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BALI STORY

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THE brochures said it was paradise on earth and I was eager to believe them.

Months before the Bali trip I'd heard nothing but "paradise" from the blessed few who had actually been there, whom I learned to single out in Manila's cafes by the clove-laced *kretek* they puffed on with conspicuous economy. It was all right to believe in paradise, but with the right sort of savvy. Everyone maintained, after duly rhapsodizing, that the whole routine had been done to death and that, objectively speaking, Bali was Third World after all—in per capita income, infrastructure, urban sleaze, *et cetera*. "You'll feel right at home," a friend assured me. I had to beware of kitsch, bargain bronzes, Aussie rednecks, and resentful natives. Aquavit and Lomotil would be sensible precautions.

I listened politely but I had my own ideas. No one was going to spoil Bali for me. I would discover my own Bali, which surely was large and complicated enough to afford a fresh surprise for just one more adventurer. I looked forward to scaling temples, to sniffing orchids, to choosing fabrics, to miming Shiva before a Nikon with a hibiscus in my ear, and I didn't care if a million other guests had gone to the same party. I would seek out the ineffable and, proclaiming it my subject, I would emerge with my own special Bali to go with the *kretek*.

I was going to Bali for a conference of writers. We had been invited from all over Asia to devote a week's wisdom to "Literature, Freedom, and the Twenty-First Century." I met some of my fellow delegates on the plane ride from Jakarta.

"Awful waste of money," said one of them, a large man who introduced himself as Aram. Dark, robust, and with locks flowing down to his collar, he was standing in the aisle with a drink in hand, fresh from the galley where he had been chatting up the Garuda ladies.

I hated cynics. I was editing my little speech, tweaking up the irony here and there. "What do you mean?"

"It's all been done before, the arguments, the resolutions. I can summarize the conference for you, right now. I can assure you with absolute confidence that we will uncover nothing new about literature, freedom, and the twenty-first century."

"Then why are you going?"

"To have fun, of course, as long as I'm not paying. I say let's drop the charade and enjoy the view. Toyabungkah should be quite a sight."

"Have you been there?"

"Heavens, no. Truth is, my last time in Indonesia was in '72. Mostly I've been in London these past ten years."

"I thought you were Indonesian, or Indian."

"Malaysian, actually. It's hard to tell, isn't it?"

"Very."

"But you're Filipino."

I sincerely began to dislike Aram. "Yes. How did you know?"

"It says so right there. That is your paper, isn't it?" He had been reading it upside down.

"Yes," I said, checking quickly for typos.

"Well, we're supposed to play good-neighborly all-Asians for a week, mix-mix. It won't work, but there's someone I wouldn't mind trying a little mixing with."

He raised his cup to a woman three seats ahead. I'd noticed her too in the departure lounge at Soekarno Hatta. She'd had a huge apple-green floppy hat on, which was interesting enough, but beneath it was an oriental Audrey Hepburnish face which, I was instantly convinced, had sent unrepentant men to prison. I'd dredged up some excuse to chat her up—the flight schedule, I think it was—and her response had transported me. "Oh, lovely, I'm going to that meeting, too." I was married, of course—I am married—but then this was, I told myself, Bali. In good time I established that she was Thai and that she worked as a correspondent for a Hong Kong women's weekly, and discovered that she, too, was married, to a Briton she'd met at school in England. I had the sinking feeling that she was a novel with a great plot that I was never going to get to write, but all the same I drafted short-story scenarios in my head. It was Preeya whom I was toning up my language for, but now Aram had obviously seen her, too.

"Do you have a paper to present?" I asked Aram.

"No," he said, and I was happy. "I can speak on anything right off the top of my head. I was a barrister in London, when I wasn't being a poet. Remind me to give you a copy of my new book of poems, all of them inspired by—well, the sheer marvel of the moment, if you know what I mean. It's a waste of time, drafting—for some of us, anyway."

