

FALLING ASLEEP IN INDONESIA

Fiction

• RYAN NICKUM

Most nights are virtually the same. You lie awake while she sleeps beside you, her back turned toward you. The only light is frequent flash of lightning and the white of her butt peeking over her underwear.

You watch the ceiling fan do its laps, listen to the motor spin. Sometimes there's thunder, or dog barks, or motorbikes with bad mufflers. Sometimes there are chirping geckos on the wall, or frogs in the neighboring rice patty, or a mystery creature caught in the ceiling, flapping about trying to find a way out into the night or into your room. You lie awake and wish she'd snore or sigh or roll over and say she can't sleep — rest her hand your chest.

There's a condom in the pocket of the shorts you sleep in and you wonder about the times you didn't use it with her. Those times, those weren't decisions, those were indecisions. Either way, there's consequences.

And your thoughts before sleep won't be filled with "what ifs" when the first of the month comes. That's how it was last month with her. The same indecision, the same restless nights, the same worries, but it turned out OK.

And you're 26 and she's 27 and you both know better. But it's an easier lesson to teach than follow. Because while you lie awake, you imagine the speech you'll give your teenage daughter that may or may not be growing in the body lying beside you.

Because she'll be a key example in your speech — and you know it'll

be a she, but you won't go so far as to imagine what to name her. She'll be the example of why women go on the Pill. Because condoms break or are forgotten and it doesn't always make a difference if you pull out early. And if your potential daughter's hormones work like yours, you'd better prepare some comforting words to help her deal with being called a slut.

She's going to have curly hair and may or may not be pretty. She's going to have very large

breasts because the girl sleeping beside you does and so do the women in your family, and that's going to provide a lot more sexual opportunities for a

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teenage slut if the boys of her age think the same as those of yours.

Mosquitoes buzz in your ear and you wonder how malaria complicates pregnancy. Or how about the five large Bintang beers you and the possible mother of your daughter shared that night.

And if she drinks like her parents did when they were in high school, then you going to have a drunken teenage slut to boot.

And if you're going to have a drunken teenage slut in the coming months, that means no more silly restaurant jobs to pay for your traveling around the world, filling up your passport. That means a lot less booze and no smoking and, worse yet, law school, because many a drunken teenage slut goes to college. Although hopefully on a soccer scholarship.

Law school will please your family, but you wonder about the reaction to the unexpected souvenir you'd be bringing home.

"Where'd you pick this up?"

And you wonder. Was it in that nice hotel in Bali with the cold shower that felt so good after a day in the heat watching the monkeys carrying their young beg for bananas from tourists? Or better yet, that shit hole in India where you both stayed for two nights despite the dirty sheets and bed bugs simply because it had cable? Hopefully, there.

"Yeah, we picked her up in Gokarna during a power outage. I think sometime in between an English premier-league match and a bad Bollywood movie."

But sleep doesn't come through worrying, so you take one of the valium the girl beside you bought in Thailand and you go out to the porch and play nine losing hands of solitaire. You watch a cat pluck a gecko off the wall and tear its head off. You go inside and wash your face in the sink and forget that you're not supposed to drink the water.

When you lie down, she rolls over and rests her hand on your chest and you kiss her left eyebrow and touch her stomach with the tips of your fingers. She sighs. You watch her for a few minutes, her chest rising and falling. Her arm twitches as she falls asleep. She smiles in her sleep. You look up at the fan and your mind doesn't wander. You don't get to the frantic delivery-room scene or the part where you get practical and fly home early to find jobs with health insurance. Instead, you fall asleep.