

Like all writers, my mother was extremely selfish. My favourite example of this selfishness, the one I love to tell people, occurred while I was on a break during one of my university terms. I was in the middle of my Classics degree, something I'd picked up three years prior. I was young, unstudious, and staggering to the finish line of a degree I knew was useless. To cope, I confined myself in my room, surrounded not by friends or family but by piles of books I'd bought but would never read. This was the dull pain that was my life.

On the dullest of these days, I sat at my desk and ate apple slices—when my mother entered my room without knocking and announced we were going overseas.

“No,” I told her. I was busy translating Book IX of the *Odyssey*, couldn't she see that?

She walked over and plucked an apple slice out of my bowl. “I need a writing holiday,” she said, her words punctuated by a decisive crunch. “We could go to a nice island, sit back and relax. You know how boring Sydney gets this time of year.”

I am no lover of my home city. It's all metallic eyesores shoved beside polluted waters, streets bulging with tourists, broken down buses, carcinogenic daylight. But I resisted. I told her I needed to work on my translations. I was enraptured, I claimed, by Odysseus describing the lotus eaters, those well-meaning but alluring islanders that delayed his return home to Ithaca.

“Come on, I'll pay for our hotel, food, everything.”

Everything? The offer seduced me. Still, I said nothing, just stared down at the swirling letters in my textbook.

“Well, you can either come with me or stay home and eat your father's cooking for two weeks,” she said shortly, then left. This was the sort of woman my mother was: enterer of rooms without permission, pillager of apple slices. Hijacker of holidays.

We took a taxi to the airport, and our driver chatted to us amicably in thickly accented English. We breezed through security, always brief but inconvenient. The plane ride had no turbulence, and it wasn't long before we touched ground. All the while I sulked, yearning for the sweet comfort of my bedroom instead of a far-off island. I won't say which one, but I think you know; many people around my age tend to travel here with their friends, party hard, get sick, and go home. Instead, here I was with mother dearest.

But something changed when I spotted the island for the first time. The airport surprised me. It was cleaner and more modern than I'd expected. Sunlight arced delightfully off tinted

glass ceilings. Our taxi—driven, again, by a man with a heavy South Asian accent—doddered past soaring skylines and sun-browned people. Our hotel was a beautiful titan tucked within a forest of leaping trees. A beach wrapped around the back, a small shore and the endless sea. I wished to tell Aristotle that Plato hadn't made up the paradisiacal Atlantis at all; it was right here.

Thankfully my mother had paid for separate rooms, and so a bellboy carrying my things led me into my own personal suite. I loved my balcony, where I imagined spending all day reading or eating or seeing what else Odysseus was getting up to. And I tried to do just this, relaxing in my hotel room. However, ennui hit me, and the next day I tried pestering my mother into exploring the island with me. She refused; she had to stay in and write. The island and its people, she claimed, were inspiration ripe for the picking. I went downstairs alone.

Our hotel had assigned my mother and I a tour guide, to accompany us for the entire duration of our two-week stay. Mine was someone named Nyoman, who was waiting for me in the hotel lobby. He had skin the colour of Vietnamese coffee, and his smile, directed at the phone in his hand, was just as sweet. I expected him to be dressed differently, but he was in an old button-down, jean shorts, and sandals. I was sorry to disturb him.

“Hi,” I said to him, walking over. “I'm Otto.”

“Oh! Hello.” He stashed his phone away. He performed a gesture I'd never seen, clasping his hands together and bowing his head slightly. “My name is Nyoman, but please call me Man.”

His voice was light and pleasant and slightly accented, like the other service workers I'd met, but quieter. I stuck out my hand; he accepted my handshake gently.

“You speak English very well,” I said, relieved.

Man nodded. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, the hotel breakfast. I'd like to go out now.”

“Is your wife also coming?”

“My wife?”

He looked at me. “The room details said there was another person staying with you. Sandra?”

I laughed. “Oh, I don't have a wife. That's my mum.”

His mouth made a small “o.” “I'm sorry, sir.”

“Please just call me ‘Otto’.”

He seemed in a hurry to move past his blunder. “Well, what would you like to do today?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” I said. “Everything.”

Man sat me at the front of his blindingly white Toyota. He wasn’t the best driver, but he was a quick one, and it wasn’t long before we were far away from my hotel and into the colourful resort town nearby. It shocked me how carelessly pedestrians weaved in between cars and scooters, all manned by men without helmets. The traffic thickened the further we went; there was a parade headed by a Chinese dragon coming our way. Despite this, Man assured me he knew his way around the town. Sure enough, he managed to pull into a side street and make an illegal manoeuvre or two until we were on our way again. He kept saying sorry for the delay, and I kept shooting his apologies down.

“Even your roads are interesting,” I told him, watching the brown buildings and people pass.