Then he marched up the aisle and, to my amazement, faced Preeya squarely and began reciting a poem: "*How often have I said before/That no soft 'if', no 'either-or'/Can keep my obdurate male mind/From loving true, and flying blind?...*"

To my even greater amazement Preeya giggled and clapped as Aram bowed to her and to the rest of the economy class. Two Muslim delegates seated across the aisle made sighing noises and shook their fezzes. Still flushed with surplus passion, Aram trundled back to his seat behind me, grinning sweetly at the Muslims along the way.

"Did you write that?"

He leaned close to me and brushed my nape with a blast of his nutty breath.

"No, of course not, that's too good for me."

"So much for the marvelous moment," I said.

"Hmm, well, the poem was there, but I created the event. That's wha—"

The plane hit and air pocket and lurched. A shard of peanut stung me in the ear.

"Hey, look, there's Bali," he said remorselessly. "Bali, just from the brochure, I love you! *"I'd die for you, and you for me/So furious is our jealousy/And if you doubt this to be true/Kill me outright, lest I kill you!"*

Three hours out of Denpasar airport, travelling inland by bus past the tourist hotels and the shops with the hideous monster-masks, past terraced fields and hillsides thick with cinnamon and clove, we arrived at Danao Batur. And seeing Danao Batur we surrendered haplessly to all that had gone before us—to geology, to fable, to custom, and to Aram's moment, a painful one, a stillness awesome to endure.

Out of Bali's cheek, prehistoric violence had gouged an immense caldera, on the lip of which we paused. Hundreds of feet below lay Danao Batur, which may once have been a sprawling crater lake but which had been reduced to a silver crescent running along the deepest bend at the base of the vestigial crater-mountain. Lean dugouts were scattered like hyphens about the water. Toyabungkah, the village itself, rested along Batur's inner shore. It was a loose throw of houses with roofs of straw and iron. Bright green strips in boxy brown patches marked gardens in the rich volcanic earth. Everything else was lake, mountain, and sky. The sky was wide and hovered low, skimming the tooth-edge of the crater across the gulf and softening it with fog—a strange effect, because everything else bristled smartly in the sun.

We rode down to Toyabungkah on a narrow asphalt road which curved and heaved and dropped with the terrain, the roughness of which evoked the memory, frozen underfoot, of great uneven surges of lava welling up onto the topsoil eons ago until the earth had choked and relented for the time being. Huge black boulders, pitted and mottled, sat on either side of the road. And everywhere, on the open land, in gashes on the rockface and straining from beneath the boulders, the grass grew, fat-bladed.

It had been warm up on the rim but it was cool down in Toyabungkah. We were close to the equator but we had been warned to bring sweaters for Toyabungkah's evenings. I thought that perhaps the coolness collected in pools, like water, with water. It was a sticky coolness, the kind most Western people hate when it afflicts them in their home countries. But we were to discover that Toyabungkah had a balm for this distress, and I fancied that the annoyance had been designed by some Balinese water-sprite so that remedy might be administered and the guest indebted further. I can say even today that having visited there, one will never sweat again, whether in New York or in Stuttgart or Manila (where it is always humid), without dipping one's soul back into the bracing chill of Danao Batur.

We were billeted in a small resort built into a hillside overlooking the water. I realized over the first few days that Aram had been right on the plane about the conference: the true wonders of the occasion lay outside the meeting hall, and outside was where, by tacit agreement, most of us soon found ourselves spending more of our time. And we got to know each other, like Boccaccio's wantons, by telling stories, the more outrageous the better, over the mellow Bintang beer in Marini's place. Marini was a local girl in her late teens who ran a store by the lakefront. Under the influence of Bintang and the crush of starlight, many a colleague promised Marini a sonnet cycle and left a tip of a thousand rupiahs.

