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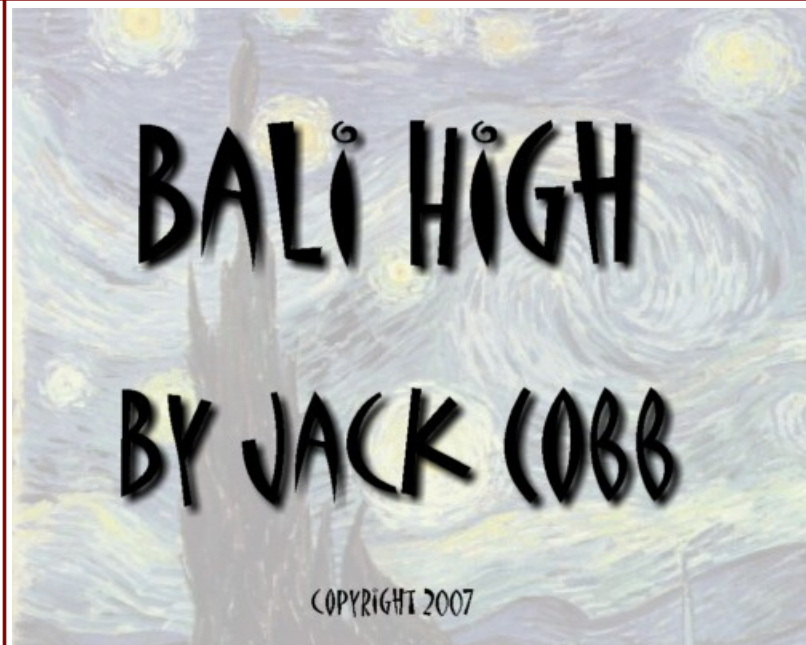
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My first few months teaching English in Korea race by like a high-speed parade of unfortunate coincidence. I get jumped for walking down the street with a Korean woman. A friend falls on me during a sandlot soccer game and breaks three of the bones in my elbow, necessitating six months of physical rehabilitation. Ajjumas, Korean housewives hired to clean my apartment, throw away half of my pots and pans in a seriocomic housecleaning.

Korean spring, a pleasant, mild-weathered two months of sitting on my balcony a lot with friends, drinking a lot of beer, gives way to the torrential rain of the typhoon season. We all ride to work together, and Randy and I already joke that what happens in Bali stays in Bali, even though it's a month away. We're the only two single men working at the university, so we're going together.

I read message boards about the Bali bombing after class each day, and the thought of sticking it to terrorists in some small way by vacationing in paradise feels like an ironic form of patriotism. Tourism on the island, just six months out from the attack, has waned at this point to a trickle, and the island depends on tourism like nothing else. If I can fight evil by drinking beer, surfing, and soaking up rays, then so be it. I will pursue it fervently. Plus, my skin, always blotchy and red with psoriasis, has degenerated into hard, scaled patches in too many places to count, and it itches as if hard-legged bugs walk across it, especially in my ears. Sunshine and salt water should help. Having just a few days free from the ceaseless itch should prove worth the ticket.

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Our seats in the JAL plane place us right across from the stewardesses. We already feel like sailors on shore leave, and the more Asahi and Sapporo the polite, attentive women give us, the worse we get. We stagger through Sukarno-Hatta International Airport of Jakarta like two sensory winos, high on the sights and smells of our first moments in the spice islands.

"Can you believe this?" Randy whispers to me as we walk into the bookstore. "Never in my life."

In the brilliant purple silk of their traditional clothing, each woman's skin is an infusion of nutmeg and faded lavender. It's all I can do not to put my hands to the cheek of the women standing at the entrance of the bookstore. I finally understand why Korean kids often walk up to us and rub the hair on our arms as if we are deer in a petting zoo. In this case, it's a lustful fascination, but still less lechery than wonder. The walkie-talkie placed discreetly at the back part of the saleswoman's

hip helps me refrain.

"It's like being Mowgli at the watering hole."

"Exactly. What?"

"My alarm clock went off when I was about six. It started blaring at the end of *The Jungle Book*, when Mowgli saw the girl fetching the water, singing about how one day she's going to make her own daughter fetch the water. Girls ceased to be gross and got interesting all of a sudden."

