

“But fish don’t know anything about gambling, humans do.”

She looked at me, holding the pen even more tightly between her fingers. She needed explanations. I was putting my serious face, using a plastic straw and a fork to dissect the mournful-looking fried fish lying on the table between her and me.

“The Ancient Greeks used to do it. When sailing, they consulted fish’s guts to predict the future, so they wouldn’t hit a storm and sink.”

“Who are the Ancient Greeks?”

“Oh, they’re all dead now.”

“What from?”

“An accident. Their boat hit a storm and sunk.”

On saying the last sentence, I could not help but smile. Not so much at my own joke, but more at the face that she was making; her face was contorted, it was a face of a serious pupil listening to a sage. I told her about Greece once before, and she took a pen and carefully crafted every word I was saying on a used serviette –the only writing material available at that time. Are the people in Greece better than the Portuguese, she asked me, with the same face that she was making when she asked me about the fish and Ancient Greeks.

I put down my plastic straw and fork.

“I was just joking. Stop making that serious face.”

At my confession, she burst out laughing, and then decorously putting her hand on her mouth, holding back her laugh.

“Oh, you cheeky Javanese-boy. Is that the right word, *cheeky*?”

“Yes, that is correct. I was being cheeky.”

I could see her eyes glowing, as they do whenever she put newly-acquired English words into their right places.

She couldn’t stop laughing afterwards, while repeating, in Tetum, every little thing I have just said at least three times to her husband who was sitting next to her. By then she already put down the pen and paper that she was using to write down strings of number to predict a winning number for a lottery. It was a new lottery system, from an overseas-based gambling business, from which she and her husband have won some money

previously. The winning number was from her sister's dream, not from fish's guts, she kept on telling me subsequently for days, still laughing endlessly afterward. In the background, the sun is setting and *Cristo del Rei* is standing tall with his arms open wide, embracing something. Or maybe anything.

Excerpt from an untitled story, by Kalakay Mandhita