
*"If all difficulties
were known at the
outset of a long
journey, most of us
would never start
out at all."*

— *Dan Rather*

Journeys

The Common Traveller and the Muslim Girl

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The first time being the only non-Caucasian on a plane is an extraordinary experience. At nineteen, I pose as a culture-hungry vagabond. Entering the Darwin airport from Indonesia, I hope to prevail against backpacker poverty with my songs, voice, and guitar, playing for change on the streets. Aside from my financial tribulations, I learn valuable life lessons. I learn that the common traveller can wrap his or her arms around a country, but a country cannot reciprocate the feeling. A country cannot love us back tangibly, despite our need to escape and find solace geographically.

Jakarta is a half-hour flight from Denpasar. Flashbacks from my past four months reveal Indonesian beaches, hazy cities, markets, street vendors, locals directing tourists to bus terminals, and ferries coming and going. I recall families of five oftentimes piled onto a single motorbike. Immense wealth enjoyed by the very few contrasts with the average South East Asian's daily struggle with extreme poverty.

From Denpasar, I hope I will be permitted entry into Australia. The Indonesian embassy issued my new passport two days after my travelling visa expired. I lost my passport on a public bus; it must have fallen out of my cut off shorts, or perhaps it was stolen while I was sleeping, or sold to some desperate refugee seeking freedom in a new country. Upon landing in Bali, Denpasar, I am anxious to speak with immigration.

A cyclist from Denmark named Swan introduces himself to me at the airport. Swan is corporately sponsored to cycle the entire world overland in one year. As we exchange travel stories at McDonalds, I realize that he is one of the first Westerners I have spoken to in at least three solid weeks. Just before I leave, Swan mentions that if I am ever in Copenhagen he will surely assist me in finding employment. Noticing it is time to board my plane, I thank Swan for lunch and enter customs.

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Almost instantly, I am called into the Immigration Office. The immigration officer notices that I have overstayed my time in Indonesia by two days. He reminds me of Father Ron, an authoritarian priest from my church back home. Father Ron was a figure who, like the immigration officer, seemed to take pleasure in the sense of power he projected on those around him. "Immigration in Jakarta said I would be able to leave the country without any problems," I say, trying not to panic. I feel like a criminal as the immigration officers' stern eyes destroy the last thread of confidence embedded in my naive existence. The officer asks for money immediately. Fearing an intense strip search, I tell him that I have nothing left in my wallet. "If you no have money, how you get bus from airport when you land in Australia?" he questions confidently. Hoping he will sympathize with me, I respond, "Well, the only money I have left can only be withdrawn from my bank account in Canada." For the first time, my nationality seems trivial. Other Canadians' stories, the ones about escaping problems just for being Canadian leaf-wearing foreigners, do not seem to apply to my situation. The immigration officer laughs in my face.

I contemplate whether my destiny now entails permanent residency in Indonesia, and I wonder how I can possibly survive detainment, knowing only enough Indonesian to jive with the locals. Attempting to recall some key Indonesian phrases, I realize my past ambition to learn the language has amounted to simple party words: rokok (cigarette), terrie makasie (thank-you), jalan, jalan (just chilling out) . Like Swan, my effort to keep my eyes open to different cultures and customs seemed genuine, but the passport tragedy amplifies the truth: perhaps I am blinder and more helpless than I have ever been in my life.

Swan's seemingly clever anecdote about his experience deflowering a Muslim girl is by no means as funny anymore. What if he got her pregnant before he left her village? Unexpectedly, I am no longer amused, remembering him laughing over lunch: "Can you actually believe she grasped for the Koran and knelt down and prayed for forgiveness midway through our sexual extravaganza?"

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This reflection triggers a memory from my past as a high school student. I recall one of my first experiences of falling into temptation, this time with a public-school boy. In 1993, hiding in the back pew of the Peace River Catholic church, I knelt, praying for forgiveness in the eighth grade. It was almost Easter, thus time for reconciliation. Feeling an immense sense of guilt for passionately kissing a non-Christian, I sensed my permanent damnation.

I identify with Swan's Muslim girl. If she is not pregnant, I think, perhaps she has learned a valuable lesson, and now practices her religion with the faith of a martyr. Alternatively, perhaps she is flogged, banished or imprisoned for her impurity. Maybe nobody will ever love her again. With every mile Swan cycles to fulfill his inner-European purpose, he is rewarded; perhaps he is even one of Copenhagen's heroes. Yet, perhaps his Muslim girl is persecuted.

The immigration officer suddenly yells, "Get up! It is now time to catch your plane." I say, "Are you saying that I can leave the country now?" He responds, "Yes! Good luck in Australia, we hope you had good vacation."

Truly now, I am awake. I take a final breath of the Balinese air—it is humid and smells like rose petals. I lope past customs, and through terminal number three, and board the plane. I take my seat, and the aircraft speeds up. I identify with the Muslim girl in many different ways. She may have felt victimized by the European traveler, just as I felt abused by the immigration officer and Father Ron.

There will always be those like Father Ron and Swan. There will always be passionate young women struggling to maintain respectable images. There will always be travellers seeking genuine truths, infatuated with their own sense of self importance, contradicting themselves, drunk in dark taverns and beachside resorts. I identify with tourists who attempt to embrace foreign philosophies, but somehow stumble or unintentionally offend locals out of ignorance. I acknowledge the common traveller's struggle with naivety.