

# Next

Next, Monica thinks she will go to Angkor Wat to see the temples or to the Ghangis to pray. She continues her list of cities and countries as she rolls over on the bed to reach for another cigarette. Blake pictures her insides as she lights it. He imagines that her body is like a cave that is burned out and uninhabitable. Over the past few days he's tried to get her to eat more but all she'll eat are the strawberries they pick themselves at the local strawberry farms. They fight about it sometimes—the smoking and the lack of eating—but he never takes it too far. He doesn't mind so much really about the cigarette burns in the blankets, the bones that stick out from behind her breasts, the money that goes missing from his wallet—just as long as she stays.

Their relationship is one of those things that just happened, she didn't seem to mind it happening and he needed some company. He met her at the bus stop in Kula Lumpur. He was meant to be going back home to Queensland but instead he got on the bus with Monica and came to the Cameron Highlands. It was cheap and he had the money that Veteran's Affairs gave him when he was discharged. He could last for a long time here, maybe months if he lived cheaply enough, maybe more if he sold his medals, perhaps he would never need to go home. Maybe he could just stay here with Monica and the smell of the tea plantations in the distance.

He paid upfront for two weeks at the Hillview Lodge and he was about to pay for another two. Outside their room on the third floor there is a wall of green plants. In the afternoons they sometimes sit on the balcony and watch the rain as it pours down over the trees. Monica tells him about the places she has been. He hasn't been anywhere really except Afghanistan and here. He tells her about the desert, the endless mountains, the heat waves coming off the pavement in Ansaris Square and the street vendors who sell coffee in bowls at the side of the road. He doesn't tell her about waking up in the hospital after their truck was ambushed, only to find that he was perfectly alright except for the missing thumbs. He doesn't tell her about the young guy who woke up next to him, numb from the waist down. The one who kept asking, 'Are those my legs? Are those legs mine?'

Sometimes they walk the five kilometres up to the Bho Tea plantation. Monica takes sprigs of aniseed leaves and chives from the farms they pass along the way and sucks on them between her teeth the way old men do with toothpicks. They stop frequently on their way up the mountain and stand amongst the rectangular rows of tea plants. She likes to watch the plantation workers pick at the tops of the bushes with their sheers and throw their pickings over their heads and into the baskets strapped to their backs. She says it makes her feel closer to God.

When they get to the tea shop at the top of the hill, they always ask to see the film they play in the dark room at the back of the shop. The woman who works there knows them now, she just waves them into the room and presses play on the little TV in the corner. In the dark,

while the video goes through the tea making process, Monica puts her hand on his knee and squeezes it tight. He likes it here, in this little room, with her in the dark.

Afterwards, they sit on the balcony and drink tea until the sun sets and they have to hitch a ride down the mountain again on the back of a plantation worker's van or with some tourists that take pity and offer them a ride. Monica collects email addresses and phone numbers off the people they hitch rides with. She tells them, in an earnest kind of way, that she will contact them when she gets to China or Japan or whatever country they come from.

Today, walking by the tea plantations, it occurred to him, just how different this landscape was from where he'd been. It wasn't that punched-awake glow of the desert, mysterious and inflamed. It didn't demand to be placated or forgotten. This landscape has that endless kind of green that makes you think of wet things like oceans and lakes and baths. It's the kind of landscape that happens when you stop looking over your shoulder. The type you notice when you dared to catch your breath, when you thought that you were safe.

Some days they take the bus up to the butterfly farm. If they sit still long enough on one of the benches the butterflies come and land on their heads or their shoulders or their arms. Blake likes to touch the iridescent green of their wings but Monica says he shouldn't do it, so he tries not to. She says their wings have some kind of powder on them and if you take it away they won't be able to move, they just shrivel up and die. But the butterflies are so still that he feels the need to touch them to see if they are really alive. They look like something that should be in a museum, like those insects you see pinned behind glass.

Monica likes to look at the creatures they keep in the cages at the back. She has memorised all the bugs, amphibians and snakes. They smell derelict, harsh and sour with something like the residue of trapped water. She rubs her hand against the glass cage of a viper and watches it shake its body back and forth like it's about to strike. Sometimes, the owner, Sunjit, will let her hold a Rhinoceros Beetle. She strokes their waxy backs as they sit in the palm of her hand as though they are kittens. Afterwards, she always smokes a few cigarettes with Sunjit and they talk about how his relatives came from Calcutta a long, long time ago to work on the tea plantations. "I will go to Calcutta next," Monica says in an earnest kind of way.

