

"Compelling,
exotic, outrageous
and deeply human."

— ELISABETH GIOVANNI



JAVA
SEA

INDONESIA

GARIS POLISI
DO NOT CROSS

DILARANG MELINTAS
POLICE LINE

THE ILLUSTRATED SOUL

*Stories from
the Songs of Time*

ARLO HENNING

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Introduction

With seemingly no way out, and with a *nothing could be worse* mentality, Hennings grabs the only light in the tunnel. This is what we Indonesians call *nekat*—a daring act undertaken with little regard for the potential consequences.

As many Westerners perceive it, Bali seems to be the dream island in Hennings' eyes. Only he forgets that nightmares are dreams too.

Despite the wittily crafted prose, readers can sense Hennings' anxiety, anguish, and rage. Imagine how isolated one must feel when one resorts to an imagined conversation with an innocent ant. And as if being alone in a foreign country were not demoralizing enough, he must also navigate the barriers of language and culture.

Indonesia, like many Eastern countries, embraces humility as a deeply rooted social practice. Although it is perfectly natural to us, outsiders may mistake it for self-degradation or hypocrisy. Fortunately, Hennings approaches Bali with an open and generous mind.

This openness becomes most evident in his encounters with the island's invisible world. Balinese culture embraces spirituality as an inseparable part of everyday life, guiding not only ceremonies but personal choices as well. Many believe that spirits reveal themselves only to those willing to acknowledge their existence. Perhaps that is why Hennings experiences events that seem impossible to explain.

From playful supernatural encounters to those that strike at the heart, these stories explore the emotional landscape of grief, rage, guilt, and healing. Balinese spiritual tradition teaches that dark emotions attract dark forces. Psychology offers a parallel idea: the monsters within us are the destructive emotions we refuse to release. Whether interpreted spiritually or psychologically, the battle is ultimately the same—a struggle against oneself.

Before healing is possible, the pain must first be acknowledged.

Hennings tells more than the story of his own life in Bali. He also illuminates the overlooked realities of living on an island too often reduced to beaches, parties, beautiful women, and endless sunshine. He reveals the misconceptions Indonesians hold about foreigners (*bule*), the challenges

of building a life in another culture, and the often harsh realities of surviving in the tourism industry.

Hennings does not romanticize Bali, nor does he condemn it. He bares it honestly. The result is a culturally rich and deeply human collection that offers rare insight into the struggle of an outsider searching for belonging in a place that is both paradise and illusion.

— *Elisabeth Giovanni*

The Jakarta Post

Foreword

My face was pressed into the sidewalk. The jackboot of a police officer was on my neck. Choking from tear gas, he grabbed my hair, handcuffed me, and threw me in the back of a paddy wagon. I was under arrest for joining a homelessness rally. The effects of the Great Recession were in full swing.

I worked as a business development executive, and my employer went bankrupt. I also had a music-business side hustle. My career had left me a small 401(k) and Social Security, but I was still a few years away from being eligible to collect them. I only had to figure out how I would survive until then. Unless you had connections, 57 was considered too old for the livable-wage job market. I applied for 715 jobs over two and a half years. The rejections came back with the familiar explanation: I was too experienced, earned too much money, and was too old. How many ways must one reinvent themselves in a lifetime?

What I thought was my ticket to the middle class had put me in debt for life. The days of the “help wanted” sign in a business window were gone. Now an algorithm determined whether I was the right fit. I felt like a member of a diaspora in the broadest definition of the term. Food shelves and thrift stores became my new go-to. Wake up, sleeping rust. Your previous employed life is over! The bills were crashing down on me, and time was running out.

My savings looked like a half can of Spam. I didn't qualify, for reasons never explained, to refinance the mortgage on my home. After 50 years as a Minnesota resident, I lost the only long-term home I had ever known to foreclosure. The home where I raised my daughter, the neighbors, and a billion memories fueled my last Minnesota Nice campfire. Both of my parents had passed away a day apart only a few years earlier. My older brother died, my sisters both suffered divorces, and my ex-spouse died from liver disease. There was no inheritance, no saving the day, and no friends able to step in and help make ends meet. I was collateral damage to the American Dream.

In an act of self-esteem building, I celebrated a handful of my life's lottery-ticket moments. As an entrepreneur, I had published a book of poetry and a novella. I released a double album of music, owned a recording studio, and performed as a professional guitarist. I had earned a major-label music contract and resurrected a former rock star's career. Only months earlier, I had been shaking rock-guitar legend Jimmy Page's hand. On the corporate path, I had earned a President's Club sales award. What happened? “Nice story. Write a book,” the sales manager said.

I lost my home for half its original value to a young immigrant couple. They had come to America for a better life—the same reason I was considering leaving it. I wished the young couple from India

good luck. I was about to discover what it meant to be a refugee. It was too late for me to start up my own business. I needed a reboot experience. In preparation, I tried to wash the tear gas from my clothes and backed up my life on a thumb drive. Modern American life evaporated before my eyes. The house, cabin, pet, health care, car, record, and book collection were gone. Everything that added up to the past 50 years of my identity was sold. I was not over-leveraged. I wasn't perfect, but I lived within my means. As I lost my possessions, it felt like a butcher had chopped off a part of my body. My suitcase was full of bloody fingers and toes. Contact with my adult daughter would become a challenge. There was even the more horrible prospect of losing a reason to want to live. I kept my guitar and headed to the airport under a dark eye of disapproval from my daughter.

There was a sense of freedom in freefalling off the unemployment trail. Absent a farewell party, bon voyage, or last goodbyes, I faced my destiny of downsizing alone. The unpredictable winds of change fingered my hair, the smell of lightning over a rice field, the hunger for a dream over the sacred smoke of Shaman fire. A tuba played in my head. The sound filled the canyonlands of my skull with an ancient melody. It sounded like how a boy once saw his life outside a bus window.

A musician I knew was living in Bali and recommended it. I knew he was poor. I also knew that whatever Bali was, it wasn't the fantasy I had seen in travel brochures.

Not knowing the language, culture, or how anything worked in Bali was overlooked. I didn't care.

So I jumped. The jet was somewhere over the Pacific before it dawned on me this was happening. I accepted a glass of wine from the flight attendant and gulped down the reality of my destination.

.

The Arrival



"Sir..... wake up. Please buckle your seat belt," the flight attendant nudged my arm. "We'll be landing soon."

Ragged from a lack of sleep, I arrived on the island of "Eat, Pray, Love" on the 15th day of the 12th month. On the eve of the full moon - a special day for a moon-related ceremony the Balinese call hitam bulan.

Limos from the area's 5-star hotels lined up along the airport passenger pickup area. The drivers holding signs with names, but none with mine. I fell in line with my Balinese handbook alongside the rest of the new arrivals.

I felt the weight of the 23-hour flight, culture shock, language barrier, and familial dislocation, chaos set in.

The noise and pollution of an airport under construction, traffic, and taxi driver hustle magnified my spinning head.

The heat was pervasive.

Even the cool blue of the sky seemed inflamed as it burned above me; the sun's flare singed my head. The road ahead was like a stretched piece of black lava with the white lane divider lifted off the road by the heat. The effect created an imaginary highway. Blended with the sky, leading to a place where only Bali's endangered starling might fly. Heat snakes rose and emerged to form a coiled python mirage. The tar was so hot that my sandals left a Nike logo on them.

As I waited for Enzo, a local expat musician to pick me up, I propped up my suitcase like a chair. Crossed my legs into the lotus position. I fell back into last night's sleepless slump. My chakras lay scattered across the Pacific Ocean.

After the first hour passed, out of boredom I began making a sundial out of the roadside litter. To tell time was to insert an ice cream stick in the middle of a melted wrapper. I got on my knees and estimated the length of the stick's shadow. Twelve fifteen p.m. It was lunchtime, but did time matter anymore?

I thought about my crazy roller-coaster life. "There's no going back." I challenged an ant that stopped to mock me.

An ant with a raised sword a hero uses to inspire exhausted troops. I heard its tiny voice say, "Tell them instead of doom, they're chosen for a sacred mission." The ant shifted its antennae back and forth as if trying to connect. "I'm Siddharlo," I explained, making fun of my name to sound like Siddhartha before he became the Buddha.

I needed to once and for all end the anger that held my demons. I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

I was glad to have company, even that of a solitary ant. I tried a couple of rusty yoga stretches, but too many years separated me from that practice. Back in the late '60s I'd been a hippie and studied things like Zen, shamanism, and yoga.

I had experienced the purple light and talked to trees. During the '80s I got into New Age music and books. I reassured myself. I knew enough to walk the walk and talk the talk to blend in with the Ubud enlightenment crowd.

"Everything makes a sound, right?" I said in my make-believe conversation with the growing company of ants. "Atoms-stars-wind-sperm-light-dreams...even silence."

We're all surfers on a cosmic sound wave, that's what we are." I was determined to blend in with the addition of beads, tie-dyed clothes, and a hair bun.

It's not as if I was afraid that I didn't know what was going on. I raised my right and left arms and drew an X in the air. "I'm situated between East and West. Everything passes overhead. I'm on the equator."

The air was dirty and dry. After several hours my mouth cracked. My face was becoming sunburned, I thought about giving up and hailing a taxi.

Many hours later, Enzo, my host, finally appeared. If there ever was a real-life white wizard the likes of Gandalf it might've been Enzo. I recognized him in the crowd from the many hours I'd spent building his website, SKYPE, email, photos, and listening to his music.

His music included belly dance. The rhythm provided a soundtrack to my map that had unnamed boundaries. He used many bizarre-looking instruments. Strange stick-like limbs that resonated on a single pluck.

"Selamat Datang di Bali, welcome to Bali," Enzo said. We shook hands with the brisk fervor of two villagers exchanging roosters for hens.

Enzo stood tall, lean, and as elastic as a horsehair guitar string. He had been a busker on the streets of Paris.

The timeless 63-year-old was dressed in a mix of colorful, Middle Eastern, gypsy-styled clothes. His coconut white-streaked gray hair was tied back into a ponytail. Beneath a clipped nose that no out-of-tune note could pass undetected, he sported a thin Salvador Dalí-like mustache. Which framed his penetrating Persian-blue eyes with added panache.

Besides speaking Italian, French, English, and Indonesian, he knew many diverse cultures and music too.

He was also a comedian trained in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition.

I never knew half the time when he was kidding or laying a Zen koan in my lap. For example, he would say in one of his many accents. "As they say in Uzbekistan: may Allah allow the tail of your sheep to fatten this year!" And, of course, I would have to be an idiot not to get it.

En route to the car we walked past tourist booths where all things unrelated to indigenous Bali were pushed into my hand. Brochures to theme parks, river tubing, dolphin swimming, scuba diving, 50% off colon cleansing, and real estate deals.

Brochures lay strewn about the ground like paradise scrapped. Before we reached the end of the parking lot, I was sweating. Enzo helped me with my things and assured me that the vehicle had air conditioning. Nearby, a blonde-colored dog who was wearing what looked like hand-painted black eyebrows barked at the gathering clouds.

It was December, the rainy season, after all, and the day was due to its soak.

Dewi, our driver and Enzo's girlfriend, was the first Balinese woman I met. A few meters down the road. The gregarious 45-year-old began sharing her story in broken English expressed through a pair of pink-painted lips and beaming white teeth. Divorced, two teenage girls, and ran her own small textile export business.

She and Enzo had met via an online dating site called Indonesian Cupid. I didn't know what the norm was for Balinese women. I had somehow pictured them to be like the tourist brochures, i.e. dressed in exotic, colorful sarongs with giant baskets of fruit on their heads. Dewi wore stylish high heels that accentuated her gorgeous tall, brown, model-slender body. She kept laughing the whole time.

I'd never had much luck with dating sites. My sister found her new husband on one. With my challenges, I couldn't in all honesty list myself as a good catch. But, I would learn soon enough none of my downsides mattered much here.

As long as I had money anything was possible?

I'd heard from lore that many Western women came here and married young Balinese men. Western men came here seeking young Asian wives. I guessed the thing to do was when in Bali do as the Balinese do. I decided to remain open to whatever may come. I wanted a Dewi for myself.

Between bursts of lightning, the road to Ubud opened up its secret, all-knowing eye. The narrow, pothole-filled road twisted through miles of endless, roadside art shops. Generations of Hindu deities dominated the path ahead.

The statues' faces greeted me with multi-creature combinations of serpents and dragons. Guiding me like guardians. Crying out in a language incomprehensible to Earthbound ears. Deities of light and demons of darkness competed for every precious inch of the road.

Driving in Bali is like being inside a Mad Max video game. And Dewi drove her van with the daring skill of a Hollywood stunt driver. Although the windshield wipers became useless against the torrent pouring down on us.

Every 60 seconds Dewi would zip past another car or motorbike or they would cut in front of her. Only by the grace of the gods did each vehicle miss the other. Looking for a seat belt that wasn't there, I reminded myself that the great Hindu spirit, Sanghyang Widhi Wasa was ever-present.

If I behaved following the Tri-Hita Karana (the good relationship between man and the universe). I would be rewarded with immortality. Regardless, I braced myself with a suitcase and awaited my next life.

The storm subsided and the rice fields beyond the road glowed from the bath of the rain. About an hour and a half later, we passed a 50-foot high statue of a Hindu warrior holding a bow in the middle of the road.

"That is a statue of Arjuna, the son of a God. It's a landmark in Ubud. You're in Ubud now, and by the way," Enzo said with the enthusiasm of a boring tourist guide. "The nickname for Ubud is the "Bud."

We took a right below Arjuna's arrow and swung up into a hilly area called Laplapan.

Dewi pulled over next to Enzo's house and parked the van along the narrow water canal that lined the road. I stepped out of the van and into a Balinese village sunset. Roosters and chickens darted back and forth across the entrance through the compound.

Growling dogs joined in the mix, and the bad muffler on a motorbike pumped up the volume. A group of local villagers looked on with mild interest. I had arrived at my second stopping point in paradise.

My host lived behind what he described as a typical Balinese family compound. Regardless of family size, babies to the most elderly, nuclear and extended family - inhabit the dwellings of a compound. These structures were made of concrete, reddish brick, wood, bamboo, and ceramic tile roof.

Two of the six villas featured a front door carved with Balinese Hindu symbolism. The compound had a small family temple in the center. Running around it were some sick-looking dogs. The pack appeared up for a chase as if we were evil spirits needing to be re-dispatched back to the netherworld.

Enzo's house stood alone, enclosed by a private wall with a rusty, vine-covered entrance gate. To get to the front door we went single file down a path of slippery moss-covered rock.

The back of his house sat on a cliff which overlooked a river coursing through a high gorge. The house was like a fortress from raiding monkeys and an army of pernicious vermin, vipers, hostile arthropods, and all manner of shadowy creatures.

I felt surrounded by imaginary creatures that could change their shape at will. And move invisibly and without form, upon the earth or through the air. I saw one that was a gigantic, winged monster, resembling lava, covered with black mud.

Should the formidable dark beast challenge my presence? I wagered if I could survive its fiery fang long enough to learn its weakness, defy its power, and rise as the victor.

Enzo knew the darkened path. I fell in behind him, finding some security in his muddy steps.

Enzo's personal belongings decorated the house. They resembled items collected on an international scavenger hunt. A multitude of books, unique artifacts, and musical instruments from every corner of the world. They all adorned his soul museum in the place that the private man called home.

