

Full Circle

by Julie Twohig

The bus breaks hard, short of the fork in the road. Passengers lurch forward spilling coconuts, dried fish and bananas from the overflowing baskets wedged between feet or perched on laps. A chicken becomes airborne. From their laughter Jean realises the locals don't bother with the cord. They simply call out or bang on the ceiling and the driver stops. Heaving her pack she scrambles over the spillage and the bodies packed tightly along the aisle.

'Sorry, sorry... excuse me.' Jean makes her way to the front while a monkey screeches from the overfull racks above the seats.

The bus, dense with heat, humidity, and the pungent sticky smells of Northern Laos has made Jean nauseous. Her cotton dress is soaked with sweat. Too bad, there won't be a shower for some time.

The driver mumbles a price. His face breaks into an absurd grin, exposing toothless gums and a smile that spreads to both ears. He stretches out his palm. Jean has no idea if she's being ripped off and in no mood for haggling, gives him a pile of coins. He takes them all. The bus coughs black fumes.

She watches it disappear, swallowed up by the lush vegetation. Stands on the potholed road for a long time, aware of the din of urban life still busy in her head. It competes with the jungle's intensity. Jean wills her crowded mind to be still.

She rests on her pack, her radar on high alert. Exhausted to the core, it occurs to her that life's a slippery slide into perpetual exhaustion.

I'll rest when I'm dead, Peter would say.

Jean sighs, small shuddering breaths. Everything aches: her shoulders have fused into her neck and her back pulsates with jabbing pains from the three day

ordeal of non-stop travel. The now familiar hollow place in her chest has taken up permanent residence.

She can't believe it's thirty two years since she was here. In the jungle regions near Luang Prabang. With Peter. It was the highlight of their overland trek. They'd known each other seven months.

Blink and you're old. Blink and you're dead.

Jean stills the welling. Reminds herself there'll be no falling apart. She tightens the straps securing the tent and bed roll before hoisting the hefty pack onto her back, the smaller water bottle handy in the pouch at her waist.

She walks away from the bus route, along the narrow left fork. She's dwarfed by the cloying rainforest. Its density makes her anxious for breath. Peter loved to tease her for her independent streak. She registers with surprise how utterly vulnerable she is. Resolves not to give into fear.

She wonders if she's missed the opening to the path. Maybe it's overgrown and the signpost is obscured, perhaps she got off at the wrong fork? The weight of the pack and the oppressive wet heat make it hard going. It's further than she remembers.

The rumble of engines cuts through her thoughts. She considers hiding. Four mud splattered trail bikes appear, their riders obscured by bulky jackets and huge helmets. She sees them vanish into the jungle ahead. The noise of the engines fades as she reaches the entrance to her track. The same track the bikers have taken. She braces herself and sets foot inside the jungle, relieved to find the path, alarmed to be sharing it with the unknown riders. The canopy of green claims her instantly.

The path smells of fungus and mulch. Fronds and succulent vines attempt to reclaim their path, winding their way through the thick undergrowth. Jean consents to their wet caresses. It's cooler inside the rainforest. Tiny droplets of water fall on her face and arms and trickle inside her dress, down her back and between her breasts, creating little streams that mingle with her sweat. She

surrenders to it all, lets the forest take her as its own. *Slap* goes the leaf as it slides across her face.

'It's madness!' her friends warned.

'What are you thinking?' said her brother.

'Please don't go mum,' chorused her children.

They debated her options, proffered suggestions, designed solutions. Her scowl warned them off when they showed her the brochures: *Scope Lifestyle Village: A New Way of Life*.

What's in store is unknown. She needs time. Precious time. One thing is sure, this trip is for her. And Peter. Full circle.

A few hours in and Jean keeps up a good pace. She strides effortlessly, pleased with her progress. She'll look for a spot to make camp. It seems a pity to stop now but she plans to rise early, and night falls fast. Tomorrow she'll find the place.

