

# LONG WEEKEND

This story was highly commended  
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Corfu, Phuket, Sicily, Penang, St Tropez, Bali. Dan Ramsay thought they were all the same now. At some point all these places would have conjured up images of sunny relaxation but now they meant endless stress for him.

Three years ago, he had jumped at the offer of a transfer to Singapore to head their new commercial property development office as Regional Director. Accommodation was a very glamorous penthouse suite with views over the South China Sea. Beaches and parks were just minutes away. At the apartments there were pools and tennis courts, but Dan never had the chance to use them.

When he left his home, it was dark, when he got back it was dark. It would be quite an impressive pad for the girls if he was a young bachelor, but those days are barely within memory now. What use was a flat one could not show off to anyone but more corporate types who bled in from the office into his home to test out his wife's culinary skills?

Sandra gladly left her job in Exmouth Street, Covent Garden as IT training officer. In Singapore she would be expected to do nothing but entertain. It was not difficult with chauffeurs and maids. Her entire closet was filled with cocktail dresses tailor-made in Arab Street. The girl he knew as wearing Next suits and Marks and Sparks knickers had long vanished. Commuting from Clapham Junction to North Cheam had become a thing of the past. So were the holidays in Spain.

It was the Thursday of the Easter weekend. A long weekend, which usually filled Dan with dread. There are so many of these long weekends in the Far East. Every festival, religious event, birthday of someone important, patriotic remembrance, was a holiday of some sort, and some are bound to fall on a Friday or Monday. On the ferry to Bintan, the pleasure island for the expatriates and wealthy locals who arrived from Singapore, Dan thought of little else except his unfinished work, left

behind on his desk. There were reports to be checked before the meeting early next week. Some of the costing and tender programmes were late.

The ferry took an hour. During this time, the passengers were subjected to Mr Bean videos. It was nice to see his two kids, Ben and Alex, enjoying themselves. It astonished him how rarely he heard his children's laughter.

On some projects, there were staffing problems. The estimates for the clients had been left on the side of his in-tray, not even in his in-tray, but on the side, so full that it was. Janet, his PA, said she would be coming in over the weekend. He did not say anything to that, as obviously, being her boss, he should approve. Inside, he was thinking, she was young, single and female. Why the hell should she spend her Easter holiday in the office tidying up after him? Still, being Director, he had to demolish such left wing thoughts.

Suresh, one of the associates, was in the middle of a meeting when Dan left at four p.m. earlier that day in order to catch the blasted ferry which Sandra had booked. This guilt of abandonment must plague all Directors in mid-swing on the golf-course, he reassured himself. Or maybe not. Maybe the very idea of being Director is to have maximum responsibility and minimum concern.

They arrived at Bintan ferry terminal where there were those interminable tourist souvenir shops. Dan watched his wife and sons rush in and out of them as though there was no time left on earth. He waited outside the shops until the coach came to pick them up for the hotel drop-off. He extricated them out of the shops.

Darling, you don't understand, said Sandra. This is not Blackpool you know, where the shops are all kitsch and crap. They are really nice shops.

They are just postcard shops.

No, they're not, darling. They have Elsa Peretti earrings shaped like starfish

Later, at the hotel, they unpacked in their private little timber bunga-

low with polished teak floor and timber shutters.

I found this on the jetty, dad. Look dad, look dad. Ben repeated like a parrot until Dan looked.

It was a little broken shell. Could have been beautiful once.

Dan expressed interest and made noises to indicate his approval. In his childhood days, he found all sorts of beautiful shells in St Ives, where he holidayed with his parents. He thought, he could show his son a shell or two, but didn't know where his things were anymore. Presumably they were all packed away somewhere in some storage container in Surrey that his company used. He was like a lost man that the corporate world had found and tied up for a ransom.

The family of four went for a walk along the beach. It was traditional. A walk on the beach is free, easy and the best exercise in the world. It was nearly sunset, but in the tropics, the sun holds itself high for a long time, cloudless, brilliant, and then all of a sudden it would be gone, quick as a finger-snap. This was a new experience when they first moved to Singapore. That was why the colonials had Sundowners. It took longer for the sun to go down than the time it took to slip down three or four whisky and sodas.