It was some menagerie. Nirman was one happy Sikh whom we induced to reveal to us what went on beneath a turban. His fellow Singaporeans included a Ph.D. in Comparative Religion from Emory and a critic with a Portuguese past. The Thais loved Elvis Presley. Ignored by his more abstemious Muslim compatriots, Aram continued plundering his store of Graves and Yeats for any and all ladies in present company, especially Marini who spoke very little English and for whom Aram therefore reserved his choicest doggerel. We were shortly joined by the inevitable stray American and by a fragile Australian doing her master's at Wollongong. The American, a thirtyish embassy man, had served in Vietnam with the Medevac crews and liked to sit back and sip his Bintang and gaze sagely across the water, while the rest of us argued fiercely about the politics of PEN. I sustained my half-hearted courtship of my favorite Thai and told her that she looked a lot like my wife. But Preeya, who bore the unlikely surname of Fitzroy and whose speech was full of h's and cute diminutives, seemed more amused by a local lad ten years her junior who brought her flowers and massaged her neck. This squire,

whose name was Subur, followed Preeya like a puppy. "He says he adores my collarbone, he really does," Preeya told me, and I was glad to annoy her by laughing. The Australian girl confessed to me that a countryman of mine had once proposed to her and that it had frightened her so much that she had burst out crying.

It was much like that for the week we spent there. We made our speeches in the mornings and rewarded ourselves with luncheons of steaming rice and the lake's own fish—gourami broiled with cloves—with *krupuk*, watermelon, and snakefruit on the side. The afternoon papers were dispensed with more quickly. Then, about half past four and after a short siesta, we put on our jackets and marched down to Marini's, while the older people strolled elsewhere to sip tea and to watch the sunset from the hilltop behind us. We brought flashlights with us, because the days were short, the beer was cheap, and the footpath was tricky for the homebound reveler. I usually carried a stick to ward off the dogs. Aram on the other hand took a large bath towel along. Marini's was near the hot springs, and there was always the chance that Marini would lose her senses and go down to the hot springs with him.

That was the balm I spoke of earlier. Toyabungkah was famous in the district for its hot springs and we had learned about them practically as soon as we arrived. The morning right after, just before daybreak, Aram and I followed a Balinese boy down to the lake to investigate.

It was true: the community did bathe there—grown men and women, boys and girls—without a stitch on and without being embarrassed in the least at the sight of us. Apparently we were neither the first nor the last alien visitors to the place and I simply presumed that all the locals had tired of protecting their modesty. Aram and I persuaded each other to strip down to our shorts—but no further—and to soak ourselves in the steaming black pool, which was actually a crook in the lake marked off from the main body by a ring of stones. I ventured beyond the stones and discovered that the water on the other side was suddenly deep and cold. Within our nook we could lean on a rock and let the water lap at our armpits. I caught a whiff of foul air and I thought that the place had gone fetid from all the waste, but Aram assured me that it was simply sulfur or ammonia, that it came from sterile furnaces underground, and that it was a cheap price to pay for such a glorious bathtub.

"I'm told," Aram said as a full-breasted maiden poured water on her head before us, "that at least once a year the people sacrifice an animal to the gods of the lake. They rowed a buffalo out to the middle last week and drowned it there."

It sounded too quaint to be true. "Where did you hear that?"

"From the bus driver, yesterday."

"Do you speak Bahasa Indonesia?"

"Not really. I used Bahasa Malaysia, but you see we have a lot of words in common."

"I spoke with the driver, too," I said. "He didn't tell me anything about animal sacrifice."

Now Aram seemed surprised. "Do you speak Bahasa?"

"No, English. The driver spoke English."

We stared at each other and broke out laughing. The Balinese girl left our side of the ring of stones and stepped over to the deep. She swam out and her glistening hair and powerful shoulders taunted me. Two younger boys who may have been her brothers chased after her with gleeful splashes. Far across on the other side of the lake, the inner rim of the caldera bared its tooth-edge in the sunrise, the cloud foam that would sheath it having yet to gather. I cursed myself for having left my camera up in my room.

"Damnedest place I've ever been," Aram said. "Can you tell me where we are?"

"Paradise, of course."

"You know, my Filipino friend, we belong here, you and I. Just look at us, look at our faces, our bodies, look at theirs. Who's to say we're not Balinese?"

"We're too fat. And we keep our shorts on."

"Not next time, I won't."

"Let's ask Preeya out here."

"Yes, let's," Aram agreed, grinning. "Do you think she will?"

