

Small Things from the Road

A Collection of Short Stories

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1 Foreword: small things, big impacts

One day, I was talking with a good friend about distinct things that made a major impact on our lives: things that touch the soul and leave us forever changed *in a good way*. In my case, I could say it was travel, but the wanderlust has been a part of me since childhood. Or I could say it was these last four years in the Asia Pacific. It is true that they were a period of intensive learning. However, *how* I explore, and *why* I travel the way I do can be attributed to three things: (1) my dad's death; (2) an important friendship; (3) a moment on the airport runway on July 24th, 2009.

Dad's death might seem like something that could only be negative, but it taught me a valuable lesson: life's impermanence. Dad was one of those people who always lived for tomorrow. His plans for travel and retirement adventures were a combination of dreams that never materialized and escapism from the present. Then, before anyone could have predicted, immortality came knocking on the door, and by then he was already too drained to fulfil any of his dreams. After that, I understood that life's plans never go as you expect: moments are over in a millisecond, there to be enjoyed, and *fear is not an excuse*. Death is there to remind us to not fear life. Solitude is there, but to remind us to not fear loneliness. We all have a road, and it needs to be walked fearlessly, openly, and alone, with the eyes of a child discovering the world for the first time.

The friendship I refer to is with one of the sanest people I know; a mathematician, a rationalist, but purer in his emotions than most. Over the years he has motivated me, perhaps unwittingly, to become a better person. He is my voice of sense, my reality check. When I am about to do something stupid, I recall a conversation we had years ago when he told me to "do the right thing, always". This (usually) helps to keep me in line. When life challenges me, I remember I have a friend who has always managed to forgive my flaws and love me like a brother. This helps me to forgive the people who hurt me, and to remember that we all make mistakes, and sometimes all we need to improve is forgiveness and a bit of guidance. So, in the road described above, he is the occasional crash barrier... important if, like me, you are sometimes a bit of a reckless drunk driver!

July 24th, 2009 is the day I left the UK with a one-way ticket to Bangkok. I knew that to leave was the right decision. Still, I had doubts. Why leave behind all those I care about? Why subject myself to loneliness and uncertainty when I could build a good life for myself in Europe? What if it's a disaster? I wasn't sure why exactly I was going or where I would end up.

With these doubts in my head, my plane to Asia orientated itself onto a London Heathrow runway on the morning of July 24th, 2009. As the engines roared for take-off, a random song came on my music player. It was a song called 'Time to Pretend' by MGMT. The lyrics remind me of living

life to the full, making mistakes... “*We’ve got the vision, now let’s have some fun*”... Something in the song clicked. A wave of excitement washed over me, as the plane accelerated and lifted off the runway. The houses and fields of Greater London grew smaller and more distant, and so did my doubts, making way for a mix of feelings that all felt perfectly synced with the *here* and *now*. Everything in that precise moment felt right, not because I thought so, but because my intuition told me so; this small moment told me so. From then on, my eyes were open: I tried my best to let go of fears, and to adopt as teachers those small, insignificant things in life that ordinarily you would not notice. In other words: I was finally on the road.

What follows is a collection of stories about those small insignificant things. Since July 24th, 2009, these small moments are what taught me the most, and therefore the ones I should share the most. But they are lost in scrap albums that show pictures of monuments and sceneries. They are also lost in emails in which I am asked “What have you been doing? How are things in (insert country)?” The truth is, I can’t even begin to describe it, so instead I end up writing “Life is good here, I went to (insert name of monument/city/etc) and did (some exciting activity).”

Since I left the UK that day, I have travelled all over the Asia Pacific region, from Japan to New Zealand, from Nepal to the Philippines. I wandered from the most polluted cities into the remotest villages, learned new languages, mingled with locals, travelled solo, with others. I became a dive instructor, a lab scientist, a wife, a philosophy student. I climbed from the deepest levels of frustration to the highest peaks of joy; I found places to call home, then disorientated myself so much that I arrived in airports, and forgot where I was flying to. But none of this matters. What really matters is the point at which all plans and itineraries are forgotten, and only the traveller remains. From then on, exploration is within. Some reach this point and realize they were searching for this kind of exploration all along.

These short anecdotes, presented roughly in chronological order, are my way of explaining what real travel is about. They are an explanation of my insights gained from small, but significant moments on the road. Each story can be read on many levels. They would not exist without the three things that led me onto the path on which I stand now. So, it is to them they are dedicated. May every day continue to reveal a short story of its own - to myself, to anyone reading this, and to anyone else!

2 Sick little birds

The first month of my trip took me to Chiang Mai, Thailand, where I had signed up for a 3-week teacher training course. Our accommodations had been organized in a hotel, in which we were assigned twin rooms, that we shared with a randomly allocated roommate on the same course. I was very lucky to share my room with Lydia, a free-spirited, hippyish character from the States. Our open personalities clicked instantly, and we became good friends, sharing many interesting conversations about everything and anything.

One day, we visited a temple where a lady was selling small birds kept in bamboo packets. Why did she keep those poor birds locked up in a packet? Neither of us knew, but it was probably part of some religious ritual, since local people were buying the birds and then releasing them into the temple. Lydia is not religious, but she bought a bird anyway so that she could set it free. She cut open the packet, and we watched it as it escaped and flew away through the temple.

Later, discussing a typically girly topic: “what’s your type of guy?” I answered with my usual: that I don’t have a specific type, but I try not to date idiots. I guess most girls would have answered with a list of superficial qualities: someone handsome, blond/dark, tall, strong, intelligent, good job, nice smile/eyes, etc...or a list of slightly deeper qualities: kind, caring, shares my worldview and philosophies, humorous, etc. In any case, most girls tend to pick qualities that imply she is selecting a guy with qualities that will most benefit *her*. But not Lydia. In her frank manner, she replied: “I am one of these people who picks up sick little birds, tries to nurse them back to health, and usually gets hurt in the process.” She could not have replied with a more beautiful, honest answer.

Because she is one of the few who seems to understand what a true relationship is about. Someone with dark hair will eventually turn grey. Someone with a beautiful smile, and great sense of humour, will have sad days. People change their mind on what they believe, know or want. So, one whose ‘type’ is someone dark, with a great smile, great sense of humour, and similar beliefs, passions and intellect, must be prepared to accept someone grey-haired, gloomy, and disagreeable. One who wants to benefit from a relationship must also be prepared to allocate considerable resources to it; one who wants a happy ending must, on some level, be willing to suffer a bitter end. Too many people end up unhappy together, because they refuse to acknowledge in the beginning that their perfect partner is also the occasional wretch. And in the end, they fail to realize that the benefits gained from the relationship are not to be attained from their partner, but from the love of nursing the wounds of a sick little bird, opening its packet, and watching it fly over temples into the distance; knowing that, if the bird was sufficiently tamed, it will return.

3 Lady with the gruesome smile

When travelling, no matter how desperate or frustrating a situation gets, there is always someone who will manage to make it bearable. Usually this someone is a stranger who has no idea how much they just helped you. This small story of a lady in Thailand sets the perfect example.

During my stay in Chiang Mai, I decided to hire a small motorbike and go around the northern hills to Pai and Mae Hong Son. It is a beautiful area, with lush mountains, rice paddies, and a much cooler climate than sea level. Problem is, I had not prepared for this cooler climate; all I had with me was a thin sweater, and a flimsy poncho, coloured horrific baby pink, with massive leaks in the side. Thanks to my miserliness, I had rented the cheapest motorbike possible, a 125cc scooter with manual gears. Until this trip, I had never used a bike with manual gears. The roads were potholed, slippery (from recent rain), steep, winding, and tricky to drive. I was on my own.

