me again. In my head I promised to stay away from the mainland as much as possible, breathing in the smell of the flotsam covered Beach and letting the city air evaporate from my lungs. Because I hadn't helped unload I offered to drag the old fridge out from its place behind the counter and into the bushes behind the hut. Kris accepted, directing me with non-useful instructions like "Walk it like its got feet." He laughed at my feeble attempts to rock it down the steps onto the deck, finally letting it just crash onto the sand. It stayed there for an hour or so before I summoned the energy to push it, over and over itself around the building to the rubbish heap behind. The rest of the refurbishment was easy, setting out the chairs on the beach, finding rocks to support the umbrellas and cleaning out the old kitchen. We had running water, but didn't drink it- it even seemed to make the dog sick, preferring instead to lick puddles of rain water from the deck or knock over bottles of clean water in the rooms to get a drink.

With Walter gone, we decided we would make the most money if we could sleep as often as possible in the main bar, closing up the blinds at night and erecting simple camp beds that could be stored outside during the day. I didn't care about privacy having spent so long with Kris, not only living together but having nursed each other through various hangovers, episodes of dodgy stomachs and even little check ups when we thought insect bits had got infected or suspected the sun had burnt through too many layers of skin. In-fact the sound of his breathing and fidgeting during the night was calming when the birds started to hoot in the night and the bigger lizards could be heard flapping their way across

the floor. Even when we had people in the bar drinking all night, he or I would still bring in one of the beds and go to sleep, right there in the room. Anyone still drinking took the hint and carried on outside or drifted off into the night. We rented out the rooms too- charging only the bare minimum to travellers, some of whom stayed for several days at a time. There was nothing much but drinking and sun bathing to be done on our beach, but after travelling for many weeks, people found it a valuable place for a few days rest. Within a couple of weeks people would arrive telling us they heard about the bar from friends on other islands or having picked up a leaflet on the mainland where we left them on the way back from Bangkok. The name and logo was enough bait to lure them, everyone in Thailand looking for that one secret place or special cove to call their own.

To be honest it was easy work- we just joined in with the guests, letting one or two of the visitors that we got to know help themselves from the fridge, writing down whatever they had on a bit of paper that we totalled up at the end of the night. Nobody took the piss or stole from us- if they did it was only because we all got carried away and couldn't remember who had what. It was the perfect lifestyle- doing nothing or sleeping all morning, cleaning up at lunchtime and serving drinks through the night. It didn't bore me, every time routine threatening to set in, a new group of people would break it and change the atmosphere. Kris even started to pick up the language, referring to me as his brother in Thai, most people taking it literally. One or two romances featured in his month, usually Americans or European girls he would drink with, telling them the story of our little bar by candle light and then taking them up to the outcrop for a fuck. None of them tried to outstay their welcome

and each 'girlfriend' learnt to respect the rules of the house- mainly that Kris had to do his shift and that I didn't give a shit for their 'does he love me' questions. My answer was always "Yeah. You should marry him." Which usually sobered them out of the place. Once or twice a couple of guys would come in and I could see Kris trying to figure out if they were mates or possible matches for me. I never went beyond gentle flirtation with anyone, even those that figured out I was gay, presuming despite my attempts to explain otherwise that Kris and I were together. The lack of sex didn't bother me, as time went on I just got used to the idea that whoever was in the camp that day were my playmates and I would one day meet someone perfect walking on the beach- probably the same day Kris would meet his perfect wife. That was the dream- maybe all four of us building a house on the island and spending happy days on Lanta. Then one morning in May, everything fell apart.

