

Round the World Now

by zoe zolbrod

It's true that he had always been more pure than her, looking for the authentic experience, authentic food. And more adventurous. Blogging their way around the world, yes, that had been his idea about what to do with the sixteen-thousand dollars they had won with the joke lottery ticket she'd bought him for his birthday. Vera had wanted to blow most of it on a deluxe trip to Italy, or wherever. Maybe even take the trip as a honeymoon. But she'd been a good sport. Camel trekked in Morocco, house-boated through Kerala, toured every last internet café in between, feeding red meat to the hungry maw of the blog. He was always looking for what would light up the message board, what would get them retweeted the most. But his sudden desire to go to a ten-day meditation retreat where you didn't speak the whole time, didn't eat animal products? That wasn't him. That wasn't real. He'd have to be OFF the blog for ten whole days. He'd have to avoid eating pigeon pie or the brains of the pig he'd documented the villagers killing. No, it was a stunt meant to impress the hippie chick he'd been so obviously into, jumping up from his breakfast to help her move her chaise into the sun, tagging along with her friends on a hike to a waterfall even though he and Vera had planned just to lay on the beach. The girl was such a cliché. Her long blond hair falling in her face when she borrowed the guitar from the Thai boy, her glowing skin—Charles had actually used the phrase: “Your skin, it just.... glows.” Vera had been embarrassed for him, but apparently needlessly. The glowing hippie was all seriousness: It's since she went vegan, she said. It's the diet of peace. “And it's even deeper, now right? That's what you see. I'm just really tapped in to the deep inner peace I found at Surat Thani.”

“You were there? I was planning to go there!” Charles had gushed.

“Bullshit” Vera muttered.

He didn't hear her. He'd barely looked at Vera the whole afternoon, the whole evening. But that night he was all over her when they climbed into their futon. A few minutes of mechanical foreplay, and then he was fucking her hard, his eyes closed in concentration. At first, Vera fought to regain his attention using her kegels and dipping into their stock of pornified baby-talk, an embarrassingly effective repertoire that they'd honed over their three years together, but she felt him blocking her voice surely as a promise-keepered teenaged girl would a roving hand. So she told herself to take her pleasure like a man, to just go in and get her orgasm, who cared what he was thinking. To help herself, and to get back at him, she fantasized that the deejay from the other night's party was singling her out on the dance floor as the thing on fire, asking her to strip. But she couldn't keep it going, and she ended up laying there, feeling beaten-up and used as Charles's thrusting shifted into high gear, the whole bungalow shaking.

So when he came back from the internet café the next morning saying that they had time to get down to Surat Thani before the next session started on the first of the month, she refused. Adamantly. They fought. They sort of made up. But he still wanted to go, and she still didn't, and they agreed to part for two weeks. She'd keep up the blog, and they'd meet up back in Bangkok on the 14th. That's what they said, at least. Those were the words.

She felt a little shaky going off by herself, but also, brave. She'd gotten online and boldly unlinked to the hippie chick's site, which Charles had added without telling her, and took down the three pictures of her blondeness playing the guitar, and responding to the messages about their last post. She tweeted. She was #travelingsolo for awhile. As it turned out, some of their tweeps were heading to Ko Samet, and she met up with them for a few days, following them to Bangkok and partying like crazy and finally, on their last night before they left for Vietnam, stumbling with them like a drunken sailor into a tattoo parlor on Khao Sahn where they each got a calligraphic #RTW tattooed somewhere on their bodies, hers on her ankle; it was the twitter tag people traveling around the

world used to identify each other; it was how they'd all met. And with the sting of it still alive, high from the adrenaline as well as the pot and the red bull and beer, she hooked up with one of the guys who'd been mooning at her the whole time, never mind the other girl in the pack—blonde, too, and thinner than Vera—who'd obviously been mooning after *him*. Their sex in Vera's room was drunk and sloppy, but the inebriation also softened the strangeness and trespass, and she took some pleasure in his obvious enthusiasm and in his preference of her. The Vaseline protecting their fresh tats rubbed off on the rough sheets.