At one point, I came around a sharp bend, on an uphill gradient, in second gear. But, coming around the bend, I realized this slope was too steep for second gear, so I shifted into first. The bike went “wrammmmm!!”; the front wheel lifted off the ground, stunt-style, up the steep hill. After that, lesson learned: stay in first gear! So here I was: cold, on a slippery, dangerous road, on a bike I was only just learning to ride, and if I crashed, there was no-one to help me. Then, rain came. At least three hours to go. Could this get any worse? I stopped by a small wooden structure, with no roof. I stood there, in my flimsy pink ‘poncho’; cold, wet, waiting for a dry spell. Then, from the other side of the structure, a figure approached me, the only person I had seen in miles.

The figure, an elderly lady, smiled and muttered some things in Thai that I did not understand. There was absolutely nothing and no-one else in this structure - not for miles - what was she doing here? There was no vehicle except mine, and she looked too old to walk long distances - how did she get here? I greeted her in Thai, and tried to explain that I don’t speak her language. But she continued talking, about what I don’t know, and simply smiling at me. Her smile was gruesome; her teeth, half of which were missing, were totally rotted and black from a lifelong habit of chewing betel nut. Her skin was wrinkled and marked with all the characters of a fruitful old age. Despite this, she kept her horrific smile, muttering things to me in Thai. In the end, I didn’t know what to say, so I just smiled back and listened to her without understanding anything. Somehow, she made me smile and forget that I was in such a miserable situation.

Soon after, when the rain cleared, I could not stop smiling at the memory of this funny old lady, who talks in a universal language, smiles where others would be embarrassed to smile, and in situations where there would be no reason to smile, or to even be there at all.

4 Thai princess

One day in Bangkok, I had a chance encounter with a Thai princess.

I was walking around in one of the shopping malls, when I saw an advertisement outside the Toni & Guy salon for a free haircut. *A free haircut!* Well, I was always in need of one of those. As it turns out, you still had to pay 500 Baht, a modest sum for a foreigner, but the salon donates it to charity. It was an offer I could not refuse.

So, I was in the salon receiving my haircut, a funky, daringly short one, and the hairdresser told me that, in one hour, a Thai princess would come for her weekly hair styling appointment. I told him, please take your time... *I don't want to miss this!* He took his sweet time, and indeed, one hour later, she walked in. She looked like one of those middle aged women, with a very garish taste in make-up, who wouldn't look out of place in the 'old-woman' clothes section of a department store. She was wearing a nasty pink lipstick, bright blue eye make-up, some sort of brightly coloured suit, and a tight scowl over her face. Not what you would imagine a Thai princess to look like at all. Her scowl didn't loosen when everyone in the store (except myself - I wasn't sure what to do!) bowed down onto the floor. Strange, I thought; shouldn't she at least smile at all these people who just got on their knees for her?

She sat down in the chair next to me, and started having her hair styled. I sat in my chair, watching my hairdresser at work, watching the princess in the mirror. I guess this is the point where, in a normal British hair salon, you would make some comment to the person sat next to you about the weather, or ask something like: "So, what do you do?" But weather in Thailand is always the same, and princesses generally don't do much besides wave at the public.

So I didn't say anything, and I ended up just watching her, out of the corner of my eye, wondering why a princess should be so miserable. Perhaps all this getting bowed at becomes tedious after a while. Perhaps money, fame and a nice haircut don't bring happiness. Or maybe it's the fact that, for the simple reason that she is a princess, people don't make small talk to her about the weather, people have stopped smiling at her, and secretly assume that she doesn't do much in life besides waving at the public.

5 Two hundred Philippine pesos

This story is dedicated to the man in Manila airport who gave me two hundred Philippine pesos (roughly \$5 USD).

When I first flew to the Philippines, I had to catch a connecting flight in Manila to Cebu. Before I left for the Philippines, I didn't know that there is a two hundred peso airport departure tax in Manila, even for connecting flights. I also didn't realize that none of the ATMs in Manila's airport would work, so when I got there, and my bank card failed to withdraw cash, I panicked, because I had no other form of cash. The only way for me to get money was my ATM card. I went out of the airport to try other ATMs, but none of them worked. There was no internet in the airport before the security gates, so I could not even call my bank. Frustrated, and not sure what to do, I went to the airline desk, explained my situation, but they could not help me either. With less than an hour now before my connecting flight due to leave, my situation was getting increasingly more desperate, still without solution.

Then, one young Filipino behind the airline desk who had heard my story pulled out his wallet and gave me two hundred Philippine pesos. Just like that. He made a small comment, along the lines of, "Well, Madam, it's your lucky day..." but he asked for nothing in return. I thanked him profusely, I told him that I had no other currency to pay him back with, but that he deserved everything, and got on my connecting flight.

Later, I discovered that two hundred pesos is a lot of money for Filipinos. For many, it's two or three days salary. To give this to a complete stranger, who is obviously much wealthier, is a massively bold act of altruism. What is it that compels people like him towards actions so altruistic? Some people make sacrifices for strangers with the secret hope that their good conduct will be reciprocated: karma, heaven, a good reputation. Others feel happier whenever they help others. Others don't feel anything, but do it out of goodness for humanity.

Whatever his reasons, I like to think that in every deed like that there is a third person, somewhere in the periphery, who benefits. Because if ever I should encounter this third person, say another stranger in my situation, hopefully I will remember the day a man in Manila airport gave me two hundred pesos. Then instead of judging this stranger as someone hopeless, who needs to learn to bring cash to foreign airports, I will remember it's better to just give them two hundred pesos, send them on their way, and hope that someday they will pass on the favour to some other hopeless stranger.

6 The crab

We humans are always telling ourselves we are the most intelligent species in the world. Yet here we are, intelligently destroying the planet and wasting our energy on pointless intellectual questions, pointless explorations. If you ask a mouse: “Who am I? What is my purpose?” It will rightly tell you: “Piss off. Let me sleep!” If we tell a dolphin, “We have invented the airplane. Let’s explore the Himalaya!” Quite rightly, the dolphin will say: “We have underwater mountains far more splendid than the highest peak on land. Why on Earth should I go to the Himalaya?”

Actually observing the animal world can be a humbling experience. Look around you, see how well everything (except humanity) fits into place; how well other species co-operate! I was told not long ago a story about ants. When a lump of honey is dropped into water, the ants will form a bridge from the edge, and other ants will cross this bridge to procure the honey. When they need to cross a water body, they will form a ball, and ants on the bottom rotate with the ants on the top so none of them drown. How beautiful is this harmony! Even the migrating birds can co-operate better than us. They fly in a v-shape, and they take turns in flying at the front, because it is more tiring.

If we humans were those birds, what would we do? Most likely, the white birds would just push the black bird to the front: “to the front, Negro!” What if we were the ants? Most likely we would just drop a stick of dynamite into the tank, that way procuring the honey is nice and easy. Why do I assume this? Just look at our history... Look at how we have exploited anyone we consider to be ‘different’, look at how corporations and governments have created roads, houses, technologies, fuel sources; basically any form of human ‘progress’. Look around you, and understand what a cosmic joke we are, how unintelligent, how out of harmony we are! I will illustrate my point further with a little anecdote.

One time in Malapascua, I was on a night dive. Night time is a beautiful time to be on a dive: tiny shrimp, with pink eyes, hide between the stony corals. Sometimes, rarer creatures like seahorses can be seen. But the best part is the crabs. Some tiny, others huge, they usually run around in the sand, sideways, sometimes transporting large rocks and other bits on their back.

I was doing my usual, poking around in the sand, looking for things. Then, a crab ran past and stopped right in front of me.