When she is lying in bed beside him, he can feel the long interlocking bones of her spine, the stringy ligaments of her thighs. He runs his hand across her whole body here in the dark. "Tell me more about Afghanistan" she says, but he knows she doesn't want to know, not exactly. He wants to tell her about the men hobbling down the street because one of their legs was blown off by a land mine; he wants to bring them here, trembling, into this room. Instead, he tells her how beautiful the mosques are; how their outer walls are white and carved in intricate patterns.

Blake wants to taste every part of her body, wants to lick her dry, from the fleshy lobe of her ear, down to the veins on the back of her knees. He likes to suck her fingers, taking each one into his mouth, slowly, one at a time. He could spend weeks with his tongue inside her. Sometimes it is only the dizziness that reminds him to breath, instead of suck and lick.

On Sundays they eat at the warongs next to the market. They always order chicken rice and Milo. Monica mostly just picks at the food on their plates and smokes. Blake eats for both of them. He has learned by now to wedge a spoon between his middle finger and his index finger. It's a messy experience but it works. He doesn't look up while he eats because he knows that the locals are watching him. He doesn't want to meet their stares. Tonight they'll eat at one of the banana leaf curry places on the main street. He likes the way the locals there scoop the food up with their hands and place it into their mouths. The Indian-Malays don't care so much about mess.

"Why do you like me?" She says suddenly drawing his attention away from the food.

"I don't know," he says, "because you don't run away when I try to eat."

She smiles, looks off in another direction and says, "I think I'll go to Seychelles in East Africa to see the giant tortoises."

One late afternoon they take a tour to the Mossy Forest on top of Brinchng Mountain. It was raining earlier and the mud on the ground takes on the quality of quicksand so that when they walk their feet sink into the ground. The tour guide walks them out among the mossy trees and low-lying vines. Monica sticks her fingers into the pitcher plants to see if they will try and eat her fingers like they eat the flies that are their main source of nourishment. When

she pulls her fingers out again they are sticky with pollen and she rubs them down Blake's arm and laughs.

Their tour guide picks leaves from the plants they pass along the way and hands them around to members of the group. Blake watches the others crush them in their hands and hold them up to their noses. "Tiger Balm," or "cinnamon," or "ginseng" they say. But Blake refuses to crush anything in his hands.

Monica asks, "What are you thinking?"

Blake says, "Nothing."

Really, he is thinking about all these kinds of things you need thumbs for. How does a man go off to war and come back missing his thumbs, just his thumbs? It makes him nervous when she asks him about his thoughts. He tries to smile, so she doesn't know what he is thinking.

Sometimes when he gets nervous he thinks about John Wayne. He knows all about Wayne's life; he didn't make it into the Naval Academy so he became a footballer, he got an injury so he became an actor, he got lung cancer so he had a lung and four ribs removed. *You just get right back up there; he said and keep on going.* He didn't look for trouble but it always came his way and he tackled it all with the same kind of impregnable virility. His tomb stone reads ugly, strong and serious. Blake admires that.

One morning, Monica tells him about leaving home. She got married to some crazy guy right after high school, the type with a shiny fast-moving car and no direction. “In the evenings,” she says, “he used to make me get all dressed up and sit in the passenger seat of his car. He’d just drive and drive all around Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo. Sometimes he used to make me get out of the car and stand on the street corner in front of Porkies with all the prostitutes. He’d drive around the block a few times and then pick me up again, always insisting on negotiating a price with before he’d let me back into the car. Afterwards, we’d do it, parked down an alleyway on one of the back streets. And then one night he doesn’t pick me up again. Just like that he leaves me on some street corner. When I got home he just looked at me and shrugged, tells me he forgot to go back.

So the next morning, I cleared out our bank accounts and sold his car to a used car yard while he was still sleeping. The cheapest flight I could get was to Bangkok, so I got on it. That was six months ago and I’ve been moving around ever since.”

Blake tries to imagine it but he can’t. He grew up in Geelong and he never really left it until he joined the army. He never really saw the point in travelling.

He lies there silently thinking about it, while she looks at him and laughs loudly. Everything about her can be so inexplicably loud sometimes. She even breathes loudly—through her mouth. When she tries to get out of bed in the mornings he always protests. He could spend hours this way, lying nude with her, trying to catch the faint glimpse of a breeze across their naked bodies.

Monica asks him if he wants to talk about anything. He says, “No”. He considers how filled every ‘no’ is like a helium balloon waiting to burst. In this ‘no’ there are images of suicide bombers who walk casually down the street and blow themselves up, offer themselves to the cause with such grace, like Jesus. And in this ‘no’ there is the coiled vigour of John Wayne and the thought of Monica standing on a street corner in King’s Cross.