Waking late from a night working the bar, I wondered out onto the beach to see Kris jogging along the sand towards me. It was hot and he seemed to be rushing a little more than usual. I walked out off the deck and met him by the water. Out of breath, his hands on his knees he looked up at me grinning. "Mate, you will never guess who is here." I couldn't think who he meant, the only idea flicking through my brain being Walter returned from Canada or the police guys complaining about the lights we had planted in all the trees. "Who Kris? Sit down mate." We sat on the sand and he started to explain. On his morning walk up the pathway to check the lanterns and pick up fruit from the little market, he had noticed a western girl walking along with a backpack on her shoulders. Even in the distance he could see she wasn't the usual

traveller type, sunglasses on her pale face and a silk scarf wrapped around her forehead. He had waited for her by the side of the road, expecting to offer her directions or a drink at the bar. When she got nearer he could see one of our leaflets in her hand- the big red logo noticeable on the front.

“Turns out she knows you mate. She came all the way to Thailand looking for the bar. She’s waiting up at the karaoke place. Daft girl is wearing proper shoes.” I knew immediately who it was. It couldn’t be anyone else. Anya.

ANYA

I turned immediately and jogged off into the bar, Kris following still out of breath. “Should I tell her you’ll go up or do you want me to bring her down. I’ve got some shoes in the room. Do you want to go or...” I stopped him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling the cigarettes from his hand. “Kris, did she say who she was, did she tell you her name?” “No. She said she knew you from London. What’s wrong? Who do you think it is?” I explained that the only girl outside of Thailand who could possibly know about the bar was Lucy, but that the description of a girl in shades and a silk scarf meant it couldn’t be her. Somehow Anya had found me and had come to Thailand. Kris remembered her name from our nights talking on Koh PhaNgan. He knew we had been seeing each other when I lived in Docklands and that she was the one I called when I almost asked for help after my passport and money was stolen. “I don’t think I want to see her, can you tell her I’m not here.” “I can’t mate. She already knows. She said some Australian had emailed her and told her you were here.” It was all possible, but I didn’t want to face her. I didn’t want her to walk into my life and make me explain where the rest of the year had gone. More than anything I didn’t want her to come here and take it all away, to talk me into going home or to expose the London version of me to Kris.

There wasn’t a choice, I couldn’t leave her sitting on the dirt road, knowing I was here, so we walked back, Kris grabbing a couple of bottles of water and the spare set of beach shoes from the shelf.

Seeing Anya was like seeing a mirage in the middle of

a desert. She looked completely out of place, sitting straight backed on the side of the road, backpack resting behind her. She had a can of coke in one hand and a cigarette in the other, silk scarf neatly folded on her lap. As I emerged from the bush and crossed the road, she stood, took off her shades and then ran towards me. “Darling, what the hell place are you in? Are you alright? Darling where is this place you live in? Oh what a journey I’ve had. Do you know how long the flight is? Oh sweetie, this is... oh, how are you?” She pulled me to her breast, one foot flicking up behind her like they do in the movies. “Hi Anya. Erm... this is Kris. You met.” Kris picked up the rucksack swinging it onto his back and turned off down the path, leaving us to catch up. He patted my shoulder as he went, Anya lifting her head to thank him.

After a few random exchanges of questions, Anya took my hand in hers and asked me to help her down the pathway to the beach. We walked through the trees and I lifted her over the rocks and onto the slope that led down to the Bar. As soon as the foliage cleared she stopped, looking out over the bay, our tables and chairs below, the sea that perfect green-blue you stop noticing after a hundred mornings. “Oh my god.” “What, Anya, are you ok?” “Yes. Darling. Oh my god, it’s beautiful. Do you really live here?” I nodded and we carried on, her skipping ahead as we approached the deck where Kris had already put out a few cans of coke in a bucket of icy water.