Dan sighed, but his sigh was swallowed by the sound of the waves. Coconut trees, strange, slim and defiant, threw themselves across a lilac sky. How many of his old schoolmates must think he was in heaven when he was posted out to the Far East. How few realise his enslavement to the corporate devil he had made a pact with.

Time for Sundowners! Declared Sandra.

She was still young, dark-haired and petite. She looked like someone else without make-up. She used to love to go to Boots in their High Street to browse at the No 7 counter. When they arrived at the hotel minutes ago, he noticed himself in the glass of the French windows in the lobby. He was balding, hunched and could be mistaken for an American eagle.

All he was, was a wallet with a bad hair cut.

They approached the hotel poolside bar. They were seated and read the drinks menu. Dan looked around and realised that every other family was also on the same deal. Expat families on long weekend in Bintan. To 'get away from it all', it would seem. As if. Why? Just across the waters, skyscrapers in Singapore loomed. In the night sky, they glittered unevenly, menacingly, yet exuding a certain cool charisma, like a femme fatale.

What you drinking, Dan, said Sandra.

When Dan did not answer and appeared to be examining the menu in detail, Sandra said she would get him a Tiger. Ben was still looking for 'things'. He looked under the table for scraps of shell or bone. Anything at all. Ben was a natural scavenger. He had a Polaroid camera as well, with which he took pictures of anything. His older brother Alex was more of a scientist. He had his binoculars with him and was looking at ships in the distance. He had an organised and methodical nature.

"I brought them with us on the walk so that when it gets dark I can look at the stars," he said.

Sandra beamed, and ruffled his hair. Dan laughed, remembering that Alex liked to name the constellations in an *ad hoc* way. Alex had wanted a telescope for a long time. It would be a good present to get him for Christmas as the view of the stars from their twenty-fifth floor penthouse would be magnificent.

They sipped their drinks and chatted about what they would do on the long weekend. Sandra had ordered a tropical of some kind, perhaps a Sea Breeze. Dan wasn't sure. Whenever he travelled for business with his business associates, they only went for the 'hard' stuff. It was straight into whisky at five pm. No mucking around with softies. The days of exploring, drinking Coronas, hiring scooters, sleeping in a dorm, were all over. There were no adventures for a corporate big wig. The nearest adventure would be ten minutes with a Patpong road whore, where you

would be so drunk your mind cannot focus on anything but client meetings first thing in the morning. There were no more new routes to take. They were all clearly charted out, rehashed in a map of Corpor-Asia.

Funny how ironic it was that the word corporate which was derived from 'the Body' had now consigned into just that, a body. No exclusivity, no adventure, no dare.

Four girls in bikinis sauntered by. They were looking for a table near the pool. They were the teenage daughters of CEOs presumably. They had the look of "CEO's daughter", haughty, tarty. They were tall, fine featured and shapely, the products of good genetics and diet.

Dan blushed. The girls were so appealing, it hurt to look at them. He thought immediately that he was also a cliché. A middle aged man fancying teenage girls. Still, he did not make his success by being a horny idiot. He was clever, ambitious and kind. All the attributes of a good boss. It was the slave lifestyle that drained him. He imagined himself making small talk at the hotel bar with the girls using pick up lines from twenty years ago. He pictured the girls staring at him as if he were an alien. Dan guffawed loudly, unable to contain his amusement at the scenario he had made up.

What's so funny, dad? said Ben.

Yeah, what's so funny, repeated Alex.

Nothing, said Dan, feeling sheepish.

Dan grinned and poured himself a little more Tiger. Clouds of work thoughts drifted back into his head and he thought that perhaps he should leave early and get the ferry that left the next day, so he could pop back into the office to finish off what he abandoned.

You're always doing this. You're always thinking of work. Can't you spend some time with your family, we never see you, blah-blah-blah

Yes, Sandra would have a fit. It would not be the first time she had a fit over his workaholicism. Actually, it was perfectionism, but she would never understand this.

They proceeded to the hotel's seafood restaurant called, inoffensively, The Terrace, for dinner. In



situations like these, Dan liked to remember the meals he used to have in Covent Garden at Mr Wong's.

