

That Time in the Jungle with Tom Cruise

by Juliet Robinson

The boat lies low in the water, which is shallow, so the hull scrapes over rocks and sticks in the silty mud, we have to climb out when this happens and push. The first few times I take off my boots, and then put them back on lacing them carefully, but soon I stop lacing them and then I don't bother to put them back on. Eventually we abandon the boat, and instead we walk upriver alongside it, pushing it against the sluggish current.

Despite the lack of rain, the humidity hasn't gone anywhere. When we first arrived all those months ago it was like walking into the hothouses at the botanical gardens. I felt wet and shiny the whole time, and it smelt like a tropical fish tank. But we've acclimatized, I'm used to the sheen of sweat on my face and my t-shirt sticking to my back. And the smell, I'm used to that also, rot and decay, at first it had stuck at the back of my throat, and it was hard to swallow, but now it isn't even there.

We've been traveling for four days - one short jungle flight, where there were more chickens on the plane than people, a day walking along dusty old military roads, a spot of hitch hiking and now the river. Our guide, who told us to call him Tom Cruise, says his sister has a restaurant in the next village where we can spend the night. Will negotiated a good price for the boat, so we can afford a night of accommodation. I'm looking forward to not sleeping in a hammock strung between two trees in the forest. I'm afraid of the dark and there are few places darker than the rain forest at night. Few places noisier either, sometimes the sounds of the forest are so alien I fall asleep sure I won't wake in the morning, I am convinced a monster will kill me in the night.

Its late when we arrive at the village, which is little more than a few longhouses crowded on the riverbank. A rusty brown dog lies in a pile of fishing nets, it stirs as we unload the boat and comes over to see if we have any food. Tom Cruise tries to shoe it away, but I tell him off and in apology offer the dog a chunk of the tracker bar I have just opened. Dusk falls quickly here and it's upon us before we have even shouldered our packs. Tom Cruise is eager to get to his sisters, he buzzes around hurrying us, though when we insist on having a smoke before we leave, he forgets his hurry and bums a rollie.

We smoke a lot here - it keeps the insects away, but also because it's a comfort and a luxury. Two things which don't otherwise exist in the jungles of Borneo.

Tom Cruise gathers our cigarette butts, pockets them, and then he is off, leading us along the trails which wind between the houses. There are no roads here and no village boundary, the forest just starts at the edge of some hog pens. Tom Cruise pushes forwards and the jungle swallows him up like a thieving fox, he vanishes into the darkness under the trees. We follow him, no questions asked, it briefly occurs to me that he could be about to rob and murder us, but this doesn't really worry me as much as it should.

It turns out his sister's restaurant is a long way into the forest. We stumble through the thick undergrowth, and I laugh when Will accidentally kicks up a fire ants' nest. I probably shouldn't it really hurts when those things set about you, but its funny listening to him shriek and thrash about in the dark.

After a while we find ourselves on a well-worn path, then there are lights ahead of us and Tom Cruise calls out, 'Hungry?'

His sister's restaurant is a funny place, its location for a start is strange, out here in the forest a good hours walk from the village. It's a large two-story longhouse on stilts, too big for one family and it doesn't look like a restaurant. We troop in, a bench table sits in the middle of the hall and a balcony runs around the upper level, there are doors up there - lots of them and scantily clad women hang over the rails peering down at us.

'A restaurant,' I raise an eyebrow at Will.

His face is sunset red, and he starts to stammer a reply, but I ignore him and stalk towards the bar at the back of the room. The smell of cooking meat stirs my stomach, and a warm beer will go nicely with that. A roof is a roof, if I get fed and I don't have to worry about forest monsters for a night I don't care if Tom Cruise's sister's restaurant is really a brothel.