Sitting down in the shade of the umbrella, Anya explained how she found me. After I telephoned from Chaloklum she had tried for days to find out where I had called from. Although the digits had

come up on her phone, the number wasn't listed anywhere, not even with the police who she had called expecting them to help. Apparently unless I had indicated that I was in danger, there was nothing they would do. The code confirming the country I was in, she had tried the Thai Embassy in London, but they too said there wasn't anything they could do unless I had specifically asked for help or if they thought I was in a medical emergency. Searching the web on Google, she matched the code to Koh PhaNgan but had no way of contacting anyone there and had pretty much given up on the search, every now and then calling the pay phone number until eventually a passing tourist answered it and told her the name of the town. Of course by that time I was long gone and even Eddie wouldn't have known where I had ended up, so fruitless calls to everywhere including his dive shop turned up nothing, apart from that I had indeed once stayed in the village. Months before that, the company I set up and she worked for had been sold- she was out of a job and had been working part time in a bar, with nothing better to do than search for me. My call set off hopes of an adventure for her, thinking she might somehow be able to track me down and come and save me from wherever I was. Everyone we knew had talked about my disappearance for months, most of them presuming I had taken too many drugs and skipped the debts for Spain or worse, topped myself, incorrectly assuming my vanishing from the company wasn't my doing. The directors had called Anya into the board room three days after I failed to turn up for work, telling her to get hold of me and order my return, but of course she couldn't do anything. Through my credit card statement a month later they knew I had gone to New York, presuming I had accepted a job offer and didn't want to face the

details of my contract. She assumed that too for a while, preferring it to the idea of me hanging somewhere, putting the evening in Docklands down to me getting pissed celebrating the new job and taking too much coke. Turns out that while I was playing at being invisible in Manhattan hotel rooms, a little network of people had been emailing each other trying to trace me down. The leader of this network was the resident in the flat under mine, he knew Anya and hoped that she could convince me to sort out his contract before the bank moved in to repossess. After a while the trail had gone cold and people got on with their lives, until that day I had called from Chaloklum and a couple of months later sent the email from Bangkok. Anya had emailed and called Lucy after receiving an anonymous email from her saying I was ok, but Lucy refused for weeks to give her anything more.

Anya had explained to her in a letter about the mess I had left in the UK, people who wanted to talk to me about money and my parents who needed to know I was still alive. Finally Lucy had cracked and sent her a copy of my email, telling her about the bar on Lanta. The day she got it Anya had booked a flight and set off on the journey half way across the world to my little island. As she explained, Kris smoked, looking over to me for a reaction. I didn't give one, a little dazed by seeing Anya at all without her bringing all this news from home. I felt like a convict being captured, coupled with an equally strong feeling of guilty-joy for seeing a face from back home. I sipped my coke, listening to her talk, staring off into the distance when she finished. I didn't know what to say, stubbing my cigarette out in the sand. "Anya. Look... I'm, I don't know. I'm sorry." That was all I could come up with, standing up from the table and walking

off into the bar.

Ten minutes later Anya poked her head around the door, looked up at the mess of bottles on the counter and sat herself down on the stool next to mine. “Kris says this might be a lot for you to take in. He says you might not want to see people from London. I understand that... well I don’t actually, but Kris says you need time. Do you need time?” I nodded and pushed the ashtray her way, still looking down at the floor. She took a roll-up and lit it, knocking her elbow into mine. “Look I came all this way, I don’t know what you are doing out here, but I’m here ok. Just come and talk to me when you can. I’ll be outside.” She flicked the tip of the smoke into the tray and left me there, where I stayed for the next hour, sipping beer and making pyramids from beer mats.

When I emerged, Kris and Anya were swimming offshore, most of their clothes folded up on the deck. I took them and put them on the bar, clearing up the cans of coke and melted ice. I waited there for a while, watching them splash in the waves, her shrieking with laughter every time he punched some water at her. I had never imagined them meeting, let alone here at the bar. When he saw me sitting there, Kris waded out of the sea and came to sit at my feet. “Mate, look I know you maybe don’t want to see her, but she’s ok man. She wants to stay a couple of days.” I looked away. “It’s up to you totally. I don’t mind, if you want her to go she will go. You don’t have to tell her stuff or anything. I haven’t.” I suddenly realised what he meant, Kris knew me as his gay best friend, a character Anya had no idea existed. That one had never even crossed my mind.