I stopped, crouched down on the ground with my torch, to look at him. He was big! About the size of three large fists. He just stood there, with a large rock on his back, looking at me. Sometimes when underwater animals look at me, I catch a sense of fear from the animal; they are looking to escape, then as soon as they find a route, they shoot off. But not this one. This crab just looked at me, completely fearlessly. We had a moment of

connection where I almost sensed a ridicule from him. It's as if he was telling me: *'What on Earth are you doing here, stupid human? Can't you see how out of place you look, crouched there in your weird suit, with your fake sun lamp, and that silly mask on your face? Don't you have anything better to do? Like, seriously...'* After some time like this, he calmly bobbed away with his rock, as if he was now bored and had seen enough of me.

The human ego will have a hard time accepting this, but what if the crab was right? What was I doing there, in my neoprene suit, looking completely out of place? What universal benefit could possibly come out of it? We go underwater to scare the living daylights out of the animals and disturb their routine. We kick over corals and destroy millions of years of natural synthesis. We spend untold amounts of energy learning how to survive down there for no more than one hour, when that energy could be spent far more efficiently elsewhere. Yes, we are fantastic at manipulating the environment. We are ingenious at exploring and adapting. And we do it intelligently. But is it an intelligent thing to do in itself? Perhaps we should intelligently blend into nature's harmony like everything else. Until then, we are the plastic surgeons of the universe; the ridicule of the animal kingdom! The sooner we become aware of this, the better.

7 Rich and poor

During my time in the Philippines, I got to know a local woman called Sonia. A devout Christian, she lived in a very modest shack just off the village beach with her husband and five sons. Together, they collected scraps for a living that they sold to the mainland for recycling. This earned them around \$50 per week. For the rest, sometimes Sonia sold banana-Q (a sort of banana skewer fried in sugar) to people in the village, but she never made much profit because she would end up giving many of them away. “Oh, but that little girl was so cute, I *had* to give her one! And you know, her family earns less than we do...” So went one excuse to her husband, Djonny, who would simply smile and shake his head, knowing that he would have to resign to another evening spent eating boiled rice with melonggay (cheap horseradish leaves) instead of fish (something more luxurious).

One evening, I came to visit them for our usual routine of sitting by the beach, listening to Djonny playing guitar, singing along, chatting about life. Djonny started playing a song, *‘Tears on my Pillow’*, which always made Sonia giggle. She would tell me how, when they were younger and he was ‘courting’ her, he used to go to her window and play her that song. Now when he plays it, he sings with a sort of mock seriousness, and it still makes her laugh. Then she would tell me how grateful she is to God to have such a kind, reliable husband, because it is common among Filipino men to cheat and abuse their wives. She would go on to tell me how lucky she is to have five such attractive, intelligent sons. Then she would tell me that her family is poor, but one day, her sons will change all that. Then I would tell her that she is poor in the pocket but rich in many other ways, and she would look at me with a knowing smile that says, yes, you are probably right.

People like Sonia often have me thinking about poverty. What defines ‘poverty’? They say anyone who lives on less than \$1/day is below the poverty line, but I can’t think of a richer existence than one fulfilled with love, contentment, and a tightly bonded family. Who is poorer: the wealthy European banker, who lives alone, and is too stressed from work to sustain anything else, or Sonia? And if we gave Sonia financial help and the banker spiritual help, would they know what to do with it?

Perhaps, in some cases, it is better to leave things as they are. To the financially poor, showing kindness not as a donor, but as a friend. To the spiritually poor, showing compassion when they are open and ready to change their life. And to be selective in who you help. Because maybe, even compared to the ‘riches’ of the West, Sonia is far from under the poverty line, and not in need of any help at all.

8 The Orio family

Somewhere in the Philippines, I ended up on a small island with no ATM and no cash. I was helped by a kind local, Warren Orio; he offered to take me to an ATM on the mainland and stay with his family. A perfect gentleman, he escorted me all the way to Cagayan del Oro, a small city on the island of Mindanao, where he lives with his family. He has a shy teenage sister, and his parents are both accountants; the nicest of people. They welcomed me, fed me silly, and took me sightseeing. When I told them I liked pineapple, they even took me to a pineapple plantation! They took me to visit other relatives, and since it was close to Christmas, they also invited me to their office Christmas party.

At the Christmas party, they were doing a lucky draw in which people won little presents. Those who won had to get into the middle of the room and accept their gifts with a little applause. After the lucky draw, they did office ‘awards’, and one of them went to the Orio parents. The whole family had to get into the middle and accept their gift, so Warren, his wife, his sister, and his parents all went to the middle of the room. They called me into the middle too: “Come up here, Yvette, you’re one of us now... you’re an Orio!”

Isn’t it beautiful how, no matter how far your own family drifts away, or how solitary your life becomes, there are always people in unexpected corners of the world who become like your family.

9 Loveless love

What is the difference between a prostitute and a one-night stand? Say a man pays the first woman \$30, takes her home. Or he buys the second woman \$30 worth of drinks in a club, takes her home. The mechanics are the same; the only difference between them is the first couple has a social label, and the second couple (sometimes) has the deluded idea that this might be the start of a decent relationship.

This question was raised by the amount of sex workers and loveless marriages I saw while I travelled in the Philippines. In the loveless marriages, the man was usually past his fifties, hideously ugly, and from somewhere like Germany, Switzerland, or the USA. She was usually in her twenties or early thirties, reasonably (but not amazingly) pretty, and Filipina. I would have liked to believe most of them married each other for love. But when I saw them together, they hardly spoke. There was rarely a hint of genuine love or companionship, so I guess the sad reality is that, for most of these couples, it's a simple trade of financial security from his side, and female 'services' from hers. They have both commodified the other, perhaps wittingly, for what they believe to be a better life.

The even sadder reality is that this is happening everywhere. Men and women marry because that person they have met is 'the one'; the 'one' who can take away their problems, make their life better. They marry for security, because they are lonely, because they are unhappy without the 'one'. They don't marry because they are themselves overflowing with love, and want to share that love; they marry because they are empty, and needy of love, and that wonderful person they have met is able to fill that emptiness. In other cases, people are more selective; they find the prettiest girl to be their trophy wife, or the most successful man to be their trophy husband. Intended or not, it is the ultimate commodification of a person! For that special person is no longer just a human being; they are a source of something, and hollow hearts keep on begging for more of that something. The result is not a relationship based on real love, but a relationship based on dependency.

To return to the original question: what is the difference between a prostitute and a one-night stand? One gets paid, the other gets drunk. What is the difference between loveless marriage agreements, and typical relationships? They are both agreements with benefits: one obvious, the other implicit. When those benefits end, the relationship breaks down. And when both parties emerge, heartbroken, they wander: *where did it all go wrong?* The truth is, it was wrong right from the start. Real love is not to be extracted from anyone else; it comes from inside. It's a resource that is so overflowing, you will pour it into everything and everyone you meet, without expecting anything in return. It is so rich that it will turn your enemies into friends. *That* is love; everything else is a meaningless illusion.

10 Mount Kinabalu

There was a short stage in my travels, a few months in, when I became disconnected from all the reasons why I was travelling. I contemplated going back; luckily, I changed my mind. Because the months that followed were the best yet. I met a fantastic travel companion in Luzon, the Philippines. Together we backpacked to the rice terraces in the north, swam with whale sharks in the south, and partied in Manila. Then I flew to Sabah, Malaysia, where my great experiences continued to get better. I went into the jungle, did beautiful dives in Sipadan, and climbed Mount Kinabalu. I became part of a travel community that was starting to feel like home; only more spontaneous, and exciting. I was at the peak of great times; I was on top of the world! But most symbolically, at the height of all this, I was on the top of Mount Kinabalu.