When he told me how much he paid in rent my heart skipped a beat in disbelief. I don't know exactly how much he paid, but think less than USD 300 per month.

I later learned that he received a deep discount by paying four years in advance. As was the traditional business practice with the Balinese. Poor access saved him money, too. Not everyone was willing to leave their vehicle on the public street and tiptoe home at night past a pack of wild dogs.

Where I came from in America, comparable housing would be more like USD 3,000 per month, with no river valley view. Little did I know at the time that I would be hard-pressed to find a house of that size in Ubud for that price.

His housekeeper showed me to my room and Enzo instructed me not to touch anything. Curious fingers later found out why. Doorknobs, switches, and all manner of things fell or broke. It raised the question of the villa's age. I didn't ask. After replacing his third water pump in a year, he explained maintenance on a Balinese house was a never-ending process of love and dedication.

Due to my naiveté about all things Bali, Enzo referred to me as a "Quaker head." I considered the term offensive to both me and Quakers. Why be so rude? Enzo had lived alone too long in the jungle. I would soon move on, so I let it slide.

I looked under my bed blankets and chairs for snakes, spiders, and centipedes, or anything that could bite me. In the living room, I found a friendly gecko that lived beneath the couch. I nicknamed it the cockroach hunter. One night he dangled from the ceiling with his squiggling catch in his mouth.

Echoing from the river below I heard the faint beating of drums. Enzo informed me that it might be a ceremony.

I couldn't sleep from the jet lag and wanted to explore. In case I stumbled into a ceremony. He loaned me his temple sarong, sash, and udeng, a tan-and-white headdress with a mosaic design. That, or similar dress, is customary attire for visiting temples and ceremonies. I stowed my things and headed out the back door.

Into a cleavage of rock I descended, and down into the Lower Jurassic, till finally reaching the valley floor. After a few switchbacks the rough footpath ended at the remains of a pair of moss- and flower-covered shrines.

The statues of gods were covered in clouds of burning incense. Past the shrines, I came upon a small botanical garden temple, carved out of ancient stone. Trees wrapped in black-and-white cloth are called the Poleng. In simple terms, the Balinese see the world as pairs of opposites: good and evil, day and night, mountains and sea. This duality forms the whole: one cannot exist without the other.

The Poleng is the perfect representation of this view. The squares of equal size are perfect black and perfect white. They intersect and are not parallel. Gray squares contain strands of both and show that you cannot have one without the other. White represents good, the gods and health; black represents evil, the underworld, and disease. The Poleng comprises them both and so the whole.

This fertile, spongy jungle opened to embrace me. I liked the scent, sun-loved wet jungle. Reborn, forever wild; the sweet aroma of ceremonial roses clinging to the damp air. The setting felt more like a dream . . . the kind embroidered in the twilight.

One Balinese woman broke into song with a high note that she alone could not sustain. Others soon came in below it, lifting and holding it as if it were a shovel full of gold. Some men joined in, too, with the deeper notes.

The men dressed in short, flat pieces of bright yellow cloth wrapped around the waist and folded in the front. They also wore headdresses like the one my host had provided me. The women wore similar clothes around their hips, tied on the left side with no drape.

A young girl was being blessed with rice placed onto the center of her forehead. I invented the ritual to mean it was her birthday. But, it was no birthday. I learned it was a sacred Balinese cremation ritual that features a magnificent dragon or serpent sculpture. It is known as Ngaben (or Pelebon when performed for nobility and royalty). Specifically, the dragon effigy used in these elaborate royal ceremonies is called the Naga Banda.

The body or the remains are placed in an animal-shaped sarcophagus or container (such as a bull or mythical beast), and the striking Naga Banda dragon-serpent structure symbolically binds or accompanies the soul during its transition.

I didn't understand what it all meant but the atmosphere unlike solemn Western funerals, Ngaben and Pelebon are vibrant, loud, and communal celebrations featuring towering multi-tiered funeral towers (bade), energetic gamelan music, and large crowds carrying the structures through the village.



Balinese Soul Traveler

An elderly man, the gelung (holy man) was adorned in a white robe and beads. To signify his sacred power a tall, golden pemangku (crown) sat atop his sage-looking brown head. The group all stood, watched, and chanted in blessing. The holy man spoke again in Balinese, commanding the others. The throng then knelt on the green earth and, as he raised his hand. And his voice, strength appeared to descend upon everyone.

I continued my journey up the terraced rice hills to the ridges above.

The people looked to the sky and toward the path by which I'd come. As darkness closed in I stood alone in the dusk among the giant stones.

Over the great valley of the river, up the eastern slopes of the hill, I climbed towards a peak. Soon the path narrowed. Using the greatest stones for support.

I moved in a single file with my invisible companions. Their presence was growing ever stronger.

By the time I reached the summit, I was gasping for breath. The view stretched out across the magnificent river. Past the mountains, continuing beyond the borders of the eye to a distant horizon.

Inside a fast-moving thunderhead, a volcano beckoned.

I was being reborn.

Sapar and the Case of Demonic Possession



Bhoma — a Balinese guardian used to repel negative energies

I'd always believed that the spirit domain and all those things we call supernatural were part of the natural world that we just hadn't yet come to understand, a parallel dimension usually concealed from view by a shroud of the unknown or held at bay by a wall of taboo and fear.

From time to time, we all have glimpses of the other side: a burst of creativity, a brilliant idea, a moment of profound clarity, a “feeling” that prompts us to action, or a stunning “coincidence.”

So common are these occurrences that most of us think little about them, particularly when they have a positive association.

However, sometimes elements and conditions come into alignment such that the fabric unravels and weakens the veil that keeps us comfortably oblivious to that which lies beyond it. I guess it should have come as no surprise that evidence of the spiritual world was so pervasive given that nearly every activity on the island was aimed at pleasing, placating, or summoning its multitudinous inhabitants.

Hindu deities and demons, “goddess” energy, animal spirits or angels, the ethers were constantly alive with invocations to invisible beings. For the indigenous people of the island, it had been a way of life for centuries, but the transplants, as well, were invested in gaining the cooperation and favor of otherworldly powers to attain their goals, both selfish and altruistic.

The cosmic wasn't some far-fetched contrivance of the imagination here, but a fact that was accepted as being as natural as the jungle itself.

I was getting settled into a daily routine and becoming more comfortable with my role as host and facilitator of Siddharlos.

Apart from the inconvenience of light bulbs burning out too quickly and occasional interference with the internet connection in the guest house, there were no further complaints from my guests about negative energy flow or other unusual phenomena.

For the most part things seemed to be running smoothly. I could only assume, then, that I was the intended target of the unexplained incidents that were occurring with increasing frequency.

Ever since moving into my villa I had an uneasy feeling, like someone was watching me. I told myself that it was my imagination and that I was just being overly vigilant while adapting to my new environment and needed to learn to relax more.

At first it was little things that were easily dismissed. The keys to my scooter started disappearing on a regular basis, only to turn up back on the table where I always left them. Well, maybe I was starting to get a little absent minded. Sometimes, when going to brush my teeth in the morning, I would find my toothbrush lying on the left side of the sink. I am right-handed and always leave it on the right side. So I began to think my mind was playing tricks on me. Maybe that was an easier explanation to deal with than the possible alternatives.

When these seemingly minor disturbances started to occur routinely they became more difficult to explain away, like when the G string on my guitar was plucked in the middle of each night, at exactly 2 a.m. The first couple of times I heard it I thought maybe I was dreaming or had misinterpreted what I'd heard, but when it happened night after night, there was no denying the source of the sound, although the cause remained undetermined.

Before long, the nighttime activity increased and, along with it, I was once again plagued by restless dreams such that it was sometimes hard to define the boundaries between sleeping and waking.

Often during the night I would hear the windows rattling. I assumed it was just the wind, but on one occasion the rattling was so loud that it woke me from a sound sleep. When I got up to investigate, I discovered that the night was perfectly calm, without so much as a whisper of air to stir the leaves. I checked the windows and found them all tightly closed.

I sat for a while in the darkness fighting unsettled feelings before finally returning to bed. I tried to put the incident out of my mind, but then the following night I was awakened by what sounded like voices coming from outside. I considered that it was probably revelers at a nearby resort. The voices seemed to be getting closer and louder, but I couldn't make out any words. When I finally went out to the patio to see what was going on, to my surprise, the voices fell silent and there were no lights and no other evidence of activity at the resort or at neighboring villas.

I was beginning to suspect that I wasn't alone.

A few nights passed without incident, then again I was awakened in the night, this time by the sound of something crashing to the floor. I ran to the kitchen still half asleep and reached to turn on the light, expecting to find that some nocturnal rodent had breached the walls and was making itself at home in my kitchen.

When I hit the switch, nothing happened. In the dim light of the moon that poured through the window, I saw the shattered fragments of a coffee mug lying in the middle of the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I detected some vague movement, not like that of a small animal as I had expected, but more like the movement of a large curtain rippling in an evening breeze, except that there was no curtain and no breeze. When I turned to see what it was, there was apparently nothing there. I cleaned up the mess on the floor as best that I could in the near darkness and then, puzzled and annoyed, I returned to bed.

Sleep escaped me, however, and I lay awake replaying in my mind the almost daily episodes of unexplained goings on and wondering what they had to do with me. Although invisible entities had been my companions at some level ever since I'd arrived on the island, there was a different feel about the more recent experiences.

I decided that my unwelcome co-occupants, whoever or whatever they may be, had overstayed their welcome and must be evicted, a task that proved to be easier said than done. It wasn't that I was afraid so much as I was irritated with the incessant disruptions, believing that I had better uses for my time and energies.

Wayan had often made reference to the presence of spirits. I confided in him my recent experiences and asked his opinion of the situation and if he could offer any advice about how to deal with it. He seemed to shrug it off with only a suggestion that perhaps I might find an answer during my meditations.

I thought it odd that he offered so little input since he had always seemed to be naturally attuned to the realm of spirit. I told him I would try that, but I couldn't help feeling that he was holding something back, a feeling that was reinforced by his avoiding eye contact whenever I approached the subject.

"Wake up, Bro," Wayan shouted as he shook my shoulders. "You are fighting in your sleep."

I awoke from my afternoon groggy nap rubbing the back of my neck. Wayan reminded me that it was time for my foot massage therapy with the village healer, Sapar.

I had dislocated my toe earlier by stomping around the house.

I thought my toe had healed, but it became worse.

Sapar, who I would describe as a metaphysical chiropractor, looked serious wrapped in his healer clothes; a reddish-orange sarong, black-and-white udeng, and white shirt. He was 30-something; narrow, with sturdy legs, and a thick chest. He wore a confident expression and spoke with a strong voice. He was sitting upright with his bare feet on a straw mat inside his family's temple. Within arm's reach was a bamboo plate filled with herbs, tiny bells, holy water, and burning incense sticks.

Putu, his young and refined wife, sat nearby like a nurse assistant and looked on attentively. Sapar was not visited by tourists, Wayan recommended him, and therefore I trusted him. Sapar bowed his head and displayed a full set of perfectly white teeth.

“Selamat sore,” I greeted Sapar and sat down in front of him in the late afternoon sun. He immediately had a close look at my foot and relayed to Wayan that I was late to return for my therapy session. I could tell by the look in his brown, experienced eyes that he was scolding me.

He went to work on my foot and I braced myself for the torture test. With both hands he rubbed in scented oil. Next he began to pull and push my toe along the joint. After several minutes of excruciating pain he gave the diagnosis.

The cuneiform bone that sat behind the big toe joint was inflamed and raging with the residue of an out-of-control bad spirit. Instead of just sitting there and crying like a baby, I thought to tell Sapar about the demon that inhabited my house.

The question was handed off to Wayan like a football where he translated the words and gave the question a lateral pass on to Sapar.

Sapar thought about it for a moment and, without looking up from my foot, he said to Wayan as he pulled on each of my little toes, “little demons.”

Amused, but not convinced he knew what he was talking about, I told him to go on.

“You lose something?” he probed.

“I have lost many things,” I told him.

“The demons feeding on your sense of loss like sucker fish,” he said through Wayan.

“How so?” I asked.

“The demon in your house has entered your body through the sole of your foot. It will eventually make a nest in your mind like rat,” he counseled.

“Do you have an answer for my demons?” I said, intrigued.

“Give it a name. Call it out before you sleep. Before you meditate...before you bathe... evoke its name and call it out,” Sapar prescribed.

“How do I know what name to call it?” I said.

From his medicine tray he gave me a handful of what looked like tea leaves. “Sprinkle the plant over your toes every day and meditate.” Sapar and Wayan went back and forth getting the translation of the directions straight.

“The demon has left your foot and make home in your mind.” He pointed at my head. “I give you blessing and herbs help,” he stated.

On that note he chopped off the top of one yellowish-orange-colored coconut and poured out its milk into a bowl. He cupped his hand into the bowl and started to chant; the coconut milk was sprinkled over my toe.

“Foot not better in three days come back.”

I thanked Sapar along with a small donation for his work and limped back to the motorbike.

That night I lay in bed and thought about what to name my demons. I sprinkled the leaves over my foot and went to sleep.

For the next couple of weeks I devoted extra time and energy to the matter during my daily meditation, visualizing a shield of bright light covering my villa and garden and providing protection to myself and my guests.

When this seemed to have no effect, it occurred to me that maybe I'd gotten a little ahead of myself. After all, what good was it to seal off the spiritual boundaries of my property if the unwelcome guests were still in residence?

My next tactic was to try and figure out how to get them/it to leave; perhaps I should create a hostile spiritual environment, so to speak. On the other hand, I didn't want to run off any good spirits that were hanging around.

I realized I was not well equipped for such a battle, but then I recalled my quest and thought how no one is truly equipped for encounters with the unknown and that some things can only be learned through experience.

With that in mind, I tumbled into bed, where I restlessly explored my spiritual arsenal. I sprinkled more leaves over my foot and finally drifted off to the vocal styling of a croaking colony of frogs that had congregated outside my window in a pond.

On this night, I noticed a strange creature firmly attached to my wooden kitchen door. It appeared to be some sort of frog, but not like any frog I'd ever seen before. My experience with live frogs had been limited to those small brownish creatures hopping around in the backyard on a summer's evening...the sort that little boys stuff in their pockets to proudly reveal at the supper table, much to the dismay of mothers and little sisters. And then there were those frogs ranging in size from one to 10 inches long that were so thick on the back roads at night after a Georgia rain that navigating a vehicle to avoid them was nearly impossible.

Occasionally one of the larger and more imposing bullfrogs would stake a claim in the middle of a narrow road, defiantly refusing to move as if to say, "You shall not pass." The bright beam of the headlights on the puddles in the road would cast an eerie reflection in the creature's normally beady-looking eyes, giving them an almost demonic glow. Even so, American frogs didn't inspire fear except in the most squeamish and posed no real danger beyond the warnings that mamas gave their little girls about not touching them because it would cause them to develop warts on their delicate hands.

But this was an entirely alien species.

I had never seen such a peculiar creature. It was about the size of my right hand, light brown in color with black spots, and had a large fleshy sack below the mouth, suction-cup-like feet, big black, buggy eyes and long spindly legs.

There was something necromantic, yet sinister about it and I was unable to resist going in for a closer look. I had dissected a similar creature in junior high biology class and remembered that the life cycle of frogs involved at least one major transformation, from tadpole to adult.

In the native lore of many cultures, frogs are symbolic of re-creation or keepers of the secrets of transformation. One such story tells of a jewel inside a frog's head. This jewel, when placed in a ring, would heat up or change color in the presence of evil, thereby protecting the wearer from demons and other malevolent forces.

