

Balmy Bali
Christine Williams

He would sit on his first-floor balcony at the top-rate *losman*, Balinese cabin accommodation, and sing along to his favourite song, 'When you're feeling lonely ...'

He'd call out jokes and jibes to the other guests who swam in the pool below.

One afternoon, with self-conscious casualness, he walked up close to a young woman – a stranger who would prove to be a good listener – who was sitting alone beside the *losman* pool. She must have had a quality about her of empathy – perhaps he'd noticed this earlier in the day when she and her husband had been teaching their infant to swim. This afternoon was free time for her, with her partner and child in their room having a nap.

'Hello, I'm Gerry,' he said, shaking her hand.

'What a lovely name. What does it mean?' She thought a scrap of humour might lessen the intensity of his gaze.

'It means trouble. Trouble for Mum.'

She wondered which Mum he meant. If he was referring to his own there was a chance he'd have a few problems to relate; if he was directing the title to her, at least they knew where each other stood.

Susie introduced herself and wondered whether he even took in her name. He asked no questions, but babbled on: one day he'd approached a girl to have 'a bit of a chat' and she'd said, 'Will you can it?'

'Now that's a bit off, don't you think? It's a bit rude, especially to a stranger.'

Already Gerry had established his sensitivity; perhaps even his fragility. This was an empty afternoon and he offered a distraction for the young woman who took up his invitation for discourse.

'What work do you do, Gerry?'

'I make teeth.'

At a loss for a ready reply, Susie looked away. Then, not wanting to hurt him as the other girl had obviously hurt him, or at least he implied she had, Susie tried to turn this surprise into a positive conversation ploy.

'It makes a person stop from smiling and want to look the other way when you say that.'

'Oh, you've got nothing to worry about. A couple of tiny fillings. That's nothing.'

The conversation chip moved back and forward a few times and he sat down beside Susie at the edge of the pool, his blond-haired legs extended into the water, swaying back and forwards. Then came the question that opened the floodgate of his memory. Why did he come back to Bali every year for his holidays, Susie asked?

'You must really love it here.'

'Love it?' and he looked as if she'd hurt his deepest feelings. He lowered his face, holding his head in his hands at chest level. When he looked up, Susie knew that the introductory uncertainty was gone. His eyes flicked off to the side and his voice was quieter and more solid.

'Balmy Bali.' Christine Williams.

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‘You know, I spent eleven months here, back in 1972. I was twenty-three then and pretty naïve. You could say it left an indelible mark on me. I learnt a lot in that time.’

‘Eleven months is a long time here.’

‘Yeah, well eight months of it was spent in gaol. I met some lovely people in gaol here – you could say the most interesting people I’ve ever met. Americans and Balinese, mostly. Really warm people. Sincere, you know what I mean?’

‘And what was that for – gaol, I mean? Drugs?’

Gerry pulled his legs out of the water and turned away from her slightly. The sunlight on the pool and the sparkling droplets of water falling away from the calves of his legs dazzled her.

‘Well, yes and no. It wasn’t that simple, you know. I mean I carry my own shit, that’s no problem. I’ve got some dope right here in my pocket now. That’s okay. It’s Bali. This was different; it was a frame-up. I know that because I found out later. I know who did it. If I’d known then what I know now ...

‘You see I’m different now. I changed a lot in that year. When I went back to Australia it took me about two years before I could get into the swing of things. You know, a routine. I kept thinking everything had changed, that everyone had changed. I remember going down to the pub with Dad. You know, we had a couple of beers and then he said he was off home, and I said, “No, I’ll wait a while.” And I did, and I felt so sad. And then it hit me. “It’s not everyone else who’s changed, Gerry. It’s you who’s changed. You’re the one who’s different.” Because I learnt a lot here, and it had to have an effect on me. I cried that night to think that I was a different person. But what could I do? I’ll tell you how it happened, if you want to hear.’

Silent assent from Susie. Who could refuse?

‘It was very different in Bali back in 1972. You know, all of this street was just bare. There was nothing here then except a juice bar and an eating house right down the end, at the beach at Legian. The juice bar was run by a girl called Made, yes, another Made. There are mostly only four traditional names here, as you’ve probably discovered. Made’s juice bar. I’d go over there from Kuta every night on my bicycle for chapchay. I’d already been here about three months when one night she called out to me as I rode past in the dark.

‘“Ger-ald,” she called out. They all do that with my name for some reason. They stress the ‘ald’ part. So I stopped and she said to come in, that she wanted to tell me something. So, okay, I went in. I liked her. But I didn’t go over there every night just to see her. I liked the food, mostly, and I was a young twenty-three, you know, the middle son and Mum’s boy, but no wimp or anything like that. I knew what it was all about, but still, I was pretty naïve, as I told you.

‘Anyway she had a proposition for me. She was an orphan, although she had plenty of aunts and uncles, and other family, and a grandfather, and they all lived on the flat behind the beach. But she owned the land, she told me. It was ten acres. And the deal was for us to marry. She’d provide the land and it would take \$7,000 to build a *losman* for tourists and a private section for us, our kids, and the pigs. And all I’d have to do is marry her. Well it was a compliment, really. I should have taken it as a compliment and left it at that. Balinese marry Balinese. But they don’t mind a bit of new blood every now and then, I thought. I mean, think of it. You’d have it made, right on the beach. When Dad found out later he said, “If only you’d let me know at

the start.” The money wouldn’t have been a problem for him.