My trek up Mount Kinabalu, as with everything else, was completely unprepared. I knew that the final ascent is usually done at night, when it's usually below freezing, but I had not bothered to even bring a proper coat. I had not done any proper exercise in months. *It doesn't matter*, I thought. *I'll see how it goes*. My trekking guide, a 20-something year old from Indonesia, had the same happy-go-luck attitude. So at roughly 8am, we set off together up the 9 kilometer staircase that is Mount Kinabalu.

As it turns out, our trek went much more easily than either of us could have hoped. By noon, we were already in the lodge where everyone stays before making the final ascent to the peak - a modest 4,095m - in the early morning. My guide told me that, since the weather was good, we could skip the crowds and make the final ascent in the afternoon for sunset. This alternative also meant we would have a proper sleep, and would not have to deal with the midnight cold. Perfect! So in the mid afternoon, we set off to the peak, and arrived there around 4pm. And it was more beautiful and peaceful than I could have imagined.

For almost two hours, we just sat there. With not another soul in sight. Just like that, on the top of Mount Kinabalu. We took a couple of pictures, but for the rest, we just sat there. We listened to some music on his radio, watched the clouds pass. One cloud came in, and took the shape of a heart. It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.

As peaceful as the scenery around me, was perhaps also the context in which it all took place. There on the top, I started thinking about how fantastic this trip had been so far - *how could I have ever considered going back?* It's funny how life always has a way of subtly pushing you into the right decisions when things become uncertain. I was also thankful that I had not followed the usual early-morning itinerary. Why follow a plan, just because the photos are supposed to be better at that time of day, and because everyone else is doing it? I could not have felt more content than that afternoon on the peak of Mount Kinabalu, completely alone, beside my

guide.

I also thought about the road ahead. From a peak, the only way on is down. From a valley, the only way on is up. But from the viewpoint they are both part of a striking scenery that cannot be matched by any flatland, no matter how beautiful. Perhaps I would feel once again lost, or lonely, or bored. I was sitting on the top of Borneo in a moment of absolute bliss - from here, it only gets worse! But at the same time, it felt great to be on the top. So I thought to myself, whatever happens tomorrow, I am going to savour, and to remember in its entirety, this beautiful moment. I am not going to plan my happiness, or my sorrow. And if, somewhere down the road, things get worse, then it's only logic that they will get better again too.

11 Chinese cuisine

The local cuisine is always an important part of the travel experience. China, naturally, sets the perfect example.

When mum and I first came to China, we were super excited about the food. We had heard so many great things about it! In virtually every country in the world, there is Chinese food. In the UK, it is popular and for good reason. The dishes are always made with high quality cuts of meat. The sauces are usually very rich and tasty, sometimes a bit spicy, or sweet and sour, but always flavoursome. Our mouths were watering with thoughts of crispy lemon chicken, roasted duck with hoisin sauce and crispy pancakes, sizzling black pepper beef, chow mein, ...

So our horror only seemed natural when we first encountered local Chinese menus. Since we could not read any of them, we had to resort to picture menus. The pictures looked truly awful. Page one: a massive chicken head poking out of a 'soup'. Page two: a really nasty cut of pork, full of fat and bones, covered in some slimy sauce. Page three: chicken feet. And so on. No sign of the crispy lemon chicken, tender pieces of sweet and sour pork, or sizzling black pepper beef... Slightly disturbed, I looked at the waitress. "Tofu?"

The culinary experiences improved somewhat, but not quite to our hopes. We tried the famous Szechuan hotpot, a dish which consists of a pot filled with a watery, extremely spicy sauce, with floating pieces of pork bone and vegetable. Mum burnt away most her taste buds with that dish. I could handle the spices, but I spent most of the evening picking out bits of meat from fatty knuckles of pork. We tried Beijing's famous crispy duck pancakes, but they were nothing special; at least compared to those in the UK. Street food in Beijing consisted of fried live scorpion, cockroaches and the like. *What happened?*

One could say that terrible food happened. But cuisines are never left in their original state; they are modified to suit whatever it is that people want to taste. And then with high expectations, those privileged enough to visit the original country get a glimpse of the real flavour, and end up sorely disappointed, instead wishing they could go back to a plate of something comfortable. I learnt my lesson; now when I travel to somewhere new, I try my best to expect the absolute worst. And somehow, the cuisine is always good.

12 A new home in Singapore

Sometimes life has a beautiful way of presenting new opportunities that, at the the time, can feel like a blessing or a curse. It all depends on how you look at it.

I received an opportunity about one year into my travels. Money was running low, and my itchy feet had been scratched for far too long. In other words, it was time to settle down and work for a while. I looked for jobs in the dive industry, but it was low season. I could have looked for English teacher jobs, but that would have meant flying to somewhere like Thailand, Korea or Japan to start searching. Then, I got an email from a professor at the National University of Singapore, offering me a job with possibility of PhD. A blessing!

But, wait a minute. This had never been part of the plan. Just months ago, I had invested significant sums of money in order to qualify as an English teacher and PADI dive instructor. Then the plan was to travel around the world by working my way as an English teacher or dive instructor. I would have liked to do a PhD at some point, yes, but not so soon, and certainly not in Asia. Why not look somewhere else for a job teaching English? Or visit some more dive resorts? Then return to Europe in a few years and pursue a PhD there, as planned?

My reason was simple, and it is summed up nicely in a quote by Osho. It goes like this:

“A rose petal, so delicate, but so strong, doesn’t hesitate about where it is falling, where it is going... simply trust. Do not the petals flutter down just like that?”

There is no such thing as a life plan. Only life’s plan for you. When it is revealed to you, you have two choices: cling to the flower, or simply trust.

I arrived in Singapore on the 4th of July, 2010. My work permit was ready, and I would soon start my work in the lab. As I walked through the airport, towards the arrivals counter, I had a distinct feeling, a very good feeling, that this city was now my home, and that everything would work out just fine. And indeed, everything worked out far better than I could have ever hoped: coming to work in Singapore turned out to be one of the best decisions that I have ever made.

When it comes to life’s plan, travel like a scattered seed, fall like a rose petal: always trusting your intuition. Because intuition is a force linked to a unity far more powerful than logic, knowledge and emotions combined.

13 A seriously beautiful joke

During my first days in Singapore, I met an eccentric, intellectual guy from Mexico. We fascinated each other from the start. We spoke the same languages, studied in the same university, shared the same zealous mindset. Just two weeks later we were living together and hopelessly in love. We would go for long walks together in the city, often to the same, familiar places. We enjoyed small rituals together, like eating a specific food dish at the same stall; savouring and appreciating every single moment together.

Then, after less than six weeks together, we got married in the registry office in Singapore. Neither of us considered ourselves the ‘marriage type’. We knew that marriage wasn’t necessary, but we didn’t care. And so we married each other because neither of us believed in marriage. It was like a beautiful, practical joke turned serious, that the poor guy, in his delusion, called ‘pure poetry!’ We barely even took the process seriously. In the marriage registration form, for example, we specified his ethnicity (Latino) as ‘Latin Android’. The wedding itself was very simple; no wedding clothes, no rings, no ceremony, no invitations. Only our closest family knew about it, but they were unable to attend on such short notice. Afterwards, though, we announced it to all of our friends and organized a massive house party in which we told everyone: “Bring cake and alcohol... because they are the only things that really matter in weddings!”

Needless to say, our carefree romance ended as quickly as it came. Less than a year later, we had a painful but amicable separation, and the marriage was annulled. Friends were generally very sympathetic. They would say: “I am so sorry it didn’t work out for you” or: “It’s OK, we all make mistakes.” Then they would assure me that some other great guy would come along soon.