Now they are waking into a yellow morning that makes Blake feel restless. Monica grabs his hand and he pulls it away but she pulls it back. She runs her fingernail down his vein from the webbing near where his thumb used to be down to his wrist and says his lifeline is “so long it’s practically ridiculous. I’d be surprised if you died at all,” she says and runs her hand down to his groin.

I could die tomorrow or the next day or even within the hour he thinks. He holds up his hands and looks at them like a curious object that has fallen in a storm. The light from the window lands its buttery texture on his palms and he thinks about how incomplete they look, how inadequate. They could be the hands of something far less human, something like a hoof or a paw.

When Monica gets out of bed to take a shower he looks at them again. He studies the indentations, the whorls, the veins and the labyrinth of patterns that are used to identify criminals and dead men. Even burned men, the type of men they pulled out of the wreckage of suicide bombs on the buses in Kabul, even they could be identified by the ashy flesh of a single fingertip.



Monica sings in the shower, something from the Rolling Stones. He pictures her dancing around in some 70s music festival. She'd look light as a feather, bucking and swaying in a mini-skirt, the ash flying off the cigarette perched precariously between her lips.

When they go out to the cactus farm Blake takes pictures of her in front of all the different species of cacti. She reads all their names out loud, enunciating all the syllables in an exaggerated kind of way. "Agave Victoria Reginae, Mammillaria Wildii, Peruvianis..." She likes the Magnificus, the way it spills itself over the edges of the hanging pots like fingers reaching out in every direction. At one point she reaches out and touches the hanging tendrils. When she recoils back with a fistful of cactus needles wedged into her flesh, Blake wants to grab her hand, wants to sit and pull every needle tenderly out for her, but he doesn't. "Couldn't help myself," she says later. Even a paw would do better than his hands he thinks, or a fin or a hoof or a flipper.

That night, she doesn't want to make love. She wants to lie here beneath the window. She's hot, she says. He touches her lips and thinks how much they remind him of John Wayne. It doesn't matter if she wants to make love or not, he just wants to look at her. He wants to run his gorged out hands across her. The fan above them beats the air, flips through it like a helicopter's blade.

Over the next few days it's as though, she's suddenly got a life without him. She sits in the courtyard with a couple of British backpackers, outlining the best beaches in Thailand on their maps. She has coffee with the woman at the Tourism Malaysia office down the street. She comes home with a dozen different brochures stuffed in her bag.

He knows she won't spend another few weeks with him at the pick-your-own strawberries farm or the butterfly park or at the night markets. It becomes apparent that these trips out by herself are practice for the day when he will be alone, for erasure, for silence and absence. He watches her walk down to the corner store for a packet of cigarettes; she walks without shoes, never missing a beat. He wants her to turn around and come back. He wants her to bring him back together, who he was then, who he is now.

Now it is time for rehearsal. She wants to go out by herself today to pick strawberries at one of the strawberry farms. She says she just wants some time to think. He watches as she walks down the road and disappears. He imagines his hand moving over her back and under the beige imprint of her nipples, the hand she had said would live forever.

When she returns it is dark. He's lying in bed with the lights off and she gets under the covers, rustling and fidgeting and breathing loudly. He watches the glow of her cigarette in the dark, watches it moving from the ashtray on the bedside table to her mouth and back again. She rolls over towards him and touches the back of his neck. He can feel her breathing slow and heavy in his ear. He reaches over and licks the edge of her chin with his tongue and she goes silent. He runs his hand across her torso and feels the ribs protruding there. Her

body is a kind of frail empty cavern. He moves over on top of her, lightly. He's afraid that she'll break apart beneath him.

And he's trembling against his own skin, on the inside. He knows that if they make love like this, in a silent kind of way, that it'll be their last time. Now she's pulling down his boxer shorts, pulling his shirt over his head, she's peeling him, pulling him apart and still there is no sound. He wants the shadows of their bodies on the ceiling to migrate down the wall and enter him, so that he is both himself and her at the same time. He wants to smother her, fall into her body.

He can't feel his own hands, his own legs, his own arms at this moment, he feels it too late—what she's become underneath him, the soft sands of Rigestan. And he's there in that place again, his boots filling up with other people's blood. The feel of once-warm, limp bodies in his arms and he's pulling at them, limbs, torsos, feet, he's pulling them out of burnt out buildings and laying them down on the sand. And then he hears his name, a word, a plea and Monica saying, "Stop, please stop."

And then he's just a thumbless man again, sitting at the edge of their bed, saying sorry over and over again and handing Monica a pack of cigarettes so that she can lie there naked, smoking in the dark. The noise is back again, she lies there breathing heavily, until she rolls over to get some sleep, to escape him.

And he knows now, that she will leave him tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day or the next.