"Ah. Indian Women?" He looks through the Indonesian phrase books, picking up a red one that reads, *Bahasat in Ten Days* absently as he listens. "Sure it wasn't the *Kama Sutra* movie that came out a few years back?"

"That didn't hurt. All that dancing in bright-colored outfits and such."

"Oh, yeah. Right. The bright-colored outfits. Maybe we should go to Goa next."

Chris picks up a copy of *How to Talk Dirty in Indoneisan*, and I pick up a copy of the Lonely Planet phrasebook. We promise to trade off as needed, but I am doubtful about my need for his book. Still, I start studying as soon as I buy the book, and by the time I get back on board I try out the basics on the JAL stewardesses, who seem to speak flawless *Bahasat*. They laugh politely as I fling tourist phrases to Chris, and he teaches me how to ask a woman into increasingly physical levels of intimacy in *Bahasat*.

Upon arrival in Denpasar, we take a taxi to Kuta Legian, where the highest concentration of hotels and clubs are, where the bomb went off almost one year prior. We see a sign that says "Segara Sadhu," recommended by the taxi driver as clean and cheap. We walk down a long shadowy alleyway with tall, crumbling concrete walls on each side, and Randy strikes me as brave in his lack of hesitancy.

We turn a corner into a courtyard, with an open area kitchen on one side, and the office on the other. Three young men play cards on the dining table, and they greet us warmly.

We negotiate a great price for a room with Putu, a tall Balinese man, and then Randy gets cold feet and wants to try for something better. We travel around the city for two hours before returning to Segara Sadhu, and Putu laughs as he checks us in. For six dollars a night, we stay one block from the beach, and a half-mile from the strip and downtown Kuta.

Downtown Kuta bounces and sways at 1 AM, heavy with house music and soft with warm, honeyed air. We walk aimlessly, wandering until we arrive at a restaurant. Randy's appetite resembles a '72 Cadillac. He eats per mile, not per day, and this will be a source of frustration and humor for both of us. I eat a plateful of nasi goreng, Indonesian style fried rice, and Randy has ikan bakar, baked fish, with rice. Bintang, the only choice of beers, surprises us, and I wonder out loud how the largest Muslim country in the world brews a better beer than Canada or America. The fried rice warms me with red pepper and garlic, much like Korean fried rice, but instead of cabbage and more cabbage like we get "back home" in Korea, cucumbers, tomatoes, and tamarind paste livens my palate. We eat fiercely, and the meal sets us to our chief task here, which entails women, more booze, and all things shore leave.

Right down the street Paddy's II re-opens tonight, just rebuilt from the bombing. It's rife with gorgeous women, some dancing on tables, drunk Australians, and large security guards both *Bule* (white) and Indonesian. I order a Guinness, something unavailable in Korea, for a dollar a bottle, substantially cheaper than I've paid anywhere. The grand re-opening of the club bombed by Jemaah Islamiyah sells T-shirts emblazoned with "Fuck Terrorist" in bright red. We both laugh at the shirt, and wait to see which of us buys one first, which one of us will

give up grammar for politics.

We drink, dance with women we suspect of plying us for business, and talk until late, when last call nears. I spot a woman in the corner arguing and returning the harassment of two young Aussie surfers barely out of their teens. She argues fiercely with them, at one point shoving them away from her with both hands. She walks in our direction, and she brings a friend. I know it could be a trap. She comes close to me and that concern dissipates in the warm, comfortable air between us.

"Hey, looks like you have some trouble."

"They're assholes. Think I'll sleep with anyone." She moves next to me, and I wonder if she's a professional. It's last call. She's with another very pretty woman. I choose to believe. She's lithe, smooth, and she smells of the watering hole.

Randy likes her friend, so we head off on two scooters to a club that "never closes." The scooters wobble with our weight as the girls weave us around the road south. We only have US dollars, a choice I made at the airport, but it gets us in and leaves us enough to drink for the night. I dance way too close with Kadek, and several Balinese people come close to her to whisper in her ear as we merge rhythmically, and I finally come to a practical appreciation of house music and techno. When we finish, we take a seat with Randy and Kadek's friend near a giant pool. I don't notice the crane until we sit down.