Of course she felt shitty the next day, like a sailor on leave, hung over, syphilis-ridden, marked for life with blue ink, and she still had a week to go until Charles was supposed to meet her—and would he even? Doubt seized her, and terror, and she cried. Well if he did, she needed to have something other than this to tell him, God. So she uploaded the photos from Ko Samet and Khao San that made it seem like she'd done a little more than bacchanal and bought a bus ticket to Kanchanaburi. She sent her intentions out into the twitterverse hoping to get some company. There were no takers, but someone did shoot back with a recommendation for the Frog Hostel. So that's where she asked to be taken when she got off the bus. And now what?

There was a check-off list of what to see. The Bridge Over the River Kwai. Some temple caves. But everything was exhausting on her own, or even scary. The night market seemed lurid, with its sniffing dogs and smeared lights. She mostly stayed near the guest house and read. She collapsed, really. And she rebelled. Even before meeting the vegan princess, Charles had been getting more and more judgmental about food, about how she ate, how tourists ate, how Americans ate, and he'd sniffed whenever she'd ordered pizza or a soft drink. So now she sipped Cokes and Fantas, meditatively creasing with her teeth the white straws stuck in tall glass bottles. She ate pancakes with honey every morning. On her way to and from the internet café, she stopped by the little store near the guesthouse and loaded down with familiar sweets: Cadbury bars,

Kit-Kats. There were no computers at Surat Thani, of course, but every time she logged on she'd still be half-hoping for a message from Charles, a note telling her that he'd bailed. And each time she didn't receive one, she felt his betrayal and her helplessness anew, a serrated knife sawing at the raw chicken breast of her heart, which was factory farmed probably, swollen with drugs. Frequently, there was a message from the guy she had shagged, once with a link to his flickr feed. God, there she was, arms slung around him, red faced, in the disco, in the tattoo parlor, the guy giving her hers smoking, his hairless chest gleaming. She felt both dirty-guilty and wanted as she clicked through the images. A cheap solace. A convenient bludgeon. She ate another Kit-Kat, which she found were not all that bad with beer.

Finally, in a panic of having posted nothing new to the blog, knowing that Charles would probably log on before she even got to talk to him, she dragged herself out of bed and got on the 8:00 AM bus to see the Earwon waterfalls that everyone insisted she must. What was it about tourists and their goddamn waterfalls? But she had a seat to herself, and looking out the bus window as it moved her forward, she felt almost capable. She could do this. #solowomantraveler #onyourownnow. #amwriting. She started composing a post in her head: *The road starts to climb, and I can look out my window and see a sheer drop.*

Just as promised, the park was beautiful. Just as promised, a gentle trail wound its way up the seven levels of falls and provided sweet vistas of the brilliant white limestone, the turquoise blue pools. Just as promised, the place was pleasantly crowded with happy Thais, unpacking picnics and rolling out mats. That'd be a good image for the blog, authentic experience, and all that, but she didn't feel comfortable pointing her camera where she most wanted to look. The family scene, the darting children, the soft watery crash, both annoying and soothing. It reminded Vera of the water park she had visited once with her sister and nieces, and she had the same feeling, admiring, but outside. Charles had refused to accompany her to the water park. He'd had nothing but derision for

the places like that, fakes, facsimiles. But at one point Vera had taken a break from the kids and climbed up the four stories of cement stairs to get to the park's tallest slide. From the highway, she'd noticed the blue tubes that shot outside the structure of the building, their angles like limbs akimbo. The sound of crowds screeching and TVs bleating receded as she climbed. When she slipped into the tunnel, she felt a gulp of fear; the fun kind, but real. And then, go! she'd zipped down the funnel, thrown slickly back and forth, the dark absolute, the air cool, the plastic's seams hitting her body with a hurting, soothing rhythm. For the ninety seconds, maybe a hundred and twenty, that she was in that slide she was pure sensation. She splashed into the pool and emerged from her dunk laughing out loud. She thought, triumphantly, of Charles. That was real, she knew. That was as good as sex. And she told him so that night in bed, on top of him, her showered body still smelling of chlorine. Maybe he hadn't believed her, but he'd been willing to play along.