As I approached within inches of the creature, it spewed a caustic liquid that hit my face, barely missing my eyes. I was later told by Wayan that the putrid brew from the creature's acrimonious belly could have blinded me.

I wondered if my precarious close encounter with the frog was in any way related to other telekinetic events that had been occurring with increasing frequency since I had been living in the villa.

It's hard to say what sort of ominous specters might be hanging around under the veil of darkness.

My villa was located on the edge of a botanical-garden riverbed which was reputed to be a place of "in-between worlds," and it was said that many spirits roamed the valley at night. I considered the possibility that my foot was an ectoplasmic magnet attracting sinister otherworldly entities, entities that disturbed my dreams and even hovered on the edge of my waking awareness.

I came to look forward to the dawn.

Each morning geckos, spiders, cockroaches and all manner of creatures of the night scurried back to the dark safety of their daytime hiding places. The rats that had thundered across my bamboo ceiling like a herd of stampeding buffalo the night before were now silent.

For the time being I switched off my fan and headed to my outdoor kitchen to boil water for coffee. While the kettle worked up to a whistle, I swept last night's bat poop off the patio furniture and settled into contemplation of my "one-way ticket" refugee status.

The silence of the jungle seemed to resonate from the deep waters of the soul and I sat listening attentively in hopes of discerning a clue, a sign, or any answer at all lying below the mist that might tell me what to do.

At this time in my life I knew I had to avoid dwelling on "what-ifs," to ponder instead the more immediate and relevant question: what now? It felt as if every belief I'd ever had about who I was, who and what I wanted to be, and where I wanted to go, came together in that moment.

The pain of the past and thoughts of all I loved pulled at my heart in scattergun flashbacks. Flash! I saw my daughter. Flash! I saw my old house. Flash! I was on an airplane going home...but there was no home to go back to.

The early morning mist that had risen from the valley's floor and swirled all around me was now vapor. The heat of the day arrived.

I rested my foot on a table and meditated on the jungle.

It hadn't stopped raining at "Camp Paradise" for three months.

As the last hazy glow of the obscured afternoon sun faded into twilight, I bid the day farewell with a local beer and a song or two on my guitar; a ritual that had become my custom.

There was a time when the instrument had served as a cherished companion and guide on countless journeys to anywhere.

It seemed funny how fingers dancing over metal and wood could discover friends, entertain strangers, and fill the void with dreams, hope, and love.

Along the length of the fret board was the sweaty, fingerprint signature of my history. My left hand tenderly embraced her neck, while I gently caressed her strings. I began making chords, strumming the strings with a rolled up matchbook.

I had seen blues players use a coin, chunks of wood, and even glass on the strings, but the matchbook was my own invention. The sound it made reminded me of cards flapping in a bicycle wheel.

I warmed up by loosely fingering once-familiar riffs of long-forgotten songs. While I strummed, the matchbook gave way and the tip of my index finger became raw. The fingernail half ripped away and my finger bled onto the strings.

I raised my voice in a medley of rain songs, as if honoring the rain in song might perhaps appease to cease the relentless demons.

Thoughts of whether I should stay or go tumbled around my troubled mind; but where would I go, even if I could? Counting rain drops alone in the jungle was neither the way of the Balinese, nor mine.

I tried to think that by losing the worldly possessions that had bound me to my old life I was becoming like my amphibious visitor, undergoing a metamorphosis from that which I had been into what I would become.

Wayan – the Balinese Gardener



Wayan Sujana

I set about my day with renewed vision and focus, more determined than ever to break down the barriers separating me from my Balinese companions, in this new sphere of being.

So far, I'd had little success at connecting in any meaningful way with the people I'd encountered on this journey. It was important to me to build new friendships, but my experience thus far with others in this place — whether native, foreign, or even fellow American ex-pats — often left me feeling discouraged.

Besides having my first housekeeper, my landlady had also seen fit to employ a gardener to care for the grounds. Although I considered domestic servants, whether indoors or out, to be an unnecessary extravagance, I had come to be grateful for them, not nearly so much for their domestic skills as for the role they would play in my enculturation and adaptation to my adopted home.

Over the past few weeks, I had begun to develop a congenial relationship with Wayan (pronounced Why-Ann), the gardener. Like Made, my maid, Wayan is the first-born child in the Balinese naming system and indicative of the lowest Hindu caste, called Anak Agung.

While all were equal within their temple, in the outside world there existed prejudicial attitudes between the Anak Agung and the people of the upper two castes.

Wayan was 38 years old; small in stature and strikingly handsome. With his Javanese Muslim wife, Etty, Wayan had a 12-year-old son, who was a budding musician. Contrary to accepted tradition, Wayan had adopted his wife's religion, despite the strong disapproval of his large, traditional Hindu family.

Etty worked from sunrise to sunset seven days a week making hand-beaded bracelets, earning two cents per bracelet, to help make ends meet.

I came to look forward to Wayan's daily visits. Besides keeping the bushes trimmed, the leaves raked, and the outdoor area of the villa tidy, he was an exceptional handyman and competent mechanic; possessing any number of other skills. It seemed there was nothing he couldn't do. Because Wayan was nearly fluent in English, communication between us flowed easily, and he often served as my interpreter with non-English speakers.

With equal skill, he could repair my scooter, extract a wasp nest from my bedroom, or shimmy barefooted up a 30-foot coconut tree — with the ease of a monkey — to fetch me a coconut. What Wayan lacked in stature he more than made up for with his vibrant personality and generous heart.

He was hard working and fearless, with a warm, genuine smile that could light up a room, and make you feel good just being in his presence. Although he possessed a plethora of attributes that would be the envy of most Western men, he bore himself with such gracious humility that I stood in awe of him.

Probably what blew my mind most of all about Wayan, was his shyness about asking for money, even when it was well earned. When it came time for him to be paid and I would ask what I owed, he would look down at the ground; shuffle his foot and say, "Whatever you want to pay." Sometimes he wanted nothing in return and only when I would forcibly shove money into his pocket would he reluctantly accept it. I found Wayan's unpretentious demeanor so endearing that it reaffirmed my belief in humanity; that which I was sure had been lost back in America, along with everything else. Unlike other Balinese that I had paid for various services rendered, Wayan didn't call me "Boss," but "Bro." I finally had a real friend on the island other than an ant and my guitar. In some ways, I felt more of a connection with him than with anyone else I'd ever met.

Wayan would become an indispensable guide and source of strength and encouragement through ominous and foreboding passages ahead. I even came to think of him as my guardian angel because I was certain that without him, I might have abandoned my quest altogether and returned to America more defeated and broken than when I left.

Like Made, Wayan willingly shared his story. By allowing me to see the world through his eyes I was able to gain new insight and perspective into the world of the Balinese people before they were thrust, with little or no preparation, into the 21st Century on a wave of technology and tourism.

Wayan was born in the spring of 1975 to a family of rice farmers. He grew up sharing a traditional family compound with his parents and at least 50 other relatives. While 50 people living together may seem like a staggering number by American standards, some family compounds are even larger and might house as many as 100 family members. Their village of Kutuh Kaja had a population of approximately 1500 at the time, made up of some 300 families. I listened intently as Wayan recalled stories of his youth and told of the Bali of not so long ago.

Although Wayan is in the same age group as most of the children born to American baby boomers, that's where the similarity ends. Completely foreign to him were such contrivances as mechanized toys and electronic gadgets. While the first wave of baby boomers' offspring in the U.S. was mindlessly flipping through 100 TV channels by remote control, playing Super Mario Brothers on early game systems, watching videos, and

beginning to discover the world of computer technology, Wayan and his peers were doing school work by oil lamp because electricity hadn't yet made its way to Bali's remote villages. When not occupied with schoolwork or daily chores, he would swim in the river that once ran behind the village, an activity he remembers fondly.

Wayan recalled the construction of the first paved road in his village in 1995, and even then only the wealthiest of villagers had a motor scooter for transportation. Wayan was in his late teens when television made its debut. It was a community event in which one day of each week a nearby soccer field would be converted to a public theater where villagers could go to view television programming projected on the large screen that was set up for the purpose. It wasn't until the age of 25 that Wayan had the opportunity to attend a rock concert. There were no malls and muscle cars, no telephones in the village, and no air conditioning to counter the brutal tropical heat. It was hard for me to imagine such a primitive lifestyle, compared to my life growing up.

I learned that neither history nor English was taught in Indonesian schools and those who became proficient in English learned mostly by independent means. Wayan had learned from an Indian man just a few years earlier, and when I inquired as to his knowledge of his country's history, he responded that the past had never been of much interest to him because his life had always required staying focused on survival in the present. Wayan listened politely as I gave him an overview of what I had learned of Indonesia's history of genocide, occupation, slavery, terrorists, and political upheaval, before finally becoming the remote outpost of art and culture and the Mecca of healing practices that have made Bali a popular tourist destination.

When I had finished, Wayan lit a cigarette and sat silently for a few moments before commenting, "Thanks, Bro. Good to know." I felt he was merely humoring me and didn't care much one way or the other.

The river that had once been a valuable resource and hub of activity and recreation for the village was now gone. Most villagers now own motor scooters and even smartphones. The fortunate ones have laptops and a few even own a car.

On a sad note, there was the central character of the book/movie *Eat Pray Love*, Ketut Lyer, and healer. Lyer's son drove around Ubud, Bali in a Ferrari sports car, buying up backpacker hostels, and branding them with his father's name.

By 2009, internet usage was commonplace and the island was teeming with tourists and ex-pats. In little more than two decades, Bali and the surrounding area had traveled from the 19th to the 21st century. For many villagers, like Wayan, it meant new jobs that had not existed before. Landowners could now obtain a significant sum of money for their rice fields that had, in many instances, failed to make a profit for many years. And for the "beautiful people" from foreign lands, with time on their hands and money to spare, it meant a new venue for self-discovery, where they could visit healers, admire ancient temples, meditate at a local yoga center, and later exchange their tales over a skinny caramel macchiato at Starbucks.

Wayan had difficulty pronouncing my name because the sound of the letter "r" is absent in the common Balinese language. Even though he would practice saying it, it usually came out as "Aldo."

Some of my business ventures, however, were not going quite so smoothly. My idea of starting a local music promotion company blew up in my face when I learned that, not only do local musicians handle their own business but also that, as a foreigner, I was not able to afford the work VISA for establishing that kind of enterprise.

I discovered that the only way a foreigner could book musicians, artists, and yoga teachers without the proper VISA documents was to operate covertly and pay off the right people. I concluded that, unless I was going to book superstars from Pop music to DJs, it really wouldn't be lucrative enough to be worth my time. I was all for implementing worthwhile cultural exchange programs for the betterment of the world, but that kind of organization takes time, so it would have to wait for now.

I was determined, however, to put my talents to good use.

I decided to help Wayan create a real estate business. He was already helping tourists to find a place to live and worked for a meager finders commission paid by the Balinese property owner. I named his business the Ubud Royal Properties. I set him up with a laptop and a business card and he did the rest. With the proper social media promotion, and nice new dress shirts bearing his business logo, Ubud Royal Properties, it wasn't long until his cell was ringing constantly, his company was thriving, and his income had increased significantly.



Wayan – Ubud Royal Properties

I learned from Wayan that the local schools did not offer a music program, so it was difficult for his son, Dewa, to pursue his musical interests. I found it extremely odd since Indonesians love music; a love that is reflected in the disproportionate number of live musical performances in their local television programming and outdoor festivals. I wasn't in any position to change the Indonesian school system, but maybe I could make a difference in the life of one child. On his own, Wayan's remarkable boy had taught himself songs by simply following along with music clips played back on his cell phone, but he wanted to play the guitar.

Having grown up without support for my musical passion, I'd had to learn on my own too. I could identify so much with Dewa's hunger for the guitar and so I determined that I would donate my time and skill to teach him. I took him under my wing and bought him a guitar. I was amazed by his comprehension and the natural ability he demonstrated. He was an eager and diligent student and learned his lessons faster than I could give them.

I'd always made an effort to provide opportunities to artists who lacked the tools and access to open their doors in the music business. It was my way of preserving and fostering the higher essence of the human spirit. You couldn't put a price tag on that kind of investment, and the returns, at least in this case, were immediate and deeply rewarding. Besides the admiration I had for Dewa's innate talent, I derived great pleasure from watching him as he embraced his guitar with love and enthusiasm and taught it to respond in harmony with his soul. Through Dewa, I became, once more, the kid who'd loved to dance with his guitar.

In a moment's vision, I recognized that I had brought much beauty to light in the world and that my ability to do so was undiminished by the tribulations of recent years. I was also reminded to never take my gifts for granted.

I had begun to feel more confident in my surroundings and was determined to share my gregarious Minnesota nature with others. Besides being occupied with home and temple duties, it would have been considered improper for the women in the village to socialize with a foreign, single man. However, I quickly discovered, with Wayan's help, that men are pretty much the same everywhere.

We devised a crude, but effective, plan to break the ice with other locals: beer and gambling. We started by inviting the staff from a local resort for a poker game, similar to 7 Card Draw. I bought the beer and spotted each of them a stack of cash from which to bet. The language of the cards was universal and they took it with great seriousness and relish. Drinking beer and lighting cigarette after cigarette, we played well into the night and, whether winning or losing, everyone was having fun. Whenever I would lose, I would exaggerate the angst and add a few local profanities for emphasis, all of which my companions found highly entertaining. The more I lost the harder they laughed. By the time the game broke up and everyone went their separate ways, I was half-drunk and exhausted, out of beer, and a little short of cash, but thanks to Wayan, I had gained new companions.

On the sacred Balinese day of silence "Nyepi", I woke up in a hospital with no memory of my name. I don't know how I got there and if it wasn't for Wayan who found me passed out on the floor of my villa I could have died. Little did I know the hoops he jumped through to find a driver and willing to defy the Gods by penetrating the dark and guarded roads of Bali to bring me to a doctor? He saved my life.

For the next three years, Wayan and I were inseparable.



Wayan and me

During that time he often complained of stomach pain and I gave it no second thought as to the reason. He said it was gas and not to be concerned. His wife said it was from drinking beer and smoking.

Wayan's stomach problems grew worse.

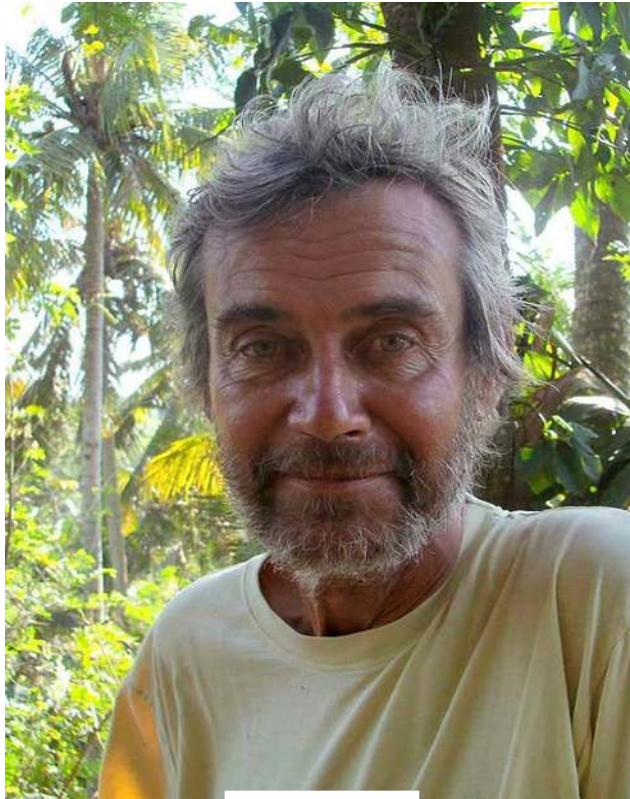
Misdiagnosed, Wayan died too young from Hepatitis B.