But if you look more deeply, there was nothing unpleasant about our separation. It *felt* unpleasant, but that doesn’t mean it was. There is nothing more toxic for the soul than a misguided romantic passion that exceeds its shelf life. For it to end was actually the best thing that could have happened! Why should I need another relationship? As for mistakes, it wasn’t a mistake at all. We lived in the moment, not caring about each other’s pasts, the future, or uncertainty. I am by no means suggesting that we should start marrying each other randomly. But, with trust in oneself, the fear of losing oneself is dropped; the result is the ability to enter relationships with totality, and without fears or expectations.

My conclusion? Don’t ever pity someone who lives and loves fearlessly, because they know there is nothing to lose. Don’t tell someone with a sense of humour that their jokes are a mistake. Don’t tell them what they are doing is bad, or good, because with black and white together you can hold the world. Just be fearless, daring, and spontaneous. And somehow, the outcome will always be positive.

14 Autumn leaves

After roughly one year and a half in tropical, humid Southeast Asia, I was fortunate enough to escape for a couple of weeks to South Korea. I was there in autumn, a beautiful time to be in Korea. The air was crisp and dry; the sky blue; the trees a beautiful blend of reds, yellow, burnt oranges and browns. Together with a friend I spent some days in the rural east, by a large temple in the middle of the forest. Children were playing in the leaves, kicking them up and then screeching with joy. Chinese tourists came to admire the colours. I wandered around, simply enjoying the autumn; by far the most beautiful season, at least to me.

One interesting feature of autumn is that it is the season of death. Death, along with life, is part of the natural rhythm that is existence. Summer has ended, winter is coming; it's time to shed. When nature sheds, it's a beautiful phenomenon. Even humans agree that it is beautiful: we kick up the leaves, we marvel at the colours, we rejoice. Yet when we ourselves have to deal with death, we mourn and cry. We cry because of the happiness of having known someone and the sorrow of their being gone, and we focus on the sorrow. People take toxic drugs to avoid their own mortality, they avoid ageing, they avoid the subject. They want to remain in the spring and summer forever. No doubt the spring and summer are also beautiful. But, how can something so beautiful and natural as the autumn be such a negative taboo for us?

We don't like death because it is the end of life. But life and death are the black and white of existence, just as summer and winter are the black and white of seasons; one cannot exist without the other! Those who died 'before their time' had unfinished business. But a life lived right has no unfinished business: it embraces death with open arms, grateful to have been part of the dance that is life! Then there are those who cling to life because they fear death. But what is there to fear? Live your spring and summer in joy and totality; then when the time comes, you will fall like the autumn leaf. Just like the leaf, when you are gone, others will see you and marvel at your beauty. They will throw you up in the air and rejoice for you. Then they will drop you where they found you, and let the winter snows bury you; then when the time comes, they will once more watch you grow in the spring.

15 The dark edge of humanity

When my sister and I went travelling around Cambodia, we decided to visit the Tuol Sleng museum in Phnom Penh. Tuol Sleng is one of the sites that was used for torture during the Pol Pot regime, a two-year genocide in which almost a third of Cambodia's population was murdered. Most of these were intellectuals. Anyone with glasses, smooth hands, or an education was selected and murdered. The horrors of this genocide are so unspeakable, and the murders in Tuol Sleng were so brutal, that they make Nazi's Auschwitz look like Disneyland.

Tuol Sleng is still very much in the original state it was left in at the end of the Pol Pot regime. It received thousands of prisoners, but only seven survived. The walls are covered with photos used for the prisoner files. Each prisoner had two photos for their file: the photo taken when they entered Tuol Sleng (open file), and the photo taken after they had been killed (close file). The open file photos show women, children, men, young and old. There is a common look in their eyes: a mix of terror, sadness, and forced bravery. It is a heartbreaking look, and even now when I see that look, it haunts me. The close file photos were even more horrifying. They show faces that had been burnt out slowly with acid; people butchered to death with a blunt weapon; drowned in tanks; and so on. Prison cells still had blood-splatter stains on the floor and ceiling. The guards committing these crimes were fellow citizens, often young. Many of them were students of the teachers they killed. After seeing all this, my sister and I were very quiet, and we decided to visit a temple.

Most of us, including my sister and I that day, will deny that it's within our own capability to treat others so badly. We look the other way and visit a temple. Surely, one has to be criminally insane to commit murder? But these guards were normal teenagers from normal families; they were not murderers before they became guards. After the Pol Pot regime, those that survived went on to have normal lives. The same happened in Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Communist China, and many other places: 'normal' people turned into murderers. Others became involved indirectly; they drove the trains that took people to torture camps, or turned a blind eye.

Albert Einstein once said that the world is a dangerous place not because of those who do harm, but because of those who look on and do nothing. He was right; Europe was dangerous in Nazi Germany, and it is dangerous today. Not because of the psychopaths who roam the streets at night, but because of the good people of society who say: "what awful things happened in the fascist regime! Thankfully this is history; such things would never happen nowadays here in Europe." But it *is* happening now! Just go to a supermarket. What do you see? Clothes coloured with toxic dyes, by people living on less than \$2 per day. Fruits sprayed with petrochemicals, so that the corporations that make them can earn more profit. Meat from animals

kept in conditions not too different from Tuol Sleng, before they are killed in the most utilitarian, inhumane ways. Much of this meat will probably be thrown out once it exceeds its shelf life, but the risk of salmonella is more important to us.

If people understood what these animals suffer to get us these products, we would all be vegetarians. But instead, we separate ourselves from the process. We tell ourselves that animals are different, they are not a high species like us, and their suffering is justified. But look under the mental abstractions we have created and you will see that our consciousness is exactly the same as theirs. “But eating meat is natural, because we are omnivores”, you then say. But the way in which animals are kept and killed in the meat production process is far from natural, and there are so many meat substitute products nowadays that it hardly seems necessary to eat meat anymore.

As for the poor who produce our first-world products, the problem is the same. In genocides and mass murders the problem is also the same: we remove ourselves until *their* suffering is separated from *ours*. But when one suffers, the world suffers, because behind every cruel system that propagates unnecessary suffering, there is a mindless crowd of sleepwalkers following the system. There is a sleepwalker in every one of us; but also a victim and a killer in every one of us. The only way to avoid becoming a killer, a victim, or a sleepwalker is to wake up, start questioning! When you wake up in the morning, ask yourself: ‘am I really awake?’ When you buy something, ask yourself: ‘where did this come from?’ And when you hear a story about a crime, a lunatic, or some other soul removed from society, ask yourself: ‘in other circumstances, could that be me?’

Only when we all realize we are dreaming will this dark edge of humanity become light; only then will this world be a safe place.

16 Rubber time

Indonesia is one of those countries where everything is always frustratingly late. They even have a special word for it: ‘jam karet’ - it means ‘rubber time’. If they say a bus leaves town at 8am, it is usually 8am jam karet, which means it actually leaves the station at 10 or 11am, and spends the first hour searching all over town for passengers. By the time it leaves town, it is closer to noon.

Why don’t they just give people a more precise time like they do in the West? Perhaps Indonesians are just lazy. Or perhaps they always lie about the time because they want others to show up first. However, a small story I read suggests another reason; but it requires one to step outside the pragmatic Western mindset.

In the story, two men are walking through rural India. They have no idea where they are or what the distances are from one village to the next. So, they ask the local people: “how far to the next village?” They say “two miles”. So they walk and walk, but hours later, they have walked at least 20 miles with no sign of any village. One of the men starts to feel agitated. He complains to his companion: “Why haven’t we reached the village yet? We’ve walked at least 20 miles, and the next village was supposed to be after just two miles!” But the other man replies: “Didn’t you know that, here in rural India, it is normal to tell people the next village is just two miles away? They do it out of compassion, to give you courage; if they told you it’s 50 miles, you would lose hope and drop dead!”