This seemed to amuse him. “Your roads are not interesting?”

“Everything’s more interesting here.”

“Wait until you see the beach, sir.”

The closer we got to the beach, the more Australians I spotted. They were mostly my age, milling around on the streets and showing off thin clothing and sunburnt flesh. They lazed around on the sand, litter all around them, or they floated on the sea’s surface, the water lapping away at their limbs so haphazardly sunscreened. They looked like they lived here.

We parked near the beach. I couldn’t imagine that the waves here were made of water. I had the feeling that if I went bounding across the sand to reach the shore, and if I thrust my hand into the sea, it wouldn’t be water but sapphires spilling through my fingers.

“I didn’t bring any swimwear,” I lamented.

“Ah, you can have mine.” From his car he fished out a pair of swimming trunks.

“You don’t want to swim?”

Man shook his head. I shrugged and took his offer. The water was full of tourists, not gems, but I welcomed it after the heat. Swimming by myself wasn’t very fun though, and I soon went back on land. I dried myself with a towel I’d borrowed from Man. He was waiting patiently on the sand. He’d been watching me swim.

“You should’ve joined me,” I said as I got in his front seat.

“I never swim.”

“You can’t swim?”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Of course I can swim.”

“Next time we can swim together.”

He smiled, but said nothing and started the car.

The day passed by pleasantly enough, but Man continued to keep his distance. I knew he wasn’t there to be my friend, but still I found it unsettling to be eating at a restaurant while sitting across from someone with nothing on his plate. At a sweaty night market, I eyed cultural foods and entertained pushy sellers; all the while Man trailed behind disinterestedly. When I got home that night, after having been driven in silence, I had the distinct feeling that I’d wasted his time.

The next few days passed by similarly. Man took me wherever he thought I’d want to go, whether that was enormous shopping complexes or restaurants or swimming pools. One day, we were at a Thai cafe, waiting for one of Man’s friends. She was supposed to meet us at eleven o’clock and lend us scooters. I poked around at the last dregs of my tea until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“It’s eleven-thirty,” I said, appalled. “Are you sure she said ‘eleven’?”

Man didn’t seem perturbed. “Here, we don’t always mean what time we say.”

“What about punctuality?”

He scoffed. “Foreigners treat time like a dog to be house-trained.”

“What?” It was the most interesting thing he’d ever said.

He seemed hasty to ameliorate any offence. “I mean that some tourists from the West think that only *their* time matters, that *their* time is being wasted. I don’t think time belongs to anyone. Sir.”

“Well, I agree with that. I think time is indiscriminate and relentless.” Like the sea which swallows everything, from sandcastles to sailing ships.

He hummed thoughtfully. “We have a phrase. *Jam karet*. It means ‘elastic time.’ You cannot stop time, but you can bend it. What if your friend is stuck in traffic, or rain? What if they eyed something beautiful and had to admire it? Would you want them to be punctual, just to please you? It is less selfish to be late, I think, than to impose yourself on other people’s time.”

I was on an island where time functioned differently, where clocks moved back and forth, where its inhabitants lived in a dream.

“*You’re* always punctual,” I said.

“Well, I work for you.”

This, I had no answer to. Eventually his friend did arrive, lending us our scooters with a friendly smile as if she hadn’t been an hour late. I didn’t care much about the scooters or the lateness. I was thinking about how today was the most I had ever heard Man talk—and I was wondering how to keep him talking.

I experimented with *jam karet*. I walked to the lobby an hour later than usual.

“Where would you like to go today?” Man asked, ever patient and polite.

“I don’t know, I’m getting pretty bored of the island.” I yawned. “I mean, it’s nice, but... it’s like Sydney.”

His eyes widened. “Sydney?”

“I’m not really immersing myself in this country’s culture. I mean, if you don’t know any—”

“Sir,” he interrupted, as close to indignant as I’d ever heard. “I will show you places.”

He took a longer time driving today. We traded the busy streets of my resort town for winding roads which cut through thick greenery. At one point we were driving through what I can only call a rainforest. We finally parked by a town, much quieter than the one where I stayed.

As Man walked me along the streets, past rice paddies, into temples with statues, we talked. He told me the Toyota wasn’t his, but rather the hotel’s. He told me about his country, his language, all the ways to say “no” and “please.” He taught me more about time.

“You know our word for ‘tomorrow’ is the same word for ‘in the future’?” he said, holding up a branch for me so I could walk past. “When you make promises for ‘tomorrow’, there is an understanding that you might mean the next day, or the next month. I’ve been told ‘tomorrow’ by a friend, only to never see her again. I’m still waiting for her, you could say.”

I laughed. “Fascinating.”