Never have I met a greater human being and I will always honor his memory.

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How to Drink Yourself to Death in Paradise



52 Goodfingers

I closed his eyelids and folded his hands.

The police carried his body to a morgue for expats in south Bali. But that is not how he would want me to end his story.

The story began when a tall, strange foreigner approached me. He had long blonde hair tied up into a bun on top of his head. Arms decorated with serpent tattoos. His neck and wrists wrapped with multicolored beads. He wore a blue tank top and parachute pants decorated in a floral Bhakti print that went past the kneecaps.

I noticed that his right leg appeared mangled. A pair of worn-out sandals covered his dirty feet.

“Transcend it,” he mumbled from within a buzzing ball of flies. “Inhale; be one with nature.” He wandered up to a coconut tree and wrapped his arms around it. The stubble of his chin rubbed against the trunk.

A soft shower of white flower petals drifted earthward. He pretended to chase a flower floating in the air, even though it was within his reach. “Try to touch it; you can’t. It’s like time; all you can do is open your mind to it.”

I guessed he was being friendly and that he was making an effort to give me some insight into his world. He gazed up through the shafts of light that penetrated the coconut trees.

“You’re like the flower floating on the wind. Go with the flow, brother,” he said.

What he lacked in self-restraint he made up for in bold self-confidence. One artery pulsated on his temple and a single bead of sweat cut a path along his brow and off the tip of his nose. This was the first time he had faced the trees.

There was no pain in his face; just a thirst. He stood among his trees. It seemed that he could smell time on the branches; that he could hear it through the rustling palm leaves. His left eye went white. His right eye was wild; pleading. He shrugged and waved at the trees.

“This is my place,” he waved.

He handed me his business card: 52 Goodfingers. Life Coach and Ubud Community magazine editor.

He pointed to a kampung across the road, indicating that he was my neighbor.

“More cosmic vibes flow through this area than anywhere else on the island,” he continued. “Take a deep breath. Taste nature’s amusement park. It’s a holy taste, brother. I don’t know about you, but it makes me want to join a drum chant.”

He invited me into his bamboo shack.

His place consisted of a single room located inside a traditional Balinese family kampung. It was not uncommon for the locals to rent out a room in kampungs. Some would call it homestay but he had more privacy. These rooms were the cheapest accommodations found anywhere on the island.

His modest living space was furnished with little more than a raggedy mattress on the floor. A small refrigerator that was at least a decade old and a rusty gas cooker. He shared a bathroom with three other families, as was typical. A basic bathroom consists of a tub of cold water and a ceramic urinal dug into the floor. You pour water on your body with a bucket to bathe and squat on the floor to relieve yourself.

We sat down on the dirty concrete floor.

I observed that his room was cluttered with moldy newspapers, piles of empty bottles, beer and soda cans, blankets, and three pairs of soiled couch cushions. In one corner there were a few paintbrushes and a blank canvas.

His place was crawling with ants and covered with a heavy layer of dust to complete the effect. The filth of his dharma crash pad made my nose wrinkle and the hair on the back of my neck curl up into tight coils.

I hadn’t seen anyone live in such unsanitary conditions since my hippie days.

52 lit up a cigarette; there were swirls of blue in the smoke that left his lungs in long, slow exhales. His face was gaunt. His body appeared to be nothing more than a shrinking skeleton draped with skin. His gaze betrayed a life complicated by many troubles. The whites of his sunken eyes surrounded oily pupils. Set in a viscous liquid that replaced once-clear pools of crystal blue.

For whatever trials he had faced, his spirit did not appear dampened. He managed to maintain a happy-go-lucky smile. His smile lit up his face, undeterred by yellow teeth, stained from years of smoking. It

didn't seem to bother him that his clothes no longer fit. Nor did he seem disturbed by the fetid aroma that formed a visible aura around him.

He reached into his worn backpack and pulled out an unmarked bottle which was filled with a lemon-colored liquid. With shaking hands, he filled two small glasses and handed one to me. In one gulp he emptied his glass. I was still examining the brew that smelled like a cross between gasoline and turpentine and wondered if it might be combustible. It turned out to be a local variety of Balinese moonshine called arak.

Local moonshine, the brew had been offered to me before by locals who worked at a resort where I sometimes went swimming. It's pure alcohol, made from coconut palm sap. When the primary ingredient is not available they will use old tires to help the fermentation process. It is addictive and many people die from drinking it.

I sat my full glass back down on the floor.

"Is this our last dance as warriors?" he asked, wiping off his mouth with the back of his hand. He picked up a paintbrush and stared at his easel.

I asked how long he'd been here.

He related how he and his wife had first come to Ubud from Holland over 25 years ago. He had been among the first foreign shop owners on Monkey Forest Road. What had happened to his wife? It had been some time since his dwelling was graced with a caring touch. He mentioned that she had left him, but then became very vague about details of his personal life.

He described the Ubud of long ago as a quaint little village. No hotels or restaurants. No traffic. A beautiful and unspoiled paradise of mountains, rice fields, and natural beauty. Everybody knew everyone and the villagers would come together to bathe in the river. Wash their clothes, and exchange the latest news and gossip. Although artists and celebrities had been visiting the area since the 1930s it remained a virgin territory until modern high-tech communication and transportation arrived.

"Hold still; stop fidgeting," 52 said. Then he stuck another paintbrush in his mouth and smudged the canvas with his right thumb. I held my pose. Right hand on knee. Left hand draped to the floor, upright, head cocked a slight shit-ass grin.

"How long do you plan to stay here?" he asked. I stared at a spot above his head, avoiding eye contact. I couldn't look into his eyes dead-on without feeling like I was falling into a well. I couldn't help wondering what had happened to this man. What had his life been like; what trials had he faced and what had happened to his leg. I found it hard to talk to him, so I didn't dare question him about it. As if shaken from a dream, I realized that I had no particular plan. I'd been in this situation before. Living from day-to-day. But had never dreamed I would ever find myself thrust back into a vagabond lifestyle. Particularly at this point in my life and in a foreign land besides.

"I don't know," I finally responded. "I suppose it will depend on what I find."

52 studied the canvas like a boxer facing a heavyweight opponent. His first brush stroke turned into an awkward dance made up of head jerks. Backbends. And flailing arms. It looked like a mismatched fight. He

took another drink and exhaled across his knuckles to loosen his stiff hands. The hand was then tested for dexterity on scratch paper. Before making its triumphant return to the canvas.

Up and down, back and forth, I listened to the soothing, rhythmic sound made by the stiff bristles of the brush against the canvas.

While he painted, the late afternoon sun broke through the gray mass of clouds. Filling the room with narrow, dust-filled fingers of light. It felt at that moment that we touched the gods. I wanted him to go on, never finish, keep this moment frozen in time. As he continued painting, my curiosity grew. I was dying to see what vision had inspired the artist. Had he discovered my secrets? I could contain myself no longer; I had to see the image that my new companion had been so compelled to create.

“What’s with the big furry feet?” I inquired.

“A traveler needs to be nimble. Well-protected feet that can move like a panther in the jungle,” he replied.

“You can never tell what creatures dwell in the shadows. You are set upon a great adventure, no?”

Without waiting for an answer, he added a touch of gray to the eyebrows in the portrait.

The face was mine.

He painted a flat, square, and hairless face with the innocent countenance of a child. As if struck by a ray of light the eyes sparkled. The ears resembled the wings of a bird. The character in the painting had reddish curled hair that unfurled over its head like a shaggy mop. To complete the picture the semi-human looking creature wore a travel jacket, backpack, and held a long, walking stick.

Like it stirred something deep inside of me. A vision that was long forgotten. Rediscovering my purpose, recalling an act of courage I thought I’d long since lost. I felt empowered and a sense of imminent victory replaced that of impending doom.

My face gave way to a smile.

“I like it,” I told him.

The muscles in his face tightened and a tear seemed ready to spill from the corner of his eye. I gathered that he was searching as if to recover something he’d lost, some idea of himself. His eyes scanned my body. Inspecting every detail. Each wrinkle in my shirt, every subtle shadow on my face, each visible fold of skin. Finally, he nodded and shot me an understanding smile.

I resumed my pose.

“Turn your head and face me,” he said.

I stared at the painting. Then he began talking to the image in the painting. As if there were no difference between the world of his dreams and visions. The conscious world of physical reality where we sat amid the garbage and clutter.

“I’m sorry for not listening to you,” he said to the image he had created. “Do you forgive me?”

He stopped painting for a moment and appeared to be studying something inside his mind. “Have you ever dreamed that you died?” he said, with one eye half-closed. “When I look at you it feels like I am looking into a mirror. A reflection filled with a myriad of colors. Crafted by the winds. Blowing across the great canvas of life, all mysterious and unknowing.”

He made no further comment and continued painting.

I paused as if observing a lifetime of history filling the vision behind his eyes. I didn’t know where to begin. Somehow I knew that he knew that he would die from drinking. I closed my eyes and thought how too many of my other friends had ended their lives that way. A bottle can kill you in paradise as anywhere else.

52 dropped his bottle of arak, and his eyes and mouth froze open. I thought it was his way of expressing what a puppet looks like when its strings are cut. I looked at him for a few minutes until I noticed that his body had stopped moving.

“Wake up!” I shook him hard, again and again. There was no response. 52 was dead.

“Every seed contains everything required to become whatever is to be,” I said. “Watered by the rain. Warmed by the sun. Nourished by the earth, transformed into something more without ever losing its seedness. Over time. Something so tiny and insignificant as a fragile drop of water, changes the very structure and design of the Earth.

Likewise, something so insignificant as a seed. Contains all the knowledge necessary to become a rose. An oak, a worm, a cat, a man.”

I dropped 52 Goodfingers' ashes into the ocean.

“Like the seed that seems so insignificant. Incapable of anything of consequence until exposed to water. Sunlight, and nourishment. In those moments of being. The eternal now. Profound clarity. Wherein the boundaries of consciousness stretched. That we may continue becoming something more. And grow into the potential of our design.”

I hung his painting on the wall of my villa.

Siddharlo's Guest House



Siddharlo's Guest House

I gave up on a plan to reverse course and reinvent myself back in the States. So I focused on the present time and place — life in “The Bud” (Ubud, Bali).

Renting out guest accommodation had become a popular way, for foreigners especially, to earn extra income on the island. This is the kind of place I first rented, and the idea appealed to me. I began to search for a suitable place where I could create my own guest house. Soon enough, I found a small plat of land I could build on.

Armed with a new sense of purpose and a proper visa, I named my new place “Siddharlo’s Guest House” in honor of the prince who became the Buddha, Siddhartha, by Herman Hesse. In June of 2012, I hung out a new sign under the Bali sun: Siddharlo’s Guest House.

Siddharlo’s Guest House was more like a fifth-dimensional train station for aliens than an inn for travelers. It was located about 10 minutes by motorbike from Ubud’s spiritual, arts, and trinket center.

My place was easier to find than most, past the only resort with a big swimming pool and down a well-paved driveway. The drive from town to my villa was an adventure in itself. The road, with all its twists and turns, was bordered on either side by a wide array of visual imagery: rice fields, villas under construction, ancient Hindu temples, botanical gardens, and an authentic Kundalini yoga ashram.

In addition, driving along the narrow, congested road was like navigating an obstacle course of dogs and more dogs, ducks, cars, motorbikes, and people.

I had sometimes dreamed about owning a resort or a guest house business and thought that people who owned these types of places really had it made. It was a way to sustain yourself while doing something you enjoyed, with the possibility of even making a little extra money.

Ideally, I would have chosen to go eco-friendly with a totally self-sustainable dwelling, operating off the grid using solar power, rainwater, and recycled gray water, which would leave only a minimal ecological footprint.

That ideal would have to wait until I had a better understanding of the local tourist accommodation business and had accrued sufficient resources to procure my own land on which to build it. So, Siddharlo's was a practice run — the first step in self-sufficiency on the island and in moving toward the realization of that dream.

The house had a small living room or office space, one large bedroom, bathroom, and an underground septic system designed to handle four people. A well would have to come later. The kitchen consisted of a countertop, sink, cabinets, cold water, and I added a refrigerator, camping stove with a tank of natural gas. I also added a microwave and an electric oven.

The standard color for a Balinese painted house was tan but Tuti elected to go with her traditional Java color and painted it green. The upside was it was easier to spot.

One feature that needed no improvements: the view. The spacious patio overlooked an expansive garden of coconut trees and tropical flora in a myriad of sizes, shapes, and colors. In the early morning, a veil of mist lay across the garden, creating an enchanting and inspiring ambiance. Intoxicating fragrances floated gently on the jungle breeze.

Before the first nail could be driven, according to local custom the land needed to be blessed and when the house finished it also needed a blessing.



Land blessing

Along with free wifi, I also set up services including transportation, bike rentals, laundry cleaning, massage, clean drinking water, delivery of meals and organic vegetables, and tour guides.

Finally, I created a roadside sign, and I employed a local Balinese man, Wayan, as my assistant. He would also add an entertaining touch by shimmying up the coconut trees to retrieve coconuts for my guests. I took photos of the guesthouse, set up a website with online booking, and officially opened Siddharlo's.



Siddharlo's Guest House under construction

After all the preparation, I remained uncertain about whether I possessed sufficient knowledge and skill to adequately meet the demands of a cross-section of international travelers. How would my past business and social experiences serve me in this venture?

I wanted to connect with my guests, befriend them, and hear what they had to say. I wanted to use my artistic knowledge and be sensitive to my guests' creative needs. I wanted to be an unobtrusive, smiling presence and provide them a calming, harmonious environment that would enrich their experience and foster a sense of well-being; a place where they could unroll their yoga mat, have a veggie shake, sing a song or two, and tell me their stories.

The construction took longer than the originally planned 6 months because the contractor I hired took off with my money and didn't pay the crew. A major setback, but not defeated, I managed to keep building day-by-day and 9 months later it was ready for my first guest. My savings were gone but I had the property.



Madurese construction crew



Almost completed

The house was small but so was my budget so in the end things balanced out.

My first guest, Jaguar X arrived at Siddharlo's at the appointed time. Seeing her up close for the first time, I was taken aback by her striking presence — tall, fit, ebony-skinned, beaded, braided, and broadly smiling. Topping off her image was an exaggerated crown of black braided hair full of bright pink and yellow string that seemed to ensnare moonbeams before falling from her shoulders, and draping her slender body to the waist like a cape of light. The statuesque cat woman stood in my doorway and surveyed the space.

“Aren't you going to invite me in?” JX queried through an American southern drawl, half-smile.

We couldn't have been standing there for more than a few seconds. I felt flush with embarrassment and checked to make sure my jaw wasn't hanging open.

"Yes, of course. Come in," I said.

I helped her carry in luggage and several hula hoops. Her cat-paw feet seemed to barely touch the floor. She appeared to float in fluid silence to the chair I held out for her. After pouring us each a cup of tea, I joined her at the table, and we began to exchange stories. JX began by telling me that she was in her late 30s, unmarried, had no children, and was self-employed.

