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SAMPLE

Dedicated to Patricia Ann Quinn 1949-2009

Author's note:

Please be aware that all and every mistakes in the text are deliberate.

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I arrived at Gambir train station on Friday afternoon, as I do on most Friday afternoons after work. Kereta Api Brawijaya to Malang in East Java along the north coast to Semarang and then cutting down south via Kediri. This time I'll just be going to Blitar, to go and hike Gunung Butak again via a route I've never tried before. Still, it's a good twelve hours.

Near the platform, next to a map of the train routes across the island, a group of local men play old-time keroncong music, brought to this port city via the sailors of previous centuries, a Portuguese tradition that stuck, and remains one of the many ingredients of the city's endless strange mix of sounds.

Hello mister, one of the men calls out to me, in a typically friendly way. I continue up the steps and find my carriage and then my seat. I think of the Krontjong de Tugu album recorded not far from here in 1972 and think how I've barely listened to it yet what with it being stuck in my attic in the Outer Hebrides. Need to get back and listen to some of those albums again.

We begin to move. On the other side of the window, this eternal village of a million worlds of ever-changing dramas passes by, and it's now as an observer from the train that you can marvel at its weird complexity instead of being within it. Especially when you are usually in it playing the role of an outsider and always the one being observed as soon as you walk out of your door.

Episodes of peoples' lives. Who is to decide whether trivial or important? The morass of primitive delights and horrors of this city and its people flying by every minute of every day along the side of these train lines, like a sped up look back at moments of life. But it isn't a single human life. It's something much bigger like the life of a city or even a segment of the life of the entire human race. And the show reel never ends and it will continue playing on far beyond past when your own life has already ended and you have had your eyes closed for the last time.

Accidental squadron formations of motorbikes, Betawi men crouched as if on hind legs staring into the far distance, smoking clove cigarettes, or sitting on half-rotten sofas left out in the afternoon rains and dry again by dawn, improvising through their lives, checking their phones, picking their noses, sleeping for an hour or two, selling food from wooden carts, waiting for motorbike taxi customers, and playing chess. All the while the rich folk are driven past in brand new vehicles to air-conditioned malls by their drivers who do nothing else much but drive, wait, smoke, chat, drive again, smile.

The Javanese are very skilled when it comes to creating traffic jams and very stoic when dealing with them. They make an awful mess for themselves and then just put up with it with a smile. Perhaps these traffic jams and the stoicism is all pre-ordained. Though most likely not in quite the manner they think.

From the train window looking down from the elevated rail, these are streets that I knew from my very first days in the city, and streets that I never knew and streets that I do still know in some part of me, because it was there that I spent some important hours. But can I recall those hours from this angle? Can I make the link back to that important brief section of my life back then? When was it and what was I doing there anyway?

I wonder if I'd give any advice to the old me back then, knowing what I know now. But what was important then anyway, to that version of me? Not sure. Maybe if I drink enough I'll remember, I'll gain access to that little room in my mind that was explored in a similarly inebriated state. But it doesn't matter anymore, now. Tidak apa apa. No what what. It may not have been all that important anyway, and what an indulgence to think otherwise.

These people on the street corners and squatting on the train tracks. What is important to them? I'll bet many of them are chatting or thinking about rice or getting bonus points for the second life. Doing what they think is expected of them by those around them. Societal expectations, following prompts. Improvising as best as they can.

I plug my phone in to the wall socket and gently crack open a beer. Breathe in the maltiness which switches that fine lever there is inside me, that everyone who is familiar with it knows and almost certainly even has. The switch that marks the crossing of the line from the random drudgery of battling with the trivial daily tasks into the enlightened other side which is the aesthetic observation of life and reflection. Happily giving way to the memories working their way through the carriage like swirling mists looping round my neck, animated and seductive gas scarves leading to a light layer of oblivion. I recline in the seat and continue watching the world.

This couldn't be any island other than Java, unless of course the course of geological events andd people who ended up here andd their choice of syllables had called it some other short collection of noises. But it didn't. So Java it is. Alright then.

The island with the best name in the world. Best make the most of it. The island that is thick with mystical smoke blown even to the eyes andd souls of atheists. A Samuel Beckett scene with so many cheap special effects andd bewildering moments. It shifts to andd fro from slapstick comedy to deadly scenarios where there will not now andd can never be a punchline. Things happen andd then you think... oh, I see. Move along.

