

These four short essays or stories or whatever you would like to call them are taken from a Narrative Non-Fiction course I completed in 2026. Although I've written a bunch of different stuff before, this was my first attempt at this particular style of writing.

It wasn't really my thing. But I did enjoy the course, and the writing exercises pushed me out of my comfortable little writing box that I previously existed in.

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## **Another First Date**

## **8 hours at Stansted Airport**

## **The Battle of Mdina**

## **Sun and Sadness**

## Another First Date

I'm good with accents, it's somewhat of a party trick of mine: determining the origin of the accent and imitating it, to what must be the great pleasure of the atypically-accented speaker.

But when she first spoke, I was clueless. Rural New Zealand? Posh Spanish? Some type of West Asia-Latin America hybrid?

Her hair was ink-black, it smelt like oranges and was chaotically composed. She was dressed professionally and her nails were a perfect pink.

But I didn't notice any of that, all I could think about was that accent. She used this weird German V, rolled Ts, and the Rs at the end of her words were never pronounced. I was unable to think of much else for the first 10 minutes of our conversation.

Eventually I was forced to ask; she told me to guess.

Three times she had restarted her life. Think about that, how many times have you started from scratch, from zero? How many times have you packed up your belongings, bought a plane ticket, and left? She had done it three times before she turned 25.

She spent her childhood in urban South Vietnam. She says she had a very happy childhood, that her Dad spoiled her, that she was her Grandad's favourite and her auntie and uncle who live in Singapore adore her. I believed it.

Ho Chi Minh is where her family remains.

"My parents always try and set me up" she says "I know I've got that option if everything goes to shit".

She argues with them over the phone about ideas she describes as "antiquated". They don't understand the concept of an independent woman. They are worried that she's unhappy, she tells them not to worry.

She tells them she's changed. She misses Vietnam, but she wouldn't go back.

The dropped Rs are from Adelaide, where she moved to as a teenager and spent four years doing what people in their late teens and early twenties typically do. She studied history and loved it.

“I could talk to a brick wall” she tells me, and that “I’ve never had a bad date”, presumably because of this. But this also means she often pauses to ask “wait, what was I saying, again?” as she drifts into a malaise, a tangent after a diversion after a side-track, an unconscious stream of expression mitigated only by her self-conscious paranoia that she’s talking too much. She pauses. She sips her glass of Riesling. Then she asks me 14 questions in a row.

She’s saying all this to some random guy she’s meeting for the first time but when she’s in a group she averages 3 words per minute. “I really don’t say much at work” she explains, “I love my book club but half of them are fucking idiots.” I have never seen such simultaneous tenderness and bite in the same person, often in the same sentence.

She moved to a different kind of beach 5 years ago, accepting a job at a recruitment agency in Bournemouth that specialised in hedge fund hiring. Boy oh boy can she recruit, how could you not let yourself be recruited by her? Bournemouth quickly shrunk. She missed Australia, she missed her family in Vietnam. She thinks too much, a bit neurotic maybe, always in the particular, the personal, always in how the situation relates to her. In Bournemouth she was over-thinking a lot.

And so why not make a change again? She decided to move to London.

## 8 hours at Stansted Airport

[16:05 BST]

The main area of the Stansted Departures is this vaguely boomerang-shaped space in which you're funneled down a narrow channel of up-market outlets and airport classics to a sprawling zone of seating, departure information boards, and eateries.

Having been to Stansted many times I know that the best thing to do is to B-line directly to the apex of the bend and take a few breaths.

[17:00 BST]

How much do you think a lego bus the size of a human hand is?

How about the USS Enterprise? That's £314.99

Now do a lifesize cat. £89.99

The Death Star is £809.99. What well-adjusted person would buy a Lego Death Star at Stansted Airport? The nice woman with bright eyes and a broad smile at the till informs me that people do actually buy these monstrosities all the time, they'll arrange for them to be picked up, put on your flight, and available at the baggage claim at your destination.

The most popular items are the F1 cars and, for some reason that I couldn't work out, Lego flowers. I leave as a guy in his mid-30s is about to deploy a Lego-for-adults theory to his disinterested girlfriend.

[20:30 BST]

Good ol' Ryanair dump us like excess pasta back into the terminal with instructions to *please do kindly* wait there patiently. The good news is that each and every passenger has received a £3 gift voucher to splash in the terminal to keep morale high and bellies full.

