

Joanna Mason

52 Card Pick Up in Laos

It was on the banks of the Mekong as I was taking a walk at sundown that I found it, the last card. The King of Hearts lay there waiting to be discovered amongst the dust and an old empty crisp packet, being pecked lightly by the weary looking chickens that had gathered for this momentous occasion. I now had a complete pack, 52 cards plus both jokers. It had been quite a journey across Laos to find them all.

It was over a few beers and during the most amazing lightning storm I had ever witnessed that I first heard of this bizarre collector's game. I had just crossed the border from Thailand the day earlier and was waiting for the storm to pass before moving on. The American explained, through sips from a Beer Lao bottle, that all over the country you could find playing cards strewn on the floor, in bushes and by the side of the road. Forked lightning lit up the sky, narrowly missing a rickety TV aerial on the tin roof of the next building. "Once you start looking you'll see them everywhere and you'll be hooked. I'm looking for the Four of Clubs. If you find it, I'll trade you." In answer to why the country seemed to be sprouting playing cards, he just shrugged and took another slug from his beer. After a long, relaxed pause he did explain that many travelers were taking on the challenge to seek and retrieve a full deck.

And he was right. After I saw the first card outside my guesthouse the next day, half buried under a pile of sugar cane, I just couldn't stop finding them. I was totally hooked and determined to complete my full deck before I left the country in a month's time.

I sat there on the tan coloured banks of Si Phan Don watching the last of the evening light dance on the surface of the Mekong River, thumbing the dirty, dog-eared King of Hearts. Some local children were getting ready for their evening bath time ritual; taking it in turns to sud up their hair and bodies with soap before somersaulting head first into the river.

I let my mind wander back to my favourite card and the serendipitous events that had brought us together. I had boarded a local bus in Luang Pra Bang headed for the pancake flipping, backpacker capital of Laos; Vang Vieng. The bus had been pre-loaded before the passenger's arrival with huge sacks of white rice. They were wedged under every seat, on the rusty old luggage racks that now bowed worryingly above my head and into each foot well. I sat with my feet on a sack and my knees around my ears and hunkered down for a long, uncomfortable journey.

About halfway the bus stopped. I peered out the window, the limestone mountains stretching out before me, the remoteness of where I was just hitting me. I couldn't see anyone waiting to get on the bus and no one got up to get off. Then, with the stealth of a panther a man emerged from the wilderness. Dressed head to toe in camouflage and carrying a wooden handled AK47 assault rifle. Suddenly realising I was the only foreigner on the bus I began to panic. The guidebook's warnings of bandits and hijackings rushing back to me. The man's black army boot fell heavy on the step as he climbed aboard and as he looked up his eyes fell directly upon me, my mop of blonde hair standing out like a sore thumb. My mouth went dry and mind began to think the worst. As his eyes met mine, he smiled a wide, toothless grin at me and quickly sat down in the chair directly in front of mine, resting his trusty gun in the empty seat. He peered back at me through the gap between the chairs and looked down to the collection of playing cards that were resting in my lap. Quickly his face disappeared from the hole and in its place a sun-toughened hand appeared and thrust a small papery ball into my own. I stared down, not sure what had just happened or what to think. I began to unravel the crumpled package to find a rather dirty, creased Queen of Diamonds staring back at me. At that moment, the worry of my impending death by firing squad disappeared and I lifted my head to thank the man. But I was too late, the bus was already pulling to a stop and the man slipped off and back into the wilderness as gracefully as he had come. Just as he stepped into the leafy jungle, he glanced back at me, flashing me one last toothless grin.