In many other countries you'd be traumatized for weeks by events here that are just shrugged off daily. Oh, my taxi driver has just hit a motorcyclist andd now we're driving off to avoid the real risk of being attacked by a mob andd asked for money or worse. OK. I see. Bravo. Or something. Who am I to disagree, as Annie Lennox once opined? Sweet dreams are made of this. I suppose if I did have to deal with a mob, I'd just make the prayer sign andd smile andd say soothing words, for the police cannot deal with this number of people even if they wanted to.

At least I usually wear a traditional batik shirt, proof that I am not entirely an alien here. But it would essentially be my fault, because if I had never come to this country andd never hailed that cab, then this accident never would have happened! I'll let you take a selfie with me if you don't burn the taxi driver alive. Deal?

On my first visit to Pontianak, in West Kalimantan, I was beckoned by a young chap with his albino girlfriend. You sister, he told me, as he pointed at his albino girlfriend. This albino woman is your sister. What is the right thing to do here? Anyway, I agreed to a couple of photos with them. What else? I'll let you take a selfie first whilst my mind processes this bizarre encounter. Then I smile andd carry on walking to the next incident.

Also in West Kalimantan, outside a remote village shop, a heavily pregnant woman wearing a Muslim headscarf rubbed her belly andd asked me to give part of my nose to her unborn child. A bit too late for that now.

One aged Australian lout told me back in 2009 that I would never leave, as he groped a gorgeous local woman young enough to be his grand-daughter in a seedy bar. I was insulted back then, thinking it would just be twelve months before I re-entered the comparatively bland UK world where shops close at 5pm, folk follow rules, queue up properly, drive the right way up roads, andd are mostly seemingly too busy to do anything vaguely interesting or that might cause them unexpected elation or surprise. But here I am still andd that oafish bastard still might be right.

If you do ever leave, even for a short period, you can suffer a mild form of sensory deprivation. Because this is one of the key hotbeds of life anywhere in the world. An entertaining migraine, as a friend once called it. How can you readjust to genuine peace and quiet and order and logic and tedium and shops being closed at 5pm after this never ending onslaught?

There's always a scruffy chap on every street corner with a motorbike ready to take you to where you want to go, day or night. But be aware that his motorbike will probably get a flat tire en route, he won't be insured or use mirrors except to check his moustache, he may well need to fill up at a petrol station first, his back light will be broken, he is likely to ask you about Wayne Rooney or Setan Merah AKA The Red Devils and what you think of Indonesian women. He won't see the potholes until it's too late and he most probably will not have any change so you will end up accidentally tipping him by a ridiculous amount. Forget mirror, signal, manoeuvre. It's just manoeuvre here, and the signals are just for fun, flashing lights, aesthetic special effects for the ride. But still. It's all rather exhilarating.

It's a huge city, growing out at metres per day. But however much concrete is laid down, and however many trucks and motorbikes cross over it, there are still ants and lizards and plants coating much of it. Bacteria dancing everywhere, in the biggest bacterial dance in the southern hemisphere. Because this land and the seas surrounding it have the optimum temperatures for life's growth and multiplication. You clean your bathroom one day yet the next morning there are ants again all over it, and a dead cockroach lying upside down that spun around for a while before giving up at 4am just before the pre-dawn call to prayer.

But just as the city grows out, the sea also reclaims the northern fringes of this floodplain. It becomes loaded with maritime grime, miniscule sea creatures and bits of old coral once more. And yet they still continue to build apartment blocks as the city sinks and the seas rise. Isn't there a bit of a risk of this entire complex being uninhabitable 20 years from now, you ask. It doesn't matter, mister. Nothing to worry about. It'll all be fine. Plenty of other folk are buying them anyway after watching the adverts. Good price for you, even though as a foreigner you can't actually legally own one. Tidak apa apa, mister. No problem. No what what. We'll give you the land certificate at some point soon in the near future when it is ready after the process is finished. And then years on you find yourself still waiting for the certificate, along with everyone else, as the Java Sea laps at your ankles on the second floor.

