

THE CANCELLED TRIP

By Jeremy Au Yong



a ONE NIGHT IN BANGKOK, BUT
b THE WORLD'S NOT MINE OYSTER.

This had to be either a mistake or a joke. Either way, it was not funny in the least. Anxiously, I scrolled through the barrage of WhatsApp messages that was bombarding my mobile phone.

This was no joke. Mum and Dad had received a slew of similar messages from friends, relatives and colleagues, some of whom had just sent us off at Singapore Changi Airport barely three hours ago. Every message was dead serious.

'WHERE ARE YOU? Landed yet?'

'Fly back ASAP! COVID-19!'

'OMG BREAKING NEWS PLS READ!'

This was no mistake. Grandma's message to our family's group chat, typed in uppercase letters, included a screen capture of the travel advisory from the Ministry of Health's website.

'From 16 March 2020, 2359 hours, all travellers (including Singapore Residents, Long-Term Visit Pass holders and Short-Term Visit Pass holders) entering Singapore with recent travel history to ASEAN countries, Japan, Switzerland, or the United Kingdom within the last 14 days will be issued with a 14-day Stay-Home Notice (SHN).'

I had been looking forward to this Bangkok trip since two years ago. Mum and Dad had been planning this getaway since last year. The hotel was booked, the tour reservations made and the itinerary planned.

"Let's just carpe diem! After all, isn't fourteen days but a small price to pay in return for five days and four nights in paradise?" Dad suggested. I thought it made sense. After all, we had already landed at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport.



Mum, however, vetoed this brave thought. “Not so fast, dear,” Mum replied, “what would the neighbours say once word gets around that we have to be on SHN? Besides, fourteen days SHN on top of five days leave would add up to a total of nineteen days away from the office. Your boss will retrench you, and we can’t have that now can we, dear? Also, Junior can’t afford to take any more days off school.” Wallace Stevens was right when he wrote ‘The world is ugly, / And the people are sad.’

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Indeed, never had an airport arrival hall looked uglier and never had I felt sadder than this cursed mo-

ment. All my lofty hopes and dreams for the perfect vacation came plummeting down to earth around me like a hail storm of Old Testament proportion. The expressions on the other travellers who had just disembarked from the same flight ran the gamut from incredulity to dismay. Apparently, ours was not the only holiday to be hailed upon.

Miserably, we started trudging forth. Dad scoured the internet for three one-way tickets back home. Mum told me to hand her the guidebook we had bought from the duty-free bookstore at Changi Airport. She dumped it, wordlessly, into one of the bins lining the path towards Baggage Conveyor Belt 13. Without the guidebook, my backpack only contained a half-empty water bottle, AirPods and my iPhone but I felt as if I were lugging bricks.



Instead of checking in to the five-star Park Hyatt Hotel in the heart of downtown Bangkok, we would have to check out the no-star airport lounge in the bowels of Suvarnabhumi Airport.

The conveyor belt inched along, empty. They had not even unloaded the luggage from the plane yet. The next available flight back was not only double the usual price but was scheduled to take off at the ungodly hour of half past six in the morning. Dad stoically fished out his credit card. We had touched down late in the evening on the 15th of March and it was already past midnight now. Instead of checking in to the five-star Park Hyatt Hotel in the heart of downtown Bangkok, we would have to check out the no-star airport lounge in the bowels of Suvarnabhumi Airport.

Like Stevens, Burns also got it right. ^eThe best-laid plans of mice and men really do often go awry, especially when they happen to be elaborate holiday plans for a much-needed, long-awaited break. The first few pieces of luggage finally started trickling out. Of course, not a single one was ours.



The writer makes a fair number of references to plays and poems as he recounts his disappointment about the cancelled trip. What is the effect of this on you, as a reader?

References to plays and poems:

^a'One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster' – from *Chess*, by Tim Rice (musical): a popular culture reference celebrating the pleasures of a holiday in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand.

^b'the world's mine oyster' – from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Shakespeare (play): Just as the delicious meat of an oyster is easily plucked from its shell, likewise the world's riches are easily obtained by a person.

^c'The world is ugly, / And the people are sad.' – from *Gubbinal* by Wallace Stevens (poem): An expression of extreme pessimism.

^dhail storm of Old Testament proportion: this is a reference to the content in the Bible.

^e"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley." – from *To a Mouse* by Robert Burns (poem)