

Miriam Huntley
21I .011

Christine

I'll be quite frank with you- no reason not to be. I am a criminal. There's no way around it, and no matter how much I try to convince myself that what I do is not really a crime, the truth remains the truth. What do I do? I seduce men and then steal from them. End of story. There's nothing complicated about it, nothing fancy. It's just a simple con-job.

I think that most people, when they hear of criminals like myself, want to know the *reason* behind their actions. Are these criminals just truly evil people, all the way down to their core? Or perhaps they have a set of extenuating circumstances that forced them into this way of life? As for myself, I can provide neither as an excuse as the "why" behind my actions, and I can't in all honesty say that I have particularly good reasons for ending up the way I have. But I'll give you the story of how I fell into this way of life anyway, because, even though it will not provide justification, it may give you a better feel for why I live my life the way I do.

I began my life in Poland, and lived there for the first twenty years of my life. I went to a mediocre university there, and, for lack of any better ideas, decided to pursue a degree in accounting. After I graduated, I was quite reluctant to begin looking for a job. I knew that with a job would come complete boredom and a rather unexciting lifestyle, and I found I had no desire to begin such a life if I could help it.

So there I was, bumbling around, not knowing what to do, when the idea came to me that I should go see India. Why I thought of India in particular, I still don't understand even now, as I knew close to nothing about the country at the time. But,

well...why not? Who wouldn't want to see India? It seemed like such an exotic, perhaps even mystical, place to me at the time, and I could already imagine the great adventures I would have there. Well, this idea took root in my head, and soon enough I just got up and did it. Bought the tickets, got together some backpacking gear, packed everything I needed- and that was it. Off to India I went.

I traveled around India for close to three and a half months, seeing all the wonderful sights there were to see. I saw the Taj Mahal, experienced the wonderful city of Dehli, learned of the rich culture of the people; I also saw the uglier parts of India, the squalor and impoverishment the poor were living in. I really grew to love the country in those few months, to feel as if it had become a part of me, and to relate to it deeply.

As my trip was coming to an end, I decided to go and visit the state of Goa: Goa, the beautiful, Goa, the magical. Goa is a tourist magnet for a good reason. Its beautiful beaches, its carefree atmosphere, its laid back way of life...what more could a visitor ask for? Oh, what fruits of pleasure I tasted in Goa during my two week visit! I spent two weeks there, enjoying myself thoroughly. During the day I would be at the beach, lazing around or playing volleyball, football, and other games with other young tourists I had met. During the night, we went to parties wilder than any I had ever been to before. There were parties on the beach, parties in the club, parties with trance music, parties with wonderful dancing...and I went to them all. I look back now in wonderment at the happy-go-lucky way of life I lived then, loving every moment with not a worry in sight.

But then...there always has to be that one event that shatters the peace, and so it came. I received a phone call at the hostel I was staying at in Anjuna; on the other end of the line was a voice I had never heard before, asking politely "Excuse me, am I speaking

with Christine Kowalski?” I said yes, he was. Then he went on to say, in words I can’t exactly remember, that he was a distant relative of mine, that my mother had passed away while I was gone, and could I please return to Poland to take care of the funeral matters. I was absolutely stunned, and couldn’t speak. At some point I dropped the phone, and just sat on my bed, frozen. I was totally lost.

My mother and I had become distant in the past few years; harsh words had been exchanged, and we both had decided to cool it from each other for a while. But I still loved her, and I was all she had ever had. My father died while I was too young to even remember him, and my mother never remarried or had any other children besides myself. And now, without me ever having made up with her, she had gone and passed away, and left me utterly alone.

I knew I had to return to Poland, that that was the “right” thing to do. But I didn’t want to. My mother always hated funerals, and had told me, before we had stopped speaking, that I should just not bother with hers. “Christine, I don’t give a damn what you do with my body after I die. Just have me cremated or something,” she would say, before I asked her to stop discussing her own death. Sitting on my bed, I was unsure of what to do.

