



As Far as You Can Go Before You Have to Come Back

Alle C. Hall

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In Alle C. Hall's candid novel-in-stories *As Far as You Can Go Before You Have to Come Back*, a teenage runaway flees an incestuous situation to pursue a new version of herself.

Armed with survival ideas from *Lonely Planet*, Jen vows to backpack her way to escape. She steals money until the opportunity to leave arises. She arrives at a hostel in Hong Kong; encounters an addict in the Philippines whom she allies herself with in hopes of finding safe companionship; and meets a French academic with whom she trusts in Malaysia. Alcohol and smoking underpin Jen's attempts to pretend that she's "American Mary," or sometimes "Carlie," a more blasé alter ego. But then a disorienting, drug-induced sojourn in Bangkok forces a reckoning.

There are straightforward depictions of the effects of sexual abuse throughout. Jen's boundaries erode; she becomes bulimic. She contends with simultaneous shamed naïveté and knowledge about self-harm. Her scenarios abroad replicate themselves in similar guises and with interchangeable men. She deals with harsh memories of her father's sensational betrayals and unsubtle signs of her fleeting lost innocence. She finds solace in tai chi, falling into a stereotypical trap of searching for herself through Eastern culture. And finally, she meets former social workers who invite her to Tokyo, where she forges a disciplined routine and gains surer footing. Still, she is reluctant to be open with her new friends, even as she yearns for change.

With a slow, realistic redemption arc, *As Far as You Can Go Before You Have to Come Back* is a novel in which a survivor of abuse achieves a gritty, tender coming-of-age and reinvents herself.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2023)

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