"My mom kicked me off the couch, and my brother was getting on my back," she explained. "I have an idea for a goddess empowerment retreat."

This was her eighth sojourn to Bali in as many years. JX continued to return because she felt certain that in Bali, among those she considered to be of highly evolved consciousness, she could develop her hoop tribe. JX had already sold many retreat tickets, had a huge following, and was a role model for the Instagram entrepreneur.

JX took a sip of her tea and continued. "I consider myself part of the Hoop Love Tribe."

"Can you tell me what you mean by the Hoop Love Tribe?" I asked.

JX paused for a moment as though collecting her thoughts. I suspected that she'd never been asked to explain it before. Perhaps she searched for an explanation that a mortal could understand.

"The Hoop Love Tribe is at one with universal goddess energy. The body of the goddess is translucent, pulsating with complex systems of glowing energy that are visible to those who have the sight, or what you might call a clairvoyant. She is not a person, but pure awareness. To be a goddess is about the integration of body, mind, and spirit into a single spectrum of light and consciousness."

JX sat back in her chair and twisted a long strand of her hair into a knot. Three of her long fingers were adorned with onyx stone rings embedded in silver. I sensed that she placed some significance on the rings, other than feminine adornment.

Searching my memory for symbolism that might reveal the rings' secrets, I recalled that onyx was believed to have the power to align its wearer with higher consciousness, facilitate wise judgment, deflect grief, and repel the negative vibrations of others. Silver was considered a mirror of the soul, a conduit connecting the physical and astral bodies, thus enhancing intuition, and was akin to the moon and feminine energy. The number three was harmony and balance; a synthesis of opposing forces. I was feeling a little hip having remembered that bit of trivia.

She caught me eyeing her satchel.

"I see that you're curious about what's in my luggage?" JX said.

"Yes, I suppose I was," I replied. I felt somewhat nosey.

As JX removed a set of bronze bowls from her satchel, she told me that they were Tibetan singing bowls. She actually traveled to Tibet to purchase them. As JX was arranging the bowls, I noticed in her open bag what appeared to be a deck of cards bearing an intricate etching of an angel, several books, and a small silk pouch tied with a golden string. Apparently detecting my interest, she told me that if I needed divine guidance, she could give me an Angel Card reading. JX went on to say that she also could read love auras and how that might be helpful if I was seeking romance or having trouble with relationships.

“And what does a thing like that cost?” I asked. I tried to maintain a respectful level of composure, but when she told me her fees, I couldn’t help but react.

“Do you realize that that is enough to provide for a family of four for a month here?” I asked. I was thinking of Wayan and how hard he worked to earn less money in a month than what JX charged for a 45-minute session of reading one’s “love aura,” whatever the heck that was.

I became somewhat concerned about what I might have gotten myself into financially.

As though reading my mind, JX said with a soft smile, “There is no charge for a healing session with the bowls, but I do appreciate a small donation.”

JX directed me to lie face down on my bed and relax, then proceeded to explain how the bowls worked by resonating with the body’s seven chakras.

Having once been a student and practitioner of yoga and meditation techniques that were rooted in Eastern tradition, I knew about chakras and understood their significance in healing and spiritual practices. I also knew that they actually have a basis in early anatomy, corresponding with the five major complexes of nerves along the spinal column and the two major parts of the brain, associated with lower and higher functioning. I didn’t know a great deal about the singing bowls, other than that their use as musical instruments dated back to Tibetan monasteries around the 8th Century AD, where they were used to begin and end daily meditations. I had heard them on relaxation discs and found the deep resonance produced by the bowls to be very soothing.

As JX placed a bowl at each chakra point, she explained how each resonated in a certain key, or harmonic tone, that corresponded with the natural frequency of the associated chakra.

“The bowls can detect the source or location in the body where there is illness or injury because there is a blockage of the energy flow through the chakra associated with that function or part of the body. The blockage causes an audible modification in the tone of the bowl’s vibration.” JX went on to explain that a recording is done of the session because it is a more reliable way of discerning subtle dissonance than trying to gauge by ear alone.

“Once the problem area is isolated, more emphasis can be placed on that chakra,” JX said, as she described how the bowls also could unblock the flow of energy because they seek to self-correct any dissonance in their tonal quality.

For the next 30 minutes or so, JX moved around and across my body, striking each bowl in turn, allowing the vibrations of the bowls to resonate into and throughout my body. JX remarked that my heart was very strong; one of the strongest she’d heard, but advised that the bowls had detected blockages in my lower three chakras. JX instructed me to remain very still, keeping my eyes closed and my mind empty of thought, in order

to allow the bowls to work. JX added that the residual vibrations would continue to move through the body with healing energy for several minutes following the last strike of the bowls. I expected the energy would stay, circulate the chakras, for as long as needed, but I suppose it depended on the healer.

When I opened my eyes a short while later, I felt very relaxed, but it quickly became clear that there had been no substantial improvement in my physical symptoms. When I turned to ask her if more sessions would be required, I realized that JX had vanished into the other room, as though fading into the trees on an afternoon breeze, along with the vibrations of her bowls.

I wasn't upset, or even especially surprised, that my Bali belly still held me captive. Maybe I was a bad patient? What I got was another in a sequence of strange afternoons on what I'd come to laughingly refer to as "Fantasy Island." The outcome was too bad, as there are true healers among us, but they tend not to charge an arm and a leg being aware of Spirit.

I wished her well.

JX's retreat earned her over \$20,000 and without the proper paperwork which she lacked it was illegal.

My next guest, "the doctor," was a first-time visitor to the island. The middle-aged man's stocky build, rosy cheeks, and big, bushy eyebrows reminded me of Grumpy the dwarf in Snow White. I chuckled to myself as I pictured him lumbering through the airport toting an ax instead of a single suitcase. His large, square face was accented by thick, black-rimmed glasses that gave him a stern and scholarly appearance. I asked about his flight and if he was experiencing any jet lag.

"No... no jet lag," he said as he brushed his short, stiff brown hair off of his perspiring forehead, "and I take special herbs to combat motion fatigue."

On the drive from the airport, I learned that he had been a practicing physician in his native Russia before emigrating to the United States a decade ago. He had arrived in New York with only \$20 USD to his name. He later relocated, settling in Los Angeles, where he established and operated a clinic as an acupuncturist, herbalist, and holistic healer. I asked what had brought him to Bali, to which he replied in his heavy accent, "I was curious what all the hype regarding healing on Bali was all about and wanted to find out for myself."

Once we arrived back at Siddharlo's, the doctor set about inspecting my bedroom with such attention to detail that I was tempted to ask him if he'd like a magnifying glass. He bounced on the sofa, opened and closed the refrigerator, checked the water pressure, and looked into, under, and behind every nook and cranny, all the while making grunts, hurumphs, hmmmms, and nods of acceptability or disapproval. He seemed to find everything in order. Well, almost everything. He stood staring at the bed and rubbing his chin as if it had just spoken to him, then asked if I had two wires. When I asked what he needed the wires for, he told me that he practiced the art of dowsing, as well as teaching it to others, thus adding to his ever-increasing resume of professed skills and talents. Dowsing, more commonly known as "divination" and best known as a method of locating underground water, is also employed for the purpose of locating metals, ore, oil, and even gravesites. What the doctor was looking for just now were signs of problematic energy flow.

I provided the wires as requested and watched as he bent them together and passed them over, under, and around the bed. When he'd completed the ritual, he announced that there were several veins of negative energy

in that area and was insistent that the bed be moved to another part of the room. I was determined to build a reputation for excellent hospitality and do whatever I could to assure the comfort and well-being of my guests, even if it meant going the extra mile, a philosophy that the doctor would put to the test over the next few weeks. Although I could see no real necessity in doing so, I acquiesced to his demands and moved the bed to a location more to his liking.

I asked him if there was anything else I could do for him before turning in. He advised me that he was a vegetarian, and asked if I could arrange delivery of fresh vegetables in the morning. “Did you know that before the collapse of communism in Russia, it was illegal to be a vegetarian?” he asked. “If you were discovered, you could actually be sent to prison.” He went on to say that he had helped to create the first vegetarian union group in Russia.

I thought it was a pretty radical idea and considered what possible reason the Russian government could have for meddling in the dietary proclivities of its populace. It was one of those profound moments of clarity in which I recognized how much I took for granted and was thankful I’d been spared many of the unpleasant circumstances that life had to offer.

“No, I didn’t know that. It is hard to even imagine,” I told him. I promised to see to the vegetable delivery and bade him goodnight.

I had heard that following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, a sizable number of Russia’s wealthy had relocated to Bali and invested large sums of money in property and business ventures and established their own expat community. They reportedly lived in proximity to one another, set up their own websites and were pretty much self-contained, choosing not to mingle with other communities, whether foreign or native. I hadn’t had any personal experience thus far.

My knowledge of communist Russia, too, was very limited, and over the next few weeks, I listened with interest as the doctor shared many stories of his life before the collapse of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Stories lavishly seasoned with boastful accounts of his own accomplishments and heroics that would have you believe that he could deliver a baby with one hand tied behind his back, diagnose some rare, obscure illness by reading tea leaves and “leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

I asked him if the movie, “Dr. Zhivago,” was realistic in its portrayal of the hardships endured during the revolution.

He thought about it for a moment before replying, “Some of it was true. You could wake up to find that a village of peasants had moved into your house.”

I nicknamed him “Dr. Zhivago” after that, which seemed to please him.

His petulance was only equaled by his miserliness. On his first morning as my guest, he presented me with a list of his expectations. Although it was posted clearly on the booking website what amenities were and were not included, he apparently chose to ignore it and leaned on me to act as his tour guide, transportation manager, and dating service, all at no extra cost.

The doctor grumbled and complained about the cost of everything, from a motorbike ride to an article of clothing, and haggled with the local merchants over even a few cents more than what he thought he should pay

for an item or service, frequently comparing Bali with India and saying how much cheaper things were there. His attitude about money seemed odd to me for a man who had lived behind the Iron Curtain and who, even now, lived in subsidized housing that he described as an apartment the size of a shoebox.

Apart from the many temple visits the doctor made on his daily outings, he was most interested in meeting with an authentic Balinese healer, more out of curiosity than need. During his stay, he connected with a fellow Russian on Facebook who was able to book a session with a healer through a Russian-owned hotel. Upon returning from the day's session, he told me how the healer had done a "body reading" and raved about having had the best massage he'd ever experienced. He didn't disclose what, if any, diagnosis and recommendations were made, but overall it had been a wonderful experience...except for paying the bill. He was upset and confused by what he considered an exorbitant price tag, having been under the impression that true healers offer their services requesting only donations as payment. He had apparently asked the healer about it, who responded that he was unaware of what was being charged by the hotel for providing his service.

When he wasn't out visiting temples and healers, taking in the sights or complaining about one thing or another, he was shopping for a wife and offering unsolicited medical services. His practice seemed to cover everything from hypnosis and past life regression therapy to dietary analysis and marriage counseling. No one was safe from diagnosis and treatment.

One day Wayan was confronted with the pronouncement that he would not live past the age of 40 due to complications from smoking cigarettes. His treatment plan for Wayan involved a session of hypnosis and acupuncture. Wayan was trying to be a good sport about it, but when he saw the box full of small needles, he was having none of it. He mumbled something about black magic and found an excuse to make a fast retreat.

The doctor's attention then focused on Wayan's wife, whom he diagnosed with marital insecurities and prescribed several hours of mental dowsing. Finally, he addressed my chronic stomach problems, naming improper diet as the culprit, once snatching a bag of chips from my hand to make his point. I had to laugh when he read the ingredients label and realized that the organic chips contained none of the offensive contents he was expecting. Nevertheless, he prescribed numerous herbs and nutritional supplements, many of which would be unavailable anywhere on the island.

After 22 days, it came time for the doctor to return home. As he prepared for his departure, I asked him what he thought of Bali. He said that he loved the Balinese temples and was very impressed with the unique spirituality and architecture of the indigenous people, but the pseudo-spiritual healing businesses that targeted the tourist dollar and were run predominantly by Western immigrants, he viewed with disdain.

"If I wanted to deal with the trendy and pretentious New Age scene and holistic medicine with an overinflated price tag, I wouldn't need to come to Bali. There's plenty of that in L.A."

I asked him if he would return to the island. He laughed and said, "You never know." We took pictures together, shook hands, and wished each other health, love, and clarity.

"Good luck with the wife search," I bid him farewell.

Siddharlo's fifth-dimensional train station in its first year of business accommodated more than 15 guests. Nazareno and Lisa were two of my youngest guests, gone from dawn to dusk, and I enjoyed "their paradise is

where I am” attitude. Both turned 30 years old in “The Bud” and had been backpacking Asia since they were 20. He was from Uruguay and she from Sweden. Both were yoga teachers. Marriage was a discussion point but not planned in their immediate future. Luckily for them, a local yoga shop contracted them to lead a “couples’ yoga,” but unfortunately the customers were few and far between, mostly due to the fact that Ubud was saturated with yoga instructors. Thus, I was constantly asked to lower their rent, and it raised the question: how did they manage financially?

It was unusual for me to meet young people who globe-trotted the world in the name of spirituality. Most people of their generation only wanted money. The two vegetarians wanted harmony and balance for the mind and body, not a mortgage and a fancy car. They were poster material with Lisa’s yoga-perfect figure, bright Swedish blonde hair, turquoise colored eyes, and a sun-healthy, freckled face. She was mature beyond her years and it gave her a magnetic attraction I found to be radiantly alive. Nazareno was the guy I always wanted to be. He loved life with a bungee jumper’s conviction. His yoga- and PADI-certified body was chiseled: stomach muscles and metal pipe arms sporting beach-burned tattoos. On top of his outdoorsman body was a strikingly handsome face that caused the local maids to giggle. Yet, he was so utterly unpretentious and comfortable with himself that his aura and smile pulled you in with an infectious likeability. No people, I thought, could be this happy and content. How to obtain such inner peace?



Nazareno

I was horribly jealous and regretted why I had not shaved my head and become a Zen monk when I was their age. That way I could have voluntarily absolved myself from my worldly possessions rather than being robbed of them. Should’ve, could’ve, and what-ifs twisted my thoughts into a pretzel of senseless, clouded exasperation.

“I am sorry to see you go,” I said.

“We really like it here, but a friend is willing to take us in for practically nothing. I hope you understand,” Lisa explained.

“Would you like to try the yellow coconut water?” I asked them. “The water inside them is considered sacred and used for ceremonial purposes. I was also told the water cleansed the intestines.”

“I would love to try it,” Lisa answered in plain English as if she had lived her entire life in Minnesota.

Wayan shimmied up a tree and cut down six coconuts. He then carefully took a hatchet and cut the top off. We poured the refreshing coconut water into three glasses.

“That’s really good.” Nazareno’s eyebrows lifted as he emptied his glass.

“There’s plenty more, so help yourselves.” I made a toast. “Here’s to your 10 years traveling on the dharma triangle: India, Thailand, and Bali.”

Lisa and Nazareno both raised their glasses in a toast.

“How are your yoga classes going?” I queried.

“Slow...” Nazareno answered.

“Do you know how to design a website?” Lisa asked.

“Yes, I can help you with that,” I offered. “Are you looking to promote yourself?”

“We were thinking of our own studio. Not sure where or how yet, but that is our direction,” Nazareno explained in his Spanish-tinged accent.