Somehow, instead of sorting out all the feelings inside of me, I instead left the hostel, found some friends, and just got really, really drunk. I don’t remember what I did that night, or the next day, or the next. The drinking seemed to help things, as I didn’t think about my dead mother too much when I couldn’t, well, think at all. This went on for two days, but I always had the feeling that something was chasing me, that it was always on the verge of catching up to me.

The second night after I had heard the news, I somehow managed to stay sober for a few hours and remember what had happened. I phoned back the relative (Stevn was his name, I believe) and informed him that I would not be coming back to Poland, that he should just cremate my mother's body and be done with it. I then asked tentatively about a will. He said he had looked into the matter, and had found that the little assets my mother had had, including the house, would be taken for extraordinary debts she had run up in the past five years. Almost as an afterthought, the man added, "There's nothing for you here." I turned this saying over and over in my head. "There's nothing left for me in Poland," I thought. Nothing. I had no reason to return. I would stay in India, at least for a bit.

And that is how I ended up staying in Goa. At first I continued to drink heavily, and there was not a single party that I did not attend. I remained in this sort of drunken stupor for two weeks, never giving much thought to what the next day would bring. I was shocked back to my senses, though, when I realized that my money had run low. I knew I couldn't continue this lifestyle indefinitely, that I needed some source of income. I began discussing this problem with a friend I had made, one of the Goan locals named Amalesh. Amalesh worked part time in a grocery store, but he also was in desperate need of more money, and we began wildly brainstorming ways to accomplish this. We saw immediately that the best thing to do would be to jump into the tourist industry. Both Europeans and Indians came to Goa to vacation, and many of them wealthy enough to spend money on just about anything. Try as we might, though, we couldn't come up with any new way of milking this profitable industry.

But we could not shake off the thought that the wealth around us was just ours for the taking, if we just knew how. This led us to start talking, only half seriously, about how one would go about stealing from the tourists. We realized that Goa brings out the romantic side in everyone, and tourists who were single were always lonely and ready at a moment's notice to take up with the first charming person they met. We then developed a plan: we could scout out the tourists, find one that was rich but romantically unattached. If they were male, I would step in, female, Amalesh would be the actor. What would happen next was just natural; everyone has heard stories of "that beautiful girl I met on vacation and never saw again" from wistful travelers returned. All Amalesh or I had to do was become that romance everyone dreams of having on vacation. Then, when we were held in their trust, it would be easy to steal their money, perhaps while they were sleeping, and disappear until the victim left Goa.

Amalesh and I talked and talked about it, went over little details to make sure nothing could go wrong, and, just like that, everything sort of fell into place. Amalesh had been the first to try it, and when I saw how easily he had acquired almost twenty thousand rupees, I was hooked. Since then, we have been living this plan of ours. Two others joined our group as well, and the four of us now bring together enough money to live rather nicely. During the winter we play the European crowd, while during summer we prey upon the Indians who came to vacation during that time. As long as there are tourists, though, we are working, and we are all very good at what we did. Of course, we take precautions: we moved around a bit from city to city, and we are always careful to execute the theft the night before the victim planned on leaving Goa. But our racket reaps up quite a good amount for us.

Do I enjoy what I do? I guess it seems like a pretty exciting way of life- all I need to do to make some money is have fun and party with people I'll never see again. And it *is* fun, it *is* thrilling. But somehow, I can never quite *fully* enjoy myself. I've never climbed out of the slump of depression I've been in since my mother died; from that day on, I've been troubled and brooding on the inside. Though to all outward appearances I enjoy Goa just as much as I did when I first came here, the pleasures here seem tainted to me, and I cannot shake off this vague feeling of bitterness inside of me. But I keep going anyway, because I have to. I cannot mope over something for too long, I cannot stay in one place for too long, I cannot stop working for too long...“Keep moving”, something inside me whispers. So I do; I move from one job to the next, steal from one man and then the next, move from one city to the next...always moving.