We're now at gate 51, exactly where we were four hours previously, with no instructions or staff members or pretty much anyone within a 100m radius who seems to know what we're supposed to do now.

How to deal with this divides the passengers evenly into two groups and speaks volumes about their dispositions and approaches to life. The slackers, shoulder-shruggers

(including this author) simply assume that this will all be fine and sorted shortly and that there's no point being miffed about it now so we may as well have a beer, read, or just generally chill.

This is utterly unacceptable to the do-ers, the type As, the eldest children, who march purposefully in unison to the Ryanair help desk where 3 staff members are bracing for impact, so that 30 seconds later there's this irate hornet swarm circling and trying to verbally sting this desk and said staff.

An older Brazilian guy with a cowboy hat and a silver beard shouts the intel he has acquired from the desk in both Portuguese and duo-syllabic English before informing the desk that he was doing what they should have done 10 minutes ago and that they should be grateful. No one reacts to this, to my cynical satisfaction, which puzzles older Brazilian guy who seems like he was expecting an applause.

I eventually get bored of this spectacle and go and eat a ham and cheese toastie and a kinder bueno (£3 off, thank you Ryanair).

[23:15 BST]

Once again I'm sat in Departures; I sit and charge my phone and force down a chicken and bacon baguette.

The airport is desolate and sad. Cleaners are already mid-shift; I hear two of them complain about how they have to stay late tonight. How many other people are getting home late tonight because of us?

I look around at my fellow passengers, who are sparsely arranged amongst the seating in departures, and feel strangely bonded to them, comforted by their presence.

# The Battle of Mdina

Jack and I march through the Vilhena Gate, an imposing Baroque mass of dense stone that Charles François de Mondion designed in 1727.

“It’s simple: you create a goal, build habits that move you closer towards that goal, track your progress, and eventually achieve that goal.”

Says Jack, as a marauding battalion of French school kids flows around us. Whatever Jack said next is drowned out by screaming French slang, as well as my thought that the old city looks and feels traditionally Mediterranean, whereas Rabat – that sits just beyond the old city’s moat – appears Byzantine. Rather than ask him to repeat, I talk over him:

“My point is that it’s not a good idea. There’s nothing wrong with the process you describe, the problem is your starting point – how exactly do you know what goal to create? The only way to do this is to try many different things, to discover what you enjoy and what you’re good at. Goals inhibit this process.”

“I disagree. Let’s be honest, people need structure and discipline. They also don’t know what to do – try telling a poor kid who grew up on a tiny farm in Yorkshire to ‘just try things’. The only escape from these situations is discipline and deliberate action.”

Jack has clichéd piercing blue eyes that sit below a slight overbrow and a low, straight hairline. He has stout legs, broad shoulders, and a back with an extraordinary total surface area. Tonight he’s wearing navy corduroy shorts, chocolate-brown leather flip flops, and a striped salmon shirt with 2 and a half buttons undone.

“That’s not true! If that kid were exposed to more ideas, better ideas, he’d be able to discover what he truly likes doing. If you rely on goals, you let your life be dictated by external cultural desires. You wake up at age 50 having achieved your goal, but what was the point? You might have a million pounds, but why?”

He works as a senior underwriter for a German insurance conglomerate. Earlier today he was clarifying the definition of “write down and dirty”, which after a long explanation involving risk tranches and asymmetric loss profiles, I can tell you is nowhere near as sexy as it sounds.

“Well, you have a million pounds, it’s not a bad position to be in, is it? You’re being too ideological, as always.”

We’ve known each other for 20 years.

“Imagine if Tchaikovsky blindly pursued getting rich instead of music. Imagine if Mother Theresa optimised her life to achieve the goal of getting a six pack.”

A light breeze brings the smell of old stone and farmland, and cool air from the surrounding ocean. The temperature is smoothly dropping as we approach the old city's northern wall, where this evening's restaurant is located.

“Table for two please” says Jack, with raised eyebrows and two fingers for extra measure. English is one of two official languages of Malta so I'm confident the maitre d understands as he swivels and walks away through the restaurant and up the stairs to a secluded rooftop dining area. It's 7:56pm. All the other tables are occupied by couples.

“Life is complicated,” I say, as I sit and glance at the half of Malta that's visible from this rooftop, “to get what you want, you have to first know what to truly want.”

Jack efficiently selects the second-cheapest rosé before closing the wine menu and summoning the waiter with an out-stretched arm.