"What," I say way too loud, "is that?"

"Bungee jumping." Kadek's friend says.

My eyes scan to the top of the crane, where a naked white woman stands poised, ready to jump.

"Wow," Randy speaks his heart. "Some people really shouldn't bungee jump naked."

"This before she actually jumps. Maybe the stretch at the end will do her good." Randy chuckles. A large white woman leaps off the platform and plunges to her near-death-sans-clothes in a matter of a couple of seconds, gravity stretching her markedly untanned breasts over both her eyes. Soon after, the night club that never closes announces last call.

We head back to the hotel room, where Kadek and her friend are asked for their ID's, a standard practice in all Balinese hotels when the staff suspect love of the transactionary nature. Kadek's face grows a deep shade of burnt umber, and she rattles a few sentences that sound like a curse.

Kadek and I head for my room, and Randy and Kadek's friend are merging comfortably as they tumble through the door to his. Kadek chooses this time to tell me she has a boyfriend, that she doesn't want to cheat. She just wants to share the bed, sleep off the Bintang, and wait for her friend and Randy to wake up so she can leave. I agree that it's fine, but as we undress, her russet skin indigo by starlight just before I shut the curtains, my head clouds.

Her phone rings. Her boyfriend, calling from Germany. He calls every ten minutes, and they argue. After about an hour of this, she turns off her phone and puts her hand on my chest. We hear Randy and her friend in the other room, all laughter and mattress springs. She draws closer to me, and we meet somewhere in a comfortable space just barely between us. The farther we take things, the louder she becomes, until she pulls away suddenly.

"My boyfriend."

"I understand." I don't.

"I will sleep with you, but you have to give me something worth a hundred American."

"What are you talking about? I thought you wanted to sleep with me."

"My friends all know I have a boyfriend. If I sleep with you because I want to, then they will think badly of me."

"And if you sleep with me for money, they'll understand?"

"No, you don't have to give me money. If you buy me something, maybe worth a hundred, then I can tell them you bought me such a nice thing, I had to."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." She is neither. I redouble my efforts to persuade her by other means, but every effort ends the same. Eventually I roll over and go to sleep to the sounds of Randy and Kadek's friend.

The next day Kadek's friend knocks on the door lightly.

"Come in, I'm naked." She giggles and enters at my lame joke. She's curvier than Kadek, but with gorgeous straight black hair and eyes like liquefied coal. She's from Java, and I find myself wondering if she charged Randy. We all sit on the stoop in front of my room, and the girls, I realize are comparing notes from the previous night. They're off soon after, and Randy and I head in separate directions—he walks to the beach to run, and I walk to the front to eat the complimentary breakfast.

The crew at the Segara Sadhu smile and wave at me as I approach. Putu introduces me to Ketut, another Putu and Komang. Ketut's a quiet, petite young woman who cooks the breakfast, and Putu the Shorter, stocky and sun-kissed, perpetually in sandals and board shorts, runs the tourism deals for expeditions. Balinese families, Putu explains, name their kids Putu, Kadek, Komang, and Ketut, in that order.

"What about if you have more than four kids?"

He smiles wide. "We start back at Putu again. But I am a first Putu."

I sit and read a Lonely Planet guide on Bali that's laying on one of the tables, and as I do, I realize I haven't yet seen the ocean here at daytime. No one in Bali hurries, so I sit and read until my breakfast comes, satisfied with the sounds of waves just a hundred or so yards away. Still a bit hungover, the simple breakfast of eggs and toast with a little butter and salt are sumptuous, and I resist the urge to have a Bintang for breakfast to cure the cat-in-mouth feeling.

After breakfast I slide out of my seat and make for the beach. I meet Randy on the way back from his run, and we plan on exploring the Bounty and seeing what other trouble we can find for the night.

I know why surfers speak with awe of Kuta, especially the novices, the minute I see the water. The waves curl in long, unhurried sets, eight to ten feet, it seems, for miles. A surfer could catch waves here for close to ten hours in an uncluttered world: no need to fight for the best waves or worry about missing the only good surf for weeks. One more wave is always coming, and it's almost always perfect.