Like him, Sandra had become a cliché too. A bossy, cantankerous, expat wife who went to colonial nonsense like tea parties, raffles and film nights. Once he saw her kneeling in their bedroom. She was bent so low she almost kissed the polished marble floor. He thought she was praying. He thought that she had become spiritual.

When she got up, she said, What? What are you looking at. He saw that she had a book in front of her, and was actually practising yoga.

Oh yes, we never see you, blah-blah-blah.

To which he would reply, Darling, I've got so much to do. My head is about to explode. I've just got to do a couple of hours' work, send some emails, won't be too long.

In the early days of arrival in Singapore, there would be tears at this point. Now, Sandra would simply shrug and tell the amah to leave his dinner for him in the fridge.

He liked having these imaginary rows. Better than having the real thing. After dinner, Dan suggested that they go for a walk.

It's quite late, Dan, said Sandra.

*It's only nine.*

The boys have to go to bed soon, she said.

*Mission Impossible* is on telly, said Alex.

Is it a hotel video channel? Asked Dan.

Sandra rolled her eyes, and asked what difference it made.

Alright then, suit yourself! See you lot later. *I* would like to go for a walk and enjoy the tropical air, said Dan.

He walked for about ten minutes to the adjacent hotel's private beach. There's a whole strip of them all along the beach, said the man on the ferry. It was a similar five star hotel resort. The pool had fancy waterfalls and lazy rivers and nearly came to the edge of the dunes. Dan climbed over a few rocks, surprising himself at how easy he found it, and in the twilight as well. He sat down on a reasonably flat rock and leant back on his palms. The rocks were lit by the bluish glow from the pools of the

resort behind him, and the sea waves outlined by strong spotlights. When Dan travelled to South East Asia as a shoestring student, he would have laughed in the face of anyone who said that he would return fifteen years later in a suit.

He found the rhythmic slish-slash of the waves soothing. The tropical night, was as always, warm, restful. He felt sad that he could not appreciate such beauty on a day to day basis. He used to be quite an attractive man. Girls would always look at him when he walked into a bar.

*Now I am an old man. A young middle-aged old man.*

"No, you're not!"

Dan jumped. Did he say something?

There was a girl standing beside him. She had long brown limbs and was silhouetted against the lights from the resort behind. The girl sounded American or Canadian, he could not tell. Canadians whom he met travelling all those years ago sewed tiny Canadian flags to their T-shirts, backpacks, whatever, so that they would not be mistaken for Americans. The reality was of course, no one cared.

This moment, however, he simply had to relish in the longest and most deliberate way possible. She wore faded denim shorts. Her sandals were of very fine silver straps that reminded him of florist's wire, whenever he had waited for bunches to be tied to bring home to his wife. Her toenails were red, watermelon red, red as his eyes on the morning after his stag night.

His eyes travelled heavenward and noticed that she had glitter make-up on her cheekbones. Sure sign that she was a teenager. No self-respecting grown up woman who wore glitter make up in the early eighties would wear it again. He recognised her as one of the teenagers parading in their parrot-coloured bikinis earlier on.

Pardon? He said.

She smiled. They said this about women. The most intriguing women never said anything again. They smile. That is how Mona

Lisa captivates. A smile was an eternal mystery, whereas words were useless, sprinkled on anyone and at any occasion. But a smile could not be.

She said her name was Monica and she was...

He wasn't listening. She might as well have been an ape ugh-ing and eck-ing at him. The air was salty, warm and heavy. It smelt like sex. Dan was transfixed by the shape of her lips, ships with an even keel. Her voice was slow and soft the drawl forming perfectly rounded o's and pointed u's. Dan realised suddenly that she had asked him something, when he paused for a reply, tilting her head.

Wha'dyou say? He inquired.

I asked what you are doing on the rocks.

Oh. I thought, I thought it was the name of a cocktail.

Dan felt very muddled but he could not make sense of what he himself was saying, let alone the girl. His whole body ached as though he was having the flu, his jaws throbbed like the gills on a fish.

She laughed. A glossy, rock and roll laugh. He listened, then he too laughed.