When she reached the topmost falls and the end of the trail, Vera didn't want to stop. She surmised the rock face of the cliff in front of her and decided she could make a go of it, finding toeholds, handholds, pulling herself up to a little platform impressively high above the ground. She felt accomplished, and held her camera out to take a picture of herself. Yeah, there it was. #travel #thailand #earawon. Tip: It's a simple A grade climb to a perch where you can picnic in arm's reach of the highest of the falls.

"Allo!"

What! She started. Her body vibrating tight. It was a man, or the head of one, popped out of a hole above her head.

"Come on. You've got to see this." She couldn't place his accent. Israeli? He had black ringlets, white teeth bared in a smile, bronze arms—visible now—propped out beside him. His eyes appeased and teased at once.

"You scared me." She didn't mean to be coquettish; he had. But after a few more volleys she let him pull her up toward the hole. #canyoubelieveI. She saw the sequence in a slide show: Her pinker

hand grasping above his darker wrist, her polished toes scrambling against the white limestone, his pleased gaze, her breasts plumped together as she balanced on the ledge before tumbling in to a little cavern. When she stood she was looking at the man's chest, even in shadow almost cartoonishly molded. Take that, Charles. *"Your muscles, they just . . . ripple."*

She followed him through a dark squeeze of rock and emerged into a small swiss-cheesed cave. A hole in the ceiling let through a beam of sun, a gap in the floor revealed the river churning its last before the drop. Two willowy girls perched at the gap's edge, their faces tinted gold from above and cool blue from below. "Allo," one said, before turning back to watch the crystalline froth. Pretty, Vera thought. She's prettier than me. She felt her back arch a little.

The man produced a spliff, and they passed it, not talking much. He was Italian. The girls were French. At one point he went and collected some more people, a couple, and even the attached woman seemed to join the harem sprawl, the stoned, loungey competition for his favor. He was handsy, and touched them all casually. A palm on a shoulder while passing a joint, fingers on an elbow to adjust a line of sight. Vera tingled when he stroked the scab on her tattoo and whispered "fresh," but she wasn't sure she'd won until he pulled her aside as everyone rose in the late afternoon to catch the last bus back to Kanchanaburi. "I have the car. We can drive back together." She felt the soar of victory.

But alone in the tinny red car with him, she quickly crashed. He wanted to take her to dinner, he said. To a nice place he knew further up into the hills. She had to agree, but as she sat at the pretty restaurant her hashish high turned into a headache, and she grew despairing. What was she doing here? She wanted to be at home. Home-home, curled up with Charles in front of the laptop watching the Daily Show, letting themselves be entertained. Not trying to get the world's attention as they traveled around it looking for enough bandwidth to upload their photos. Not trying to get Charles' attention anew every day. RTW? What the fuck. She wanted to get off. So when the Italian pointed out that the sun had now set

and that the drive back was long and proposed that they spend the night at the resort, it was easy to say no, despite his petulant show of chivalry. Of course, it was up to her, was what he said. Bitch, you're lucky I . . . was what he didn't; she didn't need Italian to understand. There was a pall as they got back into his car. It was all just waiting, now, for both of them. Waiting until the ride was over, his grim determination to take the switchbacks smoothly. The last strains of orange rimmed the hills, and then it was gone.

The black was as thick as tar. The air was sharply cool, the first cool air she'd felt in weeks. She opened her sarong, still damp from the day's swim, and stuck it out the window to flap it dry in the wind. It made a violent thwappy thwap noise. It seemed for a minute to be shaking the car, and she pulled it in. But no, it really was the car that was shaking. The Italian's jaw was clenched, his foot was pumping the brake, and the sound grew louder, louder, my god, my god. The black rushed in like a flood as her heart and metal thwapped. The Italian was glancing the car off the rocks to slow it down. Oh my god they're going to crash on a pitch black mountain road in Thailand. She flashed to herself in a gully, bones broken, blood, to the shoot of the slide at the water park, where she let it all go. Crash, smash, splash. Thump. The ride. The blackness all around. Perfect silence. Or no. A ticking.

