

Cat. 020
8 pages
3500 words

Naked on the Chaise
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It was almost noon, and the ferry that would take us to Nusa Lembongan was twenty minutes late. The sun had shifted so that the palm trees under which we had taken shelter no longer protected us from the Balinese sun. Our sunscreen—a viscous white paste of Coppertone Waterbabies—was, alas, a mere SPF 45. Before us on the sand, our bags sat, waiting patiently unlike us. I counted them again and was relieved to find there were still five.

We had only 28 hours, travel time included, for our trip to the island of Nusa Lembongan on which the best snorkeling in all Bali was to be had. Every minute lost was a minute lost. My anxiety was under control, barely. Our travel arrangements were of a type that, I knew from other travels, were high risk. The hotel where we had been staying worked only with Ferry Company A, but the hotel on Nusa Lembongan worked only Ferry Company B. Our hotel had insisted on booking us with Ferry Company A. It did not help that the web crowdsourcing rating of Ferry Company A was vastly inferior to that of Ferry Company B.

I resisted the temptation to divide the minutes we were already late by the total minutes of 28 hours. Luckily, my capacity for doing arithmetic in my head, poor even in childhood, had vanished entirely with age.

Suddenly I heard a buzz of confusion that, I knew, could mean Something I About to Happen or, then again, might not. Eight or nine small boats—the ferries—were flapping about in the waves, fastened to shore with tautly fastened ropes. None had any helpful identification as to ferry company or—of course—destination. The young woman who had given us tickets in exchange for our vouchers had disappeared, her job having been done. None of this surprised me, but I was hardly pleased.

Michael, my traveling companion, as is usual for him in these situations, was—or at least seemed—entirely calm under his Travel Smith floppy hat (I had foolishly packed mine, I had no idea in which suitcase). He had taken off his sandals, buried both feet in the sand, and was blissfully absorbed in his Kindle. Even in the equatorial sunlight, the Kindle was still managing to send him a readable text of Jo Nesbo's *The Devil's Star* or was it Henning Mankell's *One Step Behind*?

“Relax, pet,” he murmured. “We’ll get there when we get there.”

I looked for our suitcases only to find that they were gone. A small crowd was now heading down the beach toward one of the smaller ferries.

“Nusa Lembongan?” I asked a boathand, wondering if my pronunciation had any resemblance to the right one.

He held the rope as people much younger than we walked confidently through the shallow water and up an unsteady wooden plank.

He nodded.

“Hurry,” said Michael.

With considerable trepidation I stepped onto the board. Was this where “on board” came from?

“Hurry, hurry,” said the boatman.

“A wave is coming,” said Michael.

I hurried, I lurched, I fell into one of the last open seats. The little boat was so crowded I could hardly move. Young Balinese took out their cell phones and gazed at them with rapt absorption as the boat made its way out the open sea—actually, just deeper in the open sea, for there was neither dock nor harbor. Michael resumed reading his Kindle. I feared to take out my cell phone, so near to all this water, and could only stare about me. But that was enough.

Oh what a wondrous thing for a landlubber such as myself, to be moved swiftly over the water in a little speedboat without ever being out of sight of land! Above the small, pale blue, nonthreatening waves, one island after another came into view, then a high mountain.

“Look, Michael,” I cried above the noise of the motor. “That volcano over there—is that the one in Claire Messud’s first novel?”

As I said this, I remembered that Michael had never read *When the World Was Steady*. Nonetheless, he nodded assent.

“Did you climb it when you were here thirty years ago?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. Honesty compelled him to add, “Halfway.”

Nusa Lembongan looked to be small as we approached it in the usual tentative manner of small boats approaching small islands. A wooded coastline gave way to a small beach with an ice-cream snack bar where a young Australian woman was playing with her children, both buck-naked under the Balinese sun. As we waited with several European tourists for the car that would take us to our hotels, I ordered a coconut (guaranteed safe to drink from the plastic straw) and resisted an impulse to lend the Australian woman some of our Waterbabies SPF 45. It was

stronger than what she was taking pleasure in anointing her toddler son, but it was also the only bottle of sunscreen we had left, and on an island like this it might not be possible to buy more.