And that's it. That is how I have been living for the past three years...nothing complicated, nothing fancy, just a one-two job. Its not something I would have dreamed up for myself when I was kid, but, well, honestly, it's a hell of a lot better than sitting at a desk and looking over budgets I don't give a damn about. And maybe it's a bit immoral, but, well, I just try not to think about it. When I do think about it too much, I just head to the local Catholic church, and then I can feel relieved that at least I'm starting out “pure” again.

Besides, I can't really feel too bad about stealing from some of these tourists. They are the sheek, the young, and the rich, who have pampered their entire life and don't know the meaning of hardship. What is ten thousand rupees to them? A day's worth of fun? They hardly miss the money, and if it weren't for the fact that they were insulted by it, they would forget immediately that we had stole from them at all.

Take for instance these three young men who came to Goa last month, Akash, Sameer, and Sid. I had not scouted them out as possible targets beforehand, but by chance I happened to get to know Sameer and, through him, his friends. All three of these men were upper-class Indians, young and cosmopolitan, whittling away their time in Goa. They had grown up with every possible luxury, and were content to continue living off their parents and leading immature lives with no direction for as long as they could. How could I feel bad about stealing a just a little of the wealth they could never appreciate?

Conning Sameer was perhaps one of the easiest jobs I have had. He was a sweet man, just out of a relationship with a domineering bitch (the way I understood it), and was taken aback that there were other women out there who were easygoing and just out to have some fun. I told him I was from Switzerland, as with my blonde hair and sun kissed skin he would have no reason to doubt me. Sameer, like all other Indians, was taken by this. Switzerland (and maybe Sweden and the Netherlands as well) has this crazy allure for Indians, who view it as something close to an idyllic paradise. Saying that I'm from Poland just never has the same ring to it. And, after a few hours with Sameer, spinning a few more lies, the rest fell into place rather naturally.. Sameer was infatuated by me; the poor guy actually thought he loved me! Usually the men I pick out are just out to have a good time during their vacation, but Sameer was so innocently romantic that he became captivated by me. As for me, I actually rather liked Sameer, though he was really a juvenile fool, and enjoyed the time I spent with him. I'm not sorry that we stole from him, though, as it was money he neither needed nor appreciated.

With Sameer, and others like him, I was lucky to enjoy his personality while I spent time with him. Oftentimes in my “job”, as I often refer to it as, I get stuck with men so conceited and egocentric that I usually get the theft over with as soon as possible, so I can be rid of their company. Just three weeks ago, for instance, I had decided to con this wealthy businessman named Pradnesh who had been hanging around the beach. After the first hour I spent with him, I wanted to quit. Pradnesh talked endlessly about how great he was, about his incredible achievements, about his faultless body ... blah blah blah. I don't think I got a word in edgewise. If it hadn't been for the fact that Amallesh and I had decided we really needed the money at the time, I would have moved on to someone else rather than endure the pompous bore. But no matter who the man is that I am dealing with, whether it be Sameer's type or Pradnesh's type, he is always rich, always pampered, always someone who can afford to afford to lose a bit of his wealth.

And so it goes. Whoever the man, whatever the case, my role is the same. I lie a little bit, have some fun while I'm at it, and then make my living. I'm really no different than all the others here who are in the tourist business. Everyone here rips off the tourists in some way or another, and the way Amallesh and I do it is just in a more, well, unconventional way. So we're con-men...so what? So we steal for a living...what about it? Everyone has to make good for themselves. I'm sure one day I'll move on from this, perhaps to something more reputable. But for now, I am living and experiencing every day. I have a life full of excitement, danger, and fun that forces me to be continually on the move and keeps me from dwelling on my state of depression I've been hiding for the past three years. And this is the way I think I'll keep it, at least for now.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21G.011 Topics in Indian Popular Culture: Spectacle, Masala, and Genre
Fall 2006

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.