Eventually he began asking me about myself. I told him my mother was a successful author, famous for her romance series about an Australian woman finding herself on a trip to Nepal. I told him that I knew no non-English languages except Latin and Ancient Greek, which

he found hilarious. He knew four languages but he could barely read or write in his island's native tongue. I told him I wish I knew more languages, that I could only ever write stories in plain old English.

“You write stories like your mother?”

“I try, but I'll never be famous like her.”

“You should write,” he said. “Not everyone can do what they love.”

Writers are selfish, I told him. When you're a writer, you steal from what you've lived, enslave the people in your life and contort them into characters, caricatures, to fit your imperial purposes. You colonise your insignificant experiences, fatten them up with genetically modified meaning, farm them for the most vivid, traumatic moments. You psychologise yourself and thrust it into your reader's mouth, force-feeding them until they disgorge a singular, tearful interpretation of your work.

He looked at me, his face awash in moonlight from a hole in a temple's roof. “You are strange.”

I grinned, and I knew I had won him over.

Those weeks were the best of my life. Together, Man and I discovered farms, rivers, dark lakes, quiet towns away from the shore. We went on expeditions through sanctuaries, authentic markets, places rich with tradition. Sometimes we sat in a hilly village and I would recite the Latin or Greek poetry I was studying, for his amusement. I even convinced him to swim with me. And as we went on beach walks and scooter rides, I realised I was less in love with the island, and more with him.

Man told me about his brothers, and the ailing grandmother they looked after. He wasn't the eldest, but he had so much responsibility he might as well have been. He loved his grandmother, who used to play soccer when she was young and healthy. He lived here all his life, and didn't think he would ever leave. Once, during one of his monologues, he started to sob. I let him cry into my shoulder, thinking that the most fascinating thing on this island was one of its inhabitants.

But there was something I'd forgotten: my holiday would end. Perhaps time was elastic, but it was still finite. On our last day together, Man gave me my best day yet. He remembered all

the desserts I liked. He didn't resist when I dragged him to overpriced street stalls. And at night he introduced me to a secret beach, one that he made me promise not to tell anyone about, ever.

I lured him into the water. We floated in the blackness. I watched the moonlight glint off the rivulets on his chest. Strangely, this reminded me of the *Aeneid*—Book III, I think—when Aeneas dreams of his *penates*, his household gods. Illuminated by the clarity of moonlight, the gods implore Aeneas to leave the dangerous foreign land he's in, to search for home.

"My grandmother's health is getting worse, Otto," Man said as we lay down on the sand. "But I just..."

Aeneas forgotten, I sat up. "Yes?"

"It's selfish," he said, "but I wish I could leave. Go and never look back."

"I wish you could come back with me," I said, "get on my flight with me early tomorrow morning."

Man scoffed. "I couldn't leave everything behind."

He seemed to hesitate.

"But?" I asked.

"You could," he said. "You could stay for longer."

He touched my hand gently, something he'd never done before.

"I could."

"You could." I could scarcely hear him over the crashing waves.

"I could help you out," I said. "You're struggling, I know. I could help with that."

He seemed ashamed, and said nothing in response.

"You know how I hate my home life too," I continued, giving an encouraging smile. "The traffic, the tourists. The responsibilities. My stupid degree. My controlling mum. I like it much better here with you."

"Exactly," he said, eyes shining.

We spent the rest of the night staring at the time-bound moon, imagining our futures together. I would stay and finish my degree here, or write a novel about my experiences and the secret little places Man had shown me. He would continue working, but with my money, life would be better for him. For us.

He drove me home. He stopped in front of the hotel, we exchanged some words of farewell, but we stayed sitting in the car together for far longer. I listened to his breaths. I felt the charge in the air between us. I thought we might kiss. But something held me back.

My head hurt as I stumbled up to my room. It was like I'd been asleep for the last two weeks, and I was only now realising it. It was like someone had come to me in a cold, moonlit dream, urging me to wake up and find home. I threw off my still-wet shirt and shivered as I climbed into bed. Wide awake, I thought of all that I'd promised Man.

I imagined telling my mother. I hadn't talked to her the entire trip, like we were strangers, but I could easily imagine the entire conversation in my head. She would strong-arm me into refusing Man. My mother, true to her imperious self, would tell me off for falling for an islander who was only spending time with me for my money. Man was a siren, calling out for me with his beautiful voice, waiting for me to plunge into the deep.

I didn't agree with that. He'd freely shared his life with me, the blissfulness of his island home. He'd shown me around this dreamland that lacked time. He'd enchanted me, not because he wanted something, but because it was a beautiful thing to enjoy beautiful things.

I licked the taste of lotus off my lips.

I set my alarm for dawn. I thought of the last conversation I'd had with Man.

"Will I see you again?" he had asked.

"Tomorrow," I'd said.