And indeed, in Indonesia many things are communicated indirectly. In their language, there is no direct word for ‘no’. To give negative news, instead of saying: ‘I don’t know’ you would say ‘less sure’ and ‘bad’ becomes ‘less good’. Basically, Indonesians hate to be the bearers of bad news. They are also tremendously helpful and hate to say no. When asking for directions, no-one ever told me they couldn’t help me. No, they would point me to some random place and say: “maybe it’s there”. A friend told me that he once asked an Indonesian for directions, and was told: “go right, further down the road, left, ... (long set of elaborate instructions) ... and you will reach a house with a blue door. Knock on the door, and you will see an old man with a beard. He knows where everything is, ask him.”

Sometimes, aspects of a culture that are at times very annoying (and amusing) are part of a wider idea that makes that culture also very beautiful. Indonesians are among the most hospitable, kind-hearted people I have encountered, in large part due to their inability to say ‘no’ to a stranger in need. I was pondering once why the Indonesian language has no word for ‘please’. It is a word of politeness; is it because the Indonesian language is blunt? Far from it. It’s because the word isn’t necessary; Indonesians will always try to help anyone in need, and they don’t need a special word in their language to persuade them.

17 Sunrise

Not long after a big break-up, I went to New Zealand for a two-week road trip. It was a trip that was originally booked for the two of us, but since he had dropped out, I was ambivalent about going on my own. In the end I decided to go anyway, so there I was on my own, in a converted camper-car, driving around South Island's stunning winter scenery. I arrived almost completely unprepared, so every day was a most beautiful surprise.

One night, I was driving south down the Pacific coast towards Kaikoura. Until that night, weather had been beautiful; but then, an Antarctic blizzard made its way north, creating a bitter cold wind that almost blew me off the road. I was hoping to reach Kaikoura that night, for a proper dinner, but driving was too dangerous in the strong wind. So, I found a small bay in the side of the road, and parked there for the night. It was bitterly cold, with the wind howling through the windows. It was too dark to see what else was around, and I had not eaten dinner yet, so I just ate a bunch of cereal bars and crawled into bed. It was one of those nights where I most wished I could have had some company with me, someone to make this experience a little warmer, a little less dark, a little less miserable. But I was alone, so I just went to sleep, hoping that the night would be over soon.

The following morning, a light crept through the side window of my car and woke me up. When I saw what was outside, I jolted up, threw on my clothes and ran outside like a madwoman! Because outside, there was the most spectacular sunrise I have ever experienced: a dramatic, burnt yellow sky; big grey-blue waves crashing against the rocks; birds screeching, flying over the water. Everything in that moment was just so pure, and alive! I was no longer an observer. I was the sky's fire burning all away, all but that moment. I was the wind, throwing its energy into the next, and possessed with the ocean as it blasted through my soul. The birds were calling me, inviting me into their game. And all I had to do was play along. It was such a beautiful awakening, that I cried tears of happiness.

For every dark night, there is a sunrise. For every moment you think life is flat, nature will try to remind you that you are wrong. Listen to her call; step into the moment. In those moments you will be dead to the past and future, dead to whatever you thought about life, dead to your expectations and dreams. But in your heart, you will never have felt more alive.

18 On solo and duo travel

When I speak of solo travel, many people react as if it's an act of immense bravery. Others think I am out of my mind. Sometimes, in villages, I have to invent a husband who happens to be sick that day, or people will ask: *'Don't you get lonely, or bored, or afraid, or...'* I have, of course, travelled with other people. But I am convinced more than ever that solo travel is far more interesting, at least once you let go of whatever negative ideas people associate with being alone.

Take couples. When they travel together, they are miserable! Dysfunctional couples bicker their way through beautiful sunsets. Happy couples shut each other out from the world they are supposed to be exploring together. Even friends who travel together tend to miss out on local experiences, because they are too pre-occupied with each other. They end up compromising what they do because he wants to do this, she wants to do that. But the solo travellers are totally free. They go where they want, when they want. They are absolutely open to everyone and everything, and as a result their experience is often far more enriched than those who travel with a companion. If anything, anyone who travels with someone else is committing an act of immense bravery!

However, duo travel, given the right conditions, can also work well. In my case, the best duo travel I have had is with my sister. We always end up doing a road trip, with a ridiculously ambitious itinerary; for example, to see half of Australia in two weeks! We spend the minimum, sleep rough in the car, and eat whatever is cheap in the supermarket. But somehow, we never get tired of the long drives, sleeping rough, or eating tinned food. Our rough style of travel becomes an adventure! We eat the tin of ravioli at a beautiful viewpoint, and turn it into 'the best ravioli ever!' We always enjoy road life, the beautiful sceneries, and we have a blast. It's the ultimate in short road adventures.

But there are times when this type of travel, no matter how fun, would not work. Sometimes, all I want to do is park myself in a place for an extended time, where I don't know anyone, to learn about the culture, the way of life, the people. These tend to be interesting places with rich cultures and a rich solo experience. And so I reserve the road trips with my sister for places where there is a lot to see, but not too much in the way of deep exploration; and the very rich, fascinating places for solo travel.

In the end, duo travel is not necessarily better than solo travel, and vice versa. What matters is that it is put into the right type of trip. Pick your travel companions wisely. Travel with others to enjoy the journey; travel alone to appreciate the scenery.

19 A story about fear

This story was inspired by a conversation I had whilst walking around Montreal with a friend. The conversation was about fear.

There was a woman named Perception who had three children: twins Fear and Suffering, and Reality, the youngest. Fear and Suffering, being twins, were always together, walking around hand in hand. Suffering was also very fond of Reality. But Fear was fearless, and always provoking Suffering which made Perception miserable, and caused the shy Reality to hide behind Perception. Perception became overwhelmed by Suffering provoked by Fear, and decided to consult God. “Oh God, what can I do? Reality is always hiding behind me, and I cannot handle my Suffering anymore!”

God was very sympathetic. “Very well, Perception” he said. “Let me take your Suffering away. I will pick him up tomorrow morning.” So Perception gathered her three children, and told them: “Tomorrow morning, Suffering will go to boarding school. Be ready tomorrow morning.”

Suffering was reluctant to go, because he did not want to leave Reality behind. So Fear, fearless as he was, told Suffering: “Don’t worry. If we exchange clothes, I will take your place.” So the twins swapped clothes, Fear left, and Suffering stayed behind with Perception and Reality. Perception never found out; so whenever Perception thinks Fear and Reality can get along when Suffering has gone, the fact is that Suffering and Reality can get along whenever Fear has gone, no longer making Perception miserable or her Reality hide behind her.

20 Ice cream

One evening, I was walking around Singapore with Yousuf, a good friend of mine. We always end up talking about very philosophical and spiritual topics because he is a real out-of-the-box thinker, and an excellent teacher. This little story demonstrates why.

At some point during our walk we decided to sit down and share an ice cream. The ice cream came in a flat bowl. As we were eating it, Yousuf took a scoop from the centre of the bowl, thinking it must be nearly finished. But his spoon sunk deeper, and we discovered there was a whole scoop left in a hidden area at the bottom of the bowl! As it turns out, the bowl was not flat, but triangular at the bottom. What a pleasant surprise! One of us commented on how life is like this ice cream, full of unexpected surprises. It turned into a conversation on how things are never how they seem on the surface, and that you must dig your spoon under the surface to discover life's surprises. The amount of things that can be learned from an ice cream!