"No, I said, immediately despondent. I'd tried in vain to find her after dinner the night before, and I imagined that she was cruelly avoiding me. "Actually she strikes me as the stuffy type, you know what I mean?"

"Come on, you're just put off by her last name and her accent, admit it."

Around us the haze had lifted completely. The girl was swimming back to us. Dogs were yapping up the footpath.

"You also went to school there, you don't have an accent."

"I didn't stay there long enough, and I already have an accent. Comes from all the curry I eat."

"Why did you leave England?" I had read on the back cover of his book that he was now handling shipping and labor cases in Penang.

He thought about that for a while and picked out a pebble that had lodged between his toes. "It was too bloody cold." He threw the pebble into the rocks.

We sat there quietly, savoring the caustic action of the steam and the scouring our backs got from the sand. In the distance from across Danao Batur a boat came into view—a covered, flat-bottomed one, the type that carried people and livestock. A stiff wind suddenly blew down the mountain and I ducked into the water, rolling on my belly. When I arose I saw Aram wading over to the deep side, an orange starburst perching on his right shoulder. I saw more orange starbursts floating on the water, blossoms of a kind shaken loose from a nearby tree. Then I heard music and nearly fainted from the aggravation of the moment. I thought I was hallucinating, perhaps through the agency of some sweet vapor in the pool, but it was true: a gamelan orchestra was playing in the wind, casting a fine mesh of tinkles into the lake. Then I saw Preeya in a purple caftan, jaunting down the footpath, toting red field glasses. A young man whom I was later to know as Subur carried her stereo cassette player and had turned it on full blast.

She greeted us brightly, bending over a ledge above me. Aram was far away so only I was able to respond.

"You look smashing," I said. She looked totally out of context but it was an easy lie.

"Thank you," she said. "What's it like down there?"

"Come and see for yourself," I said.

"No, thank you," she said, bringing the glasses up to her eyes. "I'm waiting for that boat. I want to talk to the boatman. Will you come with me?"

"Why, yes, of course," I said, happy to help anyone, anytime. "What do you want to see him for?"

"I want to arrange a trip, a boat ride across the lake. Come along, if you like. We can bring Aram, too."

"Uhrm. What's there to see?"

"The strangest thing I'd ever heard of. A cemetery village called Trunpa, Trunni, something. They leave their dead people under trees by the lakeshore, rolled up in mats.

A family of thieves runs the place, can you believe it? I learned about it from Subur. Have you met Subur, by the way? He's Marini's cousin."

"No." Subur stood behind Preeya, looking extremely uncomfortable. I caught him glancing at Preeya and at the stereo in his hands.

"Charming young fellow. It's wicked but I think I've acquired an escort. He assures me this thing about the graveyard's quite true."

"What do you want to go there for?"

"Nothing. Just to see. Take a picture, maybe. Write a story, maybe. Who knows."

I looked behind me to where she had trained her glasses. The village, if it existed, was too far for me to see. There was only the boat, which was getting bigger, and Aram who seemed to be swimming toward it. I had stood up in the shallow water without realizing it and I felt a very slight swirl grabbing at my shins like hands. I hopped out of the lake and covered myself with a towel. Subur began to fidget and to look at his toes.

"Well, will you help me?"

I nodded at Subur. "Why don't you ask him?"

Preeya curled an arm around the boy. "He refuses to discuss it any further. He refuses to go over. It's true, he says, but he doesn't want to see it. Oh, Subur."

I looked at Aram, who was keeping his dot of a head just above the wavelet raised by the passing boat.

"Some other time," I found myself saying. "We'll see it some other time."

In the week that was to follow, the subject of Trunyan, which was the name of the place, would come up once or twice again in the conversation at Marini's. We walked along the lakeshore and threw pebbles into the water but no one made the crossing. My interest in Preeya perked up anew and I kept devising fiendish ways to bump off Subur, but nothing happened. When the conference was over we spent a free day at Denpasar, where we bought souvenir T-shirts and ogled the topless sheilas pinking in the sun along Kuta Beach. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen," Aram said.

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