Time passed. We drained the coconuts. Time passed again. After half an hour, a small truck of the kind used to move troops and agricultural workers pulled up—a cab in front, an open platform in back with narrow benches on both sides and a metal bar above for safety. Three middle-aged Poles, a Swedish couple who seemed too young to be out and about by themselves, ourselves, and everyone's luggage was hoisted up into this space.

As the truck started up, everyone fell sideways at the same angle, then scrambled for the bar. I was not sure the driver had understood the name of our hotel, which Michael said was ten minutes away, but at least we were on the right island.

We followed the coastline for a while, where seaweed was spread out to dry. Then, with another lurch, the truck started up a slow mountain and we found ourselves in tropical foliage, no doubt filled with dengue-bearing mosquitoes. Before us, a Hindu shrine displayed huge metal figures of gods and mythical animals.

Why was it, I mused, that the existing catalogue of creatures is never sufficient for any culture? All over the world, people felt a need to invent new imaginary animals that melded human and non-human features. Was this an homage to some repressed memory of evolution?

All of it—the shops filled with the dust and heat of the road, the signs I could not read, the architecture of the homes and certainly the religious icons were so different from what we were used to—but their functions were recognizable enough. The heat, the sun, the brackish taste of sea water, the slow rhythms of a place where people came to forget the press of making money and raising children and satisfying the parents' expectations—these were the same all over the world, at least it was easy and pleasant enough to think so. Pleasure, too, in going through this experience of strangeness until one could identify the things human beings had in common, or what one told oneself they had.

The truck had stopped a hotel the Poles had heard was cheap and a beach the Swedes had been told was beautiful. It seemed everyone except us had come without hotel reservations. Was the idea of wandering carefree through the world—the whole Sixties fantasy—really not yet dead? I was surprised, even horrified; then, on reflection, admiring.

The Poles had come ancient stiff suitcases with huge metallic locks would not have been out of place in a World War II movie. The young Swedish couple had one backpack each. They had been traveling around Indonesia for some weeks and

would do so for some weeks more. After all, they told us with their sweet, fresh-faced smiles and white unmarked skin, it was a very long way for them to come.

The hotel where the Poles had hoped to stay was fully booked, but a nearby one was happy to take them and the Swedes for only a little more than any of them wanted to pay. Sadly, but not very sadly, we all said good-bye forever. A few minutes later, the driver stopped the truck and announced that we had come to our hotel.

We had not. Michael's face flushed, and not from the sun.

"Oh, *that* hotel," said the driver. "The one back near beach."

And then I remembered that he worked for Ferry Company A, and our hotel on Nusa Lembongan worked only with Ferry Company B. And all became clear.

We had twenty-four hours left by the time we arrived at our hotel, directly on the main tourist and working beach.

I say "working," because women in pointed straw hats were slogging through the low tide to pick up seaweed. Bent over under the weight of their loads, they moved slowly among the little outriggers and sailboats moored in the shallow bay.

They gave a picturesque—a touristic—note to the scene, but this was backbreaking, doubtless poorly paid work. Like work of this kind in Asia and elsewhere, this looked to be done exclusively by women, mostly old. I knew I would never buy another package of *Nori* again without seeing in my mind's eye these women and the seaweed of Nusa Lembongan spread out so carefully to dry.

"Snorkeling? This afternoon? Yes, yes, of course. I will organize."

Our Host of the Tavern was a small man of indeterminate years, good English, and a grace I have met in few hotelkeepers anywhere in the world. As he listened, he turned his head at an angle, and this made him look not merely thoughtful but wise. If we needed anything, he said, we should please ask. Anything at all.