“If I hate my job, I know I want to quit my job. That's a goal I can make a plan for.”

“What happens if something changes?”

“You can change the goal.”

“That was the point of the goal?”

“To take actions to move closer to what you want, to the life you want.”

“I think we're talking about the same thing.”

# Sun and Sadness

On November 1st 1755, the city of Lisbon, Portugal's capital, was completely desolated.

A Richter-9 earthquake disintegrated vast areas of the city's buildings. Candles lit to celebrate All Saints' Day toppled, triggering a blazing fire that torched the rubble and the people trapped under it. Then a tsunami, triggered by the tectonic rupture, a terrifying 20m-high wall of blue death, drowned many of those still somehow alive.

Around a quarter of the city's inhabitants died. 85% of the buildings were destroyed. The Marquis de Pombal, Prime Minister of Portugal at the time, was tasked with the re-design and re-construction of Lisbon.

Literally central to this project was the new highway: The Avenida de Liberdade. It's a 6-lane jacaranda-tree-lined motorway that cuts right into and then through the heart of the city, connecting Campo de Ourique in the West, and Campo Pequeno - and the whole Central Portugal - in the North to central Lisbon, Setubal across the river, and the South Coast of Portugal.

The Avenida has no singular theme. Walking up it you'll notice a World War I memorial on the left side, which sits in front of boutique designer shops, just north of a near-vertical road which takes you up to Bairro Alto - the area of Lisbon zoned for debauchery and drunkenness. On the right side there's one of 5 forest-green kiosks serving over-priced beer and pop music. Glancing beyond this kiosk you'll see Alfama poking out below the Castelo de San Jorge - an old, tight neighbourhood that has been pretty much entirely ruined by AirBnB profit margins and ransacking summer cruise ship passengers.

Continuing up The Avenida, walking on the famous mosaic cobblestone pavements, will bring you to bone-dry water features, genuinely world-class hotels, like 4 different metro stations, more kiosks, then, eventually, the imposing roundabout at the top of the highway that hosts a statue of The Marquis, standing defiantly on an isolated column at the roundabout's centre.

There's a real mix of personnel that occupy The Avenida. Wealthy Portuguese lawyers and bankers step out of Uber blacks, or park in clearly-prohibited spaces outside of shops like Diamonds Factory Lisbon. Even-richer foreigners glide in and out of hotels like The Tivoli. Walking tours skim the bottom, and exhausted tourists collapse at the top. At the kiosks you'll find a mix of these tourists on the way up, whose morale and perspiration depends on which kiosk they stop at, and foreign students, to whom the over-priced beer still isn't all that expensive.

I was one of these students. I would walk up and down and up and down the Avenida, usually ending in exhaustion or boredom at one of these kiosks, always with a tiny beer the Portuguese are so fond of. Always at a solitary table.

I wasn't enjoying myself and didn't know why. My situation was perfect. I loved my studies. The weather was remarkable. The food was cheap. I was in a new, exciting, international city with no real commitments or responsibilities.

Friends and family would say how jealous they were, how lucky I was. When they asked how it was going I would reply with these objective positive facts. I didn't mention how I was actually feeling.

My apartment was ludicrously located just off The Avenida. I had no concept of Lisbon neighbourhoods, or the price a student should be paying for a room in shared accommodation, so the €450 per month for the shoebox-room with a thin, single bed and no wardrobe seemed appropriate. The tiny room sat within a tiny apartment, which I shared with two French students who spoke exclusively in French, and our live-in land-lady Senhora Baros who tutted every 5 breaths.

Everything was unfamiliar and isolating.

A simple trip to buy pens would require researching the correct shop, figuring out how to get there, memorising the Portuguese word for "pen", and an anxiety-inducing interaction with the cashier.

Lunch conversations with Portuguese coursemates commenced in English and a guilty feeling that I should be speaking more to justify it - 5/6 people in the conversation would rather speak Portuguese. Inevitably the language would switch and I would be lost.

I was in a perpetual state of guilt. I was lucky. Privileged. How could I possibly complain?

But how you should feel is not how you actually feel. And I felt lonely and sad.

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The perception of The Marquis de Pombal is one of a great man. He surely must have lived a satisfying life. He must have been happy.

Later I learned that he was exiled in 1777, right after Lisbon's re-construction. He died in 1782, alone on his estate.

From then on, whenever I passed his statue at the top of The Avenida, I couldn't help but notice how alone he appeared.