

AN ORIGIN STORY

Bangkok.
2014.

I have a column due and my editor is breathing down my neck. I'm planning on being in the Land of Smiles for a quarter of the year, my first time living the dream, being a daring digital nomad but my brain will not cooperate.

My best friend James blames the tequilas we've been throwing down our necks at a bar that's just a couple of fairy lights, rusty nails, the promise of tetanus and some planks in an extra shady section of the Red Light District but actually it's everything.

It's being there.

It's the sound of meat sizzling at roadside stalls. The sweet smell of mangos sliced and placed carefully on ice. It's the ladyboys posed like such sensual sirens beckoning sexily from the whisky islands. It's the coo of "Massage? Massage? Come in! Where you from?" called from dodgy parlours or from a pretty Thai woman who'll throw in a free fish spa if you'll agree to receive your treatment right in the tumultuous street.

If you're suddenly the spectacle that is dangling your feet in a water tank that looks like a prelude to life-saving amputation while little gray garra rufa (doctor fish) eat your dead skin and you laugh and screech at the sensation as monks, saffron robes aglow, walk by barely batting an eye.

It's all this and the fact that I have to write and make sense of it all.

Distill it into some sort of coherent chronicle that filters the sights and sounds of what feels like another planet through the inadequate page and transport the reader there with no vehicle except the wings of my words.

I start to sweat.

No, I'm already sweating.

Bangkok is where sweat goes to train for the Olympics and it's already running down my back.

It runs all the way to Malaysia as I'm darting down a street in George Town, Penang. A man is following me on his motorcycle yelling "One night! 500 Ringgit right now for one night! What's your room number?"

It's not the first solicitation and it won't be the last.

I run away, afraid, my editor breathes dragon fire down my neck but my mind still won't cooperate.

It won't write the glowing travelogue.

It won't shut down and get enough rest.

It won't stop thinking about how singular it is to be a black African woman moving through the world.

So James tells me to write that.

“Write about how you get chased and people stare and people ask you for photographs and kids call you “chocolate” and men assume you’re a sex worker. Write about travel the way only a black Zambian born, Namibia-dwelling South African raised woman solo traveller can. Marth, seriously, write that.”

As I do when I travel, I’ve scribbled that story in the oddly quiet minutes between the awe.

It’s half held in two notebooks. It’s somewhat stored in gushing voice notes whispered in silent monasteries but mostly elliptic in logs on my mobile phone.

On the road, there is no quiet, familiar desk.

Stories fly overhead like *Yi Peng* lanterns.

They zip by on overloaded scooters barely missing your feet.

They vanish into a crowd wearing the most beautiful *chut thai* or trickle away in a sonorous splash as your hurl yourself from the top of a waterfall.

The trick then is to catch them.

To find a pause in all the “Look! What’s that? Wow! Let’s go!” and whip out a phone, a notebook or simply trust in a memory ever assaulted by the sensory overload that is travel.

At home my writing is done in silence and in my room.

On the road it is done everywhere and perhaps by someone else.

A Martha who says “yes” far more often than I do, who’s braver, laughs louder, is quicker with a smile, stays up later, who will eat just about anything and walks further than her feet have ever carried her before offering intimate details of her life to strangers shooting Christmas eve fireworks towards an unfamiliar sky.

I write it all and this becomes the signature of my travelogues.

Stories from around the world, distilled through my multiple identities and my individual black history. I weave my view of the world and its views of me into the narrative. Sometimes the racism, ignorance, the solicitation and surgical masks pulled hastily over immigration personnel’s faces at my utterance of “I’m from Africa” is the story.

But on the best days it’s not.

The days I’m not an automatic ambassador for black people the world over and I can just live and write travel.

Or does travel write me?

Urging me down paths I wouldn’t take back home, allowing me the anonymity I don’t have in Windhoek in far-flung places so I can revel, go rogue and remember that the story is the journey and the destination is myself.