In a different hotel with a different host, this would have seemed a barely hidden invitation to things illegal or immoral or both, but I believed our Host of Nusa Lembongan was genuinely concerned for our welfare.

And so, you will ask, had I finally stopped counting the hours? Was I ready to give in and leave time behind as Indonesians and Europeans and North Americans come to Bali expressly to do?

Not quite. At five—half an hour later than scheduled—the boatman appeared before us as we reclined on one of those Balinese couches that look like double beds directly in front of the sea. We followed him out into the warm water and climbed up into a small outrigger with peeling white paint, just like the outriggers from which we had snorkeled in Malaysia and Sulawesi and the Philippines. The right sleeve of his white T-shirt was torn; the boat itself old and shabby; he came from no known company. Yet I trusted him immediately, partly because he had been sent by our Host of the Tavern and partly on instinct, or perhaps out of pure foolishness, because I was very tired.

He took us to the end of the beach, past cheap tourist hotels and shacks, then out into the sea and around the other side of the island. Huge outriggers passed by in the swift current between Nusa Lembongan and another small island that immediately came into view. As we donned our fins and dropped off the side, mild trepidation overcame me as it always does the first time I go snorkeling after a long time, or perhaps because the current was so fast I could see it.

Now I was surrounded by water, cold to the skin even at this temperature, even after having been heated by the Balinese sun all day. I was holding Michael's hand lightly. We were in twenty feet or so of water. Below were the corals, the seaweed, and fish.

Think of a sheaf of iridescent fabrics; of fireworks; of a light show for a rock band—none of these is even remotely as variegated, surprise-filled, or bludgeoning to human reason as any reef over which swim Southeast Asian fish. This one was healthy and moderately well populated. At every moment some strange new creature went by on its way to somewhere else. I paddled slowly, looking up from time to time to make sure the boatman was watching. He was.

When you are under water, time takes on a different, perhaps nonhuman quality. It passes more quickly yet you feel it more slowly. Almost as soon as we had immersed—so it seemed—half an hour had gone by, unfelt; unnoticed. As we climbed back on the boat, the sun lower in the sky but thankfully not yet too low.

The boat was passing through some shallows where more women were harvesting more seaweed.

“Is this a good place?” said Michael asked.

The boatman looked up and shook his head *Yes*. Then he cut the motor.

“Snorkel here?” he said. “Drift snorkel?”

We had done drift dives. A drift dive, as the name implies, is one where you let the current take you. The boat follows or, if the dive is short, waits for you to surface, and then picks you up. I had once held onto the side of a boat in Palau as

the boat drifted, watching the sea and its creatures fly by, but neither of us had ever done a drift snorkel in the open sea.

Had I thought about it, I would have reminded myself we were off an island we did not know with a boatman whose English was doubtful, whose name we did not know, and who was not affiliated with any known diving school or establishment. But I did not think. I watched Michael slide off the boat and followed, slipping into the current.

“It’s ripping,” said Michael, taking his head out of the water. “We must be going about ten miles an hour.”

And so we were. And here the fish life was even more abundant, more various, more astounding and psychedelic than at the first site. Fish of all sizes and shapes darted by—shimmering pink, coral, azure blue, tiny red fish called *anthias* who hide in white coral that looks like solid soap bubbles. Schools of them, each turning at exactly the same instant like well-trained soldiers on maneuvers.

How did they know when to turn and why did they do it? Their stiff but rapid motions looked made me think of the hand and head motions of the traditional Balinese dancers we had seen a few nights earlier on the mainland. Was long observation of the sea the source of the dancers’ gestures? Was that where Balinese rhythms came from, so different from ours in the way they stopped abruptly, then started again and always without crescendo, always without end?

“I’ve never felt anything like this,” said Michael.

“Me neither,” I said.

I put my face back into the marvelous water. It was taking us somewhere, I did not care where. Never had I given myself up in quite this way to a natural force.