As the evening turned to night, a few of the local Thais came down ordering Whisky and cokes. Anya

showered and sat with them, laughing away with Kris and showing the girls her painted nails. I stayed behind the bar, drinking myself into a stupor and waiting for them all to go away. At some point after midnight, Kris came in and asked if he should move his bed to one of the rooms, presuming I might want to share with Anya or just be alone in the bar. I told him not to, saying I would prefer if he stayed where he usually was and I would talk to her before everyone went to bed.

When I finally sat down at her table, the Thais left on a longtail and the last guest booked into our spare room. She was a little drunk but pleased I was joining her. It was easier than I thought explaining that in London I felt my whole life was becoming a trap, the days at the office and nights at the bar following one another like clockwork. She listened quietly, letting my words come. I told her I hadn't meant for her to lose her job or to worry about me, but that I had just needed to get away, to sort my head out and find out what it was I wanted from the world. She asked me how I had met Kris, so I explained about Koh PhaNgan, having my stuff stolen and sharing the little house with him. I went on to explain about meeting Lucy before that, sailing off to Sawahii island and spending the nights in the tent. We both knew there was a lot more to explain, but that seemed to be enough for a while, her hand placed over mine as she exhaled her last cigarette. "It's ok. You don't have to explain everything. I'm just glad you are alive. Kris seems like a good friend. I can't understand why you left, but I'm here now." I told her she could stay for a couple of nights in the other hut and promised I would hook up a proper shower curtain in the morning.

Climbing into my bed, I thought Kris was already

asleep, but he turned towards me as I got in. “You ok mate.” “Yeah, I’m ok. It’s just all a bit weird.” “Ok buddy, well, just let me know if you want to talk ok.” I nodded, folding a blanket under my head. A few seconds passed and he got out of bed, crawled into mine and put an arm around me. “Look, buddy, you knew they would find you someday didn’t you?” I closed my eyes, put my arm over his and allowed myself to sleep.

In the days that followed, Anya started to relax into our routine. She joined Kris and I for lunch, peeling fruit and eating bowls of rice without comment. In the afternoons they would swim while I prepared the bar, Kris and I taking it in turns to serve people and chill out, asking her about things that had happened in the outside world. While we had been away we had missed wars in the middle east, football teams winning leagues, people being assassinated and celebrities marrying each other. She had relaxed in the year we had been apart, still flirtatious and a little hyper, but more willing to join our shared silence than I had ever remembered her being capable of. In a way we become a bit of a family, her massaging the boy after he carried boxes of booze down the hill and me mixing up cocktails for us all as the sunset.

Everything about Thailand was new to her and it was fulfilling seeing the island through her eyes. She walked every day up and down the sand, stopping to watch the colour of the sky change and bringing back sea shells. As guests came and went they presumed she was part of the team, sometimes asking her for drinks or for directions home. The nights stayed the same, Kris and I shared the main hut, our camp-beds on the floor, her living in the nicer of the two rooms, a sarong hung behind the shower and her cosmetics lined up on the little wooden shelf.

One week into her stay, Kris suggested we all go to Saladan to eat in one of the restaurants over the water and have a drink in the Karaoke bars. Anya jumped at the chance, but I suggested it might not be a wise idea to leave the bar empty all night, after all we needed every penny we got from the sale of beer and had no way of telling the locals we would be closed. Kris offered to stay behind and let the two of us go, but faced with her excitement at the prospect of seeing the village and it being his idea, I gave in and we shut up shop for the night. I wrote a note and pinned it to the sign at the top of the pathway, hanging a rope across the door of the bar.