When a student's eyes are open, teachers are everywhere. A good teacher is one who knows how to keep his student's eyes open; after that, it doesn't really matter what he says.

21 Looking for my nose

Sometimes, the truth is so close to our nose we cannot see it. Because in order to see the truth, we have to distort everything we have been taught about the reality.

One day, I decided to take this idea literally: I did my morning walk while looking at my nose with my eyes crossed. My nose looked very blurry, but that's because my eyes had not learned to focus on it. The whole world around me - let's call it 'reality' - became distorted. Suddenly, normal humdrum things like walking in a line became an adventure - *and* I could see my nose at the same time! I almost walked into a tree. Did anyone notice what I was doing? Point and laugh at me? Probably; but they were so distorted I didn't care. It was fantastic!

Why do so many people bother with drugs like LSD when all they have to do is focus on their nose? Why do people frown upon the ones who try to view life from a different perspective? Distort the reality. Don't look for answers around you. In a perfect world, everyone looks at their nose.

22 A yoga class in Kathmandu

I had my second ever yoga class in a small studio in Kathmandu. The teacher was an older lady, perhaps in her fifties, with an enviable flexibility. Along with a series of postures, she taught me a lesson that is small, but very valuable, for many other things in life besides yoga.

So at some point during the class, I was in a very unnatural posture whereby one leg was bent, and all my weight shifted on it, one arm was extended towards the ceiling in line with my body, I was looking up at my hand, and the other arm was somewhere along the bottom of my body, desperately trying to balance everything else. I had to keep the posture for a few seconds, but in a posture like that, seconds feel like hours. My balance was hanging on a thread. My thighs muscles felt strained. Just when I thought I was about to become the first person in the studio to give up and fall flat on the floor, the teacher said: “In this posture, the aim is to really extend yourself towards the ceiling! Reach out to the sky!”

What, reach out to the sky? I am struggling just to stay upright. But then, she added: “If you push down onto the floor, your body will naturally extend itself towards the ceiling, and you will be steadier on the ground too.” I tried it, and it worked! I pushed down my heels and thighs towards the floor, and simultaneously my balance was better. Automatically, my upper hand reached further up towards the ceiling. What a great trick! She went on to say that, in yoga, a strong core and firm balance are the key to standing taller. Because when the core is strong, and the legs are firmly planted into the ground, the body is as a whole stronger inside the posture. As a result, it’s easier to reach higher towards the sky. To reach higher, push down harder. To achieve something, do the opposite.

This doesn’t just apply to yoga. Why is it that some things, tried directly, simply don’t work? Try telling your brain: “Go to sleep!” It doesn’t work. Because in order to sleep, you must do the opposite: try to *not* try to go to sleep. The same with happiness. To find happiness, you must not search for it. Be open to it, but don’t hopelessly run after it, and it will come to you. Why? Because you *are* happiness! It takes a madman to run after himself in a search for himself, when all he has to do is realize that he *is* himself. But look around you; most of us, by definition, are mad! Don’t try to find yourself. You are already here. Don’t try to create yourself. Your parents already created you. In fact, don’t even try to *be* yourself; you are already yourself!

So what lesson did I take home from that yoga class? When you want to reach out, don’t reach up. Just keep the core strong, and feet planted firmly on the floor; everything else that needs to come will follow.

23 The sunset on Lhotse

During my stay in Nepal, I decided to go trekking for a few weeks in the Himalayas of the Solokhumbu region around Mount Everest. I was there in winter, a beautiful time to go: clear blue skies, hardly any tourists, and comfortable, warm weather during the day. Every day was filled with magnificent scenery. Sharp, towering peaks were all around including famous beauties such as Ama Dablan, Imja Tse, Cho Oyu, Lhotse, and of course Sagarmatha (Mount Everest). Most people come to the region to see Mount Everest, but the most beautiful peak by far was Lhotse.

One thing that surprised me about the scenery, though, was the lack of snow. It's the highest mountain range in the world. It's winter. Surely, I should have spent every day plodding through waist-deep snow? There was some snow higher up in the peaks, but otherwise hardly any at all. According to the locals, December in the Solokhumbu is usually unbearably cold, and snows a lot. But the last few years... nothing. They worry a lot about climate change in the Himalayas, because many of the glaciers have disappeared. They melt, and when they do, they flood local villages. Year after year, the snows recede a little more. The Nepalese government is, quite rightly, very concerned about these issues. They had a meeting a few years ago, in which the country's officials, including the Prime Minister, flew by helicopter to Kala Pattar, a high viewpoint to Mount Everest. It was their way of making a statement to the Nepalese, as well as the outside world: if we don't act now, our Himalayas be the next Kilimanjaro.

I was thinking about all this whilst watching the sun set on the south face of Lhotse. A most beautiful peak, Lhotse is world's fourth highest at 8,518 metres: just a little lower than Everest. Its southern face, rising sharply and steeply out of the Himalayan ridge, is now only modestly hidden by small sections of snow. In the daytime, Lhotse is a grey, rocky peak. But in the late afternoon, just before the sun descends, it glows: beautiful, intense shades of yellowish orange that, like the moon, seem to light up the whole sky. As the sun drops down, the shades intensify into a deep orange, then red, then a beautiful dark pink. The pink shadow line rushes up the mountain towards the peak, like the fastest climber racing for the top. How fast would one have to run just to keep up with the light? But with each second, the race is further lost. The pink colours disappear, metre by metre, leaving behind the dark grey reality of the rocks. And as the last reddish ray finally burns off the peak, Lhotse is like a giant piece of coal that was just a moment ago alive and glowing, but now coming to its end.

What if climate change is like that? How quickly will we have to run to stay in the light, when the sun is setting much faster? And what happens when the coal burns out, leaving behind only its grey, charred remains, and the cold night ahead?

24 25 rupees

Up until recently, I never quite knew how to react to beggars in poor countries. In any large city, they approach you: their clothes are torn and dirty, faces hungry, with their hand out. In Europe, I am usually quick to reject beggars for two reasons. The bad reason: that day I have no compassion, and I simply can't be bothered to give out my money. The valid reason: European countries generally have good welfare systems designed to keep people off the street, and I refuse to fund someone's irresponsible lifestyle. But in developing countries, with no welfare system, ending up on the street is much easier. All people have to do is get sick and spend their resources on healthcare. Or marry an abusive husband, divorce, and lose everything. Get sold into a brothel, or some other low status work. Or, simply be born on the street or have some other bad luck.

So I could help by giving money. But my dilemma isn't over yet. Even in poor countries, there are many people who end up on the street not because of bad luck, but because of their careless lifestyles. Alcoholism, drugs, problem gambling and the like are as rife in many third world countries as they are in the West. Giving money would only make the problem worse, or encourage them to stay on the street. Many people, especially children, are 'employed' as beggars; the money they earn on the street doesn't even go to them. Without knowing their story, how is it possible to give money, knowing it was the best action? So in the end, I tend to treat beggars in poor countries the same way I treat them in rich countries. I reject them, or ignore them; but always with a very awkward feeling inside, a feeling of conflict that tells me I should help, but then again I shouldn't.

One day, around the Boudhanath stupa in Kathmandu, a young beggar pestered me as I was buying a yoghurt. He was still a child, probably around eight years old. He was dirty, and messy, like most other beggars around the stupa. He held out his hand: "*Miss, please money!*" I didn't want to give him money. So I bought two yoghurts, and gave him one. He looked at the yoghurt. Then gave me a funny look. "*Just one?*"

The monk next to us laughed. I laughed too. This beggar kid was funny. But had I done the right thing? Was I supporting something I shouldn't? The pot of yoghurt cost 25 rupees. Surely, if they have the same value, to give 25 rupees or a yoghurt would have been the same? Or it is?