“Nazareno, I have been curious about one thing. How have you managed to live so long abroad? Do you get money from your parents?” I asked respectfully.

“My parents have no money, amigo,” he laughed. “One time I worked for a year at a car rental agency in Amsterdam and saved.”

Lisa showed no interest in the question. I calculated that working one year at a car rental company could not cover the next nine years abroad, even for backpacking. Plane fare and passport visas cost money. If they didn’t want to tell me how they managed it, I didn’t press the question. Most foreigners I met on Bali pretended to be “something else,” so the vague response came as no surprise.

“I hope you write a book about your journey. My 22-year-old daughter will be your first reader.” I shook his hand. “Thank you for making Siddharlo’s home. Please tell your friends about me.”

They zipped up their packs. Nazareno pushed a pair of complimentary yoga class passes into my hand. “Stop by, amigo.”

“The month is already gone,” I said and hugged Lisa.

“I’d like you to have these as a token of our gratitude for your hospitality,” Lisa said and handed me two yoga mats. “We’ll come back and say hi.”

I was sorry to see them go...but they all come and go.

The Murder at Siddharlo's Guesthouse



Anne-Marie Drozdz (49-year-old school teacher)

After two and a half years of trying to reinvent myself in Bali, I faced the prospect of ending up as a 60-year-old vagrant on my stepmother's doorstep. The lengthy building process on my Siddharlo's Guesthouse had depleted my financial resources and much of my resilience.

I had bookings for the guesthouse, but not enough savings to get me through days or weeks of vacancy. I couldn't bear the thought of losing the place, having to leave Tuti, and heading out, yet again, on that rock 'n' roll highway.

In preparing the guesthouse for an upcoming guest, I reflected upon how far I had come, and how much my Indonesian wife, Tuti, and I had accomplished together. The hard work of establishing the guest house was past us.

The land had been blessed, and the house had been blessed. Surely, blood, sweat, and blessings would usher in better days. I noticed a hoop, left by my last retreat promoter — cat woman, and began to ponder the circular nature of things.

I congratulated myself for adapting to life on the equator, the center ribbon of the planet. In short, I felt no centrifugal force where I sat. The further away from the center, the more my head would spin.

With no one looking, I slipped the hoop over my head and tried several times to circle it around my neck, arms, and waist. Inevitably, I could not sustain the momentum and the hoop fell to the ground. I soon stopped trying to force it — and my body — into doing something that it did not want to do. By simply holding it up to the sky, the hoop revealed itself as a portal. I saw a serpent eating its tail, symbolizing birth and rebirth, the cyclical nature of life. And I saw myself evolving through the center of the lens, the telescope now reversed.

I understood the metaphor of the reversed telescope but had not previously experienced it. In childhood, looking ahead at life is like looking through the small end of the telescope. The view is expansive; life's end, a distant vanishing point.

In advanced "senior" years, one's perspective on life is like looking through the opposite end of the telescope. When I looked through the portal at age 60, the vanishing point appeared to be parked right under my nose.

Losing the guesthouse would dump me, full circle, back to my beginning on Bali. And I would have no money to rebuild my life there. I still had time to make this work for Tuti and me. For the moment, I could see far beyond a clearing in the jungle, and admire the garden that Tuti was tending, just beyond the Siddharlo's doorstep.

I felt fortunate to get a long-term booking and looked forward to receiving my next guest — Anne-Marie Drozd.

Months earlier, Anne-Marie had contacted me through Facebook, inquiring about renting my place. We agreed to meet a few days later at the opening to the Monkey Forest in Ubud.

When we first met, I learned that she was originally from England, single, and had no children. She described herself as a seasoned traveler and a teacher on a pilgrimage.

"I've been traveling in Asia for the past year," she told me. "I was a teacher in Vietnam for 6 years. I've traveled the back roads of Cambodia, and lived in Nepal."

I gave her a ride through the dark jungle of the Monkey Forest, back to her room in Nyuh Kuning. She gave me a rental deposit — and a hug — and said that she'd be back in two months.

In the short time I spent with her, she struck me as the type of role-model teacher who could have helped me as a struggling youth. She seemed like the kind of teacher who could change your life, the teacher you never forgot; the one for whom you spent the day polishing the biggest, brightest, red apple to place on her desk. I sensed that she could bring out the best in her students. If she asked for a volunteer to stay after class, every student would raise a hand.

I met her on her second trip to Bali. When she returned on her third visit, she was physically ill. Previously, in Nepal, she had been hospitalized for more than two weeks with dysentery. She had black rings under her eyes — part of the lingering, visible effects of dehydration and exhaustion.

I showed her around the guesthouse. To the best of her ability, she tried to follow. After a few minutes, she stretched out on the couch and propped her head up on a pillow. Her voice was zapped from even that little bit of exertion. She pulled back a strand of blonde hair, which fell halfway down her neck, and continued to talk.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" She asked.

I told her that she could smoke outside. Then she asked how she could get some food. Since she was so sick, I went to a local warung and brought a meal back for her. When I returned with her food, we resumed our conversation.

She said she started to “feel bad” again a few days earlier. I gave her the number of the local clinic and suggested she go there if she still felt ill in the next few days. Then I asked her about her plans for this stay in Bali.

“I have ideas for new art in the education business in Bali,” she told me. “I’m also interested in creating a foundation in Nepal that will help disadvantaged youth through film and drama.” She added, “Also, I want to work on my book. It’s about my parents. I have some serious issues I want to work out.”

She asked whether I knew any therapists.

I admired her gumption. I told her that I was working on a book, too, and offered to help with her writing. I also shared that I had issues to resolve with my parents too and that I was working on them.

During the next two days, I often checked in on her. Most of the time she slept through the day, too weak to get up and around. Then she sent me a text message, asking me to come by. I ended up arranging a ride for her to the hospital. She was diagnosed with a viral form of dysentery, as well as a bladder infection. She received antibiotics for the infection and was told that no medicine could treat dysentery, but it should clear on its own within a week.

Several more days passed.

While she recovered, Tuti and I continued to stop by, clean the villa, and change her linen. I also found a maid to cook and run errands for her until she felt better. The antibiotics must have helped, because she began to perk up, and planned to soon renew her visa in Bangkok.

The next 36 hours changed everything.

First, she told me about two unusual occurrences at the guesthouse.

On May 19, at 7 p.m., she called to tell me that she saw a “cross-eyed man with a flashlight” sitting on the property fence. When she told him to leave, he exposed himself, then ran away. When I asked neighbors about this person, I learned that there was a local man considered to be a mentally disabled, “harmless nuisance” who frequents the area. I told them that in the Western world, this behavior is considered an illegal act called “indecent exposure.”

Anne-Marie felt shaken by the encounter. I told her that the next day we could take a look at the construction workers next door.

On the morning of May 20, Anne-Marie, Tuti, and I stood before a crew of seven workers from Maduran and Java. Anne-Marie determined that “the flasher” was not among them. I asked her if she wanted to file a police report on the cross-eyed man. She responded with compassion, “No, not if it means he’ll go to jail.” Before we walked away, one of the workers, who called himself “Samsul,” said, “Don’t worry, boss. I will watch over your house.”

At noon, she called me again. She said that two local girls came to the door, asking for work. She had no jobs for them, and they left without further incident. Perhaps they knew that she had a maid, and were hoping to make a little money themselves. While unusual, the visit by the young girls wasn’t troubling. Still, I reminded

her to latch the gate and lock the doors. That night, she did not return my calls, nor was she online. I often found her sleeping in a bed during the day, and I thought it best to let her rest.

The next day, May 21, was the Balinese holiday of Galungan. The maid went to the guesthouse to make the traditional ceremony for the victory of dharma over adharma. This marks the time when the ancestral spirits visit the Earth. Because Anne-Marie's motorbike was gone, the maid assumed she was out. She noticed that the door was open, but did not suspect anything amiss. The work crew from next door had left for the holiday.

On May 22, at 4 p.m., I began to worry when Anne Marie did not answer my second phone call to her. I went over to check in on her and bring fresh towels. When I arrived, her motorbike was still gone. The doors were wide open, and I noticed that one of the sliding glass doors had been knocked out of its track. I shouted from the steps

"Hello, Anne-Marie. Are you home?" There was no answer.

Out of concern, I decided to step in and look around. I entered the living room, then past the open bedroom door. I looked closer, then froze in terror. Her lifeless body lay on the bedroom floor, her face covered with a black cloth.

My adrenaline kicked in, my heart pounded, and my fists clenched in sweat-drenched fear. Every part of my body started to shake. I fumbled for my cell and realized I hadn't brought it. The landline worked, but I thought it quicker to steer straight for help in person.

I met the owner of a nearby resort, where I managed to get out a few stuttered, gasped details. He called the local village security. I returned to my other rented home to tell Tuti about a possible murder. Tuti left immediately to go to the police station. I was in shock. After the police inspected her body, they said, "This is the first foreigner murdered in Ubud."

That night, the police placed Tuti and me in separate rooms and questioned us until 5 a.m. We cooperated and offered as much information as we could. I sat next to a young Balinese detective who took my statement down on his manual typewriter.

The non-English speaking detective struggled politely to get my facts straight. Emotions ran high. I could see a tear in an officer's eyes over this tragedy, and the worry on their faces. Occasional break-ins and purse-snatchings are troubling enough. I sensed that they felt as though their reputation was on the line; perhaps the safety of Ubud and its image as a safe tourist destination for women.

"Is this a witness statement or a confession of guilt?" I asked. "Do I need a lawyer?"

The detective pointed to a word at the top of the document: Saki (witness) statement. I must have repeated my story a dozen times before the police finally brought Tuti back into the room. She looked petrified.

With Tuti at my side, the officers took both of our statements and cross-examined our accounts. Satisfied that our information and accounts matched, they then allowed us to order some food and get some fresh air. We sat outside on the curb, in front of the station. Tuti, who had quit smoking cigarettes, started chain-smoking.

How effectively could the police department function in developing Ubud? The station lights flickered, the toilets had no water, and the Internet was dead. At least, using manual typewriters was faster than writing down statements by hand.

Around 2 a.m., I thought to check Anne-Marie's cell phone. To my utter disbelief, her phone was active. I heard ringing, but no answer. Then, five minutes later, came the return call. I jumped up and handed the detective my phone. Why the police didn't check her phone first, I had no idea. I gave the Balinese police a lot of credit, though. With little more than bare fists and cell phones, they would not rest until the case was solved. I hoped that they had GPS tracking capability. I didn't know after the confirmation of her cell working what the police plan was.

Sometime in the night, when police obtained a copy of Anne-Marie's passport, and they were mad at me for not having a copy of it, they officially confirmed that the dead woman was Anne-Marie Drozdz.

Evidence, they said, indicated that she had been beaten, raped, and strangled. Tuti was already crying, and I joined her. The trouble for me was that she failed to register her passport with the police when she took up residence in my guesthouse. So, they blamed me and the \$30,000 fine that came with it.

A few years earlier, Tuti had worked as an informant for the East Java police. During that time she befriended a police officer who became the number two commander in the Bali police department in nearby Gianyar. Because of that chance relationship, I believe that Tuti was able to save me from additional scrutiny and the huge fine. The police let us return home, and placed me under "soft house arrest." We were not under suspicion; we were free to move about as we pleased, but they did not want us to leave Bali.

We were also sworn to silence regarding the case. Anything we said that conflicted with police statements could be perceived as interfering with police business. That could subject us both to jail time, and, in my case, deportation.

The first break in the case came when the Balinese construction boss admitted to lying about one of the workers he hired. The worker came from Java. His real name was Hambali. He often worked under assumed names because he had a criminal record for theft. The next break came when police traced Anne-Marie's phone and motorbike to the Java city of Surabaya. Through further investigation, police caught the suspect and arrested him in his new apartment in Jakarta. Under later questioning, he confessed that he had broken away from the crew and returned to the building site alone on Monday, May 21, committed the crime on Tuesday, May 22, then left Bali that night at 10 p.m. on Anne-Marie's motorbike.

Police also arrested the construction boss, confiscated the workers' tools, and halted construction due to the lack of permits. Neither the cross-eyed man nor the two girls were investigated.

Meanwhile, news of the crime went viral world wide.

On June 9, 20 days later, police escorted Hambali to the villa to reenact the crime. He arrived in handcuffs, head down, and avoided eye contact. Chills ran through me when I immediately recognized him in his orange prison suit. He was the same worker who promised, "Don't worry, boss. I will watch over your house." His name was not Samsul, as he had said; it was Hambali.



Hambali — murderer

The 32-year-old criminal looked more like a street beggar than a person capable of murder. Hambali was short and paper-thin; less than five feet tall, 120 pounds. His bony face bore the nondescript mask of ignorance and poverty. His home was the area called Tangerang, part of greater Jakarta but in West Java.



Balinese Police

He began by saying that he had crept in through the front door. If his account is to be believed, he did not have a break-in. At this point, how and when the door went off track is unclear. Perhaps, on his way out. But there did not appear to be signs of forced entry.

In brief, he said that Anne-Marie was sleeping. He raped and strangled her, which ended in a pool of blood on the floor. Satisfied that she was dead, he quickly got a knife, picked a cabinet lock, stole her money, grabbed her laptop, phone, camera, and sped away on her motorbike. In 15 minutes, the life of a caring, loving, 49-year-old teacher was gone.

In June 2013, Anne-Marie attended Awesomeness Fest, and in February of 2014, she attended iLAB Accelerator (Entrepreneurs Institute) in Ubud. She wrote that both programs helped her focus on a new path “aligned with passion and purpose.” She looked forward to her projects in Bali and Nepal and working on her book.

“I seem to be looking and feeling younger by the day,” she wrote of her experiences. “Freaky events of synchronicity seem to be coming at me on an almost daily basis, and I go to bed every night now with a huge grin on my face, as opposed to floods of tears as in the previous years.”

In the days before her death, she had slowly begun to rebuild her energy, ready to once again embrace “a whole new world opening up in front of me.” In this life, she would never again have that chance.

The village of Ubud held a public, candlelight vigil in her honor, and authorities allowed me to hold a private memorial ceremony in the villa. I invited the other construction workers. We lit candles and prayed. We prayed for Anne-Marie, of course, but also Hambali. Perhaps if he had a teacher like Anne-Marie, who aimed to empower disadvantaged youth, he would have appreciated the value of his own life and that of others.

Despite what happened, and aside from burglary, I do believe that Ubud is still one of the safest places in the world. It is a pearl of peace in an ocean of violence.

On June 30, the sacred Balinese cleansing ceremony of mecaru resi gana took place at the villa. In the Balinese Hindu tradition, the ceremony is required to help transition and bring closure for the soul of one who’s passed, and to heal the soul of the land and community. A special blessing from the Brahman would bring the world back into balance.



My guest house—once a dream was also gone forever.

By village law, all ceremonial expenses are the responsibility of the house or landowner. To pay the \$2,000 fee, I sold my motorbike and electric guitar. I let the guitar go for much less than it was worth. I sold it to a 20-something Russian who never imagined he'd be able to own a guitar like mine. He was ecstatic. I took some small comfort in knowing that amid these tragic events, one young life was changed for the better.

Three months after the day Anne-Marie died, Hambali was sentenced to just 18 years in prison. In the United States, a conviction for first-degree, premeditated murder can carry a death sentence or life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. In Indonesia, depending on the circumstances, a conviction for illegal drug possession or dealing can mean heavy fines, many years in prison, or death. The light sentence sent her family, back in England, into a rage of protest. I didn't blame them.