Ban Saladan was busy that evening, Thais and travellers coming in by bike from across the island. The ferry brought more people, most of whom would stay in the village or in the little resorts surrounding it. Even the bike-taxi's thrilled Anya, sitting in the side car with her hair billowing out behind her. We drank glasses of vodka and rum and ate fresh fish grilled along the seafront. Anya and I walked hand in hand most of the way, Kris following behind. By midnight we were completely pissed, Kris chatting up the girl behind one of the bars and Lucy and I dancing to the usual trance pumping out of the little sound system. It was good to be away from the bar, having someone else serve us. I loved ordering cocktails, complaining bitterly when the mix was wrong, messing about with the bar team and having little glass throwing competitions. It felt like a holiday, something like the first nights in BoPhut before we worked or lived on the island.

Late in the night we left Kris at the bar and walked off to the harbour, taking a couple of beers with us. Sitting there watching the boats bobbing about and hearing the chatter of people in bars, it seemed as if

Anya had only amplified the little life I had carved out for myself. She listened to me translate every word on the bottle and the signs in the street, asking me to teach her the words she liked. I wanted the night to continue, the gently flirtation coming back into our conversation and a warmth from her being with me reminding my body what it felt like to be touched by a woman. I knew it was coming, but when she turned to kiss me I stopped her, putting my hand over her mouth. “Anya, we can’t. I can’t do that anymore.” She pulled back and looked down into the water, her mouth still open. Then she stood and made as if to walk away. “Don’t go. It’s cool, it’s nice seeing you but you know it would be wrong to do more.” “Why would it. Why would it be wrong?” Her voice was sharp and accusing, a cigarette being plucked from a packet and dropping instead to the floor. “Tell me. Tell me why it would be so fucking wrong for me to kiss you. Go on.” I couldn’t. I just sat there looking up at her pacing angrily around me. “I know why don’t I. I know exactly why you vanished from the fucking world and let us all think you were dead. I know why you didn’t call me and cut us all out of your world. I know don’t I. Tell me I don’t.” I said nothing, reaching for the cigarette on the floor but stopping when she rolled it under her foot. “It’s because you’re fucking gay. You and fucking Kris. Gay. Like I don’t know you fuck him every night in that bar. I knew the first time I saw you together. You’re a fucking poof. A fucking gay.” I stood up and took her hand. “Anya, listen. Kris and I are not together.” “Then tell me you aren’t gay. Say it now, tell me.” “I cant. I cant tell you that.” She ran off down the road, leaving her cigarettes and her beer on the road. By the time I caught up with her, she had tears running down her face, a line of mascara

staining her cheeks. I walked along side her, turning on the torch and indicating the way home.

We didn't say anything all the way home. Every time I started to talk she just looked at me with misted eyes and told me she didn't want to hear it. When we reached the bushes at the top of the slope, she took off, running and tripping down the path towards her hut on the beach. I waited there on the outcrop for a few minutes and made my way down between the trees, turning into the bar at the bottom. I flicked on the lights and walked over to the fridge. As I did so, Kris jumped up from the floor, he was naked and there was a girl on his bed. "Mate, what you doing mate, I'm with someone in here." "Oh fuck, yeah, sorry mate. Yeah, sorry I'll go. It's just Anya found out about the gay thing and it's all..." The girl stood up, covering herself with a sheet. "You're gay?" she said in a shrill Aussie accent. "No I'm not fucking gay. He's fucking gay, we just live together." "No way, like in here, that's his bed? You're fucking Bi?" I left the room, Kris shouting after me "Thanks mate, yeah I needed this. One fucking fuck, that's all I wanted mate." Anya's face appeared round the door of the bar, followed by her body naked apart from bra and underwear- "Yes they are fucking gay. What the hell did you think. Fucking fucking each other." She turned and stamped back to the hut, leaving the Aussie girl grabbing around in the dark for her clothes.

I sat alone on the outcrop, rocking with the sound of the waves and letting things crawl onto my feet. Just before dawn I took a bottle of vodka from the box behind the hut and drank it in gulps, each one less bitter than the next. I guess I passed out like that, my head on the sand and my feet in the water, hoping in

the morning not to be there.

