



## The Disappearing Season

**Cairns Wed 29 Dec 2010**

Way, way below there's an endless density of green canopies. An ocean too, full of creatures that maim, kill. Especially this time of year – the wet. I hope for a glimpse of those tourist-tempting, deadly white shores, but the plane's oval window has its limits. And it's getting dark now anyway, wispy grey clouds enveloping. I sit back, listen to the cranks and whines of hydraulics, this beast banking, descending. A thump, shudder, squeal of rubber on tarmac, the pull of reverse engine thrust.

*Breathe, Georgia.*

Tourists, too impatient, fill the aisles. A mess of hands, elbows, bag-clutching. I count my breaths ... inwards slow ... outwards slower. Tell myself there's no urgency. That I should take this moment to refocus, to tamp the small panic festering low in my gut.

A pause in the procession. I rise, pull my carry-on from the overhead cabin, then follow-the-leader toward the exit.

Something pink and fluffy falls to the ground ahead of me. A small child is reaching over her mother's shoulder, her face crumpled as if she's about to begin wailing. I know how she feels. I bend and scoop up the toy, hand it to the kid, the woman none the wiser.

"Thank you." A nod from the flight crew member. A white, white smile.

Outside at last, and my lungs aren't prepared for the heat, for the soaking of thick, damp air. Ugh. Queasy. It's funny how your brain can tell your body what to expect, but the physical doesn't get it. Not until it experiences it for itself.

Flashes of red and yellow flicker off the tarmac, its surface shiny with early evening drizzle, puddles, mist rising like precipitative ghosts. I've never walked across a tarmac – through a passenger tunnel sure – but not this. This feels primitive. Elemental.

Is this place distant enough? Hazy enough to disappear in?

The terminal corridors are painfully ablaze with vibrant tropical touristy promotions: Kuranda Railway, Skyrail, a crocodile sanctuary. I retreat to the toilets and throw up – the wine I drank probably not helping the adrenaline. "I hear it's your birthday," the flight attendant had said, handing me a mini bottle of sparkling white. I should have asked for vodka instead. But that's got to stop.

I sit, head in hands, absorbing what I've just done, where I am.

Andreas has probably called Katie by now, asking why I left my mobile at home and checking if I made it to her place for dinner, and if we really are seeing a movie. "Which one? Where?"

I told him, twice. But he'll have re-checked the cinema and time. Later, he'll call her house – the landline, to make sure I'm actually there – on the pretence of saying goodnight. I

can picture Katie, hand on hip. “Give it a break, Andreas. It’s her birthday, and you can never be bothered doing anything for her. No, I’m not going to fetch her, she’s in the shower. She’ll call you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, if I’d returned home, he would have asked to see a receipt for popcorn, a choc-top, anything from the cinema. Proof. My heart pumps hard at these thoughts, telling me to keep moving. Hand on my chest, I breathe, deeply, slowly. Release. Repeat. Splash my face with cold water. Check my reflection in the water-dropped mirror. My brown eyes almost black with lack of sleep and stress. A tangle of mouse-brown hair. Maybe I should have left it blond, just cut it short.

At the bus counter, I ask for a transfer to the closest budget accommodation. Cheaper the better. The attendant tells me there’s a hostel in the town centre, ten minutes away. I picture rooms full of bunks, young things sitting cross-legged on sagging couches, sun-bleached hair falling over smooth open faces yet to be shadowed by life’s darkness. And thirty-something me, carrying that heavy shade within.

It’s only one night.

“Sure.” I pull out the envelope I found in my pocket after Katie dropped me at the airport. Two thousand dollars in Visa gift cards to add to the few thousand in cash I’d scrimped on the sly. “No cyber trails,” her note said. “I have more if you need”. God, I love my baby sister.

Out in the humidity again, while I wait at the cement bus bays, I pull out Katie’s old phone – a 2006 Nokia, almost five years old now. The “burner” we called it, injecting some humour into the direness of our rebellion.

I text Katie: *Hey Kit. Made it.*

She’ll be wanting reassurance that no one asked for my ID when I checked in, screwing up the ticket booked in her

name. I wait to see if she responds. Nothing. Probably busy on her late shift. Ambulances wait for no one.

A small crowd has grown around me. I hang back. By the time the minibus arrives and people clamber in, the only seat remaining is behind the driver. “No suitcase?” he asks. I shake my head and sit, carry bag poking into my stomach. He shuts the automatic door, reverses the bus.

*Close your eyes. Relax now.* But the circular air vent in the ceiling is doing its best to drill ice into my forehead. I push the outlet aside.

It’s not been a long flight, just over three hours, but what came before it, the utter panic, the ache of holding things together, the not daring to breathe, has taken its toll. I’m guessing backpacker hostel rooms don’t come with minibars.