Ketawang Puspawarna is the name of the piece of music that brought me here, down this decade-long lane of surrealism. A song often played at Javanese weddings. A piece of music sent on the Golden Record into outer space on the Voyager spacecraft in 1977,

for intelligent alien beings to find and work out how to listen to. Gamelan gongs and insects and birds and gentle tender light wails, all in a non-western tuning. I wonder if it is even possible to ever find the way back out of this strange turning and back home to the main road, or once I've come down here the main road will always look wrong and not as it was and never can be again. Because it's already become part of me and in some small way I of it.

Outside, the cluttered, ramshackle buildings that could be blown over in a gust or dispersed into pieces in a flood or knocked down in twenty minutes and rebuilt in a few hours. That's the way of life alongside the railway tracks, with slender folk sat on burnt out mattresses next to crumbling cement walls and under tarpaulins, seemingly doing absolutely nothing except talking about rice, giggling and staring into the distance.

Eventually their number lessens and the buildings begin to spread themselves out a bit more. The rice fields and the smell of the earth after a storm moves in. The old Java. Light rain pelts the glass window. And it might just already be time for another beer, to encourage the swirls of mist to come in greater number and set me into my imagination a little deeper.

Banana fronds lazily slap the window as though the train is ploughing through a crop field. Sheets of plastic tied to poles, blowing in the winds, keeping the birds away. Water irrigation channels with moving bamboo, up and down, playing a repetitive, circular melody. It sounds like Gendhing Carabalen, that archaic gong music that was here many centuries before the spread of Islamic culture to these shores.

I wonder what that was like then, wandering round the outskirts of Mojokerto, but no Pizza Hut to escape to after the mayhem of the East Java roads and the noonday sun. Listening to Carabalen or Munggang before having a massive knees-up and getting plastered on jugs of cheap local wine whilst admiring the Anjasmoro mountain range from afar in unpolluted air.

Ah, how things have changed. Or have they, aside from what the extremists will tell you? I enjoy it so much sometimes that even the extremists I would have photos with, or at least a pot of tea.

I look out at some youths sitting by the railway tracks. All like extras in a film, but extras who have been given no script or proper information, even for the simplest of tasks. Workers in a hotel. A simple role to play upon life's stage you might think. But you show up to reception and ask if they have a room and it's as though it's the first time anyone has asked them that. This is a hotel, you check. They look at you as if they have seen an apparition before answering. Yes. So, do you have a room tonight? Oh, let me

check. They scramble about for a bit of paper or call someone who may know how to deal with an actual customer. And finally. Yes, it is. It is a hotel, after all. And we do. We do have a room. We just forgot for a while.

You've seen the room listed online for Rp300,000, but this chap says Rp350,000. He won't match the price, upon order of his Chinese Indonesian boss, but says you can book online if you want. So you get onto the Wi-Fi, book online and after half an hour manage to get the room for Rp300,000 instead.

You are shown to the room by a smiling man with a bowtie, in an almost dramatic fashion given the low price and obvious lack of maintenance, and for perhaps the first time that week. Upon arrival you find the key doesn't lock the door and the batteries in the AC remote are dead, so you wait another ten minutes for that to get fixed by bowtie and friends.

Then you get undressed ready to take a shower. But the hot water isn't working. You put your clothes back on and go down to reception to complain. An embarrassed young chap without a bowtie but holding a mop follows you back up to your room and after ten minutes cannot fix the shower, despite turning the hot and cold taps on in various combinations for various lengths of time.

So you end up being given a new room. You shut the door behind you. You undress. Finally. But the batteries in the AC are dead too. And there are no towels. Just making it up as they go along, yet with a belief that it is all preordained. Maintenance? What maintenance do you need in paradise?

This is in East Java. But how about on the outer islands? In Maumere, Flores, there are absolutely no hotels with hot water. Not a one. Or so our driver for the day told us. Why not, I asked him. His answer? Because it's near the sea.

As usual, you have to work out the link for yourself. Not actually because it's near the sea but because down near the coast it is hot so nobody has call for hot water down there.

They have cream of tomato soup on the menu. You order it. After 45 minutes, a young chap brings it over. It's just a bowl of warm cream with a decorative slice of tomato lying on top like a miniature salad garnish. Cream and tomato soup, then.

But it's all okay. You have a place to lie down and get some rest before being blasted with what on earth tomorrow might bring.