I woke up with blurred vision, turning my head in time to be sick on the sand. Kris was sitting behind me, his head bowed under the black cap. He let me evacuate my stomach onto the beach and then threw me a bottle of water. I sat up looking out to sea, holding the bottle and saying nothing. "I'm sorry mate. I didn't mean to say anything last night." He paused for a few seconds and continued, "It's just I was in there with that girl and..." "I know Kris." He stood and walked back to the bar, returning with a t-shirt and some shorts. I washed mine off in the sea and went back with him, stopping to spit out more water along the way. When we sat down he explained that he didn't care about the gay thing. He liked living with me and running the bar, but he was a straight bloke with a dick and he just needed time to be that every now and then.

I nodded, trying to force a smile but failing. "I love you mate, like you are my brother." "I don't think we should sleep in the hut anymore. I should sleep in the hut." He paused and then nodded. I walked off to the shower, stopping to pick up the empty vodka from the sand on the way. Everything from that point had changed. I knew I couldn't expect Kris to be what I wanted him to be. I knew we weren't like other people and at some point it would have to change, but I wasn't ready for it. I didn't want to wake up and accept that my island wasn't the same island he lived on. We all have our own islands, in our head, our boundaries and rules. From that day forward I would have to separate mine from his.

Anyawoke up late in the afternoon. I could hear her showering behind the hut, the water chugging out the pipe and her swearing as she banged it with her hand

trying to encourage more drops onto her body. When she was dressed I knocked on her door, opening it when she didn't answer and letting myself in. She was lying face down in the hammock, hair in knots all over the place. "Anya, I want to talk." She stayed motionless, but I carried on. "Look its important. I wanted to tell you, but its not easy ok. I didn't ask you to come, but you did and now you are here I want to explain who I am to you." She looked up from the hammock, brushed the hair off her face and looked at me standing in the doorway....

"Look, I know you think its weird and disgusting or whatever, but I have probably been the way I am all my life. I just needed to stop being the me I was in London to be ok with it. Kris has helped me. Everything here has helped me. Look Anya, I am happy here- I can't do anything about that." She put her head back down and held her hand out for me to hold. I sat on the floor, stroking her fingers and slowly let every feeling in my brain come out, talking for minutes without stopping, sobbing a bit but holding in the tears. When I finished, she sat up, and pulled herself out of the hammock to hug me. "It's ok. I'm a bitch. Is Kris ok?" "Yeah. He will be I guess".

In the evening we ate without talking about the night before. Kris made jokes about the state of Anya's hair, pulled back into a messy ponytail with a rubber band. I served up our dinner and told them we should close the bar for the night, hoping they felt a little bit as ill as I did. Kris agreed and went off up the path to pin up another note.

As the rest of the week passed, light-hearted conversation returned. Kris and I started to jostle with each other again, knocking a ball about on the

beach and opening the bar to customers. Anya went for long walks and took off on her own some days to take pictures of the village and buy souvenirs from the market. It was agreed that she would probably catch a flight home at the weekend and I would go with her to the ferry where the other tourists would catch a night boat all the way to Krabi and on to the local airport.

Knowing her last days in Thailand were upon us we made an effort to enjoy them, taking bikes down the coast and even finding the legendary elephant in the forest where Anya and Kris took turns trekking through the jungle.

On the last night, while Anya packed, Kris took me off to the outcrop. Sitting down together on the rocks, we talked through the whole idea of the bar, about sharing such a small space together and trying to build up a business on the quiet island. I told him how much I wanted him to be able to meet people and that I appreciated how hard it must have been for him hooking up with me for so long already. We talked for hours, eventually turning to the topic of Europe, people we missed, places we would like to see someday. Only as night fell did we return to the bar, pulling out a bottle of wine one of the Thais had brought across from the mainland and given to us in return for a room. Anya came and sat at the table, her new cotton clothes crisp white on dark tanned skin. We toasted properly, each one of us clinking glasses to the spirits of Koh Lanta, the people of Thailand and Anya's safe journey back home. As Anya stood to turn in for the night, Kris stopped her, giving her the black cap we had bought in Krabi. She promised to wear it to all the best clubs in London and tell everyone about our beautiful bar.