A natural ceiling of grasses and branches makes the perfect shelter for her first night. Jean takes off the pack, unloads its contents, pitches the little tent and makes a light meal of rye biscuits, sardines, dried fruit and nuts. She sits at last, and discovers the half dozen leeches attached to her flesh, feasting: six fat, glistening creatures.

Don't pull them off she hears him say.

Jean searches for matches, flinging contents from her pack. Her hands tremble as she burns the horrid suckers. One by one they shrivel and die, leaving puncture marks as calling cards. She finds one that's managed to slide inside her underpants and attach itself to her vulva, head burrowed in. She resists every impulse to yank it out, holds a lighted match to its body and watches it drop between her feet. The smell of burnt pubic hair makes her laugh. What would Peter say if he were here? Jean pours drinking water over her legs and scrubs

herself hard. She applies thick layers of repellent, checks the immediate area for bugs and other creatures, sprays inside the tent then crawls inside.

Curled up in the blackness of her tent she feels terribly small; an intruder amidst the majesty of the jungle. Her thoughts lap at the edges of terror. It's only the sense of Peter's embrace that protects her from the night's madness.

When morning arrives she remains still, alert to the dawn chorus. Peter's favourite time of day:

Wake up Jean... they're saying 'good morning'.

This morning Jean lets every bird's greeting pierce til her heart rings out like the hum of a Tibetan prayer bowl. And then she weeps. Little streams at first, then huge loud sobs deep inside the sleeping bag.

The cool night air won't last much longer so Jean eats breakfast, then packs quickly. By late morning, according to her pedometer she's already hiked seven kilometers. She'll be there by three. She slows her pace, eats handfuls of nuts while she walks. Her mind scans scenes from her life in fast replay: her life brimming with Beth and Sean like you could never imagine a time before children and there's never a moment to yourself and then quick as a wink they're gone and it's just Peter, and Jean.

When she was here last she was twenty five. Same age as Beth, their youngest. Daddy's girl. Beth had insisted that if her mother was determined to go through with this thing she'd have to accompany her. For once Jean was not negotiable.

She recognises the place. A shaft of sunlight floods the small clearing by the waterhole. Soft moss carpets the forest bed.

She removes the pack, places it on the ground. Unlaces her hiking boots, and strips: socks, dress, bra, knickers. A sodden mass. Jean dips her dimpled legs into the waterhole. Immerses her body, her thin hair fanning the surface. Arms,

legs and body surrender to the water's gentle cushion. She's like a baby uncoiling, its first bath. Jean floats on her back, drinks in the warm sun, a gentle smile on her face.

With her head underwater she feels her legs wrap once more around Peter, her body enfold him. Breasts flattened, pelvic bones tight against his belly. Jean soaks him in, doesn't want to let go.

She breaks the surface spurting a huge spray of water. Lies stretched out on the mossy ground in the hot sun. A layer of sweat reappears before long. Jean watches the low white clouds move in the patch of sky. They make her dizzy. She lies there for ten minutes before opening her pack.

She remembers a story about a wife who spread her husband's ashes on a windy day, his friends and family in tow spitting bits of him from their mouths as he came downwind. Jean was grateful it wasn't a windy day. She wants him all for herself.

She opens the urn and lets a handful of ash fill her cupped hand. She feels his texture, gritty in parts, soft and fine in others. A bit like he was in real life. She'd imagined pouring his ash into the pond, but now that seems inadequate.

Jean pours his ash in a zigzag line on the moss, trickling it out until the urn is empty. She puts the urn aside, and lies on his ash, rolling first one way, then the other, coating her damp body in his ash. She lays face to the sun until the ash absorbs her sweat. It forms a crust on her body. She rubs the ash into her face, into her hair, her arms, over her belly, and into the cracks and crevices. Slowly and gently at first, rhythmically, gaining vigour. She screams into the forest.

She stays quiet until it's time to wash the ash from her, and let him return to the soil. She dips her body into the waterhole one last time. And allows him to float free from her skin.