Anne-Marie was a seeker, fueled by change through education. As others noted on the Awesomeness Fest website, she was "a beautiful, kind, generous, fascinating woman . . . living her dream in Bali."

May we always remember Anne-Marie Drozdz and be inspired by her life, her teachings, and her dreams.

I could no longer make the land payments, and the ordeal had left Tuti and me traumatized. The empty shell of our future together on Bali sat abandoned by the untended garden.

I went to the guesthouse and sat down where I had shortly done before Anne-Marie arrived.

There was no hoop, no portal, no telescope that could reveal the road ahead. Trying to retrace each step or misstep, and figure out the "why" of it all was like trying to lift coconut water with a fork. The experience on Bali roughed me up and spun me 360, but spared my life. I could see and hear, I could feel. I could fill my lungs with the sweetness of the thriving jungle. I faced a new beginning, not the end.

Throughout my life, music had been my passion, my comfort, and my way to transcend boundaries. No note, no chord, no song, no sound could undo the series of events and bring back Anne-Marie. But I still had a voice in this world, and if healing were to begin, it had to begin with me. I reached for my acoustic guitar and slowly began to sing “a song in every step.” The words did not come easily.

Press Coverage

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<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/indonesian-arrested-over-murder-british-woman-100914898.html>

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<https://www.hinckleytimes.net/news/local-news/murder-probe-after-hinckley-teacher-7171265>



Introduction

Why “Mr. Bean”?

People have asked me for years why I call this Mr. Bean’s Big Javanese Wedding.

The answer is simple.

Standing with a guitar over my shoulder, I was an obvious curiosity in a small East Javanese village where few foreigners had ever visited. Every walk through the neighborhood drew smiles, waves, and laughter. Children followed me down the street. Grandmothers stared from their front porches. People greeted me as if I had stepped out of their television.

Someone decided I looked like Mr. Bean.

The nickname spread through the village almost overnight.

I never objected. Rowan Atkinson’s famous character has an extraordinary ability to stumble into impossible situations with equal parts confusion, determination, and luck.

That wasn’t a bad description of my introduction to Javanese bureaucracy.

What follows is a true story.

Every conversation, ceremony, misunderstanding, and bureaucratic obstacle happened exactly as described. Some names have been changed to protect privacy, but the events remain faithful to memory.

This is not simply a wedding story.

It is a story about family, culture, patience, humor, and discovering that when you marry someone from another world, you don’t just gain a spouse—you gain an entirely new way of seeing life.

Welcome to my Javanese wedding.

*“When you marry someone
from another world,
you don’t just gain a spouse—
you gain an entirely new
way of seeing life.”*

About the Author

Arlo Hennings is a musician, songwriter, producer, and former music executive. His life has taken him from Minnesota to Los Angeles, New York, and across the world—experiences that shaped the stories, songs, and perspective behind this memoir.

Will you marry me?

It wasn't in a fancy restaurant. It wasn't on a beach at sunset. It was on a small wooden bench in front of Tuti's family home in Pandaan, East Java.

We had been together for more than a year. We had laughed, we had fought, and we had learned how to survive each other's cultures, languages and families. I knew I wanted the rest of my life with her.

I had rehearsed what I would say a hundred times in my head. When the moment finally came, my heart was racing like a teenager's.

"Tuti," I said, "will you marry me?"

She didn't answer right away. She just smiled, looked down for a moment, and then said softly,

"I will. But first... you must marry Indonesia."

I had no idea what that meant.

I would learn soon enough.

You don't just marry the woman in Indonesia. You marry her family, her village, her past, and her future."



The Journey to East Java

After we decided to marry, I had to go to Pandaan, East Java, to meet Tuti's family and ask for their blessing.

It was my first trip to East Java. From Bali, I flew to Surabaya and then took a bus **south** toward the mountains.

The farther we got from the city, the more the landscape changed. The traffic disappeared. The air got cooler. Life slowed down.

Rice paddies stretched in every direction. Villages were small and quiet. People lived close to the land—and to each other.

I didn't speak the language. I didn't know anyone. I carried one guitar, a small bag, and a heart full of hope.

And a thousand questions.

*You don't just travel in Indonesia.
You cross from one world
into another.*



Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

Morning in Uncle Matt's House

Before meeting Tuti, most of the Indonesian women I had encountered worked as domestic staff, shop tellers, or waitresses. Tuti was the first Javanese woman I had ever really known, and my understanding of her culture was severely limited.

She was marginally educated, deeply humble, and incredibly *malu* (shy). She had never heard of the Occupy Movement, women's liberation, feminism, the #MeToo movement, Woodstock, or 9/11. Her knowledge of the United States was limited to a few pop stars and the name of the current president.

Given the language barrier alone, any betting man would have called our relationship a long shot. But I chose to view the glass as half full.

On the big day, Uncle Matt's house was a hive of activity. The pink cement walls showed their age with long, character-building cracks, and a century-old, black-and-white family photo hung distinctly crooked above the door.

Under the pale twilight of a single low-watt ceiling bulb, a dozen Javanese women sat in a circle on the floor, efficiently prepping gift boxes of chicken, vegetables, rice, and chili sauce. Others were busy clearing the living room furniture to make space for the guests.

By the time I finished my morning coffee, Tuti had already vanished to a salon. My sole responsibility for the morning was to bathe using a bucket of cold water.



*A hive of activity in Uncle Matt's house.
Everyone had a job.*

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Understanding a Traditional Javanese Wedding

Although every region of Java has its own customs, most traditional weddings follow a sequence of symbolic rituals celebrating family, commitment, and community. The ceremony described in this chapter reflects traditions commonly practiced in East Java.

BEFORE THE WEDDING

Lamaran – The formal marriage proposal in which the groom's family visits the bride's family to ask for her hand.

Siraman – A ritual purification in which the bride and groom are bathed with flower-infused water by parents and elders.

Adol Dawet – The sale of cendol (dawet) using clay coins, symbolizing prosperity and abundant guests.

Midodareni – The evening before the wedding, when the bride remains in seclusion while relatives gather and the groom's family presents gifts.

Seserahan – Gifts from the groom's family symbolizing his commitment and ability to provide.

THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY

Ijab Kabul – The official religious marriage vows that legally solemnize the union.

Panggih – The ceremonial meeting of the bride and groom as husband and wife.

Balangan Gantal – The couple throws small rolls of betel leaves at one another, symbolizing acceptance despite each other's imperfections.

Wijikan – The bride washes the groom's feet as a traditional gesture of respect and devotion.

Kacar Kucur – The groom pours symbolic gifts of rice, seeds, and coins into the bride's hands, representing his responsibility to provide.

Dahar Kembang – The newlyweds feed one another, symbolizing harmony and shared prosperity.

FAMILY BLESSINGS

Sungkeman – The bride and groom kneel before parents and elders to ask forgiveness and receive their blessings.

Tampa Kaya – The groom symbolically entrusts his earnings to his wife, recognizing her role in managing the household.

Unduh Mantu – A celebration hosted by the groom's family to formally welcome the bride into her new family.

Not every ritual appears in every Javanese wedding. Customs vary by region, family tradition, and religious practice.

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

A Walk Through the Village

Clean and dressed, I took a stroll through the village, carefully tiptoeing down a broken pathway paved with chicken droppings and navigating around the open sewage creeks that crisscrossed the neighborhood.

Unlike Bali, which is overrun with wild dogs, this Javanese *kampung* (village) preferred feral cats and caged pet birds. The dense grid of weather-beaten houses was brightened by vibrant flower pots in shades of red, blue, and pink. Front terraces and laundry lines opened right onto the street, creating an immediate sense of community.

I was an instant celebrity. Children chasing each other with ceremonial *pecut* whips paused to look at me. Power lines were tangled with lost kites, the air smelled of burning rubbish, and locals greeted me with a cheerful, drawn-out, "Gerd m-o-o-ning, Miztrrrr!"

Women held out their babies for me to see, smiling and blushing. I could only imagine what they were thinking. For all intents and purposes, it was as if Mr. Bean had stepped out of their television screens and directly into their village. I received rock-star treatment, and I loved every minute of it.

Turning a corner, I ran into a *badut*—a colorful traveling street clown who entertained neighborhoods with music, comedy, and playful performances.

By 3:00 PM, the loudspeakers from the local mosque reminded me that it was time to head back.



A badut (street clown) entertaining the neighborhood from door to door.



EXPERIENCE IT

Meet the Badut

Scan the QR code to watch the original video filmed in East Java.



For all intents and purposes, it was as if Mr. Bean had stepped out of their television screens and directly into their village.

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

The Wedding Ceremony

A traditional Javanese Islamic wedding is a beautiful, ancient affair steeped in music, folklore, and mysticism. Hour by hour, Uncle Matt's house packed tightly with relatives. Fortunately for them, they only had to memorize one new Western name. I, on the other hand, stood no chance with theirs. Guests arrived in their finest sarongs, *peci* hats, and colorful hijabs, offering a slight bow before taking their places on the floor.

Tuti had wisely vetoed the traditional, Aladdin-style groom's attire. Instead, she asked Uncle Matt to outfit me in one of his old business suits. It was too late to buy a new one, so I squeezed into a jacket and trousers that smelled distinctively of musty footwear. Uncle Matt generously doused me in cologne, which did not improve the odor profile so much as complicate it. I rounded out the ensemble with new black shoes, a gold tie, and a traditional *peci* hat edged with golden leaves.

Looking in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. I wasn't a man defined by past relationship failures anymore. I straightened my tie, adjusted my hat, and told my reflection, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

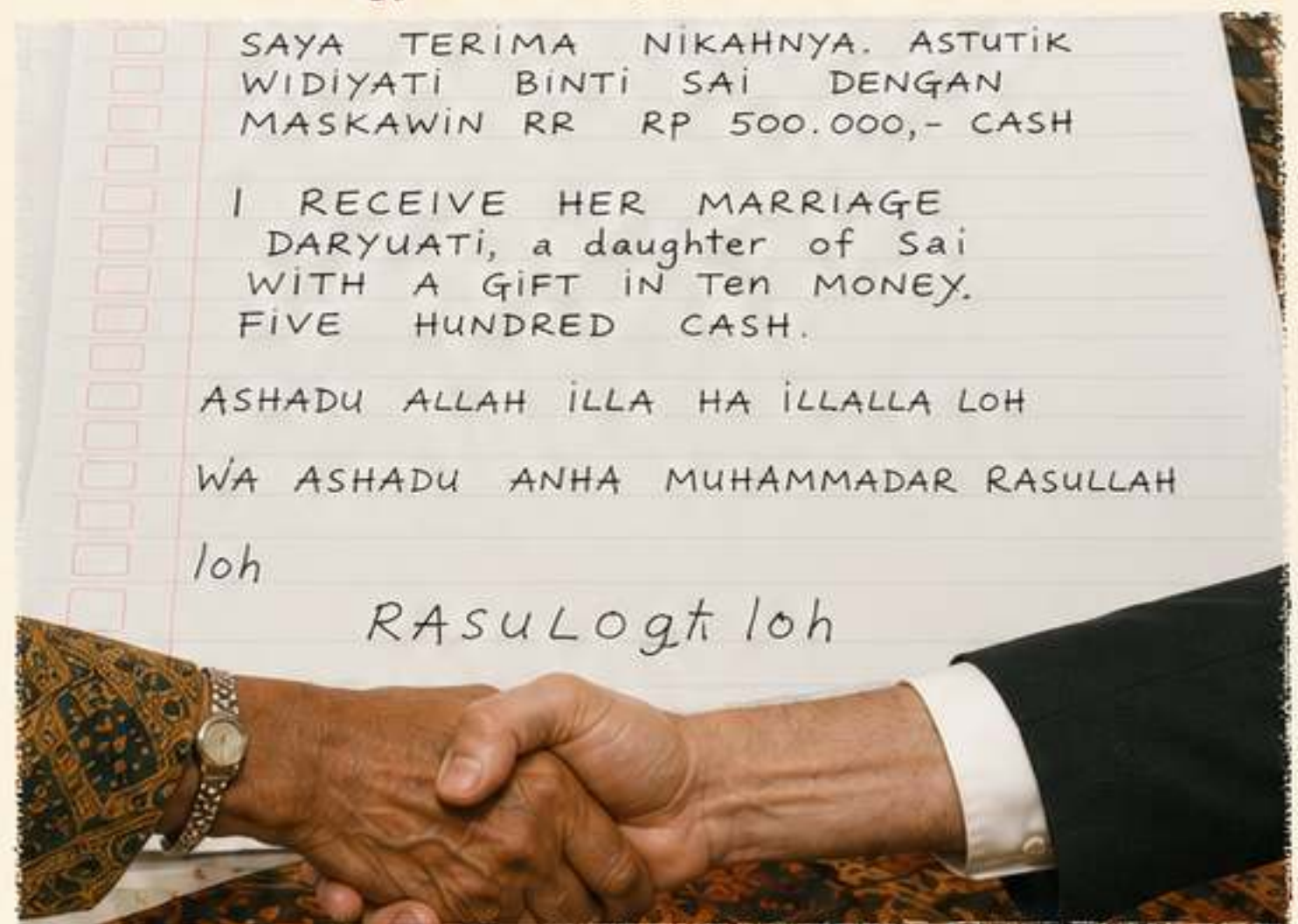
Pak Modin, the elderly holy man, arrived and seated us at a small table on the floor. He sat across from me and asked me to recite my vow. When I did, he shook his head in immediate disapproval. I had memorized the wrong version.

As he scribbled out a correction, Tuti's semi-English-speaking cousin leaned over and whispered, "You have a few minutes to get this right. Otherwise, you'll be reciting it in front of everyone until you do."

I furiously practiced the script...



I receive her marriage daryuati, a daughter of Sai, with a gift in ten money five hundred cash.



On my second attempt, Pak Modin smiled in approval. I had it right.



EXPERIENCE IT

Watch Our Wedding

Scan the QR code to watch the original video of our wedding in East Java.



"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

Lost in Translation

On my second attempt, Pak Modin smiled in approval.

Tuti's older brother, Kamid, stepped forward to represent her late father, and when her turn came, Tuti glowed like a *widodari* (goddess) as she flawlessly delivered her vows.

Sitting there without a guide or an interpreter, I had absolutely no idea what was happening.

I misplaced the wedding ring.

I handed over the dowry at the completely wrong moment, effectively reversing our traditional roles to the absolute delight of her family.

They thought I was a natural comedian.

Every few minutes someone would gently reposition me, point toward another relative, or motion for me to sit, stand, smile, or sign something. I simply followed directions and hoped for the best.

For everyone else, the ceremony unfolded according to centuries of tradition.

For me, it felt like trying to perform in a play without ever having seen the script.

When we finally paused for photographs, I caught my first good look at Tuti.

She looked absolutely stunning in her white lace *kebaya*.

At that moment, every bureaucratic headache, every language barrier, and every ounce of uncertainty disappeared.

Whatever happened next, I knew I had made the right decision.

The ceremony concluded with prayers before a long reception line of relatives and neighbors. I greeted each guest by taking their hands and touching them respectfully to my forehead.

Only then were we finally allowed to share Tuti's old bedroom without bringing theological shame upon the household.

The day had been a whirlwind of confusion, laughter, customs I barely understood, and extraordinary kindness.

I thought the hard part was over.