Before going to his own bed in the main hut that

night, Kris knocked on my door and sat on the floor next to my hammock. I noticed how tired he looked, even his usually tight Red Bull T-shirt hanging loosely around sagging shoulders. “Listen mate, I know you have a decision to make in the morning. I know she’s going to ask you to go back with her to London.” I nodded, suspecting the same having picked up the hints she had dropped about work opportunities in the city and friends who would be longing to see me. “I don’t know what to tell you, but I want you to know that whatever you do, this place couldn’t have happened without you. I couldn’t have been here. I wouldn’t be who I am.” I smiled, turned off the light and blew him a little private kiss.

THE PORT OF BAN SALADAN

The port was throbbing with people. Thirty or forty travellers mulled about outside the café, sitting on bags and ordering snacks. Women came and went with baskets of sandwiches for sale and bottles of water pulled along in big metal tubs. Anya stood, a little alarmed at the scene. I helped her load her bag onto the roof of a minibus, buying her a ticket for the journey to the airport. Stuffed full of the biggest breakfast we had ever eaten in Thailand, Anya and I paced the harbour looking for the huge metal ferry to appear on the horizon. As it did, piled to the rafters with cars and bodies, she turned and pulled me away through the crowd.

Anya's makeup was perfect again, her hair shiny with coconut oil and the silk scarf wrapped back around her forehead to give relief from the burning sun. When we were far enough away from the people to sit down, she indicated a place on the harbour wall and pulled out two cigarettes. We lit them and looked over the sea to the islands beyond- flat shapes and misty hills. "Look, I want to talk to you. You know what about." "I nodded, drawing in a lungful of smoke. "You know I think its amazing here, I think what you have done is incredibleand that makes you an amazing person. But you can't do this all your life. You can't keep running, not from life itself. I spoke to the people at airport on my way out here and they said you can fly if we fill in a form. You can come back to London with me, crash in my flat for a while, get your old job back." She looked at the dirt, paused and continued...

"It's not going to be just like it was, you are going to

have changed, I know that and London's changed too, but its time to consider it. Listen, listen to me carefully and think about it logically. It's time to come home." I drew another breath and looked back from the harbour to the cars lining up for the ferry. Two or three faces I knew were queuing for the crossing, babies and boxes piled high in trucks. "Anya, I know. I know that you can't run away for ever. I know it can't be done, but sometimes it's not easy knowing why you're running and what will be there at the end of it all." "Don't think about it. Just come back with me on this boat, I'll buy you a ticket and whatever happens at the other end we can work it out. You don't have to be anything you don't want to, but believe me when I say I will look after you. I'll take you home and be there for you every day till you want to face them all again." We stood and walked silently towards the pier. Through the bodies I could see people gathering at a stall by the water. The Thai's had brought out all the craft they could muster, hoping to sell T-shirts, Buddha's and little carved candles to the tourists. At the end of the row of tables was a little guy I recognised from somewhere, his open shirt having seen better days. Letting Anya barter for a wrap she wanted to buy, I wondered over, thinking that if I was going to leave Koh Lanta Yai, I would at least take a real picture with me. There were books and books of them, all outlines in chalk and charcoal, babies giggling in mothers arms, seascapes and underwater vistas, prints and originals. The guy selling the art stopped when he saw me and held out his hand, wide grin spreading across his dark face. "Bao... you're here!" "And so are you mister. What you doing on my island. You holiday here?" "Yes, I mean, no, I erm... look Bao, this is Anya. She's from London." Anya