I felt only the beauty of the colors and the ceaseless motion. How hard it was to watch when every minute everything changed like a kaleidoscope—or two kaleidoscopes mirroring each other, because while the fish were moving and we were moving as fast, or faster than, the fish. My eyes darted helplessly here and there as rapidly as if I was dreaming in REM motion. They tried desperately to hold onto something, anything, and—gloriously—failed. Was it Zeno who believed that everything in the universe is constantly changing? I had always thought that true, but now for the first time I felt it in my viscera. Nothing stayed still, neither us nor them.

And this thought had a converse, another twist of the ceaseless kaleidoscopes.

You can’t hold onto anything, I thought. Everything has to be let go.

I could of course have had these same perceptions by listening to several friends who had become students of Buddhism. Or, for that matter, by paying attention to what was happening around me as I waited for a traffic light to turn any day in New York, a city I visited with some regularity. I could have had this same insight, on Forty-Second Street, coming and going past the Library and Bryant Park; or in the approach to Rockefeller Center, thronged at all hours with tourists and locals snapping their cell phone camera. But I didn't. I had it off the coast of Nusa Lembongan, and it changed forever how I thought about my life.

And then we were on land, and it was after six and still not sunset. After I showered, I fell into a lounge chair next to the small swimming pool inside our tiny villa. The walls of the swimming pool were painted light blue, as if even here the spirit of the sea was perpetually present. In the warm Balinese air I lay back naked on the chaise. Every part of my body felt good. Prudence said I should rise and find the 30-percent DEET mosquito repellent—only a few months earlier I had spent a week in a Manila hospital watching Michael be very sick with dengue—but I did not.

I just lay there, naked as a baby, thinking there would not be many more years when I, now old by Balinese and almost old by Western standards, would be able to have such experiences. Thinking of how impossible it is to remember a moment like this when one is unhappy. Thinking of all the people of Nusa Lembongan who must have lain naked in the sun, all the people in warm climates all over the world who were so poor and worked so hard at things like gathering seaweed and who tried to enjoy every minute that could be enjoyed. And wondering why I had reached so late an age, I a lifelong city person, without ever before having been naked and peaceful out in the sun, and being glad I finally did so.

At breakfast a young man was teaching his small son to take his first, tentative steps: he would be alive long after we were gone. They were Swedish, the young man said, pointing to the next table where his wife was watching as she ate banana fritters. They had come to wander around these islands for some months, like the Poles and Swedes we had already met, without reservations. They had just arrived from the L— Islands a few miles away.

“It's much better there,” said the young man. “No cars are allowed, only horses. You can walk out into the sea from the island and go snorkeling.”

We should go soon, he said. It would be ruined within ten years, like Nusa Lembongan.

In the afternoon the truck from Ferry Company A was late. Our Host of the Tavern called his truck to come and refunded us the entire cost of the land transport. We tried to give him back the Indonesian bills, which we would have to exchange later at a bad rate, but he refused with a beatific smile, his head to one side. We agreed to give him an “A” rating later on TripAdvisor.

As our ferry was a hundred yards or so from the mainland, it stopped suddenly, then rocked back and forth. The boatman turned the motor off, and the only sound was that of the waves knocking gently against the hull. The boat of Ferry Company A was hung up on a rock.

At once children and young people came out from the beach, dancing and splashing around the boat in the four-foot water. It was Sunday afternoon. One by one, the other passengers, first those without luggage, then those with, decided to swim the last fifty yards or so.

“Come on,” said Michael. “You can hold your backpack up over your head.”

I walked to the back of the boat, then froze, fearful of the damage to my electronics. Just then, the tide rose just enough, and the boat slid off.

Hooray! Hooray! A Balinese *deus ex machina* had come to my rescue—or rather, the rescue, of my cell phone.

“I don’t suppose anyone will ever build a dock here,” I said as we clambered up—or rather down—on land.

“Of course not,” said Michael. “Although that would certainly be a good thing for the Balinese.”