It wasn't.



Tuti and me after the vows were finally accepted.



Tuti's older brother, Kamid, who represented her late father.



With Tuti's family after the ceremony.

*"I thought the hard part was over.
It wasn't."*

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

The Paper That Wasn't Worth the Ink

Two days after the wedding, Pak Modin called me to his office with a long face.

"Maaf, Arlo," he said gently. "There is a problem. Your marriage is declared void."

Void. Just like that.

Some bureaucratic requirement had been missed or a box left unchecked. No one seemed to agree on what went wrong. What was certain was that, in the eyes of the law, Tuti and I were nothing more than a dramatic costume change.

I felt like I had been hit by a chicken.

We laughed about it later, but at that moment my stomach dropped to my sandals.

To make it legal, we would have to start over—this time at the Department of Religious Affairs in Pandaan, an hour north of Malang.

Marriage in Indonesia isn't just a celebration. It's a multi-step bureaucratic pilgrimage with more paperwork than a small business loan.

But we were in it now. For real this time.

We gathered the documents, straightened our kebaya and batik, and headed into the belly of the system.

Our honeymoon would have to wait.



Two days after the wedding, we learned our marriage was declared void.

IN THE EYES OF THE LAW,
WE WERE STRANGERS.

*The celebration was real.
The paperwork was not.*



*Our next stop:
The Department of Religious Affairs
in Pandaan.*



*One more office.
One more set of documents.*



*Another trip. Another office.
Another round of paperwork.*

“Marriage in Indonesia isn't just a celebration. It's a multi-step bureaucratic pilgrimage with more paperwork than a small business loan.”



Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

The Missing Box

The paperwork said we weren't married.
Not just a technicality. Declared void.
Batal.

I stared at the words on the letter from the Department of Religious Affairs as if they might change if I blinked.

"Your marriage file is incomplete," the letter explained. "Therefore, your marriage is void. Please resubmit the required documents."

We had done everything right—according to custom, according to tradition, according to Pak Modin.

But according to the government, one small box on one small form had been left unchecked. And no one caught it at the time.

That tiny empty box erased our wedding.

In Indonesia, love may be blind, but bureaucracy has 20/20 vision.

Now it was our turn to enter the labyrinth.

Another trip. Another office. Another stack of forms. Another "come back tomorrow."

We gathered every document we could find—birth certificates, ID cards, photos, letters, witness statements.

We photocopied. We stamped. We signed.
We waited. We smiled.

We did it all over again.

Because this time, we weren't just playing the part.

This time, we were getting it right.

Love had brought us together.

Paperwork would have to keep us together.

KEMENTERIAN AGAMA REPUBLIK INDONESIA
KANTOR URUSAN AGAMA
KECAMATAN PANDAAN KABUPATEN PASURUAN
Jl. Raya Surabaya – Malang Km. 48 Pandaan 67156 Telp. (0343) 631171

Nomor : Kua.13.09/2/PP.00/1234/2012
Lampiran : -
Hal : Pemberitahuan

Pandaan, 24 Juli 2012

Kepada Yth.
Sdr. Arlo Hennings
di
Pandaan

Assalamu'alaikum Wr. Wb.

Setelah dilakukan penelitian berkas pernikahan Saudara dengan Sdri. Tuti Indrawati, maka dengan ini kami beritahukan bahwa berkas pernikahan Saudara dinyatakan **TIDAK SAH (BATAL)** karena berkas tidak lengkap.

Demikian pemberitahuan ini kami sampaikan agar dapat dilengkapi sesuai dengan ketentuan yang berlaku.

Wassalamu'alaikum Wr. Wb.

Kepala KUA
Moch. Syaiful Hadi, S.Ag.
NIP. 19700315 199503 1 001

TIDAK SAH BATAL

The letter that declared our marriage void.

WELCOME TO THE LABYRINTH

Different window.

Different clerk.

Different answer.

Same result:

Come back tomorrow.



One window leads to another. Patience is required.



Stamped.



Photocopied.



Signed.



Filed. Again.

“ *In Indonesia, love may be blind, but bureaucracy has 20/20 vision.* ”

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

The Consulate Solution

Back in the U.S., I called the State Department. The nice woman on the phone said, "You need to contact the U.S. Consulate in Surabaya."

So I did.

Within a week, I received an email from the Vice Consul.

He had read my story and said, "We'll help you get this fixed."

He sent me a list of documents, explained the process, and even offered encouragement.

For the first time in weeks, I felt like someone was on our side.

Our next trip: Surabaya.

The U.S. Consulate was modern, efficient, and air-conditioned—just like America.

We submitted our file. We answered questions. We signed more papers.

The Vice Consul reviewed everything personally.

A few days later, we received the news we had been praying for.

FOR THE FIRST TIME
IN WEEKS, I FELT LIKE
SOMEONE WAS ON OUR SIDE.

*Hope has an address:
U.S. Consulate Surabaya.*



United States Consulate General
Surabaya, Indonesia

Dear Mr. Arlo Hennings,

Thank you for contacting the U.S. Consulate General Surabaya regarding your marriage in Indonesia.

We will be happy to assist you.

Please find below the list of documents required to begin the process of having your marriage legally recognized.

Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

R. T. Williams

Robert T. Williams
Vice Consul

DOCUMENTS REQUIRED:

- ☒ Birth Certificate
- ☒ Passport Copy
- ☒ Marriage Documents
- ☒ Divorce Decree (with Apostille)
- ☒ Photos
- ☐ Affidavits / Statements

An email that changed everything.



Our next stop: Surabaya.



Efficient. Professional. Helpful.



Relief—and a lot more paperwork.



The day our marriage was finally recognized.

A few days later, we returned to the Consulate.

The Vice Consul handed me back our file with a smile.

"Your marriage is now legally recognized by the United States."

Just like that.

All the confusion, the void letter, the missing box, the extra trips, the translations, the stamps, the money, the waiting—

It had finally paid off.

But the journey wasn't over yet.

There was one more stop on our pilgrimage.

The big one.

Washington, D.C.

To the place where ink becomes law.

JUST LIKE THAT.

*All the confusion.
The waiting.
The stamps.
It had finally
paid off.*

“ *Hope has an address. Bureaucracy has a passport. Love has the patience to use both.*

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

Married Again.

After weeks of paperwork and waiting, the day finally arrived.

There was no big church, no white aisle, no tuxedos.

There was a small KUA office, our families, a few friends, and a mountain of emotion.

Tuti wore her kebaya—elegant, traditional, and breathtaking.

I wore a suit and a rented songkok. We were equal parts nervous and excited.

The penghulu spoke in Indonesian. We answered "Ya".

Twice.

And with that, we were husband and wife.

No confetti. No Champagne.

Just smiles, tears, and a whole lot of relief.

It wasn't the wedding we dreamed of back in the States.

It was something better.

It was real.

It was ours.

It was the start of our life together.

SIMPLE. SINCERE. SACRED.

That's the Javanese way.



In a small room, with our families and the penghulu, two simple words changed everything.

WE ANSWERED "YA".
TWICE.

AND WITH THAT,
WE WERE
HUSBAND AND WIFE.



The signatures that sealed our promise.



Two families. One new beginning.



Fresh flowers and tradition.



A ring. A promise.



Our marriage book.



Together. Hand in hand.



Sweet tea. Sweet life.

“It wasn't the wedding we dreamed of back in the States.
It was something better. It was real. It was ours.”

Mr. Bean's Big Javanese Wedding

Bureaucracy, Chicken Poop, and "I Do"

Married Again.

The day was simple, but full of heart.
There were no tuxedos,
no white aisle, no choir.
Just family. Just friends.
Just faith and tradition.

Our families prayed.
The penghulu led.
The words were spoken.
The promise was made.

Rings were exchanged—
not for show,
but as a symbol
of trust and devotion.

A signed book.
A stamped certificate.
Two families.
One commitment.
One future.

It wasn't the wedding
we once dreamed of in America.
It was better.
Because this one was real.
Because this one was ours.



The words were spoken.



Officially married. Legally recognized. Alhamdulillah.



Two families. One new beginning.



Our families prayed.



The penghulu led.



The words were spoken.



*The rings were exchanged.
Two families. One commitment.*

“ It wasn't perfect. It wasn't fancy.
But it was honest. It was blessed. And it was the start of our life together. ”

Married...Again

We thought the adventure was over.

It wasn't.

After the wedding, the village authorities reviewed our paperwork and declared our marriage legally invalid. As far as the government was concerned, we still weren't husband and wife.

Our marriage book disappeared into the bureaucratic labyrinth of the Department of Religious Affairs while officials sorted out a collection of forms, approvals, and technicalities that seemed to multiply with every visit.

Eventually, after enough signatures, stamps, and trips through government offices to satisfy even the most determined bureaucrat, we finally received our official marriage books.

Or at least as normal as life in Indonesia ever becomes.



One of many steps in our second round of wedding paperwork.



**In the end, we were married twice.
Once for love.
Once for the government.**

Ten Years Later

We recently celebrated our tenth anniversary.

Over the decade, our communication has vastly improved—even though Tuti still laughs when I try to speak Indonesian. I still laugh when she tries to help me.

It has been a challenging but wonderful journey. I have been embraced by a family and a culture that once felt foreign but now feels like home.

It will likely take me a lifetime to fully comprehend Javanese culture, language, and traditions. But that's the beauty of it—there's always more to learn, more to appreciate, and more reasons to be grateful.

I like to remind people that in my first two marriages we all spoke fluent English, thought alike, and shared a similar upbringing. This time, we come from different worlds, speak different languages, and see life through different eyes.

Yet somehow, it works.
Not because it's easy,
but because it's real.



“ Regardless of skin color, language, religion, or background, you either gel with a person or you don't. It ultimately boils down to love, loyalty, acceptance, and respect. If you have those, you can navigate any cultural divide. Don't worry about what the neighbors think. Just live your life. ”



This Javanese *raja* is a talisman for charisma and mahabah (attraction, love, and respect).

It carries the ancient spirit of Javanese mysticism, believed to radiate inner magnetism, draw harmony, and strengthen presence.

Ten Years Later

A New Beginning, A Deeper Understanding

Ten years have passed since I married Tuti in a small village in East Java. What began as a leap of faith has become a life beyond anything I ever imagined.

Together we have built a home, raised our daughter Sabrina, and faced challenges that tested us in ways we could never have anticipated. Through it all, we have learned that love is not just a feeling—it is a choice made every day.

Indonesia continues to teach me humility, patience, and gratitude. Its people, traditions, and spirit have become part of who I am. I am no longer a visitor here—I belong.

As I look back on this journey, I see that marriage was not the end of the adventure. It was the beginning of a deeper story—one still unfolding, one I am honored to live.



Our tenth anniversary—grateful for family, culture, and the life we've created together.

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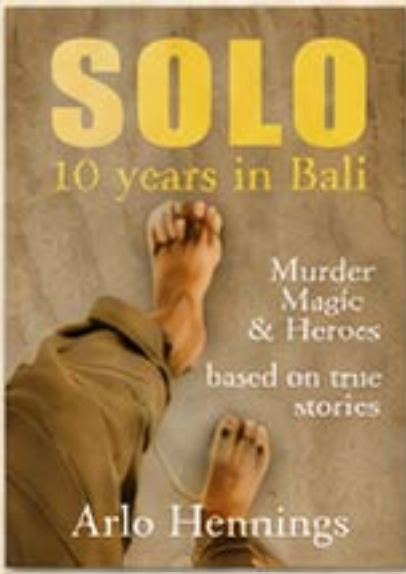
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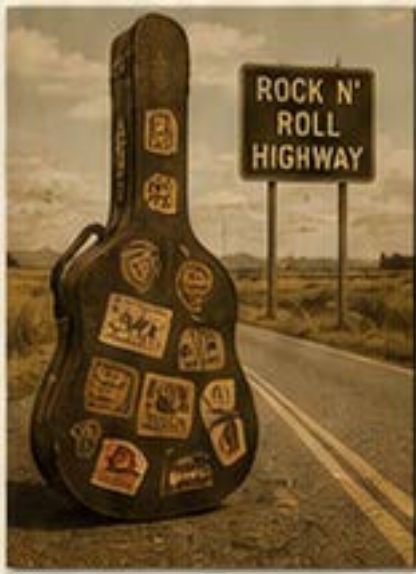
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*Dedicated to
my wife, Tuti,
and my daughter, Sabrina,
whose love made
this journey
worthwhile.*

 **EXPERIENCE IT**
Watch Our Wedding
Scan the QR code to watch the original video of our wedding in East Java.



youtu.be/bPsXICWtOlk

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Seven stories about people
caught at the strange intersections of
love, loss, belief, desire, death,
friendship and chance.

They begin in America and Indonesia—
in guest houses and villages, at weddings
and funerals, in moments of intimacy,
confusion, danger and unexpected grace.

Some are funny.

Some are unsettling.

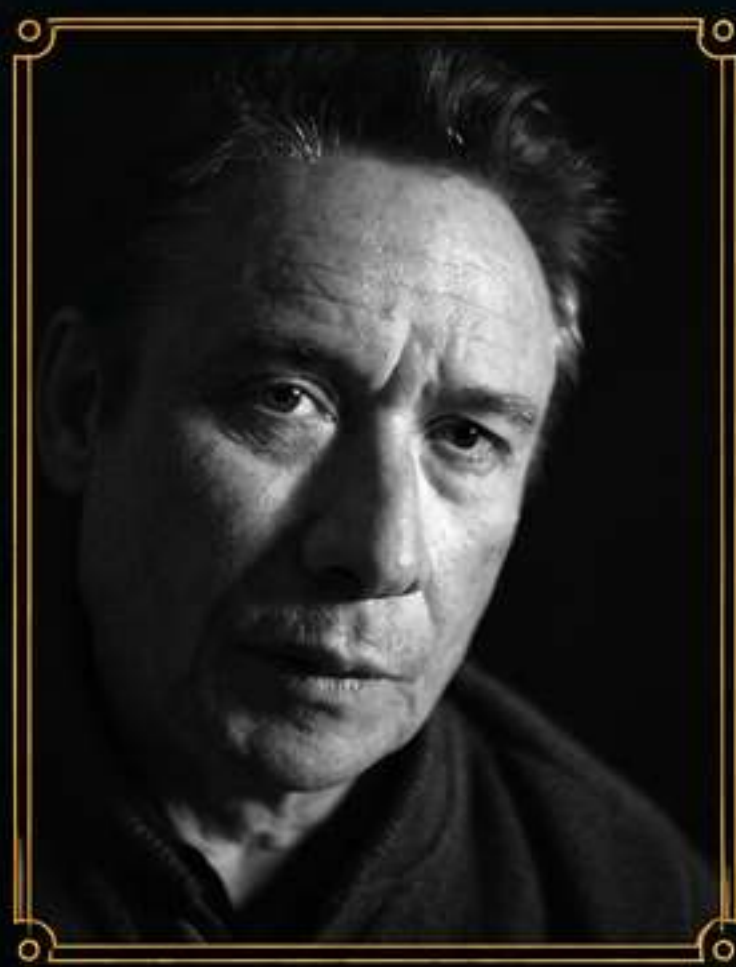
Some are difficult to explain.

Together they form a portrait of a life
lived far from where it began—
and of the people who crossed its path.

THE ILLUSTRATED SOUL

Stories from the Songs of Time

ARLO HENNINGS



ARLO HENNINGS

is a musician, songwriter,
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