

## **Rain is different on a moped**

By Natalie Sprite

It was monsoonal rain. Fat-dropped, heavy and beautiful if you were inside watching it through a window.

I was not inside. I was on a moped. Rain is less romantic when you're on a moped.

I was on my way to pick up my daughter, Evie, from school. It was a very beautiful school. Made of bamboo and coconut wood, it sat between rice fields and a jungle green river.

I was wearing the black plastic poncho which came with my hired Scoopy scooter. The poncho only came to my waist and my lower half was quickly soaked. It was also hard to see. If I dropped the visor, the world became a foggy blur. If I lifted the visor, tiny needles of water poked at my eyes.

But still, tropical rain - warm and full of thunder - is not like winter rain. This was a wild thing full of rowdy joy. So even though I was wet and squinting, I was exhilarated too. The smell of wet soil rose up around me. Such a pure smell of life – like the scent of the sea or a new baby.

The speedo on my moped didn't work, which was fine, because mostly I just went degrees of slow. Slow. Very slow. Stopped.

The petrol gauge did work and it was telling me the bike was empty. But I was used to cars where the petrol gauge says empty, but you can still squeeze out another 200 k's.

The bike started losing power. I was going down hill so I thought maybe I'd let go of the throttle. I gave it a good twist. Nothing happened. The bike continued to slow.

A massive, green and filthy truck moved in close behind me. Its grill filled both my mirrors. It came right up behind me and honked.

I pulled on the throttle again.

Nothing.

The truck honked again, long and loud. I could feel the heat of its engine and smell diesel fumes.

I pulled over. There wasn't really anywhere to pull over, just a large, long puddle that I wobbled the bike into.

I rolled to a splashy stop and climbed off. My feet disappeared into grey water. A moment of grief for my Birkenstocks. I could almost feel the cork dying beneath me. I pushed the bike through the rain. I couldn't see more than a metre in front of me. I wondered how far I was from the school. I wondered what would happen to Evie if I was late. Surely somebody would wait with her. They wouldn't just leave her.

Then I saw the sign. 'Motor Oil'. Where there's 'Motor Oil', there's petrol.

Next to the sign was an open concrete shed stacked with chairs, couches and five men. Parked out front was a row of motorbikes. The motorbikes and the men gave me confidence. Where there are men and engines, petrol must be close at hand.

I waved at the men. They watched me slosh towards them. My Birkenstocks sucked and released water with every step.

I was still wearing my helmet and poncho. "Petrol?" I asked hopefully, looking from one face to another.

They shook their heads, sad for me, but not too sad. They were nice and dry. I was not their problem.

"Can I find some petrol somewhere?" I put the bike on its stand and pointed at the sign that read 'Motor Oil'.

There were four young men, and one older man. They looked surprised to see the sign standing there. They shook their heads.

"Is there somewhere close by I can buy petrol? I've run out. I need to pick up my daughter from school. She'll be worried."

They looked at me blankly.

I shuffled through my Indonesian vocabulary and felt the broad river of my ignorance. All I had was small talk and food talk. Good morning. How are you? Two watermelon juice, no sugar. My name is Natalie. What is your name? Fried rice. Banana pancake.

The youngest man stood up and stepped forward. He had the soft, hairless face of a child and he spoke English. The wonder of the young ones. I thought of Evie. If she had been here now, she would have been interpreting for me. But she wasn't here. She was waiting for me.

"There must be somewhere I can get petrol." Desperation made my voice squeaky. Water ran down the back of my neck and dripped off my visor.

The young man pointed to the end of the road where a large black statue stood and cocked his hand into a right angle. "Then 400 metres."

I looked where he had pointed and thought about the effort it had taken me to push the bike four metres. I thought about how long it would take me to push the bike half a kilometre in pouring rain.

It would be dark in an hour, the other kids would be gone by now. I wondered how long the teachers would wait.

My dress clung to my legs. I put the bike on the stand and slogged my way towards the young man. "What if I give you money," I said, "and you get me petrol?"

"Money?"

"Rupiah."

"Yes."

"How much is petrol?"

He shrugged, fine child shoulders under a work shirt. "10,000."

"I will give you 50,000."

His face broke into a wild smile. "Yes."

"Thank you, terima kasih, thank you so much." I felt weak with gratitude.

The young man touched my poncho. "Can I take this?"

"Of course." I gave him the poncho and a blue 50,000 rupiah note and watched him pull out into the rain soaked road.

I looked at the other men. They looked at me - a strange intruder into their quiet afternoon. The old man sat on a slim timber and leather couch. It was a very elegant piece of furniture to find in a concrete shed. There were chairs made with the same care stacked up in piles around us. But it was the couch he patted. As he patted, he moved along its leather-clad length. He kept patting and moving until he was sitting at the far end and when finally I sat down, he stood up all together and moved to a chair close by.

We smiled at each other until it became awkward. Then we just sat and watched the rain together. It was quite nice then. It felt peaceful with the elegant furniture and the silent men.

I pulled out my phone sent a message to Evie's teacher, "I have run out of petrol but I have a nice young man helping me."

Ten minutes later, the nice young man came back with a one litre plastic aqua water bottle full of yellow petrol. He poured it into the bike for me. My child knight.

He gave me back my poncho, then he said shyly, "You want change?" and reached towards his pocket.

"No." I shook my head. "That's for you."

He looked at me like he'd won the lotto. Which was exactly how I felt. This sweet boy had saved my soggy foreign arse. My child would not be stranded. The day was saved.

The old man stood up then, and came in close, then said to me very seriously. "Go petrol." He pointed into the rain. Fill your tank up woman.

This was sensible advice but I ignored it. I went straight to the school, aware of how long the teachers had been waiting. Feeling guilty and anxious. Hoping Evie was okay.

When I walked into the classroom, they were standing around Ibu Selaka's laptop, reading my email - Ibu Selaka, Ibu Sasha and Evie. Evie was reading my email out loud to her teachers. The women were in peels of laughter.

When they calmed down for a moment, they explained that Evie had just read, "I have a nice young man..." and then paused, and the thought of me and my nice young man had sent them into giggles.

"How *is* your nice young man?" Ibu Selaka asked me and they broke into laughter all over again.

I fell in love with Bali all over again, then, standing there, in my helmet and black plastic poncho, dripping on the classroom floor. I had come running in, full of apology and anxiety, and found only this wild giggling joy.

When Evie and I walked out of the building, Wayan, the husband of one of the teachers, was sitting on the back step. I stopped beside him and we looked together at the sky and talked about the pouring rain.

"Difficult sometimes, on the bike," he said and I could not have agreed more. But I was aware too, of the clean wet air and the large joyful feelings moving in me.

"But it makes you happy, too," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Children are always playing in the rain. It makes them happy. Sometimes adults forget this. We worry about the mud and the dirt. We forget how it is to be a child."

"But not always."

"No," he smiled, and lent backwards on the step.

We watched the pouring sky for a moment, then Evie picked up her helmet and we moved together, out into the rain.