came over and shook his hand, pointing to a small print of the harbour building- “Oh, that ones beautiful, did you paint this?” “Yes Miss, I painted all of them. You like it? It’s this island, the one you are on.” I interrupted him, “Bao, what happened to the job, don’t you work on the cruise ship anymore?” He stopped, putting the print back on the table and shrugged. “No mister. That didn’t work out for me. Too much funny people wanting too many things. Came back here to paint. Better I think, on little island.” The boat sounded the horn and the crowd urged forward, climbing the ramp onto the deck. We were pushed forward away from the stall and into the line waiting to board.

THE ROAD HOME

The journey home was long. I walked taking in the feeling of the air, letting my arms swing by my side. The road was wet and crunched under my feet, imprints of my shoes evaporating behind me. Turning at the crossroads I waited for a bike to pass and jogged over to the other side. It was late and the sun was setting, layers of orange outlining the clouds, casting waves in the sky. Further up the hill where there were no more buildings, I stopped to see the curve of the earth on the horizon, the sea twinkling like liquid metal, lapping the rocks with droplets of light. I closed my eyes taking a mental picture, feeling the colour ease from my eyes, swim to my brain and surf through my blood. I knew how to summon it now, sitting cross legged on the edge of the cliff, dipping my head so my neck relaxed and the muscles in my back let go of their grip. Soon I would feel only the air itself pulsing in and out of my lungs, allowing each breath to sink deep inside me and become part of my body. Breath. In, out. Exhale. Breath.

Kris was there, lying on the deck, a t-shirt covering his face, feet dangling over the sand. I walked up behind him and sat down, leaning the painting against a chair. "Hey bud. How's it going." He lifted the shirt from his eyes, grinned up at me and pointed to his side. Two bottles of beer were chilling in the bucket.

THE WASTE LAND

I regretted my life in London. That may sound strange coming from someone without many years to his story, but it's true. Sometimes the rules of gravity are reversed and you find yourself sliding upwards faster than you can control. That's how life was for a while. With every new buck that I earned came another freedom, another key. When you have keys in your hand, you unlock doors, you don't think. With a box in your hands, you can't resist twisting the metal in the lock. When you have freedom, you have regret. When you have regret, you stop living.

At the end of the day, that's why I ran away. That's why I got off the train and stood in the thunder. My days had become reflections of each other and nothing seemed unobtainable- simply because I had walked so many corridors away from myself. With all the money in the world, you can't buy the feeling of quietness. You can't buy the moment you allow yourself to stop walking and just exist in a room. Those feelings had been forgotten, so far behind so many unlocked doors that I forgot I needed them. We all need them. We need to stand in the rain and remember what it's like to feel cold.

I had to move here, to live on the sand and drink the rain, because I had to strip it all away. I had to find out what my blood felt like surging through my body. You can't do that when you can't hear it. The truth is, my journey little as it might seem in the grand scale of things, was the most important one I think I will ever make. In skipping shores, I released myself from the script. I stopped trying to think

before I spoke and plan before I walked. Most importantly I allowed other people to teach me who I was. The words of strangers always ringing stronger and with more clarity than reams of ones own voice. You can't allow that to happen when everyone around you is there for the ride.

Kris says I have a habit of fucking things up. Whenever life gets a little enjoyable, comfortable, routine- he says I make a conscious effort to twist the tale. I probably do. It's my way of staying alive- scanning the horizon. I have to keep living, to keep running, to keep talking and writing- that's my contribution to the world. I don't know what it's all for or why people listen, but as long as they do I will do it. The lightening shows me that- a link of electricity between one world and another. The possibility. The reflection within the reflection.

Koh Lanta Yai may not be my home forever, but today, in this moment, when I close my eyes and let the air here come into me, I know that I'm going to be alright- I'm going to keep on breathing and walking in the right direction.

My island is beautiful.