The difference is that a pot of yoghurt has never (at least, to my knowledge) made anyone crazy. 25 rupees, on the other hand, has the power to make anyone crazy! What is money? It's a piece of paper, but also a piece of infinite procrastination. You start with a little, then you save it for something more. Perhaps that T-shirt you saw in the sales rack. Then when you have a little more, you save it for something bigger. Maybe those jeans, that fancy pair in the window! The jeans become a new vehicle. A house. And so on, and so on. Suddenly, what was a means to something of actual value

has now become an end, and other people a worthless means to this end.

And so 25 rupees, roughly equivalent to 25 euro cents, doesn't seem like a lot. In fact, it isn't. It's just old, dirty pieces of paper. But with that tiny 25 rupees come infinite possibilities, and therefore an infinite range of things - materialistic things - that can be bought. One can never have enough of something that *almost*, just almost satisfies. Worse still, procuring all these goods takes time. You need a thousand 25 rupees from a thousand kind-hearted tourists. When will all this be saved - tomorrow? The day after that, perhaps never? But then what becomes of today?

Today is a gift. More specifically, this *precise moment* is a gift. Why? Because it is already gone. Look, there it went. As for the future? It is a concept; it cannot exist until it enters the present, and when it does, it's no longer the future, and probably different to what you imagined. And then, just like that, it's gone again. Still, humankind has somehow managed to invent a paper tool that drives people to desperate means for the hope of infinite possibilities and goods in a time that, technically, doesn't exist. If beggars are hungry, shouldn't they be asking people for food or water? Yet they never ask for yoghurt, or water, or a banana; they always ask for money. They think they are better off with money. But the truth is, they are not. 25 rupees in paper is a ticket to madness; 25 rupees in a pot of yoghurt is a ticket to sweet, instant gratification.

25 T-shirt

One morning, after a shower, I was in my room looking for my T-shirt. I looked in the cupboard, on the chair, on the floor, in the laundry basket. But I couldn't find it anywhere. Where on Earth was my T-shirt? A slight panic filled me. *Did I somehow lose one of my favourite T-shirts?* Then I looked down and realized I was already wearing it.

Isn't it funny how we go through life thinking that we are perfectly sane, and then there are moments like these to remind us that we are anything but.

26 The weight of Being

In Kathmandu, I spent roughly one month at the Shechen monastery's guest house in the Tibetan district of Boudhanath. I was very much inspired in my writing by some of the people I met there. Most of them, like me, were solo travellers. With some the time spent was very short, but the humaneness behind their life's stories and the way they communicated it was more meaningful than some friendships that exist for years. Others I got to know a bit longer, and we became like a family. I had a Canadian mother figure, Renee, and an Iranian father figure, Karim. They are proof that time is completely irrelevant when it comes to human connection; fearless openness and non-judgement is everything. They have inspired me more than they will ever imagine.

One day, Karim came to me and said: "Open your hand!" Obediently, I opened my hand and he gave me a simple rock. He said: "Weigh it, can you feel its weight?" I weighed it, wandering what on Earth is this about. He knew that I was writing short stories. Then he showed me a picture of a girl, probably Nepali, carrying a heavy basket on her back, and asked me to write a short story about the weight of being. I took a walk around the stupa with the rock in my hand. Later that evening, this is what came out:

When two bells chime together
 Their sound is
 When I look at the bells
 I am
 When I think about their sound
 I am not
 That is the weight of not being

When a man works for society
 Sickened by its delusions
 When two lovers love then hate
 Weakened by the other's delusion
 They are not
 That is the weight of not being

The rock held in my hand
 Is, but is not
 The mountain from which it came
 Is, is not
 I am, I am not
 I am the weight of the Universe, but I am 61 kilo
 That is the weight of Being
 And not being.

27 Afterword: to all my fellow wanderers

To this point I have travelled through five continents and over fifty countries. I often receive praise for this. But let me tell you a secret: these statistics mean nothing; travel is unnecessary! In fact, nothing meaningful can be learned from hopping from this monument to that; from this country to that. Everywhere you go, you will discover that humanity is the same. From the most remote village to the densest city, you will find greed, joy, misery, happiness. Our evils and virtues are the same; our essence is the same; the psychological chaos in which we have constructed our lives is the same.

I observed those who gave up their riches for a life of celibacy and austerity in the name of ‘truth’; those who aggressively pursue a life of wealth out of poverty in the name of ‘family’. I observed those who became frustrated with their beliefs, only to end up substituting one dogma for another; just as the addict substitutes one obsession for another. In every corner of the world, people are so pre-occupied with their hollowness, that they distract themselves with pointless, egoistic pursuits, whether it be a career, a life of austerity, money, materialistic things, or other people. But what if this hollowness is a necessary part of us? A space we need, just as the cup needs a space to hold water?

I read a beautiful story once about a boy from Spain who treks all the way through the Sahara desert to the pyramids of Egypt, in order to find a treasure. On the way he has all sorts of meaningful experiences that open his eyes. But when he reaches the pyramids, his treasure is not there. Then he catches a vision, in which he is told the treasure is in fact under a tree in Spain. So he treks all the way back to Spain, to a tree right by his house. He digs and digs, and indeed, there is his treasure!

This is exactly what travel is. Everything I have learned in my explorations could have been learned at home. Those expecting to find the meaning of life by wandering in and out of airports will be very disappointed! Travel does, however, put people into the correct mindset to start exploration. First horizontally, then vertically. The horizontal exploration is different places and cultures. When that becomes tedious, it’s time to put aside the map, the Lonely Planet guidebook, and the camera, and start exploring vertically into the essence of our humanity. *This is where real travel begins.*

It is true that our languages and cultural habits differ. But look beyond these, and you will see that the universal language spoken underneath is the same. There is no exemplary lifestyle, culture, or religion. The common denominator is always the same: we think too much, we want much, we follow too much, and in the process we make ourselves suffer and miss out on the beauty around us that is called life.

In every small moment, in every tiny corner on this Earth, there are

small things happening that remind us of what we need to understand. The problem is, very few of us pay attention to them. We are too 'busy' running after whatever we think is important: money, a career, ideals, even freedom. So long as we are seeking, we are not free. Even the ones who renounce everything for 'freedom' are never free; they are still chained to their pursuit! Wherever you are, whatever you are trying to do, just look up at the sky. *Really look!* See how the birds tweet and dance. See how the trees sway in the wind; how the leaves drop to the ground. How everything in this world is so beautifully synced together, without a thought, without a care. How often do you care to observe this? How often are you too busy trying to achieve this or that, that you completely miss out on the natural rhythm of the real world? Look at yourself; how chaotic and out of touch you are! Nothing in your so-called life really matters.

I thought that after a few years on the road I would have figured everything out. That my doubts would have become certainties, all my dreams and ambitions realities. But the truth is, I have no idea. If anything I know less than I did before. And the beautiful part is: I don't care. I don't care if my expectations were not fulfilled, and I don't care what happens in the future. Will I die today or in sixty years? Where will I live? Will I get married and have children? What will my career be? Where will I be tomorrow? None of this matters. All that matters are these small moments of harmony, *being here now* to observe them, and having my three eyes opened wide enough for me to see them.

And so to my fellow wanderers and spiritual seekers, my only wish is this: may every day reveal itself as a new adventure, a new vertical exploration. And may each day continue to reveal short stories of its own - to myself, to anyone who has read this, and to anyone else!

28 Photos from the road



Figure 1: On the day of a seriously beautiful joke



Figure 2: From the top of Mount Kinabalu



Figure 3: The most beautiful sunrise I have ever been



Figure 4: Sunset on Lhotse