The chance of random violence always comes with living and playing in the ocean, too. Every surfer knows that sharks see the shape of a surfer on a board as

imitation seal meat, and that whenever you enter salt water outside Utah, a shark is within a few hundred yards, statistically. The chance of being killed by a bomb ranks much lower than being eaten alive or bit in two by a bull shark or a great white. Add cheap beer and friendly natives, and you have the H.M.S. Bounty all over again. Bali tourism may be down, but the surfers never stopped coming. This is just what I need.

The heat and the sun are a bit much, though, so I head back to the hotel to do some reading and take a nap. I have a strong feeling that keeping up with Randy will require lots of down time.

The bar The Bounty lies just behind Paddy's II. The stories we hear paint this place as some sort of Shangri-La of debauchery. Randy and I head back to the bar two hours before last call. When we reach this legendary place, it looks like the love child of Swiss Family Robinson and the tamer versions of the Kama Sutra. Imagine a giant, 18th century boat rested in the top branches of a giant tree. The boat provides the top level women and drinks, and closes earlier. The bottom level, the trunk of the tree, remains open later and services the lower rungs of the expat and Balinese service economy. On the way back from The Bounty, womanless, Randy and I start to talk about love and romance in the Hermit Kingdom.

"So what happened to you and Sung Lim?" Jim and Hyeon Mi, the friends who brought me to Korea, wanted to set me up with Sung Lim, a friend of Hyeon Mi, but before I got to Korea, Randy had charmed her into his bed and broke up with her twice.

Randy smiles and gives a shake of his head. "I don't think I'll ever settle down." We walk home so late that almost no one is out. We walk Korean-style, right down the middle of the road. "I'd like to be a parent someday, but married? The same woman the rest of my life?" By my count, he's run through a handful already on this trip.

"Some people aren't meant to marry." My head is still swirling with lust, Guinness, and sunburn, but I would claim this true from a coma. "Sex is like tape." I stagger in remembering a sermon, maybe, from somewhere. "You get like overused scotch tape after a while." I balance on a curb like its' a tightwire. "After a while, after enough sex or failed relationships, you can't bond to anyone. You can't stick." I feel shame burning on my face as I say this. "Of course, I'm the opposite. I'm the tape with the little colored patch still on the end."

"Are you telling me you're a virgin?"

"No." Depending on the definition, I'm lying. "I just don't feel free to commit."

"We're a lot alike, I guess."

"In some ways, yeah." We walk back to Segara Sadhu slowly.

The next few nights are much, much more of the same. I find myself unable to commit to my flesh and unwilling to leave it. I'm drawn to the women, the lavender-skinned, doe-eyed women I know are playing me in Paddy's, but unable to divorce myself from the knowledge that the exchange rate more than borders on predation. I try to weave between the traffic of my flesh and my soul. I pay women to take bus tickets home, knowing that they probably won't, or to sit and talk with me while their partners and Randy couple in his room. The frustration in me grows each time by the knowledge that what I'm doing is far less innocence than indecision.

When I surf, just before sunset most days, the steady, almost patient waves flopping the board under me, I think about Florida, where I taught high school once, and about *Perelandra*, the C.S. Lewis book about the waterworld paradise

where people sluice through the waves by the friendship of animals and the Grace of God. When the waves catch me, and I barrel towards the beach like a landbound torpedo on a piece of waxed Styrofoam, it feels like a thrilling sort of Providence. The first semester at the school on the east coast, when I surfed on the weekends and after school just before dusk, I almost believed I could have stayed in the Sunshine State forever. The sun here kisses me hard, as always, my skin freckling and burning, but the scales on my elbows, fingers, and everywhere else turns smooth and warm. It's just too bad I can't stay in the warm salt water, free of my indecision, free of my dying flesh. Here in this pastel dusk, everything glitters and rises in a shimmering trail to the sun, and I see a glimpse of something far off, something worth risk, something worth binding my self to. I paddle out to catch one more wave before it's time to head in for good.

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Jack Cobb is the assistant managing editor of *New Madrid*. His work has appeared in *The Christian Century*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and *The Penwood Review*; he has work upcoming in *The Red Clay Review* and *Read This*. He's in his last semester in the MFA program at Murray State University. He plans to return to Bali one day and work with the friends he made there.