‘So there I was, twenty-three, and this was what Made was putting to me. I said, “Well, that’s all okay, Made, but you don’t love me.” And I went back outside and got on my bike and started off, and she called out, in the dark, “Ger-ald.” So I stopped, and with my bike underneath me, I turned around and said, “What Made? What now?” and she said, “Ger-ald, you’re a gentleman.”

‘Well, that knocked me for six, and that was it. She softened me right down, because I’d never been called a gentleman before. You know, you imagine being called that in Australia.

‘So we settled on it, and we went to formally visit her grandfather. He took me into town to see about having building plans drawn up for \$7,000, and Made and I went off on our honeymoon. Because that’s the way the Balinese do it. They check out whether the chemical reaction’s going to be alright before the wedding. It’s a good idea really. Or that’s what they told me, at any rate. If it hadn’t been alright I wouldn’t have gone on with it. But it was beautiful. We stayed in the hills up near Ubud and it was just beautiful. You know, not constant sex – just when we felt like it. And it was just good to hold onto someone in bed every night. That’s important, I think, a kind of balm. It restores your balance, knowing someone is just content to be with you.

‘Every couple of days we’d come down to Kuta for a surf and Made would carry my surfboard on her head, on top of her bag, the way they carry baskets. It was unreal. I mean whoever heard of their girlfriend carrying a surfboard on her head? It was too much. I should have known it was all too good. I knew, but I didn’t know. And I was outmanoeuvred.

‘There was this guy down at the beach who had his eye on Made. You know, all that land. Not a foreigner, a Balinese. I know him. I found it all out later. I could have handled an Australian, or even an American, but a Balinese had it all over me.

‘So there I was walking back from the beach one day and they grabbed me. Found the dope on me and by the next day I was in a stinking hole of a gaol in Gianyar. It was just a cell, really, and so old . . . it was built maybe three hundred years ago.

‘It was tough and I nearly died in there – from the food and conditions, and the fear, most likely, but I lived through it all to tell the tale. Thirty days I was in there, and I couldn’t get word out to anyone, my family or anyone. I was so sick I thought I’d die. And I can remember when it rained I’d press my face against the bars and yell and scream I was so frightened. You know, I suffered from claustrophobia – I had done since I was a kid. I yelled and screamed as hard as I could and no one came, no one took any notice.

‘Made came to see me. It was pathetic really. She’d pedal the fifteen kilometres and back to bring me food, because the food in the lock-up was stinking. The only other person who came to see me was a Baptist minister. He’d been living here ten years and only had one real convert, he said. Which I think is understandable – their combination of Buddhist-Hinduism takes care of all their needs. It suits them. Anyway he got word out to my Dad, and I took notice of what this man told me. I didn’t take notice of anyone else but I took notice of him because he was a very principled person. You know, you could tell he was very strong, morally. Some people, you can just feel that about them. Very strong. After I’d pleaded not guilty,

been sentenced to eight years gaol and was appealing, he advised me to plead guilty. He said, “Look, Gerry, eight months is eight months, but you know these people, they could hold up your appeal for two years and you’d still be in gaol.” So I dropped the appeal and they sent me down to the gaol in Denpasar. It’s not there now, that gaol, but it used to loom large in the minds of the local people, it was so tough there.

‘And Dad got things moving. He contacted the doctor who’d delivered me at birth – he was a backbencher in Canberra a few years later. Dad landed over here in his fancy suit. He’s sixty-four, my Dad, but he looks fifty. And he saw the Director-General of Gaols – he was a military general, you know, with brass buttons and stripes on his epaulets and all. Dad wore his best velvet suit with brass buttons too – this was the early seventies, remember – and when the secretary outside the Director’s office saw Dad, he was impressed. You know, Dad can be very charming. When he went into the office, the Director-General, or whoever it was in charge – there are levels and levels of bureaucrats – he looked up from his doodling – because you know, that’s all they do all day, that and lunch and inspections – the guy stood up and said, “Can I offer you a seat?” Dad and I laugh about it now.

‘So it worked out that I lived in the grounds of this bigwig’s house which was attached to the gaol. I taught his children some English and they taught me some Indonesian. I was allowed out three days out of seven, after a while, when I could be trusted, and I’d come down surfing to Kuta. I smoked dope, just the same as before.

‘One night I was late getting back, and the place had guards all around to stop the prisoners getting out, of course, and I went up to the gate and banged away, trying to get back in.

‘It made me laugh, the irony of it. There I was pounding the gate to get back into prison. I’m thumping away and the guards are asleep or something, smoking, and out of it maybe and they didn’t open up for ages.

‘Bang, bang, bang, I’d go. You know it was like they were deaf or didn’t want me back. And I had to wonder why I wanted to get back in so badly. The difference between heaven and hell is in your mind, I reckon.’

To Susie this stranger had seemed like a nerd at first, and as his story developed, a victim wanting sympathy. But in the space of a few minutes Gerald had turned into a philosopher extraordinaire. There was no need for her to offer him her sympathy, after all.

What he required was her respect – and he’d earned it by living through an initiation by fire into Balinese culture, his journey past purgatory and back, and his extraordinary narrative of that trip. She was sure of him now. The tenor of his voice, his body language, these convinced her she’d been privy to a deeply-felt account of Gerald’s personal heaven and hell, his singular discovery of the ‘doors of perception’. Susie’s silence, a smile that showed her gleaming white teeth, and a gentle nod of recognition, were enough to satisfy the story-teller. He had nothing to add.

She made her way back to the *losman* and her sleeping partner, to her role as inmate in her very own prison – in contrast, a prison of love. Back to the very balm of a loved one’s body held close, a pleasure that Gerald had known so briefly – torsos locked in gentle embrace, allowing only temporary protection from a very uncertain world.