She said she was here with her family. She wanted to make her stepdad jealous. Her stepdad fancied her. Yes, she thought it was disgusting. She wanted to hang out on the rocks so he could see that she was with someone and that would annoy him.

Is he around, then? Dan asked.

He's just on the poolside terrace having a beer with Mom, she said, tilting her head slightly. He can see us, you know.

Dan blinked and barely turned his head. It was actually quite painful to turn his head. His trainer at the Hilton corporate gym said that he should see the company physio. He seemed to have developed a boardroom hunch, which was apparently worse than a computer stiff neck.

It was hard to tell if the girl was a minor, because she was so tall. She could be eighteen but it was dark. Dan turned his body around like a frog. In this world we cannot take chances, said the CEO the day before at the pitch meeting with



potential Japanese investors. Dan wanted to get a glimpse of the evil stepdad who was obviously a dirty old man (that Dan was not).

Don't look at him, hissed the girl. Let's go somewhere private, she said into his ear. I know you like me. I saw you looking at me today. She leant over and her breath was all strawberry and mint. I think you're cute. You look like Nicholas Cage.

Her hair fell open like a drape, revealing a firm cleavage.

Don't look at him, she cautioned again, sensing his distraction. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her cellulite-free thigh.

The good thing about being in the tropics was, 'you can't melt. You can't melt because you're already too hot to melt,' said the CEO, to which the Japanese suits politely chuckled.

His hand felt like a faith healer's on brown satin but still he craned his body until he could see the stepdad. Dan gasped. It was the bloody CEO, Jim Walsh! Jim sat like a big baby on a deck chair, fingers clutching his milk-bottle of Tiger.

Dan tore his hand away and got up, brushing the bottom of his Bermudas (that Sandra purchased in Raffles City mall for \$9.99, she said) to free them of grit. The bulge in them would soon subside accordingly. Even years later, he could still see the statement on the girl's face. It was a strange non-statement, as though she was an ancient tomb carving. She did not let out a scream, she did not cry, smile or sigh. Considering how vocal she was only seconds ago, she did absolutely nothing, as though she was used to the suddenness of goodbyes.

She did not follow him.

Back at the air-conditioned comfort of the private suite at the resort, Dan crept into the darkness. The bedside lamps were on, and the room was bathed in a comforting amber glow that he now associated with tropical resorts. He noticed, climbing into bed, that Sandra had painted her toenails a watermelon red. The room stank of nail polish, acetone remover or something chemical and possibly radioactive.

Ah. Just like home. Nevertheless, his addiction to work was stronger than any chemical process and he

resolved to find out the ferry times the next day so he could tear himself away from the Long Weekend.

Dan stared vacantly at the painted toenails on his wife's feet, callused, blistered and distorted from wearing high heels all the time. Looking at them made him feel weary, as though he had walked for miles and miles.

*We must try to learn and experience new things all the time,* said the CEO. *That is how we grow as a company.*

Dan turned out the lights.

**I am a published fiction writer interested in setting up a writing group with other established writers, to meet regularly and review and critique work. I live in Ham, South West London. Please contact me on 07762 369965 or email me at <sarah.weir@hamstreet.fsnet.co.uk> if you are interested.**

### DOMESTIC

Mother, I don't trust your mouth,  
that dark gash,  
a knife-wound red with blood -  
you remind me of a wild animal,  
a lioness whose teeth have torn apart  
some slower creature  
with gentle eyes and warm fur.

I'm your puppet, wound up and made to dance.  
You expect a performance,  
you flatter and prepare me.  
I'm dancing for this man of yours -  
I don't feel sorry for him,  
I've seen the way he looks at me,  
he knows my shape, he's seen  
the fullness of my lips.

Mother, you witch, I can see you -  
rubbing your hands, watching the peepshow.  
There's a knife in your mouth,  
wounds in your eyes -  
there's a pewter plate on the table.  
I ruffle his hair, imagine lifting that head,  
imagine its weight.

I have my mother's eyes,  
I have her knife in my right hand -  
she taught me how to cook,  
how to slice through vegetables  
without creating waste.  
He smiles at me and I hate his mouth -  
the gentle smile; the forgiveness.

**Helen Kitson**

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